

The Life of St. Scholastica: Introduction

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St. Scholastica (feast day February 10) and the Female Benedictine Tradition

Scholastica (480-543) was the sister of St. Benedict of Nursia, and is revered as the patron saint of Benedictine nuns. She is said to have established a convent at Piumarola in Italy, in accordance with the principles of the monastic rule established by her brother at nearby Monte Cassino. Artistic representations often depict her as a youthful Benedictine abbess, wearing black and holding in her hand a book or a dove.¹ Everything that is known of her comes from the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great who, in Book 2, chapters 33-34 describes a meeting between the siblings and the subsequent death of Scholastica.² There is little outside the *Dialogues* that attests with certainty even to the existence of this saint and at least one

scholar has suggested that Gregory invented her, following the rhetorical tradition which provided so many of the early saints with sisters to serve as a foil for their more virtuous brothers.³ Accounts of the seventh-century translation of Benedict and Scholastica to Fleury and Le Mans do little to prove the case either way, but early calendars and place-names in the Monte Cassino region offer independent evidence of a modest nature for the historical reality of Scholastica.⁴

Since there were few organized monastic communities for women in early-sixth-century Italy, Scholastica, if she did indeed exist, was in all likelihood a consecrated virgin, alone or with a few companions, perhaps in her family home in a kind of "house monastery."⁵ Nevertheless, her perceived significance to future generations as the first "Benedictine nun" gives her an honorary place in the history of female monasticism, as well as pointing up the need to understand a little of that history on its own terms. The Benedictine rule, which ultimately held sway for so many centuries as the rule par excellence for both men and women, was not the first formal attempt to codify a communal monastic life (see the Introduction to V[a], above). It was preceded, inter alia, by a rule designed specifically for women, that of Caesarius

of Arles. Caesarius composed his rule (c. 512-534) for his sister, Caesaria, whom he had helped to establish in the monastic life. In addition to the three great vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, common to all rules for both sexes, Caesarius recognized that "many things in monasteries of maidens seem to be different from those of monks," in particular the need for complete claustration: "If anyone, having left her parents, wishes to renounce the world and enter the holy fold . . . let her never leave the monastery until her death, not even into the church, where the door can be seen."⁶ This emphasis on absolute removal from the world, it should be noted, was occasioned at least in part by the violence of life in a society under constant threat of barbarian invasion and the consequent need to protect the lives of female religious from attack.⁷

Stability of place is also a feature of the rule of St. Benedict, which, however, makes no distinction with regard to gender, stating in chapter 66 that "the monastery should . . . be so arranged that all necessary things, such as water, mill, garden and various crafts may be within the enclosure, so that the monks may not be compelled to wander outside it, for that is not at all expedient for their souls." Wandering monks (*gyrovagi*) were

castigated (Chapter 1) and monks who presumed to "leave the enclosure of the monastery, or to go anywhere, or to do anything at all, however trifling, without the permission of the abbot" (Chapter 67) were to be punished.⁸ Nevertheless these recommendations did not seek to achieve strict claustration,⁹ and during the earlier Middle Ages, as the rule of St. Benedict came to serve, informally, as the guideline for monks and nuns alike, this latitude allowed initially for considerable female influence both within and without the walls of the monastery.

In England, which saw the first great expansion of Benedictine monasticism, Hild, the seventh-century abbess of Whitby, founded several monastic institutions and presided over a synod of bishops who had gathered to debate the virtues of Celtic versus Roman practice. Abbesses ruled over communities of men and women, and offered advice to secular rulers. Nuns such as Leoba and Tecla furthered the work of missionaries like Boniface by leaving their English convents to help establish monasteries abroad or, like Abbess Eadburg of Minster-in-Thamet, by contributing books, money, and altar cloths. As teachers and scholars, gifted administrators, organizers of building campaigns, the contributions of these

women to the learning and culture of early medieval Europe constituted, relatively speaking, a golden age for female monastics.¹⁰

During the later Middle Ages, as ecclesiastical authority became more and more concentrated in the hands of a celibate male clergy, an ever increasing emphasis on enforced claustration for women led to a concomitant diminishment of their power. In 1298 the bull *Periculoso* of Pope Boniface VIII declared that all religious women everywhere must be cloistered, stressing, as JoAnn McNamara puts it, "the peril of men's inability to resist raping women and women's natural inability to refrain from tempting men."¹¹ Caesarius, who had recognized early on the difficulties that strict enclosure would pose for nuns with regard to the recommendation that monastics should provide for themselves by the labor of their own hands, endowed his sister's foundation with his own money. The paradox remained, however, and women's foundations, always poorer than their male counterparts, continued to struggle with the problem of how to raise money for their convent without leaving it. The prohibitions with regard to enclosure, moreover, helped to fuel an image, gleefully embraced by male writers, of sex-starved nuns, frantic to get out from behind those walls. In

the thirteenth-century English *Land of Cokaygne*, a comic burlesque of the literary topos of the earthly paradise, nuns are satirically portrayed as taking off for a day on the river (which is of "swet milke") and going for a swim once they are out of sight of the nunnery:

Hi makip ham nakid forto plei
And lepip dune in-to þe brimme.
And doþ ham sleilich forto swimme.
Þe zung monkes þat hi seep:
Hi doþ ham vp, and forþ hi fleep.
And commip to þe nunnes anon. (lines 155-61)¹²

[They strip themselves naked to play and leap down into the water and begin swimming about skillfully. The young monks see this: they jump up and rush forward and come to the nuns at once.]
Though sexual scandals doubtless occurred,¹³ a problem exacerbated by the tendency to treat convents as a dumping ground for women (whose options were increasingly limited in the later Middle Ages), most convents continued to house women who respected their vows, even if they did leave the monastery precincts for relatively innocent social reasons or in their effort to support themselves.

The Cult of Scholastica in England

The existence of Scholastica's cult in England is attested by the inclusion of her feast day, February 10, in all Anglo-Saxon calendars where, moreover, its growing importance can be seen by the high rank order Scholastica achieved in a number of litanies.¹⁴ The seventh-century poet Aldhelm wrote about her in both the prose and verse sections of his *De Virginitate*, and in the late tenth century Ælfric of Cerne (later of Eynsham) included her in his homily on St. Benedict. Not surprisingly, given the focus of his own work, Aldhelm stresses Scholastica's purity throughout, though Gregory did not comment specifically on this aspect of the saint. The brief prose narrative explores the spectacular nature of the miracle she achieves rather than the relationship between sister and brother. In the more expansive verse treatment Aldhelm deduces Scholastica's learned qualities from her name, says that "she gained golden rewards by her vow of virginity" and nicely pulls the emphasis away from Benedict, even blackening him a little with the comment that not only did he refuse to stay in response to Scholastica's pleading, but he "showed scorn of his holy sister." The prominence accorded Scholastica in Aldhelm's poem perhaps owes something to its dedication to

the Abbess Hildelith and her nuns, one of whom was named Scholastica.¹⁵ The bond between Benedict and Scholastica very likely suggested itself as a model to the eighth-century hagiographer Felix, who in his life of the hermit Guthlac similarly emphasized a spiritual relationship between brother and sister which transcended physical separation.¹⁶

The *SEL* Version

The *SEL* is unique among medieval English legendaries in allowing Scholastica an independent existence, that is, in giving her a legend all to herself. Other Middle English versions, e.g., in the 1438 *Gilte Legende* and Caxton's *Golden Legend*, follow Gregory's practice and include Scholastica in their lives of Benedict, but the sixty-four lines of the *SEL* version are found, on their own, in the place appropriate to her feast day, February 10.

Manfred Görlach has speculated that, in its earliest stages, the *SEL* was heavily dependent on a liturgical collection. Given the widespread observance of Scholastica's feast day, as noted above, a breviary text, like that found, for example, in the uses of York and Exeter (which follow Gregory's text very closely), could have served as a

source for the *SEL* legend. But, as Görlach has further noted, the *Legenda aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine, which influenced many *SEL* legends, appears to have had little or no influence on legends of saints whose feast days, like that of Scholastica, occur in the first half of the year. A comparison of the *SEL* with these various Latin versions confirms the fact that the *SEL* has retained many details from Gregory found neither in Jacobus' severely curtailed narrative (which does not even name Scholastica), nor in the breviaries.¹⁷ Indeed, the *SEL*'s expansive treatment of the legend, as well as the many original touches that distinguish it from all other extant versions, make it impossible to determine its source with certainty. The following extract from Chapter 33 of Gregory's *Dialogues* will provide a foundation for the interpretive remarks that follow.

[Benedict's] sister, whose name was Scholastica, had been dedicated to the almighty Lord since her very infancy. She used to come to see Benedict once a year and the man of God would come down to meet her at a property belonging to the monastery not far from the gate. Now one day she came as usual, and her venerable brother came down to meet her with his disciples. They spent the whole day praising God and in holy conversation, and when night's darkness fell, they ate a meal

together. While they were seated at table, talking of holy matters, it began to get rather late and so this nun, Benedict's sister, made the following request: "I beg you not to leave me tonight, so that we might talk until morning about the joys of heavenly life." Benedict answered, "What are you saying, sister? I certainly cannot stay away from my monastery." The sky was so clear at the time that there was not a cloud to be seen. When the nun heard the words of her brother's refusal, she put her hands together on the table and bent her head in her hands to pray the almighty Lord. When she lifted her head from the table, such violent lightning and thunder burst forth, together with a great downpour of rain, that neither the venerable Benedict nor the brothers who were with him could set foot outside the door of the place where they were sitting. For the nun, as she bent her head in her hands, had poured forth rivers of tears on to the table, by means of which she had turned the clear sky to rain. That downpour began just as her prayer finished - in fact, the coincidence between the prayer and the downpour was so precise that she lifted her head from the table at the very moment when the thunder sounded and the rain came down exactly the same moment that she raised her head.

Then the man of God realized that he could not return to his monastery in the midst of the thunder and lightning and the heavy downpour of rain. This upset him and he began to complain, saying, "May the almighty God forgive you, sister. What have you done?" To which she replied, "Look, I asked you and you refused to listen to me. I asked my Lord and He heard me. Go now, if you can. Leave me behind and return to your monastery." But being unable to leave the building, he had to remain there against his will, since he refused to stay there voluntarily. And so they spent the whole night awake, satisfying each other's hunger for holy conversation about the spiritual life.¹⁸

This episode, occurring near the end of St. Benedict's life, is narrated by Gregory, in response to a question put by his disciple, Peter, to show that the desires of saints are not always fulfilled. In this one instance, explains Gregory, Scholastica justly thwarted her brother's wishes by the greater strength of her love.

In addition to the interpretation offered by Gregory himself, modern scholars have read the episode in a variety of ways: for example, to show that Benedict is passing from the active to the contemplative life, or that gender oppositions are

reconciled in God, or as an act of sympathetic magic echoing older pagan rites, or as a signal that the death of Benedict himself is at hand. Most interesting, perhaps, are the parallels with other saints' lives in which a brother and sister figure and which, according to one critic, may have provided the inspiration for Gregory's narrative. There is a core of thematic similarity in all such narratives whereby the sister is the weaker of the pair, giving way to emotion, and allowing for the brother to show not only his affection but his superior strength and virtue. More than one critic has seen a further parallel with Luke's account of the anointing of Jesus's feet at the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50), a scene which has in common with the Scholastica episode a supper, a woman's tears, and the justification of excessive love.¹⁹

The *SEL*-poet, in telling the story of Scholastica separately from that of her brother, has, not surprisingly, added much in the way of psychological and narrative detail without, however, changing the basic form of the story. Most notable, perhaps, in distinction to the interpretations outlined above, is the focus on her materiality as a "real" human being. Whatever meanings may emerge from this version of her

legend, the *SEL Scholastica* cannot simply be seen as a way of figuring some aspect of her more important brother's life. Among the poet's original touches is the emphasis on Scholastica's great age and feebleness, which increase her desire to see her brother since she is afraid this may be her last opportunity. In addition, Benedict is more rude and disagreeable, Scholastica more appealing, not just because she is old and infirm, but because of the humorous asperity of her remarks.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Scholastica narrative is the way the question of enclosure plays out in the different versions. While the claustration of women was, in historical terms, a far more pressing concern than that of men, the focus in Gregory's narrative is on Benedict's wish to get back to his cell by nightfall. Since Gregory was an active promoter of the Benedictine rule and claustration, it is hardly surprising that he takes the opportunity to underline this point. The fact that there is no similar emphasis for Scholastica may suggest either that she was not, strictly speaking, a nun, or simply that Gregory was less interested in her. What is perhaps a little more surprising is that all the later versions deriving from Gregory continue to focus exclusively on Benedict's determination not to spend the night

outside his monastery, while disregarding the fact that Scholastica is in a similar position. The increasing stridency in the later Middle Ages of pronouncements that women remain within their monastery walls at all times finds no reflection in these narratives; it is impossible to tell whether this disregard stems from respect for the authority of Gregorian tradition or the relatively insignificant role of Scholastica within the legend of Benedict. The *SEL* alone seems to have attended to (contemporary) historical reality as well as to tradition: brother and sister are both Benedictines, both concerned with keeping their vow of enclosure. But, Scholastica says, God will forgive them for this breach because of their "good intention" (line 24). This emphasis avoids the hysterical focus on the threats posed by women's sexuality and the need to preserve female chastity, by making enclosure equally important for brother and sister. The fact that the *SEL* Life of St. Scholastica appears to be the first instance of her legend appearing in the vernacular unattached to Benedict's, that the collection, in its earliest form (MS Laud 108), contains the legend of Scholastica but not that of Benedict, and that the legend begins with the comment that Scholastica would rather be a nun than a wife, suggests for one critic an intended audience of nuns.²⁰ The question

of *SEL*'s audience is complex and remains unresolved, but it seems fair to say that the legend of Scholastica demonstrates a willingness on the poet's part to present a legend which would certainly appeal to nuns as well as others.

***SEL* Texts of Scholastica**

The sixteen major *SEL* manuscripts identified by Görlach as containing the Life of St. Scholastica show little variation in the text. As with the majority of *SEL* selections in this volume MS Ashmole 43 has been used to provide a base text of this edition. For more on the selection of Ashmole, see the Introduction to I(a), above.

Manuscripts

Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 145, fols. 22r-22v.

Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 43 (SC 6924), fols. 23v-24r.

Previous editions

The South English Legendary. Ed. D'Evelyn and Mill. 1.59-60.

Early South English Legendary. Ed. Horstmann. Pp. 197-99.

