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**Recommended Citation**

Billy, Dennis J. (1991) "Hagiographical Parody in the *Ysengrimus*," *Quidditas*: Vol. 12 , Article 2. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol12/iss1/2

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Hagiographical Parody in the *Ysengrimus*

by

Dennis J. Billy

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Considered the first great expression of medieval Latin beast epic, the *Ysengrimus*, a mid-twelfth-century poem of 6,574 verses, has been hailed as a masterpiece of lampooning monastic parody and wit. Composed by an anonymous author (probably a monk of St. Peter’s, Blandigny) in the environs of the then burgeoning Flemish city of Ghent, the poem follows the exploits of Ysengrimus, a ravenous wolf-monk of dubious intelligence whose unruly gastric and sexual appetites make him more often the prey than predator in his sundry endeavors. Until now, one area that has successfully eluded the attention of most *Ysengrimus* scholars is the poem’s highly involved parody of hagiographical motifs. Even Jill Mann, the poem’s acclaimed critical translator¹ and the one scholar who comes closest to identifying the major components of this type of parody, overlooks the peculiar hagiographical context of such features as Ysengrimus’s amazing regenerative powers, his strange mode of death, the semi-autonomous existence of his body parts, and the poem’s inversion of predator-prey relationships. Rather than Mann’s “anachronistic comparison with the world of animal cartoon,”² a more useful analogy would be relating these features to the medieval cult of the holy.
Hippolyte Delehaye, the Jesuit Bollandist considered by many to be the father of modern hagiographical studies, speaks of the tendency in hagiographical literature to amplify the torture of a martyr beyond the limits of human suffering. In his opinion, the best example in which the intervention of Divine Providence enables a saint to survive death-inflicting torture comes from The Passion of SS. Clement of Ancyra and Agathangelus:

To start with, Clement is hung up, his flesh torn with iron hooks, his mouth and cheeks bruised with stones; he is bound to the wheel, beaten with sticks and horribly mutilated with knives; his face is stabbed with stilettos, his jaws are broken and his teeth drawn while his feet are crushed in iron fetters. Then the two martyrs together are whipped with ox thongs and suspended from a beam; their bodies are scorched with flaring torches and they are flung to the wild beasts. Red-hot needles are run into their fingers under their nails and they are burned in quicklime and left there two whole days, after which strips of skin are torn from them and they are once more beaten with rods. They are stretched on iron bedsteads brought to a state of white heat, then thrown into a burning furnace; this last torment lasts a day and a night. After that they are again beaten with iron hooks, and a kind of harrow covered with iron points is set up and the martyrs are flung against it. For his part Agathangelus undergoes in addition the torture of having molten lead poured upon his head; he is dragged through town with a mill-stone round his neck and stoned. Clement alone has his ears pierced with redhot needles, he is burnt with torches and he receives more blows from a stick on his mouth and head. At last after having endured fifty strokes of the rod on several days in succession he has his head cut off at the same time as Agathangelus.  

Other less impressive but nonetheless imaginative examples of this motif appear in the Old French The Sequence of St. Eulalia (ca. 880),
in which the saint survives a blazing fire before she is executed by the sword; *The Life of St. Leger* (tenth century), whose plucked-out eyes and tongue cut clean from his mouth are restored before his head, too, is severed by the sword; and the *Life of St. Margaret*, who survives torture on the rack, an ordeal of flaming torches, and drowning in a vessel full of water before she, too, is beheaded. The purpose of such amplification was to emphasize the heroic nature of sanctity, to underscore the directive and intervening role of Providence, and to conform the saint’s death to the pattern of multiple tortures as found in the Gospel narratives of the passion of Christ.

Similarities between the above hagiographical motif and Ysengrimus’s sufferings abound. The tortures to which Ysengrimus is subjected go beyond the limits of human or animal suffering: Dominus Bovo’s congregation beats him (1.1039–64); Aldrada cuts off both the top of his head and his tail with her axe (2.35–38, 115); Joseph and his three brother rams batter him (2.531–606); Bruno flays him (3.951–52); the members of the animals’ pilgrimage smash him with cups of hospitality (4.615–49); the monks of Blandigny thrash him and even poke him with a red-hot iron (5.1042–1116); Corvigar kicks him with a newly shod hoof (5.1281–1292); Joseph batters him with his horns (6.99–106); Rufanus bestows a second flaying (6.203); a relic trap causes him to sever his foot (6.514–15, 550); Salaura and her progeny of slobbering swine devour him (7.433–42). While Ysengrimus displays throughout these trials the uncanny ability to revive both hide and flesh in true hagiographical fashion, the poem’s cyclical pattern of torture and regeneration emphasizes values contrary to traditional hagiographical intent. Thus, Ysengrimus’s fear of losing his pelt at court (3.477–78), his terror at the meal of wolf heads served on the animals’ pilgrimage (4.315–16), and his utter panic upon hearing the sound of Gerard’s cackling toot (4.799–802) all demonstrate the cowardly rather than heroic brand of his sanctity. He possesses neither the reverence for God nor the inner purity necessary for medieval sanctity. Moreover, Fortune rather than Providence assumes the directive and intervening role in the poem. Responsible for Ysengrimus’s longevity, Fortune prevents him from dying, makes him yearn for death (3.6), and does not allow him to be destroyed completely until, out of a pity born from cruelty, she spends her full force on his head (3.24–26). While the sacrificial nature of the Mass allows Ysengrimus’s death in the mock liturgy of book 7 to be
understood in terms of *imitatio Christi*, the wolf–monk’s role as the poem’s antihero transforms him, within the boundaries of this comparison, into a veritable Antichrist. When taken together, these examples confirm the existence in the poem of a well-executed parody of the hagiographical motif of multiple amplified tortures.

**MODE OF DEATH**

A particular subcategory of the above motif deserves special attention in the *Ysengrimus*, that is, death by decapitation. As seen in the various saints’ lives mentioned earlier and by countless other examples not mentioned here, the loss of one’s head to the sword represents more often than not the martyr’s final torture. Decapitation achieved this privileged position because it, more than any other manner of execution, symbolizes with concrete clarity the separation of body and soul that, according to traditional Christian belief, takes place at the moment of death. It is, moreover, the manner of death of John the Baptist, that Janus figure at the crossroads of salvation history, described by Christ himself as the greatest of men (Matt. 11:11), who represents both the last of the Hebrew prophets and the first of the Christian martyrs.

Given the hagiographical preeminence of decapitation, it should come as no surprise that decapitation plays an integral role in the author’s parody of hagiographical motifs. Aldrada’s unusual account of the suffering Pharaildis, whose kisses were scorned by the Baptist’s hissing head and who was blown forever into the emptiness of the windy sky (2.71–94), supplies the basic component for the parody. By referring directly to John’s decapitation (2.78) and by indicating that the saint’s anger plagued the poor girl even after his death (2.85–87), *Ysengrimus* is presented with a dismal foreboding of things both present and yet to come.

Aldrada represents *Ysengrimus*’s most immediate threat. To avenge his theft of Gerard and Teta she desperately desires to sever his head with her axe not once but countless times (2.11–19). She manages, unfortunately, to level in *Ysengrimus*’s direction but a single pair of blows: one succeeds in cutting off only the top of his head (2.35); another misses his head completely but severs his tail (2.114–15). Since the Pharaildis story comes from Aldrada’s own lips and occurs between these unsuccessful attempts, it seems likely to have had an inverse effect on the outcome of her attack.
Rather than losing his head, Ysengrimus loses his tail; rather than kissing his head on a plate, she winds up begging for mercy with her nose in his buttocks (2.124); rather than plaguing her after his death, he has, despite his unabashed ignorance, once again haunted her during life. The poem's dramatic reorientation of Aldrada's attention from Ysengrimus's head to his posterior section also plays a significant role in the depiction of his ultimate demise.

About midway through the poem and in the first episode of the inner story, Ysengrimus encounters the decapitation motif for a second time. Here the author takes up with renewed interest Aldrada's theme of multiple decapitations: Reynard and the other members of the animals' pilgrimage disguise a single wolf's head in various ways so as to give the impression that they are serving Ysengrimus a full-course meal (4.241-364); Gerard himself brags that he can blow off the heads of more than eight wolves at a time (4.325-26). Their well-planned hoax succeeds in frightening not only Ysengrimus (4.315-16) but an entire pack of wolves (4.797-802). If Aldrada's attack in the fishing episode connects the decapitation motif with Ysengrimus's nether hole, this section of the animals' pilgrimage not only associates it with multiple head loss but also places it within the context of a meal. Already suspicions are mounting that Ysengrimus's final torture will exceed the terror and pain of a single decapitation.

Salaura and her herd of swine verify these misgivings when they eat Ysengrimus in the mock liturgy of the poem's final episode. From the perspective of the decapitation motif, the particular form and description of his demise represent a convergence of the Pharaildis story, Aldrada's attack, and the meal served on the animals' pilgrimage. The following schema should clarify the various strains at work in the author's highly imaginative confluence of themes: (1) like John the Baptist, whose name even occurs on his epitaph (7.422), Ysengrimus is described as a prophet (7.363, 371); (2) like the Baptist, Ysengrimus plagues others after his death (7.369-70); (3) rather than the Baptist's anger ("ira Johannis"; 2.85), Ysengrimus's demon, Agemundus, pursues the wolf-monk's foes without relent (7.309); (4) through Aldrada's attack, the Baptist's hissing head is internalized and transformed into a farting posterior (7.313-24, 341-44); (5) the mock meal of the animals' pilgrimage foreshadows the mock liturgy of book 7, the only difference being that Salaura has designs on more
than just Ysengrimus’s head (7.441–42). The most convincing evidence of the author’s intent to parody hagiographic decapitation comes earlier in the poem when the narrator describes Fortune’s role in Ysengrimus’s death in terms of decapitation:

Ysengrime miser, numquam tibi candida gratis;
Pensauit colaphis oscula bina decem.
Nunc pellem scidit illa tuam, nunc prorsus ademit;
Non tamen, ut penitus destruerere, tulit,
Donec continuos misere miserata labores
Viribus est totis in caput acta tuum.

(3.21–26)

[To you, poor Ysengrimus, she’s never been favourable without exacting payment for it; she’s balanced two kisses with ten blows. At one moment she split your skin, and the next, she took it away completely. But she didn’t allow you to be utterly destroyed until, with a pitiable pity on your continual sufferings, she came down on your head with full force.]

Ysengrimus himself reiterates this theme just before his death: “Nunc pressere meum pessima fata caput” [Now the worst of fates presses upon my head (7.306, my translation)]. Such evidence demonstrates the author’s desire to parody not only the hagiographic theme of surviving death-inflicting tortures, but even the traditional form of hagiographical death itself—decapitation. Ysengrimus’s brand of sanctity, in other words, places him in a class by himself. He has moved beyond John the Baptist, the prototypical martyr, and deserves a more worthy ending to his earthly existence than decapitation can provide. Indeed, both the liturgical context of his death and his role as Salaura’s food make a comparison with Christ and His presence in the Eucharist more than likely.

BODY PARTS

The most obvious example of the author’s parody of a hagiographical theme comes in the attribution of an almost separate existence to various
parts of Ysengrimus's body. In doing so, he unavoidably associates them with medieval relics.

During the twelfth century the tombs and relics of the saints were still the most prominent sites of Europe's spiritual landscape. These sacred places and objects possessed the power of the saints whose presence they signified. They emitted, as one author states, "a kind of holy radioactivity which bombarded everything in the area" and represented but one of the ways in which medieval perceptions shaped the bounds of reality to make its unseen elements tangible. As a concrete link between the natural and supernatural, relics pointed to a dimension beyond time and space. Peter Brown, the well-known scholar of late Latin antiquity, describes this paradoxical linking of heaven and earth in an object whose physical dimensions are both tiny and compact as the effect of "inverted magnitudes." Here the unimaginable dimensions of an unseen world retained their infinite power and manifested their supernatural presence by means of their association with a visible but seemingly trivial amplitude of space. The dimensions of heaven, while inverted physically on earth, were nevertheless very much alive and at work in the relics or shrine of a saint.

Many points of comparison exist between Ysengrimus and this description of relics: Salaura characterizes him as already a saint (7.393); Reynard says that the saints have acknowledged him as their companion (6.539); his entrapped foot is becoming a relic (6.542); Reynard wants all of his body enshrined (6.543); Salaura and her swine make sure this wish comes true (7.415). Aldrada supplies the most vivid description of the semi-autonomous existence of his body parts:

Iam sursum senior plantas extenderat omnes,  
Poscere duinam more uolentis opem.  
Vult, ubi subsidunt breuioribus ilia costis,  
Partiri miserum rustica seu senem,  
Potro cohesurum nodo uiuace cadauer  
Cogitat et prisco posse uigore frui;  
Utque puer ruptum prudens intermeat anguem,  
Ne coeant partes atque animentur item,  
Sic reducem uitam coituris demere truncis  
Trino intercursu prouida uersat anus.  

(2.4958)
[At this point the old man had all his feet raised in the air, in the manner of one who wishes to beg for divine assistance. The furious peasant-woman intended to split the wretched old man in two, just where his ribs narrowed down into his groin, but she thought the corpse would reunite in a living bond, and be able to enjoy its former vigour, and so, as a clever child walks between the severed halves of a snake to stop the parts joining together and coming to life again, this far-sighted granny thought to hold off the returning life from his limbs before they recombined, by stepping between them three times.]

The powers of this living nucleus of flesh are also demonstrated in the curative nature of Ysengrimus's pelt (3.1180) as well as in its extraordinary ability to revivify (6.133, 163–64). The most conspicuous parts of Ysengrimus's anatomy to exhibit a separate existence are his jaws and teeth. While his jaws are likened at various places in the poem to a pair of weaver's combs banging against each other (6.8), to a metal sheet of rings beaten on an anvil (1.80), and to a forester felling a tree (6.9–22); his teeth are variously described as mattocks (1.81) and scythes (2.405–6) able to cut through bones as though they were butter (2.394). Ysengrimus's mouth can open wider than an oven (6.100) and swallow a plateful of pies with a single gulp (5.360–69). His mouth possesses a life of its own and lives beyond the bounds of normal control.

If we suspend the dimensions of normality, these hyperbolic descriptions come close to the "inverted magnitudes" at work in the relics and shrines of saints. The power and presence in these parts of the wolf-monk's anatomy, however, spring from a diabolical rather than a heavenly source. Ysengrimus's jaws burn with their own inborn flame (1.637); his cavernous belly is an infernal and bottomless pit (1.733; 2.548; 5.361–90); his maw has an untrusty, ferocious character (1.629–32). If the author's aim in accentuating the semi-autonomous existence of Ysengrimus's body parts is to present him as a walking reliquary, he does so by emphasizing his thoroughly perverted nature. A "dirty" power dominates Ysengrimus's living bones and flesh. Agemundus alone can be his demon; his relics are of a living but satanic sort.
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PREDATOR-PREY RELATIONSHIPS

Even the poem's inverted predator-prey relationships can be understood as a parody of a particular hagiographical motif. Brown outlines the sensitive psychic and social forces at work near the shrines of the saints in late antiquity and sees "a stable grammar of the impingement of the supernatural in society that stretches from the New Testament deep into the middle ages." In his judgment these forces expressed themselves in an "imaginative dialectic" based on various forms of reversal: the act of the unclean power responsible for the saint's execution was transmuted into its reverse; through the drama of ritual exorcism the possessed discarded their demonic haunts and were reintegrated into the human community; the sick were cured through miracles wrought by the potentia of the saints they implored; women were joined by the poor in finding at the shrines the respite and protection they failed to find elsewhere. Such reversals demonstrated how heaven suspended the categories of normality whenever the divine deemed to touch the sphere of earthly space. At the shrine of a saint this heavenly power made the weak strong, reclaimed the possessed, and invested the martyr with more than earthly strength. Through the effect of "inverted magnitudes" it accomplished for a temporary and sometimes extended period of time a suspended world of inverted relationships.

In the context of reliquary anatomy, Ysengrimus's perverted sanctity changes the character of these reversals. Satan rather than a saint—hell rather than heaven—touches ground within the contours of his flesh (1.567; 2.660; 3.1115-1116, 1135; 4.633; 5.981). Ysengrimus forfeits rather than gains the potentia of a saint at his shrine. Once the devil's predator, he has now become the devil's prey. A twisted version of the normally healthy inversion of relationships at a shrine manifests itself throughout the poem: Rufanus's restoration to health (the only cure in the poem) is performed against Ysengrimus's will and without his cooperation (3.1169-1170); feminine characters such as Aldrada and Salaura attack Ysengrimus rather than adore him (2.35, 114-19); 7.423-26); weaker animals such as Gerard and Sprotin pledge to him their hatred rather than their love (4.641). Even the particular form of the wolf-monk's death, when likened to the exorcism of Mark 5:1-20, favors slow and tortuous death rather than communal reintegration. Such inverted
predator–prey relationships reflect the author’s parody of what took effect most often on pilgrimages and at the shrines of the saints. The animals’ pilgrimage in book 4 has such prominence in Bruno’s tale for the precise reason of intimating to the reader that this particular hagiographical motif is at work in the poem. In this episode, the traditional medieval principle of free hospitality to pilgrims is turned into a vengeful free-for-all (4.443–583). The pilgrimage itself, moreover, is never even completed (4.821–24). When taken together, these deficiencies indicate the extent to which relationships formed on the pilgrimage (e.g., Reynard and Sprotin) and at the shrines themselves (e.g., the circumstances of Ysengrimus’s epitaph) have gone awry. Like the pillar of Saint Gereon, they too appear differently to the wicked and the good (4.25–26). They confirm the Ysengrimus as the literary antithesis (a veritable antistructure) to the well-established traditions of medieval pilgrimage and veneration at the shrines of the saints.

CONCLUSION

Written at a time that has been dubbed “the golden age of Latin medieval satire,” the Ysengrimus mixes uncanny sarcastic wit with amusing parody to achieve its peculiarly offensive, bittersweet appeal. This essay has demonstrated that at least part of this effect comes from the poem’s consistent parody of hagiographical motifs, which the author uses to depict a world devoid of the sacred, where things “spiritual” no longer have a place in even the most traditional bastions of medieval Catholicism. Given such sobering remarks, the reader must still beware of that “overestimation of satire” that prevents him or her from appreciating the more humorous side of the Middle Ages. The poem’s irreverent posture toward some of the most sacred symbols of the medieval West takes place in a cultural milieu that allowed its inhabitants to profane the holy, amusing themselves therewith, without satirizing it. For this reason, the medieval wit—which combines biting and humorous parody, mixes invective with frivolity, and blends amusement with contempt—is not always immediately accessible to modern tastes. In what for its time was an experimental literary genre, a Latin beast epic of the quality of the Ysengrimus could easily embrace criticism and joke, ridicule and friendliness, irony and sincerity and disperse them measuredly throughout
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its lines in a series of complex parodies of the type I have represented. If such is the case, the poem can be thought to celebrate at the same time it deflates various motifs of the medieval cult of the holy that it adopts with conscious exaggeration in the fated exploits of Ysengrimus, its wolfish protagonist.

NOTES


6. Ysengrimus’s reference to his suffering the same fate as Mohammed (7.295) supports this view, since the prophet of Islam was often referred to as the Antichrist by Christians during the period of the Crusades (see R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962], 42 n.).

7. In volume one of *Butler’s Lives* alone more than thirty-four saints suffer death by decapitation: Concordius (Jan. 1), Barbasymas (Jan. 14), Agnes (Jan. 21), Anastasius the Persian (Jan. 22), Juventinus and Maximinus (Jan. 25), Sabinian (Jan. 29), Cyrus and John (Jan. 31), Phileas (Feb. 4), Soterus (Feb. 10), Polyneuctus (Feb. 13), Valentine (Feb. 14), Juliana (Feb. 16), Elias and Jeremy (Feb. 16), Sadoth (Feb. 20), Serenus the Gardener (Feb. 23), Montanus and Lucius (Feb. 24), Victorinus (Feb. 25), Adrian and Eubulus (March 5), Perpetua and Felicity

8. Medieval theology preserved the Baptist's privileged role in salvation history by stating that he was cleansed from sin while still in his mother's womb, being thus among the first to reap the fruits of redemption. In some instances the imputation of innocence to the Baptist was extended to original sin itself (see Edward Dennis O'Connor, ed., *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958], 77-84).


12. Ibid., 44-45, 80, 109, 112.

13. The other major character in the poem referred to consistently (usually by Ysengrimus) as Satan or the devil is Reynard (1.21, 190, 227, 344, 748; 5.28, 349, 416; 6.162).

14. While the exorcism in this gospel pericope involves both a casting out of a legion of demons from a man into a herd of swine and his subsequent reintegration into human society (Jesus commands the man to return to his family, Mark 5:19), the final episode of the poem relates only the one-sided consumption of Ysengrimus's flesh by swine.