The Vita Sancte Alicie Bathoniensis

Transgressions of Hagiographic Rhetoric in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale

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In a discussion of medieval genre, transgression, parody, and artistry, there is no better place to start than with the great modern theorist of parody, Alfred Matthew Yankovic, better known as Weird Al. For those who don’t know his inspired work, Yankovic is the acknowledged master of contemporary music parodies, and his genre-bending send-ups, such as “Like a Surgeon,” “It’s All About the Pentiums,” “(Living in an) Amish Paradise,” and “The Saga Begins” have garnered numerous Grammys as well as MTV Video Award nominations. The genius of Yankovic’s art is that it works on many levels: first of all, as better-than-average pop-song writing and musicianship, secondly as humorous send-ups of successful songs, but above all as transgressions of the genre expectations of contemporary music videos. And the more the audience knows about music and videos, the better Yankovic’s parodies get, since it catches casual references to nuances in the originals being parodied. For instance, knowledgeable viewers quickly recognized that Yankovic’s video for “Smells Like Nirvana” used the same high school gym, the same cheerleaders and rented costumes, and many of the same extras as in Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” while Star Wars addicts and Don MacLean fans alike saw many familiar references in Yankovic’s The Saga Begins. Every camera shot modern video watchers expect in the contemporary folk rock ballad is included in Yankovic’s work—it’s just that the lyrics fit the tune of MacLean’s classic rock anthem “American Pie,” and the action takes place in one of the cantinas of George Lucas’s Tatooine as Yankovic, costumed as Ewan MacGregor’s young Obi Wan Kenobi, sings to a rhythmic guitar accompaniment, “My, my, this here Anakin guy, Maybe Vader someday later, now he’s just a small fry.”

Why do I start a paper on Chaucer with this rehearsal of contemporary culture? Because I believe that in The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale we see similar genre-transgression taking place, and that the more familiar we are with the genre being manipulated, the more we can appreciate Chaucer’s artistry and achievement. Many scholars seeking the sources and analogues of Chaucer’s

1Videos, lyrics, and details of many of Yankovic’s works are available at http://www.weirdal.com/
most noteworthy female creation has pointed to La Vieille, estates satire, anti-feminist tracts in Latin and French, and astrological and physiognomical lore as the genres from which the Wife of Bath's richly-drawn portrait draws. But they usually neglect another, and closer genre: hagiography. Saints' lives were one of the most popular kinds of narrative in Middle English literature, if we judge from surviving manuscripts; Chaucer's audience, especially his female audience, would have known the genre and its standard twists and turns well. By using the conventions of the female saint's life in subtly perverted ways, Chaucer adds a richness and depth to Alice's story—what I would call the Vita Sancte Allicie Bathoniensis—that we as modern readers may miss if we aren't alerted to its presence.

It is no longer necessary to point out how many books of pious devotion were produced for or owned by female readers in the late middle ages. As Larissa Tracy points out, "Saints' lives served a twofold purpose: while elevating the subject they also provided a clearer picture of what role women were expected to play and how they played it, very often in their own terms with their own voice [sic]." It's clear that tales of pious women held particular interest for the female readership of late medieval England. Collections as early as the three saints' legends in the Katherine group and as extensive as those in the South English Legendary or Northern Homily Cycle show how pervasive such stories were: by the fifteenth century, when Capgrave, Bokenham, and others were writing, the saint's life was an accepted female genre, much as the romance novel is for today's reader. It was considered culturally appropriate for women to "rede on holy seyntes lyves," as Chaucer's Criseyde wryly points out (2.118).

The similarities between romance and hagiographic narrative are many. Julia Boffey notes that "Like romances saints' lives usually involve a sequence of episodes which pit the central figure against some opposition, so generating action and response, and in both genres the contests can generate accumulations of graphic and sometimes lurid detail." The conventional rhetorical structure of a female saint's life consists of a recognized succession of episodes. The saint's geographic and family backgrounds are established, as are her piety and general "passivity." She is exposed to a number of increasingly dangerous physical and spiritual perils, which she surmounts triumphantly, either exacting appropriate revenge on her persecutors and rejoicing at their deaths or converting them and mass numbers of their followers to her way, all while preserving control of her

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virginity. In her final test, the saint is usually martyred, but only after offering a last oration or sermon on her own conduct and on her beliefs that inspires mass conversions and sets the stage for divine retribution against her persecutors. Quantity is an all-important feature: there must be a sequence of perils, each greater in duration and degree than the ones before; and massive numbers of unbelievers must be converted through the saint's agency. As Thomas Heffernan points out,

In this narrative frame, action becomes ritual, and specific action becomes specific ritual. For sacred biographers, there existed a veritable thesaurus of established approved actions which they could employ in their texts. Within this cultural setting, the saint's life, with its emphasis on right action, served as a catchetical tool much like the stained glass which surrounded and instructed the faithful in their participation at the liturgy.

Unlike the male saints, in whose narratives physical action on the saint's part often figures largely, the female saints most often work their ends through verbal action—either orations or orationes, that is, prayers. Tracy identifies that female voice as a key element of the genre:

Male ecclesiastical authors, though they may have been concerned with the lasting obedience and silence of women, gave their female saints a vocal presence in their legends. While it may be the voice of Christian doctrine providing examples of sanctity for general edification, the women saints are allowed to speak for themselves.

The women are largely historical inventions constructed as representations of sanctity, but the fact that they speak clearly and loudly for themselves, instead of having their message conveyed by a male narrator, shows the female voice is an integral part of hagiography.

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Bethlehem: she is a figure of Christ. Griselda is repeatedly described with zon
the female voice is heard more clearly.6 The blazon of the saint's geography and
I shal dye a mayde" and to ask for a quick death "er that I have a shamen
negligible character in her own passw. In the Caerk's Tale of Griselda, however,
genealogy is conducted rather quickly: the second fitt of the tale tells us that
are won over by her pious gentilesse, until, when she is ordered to return to
her father's home, she does so followed by hordes of weeping converts. Finally,
Constance in the
Man of Law's Tale is a more complex figure. Her tale again begins with her genealogy and history: she is the extraordinarily beautiful
daughter of the Emperor of Rome, and her piety and beauty are so renowned
that the Sultan of Syria comes from afar to marry her and convert his entire
kingdom to Christianity. (This is powerful piety, even in a saint's life.) Her
first oration, a Chaucerian addition to the story, is two rhyme royal stanzas (II 274–
87) on the “Thy will be done” theme, stressing the speaker's strong beliefs that
such is woman's fate. She becomes immediately popular with everyone in Syria
except her mother-in-law's faction, and the Soudaness immediately arranges
the massacre of her son and the newly-converted Christians. Only Constance
survives, to face greater tortures in being put to sea in a rudderless ship. Her
subsequent prayer, another Chaucerian addition, is short again, just under two
stanzas (451–62); however, Chaucer also adds, in the narrator's voice, six more
stanzas reminding readers that such things happen all the time in biblical stories,
rebuking them for finding her long survival difficult to believe. (Petraroch, too,
touched similar disbelief in his audience, who found the actions of female saints
implausible, and reacted similarly to Chaucer; apparently such resistance in the
audience was not unprecedented; see McKinley, 97.)

Constance, of course, is swept up on the beach in Britain, where she is
befriended by the constable and converts his wife, is falsely accused of murder,
is cleared by divine intervention, and marries King Alla and bears him a son,
while in the process converting large numbers of heathens to Christianity. Once
again this brings her into conflict with a jealous mother-in-law, in the pattern of
repetition so common to hagiographic narrative. The mother-in-law so contrives
that Constance is put to sea again, with her son, in the same ship in which she
had arrived. She lands in heathen territory again, where she is menaced by a
Roman senator who takes her and the baby home to his wife. For reasons
never explored she does not reveal her identity to her father until her husband
Alla comes to Rome on pilgrimage and she is reunited with him; then she is also
reunited with her father; and all seems set for a pious happy ending. But such
cannot be, for to live in marital congress is to engage in sin, and Constance,
after all, is a saintly woman. So Alla conveniently dies a year later, allowing
Constance to finish out her life in prayer, chastity, and good works among the
poor—the true saintly ending when martyrdom is not required.

Griselda's rhetoric is also strongly reminiscent of hagiography. Most of
her direct speeches are, in fact, Chaucerian additions to Petrarch's story, and
Griselda's speeches move strongly toward the pious oration so common in stories
of saints. When she is ordered to leave Walter's house, she responds with a
theme-and-variations take on “Thy will be done” that lasts 76 lines (IV 500 ff).
Many of her added speeches are prayers—or, as in the case of her speech af-
after reuniting with her children, prayers punctuated with culturally-appropriate
sworns. As an exemplary female figure, Griselda is drawn in terms with which
Chaucer's audience would have been not only familiar but comfortable; she
offers them reification of their beliefs, not challenges to them.

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61 would agree with many of the observations about this tale made by Kate McKinley in “The Clerk's Tale: Hagiography and the Problematics of Lay Sanctity.” Chaucer Review 33 (1998): 90–111, but not with her contention that Griselda is so perfect a figure that her actions as a saint are unconvincing (105–06).
In the Second Nun’s Tale of St. Cecilia, we see Chaucer more explicitly begin to highlight the heroine’s voice for his readers. As Priscilla Martin so succinctly puts it, “Like Constance, Cecilia is a paradigm of the Christian witness and missionary activity of the early Church, but while Constance is swept away and sent passively on her epoch-making journeys, Cecilia is a militantly active heroine.” She inspires action through her rhetoric: her impulsive power is verbal, not physical. To mirror this difference, Chaucer tells us less about her temporal and more about her spiritual genealogy. We are told that she comes “of Romans, and of noble kynd,” but more importantly that she is determined on Christian virginity. When she is married to Valerian, a fairly innocuous fellow, Chaucer sets the readers up for her entry into wifehood conventionally:

The nyght cam, and to bedde moste she gon
With hire houstone, as ofte is the manere. (VIII 141-42)

But Cecilia is not about to leave any of her holiness aside, and skillfully uses her rhetorical talents to achieve her ends. First she convinces Valerian that she wants to see the angel, and Cecilia sends him away from her bed to Pope Urban at the catacombs for baptism, for only the baptised can see the angel. Valerian is confronted with a vision of a man holding a book of gold, which immediately convinces him to convert. He is baptized, returns home to find Cecilia and the angel, and requests that his brother Tiburce be converted, which the angel promptly achieves, with Cecilia preaching the catechism. The three take up proselytizing, are captured, and tortured. They convert one of their torturers, Maximus, who begins to witness his Christianity to great effect and is arrested and beated to death. Finally, the prefect Almachias decides to put a stop to all this conversion and orders Cecilia arrested. She whip him handily at debate; he has her tortured, and even orders her beheading. But the torturer is unable to complete the job; the sword won’t cut her neck, and for three days and nights (a significant number, of course) she addresses the crowd, inspiring mass conversions and the building of a church by the pope, before finally dying.

Nowhere in this tale does Chaucer give Cecilia freedom to act: he constructs her as a collection of provocative speeches rather than a physically realized character. She is, truly, a saint: a collection of idealized virtues. Unlike Constance, Cecilia never rails against her fate or accepts it as divine will, but instead embraces it enthusiastically, even using it as the opportunity for some judicious fund-raising. Unlike most of the female saints in tales Chaucer’s audience knew, here is one who is pious without being passive. Like Griselda she strikes modern readers as rather inhuman in her eager dismissal of Valerian and Tiburce and her rather callous approach to her own martyrdom. (One senses that a modern Cecilia would have had her execution televised on Oprah, if she’d had the chance.)

It’s noteworthy that these are some of Chaucer’s longest tales, for the necessary cycles of repetition needed to create the picture of pious resignation demand space for the amplificatio and elaboration his readers anticipated in an exemplary life. Chaucer’s Virginia, Griselda, Constance and even Cecilia raise and meet his audience’s expectations of what becomes a legende most.

So, when Chaucer comes to write his most famous Lyf, that of the heterodox Wife of Bath, he has command of a wide range of conventions for female exemplary biography at his command—and ready for exploitation in the Wife’s Prologue and Tale. We know from the promises of the drunken Miller to tell “a legende and a lyf” (I 3141) and of the merchant’s wife in the Shipman’s Tale to “telle a legende of my lyf” (VII 145), and indeed from the entire project of the Legend of Good Women, that Chaucer understood the potential uses of hagiographic elements in parodic circumstances. Here, in his creation of Alys of Bath and her life story, he takes the elements of occasional parody to a higher, more sustained level. If one accepts that the belief structure he inverts is that of conventional Christianity, where female submissiveness and passivity are valued, we can see that Alice is, in a funhouse-mirror way, a saint and martyr—that she wears the costumes and occupies the settings of the saint’s life genre, but in unexpected ways. Indeed Alice is the exact opposite of the physical ‘type’ of the saintly heroine—unlike the beautiful, barely pubescent heroines of most saints’ lives, she is older, wiser, and no longer virginally lovely. Where the typical heroine of a saint’s life is from a noble family, the Wife is “barly-breed” and indifferent to her own appearance, eager not to provoke unchaste

In such conventional adaptations of hagiography, Chaucer manipulates the voices of his female protagonists to address disbelief and thoughtless imitation, reality and divine unreality, and the whole concept of modeling behavior, as he confronts his audience with the question of right conduct for Christians facing challenges to their faith. Strohm notes that the reader’s expectations about the movement of the narrative help to highlight and to explain any deviations from the pattern common to narratives of other martyred saints. The audience still finds its satisfaction in anticipation and fulfillment of a design, rather than in suspense and surprise and other responses less well suited to a devotional work written for the purpose of confirming belief. (167)
gazing, the female [saint] seeks to become invisible."7 Chaucer's transgressing Saint Alys seeks just the opposite.

The Wife's vita begins with her biography and genealogy: she was married first at age twelve, and was widowed twice at a young age. She follows a consistent pattern (in her first three marriages) of marrying men who are old, jealous, and miserly, but she triumphs over them by manifesting her "virtues" of sexuality, quarreling skill, and counter-argument. Where the traditional female saint is silent and lacks initiative, the Wife, like St. Cecilia, claims that she "baa [her] proprely" (III 224), as does a wise woman, by turning men's traditional weapons of sexual desire and speech against them. Whereas in typical saints' lives, a disregard for property, material goods, and inheritances is the hallmark of the virgin martyr, Chaucer's Saint Alys positively glories in the wealth she accumulates through her successive marriages—a wealth that empowers her to face more effective temptation.

Her tests against masculine persecution grow more serious when she is matched against her fourth husband, the "revelour" who provides her belief system with the female saint, she is undaunted by the physical abuse heaped on her, and indeed, for the fourth husband matches her in sexual desire and licentiousness, and the Wife must call on all her acquired knowledge and faith in her beliefs to overcome him and "in hi owene grece" (489-90) wishing on the fourth husband the salvific result of a very unsaintly conversion.

The arch-torturer of Saint Alys, of course, is fifth husband Jankyn, the wily clerk of Oxford. Like Almaschius and the other noteworthy torturers of the saint's life tradition, he starts with verbal assaults on her beliefs, reading to her from his book "of olde Romayn geestesn (642) and turning to physical assault when she counter-attacks by tearing a page from his book. His blow leaves her deaf in one ear, literally unable to take in his point of view. As is typical of the female saint, she is undaunted by the physical abuse heaped on her, and gives back as good as she gets. Jankyn extends and increases Alys's torture by reading to her every day out of his "book of wikked wyvesn (685), attempting to shake her faith by reading from Theophrastus and Jerome. The Wife must draw on all her strength to remain "stubborn as a lioness" and to ask "who painted the lion?" (and one of the great Chaucerian parodic notes is, of course, that St. Jerome was frequently depicted in medieval portraiture as having a lion as his one-time torturer's soul, as well as for God's vengeance against all men who do not convert when faced with such incontrovertible evidence of female moral superiority. Thus, like the female saints whose lives Chaucer's audience knew, the final note of the vita of this very unorthodox saint is that of salvation, conversion, and redemption—but totally different salvations, ones which would both amuse and confound Chaucer's audience as contrary to their doctrinal and narrative expectations.

The Wife's Tale, where the narrator prays, And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves God sende hem soone verray pestilence! And olde and angry nygardes of dispence, God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (1261–64)

Finally, in a physical confrontation, Jankyn strikes the Wife down so that she lies as one dead—but when he goes to raise up her corpse, she finds the strength to proclaim him a murderer, kiss him one last time, strike him in the face, and begin preaching her 'last sermon.' That, of course, is the heretical Wife of Bath's Tale, in which the triumphant heroine demonstrates to her own satisfaction that men can successfully deal with women only by converting to women's belief system, accepting that gentilesse depends on conduct rather than rank, and granting women maistrye in intersex dealings. As both Heffernan and McKinley point out, a major feature of female saints' lives was an argument that virtue was not dependent on the saint's political, economic, or social class (Heffernan, 270 ff.; McKinley, 94 ff.). But here, Chaucer totally inverts his audience's expectations, by using an argument usually proffered to support a saint's right to preserve her virginity to campaign, instead, for a woman's right to be free of patriarchal domination.

Saint Alys's torturer, Jankyn, converts in the face of his wife's strong beliefs, burns his book of wicked wives, and grants her the 'soveraynty' she so desires. He dies, she tells us, in the state of grace appropriate to such a convert, and she prays for God's blessing on her one-time torturer's soul, as well as for God's vengeance against all men who do not convert when faced with such incontrovertible evidence of female moral superiority. Thus, like the female saints whose lives Chaucer's audience knew, the final note of the vita of this very unorthodox saint is that of salvation, conversion, and redemption—but totally different salvations, ones which would both amuse and confound Chaucer's audience as contrary to their doctrinal and narrative expectations.

Generically, all the conventions of the saint's life are present in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, just as the expected conventions are present in one of Yaukovics's videos. Similarly, it is the superb reversal and exploitation of expected elements that enriches the joke for an audience familiar with the conventions being transgressed, as Chaucer's audience was with those of hagiographic narrative. And with the linguistic artistry that is his hallmark, Chaucer even plays with the language the Wife uses to reinforce the identification of the parody in his listeners' minds. As one instance, consider the last four lines of the Wife's Tale, where the narrator prays, And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves That noght wol be governed by hir wyves; And olde and angry nygardes of dispence, God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (1261–64)

If readers substitute "save" for "shorte" and "penitence" for "pestilence," they will see how close the parody is; just inserting those two traditional words from Middle English prayer would change Alys's speech to a totally orthodox statement. But Chaucer, by changing just two words, makes it a closing oration that challenges the entire basis of that orthodoxy, that women should be submissive to their husbands. The close verbal parallels to what his audience would have expected to hear at the close of a "standard" hagiographic narrative heighten the disruptive effect of the comic close to Alys's lyf.

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What effects does Chaucer achieve by incorporating the most common elements of exemplary biography into this vita of a very unsaintly teller? This question applies in fact to the entire genre of female saints’ lives: As Heffernan argues,

What would women, married or single or widowed, make of tales which subjected women who defended principle to an encyclopedia of violent sexual abuse, ending in death? . . . The positive reception which greeted these vernacular narratives of the saints suggests some degree of sophistication on the part of its audience, an audience whose attitudes are not easily categorized despite the hegemony of orthodoxy, an audience in which men and women were aware of gender problems, and [sic] audience familiar with sexually explicit and deviant behavior, an audience who enjoyed stories which exploited mass conflict, and an audience who believed that authority figures, whether clerical or political, often had feet of clay. (264–65)

Familiarity with the genre of the female saint’s life shows us that some of the elements we see today as most revolutionary and “proto-feminist” in Chaucer would have been recognized by his own audience as variations on the given conventions of a common genre. Thus, the audiences whose expectations are disrupted by the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale are as likely to be modern as fallible experience rather than the morally defensible auctoritate that a sequence of men have labored to expose her to. Unlike the Pardoner, she’s unaware of her own shortcomings—and therein lies her failure as a “saint.” The message that Chaucer’s transgressive vita relays, then, is a critique of those in his audience who agree with her beliefs as well as of the genre itself.

The comic possibilities of Chaucer’s transgressions of genre are likewise tremendous: Alys’s vita is a parody of the exemplary lives held up to late fourteenth-century women, the kind of exemplary lives that underlie the tale of Saints Cecilia and Virginia and to a lesser extent the tales of Griselda and Constance. In creating a woman who acts in precisely the opposite way to an orthodox saint and in making her live out the adventures—the increasingly difficult tests and torments, the steadfast opposition to “heathen” beliefs, the ability to convert the most hardened tyrant, the “miraculous” revival of the dead “saint”—Chaucer effectively lampoons an entire genre of approved textual consumption in his time, much as he skewers romance on the lance of Sir Thopas or as the modern Yankovic deconstructs music videos through parodic imitation. But more significantly, by having Alys espouse her anti-misogynist sentiments in the context of a genre aimed chiefly at female readers, Chaucer forces his readers to confront a real issue, for his time and for ours: what sort of examples ought the female reader to follow? Should she be a patient pushover, like Griselda and Constance? What kind of life did that earn her? The out-and-out attack Alice mounts on misogynist teaching, while first and foremost humorous, also requires readers to ask not only “What do women most desire?” but “What should women be allowed to desire?” At the same time, if Boffey is correct that the aim of narratives of holy lives is “less to warn, more to hearten and encourage” (618), we also see the inherent dangers in Chaucer’s transgressive creation, for the appeal of this lively and engaging character’s arguments could indeed cause the unaware to “sownnen into synne” (X 1085), in Chaucer’s time or our own.

Recognizing the elements of the saint’s life in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale does not, of course, “solve” the problem that Alys and her beliefs presents for the modern reader, but complicates it even further, reminding us that Chaucer may possibly have envisioned this creation, in part, as a critique of the impossibility of the exemplary life his world demanded that women live. By incorporating the structural and rhetorical features of the saint’s life with the other sources and elements that make up the Wife of Bath’s portrait, Chaucer turns the genre and the expectations of his audience inside out with her performance. The humor comes in hearing the echoes of the saint’s life in such an unsaintly setting, the sentence in reflecting on the implications such juxtapositions raise. Like those who watch a Yankovic video, Chaucer’s readers, knowing what a saint’s life should and should not contain, and how a saint should and should not face her tests and tortures, can find in the Vita Sancte Alicie Bathoniensis a richness and depth hitherto unnoticed.
“Seyd in forme and reverence”

Essays on Chaucer and Chaucerians
in Memory of
Emerson Brown, Jr.

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