INTERPRETING FRANCIS AND CLARE OF ASSISI

FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE PRESENT

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19 Illustrated in C De Benedictis, Fig. 21.
22 JM Musacchio (The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy, Yale University Press, New Haven 1999, 141) discussed a stone of Saint Margaret with a silver mounting recorded in a fourteenth-century inventory of the belongings of the Florentine patrician Deo del Beccuto.
26 The absence of Saint Anthony of Padua, long highly venerated by Franciscans, is mysterious.
27 A Vauchez, 113–9.
28 I Hueck, 185.

Altera Magdalena? Clare as sponsa Christi and Mirror Imagery in a German Fifteenth-Century Life of St Clare

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The importance of St Clare of Assisi in the history both of Franciscan spirituality and women's religious life is widely acknowledged today by her admirers and by scholars. However, when we turn to the historical record of Clare we find a surprising paucity of written documents securely attributed to her. The fact that several of these manuscripts survive only in relatively late copies raises further questions for today's researchers. What does this failure to preserve Clare's writings reveal about her followers' attempts to interpret or in some cases re-discover Clare's vision of a religious way of life for women? Likewise in visual culture Clare appears much less frequently than Francis or even other male Franciscan saints. The scarcity of images of Clare makes a cycle of her life created in the late fifteenth century all the more precious as a record of her cult. Moreover, this visualising of her life in an illuminated manuscript offers us a tantalising glimpse of how female saintly identity was constructed in the late Middle Ages and of how late medieval Clarissans might have responded to that construction.
The manuscript, dated around 1488–90, contains the *Life* of St Clare and is known as Thennenbach 4. It now resides in the Badisches Landesbibliothek, Karlsruhe. The German text is based on the *Life* of Clare usually attributed to Thomas of Celano. Both text and miniatures are attributed to Clarissan nuns who produced this book and several other illuminated books for religious houses. The script is ascribed to the prioress, Magdalena Steimerin, while the illuminations are attributed to Sibylla von Bondorf.

Before turning to the miniature, a brief description of the manuscript may be helpful. The *Life* of Clare translated into German by an unknown author forms the core of what came to be known as the *Klarenbuch*. Two prefaces introduce the *Life* proper, and include material from such sources as the Bull of Canonisation (1255). Both text and image portray Clare as biographic subject and as author. Her life is followed by the German translation of her four letters to Agnes of Prague. The book closes with several sermons, prayers and liturgical sequences.

The artist, a member of the Poor Clares, was born around 1450 in Bondorf in the area of southern Germany known as the Black Forest. Sibylla is recorded in the Clarissan convent in Freiburg. Around 1484 she moved to the Order’s convent of St Klara auf dem Wörd, in Strasbourg. She remained there until her death in about 1524. Sybilla is an example of a category of vowed religious women who also pursued a significant artistic career. Until recently the achievements of such women had been rarely studied. Scholars like Jeffrey Hamburger have urged us to reconsider the historiographical assumptions which led art historians to dismiss the art (in a variety of media) created by female religious as at best marginal to the mainstream of art history. Images which languished until the last thirty years now excite sustained research and interest. Indeed, as Hamburger and others have argued, the visual culture of monastic women can no longer be interpreted as mere footnotes in the history of art. The paintings, textiles and prints which these often unknown women created for their religious communities and their patrons represent a distinctive visual culture.

Sybilla ranks as one of the most prolific and influential ‘sister painters’ of the fifteenth century. Her works, which extend to over 170 miniatures, were owned not only by other Clarissan houses but also by Dominican nuns and an order of reformed prostitutes known as Penitents of Mary Magdalen. Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the extensive networks that existed between *Nonnenarbeit* – nun artisans – and the convent workshops they directed. It appears visual images and texts circulated among the houses of religious women more freely and in greater numbers than we have previously suspected. In addition to the *Life* of Clare, other manuscripts which feature illuminations attributed to Sibylla include a copy of the Rule of St Clare, and German translations of Bonaventure’s *Life* of St Francis, and of the *Life* of St Elizabeth of Hungary, together with several liturgical books. Such books were often presented to convents as a gift from another house of the same order. The Rule of St Clare now held in the British Library was a gift from the Freiburg Clarissan house to the Clarissan cloister in Villengen, c. 1480, to mark the reform of that house.

These Clarissans (including of course the scribe and the illuminator) are not merely the audience for this work. In a very real sense, they participated in what we might understand as a performative engagement with text and image. My use of the concept of performance does not refer to performance in the sense of a theatrical event, but to a reader’s activation in response to an image or a text. Accordingly I propose that we imagine a Clarissan nun holding, reading and contemplating this little book as a devotional activity. Such a reader we can surely assume was well-schooled in the discipline and practice of the spiritual life. Unfortunately we cannot know exactly how this book might have been used – did the nun read the text out loud? Would she read portions of the text and then move to contemplate a picture?

Although we cannot answer these questions fully, we can draw inferences about the answers from the images themselves. Indeed, as Jeffrey Hamburger has argued, visual images played an essential role in forming, instructing and drawing religious women into the spiritual life. Nun artists like Sybilla von Bondorf employed artistic strategies which heightened the affective response of the viewer. By depicting figures who look directly out at the viewer (and thus seem to ‘speak’ to us) or figures dressed in contemporary costume (a Clarissan nun) the viewer is urged, through visual identification, to psychologically
participate in the illumination. Such emotional appeals to the gaze of the viewer aimed to involve her actively in the image. These images invite the Clarissans of the artist's community to recognise themselves in these images. The visual incorporation of the figure of an anonymous female Clarissan in a number of miniatures throughout the manuscript was meant to evoke a reciprocal response. These images call the Clarissan to spiritual devotion through imitation of the figures. The remainder of this chapter will explore this performative dimension in a single miniature from the manuscript.

The miniature that concerns us here depicts Mary Magdalen and Clare of Assisi, who clearly dominate the composition (Fig. 9). It appears at the beginning of the manuscript, in the first of the two introductions to the Life, accompanying the first illumination which portrays St Bonaventure writing the life of St Clare (Fig. 10). The devotional scene of Mary Magdalen and Clare introduces and frames the narrative of Clare's life which follows. The texts which comprise our Klarenbuch extol Clare's virtues, including her humility, poverty, devotion to the Crucified Christ and her love for her sisters. In addition to these and other saintly qualities, we also find allusions (in both texts and images) to a theme which is familiar in the devotional culture of the late Middle Ages: the image of the sponsa Christi, the bride of Christ. It is above all this role that helps us understand the appearance of Clare with Mary Magdalen.

Bruins argues that this image of the sponsa Christi together with other Marian themes demonstrates an iconographic programme that evokes Clare as altera Maria. But does this require us to conclude that nuns understood iconographic conventions so rigidly that for them only a single reading of a visual or literary allusion was possible? Several images from our manuscript suggest that the original audience of Clarissans may have envisioned more expansive readings. Firstly, the fact that subjects depicted sometimes carry no textual parallel suggests that the artist drew on external sources (textual and visual) which she assumed her audience would recognise. In the section of the Life concerning Clare's childhood, one of a series of three illuminations depict her love and care of the poor. We find an image of Clare which Bruin describes as The Miracle of the Rose (Fig. 11). Iconographically this scene plainly evokes an incident from the life of Elizabeth of Hungary, the thirteenth-century noblewoman and saint. One day on her way to tending the sick and poor, Elizabeth met her husband the Landgrave Louis of Thuringia. Curious about the bundle in her lap, Louis asked her what she was concealing. She lifted the fold of her dress to reveal not bread but roses. Visually this motif of bread miraculously transformed into roses links Clare to the cult of Elizabeth of Hungary. The insertion of this scene from the life of a late medieval female saint traditionally associated with the Franciscans lends weight to my suggestion that potential meanings were not restricted to those stated in the manuscript. Interpretation also emerged from the individual reader's own multi-layered spiritual and liturgical experience.

Throughout the Klarenbuch we read how Clare herself (in her letters to Agnes) or later commentators (the Life proper) invoked imagery that recalls the Virgin as 'the spouse and the mother and the sister of my Lord Jesus Christ.' However, the fact that Clare's first appearance in the manuscript shows her with a different Mary – Mary Magdalen – raises several questions about how to interpret the pairing of these two female saints. Sibylla von Bondorf's juxtaposition of Mary Magdalen and Clare evokes the richer interpretative traditions informing the meaning of the imagery of mystical marriage. Of course, gestures and other iconographic conventions occasionally recall the theme of altera Maria in a number of miniatures. But since the trope of imitatio most frequently evoked is the trope of sponsa Christi, we need to ask why our miniature embodies a reference to another spouse of Christ, in this case a bride who like Clare was traditionally honoured as virgin and wife in devotional texts of the late Middle Ages. Parallels between the Virgin Mary and the Magdalen emerged in patristic texts and continued to find expression throughout the Middle Ages. Hymns found in an office of the Magdalen from Aix-en-Provence extol her as star of the sea, a reddening rose or flowering cedar – all familiar as epithets of the Virgin. Linked by name and biblical typology, both women's symbolic identities combined the multiple roles of 'bride, mother, Church and Christian Soul.'

In the image, Mary Magdalen and Clare stand with each saint holding her familiar attribute – for the Magdalen an ointment jar, for Clare a monstrance. Each saint uses a hand gesture to point to her
attribute. Above them an angel appears to have just crowned the saints. Below, two diminutive figures (an unidentified woman and an anonymous Clarissan) kneel in veneration at the feet of the saints. The figure of the young woman dressed in secular dress has been identified as the Loving Soul (minnende seele). According to recent scholarship, she may represent the lay sisters who belonged to many Clarissan houses. Several other features of the miniature contribute to our understanding of the scene. We note the prominence given to hair. Not only is the Magdalen depicted with her traditional luxurious golden locks, but so is the woman at her feet. Even Clare appears with ringlets, although the nun at her feet does not. The symbol of women’s hair has an ancient and rich tradition in the West. In the context of this illumination might the artist be alluding to specific events in the lives of the Magdalen and Clare? Gospel accounts of Mary Magdalen describe how she anointed and wiped Christ’s feet with her hair. Moreover, the immensely influential legendary accounts of her life after Christ’s resurrection portray her as a desert saint, who is clothed entirely in her own hair.

In the Life of Clare, the moment when Francis cuts her hair is pivotal. This dramatic event was frequently interpreted as a symbol of her conversion to a penitential life. The Life recounts how Clare flees her parent’s house during the night. We are told that on the evening of Palm Sunday the brothers had gathered at the church of S. Maria Portiuncula to celebrate the office of vigils. By delineating the liturgical context of Clare’s reception of the tonsure, the Life alludes typologically to devotional and spiritual affinities between the Magdalen and Clare. Remarkably the Gospel for that day based on John 12, 1–11 narrates the anointing of Christ’s feet by Mary of Bethany. Because Clare received her tonsure on the occasion of a reading about how Mary of Bethany wiped Christ’s feet with her hair, surely some later Clarissans must have been aware of this conjunction between their founder and one whom they took to be Mary Magdalen.

In this regard, it will help to examine another example of a visual pairing of these two saints. The only large-scale example known to me is a devotional painting, now in a private collection. This work depicts The Virgin and Child Enthroned with the Annunciation and SS. Mary Magdalen and Clare and is attributed to an anonymous artist known as the Master of the Franciscan Temperas. The painting is dated to the 1340s, a fact which together with other features has led scholars to link this work with the patronage of Queen Sancia of Majorca. Wife of the King of Naples, Robert of Anjou, Sancia was noted for her extensive patronage and support of Franciscans.

In this Neapolitan painting on canvas, the characterisation of the Magdalen as ascetic and the representation of Clare as flagellant evokes a penitential mood. It is not penitence, however, that unites Clare and the Magdalen in our example, found in the Klarenbuch created for the Clarissans of Strasbourg. Here the two figures are portrayed as exemplars of mystic union, that is, as brides of Christ. The interweaving of such visual cues as gestures, attributes and other formal features deployed in the miniature created a multi-layering of visual allusions. This visual multiplicity has parallels in medieval texts, which likewise evoke intertextuality. Such reading between texts and indeed between texts and visual material was, as scholars argue, a feature of how medieval audiences understood narrative.

What visual tropes might have stimulated the Clarissan viewer to bring to this miniature the image of mystical union? The respective attributes that the two saints present to us and their devotees introduce the viewer to the theme of mystical union through Eucharistic devotion. The latter was, as Jeffrey Hamburger reminds us, ‘the sine qua non for any experience of union.’ The earliest images of Clare depicted with the monstrance are found in Germany and date to the early fourteenth century. Since the fourteenth century the monstrance, sometimes referred to as an ostensorium, was used to display the consecrated host. Scholars relate the function of this liturgical object in the late Middle Ages to the increasing emphasis on devotion to the Eucharist during this period. No doubt the monstrance reminded viewers of an incident narrated in the Life when Clare’s miraculous repulsion of the Saracens was attributed to her recourse to the host to defend her community. The centrality of the Eucharist in Clare’s spirituality is alluded to in several other illuminations in our Klarenbuch.

In the manuscript, the Eucharistic theme culminates in a later image: The Celestial Nuptial Banquet (Fig. 12). Here Clare appears between Christ and the Virgin at the mystical bridal feast. In her letters to Agnes of Bohemia, Clare scatters references to Christ as spouse and
lover, imagery which is drawn in part from the *Song of Songs*.

As Clare writes: ‘Happy, indeed is she to whom it is given to drink at this sacred banquet so that she might cling with her whole heart to Him / Whose beauty all the blessed hosts of heaven unceasingly admire.’

For Clare and her companions such union is available in their earthly lives through the Eucharist: for them the Eucharistic Christ is the tender bridegroom. Clare’s relationship with her spouse which is imagined in imagery derived from the *Song of Songs* is unambiguously intimate.

We turn now to the Magdalen, whose attribute the gilded ointment jar also evokes images of intimate bodily contact. Like the Magdalen’s hair, the jar reminds us of the anointing scenes in the House of the Pharisee, and of course of the anointing of Christ’s body after the Crucifixion. The Church Fathers and later medieval commentators invested these biblical episodes with rich exegesis. One such interpretive tradition holds particular relevance for our late fifteenth-century image of the Magdalen and Clare. Since the early Church Fathers, the image of the bride searching for her beloved had been applied to the Magdalen searching for the risen Christ. For many medieval exegetes and their audiences the Magdalen’s meeting with Christ after the resurrection not only enacts the mystical union of spouse and the beloved, but such imagery also inevitably recapitulates Eucharistic union.

Further on the writer exclaims: ‘Remaining enclosed, / Clare began to enlighten the whole world / and her brilliance dazzled it / with the honours of her praises.’ The *Life* reveals that despite her removal from the world, Clare’s light spreads abroad. The paradox of her exemplarity, hidden yet known, culminates in the verses cited above. Through the images of brilliant light, of the vessel filled with fragrance, and most powerfully of the broken body construed as the shattered alabaster jar, the text elevates Clare to the status of an *altera Maria Magdalena*. These striking parallels would surely have caught the attention of the Clarissans. This is all the more likely because the devotional texts and visual images of the Magdalen in the late Middle Ages routinely deployed the same language and metaphors that characterise St Clare in the *Life*. One of the most popular sources for the Magdalen’s life, *The Golden Legend*, reminds the reader that her titles of ‘enlightener’ and ‘illuminator’ derive from her embrace of the contemplative life.

For the Clarissan viewer, recognition of these parallels required her to move back and forth between multiple texts and images. Her habit of viewing and reading nourished such a deep familiarity that further associations might emerge in contemplating this miniature. During this process, might the visual language of interchange between the two saints evoke the metaphor of the mirror? Such imagery not only had a long tradition in spiritual treatises, but the mirror features prominently in Clare’s own writing.

Compositionally the artist Sibylla von Bonsdorf arranges the figures symmetrically to suggest parallels between them. Not only are the Magdalen and Clare of similar height, but their gestures are almost identical. Through ‘mirroring’ of gestural language the two saints call their attributes to our attention, thus underlining the epidemiic meaning of their ‘speaking acts.’ Below the two central figures, in the foreground, the kneeling woman and her counterpart the Clarissan nun repeat in posture and gesture their roles as intercessors or perhaps imitators. Visually the scene before us pivots on mutual mirroring.
Indeed, a number of later miniatures in the manuscript also portray various saints standing side by side, however, this depiction of the Magdalen and Clare is the only miniature where the relationship is articulated through mirroring. Moreover, none of the other pairs of saints have smaller figures introduced in a performative role for each saint.

To extend the exploration of this theme of mirroring our artist has constructed the first and last full page illuminations as mirror images. The first as we have earlier noted depicts St Bonaventure writing the Life of St Clare, while the last represents St Clare as author (Fig. 13). This final illumination introduces the texts of Clare’s four letters to Agnes of Prague. The Latin text in her book reads ‘Inspice et fac secundum exemplar,’ which we can translate as ‘gaze and follow the example.’ This exhortation of course depends on the mirror metaphor. By fashioning Clare as author, in this final painting the saint reminds us she is not only the subject of the book, but also a participant in the creation of her legacy.

Let us return to the idea of imitation and identification raised at the beginning of this chapter. I have argued that the miniature invites a response from the Clarissan viewer that through the visual rhetoric of the illumination engages her in a series of reflections which depend upon the viewer imaginatively identifying herself with a number of exemplars: Clare, the Magdalen, the Virgin and of course ultimately Christ. Might the devotional function of these paintings seek both to exhort the nun to the practice of imitation and to frame Clare as altera Maria? Is it possible that this miniature assisted the Clarissan to keep before her literally Clare’s injunction, familiar from her Testament, that the Clarissan be ‘an example and mirror not only for others, but also for our sisters whom the Lord has called to our way of life as well, that they in turn might be a mirror and example to those living in the world’?

The image explored here directs attention to the relationship of each saint to Christ, the ultimate source of their vocation. The Magdalen’s attribute functions like a literary topos helping us to insert this scene into a series of other, symbolically-related narratives. In the activity of recalling we deepen our capacity to interpret the scene depicted before us. Just as literary tropes function to make possible an interconnected reading between texts, so can visual tropes (like attributes or gestures) alert a spectator to resonances between visual narratives. Eucharistic spirituality as implied in this image renews living contact with Christ. Such visual mirroring invites us to re-frame our understanding of the Magdalen. Her alignment with Clare emphasises the role of mystic spouse. Similarly, alignment with the Magdalen brings out in Clare the exuberance of self-giving love, which like the vessel filled with perfume could not be contained in any one space.


The illuminations are the subject of Clara Bruins’ short monograph: Chiara d’Assisi come altera Maria. Le miniature della vita di Santa Chiara nel manoscritto Thennenbach-4 di Karlsruhe, Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, Rome 1999.


On other examples of this genre see Ruth Meyer, ‘Junckfraw – Muter – helferin Das bild der hl. Klara im “St. Klara-Buch” und seine rezeption im 15. Jahrhundert’, Collectanea Francescana, vol. 62, 1992, 507-32. The Latin original was believed in the late Middle Ages to be written by St Bonaventure. Scholars now ascribe the text to Thomas of Celano.


See Winston-Allen, 191.

Winston-Allen, ‘Artistic Production and Exchange.’ In the past the term nonnenarbeit has been used perjoratively to mean child-like or naive. On the problematic usage of the word see Marti, ‘“Nun’s Work,’” 133-7. For the location of these books see Winston-Allen, 190-1.

My understanding of how theories of performance can help illuminate medieval devotional practices is informed by the essays in a recent collection edited by Elina Gertsman, Visualizing Medieval Performance. Perspectives, Histories, Contexts, Ashgate, Aldershot 2008.

For an overview of women’s religious life in the Middle Ages see Crown and Veil.

Hamburger, 4.


See Bruins, Chiara d’Assisi. See also Mooney, 52-77.


See James Marrow’s influential article in which he argued that our understanding of the meaning of visual imagery in late medieval devotional painting must consider not only what a painting represented but how a painting enlisted the viewer’s experience in creating meaning. See his ‘Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance’, Simiolus, vol. 16, 1986, 150-69.

Letter 1, in: CAED, 44.

See Matter, ‘Mystical Marriage.’

See Bruins, 17, 22-3, 26.


For surveys of visual images of St Clare see Fabio Bisogni, 'Per un censuro delle rappresentazioni di Santa Chiara nella pittura in Emilia, Romagna e veneto sino alla fine del Quattrocento', in: Movimento religioso femminile e francescanesimo nel secolo XIII, Società internazionale di studi francescani, Assisi 1981, 131-65 and Servus Gieben, 'I'iconografia di Chiara d'Assisi', in: Se la bellezza veneta sino alla fine del Quattrocento', in: Movimento religioso femminile e francescanesimo nel secolo XIII, Società internazionale di studi francescani, Assisi 1993, vol. 1, 374–83.

This work is reproduced as fig.1 in Adrian Hoch, 'Pictures of Penitence from a Trecento Neapolitan Nunnery', Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, vol. 61, no. 2, 1998, 206–26.


On the monstrance as Clare's attribute see Gieben, 200–3. Rigaux, 42, notes that the canonisation proceedings report how Clare carried the host in a little chest.


See Bruins, 24.


Letter I, 44; Letter II, 47; Letter IV, 54, 55, 57, in: CAED.

Ibid., Letter IV, 55.

Ibid., 57.

See the summary and comments on this tradition by Constant J Mews, 'Singing the Song of Songs at the Paraclete. Abelard, Heloise, and Gregory the Great on Mary Magdalene as Lover and Bride,' Citeaux: Commentarii Cistercienses, vol. 59, nos. 3–4, 2008, 299–313, esp. 309–12.


'Legend of St Clare,' in: CAED, 288.

Ibid., 290. The passages quoted from Celano's Life do not appear in Thennenbach-4. Further comparison with other German translations of Celano's Life will establish if this omission was unique to the Strasbourg version of the Life.


Jeffrey Hamburger has drawn attention to how symmetrical composition, and gestures create parallels between female saints, in a drawing, c. 1500 one of at least a dozen made for the female Benedictine convent of St Walburg, Eichstätt. See his Nuns as Artists, 12–3.
Ever since St Francis of Assisi first formulated his Rule for the brotherhood in 1209, his brethren have constantly discussed what it means to be one of his followers. Again and again, throughout the Order's eight hundred years, there have been attempts to recreate the ideals and practices of the first band of followers. Again and again, newly created reform groups have, in their turn, become more institutionalised in the service of the church, leading eventually to a repeat of the process that initially gave them birth. Reform and division are inherent characteristics of the Franciscan Order. In this chapter, I discuss two kinds of reform: one that comes from the grass roots membership and one that is proposed or imposed by church authority. In particular, I will draw attention to the Observant Reform which began in the fifteenth century and the reform of the Irish Recollect province in the
Figs. 9–13 from: Sibylla von Bondorf, Thennenbach 4, 1488–90, Badisches Landesbibliothek, Karlsruhe.

Fig. 9 Mary Magdalen and Clare of Assisi (f. 5v).

Fig. 10 St Bonaventure writing the life of St Clare (f. 1v).
Fig. 11. The Miracle of the Rose (c. 1360).

Fig. 12. The Celestial Mystical Bouquet (c. 1360).
Fig. 13 St Clare as author (f. 157r).

Fig. 14 J. Carmichael, engraver, John Adamson, d. 1841, artist, View of Melbourne from the South Side of the Yarra 1839, engraving on cream paper, 1839. Image courtesy of La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H563.