Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography

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Inherited Futures and Queer Privilege

Capgrave’s Life of St Katherine

Caitlyn McLoughlin

Abstract

This chapter considers John Capgrave’s Life of St Katherine within a queer genealogical framework in order to contribute to a queer historical archive. Procreative and generative language and detail early in the narrative explicitly open the vita to a reading that considers the text itself as offspring in a genealogical line of reproduced texts. Thus the chapter also understands this textual procreation as representative of a particularly genderqueer temporality. Finally, this chapter offers an intersectional consideration of Katherine’s characterization in order to assess how different social privileges and subjugations effect and enable her veneration, complicating essentialist notions of gendered social position and female sanctity.

Keywords: queer, genderqueer, temporalities, futurity, hagiography, privilege, St Katherine, John Capgrave

Queer historicism transgresses temporal boundaries through affective connections based on identification and recognition between individuals and communities. A twenty-first century reading of John Capgrave’s verse Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria (c. 1445) shows how certain authorial modes of textual production foreground a future for queer readers by developing alternative pathways to inheritance, although these rely on Katherine’s privileged subjectivity. Homonormativity, first theorized by Lisa Duggan in 2002, refers to ‘a politics that does not contest dominant

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1 Halberstam theorizes the notion of ‘perverse presentism’, whereby methodological and interpretive insights from the present are applied to the past (Female Masculinity, pp. 52-53).
heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption. Capgrave’s endorsement of marriage and biological reproduction likewise prefigures modern homonormative uses of established familial institutions as pathways to legitimacy. This method of political validation is recognizable in various modern campaigns for the legalization of same sex marriage, which often emphasize(d) monogamous commitment and conservative values as characteristics of ‘good’ and loving couples, regardless of partners’ genders. Challenging the normative function of familial inheritance, this chapter re-evaluates ideals that shaped the social circumstances of gendered subjects in fifteenth-century England.

In the Life of Saint Katherine, Capgrave (d. 1464) – an Augustinian friar and scholastic theologian – presents a paradoxical Katherine, whose resistance to normative social institutions is complicated by the reinforcement of ‘proper’ adherence to expected social positions and gendered proclivities. For modern readers seeking a queer medieval genealogy, Katherine’s holy celibacy and formulation of gendered social positions can be claimed as queer subjectivity. Katherine functions as a religious and political model for both men and women, and Capgrave’s text itself is produced through a series of textual comminglings that powerfully evoke genderqueer reproduction. However, this purposeful reading must reconcile the text’s rejection of binary subjectivity with Katherine’s extraordinary status and privilege as a basis for her heavenly inheritance and ultimate endurance as a spiritual ideal.

In league with legends

In the Prologue to the Life of Saint Katherine, Capgrave explains how his source was derived from a long-lost biography originally composed in the fourth century in Greek by Katherine’s disciple Athanasius. This version was then translated into Latin and subsequently buried by a fifth-century scholar named Arrek. It was later found by a parson of Saint Pancras in London, who began to translate it into English, but died before completing the work. Capgrave describes himself coming upon the half-finished translation, which was composed in an obscure dialect that he deems

2 Duggan, ‘New Homonormativity’, p. 179.
‘dark language’ (‘derk langage’). He therefore decides to translate it into proper English, and to supplement missing details with an authoritative Latin source. The details of the obscure unfinished English version and the supplemental Latin source remain unknown, and Capgrave’s account of discovering the text in such fashion is unsubstantiated. Yet Capgrave’s history generally traces the evidence we do have: early Greek versions of Saint Katherine’s life date to the seventh and eighth centuries, but the first full account of her passion is found in an eleventh-century Latin version known as the *Vulgate*. The *Vulgate* most likely served as the source material for Jacobus de Voragine’s version in the *Legenda Aurea* (c. 1260), which was the source material for many more extant legends of the *Life* including those in the *South England Legendary*, the *Scottish Legendary*, and Caxton’s *Golden Legend*, as well as an anonymous prose version in Middle English (c. 1420). Capgrave could have drawn on a number of existing sources to compose his version, supplying his textual genealogy simply as a stylistic narrative technique. These accounts of Katherine’s life focus almost exclusively on the bureaucratic, hagiographically prosaic elements of her story: the saint’s brief time as a learned regent, her passion, and her martyrdom. Capgrave’s verse version, however, attends insistently to intimate aspects of Katherine’s life – particularly her heritage and youth, her eventual conversion to Christianity, and her mystical marriage to Christ – which frame her rejection of normative cultural values as the marker of her higher calling.

Capgrave’s *Life*, which survives in four fifteenth-century manuscripts, contains about 8,000 lines of rhyme royal verse divided into a prologue and five books. After detailing his discovery of the text, Capgrave fills the first book with details of Katherine’s birth, education, ancestry, and coronation. Katherine’s parents, King Costus and Queen Meliades, are described as being old when Katherine is born, and Capgrave compares them to other ‘geriatric’ holy parents including Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:1-18). As

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3 Capgrave, *Life*, Prologue, ll. 208-09. All modern English translations are my own. References to the Middle English text, supplied parenthetically and/or in corresponding endnotes by book and line number(s), are to Winstead’s edition (Capgrave, *Life*).
4 See Lewis, *Cult*, pp. 9-11; ‘A King’.
6 The only other versions that include these details are the Middle English prose version (c. 1420), as well as texts in the Middle Dutch tradition. On the latter texts, see: van Dijk, ‘Martyrs’; Williams-Krapp, *Legendare*, pp. 425-46.
7 See Bibliography for a list of extant manuscripts.
8 I, ll. 176-89. Joachim and Anne, also discussed here, are not named in the Bible, but feature in the apocryphal Gospel of James (1-5).
Katherine grows into adolescence, King Costus has a walled castle built for her, wherein she spends most of her time studying. Katherine eventually becomes so learned that she outwits 310 philosophers and scholars gathered by her father to challenge her. When the kingdom is left without a ruler after King Costus's death, Meliades immediately calls a parliament to confirm Katherine's claim to the throne. While the lords assent to Katherine's rule, her subjects quickly become dissatisfied with her devotion to study and lack of a husband:

‘We have a queen: she keeps to herself;  
She loves nothing but books and school.  
She lets all our enemies ride and run throughout the land,  
She is always studying and alone.  
This will bring us all to wreck and to sorrow!  
If she had a lord, all might be well[.]’

As queen, Katherine’s ambivalence towards marriage generates substantial conflict in the kingdom.

The entirety of Capgrave’s second book is devoted to debate over the need for Katherine to marry. However, Katherine maintains that she will only consider marrying a man who is peerless, all-knowing, mighty, rich but generous, fair, and most importantly, immortal. Book III describes a visit from the Virgin Mary to an old hermit named Adrian, going on to detail Katherine’s conversion and mystical marriage to Christ. On the Virgin’s instruction, Adrian breaks into Katherine’s castle, informs her that Christ has chosen her for a wife, and takes her to the desert, where they are met by the Virgin Mary. Adrian baptizes Katherine before she marries Christ, who gives her a wedding ring made of chalcedony, then instructs Adrian to teach Katherine about his Incarnation and promptly returns from whence he came. After eight days, the Virgin Mary tells Katherine that her mother has died in her absence, and that Katherine will be tortured and killed by a pagan emperor. Capgrave then introduces Maxentius, a

9 I, ll. 400-27.  
10 “We have a queene: sche comyth among no men; | Sche loveth not ellys but bookys and scole.  
| Let all oure enmyes in lond ryde or ren, | Sche is evyr in stody and evermore sole. | This wille turne us all to wrake and to dole! | But had sche a lord, yet all myth be wele” (I, ll. 862-67).  
11 II, ll. 1401-56.  
12 III, ll. 376-1002.  
13 III, ll. 1107-344.  
14 III, ll. 1430-57.
Persian emperor who came to power but was quickly deposed in Rome, now seeking Christians to persecute. The rest of Book IV details Katherine's confrontations with Maxentius after he invades Alexandria. Capgrave recounts various exchanges between Katherine, the emperor, and the fifty philosophers he gathers to debate her. She eventually convinces the philosophers of Christ's divinity and they convert, establishing Katherine's seminal Christian authority.

Book V records the numerous resultant martyrdoms: the converted philosophers are burned; Maxentius's converted wife is tortured before she is beheaded and thrown to the dogs; the empress's knight Porphirius converts, retrieves her body, and is likewise beheaded and given to the dogs. Capgrave also reveals the miracles that surround these violent deaths. The philosophers die in the fire, but their bodies are left untouched by the flames. After Maxentius has Katherine beaten and imprisoned, she is tended by angels; and after Katherine prays that God will destroy a torture wheel meant for her, a lightning bolt strikes the contraption, sending wheels and spokes flying through the air. When Katherine is finally beheaded, milk flows from her neck instead of blood and angels carry her body to Mount Sinai, where an oil font with curative powers appears. At this point, Capgrave's text ends suddenly, without the invocation to the saint asking for her favourable intercession to God that is characteristic of medieval hagiographies. This abrupt and atypical ending leaves the text, and the reader's relationship with Katherine, open-ended and mutable.

Problem child

Katherine's refusal to biologically reproduce extends beyond the characteristic idealization of virginity in medieval saints' lives to become part of Capgrave's textual preoccupation with procreation. Capgrave presents a genderqueer theory of authorship that subverts maternal imagery to imagine

15 IV, ll. 819–2059.
16 V, ll. 1415–1596.
17 V, ll. 288–308.
18 V, ll. 883–945; ll. 1303–65.
19 V, ll. 1912–52.
20 While she emphasizes the function of virginity in medieval hagiography, Winstead importantly points out that saints' lives often 'worked not to propagate enduring values of medieval Christianity, but to invest partisan views of topical issues with the authority of tradition' (p. 5). See also: Salih, Versions of Virginity; Bernau, Evans and Salih, Medieval Virginities.
textual production. For modern readers, ‘queer’ means that which falls outside the norm, alongside moments or actions that contravene normative behaviours or expectations – in this case, those specifically regarding gender – which allow for or produce transgressive results.\footnote{I follow Sedgwick’s formulation of queerness as ‘the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning, when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically’ \cite{Tendencies}, p. 8. See also: ‘Queer’ in this volume’s Appendix: p. 311.} Lee Edelman’s theorization of ‘the Child’ identifies the production of biological offspring as ‘central to the compulsory [heteronormative] narrative of reproductive futurism’.\footnote{Edelman, \textit{No Future}, p. 21, square brackets indicate my addition for clarity.} This ‘reproductive futurism’ ensures human survival and affords unending opportunities for cultural, social, and political redemption through the heterosexual reproduction of children. Each successive generation brings the opportunity for a new and more fully articulated identity, one that is ideally heteronormative. In contrast, Edelman argues that queerness is antithetical to any form of production.

Opposing the heteronormative conception of reproductive futurity, Edelman embraces antisociality, sterility, and the disruption of majoritarian social and political order. Just such a queer rejection of reproductive futurism emerges in the \textit{Life of Saint Katherine}. Katherine spends her adolescence and young adulthood alone, studying within her garden walls. Her antisociality becomes a problem when her subjects deem her rule incompetent, and demand that she marry to demonstrate proper sociability. Katherine’s refusal to take a husband, and her ultimate martyrdom, glorify her sterile existence and the end of her royal line. Her self-isolation and sterility lead to the disruption of social and political order: an unchallenged foreign power invades Alexandria and slaughters Katherine’s people. However, Katherine’s rejection of heteronormative modes of production and subsequent cultivation of cultural chaos results in her textual memorialization; she ultimately fits within a hagiographical lineage that articulates subversive and non-normative futures. Working within a literary genre that welcomes and celebrates immediate and distant futures independent of biological reproduction, Capgrave produces a text that is well suited to a queer historical archive unbound by normative conceptions of reproduction. Following Heather Love, throughout the twentieth century, these normative conceptions have been constructed via an understanding of queerness as ‘perverse, immature, sterile, [and] melancholic […] provok[ing] fears about the future [while] also recall[ing] the past’.\footnote{Love, \textit{Feeling Backward}, p. 6.} Essential to the construction
of a queer archive, ‘reading for backwardness’ finds value in ‘regressive’ or nonproductive identities deemed to be lagging behind by modernization efforts that sought to move humanity forward by abandoning those marked inferior or ‘backwards’. Katherine’s antisociality and sterility are of value to Capgrave, who works them into signs of heavenly preordination.

Before Capgrave imagines alternative futures, the Life’s extended prologue focuses on origins, beginning with the queer geneses of the text. Although Capgrave engenders Katherine’s textual existence and recapitulates her history, she most likely never actually lived. Capgrave is forthright about the fact that his account is not original, but instead, a translation of several other translations: the product of a lineage of male authorship. The first Latin translation of Katherine’s life was supposedly written by Arrek, who was so desirous to learn as much as he could of Katherine that he lived in Alexandria for twelve years: ‘[t]o know of this [Katherine's textual life] both the spring and the well’. Arrek’s hopeful characterization of Alexandria as a ‘spring’ (‘spryng’) or source lends a metaphoric layer to Capgrave’s fixation on origins. Capgrave recounts that one hundred years after Athanasius completed his Greek transcription of Katherine’s life, Arrek ‘did sow it anew, | For out of Greek he translated, | This holy life, into Latin’. The characterization of Arrek’s translation as being ‘sown’ (‘i-sowe’) draws on shared imagery of sexual intercourse and writing as acts of begetting, reinforcing an understanding of texts as offspring. Following this metaphor, Arrek’s translation retains some of the features of Athanasius’s Greek parent text, but also emerges as a unique Latin progeny.

Earlier in the Prologue, Capgrave explains the translation efforts of an anonymous priest who was very pale due to the ‘great labour he had in his life | To seek [Katherine’s] life for eighteen years’. Capgrave emphasizes the arduous physicality of finding and writing Katherine’s life, characterizing the task as a ‘labour’. The embodied nature of this textual production

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24 Ibid.
25 ‘This [what he had previously heard of Katherine] made him sekere into that londe to wende, | To know of this bothe the spryng and the welle, | If any man coude it any pleynere telle’ (Prologue, ll. 180–82).
26 ‘did it new i-sowe, | For owt of Grew he hath it fyrst runge, | This holy lyff, into Latyne tunge’ (Prologue, ll. 173–75).
27 ‘souen’: 4a. to beget; be begotten of seed’, Middle English Dictionary. ‘Sown’ is used with a sexual connotation later in Book III (ll. 637–44).
28 ‘For grete labour he had in his lyve | To seke [Katherine’s] liffe yerys thyrtene and fyve’ (Prologue, ll. 48–49).
29 ‘labour’: 4b. pain, sickness, disease; also, the active phase of an intermittent disease; ~ of birth’, Middle English Dictionary.
intensifies when the priest finds Katherine’s *Life* after receiving a vision in a dream: a well-dressed figure, holding a disintegrating book, tells the priest that he must eat it, and warns that he will not succeed in his translation if he does not comply.\(^{30}\) The priest is hesitant, countering: “‘I may in no way get them [the boards and leaves of the book] into my mouth: | My mouth is small and they are so great, | They will break my jaws and my throat’”.\(^{31}\) While this image incorporates the medieval conception of reading or learning as a sort of mastication, the priest’s anxiety and the graphic account of the way the book will affect his body inverts the process of birth: the priest’s throat becomes a birth canal, at risk of breaking or tearing.\(^{32}\) But the visionary figure is persistent, instructing the priest to “‘[r]eceive it boldly’” and “‘hide it in [his] womb’”, where “‘[i]t shall not grieve [him] neither in his back nor side’”.\(^{33}\) Finally the vision tells the priest that “‘in [his] womb it [the book] will be sweet’” (“‘in thi wombe it wyll be swete’”), which presents textual consumption as a type of incubation, threatening pain and complication, but also promising pleasure and fulfilment.\(^{34}\) In the fifteenth century, ‘womb’ (‘wombe’) was used to refer to the stomach or any bodily cavity, including the uterus.\(^{35}\) By instructing the priest to hide the book that holds the story of St Katherine in his ‘womb’, the man in the vision foregrounds a genderqueer textual birth. Additionally, the priest describes the book as ‘food’ (‘mete’) and as having ‘rotten’ (‘roten’) covers. These characterizations rely on an understanding of the book as organic, living, and susceptible to decay. Capgrave queerly humanizes the text by presenting a queer production process: a male, textual pregnancy.\(^{36}\) Over nearly 250 lines, Capgrave’s explication of the text’s complicated creation functions as a labour that results in the ‘birth’ of a new *textual* life of Saint Katherine, one that is dependent on ‘sowing’ and ‘begetting’ between men. This version of saintly femininity, which is conceived of by men and serves

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30 Prologue, l. 90.
31 ‘I may in noo wyse into my mouth hem gete: | My mouth is small and eke thei be so grete, | Thei wyll brek my chaules and my throte” (Prologue, ll. 95-97).
32 Considering gendered uses of the body in Carolingian monastic orders, Coon links the relationship between teeth or the capability for ‘masticat[ion] of the divine word’ and virility as indicated by the Benedictine Rule (*Dark Age Bodies*, pp. 88-95 [p. 88]).
33 “Receyve it boldly [...] in thi wombe it hyde | It schal not greve thee neyther in bak ne syde” (Prologue, ll. 101-03).
34 Prologue, l. 104.
35 ‘wombe’: 1a. (a) The human stomach; also *fig.* and in *fig.* context; – skin, the lining of the stomach; 5a. (a) The human uterus, womb; also *fig.*; specif. the womb of the Virgin Mary; also, the vaginal canal, vagina’, *Middle English Dictionary*.
36 Prologue, ll. 94-98.
as a model for both men and women, results in a textual object that modern readers can understand as both androgynous and genderqueer, further establishing a queer historical lineage.

In order to make Katherine’s life more ‘openly known to women and men’, Capgrave must endure one more stage of textual labour and deliver Katherine’s life from the nearly incomprehensible ‘dark language’ of the anonymous priest. But before ending the Prologue, Capgrave presents his own beginnings: ‘If you wish to know who I am | My country is Norfolk, of the town of Lynne | [...] God gave me grace never to cease | To follow the steps of my fathers before | Which to the rule of Augustine were sworn’. Capgrave provides an abundance of originary information, his own included, establishing the text as one concerned with genealogies on multiple levels. Capgrave interjects frequently throughout the remainder of his text. Reference to the self signals a shift in late-medieval narration and challenges previous modes of writing and hagiographic authorship, in which authors would often remain anonymous to keep focus on the holy subjects of their texts. Capgrave’s uninhibited voice brings life to the vernacular composition of the Life, imbuing it with a distinct personality. Additionally, Capgrave’s inclusion of himself in his text serves as a sort of genetic marking that reinforces and strengthens his hereditary ties to both text and narrative.

While Capgrave presents Katherine as an exceptional figure worthy of veneration, he also highlights her scholarly endeavours and touts her continuous rejection of various social expectations, often doing so in personal terms. For instance, in his prologue to Book III, Capgrave calls for Katherine’s support and comfort: ‘I apply myself directly to this work; | Thou blessed maiden, comfort me in this. | Because thou were so learned and also a clerk, | Clerks must love thee – it stands to reason’. Capgrave here seems to personally identify with Katherine on a scholarly level. This reinforcement of his respect for her scholastic achievement transgresses the ideal gendering typical of medieval literature and social thought, that would

37 Therfor wyl I theeserve so as I can | And make thi lyffe, that more openly it schalle | Be know abowe of woman and of man’ [‘Therefore I will serve you as well as I can | And make your life more plainly understood | among women and men’] (Prologue, ll. 44-46).
38 ‘If ye wyll wete what that I am | My cuntré is Northfolke, of the town of Lynne; | […] Godd gave me grace nevyr for to blynne | To follow the steppes of my faderes before | Whch to the rewle of Austen were swore’ (Prologue, ll. 239-45).
39 See: Coakley, Women; Kieckhefer, Unquiet Souls.
40 ‘I dresse me now streyt onto this werk; | Thow blyssyd may, comfort thou me in this. | Because thou were so lerned and swech a clerk, | Clerkes must love thee – resoun forsoth it is’ (III, ll. 36-39).
associate reason with men and emotion with women. Capgrave's account of Katherine's complicated origins (both as a 'historical' character and as a physical book) establishes a genderqueer beginning for a narrative and legacy that offers non-normative possibilities for conceiving of production.

Institutional privilege

Throughout the body of the text, Capgrave upholds conservative social institutions such as marriage and childbearing, but simultaneously glorifies Katherine's rejection of them. Karen Winstead points out that Capgrave addressed these kinds of 'complex social and philosophical issues' for a broad audience of readers, as evidenced in Book II during a long debate about 'a woman's fitness to rule' which 'sets forth contradictory yet equally compelling arguments about government, tradition, and gender, and [...] concludes with no clear-cut winner'. Capgrave's effective presentation of these issues critically relies on Katherine's occupation of intersecting social positions. While she is marginalized because of her gender and her religion, her inherited nobility and her social class afford political belonging that facilitates her extraordinary refusals of gender norms. Katherine's classed and gendered position in the ruling elite demonstrates her value within and for dominant cultural systems. Her refusal of prescribed modes of marriage and reproduction in favour of alternative enactments are shown to be heavenly ordained, and thus, indisputable. Taken with Emma Campbell's understanding of spiritual marriage as 'an attempt to think beyond the human limits of kinship and desire to glimpse other – potentially queer – alternatives', Capgrave's Life provides an opportunity to consider the role that social privilege plays in the enactments of gender/queer alternatives. Capgrave presents Katherine as a complex figure who assimilates various attributes of sanctity broadly and the extant legendary Katherine texts specifically, ventriloquizing Katherine's privileged — if non-conformist — voice in order to disperse various theological ruminations. This layered presentation of character is complicated by Katherine's refusal of the expectations placed

41 Winstead, 'Introduction' in Capgrave, Life, pp. 7-8.
42 In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw theorized intersectionality as a means to examine the relationships between socio-economic and socio-cultural categories and identities, and thereby analyse how multiple identities, including gender, class, and race, interact in experiences of exclusion and marginalization: 'Demarginalizing'.
43 Campbell, Gift, p. 96. See also Salih's discussion (pp. 66-97) of the 'plurality of identity positions' (p. 67) offered by the topos of sponsa Christi in Versions of Virginity.
upon her, and the immediate physical persecution but eventual (eternal) glory this occasions. Ultimately, Katherine leverages her privileged positions of ruler and scholar to achieve even greater honour as a bride of Christ and virgin saint, securing her future – made possible by inherited social positions – as one of the most popular and venerated figures of the late medieval period.

Katherine’s ‘duty’ to her people and country is marriage to a suitable consort and the subsequent production of an heir to ensure continuity of rulership, a textual detail that foregrounds her tenuous access to power. Capgrave depicts her uncle, the Duke of Tyre, as an antagonistic force who fails to understand Katherine’s fate and future sanctity, instead equating her political and general worth with her ability and willingness to reproduce. He chides: “What benefit was it to us that you were born | If you will not do right as they did – | I mean your father and mother before you?” 44 While Capgrave’s reader knows Katherine’s ultimate destiny as bride of Christ, the Duke can only understand Katherine’s purpose within the terms of biological reproduction, or rather, reproductive futurism. By reminding her that she would not be in a privileged position on the throne had her parents not taken such care in raising her, and more importantly, in producing her, the Duke presents reproduction as the critical function of Katherine’s inheritance. The saint’s refusal of the requirements of her rank and gender communicates her political inadequacy – reinforcing the notion that women do not belong in politics – but she adapts and eventually relies on those very institutions to build and foster her exceptional status as virgin martyr.

Katherine’s advisors continue to wield power over her, emphasizing the political impact of matrimony and insisting that Katherine’s retention of power is entirely dependent on marriage. Meliades avers that her daughter’s desire to marry only a man who is immortal, rich, generous, and so forth is perilous since no such man exists, while implying that failure to marry and reproduce spells certain deposition. 45 Up to this point, Meliades is the only other woman in the text, and Capgrave’s portrayal of her ‘proper’ enactment of female nobility starkly contrasts with Katherine’s rejection of it. 46 When Katherine reasserts her intention to remain unmarried, Meliades declares that she ‘bewails’ (‘wayle’) the day Katherine was born,

44 “What boote was it to us that ye were born | If that ye wyll not do ryght as thei dede – | I mene youre fadyr and modyr yow beforne?” (II, ll. 1065-67).
45 II, ll. 1014-29.
46 Meliades, daughter of the king of Armenia, is characterized as acceptably regal and exceptionally beautiful (I, ll. 218-23). She is initially anxious about her ability to conceive, and subsequently about Katherine’s opposition to marriage (I, ll. 176-79).
foreseeing that Katherine’s stubbornness will bring about her own early death.47 Katherine’s refusal to marry thus effectively kills off both her existing and potential biological familial lines. Reflecting Campbell’s argument that queerness emerges from ‘the orthodox ideological aims of hagiographic texts which use marriage as a metaphor for divine union’, Katherine trades a normative conception of feminine power, dependent on marriage and reproduction, for a genderqueer power made possible through virginity and martyrdom.48

Katherine deflects all arguments for the necessity of her marriage in favour of her solitary academic life. Capgrave’s portrayal of Katherine as a distracted ruler provides a nuanced presentation of saintliness. She is faced with an ethical dilemma requiring a choice between serving her people and serving her own desires. At this point in the text, Katherine knows nothing of Christianity. Combined with her rejection of marriage and political obligation, her decision to remain enclosed in her study appears particularly selfish, further complicating her later exemplary, saintly status. After hearing the first argument urging her to wed at a special parliament organized for just that purpose, Katherine admits silently to herself:

‘If I conceal my decision [to remain a virgin scholar], then shall I fall
Angering all my people here [...] 
Yet I greatly wonder why my heart is set 
On a point that I cannot abandon,
And yet it is against my own law, 
Which I am sworn to keep and to defend.’49

Katherine explicitly acknowledges that she is breaking the law by refusing to marry and acting in a way that does not best serve her people. This self-interest translates to a lack of governing proficiency and signals that Katherine is out of place in the political realm. Capgrave’s detailed account of Katherine’s refusal to marry for the good of her people, despite the knowledge that it would be just and lawful, suggests individual agency. But as a future virgin saint, marrying a man is a step that Katherine cannot

47 II, l. 1040–50 (1040).
48 Campbell, *Gift*, p. 96
49 “‘If I concele my counsell | than schall I falle | In indignacyon of all my puple here; | If I denye her askyng in this halle | And tell no cause, I put hem more in dwere [...] | Yet wondyr I sore that my hert is sett | On swech a poynte that I cannot let, | And yet it is agens myne owyn lawe, | Whech I am swore to kepe and to defende’” (II, l. 169–77).
Katherine's dilemma is resolved with an alternative marriage to the unlikely man she had long ago anticipated. Her mystical union with Christ affords her power in the eternal realm and absolves her of her selfish conceit: Christ chose Katherine for his wife before she was even born, so of course she desired to remain unwed. Katherine's unwillingness to compromise, as well as its effects—her poor diplomacy—are reconfigured as divine will.

Katherine's earthly privilege—determined by her socio-political status, virtue, and beauty—marks her for marriage to a high-calibre human husband, while her spiritual exceptionality leads to her mystical marriage to Christ. When the Virgin Mary instructs the hermit Adrian to travel to Alexandria to convert Katherine, she tells him that although Katherine's council laboriously used “many methods and strategies” (“many a wyle, | And many a mene”) to convince her to marry, they failed. The Virgin reveals that she herself, however, had “ordained [Katherine] a lord | To whom she shall in purity agree to be married”. The Virgin continues, telling Adrian about Katherine's impressive lineage, honour, and virtue as well as her goodness, skill, and pedigree: “[Y]ou [shall] know she is a queen – | Rich, royal, wise, and also fair, | For in this world there have been none like her”. The Virgin Mary praises Katherine's inherited wealth and status, wisdom, and beauty, thereby identifying Katherine as an idealized and privileged model of femininity. Earlier in her conversation with Adrian, the Virgin refers to Katherine as a ‘sweet flower’ (‘swete floure’), also noting Katherine's physical appeal. An emphasis on feminine beauty mirrors the reasons given by Katherine's advisors for her earthly marriage: her beauty is reworked within the context of mystical betrothal, further solidifying the substitution of marriage to an earthly prince for marriage to a heavenly one. When the Virgin notes that Katherine is childless, instead of lamenting like Katherine's advisors, she substitutes religious devotion and piety for biological children, telling Adrian, “[Katherine] has no children, neither has she any heir, | For if she believes, she shall love better the hair shirt |

50 While numerous married women were canonized and venerated, the overtly 'saintly' parts of their lives only began after the deaths—or sometimes, conversions—of their husbands. Some married couples maintained chaste marriages as an act of devotion, but often after having children. See Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*; Elliot, *Spiritual Marriage*; Karras, *Sexuality*, pp. 36–78.

51 III, ll. 192-94.

52 “For I myselve have ordeynd hir a lorde | To whom sche schall in clennesse well acorde” (III, ll. 195-96).

53 “Fyrst of alle, thu whyte sche is a qween – | A rych, a reall, a wys, and eke a fayre, | For in this worlde swech no moo there been” (III, ll. 204-206).

54 III, l. 201.
Than any fine linens after that she [will] be drawn | Unto my service and to my Son’s law”’. Winstead points out the double meaning of the word ‘reynes’ (‘fine linen’): in addition to referencing the fine cloth of Rennes, Brittany, the term ‘can also mean “the male generative organ” (MED, ‘reine’ 2b)’. This innuendo draws out Katherine’s modification of earthly marriage into something chastely spiritual. Christ’s ‘law’ (‘lawe’) is shown to be more alluring than any temporal cultural or social expectation and so Capgrave renders blasphemous any possibility other than Katherine’s spiritual marriage to Christ. Although Katherine’s conversion marks her as a minority figure within pagan territory, it also signals the assumption of an extremely powerful position with the dominant, Christian majority of her late-medieval readership.

Katherine’s rejection of earthly marriage may subvert expectations of her position, but she subsequently attains spiritual power through martyrdom. Katherine’s enduring popularity surpasses that of many other saints. During Capgrave’s lifetime, Katherine’s cult was one of the most popular in England and parts of Europe; in contemporaneous texts including the Book of Margery Kempe, Katherine is often named as one of Christ’s primary saintly spouses. Katherine’s social position required her engagement with the world around her – she had property to manage and family to quarrel with – bolstering her relatability amongst a medieval readership. In her textual afterlives, Katherine’s power and character is shown to be multivalent and familiar. After all, by presenting virginal and holy women, Capgrave and other hagiographers sought not to inspire readers to direct imitation, but instead to motivate them to be better Christians. By providing Katherine with a suitable bridegroom immediately after her rejection of the pleas of her advisors and mother, Capgrave proffers the institution of marriage itself as a force for social stability. Katherine’s refusal of an earthly husband is thus affirmed because this allows her union with Christ and her participation in the institution of marriage. This narrative foretells a familiar modern impetus amongst segments of the queer community that value institutional recognition for its ability to confer existential validity and social legibility. This risks creating a hierarchy of queer lives that is determined by heteronormative delineations of worth and efficacy. For instance, the same legal systems

55 “[Katherine] has no chylde, ne sche hath non ayre, | For if sche leve, sche schall love bettyr the hayre | Than any reynes aftyr that sche be drawe | Onto my servyse and to my Sones lawe” (III, ll. 207-10).
56 ‘Notes’ to Capgrave, Life, p. 299. Such a pun would not be surprising in this narrative, whose saints are hardly naïve.
57 See Kempe, Book, I, ll. 1158-63.
that permit same sex married couples equal recognition also maintain
discrimination against trans people within medical settings.58 Ultimately
Katherine's mystical marriage and resultant martyrdom remove her from
her position of political power, to instead reinscribe the transcendental
power of marriage as a cultural institution. That marriage is thereby shown
to be better than independence or other familial relationships is a vital
development for Capgrave's contemporary communities of East Anglian
women that found Katherine to be an attractive model of spiritual devotion.

From her privileged position, Capgrave’s Katherine tests feminine pe-
ripheries by recasting the roles of wife and mother as genderqueer spiritual
engagements. This results in her martyrdom, an outcome favourable for a
saint, but not particularly desirable or institutionally advisable for fifteenth-
century English readers. Capgrave navigates any problematic disjuncture
between literal and figurative marriage by promoting the significance of
the institution itself, regardless of the object of betrothal. Katherine is an
exemplary saintly model, whose exceptionality is well established and
contingent upon her marriage with Christ himself, thus rendering her
status, and her refusals, unattainable for a ‘common’ medieval reader.59
Capgrave’s emphasis on the institution of marriage makes Katherine’s
position as bride of Christ ordinary, but the supernatural identity of her
spouse reinforces her saintly exceptionality. By centring his narrative on
Katherine’s rejection of one marriage in favour of another and using the
terms of biological reproduction to describe textual production, Capgrave
shows that institutions endure but can be enacted otherwise.

Capgrave’s text presents an ambivalent late-medieval relationship between
gender and social position. The text reinforces the importance of marriage
and biological reproduction as cultural cornerstones, because the viability
of mystical marriage and textual production as substitutions applies only to
Katherine. Her privileged position – marked by nobility, virginity, femininity,
and eventually sanctity – allows her to avoid the social expectations of
marriage and reproduction, and rework them to suit her desires, as well as the
will of God and the salvific need of a medieval religious populace. Although
Katherine transgresses cultural norms, she eventually upholds the supremacy
of traditional cultural institutions, gradually securing her own sanctity.

59 For the medieval sponsa Christi tradition, which cast Christ as a bridegroom preferable to
any other, see McNamer, Affective Meditation, p. 31. Katherine’s nuptials represent a successful
alternative to normative marriage, unrestricted by powers of the state and unconcerned with
biological production.
Capgrave’s Katherine evidences a history of complex genderqueer ideologies in which contradictory and competing modes of existing are enabled, and widely accepted, through access to power and homonormative praxis. Duggan theorizes homonormativity within the context of neoliberal western politics and capitalist motivation: heteronormative structures are upheld by queer individuals seeking acceptance by dominant society. Similarly, Capgrave’s purpose in upholding dominant heteronormative institutions seems to be in the interest of maintaining domestic normalcy or relevancy, as exemplified by Katherine’s popularity amongst a mainstream medieval public.

**Afterlives**

Time tends to be measured in terms of progress; a historical move ‘towards modernity’ signals cultural advancement, while individual ‘success’ relies on professional and personal advancement. Queer temporality, in contrast, encompasses temporal movements deemed regressive or unsuccessful, operating ‘off the designated biopolitical schedule of reproductive heterosexuality’. Capgrave’s Virgin Mary – a figure defined by her contradictory and remarkable status as a virgin mother – offers Katherine an alternative to reproductive heterosexuality, one that destabilizes normative biopolitical schedules. The Virgin Mary tells Adrian exactly how to court Katherine in her name: “Say in just this way: ‘The Lady both mother and maiden | Greets her well’” and identifies herself in queer terms: she is both maiden and spouse, inhabiting a sexuality unencumbered by normative modes of reproduction. This link between Mary and Katherine is further reinforced by Adrian’s establishment of the Virgin Mary as a model for Katherine.

When Katherine challenges Adrian’s assertion that she can produce ‘lineage’ (‘lynage’) while still remaining chaste, he explains his Lord’s relationship to ‘his Lady’, noting that Mary is both Christ’s mother but also a virgin. This relationship is confusing for Katherine, but Adrian reassures her:

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60 Freeman (*Time Binds*, p. 3) explains this concept as ‘chrononormativity,’ whereby ‘institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts’.

61 McCallum and Tuhkanen, ‘Introduction’, sp. 10. The authors note that ‘queerness has always been marked by its untimely relation to socially shared temporal phases, whether individual (developmental) or collective (historical). More often than not, this connection remains defined in negative or hurtful ways, ways that reinforce queerness as a failure to achieve the norm’ (pp. 9-10).

62 “Sey ryght thus: ‘The Lady both modyr and mayde Gretyth hir well’”(III, ll. 183-84).

63 III, ll. 519-24.
'You shall have her Lord, who is also her Son –
A gracious lineage that may naught fail,
Marvellous descendants to learn of if you like:
He is her Lord, she is His mother;
He is her Son and she is also a maiden;
He made her, she bore Him in her womb[.]'\textsuperscript{64}

By referring to Jesus as Mary's 'Lord', Adrian indicates a noble bond of marriage, while Katherine's entrance into a familial relationship with the pair is suggested by the invocation of Katherine's descendants. Family, in this sense, is expansive and fluid, presenting another moment of queer recognition for modern readers.

Katherine, however, remains unconvinced that anyone could populate a lineage and remain chaste. Capgrave, intervening to narrate the scene, describes her as 'sore marred in mynde' (shocked) and details her physical reaction after hearing Adrian's promise of virginal procreation – she loses colour and finds herself in a 'trauns' (trance), unable to determine where she is and completely changed in 'kynde' (appearance).\textsuperscript{65} Katherine's physical change is juxtaposed against a simultaneous out-of-body experience: she feels transported to another world. She abandons her present self and emerges in a future space, removed from her temporal, political, and social bindings. Capgrave explains that she finds herself 'betwyx two thingys', reinforcing her liminal position.\textsuperscript{66} Ultimately, Katherine recognizes that Adrian's offer can fulfill her desires: '[Adrian's] words have guided now full heavily her thought | That she shall have a thing long desired | [...] so sore is her heart with this love i-fyred, | It shall no more, she determined, be polluted by the world'.\textsuperscript{67} Katherine's focus is drawn to a location outside her own worldly and polluted temporality. She chooses a future that removes her from the spatiotemporal moment she inhabits, where the possibility of producing a viable line while also remaining chaste is incomprehensible. This choice is prompted by her heart, which 'burns' with love ('with this love i-fyred'). José Esteban Muñoz conceptualizes a kind of queer futurity that

\textsuperscript{64} "Ye schull have hir Lord and hir Sone eke – | A gracyous lynage that may noght mys, | A mervelyous kynrode to lerne if ye leke: | He is hir Lorde, sche His modyr is; | He is hir Sone and sche mayde iwys; | He made hir, sche bare Him in hir wombe" (III, ll. 603-08).

\textsuperscript{65} III, ll. 610-16.

\textsuperscript{66} III, ll. 617.

\textsuperscript{67} '[Adrian's] wordes have enclyned now ful sore hir thouwte | That sche schall have a thing long desyred [...] so sore is hir hert with this love i-fyred, | It schall no more, sche cast, with the world be myred' (III, ll. 624-28).
takes account of the ways that ‘[c]ertain performances of queer citizenship contain [...] an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present’. Although Katherine exemplifies the homonormative valorization of marriage and reproduction, the genderqueer production of her text, involving various male hagiographers taking gestational roles as they produce her (their) textual legacies, challenges the heteronormative status quo and reveals the ‘kernel’ of potential for queer lives that Muñoz denotes and queer histories that I posit here. Capgrave (and others) birth the textual record of Katherine’s life.

Further developing the queer temporality of lineage without procreation, the Virgin Mary assures Adrian of Katherine’s divine destiny as a martyr: “She shall have ever as glorious an end | As any woman that lived here as a human”. Before Katherine has even begun her spiritual life – she is yet to actually convert – the Virgin Mary focuses on its end. That Katherine’s death is to be as glorious as any other ‘woman’ amongst humans serves to further reinforce her narrative position as a gendered ideal, better suited to a life after death. Her desire to remove herself from the quotidian world ultimately convinces her to convert and to marry Christ. There is no real ‘evidence’ or persuasive material that encourages her conversion. Katherine does not even know any Church doctrine – Jesus instructs Adrian to teach her after she has already married him. The overwhelming message surrounding the wedding of Jesus and Katherine is that it portends her death.

Immediately after their wedding, Jesus tells her:

‘My angels shall honour you with a service, 
As a reminder that we are wedded together. 
There has never been seen yet here such funeral office 
Of any saint that died on earth. 
This shall I do for your love dear[.]’

Christ’s wedding gift to Katherine is a funeral service. Capgrave’s focus on death before, during, and after the mystical marriage challenges the

68 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 49
69 “She schall have eke as gloryous a hende | As evyr had woman that lyved here in kende” (III, ll. 237-38).
70 III, ll. 1324-27.
71 “Myn aungellis schull honour yow with a servyse, | In tokne that we be wedded in fere. | There was nevyr sey yet swech funeral offyse | Of no seynt that in erde deyed here. | This schal I do for youre love dere” (III, ll. 1338-42).
heteronormative, reproductive goals of marriage to instead inscribe alternative modes of futurity, such as queer and genderqueer textual communities.

Re-evaluation of normative modes of production that are inherently progressive is crucial to the establishment and cultivation of a queer archive and historical genealogy. Carolyn Dinshaw theorizes a ‘touching across time’, where, she posits, ‘queers can make new relations, new identifications, new communities with past figures who elude resemblance to us but with whom we can be connected partially by virtue of shared marginality, queer positionality’.72 Capgrave’s hagiographic celebration of Katherine’s non-normative modes of procreation and marriage not only speaks to the spiritual and temporal alterity of Christian medieval readers but to the future of twenty-first-century queer communities as they seek to establish a historical archive. The expansion of a (gender)queer past works to validate a (gender)queer present by establishing relevance and permanence through recognition. The close examination of the mutability and active construction of supposedly stable social and religious structures such as marriage and family disrupts modern notions of simple and automatic cultural belonging, promoting a multitude of queer temporalities, unbound by normative notions of progress. Crucially, such archive building must not only recognize queer marginality, but also the various intersectional privileges that facilitate culturally acceptable transgression throughout history. Capgrave’s teleological focus in his fourteenth-century Life of Saint Katherine presents a kind of cultural chaos that subverts but does not ultimately destabilize conservative social institutions. Social status affords privileged access to various (gender)queer possibilities, for medieval saints as well as modern subjects.

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CAITLYN MCLoughlin received her PhD in English literature from The Ohio State University in 2019. Her dissertation examined the relationship between community, sexuality and devotional practice in late-medieval writings about holy women. She currently works in the Department of Access and Equity at the University of New South Wales, promoting literacy and university enrolment among equity students. In 2021 she will commence a postdoctoral project at the Centre for the History of Emotions at The University of Western Australia where she will continue her current research examining identity, sexuality and illness in medieval religious writing and late-twentieth-century pandemic literature.