

TRANSLATING EDWARD THE CONFESSOR:
FEMINISM, TIME, AND HAGIOGRAPHY
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I have to admit that when I was originally asked to participate in a panel on theory sponsored by the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, I was both thrilled and daunted by the task.¹ Although I believe that I incorporate feminist theory into my work all the time, being on a panel whose focus was theory made me feel outdated, behind the curve. As a result, I immersed myself in reading feminist theory at the same time that I began work on a new project regarding the Latin and vernacular lives of Edward the Confessor and, in particular, a twelfth-century Anglo-Norman life of Edward written by a nun at Barking Abbey. As may have been predicted these two strands of thought in my head—my renewed look at feminist theory and the nun of Barking’s life of Edward—began to intermingle, shifting ever so slightly the text as I had conceived it. Like a prism moved into the light, the text began to sparkle in a way I had not anticipated. This, of course, is the experience of theory for many of us, but there is something particularly exciting about feminist theory illuminating a woman’s text from the Middle Ages.

While most of my work has been engaged with feminist theories of the body and corporeality, I found for this text that I was drawn to feminist conceptions of space and time. In this paper, I would like to briefly sketch out the circumstances of the Nun of Barking’s life of Edward the Confessor, then I would like to turn to Elizabeth Grosz’s 2005 book *Time Travels* and outline some of her ideas about time and feminist politics, and finally, I would like to begin to look at the Nun’s life through Grosz’s lens and suggest why a feminist theory of time and space may be particularly pertinent to our work as medievalists.²

The Anglo-Norman *vita* of Edward the Confessor written at Barking Abbey stands out in the field of twelfth century hagiography in England for several reasons. Written at one of the most influential and important abbeys in post-conquest England, it

is one of only three Anglo-Norman *vitae* known to be written by a woman and the only one whose subject is a male saint.³ Although it purports to be a translation of Aelred of Rievaulx's 1163 Latin life written to commemorate the translation of Edward's relics (and some scholars have argued that it is a straight-forward translation),⁴ the Nun of Barking's *vita* represents far more than a shift from Latin into Anglo-Norman; it is rather what Jocelyn Wogan-Browne calls "a very full vernacularization" which goes well beyond a word-for-word translation from Latin into Anglo-Norman.⁵ Throughout the *vita*, written in octosyllabic rhyming couplets, the nun inserts both her female and her Anglo-Norman identity, expanding and altering Aelred's text as she shapes it into her own. In the process, she shifts focus from Edward the Confessor himself to his wife, Edith, and proceeds to fashion this Anglo-Saxon king as a symbol of Anglo-Norman identity.

I have been thinking about time ever since I began working on hagiography. Whether the life is written directly after the death of a potential saint by an admirer, such as Jacques de Vitry's *vita* of Marie d'Oignies or Raymond of Capua's *vita* of Catherine of Siena, or written many years after the death of a saint—from a decade to several centuries—the relation of the hagiographer to his or her subject is dependent on time. The *vita* of Edward the Confessor is particularly interesting because it had gone through so many rewritings. The first *vita* was written under the instruction of Queen Edith and most of it was written while Edward was still alive.⁶ It began as more of what we would today call a "biography," but after Edward's death it was re-formed to celebrate his piety and the chaste marriage he shared with Edith. The second *vita* was an official one written by Osbert of Clare in 1138.⁷ Aelred of Rievaulx re-wrote Osbert's *vita* into an official one for the translation of Edward's relics in 1163.⁸ Finally, the Nun of Barking wrote her own version, *La Vie d'Edouard le Confesseur*, based on Aelred's, that seems to be dated around 1182, though that date is disputed.⁹

Edward's *vitae*, as is often the case with hagiographies, in many ways become more detailed and personal the further they were composed from his death. This is partly due to the hagiographers' additions of post-mortem miracles and legends, but

also due to the way time is conceptualized in the Middle Ages. The religious medieval reader had both an expansive notion of time—the chronology expressed in Biblical terms, the future of religious prophecies, the history of secular rulers—and a narrow understanding of time—expressed in the belief that the world could end at any minute, the constant reminder that one does not know “the hour nor the day” of one’s imminent death, and of course the “regularity and repetitiveness” of monastic hours. Hagiographies are also partly influenced by how Biblical time is conceived and expressed. The way that Jesus’ Passion is expressed through meditation narratives and art makes the pain of the Passion seem immediate and constant in the medieval mind. The sacred becomes less of a historical event and more of a repeated fact. This is reflected in the hagiographic genre where the saint’s life is constantly reinforced by her/his death and its ensuing miracles.

It would be fruitful, however, to look a medieval hagiography through a modern conception of time rather than a medieval one. Grosz reminds us that time is a “double orientation of temporal movement—one force directed to the past, the other to the future—is a splitting of time, the generation of time’s divided present, a present that is never fully present.”¹⁰ This division of temporality as the time of the living, of dissipation, and the time of the past, of preservation, seems immediately useful to a study of hagiography and this *vita* in particular. The Nun is dealing with a time of the dead, a time of the past that represents both a different kind of England (an Anglo-Saxon one) and a different kind of *vita* (a Latin one). Her “translation” of the *vita* is two-fold: it translates Aelred’s life into a vernacular that preserves the text for a future audience illiterate in Latin, a future most likely meant to involve lay women and the nuns at Barking, and it also translates Edward into a different kind of saint. He is taken from his past preservation as the last Anglo-Saxon king and reformed into a future position as an Anglo-Norman saint.

Grosz argues that a reconceptualization of time is crucial to a new feminist politics and theory. She posits that time needs to be seen as a force, one that is in the process of always “becoming”:

Such an understanding of time as a dynamic force, as activity rather than as passive wearing away, erosion, is, I

believe, of vital importance for feminist theory: we need an account of time that enables us to have at least partial or mediated access to the resources of the past, those resources consecrated as history and retaining their traces or tracks in the present, which do not tie us to the past in any definitive way or with any particular orientation and which provide for us the very resources by which to supersede the past and the present—the very project of radical politics [. . .]. The project of radical politics, and thus of a radical feminist politics, remains directed at how to envisage and engender a future unlike the present, without being able to specify in advance what such a future entails.¹¹

By reexamining history and recasting it in a new light, Grosz imagines a present day feminist can literally create a different kind of past (as well as a new present and future as a result). While I am not suggesting that the Nun of Barking is interested in radical feminist politics, anachronistic or otherwise, I do believe that she has a shared project with Grosz here in a reformulation of the past into a more woman-friendly and suitable future. She has taken a specifically masculine text—that of a male saint and a king—and one that has been redacted three times in Latin by prominent clerical writers, and reformed it into a text for women, by a woman, and as I shall argue later, one that rewrites Edith as an active agent in Edward's life rather than simply a prop to his holiness.

Translation here is inextricable from a refiguring of time. The Nun of Barking could not have chosen a more controversial text as the subject of her translation. Although Aelred's *vita* shaped the Norman invasion as a necessary evil to save England from the tyrannical reign of Harold, there is no doubt that Edward is the last Anglo-Saxon king and, as such, an Anglo-Saxon saint. Aelred opens his *vita* with an homage to English kings:

Now above all states and kingdoms on earth, England can indeed be proud of her saintly kings, for some were crowned again by martyrdom, rising from an earthly to a heavenly reign; others chose exile from their homeland, preferring to die as pilgrims for Christ; several renounced their crowns and embraced the discipline of a monastery; yet others reigned with justice and holiness and strove to be their people's servant more than lord. Among these last, that brilliant luminary the glorious King Edward

shone like the morning star in a cloudy sky, like the
moon at its full all his days.¹²

The Nun of Barking, however, is using her hagiography as a way to grapple with the forces of the past (an Anglo-Saxon England) and the future (an Anglo-Norman one). Written very soon after Aelred's 1163 *vita*, the Nun's *vie* has a decidedly different political flavor. Politics cannot be far from the mind of the Nun. Henry II had appointed the sister of Thomas Becket as the abbess at Barking Abbey, and it is to the king that the *vita* is dedicated. In addition, a prophetic dream that Edward has in the *vita* is glossed as a prophecy of the role of Henry II in the future of England.

One of the places where the political context of the life is clearly articulated is in the Nun's introduction where, in writing a brief paragraph about the translation of the *vita*, she lays bare her assumptions about language, audience, and the framing of the text:

Se nul de vus est deisranz
Ki avez oï cest romanz,
De saveir en quel liu fust fait
E ki de latin l'ait strait,
.....
En Berkinges en l'abeïe
Fu translate ceste vie.
Pur amur saint Edward la fist
Une ancele al dulz Jhesu Crist.
Mais sun num n'i vult dire a ore
Kar bein set n'est pas digne unkore
Qu'en livre seit oï ne lit
U si tres saint num ad escrit.¹³

[If any of you are desiring / who have heard this romance
/ to know the place it was made / and who from Latin
took it / / At Barking in the abbey / was translated
this life. / For the love of Saint Edward it was made / by a
handmaiden of sweet Jesus Christ / but her name she will
not say right now / because she knows well that she is not
yet worthy / that in this book it should be heard nor read
/ where this great holy name is written.]¹⁴

The Anglo-Norman term *romanz*, used here, has a few translations: French vernacular, Romance language, speech in general; story, narrative, poem, romance (in French); conversation, speech. In using this word, rather than "translation," the Nun has indicated

not only that the language of the text is the French vernacular, but also that the kind of story has shifted in the translation. The narrative is a *romanz*, not a *vita*. The translation from Latin to French, from Anglo-Saxon to Anglo-Norman, from prose to poetry, from read to “heard,” from named author to anonymous one, from male to female, from *vita* to *romanz* is a political move from past to future. What may seem like a mere change in language is actually laden with the implications of the Nun’s gender, her audience of fellow nuns, as well as her altered depiction of Saint Edward and his wife, Edith.

The Nun of Barking is very aware of her role as translator, and in particular what it may mean to change a text from Latin into *romanz* in an English convent under a king whose ties to France are exceedingly strong. In the beginning of her text, she apologizes for her translation skills and her inadequacy in learning what she calls a “false French of England.”

Si joe l'ordre des cases ne gart
 Ne ne juigne part a sa part,
 Certes n'en dei estere reprise,
 Ken el puis faire en nule guise.
 Qu'en latin est nominative,
 Ço frai romanz acusatif.
 Un faus franceis sai d'Angleterre,
 Ke ne l'alai ailurs quere,
 Mais vus ki ailurs apris l'avez,
 La u mester iert, l'amendez.¹⁵

[If the order of the cases I do not keep / Nor join part to
 its part / Truly I should not be reprimanded / because I
 cannot do it any other way. / What in Latin is nominative
 / I make in romance accusative. / A false French of
 England I know / For I have not gone elsewhere to find it,
 / But you who elsewhere have learned it / Amend it where
 it is needed.]

This passage shows a heightened awareness of her place historically and temporally. She seems to be truly Anglo-Norman, not an Englishwoman who speaks French, nor a French woman living in England, but a hybrid—a speaker of *romanz*. Legge speculates that the “you” she is addressing in the last line is the continent-born king and queen, to whom the life is dedicated, but its ambiguity suggests

that the hagiographer sees an audience of listeners and readers who somehow speak and understand a more “authentic” French.¹⁶

By addressing her *romanz*-reading and speaking audience, the Nun of Barking postulates a future for this text where Edward’s life is read in the vernacular, not in Latin, and one where he is no longer simply an Anglo-Saxon saint representing the pre-conquest England, but a new kind of saint, one that has something to offer England’s hybridized people. What Grosz has suggested must be a foundation for feminist politics and conception of time—retaining the traces of the historical past while setting up a different and potentially unknowable future—is being enacted here by this anonymous Nun who offers her audience a different Edward. Wogan-Browne notes that her life “was read in male as well as female houses, transposed into different generic contexts and re-worked on the Continent for at least one noble family,”¹⁷ further underscoring that the Nun’s translation allowed it to have a life on its own that reached beyond the Latinate and official *vitae* that preceded it.

The Nun, who has now combated any potential future criticism of her language in the opening of her text, does the same thing with her sex at its close by arguing against an imagined audience criticism of a woman-authored hagiography:

Si requiert a toz les oianz,
Ki mais orrunt ces soen rumanz,
Qu’il ne seit pur ço avilé,
Se femme l’ad si translate.
Pur ço nel deit hoem pas despire
Ne le bien qu’il i ad desdire.
Merci crie, si quiert pardon
Qu’el’ emprist la presumption
De translater iceste vie.
Des qu’ele n’est mielz acumplie,
Or emblasmez sun numpueir,
Kar aquité s’ad sun vuleir.¹⁸

[It is required of all who hear, / or all who will ever hear
her romance, / that they should not revile it for this
reason, / that a woman has translated this. / For this no
one should despise it, / nor disdain the good that is there.
/ Mercy, she cries, and asks pardon / for the presumption

she took / of translating this life. / That it has not been
better accomplished / blame her weakness / for she wished
to complete it].

While this passage has been dismissed by many scholars as a traditional humility topos and common apology, I believe it is something more than that. It is certain that the Nun would have had many models of apologies written by hagiographers. Indeed, Aelred has his own in the beginning of his *vita* where he asks of his readers: “As a reward for my labours I request of your holy community, which under your command serves the cult of this great king, prayers and Masses for my sinful self, so that I, who have no merits to boast, may gain eternal life with the help of such a worthy confessor.”¹⁹ But the Nun would have had few if any models of a female hagiographer’s apology for her sex and its role in the production of the life. Indeed, I find that the apology contains a subtle scolding of readers who may dismiss the text because of its author: “it should not be despised for this reason, that a woman has thus translated it.” In other words, the Nun considers criticism of her language (a false French of England) more acceptable than criticism of her gender. By indicating this potential audience reaction, she dictates how both her apology and the text itself will be read by her future audience.

The Nun’s most innovative re-shaping of history and time is in her depiction of Edith in the hagiography. All of Edward’s hagiographers are concerned with his chaste marriage with Edith. The fact that there is no heir to the English throne is, after all, why England was left in a position in 1066 to be invaded by William. The prior depictions of Edith ranged from describing her as the most detestable mate for Edward to the holiest match possible. The chronicles state that Edward refuses to procreate with Edith because she is of the odious Godwin line (from which comes Harold); the earliest hagiography, commissioned by Edith, states that she was “recommended both by the distinction of her family and the ineffable beauty of her surpassing youth,” but ignores the issue of chastity altogether.²⁰ Aelred chooses a middle ground emphasizing that “Godwine begat Edith, as a thorn does a rose,” and that “the king and queen, once united, agreed to preserve their

chastity.”²¹ The Nun of Barking also refers to Edith as a rose, but, as Wogan-Browne has pointed out, reverses the phrase so that Edith is like a “rose that comes from a thorn.”²² The thorn is not doing the begetting. The Nun also adds after this line that Edith had always desired chastity since her childhood (a notion not found in any of the previous hagiographical accounts).

In addition, and possibly most crucially, the Nun of Barking adds an entire speech that Edith makes in reference to choosing a chaste marriage. All other *vitae* of Edward, including a later Anglo-Norman one by Matthew Paris, have Edith as a virtually silent partner in this process, simply described as agreeing to the terms. The Nun recounts a conversation on their wedding night when Edward and Edith almost restate wedding vows that are essentially vows of chastity. When Edward requests a chaste marriage of Edith, she responds, thanking him for the request, and noting that she has wanted to offer her chastity to God since she was young. While Edward’s request is four lines of the text and very straightforward, Edith’s response is sixteen:

“Pur ceo vus di, ma bele amie,
 Ke vus maintenez chaste vie.
 En ciel en serrez honoree
 Certes et de mei plus amee.”
 La dame l’ot, mult s’esjoïst
 Et jouissement au rei dist:
 “Bel duz sire, tres chier ami,
 Ou tut mun quer vus rend merci
 De la deseree requeste.
 A grante me troverez preste,
 Kar ceo ai tuz jurz desire
 D’offrir a Deu ma chasteé,

 Or desirez le mien desir,
 Kar jeo feria vostre plaisir.
 Cum seignur vus honurerai
 Et chastement vus amerai.
 Or vus en doinst Dues le poër,
 Si cum il ad fait le voler.”²³

[“Therefore I say to you, my dear friend, / That you
 maintain a chaste life. / In heaven you will surely be
 honored / And be my most beloved.” / The lady hears

this, and she rejoiced greatly / And joyously said to her king: / “Handsome, sweet lord, very dear friend, / All of my heart thanks you / for this worthy petition. / Find me ready to grant this / Because I have completely wished for this oath / To offer to God my chastity. / . . . / Now you desire my desire, / And I will do your will. / As my Lord, I will honor / And love you chastely. / God has given you the power / when you do as he has made you desire.”]

This seemingly small addition—so small that most scholars have argued that the Nun of Barking is an almost slavish translator, closely adhering to Aelred’s text—is not at all insignificant. By merely including this small dialogue, the Nun has given Edith agency, a voice, a motive for chastity, and a choice in her marriage. Perhaps *more* significantly, she gives this opportunity for voice to her readers—both contemporary and future.

This instance is one of the moments where a hagiographer’s relationship to her subject, to a historical past, and to religious time is of the utmost importance. Although the Nun has no model for these words, no textual basis for her “translation” here, she is in effect re-writing the life of Edward. The idea of a historical time and a completed past is entirely collapsed and gives way to a hagiographical imagination that re-lives the moment of Edward and Edith’s chastity. Where Grosz calls for an understanding of time as a dynamic force, as activity, rather than as passive wearing away, and “of vital importance for feminist theory,” there can be found a model in medieval hagiographical accounts of this exact type of re-imagining history. In re-writing time, in re-inscribing Edith as an active participant in the chastity and life of Edward, the Nun of Barking is giving a new historical past to the readers—male and female—of the future.

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END NOTES

1. Originally presented at the 41st International Medieval Congress, Kalamazoo, MI, 4-7 May 2006. The presentation is the preliminary work for a larger project, and I am grateful to SMFS and *MFF* for publishing it as part of the special

“SMFS at Twenty” issue. This research would not have been possible without participation in the 2005 NEH summer program at Yale University, “The Bayeux Tapestry and the Making of the Anglo-Norman World,” directed by Howard Bloch. I would also like to thank Mark Blackwell who read an early version of the paper and helped me hone some issues, as well as the Saturday Medieval Group who read the first version of the conference paper and helped me reformulate it into the next steps. Finally, I am indebted to Virginia Blanton’s careful reading and editing.

2. Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005).

3. The other two are a life of the virgin martyr St. Catherine of Alexandria, by Clemence, another nun of Barking, and an anonymous life of St. Audrey of Ely. For general information on these and other Anglo-Norman hagiographies, see M. Dominica Legge’s book *Anglo-Norman Literature and Its Background* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963). A more thorough examination can be found in Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, “Clerc u lai, muine u dame’: Women and Anglo-Norman Hagiography,” in *Women & Literature in Britain 1150-1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), pp. 61-85, and Wogan-Browne’s *Saints’ Lives & Women’s Literary Culture c. 1150-1300: Virginity and its Authorizations* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001). Another good source for information on only these three *vitae* is William MacBain’s article “Anglo-Norman Women Hagiographers” in *Anglo-Norman Anniversary Essays*. ed. Ian Short (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1993), pp. 235-50.

4. In the introduction to her edition of Matthew Paris’ later Anglo-Norman *vita* of Edward, *La Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei* (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1983) Kathryn Young Wallace writes that the *Vie d’Edouard* is “a translation from start to finish,” p. xxiv.

5. Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives & Women’s Literary Culture c. 1150-1300*, p. 251.

6. Frank Barlow, ed. and trans., *The Life of King Edward Who Rests at Westminster* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962; rpt. 1992). Barlow’s edition is a facing-page translation of the Latin and modern English. The Latin *vita* can also be found in the earlier Henry Richards Luard, ed. *Lives of Edward the Confessor: I. La Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei. II. Vita Beati Edvardi Regis et Confessoris. III. Vita Aduuardi Regis qui Apud Westmonasterium Requiescit* (London, 1858). Frank Barlow also has a noteworthy book on Edward’s life, *Edward the Confessor* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1970) that situates many of the events in the *vita* historically.

7. Marc Bloch, ed., “La Vie de S. Edouard le Confesseur par Osbert de Clare,” *Annelecta Bollandiana* 41 (1923): 5-131. There is no complete modern English translation of Osbert’s *vita*, but Barlow has translated some of it as points of comparison in his book.

8. Aelredus Rievallensis, “Vita S. Edward Regis.” *Patrologia Latina Database*. There are two modern English translations of this *vita*: Jerome Bertram, trans.

Life of St. Edward the Confessor by St. Aelred of Rievaulx (Southampton: Saint Austin, 1990); Jane Patricia Freeland, trans., "The Life of Saint Edward, King and Confessor," in *Aelred of Rievaulx: The Historical Works*, ed. Marsha L. Dutton (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005), pp. 123-243.

9. Östen Södergård, *La Vie d'Edouard le Confesseur: Poème Anglo-Norman du XIIe siècle* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1948). While William MacBain has argued that the anonymous Nun of Barking is actually Clemence of Barking, who wrote the Anglo-Norman *Vie de sainte Catherine d'Alexandrie*, this has been rejected by most scholars on insufficient evidence. See William MacBain, "The Literary Apprenticeship of Clemence of Barking," *AUMLA Journal of the Australasian Universities Language & Literature Association* 9 (1958): 3-22. MacBain argues that the *vie* must be written before 1170, the date of Thomas à Becket's murder because Becket's sister is the abbess of Barking and the life is apparently dedicated to Henry II. Dominica Legge in *Anglo-Norman Literature and Its Background* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963) places the life at 1163, which is the date of Aelred's composition—the basis for the Nun's translation (pp. 246-7). In "Clerc u lai, muïne u dame," Jocelyn Wogan-Browne extends the late date that MacBain proposes to 1189 (the death of Henry II), p. 83 n. 39, and writes in *Saints' Lives & Women's Literary Culture c. 1150-1300* that the date may be after Becket's murder because that may be "exactly when a reworking of the Aelred *vita* would be most wanted by the king," p. 251 n. 84. See also Emily Mitchell, "Patrons and Politics at Twelfth Century Barking Abbey," *Revue Bénédictine* 113 (2003): 347-64, who argues that the life was written after 1177.

10. Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 4.

11. Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 182.

12. Bertram, *Life of St. Edward the Confessor*, p. 15-6.

13. Södergård, ll. 5296-311.

14. All translations from Anglo-Norman into present day English are mine.

15. Södergård, ll. 1-10.

16. Legge, *Anglo-Norman Literature and Its Background*, p. 63.

17. Wogan-Browne notes that this trope of humility about translation is not linked to gender, and that many male hagiographers also apologize for the use of insular French. See "Clerc u lai, muïne u dame," p. 63.

18. Södergård, ll. 5312-23.

19. Bertram, *Life of St. Edward the Confessor*, p. 18.

20. Barlow, *The Life of King Edward Who Rests at Westminster*, p. 23.

21. Bertram, *Life of St. Edward the Confessor*, p. 35.

22. Wogan-Browne, "Clerc u lai, muïne u dame," p. 69.

23. Södergård, ll. 1365-86.