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A COMPANION TO  
FIFTEENTH-CENTURY  
ENGLISH POETRY

Edited by Julia Boffey  
and  
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*John Capgrave and Osbern Bokenham: Verse Saints' Lives*

SARAH JAMES

Until relatively recently, hagiography was not really considered an appropriate subject for serious scholarly attention. The pioneering nineteenth-century editing efforts of scholars such as Carl Horstmann were almost exclusively philological in their approach, with little sense that the saintly narratives themselves were worthy of literary or historical consideration (Horstmann 1878, 1881). The comments of the editor of Osbern Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, working in the 1930s, might be taken as evidence of a much more widespread disregard for the genre:

My treatment of such questions as Bokenham's sources, literary value, and so forth, is obviously only the briefest of sketches. Though I am much attached to Bokenham, I am not at all sure that he is worth extended study from these points of view. Further investigation of the sources might, however, be a useful and interesting exercise. (Bokenham, ed. Serjeantson 1938: vii)

As late as the 1990s, similar views could be found; M. C. Seymour, discussing Capgrave's hagiographical endeavours, refers casually to 'the general mediocrity of the genre', with no suggestion that such a judgement might require examination or justification (Seymour 1996: 21). Happily the world has changed, and scholars of hagiography no longer find themselves compelled to defend their field of research. The popularity of saints' lives among all medieval social strata proclaims their importance to the social, cultural and religious historian; the relationship between saints' lives and other narrative genres is now more widely appreciated and explored; detailed studies are gradually bringing to light the extent to which these highly conventional narratives are in fact deeply responsive to changing social, historical and political contexts. We even have a *Companion to Middle English Hagiography*, a book that could hardly have been contemplated a few decades ago (see, for example, Gurevich 1988; Heffernan 1988; Vauchez 1997; for a succinct overview, the 'Introduction' to Salih, ed., 2006).

In the fifteenth century the genre was flourishing. New copies of earlier saints' lives continued to be produced, and new versions were created, indicative of a continued appetite for saintly narratives, whether individual lives or collections, in verse or in prose. Among the most prominent exponents of the genre were the East Anglian trio of John Capgrave, John Lydgate and Osbern Bokenham. The

saints' lives of John Lydgate are discussed elsewhere in this volume, and therefore Capgrave and Bokenham will be my focus here.

John Capgrave (1393–1464) joined the Austin friars in his teens, was ordained priest in 1416 or 1417, and studied theology in London from 1417 to 1422. In 1422 he went on to Cambridge, taking his B.Th. in 1423 and his doctorate in 1425. Between 1427 and 1437 we know nothing of his movements, but he reappears in the records from the late 1430s, by which time he was probably at the Austin friary at Lynn, Norfolk. He became Prior Provincial of his order in 1453, and was re-elected for a further two years in 1455; he died at Lynn in 1464 (Capgrave, ed. Lucas 1983: xix–xxiii). Capgrave appears to have been a prolific author in both Latin and English; the twelve extant works bearing his name include biblical commentaries, a chronicle, the histories of famous men bearing the name Henry, and a guide to the antiquities of Rome, as well as four saints' lives in English: those of St Augustine and St Gilbert of Sempringham are in prose, and those of St Norbert and St Katherine, which are considered here, in verse. Earlier Capgrave scholarship, which focused almost exclusively on linguistic analysis and manuscript studies, has confirmed that some Capgrave manuscripts may be holographs, or else were produced roughly contemporaneously at the Austin friars' house at Lynn, and were carefully corrected (Colledge and Smetana 1972; Colledge 1974; Lucas 1981; Seymour 1986; 'Introduction' to Capgrave, ed. Lucas 1983).

*The Life of St Norbert*, completed in 1440 according to its envoy, is dedicated to John Wygenhale, Abbot of the Premonstratensian house at West Dereham in Norfolk, and relates the life of the order's founder. It is a substantial work running to 4,109 lines written in rhyme royal stanzas, and is a close translation of the Latin *Vita Sancti Norberti*, one of the earliest extant versions of the saint's *vita* (Capgrave, ed. Smetana 1977). Capgrave makes few changes to his Latin source beyond the addition of a prologue and envoy, and on a first reading his *Life* offers a rather uncomplicated picture of the saint as a man of God and worker of numerous miracles, glossing over any aspects of the saint's life that might contradict such a view. For example, the Latin *Vita's* references to Norbert's early years focused on courtly life are entirely omitted, and replaced with a rather anodyne description of him as 'Mery in word, of hert and hand ful fre,/ Large for to zeue and to take aschamed' (lines 124–5). Yet precisely because Capgrave clings so closely to his source, the small changes he does introduce are worthy of attention. In some cases they suggest the desire to inject liveliness of description or characterisation into a narrative that can otherwise seem a little bland. So, for example, to an incident in which Norbert is visited by the devil (in the form of a bear) during an all-night vigil in the monastery church, Capgrave adds a vigorous denunciation of Satan by the saint:

What abides þou, what wilt þou, cruel beest?  
 Thi hokes, þi teeth haue now no powere  
 To sette on me no daungere ne areest.  
 It is but vanyte þat þou schewis me here.  
 Thi rolled skyn, wech is no þing clere,  
 Is but fantasie as þou3 it were a rynde.  
 Thi fyry throte I counte it but a wynde. (lines 2745–50)

The terrifying aspect of the bear-devil's claws and teeth are vividly portrayed, only to be dismissed as mere 'vanyte' or deception. His wrinkled skin, sarcastically described as 'no þing clere', is recognised as mere 'fantasie' or empty appearance and is likened to a mere 'rynde' or husk; his fiery breath is no more frightening than the 'wynde'. Over the course of a single stanza the devil has been systematically diminished from a figure inspiring awe and dread to a rather moth-eaten empty bearskin. Remaining unmoved by mere appearances, the saint then proceeds to remind the devil of his Fall, before dismissing him summarily:

Thou þat were þe merke of God aboue;  
 Thou þat were swech an aungel bryth!  
 And for þou fleddist fro þat goodly loue  
 Whech þou had, þe loue of God almyth,  
 Now art þou dampned sekirly, as it is rith,  
 To dwelle in [d]erknesse, as þou apperist here.  
 Awey þou Sathan, awey þou raggid brere! (lines 2759–65)<sup>1</sup>

There is a colour in the language that is Capgrave's own, a capacity to convey lively visual images in speech that is familiar and colloquial. Lucifer the bright angel is reduced to an untidy bramble, admittedly equipped with thorns to ensnare the unwary, but too ubiquitous to be truly terrifying. Capgrave's literary style has received previous scholarly attention, often in the form of more or less disparaging comparisons with Chaucer, but he has rarely been praised for either vividness or humour (for example, Stouck 1982; for a more positive assessment see Winstead 1996). Yet here he demonstrates both, together with a keen awareness of the needs of his audience; the vivid and familiar style surely has wide appeal, but perhaps especially for those who are less theologically sophisticated, among whom we might number his Premonstratensian dedicatees, since the order was not particularly renowned for its learning (Fredeman 1975).

Among the other changes Capgrave makes to his source are a number that gesture beyond the text itself to the contemporary religious and political context. In one incident Norbert, having been elected bishop, is turned back from the gates of the city by a porter who is misled by his poor appearance into thinking he is a beggar. While the populace castigates the hapless porter for his error, Capgrave gives a conciliatory speech to Norbert:

'Be not aferd, myn owne brothire dere,  
 Ne fle not for my sake, what euyr þou sayde.  
 For I sey the treuly, þere is no man here  
 Hey ne lowe, woman ne no mayde,  
 þou3 þei avisement in here langage layde,  
 Coude a gessed þe treuth so weel as ded þou.  
 Thyn eyne be more clere, I telle the rit now,  
 That callest me a begger þan her eyne were  
 That chose me to worchep or to degree.' (lines 2969–77)

<sup>1</sup> Emendation of the original 'þerknesse'. While the *MED* does not record 'þerknesse' as a variant form for the noun, it does note the erroneous adjectival use of 'þerk': see *MED*, 'derk' (adj.) and 'derknes(se)' (noun).

This reference to an ideal of holy poverty is reinforced a few lines later when Norbert discovers how seriously the Church's property has been diminished by previous bishops, who have distributed its goods among their own relations. Capgrave again elaborates upon the Latin source, providing Norbert with an impassioned speech in which he declares his intention of eradicating corruption:

'I wil,' he seith, 'send oute in al hasty wyse  
To euery man þat they hem may avyse.  
Thei falle not in þat sentens which I wil proclame!  
That whosoeuyr hath ony possessioun  
Longyng to my cherk in Goddis name  
I wil now charge hem, and on my benysoun,  
That þei resyne hem withouten condicioun,  
And lete þe cherk haue his rith ageyn'. (lines 3030–7)

Scant as these references are, they invite us to look beyond Norbert's own historical circumstances to those of Capgrave himself, and to anxieties about nepotism, clerical possessions and the worldly nature of the established church, which were exercising the ecclesiastical hierarchy at this period.

Similar contemporary concerns have been more widely explored in relation to Capgrave's second verse life in English, *The Life of St Katherine of Alexandria*, which consists of 8,624 lines, again in rhyme royal, divided into a Prologue and five books. Unlike most earlier versions of St Katherine's legend, Capgrave's gives equal attention to the saint's life before and after conversion to Christianity, providing particularly extensive coverage of her childhood, education and early womanhood (Lewis 2000). This has encouraged scholars to utilise *St Katherine* as a means of scrutinising contemporary social and political contexts. Karen Winstead has been at the forefront of this development, exploring the saint's life both as a reflection of contemporary concerns regarding the effectiveness of Henry VI's kingship, and as an exposition of the disruptive effects of female learning on social and political order (Winstead 1991 and 1994). Certainly the Katherine whom Capgrave presents to his audience is a woman of strongly independent mind, whose commitment to scholarship demands a solitary form of living that is at odds with the needs of her country and people, and which places her in conflict with her noble advisors and her family. In the face of her continued refusal to marry, her lords attack both her learning and her gender:

Thus weyled the lordes as þei sete be-deene,  
Cursyng hir maysteris, cursyng hir bookis alle:  
'Allas,' thei seyde, 'that euere ony queene  
Thus shuld be comered [distracted]! oure wurshype is down falle!  
God sende neuere reem a kyng that wereth a calle!  
We prey god þat he neuere woman make  
Soo grete a mayster as she is, for hir sake.' (p. 169: ii, 1478–84)

Throughout the Marriage Parliament and beyond, the disastrous effects of her failure to govern actively are pitilessly exposed, as her country is subject to unrest within and attack from without. Winstead suggests that Capgrave's emphasis on

Katherine's governmental incapacity is a reflection of his own pessimism about the current state of England (Winstead 1997).

One of the most distinctive features of Capgrave's *St Katherine* is the considerable space devoted to debates: well over two-fifths of the poem are taken up with reporting direct speech. Katherine argues first with 110 pagan philosophers, then with her nobles and mother at the Marriage Parliament, and then with the emperor Maxentius in Books 4 and 5, as well as with a further group of fifty pagan philosophers. The latter are drafted in by the emperor to assist him in his conflict with Katherine, but instead she converts them all to Christianity. The use of debate was fundamental to the scholastic method, of course, and its inclusion here may reflect something of Capgrave's own intellectual background (Grabmann 1909–11; Lucas 1997). There are, however, particular advantages to using direct speech in this way. First, the effect of allowing disputants to be heard in their own words is highly dramatic and engaging for the audience; no longer mere spectators, they become involved, empowered to judge the strength of claim and counter-claim. Furthermore, by presenting arguments through the speech of others, Capgrave is distancing himself from the views expressed. The narratorial distance thus introduced may be especially valuable when the issues under discussion are contentious, as for example when Katherine argues in Book IV against the use of images in worship.

If thei be made, than arn þei creatures,  
And he that made hem, [he] is god allone.  
ley hem in water, alle youre mysty figures,  
ffor noȝt arn thei, neither þe stok ne the stoone. (iv, 1625–28)

The suggestion that these images are mere sticks and stones that should be cast into the waters might well have created a *frisson* among an audience conscious of contemporary controversies arising from Wycliffite iconomachy, particularly since the reference to images as 'stok' and 'stoone' appears elsewhere in a specifically Lollard context (for example, *Selections*, ed. Hudson 1978: 85, 87). The fact that it is Katherine, Christian saint and hence staunch upholder of orthodoxy, speaking at this point simply increases the tension of the moment. While the images to which she refers are, of course, pagan idols rather than Christian statues, the issues at stake throughout this debate are perhaps uncomfortably close to those raised by Lollardy in fifteenth-century England. In such a context, Capgrave's preference for direct speech over narratorial comment may be entirely understandable (James 2005).

As in *St Norbert*, in *St Katherine* Capgrave indulges in moments of vividly imagistic and colloquial language. When Maxentius offers to erect a statue of Katherine, to be venerated by the people, she is unimpressed. The statue, she says:

[...] shal be insensible,  
Stonde liche a ston, and byrdes flye rounde aboute,  
As I suppose it shal be right possible  
That þei shal come somtyme a ful grete route,  
her on-clene dunge shul thei there putte oute  
And lete it falle right on the ymagis face. (v, 470–75)



It is impossible to read these lines without visualising first the 'ful grete route' of chattering birds fluttering around the statue, and then the inevitable scatological onslaught. Even the most disengaged and secular-minded listener would surely respond to the humour of this hypothetical event, while a more serious auditor might well be stimulated to appreciate so fitting a fate for an idolatrous image. We do not have a clear idea of the audience Capgrave had in mind for this work; unlike his other saints' lives, all of which have named or at least clearly specified dedicatees, the *Life of St Katherine* was written 'that more openly it shalle/ Be knowe a-bovte of woman and of man' (Prologue, 45–6). This reference is tantalisingly vague, but the dramatic and expressive qualities of the language again suggest wide-ranging appeal. Derek Pearsall traces connections between this language and popular late-medieval verse romance, and suggests that this might gesture towards a relatively unsophisticated audience for the saint's life; however, he also concedes that Capgrave clearly envisages that at least some of his audience will be reading, rather than hearing, his text (Pearsall 1975; see also Fredeman 1980). The existence of a Gild of St Katherine at Lynn in the 1390s, open to both sexes, suggests one possible audience for this work, although it is unnecessary to be so specific; there is clear evidence of a substantial audience for pious literature in East Anglia in the fifteenth century, whether attached to guilds or not (Gibson 1989; Beadle 1991).

Osbern Bokenham was born in the same year as Capgrave, perhaps in Old Buckenham in Norfolk, or in Suffolk, and was also an Augustinian. He received his bachelor's degree at Cambridge one day after Capgrave, and from 1427, by which time he was at Clare Priory, Suffolk, he is referred to as *magister* in the records. He tells us that he travelled to Italy at least twice, and the latest mention of his name occurs in a will of 1463. Bokenham's writings include the *Mappula angliae*, a partial translation of Higden's *Polychronicon*, and probably at least two other works: a translation of Claudian, *De Consulatu Stilichonis*; and a dialogue recounting the genealogy of Joan of Acre (Delany 1998). However, he is probably best known for a series of saints' lives generally known as *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*. This title was given to the texts by their first editor, Mary Serjeantson, and is taken from the *Prolocutorye in-to Marye Mawdelyns lyf*, in which the author summarises his hagiographical endeavours thus far as 'dyuers legendys, wych my rudnesse/ From latyn had turnyd in-to our language,/ Of hooly wummen' (lines 5038–40). One of the extant manuscripts contains a Prologue and the lives of SS Margaret, Anne, Christina, the eleven thousand virgins, Faith, Agnes, Dorothy, Mary Magdalene, Katherine, Cecilia, Agatha, Lucy and Elizabeth. A. S. G. Edwards suggests that, by focusing exclusively on female saints, it participates in a wider fifteenth-century trend for producing miscellanies in which gender 'forms a distinctive criterion in establishing content' (Edwards 2003: 131).

The conception of Bokenham's work is complicated by ongoing research on the Abbotsford manuscript (Horobin 2008). For Arundel 327, Edwards has argued convincingly that that the legend of St Margaret was devised by Bokenham as a free-standing piece, with no intention of producing others. He suggests that subsequent legends were produced piecemeal as patrons or occasion demanded, and may have circulated in booklet form, only later being drawn together into a single text by Thomas Burgh, a friar of Cambridge (Edwards 1994). Scholars

remain divided on this issue: Paul Price (2001) concurs with Edwards' conclusions, while Carroll Hilles (2001) rejects them. Patronage is certainly central to the texts in this manuscript; several of the legends were written for named patrons, and perhaps somewhat unusually, these were in the main lay women. The name of Katherine Denston is associated with the legends of St Anne and St Katherine; Katherine Howard is also associated with the latter. John and Isabel Hunt are remembered at the end of St Dorothy, and Agatha Flegge is the dedicatee of St Agatha. Bokenham's two most distinguished patrons were Elizabeth de Vere, Countess of Oxford, for whom he wrote the life of St Elizabeth, and Isabel Bouchier, Countess of Eu, whose commission is the subject of the three-hundred line *Prolocutorye in-to Marye Mawdelyns lyf* mentioned above. In the *Prolocutorye* Bokenham provides a detailed account of the circumstances of the commission, describing the Twelfth Night festivities at the Countess' residence, and their discussions about saints' lives. It was on hearing that Bokenham was engaged in writing the life of St Elizabeth for Elizabeth de Vere that the Countess made her own request for a life of Mary Magdalene, perhaps motivated by a sense of pious competition. Sarah Salih suggests that hagiography in this context can be imagined as 'a very superior kind of consumer good, fittingly adorning the glamour of Lady Bouchier's Christmas party' (Salih 2006: 12). It also clearly serves other purposes, however; the existence of so many named dedicatees has provided fertile ground for scholars seeking to pursue a sociopolitical approach to Bokenham's work. Most of these patrons can reasonably be identified with the powerful Yorkist affinity in Suffolk, as Sheila Delany discusses in detail; thus she suggests that Bokenham's legendary might be read, at least in part, as Yorkist propaganda (Delany 1999). She develops this position more extensively in *Impolitic Bodies*, aligning the *Legendys* with the mid-fifteenth-century body politic, fragmented under Henry VI's ineffective rule and anxiously awaiting the reunification that would be possible under Richard, Duke of York (Delany 1998). Carroll Hilles also finds Yorkist sympathies in Bokenham's work, suggesting that the spiritual fecundity of his virgin martyrs parallels the physical fecundity of the Yorkist female line, in contrast to 'the impoverished Lancastrian dynasty' (Hilles 2001: 200). The *Prolocutorye in-to Marye Mawdelyns lyf* certainly bears such a reading, with its emphasis on the Countess' pedigree, being 'Doun conueyid by þe same pedegru/ That þe duk of york is come, for she/ Hys sustyr is in egal degre' (lines 5006–8).

The description of the Countess' commission goes beyond this, however, as Bokenham uses it as an opportunity to invite his audience to participate in the details of his own life and experience at this moment. The 'reuel', 'daunsyng' and 'fressh aray' he sees conjure up an image of an aristocratic household at play: a household in which he is clearly a privileged visitor. Although expressing doubts about his ability to fulfil the task satisfactorily, he agrees to the undertaking,

Vp condycyoun þat she me wolde respyt  
 Of hir ientyllnesse tyl I acomplysyd  
 My pylgramage hade, wych promysyd  
 I to seynt Iamys wyth hert entere  
 Had to performe þe same yere,

pere to purchase thorgh penytence  
Of myn oolde synnys newe indulgence. (lines 5090–6)

This addition is not strictly necessary, but its inclusion allows us to hear Bokenham's speaking voice, which is somewhat garrulous, perhaps a little pedantic concerning details, and keen to ensure that we receive as much circumstantial information as possible. Elsewhere he indulges a similar desire to regale his audience with personal anecdotal material. In the Prologue he describes his experiences of sheltering from heavy rain in Italy, which stimulated his desire to write a life of St Margaret, accompanied by some wry observations on the honesty of the locals and their tendency to 'begyle/ The wery pylgrymys' (lines 114–15). In the *Vita S. Margaretae*, he asks permission to break off for a while and rest:

For sykyr myn handys gynne to feynte,  
My wyt to dullyn, and myn eyne bleynte  
Shuld be, ner helpe of a spectacle;  
My penne also gynnyth make obstacle,  
And lyst no lengere on paper to renne. (lines 895–9)

Given these disadvantages, he requests a holiday until Michaelmas, and a few lines later resumes his task, apparently refreshed by his short vacation. Such authorial insertions give a particular flavour to Bokenham's work as he invites his audience into his world to share the pains and pleasures of writing hagiography. It may be that these personal interventions are intended to inspire belief and confidence in his readers and listeners; Ian Johnson has suggested that 'attempted valorisation by alleged associated circumstances which strictly in themselves prove little or nothing – authentication through specificity that cannot be refuted – turns out to be a hallmark of Bokenham' (Johnson 1994: 110). Alternatively, they may be a way to elicit sympathy; Bokenham seems at pains to present himself not as a distant authorial figure in full control of his work and his powers, but as a fallible individual with whom the audience can identify and sympathetically share the trials of the writing process. Or perhaps they may point to the distinctive realities of coterie textual production. The author, being known to his audience, has no need to construct an impression of authorial distance, and can instead rely upon a shared body of knowledge and experience through which readers and listeners will respond to his work. If Bokenham really did suffer from eyestrain and poor quality pens, the audience can sympathise with, and vicariously participate in, his experience; alternatively, it is entirely possible that he was known for his sharp eyesight and excellent writing equipment, in which case such a moment becomes a delightful private joke to be enjoyed by those 'in the know'.

Bokenham's negotiations with his audience reflect a wider concern with questions of *auctoritas*. In a careful examination of the prologues and other paratextual matter in the *Legendys*, Ian Johnson suggests that Bokenham energetically displays his commitment to the Aristotelian tradition of textual causation and appraisal, and hence incidentally demonstrates the continued vitality and serviceability of that tradition. But he also identifies what he describes as the writer's 'perpetually petitionary disposition', and suggests that far from regarding himself as an

*auctor*, or even a *rhetor*, Bokenham sees textual production as a form of prayer and a means of winning grace (Johnson 1994: 118). Such a stepping back from claims to *auctoritas* may stem in part from Bokenham's rather uneasy relationship with his poetic predecessors, evidenced by claims of poetic inadequacy such as that which opens his *Vita Sanctae Annae matris Sanctae Mariae*:

If I hadde cunnyng and eloquens  
 My conceytes craftely to dilate,  
 Als whilom dede the fyrsh rethoryens,  
 GOWERE, CHAUNCERE, & NOW LYTGATE,  
 I wolde me besyn to translate  
 Seynt anne lyf in-to oure langage.  
 But sekyr I fere to gynne so late,  
 Lest men wolde ascryuen it to dotage  
 [...]  
 Wherefore me thinkyth, & sothe it ys,  
 Best were for me to leue makyng  
 Of englysh... (lines 1401–8, 1417–19)

The pressure applied by his literary antecedents Gower, Chaucer and Lydgate, against whose works his own will suffer by comparison, leads Bokenham to contemplate abandoning his own poetic creation. However, there follow almost seven hundred lines on the very subject about which he claims he cannot write; thus it seems that the achievements of the illustrious threesome, however weighty, are not sufficient to prevent his continued 'makyng/ Of englysh'. Indeed Paul Price suggests that while there may be an element of Bloomian 'anxiety of influence' at play here, Bokenham in fact genuinely believes in the moral superiority of an unadorned style (Price 2001; Delany 1998 concurs). Such a claim seems to be substantiated elsewhere in the *Legendys*. Returning once more to the *Prolocutorye in-to Marye Mawdelyns lyf*, we find him refusing to invoke the aid of the Muses, instead turning to God for aid. He expresses his mistrust of the aureate poetic tradition,

Not desyryng to haue swych eloquence  
 As sum curyals han, ner swych asperence  
 In vttryng of here subtyl conceytys,  
 In wyche oft tyme ful greth dysceyt is. (lines 5225–8)

Eloquence is dangerous, it seems, providing a vehicle for deception, which is inappropriate to the task in hand.

However, I wish to suggest that Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate are not the only poets who present both an artistic and a moral challenge to Bokenham; in the prologue to his version of the legend of St Katherine, he also seems to have his sights fixed on his contemporary, Capgrave. He cautions his audience not to expect extensive coverage of the saint's early life, referring those who wish to know about such things to Capgrave's version 'In balaadys rymyd ful craftyly' (line 6359). He continues:

But for-as-mych as þat book is rare  
 And straunge to gete, at myn estymacyoun,

Compendyously of al I wyl declare  
 No more but oonly þe passyoun,  
 Of kateryne Howard to gostly consolacyoun,  
 And to conforte eek of Denstoun kateryne,  
 If grace my wyt wyl illumyne.  
 O blysful Ihesu, sum beem lete shyne  
 Up-on me of heuently influence,  
 That þis legende begunne I may termyne. (lines 6361–70)

It is not entirely fanciful to interpret this as restrained censure of Capgrave's excess in producing a life incorporating so much material, embellished with crafty rhymes, and in a book that is hard to obtain. Bokenham's own version, by contrast, is to be compendious, concerned only with the passion, and furthermore it will be produced with the assistance of a beam of 'heuenely influence', which, we are to infer, Capgrave's was not. It may be significant that while this prologue is in rhyme royal, the *Lyf of S. Kateryne* itself is in less 'crafty' rhyming couplets. In the manuscript as it is now arranged, this is the first legend that deviates from either rhyme royal or an eight-line stanza (the latter is the form for the Prologue and the *Vita Sanctae Christianae* only). Perhaps the length and elaboration of Capgrave's life stimulated a desire to produce a plainer text. Whether or not this is the case, the three following lives are also in rhyming couplets, with Bokenham reverting to the eight-line stanza for the *Lyf of S. Elyzabeth*.

The morality or otherwise of textual excess has a counterpart in the physical excess of both Bokenham's *Legendys* and Capgrave's *St Katherine*. Torture, mutilation and violent death are, of course, mainstays of the hagiographic genre, or at least of that part of it concerned with virgin martyrs (Ashton 2000). Delany conceives the *Legendys* as a somatised text concerned with the fragmentation and reconstruction of saintly body parts, and indeed her own reading re-enacts this; the heads, feet, faces, wombs, tongues, mouths, breasts, genitals and guts of these young women are itemised and subjected to her critical scrutiny before being reassembled in support of her argument for Bokenham's theological and political intentions (Delany 1998). Such a reading demands that the *Legendys* were conceived as a single collection, and thus is at odds with the model of conception proposed by Edwards. Yet both these models, the one insisting upon the wholeness of the text, the other upon its contingent and fragmentary nature, sit in fascinating relation to the saints' lives themselves, demanding that we think both about the text as body and about the body as text. Margaret Bridges, for example, considers Bokenham's practice as a translator in terms of the processes of 'excision, elision, and maltreatment/impairment', activities which, she suggests, are reflected in the physical translation of St Margaret's relics in his version of her legend (Bridges 2003: 277). Such a reading is challenging and exhilarating, but there is perhaps a danger in too readily associating the female martyr with subversion and the repressive power of authority. As Price astutely points out, the depiction of an intelligent, articulate and persuasive female saint may as easily be interpreted as an argument in favour of the status quo as otherwise. The reason is precisely that she is a saint, hence the site of miraculous occurrences that we cannot expect to replicate in 'reality' (Price 2001: 166).

As I noted at the start of this paper, serious study of late-medieval hagiography is still a relatively new phenomenon, and while a great deal of work has been done in a short period of time, there are many opportunities for further research. I shall restrict myself to the mention of four areas that seem particularly likely to yield interesting results. While much recent published research has focused on the lives produced by Capgrave, Bokenham and Lydgate, it seems clear to me that there is room to pursue further research on texts by lesser-known authors, such as the verse life of Becket by Laurentius Wade (Horstmann 1880), or indeed on texts for which we have no named author, nor any prospect of recovering one. Fertile as the mainstream ground is, there is an extensive hinterland, much of which remains almost untouched by scholarly notice. There is also much to be learned from further manuscript study, as Horobin's work on Bokenham suggests; while particular texts, such as those discussed in this chapter, have been well served, others have not yet enjoyed that careful consideration of their manuscript context that can be highly revealing. Edwards' examination of CUL, MS Add. 4122 exemplifies the fruitful possibilities of such work (Edwards 2003). Comparative studies of the lives of particular saints, or of collections, across different European vernaculars would certainly extend our knowledge significantly, and enable us to think both more broadly and more incisively about the ways in which saints' lives relate to particular social, political and historical contexts. Incidentally, such studies would also lend themselves to collaborative research projects, as would my final, perhaps rather ambitious, suggestion. Large-scale interdisciplinary projects bringing together literary scholars, cultural historians, archaeologists, art historians, and perhaps even psychologists and anthropologists, to study particular saints in all their cultural manifestations, would add significantly to our understanding of the place and function of saints in medieval spirituality. Lest such a suggestion be considered grandiose, I turn to Bokenham himself. His *Prolocutorye in-to Marye Mawdelyns lyf* clearly suggests that he considered the revels, dancing and elaborate attire of the party-goers to be important contextualisation of the narrative that was to follow; we could do worse than to take a lead from him.

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