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Hali Meiðhad: Normalizing the *Sponsae Christi*

Sharon E. Rhodes

The Middle English sermon on virginity known as both *Hali Meiðhad* and *Hali Meidenhad*[1] belongs to a variety of traditions including misogamous literature, misogynous literature, Old English homilies, virginity literature, and literature for the instruction of anchoresses. Because of this diverse heritage, *Hali Meiðhad* is unique among medieval text despite the fact that its author drew heavily on a variety of Latin sources.[2] Generally misogamous texts,[3] such as *The Golden Book of Marriage* and the speech attributed to Heloise in Peter Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum*, addressed a male audience. *Hali Meiðhad* draws on this misogamous tradition yet addresses a female audience. The misogynistic tradition also informs *Hali Meiðhad*, as it does most medieval literature, yet the misogyny of *Hali Meiðhad* is only implicit and ideological. Additionally, like the Old English homilies of Wulfstan, *Hali Meiðhad* employs alliteration, parataxis, and polysyndeton to relate spiritual ideas to "quotidian" ones—such as the presumed material desires of women—for the sake of an unlearned audience (Robertson 152, 162). Yet while

1 Many of my sources use the title *Hali Meidenhad*. However, as I am using Millet's edition I will use the title she does: *Hali Meiðhad*.

2 Bella Millet has determined a Latin source for nearly every passage of *Hali Meiðhad*. See her edition for more information on these sources.

3 Misogamous texts are those which argue against marriage, often as an inconvenience, but also as a serious distraction from righteous living.

Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* addressed the general laity, *Hali Meiðhad* clearly addresses a devoutly religious female audience: *meidens*[4] who had renounced or were seriously considering renouncing the world and consecrating themselves to Christ.[5]

To date, *Hali Meiðhad* has not been the primary subject of many literary analyses; R. W. Chambers cites the sermon in passing in his 1932 essay, "On the Continuity of English Prose from Alfred to More and His School," as do most books and articles on the *Ancrene Wisse,* a rule book for anchoresses. However, only recently have scholars given *Hali Meiðhad* any individual attention and, with the exception of Bella Millet, only insofar as they see the sermon advancing the state of women in a decidedly patriarchal society (xcv). Despite this lack of concentrated attention, the reactions of other scholars have varied significantly. N. F. Blake, for instance, summarizes the work as simply "in praise of female chastity" whereas Sister Juliana Dusel describes *Hali Meiðhad* as "a vicious diatribe which exaggerates the vexations of wedded life in order to show virginity's superiority" (35; 123). On the other hand, Julie Hassel sees in *Hali Meiðhad* "a vision of women's power and autonomy," and Elizabeth Robertson sees an ultimately positive sermon that "[establishes] a spiritual model for women that is rooted in an understanding of the pressures and attractions of everyday life and then uses these insights as a guide to transcendence" (1; EE 93). Perhaps because they were among the first to give *Hali Meiðhad* undivided attention, the latter two analyses are the most problematic.

Both Hassel and Robertson stretch to interpret *Hali Meiðhad* as a far more liberating sermon than it is. For instance, Hassel considers *Hali Meiðhad* misogamistic, and, ultimately, not misogynistic (49). Similarly, Robertson argues that "because of its criticisms of secular marriage, *Hali Meidenhad* perhaps is more appropriately labeled misogamistic rather than misogynistic" (EE 92). However, these two arguments do not stand up to scrutiny because they disregard the

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4 Though technically the Middle English word *meiden* can refer to male virgins as well as female ones, *Hali Meiðhad* addresses only members of the three female states: virgin, widow, or wife.

5 *Sponsa Christi* is Latin and means "bride of Christ," nuns and anchoresses are *sponsae Christi*, but so too is the Church, see discussion below.

various traditions of the informing texts. Especially in medieval writing, misogyny and misogamy are not mutually exclusive, and in misogamist texts addressed to men, such as the *Historia Calamitatum* and the *Golden Book on Marriage*, the two appear to go hand in hand. While *Hali Meiðhad* is not specifically misogynistic—the author does seem to feel concern for the condition in which many secular women lived—a long tradition of misogynistic medical and spiritual views of women informs the whole of the author's argument against marriage. Moreover, the fact that "women were often seen as a distraction from, if not a threat to, the orderliness of the religious life" undermines any argument that the author had "a vision of women's power" (Gunn 37; Hassel 1). Nevertheless, the author of *Hali Meiðhad* goes farther than his contemporaries He endeavors to do much more than praise maidens in arguing against marriage; he offers them a spiritual alternative wherein they may become the wives their society expects, subject to all the demands of secular married women, albeit fewer of the physical risks.

Sponsae Christi in medieval thought and literature

The concept of *Sponsae Christi*, a Latin term meaning "bride of Christ" used in reference to nuns, anchoresses and the Church itself, originated in the early days of Christianity. Many medieval authors used and discussed this idea, particularly in addressing the consecrated virgin, but also in other contexts.

Medieval medical theory, based largely on the works of Aristotle, is inextricably linked to the Church's opinion of women's spiritual potential. Aristotle posited that the soul had "nutritive, sensitive or appetitive, and reasonable faculties," seeing "women's souls as deficient in all three aspects but especially in the faculty of reason" (Robertson, EE 32). Accordingly, in medieval medical theory, "a woman is defined by her incompleteness," and it was believed that women "by nature sought . . . union with" or completion by "the male" (Robertson, MM 144, 142). Women's perceived desires and innate deficiencies necessitated that a man "on hire streoneð" (on her procreate,[6] 19). Robertson posits that "the insatiability of feminine desire . . . permeated medieval

6 Unless otherwise noted, Middle English, Old English, and Latin phrases are translated by author.

thought and literature and reinforced male fear of female sexuality" (Robertson, MM 147). These axioms "led commentators to argue that women existed in a condition of perpetual desire," which explains in large part the urgency with which the author of *Hali Meiðhad* presents the idea of Christ as a fully functioning medieval husband (Robertson, MM 147, 151). Indeed, this fear seems to motivate the author of *Hali Meiðhad* who strives to place all women, celibate or otherwise, in a fulfilling sexual relationship under the assumption that without such a relationship, "weak, changeable, willful, irrational" women will "driue adun swireuorð wiðuten ikepunge deope into helle" (fall down headlong without restraint deep into hell) through the sin of fornication (Robertson, EE 37; 12).

With the exception of early Christianity, the Church distrusted "relationships between men and women . . . not because men were not in control of their lusts, but because a woman was always seen to be a source of temptation, a threat to the purity of men by her mere presence" (Chewning 116). Elliot suggests that the literalization of the *sponsa Christi* motif allowed the Church to force virgins into the "restricted lifestyle of the secular matron" and "the passive role of the female in the normal sexual relationship" (Elliot 31; Bugge 106). This effectively made those who might have been "autonomous virgins into dependent brides" (Elliot 31). Cate Gunn notes that "following the Fourth Lateran Council, it was necessary that women wanting to pursue a religious vocation did so within an established order, but little provision was made for" those without the means or inclination to enter a convent or anchorhold (39). However, although "the Church was anxious to impose order and control on women, and the curia wanted existing, male orders to take responsibility for women," many male religious viewed women "as a threat to their salvation" (Gunn 39).

In her article "Strict Active Enclosure and Its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience (ca. 500–1100)," Jane Tibbets Schulenberg notes that "in contrast to their continental sisters, Anglo-Saxon female religious of this early period seem to have been relatively free of the trend to restrictive cloistering" that she charts on the continent (65). Not until after the Norman Conquest and the reforms of the twelfth and early thirteenth century, "would abbesses

and nuns in Britain feel the influence of reform ideology with its emphasis on monastic uniformity and strict bishop/abbot controlled enclosure" (Schulenberg 65–6). Schulenberg concludes that "in large part, the basic rationale for narrow enclosure seems to have been the desire of controlling women's sexuality through enforced isolation" (79). Consequently, "an anchorhold" could not, as Robertson argues, "offer[] a woman privacy, autonomy, and the opportunity to develop her mind" because "the anchorhold was a place defined and strictly controlled by men, and anchoresses were subject to frequent visits from priests and bishops" (Robertson, EE 30, 24). The same seems to hold for other modes of female religious life because "women in religious houses always required the presence of men, as lay brothers for practical help and, more importantly, as clerics for pastoral support and the administration of the sacraments" (Gunn 38). Although Chewning argues that "the medieval religious celibate woman" chose "not to be acted upon by masculine power," no woman could exist within the orthodox Church without submitting, in some way, to the patriarchy (129). Additionally, as evinced by the existence of the *Ancrene Wisse* and the Katherine Group, including *Hali Meiðhad*, women depended on men for reading material, which generally had to be translated or composed for them.

Although in many forms of Christian gnosis (sects that did not follow the doctrine of the established Church), both male and female virgins could be the *sponsae Christi*, within the orthodox Church of the middle ages "the unsullied (virgin) bride of Christ is" either, metaphorically, "the Church or soul" or, literally, "the virginal woman or nun" (Bugge 60–66). The idea of the virgin or nun at the bride of Christ or *sponsa Christi* gave way to the inclusion of nuptial rites in the consecration ceremonies of virgins as well as a great deal of literature on female virginity beginning with the Church Fathers.

The style and traditions employed in *Hali Meiðhad*

One of the main projects of medieval literature was creative refurbishment, so it should be recognized that authors drew from various traditions and one another's styles. There are specific connections between *Hali Meiðhad* and other medieval texts, especially,

Wulfstan's sermons, St. Jerome's letter *Ad Eustochium*, Theophrastus's *The Golden Book on Marriage*, and Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum*.

Scholars consider *Hali Meiðhad* a part of and "the thematic keynote" to the Katherine Group, a group of texts which includes a number of devotional works, guides for the female religious and female saints' lives (Bugge 87). According to Dorothy Bethurum, the saints' lives of the Katherine Group, which "are strikingly alike in diction, rhythm, and the use of alliteration," contrast sharply in style with *Hali Meiðhad*; yet, like the rest of the Katherine Group, *Hali Meiðhad* is written in "rhythmic prose" or "rhythmical alliteration": a liminal space between poetry and prose characterized by the frequent use of alliterative phrases, rhyme, and other features more commonly associated with poetry (553; Dahood 17; Blake 120). While Bethurum maintains that *Hali Meiðhad* uses alliteration irregularly and lacks something in rhythm, the alliteration and rhythm are, nevertheless, conspicuous (557). For example, the sentence fragment "þe leaðieð þe ant dreaieð with hare procunges to fleslich fulðen" (incites you and draws you with their incitements to fleshly filth) contains both rhyme and an alliterative phrase (1).

A close reading of *Hali Meiðhad* shows that it abounds with alliterative phrases, some of which link semantic themes throughout the text and others that occur only once. Both types emphasize the author's main points. One such theme, marked by alliteration in "m," links lifelong virginity to temporal and eternal reward as in the following words and phrases: *meiðhades menske* (virginity's honor; 7, 13, 23); *meiðhades mihte* (virginity's virtue; 9, 10); *mede* (reward; 3, 6, 14) and *marheȝeue* (morning gift; 20). Another semantic theme, marked by alliteration in "w," links world (3, 7, 18) *wif* (6, 13, 15) and *were* (men; 18) with *wa* (woe; 18), *wundi* (to wound; 7) and *wac wil* (weak will; 7). A third theme, marked by alliteration in "f," connects flesh with both filth and the devil as in the phrases: *fleshliches fulthen* (fleshly filth; 11, 13, 23), *flesches fulthe* (flesh's filth; 22), and *feondes fondunge* (fiend's temptation; 23, 24).

Although *Hali Meiðhad*, as Bethurum asserts, may be less regularly rhythmic than other texts in the Katherine Group, it nevertheless contains elements of the poetic rhythm that has characterized English prose since the Old English period and authors like Wulfstan. English

rhythmic prose derives from the native Germanic verse-style consisting of four-beat alliterative half-lines such as those that make up the epic poem of Beowulf (Bethurum 553). Late in the Anglo-Saxon period, prose authors began to incorporate elements of Old English poetry into their orations. Wulfstan's sermons, particularly, represent the retrofitting of Germanic verse-style for use in prose. His sermons contain some lines that could work as poetry, and many of the sentences contain two or three words with alliterating stressed elements, the hallmark of Old English poetic lines.

Alliterative similarities also connect *Hali Meiðhad* to Wulfstan's sermons. Wulfstan, Bishop of Worcester and Archbishop of York in the eleventh century and a well-known Anglo-Saxon homilist, wrote for a general and uneducated laity; in his sermons, he "connects divine sayings with the literal things of this world" with "affective techniques" remarkably similar to those of *Hali Meiðhad*: parataxis, alliteration, solid quotidian imagery (Robertson, EE 162). The following portion of Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* exhibits such "affective techniques":

> beorgan us georne wið þone weallendan bryne helle wites, 7[7] geearnian us þa mærða 7 þa myrða þe God hæfð gegearwod þam þe his willan on worolde gewyrcað. [Protect us well against the surging fire of hell torments and let us deserve the glories and the joys that God has prepared for us so that his will on earth is worked.] 266

The two clauses excerpeted above are joined by "and," equating them and not subordinating one to the other as a modern writer of English might do; this highlights the importance of both and adds a sense of urgency to the succession from cause to effect. In the excerpt above, five of twenty-eight words alliterate in "w": *weallendan* (welling), *wites* (torments), *willan* (will), *worolde* (world), and *gewyrcað* (work). Additionally, Wulfstan describes the "helle wites" as nothing more nor less than *bryne* (fire), the pain of which the simplest of peasants could easily comprehend, and, given the nature of Anglo-Saxon architecture, likely feared.

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7 7 is the short hand symbol Anglo-Saxons used for 'and,' which meant then, what it means now.

The following excerpt from *Hali Meiðhad* shows a similar use of alliteration and temporal, if not quite quotidian, imagery:

> þe deofles here of helle, þet beoð flesches lustes ant feondes eggunge, weorrið ant warpeð eauer towart tis tur forte keasten hit adun, ant drahen hire into þeowdom þet stont se hehe þerin. [the devil's army of hell, that is the flesh's desires and the fiend's incitement, attacks and ever assails this tower in order to cast it down, and draw her into slavery that stands so high therein.] 2

Though the alliteration in the excerpt from *Hali Meiðhad* is less regular, its presence is clear. The author alliterates the phrase *flesches lustes* (flesh's desires) with the *feondes eggunge* (fiend's incitement), the devil's army is a *here of helle* (army of hell) and it both *weorrið ant warpeð* (attacks and assails) the tower of the maiden. Unlike Wulfstan, the author of *Hali Meiðhad* does subordinate clauses, but like Wulfstan he does use *ant* (and) frequently; here however, he uses subordination in order to emphasize the terms and phrases conjoined: both *fleshes lustes* and the *feondes eggunge* form the *here of helle*. Finally, and also like Wulfstan, the author of *Hali Meiðhad* "renders his evocation of fearful things more powerful" through alliteration and parataxis (Robertson, EE 162).

Hali Meiðhad is "a letter in the form of a homily, written to confirm virgins in the rightness of their choice" as virginity was the apex of female status in the eyes of the medieval Church (Savage 223). And, although scholars often label *Hali Meiðhad* an anchoritic text, "there is nothing in the work which would not be equally applicable to nuns" (Millet xxiii). The text begins in the same manner as St. Jerome's *Ad Eustochium*, a personal letter to a maiden named Eustochia who was endeavoring to lead a life of contemplation. Quoting Psalms 44: 11–12, the author of *Hali Meiðhad*, like St. Jerome, begins, "Avdi, filia, et uide, et inclina aurem tuam; et obliuiscere populum tuum et domum patris tui" (Listen, daughter, and look, and incline your ears; and forget your people and your father's house) (1, Jerome 52) . The author of *Hali Meiðhad* then translates the Latin verses into Middle English and explains that they command women to remain physical virgins and become God's *Sunes spuse* rather than that of an earthly man (19). The author proceeds to describe the state of virgins, wives, and widows in this world and

the next with an oft-quoted passage vividly detailing the toil and misfortune a housewife could expect to face on an average day: "hire bearn schreamen" (her child screaming) and "þe cat et te fliche" (the cat at the flitch) (19). The author then contrasts this with the life of a maiden married to Christ, which includes a spiritual analog of everything from children to adultery (19–21). Robertson describes *Hali Meiðhad* as a triptych wherein "the author establishes an ideal, examines an alternative to the ideal, and then reexamines the ideal in the light of the alternative;" glossing over the substantial portion of the text describing spiritual adultery, whereby a virgin becomes a *forhorest* (prostitute) of the devil, and other less savory details of marriage to Christ (EE 93; 20).

Hassel, who argues that *Hali Meiðhad* offered medieval women a form of liberation, compares it to a portion of one of St. Jerome's other works: Theophrastus's *The Golden Book on Marriage.*[8] She concludes that "its rhetoric influences the descriptions of the misery in marriage as presented in *Hali Meiðhad*" (Hassel 16–17). While the author of *Hali Meiðhad* may have read and drawn on *The Golden Book on Marriage*, a comparison between the two works highlights the former's emphasis on the very real dangers and hardships of marriage for women. For instance, *Hali Meiðhad* makes no mention of "the study of philosophy," missing the lectures of "the wisest teachers," or the pain and shame of a spouse that has extramarital affairs, as does Theophrastus in *The Golden Book on Marriage* (412–413). Instead, *Hali Meiðhad* warns readers that as secular wives they will be "liggen under laðest mon" (subject to the most loathsome man) whose "fulitoheschipes" (indecencies) and "unhende gomenes" (improper pleasures) she must endure (15–16). Such a man may also "beateð þe ant busteð þe" (beat you and bruise you) without consequence (17). Finally, women married to mortal men go through the shame and "pine ouer pine" (torture above torture) of childbirth (17–18). Presumably, Hassel overlooks the physical hardships above and refers to the episode wherein a housewife finds the "cat et te fliche ant ed te hude þe hund, hire cake bearnen o þe stan" (cat at the flitch and at the hide the hound, her cake burning on

8 Though this letter is attributed to Theophrastus it survives only as an extensive quotation within St. Jerome's Adversus Jovinianum.

the hearthstone) when she notes "inconveniences and petty annoyances" in *Hali Meiðhad*, though even here there is potential danger of starvation (19; Hassel 16). Moreover, while the author of *Hali Meiðhad* obviously feels concern for women, this concern does not amount to "a vision of women's power and autonomy" nor does it offer women the chance of an uninterrupted "intellectual career" in place of a secular marriage (Hassel 3, 21). Instead, the author seems to envision a potentially less painful and humiliating, but certainly more everlastingly beneficial, subservience for women.

Hassel makes a similar argument for the influence of Peter Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum* on *Hali Meiðhad*, describing the former as providing "an image of married life as full of disorder and distraction, and the end of a philosophical career" (17). Yet *Hali Meiðhad* describes married life as consisting of much more than "disorder and distraction" and, unlike Abelard, the author of *Hali Meiðhad* mentions neither *librorum sive tabularum* (books or tablets), the *stilorum sive calamorum* (stylus or pen) nor any other symbol of intellectualism. Moreover, in the *Historia Calamitatum*, the inconveniences of reproduction such as *pueriles vagitus* (children crying) still fall to women or servants; they merely disturb the peace of the male philosopher and not his physical person. Unlike either Theophrastus or Abelard, the author of *Hali Meiðhad* describes the physical abuse women could expect from their husbands, the presumed indignity of intercourse, and the discomforts and dangers of pregnancy and childbirth. More importantly, he does so without reference to any "intellectual career" that might have been (21).

Sponsae Christi in *Hali Meiðhad*

Medieval authors employed widely recognized ideas like the idea of the consecrated virgin as a *sponsa Christi*. However, *Hali Meiðhad* presents the idea with a materialistic and quotidian bent not seen in other examples of the genre.

One of the true feats of *Hali Meiðhad* is that through the literal interpretation of *sponsa Christi* the author removes religious women from "the margins of their society" by placing them safely within "a sexually defined relationship with a man," albeit at the risk of compromising the spiritual goals of any women who seriously

aspired to an ascetic, and consequently marginal, life (Chewning 113). In a patriarchal society women are the most autonomous on the margins; however, as wives, even of Christ, women are brought back into society and the patriarchy in which the author operates. Through its presentation of the *sponsa Christi* motif, *Hali Meiðhad* allows women to fulfill their "cultural obligation[s]" while remaining virgins. According to Dyan Elliot, Tertullian, an early Church father, first wedded "the consecrated virgin" to Christ in the second century AD, thereby effectively "bringing the independent virgin firmly under patriarchal control" (Elliot 17). The author of *Hali Meiðhad* expands on and translates Tertullian's interpretation of the *sponsa Christi* for thirteenth-century English women.

However, the author of *Hali Meiðhad* does not write with "a vision of [female] autonomy" as Hassel asserts (1). Rather, the style of *Hali Meiðhad* reflects his assumptions of women's intellectual capabilities as well as his underlying fear of his audience's sex. According to Robertson, "male Christian writers viewed the uneducated as they did women—as willful, sensual, rooted in the body, and therefore capable of being taught abstract Christian ideals only through a concrete, pragmatic style" (Robertson, EE 147). The author of *Hali Meiðhad* presents every spiritual concept through a quotidian analog including children, a virgin's virtues, which "neauer deie ne mahen ah schulen aa biuore the pleien in heouene" (never die nor may but shall always before you play in heaven) (19, 20). In this way, the author gives his audience, virgin women, not only a safe marital relationship free from miscarriages, still births, and fragile infants, but a text he believed they could comprehend. Also like Wulfstan, the author of *Hali Meiðhad*'s "focus is affective rather than intellectual in [his] insistent use of alliterative patterns designed to inspire terror" or, in some cases, such as *meiðhades menske* (virginity's honor), delight (Robertson, EE 165; 7). By taking such an approach, the author of *Hali Meiðhad* keeps his audience at an intellectual distance, thereby limiting his effect on his audience's spiritual and intellectual lives, though no doubt leaving a profound impression of the tribulations of secular marriage and the joys and ultimate benefits of the *sponsa Christi* through his rhetorical techniques.

Motivated by both fear and concern and utilizing a language both comprehensible and evocative, the author of *Hali Meiðhad* reels women into a religious life as *sponsae Christi*, safe from the ravages of earthly men, yet remarkably similar to secular marriage in all other ways. John Bugge asserts that *Hali Meiðhad* "does not simply propose marriage to Christ as analogous to earthly marriage, but as a more preferable version of the same relationship" (Bugge 89).

Despite the long tradition of virginity literature in which the *sponsa Christi* indicates a female virgin, *Hali Meiðhad* presents the idea with a materialistic and quotidian bent not seen in other examples of the genre. *Hali Meiðhad* devotes a significant amount of time to the discussion of the "weden" (clothes) and "crunen" (crowns) of virgins in heaven (9). The author of *Hali Meiðhad* later describes the special "kempene crune" (champion's crown) of virgins, the "gerlondesche schininde schenre þen þe sunne, aureola ihaten o Latines ledene" (golden crown shining brighter than the sun, called aureola in the Latin language;11).

The author's "habitual appeal to the reader's self-interest" results in a pragmatic essay on the material benefits of virginity with only limited references to spiritual ones (Savage 224). For instance, the author tells maidens that as "Iesu Cristes brude, þe lauverdes leofmon þet alle þinges buheð, of al the worlt leafdi as he is of al lauerd" (Jesus Christ's bride, the beloved of the lord that all things obey, you will be the lady of all the world as he is the lord of all; 2). The author's argument relies on a sort of celestial materialism wherein Christ has more to give as a *marheȝeue* (morning gift[9]) than any "mon of lam" (man of clay; 2). Even if a virgin should marry an earthly king, his dominion would not match that of Christ, who owns all the earth and rules in the kingdom of Heaven. While virgins could look forward to "beo cwen icrunet" (be crowned queens) for eternity, earthly queens and "þes riche cuntasses, þeos modie leafdis of hare liflade; soðliche, ȝef ha biþencheð ham riht ant icnawlecheð soð, ich habbe ham to witnesse, ha lickið honi of þornes" (these rich countesses, these ladies proud of their way of life; truly, if they think rightly

9 At the time that *Hali Meiðhad* was written, husbands gave their wives a morning gift, often land, the morning after their marriage was consummated.

to themselves and acknowledge truth, I have them to witness, they lick honey from thorns; 3, 4). And, ugly maidens need not fear rejection, because unlike a *mon of lam*, Christ will "underueð bliðeliche ant biclupped swoteliche the alre ladlukeste, ant makeð ham seouesiðe schenre then the sunne" (receive happily and embrace sweetly the ugliest maiden of all, and make them seven times more shining than the sun; 20). On Earth maidens live in "þe liflade of heouene" (the way of life of heaven), free from tribulations of secular wives, and in heaven they will surpass earthly "cwenes" because "nan of þes oðres crunen, ne hare wlite, ne hare weden ne mahen euenin to hare, se vnimete brihte ha beoth ant schene to biseon on" (none of these others' crowns, nor their beauty, nor their clothes are made equal to that of the maidens, who are surpassingly bright and shining to look upon; 6, 9). Moreover, unlike earthly queens and "riche cuntasses," virgins never need worry that their "rudie neb schal leanin, ant ase gres grenin" (ruddy face shall grow thin, and turn green as grass) in the course of pregnancy (17).

In stark opposition to the supposed point of lifelong celibacy, sacrifice for the sake of spiritual gain, and "unlike Jerome . . . who [urges] the choice of virginity solely on account of the rewards in heaven, the author of *Hali Meiðhad* sets out to prove the preferability of the life of a maiden with reference first to this life alone, and then to its spiritual context" (Robertson, EE 84–5). As Millett points out, the author's "emphasis on the 'tribulations of the flesh' endured by married women seems to encourage the choice of celibacy for the wrong reasons, making it a matter of self-indulgence rather than self-denial" to practice this particular form of asceticism (Millet xxxiii). By making these assertions about the discomforts of secular marriage and the glory imparted to the *sponsae Christi* in the hereafter the author may "build[] adroitly on the desires and fears of young women," but he also undermines the value of their devotion (Millett, MEP xvii). For instance, St. Jerome addresses Eustochia in *Ad Eustochium* not merely as "filia" (daughter), but also as "conserva" (fellow servant), thereby equating their devotion (110). Later, after long discussions of scripture and advice for contemplation, Jerome illustrates his feeling of camaraderie by sharing with Eustochia his own spiritual journey (124–129). The author of *Hali Meiðhad*, on

the other hand, typically addresses the reader "eadi meiden" (blessed maiden; 2, 6, 23), "seli meiden" (innocent maiden; 2, 3, 8, 19) or simply "meiden" (20), but never as a fellow servant of God for whom his own spiritual journey might prove inspirational.

Though presumably many women who chose lifelong virginity would do so in order to avoid marriage and not simply to secure the best of the available suitors, the author of *Hali Meiðhad* does not present readers with the benefits of single life. Though there can be no doubt that some women—notably Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe—used the literalized idea of the *sponsa Christi* to their advantage, there is no reason to presume that the author of *Hali Meiðhad* had such interpretations in mind. Rather, *Hali Meiðhad* seeks to bring "the medieval religious woman" who "existed on the margins of her culture" back into the domain of the patriarchal Church as subject both to the male leaders of the Church and a husband (Chewning 129). While *Hali Meiðhad* is an impressive piece of rhetoric which draws on a variety of Latin sources while maintaining a specifically English and homely style, the narrow use of the *sponsa Christi* motif, the analogs of *The Golden Book of Marriage* and the *Historia Calamitatum*, and the style itself result in a text that emphasizes material gain—such as the *weden* (clothes) and *crunen* (crowns) of virgins—over the spiritual, thereby doing little to advance readers in their spiritual journeys, perhaps because the author of *Hali Meiðhad* did not think such a journey possible for women. Rather, the author seems to have intended simply to bring religious women under the control of the Church through the idea of *sponsa Christi* wherein women were not the independent equals of monks, let alone priests, but contained and docile wives.

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