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# Winstead, Karen A. Fifteenth-Century Lives: Writing Sainthood in England

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**Winstead, Karen A.**

***Fifteenth-Century Lives: Writing Sainthood in England.***

ReFormations: Medieval and Early Modern. Chapel Hill, NC: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020. Pp. xi, 197. ISBN 978-0-268-10854-0 (paperback) US\$45.

The literary form of hagiography reached a height of popularity in fifteenth-century England, developing from its nascency in the thirteenth century into what Christopher Cannon has called a quietly central position in English writing. The hagiography was often used as a tool to promulgate the author's social and political vision and consequently highlighted wider contemporary concerns.

Karen Winstead argues in *Fifteenth-Century Lives: Writing Sainthood in England* that the hagiographies of this period, which epitomized the values and vogues of their readers, were forged by the social tensions of the time to create experimental and even daring treatments of the genre. Although the church was imposing censorship on unauthorized translations or commentaries owing to fears of Lollardy, Winstead demonstrates that, far from becoming more conservative, hagiographical works in this period pushed the boundaries of traditional style, structure, and subject. Focusing on themes of the importance of community, teaching, and pastoral care, the authors examined by Winstead appealed to a lay readership that was increasingly confident and possibly reformist, desiring a more humane and humanizing Christianity.

Approaching her argument from five different angles, Winstead first examines four saints' lives by John Lydgate and analyzes his attempts to experiment with new literary approaches to the traditional hagiography. Lydgate was a successful and influential writer who straddled both court and monastic life, and consequently, this experimentalism became popular with other hagiographers of the period.

Having set the scene with Lydgate's works, Winstead turns to Osborn Bokenham, who wrote an anthology of holy women's lives for the growing readership of literate and wealthy women in England. His work in this genre evolved into tales that included feminine roles that transgressed social norms, with female teachers, preachers, and scholars as protagonists. Winstead uses Bokenham's work to trace a growing confidence in breaching norms within a supposedly conservative genre. She emphasizes that while women were not on the front lines of religious reform, many wealthy women had warm and close

relationships with their confessors and were patrons of literature—an influence that grew with the development of the printing press—thus exerting “soft” leverage on the prevailing religious and political narratives.

The ascendance of an educated and intellectual spirituality is traced by Winstead through a selection of poetic works and anthologies, which highlight saints who were scholars or educators. During this period of turmoil when religious authorities only permitted the dissemination of orthodox religious ideas, Winstead points out that literate and educated women were seen as a dangerous source of heretical thought. By presenting female saints as orthodox educators in their hagiographies, authors such as Osborn Bokenham and John Capgrave were emphasizing the trustworthiness of women to provide a sound intellectual foundation for Christian living.

With a brief assessment of the lives of holy laywomen recorded in thirteenth-century Europe and onwards, Winstead notes that although holy women were not attested to in the same numbers in England, several lives of modern Continental holy women were translated into English. Although this may have been problematic due to several supposedly heretical feminine holy movements in Europe at the time (such as the Beguines), Winstead agrees with Jennifer Brown and Patricia Kurtz who argued that, through the writing and then translation of Beguines’ lives, male authors could reframe these accounts in a conservative light, focusing on a female piety based on sacramental confession and the Eucharist. Beneath first impressions of their restraint of feminine religious radicalism, however, Winstead still discovers in these translations a novel feminine piety, characterized by a lay Christianity that is informed and active. Concluding her discussion of holy women’s *vitae* with the life of Margery Kempe, Winstead introduces the concept of “virtual holiness,” where the desire to do something good is on a par, in piety, with the act itself (117). Kempe negotiated with the male authorities in her life and was able to lead a life pleasing to God even when the constraints of her ordinary position prevented her from fulfilling some of her holy desires. Above all, Kempe, dissatisfied with the models provided to her of holy lives, wrote a book that she would have wanted to read. While she appropriated existing models of modern holy women, she also pioneered the idea that asceticism and suffering were not necessarily critical to the sanctity desired by many Christian women of her time.

Winstead’s thesis hinges upon significant shifts in paradigms of sainthood in the fifteenth century. It is fitting that her final chapter begins with

an analysis of three translations of the *Legenda Aurea* by the most influential hagiographer of the late Middle Ages, Jacobus de Voragine, and ends with John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, which was written as an explicit repudiation of the type of holiness described in the *Legenda*. Winstead deftly sums up her argument using these two works: while they span the Reformation in terms of the period as well as theology, they both use similar devices to present a type of sanctity that would appeal to their readership without offending the religious status quo. In these works, the authors use modification as well as preservation to produce texts that exemplify a type of orthodox revisionism, moving away from the repressive conservatism of the late medieval English Church toward the adoption, ultimately, of a Reformed piety.

Winstead has succeeded in using a small number of texts to argue that the nature of hagiography in this period was not only changing but introducing new ideas of what constituted a pious Christian life to the mainstream of religious thought, through authors, translators, patrons, and readers. Using a conventional literary form, hagiographers carefully balanced orthodoxy with a revolutionary perspective of a Christian spiritual life that was available to all people, through acts of compassion, education, and example. In this sense, Winstead has used these works to mirror the currents that were rumbling throughout late medieval Christendom, foreshadowing the tectonic shift from a hierarchical, sacramental, and vicarious religion to the egalitarian, intellectual, and moral religion ushered in by the Reformation.

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