

Gender and Holiness

Men, women and saints in
late medieval Europe

**Edited by Samantha J. E. Riches
and Sarah Salih**



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Gender and Holiness

This collection brings together two flourishing areas of medieval scholarship: gender and religion. It examines gender-specific religious practices and contends that the pursuit of holiness can destabilise a binary conception of gender. Though saints may be classified as masculine or feminine, holiness may also cut across gender divisions and demand a break from normally gendered behaviour.

This work of interdisciplinary cultural history includes contributions from historians, art historians and literary critics. A wide range of topics is covered, including:

- the cults of various saints and aspiring saints, such as Sts Margaret, George and Francis of Assisi
- Richard II's quasi-virginal kingship
- sexualised tortures of female martyrs
- homoerotic responses to the body of Christ.

This collection will be of interest not only to medievalists, but also to students of religion and gender in any period.

Samantha J.E. Riches has taught medieval history for the University of Huddersfield and history of art for the University of Leicester. She is the author of *St George: Hero, Martyr and Myth* (Sutton, 2000) and is currently researching a monograph on the cultural context of English medieval images of St George.

Sarah Salih is a lecturer in medieval literature at the University of East Anglia. Her interests include medieval constructions of gender, sexuality and subjectivity, and she is the author of *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (D.S. Brewer, 2001). She is currently co-editing, with Anke Bernau and Ruth Evans, a collection of essays on medieval virginites.

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This collection is dedicated to our fellow gossips:
Anne Dutton, Ailsa Holland, Anne MacDona and
Nicole Schulman (Centre for Medieval Studies, University
of York, 1990–91); and the honorary gossips who taught
us all: Jeremy Goldberg and Felicity Riddy

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Abbreviations

- Bible: *The Holy Bible: Translated from the Latin Vulgate and Diligently Compared with Other Editions in Divers Languages (Douay, AD 1609; Rheims AD 1582)*, London, Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1914.
- CCCM: *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis*.
- CCSL: *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*.
- EETS: Early English Text Society.
es: extra series
os: original series
ss: supplementary series
- MED: *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath, Sherman M. Kuhn and others, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1952–.
- PL: *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina*, 217 vols, ed. J.P. Migne, Paris, 1844–64.

Introduction

Gender and holiness

Performance and representation in the later Middle Ages

Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih

Then he told [the assembled community] that, even though he was old and withered and weak, one of their nuns, sitting there present among them, had at the devil's suggestion cast lustful eyes on him. Having said this, he threw off his long tunic which he had put on over his nude body and stood there naked before them, hairy, thin, and covered with scabs – a horrid sight. When he had turned himself around three times in order that he could be seen all over by everyone, he said: 'Behold [indicating a crucifix], this is the man who ought to have been desired by a woman consecrated to God, by a spouse of Christ! Behold [indicating himself] the mean little body for which the poor wretch of a nun considered it worthwhile to lose her body and soul in hell!'¹

According to Gerald of Wales, St Gilbert of Sempringham's combination of preaching and striptease was entirely successful in curing the transgressive desire of one of his nuns. Gerald's account of this incident can be interpreted in several different ways, but perhaps the most salient aspects of the episode relate to the probable date (Gilbert died in 1189, aged over 100, so this is clearly sited in the mid-to-late twelfth century), the overtly religious milieu (an enclosed foundation), and the ways in which the interplay between the genders is underpinned by a concern with sexuality. To modern eyes, there are some unfamiliar features of the scene. Here the male body is presented as the object of the female gaze, and also as abjected and repellent, although the man himself remains in complete control of what his sexed body signifies in the enclosed feminine space of the nuns' chapter house. The extent to which these factors can be generalised is by no means clear: can this episode be used to uncover wider truths about medieval people's religious sentiment and understanding of gender? On one level, it is impossible to discuss this kind of story with any degree of certainty, given the modern commentator's distance in time and space in addition to the insurmountable problem of the impossibility of truly accessing another person's subjective experience. However, this kind of evidence can, and we feel should, be explored with a range of possible readings in order to allow modern commentators as much insight as possible into the relationship between gender and religious culture in particular, as well as medieval understandings of belief systems in general.

The chapters in this collection are an eclectic mix of chronology, geography and theme. They draw upon a wide variety of source materials – literary, historical and art-historical – but their common interest is a preoccupation with the nature of religious belief, practice and representation in the later medieval period, and the extent to which issues of gender played a significant role in these discourses. In some chapters the presentation of an individual saint is the central concern, whether in literary description or visual imagery, whilst other contributions focus on the devotees of a saint. Elsewhere, consideration is given to the place of religious experience in individuals' gendered self-formations. The chapters are linked by a common interest in asking the mutually implicated questions of whether religious practice is inevitably mediated through discourses of gender and whether cultural concepts of gender are inevitably informed by religious sensibilities.

Women's studies, men's studies, medieval studies

The study of medieval women, and medieval women's religious practices, is now thoroughly mainstream, to the extent that some scholars argue that women are over-represented: '[t]o judge by the amount of interest that has been shown in them, the English religious landscape of the late Middle Ages was peopled largely by Lollards, witches, and leisured, aristocratic ladies.'² The ever-increasing number of books and collections devoted to medieval women leaves no doubt of the continuing popularity of this area of scholarship. Most notably, the work of Caroline Walker Bynum has been influential in the definition of this field. Her totemic book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* helped to place women on the map of medieval scholarship and led to the formation of a number of sub-disciplines.³ Since its publication its picture of a culture of female piety uniting canonised and uncanonised women in the practice of devotions which centre on the bodies of Christ and his female imitators has been sometimes praised and sometimes criticised, but rarely neglected. Bynum's other works have often produced a similar reaction; her searching questions about the nature of the medieval erotic in 'The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg' have provoked a range of answers.⁴ The chapters in this volume continue both to draw on and to critique Bynum's work. Her influence is also apparent in the wider scholarly community in, for example, Elizabeth Robertson's extension of the model of *Holy Feast* to anchoritic texts for women.⁵ More recently, the collection *Gendered Voices* is narrower in scope, setting out explicitly to test Bynum's thesis by concentrating especially on the issue of how men write holy women, and in one case, how a woman writes a holy man.⁶ Disaggregation is central to this particular enquiry: mystical and hagiographic writings are treated as separate categories, as are female-authored and male-authored texts. Such distinctions usefully establish the non-monolithic nature of gendered pieties, demonstrating that in some cases the topos of the holy woman's access to Christ through her suffering flesh appealed more to male hagiographers than to holy women themselves.⁷

The study of medieval gendered holiness is still most often the study of female holiness. There are many monographs and collections which declare themselves to be about medieval women, with an extra qualifier – women in communities, women

in towns, women and power, young women – but a book entitled *Medieval Men*, with or without such a qualifier, would still surprise: studying women is still, perhaps unconsciously, assumed to be a supplement to the study of men.⁸ However, in recent years collections examining men *qua* men – rather than men as a default category, as was the case in pre-feminist scholarship – have begun to redress the balance and to remind us that men too have gender.⁹ Men too, therefore, have gendered forms of holiness: as Richard Kieckhefer argues: ‘[a]mong the many services that Caroline Bynum and others have done is to make it possible now as never before to study men’s religion as men’s religion, not as religion *simpliciter*.’¹⁰ This is a fundamental issue: to leave masculinity unexplored would be to perpetuate the masculinist illusion that it is unproblematic. As Jacqueline Murray argues below, modern feminist scholarship may be complicit with the continued identification of the feminine as the marked category. Allen J. Frantzen’s argument that ‘women are not enough’,¹¹ and that gender studies must include attention to the constructions and problematics of masculinity, is compelling. With this development, medieval studies share in the general transformation of women’s studies into gender studies and the rise of interest in constructions of masculinity. The studies of women, of gender, of masculinity and of sexualities have all successively and rapidly become productive, if sometimes still controversial, approaches. The chapters in this volume utilise a range of these perspectives; part of our motivation in bringing together this collection was to demonstrate that different ways of investigating and conceptualising medieval gender and sexuality can co-exist, enriching rather than superseding one another.

Our selection process has, however, tried to redress the imbalance found in some works which ostensibly deal with gender. For example, the section ‘Saintliness and Gender’ within the collection *Images of Sainthood in the Middle Ages*,¹² contains five essays, four of which centre on women. Some work on masculine forms of holiness is obscured because it never explicitly identifies itself as being concerned with masculinity: an example might be Denys Turner’s *Eros and Allegory*,¹³ a study which can be read as concerned with gender and sexuality but which represents itself as being about medieval theology. Of the chapters included in this volume, those of Jacqueline Murray, Sam Riches, Katherine Lewis and Robert Mills centre on masculine holiness, and those of Martha Easton, P.H. Cullum, Miriam Gill and Sarah Salih refer to it as a necessary adjunct to the study of female holiness.

However, adding men to the study of gender – though an enjoyable reversal of the earlier phase of adding women to history – still does not provide a sufficiently flexible toolkit. Neither ‘men’ nor ‘women’ is a monolithic or self-evident category. Kathleen Biddick’s subtle and wide-ranging critique of Bynum argues that gender is most valuable as a critical tool if it is used in conjunction with others such as race, class and religion: thus gender should not be an overriding or privileged category.¹⁴ If the sexed body is not pre-discursive, as any developed theory of the constructiveness of gender must acknowledge, then its entries into culture will always be multiple. Refusing to privilege gender as we know it allows unfamiliar gender identities – Anke Bernau argues below that ‘holy virgin’ may be such a category – to appear. We need also to acknowledge the difference that desires make to gender: if speaking of medieval homosexuals seems unacceptably essentialist, we can follow

Simon Gaunt and identify ‘queer wishes’ in medieval texts, as Mills does in this volume.¹⁵

Gender, religion and history

The privileging of gender in this collection is tactical only: gender is intercut with other categories such as literacy by Gill, sexuality by Mills, kingship by Lewis. Most importantly, it is intercut with holiness and with history: our intention is that none of the three be privileged as the grounding terms of the analysis. We are writing from the constructionist view of gender which can now be said to be consensual, and also from constructionist views of ‘holiness’ and of ‘the medieval’.¹⁶ Constructionist theories of gender need objects which are distanced in time or space in order to trace other constructions: it must be assumed that ‘male’ and ‘female’ are not constants. Medieval Christianity is an example of a discourse which frames the construction of genders which may not be entirely familiar to the modern reader. Several of the chapters suggest that the boundaries between ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ are permeable, and that individuals could move on occasion between genders or adopt the attributes of another gender. This process can sometimes be identified within the representation of an individual by a contemporary commentator, but at other times the gender slippage seems to have occurred as the result of the subject’s own production of self. Hence we find that Riches discusses the representation of St George as a transgendered martyr whilst Salih suggests that Margery Kempe may have drawn on both male and female saintly exemplars in her performance of apostolicism. Other chapters are more focused on specific aspects of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’. Cullum considers certain forms of feminised charity, Murray explores the difficulties of male embodiment: in each case, questions are raised about the contingent nature of gendered identifications relative to issues such as class and authority.

It can be argued that the medieval period is the paradigmatic test case for studying the history of gender. Joan Kelly’s classic article ‘Did Women Have a Renaissance?’ focused attention not only on the need to include gender as a category in historical writing but also on the Middle Ages as a period which challenges linear history and conventional periodisation by being ‘better for women’ than its successor.¹⁷ That the picture of medieval women thus produced can now be identified as largely mythical is less important than the attention it drew to medieval gender systems at the time. The medieval can be constructed as showing both the alterity and the familiarity of historically-specific gendered processes and categories. The post-modern perhaps can be expected to have a special affinity with the pre-modern: the gendered fluidity found in some medieval religious contexts has been theorised by scholars in terms of the fluidity of postmodern gender theory.¹⁸

Holiness is no more self-evident than gender. It provides some of the clearest examples of the alterity of the medieval past: Bynum’s argument, for example, that medieval representations of Christ’s genitalia need not signify sexuality, which is critiqued by Mills below. John van Engen identifies two complementary misrepresentations of medieval religious culture: ‘a mythical golden age of Catholic

Christianity or an equally mythical millennium of Indo-European folk religion'¹⁹ – we hope we have avoided both. As David Aers argues, 'medieval versions (plural) of faith belong to particular communities and particular historical circumstances'.²⁰ To take religion seriously does not mean reinforcing unhistorical pieties about the Age of Faith: we aim to look at religion as historically-situated material practice. All the chapters in this volume deal with aspects of orthodox Latin Christianity, although Wendy Larson puts this in the comparative context of the Eastern tradition. However, we are aware of the imperative not to accept orthodoxy on its own terms: Mills's chapter, for example, is a penetrating interrogation of orthodoxy's previously largely unquestioned claims to heteronormativity.

Sanctity has a bearing on gender, and gender on sanctity.²¹ Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell have defined two gendered types of saint, the masculine 'holder of temporal or ecclesiastical power, missionary to the heathen and fiery preacher of the word, champion of public morality, heroic defender of his virtue – a paradigm reflecting both societal values and church regulations' and the androgynous type, characterised by 'penitential asceticism, private prayer, mystical communion with the Godhead, and charity'.²² Bynum prefers to label the latter 'feminine'.²³ This distinction is a useful starting point to the analysis of gender in hagiography, but not an absolute boundary. As Weinstein and Bell acknowledge, men too can be saints of the androgynous or feminine type. There are also a number of women saints, particularly those of the early Middle Ages, who are closer to the masculine type: founding abbesses such as Hilda of Whitby, or devout and effective queens such as Margaret of Scotland.²⁴ Individual saints might well operate in both modes, as did Hildegard of Bingen, who combined mystical experience with a public role; her hagiographers struggled with the resulting tension between two modes of sanctity, unsure whether to write her as aristocratic abbess or bridal mystic.²⁵ The gendered types of hagiography refer to moments and to writing rather than to individual saintly careers in their entirety.

This analysis, useful though it is, reifies gender by making it the fixed term of the pair. It can usefully be supplemented by the assumption that the influence works both ways; that if gender affects sanctity, so too does sanctity affect gender. Sainthood often works by breaking with normal social values, and gendered identity may be amongst these: constructing one's gender identity differently may be a marker of holiness. Male holiness can be a kind of default position, due to male dominance of the Church, but it may also demand a radical break from the secular norms of masculinity, as Cullum discusses below.

The chapters in this volume address both 'sanctities' – the production and representation of saints who are honoured as intercessors and role models – and 'pieties' – the performance by individuals of significant religious activities. This is, of course, an imperfect distinction. It can be aligned with a number of other, equally imperfect, binary divisions: that between extraordinary and ordinary morality identified by John Stratton Hawley;²⁶ between the imitation and the admiration of saints; between the representation and the performance of sanctity. Our position is based precisely on the imperfection of such terms. We assume that the representation may both reflect and inform social practice, and that practice

itself may imitate and be imitated in representation. Holiness is a *habitus* in Pierre Bourdieu's sense: an ideology perpetuated in embodied practice.²⁷ However, 'perpetuated' does not imply 'static': as Judith Butler argues, such signifying practices may comprise subversive repetitions.²⁸ Salih argues that Margery Kempe's apostolate is one such self-formation, underlining the fundamental point that what devout medieval people do with their religious models is not always predictable. By 'piety' we refer to a wide range of religious practices, both interior and exterior. These may be continuous to – or even identical with – those of sanctity, but the term 'piety' allows us to include the activities and writings of individuals who make no claim to more than ordinary holiness. These pieties may take saints as exemplars but are not limited to such objects for imitation. Gill's chapter discusses the self-representation of the medieval laity in terms of personifications and abstractions of virtue and vice. Her chapter, which concentrates on wall paintings – a particularly difficult source of evidence due to problems of loss and damage – also foregrounds the issue of the survival of evidence and the way in which uneven patterns of survival can shape scholarly perceptions of medieval religious culture. Verbal and visual representations of sanctity are more easily accessible than representations of less ambitious pieties. Written and visual hagiography, because of its sheer bulk, can come to seem both irresistible and obvious: John Kitchen makes an interesting analysis of the over-privileging of hagiography in early medieval studies,²⁹ and some of his arguments can be adapted to our rather different purposes here. The combination of studies in this volume aims to juxtapose sanctities and pieties, historical, literary and visual sources, in order to resist the production of a false consensus derived from reading any one aspect of religious culture at face value. Larson's chapter provides a timely reassessment of an individual saint cult, and warns against the assumptions of historicisation.

Interdisciplinary connections

In bringing these chapters together we have aimed to give the reader a sense of the wide range of possibilities which are open to the researcher in medieval gender, culture and religion, not only in terms of the actual evidence used, but also, and perhaps more importantly, through the range of approaches employed. This broad scope provides intimations of possible cross-currents between written texts, the visual arts and lived experience. Hence, Easton's chapter, which is largely concerned with the impact of visual representation of torture, forms a useful companion piece to Murray's discussion of textual evidence of men's 'dis-ease' with their own bodies: to what extent, one wonders, were problems of body image influenced by visual and written formations of the abject, suffering body, and to what extent were these representations informed by the problematic nature of embodied experience? Another interesting cross-current is suggested by Lewis's work on the nature of Richard II's kingship and Bernau's discussion of anchoresses: in each case, it appears that gender identity could be qualified to some extent by an attribution of the status of virginity. To what extent did Richard's (and his court's) concept of kingship rely upon the special qualities of the holy virgin, and to what extent was the concept of

virginity itself linked to ideas of secular or religious authority? The collection poses many questions, not all of which can yet be answered satisfactorily, but it is hoped that this volume will stimulate further research in several fields. For example, Larson's reassessment of the significance of St Margaret, affirming the recent arguments of Karen Winstead and Katherine J. Lewis that female virgin martyrs are essentially multivalent,³⁰ but significantly extending this argument into the experience of the Eastern Church, may indicate that other saints have been similarly misrepresented, with their original polysemic nature gradually eroded over time. Riches's recent work on St George has indicated that he is an example of an ostensibly male saint whose medieval cult was based upon a wide range of meanings, which could include the borrowing of markers of female sanctity,³¹ but how many other examples are as yet undiscovered? Lewis's chapter provides a radical reappraisal of Richard II's construction of the role of the monarch, but this surely leads to a questioning of the extent to which the medieval concept of kingship in general was predicated on the gender identity of the monarch: was this rationale peculiar to Richard and/or his courtiers, or more widespread in chronology and/or geography? Other readers will have other questions, including no doubt many we have not anticipated: we hope that the collection will inspire further redefinition of this shifting area of scholarship.

Notes

- 1 Gerald of Wales, *The Jewel of the Church: A Translation of Gemma Ecclesiastica by Giraldus Cambrensis*, trans. J.J. Hagen, Leiden, Brill, 1979, p. 188.
- 2 E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 2. Work on Lollards can also focus on women. See, for example, S. McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.
- 3 C.W. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987.
- 4 In C.W. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York, Zone, 1992, pp. 79–118.
- 5 E. Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience*, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1990.
- 6 C.M. Mooney (ed.), *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
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