

ESSAYS

IMPOSSIBLE WOMEN: ÆLFRIC'S SPONSA CHRISTI AND "LA MYSTERIQUE"

Since the earliest feminist medievalist studies of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, such as Jane Chance's *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*¹ and the anthology *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*,² new critiques of women in medieval literature have evolved away from the revisionist techniques of valorization upon which these works rely, to more critically balanced and theoretically informed points of view. With new understanding gained from scholarly incorporation of ideas from thinkers such as Foucault and what Toril Moi calls the "Holy Trinity" of French feminists—Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous—the figures of Man and Woman, ideas concerning masculine and feminine, and the relationships between power and authority that bind these traditionally designated binary opposites together are no longer viewed as monoliths whose eternal truth and existence can only be challenged or accommodated. Because of this, traditional feminist concerns such as the desire to find "positive" examples of historical women and female literary characters have also had to adapt themselves to a more post-modern outlook where the formation and answering of such questions can no longer be a simple matter of "us against them." It thus follows that our evaluations of female power and authority should also take this progress into account. In examining these dynamics within the genre of hagiography, a more theoretical approach therefore uncovers what might be viewed as "unpleasant truths" about female saints that, when following the earlier feminist model of revisionism and valorization, remain hidden.

Leslie Donovan describes female saints as women who "used their faith as a tool for empowerment."³ These saints, she argues, provided positive role models to Anglo-Saxon women, as the personal and public struggles that the saints faced were the same as those which historical women also experienced. Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg takes this further when she declares that female saints' Lives provided "sources of inspiration, authority, and empowerment for women by suggesting a variety of relevant role models and experiences for them to admire, imitate, or to modify in order to fit their special needs or situations."⁴ Both of these statements lead to the idea of a female audience being encouraged to identify with female saints by the officially sanctioned conduit of hagiographical narrative. However, two important points must be remembered when confronting such an idea. The first is that hagiography has been labelled as a form of religious propaganda,⁵ and therefore, as propaganda, does not actually coincide with the experiences of historical women, and instead presents an idealized portrait of the saint and her situation. The second is that the concepts of *admiranda* and *imitanda*—that is, simply admiring a saint's actions versus actually attempting to imitate them oneself—were carefully constructed and controlled by the Church in order to ensure that the saintly feminine ideal would always be out of reach for historical women. The only realistic option that was therefore open to the female audience was pious appreciation, but not actual re-

enactment, since the latter action would be dangerously disruptive to the bonds of society.⁶ It is because of this paradoxical and unattainable characterization of female saints, as well as other positively represented women in religious texts, that I designate them as Impossible Women. Such characterization also leads to a further duality of interpretation: on the surface, female saints' personal struggles can be read as truly praiseworthy, but on a more critical level, the realization that these saints are constructed according to propagandistic patriarchal desires makes it impossible—for the feminist at least—to continue to view them in such a simple light.

No wonder then, that, as Gail Ashton mentions, the double ideal for a female saint's identity of holy saint and earthly woman results in hagiographic texts that are full of ambiguity.⁷ In order to deal with these issues in a more exact manner, this essay shall focus on one particular type of saint, the self-styled *sponsa Christi* or "bride of Christ," within the works of that most famous of Anglo-Saxon hagiographers, Ælfric. In his *Lives of Saints*, Ælfric includes the stories of seven female saints in a total of thirty-nine pieces. This does not include the four Lives that, even though they are included in editions of *Lives of Saints*, have been shown to be the work of an author other than Ælfric.⁸ While all of Ælfric's female saints are virgins who dedicate themselves to the service of Christ, only two can be said to be bona fide brides of Christ, where their unions with Christ inform the main part of their narratives. These are saints Agnes and Agatha. For brevity's sake, this essay focuses solely on Agnes.⁹

The historical Agnes was said to be a young Roman woman who was martyred at a young age for refusing to marry a pagan. In the hagiographical (re)construction that now serves as our only cultural record, it was her self-identification as *sponsa Christi*—and therefore of already being espoused—that served as the reason for her refusal of this marriage proposal. The pagan characters, as was usual, mistook this heavenly bridegroom for a regular, mortal man, and made suitable threats against the couple as a result of jealousy. The fact that the pagans made such a mistake concerning the nature of the heavenly couple marks it out as a particularly important type of relationship. Through examining how Agnes represents this relationship in her 'own' words, as well as briefly comparing this to the speaking positionality of female mystics when they describe similar relationships, we can see how she is made to construct herself in the position of an Impossible Woman.

Female mystics such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, as well as a variety of continental European women like Hildegard von Bingen and Mechthild von Magdeburg, all dating from later medieval times, are of course well known to us. Because, however, these mystics were actual historical women, they are generally not placed in the same critical context as early medieval saints, for whom definitive historical details are usually scarce, but it is this difference that makes an analysis of Agnes' life so interesting. As previously mentioned, the fact that a saint is the product of propagandistic construction yields a highly ambiguous text. Furthermore, when we examine the hagiographical portrayal of

the saint, the tension that is caused by the desire of patriarchal authority to exercise complete control over the expression of female religious experiences that can never be fully expressed (by anyone) through mere words yields the possibility of a dualistic interpretation.

With this textual tension in mind, the language that Ælfric's Agnes uses to describe her mystical relationship with Christ can be read against what Luce Irigaray designates as *la mystérique*. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray defines *la mystérique* not only as the only place in Western tradition where women can speak so publicly, but also as the only place where the "feminine" or the "Other" can begin to be expressed—not without, of course, risk of the speaker losing herself into hysteria.¹⁰ However, following such a definition, and keeping in mind that theorizing a tangible space that necessarily lies outside of the Symbolic order of (patriarchal) signification is ultimately nigh on impossible, truly authentic mystical language would be unrecordable and unrepresentable in writing. In this particular instance, the public space of women religious can be imagined as existing in concentric circles, where movement towards the outer circles is analogous to the increasing patriarchal mediation that occurs when women's speech leaves their tongues and begins its journey into the Symbolic. We find that the speech of early saints is more institutionally mediated than that of later medieval mystics, and hence further away from a genuine expression of *la mystérique* itself. Such a paradigm, centering on a moment of feminine speech,¹¹ resists, and indeed transcends, integration into the hierarchical binary thinking that is typical of Western metaphysical thought. While it has a (feminine) central point, it has no beginning (where does an utterance begin—with a thought, with air flowing over the voice box, when it is heard?) and no end (as sound waves continue past their hearers, and utterances give rise to further thoughts), and therefore no parameters against which to make the constant judgements of value that characterize patriarchal thought. By inhabiting positions on the concentric circles, patriarchal thought does succeed in constructing arbitrary boundaries to the flow of female speech in its attempt to maintain the existence of its own metaphysical paradigm, but this does not change the infinite nature of the emanation of the feminine utterance. Indeed, in viewing the widening distances away from the origin of *la mystérique* that we find in the mystical speech of mystics and saints, we can see both paradigms, the patriarchal and the feminine, in simultaneous action. It is the greater distance from the origin of feminine speech, as well as the patriarchal insistence on creating binaries through the erection of boundaries, that contributes to Agnes's characterization of Impossible Woman.

The speech of female saints as represented by hagiography is, as one would expect, extremely varied in terms of speech situation, ability to speak, and authority in speaking. In examining the speech of female saints within the three social categories of unmarried virgin martyr, married virgin martyr, and repentant harlot—categories which are the hagiographical equivalents of the

usual “three estates” of virgin, mother, and widow—I have found that their ability and authority to speak is directly affected by the stability of their socio-sexual status. In other words, because the female saint’s significance always originates from her sexed female body, the less her own ideal of socio-sexual status is threatened by others, the greater her ability and authority to use language. The tools that I have used to measure these abilities come from the speech act theory that was first introduced by J.L. Austin¹² and later refined by John Searle.¹³ One of the most groundbreaking of their ideas is that to speak is to perform an action—something that feminist scholars picked up in the 1980s in order to “resurrect” female characters in Old English poetry, such as the Wife of *The Wife’s Lament*, by showing that instead of being merely passive characters who are completely subjected to the whims of circumstance, they are active (and hence more on a par with valorized, masculine activity) because they perform speech acts.¹⁴ As I stated at the beginning of this essay, because I am interested in extending the reaches of feminist medievalism via means of a more theoretical approach, instead of simply using speech act theory to quantify, I shall mainly use it to qualify. To give a very basic overview of some terms, Searle defines the five possible types of speech acts in his book *Expression and Meaning*: there is the assertive, where we tell people how things are; the directive, where we try to get people to do things; the commissive, where we commit ourselves to doing things; the expressive, where we express our feelings and attitudes; and the declaration, where we bring about changes in the world through our utterances.¹⁵ The other important concept that I am using is that of the perlocutionary act. Searle defines a perlocutionary act as an illocution (or simply, speech act) that strives to bring about a specific effect.¹⁶ Thus, the speech act that is also a perlocution can either succeed or fail in its perlocutionary effect. With the *sponsa Christi*’s speech, we can combine these ideas to define the extent and success of what she says.

Ælfric’s Latin source for this Life of St Agnes is found in *Patrologia Latina* 17: 735b-742d, and while he is famous for his so-called “brief style,” as well as his practice of condensing his source material in order to achieve this style, when he (re)presents Agnes in the specific guise of bride, he follows his Latin source almost to the letter. In the passages of *sponsa Christi* speech in the following analysis, it is even more interesting that Ælfric also does not carry out his usual practice of toning down both the sex and violence of his Latin sources. In *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing comment on Ælfric’s general practice of “sanitization” by saying that these episodes “cannot be read simply as an index of his famed ‘abbreviated’ style, but suggest instead an increased interest in controlling and defining the female subject and her body in relation to the unfailing will of the idealised Christian subject.”¹⁷ That Ælfric retains the erotic elements of his source in this instance comes about, as I shall argue, precisely because he is able to contain them within his own mediated version of Agnes’ saintly mysticism. Perhaps he also feels comfortable in molding speech whose ultimate origins are in *la mystérieuse* because of previous patriarchal mediation of such language into the biblical Song of Songs. In any case, because he himself is the author of Agnes’

speech, he cannot produce speech which could be counted as *la mystérique*, and so has nothing to fear in representing his own version of something that is similar in tone yet very different in its theoretical positioning. His version therefore occupies the outer concentric circles that surround (perhaps simply the nostalgic memory of?) the historical saint and her authentic expression of *la mystérique*, whatever it may have been.

One of the most threatening situations in the Life of a virgin martyr is that of the marriage proposal by a pagan of high social standing. Because losing her virginity would be the worst thing that could happen to a female saint who will eventually become a virgin martyr, she must devote all of her energy to defending the regulation of her socio-sexual status, which necessarily includes all of her speech. In defending herself, we find that the constant eruptive visibility of an issue that directly concerns the saint's body limits the ways in which she is portrayed to speak: her ability to produce speech is focused on the repetition of a small number of illocutions, while her authority is similarly low given the fact that she is in a position of solely providing answers. Her mystical *sponsa Christi* speech cannot be said to boost her authority either, since its language actually works to obliterate her subjectivity. Lastly, none of her speeches have any perlocutionary success, since her pagan suitor never drops his proposal. This failure, however, is actually necessary for the continuation of the narrative.

In Agnes's Life, this marriage proposal occurs immediately after the introductory summary of her holy life and eventual martyrdom. Because Agnes is shown as already having made the decision to dedicate her life (and body) to Christ, this proposal represents an extremely high threat to her socio-sexual regulation, with the result that her speech acts focus on quelling the threat. Her response unfolds over the course of three speech exchanges that involve the unnamed suitor as well as his father, Sempronius.

This particular instance of physical defence begins with an authorial relation of how Agnes responds to her suitor's attempts to win her affections through gift giving: "ac seo eadige agnes þæt forseah / and þæra maðma ne rohte þe má þe reocendes meoxes."¹⁸ A direct translation from the Latin, Agnes's unequivocal rejection establishes her as a woman who is not afraid of speaking sternly according to her wishes which, in light of the opening statements that her Life makes about her extreme youth (she is only thirteen years old) and wisdom, is certainly to be admired. As a speech act, however, the illocution of rejection and the qualifying proposition of the metaphor destabilize this representation. Consisting of a very simple assertive which, as an answer to her suitor's offer, follows both a conversational structure and topic that Agnes herself does not initiate or control, this illocution shows that she is clearly occupying a defensive position and is unable to regulate her socio-sexual status in an effective manner. Also, the fact that this first portrayal of her saintly speech is indirect also serves to distance her own voice from us, making it less distinct, and diminishing some of the force that it would have if it were directly stated. Lastly, this first rejection fails in its

perlocutionary intent, as immediately afterwards, her suitor—Sempronius's son—continues with his advances.

The same unsettling contrast between saintly image, intent, and utterance is repeated in Agnes's third and final exchange concerning the marriage proposal, with the result that she is unable to quell the threat to her body. Once again, her refusal is indirectly stated with a very straightforward assertive illocution and proposition, and once again, it fails as a perlocution since directly afterwards, Sempronius continues to harass her in an attempt to persuade her to change her mind. The reason she gives for her refusal that we find in the proposition—she already has a bridegroom (Christ) and therefore cannot break that bond—is also troubling because in this high threat situation she is relying upon her status as a relational object in order to assert herself as an independent subject. This is not the only time that Agnes relies upon such an oxymoronic form of self-defense. In her second exchange with Sempronius's son, she develops this theme of the *sponsa Christi* to its fullest extent.

Almost immediately after her first rejection of the marriage proposal, Agnes must provide another response when Sempronius's son ignores this rejection and tries harder to persuade her to accept his offer. This response consists of two main illocutions: a directive that is followed by a string of assertives which construct Agnes's idealization of her role as *sponsa Christi*. While the assertives and their qualifying propositions reach quite a sophisticated level of imagery, the fact that, because of and through Ælfric's authorship, the entire speech can only be read as a distant memory of *la mystérique* displaces her static saintly image through its negation of her identity as a speaking subject. Although on the one hand, as Barbara Newman argues, Agnes's description of her mystical union with Christ gives her a space in which she can express her eroticism and femininity,¹⁹ the fact that her words remove her from the usual boundaries of representation—i.e., that she is “speaking” about a situation which, because she is a saint and martyr, cannot happen within the parameters of the Lacanian Real, and instead becomes “reality” only after her death—means that Agnes as Ælfric's character suffers the loss of her subjectivity while she is still alive. Although women are only ever (re)presented as the specular Other of the masculine, and therefore only ever possess a subjectivity that is defined by the masculine, this further loss of subjectivity through her mystical speech is actually valorized by Agnes's Life. That Agnes simultaneously gains and loses authority on so many interpretive levels only serves to emphasize to an even greater extent the way in which her saintly representation relies upon a regulatory ideal that constructs female saints in a position that is almost impossible to inhabit while they are still alive.

Agnes's very first speech act, a directive, is however not a part of this paradigm. Instead, it provides the *sponsa Christi* speech with a forceful opening in the form of a severe admonishment: “Gewit ðu fram me synne ontendnys / leahtras foda and deaðes bigleafa / gewit fram me. . . .”²⁰ Though, like her first and last speech regarding the marriage proposal, this directive speech act is a defensive response

in the form of a directive, the fact that Ælfric has Agnes boldly use such strong, explicit language—words such as sin, vice, and death—in an aggressive manner improves her standing as a debater against her suitor.

However, the personal, autonomous strength and determination that results from this aggressive directive quickly dissipates as Agnes is then made to focus the rest of her speech on Christ through a series of highly descriptive assertives in an attempt to reduce the threat to her socio-sexual status through affirming her self-definition as his bride. This introduction of Christ as a third party in her responses to Sempronius's son thus relieves her of the task of straightforwardly rejecting her suitor as she previously had, as it instead instigates the excuse that she already belongs to another man. This change in the type of speech acts, as well as their substance, that Ælfric has Agnes use in her rejection therefore marks the beginning of where this speech starts to disrupt her saintly image, since she uses her ability to act through speech in order to diminish her ability and responsibility to act in her own defence, while in turn her safe dependence on Christ enables her to articulate a solid defence. This is compounded by the fact that these speech acts have no directly stated perlocutionary desire, and instead rely indirectly on the chance that they will be interpreted in the "correct" manner, something which does not succeed in deterring Sempronius and his son from continuing to seek her in marriage. As her depiction as *sponsa Christi* unfolds, the more steeped she becomes in describing her mystical relationship with Christ, and hence the less meaning her speech has as a tangible weapon, which is what she needs most in such a high threat situation to her socio-sexual regulation.

Agnes's first assertive concerning her relationship with Christ immediately establishes their betrothal as she tells her suitor that "Ic hæbbe oðerne lufiend."²¹ These words also bring into play the standard oxymoronic approach to the female saint's body, where her physicality is the cause of her problems (in that it causes others to desire her) as well as their solution (in that she transcends her body). While a common motif for transcendence is torture, in this situation Agnes will be characterized as reaching for transcendence by obliterating the physical significance of her body through her description of her spiritual bonds with Christ.

Before she expands on this theme, Agnes lists a number of ways in which Christ is the perfect bridegroom for her. She initially describes Christ as the better man in ways that closely mimic her suitor's concerns: Christ is nobler than he, and gives her better gifts. In fact, he is hardly any different from an earthly bridegroom which, as has already been mentioned, the pagans at first misinterpret. Agnes then refocuses her attention on the brilliant gifts that he has actually bestowed upon her: riches, adornment, gemstones, and the like. This more worldly description serves two functions: it introduces Christ's characterization as a mystical bridegroom on an easily understandable level, and it immediately displaces her audience's attention away from her and onto this

new man. Agnes's own participation in this conjugal relationship continues to be that of the passive receiver, almost like a doll that is dressed up in fancy clothing.

Two further excerpts show how Agnes continues to build the picture of her relationship to Christ: "He befeng minne swiðran and eac minne swuran / mid deorwurðum stanum and mid scinendum gimum,"²² and also "his bryd-bedd me is gearo nu iú mid dreamum. / His mædenu me singað mid geswegum stemnum. / Of his muðe ic under-feng meoluc and hunig / nú iú ic eom beclypt mid his clænum earmum / his fægera lichama is minum gefeðlæht / and his blod ge-glende mine eah-hringas."²³ Despite their description of "the facts" according to Agnes, her words still fail to act as a deterrent to the proposal because the perlocutionary intent of her assertives come only from their possible interpretation, not from their actual substance as speech acts.

These interpretive issues continue in Agnes's description of her mystical union with Christ as she uses language that is more and more erotic until she reaches the end of her speech where she describes this union at its most intimate: "Ðonne ic hine lufige ic beo eallunga clæne / þonne Ic hine hrepe ic beo unwemme / ðonne Ic hine under-fó ic beo mæden forð / and pær bærn ne ateoriað on ðam bryd-lace / pær is eacnung buton sare and singlarlic wæstmbærnyss."²⁴

With these words her mystical language effectively comes to an end, and, as I mentioned before, none of it has any perlocutionary success as utterances judged by the hierarchical binary standards of the patriarchal Symbolic. Because of its potential, and indeed, success in other situations, what then, has *la mystérique* done for Agnes? The answer lies in the genre of hagiography. Indeed, Agnes has availed herself of a unique speaking opportunity, but the needs of the genre trump this opportunity in order to construct her as a specific ideal image of Christian womanhood. To return to my original point concerning feminist medievalist criticism, I would conclude that, from this short examination of a specific type of speech, the fact that a virgin martyr faces her adversaries in a brave and resolute manner does not automatically mean that she is also a positive example of womanhood for real women to emulate. In this case, it is the genre's intersection between feminine utterance and patriarchal desires, much more so than our own desires as critics, that decides this potential.

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1 Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

2 Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, eds., *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

3 Leslie A. Donovan, *Women Saints' Lives in Old English Prose* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999) 2.

4 Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500–1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 56.

5 Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg introduces this concept in *Forgetful of their Sex*, 17.

6 Clare A. Lees makes this specifically gendered point in her article "Engendering Religious Desire: Sex, Knowledge, and Christian Identity in Anglo-Saxon England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27,1 (1997): 34.

7 Gail Ashton, *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint*, Routledge Research in Medieval Studies 1 (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 4.

8 In his article "On the Sources of Non-Ælfrician Lives in the Old English *Lives of Saints* with Reference to the Cotton-Corpus Legendary," *Notes and Queries* 32 (320), 3 (1985) 292, Hugh Magennis names the four non-Ælfrician Lives as the legend of the Seven Sleepers, Mary of Egypt, St Eustace, and St Euphrosyna.

9 Found in W.W. Skeat, ed., *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, EETS o.s. 76, 82, 94, 114 (London, 1881–1900; reprinted as 2 vols., 1996) vol. 1, 170-95.

10 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 191.

11 I consciously make the switch from referring to females to referring to the feminine, so as not to confine the possibilities of such speech to a specific sex, despite the fact that this paper focuses on women in this situation and not men.

12 J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

13 John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

14 Ruth Barrie Straus made this argument in her article "Women's Words as Weapons: Speech as Action in *The Wife's Lament*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 23,2 (1981): 268–85.

15 John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) viii.

16 John R. Searle, *Speech Acts*, 25.

17 Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2001) 130. In their article "Before History, Before Difference: Bodies, Metaphor, and the Church in Anglo-Saxon England," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 11,2 (1998): 315–52, Lees and Overing argue that the ideal of the Christian subject was, for women, always produced by the disciplines of their sexed bodies, while for men, it was social standing only, and not sexuality, that was the defining factor.

18 ll. 19-20: "But the holy Agnes rejected it all / and reckoned no more of the treasures than reeking dung."

19 Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1995) 6.

20 ll. 25-7: "Depart from me, fuel of sin / food of vice and nourishment of death / depart from me . . ."

21 l. 27: "I have another lover."

22 ll. 32-3: "He encircled my right hand and also my neck / with precious stones and with shining jewels"

23 ll. 43-8: "His bridal-bed is prepared for me now already with joys. / His maidens sing to me with melodious voices. / From his mouth I received milk and honey / now already I am embraced with his pure arms / his fair body is united to mine / and his blood has adorned my eyebrows."

24 ll. 58-62: "When I love Him I am entirely pure / when I touch Him I am unstained / when I receive Him I am yet a maiden / and there no child falls on the bridal. / There is conception without sorrow and everlasting fruitfulness."

LINEAGE AND WOMEN'S PATRONAGE: MARY OF WOODSTOCK AND NICHOLAS TREVET'S *LES CRONICLES*

Nicholas Trevet wrote his Anglo-Norman prose chronicle in about 1328-1334. Best-known as the source for Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*,¹ the chronicle is dedicated in the four earliest manuscripts to Mary of Woodstock, a daughter of Edward I of England, who was a nun at Amesbury. Mary's role has been seen in quite passive terms, with the prominence of the "Tale of Constance" and other accounts of women in the text attributed to Trevet's efforts to please and educate an unworldly and pious woman. We have long known, however, of Mary's active role outside the convent at the royal court. She can be placed in the Queen's entourage in 1305, and was the visitor of her order, the important abbey at Fontevrault, for England. She also travelled frequently among her own properties and on pilgrimages. Her piety we cannot determine, but unworldly she was not.²

More recent work allows us to re-evaluate the role that aristocratic women such as Mary of Woodstock played in medieval culture and politics through their patronage of historical texts like Trevet's chronicle. Plantagenet women especially were very much involved in choosing content and in influencing the composition process. Perhaps because "history" is traditionally conceived as a masculine arena, the activity of women in the production of this genre may seem surprising or unexpected. However, once we consider women's social roles as educators within their families and as the caretakers of the dead, their attention to memorializing the past in textual form makes sense. Aristocratic women were in fact particularly well-positioned to promote an awareness of the past that would popularize the lives and deeds of the family's ancestors. Among other studies, Gabrielle Spiegel has demonstrated how Yolande, Countess of Saint-Pol, sponsored the first vernacular translation of the *Pseudo-Turpin* and John Carmi Parsons has documented the extensive patronage activity of Eleanor of Castile, the mother of Mary of Woodstock.³ Far from passive dedicatees, these women had a strong motivation to create history that promoted their family's ancestors and lineage in turbulent political times.