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Idolatress or Idol?

The symbolism of the black woman and the idolatry of Solomon in the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*.



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1. Introduction

King Solomon loved many foreign women [...] They came from the nations about which the Lord had said [...], "Never intermarry with them. They will surely tempt you to follow their gods." But Solomon was obsessed with their love.

(1 Kgs. 11:1-2)

Historians often fail to utilize medieval images as historical sources, focusing on the written word and leaving the large visual materials to the realm of the art historian. This is a shame, as these old images are more than art and can tell us a great many things about the world they derived from. When put in relation to the historical context, these old illuminations can convey the attitudes and worldviews of not only the artist who painted them, but of the community that he/she lived and worked in. A comparison between images from a longer period of time, made with a consciousness of, and connections to the historical development, could visualize changes in views and perceptions and open up new windows to the past.

While browsing medieval manuscripts online, searching for sources and inspiration for my thesis, I came across one manuscript that turned out to contain a rather unusual depiction. This particular illumination features an old king, kneeling by the feet of a woman with black skin, worshipping a statue. Just the atypical content and composition of the image is enough to tingle the curiosity and imagination; who are the man and woman? Why is he kneeling at her feet? What do they symbolise? And how would they have been perceived by their contemporary public?

The illumination can most likely be identified as portraying the bible passage quoted above; the idolatry of Solomon. If this is the case it would truly be something out of the ordinary, as the idolatry of Solomon is rarely featured in illuminations from the period. The unusual motif as well as the presence of a dark-skinned woman in the image opens up several intriguing aspects of inquiry regarding its composition and comparative possibilities. On top of this, the illumination is dual; the idolatry of Solomon is placed next to a depiction of Eve and the serpent. This adds another dimension to the image, as the two were clearly meant to complement each other, encouraging further questions and comparisons.

1.1 Questions

The depiction on folio 16 recto in the Flemish *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* from c.1440¹ is an oddity. This illumination will be the basis of my study, in the analysis I will discuss and examine the following problems and questions:

- How does this illumination relate to other depictions of the idolatry of Solomon as well as other illustrations in the same manuscript?
- What is the subject and content of the illumination and what can the placement and composition communicate of the intention behind this particular depiction?
- Was there a symbolic value in featuring a dark-skinned woman in the illumination? And how does this image relate to other contemporary depictions of characters with dark complexions in similar manuscripts?

Answering these questions should lead to a deeper understanding of the illumination, as well as its relation to other depictions of the idolatry and the symbolism surrounding them. Hopefully the study will also add some clues as to the symbolic use of the idolatry, as well as the development of the perception of women in general and black women in particular during the late Middle Ages and early renaissance.

1.2 Disposition

This essay contains three main sections. Following this description there will be a brief summary of the methodology and theories I will be using in my analysis. Next follows a chapter dealing with my sources, earlier research and historical background. The main part - the analysis follows. This will be divided into three main chapters dealing with different aspects concerning the portrayal of the idolatry and the supposed symbolic value of the woman by Solomon's side, followed by my conclusion. As there are several translations and versions of the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* from the middle ages, and as the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* is a long name to read as well as write, I will simply refer to the

¹ www.cn-telma.fr/luxury-bound/manuscrit1427/, (2013-05-20).

Speculum when speaking of these manuscripts in general and the *GKS 79 2^{o2}* when referring to the Flemish manuscript from c.1440.

1.3 Methodology and Theoretical frame

I will be studying illuminations as my main source, and so it becomes natural to use illustration analysis as a method of interpreting these sources. However, the main part of this study will be based in comparative analysis. That is, throughout the study I will seek patterns and make connections by comparing the main illumination with other related images, whilst making connections to the historical context. My initial method of looking at the illuminations will be based in Erwin Panofsky's³ three levels of iconographic interpretation. First I will focus on the composition of, and relation between the two parts of the illumination from the *GKS 79 2^o*. Then I will look closer at, and make further comparisons using the right section of the illumination, the one featuring the idolatry. To deepen the study and help place it in a historical context I will implement Görel Cavalli-Björkman's theory on the dual symbolism of black women in medieval Europe.⁴ These methods and theories have been chosen as they should be efficient in helping to answer my questions. Comparative analysis is useful when looking for patterns and changes in sources, the image analysis is the most appropriate in relation to the material, whilst Cavalli-Björkman's theory is highly relevant in relation to the subject.

1.3.1 Panofsky's three levels

In the initial analysis of the illumination from the *GKS 79 2^o* I will use Erwin Panofsky's method for analysing renaissance and medieval images, a method based in discourse analysis.⁵ As my essay is a historical study, it is logical to base the image analysis on the assumed prior knowledge of the intended reader of the manuscript, thus connecting it to the historical context. This means that I will attempt to take into consideration where and when the manuscript was made, whom it was made for and what the purpose of the illustrations in

² The Copenhagen Royal Library's name for the manuscript.

³ Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), was a renowned art historian and professor at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University. Among his many books are "Meaning in the Visual Arts", "Early Netherlandish Painting", and "Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art".

⁴ Cavalli-Björkman, Görel, "*Den svarta madonnan*", Cordia, Stockholm, 1996, pp. 11-14.

⁵ Panofsky, Erwin, "*On the Problem of Describing and Interpreting Works of the Visual Arts*" Translated by Elsner, Jas' & Lorenz, Katharina in "Critical Inquiry" nr. 38 (Spring 2012), University of Chicago, 2012, pp.467 f.

the manuscript were. I will also, as far as possible, aim to figure out the symbolic meanings that the intended reader might have taken for granted.

Panofsky divided his analysis into three different levels: pre-iconographic, iconographic and iconological. In her book on methodologies Gillian Rose, professor of cultural geography, describes the pre-iconographic level as “natural”, the iconographic as “conventional” and the iconological level as “symbolic”.⁶ This gives some clues as to the substance of the different levels. The pre-iconographic level is basically “the primary level of meaning that we can grasp from our direct life experience...”⁷, a description of what is visible in an image, without previous knowledge of symbols etc. Rose offers a pedagogic example:

...when an acquaintance greets me on the street by lifting his hat' [...] [Panofsky] suggests that recognizing that he has encountered a 'gentleman' with a 'hat' requires some interpretation, but of an 'elementary and easily understandable' sort...⁸

This “elementary and easily understandable” form of interpretation is what Panofsky defines as the pre-iconographic level.

Moving on to the iconographic level, it is described by Panofsky as “...the secondary level of meaning, that we can only grasp fully on the basis of knowledge conveyed by literature, the sphere of meaning dependent on content”.⁹ Using Rose’s example this would be the “... realization that the lifting of the hat stands for a greeting”.¹⁰ When analyzing the sort of religious images that I will be looking at, the “knowledge conveyed by literature” consist of a certain understanding of the biblical stories depicted, as well as of the text in the *Speculum* itself.

Lastly, on the iconological level one has to take an entire worldview into consideration and the focus lies on general intellectual history. According to Panofsky this level comprises

⁶ Rose, Gillian, “*Visual Methodologies; An introduction to the interpretation of visual materials*”, Sage publications, London, 2001, pp.202.

⁷ Panofsky, Erwin, pp. 470.

⁸ Rose, Gillian, pp.202.

⁹ Panofsky, Erwin, pp.470.

¹⁰ Rose, Gillian, pp.202.

...the unintentional and subconscious self-revelation of a fundamental attitude towards the world which is characteristic in equal measure of the individual producer, the individual period, the individual people, and the individual cultural community.¹¹

To round off Rose's example: On the iconological level "...the gesture of lifting the hat [would be interpreted] as a symptom of that man's whole personality and background".¹²

In analysing the core illuminations of this study, I will try to get through all three levels. The pre-iconographic and iconographic levels will get separate chapters, whilst the iconological level will be dealt with throughout the essay since it encompasses all the questions, which I will discuss.

1.3.2 Hypothesis

Little previous research has been made on the subject addressed in this essay. However, in her book "Den svarta madonnan", Görel Cavalli-Björkman deals with a somewhat similar topic. She makes the case that the dark woman had a special symbolic meaning in medieval imagery. Cavalli-Björkman focuses on the depictions of the black Madonna, but she also writes about other mystic female biblical figures such as Mary Magdalene, Lilith and the queen of Sheba.¹³ The thesis and the result of her study is that the dark woman had a dual meaning in the middle ages, that she was a link between positive and negative, male and female characteristics.¹⁴ This hypothesis is applicable to the *GKS 79 2^o*'s image of the Idolatry of Solomon. Here I will use it in the analysis in relation to the symbolic value of Solomon's wife.

2. Sources and Previous Research

As the subject of this essay is somewhat atypical a presentation of and some reflections on the sources should be in place. Naturally there will also be a summary of relevant earlier research on relating subjects. Finally there will be a short introduction to the underlying subjects and historical context.

¹¹ Panofsky, Erwin, pp.479.

¹² Rose, Gillian, pp.202.

¹³ Cavalli-Björkman, Görel, pp.24, 70.

¹⁴ Cavalli-Björkman, Görel, pp.149.

2.1 Reflections on the Material

My main source is very limited as it consists of a single illumination. However, to implement my analysis I will use more material than the one picture. The material I will be using consists of illuminations from digitalised medieval manuscripts as well as some other images from the same period. This poses problems as well as possibilities. The fact that many libraries have started digitalising manuscripts, making them available online is a precondition for this sort of study. Only a few years back this would not have been possible. However, it is important to keep in mind that this also attaches an aspect of randomness, as the selection of manuscripts, which are available are not made so due to any specific criteria, therefore there may be many manuscripts of interest still collecting dust.

The illuminations that I use in the comparisons are the ones that I have come across in literature and on different library websites. In choosing the comparative materials I started out looking for illuminations that were somewhat similar to the *GKS 79 2^o*'s depiction of the idolatry and which originated from the same period and geographical area. I have, as far as possible tried to limit the study to images from the area around Flanders from the beginning of the 15th century until the start of the 16th century.

An aspect that is important is to be conscious of when working with materials this old is one's own biases and pre-understandings. It is impossible to enter this kind of study completely unprejudiced, something that of course could become an issue. Some of the subjects of this essay could be especially problematic as the painful history of cruelty and oppression that is the transatlantic slave trade and the colonisation of Africa is so much a part of our consciousness today. These things were still to come at the time when the sources of this study were created, as were the protracted disputes on the rights and possibilities of women. The list of pre-understandings that might sway the result could go on and on. This whole study originated from the preconceived notion that there was something exceptional in the depiction of a black woman standing next to a kneeling white king. However, these problems appear to some extent in most studies, and as long as one is conscious of them throughout the process the results should not be too much affected in a negative way.

2.2 Previous Research

Though not much earlier research has been made on the exact subject of this essay I did find one study from 1996 which partly handles the same manuscript, as well as a mentioning of the same illumination from the *GKS 79 2^o* in another study published 1979. Aside from those I have found some previous work on related subjects, such as: Avril Henry's transcription of a version of the *Speculum*, Shaye Cohen's study on Solomon's marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh, an article on the portrayal of women in the late middle ages by Yona Pinson and Görel Cavalli-Björkman's book on the symbolism of the black Madonna in medieval Europe. Most of this research is relatively old, dating from the late 1970-1990's. But it seems very little has been done on this field during recent years, and so the research must still be considered relevant.

The study I have found which partly handles the *GKS 79 2^o* is a contribution to a larger project concerning 15th century manuscripts and historical symbolism. The study was conducted by Bert Cardon and published in 1996. It focuses on individual manuscripts and analyses the illuminations to a certain extent, but as the work deals with several versions of the *Speculum* from the time, the focus is on a more general level.¹⁵ As Cardon's study is wider than my own in that aspect, the use of his work in my analysis will be limited to some guidance as to the symbolism used in the manuscript, as well as for comparisons of the interpretation of the illuminations.¹⁶

In 1986 the historian Avril Henry made a transcription of an old English version of the *Speculum* from 1475. The published transcription contains quite an extensive foreword and introduction in which Henry presents the manuscript and makes some reflections over the content and historical context of the manuscript. The transcription in itself has been illustrated with woodcuts from a somewhat younger, German edition of the *Speculum*.¹⁷ In relation to this study, the English transcription will be useful mainly in the context, but as the old English

¹⁵ Cardon, Bert, "*Manuscripts of the speculum humanae salvationis in the southern Netherlands (c. 1410 – c. 1470); a contribution to the study of the 15th century book illumination and of the function and meaning of historical Symbolism*" from "Corpus of illuminated manuscripts" Vol. 9, "Low countries series 6" Edited by; Smeyers, Maurits, Uitgeverij Peeters, Leuven, 1996.

¹⁶ His study has also been a useful source of background information.

¹⁷ Henry, Avril, "*The Mirour of Mans Saluacioun: A Middle English translation of Speculum Humanae Salvationis*", Scolar Press, Bradford-on-Avon, 1986, pp. 26 f.

text is more accessible than the Flemish this might be used as a complement in the analysis to a limited extent.

Shaye Cohen's article is a theological study, but it connects to the subject of the Illuminations that I'm looking at. In his article Cohen tries to answer the question if Solomon's marriage to pharaoh's daughter has traditionally been regarded more as an achievement or a sin.¹⁸ He also tries to find out which aspects of the marriage were perceived as more or less problematic, through discussing both what the old Hebrew bible says and what later scribes and religious leaders have written on the matter. Quite early on in the study Cohen seems to come to the conclusion that the sin of idolatry overshadows the sin of intermarriage in the case of Solomon as well as in most other texts.¹⁹ Cohen comes to the conclusion that the views on Solomon's marriage were changing, from the time that the story was first written down until the "final" version was edited.²⁰ He also talks of how the relation between Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter continued to be a subject of debate, and that there has been a tradition of unwillingness towards putting any blame on Solomon for the idolatry. The article will be of use to me partly as background and partly in the analysis, as the different views presented will be a useful complement when looking at the late medieval perception of the marriage and idolatry.

One of the most recent works that I have found, which touches upon the subjects of the connection between the idolatry of Solomon, the fall of Eve and the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* is Yona Pinson's article: *Led by Eve: The Large Ship of Female Fools and the Five Senses (1498; 1500)*. Pinson's study circulates round a late medieval/early renaissance book, *The large ship of female fools* and its misogynous message and relations to some other manuscripts, for example the *Speculum*.²¹ Her thoughts on the perceptions of women in the late middle ages as well as her writing about the portrayal of the fall of man in the *Speculum* will be useful in my analysis. Though the fall of man is not the focus for this study it is part of the material I'm working with, which makes it relevant. The late medieval views on women are highly relevant as the study circulates around the perception of a female figure.

¹⁸ Cohen, Shaye J. D. "Solomon and the Daughter of Pharaoh: Intermarriage, Conversion, and the Impurity of Women", *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*, No. 16-17., 1984.

¹⁹ Cohen, Shaye, pp. 26.

²⁰ Cohen, Shaye, pp.37.

²¹ Pinson, Yona, "Led by Eve. *The Large Ship of Female Fools and the Five Senses (1498; 1500)*", *Word & Image A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2010, pp. 219 f.

As to the subject of the perception of black people in medieval Europe, I will use the second part of a series of books published by Harvard Press entitled *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. The volume is written by Jean Devisse and Michel Mollat and focuses on the portrayal of African people in European art from the 14th to the 16th century.²² One of the reasons that I chose to use this study is that they mention the illumination upon which I am basing my study, they also point out some similar images and offer a good overview.²³ As the African appearance of the woman in my main source is one of this study's focal points, Devisse's and Mollat's results and reflections should be highly relevant.

Finally, I will be using the book by Görel Cavalli-Björkman previously mentioned. Her study mainly concerns depictions of the Virgin Mary as a black woman, originating from the Mediterranean area. However, a large part of her book is given up to the symbolism of different religious female characters and symbols from the middle ages as well as earlier periods. For example she has a chapter about the queen of Sheba and Lilith which brings up several depictions of the queen as an black sovereign. Cavalli- Björkman also discusses the symbolism of the black woman in medieval Europe.²⁴ This will be relevant and useful when analyzing the possible symbolism of the woman by Solomon's side.

3. Historic Background

Here follows a short introduction to the *Speculum* and the biblical story most likely referred to in the illumination, some historical context as to the contacts between northern Europe and Africa, as well as the perception of dark skin in Europe at the time.

3.1 Solomon and His Idolatry

Solomon is one of the more prominent figures of the Old Testament. He was allegedly the son of David and amongst his more famous achievements mentioned in the bible are the building of the temple in Jerusalem and the judgement²⁵. The idolatry is mentioned in the first book of Kings and describes how Solomon in his old age fell to idolatry²⁶ under the influence of his

²² Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, *"The image of the black in western art, vol. II From the early Christian era to the 'age of discovery', part 2 Africans in the Christian ordinance of the world"*, Harvard university press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1979, pp. 7 f.

²³ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp. 44.

²⁴ Cavalli-Björkman, Görel, pp. 146-150.

²⁵ 1 Kgs, 3:16-28; A biblical legend where Solomon settles a dispute between two women, each claiming to be the mother of a child.

²⁶ The worshipping of "false gods".

foreign wives. King Solomon is commonly described and known as the wisest and wealthiest of kings and the story of his idolatry has not been very popular or common in texts or depictions from the medieval period.²⁷ However, in connection with the reformation in the 16th century, the idolatry had an upsurge as protestants used the story as an allegory for the catholic worship of saints.²⁸

3.2 The *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*

The main source in this study is an illumination from a 15th century version of the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, or *The Mirror of Mans Salvation* in modern English. This manuscript was one of the most influential, widespread and copied manuscripts in Europe during the middle ages. The first versions were written in Latin and are thought to originate from the first half of the 14th century.²⁹ However, the manuscript was later translated in to several different languages, English, French and German among others.³⁰ My main source is a Flemish translation from around 1440.³¹ The manuscripts usually consist of extracts from the Old and New Testament presented in connection and/or comparison with each other and the chapters tend to have a moral appearance. Its purpose was to present an image of continuity and a divine plan, where the past and present correlate. As the title implies it was to be a mirror of the road towards salvation.³² The *Speculum* could be used as a help for the clergy in preparing sermons, but it was also evidently meant as a material for private prayer.³³ At this time books in general, and richly illuminated works like the *GKS 79 2^o* in particular were exceptionally expensive luxury objects. This means that they were only available to the elite and apart from being used for moral and social instruction they would probably have been shown off to impress visitors.³⁴

3.3 A European context and perceptions of Africa

In the early Middle Ages Africa seems to have been regarded simply as a very distant land and the unfamiliar people inhabiting the continent were presumed to be schismatics³⁵ and

²⁷ Cardon, Bert, pp. 170.

²⁸ www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=271, (2013-03-29).

²⁹ Henry, Avril, "*The Mirour of Mans Saluacioun: A Middle English translation of Speculum Humanae Salvationis*", Scholar Press, Bradford-on-Avon, 1986, pp.10 f.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ www.cn-telma.fr/luxury-bound/manuscrit1427/, (2013-03-29).

³² Henry, Avril, pp.13.

³³ Henry, Avril, pp.11.

³⁴ Bok: <http://www.ne.se.ludwig.lub.lu.se/lang/bok/132314>, Nationalencyklopedin, (2013-05-20).

³⁵ Individuals searching to produce breaches in the Christian faith.

heretics. Well into the 1400's the perception of Africa appears to have been "veiled by ignorance and vagueness"³⁶ as contact with the continent was limited. To the Christian European, the Middle Eastern and African territories were strongly connected with biblical history. Later the areas became associated with Islam and then the Turkish through the expansion of the Ottoman Empire.³⁷ Throughout the period there was a blooming trade connecting the north-western parts of Europe and cities like Bruges with the Mediterranean, and together with goods like ivories and silks, the traders brought stories of foreign and exotic places.³⁸ We also know that around the 15th century there was an active slave trade in the Mediterranean, and part of the people who were sold off to slavery were black Africans. Some research has also shown that during this century a dark skin tone started to become associated with slavery (at least in the Mediterranean area), even though there were free citizens of African origin living in Europe at the time.³⁹

Traditionally, the colour black had a special symbolic meaning in Europe. Christianity had taken over an ancient tradition where black represented the opposite, even the refusal of light. The colour was associated with thoughts of a hostile underworld and this symbolism also influences the European perception of people with dark skin.⁴⁰ However, according to Devisse and Mollat this negative perception changed for a short period of time during the first half of the 15th century. The change came about due to dualities in the symbolism of the black colour. Apart from the negative associations, black was linked to monastic humility as well as the sorrow and regret connected to the funeral rite. When these aspects of the colour became considered more significant it also influenced the views on people of dark complexions.⁴¹ A humanist optimism influenced by the Byzantine ecumenism⁴² also gained ground amongst European thinkers, carrying the opinion that any human being could accept the Christian faith and live by the grace of God, thus attaining salvation.⁴³

³⁶ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp.255.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Sekules, Veronica, "Medieval Art" from "Oxford History of Art series", Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. VIII, 4.

³⁹ Blumenthal, Debra, "Enemies & familiars; Slavery and mastery in fifteenth-century Valencia", Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2009, pp. 272.

⁴⁰ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp.255.

⁴¹ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp.256.

⁴² Tolerance between religions.

⁴³ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp.256 f.

The Flemish area, from where my main source originates, was at this time part of the duchy Burgundy, at the western border of the Holy Roman Empire^{44,45}. During the 14th and 15th centuries the relative security of a rural based society with a powerful aristocracy and an expanding catholic church had started to give way to decline in the rural economy. Growing urban centres, housing a large and wealthy bourgeois, as well as a weakened church lead to increasing insecurity.⁴⁶ Around the 14th century, depictions of the queen of Sheba and one of the three wise men with dark skin began to appear in the regions around the Holy Roman Empire.⁴⁷ During the following 200 years the black man became increasingly used symbol in Europe being used for example in the heraldry of noble houses.⁴⁸

In the east the old, fairly trade oriented Byzantine Empire started to give way to the expansive Ottoman Empire, and the capture of Constantinople in 1453 shook Europe. The rapid Ottoman expansion continued through the 15th century, and by the middle of the 16th century large parts of eastern Mediterranean as well as Syria, Israel and Egypt were part of the empire.⁴⁹ During this time the perception of people from the African continent had also grown more diverse in Europe, and already at the start of the 16th century, not much of the earlier humanist optimistic views persisted.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Later to become the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

⁴⁵ Flandern: Historia. <http://www.ne.se.ludwig.lub.lu.se/flandern/historia>, Nationalencyklopedin, (2013-05-25); Tyskland: Mellan interregnum och reformationen (1254–1519) <http://www.ne.se.ludwig.lub.lu.se/tyskland/historia/mellan-interregnum-och-reformationen-1254-1519>, Nationalencyklopedin, (2013-05-25).

⁴⁶ Sekules, Veronica, pp. 5.

⁴⁷ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp.18-20.

⁴⁸ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp.8.

⁴⁹ Osmanska riket: <http://www.ne.se.ludwig.lub.lu.se/lang/osmanska-riket>, Nationalencyklopedin, (2013-05-25).

⁵⁰ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp.256 f.

4. The idolatry of Solomon in the *Speculum* from c.1440

*Solomon paid homage to idols because of a woman although he did not believe that God was an idol.*⁵¹

The illumination on folio 16 recto in the *GKS 79 2^o* is divided into two separate images, each portrays a scene from the Old Testament. However, to implement Panofsky's theories I have chosen to start off on the fundamental Pre-iconographic level and therefore, in the first section, I will simply describe what is visible in the illuminations without connecting it to the literary context.

4.1. Pre-iconographic Level

In the left hand part of the illumination a naked woman stands next to a creature, something in between a lizard and a swan, with a scaled body, tail, legs and neck ending with a woman's head. The head of the creature and that of the woman in front of her mirror each other; they have the same pale round face and long blonde hair. The two characters stand on the dark-green grass inside a walled garden. There is also something like an ornate gate on the left margin, and a tall slim tree in the background on



Eve and the serpent. "*Spegel der Minschliken Zalicheid*" fol. 16^r, Gold Scrolls Group, Bruges, c. 1440. Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek.

the right-hand side. The two characters are turned towards each other, the woman standing in semi profile, her body is slightly arched backwards and clearly exposed to the viewer. She is facing the creature and gestures towards it with her right hand. Above both figures there are three phylacteries⁵², containing a short text in Latin.

⁵¹ (A translation from the *GKS 79 2^o*), Cardon, Bert, pp.170.

⁵² (In this context) Scrolls painted in illuminations, meant to contain names or short texts.



The idolatry of Solomon. "Spiegel der Menschlichen Zalicheid" fol.16^r, Gold Scrolls Group, Bruges, c. 1440. Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek.

In the right hand image an older, fair skinned man with a forked gray beard, dressed in wide robes in two shades of red and wearing a golden crown is kneeling in front of a pillar. On top of the pillar stands a human figure holding a spear and shield. The man's hands are raised towards the statue in front of him, and his face is turned upwards, facing the figure on top of the pillar. Just behind the man stands a woman with ebony skin, dressed in a full blue and yellow frock and turban, smiling down at him. Her right hand rests lightly on the man's back as she gestures towards the statue with her left, mirroring the gesture of the woman in the other picture. Above the head of each of the two people there is a phylactery. The scroll above the woman is empty whilst the one above the man keeps a single word, "Solomon".

4.2 Iconographic Level

The two parts of the illumination are clearly meant to relate to each other in some way. Based on what Avril Henry writes in the introduction of his transcription,⁵³ as well as on the pure disposition of the illumination and the main part of the manuscript, it seems reasonable to assume that the two were meant to reflect each other in some way. As the left picture is noticeably larger than the right-hand one, it seems reasonable to assume that this is the main image, something that the text connected to the illumination reinforces. So whom and what is portrayed in these two adjoining pictures? And, maybe more importantly, what was it that the illustrator wanted to convey to the reader?

Most people with a basic knowledge of Christian symbols would be able to identify the woman and the strange creature in the left section of the illumination as Eve and the serpent having their conversation in the Garden of Eden. This scene is often depicted in Christian contexts, from medieval wall-paintings in churches to baroque and rococo oil paintings.

Yona Pinson mentions a very similar illumination from another *Speculum* around the same period, in her article:

⁵³ Henry, Avril, pp. 11 f.

“The first two chapters of the *Speculum*, the Fall of Lucifer and the Creation of Eve, are followed by the Fall of Man (...) where, again, Eve is deliberately highlighted in a close tête-à-tête with the serpent, whose face sometimes mirrors her own”.⁵⁴

Here Pinson mentions that the faces of the two characters mirror each other in several versions of the *Speculum*. She later explains this as something that was seen as a way for the serpent to gain Eves confidence before trick her into taking the forbidden fruit.⁵⁵

The right-hand section of the illumination features a less well known scene from the Old Testament. The phylactery above the man’s head tells us explicitly that he is King Solomon, but the scroll above the woman’s head has been left empty. However, it is quite possible to make a qualified guess about who the woman is, based solely on the composition of the image and some knowledge about the biblical stories concerning King Solomon. There is a passage in the first book of kings⁵⁶ which tells the story of how Solomon, in his old age, was led astray by his many foreign wives and started worshiping their “false” gods. The illumination with Solomon kneeling by the feet of a foreign woman, in front of a high statue is clearly a depiction of this bible passage. This would make the woman by Solomon’s side one of his wives.

In his study of the *GKS 79 2^o* Bert Cardon has instead chosen to interpret the woman as being the queen of Sheba.⁵⁷ He seems to base this interpretation more or less entirely on the skin colour of the woman.⁵⁸ As there are a few known depictions of the Queen of Sheba as a black woman,⁵⁹ and as the story of Solomon and Sheba is well known, it is not a farfetched connection. Devisse and Mollat on the other hand make no such assumption. They merely relate to the woman in the image as a “black temptress” and point out that the phylactery above her has been left empty.⁶⁰ In the biblical story, the Queen of Sheba is not directly connected to the idolatry, but the blame is put on the wives of the king. Two of these wives are referred to specifically, they are: The daughter of Pharaoh⁶¹ (who is mentioned several times and seems more important than the others, as the marriage with her sealed an alliance

⁵⁴ Pinson, Yona, pp. 219.

⁵⁵ Pinson, Yona, pp. 218.

⁵⁶ 1 Kgs. 11:4-5.

⁵⁷ Cardon, Bert, pp. 170.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ One of the most famous being painted around 1400, see figure 4. in appendix.

⁶⁰ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp. 44.

⁶¹ 1 Kgs 3:1.

with Egypt), and the woman Naamah⁶² (who gave birth to Solomon's heir). The empty scroll above the woman in the illumination was probably meant to contain either a name or a short text. Considering the size of the scroll, a name seems more probable, but if it was to be Sheba, Naamah, Pharaoh's daughter or something else is hard to say definitely. But as there was a trend in Europe during this time of depicting Egyptians with dark complexions,⁶³ the daughter of Pharaoh would seem a somewhat more probable candidate than the others.

4.2.1 Text

Manuscripts of this kind were made for people who were expected to be literate. The images in the *GKS 79 2^o* were therefore most likely mainly meant as decorative complements to the written word. This makes it necessary to take the text connected to the illumination into consideration when analysing the meaning and symbolism ascribed to the images.

I have not had the possibility of properly translating the original Flemish text of the *GKS 79 2^o* myself. However, the Middle English translation previously mentioned originates from approximately the same time, and though the texts must differ to a certain point⁶⁴ they should be fairly similar. Bert Cardon's study has also provided a useful partial translation of the Flemish text which proved useful. From these sources it is possible to gather that the main theme of the text connected to this particular illumination concerns the fall of man.⁶⁵ This is in consistence with the dominance of the part of the illumination featuring Eve and the serpent.

Apart from the fall of man, the text clearly brings up Solomon and his idolatry. The wife of Solomon is explicitly mentioned as an allegory for Eve, leading Solomon astray just like Eve misled Adam.⁶⁶ There are a couple of other examples offered as well, for instance Sampson is spoken of as having been deceived by a foreign woman.⁶⁷ But the *GKS 79 2^o* does not only give an account of parts of the Old Testament. It is also something of a moralising text about how to live one's life. There is much focus on the original sin and men are told they must be careful lest women lead them astray.⁶⁸ Cardon claims that the manuscript was most likely

⁶² 1 Kgs 14:21-31.

⁶³ Cavalli-Björkman, pp. 18.

⁶⁴ Partly due to the fact that the texts were written in rime (something that naturally affects the translation) and partly due to possible differences in the interpretation of the original Latin text.

⁶⁵ Cardon, Bert, pp. 170 f; Henry, Avril, pp. 45-47.

⁶⁶ Cardon, Bert, pp. 171; Henry, Avril, pp. 45-47.

⁶⁷ Cardon, Bert, pp. 171.

⁶⁸ Henry, Avril, pp. 45; Cardon, Bert, pp. 171

meant for a young married couple, and gives this as a reason for the emphasis put on the particular passage through the presence of depiction of the idolatry.⁶⁹ This could be a possible explanation, but as Cardon also points out, the illustrator has been exceptionally true to the text in his illuminations.⁷⁰ And so, there is a chance that the artists choice to add the depiction of the idolatry was an artistic approach, because he wanted the illumination to tie on to the written word on more points. Regardless of the artists motives, the text and the illumination together echo the misogynous views of the late medieval church that Yona Pinson writes about in her study. They match her description of the proneness to portray women as false and treacherous creatures, bent on misleading men.⁷¹

In addition to the main text there are phylacteries in the illuminations. These however do not contribute much that is not already conveyed by the main text. In the picture of the idolatry the only text enclosed is Solomon's name, whilst the scrolls in the other part of the illumination hold a short text in Medieval Latin, where the snake convinces Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit.⁷²

4.3 Two parts of a whole

On first sight, it's easy to draw the conclusion that as both pictures contain two individuals, the couple on the right was meant to mirror the couple on the left. This analysis would make Solomon a mirage of Eve and his wife a mirage of the serpent. The notion presented by Pinson, that the serpent was thought to have used tricks to fool Eve,⁷³ just like Solomon's wives were said to have taken advantage of his love for them when tricking him into worshiping the false idols would correlate with this interpretation. But from what was gathered in the last chapter it seems unlikely that this was the way the image was meant to be perceived back in the 1400's.

⁶⁹ Cardon, Bert, pp. 164.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Pinson, Yona.

⁷² "*Spegel der Minschliken Zalicheid*", Gold Scrolls Group, Bruges, c. 1440. Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Ms. Gks 79 2°, folio 16 recto; Pinson, Yona, pp. 220.

⁷³ Pinson, Yona, pp. 219.



Eve and the serpent & The idolatry of Solomon.
 "Spiegel der Menschlichen Zalicheit" fol.16^r,
 Gold Scrolls Group, Bruges, c. 1440.
 Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek.

There are also aspects in the illumination itself that lead to a questioning of such a simple interpretation. One such aspect is the focal position of the statue in the right-hand picture. Another, maybe more important one is the similarities between Eve and the wife of Solomon. They are both leaning slightly backwards, towards the centre of the illumination and both of them have one arm lifted, gesturing, Eve towards the snake and the wife towards the statue. If these aspects are taken into consideration, the wife of Solomon is not an allegory for the serpent but for Eve, just like the text indicated. This would go well together with what Pinson writes about the views on Eve, expressed at the end of the 15th century.⁷⁴ For example she talks about a publisher by the name Jodicus Badius Ascensius who, According to Pinson, described Eve as the incarnation of the dangerous prototype of the rebellious female.⁷⁵ It would also correlate with Cavalli-Björkman's description of the perception of the dark woman as a threat.⁷⁶

In this interpretation of the image the statue would be a mirage of the serpent, looming over both Solomon and his wife representing the devil, the false god. This would leave Solomon as an image of Adam. But how come Adam is not represented in the left section of the illuminations? Pinson helps provide one explanation to this question. She points out that many illuminators purposefully isolated the figure of Adam as a response to the *Speculum* text, in which Adam is presented as an innocent, tempted to sin through the love he bore his wife.⁷⁷ The relation between Solomon and his wives is described in a similar way, and in his study, Shaye Cohen presents a religious tradition in viewing the daughter of Pharaoh as the

⁷⁴ Pinson, Yona, pp. 214.

⁷⁵ Pinson, Yona, pp. 216.

⁷⁶ Cavalli-Björkman, pp. 12.

⁷⁷ Pinson, Yona, pp. 219.

reason for the ruin of the temple.⁷⁸ Cohen also states that in the Jewish tradition, religious leaders have been very reluctant to put any blame on the king.⁷⁹ Devisse and Mollat mention a religious influence from eastern texts and rabbis in the Holy Roman Empire during this period.⁸⁰ This makes it seem probable that the medieval Christian clergy took a similar position, choosing to put all the blame of Solomon's idolatry not on Solomon but on his wives.



Adam, God, Noah, Solomon, Details from. "*Spegel der Minschliken Zalicheid*" fol.16^v, 13^v, 18^r, 16^r, Gold Scrolls Group, Bruges, c. 1440. Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek.

Returning to the absence of Adam in the depiction of the fall of man; in looking at pictures of Adam as well as of God, Noah, Solomon and other revered men in other parts of the manuscript, one can notice a great likeness between them. They all have the same shoulder length hair, straight nose and thick, forked beard. This could imply

that these features were used to highlight the men representing positive male role models. In the illumination featuring the fall of Eve and the idolatry of Solomon the artist may have sought to emphasize the deceit of women further by letting the famously wise king represent all of these men, whilst the deceitful and treacherous women required two (if not three, counting the serpent) representatives to fully accentuate their devious nature and the threat they presented. Put in relation to the churches weakened position at the time⁸¹ the idolatry might have been used as a cautionary example, a reminder of why people needed the church and of the importance of keeping loyal to the "true" faith.

5. Solomon's idolatry in other documents from the period?

As previously mentioned, the *GKS 79 2^o*'s depiction of the idolatry seems to be an oddity. This view is strengthened by what Cardon writes about the exceptional originality of the illumination.⁸² Though I have come across two earlier depiction of this particular bible passage, this is the only one represented in any *Speculum* as far as I can find. The majority of the manuscripts I have looked at originate from around the same time and place as the

⁷⁸ Cohen, Shaye, pp. 29.

⁷⁹ Cohen, Shaye, pp. 27.

⁸⁰ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp. 45.

⁸¹ Sekules, Veronica, pp. 5.

⁸² Cardon, Bert, pp. 170.

GKS 79 2°. The oldest one is from the second half of the 14th century around 90 years older than the main source, while the youngest might be 60 years younger at the most. In none of them is the idolatry portrayed.⁸³ The two earlier depictions of the scene appear in the *Queen Mary Psalter*⁸⁴, c. 1310 and *The Flowers of Virtue (Die Blumen der Tugend)*⁸⁵, c. 1411. Apart from these images I have included two later prints of the idolatry in the comparison.

To make a short comparison with the illustration of the idolatry from the *Queen Mary Psalter*, this is the only depiction that does not originate from the Dutch and German area but from England. I chose to include it in the study as it is the very oldest image of the idolatry of Solomon that I have



Solomon and wives worship idols. “*Queen Mary Psalter*”, fol. 66. British Library.

found. It is also worth pointing out that this illumination is a hundred years older than the next image in the chronology as it differs greatly from the others that will be presented below. In this early illumination Solomon is kneeling together with five women, some of them crowned and others veiled, perhaps to represent the difference between wives and concubines. The scene is seen from the side with the group kneeling in front of an altar topped with two small figures at the margin of the picture. The two figures on the altar are somewhat similar to the ones in the other depictions of the idolatry. But apart from that, and the fact that the king is kneeling, this image is quite different from the others I have seen. A prominent difference is that the women here cannot be perceived as threats in the same way as in the other illuminations. They are all huddled together behind the king as if it was him leading them in the worshipping, and none of them are standing. This is the one depiction of the idolatry that I have seen where the women are portrayed as more submissive than the man.

⁸³ “*Speculum humanae salvationis*”, Karlsruhe Ostmitteldeutschland, c.1350. Badische Landesbibliothek, Karlsruhe 3378; “*Speculum humanae salvationis*”, Einsiedeln, c.1430-1450. Stiftsbibliothek, Codex 206(49); “*Spejel der Minschliken Zalicheid*”, Gold Scrolls Group, Bruges, c. 1440. Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Ms. Gks 79 2°; “*Speculum Humanae Salvationis*”, Germany/Denmark, c.1400-1450, Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Ms. Gks 80 2°; “*Speculum Humanae Salvationis*”, Germany, c. 1400-1500, Haag, Museum Meermanno, Ms. 10 C 23.

⁸⁴ “One of the most outstanding of the luxury Psalters produced in England in the early fourteenth century”, Rudloff Stanton, Anne, “*The Queen Mary Psalter; A Study of Affect and Audience*”, the American Philosophical Society for its Transactions series, Vol 90, 2001, pp. 1.

⁸⁵ “...one of the most violently antifeminist writings in the Middle Ages.”, Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp. 44.

Another difference is that the wives in this image seem to be depicted as being fair. The choice to depict the women as similar to the king could be seen as somewhat peculiar, mainly because in the biblical story the foreign nationality of the women is stressed and even given as one of the main reasons for the king's idolatry. When it comes to the context of the illumination, there is a great difference between the illumination in the Psalter and the younger images. In the *Queen Mary Psalter* many scenes from Solomon's life were depicted as a sequel, telling the story of his life and deeds.⁸⁶ The idolatry in the Psalter is thus portrayed as one occurrence among others and is not highlighted in the same way as in the other depictions presented in this study. This might be the first known depiction of the idolatry, but here the idolatry in itself does not seem to have been meant to carry any exceptional symbolic meaning. The fact that the *Queen Mary Psalter* is so much older than the other sources must also be taken into consideration, as much and more happened in Europe between the start of the 14th and 15th centuries.

The second oldest depiction of the Idolatry, the one from 1411, depicted in *The Flowers of*



Solomon worshipping idols. Hans Vintler, "Die Blumen der Tugend", fol.6^r. Tyrol, 1411. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.

Virtue, is very different from the image in the *Queen Mary Psalter*. In this illumination the imagery is much closer to that of the *GKS 79 2^o*. There is only one wife featured together with Solomon and her skin and long hair is very dark, almost black. The two persons are kneeling together in front of a pillar, very similar to the one in the *GKS 79 2^o* illumination. In this image the dark woman is wearing a crown just like the king. She is kneeling just in front of him as if leading him in prayer, in that way the placement of the wife and king has been reversed from the earlier image.

There are two things that might catch the eye in looking at this illumination in relation to the one from the *GKS 79 2^o*: One is that the statue on the pillar of the older image looks much

⁸⁶ Rudloff Stanton, Anne, pp.1.

more like a devil with large leathery wings and pointer ears or horns. The other is the fact that the king is holding a spindle between his hands. The text in this manuscript talks not only of how the king was led to sin by a deceitful woman but it also claims that he was driven mad by her.⁸⁷ The traditionally female tool of the spindle, often depicted for example in the hands of Eve after the fall of man (“When Adam dug and Eve spun...”), might be meant as a sign of this madness. It can be connected to the “topsy-turvy” symbolism and general foolishness presented in carnivals and satiric spectacles of the period.⁸⁸ In this illumination the woman has come to take an active role, similar to the one in the *Speculum*, it is clear that she is not following the man but rather the other way around. Devisse and Mollat mention the portrayal in *The Flowers of Virtue* as a turning point in the perception of the black woman. According to them it came about in a transitional period when a positive image, often represented by the queen of Sheba took on a more negative and threatening role.⁸⁹ The imagery of the *GKS 79 2^o* connects very well with this development, featuring the black queen representing the corruptive wife of Solomon whilst the queen of Sheba is depicted with pink skin.

After the *GKS 79 2^o*, Flemish translation of the *Speculum*, other pictures featuring the idolatry becomes easier to find. One depiction which is sometimes mentioned as the first one showing this motif, an engraving print by “The Master of the Housebook”,⁹⁰ is approximately 30-60 years younger than the one from the *GKS 79 2^o*.⁹¹ If you put these two early depictions of the Idolatry next to each other you will notice that they are very similar, As if the second artist was inspired by the work of the first one. In both pictures the king is kneeling just below a pillar



Solomon's Idolatry, engraving, The Master of the Housebook, c.1470-1500, British Museum.

featuring a bald figure holding a spear. Solomon's hands are held together as if in prayer in a similar way in both illuminations and the wife is standing close to the king with one hand

⁸⁷ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp. 44.

⁸⁸ Bayless, Martha, “*Parody in The Middle Ages: The Latin Tradition*”, The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

⁸⁹ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp. 44 f.

⁹⁰ A famous but anonymous artist, who lived and worked in Germany and the Netherlands during the second half of the 15th century.

⁹¹ www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?objectid=1363459&partid=1&searchText=Solomon+idolatry&fromDate=1300&fromADBC=ad&toDate=1700&toADBC=ad&titleSubject=on&numpages=10&images=on&orig=%2fresearch%2fsearch_the_collection_database.aspx¤tPage=2, (2013-04-20).

resting on the king's shoulder and the other one directed towards the statue, the woman is also wearing a turban in both illustrations.

One of the most noticeable differences between the two pictures is the change in the direction from which the viewer sees the scene. In the illumination from the *GKS 79 2^o* is the onlooker sees the scene from the side, with the characters more or less lined up next to each other. The print by "The Master of the Housebook" is rotated 90° so that the viewer sees the scene from behind the pillar, with one person on either side. The characters are dressed slightly different in the two depictions. This however can be attributed to the change in fashion between the early and late 1400's, as artists during the Middle Ages as well as the renaissance, tended to represent their characters wearing updated, fashionable garb.⁹²

In another depiction, from 1501 made by an artist known as Master MZ, the idolatry is depicted in a similar way. The king is yet again kneeling alone in front of an altar upon which stands an idol. In this illumination the woman is standing behind Solomon, leaning in over him with one hand on his back. Just like in the other two illuminations, the woman is wearing a rich gown and a turban. But an interesting difference in this print is that the idol is a voluptuous woman featuring some likenesses to the wife standing behind Solomon. The most apparent of these might be that the idol is wearing a turban just like her. This female idol is not holding spear and shield like in the others. Instead she holds what looks



Solomon's Idolatry, engraving, The Master MZ, 1501, British Museum.

like a regalia in her right hand. Not only is this idol female, but the pillar upon which it stands is decorated with smaller images of naked women around the crest. The female idol occurs in several later depictions of the idolatry thorough the 16th-17th centuries.⁹³ They seem to emphasise the vanity and deceit of the woman, not only is she leading the man into idolatry, but even worse she is leading him to worship a female idol.

⁹² This becomes obvious when browsing through images originating from different years between the 14th-16th centuries.

⁹³ For example by: Lucas Cranach the Younger (16th century), Hans Burgkmair the older (16th century), Willem De Poorter (17th century), Gerard Hoet (17th century).

5.1 Idolatry, the Sybil and the deceit of women

*Look at Adam and the strong Samson; Look at David and the wise Solomon; if women's wiles have deceived such great people, test whether you are safe from the deceit of women[.]*⁹⁴

The choice to depict the idolatry seems to correlate well with the view on women as misleading and corruptive creatures that appears to have been gaining strength over time.⁹⁵ The two married women, Eve and Pharaoh's daughter depicted in the *GKS 79 2^o* who lead their men into mortal sin must have been useful symbols at the time. And in the context of the gift to a young couple it would probably have been perceived as a warning. To the young husband the passage could have acted as an encouragement to keep strict control of his family, religious matters and not falter his responsibility for the young woman who, according to the church, might lead him to his doom. To the wife it might have been a warning to keep from giving her husband advice or try to influence him, least she might cause the downfall of the both of them. Here a connection can be made to the image of the woman as wise but dangerous. Cavalli-Björkman mentions this perception of the dark woman in her study.⁹⁶ The illumination in the *GKS 79 2^o* paints out the woman as dangerous because of her wisdom which is here rather painted out as scheming sort of cunning.

In addition to the woman in the idolatry there are two unfinished illuminations in the *GKS 79 2^o* featuring women with large turbans who might also have been intended to be depicted with dark complexions. One of these images shows the tale of Jael and the other shows a scene from the tale of Judith, both strong, vigorous women of the Old Testament who took matters into their own hands.⁹⁷ But as these pictures are incomplete and have not been coloured it is impossible to know how the artist was planning to finish them. There is however another concurrence between the illumination of the idolatry and a depiction featuring the vision of the Sibyl. To start with the composition of the two illuminations in the *GKS 79 2^o* are noticeably similar. Both feature a king kneeling at the feet of a tall woman gesturing towards a deity. In the case of the Idolatry this deity is a foreign idol and in the illumination of the Sibyl it is a vision of the Madonna and child in the sky.

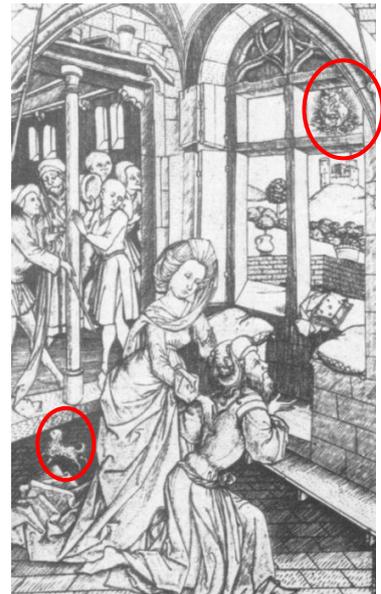
⁹⁴ Cardon, Bert, pp.171.

⁹⁵ Pinson, Yona; Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp. 42-45.

⁹⁶ Cavalli-Björkman, Görel, pp. 147 f.

⁹⁷ See figures 1. & 2. in appendix.

Looking at some other depictions of the vision of the Sibyl from the Low Countries during this time there are often even more similarities.⁹⁸ In some of the images the Sybil is wearing a similar turban, as she raises one hand towards the vision, whilst the other rests on the man's back, guiding his gaze to the sight of the Madonna and child. In one illumination, by the Master E.S.⁹⁹, there is even a small dog next to the couple, a symbol which reoccurs in "The Master of the Housebook"'s depiction of the idolatry. The question arises if these correlations are more than mere coincidences. The likeness between the two scenes does seem to point to some sort of influence from one on the other. This



The Sibyl sees the Virgin with Jesus. Part of engraving, E.S. Master, c.1450. Munich, Graphische Sammlung..

observation correlates to Devisse and Mollat's claim that the image of the black woman started to change from mainly positive into that of the temptress and the Sibyl.¹⁰⁰ It fits the change observed in the discussed images of the idolatry, where the portrayal of black women transformed from positive and meek to negative and active.

To return to the image that is the basis of this study, it clearly has things in common with the illumination of the Sibyl and there seem to be similarities in the symbolism in the two scenes. They both portray women, one with some power over the man and one with powers the man does not possess, and both are directing their man towards a deity. The reoccurring turban, which has been a common feature in the illuminations mentioned above may not have any connection to the skin colour of the women as there are plenty of examples of fair skinned women wearing similar headdresses for example in a copy of the *Speculum* from 1455.¹⁰¹ This sort of headdress was actually quite popular in large parts of Europe throughout the 15th century, and that might be all there is to it. However the turban hairstyles were influenced by Turkish fashion in connection to the fall capture of Constantinople and so the intention of depicting these women in turbans might possibly have been to direct the viewers thoughts

⁹⁸ See also figure 7. in appendix.

⁹⁹ "[A] German engraver working in the mid-15th century, named after the monogram on several of his surviving prints. He was the most prolific and influential of the early German engravers, working on profane and fantastic subjects as well as religious images and producing more than 300 known prints", www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100139230, (2013-05-14).

¹⁰⁰ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp. 44.

¹⁰¹ *Miroir de l'humaine salvation*, Bruges, 1455. Glasgow, University Library, Ms. Hunter 60.

towards the east. Depicting some of the female characters with turbans may have been a way for the artist to separate the idealized calm, virtuous women like Mary, Anna and Rebecca from the more dangerous and in ways powerful women like the wife of Solomon, Jael and Judith and in some cases the Sibyl.

If the turban was indeed meant to draw the viewer's thoughts towards the east then, taking the European climate at the time into consideration, with a weakened catholic church and a threatening Ottoman Empire,¹⁰² the symbolism of the idolatry in the *GKS 79 2^o* may well be even more extensive. The depiction of the idolatry could even be a cautionary metaphor for the threat presented by the increasingly aggressive east.¹⁰³

6. Why a black Queen?

Nigra sum sed Formosa.

- Song of Solomon 1:5-6

Only two of the depictions of the idolatry (one being the depiction in the *GKS 79 2^o*) which I have looked at clearly feature a woman with dark skin. One of the later prints can, if compared to other European depictions of Africans from the time, be interpreted as featuring a black, African wife¹⁰⁴. The others depictions seem to feature one or several fair-skinned women. So how come the artist of the *GKS 79 2^o* chose to depict the wife of Solomon with ebony skin?

As a starting point here it would choose the bible passage concerning the idolatry, as this should also have been the original reference of the artist. In the passage it is explicitly stated that Solomon's wives were "foreign"¹⁰⁵. What is more, his most talked of wife is North-African, the daughter of Pharaoh. As Egyptians were often depicted with dark complexions during this period it would seem reasonable that the artist followed this trend and gave the queen a dark skin tone.¹⁰⁶ In her study Görel Cavalli-Björkman makes a connection between a

¹⁰² Sekules, Veronica, pp. 5.

¹⁰³ Osmanska riket: <http://www.ne.se.ludwig.lub.lu.se/lang/osmanska-riket>, Nationalencyklopedin, (2013-05-25)

¹⁰⁴ Solomon's Idolatry, engraving, The Master MZ, 1501, British Museum, (see page 25)

¹⁰⁵ 1 Kgs. 11:1-2.

¹⁰⁶ Cavalli-Björkman, Görel, pp. 18.

passage in the “Song of Solomon”¹⁰⁷ and the account of king Solomon in the first book of kings. The passage is the one quoted at the start of this chapter, in English it would translate into something like either “I am black but comely” or “I am black and beautiful”. Cavalli-Björkman analysis of the passage is that the wife is telling the reader not to be misled or distracted by her beauty. That the “blackness” does not relate solely to any physical attribute, but that it is also an ancient metaphor for female wisdom.¹⁰⁸ This connection between wisdom and blackness may, as previously mentioned, be present in the illumination in the *GKS 79 2^o* as well. Though here the woman’s cunning is portrayed as the devil tool, used to lead a respectable man astray.

Bert Cardon’s interpretation of the woman as queen of Sheba is as previously discussed highly improbable, something that is further supported by Devisse’s and Mollat’s claim, that by this time depictions of the Queen of Sheba as a dark-skinned woman had become rare.¹⁰⁹ There are also other illuminations in the *Speculum* manuscripts that speak against Cardon’s interpretation; at least two images in the manuscript shows Sheba portrayed as a white, pink cheeked queen.¹¹⁰ In these illuminations it is clearly stated that the woman portrayed is the queen of Sheba, both in the text and in the phylactery in the illumination. As most other reoccurring characters in the *GKS 79 2^o* have similar features in every image, it appears improbable that one character would be depicted so widely different in two images. It seems there should be a more probable and logical explanation available.

Might not the illumination from *The Flowers of Virtue* and the misogynous views it heralded be connected to this manuscript as well? The two illuminations of the idolatry are (as mentioned previously) very similar. As the *GKS 79 2^o* was made approximately 20-30 years after the other manuscript there would have been plenty of time for the views presented in *The Flowers of Virtue* to have become widespread. Might the artist of the *GKS 79 2^o* even have seen the earlier illumination of the idolatry and been directly influenced by it? If not he may have heard of the manuscript and the illuminations in it. This would not only give a reason for the composition of the illumination, it would also give some account of why the artist chose to ad an illumination of the idolatry to the *Speculum* manuscript. Continuing along this line,

¹⁰⁷ An Epic poem featured in the Bible in connection to the Old Testament. Nowadays it is usually used by Christians in wider metaphors concerning the relationship between faith and the church rather than applied to actual biblical stories.

¹⁰⁸ Cavalli-Björkman, pp. 148.

¹⁰⁹ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp. 43 f.

¹¹⁰ See figure 3. in appendix.

Cardon's claim, that the *GKS 79 2^o* was made as a gift for a young married couple might also be taken in to consideration? According to Cardon the extra stress put on "the deceitfulness of women"¹¹¹ was connected to that the scripture was directed towards a young couple.¹¹² Could it be that the illustrator wanted to add an extra angle to the chapter dealing with female falseness at the same time as the woman's foreign origin was clearly accentuated in order to make it easier to distance her from the wife in the young couple?

Looking at Yona Pinson's reflections on the symbolism of the colour black, she mentions in her article a description of fools who wore black demonic masks and were said to "...paint their faces black with coals/ the Devil's sign upon their souls", as manipulated by the prince of darkness..."¹¹³ This would imply that a dark or black face could be regarded as a sign of the Devil. Something that coincides with the observation that the devil and his minions are often depicted with either black or dark red skin in the *GKS 79 2^o* as well as in other images, something Devisse and Mollat take note of in their study as well.¹¹⁴ Pinson also writes about the views on women in the early renaissance that "...their beauty and sexuality were conceived as ephemeral and false and inexorably related with death."¹¹⁵ These two views in combination would go well together with Cavalli-Björkman's description of the views on the dark and dangerous woman.¹¹⁶ They would also match and strengthen the message that the illumination of the idolatry from the *GKS 79 2^o* has seemed to communicate so far: the darkness and danger of women and the idolatry that they invariably led men into. In the historian Bernd Roeck's article about "The Alien in Medieval Europe", he points to the reality and presence of magic in the medieval person's life and how deviating individuals were often connected with some sort of magic abilities.¹¹⁷ The black wife of Solomon would fit this worldview, a foreign woman entering the court of the wise and virtuous king and using her magical charms and female cunning to lure the king into committing a mortal sin.

¹¹¹ Cardon, Bert, pp. 171.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Pinson, Yona, pp. 221.

¹¹⁴ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp. 18.

¹¹⁵ Pinson, Yona, pp. 223.

¹¹⁶ Cavalli-Björkman, pp. 12.

¹¹⁷ Roeck, Bernd, "*The Enchantment of the Alien: Metaphysics and Marginality in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*", Sage publications, London, 2004, pp. 40 f.

6.1 Other illuminations of Africans and relating images in the *Speculum*

In the *GKS 79 2^o* itself there seem to be only one other dark-skinned person depicted besides Solomon's wife, one of the three kings (most likely Balthazar, who was increasingly often depicted as a moor, with dark skin)¹¹⁸. Whether or not any of the individuals in the unfinished illuminations were meant to have dark skin is, as mentioned previously, close to impossible to say. Concentrating on the finished images, they perfectly follow the trend that Devisse and Mollat point to: the black woman being a representative of the false and deceptive female whilst the queen of Sheba is depicted with pale skin and the wise man is lifted as the one positive image of the foreign.¹¹⁹

In general it appears that depictions of persons with brown or dark skin were relatively unusual in other versions of the *Speculum* in these parts of Europe. Some slightly younger manuscripts can be connected to Devisse and Mollat's theory, for example a copy of the *Speculum* made in the German area at the end of the 15th century features the king Balthazar as its only dark-skinned character.¹²⁰ There is however a version of the manuscript originating from about the same time and vicinity which contains frequent depictions of characters with dark complexions throughout, this document can also be found in the Royal Danish Library.¹²¹ Here Pharaoh is depicted with dark hair and skin¹²², as is a musician¹²³, a servant¹²⁴ and several malefactors and bystanders.¹²⁵ One of the wise men seems to have a somewhat darker face but his hands are of another much paler tone, whilst the Queen of Sheba has light skin, just like in the *GKS 79 2^o*. This leaves only dubious and downright negative male characters depicted with dark skin and not a single woman with a dark complexion. That is until one looks closer at the illumination of the serpent in this manuscript. This image becomes very interesting when put in relation to the depiction of the fall of man and the idolatry from the *GKS 79 2^o* as well as in comparison with the image from *The Flowers of Virtue*.

¹¹⁸ See figure 10. in appendix.

¹¹⁹ Devisse, Jean & Mollat, Michel, pp. 22, 39-41.

¹²⁰ "*Speculum Humanae Salvationis*", Germany, c. 1400-1500, Haag, Museum Meermanno, Ms. 10 C 23.

¹²¹ "*Speculum Humanae Salvationis*", Germany/Denmark, c.1400-1450, Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Ms. Gks 80 2^o.

¹²² See figure 12. in appendix.

¹²³ See figure 13. in appendix.

¹²⁴ See figure 14. in appendix.

¹²⁵ See figures 15.-19. in appendix.

The serpent in this younger *Speculum* is similar to the one from the *GKS 79 2^o*. Only in this younger image the snake has a dark, brown colour of face and body, as well as the dark hair and yellow crown of Solomon's wife in the illumination of the idolatry from *The Flowers of Virtue*. She has also accumulated the leathery wings of the idol. In comparison to the *GKS 79 2^o*'s illumination, the younger depiction appears as a combination of the two sides of the *GKS 79 2^o* image. The serpent has come to represent not only the snake in the garden of paradise but also the treacherous wife of Solomon, the dark temptress. This could be thought to clash somewhat with the earlier interpretation, connecting Eve, and not the snake, to the wife of Solomon. However if one was to merge the deceitful queen with one of the characters from the fall of man, it stands to reason that this combination would be the most striking.



The serpent in Eden, detail from "*Speculum Humanae Salvationis*", fol. 4^v Germany, c.1400-1450, Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek.,

Looking back at the depictions of the idolatry and the fall of man with Cavalli-Björkman's double symbolism in mind it would seem that in these illuminations there is more of a change from a one symbolic meaning into another, rather than the two symbolisms coexisting. During the time between the creation of the first and the last of these images, the representation of the black woman has gone from being that of the exotic, wealthy Queen of Sheba, paying homage to the wise king Solomon, to being that of the wife of Solomon, black and beautiful, a strategic marriage but inevitably leading to the fall of her husband. Finally her transformation is complete and she has turned into the serpent of paradise, not only the idolatress but the very idol itself, an extension of the devil and the doom of man lest he be careful.

7. Conclusions

The illumination which this essay radiated from is clearly a depiction of the idolatry of Solomon, a biblical legend mentioned in the *GKS 79 2^o* text and used in comparison with the fall of man. It features King Solomon and one of his wives, most likely the daughter of Pharaoh, whom is mentioned in the first book of kings. But just like in the text, the bulk of the illumination is given up to the story of the fall of man. The smaller depiction of the idolatry was in all probability meant as an accentuating comment rather than the main focus of the illumination. However, the very presence of a portrayal of the idolatry in the *GKS 79 2^o* is very unusual, maybe even unique amongst the *Speculums* in Europe. It was in all likelihood

added either at the whim of the artist, who would have chosen to follow the text more closely in his illuminations than other artists of the time. Or on demand of the clients who wanted to put some extra emphasis on certain passages considered relevant to a young married couple. These explanations would both seem likely as the idolatry is not the only unusual image in this manuscript. The illustrator has also chosen to add an image of the Good Samaritan which is not present in any of the other manuscripts.¹²⁶

There was most likely some amount of symbolism intended in the artist's choice to depict the wife of Solomon with ebony skin. There is of course the chance that the illuminator of the *GKS 79 2^o* simply knew the story of the idolatry well. The choice to depict the wife with dark skin can subsequently have been based on the description of her as an Egyptian princess, and the current European trend of depicting Egyptians with dark complexions. However this does not make the presence of an underlying symbolism less likely.

The artist may have been influenced by the similar illumination from *The Flowers of Virtue*, which also features the wife depicted as a black woman. The misogynist views presented in *The Flowers of Virtue* also correlate well with the text connected to the illumination in the *GKS 79 2^o*. A connection can be made between these misogynist views gaining ground in Europe at the time, and the choice to depict the "deceitful" wife of Solomon with dark skin. Considering the traditional threatening and mystical symbolism of the colour black as well as Cavalli-Björkman's thoughts on the double symbolism of the black woman, a dark wife can have been thought of as having particularly strong female characteristics, therefore being especially dangerous. Yona Pinson's study supports this theory, in her study she also points to the use of the idolatry as a misogynous symbol for the weakness and treacherousness of women. This also ties together well with Devisse's and Mollat's mentioning of a changing development in the European perception of dark-skinned people during the 15th century.

When it comes to other illuminations of black people from similar manuscripts, the *GKS 79 2^o* illustration of the idolatry stands out in the way that it appears to be amongst the very few (completed) images showing women with dark complexions. The trend in depictions of dark-skinned individuals during this time appears to point towards what was to come in later centuries. There seem to be an increasing amount of depictions showing of characters with

¹²⁶ Cardon, Bert, pp.172.

dark skin as either servants or “bad guys”. Here it becomes easy to make a connection to the Mediterranean slave trade’s influence on the perception of African, (chiefly North-African) people in Europe, as well as the increasing exploration of the continent during the century.

The *GKS 79 2^o*’s illumination is likely amongst the earliest known depictions of the idolatry, originating from before the motif became more popular in connection with the reformation. In relation to other, somewhat later depictions of the idolatry, there is great likeness when it comes to composition as well as content. In comparison with the much older depiction from the Queen Mary Psalter there are however some more apparent differences, the most prominent being that the women in this illumination are depicted as a submissive group behind Solomon. When it comes to differences in relation to the later depictions, there is a perceivable pattern. In the second oldest illumination only one of Solomon’s wives is featured, and she has acquired dark skin. Though she is still kneeling she is now in front of the king, thus taking a much more active role than the women in the Psalter. Moving on to the illumination from the *GKS 79 2^o* the wife is no longer kneeling but has become even more active, standing next to the kneeling king and gesturing towards the statue. Apart from the dark skin tone, in this image the woman is also wearing a turban. Looking at the prints from just before the reformation, they too follow this same pattern; in both of them the wife is standing behind the king, gesturing towards the idol. In the youngest of these prints the king is even led to worship a female idol. By this time it seems the woman was no longer only the idolatress, but she had become the idol itself, not only Eve, but the serpent, not only the temptress but the dark temptation and the promise of doom.

The threat is present already in the depiction in the *GKS 79 2^o* with the foreign woman looming over the kneeling king. Making a final connection to the historical context, with a weakened church and an expansive Ottoman Empire, the image of the idolatry may also have been perceived as a metaphor for what might happen to the world the reader of the manuscript lived in. In this interpretation the old, previously wise, white king would be an allegory for the weakened church. Whilst the young and vigorous black woman would represent the dangerous east, threatening to doom Europe just the way Solomon’s wives doomed him by leading him into idolatry.

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13.



fol. 32^r

14.



fol. 34^v

15.



fol. 48^r



fol. 51^r

17.



fol. 43^r

18.



fol. 31^r

19.



fol. 37^r