IN LATE MEDIEVAL Scotland the key to success in the afterlife was gaining sufficient spiritual worth to move quickly from the fires of purgatory to the joys of heaven. The church offered women role models to help them achieve this spiritual worthiness. Jesus himself was the greatest role model for Christians, and male saints could also provide direction, but the Blessed Virgin Mary and the virgin martyrs were considered women’s best exemplars. Contemporary understanding of women’s nature derived from Aristotelian biology. Scottish theologians held Eve to account for the Fall and humanity’s sinfulness and associated her female descendants with matter, the senses and a lack of moral strength, shame or self-respect. In the poem The Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo, William Dunbar (c.1460–1514) created female characters who equated ‘love’ and ‘nature’ with sexual appetite rather than with constancy and loyalty. Women were believed to be preoccupied with matters of the body and in particular with sexual intercourse. Sir David Lindsay (?1486–1555) pointed out sourly that pilgrimage had made ‘mony ane hure’ of ‘gud’ wives and daughters who had been overtaken by raging lust once away from home. The stories of courageous virgin martyrs showed women how to overcome their apparent weak nature and resist sexual temptation through a strong personal bond with Jesus, the ‘undefiled Lamb’ of the Gaelic Book of Lismore. The more closely contemporary women followed in the footsteps of the virgin martyrs in their bodily chastity and physical suffering, the more they honoured Jesus in his sexual purity and suffering love.

There is strong evidence of devotion to saints in medieval Scotland, and of devotion to virgin martyrs in particular. In the early 1540’s Perth burgess Robert Lambe accused a friar of lying about the need to pray to saints to attain salvation, and was set upon by the crowd, particularly by the women. Saintly martyrdom was considered the ultimate expression of love for God; the virgin martyrs’ fierce defence of their sexual purity in the face of torture made them valuable intercessors for humanity and honourable guides to chaste behaviour. Lindsay confirmed that lay people, ‘imprudent . . . Ignorant and blynd’, worshipped saintly images in church and made pilgrimages to shrines to offer prayers and make
offerings, ‘To thame aye babland on our beidis, / That thay wald help ws in our neidis’.  

As the late medieval period saw increasing emphasis on the saving power of Mary and Jesus, devotion to virgin martyrs was expressed primarily through donations to existing foundations. In honour of the virgin martyrs, Scots made money offerings, donated images, ornaments, vestments and annual rents, and occasionally founded chaplainries and obits.  

There are references to virgin martyrs in a variety of calendars, litanies, legends of the saints and prayer books; stories about Saints Margaret of Antioch, Barbara, Agatha, Agnes, Apollonia and Lucy would have been told in church on their feast days. Based on surviving evidence, devotion to virgin martyrs appears to have been greatest in the central belt, particularly in the east, and the older saintly cults had the greatest number of dedications. For example, St Katherine of Alexandria was popular for centuries up to the Reformation, but the wave of enthusiasm for St Barbara did not occur until the sixteenth century. 

Devotion to St Katherine had a wide geographical distribution. She was honoured from Irvine in the west to Leith in the east, and Aberdeen and Inverness in the north. Glasgow Cathedral claimed to have a portion of her tomb as a relic, and the oil from her tomb was believed to have curative properties.

Late medieval devotion emphasised visual imagery, so women’s understanding of the virgin martyrs was formed partly through processions, carvings and paintings on tombs, shrines, altars, rood screens, bosses, corbels, altar linens and vestments, statues at altars and along interior and exterior walls, and to a lesser degree, the visual imagery of liturgical and devotional works. Although most of the visual evidence for the pre-Reformation cult of saints in Scotland has been destroyed, inventories of libraries and churches reveal a world rich in visual imagery. Virgin martyrs invariably were presented alongside the tools of their torture. For example, St Apollonia had her teeth torn out before being killed so was depicted holding her teeth; predictably, she was looked to for assistance with tooth problems.

These symbols of saintly torture reminded women how difficult it was to defend their sexual purity, yet how important this battle was to salvation. Processions and plays reminded lay people of the general religious truths expressed in saints’ vitae. Sir Richard Maitland of Lethington claimed that processions were an ‘outward’ expression of Scots’ devotion to God, and the carrying of saints’ images in feast day processions continued up to the Reformation. For example, it is possible that the ‘St Barball’s Castle’ in the Dundee Corpus Christi procession represented the tower in which St Barbara was immured by her father. Copies of de Voragine’s Golden Legend often showed her standing next to this tower. There is no surviving Scottish evidence of plays based on
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the life of a virgin martyr, although there is German evidence for such plays. There is, however, proof that scenes of torture appeared in some Scottish plays, and it is likely that plays or 'tableaux vivants' included virgin martyr figures, perhaps scenes from their torture. Likely venues for these scenes were the 'clerk plays' referred to by Anna Jean Mill, who believed that the Ayr clerk plays of 1534-5 and 1541 had biblical or hagiographical themes. Devotional and liturgical books were full of saintly imagery. Many of these books were illustrated with woodcuts which helped the laity to understand the text and offered spiritual guidance even to the illiterate. The prayer book of Robert Blackadder (d.1508) had an illustration on almost every page, including images of Saints Barbara, Margaret and Katherine. The latter saint was depicted holding a wheel, the text referring to her as a beloved virgin and advocate with God in (our) struggle.

St Katherine was a popular subject for visual representation. In the college of St Salvator in St Andrews there was an image of St Katherine above St Michael's altar, 'newly painted' by the provost, according to the inventory of 1450, and the executors of Hector Boece (d.1536), principal of Aberdeen, built an altar dedicated to her in King's College, Aberdeen. The King's College altar had a 'table', possibly a triptych, which depicted St Katherine along with St Barbara and the Blessed Virgin Mary, thereby visually associating the two virgin martyrs with Mary, supreme intercessor next to Jesus. St Katherine was linked to Jesus' passion and salvation in a painting in Fowlis Easter collegiate church, Angus. The saint stands to the right of Jesus in his moment of greatest power and glory after his defeat of Satan in hell and triumphal rise into heaven. She holds a wheel at her side, and grasps with both hands the hilt of a large sword that she thrusts firmly down through the head of the emperor who had lusted after her. The wheel represents the wheeled torture device which God shattered before it could be used on her, and the sword was the one with which she was eventually beheaded. This painting reminded the female viewer that preservation of sexual purity involved great sacrifice and commitment, but brought women closer to Jesus and salvation.

Stories about the virgin martyrs were found in such works as Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, also known as the *Legends of the Saints*. It was a lay rendition of the Lectionary which the clergy used to produce feast day readings about the lives and deeds of the saints. *Legends of the Saints* were owned by clerics from Caithness, to Glasgow, to St Andrews in the east, several of the copies being used by more than one cleric. Copies were also possessed by ecclesiastical institutions such as St Mungo's Cathedral in Glasgow. Scotland even had its own vernacular *Legends of the Saints* (c.1400). Although it drew heavily upon the
Golden Legend, it was written by several Lowland Scots authors who made its saintly heroes familiar and relevant to a Scottish audience.30

The stories of the virgin martyrs proved that women, too, could celebrate reason over passion, love of the spirit and heaven over love of the body and the world, and could thereby gain God's acceptance. The vita of St Katherine turned the accepted understanding of women's natures on its head since the saint categorically used reason to refute the arguments of the pagan philosophers whom the pagan emperor had sent to undermine her commitment to Christianity.31 All of the virgin martyrs rejected their sexual nature in return for the crown of martyrdom; the crown which encircled their heads in church imagery reminded contemporary women of the holiness and status that came with complete commitment to sexual purity.32

A growing body of literature in the vernaculars of the British Isles explained how women could become 'good women'. Despite their formulaic and exaggerated nature, vernacular stories of the virgin martyrs were intended to set women on the right track in recognising, avoiding, and fighting against sexual temptation. The author of the English life of St Margaret enjoined 'widows and the married, and especially maidens' to listen carefully, so that they could learn how to overcome the devil and be confirmed in their Christian faith, and the Ancrene Wisse, a guide for female recluses, invited its readers to read saints' lives, especially the vernacular life of St Margaret.33 The Middle English tract Hali Meidenbad made available to clergy and lay women the vitae of Saints Katherine, Juliana and Cecilia, and a Lowland Scots contributor to the Lives of the Saints believed he was aiding in lay religious education by writing in the 'yngis townge'.34

The stories of the virgin martyrs ran along broadly similar lines, the main theme being the connection between sexual purity and devotion to Jesus. By resisting sexual temptation, the virgin martyr gained God's favour.35 Whereas male saints could overcome sexual temptation by transcending the body, women overcame it primarily by mortifying the body.36 Virginity accompanied by physical suffering brought the highest spiritual reward. Scottish legends, like many English ones, emphasised the physical sufferings of the virgin martyrs and their triumph over the devil as part of an overall emphasis on 'matters of the flesh'. Elizabeth Robertson attributes this emphasis in Middle English devotional works to the intended female audience; women needed the strongest reminders to resist sexual sinfulness, since they had an inherently sinful nature.37 Scottish virgin martyr tales included a detailed description of the tortures endured by the saint, interspersed with conversation between the saint and her torturer, who was often a powerful official within the pagan Roman state who had wanted her as a wife or concubine. In these
conversations the torturer offered the virgin martyr goddess status (St Katherine), marriage (Saints Margaret, Agnes, Agatha), or at the very least an end to the torture, but the saint protested vehemently against such temptations, declaring her love for Jesus and scorning her torturer's overtures. In St Margaret of Antioch's vita, the saint claimed: 'No dearer wish have I . . . than to die for Christ, Who condemned Himself to death for me! . . . This torture of my flesh is the salvation of my soul'.

St Margaret had to suffer physically to prove her love for Jesus; she triumphed symbolically over women's sexual nature by overwhelming the devil in the privacy of her prison cell between bouts of torture. In her vita in the Scottish Legends of the Saints, the devil was particularly ashamed of being defeated by a woman, for his first human victim, Eve, had been a woman who had been morally weak. Before she let him go, St Margaret grabbed him by the hair and slammed her foot onto his neck, at which point he cowered, calling her 'haly margaret' and 'godis maydine dere'. The Scottish vita emphasised her purity of body and spirit through starkly contrasting images of lightness (cleanliness) and darkness (filth). The manly devil was darker than soot, and the dungeon in which she met the devil was 'myrk and depe'. St Margaret, on the other hand, was described as a 'maydine clene', clear white through virginity and clean of all 'fleschly delyt'. She harboured no lechery, had given alms, fasted and prayed to overcome temptation, and looked forward to an eternally happy future in a 'clere court' surrounded by 'haly madinis'.

St Margaret's story suggested that women could triumph over powerful sexual threats, whether they were posed by their morally weak nature ('brukil'), like Eve, or by powerful men like the devil or Margaret's torturer Olybrius, who had transformed his sexual frustration into a determination to punish her for her Christian beliefs. The latter story emphasised that women must fight sexual temptation in order to be truly worthy, St Margaret asking God to bring the devil to her so that she might overcome him. The author of Hali Meidenhad reminded women that 'no one is crowned except for whoever fights truly in that fight [physical desire instigated by the devil], and with a hard struggle overcomes herself . . . you will not be crowned unless you are attacked'. Thus readers were assured that, far from being a cause for despair, sexual temptation was a gateway to God's love and the bliss of heaven. Further, the extreme youth and sheltered noble upbringing of most of the virgin martyrs demonstrated that even the most vulnerable women could achieve spiritual acceptability if they put their minds to it. In de Voragine's Golden Legend, the story of St Agnes' martyrdom was the catalyst for the conversion and martyrdom of St Lucy, a paradigm for contemporary women who wished to achieve sexual purity and imitatio Christi, and needed role models to do so.
Believing that women’s nature led them to experience life through the body rather than the spirit, men wrote stories about virgin martyrs to provide models of acceptable female experiential spirituality. Jesus was humanised to a great degree, the virgin martyrs rejecting the love of men in exchange for the love of Jesus. In late medieval Scotland this humanising of Jesus was in full swing, Jesus being described as brother, friend and Son of Mary, rather than Son of God the Judge. The notion of Jesus as lover had roots in the Song of Songs. The call of the bridegroom (Jesus) to his ‘bride, . . . my love, my dove, my undefiled’ (Mary) had its echo in the stories of the virgin martyrs. St Agnes called Jesus her lover and her betrothed, and St Katherine claimed to be the ‘spouse to Christ. He is my glory, He is my love, He is my sweetness and my delight’, preferring the beautiful Jesus to her torturer who was ‘ignoble and deformed’. Jesus spoke to St Katherine in similar imagery as he welcomed her into heaven: ‘Come, My beloved, My spouse, behold the door of Heaven is opened to thee . . .’

The image of the devout and chaste woman as bride of Christ was reinforced in Robert’s Henryson’s allegorical poem The Bludy Serk. The princess in the poem represented the human soul, but served equally well as a metaphor for women’s ideal nature. In the poem the princess was spirited away from her father’s (God’s) kingdom by a great lion (the devil), and cast into a deep, dark dungeon (hell), where the threat of sexual and physical danger was implicit. There she was kept in darkness, hunger, cold and thirst, shut off from the sight of the earth above, much as a soul in hell was shut off from God and heaven. Finally her father found a champion to fight on her behalf, a great knight (Jesus), who fought and defeated the lion, and released her from prison. However, the knight’s fight to rescue the princess had left him mortally wounded, and the princess was distraught at the prospect of losing her greatest love. The knight told her that she could prove her devotion to him by never marrying, and by keeping his bloody tunic (‘serk’) with her and thinking of him as she looked on it. She made a vow to do this, and after his death refused to marry, spending the rest of her days devoted to his memory, praying for him and thinking about the great love he had borne her.

This tale was written with great emotional appeal, encouraging women to identify with the princess, her great fear in the dungeon, her dread and anticipation as the battle raged between the knight and the lion, her joy at being released and united with her loving knight, her terrible sense of pain and loss as she watched him die, and her grief after his death. Women’s devotion to Jesus meant remaining chaste and ever vigilant against being ‘kidnapped’ by the devil and temptation, and feeling gratitude for Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross, which had freed them from eternal death in hell. They were invited to use devotional objects as a focus for meditation and
emotional union with Jesus, just as the princess had used her knight’s ‘bludy serk’.

Women had three options open to them if they wished to have a good chance of being accepted into heaven: virginity, chaste widowhood, or spiritual purity within marriage. Their best option was to espouse complete sexual purity as ‘virgins’ or ‘maidens’. On 10 November, 1524, notary public Gavin Ros reported that Jonet Carnis, daughter and co-heir of the late Henry Carnis of Dalkeith, had ‘chosen for herself the state of religion, and offered herself ready to enter the monastery of nuns or of profession of Haddingtoun, as it may please God or seem expedient for the time’. Of course there was nothing to stop a woman from taking a vow of chastity without entering a convent, contemporary documents distinguishing between ‘vows of chastity’ and ‘vows of religion’.

Contemporary literature often advocated virginity. In the second tale of *The Thre Prestis of Peblis how thai tald thar talis* (c.1484–8), the king, wishing to seduce a burgess’ daughter, sent his fool to act as go-between. Instead of encouraging the girl to sleep with the king, the fool, the mouthpiece of the author, encouraged her to preserve her virginity. He advised her to be guided by the life experiences of St Margaret and St Katherine, reminding her that the virginity of such saints had brought them a holy crown from God and a heavenly life of great joy and pleasure. Thus reminded of her duty to God and the rewards offered virgins in heaven, the burgess’ daughter followed in the footsteps of the virgin martyrs and humbly agreed to do God’s will. In the poem *The Dreme of Schr David Lindesay* (1526?), Lindsay described the nine orders of heaven, affirming that virgins had high status. Mary, the ‘Queene of Quenis’, was next to the throne of Jesus, accompanied by ‘Ladyis of delyte. / Sweit was the sang of those blyssit Virginnis: / No mortall man thare solace may indyte’. All commentators agreed that, apart from Mary, virgins had the highest status and happiness amongst women, particularly virgin martyrs. This idea was reflected in a full page woodcut in the *Acts of the Parliaments* printed in 1541. The heaven depicted by the woodcut contained far more virgins than chaste widows and married women, although the very presence of the latter categories encouraged wives and widows to keep up their struggle for chastity.

Despite the legends of the virgin martyrs, and the advice given by contemporary writers and preachers, most women did not remain lifelong virgins. As Bishop of Dunkeld Gavin Douglas (1474–1522) noted sadly in *The Palice of Honour*, there were precious few women of ‘chaist and trew virginitie’ riding to the palace alongside Diana, the epitome of ‘chaistitie’. Nevertheless, listening to the stories of the virgin martyrs could benefit less single-minded women. The virgin martyrs’ example of
assertive womanhood could inspire Scottish women to uphold high moral standards even when they chose ordinary lives that included marriage. Chaste widowhood was the second-best option for women, less well rewarded than virginity, but still acceptable. Coupled with good works, chastity could improve a widow’s spiritual standing greatly by the time of her death. A woman who voluntarily chose chaste widowhood was Catherine Sinclair, widow of William, first lord Seton. She lived in the ‘preistis chalmeris’ of the parish church of Seton, built an aisle on the south side of the church, located her tomb within it, and appointed a priest to care for her soul perpetually. Other women chose to enter convents after being widowed, such as the ladies of Seton, Glenbervie and Bass who founded the Dominican convent of St Catherine of Siena near Edinburgh in 1517; contemporaries declared that the women of this convent expressed devotion to God through a strictly chaste lifestyle. The laity who enriched such religious foundations built in sanctions to punish unchaste sisters, since the efficacy of their prayers for souls depended to a large degree on their sexual purity. Donor James Fotheringham authorised the town council of Dundee in 1502 to set aside any sisters of the Greyfriars who ‘fell away from the perfection and rule of their profession or lapsed into a wicked and suspected manner of living’.

Finally, married women could undertake a form of sexual purity by remaining utterly faithful to their husbands, and by concentrating their minds on spiritual matters rather than the pleasures of the marriage bed. They could even give up sexual activity within marriage, modelling themselves on a variety of women saints. According to Gavin Douglas, married women could gauge whether their devotion to worldly pleasures was excessive by asking themselves if they loved any creature more than God. If they answered in the affirmative, theirs was a wrongful love, more likely to be ‘fowle delyte’ than a ‘leful ... kyndly passioun’.

Several married women in late medieval Scotland managed to combine marriage with devotion to God. For example, Marion Scrimgeour and her husband Robert Arbuthnott of Arbuthnott together received a plenary indulgence in return for supporting a crusade (1480), joined the confraternities of the Franciscans and St John of Jerusalem (1487), and obtained a portable altar (1490). Queens were expected to set an example of chaste marriage and widowhood, drawing strong criticism if they did not. John Major (1467–1550) and Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie (c.1532–80) were extremely critical of Mary of Gueldres (d.1463), widow of James II, because she forsook chastity in favour of a liaison with the married Adam Hepburn, heir to the lord of Hailes. Eighty years later, in an oration welcoming Mary of Guise to Scotland, Sir David Lindsay warned her to ‘fear God, and reverence and obey hir husband, and keip
hir awin body cleine according to Godis will and commandementis'. In an earlier poem, The Dreme of Schir David Lyndesay, the author described the pains of hell suffered by noble and royal women who had not repented of their sexual sins.

Whatever their situation, women were enjoined to pursue chastity faithfully, not merely to assume 'a sanctis liknes' or the public image of a 'haly wif'. In The Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo, Dunbar chided court women who thought nothing of taking lovers whilst pretending love and loyalty to their husbands, or feigning grief as widows whilst laughing secretly and ogling men in church over the top of their devotional books. Indeed, Dunbar's poem wryly ascribed some of women's enjoyment of saints' lives to the friars' success at flattering the ladies in the telling. Women who had sexual relations outwith marriage were on a fast road to hellfire; repentance was their only hope. Yet even the worst sexual offenders could be saved if they turned away from sin, carried out the seven deeds of mercy, eschewed the seven deadly sins, and lived chastely in devotion to God. As Gavin Douglas remarked reassuringly, even evil people could be made saints through virtue. Scottish women's best hope was to model themselves on the virgin martyrs, who had rejected the overt sexuality of Eve, followed the lead of the Blessed Virgin Mary in embracing sexual purity, and suffered physically in imitatio Christi. For the virgin martyrs, physical suffering in defence of sexual purity had been a pathway to God's favour and heaven's bliss. Their stories could help women turn love for men into love for God, and by defending their own sexual purity, find assurance of salvation.

NOTES

5. Elizabeth Robertson, Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience (Knoxville, 1990), 33–5, 37–8, 41.
12. A copy of de Voragine, Legenda Sanctorum (Lyons, 1554) was owned by John Greenlaw of Haddington, vicar of Keith Humbie (d.1566).
13. National Library of Scotland [NLS], ACC. 11218/7, Mary of Guise's Prayer Book; NLS, MS10270, Dean [James] Brown's Prayer Book; NLS, MS 10271, Blackadder's Prayer Book. See also addition of SS Barbara and Appolonia to Perth Psalter in the sixteenth century, NLS, MS 652.
14. SRO, GD79/4/74 (Inverness); Charters and Other Documents Relating to the Royal Burgh of Stirling A.D. 1124–1705 ed. Robert Renwick (Glasgow, 1884), 76–9; The Annals of Banff, i, 244–5; Edinburgh University Library, Laing Charters, no. 191; Marshall, 'Parish Church', 71 (Leith); Epistolare in usum Ecclesiae Cathedralis Aberdonensis ed. Bruce McEwen (Edinburgh, 1924), 103; Registrum Episcopatus Brechinensis eds. C. Innes and P. Chalmers (2 vols, Bannatyne Club, 1856), i, 210–2.
17. Lindsay, 'The Monarche', i, l. 2365, p.269.
18. Sir Richard Maitland of Lethington, 'Of the Wynning of Calice' (1558), The


24. ‘Register of Vestments, Jewels, and Books for the Choir, etc., Belonging to the College of St Salvator in the University of St Andrews, circa A.D. MCCCCL’, eds. A. Macdonald and James Dennistoun in Miscellany of the Maitland Club (4 vols, Maitland Club, 1843), iii, 204.

25. Francis C. Eeles, King’s College Chapel Aberdeen. Its Fittings, Ornaments and Ceremonial in the Sixteenth Century (Edinburgh, 1956), 37.

26. Fowlis Easter Church, Angus.

27. de Voragine, ‘Saint Catherine’, Golden Legend, 713.

28. de Voragine, Golden Legend, viii and Legends of the Saints, xxxii.

29. John Durkan and Anthony Ross, Early Scottish Libraries (Glasgow, 1961), 63, 67, 70–1, 84, 96, 105, 126, 135, 138–9, 147, 158, 162.


32. See paintings of St Katherine crowned in Fowlis Easter Church and image of heaven with a tier of crowned virgins in The New Acts and Constitutionis of parliament made be Iames the Fift kyng of Scottis, 1540 (Edinburgh, 1541), fo 27v.

33. Robertson, Early English Devotional Prose, 94, citing ‘Hali Meidenhad’ and ‘Ancrene Wisse’.

34. ‘Egipciane’, Legends of the Saints, l. 1471, p.338.

35. Millett and Wogan-Browne, Medieval English Prose, xv.

36. Robertson, Early English Devotional Prose, 40.

37. Ibid. 97.

38. de Voragine, ‘Saint Margaret’, Golden Legend, 352.

39. Ibid. 352–3.


42. de Voragine, citing St Ambrose, in ‘Saint Agnes’, Golden Legend, 113.
43. Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose*, 41.
47. *Protocol Book of Gavin Ros*, N.P. eds. John Anderson and Francis J. Grant (Scottish Record Society, 1908), i, no.736.
48. Cf. SRO, GD103/2/46, transumpt of papal indulgence (1502).
60. SRO, RH1/2/284, pp 1–2, plenary indulgence granted to Robert Arbuthnott of Arbuthnott and Marion Scrymgour (1480); Bryce, *Scottish Grey Friars*, ii, 263–4; SRO, RH1/2/294, grant of portable altar to Robert Arbuthnott of Arbuthnott (1490).
62. Pitscottie, citing Sir David Lindsay, in *Chronicles*, ii, 376, and Lindsay’s comments on queens as subjected beings, in Lindsay, ‘The Monarche’, i, ll. 1064–76, p. 230.

63. Lindsay, ‘The Dreme’, i, ll. 267–8, 271, p. 12.

