

Article

Comparative Hagiology and/as Manuscript Studies: Method and Materiality

Barbara Zimbalist

Department of English, The University of Texas at El Paso, 500 University Ave, El Paso, TX 79968-0526, USA; bezimbalist@utep.edu

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Abstract: Although the academic study of hagiography continues to flourish, the role of comparative methods within the study of sanctity and the saints remains underutilized. Similarly, while much valuable work on saints and sanctity relies on materialist methodologies, issues of critical bibliography particular to the study of hagiography have not received the theoretical attention they deserve. This essay takes up these two underattended approaches to argue for a comparative materialist approach to hagiography. Through a short case study of the Latin *Vita* of Lutgard of Aywières (1182–1246) written by the Dominican friar Thomas of Cantimpré (c. 1200–1270), I suggest that comparative material research into the textual history of hagiographic literature can provide us with a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the production of any specific holy figure, as well as the evolving discourses of sanctity and holiness in general. While this suggestion emerges from my own work on medieval hagiography from the Christian Latin West, it resonates with recent arguments by Sara Ritchey and David DiValerio to call for a materially comparative approach to narratives of holy lives in any religious tradition in any time period. Furthermore, I suggest that medieval studies, and in particular medieval manuscript studies, may have much to offer to scholars of sanctity working in later periods and other settings. Offering a view of material textual scholarship as intrinsically comparative, we may expand our theoretical definitions of the comparative and its possibilities within the study of sanctity.

Keywords: comparative literature; comparative method; comparative religions; critical bibliography; hagiography; hagiology; manuscript studies; medieval Christianity; religious studies; sainthood

In the century between Canon MacCulloch’s proposal of “comparative hagiology” as a discrete field of study and Massimo Rondolino’s call for its serious reconsideration, the study of hagiography has developed into an academic discipline on its own terms.¹ Countless serious and theoretically ambitious studies now provide more scholarly bibliography than any single graduate seminar could include.² Book series from American and European publishers encourage new theoretical approaches to hagiography while calling for expanded attention to global traditions of sanctity.³ Yet the role and force of the comparative within the study of hagiography remains—with a few exceptions—curiously undertheorized, despite the flourishing fields of comparative religions, comparative literatures, and their attendant professional organizations.⁴ Many possible reasons for this particular lacuna exist,

¹ See (MacCulloch 1908; Rondolino 2017).

² See, for example, (Brown 1981; Vauchez 1981; Heffernan 1988; Head 1990; Kleinberg 1992, 2008; Bartlett 2013).

³ For new book series, see Amsterdam University Press’ *Hagiography beyond Tradition* and Routledge’s *Sanctity in Global Perspective*.

⁴ For comparative studies in religion see, for example, (Clooney 2010; Clooney and Stosch 2018; Freiberger 2018, 2019; Freidenreich 2004); and in general the “Comparative Religion” series from Oxford University Press; see as well the

from the place of hagiographic scholarship within studies in religion and literature, more broadly to the difficulties inherent in academic approaches to the sacred. Yet, as Todd French notes in this issue, while the disciplinary restrictions inherent to academic specialization create a difficult terrain for comparative approaches to religious topics, they nevertheless “render collaborative work imperative.”⁵ In what follows, I want to focus on a specialized but nevertheless crucial facet of hagiography: the unique challenges inherent within the critical bibliography of hagiographic literature.⁶ I am mindful as well, here, of the historical, conceptual, and disciplinary issues raised by the term “hagiography”, long used as a generic classification with colonialist, patriarchal, and Christo-centric associations.⁷ I have chosen to use the term “hagiography” in the discussion that follows—with some caution—because I focus specifically on a methodology for approaching the literature of sanctity: the textual record of the life stories of holy men and women.⁸ In this relatively narrow terminological usage I depart from Sara Ritchey’s and Massimo Rondolino’s use of the term, explained elsewhere in this issue, to describe a much wider range of medial and conceptual records of the sacred imaginary, which variously combine in the production of holy identity and reputation. I agree with my co-contributors that hagiography in and of itself exceeds the textual, and I am mindful in particular of Jon Keune’s caution here, that we give careful nuance to the various media expressing sanctity, since “the word hagiography cannot but prioritize textuality in its very restricted sense of written documents.”⁹ However, for the purposes of this essay focused on materialist approaches to the literature of sanctity, I have chosen to use the older term hagiography for this very reason, because, in Ritchey’s formulation, “the *graphia* or text-production of the hagiographical process concentrates the *hagio* of the exemplary figure”. The material history of hagiographic texts—the various texts that lie behind the official or canonical versions of any saint’s life story in any tradition—demand rigorous and context-specific approaches to the oral and written narratives of their sanctity because it is those narratives that preserve and even—through the multiple configurations charted here by David DiValerio—create sanctity itself.¹⁰ A materialist approach to those narratives thus necessitates the technical methodology of manuscript studies and book history.

While the study of any particular saint, hagiography, or hagiographic tradition may at first glance appear singular, monolingual, or culturally isolated, in actual fact, the differences in cultural context between literary and spiritual traditions demands nuanced scholarly engagement with the complex balances of religious, political, and social forces that generate the cultural milieu of holiness.¹¹ Indeed, as Massimo Rondolino argues elsewhere in this issue, the term “hagiography” itself signifies “an analytical category for the taxonomy of sources that contribute to construct and promote the recognition of a given individual as a perfected being in the context of a particular religious theory of truth.”¹² The textual history of any single hagiographic text often encompasses a long and complicated history of narrative negotiation among speakers, languages, and versions of a life story, more often than not resulting in the type of generic diversity of sources discussed here by DiValerio, and able

Comparative Studies in Religion Unit of the American Academy of Religion. For studies in literature, see the rise in comparative literature departments in American universities since the 1990s, journals such as *Comparative Literature* (Duke University Press), book series such as Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature (Harvard University Press), and the ongoing work of the American Comparative Literature Association.

⁵ French explains, “our particular scholarly communities . . . are ill-practiced at—and perhaps ill-equipped for—crossing over traditions in the interest of interdisciplinary perspectives and compelling theories that might expand our ways of knowing.” (French 2019).

⁶ For foundational theoretical discussion of critical bibliography see (Chartier 1994; Febvre and Martin 1976; among others); for introduction to medieval manuscript studies see (Clemens and Graham 2007; Johnston and Dussen 2015); for examples of influential materialist readings of texts in manuscript that offer new views of a particular subject, author, corpus, or reading culture, see (Dagenais 1994; Bahr 2013; Lifshitz 2014).

⁷ See in particular the essays by Keune, Ritchey, DiValerio, and Rondolino in this issue.

⁸ (Ritchey 2019; Rondolino 2019).

⁹ (Keune 2019).

¹⁰ For excellent studies of hagiographic manuscript culture see (Kuefler 2014; Bcheiry 2018).

¹¹ For sanctity and holiness as communally constructed, see the essential work of (Brown 1981; Delooz 1962; Heffernan 1988; Kleinberg 1992); see also Rondolino in this issue.

¹² (Rondolino 2019).

to reveal a holy imaginary along more indexical axes, as Ritchey suggests, than we might expect.¹³ I suggest further that attention to the material history of the literature of sanctity—to the religious literature that Western scholarship has long termed hagiography—allows us to ask questions that reveal a comparative approach to hagiography from the inside out. What is the role of material history, manuscript studies, and print history in comparative studies in religious literature, and in particular in studies of hagiography? Can questions of critical bibliography be comparative? Or, to ask in another way, can such questions be anything *but* comparative? Self-reflective interrogation of the material history of hagiographic literature may be closer to Keune’s “comparative-prioritized” method than we realize, able to “disrupt normative readings” as French recommends, precisely because our narratives of the textual, material history of hagiographic literature remain largely unexamined—and unquestioned.¹⁴ Only through a comparative approach to the material record can we begin to ask such questions and work toward a more nuanced understanding of the literature of sanctity.

In what follows, I offer one set of perspectives on these issues by way of reflections on a brief case study. The text I will discuss—the *Vita* of Lutgard of Aywières (1182–1246 CE), written in the mid-thirteenth century by the Dominican friar Thomas of Cantimpré (1200–1270 CE)—appears to exemplify the authoritative textual singularity attributed to high-medieval Latin hagiography in the Western Christian tradition.⁵ This singularity, often imagined as textual, linguistic, and authorial, receives reinforcement through inclusion within the official canon of the Bollandist *Acta Sanctorum*, which offers a definitive, authoritative text of a saint’s life. As David DiValerio and Jon Keune observe in their essays here, comparative methodology appears to cohere uneasily with the apparently singular normativity of the textual, materialist orientation of hagiographic literature: the holy life story of a saintly person, assumed to be written by an authoritative, male, clerical author, most likely in service of canonization efforts.¹⁶ The textual history of Lutgard’s *Vita*, however, tells an entirely different story of narrative collaboration, textual variants, differing translations, and ongoing editorial intervention. It reveals this apparently singular *Vita* to be the product of multiple, sometimes competing forces, and demonstrates that only a comprehensive, *comparative* view of this diverse plurality can begin to show us the history of Lutgard, her sanctity, and her *Vita*. In its particulars, Lutgard’s *Vita* demonstrates one of the main reasons that comparative methodologies have had such small purchase in what otherwise remains the flourishing scholarly field of hagiography. Simply put, the official, printed version of Lutgard’s *Vita* in the *Acta Sanctorum* canonizes the text at the same time that it obscures its own varied and diverse material history.¹⁷ Through a comparative approach to the narratives and manuscripts of Lutgard’s *Vita*, however, we might not only recover some of that history and gain new perspective on the diverse influences that collude in the production of sanctity, but we can also trace the contours of a materialist methodology that argues for a more internally comparative approach to hagiography.¹⁸ Although comparative scholarship remains most frequently conceptualized as comparative *across* or *between* traditions, languages, and cultures, comparison *within* any apparently singular tradition of religious literature—comparison of the various literary, conceptual, and ideological forces that collude in the production of sanctity—offers valuable new insight both into the production of the hagiographic text as well as the production of sanctity itself.¹⁹ While approaches such as Ritchey’s analytical index or DiValerio’s formal vocabulary reveal narrative plurality within perceived

¹³ (DiValerio 2019; Ritchey 2019).

¹⁴ (Keune 2019; French 2019).

⁵ Lutgard’s *Vita* has been edited and published in Latin by the Bollandists (Bolland 1897) and in English translation as part of Thomas of Cantimpré’s *oeuvre* (Newman 2008).

¹⁶ On hagiographic scholarship as essentially comparative, see (Rondolino 2017, 2019). In Rondolino’s estimation hagiography not only essentially functions comparatively but also invites—even necessitates—reflection on that methodological quality.

¹⁷ On this point, see DiValerio’s discussion of how the reworking of hagiographic materials renders earlier sources invisible (DiValerio 2019).

¹⁸ See note 14.

¹⁹ See note 11.

textual singularity, comparison of the different actors (human and/or object) within the material history of a single text further reveal the multiplicity inherent within apparently singular traditions. The act of comparison, when considered as a fundamental aspect of a materialist approach to holy lives, thus invites theoretical reflection on the comparative possibilities inherent within studies of hagiography writ large: as method, concept, and discipline.

As I explain above, my choice to discuss Lutgard's *Vita* stems from the vast differences between the canonical version of her *Vita* as recorded in the *Acta Sanctorum* and the material record of that text before its "official" Bollandist printing. I am inspired in this textual focus by Sara Ritchey's work on late-medieval hagiographic manuscripts, particularly her observation that "the fundamental mobility of medieval texts . . . signified in ever-changing ways during the process of transmission."²⁰ Precisely because of its material variety and variance, that is, medieval hagiography often offers a particularly rich opportunity for a comparative material approach.²¹ A Cistercian prioress and mystic, Lutgard remains somewhat well known within circles of Catholic devotion as the patroness of the blind and disabled, a founding figure of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and an unofficial patron saint of Flanders. Her *Vita* is thought to have been composed within two years after her death by her spiritual friend and confessor Thomas of Cantimpré, a Dominican friar who had previously written *vitae* of Marie d'Oignies, Christina Mirabilis, and Margaret d'Ypres.²² While the *Vita* was very likely intended to promote Lutgard's canonization, she was never formally canonized; she remained popular locally, however, and a cult in her honor flourished for centuries after her death. While now little studied, Lutgard's *Vita* was much admired, often translated, and frequently recopied by medieval copyists and compilers, who saw her as one of the *mulieres religiosae* of high medieval Liège whose spirituality offered new modes of devotion and piety to high medieval women.²³

Lutgard's Latin *Vita* circulated in ten manuscripts, one of them (Brussel, Koninglijke Bibliotheek 7919) significantly shorter than the other nine. Dutch scholars have long debated the relationship between different manuscript versions of the Latin *Vita*. Guido Hendrix has termed the shorter version of the *Vita* the "primitive *vita*" or *Vita Antiqua*.²⁴ He argued that the Bollandists who had first edited the text had erroneously rejected the shorter version for invalid reasons—which included, in his view, a mistaken view of the shorter *Vita* as an abridgment rather than an original or early draft of the *Vita*. His comparative reading raised serious questions about the *Vita*'s authorship and reception. If the shorter version was indeed a true *Vita Antiqua*, he argued, than Thomas of Cantimpré must either have composed the *Vita* in parts over time; or the longer version of the *Vita* represented a collection of material written by a later author. This may not seem like a dramatic claim; yet when considered through the lens of generic scholarship, the argument takes on more urgent force. Lutgard's *Vita* has long been regarded as Thomas of Cantimpré's masterpiece. To accept Hendrix's argument would mean accepting the possibility that Thomas' final and greatest work might not have been either of those things; and more profoundly, it would mean accepting a view of hagiographic authorship as collaborative and communal. As many scholars have long argued, sanctity is essentially a communal construct, yet extending this communal impulse to the act of authorship remains a less enthusiastically embraced approach to the material history of hagiography.²⁵ A comparative reading of a single *vita*'s versions, however, suggests a communal mode of authorship more accurately reflecting the ways in which hagiography constructs its subject over time.

Since Hendrix's argument, however, scholarship continued to treat the *Vita* as the product of a single author; finally, in 1996 Jean-Baptiste Le Fèvre published a rebuttal of Hendrix, claiming that

²⁰ (Ritchey 2017, p. 1103).

²¹ I share Ritchey's view of medieval textual transmission grounded in Paul Zumthor's concept of *mouvance* and Bernard Cerquiglini's concept of *variance* (Zumthor 1989; Cerquiglini 1999).

²² For Thomas' complete *oeuvre*, see (Newman 2008); for recent analysis of his work as a whole see (Smith 2019).

²³ For discussion of Lutgard's piety see (Bynum 1987; Smith 2019).

²⁴ (Hendrix 1978).

²⁵ (Kleinberg 1992; Vauchez 1981; Heffernan 1988).

the *Vita Antiqua* was not in fact an early draft but rather a later abridgment—as the Bollandists had long ago supposed.²⁶ Hendrix’s challenge to the Bollandists’ editorial practices was clearly unpopular, and Dutch scholarship has uniformly accepted the *Acta Sanctorum* version of the text and referenced Lefebvre as the authority on the manuscripts (not Hendrix). As a result, the canonical force of the *Acta Sanctorum*’s editorial apparatus resists attempts at reexamination of the material history behind it. While on some level canonical persistence fuels the most fundamental goals of the Bollandist project in that it perpetuates a “stable” sanctity, that stability comes at the cost of a more nuanced understanding of the manuscript tradition of the *vitae*, of a clear view of the communal nature of that sanctity, and of precisely what *Vitae* such as Lutgard’s continue to represent in academic settings. When we place the material history of the Latin *Vita* alongside a comparative reading of its vernacular translations, moreover, new possibilities for understanding the text and its authorship emerge.

Lutgard’s *Vita* also circulated in manuscript in Dutch poetry, Dutch prose, and French prose. Each of these versions differs not only linguistically but formally from the canonical Latin *Vita*. The Dutch verse translation, the *Leven Van Lutgart*, preserved in Copenhagen Royal Library G.K.S. 168, consists of over 20,000 lines of poetry divided into stanzas of varying length, and an in-text dedication dates its composition before 1274. For centuries, scholars attributed this translation to William van Affligem, though within the last fifty years this authorial attribution has become more contested.²⁷ The thirteenth century manuscript translates only the second and third sections of the Latin *Vita*. Based on later references within the text to a lost first part, there is general consensus within Dutch scholarship that part one existed in verse translation at some point, though now lost, which makes the Copenhagen manuscript necessarily a copy of an earlier translated version of the *Vita*. The relatively early date suggests that translation of Lutgard’s *Vita* was taken up almost immediately after her Latin *Vita* began to circulate, which has intriguing ramifications for the relationship of the two different Latin versions to each other. The two different prose translations support this view of temporal contiguity and complex Latin textual evolution.

The prose Dutch translation, preserved in a late fifteenth century manuscript at the Brussels Library of the Bollandists, consists only of the first fifteen chapters of the Latin *Vita*. In these details, the prose Dutch translation is most similar to the shorter version of the Latin *Vita*—the version Hendrix argued for as the *Vita Antiqua*. In a series of articles in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Hendrix claimed that the existence of the prose translation confirmed his suspicions that the shorter version of the *Vita* preceded the longer version, and thus that Thomas of Cantimpré composed Lutgard’s life over a much longer period of time than generally accepted. The existence of this prose Dutch translation thus raises the possibility of an extended Latin translation informed by intermediate vernacular translation. This intriguing suggestion has yet to be taken up as a serious subject of study; furthermore, no earlier manuscript containing the prose translation is known to exist, which makes definitive knowledge of the relationship between the Latin *Vita* and the prose translation impossible. The same cannot be said, however, for the French prose translation, which represents a very early translation effort internally dated before 1248.²⁸ Like the prose Dutch translation, it does not include the full *Vita*; like the verse Dutch translation, however, it does include material from the long *Vita*. Hendrix and Josef Van Mierlo suggested that it may represent a lost, intermediate Latin version of the *Vita* by Thomas, and thus provide evidence of a longer process of hagiographic authorship that may have incorporated originally vernacular material.²⁹ This view of the vernacular translations, as potential contributors to the canonical Latin version of Lutgard’s *Vita*, specifically challenges long-held views of Lutgard’s

²⁶ (Le Fébvre 1996).

²⁷ Currently, the dbnl considers the question of authorship “zeer onzeker”, despite Erwin Mantingh’s attempts to definitively prove William’s authorship (Manitng 2000).

²⁸ The manuscript is preserved in a sixteenth century manuscript in the Leuven library of the faculty of Divinity; the prologue dedicates the text to Abbess Hadewijch of Aywières, who died in 1248.

²⁹ (Hendrix 1978; Van Mierlo 1936).

Vita as Thomas' magnum opus, and demonstrates the scholarly benefits of a comparative approach to material textual history.

I hope that the previous paragraphs have demonstrated in small part the revelatory power of a comparative approach to material history, by making visible how pervasive assumptions about Latin's anteriority and textual singularity might be usefully interrogated through a comparative, materialist approach. By accepting that vernacular translation may have played some role in the ongoing composition of Lutgard's canonical Latin *Vita*, we might take a new look at authorship as a communal venture that incorporated many more authorial participants than current scholarship allows. This type of materialist comparison, further, might combine productively with the analytical methods outlined here by DiValerio and Ritchey. Intersecting methodologies—and, often by extension, collaborative work, such as the work that inspired the essays in this issue—thus emerges as a valuable approach to the study of sanctity, despite its relative paucity in the critical record. In attempting to understand the pressures of canon and the workings of genre, we must always look to the material histories that sometimes obscure, sometimes reveal, but always shape those larger ideologies through which we encounter a text—ideologies which, as Rondolino and Keune point out, inform not just our approach to hagiographic subject but our very conception of hagiology, hagiography, and sanctity itself. Though I have focused here on a fairly conventional example of Western medieval Christian hagiography, I hope that these observations may inspire further reflection on any sanctity tradition, and on the academic discipline of hagiographic studies more broadly. Comparative investigation of the material history of hagiography—along with the collaborative, intersectional methodologies such investigation might inspire—can only augment our ideas about sanctity, authorship, and textuality, and allow us to chart new paths forward in our understanding of these discourses.

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