

Saint Christine



William Paris

This legend of Christine is one of two Middle English virgin martyr legends that we know were composed by laymen. (The other is Chaucer's Cecilia legend.) William Paris wrote as a political prisoner. He was a follower of Thomas Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, who was exiled to the Isle of Man in 1397 for treason against King Richard II. According to his epilogue to "Christine," Paris was the only man to remain loyal to Beauchamp in his disgrace. He followed his lord to prison and wrote the legend in his spare time. As far as we know, "Christine" is all he wrote.

It is easy to imagine that Paris empathized with Christine as a fellow political prisoner. His narrative, briskly told in staccato sentences, is positively gleeful. The frankly partisan narrator cheers for the saint and boos her enemies. He gloats as one judge after another tries and fails to kill the impudent twelve-year-old, two of them dying from their efforts. When Christine seems in particular trouble, he even says a quick prayer for her.

Unlike most thirteenth- and fourteenth-century saints' lives, Paris's "Christine" has been much admired by scholars. Carl Horstmann suggested that it was so well crafted that Paris must have been influenced by Chaucer. Although Paris is indeed a good craftsman, his legend bears few marks of Chaucer's style. All we can say for sure is that Paris shared Chaucer's taste for feisty heroines and action-packed narratives. To judge from the legends that were being written and read at the time, so did most people in the late fourteenth century.

Like his heroine, Paris was a survivor. After Richard II was deposed in 1399, both he and Beauchamp were released, and his loyalty was rewarded with various gifts, including the manor of Great Comberton in Worcestershire, which Beauchamp granted him "for the rent of a rose at Midsummer" (Stouck, "Poet," 114).

Edition: Paris, William. "Cristine." In *Sammlung Altenglischer Legenden*, ed. Carl Horstmann, 183–90. Heilbronn: Henninger, 1878.

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Saint Christine

Saint Christine was a radiant maiden, as scholars have seen and read in books. She served God both day and night, as a martyr and pure virgin should. She was born in Italy, I think, and came from a powerful family. But she forsook them all and gave her heart entirely to Christ.

That gentle maiden was so lovely that whoever set eyes on her—man, woman, or child—loved her. God endowed her with such grace that she fled all vice and wild deeds, vowing to be God's servant and undefiled maiden.

Her father was called Urban—a wicked tyrant and a madman. As in so many cases, though, a rogue can produce a perfectly good child, and so did Urban, by the cross! For all his wrongdoing, he fathered Christine, who lives with Christ in heavenly bliss.

Many men desired that maid—and would have married her if they could. Just seeing her on one day made them feel better for a full week afterward! Her appearance made them say to one another, "This is the finest person we've ever seen, that's for sure!"

Her family didn't want to marry her to anyone; they planned to dedicate her to the gods. Her father confined her in a stone tower with twelve maidens to attend her. She couldn't trust a single one of them, for they were there to spy on her how she lived and prayed.

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That maiden had gods of shiny gold and silver in the tower with her, which she was supposed to worship and honor day and night. But suddenly almighty God sent help: he made her yearn to bring her soul to heaven's light. The holy ghost within Christine taught her to forsake every one of her false gods, which are only pallid sticks and stones. She resolved to fear nothing but think only of heaven. See how God can turn non-Christians into his holy martyrs! Some—like good Saint John the Baptist—had grace before they were born; some—like fair Christine—acquired it in their youth; and some—as we can see in Paul's life—got it after youth was gone. Some received it at the hour of their death, like Barabbas, the thief hanged so high.¹

She had incense, but she hid it in a window, and she did so in good conscience, for she intended never to sacrifice to the false gods of heathendom, no matter who told her to. She asked Christ that she might be martyred before that happened!

One day Urban wanted to see his daughter. Christine's attendants all said, "Lord Urban, we tell you that your daughter and our noble lady scorns our gods and everything that has to do with them. In fact, she says she'll be a Christian if she can!"

Urban said, "Let me see my daughter alone. If she confirms what you say, I'll coax her into changing her mind. Believe me, unless she does sacrifice she'll be sorry—and so will I, for knowing my daughter has come to such a state will break my heart in two!"

With a stern face, Urban went upstairs to Christine's room and said, "Dear daughter, Christine! Look: I've come to visit with you and to watch you sacrifice to all our mighty gods. That's why I'm here."

"Don't call me your daughter, Urban, for I'll never call you father. My thoughts are for Jesus alone; I'm his child, sir. Don't tell me about idols made of metal; talk to me about God in majesty, for he alone made and redeemed me."

"Fair daughter," Urban said, "don't worship only one god—if you do, you'll shortchange all the others. If you give thanks to them all, you won't need to worry. Follow the example of your kin, I entreat you."

"You think you're making sense, but you're really talking like a fool who has no conception of truth and happiness. Listen, Urban: I'll sacri-

¹ According to the Gospels, Barabbas was the murderer whom the people chose to have Pilate release instead of Christ. Here he seems to be confused with the "good thief" who was crucified beside Christ and repented before his death. See Luke 23:40-43.

fice with all my heart to God in heaven and to the son and to the holy ghost—these three and no more!”

“Since you’re willing to worship three gods, why not honor others as well?”

Christine replied, “I’ll tell you why, fool: these three make up exactly one God.”

Urban went away, mad as could be. He thought his heart would break in two for love of his noble daughter.

When he had left, Christine threw down every single idol and broke their legs and arms in two. She also removed all the silver and gold plating and got rid of it, giving it to poor Christians, who had nothing.

Urban returned another day to worship his gods and found not a one—they were all gone. He summoned Christine’s attendants: “What has my little girl Christine done with all our gods? Tell me!”

They replied, “Your daughter threw them all out the window.”

Urban said, “So help me, my daughter is a damned fool! Maidens, how dared she smash such powerful gods?”

They replied, “You can see how she dared! Now they’re all in pieces. Fix them, sir! Can you?”

“Take off her clothes,” Urban said, “and bring her before me right now. You twelve men—go and beat her, naked as she was born.” They beat her until they could do no more and stood helpless. She apparently felt no pain, though, for she said to her father, “You’re a shameless abomination to God, devoid of honor, I say! See how exhausted your men are. They don’t know where their strength has gone! Ask your gods to help them now—if they can do anything, let them try! For my God’s love, I can stand more beating than you can command!”

That sweet maiden Christine was bound with chains and put in a dungeon. When her mother heard where she was, she tore her clothes and fainted away. Then she headed straight for the dungeon, her cheeks wet with tears. When she saw Christine, she fell down at her feet and said, “Christine, my darling daughter, light of my eyes, alas that I should ever see you here, brought to such a pass! You know that you can make your father and me very happy. Take pity on me, gentle girl—and on your father, fair daughter—and restore our joy!”

Saint Christine said to her mother, “Why do you call me your daughter? Don’t you know that I’m named after my God in majesty? Christ, God’s son, that’s his name. He suffered for you and me: therefore I’ll be his servant. I won’t have it any other way.”

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Seeing that she would not be able to change Christine's mind with fair speech, her mother left, a sorry soul, and she could not be comforted with food and drink. When Urban asked her how it went, she relayed Christine's answer. He carried on like a madman and demanded to see his daughter.

“Fetch her,” said Urban. “I want her brought before the bar and I’ll try to make her change her wicked ideas. She said she wasn’t my daughter—the bitch I myself begat! She broke my richly crafted gods. No wonder I’m furious!”

Christine now stands before the bar—God grant her the grace to speak well! “Sacrifice to our powerful gods!” Urban demanded. “If you refuse, you’ll die in excruciating agony. Unless you sacrifice, I’ll never be able to call you my daughter—and I won’t want to!”

Then the lovely maiden Christine said to her father, who sat so high, "What an honor you're doing me by no longer calling me the devil's daughter! The child of a devil is a devil himself, and you, father, are the direct descendant of that cursed fiend Satan!"

Urban then commanded that her clear white flesh be scraped from her bones with sharp hooked nails. He ordered all her limbs broken, one by one. By Saint John, it was a shame to see what was done to that maiden!

When Christine saw her flesh, she took a slice and threw it right at Urban's eye; if he hadn't ducked, she would have hit him. Then the witty maiden said to her supposed father, "Have a morsel, tyrant! Go ahead! After all, it's the flesh you produced."

Urban was so enraged that he put the maiden on a wheel and, to change her mind, he had a great fire, fed with oil, lit beneath her. It avoided her, though—she felt nothing but good—and instead burned to death fifteen hundred bystanders. Convinced that she acted through witchcraft or sorcery, her father was so distraught he couldn't sit still. He ordered his men to return her to prison. May Christ (and our lady, too) help that maiden, just as he did when he died for her on the cross!

When day had gone and night had come, they tied an exceedingly heavy stone around her neck, then they threw her into the sea. But once that evil deed had been done, lovely angels came from heaven and, through God's grace and great power, held her up. Then Christ himself came down and baptized Christine in the sea. It is written that he said these words: "In my father and in myself, Jesus Christ, God's heav-

only son, and in the holy ghost, us three, I baptize you with this water." Christ christened Christine with his own hands: he was both godfather and priest that night. I understand that Christine was named after Christ; thus she was called after her godfather, Christ, who christened her in the sea. She must indeed have been a holy person whom Christ thus baptized in the sea! Christ entrusted her to Saint Michael, who brought her back to land.

When her father heard what had happened, he was beside himself, not knowing what to do. Out of sheer frustration, he smacked himself in the face. When he saw her, he glared at her and said, "What's this witchcraft of yours, that neither land nor sea can kill you?"

She replied, "I received this grace from heaven, scoundrel."

"Put her in a dungeon!" said Urban. "I'll have her head tomorrow, by my life!" He may have been using a figure of speech, but he was right, that cursed fellow—for he was dead by daybreak, and Christine lived, that lovely maiden.

His successor was ruthless Dionysius, who intended to make short work of the virgin. He ordered an iron cauldron, hot as coal and filled with oil, pitch, and resin. It boiled so hot it was terrifying! But when they cast fair Christine in it, she didn't even notice. To increase her suffering—and to burn her more quickly to ashes—four men rocked her back and forth. She lay like a babe in its cradle, feeling no pain. She thanked God for not letting her be destroyed by the torments they inflicted, saying, "Thank you, heaven's king, for arranging this for me—to be born twice and rocked twice in a cradle!" When Dionysius looked over and saw she felt nothing, he was so angry he thought he'd hang himself.

Then Dionysius said to Christine, "Since these torments don't hurt you, it's obvious that our gods have helped you because they want you to be converted. Come with me, Christine, and repent; if you do, they'll have mercy and pity on you."

She said, "Dionysius, you son of the devil! I'm not at all afraid of your torments. Why not finish what you've begun? Don't let up until you've tortured me to death! You and Urban can drink from the same cask, down in the depths of hell!"

Then Dionysius said, "Cut off her hair—never mind if it's pretty! Shave her head and strip her! Parade that wretch naked through the city to Apollo! Let him deal with her! His power is so great that he can amend her wickedness!"

So they led her through the city. When women saw that maiden—completely naked, with no clothing to conceal her belly and sides—they cried out against Dionysius, “Damn you, Dionysius! You’ve humiliated all women today!”

When that noble maiden was brought to Apollo, she said, “In Christ’s name I command you to fall to pieces!” Apollo was pulverized on the spot, right there for everyone to see. With this miracle, Christine converted three thousand heathens.

When Dionysius heard that Christine had destroyed Apollo, his heart broke from fear. So he died, unrepentant. God sent Christine such grace that she hasn’t yet felt any pain, while both her enemies are destroyed—they can do no more to her!

So Urban and Dionysius are out of the picture; they have no more power over Christine. But in came a third rogue; his name, I know, was Julian. The scoundrel started by having his men prepare a red-hot oven for Christine. When it was hot—it shone bright as ever a fire can—cruel Julian said, “Put her in! Let’s see what happens.” Without pity they threw her in, thinking they’d never see her again. But she felt no more heat than she would have in a bath! She stayed in there for a total of five days, singing like a carefree girl and accompanied by angels. She felt nothing of the torments and pains that Julian inflicted on her: all was angels’ play to her. When Julian heard that, far from suffering, she was singing with bright angels, he thought she’d accomplished it by witchcraft. Lacking the grace to perceive the truth, he summoned another person to kill Christine. I hear his name was Marcus and that he came with six snakes.

Marcus was a snake-charmer. His snakes would kill any creature he wanted to harm. Now they’re set on Christine. She wasn’t at all afraid of them. See them play around her neck! Her neck was drenched with sweat; two snakes licked it all away. Two went down to her feet, licked them clean, and stayed there. Two dangled from her breasts, as if they wanted to suckle the sweet maiden. They couldn’t hurt her at all, so Julian saw.

Then Julian said to Marcus, “You said your beasts would kill her right away! Make them bite her, if you can! You know perfectly well they haven’t done so.” Marcus immediately started chanting to make the snakes bite that blessed woman. But the snakes all left Christine and killed the charmer. Saint Christine saw how Marcus, who was to have made the snakes bite, lay dead. She ordered the snakes to go away to the

desert, where they wouldn't bite anyone, and she ordered Marcus to get up. He stood up before the maid, making Julian so furious that he thought his heart would burst that day.

Her breasts were round as apples—they really were! They cut them off—such a shame—when she was just twelve years old. Milk gushed out, as everyone saw, and some were sorry. But Julian was unmoved, and he had no regrets.

Saint Christine said, with heart and soul, "Thank you, God in majesty, for all you've done to show your might through me. In all my ordeals, you've protected me, letting neither fire nor water harm me. Now I think it's time for me to be brought to the fair bliss of heaven."

Amazed that she could prate so in her torment, Julian ordered a rogue, "Cut out her tongue; it's hurting me."

When her tongue lay at her feet, that lovely maiden spoke as well as if it had never been cut out. Everyone saw and heard her. She picked her tongue up and threw it at Julian's eye; from then on, he couldn't see from that side. She smiled a little when she hit him. Not at all amused, Julian said, "Damn you! You're a witch—I know it!"

He looked aside with his one eye and said to the tongue, "While you were in her big fat mouth, you hurt me with your words. Your blow has hurt me even more by taking out my eye! Words flow to and fro like the wind, but blows sting like the dickens!" Beside himself with fury, he shot her with three arrows. Two landed in her heart, the third in her side. When Christine was struck, her soul went to radiant heaven, where she would feel no more pain.

Her body lies in a strong castle—the book calls it Bolsena—where many sick people have recovered their health, and many blind people have recovered their sight. I truly believe that if anyone prays earnestly to that damsel, she will help him with all her might—if what they want is good and right.

Saint Christine, pray that we may fare better, we who have been long imprisoned on the Isle of Man. Sir Thomas Beauchamp was once earl of Warwick; now he's a poor man, with just one squire to attend him. Where are the knights that accompanied him in his prosperity? Where are the squires, now that he needs them, the ones who thought they'd never leave him? Once he fed and clothed many yeomen; not one of them dared remain with their lord. That lord sits alone in prison. He has no men—except William Paris, by Saint John!—who wouldn't part from

him. He wrote this life in English as he sat in the prison of stone, when he could spare time from serving his lord.

Jesus Christ, God's mighty son, who came down to amend our ills and settled in a pure virgin, Mary, now your mother, grant that all who have heard this will see you in heaven. Let them see you sitting there in bliss with Christine, your radiant maiden! Amen.