

CHRISTINA MIRABILIS AND THE SCHOLASTIC NOTION OF TRUTH¹

How can people who are smart and well-educated, perhaps even shrewd and cunning, be deceived into believing far-fetched tales of miracles and wonders? This question, I believe, subconsciously nags, if not openly haunts, all medievalists at one point or another. How do we explain that otherwise astute individuals, who had received the very best education the Middle Ages had to offer, unquestioningly accepted, or even authored the most outrageous miracle stories?

Answers that depend upon naïveté, credulity, fraud or general backwardness, I wish to dismiss. Not because I believe the Middle Ages were not plagued by these faults, but rather since the phenomenon under consideration is perhaps too “medieval” to be explained by symptoms that are timeless.

Thus, in order to come up with something more satisfying, I have decided upon a somewhat paradoxical approach. I will inquire into the factual accuracy (or lack thereof) of what is undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary medieval saints’ lives: Thomas of Cantimpré’s *Life of Christina the Astonishing* (hereafter cited as *VCM*).² This peculiar story revolves around a woman who died, came back to life and subsequently engaged in extreme penitential practices. Yet, Thomas, who authored the *VCM* in 1232, was also one of the best educated individuals of his era. He studied at the University of Paris and in Cologne under Albert the Great.³

¹ A shorter version of this paper was read at the 24th Annual Conference of the Association of the Medieval Midwest, September 26 and 27 2008, North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota. I am grateful to the organizers of this conference for their invitation, as well as to the commenters who offered their helpful notes and remarks. Additionally, I would like to thank Constance H. Berman and Katherine H. Tachau for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper.

² Thomas of Cantimpré, *De s. Christina Mirabili virgine*, ed. J. PINIUS, *Acta sanctorum*, vol. 5, Antwerp, 1727, p. 637-660.

³ For Thomas’ biography see the articles by Alfred DEBOUTTE, *Thomas van Cantimpré zijn opleiding te Kamerijk*, in *Ons geestelijk erf*, 56 (1982), p. 283-299