Form and Reform
Gayk, Shannon, Tonry, Kathleen

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Gayk, Shannon and Kathleen Tonry.
Form and Reform: Reading across the Fifteenth Century.
The Ohio State University Press, 2011.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/24267.

👉 For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24267
Osbern Bokenham’s “englische boke”

Re-forming Holy Women

KAREN A. WINSTEAD

The Austin friar Osbern Bokenham is well known to medievalists as the author of thirteen verse lives of female saints composed during the 1440s. Bokenham’s literary career apparently began in 1443, when his fellow friar Thomas Burgh talked him into writing an English life of St. Margaret. Other lives quickly followed, many likewise intended for his East Anglian friends and acquaintances—a “St. Anne” for the Denstons, a “St. Dorothy” for the Hunts, a “St. Katherine” for Katherines Howard and Denston, a “St. Agatha” for Agatha Fleggge, a “St. Elizabeth” for Elizabeth Vere—and sundry others apparently meant for nobody in particular. By 1445 Bokenham had become something of a local celebrity. At a Twelfth Night party hosted by Isobel Bourchier, Countess of Eu, he boasted (by his own account) of the “dyuers legendys . . . of hooly wummen” that he had written to date: “as of” Saints Anne, Margaret, Dorothy, Faith, Christine, Agnes, and Ursula (5038–5044). The Countess forthwith requested a life of her own favorite saint, Mary Magdalene. In 1447, Burgh had thirteen of Bokenham’s verse lives copied into a manuscript, which he intended to give to a local convent. Burgh’s anthology survives (London, British Library, MS Arundel 327) and is known to modern readers by the title that the Early English Text Society gave its edition, The Legends of Holy Women. Until recently, that anthology

was all that we knew of Bokenham’s hagiography—except that it wasn’t, in fact, all of Bokenham’s hagiography, for he alludes in his *Mappula Angliae*, a geographical treatise, to “the englisches boke the whiche y haue compiled of legenda aurea and of oþer famous legendes at the instaunce of my specialle frendis.”

In 2005 that “englishe boke,” long presumed lost, turned up in Abbotsford, Scotland, amid the substantial personal library that Sir Walter Scott had bequeathed to his fellows of the Scottish bar, the Faculty of Advocates. Simon Horobin identified the manuscript as Bokenham’s and as a translation, with added legends, of Jacobus de Voragine’s influential thirteenth-century Latin legendary, the *Legenda aurea*. Like the *Legenda aurea*, it consists of chapters on the saints and on major Church festivals, all arranged according to the liturgical calendar. Sadly, it is incomplete, missing a few pages from the beginning and a substantial number from the end, as well as some middle leaves. The losses at each end are especially regrettable because they have cost us whatever general prologue and epilogue Bokenham may have written. The manuscript breaks off towards the end of the Winifred legend, so lives of saints whose feast days fall after November 3 are missing.

Despite surface appearances, Bokenham’s legendary is no straightforward translation of Jacobus. Most obviously, its mixture of prose and verse sets it apart from any other translation of the *Legenda aurea* I know of. Seventeen of the lives are in verse, including nine already known to us from Burgh’s compilation: those of Agnes, Agatha, Dorothy, Margaret, Mary Magdalene, Christine, Faith, Lucy, and Ursula. (The remaining four lives in the Arundel manuscript are of saints—Anne, Katherine of Alexandria, Cecilia, and Elizabeth—whose feasts fall after November 3, and their legends, too, probably formed part of the intact Abbotsford legendary.) The “new” verse lives are of Barbara, Vincent, Apollonia, Mary of Egypt, Paul the Hermit, Ambrose, Audrey, and Winifred. It appears that, when Bokenham undertook his *Legenda aurea* translation project, probably sometime in the 1450s or early 1460s, he simply incorporated the verse lives that he had already written on his own initiative or at the request of patrons.

The discovery of the Abbotsford manuscript, Horobin writes, “transforms our understanding of Bokenham’s life and work and compels a complete reassessment of his place in fifteenth-century literary history.” The Bokenham who

---


emerges from the Abbotsford collection, he observes, is a cosmopolitan figure, with broad-ranging interests, whose hagiography appeals to the socially conservative values of a mixed audience of men and women, religious and lay.

While I generally agree with that assessment, I will argue here that the Abbotsford collection also reveals an intellectual liberalism that is not evident in the legends of the Arundel manuscript. In the Arundel lives, Bokenham shows little interest in Christian education or intellectual life; if anything, he evinces wariness about the effectiveness of teaching and preaching—especially when it is based on reasoned argumentation. That wariness, I will argue, is most evident in his lives of Katherine of Alexandria, renowned for her learning, and of Mary Magdalene, renowned for her preaching. It sets him apart from hagiographers of his day who were using saints’ lives to champion education as the best way to combat heresy and to promote a staunch and vigorous orthodoxy. Those hagiographers included his fellow religious writers John Capgrave and John Lydgate, whose work he knew and professed to admire. In fact, to judge from the lives comprising the Arundel manuscript, one might suspect Bokenham of being aligned with reactionaries within the Church, who discouraged theologizing in the vernacular and, in the wake of Archbishop Arundel’s 1409 Constitutions, promoted what Rita Copeland has called “a systematized pedagogy of infantilization, an ‘education’ structured around conserving ignorance.”

By contrast, we find among the holy women in the Abbotsford collection female preachers, scholars, and readers of scripture. In his verse life of Apolloния, Bokenham goes out of his way to celebrate an eloquent and effective female preacher. While Bokenham is vague about exactly what lay men and women should be taught of their faith, he strongly favors preaching, and in several of his lives, most emphatically in his life of Barbara, he celebrates an intellectualized Christianity based on knowledge and reason. Read together, the Arundel and Abbotsford collections illuminate a conscientious, orthodox thinker grappling with complex issues pertaining to Christian education and reform that were much debated during the middle of the fifteenth century, notably in the writings of Reginald Pecock.

---


S
ome time after Isobel Bourchier’s Twelfth Night party, Bokenham turned his attention to the “Mary Magdalene” he had promised his hostess. Mary Magdalene enjoyed an enormous popularity in Bokenham’s day and was widely revered as a penitent and contemplative beloved of Christ. But the Countess of Eu expressed “synguler deuocyoun” for Mary in a more controversial role, namely, “of apostyls þe apostyllesse” (5066, 5068).

Mary had been known as apostolorum apostola since the twelfth century. The designation derived from the gospel account that she relayed Christ’s Resurrection to the Twelve. Her designation as apostola, Katherine Jansen hypothesizes, was probably an offshoot of the eleventh-century vita apostolica, which represented her as a missionary to Gaul. Mary’s reputation as an apostle was widely spread in sermons, liturgy, and hagiography by clerics who had no interest in presenting her as a paragon for actual women. The proprietors of Mary’s supposed relics at Vézelay, whence the vita apostolica issued, were eager to promote their sanctuary as a pilgrimage destination; the friars found Mary a useful “paradigm for fashioning mendicant identity.”

Yet the celebration of a preaching woman was bound to spark controversy. Jansen writes, “Just at the time that the image of the apostolic Magdalen became a commonplace in the preachers’ homiletic vocabulary, a debate emerged—not coincidentally—that turned on the question of whether or not women were allowed to preach.” The answer was a resounding “no.” Women lacked the training and education to preach; the necessary skills were beyond them; their beauty rather than their eloquence would captivate auditors and lead them into temptation. Preaching female saints, such as Mary Magdalene and Katherine of Alexandria, were special cases, extraordinary women who, authorized and guided by the Holy Spirit, preached, ex necessitate, during extraordinary times—if what they did could be called preaching at all. Indeed, many clergymen were uncomfortable with even female saints preaching. Vincent de Beauvais argued that Mary retired from preaching when she learned that St. Paul did not approve!


10. Ibid., 50.


It would hardly be surprising if Bokenham did not relish the prospect of celebrating a female apostle. His penchant was for re-creating traditional saints to emphasize attitudes and behaviors that would be appropriate for contemporary women.13 His Anne is a “wyf ful couenable” (1636), his Elizabeth a “merour” for “alle wyuys” (5047).14 Even his virgin martyrs display a gentility that sets them apart from the strident viragoes popularized by Jacobus de Voragine and so many of his English adapters.

At various points during his narrative, Bokenham hints at a certain discomfort with his assignment. In his “prolocutorye,” he makes it clear that he undertook the life only at the countess’s “myhty comaundement” (5084). His prologue praises Mary’s “outward penaunce & inward contemplacyoun” (5281) but says nothing of her apostolic accomplishments. Bokenham omits Jacobus’s explanation (attributed to no less an authority than the Church Father Ambrose) of how Mary came to be called apostolorum apostola.15 In fact, he only refers to Mary as such after her death: Maximin devoutly buries the body of the “apostolesse” (6293); the body of “thys holy apostelesse” was later moved to a shrine in Burgundy (6301); Bokenham prays to the “gloryous apostolesse” (6305). The very structure of the life suggests uneasiness: Bokenham ostentatiously divides his narrative into two parts, concluding the story of Mary the penitent follower of Christ by saying that it is “aftyr þe gospel” and announcing the remainder of the narrative as “lych as Ianuence [Jacobus] yt doth dyscry” (5731, 5734). He thus reminds readers that the story about the preaching saint is not in the Gospel but that it is in no way his invention; he also obliquely invites readers to compare the authority of Gospel and “Ianuence.” Before proceeding “ferþer in þis matere,” he indicates that he is weary of his task but that, with God’s grace and Mary’s goodwill, he will push himself to do what “I haue promyssyd” (5738–39). He thus iterates that telling the story of a female preacher was not his idea. Of course, this disclaiming of responsibility may be nothing but a screen; however, as noted above, the other female saints in the Arundel manuscript are more “feminine,” and Bokenham’s apparent discomfort with the apostolesse may be genuine.

Mary Magdalene’s apostolic career begins following Christ’s death, when pagans set her and a few other Christians adrift in a rudderless boat, which washes ashore at Marseilles. Mary and her companions are part of the apostolic mis-


sion to “sowe & teche” “Goddys wurdys” everywhere (5751). Seeing the locals flock to a pagan temple, Mary “hem reuokyd from hir ydolatrye, / And prechyd hem cryst most stedefastlye” (5785–86). Her audience is impressed: “Alle þat hir herdyn awundryd were” (5787). But Bokenham notes that her “beute” as much as “þe swetnesse . . . of hir eloquency” gave people “uery delectacyoun / Stylle to stondyn & here hir predycacyoun” (5788, 5790, 5792–93).

Does Mary actually convert anybody with her preaching? Bokenham doesn’t exactly say. Instead, he tells at length the story of her encounter with two of the temple-goers that she has “reuokyd,” the prince of Marseilles and his wife. Mary detains the couple, who are visiting the temple to pray for a child, with “a long sermoun” (5806) about Christ. She “counselfly hem to leue þere superstycyoun” (5807)—but to no avail:

But at þat tyme, þe soth to seyn,
Maryis wurdys auaylyd no thyng,
For as þei cam þei hom ageyn
Wentyn, obstynate in here errour stondynge. (5808–11)16

Mary follows up her sermon by appearing to the couple in a dream, urging them to help the needy Christians in their domain, but she ultimately moves them to do so only in a subsequent dream and through threats: “bettyr it is to obeye / Than to fallyn in-to þe indignacyoun / Of hir god, & myscheuousely deye” (5879–81), the wife decides. After hearing Mary preach on a later occasion, the still-skeptical prince asks, “Trowyst þat þou defende may / The feyth wych þou techyst so besyly?” (5887–88). Mary responds: “Ya, þat I may . . . / Be dayly myraclys & by wytnesse I-wys / Of oure maystyr Petyr, wych at Room is” (5889–91).

Miracles are what it takes to convert the prince and his wife. When Mary mentions “dayly myraclys,” the couple is immediately ready to bargain:

Lo, we be redy in al þinge to obeye
What-euere þou comaunde us to do,
Vp-on a condycyoun þat we þe seye.
That is to seyn, yt þou wylt preye
Thy god to us þat a chyld be bore
To been oure eyr; we ask no more. (5893–98)

When his wife conceives a child, thanks allegedly to Mary’s prayers, the prince is “dysposyd fully for to beleue”—so long as Peter can in fact “preue” “Maryis

---

16. This reference to Mary’s failure is wholly Bokenham’s. Jacobus writes: “Magdalene preached Christ to him [the prince] and dissuaded him from sacrificing” (Golden Legend 1: 377).
doctryne” (5907, 5909). The prince spends two years with Peter “in lernyng of þe feyth dylygently” (6040), but what convinces him to accept baptism is the resurrection of his wife, who had died in childbirth en route to Rome, and the preservation of their baby, who spent two years alone with his mother’s corpse on a desert island. The happy beneficiary of three miracles, the prince admits that Mary has “shewyd” “weel” that “grace fer passyth naturys power” (6086–87). He and his wife are baptized, raze the pagan temples, build churches, and appoint Mary’s brother, Lazarus, as bishop. Bokenham shows nobody being converted through preaching alone, but he leaves no doubt about the efficacy of miracles. When Mary Magdalene and her company leave Marseilles, they “come to a cyte clepyd Aguens, / Wych, with myraclys shewyde plenteuously, / To cryst was conuertyd ryht redyly” (6146–48). As we will also see him doing in his lives of Katherine and of Cecilia, Bokenham contrasts what works with what doesn’t.

Shortly after he had completed the Countess of Eu’s “Mary Magdalene,” Bokenham set about writing a life of Katherine for the “consolacyoun” and “conforte” of two other friends among the Suffolk gentry, Kathieres Denston and Howard (6365–66). Katherine of Alexandria’s popularity matched, if not exceeded, Mary Magdalene’s. Superbly educated in the Seven Liberal Arts, the legendary virgin martyr was famous for out-arguing fifty pagan philosophers and converting them all to Christianity. Bokenham had been perusing a “newly compylyd” (6357) rendering of Katherine’s life by John Capgrave, his Augustinian confere from the priory of King’s Lynn, Norfolk. In its eight thousand lines of verse, Capgrave’s Katherine is a passionate celebration of learning, both secular and theological, which uses the saint’s life both to educate readers and to impress upon them the importance of education. Capgrave devotes almost two hundred lines to Katherine’s training in the Seven Liberal Arts. He later shows her academic training to be instrumental in vanquishing the fifty philosophers: she wields their own methods of academic disputation and marshals their own authorities against them. In recounting her conversion by the hermit Adrian, Capgrave relays Adrian’s detailed answers to Katherine’s tough questions on such topics as the Trinity and the Virgin Birth. Clerics of his day who considered


Middle English an inappropriate medium for discussing abstruse doctrines would have been shocked. Indeed, Capgrave concedes, “It is ful hard swech thingis forto ryme, / To utter pleynly in langage of oure nacion, / Swech straunge doutes that long to the Incarnacion,” but that does not prevent him from reporting, in unprecedented detail, the various arguments, on both sides, about the Incarnation and other matters.  

Bokenham warns his readers that his own version of Katherine’s life will be nothing like Capgrave’s. They should in “no wyse” expect

That I shuld telle hou [Katherine] fyrst began
To be crystyn, & howe oon clepyd Adryan
Hyr convertyd & crystnyd in hyr youthe,
For þat mater to me is ful vnkouthe. (6349–53)

Anyone interested in “alle þat” should consult Capgrave’s book, with its “balaadys rymyd ful craftyly” (6360, 6359); Bokenham will recount “oonly þe passyoun” (6364).

Bokenham not only creates a shorter and simpler version of Katherine’s life than Capgrave’s but deemphasizes learning and reasoning even in comparison to much shorter Katherine legends, such as that in Jacobus’s *Legenda aurea*, Bokenham’s chief source. As Paul Price has pointed out, in recounting Katherine’s debate with the philosophers, Bokenham expunges all reference to academic disputation from Jacobus’s account. Where Jacobus’s Katherine cites pagan authorities and refutes her opponents’ arguments “with clear and cogent reasoning,” Bokenham’s Katherine convinces them with a simple declaration of faith, a paraphrase of the Nicene Creed. As Price puts it, “Bokenham’s text pointedly celebrates intellectual modesty within a female martyr most renowned for her intellectual greatness. . . . Notions of intellectual value are dethroned and their place is occupied by simple, common piety.”

What Price does not point out is that Katherine’s resort to “simple, common piety” represents a change in strategy on her part—Bokenham is showing his readers not only that faith prevails but also that reason fails. Katherine initially relies on her intellectual prowess, boasting to the emperor Maxentius that she was “instruct in þe lore / Of þe seuene scyencys clepyd liberal” (6592–93). Though she modestly adds, “Yet by my kunnyng ryht not at al / I set” (6594), she marshals the full force of that “kunnyng” against Maxentius. “In crafty wyse,”

Ghosh and Vincent Gillespie (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011).
she attacks the pantheon “By dyuers conclusyons . . . / by many sylogysmys & by many an argument” (6490–92). She exhorts Maxentius to follow “þe weye of resoun” (6480) that will prove the existence of a single god. Even when she resolves to speak plainly (“return to comown speche” [6499]), she argues like a magister: she “dylatyd” about the Incarnation “by many a resoun,” and she “dysputyd” “mych thyng . . . prudently” (6531–33).

Maxentius marvels at her “greth eloquence” and “prudence” (6559, 6560). He even acknowledges her persuasiveness:

She multyplyith many an argument,
And alle þat she seyth, by poya, 
By rethoryk or ellys by phylosophye
She confermyth ryht marualously. (6692–95)

Nevertheless, he is not in fact persuaded. Her “longe peroracyoun” (6558) merely confuses him: “We myht not wel takyn your entent, / Ner clerly vndyr-stond what ye ment” (6565–66). As he sees it, Katherine is trying to “snarlyn” him with “treccherous sotylte,” using “exaunnplys of phylosophye / To bryngyn us all to . . . folye” (6657–60). Therefore, he calls in “maystrys of gramer / And of rethoryk” who will be able to converse with her on her own terms (6667–68).

Would Katherine have persuaded these experts with the dilatations and syllogisms she used against the emperor? We can’t know, of course, because she doesn’t try. But Bokenham injects a doubt that, to my knowledge, is unprecedented in Katherine legends. Instead of making the conventional claim that that the superbly educated Katherine surpassed all scholars, he more modestly avers that she could hold her own against anyone: “Was no clerk founde in þat cuntre / What-euere he were or of what degre, / But þat she wyth hym coude comune” (6395–97).25 Readers might infer that Katherine changes tack because simply “communing” with these scholars won’t suffice and perhaps because her failure with the emperor has undermined her confidence in academic disputation. When she promises the philosophers that she will speak “pleynly . . . / Wyth-owte rethoryk, in wurdys bare / Of argumentatyf dysceptacyoun” (6761–63), she actually does so—and triumphs. The philosophers are left “as styyle as newe-shorn shepe” (6799).

As Price points out, it is most implausible that Katherine should convert “the fifty most intelligent pagan men in the world through what, for them, is an utterly

unmodified, disorientating and unargued-for statement of her belief.”  

This very implausibility underscores Bokenham’s point, namely, that the philosophers are not convinced by what Katherine says (the emperor, after all, is as unmoved by her creed as by her syllogisms); instead, as an angel assures Katherine on the eve of the “debate,” they are “ful conuertyd thorgh a specyal grace” (6737). The philosophers “kunne ne moun hyr doctryn geyn-sey” because it is “fulfyllyd wyth þe influence / Of goddys spyryth” (6820, 6815–16). Not surprisingly, Bokenham omits the long tribute to the eloquence and effectiveness of Katherine’s reasoned preaching that concludes Jacobus de Voragine’s vita.  

For Bokenham, affect triumphs over intellect; faith prevails where reason fails; and conversion is effected by God’s grace, not by human eloquence or wisdom.

Bokenham’s life of Saint Cecilia iterates this message. Cecilia was less controversial as a teacher than Mary Magdalene or Katherine of Alexandria, proselytizing only family members (i.e., her husband and her brother-in-law) in the privacy of her home until persecution pushes her into the public arena. Yet Bokenham subtly undermines the effectiveness even of this private teaching. When Tiburtius asks how his newly converted brother, Valerian, knows that the pagan gods are “very deuelys” (7741), Valerian replies, “An aungel of god þus dede me teche,” adding that Tiburtius will in “no wyse” be able to see the angel until he is “purifyid . . . / From þe fylth of fals ydolatrye” (7745–47). In other words, Tiburtius cannot be taught without first committing to Christianity. In Jacobus de Voragine’s account, by contrast, Cecilia “showed him [Tiburtius] plainly that all idols were without feeling or speech” and converts him through a lesson on Christian doctrine: Cecilia “began to instruct him about the coming of the Son of God and his passion, and to show the many ways in which his passion was fitting.”

Whereas Jacobus’s Cecilia is confident and effective, Bokenham’s heroine flounders as a teacher. She promises to explain why Tiburtius should not fear to become a Christian—“Tyburce, to me / Take heed a whyle, & I the enseence / Wyth goddys grace shal a bettyr sentence” (7786–88)—but her lecture on the joys of heaven, the Incarnation, and the Trinity merely confuses him: “þis manere talkyng / Ageyn al resoun me semyth to be; / For nowe o god þou puttyst, anoþir tyme thre; / To wych thyng my wyt can not inclyne” (7812–15). Cecilia tries to “preue” the Trinity “naturally”: “Substancyally sum thyng but oon to be, / And yet by resoun yt ys dystynct in thre” (7822–24). She then abandons her

27. “Catherine’s eloquence was admirable: it was abundant when she preached, as we have seen in her preaching, and extremely convincing in her reasoning. . . . Her speech had the power to attract the hearer, as is clear in the instances of Porphyrius and the queen, whom the sweetness of her eloquence drew to the faith. She was skillful in convincing, as we see in her winning over the orators,” Golden Legend 2: 340.
28. Ibid., 320–21.
appeal to reason and admits, “resoun here faylyth, & oonly feyth / Preuaylyth” (7841–42), exhorting Tiburtius to “forsake euydence / And to doctryne of scrypt- tur yyuyth credence” (7845–46). She concludes by reminding him that he will see angels if he is “clensyd & puryfyid” (7877–78). When she mentions angels, he immediately agrees to be baptized.

In Bokenham’s other Arundel legends, too, we rarely find saints convincing unbelievers through teaching or preaching the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Miracles, though, induce conversion. Saints may rail and reason against idol worship, but razing temples through their prayers is what convinces people that their “wordis” are “both sage & wyhse” (2803). Dorothy’s ability to procure a basket of roses and apples in February immediately transforms a sneering onlooker into a “greth credybyl wytnesse” whose “deuouth prechyng” (presumably about the miracle he has just witnessed) converts an entire city (4953–56).

As Cecilia found with Tiburtius, promises also persuade. Though he knows nothing about Christianity, Ursula’s suitor is “anoon . . . crystnyd” (3220) as soon as he learns that she will marry him if he converts. Cecilia gains converts by appealing directly to their self-interest:

But now of you I aske a questyoun:
For ych peny [if] ye receyue shuld moun
At a market or a feyr an hool shylyng,
As many as þedyr ye dede bryng,
Wolde ye not spedyn you þedyr hastly?
I trowe ye wold! (8079–84)

After she explains that her God actually will trade them “an hundyrd for oon” (8091), they immediately cry out, “Cryst þi lord ys god oonly!” (8094). Katherine of Alexandria promises the emperor’s wife a better husband and the emperor’s right-hand man a better lord in a richer kingdom; no further instruction is necessary (6949–89, 7185–90).

The legends comprising Arundel 327 show little interest in pastoral endeavors, much less in Christian intellectual life, and little interest in how the saints themselves became Christians. One might attribute Bokenham’s lack of attention to teaching and learning to the gender of his subjects, and perhaps to the gender of his patrons. Undermining the accomplishments of a female preacher or scholar, such as Mary Magdalene or Katherine of Alexandria, or of a preachy wife like Cecilia, certainly works to make those saints more exemplary by contemporary standards of femininity. Bokenham wrote in a milieu rich in female religious enthusiasts.29 Though he was certainly eager to please his female friends, he may

29. See, for example, Roberta Gilchrist and Marilyn Oliva, Religious Women in Medieval East Anglia: History and Archaeology, c. 1100–1540 (Norwich: Centre of East Anglian Studies, University
also have been wary of women like Margery Kempe—or perhaps even Isobel Bourchier, who apparently preferred the adventures of a apostolesse to the tears of a penitent.

Yet the Arundel legends are by no means only about gender. Taken together, they bespeak a pessimism about the capacity of ordinary people—men as well as women—to reason and to understand their faith. They portray a humanity that must be wooed to Christ by spectacles and promises, or ravished by the Holy Spirit.

ABBOTSFORD PREACHERS, SCHOLARS, AND EDUCATORS

There are clear continuities between the legends assembled in Arundel 327 and those of the Abbotsford collection. Most obviously, as I mentioned earlier, legends found in the Arundel manuscript also appear in the Abbotsford anthology, albeit without their original references to patrons and dedicatees. Bokenham also manifests his ongoing interest in female holiness. Five of the eight “new” verse lives found in the Abbotsford collection feature women. Among Bokenham’s prose lives, Augustine’s mother, Monica, whose life had previously been told only as part of her son’s life, receives a life of her own. Bokenham also translated for the first time into Middle English the lives of the virgin martyrs Martina and Priscilla and of Claire of Assisi, which were not included in Jacobus’s Legenda aurea. In writing about both male and female saints in the Abbotsford collection, Bokenham displays the same attention to exemplary conduct and human emotions that he had in the legends of Arundel 327. Indeed, his penchant for psychological realism and exemplarity is both more pronounced and more deftly executed in many of his Abbotsford lives.

The most surprising feature of the Abbotsford collection is that we find among his holy women so many students, scholars, and teachers—even preachers. If Bokenham subtly undermined the effectiveness of Mary’s preaching, he did nothing of the kind with her sister Martha—in fact, he did the opposite. Jacobus had written that Martha and her rather large party of Christian missionaries “converted the local populace to the faith” and says of Martha merely that she “spoke eloquently and was gracious to all.”31 Bokenham attributes the conver-

---

30. Horobin discusses the exemplarity of Bokenham’s Abbotsford saints in “Politics,” 935–38.
sions to Martha alone, and he specifically describes her as preaching: “[She] convertyd to the feyth myche peple by hyre doctrine and techynge, for she was ful facunde and ful eloquent in spekyng and prechynge” (146r). One of her miracles is to resurrect a man who had fallen into a river as he was straining to hear her preach on the other side. Upon her death, her servant Marcella wrote her biography and carried on her mission: “Marcella, Marthys handmayden (whiche seyde to oure lord as ys wrytyn in the gospel of Luc these wurdys, ‘Blyssyd be the wumbe that bare the and the brestys eek whiche yove the souken’) wroot the lyf of hyre maisteresse. The whiche Marcelle aftyr hyre maisteresse deth went in to a cuntre or a cyte clepyd Salauonia and prechyd there cristys gospell” (146v). Bokenham’s identification of Marcella as the woman referred to in Luke 11.27–28 (an identification not in Jacobus’s account) is intriguing: when Margery Kempe was accused of preaching, she was quoting those very verses from Luke to argue “þat þe Gospel ʒeuyth me leue to spekyn of God.”

Bokenham’s life of Martha might make socially conservative readers squirm, but his own contribution is mostly not to tamper with his source. Truly astonishing is his verse life of Apollonia, for there the hagiographer whose trademark was exemplarity goes out of his way to represent his heroine as a social radical—not only an effective preacher but a rebellious daughter. The best-known (and most authentic) version of Apollonia’s story, derived from Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* and widely circulated in the *Legenda aurea* and elsewhere, represents her as an elderly woman whose teeth are knocked out by pagan thugs; when her tormentors threaten to burn her alive, she leaps onto the pyre they have prepared for her. There is no suggestion that she has ever preached; in Jacobus’s account, she doesn’t even speak.

Bokenham’s Apollonia is a beautiful, outspoken princess whose father, the King of Alexandria, persecutes her because she will not desist from preaching. In portraying the saint as a young beauty rather than the “wonderful old woman” celebrated by Eusebius, Bokenham must have been drawing on a continental source. During the fourteenth century, narratives and images representing Apollonia as a princess flourished, though I have not found a source that shares Bokenham’s particular concern with preaching.

---


33. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Emily Hope Allen and Sanford Brown Meech, EETS o.s 212 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 126. I will have more to say about this incident from the *Book of Margery Kempe* below.


35. For a discussion and an example of this continental mode of representing Apollonia, see Maurice Coens, “Une ‘passio S. Apolloniae’ inédite suivie d’un miracle en Bourgogne,” *Analecta Bollandiana*
Education transforms Apollonia and sparks a father-daughter conflict. Both her parents were “educa” in the “foule ordure” of “ydolatrie,” and made it their “busy cure” that Apollonia “shuld doo the same”; however, thanks to “goddis mercy,” she was “preserued and kept by a special grace” (fol. 64). A revelation sends her to a hermit living outside the city, by whom she is “plenerly instruct in cristen guyse” and baptized. Upon returning to Alexandria, she immediately “prechid” Christ to be the only God, “even openly and in wordis pleyn.” Perhaps as a rejoinder to those who claimed that beautiful women could not be effective preachers, Bokenham makes it clear that her preaching was a success: “moche people with hir doctrine / from ydols worship she did inclyne.”

Apollonia’s passion revolves around her father’s failed attempts to stop her from preaching. Angry that she “prechid criste openly,” he exhorts her, “from such langage thi tunge restreyn” (fol. 64). When she refuses, he summons forty scholars to “to peruerte” her “with her resons”; she converts them all (fol. 64v). Upon hearing her “preisyn so eloquently / Of hir lorde Ihesu the grete gode-nesse,” he orders her teeth yanked out, a torture designed “principally . . . for that entent” that she should not be “so eloquent” “in prechyng . . . as she was whan she first bigan.” His efforts are in vain:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Thurgh goddis grace more parfitely} \\
\text{She spak than bifoire and more eloquently.} \\
\text{And anoon forthwith turnyng hir speche} \\
\text{Unto the peple there stondyng aboute} \\
\text{Cristis feith boldely she gan hem teche. (fol. 64v)}
\end{align*}
\]

Other uses of force are equally futile. Set on a pyre, “with grete stedfastnesse / She prechid the peple the high vertu / The mercy the grace and the godenesse / Of hir soueryn lorde god criste Ihesu” (fol. 65). Cast from a tower, she picks herself up, and begins “ageyn to prechyn” (fol. 65v). Once again, Apollonia does not preach in vain: “Moche peple thurgh help of grace divyne / She conuertid there by hir doctryne.”

Bokenham’s Apollonia is a radical departure from the more conventionally feminine heroines of Arundel 327. Preaching women were commonly stereotyped as agents of misrule and likely purveyors of heresy. A common accusation against the Lollards—however unfair—was that they encouraged women to preach, thus flouting propriety and the strictures of St. Paul. Margery Kempe,
brought before the Archbishop of York by clerics who “wot . . . wel þat sche hath a deuyl wyth-inne hir, for sche spekyth of þe Gospel,” hastens to rebut the charge that she has been preaching: “As-swyþe a gret clerke browt forth a boke & leyd Seynt Powyl for hys party a-geyns hir þat no woman xulde prechyn. Sche, answeryng þerto, seyd, ‘I preche not, ser, I come in no pulpytt. I vse but comownycacyon & good wordys.’”

Bokenham, though, does not shrink from using “preach” to describe what his heroines are doing; he never replaces Jacobus’s “preach” with some innocuous formulation like “comownycacyon & good wordys.”

Preaching is only one of various ways in which holy women of the Abbotsford anthology participate fully and vigorously in Christian pastoral and/or intellectual endeavors. Martina, for example, is “instruct in cristis feith perfefitely from hir youthe and in the misteries of holy scripture sufficiently enfourmed” (fol. 30). Paula is expert in Hebrew and has a deep and sophisticated understanding of Scripture:

Hooly writte, which she redde, she kept passyngly wele in hir mynde, and though she loued wele the story aftir the lettir as the grounde and the fundament of truthe yit she folowed alwaye more the gostely undirstondyng as for moste singuler edification of the soule. “The tunge of Hebreu the which I,” quoth Jerome, “with grete labour and busynesse of youthe lernyd and haue yit grete dificulte to kepyn, she lernyd anoon and coude reden in Hebreu psalmes and expressen hem wit houte ony propirte of Latyn tunge.” (fol. 50v)

Her daughter is similarly skilled. Monica’s “reson” and “witte” were “so grete and so excellent” that Augustine solicited her opinion on doctrinal points (fol. 102). Bokenham quotes the Church Father as saying, “I provided and ordeyned that whan leyser and oportunyte haboundid that ony thyng of divinite shuld be communed and disputid that she shuld nat ben absent so grete excellence of witte and reson I fonde in hir communyng.”

Even as Bokenham attests to women’s pastoral and scholarly pursuits, he humanizes them and endows them with features appropriate to lay women of his day. Paula was an “an example to al the matrones of the cité . . . in al hir porte and gouernaunce” (fol. 50); her imitable virtues—her fasting, modest dress, medita-
tions, and days given to charity and good works—are closely described. Monica is an exemplary wife, mother, and friend, whose piety is very much in the fifteenth-century style: devotion to the Eucharist, tears of compassion, joy in contemplation.

Bokenham’s most complex and fully realized female saint is also his greatest intellectual: Saint Barbara. Though the life breaks off before the account of her passion is complete, even the truncated version, at over seventeen hundred lines, is one of the longest and most complex saint’s lives in Middle English hagiography. Bokenham’s source was a Latin life by the Flemish Augustinian Jean de Wackerzelee, which was also the source of a Middle English prose life found in two late-fifteenth-century manuscripts of the 1438 Gilte Legende. Bokenham’s life of Barbara is similar to Capgrave’s Katherine in its detailed development of the virgin martyr’s life before her passion, with particular attention to her conversion, and in its emphasis on her education and intelligence; in these respects, indeed, it is practically an antithesis to Bokenham’s own life of Katherine.

Bokenham immediately signals the importance of Christian education as a theme in his “Barbara” by describing the activities of Christian missionaries—Pope Urban’s in Rome and Origen’s in Alexandria—before zeroing in on Barbara. The daughter of pagans, Barbara is dissatisfied with her native religion. Reason—not education or guidance from the Holy Spirit—convinces her that the pantheon is a fraud and that there must be only one true God. Indeed, Bokenham devotes hundreds of lines to her “musings,” “reasonings,” and “syllogizings.” Her father, like Katherine of Alexandria’s, provides her with a first-rate education in the Liberal Arts, but that education does nothing to answer her questions about the one true God. Eager for knowledge, she turns to a Christian scholar, Origen, who is said to have “provid” the existence of only one God “by resons certeyn” (fol. 6).

Christianity, in Bokenham’s “Barbara,” is an open-minded faith that encourages intellectual curiosity and study, even among women. When he receives Barbara’s letter, Origen is busy instructing the Empress and her household about “Cristis gospel” and the “principles of christen religion” (fol. 7). The Church Father is delighted that “withoute ony techyng” Barbara has “so busily . . . sought such meanys to knowe god by.” To complete her education, he


40. Bokenham’s emphasis on reason differentiates it from the Middle English prose life, which emphasizes the role played by God’s grace in Barbara’s conversion.
sends her books and a priest to instruct her in “gode livyng,” “doctrine,” and “lawe divine” (fol. 7v). His own cover letter includes a long and carefully reasoned discussion of the Trinity. After reading the letter, Barbara plies the priest with many questions about the Incarnation and other matters, “To which he made such declaracion / And in al thyngis hir aunswerid so reasonably” (fol. 8) that she is eager for Baptism. Bokenham sharply contrasts the responsiveness of Origen and his emissary with the rebuffs Barbara has received from the pagans she consulted earlier. With a dismissive condescension, they reproach the “studious ladie” for being “over busy and curious” (fol. 4v).

Barbara’s knowledge of Christian doctrine and Scripture brings about and intensifies her persecution. Eager to share her new-found religious knowledge with her father, she launches into a long lecture on the Trinity, but while she “to dilaten was busy” (fol. 10), he swoons from anger and disbelief. When he comes to, he threatens her and sends her off to the prefect to be tried as a Christian. Barbara’s ruminations on Scripture send the prefect into a frenzy: “Whan Marcian perceived thoccupacion / Of Barbara thus in ruminacion / Of hooly scripture he wex nere wode” (fol. 11v). Bokenham shows, however, that Barbara has the stamina to withstand the tortures he devises precisely because she “in holy scripture hir did exercyse.”

Barbara is a woman with whom ordinary readers might readily identify, a self-styled “symple citezeyn” (fol. 6v). She is torn between her faith and her genuine love for her father. She’s not too holy to experience doubt, perplexity, or even temptation. Filial piety doesn’t prevent her from fibbing to her father, scheming behind his back, and flat-out disobeying him. Though she’s a great intellectual, Bokenham makes her dilations and syllogizings accessible to anybody. There could be no more eloquent argument for using one’s native intelligence and common sense.

Bokenham is keenly aware of the destabilizing potential of education. Not only does it alienate Christian children from their pagan parents, as we see in the lives of Apollonia and Barbara, it also has the potential to stir up trouble even within Christian families. Bokenham makes that point clear in his verse life of Winifred. Eager that their daughter be “educat,” Winifred’s Christian parents encourage her to study with the monk Beuno:

. . . they dede here besynesse
Whan Beunoon prechyd that she shuld be
  Present & syttyn euene undyr his kne
  Hyre chargyng ententysly for to lere
What he seyde & yt awey to bere. (fol. 215)

In a move that, to my knowledge, has no precedent in any Latin or Middle English rendering of Winifred’s legend, Bokenham contrasts what Winifred’s parents expect her to learn from her religious instruction with what she actually learns. Her father counts on her, his only child, to ensure through her marriage “[t]he lyneal descens of hys kynrede” (fol. 214v). He and his spouse are confident that Beuno will teach her “wummanly honeste” and other virtues befitting a good Christian wife:

That she shuld kun lyuyn verteuously
Whan she to maryage aftyr were sent
And aduouterye fleen & al leccherye
As goddys lawe byddyth certeynly
And in trewe weedlok hyre so to reule & gye
That fruht in honeste she myht multypyle. (fol. 215)

But “contrarye to that hyre fadyr ment,” she is “styryd by grace inward / And by blyssyd Beunons doctrine owtward” to desire a life of celibacy. The potential family conflict is never realized, of course; when Winifred is beheaded by a would-be rapist and restored to life through Beuno’s prayers, it is obvious to everyone that she should dedicate herself to God by taking the veil. As a nun, being “excercysyd . . . in relygious lore” (fol. 218v) is a clear asset, for it makes Winifred ideally suited to be abbess.

REASSESSING BOKENHAM

The Abbotsford *Legenda aurea* reveals a bolder Bokenham, more creative in his selection and use of sources, more willing to portray his heroines in potentially controversial roles. Bokenham had always shown respect for women’s abilities. There is no doubting Mary Magdalene’s eloquence or Katherine’s learning; Bokenham’s doubts lie with the capacity of the *recipients* of his heroines’ instruction to benefit therefrom—wouldn’t they do better to stick to reciting the creed and proclaiming the power of God through miracles? Though miracles abound in the Abbotsford collection, they are no longer the principal means of effecting conversion. Bokenham seems more optimistic about the aptitude of ordinary people to listen and learn, and hence more optimistic about the efficacy of preaching and teaching. He seems more cognizant, also, of the spiritual rewards attending a more than basic understanding of one’s faith.

Our ability to trace the evolution of Bokenham’s thought is limited by our ignorance of exact dates for most of the lives comprising the Abbotsford col-
lection. The collection was certainly compiled after 1449, because Bokenham revised a reference to Lydgate in his “Margaret” to mention Lydgate’s death. If, as seems probable, most or all of the prose lives were written specifically for the projected legendary, the 1450s seem a likely date for them. Most uncertain in date are the verse lives; as mentioned earlier, these appear to have originated as independent compositions. “Winifred” was written after 1448, because Bokenham mentions visiting the saint’s shrine in that year, but about “Apollonia” and “Barbara” we have only the inference that they were written after 1445, drawn from Bokenham’s not citing them, in his “Magdalene,” among his “dyuers legendys.” I strongly believe that they, like Winifred, are later compositions, because they are so much more complex than anything we find in Arundel 327. If so, the strain of intellectual liberalism I’ve identified in the Abbotsford Legendys aurea seems to represent a change in Bokenham’s thinking—as opposed to Arundel 327 being Burgh’s unrepresentative selection of the most conservative among available Bokenham compositions.

It would hardly be surprising if Bokenham were revisiting his views on Christian education during the 1450s. Christian education had become a hot topic, thanks in no small measure to the controversies swirling around Reginald Pecock. In 1447, Pecock, then bishop of St. Asaph, Wales, incensed pastorally oriented clergy with a sermon delivered at St. Paul’s Cross defending bishops who did not preach and promoting writing as a more potent vehicle of Christian education. Although he deprecated preaching, Pecock was a passionate advocate of lay religious instruction, opposing those who claimed that ordinary people were incapable of understanding matters like the Trinity. In Middle English treatises written during the 1440s–50s and published during the 1450s, he championed a Christianity based both on natural reason and on the educated, clerically supervised reading of Scripture. The allegation that Pecock valued reason over Scripture contributed to the condemnation of his writings as heretical. In 1457, Pecock returned to St. Paul’s Cross to abjure his errors, confessing,
among other things, to “preferring the natural iugement of raison before th’Olde Testament and the Newe and th’auctorite and determinacion of oure modre Holy Chirche.”

Pecock’s books were banned and burned, and he was dispatched to Thorney Abbey, Cambridgeshire, where he lived confined to a single room, deprived of books and paper, until his death circa 1460.

Bokenham could not have been ignorant of Pecock’s controversial ideas. In fact, he was rather close to the conflict: Archbishop Bourchier (Isobel’s brother-in-law) launched the investigation into Pecock’s alleged heresies in 1457, and in the same year Bokenham’s Clare confere John Bury wrote, at Archbishop Bourchier’s request, a Latin treatise attacking the “nefandus” Pecock for privileging natural reason over Scripture. Pecock’s views were probably much discussed within Bokenham’s circle of acquaintance, and it would be natural for those discussions to influence Bokenham’s treatment of his materials, or indeed for Bokenham to use saints’ lives, as Lydgate and Capgrave had, as a way of safely joining an incendiary debate. The numerous preaching bishops whose lives Bokenham tells—some for the first and only time—in the Abbotsford collection show preaching as an essential component of a bishop’s duties. In fact, Bokenham’s Saint John of Beverley resigns the bishopric of York when he can no longer preach: “whan he myght no lenger labouren forto goon aboute and pre-chyn he by al the peplis assent committed his bisishopriche to his preste Wilfrid and went hym self to Bevyrlee” (fol. 102v).

But if Bokenham disagreed with Pecock on the importance of preaching, he was—or more probably became—more sympathetic to Pecock’s views on lay education. His Barbara, as I noted earlier, was not propelled towards Christianity by any special grace but by musings that exemplify Pecock’s natural reason—a faculty God gave everyone when he made mankind in his image.

Bokenham repeatedly refers to Barbara’s “syllogizing,” a mode of reasoning favored by Pecock. In fact, one might read “Barbara” as a “test” of Pecock’s ideas about lay religious instruction: How far can one rely on reason alone to reveal the truth about God? To what extent should lay Christians be trusted to study Scripture and/or theology on their own? How important is clerical guidance? With Barbara, Bokenham affirms the potency of reason but also insists that the reading of

46. Scase, Reginald Pecock, 59.
48. In his Repressor, for example, which we know was available to Bury at Bokenham’s Clare Priory, Pecock discusses at length the “doom of natural resoun, which is moral lawe of kinde and moral lawe of God, writun in the book of lawe of kinde in mennis soulis, prentid into the ymage of God” (18).
Scripture and clerical instruction are essential to a true understanding of Christianity. Neither Pecock nor his enemies would have disagreed, but, at least by 1457 and most probably earlier, the public discourse had been reduced to caricatures, his pro-reason stance versus the Church’s pro-Scripture stance.

Bokenham’s work attests to the complexity of orthodoxy in mid-fifteenth-century England. If the specter of heresy provoked repression and censorship, especially during the early 1400s, it also provoked thoughtful clergy, such as Bokenham, to reflect upon the foundations of their faith and to think and rethink what it means to be an orthodox Christian. What better outlet for such reflections than imagining the lives and deaths of Christianity’s earliest witnesses? Bokenham’s female preachers and students of Scripture rebut the pernicious stereotype of the disorderly woman—inevitably a heretic—who quotes Scripture and prates about dogma, fancying herself a scholar. More broadly, they represent an intelligent laity, male and female, whose eagerness to learn can be harnessed for good—and a Church whose confidence in the truth makes it eager to teach and unafraid to confront error or dissent.