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# **Female Saints and the Performance of Virginity in the Medieval Period**

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## Abstract

The legends of female saints in the Middle Ages, characterized by a genre called hagiography, are steeped with violence towards women's bodies in a favoring of their spiritual purity. These stories center the violence in tales of competition between men, where an idolterous man continually threatens her virginity and she ultimately dies in the name of her Christian faith. Their virginity, which is emphasized more through their spiritual selves than their physical bodies, is ultimately performed; performance, here, is defined by Judith Butler and serves to aid in analysis of why the stories of female saints center physical violence and highlight spiritual chastity. Research thus far focuses on the ways in which virginity defined the saints' identities, but there is little scholarship on the anxiety of men and patriarchal rule that is unconsciously revealed in these formulaic tales. The investigation of the female saints' performance in the context of competition between men both unveils the attitudes towards women of the time and demonstrates places where they could unexpectedly gain agency. Overall, this research hopes to unpack the medieval genre of hagiography, its treatment of women, and its impact on medieval society.

Hagiography, or the stories of saints' lives in the Middle Ages, chronicles the legends of Christian saints who served as models for Christians on Earth. Written by men, the stories of female saints are centered on a fascination with virginity, as the women proclaim repeatedly that they are chaste and will remain so against all odds, the odds often being physical tortures. In these stories, the female body becomes the site of competition between men; the torture that ensues is ultimately caused by this tension, and the woman becomes the location for their fight, seen through attempts to control her body. Even though the material female body was frequently tortured in these narratives, the women's souls were proclaimed chaste and held in high regard. In the medieval canon, these complex narratives live in harmony within popularized hagiography, demonstrating a disregard for the female material body by favoring the soul. Compared to the material body, the saints' souls were proclaimed chaste, not through physical proof but through performance. Saints' virginal identities were emphasized through repeated gestures and phrases that demonstrated spiritual chastity. This allowed them to occasionally wield agency, creating a small space within the boundaries of the male competition to resist patriarchal domination of their bodies and identities. This agency heightens the male anxiety, and the female saints therefore must always die, frequently at the hands of an eroticized or phallic weapon.

Therefore, I assert that the performance of an identity of virginity reveals fundamental knowledge about how women were thought of in both medieval literature and culture. The saints specifically emphasized their virgin status by performing their spiritual chastity. An analysis of the performative dimension of their virgin status reveals how these women constructed their identity against and aligned with ecclesiastical control, and how they sometimes gained agency unexpectedly. This performance ultimately highlights the anxieties present in men, as their issues with Christian faith, idolatry, and temptation were played out and worked through in the narratives of virgin women.

To highlight a few of these performances I will first compare two saints, St. Apollonia and the Virgin of Antioch, who reaffirm their spiritual chastity through repeated actions and phrases. I will then investigate two other saints, St. Christina and St. Lucy, who are both victims of eroticized violence at the hands of idolatrous men. The issues of idolatry and male authority play out within the context of these female virgin saints, as the men attempt to control the female reproductive body and turn to violence when they cannot. The investigation of a fifth saint, St. Agatha, further highlights the urge to control women's reproductive bodies through the specific attack on Agatha's breasts.

To thoughtfully unpack the identity of the virgin saint and the performativity of virginity, I look to Jacobus de Voragine's famous text, *The Golden Legend*, which was circulated around 1260. Voragine compiled famous legends of popular Christian saints who were looked to as models for the foundations of Christianity. Jacques Le Goff's *In Search of Sacred*

*Time: Jacobus de Voragine and the Golden Legend* focuses on the life and writings of Jacobus de Voragine through the examination of *The Golden Legend*. Le Goff, on the topic of the female virgins included in Voragine's collection, writes, "When it comes to the virgins, it is worth remarking that the essential element in female sanctity continued to be the female body [...]. Voragine nonetheless seeks beyond the body for determining criteria [...] support[ing] the idea of a superiority of women in lay society" (Le Goff 28-29). Two important concepts arise from this assertion, one being the idea that Voragine moved "beyond the body," which highlights a reliance on the performance of spiritual virginity. The second concept worth noting is Le Goff's assertion that Voragine believed in the "superiority of women," which might not be immediately apparent, since women's bodies were degraded and beaten in many of the hagiographic legends that Voragine writes of. I pause to acknowledge that looking "beyond the body" for spiritual superiority through performed virginity was a trope of the medieval period, but it does not remove the harm that is done in constantly torturing women's bodies in popularized hagiography. Additionally, I assert that Voragine's depictions of female saints do not look "beyond the body," for even though their spirituality is praised, they are still paradoxically tied to their physical bodies, seen through their eroticized, violent deaths.

My understanding of performance is further informed by Judith Butler, who writes about identity and performance in *Gender Trouble*. Butler asserts that gender is performed rather than inherent or innate, as it is something produced with culture and reaffirmed through actions. In her text, Butler writes that we cannot separate the body from cultural discourse, that one is simply taking up the tools given to them, and there is no agent prior to these tools; on this, she writes,

Acts, gestures, and desires produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body [...]. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, are *performative* in a sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through [...] discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (185)

Butler suggests that certain acts not only signify but create an identity. There is not a prior identity to the culture that is written onto a body, as these performances are the only things that create the reality of identity, which is heavily influenced by culture and history. Completing these "acts, gestures, and desires" is not a conscious practice where one knowingly and willingly puts on a costume each day to perform; rather, it is through repetition of cultural acts that identity is constructed socially, and these acts are ingrained into individuals. It is

worth noting, however, that this concept is distinctly different from drag or cross-dressing, which Butler asserts is a different kind of performativity.

In medieval times, Christianity was one tool given to people, and if we examine the ways in which different people used this tool, we uncover a reliance on a performance of a virginal identity in women as Butler suggests. In Christianity, women's identities were believed to be linked to their chastity; however, there is no prior "ontological status" to virginity, and the woman must therefore repeat certain actions that constitute the identity of chastity. While the fictional saints were not said to be consciously aware of their virginal performance, there are times in which these repetitive performances provided gaps for the women to assert some agency and resist the anxiety-ridden men who hoped to repress them. However, since hagiography was always written by men, the women in these stories are only allowed within this one location (being hagiographic literature) to resist the men who tempt them, but only the non-Christian men who want their bodies (sexually, physically, etc.). They must demonstrate opposition to the non-Christian men through repeated "acts, gestures, and desires," as Butler says, without ever fully subverting the dominant patriarchal structure; therefore they *must* die at the hands of eroticized violence.

To contextualize the concept of virginity in the Middle Ages, research on the definition, understandings, and uses of the terms "virgin" and "virginity" is essential. The concept of a virginal identity, comprised entirely of one's chastity, is heavily applicable to women, as they were traditionally considered the more lustful sex. Ruth Mazo Karras, in her text *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, corroborates this idea, writing, "Women were the temptresses who led men astray. To be too involved with women – to have sex at all, if a cleric, or to have sex other than with one's wife for reproductive purposes, if a lay man – was to turn away from higher things and to become, like a woman, bound to the body" (37). The idea that women were temptresses and were "bound to the body" illustrates that women were viewed as the more lustful sex while being under heavier scrutiny than men when it came to their virginity. Kathleen Coyne Kelly, in her text *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, notes, "For the most part, patristic writers such as [...] Augustine—who invented the concept of virginity / chastity in the Middle Ages—make it very clear that their subject is *female* virginity. Though the authors and others extol virginity as the ideal state for both men and women, they write either directly *to* women or to men *about* women" (33). If writers were meant to be writing "to men about women" as Kelly suggests, then it seems no surprise that Voragine constructed the legends of female saints in the way that he did. These stories of virgin women were heavily centered on the men of the tales—how shameful it was for them to be non-Christian or secular, but also how they should understand women as temptresses who were "bound to the body," as Karras states.

Two female virgins whose stories are included in *The Golden Legend*, the Virgin of Antioch and St. Apollonia, assert repeatedly that they are virgin in spirit, even if their physical chastity is threatened. This assertion demonstrates a performance of a spiritual virginal identity that was expected of women. Since spiritual virginity was deemed more virtuous (when physical virginity was threatened), the hagiographic legends often excuse and accept bodily torture of female virgins, for it was their souls that were valued most; this is seen in both of the following stories. First, The Virgin of Antioch, an unnamed woman whose entire identity is tied to her chastity, is described as having such immense beauty that, because of her determination to stay hidden from the eyes of men, the public resented her and decided to torture her. Eventually this resentment grew and she was given the option of either sacrificing to non-Christian idols or having her virginity taken away in a brothel. In debating what to do, the virgin girl reflects on her faith and states, “It is more meritorious to keep the mind virginal than the flesh. Both are good if possible, but if not possible, let us at least be chaste in God’s sight if not in men’s” (Voragine 251). With this, she consents to the tortures of the brothel, understanding that the physical loss of her virginity does not mean the loss of her spiritual chastity. In her consent to be forcibly taken to the brothel, the narrator notes that “brothels do not defile chastity, but chastity abolishes the shame even of such places” (251). Again, by emphasizing that a forced encounter with a brothel where the Virgin of Antioch’s chastity might be threatened and taken away does not actually “defile chastity,” there is an emphasis on her spiritual virginity over her physical purity. The narrator goes so far as to note that one’s strong spiritual chastity will actually cleanse the brothel of its impurities, which again demonstrates the fortitude and power of a virgin’s spiritual virginity. While no physical harm is eventually brought to the virgin in this story, we see that she ultimately consents to whatever tortures may occur because she believes her chastity will still remain intact in a spiritual sense; this consent paints the idea that women welcomed torture to their bodies, or at least that the harm that happens to a woman’s body does not harm her spirit.

St. Apollonia was also a beautiful woman who was “wreathed with the flowers of chastity, sobriety, and purity” (Voragine 268) and was willing to endure any physical tortures necessary to remain strong in her faith. However, in contrast to the virgin of Antioch, Apollonia did suffer physical tortures, including having her teeth beat out. But, on reflection, Apollonia decides she can accept the physical tortures that harm her body, as well as the threat against her chastity, because she has already “offered her devout soul to God” and has therefore “handed over her most chaste body to the persecutors to be tortured” (268). Again, like the Virgin of Antioch, Apollonia knows that, regardless of the physical pain she may experience, her soul and spiritual chastity are safe with God, and that is what matters most to her. These physical tortures ultimately represented her spiritual strength more than her physical identity. After consenting to the beating, Apollonia throws herself into the fire that



the tormentors built to harm her, surprising “her merciless tormentors [...] beyond measure at finding a woman even more eager to undergo death than they to inflict it” (269). Voragine notes that even the tormenters were surprised by Apollonia’s bravery, so her act of throwing herself into the fire represents her courage and disregard of physical pain in the emphasis of her spiritual bond with God. On this, Voragine writes, “This fearless martyr [...] would not be conquered by the torments visited upon her nor by the heat of the flames, because her spirit was on fire with the far more ardent rays of truth [...]. By a happy perseverance in her resolution to stay a virgin she remains unshaken in the midst of excruciating torments” (269). This quote ultimately demonstrates that through the disregard of physical pain and the focus on spiritual strength, Apollonia performs the virginal identity that was culturally ingrained into women. Because Voragine explicitly links Apollonia’s “perseverance in her resolution to stay a virgin” with her ability to “remain unshaken in the midst of excruciating torments” (269), he is affirming that her spiritual chastity is more valuable and that it can be achieved through a repetition of actions, such as the constant insistence that her soul is with God and her body cannot be harmed. This story serves as an example of how women could prove they were not “bound to the body”, and the main way this was successful was through the performance of a virginal identity. By consenting to the torture, Apollonia asserted that the female identity did not need to be associated with the material body, because she allowed her physical being to be harmed to save her spiritual purity. Yet, since the tortures are bodily and she is forced to perform spiritual purity, we cannot assert that Voragine looked “beyond the body” as she is constantly linked to her physical torture. Ultimately both women, either threatened with harm or forced to endure real pain, conclude that their spiritual faith and chastity are more important to God and to themselves. By consistently reaffirming that the virginity of the mind (in a sense) is more valuable and admirable, the story places an emphasis on women who perform a virginal identity. The consent that women give in the name of a stronger spiritual bond with God also reaffirms the acceptability of harm towards women’s bodies, for they are meant to serve as models for how women could resist temptations of the body and remain spiritually virginal.

By relying on spiritual chastity, both female saints manage to resist and revert the power from the oppressive men to themselves, as spiritual virginity is something that cannot be taken away from them or controlled by men; this is one of the gaps which Butler talks about where women may find agency. Voragine understood that for women to no longer be “bound to the body,” as Karras writes, they had to be willing to suffer torments to their bodies in the strengthening of their spiritual identities. While it is clear spiritual virginity was deemed more valuable, there were also very few ways in which someone could prove physical virginity and purity. According to Kathleen Coyne Kelly, in her text *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, there were some methods by which physical virginity could be tested, but



these methods were rare in actual practice. Kelly writes, “The presence or absence of a hymen and/or blood, the constriction or relaxation of the uterus, are but three of the many accepted signs of female virginity described in medieval medical and gynecological literature” (29), but it is important to note that these are things not visible from the outside, and clearly only with a thorough investigation of the woman’s vagina and uterus could these tests be orchestrated. Since these tests are not practical, all that is left for the female saints is a *declaration* of physical and spiritual chastity, with an emphasis on the spiritual, even if neither could necessarily be proved. This is further complicated by additional documented practices which men suspected women could use to falsify physical virginity, including the use of “certain ointments [...] in order to tighten her genitals” (Kelly 32), making it even more necessary and prevalent for a woman to proclaim spiritual purity, and less applicable to test the physical virginity. This idea is not a new one, as Karras writes about it in her section titled “The Sexuality of Chastity.” On the topic of spiritual purity, Karras notes, “Much of the monastic writings had stressed the symbolic significance of chastity as a way to reach God. The chastity of the soul was more important than the chastity of the body. The chastity of the body was by no means unimportant [...] but it was taken for granted, not really in question” (54). Karras notes here that physical virginity was never the focus of investigation, solidifying that the gynecological practices Kelly writes about were not of importance, and reaffirms the prevalence of spiritual virginity. The reliance on spiritual chastity was meant to suggest to Christians that they could be closer to God as humans on Earth, since it is inferred that only He knows and can judge one’s purity. But, not only that, by asserting that spiritual chastity was more essential to a woman’s identity, women have the opportunity to be closer to God than men. I assert this is one of the gaps that Butler talks about, where, through ingrained cultural practices, some agency might be found in openings between how women performed a virginal identity and how men were meant to perceive it.

However, while the reliance on spiritual chastity may enable women to take some power away from men in these hagiographic legends, their bodies were still tortured and harmed, and used as a representation of Earthly temptations. The above comparison of St. Apollonia and the Virgin of Antioch suggests that the Church used women and their bodies to convey Christian teachings (such as the perseverance of faith against all obstacles, the importance of spiritual chastity, the relationship with God, etc.), yet they did not *respect* their bodies and only valued them for the purpose they served. According to Karen Winstead in *Virgin Martyrs*, the virgin saints “embodied the kinds of paradoxes that were central to Christianity [...]. Their bodies, torn and made whole, replicate the miracle of the Eucharist. The paradox of the virgins’ triumph is distilled in their emblems, where instruments of torture designed to erase identity are used to proclaim identity” (12). As Winstead explains, the tortures that were meant to destroy their identities actually served to *construct* their identities through their

reliance on spiritual faith and virginity. This is clearly a problematic narrative, and Winstead acknowledges its paradoxical nature. The bodies of the virgin saints, through proclamations of their chastity, are threatened with the loss of their virginity and are then used to reinforce the strength of Christianity and the virgin identity by reaffirming the woman's spiritual purity. According to Winstead, this was all to represent hyperbolically the "paradoxes that were central to Christianity" (12). While it is possible that women were able to divert the power away from the men in the stories of female saints, it seems to come at a great cost, for the women are the ones most physically harmed in these narratives. Even in this diversion of power, though, there is still limited agency allowed. While their performance temporarily shifts the power into their hands, the stories of female saints made it difficult for non-saints to replicate said agency, as the only way a saint could resist being "bound to the body," Karras states, was to be beaten, tortured, and excruciatingly harmed, which emphasized Christian teachings and relationship to God.

The stories of female virgin saints consistently revolve around a secular man who is either non-Christian or struggles deeply with his Christian faith, who ultimately turns to the torture of a female virgin when he cannot control her body and force her conversion. Why do the stories of virgin women focus so much on these kinds of men? The attention to the male identity emphasizes the anxiety of the idolatrous man who looked to control the virgin saint's body and soul, for she serves as a representation of the Church; this is ultimately meant to reinforce the strength of God and Christianity. The anxiety of men in the hagiographical legends is not a new phenomenon, for even St. Augustine comments upon it. Patricia Cox Miller, in her article "Visceral Seeing: The Holy Body in Late Ancient Christianity," includes a quote from St. Augustine where he states that he likes to imagine the female saints "as the teeth of the church cutting off men from their errors and transferring them to her body" (392). Miller brings this up to emphasize her point that the Church used women's physical bodies to represent things that were nonmaterial or figurative in Christianity, like the strength of the religion, as I have already discussed (392). Because someone as highly regarded as St. Augustine knew that the female saints offered spaces to demonstrate sinful, non-Christian men as anxious and violent, the use of the female body as a space to construct these narratives makes sense, as it allowed readers to see that only these kinds of men would want to harm or threaten the virginity of such revered women. By performing the identity of virginity in these stories, the women reject the sinful lures of the non-Christian man and reinforce examples of Christian miracles and strength. This insight is informed by the following analysis of three other female saints from *The Golden Legend*.

Saint Christina and Saint Lucy are two examples of stories that spotlight the conflict between an idolatrous man and a virgin saint; through these narratives, they are both able to assert some authority and model a way for agency in women. Saint Christina endured a

long list of cruel tortures at the orders of her own father, who was angry when she refused to worship his idols. The story begins by characterizing Christina as “very beautiful [...] many sought her in marriage, but her parents would give her to none of her suitors because they wanted her to remain in service of the gods” (Voragine 386). This is the only reference to Christina’s chastity in the story, but it seems to serve as an assertion that Christina was a virgin, because she had been “shut [...] up with twelve waiting women in a tower” (386) and many men wanted her, which would not be true if she were known to not be a virgin. It is assumed that she is a virgin because of this fact, and it is also assumed to be one of the key factors of her identity, given what is known about female saints thus far. The most intriguing aspect of St. Christina’s story, however, is her assertion of dominance against her idolatrous father’s control. In attempting to get Christina to convert to his religion, it is written that her father “spoke softly to her, seeking to win her to the cult of the gods, but she said: ‘Do not call me your daughter, but the child of him to whom the sacrifice of praise is due, for I offer sacrifice not to mortal gods but to the God of heaven’” (386). This scene characterizes her father as calm in his attempt to sway his daughter and simultaneously places Christina in the authoritative role in which she declares she no longer wishes to be called his daughter in the name of her faith. When Christina then destroys her father’s idols and “distributed the gold and silver to the poor [...] he was angry and ordered her to be stripped and beaten by twelve men,” and Christina responds to her father by stating, “O man without honor, shameless man, abominable before God, pray your gods to give the men who are worn out with beating me the strength to continue, if you can” (386).

First, by distributing the gold and silver to the poor, Christina is representing a key teaching in Christianity: almsgiving, or the distribution of goods to the poor. By associating Christina with the goodness of Christianity, and in the assertion that her father is a “man without honor,” Christina controls the narrative against her aggressive father, suggesting even that the physical torture to her body can and *should* continue in the name of her faith. It is important to note here too that in the story this physical torture is eroticized, as she is said to be stripped naked and then beaten, in an attempt to forcefully take away Christina’s virginity. But, through her performance of a spiritual virginal identity and her suggestion that the men torturing her need more strength because God is protecting her body, no pain is said to be felt by Christina. The list of physical harms continues from there and includes having her flesh ripped off with hooks, being stretched on a wheel over a fire, being thrown into the sea with a heavy stone around her neck, having her breasts cut off and her tongue cut out, and finally two arrows being shot into her body killing her; the whole while, Christina claims no pain with God’s aid. The fact that Christina has her breasts cut off will be of importance in the later analysis of Saint Agatha, for harm towards the women’s breasts seems to specifically target their reproductive body parts. While Christina never outright mentions her chastity

in this story, the thing that kills Christina is described as a very phallic image, for only when she is “pierced through and through” (Voragine 98) by arrows is she no longer able to avoid the physical tortures with God’s assistance. The similarities we see between this story of St. Christina and others is that a male authority figure attempts to control the female saint, but is ultimately unsuccessful because of her strong faith, so he attempts to torture her but is mostly unsuccessful through God’s intervening. This story is a perfect example of how St. Augustine thought the virgins were a way to display narratively “the church cutting off men from their errors” (Miller 392), for Christina asserts her dominance against her idolatrous father in the name of her strong Christian faith. While Augustine obviously does not mention agency, there seems to be a gap made between Christina and her father where she becomes in control of the narrative, vowing to disobey his rules for the sake of her religion.

This is similar to St. Lucy who, in the unpacking of her name, is characterized as such: “Lucy comes from lux, which means light. Light is beautiful to look upon [...] light also radiates without being soiled; no matter how unclean may be the places where its beams penetrate, it is still clean [...]. Thus we are shown that the blessed virgin Lucy possessed the beauty of virginity without trace of corruption” (Voragine 27). This portrait of Lucy is notably focused on spiritual virginity and purity, much like Apollonia, for Voragine notes that “no matter how unclean” the virgin may be physically, “the blessed virgin Lucy [still] possessed the beauty of virginity,” inferring that even the forceful defilement of her virginity would not defile her spirit. It should be noted that Lucy’s physical virginity is threatened numerous times throughout her tale but is never actually taken away; therefore, this assertion ahead of her story seems to serve as a warning for the concepts to come, stating ahead of time that God will protect her most valued trait: her virginity. Similar to what I have analyzed previously, this concept should not be surprising, as the female saints continuously place their spiritual virginity ahead of their physical bodies; the performance of a virginal identity is clearly relevant in St. Lucy’s story, seen through Lucy’s repetitive actions and the note about her virginity and purity ahead of her tale. Since the warning ahead of her story seems to suggest the reader not worry about the threats or violence brought to Lucy, Voragine again undermines the severity of the physical tortures brought to female bodies from the initial reminder that Lucy cannot be soiled or corrupted. Regardless of this threat, the reader is meant to remember that her pain is for God and physical torture or the threat to her virginity actually emphasizes her strength and bond with God, so they should not concentrate on the physicality of the tortures, even if they feel cruel or overwhelming. In the actual tale, Lucy is described as someone dedicated to giving her possessions away to the poor, a key teaching in Christianity and a concept that infuriated her husband-to-be, who was an idol worshiper. When he found out about Lucy’s faith, he sent her away to be put on trial by the judge Paschasius, who threatened to have her taken to a brothel. In response, Lucy retorts, “The

body is not defiled [...] unless the mind consents. If you have me ravished against my will, my chastity will be doubled and the crown will be mine [...]. As for my body, here it is, ready for every torture" (28). Lucy, like the other virgin saints, reemphasizes her spiritual virginity over her physical chastity, which is ultimately related to the warning ahead of her tale which states her body cannot be defiled because of her strong faith and will. However, different from the other female saints analyzed thus far, Lucy goes as far as to say her chastity will be "doubled and the crown will be [hers]" (28) if her virginity is forcibly taken away in a brothel, suggesting that the taking of her virginity will actually reinforce and strengthen her bond with God, and she will adorn some kind of crown. This again suggests a favoring of spiritual chastity, for Lucy seems to acknowledge that her spiritual chastity will grow with the forced removal of her physical virginity. Also different from the other saints is the extent to which Lucy willingly gives her body for torture. We see this also in St. Apollonia who throws herself into the fire that her tormentors made for her, but many of the other saints do not proclaim something as brave as, "as for my body, here it is, ready for every torture" (28). This statement solidifies Lucy as an individual who consciously chooses to give up her body in the name of God, knowing that He will protect her. Eventually, after refusing Paschasius' threats, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, which planted her in her spot so she would not be moved, a dagger is pierced into Lucy's throat. Just like St. Christina, who is pierced with arrows, St. Lucy dies at the hands of an eroticized, phallic weapon; even more critical is that the dagger penetrated Lucy's throat, which is a very sexual image. However, even an eroticized image such as the dagger in the throat does not undermine Lucy's spiritual virginity, for we know from the warning ahead of her tale that nothing can take that away from her. Kathleen Kelly writes about spiritual virginity and St. Lucy in the chapter of her book titled, "'Armour of proof': The virgin and the church in hagiography." In specifically talking about the dagger that kills Lucy, Kelly writes, "That Lucy is stabbed in the throat may well be significant for in the gynecology of late antiquity, as the throat was considered to be homologous to the neck of the uterus. What cannot be narrated directly is merely suggested through a substitution of body parts" (57). If the neck was "homologous to [...] the uterus," then this physical attack on Lucy's neck with the dagger, which is the only torture to actually touch her body, can be read as an attack on Lucy's reproductive system, specifically her uterus. Both Lucy and St. Christina are killed by eroticized phallic violence, most likely to emphasize how dangerous idolatrous men were. These men not only wanted to physically harm the virgins, but they also wanted to control every element of their bodies, including their ability to reproduce, which, at the time, was a woman's main purpose. Ultimately, because these men could not control their bodies in the way that they wanted, they turned to physical violence. St. Lucy is *not* the only female saint to be killed by a dagger in the throat, which we have established was equated with the uterus in the Middle Ages; St. Agnes, another virgin included in *The Golden Legend*,



is killed in the exact same way (Voragine 103). Clearly, the multiple instances of this kind of eroticized torture are meant to represent something fundamental about both the virgin saints and the men that harm them, for the eroticized violence is what kills these saints. Through the performance of a virginal-based identity, the women analyzed here are able to subvert physical violence and concentrate on their spiritual chastity, which was meant to reinforce a Christian's relationship to God. Ultimately, both women protest and reassert their virginal identity through performance in order to survive the idolatrous men, creating a narrative that we know is meant to represent the strength of Christianity and encourage conversion. Because the phallic eroticized violence is the thing that ultimately kills these saints, the idea that men who resist conversion are the true villains of the stories is reaffirmed. However, through this specific death, the little agency gained through resistance of patriarchal control is taken away, and the woman must die; she must never fully subvert the man's control, as her agency must always be limited and monitored within the conversation of men and male conversion anxiety.

A fifth saint, St. Agatha, serves as a specific example of a woman whose reproductive body parts are directly targeted in the efforts to control her. St. Agatha's story is both similar and different to the previously analyzed saints, for St. Lucy dies at the hands of eroticized violence by a dagger plunged in her throat (which was equated with the uterus), and St. Christina has her breasts cut off, but dies from arrows shot into her body. St. Agatha's story is intriguing because of the location of the torture, being her breasts, for they are first twisted and tortured and then eventually cut off; breasts are an obvious marker of motherhood and reproductive functions, and this centralized torture represents a specific attack on her ability to reproduce. Agatha, like the other female virgin saints, was described as being immensely beautiful and was known to be a devout worshiper of God. Conversely, Quintianus, a consular official who was described as "baseborn, libidinous, greedy, and a worshiper of idols" (Voragine 154), decides he wants Agatha as his wife, whom he will force to also worship idols. However, to his dismay, he "quickly perceived the firmness of her resolution" (154) and decides to send her to a prostitute named Aphrodisia and her nine daughters to threaten her virginity to force her conversion. When even the ten women, who tempt her with both pleasure and pain, cannot shake her solid faith, Quintianus brings her back to question her source of strength and to threaten her with numerous tortures (154). Like St. Lucy, who also offers her body up for pain, St. Agatha declares, "If you resort to wounds and torments, I have the Holy Spirit, through whom I make naught of all that" (155), and then later takes it even further and notes, "These pains are my delight! It's as if I were hearing some good news, or seeing someone I had long wished to see, or had found a great treasure" (155). Again, by offering up her body to the tormentors, Agatha is almost controlling the narrative, for only in resisting would the pagan man gain any satisfaction, and in consenting and encouraging the torture she is relying on her performed spiritual virginity. So far, Agatha's story follows the

popularized form; however, where her story is slightly different is the specific location of the torture. After Agatha publicly proclaims that the “pains are [her] delight” (155), Quintianus is embarrassed for being made a fool; for punishment, he has her breasts first twisted and then cut off. In response, Agatha declares, “Impious, cruel, brutal tyrant, are you not ashamed to cut off from a woman that which your mother suckled you with? In my soul I have breasts untouched and unharmed, with which I nourish all my senses, having consecrated them to the Lord from infancy” (155). First, Agatha immediately relates the removal of her breasts to motherhood, for she reminds Quintianus that he too came from a woman and relied on her breasts for nourishment; this separates Agatha from most of the other saints analyzed, for she makes the direct comparison between her body that is tortured and motherhood and reproductive functions. St. Christina makes a similar connection when she has her breasts cut off: before the arrows that kill her are shot, it is noted that “Julianus had Christina’s breasts cut off, and milk flowed from them instead of blood” (388). Both Agatha and Christina’s relation of their breasts to motherhood (with the milk in Christina’s case a symbol of motherhood) and the pagan men of the stories clearly wanted to control their bodies because of their power to reproduce. Second, Agatha asserts that she has “breasts untouched and unharmed” (155) in her soul given to her *from* Christ; this serves as the reference to her spiritual chastity and performance of a virginal identity, for she suggests that Christ provides the necessary elements spiritually for Agatha to be fulfilled. Ultimately, the attempt to control Agatha and her reproductive body parts is unsuccessful, for her breasts are restored with the help of Peter the Apostle (156) and Quintianus is killed by his horses (157). Like the other virgin saints, Agatha is able to survive and resist torture through the reliance on her spiritual virginity and performance of a chastity-based identity.

Even with the threat against the saints’ reproductive systems, there is some agency gained in their stories. In Christina’s case, she forcefully asserts herself against her father and calls him a man without honor (Voragine 386), while Lucy and Agatha similarly surrender their bodies for torture, only to be untouchable with God’s help, making the men look like fools. These are clear instances in which gaps are found between the idolatrous or pagan man and the woman’s performance of a virginal identity in which she controls the narrative and gains agency. To highlight a real-life example of how the authoritative women in the saints’ stories were viewed and modeled after, I look to Catherine Sanok’s book, *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints’ Lives in Late Medieval England*. Sanok attempts to demonstrate how hagiographic texts created and sustained an imagined female community, encouraged female reader and authorship, and taught medieval women to discern their own beliefs about society through the common refusals seen in female saints’ stories. Sanok refuses to reduce these stories to misogynist tools to further degrade women, though she rightfully acknowledges the presence of violence towards women in the texts; instead, she asserts that “vernacular legends provided



impetus and occasion for thinking about the aspects of gender identity and religious ideals that had changed and those had remained constant" (ix). By stating that these stories provided an opportunity for audiences, both male and female, to question their current society and the history that preceded them, Sanok infers that women could gain more from the female saints' stories than a modern audience might assume. However, Sanok is careful to distinguish the violence and disturbing elements present in these stories from the point she is hoping to prove; she writes,

Understood as normative, female saints' lives are egregiously misogynistic, not only in their [...] fascination with the young female body as the object of often erotized violence—but also in their putative psychological effect [...]. [But], this dismissal overlooks not only evidence of women's ownership and patronage of hagiographic books but also their use of saints' legends to structure their own, sometimes idiosyncratic, spiritual lives. (xiii)

By attempting to separate the violence in their stories from the way many women may have used and understood the texts, Sanok demonstrates the ways in which a woman could reinterpret the female saints' stories. Furthermore, Sanok provides examples that show discrepancies between the actual tales and the responses that we have evidence of; the first example she gives is of the story of St. Cecilia, whom she contrasts with Julian of Norwich, one of the few popular female authors of the Middle Ages. According to Sanok's synthesis, St. Cecilia initially refuses to marry and only consents to escape her family's pressures, warning her husband that no one will touch her body because there is an angel guarding it (1). Eventually, "Cecilia is brought before the pagan judge Almachius, whose self-aggrandizing claims to power she mocks [...]. Almachius orders his soldiers to kill her, but after three attempts to strike off her head with a sword, Cecilia remains alive" (1). This story follows most the typical narrative of the female saints, as she refuses marriage and conversion and is therefore brought before a pagan judge who, when he realizes he cannot control her body, inflicts physical torture; she is then saved by God and is ultimately meant to serve as a reminder of God's goodness. To prove her argument, Sanok uses a real-life figure to demonstrate that some of the elements of the story were not meant to be taken literally. Summarizing Julian's writings, Sanok states, "Although Julian specifically identifies the saint's physical suffering as exemplary, her imitation, curiously, does not require Julian's own bodily pain or deprivation" (4). This point again reinforces the reliance on performance, specifically a spiritually chaste performance; since Julian's imitation does not include physical harm, she is unknowingly performing a culturally ingrained identity of virginity, which is emphasized through her spiritual chastity and disregard of physical pain.

Virginity was an identity learned and taught through and by medieval culture, and it was necessary for Christian women to perform this identity in the Middle Ages through repeated acts, specifically actions that demonstrate spiritual purity. By locating proof of chastity in the spiritual, male authors often steeped their stories with violence towards the female body, emphasizing that what happened to their physical bodies was not worrisome because their souls were protected by God; as a result, the notion that violence towards women is acceptable is replayed narratively in medieval fiction. While this was one trope of the genre, there were sometimes gaps in which women readers of hagiography could find agency in the ways in which the female saints opposed the male authority figures of their tales; their assertiveness served as an example for many women who, in the name of Christianity, could resist temptation, conversion, and threats from (usually pagan) men. Since this agency was only specific in patriarchal Christian discourses, the limit to how much agency a woman reader could find is questionable, but undoubtedly narrow. Overall, the analysis of the ways in which women in medieval literature performed an identity of virginity unveils how women were thought of, whether they were respected or disrespected, and how the roles to which they were confined were not as rigid as they may seem, even though they were ultimately still controlled by men. With Butler's analysis of performance, and the gaps that can be found when someone performs an identity, the female saints are essential examples for medieval readers and provocative figures for current investigations.

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