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AUTHORS, NARRATIVES, AND AUDIENCES IN MEDIEVAL SAINTS' LIVES

Introduction to the Authors, Narratives, and Audiences in Medieval Saints' Lives Special Collection

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Medieval hagiographical narratives were often used in the construction of identity, both institutional and individual, and also demonstrate the permeability of the supposed boundaries between communities such as Latinate and vernacular readers and religious and lay audiences. This introduction to the "Authors, Narratives, and Audiences in Medieval Saints' Lives" Special Collection provides a brief overview of the role of saints' lives in medieval literary culture and identifies some intersections between hagiographical writing and other areas of medieval life and literature.

The composition of saints' lives in medieval literature was more than an act of devotion. As well as allowing their authors to explore, express, and celebrate their faith, writing about saints' lives provided opportunities to explore subjects such as the foundation myths of the religious communities that produced them, travel and exploration, and gender and sexuality. These narratives were often intricate and frequently political, as well as displaying sophisticated literary qualities. The contexts and languages in which saints' lives were produced and consumed offer a window into a complex literary world, weaving together elements of history, biography, and devotional literature, as well as incorporating other art forms such as music, art, and drama.

Although hagiographical writing begins with faith, it also has a political dimension. Michael Staunton's statement in his book on the twelfth-century lives of Thomas Becket that "to write about Thomas as a saint was...to advance an argument" (Staunton, 2001: 13) applies to hagiography as a whole: saints' lives could not only argue for the sanctity and relevance of the saint in question, but also implicitly for the importance of the author, their community, or their intended audience. The decision to write a narrative of a particular saint could reflect the self-image that an author or institution was hoping to portray. It could also offer an opportunity for institutions to draw attention to themselves at times when changing fashions, rival cults, and competition for patronage threatened to attract pilgrims and donors elsewhere. A saint's life could also address and critique the secular power structures that were constantly in tension with religious communities throughout the Middle Ages, acting as a reminder of the ultimate spiritual authority of the Christian church.

Saints' lives are found in manuscripts of all kinds, from the most everyday to elaborate and luxurious illustrated books. The environments in which they were consumed were equally varied: they could be read privately, in small groups, and also performed for larger audiences in both liturgical and secular settings, such as mealtime edification in monastic refectories, parts of religious services, and entertainment for lay visitors to religious communities. This is linked to the author's choice of language: the complex interplay of Latin and vernacular literary cultures

in the Middle Ages meant that an author's decision to write in a particular language had implications for the type of audience they envisioned for their text. In some cases, this allowed communication between communities which did not usually interact, and texts could also address multiple communities simultaneously: for example, the Anglo-Norman saints' lives written by Matthew Paris, the thirteenth-century chronicler and monk of St Albans, had an audience that extended beyond monastic readers and/or listeners to include aristocratic women (Fenster and Wogan Browne, 2010: 32–35) and even King Henry III of England and his immediate family (Fenster and Wogan Browne, 2008: 10). This widespread consumption of these narratives illustrates the power of saints' lives to go beyond the communities in which they were produced and address wider audiences, making them an effective means of communication with the outside world.

The articles in this collection showcase the simultaneously individual and universal nature of saints' lives, highlighting the immense richness of this genre and its dynamic engagements with its surroundings. While each article speaks to the individual circumstances of a text's composition and re-composition in the face of changing cultural contexts, issues of identity, audience, and adaptation resound throughout the collection. Steffen Hope shows how a liturgical office produced by the monks of Bury St Edmunds to celebrate the feast day of their patron saint helped its authors to construct and articulate their institutional identity, and provides an example of a cult adapting in response to its changing environment. Simon C. Thomson's discussion of the different versions of the early lives of St Christopher also shows how changes to a narrative could adapt a saint's life to meet the needs and interests of new audiences, and illustrates how vernacular writing could become a vehicle for bringing texts to these audiences. Finally, Alicia Spencer-Hall's article explores how the life of St Marie of Oignies acted as a source of "symbolic capital" for different authors and communities, a process which continues in modern-day Wallonian tourism, highlighting how saints could be appropriated for various identificatory purposes and showing that their lives and afterlives continue to be negotiated today.

I would like to thank the contributors and peer reviewers of these articles for their hard work and patience, and I hope that you will enjoy this collection.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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