
The 15th-century Gilte Legende distinguishes itself from other well-known English hagiographic texts like the South English Legendary as the first attempt at a prose translation of the Legenda aurea, largely through the later Legende doree, into Middle English. As Larissa Tracy informs us, a Middle English edition of the entire Gilte Legende will be joining EETS' supplementary collection (2000) of lives from some of the Legende's manuscripts (p. 4). Women of the Gilte Legende fulfills two useful purposes that will set it apart from the material in the EETS edition: first, its renditions in Modern English make these texts particularly accessible to a student audience; and second, its organization of the legends into categories of female sainthood reveals the applicability of female sainthood's diverse traditions to theoretical constructs concerning voice, subjectivity, and the performance of gender. The book's benefits to students are clear. It builds on other recent work, such as Karen A. Winstead's Chaste Passions (2000), in offering translations through which undergraduates can usefully complicate their perspectives on late-medieval perceptions of women as well as female subjectivity itself. Tracy's collection importantly makes a further contribution in its inclusion of other categories of legend beyond that of the virgin martyr. It provides us as well with another way to discuss the influence and uses of the Legenda aurea and its vernacular descendents in the later Middle Ages. In addition, the annotated bibliography, which covers aspects of late-medieval hagiography, will prove helpful to both undergraduates and beginning-level graduate students in this area. As these pedagogical benefits speak for themselves, I shall focus in the remainder of this review on
the book’s second strength as a jumping-off point for further thought about how we theorize gender in the Middle Ages. The explicit theme of the book is the ontology of women’s speech and the implications of its representation by a male clerical establishment, but the lives themselves also raise a variety of other important issues pertaining to the study of gender.

By dividing the lives into those of virgin martyrs, holy mothers, repentant sinners, and transvestites (p. 7), *Women of the Gilte Legende* emphasizes the particular features of the different categories and suggests interesting avenues for exploring each one in terms of feminist and other theoretical questions. In her introduction, Tracy argues that these categories highlight an existing trajectory of female vocality in the saints’ lives overall. Virgin martyr legends endow women with a more “prominent voice than has previously been attributed to women in medieval literature” (9), and the “eloquence of virgin martyrs can function as a self-protective response to their torturers’ menacing and sexually attuned awareness of virgins’ bodies” (11). Articulating their own pure faith defends virgins, at least ideologically, against bodily compromise. Saints who are mothers, on the other hand, “are less vocal than their virgin counterparts,” achieving sanctity instead by denying their maternal identities “in order to transcend what patristic writers considered the stain of Eve” (12-13). Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-31), a late addition to the *Legenda aurea*, serves for Tracy as a transitional figure between the garrulity of the early Christian martyr and the more silent piety of the holy mother during the course of the Middle Ages (54). In the case of the repentant sinner, female voice becomes a more subtle issue, moving away from the dichotomy of speech and silence, and instead foregrounding more explicitly the problem of male representation of that voice. For a figure such as Mary Magdalene, for instance, “voice is used as an instrument of power, but—the patristic authors who constructed her life—really wielded that instrument to appeal to a growing audience
of women" (17) who could be encouraged to acknowledge their own sinfulness and thereby reform. Finally, the holy transvestites participate in Tracy's larger focus on voice through the fact that their very sanctity rests upon their silence (p. 17); they have found a way to embody protest, defying with their physical selves the notion that women's bodies cannot have access to certain kinds of sacredness. Here, as in the case of the virgin martyrs, speech and bodies are closely intertwined, but the holy transvestites elaborate upon this relationship by using their bodies to speak a complex set of signs, particularly at the moment of the body's uncovering after death, when its potential for the miraculous and its revelation as female intersect.

The interpretive essay following the translations of the lives continues Tracy's discussion of voice in the female saint's life, but in both the essay and the narratives on which it comments, other related theoretical and cultural implications of the lives themselves begin to emerge.

The interpretive essay works to reconstruct a scene of reading for this late-medieval text, speculating about its various audiences and contexts as a way of continuing to explore the issue of voice. In this capacity, her analysis joins other recent work in medieval feminist studies that examines women's reading experience of male-authored texts, such as Anne Clark Bartlett's Male Authors, Female Readers (1995). Tracy ends by re-invoking the book's opening reference to Christine de Pizan, saying, "her use of the legends to make a case for strong, educated, and vocal women in the face of masculine censure and condemnation shows exactly how influential these legends were for medieval women. While their faith is the same, the manifestations of it are not and...real women are no more homogeneous than are those of legend" (126).

Tracy contends that women absorbed the lives' messages about female independence "regardless of male authors' intentions" (102); she sees the often-assertive female speech within the legends as "giv[ing]
the impression that it is not merely the voice of a male biographer that is being heard” (108). The legends themselves, however, suggest as well that the problem of male voices telling women’s stories can be approached through the broader issue of medieval culture’s own ways of reading women and their experience. The transvestite legends in particular introduce the theme of legibility through the tendency, which many of them display to shift between masculine and feminine pronouns to describe the women who have disguised themselves as men. Tracy argues that this feature of the transvestite legend sometimes “has further implications than mere semantics”; her headnote to the legend of Theodora observes that this saint “must completely disavow her sex” (89). But one might also argue that those semantic implications are the central point, and that the shift in pronouns re-makes through language an anxiety-producing potential for the illegibility of the body itself in the eyes of the male narrator. Saint Theodora also provides an interesting opportunity for connecting these texts’ considerations of women’s readability to questions of female subjectivity. In a plot that blends mannered romance and passionate spirituality, Theodora cuckolds her husband with a suitor under the cover of darkness, telling the suitor’s emissary that “when it was evening he should tell his master to come to her and she would fulfill his desire” (90). Compounded with the later accusation which Theodora faces, of having impregnated a local maiden when in the guise of a man (a commonplace in the transvestite legends here), along with her reversion to her female identity in order to nurse the child, Theodora’s actions create a suggestive uncertainty about her own sexual agency and relationship to desire, creating a space for us to consider her particular selfhood. Saint Thais participates in this dynamic as well. A courtesan-turned-anchorite, she is walled up in order to turn further inward upon herself, compelled to consider her wasteful life by keeping her own waste in her cell (p. 83). Thais and Theodora ask us to locate
female subjectivity within the stories themselves in addition to the self-awareness and subjectivity which Tracy sees these stories as creating for the women reading them.

Finally, the pattern of transvestite stories—in which a woman disguises herself as a man, is accused of impregnating a woman, and is eventually vindicated through the revelation of her true gender at her death—intersects with and enriches critical thought about the performance of gender in many ways. These lives suggest, for instance, the importance of institutional contexts—figured as the monastic settings for some of stories—in constructing the performance of gender. And the performative element of the assumed male identities leads us to think about its relationship to the more complicated performative potential within the dead bodies unmasked as female at the stories’ conclusions.

Hagiographic texts have played an important role in the reconstitution of women’s history. Tracy’s own critical perspective on her particular choices of legend shows us one aspect of this history—a scene of readership and an attention to uses of female voice for those readers. The legends, which Tracy has helpfully collected and examined, allow us not only to imagine this past but also to listen to these narratives’ responses to our own theoretical frameworks for considering gender.

Seeta Chaganti
University of California, Davis