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Genres Reconfigured

Amy Victoria Ogden

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Medieval French Genders and Genres Reconfigured

[The Emperor] had [the saint's] feet pierced with nails in order to cause much more pain. Blood ran from the feet as water from a pipe. These torments were cruel, but God was very courteous; for, know this well, without falsehood, [the saint's] body could feel no pain. As painful as [the torturer] made the torment, God made it very sweet to [the saint].

[The saint] was very beautiful, the flower of all the [young people] of the country [. . .]. [The saint] had blond ringlets, skin as white as milk, laughing eyes, a shapely nose, bright teeth, a beautiful mouth [. . .]. [The saint] had beautiful hands and white fingers. [. . .] Never had Nature made a more beautiful creature. [The saint's parents. . .] dressed [their child] very richly, but [the saint] gave the most beautiful of these clothes to the poor. [The saint] had no thought for clothing, but rather delighted in loving God.

[The saint] says to the pagans: 'Now look at your god whom you adore; it will be thrown into this field and none of you will trust it any more.' [The saint] releases [the demon] and lets it go, making it fly in the direction of the field and, right in front of their eyes, makes it land in the rankest part. With a resounding smack, the demon hits the ground so hard that it shakes.

Stripped of the nouns and pronouns that would definitively identify the sex of the protagonists, the epigraphs above seem nonetheless to offer quite predictable portraits of saintly women and men. In fact, the citations, chosen randomly from saints' Lives, do exemplify the typical language and concerns of early medieval Francophone hagiography.¹ However, they also challenge the most prevalent modern ideas, at least in French literary studies, about the genre's treatments of gender. Consequently, these passages call into question the findings of the many studies of gender in secular literature that treat all religious works as the Other against which they define their subject, as well as the conclusions of those that, while integrating hagiographic and secular literature, still

posit a simple patriarchal hierarchy as the determining logic of medieval culture.

The evidence of hagiography's central role in the literature enjoyed by the Francophone nobility still bears reiteration, despite an increasing number of incontrovertible demonstrations to this effect. First, the indications that remain concerning hagiographers' intended audiences show them to have included both noble laypeople and religious.² Records of patronage are relatively strong for Anglo-Norman works,³ and both insular and continental Lives contain direct and (even more abundantly) indirect references to their audiences' literary tastes. Denis Piramus is not alone in his well-known boast that he can provide more delightful entertainment than that furnished by Marie de France or *Partonopeus de Blois*: Gautier de Coinci, for one, similarly implies that his *Vie de sainte Cristine* is superior to *Renart*.⁴ Many more Lives, including those in the epigraphs above, appropriate the same techniques and characterizations as romance without explicitly citing their intertexts.⁵ Second, the numbers of Lives and of manuscripts attest to the genre's importance relative to secular texts. There are approximately as many extant saints' Lives as there are romances, and quite likely more: the most recent tallies list 278 Lives⁶ and over 200 romances;⁷ the most popular of the Lives, the *Vie de sainte Marguerite*, survives in fourteen distinct versions, in over 100 manuscripts of the most popular of these versions, and in translations into most contemporary languages (some multiple times), including back into Latin,⁸ while 310 manuscripts and the translations into three languages remain of the most popular romance, the *Roman de la Rose*.⁹

The extent to which modern scholarship concerning mainstream medieval French culture has disregarded hagiography's prominence also merits substantiation. Nearly ten years ago, Simon Gaunt remarked that the neglect of hagiography is symptomatic of a larger problem:

The understandable preference of modern readers for genres which their own aesthetic and ideological predilections render accessible distorts their view of medieval culture. As every art historian, historian or medieval Latinist knows, the Middle Ages were deeply Christian, yet all too often students and critics of vernacular literature focus on the chivalric and courtly margins, thereby failing to appreciate the centrality of the dominant Catholic culture. [. . .] Modern views of medieval vernacular writing are skewed by the marginalization of hagiography.¹⁰

Ogden: The Centrality of Margins / 3

Almost a decade later, Michel Zink can still echo Gaunt's comments:

Une présence habite le Moyen Âge, lui impose sa marque et s'offre au regard de quelque point de vue qu'il se pose sur lui: celle du christianisme et de l'Église. Tous ceux qui étudient cette période placent le christianisme au centre de leurs préoccupations, non par choix, mais par nécessité [. . .]. Seuls les historiens de la littérature et les philologues ont, depuis toujours (c'est-à-dire depuis la naissance de leur discipline), une attitude différente. [. . .] Ils n'ont de cesse qu'ils n'aient délimité une littérature "profane", échappant autant qu'il se peut à la contamination religieuse.¹¹

The current situation may not be quite as bleak as Zink's criticism indicates, but we French scholars are far from being able to say with the historians that "Not only have hagiographic texts received frequent, close scrutiny from medievalists for years, but they have moved from the periphery to the center of the scholarly enterprise."¹² The listings in the *International Medieval Bibliography* offer one measure of recent scholarly interests: for the past five years, this database has recorded four studies that include the *Vie de saint Alexis*, while thirty-five discuss *Érec et Énide*; for the same period, the *MLA Bibliography* lists twenty studies that include any *one* of the fifty early Lives as a search term, while Chrétien de Troyes alone garners one hundred and forty hits.¹³ What is perhaps of even more concern is that we are passing this unbalanced picture of the period on to our students. There is, for instance, no modern English or French translation of the *Vie de saint Alexis* currently in print as an independent text.¹⁴ Would we accept the disappearance of a teachable version of Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette* as easily? In fact, of the fifty Lives written in the twelfth or early thirteenth centuries, I have been able to locate only twenty full editions and eight full translations into modern French or English published in the last fifty years. Introductory surveys also continue to present an image of the Middle Ages that relegates hagiography to the initial margin—that obligatory first chapter entitled "oldest monuments of the language"—from which one would never imagine that the thirteenth century was the height of independent verse Lives. For example, Jean Dufournet and Claude Lachet's recent anthology, *Littérature française du Moyen Âge*, which proclaims itself "tout à fait représentatif d'une littérature de cinq siècles,"¹⁵ begins with "Premiers textes et vies de saints," including five (exclusively male) saints' Lives

(Alexis, Gilles, Thomas Becket, Brendan, and Eustache) for a total of 45 pages, and then moves on to 423 pages of “Romans.”

The following remarks focus on gender studies scholarship, because this research offers a representative subset of the current state of Francophone hagiographic studies. Even more importantly, it suggests the possible contributions hagiographic studies may make both to literary studies of medieval French culture in general and to investigations that begin from a predominantly historical, theological or sociological perspective.¹⁶ As we might expect from Gaunt’s and Zink’s comments, those works that take an historical approach, as well as those that focus on early or late or non-French literature, have given substantial attention to questions of gender in religious literature for some time.¹⁷ As valuable as this work is for understanding the contexts of the French corpus, however, it does not provide an adequate substitute for analysis of the texts themselves. There is a tendency in hagiographic studies in general to range widely across cultures and epochs, giving the impression of a genre that changes slowly and in simple relation to socio-political developments. However, such a picture obscures an essential characteristic of the genre. As Brigitte Cazelles argues, “These texts took widely different forms according to their linguistic medium, their date and place of composition, and the type of sanctity that they sought to extol.”¹⁸ Each Life addresses a specific audience in its efforts to function as effective propaganda, and the conclusions we draw from one Life, or even from the Lives of one period or one language, do not necessarily apply to other works. To take one concrete, but brief, example, even a short extract from a small number of the versions of the Life of the transvestite Saint Euphrosyne reflects the variations among the renditions and the dangers of generalizing about the legend.¹⁹ When, after her death, her fellow monks discover the identity of the person they previously thought was a man, their reactions differ—subtly, but significantly—among the following three versions:

Latin (earliest manuscript, eighth century²⁰):

vidissent tam stupendum miraculum glorificabant Deum, qui etiam in femineo sexu fragili tanta miracula operatur.

Vita sanctæ Euphrosynæ col. 651

when they had seen such an astounding miracle, they glorified God, who indeed works such miracles in the fragile female sex.

Ogden: The Centrality of Margins / 5

Old English (late tenth century):

þa hī ða onfundon þæt heo wæs wifhades man þa wuldrodan hī on god, se þe on þam wiflican . and tydran hade swilce wundra wyrcað .

Life of Saint Euphrosyne 318–20

Then when they found that she was a woman, they gloried in God, who in the womanly and tender nature worketh such wonders.²¹

Old French (c. 1200):

en la cele Esmerade alhent a cors corant. / Trois cent en sunt eissut de l'enclostre cantant / qui tot vont a socurs le psalter versilhan / Illoc o[n]t le jor faite tante bele orison.

Vie de sainte Euphrosine lines 1186–89

as one, they [go running] to Emerald's cell. Three hundred came out of the cloister singing, who all go along to help, chanting the psalter. That day they said very beautiful prayers there.

The similarities among these renditions, and among the corpus of transvestite Lives more generally, have led a number of critics to disregard the variations. For example, Jonathan Walker's recent study of the "transtextuality" of medieval transvestite Lives, including ones relating Euphrosyne's tale, argues that "the strongest emphases placed on the sanctity of these saints regularly occur as the stories end, drawing much of their power from the 'correcting' of gendered appearances"; consequently, "As liberatory as they may at first seem, the transvestite characteristics of the sub-genre function as a discursive system through which hagiographers fortify distinct and hierarchical gender categories."²² Based on the author's introductory comments, which suggest that the article will provide a comprehensive survey of all linguistic traditions,²³ we might be tempted to think that these remarks apply equally well to the Greek, Latin and vernacular works, even though Walker cites only Latin and Old English texts in support of his thesis. His statements do seem clearly appropriate with regard to the *vita*, but their applicability to the Old English *Life*—which Walker later cites²⁴—is more questionable; the disparity between the modern interpretation and the Old French *Vie* is even greater. Since both the English and French translators usually follow their source quite closely, their departures from the Latin are at least potentially significant.²⁵ While the English text diminishes the miraculousness of the

saint's double existence, the French text not only elides any suggestion that a woman would naturally be weak, but even confuses the saint's various male and female identities: although the monks now know that Esmerades (Emerald) is Eufrosine, the oblique form of the saint's name in the reference to "la cele Esmerade" conflates the nun who initially took the name Esmerade with the monk who lived in the cell. However subtle it may seem, the progressive erasure of the monks' wonder and of the related idea that Euphrosyne is merely a passive vessel of God's works reflects a substantial shift in the depictions of the saint's gender and in the cultural environments that produced those depictions.²⁶

The reasons for studying hagiography are not simply that it occupied a central place in medieval Francophone culture, that it offers a vast expanse of little-explored territory, or that we French scholars are lagging behind our colleagues in other disciplines to the detriment of our beloved literature's reputation, although these factors alone might make some curious about what they are missing. The prime reason for reintegrating saints' Lives into the literature we study and teach is that, in Cazelles's words, they "constitut[e] a privileged source of documentation for our understanding of the values and ideals that epitomized medieval culture at a given moment of its history."²⁷ Cazelles bases this assertion on the variability of the genre over time, and Gaunt offers authorship and audience as another argument in its favor: because Lives are often written by ecclesiastics for laypeople, they serve as "un lieu privilégié de la conscience publique et ainsi de la représentation des structures et modèles sociaux, dans la mesure où il est l'endroit par excellence où convergent les cultures ecclésiastique et laïque."²⁸ The genre's propagandistic nature provides yet more support for Cazelles's and Gaunt's point: most of the Lives are clearly orthodox and didactic, so they provide a less ambiguous (although far from limpid) commentary on contemporary culture than does, for example, romance, with its ironies. The last, but by no means least, factor that signals hagiography's privileged position is its spiritual content. As Gaunt and Zink argue, "the Middle Ages were deeply Christian," and saints' Lives offer material that aggressively challenges what we generally think we mean by that phrase. Just as scholars have come to recognize that we do not fully understand historical masculinities or men's history, as we assumed when we first tackled women's history,²⁹ we

must now acknowledge that understanding lay society demands a more nuanced comprehension of the mentalities of the medieval Church; just as men and women participate in human history, ecclesiastics and laypeople create Christian culture. For those who fear that acknowledging the period's faith automatically entails excessively allegorical and pious readings, let me clarify that investigating the wide array of spiritualities in hagiography will lead far more quickly to a reassessment of the variability of medieval Christianity than it will to a sterilized interpretation of what Lancelot was really doing with Guenevere's hair. By allowing both mainstream religious and secular literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to be Christian *and* by not employing procrustean measures to fit those works into the varieties of Christianity expressed in non-narrative and non-courtly genres, we will only enrich our comprehension of the culture that produced the full range of texts.

Such a willingness to re-evaluate the forms of Christianity also does not necessitate romanticizing the past—ignoring the very real iniquities, abuses and violent prejudices—but it does involve balancing these aspects with the understanding that, for all its problems, Christianity was the shared faith of the mainstream culture. Emphasizing the hostility between court and Church—or between nobility and peasants or between men and women—to the point of eclipsing the forms of their cooperation risks undermining the problems and verging on parody. Monty Python's medieval Marxist peasant Dennis, who protests “the violence inherent in the system,” is funny in large part because, although he is perfectly correct that King Arthur has achieved power “by exploiting the workers, by hanging on to out-dated imperialist dogma which perpetuates the economic and social differences in our society,” these opinions are incongruous in their setting: few, if any, medieval Arthurian characters express such sentiments.³⁰ The fact that the majority of medieval French participated in the system does not mean that they were not oppressed by it, but it does mean that we cannot say they were *only* oppressed by it unless we deny them any agency of their own.

Simon Gaunt's work offers one of the most thoughtful and influential approaches to the literary study of French hagiographic treatments of gender, and it provides compelling evidence for the ways in which saints' Lives participate in a discourse that can reinforce a patriarchal

system and disadvantage women.³¹ As such, it offers a salutary corrective to anyone who would romanticize medieval social relations. His insistence on the hostility between the Church and lay society and on the misogyny of medieval culture, however, tends to draw attention away from the most provocative insights of his work.³² For example, his suggestion that “Hagiography *seems implicitly* to recognize that gender is a hierarchical construct and that meaning should be distinguished from biology” hints at a theoretical complexity within the genre that, as we will see, has broad implications, but the phrasing precludes the possibility that this complexity might be a conscious feature of the Lives or of the culture that produced them.³³ “The rampant violence and brutality inflicted on women’s bodies” that Gaunt convincingly documents as a significant part of hagiography certainly does not seem to invite us to rethink the patriarchal structure of medieval society, and it may even dissuade the faint of heart from reading the works.³⁴ Indeed, it seems to bolster the findings of other influential critics of both French and non-French hagiography such as Cazelles, who concludes that “French hagiographic romance [. . .] is in effect a violation of the female body,” and Kathryn Gravdal, who argues that “Sexual assault is one of the preferred methods of promotion to female martyrdom in early Christian hagiography.”³⁵ If, however, we recontextualize these violent images by examining them in their full narratives, we begin to see, in brilliant colors, the “fluid and dynamic picture of gender” that Gaunt has shown to be characteristic of medieval French literature more generally.³⁶

Michel Zink proposes one way of reading medieval literature that, combined with Gaunt’s findings, offers the possibility of seeing this fluidity and dynamism as part of the medieval French hagiographers’ conscious project:

n’est-il pas également légitime de ne pas vouloir tout de suite être plus pénétrant ou plus perspicace que les textes que nous avons sous les yeux, de ne pas chercher tout de suite à remonter plus haut ou à creuser plus profond, mais de les prendre, au moins provisoirement, pour ce qu’ils prétendent être, de les prendre au sérieux? [. . .] Lire les textes sur l’horizon de leur foi, c’est donc s’arrêter à ce qu’ils prétendent être et s’accrocher à la surface qu’ils nous offrent. C’est une naïveté. Mais la lecture littéraire, dont Blanchot dit qu’elle “exige plus d’ignorance que de savoir, qu’elle exige un savoir qu’investit une immense ignorance,” ne consiste-t-elle pas à accepter d’être dupe—non pas à être dupe sans le savoir ni, à l’inverse, à faire semblant d’être dupe, mais à accepter lucidement d’être vraiment dupe?³⁷

Ogden: The Centrality of Margins / 9

A credulous reading of hagiography involves believing—at least provisionally—the narrator who announces his or her purpose:

Une raison dire vos vulh, / tot simplement et senz orguilh [. . .] / Onorer vul et Deu
et lui [St. André] / et la pie sainte Marie, / Et de toz sainz la companie
The Passion of St. Andrew lines 1–2, 126–28

I want to tell you something very simply and without arrogance. [. . .] I want to honor both God and [St. André] and the holy Saint Mary, and the whole communion of saints

A credulous reading equally involves taking seriously the narrator's concluding comments:

deprions Sainte Marie, / de cui avons oït la vie, / que Deu deprit, Nostre Sagnor /
a cui ceste ot si grant amor, / qu'i[l] nos pardoist toz nos pechiez
Vie de sainte Marie l'Égyptienne lines 1319–23

Let us beseech Saint Marie, whose Life we have heard about, that she beseech our Lord God, for whom she had such great love, that he might forgive us all our sins

The stated purpose of these Lives—and of the many others that echo these sentiments—is, then, to honor the saints and to tell of goodness in order to convince their audiences that they should remember the saints, have faith in them and pray for the saints' help in this life and the next.

The importance of this framework is that it points outside of the text and outside of the terrestrial context. The hagiographers articulate the specific responses they hope to elicit from the texts' listeners and readers, and these responses involve the audiences' relationship to the dead, whom author and audience believe to be in heaven. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, whose extensive work on Anglo-Norman hagiography has done much to reveal the complexities of medieval gender relations, evokes a metaphor that suggests the importance of this extra-textual segment of the Lives.³⁸ Contrasting the type of Life cited above with narratives written about local British saints, Wogan-Browne uses the image of the diptych to explain the equal importance of the *passio* and the miracle collection that, combined, often make up each of the latter texts. In a parenthetical comment, she then warns that the “*concentration* on only the first half of the diptych in the lives of the better-known

universal saints has obscured some of the relations and functions of saints from literary criticism, and promoted essentialist readings of hagiography as rape and pornography.”³⁹ The implication of Wogan-Browne’s comment is not that the second panel of the diptych is entirely missing from the Lives of the universal saints, and even less that the metaphor does not apply to them at all: she merely says that these Lives concentrate on the *passio*. If the second panel consists of the stories of the miracles worked by the saints, and if the authors of our Lives seem to conclude by asking their audiences to pray (for miracles), then the “missing” second panel of these Lives exists in the audiences’ faith and their continuing service to the saint (and, presumably, her or his service to them). The very absence of that part of the narrative suggests not its insignificance, but on the contrary, its transcendent nature: like the immortal saint, the narrative does not die, but continues in its perpetual retelling and in the experiences of the audience. In fact, as Evelyn Birge Vitz argues, the continuing participation of the audience is essential:

without us this saint’s life—this hagiographical text [*Alexis*—would not exist. [. . .] Without our veneration of him, he has no legend—from *legenda*, “those things which are to be read” on the saint’s feast day—no story, no existence.⁴⁰

Patrick J. Geary identifies one salient difference between the Middle Ages and the modern era in their perspectives on the relationship between the living and the dead: in the Middle Ages, the dead

did not cease to be members of the human community. Death marked a transition, a change in status, but not an end. The living continued to owe them certain obligations, the most important that of *memoria*, remembrance [. . .]. Omnipresent, [the dead] were drawn into every aspect of life. They played vital roles in social, economic, political, and cultural spheres.⁴¹

If we allow that, to the medieval authors and audiences, the dead—both male and female—held this central and powerful position, and that the primary aim of the narrative is to catalyze the audience’s conversion toward devotion to the saint, then the significance of the *passio* section—and of its depictions of gender relations—begins to shift. On the one hand, the force with which hagiography depicts a patriarchal system expresses the orthodox belief that gender roles are divinely determined,⁴² which counter-balances the very unorthodox behavior of

women saints who cross dress or preach in public and of men saints who passively submit to torture and degradation. On the other hand, the hyperbolic depiction of the oppressive constraints of terrestrial life would also seem to function as a clearly persuasive technique to turn the audience away from worldly pleasures. One can hardly say that hagiographers resolutely endorse any aspect of terrestrial existence: this world, for them, is one of pain, suffering, false pleasure and only the occasional, ephemeral glimpse of eternal bliss. To take a specific example, much of the previous scholarship has been concerned with the bodies of female virgin martyrs and the suffering they endure. Like a panel of a literal diptych, the Lives frequently portray violence against female bodies in vivid, if not lurid, colors and without apparent depth. Although these passages do seem to invite comparisons to pornography,⁴³ Wogan-Browne shows that torture serves as an earnest demonstration of the texts' spiritual message: "The violence of saints' lives," she says,

stems structurally from the articulation of transcendence [. . .]. The premiss of the genre is not that it opposes heaven and earth and Christian and pagan in order to represent torture, but that it represents torture in order to distinguish revenge and sacrifice, earth and heaven, pagan and Christian.⁴⁴

The body is thus the primary tool for conveying the narrative's meaning, which contributes to the saint's *imitatio Christi*. Just as Christ's passion demonstrates what his words did not fully communicate, the graphic image of the saints' suffering—or more frequently, the painless destruction of their bodies—reinforces and ultimately proves both the truth of their verbal expressions of faith and the inherent violence and cruelty of this life.⁴⁵

The depiction of the saints' terrestrial experiences does, then, inscribe them in a hierarchical system, but the significance of the elements of that system is far from simple: "At the heart of the *passio*, the combat is a contest not of strength, but of meanings."⁴⁶ The meaning of the torture involves the physical frailty of womankind, but also the inherent pain of all terrestrial existence, the capacity of the saintly soul to overcome that frailty and withstand that pain through faith, and the fatal incapacity of nonbelievers to see beyond the physical world.⁴⁷ The validity of such a reading of torture becomes even more evident if we cease to consider in isolation the arguably marginal hagiographic

grouping of female saints.⁴⁸ If we turn, at long last, to the passages cited above as epigraphs, we find that the body more generally—whether male or female—would seem to convey this common set of spiritual meanings in medieval Francophone hagiography. In fact, Simund de Freine's description of St. Georges in the first passage resembles Gautier de Coinci's treatment of St. Cristine: both saints suffer penetrating wounds that a courtly God makes sweet to them.⁴⁹ Guillaume de Berneville's St. Gilles possesses emphatically physical beauty, as we learn from the second quotation, which echoes a portrait of St. Marie l'Égyptienne.⁵⁰ Both Gilles and Marie are very "white" (Gilles: "la charn out blanche cume leit," 59; "les deiz blans," 63; Marie: "les orelhes [. . .] / blances," 157–58; "le poitrine / Ert plus blanche ke flors d'espine," 169–70) and "beautiful" (Gilles: "fud mult bels," 55; "la buche bele," 61; "beles mains," 63; "plus bele ren ne fist Nature," 66; Marie: "Ne vit nuz hom plus bele fenme," 154; "bele crine," 156; "Plus bele boce ne vit nuz," 164). Moreover, their descriptions contain decidedly erotic overtones: in a phrase I elided above, Guillaume portrays Gilles as having "lungs les costez, grelles les flancs; / mult out large la furcheüre" (a long torso, slender waist [. . .] and powerful thighs),⁵¹ while the anonymous *Marie* author describes his saint's breasts ("si avoit beles mameles / Mut bien seans petiz et beles," 173–74). There are also differences between the men and the women: the references to Cristine's breasts, to a bed and to roses (ll. 1650–52; 1704–16) support Gaunt's contention that female saints' passions tend to be more explicitly erotic.⁵² Nonetheless, the similarities are quite striking, and together, the parallels and oppositions hint at the complexity of hagiographic genders.

The fate of Georges and Gilles is no easier than that of their spiritual sisters: Georges is mortally mutilated and resurrected not once but three times before finally dying and receiving his heavenly reward, while Gilles's beauty is eventually marred by an open wound that will not heal. The particular nature of these sufferings again calls attention to the gender hierarchy in a way that limits its meanings, this time almost entirely to the terrestrial plane.⁵³ The penetration of Georges's feet fits Gaunt's category of "oblique" sexual violence against women, while Gilles's open gash recalls the highly feminized depictions of Christ's wound in contemporary iconography and theological texts.⁵⁴ Recent scholarship suggests that this type of gender slippage is the rule

rather than the exception. For example, Robert Mills has argued for the feminization and possible queering of the images of certain male martyrs, while Samantha J.E. Riches has distinguished—usefully—between demasculinization and feminization, contending that artists demasculinize St. George in order to identify him as a third gender: virginal.⁵⁵ Within French studies, Emma Campbell has cogently demonstrated, in separate articles, that St. Alexis’s gender is unstable and highly relational, and that, in the *Vie de sainte Fey*, Simon of Walsingham disrupts the boundaries between audience and characters as well as between male and female characters.⁵⁶ Nor is St. Faith the only female saint who enjoys such fluidity: in the last of the epigraphs above, the flogging that St. Juliana gives the devil shows a virile force rivaling that of any chivalric hero. In fact, the trouncing goes on for a good quarter of the *Life’s* 2,000 lines.⁵⁷ As Vitz has demonstrated, Juliana is not alone in her aggressive behavior, and even female saints who use only words frequently wield them as powerful weapons.⁵⁸ The combination of these types of fluctuation and the overdetermined stability of gender hierarchies defined in earlier scholarship substantiate Gaunt’s suggestion that “Hagiography in many ways treats gender metaphorically.”⁵⁹ The hagiographers depend on clear gender categories in order to transform them into effective metaphors: the typical association of femininity and flesh, once anchored firmly in Georges’s and Gilles’s male bodies, conveys the saints’ ability to transcend their earthly identities. Such an uncoupling of sex and gender is a hallmark of medieval Francophone hagiography and, it would seem, of medieval religious literature and art more generally.⁶⁰ However, the limits to this fluidity are equally important: even though the hybridity of these saints’ genders articulates their heroism—Juliana’s faith gives her the strength of men, while Georges’s and Gilles’s faith allows them to express their feminine humility—it certainly does not serve a directly exemplary function. Literal imitation, such as Peter Waldo’s heretical performance as St. Alexis, is not the goal.⁶¹ The hagiographers are not advocating transvestism, effeminacy among men, or even the widespread rejection of marriage, even though all of these characteristics convey the saints’ extraordinary natures.

This distinction between exemplarity and heroism calls attention to the profoundly marginal identity of all saints: from a terrestrial, political standpoint, their behavior relegates them to the edges of society,

while from a spiritual perspective, it locates their identity in the overlap between the human and the divine. Mills points out that this terrestrial and political standpoint is as much that of the Church as that of lay authorities, as evident in iconographic depictions that feminize torturers or associate them with deviant sexualities.⁶² Saints are, then, at once antiheroes, if seen purely in their terrestrial context, and heroes, in their divine attributes. Their essential liminality points to a fundamental and paradoxical quality of hagiography: namely, the centrality of margins. We see this combination of center and margins not only in the saints' hybrid identities, but also in their role in the narratives. Since the primary stated purpose of the Lives is to inspire the audience's increased faith in God, the saint is not the true protagonist but merely God's foil; for his part, God remains on the margins of the narratives while he is at the center of the texts' significance.⁶³ Even the structure of the Lives articulates the instability of center and margins. The concluding prayer, located on the final edge of the text, functions as the central focus of the narrative, the expression of the narrative's meaning. We can see the narrative, then, merely as a prologue to the real drama that begins with the audience's responding prayer to the saint and subsequently plays out in their relationships to good and evil. Perhaps part of the reason that many modern critics have marginalized the spiritual goals of saints' Lives is that the expressions of the audience's and the author's faith themselves usually remain here on the margins of the narrative: that is, in the prologues and epilogues rather than within the drama.⁶⁴ To return to the metaphor of the diptych, the concluding prayer is the sometimes ornate, but more frequently mundane—and occasionally even invisible—hinge that connects the two panels of the Life. Most of the time it is hardware more than art, but it is structurally essential as the connection between the textual and spiritual segments of the Life.

These structural and thematic inversions and this fascination with the margins, with marginal figures and with multiple, fluid and unpredictable genders constitute the last and perhaps most enticing of the arguments for studying hagiography as an integral part of medieval Francophone literature. My contention that the interests of medieval hagiographers and modern critics overlap to such an extent may betray an excessively credulous reading of these texts.⁶⁵ However, recent

scholarship on the multitude of genders in secular literature,⁶⁶ together with the hagiographic scholarship that shows the common audience of religious and secular literature as well as that which demonstrates the gender fluidities within hagiography, would seem to establish a promising pattern. Given this mounting body of evidence, it is becoming increasingly difficult not to question our current comprehension of the relations between ecclesiastical and lay conceptions of gender and, more generally, between ecclesiastical and lay cultures. Until more scholars look beyond the violence and prejudices of saints' Lives—but without forgetting these aspects that, after all, the genre shares with all other medieval literature—we cannot determine the range of perspectives within orthodox Christianity; consequently, we are unable to judge the orthodoxy or rebelliousness of secular literature. Moreover, until greater numbers of scholars are willing to take hagiography and its stated aims more seriously, we are inadvertently perpetuating the misogynists' traditions by dismissing as inferior the genre with the highest ratio of female protagonists. Finally, until we delve more deeply into these tales of transvestites, patricides, dragon-slayers, animal rights advocates and ecstatic lovers, we—and our students—are missing out on a whole tradition of texts that are delightfully readable and shockingly modern.

University of Virginia

Notes

¹“Francophone” here signifies “expressed in any one of the dialects of French.” Although the term has generally been reserved for modern cultures, it provides a necessary conceptual tool for discussing medieval cultures. Most significantly, it suggests the close ties among French language writings without imposing on them the cultural hierarchy implied by “Old French.” For example, just as French Québécois literature is both closely related to and distinct from the culture of France, Anglo-Norman literature deserves consideration within the contexts of both the French language corpus and the antagonism between France and England. Politics, geography and negotiations with various indigenous cultures influenced medieval Francophone writers just as much as they do modern writers of French.

²These categories, of course, are far from fixed, since noble laypeople did enter monasteries, had relatives there and were sometimes educated there. See Elliott who makes a strong argument for cooperation between religious and lay composers (*The Vie de saint Alexis in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* 74); the relationships between the works they created together and the manuscripts that survive today remain to be worked out.

³Wogan-Browne, “‘Clerc u lai’” 61–63, and esp. 75 n.3 and 78 n. 5.

⁴Denis Piramus, *La Vie seint Edmund le Rei* lines 25–65; Gautier de Coinci, *La Vie de sainte Cristine* lines 1–23. The *Vie des set dormanz* also begins by dismissing Ovid’s fables, Tristram, Galerun, Renard and Hersente (lines 51–55).

⁵See, for example, the studies of courtly language and intertexts in Clemence of Barking’s *St. Catherine*: Batt, “Clemence of Barking’s Transformations” and Robertson, “Writing in the Textual Community.”

⁶Based on Thiry-Stassin’s “L’hagiographie en Anglo-Normand” and Leurquin-Labie’s “Inventaire général des légendes en langue d’oïl et en franco-provençal.” These numbers record independent Lives and therefore do not include the several French translations of Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda aurea*.

⁷Kelly, *Medieval French Romance* xiii–xxiii.

⁸Joly, “La Vie de sainte Marguerite,” 198; “Sainte Marguerite, Vie de” *Dictionnaire des Lettres françaises*; Keller, *La Vie de sainte Marguerite* 11, 14.

⁹Blamires and Holian, *The Romance of the Rose Illuminated* xviii; Brownlee and Huot, “Introduction” 1.

¹⁰*Gender and Genre* 180.

¹¹*Poésie et conversion* 1.

¹²Geary, *Living with the Dead* 10.

¹³*International Medieval Bibliography*, Upload July 2004; *MLA International Bibliography*, 4 Aug. 2004 update.

¹⁴An English translation of the *Vie de saint Alexis* by Nancy Vine Durling appears in Head, ed. *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology* (New York: Garland, 2000) 317–40.

¹⁵*Littérature française du Moyen Âge* 32. See also Boutet, “Les premières œuvres en français” in *Histoire de la littérature française du Moyen Âge* (75–76), for the traditional references to *Eulalie*, *Léger*, *Foy* and *Alexis*, of which the last “atteint pour la première fois une véritable dimension littéraire, avec un art maîtrisé et des dimensions respectables (625 vers)” (76).

¹⁶Among the book-length studies that fall, for the most part, outside the scope of this article, but that are particularly helpful for reconsidering the place of hagiography in medieval French literature, are the following: Robertson’s *The Medieval Saints’ Lives* places the Lives in the literary and historical contexts of the Latin tradition and of contemporary culture; in addition to several chapters on gender, the essays in Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Szell, *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, provide not only literary, but also sociological, historical and theological perspectives on sanctity in a number of European traditions; Laurent’s *Plaire et édifier* offers a detailed analysis of the main structural and thematic components of the early Anglo-Norman corpus; Gehrke’s *Saints and Scribes* investigates the varying rationales of different manuscript compilations that include hagiography; the essays in Krause, *Reassessing the Heroine*, range over a variety of religious and secular genres, offering many suggestive juxtapositions; Kay’s *Courtly Contradictions* demonstrates the usefulness of integrating saints’ Lives into more general literary studies.

¹⁷The interdisciplinary bibliographies in Philippart’s *Hagiographies* provide very useful starting points for exploring this vast critical corpus; Head’s introduction to his *Medieval Hagiography* offers another good overview (xiii–xxxviii). Henriot, “Texte et contexte,” summarizes historians’ contributions, published since 1990, to the study of pre–fourteenth-century Latin

Ogden: The Centrality of Margins / 17

hagiography. Although the tradition in English studies is particularly strong, Wogan-Browne notes its tendency to neglect Anglo-Norman hagiography; "Powers of Record" 74.

¹⁸*The Lady as Saint* 3. See also Geary 23–27.

¹⁹Thompson, "The Legend of St. Agnes," offers a more developed example of this approach.

²⁰Société des Bollandistes. *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina*. The version is BHL 2723.

²¹Skeat's translation. All other translations are mine.

²²"Transtextuality" 77.

²³See 74–78; Walker only identifies his corpus as "a group of medieval Christian saints' lives . . . roughly thirty-five sacred biographies" (74).

²⁴"Transtextuality" 109.

²⁵Donovan, 158; Hill, 163–65. It is often difficult to determine, since we have not yet identified the specific source manuscripts, whether or not an innovation belongs to the vernacular author; however, used cautiously, editorial patterns can reveal something about what did and did not appeal to translators and to later copyists.

²⁶Geary in fact alludes to the Life of St. Euphrosyne as an example of the importance of looking at manuscript contexts and audience (20). Walker's assertion that the transvestite Lives were "written by men for men in monastic settings" (102) appears to be accurate for only some of the versions. For example, Davis notes that "Only three Greek manuscripts of the *Life* [of St. Mary/Marinos] survive, all in the monastic libraries of Mount Athos in northeastern Greece [which . . .] are especially known for their rigidly exclusive policy toward women"; "Crossed Texts" 3. In France, however, Clugnet shows that Marina's cult may have existed in a Parisian diocese as early as the eleventh century; *Vie et office de sainte Marine* xxiii–iv. Frantzen remarks on the lay patronage of the English version of *Eugenia*; "When Women Aren't Enough" 462.

²⁷*Lady as Saint* 3.

²⁸Gaunt, "Si les anges" 896.

²⁹See Frantzen, esp. 449–50.

³⁰*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, 1975. There are certain similarities between Dennis and the herdsman in the *Chevalier au lion* whose dignified response to Calogrenant's discourteous salutation may indicate a more passive form of resistance against feudal hierarchies.

³¹E.g., Gaunt shows how the combination of physical vulnerability and heroic, but passive resistance in the depictions of female saints reinforces the idea that women's heroism entails submissive acceptance of male violence; as such, the Lives could be used to encourage self-destructive tendencies in women and reinforce men's dominant social position (*Gender*, esp. 228).

³²*Gender and Genre*, in particular, casts the Church in the role of an aggressor who "attack[s]" (198, 205), interferes with (193), "undermine[s]" (194, 196), "subvert[s]" (196), condemns outright (209), wields "highly manipulative rhetorical strateg[ies]" against and "[seeks] to impose ever more stringent rules on" (198) lay society and its institutions. Cf. also: "If some women profited from the Church's view of virginity and chastity, this is because of the way they used religious symbols and read the texts and images which contained them, *not because the Church was actively trying to help them*" (*Gender* 196, my emphasis). Walker, who acknowledges Gaunt's work as an appreciable influence (78 n.8), extrapolates that "the entire genre of hagiography represents women in varying misogynistic degrees" (104).

³³*Gender* 233, my emphasis. See also Gaunt's provocative study of the *Vie de sainte Eufrosine*, in which he concludes that "the mechanisms by which homosexuality is repudiated guar-

antee and produce a heterosexual matrix but they also *fail to occlude what they seek to repress*"; "Straight Minds" 453, my emphasis.

³⁴*Gender* 196.

³⁵Cazelles, *Lady as Saint* 82; Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens* 21.

³⁶*Gender* 286.

³⁷*Poésie et conversion* 4.

³⁸In addition to the contributions discussed below, Wogan-Browne has also shown that Anglo-Norman writings plentifully record women's active participation in literary culture both as authors themselves and as a public to whom male authors tailored their works. Moreover, she usefully insists on the need to reconsider certain key concepts—such as the relationship between person and property—in medieval thought. See, for example, "Virginity and the Gift" (*Saints' Lives* 57–90).

³⁹*Saints' Lives* 67, my emphasis.

⁴⁰*Medieval Narrative* 141.

⁴¹Geary 2.

⁴²Matter maintains that "there was no theological *debate* per se about the nature of gender in the Middle Ages" and that "Medieval Christianity [. . .] was a cultural construct that informed all aspects of life. Theological issues [. . .] were acted out in daily life not just out of a sense of 'obedience' to a theological structure, but because that was how the natural world was understood;" "The Undebated Debate" 50–51. Kooper's discussion of treatises about marriage from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries ("Loving the Unequal Equal") nuances this generalization—the treatises show the range of theologians' willingness to consider woman's equality to man within marriage—but supports Matter's thesis that the issues of the order of creation and status as image of God (or not) are determining factors in gender relations.

⁴³Citing Gravdal's suggestion of the seemingly pornographic aspects of hagiography (*Ravishing* 24–25), Gaunt reads these scenes as "deeply voyeuristic, dressing up in a pious framework the most horrific attacks on women," leading him to suggest that there is "an element of pleasure implicit in the numerous descriptions of the violation of nubile female bodies" (*Gender* 197–98). Kay (*Courtly Contradictions* 216–31) applies the Lacanian "notion of a zone between the two deaths as the space of the sublime" (218) to a number of *passio* texts about men as well as women and argues that, in Simund de Freine's *Saint Georges*, for example, "it is impossible not to see [the sublime body] also as an opportunity for the enjoyment of violence" (226).

⁴⁴Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives* 108.

⁴⁵See Kay, *Courtly Contradictions* 229, and Vitz, "Gender and Martyrdom" 92–93.

⁴⁶Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives* 106.

⁴⁷See Wogan-Browne, "The Virgin's Tale" 175.

⁴⁸See Gaunt's discussion of earlier studies on the statistics of male:female Lives (*Gender* 185). Although he is right to point out the far greater numbers of male saints' Lives, no scholar seems yet to have worked St. Margaret's popularity (in numbers of versions and manuscripts) into the equation.

⁴⁹"Clouficher li fist les péz / Que par tant fu plus grevéz. / Le sanc hors des péz corut / Cum fait ewe de conduit. / Icil tormenz fu crueus, / Mès trop corteis esteit Deus; / Car, ben sachez sans mentir, / Mal ne pout son cors sentir. / Tut li fait il torment gref, / Deu le fist a lui mult suef;" Simund de Freine, "La Vie de saint Georges" lines 459–68. Matzke notes that the piercing of Georges's feet is particular to this version of the legend (lxxx).

Ogden: The Centrality of Margins / 19

⁵⁰“Li emfes Gires fud mult bels, / la flur des autres damoiseils / de cele terre u il fud nez. / Bloi out le chef, recercelez, / la charn out blanche cume leit, / les olz rianz, le nés ben fait, / cleres les denz, la buche bele. [. . .] / beles mains out e les deiz blans, / lungs les costez, grelles les flancs; / mult out large la furcheüre: / plus bele ren ne fist Nature. / Sur tute ren l’amat li pere, / en grant cherté le tint sa mere. / Mult le vesteient richement, / mais il duné a povre gent / tut le melz de sa vesteüre. / N’aveit pas mis en dras sa cure, / en Deu amer ert sun delit.” Guillaume de Berneville, *La Vie de saint Gilles* lines 55–73. *Vie de sainte Marie l’Égyptienne* lines 149–84.

⁵¹See citation above. “Furcheüre” is literally the forking of the legs, so the passage could also be translated as “he had broad hips” or “he had a long stride.” Nonetheless, the word concentrates on a specifically male trait, on the anatomy rather than its abilities and on the region between waist and knees. See Colby, *The Portrait in Twelfth-Century French Literature* 62, for the translation “thighs.”

⁵²*Gender* 187–92.

⁵³See Vitz’s discussion of hierarchy and its terrestrial boundaries; “Gender” 93.

⁵⁴*Gender* 197. On iconographic gender-bending, see Walker-Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, esp. 102 and 278.

⁵⁵Mills, “Whatever;” Riches, “St George.” See also Kay (*Courtly Contradictions* 226), who notes the sexual quality of George’s tortures, and cf. Vitz (“Gender” 90–91) who discusses and questions the potentially erotic and emasculating nature of the sufferings of several male saints.

⁵⁶Campbell, “Separating” and “Sacrificial,” esp. 112.

⁵⁷“Az paiens dist: ‘Or engardeiz / cest vostres deus cui aoreiz, / en cest compiang jeteiz sera, nuz de vos mais ne s’i fira.’ / Lasche la main, sel lait aler, / enz el compiang lat fait voleir, / tot droit enmi lor olz voiant / l’at fait seoir el plus puant. / Li diables fist un frois teil, / croleir fist terre, mais n’ot meil;” “La Vie de sainte Julienne” 929–38.

⁵⁸Vitz “Gender” 82–85; Thompson points out St. Agnes’s aggressive use of language in her Latin *vita* (366). Uitti argues that “it is the woman saint—at least as she is depicted in the Gallo-Romance texts we have looked at—who keeps alive the fundamentally revolutionary character of Christianity. [. . .] Catherine and Fides, brides of Christ, are more *powerful* than their persecutors.” His specific example of this revolutionary quality—“It is she who undermines historical sequentiality, the seemingly unending, but in fact quite accident-prone, line of genealogical business-as-usual” (“Women Saints” 264)—does seem to be more characteristic of female saints, whose reproductive role as the daughters of the nobility is frequently highlighted; the case needs to be made, however, that male saints may be equally revolutionary in their pacifistic refusal to participate in killing.

⁵⁹*Gender* 232.

⁶⁰Gender seems to offer medieval writers a particularly appealing tool for expressing both the limits of terrestrial experience and the possibilities for transcendence; see my *Hagiography* 71–111.

⁶¹See my *Hagiography* 45.

⁶²Mills 21.

⁶³For example, God appears to Clemence of Barking’s St. Catherine, but in the Life of St. Juliana cited above, only angels transmit his messages to the saint, while in the *Vie de sainte Eufrosine*, he does not appear, although the saint receives instructions from “Sainte Sophie.”

⁶⁴See Winstead’s analysis of internal prayers: hagiographers “were concerned, above all,

with the saint's faith and with her love of God, and they conveyed her devotion through prayers and expository passages that often have little to do with the actual narrative"; *Virgin Martyrs* 23.

⁶⁵Cf. Thompson's more cautious approach: "we need not hypothesize a poet who consciously 'intended' all of these effects in order to see them as successful imaginative strategies" (395); see also Mills (8, 14).

⁶⁶See, in particular, *Gendering the Master Narrative*, cited above, and Farmer and Pasternack, eds. *Gender and Difference*. Pasternack states at the beginning of her own essay in the collection, "It is the argument of this book that even in the Middle Ages, which has in the modern imaginary often represented a period of harmonious Christian ideology, there was no single, fixed idea of the masculine and the feminine as essential qualities"; "Negotiating" 107.

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Ogden: The Centrality of Margins / 23

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