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The Virgin's Kiss: Gender, Leprosy, and Romance in the Life of St. Frideswide

Gary Stephen Fuller
Brigham Young University - Provo

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Gary S. Fuller

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Miranda Wilcox, Chair
Donald Chapman
Kimberly Johnson

Department of English

Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

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Gary S. Fuller
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

The longer thirteenth-century Middle English verse life of Saint Frideswide found in the collection of saints' lives known as the *South English Legendary* (*SEL*) narrates an event unique to medieval hagiography. In the poem, a leper asks the virgin saint to kiss him with her "sweet mouth," which she does in spite of her feelings of considerable shame, and the leper is healed. The erotic nature of the leper's request, Frideswide's reluctance to grant it, and her shame throughout the incident represent a significant departure from the twelfth-century Latin texts on which the *SEL* version of the saint's life is based. In this paper, I provide a deeper critical analysis of the text than has previously been attempted, exploring the *SEL* version of the leper's healing from medieval perspectives on leprosy, gender, religious authority, and genre.

By the thirteenth century, leprosy in hagiographic texts had come to symbolize the abject condition of Christ himself, and saints' lives invariably portrayed their protagonists as eager to embrace and kiss lepers as a means of serving Christ. Frideswide's shame and reluctance to kiss the leper greatly contrast with generic convention and cause her gender to emerge as a defining holy attribute inexplicably demanded by the leper's exigency. The *SEL*-poet's portrayal of Frideswide's gender as a vital component of her healing power is consistent with medieval conceptions of personhood, from which gender could not be separated. The poet crafts the scene of the leper's healing using conventions not only of hagiography but of romance as well; this hybridization of genres creates tension between sanctity and eroticism in the scene. The poet's depiction of the saint as simultaneously exceptional and human may have been a reaction against the contemporary ecclesiastical landscape, in which female authority and influence were limited. Moreover, the romantic language used by the poet to create tension also makes Frideswide's story more accessible to lay readers by transforming the relationship between supplicant and saint into an interaction between a courtly lover and his lady.

Keywords: Frideswide, hagiography, Middle English, saint, leprosy, virgin, gender, romance, medieval, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Oxford, South English Legendary, kiss

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Introduction

Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.[1]

As readers of medieval hagiography well know, European saints' lives often contain common narrative patterns and familiar events—but they also can surprise without warning. These texts produce a peculiar delight when their holy subject confronts an unusual situation in unexpectedly human fashion, creating a breach in the saint's halo of sanctity but also a stronger shared identity with the fallible reader. One such moment occurs in the long version of a thirteenth-century Middle English verse legend of the life of St. Frideswide, the Anglo-Saxon princess and abbess whose life spanned the seventh and eighth centuries. The poem, found in the collection of saints' lives known as the *South English Legendary* (*SEL*), concludes with Frideswide's return to Oxford after an extended absence. According to the text, as the saint entered the city, surrounded by joyous townspeople,

> A mesel com among that folc, swythe grisliche myd alle,
> That hadde yare sik ibe and ne mighte no bote valle.
> Loude he gradde and ofte inough, "Levedi, bidde ic thee,
> Vor the love of Jhesu Crist, have mercy of me
> And cus me with thi suete mouth, yif it is thi wille!"
> This maide was sore ofschame and eode evere vorth stille.
> This mesel gradde evere on and cride "milce" and "ore,"
> So that this maide him custe and was ofscamed sore.
> A suete cos it was to him, vor therwith anon
> He bicom hol and sound, and is lymes echon,

1. Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, act 5, scene 1, line 92.

And vair man and clene inou was, and of thulke cosse there

Me thencth the maide nadde no sunne, of ordre thei heo were! (143-54)

[A leper came among that people, very hideous indeed,

That had been sick for a long time and unable to acquire a remedy.

He called out loudly and repeatedly, “Lady, I bid thee,

For the love of Jesus Christ, have mercy on me

And kiss me with thy sweet mouth, if it is thy will!”

This virgin was sorely ashamed and continued quietly walking.

This leper called out incessantly and cried for mercy and help,

So this virgin kissed him and was sorely ashamed.

It was a sweet kiss to him, for immediately thereby

He became whole and sound, and all his limbs,

And was a beautiful and clean man, and as for that kiss

It seems to me that the virgin committed no sin, even though she was in a religious order!][2]

Three elements of this event in the *SEL* legend particularly draw the attention of the reader: the sensuous nature of the leper’s request for a kiss, the reluctance of the virgin saint to offer it, and her shame both before and after the healing act. Kissing of lepers had become a somewhat common hagiographical convention by the time of the *SEL*’s composition; however, these three elements in Frideswide’s story were not part of that convention and, indeed, cannot be found in

2. Reames, “The Legend of Frideswide of Oxford,” 42. The Modern English translation is my own.

any accounts of similar miracles.[3] As I will discuss, this episode in Frideswide's life is the only known instance in which a male leper requests a mouth-to-mouth kiss from a female saint; the *SEL*-poet changes the Latin sources to enhance the legend's exceptionality by fundamentally transforming the interaction between saint and supplicant. Yet, in spite of this exceptional incident, the longer *SEL* life of Frideswide has received little critical attention.[4] The purpose of this essay is to explore the tension between saintly compassion and romantic love introduced by the poet; the differences between the Latin and Middle English versions were informed by complex relationships among medieval conceptions of leprosy, gender, religious authority, and genre. Before closely reading the expanded Frideswide legend, I will examine the pertinent documentary sources used by the *SEL*-poet, review details about the composition and reception of the *SEL* itself, and discuss how leprosy was viewed by English Christians in the thirteenth century.

Hagiography, Documentary Sources, and the *South English Legendary*

Hagiography, as a literary genre, is only superficially similar to biography. Saints' lives should not be viewed primarily as registers of historical fact; indeed, many narrate events that cannot be verified by external sources. Their purpose is instead to provide transcendent patterns of holy living that Christians should strive for, either to emulate in their own lives or to seek after as intercessory gateways to the divine. Hagiographic texts are thus carefully constructed: rich in symbolism and allusion, built upon textual sediment of recurrent themes and familiar situations, their literary elements are as distinctive as the architectural features of a medieval church.

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3. See Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, 144-46, and Peyroux, "The Leper's Kiss," 172-73, 180-85, for detailed discussions and examples of the hagiographical convention of the kissing of lepers.

4. See Reames, "The Legend of Frideswide," 47, and Thompson, *Everyday Saints*, 148-49.

Although saints' lives do contain stock events and conventions that developed over centuries, they also reflect contemporary religious thought, often revealing the changing didactic goals of the clergy and the specific historical contexts that prompted authorial innovation within the genre.[5] During the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries, writers who translated early Latin legends into vernacular languages were able to break free in some measure from the conventions of hagiography and draw instead on conventions from other genres already popular in the vernacular. Elements from romance or elegy often surfaced in newly translated versions of saints' lives.[6] Both the longer *SEL* version of Frideswide's life already cited and a shorter verse version of her life also found in the *SEL* are examples of this sort of creative literary translation, which is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the entire *Legendary*.[7]

Historical records reveal very little about Frideswide. She was, as far as can be determined, a royal Mercian lady who founded and headed a monastery in Oxford in the late seventh century that was already richly endowed before the end of Anglo-Saxon times. She later was adopted as Oxford's patron saint, and the rebuilt Priory of St. Frideswide became the foundation of the current Christ Church in Oxford.[8] Historical certainty ends with these meager biographical data, and further details of her life are only to be found in hagiographic texts. Three surviving Latin texts of the life of Frideswide are considered possible sources for the *SEL* versions: a short summary of her life by William of Malmesbury in *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*,

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5. See Cazelles, introduction to *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, for a brief but insightful summary of hagiography as a genre; also, see Salih, introduction to *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography*, for a discussion of how hagiography interrelates with saints' cults; additionally, see Weinstein and Bell, introduction to *Saints & Society*, 1-15, for a more detailed treatment of the complex relationship between hagiography and history.
6. Cazelles, *Images of Sainthood*, 14-15.
7. Reames, "The Legend of Frideswide," 27-36.
8. Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, 9.

ca. 1125; a longer text with several miracle stories, written *ca*.1100-30 in "bald, rather clumsy Latin" and designated by John Blair as "Life A"; and a "longer and more elegant re-working of Life A," designated as "Life B" and written *ca*.1140-70, almost certainly by Robert of Cricklade, Prior of St. Frideswide's.[9] These Latin *vitae* recount how Frideswide was born in the mid-seventh century to Didan, an Anglo-Saxon sub-king ruling near Oxford, and Safrida, his wife. The young princess showed remarkable spiritual and mental prowess when at age five she memorized all 150 psalms over the course of a few months. After the death of her mother, Frideswide, having reached a marriageable age, instead renounced the world and became a nun, living in the strictest asceticism; her father, before his own death, built a church in Oxford and gave it to her. The texts then record how Frideswide achieved great spiritual victories over both human and supernatural adversaries during the rest of her life.

These "victories" reveal to the reader the sanctity of Frideswide, demonstrating her resistance to temptation and her power over the physical suffering of others. After becoming abbess, she rejected the devil, who, appearing as Christ, had invited her to worship him. The wicked king Algar tried to take her by force to be his wife, but was miraculously stricken by blindness as he pursued her. She fled to a wood near Bampton, where she lived three years while evading the king and healed a blind girl. Frideswide then moved much closer to Oxford, being led to a secluded spot in Binsey, where she lived with her companion sisters and miraculously located a well to sustain them. While there, she healed a young man who had been cursed for

9. Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, 9-11; here Blair refutes the premise put forward by F.M. Stenton in "St. Frideswide and her Times," *Oxoniensia* 1 (1936), 103-12, that the details of Frideswide's legend were mere inventions added to Malmesbury's simple story. Stenton's verdict was that the extra miracles were a late addition in the late twelfth or thirteenth century and could not have come from an earlier tradition. But Blair shows conclusively that Stenton must not have been aware of Life A, which was produced at the same time or earlier than Malmesbury's narrative and seems to have been independent of it, using at least one older source that is now lost.

chopping wood on a Sunday and cast a demon out of a fisherman. When she felt that her death was near she returned to Oxford, healing the young leper with her kiss as she entered the city. Being informed by an angel that she would die on Sunday, 19 October 727, she asked for a grave to be dug on the day before so that no one would be obligated to work on Sunday. When the hour of her death arrived, she looked heavenward and saw the holy virgins Catherine and Cecily, who had come to guard her on her way back to the Lord; after her passing, a light blazed through Oxford and a sweet scent filled the town. As further proof of her holy status, a paralyzed rich man was healed after dragging himself to her grave, and a crippled nobleman named Athelwold threw away his crutches and leapt into the church after interrupting her funeral.[10]

Admittedly, much of Frideswide's legend seems familiar to experienced readers of hagiography; the figure of the lustful king miraculously struck down while pursuing the holy virgin, for example, is quite common and often dismissed by scholars as a homiletic invention, although Blair notes that the abduction of noblewomen was not uncommon in early medieval times, and that "King Algar" may have had a historical precedent in King Æthelbald of Mercia.[11] A comparison of the Latin sources of the Frideswide story reveals the way in which details from the earlier texts (Malmebury's summary and Life A) are modified, enhanced, or corrected in the later Life B. For instance, in Malmesbury's brief text the blinded king's sight is restored after he sends messengers to seek the saint's forgiveness,[12] but Algar receives no such merciful treatment in Life B. Also, an error regarding the geographical location of Binsey, introduced unknowingly

10. Blair, "Saint Frideswide Reconsidered," 74-79.
11. Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, 15.
12. Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, 27.

by the writer of Life A, is corrected by Prior Robert in Life B, who obviously was well familiar with Oxford and the surrounding countryside.[13]

Significantly, some of the greatest differences between the Latin texts of the Frideswide legend are found in the incident of the leper's healing. Malmesbury's account does not mention it at all. Life A is the earliest text to record the miracle, presenting it in a very straightforward fashion:

> Cum autem ingrederetur beata Fritheswitha in supradictam urbem, occurrit ei quidam iuvenis plenus lepra, dixitque ei , "Adiuro te, O Frithesuuitha virgo, ut des mihi osculum in nomine Iesu Cristi." Illa, ut semper erat repleta Sancto Spiritu, faciens signum crucis dedit ei osculum in nomine Domini, et statim mundatus est a lepra.[14]
>
> [Blessed Frideswide had just entered the town when a young man full of leprosy ran up to her and said, "I beseech you, virgin Frideswide, to give me a kiss in the name of Jesus Christ." Filled as she always was with the Holy Spirit, she made the sign of the cross and gave him a kiss in the Lord's name, and at once he was cleaned of his leprosy.][15]

Life B, on the other hand, seems to be the product of a conscious and determined effort on the part of Prior Robert to give Frideswide the richer and more interesting history he felt she deserved, and this version of the leper's healing is significantly expanded:

> Repedanti ergo sacrosancte virgini, tota ilico in obviam ruit civitas et ecce inter *cler*i populique utriusque sexus congratulantium turbas, adest *iuvenis lepra*

13. Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, 12-13.
14. Blair, "Saint Frideswide Reconsidered," 100.
15. Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, 37.

immanissima adeo tabe et pustulis toto deformatus corpore, ut de forma hominis nichil fere inesse videretur preter exteriora liniamenta, velut in trunco ad formam humani corporis desecto, antequam artifex menbrorum ac sensuum, convenientiam distinctam imprimat arte magistra. Sic enim ulcera, sic tumors, sic iniquus color cuncta obduxerant, ut monstrum potius putaretur quam homo. Iste profecto non modo miserabilis verum extra modum horribilis, cum appropinquaret ad sanctam, quanta potuit voce horribiliter quidem rauca emisit sonitum satis confusum, verba tamen exprimentem, dicens, "*Adiuro te, virgo Frideswida*, per Deum omnipotentem, *ut des mihi osculum in nomine Iesu Cristi* Filii eius Unigeniti." O durum omnino sermonem, O dura sane postulatio! Petis, iuvenis leprose, virginem natura uti regiam sed, quia Cristi ancillam, non moribus delicatam, tibi dare osculum, in quem mares animo prorsus duriores figere abhorrent obtutum? Plane postulatio tua, ni fides eam magnifica proferri compulisset, forte putaretur insanientium improbitate prolata. Quidni? Homines, ut dixi, te intueri pre horrore nequeunt, pro sanie profluente tangere, pro fetore intolerabili tibi appropinquare, et osculum petis a regia virgine? Esto. Nisi leprosus fueris, attamen masculus, num tibi porrigere poterit osculum, que virilem ab inuente etate non novit attactum? Sed inquis, "Morbi mei intolerabilis estus, et non quem tu commemoras sexus, hoc me petere compellit. Credo enim quod ad tactum oris eius mundissimi, fugiet morbida immunditia corporis mei." O res miranda et seculis inaudita preteritis! Caritatis igne succensa virgo, contra opinionem omnium ilico accessit et *signo crucis* prius impresso, leproso contulit *osculum*. Facile etenim proculdubio sit quod a caritate vera procedit. Abhorrent

intuentes, et cum admiratione non modica rei exitum expectant. Stupendum plane miraculum! Non enim minus quam Naaman Siro septena et mistica iuxta sermonem Helisei in Iordane ablutio, quantum ad corporis sanitatem spectat, huie una pia cum humili devotione puelle sacratissime deosculatio contulit. Ore etenim virginis os leprosi tangitur, et continuo toto corpore *mandatur*. Cutis aspera ad squamarum modum solvitur et velud exuvie colubrine deponitur, ac statim fit caro ipsius sicut caro pueri parvuli.[16]

[The whole city rushed to meet her; and behold, in the joyful crowd of clergy and people, a leprous youth so disfigured with ulcers and tumors that he seemed more like a monster than a man. He approached her and said, in a raucous voice, "I charge you, virgin Frideswide, to give me a kiss in Christ's name." A hard request! Do you, from whose horrible form and smell hardened men recoil, ask this royal maiden to kiss you? An outrageous request, unless prompted by stupendous faith! If you were not a leper, but simply male, you could not ask a kiss from her who has never touched a man. But you answer, "The heats of my disease, not of my sex, prompt my request. At the touch of her pure mouth the impurity of my body will vanish." To everyone's wonder, she made the sign of the cross and then kissed the leper. Amazing miracle! What bathing in the Jordan did for Naaman, one kiss from the holy maiden did for this young man: as their

16. Blair, "Saint Frideswide Reconsidered," 113. Italicized words are direct quotations from Life A.

> mouths touched his whole body was cleansed, and his scaly skin became like that of an infant.][17]

Notable changes in this version, which I will use in my later analysis, include the emphasis on the leper's horrible appearance, the narrator's berating of the leper for his audacity in requesting a kiss from Frideswide, and the commentary on the leper's possible motivations for making the request.

Latin hagiographic texts, such as the three outlined above, were used as source material for the creation of the *South English Legendary*, which is a collection of *sanctorale* (lives of saints) and *temporale* (events of the church year) in Middle English verse. The *SEL* was first composed in the last half of the thirteenth century; the best estimate of the date of the initial collection is *ca*.1270-85.[18] The fact that the collection exists with some variation in over sixty surviving manuscripts, dating from *ca*.1300 to *ca*.1500, is evidence of its popularity. Composed largely in septenary rhyming couplets and characterized by simple, direct language, its intended purpose appears to have been the religious instruction of largely uneducated laity, accomplished via oral recitation of the legends; more recently, scholars have proposed that the collection may have been meant for "private reading or reading aloud to small groups in the homes of the rural gentry of western England."[19] Although the poets who composed the legends are not known, it is generally agreed that they must have belonged to a religious order of some sort, since the original source material of the legends was mostly in Latin. The poems in the collection generally expand upon the original narratives, often making comments or explanations to the

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17. Blair, "Saint Frideswide Reconsidered," 78. Blair qualifies his translation, saying that his aim was "to give the essential ingredients of the story, while condensing Life B's discursive style" (74).
18. Thompson, *Everyday Saints*, 189-90.
19. Thompson, *Everyday Saints*, 193.

reader in such a way that they become more memorable and accessible to the intended audience. Relative to other collections of hagiographic texts, Klaus Jankofsky notes that the legends of the *SEL* can generally be said to possess the following characteristics:

> a simplification of theological-dogmatic and hagiographical problems; an explanatory, interpretive, and didactic expansion of subject matter; a process of concretization through the creation of enlivening dialogues and scenes where the sources have plain third-person narrative, that is, dramatization; and a process of acculturation, the adaptation of essentially Latin sources to an English audience, thereby creating a distinctive flavor and mood, *Englishing*. . . . Its singularity consists in the new tone and mood of compassion and warm human empathy for the lives and deaths of its protagonists.[20]

Recent scholarship has also focused on the *SEL*'s emphasis on narrative and concludes that its storytelling function seems to overshadow even its supposed didactic purposes.[21] As we shall see, these aspects of the *SEL* are strikingly evident in the longer life of Frideswide, and provide an important contextual lens through which to view the expanded account of the leper's healing.

Conceptions of Leprosy in Medieval England

In addition to adapting the Latin sources of Frideswide's legend for a lay English audience, the poet was also drawing from a medieval worldview in which leprosy was understood symbolically. The symbolism was dual in nature, with one meaning rooted in the Old Testament and the other in early Christian hagiographic texts. Mosaic law treated leprosy not only as a danger to public health, but also as a representation of sin and spiritual disease; thus, a

20. Jankofsky, "National Characteristics," 82-83.
21. Thompson, *Everyday Saints*, 194.

leper who had been pronounced clean of the plague was required to have both sin and trespass offerings performed in his behalf.[22] Additionally, there are several incidents recorded in the Old Testament in which individuals are miraculously afflicted with leprosy as divine retribution for personal wickedness or rebellion.[23] These scriptural accounts, coupled with the natural revulsion felt by people of all classes when confronted by a leper in the advanced stages of the disease, led, in Carole Rawcliffe's words, to "the assumption that spiritual deformity would somehow leave its trace upon the body as well as the soul insidiously [finding] its way into religious and secular literature alike."[24] Many in the Middle Ages, then, assumed that leprosy was a natural result of sin and spiritual decay and that a leper's wickedness was unmistakably inscribed on his own body as a warning for all to see.[25]

These negative connotations of leprosy inherited from the Old Testament sharply contrast with strongly favorable representations of leprosy in hagiographic texts beginning in the fourth century, in which the ravages of the disease are symbolic of the suffering and sorrow of Christ himself. By the late medieval period, iconography of Christ included "images of His beaten and abused body, which shared many of the features conventionally deployed in the depiction of lepers."[26] Hagiographers and medieval theologians were also influenced by St. Jerome's somewhat liberal translation of Isaiah 53:4 in the fourth-century Vulgate Bible:

> Vere languores nostros ipse tulit, et dolores nostros ipse portavit: et nos putavimus eum quasi leprosum, et percussum a Deo et humiliatum.[27]

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22. See Leviticus 13-14.
23. See Numbers 12:10, 2 Kings 5:27, and 2 Chronicles 26:19-21 as examples.
24. Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, 48.
25. Peyroux, "The Leper's Kiss," 174.
26. Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, 60-61.
27. All Latin Bible quotations are taken from *Biblia sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, ed. B. Fischer et al. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994).

> [Surely he hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows: and we have thought him as it were a leper, and as one struck by God and afflicted.][28]

Jerome's interpretation of Isaiah's Messianic prophecy led to the long-lasting concept of *Christus quasi leprosus*: that Christ had assumed the most wretched and abject physical condition possible, through his bruises, wounds, and putrefying sores, and therefore had close affinity with the leper.[29] This concept was reinforced through incidents recorded in saints' lives, such as Francis of Assisi, in which the saint was asked for alms or other assistance by a leper, after which the leper either mysteriously disappeared or transformed into Christ and ascended to heaven.[30] Thus, service to lepers, including embracing, kissing, and washing their sores, became a way for a saint to access the divinity of Christ and show love to him, actions which are motifs in the legends of several saints. The Thuringian princess Radegund, who, like Frideswide, had founded a monastery after spurning a royal marriage, embraced the women in a group of lepers seeking charity, "and kissed even their faces, loving them with her whole soul."[31] Matilda, the wife of King Henry I of England, was found one night washing and kissing the feet of lepers; when asked what the king would think if he knew that her lips had touched the feet of lepers, she replied, "Who does not know that the feet of the Eternal King are to be preferred to the lips of a king who must die?"[32] Some saints were even portrayed as being eager to contract the disease themselves in order to experience Christ's suffering and rejection more intimately.[33] Thus,

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28. All English Bible quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*, ed. James Gibbons (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1989).
29. Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, 60-63.
30. Peyroux, "The Leper's Kiss," 173, 184-85; also see Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, 63.
31. Peyroux, "The Leper's Kiss," 181.
32. Peyroux, "The Leper's Kiss," 183.
33. Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, 59.

hagiographers constructed their narratives of saints kissing lepers to demonstrate that these kisses were a means by which saints might attain a more profound spiritual fulfillment.

Explorations of Gender, Authority, and Genre

In the longer *SEL* version of Frideswide's legend, the poet crafts the scene of the leper's healing using conventions not only of hagiography but of romance as well, thus creating tension between sanctity and eroticism in the scene. This tension is essentially rooted in the reader's expectations of competing genres: the young suffering leper approaches the maternal and compassionate abbess typical in hagiography like a courtly lover in a romance. When she kisses him, the didactic purposes of the hagiographic text are instantly subverted by the secular, sexual complexities of romance. The kiss thus activates two modes in the narrative simultaneously: saintly compassion and romantic love, and Frideswide's body becomes the nexus where generic tensions are instantiated.

In light of the prevailing hagiographic tradition and symbolism of leprosy discussed in the previous section, the longer *SEL* account of Frideswide's kiss is strikingly unconventional. When the leper makes his initial request for a kiss, the abbess tries to ignore him and continues to walk along quietly, rather than seek union with Christ through service to his earthly counterpart in suffering. Instead of viewing the request as an opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, Frideswide surprisingly feels great shame and seeks to avoid the leper altogether; this, of course, proves to be impossible because their encounter takes place in front of all the townspeople of Oxford. In fact, the presence of a great crowd of witnesses is the only detail that the Frideswide story shares with other medieval accounts of saints healing lepers. The fourth-century life of Martin of Tours records how the bishop healed a leper by kissing him in

the crowded city gates of Paris, but that text does not indicate that the leper asked for healing, and of course Martin is portrayed as kissing the leper's face and not his mouth.[34]

Indeed, it is the method of contact between the saint and the leper in Frideswide's story that stands out as its most unusual feature. In the New Testament, Jesus heals lepers with a simple touch with the outstretched hand.[35] Of known accounts of the kissing of lepers in medieval hagiography, the longer *SEL* Frideswide story is the only one in which a kiss is demanded by the leper and not offered unsolicited by the saint; it is also the only story in which the leper is male and the saint is female.[36] The leper's specific but unnecessary reference to "thi suete mouth" (147) introduces an element of eroticism that would seem to be at least a partial cause of her shame. It seems highly improbable that the leper would have made the same request in the same way had the saint entering the city been male. The overall effect of the longer *SEL* version of the healing is to highlight the gender of Frideswide and bring her femininity to the forefront; it seems to the reader that the leper requests a kiss from her, not only because she is holy, but because she is a holy *woman*. The intimate nature of the requested kiss between a woman and a man will bridge not only the gulf between holy and unholy, between health and disease, but also between female and male. Other hagiographic accounts of kissing lepers, as we have seen, involved the saint kissing feet or faces of the diseased persons; only in the Frideswide legend does the healing kiss involve mouth-to-mouth contact. Even Robert's Life B makes it clear that the saint didn't simply kiss the leper's face: "Ore etenim virginis os leprosi tangitur, et continuo toto corpore *mandatur*." Blair's translation, "as their mouths touched his whole body was cleansed," could be rendered more literally: "since the mouth of the leper is touched by the

34. Peyroux, "The Leper's Kiss," 180.

35. See Mark 1:41 and Matthew 8:3 for examples of Jesus healing lepers.

36. See Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, 144-46, and Peyroux, "The Leper's Kiss," 172-73, 180-85, for a detailed list of accounts of the kissing of lepers.

mouth of the virgin, he is immediately cleansed in his whole body." Only the act of kissing the saint *as* a woman, the poet seems to imply, can bring about a complete union, complete wholeness, and complete reconciliation between how things are and how they ought to be, in this case, the fragmentation of the leper's diseased body. The efficacy of this union is shown by the magnified scale of the healing in the longer *SEL* account, in which the leper goes from "swythe grisliche myd alle" (143) to "hol and sound" (152), a "vair man and clene" (153).

In fact, the expanded Frideswide story is a compelling example of how the religious worldview in the later Middle Ages is characterized by a yearning to bridge gaps and reintegrate fragmented parts into a meaningful whole. Caroline Walker Bynum has shown how Western European religious thinkers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were often concerned with how various body parts, such as pared fingernails, would be reassembled in the resurrection, and notes that "it was a period in which the overcoming of partition and putrefaction – either through reunion of parts into a whole or through assertion of part *as part* to *be* the whole – was the image of paradise."[37] Leprosy itself could then be seen as a powerful symbol of fragmentation, in which the sufferer, in a half-living state, is experiencing a preview of death's disintegration. The fragmentation is vividly manifest not only in the physical breakdown of the leper's body, whose horrible appearance is emphasized in Latin Life B, but also in the breakdown of community through his exclusion from the town's social environment.

In the poem, Frideswide's gendered and holy body becomes the means to satisfy the medieval desire for reintegration. Her status as a *virgo intacta* represents wholeness according to the patristic writers, who described the female virgin body as "a jewel, a treasure, a sacred

37. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 13.

vessel, a temple of God which was to be cherished and honored."[38] The saint's untarnished purity and her gendered wholeness confront the decay of the leper's body and restore it to completeness in so powerful and miraculous a fashion that the healing also expresses figuratively for the townspeople of Oxford the glory of the final resurrection. Although the patristic writers vigorously debated which body parts would be preserved in the resurrection, they did not consider gender itself to be a "fragmentation" that would be removed or recombined in resurrected bodies; risen human beings would retain their sex, because, "for reasons [theologians] could not fully explain, God's creation was more perfect in two sexes than in one."[39] So Frideswide's gender, unlike the temporary, temporal nature of the leper's diseased disintegration, is an enduring part of her identity and personhood and, as portrayed by the poet, becomes a vital component of her miraculous healing power.

Although Frideswide's gender informs and helps define her sanctity in the longer *SEL* poem, it also is inextricably connected to the shame she feels throughout the incident of the leper's healing. Whether the leper's request for a kiss was intended as a sexual advance is not as important as the fact that Frideswide, at least partially, interpreted it as one. The shame and hesitation she shows would indicate that she considered the leper's request as a possible breach of her vow of chastity, or at least inappropriate physical contact between an abbess and a lay man. There are certainly other possible explanations for her feelings, such as the natural revulsion one would feel when faced with the prospect of mouth-to-mouth contact with a leper; one can also imagine her hesitating, for modesty's sake, to perform a charitable act in front of the entire town that she would be quite willing to do in the private confines of her abbey. A telling piece of evidence that her shame was connected to her vow of chastity, however, is the fact that

38. Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 127-28.
39. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 230.

she was "sorely ashamed" *after* the kiss. Other reasons for embarrassment or shame would have disappeared once the kiss was complete and, indeed, would have been replaced by joy and gratitude when the man's leprosy vanished. However, after introducing ambiguity concerning the motivation and emotions of the participants, the poet intervenes in the narrative and offers his opinion that Frideswide was not guilty of sin "even though she was in a religious order." An important result of concluding the story in this way is that it emphasizes not only the femininity of the abbess but also her humanity. Rather than a sanctified caricature of unchanging benevolence, removed from earthly care and weakness, she becomes accessible through her display of uncertainty, shame, and embarrassment.

Additionally, one of the *SEL*-poet's changes—the initial delay of the healing—provides a link between the saint and Christ himself, thus absorbing the rich imagery and gendered symbolism of the "maternal" Christ that was prevalent in the late Middle Ages. The leper's cry for mercy evokes the account of the blind men in Matthew 20:30-34:

> 30 et ecce duo cæci sedentes secus viam, audierunt, quia Iesus transiret: et clamaverunt, dicentes: Domine miserere nostri, fili David.
>
> 31 Turba autem increpabat eos ut tacerent. At illi magis clamabant, dicentes: Domine, miserere nostri, fili David.
>
> [30 And behold two blind men sitting by the way side, heard that Jesus passed by, and they cried out, saying: O Lord, thou son of David, have mercy on us.
>
> 31 And the multitude rebuked them that they should hold their peace. But they cried out the more, saying: O Lord, thou son of David, have mercy on us.]

The similarities between this biblical scene and the poet's version of the leper healing are pronounced: the presence of a man or men with an incurable, debilitating condition; the incessant

cries of the sick for mercy; and the presence of a great throng of people. By presenting the saint as a Christ-figure, the maternal aspect of Frideswide's femininity is highlighted in addition to its sexual aspect.

Medieval writers, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Guerric of Igny, and the monk of Farne, saw Christ not only as the male Bridegroom and King of Kings but also as the supernal mother figure.[40] They associated Christ's compassion and humility in his ministry and his self-comparison that he wished to gather the children of Jerusalem "quemadmodum gallina congregat pullos suos sub alas" (as the hen doth gather her chickens under her wings) with the familiar experience of motherhood.[41] These writers' reinforced the maternal image of Christ by comparing the salvific emblems of his body and blood to a mother's menstrual blood, which was believed to nourish the baby in the womb, and breast milk, which nourished the baby after birth.[42] Conflating Christ's maternal character with the female saint, the poet of the longer Middle English life of Frideswide brings into conflict the compassion rooted in the saint's maternal self with the shame rooted in her sexual self. The leper constrained Frideswide, by her vows of devotion and piety, to help him; she was obligated, as a servant of Christ, to show mercy and render aid to all who ask for it. Her shame at being asked to submit to unwanted physical contact with a man is trumped by the leper's very public insistence on mercy. The kiss then becomes, for her, a stern test of devotion and surrender of free will that never would have been required of a male cleric in the same situation.

Why, then, did the poet make these changes in the longer *SEL* account? Some answers, perhaps, may be found in the history of Frideswide's cult prior to the composition of the *SEL*.

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40. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 157-60.
41. Matthew 23:37.
42. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 214-15.

Pre-Norman historical details of the saint's monastery are practically nonexistent; the reason, as recorded in a royal charter restoring the title-deed to St. Frideswide's in 1004, is that Danes fleeing Æthelred's extermination order in 1002 took refuge in the monastery and set fire to it.[43] Even before the fire, the monastery had apparently been converted into a minster of non-monastic male clerics. By the early twelfth century the restored monastery was refounded as a priory of disciplined Augustinian monks, and it was probably in connection with this change that Life A was written in an attempt to recover and memorialize the origins of both the community and the saint. However, because St. Frideswide's had been held for some time by Abingdon Abbey prior to the installation of the Augustinians, the new residents feared that the Abingdon monks had stolen Frideswide's remains. A fourteenth-century manuscript chronicles how the fears of the Augustinians were put to rest after a secret nighttime excursion to the church; not only did the excursion uncover the saint's remains, but it was attended by a miraculous extinguishing and rekindling of their torches as the bones were uncovered. Impressed by this heavenly sign and by the fact that the number of visitors and miracles at the gravesite had increased markedly, Prior Philip of St. Frideswide's had the saint's bones transferred to a raised shrine with great publicity in 1180. The Archbishop of Canterbury himself came to Oxford to perform the ceremony.[44] The translation of the relics and dozens of miracles reported soon thereafter seem to be the culmination of an effort begun much earlier by Prior Robert, who expanded the earlier Life A and corrected its faulty geographical references when he produced Life B *ca.* 1140-70.

When the *SEL* was first compiled *ca.*1270-85, nearly a century had elapsed since most of the healing miracles had been recorded at the shrine of Frideswide; the great majority had

43. Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, 18-19.
44. Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, 19-20.

occurred in the last two decades of the twelfth century. Henry Mayr-Harting, in a detailed study of miracles recorded at the saint's shrine, notes that in cases of healing, sixty-seven involved females and only thirty-two involved males.[45] This female-male ratio is highly unusual when compared to the shrines of other saints. Moreover, a great number of the maladies healed were related to the psychological effects of the onset of puberty in girls and sexual fear or rejection in adult women. Mayr-Harting concludes:

> One sees…in the Miracles of St. Frideswide the perennial dislocations and illnesses caused by sexual problems, compounded for women by their being regarded in that society as inferior to men and having far fewer alternative outlets for their energies and emotions.[46]

It is thus quite probable that the longer *SEL* life of Frideswide was composed at a time when she had acquired a considerable reputation for being especially merciful to women and quick to grant their supplications for relief, and therefore reasonable to assume that suffering girls and women had a long-established rapport with the saint and had adopted her as a patroness. One can then attribute to the poet the desire to strengthen Frideswide's cult by portraying her as being obligated to kiss a leprous man against the delicate dictates of her own conscience, thereby creating empathy for the saint in a female lay audience. Such a sympathetic treatment of women victimized by unwanted male advances would be consistent with a section of another, lengthy *SEL* poem, *Southern Passion*, which lauds the faithfulness of women and argues against categorizing them as "fickle and lecherous," since lechery invariably originates with men.[47]

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45. Mayr-Harting, "Functions of a Twelfth-Century Shrine," 197-98.
46. Mayr-Harting, "Functions of a Twelfth-Century Shrine," 198.
47. Pickering, "Defense of Women," 156. It is not known whether the poet who composed *Southern Passion* is the same who wrote the longer *SEL* life of Frideswide.

Another possible reason for the poet's alterations is that they may constitute a reaction against the existing religious institutional landscape in which conceptions of female monasticism had changed so much during the five centuries since Frideswide's death that she must have seemed to the poet like a mythical, unknowable creature from a lost age. The Benedictine reform movement that had begun in the tenth century, over three centuries before the composition of the *SEL*, resulted in substantial restrictions of female ecclesiastical power and influence.[48] Interestingly, the original community of St. Frideswide appears to have changed as a result of the reform: it was probably founded as a double monastery led by a female abbess but, as has been noted, was later refounded as a male-only monastery, eliminating the position of abbess altogether.[49] As the monastic reform movement continued into the eleventh century, it became less common for abbesses to attend synods (as the abbots always did) and for nuns to receive the same rigorous training in Latin and the scriptures as monks.[50] As a result, dynamic female abbesses such as Frideswide, who organized missionary work, advised monarchs, and ruled with complete ecclesiastical authority over both male and female monastics, had completely disappeared from religious establishments by the time of the *SEL*'s composition.

Indeed, the roots of an ideology that limited female ecclesiastical power can be traced to writings of early Christian Fathers, who depicted the ideal spiritual being as male and reasoned that in order to achieve relevance in Christian dialogue a woman must surpass her own nature and become "male," at least symbolically.[51] As examples of this concept, Helene Scheck makes

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48. See Scheck, *Reform and Resistance*, 83-85. A detailed treatment of the Church's attempt to limit female leadership and influence can be found in Schulenberg, "Female Sanctity," 115-21.

49. Blair, *Saint Frideswide*, 18.

50. Scheck, *Reform and Resistance*, 83-84.

51. See Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 55-56; also see Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 128-29. Schulenburg references St. Jerome, who said that when a woman "wishes to serve Christ more

mention of two tenth century saints' lives in which the female saint dresses and masquerades as a male monastic in order to live a more righteous and holy life; when the saint's true gender is inevitably discovered, the monks are amazed that a woman could be so righteous.[52] The Benedictine reform partitioned and excluded women from the realm of spiritual development, and these consequences extended through the medieval period. Female monastics were often denied access to the scriptural study and commentary available to male monastics and were increasingly confined to physical expressions of piety, such as fasting or other forms of physical penance and self-denial.[53]

Further evidence of ecclesiastical institutions limiting feminine influence is found in the conventions of hagiography itself, which tended to portray female saints as passive or reactive rather than active; female agency and exceptionality was often diminished or nonexistent in the narratives. Male hagiographers, already viewing their female subjects as "other" *because* they were female and therefore mysterious, were reluctant to portray the saints' worldly, everyday assertiveness, choosing instead to focus on "the women's proximity to the supernatural realm, a holy intimacy the men admired but felt incapable of imitating."[54] It is important to recognize that the Latin sources used by the *SEL*-poet to create his Middle English life of Frideswide were not written soon after her death in 727, but dated from the twelfth century and had thus already passed through the male authorial filter of experienced hagiographers who sought to portray female saints not as exceptional leaders and ecclesiastical rulers, but as resisters of male lust and victims of fleshly trials. Also, the basic narrative framework of the leper's healing had already

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than the world, she will cease to be a woman and will be called man," and St. Ambrose, who said that "she who believes progresses to perfect manhood, to the measure of the adulthood of Christ" (453).

52. Scheck, *Reform and Resistance*, 85-90.
53. Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 377-79, 395.
54. Mooney, "Voice, Gender, and the Portrayal of Sanctity," 10-11.

been established in the sources when the poet began his composition, and even his expanded version retains elements of female passivity. For instance, it was the male leper who dictated the terms of his interaction with Frideswide by choosing the manner of the healing, and, uncomfortable though she was with it, she is presented as unable to find any other option in its place.

In fact, the original Latin Lives A and B contain a far greater number of depictions of Frideswide's passivity than are found in the longer *SEL* version of her life. Life B in particular contains several instances in which the virgin receives instructions from a heavenly messenger on where to go or how to proceed, thus presenting her own agency as limited. The *SEL* version, in contrast, contains fewer instances of direct divine intervention, and the corresponding events show the abbess possessing a greater power of action. Anne Thompson notes that while "Robert's description [Life B] of Frideswide conspires to remove her from the human sphere,"[55] the following is true of the *SEL* Frideswide:

> Her travels are constructed as positive events, which she undertakes through her own volition, rather than being imposed on her by God and the narrator; she moves back and forth between private and public worlds without having these movements ascribed to fearfulness and self-abnegation.[56]

By returning the saint to an active role in her own story, the *SEL*-poet has reclaimed some small part of the lost female dynamism of medieval narrative and permitted a glimpse of the power and influence of the influential abbesses of Anglo-Saxon times. In this way, the poet likewise was successful in subverting long-established hagiographical conventions that governed the writing of female saints' lives.

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55. Thompson, *Everyday Saints*, 145.
56. Thompson, *Everyday Saints*, 151.

Although the *SEL*-poet assuredly did not think about texts according to our modern notions of genre, his subversion of generic conventions, not to mention his art, is largely achieved through the infusion of the hagiographic narrative with elements from another genre already popular among Middle English readers: romance. Whether the *SEL*-poet was an admirer of romances and was eager to try his hand at writing them, or whether he was simply trying to present the material in a form familiar to uneducated laity, is difficult to tell, but the influence of romance on the *SEL* versions of Frideswide's life is unmistakable. That the poet had access to romance texts is not only plausible but likely, since many abbeys had libraries that contained them, not only among the Augustinian canons regular and the Benedictines, but among other orders as well, such as the Gilbertines and Cistercians.[57] In fact, remarkably, at least two abbeys in the thirteenth century, and probably more, had installed decorative floor tiles that illustrated the story of Tristram and Isolde, whom Melissa Furrow calls "perhaps the most flagrant rule breakers in medieval romance."[58] If monks were reading romances and perhaps seeing representations of romantic themes while walking through their monasteries in the thirteenth century, it is not then surprising that romantic elements began to surface in hagiographic texts of the same period.

In general, the verse lives of saints found in the *SEL* are splendid examples of the "romanticization" of vernacular hagiographic texts, and the *SEL* versions of Frideswide's legend are no exception. In comparing the account of the leper's healing in the longer *SEL* life of Frideswide to its principal source, Robert's Latin Life B, certain elements found in the former have the effect of making it feel like a romance. While Life B draws attention to the disfiguring ulcers and tumors and the horrible smell of the leper, creating in the reader's mind the image of a

57. Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 223.
58. Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 6-8.

rotting, inhuman monster, the *SEL* version chooses instead to emphasize his humanity and courage. Though his hideous appearance is mentioned in passing, sympathy is created on his behalf with the newly added details of his having been sick for a long time and having tried unsuccessfully to find a remedy for his condition. This sympathetic treatment of the *SEL* version also extends to how the leper's request is voiced. While the leper in Life B makes his demand once in a "raucous" voice, the leper in the *SEL* version cries loudly and insistently for "mercy" and "help." Also, the narrator of Life B berates the leper for his audacity in asking the saint to kiss him in his condition and takes great pains, through an imagined conversation, to make clear to the reader that the leper is compelled to request a kiss by the "heats" of his disease and not because of sexual desire; if he were "simply male," his request would shockingly sinful. In contrast, the *SEL* version is resoundingly silent on the leper's possible motivations for requesting the kiss, and the poet only presents his judgment that Frideswide was not guilty of sin, as if her virtue were somehow in doubt. The resulting ambiguity is another means of creating tension between eroticism and sanctity, a tension common in medieval romances.

Even more striking than the narrative changes, however, is the poet's recasting of the language itself in the longer *SEL* version to make it more "romantic" than its source. In Life B, the hagiographer uses the verb *adjurare*, meaning "to conjure or adjure, to beg or entreat earnestly," to describe the leper's request; but, of course, this verb suggests that it was not a "request" at all, but a binding under oath to God.[59] The leper also addresses Frideswide in Life B using the word *virgo*, meaning "a maid, maiden, virgin," a term which was associated in the

59. *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "adjuro," by Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0059. The Middle English definition of "adjure" is "To bind (sb.) by oath (to do sth.); also, to entreat (in the name of, or for the sake of, sth. holy)"; see *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "adjuren," accessed May 2, 2012, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/.

medieval church with the elevated spiritual status connected to virginity.[60] The leper's strict charge to Frideswide while publicly recognizing her chaste sanctity thus bestows a sense of formal religious ceremony upon the leper's healing in Life B. In the *SEL* version, on the other hand, the leper's request could have been lifted directly out of a medieval romance, with the leper cast as a wooer in the courtly love tradition: "Levedi, bidde ic thee, / … have mercy of me / And cus me with thi suete mouth, yif it is thi wille!" The Middle English verb used here, "bid," is more versatile than *adjurare*: it can mean "To address a prayer or entreaty to (God, a saint); supplicate, pray; also, worship," but it can also simply mean "to request or beg (sth. of sb.)."[61] And the term of address, "Lady," is quite common in medieval romance. In addition, a lover in a courtly romance will often ask his lady to have "mercy" on him because of the suffering that his love for the lady is causing him. The idea of mercy is often expressed in romances using the Middle English word "reuth(e)," which means "pity, compassion, sympathy; also, mercy."[62] This very specific language of romance and courtly love had infiltrated religious texts by the thirteenth century, as can be seen by the following lyric that praises the Virgin Mary:

> Mi swete levedi, her mi bene [prayer]
>
> And reu of me yif thi wille is.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Swete levedi, of me thu reowe
>
> And have merci of thin knicht.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Levedi milde, softe and swote,

60. *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "virgo."
61. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "bidden."
62. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "reuth(e)."

Ic crie thee merci, ic am thi mon.[63]

A century later, Chaucer uses the same language in a completely secular context to undermine courtly love traditions, when Absolon tries unsuccessfully to woo Alisoun in *The Miller's Tale*: "Now, deere lady, if thy wille be, / I praye yow that ye wole rewe on me" (3361-62).[64] The *SEL*-poet's infusion of the formal language of courtly love into a hagiographic narrative demonstrates a knowing departure from convention and results in a complete recasting of the roles of the protagonists, with the leper as courtly lover and Frideswide as his love interest. Romantic language used in this way within hagiographic texts is thus transformational, able to confront and alter readers' expectations of social transactions between the holy and the afflicted.

With the addition of romantic language and romantic narrative elements to the Latin sources of Frideswide's legend, one could then wonder if the longer *SEL* life of Frideswide should be considered a romance. Many romances "involve the manifesting of identity."[65] It certainly can be argued that the virgin's kiss restores the leper to his true identity, at least physically, as the kiss returns him to a state of primal purity. The leper does not fit the usual requirement of romance that the protagonists be of royal or noble blood, but, as a social outcast, he does fit Melissa Furrow's model of a romance hero as an exile.[66] Despite manifesting many traits common to romances, however, the longer *SEL* version of the Frideswide story remains, at its core, a hagiographic narrative, and I would not argue that it should be considered a

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63. Saupe, *Middle English Marian Lyrics*, 52.

64. The connection between the Marian lyric and Absolon's wooing couplet is convincingly laid out by Peter G. Biedler in "'Now, Deere Lady': Absolon's Marian Couplet in the 'Miller's Tale,'" *Chaucer Review* 39, no. 2 (2004): 219-22.

65. Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 57. To support this argument, she quotes Robert W. Hanning, who said: "The great adventure of chivalric romance is the adventure of becoming what (and who) you think you can be, of transforming the *awareness* of an inner self into an *actuality* which impresses upon the external world the fact of personal, self-chosen identity, and therefore of an inner-determined identity."

66. Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 60.

romance—yet the poet has infused it with enough romantic elements that the reader is aware of the fluidity of the narrative, which depicts sacred and secular features simultaneously.

In conclusion, it must be remembered that the *South English Legendary*, while its author or authors remain unknown, was intended to provide straightforward religious instruction to the laity. Many of its poetic accounts of saints' lives expand events and dialogue from the original Latin sources in order to make them more accessible to an English audience. The longer *SEL* account of the leper's healing by St. Frideswide brings together three facets of medieval awareness that would have been familiar to that audience: leprosy, with its symbolism of wickedness and holiness; chastity, as embodied most commonly in the female virgin saint; and Christian service to afflicted and suffering souls. The tension between these potentially conflicting elements and the recasting of the legend using the language and narrative elements of romance makes the story more interesting and accessible to medieval readers than its earlier and more conventional Latin versions. The brief, impossible moment when Frideswide kisses the leper is simultaneously transgressive and transcendent, revealing God's power in the joining of holiness with disease, in the struggle between shame and faith, and in the union of woman and man. The shame and reluctance felt by the abbess regarding the requested kiss in this account also forges an important link between saint and laity, especially suffering girls and women. The poet's compelling humanistic depiction of the leper's healing in the longer *SEL* legend of St. Frideswide, with its profound explorations of gender and sanctity, makes it a truly unique and fascinating event in medieval hagiography.

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