CHAPTER 6

Imaging and Imagining Colette of Corbie: An Illuminated Version of Pierre de Vaux’s Vie de Colette

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6.1 Introduction

Although much was written about Colette of Corbie in the decades following her death in 1447, she was rarely depicted pictorially. One exception is a sumptuously illuminated manuscript version of the Vie de Soeur Colette that was produced in the last quarter of the fifteenth century (Ghent, Monasterium “Bethlehem” of the Zusters Clarissen- Coletienen, ms 8). The Vie de Colette was the official account of Colette’s life, composed by her companion and confessor, Pierre de Vaux, to advance her candidacy for sainthood. The image cycle in ms 8,

1 The folio numbers used here for ms 8 correspond with those written in pencil at the upper right corners of the recto folios and to those used in the monograph on the manuscript by Charles van Corstanje, Yves Cazaux, Johan Decavele, and Albert Derolez, Vita Sanctae Coletae (1381–1447) (Tielt, 1982); the latter includes essays by Albert Derolez, “The Illuminated Manuscript belonging to the Bethlehem Convent in Ghent,” 149–53 and Johan Decavele, “Pierre de Vaux, Saint Coleta’s Confessor and Biographer,” 145–48, along with full-color plates of all 32 miniatures in the manuscript. Ubald d’Alençon’s Miniatures et documents artistiques du Moyen Age relatifs à Sainte Colette de Corbie (Paris, 1912) and Paul Bergmans “Marguerite d’York et les pauvres Claires de Gand,” in Mélanges iconographiques, bibliographiques et historiques (Ghent, 1912) are largely descriptive rather than contextualizing.


2 The text was copied for circulation and translated from the original French into Latin and Dutch in 1450 and 1451, and again in 1509 and 1510. See Decavele, “Pierre de Vaux,” 147. Minor differences are apparent between the version in ms 8, which has not been published in transcribed form, and one at the Monastère de Sainte-Claire in Poligny, France, that was published as Pierre de Vaux, Vie de soeur Colette, introduction, transcription and notes by Elizabeth Lopez (Saint-Etienne, France, 1994).
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painted by unidentified artists (more than one hand was likely at work), is highly developed, consisting of 25 half-page illuminations and 29 historiated initials spread across 164 manuscript leaves. The images represent various aspects of Pierre's narrative: Colette as a girl teaching her parents, her approval by the Avignon Pope Benedict XIII as a reformer of the Franciscan Second Order, her ecstasies and miracles, and her death in the convent of the Poor Clares at Ghent to name a few. Indeed, no less than 40 depictions of Colette are presented, with her image appearing up to four times in a single illumination. In no other version of the Vie, and in no other known context of any sort, was Colette's life portrayed so expansively.

What was the role of Colette's imagery in this particular version of Pierre's Vie? What were the illustrations meant to accomplish and why? Certain features of the manuscript provide material for such inquiry. An inscription added to the volume in the early-sixteenth century states: “Madame Margaret of York... gave this book to the convent of the sisters of St. Clare in Ghent” [Made margrite de dyorke... donna cest livre au couvêt de chieus de S't clare en gandt (fol. 163v)].3 “Mad margrite de dyorke” is Margaret of York (1446–1503), who became duchess of Burgundy upon her marriage to Duke Charles the Bold in 1468. Portraits of Margaret and Charles, as well the couple's initials, the duchess's coat of arms and motto, and a dedicatory inscription in Margaret's hand—“Your loyal daughter, Margaret of England, pray for her and for her salvation” [Votre loyale fylle margarete Dangleterre pryez pour elle + pour son salut (fol. 163r)]—strongly suggests that Margaret commissioned the manuscript. The inscription's reference to a “couvêt de chieus de S't clare en gandt” links the volume to the community of Poor Clares known today as the Monasterium “Bethlehem” of the Zusters Clarissen-Coletienen in Ghent, which houses the manuscript to this day.4 This convent not only had been established by Colette, as part of her reform, but was also the place of her death. The Ghent community served as central catalyst of the Colettine houses in the Low Countries and France to continue Colette's reforms posthumously; it was instrumental in gathering evidence in support of her canonization and retained a critical relic—Colette's body—until 1782. Margaret traveled by boat to the convent twice in 1473, and it is possible that she presented the manuscript to the nuns

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3 My thanks to Dominique Vanwijnsberghe for her advice about the translation of "chieus."
4 It also has been suggested that an excised illuminated leaf from c.1600 depicting scenes from the passion of Christ and the lives of Saints Francis, Clare, and Colette may have originated from the Monasterium “Bethlehem.” See Maggs Bros. Ltd., Catalogue 1428, Continental, Sept. 12, 2003, n.p.