

Holy humour: Vernacular saints' lives in England, 900 — 1300

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Introduction

A modern audience, seeking literary entertainment in the form of adventure, gruesome violence and humorous word-play, would be unlikely to turn to saints' lives – particularly those written a thousand years ago. Medieval religious texts, and the people who wrote and copied them, are not usually associated with levity: rather, they are generally perceived as pious, holy, and serious — as are the homiletic and didactic works which they wrote. Is it so improbable, however, that holy texts conveying a serious meaning are entirely different creatures to texts which entertain (such as the Exeter Book *Riddles*)? The two genres are not necessarily mutually exclusive. While society today may find it strange, or even bizarre, to equate religious texts with humour, this coupling of seemingly incongruous qualities was not unusual for medieval societies, where the line between sacred and profane was often blurred. This can be seen in medieval texts themselves, where manuscripts of a religious nature are often decorated with obscene or grotesque images: the Luttrell Psalter and the Gorleston Psalter are two examples, both of which were produced in England in the 14th century.

While previous critical studies have explored the use of humour within various genres of medieval literature, including saints' lives, my work aims to identify and trace the development of the use of literary humour within a specific context: violent episodes of saints' lives, written in England from the late-900s up to 1300. In doing so, this study investigates whether humour was used to clarify aspects of the Christian doctrine associated with the martyrdoms of saints. The late 900s to 1300 was a period of great social change in England yet of continuity in the types of saints' lives copied and circulated. Focusing on a genre popular throughout the Middle Ages allows me to trace the development of humour in saints' lives from pre- to post-Conquest England, establishing literary continuities in translation. This permits me to assess whether the acknowledged entertaining qualities of later medieval saints' lives had any precedent in earlier Old English lives. As the form of humour in violent episodes differs according to the gender of the saint, I examine both male and female lives, enabling me to determine how the saints' gender affected the representation of humour within violent episodes, and how audiences responded to these episodes in medieval societies.

This approach to early medieval saints' lives will expand our knowledge of the societies that wrote and circulated these texts, challenging the perception that early medieval society was humourless, and altering our understanding of the medieval audiences for whose benefit these texts were translated from Latin into vernacular English.

Medieval mischief?

Much work has been written regarding humour and medieval works (perhaps the most notable being the Old English *Riddles*, and in Middle English literature Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*), and they have yielded varied results. Heroic texts, such as *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, have been the subject of much critical and scholarly consideration, in which word-play and symbolic laughter have figured largely in the identification of humour. Much of this Old English humour has been labelled "grim" or "sombre" however, and this perception has stretched somewhat to encompass not only heroic texts but also texts of a religious nature.

The Exeter Book *Riddles* nonetheless points to a more playful sense of humour (particularly the obscene riddles), and we do have surviving evidence that life in a monastic setting may not have been as "sombre" as we often presume it was — not least that it would have been religious clergy who copied the sexual riddles. Critic Martha Bayless has pointed to admonitions spanning from the 8th to the 10th century, which rebuke members of the clergy and monastery alike for their behaviour: for their laughter, jokes, drunkenness, and feasting. Despite these frequent condemnations, the rate at which they recurred suggests the continuation of such behaviour, implying that medieval religious life may not have been as "sombre" as we picture it today.

Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of "high" and "low" cultures has also been questioned. Rather than humour and revelry being accepted as having exclusively destabilising qualities and therefore being associated with disorder and ultimately with the "low" members of society (which consequently renders the upper echelons of society, such as members of religious orders, serious), it has now been acknowledged that humour and laughter are (and were) fluid across social groups. Humour cannot be assigned to one community of people.

Yet what of didactic and homiletic works? Would the writers of such texts have wilfully incorporated humour? Examples of literary humour within religious works should not be regarded as undermining their purpose — as we have seen humour should not be associated exclusively with being "destabilising". The use of humour to teach was by no means unusual, or unheard of; indeed it was a tradition carried down from Antiquity, and while its form may have altered with the growing influence of the Church, humour was still very much present in religious works. Concerning saints' lives in particular, historian Ernst Curtius in 1953 noted that audiences of such lives would have *expected* humour.

Saints in society

Certainly, saints' lives are not such an unusual place to look for humour as one might think. Saints themselves played a much more prominent role in medieval society than we would attribute to them today. New candidates for sainthood were constantly being put forward, with churches competing to promote their favoured saint — theft of relics to achieve this was not uncommon. Saints also had a much more physical, as well as spiritual presence; shrines to particular saints often held a relic of the saint that people could touch, or view. It could even be said that medieval saints were the equivalent of modern-day celebrities, or akin to modern day super-heroes, due to the miracles they performed.

Saints were acknowledged as being higher beings: they were not mortal, which was confirmed during their torture scenes, as they were able to withstand instances of horrendous torture without (for the most part) feeling any pain or being physically blemished. Their torture, and (in the case of martyrs) eventual death was welcomed, as it was a necessary step towards their heavenly union with Christ.

Vernacular saints' lives, circulating in manuscript form, served a specific purpose in medieval society: to be read aloud to educate the laity in matters of Christian doctrine, many of whom would not have had access to Latin learning. They functioned as edifying texts, and the saints themselves acted as models for Christian virtue, to further strengthen the readers' or listeners' faith. Simply because these texts primarily functioned as edifying texts however, it does not necessarily follow that their lives, which were so often embellished with episodes of violence and miraculous events, were void of elements of humour. Indeed humour (often occurring within episodes of violence) may have served an integral role within these lives — to maintain audience attention, and as an effective means to direct interpretation of the narrative. By directing audience interpretation, I mean to say that humour may have been used to guide the audience away from *worldly* or everyday interpretations of violence, encouraging them instead to understand the religious significance of the saint's martyrdom symbolically. Literary critic Shari Horner has also discussed the use of humour in Old English female martyr saints' lives, stating that it encouraged a symbolic understand of the dialogue between saint and pagan.

Different cultures, different concepts?

There is of course the challenge of identifying and defining humour from past societies: would medieval societies have found the same things “funny” that we do today? To counter the difficulty of identifying the presence, form, and purpose of humour in medieval saints' lives, my work examines modern theories of humour such as incongruity, superiority, and cognitive theories, and uses these approaches to put together the essential features of humour, as well as its technical applications and effects. My work utilises texts which detail how humour was perceived and used in the Middle Ages by engaging with

arguments put forward by Bakhtin and later counter-arguments. Similarly, my research applies modern and medieval conceptions of both violence and gender to medieval saints' lives, again engaging with modern theories of pain and violence. My work also engages with modern theories of gender, primarily focusing, however, on medieval perceptions of gender in a religious context.

I further refine my analysis of the function of humour by focusing on contemporary medieval instructional works and commentaries, particularly on the rhetorical treatises known as the *artes praedicandi* and earlier texts such as Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*. These contemporary sources provide precedents for humour as a tool for edification. Examining both medieval and modern thoughts on humour and how it may have functioned ensures that a comprehensive understanding of humour is acquired.

Holy humour and horror

My work investigates how humour was utilised during episodes of torture within saints' lives, and their ultimate martyrdom, examining the reasons why humour was portrayed in disparate ways according to the gender of the saint. The depiction of violent martyrdoms became more verbally embellished towards the end of the 13th century, and the use of humour more prominent, particularly in female saints' lives. Like Horner's symbolic interpretation, my research shows that humour was used to guide interpretation of such violence, ensuring that listeners understood correctly the intended doctrinal message underlying violent martyrdoms i.e. that the audience understood the violence symbolically, as opposed to literally. I examine how humour was used to distract or focus audience attention upon the tortures inflicted upon the saints, considering whether particularly violent martyrdoms were more significant in female lives, and addressing the rationale for this directed interpretation of violent episodes.

To achieve this, and to trace the development of humour and violence in saints' lives, my work looks at a wide range of lives spanning approximately a three hundred year time period: Ælfric's saints' lives, written circa the late 900s — early 1000s; anonymous saints' lives contemporary to these; the *Ancrene Wisse*, an instructional text written for anchorites, along with its associated Katherine Group saints' lives, written during the early 1200s; and the *South English Legendary*, first copied towards the end of the 1200s.

The body in medieval religious texts was often utilised as a personification of religious doctrine itself, or else guided how doctrine was intended to be interpreted by the audience. My work considers the concepts of the medieval religious body, and how gender may have been utilised in distinct ways to express a particular doctrinal message. This requires close examination of perceptions of both male and female members of the laity and those in religious orders, and their textual representations. Due to the nature of my research, how these perceptions changed and developed will also be examined, along with events that may have caused this. This will inform my own investigation of how humour was utilised,

and whether it would have been viewed by a contemporary audience as complimentary to, or subversive of the religious message of saints' lives. My work shows how the use of humour should not be attributed solely to works produced post-conquest, and that there was a literary connection between texts produced pre-conquest. The function of humour, particularly within episodes of torture, appears to have remained constant — this is not denying the shift in emphasis in the character traits of the saints themselves. While the more accepted and obvious use of humour increased throughout the centuries, the utilisation of humour itself should not be mistaken as a new development.

Conclusion

In essence, my work explores how humour may have been used to direct the audience away from worldly interpretations of violence in order to better instruct them in Christian doctrine, and how the use of such humour changed and developed from pre- to post-Conquest England. It considers possible models of audience response to such use of humour (for example edification, entertainment, laughter), and whether they may have existed simultaneously. My research also addresses whether the gendering of violence in relation to the use of humour was a preaching tradition continued from Old to Middle English lives. This first full-length study of the topic of gendered humour in this popular genre of medieval text differs from current research in that it covers a much more extended time frame, spanning both pre- and post-conquest England, thus allowing for an examination of the developing use of humour in religious contexts. A better understanding of how medieval authors intended violent episodes within hagiographic texts to be interpreted can be achieved by identifying and exploring how they deployed humour during these scenes. This expands current knowledge of medieval preaching practices, where these practices originated, and how they developed. In turn this provides a greater understanding of not just the purpose of saints' lives, but also of the societies and mind-sets that created, circulated, and listened to them, altering and refining our understanding of medieval uses and perception of humour.

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