

MEDIEVAL SAINTS

A READER

edited by

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"Foolish wretch," said Christopher, "What has become of your power now Against the One that you have begun [to fight]? You're a very feeble fighter. I pity your misery, and I shall reveal [something] to you:

For it is my Lord's will that tomorrow you shall martyr me. Smear your eyes with my blood and good sight will quickly return to you. At this the blind king had hope, [for he] understood this well.

The next day he had [Christopher's] head struck off, and smeared himself with the blood,

And had good clear eyesight; at once he changed his belief.

He gave this holy man a fair burial, and believed at once in God,

And received baptism along with all his men,

And went into the joy of heaven. And so that was much better for them Than to go to the torments of hell, and to serve their idols.

Thus at the last St. Christopher went to the most high God.

Now God bring us to that same joy to which he brought Christopher's soul.

48. AN OLD FRENCH LIFE OF ST. MARGARET OF ANTIOCH

Despite, or rather because of, the fanciful episode of her encounter with the Devil in the form of a dragon and her subsequent victory over him, Margaret was one of the most popular virgin martyrs venerated during the Middle Ages. Eight versions of her life, based on two earlier Latin texts, exist in Old French from the thirteenth century; she is included in 'The Golden Legend,' and many versions exist in Anglo-Norman and Middle English that indicate her special popularity in England. The Old French version reprinted here is preserved in over a hundred manuscripts, mostly from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and makes use of dramatic devices similar to those employed in 'The South English Legendary.' It is also an example of the extremely popular 'virgin martyr' story, of which Christina, Dorothy, Agnes and Barbara are also typical.

Source: Trans. from Old French verse by Brigitte Cazelles, *The Lady as Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1991), pp. 216-228, repr. with permission.

After the holy Passion

Of Jesus Christ, when – on Ascension day –

He ascended into Heaven,

The world was filled with many good people,

Who led a devout life.

Through the preaching

Of the apostles and the martyrs,

The Holy Spirit worked so well

That many people were believers,

Among the old and the young, including children,

Matrons, and maidens.

The good news spread in such a way

That a young maiden

By the name of Margaret

Heard of Jesus Christ,

Of the tortures he suffered,

Of eternal life

Which she knew to be neither a lie nor a fable),

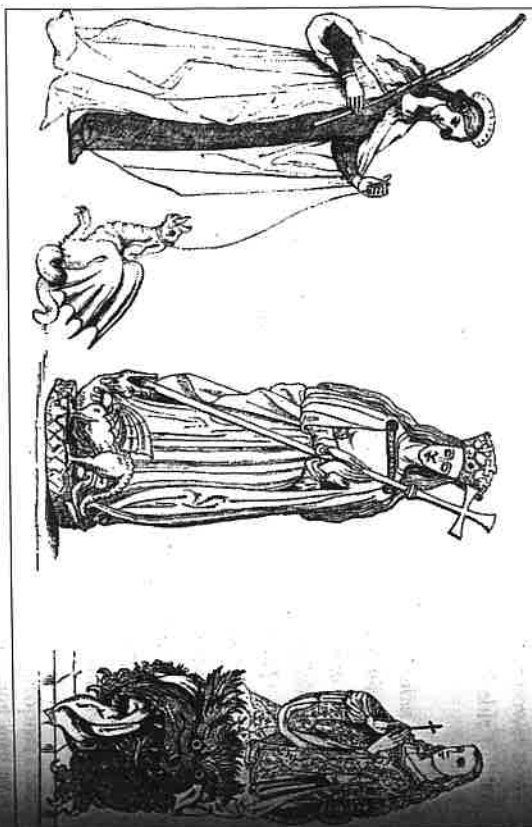
And of the eternal Kingdom of God.

She abandoned the Saracen [pagan] law,

Was baptized and purified,

And started loving God

With all her heart



[Fig. 54] Three early renaissance images of St. Margaret of Antioch (Jameson, *Saints and Legendary Art*, 2, 518 and 520).

But she hid her faith
From her father and friends.
She devoted herself to God so totally
That neither honors nor riches
Could ever convince her to seek another friend [male suitor]
Never
Will she look for the company of man
Or seek marriage,
And she will turn down any such request.
Theodosius, her father, was
A Saracen, and so was
Her mother.
Her father hated her deeply.
But her mother loved her
On account of her beauty,
Fair body, fair face,
Knowledge, courtesy, and wisdom.
Her parents did not live long
But died within two years.
She found herself an orphan.
She lived with a wet nurse
Who had raised her since childhood.

It was she who had initiated Margaret
Into the teachings of Christianity.
The wet nurse knew Margaret's devotion,
Her mode of life, and her thoughts.
Margaret, who was without pride or sin,
Called her her lady and master.
Everyday, Margaret would tend the sheep of her wet nurse
And lead them to the fields,
As she had no concern for the vain world.
Her clothing was poor,
But her body was beautiful and comely,
Her eyes bright, and her face shining.
Filled
With God's grace,
She cared for no other love
Than the love of God.
This was the only payment that she cared to receive,
While God was her only investment.
It happened one day,
As she was tending her wet nurse's sheep,
That Olymbrus passed by,
He who was the lord of the land.
He stared at her,
Not looking at her clothes,
But at her fair and graceful body,
Which was beautiful and enticing.
He continued on his way,
But did not forget her.
Shortly afterwards, he sent a messenger to her,
For he wanted to know her name
And whether she would accept to love him.
The messenger arrived
And approached the maiden.
"Maiden," he said, "may God be with you!"
She answered him without anger,
Or anguish,
Simply saying: "May God bless you too!"
Then he delivered this message:
"Maiden," he said, "my lord,
Who happened to pass by some time ago,

Sends me to you, for he would like you
To give me your name,

And to tell me whether you would accept to love him.

He wishes to know who you are, what is your lineage,

Who are your parents,

And by what law and faith you abide."

"Lord," she says, "in my childhood,

I was baptized as a Christian.

I have given my love to God,

In such a way that no offer

Could ever prompt me to have another friend."

"Fair lady," he says, "know

That you could find yourself the recipient of many riches.

Be the friend of my lord,

And you will live in great honors.

Great honor and great power

Will be yours through him.

Do as my lord begs you to do.

Reconsider your decision,

And come along with me

On this horse."

"Friend, give up your arguments.

You will never convince me.

I am the servant of Jesus Christ."

Discomfited by her response, the messenger

Leaves at once without farewell.

He goes back on his horse and departs.

He then describes to his lord

The merit and virtue

He has found in the maiden:

"She did not care a whit,

For what I told and promised her.

For she has put in a better place

Her heart, which she will not give to you.

You will never be her lord or spouse,

Not one single day for the rest of her life.

She has no desire for your love."

Olymprius becomes angry,

His rage changes his appearance.

His nostrils flare, he gnashes his teeth,

And his face loses color.

He greatly resents

The fact that the girl has rejected him.

He is determined to make her pay for it.

The following day, he calls for her,

Asking that she be brought before him,

So that he can take his revenge.

[Margaret proclaims herself a Christian, telling Olymprius that she is the servant and friend of her Spouse Jesus Christ. She is at once disrobed, hanged, and whipped.]

Blood springs like a fountain,

Running down her body.

Neither Olymprius, nor his soldiers,

Nor any of the onlookers

Could stand to look at her,

Because of the running blood

And the sufferings she endures.

Olymprius, the evil traitor,

Cries out to her: "Sister Margaret,

Trust me and follow my orders!

You will then be able to regain health.

Trust me, you will do wisely,

For I will take you in marriage."

And all those who stand around her

Cry to her: "Sister, listen to our lord!

Trust him, you will do wisely,

For our lord is offering you

A very rich marriage indeed.

Do not waste your beautiful youth,

Out of childishness or madness.

Save your body, save your life!"

The maiden hears and listens

To the noise and the shouts of the people.

And she reacts

To what they tell her:

"Ha," she says, "how evil are your counsels!

You see me suffering,

And you think that God has forsaken me?

But no. He is still protecting me.
 Your thoughts are mad indeed,
 You who advise me
 To abandon for your lord
 The friendship of my Creator.
 If my body endures these tortures,
 My soul will ascend even more happily
 To Paradise, in the company of the saints.
 This martyrdom is but a bath
 Which purifies my body and soul.
 Through it, my soul is protected
 From the ordeal of eternal death.
 It will indeed allow me to avoid sin.
 Go away, men and women!
 Your words and your arguments
 Are worth no more than an apple,
 For Jesus Christ is with me."

[Olymprius now orders that she be thrown into a dark cell.]

She is brought to the entrance of the jail,
 All bloody and naked.
 But before entering,
 She crosses herself.
 As they push her inside,
 She changes color and becomes pale,
 Because of the darkness of the cell.
 He would have a harsh and mean heart,
 He who could throw her in there
 And refrain from weeping.
 As soon as she is inside,
 She bows at once,
 And kneels on the ground.
 With sweet words, she calls on God
 To rescue her.
 She sighs and weeps,
 Saying: "Help me, sweet and fair God!
 This place is so dreadful
 That I do not know where I am.
 And I trust no one,

Sweet God, except you.
 I have been greatly shamed, degraded,
 And tortured.
 May you give me promptly your counsel.
 And may you grant me, through your grace,
 To see face to face
 The one that causes my torments.
 I must protect myself from him.
 Indeed, I do not know
 How I could have wronged him."
 Having finished her prayers,
 She looks in the direction
 Of one of the corners of her fearsome cell.
 Presently, she sees a huge dragon appearing.
 He is dark and extremely hideous,
 With black hair,
 A huge head,
 And long and wide ears.
 His eyes are big and large,
 Glowing like fire.
 Flames come out of his nostrils,
 And with them, an evil smell.
 His round and irregular teeth are ugly.
 The inside of his mouth is darker than iron.
 His beard and hair
 Look like pure gold.
 His breath is so foul
 That the whole cell reeks.
 Seeing him approaching her,
 Margaret does not know what to do.
 She does not dare make a move.
 There is no escape from the dragon.
 Fear makes her tremble.
 With his tongue,
 The dragon lifts her up by the feet.
 She falls down on the ground,
 And he swallows her up in one gulp.
 But the sign of the cross that she had made
 Has imprinted her, in such a way
 That the serpent is pierced in the middle.

When the maiden sees the opening,
She emerges from the dragon,
Healthy and unharmed,
And more confident in God's love
Than ever before.

Soon after, a dark man,
Who did not look like a Christian
But was blacker than an Egyptian,
Appears and approaches her.
She whose trust is in God
Asks him boldly:

"And who are you? I order you,
In God's name, to answer me."

"And so I will, if you intercede for me
Before your God, who harmed me greatly
When he caused my brother to be split open,
In the name of your love and prayers.
You have indeed made him pay dearly
For the sufferings you have endured.

The pain has become his."

"Who is your brother?" "Ruffin.

Most painful was his death,
Which I now deeply grieve.

This is what prompted me to come here,
To torment you, to harm you,
And to avenge my brother's death."

"What is your name?"

"They call me Beelzebub,
And rightly so.

I am the king and lord of all the devils.
I never cared for goodness,
Loving only the worst of sins.
I have swallowed in my belly
The riches, the goods,

And the possessions of many people.
I have friends and soldiers
That I send in order to deceive
Those who, I can see,
Act out of lust

And have no care for virtue.

I watch over them so closely

That I promptly induce them to sin.
And when I hold them in my nets,
Great are my joy and my satisfaction.

Such is indeed my reaction, when I can catch one of my prey.
It was I who inspired the wrongs you endured,
I who caused your capture, and your tortures.

And you can expect far more,
Unless you agree to obey

The one who holds you in his power."

When the maiden hears his words
And discovers that he is the one who caused her ordeal,

She rushes at him,
Pulls him down by the hair,
And holds him tight.

She puts her foot on his chest,
And beats him a great deal.
Under the strain of her pressure,

He cries out, begging for mercy:
"Hal' lady, lift up your foot
And let me regain my breath!

For I can hardly breathe."

"Hal!" she says, "mad and evil man,
Despicable and foul creature,
Beast full of iniquity,

Threat to my virginity,
Be careful not to harm me,
If you ever want to get up!"

"I promise you, in all honesty,
That I will never do to you
Any cruel, mean,

Harmful, or foul deed,
If you let me escape.

Take your foot away, for it hurts me."
She lets him go, and he disappears.

[Margaret resumes her prayers, thanking God for having protected her. There is a sudden earthquake. Then a dove appears, carrying a rich crown.]

All the witnesses who were near the cell
And who saw God's glorious deeds,
Began to wonder.

There numbered more than four thousand,
Men, women, and children.
They all converted and praised God.
And Margaret asked God to bless them.
When Olymbrius heard
About the conversion of these people,
He became enraged.
So great was his cruelty,
That he ordered that they be taken
Outside the walls of the city,
And that they be beheaded
In a field called Lynet.
He could not wait one more day.
When this evil deed was accomplished,
He then ordered that Margaret be taken
Out of her cell at once.
"Go," he tells his soldier,
"And cut her head off!
There is no better way for me to take my revenge.
Her resistance will thus come to an end."
The soldier who holds the sword
Goes where his lord has sent him.
He conveys his lord's edict word for word,
Asking her to kneel
And to offer him her neck,
So that he can cut her head off more easily.
For he does not want to miss his target.
She kneels at once,
Lowers her head, and offers him her neck.
But as he is lifting the sword,
He looks to his right,
And sees that God, accompanied
By his angels, is standing at Margaret's side.
The soldier becomes frightened.
As if bewitched,
He can no longer move his feet,
Nor lift his arm.
He is dismayed and confused.
"Maiden," he says, "get up at once!
I will never strike you,

Rest assured."
She tells him: "Friend, why?
For you will never join me
If you do not kill me now."
"I will not do it, for Jesus Christ
Is beside me, who forbids me
To do such a thing."
"Friend, if you have seen God,
Do what you must do, thus allowing me
To join my Creator and to adore him in Heaven.
For I have no care to remain in this world any longer."
And the soldier agrees.
She starts praying devoutly:
"I ask for your mercy, Good Lord, and present you with this request:
May all those who will write
My life, or have it written,
Receive your forgiveness, whatever their sins,
Sins which are never hidden to you.
I, Margaret, also pray to you,
God, that you give me power
To protect any pregnant woman,
If she crosses herself
With a book containing the story of my life,
Or opens it,
Or places it on her body,
So that she be granted a safe delivery.
And may you also grant me the following:
May any woman who commemorates me,
In a church founded in my name,
Be granted — when she finishes
Her prayers,
And after listening to the story of my martyrdom —
That the fruit of her womb not die,
At the time of conception,
Or during pregnancy.
And when her time comes,
May her infant be in good health,
And free from any physical or mental deformity.
I ask you also to grant me this request:
May he be never wrongly judged nor deprived of his rights

— In a court of justice or in a suit —
 He who will have, on that day,
 Remembered my life.
 And may he who gives
 — To any church where there are proofs
 That my life is true —
 Candles of oil or wax,
 Be protected from all perils.
 I also ask you, good God,
 That you protect the places
 — Where my life will be written —
 From the power of evil spirits,
 And from fires caused either by lightning or by storm.
 May the evil spirit never visit these places,
 And may they be inhabited by the Holy Spirit,
 In goodness, peace, and charity,
 And may joy, honor, and good luck
 Be bestowed on any man or woman
 Who lives at a place
 Where my life is written.”

[Descending from Heaven, a dove tells Margaret that her requests will be granted. Margaret is then beheaded, and the angels carry her soul to Paradise.]

Theotimus, the man who saw to it
 That Margaret's martyrdom be recorded,
 Along with the prayers she said while in prison,
 Had these writings sent to every church.
 Thanks to him, it became known to everyone
 That Margaret had departed from this earth.
 This news inspired
 Many ill people to go to the place where she was martyred,
 In order to be cured of their afflictions.
 There was no one,
 Upon touching her tomb,
 Who did not find himself healed at once.
 Whether bitten by a snake or suffering from fever,
 They were all cured forever.
 And I can tell you more:

There, songs of angels were often heard,
 As well as the moaning
 Of unbelievers, who came to Margaret's tomb,
 Lamenting
 The miracles made by God,
 On account of his friend who lay there.
 Margaret died at this place.
 May God, who sees everything,
 Grant his glory
 To those who remember her.
 She is now in a good place
 Where she knows only bliss.
 Let us pray to God that everyone
 Be granted to go directly to Paradise.
 Let us say amen, that God may grant our request.