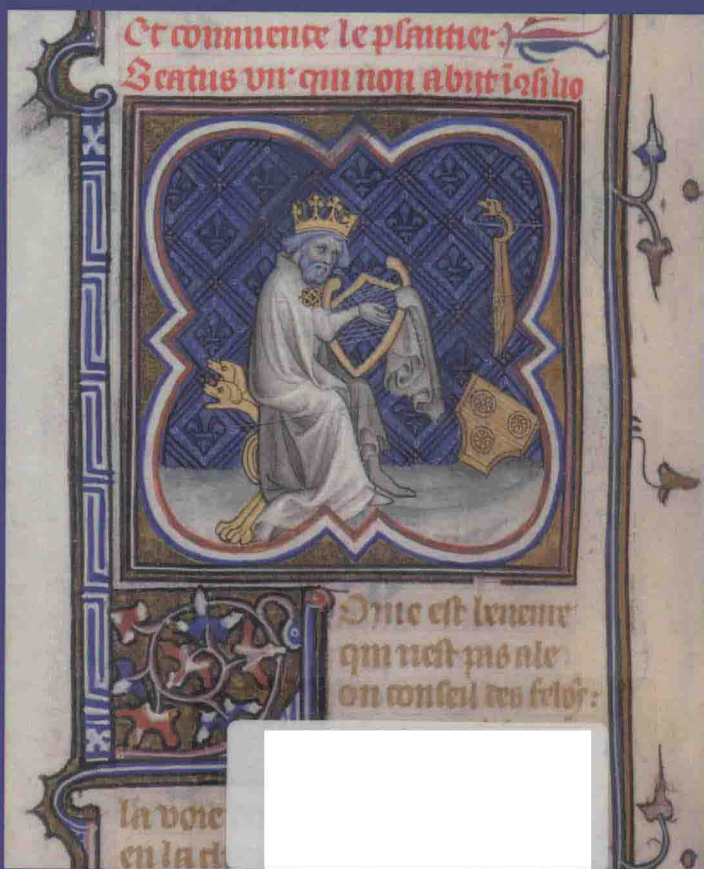


Sanctity as literature in late medieval Britain

EDITED BY EVA VON CONTZEN
AND ANKE BERNAU



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Notes on contributors

Kate Ash is a Post-Doctoral Teaching Fellow at Liverpool Hope University. She has published articles on Anglo-Scottish relations in late medieval and early modern literature. Her main interests lie in literary articulations of memory and identity, and her current research examines the relationship between memory and confession in fifteenth and sixteenth century Scotland.

Tamara Atkin is a Lecturer in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance English Literature at Queen Mary, University of London. Her first book, *The Drama of Reform: Theology and Theatricality, 1461–1553*, was published by Brepols in 2013. Her latest work explores the relationship between drama, reading and the literary.

Jessica Barr is an Associate Professor of English at Eureka College. Her publications include *Willing to Know God: Dreamers and Visionaries of the Later Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010) and several articles on visionary and devotional literature. Her current research focuses on models of reading and interpretation in later medieval visionary literature and hagiography.

Anke Bernau is a Senior Lecturer in Medieval Literature and Culture at the University of Manchester. She has published on medieval (and post-medieval) virginities, origin myths, medieval film, and dream vision literature. She is currently working on curiosity in medieval literature.

Eva von Contzen is an Assistant Professor at Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany. Currently she holds a fellowship at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS). Her research interests include the techniques of narrating sanctity in vernacular literature, the intersections of antiquity and the medieval, and, as a major new project, the functions and diachronic development of lists and other

forms of enumeration in literature. Her monograph on the *Scottish Legendary* will be published in 2015.

Helen Fulton is Professor of Medieval Literature in the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of York. Her research focuses on cultural exchanges between medieval English and Welsh literatures, including Arthurian literature, prophecy, and political poetry. She is the editor of the *Blackwell Companion to Arthurian Literature* (2009) and her most recent book is the edited collection *Urban Culture in Medieval Wales* (2012).

Kate Greenspan is an Associate Professor of English at Skidmore College, New York. She received her PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She publishes on medieval German, Italian, and English mysticism, Middle English sermons, and autohagiography. Her latest project is a book of transcriptions, translations, and interpretive essays on the writings of the fifteenth-century German mystic Magdalena von Freiburg.

Sarah James is a Lecturer at the University of Kent in Canterbury. Her research interests are centred around theological writing in the later Middle Ages, asking questions about the ways in which medieval writers engaged with the religious debates of the day, and how ordinary people, for the most part with very limited access to written texts, experienced religion. She has published a number of articles on English vernacular theology, and on the works of the Austin Friar John Capgrave in particular.

Andrew Lynch is a Professor in English and Cultural Studies at The University of Western Australia, and a Chief Investigator in the Australian Research Council Centre for the History of Emotions, 1100–1800. With Michael Champion he is editing *Understanding Emotions in Early Europe* (Palgrave). *International Medievalism and Popular Culture* (Cambria, 2014), co-edited with Louise D'Arcens, has recently been published.

Catherine Sanok is an Associate Professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan. She is the author of *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Medieval England* (University of Pennsylvania, 2007), and is currently at work on a book that explores forms of community in late medieval *Lives* of English saints.

Anna Siebach Larsen is currently finishing her doctoral thesis entitled 'Envisioning Devotion: Word, Image, and Epistemology in Thirteenth-Century England' at the University of Notre Dame. Her research interests include Middle English, Anglo-Norman, and Old French literature, in particular thirteenth-century devotional and religious texts; allegory (visual and verbal); medieval and modern literary theory as well as visual and poetic epistemologies.

Jennifer L. Sisk is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Vermont, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on medieval literature. She has published articles in *ELH*, the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, the *Chaucer Review*, *Modern Philology* and *Religion & Literature*. Although much of her research focuses on hagiography and sanctity, her other interests include medieval imagination, constructions of the literary, and the ways in which the formal properties of literature facilitate theorisations of religious belief and doubt.

Acknowledgements

Our interest in the intersections of sanctity and literature began when Eva, working on her dissertation on the *Scottish Legendary* and its narrative art, decided to organise a conference called 'Sanctity and Literature' at the Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany, in November 2010. The response to the call for papers was overwhelming – clearly the topic had touched a nerve. Anke was invited as a speaker and so began our many conversations about this topic, which culminated in our decision to put together a collection of essays that would open it up to wider discussion. We invited a selection of contributors who could cover a range of pertinent issues; we were excited that this brought together a combination of younger and more established researchers in the field. We would like to thank our anonymous readers, whose feedback and suggestions were immensely helpful and constructive. Thank you also to our contributors – it has been a pleasure working with you on this project!

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Sanctity always requires witnesses who record its occurrence, and you have all become witnesses in recording the manifold instances of sanctity as literature in medieval Britain.

Bochum/Manchester, April 2014
Eva von Contzen and Anke Bernau

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Introduction: sanctity as literature

Eva von Contzen

What does it mean to approach sanctity as *literature*? 'Literature' is often used as the umbrella term for any kind of writing produced in the medieval period, but this is not the kind of literature the title of this collection refers to. Instead, 'literature' is used synonymously with 'the literary' or 'literariness' – that is, a special quality of some texts. The explicit aim of this volume is *not* to provide an exhaustive definition of the literary in the late medieval period. Such an attempt can only fail given the complexity of the concept and its manifold implications. The examples considered in the twelve essays are focused on one configuration of literariness as it occurs within the sphere of texts dealing, in various forms, with sanctity. 'Sanctity' is used as a term to describe a range of phenomena, encompassing saints and their lives, miracles and heroic deeds as well as referring more generally to the condition of individuals inspired by religiosity that we find in a variety of medieval genres, including romances and other secular texts. It also includes the encounters with the divine related by mystics and even the ideal model of behaviour that every Christian was encouraged to strive for. The very fact that sainthood is such an important component of medieval culture, and that sanctity is such a diverse and mutable concept, means that a closer look at how writers engaged with sanctity, and how this engagement shaped their writing (and how their writing, in turn, shaped the kind of sanctity they were putting forward) is a question of importance for scholars of literature as well as for medievalists. Crucially, the essays are not concerned with sanctity *in* literature (i.e., in any medieval writing), but with medieval texts dealing with questions of holiness that bear marks of a discourse that can be described as 'literary'. Looking at textual representations of sanctity allows for exploring what the 'literary' might mean in late medieval culture. Or, more accurately, what

literary devices and techniques are developed through writing on sanctity.

Texts characterised by such a distinctive literary quality or literariness have mostly been discussed only indirectly by medievalists who have been concerned to discuss literariness, but not usually in relation to texts dealing with sanctity. The individual works scholars focus upon tend to take precedence over more general implications of the features of literariness one may have singled out. In the introduction to the 2013 volume *Answerable Style: The Idea of the Literary in Medieval England*, Andrew Galloway encapsulates the status quo of medieval studies in the pursuit of the literary as follows: 'However legion the ingenious and wide-ranging work on this topic by medievalists, however deep the critical roots, no wide-ranging conference, monograph, or collection of essays has addressed this topic for medieval literature overtly or in any significant breadth of scope and theoretical approach.'¹ If the focus of inquiry is shifted to the literary features themselves and to the merits of what these traces of literariness imply – for medieval genres, medieval writing at large, and its place in the history of literature – it becomes evident that medievalists can contribute significantly to questions of form and function, to the question of why people read and enjoy literature, and thus also to more general questions that are relevant for the humanities. If medievalists pooled their many individual and specialised findings about the concept of the literary, they would run a chance on being heard by literary scholars working on later periods and thus make a lasting contribution to literary theory at large. To achieve such a broad perspective, it is important to also take into account those texts that traditionally have not been considered 'literary'. In this context it makes good sense to concentrate on a specific theme and its configurations in order to elicit information about literariness in the medieval period. This volume is devoted to 'sanctity' not just because sanctity is a crucial, recurring theme across a wide range of medieval genres and texts, but because sanctity and the literary are inextricably linked in a dynamic nexus that is ideally suited for gaining insights into the complex functioning of the literary in medieval writing.

Of course literary theory has always implicitly and explicitly been concerned with questions that pertain to the 'literary'. For the Russian formalists, the 'literary' was characterised by a deviation, or estrangement, from ordinary language use and thus largely accessible through linguistic approaches.² The new critics and their practice of close reading placed exclusive emphasis on the literary

work itself and its text-internal aesthetics, relying on a stock of texts deemed 'literary' ('the great tradition' or 'the canon').³ The structuralists, in turn, reduced literature to its structural components, suggesting that a grammatical approach, in other words, an abstraction of form and content, can best encompass literary texts.⁴ Other important theoretical approaches, such as psychoanalytical literary theory, gender studies, post-colonialism, and new historicism have moved further away from analysing the implications of 'literariness'. Instead, they highlight the oftentimes hidden or implicit workings of the unconscious or symbolic, the depiction of gender and the colonised other in literary texts, and the exchanges between literary and cultural history.⁵ For decades, the question of literariness in medieval literature has not been in vogue, possibly because it ostensibly echoes the new critics' focus on aestheticism and thus their narrow, context-excluding close reading. Only recently, as Andrew Galloway points out, 'a new emphasis, if not a movement, has emerged, in which what counts as distinctly literary form and the very category of literature is receiving attention with a focus and energy suggesting a major reorientation of a number of familiar approaches, including historicism, theory, and gender studies'.⁶ This movement has been referred to as 'new formalism'. It is characterised by a historically informed 'rededication' to form and hence centrally concerned with issues of what is meant by literariness and the literary.⁷ Medieval scholarship, however, does not, at least not yet, feature in the debates of new formalism. This may be due to the fact that medievalists have always paid attention to form; hence one looks in vain for predominantly theoretical or programmatic articles that would also be of interest for non-medievalists.⁸

The essays in this volume aim to contribute fundamentally to these more general discussions and trends in literary theory in that they offer a thorough investigation of one specific theme – sanctity – in its implications for literariness in medieval Britain. The only other work to date that is solely devoted to 'the literary' in medieval writing is the already mentioned volume by Grady and Galloway, *Answerable Style* (2013). The thirteen contributors, in Galloway's words, seek 'the literary in history'.⁹ The main authors discussed are Chaucer, Langland, and Gower – obvious choices for explorations of literariness, not least because the status of their works as 'literary' is well established. While it stands to reason to focus on a corpus of texts that is considered literary in order to draw more general conclusions about literary forms

and functions, the essays in our volume start from the opposite direction: the essays in *Sanctity as Literature* all engage with the topic of sanctity, which is used as the focal point for the analysis of literariness. There are several advantages to this approach: for one, the shared theme of 'sanctity' ensures that the texts chosen for the analyses are easily comparable as they converge in their more general concerns and patterns. In addition, the corpus of the volume brings together accepted 'literary' authors and texts, such as Chaucer, Lydgate, and the Digby *Magdalen*, as well as texts that are often placed on the margins of the literary – for instance Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* and saints' legends. The breadth of genres under consideration allows for a detailed and at the same time representative overview of 'literariness' within a thematically well-defined context.

So how are the terms 'literary' and 'literariness' understood in the contributions to this volume? The two terms clearly relate to the meaning of 'literature' in a narrow sense, which John M. Ellis has suggested can be defined by an inverse analogy to 'weed': 'weeds are not particular kinds of plant, but just any kind of plant which for some reason or another a gardener does not want around. Perhaps "literature" means something like the opposite: any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly'.¹⁰ Which texts are 'valued highly' in any given period, however, is subject to change: 'literariness' is not a stable category that, once identified, remains the same forever. In fact, it is possible to read any text as a literary; as Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle note, 'in terms of an enactment of the strange ways of language'.¹¹ At first glance, the phrase 'an enactment of the strange ways of language' appears to recall Russian formalists' and new critics' ideas. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that it goes further: the 'strange ways of language' are not restricted to literature but, on the contrary, can be performed ('enacted') in order to *create* the literary – or, rather, literary effects in the first place.

Such a performance-based approach to the literary, which requires both formal, text-internal cues *and* the readers' input and recognition of these features as literary, also underlies the essays in this volume. Our contributors explore instances of a singularity which, according to Derek Attridge, is a constitutive feature of literariness: this singularity, not to be equated with 'uniqueness', is an event that is produced in the processes of reception and 'always open to contamination, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation, and recontextualization. Nor is it inimitable: on the contrary, it is

eminently imitable, and may give rise to a host of imitations'.¹² Tentatively, then, one might define 'the literary' as 'the potential possessed by a body of texts for a certain effectivity, a potential realized differently – or not at all – in different times and places'.¹³ In focusing on 'a certain effectivity' that is created by the texts themselves, Attridge criticises what he calls the 'instrumentalist' view of literature. By 'instrumentalist' he means 'the treating of a text ... as a means to a predetermined end'.¹⁴ Medievalists are familiar with such a treatment of their objects of study. Whenever scholars go to a medieval text in order to validate arguments about wider cultural processes, historical events, and biographical information, the text is treated as a means to an end rather than as an entity, or rather, performance in its own right.¹⁵

Texts about sanctity, saints' lives in particular, have often fallen prey to an instrumentalist approach: many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars working on medieval hagiography denied the genre any literary value, stressing instead the archaeological importance of the texts.¹⁶ In the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, scholars implicitly reiterated their predecessors' bias by drawing on hagiography as a valuable source of information on historical and political events, aspects of gender, the education of women, and practices of devotion, rather than concentrating on the narrative and literary qualities of hagiographic works.¹⁷ Following Attridge, *Sanctity as Literature* explicitly attempts to offer a different approach – one that resists an instrumental perspective, instead opening up new ways of reading this kind of literature, so often experienced as alien to modern sensibilities. To read sanctity as literature means to foreground the non-instrumentality of the texts under consideration and to put emphasis on those textual elements that are functional primarily with respect to the status of the text as a literary one.

A significant element in the creative process that brings forth a work of literature is the testing and pushing of limits on the basis of the well-known and familiar:

The creative mind can work only with the materials to which it has access, and it can have no certain knowledge beyond these; it therefore has to operate without being sure of where it is going, probing the limits of the culture's givens, taking advantage of their contradictions and tensions, seeking hints of the exclusions on which they depend for their existence, exploring the effects upon them of encounters with the products and practices of other cultures.¹⁸

Literary history in essence is the grand narrative of the trials and errors of recreating and refashioning writing. The processes that underlie these transformations of genres are by no means teleological but more like a web of roots diffusely spreading out. The practices of repetition, emulation, and innovation can be risky because the impact of a refashioned work is difficult to foresee. Medieval authors who set out to recreate the discourses of the holy were particularly vulnerable to criticism. The most 'risky' genre in this context was perhaps hagiography, the patterns of which were well-established for centuries and took their validation from the Church.¹⁹

In practice, however, late medieval authors such as Lydgate or Capgrave were very successful in introducing innovative changes to saints' legends, which altered the ways in which saintly exemplarity were depicted considerably.²⁰ The authors' success is intimately tied in with the changing values of the rising *studia humanitatis* in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This new movement, both a revival of classical literature as aesthetic inspiration and a concept of kindness, led to a change in the attitudes to reading and writing as well as to the creation and reception of literary composition.²¹ Importantly, these changes were not confined to Latin literature. Hence one could speak of a 'vernacular humanism' characterised by humane, rational, anthropocentric, and secular qualities.²² The late medieval hagiographers reinterpreted their hagiographic contents against the background of the classics, thus introducing a new literariness to their subject matter while still preserving the orthodox claims that underlie the protagonists' sanctity. Several of the essays in this volume illuminate, explicitly or implicitly, aspects of hagiography and hagiographic discourse in relation to this nascent vernacular humanism. Thus, Sarah James argues that John Capgrave, whose work has been repeatedly judged as lacking any literary value, engages self-consciously not only with Chaucer, but also with classical works in his *Life of St Katherine*, an engagement that seems to have been novel in fifteenth-century hagiographic discourse ('Reading classical authors in Capgrave's *Life of St Katherine*'). James shows that Capgrave integrates references to classical authors—Virgil's *Georgics* in particular—at crucial points in the narrative in which Katherine's character and importance as role model are thematised. In other words, Capgrave uses Katherine's sanctity in order to implement features of a new literariness.

Another fifteenth-century hagiographer whose saints' legends have found little acknowledgement is John Lydgate. His work too