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Saintly Borrowings: The Hagiographic Impulse in Late Medieval Texts

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation looks at the generic tropes of hagiography and how late medieval writers in other genres borrowed them, namely explicit moral clarity, the ability to appeal to alternate forms of authority, and the capacity to rewrite genealogy. It then examines how and why these modes of thinking were used through a series of case studies. For instance, in the anonymous *Sir Gowther*, the author relies on the possibility of rewriting genealogy in a partially successful attempt to relieve anxiety about the role of violence in a chivalric society and the dangers of illegitimacy in a patrilineal culture. Kempe draws on the language of hagiography in order to establish herself in the communities of saints and to interpret the resistance and scorn she encounters as a form of martyrdom. Finally, *The Legend of Good Women* juxtaposes classical tradition with hagiographic structure, placing the two traditions in opposition to each other in order to create a liminal space wherein feminine voices may have room to speak.

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## Chapter 1: Charting the Hagiographic Impulse

As a genre, hagiography dominated the Middle Ages, a fact still apparent from the manuscript evidence that remains to us. After all, versions of the St. Katherine legend exist in forty-eight different manuscripts—a number comparable to *Piers Plowman* (between fifty and fifty-six) and *The Canterbury Tales* (fifty). Although this legend is numerically the most popular in medieval England, vernacular lives also exist for 289 other saints, either single, paired or grouped.<sup>1</sup> The *Legenda aurea*, a hagiographic anthology, became one of the most popular books in the Middle Ages. Today it still exists, partially or entirely, in eight hundred different manuscripts. Even among the illiterate majority, saints' lives would have been preached from the pulpit, sculpted into churches, depicted in stained glass windows, and performed as plays.<sup>2</sup> The sheer weight of evidence, manuscript or otherwise, reveals the impact hagiography had on the Middle Ages. The genre is vast—encompassing not only the 289 different saints listed by D'Evelyn and Foster in *A Manual of Writings in Middle English* but also texts written in Anglo-Norman and Latin.<sup>3</sup> The *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina* lists more than eight

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte D'Evelyn. "Saints' Legends." In *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*, ed. Frances A. Foster. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1970), 561-635.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Newman frames the sacred as "the inclusive whole in which the secular had to establish a niche," which, although speaking to religious material writ large, may indeed be used to describe hagiography as well. Barbara Newman. *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular against the Sacred*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), viii. Indeed, to look at the 'genre' of hagiography more widely, Samantha Riches rightly reminds us that "written saints' legends will originally have formed just one aspect of devotion to particular saints; they have actually have been less significant at the time of their composition than shrines, relics, visual imagery, ritual, liturgy, oral narrative and other elements of a saints' cult." While of course, we are only capable of examining what remains to us, Riches reminds us of the sheer volume of hagiographic material that a medieval individual would have been exposed to and offers a comprehensive of the other ways in which a saint may have been celebrated. Samantha Riches, "Hagiography in Context: Images, Miracles, Shrines and Festivals." E In *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography*, ed. Sarah Salih. (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2006), 25-46.

<sup>3</sup> For a more comprehensive list, see Charlotte D'Evelyn and Frances Foster, "Saints." *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina: Antiquae Et Mediae Aetatis*. (Brussels: Société Des Bollandistes, 1911). Given that

thousand saints' lives.<sup>4</sup> While this disparity suggests that the majority of saints' lives were produced for clerical or monastic use, the impact of hagiography on the lay public still should not be underestimated. Hagiographic texts could spread outside their original intended context: the *Legenda Aurea*, originally written by Jacobus de Voragine as a handbook for his Dominican brothers, became one of the most popular books in the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> The *Katherine Group*, containing the lives of Juliana of Nicomedia, Katherine of Alexandria and Margaret of Antioch was likely intended for a group of anchorites but gained wider circulation and was eventually translated into both Anglo-Norman and Latin.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond differences of language and form, audience and presentation could differ. Hagiography was written in prose, rhymed poetry, stressed poetry, brief narratives, and sprawling vistas. The saints themselves could be kings, bishops, peasants, nobles and soldiers.<sup>7</sup> They exist in cramped individual treatises for scribal work or personal use and elaborate presentation copies, like British Library MS., Harley 2278, John Lydgate's *Lives of St. Edmund and Fremund*, commissioned as a gift for King Henry VI, containing

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many texts may have been destroyed through chance, neglect or willfully by reformers, it is likely that these numbers represent only a small fraction of the original production.

<sup>4</sup> It remains difficult to identify who exactly wrote saints' lives. Thomas Heffernan notes that although the vast majority of authors were clergy, there remains a wide range in skill and tone of the writing as well as the author's location and position. Thomas Heffernan. *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> See Sherry Reames, *The Legenda Aurea: A Reexamination of Its Paradoxical History*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell. *Saints & Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 194-219. Vauchez, André. *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Tables 6 and 8, 184-186. I am more interested in hagiography as a genre, borrowings from that genre and audience response to the expectations it creates, and thus to a certain extent, assume the existence of the hagiographic text as *a priori*. For those more interested in the formation of the Life, see Heffernan, *Sacred* 28-37, Vauchez *Sainthood*, Bakker, Anneke B. *The Invention of Saintliness* (London: Routledge, 2002).

118 illuminations.<sup>8</sup> Saints' lives were transmitted in large legendaries such as the *Legenda Aurea* or the *South English Legendary* while others circulated as individual legends.<sup>9</sup> Such range leads Thomas J. Heffernan to declare "these sacred tales survive in greater volume and variety than any other writing" and thus "it is fair to assume that virtually everyone in the Middle Ages was exposed to the lives of the saints in one form or another."<sup>10</sup> Hagiography also has a long history, arguably beginning with the martyrdoms of St. Paul and St. Stephen in Acts and continuing into the Reformation with texts such as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.<sup>11</sup> Heffernan suggests that the tradition, in fact, has "no *de facto* end."<sup>12</sup>

Despite this, scholars have mostly disregarded the influence such a sprawling genre necessarily exerts. Early work, such as Andre Vauchez's *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* and Thomas Heffernan's *Sacred Biography* in 1987 and 1988 respectively, but also even earlier, such as Hippolyte Delehaye's work in the early twentieth century, concerned itself mainly with the genre itself, its internal features and the development of

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<sup>8</sup> John Lydgate. *The Life of St Edmund, King and Martyr: John Lydgate's Illustrated Verse Life Presented to Henry VI: A Facsimile of British Library MS Harley 2278*. ed. A.S.G. Edwards (London: British Library, 2004). Mary Beth Long, "Corpora and Manuscripts, Authors and Audiences." In *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography*, ed Sarah Salih (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 47-69.

<sup>9</sup> Klaus Janofsky. *The South English Legendary: A Critical Assessment*, (Tübingen: Francke, 1992.) See D'Evelyn and Foster. "Saints" not only for more information on these but on other legendaries as well.

<sup>10</sup> Heffernan, *Sacred* 13-14. There were, however, likely expected and intended audiences. Catherine Sanok discusses the construction of an imagined female audience for saints' lives. Sanok, Catherine. *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). See also Bella Millet, "The Audience of the Saints' Lives of the Katherine Group," *Reading Medieval Studies* 16 (1990): 127-56. Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> For a longer discussion, see Matthew Woodcock, "Crossovers and Afterlife." In *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography*, ed. Sarah Salih (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 141-157. Jennifer Rust, "Reforming the Mystical Body: From Mass to Martyr in John Foxe's Acts and Monuments." *ELH* 80, no. 3 (2013): 627-59.

<sup>12</sup> Heffernan, *Sacred* 18. Arguably, there are elements of hagiographic tradition that persist to this day, as Angela Jane Weisl argues in *The Persistence of Medievalism: Narrative Adventures in Contemporary Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 33-120).



its tradition.<sup>13</sup> Many of these works begin with the generic distinction between the *passio* and the *vita*.<sup>14</sup> The *passio*, or martyrdom narrative, depicts the saint's violent death and downplays other aspects of the life. Altman suggests that the *passio* is structured around three diametrical oppositions between martyr and persecutor. The first occurs during the debate, during which the would-be martyr is pressed to reject their Christianity. The second opposition occurs during the actual torture and martyrdom. Finally, the third opposition is "a support system for each side, including a deity and a sympathetic group. The author clearly belongs to one of these groups and thus narrates not in the third person but in the first person plural."<sup>15</sup> While the Middle English passions seem to have lost the use of the first person plural and incorporated some elements of the *vita*, a form which arises later, many of these characteristics remain essentially, and usefully, the same.<sup>16</sup>

The more gradational *vita* appears in the fourth and fifth century as active persecutions of Christians dwindle. These texts are based on the life of the individual saint rather than the martyrdom exclusively.<sup>17</sup> The saints represented tended to be confessors rather than martyrs—bishops, ascetics and church leaders, though the category

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<sup>13</sup> Delehaye, Hippolyte. *The Legends of the Saints. With a Memoir of the Author*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1962.

<sup>14</sup> Delehaye defines hagiography as follows: "It thus appears that, in order to be strictly hagiographic, the document should be of a religious character and should aim at edification. The term may only be applied therefore to writings inspired by devotion to the saints and intended to promote it." His subdivisions focus more on the degree of historical veracity and the reliability of the evidence available to the hagiographer, more so than the content of the text itself, and thus, in the first order, do not seem forcibly *generic*. Delehaye, *Legends*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Altman. "Two Types of Opposition and the Structure of Latin Saints' Lives," *Medievalia Et Humanistica: New Series* 6 (1975): 1-12. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Strohm. "Passioun, Lyf, Miracle, Legende: Some Generic Terms in Middle English Hagiographical Narrative." *The Chaucer Review* 10, no. 1 and 2 (1975): 62-75, 154-71. 157.. He also notes that *passioun* as a term is adopted in Middle English, often used in conjunction with another term, *lyf*, or on its own when the texts focus most exclusively on martyrdom..

<sup>17</sup> Altman "Two" 3

also incorporates women and lay individuals in the High Middle Ages.<sup>18</sup> Given the *vita*'s larger focus, some sort of motivation or point of departure becomes required for these narratives, leading to what Altman sees as one of the defining aspects of the *vita*, "a device which will later become a hagiographical commonplace."<sup>19</sup> In the *vita*, "the actions of the saint are both inspired by a story, that of Christ or a previous saint, and end with a story, that of the new saint, who was led to new heights by the desire to imitate a man of holy character."<sup>20</sup> This previous distinction--- that a *vita* is defined by a new saint receiving scriptural or hagiographic inspiration---becomes blurry in the Middle Ages. *Passios* written at the time describe St. Lucy and St. Margaret as having read and been inspired by hagiographic texts or visits to shrines.

Heffernan, for his part, attributes this blurring in part to the way hagiographers borrowed freely from each other. His most specific example of this borrowing is the mid-twelfth century *Vita Aelredi*. This particular text drew nearly immediate ire from Aelred's contemporaries, who called into question whether or not Aelred had truly performed some of the miracles included in his *vita*. The reaction was so intense that Walter Daniel felt compelled to respond to those allegations in the *Letter to Maurice*.<sup>21</sup> However, Heffernan notes a telling lack in both the objections and the prolonged and often bellicose response: Daniel apparently felt no need to defend the extensive borrowings in the *Vita Aelredi*, which range from having Aelred's last words be a quotation of Scripture to

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<sup>18</sup> Strohm "Generic" 66. Vauchez *Sainthood* 268-279. I use confessor saint as the categorical term, denoting a saint that, although they may have suffered for their faith, dies of natural causes, as opposed to a martyr. Confess, in this sense, is to confess one's faith, rather than to hear a confession. Edward the Confessor is perhaps the most eponymous example.

<sup>19</sup> Altman "Two" 4

<sup>20</sup> Altman "Two" 8

<sup>21</sup> Walter Daniel, F. M. Powicke, and Marsha Dutton. *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx*. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1994).

taking the description of Aelred's corpse from Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Saint Martin*.<sup>22</sup> Many lives do share common phrases, passages, motifs and episodes with another and Daniel's assurance that the copying does not require defense suggests this intertextuality is generic to hagiography, although scholars have differing opinions as to how and why this intertextuality functions.<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Clark argues for an earlier precedent for such relationships, noting that even Church fathers practiced such comparative reading as they found Scriptural support for asceticism. Intertextual reading was among the eleven types of reading she suggests they practiced, which works "to press a mildly ascetic text in a more ascetic direction by the citation of other verses that are taken to counsel repudiation of 'the world.'" 'Talking back' was another method, placing multiple verses together so that they interact and correct each other, as Christ uses Scripture to correct and repudiate the verses quoted by Satan during the temptation on the mount.<sup>24</sup>

Delehaye and Vauchez suggest more pragmatic reasons for the relationships between texts. Indeed, as Delehaye notes with something approaching despair, often all that would be known of a saint might be their names and that they were martyred, and hagiographers "boldly took the only course open to them, and either made a generous use of the method of development as practiced in schools, or else had recourse to borrowing."<sup>25</sup> Vauchez, for his part, suggests that the recurrence of fantastic elements in

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<sup>22</sup> Heffernan, *Sacred*. 102-103. Powicke even suggests that Walter Daniel knew Aelred—he was likely his personal physician and was writing only shortly after his death, so the text doesn't require such borrowings in order to construct a complete life. Powicke, *Life*, pg. xxviii.

<sup>23</sup> Delehaye, for instance, cites the lives of St. Hubert, St. Arnold of Metz, St. Lambert and St. Remaclus as having large passages borrowed from each other. He also notes that the lives of St. Marina and Tatiana are identity, St. Castissima and St. Euphrosyne, etc. *Legends*, 102. Heffernan, for his part, notes that only 350 words of the prologue of Eddius' St. Cuthbert seem to be original, *Sacred* 141

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 125

<sup>25</sup> Delehaye *Legends*, 92.

later hagiography may also have institutional rationales. He notes that movement towards formalized canonization processes in the later Middle Ages produced “two parallel trends: a growing emphasis on the life of the saints and the increasingly strong influence of hagiographic conventions, which eventually made saints into extraordinary beings.”<sup>26</sup> Saints were expected to resemble specific, miraculous categories in these formalized proceedings. Thus, the witnesses who testified to the sanctity of a candidate had their depositions created in advance; these shaped the memory of the holy person in both subtle and overt ways to fit a specific model of sanctity. Secondly, after the creation of the rank of *beati*, it became more and more necessary for a candidate for true sainthood to stand out. Their superiority had to be clear and “the clergy, accordingly, credited [the candidates] with *all* the attributes displayed by saints in the hagiographical texts” (italics mine).<sup>27</sup> The depositions are crafted to fit a specific model of sanctity; the clergy give their would-be saints the same attributes as the ones in hagiographic texts. Both of these assume a specific, shared, generic model—that most saints have the same attributes or fit a given model of holiness.

Finally, both Heffernan and Elliott suggest that hagiographies borrow passages, motifs and even entire episodes from each other, not only for historical and institutional reasons, but also for generic purposes, creating a skein of meaning, “recursive structures intended to excite memory [and which] facilitate patterns of correspondence as multiple layers of recognition (*anagorisis*) emerged from the shuttling back and forth between the old and new biographies.”<sup>28</sup> Such an idea leads Elliott to suggest a “common narrative

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<sup>26</sup> Vauchez, *Sainthood* 4

<sup>27</sup> Vauchez *Sainthood* 530

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Heffernan, “Christian Biography: Foundation to Maturity.” In *Historiography in the Middle Ages*, ed. Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis (Boston: Brill, 2003), 115-56. 121

grammar” shared between hagiographic texts, a pattern in which “was encoded much of the meaning of the story.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, repetitiveness is neither unique to hagiography nor to the Middle Ages. One of the pleasures of the mystery or indeed the modern romance is the expected plot, whether that is the crime, suspense, and final revelation or chance encounter, obstacles and happy union.<sup>30</sup> Hagiography, however, is unique in that repetition is essential to the understanding of the text. Heffernan calls it “the constitutive rhetorical principle of the genre” and suggests it was “built into the narrative to remind the listener that this biography was part of the idealizing tradition of Christian biography and drew its legitimacy from the gospels.”<sup>31</sup> In this quotation, Heffernan evokes two key ideas. Firstly, hagiography draws its legitimacy from its allusions to gospels and *imitatio Christi*. Secondly, those allusions are meant to “remind the reader.” They encourage the reader to enter into the allusion, to seek it out and unpack it as a key to understanding the meaning behind the text. When a *vita* draws on specific episodes and ideas that show the saint following an institutionally legitimate and scripturally validated mode of sanctity, the reader was expected to be able to recognize these passages and understand their implications. When Walter Daniel writes that Aelred’s last words are the same as Christ’s upon the cross, a reader is expected to think of Aelred as, somehow, a type of Christ. The understanding of the network between Christ and a saint and one saint and another comes from these allusions and expectation of interpretation.

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<sup>29</sup> Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints* (Hanover, NH: Published for Brown University, 1987), 2,8.

<sup>30</sup> For instance, Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). Eco, Umberto. "James Bond : Une Combinatoire Narrative." *Communications Comm* 8, no. 1 (1966): 77-93.

<sup>31</sup> Heffernan, “Christian,” 121

In sketching out these basic characteristics, Heffernan and others seek to define hagiography's generic range, perhaps even its essence. This exercise is necessary: genres are defined by their limits. Nevertheless, at the same time that these limits are established, they evoke the possibility of transgression. Indeed, by establishing this taxonomy, one is forced to confront Derrida's question about the law of genre: "What if there were, lodged within the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination?"<sup>32</sup> If there should be a set of traits by which hagiography may be recognized, what are we to do with those that hover at the edges, like the "romances" of Mary Magdalene, or the Royal manuscript of *Sir Gowther*? Derrida ultimately concludes "Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Derrida's "participation without belonging" resembles the principle of "crossover" that Barbara Newman espouses in *Medieval Crossover*, in which the collision between genres is not "a genre in itself, but a mode of interaction, an openness to the meeting or even merger of sacred and secular in a wide variety of forms."<sup>34</sup> She suggests a principle of both/and, and argues "when sacred and secular meanings both present themselves in a text, yet cannot be harmoniously reconciled, it is not always necessary to choose between them."<sup>35</sup> Genre, here, seems to be more of a scatter plot. The texts that we say 'belong' to the hagiographic genre (the South English Legendary, the *Legenda Aurea*) cluster together. Liminal texts drift away from the central nexus, only loosely associated but still able to participate, to gesture back towards that cluster in an intelligible fashion. The

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<sup>32</sup> Derrida, Jacques, "The Law of Genre," Trans. Avital Ronell. *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 55-81. 57

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, "Law" 65.

<sup>34</sup> Newman, *Crossover*, IX

<sup>35</sup> Newman, *Crossover*, 8

loose, almost baggy travel of Mary Magdalene's romance occurs because of a preacher and intercessor. Gowther's romance concerns can be intertwined and perhaps resolved by hagiographic motifs. Such overlap can function because genre represents an interpretive process more than a taxonomy. When readers (or listeners) engage with a text, they construct a "preliminary generic conception," sorting through possible interpretations of the text to arrive at the ones that are most probable.<sup>36</sup> They map the text onto the scatterplot in reference to one or more generic nexus without necessarily locating it within one. *Sir Gowther* occupying a space between the romance and hagiography becomes significant, allowing the text to draw on the expectations of both clusters to create a text that is neither one nor the other but participates in both.

But what might a secular work borrow from sacred hagiography? *The Hagiographic Impulse* is an attempt to answer this question. It sees saint's lives as a literary milieu through which secular authors would have unavoidably moved and by which they would have inevitably been influenced. In the same way that modern blockbusters shape and frame modern culture—one does not have to have seen *Star Wars* to recognize Darth Vader's heavy breathing as a sign of evil or to have read Harry Potter to understand that calling someone a *Hufflepuff* is to damn by faint praise—saints' lives offered specific ideas, motifs and themes that could be recognized and adopted in other works. The motifs I intend to discuss include hagiography's ability to rewrite family and genealogy and the ability to appeal to an alternate authority in order to supersede a temporal one. I argue that secular medieval authors used these saintly modes of thinking to bypass specific cultural norms, not only to relieve contemporary anxieties but also to

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<sup>36</sup> E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 74.

grant speech and authority to those deprived of it. A saint's ability to appeal to a higher authority might allow a saint-*like* knight to justify defying his king or a particularly obstreperous would-be saint from the fifteenth century to argue with bishops and priests. Being able to disregard biological inheritance offers a way around the romance's anxiety of lineage, whether it is Havelok's divinely glowing "kyne-mark" dispelling all doubt about his parentage or the Pope dispelling the demonic taint that clings to Sir Gowther.

Indeed, hagiography is specifically prone to this type of borrowing, in part because of its own allusive nature. A saint's life borrows from Scripture and other hagiographies and it creates a network of references that ask the reader to engage with these borrowings. Such a structure encourages other genres to do the same. Those genres, however, I save for later chapters. In this particular chapter, I intend to unpack specifically what motifs are available for borrowing in hagiography by giving an overview of both the reworking of family structures and the ability to appeal to alternate authority, noting the prevalence and productivity within hagiography that allows the borrowing discussed in later chapters to occur.

### Rewriting Family

The ability to re-imagine family ties is a primary element that some secular texts borrow from hagiography. Framing familial relationships in the terms of divine hierarchy allows writers and readers of hagiography to conceptualize ideal versions of these relationships, explore how they might be different, and navigate potential pitfalls. Indeed, the late Middle Ages conceptualized its relationship to saints in terms of family. Virginia Reinberg points out that "not only were the forms of address familiar from secular life,



but they were modes of relating to saints that suggested the support, responsibility and protection expected within family and community.”<sup>37</sup> For instance, Osbern Bokenham addresses multiple saints as “lady” in the prologues and explicits of his *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* and claims St. Cecilia, Barbara and Faith as his “valentines,” implying a personal relationship.<sup>38</sup> Catherine Sanok argues that the presence of English saints in English translations of the *Legenda Aurea* creates a type of supranational sacred community.<sup>39</sup> This reworking occurred within hagiography as well as saints reconfigured their own families. Saints reconfigure their own family or take others to be spiritual family, as we can see not only in the *Legenda Aurea*, but also in other saints’ lives. Saints and other holy individuals in those texts take Christ, Pity, or sometimes even statues as a spouse. In some moments, they convert their own families and transform a genealogical family into a spiritual one. In others, they create a spiritual family out of whole cloth, constructing fellow saints as brothers and sisters and creating a genealogy of inspiration rather than blood.

Re-imagining a marital relationship is perhaps the most well-studied of these transformations, perhaps because of its prevalence in female saints’ lives. Rather than rejecting marriage outright, many texts present Christ as the bridegroom, invoking many of the same qualifications as an appealing temporal spouse might have. For instance, the early Middle English *Wooing of Our Lord* describes the ideal spouse as possessing these characteristics: beauty, wealth, generosity, wisdom, strength, bravery, a high birth,

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<sup>37</sup> Virginia Reinberg, “Praying to the Saints in the Late Middle Ages,” In *Saints, Studies in Hagiography*, ed Sandro Sticca (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1996), 269-82. 269.

<sup>38</sup> Osbern Bokenham, *A Legend of Holy Women: Osbern Bokenham, Legends of Holy Women*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> Catherine Sanok, *New Legends of England: Forms of Community in Late Medieval Saints’ Lives*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 135.

mildness and gentleness, before arguing Christ supersedes all mortal men in these respects.<sup>40</sup> The *vita* of St. Margaret from the *Katherine Group* echoes that language, when it notes “just as [Christ] is so strong and mighty, he is also the loveliest to look upon and sweetest to smell; nor can his sweet scent, nor his almighty power nor his matchless beauty ever lesson or end.”<sup>41</sup> Nor is Christ the only possible husband in hagiographic texts; some saints convert their marriages into chaste ones. For instance, St. Cecilia first converts her husband Valerian and then later her brother-in-law in *The Second Nun’s Tale*, creating a new kind of family.<sup>42</sup> St. Boniface also begins his *vita* with a lover, Aglae, who becomes equally devout after his martyrdom. She gives away her goods, frees her slaves, and devotes her life to prayer and fasting. Eventually, she even performs miracles herself.<sup>43</sup> The former husband of Saint Theodora occupies Theodora’s cell in the monastery after her death.<sup>44</sup> Even St. Germain, the bishop, lives with his wife as “brother and sister.”<sup>45</sup>

These familial relationships become overwritten by divine ones. For instance, St. Cecilia’s *vita* reveals how sanctity undergirds her relationship to Valerian from the moment of the marriage feast:

And when this blessed virgin should be espoused to a young man named Valerian, and the day of the wedding was come, she was clad in royal clothes of gold, but under she wore the hair. And she hearing the organs making melody, she sang in

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<sup>40</sup> Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*, (New York: Mahwah, 1991), 248-250

<sup>41</sup> Savage and Watson, *Spirituality*, 290-291

<sup>42</sup> A similar type of dynamic exists in the Old English life of St. Julian and Basilissa, in which Christ presents himself as a mediating third term in their chaste marriage. Aelfric, Walter W. Skeat, Gunning, and Wilkinson. *Aelfric’s Lives of Saints, being a Set of Sermons on Saints’ Days Formerly Observed by the English Church*, Ed. from *Manuscript Julius E. VII in the Cottonian Collection, with Various Readings from Other Manuscripts* (London: Pub. for the Early English Text Society, 1966).

<sup>43</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*. Ed. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 1998). Translation: Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, Vol. 1 trans. William Granger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). 291.

<sup>44</sup> Granger, *Legenda*, V1, 368

<sup>45</sup> Granger, *Legenda*, V1, 27

her heart, only to God, saying: O Lord, I beseech thee that mine heart and body may be undefouled so that I be not confounded.<sup>46</sup>

Here, both Caxton's translation of the *Legenda Aurea* and Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale* concur. The wedding is when Cecilia "sholde" be married, the conditional reflected in the Latin of the original.<sup>47</sup> Underneath her wedding clothes, she wears a hair shirt and sings "in her heart, only to God." The divine relationship takes primacy, which not even Valerian questions. When Cecilia later reveals that she is protected by an angel, Valerian's objection is telling. He threatens her only if she is concealing a relationship with another mortal man. That Cecilia's devotion should take precedence over the marital debt is never questioned, only if she is telling the truth.

Cecilia proposes a chaste marriage to Valerian: "And if so be that thou love me in holy love and cleanness, [the angel] shall love thee as he loveth me and shall show to thee his grace."<sup>48</sup> Her union with her husband becomes syntactically triangulated. The angel will love Valerian in the same way it loves Cecilia; it serves as a transitive property between the spouses, negotiating and dictating the terms of the relationship. The two crowns given to Cecilia and Valerian when Valerian returns from his conversion suggest this as well. While reflecting their roles as would-be martyrs and saints, the crowns also

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<sup>46</sup> "Cum autem cuidem iuueni nomine Valeriano desponsata fuisset et dies nuptiarum instituta esset, illa subtus ad carnem cilico erat induta et desuper deauratis uestibus tegebatur et cantantibus organis illa in corde suo soli domino decantabat dicens: 'Fiat, domine, cor meum et corpus meum immaculatum ut non confundar.'" *Legenda*, Maggioni 1180. Trans. Granger 318.

<sup>47</sup> *SNT*. Chaucer, Geoffrey, Larry Dean Benson, and Robert Armstrong. Pratt. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. ll.127

<sup>48</sup> "Si autem cognouerit quod me sincere amore diligas, ita quoque diliget te sicut et me et ostendent tibi gloriam suam." *Legenda*, Maggioni 1181. Trans. Granger, 384.

evoke the rings likely exchanged at the never-shown marriage ceremony, and thus once again, rewrite the relationship in divine terms.<sup>49</sup>

Beyond proclaiming Christ as the supreme spouse and simply transforming secular marriages into sacred ones, hagiography manifests marital connections in other peculiar ways. For instance, in the *Legenda Aurea*, St. John the Almsgiver takes Pity as a spouse. The text describes this presumably abstract concept as a “very beautiful maiden...wearing a crown of leaves,” who tells him “I am Pity...and it is I that brought the son of God down from Heaven. Take me for your spouse and all will be well with you.”<sup>50</sup> However, St. Agnes offers another clear example of divine nuptiality, as her *vita* offers two different forms of marital rewriting. Firstly, Agnes herself describes Christ as the superior bridegroom, rejecting a prefect’s son and proclaiming herself as pledged to another lover:

She began to commend this lover and spouse for five things that the betrothed look for in the men they are to wed, namely, nobility of lineage, beauty of person, abundance of wealth, courage and the power to achieve, and love transcendent. She went on: “The one I love is far nobler than you, of more eminent descent. His other is a virgin, his father knows no woman, he is served by angels; the son and the moon wonder as his beauty; his wealth never lacks or lessens; his perfume brings the dead to life, his touch strengthens the feeble, his love is chastity itself, his touch holiness, union with him, virginity.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> At least, an audience accustomed to the wedding ceremonies from the Sarum Missal would have expected such a ring exchange. *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 85-86.

<sup>50</sup> “puellam pulcherriam...et coronam oliuarum in capite baiulantem... ‘Ego sum misericordia que dei filium de celo adduxi. Me sponsam accipe et bene tibi erit.” *Legenda*, Maggioni 188. Trans. Granger, 113.

<sup>51</sup> “Cepitque ipsum suum amatorum et sponsum a quinque commendare que sponse in sponsis precipue requirunt, scilicet a nobilitate generis, a decore pulchritudinis, a diuitiarum abundantia, a fortitudine et potentine efficacia et ab amoris excellentia, sic dicens: ‘Qui longe te nobilior est et genere et dignitate, cuius mater virgo est, cuius pater feminam nescit, cui angeli seruiunt, cuius pulchritudinem sol et luna mirantur, cuius opes nunquam deficient, cuius diuitie non descreunt, cuius odore reuiuiscunt mortui, cuius tactu confortantur infirmi, cuius amor castitas est, tactus sanctitas, unio uirginitas.’” *Legenda*, Maggioni 1181. Trans. Granger, 102.

This language resembles that of the *Wooing of our Lord* or the life of St. Margaret from the *Katherine Group*. Christ becomes the husband *par excellence*, surpassing a human spouse in all traditional categories. However, the second use of nuptial language in Agnes' text is less commonplace. Although Agnes considers herself wedded to Christ, her statue becomes betrothed to a priest. Paulinus, a priest serving in her church, asks the Pope for permission to marry, so that he may be delivered from the mortal temptation of lust. The Pope gives him a ring and instructs him to stand before the statue of St. Agnes, present it with the ring, and say that the Pope has commanded them to be wed. As Paulinus does so, the statue moves so he can place the ring on its finger, and Paulinus finds himself delivered from temptation.

Marital relations are not the only ones to be re-imagined by hagiography. Filial, maternal and fraternal relations are as well. Biological parentage is replaced by an alternate and authorizing form of genealogy. Saints turn away from their birth families, praying to or reading about other saints who encourage them to seek Christ. Altman attributes this form of textual genealogy to the shift from *passio* to *vita*. Because the *vita* accounts for the full life of the saint rather than simply their martyrdom, it requires a form of motivation for either a prior pagan's conversion or a the newly acquired zeal of a Christian. Altman explains that this "device... become[s] a hagiographical commonplace: the scriptures kindle in him the desire to rise above this worldly life."<sup>52</sup> Moreover, in the later Middle Ages, as the lines between *vita* and *passio* blur into the more capacious "lyfe," accounts of martyrdom exhibit this trait as well. The *Stanzaic Life* depicts Margaret hearing tales of "howe the Jewes dydde martirdome to Saynte Laurence and

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<sup>52</sup> Altman "Two" 3

Stevyn” and the *Legenda Aurea*, we see this point in the hagiographies of St. Lucy.<sup>53</sup>

Lucy’s call towards sainthood occurs during a pilgrimage with her mother:

Lucy, the daughter of a noble family of Syracuse, saw how the fame of Saint Agatha was spreading throughout Sicily. She went to the tomb of this saint with her mother Euthicia, who for four years had suffered from an incurable flow of blood....Lucy then fell asleep, and had a vision of Agatha standing surrounded by angels and adorned with precious stones, and Agatha said to her: “My sister Lucy, virgin consecrated to God, why do you ask me for something that you yourself can do for your mother?”<sup>54</sup>

After de Voragine’s standard etymology, the text establishes two kinds of family for Lucy. She is noble born from a Syracusan family. However, within the same sentence, it establishes her relationship to Saint Agatha as Lucy notices how Saint Agatha’s fame has spread. Additionally, her pilgrimage occurs in the company of her mother, who suffers from an incurable flow of blood. This illness seems linked to menstruation and thus eventually to reproduction, establishing bloodline genealogy as unhealthy and a source of illness and death. When Lucy falls asleep that night, Agatha addresses her as *sister* and offers a solution to Euthicia’s problem. The bloody cost of childbirth can be ameliorated through a spiritual transformation. Agatha becomes a spiritual sister or mother to Lucy and inspires her to become a saint herself. Rather than biological transmission, parental ties shift to a visionary or textual inspiration, passing the desire for God and martyrdom from saint to saint.

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<sup>53</sup> Reames, Sherry L, "Stanzaic Life of Margaret." In *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 2003), ll.25

<sup>54</sup> “Lucia uirgo Syracusana nobilis genere audiens famam sancte Agathe per totam Siciliam diuulgari sepulcum eius adiit cum matra sua Euthicia annis quator incurabiliter fluxum sang3ruinis patiente...Lucia sompnum arripuit uiditque Agatham in medio angelorum gemmis ornatam stantem et dicitem sibi: ‘Soror mea Lucia, uirgo deo deuotata, quid a me petis quod ipsa poteris prestare continue matri tue?’” *Legenda*, Maggioni 50. Trans. Granger, 29.

This kind of transmission replaces biological lineage, an idea encompassed best by the *Legenda Aurea*'s etymology of St. Donatus:

Donatus comes from *a Deo natus*, born of God, and this birth is threefold-- by rebirth, by infusion of grace, and by glorification, hence a threefold generation by the Spirit or by God. For when saints die, it is then that they are said to be born, so the demise of a saint is not called death but birthday.<sup>55</sup>

Although this particular etymology emphasized martyrdom, it suggests saints' purposes transfigure them along genealogical lines. As Burrus notes in ancient hagiography, "the performative 'death' of the self becomes the sanctifying matrix of life's renewal--giving rise, in the field of literature, to ever new Lives."<sup>56</sup> They become "born of God," moving from biology into spirituality.

Finally, fraternal or sororal ties are also established along these lines. Besides the monastic use of the terms, many saints have cherished friends often addressed as brother or sister. In the *Stanzaic Life of St. Margaret*, Margaret creates a Christian community through her conversions—fifteen thousand people convert after the angels lift her out of the water—but her relationship with the executioner Malcus is notably close. He is one of four named characters and she addresses him as a brother. Similar behavior recurs through the *Legenda Aurea*, such as St. John addressing his disciples as sons and brothers. Benedict also addresses his fellow monks as brothers, and, perhaps more tellingly, may only see sister Scholastica when the will of God ordains it. When Scholastica visits him, she asks Benedict to remain with her for the night. When Benedict refused, Scholastica prays to God, who sends a thunderstorm that forces Benedict to

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<sup>55</sup>“Donatus quasi a deo natus, et hoc propter regenerationem et gratie infusionem et glorificationem que est triplex generatio spiritualis a deo. Nam et cum sancti moriuntur, tunc nasci dicentur, unde obitus sanctorum non mors sed natale uocatur.” *Legenda*, Maggioni 747. Trans. Granger, 59

<sup>56</sup> Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 14.

remain and pass “the whole night in holy conversation and mutual edification.”<sup>57</sup> Even then, such an event only occurs three days before Scholastica’s death.

Indeed, as the narrative of Benedict and Scholastica suggests, biological relationships between siblings can continue to exist, provided they—much like the marital relationships previously discussed—become triangulated through the divine. The life of St. Guthlac of Croydon provides another example of how preexisting relationships become reconfigured according to this transitive property. Although known primarily through Felix’s 8th century *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* and the Old English *Guthlac A* and *Guthlac B* in the Exeter Book, interest in the saint continues in the later Middle Ages, as extant Middle English versions indicate.<sup>58</sup> Of particular interest are the depictions in the so-called “Guthlac Roll” (London, British Library, MS. Harley Roll Y 6), a series of 18 roundels originally belonging to the Benedictine Abbey of Crowland, Lincolnshire. Dated to roughly the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, these roundels are likely designs for stained glass windows.<sup>59</sup> Guthlac and Pega, despite being actual siblings in life, have their relationship overwritten into a sanctified one in the same way as Benedict and Scholastica do, or Cecilia and Valerian. In roundel 13, Guthlac addresses his disciple

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<sup>57</sup> “totam illam noctem peruigilem ducerent atque per sacra eloquia sese uicaria relatione satiarent” *Legenda*, Maggioni 319. Trans. Granger, 192.

<sup>58</sup> Bertram Colgrave, trans. *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Mary Clayton, trans. “Guthlac A.” In *Old English Poems of Christ and His Saints*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Robert E. Bjork, trans. “Guthlac B.” In *The Old English Poems of Cynewulf*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.) Three of sixty-plus manuscripts containing some or all of the *South English Legendary*, contain the life of St. Guthlac. MS British Museum Cotton Julius D ix, has the entire poem, consisting of 292 lines. Fragments of it also occur in MS Corpus Christi College, Cambridge 145 and Oxford Bodleian 2567. The text of the poem can be found in Carl Horstmann, ed. *The Early South-English Legendary Or, Lives of Saints*. (London: Trubner 1887).

<sup>59</sup> “Techniques of Stained Glass: Illustrations to the Introduction.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 30, no. 3 (1971): 102. Images and captions from “Harley Roll Y 6.” Digitized Manuscripts. British Library. Accessed March 17, 2016. [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley\\_Roll\\_Y\\_6](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_Roll_Y_6). Half of the first roundel is lost and it seems as if there may have been two more.



Beccelm. Although the roundel only provides part of these instructions, the fragment is enough that scholars can identify not only the text referred to, but also the specific lines, which include these instructions concerning his sister: “My son, since my time now draws near, listen to my last commands. After my spirit has left this poor body, go to my sister Pega and tell her that I have in this life avoided her presence so that in eternity we may see one another in the presence of our Father amid eternal joys.”<sup>60</sup> In this passage, Guthlac says he has avoided his sister “in saeculo,” in this time.<sup>61</sup> He thus suggests he wishes to avoid a specifically earthly aspect of the relationship, in hopes that they may be closer in death. Indeed, the prospect causes him to shift from the singular to the plural, as if already syntactically anticipating their reunion. Moreover, even as Guthlac thinks of his biological sister, he surrounds her with other familial, but non-biological language. He calls Beccelm “my son” and hopes to be reunited with Pega in the presence of God, rather than the biological father they share. Finally, Pega only appears in the *vita* and roundels at the moment of Guthlac’s death, the moment when biological avoidance can be transformed into spiritual reunion.

The Guthlac Roll focuses on this transformation. Roundel 13 shows Guthlac propped upright in his bed. He speaks to the kneeling Beccelm with one hand uplifted, and index finger raised above the other three visible fingers in a gesture evocative of the Trinity and Unity. Roundel 14 shows two angels collecting Guthlac’s soul. They dominate the roundel—the lower angel’s robes overlap Guthlac’s bedding. Its wings brush the feet and cloth of the angel above it. The upper angel exceeds the interior frame

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<sup>60</sup> Trans. Colgrave, *Guthlac*. 155.

<sup>61</sup> In part, it is possible to identify which manuscript the drawer is referring to due to his use of “Beccelmus” for the disciple’s name, which links him to the D manuscript of Felix’s *vita*. Bertram Colgrave, Introduction to *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

of the roundel, halo and wings breaking the circle to nearly touch the exterior. It would be impossible to traverse this roundel without passing through either the angels or Guthlac's saintly, incorrupt body. The lines create a kind of divine barrier, which the eye must cross to arrive at Pega. In Roundel 15, she stands on the shore and listens to Beccelm. He holds her by the wrist with one hand and holds his other hand uplifted, index finger raised above the other three visible fingers—the same gesture Guthlac had previously made to him. Ultimately, the structure of these roundels and the repeated gestures show the reconfiguration of the fraternal relationship as Beccelm recreates Guthlac's gesture to his sister, reconstructing the relationship with the touch of her wrist. Indeed, perhaps in fact to reinforce the non-biological nature of their relationship, Pega and Guthlac never quite occupy the same roundel. Although Roundel 16 shows Pega aiding Beccelm to place Guthlac's body in the tomb, Guthlac himself is shown as spiritually absent—the Latin carefully notes that this is “the *body* of Guthlac” and the image itself is void of detail, lacking distinguishing facial features and indeed any sort of detail.

Hagiography uses the language of family to create new and different bonds between individuals. Even when the individuals involved are already biological family, those ties become altered and transformed by their passage through the divine. Such an ability would become useful to other texts, particular romances, who draw on this aspect of hagiography to resolve and explore major secular anxieties. Indeed, this concern about family is central to romances, texts which often ask questions about lineage: who is a character's father? Where do they hail from? Who is an appropriate spouse? These questions, however, fundamentally depend on recognizing family and lineage as discreet

and inviolable categories. Passing from this to an understanding of family as something that ultimately can be altered offers a way out of nearly impossible dilemmas.

### Alternatives to Temporal Authority

The ability to rewrite familial ties is not the only motif borrowed from hagiography. Saintliness comes with other powers and benefits as well, including a particularly explicit moral clarity. The individuals who choose Christ and the individuals who do not are clearly delineated and diametrically opposed. This clarity creates an alternate form of authority, a divine authorization which allows the saint to transcend temporal law. Heffernan suggests that this alternate, overriding authority has already begun to crystallize even at this early moment in the development of the genre and will “crystallize into a conventional *topos* in later *vitae sanctarum*.”<sup>62</sup> We see this mostly clearly in the *passio*, which Altman notes seem to tell two stories simultaneously. As he envisions in the case of the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae and Felicitas*, which Altman considers to be “the most important model for all subsequent *passiones*... one [story] concerns the real world, seen from the Roman point of view; the other is apocalyptic, portraying the end of time from the Christian point of view.”<sup>63</sup> To the Roman governor who sentences Perpetua and her allies to death, they are in violation of Roman law and deserve their fate. However, Perpetua’s dream visions depict the arena as a site of supernatural struggle. She sees herself facing an “an Egyptian...of vicious appearance,” suggesting “it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil.”<sup>64</sup> This

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<sup>62</sup> Heffernan *Sacred* 197

<sup>63</sup> Altman “Two” 2-3

<sup>64</sup> Herbert Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 128.

second story is apocalyptic and Christian. It marks the ‘sides’ clearly. The Romans have sided with the Devil. Perpetua and Felicity stand with God. This clarity gives martyrs their power and ability to resist. They are subject to an alternate higher authority which not only leads them to ignore temporal authority but also nullifies the penalties that temporal authorities wreak on their bodies. This latter ability is clearly articulated during Felicity’s labor. Her childbirth is painful, leading one of her guards to doubt her endurance in the arena. Her response is telling: “What I am suffering now...I suffer by myself. But then another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him.”<sup>65</sup> Another force—Christ, in this case—will be able to intervene in the moment of her punishment, protecting Felicity from the brunt of the torture.

The impervious martyr often cannot be killed except at their own volition. Perpetua is stabbed once by the gladiator instructed to execute her, but he seems unable to complete the killing blow. As the *passio* states, “she screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing.”<sup>66</sup> The idea that a martyr must choose to die will become a commonplace in the martyrological texts that follow. As Altman has noted, the saint’s transcendence of physical or mundane constraint will enter the *vita* as well. Rather than destroying their opponent in a titanic struggle between good and evil, saints in the *vita* transcend worldly cares, renouncing inheritances and giving their wealth to the poor. Such actions “underline the fact that worldly goods are not useless; they are simply

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<sup>65</sup> Musurillo. *Acts*. 127.

<sup>66</sup> Musurillo, *Acts*. 129

inferior to spiritual values”.<sup>67</sup> Rather than the incarnate evil represented by Roman prefects and pagan aristocrats in the *passio*, the temporal powers in the *vitae* are simply lesser.<sup>68</sup>

Both *passio* and *vita* persist into the Middle Ages, as the *Legenda Aurea* indicates with its mix of martyr and confessor saints. Thus, secular writers would have had access to this kind of alternate authority and concomitant explicit moral clarity upon which it depends. The lives of Lucy, Juliana and Cecilia demonstrate this alternate authority clearly as the saints each chastise their temporal opponents and then resist their punishments with ease. Lucy’s exchange with the consul Paschasius, for instance, clearly sets secular and sacred law in opposition to each other:

Lucy: “You obey your masters’ laws, and I shall obey the laws of my God. You fear your masters and I fear God. You are careful not to offend them, I take pains not to offend God. You want to please them; I wish to please Christ. Do then what you think will be of benefit to you, and I shall do what I think is good for me.”<sup>69</sup>

Lucy uses similar language to discuss both systems as she dismisses Paschasius’ objections. Her devotion to God frees her from the consul’s orders and the laws of the Roman Empire. Although Lucy herself is capable to present them as equivalent, suggesting that Paschasius let her follow God as she lets him follow the emperor, the events of the text suggest a more explicit hierarchy that places divine law over its

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<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Clark finds a similar intertextual strategy in ascetic works, a kind of “verbal warfare” in which one Scriptural quotation is used to refute or qualify another. Another strategy creates a hierarchy of voice, allowing interpreters to accord different weights to different Scriptural quotations in a similar way that hagiography works to create a hierarchy of values, placing secular values below sacred ones without necessarily condemning the former. *Renunciation*, 128-132, 141-145.

<sup>69</sup> “Tu principum tuorum decretal custodis et ego dei mei legem custodiam, tu principes times, ego deum timeo; tu illos offendere non uis, ego deum offendere caueo; tu illis placere desideras, et ut Christo placeam concupisco; tu ergo fac quod tibi utile esse cognoscis, ego faciam quod utile mihi esse perspexero.” *Legenda*, Maggioni 50-51. Trans. Granger, 28.

temporal equivalent. Lucy, after all, works miracles. Paschasius finds himself arrested by the Emperor he putatively follows. Moreover, Lucy cannot be dragged to the brothel, stands immune to stabbing and being doused in urine and hot oil. Her death-- like Margaret and Perpetua-- occurs on her own terms once she has received last rites. Juliana of Nicomedia, on the other hand, explicitly does assign sacred law a higher role than secular law when she chides her betrothed, "If you are so afraid of a mortal emperor, how can you expect me not to fear an immortal one?" She too receives divine healing after being tortured on the wheel and the bath of boiling lead cools to upon touching her skin. Cecilia takes thing even further. Her defiance extends to flagrant mockery when she is confronted by Almachius. The Roman prefect insists on his considerable power, only to be ridiculed by Cecilia:

"Don't you know where my power comes from?" Cecilia: "Your power is a balloon filled with wind! Prick it with a pin and it collapses, and what seemed rigid in it goes limp." Almachius: "You began with insults and with insults you continue!"<sup>70</sup>

Cecilia calls Almachius' power ultimately useless, which even the text registers as insulting, and of course, Cecilia's own boiling bath cools and she resists four blows from the headsman, only dying after she has preached for three days and given away all her possessions to the poor.

Resistance to temporal authority surfaces in other saints' lives, especially in those of virgin martyrs. These particular tales become increasingly popular during the 13<sup>th</sup> century and into the 14<sup>th</sup>, a moment when an increased number of women are sanctified

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<sup>70</sup> "Ignoras, cuius potestas sim?" Et illa, 'Potestas uestra est quasi uter uento repletus. Quem si acus pupungerit, omnis protinus rigor pallescit et quicquid in se rigidum habere cernitur incuruatur.' Cui Almachius: 'Ab iniuriis incepisti et in inuriis perserueras.'" *Legenda*, Maggioni 1186. Trans. Granger, V2, 322.

for their virginity, their martyrdom or both.<sup>71</sup> *The Stanzaic Life of St. Margaret* provides a clear example. During her torture, spectators counsel her to renounce her Christianity and do as Roman prefect Olibrius wishes. She responds to them and Olibrius as follows:

"A, ye wretched counselloures, why rede ye me soo?  
With bysynes ne with scourgys ye doo me no woo.  
My Lordys anges comyn me to and froo.  
Alle is to me grete joye that ye wene is woo.

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Than spake Olybryus: "Mayden," he sayde, "this is my posté.  
Haste thou nou yghen, that thou mayste hit see?  
Beleve on my goddys, yit I rede thee,  
Or for thi God that thou leveste on martyred schalte thou bee."

"Thye goddys," sche sayde, "ar made of stoone.  
Of my Lordys joye telle may ther noone.  
Though thou have posté of my flesshe and boon,  
To take from Cryste my soule power haste thou no one"<sup>72</sup>

The first stanza resembles the discussion between Felicity and her guard: an outside observer, as-yet unaware of the saint's true power, asks her to recant in the face of her pain. Margaret even categorizes this advice in the language of secular authority—she describes the spectators as "counselloures," a word with significant legal and governmental connotation in Middle English. However, these councilors are "wrecched," and thus not only grounded in legal and governmental language but also juxtaposed to the good council of the Holy Spirit, which is also sometimes referred to by this word. Margaret claims that neither the scourging nor their "bysynes" causes her pain. "Bysynes," of course, could simply mean their activity of scourging her. But the doubling (business *and* scourging) suggests a more intricate meaning. "Bysynes" also has the

<sup>71</sup> Heffernan *Sacred* 256, D'Evelyn and Foster *Manual*. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne tracks the conflict of these tales as moving from generational (between father and daughter) to romantic (between would-be suitor and a maiden that has chosen Christ as bridegroom). Wogan-Browne, *Literary Culture* 91-92.

<sup>72</sup> "Stanzaic Life of Margaret." *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*. Sherry Reames. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications. 2003. 115-134. Print. ll.143-159.

connotations of business in the modern sense—a task, job or duty. Margaret is being tortured by soldiers; these persecutors exemplify temporal, institutional authority. Neither physical blows nor secular authority affect her. Angels intervene and transmute her pain into joy.

For his part, Olibrius is incredulous that Margaret continues to resist his “posté,” to the point that he is only able to attribute it to physical blindness. If she is unable to see his power, it must be that she is literally unable to see. Margaret’s answer reverses his frame of reference, echoing his language and metaphor to allude to the limited temporal power Olibrius exercises and the true divine power he is unable to access, much as she uses the word “counsellors” in the passage above. She is not blind; his gods are. Made of stone, they not only lack sight, but speech and hearing as well. His “posté” is only over flesh and bone; he has none to take her soul from Christ and indeed, she even shrugs off the effect of the scourging.

Moreover, Margaret’s divinely inspired authority even informs her execution. Overcome by the power of her example Malcus, her executioner, converts and initially refuses to kill her. He is only convinced after the following conversation:

Than bespake mayde Margarete; her prayers gan sche blynne.  
 "Malcus," sche sayde, "smyte of myn hede. Forgeven is thee that synne."  
 "That wylle I not doo," he sayde, "for alle this worlde to wynne.  
 Thi Lord has grette thee, that thou beleveste ynne."

"But if thou do," sche sayde, "elles schalte thou never have  
 That joye that is in paradyse, that thou after doeste crave."  
 Malcus herde this wordys; his swerde than dydde he drawe  
 And smote of her hede with drede and mykel awe.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> “Stanzaic” 328-334



Malcus refuses even after Margaret offers him forgiveness for the sin. He will not execute her “for all this world to win,” a curiously secular statement, especially in light of the second stanza. At this point, Malcus is still thinking of *this* world, though he is already disregarding Olibrius’ temporal authority. Margaret’s response shifts his attention from this world to the next, presenting her execution as obeying God, in hopes of achieving “that joye that is in paradise,” instead of the previous secular reward that Malcus had refused. Margaret explicitly rejects political authority as the law of man, rather than of God. Whether pressured by words or violence, virgin martyrs appeal to the transcendent authority of Christianity. Having been distinctly marked *good* or *correct* by the explicit moral clarity of the text, their rejection of earthly law becomes not only justified, but celebrated by the text and supported by their miraculous ability to delay death.<sup>74</sup> In the *Stanzaic Life*, Margaret’s body seems impervious to the pain Olibrius’ soldiers inflict on her. She herself disregards the prefect’s authority with impunity. Angels turn her woe into joy and her execution happens under own saintly authority.

Hagiography not only borrows from the Bible and other hagiographies; it encourages borrowing in turn. These references encourage the reader to shuttle back and forth between texts—to consider Aelred in the light of Christ’s passion or St. John as a kind of Abel. It is a fundamental method of understanding the text, foundational enough that other, non-religious texts can tap into that intertextual network as well. Secular texts draw on major ideas from hagiography in order to advance, resolve or complicate their

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<sup>74</sup> This is not to say that only virgin martyrologies or female saints’ lives can display this topos—it exists almost inherently in the *passios*. St. Vincent’s resistance to Dacian’s torture both during his life and after his death and Laurence’s defiance of Decius, for instance, lead the respective governor and emperor to admit defeat in the face of such resistance. No are women are not the only saints to resist socially appropriate marriages, as demonstrated in lives such as St. Alexis, who flees both marriage and inheritance, as he is the only child of a noble family.

own narratives and anxieties. Previously immutable family ties become subject to change and temporal authority can be justifiably disregarded. These elements allow different genres to accomplish a myriad of different effects, some of which rely on subversive readings of hagiography. In the chapters that follow, rather than proceeding chronologically, I begin with a text that, although it may arguably fail in its appropriation of hagiographic motifs, does not work to undermine the genre itself. In my second chapter, the anonymous *Sir Gowther* uses hagiographic modes of thinking to resolve aristocratic tensions. Faced with the possibility of a sterile marriage, the Duchess of Austria instead conceives an illegitimate half-demon child, producing a worst-case scenario where a supernaturally incorrect heir might rule. By appealing to the hagiographic impulse to rewrite genealogy, the text tries to nullify his problematic parentage, rendering him “God’s child” rather than the Devil’s or any mortal man’s. I then move towards less conventional usages of hagiography, including those that may even draw the merits of the genre into question. For instance, as I discuss in my third chapter, Margery Kempe also draws on hagiographic modes of thinking, particularly its alternate access to authority and its sense of moral clarity, in order to justify her intense dedication to Christ, her weeping and her marriage to the Godhead. By enacting her own martyrdom through slander, she challenges gender and social norms and creates a space for herself and her devotion. Finally, as I discuss in my fourth and final chapter, hagiography does not always serve a reparative or recuperative function, and to reckon with the complex genre fully, we must acknowledge the range of its literary force. I suggest that Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* must be taken seriously as a hagiographic anthology, albeit one deeply intertwined with the classical narratives from which it

draws. In juxtaposing the *Legenda aurea*, as a model hagiographical collection, to the *Heroides*, the poem's primary classical intertext, the contrast between a saint's martyrdom and the romantic sufferings of a classical heroine becomes clear, opening a space that escapes the sometimes-stifling genre restrictions of hagiography and gives the feminine voice a way to speak. Throughout the late Middle Ages, in dream vision and romance, contemplative autobiography and classical translation, authors reached for hagiography for a variety of purposes. A fertile and wide-ranging genre, it offered putative solutions, actual complications, and room to maneuver to writers who range from the most well-known to the entirely anonymous. As a genre, it was-- and is-- powerful. It's time we looked at why.

Chapter 2: “Now art thou Goddus child”: Appropriating Hagiography and Rewriting  
Family in *Sir Gowther*

In 1328, King Edward III of England named himself the true king of France, following the death of his uncle, Charles IV. He claimed his kingship was by right; he was the nearest male relative through his mother Isabella and Charles IV had no male children of his own. French jurists, however, begged to disagree. Women had been ineligible to succeed to the French throne since 987; how could Isabella transmit a royal right she herself did not have? Following that logic, a conclave of nobles instead chose Phillip of Valois as king, leaving Edward with only the French title of Duke of Aquitaine and thus subordinate to Phillip. When Edward later refused homage to the man who was technically his feudal sovereign, the French sent out a call for arms, launching the 116-year conflict known as the Hundred Years’ War.

The anonymous 15<sup>th</sup> century romance *Sir Gowther* dramatizes a similar anxiety of inheritance.<sup>75</sup> The Duke and Duchess of Austria have failed to produce a viable heir, leading the Duke to consider divorce and a new and hopefully fertile wife. Unlike her

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<sup>75</sup> Thematic overlap such as this has lead scholars such as Sarah Kay to dub romances-- as well as *chansons de geste*-- “political fictions” straddling the divide between fictional conceits and real societal concerns. Indeed, Geraldine Heng suggests that this blend of fantasy and reality was what made romance an appealing place to explore such social anxieties, creating a space “at the precise junctures where both history and fantasy could be mined to best advantage-- producing a genre in which historical traumas, crises and pressures could be safely brought into discussion and explored in a medium in which pleasure, not anxiety, was paramount.” “Fair unknown” romances such as *King Horn* and *Libeas Desconus*, in which a previously unknown knight’s noble lineage becomes revealed, dramatize the fraught and uncertain nature of inheritance. The desirable heiresses of *Havelok* and *Apollonius of Tyre* draw on the ability of English daughters to inherit in the absence of a son and marriage laws emphasizing spousal consent. Sarah Kay, *The Chanson de Geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 5. Geraldine Heng, “Jews, Saracens, ‘Black Men’, Tartars: England in a World of Racial Difference.” In *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture c.1350-c.1500* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2007) 247-69. 257. Judith Weiss discusses the motif of the desirable heiress in some depth. Judith Weiss, “The Wooing Woman in Anglo-Norman Romance”, in *Romance in Medieval England*, eds. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows and Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), 149–62. For a more historical discussion, see Kenneth B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England: the Ford Lectures for 1953 and Related Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 268-278

real-life counterparts, the Duchess is able to access hagiographic and literary answers to this problem. The foreshadowed incubus and his threat to legitimacy take very little time to manifest. Despite her beauty, the Duchess is unable to produce a child. After seven years of barrenness—or ten, depending on the manuscript—the Duke threatens to divorce her. His reasoning is stark: “Y do bot wast my tyme on the / Eireles mon owre londys bee” (58-59). Despairing, she prays for a child “On what maner scho ne roghth “(66). In an orchard shortly thereafter, the Duchess encounters a man she mistakes for her husband. She has sex with him, after which point, he reveals himself as a demon and announces that she has conceived.

The child will not be her husband’s, endangering their dynasty by substituting an illegitimate child for a true heir. In western medieval Europe, functioning under the assumption of primogeniture, such an event was catastrophic. As Helen Cooper notes, by the 13<sup>th</sup> century, “what was initially set up as a legal principle rapidly came to be interpreted as ordained by God, a divine as well as a human law. On the death of a prince, you have to identify not just the legally correct heir, but the true heir in sight of God.”<sup>76</sup> The error is threatening on the religious and the social level, suggesting that the false heir may be both legally incorrect and morally suspect.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Helen Cooper “When Romance Comes True,” In *Boundaries in medieval romance*, ed, Neil Cartlidge (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 13-28. 16

<sup>77</sup> This is not to say that exclusively patrilineal inheritance was the only genealogical model available. As Floreschuetz notes, there were multiple models inherited from the classical period. However, the Aristotelian (patrilineal) model was the most predominant one. The Galenic model, which allowed for maternal contribution, was usually only invoked to save weakening bloodlines or in the absence of a male-descended heir. Angela Floreschuetz, *Marking Maternity in Middle English Romance*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 28-29.

When the Duchess chooses to conceal the true nature of her pregnancy, she does so in language that not only invokes dynastic concerns and Christian overtones, but functions as a deliberate and anxious refutation of the demon's words:

Into hur chambur fast ho wan,  
That was so bygly byld.  
Scho seyde to hur lord, that ladé myld,  
"Tonyght we mon geyt a chylde  
That schall owre londus weld."

"A nangel com fro hevon bryght  
And told me so this same nyght,  
Y hope was Godus sond;  
Then wyll that stynt all ovr stryfe"<sup>78</sup>

She informs her husband that they might conceive a child that very night. In the same way that the Duke reduced their marriage to the production of a legitimate heir—if his wife is barren, he is wasting his time—she perceives and articulates “all ovr stryfe” as resolved by the conception of the child. Specifically, she posits the solution as an heir that will rule over their lands, grounding the conception—and deception—in this political vein. The language of this claim echoes the demon's, who tells her,

. . . "Y have geyton a chylde on the  
That in is yothe full wylde schall bee,  
And weppons wyghtly weld." (76-78)

In both instances, the child is “gotten” and while the demon describes his son's future prowess with weapons—evoking the falchion, a signal item that Gowther carries throughout the romance-- the Duchess uses the same verb (*weld*, or *wield*) to describe his future governance of her husband's lands. Even as she attempts to transform this news from an evil to a good, her language evokes her anxiety and harkens back to the truth.

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<sup>78</sup> "Sir Gowther," in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), ll. 80-88. All subsequent citations from this edition. Line numbers will be given in the text.

She also claims that an angel brought her this news, creating an unsettling echo of the Annunciation. While this might seem to dovetail with the view of primogeniture as divinely ordained, Gowther's mother is actually simply lying. Fiendish deception becomes "Godus sond," creating an uncomfortable allusion to the Archangel Gabriel's message. This correspondence finds ground not only in Scripture, but also in medieval mystery plays, like the York and N-Town Cycles, where Joseph finds himself worried about the fidelity of his wife and the parentage of her child. Gowther's demonic heritage causes more problems than it solves, creating a worst-case scenario where a *supernaturally* incorrect heir can ascend to the throne. Invoking hagiographic language in its reworking of the Wish Child motif allows access to a repertory of motifs and concepts which will be key to untangling these anxieties at the end of the tale.<sup>79</sup> However, the text has become too committed to these modes of thinking and ultimately cannot negotiate the differences between hagiographic means and romantic goals. Instead, the text slides into a liminal space where neither resolution can be achieved.

But why would any romance, let alone one so concerned with temporal affairs as *Sir Gowther*, draw on hagiography? Indeed, *Sir Gowther* is hardly the only romance to do so. Texts such as *Guy of Warwick*, *Amis and Amiloun* and *Sir Isumbras* draw heavily on religious themes, many of which are specifically hagiographic. Religion permeates

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<sup>79</sup> The wish child motif, a term used by folklorists, describes the instances of women praying or wishing for a child (often, as in the case of *Sir Gowther*, alone, while in an orchard). A supernatural being of some kind arrives shortly thereafter to fulfill that wish. The children of this motif are often marked by their supernatural inheritance, whether in a positive sense—Christ arguably fulfills elements of this motif, as does the apocryphal story of St. Anne—or a negative one, such as Gowther himself or some versions of Merlin. See Jennifer Fellows, "Mothers in Middle English Romance," in *Women and Literature in Britain 1150-1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 41-60 for more details.

Arthurian mythos, surfacing in regards to Galahad, to Lancelot, even to Arthur himself.<sup>80</sup> Guy of Warwick bears a striking resemblance to St. Alexis; Sir Isumbras and St. Eustace are virtually identical.<sup>81</sup> Admittedly, some of these similarities may be explained by their shared ancestor in the Greek novel or by other structural similarities. Kathryn Hume, for instance, notes these organizational commonalities with saints' lives in the Amicus and Amelius story.<sup>82</sup> Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert suggest "romances echo saints' lives when they reimagine the plot of divestment and reinvestment that is the basis of hagiography; rather than investigating what makes a person holy, they ponder what makes a person rich, or virtuous, or triumphant, or a king."<sup>83</sup>

However, some of these romances go beyond these ancestral and structural differences, leading many scholars to suggest a new generic category—the secular hagiography or exemplary romance. This is a romance which draws on hagiographic motifs and expounds a distinctively Christian morality, though no one can quite agree which romances qualify.<sup>84</sup> For instance, Andrea Hopkins focuses on the penitential quality of *Amis and Amiloun*, *Sir Isumbras*, *Guy of Warwick* and *Sir Gowther*. Based on

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<sup>80</sup> See, for instance, Karen Cherewatuk. "The Saint's Life of Sir Launcelot: Hagiography and the Conclusion of Malory's "Morte Darthur," *Arthuriana* 5, no. 1 (1995): 62-78. This point has been long established in Arthurian scholarship. See, for example, Valerie Lagorio, "Pan-Brittonic Hagiography and the Arthurian Grail Cycle," *Traditio* 26 (1970): 29-61.

<sup>81</sup> Crane *Insular* 109-117.

<sup>82</sup> Kathryn Hume. "Structure and Perspective: Romance and Hagiographic Features in the Amicus and Amelius Storm," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 69, no. 1, (1970): 89-107.

<sup>83</sup> Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, *The Spirit of Middle English Popular Romance*, (New York, NY: Longman, 2000), 99-100

<sup>84</sup> Phillipa Hardman, for instance, sees the didacticism of Sir Isumbras and Sir Gowther as an indication that they may have been destined for young readers. "Popular Romances and Young Readers." in *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, ed. Raluca Radulescu and James Rushton, (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2009), 150-64. Diane Childress also poses the question if romanticized saints' lives should be included as well, citing Ojar Kratins' analysis of the Life of Saint Gregory. Diane Childress, "Between Romance and Legend: Secular Hagiography in Middle English Literature," *Philological Quarterly* 57 (1978): 311-22.



this interpretation, she proposes “the sinful knight” as a discrete character class.<sup>85</sup> Each of these romances, in fact, is considered either a secular hagiography or an exemplary romance by some critics while other critics explicitly exclude them from those categories. The criteria by which such categorization happens varies, an ambiguity which leads to criticism of this genre-blurring categorization. Susan Crane sees the categories of secular hagiography and exemplary romance as implying too much harmony between the genres, suggesting that “the absorption of Christian fervor in romance is, however, less complete than may at first appear”<sup>86</sup>. Church officials repeatedly condemned the reading of romances, indicating that such texts failed to dovetail appropriately with Church doctrine. Crane specifically notes that these condemnations also extend to romances that modern critics consider “hagiographic,” including *Guy of Warwick* and *Sir Isumbras*.<sup>87</sup> While the knights of these romances may display Christian virtues, those virtues are in service of secular goals such as “self-determination, family strength and worldly success”.<sup>88</sup> But when those values conflict with saintly self-abnegation, these romances uphold their own secular belief structure. Ultimately, Crane suggests these exemplary romances take religious sensibilities but using them in support of temporal achievements and worldly life.<sup>89</sup> While Crane is right to insist on the tension between the two genres, she ignores

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<sup>85</sup> Andrea Hopkins, *The sinful knights: a study of Middle English penitential romance*, (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2011).

<sup>86</sup> Crane, *Insular*. 93

<sup>87</sup> Crane, *Insular*. 94-96. Helen Cooper suggest tempering this rejection though, noting that “men of high rank within the Church—bishops and abbots—were largely drawn from the upper echelons of society, and would have grown up with romances, an interest they did not necessarily lose the moment they were ordained.” “Introduction.” In *Christianity and Romance*, ed. Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman, and Michelle Sweeney (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2010), xiii-ix..

<sup>88</sup> Crane, *Insular*, 93.

<sup>89</sup> Susan Crane Dannenbaum, “Guy of Warwick and the Question of Exemplary Romance,” *Genre* 17 (1984): 351-74. 370. K.S. Whetter, however, suggests that romance is ultimately too malleable of a genre to always suggest that its incorporation of religious motifs is always subversive. K.S. Whetter, “Subverting, Containing and Upholding Christianity in Medieval Romance.” In *Christianity and Romance*, ed. Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman, and Michelle Sweeney. (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 102-118. 103.

the possibility that this response can include turning hagiographic motifs functions of self-examination and critique toward romance's own ends.

Whether the union is awkward or seamless, the two genres share a specific aspect that allow this borrowing to happen so freely—the capacity to transcend reality. For romance, W.T.H. Jackson suggests that:

a secular work, by the independence of the word, may have its own context of interpretation, its own rules, and its own existence. The romance does develop precisely this form of independence. It has a code of behavior of its own, a set of values, a set of ideals which are in fact, unreal in the sense that they are not directly connected with the life of twelfth-century France.<sup>90</sup>

While still reflecting on actual events and concerns of the late medieval period, romances have the freedom of indirect connection. A knight of King Arthur's court is not bound by the actual martial and social life of a similar living figure in the Middle Ages—or indeed by the same inevitable role conflicts and ethical lapses that might dog a knight in reality. The marvels that surface in romance provide impossible solutions or dramatize the constraints of a knight's conflicting ethical code. This partial connection between real world concerns and an idealizing genre allows for both “imaginative freedoms...while nevertheless insisting on the audience's participation in its inherent presuppositions and preoccupations”.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, it is that very imaginative freedom that allows romances to function as political fictions and explore societal concerns without the fraught anxiety that other genres may create. The ideal nature of romance gives access to exploring the real nature of society and its demons.

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<sup>90</sup> W.T.H. Jackson and Joan M. Ferrante, *The Challenge of the Medieval Text: Studies in Genre and Interpretation*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 174.

<sup>91</sup> Laura Ashe, “Introduction,” in *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*, edited by Laura Ashe et al. (Rochester, New York, D.S. Brewer, 2010), 1-14. 1

Despite this unreality, romance is aware of the divide between its ideals and reality. Even as William Caxton cites the romances “of lancelot, of galaad, of Trystram, of perse forest, of percyual, of gawayn & many mo” as a method of “see[ing] manhode, curtosye & gentylnesse” in his introduction to Ramon Lull’s treatise of chivalry, other romances question the possibility of living out these ideals in the real world.<sup>92</sup> For instance, in Thomas Chestre’s late 14<sup>th</sup> century *Sir Launfal*, Launfal’s largesse proves to be his downfall, a default that can only be remedied by Chestre’s imagining of the faery “other world.”<sup>93</sup> Dame Tryamour provides a horse, a servant and an unlimited supply of money which allows Launfal to continue his lavish gift-giving and chivalric combat. Its ending, however, highlights a continued unease with that resolution. Launfal leaves Arthur’s court with his fairy mistress, only returning as an annual revenant, a phantom unease that cannot be integrated. The presence of the revenant provides a disconcerting reminder of the limits of the imagination, in that it is only able to provide a resolution in romance, rather than reality. Sir Gowther itself (and arguably many other fair unknown

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<sup>92</sup> *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, trans. William Caxton from a French version of Lull’s ‘Le Libre del ordre de cauayleria.’ Ed. Alfred T.P. Byles (EETS: London, 1925), 121-122. For another discussion of this discrepancy, see Raluca Radulescu. “How Christian Is Chivalry?” In *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Rosalind Field, Philippa Hardman and Michelle Sweeney (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2010), 69-83. Indeed, as Helen Cooper notes, plots of inheritance, marriage and chivalry “constitute a high proportion of Middle English romance.” Dorothy Everett argues that chivalry is the defining factor of romance, noting that even in classically inspired romances, the hero becomes knight-like in comportment and ideology. Richard Kaeuper notes the historical evidence that knights both influenced and were influenced by literature *about* knights, including records of ownership, references to romance in chivalric manuals, and the detailed and accurate ways that romances describe arms, armor, war, and violence. Cooper, “Boundaries.” 17. Dorothy Everett, *Essays on Middle English Literature* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 1978). Richard Kaeuper, “The Societal Role of Chivalry in Romance,” In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 97–114. 98

<sup>93</sup> For a discussion of the role played by other worlds in romance, see Jeff Rider, “The Other Worlds of Romance,” In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 121-11. The “other world”, in Rider’s terms, “because it is not ‘our’ world...is not bound by the material limits of our world and the mechanical limits of our ignorance.” In this way, the other world of the romance alters similar possibilities to the alternate authority possessed by a saint.

romances in which a knight's previously mysterious ancestry is revealed) explores the concerns of faulty inheritance and the possibility of a bad heir. In this particular text, the wish child motif becomes tinged with divine intervention in order to resolve that anxiety.

Indeed, perhaps no text exemplifies the sometimes-awkward fit between romance and hagiography better than *Sir Gowther*, in which a romance catastrophe—a crisis of inheritance—careens into impossible violence before somehow landing on a hagiographic ending.<sup>94</sup> Gowther's refusal to follow the precepts of chivalry ends up driving the father figure who dubbed him to his death. It is only through the revelation of his demonic heritage (and the intervention of the Emperor's mute daughter) that his violence can be reintegrated into society in a productive way and his illegitimate heritage nullified through hagiographic genealogy, rendering him "God's child" rather than the Devil's or any mortal man's. By setting the familial drama of parentage and the crisis of a young knight whose aggression cannot be controlled within the context of hagiography, *Gowther* is able to interrogate the efficacy of chivalry and the violence it endorses.

### Fathers' Son

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<sup>94</sup> Focusing primarily on the way that *Sir Gowther* blurs the lines between hagiography and romance does not preclude the ways in which the text bears some resemblance to yet other generic constructions. Shearle Furnish for instance notes that *Sir Gowther* is one of the eight or nine Middle English texts to categorize themselves as 'Breton lais' and attempt to unpack what that generic description might meant. Shearle Furnish, "Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lays," *Traditio* 62 (2007): 83-118. Others, like Ilan Mitchell-Smith and Shirley Marchalonis, locate it more solidly in the romance tradition, unpacking how it uses specific romance motifs like that of the 'fair unknown.' Shirley Marchalonis, "Sir Gowther: The Process of a Romance," *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971): 14-29. Ilan Mitchell-Smith, "Defining Violence in Middle English Romances: 'Sir Gowther' and 'Libeaus Desconus,'" *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 34 (2009): 148-61. Still more focus on the role of the 'paternal function' to use Francine McGregor's term. Francine McGregor, "The Paternal Function in *Sir Gowther*," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 16 (1999): 67-75.

Sir Gowther is found in two manuscripts, London, British Library, Royal MS 17.B.43, and Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.3.1., both of which display a marked interest in the intersection between romance and hagiography. Each version is written in twelve-line tail rhyme stanzas and dates from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, although there remains scholarly debate as to when the romance may have been composed.<sup>95</sup> Contextually, however, the Royal manuscript seems more interested in visionary material, given that it includes William Staunton's *Purgatory of St. Patrick* and the *Vision of Tundale*. Although Advocates does include hagiographic piece, and Sir Isumbras, one of the romances also often categorized as exemplary, it also encompasses John Lydgate's work on table manners, *Stans Puer ad Mensam*. Moreover, the Royal manuscript also concludes the tale with *Explicit vita sancti*. The two manuscripts tell substantially the same tale, though some scholars have argued the slight differences between them create significant and noteworthy differences. Alcuin Blamires suggests that the Royal manuscript is more invested in the chivalric aspects of the tale and Advocates in the hagiographic, including clearly identifying the fiendish nature of Gowther's parentage.<sup>96</sup> Royal, by contrast, retains more supernatural elements of the Wish Child motif: it notes that Gowther's mother specifically falls asleep under a chestnut tree, which has specifically supernatural connotations in folklore. While recounting the story of Gowther's parents' courtship, Royal also insists more heavily on their nobility, particularly in its description of the mother—noting that she is “nobil and

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<sup>95</sup> John Finlayson suggests sometime after 1400. Finlayson, "Forms" 352. Raluca Radulescu suggests sometime in the 1300s. Raluca Radulescu. *Romance and its Contexts in Fifteenth-Century England: Politics, Piety and Penitence* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013).

<sup>96</sup> Other scholars, such as Shaner suggest that Advocates was revised specifically for children, noting the preference for direct speech, bloody action and emphasis of domestic rather than chivalric virtues. Mary Shaner, "Instruction and Delight: Medieval Romances as Children's Literature," *Poetics Today* 13 (1992): 5-15.

rich” and a “lady schene” as opposed to “comly under kell” and a “mayden schene (Royal 33,37, Advocates 32, 37).<sup>97</sup> However, such verdicts become more difficult given that Advocates lacks the first thirteen and a half lines of the text—the portion of the text that so clearly embeds demonology into anxieties of inheritance.

Ultimately, however, both versions of *Sir Gowther* entangle anxieties about inheritance—and how illegitimacy can warp not only an individual’s social identity but also threaten the society in which it exists—with religious ideas and imagery. Such blurring allows the text access to hagiographic motifs that will putatively solve those very anxieties. When the Duchess of Austria prays for a child, she isn’t expecting a demon to answer her prayer. The half-human and technically illegitimate child’s propensity towards violence drives the Duke to an early grave. Gowther rules unchecked over Austria until the revelation of his true parentage causes him to see redemption from the Pope—a redemption he ultimately wins on the battlefield against the Saracens. The triumphant end inscribes him in a new and saintly genealogy, establishing him as God’s child, rather than a demon’s and elides without solving the inheritance crisis that launched the narrative.

Moreover, if we accept the Royal preface, *Sir Gowther* grounds its genealogical concerns in the Christian worldview almost immediately. Rather than beginning with the “name of the protagonist, the location of the action or the historical moment designated

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<sup>97</sup> All citations for the Advocates manuscript from “Sir Gowther.” In *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), ll.33, 36. While this chapter draws from Advocates unless otherwise noted, all citations from the Royal manuscript are drawn from “Sir Gowther.” In *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, ed. Thomas C. Rumble (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1965) 179-206.

by the name of the king,” the first twenty lines frame the tale with anxiety about incubi.<sup>98</sup>

Specifically, the text concerns itself with an incubus’ ability:

For to dele with ladies free  
 In liknesse of here fere,  
 ...And makyd hom with child  
 Tho kynde of men wher thei hit tane  
 For of hom selfe had thei nan (8-9, 15-17)

Although as Andrea Hopkins notes, the anxiety of these opening lines “is set against a background of the great cosmic struggle between God and the Devil for the possession of men’s souls,” the incubi also pose a threat to dynastic genealogy.<sup>99</sup> The heart of this anxiety is the incubi’s ability to impregnate unwitting noble women “in liknesse of here fere.” Such power to assume an aristocratic likeness is already problematic as it suggests that an incubus can assume the appearance of virtue without truly being virtuous—being noble without truly being a member of the nobility. Moreover, in this description, such demons have only one target (“ladies free”) or noble women. The verb—“dele”—is fairly neutral in the sexual sense and at most, has a connotation of general deceit. The anxiety is not about sexual infidelity or even rape writ large, but the possibility of conception. The fear is an illegitimate child, thought to be legitimate, that becomes interwoven into the inheritance of a dynastic line.

This anxiety about illegitimate children—and the incubi that could father them—is so potent that it subordinates the conventional romance account of Gowther’s parents:

Ther wonde a Duke in Estryke,  
 He weddyt a ladé non hur lyke  
 For comly undur kell;  
 To tho lyly was likened that lady clere,  
 Hur rod reyde as blosmes on brere,

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<sup>98</sup> Louise Sylvester, *Medieval Romance and the Construction of Heterosexuality*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 56.

<sup>99</sup> Hopkins *Sinful* 164.

That ylke dere damsell.

When he had weddyd that meydyn schene  
And sche Duches withowt wene,

...

On the morow the lordes gente  
Made a riall tournament  
For that lady sake;  
Tho Duke hym selfe wan stedys ten.  
And bare don full doghty men,  
And mony a cron con crake. (31-48)

The Duke of Austria marries a lady—a member of the aristocracy. Neither of them are given names, which, while not uncommon for minor characters of a romance, also reduces them to their familial and social role. By being *a* Duke and *a* lady, they can become archetypal representatives of what any Duke and lady should represent. In the Advocates text quoted above, the lady is renowned for her beauty, comparable to the lily and the rose. Royal lingers less on her beauty but dwells on aspects no less fitting: that she is “nobil and riche” (32). In many ways, she resembles the archetypal romance heroine. Their wedding is successful and is followed by a tournament in which her husband displays his martial prowess. Unlike the problematic unions of Erec and Enide or Yvain and Laudine, there seems to be no tension between martial and marital life. The match is a successful one.

However, the anxiety tainting this marriage shows itself through language and positioning within the romance. The beginning of a text is a privileged location in which readers’ expectations are the most easily shaped. In the case of *Sir Gowther*, the incubi occupy such space, coloring the marriage with the threat these demons pose to “ladies free,” such as the Duchess. In this light then, the insistence on her suitability verges on the sinister. If she truly is the most beautiful lady in the world, might that draw an incubus to her? Why does the text insist that she is the Duchess “withowt wene”? In this



case, this emphasis verges on overcompensation. We must insist on her suitability because the possibility of *unsuitability* exists and already plagues this text through the vision of the incubus.

As we have already seen, Gowther's conception injects religious elements such as the Annunciation into the more pagan Wish Child motif and even the very language of the demon connects Gowther's violence and his authority over the lands of Austria. The deception that the Duchess perpetuates is a catastrophe in a society that maps virtue onto bloodline and where the modern meanings of *gentleman*—a member of the aristocracy, a man of gentle behavior—collapse into one unified and self-referential sense. In many fair unknown romances, the trueborn knight proves his virtue; then his lineage is revealed as if in confirmation of that virtue. One causes and proves the other. Blamires notes this pattern in both *Yvain and Gawain* and the *Book of the Knight of the Tower*. In both cases, unknightly behavior by Yvain and the son of the Queen of Naples are ascribed to unknightly birth.<sup>100</sup> To be noble is to born into a noble family and one's noble behavior becomes proof of that noble birth. If the behavior does not match the blood, "medieval society is prepared to allege contamination" either through actual infidelity or through a misogynistic fantasy of a desirous woman.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, insisting "their mothers had lechers in mind" reflects the necessity of validating this link between virtue and bloodline. There must be some fault to ascribe; the possibility of a dishonorable but legitimate noble cannot be entertained.

Gowther's demonic heritage is the dark inverse of this tautology. He is evil because he is illegitimate and illegitimate because he is evil. Indeed, his fiendish heritage

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<sup>100</sup> Blamires "Twin Demons" 50

<sup>101</sup> Blamires "Twin Demons" 50

manifests itself shortly after birth. He suckles nine wet-nurses to death then tears the nipples off his mother when she makes an attempt.<sup>102</sup> Dana Oswald notes the lack of intention ascribed to these actions. Rather than being “acts of will, [they] are artifacts of his true parentage and of his identity as it is grounded in his physical form.”<sup>103</sup> When he is weaned (rapidly to avoid any further deaths) and begins to eat regular food, the text mentions no violence against the serving staff, for instance. The attacks on his mother and wet-nurses seem instead to have been an attempt to satiate an impossible, demonic appetite.

The flaw in his heritage—this innate predilection towards violence—warps his social identity. Both baptism and knighthood fail to alter his behavior, the latter so spectacularly it suggests a link between its failure and his father’s death. The text reads:

Tho Duke hym myght not chastyse,  
 Bot made hym knyght that tyde,  
 With cold brade bronde;  
 Ther was non in that londe  
 That dynt of hym durst byde.  
 For sorro tho Duke fell don ded; (149-154)

The Duke cannot control or chastise his putative son, which is already a reflection of the weakness of his patrilineal line and the impact it has on familial structure. In a last-ditch attempt, the Duke knights Gowther, hoping that the ceremony will impart the ideals of

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<sup>102</sup> Other scholars note this kind of violence seems directed against specifically maternal figures and read it as a rejection of nurture (Blamires, “Twin Demons”), familial ties, (Emily Rebekah Huber, “Redeeming the Dog: Sir Gowther.” *The Chaucer Review* 50, no. 3-4 (2015): 284-314, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Gowther Among the Dogs: Becoming Inhuman c. 1400,” In *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, (New York, NY: Garland, 1997), 219-44. Jane Gilbert, in contrast, sees the consumptive adherence to the maternal as a rejection of the paternal. Jane Gilbert, “Unnatural Mothers and Monstrous Children in The King of Tars and Sir Gowther.” In *Medieval Women - Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain: Essays for Felicity Riddy*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 329-44.

<sup>103</sup> Dana Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature* (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2010), 169.

chivalry, restraint, and mercy. Such a dubbing would ideally be a reflection of these already pre-existing virtues in a knight, rather than an attempt to imbue them into a recalcitrant heir. However, it doesn't work. In fact, even though Gowther's signature weapon is the falchion he forges at age fifteen (and later refuses to give up, even at the behest of the Pope), this passage syntactically suggests that Gowther continues his crimes with the broadsword that knighted him. The Duke "for sorro" dies, suggesting a link between the last failure of chivalric ideals and his death. Citing Ramon Lull and the *Ordene de Chevalerie* Maurice Keen notes dubbing's devotional overtones: "the bath recalling baptism and signifying cleansing from sin, the white belt signifying chastity...the word placed in his hand whose sharp edges remind him of his duty to protect the weak."<sup>104</sup> If Keen is right then the Duke's sorrowful death constitutes a religious failure as well.

The Royal manuscript lacks the phrase "For sorro"; the corresponding line reads, "But after, whan his father was dede," producing an instance of parataxis. That is to say, like Advocates, Royal mentions the gift of a sword from father to son, but, unlike Advocates, fails to specify how the Duke dies. The text proceeds directly from the insistence that no knight in all of Austria could survive a blow from Gowther to a later moment, when the Duke is dead. By placing these two moments side by side, Royal creates the suggestion that the Duke himself may have been a victim of Gowther's "dents." Either way, whether the half-demon murders his father or simply causes the fatal broken heart, Gowther's failure to correspond to socially-dictated values unravels the dynastic line that preceded him in both a biological and social sense. Dubbing reflects

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<sup>104</sup>. Maurice Hugh Keen, *Chivalry*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 45.

“both the achievement of a majority of a majority and admission into a war band or military following—and to be linked also to the idea of vassalage”<sup>105</sup>. The knighting ceremony should reflect Gowther’s entry into aristocratic society as a fully-fledged adult member. Instead, the Duke is dead; the Duchess flees to a faraway castle, and the illegitimate fiend child reigns and continues his crimes unchecked.

Gowther’s own warped social identity—demonic, unchivalric, illegitimate—also manifests itself in crimes that target socially normative institutions like marriage, the Church and family. Specifically, many of these crimes directly target socially normative genealogy. Gowther disrupts marriages and the easy transmission of inheritance. His wet-nurses are all women who have given birth recently enough to still be lactating. Their deaths endanger their own children and prevent the production of more. When Gowther rapes maidens before they can marry, he endangers the validity of any heirs they might produce. After all, in a patrilineal society before DNA testing, in a society enculturated to believe that women lie, virginity was the only real safeguard. Indeed, the text foregrounds the marriage itself as a victim, noting that “Meydyns maryage wolde he spyll” (196). Syntactically, marriage is the subject of the line, the thing that is spilled or spoiled; the maidens only function as a possessor. “Spill,” notably, also does not carry any implication of sexual assault, but simply means to destroy or to kill. The suggestion of rape comes from context, as the next line explicitly notes that he rapes wives and kills their husbands as well. Even here, however, he is still destroying already formed familial structures as well.

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<sup>105</sup> Keen *Chivalry* 67.

The narrative also lingers on Gowther's crimes against the Church; of the thirty-five lines listing his escapades, twenty-five detail him forcing friars to leap off cliffs, hanging parsons from hooks, and most prominently, raping and burning a group of nuns alive in their monastery.<sup>106</sup> It happens as follows:

He went to honte apon a day,  
 He see a nonry be tho way  
 And thedur con he ryde;  
 Tho pryorys and hur covent  
 With presescion ageyn hym went  
 Full hastely that tyde;  
 Thei wer full ferd of his body,  
 For he and is men bothe leyn hom by -  
 Tho sothe why schuld y hyde?  
 And sythyn he spard hom in hor kyrke  
 And brend hom up, thus con he werke;  
 Then went his name full wyde. (181-192)

The violence against the Church is obvious. However, such violence is performed in a way evocative of his earlier crimes against maidens and wives; both are an act of rape. Given that nuns are also commonly referred to as the brides of Christ, the same language of social disruption can even carry into this behavior. He also encloses them in the Church--- almost a parody of cloistering—before setting it afire.

Other aspects of this passage also highlight the impact of his warped social identity through its perversion of aristocratic habits and protocols. When Gowther comes upon the nunnery, he is hunting—his favorite (and a normally chivalric) past-time, but Gowther's version is both less noble and less innocent. While he may love hunting “aldur best,” it becomes clear that what Gowther loves hunting best is people (178). His role as Duke also becomes similarly contaminated. As Mitchell-Smith notes, “the severity of the violence and the monstrosity of Gowther result both from the innocence of his victims

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<sup>106</sup> I draw from the Royal manuscript; Advocates suppresses the detail of the rape.

and also from their being *his* people — not just in a local way but also as Christians in a religious land. Violence against these people is ultimately a threat to a unified and cohesive social structure”.<sup>107</sup> He comes upon the nuns “with presescion ageyn him”—in procession, going to meet him—a sign of feudal homage they must render him as Duke and one which also causes them to leave the (precarious) safety of the nunnery. Warped by the presence of an illegitimate heir, a worst-case scenario tainted with demonic blood, the nun’s obedience to feudal obligation places them in danger.

Ultimately and ironically, Gowther’s behavior reflects one final warped adherence to social norms. Buried within the list of crimes against the church is a single verse sentence:

Erly and late, lowde and styll,  
He wold wyrke is fadur wyll (175-176)

Gowther, after all, has been a poor example of a Christian knight. Baptism has had no effect on him; knighting has failed so spectacularly that it may have killed his putative father, the Duke. But the Duke is not really his father. Gowther is a cuckoo in the nest, a brood parasite raised by at least one parent not his own. His true father, after all, is a demon and Gowther is very much the perfect son.

### Possible Penances

The text of *Sir Gowther* does substantial work to allow itself access to religious and specifically hagiographic themes. For instance, it is a demon who cuckolds the Duke rather than a human being. Moreover, unlike other elements of the wish child motif, this conception is especially categorized as infernal, grounding it in Christian theology rather

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<sup>107</sup> Mitchell Smith “Defining” 153

than folklore or other varieties of the supernatural. The Duchess also couches the transgression in annunciatory language, an unsettling parody of the *imitatio Christi*.

Even Gowther's crimes and penance set him up to function as a kind of penitential saint. The particular structure of his romance likens him to St. Christopher or St. Paul. Like St. Paul, Gowther begins by persecuting the Church in particular. As the text recounts, he forces friars to leap from cliffs, hangs parsons from hooks, and burns hermits alive. His rape and murder of nuns is discussed elsewhere in this chapter as well. Indeed, the form of sudden conversion that occurs after Gowther learns his father's true nature is often called Pauline. Alan Ambrisco notes that "Paul's conversion narrative, presented in Acts 9:1–18, 22:3–16, and 26:9–18, became for medieval Christians the idealized paradigm for a sudden, intense, and irreversible conversion experience," allowing for radical contrast between the villainy of Gowther's previous acts and the saintliness of his epilogue. E.M. Bradstock even suggests that the mute maiden falling from the tower is meant to evoke one of Paul's miracles: the reincarnation of Eutychus, who dies after falling from a third-story window.<sup>108</sup>

St. Christopher not only shares a narrative of conversion and repentance with Gowther, but physical aspects as well. Both Gowther and Christopher are described as physically imposing individuals; the narrator repeatedly calls Gowther "styff in stour" or sturdy in battle during his fight against the Saracens and earlier notes that he grew as much in six months as most children do in a year.<sup>109</sup> The *Legenda Aurea* describes St. Christopher as a Canaanite of enormous size, claiming that he was twelve feet tall.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Bradstock, "Penitential" 9. See Acts 20:9 for the story of Eutychus.

<sup>109</sup> See line 145 for discussion of his growth rate and lines 413, 482, 554, 613 for the use of *styff*.

<sup>110</sup> Jacobus de Voragine. *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*. Translated by William Granger. Ryan. Vol. 1. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 10.

Both men also share associations with dogs: Gowther through his penance and Christopher through his iconography. The Byzantines, misinterpreting *Cananeus* (Canaanite) as *canineus* (canine), represented Christopher as dog headed, an image that was picked up by Western sources as well.<sup>111</sup> Christopher even has demonic associations, serving first the king of Canaan and then the Devil himself before finally going to serve Christ, reasoning that if the king fears the Devil and the Devil fears Christ, Christ must be the most powerful of all three.

Dogs mediate Gowther's connection to the divine in other ways as well. The "toogruhowndus fyn" the Emperor's daughter sends to Gowther with fresh bread and the greyhound who feeds Gowther in the wilderness have religious connotations—a greyhound feeds St. Roch in his *vita* and Bozon compares it explicitly to the penitent soul.<sup>112</sup> The food that these greyhounds bring Gowther reinforce the hagiographic components of the narrative. While the "whyte lofe" brought by the greyhound in the wilderness is not explicitly paired with wine, the greyhound does feed Gowther three times, suggesting a religious link. The emperor's daughter's behavior is also telling:

toke too gruhowndus fyn

And waschyd hor mowthus cleyn with wyn

And putte a lofe in tho ton;

And in tho todur flesch full gud; (446-448)

The Eucharistic implications of this food are obvious. The daughter washes out the greyhounds' mouths with fine wine and places bread in one of their mouths. The daughter's later role as explicit divine emissary further reinforces this parallel. The flesh

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<sup>111</sup> Leslie Ross, *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996).

<sup>112</sup> Huber "Redeeming" 310



“full gud” she places in the other dog’s mouth reinforces the Eucharistic symbolism. There are two dogs, operating in parallel and each referring to the other, creating a link between the flesh and the bread that further supports the sacred nature of this communion. The link marks Gowther’s transition back into the Christian community through an “inclusive act” performed by and for “human beings bound into community through commensality.”<sup>113</sup> The text unequivocally concerns itself with the entanglement between hagiographic and dynastic motifs and issues, and this overlay is not merely for shock or entertainment value. By allowing sacred content to bleed into a romance, it addresses an aristocratic, dynastic anxiety through specifically hagiographic ideas. At the same time the text slips into a liminal space between the two genres, having so complicated its premise that a complete resolution seems impossible. Gowther’s parentage is demonic, which draws hagiographic ideas into the text in order to putatively resolve the issue of his illegitimacy. However, the text also imports the good-and-evil moral binary of the *passio* while doing so, meaning that Gowther’s lingering Saracen connections make it difficult to believe in the entirety of his redemption.

The revelation of Gowther’s parentage launches the narrative of his redemption, and it is thus appropriately twofold. The old earl, a figure notably derived from romance, is the first to express suspicions about Gowther’s legitimacy, doing so in a language that insists upon the equivalence of virtue and ancestry:

We howpe thu come never of Cryston stryn,  
 Bot art sum fendys son, we weyn,  
 That werkus hus this woo.  
 Thu dose never gud, bot ey tho ylle -  
 We hope thu be full syb tho deyll” (208-212).

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<sup>113</sup> Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 1987). 48-49

The verb “hope” repeats here, twice in five lines. While the word can mean simply to believe or infer, it also carries its modern denotation. The earl and his fellow aristocrats do not only believe that Gowther must be of close demonic descent (“full syb”). They also desperately hope so. Such a pedigree would reinforce the preexisting assumptions of their society, in which the firstborn heir inherits by primogeniture, and his virtues pass through his bloodline. Indeed, the earl justifies his suspicions through this connection between behavior and bloodline. Gowther must come “never of Cryston stryn” but be “sum fendys son” because he does “never gud, bot ey tho ylle.” The statement of this equivalence is the other occurrence of hope in this passage, evoking both belief and need. For Gowther to be truly human, truly Christian, truly an aristocrat and a knight, yet still to commit such atrocities poses a threat to normative social structure.

In order to resolve this threat by accessing the hagiographic ability to rewrite lineage, Gowther’s illegitimate birth must also be couched in religious terms. Although the old earl is a chivalric figure, Shirley Marchalonis notes his mother reveals the truth in a scene that evokes images of religious contrition.<sup>114</sup> Provoked by the earl, Gowther finds his mother and threatens her, asking who his father is. She replies:

"Son, sython y schall tho sothe say:  
 In owre orcharde apon a day  
 A fende gat the thare,  
 As lyke my lorde as he myght be,  
 Undurneyth a cheston tre";  
 Then weppyd thei bothe full sare.  
 "Go schryfe the, modur, and do tho best,  
 For y wyll to Rome or that y rest  
 To lerne anodur lare." (229-237)

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<sup>114</sup> Marchalonis, "Process," 15.

Firstly, Hopkins notes that “It is reminiscent of the penitence described by the contritionist theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, for whom repentance was not valid unless accompanied by bitter tears.”<sup>115</sup> However, the horror of the fiend becomes a strange sort of opportunity. The impact is devastating; Gowther weeps immediately and pronounces his desire to go to Rome and “lerne another lare.” The supernatural force of event is great enough that it causes him to immediately seek redemption and social integration. Would such a reversal have been likely if Gowther was simply the son of another knight?

In order to postulate saintly solutions to this worst-case chivalric scenario, the text begins to subordinate romance to hagiography. Gowther seeks out the Pope as a source of absolution, transforming his genealogy from a romance to a hagiographic concern. Upon reaching the Pope:

[Gowther] preyd hym with mylde devocyon  
 Bothe of schryfte and absolyscion  
 He granttyd hym is bone.  
 "Whethon art thu and of what cuntré?"  
 "Duke of Estryke, lorde," quod hee,  
 "Be tru God in trone;  
 Ther was y geyton with a feynde  
 And borne of a Duches hende; (268-275)

Gowther asks to be shriven, but the contents of his confession seem strange. Rather than the *Confiteor* or a listing of Gowther’s (numerous and frankly appalling) sins, Gowther responds with his social position and genealogy. Indeed, when the Pope mentions later that “thu hast Holy Kyrke destroyed,” Gowther seems to dismiss that almost as trivial, insisting that the Pope “be thu noght agrevyd.” Rather than the rape and murder of nuns and the burning of the nunnery, he instead presents his bloodline and social standing as

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<sup>115</sup> Hopkins, *Sinful* 164.

his crimes. They encapsulate all of his deeds and attribute them to his demonic heritage while simultaneously still grounding this scene in the previously discussed feudal anxieties around his illegitimacy.

Both Gowther's confession and his absolution are framed in genealogical terms, allowing access to the hagiographic possibilities, wherein a saint is able to overwrite their own or other's genealogy to create a new family through Christ. Biological parentage becomes replaced by an alternate and authorizing form of genealogy. Saints turn away from their biological bloodlines, praying to or reading about other saints who (through text or apparition) encourage them to seek Christ and sometimes martyrdom. For instance, *The Stanzaic Life* depicts Margaret herself hearing tales of "howe the Jewes dydde martirdome to Saynte Laurence and Stevyn."<sup>116</sup> The *Legenda Aurea* recounts that St. Lucy traveled to a shrine of St. Agatha as a child with her mother, having a vision in which Agatha told her she was destined for martyrdom. In this way, rather than biological transmission, parental ties shift into a visionary or textual inspiration, passing the desire for God and martyrdom from saint to saint.

Gowther's redemption draws on the same hagiographic capacity to be rewritten. After his recovery from the battle with the Saracens, the newly resurrected daughter of the Emperor proclaims that he is forgiven. It is only after this point that the Pope adds these words:

"Now art thu Goddus chyld;  
The thar not dowt tho warlocke wyld,  
Ther waryd mot he bee" (673-675)

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<sup>116</sup> Sherry Reames, "Stanzaic Life of Margaret." In *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 2003), ll.25.

Not only is his forgiveness proclaimed via Godly messenger first, and then afterwards by the Pope, Gowther is moved out of direct, bloodline genealogy. As opposed to the nuns, husbands and wives who belonged to Gowther as Duke (and whom he badly mistreated), Gowther becomes “won of His”—belonging to God, a claim that circumvents the dynastic anxiety of his birth (666). The Pope seconds this, invoking the alternate authority of hagiography to rewrite Gowther’s genealogy. He claims “Now art thou Goddus child,” superseding his problematic parentage. As Cohen notes: “God is his father, this simple fact guarantees his legitimacy, the truth of his identity by allowing his body to be placed outside the chains of filiation that would otherwise delimit him”.<sup>117</sup> Beyond that, the Pope insists that he need not fear “tho warlocke wyld,” which Laskaya and Salisbury, for their part, gloss as the Devil. However, it also harkens back to the opening of the tale, when the narrator promises to tell us of “a *warlocke* greytt, /What sorow at his modur hart he seynt/ With his warcus *wylde*” (22-24, italics mine). Perhaps, it is not the devil that he no longer needs to fear, but the sorrow and dynastic instability that his own “warlock” heritage created. The alternate genealogy accessible via hagiographic impulse allows the romance to posit a solution.

Ultimately, though, too much hagiography may have leaked into *Sir Gowther*. In taking up this approach to genealogy from hagiography, the text also problematically borrows the binary approach of the *passio*. The *passio*, an earlier type of saints’ life that focused more closely on the saint’s martyrdom rather than any earlier episodes in their life establishes a black and white binary between oppressor and saint. Even as the ability

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<sup>117</sup> Cohen, “Inhuman,” 236-237

to rewrite genealogy offers a solution, the *passio*'s binary perspective problematizes redeeming a half-demon character.

### Saracen Swords

Reaching for the ability to rewrite genealogy, *Sir Gowther* ends up importing enough hagiographic impulse that achieving a romance ending becomes complicated. In many ways, it makes sense that such overborrowing would happen. Many elements of these two genres are shared, easily allowing *Sir Gowther* to slip into a liminal space between the two genres. The *passio*'s narrative of testing and reward dovetails nicely with the tales of chivalric conflict in general. A saint proves their devotion by defying a prefect, a king, a father. Cecilia refuses Almachius' orders to sacrifice to Jupiter; Sebastian harangues the Emperor Diocletian for his cruelties. Perpetua and Felicity cling to their faith in the arena. Similarly, a knight rides forth and proves his valor on the battlefield or in single combat against a giant or dragon—Havelok to reclaim his Danish kingdom, Horn his kingdom and his bride, Degaré to find his heritage. Saint or knight, each character meets a clearly delineated foe, overcomes them and receives an earthly or heavenly reward.

The layering of the *passio*'s conflict also aligns with *Sir Gowther* in particular, where the half-demon's war against the Saracens becomes a macroscopic version of his own internal struggle. In a *passio*, a simple conflict between Roman prefect and sheep-herding maiden becomes a titanic struggle between the saintly champion of divine justice and the Devil's own representative. Such transformation layers the macroscopic conflict of salvation onto a microscopic interpersonal conflict and justifies the saint's defiance of

temporal authority. It elevates the stakes of the conflict and it makes it impossible to establish a middle ground. In the case of *Sir Gowther*, the half-demon knight struggles against Others both internal and external. As I have mentioned before, Gowther's demonic heritage seems to pose the internal threat. It is the subject of his confession to the Pope; it defies the strictures of baptism and dubbing and makes Gowther a danger to his own people. However, this internal Other becomes mapped onto an external threat: the Saracens who menace the Emperor. Much like the shepherdess and Roman prefect become emblematic of good and evil, Gowther's quest for his own redemption gains greater stakes.

However, a key difference exists between the saint's defiance and Gowther's struggle for redemption. Gowther's own demonic heritage—and the way the language of the text consistently links him to his Saracen enemies—renders the explicit moral clarity and binary opposition of the *passio* uneasy. Although Gowther's quest for redemption and the saint's struggle against a pagan government official both occupy the microscopic role in the dynamic of the *passio*, the saint's struggle is not internal. Their own character is never in doubt. Gowther, however, is at war with his own soul and his own ancestry, and that uncertainty extends to the way the text links him to his enemies.

The text uses language that ties Gowther to the Saracens and thus renders the Saracens demonic, of which the old earl's mapping of Christianity onto bloodline is the first indication. As previously mentioned, the earl confronts Gowther about his crimes and insists:

We howpe thu come never of Cryston stryn,  
 Bot art sum fendys son, we weyn,  
 That werkus hus this woo. (208-210)

The earl insists that Gowther is not of “Cryston stryn” and thus a “fendys son” by default, eliding the possibility of non-Christian humanity. His lack of Christianity comes with his inhuman blood, thus suggesting that to be human is to be Christian; to be of any other religion is to be demonic. While the Saracen was not the only racialized Other in the Middle English imaginary, Jews and Saracens often were conflated. As Geraldine Heng notes, the two groups were linked “by points of resemblance and historical ventures, it was thought, against the West” and that “the association of the infidel *within* Europe (Jews) and the infidel *without* (Muslims) is manifested in medieval literature with particular vivacity.”<sup>118</sup> The Saracens, of course, are also the non-Christian other featured in the romance and thus become contaminated by the equivalency made between religion and humanity.<sup>119</sup>

Gowther’s choice to carry a falchion—an explicitly Saracen weapon—not only connects Gowther to the Saracens but therefore renders the Saracens demonic. Many scholars have noted the Eastern origin of the weapon. Montañó for instance, suggests that Gowther’s early creation of the weapon (“the very image that Christian Europe held of Islam and Saracens”), without metallurgical skill suggests an innate and natural interpretation of race.<sup>120</sup> E.M. Bradstock also acknowledges “that the sword is of Oriental origin and a weapon that a Saracen would carry.”<sup>121</sup> For an object that carries such weight

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<sup>118</sup> Heng “Jews,” 256

<sup>119</sup> While implying that Saracens are monstrous is a conventional trope, *Sir Gowther* draws on it and renders it explicit. Jesus Montañó notes this in medieval Christian writers “especially those of the popular chansons de geste.” Jesus Montano, “Sir Gowther: Imagining Race in Late Medieval England.” In *Meeting the Foreign in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Routledge, 2002), 118-32. 122. Meredith Jones notes their depiction as “physical monstrosities: many of them are giants, whole tribes have horses on their heads, others are black as devils.” Meredith Jones, “The Conventional Saracen of the Songs of Geste.” *Speculum* 17, no. 2 (1942): 201-25. 205.

<sup>120</sup> Montañó “Imagining” 123

<sup>121</sup> Bradstock, E. M. “The Penitential Pattern in *Sir Gowther*.” *Paragon* 20 (1974): 3-10.



in the narrative to be so racially tinged is a telling sign.<sup>122</sup> The falchion is also linked to the Devil throughout the poem. The fiend alludes to it after impregnating the Duchess; their child would be “wylde” and “weppons wyghtly weld” (77-78). Even Gowther himself links the two in his confession to the Pope. When speaking of his (biological) father, Satan, Gowther nods that “my fadur has frenchypus fone” (276). Then when the Pope requests that he lay down his falchion a scant eighteen lines later, Gowther refuses in very similar language: “This bous me nedus with mee beyr, / My frendys ar full thyn” (274). Gowther resembles his father through his reference to this sword of Eastern design and ultimately carries this racially and demonically tinged weapon throughout the narrative of his redemption.<sup>123</sup>

Other connections between Gowther and the Saracens initially seem to track his redemption, but all eventually prove to be more uneasy and ambivalent. For instance, both the Sultan and Gowther are originally described as wearing black, but Gowther’s armor gradually transforms from black to red to white over the course of three days of fighting. Marchalonis discusses the alchemical significances of these colors as well as their roles in dubbing ceremonies and suggests that the changing color of the armor reflects Gowther’s gradual purification.<sup>124</sup> Ilan Mitchell-Smith, for his part, suggests that the black armor could indicate either Gowther’s sinful past or his current humility.<sup>125</sup> The transformation thus seems to be compatible with the binary positioning required by the

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<sup>122</sup> Shearle Furnish, for instance, sees the sword as a motif that “binds all these episodes and themes” of the romance, similarly to “the gem-cloak in *Emare*, the similar heirloom cloth in *Lay le Freine*, Sir Degare’s horses and chivalric gear, Orfeo’s harp and Dorigen’s rocks.” Shearle Furnish, “Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lays,” *Traditio* 62 (2007): 83-118. 109

<sup>123</sup> Bradstock suggests that this indicates the falchion can in fact be redeemed, but I would suggest that the disobedience of the Pope in a story putatively about redemption would have created too much unease within a medieval audience to accomplish such a task easily. “Penitential,” 7.

<sup>124</sup> Marchalonis “Process” 20-23

<sup>125</sup> Mitchell-Smith “Defining” 158

*passio* by the third and final day of fighting—a Christian knight in white armor, a Saracen sultan in black.

However, the reality is more complicated. Gowther’s Saracen-and-demon heritage complicates his putative saintliness, a concern that may be reflected in the representation of his opponent’s shield. While many scholars have noted that the Sultan’s shield and armor is black, the text actually reveals a more detailed picture:

Tho Sawdyn bare in sabull blacke,  
Three lyons rampand, withowt lacke,  
That all of silver schon;  
Won was corvon with golys redde,  
Anodur with gold in that steyd,  
Tho thryde with aser, y wene;  
And his helmyt full rychely frett,  
With charbuckolus stonus surly sett  
And dyamondus betwene;  
And his batell wele areyd, (577-586)

The Sultan’s shield is sable black, but that is only the background of his heraldry, which features three lions, one red, one gold and one azure. Strangely enough, this would seem to connect him to Christ, with the Trinitarian implications of the number of lions and the association of Christ, the Lion of Judah, with the animal. “Golys redde” or red gules and argent were also common heraldic tinctures. The color of his helmet is left unstated, though it is adorned with carbuncles, a type of red gemstone, likely a garnet and diamonds. Tellingly, this means that the Sultan’s own armature includes all three colors of Gowther’s— black background on his shield, a red lion and red gemstones on his helm and finally, white diamonds. The two perhaps are not as far apart as this hagiographically tinged romance would like to have them and because of that—and Gowther’s demonic heritage—it calls into question the possibility of Gowther’s redemption.

Gowther's repeated association with dogs also links him ambivalently to his Saracen opponents. In the Emperor's Court, Gowther first snatches a bone from a "spanyell" and later sits between "too small raches" after one of his battles with the Saracens (353, 444). Huber notes these dogs are specifically chivalric animals, used for hunting purposes and perhaps serve as an intermediate step from "wild dog" to a domesticated one as Gowther begins to reintegrate himself into society.<sup>126</sup> Dog-like himself, Gowther's re-entry into the human is mediated by dogs. Yet the mediation also abases him by connecting him to the Saracens. Gowther's penance lowers him to the same level as these animals if not lower, depending on whatever he can snatch from their mouths for sustenance. Michael Uebel, for instance, suggests that "Gowther contaminates his soul—for he cannot do otherwise—by abjecting himself as a dog."<sup>127</sup> He notes also that the dog-man hybrid *oyur cynocephali* was "seen as an image of the punishment that submission to sin brings down upon mortals"<sup>128</sup>.

Gowther and the Sultan are symbolically likened to dogs. The Emperor refers to the Sultan as a "hethon hownde" when he refuses his marriage suit for his daughter, less than a scant thirty lines after Gowther is described as having been fed "among tho howndys" (392, 367). Nor is this comparison to dogs limited only to this particular romance. Jesus Montano notes "hethon hownde" as a "kind of alliterative shorthand that accurately draws racial symbolic connotations"<sup>129</sup>. Both *chanson de geste* and romance often depicted the Saracens as dog-like<sup>130</sup>. In the *King of Tars*, the Christian princess

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<sup>126</sup> Huber "Redeeming" 309

<sup>127</sup> Uebel "Within" 108

<sup>128</sup> *ibid*

<sup>129</sup> "Imagining" 125.

<sup>130</sup> See Uebel "Within" 108 for other examples.

dreams of “An hundred houndes blake” and one “that greved hir sore, / Oway that wald hir take,” symbolically representing her Saracen husband and his nation. The same link between Saracen and hound recurs eight additional times in the 1241-line poem.<sup>131</sup>

Being dog-like, then, seems to represent different impulses, both in the text of *Sir Gowther* and in the romance tradition as a whole. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes, hybrid forms like the dog-headed Saracen (or indeed St. Christopher) “encode two competing but not contradictory affects: these Others are threateningly feral, but also responsive to domestication at the hands of an evangelical master. The Saracen cynocephalus incorporates a dual Christian impulse, bellicose and missionary.”<sup>132</sup> Such an impulse is easily exemplified in the *King of Tars*, where the King of Tars first goes to war to prevent his daughter from wedding the heathen hound Sultan. Once such a violent response is proven unsuccessful, however, the wedding leads to the possibility of conversion. The princess and Sultan have a child together, but the child is only a lump of flesh. When his own gods fail to grant the child a human shape, he turns instead to Jesus Christ. The princess convinces him to free Christian prisoners, including a priest. She asks the priest to baptize the lump-child, telling him: “For thurth thine help in this stounde, / We schul make Cristen men of houndes.”<sup>133</sup> In the same breath that she invokes the bestial nature of the Saracens, she also notes the possibility of their transformation. In a romance, such a transformation becomes possible. From the Sultan in some versions of the Constance saga, who either converts or dies willing to do so, to Saracen princesses such as Josian of

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<sup>131</sup> All citations from John Chandler., ed. *The King of Tars*. (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2015), 420-422. Additional occurrences at lines 93, 169, 445, 740, 1091 and 1172.

<sup>132</sup> Cohen *Giants* 132.

<sup>133</sup> *King of Tars* 739-740

*Bevis of Hamtoun*, the hounds can become men (and sometimes women).<sup>134</sup> However, in an attempt to reconcile the genealogical threat posed by Gowther's illegitimacy, the text has reached for hagiographic modes of thinking. In attempting to access the saintly ability to rewrite genealogy, to transform Gowther from a bastard monster to "Goddus chylde; The thar not dowt tho warlocke wyld," the text may have overreached (673). Gowther is not simply a Saracen or simply illegitimate or even simply a dog-headed monster. He is a demon and the same generic conventions that should mark his redemption ultimately undermine it.

Despite the uncertainties created by the links to the Saracen sultan and bolstered by the explicit moral binary of the *passio*, the text wants to believe in Gowther's redemption. Seemingly delivered from the evil of his genetics, the half-demon repairs the damage caused by his actions as much as possible. He marries the formerly mute daughter of the Emperor and then returns to Austria, where he not only cedes the dukedom to the old earl who confronted him but also arranges for a marriage between his mother and the earl, thereby restoring Austria to an 'uncontaminated' bloodline. Additionally, he builds two abbeys—one housing "monkus blake" (694) or Benedictines, wherein he intends to be buried. The other is on the site of the nunnery he burned. Depending on the manuscript, this location either houses "monkes gray" or Franciscans or "a covent therin" (Royal 656, Advocates 704). While "covent" can be an institution of either religious group and an "abbey" can be presided over by an abbot or abbess, the

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<sup>134</sup> Marianne Ailes and Phillipa Hardman note that the beautiful Saracen princess who converts still retains dangerous elements. Marianne Ailes and Phillipa Hardman, "Crusading, Chivalry and the Saracen World in Insular Romance." In *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Phillipa Hardman, Rosalind Field and Michelle Sweeney (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2010), 45-66. Carol Heffernan notes knights who convert including Otuel in *Otuel and Roland* and Sir Ferumbras in *The Sege of Melayne*. Carol Heffernan, "Introduction: Romance and the Orient." In *The Orient in Chaucer and Medieval Romance*, (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2003), 1-22.

earlier use of the word convent to refer specifically to the nuns suggests that Gowther may have simply rebuilt the nunnery that previously existed there in the Advocates version.

Reparations complete, Gowther seems headed for a traditional romance happy ending, were it not for a final key uncertainty. Upon his return to Almayne, he discovers that his father-in-law, the Emperor, has died, leaving Gowther in command. The text summarizes his reign:

Furst he reynod mony a yere,  
An emperour of greyt power,  
And whysyle con he wake;  
And when he dyed, tho sothe to sey,  
Was beryd at tho same abbey  
That hymselfe gart make (721-726)

At first blush, Gowther's career as an emperor is exemplary. His reign is long; he himself is powerful and rules wisely. When he dies, his burial is appropriately pious. However, there is something lacking--both in Gowther's career and in the arranged marriage of his mother and the earl. While Gowther may be wise and powerful and the marriages may be politically savvy, neither of them are explicitly fruitful. The earl is already old, and the Duchess's struggle to produce a viable heir is the difficulty that launched this narrative in the first place. Despite this primacy of lineage as a concern, the text never explicitly states whether Gowther and the emperor's daughter have any children. While this may potentially be an oversight, such an omission seems strange given the thematic resonances children (or the lack thereof) have throughout the tale. In comparison, the *Erle of Tolous* and *Havelok the Dane* specify that the respective titular character produces fifteen children. Even *Sir Orfeo* establishes an heir to the kingdom in absence of Orfeo

and Heurodis's biological children. Gowther's failure to produce, in that light, seems a noticeable and troubling lack.

This implied lack of heirs betrays a refusal to envision the kind of children Gowther would sire. The explicit moral binary of the *passio*, imported in an attempt to neutralize Gowther's demonic heritage, marks the Saracens as irredeemable in a way that romance might normally leave more ambivalent. Yet Gowther remains tied to his enemies—through his sword and his armor, through canine metaphor and the text's conflation of humanity and Christianity—and thus the text cannot fully trust in the permanency of his transformation. As Dana Oswald puts it, “while Gowther's own parentage is resolved by the power of God, it is not so absolute that Gowther himself can father an entirely human child.”<sup>135</sup> She notes that even the language of the transformation seems suspect:

Tho Pope had schryvon Syr Gother -  
 He lovyd God and Maré ther -  
 And radly hym con kys,  
 And seyde, "Now art thu Goddus chyld;  
 The thar not dowe the warlocke wyld,  
 Ther waryd mot he bee" (670-675)

Oswald suggests that *waryd* comes from ‘varien,’ a Middle English verb meaning to “To undergo a change in form, attribute, status, etc., be altered; undergo successive or alternate changes.” Indeed, the varied definitions of the word carry a connotation of instability. The second possible definition offered by the Middle English Dictionary is “to exist in a variety of possible forms, conditions” and the third speaks of instability and inconstancy. If indeed, *waryd* comes from *varien*, then the Pope's assertion of Gowther's transformation leaves ample room for the half-demon to simply transform back. Salisbury

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<sup>135</sup> Oswald *Monsters* 194

and Laskaya, for their part, gloss *waryd* as ‘vanquished,’ but even then, the text remains ambiguous. The demon *must* be vanquished. Does that imply it hasn’t been already? If the demon cannot be vanquished, does Gowther then have reasons to fear?

Other moments in the text also suggest such a transformation may only be on the surface, especially in comparison with *The King of Tars*. In that romance, both the lump-child and the Sultan undergo physical transformations after baptism. While the child’s skin color is not specified prior to its baptism (“a rond of flesche yschore”), afterwards, the perfection of its newly formed limbs and features are praised (577). The narrator notes, tellingly, that “Feirer child might non be bore,” an adjective which, then as now, denotes both beauty and color (755). The Sultan’s skin tone is not given until roughly two thirds of the way through the text. He is only specified to be “blac” shortly after the lump-child has been baptized and transformed; as if the audience would have need of a physical signifier to represent the truth of his conversion, from black to “al white bicom thurth Godes gras/ And clere withouten blame” (923-924). (That the prior events of the romance *include* a false conversion—the princess’s to Islam—reinforces the possibility of this interpretation). *The King of Tars* uses color as a representation of the Sultan’s heathen status and the transformation as the proof of his conversion.

Gowther’s own transformations—namely the color of his armor and the lifting of his penitential silence—seem shallow by comparison. He arguably undergoes a similar transformation during the three days of battle against the Saracens as his armor transforms from black (like the skin of the Sultan) to red and finally to white. While Marchalonis notes that the colors of the armor represent the possibility of alchemical transformation, it is important to note that the transformation is here actually a successive



exchange of equipment rather than physical alteration.<sup>136</sup> While there is nothing to suggest that this particular equipment is false, the idea of a knight wearing fake colors or indeed another man's armor is extant in medieval literature. The same surface transformation can be said about Gowther's speech. Unlike the dog-headed St. Christopher, who can only bark as the pagan Reprobus or indeed the Emperor's mute daughter, Gowther is only under instruction not to speak as part of his penance. Rather than transformation or miracle, Gowther simply resumes what he has always been able to do.

In addition to these unsettlingly (and literally) surface-level transformations, the lingering (Saracen, demonic) falchion also causes concern. In the same way that Oswald suggests that Gowther's own body remains as a trace of his monstrosity, the falchion remains as a trace of his (formerly monstrous) violence. Despite the Pope's specific request ("Lye down thi fachen then the fro"), Gowther refuses to forsake the weapon, a transgression the text never lets the reader forget (289). Even during the climactic battle, the text returns to the weapon repeatedly. For instance, the Emperor reflects on the prowess of the knight in red armor on the second day, noting that "his fochon is full styffe of stele" (493). Gowther's childhood weapon remains even on the third day: "All that he with his fawchon hytte/Thei fell to tho ground and ross not yette" (604-5). He rides with the Emperor, fighting side by side and no Saracen dares come within a spear length of them, too afraid of Gowther "with his fachen large and long" (619). The weapon previously used to kill hermits and knights alike now fights in the service of the Emperor.

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<sup>136</sup> Marchalonis "Process" 20-23

The falchion serves as a source of limitless violence that lingers to the end of this text and ultimately serves as a crisis point for Gowther's redemption. As Richard Kaeuper notes, the narrative of *Sir Gowther* depicts "nearly fathomless depths of knightly violence" but "elevates the reformed sinner to the skies, with the problem of violence a central issue in the double process."<sup>137</sup> Violence seems to be both the problem and the solution. When inappropriately directed—at Gowther's own people, within his own realm—the violence ceases to be knightly. Within the "narrowly defined spaces and at appropriate moments," such as defending the Emperor against the Saracens, however, such violence becomes celebrated.<sup>138</sup> In many ways, this particular romance seems more akin to the *juvenes* finding his way in society, but such an insistence becomes complicated given the lingering demonic associations of the falchion. How easily can this transformation linger, especially one that almost seems to have been predicted by Gowther's demonic father? After impregnating Gowther's mother, he prophesizes that "Y have geyton a chylde on the / That in is yothe full wylde schall bee, / And weppons wyghtly weld" (76-78). Gowther certainly has been "full wylde" in youth. But does his martial prowess fall under the same category? He does indeed wield weapons "wyghtly" in the fight against the Saracens; does that suggest that his wildness too, remains extant, threatening to reemerge at a later date? Even if not, if we read his martial prowess as syntactically independent from "in is yothe," Gowther's redemption still unfolds uneasily according to demonic prophecy.

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<sup>137</sup> Richard Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 265.

<sup>138</sup> Mitchell-Smith "Defining" 148-149

The text remains anxious and uncertain, unable to commit to the truth of Gowther's redemption. Gowther's demonic heritage is simply too irredeemable. His falchion lingers; the genealogical "solution" of his transformation only delays the crisis of inheritance by another generation. Worrisome moments in the text allude to the possibility that he may change again or never have truly changed in the first place. In reaching for the hagiographic, Sir Gowther may have unintentionally undermined its ability to resolve the dynastic uncertainties which drive the text. When it embroils religious and aristocratic values in Gowther's conception and in its depictions of his crimes, it does gain access to the alternate authority made available by hagiographic conventions to rewrite his genealogy in a way that is acceptable. However, it also imports the binary structure of the *passio*, polarizing the two halves of his nature to such an extent that it renders his redemption suspect. He *does* become a saint, so the text tells us and miracles occur around his tomb. The blind see; the mute speak; the mad regain their sanity. Gowther, the genealogical twist, the kink in a patrilineal dynasty, himself becomes the corrective, but even here, at what should be the triumphant end, uncertainty lingers. The text brings us back to his heritage, reminding us, once again that Gowther was "geyton with a felteryd feynd." Ultimately, thus, it is perhaps telling that this text reaches us in two manuscripts, Advocates and Royal—the former of which ends the tale *Explicit Syr Gother*, the latter with *Explicit vita sancti*. In trying to be both a genealogical romance and a hagiography, the text ultimately cannot span the distance between the two. It slips into a liminal space that it ultimately cannot escape.

Chapter 3: "Sygth of hir sowel": Building a Hagiography in the *Book of Margery Kempe*

One of the best-known scenes in the *Book of Margery Kempe* is the visionary's conversation with her husband John on their return from York, drawing attention for its reference to the mystery plays that occur in York, the domestic detail of the scene and even its sexual economics.<sup>139</sup> Nevertheless, no one has yet examined the exact language of John's sexual ultimatum and its misappropriation of hagiographic motifs. He poses this hypothetical situation to Margery:

Margery, if her come a man wyth a swerd and wold smyte of myn hed les than I schulde comown kindly wyth yow as I have do befor, seyth me trewth of yowr consciens—for ye sey ye wyl not lye—whether wold ye suffyr myn hed to be smet of er ellys suffyr me to medele with yow agen as I dede sumtyme?<sup>140</sup>

John's demand draws in particular on a similar conversation between husband and wife in the legend of St. Cecilia, one of the most widely distributed martyrologies in later medieval England, and the Tale Chaucer assigned to his Second Nun.<sup>141</sup> After Cecilia is wed, she tells her new husband Valerian her guardian angel will slay him should he ever

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<sup>139</sup> For dramatic interpretations, see Carole M. Meale, "'This Is a Deed Bok, the Tother a Quick': Theatre and the Drama of Salvation in the Book of Margery Kempe." *Medieval Women - Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*, 2000, 49-67. Claire Sponsler, "Margery Kempe, Drama and Piety." In *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Katherine J. Lewis and John H. Arnold, 129-44. Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2004. Sarah Salih, "Staging Conversion: The Digby Saint Plays and The Book of Margery Kempe" in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, ed by Samantha Riches and Sarah Salih. New York: Routledge, 2002. Scholars who note the sexual economics include Sheila Delaney, "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and The Book of Margery Kempe," *Minnesota Review* 5 (1975). Scholars interested in historical detail might consult Janet Wilson "Communities of dissent: the secular and ecclesiastical communities of Margery Kempe's Book." in *Medieval Women in Their Communities* ed. Diane Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) for a contextualization of Margery in King's Lynn.

<sup>140</sup> All citations from Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Press, 1996), 37.

<sup>141</sup> Sherry L. Reames, "The Sources of Chaucer's 'Second Nun's Tale'," *Modern Philology* 76, no. 2 (Nov., 1978): 111-135.

touch her “in vileynye.”<sup>142</sup> Valerian counters that he will have to see this angel before believing her. If he discovers she is actually having an affair with another man, he will slay both of them “right with this sword.”<sup>143</sup> On the road from York, John reconceives all three roles—the would-be saint, the husband and the avenging angel. Rather than an angel guarding Cecilia’s chastity through threat of violence, the hypothetical man with a sword acts to enforce John’s will. John thus casts Margery as Valerian, obligated to either assent or call down inexplicable vengeance. The difference, of course, is that John, our would-be Cecilia, seeks sex rather than chastity and that the angel threatens his life instead of Margery’s. That Margery seems remarkably inured to this idea— and that John eventually agrees to live chastely with Margery—may be less noteworthy than the way in which even John seems able to gain some sort of access, however brief, to the ability to position himself within a hagiographic narrative. John’s hagiographic fluency indicates a more profound assimilation of the genre in *The Book of Margery Kempe* than the explicit references to saints’ lives that many scholars have noted. This assimilation extends to an understanding of hagiographic motifs, themes and structural components. Kempe’s ability to draw on these structural components is what makes her text truly hagiographic. These hagiographic aspects allow her to frame her relationship to Christ and others and also to reckon with the institutional resistance that plagues her visionary career using this framework. She draws on the psychological layering of the *passio* in order to turn the rumors and slander that surround her into a form of martyrdom and the saintly ability to rewrite family in order to build a supportive community around herself.

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<sup>142</sup> *SNT*. Chaucer, Geoffrey, Larry Dean Benson, and Robert Armstrong. Pratt. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. ll.156

<sup>143</sup> *SNT*, 165

Although hagiography is hardly the only genre upon which the *Book* draws, the genre does unite concerns from across the *Book*'s critical history.<sup>144</sup> Whether its relationship to the English contemplative tradition, the nature of the sin that drives Margery to madness, or even the *Book*'s perplexing focus on slander, each of these elements can be approached through examining the hagiographic motifs they might draw upon. Indeed, when the single manuscript copy of the *Book* was discovered in 1934, it swiftly attracted a range of critical attention. Previously, known only through brief excerpts published by Wynkyn de Word in 1501 (who tellingly presented Margery as a holy contemplative), the text offered a plethora of scholarly possibility. Feminist critics followed the footsteps of Hope Emily Allen. Other researchers interrogated the original trauma that caused Margery's spiritual awakening.<sup>145</sup> Yet more focused on the religiosity of the text, whether it be the physicality of Margery's worship, her tears, her white clothes or what sort of *imitatio* she intends to be performing—Marian, Christian, or saintly.<sup>146</sup> How Margery navigates the careful distinction between good words and

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<sup>144</sup> The contemplative tradition is the predominant genre besides hagiography that scholars have noted, including Liam Peter Temple, who suggests Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe must be considered in the larger continental contemplative tradition. Returning the English "Mystics" to their Medieval Milieu: Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe and Bridget of Sweden, *Women's Writing*, 23:2, 141-158. He builds on similar and seminal work by Nicolas Love. "The Middle English Mystics," *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 539-65. Denise Baker posits a similar argument for Julian of Norwich as well. "Julian of Norwich and the Varieties of Middle English Mystical Discourse," *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: Brewer, 2008), 53-63. Indeed, even Margery's first readers, the annotators of the manuscript, seem to have placed in this tradition based on their marginal notes, as Corinne Saunders aptly discusses in *Writing Revelation: The Book of Margery Kempe*. In: Atkin T, Rajsic J, editors. *Manuscript and Print in Late Medieval and Early Modern Britain: Essays in Honour of Professor Julia Boffey*. Cambridge (UK): Boydell & Brewer; 2019.

<sup>145</sup> Often conjectured to have some relation to Margery's marriage or experience of childbirth. Some scholarship has verged on the diagnostic, such as Julia Bolton Holloway's 'Bride, Margery, Julian and Alice: Bridget of Sweden's Textual Community in Medieval England.' *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*. Ed. Sandra McEntire. ) New York: Garland, 1992.) 203-222. Others suggest infidelity or some other sexual sin, such as Liz Herbert McAvoy. "Spiritual Virgin to Virgin Mother: The Confessions of Margery Kempe." *Parergon* 17, no. 1 (1999): 9-44.

<sup>146</sup>For instance, Sarah Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe", in David Aers, ed., *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History* (Brighton: Harvester

preaching and structures her relationship with Christ are also popular topics for scrutiny.<sup>147</sup> Still other scholars have spent time untangling to whom we should allocate responsibility for the text— to Kempe’s scribes, to Kempe herself, or some combination of the two.<sup>148</sup> A corollary of that argument, of course, is the relative transparency or ‘craftedness’ of the narrative. What are we to make of the fact that, as the *Book* tells us, “thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr...but lych as the mater cam to the creatur in mend whan it schuld be wretyn”? Even the very sentence itself is ambiguous. When it came time that the book should be written, did Kempe dictate in a random order, “lych as the mater cam”? Or was the order of the scenes calculated and constructed, dictated as Kempe decided it “schuld be wretyn”?

Perhaps the most famous perspective in this particular debate is Lynn Staley’s. In her book *Dissenting Fictions*, she ultimately argues that the book is a crafted and literary narrative, constructed by an author (“Kempe”) about a character (“Margery”) with a

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Press, 1986), 34-57. 51-69; Susan Dickman, "Margery Kempe and the English Devotional Tradition," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Exeter, 1980), 156-172, Susan Dickman, "Margery Kempe and the Continental Tradition of the Pious Woman." In *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*. Ed. Marion Glasscoe. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1984.) 150-68. Gutgsell, Jessie. "The gift of tears: weeping in the religious imagination of western medieval Christianity." *Anglican Theological Review* 97.2 (2015): 239-253.

<sup>147</sup> For instance, Barbara, Zimbalist. "Christ, Creature, and Reader: Verbal Devotion in The Book of Margery Kempe." *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 41, no. 1 (2015): 1-23. Nadeane Trowse. "The Exclusionary Potential of Genre: Margery Kempe’s Transgressive Search for a Deniable Pulpit." *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre: Strategies for Stability and Change*. Ed. Richard M. Coe, Lorelei Lingard, and Tatiana Teslenko. (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2002.) 341–353

<sup>148</sup> Joel Fredell. "Margery Kempe: Spectacle and Spiritual Governance." *Philological Quarterly* 75 (1996): 132-41 suggests Margery as a careful construction shared by both Kempe and her scribe. S.B. Fanous, "Biblical and Hagiographical imitation in the Book of Margery Kempe", Oxford, diss., (1998)., suggests that we should regard the second scribe as the author of the *Book*. Nicholas Watson, "The Making of The Book of Margery Kempe," in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 395–434; and Felicity Riddy, "Text and Self in The Book of Margery Kempe," *ibid.*, 435–53 both see it as a collaboration. While Riddy suggests disentangling these aspects isn’t fruitful, Watson, by contrast, tries to separate which elements which author was responsible for and finally suggests that the primary author is clearly Kempe.

degree of artifice that at times seems to verge on the fictional.<sup>149</sup> This approach has proved productive and indeed many scholars have adopted this nomenclature in order to mark the separation between author and character.<sup>150</sup> The perspective insists on Margery Kempe's authorship and denies the premise that she composed the *Book* so naively as to deny the text any sort of literary technique or merit.<sup>151</sup> Such self-fashioning— ordering scenes, what to include or leave out, how such details are recalled— occurs in nearly any autobiography or biography. Events are structured and recalled with a given agenda to reflect a particular, subjective point of view without ultimately sacrificing the reality of the events or the potential historical value of the narrative. Nevertheless, such a text is *produced*, and in the case of the *Book of Margery Kempe*, produced with a purpose in mind. As both Sarah Salih and Carol Meale have suggested, “the *Book* is aware of the possibility of canonization” and that it “constructs a determined performance of sanctity.”<sup>152</sup> The text recounts Margery's meetings with important members of the church, validates her beliefs and her orthodoxy, and documents her performance of miracles. Richard Kieckhefer rightly calls it an autohagiography.<sup>153</sup> However, if the *Book* is in any major sense a bid for canonization, then the detailed recounting of the slander and opposition that Margery faces seems like an act of self-sabotage. Why would such

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<sup>149</sup>Lynn Staley. *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

<sup>150</sup> Although I do not use this particular distinction, I do note its importance.

<sup>151</sup> For instance, Antony Goodman, “The Piety of John Brunham's Daughter of Lynn” in *Medieval Women* ed. Derek Baker, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1978) 347– 59.

<sup>152</sup> Meale, “Deed Bok,” 64. Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 174. Katherine J. Lewis discusses the reason why Kempe's bid for canonization may not have been successful, noting that at this point in time, the Church was mostly canonizing men, particularly high-status martyr saints, martyred boys or miracle-working parish priests. Lewis, “Margery Kempe and Saint Making in Later Medieval England.” In *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. John Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2004,) 195-216.

<sup>153</sup> *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth Century Saints and their Religious Milieu*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6.



scenes be included, let alone given such primacy in the text, if they ultimately give voice to her detractors?

I suggest that a generic approach to the use of hagiography in this text provides an answer and indeed accounts for the primacy that slander takes in the narrative.

Margery Kempe's exposure to hagiography would have been widespread; she would have been exposed to it in the books she encountered, in the sermons she heard, in the churches she visited, and in the plays she attended. Sarah Salih notes, for instance, that Margery's familiarity with virgin martyr legends would "require no particular effort or unusual piety on her part."<sup>154</sup> She adds that Mirk's *Festial* suggests reading a saint's legend on their feast day and that Margery's own local church was dedicated to St. Margaret and all virgin saints.<sup>155</sup> Such routine exposure resembles that of the most common genres in our own mass culture, such as the romance, the sports biography, the fantasy novel, the sci-fi blockbuster. Our understanding of these goes beyond simply being able to cite names (*Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, et cetera) but an immediate understanding of the attitudes, expectations, and typical narrative and motifs that each genre employs. One might say modern mass culture produces a fantasy *mode of thinking*: dragons occur unquestionably; prophecies come true; feudalism functions in a more clear and coherent way than it may have ever actually worked in the Middle Ages. We would recoil at the appearance of a lightsaber (but not a flaming sword) or spaceship, even if such things were explained within the course of the narrative. In this chapter, I want to suggest that Margery Kempe was able to employ a hagiographic mode of thinking in her text, that her alignments with this genre go deeper than simple imitations of particular

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<sup>154</sup> Salih, *Virginité*, 197.

<sup>155</sup> Salih, *Virginité*, 197.

saints, and that the slander plays a key role in this particular mode of thinking. Although hagiography is clearly not the only genre at play in Margery's text, it does provide a primary intertext. By drawing on these elements, the resistance she faces from those around her instead becomes authorizing, a method of non-fatal martyrdom upon which Margery stakes her claim of sainthood.

I make this argument firstly by acknowledging the *Book's* explicit debt to hagiography— both Margery Kempe and Christ reference saints; important events are dated by their saint's day. I follow up on the many comparisons she draws between herself and Bridget of Sweden, as well as the various kinds of *imitatio* that she engages in. These elements are only Margery's entry into the hagiographic genre. They allow her to gain access to the other hagiographic motifs that follow: the ability to recreate family ties and locate herself in community of the faithful and to frame her relationship to Christ and others, whether through the maternal metaphors she often employs with her confessors or the 'weird family' she creates with Christ and the Virgin Mary, and which derives heavily from hagiography. Finally, Margery Kempe also draws on a particular aspect of hagiography: the *passio* or martyrdom narrative's ability to construct multiple layers of reality— a harrowing conversation with a local magistrate becoming a titanic conflict between good and evil— in order to enact her own form of martyrdom. The 'sclandre' that she routinely faces from her neighbors, traveling companions and even members of the church become equivalent to the persecution faced by virgin martyrs, an idea perhaps best encapsulated by her parable of the man subject to slander. This layering effect (which she terms her 'bodily eye' and her 'ghostly eye') solidifies into the primary

way Margery's experiences saintliness. It allows her to conflate sacred and contemporary time in her visions and turn instances of everyday life into inspiration for salvific tears.

### Miracles, Margery, Mary

Margery's visions abound with allusions to saints and she imitates and competes with many of them. Timea Szell for instance, notes Margery's affiliations with multiple categories of women saints, including widows, virgin martyrs, penitent prostitutes and virgin transvestites.<sup>156</sup> Julia Bolton Holloway and Sarah Salih also connect her to specific saints, including St. Bridget, St. Margaret, St. Katherine, St. Barbara and even St. Paul.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, saints' days figure prominently in the text, often surfacing at thematically relevant moments. Perhaps the most obvious moment is Mary Magdalene's feast day, as the second scribe claims to have written his prologue "the day next after Mary Maudelyn." While this allusion links Margery to the penitent saint in an acceptable way, scholars have also noted a more troubling association with St. Margaret's feast day.

During the episode during which Margery is tempted with lechery,

yt fel so that a man which sche lovyyd wel seyde onto hir on Seynt Margaretys  
Evyn before evynsong that for anythyng he wold ly be hir and have hys lust of  
hys body & sche shuld not wythstond hym....At the last thorw inoportunyte of  
temptacyon and lakkyng of dyscrecyon sche was ovyrcomyn and consentyd in hir  
mend...and he seyde he ne wold for al the good in teh world. (29)

St. Margaret of Antioch, of course, seems like an unlikely candidate for a bout of lechery.

A virgin martyr, she is known for refusing the advances of the Roman prefect Olibrius.

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<sup>156</sup> *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth Century Saints and their Religious Milieu*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6. Timea Szell. "From Woe to Weal and Weal to Woe: Notes on the Structure of *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. S. J. McEntire (New York: Garland Press, 1992) 84.

<sup>157</sup> Holloway, "Bride." Salih, *Virginity*, 193-196

The thematics of sex and resistance from her tale apply to Margery's life in the same ways that John inverts the life of St. Cecilia on the road from York. Gayle Margherita traces the mutation of these hagiographic motifs in some detail, noting that the man's initial attentions, like Olibrius', are unwanted and escalate into threats of rape.<sup>158</sup> Afterwards, however, Margery consents in her mind and pursues the affair, only to be rejected by the man in turn. Both players here seem to alternately pick up the roles of Olibrius and Margaret.

The explicit references to the saints are perhaps mostly easily noticed in her visions. Beyond the Virgin Mary and various persons of the Trinity, Margery also recounts that "sumtyme Seynt Petyr, sumtyme Seynt Powyl, sumtym Seynt Kateryn, er what seynt in hevyn sche had devocynon to aperyd to hir sowle" (51). The same scene also contains a brief reference to St. Bridget's *Liber Celestis*. Christ places her among the saintly chorus as well, reassuring her of his affection despite her married state (and pregnancy, in that particular scene). He draws her attention to the many other penitent saints in Heaven, noting that she should "have mend, dowtyr, what Mary Mawdelyn was, Mary Eypcyan, Seynt Powyl and many other seyntys" (59). He assures her also that all of his saints—specifically naming Katherine, Margaret and Mary Magdalene again—will come to collect her at the moment of her death. Katherine, Margaret, and Mary Magdalene prove to be particular favorites elsewhere in the text, invoked by name throughout.<sup>159</sup> These invocations and *imitatio* of various saints reveals another moment

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<sup>158</sup> Gayle Margherita, *The Romance of Origins*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) 32-33

<sup>159</sup> Concerning Mary Magdalene in particular, see Eberly, Susan. "Margery Kempe, St. Mary Magdalene, and Patterns of Contemplation." *Downside Review* 107(1989): 209-23. "The Mendicant Margery: Mary Magdalene, Margery Kempe, and the Late Medieval Penitential Sermon." *Mystics Quarterly* 35.3-4 (2009): 1-29.

where Margery's dual subscription to contemplative and hagiographic tradition surfaces. While *imitatio* in many senses is a contemplative topos, we must not forget that Margery is both subject and author, saint and hagiographer. In the same way that Walter Daniel borrows freely from Scripture to compose his *Vita Aelredi* or other hagiographers borrow phrases, episodes and miracles from previous works in order to make evident their subject's sanctity, Margery writes herself as following hagiographic models in same breath that she engages in contemplative *imitatio*.

In Margery's visions in the Holy Land, in fact, she often seems to adopt the position of Mary Magdalene within apostolic narrative, including the moment where Mary bears witness to the resurrection. Margery first has a vision where she sits grieving with the Virgin Mary for the three days Christ lies dead. Afterwards, her vision shifts to Mary Magdalene in telling ways:

And anon aftyr the creatur was in hir comtemplacyon wyth Mary Mawdelyn, mornyng and sekyng owr Lord at the grave, and herd and sey how owr Lord Jhesu Crist aperyd to hir in lekenes of a gardener...Owr Lord seyde to hir, "Towche me not." Than the creatur thowt that Mary Mawdelyn seyde to owr Lord, "A, Lord, I se wel ye wil not that I be so homly wyth yow as I have ben afor," and mad hevycher...And than the creatur thowt that Mary went forth wyth gret joye, and that was gret mervyl to hir that Mary enjoyid, for yyf owr Lord had seyde to hir as he dede to Mary, hir thowt sche coud nevyr a ben mery. That was whan sche wolde a kysyd his feet, and he seyde, "Towche me not." (187-188)

At the beginning, the sentence has an unclear modifier. Margery is in her contemplation with Mary Magdalene, but the modifier floats, making it unclear if Margery, Mary or both women are seeking Christ at his grave. Margery is the subject of the sentence after all. The apostle's role is relegated to prepositional phrases throughout. Even the majority of Mary's responses— examples of which are included above— are preempted by "than

the creatur thowt that,” once again grammatically subordinating Mary to Margery’s vision. In many ways, Margery and Mary blur together.

In fact, the two women become so syntactically intertwined that Margery exceeds Mary Magdalene in proximity to Christ. For instance, Mary Magdalene regrets that she may not touch Christ as she did previously, but swiftly regains her cheer after the rejection. By contrast, Margery is devastated by the idea that Christ would refuse to let her touch him. She notes she would begin to weep any time this episode was recounted. Dinshaw claims this is the damning moment, establishing Margery’s saintliness as ultimately too beholden to physicality.<sup>160</sup> Such an interpretation is possible; after all, this is a woman so obstreperous that even the apostles in her own visions tell her to be quiet (168). However, given Margery’s often competitive *imitatio* of saints such as Bridget, she may actually be using this moment to establish her primacy over even Mary Magdalene. Audrey Walton argues that Margery’s resistance and sadness in face of the *noli me tangere* actually derives from the Magdalene tradition as expressed by preaching friars, rather than revealing her ultimate inability to transcend the physical. In this case, the friars interpreted the *noli me tangere* as a reminder of the degree of affective privilege granted to Mary Magdalene.<sup>161</sup> If we accept Walton’s argument then Margery’s involvement in this scene of putative rejection becomes an assertion of her particular status in Christ’s eyes. Mary, after all, mourns that she cannot be as “homly” with Christ as she once was. Her word choice is telling: it harkens back to chapter 36 of the *Book* where Christ insists to Margery that “most I nedys be homly with the and lyn in bed with

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<sup>160</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Communities and Sexualities, Pre- and Post-modern*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 162-163

<sup>161</sup> Audrey Walton. "The Mendicant Margery: Margery Kempe, Mary Magdalene, and the Noli Me Tangere." *Mystics Quarterly* 35, no. 3/4 (2009): 1-29.

the.” (32) Whether Margery could bear Christ’s refusal or not is irrelevant; he’s unwilling to give her up. Still, this moment alone is insufficient to explain the prevalence of Mary Magdalene in the text. She is one of the saints invoked most often; she must serve more than one purpose. Beyond simply allowing Margery Kempe to flaunt her connection to Christ, aligning herself with Mary Magdalene as well as St. Katherine gives Margery license to “talk back” to clerical authorities, imitating the courtroom trials of St. Katherine or the apostolic witnessing of Mary Magdalene, whose “habit of apostolic assertions brought into conflict with the figure of St. Peter” in some accounts, including late medieval drama.<sup>162</sup>

However, this depiction of Mary Magdalene is not the only moment of *imitatio*, competitive or otherwise. Margery also creates echoes of St. Margaret in her text. After all, Margery shares a name with the saint; Margery’s parish church is named for her as well and Salih notes that “Margery, veteran of many childbirths whose own miracles include curing a woman of postnatal madness” would be an appropriate follower of St. Margaret, patron saint of childbirth.<sup>163</sup> Such invocations are prevalent throughout the book as Margery’s visions of Christ elevate her to not only equality with some saints (“I love the as wel” as Mary Magdalene is only one example of many) but also allows her to exceed others (169). This “competitive *imitatio*” surfaces most often with (but is not limited to) St. Bridget of Sweden.<sup>164</sup> Bridget, of course, resembled Margery in many ways; she, Margery, and Julian of Norwich might fit into a wider trend of affective piety

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<sup>162</sup> Walton, “Mendicant,” 13

<sup>163</sup> Salih, “Versions,” 197

<sup>164</sup> Wilson, Janet. “Communities of Dissent: The Secular and Ecclesiastical Communities of Margery Kempe’s Book.”

In Watt, 155–85. 161. Jessica Rosenfeld argues that such competition is in fact key to understanding Kempe’s style of devotion. Jessica Rosenfeld (2014) *Envy and Exemplarity in The Book of Margery Kempe*, Exemplary, 26:1, 105-121.

as evidenced by their vivid descriptions of Christ's crucifixion.<sup>165</sup> Like Margery, Bridget was married and had children. She only truly began her holy vocation after the death of her husband, despite having visions for the majority of her life. She founded an order of nuns during her lifetime and was canonized in 1391. Her books enjoyed great popularity in England: there are two full extant manuscripts of the *Liber Celestis* in Middle English, along with many extracts and selections. Margery herself even mentions having the text read to her.

Even this brief discussion of Bridget's biography makes it clear how Bridget may have functioned as a useful model to validate Margery's own sanctity. However, Margery Kempe swiftly makes clear how her saintliness exceeds Bridget's. In chapter 17, Margery lists the books she has had read to her in order to insist on the uniqueness and superiority of her visions: "sumtyme alle thre Personys in Trinite and o substawns in Godhede dalyid to her sowle...so excellently that she herd nevyr Boke, neythyr Hiltons boke, ne Bridis boke, ne *Stimulus Amoris*, ne *Incendium Amoris*.." Her visions transcend anything described by Bridget. Margery Kempe gestures to Bridget's saintliness—and indeed even seems to authorize it—only to use such a move to bolster her own account on other occasions as well. As Margery attends mass, she witnesses the sacrament shaking and flickering "as a dowe flekeryth wyth hir wengys." The chalice of sacramental wine moves so violently it might fall out of the priest's hands. When she looks to see it again, Christ explains

"Thow schalt no mor sen it in this maner, therfor thank God that thou hast seyn. My dowtyr, Bryde say me nevyr in this wyse...Ther schal be an erdene, tel it whom thou wylt in the name of Jhesu. For I telle the forsothe rygh as I spak to Seynt Bryde ryte so I speke to the, dowtyr, and I telle the trewly it is trew every

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<sup>165</sup> Liam Peter Temple (2016) Returning the English "Mystics" to their Medieval Milieu: Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe and Bridget of Sweden, *Women's Writing*, 23:2 141-158.



word that is wretyn in Brides boke, and be the it schal be knowyn for very trewth” (57-58).

In this passage, Margery Kempe of course claims a miracle for herself by predicting an earthquake will strike King’s Lynn, but also makes two additional moves. Firstly, she authorizes St. Bridget; Christ specifically insists on the authority and correctness of the Swedish saint’s text. Secondly, she establishes herself as a herald for Bridget: The *Liber Celestis* shall be known for “very trewth” through Margery’s intervention. While such a gesture originally seems to subordinate Margery to Bridget, we must also remember Christ begins this exchange by insisting that Bridget had never seen the Eucharist behave in such a way. While validating Bridget’s book and setting herself up as her emissary, Margery still establishes herself in a more privileged position to Christ.

Ultimately, Margery’s use of hagiography is multivalent. Beyond her imitating (and surpassing) Bridget and Mary Magdalene and invoking Katherine and Margaret, scholars have compared her to other maternal and harlot saints as well. In her book, *Authority and the Female Body*, Liz Herbert McAvoy sees the maternal element of Margery Kempe’s text as critical. She connects Margery to Elizabeth of Hungary as well as Bridget of Sweden, suggesting that “the maternal saint provided women with a role model which was infinitely more attainable than virgin motherhood.”<sup>166</sup> Ultimately, she sees Margery as having transformed her maternal instincts from biological to spiritual, though of course, McAvoy notes that the *Book* “points towards an ongoing dichotomy in her life concerning commitment to her family.”<sup>167</sup> Margery never quite severs ties with

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<sup>166</sup> Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*, (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 44.

<sup>167</sup> McAvoy, *Authority*, 47. Interestingly, there is another vein of scholarship which suggests this role is downplayed in the *Book*, noted by scholars such as Clarissa Atkinson in *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, UP. 1983). However, Atkinson focuses on

her family in the same way that Elizabeth and Bridget do. Nevertheless, McAvoy also sees Margery as being closely aligned with the “harlot saints,” who include Mary Magdalene, Mary of Egypt, and Pelagia. McAvoy notes the similarity of Margery’s story to their narratives; in both, an initial period of sinfulness gives way to a moment of conversion and subsequent repentance and contrition. She particularly references Margery’s “characteristically dramatic and hyperbolic” behavior and links it to Mary of Egypt’s account of tearing at her hair and beating her breast upon realizing her own sinfulness.<sup>168</sup> Additionally, her hair shirt (both bodily and spiritual) further connects her to Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalene.

Maternal saint, harlot saint, virgin martyr— Margery Kempe has been likened to nearly all possible saintly categories. Timea Szell, for her part, refuses to commit to any one category, noting that “to a certain degree, Margery Kempe fits all four conventional hagiographic categories of female saints,” which she lists as the chastely married or widowed woman, the virgin martyr, the reformed prostitute, and the transvestite saint.<sup>169</sup> Naoe Yoshikawa makes a similar gesture, though her categories are different; virgin martyr and repentant sinner occur again, but she also lists apostolic saints as a category, including Mary Magdalene, Peter, and Paul. This plethora of options, each with evidence to support the categorization, may have led Catherine Sanok to conclude “if Margery’s *imitatio* of traditional saints is more extensive than Christina of Markyate’s, it is also, paradoxically, more difficult to identify as such.”<sup>170</sup> Instead of a single affiliation, Sanok

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Margery’s experiences of motherhood and her actual children, whereas these scholars seem more interested in how the maternal metaphor allows Kempe to make a claim for saintliness.

<sup>168</sup> McAvoy, “Body,” 88

<sup>169</sup> Szell, “Weal” 83

<sup>170</sup> Catherine Sanok. *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints’ Lives in Late Medieval England*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.)122

suggests that Margery performs “a series of temporary affiliations with several traditional saints, which together signal the *Book’s* deep engagement with vernacular legends.”<sup>171</sup> I agree with Sanok in this regard. With so many references to so many different saints, trying to argue that Margery Kempe writes (or lives) one kind of *imitatio* is ultimately self-defeating. Instead, I would suggest that she is aware of saintliness as a genre with a range of generic possibilities and tropes, drawing on them as necessary in order to enact this autohagiography both in life and on the page.

### Community of the Faithful

Of the many hagiographic impulses that Margery Kempe draws upon, her ability to construct a spiritual lineage— not only in a sense of family but also in framing herself and her tale as belonging to a community of saints—has drawn the most attention. Such behavior is frequently seen in other hagiographies. For instance, St. Margaret enters into saintly genealogy by reading about the martyrdoms of St. Lawrence and St. Stephen and then names her own executioner ‘brother,’ Margery Kempe also creates a textual genealogy and community for herself. She begins this process by framing her text as an acceptable entry into the community of the faithful. Her two scribes build this framework first, possibly under her guidance. Later on, the annotators of the *Book* itself added marginalia to reinforce and frame such opinions, showing that they too saw and recognized the text as a religious work. Arguably, even Margery’s own miracles of translation work to ensure this textual acceptance. She additionally constructs a spiritual family in her visions, framing herself as mother, sister, daughter, and lover to Christ (and

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<sup>171</sup> Sanok, *Historical* 125

sometimes the Godhead) as well as a servant and friend to Anne and Mary. Such rewriting has drawn critical attention, but is not as unusual as many scholars have believed. Margery herself offers a biblical precedent for the idea and rewriting biological family into a spiritual one is a common aspect of hagiography. We even witness such transformations outside Margery's visions as well as she plays a maternal role to her various confessors and benefactors.

Firstly, the *Book's* two prefaces work to frame her as belonging to this holy community. Both texts relate the broad contents of the *Book*, the second scribe's eventual agreement to write the text, and his miraculous understanding of the badly written prior text. The first preface (upon which I intend to focus) categorizes the text as a "short tretys and a comfortabyl," intended to provide both teaching and solace about how a "synful caytyf" finds redemption. (17) The text then works to authorize itself. Margery recounts that she spoke with "many worshepful clerkys, both archebyssshopys and bysshoppys, doctowrs of dyvynyte and bachelers also. Sche spak also wyth many ankrys," all of whom verified and validated her visions. (18) Moreover, it is not until God himself orders her to write down her visions that Margery seeks out a scribe. Such framing sets Margery in an expected category and constrains a work that may seem dangerous within careful scribal validation and limits. It links her to the tradition of female sacred biography, in which the works and lives of women like Christina of Markyate, Mary d'Oignes and Bridget of Sweden were set down and prefaced by male scribes. Indeed, Margery's scribe makes this connection explicit. In chapter 62, he recounts his initial reluctance to believe Margery's holiness until he "red of a woman clepyd Marie de Oegines" and her own gift of tears, an account which reconciled him to Margery's excessive displays of devotion.

Liam Peter Temple notes that the *Book* was prepared for “wider readership,” and that even if such readership did not necessarily occur, “it is important to consider the process [it] underwent in expectation of such.”<sup>172</sup> Clerical scribes bolstered her legitimacy and helped invalidate any claims of heresy. In fact, this framing strikes Lynn Staley as so important that she suggests the scribes may not have even existed in the first place and they instead function as an “elaborate fiction that joins Margery to communal values by establishing a series of shared expectations.”<sup>173</sup> All saints have *vitas*, but female saints, especially, have scribes, an expectation of which Margery Kempe would have been very aware.

Other moments in the text, such as book lists and marginal notes, work to make Margery resemble a conventional holy woman functioning within the contemplative tradition. She lists books that she has had read to her, each one carefully calibrated to prove membership in a certain textual community: Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*, St. Bridget’s *Liber Celestis*, Richard Rolle’s *Incendium Amoris* and the *Stimulus Amoris*. These books align her not only with the contemplative tradition of affective piety—a genre which is also clearly present within the text—but also with Bridget herself. Jacqueline Jenkins, for instance, argues these books functioned as “a kind of shorthand” establishing a clerically orthodox and religiously devout identity in the reader.<sup>174</sup> In the paratext, marginal notes show the four annotators interpreting Margery’s actions.

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<sup>172</sup>Temple, “Mystics”, 150.

<sup>173</sup> Lynn Staley. Introduction to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Press, 1996. See also Staley’s first chapter of *Dissenting Fictions* and “The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe.” *Speculum* 66, no. 4 (1991): 820-38.

<sup>174</sup>Jacqueline Jenkins, “Reading and *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” In *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Katherine J. Lewis and John H. Arnold, 129-44. Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2004. 122-123

Although most of these emendations correct mistakes or clarify obscure passages, the first and the last of the four annotators also respond to the text's spiritual concerns. The first annotator marks the first instance of weeping as *nota de clamore*, appends *nota de vestura* to a description of Margery's white clothes, and finally adds *nota de confessione* to chapter 32. Corinne Saunders sees explicitly contemplative indications in these notations, suggesting a link to "Richard Rolle's notion of spiritual 'clamor'" and noting that the last annotator clarifies the books that Margery has referenced and labels Margery's religious feelings using the language of contemplation and affective piety, linking her ultimately to not only Richard Rolle but also to Richard Methley and John Norton.<sup>175</sup> While working within the contemplative tradition, the annotators seem "interested in organizing the text by making what might well seem strange familiar to a monastic reader."<sup>176</sup> While the preface worked to establish her in a specific holy tradition, the marginalia not only does that but signals that at the very least an audience of two believed such signaling.

Finally, the two miracles of translation are the most obvious gesture towards textual (and linguistic) community. The first miracle, of course, is the second scribe's ability to read the first scribe's handwriting, which was "neithyr good Englysch ne Dewch, ne the lettyr was not shapyn ne formyd as other letters ben" (19). While these problems are alluded to in the second (earlier) preface, their resolution only occupies a few scant lines. However, in the first (later) preface, the scribe notes that "ther schuld nevyr man redyn it, but it wer special grace" — a miracle. Moreover, he is only able to read the text when Margery brings it to him again, promising to pray to God for him and

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<sup>175</sup> Saunders "Revelations."

<sup>176</sup> Staley, "Introduction" 4

“purchasen hym grace to reden it and wrytyn it also” (20). Later on, it seems as if she intervenes to deliver him from some sort of eye disease as well. The other miracle is Margery’s ability to speak with her German confessor. Margery encounters him in Rome. They first speak through an interpreter— as she speaks no German and he speaks no English— and then agree to pray for the grace to understand each other. After thirteen days of prayer, “he undirstod what sche seyde in Englysch to hym and sche undirstod what that he seyde. And yet he undirstod not Englisch that other men spokyn, thow thei spokyn the same wordys that sche spak” (88). This translation miracle later becomes triangulated into the gift of Latin. While at dinner with her fellowship and confessor, they at first speak only in English, testing whether or not he is able to understand them. After some time of this, Margery

“seyng and wel undirstonding that hir confessowr undirstod not her langage and that was tediows to hym, than, in party to comfort hym and in party er ellys meche mor to prevyn the werk of God, sche telde in hyr owyn langage in Englysch a story of Holy Writte whiche as sche had lernyd of clerkys whil sche was at hom in Inglond, for sche wolde spekyn of no vanyte ne of no fantasiis. Than thei askyd hir confessowr yf he undirstod that sche had seyde and he anon in Latyn telde hem the same wordys that sche seyde befor in Englisch, for he cowde neythyr speke Englisch ne undirstondyn Englisch save only after hir tunge” (101)

In this moment, Margery effectively speaks three different languages simultaneously. After the text notes that the priest cannot understand English, Margery then tells him a Biblical story “in hyr owyn langage in Englysch.” A few scant lines later, the text insists again that the priest could neither speak nor understand English “save only after hir tunge.” Margery in this moment, seems to speak an English the preacher cannot understand, a Latin that she herself does not understand, and the holy intermediary language through which they are able to communicate. This moment is also fraught with

danger; it comes as close to preaching (an act forbidden to women and one which Margery continually denies performing) as Margery ever gets. After all, she recounts Biblical material in Latin through the mouth of a priest. As such, the text is careful to establish Margery's pure motives: she tells the story partly to comfort him and partly to prove the work of God. She insists she tells no vanities or fantasies, but never claims any sort of teaching or didactic purpose. She skirts preaching by claiming different motivations, even as her language and her proxy brings her closer to that point. Christine Cooper-Rompato also suggests that such translation miracles, or xenoglossia, are common both to hagiography and to female English mystics. She notes that "the gifts of vernacular and Latinate xenoglossia form an important part of the vitae of many later medieval holy women," noting that such gifts assure that "language can be translated perfectly, and [with] its claim of Divine approval, xenoglossia became an attractive model for English writers, particularly those exploring women's authority to speak."<sup>177</sup> It is telling, then, that one of Margery's motivations is to prove God's work and provide a public and attestable demonstration of this miracle.

Most importantly, as Lynn Staley has argued, xenoglossia allows Margery to create a larger Christian community, granting her access to new confessors and companions along the road. She notes that "wherever Margery goes, she is able to communicate with those who are receptive," such as her collection of "non-English-speaking followers, a German priest and several Italian women" that gather around

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<sup>177</sup> Christine Cooper Rompato, *The Gift of Tongues: Women's Xenoglossia in the Later Middle Ages*, (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010), 103-104. In an earlier article, she notes some of these many saints, including St. Dominic, Vincent Ferrer, Colette of Corbie and Clare of Montefalco as well as the gendered expectations of such xenoglossia: as vernacular xenoglossia is often used for preaching, women usually receive the gift of Latin for reading or writing. "Miraculous Translation in "The Book of Margery Kempe"." *Studies in Philology* 101, no. 3 (2004): 270-98.



Margery in Rome.<sup>178</sup> Though Staley ascribes Margery's communication to a "truly universal system of signs" rather than xenoglossia, either of these possibilities builds a community that transcends linguistic boundaries. Even the performative religiosity of Margery's visions is comprehensible in a larger Christian community. Weeping, after all, transcends language.

Margery also demonstrates her interest in such a community in the way she envisions her relationship to Christ and to others. For instance, she occupies multiple roles in respect to the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary calls her "dowtyr" but also calls herself Margery's "lady" and "maystres" (60). However, the most notable of these multiplicitous relationships is the one Margery has with Christ. He addresses her as mother, daughter, sister, and lover, insisting at one moment, for instance:

I preve that thow art a very dowtyr to me and a modyr also, a syster, a wyfe, and a spowse, wytnessyng the gospel wher owyr Lord seyth to hys dyscyples 'He that doth the wyl of my Fader in hevyn he is bothyn modyr, brothyr, and syster unto me.' (44).

This passage transcends both gender and familial roles. Christ specifies that Margery is both his wife *and* his spouse, as if these two terms express different roles. Such division suggests that Margery either occupies the role of both husband *and* wife or the role of both a physical and spiritual spouse. Christ's Scriptural reference transcends categories similarly, noting that anyone who follows God will be both mother, brother and sister to him.

Modern scholars have taken note of what Dinshaw notes as this "queer family," a concept which is indeed grounded in Scriptural and hagiographic precedent. Even here, Christ grounds these relationships in Scriptural precedent (149). Margery's relationship

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<sup>178</sup> Staley, *Dissenting*, 153

to him is no more unusual than his relationship to his disciples. Indeed, Margery includes another Scriptural precedent for these familial ties. During her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, she has a vision of the Crucifixion, including when Christ rewrites the Virgin Mary's family: "And than sche herd owr Lord hangyng on the crosse seyn thew wordys to hys modyr, "Woman, se thy sone of Seynt John, the Evangelist" (184). Christ's choice to (anachronistically) specify the title John later holds in the Catholic Church— saint and evangelist— is telling. It suggests that John's translation into Mary's lineage can only occur through divine possibility. Margery accesses this ability in her visions, whether to inscribe herself in domestic relations (as in her visions in chapter 6, wherein she is a servant to both Saint Anne and the Virgin Mary), marital ones (her marriage to the Godhead), or sexual ones (such as Christ's protestation that he "most nedys be homly wyth the and lyn in thi bed with the" and his instructions that Margery should "take me to the as for thi weddyd husbond") (32-33, 92-94). Moreover, Margery imbues these relationships with visceral details, giving them the valences of reality. The notorious "good cawdel" incident is a telling example. After Mary swoons following Christ's burial, Margery "thowt, whan owr Lady was comyn hom and was leyd down on a bed, than sche mad for owr Lady a good cawdel and browt it hir to comfortyn hir" (186). One of the text's emendators had carefully crossed out this section, leading Staley to suggest that the detail "bothered this reader because it seemed to impose too much fictional homeliness on the gospel story."<sup>179</sup> Gail McMurray Gibson links the detail to the *Meditationes*, whose author urged the Franciscan nun to "serve, console and comfort so [Mary] may eat a little," although she too is quick to point out that Margery still goes one

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<sup>179</sup> Staley, "Introduction," 7

step further by mentioning a specific dish.<sup>180</sup> Gibson even notes that the verso of the *Book's* final folio contains fragments of a recipe (listing ground cinnamon and sugar) and speculates that this could indeed have been the recipe for the caudel. Chapter 6's domestic visions contain similar details, such as the "fayr whyte clothys and whyte kerchys" in which Margery wraps first Mary and then Christ. Unlike the maternal metaphor deployed by writers like Bernard de Clairvaux, these details speak to the actuality of maternal experience and of mourning.<sup>181</sup>

Queer, scriptural, both or otherwise, Margery's spiritual family seems to be close and supportive, lending credence to Dinshaw's argument that Margery "shows up the earthly family (as she knows it) for its limitations, especially for its lack of intimacy."<sup>182</sup> Indeed, her spiritual family takes priority over her biological one, to the point that even the Virgin Mary herself questions her judgement. Mary offers Margery the choice of who she will have "felaw wyth" her in Heaven— an implicit offer of salvation to whomever she chooses. Margery asks for her confessor, or ghostly father. Mary herself has to bring up Margery's biological family:

"Why askyst mor hym than thyn owyn fadyr er thin husbond." "For I may nevyr qwyte hym the goodnesse that he hath don to me and the gracyows labowrys that he hath had abowt me in heryng of my confessyon." "I grawt the thi desyr of hym, and yet schal thi fadyr ben savyd, and thi husbond also, and alle thi chylideryn."  
(34)

Although she does achieve this goal in the end, Margery can only occupy herself with her blood family through Mary. Indeed, she never actually asks for their salvation in this moment. Mary grants it as an additional boon.

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<sup>180</sup> Meditations on the Life of Christ, qtd in Gail McMurray Gibson, *Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages*, (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 51.

<sup>181</sup> See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) for a discussion of these metaphors.

<sup>182</sup> Dinshaw, *Medieval*, 149

This apparent lack of concern for her blood relatives leads scholars like Clarissa Atkinson and Anthony Goodman to conclude that Margery downplays the role of the maternal in her text.<sup>183</sup> Others, such as Tara Williams, though, have argued that “motherhood and maternal imagery are prevalent and pervasive in this text,” noting that the book is framed by the birth of one child and Margery’s interactions with her adult son.<sup>184</sup> Hwanhee Park notes similar valences in the text, suggesting that “to sanctify its secular woman protagonist, the *Book* chooses to utilize the domestic ideals of a woman.”<sup>185</sup> Ultimately, Margery’s spiritual family allows her to comport herself as spiritual wife and mother, providing the middle ground that allows Atkinson and Goodman, Park and Williams to draw such differing conclusions from one text. Margery eschews her biological family except when they can be translated into her spiritual one (as her adult son is when he repents). But her priority is her spiritual family, and she conceptualizes these relationships with the lived detail and experience to which she is accustomed.

Margery’s concern with her spiritual family may surface most explicitly in her visions, such as the ones she shares with Christ and the Virgin Mary. However, Margery also tries to enact this behavior— and Margery Kempe to represent it— in her contemporary world as well. Her bodily relationships with others are described in the same familial rhetoric as her visions. For instance, the papal legate “odeyned for this creatur and made her chawnge as sche had ben hys modyr” (72). Such reception is

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<sup>183</sup> Atkinson, *Mystic*. Goodman, “Piety.”

<sup>184</sup> Tara Williams. “Manipulating Mary: Maternal, Sexual, and Textual Authority in The Book of Margery Kempe.” *Modern Philology* 107, no. 4 (2010): 528-55. 533.

<sup>185</sup> Hwanhee Park. “Domestic Ideals and Devotional Authority in The Book of Margery Kempe.” *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 40, no. 1 (2014): 1-19. 2.

common in the text. The German priest as well as the cleric in chapter 40 behave similarly. Furthermore, the desire to form a saintly community even shapes the kind of saints after which Margery models herself. Chapter 39, for instance, is heavily preoccupied with St. Bridget of Sweden. Margery speaks with Bridget's handmaiden, sees the chamber in which St. Bridget died, and visits the stone upon which God had appeared to Bridget and told her when she would die. Although Bridget has certainly surfaced elsewhere in the text, both before and after this moment, a familial connection triggers this intense focalization. A "jentylwoman in Rome" asks Margery to be the godmother of her child. She intends to name child after Saint Bridget, whom the gentlewoman knew in life. The web of community here is tangled—Margery stands as godmother to a child who is the namesake of a saint known to the biological mother in life; Christ previously had spoken to Margery about that very saint, upholding Bridget's words as true, naming Margery as her herald, and insisting that Margery exceeds her in some ways.

Even when it works to place Margery above others in a divine hierarchy, the *Book* is deeply concerned with community.<sup>186</sup> The prefaces, marginalia and book lists in the text work to place her in a recognizable saintly paradigm and genealogy. In her visions, Margery casts herself as occupying nearly every possible role in respect to Christ (and to the Virgin Mary to a lesser extent) and uses Scriptural references to justify these choices. Moreover, these same relationships bear out even in reality as well, as she occupies a maternal role towards many church officials. In this light, it is hardly surprising that as

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<sup>186</sup> This has been noted by scholars such as Lynn Staley, who sees Margery's travels as an attempt to create a wider and Pentecostal Christian community and by Terence Bowers, who suggests that Margery's pilgrimages "tend to give rise to other forms of community." Terence N. Bowers. "Margery Kempe as Traveler." *Studies in Philology* 97, no. 1 (2000): 1-28. 6

early as chapter 3, Margery insists on Heaven's communal nature, noting that it is "fulmery in hevyn." The oft-repeated statement garners resistance from those around her, who insist "Why speke ye of the myrth that is in hevyn; ye know it not, and ye have not be ther no mor than we." (26) The townsfolk seem angry that Margery's attention has been drawn away from her earthly community towards a spiritual one. Their resentment of Margery's attempts to create a spiritual community in fact manifests into another key idea of this text—that the slander and malice that Margery faces is in fact a key aspect of her autohagiography, one that allows her to use this resistance to her sainthood as its very method of authorization.

### The Parable of Slander

The *Book's* preoccupation with slander is one of the elements that distinguishes it from other texts that draw on the contemplative tradition. Both Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, after all, share intensely affective and intimate visions of Christ. Margery's deliberately included book list alone establishes her as moving within that particular intellectual vein—and wishing to be seen as such. However, the intense focus on the opposition that her putative holiness receives deviates from that tradition, an oddity that has not gone unnoticed by scholars. Edwin Craun, Gail McMurray Gibson, and Olga Burakov Mongan all dedicate attention to it; Craun and Gibson ground the *Book's* desire to relate opposition to Margery to various contemporary traditions, although they each have their own ideas as to which. Craun locates it in the penitential tradition of fraternal correction; he focuses particularly on moments where Margery

chastises her interlocutor for their own sins.<sup>187</sup> Gibson and Mongan see the *Book* as enacting a martyrdom by slander, although Gibson is more interested in seeing how Margery's use of saints' lives reflects the incarnational aesthetic present in East Anglia at the time. They draw on depictions of trials and debates in vernacular saints' lives and suggest that Margery uses this verbal abuse to fuel a claim to sainthood.<sup>188</sup> Salih also continues this line of thought, noting "the delicate balance between praise and slander, slander and praise [that] enables Margery to maintain the delicate balance of disruptive sanctity."<sup>189</sup>

The role of slander in Margery Kempe's project is made clear from very beginning. After establishing that the *Book* is a "tretys and confortabyl" and relating how Margery was moved to penitence, the preface immediately discusses how others react to her contrition:

And in schort tyme ower mercyful Lord vysytyd this creatur wyth plentyuows teerys of contricyon day be day, in so mech that sum men seyden sche myghth wepen whan sche wold and slawndered the werk of God. Sche was so usyd to be slawndred and repreved, to be cheden and rebuked of the world for grace and vertu wyth which sche was indued whan sche sufferyd any dysese for the lofe of God and for the grace that God wrowht in hyr. For evyr the mor slawnder and repref that sche sufferyd, the more sche incresyd in grace and in devocyon. (18)

The concept of slander is introduced only a scant thousand lines into the text. This early and privileged position reveals how key slander is to Margery's hagiographic praxis. Indeed, the two seem inextricably intertwined. Margery first begins to be slandered by "sum men" shortly after she receives the tears of contrition. The text reminds the reader

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<sup>187</sup> Craun, Edwin D. "Fama and Pastoral Constraints on Rebuking Sinners: The Book of Margery Kempe." In *Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe*, edited by Fenster Thelma and Smail Daniel Lord, 187-209. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2003.

<sup>188</sup> Gibson, *Devotion*. 47, 64-65.

<sup>189</sup> Salih, *Virginity*, 216. See 212-216 for a more prolonged discussion.

these tears are “the werk of God,” but the antecedent is slippery. Is the work of God the tears or Margery herself? The sentence structure is ambiguous, and thus the slander allows Margery to mark herself as holy. Indeed, this equivalence occurs elsewhere in the text as well. Margery repeats that she was “cheden and rebuked of the world for grace and vertu,” then further notes that such actions only increase her sanctity. (18)

Interestingly, she still lists the powerful church men who support her claim to sanctity, but only *after* this narrative of rebuke. The rebuke takes precedence.

In the narrative itself, concern with slander and reputation even precedes Margery’s conversion. After her attempts to start first a brewery and then a mill flounder, the village gossips about these failures: “than sum seyden sche was acursyd; sum seyden God toke opyn venjawns upon hir; sum seyde on; and sum seyde another. And sum wyse men.... seyde it was hey mercy.” (25). These speakers are depersonalized, represented only by the anaphoric repetition of “sum seyde.” Only those who see the misfortune as God’s work merit a noun or adjective. Otherwise, an entire faceless world arrays itself against Margery.

Mongan notes how this slander draws on devotional literature, although she does not tie it to the earlier, preexisting obsession with scandal in the text. However, Margery uses this pre-existing concern to construct a form of martyrdom for herself. As she notes, all saints “passed be the wey of tribulacion” (43). Such trials are essential: martyred saints prove their faith and win their salvation through their resistance to such tribulation. Margery cannot claim the institutional power or privilege of such confessor saints as abbesses and bishops; preaching is a route forbidden to her and even her “good words” quite often skirt too close to the mark for local ecclesiastical authorities. Because of this



restriction, martyrdom seems her only route to sanctity. However, actually dying frightens Margery:

Than thys creature thowt it was ful mery to be reprevyd for Goddys lofe; it was to hir gret solas and cownfort whan sche was chedyn and fletyn for the lofe of Jhesu...Sche ymagyned in herself what deth sche mygth deyn for Crystys sake. Hyr thowt sche wold a be slayn for Goddys lofe, but dred for the point of deth, and therfor sche ymayned hyrself the most soft deth, as hir thowt, for dred of inpacyens, that was to be bowdyn hyr hed and hir fet to a stoke and hir hed to be smet of wyth a scharp ex for Goddys lofe. Than seyde our Lord in her mend, "I thank the, dowtyr...And yet schal no man sle the, ne fyer bren the, ne watyr drynch the, ne wynd deryn the." (43)

Beyond simply dying for Christ's sake, it is clear from this passage that Margery is considering martyrdom, with all its implied tortures and suffering. While willing to die, she worries about "inpacyens," a word closer to its etymological roots than its modern cousin, connoting an inability to bear adversities or a lack of endurance as opposed to simply an inability to wait. For this reason, she hopes for a 'soft' death. However, the Lord assures her that such sacrifice will not be necessary and further reinforces the concerns about torture; beyond simply asserting that no man will kill Margery, he also reassures her that she is safe from fire, water, and wind. Implicitly though, these concerns become linked with what Margery *is* willing to do and which earns her this excusal from martyrdom. The chapter begins by noting how cheerfully Margery endures chiding and reproof because of her love of Christ and then moves into her discussion of dying without any kind of transition, suggesting that one thought moved seamlessly into other. Margery herself, after all, tells us that *Book* is written as it comes to her, so these two ideas existing scant sentences from each other makes the equation between martyrdom and slander obvious. In fact, Olga Mongan argues the *Book* "transfigures the mundane squabbles between Margery and her detractors into an archetypal structure between the

servant of God and the Devil.”<sup>190</sup> What Mongan describes here parallels the layered structure of a *passio*, in which the verbal trials of saints such as Margaret and Katherine figure not only as secular courtroom dramas but also enact higher struggles between good and evil. While these saints face trials and verbal assault as only part of their martyrdom, it will make up the entirety of Margery’s.

The parable of slander Margery tells to the two monks encapsulates this attitude best. A man had been given a specific penance by his confessor: he should hire men to reprove him for his sins for the span of a year. One day, he came into a crowd:

and stod among hem as I do now among yow, despysyng hym as ye do me, the man lawhyng er smylyng and havynge good game at here wordys. The grettest maystyr of hem seyde to the man, ‘Why lawhyst thu, brothel, and art thou gretly despysed?’ ‘A, ser, I have a gret cause to lawh, for I have many days put sylver owt of my purse and hyred men to chyde me for remysseyon of my syn, and this day I may kepe my sylver in my purs, I thank yow alle.’ (41).

The parallel in this parable is clear. Margery resembles the penitent man, and the crowds play the same role in both moments. Slander and salvation enter into a monetary economy; in order to win salvation, the penitent man must accept the reproof of the crowd. Without voluntary public shaming, he is obligated to pay for it. By laughing at the man (or at Margery), the crowd actually enacts the will of God and helps both heroes achieve their ends.

This economy of slander and salvation quickly becomes part of the narrative structure. Mongan, in fact, has compiled a list of the various charges Margery faces, including hypocrisy, heresy, false prophesizing, and sexual misconduct.<sup>191</sup> Samuel Fanous also notes the focus on moments of verbal abuse, and sees a “high degree of

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<sup>190</sup> Mongan, “Slander,” 34

<sup>191</sup> Olga Burakov Mongan. *Slanderers and saints: The function of slander in The Book of Margery Kempe*. *Philological Quarterly*. 2005. 84. 27-47. 3

selectivity” in Margery’s travels within England. He suggests the text “focus[es] by design on a discrete set of events and circumstances...they are taken up almost exclusively with a series of hostile confrontations (linked by the briefest of clauses) with implacable, obdurate, towering temporal and ecclesiastical authorities.”<sup>192</sup> Indeed, remarkable or supernatural events in the *Book* are often immediately followed with suspicion and slander, as if such reaction adds to Margery’s holiness. When sickness breaks out on Margery’s ship to Venice, Christ promises her that no one will die. While promise proves true, she is abandoned by her countrymen afterwards. The rhetorically telling “some of hem seyden” surfaces as well. Her companions note that they would not travel further with her for a hundred pounds, but the repetition arranges the entire world against her. Shortly after the miracle of xenoglossia, where Margery and the German priest are able to understand each other, the text recalls her weeping and notes that many people believed her to be possessed with an evil spirit or merely pretending. In this moment, the link between the miracle and slander is a reflexive association. As we know from the preface, the *Book* is not told in chronological order, but rather as Margery recalled it or wished it to be told. As opposed to the sickness on the ship, in this moment, slander follows sanctity because Margery chooses to associate the two. Even the healing of the postpartum woman in chapter 75, deemed a “ryth gret myrakyl,” is followed by slander in the next chapter when Margery’s husband John falls and injures himself. Margery’s text seems to have absorbed this equivalence between slander and salvation,

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<sup>192</sup> Samuel Fanous, “Measuring the Pilgrim’s Progress: Internal Emphases in *The Book of Margery Kempe*.” In *Writing Religious Women: Female spiritual and textual practices in late medieval England*. Ed. Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2000. 157-178. 160.

evoking the moments where she faces slander immediately after recounting the most miraculous ones.

Moreover, even the content of the *Book* reflects this idea, as Christ deliberately creates moments for her to be scorned; the white clothes that have produced so much scholarly ink are a clear example.<sup>193</sup> When originally told by Christ that she should “ben arayed after my wyl,” in white, Margery protests that if she dresses differently than other chaste women, “I drede that peply wyl slawndyr me. Thei wyl sey I am an ypocryt and wondryn upon me.’ ‘Ya, dowtyr, the more wondryng that thou hast for my love, the more thou plesyst me’” Christ responds (45). He reiterates the equation in chapter 32 as well—the more slander and reproof Margery faces, the more he loves her (87). The implicit equivalence between reproof and holiness in the parable of slander is now made explicit and placed in the mouth of God. Without recourse to the institutional support that might allow her to follow other possible routes to saintliness as a bishop or abbess might, Margery instead suffers through slander in the ways a virgin martyr might or indeed as Christ suffers through the Crucifixion. The former, of course, has other hagiographic precedent; the latter is an analogy from Margery’s visions. Christ notes “And herby mayst thou knowyn that I suffyr many schrewyd wordys, for I have oftyntymes seyde to the that I schuld be newe crucifyed in the be schrewyd words,” after Margery has been chided by a priest (90). It is through Margery’s own trials (“herby”) that Christ’s own suffering is made known, in an *imitatio Christi* so intense Christ may be enacting an imitation of Margery instead. Christ suffers shrewd words because Margery does and

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<sup>193</sup> See for further discussion of the clothes, “‘Why Gost Thou in White?’ A Non-Question Reconsidered as a Genuine Request for Information,” *Papers on Language and Literature*, 48.1 (2012): 101-108 and Salih, *Virginity*, 217.

characterizes them as a new crucifixion “in the,” merging his passion with the verbal abuse that Margery faces. Later, he links this reproof to martyrdom as well, noting that “Dowtyr, it is mor plesyn unto me that thu suffyr despitys and scornys, schamys and reprevys, wrongys and diseys than yif thin hed wer smet of thre tymes on the day every day in sevyn yer.” (131) Additionally, Mongan notes that Margery is not the only would-be saint to have faced such backlash, noting “in depicting Margery as a long-suffering victim of falsehoods, the *Book* may be taking its cues from popular medieval saints’ lives,” such as St. Elizabeth of Hungary, who is warned in her Revelations to avoid strife and backbiting.<sup>194</sup> Even the Virgin Mary faces malicious rumor in cycle dramas, where questions arise about her chastity and the nature of Jesus’ parentage.<sup>195</sup>

Ultimately, Margery’s confrontations with her accusers draws on the transformative logic of the *passio*. Whereas John’s hold on hagiography on the road to York was slippery, figuring himself both as Cecilia and Valerian at different moments, Margery’s grasp is firm; her role is clear. Those who would stand against her figure as the pagan tyrant of the *passio*; Margery stands as the saint. Indeed, the text’s allusions to Saint Katherine make it clear that this impulse is hagiographic. In Leicester, Margery’s outbursts in a church cause the mayor to level accusations at her. He first asks where she came from and whose daughter she was before refuting her answer, claiming “Seynt Kateryn telde what kynred sche cam of and yet are ye not lyche, for thu art a fals strumpet, a fals loller, and a fals deceyver of the pepyl, and therfor I schal have the in preson” (113-114). According to Salih, Katherine functions as Margery’s inspiration in

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<sup>194</sup> Mongan, “Slander” 33

<sup>195</sup> Play 13 of the York Cycle, “Joseph’s Troubles About Mary” and the doubting midwife in the Chester and N-Town plays provide relevant examples.

these court scenes; the opposition between her accusers' learned authority and Margery's divinely inspired answers specifically evoke the *South English Legendary*.<sup>196</sup> Mongan notes similar echoes, particularly since Margery describes Margery's answers as given "redily" or 'reasonably,' two Catherinian formulas."<sup>197</sup> Indeed, the Mayor of Leicester has paradoxically argued that Margery is like to Katherine by the very effort of recognizing her *imitatio* in an attempt to reject it. Nor is this the only moment where opposition to Margery seems demonic. During the feast in Rome where the German priest's ability to understand Margery is questioned, the text suggests that "the slanderous words [her detractors] rehearse at the feast do not originate with them...Rather, they are the work of the Devil, the father of all lies and the archenemy of God himself."<sup>198</sup> Ultimately, by drawing on the *passio*'s ability to layer saintly trials on top of the slander that Margery has pervasively faced, the verbal abuse clergy and countrymen level at her becomes transfigured into a method of salvation and martyrdom.

### The Sight of Her Soul

Slander becomes a method of achieving saintliness because Margery can operate on both a mundane and spiritual level at once. The harsh rebukes that she faces from clergy, friends and family become transmuted into a form of martyrdom, allowing her to enact a form of hagiography in face of local opposition. Indeed, this ability to work on two levels at once—both the mundane and the spiritual pervades Margery's relationship

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<sup>196</sup> Salih, *Virginity*, 197. See also Katherine J. Lewis' argument that Margery models herself on Katherine as well as the Empress, another married saint. *The Cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2000, 242-245.

<sup>197</sup> Walton, "Mendicant," 12

<sup>198</sup> Mongan, "Slander" 37

to her family as well— where biological family can become spiritual family and she asks for salvation first for her confessor, or holy father, before being granted the same for her biological children. Finally, the same double exists in her visions. Margery's visions work to transform reality into something with spiritual significance. Ordinary events— such as a child in the street—become imbued with spiritual meaning and operate on two levels at once: both English child and image of Christ.

Often, these doublings cause her to weep at seemingly inexplicable moments. For instance, the text notes that “sumtyme, whan sche saw the crucifyx, er yf sche sey a man had a wownde er a best whethyr it wer, er yyf a man bett a childe befor hir er smet an hors er another best wyth a whippe, yyf sche myth sen er heryn it, hir thowt she sche saw owyr Lord be betyn er wowndyd lyk as sche saw in the man er in the best.” (76) The list seems reasonable at first; Margery weeps when she sees a crucifix. This seems a fairly obvious invocation of Christ's passion and thus a fairly self-explanatory reason for a vocal would-be saint to wail. However, the text's anaphoric structure creates a series of equivalencies. The man with a wound, the child, horse or other animal being beaten— these all become interchangeable with the story of Christ's passion or the image of the crucifix. The thematic resonance they share— images, acts, or stories of violence— is enough to activate a layering effect between them. In the same way that the *passio* layers the struggle between God and the Devil onto a mundane trial, Margery shuttles between mundane violence and Christ being scourged before the Crucifixion.

As the text progresses, Margery also begins to formulate her vocabulary for discussing these differing ways of seeing, eventually naming them as two distinct functions: “sche had so very contemplacyon in the sygth of hir sowel as yf Crist had

hangyn befor hir bodily eye in his manhode.” (77) The sight of her soul (which she also terms her “ghostly eye” elsewhere) functions in simile to her bodily eye. One feeds into the other; images seen in reality (a beaten horse) can trigger images in her spiritual sight (Christ being scourged) and vice-versa. These two senses become methods of triangulating this movement between times and realities. It allows her to feel the events of the sacred past as viscerally as if they were truly occurring again, so that so Margery feels justified defending her tears. No one faults a person for weeping for the lost friend, why should she be faulted for weeping at the loss of the most perfect friend of all?

In Rome, Margery’s vision shuttling between mundane and sacred becomes prevalent. She weeps at the sight of children in the street, seeing them as the Christ-child. Attractive men merit similar attention; they evoke the image of Christ as an adult. As she weeps at a mass, the priest reproves her for her behavior, insisting that “Damsel, Jhesu is ded long sithyn.” Her response is telling: “Sir, hys deth is as fresch to me as he had deyed this same day, and so me thynkyth i t awt to be to yow and to all Cristen pepil” (145). In this moment, Margery acts in sacred time. The liturgical cycle enacts and re-enacts Biblical narrative even as secular time moves forward in a linear fashion. A priest has given mass that speaks of Christ’s Passion; it *has* in fact been enacted the same day. Christ has died both “long sithyn” and “this same day.” In many ways, this is emblematic of Margery Kempe’s approach to sanctity. The answer has always been both.

Indeed, The *Book* itself can be seen as multiplicitous, drawing on both hagiography and contemplative tradition to make an argument for Margery’s holiness. Her book list, her intimate and affective visions and indeed even the paratext of the manuscript itself ties her to the contemplative tradition, while at the same time, she uses a



potentially contemplative (and absolutely competitive) *imitatio* to connect herself to various saints. Even then, this *imitatio* is multiplicitous— she imitates Mary Magdalene, Bridget of Sweden, Margaret of Antioch, Katherine of Alexandria, the Virgin Mary, and of course, Christ himself. These imitations allow Margery access to hagiographic motifs, themes and structural components. She rewrites family ties to bind her into a community of the faithful and the holy and to frame her relationship to Christ and others. She is wife, mother, sister, daughter and lover to Christ, friend and servant to the Virgin Mary and St. Anne, mother to numerous priests and confessors as well as to her own repented son. Her family redoubles upon itself.

Even the persecution she faces from those around her functions in multiple ways, allowing her access to another register of holiness. The *passio*'s ability to construct multiple layers of reality— a harrowing conversation with a local magistrate becoming a titanic conflict between good and evil— lets Margery enact her own form of martyrdom. The 'sclandre' that she routinely faces from her neighbors, traveling companions and even members of the church become equivalent to the persecution faced by the virgin martyrs, an idea perhaps best encapsulated by her parable of the man subject to slander. Finally, this layering effect (which she terms her bodily eye and her ghostly eye) solidifies into the primary way Margery's experiences saintliness. It allows her to conflate sacred and contemporary time and turn instances of everyday life into inspiration for salvific— and perhaps excessive tears. Her concluding prayer lasts nearly two hundred and fifty lines, after all. She prays for those put off by her crying. She prays for the Pope and his archbishops, for all men and women of religion, for rich men and for the King of England, "for all my chylderyn, gostly and bodily" (232). She prays for

bedridden men and women, for those who are in prison, for those in purgatory and for lepers. The prayer is excessive, multiplicitous, invoking both secular and sacred concerns. When faced with a concern about who to pray for, when to cry, which saint to imitate, Margery Kempe's response has always been resoundingly: yes, both, and all.

## Chapter 4: “Al ne is nat gospel”: Genre and Misreading in “The Legend of Good Women”

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Legend of Good Women* did not receive its first book-length study until 1972.<sup>199</sup> In *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*, Robert Worth Frank engages with the text mostly through a New Critical lens, asserting its aesthetic and literary value both on its own and as a critical juncture in Chaucer’s career (between the *Troilus* and the *Canterbury Tales*). The poem began to attract feminist accounts shortly thereafter. In the growing scholarly attention that followed, these two concerns—making basic sense of the poem’s structure and its place in Chaucer’s canon and understanding its relation to issues of gender and sexuality—have dominated discussion and have often overlapped.<sup>200</sup> Some feminist accounts, most notably that of Elaine Tuttle Hansen, have focused on the poem’s general relation to misogynistic discourse.<sup>201</sup> Others have zeroed in on Chaucer’s use of hagiography.<sup>202</sup> There can be no doubt of the fundamental soundness of the latter approach. As incoherent and off-putting as the poem

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<sup>199</sup> Robert Worth Frank, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*. (Cambridge 1972).

<sup>200</sup> Under the first concern we can include growing attention to poem’s manuscript history. See, for instance, Julia Boffey, “‘Twenty Thousand More’: Some Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Responses to *The Legend of Good Women*.” In *Middle English Poetry: Texts and Traditions*, ed. A.J. Minnis. (Rochester 2001): 279-97. M. C. Seymour, “Chaucer’s Revision of the Prologue of ‘The Legend of Good Women’” *The Modern Language Review* 92 (1997): 832-41. Michael Cherniss, “Chaucer’s Last Dream Vision: The ‘Prologue’ to the ‘Legend of Good Women’” *The Chaucer Review* 20 (1986): 183-99.

<sup>201</sup> Elaine Tuttle Hansen. “Irony and the Antifeminist Narrator in Chaucer’s “Legend of Good Women”” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 82 (1983): 11-31.

<sup>202</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw sees the text’s hagiography as a masculine model containing feminine narratives. *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*. (Madison 1989). Sheila Delany argues that the *Legend* has a long history of being read as a defense of women, so much so that Osborn Bokenham used its structure in compiling his own hagiographic anthology (*Impolitic Bodies: Poetry, Saints and Society in Fifteenth Century England* [Oxford 1998]). Both Janet Cowen and Catherine Sanok have addressed this text in a hagiographic light as well. See for instance, Janet Cowen, “Chaucer’s “Legend of Good Women”: Structure and Tone.” *Studies in Philology* 82 (1985): 416-36 and Catherine Sanok, “Reading Hagiographically: *The Legend of Good Women* and Its Feminine Audience,” *Exemplaria* 13 (2001): 323-54. Finally, Kara Doyle and Nicole McDonald turn to the text’s circulation to locate and recuperate its female readership: Kara A Doyle, “Thisbe Out of Context: Chaucer’s Female Readers and the Findern Manuscript.” *The Chaucer Review* 40 (2006): 231-61. Nicole F. McDonald, “Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*, Ladies at Court and The Female Reader,” *The Chaucer Review* 35 (2000): 22-42.

may still seem, certain elements of the *Legend of Good Women* are unmistakable. It is an ensemble of classical women, prefaced by a dream vision and wrapped in the language of hagiography. Moreover, this text is not just about women, but a *legend* of good women, deeply embedded from its very title into the generic expectations of hagiography and interested in questions of saintliness and femininity. This chapter returns to Chaucer's use of hagiography and focuses in particular on the gap between hagiography and his use of classical tradition. This generic gap has long been cited as one of the poem's most disabling incoherences; I will argue, on the contrary, that this gap constitutes a liminal space, where the poem's heroines find a way to speak.

My chapter responds not only to previous accounts of the *Legend*, but also to the wealth of recent feminist work on hagiography more generally. Saints' lives were one of the most widely-read genres of the late Middle Ages, especially among women, and while feminist scholarship is not solely responsible for the increase in attention to this crucial genre, it has probably played the dominant role.<sup>203</sup> Scholarship has paid attention both to women's devotion and mysticism and to the feminization of male devotion. For instance, Carolyn Walker Bynum's discussion of how male religious authorities augmented their language "with maternal metaphors because they needed to supplement their image of authority with that for which the maternal stood: emotion and nurture".<sup>204</sup> Dealing more specifically with hagiography, other scholars have noted the creation of a female audience and network of circulation and patronage for these texts. Such scholars

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<sup>203</sup> Catherine Sanok, for instance, notes that "Of the literary works dedicated to English women between the thirteenth and the late fifteenth centuries identified by Karen Jambeck, almost forty percent (twelve of thirty-one) are saints' legends," "Reading Hagiographically," 325.

<sup>204</sup> Carolyn Walker Bynum. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Berkeley: California UP, 1982. 154.

include Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Catherine Sanok, the former of whom notes that “women... engaged in literary activity: they were patrons and dedicatees (sometimes personally engaged in the selection, treatment, or transmission of material); they were audiences, readers, scribes and copyists, and, not least, composers of texts.”<sup>205</sup> Finally, other scholars such as Katherine J. Lewis and Catherine Sanok have postulated the possibility of alternative readings in specific saints’ lives whether by comparing “about the aspects of gender identity and religious ideals that had changed and those that had remained constant”<sup>206</sup> through the paradoxical exhortation towards *imitatio* of ancient saints or via certain types of resistant, subversive readings.<sup>207</sup>

All of these feminist approaches have produced a more nuanced understanding of literary culture in the Middle Ages. They also help explain the high female readership of a genre that at first glance can be seen as misogynistic, and work to restore agency to voices that have mostly been silenced by the historical record. However, we should not let the very real possibility of alternative readings make us overlook the dominant interpretations, especially if the latter are oppressive, coercive and conservative. In the case of the *Legend*, alternative possibilities emerge neither from the hagiographic or classical traditions alone, but precisely from the tensions between the two.<sup>208</sup> In what follows, I will trace the ways

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<sup>205</sup> Wogan-Browne, Jocelyn. *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture, c. 1150-1300: Virginity and Its Authorizations*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. 1.

<sup>206</sup> Sanok, Catherine. *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania U, 2007. IX. Lewis, Katherine J. “Lete me suffre”: Reading the Torture of St. Margaret of Antioch in Late Medieval England.” *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne. Turnhout: Brepols. 2000. 69-82. Print.

<sup>207</sup> Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England*. (Philadelphia 2007) at IX; Katherine J. Lewis. “Lete me suffre”: Reading the Torture of St. Margaret of Antioch in Late Medieval England,” in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*. ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Turnhout 2000), 69-82. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture, c. 1150-1300: Virginity and Its Authorizations*. (Oxford 2001)

<sup>208</sup> The paradox has also animated the poem’s reception history. John Lydgate’s suggested that the *Legend* does not reach its full complement of ‘good women’ because Chaucer was unable “in all this world to

Chaucer uses classical heroines to put pressure on some of the more repressive or contradictory aspects of hagiography. In part, that will involve juxtaposing the *Legenda aurea*, as a model hagiographical collection, to the *Heroides*, the poem's primary classical intertext. It will also involve broader contrasts between hagiography and classical tradition, in particular the contrast between the saint's *passio* and the romantic sufferings of the classical heroines. However, the alternative feminine model of reading and thinking that emerges out of this process is partial, contested and contradictory.<sup>209</sup> The text must speak through its gaps and distortions caused by working to accommodate two disparate literary traditions. To reinforce this point, I begin my analysis with Chaucer's account of Philomela.

### Unmuting the Nightingale

In its various forms, the most complete of which is in Book VI of the *Metamorphoses*, the story of Philomela is a brutal account of rape and betrayal, mutilation and murder. At his wife Procne's behest, Tereus travels to Athens to request that her sister Philomela visit. However, instead of taking Philomela to his wife, Tereus rapes and imprisons her in a cabin in the woods. To assure that Philomela cannot betray his crime, he cuts out her tongue and leaves her there. But Philomela remains capable. Her body remains

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fynde so greet a noumbre," only to be answered by the Fairfax poet, who demanded that Lydgate issue a retraction for such sentiments. Delany, *Naked Text*, 6-7.

<sup>209</sup> Rosemarie McGerr, in fact, suggests that resistance to closure is part of the Chaucerian style and thus, in this way, we can speak of the *Legend* as complete. "Sentence and Significance in the Legend of Good Women." In *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998. However, as Seymour notes, the manuscript history of the *Legend* makes this even more difficult, as no one manuscript contains the entirety of our modern version. For his part, he makes an argument that the poem was not abandoned, as some scholars have suggested, but it may have been lost over time. He suggests that we can reconstruct the twenty tales promised from other Chaucerian sources. M.C. Seymour, "Chaucer's Legend of Good Women: Two Fallacies." *The Review of English Studies* 37 (1986): 528-34.

expressive. It speaks with more than just tongue and teeth: Philomela speaks by weaving. She tells her story, cries for aid, accuses Tereus, and ultimately achieves both rescue and an ending that is—albeit neither happy nor triumphant—a form of escape. Chaucer picks up this gruesome story in the *Legend of Good Women* and insists on its potency:

And, as to me, so grisly was his dede,  
That, whan that I his foule story rede,  
Myn eyen wexen foule and sore also;  
Yit last the venim of so longe ago,  
That hit enfecteth him that wol beholde  
The story of Tereus, of which I tolde. (2238-2243)<sup>210</sup>

The man's "grisly dede" is a contagion that affects the 'real' world of the narrator. It transcends the text, rendering the narrator's eyes foul and sore. Moreover, this effect does not only apply to the narrator. The venom "enfecteth him that wol beholde" the story of Tereus. The only condition is having read—or perhaps only having *looked at*—such a tale. What is it about Tereus—or the tale—that provokes such a communicable disgust? Tereus is not the only rapist in the *Legend*. The text indicts Jason, not Tereus, as the root of false lovers. Nevertheless, this tale communicates in a way which I suggest has little to do with Tereus and much more with Philomela. Her initial outcries are unsuccessful and provoke violent consequences:

Lo! here a dede of men, and that a right!  
She cryeth "suster!" with ful londe stevene,  
And "fader dere!" and "help me, god in hevene!"  
Al helpeth nat; and yet this false thief  
Hath doon this lady yet a more mischeef,  
For fere lest she sholde his shame crye,  
And doon him openly a vilanye,  
And with his swerd her tong of kerveth he, (2238-2243)

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<sup>210</sup> All citations of Chaucer's works are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).

Tereus' actions are characterized as a *dede* once again. The word occurs only three times: in the passage above, in the invocation, and in the description of the rape. The recurring term links these moments and leads readers to reflect on how utterly Tereus' attempt at silencing fails. For fear that Philomela would "crye/ and doon him openly a vilanye," he cuts out her tongue. Nevertheless, his deed makes him not only notorious but also a transmissible infection, reddening and inflaming his readers' eyes. Philomela's silent cries ring loud.

Philomela's weaving is able to transcend this silencing and work transformative magic. She may be the only woman in the *Legend* able to communicate successfully with others. Thisbe's bloodied scarf sends the wrong message; no family can dissuade Lucretia from her suicide; letters go unanswered. Philomela's 'lettres,' on the other hand, reach their target. Tereus cuts out Philomela's tongue, but as the narrator notes "lettres can she weve to and fro" in a tapestry. *Lettres* suggests not only the letters of the alphabet, but also the epistles sent by the women the *Legend* draws from the *Heroides*. The narrator alludes to and quotes extensively from these letters but ultimately abandons them as unanswered. By contrast, the movement of Philomela's shuttle "to and fro" implies reciprocity, a dialogic exchange of letters rather than monologic loss. Indeed, Philomela is the only person whose letter arrives, delivering what Simpson calls "a revolutionary message out of the prison-house of male brutality".<sup>211</sup> Procne finds her, a result Philomela achieves by thwarting the expected method of communication. Rather than the genre Tereus expects—that she "shulde his shame crye" and accuse him verbally—she instead expresses herself another way. She neither writes letters like the women of the *Heroides* nor wails aloud; she

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<sup>211</sup> James Simpson, "Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Wills in Chaucer's Legend of Good Women," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 20 (1998): 73-100 at 87.



weaves. Even Procne's rescue is achieved through this same sort of subversion. When Procne receives the tapestry:

No word she spak, for sorwe and ek for rage,  
 But feynede hire to gon on pilgrimage  
 To Bacus temple, and in a litel stounde  
 Hire doumbe sister sittynge hath she found,  
 Wepyng in the castel, here alone. (2374-2378)

By going to her sister's aid, Procne too is struck dumb ("no word she spak"). However, she finds another genre to express herself through. Rather than the lament of "sorwe" or the epic of "rage," she relies on the language of pilgrimage and devotion to justify her deception. Philomela and Procne encapsulate the project of the *Legend of Good Women* in miniature. James Simpson sees the weaving paralleling the narrator, upon "whom the tyrannical god of Love imposes the strictest limits of the sayable in the *Prologue*."<sup>212</sup> Constrained to produce hagiography, the narrator juxtaposes it against classical epistolary. That juxtaposition demonstrates the limits of hagiography as a genre but also points beyond it toward another, potentially more successful form of reading and writing, one that Alceste will propose in the Prologue.

### Doubling the Legend

Chaucer's classical heroines come from a range of sources, but mainly from the *Heroides*. The *Heroides* is also a poetic anthology of abandoned women, and it shares Chaucer's interest in tales stretched between genres. As Sara Lindheim notes, "doubleness pervades the *Heroides*," with its twin addressees (the putative mythological recipient and the actual reader), twin authors (Ovid and the heroine) and twin genres, (elegiac and

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<sup>212</sup> Simpson "Ethics" 87

epistolary).<sup>213</sup> Lindheim sees this duality as creating a gap through which “the poet rewrites the ideology present in the “source text” through the subjective perspective of the heroine.”<sup>214</sup> This gap creates the opportunity for subjective voice. Chaucer adopts the same paradigm by deploying classical heroines in a text that is structurally hagiographic. Where Ovid straddled the elegiac and the epistolary, Chaucer now straddles the classical and the hagiographic.

Chaucer’s poem deliberately echoes the *Legenda aurea* in its choice of title.<sup>215</sup> In his discussion of generic terms for hagiography, Paul Strohm argues that in the fourteenth century, *legend* most often was a specific reference to the *Legenda aurea*.<sup>216</sup> John Fyler sees the parallel as self-evident, suggesting “it becomes apparent that in Cupid’s religion this “Seintes Legende” replaces the famous late thirteenth-century collection.”<sup>217</sup> There is

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<sup>213</sup> Sara H. Lindheim. *Mail and Female: Epistolary Narrative and Desire in Ovid's Heroides* (Madison 2003), 7

<sup>214</sup> Lindheim, *Mail*, 7. Other scholars who discuss the dual genres of the *Heroides* include Laurel Fulkerson. *The Ovidian Heroine as Author Reading, Writing, and Community in the Heroides*. (Cambridge, U.K. 2009.) Duncan F. Kennedy. "The epistolary mode and the first of Ovid's *Heroides*." *The Classical Quarterly* 34(1984): 413. Linda Kauffman. *Discourses of desire: gender, genre, and epistolary fictions*. (Ithaca 1988).

<sup>215</sup> For instance, Sheila Delaney argues *The Legend of Good Women* is so recognizably either hagiography or mock-hagiography that Osborn Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* is “an act of homage that also became a profound critique,” borrowing Chaucer's basic structure. *Naked Text*, 7. Catherine Sanok concludes that “they herald an affiliation with hagiography in a way that would have been clear to a contemporary audience for whom that genre was the single most familiar narrative discourse [and...] authorize a hagiographic reading of the poem.” “Hagiographically,” 342. This is not to disavow the way that the Legend draws on other genres as well, including courtly flower and leaf debates, the palinode and even romance. McDonald discusses how the two prologues respond to two different generic needs and envisions a feminine audience in the flower and leaf game in the F prologue. Nicole F. McDonald. “Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, Ladies at Court and the Female Reader.” *The Chaucer Review* 35 (2000): 22-42. Canitz dubs this confluence of genres “courtly hagiomythography” and concludes that “this implies that Chaucer is not simply exchanging an inadequate view for a “correct” one but questioning the univocal authority of any single generic perspective”. A.E. Christa Canitz, “Courtly Hagiomythography and Chaucer's Tripartite Genre Critique in the “Legend of Good Women”” in *From Arabye to Engeland: Medieval Studies in Honour of Mahmoud Manzalaoui*, ed. A.E. Christa Canitz and Gernot R. Wieland, Actexpress (Ottawa 1999) 132.

<sup>216</sup> the earliest use of legend not to specifically refer to a saint's life is the Miller's protestation that he will tell “a legende and a lyf” in his prologue. Paul Strohm. “Passioun, Lyf, Miracle, Legende: Some Generic Terms in Middle English Hagiographical Narrative.” *The Chaucer Review* 10 (1975): 62-75.

<sup>217</sup> John Fyler. *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven 1979) 99.

only one point in the poem where *legend* refers to something other than the poem itself.

As Chaucer justifies Lucretia's inclusion in his anthology, he mentions Augustine's

compassion for her: "he that cleped is in oure legend / The grete Austyn . . ." (1689-1690);

Here *legend* refers to the *Legenda aurea*, where Jacobus does indeed accord Augustine that

honorific.<sup>218</sup> Nor is this the only time that Chaucer makes use of the *Legenda*; a large part

of the *Second Nun's Tale* is a strikingly faithful translation.<sup>219</sup> In addition to the title, the

initial engagement with hagiography can also be seen in the poem's paratext. Alceste's

charge to the narrator, after all, is to make a "glorious legend" and manuscripts refer to the

women as martyrs and to the texts as legends in their titles.

The *Legend* displays an interest in historical veracity that might also be traced to

hagiography. As Lisa Kiser notes, hagiography necessarily makes "a claim of historical

veracity," of being an account of events that have actually occurred in order to retain their

didactic and moral elements.<sup>220</sup> All saints' lives claim to be true, even as hagiographers

admit to adding miracles to their subjects' lives.<sup>221</sup> (Even in those cases, these writers

make a claim of spiritual truth for their texts.) Such a desire for veracity is clearly visible in

the *Legenda aurea*. Jacobus pays particular attention to dates and details. He attempts to

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<sup>218</sup> Specifically, he begins the legend "*Augustinus doctor egregius*"—the distinguished doctor Augustine. 842 *Legenda Aurea*. Ed. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni (Florence 1998) 842. He describes Augustine in an exceedingly positive light, which John Tatlock notes is relatively unique to the *Legenda*. "Chaucer and *Legenda Aurea*." *Modern Language Notes* 45 (1930) 296-298.

<sup>219</sup> See Sherry L. Reames, "A Recent Discovery concerning the Sources of Chaucer's 'Second Nun's Tale'" *Modern Philology* 87. 4 (1990): 337-361 for a longer discussion. For a longer discussion of Chaucer's familiarity with the *Legenda Aurea*, see Tatlock, "Chaucer and the *Legenda*," 296-298.

<sup>220</sup> Lisa Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales* (Ithaca 1983), 102. She also notes the difficulty of pinning down precisely what characterizes an exemplum, 78-81.

<sup>221</sup> Delehaye cites the lives of St. Hubert, St. Arnold of Metz, St. Lambert and St. Remaclus as having large passages borrowed from each other. He also notes that the lives of St. Marina and Tatiana are identical as are St. Castissima and St. Euphrosyne, etc. Delehaye, Hippolyte. *The Legends of the Saints. With a Memoir of the Author* (New York 1962), 102. Heffernan, for his part, notes that only 350 words of the prologue of Eddius' St. Cuthbert seem to be original. Heffernan, Thomas J. *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages*. (New York 1988), 141.

reconcile differences between his varying sources and accounts for the improbability of miracles. In the life of St. Margaret, for instance, he stresses the dubious nature of the dragon episode.<sup>222</sup> He explains the magi's rapid arrival in Bethlehem by suggesting "According to Remy, this because the boy towards which they were speeding was able to conduct them to him in such a brief time. Or it can be said, according to Jeremiah, that they were coming on dromedaries, which are the swiftest animals".<sup>223</sup> Such accounting resembles the narrator's hesitation about Aeneas' invisibility in the *Legend of Dido* (1019-1021). Kiser sees such insistence occurring throughout *The Legend of Good Women* and Laura Getty points out that "many of the classical women in *LGW* were believed to have been historical figures."<sup>224</sup> Beginning with Cleopatra, an actual historical figure, only further reinforces this tendency.

However, this insistence on veracity also undercuts the *Legend's* use of genre as the poem strains to accommodate both its classical source text and its hagiographic structure. For instance, although the *Legend of Thisbe* "adheres to its source, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* IV, 55-166 most faithfully," Chaucer still includes certain alterations which dramatize this unstable duality.<sup>225</sup> In the opening, the narrator follows Ovid; he situates us specifically in history "at Babiloyne" of "the queen Semyramus" and

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<sup>222</sup> "Istud autem quod dicitur de draconis deuoratione et ipsius crepatione, apocryphium et friuolum reputatur" Jacobus, *Legenda*, 618. "However, such a thing which is said about the dragon devouring Margaret and bursting asunder, is considered apocryphal and frivolous."

<sup>223</sup> Secundum Remigium quoniam talis puer ad quem properabant eos in tam breui spatio perducere potuit. Vel potest dici secundum Ieronimum quod super dromedaries uenerunt, qui sunt animali uelocissima." *Legenda* 134. I cite these as representative examples, but this is a dominant concern throughout the *Legenda*. Jacobus includes, among other things, speculation as to why Joseph brings oxen to Bethlehem and justification for Mary's choice of sacrifice at her purification.

<sup>224</sup> Laura Getty, "'Other Smale Ymaad Before': Chaucer as Historiographer in the *Legend of Good Women*" *Chaucer Review* 42 (2007) 48-75 at 48.

<sup>225</sup> James W. Spisak, "Chaucer's Pyramus and Thisbe," *Chaucer Review* 18 (1984), 204-210 at 204. Delany, for her part, suggests that the source "offer instead a twelfth century text, the Old French lai of Pyramus and Thisbe, inserted into [the Ovid Moralize] by its anonymous clerical compiler." *Naked Text* 123. Regardless, the comparison between the wall and the confessional is a markedly non-classical addition.

establishes the pagan nature of the setting (707). After that, however, an authorial addition describes Thisbe and Pyramus speaking through the wall “softe as any shryfte” (706-7, 745). The clearly established time period (required by the hagiographic structure, pagan from its classical source) draws attention to the anachronistic language. The erotic charge of the scene—reinforced by what Delany sees as sexual language surrounding the “cleft” in the wall—only renders the anachronism more uneasy.<sup>226</sup> Thisbe whispers secrets to her lover rather than sins to God. Her confession, at best, is only a confession by simile.

For her part, Laura Getty suggests that the allusions to Dante in *The Legend of Good Women* also work to highlight this temporal discontinuity. She notes that many of the men and women in the *Legend* are placed in “Limbo, at best, or in rather uncomfortable parts of hell. No matter how Chaucer rewrites the stories, the reference to Dante keeps the infernal versions of their fates in the background. The simple historical distinction between Chaucer’s time and the past dooms the women. If Virgil cannot escape divine justice, why would Dido be able to circumvent the system?”<sup>227</sup> The expectations of hagiography to which these women are unable to conform become increasingly highlighted. These are not simply good-but-pagan women, but rather *damned-and-pagan* women. The temporal discontinuity between Medea, Dido and Philomena and the ancient saints to which they are being implicitly compared gapes wide; it suggests that hagiographic dictates cannot--- or should not—always be applied. It also creates space in between. These characters have been brought into a new context, a new environment, surrounded by hagiographic cues and structure. No longer entirely classical or epistolary, nor entirely hagiographic, it allows the space for something more.

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<sup>226</sup> Delaney, *Naked Text* 126-130.

<sup>227</sup> Getty “Historiographer” 55

This emphasis on historical validity is not the only element the *Legend* explicitly shares with the *Legenda*; both also gesture repeatedly to their sources. Jacobus de Voragine names his sources throughout his texts, either to bolster his own authority or to allow the reader to find these alternate narratives for themselves.<sup>228</sup> In the case of the *Legend*, though, both of these elements further highlight the gap between the classical source and its hagiographic destination. While Jacobus de Voragine is able to reference other hagiographic texts or treatises written by Church fathers, the *Legend of Good Women* repeatedly refers readers to another version of the tale, written for different purposes and other generic constraints. For instance, the *Legend of Dido* ends with a terse dismissal inviting readers to “Rede Ovide, and in him he shal hit finde” (443-444, cf 1002-1003). In the *Legend of Hypsipyle*, the narrator refuses to list the men traveling with Jason. Inquiring minds should “go rede Argonautycon” (1456-1458. See also 1552-1558, 1564-5 for similar explicit invitations). Medea’s concludes: “Wel can Ovyde hire letter in vers endyte, /Which were as now to long for me to wryte” (1678-1679). Ariadne receives similar treatment. The narrator cuts off her epistle, noting: “What shulde I more telle hire compleynyng? . . . In hire Epistel Naso telleth al” (2219). Beyond the *Heroides*, the *Legend of Dido* invokes Virgil; Medea and Hypsipyle alludes to Guido delle Colonne and Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica*; Lucretia mentions Livy and Augustine.<sup>229</sup> Ultimately, as opposed to the Church Fathers and historians cited by Jacobus, the *Legenda* points to its classical sources, straddling the divide between the two.

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<sup>228</sup>For instance, he cites Augustine’s *Against Faustus*, Prosper’s *On the Contemplative Life* and St. Isidore’s *On the Life and Death of the Saints* in the legend of St. Thomas, although this only a representative example of a larger trend. Jacobus, *Legenda*, 53, 55, 62

<sup>229</sup> It is worth mentioning that some scholars consider Ovid’s *Fasti* as a more likely source for the legend of Lucretia, despite the reference to Livy. See Kathryn L. Lynch, *Chaucer’s Philosophical Visions* (Woodbridge 2000), 135.

The *Legend's* source references become entangled with the idea of *brevitas*.

While Jacobus mentions his sources as a method of self-validation, Chaucer does so to shorten his narrative. Such a technique, Janet Cowen argues, “should be seen partly in the terms of the analogy between his poem and the *Legenda*.”<sup>230</sup> Saints’ lives, especially *passios*, do abbreviate a saint’s life to hasten their martyrdom. However, Cowen is right to note that hagiographic *brevitas* can only partly account for its equivalent in *The Legend of Good Women*. As many other scholars have noted, this narrator is *bored*. He complains that his text is “to longe,” so long a sermonynge,” “to long for wryten and to sen,” and “to long for me to wryte” within the first four legends of the nine contained within the text (619, 1184, 1565, 1679, in the legends of Cleopatra, Dido, Hipsipyle and Medea respectively). He chafes under the restrictions imposed by Cupid and seems to wish to dispatch with the legends as quickly as possible, complaining all the while. The sense of exhaustion pervades the text, dramatizing the difficulty of the narrator’s labor and contributing a sense of unease. The narrator’s lack of interest in his own text makes it difficult for the reader to engage fully and to trust in the generic cues being given.

The combination of classical, often epistolary source references and *brevitas*—marked as unusual by the narrator’s palpable boredom-- offers gaps through which readers glimpse the excess material. For instance, Chaucer ends the legend of Dido with a terse dismissal that ultimately opens up one such gap, inviting the reader to “Rede Ovide, and in him he shal hit finde” (443-44). By drawing attention to what is not in the narrative, the astute reader, primed to notice such gaps by the loosely allusive interpretive network of hagiography, is invited to find the rest and thus to question the narrator’s

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<sup>230</sup>Examples in the *Legenda Aurea* are too numerous to note, but St. Agnes, St. Stephen and St. Margaret of Antioch provide relevant ones. Cohen, “Structure,” 420.

account. *The Legend of Good Women* as a whole is rife with such moments--- some are general complaints but many refer to specific sources. To be clear, this is not to say that Chaucerian adaptation is somehow unusual. Chaucer is fond of drawing on multiple sources, but here a full half of the legends encourage readers to compare Chaucer's version to other sources. These lacunae create a deliberately overt and clumsy attempt at adaptation; drawing attention to what is missing, the text invites astute readers to seek out the rest and question the narrator's interpretation.

Furthermore, medieval readers would have been comfortable interrogating a text such as the *Legend of Good Women* because saints' lives encouraged such engagement.<sup>231</sup> Florence Percival and Laura Getty discuss this tendency in historical writing, which, as Percival claims, "should alert us to the fact that the capacity to read between the lines was well developed in an educated medieval audience."<sup>232</sup> Such a capacity was also especially encouraged in hagiography for a variety of reasons, including historical ones. The life of a saint began as an oral tradition around a cultic site, creating "shared anticipations" that would limit what actions the hagiographer could take.<sup>233</sup> As Sanok notes, "The audience's role, however, is not limited to the production of the text: as a sacred genre, one which can produce spiritual events or merit heavenly intercession, hagiography requires an audience for the completion of its sacred meaning, which is realized only in the act of reception."<sup>234</sup> Hagiographic borrowing "facilitate[s]

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<sup>231</sup> Florence Percival and Laura Getty also discuss this tendency in historical writing, which, as Percival claims, "should alert us to the fact that the capacity to read between the lines was well developed in an educated medieval audience."<sup>231</sup> Florence Percival, *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge 1998), 211.

<sup>232</sup> Florence Percival, *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 211.

<sup>233</sup> Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 19.

<sup>234</sup> Sanok "Hagiographically" 329



patterns of correspondence as multiple layers of recognition (*anagorisis*) emerged from the shuttling back and forth between the old and new biographies.”<sup>235</sup> For instance, Jacobus de Voragine discusses the Apostle Paul, claiming “Abel offered sacrifice and from that cause is praised, but if we bring up the sacrifice of Paul in the middle of enemies, it will appear as superior as heaven to earth...Abraham who at the command of God relinquished fatherland and kinsmen is praised by all, but how can he be equal to Paul?”<sup>236</sup> What does it mean for Paul to be a kind of Abel, a kind of Abraham? Medieval readers would be able to recognize the comparison and tease out its implicit meaning.<sup>237</sup> The residual epistolarity of the tales from the *Heroides* would have only reinforced the interpretive obligations placed on the reader—and further complicated the poem’s relationship to hagiography. Medea’s legend concludes: “Wel can Ovyde hire letter in vers endyte, /Which were as now to long for me to wryte” (1678-1679). Ariadne receives similar treatment near the end of her legend, where the narrator cuts off her epistle, noting:

What shulde I more telle hire compleynyng?  
It is so long, it were an hevy thyng  
In hire Epistel Naso telleth al” (2219-2222)

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<sup>235</sup> Thomas J. Heffernan. “Christian Biography: Foundation to Maturity.” In *Historiography in the Middle Ages*, edited by Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, 115-56. Boston: Brill, 2003. 121

<sup>236</sup> Abel obtulit sacrificium et inde laudatur, sed si Pauli hostiam adducamus in medium, quantum celum a terra superior apparebit.... Abraham mirantur omnes qui ad dei preceptum patriam atque cognatos reliquit, sed quomodo Paulo possit equari?

Jacobus *Legenda* 587

<sup>237</sup> Elizabeth Clark, for instance, argues that such comparative reading was practiced even by Church fathers as they found Scriptural support for asceticism. Among the eleven types of reading she argues were practiced, she includes intertextuality, which works “to press a mildly ascetic text in a more ascetic direction by the citation of other verses that are taken to counsel repudiation of ‘the world’” and ‘talking back’ a method of placing multiple verses together so that they interact and correct each other, as Christ uses Scripture to correct and repudiate the Scripture quoted by Satan during the temptation on the mount. Elizabeth A. Clark. *Reading Renunciation Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity*. (Princeton 2001). 125

In the *Legend of Phyllis*, although the author does not explicitly refer to Ovid, he still alludes to a letter beyond the legend, one which the audience likely understands to be Ovidian, given the preceding legends and references. He notes:

But of the letter of Phillis wol I wryte  
A word or two, although it be but lyte  
...But al hire letter wryten I ne may  
By order, for it were to me a charge;  
Hire letter was right long and therto large (2495-2515)

These repeated quotations and invocations allow the *Legend* to retain the dialogic nature of epistolarity, namely that “the fundamental category of epistolarity is that it must be written to be read . . . its existence depends on sustaining the illusion of a dialogue with the reader”.<sup>238</sup> However, the hagiographic structure—which requires martyrdom of these women—and Cupid’s insistence that the heroines “chosen to be dede” must additionally foreclose the very dialogic possibility that these letters retain—that the erstwhile lover reads the letter and returns (290). The narrator radically abbreviates the letters and “provokes a sharp sense of authorial suppression” either to quicken a boring task or to ensure that his subjects conform to hagiographic standards.<sup>239</sup> Nevertheless, the dialogic nature of the letters remains tangible. Through that dialogic possibility as well as the interpretive network suggested by hagiography, the *Legend* directs readers who are primed to make comparisons to other available sources. Such a comparison makes the juxtaposition between the text’s two competing impulses (classicizing and hagiographic) visible.

Sources would have been available to elucidate the clashing nature of these impulses. Much of the material Chaucer draws upon was recognizable either through the

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<sup>238</sup> Linda S. Kauffman. *Discourses of desire: gender, genre, and epistolary fictions*. (Ithaca 1988) 36

<sup>239</sup> Simpson, “Ethics,” 87.

original texts or vernacular adaptations. As Desmond notes, the Man of Law identifies *The Legend of Good Women* as “an aspirational, if not actual, vision of the legends as an Ovidian text,” describing the legend in his Prologue as “of loveris up and doun / Mo than Ovide made of mencioun / In his Episteles, that been ful olde.”<sup>240</sup> Late medieval English readers may well have known Ovid, although the author was better known on the continent; there are at least eight extant fourteenth century copies of the *Metamorphoses*, along with assorted commentaries, seven of the *Fasti*, seven of the *Ibis* and five of the *Heroides*.<sup>241</sup> Another five extant copies of the *Heroides* date from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. While a smaller number than the *Canterbury Tales* or *Piers Plowman*, these manuscripts still attest to a Latinate presence.<sup>242</sup> They would have been used as a grammar and a guide to rhetorical principles and the *ars dictaminis*.<sup>243</sup> Beyond these school texts, prose summaries and moralized versions would have existed as well, such as Pierre Bersuire’s *Ovidius Moralizatus* and eventually the *Ovide Moralizé*.<sup>244</sup> Furthermore, such tales were routinely adapted; Machaut, Boccaccio, Christine de Pizan, Gower and Chaucer count among the most literary of the adapters.<sup>245</sup> McKinley also notes that Ovid appears “if fleetingly in a wide array of kinds of writing from high to later medieval England,” including William Fitz Stephen’s description of London in his preface of a *vita* of St.

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<sup>240</sup> Marilynn R. Desmond, “The Translatio of Memory and Desire in *The Legend of Good Women*: Chaucer and the Vernacular Heroides,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 35, no. 1 (2013): 186-187.

<sup>241</sup> Kathryn L. McKinley. “Gower and Chaucer: Readings of Ovid in late medieval England.” Ed. James G. Clark, Kathryn L. McKinley and Frank Thomas. Coulson, *Ovid in the Middle Ages*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 197.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> James G. Clark. “Ovid in the monasteries: the evidence from late medieval England.” *Ovid in the Middle Ages*, ed. James G. Clark, Frank Thomas. Coulson, and Kathryn L. McKinley (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>244</sup> Clark “Monasteries” 186-187

<sup>245</sup> For a discussion of their adaptations, see Carolyn Collette 33-77.

Thomas of Becket, John of Salisbury's *Policratus* and Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, although these might be explained through the use of florilegia.<sup>246</sup>

Ovid was a known quantity—particularly the *Ovidius ethicus* of the Latinate classroom. As Desmond notes, “Most scholarship on the *Heroides* in *The Legend of Good Women* assumes that Chaucer's reading of Ovid's text would have been shaped by the academic tradition represented by the *accessus ad auctores* found in medieval Latin manuscripts of Ovid.”<sup>247</sup> These *accessus* offer a moralizing viewpoint on Ovid—but one that is diametrically opposed to the “good women” endorsed by the God of Love. The *accessus* reveal a multipart division of love, with the women of the *Heroides* exemplifying infatuation, unchasteness and irrational passion, the better to encourage a reader to avoid their negative examples and pursue a rational and chaste love.<sup>248</sup> Such a description hardly dovetails with the women “trewe in lovinge al hir lyves” described in *The Legend of Good Women*. In the case of Dido, Chaucer even eschews an alternate tradition that might uphold her as a paragon of virtue, one in which Aeneas plays a lesser role and Dido kills herself to avoid the attentions of Iarbas. This Dido seems much more akin to Lucretia (whose inclusion in the *Legend* provides much of the fodder for any sincere reading of the text) or Virginia than the Dido of the *Heroides* or the Aeneid. Chaucer was likely aware of this tradition; Boccaccio's *De mulieribus Claris*, upon which he drew for the Monk's account of Zenobia, recounts this non-Virgilian version.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> McKinley “Readings” 197.

<sup>247</sup> Desmond “Translatio” 182

<sup>248</sup> A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scolar Press, 1984), 182-3, 226-7. For a detailed discussion of the *accessus*, see Ralph J. Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling: Studies in Medieval School Commentaries on Ovid's Ars Amatoria, Epistulae Ex Ponto, and Epistulae Heroidum* (München: Bei Der Arbo-Gesellschaft, 1986), 154-164.

<sup>249</sup> Delany, *Naked* 194-195, See also Canitz, “Hagiomythography” which terms this choice “his rejection of the tradition which represents Dido as good because chaste” and suggests that “Chaucer brazenly takes the inversion of normal values to an extreme.” 148

Instead of a tradition which upholds a chaste and virtuous Dido, Chaucer deliberately opts for a possibility with more cognitive dissonance, one in which her mad passion--- and eventual suicide--- becomes equated with the moral high ground.

Even for the women who do not derive from the *Heroides*, a reader would have likely had the background knowledge to recognize Chaucer's alterations. The case of Cleopatra was fairly contentious at first blush--- not featured in the *Heroides*, she was nevertheless accorded pride of place in *The Legend of Good Women*. She comes first in the legends—a position that the God of Love clearly designates for her. Thus, if the legends were meant for an unironic reading, Cleopatra might be the place to begin such an argument. If she could sincerely have been depicted as a 'good woman,' she might set the model for reading the legends that follow. However, Beverly Taylor has reviewed the historical sources available to a medieval audience and concluded that the depictions are "invariably unflattering," often only shifting in how much blame is accorded to Antony. She notes that "Horace in an ode calls her a 'frenzied queen' and 'accursed monster' who served 'a polluted crew of creatures foul with lust'" and that both Ovid and Virgil have similar takes. She rejects Lowes' assertion that medieval views were kinder by noting that "if anything, the medieval Cleopatra was less esteemed than her classical antecedent," given her opposition to Augustus, whose *pax romana* was viewed as a prefiguration of Christ's golden age.<sup>250</sup> Moreover, Dante places her in the circle of the lustful and Boccaccio condemns her for wrongful love as well in the *De Casibus*.<sup>251</sup> No

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<sup>250</sup> Beverly Taylor, "The Medieval Cleopatra: The Classical and Medieval Tradition of Chaucer's Legend of Cleopatra," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 (1977): 251.

<sup>251</sup> See Percival "Legendary" 223-228 for a longer discussion. She suggests that Chaucer's source is in fact Vincent de Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale*, which remains a negative account.

matter the source, comparisons between the woman who exists and the *Legenda* and her literary antecedents would have been possible.

The *Legend of Good Women* straddles genres and source texts—the *Legenda aurea* and the *Heroides*, hagiography and classical compilation. It takes on the structure of a hagiographic collection through its deployment of paratext, binary perspective, *occupatio* and use of other sources—the latter of which is an aspect the *Legenda* and the *Heroides* share. Both textual grandparents also encourage readers to engage with the text. Hagiography uses its intertextual nature to encourage readers to compare characters; the remnant of the *Heroides*' epistolary form encourages dialogic thinking. This kind of engagement (made possible through the knowledge that medieval readers had of the original texts) makes the gap between the text's two impulses (classicizing and hagiographic) visible. Ultimately, this allows the *Legend* create the same sort of gap as the *Heroides*.

### Standing in the Gap

The *Legend* is neither fully classical nor fully hagiographic. When it hews too closely to one genre or the other, the individual legends struggle and fail, producing in Kiser's apt words, "a facile union that corresponds to the God of Love's own artificial synthesis," the results of which, she notes, "are appalling."<sup>252</sup> In this uneasy way, the tales of Lucretia and many other women in the *Legend* resemble the *passio*—a narrative of martyrdom, first and foremost. These oppositions the *passio* depicts are polarizing, marking extremes as they imbue an earthly conflict with the apocalyptic valences of a

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<sup>252</sup> Kiser, *Classical* 103.

struggle between good and evil. The titanic struggle they invoke always ends with death. Lucretia, for instance, might seem to conform to saintly models, especially in light of the caveats I mention above. The conflict here is binary—Tarquinius is indeed a tyrant and a rapist and her death is in service of an abstract virtue, asserting her wifely chastity and refusing all dishonor. Equally, she has a historical reception that might allow Chaucer to read this story either positively or negatively, especially in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, where the Augustinian view of Lucretia resurfaced and “a vigorous debate of the subject may be identified.”<sup>253</sup> In this way, Lucretia offers potential but remains contentious. In this case, I suggest that Chaucer highlights the ways in which she does not and cannot be made to conform to hagiographic expectations. Firstly, her death is a suicide, explicitly disallowed by the Christian faith, making the equivalency even more difficult. Additionally, the way that the narrator evokes multiple sources for his legend highlights this disparity. He mentions not only “Ovyde and Titus Lyvius” but also<sup>254</sup>:

The grete Austyn hath gret compassioun  
Of this Lucesse, that starf at Rome toun  
And in what wise, I wol but shortly trete,  
And of this thing, I touch but the grete (1690-1694)

Despite the compassion that Chaucer claims the Church father might possess for the Roman matron, Augustine actually condemns Lucretia. In *De Civitate Dei*, he claims her suicide is unjustifiable and a form of murder. He summarizes the dilemma of Lucretia thusly: “Si adulterata, cur laudata; si pudica, cur occisa?”<sup>255</sup> If truly chaste and unwilling, then her suicide becomes worse, as she is then guilty of the murder of a chaste and

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<sup>253</sup> Percival *Legendary* 265. See her prolonged discussion of the use of the source material and contemporary attitudes toward Lucretia. 261-283

<sup>254</sup> Both Percival and Middleton suggest that Ovid’s *Fasti* is the more likely source of these two, as well as noting an element of parody in that account. Percival *Legendary* 261-262.

<sup>255</sup> If adulterous, why praise her? If chaste, why slay her? CITE.

innocent woman—herself. To exonerate the suicide and lessen its import is to imply her consent, making her an adulterer unworthy of praise. Moreover, Lucretia is concerned about what she (and her body) signifies to the point of farce. She is first anxious that “hir husbonde shulde nat have the foule name” and then, in the act of committing suicide, pays careful attention to the physical details of her body:

And as she fel adoun, she kaste hir lok,  
 And of hir clothes yet she hede tok.  
 For of hir fallynge yet she had a care,  
 Lest that hir fet or such thing lay bare;  
 So wel she loved clenness and eke trouthe (1856-1860)

Rather than the total physical disregard of St. Cecilia, who preaches with a slit throat or St. Margaret, whose body is described as being torn and bloodied, Lucretia has a fastidious concern for modesty, conflating the body itself with what it signifies. Indeed, Percival notes that even in Ovid, “the scene is perilously close to burlesque” and in Chaucer, the insistence of the physicality—the small detail of the feet—verges on the ludicrous.<sup>256</sup> Does covering one’s feet actually have anything more than passing resemblance to the virtues of “clenness” and “trouthe,” especially given a tale where these virtues echo through the much more major concerns of rape and suicide? Minnis, for his part, sees this as an appropriate echo of hagiographic tradition, but indeed, such compliance can work to undermine itself. Her adherence may be apt, but somewhat too neat.<sup>257</sup>

The tale itself echoes this confusion later, insisting that Lucretia was “in Rome toun...holden there / a seynt.”<sup>258</sup> However, even the language of this assertion works to

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<sup>256</sup> Percival *Legendary* 277

<sup>257</sup> A. J. Minnis, V. J. Scattergood, and J. J. Smith, *The Shorter Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 365.

<sup>258</sup> Chaucer *Legend* 1871-1872



undermine it. She is *held* to be a saint in Rome, a verb that carefully avoids stating that she actually is. Specifying the location limits her purview to one city. Moreover, that one city is pagan Rome, highlighting the temporal difference. As a pagan, Lucretia can only be held as a saint, even in Rome, the city that will later hold such power in the Catholic Church that such a careful caveat would be unnecessary. Catholic Rome canonizes; those that it holds to be saints *are* saints. Lucretia can only occupy this uncertain space.

Requiring that not only Lucretia but the rest of Love's martyrs be *martyrs* in fact forces another alteration of the source material. In the *Heroides*, for instance, while some of Ovid's epistles are paired with responses, Chaucer uses only the women whose letters are unanswered. Moreover, he must foreclose the possibility that these letters invoke—that the erstwhile lover may indeed return. Because of the constraints of the *passio*, which require these women suffer and then die, such a possibility cannot be entertained. In fact, locking his heroines into this genre actually involves killing one, claiming that Hypsipyle “deyed for his love, of sorwes smerte” (1579). This addition seems to be original; the *Heroides* makes no mention of her death. Moreover, for a text that calls its heroines “martyrs” and even creates an original death for Hypsipyle, a small but significant number do not die by the end of the text. Particularly, I refer to Philomela, Ariadne, and Medea. However, this actually proves to be another way in which these heroines cause hagiography to fail. Recounting Philomela's death (or metamorphosis) would force the narrator to continue her narrative past the cannibalistic banquet that Philomela and Procne serve to Tereus. Medea, for her part, does not die as a result of Jason's treachery, but instead revenges herself, killing their children and eventually remarrying.

The women of the *Legend* must die for something—but what? A facile answer might be love. As Delany notes, “[hagiography] does show women suffering and dying as a consequence of love, and so does Chaucer. In basic plot, therefore, his stories do parallel those of hagiography and open up the possibility of bringing into play different or competing concepts of love.”<sup>259</sup> Such a comparison becomes more difficult, however, in a text where the male lovers are fickle, Love (the god) is an illiterate tyrant and love (the concept) still leads to damnation. If these women die for love (the concept), they are dying for a sexual, romantic love, which differs importantly from its hagiographic equivalent—though the God of Love cannot tell the difference. Dido, Cleopatra, Hypsipyle, Phyllis and Thisbe die because they refuse to forsake the men they love—*cupiditas*, no matter how idealized. Although both Phyllis (“my body mote ye se withinne a while”) and Thisbe offer their bodies as a signifier (But Gode forbade but a woman can / Ben as trewe in lovyng as a man! / And for my part, I shal anon it kythe.”), at best they signify a somewhat dubious definition of heterosexual fidelity rather than salvific faith.<sup>260</sup> By comparison, St. Margaret is martyred because she refuses that sexual attachment, finding the pains of martyrdom “swetter” (an erotically charged term) than the carnal, or at the least physical “mylkes reeme.”<sup>261</sup> Cecilia, although married, transfigures her married relationship into an example of a Christian community, converting her husband and remaining a virgin. Her martyrdom also shows her transcendence of physical reality—even in the boiling bath, she feels no

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<sup>259</sup> Delany, *Naked Text*, 67

<sup>260</sup> Chaucer *Legend* 2551, 909-911

<sup>261</sup> Reames, Sherry L. “Stanzaic Life of Margaret.” In *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*. (Kalamazoo 2003). ll.123. I here distinguish between *erotic terms* and *sexual attachment*, for, as Virginia Burrus as so aptly noted, hagiography is rife with its own particular form of “transgressive eroticism,” which “thrives in the refusal of the telos of satisfaction.” Virginia Burrus. *The sex lives of saints: an erotics of ancient hagiography*. (Philadelphia 2007), 10

pain, showing such divine control over her corporeality that she does not even sweat. The tortured and eventually murdered body signifies the saint's faith.

If the women of the *Legend* are dying for their lovers, different difficulties arise. At first, this parallel between dying for one's lover and dying for God seems apt; the rhetoric of the celestial bridegroom surfaces regularly in virgin martyrologies. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne builds on Janice Radway's work with Boon-Mill romances and shows structural similarities between hagiography and contemporary romance.<sup>262</sup> She suggests that role of the torturer and the bridegroom occupy different character spaces in hagiography (the pagan tyrant and Christ, respectively), but become conflated within the same character for popular romance. I argue that the same conflation occurs in *The Legend of Good Women*. As A.E. Christa Canitz notes, "Unlike the celestial bridegroom to whom the saints have dedicated themselves . . . , for the female victims in *The Legend of Good Women*, the beloved often becomes the torturer-- physically or psychologically-- rather than the absolutely loyal and reliable bridegroom to be expected on the basis of the correspondence with saints' lives."<sup>263</sup> The men for whom these women die are too treacherous to be the Christ-bridegroom-hero. Alceste, after all, asks for a dual legendary, not only of "goode wymmen" but also "of false men" (484-486). Passages such as the bombastic description of Jason in the joint legend of Hypsipyle and Medea foreground their treachery. Lasting more than 25 lines, it discusses his falseness with invective that borders on the absurd:

Thow rote of false lovers, Duc Jasoun  
Thow sly devourere and confusion  
Of gentil wemen, tendre creatures

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<sup>262</sup> Wogan Browne, *Saints*, 92-106. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

<sup>263</sup> Canitz, "Hagiomythography," 141

...  
 Yif that I live, thy name shal be shove  
 In English that thy sekte shal be knowe!  
 Have at thee, Jason! Now thyn horn is blowe!

...  
 For evere as tendre a capoun et the fox  
 Thow he be false and hath the foul betrayed,  
 As shal the good-man that therefore hath payed.  
 Al have he to the capoun skille and right,  
 The false fox wol have his part at nyght (1368-1393)

The effect is simultaneously condemnatory and comic. Jason is the “rote” of false lovers, a source, root or model for the rest of his “sekte”, which is perhaps why he warrants such prolonged attention. The invective, however, sputters and rants. It relies on monosyllables and short, broken lines, producing an effect that borders on the juvenile.

The passage then slides into a barnyard lament unflattering to all parties involved. The narrator laments that Jason, a fox, has as much access to tender capons (presumably Medea and Hypsipyle) as any good man who has paid for them. Besides the obviously problematic linkage between courting a woman and paying for a chicken, this metaphor diverts sympathy away from the women, the putative subject of the legend. Instead, the affect centralizes on the good man, cheated of womanly affection by false lovers like Jason. The women—and the chickens—ultimately suffer the same fate either way, if the metaphor is followed to its conclusion. The good man buys a chicken for his dinner; Jason is a fox and a “devourere.” It seems that the only difference for the women is whether or not they are spiced and cooked before consumption. Moreover, the sexual nature of the metaphor becomes more complex--- and perhaps more insulting to a medieval mind—given that these chickens are specified to be not hens, but capons. A capon is a rooster, castrated and force-fed to produce more tender meat, an analogy which might reflect badly on Jason and our unnamed good man.

Finally, identifying Jason, the only man involved in a double legend, as the root of false lovers reinforces the ineffectiveness of these women's martyrdom. If they are dying or suffering for their lovers, it is ultimately ineffectual. The narrator may very well have added that Hysipyle "deyede for his love, of sorwes smerte."<sup>264</sup> Indeed, the use of the personal pronoun suggests that she dies specifically for Jason rather than any abstract ideal of love, but her death doesn't prevent Jason from continuing unimpeded to seduce and abandon Medea.

Even the honest men in the *Legend* fall short of the celestial bridegroom. They are not Christ, after all, and do not have his power. This is clearest with Hypermnestra, whose legend most resembles a *passio*. She defies her father and cleaves to the bridegroom, a gesture evocative of St. Juliana or the more contemporary Christina of Markyate. However, her act of defiance goes unrewarded. Lyno flees, leaving Hypermnestra to be captured and imprisoned by her father:

This Lyno swift was, and lyght of fote,  
And from his wif he ran a ful good pas.  
This sely women is so weik- Allas! —  
And helpless, so that or she fer went,  
Hire crewel fader did hire for to hente (2709-2715).

The text characterizes him as light and swift of foot, but omits all other virtues. Lyno has no power to send angels to succor Hypermnestra in prison, to shatter the walls with lightning or even grant her swift feet of her own. Only in *The Legend of Good Women* does a would-be saint's refusal to yield result in her Christ-figure spouse escaping through the window and leaving her behind to die.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Chaucer *Legend* 1579

Beyond the inability of the men in the *Legend* to be bridegrooms, they cannot even truly be effective torturers. Each man has his own origin text, derived from original sources or retellings thereof. Jason is the hero of the *Argonauticon* and Theseus surfaces as a distinguished king and statesman in *The Knight's Tale*. Aeneas, for his part, presents the most vivid example of this. Although as Sanderlin notes, Chaucer downplays the epic nature of Aeneas' tale "by minimizing—almost omitting—Aeneas' Roman destiny and the sentiment and pathos with which he invested it" in *The Legend of Good Women*, a contemporary medieval audience would have been as familiar with this story as any of the others.<sup>266</sup> Indeed, Mercury's commanding Aeneas to sail and the high cost of Roman destiny that Virgil depicts fits neatly into the hagiographic idea of alternate authority. Rome must be founded; the behests of the gods override whatever promises Aeneas may have made to Dido.

Finally, if these women die neither for their own lovers nor for the concept of love, then perhaps they die for Love, the personified deity of the prologue. At first, it aligns the tales with hagiography. At best, though, Cupid is bumbling and a poor reader. At worst, he is a tyrant. His powers are limited; he is unable to transcend the frame narrative and intervene on behalf of his saints. The prologue works hard to discredit him as an authority figure. Finally, the reward for these saints seems not to be Heaven or attendance on Alceste, but an unfinished legend written by a constrained and despairingly bored narrator. Without the possibility of redemption, his saints' suffering lacks purpose. Even when these texts hew too closely to hagiography, they end by revealing the gap between the classical source texts and generic restrictions the texts struggle to adhere to. Rather than abject

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<sup>266</sup> George Sanderlin, "Chaucer's 'Legend of Dido': A Feminist Exemplum," *The Chaucer Review* 20, no. 4 (Spring 1986): 331.

failure, however, these gaps point to the possibility of a space in-between, where heroines such as Philomela, modeling themselves on Alceste, are able to find ways to communicate. Bound and constricted by a fixed narrative moment, they nevertheless find a way to speak.

Alceste provides a model for this kind of liminal speech in the Prologue.<sup>267</sup> The Prologue, although not hagiography itself, primes the reader to expect hagiographic material as well as its eventual destabilization.<sup>268</sup> It dramatizes the tension between lived experience and written text as well as multiple methods of reading, some fundamentally flawed. This discussion begins immediately, in the opening lines of the Prologue, as the narrator cites Heaven and Hell as an example of knowledge that “by assay there may no man it preve” and ultimately concludes that “Wel oughte us thane on olde books leve / There as there is no other assay by preve”. (587-631) Besides immediately placing the text within a Christian context with its invocation of Heaven and Hell, the text establishes a clear delineation between the knowledge one should gather from lived experience and

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<sup>267</sup> Which prologue should be accepted as the most “authentic” is a debate that has yet to be resolved in the scholarly community. For the purposes of this paper, I am relying on the G prologue in general, particularly because of its expansion of Cupid’s diatribe. The Riverside Chaucer contains an overview of the dispute, 060-1061. For instance, Joseph A. Dane suggests that the G prologue is indebted to scribal error. “The Notions of Text

and Variant in the Prologue to Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*: MS Gg, lines 127–38,” *Publications of the Bibliographical Society of America* 87 (1993): 65–80. M.C. Seymour wonders if the revisions to G can be considered authorial revisions (“Fallacies”) while Burt Kimmelman upholds that very position. Burt Kimmelman, ““Than Motyn We to Bokys’: Writing’s Harvest in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*,” *Journal of the Early Book Society* 3 (2000): 1–35. Delany also offers her analysis in *Naked Text*, 34–43.

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the knowledge for which one should trust in “olde books”—namely, that knowledge that is unobtainable otherwise. But which books? The narrator insists that that it is best to:

trowen on these olde aproved storyes  
Of holynesse, of regnes of victoryes,  
Of love, of hate, of other sondry thynes,  
Of which I may nat make rehersynges (21-24)

The presence of “aproved” is complicated; it suggests not that all old stories are worth believing, only the ones that have been tested, investigated or examined. The word suggests an unspecified agent doing the testing or the examining. These old books, rather than descending *ex nihilo* have been carefully selected and cultivated—perhaps even sanctioned or endorsed by an authority—which opens the possibility of questioning that authority’s methods. This possibility will become more important as the Prologue continues, given that the authority figure the narrator encounters next—Cupid—has been read by many scholars as lacking not only wisdom but also reading skills. Moreover, the narrator gives a long list of topics—including love and “holynesse,” which potentially gestures towards the hagiographic nature of the legends—but notes that there are other topics about which he “*may nat make rehersynges*” (*italics mine*). He *can*; the narrator is fully capable of doing so, but he may not. He lacks permission, alluding again to an unseen authority and raising questions as to what has been left out because of their dictates.

At first, however, this tension between lived experience and written text is understated, and the pressures imposed by any endorsing authority remain implicit. For the moment, the narrator inhabits the divide relatively successfully; he is a lover of books who nevertheless is able to be seduced from his study “in the joly time of May” to



indulge in the lived experience of springtime and his devotion to the daisy.<sup>269</sup> However, as Catherine Sanok notes, such distinction becomes immediately complicated as “we soon see that [the narrator’s] appreciation of [the daisy] is determined by his reception of French marguerite poetry, thoroughly undermining the neat opposition between the epistemologies of literature and of experience he had drawn earlier,” a complication occurring in the first thirty lines of the poem.<sup>270</sup> Such cross-contamination becomes even more pertinent when the narrator discovers that the daisy is in fact actually not only a woman, Alceste, but also a woman who further undermines his distinction between knowledge obtained from books and from experience, since she does in fact, have lived experience of Hell, or at least the Roman underworld.

Echoes of God and Christ surface in the descriptions of both Cupid and Alceste as well, thereby transferring this same fluidity of genre and expectation to the texts from which they are drawn and the texts to which they aspire. Both classical creations, they nevertheless contain devotional aspects. The poem associates both Cupid and Alceste with the sun, a symbol of Christ—Cupid because he is crowned with one and Alceste through her alter-ego the daisy, which resembles the sun and apocryphally draws its name from it. Yet the text also downplays and complicates the parallel. Cupid’s wings are “aungellych,” angel-like rather than an actual angel’s and “his gilte heer” is crowned, although only in the F prologue, “with a sonne / instede of gold, for hevynesse and

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<sup>269</sup> Chaucer, *Legend* 38.

<sup>270</sup> Sanok, “Hagiographically” 331. Chaucer’s debt to marguerite poetry is first noted by JL Lowes “The Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* as Related to the French Marguerite Poems, and the *Filistrato*,” *PMLA* 19.4 (1904), 593-683. See also, more recently, Lisa Kiser. *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and The Legend of Good Women*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983. 23-24, 44 and Kiser, Lisa J. *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and The Legend of Good Women*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983. 116-120. For a longer discussion of the French poems to which Chaucer may be indebted, see James I. Wimsatt. *The Marguerite Poetry of Guillaume De Machaut*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970.

weight.”<sup>271</sup> The association of guilt with the sun gives an impression of artificiality and falseness, perhaps only reinforced by the fact that Cupid wears silk embroidered with “green greves / in-with a fret of rede rose-leves” instead of actual plant material.<sup>272</sup>

Additionally, Lisa Kiser notes that the narrator’s devotion to Alceste uses language similar to devotional verse addressed to the Virgin Mary in addition to her Christ-like resurrection and comparison to the sun.<sup>273</sup> However, even as the narrator reveres her, these similarities also draw attention to the ways in which Alceste fails to be Christ-like. Rather than ascending from Hell by her own power, as Christ does after the Harrowing, Alceste must be rescued. The daisy is only an echo of the true “day’s eye,” the sun itself. Even before reaching Love’s Legendary, the elements of Alceste and Cupid that make them like Christ but not quite identical to Christ prepare the reader to see how something that looks Christian (or hagiographic) does not always have to be so. The generic (or sartorial) cues do not always point in the right direction.

Even as she occupies this space between lived experience and learned authority, between classical heroine and saintly martyr, Alceste is held up as *the* heroine to which all other good women should aspire. She is the first woman we meet and the only one to transcend the individual legends and exist outside of it. When Cupid and Alceste encounter the narrator in the dream vision prologue, each character dramatizes possible readings of the narrator’s persona and literary production.<sup>274</sup> Cupid’s hermeneutics are rigid and focus

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<sup>271</sup> Chaucer, “Legend.” 230-231.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid. 227-229

<sup>273</sup> Kiser *Classical* 47.

<sup>274</sup> As Robert Payne points out, this is the narrator most closely identified with the historical Geoffrey Chaucer in all of his dream visions, but this is still not to say that conflation between the narrator and author is inevitable or even desirable. In fact, the narrator seems mostly unaware of the subtle work that is being accomplished. “Making his own Myth: The Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*” *Chaucer Review* 9 (1975): 297-211.

on exemplarity, while Alceste offers a series of looser alternatives. Upon encountering the narrator, Cupid characterizes him as “mortal fo” no better than a “worm,” citing two particular texts as criminal (G 244,247):

... Thow mayst it nat denye,  
 For in pleyn text, it nedeth nat to glose,  
 Thow hast translated the Romauns of the Rose,  
 That is an heresy ageyns my lawe,  
 And makest wise folk for me withdrawe;  
 . . .  
 Hast thow nat mad in Englysh ek the bok  
 How that Crisseyde Troylus forsok,  
 In shewynge how that wemen han don mis? (G 255-266)

Cupid’s interpretation of the narrator’s texts resists multivocality and reads the particulars of a given text as both generalizable and exemplary, a reading method that hagiography shares. In her analysis, Laura Getty relies on the F prologue for this passage, providing a different but equally telling possibility. In F, the accusatory line reads: “For in pleyn text, withouten need of glose/thou hast translated the Romaunce of the Rose” (F.3300) She suggests that the narrator’s crime is in fact the lack of gloss. He has produced a text that is “plain,” without explicit moralization—an argument which not only highlights the exemplary nature of the readings Cupid seeks but also their potential lack of ethics, given the suspect nature of glossing throughout Chaucer’s oeuvre.<sup>275</sup> Moreover, Cupid already seems to be undermining his own position of authority in regards to this particular text. Besides the general absurdity of dismissing a text as long, complex and multivocal as the *Romance of the Rose* as a monolithic heresy, he then characterizes the “folk” who withdraw from him after reading the *Romance* as ‘wise’

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<sup>275</sup> Laura J. Getty, ““Other Smale Ymaad Before”: Chaucer as Historiographer in *The Legend of Good Women*,” *The Chaucer Review* 42, no. 1 (2007): 53, doi:10.1353/cr.2007.0021.

rather than as foolish, gullible or easily led astray, suggesting that there is perhaps some validity to such a retreat.

In spite of her presentation as an intercessionary figure worthy of devotion, Alceste does neither Cupid nor the narrator any favors. In fact, Alceste's rebuke of Cupid discredits both him and the narrator equally as a source of authority. It also offers a set of elusive and ambiguous potential readings of the narrator's work. As Peter Allen notes, "Love is an extreme reader, seeing not only the page but also the world in black-and-white terms," a tendency for which Alceste not only chides him but also claims is a fault in ruling.<sup>276</sup> She points out that

[a god] shal nat ryghtfully his yre wreke  
Or he have herd the tother partye speke.  
Al ne is nat gospel that is to yow pleyned;  
The god of Love hereth many a tale yfeyned (324-327)

Alceste rebukes the God of Love's reading as well as his anger. She reminds him that "all ne is nat gospel," undermining his interpretation in two separate ways, depending on the interpretation of 'gospel'. Besides the sense of truth, thus suggesting that Cupid could have been deceived, the word 'gospel' could also mean gospel in the specifically religious sense, denoting the teachings or doctrine of Christianity. Not only are the accusations that Cupid has heard potentially 'yfeyned', but *The Romance of the Rose* nor *Troilus and Criseyde* should not be assumed to function as "gospel," religious texts meant to instruct.

To make these assumptions, and to "dampne a man withoute answere or word," Alceste reminds him, "is no maystrye for a lord" and in fact is "lyk tyraunts of Lumbardye" (354, 386-7). Rather than Cupid's strict approach, outlined by the

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<sup>276</sup> Allen, "Reading" 422.

antifeminist tradition and hagiography, Alceste instead offers a series of alternatives, though no one of them are exactly complimentary to the narrator: He may be “nyce” or a fool, who “wrote the Rose and ek Crisseyde / of innocence and nyste what he seyde” (340-345). Another possibility that she suggests is that he was “boden make thilke tweye / Of som persone and durste it not withseye” (346-347). Finally, she reminds Cupid of the other works that the narrator has produced, as if to suggest that the interpretation of a text may change based on its context, citing, among others, *The House of Fame*, *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Parliament of Fowls*. Particularly tellingly, given Cupid’s inclination towards hagiography, she mentions the life of Saint Cecilia and “Orygenes upon the Maudeleyne” (438). These suggestions are multivalent, each possible but none conclusive, exculpating the narrator not only through the actual arguments but also by undermining the decisiveness of Cupid’s single reading.

Alceste’s rebuke of the God of Love does, however, beg the question---if she claims that condemning a man without letting him speak is the act of a tyrant, why then does *she* interrupt our narrator? His defense encompasses roughly 18 lines, but here I focus on the last few, which seem to provoke her answer. The narrator claims:

Algate, God wot, it was myn entente  
to forthere trouthe in love and it cheryce,  
And to be war fro falsnesse and fro vice  
By swich ensauple; this was my meninge. (461-464)

The language that the narrator uses is what provokes Alceste’s interruption that he “lat be thyn arguynge” (465). Rather than rejecting Cupid’s method of interpretation, he also refers to *The Romance of the Rose* and to *Troilus and Criseyde* as “swich ensauple,” thus only disputing the content of the moral, rather than its existence. In fact, I suggest that this language is what provokes his penance, rather than the prior dispute with Cupid,

who has ceded all right to decide what is done with the narrator to Alceste. She is the one who proposes hagiography, the “makynge of a glorious legende / of goode women, maydenes and wyves” (439). This penance is thus both the narrator’s punishment and an answer to Cupid’s style of reading. Because the narrator insists on referring to *the Romance of the Rose* and *Troilus* as exemplary, she condemns him to repeat that error, writing hagiography until it literally falls apart. The failure of the legends also serves as another answer to Cupid, demonstrating the flaws in his interpretive method.

Here in the *Prologue* as well as in the legends themselves, the text struggles between a classical and epistolary source text and its hagiographic structure. The uses of *brevitas* and allusion to sources makes *The Legend of Good Women* structurally hagiographic, haunted by the vision of the *Legenda aurea*. However, it retains the dialogic remnants of the *Heroides*. Primed by both elements, readers of the *Legend* make connections with the sources they know and thus understand the strain under which these tales are functioning. Even if these women could convincingly fit the role, the surrounding text betrays them. While the demand that a Christian martyr die to prove their fidelity is austere and constricting in its own right, a saint who dies has the promise of salvation. At best, Lucretia, Hypermnestra and the rest have the honor of a dubiously composed legend.

Their deity lacks both power and reading skills. Their lovers are false and fail to live up to the comparison to Christ. These two warring impulses—classical and hagiographic—instead work in tandem to pull the text apart. This disunity, this *unweaving* allows for a liminal zone, for ambiguous and diffuse ways of reading. Alceste chastises both Cupid and the narrator, offering layered explanations for the narrator’s misdeeds and

condemning him for replicating Cupid's strict monovocal interpretations. Philomela weaves, bypassing Tereus' expectations for how she might communicate.

Influenced both by hagiography and its classical source material, the *Legend of Good Women* tries to be both and ends up as neither. What to do then, when the genre we expect fails us? When the results are too exhausting or the conventions too restrictive? Chaucer shows us a way out by modeling methods not only of alternative reading but alternative writing as well. Alceste responds to a singular and punitive reading of Chaucer's oeuvre with multiple and overlapping alternate possibilities. The strategy is successful; confronted with plurality—with the idea that “al ne is nat gospel”—Cupid cedes the narrator's fate and ultimately the *Legend* to Alceste. Philomela, raped and mutilated, loses her ability to speak. Nevertheless, she writes around her restrictions. She weaves, a provocative image for a text composed of abbreviated parts, half-included letters and references to multiple sources that the narrator entwines into a whole. Her “lettres” woven “to and fro” are the only successful communication of the *Legend of Good Women*. Procne comes. Philomela lives. And for a reader primed to look for what Chaucer leaves out, Procne and Philomela do not just live. They fly.

“This wyl is in myn herte” : Hagiography in Other Texts

In the *Legenda Aurea*, Jacobus de Voragine tells the story of a saint named Felix, called “Felix *in Pincis*, either from the place where he was buried or because he is reputed to have been killed with styluses...the Church, however, seems to hold that he was a confessor, not a martyr.” From that initial moment of vagueness, the text notes that “Felix had a brother who was also called Felix,” who could, like his brother, destroy pagan idols by blowing on them. Two saints share the same name and a single vita, even though the notes imply this doubling occurs because a church on the Pincio in Rome is dedicated to St. Felix of Nola, suggesting the existence of a St. Felix *in Pincis* and a St. Felix of Nola. In other words, one of these saints probably never existed. Furthermore, while St. Felix *in Pincis* was likely an architectural aberration, even St. Felix of Nola was removed from the liturgical calendar by the Second Vatican Council. Yet the genre seems capacious enough to create at least one saint from whole cloth, creating miracles, a spiritual genealogy, and an appropriately sacred death. Its fluidity allows one life to borrow from another, or indeed, in the case of St. Felix, to give rise to another saint entirely, whose existence seems to be purely literary.

Such borrowing occurs not only between one hagiography and another, but between hagiography and other genres. Many scholars have noted the ways in which vernacular saints’ lives adopt elements from romance, such as the Stanzaic Mary Magdalen’s Marseilles episodes, with its sea voyages, lost and found heir, and clear indication that wealth, if used properly, is not a fault. The white deer of the *Vie de Saint Gilles* resembles many other mysterious animals hunted throughout romance, and the saint himself is described as blond and fair, fitting the requirements of the romance hero



he resembles.<sup>277</sup> Indeed, even the *Legenda Aurea* contains descriptions of the sacred bridegroom which resemble those of romance heroes. Many scholars suggest that vernacular romance drew on saints' lives in an attempt to capitalize on the secular genre's popularity, but hagiography clearly had a substantial popular appeal of its own. In the case of the *Legenda*, over eight hundred copies of the manuscript work survive. When printing was invented, the *Legenda* appeared in more editions than even the Bible. Regardless of the why, however, both genres seem to have borrowed freely from the other.

Throughout these chapters I hope to have unpacked the various reasons why secular genres may have borrowed from hagiography and what effects they may have had, ranging from the simple to the complex. In these case studies, I begin with Sir Gowther, a text which straddles the divide between romance and hagiography so completely that one of its two extant manuscripts ends by identifying Sir Gowther with St. Guthlac of Crowland.<sup>278</sup> Ultimately, though, Sir Gowther begins by identifying a romance concern as its central narrative force: the Duchess of Austria, having failed for many years to produce an heir, rashly prays to have a child any way she can, only to find herself impregnated by a fiend. In many ways, this scenario is akin to the romance motif of the Wish Child or the Devil's Contract, but the text, drawing on romance elements, seems much more interested in exploring the implications of Gowther's fiendish nature. His crimes, the revelation of his parentage, and the manner of his redemption all seem targeted to grant access to hagiographic impulses—namely the ability to rewrite

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<sup>277</sup> "Vie de Saint Gilles." Delbert W. Russel, Jocelyn Wogan Browne and Thelma Fenster. *Verse Saints' Lives Written in the French of England*. Tempe, Arizona: ACMRS, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2012.

<sup>278</sup> E. M. Bradstock, "The Penitential Pattern in *Sir Gowther*," *Parergon* 20 (1978): 3–10. 9.

genealogy. After having won his redemption, Gowther is declared God's son, thereby undoing the Duchess's original infidelity, but the text remains uncertain about the stability of the conclusion it has reached.

My next chapter moves to spiritual autobiography, where Margery Kempe draws on the language of hagiography in order to establish herself in the communities of saints. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, she references and then rivals saints such as Bridget of Sweden and Mary Magdeleine in order to authorize her self-presentation and reject claims that she is heretical or mad. The 'queer family' that she creates, positioning herself as sister, mother, lover and wife to both Christ and the Godhead would not be out of place in a saint's life, and she uses the elements to create a community both within her visions and without. Finally, she draws the layered narratives of a *passio*, in which a single conflict between saint and persecutor becomes a microcosm of the larger apocalyptic struggle between good and evil to interpret the resistance and scorn she encounters from her husband, other townspeople and clerical authorities alike as a form of martyrdom, or suffering for Christ. Ultimately, by enacting her own version of a saint's life, Margery challenges gender and social norms, and uses these expectations to create a space for herself and her devotion.

The *Legend of Good Women* is perhaps the most complex usage of hagiography of the cases I have examined. Like *Sir Gowther*, the text works between two specific textual traditions: classical and hagiographic. Like *The Book of Margery Kempe*, it is also interested in when, where and under what conditions women (or feminine voices, at least) are and are not allowed to speak. However, in this case, the strain between classical intertext and hagiographic expectations becomes more apparent, a strain which I argue is

intentional on Chaucer's part. By pushing classical tales into a hagiographic context--- a square peg into a round hole, as it were---the text opens up gaps through which a partial and limited feminine voice is able to speak. "Al ne is nat gospel," Alceste chides the God of Love in the *Prologue*, and it is indeed through the possibilities of multiplicitous, fluid readings (a possibility much more hagiographic than even Alceste herself might realize) that these classical women of the legends are able to find a way to speak (G326).<sup>279</sup>

What I have hoped to do here, by assembling individual cases of where secular texts drew on hagiography, is to make an overall argument about the influence of saints' lives on other genres. After all, *Sir Gowther*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and *The Legend of Good Women* are hardly the only other texts who draw on hagiographic modes of thinking. Work has been done on *Amis and Amiloun*, *Sir Isumbras*, and *Guy of Warwick*, among the various anonymous romances, as well as on several of *The Canterbury Tales*, including "The Man of Law's Tale," "The Physician's Tale," and "The Clerk's Tale." I conclude here in a gesture towards further lines of inquiry with a brief discussion of the lattermost of these, and suggest that in many ways, the horror of Griselda and Walter's game of brinksmanship can be seen as a case of misreading (and misapplying) hagiographic modes of thinking.

"Ther may no thyng, God so my soule save,  
Liken to yow that may displese me;  
Ne I desire no thyng for to have,  
Ne drede for to leese, save oonly yee.  
This wyl is in myn herte, and ay shal be;  
No lengthe of tyme or deeth may this deface,  
Ne chaunge my corage to another place." (CT 505-511)

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<sup>279</sup> All citations of Chaucer taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).

The lines above from Griselda as she reasserts her loyalty to her husband, Walter, shortly before he sends soldiers to take her daughter away. In many ways, this statement of devotion resembles that of the virgin martyrs, such as St. Margaret's declaration to the Saracens in the *Stanzaic Life of Margaret*:

"I have geve my maydenhed to Jhesu Cryste of heven,  
To kepe it, if His wylle be, for His names seven.

"Jhesu Cryste my Lord, that dydeste for us alle,  
Hyghe Kynge of heven, to Thee I clepe and calle.  
Of my steedfaste herte ne latte me never falle,  
And of my stabylle corage not turne for hem alle."<sup>280</sup>

Both women call upon both their "herte" and "corage," praying to God that their steadfastness does not falter, change or turn. Both women profess obedience and submission to their Lord's will: Margaret acknowledging that her virginity belongs to Christ "if His wylle be." Griselda professes that Walter's will is "in myn herte"—and it is this latter distinction that opens up interesting questions about how hagiographic tropes work in "The Clerk's Tale."

Linking Griselda's suffering to Job's trials in the Bible is not a new idea. It is an idea implicitly suggested by the text itself and discussed by scholars as well. The Clerk reminds his listeners that "Men speke of Job, and moost for his humblesse" before concluding that no man can be as humble as a woman (CT 932). The invocation invites the listeners (in what is indeed a fairly hagiographic move) to consider Griselda as a type of Job, entering this tale into an intertextual web where meaning can shuttle back and forth between the two stories. Indeed, Jill Mann and Ann W. Astell take the Clerk up on

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<sup>280</sup> Reames, Sherry L. "Stanzaic Life of Margaret." In *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*. (Kalamazoo 2003). ll.57-62

his discussion, considering the way Christianity is applied throughout the narrative.<sup>281</sup> Moreover, the Clerk also alludes to the Epistle of Saint James in his conclusion, noting that “He preeveth folk al day, it is no drede” (CT 1154-1155). However, these excerpts point out a dangerous conflation. St. Margaret promises her virginity to Christ; the Epistle of Saint James notes that God undoubtedly tests people. In the case of the Clerk’s Tale, however, Griselda has promised her obedience to Walter, rather than any sort of divine entity—a conflation that the tale can only uneasily resolve.

In a *passio*, both saint and persecutor have their own supernatural authorities to which they can appear. St. Margaret calls upon Christ; Olibrius has the authority of the Roman empire and his own pagan deities. In this case, Margaret engages in two discreet narrative actions—offering obedience to Christ and defiance to Olibrius. However, in the case of the Clerk’s Tale, these character types collapse. Walter functions both as the celestial bridegroom requiring obedience and the pagan tyrant imposing suffering. In many ways, then, Griselda’s obedience to the bridegroom becomes a very unsaintly submission to the tyrant. This conflation produces an unease felt not only by modern readers but apparently also anticipated by the teller, as the clerk hastens to assure us that he does not mean to suggest that all wives ought to behave like Griselda. Even the pilgrim Chaucer himself feels the need to add a similar envoy.

The above discussion is a brief one, which does not do justice to the complexity of “The Clerk’s Tale” or the admirable scholarship that has been produced concerning it,

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<sup>281</sup> Ann W. Astell, “Translating Job as Female,” in Jeannette Beer, ed., *Translation, Theory, and Practice in the Middle Ages* (Kalamazoo, 1997), 59–69; Jill Mann, “Suffering Woman, Suffering God,” in her *Feminizing Chaucer*, 2nd edn. (Woodbridge, 2002), 100–128.

but I hope it offers an illustration of the way many other texts can be read (and reread) in light of the hagiographic modes of thinking they may have imported. The *passio*'s character types reveal the nature of the unease inherent in "The Clerk's Tale." Anxiety about inheritance seeks resolution in spiritual genealogy in *Sir Gowther*. Slander and rumor becomes a form of martyrdom for Margery Kempe, and the gaps between hagiography and classical tradition open methods of speech and freedom in *The Legend of Good Women*. These are some, but hardly all, of the ways forward into texts through following the hagiographic impulse.

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