

***The Storie of Asneth and its Literary Relations:***  
**The Bride of Christ Tradition in Late Medieval England**

by

Heather A. Reid  
MA, University of Victoria, 2003  
BA, Canadian Union College, 1997

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

INTD PHD

in the Faculty of Humanities  
Departments of English, Medieval Studies, Greek and Roman Studies, History

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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Dr. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, (Department of English)  
**Supervisor**

Dr. Andrew Rippin, (Department of History)  
**Co-Supervisor**

Dr. Iain Macleod Higgins, (Department of English)  
**Departmental Member**

Dr. Laurel Bowman, (Department of Greek and Roman Studies)  
**Departmental Member**

## Abstract

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This is a study of the fifteenth-century, “Storie of Asneth,” a late-medieval English translation of a Jewish Hellenistic romance about the Patriarch, Joseph, and his Egyptian wife, Asneth (also spelled Aseneth, Asenath). Belonging to the collection of stories known as The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and derived from Jewish Midrash, the story was widely read among medieval religious in England in Latin before being translated into the vernacular for devotional purposes. Part of this study considers and identifies the aristocratic female patron (Elizabeth Berkeley) and author (John Walton) of the fifteenth-century Middle English text, based on literary, historical, and manuscript evidence from the sole surviving copy of the text in Huntington Library EL.26.A.13, a manuscript once owned by John Shirley.

Also explored is the ritualistic pattern of events in the text (original to its Hellenistic origins) that coincides with ancient female initiation rites as we understand them from recent studies of Greek mythology. Centred in the narrative, culminating Asneth’s liminal seclusion, is her *sacred marriage* with a heavenly being. The argument suggests that in the Middle Ages this sacred consummation would have been interpreted as the union of God with the soul, similar to the love union in the Song of Songs. In the Christian tradition it is referred to as *mystical marriage*. Early Christian exegesis supports that Joseph was considered a prefigurement of Christ in the Middle Ages. In her role as divine consort and Joseph’s wife, Asneth would also have been identified as a type of Ecclesia in the Middle Ages—the symbolic bride of Christ. Patterns of female initiation in the story are also reflected in the hagiographical accounts of female saints, female mystics, and the ritual consecration of nuns to their orders, especially where they focus on marriage to Christ.

The similarity of Asneth with Ecclesia, and therefore Asneth’s identity as a type of the church in the Middle Ages, is then explored in the context of the theology of the twelfth-century Cistercian prophet, Joachim of Fiore. The thirteenth-century Canterbury manuscript, Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 288 (CCCC MS 288), which holds a Latin copy of *Asneth* also contains one of the earliest Joachite prophecies in England, known as *Fata Monent*. The study suggests *Asneth* may have held theological currency for early followers of Joachim of Fiore in England.

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## Acknowledgments

In 1910 Henry Noble MacCracken edited a previously unknown Middle English text and called it “The Story of Asneth.” At the time he believed the Latin exemplar to be lost. The Middle English *Asneth* was not printed again until Russell A. Peck edited it for TEAMS Middle English Text Series in 1991, updating information, including about the Latin source that had since been identified. Peck further contextualized *The Storie of Asneth* with regard to the broader studies that had been accomplished since MacCracken first brought *Asneth* to the attention of medievalists; he also gave us the latest information about the fifteenth-century manuscript in which our only Middle English copy survives.

I first read *The Storie of Asneth* as an MA student at University of Victoria, where I wrote a short textual analysis of it for Professor Kathryn Kerby-Fulton in 1998. While I recognized many biblical allusions in the story, the more I read and analyzed, the more confusing and complicated the story seemed to get, instead of the other way around. And what was that encounter in Asneth’s bedroom with the man from heaven all about? When I started reading about the visitation scene in works by those who study the text as an ancient, perhaps pre-Christian one, I was unsatisfied. The tentative answers that were presented seemed to have little to do with how the text might be interpreted by a medieval vernacular audience (at least I couldn’t yet figure out the connection). In any case, I still felt that the key to understanding how the text was understood in the Middle Ages might begin with some sort of ancient context for the story. It was in Laurel Bowman’s class on how to interpret Greek mythology that I first learned about the study of female initiation rites in Greek mythology and instantly recognized a similar pattern also embedded in Asneth’s story; this still left unanswered the question of why a story with this particular ritual sequence would have been valued—or perhaps it had nothing to do with *Asneth*’s later medieval currency at all. Yet I was quite certain *Asneth* would have had some sort of more sophisticated theological value to medieval religious readers or there wouldn’t have been so many (nine surviving) Latin copies. This dissertation represents my attempt (to date) to understand *Asneth*’s importance in the Middle Ages.

Any mistakes in the following study are my own. Anything that is scholarly or makes sense is a result of the support I have received over the years. I owe my thanks first to Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, the kindest, most patient of graduate supervisors. She has constantly put before me new scholarship that might help my study of *Asneth*, including her own study of Joachite texts in England. I had never heard of Joachim of Fiore before, but Chapter Four is a result of the introduction that Kathryn's *Books Under Suspicion* initially provided. I would also like to thank Laurel Bowman, who, as I mentioned above, introduced me to the existence of female initiation rites in Greek mythology (the basis of Chapter Three) and who has provided help with the Hellenistic aspects of the text. I also thank Margot Louis, a member of my MA thesis committee who sadly passed away in 2007. She initially guided me through some of the mythological aspects of the text.<sup>1</sup> Thanks also to Iain Macleod Higgins for his expertise on Middle English Literature in general, but also for further introducing me to medieval courtly love traditions that I have found to resonate with *Asneth*'s story. I would also like to thank Andrew Rippin for introducing me to Medieval Islamic stories about Joseph and pointing out further biblical allusions in *Asneth*. I also owe a huge "thank you" to Jonathan Juilfs, who generously helped me find Latin references for Chapters Three and Four *and* helped me interpret them. Jonathan also helped format and copyedit my dissertation. I have to thank my children, Amanda and Grant, who put up with a mother who was also a graduate student, and my friend, Shirley Kay, who said "just wait" when I thought I would have to quit my PhD program for personal reasons. Finally, my husband, Greg Lefief, gets a big thank you (too big for words) for supporting me in my academic pursuits, following me to California (including once to the Huntington Library) and among other things, presenting me with food at my computer in the last six years.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of Chapter Three was published in the festschrift dedicated to the memory of Margot Louis: "Female Initiation Rites and Female Visionaries: Mystical Marriage in the Middle English translation of The Story of *Asneth*," in *Women and the Divine in Literature before 1700*. A version of Chapter Two is forthcoming in 2012 after it was presented at the "Mapping Late Medieval Lives of Christ" conference, sponsored by the Geographies of Orthodoxy project at Queen's University, Belfast in June, 2010: "Patroness of Orthodoxy: Elizabeth Berkeley, John Walton, and The Middle English 'Storie of *Asneth*,' a West Midlands Devotional Text," *'Diuerse Imaginaciouns of Cristes Life': Devotional Culture in England and Beyond, 1300-1560*, Stephen Kelley and Ryan Perry, Eds., Brepols.

## **Dedication**

For Greg

## Introduction

The Egyptian priest Potiphar's daughter, Asneth, is briefly mentioned just three times in Genesis, once as Joseph's wife (41:45) and twice as the mother of Ephraim and Manasseh (41:50; 46:20). Though seemingly textually marginalized as simply wife and mother in the Old Testament, a rich interpretation of the biblical events surrounding her marriage to Joseph the Patriarch—narrative exegetical embellishment of the type known as Midrash—survives in Greek and a handful of other languages; Syriac and Armenian are among our oldest extant examples.<sup>2</sup> Asneth's sophisticated story gained popularity in Christendom, especially in the tenth century, before being translated from Greek into Latin, likely at Canterbury in the twelfth century.<sup>3</sup> Because it was first thought to be an Early Christian text, modern scholars of religion have only in the last decades begun to study *Joseph and Aseneth* as an important story belonging to the genre of texts known today as Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, extra-biblical texts concerning Old Testament characters or narratives; events of the story fit precisely within the narrative paradigms of Genesis 41. Most scholars now agree, in its earliest form the story likely pre-dates Christianity (1<sup>st</sup> c. B.C.E. to 2<sup>nd</sup> c. C.E.), and is even thought to have influenced important

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<sup>2</sup> For literary studies of Midrashic texts, see for instance, Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) and his edition, *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993). Also see, Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds. *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> For the surviving languages and groupings, as well as the dating of the story, see Christoph Burchard's introduction in his, "Joseph and Aseneth (First Century B.C. – Second Century A.D.): A New Translation and Introduction," *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 2, Ed. J. H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985). On the Canterbury provenance, see Ruth Nisse, "Your Name Will No Longer Be Aseneth': Apocrypha, Anti-martyrdom, and Jewish Conversion in Thirteenth-Century England," *Speculum* 81 (2006): esp. 785n65: "Of the six earliest surviving manuscripts, three are traceable to Christ Church, Canterbury." Reference to a possible early twelfth-century copy appears only as "Assenech" in a catalogue of books from Rochester Cathedral. An early twelfth-century catalogue of Durham Cathedral also lists a text called "Putiphar."

Christian traditions such as the Lord's Supper.<sup>4</sup> Old Testament scholarship has not yet discovered the key to the numeric and astrological aspects of *Asneth*, nor to other prominent symbols in the story, though current research continues to add relevant pieces to this puzzle.<sup>5</sup> Little work has been done on the Medieval Latin or Middle English versions of *Asneth*'s story which this study attempts to help rectify. Found in England in medieval library catalogues and in extant manuscripts that have their provenance in monastic circles, *Asneth* had an especially wide readership in Latin among insular medieval religious.<sup>6</sup> In the early fifteenth century, an aristocratic woman (mentioned in the translator's prologue) commissioned a Middle English verse translation for a vernacular audience, which is the version of the story that began my study and remains my primary text of focus. The late medieval translation was edited by Russell A. Peck in *Heroic Women from the Old Testament in Middle English Verse*<sup>7</sup> titled, "The Storie of

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<sup>4</sup> Christoph Burchard, "The Importance of Joseph and Aseneth for the study of the New Testament: A General Survey and a Fresh look at the Lord's Supper," *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 102-34.

<sup>5</sup> For major studies, see the works of Christoph Burchard, Ross Shephard Kramer, and Edith McEwan Humphrey.

<sup>6</sup> Besides a redaction made popular by Vincent of Beauvais, there remain at least nine Latin manuscripts thought to have been transcribed in England and four more on the continent that may also have had English provenance. On this see Burchard's "Joseph and Aseneth," Introduction, where he also discusses the languages, and groupings. *Asneth* is additionally found on medieval library lists. For instance, see R. Sharpe, et al, eds., *English Benedictine Libraries: The Shorter Catalogues*, Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues 4 (The British Library in Association with The British Academy, 1992): Glastonbury, Somerset, Abbey of the BVM, B45.16 (p.240) *Historia Assanekis sponse Ioseph*. Select list of books noted by John Bale c 1550 Bodl. MS Selden supra 64 Fol. 191r, "lost register may have dated from the second quarter of the 15<sup>th</sup> cent." (p. 238); David N. Bell, ed., *The Libraries of the Cistercians, Gilbertines and Premonstratensians*, Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues 3 (The British Library in Association with The British Academy, 1992): Titchfield, Hampshire Prem Abbey of St. Mary and St. John the Evangelist P6, Catalogue of the Library, 29 Sept, 1400. BL MS Add. 70507 Fol. 24v, .N.VII. *Historia qualiter Ioseph accepit filiam Putifaridis in uxorem* (p. 233). Also see Ruth Nisse "Your Name" where she lists two twelfth-century instances of the text on library lists, noted also in Chapter 4 and in note 3 above.

<sup>7</sup> Russell A. Peck, ed., *Heroic Women from the Old Testament in Middle English Verse*, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series, (University of Rochester Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University Kalamazoo, 1991): 1-68. As of the date of this thesis, a full text edition of *The Storie of Asneth*, edited by Peck, is available online at: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/asnint.htm>. The only other previously printed version of the poem is Henry Noble MacCracken, ed. "The Storie of Asneth: An Unknown Middle English Translation of a Lost Latin Version," *JEGP* 9 (1910): 224-64. MacCracken

Asneth.” My interest in this pre-Christian Jewish Hellenic story as a medieval text (Middle English, but also Latin) attempts to answer the question of its value to medieval readers in England. What was it about *Asneth* that so captured the medieval imagination, both for religious and vernacular audiences?

This study traces the origins of Asneth’s story as a pre-Christian, Jewish Hellenistic mythological account and argues for a ritual, ascetical, and theological continuity from its ancient cultural origins into Christian times. I will argue that a continuity of ideas in the text, especially those surrounding Asneth’s encounter with (in Middle English) the “man com doun fro hevene” (l. 415), the angel who assumes Joseph’s likeness, would have been interpreted in the Middle Ages as an allegory of Christ and his church, as well as the kind of spiritual union implied in the Song of Songs between God and the soul. The story may have also served as a moral example for Christian couples in their practice of *spiritual marriage* (sexual abstinence within licit marriage), and as we shall discover, likely once served as an allegory of Jewish conversion in end-times.

Chapter One is important for its overview and introduction of the story’s plotline, and an initial interpretation of events that occur between Asneth and the angel in their mystical encounter centred in the text. The tension between Asneth’s spiritual conversion and the implied sexual union that occurs almost simultaneously in the erotically charged scene with the angel is key to understanding later theological interpretations of their encounter.

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includes Vincent of Beauvais’ version of the tale in Latin at the bottom of the page, a redaction popular in Europe in the Middle Ages.

After a overview of the plotline and a literary reading of the visitation scene in Asneth's story, Chapter One then includes three versions of Asneth's penitential Psalm; this prayer (the second of her prayers in the narrative) occurs at the end of the seven years of plenty after her sons are born. I have included these excerpts so one may compare a modern English translation of the Greek text to the Middle English version and the Medieval Latin, all of which belong to the B-grouping of Greek texts discussed below. This small sample serves to show just how closely the Medieval Latin, and in turn, the Middle English translation coincides with the Ancient Hellenistic Greek story and therefore just how carefully ancient typology and ritual events were preserved in the story into the Christian Middle Ages.

In Chapter One, I then make more specific comparisons between the Middle English text and the twelfth-century Latin version from which it was derived. A close reading of the text in Middle English compared to Medieval Latin allows us to identify some of the translation practices of the Middle English poet, but a literary reading of the Latin also leaves us with an even stronger impression that Joseph and Asneth procreate while paradoxically remaining virgins, which appears to occur only with the help of Joseph's angelic surrogate in Asneth's bedroom. The Latin text from which the Middle English Poet translated offers at times an even richer possibility for interpreting Asneth's visitation scene with the angel by using word choices that have double, often suggestive, meanings that further allude to Asneth's sexual conjugation (and propagation) with the the angel. A close reading of Asneth as a divine consort is an important springboard for understanding how the story may have been interpreted in the Later Middle Ages as an allegory of Christ and his Church in the Song of Songs tradition.

In Chapter Two I have focused on the Middle English Text and the literary, historical and codicological clues surrounding the only surviving copy of the Middle English translation, of *Asneth* in Huntington Library EL.26.A.13, which I refer to as “The Storie of Asneth” as Peck does. Chapter Two identifies the aristocratic female (Elizabeth Berkeley) who likely commissioned the story’s translation from Latin to Middle English, as well as the poet-cleric (John Walton) who obliged her, adding another text (*Asneth*) to his only other known translation to date—his popular 1410 translation, *Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae*.<sup>8</sup> As we will find out further in Chapter Four, *Asneth* may have had more in common with the feminization of Wisdom, and therefore with the personification of Philosophy of *Boethius*’ fame, than we have imagined. In Chapter Two I also argue for the probability that the fifteenth-century book-collector and book-maker, John Shirley, once owned our only surviving copy of *Asneth* in Middle English, more firmly adding it to the long list of Middle English texts and translations whose sometimes sole survival we owe to his bibliophilic love of books.<sup>9</sup>

Chapter Three begins by focussing (once again) on *Asneth*’s encounter in penitent seclusion with the angel of her visitation scene. I argue that *Asneth*’s story reveals a surprising amount in common with what we know about female initiation rites as they are understood from recent studies of Greek mythology, and therefore begin to establish an ancient context for medieval interpretations of the text. Understanding *Asneth*’s “female

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<sup>8</sup> See Mark Science, Ed., *Boethius, De consolatione philosophiae*, Trans. by John Walton (London: Oxford University Press, EETS, no. 70, 1927). I refer to Walton’s translation hereafter as *Boethius*.

<sup>9</sup> The Middle English version survives only in the fifteenth-century manuscript, Huntington Library EL.26.A.13. I use Russell A. Peck’s edition “The Storie of Asneth” here. I also refer to an edition of the Latin text from the twelfth-century manuscript Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 424 (an epitome of CCCC MS 288) from which R. A. Dwyer demonstrated the Middle English *Asneth* was derived. It is edited by M. R. James in P. Batiffol, “Le Livre de la Priere d’Aseneth,” *Studia Patristica* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1889): 89-115. See also, Dwyer’s, “Asenath of Egypt in Middle English,” *Medium Aevum* 39 (1970): 118-122, and Henry Noble MacCracken, ed., “The Storie of Asneth: An Unknown Middle English Translation of a Lost Latin Version,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 9 (1910): 224-64.

initiation” is important for our understanding of how medieval female religious may have related to *Asneth* more specifically. A section of Chapter Three discusses Joseph, *Asneth*’s counterpart, as the ancient male initiate, and in doing so, considers stories of him in Islamic mythology, as well as Jewish mythology. Considering him in the ancient context of the cyclical year-king-god, who is buried and subsequently resurrected (several times) in various interrelated traditions, helps us understand how typology in *Asneth*’s story would have contributed to reasons Christians interpreted Joseph as a Christ figure.

Once aspects of ancient female initiation are recognized in *Asneth*’s story, one can see similar patterns and motifs associated in a variety of medieval holy women’s accounts, especially where they centre around ritual marriage to Christ. These include the hagiography of Early Christian female saints. Among them John Capgrave’s late-medieval account of the Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria offers surprising typology in common with *Asneth*’s story. We can also recognize markers of female initiation in the accounts of medieval female mystics such as Margery Kempe. Perhaps most important, considering the Latin readership *Asneth* enjoyed in monastic settings, is the similarity of *Asneth*’s “initiation” to ideas at the heart of the ritual consecration of some nuns to their orders in the Middle Ages—symbolic death, marriage, and a celebration of fecundity; key to all of these proposed “types” of female initiation in the Middle Ages is the initiate’s role as divine consort. In her role as the female initiate (reminiscent of those in ancient mythology), *Asneth*’s value to monastic audiences as the symbolic Bride of Christ therefore begins to take further shape. For medieval religious (by far the largest known group in possession of her story) *Asneth*’s erotic encounter with the “man from heaven” would have been seen as a *mystical marriage*, which besides implying a marital

union with the divine, was also understood to represent the soul's union with God. The Christian analogy of mystical marriage was well established through various exegeses on the *Song of Songs* in the Middle Ages, most notably in the twelfth century by Bernard of Clairvaux, and would have enabled medieval readers to easily reconcile the spiritual conversion (pertaining to the soul) and sexual consummation (pertaining to the soul as bride) that occurs simultaneously in Asneth's story. Reading *Asneth's* encounter with the heavenly visitor in the context of mystical marriage would have been natural due to motifs that existed in the text from Hellenistic times that were faithfully perpetuated in the Middle Ages—motifs that would have also helped identify Asneth with Mary in part due to the emphasis on celibate procreation implied in Asneth's story.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Chapter Four further explores the idea of Asneth as (symbolically) the Bride of Christ, identifying her many similarities to the personification of the Christian Church, Ecclesia. I will argue that Asneth would have been seen as a type for the church in the Middle Ages, which may be one of the keys to her popularity from Early Christian times. As modern readers we are drawn to the romantic, adventuresome plot of Asneth's story, much in the same way we are drawn to Arthurian literature, where sexual liaisons are formed, damsels are kidnapped and rescued, and enemies conquered; these kinds of events all happen in *Asneth* too (not unlike hagiographical accounts perpetuated in such collections as *The Golden Legend*). Yet when we get to the end of our understanding of romantic themes and formulaic plots, we are unfamiliar with the more complicated symbolic imagery occupying almost every line of Asneth's story, which has remained mysterious and largely unexplained. When one compares Asneth to theological ideas and

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<sup>10</sup> Peck, 14, also notes that Asneth is “amply adorned with Marian imagery.”

images regarding Ecclesia (including what both Ecclesia and Asneth have in common with Mary), we begin to realize it is likely an understanding of Asneth as a type for Ecclesia that was (at least initially in Latin) at the basis of her story's perpetuation in the Middle Ages.

Once the comparisons between Asneth and Ecclesia are explored, Chapter Four suggests that interpreting Asneth as a type of the Church in the Middle Ages may have had special importance to medieval religious in their quest for answers about the apocalyptic fate of the Christian Church at a time when current events looked rather grim from a number of troubling perspectives. It is a mid-thirteenth-century historical context of salvation history that the text's inclusion (in Latin) in a Canterbury manuscript suggests. *Asneth* is grouped in CCCC MS 288 with apocryphal literature, legends, and prophecy, some of which can be read as allegories of church history. Indeed, these texts are highlighted by one medieval reader in a marginal heading as "certain visions and stories of the captivity of Israel and other history" (my translation). The manuscript also contains letters regarding the thirteenth-century Mongul invasions, clerical corruption, and the political tension between Pope Innocent IV and the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, including as it is revealed in an early Joachite prophecy found in the manuscript. A discussion of Asneth and Joseph in the context of the theology of the twelfth-century Cistercian prophet, Joachim of Fiore, helps us understand why we might find it along with one of the earliest Joachite prophecies known to exist in England, *Fata Monent*. It is implied that *Asneth* may have had apocalyptic significance to early followers of Joachim of Fiore in England, as they attempted to further map out the salvation history of the Christian Church, looked forward to mass conversions of Jews at

the “End of Time” and generally tried to make sense of current tumultuous events occurring across Europe in their lifetime.

### The Text

Though in the present study, I primarily focus on the Middle English verse translation, *The Storie of Asneth*, edited by Russell A. Peck, in places comparing it to the Latin, I have also made use of the more recent English translation from Greek by Christoph Burchard. In key places where one may wish to make further comparisons (in Chapter Three) I have also included words from an edition of the Greek text.<sup>11</sup> In Latin the *Asneth* text is variously called, “The Prayer of Aseneth,” or “The Marriage of Joseph and Aseneth,” (also spelled Asenath, Asenech or Asseneck). Burchard’s Modern English translation from the Greek texts is titled *Joseph and Aseneth*, and most closely resembles the group of Latin manuscripts, L1.<sup>12</sup> L1 manuscripts (circa 1200) were likely all produced in England and form part of the b grouping of manuscripts which Christoph Burchard tells us “houses our oldest witnesses (Armenian, Syrian) and is the largest and most widely distributed group; readings offered or supported by it are very often superior to their competitors on internal grounds.”<sup>13</sup> Burchard bases his preliminary text on b

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<sup>11</sup> The Latin text edited by M. R. James in P. Batiffol is based on Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 424, an epitome of CCC MS 288. It is believed the Middle English *Asneth* was translated from a copy derived from this version. The Latin edition is preceded in Batiffol, by a Greek edition, based on the following four manuscripts from which it is believed the Latin translation was derived: Vatican.Gr.803; Palatin.Gr.17; Bodleian.Barocc.148; Bodleian.Barocc.147 (in Batiffol 39-87).

<sup>12</sup> I have also looked at Philonenko, ed. “Joseph and Aseneth,” an English translation found in *The Apocryphal Old Testament* ed. H.F.D Sparks (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), which is based on the “d” grouping of manuscripts, on which see Burchard “J & A”; for an inclusion of her story, also see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 11<sup>th</sup> Im. 1980): 170-178. Ginzberg’s summary of some of the Midrashic traditions surrounding Asneth, are subtitled chronologically, “Asenath,” “The Marriage of Joseph,” Kind and Unkind Brethren,” and “Treachery Punished.” The only endnote (n.432) within these pages states that it is Jewish in origin, and pseudepigraphic (comp. Schurer, *Geschichte*, fourth edition, III, 399-400). Burchard and others affirm the story’s midrashic origins.

<sup>13</sup> Burchard, “A New Translation” 180.

unless a variant reading proves superior, which is why his English translation from the Greek is at times valuable for comparison with the Medieval Latin and Middle English translations; all belong to the “b” texts. L1 manuscripts are listed as follows:<sup>14</sup>

- 1) Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Peniarth 335 A, f. 166r-182v
- 2) Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 288, f. 88r-97r
- 3) Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 424, o.f.
- 4) Cambridge, Trinity College, B. 1. 30, f. 11r-23v
- 5) Cambridge, Trinity College, O. 9. 28, f. 47r-54r
- 6) London, British Museum. Add. 18210, f. 49v-54v.
- 7) London, British Museum, Cotton Claud. B. IV, f. 61v
- 8) London, British Museum, Egerton 2676, f. 53r-65r
- 9) Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawl. G. 38, f. 90r-96v
- 10) Paris, Biblioteque Nationale, Lat. 14656, f. 151r-162v; Kurzfassung
- 11) Lüttich [Liège], Biblioteque de l’Universete, 184, f. 112v-118v
- 12) Oxford, Bodleian Library, Add. C. 108, f. 17v-20r;
- 13) Wein [Vienna], Nationalbibliothek, 13707, f. 201r-202v;
- 14) [Middle English] San Marino, Calif., H. E. Huntington Library, EL.26.A 13, f. 121r-132r

The Middle English *Storie of Asneth* is surprisingly consistent with Burchard’s modern translation from Greek, though we do see some abridgement in both the medieval Latin and Middle English versions partially for reasons of expediency. Naturally, wording is rearranged for the purpose of alliteration and rhyme, in the Middle English verse translation, and among other small abridgements, the Song of Asneth, as well as the bee scene, are slightly shorter in the medieval versions (both Latin and Middle English).

While there are few differences in the entire Middle English text compared to the Latin, there are some that will remain important evidence of the presuppositions held by the Middle English translator, which are also suggestive of Later Medieval Christian

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<sup>14</sup> Buchard, *Untersuchungen zu Joseph and Aseneth* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1965). For their descriptions see his ‘Der jüdische Asenethroman und seine Nachwirkung: Von Egeria zu Anna Katharina Emmerick oder von Moses aus Aggel zu Karl Kerényi’, in *Gesammelte Studien zu Joseph und Aseneth*, ed. Carsten Burfeind, *Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha* 13 (Leiden 1996): 321-436, esp. 367-70.

interpolations of the story significant to this study. A closer examination of the Middle English translation compared to the Latin will be explored in Chapter One.



## **Chapter One:**

### **The Middle English *Storie of Asneth*: An Overview**

This chapter offers, first, an overview of events in the apocryphal story of Asneth's marriage to Joseph from the Middle English Translation known as *The Storie of Asneth*. After an overview of the plot and an initial literary reading, I have included for purposes of comparison lines from the second prayer of Asneth (occurring after her sons are born) from three translations belonging to the b-group of the Greek manuscripts: Burchard's modern English translation from Greek, the Middle English translation, and the Medieval Latin translation. My purpose is to illustrate how the Latin and Middle English translations retain details from our oldest witnesses of the ancient story (upon which Burchard's English translation is based). A few important differences will be discussed below and in subsequent chapters where they are relevant. In this chapter, I then examine key lines of the Latin and Middle English texts together from the scene where Asneth is visited in her tower room by the angelic "man from heaven." A comparison of the Middle English and Latin allows us to analyze in closer detail part of Asneth's curious encounter with the heavenly visitor, who is also Joseph's look-alike. This sexually suggestive scene was chosen because it is central to what I will later argue (in Chapters Three and Four) made Asneth's story relevant to Medieval Christians. I use M. R. James' edition of the Latin text based on CCCC MS 424 and its epitome, CCCC MS 288, dating from the late-twelfth and thirteenth centuries respectively—the version

from which scholars believe *The Storie of Asneth* was translated.<sup>15</sup> Besides analyzing the visitation scene from a literary perspective, comparing the Middle English with the Latin gives us insight regarding the Middle English poet's translation practices and allows us to see small discrepancies in translation he settled on. This may in turn give us clues about the translator's fifteenth-century vernacular reading audience, which is further explored in Chapter Two.

The fifteenth-century Middle English translation of Asneth's story is fronted with the translator's prologue and ends with his epilogue on the death of the patroness.<sup>16</sup> As I discuss in Chapter Two, he uses the prologue to affirm his humility in undertaking the task of translation, as well as to emphasize the virtues of the great lady who commissioned the work. Intermixed with his statements of his own incompetence, "Dulled I am with dotage, my reson ys me reft" (11), is the paradoxical knowledge of religious imagery and literary insight he exhibits.<sup>17</sup> Our translator is well-attuned to imagery that typically suggests the owl is a symbol of the night and therefore darkness, and juxtaposes it against the sunbeams, a symbol for Christ, associated in the story with

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<sup>15</sup> M. R. James edition of the Latin text is found in Pierre Battifol, "*Le Livre de la Prière d'Aseneth*," *Studia Patristica: Etudes d'ancienne littérature chrétienne* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1889), 89-115.

<sup>16</sup> Russell A. Peck has noted: "In the Ellesmere manuscript a lament on the death of a great lady immediately follows the story of Asneth. It is in the same verse form as *Asneth* and was apparently already attached to the exemplum that our scribe copied. MacCracken considered it to be an epilogue, as if the lady who requested the translation had died and is now lamented [MacCracken "An Unknown" 262-264]. Brown and Robbins, in the *Index of Middle English Verse*, considered it to be a separate poem" 15-16. Peck suggests it may not have been part of the original poem, but written on behalf of the patroness and added to the manuscript after her death. Though it has been contested as original to the translation, both MacCracken and Peck, as I do, associate the lady in the epilogue with the patroness of the *Asneth* translation. The rhyme scheme (as MacCracken noted) suggests it is by the same translator/poet, a probability I will further explore in Chapter Two.

<sup>17</sup> This is consistent with "pro forma" modesty expectations of writers of this period, but here it is also perhaps neatly fitted to the occasion, and reflects a biographical truth. On the modesty topos, see E. R. Curtius, "Affected Modesty," in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953) 83-85.

both Joseph and his celestial look-a-like of Asneth's visionary encounter.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the story the dichotomy of light and dark, day and night, are integral. Similarly the red rose is another symbol for Christ and is contrasted with the mole, which lives underground and is therefore also associated with darkness: "For as the oule ys unable to blase the sunnebemys, / So ys the moselynge molle to jaile [cast forth] the rede rose, / And as able ys the asse to Danielis dremys" (17-19).<sup>19</sup> The fact that the poet has associated the story with the Prophet Daniel's dreams from the Bible further serves to help readers understand that the forthcoming story belongs to a similar mysterious but important genre of apocalyptic texts.<sup>20</sup> The translator chooses images for his prologue that foreshadow significant events in the story, ending with a humble acknowledgement of the task before him and praying that the Lord will "Gyde this werke...and graunte it good endynge, / Utterali the Latyn in Englyshe to transpose" (28-29).

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<sup>18</sup> Jacob is more subtly, but similarly described in terms of the sun in *Asneth* as well. On Joseph as a type of Christ, see Chapter Four.

<sup>19</sup> Medieval bestiaries associate the wild ass, "Onager," with the Devil. See Ron Baxter, *Bestiaries and Their Users in the Middle Ages* (Phoenix Mill, UK: Sutton Publishing, Courtauld Institute, 1998): "The Onager is said to bray on the spring equinox, when the day becomes as long as the night, just as the Devil howls when he sees that the people of light, the faithful, have become as numerous as those who walk in the darkness, the sinners" (37). "The wild ass...represent[s] the Devil. It will also be remembered that the specific aspect of the Devil described...is his howling over the souls of the faithful prophets and patriarchs lost to him" (48). For a summary of the Bestiary tradition that associates both the mole and owl with night or darkness, see <http://bestiary.ca>, which also lists manuscripts and exegetical references. The owl was also associated pejoratively, on account of its hooked nose and slanting flight, with the Jews in the Middle Ages, though there may be no reason to believe our translator associated it this way. In the allegory of the biblical *Song of Songs*, Christ was considered the Rose of Sharon. Also see Theresa A. Halligan, ed. *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtilde of Hackeborn* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1979), 199, where Mechtild of Hackeborn refers to Christ as a rose. "Thanne sayde oure lorde to here: 'Loo, y am pat am a rose ande borne [without] a thorne ande prykyde y am w<sup>th</sup> many thornys.'

<sup>20</sup> Joseph traditionally is often compared to Daniel, who interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream. This is also standard reference with respect to medieval dreams (eg. Langland, Chaucer). See A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976). For a critical explanation of the apocalyptic quality of *Asneth*, see Edith McEwan Humphrey, "The Ladies and the Cities: Transformation and Apocalyptic Identity in Joseph and Aseneth, 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse and the Shepherd of Hermas." *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series* 17 (1995).

What occurs between the translator's prologue and his epilogue, as he has prayed for "Utterali... to transpose," is a very close translation of the Medieval Latin story.<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that he is translating into Middle English verse, a task that requires an even greater range of literary skills than translation alone, the poet accomplishes a remarkably faithful text that rarely departs from the Latin sense. The few omissions and embellishments that do occur become evidence of a Late Medieval understanding of the story. What is even more remarkable is that neither the Latin nor the Middle English versions of *Asneth* vary in much detail from Christoph Burchard's recent scholarly edition, based on the B grouping of surviving Greek texts.

My wish to further understand why the story held currency as both a religious and devotional text in Late Medieval England has motivated me to focus on the Middle English translation as we go through the main points of the story. The details of the events discussed here found in the Middle English text are consistent in Latin, and go back to Greek (the B texts) unless otherwise noted.

### **Assessing the Narrative**

Asneth's story begins in Egypt at a time prefacing an agricultural disaster. According to Genesis tradition, because Joseph accurately interpreted the dreams of his prison inmates, he is called upon to unravel the meaning of the king's troublesome dreams about hard times to come. Pharaoh then favours Joseph with a diplomatic position in Egypt (second only to himself), and appoints him to gather extra stores of grain during the seven years of plenty in preparation for the seven years of famine that his dreams have foretold will follow. For readers familiar with the Old Testament, Asneth's story is

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<sup>21</sup> Burchard, 247, in Charlesworth, n. "i" indicates that a doxology to Asneth may actually be traditional to the end of the story based on *Genesis* 50:22-26, however the epilogue does not have a Latin precedent, and is therefore original to the Middle English version of the story.

easily understood in the context of the events that occur in *Genesis* 41:29-31. It specifically begins in “The firste yeer of seven yeeris of plenteus abundance” (34).<sup>22</sup> Joseph has come to the country of Heliopolis to gather the grain of that region, which is where Asneth is introduced.<sup>23</sup> In a detailed introduction to the priest Potiphar’s daughter, we are told that she is “eyhtene yeer age,” is a “virgine” and “the most comely creature / Of Egipt” (48-51). She is not like the “dowhtres of Egipt in here resemblance,” but looks like the Hebrew women, Sarah, Rachel, and Rebecca (52-55), helping to foreshadow her place among these important mothers of Israel. Many men have wanted her, but she has haughtily rejected them all to date: “Dispisyng eche man deynusly, and proude of her corage” (69). She lives in the center of Heliopolis (a suburb of Cairo today) in ten tower rooms adjacent to her father’s home—presumably a temple compound—with her seven handmaidens who, like her, have never been in the company of men. Much detail is given with regard to dates, numbers, geographic placement of windows, clothing, etc., which is indicative of the complicated symbolism and allusiveness in the story. Readers are meant to liken Asneth, who is ripe for marriage, to her lush, fertile garden, which is also described in some detail where the trees are literally bending under their prolific burden: “faire behonge / With frutes that were delectable.” Within the enclosure of her garden there is also a “cundite...that ran as cristalle cleer, / That moisted the trees lustily and dide to hem gret chere” (99-102), adding to the image that germination takes place

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<sup>22</sup> Numbers in brackets following the Middle English text are line numbers in Russell A. Peck’s edition, *The Storie of Asneth*.

<sup>23</sup> The idea that the great Egyptian pyramids were built for Joseph’s grain storage was perpetuated in the fourteenth-century *Mandeville’s Travels* and earlier sources, on which see Iain Macleod Higgins, ed. and trans., *The Book of John Mandeville with Related Texts* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2011) esp. p. 32 and n. 85. In the Middle Ages, this idea would have added to the monumental feats Joseph’s character was understood to have accomplished in ancient times.

here. Despite her desirability, every attempt to marry off Asneth has been frustrated by her refusals, which is about to be repeated with Joseph.

Joseph sends word that he intends to take his ease at Putiphar's home, which is an honor since Joseph is a high-ranking officer in Pharaoh's court. Putiphar reveals his plan to Asneth to marry her to Joseph, praising him as Pharaoh's diplomat and a man of the Hebrew God, but Asneth rejects this proposal, sight-unseen, exclaiming her disdain by stating that she will not be degraded in a union with the son of a herdsman, a slave, and an ex-convict! "Of hym I have disdeyne. / A futif he ys, by bargayn bouht, and more I say yow pleine, / That herdis sone of Chanan his lady wold have fuyled. / In prison therefore he was put and of al worshyp spuyled (148-51).<sup>24</sup> She further claims Joseph is a fraud, stating that his ability to read dreams is of no significance because the old wives of Egypt had that knowledge and he was not needed in the first place.<sup>25</sup>

Subsequent to her haughty replies, Joseph is announced at the gates, and Asneth is sent to her quarters, however despite her claims of repulsion, her curiosity prompts her to watch his arrival from an east-facing window. Significantly, Asneth's first sight of Joseph, who is described in terms of the sun, is in the East where the sun rises. Upon Joseph's arrival the porter's son is ordered "the gatis up to sprede" (168). As Asneth sees Joseph approach her home, she immediately begins to understand her mistake. She (and

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<sup>24</sup> In the Genesis account, Joseph is jailed because Potiphar's wife, after trying to seduce Joseph unsuccessfully, spitefully accuses him of trying to molest her.

<sup>25</sup> Theological essays on *Asneth* all agree that the story is a conversion story. Further to that I suspect the story represents a Jewish usurpation of fertility traditions, such as that of Isis and Osiris, who preside over both fertility and death rites in Ancient Egypt. Howard Clark Kee recognized similarities between conversion in Asneth to aspects of the Cult of Isis, on which see Kee's, "The Socio-Cultural Setting of Joseph and Aseneth," (*New Testament Studies* 29): 400, and Randall Chestnut's, *From Death to Life : Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth* (Sheffield, England : Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 49. Asneth may also be compared to the Egyptian grain goddess Neith, for whom she is named, on which see Peck, 19, who cites *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Jerusalem Ltd., 1972), vol. 3: "Asenath," by Nahum M. Sarna, col. 693. [Hebr. Meaning in Egyptian "she belongs to, or is the servant of [the goddess] Neith," daughter of Poti-Phera, the high priest of On (Heliopolis).]

readers of the text) are in awe of the way Joseph is described in majestic, symbolically pure language; his chariot is being drawn by white horses, his clothing is all white, and he is holding the olive branch of peace in his hand. He is almost god-like: “as the sunne fro heven, with his bemys / Radiant” (194-95). Joseph enters the hall and everyone honours him except for Asneth who remains in her tower rooms, but by now she recognizes him as divinely appointed and a saviour of Egypt: “Allas that ever I dispised hym or made hym resistance / Godis son, I wot, is ful noble of alliance, / And the saveour of al Egypt, withoute variance” (198-200).<sup>26</sup> Asneth is immediately so taken aback at her mistake in refusing him that she wishes her father would now just give her to Joseph as a servant, let alone a wife.

In the meantime Joseph asks about the girl in the window. He doesn't like the attitude he perceives, thinking she is wanton: “For Joseph dred wonton wymmen, that good men do perverte” (218). The story explains that “Alle faire femelis of Egypt he had in hevyness, / For thei desired to slepe with hym, he was so amiable; / But he dispised hem and here menis – in clenness he was stable” (226-28). Joseph's virginity is emphasized here and earlier when Pharaoh tells Asneth that Joseph is “a maide clene as ye be, so virgine he ys specialle” (143) and also later when we are also told that “he was chast and virgine pure, and clene in continence” (220). Joseph's virginity is therefore contrasted in the text with his anxiety over being constantly sexually pursued, which is consistent with his experience in other Jewish Midrashic traditions where he must ward

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<sup>26</sup> That she refers to him as God's son and Savior is evidence that Christian readers would have equated Joseph with Christ.

off women who desire to seduce him as Potiphar's wife does in biblical tradition.<sup>27</sup>

Joseph then asks Putiphar to have the strange woman (Asneth) removed so that she doesn't harm him, whereupon Putifar convinces Joseph of his daughter's virtue. Joseph then asks for her and receives her to himself as a sister, allowing her to kiss his hand only; because of his purity he will not allow Asneth to defile his mouth with a kiss for the reason that she worships false gods and eats sacrificial meals.

Soon after Joseph departs, promising to return in eight days. When Joseph leaves Asneth "wepte sore to the sunne siled west" (274). Joseph is further associated with the sun here, when his departure is associated with the setting sun, the absence of light. This is the point in the story that Asneth begins lamenting in earnest her initial reception of him, and repents of her position in Egypt and her pagan ways. At first she grieves in her tower with her seven maids, refusing to eat: "Bred ne water wolde she noon, by no maner mene" (275). When night comes, they all sleep, except for Asneth who lies "wakyng alone...knocking here brest...tremblyng" (277-78). She later "wails" and "sobs" so loudly that she wakes her maids, but despite their efforts she will not unbar the door of the room where she has secluded herself and tells them: "Mi heed yt aketh grevusley; on bed therefore I lye. / I am so sik in al my membris, that I may not rise / To open the dore" (294-296). When she is sure her maids have gone to bed, she gets up to retrieve ashes from the compound gates and from an adjacent room, "a blacke robe, a cloth of sorwe and deelee" (which we are told was for a brother who had died), returning to her room in secret, where once more she "schytte the dore with barre and bolt" (299-302). Separated from even her best friends, she removes and rejects all that symbolizes Egypt,

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph is the only male virgin mentioned in the Old Testament (on which see Burchard "J & A", Introduction). His sexual purity and steadfastness in the face of traditional attempts on his virtue may have been attractive to medieval male monastic readers—those reading the story in Latin.

throwing her rich clothing, jewelry, idols, and sacrificial food out the windows for the dogs on the street below to devour. She puts on the black mourning robe, “bond her leendis [loins] with saccloth for penance, / And did an here [hair shirt] heve upon here bodi” (322-23). The hair shirt is a Latin embellishment perpetuated by the Middle English poet, which adds a particularly medieval emphasis to Asneth’s penance.<sup>28</sup>

Dressed in a black robe, sackcloth, and (in the Middle Ages) a hair shirt(!), she pours ashes everywhere, onto the floor and onto herself, and cries so many tears that they turn to mud. She remains in this half-starved, half-crazed, dirty and depressed state for seven days:

In the mornynge when she roos, with fen [mud] sche was fuyled,  
 That with the teris and askes [ashes] were medled so in same,  
 Sche fil again flatt on here face, here body so sche spuyled  
 And lay there til hit was nyht, Asneth by here name.  
 So sche meked here by seven daies, that noble worthi dame;  
 The eyhte day the cokkys crew, the day began to sprynge,  
 The mayde a lytel lefte up here heed, ful faynt of fastynge  
 After she roos on here knees, feble sche was and feynt  
 And lifte up here heed a lite, and syhed wondir sore.  
 The maide was meked, and made megre, and with sorwe atteynt  
 (328-37, square brackets mine)

.....  
 Desolate maide and desert [isolated], of comfort destitute (341)

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<sup>28</sup> Burchard’s translation from the Greek reads: “And she took a piece of sackcloth and girded it around her waist. And she loosened the clasp of the hair of her head and sprinkled ashes upon her head. And she scattered the ashes on the floor and struck her breast often with both hands, and wept bitterly, and fell upon the ashes and wept with great and bitter weeping all night with sighing and screaming until daybreak” (p. 216, 10:14-16). In Latin, this becomes: *Et accepit pellem saccum, et circumcinxit circa lumbos eius et circumposuit cilicium tristicie, et tutudit utraque manu sua pectus, et ploravit amare, et cecidit super cinerem, et flevit planctu magno et amaro cum suspirio et stridore per totam noctem usque mane* (James p. 99, ll. 1-6).

In addition to her pathetic physical condition, her community has also excluded her. In her lengthy repentance speech, she states that her parents have now rejected her for desecrating their gods:

Mi fadir, my modir, and my kyn, thei wel me have in hate,  
 For I have disparlid al here goodis, and cast hem underfote,  
 And forsake me for here doughter, and with me debate.  
 (342-44)

.....  
 Receyve me, Lord, for fadir and modir refuse me with bale  
 And seyn, ‘Asneth is not oure doughter,’ to grete and to smale  
 ‘For sche hath destroyed oure godis of goold, and gyfe hem  
 in conculcation’ (394-95)<sup>29</sup>

Isolated, emaciated, disowned, and utterly self-effaced, she finally manages to rise from the muddied floor where she stands beneath the East window of her tower room. She appeals to the Israelite god to save her in a song of repentance that lasts for eleven verses. On the brink of death, in the darkness of night that precedes daybreak, dressed in black, which is further emphasized by the fact that she is also covered with mud from the ashes, mixed with her tears, she repents among other things of not marrying: “Yett moreover in my mynde with sorwe I marke and note, / That al my lovers that me wowed, I hated in alle wyse” (346-47). The fact that she has been unwilling to marry and therefore reproduce (discussed further in Chapter Three) is perhaps emphasized when she wraps her loins in particular with saccloth. At this point in the story, when her humility could not be greater, Asneth’s salvation is imminent.

On the eighth morning (the same day Joseph is scheduled to return), Lucifer, the Morning Star, appears through the Eastern window of her tower room and splits in two,

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<sup>29</sup> That Asneth’s parents reject her, I discuss in the context of female initiation and conversion in Chapter Three below; however, many medieval religious also experienced family tension for giving up earthly families for the monastic life, and therefore may have related to this aspect of Asneth’s conversion, in any case.

revealing a “man com doun fro hevene” (415) standing before her. We learn he is a “prince of Godis hous” (420), just as readers understand that Joseph is a prince of Pharaoh’s house. Asneth has earlier referred to Joseph as “Godis son,” therefore he can be interpreted as a prince of God’s house as well. Among the numerous similarities that can be noted between Joseph and the angel is that they are both heavily embellished in terms of the sun, but to clinch it, the angel looks almost exactly like Joseph: “Sche lyft then here heed and saw a man like almost / Joseph” (423-24). In fact our Middle English translator adds that he is Joseph’s “dere friend” before the angel goes on to say (as in the Latin and Greek texts) that he will give her “into wyf to Joseph” (459). But what follows is a ritualistic account that suggests that it is the angel who sexually consummates marriage with Asneth, before Joseph arrives on the scene; we should understand the angel to be Joseph’s spiritual proxy somehow. He begins by telling her to remove her black robe, wash the ashes from her face and hands and put on a new linen robe:

The aungel saide to Asneth, “Do of thi blak haire,  
 And thi garnement of drede, the saccloth, do away;  
 Smyte the askes fro thi heed, and washe thi face faire,  
 And thi handis with rennyng water; do on thi riche array,  
 Thi lynnyn robe, untouched newe, that glorious ys and gay,  
 And gird the with the double ceynt of thi virginité  
 And then com to me agayne, and I shal speke to the. (433-39)

Asneth does as he has instructed, including putting on a “white robe” (441) and a new “theustre vail...for virginal excellence” (444-45). Yet right away the angel tells her to remove her veil (that which represents her virginity): “Lai don thi vail; discovere thi hed in haste” (447). In a lengthy blessing he proclaims she shall marry Joseph, but in the same blessing he also equates Asneth with the maid Penance (in Latin *Penitencia*), who “renoveleth [renews] virgins clene to Goddis dere blessynge” (473):

For penaunce ys the dere douhter of hiest God in hevене,  
 And entyndyng upon maidenēs and loveth you gretly,  
 And praieth for you every hour to God, I telle the evēne,  
 And for alle repentant in Godis hie name mekly.  
 Yt maketh maidenēs to reste in hevēne in place arayd sikerly,  
 And renoveleth virgines clene to Goddis dere blessyngē,  
 And ministreth hem joye and blisse in wordlis withoute  
 endyngē. (468-74)<sup>30</sup>

These lines remind us of Asneth's present virginal state, but also seem to suggest she will be renewed, or remain a virgin through all eternity. The angel also tells Asneth to put on her "garnementis / Of weddyngē" (l. 482) for Joseph's arrival, yet at this point, in a provocative move dressed in her wedding garments, her virginal veil removed, Asneth invites the man from heaven (who looks just like Joseph) to sit on her bed. She assertively guides him there by gripping his robe, telling him that no man or woman has ever before sat there (509). Next, in a time-honored symbol for sex, she offers to feed him from her "celar" [cellar], inviting him to eat and drink according to his "desire":

Breed and wyn fro my celer, ful swete and redolent;  
 And when ye have ete and drunke then aftir your desire,  
 Ye mai folwe forth your way after your entent. (511-13)

At this point the angel asks her to bring him a honeycomb, but because she "had non redy she stood al dismaid" (518) and offers to send a child to the field for one. Instead he tells her again to enter her cellar, where she miraculously finds a honeycomb "of a gret assise...white as the snowe, clene and pure in kind" (526-27). Heavenly beings eat of this, he tells her, and all who come to God in holy penance shall eat of the comb that the bees of Paradise made using the dew of roses, and those who eat of it shall never die.

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<sup>30</sup> The sense that Penance helps renew virgins is more explicit in Latin: *Et est penitencia filia altissimi, et intendens super virgines, et amat vos valde, et pro vobis rogat omni hora altissimum, et pro omnibus penitentibus in nomine dei excelsi patris eorum. Facit virgines, et requiescere eas facit in loco quem preparavit in celis, et renovate eas, et ministrat eis in eterna secula.* (p. 103, ll. 12-17).

Sharing this heavenly meal, he eats some and places some in her mouth, and then tells

Asneth:

Lo, thou hast ete of the bred of lyf,  
 And thou art enoynted with holi crème, and thi flesh fro this day  
 Schal be renewed, and thi bonys cured from al strif,  
 And thi vertu nevere faile; the soothe now I the say.  
 Thy juvente schal have non age, thi beauté schal laste ay.  
 Of alle that fle to oure Lordis name, God and Heavene King,  
 Thou schalt be as cité build of joye, withoute endyng.

(552-58)<sup>31</sup>

It is such references to the “bred of lyf” and other Eucharistic-like images in *Asneth* that have puzzled scholars and caused Christoph Burchard to theorize that *Asneth* (a pre-Christian text) actually influenced the New Testament Lord’s Supper ritual, for these images are original to the earliest extant copies of the story.<sup>32</sup>

Following this the angel restores the life-giving honeycomb he feeds to Asneth into its previous intact state, and with his finger makes a cross-like gesture along the comb from north to south and east to west, which leaves a trail of blood, an event that also goes back to Greek versions of the story. Then bees with purple wings emerge from the comb (567-68). They encircle Asneth and build a honeycomb in her hand (consistent in Latin, but in Greek versions, they build the honeycomb on her lips). The bees also eat from the comb before flying East into Paradise. The man from heaven calls Asneth a “cité bild of joye” (558), and we learn that he has renamed her “Cité of Refute [Refuge]”

<sup>31</sup> *Dixitque ei* : “ *Ecce comedisti panem vite, et uncta es crismate sancto, et ab hodierno die carnes tue renovabuntur, et ossa tua sanabuntur, et virtus tua erit indeficiens, et iuventus tua senectutem non videbit, et pulcritudo tua in eternum non deficiet. Eris sicut metropolis edificata omnium confugientium ad nomen domini dei regis seculorum.* (p. 105, ll. 23-28).

<sup>32</sup> See his “The Importance.” Burchard’s recent translation of the above passage from Greek reads: “And the man said to Aseneth, ‘Behold, you have eaten bread of life, and drunk a cup of immortality, and been anointed with ointment of incorruptibility. Behold, from today your flesh will flourish like flowers of life from the ground of the Most High, and your bones will grow strong like the cedars of the paradise of delight of God, and untiring powers will embrace you, and your youth will not see old age, and your beauty will not fail for ever. And you shall be like a walled mother-city of all who take refuge with the name of the Lord God, the king of the ages’” (in Charlesworth, p. 229, 16:16).

(610), also naming her maidens the seven pillars of the city for which Asneth now stands (583-84).<sup>33</sup> With his touch the comb is consumed by fire, and the man from heaven departs East toward Heaven in a chariot drawn by four horses resembling flame, thunder and lightening.

Immediately after the angel departs, Joseph is announced at the gates, and Asneth alone goes to meet him. This time when Joseph “enters” the walled temple compound, the gates are significantly closed behind him: “And shitte out alle straungeris that no man schul hym dere [bother]” (599); his seclusion with Asneth is further emphasized by the fact that the couple is now unchaperoned: “Sche ladde him in by the right hand. Here fadir was absent” (623-24). For a girl of who it states was raised completely separately from the company of men, it is a bold move. Here the reader must recognize the walled city as a metaphor for Asneth herself to fully appreciate the significance of Joseph’s entrance. Now that his role as husband has been ordained, the gate is closed and guarded with Joseph inside. Joseph’s right as husband is shown in the typology and language, but never with the intimate detail we have seen with the angel, yet when he “enters” it is symbolically an act of sexual consummation in itself. Asneth herself is now the city (named so by the angel) and therefore through her “gates” Joseph may be understood to enter Asneth in marriage. Joseph has also dreamt that Asneth is to be his wife, and the next day Joseph approaches Pharaoh asking to be allowed to marry her, and Pharaoh presides over the formalities. It is briefly mentioned that Asneth conceives and bears Manasseh and Ephraim, after which there is a lengthy *Song of Asneth* (highlighted further

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<sup>33</sup> In Burchard’s translation from Greek (16:17, p. 229), she is called a “walled mother-city of all who take refuge with the name of the Lord God” (my emphasis). Asneth’s identification with a city is discussed further in Chapter Four.

below) where she again laments her former proud ways. Then the first half of the story, which also ends the seven years of plenty, is complete.

The second part of Asneth's story starts with the beginning of the seven years of famine, "hunger scars and chere" (718). Here we find more details with regard to numbers and dates that we should take to be typologically important although scholars have not yet entirely determined their significance. Asneth announces to Joseph that she will go to visit and pay homage to the patriarch Jacob, who she refers to as "Mi fadir" (724). Israel is described as the wise old man and god-like: "His heed white as the snow, his berd to the brest right / Al white was sittynge, and his yees schynyng as liht" (733-34), and Asneth defers to him and accepts his blessing in this scene.<sup>34</sup> Joseph's brothers Simeon and Levi are in attendance. There seems to be a lack of transition here, because it states immediately within the same stanza that Asneth is afterwards walking in Pharaoh's house, where she is spied by Pharaoh's son, the prince, who later languishes in love for her and doesn't know what to do. We are reminded here that he had previously wanted to marry Asneth. The Prince sends for Simeon and Levi, attempting to bribe them if they will help him overthrow his father and kill Joseph so he may rule Egypt in his father's place with Asneth as his queen. They refuse whereupon the prince succeeds gaining co-operation for his sinister plot from Dan and Gad, but because Simeon and Levi apprise both Pharaoh and Joseph of the prince's plan, he is not successful.<sup>35</sup> The

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<sup>34</sup> Though it is not made explicit in this scene, Asneth and Joseph's visit to Jacob after their sons are born may be understood to relate to the tradition of Israel blessing the sons of Joseph. Levi doesn't gain a land inheritance because his is a tribe of priests, therefore one of the other twelve sons of Jacob receives two shares of the inheritance. Jacob names Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Mannaseh, as his own and blesses them as inheritors of Israel.

<sup>35</sup> In Old Testament stories of the former prophets, Dan and Gad are often the scapegoats of the stories. They are the two of the twelve sons of Israel who exhibit disappointing behavior, coming too late to battles to be of any help, and who are generally the mischief-makers. There is also a history of their hatred for Joseph

prince lays an ambush for Joseph and Asneth, but Benjamin, in Joseph's absence, gives chase and kills the prince, saving Asneth. Benjamin wants Dan and Gad slain for their part in the planned assassination and kidnapping, but Asneth intervenes: "And myldely with softe wordis her wrathe sche gan swage" (863). She convinces Benjamin that his father would not be able to bear the removal of two sons—tradition has it that it nearly killed Jacob when he once believed Joseph was dead after his brothers sold him into slavery (Gen 37:35). Asneth's intercessory role in this scene goes back to Greek versions of the story, yet medieval audiences would have associated Asneth's actions here with her nobility. One of the expectations of a queen in the Middle Ages was her intercession with the king on behalf of the people. This and other features would have helped make the story popular among aristocratic audiences in Late-Medieval England, which will be discussed further in Chapter Two.<sup>36</sup>

At the end of the story, the prince's bloody body is strapped to a horse and sent back to Pharaoh who mourns his son's treachery and the loss of his heir and soon dies of grief and old age. This leaves Joseph to rule Egypt with Asneth by his side for forty-eight years, after which time he "gaf his diademe to Pharaois sone fre, / That was at his fadir deth at the brest soukyng." The story ends by telling us that because upon the king's death, Joseph raised Pharaoh's (other) son from infancy, Joseph "was called in Egipt fadir to the kyng" (880-82).

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having to do with their mothers' status as handmaids as well as the rivalry between northern and southern tribes (Ginzberg v. II, 207, 216-218).

<sup>36</sup> See Paul Strohm, "Queens as Intercessors," *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992) 95-119.

### **Asneth's Prayer of Repentance**

Before discussing more specific translation choices made by our Middle English poet, I have included here The Song of Asneth or "Asneth's Psalm" from the three translations discussed in the introduction and above (Modern English, Middle English, and Latin) for the purpose of comparison. We will see a close relationship between these three translations, since all three belong to the b-grouping of texts derived from our oldest examples of the Greek manuscripts. Their close correlation in narrative detail (albeit with some exceptions) helps to illustrate that the Middle English translation (twice removed from the Greek text) retains important details in terms of ancient typology, a realization that becomes further important in subsequent chapters.

In the prayer compared here, Asneth offers a version of the kind of penitent annunciation of her former life we find in the scene following Joseph's departure, when she has isolated herself in her tower rooms, and where along with her visible penitential actions (the removal and rejection of her worldly possessions, the gathering of ashes, and doning of black clothing) her sorrowful words seem to conjure the Angel and God's blessing. What is compared below, however, is her second penitential prayer, which, while it recalls her earlier (pre-marital, pre-conversion) humiliation and sorrowful words, is a prayer that she recites following the birth of her two sons, which also happens to end the first half of the story, coinciding with the end of the seven years of plenty of Genesis tradition. Both prayers would have been appealing in the Middle Ages (in Latin and in Middle English) as a devotional exemplum. In Peck's Middle English edition, this second prayer is found on lines 684-716; however, for comparison's sake, let's begin with Christoph Burchard's modern English translation of the Greek text which reads:

And then Aseneth began to confess to the Lord God and gave thanks, praying, for all the good (things) of which she was deemed worthy by the Lord:

I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned;  
before you I have sinned much,  
I Aseneth, daughter of Pentephres, priest of Heliopolis,  
who is overseer of everything.

I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned;  
before you I have sinned much.  
I was prospering in my father's house,  
and was a boastful and arrogant virgin.

I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned;  
before you I have sinned much.  
And I have worshiped strange gods who were without number,  
And eaten bread from their sacrifices.

I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned;  
before you I have sinned much.  
Bread of strangulation I have eaten,  
and a cup of insidiousness I have drunk from the table of death.

I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned  
before you I have sinned much.  
And I did not know the Lord the God of Heaven,  
and I did not trust in the Most High God of life.

I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned;  
before you I have sinned much.  
For I trusted in the richness of my glory and in my beauty,  
and I was boastful and arrogant.

I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned;  
before you I have sinned much.  
And I despised every man on earth,  
and there was no one who achieved something before me.

I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned;  
Before you I have sinned much.  
And I had come to hate all who had asked my hand in marriage,  
and despised them and scorned them.

I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned  
before you I have sinned much.

And I spoke bold (words) in vanity and said,  
 “There is no prince on earth who may loosen the girdle of  
 my virginity.”

I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned;  
 before you I have sinned much.  
 But will be the bride of the great king’s firstborn son.

I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned;  
 before you I have sinned much,  
 until Joseph the Powerful One of God came  
 He pulled me down from my dominating position  
 and made me humble after my arrogance  
 and by his beauty he caught me,  
 and by his wisdom he grasped me like a fish on a hook,  
 and by his spirit, as by bait of life, he ensnared me,  
 and by his power he confirmed me,  
 and brought me to the God of the ages  
 and to the chief of the house of the Most High,  
 and gave me to eat bread of life,  
 and to drink a cup of wisdom  
 and I became his bride for ever and ever.<sup>37</sup>

In the Middle English *Storie of Asneth*, edited by Peck, this portion of the poem reads:

And after Asneth seurlly to God sche mad here mone,  
 Remembringe here olde synne by privé meditacion,  
 And after mournynge thus sche saide, with gret lamentacion,  
 “Lord, synned I have synned, moche synned in Thi presence,  
 Asneth, dowhter of Putifar, pardone myn offence.

“Most foulest in my fadir hous I was of governance,  
 A maide enhansed and right proud, I have synned, Lord, to The,  
 Fals godis herid withoute nombre to my daliance,  
 And ete bred of her sacrifice so synned in that degré;  
 Synned, Lord, I have synned in thi sihte fre,  
 And ete of bord of pestilence, bred that is straunglinge,  
 And drunke of the chalis of defaute, in thi presence synnyng.

“And of The, Lord God of hevene, I was ignoraunt,  
 Not tristinge in the hihe God that art lyf eternalle.  
 I have synned, Lord, in Thi presence, my synne is displiant,  
 For I triste on my richesse and my beauté withalle.  
 I have synned, Lord, lift up with pride, confesse so I schalle:

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<sup>37</sup> “J & A, A New Translation,” 237-38, ll. 19-34.

I was dispisyng every man on erthe with errour;  
There stood never man in my presence that I gaf favor.

“Alle my woweris I dispised; of hem I hadde disdeyn.  
Synned, Lord, I have synned in presence of Thi face,  
For I saide there was no prince, with glorie that was veyn,  
That the girdel of my maydenhed was worthi to unbrace.  
I willed to marie the kyngis sone, so proud was my trace.  
Synnyng, Lord, I have synned contynuyng in Thi presence,  
Til Joseph the myghty man of God tok me with excellence;

“For as the fyssh by the hook ys take by distresse,  
So ys beauté drow me to hym by vertuus provydenche,  
And ladde me to Almighty God with gret gentynesse,  
And did me taste of the drynke of the eternal sapience.  
And now I am mad his conthorall by his advertence  
Ay to dwelle an byde with hym in wordle withoute ende.  
Synned, Lord, I have synned; remission thu me sende.”<sup>38</sup>

The Medieval Latin reads:

Postea dixit Aseneth: Peccavi, domine, peccavi, in conspectus tuo, multum peccavi. Ego Aseneth filia Putifaridis sacerdotis Helyupoleos, --peccavi, domine, peccavi in conspectu tuo, multum peccavi,--ego eram vilissima in domo patris mei, et eram virgo elata et superba, --peccavi *etc.*, -- et colui deos quorum non est numerus, et comedi et calicem defectus potavi ex mensa pestilentie, -- peccavi... --et nescivi dominum deum celi, eque operavi in altissimo deo vite, --peccavi... --quia speravi in divitiis glorie mee et super pulcritudine mea fui elata et superba, -- peccavi. . . --et eram dispiciens omnem hominem terre, et non erat vir qui posset astare in conspectus meo, -- peccavi. . . --omnes arrabuntes meo despexi et dedignata sum, -- peccavi...--et dicebam quoniam non est vir princeps terre qui dissolveret mihi cingulum virginitatis, --peccavi...--sed ero sponsa filii magni regis primogeniti,--peccavi...-- usquedum veniret Ioseph fortis dei, qui comprehendit me sicut piscem per hamum pulcritudine sua, et sapientia sua, et virtute sua extraxit me, et adduxit me deo viventi et

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<sup>38</sup> ll. 684-716. The Later Middle English inclusion that has Asneth asking for remission of sins (l. 716) is consistent with the conservative way the cleric interprets and embellishes other portions of the story. See Chapter Two.

altissimo, et dedit mihi calicem sapientie et facta sum ei  
sponsa in secula seculorum.<sup>39</sup>

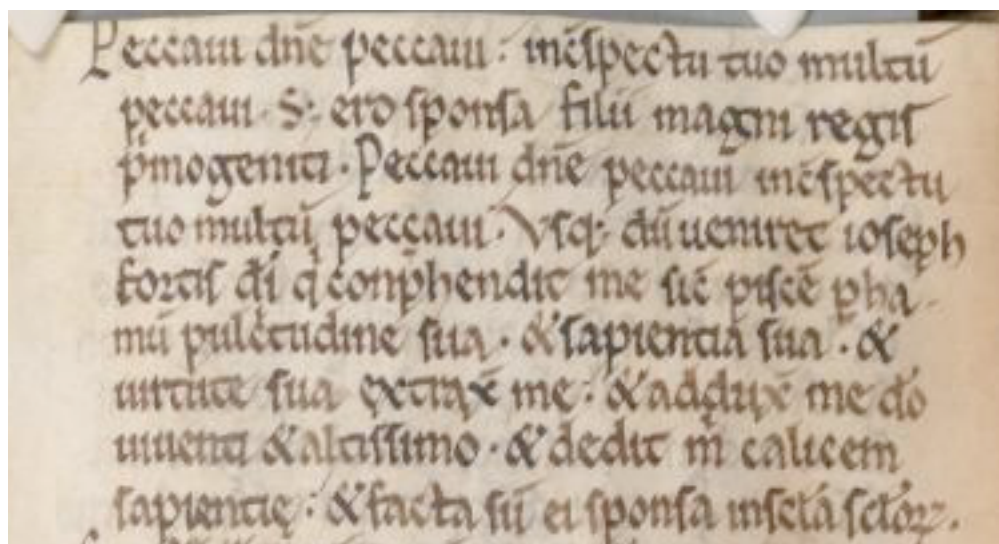
This portion of CCCC MS 424, on which James's Latin edition is based, from f. 56r -56v,  
is included below:<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> James' edition in Batiffol based on CCCC MS 424 and 288, in *Studia Patristica*, p. 109-110, ll. 22-31, and ll. 1-12. The elipses and dashes occur in James' Latin edition, perhaps for emphasis. Images of CCCC 424, on which the edition is based, bear no such punctuation marks. See fol. 56r-56v of CCCC MS 424 (image below) for these lines.

<sup>40</sup>The manuscript may be viewed online at:  
[http://parkerweb.stanford.edu/parker/actions/page\\_turner.do?ms\\_no=424](http://parkerweb.stanford.edu/parker/actions/page_turner.do?ms_no=424). I would like to thank the Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, who kindly gave me permission to include images here from Cambridge Corpus Christ College MS 424, fol. 56r-56v.

Peccavi dñe peccavi. in conspectu tuo multum  
 peccavi ego asenech filia putifarum sacerdo-  
 tis hely poleos. Peccavi dñe peccavi. in con-  
 spectu tuo multum peccavi. Ego enim vilis-  
 sima in domo patris mei. & erant iurata elata  
 & superbia. Peccavi dñe peccavi in conspectu tuo  
 multum peccavi. & colui deos quorum non est nume-  
 rus. & comedi panem de sacrificiis eorum. Pecca-  
 vi dñe peccavi in conspectu tuo multum pec-  
 cavi. panem suffocantem comedi. & calicem de-  
 fectum potavi ex msa pestilentie. Peccavi dñe  
 peccavi in conspectu tuo multum peccavi. &  
 nescivi dominum deum celi. neque speravi in altissi-  
 mo deo vitæ. Peccavi dñe peccavi. in conspec-  
 tu tuo multum peccavi. quia speravi in di-  
 vitis carne mee. & super pulchritudine mea fui  
 elata & superbia. Peccavi dñe peccavi in conspec-  
 tu tuo multum peccavi. & erant despiciens omnem homi-  
 nem. & non erat vir qui possit stare in conspec-  
 tu meo. Peccavi dñe peccavi in conspec-  
 tu tuo multum peccavi. Omnes arrabuntel  
 meos despexi. & dedignata sum. Peccavi  
 dñe peccavi. in conspectu tuo multum pec-  
 cavi. & dicebam quoniam non est vir princeps



CCCC MS 424 f. 56v

Though the sentiment in each translation of Asneth's prayer remains the same, there are a few distinctions we can note. The Latin translation, much like Christoph Burchard's modern English one (each translated from the Greek) retains, without variation, the rhythmic, repetition of the refrain: "I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned / Before you I have sinned much." (*Peccavi, domine, peccavi, in conspectus tuo, multum peccavi*). This is just the type of penitential moment that would have attracted the attention of medieval monastic communities, including the repetition in prayer that was valued for devotional meditation. The type of affective devotion Asneth's story would have evoked in the Middle Ages is one of the qualities of the text I discuss further in Chapter Three. While medieval religious would have been compelled by the almost hypnotic reminder (over and over again), of Asneth's confession to sin, our Middle English translator apparently does not feel quite as compelled to retain this type of rigid repetition for a vernacular (aristocratic) reading audience—at least not nearly to the extent that it is precisely repeated in his exemplar. Instead, where our Middle English

translator does include a version of the line “I have sinned, Lord [etc.]” (several times), he delightfully varies the wording, making it flow in a much less monotonous fashion—the stanza affects this choice too. Moreover, our Middle English translator has embellished Asneth’s prayer with a concluding line as a way to remind his lay audience of the reason for all this confession and prayer in the first place, helping to further Christianize it at the same time. Asneth, as every medieval reader does, needs remission of her sins, which she finally requests: “remission thu me send.” This addition seems to further reassure the reader (as the angel has already promised), that Asneth will indeed be forgiven in “world without end,” as readers who do likewise can expect to be. Following are the variations of the refrain the Middle English poet includes:

“Lord, synned I have synned, moche synned in Thi presence, (687)

.....  
I have synned, Lord, to The, (690)

.....  
Synned, Lord, I have synned in thi sihte fre, (693)

.....  
in thi presence synnynge (695)

.....  
I have synned, Lord, in Thi presence, my synne is displiant, (698)

.....  
I have synned, Lord, lift up with pride, confesse so I schalle: (700)

.....  
Synned, Lord, I have synned in presence of Thi face, (704)

.....  
Synnynge, Lord, I have synned contynuyng in Thi presence, (708)

.....  
Synned, Lord, I have synned; remission thu me sende.” (716)

We see in the way he has varied these lines, not the strict translator of a religious liturgical text (though he does a remarkably faithful job), but a talented literary poet, who by all accounts helps to make an ancient text current for his vernacular readers, including manipulating it to conform to prestigious rhyme royal verse.

While there are few differences in the entire Middle English text compared to the Latin, there are some other noteworthy embellishments that will remain important evidence of the presuppositions held by the Middle English translator. As we can observe, both the Latin and the Middle English translations are, in any case, very closely comparable to Burchard's modern English translation (and therefore the Greek Texts of the B grouping), to which the Latin also belongs. A closer examination of the Middle English translation compared to the Latin is explored next.

### **Translating *The Storie of Asneth* from Latin**

A close reading of the Latin text helps shed further light on key scenes and ideas as well as the translation decisions made by the fifteenth-century poet. Though it is remarkably faithful, as we have seen above, in places subtle but important differences in meaning can be seen when one compares just a few lines of the Middle English Verse translation of *Asneth* with its Latin counterpart. In embellishing, if only minimally, the Middle English translator has painted an already exciting picture with even more drama and colour, creating for medieval lay readers what must have been a story they “just couldn't put down.” The fact that the Middle English translator seems to at times carefully tiptoe around explicitly sexual terms or implications may attest to the fact that he was likely writing for an aristocratic, female audience, which is discussed further in Chapter Two. But the fact remains that most of the text is accurately accounted for down to significant details. The translator adds very little and leaves out very little compared to his source and retains a sense for what I argue is an implicit sexual theme at the centre of the story.

My attempt at understanding the Latin text, uncovers, if I am correct, a richness that has not or cannot be fully conveyed in English.<sup>41</sup> This is especially true where a Latin word has multiple meanings, some which leave open more erotic possibilities of meaning even if the more usual, primary usage is mundane. It is important to draw attention to these possibilities, because multiple meanings allow for an even more sexually explicit reading of the visitation scene in Latin. Because of the limits of the English language, an equivalent word in Middle English at times renders a singular meaning, and therefore loses the poetic possibilities of the word play in Latin.

The portion of the text I draw attention to for comparison is from pages 101-104, in James' Latin edition designated XIV and XV. In the medieval verse translation, it is approximately lines 412 to 516, from where Asneth sees the star, Lucifer, up to the point where she brings the angel food and wine from her storeroom. As I discuss what I consider to be similarities and notable differences, I refer to my own numbering of the portions of the texts (numerically ordered according to the storyline), which occur together in charts at the end of this chapter, not the line numbers as they appear in cited sources.

Besides producing a translation that conforms to rhyme and pattern of Middle English Verse (by sometimes switching the order of phrases and words, and by adding some description), the Middle English translator importantly captures the "sense" or spirit of this exciting story, often making it more dramatic than the original with his slight

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<sup>41</sup> I have made use of Charles T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds, *A Latin Dictionary*, founded on Andrews' edition of Freund's Latin dictionary. Revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten by Charlton T. Lewis, Ph.D. and Charles Short, LL.D. Oxford. Clarendon Press. 1879, available at: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/resolveform?type=exact&lookup=caput&lang=la>, as well as the Oxford Latin Dictionary (OLD), 1968-82. For medieval Latin definitions I have also consulted R. E. Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List From British and Irish Sources* (London: Oxford University Press, first published 1965, reprint, 2008) and J. F. Niermeyer, *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976).

embellishments. In #1, for instance, after seeing the star, Asneth not only speaks, but the poet reminds us that she does so in her own “langage,” that is, a language other than ours, reminding readers of her foreignness. Drawing attention to Asneth’s foreign language would help to heighten the awareness of an exotic setting, as well as an exotic heroine. A more descriptive quality in his writing may also be seen (# 3), where Asneth answers the angel, “Lo, my Lord” but is apparently so nervous that not only do all her limbs tremble with fear, but according to the Middle English poet, she can hardly breathe as well; only afterwards (i.e., after speaking) “therwith sche took breth.” Similarly, the angel does not just answer her, but answers her “in haste.” In small ways, the Middle English translator helps turn the narrative, imaginatively, into even more vivid, life-like, action. Though these slight embellishments may be seen as a case of turning the demands of writing in metrical verse to good effect, they also offer some character development in the Middle English translation that is not quite as vivid in the Latin.

The Middle English poet also achieves a style that makes the story more immediate, personal, and comforting to the reader. In #4, he tells Asneth not only to stand, and that he will tell her his words, but to “be nothyng agast” because he is going to speak his words in order “to cumfort of thi gost.” In Middle English the angel is like a kind uncle or sympathetic priest, rather than the almost austere commander we sometimes get the sense of in the Latin version.<sup>42</sup> In Middle English, he reflects, even more so than in Latin, the sympathetic and comforting God he is portrayed as serving. He also calls himself “Joseph’s dear friend” (#14), and Asneth refers to him as her friend (#23), which is not original to the Latin. The fact that the translator has emphasized the

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<sup>42</sup> In Latin the angel also tells her to be comforted and not afraid in several places, but not quite so often as he does in Middle English.

angel is a “friend” may be reflective of the Late Medieval emphasis on affective piety, or a more personal approach to a relationship with God. It resonates with what we know of the increasing focus on the humanity of Christ in later medieval devotional literature and practices, including in vernacular works translated or compiled for readers that included the laity.<sup>43</sup> Certainly this would have been a stronger feature of the fifteenth century than it was in the late-twelfth century when *Asneth* was translated into Latin.

Asneth’s visitor is an angel the reader is meant to trust. We are meant to lose our fear of him, just as Asneth loses her fear of him. This talkative, kind, almost jovial guest, in Middle English does not austere say “speak” *loquere*, he reassuringly, sanguinely, invitingly, says, “Spek on, Asneth, thi bone I graunte the” (#26):

The angel said, “Spek on, Asneth, thi bone I graunte the.”  
 And sche tok hym by the palle, and said with vois ful free,  
 “I pray the, lord, to sitte a while upon this bed so clene,  
 For man ne womman satt never theron by no maner mene  
 [.]”

*Qui dixit, “Loquere.” Et dixit Asneth extensa manu sua  
 apprehendens pallium eius, “Domine, precor te, sede nunc  
 paululum super lectum istud, quoniam mundum est et  
 incontaminatum, et vir aut femina non sedit aliquando  
 supre illud . . .*

**[The angel] said, “speak.” And Asneth with her  
 outstretched hand laying hold of his cloak said, “Lord,  
 I beg you, sit now a short while upon the bed because it**

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<sup>43</sup> Works such as Nicholas Love’s Late Middle English, *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus* and others texts such as Walter Hilton’s (attributed) *Prickyng of Love*, and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which are discussed in Michael G. Sargent’s introduction to his recent edition of Love’s *Mirror: Nicholas Love’s Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Critical Edition Based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 6578 and 6686*. (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992) ix-cxlii. What may be of further note is that these vernacular devotional works made available to the laity, the “symple soules” referred to time and again by Love, the kind of meditation on Christ (with an affective emphasis on his humanity) that was previously only accessible to medieval religious. The encouraged goal (included for the laity) was the ecstatic experience that was often described in sexual terms as mystical marriage between God and the soul. I argue further in Chapter Three and Four that this concept may have been interpreted as being at the centre of Asneth’s story in the Middle Ages.

**is clean and uncontaminated and neither man nor woman has ever sat upon it....**

Yet at other times, the Middle English poet translates literally as in #12. In Latin the mud literally materializes “from the ashes *and* your tears.” In Middle English it is similarly “the fen, mad of the askes *and* of gret terynge”.

The aungel said, “Asneth, maide, of good chere thu be,  
Oure Lord hath herd thi prayer and thi confession fre;  
Thi fast he saw of seven dayes, and thi lou mekyng,  
And the fen, mad of the askes and of gret terynge.

*Dixitque angelus domini: “Confortare, Aseneth virgo.  
Exaudivit dominus confessionem tuam et deprecationem  
tuam, quoniam respexit humilitatem tuam et inedia VII  
dierum, et lutum a cineribus et lacrimis tuis.*

**And the Lord’s Angel said: “Be consoled, maiden Asneth. The Lord clearly heard your confession and your plea, because he considered your humility and seven days’ fasting, and also the mud made from the ashes and your tears.**

We can note the wording in this scene—*Exaudivit dominus confessionem tuam et deprecationem tuam, quoniam respexit humilitatem tuam*—echoes that of the *Magnificat*, known also as *The Song of Mary* (one of the most ancient Christian liturgical hymns), based on Luke 1:45-46, where a pregnant Mary, upon the occasion of her visit to her cousin Elizabeth states: “he [the Lord] hath regarded the humility of his handmaid” (Douay-Rheims). This would be just one more reason medieval audiences would have identified Asneth with Mary.

Though the poet does at times slightly embellish the text, it is none-the-less truly amazing that for the most part, our translator gives medieval audiences a literal rendering of the original as also with #2:

And sodeynly sche saw a selcouth siht.

Sche saw faste by the sterre how hevene partyd in two,  
 And a wondrous gret liht lemed out in that stede,  
 And Asneth ferd fel on here face, on the askes tho,  
 And a man com doun fro hevene, and stood upon here heed,  
 Callynge Asneth by here name

*Et adhuc prospiciebat, et ecce prope luciferum finditur  
 celum, et apparuit lux magna et ineffabilis. Et vidit Aseneth  
 et cecidit in faciem super cineres. Et ecce vir de cello  
 descendens stetit super capud Aseneth, et vocavit eam ex  
 nomine.*

**She looked and behold/lo the heavens were divided near  
 Lucifer [the morning star/Venus], and a great and  
 indescribable light was visible. And Asneth saw it and  
 fell on her face upon the ashes and there was a man  
 descending from heaven who stood above/over Asneth's  
 head and called her by name.**

Where the translator fails to specify “Lucifer” in these lines, we realize he has already covered it, naming the star, Lucifer, in a previous line “The sterre Lucifer in the est shewed his visage” (408), corresponding to the Latin: *ecce stella lucifer ascendit versus orientem celi*, giving us an antecedent. This allows for some expediency and flow in the writing without altering meaning. The Middle English emphasis is on the “selcouth siht”; however, it could also be a matter of our poet being sensitive to readers who would have associated the name of the star with the fallen angel. In the case of the latter, perhaps instead of pressing a point, he purposely opted to be more vague.

In other places, he has indeed left out very small portions of the text for expediency, picking up the pace just a bit, as in #8:

*Festinavit Aseneth, et intravit in thalamum suum secundum,  
 ubi erant repositorie ornatus eius, et aperivit archam suam,  
 et accepit stolam candidam*

Asneth hasted forth anon and did as he desired,  
 And caste on the white robe with precious parentis,

**Asneth hurried and entered into her other/next wedding chamber where her richly adorned repositories were and she uncovered/opened her box/chest and retrieved the spotlessly clean/white robe.**

Moreover, some meanings, or multiple meanings, in Latin, seem to support a richer connotation than an English word would afford, if it could even be found. As I have suggested above, understanding something of the richness of the Latin text in key parts of the narrative will help as we explore an interpretation of this scene in the context of *mystical marriage* in later chapters. The Latin seems to leave little doubt that the angel and Asneth are meant to fulfill a sexual consummation, as does the Middle English from which I first interpreted the scene in this way. The wording in Latin also alludes to Asneth's symbolic death and resurrection even more explicitly than does the Middle English in this scene.

The usual meaning of the Latin word *caput* [*capud*] is "head," but it can also mean "chief person" "leader" or "physical life" (*Lewis & Short*), in much the same way it does in English. That the man stands at Asneth's head suggests that he is her leader, but in Latin the man from heaven does not simply stand at or over Asneth's head, he may have additionally been understood to stand over her very life, which helps the reader identify his presence with Asneth's symbolical resurrection. Not only can we interpret that Asneth is symbolically dead, but in Latin she seems to be symbolically dead to love. I argue in Chapter Three that Joseph, when she at first rejects him as a marriage partner, becomes "as if" dead to Asneth, and therefore the Latin word for ashes used here seems to neatly correlate with the typology and story-line; *cineres*, while referring to burnt matter, is also

“an emblem of destruction, ruin, annihilation” (*Lewis & Short*).<sup>44</sup> The Latin word *cineres* may therefore have helped reinforce for readers that what Asneth covers herself with is also associated with her rejection of Joseph in the context of destroyed love.

The theme of resurrection in this scene is also further supported in Latin (#13), where the angel states: “hodierno die renovata es et vivificata es,” which I have translated: “**from this day you have been restored and have been brought back to life.**” The Middle English translator renders this: “Lo fro this day thu art renuwed and quicked fro al straf.” In Middle English, what the angel states seems to refer more to a spiritual renewal and arousal (from strife) than a resurrection from an actual physical death, yet I would argue that resurrection of both body and soul is implicit in the Latin.

A reading of the Latin in the context of the angel as a divine consort also allows us to wonder if the words *flamma ignis* are further suggestive of the angel’s sexual purpose in Asneth’s chamber (#4):

*Surge et sta super pedes tuos, et loquar ad te verba mea.”*  
*Et elevavit capud suum Aseneth. Et ecce vir per omnia*  
*similes Ioseph, stola et corona et virga regina*  
*verumptamen vultus eius ut fulgur, et oculi eius ut radius*  
*solis, et capilli capitis eius ut flamma ignis.*

“Arise, and stand on thi feet, and be nothyng agast,  
 And my wordis schal speke to the to cumfort of thi gost.”  
 Sche lyfte then here heed and saw a man like almost  
 Joseph, with scepter, stole, and coroune, his cheer as  
lyhtyng leem,
 And his yes bright shynyng as doth the sunne beem.  
 The heris of hys heed, thei were as flame of fire brennyng,

**“Rise and stand on your feet and I will tell you my words.” And Asneth lifted up her head. And there was a man similar to Joseph in all things: outer garment,**

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<sup>44</sup> It is not entirely different in English, as for instance when one refers to what is left after something is destroyed: “the ashes of my career.”

**and crown, and royal scepter. And yet his face was as lightning and his eyes like a ray of the sun and the hair of his head as a flame/blaze of fire.**

One might construe that the man's hair is not simply like "a blazing fire", since *flamma* can also mean: "the flame or fire of passion, esp. of love," and *ignis*: "The fire or glow of passion" (Lewis & Short). In Latin the man from heaven may have been surrounded more specifically by a fire of love, excitement, and passion for Asneth, adding to the notion that at the basis of the events that transpire during the angel's visit was a sexual consummation, albeit of the highest spiritual significance.

It may also be of note that when the angel discusses what I have interpreted to be the renewal of Asneth's physical virginity for eternity as a result of Penance (personified as a maid beloved by God), our Middle English poet perhaps glosses things over just a bit, creating a slightly less explicit translation (#17):

*Facit virgines, et requiescere eas facit in it quem  
preparavit in celis, et renovat eas, et ministrat eis in eterna  
secula.*

Yt maketh maidenen to reste in hevene in place arayd  
sikerly,  
And renoveleth virgines clene to Goddis dere blessynge,  
And ministreth hem joye and blisse in wordlis withoute  
endynge.

**[Penance] makes virgins, and shall make them rest in the location she made ready in heaven, and restores the same [as before] and she attends to them in the eternal world.**

He translates, "And renoveleth virgines clene to Goddis dere blessynge" (#17), which might be construed as simply a spiritual renewal, as opposed to the possibility that the Latin also suggests a virgin's physical state. While the Latin word *loco* usually means "location" or place, it can also refer to female genitals. Another medieval example

of the use of “*loco*” (and “*locum*”) for female genitalia is in Hildegard of Bingen’s vision from *Scivias* where she describes the birth of Antichrist from Ecclesia’s vagina.<sup>45</sup> Here is an instance in the Latin text where a word “*loco*” may suggest more than its most apparent meaning especially in light of the context of “renewing virgins” the angel relates occurs in heaven. In Middle English it seems that God renews clean virgins, but in Latin there may be an allusion to the idea that Asneth’s very virginity (maidenhead) may be renewed forever.

Finally, in Latin, Asneth’s room is called a *thalamum* (#8), which can mean “a sleeping-room, bedchamber” “A marriage - bed, bridal-bed” or marriage itself: “marriage, wedlock” (Lewis & Short)—a fact that the Middle English translator does not precisely translate:

Festinavit Aseneth, et intravit in thalamum suum  
secundum, ubi errant repositorie ornatus eius, et aperit  
archam suam, et accepit stolam candidam

Asneth hasted forth anon and did as he desired,  
And caste on the white robe with precious parentis....

**Asneth hurried and entered into her other/next wedding chamber where her richly adorned repositories were and she uncovered/opened her box/chest and retrieved the spotlessly clean/white robe.**

In Latin this can be understood more specifically as Asneth’s marriage chamber, not simply her sleeping quarters, which is the word *cubiculum*; this word or others for

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<sup>45</sup> *Latin WORDS*, [loco/locus/loci] references the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, on which further see the *OLD* 1968-82 “locus” (um) (i) or (a) 2. “A part of the body b (pl.) the female genitals.” For translations and a discussion of Hildegard’s vision, see Kerby-Fulton, “Prophet and Reformer: ‘Smoke in the Vineyard,’” *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, Ed. Barbara Newman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998) 70-90. esp. 83, and Burnard McGinn, “Visions of the End,” *Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 101. For the the Latin passage from *Scivias*, see *PL* 197, C 709A – 710C, esp. 709B. *Patrologia Latina*, accessed online August 22, 2011, at: <http://pld.chadwyck.com>.

chamber, or bedroom, might have been used, but in Latin she specifically enters her *thalamum*, distinctive as the place reserved for conjugal relations. In her story it is where she goes to retrieve the pure, new linen garment, and it is into the midst of this marriage chamber (*thalamo*), that she comes to the angel (i.e., he is already in her marriage bedroom: *angelum in thalamo suo primo*) and stands in his view for approval, as a bride (#10). In #20, he instructs her to dress, specifically in a wedding garment, *stolam nuptialem* (which is translated “thi garnementis / Of weddyng”) and to lie down near to him in *thalamo tuo*, and that this is how she is to proceed to / with Joseph. In #26 *lectum* can mean, not simply “couch/bed/lounge/sofa,” but also “A bridal bed” (Lewis & Short). It is the place she guides him to, by gripping his robe, and upon which she invites him to rest. It seems that Joseph will come after the angel (or somehow, mystically simultaneously) for it is the angel who is there, prompting her to lie down next to him, in her wedding garments, in the marriage chamber, ready for a sexual consummation, before Joseph himself returns to Potiphar’s home.

The Latin seems to give more sense of simultaneity than the Middle English; *ipse veniet ad te hodie* means that Joseph will come “today” or “presently” himself *ipse* in person. If the angel emphasizes that Joseph will come in person, the real Joseph (i.e. in the flesh), he seems to be offering another comparison to the spiritual look-a-like who is already occupying this place of honour in the marriage chamber. Just as Asneth has already “stood in view” of the Angel for approval, it seems she will do the same for Joseph who *videbit te et letabitur*.

In the next lines (#21) after the angel has spoken, Asneth has great happiness, or delight/joy *laetitia*, because of the angel’s words:

*Et postquam consummavit angelus domini loquens verba ista, letata est Aseneth leticia magna super sermonibus eius, et adoravit eum super faciem in terra*

And after he had endyd his word, Asneth with consolacion  
Worshiped hym don on the erthe,

**And after the angel of the lord finished speaking those words, Asneth rejoiced with great happiness/joy at his words, and she revered him prostrate on the earth/ground.**

In the context of her story, it is as if the angel's very words have somehow impregnated Asneth, giving us the sense that their encounter has been prolific. Of the words that could have been used for something akin to joy or happiness (*exultatio*, *gaudium*, *felicitas*), the Latin associates what Asneth experiences with a word "laetitia" that, though it means joy, has also been associated more specifically with fruitfulness or fertility.<sup>46</sup>

My theory that the story portrays a mystical sexual consummation between Asneth and the angel seems to be more greatly supported by meanings in Latin; however, that is not to say that the Middle English translator did not do his job. Inevitably some things will be edited in translation. Yet the Middle English translator rendered the story accurately enough from Latin, that, as I mention above, it was from his version that I first found clues and keys to notions of a divine, mystical marriage, and in turn echoes of Near Eastern myth and ritual. The specificity with which the Middle English poet has translated, while managing to make the story even more exciting, and at the same time conforming it to rhyming verse, attests to the translator's knowledge of Latin and considerable literary skills.

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<sup>46</sup> In association with Columella's classical agricultural treatise: Col.2.10.35. See Oxford Latin Dictionary, 1968-82: "laetitia" 2. "fertility (of land); luxuriance, fruitfulness (of vegetation)."

### Examples of Close Middle English Translation

<p>1. [XIV.] <i>Et postquam quievit Aseneth confiteri domino, ecce stella Lucifer ascendit versus orientem celi et vidit eam et gavisata est et ait: "Putasne audivit dominus meus deprecationem meam, quoniam stella hec nuntius et pr[a]eco lucis diei surrexit"?</i></p>	<p>And when sche thus had said, / The sterre Lucifer in the est shewed his visage, / And theof Asneth was ful glad, and seide in here langage, / "Trowest not God hath my prayer herd? The message - lo! - of lyht / Is rise up</p>
<p>2. <i>Et adhuc prospiciebat, et ecce prope luciferum finditur celum, et apparuit lux magna et ineffabilis. Et vidit Aseneth et cecidit in faciem super cineres. Et ecce vir de cello descendens stetit super capud Aseneth, et vocavit eam ex nomine.</i></p>	<p>And sodeynly sche saw a selcouth siht. / Sche saw faste by the sterre how hevене partyd in two, / And a wondirful gret liht lemed out in that stede, / And Asneth ferd fel on here face, on the askes tho, / And a man com down fro hevене, and stood upon here heed, / Callynge Asneth by here name</p>
<p>5. <i>Vidit Aseneth et cecidit in faciem ante pedes eius, et timuit timore magno, et contremuerunt omnia membra eius. Et ait illi angelus domini: "Confortare, Aseneth, et ne timeas, sed elevare super pedes tuos, et loquar ad te verba mea".</i></p> <p>6. <i>Et surrexit Aseneth super pedes suos, et angelus dixit: "Depone cilicium istud nigrum quod induta es, et cinctorium tristicie, et saccum de lumbis tuis, et excute de capite tuo cinerem istum, et lava faciem et manus tuas aqua viventi,</i></p>	<p>And Asneth, frayd of the syhte, fel to his feet for fere, / In so moche that al here membris were meved with tremblynge. / And the aungel saide thenne, "Asneth, nothings the dere; / Be thu cumforted, and rise up, and on thi feet the rere, / And [I] schal speke my wordis to the after myn entent."</p> <p>And Asneth roos upon here feet at his comaundement. / The aungel saide to Asneth, "Do of thi blak haire, / And thi garnement of drede, the saccloth, do away; / Smyte the askes fro thi heed, and washe thi face faire, / And thi handis with rennynge water;</p>
<p>7. <i>et indue stolam lineam intactam novam et gloriosam, et circumcinge te zona duplici virginitatis tue, et accede ad me, et loquar ad te sermons meos".</i></p>	<p>do on thi riche aray, / Thi lynnene robe, untouched newe, that glorious ys and gay, / And gird the with the double ceynt of thi virginité, / And then com to me agayn, and I schal speke to the."</p>
<p>11. <i>Dixit ei angelus; "Demitte theristrum a capite tuo. Et quare tu fecisti istud? quoniam tu virgo es, et capud tuum est sicut viri adolescentuli". Et demisit</i></p>	<p>The aungel saide, "Lai don thi vail; / discovere thi hed in haste. / Why dost thou thus? Thou art maide, thin heed is fair to se, / As the heed of a yonglynge." The</p>

<i>Asneneth theristrum a capite suo.</i>	vail away sche caste.
<i>12. Dixitque angelus domini: "Confortare, Aseneth virgo. Exaudivit dominus confessionem tuam et deprecationem tuam, quoniam respexit humilitatem tuam et inedia VII dierum, et lutum a cineribus et lacrimis tuis.</i>	The aungel said, "Asneth, maide, of good chere thu be, / Oure Lord hath herd thi prayer and thi confession fre; / Thi fast he saw of seven dayes, and thi lou mekyng, / And the fen, mad of the askes and of gret teryng.
<i>15. Et nomen tuum non vocabitur adhuc Asneneth, sed erit nomen tuum Multis refugii, quoniam in te confugient gentes super dominum deum altissimum, et sub alis tuis cooperientur multi confidentes in domino, et in muro tuo conservabuntur attendentes altissimum.</i>	"And thi name schal be called Asneth no more, / But hit schal be Moche-of-Refute, and so men schul the calle, / For peple schul turne to God by the, I warne the bifore, / And undir thi wynggis thei schul be covered, tristyng in God alle, / And attendyng to the hiest God schul be kept in thi walle,
<i>16. Penitencia enim tua exoravit altissimum super te omni hora, et super omnes penitentes in nomine dei altissimi. Et est penitencia filia altissimi, et intendens super virgines, et amat vos valde, et pro vobis rogat omni hora altissimum, et pro omnibus penitentibus in nomine dei excelsi patris eorum.</i>	For thi penaunce hath prayd to Hym for the every hour, / And upon alle other penantes, in Godis name with dolour. / "For penaunce ys the dere douhter of hiest God in hevене, / And entendyng upon maidenes and loveth you gretly, / And praieth for you every hour to God, I telle the evē, / And for alle repentant in Godis hie name mekly.
<i>17. Facit virgines, et requiescere eas facit in loco quem preparavit in celis, et renovat eas, et ministrat eis in eterna secula.</i>	Yt maketh maidenes to reste in hevене in place arayd sikerly, / And renoveleth virgines clene to Goddis dere blessing, / And ministreth hem joye and blisse in wordlis withoute endyng.
<i>18. Et est penitencia valde bona, virgo hilaris semper et modesta et mansueta, et iccirco altissimus diligit eam, et omnes angeli reverentur eam, et ego diligo eam valde.</i>	"Penaunce ys a maide good, glad, and mesurable. / The hiest God hath here in lond, his angelis in reverence, / I love here wel.
<i>19. Et ecce pergam ad Ioseph, et loquar ei, et gaudebit super te, et amabit te, eritque tibi sponsus et tu illi sponsa in secula seculorum.</i>	Now schal I go withoute ony fable, To Joseph and telle of the the wordis of my sentence, / And he schal come this dai to the and see thyn excellence, / And with joye love the well; thi spouse be he schalle, / And wedded wyf to hym in wordlis eternalle.

<p>22. <i>et dixit: "Benedictus dominus duses tuus altissimus, qui transmisit te, et liberavit me de tenebris, et subtraxit me de fundamento abyssi,</i></p>	<p>and said in comendacyon, /          "Blessed be thi God most hiest, that thus the hath sent, / And delivered me fro derknesse and depnesse of my bale;</p>
<p>24. <i>"Nomen meum in celis est scriptum in libro altissimi digito dei in capite libri ante omnes, quoniam princeps sum domus dei, et omnia descripta in libro illo ineffabilia sunt, et non convenit hominibus dicere ea vel audire, quoniam magna sunt et mira valde"</i></p>	<p>The angel saide, "My name is write in Godis book in heven, / With Godis fynger afore al othir in the bokys bygynnyng. / For I am the Prince of Godis Hous, and so I tel the even, / That al that writen is in that boke, hit passed mannys spekyng; / Inconvenient therfore yt ys, to eche man unsyttyng, / To commune or to here of hem that are celestiale, / For thei be gret fro mannys mynde, and wonderfull with alle."</p>
<p>25. <i>Et dixit Asneth, "Si inveni gratiam in conspectus tuo, domine et cognoscam quoniam facies omnia verba quecunque locutus es ad me, loquar nunc ancilla tua in conspectu tuo"</i></p>	<p>Thenne seide Asneth, "Good lord, lat me fynde grace / That I mai knowe that yt be do that thu hast said to me. / Gyf thyn handmaide leve to speke in presence of thi face."</p>
<p>27. <i>et preparabo tibi mensam, et afferam tibi panem, et superpono supra eam et manducabis, et afferam tibi ex cellarario meo vinum vetus et suave olens, et bibes, et postea prosequeris viam tuam"</i></p>	<p>"And I schall make a bord redy, and offre to your plesir / Breed and wyn fro my celer, ful swete and redolent; / And when ye have ete and drunke then aftir your desire, / Ye mai folwe forth your way aftir your entent."</p>
<p>28. <i>Dixitque ei angelus, "Affer cito."</i></p>	<p>The aungel saide, "Bringe yt sone, therto I consent."</p>

### Examples of Middle English Translation with Notable Small Discrepancies

<p>3. <i>Illa vero pre timore non respondit. Et vocavit eam secundo dicens: "Aseneth, Aseneth". Illa autem dixit: "Ecce ego, domine, quis es? Annuntia mihi". Et dixit: "Ego sum princeps domus dei et omnis exercitus altissimi.</i></p>	<p>sche answered not for dred, / And he called here the secounde tyme, and saide, "Asneth! Asneth!" / Then sche answered, "Lo, my Lord," and <b>therwith sche took breth</b>, / And saide, "Tell me who thou art," and he answered <b>in haste</b>, / "I am a prince of Godis hous, and of Hys hevenly ost.</p>
<p>4. <i>Surge et sta super pedes tuos, et loquar ad te verba mea". Et elevavit capud suum Aseneth. Et ecce vir per omnia similes Ioseph, stola et corona et virga regina verumptamen vultus eius ut fulgur, et oculi eius ut radius solis, et capilli capitis eius ut flamma ignis.</i></p>	<p>Arise, and stand on thi feet, <b>and be nothyng agast</b>, / <b>And my wordis schal speke to the to cumfort of thi gost.</b>" / Sche lyfte then here heed and saw a man like almost / Joseph, with scepter, stole, and coroune, his cheer as lyhtyng leem, / And his yes bright shynyng as doth the sunne beem. / The heris of hys heed, they were as flame of fire brennyng,</p>
<p>8. <i>Festinauit Aseneth, et intravit in thalamum suum secundum, ubi errant repositorie ornatus eius, et aperit archam suam, et accepit stolam candidam</i></p>	<p>Asneth hasted forth anon and did as he desired, / And caste on the white robe with precious parentis,</p>
<p>9. <i>et cinxit se zona duplici virginitatis sue, una zona super lumbos suos et una desursam mamillarum suarum, et excussit cinerem de capite suo, lavitque manus suas et faciem suam aqua viva,</i></p>	<p>With double ceynt gird aboute, and diversly atired / Above the brestis, and on the lendis gird on here garnementis,</p>
<p>10. <i>et accepit theristrum lineum novum intactum gloriosum, et coperuit capud suum, et venit ad angelum in thalamo suo primo, et stetit in conspectus eius.</i></p>	<p>A lynen newe theustre vail with riche ornamentis; / Here hed was voluped with that vail, for virginal excellence, / And returned to the aungel, and stood in his presence.</p>
<p>13. <i>Gaude, Aseneth virgo, quia scriptum est nomen tuum in libro viventium, et non delebitur in eternum. Ecce ab hodierno die renovata es et vivificata es, et manducabis panem benedictionis, et bibes potum incorruptionis, et ungueris crismate sancto.</i></p>	<p>"Be glad, virgine, for thi name ys write in the book of lif, / And schal never be don away, but ay in remembrance. / Lo fro this day thou art renuwed and quicked <b>fro al strif</b>, / And thou schalt ete of blessyng bred and have drinke of plesance; / Thou schalt be enoynted with</p>

	holi creme of glorious purveance.
14. <i>Letare, Aseneth virgo, ecce dedi te hodie sponsam Ioseph, et ille tuus sponsus erit in secula seculorum.</i>	And, more, I gif the into wyf to Joseph <b>my dere frend</b> , / And Joseph into thi spouse in wordle withoute end.
20. <i>Ecce nunc audi me, Aseneth virgo, et indue stolam nuptialem iacentem adhuc in thalamo tuo, et omnia ornamenta nuptialia circumpone, et exorna te ipsam ut sponsam, et procede in obviam Ioseph. Ecce enim ipse veniet ad te hodie, et videbit te et <b>l[a]jetabitur.</b></i>	“And now here me, Asneth, maide: do on thi garnementis / Of weddyng now in thi chambre, and atire the with alle, / And enbelise thi bright beauté, with precieuse ornamentis, / And go forth to mete Joseph, thi spouse specialle. / For he schal come and se the today, <b>in vesture imperialle.</b> ”
21. <i>Et postquam consummavit angelus domini loquens verba ista, <b>letata est Aseneth l[a]jeticia magna super sermonibus eius</b>, et adoravit eum super faciem in terra</i>	And after he had endyd his word, Asneth with consolacion / Worshiped hym don on the erthe,
23. <i>et benedictum nomen eius in eternum. Tibi vero quod est nomen? Annuntia mihi, quatenus laudem et glorificem te in secula seculorum” Dixitique ei angelus domini:</i>	Blessed ever be His name, Lord God omnipotent.” / And to the angel afterward these wordis sho gan availe: / “What is thi name? Tel me sone, and give yt me in tale, / That I mai worship and thanke the, <b>my lord and my frend</b> , / And glorifie thi grete name, in wordle without ende.”
26. <i>Qui dixit, “Loquere”. Et dixit Asneth extensa manu sua apprehendens pallium eius, “Domine, precor te, sede nunc paululum super <b>lectum</b> istud, quoniam mundum est et incontaminatum, et virautfemina non sedit aliquando supre illud,</i>	The angel said, “Spek on, Asneth, <b>thi bone I graunte the.</b> ” / And sche tok hym by the palle, and said with vois ful free, / “I pray the, lord, to sitte a while upon this bed so clene, / For man ne womman satt never theron by no maner mene,



**Chapter Two:  
Elizabeth Berkeley and John Walton:  
The Patroness and the Poet of *The Storie of Asneth***

The matter of patronage and authorship of the fifteenth-century Middle English *The Storie of Asneth* has so far remained a mystery, one I hope to begin to solve in this chapter. Formal and linguistic clues in the Middle English text (including in the author's original prologue and epilogue) point to the identity of the aristocratic female patron as well as to the poet she gently urged to translate "the Latyn of that lady, Asneth Putifar" (4). While such clues and what we know of the corresponding contextual history of these persons remains circumstantial, a further exploration of literary and linguistic evidence helps strengthen our case for Elizabeth Berkeley's patronage and John Walton's authorship of *Asneth*. This is especially true when we compare the *Asneth* translation with John Walton's well-known 1410 translation *Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae*, a text we know was commissioned by Elizabeth Berkeley.<sup>47</sup> Finally, codicological evidence that suggests the famous fifteenth-century book collector, John Shirley, once owned the surviving copy of *Asneth* in Huntington Library EL.26.A.13 seems to give further strength to my theory. The idea that Elizabeth Berkeley commissioned John Walton to translate *Asneth* is even more intriguing when we are presented with the facts concerning Shirley's close family relationship to both Elizabeth Berkeley and her husband, Richard Beauchamp, the thirteenth Earl of Warwick, all of which I will discuss further below.

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<sup>47</sup> See Mark Science, Ed., *Boethius, De consolatione philosophiae*, Trans. by John Walton. I refer to Walton's translation hereafter as *Boethius*.

### The Patroness and Poet

In his original prologue and epilogue, the translator of *Asneth* has left clues about himself and his patroness.<sup>48</sup> In the first, the poet describes himself as old with somewhat failing abilities, offered in feigned protest of the lady's request, thus meeting expected humility *topoi* of the later Middle Ages. The epilogue states that the lady passed away at an age considered by the poet to be "out of seson", "untymely", and "agayn the order of nature". That she was able to solicit an English translation of a Latin text suggests she was an influential woman, perhaps at a prime age in life. The possibility that the aristocratic female patron may have had some sort of connection to the book collector, John Shirley, who we know owned at least the first portion of EL.26.A.13, prompted my original search for a patroness among women of power in Shirley's milieu. And yet, setting aside her connections to Shirley for the time being, we know that Elizabeth Berkeley commissioned John Walton to translate a literary work before this. Her early death also coincides with our dates for the manuscript based on other evidence; all are factors that make Elizabeth Berkeley of primary consideration. Before we consider her in more detail, however, let us first look at textual evidence in a comparison of Walton's *Boethius* with *Asneth*.

John Walton was an Augustinian Canon of Oseney, Oxford, and although his precise origin is unknown, surviving records of him occur in documents from Oxford.<sup>49</sup> His monastery at Oseney had founding connections to the Warwick family, and this,

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<sup>48</sup> Neither similarly occurs in the Latin version. See James's edition in Batiffol based on CCCC MS 424 and 288, the version of the story from which R. A. Dwyer demonstrated the Middle English *Asneth* was derived.

<sup>49</sup> See information in Mark Science's introduction repeated in the entry for John Walton in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, hereafter cited as ODNB: "John Waltoun had been a canon of Oseney Abbey, a religious house confined to Augustine Canons, the site of which is at present occupied by St. Frideswide's Church Oxford." Walton was also known as "Johannes Capellanus" or John the Chaplain (Science xlvii-iii). I have made use of the ODNB here and afterwards online at: <http://www.oxforddnb.com>.

along with the existence of a possible exemplar for *Asneth* at the Collegiate Church, Warwick, makes for an intriguing connection.<sup>50</sup> The Latin manuscript from Warwick forms part of the *miscellanea*, Cambridge University Trinity College MS 0.9.28, and the hand of the *Liber de Aseneth* is dated fourteenth century.<sup>51</sup> While not conclusive, a Warwick connection is also consistent with the early suggestion by Henry Noble MacCracken that, based on its dialect, *Asneth*'s poet was likely a cleric or chaplain living not far from Warwickshire and not long after the death of Chaucer.<sup>52</sup> Whether or not Walton himself originated from Warwick, records place him at Oseney before he succeeded John Trevisa as Berkeley chaplain in 1402. Richard Beauchamp was married to Elizabeth Berkeley by that time.<sup>53</sup> Sir Thomas Berkeley (1368-1417), Elizabeth's

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<sup>50</sup> On the Warwick founding connections to Oseney see Ralph Hanna III, "Sir Thomas Berkeley and His Patronage," *Speculum* 64 (1985): 902.

<sup>51</sup> For a description see, M. R. James, *The Western Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge: a Descriptive Catalogue*, no. 1440, p. 472, "From the Collegiate Church of Warwick(?)": Item 7, fol. 47 "Liber de Aseneth"; Item 10, fol. 59 (also 14<sup>th</sup> c.) "Testamenta xii patriarcharum filiorum Iacob translata a ven. Lincoln. Epo. a Greco in latinum." [*Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* is a text that is often found together in MSS with *Asneth*.]; Item 12, "Cent. xv. fol.101, Fundatio Collegii de Warwick per Thomam de Bello Campo Sancte matris ecclesie filiis uniuersis. Ends fol. 106a with confirmation by the Prior of Worcester." The online catalogue bibliography for this ms references N. R. Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain, Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks 3*, 2nd ed. (London, 1964), Warwick St Mary: (rabbit.trin.cam.ac.uk/James/O.9.28.html). Given its date as well as its location, this could even be the exemplar for the early fifteenth-century Middle English translation, however this has not yet been established. In any case, similar Latin copies circulated. Another copy of *Asneth* in Latin is reported from the Glastonbury Abbey of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Somerset, from *English Benedictine Library Catalogue: Glastonbury, Somerset, Abbey of the BVM, B45*. The select list of books was noted by John Bale c. 1550, Bodl. MS Selden Supra 64, fol. 191r: "lost register could date from the 1st quarter of the fifteenth century." Hanna, "Sir Thomas Berkeley," mentions Somerset as a location of several Berkeley manors, citing Nigel Saul, *Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1981), 3-4, 62.

<sup>52</sup> Peck, 6. See also H. N. MacCracken, "Notes: The Source of 'The Story of Asneth'," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* XI (1912): 291-92.

<sup>53</sup> Margaret Connolly mentions that a 1408 English translation of *De re militari* by Vegetius is attributed by some to Walton's authorship and Thomas Berkeley's patronage. See her *John Shirley: Book Production and the Noble Household in Fifteenth-Century England* (Brookfield: Ashgate, 1998) 115. Hanna (900) questions this attribution to Walton. David Fowler names a John Bonjon as Trevisa's successor in 1402. See his, *The Life and Times of John Trevisa, Medieval Scholar* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995) 104, on which also see Hanna. It may be that Walton was only one of a "profusion" of domestic chaplains associated with Berkeley at any given time (Hanna 892). Whether Walton succeeded Trevisa in 1402, or whether he was a Berkeley or Warwick chaplain in some other capacity, he was connected with the Berkeley's by at least 1410 when he translated *Boethius* for Elizabeth Berkeley.

father, was one of the patrons of John Trevisa, an Oxford-educated priest, who is famous for the *Dialogue Between the Lord and the Clerk on Translation* and *Epistle to Thomas, Lord Berkeley, on the Translation of Higden's Polychronicon*, both found prefacing his *Polychronicon*.<sup>54</sup> Carrying on the tradition of patronage in the household, Elizabeth Berkeley's 1410 commission of Walton's *Boethius* is confirmed in manuscript colophons which name the two and is corroborated in an early printed edition of the text in 1524, where their names are inscribed within the ending of the printed text by way of acrostics in four epilogue verses subtitled: "NOMEN Transferri procurantis", "COGNOMEN", "NOMEN Translatoris", and "COGNOMEN Translatoris", respectively.<sup>55</sup>

Walton translated *Boethius* largely into rhyme royal verse, and *Asneth* was also translated into rhyme royal verse. Independent studies confirm each is in a West Midland's dialect.<sup>56</sup> The place where we might find the most similarity in two translated works by the same author, however, are in the original prologues. True to the widespread humility topos in the Middle Ages, the translator begins *Asneth's* prologue justifying an

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<sup>54</sup> See Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans, eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999) 130.

<sup>55</sup> On the 1410 translation date, see Mark Science, where in his introduction he includes the ending verses; The 1525 edition was printed by Thomas Richard of Tavistock, on which also see Brian Donaghey, Irma Taavitsainen, and Erik Miller, "Walton's Boethius: From Manuscript to Print," *English Studies*, 5 (1999): 398-407, where they demonstrate that the Tavistock monk used Royal Copenhagen MS Thott 304,2 (the only known ms of Walton's Boethius which contains the commentary) as his exemplar and that based on Iain Doyle's comments, Thott 304,2 is possibly Elizabeth Berkeley's presentation copy. The first letter of each line in the translator's ending verses (found in the Tavistock edition, but not in Thott 304,2, because the manuscript has not survived in its entirety) comprises the letters in their names, which can be read vertically, on which also see Ian Johnson, "New Evidence for the Authorship of Walton's Boethius," *Notes and Queries* 241 (March 1996): 19-21. See also Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et. al. eds., 34-35. I have looked for a similar acrostic in *Asneth*, or some clue that may have been hidden in the text, and while there is nothing that is as explicit as the acrostics in *Boethius*, a sort of anagram acrostic "OHTDEA" (ll. 920-25) seems to highlight the word DEATH or DETH, or "O DEATH" in the epilogue of *Asneth*, which makes thematic sense. On other acrostics and anagrams in *Boethius*, see Johnson, "New Evidence."

<sup>56</sup> For *Asneth* see Peck 16-17, and for *Boethius* see I. R. Johnson, "Walton's Sapient Orpheus," *The Medieval Boethius: Studies in the Vernacular Translations of De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. by A. J. Minnis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987).

effort at translation that is due to the strong insistence of a patroness who has ultimate power over her servant.<sup>57</sup> Yet even when recognizing the topos, this overly humble sentiment in the prologues to both works is remarkably similar. There is more than one translator's preface or prologue to Walton's *Boethius*, so for comparison's sake, excerpts from more than one are presented here as follows:

Insuffischaunce of connyng and wytte  
 Defaut of langage and of eloquence  
 This werke fro me schulde haue *wit*holdyn yit  
 Bot that youre heste hath done me violence,  
 That nedes most I do my diligence  
 In thyng that passeth myne abilite,  
 Besekyng to youre noble excellence  
 That be youre help hit may amended be. (1.1)  
 . . . . .  
 As fro the text that I ne vary nocht  
 But kepe the sentence in hys trewe entent, (1.3)  
 . . . . .  
 Bot I most use the wittes that I haue;  
 Thogh I may nocht do so, yit nocht-for-thye,  
 With help of god the sentence schal I saue. (2.4)  
 . . . . .  
 And eke in reuerence of youre worthinesse  
 This simple werke as for an obseruaunce  
 I schal begynne after my simpelnesse  
 In wil to do *your* seruice and plesaunce. (4.9)<sup>58</sup>

At the end of the prologue to *Boethius* (following the translator's first preface), Walton asks for readers to correct any faults they find with his translation:

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<sup>57</sup> See E. R. Curtius, "Affected Modesty," *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953) 83-85. See also Hanna, "Sir Thomas Berkeley," where he argues, in the case of Thomas Berkeley's patronage of Trevisa, that in the prologues a political philosophy comes through that goes beyond the topos and extends to a recorded moment "in which secular figures insist on overturning a received situation of clerical control" both political and textual; this can be compared to Walton's prologues. The message is "rather than adopting a suspicious or cynical attitude toward lay intellectual interests, [clergy] should learn to trust secular lords, accept their aspirations, welcome their power, and seek to be protected by it" (896, square brackets mine). If biographically true in some sense, this philosophy is especially intriguing in the light of female patronage.

<sup>58</sup> Taken from Walton's *Boethius* edited by Mark Science, except that I have substituted "th" where Science retains thorns and "y" for yough. The numbers in brackets indicate page number followed by stanza number, as Science's edition does not have line numbers. Italics are Science's.

And every Lord or lady what ye be  
 Or clerk that liketh for to rede this,  
 Besekyng lawly with humylite  
 Support where I haue [seyde] amys;  
 Correcte[th] only there that nedful is,  
 If word or sentence be noight as it scholde.  
 My-self I am vnsuffishaunt I-wys  
 For if I couthe have better done I wolde. (11.31)

At the end of the translator's second preface, before he begins book four and five of

*Boethius*, Walton solicits help from God with his translation:

To the that art the welle of sapience,  
 All-myghti lord, this labour I comyt;  
 Thogh I be fer fro craft of eloquence,  
 Enforce thou my connyng *and* my wit  
 This matter for to treten so that it  
 Be to thi honour *and* to thi plesaunce;  
 So take it lord in-to thi gouernaunce. (212.582)

In *Asneth* the translator delivers the topos with strikingly similar diction. Here the translator expresses an almost exact sentiment of humility, gentle coercion by the patroness, and in a much more personal use of the topos, as above, he invites *her* to correct any shortcomings, after asking God for help with his translation:

And I answered, "Ma Bele, langage I lakke  
 To parforme youre plesir, for yt is ful straunge  
 That broken tuskes shold wel harde nuttis crakke,  
 And kerve out the kernelis, to glade with yowre graunge;  
 For lame and unlusty now age hath me left;  
 Mi spiritis are spended, I lakke sapience,  
 Dulled I am with dotage, my reson ys me reft,  
 Prived and departed from al eloquence,  
 So my seson ys passed with langage to jape. (ll. 5-13)

.....  
 And when daunger dynusly here desire refused,  
 La Bele ful benignely sayde to me than,  
 "That servant ys not to blame, but fully excused,  
 That meketh hym to his maystresse, and does as he can".  
 Concluded thus with gentilnesse, I toke on to me the cure,  
 Asneth storie to translate after my cunnyng,  
 Fro Latyn into Englysh as God me sendeth oevre.

Gyde this werk, gracious Lord, and graunte it good endyng,  
 Utterali the Latyn in Englysh to transpose;  
 Hit is nuyus, but the sentence I schal sue in trace,  
 And yf ye fynde fautes, grave hem with yowr glose,  
 I pray yow thus, my maystresse, of your good grace. (ll. 21-32)

While one *can* see a distinction between the two prologues in terms of a stronger alliterative style in *Asneth*, and a stronger continentally-derived rhymed verse in *Boethius*, despite their differences, the similarities suggest a poet who was comfortable working in both the older alliterative style *and* the continental rhyme royal mode; given his literary proficiency, there is no reason to believe that Walton wouldn't have been comfortable working across styles. Indeed, though *Asneth* is highly alliterative, it is also (as is *Boethius*) written in rhyme royal verse—a delightful amalgamation of both. In any case, as we see above, the expected sentiments come through similarly in the prologues of both works, but what is striking is that they share word choices and ideas that have a stronger affinity than one might expect even given the expected topoi and a common dialect. In the following example, the first column of words and phrases comes from *Boethius*, the second from *Asneth*:

From Walton's prologues, *Boethius*:

From prologue, *The Storie of Asneth*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cunningg</li> <li>• sapience</li> <li>• Defaught of langage and of eloquence</li> <li>• Thogh I be fer fro craft of eloquence</li> <li>• But kepe the sentence in his trewe entente</li> <li>• With help of god the sentence schal I saue</li> <li>• Besechyng to youre noble excellence /That be youre help hit may amendyd be</li> <li>• Correcte[th] only there that nedful is, If word or sentence be nocht as it scholde</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cunningg</li> <li>• sapience</li> <li>• Prived and departed from al eloquence</li>   <li>• but the sentence I schal sue in trace</li>   <li>• And yf ye fynde fautes, grave hem with yowr glose, / I pray yow thus, my maystresse, of your good grace</li> </ul>
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Another striking comparison between the prologues can be seen in specific conceits the author uses that are direct allusions to themes and typology within the translations that follow. After studying a selection of other prologues to Middle English works, I found these to be unique.<sup>59</sup> In his prologue to *Asneth*, the translator makes a direct allusion to the corn image in the story, for Joseph is the gatherer of corn (grain) in Egypt, during the seven years of plenty according to Biblical tradition, and the story is set around this fact.<sup>60</sup> The translator's line reads: "And kerve out the kernelis, to glade with yowre graunge", in reference to the translator's abilities to do the story justice.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, conceits in the prologue to *Boethius* are specifically employed regarding the author's ability as a translator and are also direct allusions to themes within the story itself, including 'so help me with hys inspiracioun / That is of wisdom bothe lock and key" (1.2) and 'so that in shenschip *and* confusioun / Of al this foule worldly wrecchydnesse, / He helpe me in this occupacioun" (3.9). It is possible that "lok and key" is a conventional motif in medieval literature, as is the "kernel of wisdom" motif; however here these ideas and images also foreshadow typology in the story they preface. The lock and key refers to both god's wisdom (the lock) and the divine inspiration that is

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<sup>59</sup> See the collection provided by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et. al. eds., *The Idea*.

<sup>60</sup> Jewish midrashic tradition perpetuated in *The Golden Legend* in the Later Middle Ages, asserts that the couple procreated during the years of plenty and remained sexually abstinent during the seven years of famine, which helps readers identify the couple with the fertility of the land. See William Caxton's 15<sup>th</sup> c. version of Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, "The History of Joseph," an edition of which can be accessed online at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/GoldenLegend-Volume1.htm>. For the Jewish Midrashic tradition, see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, V. 2, trans. by Henrietta Szold, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909-1938) 77n190, which cites various primary Jewish sources.

<sup>61</sup> Peck notes: "the poet's phrase [...] which seems to mean 'to add gladly to your granary,' could be a witty reference to his patroness' library where such kernels of wisdom are stored; the metaphor also anticipates the grain motif which becomes important typologically in the subsequent poem" 7. The motif of wisdom as "kernel" is recognized as a standard image in medieval literature for the inner wisdom that one finds in, particularly, biblical narrative. One sees this especially in Chaucer.

the key to understanding god's wisdom; the inspiration the poet solicits in his task of translation is therefore an allusion to the divine inspiration readers understand Boethius needs in the coming text to unlock Wisdom's words. Lock and key could also help to prefigure the understanding of Boethius' literal imprisonment as part of the setting of the text. The idea that worldly pursuits bring nothing more than shame and confusion is another one of the philosophical underpinnings of *Boethius*. Word choices, phrases, and conceits are not merely conventions that are repeated in the prologues to both works; how they are used underscore a distinct similarity in authorial style that may be attributable to John Walton.

We can add to these textual similarities the fact that *Boethius* and *Asneth* are both noticeably alliterative, where at times the Rhyme royal scheme is over-shadowed by its liberal use. Mark Science refers to Walton's use of alliteration as, "alliterative coloring", but I suggest that in places, it rivals the alliteration found in *Asneth*, which is facilitated by more stressed beats per line—in *Asneth* running to usually seven beats instead of five as it does in *Boethius*.<sup>62</sup> Given *Boethius*' shorter lines, the alliteration at times occurs with as much proliferation by instead spilling to the next line of verse as it does in the following examples:

I have herd speke *and* sumwhat have i-seyne  
 Of diuerse men that wondir subtillye,  
 In metir sum and sum in prose pleyne,  
 This book translated have I suffyshauntlye  
 Into Englissh tonge, word for word, wel neye; (2.4)

.....

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<sup>62</sup> See Science, lxi. Also, examples of alliteration that "tinge" the text may be seen in the following stanzas: 334, "the wiche is g[o]d; *and* sothely for to seyne"; 446, "The welle of wisdom for to seke and fynde / Thow graunt hym lord be lemyng of thi light"; 473, "Where that this good is founden fynally." Alliterative couplings such as "welle of wisdom" and "founden fynally" and others, may be indications of word couplings that Thorlac Turville-Petre discusses in the context of collocations and set phrases of the alliterative style. See his *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge: Rowan and Littlefield, 1977) 83-92.

[I] seide that verrey soth is that sentence.  
 “And what”, quod sche, “though that thou seidest nay,  
 Sith euer yit men done hire diligence,  
 The strengest for to get it if he may (139.364)

Moreover, many lines in *Asneth*, as well as in *Boethius*, bear no alliteration at all.

Though alliteration in *Boethius* may occur with less regularity than in *Asneth* neither do the two works vastly differ in this respect, and in other texts of the period, particularly in the Rhyme royal tradition adopted from continental models, alliteration is largely missing. When comparing, one must first concede that both works make use of alliteration and then consider that the longer, more alliterative, sometimes enjambed lines in *Asneth*, may speak to a style that is easier—one that Walton may have been trying to suppress to a certain extent in *Boethius* in imitation of Chaucer, though if so, he has not quite succeeded.<sup>63</sup> Evidence of Walton’s discomfort with a more formal style may be accounted for in the justification he gives for switching meters partway through *Boethius*, found in his preface to books IV and V. He acknowledges the “high matter” he has been entrusted with and privileges the ‘sentence’ (sense) of the work over the meter and the need to balance this against his own limits as a poet:

Lo of hye a mater for to trete  
 As after this myn auctour doth pursue,  
 This wote I well, my wittes ben vnmete  
 The sentence for to saue in metre trewe (210.576)

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<sup>63</sup> See Ian Johnson’s introduction to the prologue of Walton’s *Boethius* in Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et. al. eds., *The Idea*, 35: “By rendering Boethius poetically (in the rhyme-royal stanza made fashionable by Chaucer), he aims to surpass Chaucer and Gower, if not in the eloquence he says he lacks [...] then in the purity of his morality and shunning of ‘pagan’ classicism derived from ‘olde poesyes derke.’” See also Mark Science where he informs us that not only is Walton’s *Boethius* in a Chaucerian tradition, but that Walton in many instances uses Chaucer’s translation of *Boethius* over a more accurate translation from the Latin original. For a list of specific plagiarisms, see p. liii, in Science’s Introduction. Subsequent scholarship has suggested that Chaucer’s influence on Walton’s translation is not as great as, for instance, Nicholas Trivet’s commentary, which he incorporates into the text, and Science also admits that Walton is often more faithful to the Latin original than is Chaucer. On Walton’s incorporation of Trivet’s commentary into *Boethius*, see I. R. Johnson, “Walton’s Sapient Orpheus.”

The prologue, along with the first three books of *Boethius*, has an eight-line stanza: ABABBCBC. The last two books have a seven-line (rhyme royal) stanza, ABABBCC, a stanza shift which may imply that the lines above refer to a real struggle with the meter. Walton moves to a different scheme yet again in the epilogue (prayer) verses to *Boethius*: AAAAABAB. By comparison, the prologue to *Asneth* is in an eight line, ABABCDCD, meter, but the body of *The Story of Asneth* is translated in the rhyme royal stanza that Walton adopted in the last half of *Boethius*: ABABBCC; the epilogue maintains this meter (consistent with the body of *Asneth*) for the first three stanzas and changes to ABABACC for the last four stanzas. *Asneth* is in longer, (and like Walton's *Boethius*), not always in syllabically consistent metrical lines, though lines in *Asneth*'s epilogue have usually five stressed beats—consistent with what we find in Walton's *Boethius*. Perhaps not surprisingly, in *Asneth* we find as ready a change in meter and rhyme scheme as we find in *Boethius*—in each the poet changes the rhyme scheme *three times*. Mark Science notes of Walton's *Boethius* that ‘such a change in a single work is of rare occurrence’, though Lydgate did this in his *Testament*, and a number of minor poems. Lydgate's authorship has been discounted, though Russell A. Peck has noted that the *Asneth* poet “is well schooled in Lydgate, sharing many of that poet's goals”. I have also found that many of the more unusual words occurring in *Asneth* are shared with works by Lydgate, according to the *MED*. Lydgate and Walton were both patronized by the same family (although Lydgate had many patrons), so we might expect the poets to have to have been familiar with one another's work, accounting for some similarities. Indeed, if *Asneth* has always been with the other texts in Huntington EL.26.A.13, it may be no coincidence that we find several of Lydgate's poems and one of his translations in the

same manuscript. Lydgate is also the only other poet known to mention Asneth in Middle English, and John Shirley knew Lydgate personally, as he would have known Walton personally.<sup>64</sup>

Further linguistic and stylistic similarities between Walton's *Boethius* and *Asneth* are also prominent. For instance, Peck brings our attention to the phrase "without varyance", which appears three times in *Asneth*.<sup>65</sup> Though not uncommon (we find it also in Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes* in the first half of EL.26.A.13) a variation of the phrase is also found throughout *Boethius*.<sup>66</sup> Science unflatteringly describes Walton's translation as drab, monotonous, and tag-laden, including, "it is no nay", "soth to seie", "as semeth the", "it is no drede", "it is no questioun", "in no wise", and "in no manere" among others. In comparison, *Asneth* has an abundance of similar tags such as, "me seemeth" (l. 906), "sothly as I the say" (ll. 271, 555), "I telle the even" (ll. 470, 498), "I

<sup>64</sup>See Peck 6. Lydgate compares Asneth to the Virgin in "To Mary the Queen of Heaven," found in *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. by Henry Noble MacCracken, EETS 107 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911) 286. Lydgate's authorship has been discounted by Richard Dwyer, based on the poem's relationship to its Latin source. See his "Asenath of Egypt in Middle English," *Medium Aevum* 39 (1970): 122, also cited in Peck.

<sup>65</sup>Peck (7) notes that the phrase is also found in association with Margery Hungerford's name in the Findern Manuscript. I suggest she may be the daughter-in-law of Walter V Hungerford, originally Margaret Botreaux, born in 1410 in Farleigh (Hungerford), Somerset, England, married to Robert Hungerford, Sir Walter's son. Hanna (897) mentions a Sir Walter Hungerford of Heytesbury as having witnessed deeds involving Berkeley, and that he was "more than an acquaintance of Thomas Berkeley's," and that among Berkeley's properties by marriage was a manor at "Cherleton iuxta Hungerford." Elizabeth Berkeley's household books mention her stay at her Wiltshire manor of "Chilton" (April 22, 1421) no doubt the same manor as "Cherleton iuxta Hungerford," as the book mentions provisions for her stay had been bought at Hungerford, on which see C. D. Ross, "The Household Accounts of Elizabeth Berkeley, Countess of Warwick, 1420-1" (*Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucester Archaeological Society*, 1951): 87-88. Walter V Hungerford was a statesman and also fought in France with Elizabeth Berkeley's husband, Richard Beauchamp. As for the term "without variance," it does not have an equivalent in the Latin original of *Asneth*. See for instance, p. 98, ll. 13-16 in Batiffol "Et memoratus est mandatorum patris sui, et ante oculos habiuit ea propter quod dixerat Iacob Ioseph et universis filiis suis: "Custodite fih fortiter a muliere alienigena ut non communicetis ei." Compare to *S of A* ll. 230-233, "...but have in remembrance / The commaundementis of my fadir, and ever kepe hem wel; / For he bad me and my bretheren, withoute variaunce, / to kepe us clene fro wymmen of straunge alliance." Ralph Hanna, "Sir Thomas Berkeley," suggests a provincial circulation, which included neighboring estates and families connected with the Berkeleys for manuscripts such as Digby 233, and it may be assumed that if *Asneth* had Berkeley origins, a copy may have once similarly circulated.

<sup>66</sup>See for instance *Boethius*, stanzas 138, 150, 164, 203, 224, 295, 317, 321, 403, 437, 492, 547, 748, 969.

tel you trulye” (l. 763), “In no wise” (ll. 549, 424), and “no maner mene” (ll. 275, 509).<sup>67</sup> In both texts the tags are used for both metrical filler and conveniently sometimes at the end of lines to facilitate rhyme, which offers a further comparison between the two texts. Science complains that in *Boethius* Walton has rhymed simple words with their compounds; while not strictly compound words, in *Asneth* our poet has rhymed “rialle” with “imperialle” (ll. 177-78) and ‘soukyngne” with “kyngne” (ll. 881-82), which seem to be rather unimaginative and have the same redundant effect. And to his complaint that Walton repeated rhyming words in the same stanza, we see that in *Asneth* the poet has similarly rhymed “fett” with itself (ll. 787, 789), “beauté” with itself (ll. 928, 930), and “disteyne” with “disdeyne” (ll. 146, 148). Science also mentions several words which he feels Walton used unusually in translation (compared to Chaucer’s translation of *Boece*), and one of these—”repreve”—is used twice also in *Asneth*, although in a search of the word in the *MED*, it was apparently not uncommon, and Chaucer is listed as having used it elsewhere. Nevertheless, in *Boethius* Walton uses forms of the word “repreve” (repreued, repreued, repreuable), corresponding to the Latin: *spernere; nihili pendenda; contemnendum est*, respectively, which in each case, Chaucer translates as “despised” or “worthy to be despised”.<sup>68</sup> The word is twice similarly used in *Asneth*: “He [God] repreveth no maner man that turneth Hym with penance” (l. 356 square brackets mine), corresponding to the Latin: *et non arguens aliquem in tempore penitencie eius* (p. 100, ll. 3-4), and “yf ye slowe hem so, / Ye schuld be repref to alle men...” (ll. 865-66), corresponding to the Latin: *obprobrium omnibus hominibus eritis* (p. 114, ll. 23-25). In

<sup>67</sup> Also in *Boethius* “no manere of way” (178, l. 1244). In 189 lines in Book V of *Boethius*, I found 7 such tags; in 131 lines in *Asneth*, which included the dialogue with the angel, where we might expect them to occur more often, 9 such tags.

<sup>68</sup> See *Boethius*, st. 69, ll. 1-3; st. 347, l. 3; st. 346, ll. 4-5.

each case, the word “despises” or “despised” may have been used instead, but the translator of *Asneth*, as Walton does in *Boethius*, uses a form of the word “repreve” similarly, to more subtle effect, which offers a deeper moral or spiritual application implicit in the sense of the Latin. It should be noted that the word “despise” is used elsewhere in both Walton’s translation of *Boethius*, as well as in *Asneth*, so where “repreve” is used, it may indicate a level of finesse or greater subtlety of understanding on the part of the translator in scenes which may hold more importance. What is noteworthy in both cases, however, is that the translator is not always attempting to capture the variety of diction in the Latin, which suggests a translator with some imaginative limitations. This is consistent with Science’s judgment that Walton was “unable to shadow forth the form and style” of Boethius’ Latin, yet he also acknowledges that Walton’s ‘subtle dialectics are often clearly expressed in the verse rendering [. . .] [in some cases] with much more effectiveness than is found in the long involved sentences of Chaucer’s prose version” (lxi, square brackets mine). Mark Science brings our attention to another important stylistic consideration in *Boethius*:

Writing at the request of a lady, to whom no doubt [the belief that] the abstract and metaphysical qualities of the original proved a source of great difficulty, Walton probably realized what was expected of him. Anything which would illustrate or explain would be of service; simplicity would be helpful and paraphrase would often be preferable to literal rendering. With these points in view it is easy to realize [...] why explanatory lines so often find a place, and why literal expression is so frequently sacrificed for simple exposition. (lxi, square brackets mine)

In *Asneth*, certain interpolated qualifications by the translator may be similarly explained as an effort to make the “abstract and metaphysical” nuances in the text more explainable. For instance, the qualification, “this was here procreacion”, the translator’s

remark on the birth of Asneth's sons after Joseph "knew" her in the biblical sense, may be designed for a female audience whose ability to readily understand the significance of certain passages might have been questioned by the translator.<sup>69</sup> It also serves to remind a reader, in a very Augustinian way, that the conjugal act is for procreation.<sup>70</sup> In Asneth's repentance scene, after including the medieval penitential "hair shirt" found in the Latin translation, the translator also puts in Asneth's mouth the request, "remission thu me send". These embellish the sense of the Latin, and move beyond strict translation, emphasizing the moralistic, salvific quality of the story for a medieval Christian lay audience. Ian Johnson comments on Walton's style in *Boethius* as "moraliz[ing] more explicitly and consistently than [...] in the original".<sup>71</sup> We see the same quality in *Asneth*'s translation, which is also supported by Dwyer's observations regarding psychological points in *Asneth* that are made more forcefully at times in the English than the Latin; the tendency to dramatize moments in the text where the translator may believe a lesson should be observed, allows us to characterize the moralistic tendencies of *Asneth*'s translator and adds to the comparisons that we can make between the two translated works.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> ll. 683. The words do not occur in the Medieval Latin version. See James's edition.

<sup>70</sup> Hanna suggests (902) that Elizabeth Berkeley was at the head of a long line of readers who objected to Chaucer's cumbersome prose in *Boethius*, and the notion also supports the desire for a style in translation that is easy to understand, a style that I argue is consistent in both works. See also Johnson, "Walton's Sapien Orpheus," where he talks about Walton's translation in the spirit of the "dominant conception of translation in the late-medieval period, when it was seen as akin to commentary," supporting the idea of an explanatory style in his writing (143). The idea of a sexual relationship being justified for procreation purposes is Augustinian, and also implicit to the concept of *spiritual marriage* in the Middle Ages, on which see Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage* and Chapter Three below.

<sup>71</sup> "Walton's Sapien Orpheus," 144, square brackets mine.

<sup>72</sup> Dwyer, "Asenath of Egypt," 121-22: "Now and then a psychological point is made more forcefully than in the original; as when Joseph's reaction on first seeing Asenath—"Que est mulier illa que erat in cenaculo ad fenestram? Abeat nunc de domo ista"—is nicely expanded into, "What womman was sche pat, that in pe wyndow stod of pe cenacle, as I cam in? *she ys ageyns my herte*, Remeveth here sone out of *pis* hous, *for marrynge of my mod*" (ll. 215-17, his emphasis).

Walton's penchant for moralizing is revealed in his somewhat backhanded tribute to Chaucer in his prologue to *Boethius*. While he pays the expected reverence to the popular father of English poetry, he also chastises the choice of classical themes and pagan gods that characterize Chaucer's work and are likewise found in *Boethius*.<sup>73</sup> Asneth's rejection of pagan rituals and idols and her conversion to Joseph's religion, may have been especially appealing to a wise old Augustinian canon, who had voiced his discomfort regarding any veneration of classical religion or "fals goddess". In a digression found in the Augustinian *Soliloquies*, a work that may have been familiar to an Augustinian canon such as John Walton, a repudiation of the worship of false gods and idols seems to echo the sentiment in Walton's prologue to *Boethius*:

Here seynt Austen despysyth fals ydolys that were som tyme. For in olde tyme men made many goddys and ymagys of hem. Some pepel helde the sonne for here god, and some the mone, som the other planetis, somm the elementys; and some helde for here god what thing they sawgh first aday, hound or catte or other thyng [...] And in doynge of this they synnyd dedly, bothe in thought and in dede; for they bylevyd in feendes, and forsokyn God her maker that made all thyng of naugt.<sup>74</sup>

Thematically, *The Storie of Asneth* would have been appealing from the perspective of a conservative Augustinian Canon of Oseney, John Walton, as well as a patroness, Elizabeth Berkeley, whose family had a long-standing relationship with the Augustinian Canons of both Bristol and Oseney, and who despite her wealth and potential opulence,

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<sup>73</sup> On which see Ian Johnson in Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et. al. eds. *The Idea*, and esp. ll. 41-48 of Walton's prologue to *Boethius* edited in the same.

<sup>74</sup> ll. 39-43 and ll. 47-49 in Wogan-Browne et. al. eds., *The Idea*, 226. *Augustinian Soliloquies* is dated "perhaps 1390-1420; perhaps East Midlands." While the dating of this translation into English is contemporary with Walton's life, it was widely read before then in other languages, including Latin and French. The author is anonymous.

may have adopted a level of moral discretion in her life that tended towards the conservative.<sup>75</sup>

There is at present no conclusive evidence that Elizabeth Berkeley commissioned the *Asneth* text, yet there is a mound of circumstantial evidence suggesting that she did. Though we know our copy in EL.26.A.13 is not likely the original copy of the text (Peck has demonstrated that it is not a holograph), paleographic and linguistic evidence for dating *Asneth*, corroborates a date for the manuscript just after Elizabeth Berkeley's death on December 28, 1422, which I discuss further below. We know that Elizabeth Berkeley commissioned John Walton's translation of *Boethius*, and that among other linguistic comparisons that can be made, his prologues to *Boethius* are remarkably similar in diction, phraseology, and style, to the prologue in *Asneth*.

Alongside other circumstantial clues that can be mounted in her favor, Elizabeth Berkeley fits the description of the anonymous patroness of *Asneth*, whom Russell A. Peck discusses. To have known of the Latin story, he suggests, she must have been quite well educated, and in contact with an unusual library. I would add to this, that she need only have been made aware of the story through one of her chaplains or a confessor. Peck also suggests, due to the story's rich iconography, that an intelligent woman concerned with the raising of her household might want it in the vernacular for instruction.<sup>76</sup>

We may assume that Elizabeth Berkeley had knowledge of Latin, because her household books were written in Latin, but also in Walton's prologue to *Boethius*, he alludes to the fact that the patron (Elizabeth Berkeley) understands the Latin original,

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<sup>75</sup>The Berkeley family's connection with Bristol is mentioned in Fowler, *John Trevisa*, 87.

<sup>76</sup> See Peck, 8, 11.

when he asks that both lords *and* ladies correct any faults in translation.<sup>77</sup> The female patron's knowledge of Latin is also alluded to in the prologue to *Asneth*, where the translator asks *her* to correct his mistakes: "And yf ye fynde fautes, grave hem with yowre glose, / I pray yow thus, my maystresse, of yowre good grace" (31-32). The convention of asking for corrections is common, but not in relation to women; it tells us that Elizabeth Berkeley may have had substantial literary skills. She also had access to the Berkeley and Warwick libraries and, through her family connections and association with ecclesiastics, it is likely that she could have solicited works from any number of libraries or religious houses. Perhaps most significantly, there is an extant Latin copy of *Asneth*, originating from the Collegiate Church of St. Mary, Warwick. It is consistent with the Cambridge Corpus Christi College manuscripts MS 424 and MS 288, the fuller Latin version from which the Middle English translation was derived.<sup>78</sup> The church that held the manuscript is within steps of Warwick Castle, her husband's home estate, and contains the famous Beauchamp Chapel where Richard Beauchamp is buried. We may conclude that a Latin copy of *Asneth* was available to the Countess of Warwick—very close to home indeed—and that she could read it.

Besides her knowledge of Latin and her access to *Asneth* in Latin, Elizabeth Berkeley would have also had the motivation for commissioning such a translation, based on the desire for works appropriate for female instruction. She had three daughters, Margaret, Eleanor, and Elizabeth, whom she was raising in the Berkeley household as well as the daughter of a gentlewoman, whose husband was one of the Earl's retainers

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<sup>77</sup> See C. D. Ross, 70. The books are found in Longleat MS IX, listed as "Accounts and Expenses of the Households of the Earl of Warwick."

<sup>78</sup> The redaction is Vincent of Beauvais' abridgement in *Speculum historiale* (c. 1260), on which see Peck, 3.

killed during the Agincourt campaign.<sup>79</sup> These children, along with six gentlewomen and Elizabeth Berkeley herself, would have made a substantial female community of at least eleven upper-class women *known* to be living within the Berkeley household in 1420/21.

Elizabeth Berkeley was entirely capable of soliciting a translation as well as supplying her translator with books, including Chaucer's prose *Boece*, a copy of which we know Walton consulted when translating *Boethius* into English verse. Ralph Hanna suggests that both Shirley and Walton may have been facilitated in their tasks by an exemplar of Chaucer's *Boece* available in the Berkeley household. Hanna also says of Elizabeth Berkeley, that because of "continuing literary patronage in her household [...]" rather than an isolated imitation of her father, Walton's work initiated ongoing and quasi-independent activities" (902). In his reference to continuing literary patronage in the household, Hanna was referring to Sir Thomas Berkeley's literary patronage of Trevisa and others; Elizabeth's oldest daughter, Margaret Beauchamp Talbot, as well as Richard Beauchamp and his second wife, Isabelle Dispenser, also patronized Lydgate, yet it is certainly anticipated by Hanna, that during her lifetime Elizabeth Berkeley would have commissioned more literary works besides Walton's *Boethius*.<sup>80</sup>

Beyond the household, Elizabeth Berkeley would have socialized in what Hanna describes as the "outer reaches of the court"; not surprisingly her household books name

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<sup>79</sup> See Ross, 92: "The child is thought to be the daughter and only child of Sir Baldwin Strange, named also Elizabeth." On Strange, see also A. I. Doyle, "More Light on John Shirley," *Medium Aevum* 30 (1961): 93-101, esp. 94.

<sup>80</sup> Margaret Beauchamp Talbot patronized Lydgate ("Guy of Warwick," 1427-30), as did Isabelle Dispenser, ("Fyfftene Ioyes of Oure Lady," 1427-30) on which see Karen Jambeck, "Patterns of Women's Literary Patronage: England, 1200-ca. 1475," *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, Ed. June Hall McCash, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996) 247. On Berkeley/Beauchamp commissions, also see Hanna, "Sir Thomas Berkeley," and Ryan Perry, "The Clopton Manuscript and the Beauchamp Affinity: Patronage and Reception Issues in a West Midlands Reading Community," *Essays in Manuscript Geography: Vernacular Manuscripts of the English West Midlands from the Conquest to the Sixteenth Century*, Ed. Wendy Scase. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007): 131-159.

several female friends she met with in London in June, 1421; all, it would seem, had West Midlands connections, and in many cases, a connection with those in service to, or with, her husband: Lady Elizabeth Harrington (the daughter of Edward Courtenay, earl of Devon), widow of John (Lord) Harrington who was buried at Portlock, Somerset; Lady Elizabeth Dudley (nee Berkeley)<sup>81</sup>, Elizabeth Berkeley's half cousin, daughter of John Berkeley of Beaverston (Wotton Under Edge), who brought to dinner with her a retinue of 12, including a "chaplain"; Lady Constance, wife of Lord Richard Lestrage,<sup>82</sup> whose family chaplain was the poet and Augustinian friar, John Awdelay; Matilda Salveyn, who she visited "frequently," (perhaps attesting to their closer friendship) was the wife of Sir Roger Salveyn, who was Richard Beauchamp's treasurer at Calais. In addition to her female coterie, it is significant that in August, she hosted John of Lancaster and his retinue at "Good Rest Lodge" near Warwick.<sup>83</sup> Such social connections, including that of the king's brother (and Guardian of England during Henry V's absence in France), help to paint the picture of a Lady with considerable connections and power in her own right, but also illuminates the kind of potential readership that a vernacular translation such as *Asneth* might have enjoyed, yet the fact that there is only one surviving copy may speak to her inability to help disseminate this translation because of her untimely death on December 28, 1422. Ralph Hanna describes a detailed line of manuscript transmission for Sir Thomas Berkeley's commissions, taking in London circles, due likely to his

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<sup>81</sup> Wife of John Dudley, first Baron Dudley (1400–1487), also known as Sutton, John (VI), courtier and diplomat. He served under the crown as a soldier by February 1418, well before he had attained his majority, when he attended Henry V to France as an esquire in the king's retinue. By 4 July 1419 he had been knighted. He served in France in 1421 with a small retinue, and in the following year he was given the honour of bearing the royal standard at the king's funeral. Hugh Collins, 'sutton, John (VI), first Baron Dudley (1400–1487),' *ODNB*.

<sup>82</sup> (1381-1449), 7<sup>th</sup> Baron Strange of Knockin, Shropshire.

<sup>83</sup> Ross, 94-6, and for information on these names and their family connections, *ODNB*.

mercantile activities. Because it was commissioned during his lifetime, *Boethius* may have been similarly disseminated via her father's connections, helping to explain the comparative difference in surviving numbers of manuscripts between the two texts. By comparison *Asneth* may have been commissioned *after* Thomas Berkeley's death (d. 1417) and Elizabeth Berkeley may have even passed away before its completion, either possibility potentially precluding a wide transmission of the text facilitated by the patroness, or *Asneth* may simply have been considered more exclusively women's reading material, and therefore any plan for transmission may have been more intimate and provincial. In any case, her closest friends, such as her ladies-in-waiting, would have shared in her devotions and been privy to her library. They certainly would have known of her commissioning such a text.

The prologue and epilogue to *Asneth* show the substantial influence of literary models and bear an abundance of expected *topoi*, yet aspects of the prologue may also be taken as biographical. Its biographical quality is true to the local and personal manner in which the translator recounts the circumstances of how he came to translate the text in the first place. We also believe him when he tells us of his female patron in the prologue, and accounts for her death in the epilogue.<sup>84</sup> The translator's old age mentioned in the prologue may also be historically true. John Walton was already of mature years when he translated *Boethius* in 1410, perhaps ten years or more earlier.<sup>85</sup> We can assume at the very least a middle-aged man is illustrated in the prologue to *Asneth*:

For lame and unlusty now age hath me left;

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<sup>84</sup> Ralph Hanna (895) makes the case for biographical truths that can be extrapolated from Trevisa's "Dialogue."

<sup>85</sup> While still at Oxford, he received special dispensation from Rome in 1399 to "hold together with his Canonry, one other benefice," and there is evidence that the title of "papal chaplain" was conferred on him in 1398 (Science xlvii).

Mi spiritis are spended, I lakke sapience,  
 Dulled I am with dotage, my reson ys me reft,  
 Prived and departed from al eloquence,  
 So my seson ys passed with langage to jape. (ll. 9-11)

Such a mention of old age is reminiscent of Chaucer's prologue to *The Complaint of Venus*, where we know he was likely in his mid to late fifties when he translated the work and also true of the prologue to George Ashby's *Active Policy of a Prince*, where he mentions a specific old age, "Right nygh at mony years of foure score" (nearly eighty years old).<sup>86</sup> The epilogue immediately follows the *Asneth* text in EL.26.A.13 and provides us with another comparison: *Boethius'* epilogue by Walton contains a prayer we already know is for Elizabeth Berkeley, since it is here we find her name in acrostics.<sup>87</sup> That such an acknowledgement (including, similarly, a prayer for the lady) occurs at the end of *Asneth*, but in the context of her death, signals that the countess may have passed away during *Asneth's* composition, or very shortly afterwards; In the surviving copy of *Asneth*, however, (not a holograph) the epilogue was transcribed at the same time and is not an addendum, pointing to a date in EL.26.A.13 no earlier than the death of the patroness, who the poet considers was taken in "tender age". The pronoun "thu" in the epilogue to *Asneth* refers to the personification of death that the poet addresses:

And ladies likyng thu sleest out of seson,  
 And revest hem here ryalté with thi resprise.  
 Thyn insaciablen malice who may acomplise  
 When that loveli ladies thu leyest so lowe  
 And here bright beaute thu blemshest in a throwe? (ll. 901-905)

<sup>86</sup> Wogan Browne et. al. eds., on Chaucer and the topos of old age, 28n5, and on George Ashby, 60, ll. 92-94. The translators prologue also reflects the "dullness" topos, which was common in fifteenth-century English verse, on which see David Lawton, "Dullness and the Fifteenth Century," *ELH* 54:4 (Winter 1987): 761-799.

<sup>87</sup> The prayer is written in the first person, though this may be a convention that allows anyone to use it for themselves. The second two verses, where Walton's name occurs in acrostics, also in the first person, seems less generic, where he thanks Lady Sapience for helping him bring the work of translation to an end (see Science xliii-xliv).

.....  
 To repress so noble, so gentille a creature  
 In tendir age untymely agayn the ordir of nature. (ll. 918-19)

Elizabeth Berkeley would have been just thirty-five or thirty-six years old when she passed away on December 28, 1422, and in the eyes of an aging cleric, may have been considered a “tender age” indeed!<sup>88</sup>

The prologue offers yet further little clues about the commissioning of the story, beginning with a hilly geographic location, which is consistent with the famous terrain that surrounds Berkeley. If her household books for 1420/21 are indicative of other years, the family spent more time at Berkeley than at other family estates. It follows that a family chaplain or cleric would at times be “logged” (as the prologue states) at Berkeley Castle. Hanna indicates that dependent clerics existed in profusion at Berkeley.<sup>89</sup> C.D. Ross in his article on the household accounts of Elizabeth Berkeley for 1420/21 reports, among other details that clerical friends of the Countess lodged at Berkeley for weeks at a time:

But the regular household staff (or such of them as ate in the hall) formed but a tithe of the many persons who daily sat down to meals at the countess' table. The offering of hospitality was at once a duty and a pleasure. . . Elizabeth Berkeley's household expenses were swollen by the flow of visitors of all ranks of society who enjoyed her hospitality. Her guests in this year ranged from a royal duke to humble carriers of wood, and from cathedral clergy to hermits. Not a day passes when the arrival of guests is not recorded. Many were casual guests, unknown travelers who benefited from Lady Warwick's hospitality: we hear constantly

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<sup>88</sup> The convention is also used by John Awdelay in a poem commemorating Henry V, who passed away in 1422 at the age of thirty-four and was likewise considered “tender of age”: “ffore he is ful yong, tender of age, / Semele to see, o bold corage, / Louele & lofte of his lenage, / Boþ perles prince & kyng veray.” Audelay, John, fl. 1426: no. 41. A RECOLLECTION OF HENRY V (1429) “De rege nostro henrico sexto” from Anon., 1100-1500 (Middle English Lyrics and Ballads): *Historical poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (1959), ll. 1-4. On the *Asneth* text in EL.26.A.13 not being a holograph, see Peck, 6.

<sup>89</sup> “Sir Thomas Berkeley” 892.

(especially while the household was at Berkeley) of meals and lodging given to “two pilgrims at the castle gate,” “two clerks of Oxford” and the like. (92)<sup>90</sup>

.....  
 Elizabeth Berkeley seems to have relished the society of ecclesiastics, for some of her clerical friends lodged with the household for weeks together, while the household was at Berkeley, the prior of Langebridge and Master John Stanwey, at that time canon and later dean of the cathedral church of Hereford, were often among her visitors. There was also a friar Master of Theology from Bristol with his companion.... Wherever the countess might be staying, it seems to have been her custom to invite the local parish priest, and often the parish clerk too, to dinner on Sunday. (93-94)

Moreover, the books record that the household was at Berkeley in the winter of 1420/21.<sup>91</sup> If it was commissioned at around this time, shortly before she passed away, the story may have held additional significance, because this is also a time when her property was threatened and the ownership under suit by her cousin and male heir, James Berkeley.<sup>92</sup> If she were not already familiar with it, the story may have been introduced to her by a cleric, who believed it thematically relevant. Peck says of Asneth, “Even in the abduction, she teaches her audience how to behave in adverse circumstances and to

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<sup>90</sup> See also 93: “A large group of the countess’ visitors were people in the service of her husband, Earl Richard. We hear much of the comings and goings of the busy officials who managed the earl’s estates. The supervisor and receiver general, John Baysham, the earl’s chief financial officer, was often with the household; so too were his secretary, John Shirley, and his chamberlain, Richard Curson, whose wives, Elizabeth Shirley and Margaret Curson, were ladies in waiting to Lady Warwick.”

<sup>91</sup> Hanna, 892; Ross, “Household Accounts,” 86: “The first six months of the accounting year, from 1 October 1420, to 28 March 1421, were spent by Countess Elizabeth in apparently peaceful routine at Berkeley. For the second half of the year she was much more active.” The article gives a detailed accounting of her movement from estate to estate.

<sup>92</sup> See Ross, 81-83, for an explanation of the dispute and estates involved. Ross recounts: “In July 1421 the dispute came to the notice of the king’s council on a petition brought by Elizabeth Berkeley. She complained that James Berkeley [cousin and claimant] had put an armed force of soldiers and archers into the rectory house at her manor of Wotton-under-Edge to prevent her entering there, and that his men had fired arrows and shouted obscenities at her as she passed through the place” (square brackets mine).

forgive their enemies”, supporting his view that the story was meant as exemplum and instructional material.<sup>93</sup>

The story’s thematic relevance to a female audience brings us to consider the ideal of modesty and devotion also perpetuated in the epilogue. There the patroness is described in somewhat conventional, virtuous terms, which echo that of the biblical heroine. It occurs in an eruption of alliteration not exceeded anywhere else in the text:

In vertu here wommanhed was volupid many folde—  
 Discreet, devoute, diligent. Deeth, thu mayst agrise  
 To represe so noble, so gentille a creature (ll. 916-918)  
 .....  
 Of Lordis lyne and lynage sche was: here sche lyse,  
 Bounteuus, benigne, enbleshed with beaute  
 Sage, softe, and sobre, and gentyll in al wyse  
 Meke, mylde, and merciful, of pite sche bar the prise.  
 Comely, kynde, and curteis, in nobleye of nurture,  
 Verdant in alle vertu, plesaunt and demure. (ll. 927-933)

While we might expect a cleric to attribute these virtues to a late mistress whether she deserved them or not, in Elizabeth Berkeley’s case they may fit a biographical truth. Her “pite” and kindness are apparent in the documented hospitality she gave to people from every class who came to her gates, including her penchant for hosting a great variety of ecclesiastics and clerics. The “discreet, devoute, diligent” description may also have been earned by the modest but capable way she handled her household. Despite her hospitality, Elizabeth Berkeley is described as keeping a household that according to Ross, “was not large by contemporary standards”, although by all accounts she could have afforded one that was much more ostentatious, and by comparison, according to Hanna, her father “used his income to support a life-style of considerable

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<sup>93</sup> See Peck, 10-16.

sumptuousness”.<sup>94</sup> Elizabeth Berkeley not only inherited (at least for a time) all of the Berkeley estates, but would have had the advantages of the Warwick estates as well; by the 1420’s the Earl of Warwick was one of the most powerful landowners in the West Midlands.<sup>95</sup> Since we know that despite her wealth she maintained a relatively modest household and that she also spent a great deal of time in the society of ecclesiastics, we may reason that Elizabeth Berkeley possessed the kind of piety that was compatible with her chaplain, John Walton.

***Asneth Part of Shirley’s Collection: Huntington Library EL.26.A.13***

As we have already noted, Huntington Library MS EL.26.A.13 is described as a two-part, composite volume.<sup>96</sup> Part I includes flyleaves with short verses in John Shirley’s hand, as well as his signature bookplate, “Ma Joi Shirley” with the addition of the names of Margaret and Beatrice, suggesting that he at some point gifted the collection to his second wife, Margaret, and her sister, Beatrice Lynn.<sup>97</sup> The verses in Shirley’s hand on the flyleaves include three verses by Lydgate, two by Chaucer (both from *Troilus and Criseyde*), and one from John Walton’s translation of *Boethius*, headed “Boece”: This verse and one by Lydgate, *A Prayer for King, Queen and People*, were

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<sup>94</sup> Ross, 91; Hanna, 882.

<sup>95</sup>“It is estimated that by the 1430s the earl was the third wealthiest noble in England, after York and Stafford.” Christine Carpenter, “Beauchamp, Richard, thirteenth earl of Warwick (1382–1439),” *ODNB*. On which also see Ryan Perry, 131-32.

<sup>96</sup> *Guide To Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Huntington Library*, 35-39. Connolly makes the case the manuscript is actually in three composite parts, the flyleaves containing Shirley’s *ex-libris* and verses in his hand forming the first portion, possibly belonging originally to a different manuscript; see her *John Shirley*, esp. 104-107.

<sup>97</sup> Shirley married Beatrice as early as 1421, however, based on John Shirley’s first wife’s inclusion in the 1420-21 household books of Elizabeth Berkeley (to Michelmas, September 29), a 1421 date for his second marriage would be early indeed. On dates of Shirley’s second marriage, see A. I. Doyle, “English Books in and out of Court from Edward III to Henry VII,” *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, Eds., V. J. Scattergood and J. W. Sherborne (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1983) 163-182, esp., 177 and Connolly, 60.

probably recorded by Shirley from memory due to the inconsistency in wording that occurs between manuscripts within which Shirley copies the same verses.<sup>98</sup> Following the flyleaves on a different portion of vellum in an Anglicana Formata hand consistent throughout the remainder of Part I, we have Lydgate's *Daunce of Machabree*, fols 1-12v, and then three shorter Lydgate poems ending on fol. 17. Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes* follows on fols 18-115, making up the largest portion of Part I. On fol. 115v is a list in a current hand of locations from Calais to Jerusalem.<sup>99</sup> Part II, on yet a differing, third piece of velum, comprises the *Storie of Asneth* with its prologue and epilogue (fols 116-127), occurring continuously in the same textura hand. The text is untitled in the manuscript. Because his hand also occurs at the end of Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes*, all of Part I of EL.26.A.13 is attributed to Shirley's ownership. There has been some question about just when *Asneth* was added to the items that make up Part I, yet both parts of the manuscript date to the fifteenth century. Evidence for the two parts having been together since at least the sixteenth century is the chapters of Hoccleve's *Regiment* written on the back flyleaf verso of Part II in a sixteenth-century hand, and yet aside from the fact that there is no clear evidence to suggest they have *not* been together since the fifteenth century, further clues suggest that Part II was with Part I from its inception. Among these is the fact that the four-line cadel heads in *Asneth* appear to emulate a smaller cadel occurring on fol. 1 in Part I of the manuscript (see figures below).

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<sup>98</sup> On Shirley copying from memory, Connolly, 153, as well as Julia Boffey and John J. Thompson, "Anthologies and Miscellanies," *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375-1475*, Eds. Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 279-315, esp. 285.

<sup>99</sup> An inclusion of this type might be expected in a manuscript once owned by Shirley, due to his service to Richard Beauchamp, who is known to have made the pilgrimage from Calais to Jerusalem, though it is not certain whether Shirley ever accompanied him. See *ODNB*: "Richard Beauchamp" which references *Pageant of the birth, life and death of Richard Beauchamp, earl of Warwick*, ed. Viscount Dillon and W. H. St John Hope (1914). On Shirley as pilgrim, Connolly, 18.

When I consulted with Madie Hilmo, Medieval art specialist from the University of Victoria, Canada, she indicated the smaller Cadel in Part I is certainly scribal, and noted, “the fact that the later one uses a similar head suggests a connection, if only by way of trying to imitate the former and unify the manuscript.”<sup>100</sup> Given that both halves of the MS are dated to the fifteenth century, based on Dr. Hilmo’s observations, the decorator of Part II is imitating the scribe of Part I in the fifteenth century and is able to because he has Part I in front of him, suggesting that our *Asneth* scribe is adding to Shirley’s manuscript.

Several further clues point to the fact that *Asneth* was copied contemporaneously with Part I. *The Huntington Guide* tells us that the flyleaf that ends Part II is marginally framed on three sides in the same way as Part I, indicating that the parchment in Part II was prepared to go with Part I; apart from the fact that the rest of the leaves in Part II have lines for text that extend further down the page than they do in Part I, I have observed that the marginal space on three sides is consistent in Part I and all of Part II. It is also worth noting that the Cadel heads in *Asneth* were not planned before the velum had already been ruled. I have observed that the lines of the margin, as well as the lines prepared for the text can be seen beneath the faces, suggesting that the pages were prepared before knowing exactly what would fill them, yet apparently in anticipation of adding to the manuscript. This may be supported by the fact *Asneth* does not have spaces between the verses (and was therefore not ruled with the verse lengths in mind), having paraph marks in the margins where such a break is acknowledged.

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<sup>100</sup> In personal correspondence to me dated December 15, 2009.

Though both halves of the MS are on differing vellum, I found the last leaf of Part I of the manuscript, a singleton at the end of Hoccleve, to be neatly folded around the first quire of *Asneth*, ending as a stub between folios. If Part II had not been a continuation of the manuscript, then one might expect this singleton to have been folded backward, around the rest of the text to which it belongs. Though it is not impossible that the singleton was joined to the *Asneth* text in this way at a later binding, it seems less likely. The three differing types of vellum in the overall manuscript, including two different pieces of vellum in Part I, once owned by Shirley, could simply attest to the notion that the entire volume was not planned in advance, but added to with some attempt at continuity as the opportunity arose for Shirley to add texts to his book.

In terms of more closely dating *Asneth* based on the occurrence of unusual words, R. A. Dwyer noted that the word “conculcacioun” used in *Asneth*, (l. 396) is “first recorded in the *MED* c. 1425”.<sup>101</sup> I have similarly noted that the use of the word “contexit” or “context” (l. 94, l. 176) is first attributed by the *MED* to 1425.<sup>102</sup> In

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<sup>101</sup> See Dwyer, “Asenath of Egypt,” 122n8.

<sup>102</sup> In association with the Middle English translation, “Guy de Chauliac’s Grande Chirurgie.” Other words are recorded solely for *Asneth* by the *MED*: “Malgese” l. 896, ‘silvestrie” l. 900, “contharalle” l. 144, listed as Medieval Latin, no doubt some of the neologisms Peck notes exist in *Asneth*. Science notes that “Latinisms” are rampant in *Boethius*, and the same is true for *Asneth*, though this is not unusual for vernacular works of the period. Peck (5) notes that the *The Manual of Writings in Middle English* estimates the date of composition of the Middle English *Asneth* to be c. 1400. The *MED* lists *Asneth* as 1475, hence there has been a rather broad dating of *Asneth*, which we can narrow. Peck, 5n3, cites a personal letter from A. I. Doyle, dated 17 April 1991, where he states of *Asneth*: “I would remark with relation to the possible date of composition of the poem(s), on the very strong alliterative style, which to a large extent over-rides the stanzaic rhyming quality. The syntax and accentuation are not polished post-Chaucerian in their effects. Some of the vocabulary supports this impression. It inclines me to push the composition back to earlier in the fifteenth century, and it is not easy to date paleographically the hand, as a conventional textura. The ‘Cadel’ decorative initials with grotesques are also difficult to date, for they occur in liturgical manuscripts over a long stretch of time, certainly from the beginning of the fifteenth century into the sixteenth, when they are utilised by printers too. They are not common in English literary manuscripts, but there are some from Yorkshire of very early fifteenth or even late fourteenth century making. They could, of course, have been added sometime after the writing, though I wasn’t inclined to think so when I saw the manuscript.” In personal correspondence on the *Asneth* portion of the manuscript, which I received from Dr. Doyle dated 28 June 2008, he writes “The Cadel initials are rather unusual in this type of text and as I may have said in my last letter [...] I would push my dating later than the script, which is not easily datable closely, if in Shirley’s time, then the second rather than the first quarter of the fifteenth century.”

correspondence with Russell A. Peck, Ian Doyle suggested an earlier-fifteenth century date for the composition of *Asneth*, based partially on the strong alliterative quality of the text, and in a letter to me, he indicated that if in Shirley's time, paleographically, he would date it to perhaps the second quarter of the fifteenth century, though he has indicated that both the hand, as well as the Cadel heads, are difficult to date. If we accept that *Asneth* may have been with Shirley's other items contemporaneously, it is consistent with dates for the Lydgate items in Part I to no earlier than the second quarter of the fifteenth century. Connolly judges John Shirley's signature in the flyleaves to be the closest in resemblance and style to that of the Beauchamp letter of 1424,<sup>103</sup> but the Lydgate couplet in Shirley's hand on the flyleaves, comes from his "A Prayer for King Queen and People" which was written for the coronation of Henry VI and therefore dates the flyleaves of manuscript to no earlier than 1429.<sup>104</sup> Lydgate's *Daunce of Macabree*, in Part I, was translated likely in 1430.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Connolly, 105.

<sup>104</sup> The 'sixt Henry' is mentioned on line 58 of the poem the couplet is taken from, and 'his moder Kateryne' (Catherine of Valois) on line 66, on which see Henry Noble MacCracken, ed., *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1910-1934) (accessed here through *Literature Online*), and cited by Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate (1371-1449): A Bio-bibliography*, English Literary Studies Monograph Series No. 71 (Victoria: University of Victoria, 1997): 29, where he also tells us it was "said by Shirley (MS Ashmole 59) to have been 'presented' by Lydgate to the King on the day of his coronation." Since the couplet mentions both a king and a queen, we can assume he wrote the couplet in the manuscript either before Catherine died (1437), or after Henry married (1445), but before Shirley himself died, (1456), therefore the couplet in EL.26.A.13 dates 1429-1437, or 1445-1456, on which also see Connolly, 109. On names occurring in the manuscript, including Beatrice's husband, Avery Cornburgh, see Connolly, 14-23 and 105 and Doyle, 'English Books', 176-78. Most of the names imply an initial intimate coterie for the manuscript, which seems consistent with Doyle's observation that based on the form of Shirley's *ex-libris* he regarded his books, especially EL.26.A.13, as 'et amicorum' ('English Books', 177) This connection of Shirley's texts with close friends and family is not inconsistent with the notion that the *Asneth* text may have been intended for an intimate, perhaps provincial dissemination as devotional material, on which (with respect to other Beauchamp texts) also see Perry, 135.

<sup>105</sup> On which see Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia: 1970): 177, and also his *John Lydgate: A Bio-bibliography*, 51. On the translation dating to as early as 1424 see also Walter Schirmer, *John Lydgate: A Study in the Culture of the Fifteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961) 128n5.

Alongside other clues that *Asneth* was with the other works in the collection from the time it was inscribed, we might note that the main texts in the first half of the manuscript, Lydgate's *Daunce of Machabree* and Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes*, might be described as moralizing texts and therefore thematically compatible with the conservative subject matter of *Asneth*'s story, including her moving, affective conversion. We find a single Latin highlighting mark in *Asneth* (fol. 124v), beside the part in the story where Joseph indicates he wants nothing to do with wonton Egyptian women. The mark may mean *debent* (which can mean: ought, must, should):<sup>106</sup>



EL.26.A.13 fol. 124v<sup>107</sup>

It brings our attention to the part in the narrative where Joseph refuses to kiss *Asneth* in greeting (as he ought/must/should?) since she has blessed false gods with her mouth, where he states: “the man that worshipeth god, his modir kysse he schal, his sister, his wyf and his kindred and make heem good chere” (ll. 264-65). The abbreviation occurs on the line within the text space, and not in the margin proper—a clue that it may have been included by the copyist. In any case, *Asneth*, a devotional work, may be seen to belong in the manuscript from the perspective of literary content, including moral exemplum, and makes sense in the scheme of the collection. Connolly states of John Shirley, “It might be expected [. . .] that the nature of the books which he owned or handled would also be predominantly courtly, but in fact this is not the case, though he clearly did read some

<sup>106</sup> See Adriano Capelli, *DIZIONARIO DI ABBREVIATURE LATINI ED ITALIANI*. (Editore Ulrico Hoepli, Milano, 1990): 87, and Lewis and Short.

<sup>107</sup> This item and others manuscript images occurring in this chapter from Huntington Library EL.26.A.13, are reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

material of this kind. There are four poems of Lydgate's in the first section of Ellesmere 26.A.13, ff. 1r-17v, though these are all of the moralizing rather than the entertaining variety".<sup>108</sup> The verses Shirley copies into the flyleaves are also of a moralistic nature (typical of Shirley), including the one from Walton's *Boethius*:

For right as pouert causeth sobirnesse,  
& febilness enforceth continence,  
Right so prosperite and sekirnesse  
The moder is of vice and necligence.  
And pouer also causep goode thewes;  
There is none more parelouse pestilence  
Than hyhe estates gyffen vnto schrewes. (4.2)<sup>109</sup>

The fact that *Asneth* is written in a more formal textura script, however, also fits the possibility that out of reverence for the patroness who has died, a more formal script and careful style was adopted for *Asneth*, especially if the owner knew the lady, and to him she was not the anonymous patroness whose name is absent from the text. The formal script may also help to embellish the serious, religious subject matter found in a text that originated in a devout household. Both factors may have been compatible for texts owned or read by those in the Beauchamp affinity, an affinity that includes John Shirley, and as Ryan Perry has observed, an affinity within which the appearance of conservative, orthodox tastes was important.

### **The Shirley Connection**

We have considered the probability that the *Asneth* text was with the rest of Huntington Library MS EL.26.A.13 from its inception, and therefore owned by the fifteenth-century book collector, John Shirley. We have also looked at evidence for John Walton's authorship and the likelihood that Elizabeth Berkeley commissioned him to

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<sup>108</sup> Connolly, 110.

<sup>109</sup> See Science's edition by page and stanza.

translate *Asneth*. Now let us allow the relationship between Shirley and the Berkeley/Beauchamp households to lend weight to these considerations. Besides her previous patronage of John Walton, Elizabeth Berkeley had an important connection to John Shirley.<sup>110</sup> Her household books for 1420/21, lists John Shirley's first wife, Elizabeth Shirley, as one of her six ladies-in-waiting. If translated for the education of women in the Berkeley household, Elizabeth Shirley would have known the translation, and perhaps quite intimately; Elizabeth Berkeley's closest friends and especially her ladies-in-waiting would have even read such a text at shared moments of devotion with the countess, as they would have done with other texts in her library.<sup>111</sup> If *Asneth* were known to, or a copy of it even given to John Shirley's first wife, we might find it joined to a collection that was eventually shared with his second wife and her sister, whose names Shirley wrote in the bookplate of Ellesmere 26.A.13 in a way suggesting it was his gift to them.<sup>112</sup>

By 1421, Shirley was secretary to Richard Beauchamp, the 13<sup>th</sup> Earl of Warwick. Shirley accompanied Warwick on various political and military campaigns as well as serving him in business matters, benefiting from a prolonged and continuous association until the Earl's death in 1439.<sup>113</sup> According to Elizabeth Berkeley's household books, John Shirley made up to sixteen visits to Berkeley and other Beauchamp households that

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<sup>110</sup> I had considered that Richard Beauchamp's second wife, Isabel Despenser, who patronized Lydgate may be the patroness of the poem, but her longer life to 1439 makes this connection not as likely. Further, Lydgate's authorship has been discounted by others, on which see Peck, 6-7.

<sup>111</sup> Besides Elizabeth Shirley, two other gentlewomen are mentioned in 1420/21: Philipa Pycard (her husband, John Pycard, is listed in the Earl's service, though we are unsure in what capacity), and Margaret Curson, whose husband was Richard Curson, the Earl's chamberlain (see Connolly, 45, and Ross, 93).

<sup>112</sup> See Peck, 3-5, and Connolly, 105. Peck states of Beatrice and Margaret, "The women are evidently the owners of at least the first gathering [of EL.26.A.13] and likely more" (square brackets mine).

<sup>113</sup> See Connolly, 5, 14-23.

year, wherever the wives were in residence.<sup>114</sup> Even if we discount the close relationship between his first wife and the countess, John Shirley would have had access to the libraries of both the Berkeley and the Beauchamp households and could have obtained the text, just as we know he obtained other Berkeley commissions.<sup>115</sup> Margaret Connolly names the Beauchamp household and its various connections to be the most obvious sphere of existence, influence and circulation for Shirley's manuscripts.<sup>116</sup>

Shirley transcribed and collected numerous other works commissioned by members of both the Beauchamp and the Berkeley households, including Trevisa's translation of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* into the first section of MS BL Additional 16165, following a copy of Chaucer's *Boece*, noting in the rubric that the text (*Nicodemus*) was translated at the "instaunce of Thomas some tyme lord of Berkley".<sup>117</sup> While Shirley chose to include Chaucer's *Boece* in BL Additional 16165, he also admired Walton's popular verse translation of *Boethius*, for he personally copied a stanza of it (probably from memory) into two different manuscripts, including, as we have already noted, into a flyleaf of EL.26.A.13.<sup>118</sup> If Shirley were familiar enough with Walton's work to commit portions of it to memory, he would have been interested in other works by a poet he admired. Hanna suggests that Shirley and Walton may have been facilitated by the same copy of Chaucer's, *Boece*, in the Berkeley household; further to this, given his frequent

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<sup>114</sup> Ross, 93. Connolly, 20.

<sup>115</sup> See Connolly, 115, about Elizabeth Berkeley's copy of Walton's *Boethius*: "If her manuscript of the text still survives it can no longer be identified, but we can be sure that a copy of the work was available in the Beauchamp household for Shirley to consult." Also Hanna, 902, mentions the possibility of an archetype for both Shirley's copy of Chaucer's *Boece* (B.L. Additional 16165) and the copy of Chaucer's *Boece* that Walton heavily relied on for his verse translation, as existing in the Berkeley household. It is a tantalizing thought that Shirley and Walton were household bibliophiles in co-operation with each other on more than one occasion.

<sup>116</sup> *John Shirley*, 5.

<sup>117</sup> Connolly, 5, 15.

<sup>118</sup> The other is BL Royal 20.B.XV, where the verse is written in the flyleaf. See Connolly, 109-13.

visits to Berkeley, and his bibliophile tendencies, Shirley would have known Berkeley's cleric personally and been aware of a new translation he was working on.

Shirley copied a virelai into Add. MS 16165 (fol. 245v), which he attributed to Richard Beauchamp, written in devotion to his second wife, Isabelle Despenser.<sup>119</sup> We might similarly find verses commemorating the virtues of the Earl's first wife in another manuscript owned by Shirley—the epilogue to the lady that follows the *Asneth* translation in EL.26.A.13.

Based on our consideration of Elizabeth Berkeley's patronage of the *Asneth* text in Part II, it could not have been copied before she died on December 28, 1422, and based on other textual evidence (unusual words that date to 1425), as well as Ian Doyle's observations, paleographically Part II likely dates to the second quarter of the fifteenth century. The Lydgate verse from 'Our King Our Queen' in the flyleaves and his *Daunce of Machabree* in Part I, could not date any earlier than the second quarter of the fifteenth century. The similarity of the Cadel heads in both Parts of the manuscript, as well as the similar marginal framing, further suggests unity of the manuscript from its inception.

Evidence allows us to be fairly certain that *the Storie of Asneth* in Huntington Library MS EL.26.A.13 belonged to John Shirley, and that it was commissioned by his Lord's wife, the Countess of Warwick, and translated by John Walton, a poet he admired and knew well.

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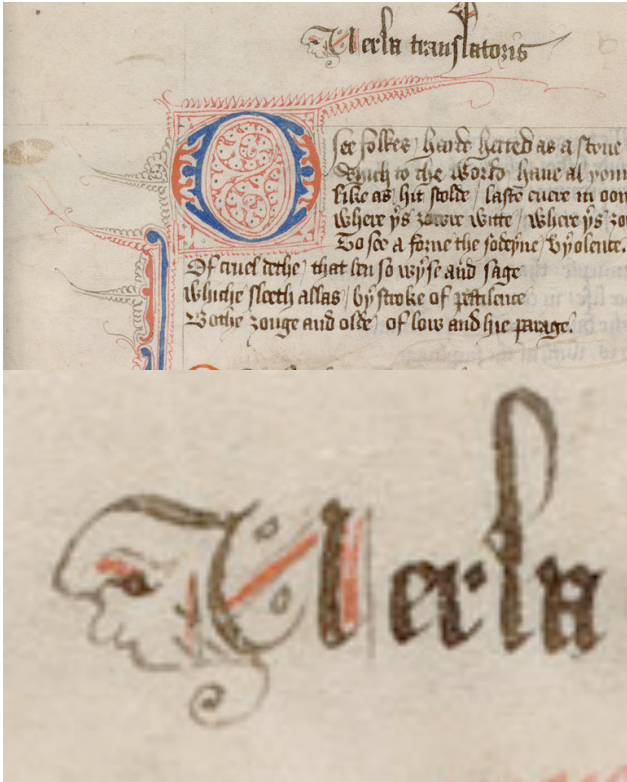
<sup>119</sup>Connolly, 29, and Henry Noble MacCracken, "The Earl of Warwick's Virelai," *PMLA*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (1907): 597-609, where he edits the poem from BL Add. 16165. According to Connolly, it is partly the attribution of this poem to Richard Beauchamp for his second wife Isabelle Despenser that helps date this portion of Add. MS 16165. They were not married until 1423. Interestingly, however, the attribution was squeezed in at the head of the poem, beside the word "balade" "in smaller more cramped letters [...] in a manner which suggests they may have been an afterthought," still probably in Shirley's hand (Connolly, 29). We know Shirley made mistakes of attribution in other instances, which leaves us with the intriguing possibility the poem was written for Beauchamp's first wife, Elizabeth Berkeley, rather than for Isabelle Despenser, thus offering a possible earlier date for Add. 16165, thought already to be his earliest collection, c. mid-1420s.

*The Story of Asneth* in Middle English was translated in such a way that would have met the needs of an orthodox household, especially valuable, perhaps, as devotional reading for the substantial number of women in Elizabeth Berkeley's coterie. The moralistic nature of the story is further supported in translation by the conservative, explanatory embellishments made by our Middle English translator, which include an emphasis on medieval penance in the context of what I describe in Chapter Three, below, as the liminal stage of an initiation scene that is associated with conversion. Asneth's erotic encounter with a "man from heaven" in this scene in the Middle Ages would have been equated with the mystical marriage of God with the soul, associated with the *Song of Songs* tradition. The mystical marriage iconography would also have been evocative of nuns' initiations as brides of Christ, and any number of female saints who claimed marriage to Christ, associating the story with medieval hagiography. In this sense, Asneth's repentance and mystical union is significant for religious and laity alike who wish to meditate on the soul's union with Christ, which we know based on texts such as Nicholas Love's Middle English, *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, was an experience that pushed the boundaries of lay devotion.<sup>120</sup> Asneth's exciting story (including a kidnapping and chase scene), would have met the later medieval tastes for Romance, but more importantly, at its centre is a passionate, personal exemplum of "how to feel" and "how to be saved". Originally read in monastic settings in Latin, the Middle English *Asneth* should be counted among the codices associated with orthodox devotional works for women and the laity, originating in the West Midlands.

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<sup>120</sup> See Michael Sargent's recent edition of Love's *Mirror* including his introduction where he discusses other texts that would have also served this devotional purpose for lay readers.

Now that we have established who likely commissioned and translated Asneth's story into Middle English, let us consider in more detail what currency the text had, not just in the context of an aristocratic household, as lay reading material (including devotionally for women), but before it was even translated into Middle English. Let us consider further what currency *Asneth* might have had for the medieval imagination altogether.



**Figure 1.** Cadel head, Lydgate's *Daunce of Machabree*, El.26.A.13, fol. 1r  
(first page, first half of composite ms)



**Figure 2.** Cadel Head #1, *Asneth*, EL.26.A.13, fol. 121r  
(first page, second half of composite ms)

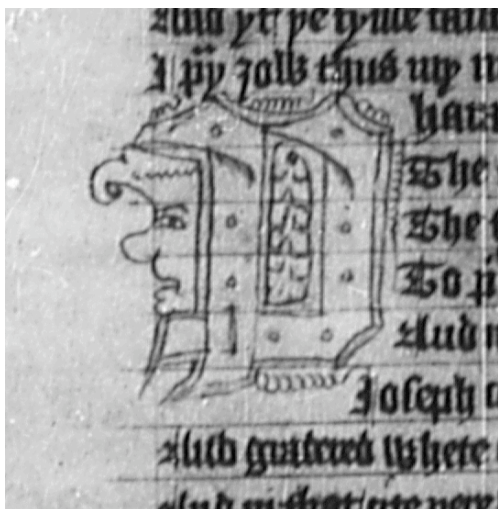


Figure 3. Cadel Head #2 *Asneth*, EL.26.A.13, fol. 121r



Figure 4. Cadel Head #3 *Asneth*, EL.26.A.13 129v



Figure 5. Cadel Head #4 *Asneth*, EL.26.A.13 131v



**Chapter Three:**  
**Female Initiation Rites and Women Visionaries:**  
**Mystical Marriage in *The Storie of Asneth***<sup>121</sup>

Initiation is a term used by anthropologists to indicate rites of passage seen in societies the world over. Recent studies have distinguished some unique conditions and rituals associated with female initiation in Greek mythology that allow us to recognize strikingly similar behavior in the accounts of medieval female visionaries. Through my study of *Asneth*, not just as a medieval text, but Jewish Hellenic in its origins, I am able to propose a comparative model for female initiation in the Middle Ages, and therefore offer a possible new way of reading some of the experiences of medieval female religious. Even though the text was translated first into Latin in the late twelfth century, and later into Middle English, it remarkably preserves intact a similar set of experiences as those found in later medieval hagiography as I will discuss later in this chapter. As Ken Dowden has concluded in his extensive study, *Death and the Maiden: Girl's Initiation Rites in Greek Mythology*:<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> I first tried to make sense of the curious typology in the Middle English *Storie of Asneth* as a master's student at the University of Victoria. After coming to the premature conclusion that *Asneth* *must* be the Egyptian goddess, Isis, it was Professor Margot Louis, a member of my M.A. Thesis committee, who wisely helped me see *Asneth* as having similar qualities in common with, rather being "just like" her mythological sisters from other cultures. Margot's guidance regarding how to begin to understand mythological archetypes in this story proved to be invaluable. She is sincerely missed. I would also like to thank the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria for granting me a student fellowship in 2004-05, giving me the opportunity to further study *Asneth* in the context of female initiation. A version of this chapter occurs in the festschrift dedicated to the memory of Margot Louis: "Female Initiation Rites and Women Visionaries: Mystical Marriage in the Middle English Translation of *The Storie of Asneth*," *Women and the Divine in Literature Before 1700*, Ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, (Victoria: ELS Editions, University of Victoria, 2009) 137-152.

<sup>122</sup> (London and New York: Routledge, 1989). On female initiation rites in Greek culture, see also, Mark W. Padilla, ed. *Rites of Passage in Ancient Greece: Literature, Religion, Society* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1999); David B. Dodd and Christopher A. Faraone, eds., *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives: New Critical Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge,

Mythology is the real preservative. Rites are mere behavioural patterns, not necessarily leaving us any archaeological clues to their existence.... Unnoticed and unremarkable, they gradually lose importance and pass out of currency as urbanism advances; by the time they would seem remarkable, they are usually forgotten (hence in our own times initiations are usually described as a feature of other, exotic, cultures). Narratives, on the other hand, are memorable, entertaining and capable of reuse. Mythology, precisely because it was no longer perceived as a handmaiden of initiation rites, could live on, reapplied and modified for new audiences, whilst like a fossil retaining the shape of initiation. (203)

*The Storie of Asneth* is just such a narrative.<sup>123</sup> Besides its implications for being read as an exemplum for celibacy within marriage in the Middle Ages by the laity, which I will discuss at the end of this chapter, medieval religious and lay readers, alike, would have equated Asneth's story with saint's lives and read it as *exempla* on other levels, including as an example for the behavior of young aristocratic women. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that a close literary reading of the *Asneth* text additionally reveals events and imagery that "retain the shape" of female initiation as it is understood from Greek mythology. Though we cannot reduce experience to typology, and in each social context (as Dowden reminds us) such typology may differ in significance, experiences found across a spectrum of texts, spanning different periods in history, may have much in common. Events leading up to Asneth's marriage with Joseph, in particular her mystical union with a god-like "man from heaven," or if viewed from an ancient perspective, her culminating, redemptive "sacred marriage" with a god, retain elements of the original culture of the text and its mythology of female initiates.

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2003); in Greek culture and other contexts, Bruce Lincoln, *Emerging From the Chrysalis: Rituals of Women's Initiation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Lincoln similarly states: "Certain historical, mythological, and narrative texts contain accounts of rituals, occasionally in disguised form but often quite plainly laid out" (72).

<sup>123</sup> See Burchard's translation, "Joseph and Aseneth" in Charlesworth.

Just how influential *Asneth* was on the development of Christian culture, we will never really know, but Christoph Burchard has suggested it may hold important keys to understanding some New Testament and Early Christian concepts, such as the Lord's Supper.<sup>124</sup> Whether or not it was a pivotal text with that kind of impact is not my concern here. What we do have is a story that was perpetuated in Hellenistic Judaism, contains (as others have shown, and I further propose) classical imagery, and was later adopted by Christians, culminating in popularity in the Middle Ages.<sup>125</sup> I treat it as illustrative of ideals and modes of thought that may have had their roots in classical antiquity, were adapted for a Hellenistic Jewish audience, and find their way into monastic and later lay communities in the Christian Middle Ages. Moreover, I am not suggesting there were not countless other avenues by which similar typology could trickle into the imagination of medieval readers. Like so many biblical and apocryphal stories, *Asneth* is just one text that offers a bridge between the Ancient Near East and medieval society. The mystical scene dominating the centre of *Asneth*'s story, while it would have fulfilled a medieval understanding of mystical marriage, echoes what we also know of *sacred marriage* (*hieros gamos*) from classical mythology, no doubt reflecting Hellenistic ideals from the time the story was written.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> See Burchard, "The Importance," 102-134.

<sup>125</sup> The Middle English translation is the first English translation that scholarship is aware of. To my knowledge it was not translated into English again until Christoph Burchard's translation of known Greek versions of the b grouping of texts was accomplished to facilitate recent scholarly interest in the text as part of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.

<sup>126</sup> See Ross S. Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and his Egyptian Wife Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Kraemer touches on the presence of sacred marriage in the story: "the images of divine bride also reflects the numerous images of sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*) within the story, including the unions of Wisdom and the Wise Man, the lovers in the Song of Songs, Selene (Moon) and Helios (Sun), God and Israel, and perhaps others" (30). I propose that sacred marriage is the central theme in *Asneth*, the mystical consummation with the "man from heaven" appearing in the centre of the story, around which all other action takes place.

While a study of ancient typology in the context of Medieval reception may be viewed by some as unusual, I propose it is precisely this type of typological contextualizing that will help us learn more about the Medieval relevance of Asneth's story. Theories about *why* the story was translated from Greek into Latin, and later into Middle English are still sparse.<sup>127</sup> That it had all of the romantic appeal of the saints' lives, and on this basis alone it would have been relevant to later audiences, there can be no doubt. That Joseph and Asneth were seen to model later medieval notions of marital celibacy is also probable. These still leave unanswered questions about more sophisticated theological readings that one may suppose helped perpetuate the text in religious communities in England from the late twelfth century onward—theological readings, including mystical union with God, that may have more in common with ancient rituals than we have yet acknowledged. The similarity of the ancient ritual sequence in *Asneth* to that undergone by medieval female religious, makes what they have in common significant, warranting further consideration.

Although they are not always in complete accord, those who study medieval female visionaries suggest there *are* patterns that emerge from the experiences of these holy women, whether resulting solely from their internal affective states, or whether influenced by the cultural and ideological constructs within which their experiences are formed and retold. As Elizabeth Petroff reminds us:

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<sup>127</sup> Ruth Nisse discusses *Asneth* in the context of texts that may have been read by those interested in the conversion of the Jews in the Middle Ages, for instance, which I discuss further in Chapter Five. See her, "Your Name Will No Longer Be Aseneth': Apocrypha, Anti-martyrdom, and Jewish Conversion in Thirteenth-Century England," *Speculum* 81 (2006): 734-53.

This developing mystical path is typically described as having three stages—purgative, illuminative, and unitive—that at times blend into one another and overlap.<sup>128</sup>

These “stages” of mystical experience are surprisingly similar to the three stages of initiation first introduced by Arnold Van Gennep early in the 20th century, still used by anthropologists today: separation (purgation), liminality (where transformation and illumination takes place); aggregation (union/reunion).<sup>129</sup>

The Middle English translation, *The Storie of Asneth*, hardly differs from the Latin version of *Asneth* (which is itself, closely comparable to the Greek), but more importantly, it is a text that is re-claimed, as it were, in the fifteenth century by a female patron for a female lay audience. That is, after being transmitted in Latin in male-dominated religious contexts, only in the Middle English reception does the text regain its role as an initiation text, a text identified by Peck as desirable for its example to young aristocratic women. Not every young woman sought out “marriage” with Christ, associated with female mystics and nuns, but each would have appreciated the significance and sacred gravity of sacrificing herself in marriage, and thus shedding the

<sup>128</sup> Elizabeth Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994): 4-5. On the three stages, see also Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). See also Petroff’s, “Medieval Women Visionaries: Seven Stages to Power,” *Frontiers* 3 (1978): 34-45. Also see Carolyn Walker Bynum’s, “Patterns of Female Piety in the Later Middle Ages,” *Crown and Veil: Female Mysticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, Eds. Jeffery H. Hamburger and Susan Marti, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008): 172-190. Evelyn Underhill, “Mystical Union,” *Parabola* (2004): 69-72, describes Richard of St. Victor’s formulaic steps to Union with God in terms of a bride’s Mystical Marriage to Christ, and reminds us, “that the constant use of such imagery by Christian mystics of the mediaeval period is traceable to the popularity of the Song of Songs, regarded as an allegory of the spiritual life.” On steps to mystical marriage, see also Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), and for a sample of the exegesis, Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995). The *Song of Songs* is identified as a “sacred marriage” similar to that found in ancient Sumerian myth by Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite: Aspects of Faith, Myth, and Ritual in Ancient Sumer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969). Ross S. Kraemer also equates the *Song of Songs* with sacred marriage and with *Asneth*. On female mystics’ experiences as cultural constructs, see Laurie A. Finke, “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision,” *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993) 29.

<sup>129</sup> A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

role of maidenhood in favour of spouse and mother for the benefit of society. In the Middle English translation, one can readily identify female initiation patterns in the story, so it is the Middle English text quoted here, with some reference to the Latin as well as to the variant translation of Greek Versions (by C. Burchard), where these lend clarity. In this chapter I reemphasize portions of the *Asneth* narrative, in a discussion of female initiation in Antiquity in relation to the story. In order to fully grasp Asneth's role as the female initiate, it is also important to begin to understand Joseph as the male initiate in ancient mythology to which I devote a section in this chapter. I then look at the story's further relationship to female visionary exempla and experience by comparing aspects of Asneth with John Capgrave's Life of St. Katherine of Alexandria, and also excerpts from the life of Margery Kempe for similar typology. I end this chapter with a discussion of the kind of example Asneth's story may have held, for lay couples wishing to attain a higher spiritual experience, namely the practice of celibacy within licit marriage, which has been coined by others *spiritual marriage*.<sup>130</sup>

### **Female Initiation in Antiquity and *The Storie of Asneth***

The mythology presents us with whole communities dying from plague or famine: at Mounichia, Brauron, probably Aulis, in Messenia...at Patrai, Kalydon, even in 'Aonioa'... Time and again, the only answer is the ultimate sacrifice: death of the Maiden. Without the elimination of maidens by initiation into matronhood, there will be no renewal and there would be no tribe. (Dowden 1989: 201-2)

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<sup>130</sup> The mystical marriage of God with the soul, as well as the allegorical marriage between Christ and his church, have variously been called "spiritual marriage," but in my argument, I make these distinctions: I refer to *sacred marriage* in terms of the ancient mythological marriage between a god and a mortal queen/goddess, such as that between Isis and Osiris; mystical marriage as the (Christian) allegorical marriage between God and the soul, and/or Christ and his church, as well as what mystics experience in vision when they eroticize their union with Christ; and finally, I refer to the practice of celibacy within licit marriage among lay couples in the Middle Ages, as *spiritual marriage*.

Simply defined, initiation is the transition from one social status to another.

Anthropologists identify similar cross-cultural patterns that accompany rites of passage, still using the phases of initiation coined by van Gennep. They are often used to explain rituals having to do with religious conversion, and it is in this context that Rees Conrad Douglas identified the three stages (separation, liminality, aggregation) in *The Story of Joseph and Aseneth*.<sup>131</sup> He makes a distinction, however, between initiation and conversion:

*Initiation* often entails continued membership in the same larger group, however a member's status and subgroup may change. *Conversion* usually implies at least a change from one group to another. (32, his emphasis)

Those who study Old Testament Pseudepigrapha often focus on Asneth's conversion to Judaism as the underlying significance of the story. While it *is* significant, further analysis may enhance our reading of this sophisticated account of conversion. Scholars of Pseudepigrapha are still debating the meaning of astrological and erotic typology found in *Asneth*. By Douglas' definition, I propose a reading in which Asneth experiences double initiation by becoming converted into Judaism, and simultaneously undergoing *female initiation* into matronhood.

Ken Dowden has identified surprisingly consistent elements of female initiation from Greek mythology, expanding on the popular three-stage framework outlined by van Gennep. It is impossible here to do justice to the breadth and insight of Dowden's observations. For our purposes, I summarize signs of female initiation discussed by

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<sup>131</sup> The story is known by this name in Pseudepigraphal studies. See Conrad Douglas, "Liminality and Conversion in Joseph and Asneth," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 3 (1988). On early Christian (4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> c.) initiation/baptismal rites that, in part, suggest a connection with ancient fertility cults, see Mark Searle, "The Rites of Christian Initiation," *Between and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*, Eds. Louise Carus Mahdi, Steven Foster & Meredith Little (Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 1987) 457-470.

Dowden, though the chronology of these experiences is not always exact, nor is each sign recorded in every case of female initiation. Moreover, they too at times “blend into one another and overlap.” What seem to be the most important elements of transformation, as with other kinds of initiations, are the mysterious acts (which are not always revealed) that happen in some form of separation or seclusion known as the liminal period.<sup>132</sup>

Signs of female initiation in Greek myth are as follows:

- beauty, virginity (or unmarried maidenhood), sexual ripeness
- the initiate is often of the aristocracy, often 18 years old, often a priestess or representative of a goddess
- refusal to marry
- disownment, banishment (separation)
- isolation (liminality)
  - madness/mental anguish/socially reproachable behavior/trickery
  - death/burial in or identification with the earth (e.g. a cave)
  - renewal/cleansing (the cure for madness)
  - sometimes renaming
  - marriage/sacred marriage (sometimes rape by a god)
- agricultural prosperity/salvation for a population (aggregation/proliferation)

The over-riding premise of female initiation in antiquity is that the maiden must die, and in her stead, the mother must emerge to ensure the continuation of society. Thus the events of female initiation necessarily involve rituals that symbolize death, marriage, and renewal or progeneration. In mythology that links this process with fertility figures, whose union leads to agricultural prosperity, the woman is often identified in some way with the fertile earth, and as we will see, this is also the case with *Asneth*.

Not all of the various characteristics that identify the female initiate occur in every myth, but it is astounding that so many of them appear together in *Asneth*.

Hellenistic audiences, especially, may have recognized an established type. Moreover,

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<sup>132</sup> For analyses of transition in the liminal state, see Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between” *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*. Eds. Louise Carus Mahdi, Steven Foster & Meredith Little. (Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 1987) 3-19.

not every girl undergoes female initiation. Dowden has shown that initiates are often selected to represent the larger group, and that these girls are often priestesses of a goddess, or at least “clearly enough assigned to the goddess from the secular world.”<sup>133</sup> It is worth noting here that Asneth is the daughter of a priest, and likely a priestess herself, and that her name (As/Neth) means that she is of, or belonging to, the Egyptian grain goddess Neith.<sup>134</sup>

Asneth’s selectivity for initiation is seen in her unparalleled beauty, aristocracy, virginity, marriageable age of 18 years, and her unwillingness to marry.<sup>135</sup> One may also see Asneth as the perfect aristocratic maiden sacrifice given her virginal companions, the seven handmaidens, all born on the same night as she.<sup>136</sup> Compare Asneth, for instance, with Artemis and her Nymphs. Dowden reminds us that the nymphs live on the northern bank of the Alpheios, described as “lush, moist feminine country” appropriate for girl’s initiations.<sup>137</sup> It can be likened to Asneth’s moist lush garden, through which runs a conduit. In her study of the female initiation of Io, Phyllis B. Katz tells of the consequences, not just to herself, but also to her maids, upon Io’s refusal to marry:

For they know that Io’s madness stems from her avoidance of her sexuality and her persecution by Hera, and that her painful wanderings are actually a ‘meta-symptom’ of her real madness and suffering. Their use of the adjective ‘manshunning’ [asterganora] emphasizes the impact on them of Io’s unmarried state. These maidens sympathize with her suffering but they know its real cause: Io’s failure to accept her natural female role, the natural end of a girl’s transition from childhood to adulthood. (135)

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<sup>133</sup> Dowden, esp. 129-34 and 171.

<sup>134</sup> According to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, cited in Peck. For Asneth as “a performing priestess,” see Burchard, “The Importance” 113.

<sup>135</sup> Compare the daughters of Proitos, the Proitids, who refuse to marry, ch. 2, Dowden.

<sup>136</sup> Dowden, throughout, notes the importance of night to female initiation; see esp. 202.

<sup>137</sup> Dowden, ch. 4, p. 102, and ch. 7.4.2.

On the heels of Asneth's refusal to marry begins her liminal seclusion, the initiation stage that promises to see Asneth transformed. According to Dowden, it is a banishment or isolation that often occurs because of refusal to marry and is the time when the initiate exhibits varying degrees of madness. In Asneth's case, her refusal of Joseph is equal to her refusal of the God of Israel. Jewish and later Christian readers might see this alone as madness, yet the reader is given an intimate "inside" view of this process. Asneth trembles, wails and cries so loudly, she at one point wakes her maids.<sup>138</sup> She refuses to eat, throwing her sacrificial food onto the street below, where her rich clothing, jewelry and idols also end up (ll. 307-320). She puts on a black robe for mourning, which we are told was for a brother who died (l. 300), and muddies herself with ashes (ll. 321-326), associating her with both death and the earth. She is in a state of "madness" experienced by female initiates of old, where contrasted with their beauty, during seclusion, they instead become ugly.

She is already separated from her family and friends, yet strangely, Asneth states that her parents have actually rejected her, though no events in the story backs this up. In his introduction to the story as part of *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Christoph Burchard also notes that nothing in the narrative indicates her parents have rejected her, and he suggests that conversion to Judaism itself may have incurred rejection (*Joseph and Asneth*, p. 218). While this may or may not be part of the "initiation" of conversion, we do know, based on Dowden's study, that rejection *is* a factor in female initiation. The

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<sup>138</sup> Compare this, for instance, with the opening lyrics of the Greek classic, Euripides' *Helen*, where the Spartan women hear from Helen, "a painful wail / a loud lament, a sad lyreless song, / such as some nymph in grievous pain might cry out," during what Bella Zweig associates as part of the ritual transition stage in female initiation. Excerpts (ll. 184-186) cited by Bella Zweig, "Euripides' *Helen* and Female Rites of Passage," in Padilla, 167.

strange insertion of her parent's rejection, along with other strange details, may have met Hellenistic readers' expectation of the typology in a "once upon a time" fashion.

During the liminal period a maiden is often associated with trickery. Asneth tricks her maids by twice slipping past them, unnoticed, when they think she is unable to get up from her bed: once to collect ashes, and once to retrieve a black mourning robe. Her actions (though apparently while she is distressed) are described using words that translate into Middle English as "sche busked here ful boun" (hastened, eagerly), "by aventure" (by chance), and "privelye" (secretly) which suggest purpose and subterfuge.<sup>139</sup>

Asneth's seclusion is filled at first with wailing and an outward manifestation of madness, but after seven days of fasting, she is in a weakened state that is readily identified with death. That is, the reader sees that if something doesn't happen soon, Asneth will die. When the angel appears on the scene, in what can be described as a blinding light (like the sun), the dichotomy of darkness and light in Asneth's room is as death and life, once again reminding us of her symbolic death. The fact that he later feeds her "bred of lyf" and offers her beauty and virtues that will be everlasting, adds to the impression that he is, indeed, resurrecting her.

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<sup>139</sup> See lines 282 and 297. For the Latin, M. R. James, ed., in Batiffol, 97-98: *Et surrexit de lecto suo, et descendit pedetentim gradus de cenaculo, et venit ad portam. Et portarius dormiebat cum pueris suis. Et festinavit Aseneth et extraxit a fenestra pellem quae operiebat eam, et implevit eam cinere, et ascendit in cenaculo, et posuit eam super pavimentum, et clausit portam diligenter, et vectem subposuit ex latere. Et suspiravit suspirio magno cum planctu. [. . .] Abierunt virgines sedere in thalamis suis. Et surrexit Aseneth et aperuit silenter hostia, et ivit in thalamo suo secundo ubi errant repositure ornatus eius, et aperuit archam, et extraxit tunicam nigram et obscuram, eratque istud indumentum tristicie eius quum mortuus est frater eius iunior, et istud erat induta lacrimans fratrem suum. Et accepit tunicam nigram, et immisit illam in thalamo suo, et clausit iterum firmiter hostium, et vectem emisit de transverso.* In Burchard's translation from the Greek texts, after Asneth told her maids to go away, "Asneth rose and opened the door quietly" [ἡσυχῶς] and after putting on the black mourning robe, "closed the door again firmly and slipped the bolt across" [ἄσφαλῶς]. She also "hurried" when she was throwing her idols, food and clothing out the window. In Greek, the sense that she is doing all this in secret, without her maids or anyone else knowing, is supported. See Burchard *Joseph and Aseneth*, p. 215-16, 10:8-13 and the Greek text found in Batiffol.

What follows in Asneth's bedroom is a detailed erotic ritual that I suggest coincides with our understanding of the ancient sacred marriage ritual, including the fact that the god sometimes looks like the king. James Frazer explains that during the sacred marriage ritual in antiquity a woman slept alone in the temple, a woman who had no commerce or intercourse with mortal man. In Egypt she was referred to as the divine consort, and was often the Queen of Egypt herself. During the act, the god assumed the form of the reigning king, and in that disguise had intercourse with the queen.<sup>140</sup> H. S. Versnel reminds us: "In the New Year complex king and god are supposed to be one another's reflection in fall and rise."<sup>141</sup> R. T. Beckwith has demonstrated that Asneth's story takes place during the New Year, and we know that during Asneth's encounter, the man from heaven looks just like Joseph, who represents and later succeeds the king. (For a discussion of the New Year complex identified by Frazer, and others and a brief discussion of Joseph in this context, I have included a section in this chapter below).<sup>142</sup> In her story Joseph leaves Asneth's home, and she begins to mourn as if he is dead to her. It is the god-like being, looking just like Joseph, who seems to rise in his stead through the presence of the star. Like the queens described by Frazer, Asneth, along with her

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<sup>140</sup> *The Golden Bough*, online edition at <http://www.bartleby.com>, (ch. 12, p. 1, accessed Sept. 28, 2008). On sacred marriage in ancient Sumeria, also see Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite*. See also Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro, eds., *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity*, (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2008), and Pirjo Lapinkivi, *The Sumerian Sacred Marriage: In the Light of Comparative Evidence* (State Archives of Assyria Studies XV, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, University of Helsinki, 2004).

<sup>141</sup> He goes on to say: "so here the search has been for the mythic-divine—not only heroic—reflections of the initiation candidate" (49), "What's Sauce for the Goose is Sauce for the Gander: Myth and Ritual, Old and New," *Approaches to Greek Myth*, Ed. Lowell Edmunds (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990) 23-90. Versnel is speaking of male initiates, who I suggest have similarities with Joseph in *Asneth*, which I discuss further below.

<sup>142</sup> R. T. Beckwith, "The Solar Calendar of Joseph and Asenath: A Suggestion," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 15 (1984): 90-111.

maids, has never been in the company of men, “With man ne manlichild speke thei in no manere entent” (l. 88).

The man from heaven instructs Asneth to wash, and we know that the libations or washing of the initiate are referred to sometimes as the cure to madness, hence the “conduit” in Asneth’s garden takes on further significance as that which will help see to her cure.<sup>143</sup> It also functions to aid germination; the ultimate cure to maidenhood is motherhood. In a more physical reading, the moistening of the maid by her husband, her own germination, is the cure to her madness. Moreover, Asneth changes into her wedding garments. She removes her “virginal” veil, before engaging with the man from heaven.

In a sexual reading of the story, “cellar” imagery must be likened to the womb. It is the place from where the angel plunders food and wine “aftir [his] entent” and “plesant to his taste” (516). It is also the place where the Angel plants a pure white honeycomb, symbolic harvest of Asneth’s womb, the womb of a converted woman and a virgin.

Asneth may be further associated with death and burial (and also regeneration) when she enters her cellar; initiates in other myths who enter caves are thus symbolically buried. In his discussion of the liminal period in rites of passage, Victor Turner says, “It is interesting to note how, by the principle of the economy (or parsimony) of symbolic reference, logically antithetical processes of death and growth may be represented by the same tokens, for example, by huts and tunnels that are at once tombs and wombs” (9).

The cellar may have implications with respect to funerary rites, which would further

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<sup>143</sup> Dowden, 91, for instance, where “rites at a spring” restore sanity for the Proitids. Burchard’s translation reads: “And there was in that court, on the right hand, a spring of abundant living water [πηγή ὕδατος πλουσία] and below the spring was a big cistern [ληνὸς μεγάλη] receiving the water of that spring” (*Joseph and Aseneth*, 205, 2:12). In Burchard’s translation when Asneth washes the ashes from her face and hands as the angel instructs, she washes with this “living water” (225, 15:15).

associate Asneth here with death. A. Rosalie David describes “a small enclosed room, known today as a ‘serdab’ from the Arabic word meaning ‘cellar,’ was included in some of the mastaba-tombs. It provides a place accessible to the living, where food offerings could be brought for the deceased.”<sup>144</sup> Asneth is instructed by the angel to “*Entre into thi celer*” (521). In Latin she enters her “*cellario*”; Burchard translates the Greek word, τῷ ταμείῳ or τὸ ταμειῶν σου as “storeroom” (15:14 and 16:8). In Latin, “*cella*” can mean storeroom, but also “temple chamber” or “sanctuary” adding to the possibility of layered meanings here. Kraemer discusses aspects of the story in the context of ancient sun adjuration, which has clear reverberations in this scene.<sup>145</sup> Asneth not only appears to conjure the angel, described as the sun, from the beyond, but she enters her cellar in order to feed the divine who enters her conjugal chamber, and anoints her with holy cream from heaven. During their encounter, the “dew” of the rose in heaven, as well as “holy creme,” the honey oozing from the honeycomb, may symbolize the male contribution in coitus.<sup>146</sup> It is only after Asneth is “anointed” with “holi creme of glorious purveance [provision],” or experiences a sacred consummation, that she is promised renewal of the flesh and never-failing “vertu.”<sup>147</sup>

Beyond the typology which signals she is a candidate for female initiation, signs of female initiation include the rejection of her family, the wailing sobs (madness) Asneth

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<sup>144</sup> See her monograph, *The Ancient Egyptians: Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) 61.

<sup>145</sup> In Egypt Isis and Osiris (who is identified with the sun) preside over fertility, but also Egyptian funerary rites. Joseph and Asneth have many characteristics in common with this and other fertility couples, as I will discuss further below. For aspects of sun adjuration in *Asneth*, see Kraemer, *When Joseph Met Asneth*, 91-93, 97, 101, and sun adjuration in ancient Israel, 157.

<sup>146</sup> In Burchard’s translation of the Greek, Asneth has been anointed with “ointment of incorruptibility” [χρίσματι κέχρισται ἀφθαρσίας] (229, 16:16).

<sup>147</sup> Square brackets mine. The entire scene with the angel occurs in lines 410-592 of “The Storie of Asneth,” Peck’s edition.

incurs in isolation, her identification with death and the earth, the libations or washing, a change of clothing, a sacred meal, sacred marriage, and renaming. Most importantly, Asneth's new title "City of Refuge," is a reference to her new status as a protective "mother of Israel," substantiated by her conception of Ephraim and Manasseh, who each become tribes of Israel.<sup>148</sup> In Dowden's terms, the death of her maidenhood has been necessary for her transition to matronhood. Her union to both a god and a mortal husband affirms Asneth's matronhood. Finally, Asneth's marriage to Joseph is directly associated with the fertility of the land. Asneth's name, itself, means of, or belonging to, the Egyptian grain goddess Neith, and the couple procreate during the seven years of plenty, linking their reproduction to agricultural prosperity.<sup>149</sup> The initiation of the maiden described by Dowden, her transition to matronhood for the (agricultural) prosperity of a tribe, is thus fully realized in this Hellenistic Jewish story.

### **Concepts of Joseph in Biblical and Near Eastern Thought**

Though my main focus in this study is *The Storie of Asneth* and its significance to medieval culture, a large part of the medieval interest in Asneth's story is that she was the wife of Joseph. Though Joseph maintains a minimal role in the action of her story, I suggest here that part of the reason his marginalization worked was that there was

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<sup>148</sup> See Judges 5:7, where the prophetess Deborah is referred to as a "Mother in Israel," and also II Samuel 20:19 (II Kings in the Douay-Rheims Bible, based on the Latin Vulgate), where the city of Abel is referred to as a "Mother in Israel," offering a co-usage of the term in the Old Testament for both a female visionary and a city. Moreover, Ecclesia (the Church) is both a bride and city in the Apocalypse. In Burchard's Greek translation of *Asneth*, her new title translates as "walled mother-city of all who take refuge with the name of the Lord God" (my emphasis), in Charlesworth 16:17, p. 229.

<sup>149</sup> It is worth noting here again that William Caxton's 15<sup>th</sup> c. version of de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, "The History of Joseph," mentions that Joseph and Asneth have their children during the seven years of plenty, affirming this understanding in the Middle Ages. This is also consistent with *Genesis* 41:50. Jewish Midrashic tradition asserts, "Asenath bore him two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, during the seven years of plenty, for in the time of famine Joseph refrained from all indulgence in the pleasures of life," implying the couple's sexual abstinence during the years of famine. See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, V. 2, p. 77, fn. 190 source: Ta'anit 11a. Comp. ER 20, 112 and 25, 120; EZ I, 167, and 15, 198.

profound mythology of him that circulated from ancient times in Jewish, Islamic, and Christian tradition; all would have added to a medieval understanding of the Patriarch, and in turn, Asneth. A discussion of Asneth as a female initiate makes further sense if one understands Joseph as the male initiate. In Christian tradition, he is also understood as a type of Christ, which helps to clinch the typological association in her own story of Asneth with god's bride, on which see Chapter Five below.

Since it is accepted that Asneth's story was derived largely from Jewish Midrash, a look at Islamic sources, which are also influenced by Midrashic sources, makes sense as we try to piece together Joseph's relevance in Near Eastern traditions, and his legacy in Christian tradition.<sup>150</sup> In his study of the Genesis account of Joseph, compared to the Qur'an, John Kaltner affirms: "Attention to [the differences between the two] and their implications, can enable the Biblical reader to think about the Joseph story in new and interesting ways" (1, square brackets mine). One thing on which scholars agree is that mythology surrounding Joseph has no Urtext, no known original source. Though this is so, as in *Asneth*, we may still recognize themes and typology surrounding Joseph that much resemble those in other ancient mythologies including those of Sumer and Egypt. While direct influence may not necessarily be assumed, common threads of meaning found in themes that seem to be perpetuated in various Near Eastern mythologies may be evidence that some stem from common, perhaps even Indo-European roots about which scholars are only able to speculate. What scholars agree on is that various stories pertaining to Joseph may have later been symbiotically influenced, especially as Judaism

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<sup>150</sup> For a more in depth study of Joseph's story in Judaic and Islamic tradition, see Marc Bernstein, *Stories of Joseph: Narrative Migrations between Judaism and Islam* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006) and John Kaltner, *Inquiring of Joseph: Getting to Know a Biblical Character Through the Qur'an*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003), where he states: Many of these writings [about Joseph] like the Midrashim and the Talmud, come from the Rabbis" (xi, square brackets mine).

gives way to both Christianity and Islam. It is assumed that stories with similar themes partially evolved due to their oral transmission between migratory tribes, and later due to trade relationships between cultures.<sup>151</sup> If similar stories that seem to address similar themes are perpetuated across Near Eastern cultures, a comparative study inevitably also reveals differences in cultural ideologies, however what I will focus on here are the similarities between Jewish and Islamic mythology which seem to support Joseph as the initiate, Judaism's version of the sacrificial fertility king of ancient rite.

Scholars of Greek mythology identify the ancient theme in myth and literature of the death of the king for agricultural and cultural prosperity and tribal continuation. There is a continuum of stories that James Frazer describes in *The Golden Bough* as the "Killing of the Divine King" and what H. S. Versnel calls the "year king-god scheme" having to do with the fertility of the land and ending in sacred marriage, re-instatement of a king, and regeneration of the land. This scheme also fits into the Dumézilian, trifunctional ideology of Indo-European myth, which may be briefly summarized as 1) sovereignty/ kingship/religious rule, 2) force/war, and 3) fertility as it pertains to the land, as well as the sexual capacity of women.<sup>152</sup> Especially seen in this third portion of the

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<sup>151</sup> The idea of direct influence has now been supplanted by the idea of symbiosis between Islam and Judaism. See Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press: 1995). See also Lassner and his discussion of cultural transmission and borrowing, and the problem for modern scholars in trying to distinguish between "early memory and later imagination." His discussion is in the context of versions of the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba as they appear in Islamic sources, but are also applicable to discussion of the Joseph myth in Jewish and Islamic sources: Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993). See his Chapter Two in particular. For an example of the possible evolution of biblical legend in the Arabian Peninsula, for instance, and a discussion of symbiotic cultural influences on these legends, see also Chapter One of Reuven Firestone's, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). In terms of Medieval influence, one must not discount pilgrimage and crusade travel between the Near East and England.

<sup>152</sup> See Robert Mondi on Near Eastern Mythic Themes: "Greek Mythic Thought in the Light of the Near East" (in Edmunds), as well as Joseph Falaky Nagy, "Hierarchy, Heroes, and Heads: Indo-European Structures in Greek Myth" on Indo European Mythic themes (in Edmunds) who each mention this.

tripartite, Joseph may be identified with the *year king-god* of fertility rite who takes a wife in sacred marriage. Joseph's story fits within this ritual pattern that Frazer offers in *The Golden Bough*, and which Versnel summarizes as:

Sacral year king guarantees fertility of nature (Year god represents natural vegetative force); suffers ritual death (dies, is imprisoned in underworld); a new vigorous king succeeds (rises again, is reborn). (30)

He lists the same scenario in the context of Marduk as:

Crisis situation between old and new; King is dethroned and humiliated; King is reinstated; Triumphal pageant; Sacred marriage. (37)

Versnel goes on to make a more specific connection of this scenario with initiation rites, when he states, “so here the search has been for the mythic-divine—not only heroic— [but] reflections of the initiation candidate” (49 square brackets mine).<sup>153</sup> Versnel is speaking of male initiates, a role that Joseph fits as Asneth's counterpart in *The Storie of Asneth*; Joseph is like Marduk or Osiris in the year king-god scheme, partially because he is symbolically buried several times in biblical tradition, but also for other reasons.

I have argued elsewhere that a more thorough comparison between Joseph and the Egyptian, Osiris, may reveal that Jewish writers of Joseph's story may have perpetuated elements of Osiris in the character of Joseph more specifically.<sup>154</sup> Osiris is the Egyptian god of vegetative cycles, and also god of the underworld, death rites, and yearly sacred marriage to the goddess Isis. Marduk fulfills this function in Babylonian society as the

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<sup>153</sup> For this and an overview of myth and ritual schools of thought in the last century, see Versnel, “What's Sauce for the Goose,” in Edmunds, 23-90. In the ancient Egyptian, “Tale of Two Brothers,” a story which scholars continue to compare archetypally to Joseph, there is yet another reference of Joseph to the “dying and living again of the bringer of fruitfulness who is incarnated in the king,” on which see Susan Tower Hollis, *The Ancient Egyptian “Tale of Two Brothers”: A Mythological, Religious, Literary, and Historico-Political Study*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oakville, CT: Bannerstone Press, 2008) 38.

<sup>154</sup> Reid, MA thesis, “‘This was here procreation’ *The Storie of Asneth* and Spiritual Marriage in the Later Middle Ages,” (University of Victoria, 2003).

husband of Ishtar (as Frazer and Versnel have reminded us). Indeed, the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* mentions Joseph's likeness to Marduk.<sup>155</sup> Marduk is otherwise also identified with Dumuzi, husband of Inanna to the Sumerians. Sirius (Osiris) is regarded as the star of Isis to the Egyptians, just as to the Babylonians, Venus, the morning star (also known as Lucifer), is the star of the goddess Ishtar. In his study of the astrological calendar in *Joseph and Aseneth*, R. T. Beckwith has demonstrated that when Asneth looked out her eastern window before daybreak, both stars, Sirius and Venus, would have been visible to her in the same part of the sky, though in her story it names "Lucifer" (Venus) as the star that splits in two, from which the Angel emerges. And yet, based on the very sophisticated and precise calendar that can be traced in her story, we can begin to understand that ancient readers would have identified Asneth with either one of these goddesses (Isis or Ishtar) and hence Joseph would have been identified with the corresponding year god-king. Each of these ancient queen-goddesses mourns her lover who dies at the end of the growing season. Her tears flood the river (Nile and Euphrates respectively), depositing fertile mud on the delta in anticipation of the growing season. Asneth is likewise associated with tears that produce mud. Indeed, when the man from heaven descends from the star into Asneth's marriage chamber, he is described as Joseph's likeness and as the sun "a man like almost/ Joseph, with scepter, stole, and coroune, his cheer as lyhtyng leem, /And his yes bright shynyng as doth the sunne beem. The heris of hys heed, thei were as flame of fire brennyng" (l. 423-26). At this moment Asneth is literally covered in mud—"the fen, mad of the askes and of gret teryng" (l. 453). Here light meets darkness, sun, meets earth. Asneth is like the other goddesses whose tears coax the return of her lover, a lover who returns simultaneously with the

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<sup>155</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1960).

appearance of the star, and with whom she will copulate in sacred marriage for agricultural prosperity. For the ancient goddesses, this occurred at the New Year, precisely when, as Beckwith has shown, Asneth's tears conjure both the angel, and Joseph's return.<sup>156</sup>

In addition to similarities with these two ancient gods, other mythic signals in versions of Joseph's life seem to hark back to commonly understood ritual scenarios. One of these signs is the image of the wolf in both Jewish and Islamic traditions. After the brothers have thrown Joseph into a pit and subsequently sold him into slavery, they falsely report to Jacob that a wolf or pack of wolves has devoured Joseph, depending on which tradition you read.<sup>157</sup> In Islamic tradition, Jacob foresees in a dream that wolves attack Joseph. Jacob also has a premonition that Joseph's brothers wish to do him harm. That the wolf image survives may hark back to an image of male initiates that also survives in ancient Greek myth. That is, when boys are in the liminal stage of initiation into manhood, they characteristically band together and roam the countryside wreaking havoc and are often described as wolves. The typology is ancient, and indeed, the wolves in Islamic versions of Joseph's story are interpreted as a metaphor for the brothers themselves.<sup>158</sup> Dowden has reminded us that "men retain this characteristic liminal stage

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<sup>156</sup> On the identification of these queens with the stars, see Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, online edition at <http://www.bartleby.com>, (ch. 12, p. 1, accessed Sept. 28, 2008). On sacred marriage in the context of Sumerian society, also see Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite*. On the stars Asneth sees out her window at precisely the New Year, see Beckwith "The Solar Calendar."

<sup>157</sup> The Qu'ran has the brothers telling Jacob a wolf killed Joseph, a tradition that is accounted for in Brinner: "According to Ibn 'Abbas and others, what Jacob said is only because in a dream he had seen Joseph on top of a mountain being attacked by ten wolves who were about to devour him, while one wolf among them was protecting him." See William M. Brinner Trans. Ann. , *'Ara'is Al-Majalis Fi Qisas Al-Anbiya' or 'Lives of the Prophets'* (Lieden: Brill, 2002) 188. This Islamic account would suggest that the wolf pack metaphor for the brothers was understood at least in later readings such as this. For more comparisons of the story, see Marc Bernstein, *Stories of Joseph*, and John Kaltner, *Inquiring of Joseph*.

<sup>158</sup> See for instance, Brinner.

sometimes into their thirties as with Diomedes and Achilles.”<sup>159</sup> This helps us understand that even at their age, Joseph’s grown bothers may be associated with initiatory-type behavior especially given that they are not yet established independently from Jacob’s household. Liminal initiatory-type behavior, commensurate with wolves, may be understood when they seem to act in typical pack instinct against Joseph, wishing to subjugate him, and almost killing him, for, according to Dowden, part of the ancient rite included a human sacrifice in association with the initiates’ metamorphosis into wolves. Joseph’s brothers may be seen to symbolically kill him—devour him as a pack of wolves—when they put him in the ground and subsequently sell him into slavery—further identifying him with death in this incident.

In Genesis, Joseph dreams of wheat and stars in nearly parallel ways, which show a prophetic hierarchical relationship between him and his brothers, but also helps to identify him with the fertility of the land. The dreams would affirm for ancient readers the connection of astrology with the growing season and hence Joseph’s identity with both. This prophetic foreshadowing is later realized when Joseph is further identified with agricultural prosperity and famine in Egypt, when he is appointed by the pharaoh to collect wheat during the seven years of plenty, against the seven years of famine. As I have already mentioned, according to Jewish Legend, Joseph and Asneth were fertile during the seven years of plenty when their sons were born and abstained from sexual activity during the seven years of famine. The tradition that their own reproduction echoes that of the land, makes further sense if the marriage can be identified with the “sacred marriage” of fertility rite and the agricultural prosperity of a whole culture is

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<sup>159</sup> Dowden, 110-112.

dependent upon its consummation. Put simply, if the fertility couple doesn't copulate, nothing will grow. Finally, Joseph ends up ruling Egypt in Pharaoh's, or Potiphar's stead, depending on whether one is reading the Jewish, or the Islamic account. In either case, Joseph takes on the temporary role of king or ruler, renewing leadership in Egypt. That Joseph symbolically dies and becomes resurrected several times, in both Islamic and Jewish accounts of his story, further supports his sacrificial role as a version of the ancient *year god-king*. Although one may go no further than the Old Testament to see his symbolic burials, this sense is affirmed in supplemental mythology.

Pathetic events in *Joseph* are contrary to what one would expect to happen to a favourite son who is above moral reproach. In a Job-like manner, the Old Testament as well as Islamic assumptions that if one does "good" they will correspondingly be blessed by god, and the converse assumption that doing evil will reap God's curse seem to at first be sorely tested where Joseph is concerned. It is outrageously unfair that Joseph is betrayed and sold into slavery, unless one recognizes that he is the necessary sacrifice consistent with the ancient archetype. Joseph's first symbolic death, when his brothers throw him into the pit or well is supported in Islamic images of this scene, which survive in medieval manuscripts. They show a cross section of earth within which Joseph is cradled in a cavern-like pit consistent with burial in the earth, as in a grave.<sup>160</sup> The symbol of the pit as death is further affirmed in Islamic myth when Joseph is instructed by Gabriel to recite an invocation for God to free him from the pit, which includes the

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<sup>160</sup> Rachel Milstein, Karin Ruhrdanz and Barbara Schnitz. *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qisas al-Anbiya'* (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 1999), Illustrations XVI. ms. N-2; 29 ms. T-1; 69. Haft Awrang.

title for God, “Reviver of the dead.”<sup>161</sup> Joseph’s second symbolic death is when he is thrown into jail (in ancient Egypt, also a pit in the ground), on the false testimony of Potiphar’s wife, who accuses him of trying to sexually accost her.<sup>162</sup> This part of the myth is retained in both Jewish and Islamic tradition, with small difference. On a broader scale, the selling of Joseph into slavery in Egypt generally may also symbolize death, and his rise to power, resurrection.

Joseph’s death and resurrection are also symbolically played out in the Pseudepigraphal story of *Asneth*. Asneth’s story includes a female initiation rite, the “death of the maiden” (as Dowden has coined this ritual) in Asneth’s preparation for her sacred marriage with Joseph (or at least with his spiritual look-a-like) and motherhood. At the beginning of the story, Joseph leaves Potiphar’s house after being rejected as a marriage candidate by Asneth, and may be understood to be “as if” dead to Asneth, when she puts on black mourning garb and proceeds to repent and bewail his absence. This may be further affirmed when she approaches the gates of the temple, where he has exited to the west (as the dying sun) and she gathers ashes, which further signals her mourning. He remains absent for seven days and triumphantly returns, as if resurrected, on the eighth day. The number seven is another unifying symbol of Joseph’s death. As might be expected of Joseph’s symbolic deaths, he spends seven years in jail, according to some accounts.<sup>163</sup> It is also commensurate with the seven years of famine, the literal

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<sup>161</sup> Brinner, 191, according to intertwined reports of al-Suddi and Raja—Ibn Mas’ud, Ibn Abbas, et. al. and Ishaq, b. et. al.

<sup>162</sup> In Judaic tradition Joseph marries Potiphar’s daughter, Asneth, and in Islamic tradition, he ends up marrying his seductress, Potiphar’s wife, Zulaika. It should not be surprising that Zulaika bears many traits in common with Asneth, in both Jewish (as an antithesis of Asneth) and Islamic mythology, which is, however, beyond the scope of the present study. I have my own theories, but for a comparison, also see, Bernstein “Stories of Joseph,” and Kaltner, “Inquiring of Joseph.”

<sup>163</sup> Brinner, 206: “most commentators agree that [the time Joseph spent in prison]...was seven years.”

death of the land, or agricultural infertility, which Joseph presides over as the year-king.<sup>164</sup>

No matter where the idea of sacrificial king originated, it has retained its importance in the major religions of the Near East and the West, including Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.<sup>165</sup> It may be seen in messianic images, especially of Jesus, the king who is sacrificed and buried in a cave, and subsequently resurrected for the prosperity and continued life of a very large tribe, humankind. Christ is Christianity's version of the dying and rising god of ancient tradition. The biblical New Testament certainly makes use of fertility language when it speaks of the saving of souls in harvest/agricultural terms in connection with Christ's saving power. Certainly the baptismal rites of early Christianity, which took days to accomplish and included liminal seclusion as part of its initiation into Christianity, emulated the death and resurrection of Christ at specifically Easter time—a time that has long been associated with pagan fertility rites. Mark Searle has traced early Christian baptismal rites of passage stating:

It was then [350-450 AD], if not a century earlier, that baptism came to be celebrated almost exclusively on Easter night, the night when Christ's new "Passover" or *transitus* from this world to the Father, from death to life, was accomplished. (458 square brackets mine)

Searle cites Narsai of Nisibis, one of the foremost Syriac theologians of the Early Church in an example that shows how baptism then was symbolic for the resurrection of the dead

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<sup>164</sup> Jewish writers offer agricultural ritual scenarios in the Pseudipigraphic, *Asneth* with the outcome that it is the Israelite nation that in effect becomes "reinstated" or "renewed" at the end of the story.

<sup>165</sup> An intriguing comparison might be made between the tradition of the dying and rising (man/god) and the Islamic version of Saint George, "Jirgis." Unlike most saints who often escape several near-death tortuous experiences, before finally being martyred, Jirgis actually dies and is resurrected several times. See an edition of the story in Brinner, 715-725.

in a rebirth/renewal capacity that at the same time included aspects of a ritual marital union with Christ:

As a babe from the midst of the womb he looks forth from the water; and instead of garments, the priest receives him and embraces him. He resembles a babe when he is lifted up out of the water; and as a babe everyone embraces and kisses him. Instead of swaddling clothes, they cast garments upon his limbs, and adorn him as a bridegroom on the day of the marriage supper. He also fulfills a sort of marriage-supper in baptism, and by his adornment he depicts the glory that is prepared for him. (466)<sup>166</sup>

When one identifies Joseph with Christ, as I believe Christians would have, one may make further points of comparison. In stories about him, including in the Old Testament, Joseph is drawn from a pit, or well, alive. In Islamic Myth, he is literally drawn from the well in the water bucket, identifying him even more specifically with “living water”.<sup>167</sup> He shares a name with Christ’s father (who is also the son of Jacob, according to the Gospel of Matthew), which would bear comparison for Christian readers, and in numerous other sources, as well as in Asneth’s story, he is described in terms of the sun. In these ways and others, medieval readers would have identified Joseph with Christ, and Asneth with Mary, who experiences a sexual consummation with God. The culminating act of sacred marriage is retained in Judeo-Christian theology when God’s people are described as the bride who will be collected at His triumphal return.

Given its relevance to Eastern and Western religions alike, one would not expect the total suppression of fertility or sacrificial images in stories about Joseph by either Judaism or Islam. If images are embellished or changed, it is because the ancient

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<sup>166</sup> See Mark Searle, “The Rites of Christian Initiation,” in *Betwixt and Between*, 457-470.

<sup>167</sup> In Brinner Joseph is specifically compared with Mohamed, Islam’s highest prophet, in terms of physical beauty and character.

typology has taken on evolved significance (including theological) for changing cultures. We see the retention of ancient initiation rites in the Middle English *Asneth*, for instance—including reading Joseph as the ancient male initiate—yet we also see Christian inclusions of a medieval hair shirt, and Asneth asking for remission of her sins revealing a Medieval Christian reading of a pre-Christian, Hellenistic text. That Joseph was understood as a Christ figure in the context of her story, to early as well as medieval Christians, I will discuss further in Chapter Four.

### ***Asneth* and Medieval Female Visionary Experience**

In the Latin version of Asneth’s story, the translator emphasizes what I have argued should be understood as Asneth’s holy consummation with the man from heaven, suggesting that early medieval propagators of the story also read Asneth’s encounter in this way, as I have discussed in Chapter One.<sup>168</sup> Further to the erotic element implicit in Asneth’s encounter with him, in medieval versions of the story, Asneth’s experience with the man from heaven would have been understood as an ecstatic one. In her encounter with him, the angel is pleased with Asneth, laughing at her “intelligence” (*intelligentium*). I suggest this would have been viewed as a reference to Asneth’s mystical capabilities, her spiritual wisdom or intelligence, rather than simply a human capacity for thought or sound judgment.<sup>169</sup>

And the aungel smyled then, with lauhynge cuntenance,  
For the wisdam of Asneth, upon here intelligence.  
He called here unto hym, his right hand he did hance  
Upon here heed. (538-40)

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<sup>168</sup> For an analysis of these lines in Latin, see Chapter One.

<sup>169</sup> Asneth is sometimes compared to Wisdom. See Kraemer, “*When Aseneth Met Joseph*,” as well as my note 235 below, and Chapter Four of this study in general.

*Et subrisit angelus super intelligentiam Aseneth vocavitque ipsam ad se, extenitque manum suam dexteram et tetigit caput eius.*

In the story, *intelligentiam* “understanding” or (in Middle English) “intelligence” is also attributed to Levi, known in biblical tradition for his dream-reading and divining capabilities: “And Asneth loved Levy wel for hys intelligence” (747) (*Et dilexit Aseneth Levi quoniam erat vir intelligens*).<sup>170</sup> In each the statement stands out in the narrative, almost awkwardly, not necessarily fitting for any other reason than to bring our attention to Levi's mystical qualities. It no doubt implied Asneth and Levi had a special bond because of this shared capability. The word “intelligence” is used rarely in Middle English, and according to the *MED* can mean “The highest faculty of the mind.” Yet Chaucer uses the word in connection with the divine, “Resoun is al oonly to the lynage of mankynde, ryght as intelligence is oonly the devyne nature,” and Lydgate associates intelligence with “Secre thynges” and “hyd mysteryes”.<sup>171</sup> The specific use of the word “intelligence” may be related to an understanding of Augustine’s hierarchy of vision types, where intellectual vision is the highest form, as opposed to corporeal or “bodily vision,” which is the lowest form of vision and most often associated with women.<sup>172</sup> As far as medieval translators were concerned, Asneth may have been viewed as a female visionary and one with high spiritual status.

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<sup>170</sup> The priest, Potiphar, is also attributed intelligence 43-44, but a priest’s visionary capabilities may also have been assumed by Medieval translators.

<sup>171</sup> See: *Boece* 5.pr.5.40 and *Secreta Secretorum*, Sln 2464, 231. (See *MED* entries for further manuscript and ed. sources.)

<sup>172</sup> Julian of Norwich is famous for having “intellectual” vision and asking for bodily or “corporeal” visions, and Margery Kempe is known for her bodily visions. For more on female visionaries and vision types, see Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006) esp. 21-22, 207, 229; and Katherine Zieman, “Playing Doctor,” in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press) 315. On Spiritual Intelligence (intellectual vision), see also Robert Lerner, “Ecstatic Dissent,” *Speculum* 67 (1992): 33-57.

Another facet of the text that would stand out for a medieval audience is the imagery of the honeycomb (which I will further discuss in Chapter Four). Bees, even in antiquity, were symbols of purity, and were later associated with Deborah the Old Testament prophetess, and later with Mary. Moreover, in the Middle Ages, bees were thought to reproduce without having sex. Bees produce the honeycomb, which mysteriously appears in Asneth's "cellar," a symbol of her womb. That is, of all creaturely assistants a god might use, bees would have the ability to help Asneth procreate while remaining a virgin. They also produce the honeycomb in her hand (or in Greek versions of the story, on her lips). The additional likeness of the comb—marked with a cross and called "bred of lyf" (552)—to the Eucharist, would have further identified Asneth with Mary, who bore the Logos, Christ.<sup>173</sup> In *De virginibus* (Ch. VIII, 40-41), St. Ambrose of Milan expands on the passage concerning honeycomb in the *Song of Songs*, giving us an idea of how bees would have been equated in the Middle Ages with virginity and a type of reproduction:

Let, then, your work be as it were a honeycomb, for virginity is fit to be compared to bees, so laborious is it, so modest, so continent. The bee feeds on dew, it knows no marriage couch, it makes honey. The virgin's dew is the divine word, for the words of God descend like the dew. The virgin's modesty is unstained nature. The virgin's produce is the fruit of the lips, without bitterness, abounding in sweetness. They work in common, and their fruit is in common. How I wish you, my daughter, to be an imitator of these bees, whose food is flowers, whose offspring is collected and brought together by the mouth.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> The cross-like sign the angel makes along the honeycomb goes back to Greek versions of the story and is one of the things that intrigues scholars about this pre-Christian text, including Burchard, "The Importance," who suggests Asneth's story may have influenced the New Testament tradition of the Lord's Supper.

<sup>174</sup> Christian Classics Ethereal Library, *Works of Ambrose of Milan* (<http://www.ccel.org>, accessed Sept 28, 2008.)

There can be little doubt that Asneth's "bee miracle" alone would have resonated in monastic societies among religious women who were, in part, encouraged to act like bees, and "(re)produce" or "be fruitful" without having sex. These same women were the brides of Christ, living representatives of the object of Christ's affection—the church. The erotic relationship between Christ and his bride, a type of "sacred marriage" illustrated in the *Song of Songs*, was a common focus in medieval exegesis and identified by Christians with mystical union, "mystical marriage" with God.

Though the experience did not exclude men, we more often read of the mystical marriage union (sometimes provocatively so) in the context of medieval female mystical experience, and Carolyn Walker-Bynum reminds us that, "the image of bride or lover was clearly a central metaphor for the women mystic's union with Christ's humanity."<sup>175</sup> Perhaps seen as the ultimate achievement of female religious in the Middle Ages, many women mystics record a marriage with Christ through ecstatic, visionary experience (as do Mechtild of Hackeborn, Catherine of Sienna, Margery Kempe, and numerous others).<sup>176</sup> Those who did not attain an ecstatic experience still sought this union by meditating on Christ's passion, and role-playing the part of his spouse or mother, as some Beguine sisters are known to have done.<sup>177</sup> Indeed, as part of every nun's profession to

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<sup>175</sup> See Carolyn Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion," *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1991) esp. 134.

<sup>176</sup> On the nature of Catherine of Sienna's visions, including marriage to Christ, see Carolyn Walker-Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (University of California Press: 1987) 174-175. On Margery Kempe's as Christ's spouse, see my discussion below, and on Mechtild, Chapter Four.

<sup>177</sup> On this see Joanna E. Ziegler, "Reality as Imitation: The Role of Religious Imagery Among the Beguines of the Low Countries," in *Maps of Flesh and Light*, as well as Carolyn Walker Bynum, "Patterns of Female Piety."

monastic orders, she is called “bride of God,” and symbolically given to Him in marriage.<sup>178</sup>

To what extent features of ancient initiation, as seen in *Asneth*, consciously impacted medieval female religious experience, we will never really know, but we do know that consecration of a nun to her order contains the core elements of female initiation we have explored in *Asneth*. Nancy Bradley Warren tells us of the Bridgettine induction service that “a ‘complex cluster of ideas—virginity, marriage, intercourse, fertility’ . . . lies at its heart.”<sup>179</sup> This is precisely the core of ideas involved in ancient female initiation.

In medieval versions of *Asneth*, both Latin and Middle English, the insertion of a hair shirt in her repentance scene suggests that medieval translators associated *Asneth*’s liminal seclusion, which I have demonstrated is consistent with her symbolic death, with a type of penitential behavior that was also expected of female religious in the Middle Ages. Dyan Elliot writes of female spirituality in the High Middle Ages, “women would effectively become living martyrs”; their “honorary role as living dead was enacted in a number of dramatic ways.”<sup>180</sup>

That the enclosure of an anchoress represented a type of death is seen in the accounts of Hildegard of Bingen, where upon her enclosure funeral rites were

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<sup>178</sup> See Nancy Bradley Warren, *Spiritual Economies: Female Monasticism in Later Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), esp. “Vows and Visitations: Textual Transactions and the Shaping of Monastic Identity,” 3-29.

<sup>179</sup> See Bradley Warren’s “Brides of Christ,” esp. p. 12 in *Spiritual Economies*. She quotes from Roger Ellis, *Viderunt Eam Filie Syon: The Spirituality of the English House of a Medieval Contemplative Order from its Beginnings to the Present Day*, *Analecta Cartusiana* 68 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik and Amerikanistik Universität, Salzburg, 1984).

<sup>180</sup> Elliott, *Proving Women: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 70. Bruce Lincoln suggests that in regards to women’s initiations, van Gennep’s three stages cannot always be accurately described: “I would suggest three others: enclosure, metamorphoses (or magnification), and emergence.” He also reminds us that the liminal period “may last for months or years” *Emerging*, 101, 99.

pronounced, as was the custom.<sup>181</sup> Not every anchoress experienced ecstatic vision, but in the select women who were privileged with this experience, it was often in the liminal state of isolation that enclosure would have provided, that visions occurred, and in this visionary state of ecstasy that a woman realized her mystical marriage to God. Virginia Burrus has suggested that, “holy women—like virgin martyrs—only really become representable in the moment of their dying, the moment when they meet their Bridegroom.”<sup>182</sup> It might be argued that within convent life, the transformation from virgin to mother was perpetual. As seen in the accounts of Medieval female saints lives, ultimate union, marriage with Christ, occurred only at death, towards which all else pointed. Before death and marriage to Christ could be ultimately realized, however, they could only be ritualized. Or experienced in vision.

We may recognize in the experiences described by female mystics elements of conversion generally, and we know that the stages of conversion (separation, liminality, aggregation) *are* similar to those of female initiation. Yet most medieval female visionary accounts occur subsequently to conversion; rather than changing from one social group to another (conversion), they change status within an already established group—femaleness—where they become distinguished as brides of Christ (initiation).<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> See Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, “Hildegard of Bingen,” *Yale Guide to Medieval Holy Women*, Eds. Rosalynn Voaden and Alastair Minnis (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming in 2009). She cites Anna Silvas, trans. *Jutta and Hildegard: the Biographical Sources* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 94 and 108.

<sup>182</sup> Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 53. Gloria Ferrari in her study of the ancient Greek wedding as rite of passage, reminds us that “Support for the idea that marriage is an initiation has been found in the conceit, commonplace in Greek culture, that the death of an unwed maiden is a wedding in Hades or to Hades himself.” See her “What Kind of Rite of Passage was the Ancient Greek Wedding,” in *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives: New Critical Perspectives*, Eds., David B. Dodd and Christopher A. Faraone (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) 27-42.

<sup>183</sup> On conversion in medieval society as leaving the broader society and joining a more restricted one, whether a monastic order, or a lay society, like the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, see John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The World of the Devotio Moderna in the Later Middle*

To what extent the ancient acts of the female initiate are implied in the very theology of the church as bride of Christ, we may never fully discover, but parallels in behavior and typology may bear further investigation. A close reading of *Asneth* in relation to ancient initiation features makes our understanding of the story's reception, in both Latin and in Middle English, important. Sadly, because it survives in just one manuscript in Middle English, we know little of *Asneth*'s fifteenth-century reception. Yet because so few of the story's details were changed or omitted in Middle English, it suggests that *The Storie of Asneth* possessed universal, perhaps inherently understood, qualities, that remained important in the experience of a woman's transition from maid to bride and mother, in whatever context she fulfilled her initiation. And yet, perhaps the initiation that Asneth experienced (whether recognized as one or not in the Middle Ages) held important typology for one group in particular. The "death of the maiden," and her subsequent identification as bride of [a] god, are trademarks we can also associate with medieval holy women.

Before discussing medieval female visionaries further, it will be helpful to briefly identify points in common between *The Story of Asneth*, and saints lives, especially earlier female saints popularized by collections such as de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, and Osbern of Bokenham's, *Legend of Holy Women*. Like *Asneth* the narratives of many female saints also "retain the shape" of initiation.

### **Female Initiation and Female Hagiography**

Female saints lives are usually quite formulaic in their depictions of these martyrs. Because their protagonists hold so many points in common with classical

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*Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). See also Carolyn Walker Bynum, "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's theory of Liminality," in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 27-52.

female initiates, we might even read these stories as Christianizations of female initiation as it is understood from Greek mythology. It is enough to say, however, that they have a remarkable number of points in common, as does *Asneth*, with stages in ancient female initiation. The hagiographical stories are usually set in an early Christian time among “pagan” or classical adversaries and the main character is often described as special or chosen from childhood, before she at some point (not always described in detail) converts to Christianity. Conversion to Christianity, therefore, is a given, and not usually the main transition in the stories. Rather, the focus is martyrdom, and while death is also symbolic of conversion, the events surrounding the deaths of these sexually pure women makes their experiences coincide more with that of female initiation than conversion, as events in *Asneth* seem to do. That is, the stories are less concerned with change of status from one social group to another (conversion), than with transformation within an already established context of Christianity and femaleness that ends symbolically in marriage.

In the stories of female saints, the protagonist’s virginity, her nobility/aristocracy, and often her outward beauty, are usually highlighted. Most female saints are propositioned by a pagan king or authority figure, who offers marriage or a privileged sexual relationship (a “type” of marriage) which they refuse. Still others are married at some point, but vow to remain celibate, either while they are still married (reflecting aspects of *spiritual marriage* in the Middle Ages, which I discuss below), or as widows. Either way, a commitment to virginity, or renewed virginity is crucial. With the rejection of marriage often comes the explanation that they already are, or have been chosen to be the bride of Christ.

Because they refuse to give up their virginity or join themselves to a pagan king, and therefore proliferate in a pagan society, they are marginalized and punished. This liminal stage usually finds them in the seclusion of prison, where they undergo extreme physical punishment, are often stripped of possessions (including clothing), whipped, beaten, and tortured. They also experience mental anguish, which may be equated with “madness.” Often demonic forces appear, sometimes in the form of beasts, which the maid must overcome. In many accounts, just when the saint is most degraded, a heavenly being (sometimes another dead saint) appears and ministers to her physical needs. The being may feed her (a meal that heaven has provided), help to wash and clothe her, and they often affirm, specifically, that she is God’s bride. Sometimes the saint is renamed during this visitation. Eventually, the holy maiden must die, but her death facilitates the salvation of many. At her martyrdom, many are converted in a proverbial “harvest” of souls, and still others who venerate her after death, receive the kind of protection offered to the followers of *Asneth*, who as a result of her transformation, will repent and gather within her walls.<sup>184</sup> The message seems to be that whoever receives the maid will achieve prosperity for their society. For *Asneth*, originally, it would have been prosperity for Hellenistic Judaism; in the case of our early female saints, it is prosperity for Christianity.

At this point it is useful to remember, again, that female initiation may be distinguished from the initiation that involves religious conversion, though it is not always separate from conversion in both pre-Christian and Christian contexts. *Asneth*’s story shows that she experiences conversion to Judaism *and* female initiation almost

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<sup>184</sup> The very term “harvest of souls” may owe its roots to the ancient fertility rites that make their way into Christian ideology and theology.

simultaneously, and that as a result, others will convert, finding refuge within her walls. Female saints convert at some point, but perhaps more importantly, it is the pagan witnesses to their martyrdom who convert to Christianity as a result of what I propose may be seen as the maid's initiation. In each case female initiation, including the symbolic or actual death of the virgin, culminating in divine marriage, is a salvational act.

It is impossible in this context to compare each female saint's life or female mystic to this scenario. Instead I offer a literary reading of portions of John Capgrave's fifteenth-century *Life of St. Katherine of Alexandria*, as well as excerpts from the life of Margery Kempe in order to highlight what I have identified as patterns and ideology consistent with ancient female initiation that were retained in the Middle Ages. I have chosen these texts because both date to the early fifteenth-century and are therefore contemporary with the translation of *Asneth* into Middle English. As I discuss each of these women (literary and historical) I draw some further parallels to the *Asneth* story.

### **St. Katherine of Alexandria**

Elements of female initiation may be clearly seen in John Capgrave's late Middle English *Life of St. Katherine of Alexandria*. While earlier accounts circulated, none elaborate the events of her life as Capgrave's lengthy version does. At a time when the mythology was in danger of losing significance, he expands on *Katherine* to such an extent, we can only assume certain typology was as important as ever; it seems to have been consciously included in the story for the edification (especially) of the female audiences and laity for whom he wrote in the vernacular. In his text Capgrave elaborates on Katherine's mystical marriage with a level of sophistication reminiscent of what we find in *Asneth*. Katherine's mystical marriage had only become part of her legend in the

thirteenth century, which suggests a later medieval concern with this typology. *Asneth*, as we know was translated into Latin in England in the late 12th century, which offers the intriguing possibility that *Asneth*'s story influenced the hagiographical accounts of Katherine, though there is no sure evidence that Capgrave read *Asneth*.<sup>185</sup>

St. Katherine of Alexandria, like *Asneth*, was compared to Mary by medieval readers: "But next that Lady above alle other in blys/ Folowyth this mayde weche we clepe Kateryne" (Prol. 12-13).<sup>186</sup> Her parents were at first unable to conceive, and therefore their conception of Katherine (compared that of "Zacharye and Elysabethe" and "Abraham and Sarra") is miraculously ordained (Capgrave Bk 1, 182-183). Moreover, like her sister saints, she is chosen from birth to be God's bride, exhibiting special qualities from infancy:

For God to Himselfe this mayden had i-chose  
As for His owyn spouse and for His wyffe dere. (Bk. 1, 190-92)

.....  
Sche was fro hir byrth bothe meke and mylde.  
Mercy fro the tetys grew with hir alsoo  
And lested with hir all hir lyffe ther-too. (Bk 1, 241-243)

.....  
Sumtyme to hir mayster wold sche sey nay –  
Whan he bad heir play, sche wold sit styll.  
To stody and goodenes inclined was hir wylle (Bk 1, 271-73)

The patron saint of Scholars, Katherine is born of a Saracen king and queen and lives in a walled palace. Only she holds the key to her private garden. It is similar to *Asneth*'s womb-like garden, or Susannah's, the gates through which, symbolically, only a husband

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<sup>185</sup> On the marriage scene being a later medieval inclusion, see Karen Weinstead, ed., *The Life of Saint Katherine*, Kalamazoo (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999) 32, the edition quoted from in this chapter. See her introduction for Capgrave's audience and versions of St. Katherine that circulated previously. For Capgrave in general see Weinstead's, *John Capgrave's Fifteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

<sup>186</sup> Compared again, Bk 3, 389-92, and in countless other places.

may enter. If familiar with similar typology, one can understand that Katherine is protecting her own garden against marital invasion, choosing instead a life of study.

Sche bare the key of this gardeyn - there had it no moo.  
 Whan sche went in, sche schett it full fast.  
 It was speryd ful treuly went sche to or froo,  
 For of many thynges was sche sore agast  
 But most of inquietude. (bk 1. 351-355)

.....  
 The walles and the toures were made nye so hye,  
 Ful covertly with arches and sotelly i-cast;  
 There myght not cume in but foule that doth flye.  
 The gatis, as I seyde, were schett full fast  
 And evyr more hirselve wold be the last.  
 The key eke sche bare, for sche wolde soo.  
 Thus lyved this lady in hir stody thoo. (bk 1. 358-64)

Katherine is so content with her life of study, and so resistant to marriage, which one may extrapolate would interrupt this life, that Capgrave devotes a whole book to the Marriage Parliament, a philosophical debate in which Katherine defends her right to remain single. What she will produce in her garden is not children, but scholarship. Thinking to trick her advisors, she finally agrees to marry if they can find her a husband with impossibly high qualities that she relays to them in detail, not realizing she has sealed her own fate to become Christ's bride by describing qualities that He alone possesses.

Like other maidens ripe for initiation, Katherine is "'Fyrst of alle... a qween/ A rych, a reall, a wys, and eke a fayre,/ For in this worlde swech no moo there been" (Bk 3, 204-06). She is beautiful, aristocratic, virginal, and refuses to marry, all prerequisites for female initiation. Moreover, we are forewarned of the (liminal) transformation that will take place before Katherine's initiation is complete: Before a "heyere lord of degree/'Schal be hir spouse...Sche must forbere first mech thing" (Bk. 3, 217-19).

According to Capgrave, the Virgin Mary sends the hermit Adrien to lead Katherine to conversion and to the location of her subsequent mystical marriage with Christ. Adrien miraculously enters the garden; the locked gates open for him “at a swap” (313), and she wonders “how that ony man/ Might entere to hir into that privy place” (316-17). Though the hermit is sent to see to her conversion, Capgrave tells us she is already a Christian in her heart:

Cryst had made His horde  
Or this ermyte cam and leyd His grete tresoure  
Right in hir hert, empreded full sore,  
For thow He sent the ermyte as his messangere,  
Or the ermyte cam, Crist Himself was there (465-69).

As in *Asneth*, there is the sense that Kathryn’s initiation does not quite equal her conversion, but occurs somehow simultaneously, or subsequently to it. It is after Adrien explains Christian doctrine, affirming points of faith to Katherine (who already has them imprinted on her heart) that her mystical journey begins. He miraculously, invisibly, leads her through the city to the wilderness location of his hermitage, which has disappeared. Its place is a “castell”, with a “tour” (905). Capgrave leaves us in no doubt this is a mystical experience.

There where thei received on every syde  
With swech manere persones of face and of clothing  
We can not speke it. I trow thei told it nowte,  
For thei that are lyfte to swech mysty thing,  
Thei telle what thei sey whan thei were thedyr broute,  
But thei cannot expresse her wyll ne her thowte  
In which thei hade that manere solace  
It is another langage that longyth to that place. (917-24)

Katherine is, indeed, experiencing a vision, compared to

Seynt Poule hymselfe [who] was on of thoo  
That was thus i-raveched, yet dowted he  
Wheythyr his body or nowte were in that secree.

But this doute I not, that the body of this mayde  
Was in that temple where sche was arayde. (927-29)

Unlike Asneth, who seems to be attributed the qualities of intellectual vision, Kathryn is attributed bodily vision, more commonly associated with female visionaries in the Middle Ages. Capgrave tells us she was bodily transformed to that place, where in the heavenly castle Katherine is welcomed for her virginity.

“Wolcom, syster, onto this holy place!  
Wolcom to oure Lord, which hath yow chose  
For to be His spouse right of His grace!  
Wolcome of clenness very sweet rose;  
For youre virginité, wythouwte ony glose,  
Schal we receive yow.” And thus forth thei hir lede  
These gostly folkys in wondyrfull wede (946-52)

Soon, however, Katherine falls “Down all in trauns – there was nevyr man ne schalle / That may susteyn in body swech hevynly blysse, / For who schall it susteyn must dye first iwys (978-80). This passage alludes to her symbolic death in this transformation. Because of her human carnality, she at first cannot rise to meet Christ, and in Capgrave’s version, Mary must intervene, lifting Kathryn up, resurrecting her, as it were, to Christ’s presence. But before Kathryn may see Christ’s face, she must undergo a ritual cleansing equated with baptism. This the priest Adrien must perform: “Let her goo clense hir, lete hir goo purchase / The holy baptem, than hath sche My merke / Bryng hir than to me” (1048-1050). Mary explains this bathing is natural for any bride: “Beth not discomfortyd in no manere weye / With my Sones wordes, for in sykyrness...It is a goodely useage, sothely to seye, / Who schal be weddyd onto duke or kyng / Befor hir weddyng to haf a bathyng.” Mary’s words hint that this act incurs a transformation in itself: “Aftyр your waschyng, ye schal be full mery!”

During cleansing Mary herself strips Katherine of her clothing, and Capgrave seems to address the expectation that her name will change here; that is, he anticipates readers may expect that it will, but instead has Mary explain that Katherine's name will be "renewed" but not changed for this reason: "That thei which knew hir ethir eld or yung / Schul haf an evydens sche is styll the same / Whech sche ws befor (1097-99). Here we may interpret that she is not changing from one social group to another, but will remain "styll the same," suggesting transformation within an already established group. At her baptism, Mary becomes her Godmother, and Katherine must answer the articles of faith.<sup>187</sup> Mary then leads her to Christ, where Katherine (as Asneth did in the presence of the angel) falls flat on her face. And just as in her story the angel tells Asneth to rise, Katherine is "lyft up by oure Lorde Hymselfe." He reminds Katherine of the marriage parliament, and her refusal to marry any except one possessing his own qualities, and asks her if she will have him. Similar to Asneth's acknowledgement of the God of Joseph, Katherine acknowledges Christ as the "Soveren makere of all manere thing," and asks that he "forgefe me all manere offens," implying her previous unwillingness to marry. And Katherine says finally, "Make me Your servaunt and not Youre wyff; / I am not worthy to so hye a lyffe!" (ll. 1218, 1223-25). This is astoundingly similar to Asneth's willingness, after she first lays eyes on Joseph and later during her repentance, to simply become Joseph's handmaiden as opposed to his wife: "I wolde my father wolde me gife to Joseph in service, / Forever therto I wolde assente to be hys owen

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<sup>187</sup> Though Capgrave has Christ insist that a priest preside over Katherine's baptism, Mary has a remarkably important role here, almost daring his audience to object to a woman's involvement in helping to administer this sacrament.

servant” (Peck ll. 208-09); “Now, good Lord, take me to hym to be his handmaide, /  
And I schal wassche louly hys feet; subdue me to his servage” (ll. 405-06).<sup>188</sup>

Just as Asneth throws her rich robes, jewelry, idols and sacrificial food out the windows onto the street below her tower, Katherine forsakes all that symbolizes her previous life, “I forsake here, Lorde, for Thi love, / Crown and londe, castell and town, / Gold and sylvyr, bothe hows and rofe, / Brochys and ryngys, mantel and gown” (Capgrave ll. 1233-36). Christ then proclaims Katherine his “wyff forevyr...Because of [her] constans in virginité” (ll. 1263-64 square brackets mine). The notion that the eternal quality of their relationship has to do with Katherine’s virginity is similar to the notion that Asneth’s virginity will be renewed, due to her repentance, in perpetuity, and she will be Joseph’s wife in world without end. Christ also warns Katherine that “a new conflict in schort tyme schul ye / Begyne for My sake” (ll. 1263-66). Mary gives Christ a ring, and he places it on Katherine’s finger. He then asks the hermit Adrien to teach her of the Trinity and the Godhead: “Thys werk, this lessoun, trully to performe, / Eight dayes wyll I sche dwell with thee” (ll. 1331-32). It is during what I suggest is a liminal isolation for eight days in Adrien’s hermitage cell that Katherine also fulfills symbolic death. At one point she falls “Down in a swow, as ded thoo sche lay” (l. 1353). And after reviving her with water from his well, “Adryane sayde to hir, ‘Lady dey no mor’” (l. 1361). Though one may read the symbolic death and resurrection of baptism here, especially given that Adrian revives her with water, Katherine’s association with death during this eight-day

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<sup>188</sup> Although I argue this typology is ancient and bears an abundance of similarity to ancient sources, some of the remarkably similar lines and scenes in each story (Capgrave’s *Katherine*, and *Asneth*) makes me believe Capgrave was familiar with Asneth’s story.

isolation also fulfills the typology of the female initiate in this regard.<sup>189</sup> Asneth fulfills this liminal stage similarly, when on the eighth day of her isolation she is resurrected by both the angel's and Joseph's return. In Capgrave's version of *Katherine*, at the end of the eight days, Mary returns in the company of Angels, saints and virgins, with Christ's greeting, to reveal the events of Katherine's future literal death, "the manere of youre endyng. / A tyraunt – a wers was nevyr levyng - / Schal distroye youre regne and your body sle" (ll. 1446-47).

Two years after Katherine's marriage to Christ, the emperor Maxentius takes over her kingdom; thus begins a formulaic pattern of events similar to those of most female saint's lives. Maxentius offers Katherine safety from persecution, along with power and riches in exchange for disavowing Christianity and becoming his mistress. As we expect she refuses this *type* of marriage, and her persecution begins. She is stripped "moder-naked" (as naked as when she was born) beaten, and marginalized in prison, "the depe cave of ston" (Bk 5, l. 675). She is "left alone in cave" (l. 693) for forty days (symbolic of Christ's own liminality) and is specifically in a cave that can be identified with the death that accompanies initiation. Christ, her true spouse, however, would "noth levyn hir like a caytiffe" (l. 697). He sends "servauntis fro the hows of lyffe... to comforth this mayde... with lyght of heven and with heavenly mete" (ll. 698-708). In her dark seclusion she is visited by heavenly beings of light who feed and comfort her. At the hour of her death, after commending her soul to Christ:

Sche had scarise made hir conclusyoun...but anon sodenlye  
Fro the hevene thei herd thoo a sownde soun

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<sup>189</sup> As Karen Weinstead has pointed out (Ch 3 note to line 1332), the eighth day (according to Jacobus de Voragine in the *Golden Legend* 1:216-17) stands for the resurrection. Asneth is also in the liminal stage of her initiation for seven days, and is symbolically resurrected on the eighth day upon the return of the angel, and of Joseph, which culminates in marriage.

A swete voys, and thus it gan to crye:  
 “Myn owne spowse, My wyffe and mayde holy  
 Come now to Me, come now onto thi rest,  
 For in My feyth thu hast labored as best. (1856-62)

Katherine’s initiation is complete. Just as Asneth’s symbolic death and marriage facilitates the salvation of souls, Katherine’s death and marriage to God (prefigured symbolically in the visionary marriage scene) results in the proliferation of souls in Christ.

### **Medieval Female Mystics including Margery Kempe**

Through stories such as *Asneth*, *The Life of St. Katherine of Alexandria*, and earlier biblical and apocryphal narratives and saints’ lives, models for female behaviour permeated the Middle Ages. It is among female religious, and in particular, female visionaries, we see behaviors that echo female initiation in antiquity. In ancient societies, as Dowden reminds us, not every woman was a candidate for female initiation. In medieval society, too, select women may be seen to stand for a group, women similar to “priestesses of a goddess, or at least ‘clearly enough assigned to the goddess from the secular world’.” In the Christian Middle Ages, the prevailing goddess was Mary, and both Asneth and Capgrave’s St. Katherine are identified with her (Mary is, in fact, Katherine’s godmother), but to a great extent, so were all female religious. Nancy Bradley Warren reminds us that a hymn sung by the Bridgetine nuns, emphasizes:

that the virginal conception of Christ was, at the same time, an intimate intercourse between him and the soul of the Virgin Mary which produced a whole host of “fayre children.” ...The newly professed is thus truly what the *Extravagantes* first called her, a daughter of the Virgin.... She is also...the spouse of the Virgin’s son: at the same time, therefore, daughter, wife, and mother to be...herself another Virgin Mary....The Brigittine consecration service contains a ‘complex cluster of ideas—virginity, marriage,

intercourse, fertility' which lies at its heart.”<sup>190</sup>

As we have already noted, this “cluster of ideas” is inherent in the aspects of ancient female initiation we have seen above. If not every nun achieved visionary status and mystical marriage to God, there was clearly the potential to do so.

I am not suggesting that each medieval female visionary shared exactly the same experiences, yet patterns emerge from the records of their lives. We may recognize in them elements of conversion generally, and the initiation of conversion (separation, liminality, aggregation) is closely related to that of female initiation. Yet most of these women’s accounts occur subsequently to conversion. In her critique of Victor Turner’s theory of liminality, Carolyn Walker Bynum has noted that patterns in the experiences of medieval female religious do not fit Turner’s notions of Reversal and Elevation, that occur, for instance, during the liminal stage in the conversion stories of male religious. She observes that, “when women recount their own lives, the themes are less climax, conversion, reintegration and triumph, the liminality of reversal or elevation, than continuity.”<sup>191</sup> The reason may be that women were symbolically transforming within the same “group” to which they already belonged—femaleness—which offered continuity. Unlike conversion, with initiation the subgroup simply changes.

Perhaps because within it they often experience marriage to God, the liminality of female visionaries has more in common with female initiation, concerned with a transition from maid to mother (virginity—marriage—intercourse—fertility), than the

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<sup>190</sup> See Bradley Warren’s “Brides of Christ” in *Spiritual Economies*, esp. p. 12. She quotes from Roger Ellis, *Viderunt Eam Filie Syon: The Spirituality of the English House of a Medieval Contemplative Order from its Beginnings to the Present Day*, Analecta Cartusiana 68 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik and Amerikanistik Universität, Salzburg, 1984).

<sup>191</sup> See Carolyn Walker Bynum, “Women’s Stories, Women’s Symbols” 27-52.

initiation of conversion.<sup>192</sup> In each case the female mystic's virginity (or renewed virginity), often her aristocracy, and often her dramatic refusal to marry, are signs of her candidacy. Moreover, as in Asneth's story, some were rejected by their families for their refusal to marry. Christina of Markyate's dramatic escape from her parents and an arranged marriage is one example.<sup>193</sup> As mentioned above, a female mystic's "living death" in her separation from society additionally signals the ancient scenario.

Quoting Mechthild of Magdeburg, Heinrich of Nördlingen writes of the mystical bride in paradoxes that echo female initiation: humility—death—marriage, including the paradox of being both dead and living.

In the greatest strength she is lost to herself / In the most beautiful light she is blind in herself...In the greatest clarity, she is both dead and living. / The longer she is dead, the more blissfully she lives....The deeper her wounds, the more violently she rages....The more silent she remains, the louder she cries...The more his desire grows, the lovelier their wedding will be.... The more humbly she bids farewell, the faster he returns.<sup>194</sup>

As I have mentioned above, it is often in the liminal state of isolation that enclosure would have provided (also associated with death) that women experienced ecstatic vision, and in this state realized their mystical marriage to God. Laura A. Finke reminds us that Orthodox mystics were cloistered, with few exceptions in keeping with the church's sense of women's spiritual role. Though not all mystics were nuns and women in many roles (nun, abbess, wife, mother, tertiary, anchoress, Beguine or itinerant) could achieve

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<sup>192</sup> Dowden on the prophetic capacities of initiates in mythology: "Marginal territory suits the liminal period of initiation. But it also is right for divine encounter in a way no everyday place could be" (100).

<sup>193</sup> See C. H. Talbot, ed. and trans., *The Life of Christina of Markyate A Twelfth Century Recluse* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press in Association with the Medieval Academy of America, 1998).

<sup>194</sup> He quotes from Mechthilde, Book I, ch 22. Excerpts in Margot Schmidt, "An example of Spiritual Friendship," trans., Susan Johnson, in *Maps of Flesh and Light*, 80-81.

ecstasies, “the model upon which all spiritual organizations for women were based was the cloister. And quite clearly its primary purpose was isolation.”<sup>195</sup> Yet even in one who was never formally enclosed, nor physically reclusive, we see remnants of female initiation, including in the accounts of Margery Kempe’s life as it is revealed to us through her “Book.”

The purpose and nature of *The Booke of Margery Kempe* has been strongly debated by scholars. Karma Lochrie has referred to the *Book* as an “autobiographical mystical treatise” a woman’s attempt to “write the body in [her] mystical visions” at a time when affective devotion was encouraged but could also be denigrated in association with the female body.<sup>196</sup> The *Book* has variously been marginalized over the years because some thought it the work of a female ‘hysteric’; a recent theory even suggests that Margery suffered from the rare psychological “Jerusalem Syndrome,” manifested in her extreme bouts of crying, which is brought on by the profound experience precipitated by religious pilgrimage.<sup>197</sup> The autobiographical nature of the *Book* has also been questioned by some, because it is thought to be heavily edited, and perhaps even entirely written by a scribe, though most agree that Margery herself dictated it and oversaw its creation for the most part as she claimed.<sup>198</sup> Despite the various theories regarding its

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<sup>195</sup>“Mystical Bodies and the Diologics of Vision,” in *Maps of Flesh and Light*, 36.

<sup>196</sup> Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991) 1-2.

<sup>197</sup> The same authors theorize Bridget of Sweden also suffered from the same syndrome. See Moshe Kalian & Eliezer Witztum, “Jerusalem Syndrome as reflected in the pilgrimage and biographies of four extraordinary women from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the second millennium,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 5:1 (2002): 1-16.

<sup>198</sup> On the indistinctiveness between author and scribe, see, Felicity Riddy, “Text and Self in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” and for the notion that the making of the *Book* was more or less overseen by Margery herself, see Nicholas Watson, “The Making of the Book of Margery Kempe.” Both are chapters in *Voices in Dialogue*, Watson 395-434, Riddy 435-453.

purpose and value, Lynn Staley has reminded us that the Book is at the very least “an amazing testimony to the social and religious tensions of late Medieval urban life.”<sup>199</sup>

According to Peter Pelligrin:

Margery’s *Book* is not a treatise on contemplation, nor a how-to-book for would-be mystics . . . nor is it a series of revelations from a loving God meant to be shared with all the world, as is Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations*. It is autobiographical in character and obviously intended as an exemplum of the working of God’s grace in the life of a sinner.<sup>200</sup>

What may be more to the point of my discussion here is the theory by Raymond A. Powell, that “so many of the religious trends in the England of [Margery’s] day find an expression in her religiosity that she may well be considered an exemplar of late medieval piety.”<sup>201</sup> Powell claims that “there is no question that Kempe . . . was a disciple of the *Meditationes*’ tradition,” a tradition that among other things, encouraged the reception of God’s grace through the physical senses, and encouraged the use of imagination in devotional practices, including *mystical marriage* as one of the culminating steps to God.<sup>202</sup> This type of devotional program can be seen, for instance, in Nicholas Love’s, *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus* and related texts.<sup>203</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>199</sup> Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions* (University Park Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994) xi.

<sup>200</sup> See Peter Pellegrin, “I wold yow wer closyd in a hows of ston’: Sexuality and Lay Sanctity in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” in *Lay Sanctity, Medieval and Modern: A Search for Models*, Ed. Ann W. Astell (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000) 91-104, esp, 93.

<sup>201</sup> Raymond A. Powell, “Margery Kempe: An Exemplar of Late Medieval English Piety,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 89:1 (January 2003): 1-23.

<sup>202</sup> Though the only surviving copy of Margery’s *Book* is associated with the Carthusians of Mount Grace (monastic readers), on the book as an “instructive example of a manner of living after the life of Christ” likely originally intended for the laity, also see Lochrie, 206-207, and Kelley Parsons on the *Book*’s preparation for lay women in particular, “The Red Ink Annotator of the Book of Margery Kemp and His Lay Audience,” *The Medieval Professional Reader at Work*, Ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Maidie Hilmo, ELS Editions No. 85 (English Literary Monograph Series, University of Victoria, 2001).

<sup>203</sup> Works such as Nicholas Love’s Late Middle English, *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus* and others texts such as Walter Hilton’s (attributed) *Prickyng of Love*, and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which are discussed

Powell has identified the book as an “auto-hagiography” saying: “*The Book* contains ample evidence that Kempe believed she would one day be venerated as a saint. . . . [it] was written to promote the cult of St. Margery of Lynne. . . . With saints so accessible it was plausible for Kempe to believe she belonged in their company, and she wrote to make that very point” (22, square brackets mine). Whether consciously by Margery herself, (or modified by a scribe), it seems apparent to me also, that the experiences accounted for in Kempe’s *Book*, reflect patterns found in the lives of female saints that circulated in the Late Middle Ages, including aspects of female initiation.

Margery Kempe was never a nun—she was a wife and mother, and even went on pilgrimage—yet in the *proem* introduction to her *Book*, initiation-like experiences are hinted at in advance: physical illness that brought on a type of “madness,” her giving up of worldly goods, pomp and pride, and tellingly, her rejection by kindred and friends. All, including her visions, speak of the liminality of the initiate.<sup>204</sup>

Towched be the hand of owyr Lord wyth grett bodyly  
sekenesse, wher thorw sche lost reson and her wyttes a long  
tym tyl ower Lord be grace restoryd her ageyn, as it schal  
mor openly be schewed aftyrward. Her werdly goodys,  
whch wer plentyuows and abundawnt at that day, in lytyl  
whyle after wer ful bareyn and bare. Than was pompe and  
pryde cast down and leyd on syde. Thei that befor had  
worshepd her sythen ful scharply reprevyd her; her kynred  
and thei that had ben frendys wer now hyr most enmys.  
(21-28)

.....  
Sche knew and undyrstod many secret and prevy thyngys

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in Michael G. Sargent’s introduction to his recent edition of Love’s *Mirror* (ix-cxlii). What may be of further note is that these vernacular devotional works made available to the laity, the “symple soules” referred to time and again by Love, the kind of meditation on Christ (with an affective emphasis on his humanity) that was previously only accessible to medieval religious. The encouraged goal (included for the laity) was the ecstatic experience that was often described in sexual terms as mystical marriage between god and the soul. As I have been arguing, this idea may have been interpreted at the centre of Asneth’s story in the Middle Ages.

<sup>204</sup> Major studies on Margery Kempe include: Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983).

whch schuld beffallen aftyrward be inspiracyon of the Holy Gost. And often tymes, whel sche was kept wyth swech holy spechys and dalyawns, sche schuld so wepyn and sobbyn that many men wer gretly awondyr, for thei wysten ful lytyl how homly ower Lord was in hyr sowle (41-45).<sup>205</sup>

Margery seems to have been obsessed with certain criteria for her unconventional religious life (which Powell suggests was directly influence by hagiography). Even though she was married and bore 14 children, like some female saints of old, such as St. Cecelia, Margery finds a way to renew her virginity, by convincing her husband to forego the marriage debt, thus achieving a *spiritual marriage*, sexual abstinence within licit marriage.<sup>206</sup> She forsakes her former privileged life, including her elaborate clothing, and at Christ's request, begins to wear only white, though she notes this was not the custom even for other chaste women of her time, hinting there must have been other models for her strange act:

“And, dowtyr, I sey to the I wyl that thu were clothys of whyte and non other colowr, for thu schal ben arayd aftyr my wyl.” “A, der Lord, yf I go arayd on other maner than other chast women don, I drede that the pepyl wyl slawndyr me. Thei wyl sey I am an ypocryt and wondryn upon me.” (732-35)

Margery's goal to no longer be conjugally married marks the beginning of a social separation from society if not a physical one. Both her husband and the advances of another man threaten her chastity, further meeting the typology of a female saint and (based on her rejection of marriage) the ancient female initiate. Margery incurred much

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<sup>205</sup> Selections are quoted by line number from Lynn Staley, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) for TEAMS Middle English Text Series, which can be accessed online at: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/staley.htm>.

<sup>206</sup> She and her husband belong to a handful of historical couples whose sexually abstinent “spiritual marriage” is documented in the Later Middle Ages. See Dyan Elliott, “Spiritual Marriage,” and my discussion of Asneth in the context of spiritual marriage in the Middle Ages further below.

criticism for no longer accepting the role of wife and mother in order to become Christ's spouse, and it is in this socially liminal stage that she experiences the kind of doubt and uncontrollable crying and wailing, called "madness" in other initiates. Moreover, in vision, Christ associates the affective devotion of her crying with every type of femaleness, including motherhood, but perhaps most importantly, and lastly, with the actions of his own "wyfe":

"Though it be so that thu wepe not alwey at thi lyst, my grace is nevyrthelesse in the. Therfor I preve that thow art a very dowtyr to me and a modyr also, a syster, a wyfe, and a spowse. . . . Whan thow stodyst to plese me, than art thu a very dowtyr; whan thu wepyst and mornyst for my peyn and for my passyon, than art thow a very modyr to have compassyon of hyr chyld; whan thow wepyst for other mennys synnes and for adversytés, than art thow a very syster; and, whan thow sorwyst for thow art so long fro the blysse of hevyn, than art thu a very spowse and a wyfe, for it longyth to the wyfe to be wyth hir husbond and no very joy to han tyl sche come to hys presens." (711-21)

She was never canonized and there is no record of miracles at Margery's death, though some occur during her lifetime, adding to the orthodoxy of her behavior and identifying her with others whose visions incurred miracles.<sup>207</sup> In vision she associates herself with Mary (in numerous accounts), but more tellingly she is Christ's spouse in an erotic visionary *mystical marriage* scene:

And oftyntymes have I telde the that I have clene forgove the alle thy synnes. Therefore most I nedys be homly wyth the and lyn in thi bed wyth the. Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, and thu mayst boldly, whan thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for thi weddyd husbond, as thy derworthy derlyng, and as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir

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<sup>207</sup> See for instance, Book 1, Ch. 9. Margery also visited the recluse, "Dame Jelyan," Julian of Norwich. If Margery's book is to be believed, "many days. . . thei were togedyr" (986-88), offering a further model for her behavior.

husbonde. And therfor thu mayst boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle and kyszen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as swetly as thow wylt. And, as oftyntymes as thu thynkyst on me er woldyst don any good dede to me, thu schalt have the same mede in hevyn as yf thu dedist it to myn owyn precyows body which is in hevyn, for I aske no mor of the but thin hert for to lovyn that lovyth the, for my lofe is evyr redy to the. (2101-11)<sup>208</sup>

Like the female saints before her and like Mary, Margery's status as God's spouse (and therefore spiritual mother) gives her a mediating role.<sup>209</sup> Through her prayers, she acts for the preservation of not just a certain tribe (suggested by Dowden of Greek initiates), but as claimed by Margery, the salvation of many hundred thousand souls.<sup>210</sup>

Than this creatur coveyted gretly to be delyveryd owt of this wretchyd world. Ower Lord Jhesu Crist seyde to hir mende sche schuld abyden and languren in lofe. "For I have ordeyned the to knele befor the Trynyté for to prey for al the world, for many hundryd thowsand sowlys schal be savyd be thi prayers." (450-53)<sup>211</sup>

It would be pushing the limits of what we know to suggest that aspects of female initiation were consciously acted out in the experiences of medieval female visionaries

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<sup>208</sup> It should be noted that Kelley Parsons, "The Red Annotator," has demonstrated that the 16<sup>th</sup> c. annotator, who was likely preparing the text for use by lay women (she argues for devotional purposes, rather than contemplative purposes), considerably toned down the fleshly language of Margery's encounter. That is to say, Margery's mystical marriage was not quite mystical enough for his liking! This might be compared to the slightly toned down way *Asneth's* translator interprets the Latin of her mystical encounter with the angel for a female lay audience.

<sup>209</sup> For St. Katherine as intermedator, "for us alle onto oure Lorde Jhesus," see Capgrave's Prologue, 229-31.

<sup>210</sup> Margery's idea of inclusive salvation for all is discussed in Nicholas Watson's "Visions of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27:2 (Spring 1997): 145-187. Watson suggests that works in English (including, among others, those of Langland, John Mandeville, and Margery Kempe) exhibit a tendency towards a more inclusive theological approach to non-Christians, as does the nature of the language as a whole, as opposed to Latin. In any case, Margery's reluctance to accept that not all will be saved is punished when Christ insists in Chapter 59 that she must "heryn of [the] dampnyd as of [the] savyd," on which see Watson, p. 153. Even so, her high expectation for the kind of harvest of souls she can expect because of her mediation of their behalf with Christ is considerable, and may be modeled on hagiography.

<sup>211</sup> On the redemptive qualities of mystical marriage (in reference to Hadewijch of Brabant), see Barbara Newman where she says, "This 'power' of the bride is coredeemptive, for she is told that the life of all creation will be renewed in her heavenly marriage" (125). From Newman's "On the Threshold of the Dead: Purgatory, Hell, and Religious Women," *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

(though the possibility should not be discounted). Though we can find patterns from classical and early Christian mythology in the biographical and autobiographical accounts of these women, what these behaviours exactly meant in the Middle Ages is sometimes less clear. What I hope to begin to show is that there are *are* similarities that need to be further considered and may give us access into the minds of medieval female mystics and their hagiographers, and in turn, further knowledge of the culture (and theology) within which they wrote. While we recognize similar patterns, it is the overwhelming implication of these women as divine consorts in mystical marriage with god, and to some extent, symbolic mothers of a tribe (Christianity), that signals the legacy of female initiation seen in the stories of their classical and early Christian sisters.

### **Spiritual Marriage in the Middle Ages and *The Storie of Asneth***

Asneth's story, among its other interpretations, may have been considered an exemplum for *spiritual marriage*—the category discussed by Dyan Elliot as celibacy within licit marriage in the Middle Ages. This type of spiritual marriage was idealized and practiced among lay married couples who relinquished sexual relations for reasons of piety.<sup>212</sup> Although the term *spiritual marriage* is sometimes used to refer to the marriage of God with the soul, or Christ with the church, these allegories are more often referred to as *mystical marriage*, the term I use for them.

The practice of *spiritual marriage* (marital celibacy) was not exclusive to medieval England or even to Christian cults. It is documented—in Eastern *Lives* that circulated (and some that did not circulate) in the West—to as early as 300 CE; Egypt, North Africa, Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, Gaul, Spain, and Syria are among the areas

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<sup>212</sup> For a full study of spiritual marriage in the Middle Ages, see Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993).

where the practice is accounted for. Though a direct correlation can never be proven, Christoph Burchard lists the groups of *Asneth* manuscripts (besides the sixteen extant Greek and the Latin translations) as surviving in Syriac, Armenian, Rumanian, Ethiopian and possibly Arabic—languages geographically commensurate with the documented practice. Although *Asneth* was not translated into Latin in England until probably the late twelfth century, based on extant manuscripts in other languages, we know that the story was prolific in Christendom in the East from at least the fifth century and gained in popularity in the tenth century, occurring in manuscripts in Greek to as late as the seventeenth century.<sup>213</sup> Dyan Elliot tells us that the European practice of celibacy within marriage was the largest between the tenth and sixteenth centuries.

Augustine was the first to develop a theory of legitimate marriage that was not dependent on the conjugal debt, and helped put specifications on marital relations that made the sexual act sinless if one subjected oneself to the duty, rather than initiating it. This helped balance the need for marriage against the spiritual privileging of celibacy that took hold in the late fourth and early fifth centuries:

But in order to ensure an honorable place for marriage [Augustine] had both to affirm reproduction and to distance himself from the sexually oriented mentality which had led Jerome to deny that Mary and Joseph were, in fact, married—a position that could, by implication, destabilize any union where sexual relations had ceased.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Burchard in Charlesworth, 178-179.

<sup>214</sup> Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, 45, (square brackets mine), and regarding Augustine, 43-50. For a discussion of celibacy within marriage and a history of marriage being considered legal, based on the “consent” of the couple (early considered manifest if sexual relations had ensued, and later whether they did nor not), see Irven M. Resnick, “Marriage in Medieval Culture: Consent Theory and the Case of Joseph and Mary,” *Church History* 69:2 (June 2000): 350-371.

Augustine asserted that one could remain sexually “pure,” *and* fulfill the obligation to reproduce, thereby emulating Mary and Joseph’s example within marriage.<sup>215</sup> For those who believed that sex even within marriage was sinful, a compromise might be reached whereby couples abstained from sexual relations after procreation had already taken place, thus helping to mitigate the seemingly impossible paradox of fulfilling the marital obligation to reproduce *and* achieving sexual purity.

The two documented cases of celibacy among lay married couples in England are between Margery and John Kempe, and Margaret Beaufort and Thomas Stanley, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively. They coincide with the period of Asneth’s circulation in Middle English, though many Latin copies of the story existed at this time also and hagiography emphasizing the practice also circulated.<sup>216</sup> Besides the two documented cases, there is some evidence of earlier cases of spiritual marriage in England among the elite, going back to Edward the Confessor, for whom “renunciation of sex formed his chief claim to sanctity as the basis of divine kingship,” a practice that Richard II may have attempted to emulate for similar reasons in the late-fourteenth century. John Bowers has made the case for *spiritual marriage* between Richard II and Queen Anne, and has even suggested the chaste maiden described in the *Pearl* poem, may have been modeled on Anne—her own crown decorated with pearls and lilies the very model for the pearl-encrusted diadem described in the poem. Bowers suggests that

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<sup>215</sup> It was still debated, even in the Late Middle Age, whether or not Mary and Joseph maintained a celibate marriage, and also whether the conception of Mary was “miraculous,” that is, whether St. Anne herself was celibate within marriage (conceiving instead during her visitation with the angel). For this, as well as the theological and popular positions regarding the relationship of sin to sexual relations within marriage in the Later Middle Ages, see Ann W. Astell’s, “Chaucer’s ‘St. Anne Trinity’” Devotion, Dynasty, Dogma and Debate,” *Studies in Philology* 94:4 (Fall 1997) 395-416.

<sup>216</sup> For instance the chaste marriage accounted for in the Life of St. Cecilia, perpetuated in Chaucer’s *Second Nun’s Tale*.

even if it was not widely practiced, the appearance of chaste marriage may have been the fashion in Richard II's court, including in the literary texts perpetuated there.<sup>217</sup>

In terms of *The Storie of Asneth* (and the translation's Latin precedent) Asneth's conversion, faithfulness and willing subjection to patriarchal power, her sisterly relationship to Joseph, and perhaps most importantly, her ability to seemingly procreate while maintaining a chaste purity "snow white" as the bees of lines 567-571, may have made her presence in medieval literature the model "spiritual wife" of the High Middle Ages. At the core of Asneth's story is her union, not with Joseph, but with his angelic proxy, but before this occurs, we are reminded numerous times of both Asneth and Joseph's virginity. Moreover, if Asneth's union with Joseph's look-a-like was understood as an example of *mystical marriage* in the Middle Ages, as I propose it would have been, then this would have held social implications that suggested to readers that her union with the man from heaven was only possible because she was a virgin (and/or remained celibate). As I have suggested in Chapter One, and will discuss further in Chapter Four, medieval readers may have even been open to the notion that Asneth's conception of Ephraim and Manasseh was miraculously accomplished somehow with the angel, a fact that would have further identified her with the Virgin Mary, and for some, also with Anne, Mary's mother. The Latin emphasis on Asneth's 'laetitia' (which means joy, but also fertility, fruitfulness, or floridity), specifically after the angel had spoken his words to her, may have even been understood to refer to her conception.<sup>218</sup> Anne Astell has noted that it was understood by some in the Later Middle Ages that "the literal

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<sup>217</sup> See John M. Bowers, "Marriage, Fashion and Texts at the Court of Richard II," *Pacific Coast Philology*, 30:1 (1995): 15-26. Bowers also suggests that chaste marriage between Richard and Anne for reasons of piety may have been a mask for Richard's aversion to heterosexuality.

<sup>218</sup> "Et postquam consummavit angelus domini loquens verba ista, letata est Aseneth leticia magna super sermonibus eius..."

moment of Mary's conception [occurred] either at Joachim's greeting, which passed through Anne's ear, or through a chaste embrace or a 'kusse of clenness'" or was simply thought to have occurred miraculously at the "hour of the angel's annunciation to her," illustrating another case where words (either Joachim's or the Angel's) were thought to cause conception to take place without the need for marital sexual relations.<sup>219</sup> Joseph certainly lacks the kind of action in *Aseneth's* story or in her bedroom that the angel enjoys. Moreover the emphasis on friendship between the couple over a sexual relationship has been noted by others. In her book, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, Ross S. Kraemer states:<sup>220</sup>

Given the centrality of both male and female virginity and sexual fidelity in *Aseneth*, these issues are worth pursuing further. (103)

.....  
It seems likely that paradigms of joint marital chastity and emphasis on concord and friendship contribute to the emergence of Christian paradigms of celibate marriage, since this is already a move away from marriage as centered on childbearing and the transmission of property to a construction of marriage as the perfect union of two like-minded souls—in which case the idea of celibate marriage is not so far away. (291n14)

Kramer concludes this paragraph: "*Aseneth*, however, is clearly not a tale of celibate marriage." While the tale itself may not overtly state that the couple practiced a celibate marriage (indeed *Aseneth* produces two children—a fact that Kramer uses in her conclusion on the matter), medieval readers may have been keen to pick up on the emphasis of friendship and virginity between the couple and the implication of their celibacy. In any case, the notion that celibacy occurred at least *after* they have their

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<sup>219</sup> Square brackets mine. See Astell, "Chaucer's 'St. Anne Trinity'" 412.

<sup>220</sup> (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

children, is accounted for in the tradition that Joseph and Asneth fulfilled their duty to procreate during the seven years of plenty (mentioned in Genesis 41:50) and abstained from marital relations during the time of famine.<sup>221</sup> The fertility of the land contrasted with its subsequent infertility, symbolically supports the understanding of the couple's later sexual abstinence. It is precisely the Christian paradigm of spiritual marriage that is among the ideals that medieval readers may have taken away from Asneth's story.

Ross Kraemer discusses *Asneth* in the context of the threat to chastity that is common in the plot of Greek narratives (romances):

The narratives of Greek novels depend for much of their plot elaboration on an extended separation of the lovers, but in *Aseneth*, Aseneth's separation from Joseph lasts only one week, and the drama of that week is entirely an interior one [the fasting, repentance and visitation scene]. During that extended separation, the heroine is [normally] subjected to repeated threats to her chastity, and sometimes the hero is to his own as well. Clearly the theme of threatened chastity occurs in *Aseneth*, but in significantly different form. While Aseneth herself is initially presented as a threat to Joseph's chastity, only in the second part of the narrative is Aseneth herself endangered, after she and Joseph are married and after Manasseh and Ephraim are born. (11, square brackets mine)

.....  
 Finally it is worth pointing out that for those scholars who emphasize the similarity between *Aseneth* and Greco-Roman novels, chapters 22-29 are seen to provide the elements of adventure, threatening the chastity of the heroine that typifies such novels, although usually prior to the marriage, not subsequently. (41)

If, at the very least, it is *after* Manasseh and Ephraim are born that readers understood Asneth and Joseph to become a chaste married couple, then the major threat to the

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<sup>221</sup>Again, Jewish Midrashic tradition has it that, "Asenath bore him two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, during the seven years of plenty, for in the time of famine Joseph refrained from all indulgence in the pleasures of life," implying the couple's sexual abstinence during the years of famine. See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 77n190, where he cites Jewish sources.

heroine's chastity occurring after celibacy has begun, during the beginning of the seven years of famine, makes sense.<sup>222</sup> In the Middle Ages a threat to chastity would be just as grave to one who had already borne children, but who had restored or renewed her virginity through repentance. That Asneth was promised this type of renewal may have been understood when the angel tells Asneth that Pennance will "renoveleth virgines clene to Goddis dere blessynge / . . . in wordlis withoute endynge (473-474).

According to Elliot, it was mostly women who took the initiative to remain chaste in medieval marriages, and they often achieved relative autonomy in marriage and society in correlation with their marital continence. The aspect of Asneth's story that gives almost no significance to her consummated relationship to Joseph, and yet great significance to her subjection to him and the patriarchal system of Israel, may have satisfied real social concerns in the Middle Ages around the threat to patriarchal control over women who maintained a higher level of spirituality through celibacy in marriage, and therefore were not bound by usual hierarchies; accusations that Margery Kempe (one who achieved marital chastity) "[led] women astray," reflects this kind of tension.<sup>223</sup> In the private sphere, Asneth has attained a power through spirituality that not even Joseph's compares to. It is understood that Joseph's spirituality and godliness are profound. It is traditional from a Biblical perspective, but also shown in the story through the pomp of his public recognition and material connections, however, the reader doesn't have the opportunity to experience, and therefore internalize his personal spiritual experience as the reader does Asneth's experience. Joseph's lacks the specific details which are

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<sup>222</sup> I propose *The Story of Asneth* may be compared with mythology regarding Isis and Osiris and Isis is similarly threatened after she has had a child.

<sup>223</sup> On the various types of accusations leveled at Margery Kempe, see Watson, "The Making" 395.

necessary to be considered an exemplum, whereas *Asneth's* fits, in many points of specific detail, the experience of the majority of the women who were thought to have achieved spiritual marriage in the Middle Ages, women who also had mystical visionary experiences:

But the line between sexual activity and the possibility of mystical experience cannot be firmly drawn. Mysticism played an important part in the spirituality of eight out of the nine women who convinced their husbands to make a gradual transition to chastity compared with probably only two out of seven of their virgin counterparts; this fact invites an examination of the relationships between sexual intercourse and spirituality. (Elliot 235)

I have suggested earlier that the reference to *Asneth's* "intelligence" in the story may have helped identify *Asneth* as visionary.

While *Asneth* may have partially been valued as an exemplum of women's malleability and subjection to patriarchal power, it is an interesting thought that later women may have circulated it among themselves in their devotional material for empowering reasons, for as we have seen with many female mystics, spiritual enlightenment and direct revelation from God (of the type *Asneth* experiences) ultimately trumps patriarchal control in the Middle Ages.<sup>224</sup> In part this empowerment also happened as a result of renunciation of marital relations, but we should also recognize that celibacy would have helped facilitate the longevity and health of women who were no longer at risk for the high mortality rates associated with child-bearing in the Middle

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<sup>224</sup> Peck (11) describes *Asneth* as "a guidebook in social behavior for aristocratic women," but also comments on the thinking, independent characteristics of the heroine. "Susan Groag Bell [...] demonstrates the substantial power that female book owners exercised over vernacular literature as readers, literary patrons and mothers in charge of education of their children." Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, eds. *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (London: University of Georgia Press, 1988) 7. There is evidence that Shirley's second wife and her sister, Margaret and Beatrice Lynn, may have once owned the manuscript that holds *Asneth*, on which see Chapter Two, above.

Ages. What may have been thought by some in the fifteenth century to be lighter devotional reading material for upper class women may have had a further-reaching function, spiritually, practically and politically. In this respect we may even consider *Asneth* a subversive feminist text. Certainly women such as Margery Kempe understood that celibacy led to a level of freedom and a religious/political voice that was otherwise inaccessible to a laywoman.

### **Spiritual Marriage and the Courtly Love Tradition**

Dyan Elliot has suggested that “popular representations of Spiritual Marriage were by no means confined to devotional works, but also made inroads into the romance tradition” (174). In this respect, *The Storie of Asneth* may have offered the reader an example of spiritual marriage from the perspective of both a devotional as well as a romantic genre.

The erotic ethos of the troubadours presented an extramarital model that celebrated passion as opposed to pro-creation. Because the alleged object of the poet’s desire was usually unattainable, such relations were frequently described as remaining unconsummated—a feature connoting certain superficial similarities with Spiritual Marriage....There is little doubt that the alleged longing of the troubadours has a sexual as opposed to a religious telos. (Elliot 133, 133n5)

In nearly every scholarly source, *Asneth* is described as a Hellenistic Romance, due to the adventure prevalent especially in the second part of the story where she is kidnapped and subsequently rescued. In Burchard, *Asneth*’s romance is associated specifically with “the erotic variety.”<sup>225</sup> According to Carol Meale there were two main types of literature being read by medieval women, devotional literature and romantic literature, particularly

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<sup>225</sup> Burchard’s introduction in Charlesworth, 183.

of the Arthurian tradition where stories of Lancelot and Tristan were most popular.<sup>226</sup>

*Asneth* would have nicely filled the expectations for readers of either genre, because it may be seen as a curious amalgamation of exciting adventure story and mystical text.

Although it is assumed that the concept of spiritual marriage “made inroads into the romance tradition,” it may be argued that the tradition of celibate love may have originated with romance and made inroads into religious and devotional works. As I have suggested above, *The Storie of Asneth* has features in common with ancient mythology involving the exciting lives of fertility couples, suggesting there may have been at one time a close relationship between romance and religious traditions.<sup>227</sup> What appears now to be only a superficial relationship between the courtly tradition of unconsummated love and spiritual marriage may not have been so at one time. Current studies, including those of Barbara Newman on Christ’s likeness to cupid in medieval visual representations, show us that clear lines of separation between (classical) romantic and spiritual concepts may not have been drawn by medieval readers.<sup>228</sup> Certainly *Asneth* also shares theological pertinence, but also the elements of exciting, romantic adventure, with Medieval Hagiography. Additionally, classic romances of the Middle Ages are Arthurian, which have also been associated with religious allegory. In whatever genre chaste love appeared first, it is clearly a theme that has a place in both religion and romance. Christ has always been seen in Christian tradition as the allegorical husband of his bride, the

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<sup>226</sup> See her “...alle the bokes that I haue of latyn, engliche, and frensch’: laywomen and their books in late medieval England.” *Women and Literature in Britain 1150-1500*. ed. Carol M. Meale. (Cambridge University Press, 1993) esp. 139.

<sup>227</sup> Burchard states: “As to conversion forming part of a romance, apart from the general presence of religion, sometimes with an outright propagandistic drive (Heliodorus), there is Apuleius, Book 11.25 and (in a way) Cupid and Psyche again (in Charlesworth, 184).

<sup>228</sup> See her, “Love’s Arrows: Christ as Cupid in Late Medieval Art and Devotion,” in *The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) 263-86.

church, Ecclesia. Mythic couples such as the Egyptian, Isis and Osiris, or the Sumerian, Ishtar and Marduk, may even be the forebears of this religious allegory through their enactment of the ancient sacred marriage rite. In any case, further study of the influence of the romantic tradition on Christianity may bear future attention.

Regardless of early typology in *Asneth*, Medieval Christian readers would have understood the poem in an evolved Judeo-Christian way commensurate with their knowledge of the Old and New Testament and medieval theological and popular religious beliefs that associated sex with original sin. Asneth's visionary encounter with the Angel would have been understood as her virginal consummation with the divine, a mystical marriage to God. This is also what Mary experienced. Through Mary's conception of Christ, original sin was counteracted and salvation for mankind made manifest. In a similar way, Asneth's mystical marriage with the "man from heaven," but also the mystical marriage of all female saints with Christ is what facilitates salvation. What these women have in common, as role players (consciously or not) of the female initiate of antiquity, is their similarity with God's allegorical bride, Ecclesia, the subject of Chapter Four.



**Chapter Four:**  
***Asneth, Iconographic Ecclesia,***  
**and a Discussion of CCCC MS 288**

**Asneth as Ecclesia**

We have explored interpretations of *The Storie of Asneth* as an exemplum for spiritual marriage (celibacy within marriage) in the Middle Ages, partially owing to the fact that Asneth and Joseph seem to procreate while retaining virginal status. Besides typology that supports this notion, we understand they procreate during the seven years of plenty (Genesis 41:50), which is also noted in *The Golden Legend*. This happens perhaps with the divine intervention and help of the Angel. Implication is made explicit that Joseph and Asneth remain celibate during the years of famine, according to Jewish Midrash. We have also interpreted Asneth's story in the context of female initiation in Antiquity *and* what I have interpreted as female initiation in the Middle Ages, due in part to similarity between what happens in Asneth's liminal isolation compared to ideals and rituals relevant to nun's consecration to their orders and the experiences relayed in hagiographic accounts of female saints and visionaries—ideals that in part identify holy women as God's brides, while at the same time identifying them with Mary, brides and mothers in one. These notions are not precluded but further supported by an allegorical reading of Asneth's story in the context of God's spiritual union with the soul and Christ's union with the Church, for they are all related. These later two allegorized relationships are known as mystical marriage—a union that is described in erotic terms most famously during the Middle Ages in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux and the

*Song of Songs* tradition in Medieval exegesis.<sup>229</sup> Bernard says of the bride of *Song of*

*Songs* 1:1:

*Anima sitiens Deum....Nec sunt inventa aequae dulcia nomina, quibus Verbi animae quae dulces ad invicem exprimerentur affectus, quemadmodum sponsus et sponsa....Una utriusque hereditas, una mensa, una domus, unus thorus, una etiam caro....Haec quoque iubetur nihilominus oblivisci populum suum et domum patris sui, ut concupiscat ille decorem eius.*<sup>230</sup>

[S]he is the soul thirsting for God [...] No sweeter names can be found to embody that sweet interflow of affections between the Word and the soul, than bridegroom and bride [...] They share the same inheritance, the same table, the same home, the same marriage bed, they are flesh of each other's flesh [...] The bride for her part is bidden to "forget her nation and her ancestral home," so that the bridegroom may fall in love with her beauty.<sup>231</sup>

While the bride is the soul, she is also the city/church of *Revelation* 21:2: "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned

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<sup>229</sup> While some refer to these allegories as spiritual marriage, most scholars refer to them as mystical marriage, distinctive from spiritual marriage (celibacy within licit marriage). It should be noted that Jewish allegorizing of the *Song of Songs* is similar to Christian interpretations. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* states that by at least the 1st century BCE, the *Song of Songs* was interpreted as an allegory "in which the love of God for His people was expressed" (16). "When the Christian Church included the Hebrew Bible as a part of its canon, the allegorical interpretation of the *Song of Songs* was taken over with it, but the allegory was modified so that it conformed to the doctrinal needs of the Church. The *Song* was now understood as a portrayal of the love of Christ for his church" (17). If as Ross Shepard Kramer and others have suggested the *Song of Songs* influenced portions of *Asneth*, the dating of the exegesis that suggests it is an allegory portraying God's love for Israel is consistent with the dating of *Asneth* to as early as the 1st century BCE. Source: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 19. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, 14-20. Accessed online, Jan 13, 2011: <http://go.galegroup.com>. For excerpts from Christian mystics, many of whom describe the ecstatic experience of the soul's union with God in sexual terms, see Louis Dupré and James A. Wiseman, O.S.B., eds *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2001).

<sup>230</sup> I am hugely indebted to Jonathan Julifs, who generously looked up and offered his expertise regarding the Latin references to the texts (including biblical) cited in this chapter. Exegetical sources cited are from Brepols, "Library of Latin Texts—Series A," searched via the Cross Database Searchtool at <http://www.brepols.net>, and *Patrologia Latina* database (<http://pld.chadwyck.com>); dates accessed: 19-21 April 2011. Here, Bernard of Clairvaux (Bernardus Claraevallensis) *Sermones super Cantica Cantorum* Sermon 7, paragraph 2 [ed. Leclercq in LLT-A; see pdf].

<sup>231</sup> See Sermon 7:1-4, *Bernard of Clairvaux on The Song of Songs I*, Trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1971).

for her husband.”<sup>232</sup> According to Bernard, the “same Lord who is head of the Church is the Bridegroom, as body is the bride.”<sup>233</sup> This is consistent with *Colossians* 1:18: “And he is the head of the body, the church.”<sup>234</sup> God’s church in the Old Testament is Israel; to Christians, she is Holy Church, Ecclesia, home to her Christian children. Asneth is similarly a Mother “City of Refuge” for converts who would find shelter within her womb-like walls.<sup>235</sup> Asneth is the woman in the tower, iconic mother of penitential proselytes as well as penitential Israel,<sup>236</sup> as Mary is the mother of penitent Christians.

Recent scholars have noted similarities between Asneth and the bride in the *Song of Songs* who is equated with Ecclesia; Ross Shephard Kraemer even suggests the Old Testament book is a source for some portions of Asneth’s story. Kraemer additionally reminds us that of many interpretations of Asneth’s story, Joseph was seen as a Christ figure by the fourth-century Syrian, St. Ephrem, who interpreted Joseph and Aseneth as a “model of the marriage of Christ and the church of the Gentiles,” and Christoph Burchard points us to a twelfth-century Armenian interpretation of Joseph as a Christ figure, in connection with *Joseph and Aseneth*. St. Ambrose also interpreted Joseph as a prefiguration of Christ. Evidence that Asneth would have been seen as an Ecclesia figure

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<sup>232</sup> Apocalypse 21:2: “sanctam civitatem Jerusalem novam descendentem de caelo a Deo, paratam sicut sponsam ornatam viro suo” (accessed online at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/vul/>).

<sup>233</sup> See Sermon 27:7. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* II, Trans. Killian Walsh. For the Latin [ed. Leclerq in LLT-A; see pdf], “unus idem que Dominus, et sponsus in capite, et sponsa in corpore.”

<sup>234</sup> Both texts from the Douay-Rheims English translation of the Latin Vulgate.

<sup>235</sup> In the introduction to his translation of the Greek text, Burchard states: “Aseneth, who found her way to God, is also an eternal City of Refuge for all (not just women) who repent in like manner [. . .] with her seven virgins as pillars to support her [. . .]. The tradition of Sion, the City of God, also described under the figure of a woman, lies behind this concept,” 189.

<sup>236</sup> On which also see “The Ladies and the Cities,” by Edith McEwan Humphrey.

in the Middle Ages (inseparable from Joseph being associated with a Christ figure) is strengthened if we continue to look at typology associated with Asneth.<sup>237</sup>

In her *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* Ann W. Astell discusses Ecclesia and Mary in the context of the bride figure of the *Song of Songs*. What is highlighted below are all features of Mary that would resonate with medieval readers and helps us understand how Asneth would have been identified with the church, Ecclesia, through similar images and ideas. We should also understand that in her similarities with the female personification of the Christian Church, Ecclesia, Asneth's identification with Mother (institutional) Church, cannot be entirely separated or distinguished from the typology that surrounds her, since one (typology), may have helped to inform the other

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<sup>237</sup> Ross Shepard Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 260-61; 253-54. A discussion of Joseph as a Helios/Christ figure occurs in her argument for considering the story a Christian text, as opposed to a Hellenic Jewish one, which has been the prevailing opinion among scholars of the Pseudapigrapha. I would, however, emphasize that it need not have been Christian. Similar typology dates to earlier than the Christian era, as we see it in association with figures such as Isis and Osirus. The story was clearly later interpreted in the context of Christianity, however, as scholars such as Burchard, who propose a pre-Christian origin for it, all agree. In addition to Kraemer's mention of St. Ephrem's interpretation of the marriage of Joseph and Aseneth as a "model of the marriage of Christ and the church of the Gentiles" she says their son, Ephraim, was also seen as a type of Christ, 251. A commentary note on Ephram's Hymn VII (p. 300n553), it states "St. E. assumes that the type of Joseph was fulfilled in Christ to the letter." See *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series*, Vol. XIII: Gregory the Great (II), Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat. Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, accessed online at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf213.iii.vii.viii.html?highlight=joseph-highlight> on Nov. 25, 2010. For St. Ambrose's interpretation of Joseph as a prefigurement of Christ, and other exegesis regarding Joseph, see Mark Sheridan, ed. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament, II, Genesis 12-50*, General Ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2002) esp. 229-318. See also p. 197, Burchard, "A New Translation," regarding the 12<sup>th</sup> c Armenian interpretation of Joseph as a type of Christ. Kraemer does suggest (briefly) that underlying the physical description of Asneth (as a daughter of Jerusalem) is the description of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16. Though Kraemer does not exactly equate Asneth with Jerusalem, nor discuss Asneth as a type for Ecclesia, she does point out Asneth's similarities to Wisdom (and prior to conversion, Wisdom's antithesis). Wisdom, however, has been identified with Ecclesia by other scholars, a connection I explore further below. Kraemer even briefly suggests that Asneth's story is a "tale of the Soul" and yet never makes this connection more explicitly with how Christians would have equated this with mystical marriage, because she does not really identify the couple with sexual abstinence. She does say, without going into detail, that "the marriage of Joseph and Aseneth provides a paradigm for spiritual marriage of various sorts. [. . .] Syrian Christians seem to have believed that the prohibition against sexuality and marriage only came into effect with the coming of Christ, so that even if their union were construed to have had an ordinary dimension of sexuality resulting in the birth of Manasseh and Ephraim, it could easily have been incorporated into an ascetic Christian theology by virtue of its historical chronology" (263). I argue that Asneth was precisely construed this way by early and later Medieval Christians, and would have been equated with the soul, and Ecclesia.

(institution). The theological significance afforded to the city and garden imagery associated with Ecclesia, for instance, would have been reflected in church structures, policies, and the role Mother church would have played, including providing physical places of worship as havens for believers.

Asneth's typological identification with the walled, temple-like, mother "city of refuge" she is named for all those who would repent can first of all be compared with notions of both Mary and Ecclesia in the most literal sense of space and structure.

Alan of Lille, for instance, identifies the houses of the king with church buildings, all of which are Mary's home [. . .] her body is the pattern for their construction as the womblike home of Christ (46).<sup>238</sup>

Just as Mary's body is the pattern upon which church buildings are modeled, there is a correlation between the female body (in this case Anne's and Mary's) with the tabernacle that holds the consecrated host, a physical object that can be similarly understood as a (microcosm) church structure. Carolyn Walker Bynum explains:

As the cult of the host grew in the later Middle Ages, tabernacles came to associate the consecration with the Incarnation, and therefore with the Virgin Mary. The Cistercians generally stressed the association of Mary with the sacrament, and at Citeaux the pyx was held by an image of the Virgin. The angel's words of salutation to Mary were sometimes reproduced on tabernacles. In his explanation of the mass . . . William Durandus said that the pyx or tabernacle or reliquary in which the host is kept signifies Mary's body. There is even an extant tabernacle that explicitly identifies the container with Mary. (It is surmounted by Anne, Mary's mother, and thus suggests that it is Mary herself.)<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Astell cites Alan, PL 210 c64. See also Alan of Lille (Alanus de Insulis Chapter 1 [ed. Migne, PL 210, col. 64] for the Latin: "Compendiosa in Cantica Canticorum ad laudem deiparae Virginis Mariae elucidatio."

<sup>239</sup> *Holy Feast*, 81.

Besides the architecture equated with their bodies, in her story, Asneth's womb is identified with her garden, within which at the beginning of the story, the trees are literally bending under the burden of their ripe fruit. Her womb can also be identified with her storeroom or cellar, from which she produces the pure white honeycomb, miraculously planted there by the Angel who later eucharistically feeds it to her. Astell reminds us that Mary's womb which produces Christ, is also interpreted as garden-like and further compared to the church in this way:

Honorius develops the idea of the "hortus conclusus" in a similar way, noting that if Mary is the singular Garden of God, blossoming with virtues, bearing Christ as the fruit of her womb, then the church too is a Marian garden to the extent that it imitates her, "Emissiones tuae, id est, imitatores tui sunt ut paradisi diversarum arborum" (Astell 46).<sup>240</sup>

Besides their garden-like qualities that produce Christ-like fruit, we may more specifically associate the fruit of Asneth's womb with bees, which are typologically also associated with Mary and Ecclesia. In Asneth's story, not only does she miraculously find in her womb-like storeroom a eucharistic-like honeycomb, but in Greek versions of Asneth's story, the miraculous bees that emerge from the honeycomb and surround Asneth at one point, build a honeycomb on her lips. Mary has long been associated with honeybees, but this imagery in *Asneth* may be directly compared to earlier Christian

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<sup>240</sup> Astell cites Honorius of Autun, *Sigillum Beatae Mariae*, PL 172, c508. The fuller Latin quote reads: *Hortus conclusus, soror mea, sponsa. Ipsa erat herbarum vel arborum hortus, id est plena virtutibus; quae erat in partu conclusus, scilicet signaculo sancti Spiritus. Hortus conclusus iterum, quia post partum non est reclusum virginitatis signaculum. Fons signatus. Ipsa etiam erat fons, id est primum exemplum virginitatis. Qui fons erat signatus, id est Christi passione consecratus. Emissiones tuae, id est imitatores tui sunt ut paradisi diversarum arborum.* [ed. Migne, PL 172, col. 508].

images of Ecclesia, who utters sweet words from lips that, like Asneth's, are equated or associated specifically with honeycomb, reflecting again the *Song of Songs*<sup>241</sup>:

Bruno, too, conforms his teaching to the model of instruction found in the Song of Songs. The lips of the church, he says, are distilling honeycomb, that is, sweet and moving words: "Favum distillant labia Ecclesiae, id est, dulcia et suavia verba" (c1259).<sup>242</sup>

If we look at the way Hildegard of Bingen interprets her visions, and in turn represents Ecclesia in *Scivias*, we gain a further understanding of how the medieval imagination may have conflated *Asneth* with notions of Ecclesia. This may be especially seen where Hildegard focuses on Ecclesia as the Bride of Christ, which is discussed by Barbara Newman in *Sister of Wisdom*. One need only analyze an image of Ecclesia from

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<sup>241</sup>See the Latin translation in Battifol, p. 106, ll. 9-11 where the bees build it in her hands: *Et exierunt apes de favo multe valde candide sicut nix, et ale earum purpuree ut iacinctus, et circumdederunt omnes Aseneth, et operabantur in manibus eius favum mellis, et manducaverunt ex eo*. In Middle English, they also build it in her hands: "And bees come out therof ful fele, and white as the snow; / Here wynges were of purple hewe; aboute here thei yede / And wrouhte a honycomb in here handis and ete therof inow" (ll. 567-69). I have argued elsewhere (MA thesis, 2003) that for Hellenistic readers the bees may have been equated with the Egyptian "Ba" ancestral spirits which accompany the creator God, the "Ka" (Osiris in Ancient Egypt) as he ascends on his temple, entering into his image there. Moreover the "Ba" are described as exhaled winged beetles that ascend to the sky, and are associated with the ancestor gods of the underworld, on which see Reymond, Eve A. E. *The Mythical Origin of the Egyptian Temple*, p. 115, and Assmann, Jan. *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, 422-23, and footnote 39. Reymond (p. 8n2) also refers to them as the "Builder Gods," in reference to the worship of the Ancestor Gods in the Edfu documents. Bees are also associated with the Egyptian Goddess, Isis (including in their association with death) who has much in common with Asneth (see Ch 3 above). Isis is associated with fertility, but also the underworld. See Anthea E. Portier-Young, "Sweet Mercy Metropolis: Interpreting Asneth's Honeycomb," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 14.2 (2005), esp. 144. Also see Kraemer on the bees, including as souls and guides of the dead in ancient cultures, "When Joseph," 167-179.

<sup>242</sup>Astell, *Song of Songs*, 47; For more context: «*Favus distillans labia tua.*» *Favus enim mel est in cera, per quem spiritualis intelligentia significatur in littera. Favum distillant labia Ecclesiae, id est dulcia et suavia verba*. From Bruno of Segni (Bruno Astensis) *Expositio in Cantica Canticorum* Chapter 4 [ed. Migne, PL 164, col. 1259]. What is interesting here is the term "*spiritualis intelligentia*" in association with the honeycomb and Ecclesia's distilling words. I have argued above that Asneth would also have been associated with "spiritual intelligence" in both the Latin and Middle English interpretations of her story—it is specifically referred to in the scene with the angel and the honeycomb, when he laughs at her intelligence and in association with Levi, known for his visionary gifts. See also *Song of Songs* 4:11-12 Douay-Rheims, "Thy lips, my spouse, are as a dropping honeycomb, honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments, as the smell of frankincense. My sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up."

*Scivias* to make some remarkable comparisons with what we also know of Asneth. (See figure below.)



In Hildegard's illustration, Ecclesia stands in front of a phallus-shaped tower, with the fire-like glory of God's spirit ejaculating as in a climax out of the windows above.<sup>243</sup> It

<sup>243</sup> The image occurs on p. 217 of Newman's *Sister*, from *Scivias* II.4, originally from the former Rupertsberg Codex, c. 1180, St. Hildegard's Abbey, Eibingen. I would like to thank Brepols Publishers for granting me copyright permission to include the image here cited: Hildegardis Bingensis *Scivias*, edd. A. Führkötter – A. Carlevaris, CC CM 43, Turnhout, 1978, Plate 13, between pages 158/159. I would like to thank Professor Iain Higgins of the University of Victoria for pointing out to me that the tower's shape may also have been considered womb-like in a medieval context; male and female reproductive organs were

reminds us of Asneth's tower and what takes place there in the blinding light of the glory of the angel who illuminates it fully dispelling the darkness in which Asneth is shrouded.<sup>244</sup> When the angel alights in Asneth's tower room, his face is described as lightning, his eyes as sunbeams, and his hair as flaming fire:

[ . . . ] his cheer as lyhtyng leem  
 And his yes bright shynynge as doth the sunne beam.  
 The heris of hys heed, thei were as flame of fire brennyng.  
 (ll. 424-26)

[ . . . ] *verumptamen vultus eius ut fulgur, et oculi eius ut  
 radius solis, et capilli capitis eius ut flamma ignis.*  
 (Battifol p. 102 ll. 3-5)

The kind of extreme light described in Asneth's story may be understood to have escaped the windows and illuminated the surrounding area as it does in Hildegard's painting!<sup>245</sup>

The union described in *Asneth* would have been understood in the Middle Ages as God's marriage (i.e. his spirit's union) with the soul, and also as a sexual coupling with his bride, the church, but even more specific imagery may be compared. In Hildegard's image of the tower behind Ecclesia, we can count exactly seven pillars, which help to support it.<sup>246</sup> In *Asneth* her seven maids are the "prudent" pillars that are to support

considered outer/inner homologues of each other. This fits with the discussion below (for instance in the context of Mary) regarding the womb-like importance of the Church, both symbolically and structurally.

<sup>244</sup> In terms of the tradition that Christ is the head and his bride the body of the church (see as an example, Bernard above), it is worth noting that when the angel appears to Asneth, in Latin: "Et ecce vir de cello descendens stetit super capud Aseneth, et vocavit eam ex nomine [and Behold! a man/husband descending from heaven stood/rested above/over Asneth's head and called her by name.] His proximity to her head, or domination of it here may help to establish that the angel represents Christ as the head of the church (Asneth) to a medieval reader. This is consistent in the Middle English translation as well: "And a man com doun fro hevене, and stood upon here heed / Callynge Asneth by here name" (ll. 415-16).

<sup>245</sup> Jeffrey F. Hamberger and Robert Suckale include a copy of and describe an illumination in the Rothschild Canticles (Flanders), a manuscript made for an unidentified nun, around c. 1300 (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, ms. 404 f. 65v-66r). In this mystical miscellany "the image of Christ descending in a fiery sunburst to join his bride in bed has a sexual energy unparalleled in Christian art before Bernini's sculpture of the ecstasy of St. Teresa" (99). See their "Between This World and the Next: The Art of Religious Women in the Middle Ages," in *Crown and Veil*, 76-108.

<sup>246</sup> One must look at the image originating from the Eibingen manuscript, which is printed in Newman's *Sister* and above, and clearly has seven pillars. There is a discrepancy between the original and how it is depicted

Asneth's city of refuge, very much like the virtues that support the church.<sup>247</sup> In the Middle English version of *Asneth*, the angel calls the maids to his presence, and blesses them, telling them:

Be ye to the Cité of Refute [Asneth] seven pileris in assistance,  
And alle dwellynge in that cité schul reste on your prudence. (l. 583-84)

*et sitis sicut columbe civitatis refugii, et omnes inhabitants in illa civitate  
super vos requiescant in secula seculorum.* (Battifol p. 106, ll. 24-27)

Also in Hildegard's depiction of Ecclesia's tower are three windows, the exact number described in Asneth's chamber in the tower where the mystical union takes place:

in the chief chambir of Asneth ther were wyndowys thre,  
The firste retardyng to the est, the secunde was sought right,  
The thirde lay north upon the street (ll. 89-91)

*Et erant fenestre magno thalamo Aseneth ubi virginitas  
illius nutriebatur. Una fenestra que prima magna valde  
prospiciens ad orientem, et secunda prospiciens ad  
meridiem, et tercia prospiciens ad aquilonem in plateam  
deambulantium.* (Battifol p. 90-91, ll. 33-37)

For Hildegard, the three windows have a trinitarian meaning; the light shining from them is equated with the gifts that the power of the Holy Spirit emit, which is consistent with the notion of mystical marriage—the Spirit's union with the soul:

The tower has three windows in its summit from which  
shine so much brilliance that even the roof of the tower,  
which is constructed like a cone, shows very clearly in its

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in Hart and Bishop's edition of *Scivias* (Paulist Press, 1990). At first confused, because it appears Hildegard's Ecclesia has eight pillars supporting her tower, it is clear that Hart and Bishop's edition has included, not copies of the original, but drawings of Hildegard's drawings. That is, they are not facsimiles; the image of Ecclesia in Hart and Bishop's edition has been embellished by a modern artist.

<sup>247</sup> In correspondence dated April 28, 2011, Jonathan Juilfs kindly directed me to "a well-known devotional category of the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, taken right out of Isaiah 11:2-3 (Vulgate): it consists of *sapientia* (wisdom), *intellectus* (understanding), *consilium* (counsel), *fortitudo* (fortitude, courage), *scientia* (knowledge), *pietas* (piety, duty), and *timor Domini* (fear of the Lord). All of these virtues play seamlessly into Hildegard's allegorization of the Beatitudes and of Ezechelian imagery in *Scivias* Book I." See also Bernard of Clairvaux's description of the virtues that hold up Wisdom, based also on Proverbs 9:1. He says: "It is right to put wisdom after virtue, for virtue is, as it were, the sure foundation, above which wisdom builds her home." *Sermon* 85:9.

light; for the ineffable Trinity is manifested in the outpouring of the gifts of the power of the Holy Spirit (Hart & Bishop 189)

[antecedent is *turris*] *Quae tres fenestras in summitate sui habet, ex quibus tantus fulgor resplendet quod etiam tectum turris illius quod se uelut in conum erigit, in claritate eiusdem fulgoris manifestius uidetur: quia ineffabilis Trinitas in effusione donorum excellentiae Spiritus sancti manifestatur.*<sup>248</sup>

Hildegard's notions of Ecclesia, and especially the image of the tower she produces are so strikingly characteristic of what we know of Asneth's tower structure, a structure in a city it is implied she herself stands for, that my first impression upon seeing her images and reading Hildegard's descriptions of Ecclesia was that Hildegard must have been familiar with Asneth's story, though this would be difficult to prove since *Scivias* was completed in the *mid*-twelfth century and the earliest extant copy of *Asneth* we have in Latin dates to the *late*-twelfth century. Still, there is some evidence that Asneth's Latin translation may have dated to the early-twelfth century too, based on the listing of an "Assenech" text in an early-twelfth century catalogue of books from Rochester Cathedral Priory, as well as an entry in the early-twelfth-century catalogue of Durham Cathedral of a text called "Putiphar."<sup>249</sup> Though it can't be proven, it is not impossible that Asneth's translation into Latin occurred in time for Hildegard to have acquired a copy of it by the middle of the century when *Scivias* was written. In any case, it may be more helpful to realize that there was a network of related models for Hildegard's Ecclesia, which besides the bible, may have included the female figure in *Shepherd of Hermas* and the wisdom figure Sophia (as Barbara Newman has already suggested and I further discuss below).

<sup>248</sup> Hildegardis Bingensis, *Scivias* II.4.3 (LLT-A: CCCM 43, ed. Führkötter)

<sup>249</sup> See Ruth Nisse, "Your Name" 748 and 748n65.

Each of these female figures also has typology strikingly similar to *Asneth*. What I hope to show is that images and ideas regarding Ecclesia in the Middle Ages (including those perpetuated by Hildegard) would have caused readers to associate *Asneth* with Mother Church.

Newman writes of Hildegard's interpretations of Ecclesia:

While the church is allegorically the bride of Christ, she is “wedded” in a different sense to the Holy Spirit, who makes her fruitful. Vision II.4 of Scivias, which deals with the sacrament of confirmation, shows the Spirit in the form of a tower literally “confirming” or upholding the woman Ecclesia to keep her from falling [. . .] But at the same time the tower is said to represent “the measureless sweetness of the Holy Spirit,” pouring forth rivers of holiness and kindling fiery virtues in the Church. The image is suggestive.<sup>250</sup>

I take Newman's use of the word “suggestive” to mean sexually suggestive, and it is hard to evade an erotic reading here both in image and the wording Hildegard has created.

Hildegard recounts:

And then I saw a great round tower consisting wholly of a single white stone, with three windows in its summit. From them shone a light so intense that even the roof of this tower which was raised in the form of a cone, could be plainly seen in the brightness of this light. These windows were decorated with beautiful emeralds. And the tower was set in the middle of [Ecclesia's] back, like a tower in a city wall, so that because of its strength the woman could by no means fall. And I saw those children who had passed through the woman's womb . . . shining with great brightness.<sup>251</sup>

*et deinde uidi uelut magnam et rotundam turrim, totam que integrum et album lapidem existentem, tres que fenestras in summitate sui habentem, ex quibus tantus fulgor*

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<sup>250</sup> Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989) 216.

<sup>251</sup> In Newman, *Sister*, 216, square brackets Newman's.

*resplenduit quod etiam tectum turris illius quod se uelut in conum erexerat, in claritate eiusdem fulgoris manifestius uideretur. ipsae autem fenestrae pulcherrimis smaragdis circumornatae erant. sed et eadem turris uelut in medio dorsi praedictae muliebris imaginis posita erat, secundum quod aliqua turris in murum urbis ponitur, ita quod eadem imago prae fortitudine eius nullo modo cadere poterat. et infantes illos qui uentrem eiusdem imaginis... transierant uidi multa claritate fulgentes.*<sup>252</sup>

I have interpreted other images of garden wall or city wall in apocryphal literature to be female and womb-like, the gates, vaginal-like. In the apocryphal story of *Susannah*, based on the thirteenth chapter of Daniel, Susannah's garden walls are breached by the elders—they have entered a private womb-like place that has been tended and cared for carefully by her and her husband, where the gates were normally shut and guarded well. When the Elders sneak into her garden, we understand in both word and typology that they plan to sexually invade Susannah, for her garden and its surrounding wall represents herself.<sup>253</sup> When Joseph returns to Asneth's home after eight days, he “enters in” through the gates of her city/temple compound—a city she now stands for. The gates are shut behind him, and the story makes a point of telling us that he and Asneth are unchaperoned, suggestive of his sexual right as a husband. If we can assume that Hildegard was familiar with similar typology in ancient sources, then her “tower in a city wall” can be read in the same way, especially if we identify the city wall with the woman—that which surrounds the womb—and the phallus-like tower with the spirit, and in medieval fashion understand the union of the spirit with the church as a sexual allegory.

<sup>252</sup> Hildegardis Bingensis, *Sciuias* (LLT-A: CCCM 43, ed. Führkötter), II.4.*visio*

<sup>253</sup> A Middle English verse translation, “The Pistel of Swete Susan,” has been edited by Peck, along with *Asneth*, in *Heroic Women from the Old Testament in Middle English Verse*, edited by TEAMS Middle English Text series, available online at: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/susanfrm.htm>.

Newman goes on to remind us that the images of Ecclesia as a woman with a tower and a type of baptismal womb would also have had similarities with the *Shepherd of Hermas*, a second-century apocalyptic work that circulated in Northern Europe and England during the Middle Ages, that Newman suggests Hildegard must have known:<sup>254</sup>

In Hermas's third vision, Lady Church shows the seer "a great tower being builded upon the waters" by angels, archangels, and virgins representing the virtues. Questioned by Hermas, she explains that the tower represents herself, the Church, built on the waters of baptism [ . . . ] In the *Shepherd*, the old woman who grows younger and the unfinished tower both represent the mysterious history of the Church, eternal in the heavens yet still incomplete on earth.<sup>255</sup>

The identity in *Shepherd* of the church with the tower is, as Newman has pointed out, striking in its similarity to Hildegard's exegesis. Ecclesia herself is the city or a tower, or a combined structure of some kind. In Hildegard they are inseparable "a tower in a city wall." In *Asneth*, Asneth herself is a city, and resides in a tower, which seems to be attached or one-in-the-same. Asneth is the city of refuge, within whose walls (a womb-

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<sup>254</sup> Kathryn Kerby-Fulton mentions *Hermas*' influence on both Hildegard and Robert of Uzes and "a number of other Late Medieval Visionaries" and its circulation in Northern Europe and England. See Kerby-Fulton's chapter, "Pier's Plowman and the Medieval Visionary Tradition" in her *Reformist Apocalypticism*, esp. p. 85 and n. 29. Peter Dronke also says Hildegard was almost certainly familiar with *Hermas*, as well as Augustine's *City of God*. Dronke also reminds us that in Hildegard's lyrical play, *Ordo Virtutum*, one of her earliest works, in her depiction of the heavenly city of Jerusalem [the symbolic bride of the Apocalypse], "the symbolism of the city built with precious stones is fused with that of a flowering garden." Dronke reminds us that "two of Hermas's visions concern the building of a tower that is revealed as Ecclesia." Along with other typological comparisons we can make with Asneth's story, in *Hermas* "the Shepherd is both Hermas's guardian angel and a celestial image of Hermas himself (for he can assume Hermas's own shape)" which is strikingly similar to the angel in *Asneth*, who takes on Joseph's likeness. See Peter Dronke, "The Symbolic Cities of Hildegard of Bingen," *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 1 (1991): 168-183 esp. 168 and 170.

<sup>255</sup> *Sister*, 216

like enclosure, associated also with baptism in *Shepherd*) runs a cleansing conduit and converts may find refuge and be saved.<sup>256</sup>

It is worth noting here also Asneth's likeness to ideas and iconography surrounding *Lady Wisdom*. I have noticed profound similarities between Asneth and the Gnostic Wisdom figure Sophia as she is highlighted, for instance, in *The Syriac Acts of Judas Thomas*.<sup>257</sup> Asneth's similarities with Wisdom and also Ecclesia may lead us to wonder if medieval notions of Wisdom, such as Boethius' Lady in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, would have been equated with Ecclesia in the Middle Ages. In the translator's prayer verses found at the end of the early printed (Tavistock) edition of Walton's *Boethius*, John Walton certainly seems to equate Wisdom with Mary, who (as Ann Astell has demonstrated) was equated with the church in the Middle Ages.<sup>258</sup> If so, there may have been a stronger thematic relationship between Walton's translation of Boethius' *Consolatio* and *Asneth* for Elizabeth Berkeley in the early fifteenth century (see Chapter Two above). The countess and/or Walton may have identified one literary figure with the other on a deeper philosophical and religious basis than we may at first suppose. Sophia/Wisdom has been equated with Ecclesia in scholarship already.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Edith McEwan Humphrey in "The Ladies and the Cities" draws comparisons between *Asneth* and *The Shepherd of Hermas* in terms of the similar apocalyptic transformation the woman/bride goes through in both stories.

<sup>257</sup> See G. R. S. Mead's translations from extant surviving manuscripts: *The Wedding Song of Wisdom: Gnosticism and the Rite of Sacred Marriage*, a rare book reprinted by Holmes Publishing Group, 1999.

<sup>258</sup> For the ending (prayer) verses by Walton, see Mark Science's edition of Walton's *Boethius*.

<sup>259</sup> See Newman's *Sister of Wisdom*, her chapter entitled "The Bride of Christ," as well as Marina Warner's, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*. (London: Random House, 1996) 199-200, where she also mentions the Sophia figure in Herrad of Hoenburg's Garden of Delights. On Herad, see Fiona Griffiths, *The Garden of Delights: Reform and Renaissance for Women in the Twelfth Century*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Kraemer identifies similarities between Asneth and Wisdom, but does not otherwise equate Ecclesia with Asneth as I have mentioned in fn. 235 above.

The similarities between Ecclesia and Sophia/Wisdom are numerous, as are the similarities between Asneth and Sophia; the association of all three in terms of typology, becomes clear in a comparison of just a few lines of the ancient Syriac poem. Here the king (god) in his bright radiance (as the sun) ascends, “rests” in/on Sophia in sacred marriage—a king who enthrones himself literally at Sophia’s head, just as Christ enthrones himself as the head of the Church, and just as the angel alights and stands at/over Asneth’s head in her story. Moreover, just as Asneth receives the holy meal of honeycomb that the bees also share, in the Gnostic account, the king feeds Sophia and those associated with her:

The Maiden is Light’s Daughter;  
 On her the King’s Radiance Resteth (ll. 1-2)  
 .....  
 On the Crown of her Head the King throneth,  
 [With Living Food] feeding those ‘neath Him’ (ll. 7-8  
 square brackets Mead’s)  
 .....

Like Ecclesia and Asneth, Sophia is also equated with architecture—described specifically as a city/bride, who is led by seven bridesmaids:

Her Tongue is like the Door-hanging (l. 15)  
 .....  
 Step-wise, her Neck riseth—a Stairway  
 The first of all Builders hath builded. (ll. 17-18)  
 .....  
 Her Fingers are secretly setting  
 The Gates of the City ajar (ll. 21-22)  
 .....  
 Her Bridesmaids, too, are Seven  
 Who lead the dance before her. (ll. 32-33, tr. Mead)

The fact that Sophia secretly sets the gates of the city she stands for “ajar” is, as Newman states of Hildegard’s Ecclesia, “suggestive”. It speaks of her sexual invitation to the God to “enter” her in sacred marriage. Moreover, Mead equates Sophia’s sacred marriage

here to the *Song of Songs*. We have seen the bride's role in the context of the Old Testament book, equated with Mary, Ecclesia, Asneth, and now Wisdom—Sophia—by several different scholars. There is a network of interconnected parallels and similarities between these female figures and historical interpretations and representations of God's bride. Moreover, Mead compares the Syriac poetry to Proverbs 9:

Wisdom hath built herself a house, she hath hewn her out seven pillars [. . .] She hath sent her maids to invite to the tower, and to the walls of the city: Whosoever is a little one, let him come to me. And to the unwise she said: Come, eat my bread, and drink the wine, which I have mingled for you. Forsake childishness, and live, and walk by the ways of prudence. (9:1-6, Douay-Rheims)

Wisdom's bridesmaids (pillars) may be associated with Asneth's seven virgins, the virtuous handmaidens who are named the prudent pillars of the city that she stands for. Moreover, before they are named the pillars of her city, Asneth asks the Angel to give them a special blessing, in association with her own anointing—in Asneth's case, with "holy crème," anointment of incorruptibility:

Asneth saide, "I have seven maidenen on o nyht bore  
With me; as my sisteres I love hem all therfore.  
"To blesse hem as thu hast me afore the I hem calle." (578-80)

*Et dixit Aseneth angelo: "Domine, sunt mihi septem virgins  
congregate mihi ab adolescentia, in una nocte mecum  
genite, et ego diligo eas ut sorores meas. Vocabo eas et  
benedices eas sicut et me."* (Battifol p. 106, ll. 20-23)

Hildegard recounts that Ecclesia similarly asks the Spirit to anoint her children along with herself. She says that the apostles:

[. . .] constructed the Church and strengthened her with strong virtues to build up the faith and adorned her with many brilliancies. And because the Church, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has been so strengthened by

them, she [Ecclesia] asks that her children also be adorned in this anointing by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>260</sup>

Ecclesia is mother church (also a city), just as Asneth is the “mother city” of converts.

Hildegard states of the baptized children of Ecclesia:

And you see those children who, as mentioned before, had passed through the womb of that image, shining with great brightness. These are they who in the innocence of a lean and pure heart have gained a mother, the Church, in the font of regeneration, as was shown to you before, and are children of light.<sup>261</sup>

The Mother imagery can be extended here also to Sophia/Wisdom, but as Mead shows, a mother who is not in fact God, but is God’s consort in marriage. Sophia (as Asneth in her conversion) is subject to and needs God’s blessing and redemption:

Mother, and Mother of the Living. She is also called Light Mother or Shining Mother, and the Power Above, and from her all spiritual souls draw their origin [...] But the various fortunes of all such souls were wont to be contemplated in those of this mythical personage Sophia, and so it was taught that the Sophia also needed Redemption wrought by Christ, by whom she is delivered from her [spiritual] ignorance and her passions. (*Wedding Song*, tr. Mead 21-22).

From her virginal sacred marriage, including the light-equated God ascending at/over her head, to her identification with a city that houses converts (her children), to her seven handmaidens (the supportive, virtuous, pillars of the city she now represents) who she asks god to bless, right down to her own redemption or conversion, the comparison between Sophia, Ecclesia and Asneth can be made—at least in typological terms. While

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<sup>260</sup> Hart and Bishop, 191. Of the Bride’s [Ecclesia’s] love for her maids, Bernard says, “She is never so bent on her own progress as to overlook their interest, nor desirous of promoting her own welfare at their expense.” “She speaks to them therefore as follows: ‘Be happy, be confident: the King has brought me into his bedroom. You may regard yourself as introduced too [. . .] every preferment I enjoy is a joy for you all.’” *Sermon* 23:1-2.

<sup>261</sup> Hart and Bishop, 192.

Hildegard may never have read *Asneth* (though I do wonder), the similarities between *Asneth* and Hildegard's *Ecclesia*, despite *Asneth*'s ancient origins, leaves little doubt that *Asneth* would have been identified with a type of the church by Medieval readers familiar with such typology.<sup>262</sup>

The mystical marriage of God with the soul is so profoundly described in *Asneth*'s encounter with the angel, that, as I have argued, it is hardly distinguishable in type and theme from some medieval women's visionary experiences, whose mystical union with Christ often conjures sexually charged images, spiritual equivalents to the Annunciation and Miraculous Conception. Moreover, there is some evidence that other holy women were described in architectural terms, which, besides their association as both bride and mother of Christ in emulation of Mary, seems to suggest their association with *Ecclesia* (and perhaps wisdom figures) on yet another level.

In his letter to Hildegard of Bingen requesting a copy of her sermon preached to the Clergy of Cologne, Philip of Heinsburg (later archbishop of Cologne) addresses Hildegard as a temple, where prayers may be offered up, as in a church. Even when one recognizes the New Testament "temple of the holy spirit" tradition that each believer is

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<sup>262</sup> To date, my research has uncovered no Latin glosses to *Asneth*. What has been a mystery to scholars of Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, who have only in the last decades begun to study the text with vigor, may be partially unravelled through the study of similar typology and how it was viewed in the Middle Ages. There is more typology in Hildegard's explanation of *Ecclesia* that seems to further echo a curious sequence in *Asneth*. It is the image of some of *Ecclesia*'s children who wish to harm her: "But others tear themselves away from her and attack her and break her established rules. They abandon the material womb and the sweet nourishment of the Church and trouble her with many errors, and with different oppressions tear to pieces her laws, which God established. Among these, some by the fruit of penitence humbly return to her; for their grave offenses they inflict grave punishments on themselves by doing worthy penance for the restoration of life" (Hart and Bishop 196). Scholars have puzzled over the symbolic significance of the bees that emerge from the honeycomb, who eucharistically eat from the comb, but part of whom, in Greek versions of her story, try to sting *Asneth* and are relegated to working in her garden for the rest of their days. Medieval readers, at least, may have interpreted them as converts who, according to Hildegard, try to hurt *Ecclesia* and must do penance.

deemed to be, there seems to be a more explicit ecclesiastical application here. He

writes:

*Nam, cum ex multis rerum indiciis manifestum sit, quod in precordiis uestris placitam sibi sedem elegerit, merito et nos in admirationibus nostris ad uos quasi ad uiuum Dei templum preces oblaturi accedimus, et de corde uestro, sicuti reuera de Dei oraculo, ueritatis responsa flagitamus.*<sup>263</sup>

For since it is abundantly clear that the Spirit has chosen a dwelling pleasing to Himself in your heart, understandably we come to you in admiration as if to the living temple of God to offer up prayers, and we seek responses of truth from your heart, as if from the very oracle of God.<sup>264</sup>

Theology associating the church with God's Bride is integral to Judeo-Christian thought, and permeates all aspects of Christianity, beginning with Mary's miraculous conception of Christ. When Mary conceived, virginally, miraculous, through union with God, she produced the literal body of Christ, and therefore brought forth (mediating through her body) the salvation of mankind. Salvation is therefore at the heart of notions surrounding mystical marriage. In his study of sex and salvation in ancient Christianity, Roger Steven Evans discusses the relationship between virginity and salvation, that is to say, the saving power of the virgin's body, particularly in the early church:

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<sup>263</sup> Epistularium Hildegardis Bingensis (LLT-A: CCCM 91, ed. L. Van Acker, 1991-93) Class 1, Letter 15 (p. 33).

<sup>264</sup> Letter 15, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen* Volume I, Trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 54. See also "Playing Doctor: St. Brigitta, Ritual Reading, and Ecclesiastical Authority," in *Voices in Dialogue*, 316, where Katherine Zieman recounts Bridget's visionary experience recorded in the *Revelaciones Extravagantes*, in which Christ says: "I am like a carpenter, who cuts down the trees, brings them out of the woods into a house, and there makes a beautiful image, decorating it with colors and designs. When his friends, upon seeing the image, note that it might be decorated with even prettier colors, they paint it and apply their own colors." Although the primary rhetorical gesture in this revelation seems to be to give divine approval to Alphonse [Bridget's hagiographer], this approval is given in terms that align him with Christ as co-creator of the image that resides within Birgitta" (square brackets mine). While Zeiman cites this in the context of male editorializing of the female mystic's revelations there is an unmistakable association between the female mystic here and the "house" that Christ himself enters and decorates with beautiful images, which additionally alludes to the church.

Athanasius states that “in every house of Christians, it is needful that there be a virgin, for the salvation of the whole house is [dependent on] that one virgin.” This and similar statements by the church fathers illuminates the degree of sanctity afforded to those who had voluntarily sacrificed their sexual selves for the sake of Christ. Not only were they the brides of Christ, but their virginity was efficacious for salvation. [ . . . ] This is the true power of virginity; that it has the power to save, not only the individual practicing virginity, but those who simply fell under her influence.<sup>265</sup>

Evans emphasizes that the virgin brides of Christ were holy mediators of the grace of Christ, not saviours in themselves, but I would add that their mediating power is precisely due to their ability to reproduce a type of Christ including notions associating what they produce with the Logos/Word and His offspring (converts).

If we associate the Logos/Word with honey/honeycomb and in turn with that which the virgin womb produces in the Middle Ages, the intersection of the typology with theology becomes even more intriguing. In her study of the twelfth-century *Hortus deliciarum*, Fiona J. Griffiths discusses the medieval notions of honey. See especially her chapter, “A Bee in the Garden of the Lord” where she reminds us “medieval authors consistently describe the Scriptures as a honeycomb, and spiritual knowledge as honey”

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<sup>265</sup> Roger Stephen Evans, *Sex and Salvation: Virginity as a Soteriological Paradigm in Ancient Christianity* (Oxford: University Press of America, 2003) 157-159. Evans cites Athanasius from *Canons of Athanasius* 98. On a discussion of Asneth’s virginity “serving as the embodiment of [ . . . ] repentance and conversion” in relation to salvation (hers and other converts), in the context of Mary and ancient paradigms of virginity, see Mary F. Foskett’s *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002) 98-104, and on the transition of both Asneth and Mary from *parthenos* to *meter* (virgin to mother), 133-136. As I have discussed in Ch 3, above, one of the ideas that inform religious women, in addition to their virginity, is their likeness to Mary also as mothers. Carolyn Walker Bynum gives us yet another example of this in her discussion of the sister book of Töss, where Adelheid von Fauenberg desires that her body be “martyred” for the baby Jesus, including: “her veins woven into a little dress for him, her blood poured out for his bath, her bones burnt to warm her, and ‘all her flesh be used up for all sinners’ [ . . . ] motherhood is blood sacrifice and reparation for all sinners, as well as comfort, dependency, and union” (173). See her “Patterns of Female Piety in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Crown and Veil*, 172-190.

(98).<sup>266</sup> The female religious Harrad of Hohenbourg, who compiled the book for the nuns in her care, described herself as a little bee, collecting nectar from various flowers (texts) available to her, for the purpose of forming a new textual creation. Griffiths cites the tradition of Ambrose, where it is recorded by Paulinus that Ambrose received a visitation from bees as an infant: “settling on his mouth, the bees ensured that the words of the proverbs were fulfilled: ‘Good *words* are a honeycomb’” (100, my emphasis).<sup>267</sup> We saw above that the lips of the church, itself, are distilling honeycomb, which is equated (by Bruno) to sweet and moving words.<sup>268</sup> All of these examples further supports the idea, that what holy women will produce is WORD, associated with the Logos, Christ, associated with honeycomb and honey. Carolyn Walker Bynum reminds us that “Thirteenth-century visions and prayers are filled with light and comfort: the wounds of Christ glow, and the fluid running from his side is honey, not blood.”<sup>269</sup> This lends further support to the notion that Christ’s body was associated with honeycomb. The notion is combined in the honeycomb image, associated with both Mary and Asneth’s wombs that is Eucharistic-like. In Asneth the honeycomb is “the blessed brede of lyve”

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<sup>266</sup> For a discussion of Asneth’s honeycomb in the context of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, and Biblical references to honey, see Anatheia E. Portier-Young’s “Sweet Mercy Metropolis,” where she summarizes: “Thus from the biblical tradition we learn of God’s supernatural sweetness, manifested in God’s words and God’s wisdom” (149). She also reminds us that in *Asneth*, “the honeycomb has emanated from his [the angel’s] mouth, having come into being by his speech” (139), which is not inconsistent with my theory that the honeycomb, in the Middle Ages would have been equated with Logos—Christ as Word. Portier-Young, also cites Kraemer (145), who she says “interprets the honeycomb as a symbol for divine Wisdom [ . . . ] She argues that by consuming the honeycomb that is Wisdom, Asneth herself becomes Wisdom.” Kraemer also identifies Asneth with Wisdom due to her maiden’s comparison with the seven pillars of Wisdom’s House in Prov. 9:1, “When Aseneth” 26.

<sup>267</sup> Besides Ambrose, Kraemer adds to this tradition, Plato and Pindar—other notables a swarm of bees descended on in their cradles. See “When Aseneth” 167 (on this she cites Burchard and Philonenko).

<sup>268</sup> See Griffith’s, *The Garden of Delights*. Burchard, “A New Translation,” 189, reminds us of the possible Gnostic allegorization of Asneth as “the mythic figure of Wisdom fallen into error, and Joseph is the divine *Logos*, who is coming to rescue her by uniting himself to her” (my emphasis).

<sup>269</sup> See her “Patterns of Female Piety” 181.

(l. 259). In a letter to St. Bernard, Hildegard gives us a tantalizing honey image that, as in *Asneth*, is the Christ-like fruit of the virgin's womb:

*Oro te per serenitatem Patris, et per eius Verbum admirabile, et per suauem humorem compunctionis, Spiritum ueritatis, et per sanctum sonitum, per quem sonat omnis creatura, et per ipsum Verbum, de quo ortus est mundus, et per altitudinem Patris, qui in suaui uiriditate misit Verbum in Virginis uterum, unde suxit carnem sicut circummedificatur mel fauo.*<sup>270</sup>

And so I beseech your aid, through the serenity of the Father and through His wondrous Word and through the sweet moisture of compunction, the spirit of truth, and through that holy sound, which all creation echoes, and through that same Word which gave birth to the world, and through the sublimity of the Father, who sent the Word with sweet fruitfulness into the womb of the Virgin, from which He soaked up flesh, just as honey is surrounded by honeycomb.<sup>271</sup>

Another example of this divine honeycomb imagery in a female mystic who identified herself as God's bride is Mechtilde of Hackeborn.<sup>272</sup> The following excerpt from the fifteenth-century Middle English translation of *Book of Ghostlye Grace* recounts a vision where Mechtild has an entirely erotic encounter with honeycomb that is also associated with the body of Christ, and that with which he infuses himself in her:

And aftere that, sche sayde: "Who wille haffe of the honye of hevenlye Jerusalem?" Ande anone hym<sup>273</sup> thowght sche profryde a honycombe, owte of a vesselle that sche hadde,

<sup>270</sup> Epistolarium Hildegardis Bingensis (LLT-A: CCCM 91, ed. L. Van Acker, 1991-93) Class 1, Letter 1 (p. 5).

<sup>271</sup> *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen* Volume I, Trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, 8.

<sup>272</sup> On the fifteenth-century Middle English translation of Mechtild's Book and a full edition on Microfiche, see Theresa A. Halligan, ed., *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtilde of Hackeborn* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1979), from which I quote here. Mechtild was a German Nun who wrote originally in Latin in the 1290's.

<sup>273</sup> The translator uses the pronoun "hym" though it is generally accepted that the original writer was one of the Helfta nuns, Gertrude the Great. Wogan-Brown et al, 288.

to all the sustrene in the qweere whiche come to here, Ande that same persone that sawe as by vysiou[n] [went] to here also, als hym thought, ande sche gaffe hym a gobette of brede owte fro the honye. Ande while sche helde that breede in here handdys, wonderfullye that gobette of breede with the honye both togydders bygane to wexe owte into a loofe, so that the gobette of breede wexe owte in a hoole loofe, ande the honycombe persede the lofe withyn ande withowte, ande throrowe here handdis. Whilys sche helde that loofe, itt droppede in so moche plenteuosnes ande habundaunce that itt wette alle here lappe, ande so ranne forth ande moystede alle the erth abowte them.<sup>274</sup>

Here Mechtilde, “profryde a honycombe, owte of a vesselle that sche hadde,” which we understand was a gold cup in the shape of Christ’s heart.<sup>275</sup> We may also recognize “vessel” as womb-like (similar to the womb-like tabernacle that holds the host, Walker-Bynum reminds us stood for Mary herself), or since it is a gold cup, also with that which holds Christ’s blood, which Bynum reminds us was regularly equated with honey. Here the honey pierces the Eucharistic-like bread or is absorbed by it, reminding us of the Virgin’s womb in Hildegard’s letter above. We have an image of inundation, even the piercing that is associated with sexual union. That Mechtilde is being fertiley covered, inundated, and is even overflowing with a symbol for the seed of God, the honey, seems clear. It overflows from her hands, drips through her fingers, and onto her lap/loins completely wetting her. Like Asneth, Mechtilde seems to be similarly “anointed with holy crème” in the most sexually suggestive way. Mechtilde’s account goes even further, suggesting a comparison between the bride of god and the fertile earth. “[I]tt wette alle

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<sup>274</sup> ll. 15-25.

<sup>275</sup> Wogan-Brown et al, as well as Bynum makes reference to a “vessel” that Mechtilde reportedly had been given by Christ that was in the shape of Christ’s heart and held the sacrament. The book states: “What wordis owre lorde saide to here whan sche schulde go to Goddys borde and resayve that holy sacrament. And how owre lorde yave his hert in lyknes of a cuppe of golde and bade hyr bere hitt abowte to alle seyntes” (ll. 19-22). In their mention of the vessel, attention is given to the unusualness of a woman being allowed to proffer the sacrament.

here lappe, ande so ranne forth ande moystede alle the erth.” If one is still not convinced of this as a fertile image of a holy and erotic nature, the hagiographer makes sure we understand it is when she seems to make reference to a sexual orgasm. A “wonderfulle ande a luffynge styrrynge [...] wente thoroweowte alle the partyes of my bodye.” Moreover, in her account, Christ says, “I brenede in so moche luffe of here that y myght no langgere forbere, botte anone I come fro heuene ande puttede me alle fullye into here.<sup>276</sup> Mechtild also variously describes Christ as “here dere love”<sup>277</sup> and “the luffere of my sawle.”<sup>278</sup>

Holy women including medieval female mystics are the temple or house whose wombs receive the Holy Spirit, as Hildegard’s tower (Holy Spirit) in a city wall (Ecclesia) illustrates and as Philip of Heinsburg suggests of Hildegard herself. If spirit is what they receive, honeycomb—associated with Word (Christ himself)—is what holy women produce in union with God, both in their symbolic wombs (cellar, tabernacle, vessel) and by their mouths. Herad of Hoenburg literally produced Word, associated with honey, as a bee in God’s garden, collecting and creating text, literally compiling a manuscript. Though not explicitly associated with honey, my interpretation of Capgrave’s St. Catherine of Alexandria (see Chapter Three above) is that what she will produce in her unmarried, virginal, womb-like garden is scholarship, also associated with text—Word. Honeycomb is what Asneth produces in her womb-like cellar, but also what Ecclesia and Asneth have built on their lips, sweetness (Word) dripping from them.

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<sup>276</sup> p. 133, ll. 6-17.

<sup>277</sup> p. 9, ll. 10-12.

<sup>278</sup> p. 182, ll. 11.

While virgins, in various capacities, are producers of Christ-equated Word, they are also mediators. In his study of virginity in Early Christianity, Peter Brown notes the mediating quality of virginity as the house of the Holy Spirit:

Equally important was the appeal of the virgin state as a form of “mediation” between the divine and the human [. . .] [T]he enormous symbolic weight placed on the individual human body [was] an obsessively significant locus of that “abnormal, not-natural, holy” mediation of human and divine. Virginity was an intensely physical state of the body. The intact body of the virgin woman remained throughout the organizing image of the whole notion. A body in this state—or, at least, a body perpetually removed from future sexual experience—was treated as a “temple of the Holy Spirit” in the most concrete manner [. . . ]<sup>279</sup>

Personal salvation is the result when the soul conjugates with God through mystical marriage. When a woman, a virgin who represents the “house” or the temple/church, conjugates with God, however, the results are more far-reaching, as they were with Mary. One type of this notion, as I have already discussed in Chapter Three, may be seen in the hagiography of female saints, for when these virgins realize their marriage to Christ upon their martyrdom, many souls are converted to Christianity and are therefore saved. At that moment and afterwards when prayers to the saints are offered they become mediating agents between the human and the divine. Asneth’s allegorical marriage to the divine in her story, resulted in her being a sheltering space for all who would convert and find refuge within her walls, which tells us that she is likewise a catalyst for the salvation

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<sup>279</sup> p. 432, 434, Peter Brown, “The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church” *Christian Spirituality I: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, Eds. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 427-443. Burchard, “A New Interpretation,” 189, similarly reminds us that access to salvation through or “in” Aseneth is not exactly the same as being “in” Christ, suggesting she is a mediator, not the source of salvation.

of many; we are also told that she and virgins like her will be renewed forever—in world without end.<sup>280</sup>

It is in the context that associates holy women with the church in the Middle Ages, that images in *Asneth* that can be equated with Mary and by extension with the mothers of Israel, become essential in an understanding of *Asneth* to Christian readers.<sup>281</sup> In her story, *Asneth* is explicitly compared to Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel—the first three mothers of Israel. These comparisons would have made her story relevant to medieval theological readers, including those interested in apocalyptic, revelatory material having to do with spiritual fruition, but in particular, Holy Church’s proliferation (or lack thereof) in the Middle Ages. I have found that *Asneth*’s association with this notion in the imagination of Medieval Christians may have held special importance to one theological circle in particular, whose exegesis her story may have fit into like a key into a lock—a natural piece of the puzzle regarding certain notions of salvation history that linked her with Ecclesia.

### ***Asneth* and the Theology of Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202)**

Along with theological evidence, a potentially revealing bit of manuscript evidence suggests that *Asneth* may have been valuable as a type of the church to the followers of the twelfth-century Cistercian prophet and exegete Joachim of Fiore. Part of this has to do with Joachim’s view that various biblical women should be understood as types of the church at different stages of earth’s history, which I will discuss in further detail below.

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<sup>280</sup> Penance, *Asneth* is told: “renoveleth [renews] virgines clene to Goddis dere blessynge/ And ministreth hem joye and blisse in wordlis withoute endynge” (ll 73-74). On this, and for the Latin, also see Ch. 1 above.

<sup>281</sup> As Russell A. Peck has reminded us (Intro.), and as I have further attempted to show, *Asneth* is “amply adorned with Marian imagery.”

We know that the translation of *Asneth* from Greek into Latin likely occurred at Canterbury. Besides a redaction that circulated in the later-thirteenth century, nine extant Latin manuscripts of *Asneth* survive (listed in my Introduction) and of the earliest six (dating from the late-twelfth to thirteenth century), three can be traced to Christ Church, Canterbury. The Latin translation of *Asneth* may even date to the early-twelfth century; as I have mentioned above, there is reference to a text called “Assenech” in a catalogue of books from Rochester Cathedral Priory.<sup>282</sup> Ruth Nisse has also reminded us of the existence of an entry in the early twelfth-century catalogue of Durham Cathedral, which lists a text called “Putiphar,” which, if it is our text, further suggests an early-twelfth, rather than late-twelfth century date for *Asneth*’s translation into Latin.<sup>283</sup>

The Latin *Asneth* likely began as a Canterbury text, and we know that Joachite texts survived at Canterbury also, even after the condemnation of his works in 1263 at the Council of Arles. The earliest known contact between Joachim of Fiore and England is a documented visit the abbot had from Richard the Lionhearted in Messina in 1190/91. The abbot’s reputation as having the spirit of prophecy was already beginning to spread, and it is speculated that Richard sought Joachim’s foreknowledge of events that would take place in the Holy Land. In the company of the English king and his courtiers, Joachim apparently predicted the downfall of Saladin, who he identified with the 6<sup>th</sup> head of the seven-headed dragon of the Apocalypse that would prefigure the final

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<sup>282</sup> Nisse notes it is “intriguingly bound with another work that touches on Jewish conversion.” See Nisse, “Your Name” 748 and 748n65.

<sup>283</sup> Nisse suggests of “Putiphar” that the early twelfth-century date for the Latin *Asneth*, here, is that it could have contributed to subsequent portrayals of conversion in the chansons de geste. A reading of the text in the context of conversion is not inconsistent with my theory that *Asneth* would have been understood, more specifically, as a type for Ecclesia.

Antichrist.<sup>284</sup> Morton Bloomfield and Margorie Reeves have suggested that the chroniclers who accompanied Richard II and met Joachim in Messina personally, may have been directly influential in furthering Joachite ideas in England. In any case, Bloomfield and Reeves have argued that an English manuscript dating to 1213 (now lost) containing a collection of letters by Peter of Blois was the exemplar for a German manuscript (MS. Amplonian F. 71), containing the same letters in addition to Joachim's interpretations of the Apocalypse; the English manuscript was therefore the exemplar for the Joachist material as well, dating his works in England to the early thirteenth century.<sup>285</sup> We also know that a Franciscan named Adam Marsh, around mid-thirteenth century (before 1253) sent some of Joachim of Fiore's writings to Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln with the optimistic recommendation that Joachim was "not unjustly believed to have obtained the spirit of divine understanding."<sup>286</sup> Just how prolific Joachim's followers were in England in the mid-thirteenth century, we don't know, but there is evidence that his ideas circulated around the time Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 288 was being compiled. In this mid-thirteenth century manuscript from Canterbury, we find *both* a copy of Asneth as well as a small Joachite prophecy known as

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<sup>284</sup> Reeves, *The Influence*, 6-7. Later Joachists identified Frederick with the 7<sup>th</sup> head.

<sup>285</sup> On his condemnations at the Council of Arles see Margorie Reeves, *Influence* and n. 289 below. See Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under*, 103, and her list of Joachite Manuscripts in England, including Canterbury texts in "English Joachite Manuscripts and Medieval Optimism about the role of the Jews in History: A List for Future Studies." *Florilegium* Vol. 23.1 (2006): 97-144. On the dating of the copy of *Asneth* in CCC MS 424, (thought to be perhaps 12<sup>th</sup> c.)—see James' description and comments. On the English exemplar for the German text with Joachite exegesis, see Bloomfield and Reeve's "Penetration of Joachimism into Northern Europe," *Speculum* 29:4 (Oct., 1954), 772-793: "The original from which the Erfurt copy was made was almost certainly an English Manuscript" (779).

<sup>286</sup> See Lerner, "Frederick II, Alive, Aloft, and Allayed, in Franciscan-Joachite Eschatology," *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Werner Verbeke, Daniel Verhelst and Andries Welkenhuysen (Leuven University Press, 1988) 359-84, esp. 367, and his note 25 citing Reeves who shows that Adam Marsh's letter to Grosseteste must have been written before 1253.

“Fata Monent” concerning the fate of the church, which I will discuss in more detail below.

Joachim of Fiore’s complicated exegesis is still being debated by scholars of religious thought. Believed to have originally been orthodox in nature, his theology later fell into disfavor, partially for the political way it was used by later subjects of his teaching—most famously the Spiritual Franciscans under Peter Olivi. Earlier studies on Joachim of Fiore include the works of Marjorie Reeves, Morton Bloomfield, Robert Lerner, Bernard McGinn and the recent study by Kathryn Kerby-Fulton on Joachim’s reception in Late Medieval England.<sup>287</sup> What is important for this discussion is the emphasis Joachim places on the Old Testament woman, Rachel, and her close relatives in his scheme of salvation and how these biblical women relate to Asneth. In Joachim’s view several Old and New Testament women represented the church, Ecclesia, as Mary did, each allegorically producing the body of Christ (Logos, but also the members of his church) at different stages of church history.

Joachim of Fiore saw history from the beginning of time to a future utopian world of spiritual peace in concords between the Old and New Testaments. His prophetic

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<sup>287</sup> On Joachimism the following works were consulted: Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford, 1969); Reprint, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993. Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future* (New York, London: Harper Torchbooks, 1977). Marjorie Reeves and Beatrice Hirsch-Reich, *The Figurae of Joachim of Fiore* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972). Robert Lerner, “Ecstatic Dissent,” *Speculum* 67 (1992): 33-57. Robert Lerner, *The Feast of Abraham: Medieval Millenarians and the Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). Robert Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit*, Berkeley (University of California Press, 1972) reprint, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991. Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn, eds., *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992). Bernard McGinn, tran. *Apocalyptic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot* (New York: MacMillan, 1985). Bernard McGinn, “Portraying Antichrist in the Middle Ages,” *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages*, Eds. Werner Verbeke, Daniel Verhelst and Andries Welkenhuysen (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1988). Morton W. Bloomfield and Marjorie W. Reeves, “Penetration of Joachimism into Northern Europe,” *Speculum* 29:4 (Oct., 1954), 772-793. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

approach was derived from complicated interrelated patterns of two's, three's, and twelve's, which were then broken into portions of seven and five. These sometimes overlapping relationships were disseminated in part through figural diagrams and pictures, including those of the intertwining branches of a tree.<sup>288</sup> He seems to have been especially prone to using fecund metaphors, and the very name of the order he founded, "San Giovanni in Fiore," literally means "St. John in Flowering."<sup>289</sup> Joachim is probably best known, however, for his Trinitarian concepts of three *Ages* of history, known also as *Status*. The Old Testament represented the father and the First Status. The New Testament represented the Son and the Second Status. Both pointed to a Third Status in history representing the Spirit, the most important *Age* which was yet to come.

Marjorie Reeves tells us:

The order which characterizes the third *status* is a constant theme in the Abbot's writing. It is elusive, for all that, since Joachim did not attempt a specific description of the third order. Its general character, however, appears in its many designations. Besides the frequent *ordo monachorum*, Joachim speaks of the *ordo* or *ecclesia contemplantium* or *quiescentium*, always in contrast to the life of activity and labour, and sometimes of the *ecclesia spiritualis* or *populus ille spiritualis*. It is typified in Joseph in the Old Testament and S. John the Evangelist in the New, and because these represent the Holy Spirit, it is a sevenfold order. It is found also in Sarah and Mary, contrasted with Hagar and Elizabeth. It is the Virgin Church 'que nescit virum, que requiescit in silentio heremi'.<sup>290</sup>

Joachim's ideas about the Third Status, or time of spiritual fulfillment (similar to another Pentecost) became controversial over time. It was believed that a new breed of

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<sup>288</sup> A major iconographic focus in his *Figurae*, see Reeves and Hirsch-Reich, eds.

<sup>289</sup> Lerner, *Feast*, 10.

<sup>290</sup> Reeves, *Influence*, 137.

spiritual men, characterized in part by their poverty, would lead the Christian church through tribulation, brought on by the Antichrist, into a new peaceful era here on earth which would be epitomized by the Spirit. The initiation of the Third Status would also see an ecumenical conversion of Jews, Greeks and other non-Christian people back into the fold. A peaceful, contemplative time of “Spiritual Intelligence,” idealized in part by increased spiritual visionary and ecstatic experience would ensue in this world, that is, *before* the Second Advent of Christ. Though Joachim himself was not specific about how this would play out, the Spiritual Franciscans adopted his system, believing they were the chosen spiritual men of Joachim’s *Third Status* prophecies. Despite the later perceived threat to the papacy and the resulting fatal consequences for the Spiritual Franciscans, Joachim’s writings survived among the educated. Even though the condemnations of his doctrines at the Council of Arles in 1263 minimized his influence, portions of his theology were adapted in Later Medieval orthodox views.<sup>291</sup> He seems to have straddled a line, however, between heterodox and orthodox theology from the beginning of the thirteenth century. But that is not our concern here. What may be relevant about Joachim’s theological perspective, is just how Asneth’s sophisticated, symbolic story, may have helped facilitate his view of salvation history and its interpretation by his followers.

In Joachim’s world view, the three Old Testament patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, also represented Joachim’s three status of history: Abraham represented the father, Isaac the son, and Jacob and his progeny, the Holy Spirit. Robert Lerner tells us:

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<sup>291</sup> On the minimizing of his influence in 1263, and the issues surrounding his condemnation at the Council of Arles, see Reeves, *Influence*, 37, and 61: “At the Council of Arles in 1263 the whole ‘pernicious’ doctrine of the three *status*, as preached by the Joachites, was condemned, together with the writings of Joachim which were its foundation.”

Joachim's 'concordance' hermeneutic goes further and reads all the history in the Old Testament as prefiguring in different ways the entire life of the Church, from its founding until the end of time. Joachim must have arrived at his concordance principle from the point of typology [. . .] but himself distinguished between concord in the 'head,' and concord in the 'body.'" By this he meant that, if there was a concord teaching about Christ (the 'head'), there must also be one extending to Christ's 'body,' the Church—and not just the apostles but the 'rest of the saints.'"<sup>292</sup>

What we should understand is that Joachim was engaged in finding a concordance between the Old and New Testament regarding Christ's body, the church—his bride. Of key importance to placing Asneth within a Joachimist understanding is with regards to his concordance of the body, Ecclesia. It is here that the wives of the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, play a large part in Joachim's interpretations since their wives represented to Joachim the church at different stages of history. Marjorie Reeves writes:

Hagar, the bondwoman of Abraham, represents the Letter in contrast to Sarah, the Spiritual Intelligence, the Synagogue in contrast to the Latin Church, the Church of the second status in contrast to the Spiritual Church of the third [status]. Of Jacob's two wives, Leah, who conceives first, produces the spiritual children of the second status, but Rachel, who remains sterile until the sixth year, conceives the spiritual order of men to be born in the sixth tempus, that is, at the approach of the third status. Perhaps because he sees the development of spiritual understanding in history so much in biological terms of germination and fructification, of conception and birth, Joachim returns again and again to this theme of the fertile woman in the Bible.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Lerner, *Feast*, 13

<sup>293</sup> *Prophetic Future*, 11, square brackets mine.

We can see the potential for confusion in trying to grasp Joachim's system. However, let us continue to focus on these important women. Rachel gives birth to the spiritual age, the Third Status, identified by Joachimists specifically with Joseph and his sons Manasseh and Ephraim. Of the two Manasseh represents the humanity of Christ, Ephraim the fruit of the Spirit. In the Old Testament, Jacob in old age blesses Joseph's two sons giving them each a portion of the inheritance, a theme Joachim returns to many times.<sup>294</sup> Two tribes of Israel are then named for his sons rather than Joseph himself. In this tradition, as with other accounts of biblical inheritors where the younger instead of the older brother prevails, Jacob crosses his arms and blesses Joseph's youngest son, Ephraim, with his right hand. In Joachim's system this was because that which comes last, inheritance in the spirit represented by Ephraim, must come first. One may ask why Joachim placed such importance on Joseph and not Judah, through whose line Christ descended. It is because in Joachim's view of salvation, Judah and Joseph represented parallel lines; the first represented succession by the flesh, the second by unction, again placing spiritual importance on Joseph, the younger, and his progeny.<sup>295</sup>

But if we focus on the women in Joachim's worldview, we see that "Leah represents the active church of the second *status*, Rachel the contemplative church of the third *status*."<sup>296</sup> In the New Testament, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, represents the church of the *Second Status*, and Mary the church of the *Third Status*. Rachel in the Old Testament therefore concords with Mary in the New Testament. Both give birth to the church of Joachim's *Third Status* or coming, Pentecost-like Spiritual

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<sup>294</sup> It should be noted that the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh by Jacob may be implied in Asneth's visit to Jacob in her story..

<sup>295</sup> Reeves and Hirsh-Reich, *Figurae*, 36

<sup>296</sup> Reeves and Hirsh-Reich, *Figurae*, 176.

Age. A later Joachim-inspired prophecy found in a Cambridge manuscript (CUL Dd.i.17), known as the *Regnum* prophecy, also called, “The Kingdom of the Holy Spirit,” goes as far as to state that Rachel not only represented the synagogue but that (like Mary) she conceived spiritually by the Holy Spirit. In her *Books Under Suspicion*, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton explains Rachel’s role according to this pseudo-Joachite prophecy:

Rachel, it says, represents the Synagogue, whose fruitfulness was not ultimately “barren” (sterile), but merely delayed, conceiving spiritually by the Holy Spirit and bringing forth both the people of Israel and the people of Judah [ . . . ] Through Rachel, the prophecy asserts, all salvation comes and the kingdom of the Holy Spirit itself [identified with Joachim’s Third Status], described in true Joachite fashion as coming *after* Antichrist.”<sup>297</sup>

Again, what must be noted is that in Joachim’s system, *all* of these Biblical women, including Hagar, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel in the Old Testament, and Elizabeth and Mary in the New Testament, represent God’s church at different stages of world history. What can be additionally noted is that many of them are known in Biblical tradition to have experienced a type of miraculous conception. In Old Testament tradition, Sarah scoffs when told by an angelic visitor that she will conceive, because she knows she is too old to be fertile (Genesis 18). This is repeated similarly in the story of

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<sup>297</sup> Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under*, 116-117, square brackets mine. The *Regnum Prophecy* listed in CUL Dd.i.17 as ‘The Prophecy of John of Lignano’ ff. 203vb-204 rb ‘Written after 1378’ occurs in a manuscript dating to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, probably originating from the York Austin Friars on which see C. David Benson and Lynn Blanchfield, *The Manuscripts of Pier’s Plowman: The B-version* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997) 32-38. Also see Kerby Fulton’s “English Joachite Manuscripts,” 124 and her *Books Under Suspicion*, “Case Study I of Dangerous Reading Among Early Piers Audiences,” 109-124, where she analyzes “The Kingdom of the Holy Spirit” in CUL Dd.i.17 in detail, and tells us it is “ensnared in papal condemnation,” and together with the other works in the manuscript may have indicated “radical ecclesiastical agendas.” This may not be vastly different from the agenda of the compiler of CCC MS 288, which contains *Asneth*, although MS 288 was compiled over a century earlier. On the York Austin Friars owning numerous Joachite works, see Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under* and “English Joachite Manuscripts.” On the typological tie of female ecstatic experiences to Rachel and her son Benjamin in the Middle Ages, see Jonathan Juilfs, “‘Reading the Bible Differently’: Appropriations of Biblical Authority in an Heretical Mystical Text, Marguerite Porete’s *The Mirror of Simple Soules*,” *Literature and Religion* 42:1-2 (Spring-Summer, 2010), esp. 83-84.

Elizabeth's conception of John the Baptist (Luke 1), because she is also known to be infertile. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton reminds us that at least one copy of a medieval Joachite prophecy, "Kingdom," tells us that Rachel conceived spiritually by the Holy Spirit. Of course, of these women Mary is our most famous miraculous conceiver.

To place Asneth in this milieu of Biblical women would be natural for those in contact with her ancient story, but it would be especially appealing for those who had a special interest in Joachim's unique theology. Not only her mother-in-law, Rachel, but Asneth's husband, Joseph, and sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, are key figures in Joachim's apocalyptic theology of the "Third Status" or "Age of the Spirit." Moreover, Asneth is Joseph's wife, giving birth, not at the *beginning* of Joachim's Age of the Spirit as Rachel does, but *after* the Age of the Spirit has (allegorically speaking) already begun. One must remember that these Old Testament women are allegorically concorded with or mapped-on to women in the New Testament that also represent the church, but also onto notions of the church at a later stage in history that Joachim attributed to the future—in this way they represent the church in Joachim's third, future, *Age of the Spirit*. In any case, Asneth perfectly fits within this allegorical map, and as I have already demonstrated above, she had unique characteristics that would have identified her as a type of Ecclesia for medieval readers.

Joachim's ideal *Third Status* was a time of increasing asceticism and contemplation as well as Spiritual Intelligence (*intellectus spiritualis*)—a time of increased visionary activity—and was typified in part by celibacy and the Virgin Church.<sup>298</sup> As I have shown in Chapter Three, readers may well have interpreted

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<sup>298</sup> Lerner, *Feast*, 20, and Reeves, *Influence*, 137.

Asneth's conception as having been accomplished during her encounter with the angel, while Joseph and Asneth somehow remained virginal. It is especially alluded to in the Latin translation of the story that circulated among medieval religious. For Joachists who read the story in this way, it would be considered fitting that the sons of Joseph, who each represented different aspects of the spirit, should be conceived in the spirit. One familiar with Asneth's story may have understood that Ephraim and Manasseh were conceived in mystical marriage, which occurred during an ecstatic, visionary experience. Moreover, when Joachim of Fiore speaks of the *Third Status* as a time of *intellectus spiritualis*, he is referring to an increase in intellectual understanding that is equated with illumination or revelation from God, identified with a level of visionary experience.<sup>299</sup> As I have argued in Chapter Three, medieval Latin translators of *Asneth* assume for her "intelligence," a term that was also perpetuated in Middle English. I have interpreted it to mean spiritual intelligence, since the story also connects Asneth to Levi through the mention also of his "intelligence," and he is specifically known in Biblical tradition for his spiritual intelligence—visionary abilities. This type of spiritual intelligence would, for some, further identify Asneth with Joachim's *Third Status*—the *Age of the Spirit*. The fact that she was Egyptian, not Jewish, would also reflect for readers of Joachim the ecumenical concept that in the *Third Status* or *Age of the Spirit* those of other faiths (Greeks, Jews, Saracens) would be converted. Asneth is Egyptian and converts to Judaism, which would have equaled conversion to Christianity in Joachim's system of concords between the Old and New Testament. More importantly, she is the mother-city figure of specifically those who repent—converts like herself.

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<sup>299</sup> For an explanation of intellectual vision, including in the context of Joachim, see Rober Lerner's "Ecstatic Dissent."

***Asneth* in CCCC MS 288**

What may be more intriguing for our understanding of how *Asneth* was received in England as a type for Ecclesia is the material *Asneth* is found with in the mid-thirteenth century Canterbury manuscript CCCC MS 288. This compilation of texts would seem to support the notion that its compiler was interested, particularly, in the apocalyptic, prophetic fate of the church. The manuscript description for CCCC MS 288 tells us that the manuscript was from Christ Church Canterbury and was once owned by *N. de Sandwyco*, Nicholas of Sandwich, who was prior from 1244 to 1258; also in the library catalogue compiled under Prior Estry, he is listed as the donor of a “Liber Solomon” containing Ecclesiastes and the *Song of Songs* with other Wisdom of Solomon Texts.<sup>300</sup> His copy of the *Song of Songs* would support the notion that he was interested in, among other things, typology concerning the Church. He also owned a copy of Grosseteste’s Latin translation, *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, a work more prolific than *Asneth* in the Middle Ages if we consider the greater number of surviving Latin manuscripts, however it was often found with *Asneth* in Latin manuscripts, suggesting a perceived relationship between the two in the Middle Ages. Besides the fact that both texts deal with the sons of Jacob on some level, *Testament* was believed to hold many prophecies that prefigured Christ, and therefore may have been considered complementary to the *Asneth* text for readers who understood Joseph as a prefigurement of Christ.<sup>301</sup> Ruth

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<sup>300</sup> See M. R. James, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of Corpus Christi College Cambridge*, 2 (Cambridge, Eng., 1911), pp. 48-63. See also, the description of the manuscript, based on James’ description, at *Parker Library on the Web*, [http://parkerweb.stanford.edu/parker/actions/manuscript\\_description\\_long\\_display.do?ms\\_no=288](http://parkerweb.stanford.edu/parker/actions/manuscript_description_long_display.do?ms_no=288). Accessed, October 24, 2010. The manuscript descriptions list him as prior from 1255-1280. Ruth Nisse lists Sandwyche as Prior for 1244 to 1258 in her: “Your Name” 747.

<sup>301</sup> On the notion that prophecies in *Testament of the Twelve* were taken to prefigure Christ, and the text’s history in medieval England see M. de Jonge “Robert Grosseteste and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs,” *Journal of Theological Studies*. n.s.: 42 (1991): 115-125. Also see Ruth Nisse’s, “A Romance

Nisse suggests that Prior Nicholas probably compiled his book in the 1250's or 1260's. Some of the key texts in CCCC MS 288 include: Pseudo-Augustine's sermon on the Jews, the *Vindicta Salvatoris* (on the Fall of Jerusalem and legend of St. Veronica's Veil), the Infancy Gospels of Matthew and Thomas, *Liber de Aseneth*, *Revelations of the Pseudo-Methodius on the Beginnings and End of the World*, *Verses on Evangelium*, including *Fata Monent* (our little Joachite Prophecy), Hildegard's Letter to the Clergy of Collogne, and several letters (including two from Frederick II to the English King) regarding, in part, the thirteenth-century Mongol invasions.<sup>302</sup>

Ruth Nisse has argued that the book was compiled by someone interested specifically in the conversion of the Jews at a time in England (before their expulsion in 1290) when it was a politically fraught topic under King Henry III: "The collection represents a monastic anthologist's attempt to use these disparate legendary narratives to respond to the challenge posed by the pseudo-Augustinian sermon on the refusal of Jews to convert."<sup>303</sup> At the same time, Franciscan and Dominican friars were perpetuating the grounds for Jewish and Muslim conversion based on theological justifications.<sup>304</sup> Nisse writes:

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of the Jewish East: The Ten Lost Tribes and The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs in Medieval Europe," *Medieval Encounters* 13. 3 (2007): 499-523.

<sup>302</sup> Ruth Nisse ("Your Name" 734) has reminded us that Pseudo-Augustine's sermon on the Jews, regardless of its original context, was "one of the most popular and forceful statements throughout the Middle Ages on the Jews' refusal to accept 'their own' prophecies concerning Jesus and the long-awaited Messiah." For a study on the ideas and attitudes regarding Jews in medieval society, see Jeremy Cohen's, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999). For a history of Augustine's attitude towards, and defense of the Jews, see Paula Fredriksen's, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New York, London: Doubleday) 2008.

<sup>303</sup> Nisse "Your Name" 735.

<sup>304</sup> Nisse, "Your Name." For more on this see, Robert C. Stacey, "The Conversion of the Jews to Christianity in Thirteenth-Century England," *Speculum* 57 (1992), 263-83, and Jonathan M. Elukin, "The Discover of the Self: Jews and Conversion in the Twelfth Century," *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe*,

The Canterbury manuscript represents a different kind of clerical response to the problems of Jewish conversion that were exacerbated by the political and intellectual conditions of the mid-thirteenth century [. . .] the compiler of this anthology locates the key to understanding conversion in the resources of fictional invention provided by the category of “apocryphal” texts. In his selections the compiler attempts to construct a Christian eschatological narrative that responds to both the monastic understanding of a hostile, but largely inaccessible, Hebrew textual tradition and the heightened violence against English Jews, including those in Canterbury itself.”<sup>305</sup>

Nisse explains that the first item in the manuscript helped to contextualize the apocryphal works, [including *Asneth*], the largest part of which are Jewish in origin:

Pseudo-Augustine’s sermon on the Jews [was] one of the most popular and forceful statements throughout the Middle Ages on the Jews’ refusal to accept ‘their own’ prophecies concerning Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah [. . .] Whatever its specific context, it emphasizes the absolute continuity of the Jews of Jesus’s day with current-day Jews as eternal misreaders of their own scripture who stubbornly resist conversion—and who will continue to do so until the end of days.<sup>306</sup>

Following the Pseudo-Augustinian sermon is the *Vindicta Salvatoris* (c 700), an early medieval account of the fall of Jerusalem and the legend of St. Veronica’s veil from which Nisse reads the theme of destruction in the context of, again, Jewish conversion: “In this wildly ahistorical legend, the emperors Tiberius, Titus, and Vespasian all convert to Christianity.” She interprets other texts in the manuscript, including *Asneth* (owing to her conversion in the story), to contribute systematically to a hermeneutic that focuses on the same need for Jewish Conversion. Nisse tells us that other monastic chroniclers in

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Eds., Michael A. Signer and John Van Engen (Notre Dame Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001) 63-76, cited also by Nisse.

<sup>305</sup> Nisse, “Your Name,” 744-45.

<sup>306</sup> Nisse, “Your Name,” 734.

the thirteenth century likewise attempted to draw connections “between the actual ‘historical’ Jews in their midst and the eschatological Jews who would fulfill their role at the end of days.”<sup>307</sup> What I propose in a short discussion of the manuscript here is that based on the letters that accompany the apocryphal works in the manuscript, as well as a possible reading of *Asneth* that would have identified her with Ecclesia in the Middle Ages (including by our compiler), our compiler is interested in Jewish conversion as part of the larger, apocalyptic history of the church in general and therefore a history (as Nisse has already suggested) that has to do with the eschatological role Jewish conversion fulfills at the end of days more specifically. If seen as a compilation concerning church history (which encompasses and includes Jewish conversion at *the end*) then we can further make sense of some other texts in the manuscript. But my theory that the texts included in CCCC MS 288 are concerned with church history and Jewish conversion at *the end of time* does not preclude Nisse’s insistence that the texts address the contemporary, political pressure for Jewish conversion in the thirteenth century. What we should recognize is that the compiler may have seen *the end* and contemporary political happenings as one-in-the-same—that is, current events as fulfilling end time prophecy.

While Nisse sees the *Vindicta Salvatoris* as important for its support of Jewish conversion for our compiler, Stephen Wright tells us that in the Middle Ages dramatizations of the destruction and Roman conquest of Jerusalem whose direct source was *Vindicta Salvatoris* were seen as:

A new interpretation of the Church's own history, nature and mission. In a sense, the bitter separation of Church and

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<sup>307</sup> Nisse, “Your Name,” 739.

Synagogue can be traced to the destruction of Jerusalem, since for the latter it resulted in renewed obedience to the Torah, while for the former it became a sign of the rejection of the old Israel and the birth of a new Christian empire in Rome. In the Christian imagination, the destruction of Jerusalem was finally removed from its secular context altogether and came to stand for nothing less than the ultimate triumph of Ecclesia over Synagoga, a symbol of the Western Church's repudiation of its own Jewish heritage.<sup>308</sup>

Here we have an interpretation for the text suggesting that it could have been placed in the manuscript as a contribution to the reader's understanding of a history of Ecclesia. I have already highlighted how the inclusion of *Asneth* may be interpreted in this way as well. Both texts may be read in the context of the history of the church and therefore salvation history altogether, including the important aspect of Jewish conversion at *the end* of time. It is helpful here to draw attention to a description in CCCC MS 288 from Booklet V of Nicholas of Sandwich's compilation which reads: "Visiones quaedam et narrationes de captivitatibus Israelis et alia historica" (certain visions and stories of the captivity of Israel and other history) followed by the name "Liber N. de Sandwico." Based on this marginal heading on f. 111v, we know that at least one medieval reader of Nicholas of Sandwich's collection recognized in it a history of the captivity of Israel—that is, a history of God's church at its most vulnerable. Given Wright's insight on *Vindicta Salvatoris*, we know that Israel, and particularly her temple at Jerusalem, was considered the progenitor of the Christian church as God's bride, Ecclesia. Moreover, if we look at other items in the manuscript, taken together with the apocryphal works, they seem to highlight the looming threat of Antichristian forces that Ecclesia was doomed to

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<sup>308</sup> Stephen Wright, *The Vengeance of our Lord: Medieval Dramatizations of the Destruction of Jerusalem* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1989) 6. On the *Vindicta* as a direct source for the plays, see p. 29. See p. 30-31, for its importance also regarding a "wider statement on the miraculous nature of the conversion of men and nations."

battle imminently. These threats are from the political and ecclesiastical events occurring, not just in England, but also on the continent in the mid-thirteenth century.

Contemporary with the time this manuscript may have been compiled (perhaps as early as the second half of the 1440's, given that Nicholas of Sandwich is prior from 1444), the tensions between Frederick II, the most powerful Holy Roman Emperor of the Middle Ages, and Pope Innocent the IV were at a boiling point. The two were at odds such that the western world was watching to see what would happen next. In 1244 Pope Innocent IV actually fled Rome for Lyon in fear of Frederick's incitement of anti-papal sentiments in Italy, and in 1245 excommunicated Frederick II at the Council of Lyon on the grounds of heresy, abjuration, and sacrilege.<sup>309</sup>

In the mid-thirteenth century there was a specific worldview held by Joachimists that considered the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, of the powerful German Hohenstaufen, a threat to the church in apocalyptic proportions. For Joachimists Frederick was the last Antichrist, the seventh head of the beast of the apocalypse. Moreover, Joachim of Fiore's followers understood there would be mass conversion of Jews, Muslims and pagans at the advent of the coming *Third Age*, an age that is ushered in by the last Antichrist. In his article on thirteenth-century Joachimist attitudes towards Frederick II, Robert Lerner summarizes the years between 1247, and 1260 as:

a period of intense anti-imperial Franciscan Joachimism [. . .] when first Frederick II and then his heirs were thought to be on the verge of fulfilling the final manifestations of evil before the advent of Joachim of Fiore's marvelous earthly Sabbath [the Third Status, or Age of the Spirit]. During

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<sup>309</sup> Robert E. Lerner, "Frederick II, Alive, Aloft, and Allayed" esp. 362. Innocent IV is the second pope in a row to excommunicate Frederick II, after Gregory IX in 1227. See Joseph P. Huffman, "Cologne Archbishops," *The Social Politics of Medieval Diplomacy: Anglo-German Relations (1066-1307)* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) 226.

this time Joachite ideology became a dynamic impulse directly affecting the course of human events.<sup>310</sup>

In CCCC MS 288, along with two letters by Frederick II to the English “against the Pope” listed as “Frederici imperatoris epistolae duae ad Anglos contra papae” and other verses on the corruption of the church, we find one of the earliest extant Joachite texts in England. The pseudo-Joachite, *Fata Monent* on f. 104r listed with “Verses on Evangelium: on the Church” is counted as Joachite because the little prophecy deals with the political and ecclesiastical tension between Frederick II and Pope Innocent IV.<sup>311</sup> It is deliberately vague, with Frederick basically telling the pope (in verse form) that the papacy is on a straying path and is doomed to fall due to its increasing error, soon leaving the church/world headless:

*Fredericus imperator ad papam:  
Fata monent, stelleque docent aviumque volatus:  
Tocius subito malleus orbis ero  
Roma diu titubans, longis erroribus aucta,  
Corruet et mundi desinet esse caput.*

The pope, Petrus, responds that Frederick should be worried about his own doom: the ship of Peter may become agitated—tossed on the waves—but it never sinks; The pope (given the authoritative last word on the matter) predicts Frederick will have a short life (*via brevis*) and claims that it is Frederick who is the one going to Hell (*pena perhennis erit*):

*Petrus ad Fredericum:*

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<sup>310</sup> He goes on to say, “the Joachite obsession subsided, and when Joachimism arose again to affect the conduct of Franciscans a few decades later it took an entirely different turn.” The Franciscans, under Peter Olivi, focus more on resisting an Antichristian pseudo-pope, rather than an Antichristian emperor. Robert E. Lerner, “Frederick II” 380 and n65. Square brackets mine.

<sup>311</sup> The only other English manuscript the prophecy is found in is Harley 3724, a late 13th c. Anglo-Irish manuscript that Kathryn Kerby-Fulton describes as a mix of prophecy, goliardic poetry, and ecclesiastical politics. See her *Iconography and the Professional Reader* (n.51, p. 222). Also see her “English Joachite Manuscripts.”

*Fata silent, stelleque tacent, nil predicat ales  
 Solius est proprium nosse futura Dei.  
 Niteris incassum navem submergere Petri,  
 Fluctuat et numquam mergitur illa ratis.  
 Fama refert, scriptura docet, peccata loquuntur,  
 Quod tibi vita brevis, pena perhennis erit.*<sup>312</sup>

Innocent IV was pope from June 28, 1243 to Dec 7, 1254, so if we can assume that *Fata Monent* was written during Innocent IV's papacy, perhaps after the 1245 condemnation of Frederick at The Council of Lyon and before Frederick dies in 1250, it is therefore very new when CCCC MS 288 is compiled. Nicholas of Sandwich was Prior of Canterbury Cathedral from 1244-1258, and although Nisse has suggested that his book was likely produced in the 1250's or 60's, there is certainly the chance it could have been produced in Frederick's lifetime (before 1250). More intriguing than the exact date of compilation is the question: what was Nicholas of Sandwich doing with a text we associate with Joachite thought?

If Nicholas' book was compiled as early as 1250 (or perhaps before), and it contains a Joachite text, then we must conclude that Joachite notions had reached England by then as Bloomfield and Reeves' have argued they did (as soon as the early-twelfth century). None-the-less, if CCCC MS 288 may be identified in any way with Joachimist thought, and we may suppose it can be based on the inclusion of *Fata*, we must understand that it should be identified with an important, but relatively early understanding of Joachimism in England. We should also remember that Joachist thought at this time was only one of the eschatological forces that cast Frederick II in an

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<sup>312</sup> The Latin text is edited and discussed in, Holder-Egger, Oswald. "Italienische Prophetieen des 13 Jahrhunderts, III," *Neues Archiv* 33 (1908): 95-187, which may be found online at: [http://www.digizeitschriften.de/dms/img/?PPN=PPN345858530\\_0033&DMDID=dmdlog13](http://www.digizeitschriften.de/dms/img/?PPN=PPN345858530_0033&DMDID=dmdlog13). *Fata Monent* is edited specifically on p. 106.

Antichristian light, including the papacy itself—a papacy that during its conflict with Frederick II befriended Joachists, using their sympathies to its advantage.<sup>313</sup>

What is striking is the contemporary immediacy, not simply of the pseudo-Joachite *Fata*, but of other material in CCC MS 288 as well, including Frederick’s letters which are associated with the Mongol Invasion of 1241.<sup>314</sup> The fact that the manuscript does not hold any works, that I have so far ascertained, overtly referring to Antichrist or to Frederick’s identification with Antichrist (other than the somewhat vague *Fata*) suggests that its compiler may have been cautious in documenting this connection, especially if Frederick II was still alive when Nicholas put together his book. Or it may simply speak to the fact that Nicholas did not identify Frederick with Antichrist. If Frederick was dead by the time the book was compiled (d. 1250), then Sandwich (along with many disappointed Joachists) would have realized that Frederick could not have been the *final* Antichrist, the seventh head of the dragon of the apocalypse, after all.<sup>315</sup> Yet the fact that Frederick II figures prominently in the works collected, works at least partially identified as “*Visiones quaedam et narrationes de captivitatibus Israelis*” suggests that Nicholas recognized him as a threat in the salvation history of the church at a time when it was perceived to be in captivity—literally captive due to Frederick’s success in keeping the papacy routed to Lyon, and spiritually, due to clerical corruption.

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<sup>313</sup> On the papacy befriending or using Joachists to their advantage during Frederick II’s reign, see Lerner, *Frederick II*. By 1255, five years after Frederick’s death, however, radical Joachist thought is already creating waves. At the Council of Anagni (1255), Gerardino’s “Eternal Gospel” consisting of Joachimist thought—the theory that Joachim’s writings are basically the third Testament—are examined. Lerner, *Feast*, 44-45, see also Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under* on the scandal of the eternal evangel.

<sup>314</sup> Nisse, “Your Name,” 735. See also Joseph P. Huffman, *Social Politics* “Cologne Archbishops”.

<sup>315</sup> Lerner demonstrates how Frederick II supplanted Saladin as the 6<sup>th</sup> head of the dragon in later Pseudo-Joachite works. See his, *Frederick II*.

Kathryn Kerby-Fulton lists CCCC MS 288 among the earliest extant manuscripts of English provenance containing a work of Hildegard of Bingen,<sup>316</sup> just as we know it is among the earliest of English provenance to contain a Joachite work.<sup>317</sup> By the fourteenth century, Hildegard is the figure most widely associated with Joachim in literary reception.<sup>318</sup> Apart from Jewish conversion as part of the concern with church history in this manuscript, the compiler seems equally preoccupied with clerical corruption, which is what Hildegard's letter to the Clergy of Cologne (f. 101v) addresses.<sup>319</sup> The inclusion of her letter is not the only text on the corruption of the church; other verses in CCCC MS 288 also highlight this concern. Moreover, the chastisement of the clergy for their corruption is a common theme in apocalyptic prophecy, which marks end time eschatology.

In the mid-thirteenth century the Mongol threat of invasion was additionally seen as a sign of *The End*. Included in the manuscript are several letters on this topic. Besides Hildegard's Letter to the Clergy of Cologne, there is a curious connection in CCCC MS 288 between Frederick II, the Tartar Invasions, and the clergy of Cologne. In the 1240's, Conrad, the Archbishop of Cologne, though officially under Staufen rule, supported the papacy, and was therefore at odds with Frederick II.<sup>320</sup> Joseph Huffman, in his chapter

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<sup>316</sup> She associates CCCC MS 288 with collections "sensitive to England's relations with the papacy" and "Church state tensions over ecclesiastical property," in "Prophecy and Suspicion: Closet Radicalism, Reformist Politics, and the Vogue for Hildegardiana in Ricardian England." *Speculum* Vol. 75, No. 2 (Apr. 2000): 318-341. Although this is one of its earliest occurrences in an English manuscript, Hildegard's letter to the Clergy of Cologne was also among the most widely disseminated of her prophecies. See Kerby-Fulton "The Visionary Prophecy of Hildegard of Bingen" (39) in her *Reformist Apocalypticism and 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>317</sup> See Kerby-Fulton's list of manuscripts and their provenance in "English Joachite Manuscripts."

<sup>318</sup> Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under*, 188

<sup>319</sup> Hildegard's letter to Cologne contains a brief disendowment prophecy. See Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under*, 452nn3-4.

<sup>320</sup> Huffman, 269.

on the relationship between the English and the Archbishops of Cologne, mentions that Conrad, as well as the Duke of Brabant, write to Henry III appealing for English help against the Tartar threats. Frederick II also writes the English king about the Tartar threats in a letter dated July 3, 1241, which occurs in CCCC MS 288. Huffman writes of the rallying of support against the Mongols:

The initiative [...] appears to have originated among the Franciscans via Cologne, since a certain Franciscan in the city had already forwarded to the duke of Brabant a letter of Jordan, warden of Pinsk (Franciscans in Bohemia and Poland), about the Tartars [...] Therefore the call was a general one to Christian princes to come and defend central Europe against the Tartars, not an isolated request from Conrad to the English King.<sup>321</sup>

The letter from the Franciscan, “Jordan, warden of Pinsk” is certainly our letter in CCCC MS 288, by “Jordano the Minorite” regarding the Tartars on f. 104v, associated with the date 1239.

It seems likely that along with the Joachist, *Fata Monent*, and the letters of Frederick II, *Pseudo-Methodius* was included in CCCC MS 288 as yet another affirmation of Frederick’s threat to Israel (God’s church) in an attempt by our compiler to further highlight *End Time* events. It may have been anticipated that readers would associate Frederick II with the text’s “Last World Emperor.” Owing to his crusade conquest in the holy land and success against the Tartars, Frederick II may certainly have appeared to “subdue the Ishmaelites” in the minds of thirteenth-century readers.<sup>322</sup>

Marjorie Reeves tells us:

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<sup>321</sup> Huffman, 269n211.

<sup>322</sup> For the early thirteenth-century identification of the Mongols and Tartars with the “Ishmaelites” see Robert E. Lerner, *The Powers of Prophecy: The Cedar of Lebanon Prophecy from the Mongol Onslaught to the Dawn of the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983) esp. 21. On the Mongol invasions signaling apocalyptic last day events in the medieval imagination, see Sophia

The figure of a Last World Emperor was greatly popularized by [. . .] Pseudo-Methodius, composed in the Eastern Empire towards the end of the seventh century and disseminated in the eighth at the court of Charlemagne in a Latin Translation. This emphasized a rising crisis of evil culminating in the conquest of Christendom by Ishmaelites. When evil was at its height, there would arise from slumber a ‘rex Gregorum sive Romanorum in furore magna’. He would subdue the Ishmaelites and inaugurate a reign of felicity.<sup>323</sup>

Robert Lerner says that the time of felicity associated with the prophecy, was, however, not supposed to be prized, but was merely a delusory calm before the storm—a divinely ordained, “trickery” as it were, before the storm of destruction, associated with I Thess. 5:2-3: “The day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say ‘peace and safety,’ then sudden destruction cometh upon them.” *Pseudo-Methodius*’ presence in CCCC MS 288 seems to be an additional warning to readers to be wary of Frederick II, regardless of the apparent protection he provided against the Antichristian invaders of the 1240’s, and that Christendom had best wake up, because Israel is actually captive to her apparent champion. In any case, Reeves reminds us that *Pseudo-Methodius*’ apocalyptic “Last World Emperor” is married to notions of the Angelic Pope (and papal Antichrist) in later Joachimist treatments of the Third Status, specifically by the Spiritual Franciscans.<sup>324</sup> Though it variously circulated in the thirteenth century, it should be noted that *Pseudo-Methodius* is found in numerous manuscripts with Joachist

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Menache, “Tartars, Jews, Saracens and the Jewish-Mongol ‘Plot’ of 1241,” *History* 81 (July 1996): 319-342.

<sup>323</sup> Reeves, *Influence*, 300.

<sup>324</sup> Reeves, *Influence*, 324. On the Joachist notions of the papal Antichrist as well as reformist “angel” pope, see also, Bernard McGinn, “Angel Pope and Papal Antichrist,” *Church History* 47. 2 (June 1978): 155-73.

works, and as Reeves shows, more than once influences Joachists in their interpretation of the final tribulation of the church.<sup>325</sup>

What we can conclude is that our compiler of CCCC 288 likely recognized *Asneth* as a type for the Church and therefore included it in the manuscript in an effort to try to understand the church's role in history.<sup>326</sup> Based on the works compiled in his book, we may ascertain that Nicholas of Sandwich was concerned with the conversion of the Jews and the role they played in Christian Eschatology—the apocalyptic salvation history of the church. Part of this eschatology included the “captivity of Israel” at the hands of Antichristian forces—for contemporary readers that meant a church that was threatened by specific historical incidents and factors regarding Frederick II, clerical corruption, and the Mongol invasions. We curiously have in CCCC MS 288 one of the earliest extant works associated with Joachite thought found in England, and we know that the conversion of the Jews was of paramount importance to Joachim's *Third-Age* theology. We have seen how *Asneth*'s story may have fit theologically into a Joachist, *Third-Age* paradigm even more specifically. Sandwyche was prior of Canterbury from 1244-1258 and then precentor very briefly in 1262 before being forced to resign.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Reeves, *Influence*, 348.

<sup>326</sup> Among the texts associated in the manuscript with the “Captivity of Israel,” are glosses on both Esther and Judith. It may be of note that the figure of Esther also symbolized to Joachim the *third age* as did Judith. See Reeves, *Influence*, 341n4, 396, and Joachim of Fiore, Commentary, *Book of Figures*, in McGinn, trans., *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 138 .

<sup>327</sup> On which see (also cited by Nisse), *The Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury*, ed. William Stubbs, Rolls Series 73 (London, 1879-80) 2:202, 207, and 217; and Joan Greatrex, ed., *Biographical Register of the English Cathedral Priors of the Province of Canterbury*, c. 1066-1540 (Oxford, 1997) 280, which also notes some correspondence of Sandwyche's that survives, including “his letters to the monks who were making the rounds of the manors rebuking them for their failure to alleviate the financial plight of the priory and for their prolonged absence and their excessive hospitality.” It is also worth noting that Nicholas of Sandwyche, may have been rather anxious about protecting Christ Church's library: “Christ Church, Canterbury, is known to have lent a volume containing the brut chronicle and a work by St. John Chrysostom to Master Laurence de S. Nicholas d. c. 1237; this is known because he failed to return it, and Prior Nicholas had to write a letter to Anglesey Abbey, seeking its restitution.” See *A History of Canterbury Cathedral*, Eds. Patrick Collinson, Nigel Ramsay, and Margaret Sparks (Oxford University Press, 1995)

Nicholas of Sandwich may well have been familiar with Joachite theology—we can conclude that Joachite works had reached England decades before he compiled his book, based on Bloomfield and Reeve’s findings. If Sandwich perpetuated notions implicit in Joachite thought, however, we might expect them to have been rather cautiously asserted since Joachim’s Trinitarian concepts were condemned in 1219.<sup>328</sup> We might expect any Joachist assertions to be further subdued or censored after the disappointment of 1260 (the time the Spiritual Franciscans set as ushering in the Age of the Spirit), and certainly by 1263 when Joachim’s works were condemned altogether, which coincides with when Nicholas is forced to resign (after 1262) although we will never know the exact circumstances surrounding his resignation. While we may also never know the exact apocalyptic leanings of the compiler of CCCC MS 288, we do know that prophecy was a contributor to trends of thought in the mid-thirteenth-century concerning apocalyptic end day events, and one need not have been a Joachist to have been caught up in notions that *The End* was near. In her discussion of Joachimist thought, Marjorie Reeves states:

By way of circulating prophecies and discussions upon them we reach the famous year 1260. The great mass movements of medieval Europe will always remain mysterious, for the causes and courses of those great waves

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361. It may be of note that of John of Chrysostom’s sermons, eight directed against Judaizing Christians are controversial for their impact on the development of Christian antisemitism, on which see, *John Chrysostom, Discourses against Judaizing Christians*, trans. Paul W. Harkins. *The Fathers of the Church* Vol. 68 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1979), and Walter Laqueur, *The Changing Face of Antisemitism: From Ancient Times To The Present Day* (Oxford University Press: 2006) 48. It may have been that retrieval of Chrysostom’s text was sought out, not in the interest of protecting Christ Church’s collection as much as for his own use, especially in light of Ruth Nisse’s theory about the subtext of CCCC MS 288 concerning the Jews. According to the *Biographical Register*, in 1262, after being appointed precentor, Sandwyche “soon res[igned] because of objections within the community” (280). Although we know very little about him, what is recorded may speak to a personality that tended to worry, or was simply not liked by his peers, although we cannot know for sure what his peers objected to. We certainly see a level of anxiety implied in the collection of texts he has put together in CCCC MS 288.

<sup>328</sup> They were also implicated in the condemnation at the Council of Anagni (1255) of Gerard of Borgo San Donnino’s *Evangelium eternum*, also known as the “scandal of the eternal evangel,” where the Joachite fanatic, Gerard, claims that “the Old and New Testaments would be ‘superceded’ [. . . ] in the imminent *Age of the Holy Spirit*.” Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under*, 120-122.

of emotion cannot be exactly tracked. No doubt there were restless forebodings and expectations abroad, for at various times in the first half of the thirteenth century independent prophets arose to cry ‘Antichrist comes!’” (53-54).

Based on just some of the texts in CCCC MS 288, as well as an inscription within it, we can at least surmise Prior Nicholas’ motivations for compiling CCCC MS 288 concerns the dire straits the church was deemed to be experiencing imminently. The church’s threat of “captivity” was associated with apocalyptic interpretations of events in Sandwich’s own lifetime. Letters and prophecies that highlight these concerns are found along with apocryphal allegories of the Church in history (including *Asneth*) that contain subtexts concerned with the conversion of Jews, which was an eschatological concern of those (including the Franciscans) in Joachimist circles. *Asneth*’s association with Joachimist paradigms in England is certainly a topic for further study. What we can conclude, at the very least, is that part of the reason *Asneth*’s story had a reception history in monastic reading circles, is that readers familiar with the typology associated with her story would have identified her as a type for Ecclesia.

## Concluding Thoughts

Building on prior scholarship in Manuscript Studies, Medieval Literature, Classical Studies and even Theology, *The Storie of Asneth and its Literary Relations* has attempted to further answer the question: What currency did *Asneth* have for Medieval reading audiences? This study has examined the potential the text may have had in the Middle Ages to religious as well as to lay readers with some surprising payoffs.

*Asneth's* "relationship" to the fifteenth-century manuscript in which it survives revealed that Elizabeth Berkeley likely commissioned her cleric, John Walton, to translate *The Storie of Asneth* into Middle English verse as she did his 1410 translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. We saw in Chapter Four that *Asneth's* likeness to Lady Wisdom (and the relationship of Wisdom to Ecclesia) in the Middle Ages may have made the two texts, *Boethius* and *Asneth*, appear to have much more in common in the eyes of the patroness and poet of these texts than we may at first suppose. We also saw further evidence for John Shirley's ownership of the only surviving copy of the Middle English text of *Asneth* in Huntington Library EL.26.A.13. Uncovering the names of the patroness and poet of the Middle English *Asneth* adds to the ongoing research regarding female patronage in the Middle Ages but also to the texts we can attribute to the poet, John Walton's, authorship and to the long list of literary texts we have today because John Shirley added them to his books. It also contributes to our knowledge of the kinds of texts being commissioned and their relationship to aristocratic circles *outside* of London in the Later Middle Ages. The strange marrying of the alliterative style and rhyme royal verse that the Middle English *Asneth* was translated into may be further studied in the context of political and social systems as they relate to medieval literature

as well as help us further understand the level of versatility some translators were capable of. On issues of Middle English patronage, reception, and translation practices, there is further work to be done in contextualizing *The Storie of Asneth*.

In a close literary reading of the narrative, I have demonstrated that Asneth's "relationship" with the man in her marriage bedroom and on her bed can be analyzed as a sexual one. Since this erotic ritual scenario is centred in our oldest extant copies of the text in Greek, it was important to try to understand the scenario of *sacred marriage* in Hellenistic and even earlier cultures. I have argued that this ritual type of marriage informed Asneth's story from its (pre-Christian) inception. In the context of sacred marriage centred in her story, we found that Asneth has much in common with Babylon's Ishtar, Egypt's Isis, and other ancient goddess-queens. We discovered that sacred marriage of the goddess (or her representative) is integral to the survival of ancient agricultural tribes; it is only through the sexual union of the god-king and goddess-queen that crops grow and tribes are hence ensured salvation from starvation. Moreover, sacred marriage as a ritual sexual conjugation is what the virgin maid experiences at the end of her liminal transformation to motherhood in what we know of ancient female initiation; I have demonstrated that this rite (as it is understood from Greek Mythology) is also manifest in *Asneth*.

We then looked at how the sequence of ideas at the heart of ancient female initiation is also embedded in the Christian hagiography of the virgin martyrs, some medieval female mystical visionary accounts, and in a way, every nun's consecration to her orders. All of these types of medieval women (literary and historical) have in common with the ancient archetypal bride their culminating symbolic union to the divine

in *mystical marriage* with salvation as the result—for themselves but also for those who benefit from the bride’s mediation on their behalf with God. Not only women but men also in their highest spiritual experiences describe their souls’ union with God in marital terms.

From a theological perspective, understanding the Bride of Christ tradition in the Middle Ages (perhaps stemming from its mythological roots in antiquity) is to begin to understand the kind of network of ideas surrounding several other symbolic “types” of women who were known as divine consorts. For instance, Mary and Sophia (or Wisdom) are each associated with the bride in the Song of Songs, but also identified with Mother Church, Ecclesia, in the Middle Ages. As we saw all three have a striking number of related characteristics in common with *Asneth*. Moreover, an analysis of the “relationship” *Asneth* has to the other texts in the mid-thirteenth century Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 288 seems to support that its compiler, Nicholas of Sandwyche, would have understood *Asneth* as a type of the Church too.

In CCCC MS 288 along with *Asneth* we find one of the earliest Joachite texts in England, the little prophecy known as *Fata Monent*, which deals with ecclesiastical tensions between Pope Innocent IV and the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II; it debates the fate of the Church as the foundering ship of Peter, with the Pope’s last, authoritative word on the matter, depicting Frederick II in an Antichristian light as Joachists did. In his theology of concords between the Old and the New Testament, the Cisterian prophet, Joachim of Fiore, identified several biblical women with God’s Church at different stages in earth’s history and Joseph with Christ (as earlier exegesis had done). *Asneth* would have likewise been identified by Joachim’s followers as one of God’s important symbolic

brides—symbolically, typologically, the bride of Christ. Joachim of Fiore’s unique theology is just one more example of why *Asneth* may have been considered significant as God’s Bride—the Church. When we realize how *Asneth* was likely seen as a personification of the Christian church, we can then begin to grasp that the sophisticated astrological and symbolic elements packed into the narrative would have been important for some in determining the salvation history of the Christian church, which is why I believe Nicholas of Sandwych added *Asneth* to CCCC MS 288. What appears initially as an exciting romantic story—albeit one with affective devotional elements—is one that would have signalled for some readers that *Asneth* was also a type of the New Jerusalem of apocalyptic thought and prophecy in the Middle Ages.

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### **Cambridge University**

CCC MS 424, MS 288  
Trinity College MS 0.9.28  
CUL Dd.i.17

### **Copenhagen, The Royal Library:**

MS Thott 304,2

### **Erfurt Library**

MS. Amplonian F. 71

### **London British Library:**

BL Add. 16165  
BL Royal 20.B.XV  
Harley 3724

### **Oxford University Bodleian Library:**

Bodl. MS Selden Supra 64

### **San Marino, CA, Huntington Library**

EL.26.A.13

### **St. Hildegard's Abbey**

Eibingen ms (Scivias)  
(formerly Rupertsberg Codex).

### **Wiltshire: Longleat House**

Longleat MS IX

### **Yale University**

Beinecke ms.404