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Review of Rethinking the South English Legendaries

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This collection represents another milestone in the history of *South English Legendary* (*SEL*) studies and makes a substantial contribution to that history. It contains twenty-one essays on the *SEL* by both long-established *SEL* scholars and new voices. The editors have wisely chosen to reprint some particularly important articles from the past. Thus, they have included earlier essays by Thomas Liszka ("The *South English Legendaries*"), Oliver Pickering (excerpts from "*South English Legendary* Style in Robert of Gloucester's *Chronicle*" and "The Outspoken *South English Legendary* Poet"), John Frankis ("The Social Context of Vernacular Writing in the Thirteenth Century"), and Thomas Heffernan ("Dangerous Sympathies: Simon de Montfort, Politics, and the *South English Legendary*"). Anne Thompson, who wrote the first literary-critical monograph on the *SEL*, is represented by a short, helpful afterword, in which she reviews the contents of the collection and suggests areas ripe for future study.

The collection is divided into five major parts and Thompson's afterword. In the first section, entitled "(Re-)situating the *South English Legendary*," the editors include the essays cited earlier by Liszka, Frankis, and Pickering. Also included is a contribution by Sherry Reames, whose essay, entitled "The *South English Legendary* and Its Major Latin Models," discusses the *SEL*'s debt to Latin collections of saints' lives written for use in the church liturgy.

The second section of the collection is entitled "Manuscripts and Textual Cultures of the *South English Legendaries*." Within this section, Chloe Morgan's interesting essay, "'Lite bokes' and 'grete relikes': Texts and Their Transmission in the *South English Legendary*," is an exploration of the *SEL*'s characteristic attitude toward written (as opposed to oral) language. Stephen Yeager's essay, "Documents, Poetry and Editorial Practice: The Case of 'St. Egwine,'" finds that the *SEL*'s narrative of St. Egwine was primarily an "'account' in the more bureaucratic sense of the term . . . confirming the possessions and privileges of the monastery he founded" (p. 168).

Essays by Catherine Sanok, Virginia Blanton, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, and E. Gordon Whatley make up the third section, "Textual Communities and the *South English Legendaries*." In "Forms of Community in the *South English Legendary*," Sanok approaches the coherence of the legendary by considering its (flexible) formal principles, principles reflecting the compilers' strong interest in community. In "Counting Noses and Assessing the Numbers: Native Saints in the *South English*

Legendaries," Blanton focuses on English saints. One fifth of all legends in the *SEL* concern English saints, but Blanton focuses on the much smaller number of lives of the native female English saints "to challenge the essentialist arguments put forward about male saints as representative" (p. 233). Wogan-Browne's "Locating Saints' Lives and Their Communities" argues that the legend of St. Kenelm cannot simply be seen, as it often is, as an endorsement of English nationalism. Finally, Whatley's essay, "Pope Gregory and St. Austin of Canterbury in the *Early South English Legendary*," explores the *SEL*'s enthusiastic embrace of Pope Gregory as "Apostle to the English," while ironically relegating St. Augustine, who actually traveled to England and proselytized the English, to a secondary, more passive role.

The fourth and largest section of the collection is entitled "Contexts and Discourses." In this section, Heather Blurton's "'His right hond he liet of-smite': Judas/Quiriac and the Representation of Jewish Identity in the *South English Legendaries*" treats the *SEL*'s *passio* of St. Quiriac, the apocryphal first Bishop of Jerusalem, within the historical context of the late thirteenth-century English coin-clipping scandal and the subsequent persecution and forced conversion of English Jews. Sarah Breckenridge's article, "Mapping Identity in the *South English Legendary*," shows how the *SEL*'s chronological structure (the liturgical year) intersects with its emphasis on geographical place.

Karen A. Winstead's essay focuses on the only illustrated *SEL* manuscript, produced ca. 1400. In this article, entitled "Visualizing the *South English Legendary*: Bodleian Library, MS Tanner 17," Winstead examines the portraits included in the manuscript and finds that they do not exactly illustrate the *SEL* lives but "provide alternative views of the saints—views that in the case of the martyrs, are very much at odds with the legends" (p. 372). Robert Mills's "Conversion, Translation and Becket's 'Heathen' Mother" examines the *SEL*'s "romance" of Thomas Becket's parents, and particularly of his mythic foreign-born mother. He demonstrates how motifs of linguistic translation are reflected in the presentation of the mother's religious conversion. In "Bodies of Belief: MS Bodley 779's *South English Legendary*," Wogan-Browne argues that, although earlier *SEL* manuscripts have generally been privileged as somehow more authentic, the *SEL*'s fifteenth-century manuscripts, like MS Bodley 779, testify, not to the decline, but to the continuing vigor and relevance of the collection.

The fifth section of the collection is entitled simply "Performance." In the first article, Pickering analyzes "Black Humour in the *South English Legendary*" and finds this particular comic style to be what one would expect of English writing in the late thirteenth century, far removed from the later comic sophistication of, say, Chaucer or the *Gawain* poet. The last essay in the collection is pedagogically focused. Written by Morgan, Wogan-Browne, and Tim Ayers, "Teaching the *South English Legendaries* at York: Performativity and Interdisciplinarity" presents a creative attempt by the authors to bring the *SEL* to life via live performance.

All of these essays further our understanding of various aspects of the *SEL*; together, their impact on *SEL* studies will be significant. Nevertheless, there is an apparent inconsistency at the heart of the collection. On one hand, while attempting to suggest the importance of the subject matter, the introduction opens with the statement that, judged from the number of extant manuscripts (over 60), the *SEL* is "among the most popular texts of the English Middle Ages" (p. 3). On the other, in naming the book, the editors adopted Thomas Liszka's argument that what they are focusing upon is not a single literary artifact but rather a multitude

of artifacts—hence, the "*South English Legendaries.*" However, if this is true, then it is difficult to see how one can still hold to the original statement that there is *something* (the putative object of this collection of essays) that was "among the most popular texts of the Middle Ages" because each of the manuscripts may, in fact, contain a different work or collection of smaller works. Yet the editors want to have it both ways: "We agree with Liszka," they write, "that the texts have been done a disservice by the accepted title, and we follow the suggestion that the plurality of the work should be reflected by a plural in its title . . . We none the less exploit the possibility of using a plural title while continuing to discuss a single 'work' rather than 'works'" (p. 10). Thus, what is termed the *South English Legendary* or the *South English Legendaries* continues to suffer from what one might call a "one or many" problem, perhaps the most fundamental of all problems in *SEL* studies. Indeed, singular and plural forms of the *SEL* appear interspersed indiscriminately throughout this collection.

William Robins's nuanced and substantial article on the collection, found in the second section, offers substantial new insights into this problem. Building on a thorough and orderly review of the textual scholarship, he demonstrates in detail why the "one or many" problem has been exceedingly difficult to resolve. Rather than a "work," he calls the *SEL* a "textual domain," and within this domain are individual items that tended to circulate with one another, having a clearly defined genre, employing a common metrical pattern, and sharing an uncomplicated narrative style with stark characterizations. Nevertheless, the individual items never appear in the same order within the various *SEL* manuscripts. He argues that, while *SEL* authors often wrote their stories independently, they strove to make their texts conform to "*SEL* hagiography." He also shows how items circulated not only as autonomous articles but also in smaller compilations and collections of various sizes. He concludes, then, that the textual domain of the *SEL* is informed by "modular dynamics," where each individual item is an independent module but is also available to be subsumed into a larger compilation. The *SEL*'s modular dynamics lead Robins to "suspect that redactionist accounts of the *SEL* [like Manfred Görlach's] have been overstated" (p. 205). At the same time, he does not accept Beverly Boyd's argument that the manuscript compilations are merely collections of individual items. The *SEL*'s textual domain takes its shape primarily as an ensemble—the whole being greater than the parts. "The upshot is," he concludes, "that the *SEL* is not simply a batch of individual poems, nor simply a set of manuscript compilations, but is also, in important ways, a larger cultural text" (p. 207).

No one can deny Boyd's or Liszka's authority in underscoring the unsettling variety of the tradition's manuscripts. But the scholars in this essay collection demonstrate why it is difficult for critics to abandon completely the idea that the phenomenon in question is in some sense a single work. Unlike *Piers Plowman*, which exists in fifty-two widely differing manuscripts—so different that we readily accept that there are four separate versions of the poem—the *SEL* does not have a single author upon whose authority we can anchor the work's extraordinary *mouvance.* Yet, as Paul Zumthor taught us, *mouvance* was a common medieval phenomenon, particularly with anonymous works. Medieval "works," he argued, should be defined not by some impossible textual archetype but rather as complex diachronic unities. "The work," he writes, "is dynamic by definition. It grows, changes, and decays. The multiplicity and diversity of texts that bear witness to it are like special effects within the system. What we see in each of the written utterances . . . is less something complete in itself than the text still in the process of

creation; not an essence, but something coming into being" (*Toward a Medieval Poetics*, p. 48). This sounds very much like a description of the *SEL* phenomenon. Accordingly, I suspect that, while properly recognizing the remarkable diversity of *SEL* manuscripts, literary critics will continue to explore the possibility of an even more nuanced but capacious definition of the medieval "work" called the *South English Legendary*. This collection helps us move in that direction, but we still have further to go.

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