



PROJECT MUSE®

*Imagining the Sacred Past: Hagiography and Power in Early
Normandy* (review)

David Crouch

Biography, Volume 30, Number 4, Fall 2007, pp. 635-637 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2008.0016>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/232647>

art (277–95, with 15 illustrations) is informative, but I suspect that art historians would also remark on its superficiality. The frontispiece of the “Fall of Satan” from the *Très Riches Heures* of Jean, Duc de Berry, is for some reason inverted (and the inversion is noted), but the result is to show Satan rising, not falling. Since Kelly has set out to debunk the (mostly medieval) new biographers and to rehabilitate Satan’s reputation, the inversion may make sense. We hear echoes of the great debate among scholars of *Paradise Lost* regarding whose side Milton was really on: the Devil’s or God’s. As Stanley Fish has shown, however, the question turns less on texts and authors than on the readers making the interpretations (*Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* [2nd ed., Harvard, 1998]).

On page 229 Kelly helpfully invokes the metaphor of Satan’s *Curriculum Vitae*, a model that in several ways works better than the hypothesis that Satan has a biography. A “course of life” on paper that continues to be updated is exactly the research project that Kelly and a host of other scholars continue to pursue. The documentary record is alive, not the subject itself.

James H. Morey

Samantha Kahn Herrick. *Imagining the Sacred Past: Hagiography and Power in Early Normandy*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007. 256 pp. ISBN 0-674-02443-5, \$49.95.

The potential of hagiographical writings to offer more than just insights into sanctity has long been known. Hagiographies were generated by clerks and religious communities within their social—as well as religious—contexts, and they can insensibly and sometimes deliberately unveil much about their contemporary worlds. This sort of potential is never more tempting to exploit than when the historical record is otherwise slight. Paul Fouracre and Patrick Geary explored Merovingian and Carolingian society in this way some decades ago. There has been a rising number of such studies of late in English, and Samantha Kahn Herrick’s is the second to take Norman hagiography as a principal focus for such a study.

Herrick studies three less well-known Norman works: the *Vitae* of St Taurin of Evreux and St Vigor of Bayeux, and the *Passio* of St Nicaise, a Norman saint particularly curious in that in his imagined lifetime he never actually entered the duchy. Herrick argues for their composition by different authors in much the same era, the third or fourth decades of the eleventh century. They were composed by authors well acquainted with traditions of past Frankish hagiography, working with precious little in the way of historical or legendary material concerning their early Christian subjects. They are

therefore mostly works of pious fiction, and have thus escaped much serious scholarly attention.

Throughout the book, Herrick's arguments are cogent and well constructed. Her writing style is clear and elegant. The book is a delight to read. There are many other things to commend about it. Her command of Norman historiography is considerable, as is also her knowledge of the other hagiographies associated with the duchy. Besides that, she has worked hard to construct a much broader context for her study, comparing her body of texts with others across eleventh-century France. This enables her to observe similarities, such as the concern to establish contact between the heroes of the text and the apostolic era of Christianity, however implausible. She is also able to reach a persuasive conclusion about some singularities of Norman hagiography—for instance, that it had an atypical concern with the conversion process. She puts this down to continuing Norman insecurity in the 1020s and 1030s about the damage done to its religious infrastructure by the Vikings.

There is much to praise and commend in this admirable work of analysis. Its most contentious conclusion needs some reasoned assessment, however. As in the work of Felice Lifshitz on which it is partly modelled, there is a presupposition in Herrick's monograph that hagiographers had political concerns as much as a political context. This is at odds with an alternative tradition that sees hagiography arising from clerical communities with ecclesial concerns. Thus the similar rash of hagiographies that appeared out of the religious communities of Southeast Wales in the 1110s and 1120s has been seen as the defensive reaction of the native collegiate churches to changing ecclesiastical structures in their region, not as a response to any political need.

Herrick sees the three works considered here as, in part, a program with a secular concern, a "common vision" to be found in all three. This was the affirmation of early eleventh-century Norman ducal authority in the portrayal of the relationship between the lay power and the saint. In the *Vita* of St Taurin, this is represented by the consul Licinius, whom he converts. In that of Vigor, it is King Childebert, who assists the saint with the strategic grant of a site of pagan worship, which he then suppresses. Since the lay power martyred Nicaise and his companions, the relationship in that third case is not obvious, but it is implied to lie in the territoriality of the *Vita*'s author about the French Vexin, the district in which Nicaise was martyred. The relationship between "prince" and saint is said to be a deliberate construction, putting lay power in partnership with that of the sacral. The political point is that after the saints' day, ultimately the dukes of Normandy will inherit the saints' power and take responsibility for the conversion of Viking Neustria, and so the hagiographies legitimize the power of Rollo's dynasty.

It is a pity that this model is pushed so hard by the author, and is allowed to exclude other possible explanations. It is arguable, for instance, that King Childebert plays so prominent a role in the *Vita* of St Vigor because his association with Vigor would thus boost the monastery of Cerisy, a newly founded house of the 1030s dedicated to Vigor, where the *Vita* was composed. It gave Cerisy some status against longer-established rivals, like Jumièges and Mont-St-Michel, which claimed to possess Carolingian royal diplomata. It is arguable also that the territorial concerns with the French Vexin so evident in the *Passio* of St Nicaise (composed at the abbey of St-Ouen of Rouen) had nothing to do with establishing ducal claims in the region, but more to do with affirming the archiepiscopal authority of Rouen in a region which was politically outside Normandy. The features Herrick identifies can be interpreted equally as the product of ecclesial as political concerns, but these are not considered, even to be argued against. This is not to say that Herrick's theory is not worthwhile, but it is the job of the historian to consider multiple theories, even if it does not make the resulting work easier to read.

The quality of Herrick's work is not in doubt, however. There is, in addition to the text, a learned appendix on the manuscripts and manuscript traditions of the *Vitae* of Taurin and Vigor, and another on the transmission of the *Passio Nicasii*. The endnotes are models of erudition. This book could not be bettered as an example of the new school of early medieval hagiographical criticism.

David Crouch

Ronald Bedford, Lloyd Davis, and Philippa Kelly, eds. *Early Modern Autobiography: Theories, Genres, Practices*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2006. 309 pp. ISBN13 978-0-472-06928-6, \$27.95.

The contributors to this valuable multidisciplinary collection bring to the study of early modern autobiography a rigorous attention to a wide range of early modern autobiographical material. In their introduction, the editors argue that early modern autobiography demonstrates the "constant interplay between two poles: the grand ideals of selfhood . . . and the everyday terrain," and thus the objects of study are drawn from those poles and everywhere in between (2). Underlying the volume is the assertion that, as Lloyd Davis claims in his overview of the critical debates about autobiography, "detailed reflection on social, cultural, and historical factors" is essential to the study of early modern autobiography (23). Indeed, the strength of many of the essays in the collection is their attention to the cultural making of the "self" of self-writing. This volume is rich and full of insights into the construction and