

Leeds Studies in English

New Series XLVI

2015

Edited by

Alaric Hall



Reviews editor
N. Kivilcim Yavuz

Leeds Studies in English

<www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

School of English
University of Leeds

2015

Leeds Studies in English

<www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

Leeds Studies in English is an international, refereed journal based in the School of English, University of Leeds. *Leeds Studies in English* publishes articles on Old and Middle English literature, Old Icelandic language and literature, and the historical study of the English language. After a two-year embargo, past copies are made available, free access; they can be accessed via <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>>.

Editorial Board: Catherine Batt, *Chair*
Venetia Bridges
Marta Cobb
Alaric Hall, *Editor*
Paul Hammond
Oliver Pickering
Helen Price
Slavica Ranković
N. Kivilcim Yavuz *Reviews Editor*

Notes for Contributors

Contributors are requested to follow the *MHRA Style Guide: A Handbook for Authors, Editors, and Writers of Theses*, 2nd edn (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2008), available at <<http://www.mhra.org.uk/Publications/Books/StyleGuide/download.shtml>>.

Where possible, contributors are encouraged to include the digital object identifiers or, where a complete free access text is available, stable URLs of materials cited (see *Style Guide* §11.2.10.1).

The language of publication is English and translations should normally be supplied for quotations in languages other than English. Each contributor will receive a free copy of the journal, and a PDF of their article for distribution. Please email all contributions to <lse@leeds.ac.uk>.

Reviews

Copies of books for review should be sent to the Editor, *Leeds Studies in English*, School of English, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, United Kingdom.

Contents

Kinsmen Before Christ, Part II: The Anglo-Saxon Transmission P. S. Langeslag	1 <i>University of Göttingen</i>
Saint as Seer: Structure and Style in Ælfric's Life of St Cuthbert Hiroshi Ogawa	19 <i>University of Tokyo (emeritus)</i>
The Virgin's Kiss: Gender, Leprosy, and Romance in the Life of Saint Frideswide Gary S. Fuller	38 <i>Brigham Young University</i>
The Terror of the Threshold: Liminality and the Fairies of <i>Sir Orfeo</i> Piotr Spyra	57 <i>University of Łódź</i>
<i>Þjalar-Jóns saga</i> : A Translation and Introduction Philip Lavender	73 <i>University of Copenhagen</i>
Reviews:	
Geraldine Barnes, <i>The Bookish Riddarasögur: Writing Romance in Late Mediaeval Iceland</i> . Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2014 [Sheryl McDonald Werronen]	115
Carolyn P. Collette, <i>Rethinking Chaucer's 'Legend of Good Women'</i> . York: York Medieval Press, 2014 [Pelia Werth]	117
Elizabeth Cox, Liz Herbert McAvoy and Roberta Magnani, <i>Reconsidering Gender, Time and Memory in Medieval Culture</i> . Cambridge: Brewer, 2015 [Benjamin Pohl]	119

The Virgin's Kiss: Gender, Leprosy, and Romance in the Life of Saint Frideswide

Gary S. Fuller

*Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.*¹

Medieval hagiographic texts often produce a peculiar delight when their holy subject confronts an unusual situation in unexpectedly human fashion, creating a breach in the saint's halo of sanctity but also a stronger shared identity with the fallible audience. One such moment occurs in the long version of a thirteenth-century Middle English verse legend of the life of St Frideswide, the Anglo-Saxon princess and abbess (c. 650–727). This poem, found in the collection of saints' lives known as the *South English Legendary* (*SEL*), concludes with Frideswide's return to Oxford after an extended absence. According to the text, as the saint entered the city, surrounded by joyous townspeople,

A mesel com among that folc, swythe grisliche myd alle,
That hadde yare sik ibe and ne mighte no bote valle.
Loude he gradde and ofte inough, 'Levedi, bidde ic thee,
Vor the love of Jhesu Crist, have mercy of me
And cus me with thi suete mouth, yif it is thi wille!
This maide was sore ofschame and eode evere vorth stille.
This mesel gradde evere on and cride 'milce' and 'ore,'
So that this maide him custe and was ofscamed sore.
A suete cos it was to him, vor therwith anon
He bicom hol and sound, and is lymes echon,
And vair man and clene inou was, and of thulke cosse there
Me thencth the maide nadde no sunne, of ordre thei heo were! (ll. 143–54)

(A leper came among that people, very hideous indeed,
That had been sick for a long time and unable to acquire a remedy.
He called out loudly and repeatedly, 'Lady, I bid thee,
For the love of Jesus Christ, have mercy on me
And kiss me with thy sweet mouth, if it is thy will!
This virgin was sorely ashamed and continued quietly walking.
This leper called out incessantly and cried for mercy and help,

¹ Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), pp. 245–85 (p. 280) (v.1.92).

So this virgin kissed him and was sorely ashamed.
It was a sweet kiss to him, for immediately thereby
He became whole and sound, and all his limbs,
And was a beautiful and clean man, and as for that kiss
It seems to me that the virgin committed no sin, even though she was in a religious order!²

Three elements of this event in the *SEL* legend particularly draw the attention of the reader: the sensuous nature of the leper's request for a kiss; the reluctance of the virgin saint to offer it; and her shame both before and after the healing act. Kissing of lepers had become a hagiographical convention by the time of the *SEL*'s composition; however, these three elements in Frideswide's story were not part of that convention and, indeed, cannot be found in any accounts of similar miracles.³ Moreover, this episode in Frideswide's life is the only known instance in which a male leper requests a kiss from a female saint, and the *SEL*-poet has enhanced the event's exceptionality by making changes to the Latin source which fundamentally transform the interaction between saint and supplicant. Yet, in spite of this remarkable incident, the longer *SEL* life of Frideswide has received little critical attention.⁴ The purpose of this essay is to explore the tension between saintly compassion and romantic love introduced as the *SEL*-poet negotiates intersections of conventional portrayals of leprosy, gender, and religious authority; this tension, I propose, can provide new insight into the medieval conflation of hagiography and romance and suggest new ways of thinking about the construction of romantic identity in thirteenth-century England.

Latin Sources for the *SEL* Lives of Frideswide

Latin hagiographic texts were used as source material for the creation of the *South English Legendary*, a collection of liturgically-ordered saints' lives in Middle English verse. The *SEL* was first composed in the last half of the thirteenth century; the best estimate of the date of the initial collection is *c.* 1270–85.⁵ The fact that the collection exists with some variation in over sixty surviving manuscripts, dating from *c.* 1300 to *c.* 1500, is evidence of its popularity.

² 'The Legend of Frideswide of Oxford, an Anglo-Saxon Royal Abbess', in *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, ed. by Sherry L. Reames (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003), pp. 23–50 (p. 42). The Modern English translation is my own, as are all subsequent Modern English translations of Middle English verse in this essay. The longer *SEL* life of Frideswide is found in only four manuscripts: Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 43 (*c.* 1300–30); Cambridge, Magdalene College MS Pepys 2344 (*c.* 1325–50); London, British Library MS Cotton Junius D IX (early fifteenth century); and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 779 (*c.* 1400–50); see Manfred Görlach, *The Textual Tradition of the South English Legendary*, Leeds Texts and Monographs, n. s. 6 (Leeds: School of English, University of Leeds, 1974), p. 196.

³ See Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), pp. 144–46, and Catherine Peyroux, 'The Leper's Kiss', in *Monks & Nuns, Saints & Outcasts*, ed. by Sharon Farmer and Barbara H. Rowenstein (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 172–73 and 180–85, for detailed discussions and examples of the hagiographical convention of the kissing of lepers.

⁴ See 'The Legend of Frideswide', p. 47, and Anne B. Thompson, *Everyday Saints and the Art of Narrative in the South English Legendary* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 148–49. Also see Oliver Pickering, 'Black Humour in the *South English Legendary*', in *Rethinking the South English Legendaries*, ed. by Heather Blurton and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 427–42 (p. 433).

⁵ Görlach, pp. 37–38; see also Thomas R. Liszka, 'Talk in the Camps: On the Dating of the *South English Legendary*, *Havelok the Dane*, and *King Horn* in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108', in *The Texts and Contexts of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108: The Shaping of English Vernacular Narrative*, ed. by Kimberly K. Bell and Julie Nelson Couch (Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 31–50, in which Liszka summarizes pre- and post-Görlach scholarship on the dating of the *SEL*.

The Virgin's Kiss: Gender, Leprosy, and Romance in the Life of Saint Frideswide

Composed largely in septenary rhyming couplets and characterized by simple, direct language, its intended purpose appears to have been the religious instruction of largely uneducated laity, accomplished via oral recitation of the legends; more recently, scholars have proposed that the collection may have been meant for 'private reading or reading aloud to small groups in the homes of the rural gentry of western England'.⁶ Although the poets who composed the legends are not known, it is generally agreed that they belonged to a religious order, since the original source material of the legends was mostly in Latin. The poems in the collection often expand upon the original narratives, making comments or explanations to the reader in such a way that the saints' lives become more memorable and accessible to the intended audience. Relative to other collections of hagiographic texts, Klaus Jankofsky notes that the legends of the *SEL* can generally be said to possess the following characteristics:

a simplification of theological-dogmatic and hagiographical problems; an explanatory, interpretive, and didactic expansion of subject matter; a process of concretization through the creation of enlivening dialogues and scenes where the sources have plain third-person narrative, that is, dramatization; and a process of acculturation, the adaptation of essentially Latin sources to an English audience, thereby creating a distinctive flavor and mood, *Englishing* [...] Its singularity consists in the new tone and mood of compassion and warm human empathy for the lives and deaths of its protagonists.⁷

Recent scholarship has also focused on the *SEL*'s emphasis on narrative and concludes that its storytelling function seems to overshadow even its supposed didactic purposes.⁸ As an important part of their poetic project, the writers of the *SEL* blended the conventions of hagiography with conventions from other genres already popular in English, such as romance. Both the longer *SEL* version of Frideswide's life already cited and a shorter verse version of her life found in other *SEL* manuscripts are examples of this sort of creative literary translation, which is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the entire *Legendary* and which provides an important contextual lens through which to view the expanded account of the leper's healing.⁹

The shorter life of Frideswide, although not the focus of this essay, differs in its presentation of the virgin's kiss and must be mentioned here. It is one of the rarest texts in the *Legendary*, existing in only two surviving manuscripts, plus a fragmentary copy in a third.

Latin Lives A and B were used by one or more poets to create the shorter and longer *SEL* verse legends of Frideswide's life, respectively. The shorter version is one of the rarest texts in the *Legendary*, existing in only two surviving manuscripts, plus a fragmentary copy in a third.¹⁰ Its version of the leper's healing consists of a compact pair of couplets that portrays

⁶ Thompson, p. 193.

⁷ Klaus P. Jankofsky, 'National Characteristics in the Portrayal of English Saints in the *South English Legendary*', in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Tímea Szell (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 81–93 (pp. 82–83).

⁸ O. S. Pickering, 'The *South English Legendary*: Teaching or Preaching?', *Poetica: An International Journal of Linguistic-Literary Studies*, 45 (1996), 1–14 (pp. 3, 10–11). Pickering notes that while the *SEL* legends are 'in almost all cases straightforward narratives' (p. 3), the creative changes made by an 'outspoken' late reviser moves them moderately closer to the sermonizing end of the teaching-preaching continuum (pp. 10–11).

⁹ 'The Legend of Frideswide', pp. 27–36.

¹⁰ Görlach, p. 196. The two manuscripts containing complete copies of the shorter life of Frideswide are Cambridge, Trinity College MS 605 (c. 1400) and London, British Library MS Stowe 949 (late 14th century); the fragmentary copy is found in Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales MS 5043 (c. 1400?).

the event in a very straightforward way, meeting the expectations of hagiographic readers by preserving the conventional roles of saint and supplicant:

As heo yede a day in the toune, a mysel heo mette.
To hure the mysel felle adoune, and on knes hure grette,
And bysoght that lady that heo hym cusse scholde.
Heo custe hym, and he was hole, ryght as God hit wolde. (ll. 111–14)

[As she walked one day in the town, a leper met her.
The leper fell down before her, and on his knees greeted her,
And begged that lady that she would kiss him.
She kissed him, and he was whole, just as God wished it.]¹¹

No confusion of feeling or ambiguity of motivation is present, and the relative communal positions of the protagonists are made clear by the added visual detail of the leper falling to his knees before the abbess (a detail found in no other version of the legend). The natural assumption by the reader is that Frideswide has kissed the leper on the forehead or face in a chaste and benevolent manner. The simpler description of the kiss and lack of interiority in both protagonists as portrayed in the shorter *SEL* life are in marked contrast to the account found in the longer *SEL* life, reinforcing the exceptionality of the latter.

Apart from her *vitae*, historical records reveal very little about Frideswide. She was, as far as can be determined, a royal Mercian lady who founded and headed a monastery in Oxford in the late seventh century that was already richly endowed before the end of Anglo-Saxon times. She later was adopted as Oxford's patron saint, and the rebuilt Priory of St Frideswide became the foundation of the current Christ Church in Oxford.¹² Historical certainty ends with these meager biographical data, and further details of her life are only to be found in hagiographic texts. Three surviving Latin texts of the life of Frideswide are considered possible sources for the *SEL* versions: a short summary of her life by William of Malmesbury in *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, ca. 1125; a longer text with several miracle stories, written c. 1100–30 in 'bald, rather clumsy Latin' and designated by John Blair as 'Life A'; and a 'longer and more elegant re-working of Life A', designated as 'Life B' and written c. 1140–70, almost certainly by Robert of Cricklade, Prior of St Frideswide's.¹³

Using the designators M, A, and B for each of the respective sources, a composite of the events in the Latin *vitae* may here be presented. Frideswide was born to a king of Oxford [MAB] named Didan, of the Anglo-Saxons, and his wife Safrida [AB].¹⁴ The young princess showed remarkable spiritual and mental prowess when at age five she memorized all 150 psalms over the course of a few months [AB]. After the death of her mother [AB], Frideswide, having reached a marriageable age, instead renounced the world and became a nun, living in

¹¹ 'The Legend of Frideswide', p. 31.

¹² *Saint Frideswide, Patron of Oxford: The Earliest Texts*, ed. and trans. by John Blair (Oxford: Perpetua, 1988), p. 9.

¹³ Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, pp. 9–11; here Blair refutes the premise put forward by F. M. Stenton in 'St. Frideswide and her Times', *Oxoniensia*, 1 (1936), 103–12 that the details of Frideswide's legend were mere inventions added to Malmesbury's simple story. Stenton's verdict was that the extra miracles were a late addition in the late twelfth or thirteenth century and could not have come from an earlier tradition. But Blair shows conclusively that Stenton must not have been aware of Life A, which was produced at the same time or earlier than Malmesbury's narrative and seems to have been independent of it, using at least one older source that is now lost. Görlach also believed that the longer and shorter *SEL* versions of Frideswide's life were based on independent sources, although at the time his book was written (1974) Life A had not yet come to light; see Görlach, p. 197.

¹⁴ It should be noted that the longer *SEL* version of Frideswide's life presents her father only as a nobleman, 'Sire Didan', whereas the shorter *SEL* version and all Latin sources discussed in this essay identify him as a king.

the strictest asceticism [MAB]; her father, before his own death, built a church in Oxford and gave it to her [AB]. After becoming abbess, she rejected the devil, who, appearing as Christ, had invited her to worship him [AB]. The wicked king Algar tried to take her by force to be his wife, but was miraculously stricken by blindness as he pursued her [MAB]. She fled to a wood near Bampton, where she lived three years while evading the king and healed a blind girl [AB]. Frideswide then moved much closer to Oxford, being led to a secluded spot in Binsey, where she lived with her companion sisters and miraculously located a well to sustain them [B]. While there, she healed a young man who had been cursed for chopping wood on a Sunday and cast a demon out of a fisherman [AB]. When she felt that her death was near she returned to Oxford, healing the young leper with her kiss as she entered the city [AB]. Being informed by an angel that she would die on Sunday, 19 October 727, she asked for a grave to be dug on the day before so that no one would be obligated to work on Sunday [AB]. When the hour of her death arrived, she looked heavenward and saw the holy virgins Catherine and Cecilia, who had come to guard her on her way back to the Lord; after her passing, a light blazed through Oxford and a sweet scent filled the town [AB]. As further proof of her holy status, a paralyzed rich man was healed after dragging himself to her grave, and a crippled nobleman named Athelwold threw away his crutches and leapt into the church after interrupting her funeral [AB].¹⁵

Admittedly, much of Frideswide's legend seems familiar to experienced readers of hagiography; the figure of the lustful king miraculously struck down while pursuing a holy virgin, for example, is quite common in lives of virgin martyrs and often dismissed by scholars as a homiletic invention, although Blair notes that the abduction of noblewomen was not uncommon in early medieval times, and that 'King Algar' may have had a historical precedent in King Æthelbald of Mercia.¹⁶ A comparison of the Latin sources of the Frideswide story reveals the way in which details from the earlier texts (Malmesbury's summary and Life A) are modified, enhanced, or corrected in the later Life B. For instance, in Malmesbury's brief text the blinded king's sight is restored after he sends messengers to seek the saint's forgiveness, but Algar receives no such merciful treatment in Life B.¹⁷ Also, an error regarding the geographical location of Binsey, introduced unknowingly by the writer of Life A, is corrected by Prior Robert in Life B, who obviously was well familiar with Oxford and the surrounding countryside.¹⁸

A comparison of individual events narrated by the Latin sources of the Frideswide legend reveals that some of the greatest differences are found in the incident of the leper's healing. Malmesbury's account does not mention it at all. Life A is the earliest text to record the miracle, presenting it in a very straightforward fashion:

Cum autem ingrederetur beata Fritheswitha in supradictam urbem, occurrit ei quidam iuuenis plenus lepra, dixitque ei, 'Adiuro te, O Frithesuiitha virgo, ut des mihi osculum in nomine Iesu Christi.' Illa, ut semper erat repleta Sancto Spiritu, faciens signum crucis dedit ei osculum in nomine Domini, et statim mundatus est a lepra.¹⁹

(Blessed Frideswide had just entered the town when a young man full of leprosy ran up to her and said, 'I beseech you, virgin Frideswide, to give me a kiss in the name of Jesus

¹⁵ John Blair, 'Saint Frideswide Reconsidered', *Oxoniensia*, 52 (1987), 71–127 (pp. 74–79).

¹⁶ Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, p. 15.

¹⁷ Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, p. 27.

¹⁸ Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, pp. 12–13.

¹⁹ Blair, 'Saint Frideswide Reconsidered', p. 100.

Christ.' Filled as she always was with the Holy Spirit, she made the sign of the cross and gave him a kiss in the Lord's name, and at once he was cleaned of his leprosy.)²⁰

Life B, on the other hand, seems to be the product of a conscious and determined effort on the part of Prior Robert to give Frideswide a richer and more interesting history, and this version of the leper's healing is significantly expanded:

Repedanti ergo sacrosancte virgini, tota ilico in obviam ruit civitas et ecce inter *cleri* populique utriusque sexus congratulantium turbas, adest *iuvenis lepra* immanissima adeo tabe et pustulis toto deformatus corpore. [...] Sic enim ulcera, sic tumors, sic iniquus color cuncta obdlexerant, ut monstrum potius putaretur quam homo. Iste profecto non modo miserabilis verum extra modum horribilis, cum appropinquaret ad sanctam, quanta potuit voce horribiliter quidem rauca emisit sonitum satis confusum, verba tamen exprimentem, dicens, '*Adiuvo te, virgo Frideswida, per Deum omnipotentem, ut des mihi osculum in nomine Iesu Christi Filii eius Unigeniti.*' [...] O dura sane postulatio! Petis, iuvenis leprose, virginem natura uti regiam sed, quia Christi ancillam, non moribus delicatam, tibi dare osculum, in quem mares animo prorsus duriores figere abhorrent obtutum? Plane postulatio tua, ni fides eam magnifica proferri compulisset, forte putaretur insanientium improbitate prolata. Quidni? Homines, ut dixi, te intueri pre horrore nequeunt, pro sanie profluente tangere, pro fetore intolerabili tibi appropinquare, et osculum petis a regia virgine? Esto. Nisi leprosus fueris, attamen masculus, num tibi porrigere poterit osculum, que virilem ab inuente etate non novit attactum? Sed inquis, 'Morbi mei intolerabilis estus, et non quem tu commemoras sexus, hoc me petere compellit. Credo enim quod ad tactum oris eius mundissimi, fugiet morbida immunditia corporis mei.' O res miranda et seculis inaudita preteritis! Caritatis igne succensa virgo, contra opinionem omnium ilico accessit et *signo crucis* prius impresso, leproso contulit *osculum*. Facile etenim proculdubio sit quod a caritate vera procedit. Abhorrent intuentes, et cum admiratione non modica rei exitum expectant. Stupendum plane miraculum! Non enim minus quam Naaman Siro septena et mistica iuxta sermonem Helisei in Iordane ablutio, quantum ad corporis sanitatem spectat, huic una pia cum humili devotione puelle sacratissime deosculatio contulit. Ore etenim virginis os leprosi tangitur, et continuo toto corpore *mandatur*. Cutis aspera ad squamarum modum solvitur et velud exuvie colubrine deponitur, ac statim fit caro ipsius sicut caro pueri parvuli.²¹

(When the most holy virgin returned, the entire town immediately rushed to meet her in the way, and, behold, among the crowds of rejoicing clergy and people, both men and women, there is a young man so deformed by monstrous leprosy with pus and blisters on his entire body [...] Thus ulcers, tumors, and uneven complexion so covered everything, that it was easier to believe him a monster than a man. That one certainly was not only pitiable in manner but very frightful; when he approached the holy one, how horribly with a raucous voice he was able to emit a quite disordered sound, yet still expressing words, saying, 'I adjure thee, virgin Frideswide, by Almighty God, that thou give me a kiss in the name of Jesus Christ, His Only Begotten Son.' [...] Oh truly hard request! Do you, leprous youth, at whom men of entirely hard character shudder to fasten their gaze, ask this virgin to give you a kiss, who is not only of royal birth but also Christ's handmaid, and not of wanton character? Clearly your request would be considered an insane wickedness, unless great faith prompted it to be brought forth. Why not? Men, as I said, cannot look at you because of the dread of touching the flowing gore, of approaching your insufferable stink, and you ask a kiss from the royal virgin? So it is. If you were not a leper, but

²⁰ Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, p. 37.

²¹ Blair, 'Saint Frideswide Reconsidered', p. 113. Italicized words are direct quotations from Life A.

simply male, you would never be able to offer a kiss to her, who does not know the touch of one who has arrived at a manly age. But you say, 'Remember, the insufferable heat of my disease, and not any such thing as my sex, compels me to ask this. For I believe that at the touch of her pure mouth the diseased foulness of my body will flee away.' A wonderful thing, and unheard of in the past! Kindled with the flame of charity and against the opinion of everyone present, the virgin immediately approached, first making the sign of the cross, and bestowed a kiss upon the leper. Truly it is without a doubt that she proceeded by true charity. Those observing shrink back and anticipate the outcome of the event with no moderate admiration. A truly amazing miracle! For indeed, what the seven and secret washings in Jordan according to Elisha's sacred word did for the health of the body of Naaman the Syrian, so did one holy kiss bestowed by the consecrated maiden with humble devotion. Since the mouth of the leper is touched by the mouth of the virgin, he is immediately cleansed in his whole body. His skin, rough like scales, is loosened and shed just like a molted snake skin, and immediately his flesh is like the flesh of a very small child.)²²

Notable changes in this version include the emphasis on the leper's horrible appearance, the narrator's questioning of the leper for his audacity in requesting a kiss from Frideswide, and the explanation of the leper's possible motives for making the request.

Medieval Conceptions of Leprosy

As the writer of the longer *SEL* life of Frideswide adapted his Latin sources for a lay English audience, he was drawing upon a medieval worldview in which leprosy was understood symbolically. The symbolism was dual in nature, with one meaning rooted in the Bible and the other in early Christian hagiographic texts. Mosaic law treated leprosy not only as a danger to public health, but also as a representation of sin and spiritual disease; thus, a leper who had been pronounced clean of the plague was required to have both sin and trespass offerings performed in his behalf.²³ Additionally, there are biblical stories of individuals who are miraculously afflicted with leprosy as divine retribution for personal wickedness or rebellion.²⁴ These scriptural accounts, coupled with the natural revulsion felt by people of all classes when confronted by a leper in the advanced stages of the disease, led, in Carole Rawcliffe's words, to 'the assumption that spiritual deformity would somehow leave its trace upon the body as well as the soul insidiously [finding] its way into religious and secular literature alike'.²⁵ In their sermons, medieval clergy used not only Bible stories but also popular tales and moral anecdotes that connected leprosy to wickedness, often interpreting the stories on multiple levels; such preachers, for example, might refer to the lepers in the tales as allegorical figures representing specific sins, such as the 'leper of bakbityng'.²⁶ Many in the Middle Ages, then, assumed that leprosy was a natural result of sin and spiritual decay and that a leper's wickedness was unmistakably inscribed on his own body as a warning for all to see.²⁷

²² Blair, 'Saint Frideswide Reconsidered', p. 78. The Modern English translation is mostly my own, with valuable assistance from Miranda Wilcox, for which I am grateful.

²³ See Leviticus 13–14.

²⁴ See Numbers 12:10, 2 Kings 5:27, and 2 Chronicles 26:19–21 as examples.

²⁵ Rawcliffe, p. 48.

²⁶ Rawcliffe, pp. 48–49.

²⁷ Peyroux, p. 174.

These negative connotations of leprosy inherited from the Bible sharply contrast with favorable representations of leprosy in hagiographic texts beginning in the fourth century, in which the ravages of the disease are symbolic of the suffering and sorrow of Christ himself. By the late medieval period, iconography of Christ included ‘images of His beaten and abused body, which shared many of the features conventionally deployed in the depiction of lepers’.²⁸ Hagiographers and medieval theologians were also influenced by St Jerome’s somewhat liberal translation of Isaiah 53:4 in the fourth-century Vulgate Bible: ‘vere languores nostros ipse tulit, et dolores nostros ipse portavit: et nos putavimus eum quasi leprosum, et percussum a Deo et humiliatum’ (‘surely he hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows: and we have thought him as it were a leper, and as one struck by God and afflicted’).²⁹ Jerome’s interpretation of Isaiah’s Messianic prophecy led to the long-lasting concept of *Christus quasi leprosus*: that Christ had assumed the most wretched and abject physical condition possible, through his bruises, wounds, and putrefying sores, and therefore had close affinity with the leper.³⁰

Christus quasi leprosus was reinforced through incidents recorded in saints’ lives, in which a saint is asked for alms or other assistance by a leper, after which the leper either mysteriously disappears or transforms into Christ and ascends to heaven.³¹ Thus, service to lepers, including embracing, kissing, and washing their sores, became a way for a saint to access the divinity of Christ and show love to him, actions which are motifs in the legends of several saints. The Thuringian princess Radegund, who, like Frideswide, had founded a monastery after spurning a royal marriage, embraced the women in a group of lepers seeking charity, ‘and kissed even their faces, loving them with her whole soul’.³² Matilda, the wife of King Henry I of England, was found one night washing and kissing the feet of lepers; when asked what the king would think if he knew that her lips had touched the feet of lepers, she replied, ‘who does not know that the feet of the Eternal King are to be preferred to the lips of a king who must die?’³³ Some saints were even portrayed as being eager to contract the disease themselves in order to experience Christ’s suffering and rejection more intimately.³⁴ Thus, hagiographers constructed their narratives of saints kissing lepers to demonstrate that these kisses were a means by which saints might attain a more profound spiritual fulfillment. Yet Frideswide’s healing kiss in the longer *SEL* version of her life departs from these conventions, and functions in a radically different way from the expected hagiographic treatment of kissing lepers.

The virgin’s kiss and the construction of romantic identity

In the longer *SEL* version of Frideswide’s legend, the poet crafts the scene of the leper’s healing using conventions not only of hagiography but of romance as well, thus creating tension between sanctity and secular love in the scene. This tension is essentially rooted in the reader’s expectations of competing genres: in hagiography, a suffering leper requests healing from a maternal and compassionate abbess, and, in romance, a courtly lover begs his beloved to heal

²⁸ Rawcliffe, pp. 60–61.

²⁹ All Latin Bible quotations are taken from *Biblia sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, ed. by B. Fischer and others (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994). All English Bible quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*, ed. by James Gibbons (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1989).

³⁰ Rawcliffe, pp. 60–63.

³¹ Peyroux, pp. 173, 184–85; also see Rawcliffe, p. 63. One such incident occurred in the life of Francis of Assisi.

³² Peyroux, p. 181.

³³ Peyroux, p. 183.

³⁴ Rawcliffe, p. 59.

his lovesickness with her favor. When the saint kisses the leper, the didactic purposes of the hagiographic text are instantly subverted by the secular, sexual complexities of romance. The kiss thus activates two modes in the narrative simultaneously: saintly compassion and romantic love, and Frideswide's body becomes the nexus where generic tensions are instantiated.

In light of the prevailing hagiographic tradition and symbolism of leprosy, the longer *SEL* account of Frideswide's kiss is strikingly unconventional. When the leper makes his initial request for a kiss, the abbess tries to ignore him and continues to walk along quietly, rather than seek union with Christ through service to his earthly counterpart in suffering. Instead of viewing the request as an opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, Frideswide surprisingly feels shame and seeks to avoid the leper altogether; this, of course, proves to be impossible because their encounter takes place in front of all the townspeople of Oxford. In fact, the presence of a great crowd of witnesses is the only additional detail that the Frideswide story shares with another medieval account of a saint healing a leper. The fourth-century life of Martin of Tours records how the bishop healed a leper by kissing him in the crowded city gates of Paris, but the leper does not ask for healing, and Martin is portrayed as kissing the leper's face and not his mouth.³⁵ Indeed, it is the method of contact between the saint and the leper in Frideswide's story that stands out as its most unusual feature. In the New Testament, Jesus heals lepers with a simple touch of his outstretched hand.³⁶ Of known accounts of the kissing of lepers in medieval hagiography, the Frideswide legend is the only one in which a kiss is demanded by the leper and not offered unsolicited by the saint; it is also the only story in which the leper is male and the saint is female.³⁷

The gender difference between the saint and the leper is highlighted when the male leper makes specific reference to the female saint's 'suede mouth' (147); his familiarity introduces an element of eroticism and seems to provoke her shame. It is highly improbable that the leper would have made the same request in the same way had the saint entering the city been male. The overall effect of the longer *SEL* version of the healing is to highlight the gender of Frideswide and bring her femininity to the forefront; it seems to the reader that the leper requests a kiss from her, not only because she is holy, but because she is a holy *woman*. The intimate nature of the requested kiss between a woman and a man will bridge not only the gulf between holy and unholy, between health and disease, but also between female and male. Other hagiographic accounts of kissing lepers, as we have seen, involved the saint kissing feet or faces of the diseased persons; only in the Frideswide legend does the healing kiss involve mouth-to-mouth contact. Even Robert's Life B makes it clear that the saint didn't simply kiss the leper's face: 'Ore etenim virginis os leprosi tangitur, et continuo toto corpore mandatur' (since the mouth of the leper is touched by the mouth of the virgin, he is immediately cleansed in his whole body). Only the act of kissing the saint *as* a woman, the *SEL* poet seems to imply, can bring about a complete union, complete wholeness, and complete reconciliation between how things are and how they ought to be, overcoming the fragmentation of the leper's diseased body. The efficacy of this union is shown by the magnified scale of the healing in the longer *SEL* account, in which the leper goes from 'swythe grisliche myd alle' (143) to 'hol and sound' (152), a 'vair man and clene' (153).

³⁵ Peyroux, p. 180.

³⁶ See Mark 1:41 and Matthew 8:3 for examples of Jesus' healing lepers.

³⁷ See Rawcliffe, pp. 144–46, and Peyroux, pp. 172–73, 180–85, for a detailed list of accounts of the kissing of lepers.

In fact, the expanded Frideswide story is a compelling example of how the religious worldview in the later Middle Ages is characterized by a yearning to bridge gaps and reintegrate fragmented parts into a meaningful whole. Caroline Walker Bynum has shown how Western European religious thinkers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were often concerned with how various body parts, such as pared fingernails, would be reassembled in the resurrection, and notes that 'it was a period in which the overcoming of partition and putrefaction — either through reunion of parts into a whole or through assertion of part *as part to be* the whole — was the image of paradise'.³⁸ Leprosy itself could then be seen as a powerful symbol of fragmentation, in which the sufferer, in a half-living state, is experiencing a preview of death's disintegration. The fragmentation is vividly manifest not only in the physical breakdown of the leper's body, whose horrible appearance is emphasized in Latin Life B, but also in the breakdown of community through his exclusion from the town's social environment.

In the longer *SEL* poem, Frideswide's gendered and holy body becomes the means to satisfy the medieval desire for reintegration. Her status as a *virgo intacta* represents wholeness according to the patristic writers, who described the female virgin body as 'a jewel, a treasure, a sacred vessel, a temple of God which was to be cherished and honored'.³⁹ The saint's untarnished purity and her gendered wholeness confront the decay of the leper's body and restore it to completeness in so powerful and miraculous a fashion that the healing also expresses figuratively for the townspeople of Oxford the glory of the final resurrection. Although the patristic writers vigorously debated which body parts would be preserved in the resurrection, they did not consider gender itself to be a fragmentation that would be removed or recombined in resurrected bodies; risen human beings would retain their sex, because, 'for reasons [theologians] could not fully explain, God's creation was more perfect in two sexes than in one'.⁴⁰ So Frideswide's gender, unlike the temporary, temporal nature of the leper's diseased disintegration, is an enduring part of her identity and personhood and, as portrayed by the poet, becomes a vital component of her miraculous healing power.

Although Frideswide's gender informs and helps define her sanctity in the longer *SEL* poem, it also is inextricably connected to the shame she feels throughout the incident of the leper's healing. Whether the leper's request for a kiss was intended as a sexual advance is not as important as the fact that Frideswide, at least partially, interpreted it as one. The shame and hesitation she shows would indicate that she considered the leper's request as a possible breach of her vow of chastity, or at least inappropriate physical contact between an abbess and a lay man. There are certainly other possible explanations for her feelings, such as the natural revulsion one would feel when faced with the prospect of mouth-to-mouth contact with a leper; one can also imagine her hesitating, for modesty's sake, to perform a charitable act in front of the entire town that she would be quite willing to do in the private confines of her abbey. A telling piece of evidence that her shame was connected to her vow of chastity, however, is the fact that she was 'sorely ashamed' *after* the kiss. Other reasons for embarrassment or shame would have disappeared once the kiss was complete and, indeed, would have been replaced by joy and gratitude when the man's leprosy vanished. However, after introducing ambiguity

³⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 13.

³⁹ Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500–1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 127–28.

⁴⁰ Bynum, p. 230.

concerning the motivation and emotions of the participants, the poet intervenes in the narrative and offers his opinion that Frideswide was not guilty of sin 'even though she was in a religious order'. An important result of concluding the story in this way is that it emphasizes not only the femininity of the abbess but also her humanity. Rather than a sanctified caricature of unchanging benevolence, removed from earthly care and weakness, she becomes accessible through her display of uncertainty, shame, and embarrassment, and her emotional response draws the reader into an unexpected and compelling moral dilemma. The leper has constrained Frideswide, by her vows of devotion and piety, to help him; she is obligated, as a servant of Christ, to show mercy and render aid to all who ask for it. Her shame at being asked to submit to unwanted physical contact with a man is trumped by the leper's very public insistence on mercy. The kiss then becomes, for her, a stern test of devotion and surrender of free will that is unlikely to have been required of a male cleric in the same situation.

Why, then, did the poet make these changes in the longer *SEL* life of Frideswide? One possibility is that the poet was crafting the narrative for a lay female audience. Considerable scholarship in recent years has established that vernacular saints' lives were read by large numbers of women, and many were written explicitly for female readers, especially those whose subjects were virgin martyrs.⁴¹ Lay women readers were urged by moralists and hagiographers to read the legends as exemplary biography; however, since closely imitating the sufferings and miraculous deeds of the virgin saints was not possible, they were encouraged to find and emulate virtues in the stories consistent with contemporary social expectations and feminine devotional practice.⁴² These interpretive readings were often figurative in nature, and readers were sometimes quite flexible in their mapping of heroic behavior onto practical daily routines. Thus, in addition to viewing Frideswide's act as an exemplar of compassion to suffering souls, the healing could also be read more generally as a victory of Christ's compassion (as symbolized by the saint) over sin and wickedness (as symbolized by the leper). Alternately, viewing the leper as Christ (through the lens of *Christus quasi leprosus*) and Frideswide as the betrothed of the Bridegroom, 'refined gentlewomen' might see how compassionate sacrifice might bring healing benefits to their own marriages.⁴³

The notion that some *SEL* legends were written largely for female readers illuminates possible reasons for the poet's changes, and the history of Frideswide's cult prior to the composition of the *SEL* also suggests a female audience. Pre-Norman historical details of the saint's monastery are practically nonexistent; the reason, as recorded in a royal charter restoring the title-deed to St Frideswide's in 1004, is that Danes fleeing Æthelred's extermination order in 1002 took refuge in the monastery and set fire to it.⁴⁴ Even before the fire, the monastery had apparently been converted into a minster of non-monastic male clerics. By the early twelfth century the restored monastery was refounded as a priory of disciplined Augustinian monks, and it was probably in connection with this change that Life A was written

⁴¹ See Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c. 1150–1300: Virginity and its Authorizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁴² Sanok, pp. 2–9; also, see Andrea Hopkins, 'Female Saints and Romance Heroines: Feminine Fiction and Faith among the Literate Elite', in *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman, and Michelle Sweeney (Cambridge: Brewer, 2010), pp. 121–38 (pp. 126–27).

⁴³ Winstead's phrase, p. 113.

⁴⁴ Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, pp. 18–19.

in an attempt to recover and memorialize the origins of both the community and the saint. However, because St Frideswide's had been held for some time by Abingdon Abbey prior to the installation of the Augustinians, the new residents feared that the Abingdon monks had stolen Frideswide's remains. A fourteenth-century manuscript chronicles how the fears of the Augustinians were put to rest after a secret nighttime excursion to the church; not only did the excursion uncover the saint's remains, but it was attended by a miraculous extinguishing and rekindling of their torches as the bones were uncovered. Impressed by this heavenly sign and by the fact that the number of visitors and miracles at the gravesite had increased markedly, Prior Philip of St Frideswide's had the saint's bones transferred to a raised shrine with great publicity in 1180. The Archbishop of Canterbury himself came to Oxford to perform the ceremony.⁴⁵ The translation of the relics and dozens of miracles reported soon thereafter seem to be the culmination of an effort begun much earlier by Prior Robert, who expanded the earlier Life A and corrected its faulty geographical references when he produced Life B c. 1140–70.

When the *SEL* was first compiled c. 1270–85, nearly a century had elapsed since most of the healing miracles had been recorded at the shrine of Frideswide; the great majority had occurred in the last two decades of the twelfth century. Henry Mayr-Harting, in a detailed study of miracles recorded at the saint's shrine, notes that in cases of healing, sixty-seven involved females and only thirty-two involved males.⁴⁶ This female-male ratio is highly unusual when compared to the shrines of other saints. Moreover, a great number of the maladies healed were related to the psychological effects of the onset of puberty in girls and sexual fear or rejection in adult women. Mayr-Harting concludes:

one sees [...] in the Miracles of St. Frideswide the perennial dislocations and illnesses caused by sexual problems, compounded for women by their being regarded in that society as inferior to men and having far fewer alternative outlets for their energies and emotions.⁴⁷

It is thus quite probable that the longer *SEL* life of Frideswide was composed at a time when she had acquired a considerable reputation for being especially merciful to women and quick to grant their supplications for relief, and therefore reasonable to assume that suffering girls and women had a long-established rapport with the saint and had adopted her as a patroness. If this was indeed the case, the poet may have wanted to strengthen Frideswide's cult by portraying her as being obligated to kiss a leprous man against the delicate dictates of her own conscience, thereby creating empathy in a female lay audience. Such a sympathetic treatment of women beset by unwanted male advances would be consistent with a section of another, lengthy *SEL* poem, *Southern Passion*, which lauds the fidelity of women and argues against categorizing them as fickle and lecherous, since lechery invariably originates with men.⁴⁸

Another possible reason for the poet's alterations is that they may constitute a reaction against the existing religious institutional landscape, in which conceptions of female monas-

⁴⁵ Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, 19–20.

⁴⁶ Henry Mayr-Harting, 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century Shrine: The Miracles of St Frideswide', in *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. H. C. Davis*, ed. by Henry Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore (London: Hambledon, 1985), pp. 193–206 (pp. 197–98).

⁴⁷ Mayr-Harting, p. 198.

⁴⁸ O. S. Pickering, 'The "Defense of Women" from the *Southern Passion: A New Edition*', in *The South English Legendary: A Critical Assessment*, ed. by Klaus P. Jankofsky (Tübingen: Francke, 1992), pp. 154–76 (p. 156). It is not known whether the poet who composed *Southern Passion* is the same who wrote the longer *SEL* life of Frideswide.

ticism had changed so much during the five centuries since Frideswide's death that abbesses of her stature were now completely unknown. The Benedictine reform movement that had begun in the tenth century, over three centuries before the composition of the *SEL*, resulted in substantial restrictions of female ecclesiastical power and influence.⁴⁹ The original community of St Frideswide appears to have changed as a result of the reform: it was probably founded as a double monastery led by a female abbess but, as has been noted, was later refounded as a male-only monastery, eliminating the position of abbess altogether.⁵⁰ As the monastic reform movement continued into the eleventh century, it became less common for abbesses to attend synods and for nuns to receive the same rigorous training in Latin and the scriptures as monks.⁵¹ As a result, dynamic abbesses such as Frideswide, who organized missionary work, advised monarchs, and ruled with complete ecclesiastical authority over both male and female monastics, had completely disappeared from religious establishments by the time of the *SEL*'s composition.

Indeed, the roots of an ideology that limited female ecclesiastical power can be traced to writings of early Christian Fathers, who depicted the ideal spiritual being as male and reasoned that in order to achieve relevance in Christian dialogue a woman must surpass her own nature and become male, at least symbolically.⁵² Helene Scheck offers the tenth-century lives of two saints, Euginia and Euphrosyne, as examples: the female saints dress and masquerade as male monastics in order to live a more righteous and holy life, and when their true gender is inevitably discovered, the monks are amazed that women could be so righteous.⁵³ Consequently, female monastics were often denied access to the scriptural study and commentary available to male monastics and were increasingly confined to physical expressions of piety, such as fasting or other forms of physical penance and self-denial.⁵⁴

Further evidence that ecclesiastical institutions limited feminine influence is found in the conventions of hagiography itself, which tended to portray female saints as passive or reactive rather than active. Male hagiographers, already viewing their female subjects as 'other' because they were female and therefore mysterious, were reluctant to portray the saints' worldly, everyday assertiveness, choosing instead to focus on 'the women's proximity to the supernatural realm, a holy intimacy the men admired but felt incapable of imitating'.⁵⁵ It is important to recognize that the Latin sources used by the *SEL*-poet to create his Middle English life of Frideswide were not written soon after her death in 727, but dated from the twelfth century and had thus already passed through the male authorial filter of experienced

⁴⁹ Helene Scheck, *Reform and Resistance: Formations of Female Subjectivity in Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), pp. 83–85. A detailed treatment of the Church's attempt to limit female leadership and influence can be found in Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, 'Female Sanctity: Public and Private Roles, ca. 500–1100', in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), pp. 102–25 (pp. 115–21).

⁵⁰ Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, p. 18.

⁵¹ Scheck, pp. 83–84.

⁵² See Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), pp. 55–56; also see Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, pp. 128–29. Schulenburg references St Jerome, who said that when a woman 'wishes to serve Christ more than the world, she will cease to be a woman and will be called man', and St Ambrose, who said that 'she who believes progresses to perfect manhood, to the measure of the adulthood of Christ' (p. 453).

⁵³ Scheck, pp. 85–90.

⁵⁴ Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, pp. 377–79, 395.

⁵⁵ Catherine M. Mooney, 'Voice, Gender, and the Portrayal of Sanctity', in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. by Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 1–15 (pp. 10–11).

hagiographers who sought to portray female saints not as exceptional leaders and ecclesiastical rulers, but as resisters of male lust and sufferers of fleshly trials. Also, the basic narrative framework of the leper's healing had already been established in the sources, and even the *SEL*-poet's expanded version retains elements of female passivity. For instance, it was the male leper who dictated the terms of his interaction with Frideswide by choosing the manner of the healing, and, uncomfortable though she was with it, she is presented as unable to find another option.

In fact, the original Latin Lives A and B contain a far greater number of depictions of Frideswide's passivity than the longer *SEL* version of her life. Life B in particular contains several instances in which the virgin receives instructions from a heavenly messenger on where to go or how to proceed, thus presenting her own agency as limited. The *SEL* version, in contrast, contains fewer instances of direct divine intervention, and the corresponding events show the abbess possessing a greater power of action. Anne Thompson notes that while 'Robert's description [Life B] of Frideswide conspires to remove her from the human sphere',⁵⁶ in the *SEL* versions '[Frideswide's] travels are constructed as positive events, which she undertakes through her own volition, rather than being imposed on her by God and the narratort'.⁵⁷ By returning the saint to an active role in her own story, the *SEL*-poet has reclaimed some small part of the lost female dynamism of medieval narrative and permitted a glimpse of the power and influence of Anglo-Saxon abbesses.

Yet, even as medieval conceptions of leprosy, gender, and religious authority collide and provide an underlying tension in the longer *SEL* life of Frideswide, the poetic art that is likely to have made it appealing to a medieval audience is largely achieved through the infusion of the hagiographic narrative with the language and conventions of romance. That the poet had access to romance texts is not only plausible but likely, since many abbeys had libraries that contained them, not only among the Augustinian canons regular and the Benedictines, but among other orders as well, such as the Gilbertines and Cistercians.⁵⁸ Writers of Middle English hagiography often absorbed the stylistic conventions of romance while rejecting much of its subject matter, which is vividly demonstrated in several *SEL* manuscripts. No fewer than fifteen contain a poem called 'Banna Sanctorum' that was written to serve as a prologue to the collection in later manuscripts and which seeks to prove the superiority of saints' lives over romance stories:

Men wilneþ mucho to hure telle of bataille of kyng
And of kniȝtes þat hardy were þat muchedel is lesynge
Wo so wilneþ mucho to hure tales of suche þinge
Hardi batailles he may hure here þat nis no lesinge
Of apostles & martirs þat hardy kniȝtes were
Þat studeuast were in bataille & ne fleide noȝt for fere
Þat soffrede þat luper men al quik hare lymes totere (ll. 59–65)

(Men greatly desire to hear of the battles of kings
And of knights who were brave, much of which is lying.
Whoever would like to hear tales of such things
May hear of hardy battles here which are not lies;

⁵⁶ Thompson, p. 145.

⁵⁷ Thompson, p. 151.

⁵⁸ Melissa Furrow, *Expectations of Romance: The Reception of a Genre in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2009), p. 223.

The Virgin's Kiss: Gender, Leprosy, and Romance in the Life of Saint Frideswide

Of apostles and martyrs who were bold knights,
Who were steadfast in battle and fled not for fear
And suffered evil men to tear their living limbs to pieces.)⁵⁹

The poet here employs a conscious rhetorical strategy, asking the reader to exchange the stories of popular romance (which he characterizes as 'lying') for the legends of the *SEL* saints (which are 'not lies'); rather than reject the style and motifs of romance, however, he embraces them, and in a manner reminiscent of the earlier Old English poetic tradition casts the holy martyrs as knights and heroic warriors. At a stroke, the poet has claimed the best qualities of a popular literary genre and fitted them with what he considers to be proper subject matter.

One particular *SEL* manuscript blurs the line between hagiography and romance even further, as it includes in the compilation actual romances that involve saint-like protagonists, such as *King Horn* and *Havelok the Dane*. A recent collection of essays on Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108 shows how 'genres are critical constructions after the fact of writing', and are very much in the eye of the manuscript compiler.⁶⁰ Kimberly Bell and Julie Nelson Couch, in their assessment of this manuscript, argue that, rather than viewing it as being clearly divided into a *vita* section and a romance section, it should be read as a whole book, noting that the consecutive numbering of all the texts in the manuscript and its mostly uniform decoration indicate a desire on the part of the compilers to frame the romances as part of 'a continuum of saints' lives and religious matter'.⁶¹ Andrew Lynch continues this argument by noting that in the juxtaposition of *vita* and romance, new combinations of images and ideas could form in the mind of the reader, reinforcing but also varying and enhancing themes of heroic virtue.⁶² The direction of the connections is framed by the compiler of the collection and the choices of what texts to include, and in which order. Legends of martyrs and confessors in the *SEL* are linked to the exile-prince romances *Horn* and *Havelok* by 'the special prominence they give to the nature and disposition of heroic bodies'; divine power is registered corporeally in both types of protagonists 'through signs of divine origin, providential preservation, and ultimate heavenly endorsement'.⁶³ The inclusion of these romances in a notable *SEL* manuscript such as Laud Misc. 108 seems to highlight two genres that in the thirteenth century were being drawn ever closer together, as authors and compilers, responding to a changing readerly aesthetic, sought to redefine the artistic boundaries of hagiographic narrative.⁶⁴

In general, the verse lives of saints found in the *SEL* are splendid examples of the romanticization of vernacular hagiographic texts, and the *SEL* versions of Frideswide's legend

⁵⁹ *The South English Legendary, Vol. 1*, ed. by Charlotte d'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), p. 3. The 'Banna Sanctorum' is found in two of the four *SEL* manuscripts containing the longer life of Frideswide: Cambridge, Magdalene College MS Pepys 2344 and London, British Library MS Cotton Junius D IX.

⁶⁰ Andrew Lynch, 'Genre, Bodies, and Power in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108: *King Horn, Havelok*, and the *South English Legendary*', *Texts and Contexts*, pp. 177–96 (p. 179). Although the manuscript focused on in these essays does not contain either the shorter or longer life of Frideswide, the collection addresses connections between genre and manuscript compilation that are pertinent to the discussion at hand.

⁶¹ Kimberly K. Bell and Julie Nelson Couch, 'Introduction: Reading Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108 as a Whole Book', *Texts and Contexts*, pp. 1–18 (pp. 7–9); also see Murray J. Evans, '“Very Like A Whale”: Physical Features and the “Whole Book” in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108', *Texts and Contexts*, pp. 51–69.

⁶² Lynch, pp. 177–78, 182.

⁶³ Lynch, p. 187.

⁶⁴ See Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, '“Bet ... to ... rede on holy seyntes lyves ...”: Romances and Hagiography Again',

are no exception. In comparing the account of the leper's healing in the longer *SEL* life of Frideswide to its principal source, Robert's Latin Life B, certain elements found in the former have the effect of making it feel like a romance. While Life B draws attention to the disfiguring ulcers, tumors, and horrible smell of the leper, creating in the reader's mind the image of a rotting, inhuman monster, the *SEL* version chooses instead to emphasize his humanity and courage. Though his hideous appearance is mentioned in passing, sympathy is created on his behalf with the newly added details of his having been sick for a long time and having tried unsuccessfully to find a remedy for his condition. This sympathetic treatment of the *SEL* version also extends to how the leper's request is voiced. While the leper in Life B makes his demand once in a 'raucous' voice, the leper in the *SEL* version cries loudly and insistently for 'mercy' and 'help'. Also, the narrator of Life B questions the leper for his audacity in asking the saint to kiss him in his condition and takes great pains, through an imagined conversation, to make clear to the reader that the leper is compelled to request a kiss by the 'heats' of his disease and not because of sexual desire; if he were 'simply male', his request would shockingly sinful. In contrast, the *SEL* version is resoundingly silent on the leper's possible motivations for requesting the kiss, and the poet only presents his judgment that Frideswide was not guilty of sin, as if her virtue were somehow in doubt. The resulting ambiguity is another means of creating tension between sacred love and sexual desire, a tension common in medieval romances.

Even more striking than the narrative changes, however, is the poet's recasting of the language itself in the longer *SEL* version to make it more like a romance than its source. In Life B, the hagiographer uses *adjurare* to frame the leper's request, a verb with legal connotations involving a binding under oath.⁶⁵ The leper also addresses Frideswide in Life B using the word *virgo*, a term that could simply mean 'a maiden', but was often used in ecclesiastical discourse to signify the elevated spiritual status of virginity.⁶⁶ The leper's strict charge to Frideswide while publicly recognizing her chaste sanctity thus bestows a sense of formal religious ceremony upon the leper's healing in Life B. In the *SEL* version, on the other hand, the leper makes his request in the language of medieval romance, with himself cast as a wooer in the courtly love tradition: 'Levedi, bidde ic thee, I [...] have mercy of me I And cus me with thi suete mouth, yif it is thi wille!' The term of address, 'Lady', is quite common in medieval romance. And the Middle English verb used, 'bid', is more versatile than *adjurare*: it can mean 'to address a prayer or entreaty to (God, a saint); supplicate, pray; also, worship', but it can also simply mean 'to request or beg (sth. of sb.).'⁶⁷ In addition, a lover in a courtly romance will often ask his lady to have mercy on him because of the suffering that his love for the lady is causing him. The idea of mercy is often expressed in romances using the Middle English word 'reuth(e)', which means 'pity, compassion, sympathy; also, mercy'.⁶⁸

in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. by Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994), pp. 83–97, for a useful discussion of the similar functions and relations to cultural context exhibited by hagiographic and romantic texts.

⁶⁵ To swear to, to confirm by an oath'; see Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary Founded on Andrews' Edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), s.v. 'adjuro', <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0059>>, accessed May 2, 2012. The Middle English definition of 'adjure' is 'To bind (sb.) by oath (to do sth.); also, to entreat (in the name of, or for the sake of, sth. holy)'; see *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001), s.v. 'adjuren', <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>>, accessed May 2, 2012.

⁶⁶ *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. 'virgo'.

⁶⁷ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. 'bidden'.

⁶⁸ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. 'reuth(e)'.

The Virgin's Kiss: Gender, Leprosy, and Romance in the Life of Saint Frideswide

This language of romance and courtly love, with its repeated address of 'Lady' and its plea for mercy or pity, by the thirteenth century permeated religious texts that praised the Virgin Mary, as can be seen by the following lyric:

Mi swete levedi, her mi bene [prayer]
And reu of me yif thi wille is.
[...]
Swete levedi, of me thu reowe
And have merci of thin knicht.
[...]
Levedi milde, softe and swote,
Ic crie thee merci, ic am thi mon.⁶⁹

A century later, Chaucer uses the same language in a secular context to undermine courtly love traditions, when Absolon tries unsuccessfully to woo Alisoun in *The Miller's Tale*: 'Now, deere lady, if thy wille be, I praye yow that ye wole rewe on me' (3361–62).⁷⁰ Yet it was not the convention to make use of this language when addressing female saints in hagiographic texts. The *SEL*-poet's infusion of the formal language of courtly love into a hagiographic narrative demonstrates a popular departure from the conventions of Latin saints' lives and results in a recasting of the roles of the protagonists, with the leper as courtly lover and Frideswide as his love interest.⁷¹ When used in this way in a hagiographic text, the language of romance becomes transformational, able to confront and alter readers' expectations of social transactions between the holy and the afflicted.

The word 'suede', in particular, conveys multiple meanings to medieval readers, and its two appearances in the *SEL* healing (each functioning differently from the other) are responsible for much of the ambiguity in the poem. In one sense, the reference to Frideswide's 'suede mouth' is an example of the romantic language common to secular love lyrics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; one of these, entitled 'When þe Nyhtegale Singes,' seems to closely parallel the language in the saint's legend: 'Wiþ þy loue, my suede leof, mi blis þou mihtes eche; I A suede cos of þy mouþ mihte be my leche' ('with thy love, my sweet dear, thou mightest increase my bliss; I A sweet kiss of thy mouth might be my healer').⁷² But 'suede' can also mean 'of God, Christ, Mary, a saint, etc.: blessed, holy; gracious', or 'spiritually refreshing'; the resolution of the sacred-or-secular ambiguity depended largely on the life experience and devotional practices of the reader. When the kiss is described as being 'suede' to the leper, other definitions of the word are activated, such as 'precious, valuable', and 'of

⁶⁹ *Middle English Marian Lyrics*, ed. by Karen Saupe (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998), p. 52.

⁷⁰ The connection between the Marian lyric and Absolon's wooing couplet is convincingly laid out by Peter G. Biedler in '“Now, Deere Lady”: Absolon's Marian Couplet in the “Miller's Tale”', *Chaucer Review*, 39 (2004), 219–22.

⁷¹ As the use of the language of romance casts the protagonists in new roles, the saint's first refusal to grant the leper's request brings to mind the lady's initial rebuff of the lover in some courtly love literature. Another compelling use of romantic language occurs earlier in the longer *SEL* Frideswide legend, when the devil addresses the saint as 'my lemman' (35), a Middle English romantic term of endearment. It is worth noting that the sexual tension introduced in the longer *SEL* life of Frideswide seems to have made a later writer uncomfortable: in a Middle English prose recasting of the legend made in or after 1438 and added to the *Gilte Legende*, the writer renders the kiss, 'and than this holy virgyn fulle mekely kyssyd hym' (see *Supplementary Lives in Some Manuscripts of the 'Gilte Legende'*, ed. by Richard Hamer and Vida Russell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 155). The use of the word 'mekely' (meaning, variously, 'humbly', 'respectfully', 'courteously', 'quietly', or 'graciously') sanitizes the intrusion of romance into the hagiographic account.

⁷² *The Harley Lyrics*, ed. by G. L. Brook (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1948), p. 63.

the harmony or accord of parts'.⁷³ Mary Carruthers has shown that a medieval understanding of 'sweetness', while sometimes understood as a medicinal property that restores the balance of the body's humors ('þe swete accorde'), also includes a component of bitterness that fights against wholesomeness, yet is inseparable from it. She notes that 'sweetness characteristically occasions and exploits irony, oxymoron, paradox [...] [its] very essence is ambiguous'; this notion is encapsulated in medieval awareness by the apostle John, who in vision eats a scroll that is sweet in his mouth but bitter in his belly, and by the tree in Eden, whose sweetest fruit also introduced the bitterness of death.⁷⁴ In the *SEL* version of Frideswide's story, tension is produced at a climactic moment because the kiss is sweet only to *one* of the protagonists; the poet thus skillfully uses the compound and contrary nature of the medieval concept of sweetness to great effect by introducing the appearance of shame as the bitter fruit of sweet healing.

With the addition of the language and narrative elements of romance to the Latin sources of Frideswide's legend, the cleansing of the leper, in which he is restored from a state of repulsive degeneration to a state of primal purity, performs an important generic function in the longer *SEL* poem. Having reversed the conventional hagiographic roles of the participants, so that the leper is now the protagonist and the virgin saint his love interest, the poet uses the kiss to reveal the leper's true identity, a central theme of medieval romance. Simon Gaunt argues that, in contrast to the epic, in which the hero's identity is constructed primarily in relation to other men, 'romance constructs masculinity in relation to femininity, developing a strong sense of alterity'.⁷⁵ This alterity is vividly displayed in the contrasting reactions of the leper and Frideswide to the kiss, and in the reader's realization that the leper's recovery of identity is counterbalanced by the diminution or loss of the saint's self-identity. The use of shame as a device leading to self-knowledge is also prominent in the romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, when the revelation of Gawain's hidden cowardice and dishonesty results not only in his deep shame but in a greater self-awareness and dedication to the chivalric code. However, the *SEL* poem departs from *Sir Gawain* in that the shame does not participate in the construction of romantic masculine identity, as it does for Gawain, but in the deconstruction of sacred feminine identity, as Frideswide's chastity is portrayed as potentially suspect. The conflict and ambiguity arising from these intersections of gender and genre suggest that the *SEL* saints' lives might contain more insight into the construction of romantic identity than has been considered previously.

It must be remembered that the *South English Legendary*, while its author or authors remain unknown, was intended to provide religious instruction to the unlettered, whether lay or religious. The longer *SEL* account of St Frideswide's healing of the leper brings together three facets of medieval awareness that would have been familiar to that audience: leprosy, with its symbolism of wickedness and holiness; chastity, as embodied most commonly in the female virgin saint; and Christian service to afflicted and suffering souls. The tension between these potentially conflicting elements and the recasting of the legend using the

⁷³ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. 'swet(e)'.
⁷⁴ Mary Carruthers, 'Sweetness', *Speculum*, 81 (2006), 999–1013 (p. 1010).

⁷⁵ Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 73–75. Robert W. Hanning neatly summarizes the matter of identity in romance in the following statement: 'the great adventure of chivalric romance is the adventure of becoming what (and who) you think you can be, of transforming the *awareness* of an inner self into an *actuality* which impresses upon the external world the fact of personal, self-chosen identity, and therefore of an inner-determined identity' (quoted by Furrow, p. 57).

The Virgin's Kiss: Gender, Leprosy, and Romance in the Life of Saint Frideswide

language and narrative elements of romance make the *SEL* poetic rendering of the story accord better with thirteenth-century English readerly tastes than its earlier and more conventional Latin versions. The surprising moment when Frideswide kisses the leper is simultaneously transgressive and transcendent, revealing God's power in the joining of holiness with disease, in the struggle between shame and faith, and in the union of woman and man. The shame and reluctance felt by the abbess regarding the requested kiss in this account also forge an important link between saint and laity, especially suffering girls and women. The poet's compelling humanistic depiction of the leper's healing in the longer *SEL* legend of St Frideswide, with its profound explorations of gender and sanctity, makes it a truly unique and fascinating event in medieval hagiography.