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"In Praise of the Saints: Introducing Hagiography into the British Literature Survey"

by John P. Sexton

Despite increased interest in hagiographic writing among scholars of early literature in the last few decades, serious study of saints' lives in the undergraduate classroom remains rare. To some degree, this is a result of poor representation in the leading anthologies,^[1] but another contributing factor has been the perception of a distinction between hagiographic and other medieval writing in terms of genre or of literary value. Such distinctions, however, are modern inventions, and do not accurately reflect the medieval reader or writer's view. Nor is the inclusion of the literature alongside the expected "great works" difficult or jarring; a short section on hagiography can in fact be introduced into a survey course with great ease. Indeed, because many texts already common to these surveys assume a reader's intimate knowledge of the cult of the saints, most commonly-offered surveys (especially courses such as World Literature to 1500 and the ubiquitous survey of pre-1800 British Literature) will actively benefit from the inclusion of hagiographic writing. Students exposed to hagiographic materials will understand the traditions influencing Bede's biographical sketches, make deeper connections with Gawain's fealty to the Marian cult, and of course illuminate

the import of the “hooly blisful martir” whose shrine the Canterbury pilgrims seek. This short essay offers several suggestions for incorporating the saints into an undergraduate curriculum.

In addition to exposing students to a literary tradition they might otherwise never learn about, adding even one saint’s life to a reading list can deepen their understanding of medieval religious thought and parish life. The cult of saints was a popular and populist movement from its beginnings in the second century, and it remained an expression of the connection between local and universal Christendom for over a millennium. To a greater degree than Christological or doctrinal literature, then, the literature took on the sensibility of its audiences. In many ways, it responded to the need for intermediaries between the lay Christian and God. Students, often unfamiliar with the significance of medieval saints and their cults, are unable to appreciate saints’ vital roles in lived religious experience. A single class meeting devoted to the South English Legendary’s *Life of St. Margaret of Antioch*, therefore, offers a rich addition to students’ developing understanding of the medieval world.^[2] The text is highly useful as an exemplar: Margaret’s virginity and willingness to die for her faith are heavily emphasized; scenes of torment appropriate to the then-popular practice of affective piety are juxtaposed with miraculous healing; Margaret’s battles with human evil (in the form of the ardent heathen Olybrius) and supernatural demons (in both manlike and dragonish forms) are well-told and replete with fascinating details (such as the

Legendary's creator's skeptical aside about the dragon's place in the story); the final martyrdom incorporates many typical elements and provides a clear appeal to specific "uses" of Margaret's saintly ability to intervene with God on behalf of those who venerate her.

A single text, however, can by implication (or student inference) create an erroneous sense of hagiographic literature as an unvarying whole. Introducing students to several saints' lives and traditions is obviously the easiest solution when time permits. This also provides greater flexibility in a survey, when a professor may have specific goals in mind for each unit of a semester's reading schedule. Choosing several lives written or compiled by a single author (*Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, for example, or Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*) encourages a deeper consideration of the style or predominant concerns of that author and perhaps his audience. *Ælfric's* ambivalence about miracles, for example, and his admonishments that "we must not pray/ to God's saints just as we do to God's self [...] but truly we should beg the saints/ to intercede on our behalf with all-mastering God,"^[3] tell a story beyond that of the lives themselves and may be joined into larger thematic units on cultural currency. Presenting a set of texts from several different authors spanning centuries within a single country, on the other hand, builds a different sort of narrative—one that directs attention to the changes which occurred within the cults of the saints themselves over time. In a British Literature survey, for instance, a reasonable if incomplete sense of the evolution of

medieval hagiography can be introduced through a set of three texts: first, Bede's St. Oswald materials (excerpted from the *Historia Ecclesiastica*) or his *Vita Cuthberti* for the earliest form of St. Cuthbert's cult in Lindisfarne; second, selected portions of William of Malmesbury's *Vita Wulfstani* for St. Wulfstan of Worcester (for a contrasting view of what made a bishop worthy of veneration, as well as William's admonishment that his Christian readers should "strive to follow in [Wulfstan's] tracks by exertion of an emulous foot.")^[4] or Edward Grim's *Vita Sancti Thomae* for Thomas Becket (providing a view of contemporary politics as well as an eyewitness account of a saint's martyrdom); finally, one of the *vitae* of the anonymous 13th century *Katherine Group* (for a glimpse of the later medieval practice of affective piety) or an excerpt of the account of the life of Christina of Markyate (for its remarkable insight into the consciousness of saintly fortitude that could shape the religious experience—and the lives—of medieval Christians). As will perhaps be obvious, these texts link well to other literature and historical contexts necessary for a survey. These texts can be taught in sequence or, in a chronological survey, can provide a thread of continuity from one historical period to the next.

While spreading the study of the saints out over the course of a semester is valuable as a means of providing breadth and linking various periods, a different but at least equally valuable tactic, and one providing even greater continuity, is the study of a single cult's evolution through the medieval period. Such a study offers a window into

the changing relationships between a saint, his or her cult, the Church (both in its local and universal forms), and secular authority. Several cults lend themselves readily to such a study. The cult of Swithun, Æthelthryth, Cuthbert, Thomas Becket, or the Virgin Mary offers both literary and cultural materials to enrich any survey course. Swithun's cult in Winchester, for example, provides a vast array of miracle collections, biographical details, hymns, sermons, and related materials, recently collected into a monumental single volume.^[5] The study of the initial tenth-century miracle collections (the *Translatio et Miracula S. Swithuni* of Lantfred of Winchester, the *Narratio Metrica de S. Swithuno* of Wulfstan, and the *Natale S. Swyðuni Episcopi* of Ælfric of Eynsham), including eyewitness accounts of the translation of Swithun's relics from his modest grave in the churchyard into a lavish shrine within Winchester Cathedral, are by themselves a remarkable lesson in the creation of a cult. Swithun, who was known only as an obscure bishop of the ninth century until his cult suddenly arose in a period of religious reform and architectural renewal at Winchester, remained an important saint throughout and beyond the medieval period. Surviving records of the destruction of the saint's shrine in 1538 during the Dissolution of the Monasteries and a short poem ("When Winchester Races") written by a dying Jane Austen in 1815 allow a class to weave Swithun's cult through the entire semester's work.^[6] The other saints listed earlier can be used in a similar fashion, with allowances being made for the evolution of each cult.

The average literature survey is already packed to bursting with material, and any call to add to the course's burden (and, by extension, the burdens of professor and student) is likely to be met with skepticism. Yet any survey covering the late antique or medieval periods, especially the traditional surveys of Western literature or British literature, benefits from the addition of hagiography, and in many cases I have found that students are enthusiastic about and fascinated by these remarkable stories.

Whether incorporated as a single short text, a series of individual saints' lives, or a semester-spanning single-cult study, hagiography should be a priority for those seeking to create a representative survey of early literature. When we fail to introduce our undergraduates to saints' lives as a literary and cultural tradition, we do a disservice to them as emerging scholars and to our overall subject matter. A well-rounded view of the hagiographic tradition as it existed in different times, places, or cults not only challenges the common assumption of a monolithic medieval religious culture, but also reveals to students a new way to think about—and with—the culture and the minds of the pre-modern world.

Endnotes

1. The *Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors* (8th ed.) offers no hagiographic material. The *Norton Anthology of English Literature Volume I* (8th ed.) is only slightly better, offering the brief hagiographic excerpt *Cædmon's Hymn* from Bede

and the hagiography-like *Judith*, along with the “Anne Askew” excerpt from Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*. The *Longman Anthology* (3rd ed.) offering is nearly identical. The best of the group is the *Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Middle Ages* (2nd ed.), which offers two legitimate (if brief) hagiographic texts, *The Passing of Mary of Egypt* and Ælfric’s *The Passion of Saint Edmund, King and Martyr*.

2. A useful edition, edited by Wendy R. Larson, can be found in Thomas Head’s *Hagiography: An Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 2001). Head’s anthology includes several excellent texts for beginning hagiographical study, with selections representing a number of important cults as well as texts of general hagiographic interest (such as Victricius of Rouen’s “In Praise of the Saints” and Guibert de Nogent’s “On Saints and Their Relics”).

3. “...we ne moton us gebiddan / saw to godes halgum swa swa to gode sylfum [...] Ac we sceolon biddan soðlice þa halgan / þæt hîus þingion to þam þrym-wealdendum gode.” Ælfric, Abbot of Eynsham. *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints*. 2 vol. Early English Text Society 76, 82. Edited by Walter W. Skeat. London: N. Trubner, 1881. I. 31. 284-288. All translations in this article are my own.

4. [...] “mores eius emulo exercitii pede sequi contendat.” William of Malmesbury. “Vita Wulfstani.” *William of Malmesbury: Saints’ Lives*. Ed. Michael Winterbottom and R. M. Thomson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002. 12.

5. Lapidge, Michael, with John Crook, Robert Deshman, and Susan Rankin, eds. *The Cult of St. Swithun*. Winchester Studies 4.2. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003. The book provides facing-page translations of the relevant texts; its production values and price, however, make it more reasonable as a book for purchase by a library than by individual students.

6. *Jane Austen: Poems and Favorite Poems*, ed. Douglas Brooks-Davies (London: J. M. Dent, 1998), 18.

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