

# Leeds Studies in English

New Series XLII

2011

Edited by

Alaric Hall



Editorial assistants  
Helen Price and Victoria Cooper

*Leeds Studies in English*

<[www.leeds.ac.uk/lse](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse)>

School of English  
University of Leeds

2011

## REVIEWS

Rachel Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate: Miracle Stories and Miracle Collecting in High Medieval England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. viii + 337 pp. ISBN 978-0-8122-4279-9. £42.50.

When I was on the isle of Thanet, I went walking along the seashore with a knight who had asked me there for his edification. We considered those things that were marvels of God there and drew from them material for good conversation. From there the conversation turned to father Dunstan, as every time I find occasion for speaking about him I always obtain the greatest benefit. Recalling that name, the knight paled, and breathing deeply as if in pain he said, 'Oh, how ungrateful I am, I who am forgetful of his great kindness' (p. 19)

The story above, recounted by Koopmans in the first chapter of *Wonderful to Relate: Miracle Stories and Miracle Collecting in High Medieval England*, is emblematic of both the subject matter and the methodology of this fascinating and important book. Koopmans uses this anecdote, recounted by Osbern of Canterbury in his collection of the miracles of St Dunstan, to highlight what she understands to be the key aspect of miracle stories in high medieval England: the greater importance of their oral to their written form. Here, the memory of a miracle is shared between Osbern and the anonymous Knight of Thanet. The miracle is remembered between members of the same community, retold, and, finally written down: 'then, seeing those who were present, I presented to them in words what I now produce in letters', Osbern concludes (p. 20). It is the spectre of forgetting, Koopmans argues, more than the demands of propaganda or avarice, that was the main impetus for the fashion for miracle collection that emerged, peaked, and then subsided in high medieval England.

*Wonderful to Relate* analyses the seventy-five or so surviving miracle collections from high medieval England for what they can tell us not just about high medieval religious culture or the cult of saints, but more generally about the relationships between orality and literacy, monastic culture and lay culture, history and written record. The introduction insists we rewrite our understanding of at least this corner of medieval English literary history. It is worth quoting in full a passage that amounts to a manifesto:

English miracle collections were written in the same monastic contexts and frequently by the same authors who produced other Latin prose texts of the period. In terms of numbers of authors, miracle collecting was actually a more important and mainstream literary activity in England than the writing of chronicles. The creation of miracle collections is usually thought to have been driven by the pressures of cults and the immediate political needs of monastic communities. Except in studies of pilgrims, disease, illness and the

## Reviews

like, it has been rare for miracle collections to be considered as a body. But the stark rise and fall of miracle collecting in high medieval England demonstrates that we need to think in terms of broader patterns of production, to read individual collections within these broader patterns, to weigh the influence of specific authors, to formulate explanations for peaks and troughs in the popularity of miracle collecting, and to recognize the miracle collection for what it was: a defining genre and major literary phenomenon of the long twelfth century. (p. 2)

*Wonderful to Relate* rises to the challenge it presents here. Its ten chapters fall loosely into three sections. The first two chapters set the scene and articulate the book's methodology. The centrepiece of this methodology is a focus on the 'oral creation and circulation' (p. 11) of miracles, especially as 'personal stories'. Here Koopmans argues that 'many of the repetitive similarities between stories in different collections were not the results of writers working to set models. Rather, these similarities were already a feature of the oral stories the collectors heard' (p. 6). Chapters Three through Seven write the literary history of English miracle collections by focusing chronologically on the important miracle collections and their key developments. Thus Chapter Three begins with the observation that no miracle collections were produced in England in the troubled years between 800 and 950, and it moves on to consider the sole pre-Conquest miracle collection, Lantfred of Fleury's *Translation and Miracles of Swithun*. Koopmans reorients our understanding of this collection from the context of English monastic reform, back to Fleury, with its history of miracle collecting, and suggests that the first 'English' miracle collection was in fact intended for a non-English audience. This may, in part, explain why English miracle collecting had to wait for yet another foreign monk, this time Goscelin of St Bertin, before the 'fad' really got underway. Chapter Four considers Goscelin of St Bertin's career as a professional hagiographer in post-Conquest England. Koopmans attributes much of the structure, form and meaning of the standard format of the miracle collection to Goscelin's pioneering lives of Wulfsgie, Edith and Kenelm. Chapters Five and Six turn to the native English miracle collectors, Osbern and Eadmer of Canterbury. Reading Osbern and Eadmer's lives of St Dunstan against one another, Koopmans traces a developing tension in the treatment of the oral sources of miracles. Chapter Seven describes the shifts in miracle collecting from the 1140s–1170s to the 1170s–1200. It also serves as something of an introduction to the final three chapters, which focus on the collections of miracles of St Thomas Becket: those of Benedict of Peterborough and William of Canterbury. Three appendices on the manuscripts and relationship between these collections support the analysis here.

At the same time as it focuses on these case studies, *Wonderful to Relate* constructs an overarching narrative that describes English miracle collecting as falling into two main phases. The first, c. 1080–1140, arranged miracles into medium-sized collections that intend to preserve current oral stories, and which present themselves as self-consciously attempting to preserve the past from oblivion. In this, they share the impulse of post-Conquest historiography. The second phase, from c. 1140–1200 sees collections grow longer, while the individual narration of miracles becomes shorter: the collecting impulse shifts from recording in-house gossip to a desire to add as many witnesses as possible. And for the first time, these witnesses prominently include lay persons. Here, the influence on the development of the canonization dossier is seen. In the thirteenth century, as Koopmans describes in the conclusion to the book, miracle collections are still produced, but the *exemplum* overtakes the miracle as the narrative of choice.

## Reviews

The critical interventions of *Wonderful to Relate* are many and important. In particular, Koopmans' untangling of the relationships between the Becket miracle collections will be invaluable. In many cases, she reorients traditional interpretations and offers new perspectives. For example, Koopmans disputes Southern's argument that the impulse behind miracle collecting reflected the need for and importance of a written record, as well as those arguments that see in miracle collections a propaganda for the monastic reform movement directed at the laity. Here, however, I was sometimes left wondering if her central argument that the chief motivating factor behind the collection of miracles was a desire to preserve the past takes her texts a bit too much at face value. After all, this study does such a good job of presenting these miracle collections as key and central cultural documents that it is difficult not to see them performing variously in multiple contexts. Nevertheless, throughout this study, Koopmans' insistence on unearthing and attending to the 'personal stories' that, she argues, were the lifeblood of the tradition of miracle collecting – and, indeed, of the cult of saints more generally – offers up a series of engaging anecdotes, such as the story of the Knight of Thanet, which make this book a pleasure to read and which make these miracles come alive once more.

HEATHER BLURTON

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
SANTA BARBARA

Massimo Verdicchio, *The Poetics of Dante's 'Paradiso'*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. xi + 177 pp. ISBN 978-1-4426-4119-8. \$45.00.

According to the author, *The Poetics of Dante's 'Paradiso'* came from a desire to continue the critical reading of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* established in his earlier work *Reading Dante Reading*, which identified the *Commedia* as a text with a predominantly ironic tone. The criticism of the characters in Paradise, which Verdicchio believes the poet intended, 'required on Dante's part the use of a very subtle irony, which, while upholding their status as blessed souls, exposed their earthly flaws ... in *Paradiso* there is no punishment, only ... an ironic smile that serves as a *contrapasso* for these souls' (p. x). The analysis of *Paradiso* is sequential, dedicating a chapter to each heaven, each beginning with a quote from the *Convivio* referencing the connection made in that work between the heaven and its respective science. While this mode of reading relies on accepting a continuity between the thought of the *Convivio* and *Commedia* which is not uncontroversial, it nevertheless acts as a productive lens for interpretation which would merit more consistent and detailed analysis.

Prologues I and II establish Verdicchio's rationale for reading the *Commedia* as primarily a work of social and linguistic critique. He puts forward a case for seeing in the figures of the *veltro* of *Inferno* I and the DXV of *Purgatorio* XXXIII respectively the *Commedia* itself and Dante the poet, whose joint role is to critique the Church and Empire. The subsequent argument is largely dependent on one's acceptance of this interpretation, though perhaps sufficient grounds for reading the *Commedia* as biting comment could be found without recourse to such an elaborate and therefore vulnerable interpretation. Furthermore, in the book as a whole the author has chosen to minimise engagement with other critical works which, while allowing for a certain purity of argument, also at times impoverishes it. Prologue II establishes 'the poetics of *Paradiso* as an allegory of irony' as only this mode of reading recognises Dante's intention to reveal the deception and 'empty rhetoric' (22) of language.