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Can the Virgin Martyr Speak?

ROBERT MILLS

Feminist analysis of female virgin martyrs often confronts a seemingly intractable double bind. On the one hand, tortured, dismembered virgins feature heavily in a script that casts the virgin as victim. Tertullian's remark that 'every public exposure of an honourable virgin is [to her] a suffering of rape',¹ like the conventional critique of modern pornography, conflates spectacle *with* sexual violence,² an argument that simultaneously raises rape to the status of ever-present threat and denies the virgin any sort of public space in which to resist. Likewise, hagiography critic Brigitte Cazelles argues that the theatrical ordeal of female virgin martyrs 'reduces, rather than promotes, their role as active contributors to the cultural or spiritual welfare of society'; female sanctity is grounded, for her, 'in bodily pain, silence, and passivity'.³ On the other hand, female saints' lives have also been read for the discourses of 'empowerment' they embody, for the ways in which they defy the tradition of relegating women to an inactive, speechless, painful existence. Virgin martyrs are consistently public, it is countered; they engage in openly political discourse with the people who are portrayed as their oppressors; they actively resist objectification and rape. As Jocelyn Wogan-Browne remarks, saints' lives 'do at least open up the possibility of resistant readings, which in particular contexts may constitute relative empowerment or recuperation'.⁴

This article will endeavour to negotiate the conflict between victimization and empowerment that appears to characterize the virgin

martyr's condition with reference to a body of postcolonial writings that similarly attempt to assess the role of women's desire, agency and subject status in the discourses in which they are inscribed. In her 1985 article 'Can the subaltern speak?', Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes the circumstances surrounding the death of a young Bengali woman on her husband's funeral pyre (the practice of 'sati' or widow sacrifice).⁵ Because the widow's attempt at 'speaking' outside normal patriarchal channels was not understood or supported, an absence of subject status that brings into focus the difficulty with which the voices of oppressed subjects can ever be recovered, Spivak concludes that 'the subaltern cannot speak'.⁶ I wish to use Spivak's example of the immolated widow as a way of thinking through the medieval female virgin martyr, not because I think we should ignore the clear cultural and historical differences between these two categories of subject, but because the tortured virgin shares one quality in particular with the sati: her identity is predominantly an effect of discourse, rather than a clearly identifiable, self-evident reality. Moreover, the martyr's discursive formation is predicated on the opportunities afforded by her iconic death. The martyr-to-be is merely a Christian noblewoman, albeit chaste and pure; it is only *in death* that her virginal status is confirmed and her role as martyr fixed. Likewise the prospective sati is only a widow until she makes her sacrifice and turns into sati proper; the only true sati is a dead sati.⁷ The question I wish to pose is whether death, in turn, makes martyrs, like satis, emblematically silenced subjects. Spivak's point about the subaltern is not that the sati never actually talks in various ways, but that speaking is 'a transaction between speaker and listener' and that, as such, subaltern talk does not achieve the level of a dialogic utterance.⁸ Sati is different from martyrdom in that martyrdom's status as fiction is more immediately apparent (at least for the modern reader). In addition, familiarity with the genre would mean that medieval audiences approached the lives in full awareness of the virgin's martyr status from the beginning. But if, as Gail Ashton has implied, the prevailing tendency in virgin martyr legends is to make virgins 'powerless mirror images of patriarchal assumption', 'patriarchal dolls' who ventriloquize predominantly masculine concerns, speaker and listener become one, effectively silencing what Ashton has more optimistically termed the 'authentic female voice'.⁹ And if, as Karen Winstead has argued, the legends invite more radical interpretations in certain specific contexts,¹⁰ is this desire for resistant subjects wishful thinking, a rhetorical move that

downplays the patriarchal violence of these texts? Or can the voice of the virgin martyr be satisfactorily represented by the modern hagiographic scholar? In what voices do female virgin martyrs speak – their own, those of their authors or readers, or voices continuous with the language of their oppressors?

The subject of martyrdom: circumvented rape

In the *Golden Legend* (c. 1260), Jacobus de Voragine features the stories of a number of virgin martyrs, including that of St Agnes, a young woman who died c. 305 during the age of Constantine.¹¹ Agnes, a 13-year-old virgin, is returning home from school when the Roman prefect's son catches sight of her and immediately falls 'in love'. Agnes rejects his protestations, explaining that she has already promised herself to another lover 'far nobler than you, of more eminent descent. His mother is a virgin, his father knows no woman, he is served by angels . . . his love is chastity itself, his touch holiness, union with him, virginity.' When the prefect's son hears her words, he is beside himself with grief; the doctors diagnose lovesickness. The young man's father seeks Agnes out and tries to persuade her to change her mind; hearing rumours that her betrothed is in fact Christ, the prefect begins to use threats. Agnes exclaims: 'Do whatever you like, but you will not obtain what you want from me' (p. 102). The prefect replies that she must choose between either sacrificing to the virgin goddess Vesta ('since your virginity means so much to you') or being placed in a brothel.

Unable to compel Agnes to obey his commands on account of her rank, the prefect decides to bring up the issue of the young woman's Christianity. Agnes still refuses to sacrifice to the pagan gods, asserting that her virtue cannot be tarnished 'because I have with me a guardian of my body, an angel of the Lord'. So the prefect orders her to be stripped naked and taken to a brothel; miraculously God makes Agnes's hair grow till it covers her bared flesh. When she enters the 'house of shame', it is filled with light and she transforms the place into a house of prayer. The prefect's son goes there with his friends and invites them to go in and 'take their pleasure with her'; terrified by the miraculous glow, they all run away. Ridiculing their cowardice, the youth rushes in 'to force himself upon Agnes' but, overwhelmed by the light, he is set upon by a devil and dies of strangulation. His father, the prefect, on a mission to find out the circumstances of his son's

death, persuades Agnes to bring the son back to life. Agnes complies and the priests of the temples, seeing the young man resurrected and now preaching the words of Christ, accuse the saint of witchcraft. The prefect, impressed by the miracle, defers responsibility to Aspasius, his deputy. Aspasius has Agnes thrown into a fire but the flames separate and, while Agnes survives unscathed, the spectators on either side are burned to a crisp. Finally the deputy orders a soldier to thrust a dagger in Agnes's throat, at which point 'her heavenly spouse consecrated her his bride and martyr' (p. 103).

The Life of St Agnes was disseminated in England in the later Middle Ages in a number of vernacular versions, including those in the late thirteenth-century or early fourteenth-century *South English Legendary*¹² and Osbern Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* (c. 1447).¹³ Much hagiographic scholarship has focused in recent years on the rape motifs in legends of this sort. The argument runs that female saints' lives frequently display an obsession with sexuality (over half of Jacobus' tales of holy women stress their chastity);¹⁴ moreover critics have demonstrated that the martyr legends often contain a gender-marked narrative structure centred around motifs of sexual coercion.¹⁵ In the *Golden Legend* alone, at least thirteen virgin martyrs undergo some form of violent constraint akin to rape: Lucy, Agnes, Agatha and Daria are forced into brothels; attempts are made to compel Anastasia, Juliana, Margaret and Ursula to marry; Justina, the Virgin of Antioch and Theodora undergo sexual harassment in one form or another; finally, actual attempts at rape are carried out on Margaret, Lucy, Justina, Anastasia's maids and, as we have seen, Agnes. In each case, the rape or sexual assault is never completed, because the wicked seducers are thwarted by the constancy of the holy virgins. Nonetheless, as Kathryn Gravdal implies, the torture scenes also open up 'a licit space that permits the audience to enjoy sexual language and contemplate the naked female body', while at the same time covertly placing the blame for masculine desire on the virgin's doorstep.¹⁶ In a manner paralleling modern courtroom discourse suggesting that the victim 'was asking for it',¹⁷ tales of this sort, scholars argue, convey the virgin martyr's dilemma: the virgin, however virtuous, is depicted as so physically attractive that she literally leads the heathen seducer to sin.¹⁸ Jacobus opens by describing Agnes's 'beautiful' (p. 102) countenance; vernacular accounts imply a comparable emphasis. For instance, in the *South English Legendary*, we are told that 'so vair womman nas non / As þis maide forþward was

of fel & of bon' (ll. 5–6) (there was not such a good-looking woman as this maiden henceforth was in skin and bone); and later on 'Þe constable hure let strupe so naked so heo was ibore / Þat echman ssolde hure deorne lymes iseo hure to ssende' (ll. 42–3) (The constable caused her to be stripped as naked as when she was born so that, to shame her, everyone would see her private parts). In Bokenham's *Legendys*, the narrator exclaims that Agnes 'fayr were in hir vysage / Bodyly and endewyde with gret beute' (ll. 4117–18). Significantly, what later becomes an act of 'foul lust' (l. 4413) is initially described as the prefect's son's 'blynd loue' (l. 4192), a verbal slippage that temporarily shifts the focus away from the coercion of the female saint to the dilemma of an 'anguysshyd' male lover (l. 4193). Though the term 'rape', in modern parlance, can become similarly inflected with sexual or romantic connotations (as the phrase 'date rape' implies),¹⁹ feminist critics maintain that rape can be better understood as an exercise in power.²⁰ What more explicit expression of unequal power-relations could there be than a representation of a man stripping a young woman naked and driving her into a brothel? Convinced by such arguments, Simon Gaunt concludes: 'The universal subtext of saints' lives about women is forced sex, in other words rape.'²¹

Can one make such universal claims? Is forced sex the only underlying meaning borne by these stories? And if it is, did its mode of presentation have entirely negative implications for medieval women, whether as readers or listeners themselves, or as the wives and daughters of readers and listeners? The sexual desires of the evil tyrants are always thwarted, after all, and the rapists frequently receive their comeuppance in the form of grisly punishment and damnation.²² According to Bokenham, as Agnes sits in the brothel in prayer, the prefect's son 'sudeynly doun fel up-on hys face, / And þe deuyl hym stranglyd in þat place' (ll. 4426–7). Moreover, as Gravdal admits, the rape plot can also be interpreted as opening up a space for female heroism, transforming the virgin's martyrdom into a specifically feminine form of *imitatio Christi*.²³ Several of the stories in Bokenham's *Legendys* contain dedications to specific female patrons and the extant manuscript of the text was presented to a convent of nuns in Cambridge: that a significant proportion of Bokenham's audience were women suggests the possibility of meanings in the *Legendys* that are not simply complicitous with attempts to legitimize sexual violence.²⁴ How do we make room for these seemingly 'positive' readings in our understanding of virgin martyrs?

The focus on the martyr's speech is especially significant in legends such as Bokenham's *Life of St Agnes*. As Alison Elliott points out, the dramatic climax in martyrdom legends is not usually the moment of death itself but the scenes of confrontation between the saint and persecutor prior to death; these scenes often contain a theatrical dynamic.²⁵ A close examination of Bokenham's rendition highlights this verbal element well. When the prefect's son first tries to woo Agnes with ornaments and precious stones, she spurns his affections, exclaiming: 'Go hens fro me, of syn norsshere / And contraryous to euere good entent' (ll. 4141–2).²⁶ The virgin continues by playing on the son's jealousy and adopting erotic language to describe the union with her 'louere' (l. 4162):

And takyn of his mouth many a kys haue I
Swettere þan eythir mylk or hony;
And fulle oftyn in armys he halsyd [embraced] hath me
Wyth-out blemysyng of myn uirgynyte,
Hys body to myn now conioynyed is. (ll. 4172–6)²⁷

It is precisely this answer that makes the young man 'wex ful heuy' (l. 4191) and become sick. Soon after, Agnes is summoned before the prefect but, rather than proceeding straight to the tortures, the prefect engages in a lengthy dialogue with her. When he mentions his 'sonys loue' (l. 4241), Agnes simply throws back 'skorn' (l. 4243); when he asks her to worship idols, Agnes calls him 'prefect vycyous' (l. 4275). When he threatens the brothel, Agnes, 'inflammyd with grace / And strengthyd with gostly stedefastnesse' (ll. 4302–3), stands in front of the prefect and exclaims:

I sekerly [confidently] despise al þi thretyng
In hys goodnesse fully trusting
Þat neþir I to ydols shal sacryfyse do,
Nere with sinners vncleennes be defoulyd, lo. (ll. 4312–15)

Hearing her own threats of damnation, the prefect 'wex nere made' (l. 4351), demonstrating the power of Agnes's maddening discourse.

The power of the saints' speech to disrupt the rape script becomes most apparent in the torture scenes. According to Elaine Scarry, one of the injurious effects of torture is to disable language in the victim²⁸ – not so in Bokenham's virgin martyr narratives, for the virgin

continually punctuates the scenes of suffering with words addressed to her spectators (both within and outside the text), her tormentors and God. In the brothel, she gives praise when a white stole is sent to her to cover her nakedness; henceforth whoever enters the place exits praying. In this way, a den of corporeal sin becomes transformed into a place of spiritual conversation. Later, when she has been cast in the flames, Agnes uses language to escape more 'wykkyd mennys thretys' (l. 4558); her prayer literally puts out the flames (l. 4594). The adversarial content of the speech in these texts seems to resist the stereotype of passive femininity usually marked out for women in medieval romances, which routinely portray heroines as empty signs within a masculine homosocial discourse.²⁹ But it also contradicts the recommendations of secular virginity discourse that emphasize the verbal decorum with which virgins should comport themselves. Christine de Pisan, in *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, argues that women who are chaste

should display an expression of humility with the eyes lowered, and their speech should be kindly . . . Their speech should be amiable and courteous to all people; they should have a humble manner and not be too talkative . . . These maidens ought to take care not to get into arguments or disputes with anyone, neither serving-man nor chambermaid. It is a very ugly thing in a girl to be argumentative and to answer back, and she could lose her good name because of it.³⁰

Agnes, according to this model, should behave in ways that are 'amiable and courteous'.³¹ But instead the martyr responds to her sufferings by arguing, cursing and talking back; it is precisely through such means that she *keeps* her good name.

My question in this context is whether St Agnes's verbal dissidence can be taken as evidence that the virgin martyr speaks (at least, in a voice that can be identified as her 'own'). So long as scholars attempt to retrieve some sort of sovereign female consciousness from the text, a 'concealed voice' that can be realistically salvaged and reinscribed, the performative character of hagiographic speech acts will be misunderstood. Strategically these researches have potency, but they do not address the complicity of such scholarship in the production of what may turn out to be a very problematic way of thinking about gender. Indeed, an approach like Ashton's, which seeks to excavate the 'doubled discourse' of hagiography with reference to Irigarayan

notions of mimesis and textual fissure, confronts precisely this difficulty. With her claims that the dialogue between saint and pagan tormentor is 'inherently fissured', and that it is possible to discover, beneath layers of patriarchal discourse, the speaking 'I' of a 'marginalised, vulnerable woman', Ashton's analysis runs the risk of eliding the disruptive feminine voices she discovers with the actions, experiences and words of *actual* female subjects, thereby ignoring the complex workings of gender in the context of hagiographic writing, reading and viewing.³² Instead of excavating the 'authentic' male or female voice, it may ultimately be more productive to deconstruct the binary representational systems by which those gendered voices are constituted in the first place, to consider the ways in which dichotomous sexual difference acts as a screen for the projection of other categories of difference. In this respect, the theory of speech mapped out by Judith Butler provides a useful way of thinking through the issue of hagiographic voices: Butler suggests that a speech act is not a momentary occurrence 'but a certain nexus of temporal horizons', a product of citation whereby 'the contexts it assumes must not be quite the same as the ones in which it originates'.³³ It follows that the virgin martyr's voice is itself embedded in citational practice, a discursive performance that chimes with a chorus of other, not always harmonious, voices – voices that variously precede, succeed and exceed the text and condition the latter's reception and meaning. Some of the contemporary ideologies in which those voices are inscribed will be considered in due course; at this point it is simply worth noting that one of the major discourses 'recycled' in the context of the virgin's speech is the voice of God, as witnessed in Agnes's speech describing erotic union with Christ, which borrows imagery from the Song of Songs.³⁴

Analyses of saintly speech also need to account for those moments in which attempts are made to censor or put an end to discursive performance. After all, Bokenham's *Life of St Agnes* demands not only that we read the saint's martyrdom through acts of speech but also that we perceive it in the context of an act that attempts to silence that speech: she is only consecrated martyr after her throat is stabbed. The passage describing the incident is remarkably terse:

Thys seyng, Aspasye, þe prefectys vyker,
The sedycious peple to plesse the entent,
Comaundyng a swerd both bryht & clere
Into hyr throte depe for to be sent,

And þus þis holy mayde, þis innocent
Cruelly martyrd for crystys sake,
To hym as hys spouse he dede take. (ll. 4596–4602)

The maid is transformed into martyr and uncontested virgin only once her throat is cut.³⁵ In other words, earning the label 'martyr' seems to demand, by definition, a violent *cessation* of verbal activity. Taken out of context, this passage suggests that silencing is a symbolic component of the virgin martyr's death.

In actual fact, however, Bokenham's *Life of St Agnes* refuses to acknowledge the threat that death poses to speech: in a vision after her death, Agnes's parents see her pray one last time (ll. 4627–34), suggesting that Aspasius' attempts at censorship are woefully inadequate. Indeed, the narrative continues by telling the story of how Constance, daughter of Constantine, prays at Agnes's tomb and has a vision in which Agnes appears and exhorts her to 'do constaunthly' (l. 4662); Bokenham goes on to refer to the afterlife of the saint in the writings of Ambrose (which he suggests are his source) and he concludes by making a personal request for intercessory prayer (ll. 4708–35). The martyr's death does not put an end to the martyr's voice, and the act of silencing conversely endows her speech with permanence and authority.³⁶ These scenes raise a fundamental issue in the analysis of hagiographic writings. On the one hand, we can accept the terms of the fantasy by understanding martyred saints as products of *process*, reading martyrdom and virginity as ongoing activities, 'performances' punctuated by continuous speech acts.³⁷ On the other hand, we can reject the fantasmatic dimensions of the genre and understand saintly identities as products of *closure*, perceiving martyrdom and virginity as stable subject positions accomplished only through death and, it follows, silence.³⁸ Before attempting to address these points in more depth, let us consider the subject of sati.

The subject of sati: bodies in pain

In 1987, Roop Kanwar, an educated 18-year-old woman from a village in the state of Rajasthan in India, died on her husband's funeral pyre while hundreds of people looked on. Initially, the state government refused to respond, despite the banning of sati in modern India. But intense media interest and pressure from women's groups eventually

combined to produce legislation prohibiting both the commission and glorification of sati. All the same, no one was convicted of participating in Roop Kanwar's sati. Indeed, subsequent to the issue of the new legislation, large pro-sati rallies occurred in the state capital, objecting to the government's intervention in traditional religious customs; meanwhile Roop Kanwar's village has been transformed into a lucrative pilgrimage site.³⁹

The arguments that surround Hindu widow sacrifice hinge, as in medieval hagiographic scholarship, on questions of female agency. Was the sati voluntary? Or was the widow forced upon the pyre? Those who defend the practice of sati portray it as an individual decision, invested with the ingredients of self-sacrifice: they compare the widows with religious male martyrs, soldiers and ascetic monks.⁴⁰ (These associations are reminiscent of the discourse of 'becoming male' espoused in Christian patristic virginity discourse.⁴¹) Yet critics of sati expose the custom as murder: they argue that, even if she outwardly complied with the decision to throw herself in the flames, the woman's choices were constrained, both by the prospect of life as a mistreated widow and by a deluge of ideological indoctrination.⁴² As with scholarship on medieval female saints, we find the subject of sati trapped between positions of victimhood ('she was forced to die') and positions of empowerment ('she chose to die').

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan suggests that the only way to break the critical impasse is to shift the emphasis from notions of sati-as-death (a model that places emphasis on the widow's *intentions*, whether sati is considered suicide or murder) to a concept of sati-as-burning (the idea that pain itself provides a ground for subjectivity, and that the focus be directed to the widow's *experience*). Describing an anti-sati poster produced by an anti-sati activist organization, she suggests that the graphic at its centre, depicting a woman rising upward from the flames, simultaneously communicates an experience of pain and an attempt to protest against it. Sunder Rajan concludes of the image:

There is no naturalistic insistence on the mutilation of burning, but the posture and expression of the figure, though stylised, capture the essence of pain. The sati is not a dead woman, but a burning woman seeking to escape, not a spectacle but the subject of action and agency.⁴³

Might the subject of martyrdom be read similarly, as an embodiment of both protest and pain? In the Bokenham Life, the focus is certainly

on martyrdom as a discursive performance: the martyr is an agent who speaks and protests. Yet the narrator refuses to picture Agnes as a body-in-pain. The language used communicates permanence, not decay: the saint is introduced as a 'gemme of uirgynyte' (l. 4120). This suggests that fleshly pain, in this legend at least, is not a primary focus; the refusal to represent the virgin's suffering is especially apparent in the lines describing Agnes's death, which seem astonishingly blunt. The virgin's experience of pain, in Bokenham's Life of St Agnes, does *not* appear to be subject-constitutive.

We may do better comparing Sunder Rajan's analysis with an example more directly comparable to the visual content of the anti-sati poster. There is a gold cup in the British Museum made in the late fourteenth century and given to Charles VI of France (reigned 1380–1422) by Jean, duc de Berry (1340–1416), on the occasion of a visit to Touraine in 1391 (Figs 3 and 4).⁴⁴ The cup relates, round its lid, the life and miracles of St Agnes, including her death at the hands of Aspasius; the bowl of the cup depicts the saint's burial and miracles connected with her tomb. In the last scene on the lid, Agnes kneels, eyes closed, amid a bundle of faggots as the prefect's deputy looks on; untouched by the flames, an executioner thrusts a spear towards her neck (Fig. 3). The British Museum cup certainly depicts Agnes as a subject of process: here the saint is not dead but dying; the artist captures the moment just before the neck is penetrated with the lance. (Indeed, the moment portrayed is reminiscent of passion iconography showing the penetration of Christ's side with the spear of Longinus; the speech-scroll that emerges from Agnes's mouth, exclaiming 'Into thy hands O Lord I commend my spirit', likewise opens up the scene to typological readings.) But it is debatable whether an image of this sort communicates the same message as the written legends, where it is predominantly injurious acts of speech that allow for the manufacture of empowering models of subjectivity. After all, in the process of being burned, Agnes is depicted as still and bound while the executioner is violently in motion. So it becomes necessary to interpret the martyr's silence and inaction as a form of strength if we are to understand the burning scene as a politically enabling image. It is only when we turn our attention to the rest of the cycle that we see a virgin as someone who acts and reacts, as in the scene in which Agnes resurrects the prefect's son (Fig. 4).

Other images of St Agnes, too, convey a similar dynamic, such as the cycle in the late twelfth-century Pamplona Bible (Figs 5 and 6). On one



Figure 3 'The burning of St Agnes', scene from the lid of the Royal Gold Cup (c.1380). London, British Museum. © British Museum.



Figure 4 'The miracles of St Agnes', scene from the lid of the Royal Gold Cup (c.1380). London, British Museum. © British Museum.



Figure 5 'St Agnes Cycle', Pamplona Bible (late twelfth century). Augsburg, Universitätsbibliothek, Cod.I.2.4°15, fol. 249.



Figure 6 'St Agnes Cycle', Pamplona Bible (late twelfth century).
Augsburg, Universitätsbibliothek, Cod.I.2.4°15, fol. 249v.

folio, the saint is depicted conversing with the prefect's son, her head and body covered by garments; on the next, she is shown being led off to a brothel by two men, one of whom grabs her arm while the other tousles her hair (shorthand, in the medieval symbolic lexicon, for the threat of sexual violation).⁴⁵ According to Diane Wolfthal, such pictures projected, to medieval viewers, 'a collective image of how a rape victim should look'.⁴⁶ In an example closer in provenance to Bokenham's *Legendys*, a fifteenth-century window in the church of St Agnes at Eye in Suffolk, the saint is represented with drops of blood on her garments and a sword shoved through her neck.⁴⁷ Again, for the modern non-believer, it takes a leap of imagination to read the virgin martyr in terms analogous to Sunder Rajan's assessment of the anti-sati poster.

Medievalism, colonialism and the politics of speech

In order to bypass the methodological crisis posed by maintaining the stark division between victimization and empowerment, Sunder Rajan asks us to redefine subject-status itself, to view victim *as* subject. This communicates the fundamental point that there is not any necessary opposition between power and passivity. But her argument still asks us to choose between the contrasting models of process and closure that, I have suggested, also characterize medieval representations of martyrdom. Do we indeed need to choose? Does the answer simply depend on which element of the legends we bring into focus – the speech-authorizing deaths or the meaning-proliferating tortures? Can we imagine virgins as subjects and *at the same time* as objects, rather than letting the virgin-as-signifier disappear into a stark choice between victim and agent? The reason why I pose this dilemma is that, in certain contexts, virgin martyrs are inescapably both. Requiring feminist analysis to make a choice between subject-constitution ('the virgin resists objectification through language') and object-formation ('the virgin is a passive victim of patriarchal violence') invites interpretative paralysis, during which alternative desires and textual investments are potentially foreclosed. The risk – and possibility – is that we simply ventriloquize our own concerns when we make the virgin martyr speak.⁴⁸ This is not a plea for historicity, for reading the virgin martyr 'on her own terms' – the fictionality of the legends precludes such investigations.⁴⁹ But it does highlight the difficulties that arise from making political claims about medieval texts and images.

This is precisely what concerns Spivak in her article on the subaltern. Describing the arguments surrounding the abolition of sati rituals by the British in nineteenth-century India, Spivak asserts that the Hindu widow becomes subject both to the chivalric colonialist formula of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' and to the Indian nativist argument that 'the women actually wanted to die'. As she puts it: 'Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the "third-world woman" caught between tradition and modernization.'⁵⁰ In other words, even when the subaltern tries, to the death, to cry out, she remains caught in a trap between two ideologies; as a speech act, the sati fails because the words of the immolated widow cannot be properly interpreted. Problematizing a clear-cut division between colonizers and colonized, Spivak inserts 'brown women' as a category exploited by both.

Likewise, the agency of the virgin martyr cannot be idealized as a force totally separate from the order it opposes. Exploited by ideologies of patriarchal violence and simultaneously inserted into narratives of female resistance, the saint has a role to play in the discourses of both;⁵¹ the sexual politics of virgin martyr legends are also tangled up in other networks of power, such as class, religious identity and race. Agnes is, after all, described in Bokenham's *Life* as a woman born of parents of 'hy nobylesse' (l. 4236); she has not escaped the privileges of social class and her parents are part of the same Roman establishment as the prefect himself. (Hence the prefect's initial hesitation in using 'opyn violence' (l. 4236) against her.) Moreover, one of the ways in which the saint declares her allegiance to Christ is to evoke the 'precyoushere ornamentys' (l. 4145) and 'shynyng gemmys' (l. 4153) he has given her – a rhetorical strategy which challenges the spiritual impoverishment of the prefect's son in distinctly material terms, as if to say 'my gems are better than your gems'.⁵² The visual images closest in provenance to Bokenham's *Legendys* highlight this economic framework well: panels representing female saints on the south side of the rood screen at North Elmham in Norfolk depict them dressed in the fashions of fifteenth-century queens and noblewomen.⁵³

Agnes is also, like the prefect with whom she does battle, a religious fundamentalist: 'I do reprove / For crystys sake, & wyl hym not han / Doum ydols to worshepe' (ll. 4262–4). For all her presentation as a violated victim in the overt content of the tale, Agnes zealously

espouses a religion that, in Bokenham's day, comfortably inhabited the position of intolerant oppressor: Christianity's self-representation as victim should not obscure from view its simultaneous alignment *with* violence. Indeed, we should remember that, in certain saints' lives, the evangelizing tone was bound up with discourses of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and the contemporary war against heresy. In the early thirteenth-century Katherine group, aristocratic female audiences were invited to define themselves against 'þe Gius' who put Christ to death;⁵⁴ the Auchinleck manuscript, compiled in the 1330s, contains lives of St Margaret and St Katherine which describe the saints' persecutors as 'sarrazins so blake' endeavouring to make the virgins believe in 'Mahoun'.⁵⁵ Other texts in the Auchinleck manuscript imply a mixed secular audience, perhaps a noble household,⁵⁶ demonstrating the ways in which rich female readers were occasionally presented with saintly intercessors constructed with reference to racial as well as gendered categories.

Of course, in fifteenth-century England there was not a significant Jewish or Muslim population; it was heresy that offered the best opportunity for demarcating and safeguarding the Christian *communitas*.⁵⁷ Perhaps one of the associations that Bokenham's audience had with the 'sedycious peple' (l. 4541) burned by the flames that leave Agnes miraculously unharmed were heretics, possibly Lollards: the punishment for relapsed heretics was burning at the stake and Bokenham makes it very clear that the same people who 'dede makyn anoon a ryht greth feer' (l. 4542) are those 'on ych syde brent' (l. 4544). After the Lollard heresy had been declared a capital offence in England in 1401, with the institution of the statute *De haeretico comburendo*, actual executions by fire took place several times in the south-east, in the first three decades of the fifteenth century. Though the East Anglian mystic Margery Kempe herself escaped such a fate, when she was arrested in Beverley on suspicion of Lollardy she was confronted with local housewives who ran out of their houses with their distaffs, crying 'Brennyth this fals heretyk'.⁵⁸ This raises the possibility that the eradication of heresy and motifs of burning were linked in the minds of Bokenham and his readers. I do not wish to suggest that, where we see fire, we should automatically think heresy: images of flames connote, amongst other things, purgatorial and infernal torment. But the facts that Agnes's fiery ordeal echoes a punishment recently imposed on heretics, and that her enthusiastic rejection of idols superficially chimes with the Wycliffite suspicion of images, are grounds for suggesting the

possibility of 'resistant' or heterodox readings. This may explain why Bokenham goes to some effort to explain that Agnes stands 'in þe myddys of þe feer' (l. 4550), that the flames 'in no wyse cam anneys ny' (l. 4546) and that she was '[w]yþ dew from heuen bathyd' (l. 4562); it may also account for the relative absence of late medieval iconography depicting Agnes's burning (the British Museum cup being a rare exception). The iconic image of a saint in flames perhaps conveyed, all too powerfully, the martyr-like associations that risked attaching themselves to executed heretics.⁵⁹

Speculation aside, it is clear from this discussion that the operations of power in hagiographic representations can become notoriously blurred: saints' lives often negotiate the division between self and other in ways that disguise oppressors as victims and victims as oppressors. Once again, such issues are brought into focus by an examination of hagiographic art. Consider a panel from a painting by Meister Francke depicting the tortures of St Barbara (a virgin martyr put to death in Nicomedia in the third century CE). In Francke's painting, the saint's beauty is a marker of social status as much as sexual desirability: her immaculate complexion and blonde locks contrast wildly with the scruffy louts responsible for her arrest and torture (Fig. 7). If we insist that a painting like this is transparently about male desire and female disempowerment, we risk overlooking the class prejudices of the image. Modern fantasies of the archetypal pornographic consumer frequently register upper-class fears about lower-class men; likewise, Francke's painting presents the voyeuristic, sadistic gaze as an attribute of the uncivilized, economically dispossessed male.⁶⁰ One of the overarching fantasies of martyrdom iconography is that the sexually voracious 'pornographic' gaze is somewhere else, that it is 'other'; in comparable paintings depicting the martyrdom of male saints, the torturers are occasionally depicted as black or Jewish, while the people who commissioned such iconography were invariably white and well-to-do.⁶¹ Images of this sort are striking but they are by no means exceptional. Looking to medieval visual culture reminds us that the horizons of expectation aroused by medieval texts cannot easily be separated from the extra-textual contexts in which they were conceivably understood.⁶² So to foreground 'empowerment' or 'victimization' as the hermeneutical framework for exploring medieval hagiography is not necessarily to engage in readings that are politically valuable or 'gender-positive'.

Medieval studies is traditionally reticent about admitting its stake in positions of colonization; too often the ethical implications of



Figure 7 'Barbara's trial', panel from Meister Francke, *Martyrdom of Saint Barbara* (c.1410–15). National Museum of Finland, Helsinki.

recovering voices from the past have also been downplayed. It should be recalled that the Middle Ages as a historical construct was originally invented in a climate that was also a breeding ground for Orientalism. (Orientalism, in Edward Said's definition, is a systematic and continuous discursive formation aimed at creating binary distinctions between East and West and thereby 'dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient'.⁶³) To ignore the imperialistic foundations of medieval studies ultimately risks entering into a rhetorical collusion *with* those power structures, producing a dichotomizing tendency from which hagiography criticism is certainly not immune. As Kathleen Biddick has powerfully argued, feminist scholarship should resolutely resist falling into the neo-colonial trap. Critiquing the rhetoric of Caroline Walker Bynum's writings on mystics, Biddick writes: 'A historical study of medieval gender interrupts this foundational category of *Christianitas* by asking how a historical construction of gender in medieval Christendom was *simultaneously* a construction of other differences.'⁶⁴

The usefulness of Spivak's account of gender in modern-day India is that it critiques the fetishization of immolated widows as victims or agents by demonstrating that they are caught in the divisions of an implacable double bind, a bind in which difference itself becomes displaced. Deploying Spivak's formula, it might in turn be argued that feminist hagiographic scholarship risks following a pattern of academics 'saving white women from brown men'. Excavating the 'resistance' in a given text or historical situation also requires that we simultaneously keep in view the sheer bigotry of certain medieval texts and images (particularly when read together). Looking *with* the martyred body in question entails highlighting not only the structures of objectification and heterosexual desire by which virgin martyrs are coerced and the routes of power and verbal dissidence by which they achieve transcendence, but also a number of more objectionable responses not accounted for in readings that simply foreground a gender-inflected 'rape script' or narratives of saintly 'empowerment'. As in modern societies, where women's political activity has been harnessed by right-wing movements and religious fundamentalists (the anti-abortion movement is a case in point), women's active participation in politics does not automatically stem from feminist concerns. Nor do the discourses that cluster around images of ostensibly powerful women always concern themselves explicitly with gender: the appropriation of Joan of Arc in the service of nationalist and

xenophobic agendas in modern France highlights the difficulties that arise from imagining saints as sovereign, speaking 'subjects'.⁶⁵

This is not to say that we should discard all attempts to discover representations of female militancy and power. But we may need to rethink our concept of hagiographic voices. When the virgin martyr speaks, the 'I' that we imagine she inhabits may not in fact be an 'I' at all (at least, in the singular, Cartesian sense of the term). Rather, what appears to be a speaking 'I', a subject of agency and power, may in fact be a nexus of multiplicity, a site of heteroglossia in which a body of contradictory discourses compete for our attention. Of course, this requires that our researches are historically situated – that, in our attempts to 'speak the saint', we consider the manifold ways in which female saints made meaning for their original makers, tellers and receivers. But we should also reflect on the operations of desire outside the text, the ways in which virgins continue to make meaning for critics today.⁶⁶

Notes

I wish to thank Emma Campbell for her comments on an earlier draft and Ashley Tellis for first suggesting to me the parallel between Christian martyrdom and sati.

¹ Tertullian, *Liber de virginibus velandis*, PL, 2, col. 892. My translation.

² For an argument that pornography is the theory, and rape the practice, see Robin Morgan, 'Theory and practice: pornography and rape', in Laura Lederer (ed.), *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), pp. 125–47.

³ Brigitte Cazelles, *The Lady as Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 9, 54.

⁴ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, 'The virgin's tale', in Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (eds), *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All her Sect* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 165–94 (p. 180).

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak? Speculations on widow-sacrifice', *Wedge*, 7/8 (1985), 120–30. For the purposes of the discussion that follows, I have employed the insights of the 1988 version: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 271–313, cited henceforth as Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?' In this article, I have used the term 'sati' to refer both to the practice of widow sacrifice and to the widow who performs it.

⁶ Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', p. 308. 'Subaltern' refers in Spivak's

writings to those subjects who have limited or no access to imperialistic narratives of domination; *ibid.*, pp. 283–5.

⁷ This parallels R. Howard Bloch's point that 'the only true virgin is a dead virgin'; Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 108. In thinking through this issue, I have also found invaluable the insights of Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2001), pp. 95–8.

⁸ 'Subaltern talk: interview with the editors', in Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (eds), *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 289.

⁹ Gail Ashton, *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 41, 104, 148.

¹⁰ For example, see Winstead's discussion of the Katherine group in *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 34–63.

¹¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. Theodor Graesse (Dresden and Lipsius, 1846), pp. 113–17; English translation in Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 101–4. Further page references to the English translation are given after quotations in the text.

¹² *The South English Legendary*, ed. Charlotte d'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, 3 vols, EETS, os, 235, 236, 244 (London: Oxford University Press, 1956 (vols 1, 2) and 1959 (vol. 3)), vol. 1, pp. 19–25. Further line references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹³ Osbern Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, ed. Mary S. Serjeantson, EETS, os, 206 (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 110–29. Further line references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. There is an Anglo-Saxon life of St Agnes by Ælfric (c.988); Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, 2 vols, EETS, os, 94, 114 (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), vol. 1, pp. 170–94. Other vernacular versions of the St Agnes legend include the early fourteenth-century Anglo-Norman poem *La Vie Seinte Agneys*, written by Nicole Bozon, a Franciscan friar based in northern England: see *The Old French Lives of Saint Agnes and Other Vernacular Versions of the Middle Ages*, ed. Alexander J. Denomy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938). Court records survive concerning a proposed performance of a play depicting the life of St Agnes in Winchester in 1409: see Jane Cowling, 'A fifteenth-century saint play in Winchester: some problems of interpretation', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 13 (2001), 19–33. For an account of the transformation into the vernacular of the late fifth-century Latin *Gesta sanctae Agnetis* (which forms the basis for most subsequent medieval versions), see Anne B. Thompson, 'The legend of St Agnes: improvisation and the practice of hagiography', *Exemplaria*, 13/2 (2001), 355–97.

¹⁴ The saints' chastity is explicitly stressed in 55 per cent of female lives in the

Golden Legend compared with 8 per cent of male; over a third (34 per cent) feature graphic scenes of sexual coercion compared with an almost negligible number for men. The male *vitae* generally place more emphasis on worldly affairs such as religious, secular or military office, preaching, conversions and miracle-working.

¹⁵ Rehearsals of this argument are too numerous to cite in full, but representative examples include Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 21–41; Catherine Innes-Parker, 'Sexual violence and the female reader: symbolic "rape" in the saints' lives of the Katherine group', *Women's Studies*, 24 (1995), 205–17; Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2001), pp. 120–51; and Diane Andrews Henningfeld, 'Contextualising rape: sexual violence in Middle English literature' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Michigan State University, 1994), pp. 136–59.

¹⁶ Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, pp. 24, 35–40.

¹⁷ Sue Lees, *Carnal Knowledge: Rape on Trial* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996), pp. 129–58.

¹⁸ Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, p. 35.

¹⁹ Lees, *Carnal Knowledge*, pp. 66–94.

²⁰ Susan Brownmiller, *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 256.

²¹ Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 197.

²² See Wogan-Browne, 'The virgin's tale', p. 178.

²³ Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, pp. 23–4.

²⁴ Sheila Delany, *Impolitic Bodies: Poetry, Saints and Society in Fifteenth-Century England: The Work of Osbern Bokenham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 15–22.

²⁵ Alison Goddard Elliott, 'The power of discourse: martyr's passion and Old French epic', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, ns, 11 (1982), 39–60. See also Maud Burnett McNerney, 'Rhetoric, power, and integrity in the passion of the virgin martyr', in Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie (eds), *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), pp. 50–70.

²⁶ The *South English Legendary* is also keen to stress saintly impertinence: Agnes calls the prefect's son 'pou luper depes fode' (l. 23) (you evil food of death) and 'pou develles lime' (l. 37) (you agent of the devil). Despite the presence of aggressive verbal action in late medieval vernacular lives of St Agnes, Thompson points out that the speech scenes in the fifth-century Latin *gesta* were severely diminished in subsequent redactions, including Jacobus; 'The legend of St Agnes', pp. 366–78.

²⁷ For an argument that language comparable to this in the *Golden Legend* 'actually compromises Agnes's inviolate position because of its profane resonances', see Kathleen Coyne Kelly, 'Useful virgins in medieval

- hagiography', in Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl (eds), *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 135–64 (p. 157).
- ²⁸ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 35.
- ²⁹ Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, pp. 71–121.
- ³⁰ Christine de Pisan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies, or The Book of the Three Virtues*, trans. Sarah Lawson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 160–1. For a comparable prescription in a religious text, see the thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse*, which declares that recluses must not recount 'any trivial stories or items of news, or sing or talk in a worldly manner between themselves'; *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, rev. edn 1992), p. 142.
- ³¹ Indeed Christine de Pisan explicitly argues that virgins should 'eagerly read' the biographies of saints such as Agnes; *Treasure of the City of Ladies*, p. 161.
- ³² Ashton, *Generation of Identity*, p. 110. In this respect, I find the analysis of saintly speech more helpful in Françoise Meltzer, *For Fear of the Fire: Joan of Arc and the Limits of Subjectivity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Though her focus is a woman whose trial records reveal historical voices ostensibly more 'recoverable' than those registered in the lives of early Christian martyrs, Meltzer resists the temptation to equate instants of enunciation with occasions of sovereign subjectivity.
- ³³ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 14–15.
- ³⁴ For an argument that passion cycles 'recycle' texts made familiar by liturgical usage, see Duncan Robertson, *The Medieval Saints' Lives: Spiritual Renewal and Old French Literature*, Edward C. Armstrong Monographs on Medieval Literature, 8 (Levington: French Forum, 1995), pp. 44–5. For arguments about speech and female subjectivity in saints' lives that parallel my own – formulated specifically in response to Ælfric's tenth-century Life of St Agnes – see Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, 'Before history, before difference: bodies, metaphor, and the Church in Anglo-Saxon England', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 11 (1998), 315–34; Miranda Hodgson, 'Impossible women: Ælfric's sponsa Christi and "la mystérique"', *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 33 (2002), 12–21. Thanks to Clare Lees for providing these references.
- ³⁵ This is a motif that appears with some frequency in the lives of other virgin martyrs too: in Bokenham's Life of St Christine, the judge orders the saint's 'tong out kut to be' (l. 3052); in his Life of St Lucy, the tormentors 'shouyn a swerd' (l. 9406) in the saint's throat.
- ³⁶ Sarah Kay, 'The sublime body of the martyr: violence in early romance saints' lives', in Richard W. Kaeuper (ed.), *Violence in Medieval Society* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000), pp. 3–20 (pp. 18–19).

- ³⁷ An approach taken by Salih, who draws an analogy between medieval virginity discourse and Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity in *Versions of Virginity*, pp. 31–8, 95–106.
- ³⁸ For instance Ashton, whose work foregrounds the fact that Bokenham's virgins are 'passive, pious, silent vessels filled with virtue, itself a gift from God'; *Generation of Identity*, p. 31.
- ³⁹ The details of Roop Kanwar's death are recounted in Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 16–17.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.
- ⁴¹ Jerome, *Commentarium in Epistolam ad Ephesios*: 'But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, she shall cease to be woman, and shall be called man', *PL*, 26, col. 533. My translation. Sunder Rajan notes that the conflation of sati with Christian martyrdom is a 'familiar cognitive procedure'; *Real and Imagined Women*, p. 46.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- ⁴⁴ O. M. Dalton, *The Royal Gold Cup in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1924).
- ⁴⁵ Diane Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: The 'Heroic' Tradition and its Alternatives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 43.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- ⁴⁷ Cowling, 'A fifteenth-century saint play in Winchester', pp. 24–5. Other images of Agnes appear on fifteenth-century East Anglian rood screens: see Eamon Duffy, 'Holy maydens, holy wyfes: the cult of women saints in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England', in W. J. Shields and Diana Wood (eds), *Women in the Church*, Studies in Church History, 27 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 175–96.
- ⁴⁸ An investment that is to some degree inescapable: this chapter itself, by engaging with feminist and postcolonial theory, is certainly not immune to the charge of ventriloquism and, indeed, anachronism.
- ⁴⁹ For an analysis that does consider the historicity of the rape of virgins in early Christian persecutions, with the conclusion that the tortured virgin 'is more useful as a metonym, as an inviolate body that stands in for the Church, than as an actual, historical person', see Kelly, 'Useful Virgins', pp. 139–44.
- ⁵⁰ Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', p. 306.
- ⁵¹ Though the degree to which one discourse is emphasized over another is dependent on the particular contexts in which the legends arise. As Winstead demonstrates, the transformations of English virgin martyr legends between 1100 and 1450 'signal a struggle over the meaning of these powerful cultural symbols'; *Virgin Martyrs*, p. 5.
- ⁵² For an argument that the saintly struggles in the fourteenth-century *North English Legendary* are likewise portrayed in economic as well as sexual terms, *ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

- ⁵³ Reproduced in Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 171 and pl. 68.
- ⁵⁴ For example, 'Seinte Margarete', in Millett and Wogan-Browne (eds), *Medieval English Prose for Women*, p. 48; for other examples of anti-Semitic sentiment in virgin martyr legends, see Wogan-Browne, 'The virgin's tale', pp. 178, 191, n. 47, and Ruth Evans in this volume. For a compelling account of the extent to which aristocratic female audiences of the thirteenth century were 'complicit in the oppositions of Christian aristocratic ladyhood and Jewishness', in the context of vernacular *Vengeance nostre seignur* cycles inserted into the manuscripts they read, see Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c.1150–1300: Virginity and its Authorizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 118–22. For an argument that Jews provided 'a nexus of enmity and violence within which latter-day martyrdoms could be imagined and narrated', see Miri Rubin, 'Choosing death? Experiences of martyrdom in late medieval Europe', in Diane Wood (ed.), *Martyrs and Martyrologies*, *Studies in Church History*, 30 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 153–83 (pp. 165–8).
- ⁵⁵ 'Seynt Katerine', in *Altenglische Legenden: Neue Folge*, ed. Carl Horstman (Heilbronn: Henninger, 1881), pp. 242–58 (pp. 242, 252); see also 'Seynt Mergrete', in the same volume, which describes how Margaret complains that 'Fram þis foule Sarazins / y may me nouȝt defende' (p. 227) and how the pagan tormentor Olibrius asks the virgin 'Wiltow leue on Mahoun / and þi god forsake?' (p. 233).
- ⁵⁶ Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290–1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 134–6.
- ⁵⁷ Indeed, as Susan Schibanoff has pointed out in a survey of the links between orientalism and sexual difference in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, Islam was often constructed in this period as a sort of heresy, a 'fraudulent new version' of Christianity; Schibanoff, 'Worlds apart: orientalism, antifeminism and heresy in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*', *Exemplaria*, 8 (1996), 59–96 (70).
- ⁵⁸ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Harlow: Longman, 2000), p. 258. On motifs of burning in the lives of other saints, see Ashton, *Generation of Identity*, pp. 146–7; on the imposition of burning as a penalty for relapsed heretics in fifteenth-century England, see Delany, *Impolitic Bodies*, p. 9.
- ⁵⁹ For instance, in 1440, the relapsed heretic Richard Wyche was executed but began to attract the sort of devotion normally reserved for saints; *ibid.*, p. 9.
- ⁶⁰ I have found the views expressed in Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (New York: Grove Press, 1996) helpful in thinking through the relationship between pornographic representation and class prejudice.
- ⁶¹ See, for instance, the late-thirteenth-century illumination in *Le Livre*

d'images de Madame Marie from northern France depicting the stoning of St Stephen (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS nouv. acq. fr. 16251, fol. 76), and the martyrdom scenes in the anonymous Valencian *Retable of St George* from c.1400 (London, Victoria and Albert Museum), depicting executioners with Moorish attributes.

- ⁶² See the catalogue of paintings in Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*, 2 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
- ⁶³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1978), pp. 2–3.
- ⁶⁴ Kathleen Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 147.
- ⁶⁵ Meltzer, *For Fear of the Fire*, pp. 15–16.
- ⁶⁶ Wogan-Browne skilfully takes up the historical dimensions of this project in *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture*, especially in ch. 7, 'The virgin speaks', pp. 223–56; Meltzer, *For Fear of the Fire*, brilliantly exposes the operations of fetishization and nostalgia in contemporary theoretical writings contemplating virginity discourse and the lives of early female saints.