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A Companion to Middle English Hagiography (review)

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The book has no conclusion. The last paragraph of the last chapter dwells on the elusiveness of work's meaning: "Work is always a work in progress . . . true work is an imperfectly realised ideal, a significance, that subsists in the human longing for it." And there the work ends, or rather suspends itself. In adopting the present tense, Masciandaro leaves us with the impression that his final words convey a kind of natural truth about humanity, whose condition is found in their longing for meaningful work rather than idleness. Gower could have no better apologist for his views on the "common little people" whose unwillingness to work at menial tasks deprived Gower of the food owed to his own table while he got on with the higher business of writing.

And thereby hangs the main problem. The *Voice of the Hammer* is undoubtedly a thought-provoking book with some very clever ideas, which are beautifully expressed. But as a PhD thesis it really needed more revision for the author to develop, and above all clarify, his purpose. I feel like Gower myself—get back to work, your necessary labor is not finished yet!

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A COMPANION TO MIDDLE ENGLISH HAGIOGRAPHY. Edited by Sarah Salih. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006. Pp. x + 182. \$85.

Middle English hagiography is an unwieldy narrative tradition. It encompasses large legendaries, sermon cycles, individual legends in verse and prose, as well as a range of short forms such as lyrics and prayers. Earlier surveys of the genre include Charlotte D'Evelyn's chapter in the *Manual of Writings in Middle English* and Manfred Görlach's *Studies in Middle English Saints' Legends*, both of which catalogue the central texts. Sarah Salih's *Companion to Middle English Hagiography* offers us another kind of introduction, one which approaches the tradition from a range of perspectives and methods; as befits a Companion, it serves as much as an introduction to critical work on saints' lives as it does to the genre itself.

Salih's introduction helpfully locates Middle English hagiography in terms of late medieval religious and social practices. This provides both a warrant and a method for reading saints' lives as cultural texts, imbedded in material, ritual, and social life. And it follows one of the signal decisions that Salih has made in organizing the volume: to present Middle English hagiography in a synchronic framework—with essays on the relationship between legends and other aspects of cults (Samantha Riches), manuscripts and audiences that read them (Mary Beth Long), some of their central thematics (Claire M. Waters on power and authority, Robert Mills on violence, and Anke Bernau on gender and sexuality), their relationship to historiographic traditions (Katherine J. Lewis) and to other narrative forms (Matthew Woodcock). This is an important departure from the way the genre is usually defined: that is, through its long history, from founding texts such as the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, to monastic *vitae* and pastoral legendaries such as the *Legenda Aurea*, with vernacular texts understood as late iterations of this tradition. This diachronic model, with its attendant methodologies, especially reading vernacular legends against Latin "originals," is one reason vernacular legends have been marginal to the study of history, as Katherine Lewis argues in her contribution to the volume, and—for somewhat different reasons—why they remained marginal to Middle English studies until recently. Read in the context of the history of the genre, saints' lives can seem separate from history itself, preserved by their form

and function from a more dynamic relation to the present they inhabit. Or they can seem merely responsive to that present moment, reflecting changes in audience, social function, or institutional affiliation, rather than actively shaping them. Salih's *Companion* well demonstrates how productive a broadly synchronic definition of the tradition is, though this framework also makes the absence of Anglo-Norman hagiography (excluded for practical reasons) still more regrettable.

The first two chapters address material contexts for English saints' lives. In a move that may strike some readers as odd, others as refreshing, Samantha Riches argues against the significance of hagiography, which "can be unduly privileged by the simple fact of its survival and publication," over material and ritual elements of saints' cults that do not survive. Her essay discusses the cults of St. Edmund of East Anglia at Bury St. Edmunds and St. George in Norwich, with attention to saints' lives only in so far as they seem to document cult practices (e.g. the reference to St. George plays in Alexander Barclay's legend). The essay depends far too heavily on a confident distinction between "text" and "context" and a naive assumption that the historical "context" of medieval cult is stable and transparent. So, for example, two images of St. Edmund's martyrdom are read in thematic terms (he is clothed in one, emphasizing his "kingly dignity"; naked in another, emphasizing his typological relationship to Christ, p. 39), with very little discussion of how the differences between them might reflect differences in their "contexts": one is twelfth century, the other fourteenth; one is a manuscript illumination, the other a wall painting. Fortunately, well-known studies, like those edited by Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn in *Interpreting Cultural Symbols: St. Anne in Late Medieval Society* (1990), have long provided excellent models for reading saints' lives in relation to the images, performances, and practices with which they were affiliated. The next chapter by Mary Beth Long ("Corpora and Manuscripts, Authors and Audiences") provides a different and more successful approach to "context," here the material manifestation of the texts themselves. Long contrasts London, British Library MS Harley 4012 to British Library MS Arundel 168, both of which contain a legend of St. Katherine of Alexandria, in order to alert us to the kinds of questions prompted by attention to the variety of manuscripts that contain saints' lives and to their several audiences. The heart of the chapter is a catalogue of major collections of saints' lives and individual legends by known authors. This quick survey will be a useful starting point for students before they consult D'Evelyn's and Görlach's more detailed guide.

The title of Claire Waters's contribution, "Power and Authority," may seem somewhat redundant at first, but Waters's goal is precisely to explore the loose and overlapping jurisdiction of the two terms. Her fresh and nuanced analysis will help those new to the field and those who have plowed it before to understand better the paradoxical rejection and appropriation of earthly power that characterizes so much vernacular hagiography. Indeed, more than any other essay in the *Companion*, Waters's chapter helps us to see the various narrative forms we label "hagiography" as a group, with a shared ambivalence toward the relationship between earthly and spiritual power: her analysis puts virgin martyr legends and the lives of contemporary mystics, legends of saintly kings and those, like Thomas Becket, martyred by the state, in meaningful dialogue with one another, without flattening their disparate investments. Her analysis is especially strong in its ability to explain the relentless focus on the body in saints' lives, as "the site where God asserts his control over the ultimate expression of earthly power, the power to cause death" (p. 80). And it is thoroughly compelling in its recognition that

legends which emphasize networks of kinship, like the popular lives of St. Anne, formulate an alternative understanding of “power and authority” that resides in the generative community of family rather than the one produced violently in so much of the canon.

Robert Mills focuses on the institutional value of this violence: he follows Sarah Kay in understanding the saint’s body as “sublime” in its resistance to violence, “located in a universe beyond the frontier of natural death,” and argues that its sublimity “materialises” the authority of the church. Using the broad rubric of violence to compare different narrative paradigms in the *South English Legendary*, Mills offers a number of new insights—for example, the surprising resonances between virgin martyr legends and the story of a Jewish boy miraculously converted by Mary—that demonstrate the value of an approach that “foregrounds the symbolic exchanges that transpire between different models of sanctity” (p. 103). In the following chapter, Anke Bernau provides an introduction to gender and sexuality, emphasizing how saints’ lives provide both idealized models and “unnatural” antitypes for masculine and feminine behavior. In her reading, the apparent subversion of gender roles in some saints’ lives—such as the virgin martyr’s rejection of a father’s authority—is fully contained by the spiritual patriarchy that authorizes that rejection. Although she remarks the relative neglect of male saints’ lives in readings that use gender and sexuality as key analytical tools, she devotes most of the chapter to female saints’ lives—legends of virgin martyrs, reformed prostitutes, and girls who pass as monks.

Katherine Lewis’s essay challenges historians to recognize vernacular hagiography as a useful resource for understanding “not just religious and devotional matters but also aspects of political power, socio-cultural ideologies, personal prestige and communal identity” (p. 122). She opens fascinating questions about the boundaries between literary and historical scholarship, as when she notes that the kind of analysis she advocates here is already pursued by literary scholars. Hagiography may trouble disciplinary boundaries today because, as Lewis demonstrates, it inhabited different discursive boundaries in the Middle Ages. She argues, in particular, that hagiography was a form of historiography in the period and explores how one saint’s life, Henry Bradshaw’s *Life of St. Werburge of Chester*, narrates the past in order to shape the present fortunes of his abbey. Matthew Woodcock picks up the question of discursive boundaries in the volume’s final essay, charting the crossings between hagiography and some of its affiliated genres—chronicle, travel narrative, and romance—and briefly discussing the complicated appropriations of the genre in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* and the *Book of Margery Kempe*. A short concluding section traces the hagiographic debts in three important Reformation works: John Bale’s *King Johan*, John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, and Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. Woodcock argues against the assumption that early modern texts “secularize” the medieval form, insisting that the genre always had “blurred” the edges between the sacred and secular. This ambitious and wide-ranging essay lacks the space to develop some of its important insights. But here, as elsewhere, we can ascribe a certain unevenness in the volume to its various goals—introduction, provocation, account of the state of the field, and forum for new work—and to the various audiences to which they point, a variety that might remind us of unruly genre the *Companion to Middle English Hagiography* seeks to describe.

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