

# HOMO SACER: POWER, LIFE, AND THE SEXUAL BODY IN OLD FRENCH SAINTS' LIVES

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Por poi qu'a ces paroles Urban tout vif n'enrage.  
Les dras qu'ele a vestus li despoille et esrage,  
Sur sa tenre char batre fait .x. hommes lasser.  
Ainsi la cuide faire fenir et trespasser.  
Jamais, [ce dist, n'ert liés] tant come ele soit vive.  
Crueuté en son cuer tel mautalent avive  
Que par ses blondes tresses nue l'a faite pendre.  
Lors fait verges de fer a ses ministres prendre,  
Tant la commande a batre sans plus de delaier  
Que le cler sanc en facent de toutes pars raier,  
Mais le divin souleil et la divine raie  
Qui en tous ses amis en tous [tempores] raie

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Raie si en son cuer et si la reconforte  
Que de rien c'on li face point ne ce desconforte.  
Son pere qui son lit apareille en enfer  
Toute la fait desrompre de ses verges de fer.  
1485-1500<sup>1</sup>

At these words, Urban was almost beside himself with anger. He tore off the clothes [Christine] had on and made ten men exhaust themselves by beating her tender flesh. He thus sought to make her depart [this life] and die. This said, never had she been so joyful in her whole life. Cruelty awakened such evil intent in [Urban's] heart that he had [Christine] hung naked by her blond tresses. He then made his minions take up rods of iron and commanded that she be beaten without further delay until they made clear blood stream from every part [of her body]. But the divine sunshine and divine ray [of light] that shines in all [God's] friends at all times also shone in her heart and thus comforted her so that nothing that was done to her pained her. Her father, who was preparing his bed in hell, had her completely torn apart with his rods of iron.

This passage, taken from Gautier de Coinci's *Vie de Sainte Cristine*, paints a vivid and rather disturbing picture of the power struggle between the pagan tyrant and the Christian martyr; a couple who, in this case, also happen to be related to one another as father and daughter. The text's insistence that Christine is comforted in her agony by divine light undoubtedly offsets something of the violence of this scene, yet the details of the saint's tortures are nonetheless shockingly and unremittingly cruel. Urban, enraged at his daughter Christine's disregard for his religious sensibilities, orders that she be stripped and beaten to death, by ten of his men;

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<sup>1</sup> Gautier de Coinci, *La vie de Sainte Cristine*, ed. Olivier Collet (Geneva: Droz, 1999). Translations of saints' lives are mine, unless otherwise noted.

the naked young girl is then hung by her hair and beaten with iron rods until her body is soaked in her own blood. Although he was reluctant to punish his beloved daughter earlier in the poem, Urban's cruelty towards Christine in this episode reaches a new level: consumed by the evil that cruelty inspires in him, the pagan father's commands suggest that he not only wishes Christine dead but that he also wants to see her suffer and bleed. Although the saint is comforted by God in her torments, she is nonetheless almost torn apart by the punishment she is forced to endure.

It might of course be argued that the comfort for this torture that Christine receives by God's grace draws attention away from the cruelty of her punishments, focusing the attention of the reader elsewhere. Yet, rather than obscuring Christine's torture, Gautier's clever use of rhyme in his description of her consolation seems instead to emphasize it. The repetition of *raie* ("ray, radiate") in the couplet spanning lines 1495-96 and again at the beginning of line 1497 cumulatively underlines the hyperbolic quality of the saint's experience of divine grace under torture, suggesting an exposure to heavenly light that is almost overwhelming. At the same time, however, this image of light develops the rather more violent image of streaming blood found in line 1494; *raie* echoes and elaborates upon the verb *raier* ("to flow, pour in streams") placed at the end of the preceding couplet. Streaming blood and shining light are thus implicitly connected: just as the transmission of divine grace is inspired by torture, so light seems to emerge from flowing blood, *raie* from *raier*. This is less a displacement of one image by another than a form of poetic elaboration that holds the two images together, in tension. Indeed, on a more general level, the interweaving of the depiction of horrific violence and the communication of divine grace in this passage suggests a framework for the reading of violence in saints' lives that clearly sees torture as integral to the ideological message of the text. The last two lines of this quotation underline this dynamic insofar as what is emphasized here too is the spiritual meaning of the violence enacted upon the body of the saint. The tearing of Christine's flesh is further evidence of her father's spiritual bankruptcy; her abuse at the hands of Urban and his henchmen is both the representation of a body in pain and a depiction of a fundamental difference between Christine and Urban's spiritual states and final destinations.

It is perhaps to be expected that the complex association of physical violence and religious ideology in such scenes presents something of a challenge to modern critics. What episodes like this one force us to contemplate is an extreme and sometimes profoundly troubling confrontation between a vulnerable victim and the tyrannical violence with which he or she is faced. This confrontation is something we are, in most cases, encouraged to interpret; yet this is precisely why it remains central to the way hagiographic texts negotiate their effects. Moreover, the power politics of such scenes appear to lend themselves to articulation in gendered terms: in the example given above, for instance, the conflict is one that occurs between a young woman and a cohort of male torturers, who strip her and beat her until she bleeds.

The ways in which episodes like this one are approached have often focused on the relationship between power and the body. As feminist critics of medieval hagiography have indicated, what appears to be represented in such scenes is a crude and often brutal depiction of power in which the body of the martyr (especially the female martyr) is the focus for a conflict with both physical and metaphysical implications. Feminist critics from the early nineties onwards have pioneered the investigation of how the female body is implicated in the workings of power in hagiographic texts, arguing for recognition of the ways in which such a relationship might be affected by factors such as gender and sexuality. From this perspective, the body, while essential to both male and female saints' lives, is disposed of in radically different ways and has a far greater exposure in the lives of female saints than it does in the texts devoted to their male counterparts. This phenomenon finds its apogee in the depiction of the female virgin martyr, whose body is commonly considered to be more sexually marked than that of the male saint.<sup>2</sup> Many such studies point to the ways in which

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<sup>2</sup> On virginity and the gendering of the flesh as feminine in the early Christian tradition, see R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), esp. 65–112. On the sexualization of female virgin martyrs in the high Middle Ages, see, for example, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "The Virgin's Tale," in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*, ed. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (London: Routledge, 1994), 165–94; Wogan-Browne,

violence towards the body of the female martyr is represented in sexualized terms, making the female body a locus of sexualized dispute in saints' lives in a way not reflected in the lives of their male counterparts.

At the other end of the critical spectrum, however, one finds arguments for viewing the treatment of the body in hagiographic texts as a means of underlining a fundamental similarity between male and female saints. According to this logic, gender and sexuality are of only limited importance in this literature because the body is the site of forms of suffering and sacrifice that invite one to look beyond sexual and social differences to a model of Christian salvation supposedly available to all. Once again, the body's implication in structures of power and violence is often foregrounded by such arguments. However, unlike the readings mentioned above, this latter position often insists that power may be transcended along with the body that the saint eventually leaves behind. Evelyn Birge Vitz usefully summarizes this point of view at the end of her article on gender and martyrdom:

The body is essential to martyrdom accounts. Yet, paradoxically, gender is perhaps less important here than in any other branch of hagiographical narrative. This is precisely because stories about martyrdom are concerned with physical suffering and death, and the willingness to undergo them — issues that can, and often do, transcend gender — rather than with activity and power in this world, which are almost unavoidably marked by gender considerations.<sup>3</sup>

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*Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c. 1150-1300: Virginity and its Authorizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 57-90; Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 185-98; Brigitte Cazelles, *The Lady as Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 43-61; and Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 21-41.

<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Birge Vitz, "Gender and Martyrdom," *Medievalia et Humanistica* n.s. 26 (1999): 79-99, at 96.

According to Vitz, the body is therefore a transcendent site of forms of suffering that gestures beyond socially and sexually particularized forms of power; while the body is central to accounts of martyrdom, to focus on sexual politics is, by definition, to miss the point.<sup>4</sup>

While critics on both sides clearly disagree on the ways in which power and the body come together in accounts of martyrdom, there seems to be general consensus that the body is indeed that which is most fundamentally at stake in such accounts. As suggested in the quotation that opened this article, this consensus has a strong textual foundation. Precisely because it is situated at the point where human and divine authorities both conflict and intersect, the body seems to have a central, yet paradoxical, status in accounts of martyrdom. As a token of the physical world that the saint must renounce in order to accede to his or her superior status in heaven, the saint's body is a physical remnant that must be disciplined and eventually overcome. Yet, precisely because of this status, the body is also a privileged site for the conflict that guarantees the individual's saintly caliber. The seemingly negative attitude towards the body that the saint exhibits during his or her lifetime through extreme and sometimes spectacular forms of physical denial frequently highlights its strategic importance in the transition between the human social world on the one hand and the metaphysical sphere of relations with God on the other. In representing the last vestige of the saint's attachment to the physical universe, the body both marks the threshold between human and heavenly spheres and allows that threshold definitively to be crossed; it is at once an abject residue of the physical world and a privileged point of access to the divine.

Current work is increasingly underlining the ways in which male as well as female bodies are implicated in the ideological workings of violence and power in hagiographic texts.<sup>5</sup> However,

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<sup>4</sup> For a similar argument not focused on the body *per se*, see John Kevin Kitchen, *Saints' Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). For a critique of Vitz's position, see the Introduction to *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> On male saints, see Robert Mills, "A Man Is Being Beaten," *New Medieval Literatures* 5 (2002): 115-53 and "Whatever You Do is a Delight to Me! Masculinity, Masochism, and Queer Play in Representations of Male

partly because of the feminist genealogy of discussions of the body in saints' lives, much existing research in this area understandably focuses on female saints to the exclusion of their male counterparts. One of the aims of this article is therefore to outline a general theory of how power functions in saints' lives and to consider exactly how the body, as an entity that is always socially and sexually marked, figures within such a framework. One of the questions raised by the passage from the *Vie de Sainte Cristine* quoted above is how implicitly sexualized forms of violence fit into the broader structures of sovereign power depicted in saints' lives. Although, on one level, Christine's tortures seem to polarize the sexes in a scene that focuses on the exercise of power over the female body, on another level, this episode draws attention to a far more universal confrontation between pagan and Christian sovereignty. Both punished and protected, the martyr's body is situated at the point of intersection between pagan authority and divine power. It is the precise nature of this conflict and its implications for the way that we as critics approach the treatment of the body in saints' lives that will provide the focus for the arguments that I will be presenting here.

In exploring the ways in which power operates in saints' lives, I will draw upon the work of contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, whose thinking offers a useful critical tool for considering the interface between sovereignty, the law, and the forms of life that are both produced by and productive of sovereign power. This interface, as I will argue, is fundamental to hagiographic literature; yet, what this means is that the interest in the body in accounts of martyrdom is part of a set of much broader concerns. Taking my cue from Agamben, I will therefore suggest that the

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Martyrdom," *Exemplaria* 13 (2001): 1-37; and Emma Campbell, "Separating the Saints from the Boys: Sainthood and Masculinity in the Old French *Vie de Saint Alexis*," *French Studies* 57 (2003): 367-82. Sarah Kay's recent work has persuasively outlined how the production of what she terms the "sublime body of the martyr" (a body that is not gender-specific) might act as a support for the ideological message of hagiographic texts: *Courtly Contradictions: the Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 216-31 and "The Sublime Body of the Martyr: Violence in Early Romance Saints' Lives," in *Violence in Medieval Society*, ed. R. W. Kaeuper (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2000), 3-20.

interest that saints' lives demonstrate in the body should be seen in conjunction with their preoccupation with life, a preoccupation that relies upon the body, while not being reducible to it.

The texts I will be discussing here in most detail — the anonymous *Vie de Saint Laurent* and Wace's *Vie de Sainte Marguerite* — can be dated to the mid- to late-twelfth century and, like most extant vernacular saints' lives from this period, are both written in Anglo-Norman. The other examples I will consider all predate 1220 and are of either Anglo-Norman or Northern French origin. My discussion will proceed in four stages. First, in order to provide the theoretical framework for my discussion, I will outline Agamben's concept of sovereign power and its relationship to life, particularly "bare" life. Second, I will examine the way in which the relationship between sovereignty and bare life described by Agamben might be brought to bear on readings of saints' lives and how examining such structures of power elucidates the complexity of the operation of sovereignty in accounts of martyrdom. Third, I will consider how an interpretation that focuses on the life of the saint might be used to complement and, in certain respects, to qualify critical assumptions concerning the role of the sexual body — particularly the female body — in *passiones* (accounts of martyrdom). One of the aims of this section will be to re-examine the claim that female saints' lives represent tales of "circumvented rape."<sup>6</sup> Finally, I will suggest how focusing attention on the life of the saint as the biopolitical foundation of God's law might have an ideological function in hagiographic literature for medieval readers and audiences.

### *La Nuda Vita*

In the final chapter of the first volume of his *Histoire de la sexualité*, Michel Foucault identified what he claimed to be a fundamental historical shift in the way that power was exerted over human subjects.<sup>7</sup> Foucault argues that in its traditional form — a form

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase is Kelly's: "Useful Virgins," 137.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976–84).



based on premodern concepts of territorial sovereignty — power is defined as the right over life and death. Such a right is exerted primarily through the demonstration of the sovereign's power over death; power thus exerts itself as the abstention of the right to kill, concerning life only to the extent that it defines its outer limit. The modern period, Foucault claims, witnesses the radical transformation of this model of power. As of the seventeenth century, state mechanisms increasingly rely on a power over life that expresses itself through the regulation of the life and health of the individuals subject to the state. The power to kill that characterizes premodern sovereignty thus, in the modern state, becomes the power to control life directly, through technologies that observe, classify, and regulate it. In the modern state, death is no longer the point at which power is expressed most clearly but the moment when the individual eludes power; death thus ceases to occupy a central position in public ritual in the modern era, as power over death is transformed into power over life. Sovereign power has, in other words, become biopower.

Foucault's theory of biopower is already familiar to many medievalists. I rehearse it here because Agamben's theory of bare life and its relation to sovereign power emerges in the context of his critique of Foucault's theory, a critique that provides an essential context for understanding Agamben's own concept of sovereignty. Although Foucault is aware of the fact that the two powers he describes can, in certain cases, be integrated with one another, they nonetheless remain conceptually and historically distinct in his account of the evolution of power in the modern era. Despite the fact that Foucault's thinking on biopower altered subsequent to his composition of the *Volonté de savoir*, this account continued to have an enduring effect on scholars who used (and continue to use) his work. Perhaps for this reason, in his own theorization of sovereignty, Agamben takes issue with just this distinction between biopower and sovereign power; for, unlike Foucault, Agamben argues that sovereignty cannot be considered to predate biopolitics since sovereignty is by its very nature biopolitical. As Agamben demonstrates in *Homo Sacer*, the creation of a biopolitical subject through the inclusion of a certain form of life in the political sphere constitutes

the foundation of sovereign power. In this respect, then, Agamben argues, "biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception."<sup>8</sup>

In suggesting that biopolitics is entirely compatible with, and indeed necessary to, sovereign power in its modern and premodern forms, Agamben's theory of sovereignty has a particular claim on the attention of medievalists.<sup>9</sup> While taking seriously the radical shift in the study of power precipitated by Foucault, a shift that directed attention towards the ways in which power penetrates subjects' bodies and forms of life, Agamben gives this theory new meaning for the study of power prior to the Renaissance. As the description I have given above suggests, the chronological shift that Agamben's theory marks is nonetheless closely tied to his revision of the relationship between sovereignty and death posited by Foucault.<sup>10</sup> Agamben argues that sovereignty relies less on the physical manifestation of power over death (and, by extension, of power over life itself) than on the production of a form of life that he describes as bare, or naked, life, "*la nuda vita*." This life is the life of *homo sacer*: the "sacred" subject constituted by sovereign law as its biopolitical foundation.<sup>11</sup> Agamben's reassessment of the chronological separation of Foucault's two models of power thus rearticulates the importance

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<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Agamben himself often uses medieval examples to illustrate his theories: see, for example, his discussion of Marie de France's *Bisclavret* in *Homo Sacer*, 107-8. For uses of his theory of bare life in work on medieval literature, see Sylvia Huot's *Madness in Medieval French Literature: Identities Found and Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. 65-96; and Robert Mills's article "Sovereign Power and Bare Life in Poetry by François Villon," *Exemplaria* 17 (2005): 445-80. Valentin Groebner has also recently used Agamben's thought in his work on medieval visual culture: *Defaced: The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages* (New York: Zone Books, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see also Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 1999), 82-86.

<sup>11</sup> Agamben's deployment of the idea of the sacred is intimately connected to what he perceives to be the status of the *homo sacer*. Sacredness in this sense is dependent not on any particular religious principle but instead on the conjunction of two traits: the unpunishability of killing and the impossibility of sacrifice. "Sacredness" thus designates in this context a double exception from human and divine spheres. See, for example, Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 81-82.

of biopolitics for *all* manifestations of sovereign power, a notion that links medieval political models to the operations of modern state power rather than attempting artificially to separate them.

Since one of the aims of Agamben's philosophy is to challenge the self-evidence of what is meant by "life" and "death," the life that lies at the heart of Agamben's thinking on sovereignty requires some explanation. At the very beginning of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben invokes the Greek distinction between *zoē* and *bios*: two forms of life that, although traceable to a common etymological root, remain semantically and morphologically distinct. In Greek, *zoē* referred to the fact of existence common to all living beings, whereas *bios* designated a form of living proper to an individual or group; *zoē* thus connoted a degree zero of life, while *bios* evoked a particular way of living.<sup>12</sup> Foucault's notion of biopower is, of course, based on precisely this distinction between natural life and political or cultural life, yet, for Foucault, what defines *zoē* in the modern era is its inclusion in mechanisms of state power (whereas man previously had a private existence with an additional capacity for political existence). Agamben's philosophy approaches the conceptual distinction drawn between *zoē* and *bios* in Greek culture from a different angle. In Agamben's work, *zoē* is never entirely excluded from the political sphere: on the contrary, it is the life over which sovereign power can, and must, be exercised. Unlike *bios*, however, the life designated by *zoē* is included in the rule of law in the form of its exclusion. The inclusive exclusion of *zoē* from the political realm is constitutive of what Agamben terms *la nuda vita*: "bare life."<sup>13</sup> Thus, while it should be emphasized that bare life and *zoē* are not synonymous, they are crucially linked in the state of exception insofar as it is the sovereign exception of *zoē* from the rule of law that creates the conditions in which bare life can emerge as such.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1-3.

<sup>13</sup> I follow Daniel Heller-Roazen's translation of the term (particularly in the two works that most clearly articulate Agamben's concept of *la nuda vita*: *Homo Sacer* and *Remnants of Auschwitz*). *La nuda vita* has been translated elsewhere as "naked life": see Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 143n1.

<sup>14</sup> In his more recent work, Agamben stresses the fact that bare life always emerges from the state of exception, rather than being a form of life that pre-

Bare life is at the core of sovereign power because it designates a space of indistinction — a threshold — in which the law is at once suspended and established. This kind of life is paramount to the exercise of sovereignty because, Agamben argues, sovereign power is structured by such spaces of indistinction: spaces where life can become absolutely subject to a sovereign violence that makes its own law where all the rules no longer apply. As Agamben puts it:

The “sovereign” structure of the law, its peculiar and original “force,” has the form of a state of exception in which fact and law are indistinguishable (yet must, nevertheless, be decided on). Life, which is thus obliged, can in the last instance be implicated in the sphere of the law only through the presupposition of its inclusive exception, only in an *exceptio*. There is a limit-figure of life, a threshold in which life is both inside and outside the juridical order, and this threshold is the place of sovereignty.<sup>15</sup>

The notion of the limit-figure or threshold here designates a “bare” form of life that is included in the law in the form of the law’s suspension: in other words, a life that is contained in the law through an inclusion that is also an exclusion. The principle that governs the inclusion of life in the law is identical to that expressed in the maxim that the exception proves the rule: the rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it. In much the same way, Agamben suggests, the juridical order both abandons and incorporates a limit-figure of life that suspends and establishes the rule of law. This form of life is bare life, the ultimate subject of sovereign power: the life of *homo sacer*.<sup>16</sup>

Because of its liminality with regard to the law, bare life is characterized by its exposure to violence. *Homo sacer* exists in a

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exists such a state; Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 87–88.

<sup>15</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> In *Means Without End* Agamben underlines this point: “The ultimate subject that needs to be at once turned into the exception and included in the city is always naked life,” 6.

sphere abandoned by the law in which he can be acted upon with impunity, in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide or performing a sacrifice. Moreover, the violence to which *homo sacer* may be subject is “sovereign” not only in the sense that it is not itself accountable to the law but also in the sense that it is the founding gesture of the law. The production of a space in which the bare life of *homo sacer* may sovereignly be acted upon is thus the originary activity of sovereignty, an activity that constitutes the biopolitical kernel of sovereign power.

What characterizes the status of *homo sacer* is, therefore, his exceptional status with regard to the law and the violence to which he finds himself exposed in being life that may be killed but not murdered or sacrificed. It is important to emphasize at this point that the violence to which *homo sacer* is exposed relies on a potential exercise of power over life that does not have to be actualized; bare life assumes a *capacity* to be killed, a capacity to be subjected to violence that is not *necessarily* brought to fruition. This, indeed, is one of the points at which Agamben’s thesis can be considered to part company with that of Foucault: the basis of sovereign power is not to be found in acts that subject life to the law, but instead in the clearing of a space in which sovereign power may be exercised upon a limit-figure of life that is included in the law in the form of its suspension. In other words, what matters is not sovereign agency *per se* but, instead, the establishment of a situation in which that agency becomes possible, in which power can be exercised over life with absolute impunity.

This element of potential is what enables Agamben to draw comparisons between what are otherwise vastly different areas in which the state of exception has become the rule, areas such as the concentration camp, the airport *zone d’attente* for refugees, and the critical ward of the hospital (and, in more recent times, the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay).<sup>17</sup> While power may be exercised to different ends in such spaces, Agamben argues that they nonetheless share a common structure insofar as they represent zones of exception in which life becomes absolutely subject to the potential force of a power that may therefore act sovereignly upon it. For instance, Agamben argues in *Means Without End*

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<sup>17</sup>This more recent example is mentioned by Agamben in *State of Exception*, 3–4.

that, if the essence of the camp lies in the materialization of the state of exception and creation of a space for bare life as such, we must admit that all such structures are “camps,” regardless of the nature of the crimes committed within them and regardless of their specific topography. Thus, Agamben claims that

*inasmuch as its inhabitants have been stripped of every political status and reduced completely to naked life, the camp is also the most absolute biopolitical space that has ever been realized — a space in which power confronts nothing other than pure biological life without any mediation. The camp is the paradigm itself of political space at the point in which politics becomes biopolitics and the *homo sacer* becomes indistinguishable from the citizen.*<sup>18</sup>

Although Agamben's work has focused to a large extent on the concentration camp (and, most particularly, Auschwitz), his point in so doing is to emphasize its paradigmatic status as a *nomos* — or legal realm — of sovereign power, a power that he claims is increasingly widespread in the contemporary world.<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>18</sup> Agamben, *Means Without End*, 41; italics in original.

<sup>19</sup> This is one of the more radical and ethically problematic aspects of Agamben's thinking. In taking the camp as an example of the way power is structured in the modern era, Agamben clearly militates against the view that Auschwitz was (and remains) an atrocity specific to Nazi Germany. By extension, he also suggests that the appalling suffering experienced in Auschwitz was the product of power relations that are by no means particular to that concentration camp. In drawing analogies between the concentration camp and other spaces of exception such as hospital wards and airport *zones d'attente*, Agamben clearly risks effacing the particularity of such spaces and makes it effectively impossible to judge them in ethical terms. As this article would imply, I believe that the specificity of the ways in which such spaces of exception are created and experienced certainly *is* important; however, this does not, in my opinion, diminish the interest or importance of Agamben's often provocative work in this area. Apart from his chapter “What is a Camp?” in *Means Without End*, 37–45, Agamben devotes large sections of his work to discussion of Auschwitz; this is perhaps most notable in *Homo Sacer* and *Remnants of Auschwitz*. His analysis of how the state of exception plays a definitive role in the current political climate of the West is further developed in *State of Exception*.

distinction Agamben draws between modern state politics and the premodern political realm (a distinction that, in a sense, replaces that made by Foucault between sovereignty and biopolitics) thus concerns the generalization of the state of exception in the modern era, as the realm of bare life previously situated on the margins of the political order increasingly coincides with the political sphere.

Agamben's account of sovereignty and its relation to bare life usefully develops Foucault's theories of power and, as I hope to demonstrate, raises a number of important questions with regard to hagiographic depictions of sovereignty. In focusing on the biopolitical foundations of sovereignty, Agamben's theory nonetheless substantially overlooks the relationship between the production of bare life and the social existence (*bios*) from which it is distinguished. This is, in a sense, entirely understandable. *Homo sacer* is, after all, a being stripped of all social and political identity: the bareness of his existence resides in the fact that he represents the palpitation of life on the limit of social, sexual and gender categories as well as on the threshold of the law. Agamben's theorization of sovereignty certainly incorporates a consideration of how, especially in the case of the Nazi state, life may be transformed into bare life through the gradual erosion of citizenship (and the rights and responsibilities that accompany such status). Yet he glosses over two points that might have a bearing on how sovereign power exerts a potential force over human subjects. The first point concerns the complicity with mechanisms of power suggested by Foucault's work on technologies of the self, which points to an ambiguous collusion with sovereignty as well as a possible site from which such power may be challenged.<sup>20</sup> The second point relates to issues of gender politics: namely, how the production of bare life (as a category that transcends gender) might differ for male and female subjects and how this might be connected to the relationship of life to the law within the socio-political sphere.

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<sup>20</sup> Agamben is certainly interested in the possibilities for political agency and human intervention in the structures of power he outlines; this is amply clear in *Means Without End*. What is less clear, however, is how those structures might operate ideologically, as frameworks within which subjects might wish to be constituted as such.



I do not claim to provide a definitive corrective to Agamben's theory in the present article. It nonetheless remains my contention that the study of medieval saints' lives might do more than just benefit from Agamben's insights into the workings of sovereign power as a biopolitical phenomenon. In considering the interface between sovereignty, life, and the law that Agamben situates at the heart of his theory, the study of medieval saints' lives might also reflect on issues that Agamben's work does not explicitly address. While drawing on Agamben's compelling and thoughtful revision of Foucault's ideas — a revision that I firmly believe to be a useful critical tool for examining the operations of power in saints' lives — this article will outline one of the possible ways in which such a response might be articulated.

### **Sovereign Power and the Saint's Life**

An essential element in hagiographic accounts of Christian martyrdom is the way in which religious dispute between pagans and Christians is rendered in terms of a disputed sovereignty over the life and body of the saint. The martyr usually finds him- or herself caught between two, invariably conflicting, sovereign powers. On the one hand, the saint must answer to an earthly sovereign seeking to subject him or her to pagan law; on the other hand, the saint is answerable to God as the divine sovereign whose law the martyr seeks to uphold through his or her suffering and death. *Passiones* thus present complex depictions of the often brutal relationship between sovereignty and the life over which it is exerted, making life the object of a struggle between alternative, ideologically conflicting versions of sovereign power. The depiction of *two* forms of sovereignty, as opposed to just one, is often absolutely central to the way in which accounts of martyrdom present the struggle over the saint's life and body. As we shall see, what such a struggle produces is, however, not a *homo sacer* figure in the sense Agamben intends. Although the violence of pagan sovereigns is aimed at the subjection of the saint to pagan law and, in certain instances, at the creation of bare life as such, what these attempts actually serve to confirm is the fact that the martyr's life belongs to and is protected by God. The ideological importance of this demonstration will



be examined in the last section of this article; it is first necessary to explore in more detail the precise nature of divine and earthly sovereignty in Old French accounts of martyrdom.

As far as the saint's relationship to pagan authority is concerned, the various representatives of pagan law in accounts of martyrdom seem to subscribe to a model of sovereign power akin to that outlined by Agamben. Pagan sovereignty is acutely aware of its investment in biopolitics in these texts, an investment that is repeatedly asserted through the threats it makes to those Christians who would place themselves outside the purview of pagan law and religion. In the Anglo-Norman *Life of Saint Lawrence*, the saint's refusal to cooperate with the demands of his persecutors and to worship pagan gods is met with a threat of torture and death that is entirely characteristic of medieval accounts of martyrdom. The presentation of this episode sets the saint against pagan law and its enforcers, whose authority is clearly underlined. Lawrence is brought before the powerful persecuting emperor Decius Caesar in his role as defender and enforcer of pagan law: mounted on the imperial throne, surrounded by the noblemen of the senate, and passing judgment on various legal cases. When Lawrence fails to produce the treasure of the church that the Roman authorities have demanded, Valerian (who is in this text mistakenly identified as the pagan provost of Rome and, we are told, has great power over everyone as a result) leaps to his feet and cries:

“Guerpis, va! tes enchantemenz,  
Et fai a nos deus sacrefise,  
Ou nos ferun de tei justise!  
A nos deus sacrefieras  
Ou a torment ocis seras!”      *Laurent* 424-28<sup>21</sup>

“Come on! Renounce your sorcery and sacrifice to  
our gods or we will punish you! You will sacrifice

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<sup>21</sup> *La vie de Saint Laurent: An Anglo-Norman Poem of the Twelfth Century*, ed. Delbert Russell, Anglo-Norman Text Society 24 (London: 1976), cited in the text as *Laurent*. Translations are based on Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Glyn Burgess, *Virgin Lives and Holy Deaths: Two Exemplary Biographies for Anglo-Norman Women* (London: Everyman, 1996), with some modifications.

to our gods or you will be killed in the agony of torture!"

Although brief, this pithy little speech effectively encapsulates the attitude that characterizes the pagan position for most of the text. In openly rejecting pagan law, the saint is situated outside that law, yet, at the same time, the pagan authorities claim that the saint nonetheless falls within their juridical power. Valerian reminds Lawrence that, if he fails voluntarily to confirm pagan law by renouncing those things that place him in opposition to it, he will be punished by the authorities; should Lawrence refuse to embrace pagan practices, he will be subject to a violence designed to enforce the law that dictates he does so. What is more, this violence will supposedly re-establish the law's legitimacy. Indeed, the expression used by Valerian — "nos ferun de tei justise," meaning "we will punish you," but also, translated literally, "we will make justice of you" — suggests that the act of punishment will function to make or remake the law upon the foundation of Lawrence's brutalized body: he will, quite literally, be transformed through torture and death into the stuff of justice itself.<sup>22</sup>

This is a scenario that is all too familiar in accounts of martyrdom. Typically, when the saint's rejection of pagan law is discovered, he or she is brought before the authorities, the authorities make various attempts to change the saint's mind before condemning him or her to punishment and death, and the martyr is then subjected to horrific, often incrementally brutal, levels of torture. Equally familiar in these texts, however, is the martyr's triumph over his or her tortures and, by extension, over the judicial order that imposes them. For, despite the fact that the saint repeatedly endures ruthless punishments imposed by the pagan authorities, the life of the saint is never definitively subjected to pagan law or sovereign violence. While the saint's body is mercilessly tortured by the pagans, the life that it represents always remains beyond the control of pagan sovereignty, a sovereignty which is thereby deprived of its biopolitical foundation even as it seeks to produce and confirm that foundation. Viewed from the perspective of the hagiographic text, the impotence of pagan sovereignty is of course

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<sup>22</sup> This turn of phrase also appears elsewhere in the text (*ibid.*, 582-83).

a function of its contradiction of God's law. It is precisely because the martyr's life belongs to another, divine sovereign that it cannot be acted upon with impunity by the pagan authorities.<sup>23</sup>

In twelfth-century vernacular texts, the frustration of pagan sovereignty implicit in its failure to subject the saint to torture is clearly recognized as significant: while the martyr repeatedly emerges unharmed from his or her chastisement, the saint's tortures are subject to ever greater levels of elaboration, as punishments become more drawn-out and technically complex.<sup>24</sup> Like many Christian martyrs in twelfth-century vernacular texts, Lawrence is submitted to a series of increasingly gruesome tortures. The saint is beaten with clubs and sticks, has his flesh seared with burning plates of iron, is tortured on a scaffold, has his teeth knocked out with stones, and is roasted alive on an iron grill. Yet, in spite of the fact that all of these punishments are designed publicly to demonstrate the power of pagan sovereignty over the saint, the episodes in which Lawrence is tortured serve instead to undermine pagan law. Pagan authority is repeatedly asserted through torture to little useful effect. During the first beatings endured by the saint, for example, Lawrence gives the following account of his supposed suffering:

“Graces rent a Deu mon Seignour  
Qui m’a issi revisité

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<sup>23</sup> This is why the saint's life cannot be qualified as what Agamben terms “form-of-life.” Form-of-life in Agamben's philosophy designates a life in which it is impossible to isolate bare life (a life that cannot be separated from its form), yet, for precisely that reason, it is also a life that cannot be subject to *any* form of sovereignty. For instance, Agamben argues that “a political life, that is, a life directed toward the idea of happiness and cohesive with a form-of-life, is thinkable only starting from the emancipation from such a division [between bare life and the forms of life], with the irrevocable exodus from any sovereignty” (*Means Without End*, 8). Although the saint cannot be turned into bare life by the pagan authorities, this is attributed to the fact that this life belongs to another, more powerful sovereign, not to the fact that his or her life would not be amenable to sovereign control *per se*.

<sup>24</sup> Kay makes this point in *Courtly Contradictions*, 224. Kay incisively explores the ways in which this escalation in violence might relate to the construction of what she terms, after Žižek, “the sublime body of the martyr.”

Et de sa grace enluminé  
Que o ses sers me veut ajoster.  
Jesu, tei puisse jeo loer,  
Cist batre n'est torment pas."  
A Decium dit: "Ohi, las!  
Chaitis, en ire forsenés,  
Et plus de mei tormentés!"      *Laurent 527-35*

"I give thanks to God my Lord, who has visited me in this way and illuminated me with his grace because he wishes to add me to his servants. Jesus, may I praise you; this beating is not torment." He said to Decius, "Oh dear! You poor thing, you're going mad with anger; I'm not the only one being tortured!"

Lawrence's speech is a devastatingly sarcastic response to the violence that supposedly posits and preserves pagan law. The purpose of torturing the saint — as intimated earlier by Valerian — is forcibly to demonstrate the power of pagan sovereignty over life: if Lawrence insists on excluding himself from the rule of law, he will be made into an example that ultimately confirms it. However, what Lawrence suggests here is that, even though his body may be delivered over to the violence of pagan law, he remains indifferent to its effects. While everyone has been busy beating him, Lawrence claims, he has been too preoccupied in his tête-à-tête with God fully to appreciate his punishment: as the privileged recipient of divine revelation, he hasn't felt a thing. The saint's indifference is crucial here because it acknowledges the pagan's sovereign agency while, at the same time, depriving that agency of its ideological force. The outcome of the saint's torture is not to make him acknowledge pagan authority, but quite the reverse: Lawrence both denies that he is suffering under torture and gives thanks to God as a Lord who — as a result of the saint's torments — has just confirmed his place as a servant in the divine household. The saint's insensibility to pagan violence thus appears as a symptom of his subjection to a divine master who has a prior claim to the life upon which Decius and his cronies try to act. The purpose of Lawrence's declaration

of allegiance to God is therefore to assert that pagan law is, in this case, without biopolitical foundation: the life it seeks to create and transform into *justise* is located just out of reach.

Moreover, as Lawrence's remarks imply, what occurs when sovereign violence fails to hit its mark in this respect is a doubling back of the law in which pagan authority loses its footing and thus itself becomes the object of its own violence: as Lawrence indicates, it is the pagan agent of the law, not the Christian martyr who is being tormented. This kind of reversal occurs quite frequently in texts such as this one. Another example can be found in the version of the *Vie de Saint Georges* located in Tours, manuscript 927.<sup>25</sup> Towards the end of this text, just after a particularly successful miracle and just before George's decapitation, the tyrant Dacien splutters a final speech relating his frustration at the martyr's supernatural tenacity during seven years of torture. As if to underline the role-reversal implicit in his words, Dacien seems to be on his last legs even as he pronounces this speech: he is almost dying of anger ("d'ire a poi ne crieve"), he is pained by the spectacle of success before him ("se que il veit forment li grieve") and he is in such an anguished state that he bursts out of his belt and collapses on the floor ("d'angoisse brisa sa sainture, / pasmé chaï a terre dure," *Georges* 399-402). This general state of physical and mental disarray is attributed more explicitly to the failures of pagan sovereignty in Dacien's monologue itself, which is worth quoting in full:

"Tot est ma hautesse perie!  
 Jorge a fait ma gent reneer  
 Por son deu, se ne puis neer.  
 Destruit a mes deus e ma loi,  
 Or l'estuet morir sans delloi  
 Ou le cors me detrencherai  
 Ou ardeir en feu me ferai!  
 Tormenté en mainte maniere  
 Ai son cors avant e ariere,

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<sup>25</sup> This is a thirteenth-century manuscript of small format (11 x 14.5 cm) that also contains the *Vie de Sainte Marguerite* under discussion here. See Yvette Guilcher's edition: *Deux versions de la Vie de Saint Georges*, ed. Yvette Guilcher (Paris: Champion, 2001), 12-25.

Bien a VII ans e plus, se croi,  
Que onques n'ot paor de moi.  
Grant mal m'a fait, au cuer me toche.  
Un frain li metrai en la boche,  
De ma cité, de ma muraille,  
Hors sera traîné, sans faille.  
La vueil ge qu'il perde la vie  
Ou fu ocise Alexandrie." *Georges*, 404-420<sup>26</sup>

"My dignity has perished entirely! George made my people recant for his god, that I can't deny. He has done away with my gods and my religion, [so] now he must die without delay; I will either cut his body up or make him roast in a fire! I have tortured his body in many different ways, both back and front, for a good seven years or more, I think, without him ever fearing me. He has done me great harm; it touches me to the heart. I shall put a bit in his mouth and he shall be dragged out of my city and my walls without delay. There I want him to lose his life, where Alexandria [Dacien's converted and martyred wife] was slain."

George's resistance to torture thus not only contrasts with the tormented and powerless state of the pagan tyrant, but also, by Dacien's own admission, seems to be the primary cause of this suffering. Dacien claims that he has tortured George's body every which way for seven years without being able to make him recognize and submit to his power ("avoir paor de moi"). This admission of his own impotence with regard to George directly precedes Dacien's assertion that, paradoxically, George has done him *grant mal* (great harm), the implication being that such damage is the inevitable outcome of the saint's indifference to the sovereignty of his torturer. Seen in the context of the rest of Dacien's speech, George's indifference seems to play a fundamental role in the paradoxical

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<sup>26</sup> Simund de Freine, "La vie de St. Georges," in *Les oeuvres de Simund de Freine*, ed. John E. Matzke, SATF (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1909). Cited in the text as *Georges*.

imbalance of power also seen in the *Vie de Saint Laurent*. Each description of the violence to be done to the saint is preceded by Dacien's admission of his own impotence, a strategy that makes the saint's tortures appear to be the direct result of pagan desperation, rather than a demonstration of pagan sovereignty. Martyr and tyrant thus seem to be caught in an interminable vicious circle in which the saint's tortures fail to confirm the power that they should underwrite, highlighting the doubling back of the torment the pagan seeks to visit on the saint and necessitating the repetition of Dacien's fruitless attempts at forcing George to submit to him.

Another typical situation, where the violence performed on the saint is echoed in God's punishment of the body of the pagan persecutor, is correlative to this doubling back of the law. An example of this exercise of divine sovereignty over the body and life of the pagan can be found in the *Life of Saint Christine* by Gautier de Coinci, the first work cited in this article, where we see this happen twice. In the first instance, the saint's pagan father is killed, at Christine's request, after trying to drown her in the sea; in the second, the pagan governor who replaces Christine's father loses his eyes (again, as she has predicted) when he has the saint's teeth pulled out. Here, once again, pagan violence doubles back upon itself, with one important difference: unlike the "torturing" of Lawrence's tormentors or the pain that George inflicts on Dacien, the violence that redoubles on its pagan author is here presented explicitly in terms of the agency of divine power upon an earthly sovereign. The pagan persecutor thus inadvertently becomes subject to a divine sovereign whose power he refuses to recognize, thereby himself becoming the object of a form of violence that asserts a superior, supremely effective form of sovereignty over human life.

Such failures of pagan judicial violence are clearly intended to demonstrate an important ideological point: the life of the saint falls under God's jurisdiction alone and cannot therefore be acted upon with impunity by an earthly sovereign who refuses to acknowledge this superior, divine claim over life. The idea that the life of the saint belongs to God and cannot therefore be used as the basis of a pagan judicial order tallies with a claim that is repeatedly emphasized in the *Life of Saint Lawrence*. That is, that the Christian law is superior to that of the pagans because it has at

its center a living God who is the creator of all things. Even before Lawrence's tortures begin, he goes to some lengths to explain to Decius Caesar that he will not worship pagan idols because they are dead objects created by human beings. It is worth noting in this context that the Anglo-Norman writer considerably expands upon his Latin source at this juncture in order to elaborate upon the distinction between *faiture*, a made object, and *creature*, a created being, thus emphasizing the idea that God is the supreme creator (*Laurent* 441-515). The gist of Lawrence's exposition is unambiguous: anyone who accepts God as their creator is compelled to serve and worship him in the hope that they will posthumously gain admission to the heavenly kingdom over which God presides.

Reflections of this kind are relatively commonplace in hagiographic texts. Clemence of Barking's *Vie de Sainte Catherine d'Alexandrie*,<sup>27</sup> an Anglo-Norman text roughly contemporary with the *Vie de Saint Laurent*, repeatedly foregrounds God's role as creator to similar ends. Catherine draws attention to the difference between her living God and the dead divinities worshiped by the pagans on several occasions. Even before her famous debate with the pagan philosophers, Catherine tells the emperor Maxentius that he will have to provide very convincing reasons for her to worship gods that do not hear, speak, see, feel or think (*Catherine* 394-404). The issue of the worthlessness of inanimate statues (as opposed to created beings) is then raised once again by Catherine when Maxentius offers to have her image cast in gold (*Catherine* 1302-28). Catherine's most extended reflection on the relationship between God's power and his creation of the physical world nonetheless comes in her debate with the pagan clerks. Her initial statement of her position focuses on the Creation and God's role as divine author (*Catherine* 685-732), a role that is emphasized repeatedly during the intellectual sparring that ensues. In terms that are even more explicit than those used by Lawrence, Catherine makes clear that God's omnipotence is connected directly to his authorship of

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<sup>27</sup> Clemence of Barking, *Life of St. Catherine*, ed. William MacBain, Anglo-Norman Text Society 18 (Oxford: 1964). Cited in the text as *Catherine*. Translations of this poem are based on Wogan-Browne and Burgess, *Virgin Lives and Holy Deaths*.



the world. Responding to the pagan claim that God cannot be both man and God, Catherine asks provocatively:

“Ne pot cil dunc hume devenir,  
 Ki tut puet faire a sun plaisir?  
 E ne pot il faire de sei  
 Ço qu’il fist de mei e de tei?  
 Par poesté, nient par nature,  
 Devint li faitres criature.” *Catherine* 833–38

“Could this [God], who can do everything as he pleases, not then become a man? And can he not make himself what he made you and me? Through his power, not through nature, the maker became a creature.”

What Catherine asserts here is that the power that God manifests in his creation extends to his own, “unnatural” status as both divine maker and human creature.<sup>28</sup> The miracle of the Incarnation can thus be explained by reference to the Creation insofar as God’s omnipotence is, in effect, an absolute power over life that both makes and defies the laws of nature. If one accepts that this works both ways, what is also implicit in Catherine’s speech is that God’s creation of human beings is part of the same boundless sovereignty that makes the logical impossibility of the Incarnation possible. The limitlessness of God’s sovereignty, Catherine thus suggests, is defined by its relationship to creation in the state of exception, where fact and law are indistinguishable from one another.

This focus on God as creator returns us to the relationship between sovereignty and the life over which it exerts its power. For if, as these saints claim, God is the ultimate sovereign, he is so because he has created life and therefore always already has monopoly over it: Christian law has the upper hand because life is the natural and inalienable basis of God’s sovereignty. The kind of life that, in Agamben’s terms, would be defined by *zoē* (as that

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<sup>28</sup> For discussion of Catherine’s debate with the clerks in this text as evidence of the theological erudition of female authors and audiences, see Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives*, 223–56.

which is common to all living beings) is therefore at the root of a sovereign power that is always traced back to God. Moreover, precisely insofar as it is linked to the creation and manipulation of life, God's sovereignty is essentially characterized by its relationship to the state of exception and his power to make and suspend the law as he sees fit. Although he might not choose to avail himself of the violent possibilities of his prerogative as sovereign in the case of the saint, God's potential for agency over bare life is a quintessential feature of his power as creator.

We can glimpse in the pagan's recognition of this fact a grotesque parody of the kind of agency that Agamben suggests might constitute and reinforce sovereign power. Towards the end of the *Life of Saint Lawrence*, Decius openly admits that the saint's knowledge of and adherence to *divine lei*, divine law or religion, sets Lawrence apart in making him indifferent to pagan authority and the structures which that authority supports. In an act of seeming desperation, the pagan tyrant's response to this is nonetheless to have the saint's teeth beaten out with rocks in a gesture that seems more designed to vent Decius's frustration than to serve any meaningful punitive purpose (*Laurent* 808-22). The recognition of the saint's location outside pagan law thus prefaces an act of violence that, as seen previously, attempts implicitly to reinclude him in the law he rejects. However, all mention of punishment or justice on the part of the pagan authorities has by now disappeared. What we seem to be presented with is instead an attempt to produce a *homo sacer* figure that might confirm pagan sovereignty at the point at which it has clearly reached its limit.

The relationship between Agamben's theory and what confronts Dacien at this point in the poem perhaps requires more detailed explanation. Sovereignty in Agamben's view is structured by its relationship to the exception: by the creation of a space that is both inside and outside the law, in which bare life can emerge as such. Such a space fundamentally depends on the suspension of the law, thereby allowing the juridical order to withdraw from the exception and abandon it. In the same way that, by suspending itself, the rule gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, constitutes itself as rule, this withdrawal establishes a space in which the law can have validity, in which sovereign agency

over life becomes possible. What pagan authorities are faced with (and what Dacien openly acknowledges) is, in contrast to this, a situation where the exception has subtracted itself from the rule, thereby depriving sovereignty (and the juridical order associated with it) of its founding gesture. Pagan sovereignty repeatedly finds itself confronted with its own inability to withdraw from the exception and thereby create a space in which bare life can emerge precisely because the exception is not of its own making. As suggested by the continuation of futile tortures after the penny seems finally to have dropped in the pagan camp, the last resort of the tyrant is therefore a violence that invokes unsuccessfully the bare life that invariably escapes it.

Thus, what the drama of pagan judicial violence reveals in accounts of martyrdom is that life is essential to both Christian and pagan sovereignty, even if these two powers exert themselves in different ways. As I have suggested, pagan violence exposes a form of life that is at the root of the law, but at the root of *God's* law, not that of the pagan sovereign. The saint's sacrifice in a sense requires this exposure. For, although the saint is never reduced to bare life by his pagan persecutors, the purpose of demonstrating this impossibility is to expose his or her life as ultimately subject to God's sovereignty, an exposure that the saint must reinforce voluntarily through sacrifice. Sacrifice represents the saint's acknowledgement of God's right over life and death and his or her active submission to that right. Thus, although God does not act upon the saint as if he or she were bare life, the potential for such agency is openly admitted and inscribed through martyrdom.

This point can be illustrated if we look more closely at the way in which the sacrifice of the martyr is performed. For, although the saint is given to God from the outset, this "givenness" is exposed through torture as a form of biopolitical belonging that, in order to be a sacrifice, must be affirmed voluntarily. The saint ultimately gives him- or herself to God at the point where life is all that he or she has left, yet this gesture is a confirmation of a prior belonging to God that is recognized and reaffirmed through sacrifice. An example of how this works can be found in the Anglo-Norman *Vie de Sainte Foi*, where Saint Faith renders herself to God in a gesture that explicitly acknowledges God's prior claim over the life which

she gives to him of her own volition. When interrogated by the tyrant Dacien, Faith asserts that:

“Puis ke jeo fui de funz levée,  
E en le nun Deu baptizée,  
A Jhesu del tut me rendi  
Ke pur nus tuz la mort suffri,  
A Jhesu Crist, le fiz Marie  
Ke cele terre ad an baillie;  
A li me doinz, a li me rend  
A li auke devotement.”<sup>29</sup>

“Ever since I was raised from the font and baptized in the name of God I gave myself entirely to Jesus, who suffered death for us all, to Jesus Christ the son of Mary who has dominion of this world. It is to him I give myself, to him I return myself, to him devotion [is due] forever.”

Faith's gesture of self-sacrifice is therefore a gift that returns that which already belongs to God. The first part of the saint's response indicates both her recognition of the debt she owes to Christ on account of his passion and her acknowledgement of Christ's possession of the world. Faith expresses this obligation to Christ through a gift of self already implicit in her baptism as a Christian, a gift that she then goes on to reaffirm in the present tense (“a li me doinz”). As the saint herself suggests, this gift is also a form of giving back: she offers in sacrifice to God that which she has already given but also, more importantly, she renders that which God already possesses anyway. A similar assertion is made by Lawrence, who claims that “mei ai en sacrefise osfert / a Deu, a qui sui donez” (“I have offered myself as a sacrifice to God, to whom I am given,” *Laurent* 847-48). The saint thus offers himself through sacrifice to a Christian God to whom he, like Faith, already belongs.

Such claims reaffirm that the saint's life — the life over which the pagan law attempts and fails to assert control — is already

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<sup>29</sup> Simon of Walsingham, *Vie de Sainte Foy* 293-300, from “Vie Anglo-Normande de Sainte Foy,” ed. A. T. Baker, *Romania* 66 (1940-41): 49-84.

and inevitably subject to God's power. In other words, the saint acknowledges God's potential for sovereign agency over his or her life and, in so doing, claims that life as the biopolitical foundation of divine, rather than human and pagan, law. By rendering his or her life to God, the saint thus performs a sacrifice that confirms the sovereignty of God's law through the agency of its biopolitical subject.<sup>30</sup> The biopolitical subject is thus not so much produced by the sovereign as the other way around: the sovereign's power is asserted (one might even say created) through the rendering of a form of life that is considered to be always already his.

This is possibly the primary difference between pagan and Christian sovereignty in accounts of martyrdom. Earthly, pagan law relies on the violent exercise of power over life, an exercise that invariably fails to achieve its ends due to the alienation of pagan sovereignty's biopolitical grounding. In contrast to this, divine sovereignty relies primarily on a power over life that is attendant upon God's powers of creation. As pagan sovereigns discover to their cost, life is thus always already subject to God's sovereignty. The ideological reaffirmation of God's power, although this may take the form of violence in the case of the punishment of non-believers, depends to a far greater extent on voluntary sacrifice. It is by acknowledging God's sovereignty in a gesture of sacrifice that reaffirms his empire over life and death that martyrs not only endorse God's power but also definitively reinforce the distinction between earthly and divine forms of sovereign power.

### The Sexual Body

The question thus arises as to how gender and the sexual body function within the hagiographic matrices of sovereign power I have outlined. This, indeed, is an area where I believe that Agamben's thought may be brought into particularly fruitful dialogue with scholarship on medieval saints' lives. Agamben's theory of biopolitics

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<sup>30</sup> One might compare Agamben's discussion of Hobbesian political life in *Means Without End*, where he suggests that the *puissance absolue et perpétuelle* that defines state power is founded not on political will but on bare life, which is protected only to the degree to which it submits to the sovereign's right of life and death (5).

does not explicitly engage with questions of gender and sexuality. In exploring how sexuality inflects the articulation of power in saints' lives, I will therefore consider how the biopolitical model of sovereignty outlined by Agamben might include consideration of such questions. I will also suggest how adopting an approach inspired by Agamben's thought might further illuminate some of the terms in which gender and sexuality have conventionally been discussed in medievalist scholarship on saints' lives, particularly on the relationship between power and the sexual body as it has been debated in the work of feminist critics.

It has often been pointed out that sex and violence are intimately linked in the lives of female saints. The female martyr is usually expected to defend her virginity at all costs, thereby affirming her absolute commitment to God through a form of sexual abstinence that is also a form of donation. The virgin's integrity implies not only sexual resistance but also sexual belonging: in preserving her virginity, the saint both refuses the sexual domination of a (usually pagan) husband and reaffirms her prior "marriage" to God. As R. Howard Bloch has suggested, virginity can thus be thought of as part of a medieval "biopolitics of asceticism," whereby the sexual body is regulated and controlled through the discourses of sexual abstinence and prohibition promoted by the Church.<sup>31</sup> Bloch's analysis is not of course specific to hagiographic literature, where I would argue that the biopolitical dimension of virginity should be seen in relation to the workings of sovereign power. Virginity in saints' lives is not simply biopolitical in the sense that it implies a regulation of the sexual body. Virginity emerges at the point of intersection between two competing authorities, both of which claim sexual sovereignty over the saint even as they assert absolute power over her life itself. The virgin body thus connotes a form of sexual subjection that is biopolitical both in the sense that it implies a disciplining of the body and also, more importantly, in the sense that it exposes the living foundation of sovereign law.

The connection between sovereign and sexual violence can be seen quite clearly in Wace's *Life of Saint Margaret*, a text roughly

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<sup>31</sup> Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, 81-91.

contemporary with the *Vie de Saint Laurent*, which has been studied for its focus on the corporeality of the female saint.<sup>32</sup> As in the Lives of most female martyrs in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the pagan authority that threatens the saint is initially articulated in sexual terms, as a proposal of marriage that would compromise Margaret's vow of chastity. The pagan tyrant in question — Olybrius — is presented in much the same way as the pagan authorities in the Life of Saint Lawrence; Olybrius is described as a powerful provost surrounded by a large retinue of knights, his particular area of jurisdiction being the suppression of Christianity through torture, imprisonment, and forced conversion (*Marguerite* 87-94). This description nonetheless provides the background for a conflict that initially takes the form of a refused marriage proposal, a refusal that, like those of other female martyrs, conflates the religious and political authority of the pagan with the sexual authority he attempts to assert through conjugal union. Margaret's rejection is thus a refusal of pagan authority in both religious and sexual terms and, conversely, an assertion of God's authority over both the life of the martyr and her sexual body.

The relationship between the sexual threat implied by the pagan marriage proposal and the sovereign violence potentially exercised by the tyrant over the life and body of the saint is clearly in evidence in Olybrius's response to Margaret's refusal. Having been informed that Margaret's faith would make marriage to him impossible, Olybrius retorts:

“Se nos dex ne veus aorer,  
Jo te ferai forment pener,  
En torment morir te ferai,  
En fu ardant ton cors metrai.  
Le tien Dé guerpis et ta loi,  
Richement remanras od moi,

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<sup>32</sup> Wace, *La vie de Sainte Marguerite*, ed. Elizabeth A. Francis (Paris: Champion, 1932), cited in the text as *Marguerite*. See esp. Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 21-41; and Robertson, “The Corporeality of Female Sanctity in *The Life of Saint Margaret*,” in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 268-87.

Riche feme de toi ferai  
Et en mon lit te metrai." *Marguerite* 154-62

"If you do not want to worship our gods, I shall have you cruelly punished and make you die in torment; I shall put your body in a blazing fire. Renounce your god and your religion and you shall stay with me in luxury, I shall make you a rich woman and put you in my bed."

The similarity between the lines "en fu ardant ton cors metrai" ("I shall put your body in a blazing fire") and "et en mon lit te metrai" ("I shall put you in my bed") suggests that the sovereign violence potentially exercised over the life of the saint and the sexual coercion that underwrites the marriage proposal are intimate bedfellows in more than one sense. What Olybrius implies is that his power over Margaret as torturer is part of the same authority that he would exercise as her sexual partner, that sovereign violence and sexual domination are part of the same biopolitical gesture. Indeed, the use of the verb *faire* here suggestively connects Olybrius's agency as persecutor and would-be lover or husband: the claim that "riche feme de toi ferai" ("I shall make you a rich woman") cannot help but recall the considerably less enticing assertions that "te ferai forment pener" ("I shall have you cruelly punished") and "en torment morir te ferai" ("I shall make you die in torment"). In a similar way, Olybrius's declaration that that he will put Margaret's body either on the bonfire or in his bed — both gestures being described using the verb *mettre* — establishes a parallel between the sovereignty over the body that would underwrite either action. The implication of these parallels is that the exercise of sovereign violence and sexual domination are equivalent to one another insofar as they would both supposedly confirm the subjection of the martyr's life to the law. The sovereign capacity to exercise power over life and death is comparable to the capacity to exercise sexual sovereignty over the body; the potential violence contained in each of these gestures ultimately aims at the same biopolitical target.

Of course, Olybrius's words also underline the Christian significance of Margaret's refusal and of God's protection of her



body. If, as seen in the Life of Saint Lawrence, the saint's life is the foundation of Christian (rather than pagan) law, Margaret's virginity is a token of the bodily integrity that guarantees that foundation. Just as torture would assert the tyrant's power over the life of the saint, so Olybrius's ability to control Margaret's sexual body by forcing her into his bed would lay claim to a biopolitical authority that implicitly belongs to God alone. The protection of the saint's virginity thus reinforces the inalienability of the biopolitical foundation of God's sovereignty, an inalienability already implicit in the protection of the body from pain and death. Sexual and physical integrity or violation are in this sense one and the same thing.

The development of the motif of sexual domination in the Life of Saint Margaret serves further to highlight the biopolitical stake of sovereignty in sexualized violence. Margaret's encounter with the dragon while she is in prison represents a conflation of sexual violation with a violence directed at the body and life of the saint, a conflation that reproduces the paradigm of sexual sovereignty already implicit in Olybrius's speech. While alone in her cell, Margaret comes face to face with a black, bearded, fire-breathing dragon that swallows her whole before being overcome by the sign of the cross. Having vanquished the dragon that consumed her, Margaret then speaks to one of his diabolical relatives, who explains how his brother "le cors de toi asorbesist / et ta virginité tolsist" ("would have consumed your body / and taken your virginity," *Marguerite* 369-70) before he was destroyed. This, once again, provides an opportunity for Margaret to affirm that her virginity belongs to God: she defies the devil to whom she speaks to threaten her as has his brother, telling him that she is God's spouse and that he should therefore never attempt to take her virginity by force ("tolir ma virginité," *Marguerite* 379-82).

In representing a struggle for power over life that is at one remove from the law, Margaret's encounter with the dragon is a perverse simulation of the state of exception in which sovereign agency over bare life becomes possible. Once again, the episode serves to confirm the impossibility of such agency on the part of those who do not act in God's name, an impossibility that echoes the alienation of pagan sovereignty's biopolitical grounding in Margaret's dealings with Olybrius elsewhere in the text. Despite the fact that the attempt on Margaret's life and virginity while she

is in jail inevitably fails, the episode underlines two related points with potential significance for the way the biopolitical dimensions of sovereignty might be considered in relation to sex and gender. First, although the violence Margaret experiences in prison is at one remove from the forms of coercion available to her pagan tormentors (notably, marriage and a physical punishment sanctioned by the law), it nonetheless represents an extreme version of the threat that such coercive measures pose. Second, in a way that mirrors the attempts of Olybrius to subject Margaret to pagan law, the violence with which she is confronted while in jail clearly threatens *both* her life and her virginity; indeed, the implication here is that the one is inseparable from the other.

What taking both of these points seriously entails, however, is appreciating the extent to which both the mechanisms that submit life to the law in a socio-juridical context and the processes that produce bare life in the state of exception might be different for men and women, even as they are aimed at the same biopolitical target. It has often been noted that female saints have to overcome sexual threats and coercion in ways that their male counterparts do not. What I would like to suggest here is that this has less to do with sexual difference *per se* than it does with the way the law codifies and inscribes that difference. As suggested by the Life of Saint Margaret, the marriage proposed by the pagan tyrant, in offering a space in which the female body would be absolutely subject to the authority of her husband, is seen as equivalent to the exercise of power over life displayed through torture. In designating a space in which sovereignty — and specifically *sexual* sovereignty — may be exercised over the female body, marriage thus provides a sexually differentiated space for the inclusion of life within the law. In turn, what the episode involving the dragon suggests is that precisely because sovereignty and sexual dominion are already so intimately connected in the female saint's relationship to the law, the violence to which she would be exposed in the state of exception (a violence from which she, like her male counterparts, inevitably escapes) must somehow respond to this qualification of female life in those spaces where the law is suspended.

What the evidence of saints' lives seems to highlight is sovereignty's investment in exercising power of a sexual nature as

part of its more general assertion of power over life. This is not to say that the life that underwrites sovereign power is itself sexually differentiated or that men may not be subject to sexual violence; rather, it is to suggest that the means whereby life becomes subject to the law may, in certain cases, take sexually specific forms. What is more, in the same way that the assertion of power within the socio-political sphere can be related to sex and gender, such factors also potentially have a bearing on the exercise of power in those spaces located on the edges of that sphere. For although bare life is, by definition, something that is not sexually specific, its exposure to sexual violence may take forms that are residually attached to the sexually determined ways in which life is subject to the law in the juridical sphere from which it is subtracted.

This investigation of Agamben's theory of sovereign power also potentially has a bearing on the way in which sexual violence is viewed in hagiography, particularly in the case of female saints. The primary aim of the circumvented rape plot of female saints' lives is often considered to be the exposure of the sexually inviolate female body or the ideal of virginity she represents. Thus, Cazelles suggests that sexual violence is integral to the forced exposure of the female heroine's flesh, making French hagiographic romance itself "a violation of the female body."<sup>33</sup> Focusing more specifically on virginity, Gravdal argues that "the obvious explanation for the importance of rape in early Christian hagiography is that it corresponds to the new ideal of feminine virginity."<sup>34</sup> Rape — or the threat of rape — in saints' lives thus opens a space in which the sublimation of female sexuality can be both displayed and promoted by the Church. Kelly similarly suggests that the tale of circumvented rape is a means of "proving" virginity through its public affirmation while compromising the inviolate status of the saint through her narrative circulation. The threat of rape thus, once again, serves to foreground the virgin as a figure that may be circulated in the discourses of the Church.<sup>35</sup>

As these critics suggest, the circumvented rape plot undoubtedly foregrounds the inviolate nature of the holy heroine.

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<sup>33</sup> Cazelles, *Lady as Saint*, 82.

<sup>34</sup> Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 40-62.

Yet, as I have been arguing here, the sexual violence that is in many ways specific to female saints' lives is also part of a broader representational scheme in which both male and female saints find themselves caught between conflicting sovereign powers. From this perspective, the so-called victimization of the female saint should be seen on a continuum with that of the male martyr. For, as I have suggested, what is fundamentally at issue in accounts of both male and female martyrdom is life: or, more accurately, the way in which life supports or undermines sovereign power. In this sense, hagiographic literature is concerned with a form of life common to both men and women; yet it also highlights the ways in which such life might be inscribed within or subtracted from the law in sexually differentiated ways. Female saints' lives could thus be said to deploy an undifferentiated biopolitical logic in sexually specific ways, demonstrating how sovereign power is articulated differently for men and women while nonetheless exposing a form of life that transcends such gender differences.

Seen in this context, the sexual violence with which the female saint frequently finds herself threatened should be viewed from at least two different angles. The sexual aggression of saints' lives represents, on one level, forms of violence which, from a pagan perspective, cannot be rape because they would represent a type of violation that is entirely devoid of criminal status. Marriage in this context opens an ostensibly legitimate space for the exercise of pagan sovereignty over the female saint, where the female subject's life and body would come under male, pagan jurisdiction. The sexual threats that sometimes follow such proposals (as in Margaret's encounter with the dragon), while representing a violation of a different order, do not refer to criminal sexual violence. Insofar as such spaces parody the state of exception described by Agamben, they threaten a sexual violence on the limit of the law, where sexual domination could (from the pagan point of view) be exercised with impunity. Thus, in the same way that the violence perpetrated against *homo sacer* is neither murder nor a sacrifice, the pagan threat of sexual violation in such places evokes a sexual act that would similarly be without criminal status in the human judicial scheme of the *passiones*.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Gravdal argues in a chapter on the poetics of rape law that "medieval law, like medieval literature, creates a generous space for the cultivation of discursive

By contrast, considering such violence as a form of attempted rape becomes significant when reflecting on why the sexual violence threatened by the pagan sovereign cannot actually take place. As female saints repeatedly insist, in being given to God, their virginity is not excluded from the law in the way their persecutors assume. The attempt sovereignly to act upon the virgin's sexual body on the part of the pagan authorities, like the attempt to exert absolute power over the life and body of the martyr, endeavors to appropriate the biopolitical foundation of God's law. The sexualized violence of pagan sovereignty in the Lives of female martyrs is geared towards rape to the extent that taking sexual possession of the virgin body would amount to the theft of that which, like the martyr's life, always already belongs to God.<sup>37</sup> The circumvented rape of the *passiones* is therefore rape as *raptus*: the forced abduction of an item in someone else's power.<sup>38</sup> But this attempt at biopolitical

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strategies that rationalize male violence against women." I would argue that, in hagiography, it is also possible to glimpse the unpicking of such a process of rationalization, as spaces of "legitimate" sexual activity and the courtly discourses that support them are strategically undermined. This is not simply a matter of exposing supposedly legitimate forms of sex as criminal but also involves considering forms of sexual violence that are ambiguously situated on the limits of the law. See Gravdal, "The Poetics of Rape Law in Medieval France," in *Rape and Representation*, ed. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 207-26, 223.

<sup>37</sup> Evelyn Birge Vitz has made the point that the modern distinction between compulsion and consent implicit in contemporary definitions of rape cannot be applied without anachronism to the medieval period. While I support her advocacy of a nuanced approach to the ways sexual violence signifies in medieval culture, I would not subscribe to the view that medieval people had lower expectations of control, or that this implies that rape is a meaningless term when applied to medieval texts. As I suggest here, a certain concept of rape seems to have a specific structural importance in accounts of female martyrdom. See Vitz, "Rereading Rape in Medieval Literature: Literary, Historical, and Theoretical Reflections," *Romanic Review* 88 (1997): 1-26, especially 24.

<sup>38</sup> For an exposition of the way in which the definition of *raptus* in English law altered over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 33-75. Saunders emphasizes that the definition of rape in medieval culture often included ideas of sexual violation, abduction, and forced marriage.

appropriation, while remaining conditioned by sexual factors, is nonetheless part of a more generalized conflict between pagan and Christian sovereignty in which the life and body of the martyr are crucially at stake.

Rather than seeing the rape plot exclusively in terms of sexually specific ideals of sanctity, it might thus be possible to consider how it represents a gendered configuration of power relations that operates more generally within the representational norms of vernacular saints' lives. I hope that it is already clear that I am not arguing against the view that certain kinds of sexual threat in saints' lives are determined by gender. Rather, I am suggesting that the issues of power that such depictions raise should be viewed in the context of forms of subjection that, while differing for men and women, nonetheless target a common goal. What accounts of martyrdom encourage us, as critics, to consider is the relationship between the universal and the specific dimensions of sovereignty. For, as I have argued here, these texts point us towards the ways in which power over life may be articulated in sexually specific ways while, at the same time, gesturing towards a form of life that may be subtracted from such sexual specificity.

### Sovereign Subjects

Having given an outline of the workings of sovereign power in accounts of martyrdom as part of a biopolitical and sexually determined plot, I would like to conclude by considering the ideological purpose of such a plot. As I have argued, the ways in which sovereign power features in accounts of martyrdom make life at least as important as the body that represents it. Physical torture, while both directed at the saint's body and to some extent determined by the sex of that body, is nonetheless a means of exposing a universal form of life situated at the root of the law which is embodied in the saint. What I will consider in this final section is therefore how the narrative exposure of this form of life in hagiography might serve an ideological purpose for the readers or listeners of these texts.

The blurring of the boundaries between life and text is often implicit in the ways medieval saints' lives present their subject

matter. More often than not, even when the text relates what is, formally speaking, a *passio* (the life of a martyr as opposed to that of a confessor saint), readers or listeners are encouraged to attend to the telling of a saint's *life* in rubrics that announce the *vie* or *vita* that is about to commence.<sup>39</sup> Life is thus the ostensible subject of the hagiographic text; it is at once its matter and its form. On one level, of course, *vie* clearly refers to a type of biography: a form of life that, in Agamben's terms, might be associated with *bios* rather than *zoē*. However, I would suggest that, when considered in the context of hagiographic literature's religious aims, *vie* also designates a form of life exposed — or even produced — by the narrative, a life that provides a crucial ideological focus for the text.

As I have already argued, the aim of the conflict between sovereign powers in *passiones* is the exposure of a form of life that is revealed as the foundation of God's sovereignty through the tyrant's attempts to transform it into the biopolitical grounding of pagan law. On a superficial level, the ideological purpose of this exposure is to reinforce the legitimacy of Christian sovereignty; yet, in so doing, saints' lives simultaneously obviate the need for the exercise of God's sovereignty over the life of Christian subjects outside the text. Martyrdom and the discourse woven around it expose to the Christian audience the universally human capacity to be killed which the community shares with the saint. This capacity is one that the community — like Faith, Margaret or Lawrence — can acknowledge and render to God in a gesture that asserts the sovereign power of the law and one's subjection to it without requiring physical sacrifice. Such an acknowledgement is often

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<sup>39</sup> For example, in the Campsey manuscript (London, BL Additional 70513), *vie* is used to describe the lives of martyrs as well as those saints who achieve sanctity by other means. The life of Saint Faith mentioned earlier is thus announced as "la vie sainte fey. virgine et martire." Clemence of Barking's life of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, a version of which is also contained in this manuscript, is similarly introduced as "la vie sainte katerine." The *Vie de Saint Laurent* in London, BL Egerton 2710, is also announced as "la vie de seint laurent." Wace claims at the very beginning of his life of Saint Margaret that "a l'onor Deu et a s'aïe / dirai d'une virge la vie" (*Marguerite* 1-2). George's *passio* is likewise announced as a "life" in Tours 927, this time in Latin: "incipit vita beati Georgii militis." On the distinction between *passiones* and *vitae* in texts prior to 1000, see Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1987), 1-15.



implicit in the epilogues that conclude vernacular saints' lives. In the epilogue to the life of Saint George discussed earlier, it is possible to see how hearing the saint's life is linked to a recognition of God's power over the lives of the Christian audience:

La mort saint Jorge avés oïe  
Dignement e sa sainte vie.  
E Des vos doint santé e joie,  
E de vos preeres vos oie.  
E vos doint fenir en bon point  
A tos vos vies, e vos doint  
E sens e bien a grant planté  
E de bien faire volenté.  
Cui secula per omnia  
Est honor, virtus, gloria. Georges 469-78

You have fittingly heard [the tale of] the death of Saint George and his saintly life. May God give you health and happiness, and hear your prayers. May he grant that you die well; may he give you all your lives sense and goods in great plenty, as well as the will to do good. *Cui secula per omnia est honor, virtus, gloria.*

The positive effects of hearing the saint's life — the divine gifts of health, happiness, good sense, wealth, and the desire to do good — already assume a life subject to the divine power that confers such gifts. Moreover, the hope that God will hear the audience's prayers and fill them with the desire to do good implies an active acknowledgement and reaffirmation of this belonging. Just as the *sainte vie* the audience has heard relates the story of an exemplary life absolutely subject to God, so the audience submits to the same divine power acknowledged in more extreme fashion by the saint himself.

Life is thus both the subject and the object of the hagiographic text. If a life subject to divine law is revealed to the audience through stories of martyrdom, it is also in a sense produced by such texts. Insofar as it reveals a form of life common to all, a life that the



martyr claims can only reaffirm God's sovereignty, the *vie* grounds Christian community even as it exposes the biopolitical foundation of that community. The conflict of sovereign powers staged in accounts of martyrdom thus has a biopolitical significance for the audiences of such texts insofar as the spectacle of violence outlines a relationship to the law that the Christian community is encouraged to adopt in its turn. The text thus becomes a space in which the biopolitical foundation of Christian law is both represented and produced in order to posit and to uphold God's sovereign power, uniting the community through its common identification with the life that makes it subject to divine law. One might consider the glimpse of the divine that these texts are supposed to offer to reside in precisely this gesture; for, it is in seeing one's own life as subject of and to divine law that the audience might submit to – and also thus themselves produce – the sovereignty of God.

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