

Article

Saints and Celebrities

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Abstract: This article offers a pedagogical approach to introducing undergraduate students to hagiology by comparing medieval sanctity to modern celebrity. The bodies of saints and celebrities are important loci for the transmission of sanctity or celebrity from a person to the public and for the continuity of identity. Examples include St. Faith, St. Cuthbert, Kim Kardashian, and Marilyn Monroe. Using a comparative method allows students who are non-religious to better apprehend the unfamiliar practices and beliefs around the cult of saints and relics.

Keywords: hagiology; celebrity; Kim Kardashian; Marilyn Monroe; relics; comparative method in religious studies

1. Saints and Celebrities

Teaching religion in the US today offers a multitude of challenges, which vary greatly depending on the context in which one teaches. Some classrooms are very diversely religious, some more homogeneous. In my small college, the religiously unaffiliated are the largest group. My students may be “spiritual but not religious,” or they may have some beliefs about greater-than-human forces, but they lack religious literacy. For example, they know that Jesus is a very important figure in Christianity, but they do not know what a gospel is.

To find some kind of reference point for these students, I use comparison to contemporary culture. There are a wide variety of possibilities, but a comparison of the medieval cult of saints and relics with contemporary celebrity culture helps students understand ideas of sanctity that may be strange and unfamiliar and simultaneously defamiliarizes their own ideas of fame and its power. In the end, it helps them to see more specifically what medieval Christian ideas of sanctity entailed, because, despite the similarities, the ideals of the two time periods are different. My hope is that this can offer a useful and productive pedagogic model for drawing comparisons between other forms of sanctity and contemporary culture.

An easy way into this model begins with the human body and turns to the similarities and differences in the ways medieval and modern cultures construe the body, and their respective emphases on materiality and image. My inspiration for this approach is Caroline Walker Bynum’s chapter, “Material Continuity, Personal Survival, and the Resurrection of the Body” (Bynum 1992) on the cult of saints and relics and issues of the continuity of identity. In it, she places twelfth- and thirteenth-century theological discussions of the reconstitution of bodies at resurrection and the popular veneration of saints and relics in comparison with modern philosophical discussions about the body and popular movies (e.g., *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) to enlighten both sets of discourse. Like her, I find that discussions of bodies and identity are fertile ground for comparison. However, I also take seriously her point that it is important to move past the broader similarities to attend to the differences, such as the medieval concept of a soul–body dualism that is absent in modern philosophy (p. 247). Expanding on this, I draw on Bruce Lincoln’s argument in *Apples and Oranges* that “weak” comparisons are preferable to “strong” comparisons. Weak comparisons are “inquiries that are modest in scope, but intensive in scrutiny, treating a small number of examples in depth and detail, setting each and its full and proper context.”



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This sort of comparison seeks to avoid “the impulse to subordinate the particular to the general, to privilege similarities over difference, and construe favorite examples as the standard against which others are measured and interpreted” (Lincoln 2018, p. 11). Thus we can say, with Bynum, that identity’s relationship to the body is very important in both the twenty-first and thirteenth centuries, but that the arguments about it use very different parameters and are inspired by very different anxieties.

Unfortunately, it is not really possible in the classroom to provide the measure of depth and detail Lincoln recommends. Institutional demands may not allow an entire class on hagiology; therefore, the model I discuss below is one unit in a class, a unit that can expand or contract depending on the course’s needs. However long the unit, I emphasize the importance of context and show students where it is that the differences matter. The comparison does eventually break down, but where it founders is the very place where the professor can lead students to a better understanding of past and present, because, as Bynum (1992, p. 252) notes, those time-bound examples tell us the most about ourselves. We may share the same concerns about the survival of identity, but way we express those anxieties, and those differences can reveal the particular anxieties of our time and culture.

Both saints and celebrities are human figures held in high regard and whose bodies and material remains (bodily and otherwise) are highly valued and treated as qualitatively different from those of ordinary persons. However, the reasons why those qualities that are admired *are* admired has much to do with the temporal contexts of each type, teaching us about both the past and ourselves.

2. Relics and Their Containers

Relics and their enclosing containers, reliquaries, are a useful place to begin a study of sanctity, because it is their sacred quality that distinguishes them from otherwise profane objects. In the Middle Ages, beginning in the ninth century, they are significant foci of belief and practice, though the veneration of holy objects goes back to at least the fourth century (Brown 1982; Hahn 2010; Geary 1990). Cynthia Hahn defines a relic as “a physical object that is understood to carry the *virtus* of a saint or Christ, literally the virtue but more accurately the power of the holy person” (Hahn 2010, p. 290). Relics could be the entire body of a saint or portions of it, but they also could be other material objects. Non-corporeal relics, sometimes called contact relics, are objects that “have been sanctified by having come into contact with a sacred person” (Hahn 2010, p. 290). This transference of sanctity from body to object is a sort of “contagious’ *virtus*” (Hahn 2010, p. 290) or “holy radioactivity” (Walsham 2010, p. 12). The relics of the True Cross are an obvious example of this transference of divine power from a body to another substance. The sanctity of the saint’s body overflows its boundaries, seeping into other material objects.

The attribution of sanctity is the characteristic that distinguishes the relic from the ordinary corpse or fragment of a corpse, or a length of cloth from the cloth used to wipe the face of Christ (Walsham 2010, p. 9). A splinter of wood is unimportant unless it is a piece of the cross on which Christ was crucified. In the case of the saint’s body, that the remains of the “very special dead” (Brown 1982) are sacred is an inversion of their previous profane status. As Hahn (2010) argues, reliquaries play a crucial role in marking out the holy status of relics, distinguishing them from ordinary objects, and although they may constrain interpretation of the contents, “imaginative memory” (Remensnyder 1996, p. 886) may ascribe a range of meanings to it.

Decorated with precious metals and jewels, reliquaries take a variety of shapes, such as a casket or other relatively simple shape. Of these, the most fascinating reliquaries are body-part-shaped reliquaries, formed as arms or busts, among other shapes. Arm reliquaries were used in ritual, when priests would lift the arm reliquary and use it to bless the congregation. Practices such as these show us one way the distinction between relic and reliquary could be blurred (Hahn 1997, p. 27; 2010, p. 291). The body-part-shaped reliquaries also underline the importance of the body in understanding relics and their significance.

The corporeality of the relic is reflected in the shapes of these containers, reminding the viewer of the body or body-fragment that lies within. The relic—and the reliquary—link the viewer to the divine. They also remind the scholar of the complexity of matters having to do with the body. The body is an important site of cultural constructions of meaning, of discourses of identity and the self. The relics and reliquaries portray the promise and the reality of a body, transformed like the transfigured Christ, into a perfected whole. The fragments of the saints' bodies, scattered about in reliquaries and churches, are reassembled, and those who are less saintly hope they will be judged worthy and their bodies' material drawn back together. This hoped-for reassemblage generated many anxieties (Bynum 1992), but the underlying social logic that one's eternal life was embodied pervaded the cult of relics and of saints. Punitive practices of dismemberment and immolation are the flip side of this logic: the destruction of the body signifies the annihilation of the person.

In imparting this basic overview to students, a slideshow with images of relics and reliquaries is indispensable. Fortunately, these are abundantly available in digital databases of images. The slideshow I create includes reliquaries in that are formed in the shapes of body parts and those that are not. At least two or three of the images will be relic containers with crystal or other semi-transparent panes. A selection of the multitude of heads, arms, torsos, and the occasional foot shine out from the projector. Only the most sedate of classes can resist asking about the contents of the body-shaped reliquaries (e.g., does the shape of the container match the contents?). The slideshow continues with pictures of the relevant medieval pilgrimage routes and of the tympanum over the western door of the extant church. The tympanum depicts the Last Judgement, and includes many delightful details of heaven and hell and an image of St. Faith herself interceding for her followers. Depending on the course, the slideshow and its accompanying lecture and can dovetail with related topics such as the pilgrimage and the significance of sacred spaces for the pilgrim and others (Foletti 2022).

What images cannot convey, are the stories of the saints' miraculous and wondrous lives and deaths. A story that does double duty as a concise example and evocative illustration of holy radioactivity can be found in Bede's prose life of Saint Cuthbert, which relates a miraculous exorcism of a boy possessed by demons (Colgrave 1985). The story sets the miracle against the failure of a priest to exorcise the boy and the refusal of the other saints at Lindisfarne to cure him, because, as the text tells us, they wish to show how powerful Cuthbert is. The boy is terribly afflicted, tearing at his own flesh and uttering terrible cries. Inspired by the spirit, another priest takes some soil from the place where Cuthbert's corpse was washed, mixes it with water, and pours it in the boy's mouth. The effect is instantaneous. The boy falls into a deep sleep and when he wakes up in the morning he has recovered. He and his father give thanks, many times, then go home.

This miracle story evokes the inversion of purity and impurity that is common in the cult of relics. In this case, it inverts the impure qualities of dirt imbued with the wash-water of a corpse. Dirt is not food; it is not clean. Corpses are not clean nor is the water that washed them; one does not eat them. However, the water from a saint's body is clean and pure; if one consumes the dirt soaked in that water, it can heal. There is a great deal in this story that this summary cannot contain. For example, it is one of the earliest examples of healing through the mixing of soil and water and an example Bede's use of cosmological and Christological symbolism (Rowley 2023, p. 247). However, for pedagogical purposes, it is usually easy for contemporary American students to understand, for whom associations of uncleanness with dirt and corpses is quite strong. The miracle story itself is short enough to assign as one of several readings to accompany the lecture and class discussion.

3. Visualizing Sanctity

Another saint who provides a rich set of resources for classroom use is St. Faith. We have a robust number of texts related to the saint that include a very brief *vita*, four books of miracles, and other texts, collected in *The Book of Sainte Foy* (Sheingorn 1995). Supplementing these are her reliquary and the religious buildings in Conques, France,

where her relics and reliquary are still held. The reliquary is striking. It represents the saint's entire body; as Pamela Sheingorn notes, at the time of its creation in the ninth century, this kind of three-dimensional sculpture was uncommon outside of southern France, and it drew skepticism and distrust. Nevertheless, St. Faith became famous for one miracle in particular: restoring a man's eyeballs after they had been ripped out (p. 10). One can imagine that in a period when the wholeness of body was linked to resurrection and salvation, the regeneration of a body part was especially significant. Variations of this miracle recur, and there are many other miracles that present St. Faith as a patron who protects her devotees and monks, is a conduit of divine vengeance, and even requires rich ladies to donate jewelry.

The saint's *Passio* is a brief, accessible *vita*. Set in the fourth-century in Agen, the earliest surviving manuscript dates from the tenth century (Sheingorn 1995, p. 21). The focus of the narrative is her martyrdom. The text describes St. Faith wearing a bright white garment, which is associated with her virginity and faith in Christ. The beauty of her mind and body are also singled out, as is her youth and noble status. Another soon-to-be martyr, Caprais, watching St. Faith's execution from afar, has a vision of her garbed in a white, shining garment as a dove descends from a cloud and places a bejeweled crown on her head (Sheingorn 1995, p. 35). Her only act in the text is to refuse to worship the Roman goddess Diana. My students often assume that a saint must have done an abundance of good deeds in their lives, and therefore the paucity of actions in the narrative puts them in a position where they must take seriously the positive valorization of martyrdom in the text and the physical attributes that signal her sanctity.

St Faith's reliquary reinforces her textual appearance. It is approximately four feet high, and the eyes are a prominent feature as is the elaborate crown. Like all reliquaries, it is covered with precious metal and gems, and it also has jewelry that has been added in a process of accretion. The reflection of light from the reliquary echoes the imagery of light in the *Passio* and is associated with the divine light of heaven (Dahl 1978). The overall effect is an association of the light with the sacred that is both redundant and reinforcing. Foletti argues that pilgrims' sensory experience of the space also included smell, sound, and temperature (Foletti 2022, p. 178). Although his interest is in the construction of the sacred space, it is also possible to read this immersive experience in light of Spencer-Hall's discussion of "ecstatic cinema" (Spencer-Hall 2017, pp. 16–18). Furthermore, the saint, as an inhabitant of both her future, saved body, her relics, and the reliquary, could be met during a procession through the surrounding area. At this point in teaching about the cult of saints and relics, students often find the material alienating. They are predisposed to dismiss the Middle Ages as a period of ignorance and to relegate the cult of saints and relics to the category of incomprehensible and credulous. This is where comparison can help.

The saint's appearance offers the first opportunity for comparison. To help them decode the imagery of the *Passio*, I have students draw a picture of her and create a list of her saintly attributes. Staying within the religious context but moving out of the limited time frame of the tenth-century text, an obvious comparandum is the transfiguration of Christ. In discussion, we look at the two texts—or two drawings—side by side to see how the transformation of Christ's body and its white and shining garment is unmistakably similar to the radiant raiment of St. Faith. Having established that, we move to a discussion of the contrasts of light and darkness that appear in popular culture as well. A reference to the now-classic *Star Wars* movies introduces students to the concept that holy people glow. Students usually can supply other, more recent examples of the overlap of light with bodies that are holy and/or powerful. This relatively easy comparison on the basis only of the imagery of light is the first step in comparing medieval and modern bodies.

4. LifeGem: Modern Relic

However, this very broad comparison does not ameliorate the alienating impact of the relics. Before moving to a narrower, "weak" comparison, it can help to briefly discuss a parallel in modern practices of dealing with the dead: LifeGem. This is the name of

both the company and the product they sell to the families of the deceased. A LifeGem is a “diamond” that is made with some portion of the deceased body. The company’s “How to Order” page indicates that one may use a lock of hair or a portion of the cremains. LifeGems come in several sizes, cuts, and colors, including blue, green, yellow, red, and clear or colorless. They are depicted on the home page mounted on finger rings, usually as a single stone on a band.

The website emphasizes the remembrance of the departed and comfort. The page “Why Choose Life Gem?” asserts that the LifeGem is a “memorial to [your loved one’s] unique life. It is a way to embrace their memory day by day. It is comfort and support when and where you need it.” It goes on to note the “comfort and peace” clients feel when “holding the LifeGem of their loved one near.” Much of the language on this webpage encourages the reader, and potential customer, to think of LifeGem as the best memorial and tribute to the deceased and as one that is eternal. The repetition of terms such as “everlasting” culminate with the statement: “Your LifeGem memorial diamond will provide a lasting memory that endures just as a diamond does. Forever.” One hopes that these promises are accurate, considering the jewels cost between \$2490 and \$19,000 (according to the “LifeGem Prices” webpage), which is far more than ordinary lab-produced gems (LifeGem 2016).

Students usually find this LifeGem fascinating, and they learn from it that it is not just medieval people who want physical contact with the bodies of the deceased. Other examples could be used, such as Victorian hair jewelry or modern jewelry designed to hold cremains. Methodologically, the problem is that LifeGem is not widely known or used. Their website only claims “thousands” of customers. Despite this, it does defamiliarize students with their own culture, and it opens up space to talk about funerary practices more generally. Often a student will note that embalming is a rather strange practice, and it is very widespread, even required before cremation in some places. The bodies of the ordinary dead are not incorruptible like St. Cuthbert’s, but we would like to think that they are. This is an opportunity for students to see a crucial difference between medieval and modern ideas of the body. The medieval person would have been horrified by the destruction of the body through cremation and found no comfort in it. While LifeGem’s website suggests that the person remains present in the jewel, neither they nor anyone else claims that the gem can perform miracles or that it has some sort of agency. These are differences that cannot be ignored.

5. Celebrities

I suggest that a better comparison is to the high valorization of individuals of today—that is, to look to those people in contemporary culture who receive a very high degree of attention, time, and money. In the twenty-first century, celebrities are the individuals who fascinate audiences and are the focus of their time, attention, and money.

Comparisons of sanctity and celebrity are not new; they can be found in studies of explicit or official religious discourses and practices, such as stigmata, and of seemingly non-religious pilgrimages and shrines (e.g., Van Osselaer et al. 2021; Margry 2008). Many of these studies limit celebrity to the modern era of mass media, which often is considered necessary for celebrity to exist (Rojek 2010). Perhaps because of this stress on modern media, comparisons of medieval Christian saints to celebrity and film more broadly are fewer in number (e.g., Kleinberg 2011; Robinson 2017; McGinn 1998; Spencer-Hall 2017). Kleinberg (2011) asserts that celebrity did exist in the medieval period with certain figures such as Fulk of Neuilly, and points to the excessively exuberant behavior of the saints’ fans as evidence. Robinson (2017) writes that he created a “slide-show that juxtaposed certain key figures in popular culture with images of more conventional religious devotion” in order to forge a connection with viewers of the exhibition “Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe” at the British Museum (p. 119). Spencer-Hall’s *Medieval Saints and Modern Cinema* offers a robust comparison of the Holy Women of Liège (and a few others) and modern exemplars using film studies and related media studies to

shed light on both. Her work, in drawing medieval and modern alongside one another, most closely resembles what I describe below as a means of helping students understand medieval sanctity. However, the focus of my comparison is on the relics, “holy radiation,” and the blurry line between body and material object, which are less her concern.

In order to address these vast issues of sanctity, body, and identity, engage in a “weaker” comparison, using a celebrity with staying power and no small measure of bodily capital: Kim Kardashian. First, a word about the choice of this particular celebrity. Whereas LifeGem is relatively unknown, Kardashian—and her family—are ubiquitous in today’s culture. Students are readily familiar with her. Like other reality TV stars, her public appearances are key to maintaining the fame that shapes and reshapes her brand and her body (sometimes in a very literal sense), which in turn brings money and sales to her businesses. Deftly weaving social media, television, and other media, Kim Kardashian is an excellent example of celebrity. It is common to say that she is “famous for being famous” and not for a career in acting or in music. Whether this is a distinction that holds up is another matter. It assumes, among other things, that reality tv does not require acting and that any publicity stunt will make someone famous. There is a lot going on with Kim Kardashian, more than a short article such as this one can summarize, but this makes her an excellent subject for the discussion of fame in twenty-first-century America.

The specific moment in her career I have selected is one of telling controversy: at the 2022 Met Gala, Kardashian wore a dress that had belonged to Marilyn Monroe. The light beige dress embellished with Swarovski crystals was designed by Jean Louis for Monroe, who wore it in 1962 when she sang “Happy Birthday” to President John F. Kennedy. The dress was form-fitting for Monroe, who reportedly had to be sewn into the dress. Kardashian, who often alters her appearance to fit her current look, had her hair dyed a platinum blonde that was almost white and pulled tightly back into a bun. She coordinated other items in her outfit to further mimic Monroe in a kind of fashion play sometimes called “Marilyn drag” (Rivieccio 2022). The assimilation of herself to Monroe is part of her celebrification, a process of self-manufacture Spencer-Hall identifies as integral to the medieval creation of medieval sanctity (Spencer-Hall 2017, p. 117). Kardashian’s arrival on the red carpet sparked considerable interest, not simply because she was wearing that particular dress, but because her previous appearances have also been memorable. Although one of the earliest reports of her arrival misidentified the dress as a “version” of Monroe’s (Friedman 2022), it was the original dress, and some Marilyn fans had a problem with this.

The criticisms—and controversy—over this dress choice were sparked by an Instagram post from Scott Fortner, a collector of Marilyn Monroe memorabilia and creator of a website, The Marilyn Collection (Fortner 2022). Fortner was reposting pictures of the dress taken by ChadMichael Morrisette after the gala; these pictures showed damage purportedly caused by Kardashian wearing the dress. Paired with before and after shots, his post was picked up by others and led to many news and social media stories about the damage. The initial news coverage of the gala merely reported on her appearance as the sort of sensation Kardashian often creates and curates. The story of the damage to the dress drew wide reporting, from *US Weekly* to *Forbes*. Initially, neither Kardashian nor the dress’s owner (Ripley’s Believe It or Not! Museum in Orlando, Florida) responded. About a week later, Kardashian was interviewed about it on *The Today Show*, and she insisted that she had not damaged the dress. Ripley’s also issued a statement saying she had not damaged it.

The more benign objection to Kardashian wearing the dress is that it is fragile, as are all textiles, and difficult to preserve, even in a museum setting. Anyone wearing a sixty-year-old dress, even for a few minutes as Kardashian did (she changed into a replica after the red carpet), is very likely to cause some sort of damage. However, the objections raised went further. Most revolved around the fact that this was *Marilyn’s* dress. Some criticism was broader or vaguer. One criticism leveled by Morrisette was that the dress is “a national treasure” (Grindell 2022). Others made similar statements that the dress was of historic value and should have been better protected by Ripley’s. This category of

objection characterized the dress as somehow belonging to some vaguely defined group or posterity, and not its owner's private property. These remarks associate the mythos of Marilyn Monroe with America, and therefore its belonging to some "us".

By and large, though, the problem was that Kardashian wore Marilyn Monroe's dress. Bob Mackie, one of the dress's designers, said in an interview that the dress was "designed for Marilyn" who was a "goddess" and that "no one else should be wearing it." Kardashian wearing it, he said, was "a big mistake" (Lenker 2022). Commenters on Forstner's Instagram post expressed anger and disgust. One wrote: "This is Marilyn's dress, now it is TAINTED, I can't believe KK thought she was good enough for it." Others emphasized differences in the women's "body types," often singling out the shape of Kardashian's derriere, even though comparisons between the two women are often favorable to Kardashian (Englund 2023). Some went further, using language that disparaged Kardashian based on her perceived racial identity.

The point here, and for the classroom is, if it is just a dress, who cares? If it were merely an antique, some people would be upset, but not many. If it were a lesser-known actor's dress, some would care, but not many. Obviously, it matters because it is Marilyn Monroe's dress, she is held by many to be the celebrity ideal, and Marilyn as a symbol is the center of its own industry. Deepening the issue for many are the associations with *this* dress. Many, including Kardashian, describe it as special. In fact, the dress's distinction as Marilyn's is crucial to Kardashian's celebrification, which, as Spencer-Hall shows, is an ongoing and evolving process (Spencer-Hall 2017, pp. 173–87). It is the "happy birthday Mr. President dress," the first "naked dress" that caused a sensation when Monroe first wore it. It is a dress Monroe wore not long before her death. To put another person's body into that dress is to disturb and disrupt those associations. To damage the dress in the process somehow damages those associations irreparably. The dress will never be the same again. A *USA Today* headline, quoting Morrisette, suggested it had been "ruined" (Trepány 2022).

As is probably obvious at this point, I am suggesting that the dress operates much like a contact relic. Some aspect of Marilyn Monroe's identity, which we call her celebrity, has "transferred" to the dress, a dress made for her, that she wore on a famous occasion. In the absence of Monroe herself, the dress stands in for her and her celebrity. The impact of putting another body in it is to disrupt the investiture of celebrity in the dress. One commenter on Fortner's Instagram post put it this way: "she's [Kardashian] wearing the dress of the biggest star to grab a piece of her real stardust." Another person commented on a *Hollywood Reporter* YouTube video that the dress would need "major sanitization." This and similar comments bring the body and ideas of purity back into the picture. If we think of the dress as the relic of a Hollywood star, then its purity has been despoiled by another celebrity who is construed as dirty. The source of the purity and impurity is the body, which imbues these purported forces into the material object. Kardashian hopes to absorb some of the celebrity aura for herself, but fans of the late Monroe object. However, everyone agrees that the dress carries some value as a conduit of celebrity and purity.

The other measure of its value is the response fans have to it and to other celebrity memorabilia. To take another example, home run baseballs are imbued with the identity of the baseball player and the event of the home run itself. Better yet is the autographed home run baseball, the inscription further tying together an otherwise banal object with the fame of the athlete. The autographed photo is more valuable than the unsigned, the imprint of the signature imparting more of the person and their fame. Not only may these objects have monetary value, but they also have a sort of "sentimental" value, a feeling of "specialness" and a connection to the person linked to the object. In class discussions, I may ask students to think about what it would be like to meet a famous athlete or internet influencer. What would their emotional response be? Would it be exciting? Would they want a selfie with the celebrity?

6. Side-by-Side: St. Faith, Kim, and Mary

These questions can be the beginning of an unstructured discussion in class, but they also lend themselves to group work and writing assignments. In small groups, or working independently, students engage in their own comparison of the image of Kardashian in the Marilyn Monroe dress with their previously created drawing of St. Faith. Breaking the process down to begin with smaller questions can guide students toward this goal, such as: what colors dominate in each image and which part of the body is emphasized? An additional comparison to images of Mary Magdalene can elucidate crucial differences between medieval and modern representations of the female body. According to medieval elaborations of her life, Mary Magdalene made her way to France, where she lived as a hermit, clothed only in her hair. She appears this way in numerous medieval images, including in depictions of her ascension into heaven. In some, her hair cascades down in thick waves to enclose her body. In others, the ends of the waves curl up from her body while still obscuring every part of her but her head, hands, and feet. In a stark contrast, in Titian's painting of Mary, her long, flowing hair parts strategically to reveal full, rounded breasts. Her arms cross her body, one hand gathering a swath of hair up to cover her groin, a part of her body that the frame of the painting does not quite exclude. The contrast between the eroticized and demure Magdalene can open up questions about gender and the sexualization of women's bodies. In turn, those questions could lead the conversation back around to the bodies of Kardashian, Monroe, and St. Faith. These are broad questions that may work to be more effectively answered in a written assignment. In classes where students may be expected to engage in self-reflection, a portion of that essay could ask students if they feel there is a celebrity, athlete, or other famous figure, whom they admire or idolize. Students could describe the figure's outstanding qualities and the connection, if any, they feel toward the figure. Perhaps the prompt could be, "who is a contemporary artist, actor, or similar sort of person whom you would be really excited to meet? What about them makes them special to you?" Students can submit an image of their celebrity with the essay to supplement their written discussion.

7. Self and Image

Taking a moment to think of one's self in relation to a celebrity or a saint brings us back around to the selfie in modern celebrity culture. Certainly, Kardashian knows the value of the selfie in cultivating and maintaining her star power; she has also collected hers in a book, *Selfish* (Spencer-Hall 2017, p. 178). Photos are also important for pilgrims who journey to the roadside memorial for Stephen Prefontaine, where they take photos of themselves with the photograph on a memorial stone placed at the site (Wojcik 2008, p. 211).

The selfie or photo with a celebrity brings us to the point where the comparison of medieval saints and modern celebrities starts to break down. The selfie with a celebrity records a moment of physical contact, memorializing the event, but images themselves have become more important. For example, a Mickey Mantle baseball card, albeit a very rare one, is an object of great monetary value. However, it has no connection to Mantle's body, except as an image of it. Marilyn Monroe's image has become an object of value, a brand, to be sold and resold simply because it looks like her. Medieval relics need to be the bodily remains or to have been in contact with that body or its remains for the "holy radiation" to be transferred. Put differently, the transmission of identity is attenuated in celebrity memorabilia. In some sense, Marilyn Monroe continues in the clothes and objects she leaves behind, but not to the same extent as St. Cuthbert or St. Faith. Marilyn Monroe's relics do not have the power to heal or to *do* anything; her dress is not understood to have agency.

Instead, in the modern era, there is an emphasis on the representation of the body. The picture or video is one kind of image, but it is important in another sense. Celebrities make their images: their look, their reputation, etc. Fans and followers choose the celebrities and influencers that appeal to them. Scholarship in celebrity studies sometimes asserts that

celebrity depends on modern mass media. However, like Spencer-Hall, I am not so certain that celebrity is solely modern. Perhaps the difference lies in the easy replication of the images, the speed of their dissemination, and their scope. Students are immersed in social media that thrives on and sustains this kind of relationship between the consumer and the celebrity. Kardashian and other influencers are adept at finding the image that resonates with their fans, simultaneously creating a persona that reflects those desires for followers and shapes their desires. Creating a self that is enjoyed by others is not something that began with the Kardashian–Jenner clan. Marilyn Monroe herself, or perhaps one should say Norma Jean Mortensen, engaged in self-crafting to suit her audience: sexually available yet somehow innocent. The image that holds appeal may have little to do with reality, like Donald Trump’s self-styling as George Washington or his followers producing images of him as a Rambo-like warrior riding a tank. These images are, rather, projections of what is desired. The irony is that none of them are giving us the “real” person, whatever that may be.

The questions of self and selfhood evoked by Kardashian and Monroe are easier for my students to understand than the questions of sanctity and salvation. From reliquary to dress, from relics to LifeGem, for medieval and modern people identity is rooted in the body. They share a concern for bodily identity and the tendency of bodily identity to “rub off” onto other things. Working backwards from the modern celebrity gives students some common ground with the medieval past, in its similar-yet-different representations of the body. However, it also opens up the possibility of conversations about differing ideals of bodily perfection and the disjuncture between one’s self and the image of one’s self. Hopefully, these conversations give my students a better sense of the past and its peculiarities and, more importantly, a better sense of their own strangeness.

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