

**THE ROLE AND SYMBOLISM OF THE DRAGON  
IN VERNACULAR SAINTS' LEGENDS, 1200-1500**

**BY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis looks at the role and function of the dragon in the saint's encounter with the monster in hagiographic texts, written primarily in the vernacular, between 1200 and 1500. Those connotations accrued by the dragon which are relevant to this thesis are traced from their earliest beginnings. Although by the middle ages the multi-valency of the dragon is reduced to one primary symbolic valency, that of evil and significantly, the evil of paganism, the dragon never loses completely its ancient associations and they help to colour its function within the narrative. The symbolic use of the dragon in vernacular saints' lives is generally consistent, although allowing for different didactic emphases. However, the two legends on which this thesis concentrates are those of St George from Caxton's Golden Legend and St Margaret from the Katherine Group. Each reveals tensions within the text when the dragon's role departs from the familiar hagiographic topos. Firstly, the role of the hagiographic dragon is identified by a comparison with that of the dragon in romance. Allowing for cross-fertilization, this thesis focuses on the significance of the hero's dragon-fight and the saint's dragon encounter to differentiate between the ethos of the romance and hagiographic genres respectively. Tensions are created in the hagiographic text when the romance topos of the dragon-fight is used in conjunction with the hagiographic dragon encounter, as in the legend of St George. Finally, in the legend of St Margaret, the dragon's appearance unbalances and unsettles the perspective of the narrative when its role and function are deployed in the promulgation of virginity.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.

- BV**            *Biblia Sacra Vulgata Juxta Clementinam*, eighth edition (1985).
- BH**            *The Romance of Beues of Hamtoun*, ed. E. Kölbng, EETS, ES, 46, 48, 65 (1885-1894).
- EETS**        Early English Text Society.
- ES**            extra series.
- OS**            original series.
- GL**            *Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints as Englished by William Caxton* ed. F.S. Ellis, 7 vols. (London, 1900).
- GL folio**     *Golden Legend* , William Caxton (1483) STC 24873.
- GW**            *The Romance of Guy of Warwick*, ed. Julius Zupitza, EETS, ES, 42, 49, 59 (1883-1891).
- MED**         *Middle English Dictionary*, eds. Shermann M. Kuhn and John Reidy (Michigan, 1965-).
- PMLA**        *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America.*

## CHAPTER 1 - DRAGON LORE AND THE DRAGON

I begin this examination of dragon-lore with a description from Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca Historica*<sup>1</sup>. Recorded as a real event, the description of the capture of this immense serpent-like dragon for King Ptolemy reveals the main characteristics of this monster, its huge physical size and its aggression and hostility towards any living creature which it can kill in a variety of ways: 'This serpent was xxx cubites of length and was accustomed euermore to lye by the waters side knyttyng and rolyng hym-self all vppon an hepe as though it had bene a thyng immobile; and when any other beste came toward the watre for to drynke, anon he wold stert vp at oones, and either he wolde bite theym, orrelles wynde hym-self about theire legges environ, and so styng them vnto dethe and fynally distroy them, fedyng hym-self vppon them for his repaste.' It also shows that such creatures were not categorised as 'fabulous' or the product of a vivid imagination and so by contrast it illuminates the use made of the dragon in romance and hagiography, subjects of later chapters. Although the hyperbolic account suggests the author had his audience very much in mind in his intent to frighten and excite, the graphic description does emphasise the dangers and the problems of capturing such a powerful and deadly beast but nevertheless it is subdued successfully by ordinary labouring men, simply because there are enough of them; significantly there is no single-handed attempt to deal with the dragon. This sets it apart from the hagiographic and romance topos in which the dragon is subdued by one person, the hero or saint respectively, whose superhuman powers make the protagonist especially fitted for the task. After capture, the dragon is shown as a sad and sorry creature with broken teeth and it is deliberately starved into submission. At first Diodorus's dragon is awesome for it possesses death-dealing attributes which recall the dragon of the scriptures and romance but it is diminished in this account by its ignominious end.

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<sup>1</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, trans. John Skelton, eds. F.M. Salter and H.L.R. Edwards, EETS, OS, 233 (1956), Liber Quartus, pp.260-262, (p.261). Skelton's translation is a translation of a translation. The original *History of the World* was written in Greek in the first century BC; the work was then translated into Latin before the middle of the fifteenth century by Poggio Bracciolini. It was this version which Skelton translated into English towards the end of the fifteenth century.

For the God-fearing Christian, the creature called the 'dragon' assumes a more ominous, supernatural presence for its close association with evil and death ensures it has a long-established symbolic significance for mankind. Diodorus's dragon may overawe the reader by its sheer physical might and size but it lacks the portentous presence of the scriptural dragon, the dragon of the bestiary and of romance.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the episode is meant to be regarded as a historical fact, an authentic account of an actual capture, historically documented. That the capture is motivated by King Ptolemy who resides in Alexandria helps to substantiate its authenticity, although it would appear that in general the attributes of crocodile and snake have been conflated here to create a rare creature. The serpent, thirty cubits in length, is described as lying by the water coiling and uncoiling itself but ready to bite or to sting to death and then eat any creature who comes to the water to drink. Although the capture is a dangerous task, with money as an inducement, the hunters plan how they might cooperatively secure this 'wilde worme'.

It possesses the familiar attributes of a dragon and in many ways resembles the description of Leviathan in Job 41: it is associated with fire, insofar as its eyes glow and flame and its scales have the hardness of armour. It hisses like serpent yet, unlike a serpent, it has tusks and bristles which suggests features of the wild boar. It also has the means to kill its enemy by delivering a fatal sting as a snake might, although first winding itself around its victim to immobilize it. Significantly, the medieval bestiaries recorded this characteristic of the dragon, although the victim was suffocated by the dragon's strangle-hold grip. This monster is an amalgam of repellent reptile and a feared and ferocious animal. Ptolemy's dragon or serpent is associated with water, as the dragon had been from the earliest times of its existence. As a jealous withholder of life-giving water, the dragon's function is a destructive one but there is no overt symbolic significance.

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<sup>2</sup> The account of Diodorus Siculus also records that King Ptolemy liked collecting strange and huge creatures and had what amounted to a zoo, including elephants which indicates that the dragon was regarded as an extant animal, albeit unfamiliar and unusual.



However, the emphasis of the account is on the action of capture, the securing of a dragon for Ptolemy. 'But when it was so they approached nere vnto hym and sawe his glasyng ien glowyng and flamyng like vnto fire, and how he lay likkyng his lippes with his towng, and the horrible sharpenes and hardenes of his scales, as often as he moved theym how they sheverd and ruskeled to-gedre like as it had bene harneis of plate, and his tuskes that stode out tusked as a tentre-hoke, his lothely wide mouth discoloured vgly to behold, they were wondrely agast. They set there bestes with ropes, cheynes, and hokes to catche hym by the taile; but anon as he feled it, he busked hym vp with his breme bristels makyng an hissyng terrible to here. And when there bestes stert bak for drede of the noise, he raught to the best that next hym stode, and ravenously devoured hym and swallowed hym quyk, and cawght with his taile a felow that wolde have fled, plukkyng hym harde vnto hym and stang hym to the dethe.'<sup>3</sup>

The rest of the men run away but their greed makes them determined so they make a strong net, stop up the hole of the serpent's den and a great force of archers, horsemen and people with slings observe the dragon from afar off. No one is brave enough to go near it but such is the noise, the serpent is so confused it is trapped by the net when it cannot take refuge. Finally with broken teeth and bruised tail the serpent is taken to Ptolemy who feeds it little at first until it is tamed, 'nurrished vp' and put on display.

By contrast, the modern reader is likely to regard the dragon as a fabulous animal conjured up in a stereotypical picture of a two-winged monster with a body covered in hard scales. It has a developed snout, often an eagle-like head, a lashing tail and it exhales fire. This is the monster killed by St George and celebrated also in countless artistic depictions as being repulsive and hostile to man. For centuries European artists have employed these basic features in paintings and drawings while creating their own individual interpretations, and emphasising certain attributes, for example with regard to colouring and size. St George encountering and killing the dragon has been a popular subject for painting from medieval times onwards. In Paulo

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<sup>3</sup> Diodorus Siculus, pp. 260-261 .

Ucello's painting of St George dispatching the dragon, (c.1460), the vivid green dragon dwarfs both saint and maiden. Its huge muscular limbs, of which the front two only are visible, have clawed feet like those of some gigantic bird. Its eyes, set in a head covered with protuberances, are wild, its ears cow-like and its mouth is wide open, displaying teeth, prominent fangs and a long, thin pointed tongue. Its two wings are bird-like, yet webbed. On the outer and inner sides are three pink and blue concentric rings respectively, like big deceptive eyes. Its tail is narrow and elongated and looks like jointed armour. This is perhaps the oddest of dragons, its curious proportions the result of Ucello's interest in perspective.

Whilst usually shown or described as a huge creature, in some depictions the dragon is relatively small and resembles a large, fleshy snake. Sometimes it is much smaller in comparison with Ucello's dragon: the dragon lying at the feet of St George in Mantegna's painting of the saint (1460) resembles a large mastiff. Whatever the pictorial representation of the dragon, whether large or small, it is a creature which inspires abhorrence and fear, a greater fear than that inspired by a wild animal like the lion which is dangerous also. While the lion fights with claws and teeth, the dragon can bring to bear a greater number of unusual weapons from which there is little chance of escape: primarily fire and poison but also a lashing tail and a vast teeth-lined mouth. More importantly, the dragon carries with it sinister connotations for it has also become an embodiment of evil, a representation of Satan.

In medieval churches the dragon was often featured in the decoration of font, pillar and misericord and in general it was given the shape and scalliness of a crocodile with the addition of wings. However, the very earliest representations of dragons would not be recognised as such today. Many were compounded of equine, avian, leonine or other animal parts in a variety of permutations, often depending on the animals with which a particular race was familiar. Between these very early dragons or composite beasts, and the later representations, there has been a long evolutionary process, the image of the dragon and its significance developing and changing with the different cultures in which it has featured.

In the East, the dragon has a more benign image than its European counterpart, although

it can be bad-tempered and even malevolent. Some of the Chinese emperors claimed descent from the dragon, indicating the reverence in which it has been held historically in the East. Most usually wingless, it resembles more a flying serpent than the weightier beast we are accustomed to call a dragon. Associated with mountains and more particularly with water, as are dragons in general, the Chinese dragon has the capacity for metamorphosis, sometimes changing into human shape. It has the power of speech but will not tolerate being looked squarely in the eye. There does not appear to be a tradition of the dragon fight in Oriental dragon tales because it has never been completely associated with evil, as it has been in Europe and what we now call the Middle East. At first the European dragon had an ambivalent image for, as a symbol of water, it could be regarded as beneficent when rain fell and guaranteed the fertility of the crops but when a lack of water brought drought or an excess of it caused flooding, death and destruction, then the dragon was regarded as malevolent.

Although dragons the world over share certain basic characteristics which enable them to be called 'dragons', they possess no fixed physical form or behavioural pattern. There is no standard dragon and variations are to be found in the literature and art of different cultures although, except for a very few occasions in folklore, the Western dragon's primary characteristic is malice towards mankind. So, like a palimpsest, varying kinds and shapes of dragon are glimpsed, often only sketchily, from the earliest depictions in the Middle Eastern creation myths to the later European representations but they are testimonies to the long and diverse process of the accretion and evolution of dragon lore.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to trace or explore in detail the complexities of the many and varied myths and legends which grew up around the monster we call the 'dragon' but it is necessary to trace those elements of dragon lore which, evolving over the centuries, are of significance to a study of the function of the dragon in medieval hagiography in particular. The Greek word 'drakon', Latin 'draco', from which the English word 'dragon' comes, means 'snake'

and indeed 'dragon' and the two words are often used interchangeably in the Christian tradition.<sup>4</sup> Heinz Mode makes the point that the word 'dragon' was not a word which existed in pre-Hellenic times and he says it cannot be found before this time in the descriptions of monsters in the writings from Mesopotamia, Egypt, India or China for example.<sup>5</sup> However, it is in the Middle East that the first 'dragon' appears, in the myths which seek to explain the beginnings of the world both on a cosmic and human scale. The Babylonian *Enuma elis* is such a myth and recognised as an important starting point in dragon lore.

### EARLY MIDDLE EASTERN *ENUMA ELIS*.

What distinguishes the type of monster we refer to as a 'dragon' from other monsters, equally prevalent in legend and myth, is its close association and originally its identification with the seas and primeval waters. However, its physical characteristics, as depicted in art, depend on the imagination and interpretation of the artist in these early cultures. The dragon first appeared in what we now call the Middle East, in the creation myths, like the Babylonian epic of creation called *Enuma elis* of about the eighth century B.C., in which the female dragon Tiamat fights her son Marduk. The title of the myth comes from the opening words: 'When sky before the earth was formed.' It recounts how Marduk eventually subdues his mother in order to allow for the creation of the universe. Order and stability are established out of primeval chaos so that the salt seas, the element of Tiamat and the meaning of her name, are constrained, and land can emerge on which newly-created man, the servant of the gods, may live. This conflict clearly showed that the concept of evil was closely associated with destructiveness and disorder and the frustration of a stable universe in which each element had its appointed place. Although the description of the god Marduk includes mention of his specific weapons, like the winds, a bow

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<sup>4</sup> Both the Anglo-Saxon and Middle English dictionaries equate the dragon with the serpent: *The Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, eds. Joseph Bosworth and Northcote Toller (Oxford, 1882) and *The Middle English Dictionary*, eds. Shermann M. Kuhn and John Reidy (Michigan, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Heinz Mode, *Fabulous Beasts and Demons* (London, 1975), p.116.

and arrows and a mace, the cosmic scale of the description recalls the divine champion of the Israelite creation poetry, (see below). Creation's future depended on the keeping in check of those forces of chaos, the engulfing seas, represented above all by the sea-monster.

G. Elliot Smith draws attention to the widely divergent depictions of these early dragons by reproducing two diagrammatic drawings, one from a cylinder-seal from Susa which Elliot Smith claims shows the earliest picture of a dragon composed of the fore-part of the falcon of the Egyptian solar god, Horus, united with the hindpart of the lioness of Hathor, in her destructive aspect of Sekhet and also incorporating the qualities of the water-god, Osiris.<sup>6</sup> The fight between Horus and the evil Set, who has murdered his brother, Osiris, is a myth of confrontation, the opposing sides representing light, fertility and creation, on the one hand, and darkness, drought and death on the other. However, the student of modern heraldry would not regard the composite beast of the Susa seal as a 'dragon' but possibly an early type of gryphon or griffin,<sup>7</sup> thus reinforcing the underlying impossibility of determining what was the earliest depiction of a dragon. It is quite different from the adjacent illustration of Tiamat taken from a Babylonian seal, now in the British Museum, which Elliot Smith believes to be the earliest representation of the dragon, Tiamat. She has two wings, a scaly body, four legs and a longish neck and she has a resemblance to the popular concept of the Loch Ness monster. It was not until the Middle Ages with the development of heraldry and heraldic devices that the stylised, stereotypical drawings of composite monsters like the dragon, the griffin, the cockatrice and the wyvern for example began to develop certain conventional attributes, although the dragon never acquired a consistent and fixed appearance. Also, these other creatures did not capture the popular imagination, nor the imagination of writers and painters, as much as the dragon did, largely because the dragon carried with it so many evocative mythologies.

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<sup>6</sup> G. Elliot Smith, *The Evolution of the Dragon* (Manchester, 1919), p.79.

<sup>7</sup> In heraldry, the gryphon or griffin is distinguished from the dragon by its lion-like body and hind legs and tail but it has an eagle's head and wings and while the bestiary says it will tear human-beings to pieces, the children who are snatched by a griffin in *Sir Torrent of Portyngale* and other romances are found eventually safe and sound.

Because the heraldic dragon and griffin rampant can, at a quick glance, be mistaken for each other does suggest that mythic monsters were created using a familiar pool of 'spare parts'. Heinz Mode prefers to call them 'composite creatures', rejecting the term 'fabulous creatures' when describing dragons because the former term suggests they were capable of existence, each separate part being anatomically correct<sup>8</sup> and each component contributing to the power and the awesomeness of the whole. However, although the parts might be 'anatomically correct', these were then given properties which further demonstrated the creature's singularity and marvellousness: the dragon could exhale fire from its gigantic mouth, while the horns of the yale could alter their position. These earliest myths reveal the dragon as an aggressive monster, involved in conflict and the destruction of order and associated with water in some form. Chronologically, the next culture which contributes to our perception of the dragon and perpetuates it as a monster, inspiring wonder and fear, is Greek, c.1500 B.C.

### GREEK MYTHOLOGY.

Classical Greek mythology and legends abound with monsters which must be overcome, either by physical force, guile or by trickery, often with the help of a god or goddess. These stories contain elements familiar to dragon lore, topoi which appear in the saints' legends and the romances of the Middle Ages. The rescuing of a maiden from a monster by the hero is a familiar romance topos. In the Greek legend, Hercules saved the princess Hesione who was to be sacrificed to the dragon in order to prevent the destruction of the people from plague. More particularly, the heroic dragon-slayer, Perseus would seem to have a direct influence on the legend of St George. The Princess Andromeda, whom Perseus saved from a sea-serpent, represents the archetypal sacrificial victim awaiting her fate, chained to the rocks near Joppa, according to legend. The placating of the dragon with animal sacrifices and then, when these

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<sup>8</sup> Heinz Mode, *Fabulous Beasts and Demons*, p.31. It would appear that in the Middle Ages there was no felt need to question the existence of those animals we would call 'fabulous', largely because the accumulated store of animal lore had been passed down from antiquity and its authors were long-established as scholars.

fail, with human sacrifices is a familiar topos which reaches its apogee with the legend of St George, who saved a princess from a similar fate by killing the dragon which threatened to devour her. Significantly, St George's life-story was associated with Joppa, so it has been suggested that the dragon encounter was an incorporation of the Perseus legend, the heroic exploit of a Greek hero transposed to the life of a Christian saint.

Many other Greek heroes are celebrated for their successful slaying of huge snakes or dragon-like monsters: Apollo killed the serpent Python, and Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, dispatched the serpent of Mars, described in some detail by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, a much-read text in the Middle Ages and a well-used source for medieval writers. Indeed, the creatures slain by the Greek heroes resembled the serpent rather than the dragon; Ovid describes the serpent of Mars as: '.....a creature with a wonderful golden crest; fire flashed from its eyes, its body was all puffed up with poison, and from its mouth, set with a triple row of teeth, flickered a three-forked tongue.....the dark gleaming serpent put forth its head from the depths of the cave, hissing horribly....' and it 'coiled its scaly loops in writhing circles, then with a spring shot up in a huge arc, raising more than half its length into the insubstantial air, till it looked down upon the whole expanse of the forest.'<sup>9</sup> This description contains those attributes usually associated with the snake, like hissing, poison and the forked tongue, as well as the attribute of fire associated with the dragon, demonstrating that dragon and snake qualities were often amalgamated in the same monster. Like the account of Diodorus Siculus, the description is calculated to produce an effect on the reader, one of horror and fear, for the serpent kills those who have stumbled upon it with its 'fangs, its constricting coils, and tainted poisonous breath' The vastness of this creature 'It was as huge as the Serpent that twines between the two Bears in the sky, if its full length was uncoiled' also contributes to a terrifying picture.

However, in Hellenic mythology there is no indication of a cosmic and eternal struggle between good and evil, order and disorder, as there is in Judaic mythology. The hero's reputation

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<sup>9</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. This translation is by Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth, 1955), p.75 ll.31-43.

is elevated by the slaying of a dragon or monster and his bravery and skill are celebrated. These monstrous creatures were sometimes the offspring of gods and goddesses, like the Cyclops, created by Poseidon, who was displeased when Odysseus injured the one-eyed monster. The progeny of the gods and goddesses have been born from many different fathers and mothers, some mortal, some immortal and the deities protect their own: they exercise no moral judgment in acting as they do.

As there is no demarcation between what is right and what is wrong in the portrayals of the deeds of the gods and goddesses in Greek mythology, the reader is not asked to ally himself or herself with the cosmic good, since that kind of Judaic-Christian, moral or religious affiliation is outside the ethos of the narrative. The reader's interest is with the hero, whose progress is followed, and so his monstrous foes are ours also because they are the obstacles to the achievement of his reward. His success may be due to his daring, his cunning or indeed to a special piece of armour or equipment. However, the hero who rescues the young, innocent maiden from a vile monster, clearly has our sympathy for he shows compassion for her and her purity, implied in her virgin state. This kind of story patently represents the heroic stand against that which is ugly and destructive. The single hero, who seeks out and does battle with an evil, preying monster is a topos which emerges in most genres of literature: legend, myth, romance, saga and hagiography, for example. The hero requires a monster, an adversary built on a scale commensurate with his daring, his prowess in fighting and his bravery: the monstrous dragon provides a worthy opponent.

Larousse claims that the legendary Hellenistic heroes had a function which was to act as intermediaries between the divinities and ordinary men and women. 'the heroes who were idealised men, became demi-gods and in the hierarchy occupied a position midway between men and the Olympians.' Interestingly, this invites a comparable evaluation of the status of saints in 'the hierarchy', who also become intermediaries between God and mankind, because their



Christian valour demonstrated their pre-eminence among humankind.<sup>10</sup>

OLD TESTAMENT: Israelite poetry and Hebrew myth

THE NEW TESTAMENT: the dragon of the Apocalypse

The Babylonian creation myth, with which the exploration of this topic began, has affinities with parts of the Old Testament which describe Leviathan, a sea-monster or dragon, whose habitation is in a cosmic setting, in the primeval oceans. Unlike the Hellenic myths discussed above, the fight between God and Leviathan involves the opposing supernatural forces of good and of evil, of creation and destruction, of order and chaos. In addition, the dragon of the Apocalypse and the serpent of Genesis make significant contributions to the connotations with which the medieval dragon is imbued. Each kind of dragon has a different provenance and different attributes which help to create a complex and multivalent beast, rich in symbolism.

John Day examines the conflict between Leviathan, the dragon, and God (Yaweh) in the Old Testament and concludes that the conflict had its origin in Canaanite mythology and does not come from Babylonian sources, like that of *Enuma elis*. Day shows that the various names used to describe the sea-monster: 'Leviathan', 'Rahab' or 'Tanin' refer, in Israelite poetry, to the nature of this monster meaning: 'the twisting serpent' or 'the crooked serpent', and 'twisting one'. (Isaiah 27 v 1; 51 v.9; Jeremiah 51 v. 34; Psalm 87 v.4). While Rahab is an alternative name for 'Leviathan', 'Tanin' may be translated as 'dragon'.<sup>11</sup> God's control of the sea and the dragon therein is supreme and mirrors his control over creation:

*Tu confirmasti in virtute tua mare; Contribulasti capita draconum in aquis. Tu confregisti capita draconis; Dedisti eum escam populis Aethiopum* (Psalm 73 (74) vv. 13-14, BV). Also: *Tu*

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<sup>10</sup> Larousse, *Encyclopedia of Mythology* (London, 1960), p.192.

<sup>11</sup> John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of the Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 66, p.179.

*dominaris potestati maris, Motum autem fluctuum eius mitigas, Tu humiliasti, sicut vulneratum, superbum; In brachio virtutis tuae dispersisti inimicos tuos. (Psalm 88 (89) vv.10-11, BV)* A similar picture is found in the Book of Job 26 vv. 12-13: *In fortitudine illius repente maria congregata sunt, Et prudentia eius percussit superbum. Spiritus eius ornavit caelos, Et obstetricante manu eius, eductus est coluber tortuosus. (BV)*

Likewise Isaiah 51 v 9 shows a warrior God in combat with the dragon: *Consurge, consurge, induere fortitudinem, Brachium Domini! Consurge sicut in diebus antiquis, In generationibus saeculorum. Numquid non tu percussisti superbum, Vulnerasti draconem? (BV)*

The dragon or sea-monster functions as a means by which God's omnipotence may be emphasised, since God alone can vanquish it. God protects his ordered creation and therefore it is a wise man who trusts in Him alone and obeys his commands. The prevailing imagery in which the antagonism between God and the destructive powers of evil is described is of battle. This is also a recurrent motif in medieval hagiography and in other literary genres of the period and one which will be explored at a later stage. God is the great and stern warrior with an invincible strength in his arm, who hacks the dragon to pieces and puts chaos to rout. The surging seas, a cosmic setting to this battle, are a reminder of the primeval waters of the creation.<sup>12</sup>

In the Book of Job 41 vv. 4-25, there is a lengthy description of Leviathan, which has been equated with the crocodile, but the detailed listing of its behaviour and attributes demonstrates emphatically the mythological nature of this water monster, a view upheld by Day. Though unmistakable crocodilian attributes feature in its composition, Leviathan can be captured by God, alone.<sup>13</sup> The water monster cannot be caught by man as was the Nile crocodile which

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<sup>12</sup> Many dragons in European and Chinese legend are also associated closely with water, not cosmic seas or oceans but nevertheless local wells, springs and rivers, which are the habitats of these creatures and which they guard jealously. It would seem likely that a powerful creature, like a water serpent or dragon, would be invented as an explanation for the swirling, serpentine movement of the currents and tides and the meanderings of a river.

<sup>13</sup> John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon*, p.83. The author makes the point that Leviathan was a mythological sea-monster and therefore neither whale, crocodile or other living sea-creature, although he says that the writer of Job may well have believed in Leviathan's existence.

was successfully hunted in Egypt. That God only can subdue it creates a graphic impression of size and elemental power in keeping with its cosmic significance. Certain attributes of the Leviathan distinguish it from other creatures like the crocodile and also are shared by the dragon of Western folklore. The Leviathan in Job can exhale fire and stress is placed on the flames and sparks which issue from it. This description from the Book of Job 41 vv 4-35 which follows appears to celebrate the magnificent strength of this water monster:

*Quis revelabit faciem indumenti eius? Et in medium oris eius quis intrabit? Portas vultus eius quis aperiet? Per gyrum dentium eius formido. Corpus illius quasi scuta fusilia, compactum squamis se prementibus. Una uni coniungitur, Et ne spiraculum quidem incedit per eas. Una alteri adhaerebit, et tenentes se nequaquam seperabuntur. Sternutatio eius splendor ignis, Et oculi eius ut palpebrae diluculi. De ore eius lampades procedunt, Sicut taedae ignis accensae. De naribus eius procedit fumus, sicut ollae succensae atque ferventis. Halitus eius prunas ardere facit, Et flamma de ore eius egreditur. In collo eius morabitur fortitudo, Et faciem eius praecedit egestas. Membra carnum eius cohaerentia sibi; Mittet contra eum fulmina et ad locum alium non ferentur. Cor eius indurabitur tanquam lapis, Et stringetur quasi malleatoris incus, Cum sublatus fuerit, timebunt angeli, Et teriti purgabuntur. Cum apprehenderit eum gladius, subsistere non poterit, Neque hasta, neque thorax; Reputabit enim quasi paleas ferrum, Et quasi lignum putridum aes. Non fugabit eum vir sagittarius; In stipulam versi sunt ei lapides fundae. Quasi stipulam aestimabit malleum, Et deridebit vibrantem hastam. Sub ipso erunt radii solis, Et sternet sibi aurum quasi lutum. Fervescere faciet quasi ollam profundum mare, Et ponet quasi cum unguenta bulliunt. Post eum lucebit semita; Aestimabit abyssum quasi senescentem. Non est super terram potestas quae comparetur ei, Qui factus est ut nullum timeret. Omne sublime videt: Ipse est rex super universos filios superbiae. (BV)*

The Leviathan's immensity and its fierceness are awe-inspiring. It is conjured up in a series of images which recall the battlefield, for weapons cannot pierce its hide which is referred to as if it were a strong and invulnerable suit of armour. Also, the description is another reminder of the elemental surges of the oceans, kept in control by the superior might of God only.

Its renown is such that it is an object of terror, of nightmarish, archetypal chaos. Again the images of the dragon and the divine power of God reflect the theme of order and disorder and the establishment of God's supremacy over creation. Neil Forsyth stresses, however, that the dragon not only represented disorder but, in other Canaanite versions, it stood for death because water flooding the crops also threatened the survival of a community which depended on growing its own food.<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, the serpent or snake of Genesis seems a different beast from the dragon or sea-monster of Israelite poetry. It does not live in or come from the sea; it does not appear to have that physical strength or size which is the mark of the ever-threatening Leviathan, controlled only by divine might. The Leviathan is an instantly recognisable destructive and evil force on a cosmic scale, and yet by contrast the power of the serpent of Genesis is proved to be as great, in a different way from that of the sea-monster. Both these depictions of evil forces contribute their own significant connotations to the development of the image of the dragon as it is featured in hagiography.<sup>15</sup> Eve is tempted by the serpent and by taking a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, which she and Adam eat, the introduction of evil into the world is signified as well as the concomitant disorder, pain and death that this act brings. The serpent of Genesis is sometimes represented pictorially as a snake with a woman's head, so making a visual connection between evil and woman. This is evil with a fair aspect but God's words to the serpent ensure its establishment as the traditional enemy of mankind: *Quia fecisti hoc, Maledictus es inter omnia animantia, et bestias terrae. Super pectus tuum gradieris, et terram comedes cunctis diebus vitae tuae. Inimicitias ponam inter te et mulierem, Et semen tuum et semen illius.....* (Genesis 3 vv. 14-15 BV)

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<sup>14</sup> Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton, 1987), p.60.

<sup>15</sup> The development of Satan as an embodiment of evil is too complex and of peripheral significance to be dealt with in this thesis. Nevertheless, his role as the adversary of God is not equated in Canaanite-Judaic writings with the dragon of the Old Testament and neither does he represent chaos. This concept emerges in the later apocryphal books. Forsyth points to Revelation 12 as furnishing the seminal imagery of the war in heaven where the dragon's description recalls Old Testament references to the dragon, like Psalm 74; Forsyth also recognizes the influence of Greek mythology on the developing concept of the dragon. *op. cit.* pp.252-254.

Unlike the dragon, the serpent can speak and does so with guile and persuasion. The sword and the spear are useless against an adversary which tempts mankind to greed, lust and temporal power. Although there are differences between the ways in which the two creatures function within scripture, some of the connotations which have grown up around the serpent of the Garden of Eden have become subsumed into dragon lore. Also, some of the earlier ecclesiastical depictions of St George show him fighting a dragon which resembles a python-like snake or serpent, perhaps reflecting this conflation.<sup>16</sup> It may also be a deliberate means of emphasising the strength and power of the good over evil by showing the dragon reduced to a quivering corpse but more probably this indicates that the local school of ecclesiastical sculptors of the time represented the dragon as a snake-like creature because it could be accommodated more easily in a limited space, like a small tympanum.<sup>17</sup> One of the panels of the late twelfth century cathedral doors at Ravello also shows St George attacking a fish-like dragon indicating that in visual art, the dragon of the twelfth century was not always portrayed as large and threatening. (See Plate 2)

Leviathan, the monster of the primeval waters, the tempter from Genesis and the dragon from the Book of Revelation are depicted as being the destroyers of good and a threat to God's created world and to mankind.<sup>18</sup> Although they have their own connotations, coming as they do from different provenances and although the basic symbolic equation of snake/dragon with evil is a fundamental and simple assumption, the different ways in which these creatures function

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<sup>16</sup> See the church of St John the Baptist, Ruardean, Gloucestershire where, sculpted on a twelfth century tympanum above the south porch, St George attacks the dragon with his lance. The dragon's body is segmented and snake-like. Its appearance does not conform to our modern perception of the dragon. (See Plate 1).

<sup>17</sup> Another twelfth century tympanum over the south porch of St George's Church, Brinsop, Herefordshire, depicts a dragon with vestigial wings which creeps sinuously along the ground. Clearly, the similarity of both Brinsop and Ruardean's sculpted depictions suggests the work of the Herefordshire/Gloucestershire school of sculptors.

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, this symbolism is not confined to Judaic and Christian cultures but can be found also in the Mithraic tauroctones which feature a serpent attempting to destroy the act of creation as Mithras slays the bull to bring fertility to the earth. The tauroctone under the foundations of the St Clement's basilica in Rome shows this mythic event (See Plate 3.)

within the Bible occasion the creation of a number of different templates: situational, figurative and didactic, used recurrently in the hagiographic genre by medieval writers.

For instance the story of Daniel, Bel and the Snake<sup>19</sup> in the Vulgate provides a topos familiar to the legends of the martyrs. Daniel's refusal to worship a Babylonian dragon ensures his imprisonment in the lions' den and prefigures the later hagiographic topos of the saint's denunciation of the Roman idols and his/her subsequent imprisonment. God's intervention in Daniel's plight recalls the intervention of Christ in the mitigation of his saints' sufferings. The interpretation placed on the snake/dragon by the Franciscan theologian, Nicholas de Lyra, (c.1270-1340) reflects the fusion of their attributes and reinforces the medieval perception of the dragon as being a creature of deceit and guile, a depiction found in the medieval bestiary, to be discussed later in the chapter.<sup>20</sup> However, by contrast, the portrayal of the archetypal dragon in hagiography and romance shows its reliance on its strength and viciousness.

The dragon and its subduer, St Michael, appear dramatically in the New Testament, in the Book of Revelation. The dragon is presented in some symbolic detail, St John's personal vision of evil and the cataclysmic struggle necessary to vanquish it reveals the extent to which the connotations surrounding the dragon have been extended and developed. Allowing for the many biblical commentaries on the complex symbolism of this last New Testament book, what emerges from chapters 12 and 13, in particular, is that the evil the dragon embodies is ancient, powerful and malevolent towards those who worship Christ. Again Nicholas de Lyra's '*moraliter*' provides relevant comment. In *Apocalypsis* or Revelation 12 v.1 he glosses the *draco magnus rufus* as '*diabolus superbus & maliciosus*'. In Revelation 12 v.9, the old dragon is referred to as *serpens antiquus qui vocatur diabolus* and *Satanas qui seducit universam orbem*'. (BV) The

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<sup>19</sup> The account of Daniel, Bel, and the Snake is to be found in the Vulgate, Daniel 14. In the English Bible this is the Apocryphal book of Bel and the Dragon.

<sup>20</sup> *Per draconem, de quo dicit Aug. in sermone quodam (leo aperte irascitur, draco occulte insidiatur) fraus & malicia designatur. & ideo draconem colunt; illi qui per fraudem & malitiam veritatem sebuertere quaerunt cuiusmodi sunt detractores, adultores, advocati cupidi, & iudices iniqui & consimiles. Per sapientiam autem Danielis draco fuit interfectus, ficut dicitur infra.* See Nicholas de Lyra, *Biblia Sacra cum Glossa Ordinaria*, 1617 edition, vol iv, Danielis Cap. XIII.

significant connection with Genesis 3 is made and developed when the enraged dragon goes to wage war on woman's progeny because Michael is victorious over him and the dragon is cast out of heaven. This battle, described in the last book of the New Testament, is described in martial terms, St John's vision reflecting the age-old images of Hebrew literature, the battle between God and mutinous evil. The fight of St Michael provided a theological source for the hagiographic topos of the encounter between saint and dragon. In medieval iconography, he is dressed in armour with the sign of the cross on his tunic and he brandishes a sword, while triumphantly trampling the devil into the ground. His angel's wings alone differentiate him from St George who is seen depicted in stained glass and on rood screen often in the same stance.<sup>21</sup> The visionary imagery from Revelation provides many of the seminal influences on the medieval, and indeed modern, perception of the dragon.

The battle-lines are drawn between God and those who rebel against him and this cosmic war epitomizes the sublunary battle between saint and dragon, between the Christian faith and idolatry: *Et datum est ei os loquens magna et blasphemias: et data est ei potestas facere menses quadraginta duos. Et aperuit os suum in blasphemias ad Deum, blasphemare nomen eius, et eos qui in caelo habitant.* (Rev. 13 vv. 5-7 BV) The great, red dragon which has seven heads, ten horns and seven diadems on its heads emerges from the sea and by so doing establishes a significant connection with Leviathan of the Old Testament (Rev. 12 vv. 3-4). It stands in readiness to devour the infant, about to be born of the woman, but the child, who represents Christ, will rule the nations with authority, a rod of iron, (Rev. 13 v. 5). The red dragon's seven heads have been seen as symbolic of the Roman empire whose pantheon of gods threatened the true religion, although Nicholas de Lyra glosses them as subordinate demons: *'inferiorum daemonum uniuersitas'*.<sup>22</sup> Thus, a strong connection between paganism and

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<sup>21</sup> For example, St Michael is portrayed on the fifteenth century rood screen of Ranworth church, Norfolk, in the same pose; his garments of feathers and his wings are the features which distinguish him from St George. (See Plates 4 and 5.)

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas de Lyra, *Biblia Sacra*, vol. vi, *Apocalypsis* Cap. XII.

the dragon is established in this apocalyptic vision. In addition, there is clear encouragement to those who refuse to bow down before these monsters. The saints' testimony to Christ in their refusal to worship pagan gods ensures that they are received into the bliss of heaven: *Et vidi sedes, et sederunt super eas et iudicium datum est illis: et animas decollatorum propter testimonium Iesu, et propter verbum Dei, et qui non adoraverunt bestiam, neque imaginem eius, nec acceperunt characterem eius in frontibus, aut in manibus suis, et vixerunt, et regnaverunt cum Christo mille annis.* (Revelation 20 v 4 BV)

The dragon is regarded by twentieth century readers as a creature of folk-lore and legend but for the people of the Middle Ages the dragon could be accepted as a real creature. Since man's advent on earth his relationship with animals has been invested with a significance beyond the provision of their flesh for food and their skins for clothing. Observation of and interest in their appearance and their behaviour clearly provoked many distinguished writers from early cultures and civilizations to record information and to attempt to give reasons for what appeared to be mystifying aspects of natural history. Sources of animal lore from classical times included Herodotus, (fifth century B.C.) whose works contained many observations about animals, Aristotle's *Historia Animalium* (fourth century B.C.), Aelian's *De Natura Animalium* (third century B.C.) and Pliny, the Elder, whose major work, *Historia Naturalis*, (first century A.D.) owed much to Aristotle. Pliny's work was still being used as a text book in the seventeenth century, an indication of this strong tradition. The Bible too, was a formative influence on our ancestors' perceptions and concepts of animals: the ant symbolized the worker whom the lazy person was encouraged to emulate and the wolf was referred to in derogatory terms as being treacherous and vicious in contrast to the lamb, associated with the sacrificial 'lamb of God.'

However, the single most influential work to be considered as having a profound influence on the development of the Christian's perception of the natural world was *Physiologus* which may be regarded as the ancestor of the medieval bestiary.



PHYSIOLOGUS

*Physiologus* marked an important stage in the evolution and preservation of medieval animal lore; its title, meaning the 'naturalist', refers to the author who is unknown. It was essentially a compilation of knowledge about animals made during the second or third centuries AD. in Alexandria, although, as has been seen above, individual influential writings on animals were in existence from classical times. *Physiologus* was translated from the Greek into Latin about the time Isidore of Seville was compiling his *Etymologiae* in the seventh century, (see below). What differentiated *Physiologus* from other earlier works on animals was the use made of the animal kingdom for the promotion of the Christian doctrine and morality. It was a collection of tales featuring animals and was initially drawn from early civilizations; these stories were then absorbed into Greek and Roman folklore and art and subsequently were used to inculcate Christian doctrine by the addition of allegorical interpretation. Michael Curley, in his introduction to his translation, concludes that the Greek text was being widely read by 'the last quarter of the fourth century' and the earliest Latin translation could have been also read, 'sometime in the fourth century.'<sup>23</sup> He says: 'The anonymous author of *Physiologus* infused these venerable pagan tales with the spirit of Christian moral and mystical teaching, and thereafter they occupied a place of special importance in the symbolism of the Christian world. Both directly and through numerous intermediaries *Physiologus* became an established source of Medieval sacred iconography and didactic poetry and was used in the preaching manuals and religious textbooks of the later Middle Ages.'<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* contains a reference to the work, which, it seems, would have been familiar to medieval readers or listeners for it merits no introduction:

'and Chauntecleer so free

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<sup>23</sup> *Physiologus*, translated and with an introduction by Michael Curley (Austin and London, 1979), Introduction, pp.xix-xx. The text the translator uses is based on two editions of the Latin *Physiologus*, both prepared by Frances Carmody and referred to as the y-version and the b-version. Curley has used predominantly the former as it is closer to the Greek original.

<sup>24</sup> *Physiologus*, Introduction p.ix.

Soong murier than the mermayde in the see

(For Physiologus seith sikerly

How that they syngen wel and myrily).’ ( ll. 3269-3272 )<sup>25</sup>

The created world was likened to a mirror in which God's purpose could be seen, for it was the means by which mankind could glimpse God and the heavenly kingdom. Michael Curley quotes from Book 3 of Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* in order to explain the anagogical structure of nature which underlies Christianity's perceptions of the universe and the extract also reveals the way in which the animal lore in *Physiologus* was used didactically:

‘The apostle Paul teaches us that the invisible things of God may be known through the visible (*invisibilia Dei ex visibilibus intelligantur*), and things which are not seen may be contemplated by reason of and likeness to those things which are seen. He shows by this that this visible world may teach about the invisible and that earth may contain patterns of things heavenly, so that we may rise from lower to higher things (*ut ab his, quae deorsum sunt, ad ea, quae sursum sunt, possimus adscendere*) and out of those we see on earth perceive and know those which are in the heavens. As a certain likeness of these, the Creator has given a likeness of creatures which are on earth, by which the differences more easily might be gathered and perceived. And perhaps just as God made man in his own image and likeness, so also did he make the remaining creatures after certain other heavenly images as a likeness. And perhaps every single thing on earth has something of an image and likeness (*habent aliquid imaginis et similitudinis in caelestibus*) in heavenly things, to such a degree that even the grain of mustard which is the smallest of all seeds may have something of an image and likeness in heaven.’<sup>26</sup>

This Christian perception of the created world is one which Alan of Lille also explores in his work. A monk, preacher and scholar and associated with the Chartrians, he died at the beginning of the thirteenth century. He was interested in the relationship between the natural

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<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L.D. Benson et al, third edition (Oxford, 1989) VII B<sup>2</sup> p.259.

<sup>26</sup> *Physiologus*, Introduction pp.xiii-xiv.

world of flora and fauna and God and the following extract from his *Anticlaudianus* (ll. 1182- 83) reflects this exegetical approach:

*'omnis mundi creatura*

*quasi liber et pictura*

*nobis est in speculum;*

*nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis,*

*nostri status, nostrae sortis*

*fidele signaculum.'*<sup>27</sup>

I want now to look at entries in *Physiologus* relevant to the serpent and to dragon lore particularly. Although there is a lengthy section on the serpent in *Physiologus*, there is no specific entry for the dragon. That the dragon is a recognised creature is, however, evident from the mention of it in various other entries where, in the descriptions of the elephant and the panther respectively, it is equated quite simply with evil, over which Christ has complete control. A longer reference is made to the dragon in the short entry on the echinemon, which, we are told, is hostile to it: 'if he encounters a dragon, he goes against him and besmears himself with mud and covers his nostrils with his tail, hiding himself and inflating himself, and thus stands against the dragon until he kills it.' The interpretation follows: 'Thus also did our Savior, taking on from the earth the substance of a body, that is, the body which he received from Mary, stand until he slew the intelligible dragon Pharaoh (that is, the devil), who sits by the rivers of Egypt (Ez. 29:3).'

Significantly, the use of 'intelligible' indicates the influence of Origen, referred to above, and the correspondences he had in mind between the perceived created being and its divine archetype. Here the dragon clearly functions as a symbol for the devil (an established image) and for the evil Egyptian king, a powerful historical reminder of the suffering of the Israelites under the Egyptians.

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<sup>27</sup> *Patrologia Latina*, 210 579a.

<sup>28</sup> *Physiologus*, Section XL, p.54.

The stag in *Physiologus* is also 'an enemy of the dragon', which flees from the beast, escaping into the cracks of the earth. Clearly, the dragon here is a serpent or snake which is drawn out from its hiding-place when the stag spews water it has been drinking into the crack. The stag kills the emerging snake by stamping on it. 'Thus did our Lord kill the huge dragon, the devil, with heavenly waters of indescribable wisdom. The dragon cannot bear water, and the devil cannot bear heavenly words. If you also have intelligible dragons hidden in your heart, call upon Christ in the Gospels with prayers and he will kill the dragon...' <sup>29</sup> The 'intelligible dragons' are equated in this quotation with inner, spiritual evil. Curiously, it is said that the dragon hates water whereas some hagiographic dragons live in or near water as do dragons from folk-lore.

The inclusion of the serpent in *Physiologus* is used to point out a succession of ways in which the Christian should strive to put evil behind him.<sup>30</sup> The text is supported by frequent scriptural references and quotations and each natural habit of the serpent is used as a didactic symbol. For example as the serpent grows old and he wants to be renewed he must fast for forty days and forty nights in order that his skin may become loose and he can slough it off by squeezing between a crack in a rock. Then the moral is drawn, that it is necessary for the Christian to, 'throw off for Christ the old man and his clothing through much abstinence and tribulation'. Michael Curley points out where this *Physiologus* legend differs from a much earlier, but very similar one, in Pliny and Aelian, for these authors do not state that the serpent fasts for forty days and nights: Pliny refers simply to the hibernation of the serpent who can go for a year without food if protected from freezing conditions.<sup>31</sup> The use of the resonant scriptural reference to Christ's fasting in the desert which occurs in the Gospel of St. Matthew, (4 v.2) demonstrates the way in which the material is utilised and the emphasis changed in order to imbue it with Christian meaning, and thus give it a greater scriptural authority.

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* Section XLV, p.58.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* Section XIII, p.16

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* Introduction, pp.xxii-iv.

Surprisingly, the serpent is not depicted as the symbol of evil here; this is not the biblical creature responsible for tempting Eve but the generic serpent whose behaviour in the wild can provide salutary lessons for the Christian. The entry begins: 'The Savior says, "Be wise like serpents and mild like doves." ' (Matt. 10 v. 16)<sup>32</sup> These polarised symbolic values can obviously be accounted for in their scriptural provenances, but the symbolic values given to animals are not always fixed and constant. Nevertheless, the hagiographic dragon, as distinct from the bestiary serpent, always represents malevolence and the forces of evil.

The description and exegesis of the whale is of interest as it also carries connotations of evil, reminiscent of Leviathan.<sup>33</sup> It is called the 'aspidoceleon' and it is a 'figure of the devil' since sailors, mistaking it for land, anchor their ships to it and light fires on it to cook their meals, whereupon the whale, feeling the heat, plunges to the depths of the sea, taking the ships with it. The moral follows: 'You also, O man, if you fix and bind yourself to the hope of the devil, he will plunge you along with himself into hell-fire.' The creature is also associated with guile and St. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians, (2 v. 11) are quoted and used to refer to the whale's deceiving nature: 'We are not ignorant of his cunning', indicating that vigilance is needed to escape its giant maw, which swallows the complacent and unwary. Guile, however, is not a quality associated with the biblical Leviathan, but with the snake of Genesis. Rather, Leviathan's brute, primitive strength is accentuated, suggesting it is an archetypal beast of cosmic mythology whom God alone can subdue with physical might. It is curious that such an ocean creature as the aspidocoleon should be used as a symbol of cunning, rather than of physical power, bearing in mind its size and strength and its habitat, all reminiscent of Leviathan. This 'whale' is very different from the 'whale' or big fish which swallowed Jonah. Plainly, creatures which are little seen and which are vast and powerful are selected to represent the awesome threat and sinister nature of evil.

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* Section, XIII, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* Section XXXI, pp. 45-6.

These lessons, like many others in *Physiologus*, become part of an increasingly rich storehouse of traditional animal lore; for example the description and symbolism of the serpent is repeated almost word for word in the much later work of Hugh of St Victor, (see below). What is also significant is that the depiction of evil as a monster draws on a multifarious input during this evolutionary process from a great number of sources, including most importantly Greek legend and Judaic and Christian literature. Therefore, the accretion over thousands of years of connotations of evil which are embodied in a monstrous animal called a dragon belies a simple perception and interpretation of it.

### ISIDORE OF SEVILLE AND THE *ETYMOLOGIAE*.

The choice of noteworthy contributors to the evolution of the bestiary has to be, of necessity, eclectic but there is a manifest link between *Physiologus* and the Latin bestiaries and that is Isidore of Seville (c.560-636), Archbishop of Seville from the beginning of the seventh century, an eminent theologian and scholar who founded both religious houses and schools. He started to compile his major work, *Etymologiae*, in 623, but it was incomplete when he died in 636. It was an encyclopedic work, its information, both religious and secular, being classified according to subject matter. This was used for both reference and source material by succeeding generations of medieval writers and scholars. In Isidore's *Etymologiae*, thus called because it contains etymological explanations, his classification of animals in Book XI, *De Animalibus*, contained new additions to the entries of *Physiologus*. However, while the *Physiologus* entries were lessons in morality, Isidore's work was not didactic: it merely described the nature of animals and did not use their behaviour as a means of making moral and theological points. The section devoted to animals includes the different kinds of serpent, among which are the 'anguis', the 'coluber', the 'draco' and the 'basilicus'. The information Isidore selects is presented with an objectivity which is that of the recorder of animal behaviour and in that way his work differs from *Physiologus* which used the animal kingdom to reinforce Christian doctrine. Isidore writes about the similarity of the 'anguis' and the 'coluber' for they slide along the ground, twisting and winding

as they go. The serpent covers the ground with 'the most minimal effort of its scaly body' and it is poisonous. The 'draco', or dragon, significantly included in this category, is the biggest of all the serpents *'qui saepe a speluncis abstractus furitur in aerem, concitaturque propter eum aer. Est autem cristatus, ore parvo, et arctis fistulis, per quas trahit spiritum, et linguam exerit. Vim autem non in dentibus sed in cauda habet, et verbere potius quam rictu nocet.'*<sup>34</sup> (which is often drawn from caves, and carried into the air, the air is stirred up on account of it. But it is crested, small in mouth and with open tubes, through which it draws breath in and out and puts out its tongue. It has strength not in its teeth, but in its tail, and it causes pain more from a blow than from its mouth.)

In Isidore's description the dragon's habitat is a cave and it is able to be carried into the air, or presumably to fly. It is crested and its tail is more harmful than its teeth. Isidore goes on to say the dragon is not poisonous because it does not kill in this way but it will kill an elephant by tying its legs in knots,<sup>35</sup> so that the beast dies from suffocation when it falls to the ground. It also comes from Ethiopia and India: *'Gignitur autem in Aethiopia, et India in ipso incendio jugis aestus.'* (It arises in Ethiopia and India in the very heat of the fire of the mountain top.)

Interestingly, Isidore's dragon has features in common with Diodorus's serpent-dragon for both can kill by winding themselves around their victims, the first in order to suffocate, the latter to inflict a fatal sting.

Five hundred years separate the scholarship of Isidore and the next author, Hugh of St Victor, whose work on the categorisation of creation is chosen to illustrate his dependence on his predecessor and also to show the unbroken line of scholarship which reiterated the patterns of animal behaviour which were accepted as standard. Most importantly, unlike Isidore's

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<sup>34</sup> *Patrologia Latina*, 82, Lib. XII, Cap. IV.

<sup>35</sup> The extract from Diodorus Siculus, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, remarks on the dragon winding itself round its prey, as do the Latin bestiaries, but this feature disappeared from the post-medieval stereotypical dragon and indeed the dragon of medieval romance and hagiography killed by other means, either by exhaling poisonous gases or by lashing its victims with its tail or by tearing its adversary to bits.

accounts of animals' behaviour, Hugh's descriptions are used to reinforce Christian faith and morality. It is very apparent that the tradition of animal lore did not lose its authority as it was passed down in an almost unaltered form from centuries before Isidore in the seventh century, to the writers of the medieval bestiaries.

### HUGH OF ST VICTOR.

Hugh of St Victor (d.1142), about whose life little is known, entered St. Victor, an Augustinian house of canons in Paris, in the early twelfth century and he taught here until his death. He was a scholar and revered theologian whose *De Bestiis et Aliis Rebus*, an appendix to his *Opera Dogmatica*, contained classifications of the natural world. He lists the distinguishing features of animals including the dragon and the different kinds of serpents, among the other information on fauna. Although, he draws for the physical descriptions upon Isidore's work, the interpretations of these creatures provide a significant contribution. The purpose of these encyclopedic works was not merely the classification of the flora and fauna of the natural world but more importantly the interpretation of the visible natural world as a means of reaching the invisible world of the Godhead which lay behind it. The Christian morality to be derived from the creation depended on its inherent symbolism which required interpretation. In his work the *Didascalicon de studio legendi*, ( *On the Study of Reading*), c.1141, Hugh expounds the way in which a text can be read allegorically: '...we shall demonstrate by a particularly short and clear example. The Scripture says: "Watch, because your adversary the Devil goeth about as a roaring lion." Here, if we should say that the lion stands for the Devil, we should mean by 'lion' not the word but the thing. For if the two words 'devil' and 'lion' mean one and the same thing, the likeness of that same thing to itself is not adequate. It remains, therefore, that the word 'lion' signifies the animal, but that the animal in turn designates the Devil. And all other things are to be taken after this fashion, as when we say that worm, calf, stone, serpent, and other things of



this sort signify Christ.' <sup>36</sup>

The exegetical tradition initiated in *Physiologus* was developed by the Church Fathers who found in the Scriptures layers of meaning, initially a threefold and then later a fourfold interpretation: historical, allegorical, anagogical and tropological. For Hugh of St. Victor, 'Nature' was the expression of Divine Wisdom: 'It ought also to be known that in the divine utterance not only words but even things have a meaning— a way of communicating not usually found to such an extent in other writings. The philosopher knows only the significance of words, but the significance of things is far more excellent than that of words because the latter was established by usage, but Nature dictated the former. The latter is the voice of men, the former the voice of God speaking to men.' <sup>37</sup>

Hugh begins the description of the dragon thus: '*Draco maximus est omnium serpentium sive omnium animantium super terram*' (The dragon is the greatest of all serpents, in fact of all living things on the earth.) His physical description is drawn from Isidore and so it is his 'interpretation' of the dragon's behaviour which deserves our attention:

*'Huic draconi assimilatur diabolus, qui est immanissimus serpens. Saepe in aerem a spelunca sua concitatur, et lucet per eum aer, quia diabolus ab initio se erigens tranfiguratur se in angelum lucis, et decipit stultos spe falsae gloriae, laetitiaeque humanae. Cristatus esse dicitur, quia ipse est rex superbiae. Venenum non in dentibus, sed in lingua habet, quia suis viribus (juribus) perditis, mendacio decipit, quos ad se trahit. Circa semitas, per quas elephantes gradiuntur, delitescit quia diabolus semper magnificos viros insequitur. Crura eorum caudae nodis illigat, et si potest illaqueat, quia iter eorum ad coelum nodis peccatorum illaqueat, ac suffocando perimit, quia quisquis vinculo criminum irretitus moritur, sine dubio in infernum damnatur.'* <sup>38</sup> (The devil who is the most monstrous serpent resembles a dragon. He often stirs

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<sup>36</sup> *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St Victor*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York, 1961), p. 150.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p.150.

<sup>38</sup> *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 177 Appendix: 'De Bestiis et Aliis Rebus', Liber Tertius, Cap. XXIV.

up the air from his cave and lights up the air around him because from the beginning, the devil raised himself up and transformed himself into an angel of light and deceived the foolish with the hope of glory and of human happiness. He is said to be crested because he is king of pride. He has poison in his tongue not his teeth because once he has destroyed their strength in right (thinking), he deceives into lying those whom he draws to himself. He wanders along the paths where elephants walk, concealing himself, because the dragon always follows the mighty men. He ties their legs with the knots of their tail, and if he can ensnare them because he ensnares the sinner with knots on their journey to heaven and destroys them by suffocation, because whoever is trapped in the chains of vices is damned forever in hell.)

This is an important first sentence since later Hugh makes clear that this immense serpent, the dragon, is equated with the devil. Thus, its huge size indicates not only the power of evil but gives it a monstrous and frightening aspect.<sup>39</sup> Hugh describes the dragon as living in a cave, where it stirs up the air and illumines it. This activity symbolises that of Lucifer, the devil, who raised himself up and transformed himself into an angel of light, thereby deceiving the foolish with the false hope of glory and happiness. This moralization concerns itself with establishing the connection between the dragon and the pride of the fallen angel and warning against vainglory. The dragon, concealing himself from the elephants in order to trap them by tying their legs with the knots of his tail, is an allegory for the way in which the devil tries to ensnare sinners on their journey to heaven and he finds greater satisfaction in bringing the mighty down and ensuring their damnation. Interestingly, the features here more resemble those of the serpent of Genesis, lying in wait for the unwary, than they do the dragon-monster who has to be subdued by physical strength. Moreover, temptation and deception are not the weapons of the archetypal dragon of Israelite poetry, medieval hagiography or romance.

Hugh of St Victor also describes the serpent, differentiating it from the dragon and firmly

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<sup>39</sup> The grotesque appearance of the devil as part monster, part human-being was developed in visual art in the twelfth century as a deterrant to sinners, just as the very nature and appearance of the dragon was another fitting embodiment of the vileness and the power of evil.

basing his account and exegesis on *Physiologus*, although the latter includes precise biblical references for each major exegetical point, while these are excluded by Hugh. Christian truth is drawn from its behaviour: when the serpent sloughs off its old skin by rubbing itself within a narrow fissure of rock, it is an allegory for the renewal of a Christian's commitment to Christ through difficulties and abstinence. When it drinks at the river's edge it leaves behind its poison, signifying that the Christian must throw away worldly desires when embracing the faith and when it sees a man naked, its fear inhibits it from attacking him whereas it will attack a clothed man. The serpent did not attack Adam in Paradise because he was naked, signifying that he had not sinned.

The 'natural history' of the serpent is used here to enforce the Christian way of life and the accustomed connotations of mendacity and guile used to tempt man are absent. Indeed the serpent is referred to as having good qualities, '*in naturalibus bonis*'. However, as has been stated above, it is not uncommon for the same animal to be used as two different symbols, representative of good and evil, although not at the same time.

### LATIN BESTIARIES.

The Latin bestiaries, with which my exploration of animal-lore and in particular dragon-lore continues, were texts which emerged in the twelfth century. They formed a stage in the the exposition of animal-lore, building on the ancient traditions of animal behaviour as both Isidore of Seville and Hugh of St Victor had done.

The two bestiaries to which I shall refer are those translated from the Latin by T.H.White<sup>40</sup> and by Richard Barber.<sup>41</sup> These texts are almost identical in their animal descriptions and

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<sup>40</sup> T.H.White, *The Book of Beasts*, new edition (Stroud, 1992). White's translation is of a Latin prose bestiary which was copied in the twelfth century, listed as li.4.26 in the Cambridge University Library. Any references to this translation will be to CUL li. 4. 26.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Barber, *Bestiary* (Woodbridge, 1993). This is an English version of the Bodleian Library manuscript, Bodley 764, based on a late twelfth century manuscript. It will be referred to as Bod.764. Although from the same century as White's text, it is later.

clearly owe a debt to those established traditions of animal behaviour recorded in the *Physiologus* and *Etymologiae* for the information in the bestiaries varies little, if at all, from these antecedent works. Indeed, the indebtedness to *Physiologus* of the writer of the bestiary manuscript CUL li. 4. 26 is clear when he refers to Physiologus, the author, as an authority, in the section on the panther: 'Physiologus says that the only animal which it considers as an enemy is the Dragon.'<sup>42</sup> The writer of the same also quotes Pliny's *Natural History* in the description of the pard, showing that subsequent authors were content to accept the wisdom of the ancient authorities. The influence on the bestiary of an established and observed tradition is marked, not only in the content but also in the ordering of information. As in *Physiologus*, distinguishing and remarkable attributes are followed by the moral lesson to be drawn. In many respects the Latin bestiaries were expanded versions of that influential work, the original forty or fifty legends forming a nucleus which increased to nearly three times as many, incorporating more exotic and fabulous beasts, birds and reptiles. They were popular texts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries particularly, and reached a wide audience in the Middle Ages whose knowledge of animals, their appearance, behaviour, habitats and the etymology of their names was fed from such sources. Many of the bestiaries were illustrated, some with elaborate and colourful representations of the essential characteristics of the animals and birds.

Both bestiary texts follow, almost word for word, the accumulated wisdom of animal lore, of Isidore of Seville and Hugh of St Victor and use their information on snakes, serpents and the dragon. There is no additional information given and it is ordered in the same way. The serpent, we are told, is a generic name and then the attributes are listed, following Isidore closely. The progress of the 'anguis' along the ground is symbolic: 'they are angular and never straight', clearly indicating the approach of the serpent of Genesis. 'Coluber (another name for snake) is called this because *'colat umbras'* - it inhabits shady places— or else because it glides with serpentine coils (*colubrosus*) into slippery courses... Serpens gets its name because it creeps (*serpfit*) by

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<sup>42</sup> *op. cit.* CUL li 4 26, p.14.

secret approaches and not by open steps. It moves along by very small pressure of its scales...'<sup>43</sup>

The author emphasizes the great variety within the species of serpent: 'Of these creatures how many poisons there are, how many species, how many calamities, how many griefs, and what a lot of different colours they have got!' <sup>44</sup> The quotation amply reflects the variety of attributes and connotations associated with snakes and indeed its conflated companion, the dragon who appears next in both bestiaries.

Both descriptions of the dragon, allowing for minor differences of translation, are almost the same and follow the standard pattern of information set out by Isidore but accompanied by Hugh's moralization. Both describe its attributes and point out that the dragon's strength lies in its tail and not in poison but that it inflicts death by suffocation, by winding itself round its victim. The illustrations accompanying both bestiary texts are very similar. Both show an elephant succumbing to a dragon whose body certainly is smaller than the elephant's but whose elongated, serpentine neck can encompass the larger animal. The dragon has two talons and a face like a hound. In the CUL li. 4. 26 manuscript it has talons, eagle-like wings and resembles the griffin more than the four-legged dragon, bearing no resemblance to the stereotypical dragon developed as a heraldic device, and reinforces the claim that visually the dragon did not at this time have an appearance that was 'fixed'. Rather, its appearance depended on the genre in which it was featured or on the way it was interpreted in church decoration.

Although the translation of the description of the dragon in Bodley Ms. 764 is very similar to the translation of the CUL li 4 26 manuscript, any reference to size is omitted. However, it refers to the dragon as 'fairest of all serpents'. The devil's association with a spurious, outward beauty indicates deception, the cunning of the serpent who beguiled Eve. This paradox of the repellent serpent with the word 'fairest' strikes a chilling note of danger. The strategy of evil to catch the unwary is also prevalent and is much emphasised in Christian sermons, for evil may

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* p.165.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* p.165.

appear superficially attractive. Even a huge beast like the elephant is vulnerable, so no-one can be complacent. The use of the word 'path' as a symbol for the journey through life is a familiar image. The section on the dragon referred to above is full of connotation and familiar imagery and it is no wonder that the bestiary was a much used resource for the medieval sermon writer, who wished to thrust home the message of Christian morality and doctrine in an entertaining and familiar way.

The dragon makes an appearance in other animal descriptions in the bestiaries. For instance in the account of the panther we are told that the dragon is fearful of it and when it hears the panther belch it flees and hides, remaining motionless: 'The true Panther, Our Lord Jesus Christ, snatched us from the power of the dragon-devil on descending from the heavens. He associated us with himself as sons by his incarnation, accepting all, and gave gifts to men, leading captivity captive.' Christ is called the 'Panther-Christ' and the passage goes on to talk of Christ's Passion: 'Dying, he reposed in the den-tomb and descended into Hell, there binding the Great Dragon.'<sup>45</sup> What is interesting here is that the dragon is capable of fear which is contrary to the accustomed behaviour of the dragon in hagiography or romance. However, the didactic point must be made that the dragon is subject to the power of Christ and this is done by showing a weakness in the beast. While the dragon of the Book of Revelation is conquered by St Michael, and St George dispatches the predatory dragon of Silene, the emphasis is on both dragons' aggression and determination to fight to the death: they are creatures who inspire terror. While physical might is an important feature in their armoury, in the saint's legend the supreme power of the cross is sufficient to cause the dragon to cease fighting: it capitulates because it recognizes a superior force.

The dragon also features in the section of the bestiary describing the Indian Perindeus tree in which doves live, feeding off the fruit. The story illustrates that God's power is supreme. The dragon kills any dove which it finds outside the shade of the tree. The lesson follows:

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.* p.15.

'Understand that the tree is God the Father and the shade is God the Son.....The fruit of the tree is heavenly wisdom, i.e. of the Lord. The dove is the Holy Ghost. Look to it, therefore, O Man, lest before you can receive the Holy Ghost, which is the spiritual and heavenly dove descending and abiding in you, you do not remain for eternity outside the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Look to it lest the Dragon destroy you, i.e. the Devil. Now if you have the Holy Ghost, the Dragon cannot come nigh you....the serpent of old should seize you and gobble you up....'<sup>46</sup> Once more, these lines show the long-established usage of the dragon and the serpent as interchangeable symbols for evil. They also reveal that the act of devouring was an established feature of the dragon's behaviour, a symbolic representation of the voraciousness of sin, its mouth, the gateway to hell. Every detail of the story is used to extract a symbolic, moralistic meaning, which is clearly stated. Patently, the story emphasises that the dragon comes within God's power; it is not an autonomous evil force which has emerged in God's creation, over which the Creator has no control for while the opposing nature of good and evil is a frequently used image, the two forces of light and darkness are not given equal powers. This theological issue, the place of evil in creation and its relationship with the Godhead, is one which has a prime place in the works of all Christian philosophers and thinkers and due emphasis is given in the bestiaries to asserting that evil can be conquered by the devout Christian.

It is clear that evil, while it is a potent and omnipresent force, is always thwarted in the divine scheme of things. The fallen, created world is flawed by wickedness and sin, and their presence necessitates a continual struggle for the committed Christian. While it is in the nature of the didacticism to view these bestiary accounts in terms of the simplistic confrontation between good and evil, St. Augustine refutes the dualism of Manichaeism: 'To start with, then, the Devil is the Lord's handiwork. For there is nothing in nature, even among the last and the least of the little creatures, which is not brought into being by him, from whom comes all form,

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* p.160-1. The symbolic swallowing by the dragon is featured in the legend of St Margaret but the saint is preserved by her faith, symbolised by the cross.

all shape, all order..' <sup>47</sup>

While the scriptural dragon may represent quite simply the forces of evil directed at God through his creation, mankind, by extrapolation, the dragon carries also connotations of death, the darkness of the grave and ignorance. The unrepentant sinner and the disbeliever are condemned to the everlasting fires of hell, having rejected Christ's offer of eternal life. Thus, associations are built up and developed from particular biblical sources. The dragon never became a synthesis of its many and varied parts: as a monster, it developed by accretion. This meant that the narrator could select from a rich storehouse of attributes and associations. Nevertheless, certain dragon topoi became established: the dragon-fight of the romance hero,<sup>48</sup> the dragon encounter of the saint,<sup>49</sup> the dragon lying at the bottom of the ladder leading to heaven,<sup>50</sup> used in hagiography and homily. Not surprisingly, in conjunction with the prolific accumulation of connotations attendant on the dragon, it possessed a multivalency which reflected these associations. The bestiary exegesis referred to above demonstrates the conflation of the serpent, the tempter of Eve, with the dragon of the Book of Revelation. This conflation, effected in the scriptures themselves, makes a major contribution to the dragon's multivalency, for each respective context enriches the image of the dragon and what he represents and creates a complex resonance of associations. The dragon of the Apocalypse represents the evils of paganism which threaten the Christian faith and yet also it is an embodiment of the pride of the devil, the fallen angel, Lucifer, whom St Michael sent hurtling from heaven, having confronted him in battle.<sup>51</sup> It is the Book of Revelation which would appear

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<sup>47</sup> *St Augustine, City of God, (Dei Civitate)* trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, 1984), p.447.

<sup>48</sup> See the romances of *Guy of Warwick*, *Beues of Hamtoun*, *Sir Torrent of Portyngale*.

<sup>49</sup> In all chapters, the Roman numerical references to the 1483 folio version of Caxton's *Golden Legend* appear first, followed by volume and page references to the 7 volume edition edited by F.S. Ellis (London, 1900). See the legends of St Silvester (C ix; vol.ii p.197); St Donatus (CC xi; vol.v p.200) and St Martha (CC xxx; vol.iv p.135).

<sup>50</sup> This image occurs in the *Gesta Romanorum*, story no. XXX which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3 and also in the legend of St Saturnine in Caxton's *Golden Legend*, also dealt with in Chapter 3.

<sup>51</sup> The Book of Revelation 12 vv. 7-9.



to provide the symbolic framework for the hagiographic topos in which St George fights the dragon. The topos is also mirrored less militantly in other saints' face to face encounters with dragons. However, the legend of St George may also have been influenced by the story of Perseus who saved Andromeda from the dragon-like sea-monster and indeed the role of the maiden would seem to support this. The legend of St George illustrates the way in which the dragon and the topos of the dragon-fight resonates with echoes from different sources, religious and secular. Clearly, over the thousands of years during which mythology relating to the dragon established itself and continued to grow the dragon acquired multifarious attributes. These have militated against the containment of the dragon's behaviour within any consistent and fixed portrayal. However, in the West it has always been depicted as a monster of awesome physical size and concomitant power which is used aggressively and malevolently.

By contrast, however, the traditional lore of the dragon, set down by Isidore and perpetuated and interpreted by Hugh of St Victor and the bestiaries describes a dragon which, though dangerous, relies on a kind of cunning to make a kill: it lies in wait to bring down the victim by winding itself round the limbs. However, the guile of this type of dragon cannot be compared to that of the serpent, reliant on the temptation of his victim. Certain of the dragon's attributes have been discarded or side-lined in favour of others for this is not a dragon the modern reader would recognise, just as Diodorus' serpent-like dragon more resembled the monsters of classical Greek legend than the modern, stereotypical dragon. It is apparent that the shape and attributes of the serpent have influenced the depiction of some of the earlier dragons. Nevertheless, the romance genre and the saint's legend in most part dispensed with the serpentine qualities and developed a monster which portrayed the dragon's crocodilean features. Also, these two genres depicted the dragon which poisoned whole communities in order to intimidate its citizens into providing it with food, often human beings, once all the livestock had been eaten. The ravering maw of this dragon suggested all the terrors of being eaten alive so the dragon which stung its victims like a snake was not used but replaced by this more dramatic creature, sometimes firebreathing with a lashing tail, which featured in attacks on the romance

hero. This more robust creature, fuelled by an impersonal hatred was an adversary worthy of the hero and the saint and one which would more effectively emphasize their respective superior powers. The biblical conflation of the serpent of Genesis and the dragon of Revelation provides the church with a powerful image of evil. Yet, even in saint's legend, sermon or homily, other mythological connotations may be implicitly present in the text contributing to the complexity of the image. The dragon is most commonly cast as the mighty opponent of Christianity and the threat of the organized evil of paganism is captured most vividly in the stance taken by the angel and warrior St Michael against a monster with a huge physical presence. Conflict, seen in terms of single combat, is the hall-mark of the dragon topos which I will explore in subsequent chapters in relation to both romance and hagiography.

## CHAPTER 2 - ROMANCE AND THE DRAGON-SLAYING HERO

The knight's quest is at the heart of medieval romance, forming the basis of the narrative. The series of challenges which dominates the quest demonstrates the knight's honour and bravery and it is the single combat which most effectively reveals his exceptional skill in arms and singles him out as the chivalric hero. This kind of encounter has been long established as a literary convention, recognised in folk-lore, fairy story and romance as a means of extolling the bravery of one who will valiantly pit his limited size and physical resources against an opponent whose superhuman physical advantages suggest the hero's task is impossible. In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Greatheart fights Giant Maul, an allegorical contest which presents the essence of the topos. The form of the single combat varies little from one romance to another: the challenging knight, the wild boar, the giant or the dragon are all worthy opponents. Another knight who challenges the romance hero will usually fight according to martial rituals which have long been set up by the aristocratic society to which both belong but the hero's non-human adversaries are essentially different; not only do they possess a brutal and consummate physical strength but it is unencumbered by the constraints of the chivalric code. In general terms, the single combat valorizes the hero but each kind of adversary provides a means of revealing different virtues and qualities of the knight.

The wild boar usually provides the least demanding of opponents. Supreme amongst other boars, it will have acquired renown as a dangerous animal which has put other hunters to flight or killed them. The heroic chivalric knight who is successful where others have failed reveals himself as a skilled and fearless hunter. The boar hunt was a familiar part of court life so the knight is shown in the context of this courtly tradition, emerging from this kind of encounter with a reputation which was the aspiration of all young knights. The boar was most often the first challenge that was presented to the romance hero but, unlike the other adversaries, the fight would have a basis in reality, even allowing for the hyperbolic description of the boar's physical appearance and the ensuing encounter. Interestingly, Bevis fights a boar which lives at 'the

devillus denne',<sup>1</sup> which might suggest the beast's synonymity with the devil; it carries a symbolism which is at odds with the 'reality' of the episode and so suggests an encounter which is metaphysical— a conflict between good and evil. However, in spite of the allusion to the devil, the text describes an animal which remains essentially a dangerous wild beast and there is no further extension of the imagery. Historically it does not carry the connotations of evil which the dragon does and neither does it inspire the intensity of dread which both the giant and dragon do. We can assume that the diabolic epithet was applied in order to stress the destructiveness and ferocity of an animal which had slaughtered many knights and eaten them.

The topos of the fight with the giant offers similarities and contrasts with other challenges and provides another opponent popular with readers: the eponymous Sir Torrent fights about six giants during his life and these form the majority of his challenges. However, he does kill a dragon belonging to a giant who then seeks out Sir Torrent to avenge his death; significantly, the giant and the dragon form a destructive and bellicose alliance. The giant's huge proportions, his power of speech and his arming himself as a knight before a martial contest suggest he has affinities with the human race although his monstrous size, savagery and unchivalric conduct set him apart from it. However, the giant's sub-humanity serves by contrast to distinguish the hero as the ideal of manhood and a model of 'gentillesse'. The knight's own reputation for chivalric behaviour is enhanced and his status within a courtly society is made clear. Again, the proof of the knight's worthiness lies not only in his valiant and victorious fight but importantly, he achieves success by fair means, by fighting according to the chivalric code. The African giant Colbrand will not lend Guy a weapon when his sword is broken<sup>2</sup> although a true knight would seek a fair fight and attempt to restore the balance by giving a weapon to an enemy whose own had been made useless. The Muslim refuses with the words:

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<sup>1</sup> *Sir Beues of Hamtoun* ed. Eugen Kölbing, EETS, ES, 46, 48, 65 (London, 1885-1894), l.633 from the 'lower' text, ie 'v according to M, with the differing readings of L and o where extant.....' See Introduction to this edition, p.xii.

<sup>2</sup> *Guy of Warwick, the Auchinleck and the Caius MS* ed. Julius Zupitza, EETS, ES, 42, 49, 59 (1883-1891). The fight is described in the Caius MS ll.10528-10769 and Colbrand's refusal in ll.10718-10719.

Some helpe tormagaunte,  
 Wepon for me shalt thow none have,  
 But now shall I sle the with my staffe.' (GW. Caius MS. ll.10723-25)

However, before the combat takes place, Guy prays to God and the narrator makes clear that this is also a fight between two antagonistic faiths and cultures and Guy becomes the means of delivering a victory for Christianity.

Colbrand is the champion of the King of Denmark and Guy fights successfully against the giant on behalf of King Athelstan of England so another aspect of Guy is presented: he is the patriot who is influential in the development of the history of England which elevates his role as romance hero from fiction to a kind of historical 'reality'. He is the champion of England, a man who will sacrifice his life, if need be, to preserve the land against invaders. This confrontation with Colbrand is not merely another challenge, another episode to maintain the momentum of the romance for, while it does serve the well-established function of celebrating the bravery of Guy, it has other functions too. Because Guy is fighting as a pilgrim and anonymously it demonstrates the conscious sacrifice of reputation which runs counter to the chivalric convention and indicates Guy's determination to concentrate on fulfilling God's will and not his own. In some ways this fight is atypical of the romance hero's encounters with dangerous beasts and giants, not least because of Guy's renunciation of his career as a knight in order to do God's will. As in many romances this topos functions firstly as a valorization of the chivalric knight but importantly also illustrates aspects of the hero other than his valour.

Now I want to turn to the stereotypical confrontation of the chivalric knight with the dragon whose function, like that of giant and wild boar, is largely, but not solely, to demonstrate the hero's bravery and his prowess in arms. The dragon is usually presented as the most dangerous opponent and thus the most worthy of a chivalric hero.<sup>3</sup> Sir Eglamour takes on the dragon as the last and most testing of his designated challenges and he takes a year of nursing to recover from

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<sup>3</sup> The dragon is usually male most probably because of its connotation with the devil. However, the dragon fought by the chivalric hero in *The Knight of Curtesy*, a short verse romance, is female, *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose*, ed. Douglas Gray (Oxford, 1985), pp.185-199.

his near-fatal wounds. However, I would argue that, while valorization is indeed a function of the encounter with the dragon, there are underlying connotations which, derived from ancient dragon lore, are carried by the dragon and are also inherent in the topos of the dragon-fight and may cause unresolved tensions in the text.<sup>4</sup> These contribute to the reader's perception of the dragon by endowing it with an awesomeness which goes beyond the conventional description of its grim appearance and its aggressively energetic participation in combat for these connotations reflect the archetypal dragon of the Old and also the New Testament. It is apparent these monsters are not to be thought of as merely wild and dangerous and although these residual biblical connotations may not be articulated, at times their latent significance will affect the perception of the topos of the dragon-fight, conferring on it an implicit symbolism which may border at times on the supernatural. While the dragon fight follows a basic formula, variations of descriptive detail, emphasis and length will influence the significance of the dragon's role and concomitantly the part of the chivalric knight. Firstly though, I want to outline the structure and the principal elements of the convention of the romance dragon-fight.

Generally, the fight itself is an episode which is self-contained; like the other set-pieces featuring fights with giants and wild animals, the encounter may be removed from the narrative without disturbing the course of events. Sometimes, however, it leads on causally to subsequent stages in the hero's quest as happens in *Sir Degarré* where the dragon-fight introduces the next development in the plot. The eponymous hero saves the earl, and invited back to his house, is offered a reward of treasure and land which Degarré refuses; he is then dubbed a knight. That the dragon-fight is an accepted and familiar topos in the romance genre is demonstrated by a similarity in the structuring of these conflicts and the language employed to describe both the action and the physical appearance of the dragons.

The monster's reputation for widespread slaughter is stressed in order to emphasize the superhuman success of the hero. The dragon's physical appearance is described, underlining

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<sup>4</sup> These connotations have been explored in the first chapter where I have looked at the dragon as a symbol of evil going back to the beginning of history. I have also shown how this symbolism informs Judaic-Christian literature.

its grotesqueness with epithets and phrases like 'gryslly'<sup>5</sup>, 'gastelich to sene'<sup>6</sup>, 'fers and fell'.<sup>7</sup> The measurements of its body and tail, stress the power vested in its size and its other attributes underline its separation from the wild beast and the giant, like its obnoxious stench and its ability to breathe fire or poison its victims. The description of Leviathan in Job is lengthy and detailed and while most romance descriptions of the dragon are not as comprehensive as this, they reflect the essential problem of the hero, the beast's invulnerability, fully delineated by the emphasis placed on the impenetrable nature of its scales and its fierceness. A comparison of two short quotations from Job and then from *Guy* reveals the similarity: *Cum apprehenderit eum gladius, subsistere non poterit, Neque hasta, neque thorax.* (Job 41 v.17 BV) and from *Guy of Warwick*:

'þe smallest scale þat on him is

No wepen no may atame, y-wis.'

(*GW Auchinleck MS ll. 7161-7162*)

The romance dragon's gaping mouth, lined with sharp teeth, its impenetrable hide and its long, thick tail which can deal a fatal blow underline further its reputation for invincibility. Other physical features of the colour and the length of parts of the beast's body vary from one text to another and contribute to its exotic and awe-inspiring presence, not least it roars loudly: Bevis and Ascopard hear the dragon's thunderous roars before they come across it and Ascopard retreats from fear. (BH. ll. 2737-2738) The challenge is so daunting that an established element in the dragon-fight itself is the knight's prayer to God for help before undertaking or even during the fight. When the combat is depicted in some detail, the lengthy and difficult ordeal is stressed; the knight is barely able to protect himself against an onslaught in which the blows and counterblows are recorded and in which the knight's armour and weapons are so badly damaged

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<sup>5</sup> *Sir Torrent of Portyngale*, ed. E. Adam, EETS, ES, 51 (1887), I. 524.

<sup>6</sup> *Guy of Warwick*, Auchinleck MS I.7156.

<sup>7</sup> *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, ed. Frances E. Richardson EETS, OS, 256 (1965), Cotton MS I. 698.

he suffers severe wounds. Eventually, the exhausted hero manages, often unexpectedly, to deliver a fatal blow, so bringing the fight abruptly to an end and he removes the head, or perhaps the tongue, as a trophy and evidence of his success, after which there is much rejoicing of the people who have suffered from the beast's depredations.

Initially the hero may be mounted but the horse is always killed, forcing the combat to be conducted face to face, on the ground. What characterizes the fight is its physical action and its description of strength pitted against strength in a constant movement which exhausts the knight's energy and also makes demands on his martial skill and strategy. The chivalric hero dispatches the dragon successfully, although in a few instances in so doing the knight is badly wounded.

There are similarities with the giant fight topos, particularly in the handling of the action which concentrates on the physicality of a struggle between unequal contenders. However, as dragons do not speak, there is no verbal exchange between the hero and the dragon; the blows inflicted on the participants form their only contact. In this way the dragon is distanced from the hero in comparison with the attributes shared by the hero and the giant; also its exotic appearance and its armoury of fire and poison create an impression of a fabulous animal, far removed from the experience of ordinary men, although there is every reason to believe that medieval man and woman believed in the existence of the dragon, usually in far-off corners of the then-known world. When news is brought to King Athelstan and Guy of a violent monster laying waste Northumberland, the messenger's words indicate uncertainty because of the rarity of this sight: 'Men seȝþ þat it is a dragoun.' (GW Auchinleck MS I.7166) However, I want to argue that the dragon is not perceived merely as an extraordinary ferocious monster and that even in romance narratives it carries with it residual implications which hint that it belongs to the metaphysical world as well as to the exotic animal kingdom.

Carol Fewster maintains that while Guy's fight against the dragon and against the giant Colbrand have a basic similarity of matter and organisation, they are presented quite differently. The distinction she draws is based on her perception of the Colbrand fight as being placed in a



specific historical and nationalistic context as the contest has bearing on the fortunes of England. She maintains that by contrast the dragon-fight, in true romance tradition, is an incident slotted into Guy's series of 'aventures': it has no consequences other than for Guy and his reputation. The description of the dragon is presented in non-specific terms, comprised of 'a series of comparative statements' and 'The force of the description is that of a set of superlatives— the dragon is a very terrible opponent.' Guy's confrontation with Colbrand she says is 'precisely quantifiable' and 'real place-markers' are used 'to suggest a major and realistic threat.'<sup>8</sup> She sees the Colbrand fight as having a more serious function in the narrative but the dragon-fight is regarded as no more than a familiar literary convention. Fewster also draws together the two parallel fights by suggesting that the dragon-fight intimates a growing piety on Guy's part because he prays to God for help, realising that the dragon is a terrifying adversary but in the Colbrand fight the 'references to Christianity are used far more systematically', giving the episode a profounder Christian implication. It is, however, a familiar motif of the romance hero to pray to God during a fight in which the opponent appears invincible and therefore to claim this shows Guy's increased piety would be to give it a questionable significance. Fewster contends that the Colbrand fight elevates Guy from the hero familiar to romance, to a devout Christian hero who has as well national status. Although I would agree that the Colbrand fight has a greater significance because it illumines Guy's developing function within the narrative, I believe that the dragon is more than 'a very terrible opponent'. Because the dragon carries with it the many and varied biblical connotations associated with evil, with Leviathan and the apocalypse, its impact is more than its description suggests. Superficially, it is the exotic monster, familiar to romance but I would argue that its presence within the narrative does not become stale with use, rather it leads the reader into another world of horror and nightmare. Although the chivalric hero has learnt his martial skill and gained his experience on the battle-field or in the tournament, the dragon-fight, by contrast, is undertaken in a private, claustrophobic arena in which the two

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<sup>8</sup> Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge, 1987), pp.84-85. Fewster uses the description of the dragon from the Auchinleck MS ll. 7165-7176.

contestants confront each other. By comparison, the Colbrand fight is witnessed as a public event and the outcome verified by the spectators. The solitariness of the dragon-fight provides a sinister intensity and mystery and is contrasted with the public world of the community of townsfolk into which the hero re-emerges as if from a supernatural world, suggestive of hell.

I have argued that each opponent has particular and special functions to perform in relation to the presentation of diverse facets of the heroic knight's idealised <sup>nature.</sup> Essentially, these confrontations contribute to a more rounded and complex valorization of the knight but because of the connotations associated with the dragon, the dragon-fight itself suggests a role for the knight as the destroyer of a more sinister destructive force than that of his other adversaries.

Clearly, the hagiographic topos of the dragon encounter, to be explored in the next chapter, concentrates on the dragon as an embodiment of evil, often a demon, a devil, or Satan himself, and the fight represents the confrontation of the forces of evil, often in the form of paganism, with those of Christianity. Yet, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the symbolism of the dragon in hagiography and homiletic collections such as the *Alphabet of Tales* and sermons would also have had some influence on the response of romance readers to their perception of the monster. That the romance dragon was a different kind of monster, a physical, energetic opponent which had to be overcome with weapons by a knight who sought fame is true but nevertheless it cannot be isolated completely from its symbolic counterpart, the product of a complex weaving of Christian and Judaic mythology.

The process of cross-fertilization in which generic conventions, topoi, rhetoric and indeed devices of plot are adopted and also adapted for use in the romance and the saint's legend is well-illustrated in the way in which the confrontation with a dragon has been taken from the romance genre and adapted for use in saints' legends in the later Middle Ages. Indeed, it is this exchange between the two genres which illustrates the close interrelation between them. Cross-fertilization has enriched both genres but it has also contributed to the problem of defining romance. In addition, the sheer kaleidoscopic variety of material found in the genre has compounded the problem. However, the area where romance and hagiography overlap causes

most dissent among critics. Hagiography provides an exemplary model in the saint who is the vehicle for an overtly didactic emphasis on the Christian faith: he renounces this world and its values in order to focus on the next. However, when the romance foregrounds the chivalric hero's preoccupation with service to God and the state of his own soul, then both romance and hagiography meet on middle-ground incorporating elements from both genres. Called variously, the 'hagiographic romance', 'pious romance', 'religious romance' or 'secular hagiography' it is concerned with a depiction of the protagonist as a sinful knight who, made aware of his shortcomings or wickedness, becomes preoccupied with the salvation of his soul through penance.<sup>9</sup> The fallible knight is placed in a context familiar to romance and he encounters marvels, fights the Saracens and travels extensively before being restored to his former place in society. Clearly there are distinctions between the fallible or sinning knight, the knight who pursues his quest for reputation or heritage or love and the saint who endures the temptations of the flesh or the torture leading to martyrdom in order to reap a reward in heaven. The romance hero and the hagiographic protagonist have very different ideas of what makes up the good life, even allowing for the professed Christian faith of the chivalric hero, while the hero of religious romance goes through a process of reform but does not forgo those benefits familiar to the successful knight.

In the next chapter, I shall be exploring in more detail the saint's role in the dragon encounter although at this point a brief summary of the characteristics of the saint's legend and its protagonist are necessary in order to establish the simple but fundamental differences between the two genres. The purpose of hagiography is to celebrate a man or a woman already established as a saint because of exemplary self-abnegation and a submission to God's will. The saint looks beyond the delights of this temporal world to reunion with God in heaven and his or her religious identity is never compromised or ambivalent. The hagiographic conventions leave the reader in no doubt as to the moral and religious goals pursued by the saint, even though

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<sup>9</sup> For Andrea Hopkins a preoccupation with sin and penance informs what she terms the 'religious romance'. Her book, *The Sinful Knights* (Oxford, 1990), includes studies of the knights Sir Isumbras, Guy of Warwick, Sir Gowther and Robert of Sicily.

romance topoi may be included. However, the presentation of the romance hero does not have such tight constraints and it is the examination of the protagonist of romance in comparison with the hero of the pious legend which has often been the critical starting point because once the Christian faith of a knight is given an importance greater than the conventional lip-service that most romance knights pay to Christianity, then the protagonist is shifted towards the middle-ground, towards the overlap between romance and hagiography. In addition if the context in which the hero is placed, even in part of the narrative, contains topoi which are at variance with the stereotypical presentation of the knight, then generic tensions are created.

Diana Childress argues that what she terms 'secular legend' must be considered a genre in its own right and not as an amalgam of romance and hagiography and she sees the disparity between the hero of romance and the hero of secular legend respectively, in his 'management of his environment'. Firstly, the superhuman romance hero relies on his own martial prowess: 'When he kills a giant or a dragon.....he depends on his sword and lance, not on magical incantations or supernatural aid. He uses "physical" not "magical" means.' <sup>10</sup> She says that in contrast, the hero of secular legend accomplishes his deeds through divine aid, the power of God working through him. Broadly speaking this may be a valid distinction but it does demonstrate the inherent problems of evaluating a narrative in terms of generalized opposites. The cross-fertilization of topoi and other elements can create ambivalences which undermine this premiss. For instance, as I argue in more detail later in the chapter, Bevis's successful fight against the dragon can be viewed as a demonstration of his own prowess but viewed from another perspective the holy well provides him with divine help when he is restored by its waters. While Bevis cannot be regarded as a hero of hagiographic or pious romance, in this particular episode the topoi contribute to a perception of the dragon-fight which hints at supernatural depths, at odds with the narrative as a whole.

Furthermore, Childress draws distinctions between the moral states of the respective

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<sup>10</sup> Diana T. Childress, 'Between Romance and Legend: "Secular Hagiography" in Middle English Literature', *Philological Quarterly*, 57 (1978), 314.

heroes, finding that the hero of secular legend changes from evil to good during the narrative whereas the romance hero is an admirable chivalric knight from beginning to end. Again, while these distinctions have a surface validity, they also reveal the fundamental and insoluble problem of categorization, for there are always exceptions. This is exemplified in her citing of Guy of Warwick whom she claims becomes a hero of secular legend by the end of the narrative. However, even after Guy has renounced his chivalric career to become a pilgrim, the vicissitudes of his life reflect much of the adventure and the combat he enjoyed as a chivalric hero whose valiant, honourable conduct remains essentially unchanged until the end.

Moreover, Childress says: 'the romance hero pursues his goals energetically, even aggressively, but the protagonist of secular legend must patiently endure humiliation, deprivation and suffering,'<sup>11</sup> the emphasis being on penance and passivity. Again there is a general truth in her statement but Sir Isumbras's encounters with the Saracens show him fighting with great ferocity in the pursuit of a particular religious goal. He is not like Chaucer's Custance, helplessly adrift in a rudderless boat, totally dependent on the intervention of God. Although the hero of secular legend may submit to God's will, it does not preclude him from taking the same initiative as Bevis or Guy in fighting vigorously in the cause of right, honour and the Christian faith when he sees an opportunity.

Childress's comparisons point to her perception of a fundamental difference between the values of romance and those of secular legend. She makes this distinction: 'The noble human hero who actively pursues secular goals, whether to win love or to regain a kingdom, or to uphold the honor of the Round Table or of Christendom, is glorified as an admirable example of human valor, strength, courtesy and piety; but the hero who does penance for his sinfulness or who may patiently undergo physical hardship and deprivation and who is rescued or rescues others by divine miracles can only remind us of the spiritual priority of the other world.'<sup>12</sup>

The key words for Childress are 'the spiritual priority of the other world' which indicate that

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<sup>11</sup> Childress, 'Between Romance and Legend..', 317.

<sup>12</sup> Childress, 'Between Romance and Legend..', 320.

the hero of the secular legend possesses an awareness of the judgement day and therefore a need to repent. However, if we were to talk of the 'spiritual priority of the other world' in relation to hagiography there would be a different perception of its meaning. If hagiography celebrates the saintly Christian who gives up worldly affairs and goods, who turns away from marriage and family in order to die for the faith or devote himself to prayer or preaching, then secular hagiography would appear to show how sinful man can achieve redemption through suffering and yet eventually preserve the good things of this world; it is a recognition of both the values of this world and of the next, and the possibility of having the best of both worlds. Indeed, while Sir Amadace is made to suffer the reversals of fortune in order to expiate the sin of prodigality, his story ends with his being crowned king 'Wyth gold so clure schinand' <sup>13</sup>

Childress's position regarding romance and 'secular hagiography' differs fundamentally from that of Susan Crane who does not recognise the pious romance as a separate literary group, simply because she considers that the values of the knight and the saint are quite incompatible.<sup>14</sup> She finds such polarized positions cannot overlap for even Sir Isumbras who, after enduring great hardship and misery as penance for his pride, is reunited with his lost sons. He thanks God and returns to the comforts of this world, a situation which contrasts with that of the saint. Her definition of hagiography is rigorously applied: 'The saints of hagiography may seem also to exemplify a kind of private achievement, but.....their surrender of identity and of will to God as well as their transcendent goals divide them from heroes of romance.'<sup>15</sup> She substantiates this viewpoint by drawing on contemporary clerical contempt of entertainment in general, to the minstrel, the juggler and romance, which recognises an unbridgeable chasm

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<sup>13</sup> 'Sir Amadace' in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (repr. London, 1988) l.837.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley, London, 1986). See Chapter 3, pp.92-117.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* pp. 101-102.

between the saint's story and romance.<sup>16</sup> Crane deals with the appropriation by hagiography of romance features like the 'fabulous, affective, and dramatic' with the rider that 'While tacitly adopting these elements, religious literature overtly condemns the romances themselves.'<sup>17</sup> She also maintains that the borrowing of religious elements by the romance genre is used largely to enhance the military qualities of the romance hero and that his professed faith is not fully integrated within a Christian way of life.

Between the opposing critical stances of Childress and Crane one may suggest a notion of 'slippage', for while the romance and hagiographic values which imbue these two genres represent the mutually exclusive concerns of this world and the next respectively, in some romances there is an attempt to delineate a less stereotypical knightly hero who is forced, by divine intervention, to review his life in the light of that to come and yet, within these parameters, there is the opportunity for the predictable adventures of romance to proceed, even if under the guise of divine providence: the battle against the Infidel and the single combat. The hero's acceptance of fallibility suggests a development in the portrayal of a hero, one who has weaknesses and vices but who yet can still retain the reader's admiration because he both proves himself in conventionally heroic action but also as a penitent who endures hardship, he provides another pattern for imitation.

Fundamental to an assessment of these genres is the notion of an underlying system of values. However, rarely in all romances is the system consistent and clear-cut. The divergent critical discussion provoked by *Amis and Amiloun* testifies to the impossibility of forcing texts into labelled categories. I would argue that this difficulty may be exacerbated by the way in which the romance conventions are handled. If action, demonstrated in fighting, underpins the romance genre's concern with validating the chivalric hero's courage, the priority of hagiography is the

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<sup>16</sup> G.R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, rev. edn. (Oxford, 1966), p. 13. Owst quotes lines from William of Nassington's *Speculum Vitae* in which he expresses his objection to romance because it is a frivolous vanity. The quotation names several romances including *Octovyanne*, *Isambrase*, *Buyes of Hampton* and *Guy of Warwick*, two of which might be termed 'hagiographic romances' or 'pious legends' by some critics.

<sup>17</sup> Crane, *Insular Romance*, p. 102.

demonstration of Christ's power at work in the saint. This is seen in the way in which the romance dragon-fight becomes the dragon encounter in hagiography. And yet this seemingly clear-cut system of values residing in a romance, or a hagiographic convention, may be undercut by ambivalence when a topos attempts to fuse elements both from romance and hagiography. Such is the case I shall argue in Chapter 4 in the discussion of St George's fight with the dragon.

Patently the dragon of the romance narratives cannot be regarded as synonymous with the devil or with Satan, as is the hagiographic dragon; it does not function only as an embodiment of evil, a symbol of the external force which has its origin in the rebellion of the fallen angels against God. If it were regarded as such a symbol, then the ethos of the romance would become problematic for, given that the bedrock of romance is the challenge by which the knight is tested and tried, the symbolic dragon would undermine the physical encounter, essential to the validation of the hero's knighthood. Also, if the romance dragon were to be interpreted as a symbol, then not only the role of the knight becomes questionable but also the fight is affected by a symbolic perspective, too. The knight might perhaps be regarded as the symbol of the Christian soul fighting off an evil assault on the spirit but the dragon is not simply historically an appropriate embodiment of spiritual evil. If the knight were to be interpreted as the faithful Christian taking on the devil in order to subdue it, then contradictory values emerge for the romance topos celebrates the knight's success and elevates his personal reputation as a man of arms, albeit a Christian one. The eponymous hero Sir Eglamour, like many other chivalric knights, is sent by a treacherous and evil earl to fight a dragon as one of a number of tests of his bravery and martial skill. As in this romance, the proving of a knight's worth enabled him to woo the lady he loved. If the dragon becomes a symbol of evil, then other consequential changes have to be made to the topos in order for it to function within the expectations of the genre. Ironically, this concatenation would produce the hagiographic topos: the hero becomes the saint whose power over evil (the dragon) is God-given, rendering weapons redundant and the fight superfluous. In this confrontation Christianity is demonstrated as being victorious over the forces of the devil. Thus, the adoption by hagiography of the topos of the dragon-fight necessitates the





weakening of the romance dragon's physical presence by a much less detailed description in order that it functions effectively as a symbol.

However, the romance dragon does have a certain kinship with its hagiographic counterpart for their shared attributes of poisonous breath, fire-breathing and its noxious stench are clearly associated with the fires and noisomeness of hell. In some romance texts the language which refers to the dragon intimates that it is to be associated with the darker forces, with hell and its inhabitants, demons and fiends. The topos cannot support the equation of the dragon with cosmic or demonic evil in unequivocal terms, but these references encourage a perspective of the dragon-fight which exceeds the purely physical by hinting at the shadowy, subterranean regions from which the monster comes.

*Sir Eglamour of Artois* follows the fortunes of a knight who must accomplish several feats in order to win his lady. Sir Eglamour's third and most demanding challenge is a fight with the dragon of Rome. This episode illustrates the way in which the dragon brings with it a hellish provenance which is not stated as a fact but is alluded to by comparisons. The monster attacks the knight with fire continuously 'As hyt walled owt of helle' (l.738 Cotton MS) and later when Sir Eglamour has hacked away half of its tail 'The fend began to ʒelle.' (l.741 Cotton MS) The word 'fiend' to describe the dragon is used, as is 'devil' as a term for other adversaries, indicating that any opponent of the Christian hero and knight is regarded as malevolent. When Guy of Warwick faces Ameraunt he distinguishes between humanity and the demonic when he remarks to the king:

"'lesu,' quod sir Gye than,

Hit is the devyll, it is no man.' " (GW Caius MS ll.8153-8154)

However, when attached to the dragon as it most often is, along with appropriate supporting images, the inferences to be drawn are that this is a monster which has come from hell implying that the foe and also the fight have an ominous significance for the knight himself. Yet, the episode, while hinting at a challenge which is supernatural as well as physical, remains within the romance genre simply because the hero's perception of what he is undertaking is

limited to the corporeal and the material. It is the redactor who gives the reader a view of the dragon which stems from the bestiary's equation of the monster with the evil of sin, but the episode is not developed along these lines. Just as the redactor of Sir Eglamour's fight has effectively utilized the supernatural, the dragon-fight in *Sir Degarré* provides a contrast which demonstrates how the dragon's sinister presence may be diminished by a mundane comparison. The beast is described as being 'Ful of filth and venim..', an impression undermined by 'Pe smoke com of his nose awai/ Ase fer out of a chimenai'.<sup>18</sup>

I want to examine closely the dragon-fight in the romance *Sir Beues of Hamtoun* because it occupies a lengthy part of the narrative in comparison with other romance dragon-fights, even when they themselves may be considered detailed.<sup>19</sup> It also transcends the standard romance dragon-fight because it is the culmination of a long explanatory introduction about the provenance of two dragons; in addition, it incorporates Bevis's dream of the poisoned young knight which provides his motivation for what he is told is an impossible undertaking, a long description of the dragon and of the fight with the additional feature of the holy well. The narrator of *Beues* recounts the origin of the two dragons, one of which Bevis kills near Cologne. Once there were two kings, of Apulia and of Calabria who were repeatedly cursed by their subjects because they would not stop taking up arms against each other, so laying waste the land over a period of twenty-four years:

'Pai hadde mani mannes kours,

Whar þourȝ hii ferden wel þe wors;

Par fore hii deide in dedli sinne

And helle pine þai gan hem winne.' (BH ll. 2619-2622)

Having died in deadly sin, they were sent to hell where they became dragons but they still

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<sup>18</sup> *Sir Degarré*, eds. A.V.C.Schmidt and Nicholas Jacobs in *Medieval English Romances* (London, 1980), vol. ii, pp. 57-88, l.348 and l. 354 respectively.

<sup>19</sup> *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, ll.2597-2910 cover the complete episode from the explanation of the two dragons' origins to Bevis's triumphant reception, having killed the dragon of Cologne. The central episode, the description of Bevis's fight with the dragon, occupies ll. 2760-2888.

continued to fight on earth for thirty-four years. A holy hermit begged Christ to stop them and the prayer was answered, the dragons flying away, one first to Tuscany, the other to St Peter's bridge in Rome where every seven years when it moved a dreadful stench and vapour gave the people an incurable fever. The other dragon then flew on to Cologne where it lived under a cliff and in a dream Bevis learns that this dragon has killed a young knight by poisoning him so that his body swelled and his flesh rotted. It is this knight's death which Bevis sets out to avenge.

The clear association of the dragons with sin and hell suggests more than renowned, dangerous monsters. Moreover, the supernatural is introduced when the kings are transformed into dragons which are the embodiment of evil in hagiography. They are creatures from hell and, as dragons, their continued destruction of the land shows that the evil they did in life continues after their transformation. The hermit's successful prayer to Christ which ensured that the dragons abandoned their native regions has similarities with the less usual hagiographic topos when the saint ensures the dragon leaves the community it is preying on. The dragon is not killed but is sent away or it slinks out of the town, unable to compete with the power of the saint. Then, when Bevis takes on the dragon, he is saved from physical exhaustion and the effects of the dragon's poison by a holy well into which he falls. He drinks the water whereupon he is revived and his leprous body cured. Bevis's prayers to Christ and to the Virgin Mary before the renewal of the fight is a romance convention but interestingly Bevis's prayer to Christ "Help," a seide, "godes sone, / þat þis dragoun wer ouer-come!" ( *BH*. II.2861-2) mirrors that of the holy man who first prayed that the people should be set free from the despoliation of the dragons. The dragon flees 'ase he wer wod' ( *BH*. I.2870) when he hears the prayer and is pursued by Bevis and slaughtered. That the dragon is afraid of the power of Christianity ensures its flight and so protects Bevis from another onslaught.

The theme of the opposed worlds of heaven and hell echoes throughout this episode. The dragon is shown to be an antagonist of Christianity but it is more than a fierce adversary for it is placed in the narrative as an evil force in opposition to the divine will, its origin in hell reinforcing this association. Interestingly, a variant text of *Beves* refers to St Michael in the

familiar apocalyptic image as a dragon-slayer<sup>20</sup>. Bevis asks whether anyone can slay the dragon:

"Lorde Iesu Cryst," sayde Beuys tho,  
 "May no man that dragon slo?"  
 "Nay," they sayde," wythout fable,  
 Al crystendome were nat able;  
 But if Myghel from heuen come down,  
 Shal no man sle that dragon!"

(*BH* II. 2379-2384)

St Michael as the heavenly warrior of the Book of Revelation who sends Satan tumbling out of heaven and into hell is given a powerful presence dominating the war in heaven and as the archetypal dragon-slayer he endows this version of the text with these biblical and metaphysical overtones.

The introduction of the holy well appears to suggest further potential for a supernatural interpretation of this episode for the well's water effects what appears to be a miracle cure for Bevis and yet the significance of the well still remains ambivalent. How far the holy well may be considered divine help, specifically arranged for Bevis, is problematic for he stumbles into the well inadvertently and yet the existence of the well in the place of combat may be regarded as providential.<sup>21</sup> Diana Childress maintains that the romance protagonist has to rely on his own physical strength and use of weaponry, whereas the hero of secular hagiography is aided by God who intervenes.<sup>22</sup> Bevis's expertise is a determining factor in his success but the well's waters do save him from a death the young knight did not escape and so parts of the narrative deliver opposing interpretations. Heroes of romances are also saved from death by magical means but

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<sup>20</sup> This text is printed beneath the leading Auchinleck text. See footnote 1, also Kölbing's introduction, p. xlii.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Auerbach looks upon the knight's quest, not simply as a series of random adventures, but as undertakings which are so contrived to provide each knight with the means of proving himself. See Chapter 6, 'The Knight Sets Forth', pp.123-142, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*.

<sup>22</sup> Childress, 'Between Romance and Legend...', 314

magic can be discounted here, for this well is termed 'holi'

'bat water was so holi,  
 Pat þe dragoun, sikerli,  
 Ne dorste neȝe þe welle aboute  
 Be fourti fote, saundoute.' (BH ll.2807-2810)

Importantly, the emphasis is on the power of chastity to strengthen and heal, a virtue given to the well by the virgin who bathed in it rather than on Christ's personal intervention in Bevis's rescue. And yet, because the dragon cannot venture near the well because of the power of its holiness an underlying antagonism between that which is evil and that which is holy and virtuous is suggested which implies there is a supernatural significance to the fight. Importantly, however, Bevis treats the dragon as a physical adversary to be vanquished with strength and with weapons; although he knows of the origins of the two dragons, he does not refer to this dragon as the embodiment of the evil spirit of one of the kings. Moreover, this dragon cannot be regarded as symbolic of evil in general: its evil is related to the continual belligerence and hostility of a specific king.

Within this self-contained narrative there are inclusions which hover between the topoi of romance and those of hagiography. Ancient biblical connotations associated with the dragon cannot be isolated from the romance dragon and the redactor of this narrative was very much aware of them. He has created a dragon that is more than a physical adversary and yet has managed to balance its ambivalent metaphysical attributes with a reality founded in the sublunary world by giving it, and indeed the other dragon, a provenance: its own identity in a precisely located place, during a stated time span.

'þar was a king in Poyle londe  
 And anoþer in Calabre, ich vnderstonde;  
 Þis twe kinge fouȝte ifere  
 More þan foure and twenti ȝere.....' (BH ll.2611-2614)

Nevertheless, the dragons are placed in the romance tradition with the warring kings, the

fallen knight and the dragons' flight over many lands of Europe. In addition, the dragon-fight itself parallels many others, as does the dragon's description, which dwells on details of its colour and size.

The dragon has often been dismissed by critics who regard it as an exotic inclusion with a limited role. Pamela Gradon speaks of the 'growth of interest in romantic wonders in the narrative works of the period' (the eleventh and twelfth centuries). 'In these works, monsters and marvels abound and the putative "wilderness of dragons" of the *Beowulf* poet's world becomes a reality. But while the dragon in *Beowulf* is there, so to speak, to be slain by the hero, the dragons of romance exist in their own right to amaze and horrify the reader.'<sup>23</sup>

Surely, the romance hero, like *Beowulf*, is given dragons to fight in order that his bravery can be demonstrated. Also, if the function of the romance dragon is to provide mere entertainment, we may ask why dragons feature so prominently and not basilisks or other marvellous bestiary creatures. While the dragon-fight does give the narrator an opportunity for a colourful description of a feat of arms, I maintain that there are more sinister implications carried by the romance dragon: it cannot be looked upon in the same light as the monster and dinosaur recreated in contemporary film and horror comic whose sole object is to astound and thrill with physical terror. Literary and visual art reinforces the sinister image of the dragon as emanating from hell, an underworld where horrifying creatures live and therefore its inclusion in romance, hints at visions of hell and by extrapolation, even the possible destiny of the soul.

Carol Fewster maintains that the fantastic world created in romance with its magic, grateful lions, dragons and giants and foolproof disguises is a 'distancing device', which deliberately separates the reader from the real world.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, I would argue this is relevant particularly to the romance dragon whose identity is not limited to the material world and its physical appearance. While it belongs to a world of the exotic marvel, it also has its being in a

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<sup>23</sup> Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature* (London, 1971), Chapter 4, 'The Romance Mode', p. 228.

<sup>24</sup> Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre*, p.36.

context which draws on a distant mythical heritage and a past rooted in religious symbolism. Thus, its contribution to the romance challenge is endowed with an implicit profundity which, in this case, belies Gradon's claim that 'The world of the romances, like the world of folk-tale, is a world without depth...' <sup>25</sup>

Kathryn Hume also compares the use of the romance dragon with that in *Beowulf*: 'Romance giants and dragons are not terrifying, independent forces like Grendel or Beowulf's final foe; rather, they appear in the hero's path like oversized rabbits pulled from the author's hat, and really exist only for the period it takes the hero to dispatch them.' <sup>26</sup> This dismissal of the giant and the dragon is based on a generalization which ignores the best examples of both topoi: Guy's fight with Colbrand and Bevis's with the dragon. Indeed, the very nature of romance is in question here for Hume seems to want from the genre a more 'realistic' portrayal of the dragon, an exploitation of the drama inherent in its physical size and belligerence but romance is not a 'realistic' genre; it operates according to a stylized pattern. Therefore, the established convention of the dragon-fight, like other romance conventions, should not be diminished by occurrence and reoccurrence. The significance and the effect of the dragon lies in what it suggests and what it represents for the reader.

Curiously and in contrast, John Stevens makes no mention of the dragon, while exploring the 'marvellous' in romance although he does discuss the role of the giant which confronts Arthur in *Morte Arthure*: the giant is an appropriate opponent to show off Arthur's feats of arms; he does not carry any supernatural overtones. Stevens goes on to distinguish between the 'experience of the supernatural and the encounter with the marvellous' <sup>27</sup> and draws up categories of the marvellous, the largest being that which may frighten and amaze the reader. Nevertheless, one of the key-points of Stevens' argument is that 'only the context of a particular romance.....can

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<sup>25</sup> Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature*, p.215.

<sup>26</sup> Kathryn Hume, 'The Formal Nature of Middle English Romance' *Philological Quarterly*, 53 (1974), 162.

<sup>27</sup> John Stevens, *Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches* (London, 1973), pp. 98-99.

determine for us how to take the marvels.' <sup>28</sup> I would suggest that while the dragon may feature in a romance ostensibly to provide a fitting opponent for the hero, as does the giant, and, while the overall context of the romance may appear to support this view of the monster, its long-established identity with cosmic evil accords it a greater intensity of malignity. Thus, the dragon-fight may, in isolation from the rest of the narrative, become enhanced as a marvel with a supernatural significance derived from dragon lore.

Northrop Frye examines the place of romance which he puts between myth and 'naturalism': 'Myth, then, is one extreme of literary design; naturalism is the other, and in between lies the whole area of romance, using that term to mean, not the historical mode but the tendency to displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to 'realism', to conventionalize content in an idealized direction. The central principle of displacement is that which can be metaphorically identified in a myth can only be linked in romance by some form of simile: analogy, significant association, incidental accompanying imagery, and the like. In a myth we can have a sun-god or a tree-god; in a romance we may have a person who is significantly associated with the sun or trees.' <sup>29</sup> This sums up the mechanics of the stereotypical dragon-fight, carrying as it does connotations of evil but also accompanying images which reinforce them like the kind of comparisons seen in the fight of Sir Eglamour, referred to earlier in the chapter.

The complete episode in *Beves* provides an important illustration of the way in which the dragon is perceived as being more than the bestial enemy of a community. The dragon is marked out from the beginning as a creature from hell, sent there as a result of its sins, (*BH*. ll. 2621-2624). The dragon's origin raises the question of its role in the fight and the role of the knight. Bevis is determined to undertake a seemingly impossible challenge to rid the region of a dragon which he knows from his dream has an ominous, supernatural identity, (*BH*. ll. 2691-2692). John Stevens includes in his list of the 'marvellous' discussed above, the category of the

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p.99.

<sup>29</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1973), pp. 136-7.



'miraculous' , 'that is to say, the marvellous *controlled by God*. Miracles are God's magic, his supernatural interventions in the natural workings of the created world.'<sup>30</sup> Vision and dream have long been familiar literary devices for 'supernatural interventions.' Clearly, Bevis's dream fits into this category: it can be called a *somnium* insofar that it brings the hero an idea of what the future holds and more importantly, we may assume that it is sent by God. This kind of accretion of detail from the beginning of the whole dragon episode reinforces its supernatural significance and yet at times this is undercut by the conventional romance dragon-fight as I shall show in the further exploration of this motif. The dragon has lived in hell and it carries with it a destructive evil fuelled by hatred. Although Bevis tackles the dragon as a physical adversary and does not refer to its provenance, it nevertheless colours the undertaking. Bevis faces not just a ferocious, horrifying monster but a spirit from hell who is constrained by the force of holiness: it cannot come near the well and flees on hearing Bevis's prayer. His fight implies more than the antagonism between the chivalric knight and a dangerous opponent.

While Bevis's role throughout the romance is to take up arms against injustice and wickedness, he does this largely by fighting against human adversaries. Susan Crane stresses Bevis's active heroism: 'For the relation of hero to world is typically one of domination: he kills dragons, abashes pagans, escapes prisons, tames lions, beheads adversaries, and converts or marries princesses.'<sup>31</sup> However, Crane also recognises a hagiographic tone which permeates this episode: 'Introducing an interpolated combat with a dragon, the poet ranks Bevis's achievement with similar victories by the English Wade and Guy of Warwick. (*BH*. II.2599-608) Told in the manner of a saint's legend, the dragon-killing extends the correspondences suggested in Anglo-Norman between the hero and St George, patron saint of the English army from the earliest Crusades.'<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Bevis's fight may suggest the archetypal fight of St George

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<sup>30</sup> John Stevens, *Medieval Romance*, p.101.

<sup>31</sup> Crane, *Insular Romance*, p.80.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p.60.

as a demonstration of heroic action in the name of Christianity, although the equation of Bevis with the saint clearly cannot be made for the values of the saint and Bevis, the romance hero, are incompatible. Yet the congruity between the two endows Bevis's fight with implications and colours the reader's perception of it as being more than a physical contest. Even if Bevis were aware of any supernatural threats in his introduction to the dragon through dream and popular legend, he seems to have forgotten them during the fight itself. However, as I have reasoned earlier, the romance dragon-fight cannot be viewed as a hagiographic feature, a symbolic representation of the opposition of Christ's power with that of the devil and indeed Bevis's fight is no exception. Bevis stands against the evil spirit of a particular man while St George faces the very devil himself. Yet, that is not to diminish Bevis's role for he, too, is up against more powerful forces than those of this world and he therefore reveals a greater spiritual courage than for instance he does in tackling the boar which, although of extraordinary size and savagery with a reputation for killing many knights, is still a known beast. However, a comparison of the night Bevis experiences before the boar fight with the night before his confrontation with the dragon reveals a difference between the two episodes. He decides to seek out the boar by himself:

'Beues lay in is bedde a niȝt  
 And þouȝte, a wolde keþen is miȝt  
 Vpon þat swin him self one,  
 Þat noman scholde wiþ him gone.' (BH II.751-754)

But before the dragon-fight, Bevis dreams he is wounded but revived by a virgin. The dream is prophetic but disturbing, indicating that the dragon-fight carries with it an ominous supernatural quality:

'Whan he of is slepe abraid,  
 Of is sweuene he was afraid.' (BH II.2691-2692)

The dragon-fight validates Bevis's physical courage but at the same time suggests that heroism embraces spiritual qualities too for Bevis is fearful he is undertaking more than combat with a wild animal. It cannot be claimed that Bevis shows an awareness of the state of his own

soul and neither does he develop in piety as Guy of Warwick does. However, the very nature of the dragon and the concomitant circumstances of the fight endow Bevis's courage with an implied spiritual dimension. Clearly, it is more terrifying and difficult to confront an embodied spirit from hell than it is to dispatch a dragon, however monstrous. In addition Bevis is told that only St Michael can kill the dragon. (*BH* II. 2383-2384, lower text, see footnote 2)

In spite of the inbuilt generic ambivalences, there is no basic undermining of the overall ethos of this topos and its place in the complete narrative. Bevis is the means by which the romance topos is held together because clearly his values, those of the chivalric knight, remain constant, as do his priorities which are of this world. After his victory Bevis is taken through the town by joyful priests and people, in procession, reminding the reader that it is Bevis's valour and prowess which is celebrated and his own reputation further enhanced. Prior to his coming across the dragon whom he intended to fight with the help of Ascopard the giant, he says "Hadde we be dragoun wonne, / We hadde þe feireste pris vnder sonne!" (*BH* II.2745-6), words which confirm the attitude of the questing knight, anxious to do good but also to establish further his chivalric renown. Afterwards, he moves on to his next enterprise, the avenging of his father's death, but there is no idea of spiritual progression: Bevis emerges from his experience unaltered.

Although Christian belief is fundamental to the chivalric knight and Christian elements are introduced into the romance, the romance hero lives in a temporal world in which he exists without questioning or doubting his own actions within it. Crane looks at Bevis, the Christian knight who 'brought up in a pagan kingdom, refuses to convert from Christianity and frequently defeats pagan forces. Yet in all these cases, religious faith enhances a fundamentally political and military heroism, rather than subsuming knighthood within a Christian system of life.'<sup>33</sup>

As we have argued earlier, Bevis's quest is, unequivocally, a temporal one and therefore the narrative must be categorized as romance; indeed, the ambivalences which emerge in the dragon-fight occur independently of the hero insofar as any possible spiritual significance for

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p.104.

Bevis is not articulated by the redactor or by Bevis himself who remains aloof from any spiritual implication the event may suggest. Importantly, it does demonstrate the way in which it is possible for hagiographic elements to disturb but not destroy the ethos of this romance and it also shows how the dragon assumes an even greater significance when its religious and mythological identity are reinforced by these elements.

While I have referred to the Christian context of romance which is closely associated with the Christian faith of the hero, I want to look in more detail at the ways in which this is demonstrated. What links the warrior heroes Bevis and Guy to Saint George is the concept of the '*miles christi*'. Bevis and Guy are the stereotypical crusaders of romance, taking active parts in battles against the Saracen. Although never a crusader but often popularly linked with taking part in the Crusades, St. George was adopted as the patron saint of soldiers ever since he inspired the flagging spirits of the besieging crusaders to retake Jerusalem when he appeared to them on the walls of that city. This legendary reputation was brought back to England by the crusaders and he was adopted as the patron saint of England. Also, by tradition he was a soldier and is referred to as a 'knyght', both in the addition to his legend of the dragon episode and also in his passion when he saw Christians leaving the faith because they were being forced to sacrifice to idols.<sup>34</sup> We are told by Caxton that George abandoned his life as a soldier in order to serve God. However, in visual art, St George is represented as the archetypal crusader, armed with a sword and dressed in armour bearing the cross of Christ.<sup>35</sup> His iconography has been fixed thus ever since the twelfth century.

The topos of the soldier of Christ is much-used in romance, for it provides a means of revealing the hero's prowess in arms and his bravery. His reputation is further enhanced when he confronts the Saracen and defeats them, for the Crusades were considered to be a worthy cause and their significance in the Europe of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries is

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<sup>34</sup> *GL* folio C lvii; *GL* vol.iii p.126.

<sup>35</sup> The central panel of the Valencia altarpiece shows St George, wearing the cross, armed, mounted and in the thick of the fighting at the battle of Puig, against the Moors in 1237. (See Plates 6 and 7.)

reflected in the frequency with which they feature in romance. Knights, ordinary soldiers and mercenaries were exhorted to join the first Crusade by Pope Urban the Second in 1095. He not only gave his blessing to the war to liberate Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the occupying Muslim forces, the Seljuk Turks, but offered inducements to take part: indulgences were granted and religious concessions made. The crusading knights adorned their armour with the cross of Christ to signify that this was a Holy War and they were Christ's soldiers defending the true faith.

Chaucer's *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* provides an idealised portrait of such a knight who has fought in the most far-flung heathen lands as well as in christendom.<sup>36</sup> His 'worthynesse' is the feature which is most often repeated. 'Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie', as well as an aristocratic 'gentillesse' seem to distance him from the brutalities of war. We are told that his bearing is 'as meeke as is a mayde' which creates an image which conflicts with the essentially masculine career of the combative knight and crusader. The impression the reader is left with in the last part of his portrait is one of Christian goodness

' He nevere yet no vilenye ne sayde

In al his lyf unto no maner wight.' (ll.70-1)

Bevis, also a chivalric knight and crusader, is very different from Chaucer's character. Bevis gains from a mythic reputation as a knight which is characterised by aggression, violence and belligerence. That he is a survivor of many frequent, bloody and long combats and battles indicates his skill with a sword and also his bravery, especially when he confronts singlehandedly thousands of London citizens and then, with the help of his sons, gains the victory, killing 32,000. The 'parfit gentil knight' and the aggressive warrior are both ideal depictions and are not mutually exclusive, their differences representing some of the contradictions to be found in the concept of the '*miles christi*' .

This issue did not present a real dilemma for the church; it saw no need to justify the encouragement of men to kill in a rightful cause and Christine de Pisan (c. 1363-1431) lists the

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<sup>36</sup> *The Riverside Chaucer*, I A p. 24, ll.43-78.

wars that are considered lawful, undertaken to sustain justice, against oppression and against usurpation and those considered unlawful are undertaken simply for revenge and for aggression.<sup>37</sup> While some few churchmen were doubtful about the morality of war, the Church saw an opportunity of harnessing military might to political ends as well as to spiritual ones. The soldier saints, St George, St Martin, St Theodore and St Demetrius, are iconographic examples of the way in which the Church justified war. Even Christ himself has been pictured at the head of an armed force and I will argue below that this causes a conflict of images, the soldier leading his men into battle with the crucified victim, Christ.

The true knight and Crusader was perceived as offering his life in the service of Christ, as if to a feudal lord. In 1484 Caxton translated a work on chivalry by Ramón Lull from French into English, encapsulating the religious aspect of the chivalric code: 'The offyce of a knyght is to mayntene and deffende the holy feyth catholyque/ by whiche god the fader sente his sone in to the world to take flesshe humayne in the gloryous vyrgyn oure lady saynt Mary/ And for to honoure & multiplie the feythe suffryd in this world many traualles/despites/ & anguysshous deth....'<sup>38</sup> Behind this thinking lies Augustine's acceptance of the just war as an integral part of Christian life and practice. He writes in *City of God*, (*De Civitate Dei*) xix, 12 about mankind's wish for peace: 'there is no man who does not wish for peace. Indeed, even when men choose war, their only wish is for victory; which shows that their desire in fighting is for peace with glory.'<sup>39</sup> In this way war becomes the justified means of ensuring peace, which is something of a contradiction in itself. War then can be a necessity if the harmony of God is to be restored. St Augustine continues by saying that : ' a man who has learnt to prefer right to wrong and the rightly ordered to the perverted, sees that the peace of the unjust, compared with the peace of

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<sup>37</sup> Christine de Pisan, *The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyualrye*, trans. William Caxton, ed. A.T. P. Byles, EETS, OS, 189 (1932), Book 1 p.11.

<sup>38</sup> Ramón Lull, *Le Libre del Orde de Cauayleria*, trans. William Caxton as *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry* ed. A.T. P. Byles, EETS, OS, 168 (1971), p.24.

<sup>39</sup> *City of God (De Civitate Dei)*, p.866.

the just, is not worthy even of the name of peace...' <sup>40</sup>

In the light of such thinking, the knight's profession was considered to be a necessary and worthy one, contributing to a stable, Christian society, just as did the two other estates, the clergy and the '*laboratores*'.

While hand-to-hand fighting was of necessity brutal and violent, for the élite, the aristocratic knights who were engaged in warfare, there were rules of conduct laid down but these did not extend to the ordinary soldiers of humble birth. The chivalric code was applied by and to the knightly class so that while a noble might be taken a prisoner and ransomed, a foot-soldier could be mercilessly killed and indeed whole communities of women and children could share a similar fate. It is to be expected that in the heat of battle the discipline of the chivalric code would be forgotten and barbarous and gratuitous acts of cruelty and treachery would be perpetrated on both sides. John Barnie stresses that 'Chivalry was a complex and often contradictory code and one of the ironies of the ideal is that its noblest virtues contain *in potentia* the very vices it strove to overcome.' <sup>41</sup>

At this point I want to lay alongside the chivalric, heroic convention, celebrated in those romance heroes like Guy and Bevis who actively defend the faith, another alternative concept of heroism and warfare which has its own contradictions, largely inherent in the imagery which has been used to symbolise the relationship between good and evil, a relationship seen in oppositional terms. Indeed, it is almost impossible to represent good in relationship with evil without using the imagery of battle and attack, and this is the imagery which represents God's relationship with Leviathan in the Old Testament. God is the great warrior whose fight is on a cosmic scale. But it is in the New Testament that we find the image of the '*miles christi*' which becomes an archetypal metaphor, quoted widely and frequently in sermons and religious treatises. Under the sub-heading *Christi militia*, St Paul's letter to the Ephesians rouses them to

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* p.869.

<sup>41</sup> John Barnie, *War in Medieval Society: Social Values and the Hundred Years War, 1337-1399* (London, 1974), p.95.

stand firm in the faith: *Induite vos armaturam Dei, ut possitis stare adversus insidias diaboli: quoniam non est nobis colluctatio adversus carnem et sanguinem: sed adversus principes, et potestates, adversus mundi rectores tenebrarum harum, contra spiritualia nequitiæ, in caelestibus. Propterea accipite armaturam Dei, ut possitis resistere in die malo, et in omnibus perfecti stare. State ergo succincti lumbos vestros in veritate, et induti lorica iustitiæ, et calceati pedes in præparatione Evangelii pacis: in omnibus sumentes scutum fidei, in quo possitis omnia tela nequissimi ignea extinguere: et galeam salutis assumite: et gladium spiritus (quod est verbum Dei).* (6 vv.11-17, BV) St Paul describes a spiritual fight against the evil of everyday life and the required protection against the devil lies in the armour, the shield of faith, the breastplate of righteousness and so on. The sword alone is a weapon and capable of inflicting injury and death, even in self-defence but here it signifies the scriptures which can be used to attack evil.

St Paul's imagery is replicated in St Aldhelm's writing on virginity (*De Virginitate*) in the late seventh century. He addresses the abbess Hildelith and the nuns at a monastery at Barking. 'Virgins of Christ and raw recruits of the Church must therefore fight with muscular energy against the horrendous monster of Pride and at the same time against those seven wild beasts of the virulent vices, who with rabid molars and venomous bicuspidis strive to mangle violently whoever is unarmed and despoiled of the breastplate of virginity and stripped of the shield of modesty.....' Significantly, evil is symbolized by the wild animal. He exhorts the nuns to put on the whole armour of God, developing this image further, reminding the faithful that the fight is a continuous one because evil is omnipresent. The nuns are to: 'fight strenuously in the forefront of the battle as rulers of the world or as the warriors of the Lord, steadfastly struggling with steadfast foes, against the dominion of Leviathan and the powers of darkness.'<sup>42</sup>

There is a fundamental paradox in this imagery for while combat is urged, the victory is to be gained, not by conventional retaliation, but by the strength of resistance and a reliance on

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<sup>42</sup> Aldhelm: *The Prose Works*, trans. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (Ipswich and Totowa, NJ, 1979) 'De Virginitate', p 68.



protective armour which stands for the Christian virtues. The battle is an inner, spiritual one waged primarily against the temptations of Satan and yet the imagery reflects the external, physical fight of the soldier who must attack to stay alive.

Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, (late-fourth century) describes in Pauline imagery the battle between the vices and the virtues for possession of the human soul. Cyprian of Carthage (d.258 c) also wrote of battle and the necessity of the human soul to withstand the onslaught of Satan's armies but he viewed evil as an external force, its vices emanating from the world and not so much as an inner, spiritual falling into sin. Prudentius' work concentrated on this aspect of the human soul under threat from those vices like lasciviousness, greed, jealousy and anger which were within the human soul itself and which could subdue its virtue. The *Psychomachia* depicts an inner, spiritual and moral struggle in which the virtues are given to mankind to fight the vices, since original sin predisposes mankind to evil. Whereas Satan has his soldiers, Christ, of his grace, arms the soul with virtues and these represent active attacking participants in the battle.

For Prudentius the scripturally-derived imagery of battle has specific relevance to the state of the soul and yet the image cannot help but retain the association with the attacking external enemy like that of paganism. The Pauline and Aldhelmian use of the imagery of weapons and armour further complicates the development of the image of warfare. Central to the problem is the perception that warfare means active, physical engagement with the enemy which requires an aggressive confrontational stance while the theological imagery of warfare stresses the fight is an inner one against temptation, 'the fiery darts of the evil one'. To withstand these necessitates determination of the will. The crusader warring against the Infidel uses his sword to kill the opponents of the Christian faith and likewise the romance hero has no dilemma in witnessing to Christianity; he perceives his fight to be an external one against idolaters and like the saint he will not capitulate to another faith. Whereas the spilling of blood is undertaken actively by the romance hero, the saint's stand against paganism lies in the shedding of his own blood.

Running in parallel and at times counter to the image of the sword is that of the stand

against evil taken by a suffering Christ on the cross which becomes a stronger force. The saints' legends abound with examples of the effectiveness of the sign of the cross against the dragon and the devil himself. Gerald of Wales gives an account of the saints Justina and Cyprian, the latter being converted to the faith as a result of a practical demonstration of the devil's inadequacy. Cyprian, before his conversion, unsuccessfully used the devil to try to persuade Justina to become his spouse and he asks the devil : 'Tell me, what is this victory of hers?' The devil replies ".....I saw the sign of the Crucified, and I was consumed and melted like wax before fire." This knowledge forces Cyprian to realise the ineffectiveness of the devil and he says : ' " Then the Crucified is greater than you." The devil replied: 'Yes greater than everyone, for through him God has had mercy on the world.' ' 43

Christ is the merciful, sacrificial victim, the Lamb of God. The essence of the Christian paradox is of the all-powerful God becoming flesh and therefore, like all mankind, subject to the suffering of the body and ultimately death. But it is only by becoming man that Christ can defeat the devil who will be deceived by this human disguise. The figure of the victorious Christ on the cross gave way in the twelfth century to the broken man, hanging in agony, an image which invited empathetic identification with his suffering and which also suggests the paradox at the heart of Christ's death.

*Piers Plowman* reveals some of the contradictions which emerge when the imagery of the fight against evil is used and in particular when Christ becomes the soldier or knight who is at the heart of the struggle. *Passus XVIII* describes the entrance of Christ into Jerusalem, barefoot, riding on an ass, unarmed and without spurs. The young knight is on his way to be dubbed. The chivalric, unarmed knight described in Pauline imagery captures the essential paradox of the crucifixion and the complexity of communicating to the faithful a Christ who is simultaneously victor and vanquished. The image serves to show that while Christ is like a soldier in that he will confront his enemy, the powers of darkness, he cannot take arms against the devil

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<sup>43</sup> Gerald of Wales, (Giraldus Cambrensis, 1146-1223) *The Jewel of the Church*, a translation by John J. Hagen of *Gemma Ecclesiastica*, Davis Medieval Texts and Studies Series, Lugduni Batavorum, ed. E.J. Brill (1979), p.75.

because Christ's role is to suffer and not to attack.

As well as being called a knight, Christ is also referred to as a king and a conqueror; the latter title is given to him because he overcame his foes and rose from the dead, after first harrowing hell. Juxtaposed images of conquering hero, warfare and physical combat are undercut by the image of the suffering son of God who does not meet his death as a warrior but, by accepting the will of God, undertakes to die in the company of thieves. For the Christian the sacrificial blood of Christ has a sacred significance celebrated in the Eucharist. Therefore, the saint whose blood is shed for Christ in martyrdom mirrors his crucifixion and s/he goes straight to heaven. *The South English Legendary* underscores the importance of Christ's blood watering the seed of Christianity which gives life and hope to a 'hard and luper' land, <sup>44</sup> (l.5) a sacrifice to be imitated by the martyrs, beginning with St Stephen and the apostles, represented as 'oure Louerdes knyȝtes' (l.19) who battle to uphold Christendom. The military image is an extended one, presenting Christ as a king leading his men into the fight, the paradox being that the fight was conducted on the cross with Christ's shedding of blood. Thus, any involvement of the saint in a violent spilling of blood of someone else's blood runs counter to the hagiographic topos which reflects the act of submission in the crucifixion.

The legend of St Martin, born into a military family, illustrates the hagiographic topos in which sainthood is seen as incompatible with the active use of arms and the shedding of blood. As a boy the saint had dedicated his life to God but was forced against his will to be a soldier. Refusing to fight the invading barbarians, his words convey the contradiction of the soldier/knight of Christ for whom fighting is untenable: 'I am a knyght of Ihesu crist, it apperteyneth not to me for to fyghte.' When accused of cowardice St Martin agrees to meet the enemy unarmed, his sole protection being the sign of the cross and the episode ends: 'But on the morne the enemyes sent messagers that they wold yelde them and their goddes, wherof hit is no doubtte that by the

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<sup>44</sup> *The South English Legendary* eds. Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, EETS, OS, i, 235, pp. 1-3, ii.236, pp.1-68 (1956).

merytes of this hooly man that this vycторыe was hadde withoute shedyng of blood.'<sup>45</sup> It is the heathen rulers who are associated with blood and violence, particularly in the torturing of the saints. Moreover, Caxton's *Life of St Demetrius* records that Maximian went, as a spectator, to view a battle that was about to take place because he much enjoyed seeing the spilling of human blood.<sup>46</sup>

Bernard Huppé has explored the problems of the presentation of the saint as a '*miles christi*'. He looks at Aelfric's life of St Oswald and his part in battle, concluding that the military detail is not foregrounded: it is the power of the cross which ensures victory. Aspects of the heroic genre are lacking: 'The lack of development of the heroic motif of vengeance, in contrast to its prominence in *Beowulf* and its important place in the *Roland*, suggests a deliberate negation of the heroic possibilities in the battle for the purpose of stressing Oswald's saintly character.'<sup>47</sup> Clearly, there is a compromise to be found in the glossing over the saint's shedding of blood, even in a worthy cause. In the legends of the later Middle Ages, as printed in the *Golden Legend*, battles, in which the saint takes a prominent part, do not have a place.

I want now to look at the way in which Christianity and its values form an integral part of romance. Romance is set against a background of the Christian faith: the knightly protagonist is Christian and he usually, but not always, conforms to the chivalric code which is permeated by Christian values. When the romance hero Bevis, as a young boy, is sold to the Muslim king, Ermin of Armenia, his staunch refusal to desert his Christian faith enables the plot to capitalize on the conflict and enmity between Muslim and Christian. Bevis's upholding of his faith is aggressive and militant, attacking those who come to worship the heathen idols. The romance topos provides an effective contrast with the hagiographic topos when the saint is brought before the Roman rulers. While St Theodore does set fire to the temple of Mars, having been ordered

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<sup>45</sup> *GL* folio CCC lvi; *GL* vol. vi pp.143-144.

<sup>46</sup> *GL* folio CCC lvi; *GL* vol.vii p.183.

<sup>47</sup> Bernard F. Huppé, 'The Concept of the Hero in the Early Middle Ages' in *Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, eds Norman T. Burns and Christopher Reagan (London, Sydney, Auckland, Toronto, 1976) pp. 1-26.

to sacrifice to the idols, the refusals of the saints to worship may be vociferous and adamant but, almost without exception, there is no accompanying physical violence. Generally it is God who avenges his saints. However, it is Bevis who takes the initiative in this episode:

'Out of a mameri a sai  
 Sarasins come gret foisoun,  
 Pat hadde anoured here Mahoun.  
 Beues of is palfrei aliȝte  
 And ran to her mameri ful riȝte  
 And slouȝ here prest, þat þer was in  
 And þrew here godes in þe fen  
 And louȝ hem alle to scorn.' (BH II.1350-1357)

Generally, Bevis's faith is demonstrated by a belligerence towards the Muslim as he sees his role as a protector of the true faith. Unlike the saint his actions do not provoke mass conversions.

' "Ich ȝelde me  
 To god, þat sit in trinite!  
 To non oþer man i nel me ȝelde,  
 While þat ich mai me wepne welde !" ' (BH II.4429-32)

The narrative testifies to Bevis's bravery in the defence of the true faith and this is manifest in the power of weapons:

Þanne sire Beues and sire Gii  
 Al þe londe of Ermony  
 Hii made cristen wiȝ dent of swerd....' (BH II. 4017-4019)

It is the supreme pride in the rightness of their actions that typifies the romance heroes; they are confident in their autonomy although Bevis does pray to Christ when in a difficult situation which threatens his life and even interpreting this as an automatic reaction, a desperate plea for help, the outcome reinforces the efficacy of prayer and so Christ's approval of Bevis. He

prays to him when lying in prison under the weight of a huge boulder which he cannot move and in answer to his prayer the stone rolls off him, killing the gaoler so that Bevis can make his escape. This episode is reminiscent of the help given to the imprisoned and tortured saints: in one of the versions of the St George legend, Christ removes a crushing stone from the saint. Although the effect appears to be a superficial narrative ploy to free the hero from an impossible situation, it may be argued that there are times when the sword cannot provide the solution to difficult situations and we are reminded of the limitations of human, and indeed superhuman power and therefore of the importance of prayer.

Susan Crane looks at the Christian knight of romance and finds him to be an unacceptable example of the tenets of Christianity. She examines the introduction of Christian elements in *Richard Coer de Lyon* when 'the occasional interventions of God and St George on Richard's behalf do not raise the tone of Richard's exploits so much as they implicate divinity itself in the abasement of crusading ideals to human prejudice and bloodthirstiness.'<sup>48</sup>

However, the intent of the romance is to demonstrate that the '*miles christi*' is considered to be a fitting hero, within the romance concept of what being a Christian means, even if there are inherent religious paradoxes concerned with the spilling of blood. Hagiography and romance present the Christian faith in divergent ways in relation to the perception of what witnessing to the faith means for the protagonist. The romance hero takes up arms against the Muslim and celebrates the spilling of infidel blood whereas the saint submits to the shedding of his own blood in imitation of Christ and demonstrates before the Roman rulers God's power to overcome by suffering. Both protagonists, chivalric hero or saint, pray to achieve their goals, for the former, the defeat of the muslim forces, or the dragon or giant and the saint, for help from God in withstanding the temptations and tortures of the flesh. Importantly, Peter Brown points out that it was not just the ability to withstand tortures which made the early martyrs Christian heroes, for the Roman world was used to witnessing acts of bravery and cruel deaths in the gladiatorial contests but he argues that the martyrs represented an élite, 'Far superior to their fellow men

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<sup>48</sup> Crane, *Insular Romance*, p.107.

by reason of a special intimacy with the divine.'<sup>49</sup> In the next chapter I want to turn to the saint's dragon encounter in popular hagiographic legend and argue that, indeed, the saint is set apart from his romance counterpart by virtue of the imminent presence of Christ.

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Harvard, 1981), pp. 55-56.

### CHAPTER 3 - HAGIOGRAPHY AND THE SAINT'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE DRAGON

Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*, written towards the end of the seventh century, extolled those saints whose lives had been dedicated to the virgin state. Among those were both male and female saints who had vanquished dragons. Clearly, the dragon had become a hagiographic feature in the writings of the early Christian church and encounters with dragons became a popular episode in saints' lives in medieval legendaries like the *Legenda Aurea*. Jonathan D. Evans in an article on the medieval dragon tradition also stresses the popularity of the dragon in literature but draws a distinction between the Old Norse corpus of dragon lore and other European medieval legends, the former being '...uncontaminated by the dragons in the St George legend and all the associated lore from the *Physiologus*, and related bestiaries, allegories, commentaries, and natural histories invented from patristic sources....'<sup>1</sup> While Evans implies that these sources are a vitiating influence on dragon lore, in this chapter I want to argue that the input from a variety of biblical and ecclesiastical sources, such as those listed above, and in addition from ancient mythology, contributes to a richer and more complex image of the dragon. By bringing with it multifarious connotations, our interpretation of the monster may be complicated within a particular narrative so that it becomes a shifting, ambivalent symbol which may even unsettle the established hagiographic ethos. Even when the hagiographic dragon is used as a simple equation with a generalized evil, the symbol carries with it the residual echoes from a variety of such sources. The representation of the dragon varies in intensity from the brief mention of its existence to a more complex one involving its pernicious attributes which also can be interpreted symbolically. I shall explore the role of the dragon as a symbol to show the variety of nuances which accompany its use within the saint's legend particularly but also with reference to moral tales.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan D. Evans, 'Semiotics and Traditional Lore: The Medieval Dragon Tradition' *Journal of Folklore Research*, 22 (May-Dec. 1985), 86.



Because dragon encounters in late medieval saints' lives owe much to the romance genre, I want to begin by making a comparison between the two genres, using a narrative structure which has been devised by Evans. He applies it to Old English and Old Norse dragon-slayer episodes which help to establish the hero within the epic. However, I believe an examination of the building blocks of this narrative structure illuminate the medieval romance topos. Evans maintains that: 'Old English and Old Norse dragon-slayer episodes, the chief cultural artifacts in which medieval dragon-lore is embodied.....' exhibit... 'this narrative structure: *preparation, travel, combat, slaying and reward.*'<sup>2</sup> He describes '*preparation*' as the arming of the hero and perhaps the additional precaution of acquiring magical charms; '*travel*' refers to the isolated and distant dragon's den and the hero's journey to it; the '*combat*' is the central focus of the episode and this part can be as brief or as detailed as required; the '*slaying*' sees the dramatic resolution of the combat which may be followed by the removal of a trophy like the tongue or head as proof of victory; the '*reward*' brings the episode to a conclusion with the hero receiving money or land or the hand of the princess. Evans maintains that this pattern reinforces the 'values of the heroic ethos' for in the Germanic tradition the slayer of a dragon is never the villain but always the hero and the two combatants always have oppositional roles.

Not all the elements Evans puts forward are used necessarily in each romance dragon encounter, as can be seen in *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, but they are familiar features which underpin the ethos of the genre and provide a contrast with the values inherent in the hagiographic topos. *Sir Eglamour* illustrates this basic narrative structure. The knight is sent by the earl on his third quest, namely to find and fight the dragon of Rome. His preparation does not take the form of arming but of taking leave of his lover Cristabelle, to whom he gives a ring. He travels from Artois to Rome to find the monster which he engages in combat and slays. The Emperor and the people rejoice; the bells ring and the dragon is brought back to St Lawrence's church. No reward is mentioned but the knight receives privileged treatment when he is taken

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* 95.

home by the Emperor and his daughter tends his grave wounds. The dangerous enterprise is undertaken far from home, alone, unaided and for love and there is public recognition of the knight's bravery once the task is completed.

Although there are certain elements outlined by Evans which are common to both romance and hagiography, there are omissions and significant amendments which point to a very different use made of the encounter between saint and dragon. While there are female saints who deal with dragons, their experiences are not always analogous to the romance hero's role as is that of the male saint, therefore I shall refer in the first part of the chapter almost exclusively to the male saint.

These five elements: *'preparation'*, *'travel'*, *'combat'*, *'slaying'* and *'reward'* concern the romance hero at each stage and confirm his central position in the narrative. These stages build up to a climax which is the idealization of the hero's bravery contributing to his renown. Thus, they combine to make clear the knightly ethos. By contrast, the negation of the self-hood of the hagiographic 'hero' stresses different values. He is God's vehicle for the demonstration of the Christian faith and while he is central to the action his concern is to serve God. It is God who is really at the centre of the text: he controls the action and it is God at whom the reader is invited to marvel. Therefore, the saint does not need to undertake a personal quest in order to prove himself to be brave and honourable.

*'Preparation'* and *'travel'* provide the initial stages of the development of this romance motif and it is the single combat to which they lead. By contrast, there is no such build-up to the saint's encounter with the dragon. Clearly, there is no need for the saint's *'preparation'* since that implies a dependence on his own ability to foresee any dangerous eventuality; while the hero trusts in a favourite or unique sword, the saint depends on the cross and allows God to take control of his life. Therefore, there is no careful selection of the best weapons to use nor, indeed, is there any of the ritual donning of armour which belongs to the heroic and chivalric texts for most saints subdue their dragons immediately they encounter them and they do not require armour to do so for no physical combat is necessary. When the saint resolves the situation face

to face with the dragon, he does so by making the sign of the cross, symbolizing that Christ works through him to achieve victory over the monster. While the saintly hero's exploit is diminished as a physical act of bravery and heroism, it gains from the exhibition of a miraculous power which is seen to be speedily and overwhelming effective. The actual slaying does not take place until later and the dragon is led off, although a few dragons may be allowed to slip away, thus escaping slaughter. Finally, when the dragon is killed, the populace usually effects the killing and not the saint, although St George is an exception. The hagiographic dragon's dispatch is a public event and the focus widens to embrace the last stage of the episode, which for the knight of romance would be his reward. However, in the saint's legend, the '*reward*' takes the form of the conversion of the people who have been saved from the dragon and so in the establishment of the Christian faith the saint reveals his reward is a spiritual one, namely the saving of souls.

Having looked at the stages in the slaying of a dragon set out by Evans, it might be argued that although this topos became a popular feature in the legends of the later Middle Ages because it provided the kind of entertainment more often found in epic or romance, the saint's dragon encounter becomes a pale imitation of the chivalric hero risking his life in vigorous combat. Likewise, because the single, climactic combat and slaying do not take place, the dramatic impact of the encounter is lost; indeed, there is no real danger for the saint and the thrill and detail of these two elements are denied to the reader or audience.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, I would argue that the hagiographic dragon encounter, although lacking the more exciting aspects of the romance slaying, and very much underplaying the role of the 'hero', gains from the implied contrast. Although the two kinds of dragon encounter are founded on different values, cross-fertilization does take place, as I have pointed out in Chapter 2, when the romance fight itself can hint at a more spiritual struggle between good and evil, between Christianity and the devil. Nevertheless, tensions emerge between the actual physical fight and

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<sup>3</sup> I have shown in Chapter 2 that the dragon-fight from romance can be colourful, fast moving and detailed as is seen in *Bevis and Guy*.

an inherent, but sometimes elusive, background symbolism. While I am not suggesting that a conscious and deliberate comparison between the two topoi takes place whenever a saint confronts a dragon, I would argue that there is a dichotomous relationship between the hagiographic and the romance motif, the latter informing and giving increased significance to the former, just as the former carries residual echoes of the latter.

The tensions between the dragon-fights of romance and hagiography manifest themselves largely in the values which are intrinsic to the saint and the chivalric hero, respectively. Paradoxically, the saint would appear to take on the role of hero and yet he cannot become the brave knight associated with romance without compromising the Christian message. The saintly hero parallels the suffering Christ whose crucifixion and subsequent victory over death and evil is achieved, not by the sword but by faith, by a voluntary acceptance of the will of God. Any elevation of the saint as a meritorious and autonomous individual would destroy the unique relationship between the saint and Christ. The paradox of power and victory granted to the weak and lowly is at the heart of the Christian faith and the essence of the saint's meeting with the dragon serves as a reminder of this. The focus in the romance is on the death-dealing soldier shown in physical action when his superhuman struggle with the monster is recorded, often in some detail.

Within the familiar context of a dangerous dragon threatening a community, the saint is presented as one who is set apart from ordinary people by his virtue and the grace of God and is therefore an appropriate conduit for the love of Christ: he is not a triumphant individual acclaimed for his bravery. Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* speaks of the glory of the saint's 'spiritual purity' and his summaries of selected male and female saints' lives emphasize this as being a source of their great Christian power. Aldhelm's account of the legend of St Hilarion stresses that it was his abstemiousness which gave him a spiritual strength, enabling him to effect miracles. We are told that '.....with the weaponry of prayer he killed a dragon, horrendous with its scaly body, near Epidaurus, a town in Dalmatia, a dragon that they called 'boa' for the reason that it was of such enormity that, slaying cattle with the poisonous teeth of its jaws, it is accustomed

to swallow them whole with the greedy appetite of its stomach -and it not only gulps down cattle and sheep, but also farmers and ploughmen and swineherds, drawn to it by the force of its breath.' St Hilarion commands it with great authority to climb onto its own funeral pyre. He also saves the citizens of Epidaurus from an inundation of the sea which stops and forms a huge wall in front of the saint. Aldhelm rejoices: 'Oh how great is the force of virginity, which curbed the insanity of a raging monster with a humble prayer.....so equalling the deed of the prophet Daniel with regard to the dragon and those of (Moses) the law-giver in regard to the sea!' <sup>4</sup>

The physically active soldier who needs to inflict a mortal blow on the monster if he is to gain honour and renown is replaced by a man whose own power to bring about the subjugation of the dragon is dependent on his faith and so ultimately on his Saviour, Christ himself. The saint's conquering of the dragon valorizes the saint insofar that his 'spiritual purity' and Christian faith is shown to empower him. However, the dragon-killing in romance is a means of demonstrating the knight's martial skills and his bravery. The military might of both the romance hero, Bevis, and the epic hero, Beowulf, demonstrated in their respective fights with the dragon,<sup>5</sup> is a celebration of those masculine attributes associated with the chivalric or heroic code: bravery, skill with weapons, resourcefulness and tenacity. Power is thus vested largely in a man's own right arm and he is dependent on himself alone for success. Qualities of personality help to determine victory but these too exhibit the toughness of the soldier and are a reflection of these masculine codes. It is to be expected that the exaltation of virtues which are essentially masculine do not have a place in the saint's legend for that would give an importance to the temporal at the expense of the spiritual and deny the saint's proper preoccupation which is with the eternal. Resoluteness of faith and self-abnegation are built into the dragon topos in the presentation of the saint as protagonist and in the way in which his power is exercised so that

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<sup>4</sup> *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, pp.88-89

<sup>5</sup> *Bevis of Hamtoun* (BH II.2757-2910) and *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. F. Klaeber, third edition (Boston, New York and London, 1950) II.2538-2709.

these spiritual values derive a greater significance because they provide an implicit contrast with the familiar dragon-slaying of the secular genre. Thus, in the saint's dispatch of the dragon, valour becomes of little importance and strength of faith is the *sine qua non* in the face of the opponent. The effectiveness of this hagiographic convention lies in the reduced role of the saint as an individual and the concomitant elevation of Christ as a power for good. It provides a contrast with the celebration of the individual, autonomous hero of romance. Significantly, in contrast to the secular topos, there are three participants in the hagiographic topos: Christ, effectively present but invisible, whose supernatural power emanates through the saint and then the saint himself and the dragon; in this way the fierce oppositional nature present in the romance topos is dispersed between three, not two, participants.

Nevertheless, inherent in both conventions is the idea of battle and of conflict between the good man and his destructive adversary, in order to establish supremacy. The difference is that the secular hero literally arms himself and fights the dragon in a physical encounter, whereas the hagiographic topos utilizes the Pauline metaphor of spiritual armour in which to clothe the saint. The armour, of foremost importance, is the all-sufficient power of faith and spiritual worth. The cross is a symbol of faith and provides a protection and a defence against evil over which the latter has no power. The fundamental distinction between the hagiographic motif and its counterpart in romance is its symbolism. While the romance dragon may be loosely described as evil because it is wilfully destructive and antagonistic to human civilization, it does not carry any theological connotations. However, the opposing forces of Christ and Satan are represented respectively in the symbolism of the cross and the dragon and while the use of the dragon as an embodiment of evil remains constant, the exact nature of the embodied evil may vary, depending on the emphases of the narrative and the context in which the dragon appears. A major contribution to this hagiographic topos has been the apocalyptic image of St Michael who sent the fallen angels and the dragon, Lucifer, tumbling down into hell. (Revelation 12 v.9) However, there is one significant difference and that is the way in which the dragon is overcome. St Michael uses his spear or his lance, whereas the unarmed saint makes the sign of the cross and

he has no protective armour; in contemporary painting, the arch-angel is clothed as a medieval knight and spears the devil in the shape of a dragon or grotesque human being, trampled under his feet. Thus, although St George is portrayed as a soldier in his legend, this militaristic image is adapted in the majority of other vernacular legends to the demands made by the crucifixion when the Christian concept of power and of valour is redefined by a suffering Christ on the cross, encapsulated in the signing of the cross by the saint.

The apocalyptic combative role of St Michael is reinforced in his legend when he goes to the aid of the people of Garganus and ensures that they triumph over their enemies so that: '.....vi. hundred of the aduersaries were kyllyde what by enemyes and arrewes of heuene, and the toþer þrouȝ vertue that they fonde in the archangel lefte and forsoke here erreure of ydolatrie and ȝafe hem to Cristen lyfe.'<sup>6</sup> This physical fight over which the saint has control is in marked contrast with the dragon encounter, also frequently used to bring about a mass conversion, for the arch-angel himself appears to be the source of power and because of his depiction as a fighter of metaphysical strength is able to intervene in the fortunes of two opposing forces and determine the outcome of the battle as a demonstration of Christian might. *Speculum Sacerdotale* also states clearly: 'Miȝhell is callyd the bannerer of Ihesu Crist, for he bereþ oueral the signe of victorie of Crist'<sup>7</sup> and in addition that his power is more considerable than that of the ordinary saint because of his relationship with God: 'And of alle archangelles and aungelles there is noon that may do so as God but Miȝhel. And Miȝhel with his aungels is seide to feiȝt aȝeynst þe deuel for holy chirche of God.'<sup>8</sup>

From the description of St Michael's battle in Revelation, it is clear that the dragon and Satan have a symbolic parity but also, more specifically, there is a reference to those who, like the saints, later were to overcome the dragon: *Et ipsi vicerunt eum propter sanguinem Agni, et propter verbum testimonii sui, et non dilexerunt animas suas usque ad mortem* (Revelation 12

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<sup>6</sup> *Speculum Sacerdotale* ed. E.H. Weatherly EETS, OS, 200 (1936), p. 211 ll.27-31.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p.212 ll.31-32.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p.212 ll. 37-39.

v.11 BV). In hagiography, the dragon is most often used as a specific symbol of paganism, a subject of particular concern to the early Christian church. The undermining of faith by the worship of idols, believed to be inhabited by demons and devils ready to seduce mankind away from the true faith, is captured particularly in the passions of the martyrs who resist the threats of the pagan ruler. The dragon, however, stands for an aggressive attack on Christian belief and with its ravaging maw suggests the determination of evil to appropriate humanity for itself. Its infliction of plague on communities through its poisonous breath by which it intimidates a populace to sacrifice its cattle and its citizens suggests an assault on the ordered society. The dragon also represents the condemnation of mankind to death with no hope of redemption. In addition, it is used in the life of St Margaret to represent sexual temptation and the threat of rape which is a subject I shall discuss separately in Chapter 5.

At this point I want to look more closely at specific legends in which dragons appear in order to explore in more detail the valency of the dragon's symbolism and its role within selected narratives which will be taken largely, but not completely, from the *Legenda Aurea* and Caxton's translation, the *Golden Legend*. I have stressed that the dragon often appears as a symbol of paganism and the dispatching of the dragon is used as a public demonstration of Christian power in competition and conflict with idolatry. Keith Thomas examines the way in which any new religion has to establish itself by showing it is more supernaturally powerful than its predecessor. This will mean that its 'magic' must be seen as stronger and more successful. He writes: 'Nearly every primitive religion is regarded by its adherents as a medium for obtaining supernatural power. This does not prevent it from functioning as a system of explanation, a source of moral injunctions, a symbol of social order, or a route to immortality; but it does mean that it also offers the prospect of a supernatural means of control over man's earthly environment. The history of early Christianity offers no exception to this rule. Conversions to the new religion, whether in the time of the primitive Church or under the auspices of the missionaries of more recent times, have frequently been assisted by the view of converts that they are acquiring not just a means of other-worldly salvation, but a new and more powerful magic. Just as the Hebrew priests of the



Old Testament endeavoured to confound the devotees of Baal by challenging them publicly to perform supernatural acts, so the Apostles of the early Church attracted followers by working miracles and performing supernatural cures. Both the New Testament and the literature of the patristic period testify to the importance of these activities in the work of conversion; and the ability to perform miracles soon became an indispensable test of sanctity.<sup>9</sup>

The submission of the dragon by the saint is presented as a miracle, one of many he may perform in his life. The success of the power struggle between good and evil is dependent on the saint's 'ability to perform miracles' with the aid of the cross, shown to be a 'new and more powerful magic'. Yet, the patristic fathers warned against the reliance on amulets and other magic charms exhorting the use of the name of Jesus and the sign of the cross, drawing a distinction between miracles, derived from Christ, and magic. The cross has been depicted in medieval paintings with the dragon lying defeated at its base showing how Christ, by his crucifixion, overcame death as well as sin. Athanasius too emphasises the power of the cross but specifically in its ultimate defeat of death: 'For that death is destroyed, and that the cross is become the victory over it, and that it has no more power but is verily dead, this is no small proof, or rather an evident warrant, that it is despised by all Christ's disciples, and that they all take the aggressive against it and no longer fear it; but by the sign of the cross and by faith in Christ tread it down as dead.'<sup>10</sup> This stresses that there is no real escape from God's invincible, immanent power and that there is no effective challenge or alternative.

Now, I want to look briefly at the use made in hagiography of the beast or wild animal and determine what it is that sets the dragon apart from other beasts so that it becomes the archetypal representation of evil only repelled by the cross. The dragon's very size, ferocity and grotesqueness make it a visible reminder of the monstrousness of evil; its ancient provenance as an evil creature endows it with associations no other animal could emulate. While wild animals

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<sup>9</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth, 1971), pp. 27-28.

<sup>10</sup> 'Athanasius: On the Incarnation of the Word' in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, vol. 111, ed. Edward Rochie Hardy, trans. Archibald Robinson (London, 1954), p.81.

have a role in hagiography as a means of showing the saint's spiritual strength, the dragon has a more significant and powerful symbolic function. Lucille Guilbert has written about the significance of the appearances of animals in hagiography: 'L'animal est l'un de ces moyens qui montrent le saint dans sa puissance et dans sa gloire'<sup>11</sup> and 'Le héros de la foi exerce un forte autorité même sur les bêtes féroces qui s'apprivoisent et s'adoucissent en sa présence, et qui au lieu de le dévorer le protègent et le servent.'<sup>12</sup> The taming of a fierce animal like a lion or a wolf is included in a saint's life to exhibit his authority. Saint and animal can co-exist in a harmony which mirrors the prelapsarian Eden and while the subjugation of a savage animal more befits the strength of the male rather than the more passive female saint who is generally associated with the gentle beasts like the lamb, the doe and the sheep, St Margaret and St Martha each successfully stand up to a dragon. Guilbert's analysis deals predominantly with animals, both wild and domesticated, which would be familiar to a medieval community: she does not embrace in her commentary fabulous and monstrous animals like the dragon, even though they appear in medieval bestiaries alongside such commonplace animals as the deer, the mouse and the lion.

Although one function of the dragon is used to reveal the power of the saint, its monstrous nature places it outside the animal kingdom of sentient creatures which make up God's creation: it is unlike other ferocious animals and while the legends of St Jerome and St Francis demonstrate a sympathy for dumb creatures which allows them to be included, albeit in a limited way, within the society of mankind, the symbolic use of the dragon effectively signals that evil cannot be found a place within an ordered Christian society. Its place is forever 'outside' and its exclusion mirrors that of the fallen angels, condemned to frequent the margins. Like the progeny of Cain who were monsters such as Grendel, dragons are often presented as being outcasts and so they are to be found most often outside the city walls, signifying they are excluded from a stable civilized society or at the bottom of a pit, suggesting the abyss of hell.

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<sup>11</sup> Lucille Guilbert, 'L'animal dans *La Légende Dorée*' in *Legenda Aurea, Sept Siècles de Diffusion*, Actes de Colloque International sur la *Legenda Aurea*, 1983. *Cahiers d'études médiévales*, Cahier Spécial (2) (Montreal, Paris, 1986), p.78.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p.82.

This strong connotation with primeval evil enhances the ominousness of the monster in comparison with that fought by the secular hero, for it becomes more than physically life-threatening: it threatens the soul of mankind. For this reason, the hagiographic dragon cannot be viewed in the same light as the romance monster since it is not just a foil for the hero, a means of valorizing his chivalric worth.

The isolated position of the dragon can be contrasted with hagiographic depictions of close relationships between man and animal which reveal in a small way the relationship between God and his creatures. The exclusion of the dragon is emphasized if we consider the inclusion of the lion within God's creation and man's jurisdiction in the legend of St Jerome in which the lion belongs within the community and becomes an important contributor to it. The lion had been sent to the saint by God to be cured of its wounded paw but also for the 'profit' of the brethren who live in harmony with the tamed lion because it is God's intention that there will be mutual benefit for man and animal. Human-like, the lion feels shame when the ass, for which he is responsible, is stolen when the lion falls asleep. Similarly, the life of St Francis presents the animal world in a sympathetic light. He calls the beasts his 'brethren' and when he preaches to the birds they listen, unafraid. Many medieval legends show a relationship between saint and animal which is based on a mutual understanding: the animal is obedient to the saint and will not attack, indicating that in a perfect state the wild animals would not possess predatory natures and Isaiah's words would be fulfilled: *Habitabit lupus cum agno, Et pardus cum haedo accubabit; Vitulus, et leo, et ovis, simul morabuntur, Et puer parvulus minabit eos.*(Isaiah 11 v. 6 BV)

By contrast many legends contain another established hagiographic convention: the exiling of the wild animal, often found preying on a community. St Vedaste comes across a wolf in the ruins of a church and commands it to leave and it is not sighted again. However, there are occasions when the animal is not responsive to the command of the saint and such is the case when St Theodora saves a man about to be torn to pieces by a wild animal. Her prayers, followed by a cursing of the beast, ensure it falls down dead. Moreover, this saint is beset by devils who appear in the form of wild beasts and once again her prayers are successful and the

devils disappear. The use of the animal in saints' legends referred to above does serve as a means of demonstrating the power, not only of the saint, but also of Christianity. Nevertheless, the legend of St Theodora reminds us of the connotations which the words 'beast' or 'animal' could carry, connotations of violence, an enmity towards mankind and predatoriness, which is associated with the evil of the Fall and which may require Christian prayer as a protection. I want to suggest that the role of the wild animal in the saints' legends referred to above is to demonstrate the might of Christianity and also to show that these animals are included in God's creation and in their relationships with human beings: they have a part to play. In like manner, the dragon's role in the saints' legends demonstrates the power of Christianity working through the saint but there the similarity ends. The dragon is not only huge and monstrous but unlike any other animal it carries mythological and theological connotations which are archetypal and atavistic; traditionally in bestiary and homiletic tale it is a symbol of the devil. Its role is unique, for it cannot be replaced by even the wildest and most feared of animals like the wolf, bear or lion because it stands outside God's creation and yet, it is allowed by God to exist. In contrast with the lion, sent by God to St Jerome who then tames its natural ferocity, there is no possibility that the dragon can be put to comparable use for its essential nature cannot be changed and it is beyond redemption. The didactic lesson of the dragon encounters is that any appeasement of the monster perpetuates its destructive force so that the Christian's duty is not to compromise but to seek out the conflict and dispatch the evil if the good and ordered life is to be enjoyed.

David Williams argues that the monster in the Middle Ages symbolized that which was anti-nature in its malevolent antagonism towards God's creation<sup>13</sup> and indeed, the concept of the monstrous within God's creation occupied the Church Fathers. Urban Tigner Holmes draws attention to the derivation of 'monster' from Latin '*monstrare*', to show, and the theme of his article is that the monster is a deviation from nature, allowed by God and used by him as an omen or portent. Holmes quotes from St Augustine and Rabanus Maurus to support his claim that in

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<sup>13</sup> David Williams *Cain and Beowulf. a Study in Secular Allegory* (Toronto, 1982), pp. 33-34. See particularly Chapter 2, pp. 19-39. The monstrous giants of the Old Testament, the progeny of Cain, were viewed as being responsible for paganism and social chaos.

episodes from romance in which monsters feature 'there are meaningful warnings in the sense established by St Augustine and others.'<sup>14</sup> However, in this context 'monster' refers to aberrant human creatures such as dwarfs and giants like Calogrenant from Chrétien's *Yvain* and it fails to encompass the monstrous animal, the dragon, which does not have any affinity with the natural world. Significantly, the dragon, commonly referred to as a 'monster', occupies, at times, an ambivalent representation as predominantly a symbol of paganism but also it is a visible reality.

Within the saint's legend, the monster functions as a fierce physical opponent of the saint and also the community it is determined to ravage by plague unless appeased and, more importantly, it symbolizes a spiritual threat. David Williams writes of the medieval perception of the dragon as both symbol and reality: '.....there are at least two major manifestations of the monster in the Middle Ages: the symbolic and the literal.....It is not to be supposed that medieval people conceived of the monster only in abstract terms, nor should it be supposed that what has been called the "symbolic universe" of the medieval mind excluded the literal and the concrete. On the contrary, the medieval manipulation of the grotesque would seem to indicate a process in which the metaphorical and figurative is steadily concretized to produce the idea of living races of monsters populating various remote corners of the world.'<sup>15</sup> The depiction of the dragon in hagiography accommodates both views, often simultaneously. I would agree that this is evident in the prison where St Margaret is physically assaulted by a dragon which she knows is the embodiment of evil but, more importantly, it also presents a spiritual threat to her. However, for the townsfolk who witness the event from outside, the saint's danger is a physical one alone.<sup>16</sup> It would seem that while the saint, holding up the cross, recognises the dragon as both a satanic symbol and also her imminent death, the populace sees the monster as a physical

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<sup>14</sup> Urban Tigner Holmes, *The Monster in Medieval Literature: Studies in Honour of Alfred G. Engstrom*, eds. T. Cargo and E.H. Mickel (Chapel Hill, 1972), p.61.

<sup>15</sup> David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Exeter, 1996), p.11.

<sup>16</sup> *Seinte Marherete* ed. Frances M. Mack EETS, OS, 193 (1934), p.20 ll.16-23.

reality only.

The homily of *The Man and the Honey in the Tree*, in the *Gesta Romanorum*, a collection of stories composed at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries, uses the dragon as a simple symbol of evil, unadorned with detail<sup>17</sup>. The homily preaches the need to turn from the world, the flesh and the devil, before it is too late and the explication of each of the symbolic elements within each story ensures that the 'moralitee' is clearly defined. The story tells of an Emperor of Rome who, while out hunting, sees a man pursued by a unicorn. The man is so frightened he falls into a ditch but clings to a tree in order to get out but then when he looks down spies 'an hidowse pitte' and at the bottom: 'an orible' dragon<sup>18</sup> waiting with open mouth until the man loses his grip and falls. Ignoring the offer of a friend with a ladder, in an attempt to reach some honey, the man falls to the bottom and into the mouth of the dragon who devours him. We are told that the dragon is the devil and the pit where he lives represents hell. The honey is delight in sin which distracts man from the serious state of his soul. The friend is Christ and the ladder which offers hope is penance. Failure to turn from the world by doing penance for sin results in being taken to hell by the devil who, by devouring the man, destroys his hope of salvation and so his soul is lost. In this story, the dragon represents a generalized evil and hell, its lair, at the bottom of a pit. Both are established images to be found in the legend of St Silvester as well.

Also, in the *Life of St. Saturnine* in the *Golden Legend*, the dragon waits for the erring to fall.<sup>19</sup> However, what it symbolizes is somewhat different. St. Perpetua, while imprisoned for her faith, has a vision in which she sees a ladder made of gold, which was of 'a meruaylous heyght' and which reached up to heaven. The ladder was so narrow that people had to proceed singly

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<sup>17</sup> *The Early English Version of the Gesta Romanorum*, ed. Sidney J.H. Herrtage, EETS, ES, 33 (1879), pp.109-111.

<sup>18</sup> The epithet 'orible', 'horible' 'horrabul' is often applied to the dragon. It had, in the Middle Ages, an intensity of meaning now reduced. The *MED* list of meanings includes moral repulsiveness as well as loathsomeness of appearance and interestingly the word can denote also that which is awe-inspiring.

<sup>19</sup> *GL* folio CCC lxxxix ; *GL* vol.vii p.30.

and, in addition, on the sides of the ladder were 'cultres and swerdes yron sharpe' so that the person who ascended had to look straight up to heaven to avoid falling off. At the foot of the ladder there was 'a dragon of horryble grete fourme.' The dragon, far from being the aggressive monster, is quiescent, biding its time and yet its presence had the effect of deterring people from ascending the ladder because they were so frightened but Satyra, who was ascending the ladder, encouraged those watching to climb up and join him, and told them to ignore the dragon. The saints who were also in prison with St Perpetua, namely Revocata, Felicity and Saturnine knew immediately what the vision meant: it was God calling them to martyrdom. The dragon at the foot of the ladder symbolized the pagan worship which must be spurned by the saints and the knives and swords represented the torture which must be endured if martyrdom were to be achieved and the immediate reward of life in heaven with Christ to be secured. In symbolic terms the topos of martyrdom is presented, showing there are no short cuts or alternative means of reaching heaven. The dragon lies waiting at the bottom of the ladder, as it does at the bottom of the pit in the story above. The two symbols in opposition here are the dragon whose habitat is conventionally below and heaven situated above mankind. Clearly, the dragon in the above passion is specifically associated with paganism and not with generalized evil. Interestingly, both narratives referred to here use the image of the ladder as a way of gaining access to heaven, as a means of moving between polarized states of being.

The dragon is further symbolized as the plague, an association also to be found in the romance genre but usually without any symbolic meaning attached. The dragon's lair was traditionally found in a river or lake and the noisome vapours given off from the water were attributed to its antagonism to mankind. In the account of the origin of the Greater Litany recorded in the *Speculum Sacerdotale*,<sup>20</sup> the dragon which frightens the Roman population appears to be represented, like the plague, as a reality, a monstrous creature which appears among 'a gret multitude of serpentes' and yet clearly it is also a symbol of evil and its snake

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<sup>20</sup> *Speculum Sacerdotale*, pp.135-138.

companions alert the reader to this inherent symbolism. Once more, the boundaries between the reality of the dragon and what it stands for are quite separate at times and at others there is a blending of the two. Williams highlights what he considers to be a special attribute of fantastic creatures in general. Because their provenance was given as some far-flung corner of the world, often India or Ethiopia, an indication that their existence was real, it was unlikely anyone would be able to see them for themselves. Williams states: 'The India-Ethiopia complex is an example of medieval sign-making at work in the field of teratological geography, where spatial semiotics expresses the idea of the monster as simultaneously participating in the material and spiritual worlds and thus forming a bridge between the two. It is in this sense that the Middle Ages conceived of the monster as a being that really existed, but whose existence was highly contingent: the monster existed, but *far away, not here*.' <sup>21</sup>

The symbolism is conventional: the dragon is actively pursuing the inhabitants of the city which is infected with the creature's breath, so causing plague. Many citizens die and the city is almost empty; St Gregory, who becomes the new Pope, after the death by plague of Pope Pelagius, exhorts penance as the only means of driving away the sickness. He says to the people: 'Brepren, vs muste drede the sorowe and the turmentis of God that are to come and eke that now are. And this sorowe may be an enterynge of oure conuersion, and the hardnes of oure hertes may be lowsid, meltyd, and amended by this sorowe that we nowe haue, witnessynge the prophete where he seip: "*Peruenit gladius vsque ad animam*. The penyshynge of God comeþ vnto the sowle." ' Here, the function of the dragon is to explain the plague which, although evil, seems strangely to be sent by 'the swerde of God' as a kind of punishment to encourage conversion and penance for sin. Outbreaks of plague were interpreted as traditional signs of divine displeasure so the saint recommends the archetypal response: 'And let vs punysche oure-self for oure wickydnes þrouȝ wepyng and syȝeynge, and let vs go a-fore the stroke of God by

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<sup>21</sup> David Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, pp. 13-14.



confessioun.' A penitential procession is arranged and the city is saved.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, the account of St Gregory's life in the *Golden Legend* narrates a similar story but much more economically. In this account there is no dragon, but there is a plague which is dispersed by prayer. By removing the symbol, the horror of the evil cause of the plague is not so clearly emphasized. However, the choice of the dragon as a symbol of plague does create problems in the *Speculum Sacerdotale* for the dragon's satanic association makes him a creature opposed to the Godhead. While in the Bible, as in popular legend, God has customarily employed suffering as a punishment to bring people back into the fold and also to test their faith, the image of the dragon, representing evil, as it always does in hagiography, cannot easily be accommodated within the narrative. While the legend suggests that God is using evil purposefully to precipitate repentance, the evil suggested by the dragon topos is otherwise always depicted as oppositional. Satan is used by God but usually as a tempter to test and refine faith: this role for the dragon runs counter to its traditional antagonistic aggression to God, as depicted in the seminal story of St Michael. The medieval church would have subscribed to the received doctrine that God allowed the existence of evil on the earth and that it was ultimately within his control but the symbolic use of the dragon in the *Speculum Sacerdotale* account suggests some collusion of God with evil and certainly breaks away from the traditional use of the pestilential dragon of the saints' legends.

### ST SILVESTER

The dragon's instigation of plague and the effect this has on a community frequently provides the catalyst for the intervention of the saint (and indeed often the romance hero) who responds to the pleas of the people. It is St Gregory who interprets the meaning of the plague/dragon and knows what to do, suggesting that the saint has a clearer recognition and understanding of evil than ordinary people.

Caxton's translation of the legend of St Silvester from the *Legenda Aurea* develops

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<sup>22</sup> *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p.136 ll.18-38 and p. 137 ll.1-2.

Jacobus De Voragine's account and gives a greater significance to the episode by including the visionary presence of St Peter to whom the saint prays when he must rid the city of the dragon.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in effect, two saints are ranged against paganism, embodied in the evil dragon. This legend combines a number of different symbolic associations in its dragon, most importantly the plague and paganism but this quite complex web of associations coheres successfully and succinctly. The narrative describes St Silvester's encounter with a dragon which echoes with familiar images in a more detailed symbolic context. The narrator also focuses on the death-dealing infection caused by the dragon's breath but the evil is not inherent in the people as it is in the account of the origins of the Greater Litany referred to above. The plague is used symbolically to express the vengeful spirit of paganism, for the pagan bishops believe the plague is due to the displeasure of the dragon because of the conversion to Christianity of the Emperor. In the hagiographic convention, the populace calls on the saint for help and he responds to Constantine's plea to kill this poisonous dragon which lives in a deep pit.

The pagan bishops accuse the Emperor of bearing the responsibility of the deaths of more than three hundred men daily because of his conversion. On the advice of St Peter, to whom he prays, St Silvester repeats the creed and commands 'Sathanas' to wait in the pit until the Day of Judgement. This necessitates the descent of the saint into the bowels of the earth in order to confront the dragon, effectively suggesting the descent of Christ into hell, before his resurrection. The beast's mouth is bound with thread and is sealed with 'thenprynte of the crosse'. The symbolism in this subjugation of the monster is reminiscent of other hagiographic evil beings like devils and demons who are literally bound to stop their evil intervention.<sup>24</sup> The poisonous breath represents a pervasive evil which must be contained and the binding of the dragon's mouth ensures this, while the seal, the imprint of the cross and the mark of Christ, is a personal guarantee of the latter's permanent victory over evil. This success is accompanied

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<sup>23</sup> *GL* folio C ix; *GL* vol.ii pp.203-204.

<sup>24</sup> See the legend of St Margaret in the Katherine Group where the black demon's hands are so constrained, see *Seinte Marherete* ed. Frances Mack, EETS, OS, 193 (1934) p.24, l.24.

by the conversion of a vast crowd of people. Thus, we are told, not only is the city saved from the pestilential breath of the dragon but also from paganism. There is a clearly stated correspondence here between the dragon and the arch devil Satan, who stands in this account for the evil of paganism which has permeated the city in poisonous clouds and will destroy it. Paganism is, by inference, death-bringing, while the true faith offers eternal life. And yet, the dragon appears as a physical beast which brings physical death, in large numbers, to those who breathe in his venom, a situation shown in the Greater Litany, mentioned above. However, this fairly brief episode in the saint's eventful life carries a meaning which transcends the literal. It becomes an encapsulation of the bedrock of Christian belief and in imagery which recalls and reiterates the significance of the crucifixion and the days afterwards, it demonstrates again in the figure of the saint, the victory of Christ over evil and death, and his emergence unscathed from the very depths of darkness and degradation into the light with the offer of redemptive life. The pit itself is the entrance to hell, analogous to the vast mouth of hell in medieval drama. Significantly two enchanters who check to see what the saint does are brought out barely alive from the pit: they have almost become denizens of hell. But just in time they are converted. Once again the unique power of Christ is demonstrated as working through the saint and this power exceeds the magic of the enchanters, associated in hagiographic legend with the spurious power of superstition and idolatry. The lesson of this episode is clearly stated and yet there is a successful fusion of the symbolic narrative with the surface narrative of the community threatened by the venom of the dragon. The hagiographer recognises how the story works for his listeners and so, perhaps fearing that the underlying symbolism may be lost on them if it is not stressed, states the import of the story at the end of the episode: 'Thus was the cyte of Rome delyured fro double deth, that was from the culture and the worshyppyng of false ydolles, and from the venym of the dragon.'<sup>25</sup> While the essential lesson is made clear, there are biblical resonances at work here and underlying, symbolic meanings enrich the simple, standard topos. Also, the inclusion of the creed which the saint must recite to the dragon: ' Our Lord Jhesu cryst

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<sup>25</sup> *GL* folio C ix; *GL* vol.ii p.204.

whyche was born of the Virgyne Marye, crucyfyed, buryed and aroos, and now sitteth on the right syde of the fader.....'<sup>26</sup> makes this a confrontation between the forces of evil and those of God; it represents the struggle to overpower the devil. This image of confrontation of saint with dragon is re-enacted throughout the hagiographic genre time and time again and this reiterates the recurrent necessity of being ready to face up to ubiquitous evil.

The account of St Silvester's dispatch of the dragon, in common with other hagiographic dragon topoi, represents a conflict in external terms, between the true faith and that of the evil of idolatry. This image of the opposition of good and evil suggests a Manichean view of these forces in the world and would appear to indicate that evil is not a force under God's control. However, the very nature of the image of conflict helps to reinforce such an interpretation and yet, even though the victory cannot ever be permanent, the saints always overcome their respective dragons and therefore, keep at bay paganism, the devil or evil in general. There is also implied a ritual cleansing of evil so that a new beginning is made: Christianity is introduced to an erstwhile pagan populace and provision is made for the building of churches. In the legend of St Silvester, the conversion of Constantine is both ratified and publicly vindicated. Again, the literal story symbolizes the essential significance of the true faith in its introduction of hope in a new Christian life, released from the stranglehold of death and the devil.

This externally presented battle between Christianity and paganism epitomises the active part to be taken by the true Christian, a part which has been emphasized by St. Paul and perpetuated by the Church Fathers. The dragon is an appropriate image by which the active engagement of the Christian with evil can be depicted. However, a comparison with St. Leonard's encounter with evil brings into relief those elements which characterize the dragon/saint topos. St. Leonard too struggles to conquer evil which is symbolized not by a dragon but by a 'serpent'. An earlier chapter looked at the synonymy of dragon and serpent for both can, and often do, carry the same connotations and symbolic associations: the Latin 'draco' was

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<sup>26</sup> GL folio C ix; GL vol.ii p.203.

translated by either 'dragon' or by 'serpent' which is clearly shown in the Apocalypse of St John where these terms are interchangeable: *Et apprehendit draconem, serpentem antiquum, qui est diabolus, et Satanas, et ligavit eum per annos mille.* (Revelation 20 v.2 BV). St Leonard suffers the intrusion of a huge serpent while at prayer but he concentrates steadfastly on his devotions, even though the serpent stretches from his feet to his breast. At the conclusion of his prayers the saint chastises the serpent whom he recognises as the tempter and tormentor of men from the Garden of Eden. He says to it, ' " ..... thy myght is gyuen to me now, do to me now that whiche I haue deseruyd." And whanne he had sayd thus, the serpente sprange oute of his hode and fylle donne ded at his feet.' <sup>27</sup> By contrast with the episode discussed above, the struggle depicted here is an inner one. The saint is tempted by the devil when he is vulnerable, when he is at prayer and subject to the distraction of straying thoughts but the weaknesses of the flesh are overcome because his sanctity protects him from the devil's wiles. The ascetic saint who escapes from the world into the desert, still has to struggle with the flesh and the devil and St Leonard, while not a desert father, must endure the kinds of temptations which can be mastered only with effort. The insidious malice which worms its way into the saint's thoughts is effectively represented by the serpent of Genesis.

However, the dragon's established behaviour is not characterized by evil which is worked by cunning and guile: rather the monster with its size and aggression is distinguished by its frightening physical assaults. By contrast, the serpent which appears to St Leonard is an embodiment of his own weakness and therefore, in the enveloping folds of the serpent, the evil is represented as being all-consuming in its personal attack on the saint. Unlike the serpent of the Old Testament, dragons do not talk and their victories are not usually achieved by the temptation of their victims. Their power is depicted symbolically as that of physical menace and they are invincible except to those who have divine help. And it is at this point in the story that the saint enters when he or she is approached by a desperate city or community held at bay by

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<sup>27</sup> GL folio CCC l iiii; GL vol. vi pp. 138-139.

the monster. The response of the saint also suggests that those who call upon Christ will be answered. This appeal for assistance when all else has failed and the populace defeated, stresses that the function of the dragon here, while obviously standing for idolatry, is also to highlight the importance of the community as a potential focus for Christian life and citizenship. The individual conquests over personal evil are replaced by conquests in the public arena when the saint takes on the dragon; the latter does not seek out or challenge the saint: it is the saint who usually seeks out the the dragon.

While the dragon features in a number of saints' lives in Caxton's *Golden Legend*, Mirk's *Festial* and the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, its appearances may often be brief. Such a one occurs in the *Feast of St Peter ad Vincula*, where there is mention of a great dragon at Epirus which is killed by St Donatus who spits into its mouth having made the sign of the cross first.<sup>28</sup> In the account of the life of St Donatus, itself, the dragon attacks the saint's ass by winding its tail round the animal's legs, an attack reminiscent of that recorded in the medieval bestiaries but which is uncommon in hagiography and romance. Drawing on its mythological and folkloric provenance, the dragon's habitat is water. As water is essential to townsfolk or citizens, the poisoning of their life-supply means death and on a symbolic level, the dragon's prevention of their baptism in the water of eternal life is stopped only by the intervention of the saint.: 'an horryble dragon yssued out of the fontayn and ibonde his tayle about the legges of the asse....donat smote hym wyth his staffe or as somme say he spytte in hys mouth and he deyed.'<sup>29</sup> The exorcism by holy saliva, like holy water, has a significance. Jeffrey Burton Russell gives an account of the ritual practices of exorcism when he writes of the examination of the catechumens: 'The scrutinies also included the 'exsufflation', in which the priest blew into the candidate's face. A standard part of many liturgies from the fourth century, the exsufflation showed contempt for the demons and was believed to drive them away; it was much like the desert fathers' practice of hissing or spitting at demons. The priest also touched the catechumen's ears with spittle, again to show contempt

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<sup>28</sup> *GL folio CCxxvi*; *GL vol.iv p.161*.

<sup>29</sup> *GL folio CC xi*; *GL vol.iv pp.203-4*.

for the Devil but also because spittle has healing properties. The sign of the cross was marked on the candidate's forehead as warning to demons against coming near.' <sup>30</sup> This emphasizes that characteristic of the dragon which presents the paramount threat to a community, that of poisoning, and which features prominently and consistently in the depiction of the hagiographic dragon. It also shows the saint performing a ceremony, using those aids which would ensure the defeat of evil.

The Apostles too, have their encounters with dragons. Mirk records how St Matthew was sent to the city of Nadabere where he seeks out two magicians who use their power to encourage the people to believe in them and worship them. They do this by what can be called conjuring tricks, by creating illusionary visions. The saint makes it known that the magicians' power is from the devil. Having had their following destroyed, in revenge the necromancers make two dragons 'gret and horribly, forto spowte fyre and so fowle stenche þat they sloen mony men.' <sup>31</sup> These are clear signs that their origins are evil, representing the fires and the stench of hell. The saint protects himself with the sign of the cross and confronts the beasts who fall down dead at his feet. The magicians are then challenged to restore the beasts to life and St Matthew says that, were it not for his being God's servant, he would make the dragons attack them as they had intended the dragons to kill the saint. Then the didactic message stipulates that 'hit ys þe techyng of our maystyr, alगतys forto do good aʒeynys euell' <sup>32</sup> and unusually, the evil dragons are restored to life and sent where they will do no harm to man or beast. The saint then preaches to the people by describing paradise. St Matthew prevents the establishment of an idolatrous religion based on the power of evil fiends yet he allows the dragons to leave. Although their evil has been made inactive and impotent, they are the fabrications of an evil force which has been rendered harmless. The aim of the narrative is a demonstration of the power of Christianity to

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<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer, The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London, 1984), p.126.

<sup>31</sup> John Mirk, *Festial* ed. T. Erbe, EETS, ES, 96 (1905), p.255 ll.26-27.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p.255 ll. 35-36.

raise the dead, for the restoration of the dead dragons represents the central significance of the Christian faith, which is symbolized in the cross and the resurrection. The clever necromancers cannot compete, so once again the gulf between miracle and magic and between the true faith and the illusory worship of devilish idols is demonstrated in a literal way. The saint then preaches to the people of the joys of paradise, thus reinforcing his message by encouraging the people to adhere to the Christian faith so they can enjoy a future in heaven: 'þere was euer day and neuer nyght, ther was everlastyngge youþe and neuer eld.....'<sup>33</sup> St. Matthew has rendered a public service and he has also ensured that the people return to the true faith. Again the interaction of saint with the people is the basis of the episode. The account in the *Golden Legend* is much briefer and simply records the saint's conversion of the people of Ethiopia where he sends two sorcerors, Zaroen and Arphaxat, out of the country for terrorizing the people by leading two dragons about the towns and cities.

St Philip's sudden encounter with a dragon encapsulates in a dramatic way the confrontation of Christianity with paganism. There is an attempt to force the saint to offer a sacrifice before the statue of Mars: '....anone under thydol yssued out a right grete dragon, which forthwith slew the bysshoppes sone that apoynted the fyre for to make the sacrefys, and the ii prouostes also, whos seruanter held Saint Phylip in yron bondes; and the dragon corrupted the peple with his breethe that they al were seek....'<sup>34</sup> The saint tells them to smash the statue and put in its place a cross which would ensure that the sick would be cured and the dead brought back to life. Here, there are the diametrically opposed forces of Mars and Christ and yet the power of the cross is seen to be greater than that of the pagan God of War. A successful demonstration has taken place and there is overt symbolism in the emergence of the evil dragon from the pagan statue. On the one hand there is death, destruction and sickness symbolized by the dragon which represents paganism, and on the other there is health and a renewal of life symbolized by the cross. A different approach has been introduced which brings immediacy

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p.256 ll.4-5.

<sup>34</sup> *GL folio C lxiii; GL vol. iii p.156.*



showing how the conflict between the dragon and Christ can achieve a variation of situation and also a different didactic approach within the limits of the standard hagiographic convention.

The dragon is invariably a symbol of evil. In the hagiography of the early Christian church it was frequently identified with the external threat of evil against which the sanctity of the saint was pitted. The monster stood for the huge religious and institutional threat of paganism with its hideous idols and cruel persecutions of Christians, epitomized in the ferocity of the pagan Roman ruler or prefect, sometimes referred to as 'dragon'. The monster's poisonous breath, most often aimed at the destruction of great numbers of people, a whole town or city, and not individuals, is used to symbolize the spiritual death of those who have not heard about Christ or it can represent the collective wickedness into which a professed Christian community has sunk and for which it must do penance. There is an ambivalent conjunction in this topos of the 'reality' of a plague which may afflict a community and the symbolic use of the dragon as the evil author of the pestilence, forming an explanation of the plague's occurrence. We have referred to the dragon's place as being outside the city walls indicating an instinctive and envious antipathy towards the society enclosed within. In some legends and passions, the dragon is identified with Satan himself or a subordinate devil or demon. Thus, the evil the monster represents may be specific or it may be much vaguer and more general. It can both attack violently or it can lie in wait for those who commit sin, as is depicted in the bestiary portrait of the dragon. Rarely does it portray the evil tempter: its function is usually an attacking one. Nevertheless, the dragon in the legend of St Margaret, to be examined in Chapter 5, combines the roles of tempter and violent attacker: the dragon poses a spiritual threat to the saint who has been singled out for ruination by the devil.

I have explored the dragon's symbolic use in a variety of saints' legends, concluding that although there is a basic narrative pattern to the saint's encounter, the context in which the dragon appears may be changed slightly and indeed, the emphasis, which means that some of the many mythological and ecclesiastical connotations associated with the dragon may emerge to colour the account. However, the legend of St Martha, found in Caxton's *Golden Legend*, must

be considered apart from the accounts already discussed for, while her dealings with the dragon have certain similarities with the established dragon topos, there are significant differences both in the presentation of the dragon and also in the setting of the encounter.

### MARTHA. HAGIOGRAPHY AND FOLKLORE

From the Gospel accounts of Luke and of John, there emerges a picture of Martha as one who serves and is concerned with the practicalities of domestic organisation. She is contrasted in the account with her sister Mary, who sat at Christ's feet and listened to his words in spite of Martha's call for help with the preparations for the meal. Christ urges Martha not to fret and is very sympathetic to Mary who, he says, has chosen the '*optimam partem*'. (Luke 10 v.42 BV) This account has been the source for the allocation of stereotypical roles to the sisters, Martha symbolising the active life of service and good works, and Mary that of contemplation and prayer. While the latter was long seen as demonstrating the 'best part' of the Christian life, there began to be a recognition among some theologians that a combination of the two, seemingly opposed, roles was necessary to a complete ecclesiastical life, and others were at pains to stress the importance of good works. Thus, the two sisters have been considered together, providing as they do, the scriptural source for a theological issue which reverberated throughout the Middle Ages: the debate on the relative merits of the active Christian life versus the contemplative one. It would seem appropriate that Martha's active personality fitted her for an encounter with a dragon more than her sister's contemplative character.

Diane Peters stresses the problematic nature of the development of the legends surrounding the saint. However, she cites Origen (c.185-254) as providing the seminal interpretation of the roles of Mary and Martha, of the contemplative and the active life, respectively, as recorded in Luke 10 vv. 8-42. From the late-sixth century the medieval martyrologies indicate that the feast day of St Martha was celebrated on January 19, although this changed to July 29 in the later Middle Ages. Peters says that by the twelfth century Martha, with Mary and Lazarus, was believed to have travelled to Provence after Christ's ascension. Martha

became associated with Tarascon where there was already a church dedicated to her. Then, most conveniently, her body was found in 1187, thus, substantiating the people's claim to the saint.<sup>35</sup> Because the renown of the saint brought in money, the old church was replaced by a prestigious new basilica. John Rees Smith's discussion of the growth of the cults of St Mary and St Martha highlights the atypical hagiographic process by which St Martha came to be venerated: 'Generally the discovery of a saint's relics was staged to coincide with the reconstruction of a church, but in the case of Martha first the legend was invented, then the body was discovered, and finally the new church was built.'<sup>36</sup> Thus, we are prepared for a carefully constructed legend by local writers in which the various elements have been chosen to identify the saint with the specific place of Tarascon and to create a patronal church which will celebrate and perpetuate her life and works. The dissemination of the legend of the Provençal St Martha can be attributed to the late twelfth century: her life is recorded in four main Latin texts from this time or from the beginning of the thirteenth century but it became widely known through the popular *Legenda Aurea*. Peters lists the principal components of the legend which are common to all the extant texts including: Martha's journey with Lazarus and Mary Magdalene to the Rhône area, the conversion of the local people and Martha's victory over the dragon. Giles Constable refers to the *Life of Saint Mary Magdalen and of her sister Saint Martha*, found among the works of Rabanus Maurus but written by a Cistercian, perhaps at Clairvaux in the twelfth century. Martha is praised as having a man's spirit in a woman's breast, an allusion, perhaps to her victory over the tarasque and he refers to a late fourteenth century stained glass window at Old Wardon Abbey which depicts Martha with the monster.<sup>37</sup> It is the introduction of this dragon-monster into the life of Martha of Bethany in which I am primarily interested. It is clear that the tarasque belongs to an oral tradition which pre-dates the saint's legend, its inclusion amalgamating folklore with

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<sup>35</sup> Diane E. Peters, 'The Iconography of St Martha: Some Considerations' *Vox Benedictina* 9 (1992), 42-44.

<sup>36</sup> *The Lives of St Mary Magdalene and St Martha* ed. John Rees Smith, Exeter Hispanic Texts XLVIII (Exeter, 1989), p.xvi.

<sup>37</sup> Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 88.

hagiography. However, I want to argue that this amalgamation creates tensions which militate against a conventional hagiographic perspective.

The text to which I shall refer mainly is that in Caxton's *Golden Legend* but I shall introduce comparisons with the *Legenda Aurea* and other named accounts. While the two sisters appear together in the two gospels of Luke and John, the legends which grew up round the sisters treated them separately. At first they are represented along with Lazarus, their resurrected brother, as a family which lived at Bethany but the hagiographers have created for the sisters a spurious royal lineage, making their father a governor of Syria and a considerable landowner. The hagiographers have also used the sisters as pegs upon which to hang a series of events and adventures, some of which belong more to romance or folklore than to hagiography, and it is this folkloric aspect of the legend which I believe dominates Martha's dispatch of the dragon. The legends follow Mary and Martha respectively, accompanied by Lazarus and others, including Maximin who had baptized the sisters after Christ's crucifixion. At first their lives coincide, for they all refuse to worship false gods and so all are punished by being put in a boat without rudder, sails and oars, the punishment of Custance in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and, in accordance with this topos, familiar to hagiographic romance, God takes charge of their journey so that they arrive at Marseilles where the local populace is converted by Martha's eloquence and Mary's preaching skills.

Once in the region round the Rhône where the saint's legend is rooted, the sisters go their separate ways and it is from this point that the legend of Martha will be discussed. Martha's legend echoes with the typology of Luke in the references to her relationship with Christ: she is the hostess, and Christ is the guest. This distinguishes her from her sister, Mary, and gives her an identity but while the vicissitudes of her life have much in common with other saints' lives in their fair share of the wondrous and the miraculous, St Martha's legend is distinguished from them in two significant aspects. The specific locale in the Rhône area which is described as if it were a real landscape and the untypical presentation of the dragon itself suggest that the hagiographic narrative has been grafted on to an established folkloric tradition involving a specific

monster, native to the region. Although the hagiographic motifs are used in a conventional narrative structure: the plea for help, the encounter, the effective dispatch and the conclusion, (usually the people's conversion), there is within each of these elements a concession to a popular culture which distorts the hagiographic norm.

St Martha encounters her dragon in its own habitat and, like many male saints, she deals with the dragon in response to a frightened populace's plea for help. More popularly known as the 'tarasque', the dragon is a curious and unique composite beast which is described in some detail, as is common in romance. Both the account in the *Golden Legend* and in the *Legenda Aurea* records its origin and its means of defence. The latter reads: '*Venerat autem per mare de Galatia Asiae, generatus a Leviathan, qui est serpens aquosus et ferocissimus, et ab Onacho animali, quod Galatiae regio gignit, quod in sectatores suos per spatium iugeris stercus suum velut spiculum dirigit et quidquid tetigerit, velut ignis exurit.*'<sup>38</sup> The traditional anonymity of the hagiographic dragon is not preserved for it has a provenance and we are reminded of the pair of dragons in *Bevis*. It is also associated with the chaos water-monster, Leviathan, from the Old Testament whose evil was expressed particularly in a threat to the stability of creation. In addition, this dragon is linked to the Bonnacon of the bestiary, a kind of bison which does not stay and fight but defends literally from the rear. Traditionally, this would appear to be a cowardly beast, not given to staying to fight but its offspring is aggressive, devouring men and upturning boats. In addition, in the bestiary there is no symbolism attached to the Bonnacon, much less any connotation of evil. The *Golden Legend* description adds a few more details to those set out in the *Legenda Aurea* but it is still hard to picture this composite animal: '...a grete dragon, half beste and half fysshe, gretter than an oxe, lenger than an hors, hauyng tethe sharpe as a swerde, and horned on eyther syde, hede lyke a lyon, taylor lyke a serpent, and defended hym wyth two wynges on eyther syde, and coude not be beten wyth cast of stones ne wyth other armour and

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<sup>38</sup> *Legenda Aurea, Jacobi a Voragine*, ed. T. Graesse (Vratislava, 1890, reprinted Osnabrück, (1969), Cap. CV p.444.

was as strong as xii lyons or beres....'<sup>39</sup>

The description conforms to the conventional hagiographic dragon neither in its wealth of detail nor in its physical appearance and evil characteristics. Indeed, its fantastical appearance is reminiscent of those exotic creatures whose complicated forms are characteristic of Mandeville's *Travels*. Its parents are Leviathan and the 'Bonacho' which burns its pursuers with excrement covering a large area of land. The scale and size of this dragon is consistent with the traditional opponent of the saint but in other respects it is not; its unique parentage makes clear it is imbued with Leviathan's cosmic evil while the bonacho's inimitable method of excretion suggests the repellent filthiness of sin. The bodily function of excretion has provided medieval religious and homiletic literature with a recurring image of sin and bestiality. The author of the *Ancrene Wisse* uses such imagery when he reviles the imprudent speaker, the flatterer and the backbiter in virulent terms: 'ha beoð þes deofles gong men & beoð aa in his gong hus. Pe fikeleres meoster is to hulie þe gong þurl. Pet he deð as ofte as he wið his fikelunge & wið his preisunge wrið mon his sunne. Pet stinkeð na þing fulre.'<sup>40</sup> By contrast the panther, a bestiary symbol of Christ and traditional enemy of the dragon, had breath so sweet that he was followed by all the other animals except, of course, the dragon who hid from him.<sup>41</sup>

Archetypal hagiographic descriptions of the dragon may refer briefly to the creature's size, its physical strength and its poisonous breath to create an image of the force of evil. However, the hagiographic dragon is not emphasized as a living, breathing animal but exists primarily as a symbol, so St Martha's monster departs significantly from its established presentation in the saint's legend as is seen in the local fifteenth century representation of the saint and the monster. (See Plate 8) St Martha's hybrid creature is more of a repulsive curiosity which has its origins in the collective imagination of a particular rural community. In spite of the fact that this dragon is exceedingly dangerous and that it carries strong connotations of sin derived from its parentage,

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<sup>39</sup> GL folio CC xxx; GL vol iv p.136.

<sup>40</sup> *Ancrene Wisse*, ed. J.R. R. Tolkien EETS, OS, 249, (1962), p.45 ll. 26-30.

<sup>41</sup> *The Book of Beasts*, p.16.

it lacks the supernatural awesomeness of the hagiographic dragon. By constructing a beast of so many different parts, the coherent identity of the monster is lost. Although the dragon in the legend of St Margaret has a dominating physical presence and is described in detail, the narrative preserves the horror of both the satanic evil of the creature as well as its physical aggression, a topic I shall discuss in Chapter 5.

The dragon has been associated with water which it guards zealously since its first appearances in ancient cultures, but the dragon of the saint's legend is not consistently presented in a particular habitat, let alone a stretch of water which is so precisely located. St George's dragon is found in a 'stagne or a ponde lyke a see'<sup>42</sup> near the town of Silene but this brief reference is vague. St Martha's dragon is located in a named river, the Rhone, in a stretch of water which runs through 'a certayn wode bytwene Arles and Auynyon'.<sup>43</sup> There is a concern to site the monster in a specific place, as if it belongs to the named landscape with which it has always been associated. The legend of St Martha is dependent on this regional setting for its significance and this setting is graphically realized. While there are appropriations from the bestiary and biblical references, the emphasis placed on the creature's size and the general hyperbole of the description suggests the creation of a dragon whose characteristics are so contrived that they cannot be matched by any other dragon, let alone a hagiographic one, and indeed even its sinking of ships is a most unusual feature. There is an inherent popular pride in this creature's uniqueness which emanates from this dragon episode. St Martha comes across the tarasque eating a man and she subdues it in true hagiographic fashion: she holds up the cross for all to see, having first thrown holy water on the dragon. The dragon 'anon was ouercomen and stonyng stil as a sheep' so she ties her girdle to it whereupon the citizens kill it with 'speres and glayues'.<sup>44</sup> As in the St George legend, the monster is then led like a tame animal, its evil made impotent, a symbolic hagiographic convention which precedes the

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<sup>42</sup> *GL folio CC xxx; GL vol. iii p.126.*

<sup>43</sup> *GL folio CC xxx; GL vol. iv p.136.*

<sup>44</sup> *GL folio ibid; GL ibid.*

conversion of the people and then the construction of the Christian church. However, St Martha and her sister have previously converted the people on their arrival in Provence, therefore any capital to be made from the dragon's death on behalf of the Christian faith is denied by the incompleteness of the topos. Although the saint's encounter with the dragon testifies to her faith and sanctity, the killing which follows suggests merely the determination of a populace to kill a wild and dangerous animal which has long preyed on them. The tarasque valorizes St Martha's sanctity but it cannot be used as a public demonstration of the power of a new faith being offered to a benighted people.

Le Goff has distinguished between the evil dragon which must be vanquished in order for Christianity to be established over paganism and the dragon who is the 'spirit of the place' who must be driven away in order to tame the wilderness so that a town or village may be established. He examines the dragon episode in the life of St Marcellus whose spiritual virtue is put to the use of the community when he banishes the beast: 'Thus it is in his civic rather than his religious role that Marcellus is shown triumphing over the dragon.'<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, because this dragon is associated with supernatural evil, it cannot be allied with the *genius loci* in spite of the many topographical details of the area which are included: 'The dragon was called of them that dwellyd in the countre tharasconus, wherof in remembrance of hym that plase whiche tofore was called Nerluc, and the blacke lake, by cause there ben woodes shadowous and black.'<sup>46</sup> This again indicates a determination to celebrate and commemorate both the dragon and the place in which its killing happened; it seems that the fame that the region enjoys is as much attributable to the notoriety of the strange creature as to the saving of the people by the saint. The creation of a topographical atmosphere in the description of the woods which are full of shadows and darkness which is redolent of evil, has more in common with romance than with the typical hagiographic legend where there is no real interest

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<sup>45</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1980) p.164.

<sup>46</sup> *GL folio CC xxx, GL vol. iv p.136.*



in the setting of the encounter between dragon and saint. The sense of place in this account is developed from the start of this part of the story by a narratorial voice which suggests the beginning of a romance: 'There was that tyme upon the Ryuer of rone, in a certayn wode bytwene arlia and auynyon.....'<sup>47</sup> Moving away briefly from the dragon encounter, thereafter the events of her life are recorded and these conform to hagiographic convention, except there remains a scrupulous attention to where events happened. For instance it is at 'Petrogoricke' that the Lord appeared to Frontonius who helps to bury St Martha, and the saint herself, 'On a tyme at Auynyon preched bytwene the toun and the Ryuer of roon...'<sup>48</sup>

After the description of the woods, there is a switch to the hagiographic convention which follows the slaughter of the evil dragon and the account is once more on a hagiographic course. The convent of sisters which gathers to be near the saint builds a church in honour of the Virgin Mary. The evil has been replaced by the ordered life of the community and the saint undertakes an ascetic regime of fasting and prayer.

By contrast, the *South English Legendary* contains a shorter version of the legend and nearly all details of place and setting have been omitted, as well as the regional name for the dragon; it states that the saint went to Marseilles (Marcile) by boat but the encounter with the dragon is introduced in this way

'In þe contreie þat was Martha in a wode beside

A luper dragon þer was wiþ alle þat slou men wel wide...'<sup>49</sup>

The dragon is emphasized as being half fish and half beast but there is no mention made of the Leviathan and the 'Bonacho' and the latter's habits so there is a deliberate reduction of the more extravagant attributes of the dragon in order to create perhaps a more symbolic role for it.

What is known of the origins of the dragon episode in the St Martha legend points to a folkloric source which is overtly present in the conjunction of the background locale with its

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<sup>47</sup> *GL folio ibid; GL ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *GL folio CC xxx; GL vol. iv p.139.*

<sup>49</sup> *South English Legendary* EETS, OS, 236, p.349 ll. 15-16.

indigenous dragon. The saint is then given a hagiographic role whose greater metaphysical significance is limited by the confines of the specific. St Martha's legend had its origins in a redaction dated from the latter part of the twelfth century, though outside the Gospels, nothing is known of the saint. Louis Dumont says that a church has existed at Tarascon dedicated to the saint from the ninth or tenth centuries and perhaps earlier and in a book written from the ethnographic point of view, he looks at the cult of the tarasque, the ancient Tarascon dragon, which pre-existed St Martha, which was then grafted onto the legend of the saint. Patently, there is a dissonance between the ancient rite and the hagiographical legend which Dumont stresses: the cult of the tarasque flourished separately from the celebration of St Martha's victory over the monster which unaccompanied by a representation of the saint, had its own festival at Pentecost, whereas the saint's encounter with the dragon was represented separately on the 29th of July. However, the violent and aggressive diversions of the monster which characterized the profane procession, Dumont maintains, were part and parcel of the festival and were not considered to be symbolic of evil. He says that if the aggression of the tarasque was not thought of as evil, then the tarasque itself was not recognised as such.<sup>50</sup> In conclusion Dumont summarizes the cult of the tarasque: 'Le facteur sociologique est fondamental: la Tarasque est avant tout la bête éponyme, le palladium de la communauté. La principale fête, celle de Pentecôte, l'associe à la grande revue locale des corps de métiers. On dirait que la fête patronale était ici dédoublée: il y a bien, le dimanche de la Sainte-Marthe, la fête votive, la *vôte*, avec les jeux habituels, mais elle est bien pâle a coté de celle-ci. Tout se passe comme si la *patronne* officielle, catholique, de la localité était distancée sur le plan des réjouissances populaires par la Tarasque, véritable *patronne profane*, beaucoup plus brillante, dont les courses sont une sorte d'exultation violente des énergies locales....'<sup>51</sup> Clearly, the tarasque was regarded possessively, as an indigenous monster of which the region was proud. Originally, it had no identification with evil which would explain its

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<sup>50</sup> Folklore concerning dragons, while presenting them as aggressive and destructive, did not suggest they were to be identified with cosmic evil.

<sup>51</sup> Louis Dumont, *La Tarasque: Essai de description d'un fait local d'un point de vue ethnographique* (Paris, 1951), p.227.

atypical hagiographic presentation. It is possible that the tarasque represented the very early enemies of the region like the Teutons, or that it was identified as the enemy of fecundity conquered by the sun or more understandably it stood for the waters of the river which brought flooding. From pre-Christian days the tarasque brought many possible historical and mythological associations. However, once appropriated for Christian purposes and included in the saint's legend, it played its part as a symbol in the liturgy, being used in medieval Rogation ceremonies.<sup>52</sup> The description of the tarasque does not match with the hagiographic dragon and its representation in the late fifteenth century altar-piece suggests a unique beast (Plate 8). The varied connotations which accompany it create tensions within the framework of the legend for they underlie the ostensible hagiographic elements. Also, by the re-creation of the Provençal landscape, the characteristic hagiographic distancing from the specific and the individual, is diminished.

Le Goff also draws attention to the use made of local pagan rites and culture within the Christian church: 'Evangelization demanded that the clerics make some effort to adapt culturally: language (*sermo rusticus*), use of oral forms (sermons, chants), certain kinds of ceremony (liturgical culture, processions- the Rogation days and processions instituted by Gregory the Great), and satisfaction of 'client' requests (miracles 'to order').'<sup>53</sup> This may well account for the somewhat aberrant treatment of the dragon in the saint's legend. If the tarasque were grafted on to the legend of St Martha in order to strengthen the claim of her patronal church, we could expect certain anomalies to present themselves in the combination of what was essentially a local dragon of significance (but not an embodiment of evil) with the established demands of the saint's legend in which the dragon is essentially symbolic and the environment characterised by anonymity, even if the location is named. Interestingly, Jacqueline Simpson records the lack of

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<sup>52</sup> The Rogation ceremony is described in *Speculum Sacerdotale*, 'Letany' pp.141-142. 'And the dragon pat is borne þe þre dayes with the longe tayle two dayes afore the crosse and the banners and in the laste day after hem, he signifien þe deuel...' p.141 ll.25-27.

<sup>53</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, p.157.

topographical features in the dragon legends and stories she has studied.<sup>54</sup> Although these would be termed folklore, it is curious that narratives that are associated with particular places (like the *Dragon of Wantley*) do not include local landmarks and background description.

Also, importantly the female saint's meeting with the aggressive dragon is not a frequently used motif in legends. In addition, although most usually in Middle English accounts of female saints, their power is emphasized and attributed to their virginity, St Martha's virgin state is not mentioned as being the source of her power over the dragon although we are told: 'It is nowher redde that martha had euer ony husbond ne felawssshyp of man..' <sup>55</sup> What is stressed is the special relationship of the saint to Christ, namely the biblical reminder of St. Martha's choice to serve Christ as hostess; the word 'hostesse' is used frequently. It would seem that from a variety of sources, the input into the whole legend of St Martha has resulted in a curious amalgam. Her miracle of raising the dead man for example mirrors Christ's ministry on earth and the prescience of her own death is a hagiographic convention. Leviathan has its origins in Old Testament mythology and from the New Testament there is the reference to the relationship between Christ and the saint; the bestiary contributes the *bonnacho* and pure fiction accounts for her spurious ancestry, although this is also a hagiographic device. Finally, the inclusion of the *tarasque* may be attributed to folklore. Many of the constituent elements pull against each other, undermining the overall hagiographic perspective but it is the dragon topos in particular which treats the saint as a hero whose significance is local and popular.

The narrative structure of a hagiographic dragon encounter follows generally a set order of events: the plea from the community for help; the confrontation by the saint; the signing of the cross; and the consequent dispatch of the beast. Nevertheless, the emphasis of each account may vary and this variation is dependent largely on how the symbolic role of the dragon is used. While it has been established that invariably it represents evil, it may embody a more specific kind of evil, more notably and frequently in the accounts of the early saints, that of paganism. In this

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<sup>54</sup> Jacqueline Simpson, 'An Analysis of Fifty British Dragon Tales' *Folklore* 89 (1978), 81.

<sup>55</sup> *GL folio CC xxx; GL vol. iv p.135.*

context, its association with the devil and demons may be made overt or remain tacit insofar as the idols of wood and stone were recognised as the habitations of such creatures whose aim was the undermining of the Christian faith. In the passions, paganism is epitomised by the cruelty and aggression of the Roman ruler in person, in confrontation with the saint. These qualities of the pagan Roman authorities are also shown in the dragon's embodiment of idolatry which, however, is presented, in general, as being more impersonal in its attack. While the anger of the ruler or prefect is engendered largely by the indomitable spirit of the saint, the dragon attacks a town or a city, its evil paganism symbolized in its poisonous breath and in its predatory demands to devour the inhabitants and their livestock. The dragon lies outside the city boundaries, an exile, like his monstrous forbears associated with Cain and when vanquished, either by being sent away or killed by the populace, its end marks a new beginning of Christian stability. The intervention of the saint to rid a community of its dragon may enable the conversion of a pagan people or it may bring the return to virtuous living of an erring Christian populace. The dragon can also be equated with Lucifer or Satan himself, as it is in the legend of St Silvester, where the contributing imagery reveals in the whole encounter a summation of the Christian faith. Rarely is the role of the dragon equated with that of the serpent with whom it is biblically conflated. The monster's active physicality allies it with the dangerous beast which can kill both the body but symbolically the soul as well. The serpent is the seducer, the tempter to sin, but the dragon is linked with literal death and metaphorically with eternal damnation.

The hagiographic dragon is both a reality and a symbol: it functions as such simultaneously. Unlike the portrayal of the brightly coloured, vigorous and fast-moving romance dragon, generally, the hagiographic monster is a duller but more complex adversary. The symbolic layers of meaning, built up in relation to the dragon from ancient civilizations onwards, have contributed to its multivalency so that one symbolic interpretation may influence or merge with another. The dragon lying in wait at the bottom of the ditch in the *Gesta Romanorum* story is latently quiescent like the dragon of the medieval bestiary waiting for the sinner yet, once caught, the victim will be summarily devoured. Finally, there has always been a place for the

dragon or monster whose notoriety has become part of local mythology like the tarasque; it asserts its ownership of a stretch of water or lair and for the common good must be displaced by the saint.<sup>56</sup> In this case the symbolism of the dragon is ambivalent, for its antagonism towards the local people suggests the elemental power of the river to destroy by its currents and sudden floods. In this sense the tarasque may be thought of as evil but it is not presented as the familiar hagiographic dragon whose evil can be termed metaphysical.

Clearly, the hagiographic dragon is used largely as a symbol of evil in general and paganism in particular but it is not always confined within the constraints of this basic symbolic representation and indeed, as is seen in the legend of St Silvester, the symbolism may be developed to heighten the didactic message. Within the same legend, the dragon may be viewed as both symbol and reality, as the source of evil and also as the bringer of plague. Its effectiveness as evil's embodiment is due to biblical, mythological and folkloric connotations accrued over thousands of years. The influence of the romance dragon encounter to these later saints' lives has meant that the saint has been viewed as a kind of hero, albeit as the vehicle of the omnipotence of God. As an easily recognizable symbol of the enormous power of evil against which the saint takes a stand, the dragon encounter encapsulates the essential obligation of the Christian to fight as a *miles christi* in the pursuit of the good. The dragon is the aggressor, the initiator of evil, yet it is usual for the saint to seek out the dragon in response to a desperate plea from a town or village. Therefore the saint appears to take on the role of the knightly hero but the notable difference is that the saint does not need a sword because he is furnished with the cross to vanquish the opponent: thus, as always, evil is shown to be always within the control of God.

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<sup>56</sup> Le Goff interprets the vanquishing of the dragon by St Marcellus as 'material, psychological, and social in nature, not religious.' p.164. He suggests that the saint has tamed the *genius loci*, enabling a site to be cleared and a Christian community to be set up. (pp. 172-3).

## CHAPTER 4 - SAINT GEORGE

The differences and similarities of the dragon encounter as used in hagiography and romance have been explored in Chapter 3. The process of cross-fertilization, the borrowing of topoi and literary convention, has resulted generally in a mutual enrichment of both hagiography and romance, although I argue that cross-fertilization can create ambivalences which may cause unresolved tensions within the narrative. In that previous chapter, I examined the hagiographic topos of the saint's encounter with the dragon, concluding that its adaptation of the romance dragon-fight necessitated significant changes in order to preserve the integrity of the saint's legend. The romance topos of the dragon-slaying knight is underpinned by such different values that the fight is replaced by the saint's encounter. Also, the dragon has a different role in these two genres and is therefore presented in divergent ways. When these differences are not maintained and there is a blurring of the two dragon-fight topoi or inconsistent use made of them, then the role of the protagonist is noticeably affected .

In this chapter I want to suggest that in Caxton's *Golden Legend* and in other popular versions of the dragon-slaying legend of St George, the distinctive elements, far from being mutually enriching, pull against each other and open up gaps and inconsistencies in the text. The hagiographic purpose is undermined by the dominance of the romance story of the dragon-fight.

To begin with, I want to look at the development of the St George legend. Historically the dragon-slaying episode was a much later addition to the original passion. It was crudely attached to the beginning of the original account and was not properly assimilated. The earliest legends of St George record the details of his martyrdom at the hands of Roman rulers but no account of the dragon-slaying is included. However, the killing of the dragon was first brought to prominence with its inclusion in the *Legenda Aurea*. The episode formed a preliminary part of the legend which described the saint's witness to the Christian faith and subsequent death. Although the dragon's slaughter by St George was not Jacobus de Voragine's invention and appears to have been derived from much earlier Byzantine legends of the saint, his Latin version popularized the legend in western Europe.

In 1483, Caxton printed his translation of the *Legenda Aurea*, entitled the *Golden Legend*. While Caxton based his translation on the *Legenda Aurea*, he also consulted two other translations, one by Jehan de Vignay called the *Legende Dorée*, a French translation which was started in about 1333-4 but was not completed for several years, and an English translation from the French version, the *Gilte Legende* of 1438. Thus, three texts contribute to Caxton's *Golden Legend* which has similarities with and slight differences from all three, but all depict the saint as a soldier and a knight, both in the accretion to the passion and in the passion itself. Significantly, Caxton makes an addition to the Jacobus de Voragine account of the St George legend, which is included in the *Gilte Legend*. When fearing to scale the walls of Jerusalem taken by the Saracen, the crusaders: 'sawe appertely saynt George whiche had whyte armes with a reed crosse, that went vp tofore them on the walle, and they folowed hym, and so was Iherusalem taken by his helpe.'<sup>1</sup> The returning crusaders brought back the legend of St George to England where he was adopted as the country's patron saint, his feast day established by the Council of Oxford in 1222.<sup>2</sup> He also became the patron saint of associations and guilds connected with warfare and armourers. Donatello's statue of the saint, completed between 1415 and 1420, was commissioned by the Guild of Armourers of Florence. The statue, imitating the style of classical Greece, celebrates a confident soldier and man of action, the Christian '*miles christi*', but St George is not accompanied by the dragon. However, the medieval church commemorated the saint as the slayer of the dragon and his iconography became fixed as such and in stained glass and on rood screen, the saint is depicted as a crusading knight in armour, his surcoat usually bearing the red cross and at his feet, the vanquished dragon. He may

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<sup>1</sup> *GL* vol. iii p.133. Quotations are taken from Caxton's translation of the *Golden Legend*, (London, 1483) STC 24873. The legend of St George is there numbered C lvii. However, for ease of page reference I have also referred in each instance to Caxton's translation in F.S. Ellis's edition of the *Golden Legend* in seven volumes (London, 1900).

<sup>2</sup> St George's red cross on a white background identified him with the crusaders who also carried this device on their flags and armour as early as the reign of Edward I or Richard I. See David Scott Fox, *Saint George, The Saint with Three Faces* (Windsor Forest, Berkshire, 1983), p. 71. The twelfth century carved tympanum at Fordington Church, Dorchester, is believed to depict the earliest representation of the saint's flag. (See Plate 9.)



brandish a sword but more usually, where space allows, when sculpted on a tympanum or portrayed in a medieval painting, he may be shown in action, mounted on a charger, facing the dragon, his lance ready to deliver the incapacitating wound.<sup>3</sup> Also, in Caxton's folio edition of the *Golden Legend*, an accompanying illustration shows the haloed St George, fully armed, his visor up, a sword hanging from his belt. In his mailed fist he carries a lance which he thrusts into the dragon's upturned mouth, its long thin tongue winds round the lance and the saint's foot is on the dragon's neck. It has two visible feet, long, dog-like ears, big eyes, a long snout and a head which is disproportionate to its body, which is covered with scales. There is no horse but in the background there is a stretch of water.

The legends surrounding the saint are many and derive from a variety of provenances which are impossible to disentangle with any certainty. According to Delehaye, the oldest legend of St George goes back to the fifth century version, based on a Greek original, known as the Vienna manuscript.<sup>4</sup> This legend can be reduced to the following narrative structure and hagiographic topoi: The saint, a military commander from Cappadocia, a Roman province, corresponding to present-day Turkey, testifies to Christ and is questioned about his faith by the emperor Datianus, equivalent to the ruler Dacian in later versions, who, finding him obdurate in his refusal to sacrifice to idols, has him tortured. During his seven years of suffering he is visited by divine visions which bring him comfort and strength to withstand the very many and varied cruelties which Datianus hopes will break the saint's spirit. He is also resuscitated by Christ and St Michael, having died on three occasions during his prolonged torment. Finally he is beheaded, but not before his witness to Christ has converted large numbers of people, and his faith has worked miracles. From this version are developed Latin and Coptic translations with numerous changes and alterations.

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<sup>3</sup> On a fifteenth century mural in Pickering Church, Yorkshire, St George is shown in stylised action against the dragon who winds its tail around the tail of the saint's horse. This method of attack is described in the medieval bestiary. (See Plate 10.)

<sup>4</sup> The Bollandist scholar, Hippolyte Delehaye has researched the earliest Greek accounts of the saint's life and passion in *Les Légendes Grecques des Saints Militaires* repr. (New York, 1975) pp. 45-76.

There is a second legend of St George in the Vatican manuscript 1660, of a later date than the Vienna manuscript. This story differs slightly although the essential elements of the Vienna manuscript are included. The emperor, Datianus, becomes the ruler Diocletian and he is given a 'second', Magnentius, who was one of seventy-two kings in the first vita who supported Datianus in his persecution of the Christians. The magician, Athanasia, who was commanded to poison the saint in the original episode is not included and many other episodes are omitted, including the three resuscitations, which are replaced by the miraculous healings of St George's terrible injuries by divine intervention.

While the detailed tracing of the modifications to the legend is outside the scope of this thesis, a brief reference to these early texts reveals something of the growing popularity of a cult which was being recorded by the fifth century. Also, what is apparent is that succeeding accounts were tinkered with and alterations made, probably by successive redactors who, having their audiences in mind, made concessions to popular taste. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental pattern to the passion, a sequence of stages by which the passion proceeds, a pattern replicated in the very many accounts of the martyrdom of both male and female saints. The saint's legend celebrates the strength of God working through the lone saint whose fight against the evil of idolatry takes place against a hostile background of paganism.<sup>5</sup> While these elements, like the refusal to worship pagan gods and the saint's subsequent tortures, were essential to the development of the narrative of St George, alterations were made which did not disrupt this hagiographic structure.<sup>6</sup>

The number of shrines and churches dedicated to St George in what we now call the Middle East suggests strongly that a popular cult flourished around this saint and that it is more

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<sup>5</sup> Hippolyte Delehaye deals with the basic units of the hagiographic passion in *Les Passions des Martyrs et Les Génres Littéraires* (Bureaux de la Societe des Bollandistes, 1921), pp.236-315.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, some of the changes involved the numbers and kinds of torture the saint endured. The Vienna manuscript lists the wearing of shoes full of pointed nails, the enduring of a boulder on the saint's chest and the drinking of molten lead which do not appear in the *Golden Legend*. A late medieval series of paintings of the tortures and death of St George can be seen in the Groeninge Museum, Bruges, where the artist has chosen to illustrate the more dramatic events of the saint's martyrdom. (See Plates 11 and 12.)

than probable he lived and died in the area of Lydda. However, the response of Pope Gelasius to the legend of the saint was not enthusiastic for he listed the saint's passion in the first Index of the Roman Catholic Church in 494. We can only surmise the reason for this for the version of the legend which was censored is not known. However, it is possible that the saint's life appeared too incredible, perhaps too much like a fiction than a reality; possibly he was offended by the accounts of the three resurrections. Perhaps the number and the gruesomeness of the tortures were thought to stretch the credulity of the faithful beyond the bounds of sense and taste. Thus, from the very early development of the cult, the legend of St George has been tainted with a notoriety, an inappropriateness perhaps generated by hyperbole.

Later, the author of the *Legenda Aurea* records his doubts regarding the saint's authenticity and, by referring to the many and varied accounts of the saint's life, contributes to a general scepticism and prepares the way for the romance element. The following extract from Caxton's *Golden Legend* is a close translation of Jacobus de Voragine's narrative which also highlights the conflicting beliefs regarding the place of his death: 'And his legende is nombred amonge other scryptures apocryphale in the counseyll of Nycene, by cause his martyrdome hath no certayne relacion. For in the kalendar of bede it is sayd that he suffred martyrdome in parydye in the cyte of dyapolim ..... And in another place it is sayd that he suffred dethe vnder dyoclesyan emperor of Persia, being present seventy kings of the empire. And it is said that he suffered death under Dacian the provost, then Diocletian and Maximian being emperors.'<sup>7</sup> It can be argued that this introduction becomes a preparation by the compiler for the addition of the dragon-slaying episode to the original story. In an implicit way he is admitting that fact has been subsumed in hearsay and popular belief, since there is no uniform presentation of the historical background. The reworking of saints' legends, albeit within the confines of the genre, went on from their inception but factual precision was never an important aspect. That the details of historical background might alter from one version to another was insignificant compared with

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<sup>7</sup> GL vol. iii p.126.

the communication of the experience of the saint's life and the popularising of that. This new episode in the life of St George was introduced and contributed largely to his popularity.

I would argue that this 'new' episode, the slaying of the dragon, follows, for the most part, the conventions of romance while the original legend, which recounts the saint's passion, follows closely the established hagiographic pattern of the martyrdom of saints. Therefore, these two major episodes in the saint's legend remain discrete parts. St George who killed the dragon has his being in the timeless past of the romance world of knights, combat and adventure, while St George, the martyr lives and dies, historically placed in the early centuries of the Christian church whose members endured persecution under the rule of the Roman emperors. There are two St Georges who belong to two different historical times, two different cultures, two different genres and two different iconographies.

An examination of the iconography of St George in Middle Eastern Christian art by Nikolaj Ovcarov lists the three variant stereotypes of the saint: the martyr, the patrician and the soldier which succeeded each other chronologically during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>8</sup> This development reveals the problems inherent in the presentation of a saint who was celebrated for his martyrdom but who later became even more celebrated for his strong links with the crusaders as a warrior and eventually as a dragon-slayer. The oldest preserved representations of him, dating from the eleventh century, depict him in the saint's role as mediator between God and man but a seventh century description of an icon of the saint portrays him as a beautiful adolescent, sumptuously dressed with abundant, golden hair.<sup>9</sup> Ocarov emphasizes its importance: 'car elle nous transmet la première constitution historique de type du saint— un martyr en habits patriciens, avec une croix dans sa main droite.'<sup>10</sup> Later from the ninth to the

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<sup>8</sup> Nikolaj Ovcarov, 'Sur l'iconographie de St Georges aux X1-XIIe siècles' in *Byzantinoslavica* 52, (1991), 121-9.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p.121. A painting by Pisanello departs from the familiar depiction of St George who, having fought the dragon, is richly dressed in the height of extravagant fashion with golden hair and a small quiescent dragon at his feet. (See Plate 14.) A painting by Crivelli shows the saint in action; he is a very young man, also with golden curls and androgynously beautiful. (See Plate 13.)

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p.121

eleventh century, the saint as martyr could be shown dressed expensively: 'l'incarnation d'un aristocrate remarquable (*comes*) et modèle de l'honneur d'état'<sup>11</sup> but he could also be dressed modestly. Finally, there was a transitional phase when the patrician became the warrior-saint, a hybrid representation: 'une croix à travers la poitrine et en riches habits aristocratiques'.<sup>12</sup> Ovcarov continues by delineating the last phase, the reversal occurring towards the end of the eleventh century when replacing the cross, weapons appeared in the hands of the warrior-saint. Nevertheless, the three types of saint could appear simultaneously, presumably evoking different responses and yet claiming to be the one same saint.

While Ovcarov traces the visual representations of the saint from martyr to warrior, Jennifer Fellows examines the way in which the hagiographic narrative moves towards romance, similarly from martyr but more specifically towards warrior and dragon-slayer, an inclusion which she claims marks the most significant changes in the legend.<sup>13</sup> She argues that as the Christian church became fully established and religious persecution decreased, opportunities for martyrdom were fewer and therefore a different kind of witness was required of a more active kind and the '*miles christi*', the crusading knight, was an appropriate image. She argues that this may have influenced the popular perception of the saint before he was associated with the dragon. St George was identified with the role of crusader when he appeared at the siege of Antioch and he became the chivalric knight in the popular mind: 'It may be that his elevation to the status of dragon-slayer can be interpreted as an attempt to crystallize this more militant aspect of his saintly nature in a single memorable image. In a sense it bridges the gap between George the martyr and George the warrior saint: while superficially, in its portrayal of armed combat against a flesh-and-blood enemy of good, it seems more closely related to the concept of the latter, at a more symbolic level it also reiterates the themes of triumph over death and evil

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p.122.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p.126.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Fellows, 'St George as Romance Hero' *Medieval Studies* 6 (1996), 27-54.

implicit in the story of his martyrdom.<sup>14</sup> While this is a highly probable reconstruction of what happened to the depiction of the saint, it also highlights the disjunction between the martyr and the dragon-slayer, revealing the way in which a late medieval saint has been roughly yoked to the earlier martyr, who resembled so many other early Christians who were tortured and killed for their faith. The accretion is imbued with romance elements which remain independent of the hagiographic context in which the legend is placed, initially. This causes problems with the presentation of the saint who resembles the chivalric romance hero for at least half of the accretion, thus threatening the hagiographic ethos.

However, an attempt is made to bridge the gap between the two St Georges and the two genres in the latter stages of the preliminary episode when the saint converts the people of Silene from paganism, a recognised hagiographic topos. Paganism is the common link between the two parts, although the pagan community of Silene is not characterised as such until these later stages and it is the inclusion of the dragon-fight which makes the more dominant and more vivid impression. However, the catalyst of the saint's passion is paganism and his continuous refusal to take part in idolatrous worship runs throughout the original legend.

His role as a chivalric dragon-slayer distinguishes him from other saints in the popular imagination. While many saints confront deadly dragons, they are not depicted as George is, as a medieval knight, mounted and armed. St George's chivalric response to the maiden was a popular subject, commemorated in poetry and song, as it was in art. The following, mid-fifteenth century, anonymous lyric which, in its handling of the episode is not untypical, is an indication not only of the saint's popularity as a dragon-slayer but it also denotes the way in which chivalric virtues colour this interpretation of the event. The chivalric ethos of the poem is used as a vehicle for theological didacticism: 'worship of vertu is the mede'. However, appropriately for a soldier, conflict is an important element in the promotion of the good: in his fight against the dragon and in his inspiration to English troops fighting the French. St George is referred to as 'our Lady

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* 32.

knight' and as 'our sovereign Lady's knight', phrases which convey his important role as a saint who is at the Virgin Mary's command while at the same time these phrases reinforce the world of romance, the knight undertaking chivalric feats for his lady. 'Our Lady knyght' is also a reminder of the maiden whom the knight, St George, rescued. The ambivalence of the language allows for movement between the world of romance and hagiography, between the maiden and the Virgin.

*A carol of St. George*

Enfors we us with all our might

To love Seint George, our Lady knight.

Worship of vertu is the mede,

And seweth him ay of right:

To worship George then have we nede,

Which is our sovereign Lady's knight.

He keped the mad from dragon's dred,

And fraid all France and put to flight.

At Agincourt -the crownecle ye red-

The French him se formest in fight.

In his vertu he wol us lede

Againis the Fend, the ful wight,

And with his banner us oversprede,

If we him love with all oure might.' <sup>15</sup>

In this lyric there is no jarring incompatibility between the soldier who kills the dragon and inspires men to kill in battle and the hagiographic saint. In the same way the medieval church's

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<sup>15</sup> *Medieval English Lyrics*, ed. R.T.Davies (London and Boston, 1963), p.185.

visual depiction of the saint showed its assimilation of the two roles.<sup>16</sup> Also, the significance for the English was his adoption as their patron saint and his participation in the war against the French. The ending to Caxton's legend of the saint, added to Jacobus de Voragine's version, rejoices in the fact that St George is England's patron saint and an inspiration to its soldiers. The lyric exploits the established convention, the metaphorical fight against evil, personified as 'the Fend' which the saint encourages us to undertake in the pursuit of virtue.

Jennifer Fellows refers to the 'partial symbolism' to be found in medieval hagiography 'by means of which Christian virtues and the contingencies which evoke their practice are represented in extreme, almost archetypal form— not among the trials of daily life but in terms of exaggerated physical conflict or endurance, the enemies of good often appearing in the form of monsters or of tyrants, such as are typical also of romance literature.'<sup>17</sup> While the dragon in the carol is not overtly connected with the fiend, the context of combat against the enemy, whether the French, the devil or the dragon, would suggest by inference that the saint/knight is portrayed as a militant warrior in the service of the divine. That the saint is also an intermediary is an important message in the lyric for it brings the reader into the poem as a potential participator in the fight against the dragon, spurred on by England's patron saint.

The short lyric discussed briefly above shows a skilful manipulation of romance, hagiography and didacticism within the space of fourteen lines. As I shall discuss later in the chapter, the handling of these elements is not managed so competently in the accretion to the saint's passion. A mixture of conflicting topoi from romance and hagiographic genres, particularly at the point in the legend when St. George confronts the dragon, reveals the problems of taking a romance story and incorporating it in a hagiographic legend. As the dragon runs towards the saint he makes the sign of the cross, a conventional hagiographic topos, which, in the

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<sup>16</sup> Marina Walker writes of the significance of the Virgin Mary in fusing the concerns of the pious ascetic, intent on meditating on the Virgin, with the practice of secular love as enjoyed by indulgent courtiers of the thirteenth century. *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Picador edition, Pan Books Ltd. London, 1990), p.147.

<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Fellows, *op. cit.* 29.



encounters of other saints with dragons, is sufficient to subdue or dispatch the monster, rendering the use of force unnecessary. St Silvester and St Donatus, described in more detail in an earlier chapter, rely solely on the sign of the cross for their victory over their respective dragons. However, St. George responds like the armed, chivalric knight in romance when he takes up his spear to overcome the dragon which he then wounds and throws to the ground. By taking an active and physical role in confronting the dragon with weapons, the saint appears to be masquerading as the heroic knight and yet the sign of the cross would have been enough protection against the dragon, rendering the fight superfluous. Conflicting topoi are at work here for while the dragon itself is a familiar feature of hagiography, the method of overcoming it is not, and this is an aspect I want to look at more closely later on, but first I want to look in more detail at the part played by the saint in this episode.

With particular reference to the eponymous Bevis, I referred in Chapter 2 to an article by Diana Childress<sup>18</sup> in which she isolates three distinctive aspects of the romance hero: he has no supernatural power and therefore depends on himself and his weapons to fight his adversary; from first to last he is essentially a good man and thirdly he acts with aggression, taking the initiative against his foe; he does not wait passively for his life to be directed by God, as do the heroes of secular hagiography. Childress comes to this conclusion when determining the differences between the romance hero and the hero of secular legend but when one of these criteria is applied to St George as a romance hero, a problem arises. While the romance hero is characterised by his reliance on his own strength and weapons and not on any external aid, the sign of the cross furnishes St George with supernatural help. Many a romance hero prays to God before battle or single combat but this convention does not automatically ensure victory, although it is in the nature of romance that the hero is usually successful. The sign of the cross, however, has a powerful religious significance in the defeat of evil and like other saints who are dragon-slayers his success can only be interpreted as God-given and yet there remains an

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<sup>18</sup> Childress, 'Between Romance and Legend...' pp. 311-322.

ambivalence. How far the saint's success is due to his being a soldier is unclear, for why cast this role to a soldier/saint unless some profit can be made from his military expertise? It is in his role as knight that the saint responds to the maiden, taking that initiative which Childress maintains is characteristic of the romance hero. In addition the dragon is attacked with 'aggression', another quality she attributes to the protagonist of romance.

The saint's role and responses thus provide a necessary starting point in the revealing of inconsistencies within the ethos of the text. Unless otherwise stated, any textual references to the legend will be to the version which appears in Caxton's translation of the *Legenda Aurea*, namely the *Golden Legend* (1483). The beginning makes clear that this is the life of an extraordinary Christian, St George, whose name is subject to a variety of etymological interpretations which indicate his many virtues. Significantly, he is termed 'an holy wrasteler. For he wrasteled with the dragon'. This is an ambivalent description for it is unclear whether the fight is to be looked on as a metaphorical or a physical struggle. While fighting would appear to be compatible with the soldier-saint who fought the dragon, the word 'wrasteler' also suggests an inner fight in which the saint wrestles with temptation, the dragon symbolizing the evil to be resisted, in which case the whole episode must be viewed symbolically as a trial of personal spiritual strength. The writer of the *Ancrene Wisse* uses the word 'wrestle' in this sense of struggling against temptation and the wiles of the evil<sup>19</sup>: 'þe oðer bitternesse is i wreastlunge & i wragelunge aȝeines fondunges.....Dis wreastlunge is ful bitter to monie þe beoð ful forð i þe wei toward heouene, for þe ȝet i fondunges, þet beoð þe deofles swenges, waggið oðerwhiles & moten wreastlin aȝein wið strong wraglunge.' And yet, this reference to the fight with the dragon would suggest the very familiar hagiographic topos, the confrontation of an external evil force by the Christian saint who overcomes it with God's help. Indeed, the image of St Michael taking up the challenge of the rebellious angels in the apocalyptic battle and represented iconographically as a warrior-angel, armed with a sword and protected by armour as he attacks the devil in the

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<sup>19</sup> *Ancrene Wisse*, p 190, ll. 13-19.

shape of a dragon or grotesque monster informs and influences the interpretation of the dragon-fight of St George.

After the etymological introduction the reader is told in the opening sentence of the narrative: 'Saynt George was a knyght and borne in capodoce.' This piece of information forms our view of the man as a soldier who, it is to be remembered, is not a saint until his martyrdom earns him this title, although like all accounts of saints' lives the narrative refers to him as being sanctified already. The legend plunges immediately into an explanation of the events which have led up to the dragon-slaying episode and as the legend proceeds it slides almost imperceptibly from the overt hagiographic intent of the introduction into the romance genre, particularly as the protagonist seems to fit more and more easily into the role of the chivalric hero of romance.

The saint's first appearance in the narrative would suggest he is a knight errant: the *Legenda Aurea* reads: *Quam beatus Georgius casu inde transiens....*<sup>20</sup> Caxton's translation baldly states 'Whan she was there saynt George passed by...' The opening of the episode also suggests it is by chance that the saint is in the region: *Georgius tribunus genere Cappadocum pervenit quadam vice in provinciam Libyae...*<sup>21</sup> which Caxton translates as 'On a tyme he came in to the prouince of Lybye..' <sup>22</sup> Like the stereotypical chivalric hero of romance, he seems to be on his way somewhere: to reach Silene is not the purpose of his journey and neither is it to rescue the the abandoned maiden. This sense of coincidence is also to be found in the *Gilte Legende*: 'And as by auenture it fell that Seint George passed thereby...' <sup>23</sup> By contrast the legend, as it is told in Mirk's *Festial*, makes quite plain that this encounter is no casual happening

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<sup>20</sup> *Legenda Aurea*, Cap. LVIII p. 261.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p.260.

<sup>22</sup> *GL* vol. iii, p.126

<sup>23</sup> *Three Lives from the Gilte Legende*, ed. Richard Hamer from M.S. B.L. Egerton 876 (Heidelberg, 1987), p.66.

but divinely appointed : 'But þen by ordenance of God, Seynt George come ryding þat way.'<sup>24</sup> Mirk wrests the narrative out of romance and at this point at least, puts it firmly into the hagiographic genre with God, or Christ, at the centre of the narrative, influencing and determining the saint's life. However, Mirk's *Festial* does not maintain this hagiographic line but emphasizes those romance elements which reflect the social order and the formalities expected of the chivalrous knight and the royal maiden. In the *Festial*, the maiden makes clear her position as the king's daughter, while the saint, refusing to abandon her, is gallant: ' "Damesell," quod George, "þat wer a gret vyleny to me, þat am a knyȝt well i-armed, yf I schuld fle, and þou þat art a woman shuld abyde' ." <sup>25</sup> He presents himself as the chivalrous knight and hero of romance. A fragment of a Northern version enhances further the relationship between the two when the saint says '& have no drede þu swete thyng..' <sup>26</sup> In Caxton's version, the maiden addresses the saint as a 'fayre yonge man',<sup>27</sup> while in the *Speculum Sacerdotale* she says: 'yonge man þou art grete and semely'.<sup>28</sup> To her he is a young and handsome knight which further indicates his place as a romance hero whose outward appearance attracts the notice and the complimentary comment of the lady. Any reference to the outward appearance of a male saint and his physical attractiveness is uncharacteristic of hagiography. A female saint might be so outwardly beautiful she attracts the attentions of a powerful ruler who determines on possessing her in marriage but this is a topos which allows the virtue of female virginity to be celebrated.

St George responds with compassion to the vulnerable maiden and bravely risks his own life and his determination to stay and fight to protect the lady casts the saint as a chivalric hero.

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<sup>24</sup> *Festial*, p.133, ll.13-14.

<sup>25</sup> *Festial*, p.133 ll.24-26. The knight who saves a lady from danger or death is a romance topos derived from the chivalric code. When Sir Torrent rescues princess Eleonore from the giant's castle, he releases her not only from imprisonment but also from the evil intent of another kind of monster, the giant.

<sup>26</sup> 'From the Northern Fragment, "The Life of St George," ' Roscoe E.Parker, *Modern Language Notes* 38 (1923), 97-101.

<sup>27</sup> *GL* vol.iii p.128.

<sup>28</sup> *Speculum Sacerdotale*, ed. Edward H. Weatherly, EETS, OS, 200 (London, 1936) p.132, l.9

By saving the maiden he also rescues the whole town from the dragon but it is the maiden to whom he first responds and not the community, the latter response being the established hagiographic topos when other saints confront dragons. St George sees the dragon running towards them, mounts his horse and 'drew out his swerde and garnysshed hym with the signe of the crosse and rode hardely ageynst the dragon whiche came toward hym, and smote him with his spere and hurte hym sore and threwe hym to the grounde.'<sup>29</sup> Mirk's account reads: 'þen made George a cros befor hym, and set hys spere in the grate and wyth such myght bare down the dragon into the erth....'<sup>30</sup> and the account in the *Speculum Sacerdotale* is almost identical. The references to the sword, the 'grate' and spear place the action in the medieval world of chivalry and the rush to engage with the monster, captured in the brief but energetic description, is also typical of chivalric encounters.

Also, the encounter between St George and the maiden is seen initially from the perspective of romance, their conversation reflecting a refinement of manners between the sexes which is a characteristic of the genre. Interestingly, the way in which the scene is handled in the *Legenda Aurea* differs in degree from Caxton's translation, for the affective mood of the former is much diminished by Caxton whose concise style and omission of graphic detail shows that the translation has not been slavishly done but judgement has been exercised, perhaps revealing Caxton's unease at releasing into a hagiographic account affective romance elements. He might have wished to reduce the impact of the *Legenda Aurea* account in order to distance the maiden from the saint, to make clear their respective positions but failed to succeed completely because it is woven, if inexpertly, into the fabric of the larger part of the legend. The two extracts which follow highlight the differences in the handling of the meeting of saint and maiden, the first from the *Legenda Aurea* and the second from the *Golden Legend*. They also show how the constraints of source material allow for a conservative tempering of the intensity of the meeting

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<sup>29</sup> *GL* vol. iii p.128.

<sup>30</sup> Mirk, p.133 ll. 27-29.

but no more.

The saint notices the weeping maiden and asks her why she wept. She answers: " ..... *bone juvenis velociter equum adscende et fuge, ne mecum pariter moriaris. Cui Georgius: noli timere, filia, sed dic mihi, quid hic praestolaris omni plebe spectante? Et illa: ut video, bone juvenis, magnifici cordis es tu, sed mecum mori desideras? fuge velociter.* George refuses to leave until she explains why she is afraid and then he says: *filia, noli timere, quia in Christi nomine te juvabo. Et illa: bone miles, sed te ipsum salvare festines, mecum non pereas.*" <sup>31</sup>

The Caxton version: '.... whan he sawe the lady he demaunded the lady what she made there and she said: goo ye your waye fayre yonge man, that ye perysshe not also. Then sayd he telle to me what haue ye and why wepe ye, and doubte ye it no thyng. Whan she sawe that he wold knowe, she sayd to hym how she was delyuered to the dragon. Than said saynt George fayre doughter, doubte ye no thyng hereof. For I shall helpe thee in the name of Ihesu cryste. She said for goddes sake, good knyght, goo your way and abyde not with me for ye may not delyuer me.' <sup>32</sup>

The direct speech of the *Legenda Aurea* and the urgent concern St George and the maiden have for each other creates a dramatic moment in the face of the latter's imminent death. In Caxton's translation this episode is more muted as a result of indirect speech and a more formal conversation but the meeting still belongs to the world of chivalric romance. The maiden's consideration for the knight is expressed in words which show a gentility and courtesy which is commensurate with her social position and rank as a king's daughter: '...goo your waye and abyde not with me for ye may not delyuer me'. <sup>33</sup> She talks to the knight as if he were a romance hero, whose youth and beauty will be destroyed, as hers will be, by the dragon and this emphasis on youth and the concern for the ephemeral nature of earthly beauty also suggests that this is

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<sup>31</sup> *Legenda Aurea*, ed. T. Graesse, p. 261.

<sup>32</sup> *GL* vol. iii p.128.

<sup>33</sup> *GL* *ibid.*

a theme from romance. The weeping of the maiden concerns the knight and he is determined to know the cause: '...telle to me what haue ye and why ye wepe...' <sup>34</sup> An affective meeting between a saint and a young princess is a *topos alien* to hagiography. The reader here has a confused expectation, for the text indicates the possible development of a tender relationship, and yet this is a saint whose interest in the opposite sex is outside his hagiographic role. However, as they exchange words, the knight's position alters in relation to the maiden. Ambivalence develops as the knight takes on the authority of the saint and any suggestion of the development of an amatory relationship is undermined with his firm words: '.....fayre doughter doubtte ye no thyng herof. For I shall helpe the in the name of Ihesu cryste' <sup>35</sup> While she shows great sorrow for her own plight and also the potential death of the young knight, he distances himself from her as a nubile woman. By calling her 'doughter', the knight's role as romance hero is eroded. Their relationship becomes an unequal one as he takes command of the situation: 'daughter' suggests the relationship between a priest and a member of his flock. This authority springs from his Christian faith and ultimately from God. The perspective changes imperceptibly from which we view the knight causing a tension between the two genres. At this point the hero is neither the conventional romance hero nor hagiographic saint and this affects the role of the lady whose function in the narrative remains unclear.

She is introduced as a pitiful victim, her fate sealed by an adamant populace. The circumstances which bring her to the dragon's lair are recounted in some detail and at the beginning she and her father are placed at the centre of the story. The saint himself does not make an appearance until a third of the way into this episode and it is not until the later stages, when St George actually kills the dragon, that the story takes on a hagiographic significance. This happens gradually as St George begins to assert his dominance over events, turning them into

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<sup>34</sup> *GL ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *GL ibid.*

a demonstration of the power of Christianity, but there is a transitional state when there is an uncertainty of genre. The maiden precipitates the action in her role as victim, for it is the saint's response to her imminent death which produces the climax of the story whose tension and drama has its provenance in romance, although the true Christian may find a greater climax in the conversion of the pagan populace. The maiden has a limited but important function in relation to the saint. Like many ladies in romances it would appear she has a role to enhance the reputation of the hero/saint and she walks out of the narrative when, at the command of the saint, she leads the dragon by her girdle into the city. The royal maiden, arrayed in her wedding clothes, waiting to be devoured by the dragon, supplies the early part of the story with a powerful and arresting image but eventually her presence is supplanted by that of the saint whose concern to establish a Christian community ensures that hagiography supplants romance. Strangely, the maiden is forgotten because she no longer has a function in the narrative: she is no longer the sacrificial victim, an archetypal topos in Greek legend, folklore and romance and, unlike Andromeda who marries Perseus, she cannot be given in marriage to the saint. Curiously, the king's reaction, which surely must have been joyful, is not recorded and the affective detail, so prominent in the early part of the story, when he weeps at his daughter's imminent death, gives way to an economy of narration which excludes everything except that which is relevant to the promotion of Christianity and the establishment of the faith in Silene. The relationships between king and daughter and between king and subjects are no longer important to a theme which concentrates on religious priorities.

The saint rescues the maiden but he can be viewed as also protecting her virginity by saving her from the bestial monster. The innate contrast between the destructiveness and brutishness of the dragon and the beauty and innocence of the maiden reinforces such an interpretation. The romance topos of the lascivious giant/monster is a familiar one. Also, many of the legends featuring female saints emphasize the significance of virginity by the fierce way in which they resist assaults on their chastity by pagan rulers inflamed with desire. Significantly, in *Speculum Sacerdotale*, but excluded from Caxton's account and from Mirk's *Festial*, is the



significant mention of the Virgin Mary whose immaculate state makes her a role model for young maidens. In answer to the cries of the people who fear that they will be massacred by the dragon brought into the city by the saint, he replies: 'Drede you noȝt, for the moder of Crist sent me to you for to delyuer the douȝtter of the kyng and you boȝe fro perischynge..' <sup>36</sup> Interestingly, the *Gilte Legende* also records St George's reassurance to the populace but their protector is not Mary but Christ: '..... oure Lord hathe sent me hedyr to you to deliuer you of the paynes of this dragon.' <sup>37</sup> These quotations emphasize a hagiographic focus on the supernatural power behind the saint which is not apparent in all versions of the legend.

The reference in *Speculum Sacerdotale* to the intervention and direction of the mother of God and also of Christ would suggest further that the saint's help was preordained, an impression not given in the *Golden Legend*. The legend gives encouragement to those who pray to heaven for help because this is a demonstration of the relationship between mortal beings, the saint (as intercessor) and the heavenly powers. At the same time however, another inconsistency emerges for the Virgin has taken pity on pagans who, presumably, have not prayed to God for help. Not surprisingly, at the end of this episode a church is built by the converted king, 'in honowre of oure lady Marie, moder of Crist, and of Seynt George....' <sup>38</sup> The part played by the Virgin is in direct response to the maiden (and the other people) but her intervention through the saint in this account is a more explicit development of a theme which remains implicit in the two other accounts mentioned. <sup>39</sup>

Sir James Frazer points out that the theme of the demon lover and his mortal brides is a common type of folk-tale and exists worldwide. <sup>40</sup> Although there are details which vary from tale

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<sup>36</sup> *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p.132 ll.31-33.

<sup>37</sup> *Three lives from the Gilte Legende*, ed. Richard Hamer (Heidelberg, 1978), p.68.

<sup>38</sup> *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p.133 ll.2-3.

<sup>39</sup> In the lyric quoted above St George's links with the Virgin are an important means of accommodating both the chivalric world and the heavenly one.

<sup>40</sup> Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (abridged) (London, 1932), p 146.

to tale, the basic story is largely that of the St George legend. The narrative structure Frazer outlines as follows: a dragon, or many-headed serpent, demands the sacrifice of a victim or the community will suffer. Generally, the victim is a virgin and after many have lost their lives, it falls by lot to the king's daughter to be sacrificed. However, she is saved by the hero, usually a young man of humble birth, who slays the monster and marries the princess as a reward. Importantly, the monster or dragon inhabits a sea or lake or fountain and in other versions of the story he allows use of the water only on payment of a human victim. It is highly probable then that this part of the St George legend was an archetypal story belonging to the collective imagination and the experience of many peoples; it found its way into Greek mythology and also into romance and fairy tale and here it makes an appearance in hagiography carrying with it from by-gone ages connotations which can be inferred. The story still resonates with these folkloric elements and there there has been little attempt to absorb or re-fashion the basic plot into a hagiographic legend which observes the genre's conventions. The maiden, a recognisable figure from folk-lore or romance, is the archetypal sacrificial maiden and also the virgin to whom the chivalric knight responds, but she has no structural function. She provides interest and drama but she is redundant to the narrative for George, as a saint, cannot marry the maiden for that would be inimical to his role as a celibate saint, although later stories of the dragon-slaying did include a named princess Sabra, whom St George rescued and married, and the romance expectations raised in the encounter of saint and maiden were duly fulfilled.<sup>41</sup> Neither is he offered her hand in marriage as a reward which would at least have given the saint the opportunity of refusing the offer so revealing his dedication to the celibate life. What became of the princess who occupied such a central role for half of the story is not recorded. Indeed, if she were to be removed totally from the narrative, the story would become a tighter hagiographic account and similar to many others in which the saint destroys a dragon plaguing the people whom he then converts.

While the maiden's function is problematic, so also is the physical encounter of the saint

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Johnson's *Seven Champions of Christendom*, printed c.1597, extends the legend of the saint further into the realms of romance and ignores the conventions of the hagiographic genre. The princess Sabra was the daughter of the legendary King Ptolemy of Egypt.

with the dragon. This, like the maiden, guarantees interest because it has a dramatic appeal and yet if one were to remove the fight and follow the conventions of hagiography, the dragon would have been as easily subdued with the sign of the cross, so making the fight redundant also. The heroic encounters with monsters, evil knights, giants or wild animals in single combat provide the challenges needed to enhance the romance hero's reputation and indeed, the first part of the St George story would not look out of place in any romance. With some similarity to St George, the eponymous Guy of Warwick responds to the plight, not of a maiden but of a people who are subjected to destruction by a predatory dragon who devours their cattle and sheep and lays waste their land. Guy promises help to kill the dragon and to restore the country to order:

'Ich him schal ouercome þurch godes miȝt;

For wiþ him ichil hold fiȝt.' (GW ll.7185-6)

Guy, like the saint, has a confidence that he can overcome the dragon if God's strength will aid him and the words 'Ich him schal ouercome....' underline the hero's assured hope that divine help will not let him down. Guy of Warwick prays at some length that God, who made the day and the night, and who saved Daniel from the lion, will save him from, 'þis foule dragoun' which he is about to fight. Unlike the romance hero Guy, St George does not pray although he pledges help in the name of Jesus Christ but, as the dragon rushes towards him, the saint makes the sign of the cross<sup>42</sup> and then attacks and wounds the dragon. We may assume that it is the strength of the saint's faith, symbolized by the cross, that ensures his success. In contrast, Guy must fight if he is to rid the country of the dragon. The single-combat topos of romance is preserved with Guy's rejection of the king's offer of a band of a hundred knights to go with him and he engages with the dragon single-handedly, as does St George. There is much in common between this episode and St George's fight. Superficially, St George appears to be, like Guy, the stereotypical, chivalric hero of the romance, albeit within a single, circumscribed scene.

Yet, essentially this signing of the cross is a hagiographic convention slipped into what

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<sup>42</sup> Many saints, confronting evil, whether dragons, demons or devils, used holy water or spoke Christ's name, with the same effect of making impotent their power.

is essentially a physical confrontation, the single combat familiar to romance. Thus, briefly the generic focus is blurred as the narrative moves between conflicting topoi and the protagonist's role shifts between romance hero and saint. He is successful in conquering the dragon which is a tribute to his courage but if he is the hagiographic hero his bravery and martial prowess must be attributed to God's intervention and help. Nevertheless, overall, it is the romance protagonist, showing active engagement with the enemy, which dominates at this point, even though the description of the fight is stylistically different in some respects from the stereotypical dragon-fight of romance. The description in the *Golden Legend* is brief, as it is in *Mirk's Festial* and the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, unlike the prolonged account of the fight with the dragon in *Guy of Warwick* for example, where the description of the hero's struggles with injury and fatigue is a literary convention whose function is to demonstrate the bravery and mental tenacity of the hero. It extols the potential of the human spirit by emphasising that the hero is human; only in his bravery and in his skill is he superhuman. The reader is never aware that St George struggles against fatigue and other weaknesses of the human flesh and, unlike the romance heroes, he does not sustain injury which he has to endure while still fighting on. While the essence of the romance dragon-fight is the emphasis on the physical power of hero and dragon unleashed in combat, in contradistinction, the humanity of the saint is brought to the fore when he meets and talks with the maiden.

Also, in romance the monster is usually described in great detail, creating a vivid picture of its repulsive physical strength, again so emphasizing the bravery of the hero. There are detailed descriptions of the monsters in *Guy of Warwick* and *Beues*. For example the size of the dragon Guy fights is stressed in the following extract :

'Gret heud it hap & gastelich to sene:

His nek is greter þan a bole,

His bodi is swarter þan ani cole.

It is michel & long, & griseliche,

Fram þe nouel vþward vnschepliche.' (GW II.7156-7160)

However, the saint's legend usually omits details of the dragon's appearance although the legend of St Martha is a notable exception. The monster's physical appearance is not described in the *Golden Legend* nor in the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, however, in the former the reader is told how it moves: 'the dragon appyeryd and came rennyng to theym, and saynt George was vpon his horse, and drewe oute his swerde....'<sup>43</sup> The speed of action engendered in this passage is found in the romance genre and the initial move of the dragon is described in similar terms in *Beues*: 'Ȝenande aȝenes him anan,Ȝenande & gapande on him so...' (*BH* ll.2762-3) Nevertheless, the concision of description accords more with hagiographic convention where the dragon's presence is a symbolic and not a physical one. Also, in accord with hagiography, the tone of the successful outcome is muted, the victory stated but not extolled; George 'smote hym with his spere and hurte hym sore and threwe hym to the grounde. And after sayd to the mayde delyuer to me your gyrdel...' <sup>44</sup> Unlike the romance however, St George's fight with the dragon does not culminate in its death, for it is killed later. He wounds it and it is thrust to the ground, its power made impotent, symbolized by the maiden leading the monster by her girdle round its neck, a familiar hagiographic motif. Its inherent maliciousness has not been transformed into good but rendered harmless. In comparison, the romance dragon is always slaughtered in single combat by the hero: it remains a threat until that time for even in its death throes it can recover sufficiently to deliver a serious injury, or even a mortal one.

Although the saint is presented as a chivalric knight, armed and mounted on a horse and the attack on the dragon is straight out of romance, the beast being brought down by the saint's spear, the actual conquering of the dragon remains, at this point, associated more with hagiography, where the topos allows for the dragon to be sent away or killed later, disarmed by the cross. The killing of the beast takes place within the city after the saint effectively bargains

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<sup>43</sup> *GL* vol.iii p.128.

<sup>44</sup> *GL* *ibid*.

with the frightened people: '.... doo ye to be baptyseed and I shall slee the dragon.' <sup>45</sup> The dragon is killed and then the saint smites off its head in what is a public display of the power of Christianity, although it is the chivalric hero who usually cuts the head or the tongue from his dragon as a trophy and proof of victory. In romance the killing takes place in what is a private fight, removed from the public gaze, a physical battle for survival in a private arena. The romance hero's motive in confronting the dragon is to prove to himself that he is worthy of being a knight although his destruction of a dangerous monster in response to a plea for help indicates a more altruistic motive as well. Within the limits of this episode, the protagonist and the world in which he moves is redolent of romance although there are hagiographic topoi, most significantly the signing of the cross, which undermine St George's presentation as the chivalric hero.

I want to turn to the dragon here for its role is ambivalent also. At first it appears to be the predatory and voracious monster of romance which batters on a community impotent to combat its venomous breath and its insatiable demands but there are implicit reminders of the hagiographic dragon also. While the romance dragon is an abnormal monster, an opponent worthy of the hero, it has no overt symbolic function. It is destructive and therefore has to be killed but it does not have a didactic role as an opponent of the forces of Christianity. As I have argued in Chapter 2 in relation to the dragon-fight in *Beues*, any supernatural connotations which may be attached to the romance dragon are derived either from the particular context of the fight or from the use of literary conventions which denote the hellish provenance of the dragon. Yet, as I have also argued it is not possible to isolate completely the romance dragon from its hagiographic counterpart because the dragon carries potent connotations of evil from the earliest beginnings of civilization. While hagiographic dragons also hold towns to ransom, kill by the exhalation of their breath and some lay waste lands by breathing out fire, as in the legend of St Matthew, <sup>46</sup> their function, as creatures of an evil force, is made overt. In most of the accounts

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<sup>45</sup> *GL* *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Mirk's Festial*: '...too dragons, gret and horribly, forto spowte fyre and so fowle stenche.....' p.255 ll.26-27.

in the *Golden Legend* they symbolise idolatrous worship, representing the evil forces of the devil. The saints of the early Christian church are commemorated in the *Golden Legend* because, as instruments of God, they made a stand against paganism and many of the dragon-slaying saints like St Silvester worked to protect Christianity against the inroads of idolatry, achieving their victories over their respective dragons by making the sign of the cross. St Silvester's dragon is referred to specifically as 'Sathanas', fixing the monster as the embodiment of the malign and destructive arch-enemy of the Scriptures.<sup>47</sup> St George's dragon is not referred to as being evil, neither is there any suggestion that it symbolises the paganism of the people of Silene whose plight is the prime and only focus of the opening of the accretion.. After the dragon has been subdued the people are converted to Christianity, thus following the conventional structure of the saint's legend.

The mass witness to the Christian faith is a set-piece which relies on the recording of the conversion of thousands of pagan people. The *Golden Legend* states: 'Than were there well xv. thousande men baptyseed without women and chylidren.'<sup>48</sup> However, it is not until this point that the paganism of Silene has been emphasised. The evil of idolatrous worship is a theme which is not mentioned, let alone laboured, and paganism is not condemned. It is significant that when the maiden exhorts the saint to leave her to her fate, she says: 'for goddes sake good knyght goo your waye....'<sup>49</sup> It is as if the redactor has forgotten the importance of the princess being a pagan and this underlines how tensions are created between the established elements of the hagiographic and romance genres. Indeed, the people emerge very sympathetically from the depiction of the town as frightened victims of a rapacious dragon: they are not presented as deluded pagans. The king's provenance is one of romance; he is not the stereotypical representative of the idolatrous ruler who demands pagan worship from a Christian in many a saint's legend. St George says that if the people believe in Christ and are baptised then he will

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<sup>47</sup> *GL* folio C ix; *GL* vol.ii p.203.

<sup>48</sup> *GL* vol iii p.128.

<sup>49</sup> *GL. ibid.*

slay the dragon. The saint makes a condition but for the desperate townsfolk this will be sufficient persuasion: 'Than saynt George sayd to theym: Ne doubte ye no thyng, without more byleue ye in god, Ihesu cryst, and doo ye to be baptyseed and I shall slee the dragon.'<sup>50</sup> This statement shows the saint's authority familiar to the hagiographic genre and it also stresses the importance to the Christian of the symbolic sacrament of baptism, the redemptive power of Christ and a belief in the life to come. It represents for the people a new beginning with a new faith. The saint's refusal of the reward of money is an explicit rejection of worldly values and his instructions to the king to take charge of the churches, honour the priests and have compassion for the poor further indicate the hagiographic focus of the narrative at the end where the Silenians' paganism is made a crucial point and their conversion effectively brings the accretion to a conclusion. It would appear that it is the physical act of dealing with the dragon which has so impressed the people that they will believe anything the saint suggests. Paganism has been supplanted by a superior power but it has been demonstrated as working through a brave knight who is imbued with the qualities of a romance hero. The ambivalence of the function and role of the dragon concomitant with the ambiguity of the protagonist's role throws into prominence the pull between the two genres.

A comparison with other redactions of the legend reveals a similar tension between romance and hagiography. In his *Festial*, Mirk applies to the dragon the epithet 'horribull' (the *Golden Legend* omits this) which is an indication of a horror and revulsion evoked by evil for the word had a greater intensity in Middle English than it has today.<sup>51</sup> However, this is not developed. It may be argued that since the dragon is frequently an archetypal, theological symbol of evil, it would be recognised as such and so the fight would be viewed as a symbolic representation of the continuous conflict between Christianity and evil. Of all the dragons in the three main versions of the legend I have dealt with, the behaviour of Mirk's dragon is most like

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<sup>50</sup> *GL* *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> See Chapter 3, footnote 18.



that of a romance dragon: '....þe horrybull best put vp his hed, spytyng out fure, and proferet batayll to George.'<sup>52</sup> This presents a visual picture of an aggressive monster which is physically active and the effect is highlighted by the vulnerability of the maiden, expressed in her own words: 'Gentyll kniȝt, well may I be of heuy chere, þat am a kyngys doghtyr of þys cyte, and am sette here forto be deuoured anon of an horrybull dragon þat haþe eton þe chyldyr of þys cyte.'

<sup>53</sup> This part of the narrative is straight from romance with the chivalrous knight responding to the plight of the maiden; these elements of the story run counter to the two, stark opening statements: 'Good men and woymen such a day ȝe schull haue þe fest of Saynt George. Þe wheche day ȝe schull come to holy chyrch, in worschyp of God and þat holy martyr George þat boȝt his day full dere.'<sup>54</sup>

However, in all the versions I have been looking at, the saint's signing of the cross would appear to confirm that this is an evil force and not merely a huge and deadly monster with which the protagonist has to contend. Nevertheless, the attempt to amalgamate the romance topos of the heroic fight with a hagiographic topos which symbolises in general terms the scriptural confrontation of the forces of good and evil or more particularly paganism produces profound weaknesses which cannot be resolved.

The underlying tensions are created largely by the interaction of saint and dragon in the fight but these tensions disappear once the dragon departs from the narrative, carted out of the city in four waggons, a motif familiar to saints' legends. The saint then assumes the role of the Christian preacher and his function as a knight diminishes, allowing for the hagiographic focus to sharpen and the conflicting undercurrents to be resolved. However, what does distinguish the saint from the romance hero and this applies more particularly to the *Golden Legend* account is the authority which he exercises and which seems to emanate not just from physical strength and

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<sup>52</sup> Mirk's *Festial*, p.133 ll. 26-27.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* p.133 ll.18-21.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.* pp.132-3 ll. 32-33.....1-2.

courage but from a higher authority, from God. The hagiographic focus develops slowly as his influence and his supremacy is stamped on events during the narrative and it emerges for the first time just before he takes on the monster : '....fayre doughter doubte ye no thyng herof,'<sup>55</sup> he says with the conviction of the saint and this supremacy becomes more insistent as the narrative proceeds. This phrase, 'doubte ye no thyng...' is repeated later on when the saint enjoins the multitude of people to convert.<sup>56</sup> His commanding role finds its expression whenever he speaks and in particular once the dragon has been overcome. But ambivalences are created here as the saint fights as a medieval romance hero, yet simultaneously acknowledging a divine authority. The protagonist functions as both knight and saint, but inconsistently in both roles, until the later part of the legend when the hagiographic topoi underpin more strongly the saint's role and his chivalric image becomes non-existent .

In the St George legend, the killing of the dragon occupies a central position and the effects dominate the subsequent events, unlike the killing of the dragon in the romance. That it is given a unique importance within the account of the saint's life may suggest that this episode is more than a routine conquering of a monster but the occasion is so imbued with the trappings of romance that the episode creates expectations which hover between the two. Our instinctive expectation is that this is a fight of specific Christian significance because the knight is a saint but our interpretation of the topos as being that of romance contradicts this expectation, for the physicality of the action is emphasized when St George, 'rode hardely agaynst the dragon whiche came towards hym, and smote hym with his spere and hurte hym sore and threwe hym to the grounde.'<sup>57</sup> It is evident that the story of St George and the dragon could be edited without losing or diminishing the hagiographic didacticism, indeed it may be argued that a judicious pruning may create a more consistent hagiographic message. The shortened version could be

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<sup>55</sup> *GL* vol. iii p.128.

<sup>56</sup> *GL* *ibid*.

<sup>57</sup> *GL* *ibid*.

summarised as follows: the saint, by making the sign of the cross, conquers the dragon who is terrifying the people. The people are so impressed with the saint they convert to Christianity. This is the basic pattern of most episodes of saints' legends featuring a dragon; by omitting the maiden and the physical encounter with the beast, both familiar romance topoi, the existent tensions between two conflicting genres will be eradicated. The saint, the dragon, the dragon-fight and the maiden are set in a context which has also more in common with romance than hagiography and, for that reason, this background plays a significant part in creating a legend which has no consistent register.

It is the community to which I want to turn now because it sets the initial context of romance and therefore it also interferes with the original hagiographic intent, signalled by the opening etymological explanations of the saint's name. The town or city held to ransom, which is featured in saints' legends, is a topos found in romance and in other genres.<sup>58</sup> This fear which grips the people of Silene represents a large proportion of the narrative considering the brevity of this medieval addition. The background paints a picture of a hierarchical society subject to a system of lots; 'were he gentle or poor', social position was no protection when the lot fell on a child or young person. This is a traditional feature of romance, myth and folklore and is used to engineer a dramatic and affective situation. When the king is confronted by the angry populace because he pleads exemption for his daughter, there are indications of a community beginning to disintegrate, of a social system which is under threat. The king pleads with the people: 'and demaunded viij dayes respyte, and they graunted hit to hym.'<sup>59</sup> The vulnerability of the royal family places the king's power in jeopardy and the wrath of the people gives them power over the king. The desperation and the anger of the community, caused by the loss of livestock, but now, more gravely and desperately, by the relentless loss of their children, exemplifies the destructive effects of evil on the town. It is not until the saint kills the dragon that peace and harmony can

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<sup>58</sup> The Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* captures the fear which oppresses the communal life in Heorot where the warriors wait each night for the monster Grendel who takes them away one by one and devours them.

<sup>59</sup> *GL* vol.iii p.127.

be restored in the community, which is now founded on the enduring values of the Christian faith. Before this happens, the people, stricken by fear, run into the country to hide when the dragon is brought within the city walls: 'alas alas we shall be all deed'<sup>60</sup> they cry, for they are not convinced the saint will be successful.

The king's tears of grief are recorded, as are his endearments, but significantly there is a more worldly concern: 'Now shall I neuer see thyn espousayls,' he says,<sup>61</sup> which is almost identical with the words in the *Gilte Legende*. The *Speculum Sacerdotale* also records the king's sorrow but includes this telling remark: 'Alas, douȝtur, swete derlyng, for I trowid to haue seen come of the kyngis children and the blode of kyngis to haue holden forp'<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the preoccupation with the producing of heirs is a feature of romance where marriage, kinship and the blood line are instrumental in the achievement and retention of power. Susan Crane has emphasised the importance of such parental concerns: 'The idea that children double their parents' lives, by stressing continuity rather than disjunction between generations, validates the principle of land inheritance.'<sup>63</sup> Certainly, such preoccupations lie with many romance protagonists and these temporal concerns with heirs, land and possessions instigate and determine the plot of *Octavian* and the romance hero, Bevis, does not rest until his inheritance and his status are restored to him. While these secular concerns are not of significance to the story line of the St George legend as they are to many romances, they do signal the values of the narrative at this stage.

The *Golden Legend* reflects, to a lesser extent, the affective style of the *Legenda Aurea*; the emotion revealed in the grieving relationship between father and daughter has a prominence which hagiography would not give to characters who have no real involvement with the saint at

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<sup>60</sup> GL vol. iii p.128.

<sup>61</sup> GL vol. iii p.127.

<sup>62</sup> *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p.131 ll. 31-32.

<sup>63</sup> Crane, *Insular Romance*, p.89.

this point: 'Then dyd the kyng doo araye his daughter lyke as she shold be wedded, and embraced hyr and kyssed her.....'<sup>64</sup>

The description of the commoners who are shown also to be grief-stricken and terrified creates another dimension to the story and it is one which, in its detail and intensity, would be excluded from hagiography. These are essentially background characters at this stage whose views might well have been put into indirect speech but their robust rhetoric gives drama to their exchanges with the king: '...how syr ye haue made and ordeyned the lawe, and our chyltren ben now deed and now ye wold doo the contrarye your daughter shal be gyuen, or ellys we shall brenne you and your houses.'<sup>65</sup> Their response to the dragon's threat extends the story and widens the focus to embrace concerns which are not customary in the saint's legend. The personal suffering of the populace is highlighted, inviting an empathetic response which undermines the purpose and the tone of the hagiographic account because it foregrounds those things which are not important, seen in the light of eternity, and distracts from the central character, the saint.

In keeping with the temporal concerns of this community, St George is offered a reward for killing the dragon: significantly it is a huge sum of money which the saint refuses and then gives to the poor, providing a neat parallel with the attempt of the king to bribe the commoners to let his daughter live. This is a worldly society which sets store by money and values which are found in romance, whereas saints' lives are an inversion of the temporal and their martyrdoms reinforce this. Caxton's version of the accretion ends with '... and after he kyssed the kyng and departed' and the original passion follows at once with 'Now it happed that in the tyme of dyoclesyen and maxymen....'<sup>66</sup> There is no linking of the two parts, for immediately the scene shifts backwards in time to the early centuries of the Christian church and the persecution of its

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<sup>64</sup> *GL* vol. iii p.127.

<sup>65</sup> *GL* *ibid*.

<sup>66</sup> *GL* vol.iii p.129.

members. The preliminary part of the accretion is largely made up of elements drawn from medieval romance and folklore: the drawing of lots, the imminent sacrifice of the princess and the subsequent dragon-fight in which the knight successfully dispatches the beast and saves the king's daughter. Historical time is irrelevant; the narrative has the timeless quality of romance: 'On a tyme he came in to the prouince of Lybye...' <sup>67</sup>, reminiscent of the stereotypical opening of romance and fairy tale, 'Once upon a time...' By contrast, the passion is placed in the specific time of Diocletian and Maximian's persecution of the Christians: 'within a month were martyred well twenty-two thousand...' <sup>68</sup> Thus, a historical context is deliberately provided at the beginning of this part as if to signal that this is an authentic, verifiable event which has been recorded as part of the history of the making of the early Christian church. Clearly, the accounts of the passions of saints adopt the New Testament practice of providing an historical and also a political background against which the protagonist moves and which has significance for him or her. St Matthew's Gospel's account of Jesus' birth begins: *Cum ergo natus esset Iesus in Bethlehem Iuda in diebus Herodis regis...* (2 v.i BV) Luke's account is similar in style: *Factum est autem in diebus illis, exiit edictum a Caesare Augusto ut describeretur universus orbis.* (2 v.1 BV).

Opportunities have been taken to increase the romance elements in the legend, particularly in the *Legenda Aurea*, but ironically, on occasions when the text could be used to exploit symbolism for hagiographic purposes the symbolism remains implicit. The latent symbolism and theological imagery rise to the surface of the narrative, only to disappear again. The images are ones which would be familiar to a medieval reader or congregation but either they have not been developed or they do not occur in contexts which confirm their established interpretation.

The image of water echoes and re-echoes in the narrative. In *Speculum Sacerdotale* the

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<sup>67</sup> *GL* vol.iii p.126.

<sup>68</sup> *GL* vol.iii p.129.

dragon's lair is 'a ryuoure like to the see' <sup>69</sup> or in Caxton 'a stagne or a ponde lyke a see' <sup>70</sup> from which the dragon emerges to wreak havoc on the people. This association of the dragon with water is archetypal: it could prevent a community from drawing an essential supply of water by occupying or guarding a spring or well. The second connotation of water is implicit, but the sacrament of baptism which the thousands of townspeople undertake is the first important ritual in their conversion from paganism to Christianity and the dragon can be interpreted as an evil force preventing the people's admission to the faith. The third association of water occurs in *Speculum Sacerdotale* as it does in the *Golden Legend*, towards the end when from the church altar 'sprynge a rynnynge welle, þe licoure of whiche helpeþ yche seke man þat receyueþ it.' <sup>71</sup> Caxton's account refers to this running water as 'lyuyng water' <sup>72</sup> and also states its healing properties. The reference to 'living water' is taken from St John's Gospel, where Christ says to a woman at the well: *Omnis qui bibit ex aqua hac, sitiet iterum; qui autem biberit ex aqua quam ego dabo ei, non sitiet in aeternum: sed aqua quam ego dabo ei, fiet in eo fons aquae salientis in vitam aeternum.* (4 vv.13-14 BV) This makes a specific connection with the sacrament of baptism, the hope of eternal life implicit in the commitment to the Christian faith. However, healing water is also a feature of romance for Bevis renews his flagging strength in a holy well during his fight with the dragon, although Bevis is physically refreshed, not spiritually, and this difference is significant. Nevertheless, there is no attempt in the St George legend to suggest a profounder implication although the image of the 'running water' invites a contrast with the stagnant water or the river in which the death-dealing dragon lives, each reference, at the beginning and at the end respectively, creating a sense of progress from evil to good, from

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<sup>69</sup> *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p.130 l.32.

<sup>70</sup> *GL* vol.iii p.126.

<sup>71</sup> *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p.133 ll.4-5

<sup>72</sup> *GL* vol.iii p.128.

turmoil to order, from death to eternal life. So, while the images of water form integral links connecting the structure of the didactic message, these connections are implicit only. While the writer has seized on the opportunities to expand the romance elements of the legend, he has ignored the spiritual resonances.

The *Legenda Aurea* and Caxton's translation are marked predominantly by differences in intensity of tone and the use of detail but in other respects the translation follows the sources except that there is an addition in the last paragraph of Caxton's version which honours St George as 'patrone of this royaume of Englonde and the crye of men of warre'.<sup>73</sup> This is a significant inclusion because it reveals that Caxton saw the saint not only as a medieval knight, and an inspiration to the ordinary soldier but also as belonging to the English. Other vernacular writers writing in the fifteenth century celebrate these popular aspects of the saint and their presentations enhance further the saint's image as the chivalric knight. John Lydgate (1370-c-1451) stresses the qualities of the saint as the ideal *miles christi* in his poem, *The Legend of St George*. While Lydgate follows the narrative pattern of the *Legenda Aurea*, the saint is given prominence as 'Crystes owen knight' in his fight against: 'þe feond', 'þe worlde, þe flesshe'.<sup>74</sup> The poem reflects Caxton's additional paragraph in a commemoration of the saint's renown for Lydgate says with some pride how Edward, King of England, founded the Garter in the saint's honour. As Lydgate reiterates the important influence the saint has on English soldiers, the saint becomes fixed as an English medieval knight:

'....howe he is protectour and patrour,  
 Dis hooly martir, of knighthood loodsterre,  
 To Englisshe men boope in pees and werre.' (ll. 5-7)

The poet focuses on not only the saint's chivalric heritage but also on his close relationship with the Virgin 'oure ladyes owen knyght' which is also a motif in the lyric, *A carol of*

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<sup>73</sup> *GL* vol. iii p.133.

<sup>74</sup> John Lydgate, *The Minor Poems*, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, EETS, ES, 107 (London, 1911), l.20.



*St George*, discussed above. Because *St George* is presented as England's patronal saint who has been present at the Crusades, his presence as the stereotypical protagonist of the saint's legend becomes more problematic. Nevertheless, while he resembles in some aspects the knightly hero of romance, like *Bevis* or *Guy* who each fight a dragon, Lydgate does state that *St George's* victory over the dragon is a demonstration of Christ's power. Lydgate attempts to balance the claims of romance and hagiography:

'How God þis martyr list to magnefye,

And him to enhaunce thourghe his Chiuallye.' (ll. 125-126)

However, within these two lines the poet clothes the hagiographic martyr as a chivalric hero. Throughout the poem the extended chivalric metaphor dominates, heightening those elements of romance already seen in the *Legenda Aurea* and Caxton's version. The balancing of the ethos of romance with that of hagiography, that is the active chivalric hero of romance with the dragon-slaying saint, becomes more complex as the image of the saint as a medieval knight becomes rooted in England's heritage and he is identified as a member of the chivalric order. The frequent use of the image of the chivalric knight is seen not only in the saint's legend and of course in romance itself but also in sermon, homily and religious treatise.

William Dunbar's religious lyric, *The Resurrection of Christ* illustrates the influence of the chivalric world and its imagery on medieval writing, although his poem it is not specifically about the saint. The theme is the redemption of mankind and the harrowing of hell depicted in metaphorical terms. The fight itself with Christ, the 'campioun', is also reminiscent of *St George's* fight with the dragon thus showing the widespread importance of the nation's patron saint as a chivalric figurehead and one who comes to be looked on as a hero. Although the saint's confrontation hovers between the 'real' and the 'symbolic', the metaphorical treatment of this episode in Christ's life illustrates how the fight against the devil was seen in terms of Christ, as the attacking chivalric knight, a point also made in Chapter 2. The poem underlines the popularity of the world of chivalry and the heroic knight as providing action and entertainment and it also shows the potentiality of an image, also seen developed and extended along individual lines in

the *Ancrene Wisse* and *Piers Plowman* and in the poem below, *The Resurrection of Christ* by William Dunbar.

'Done is a batell on the dragon blak;  
 Our campioun Chryst confoundit hes his force:  
 The yettis of hell ar brokin with a crak,  
 The signe triumphall rasit is of the croce,  
 The divillis trymmillis with hiddous voce,  
 The saulis ar borrowit and to the blis can go,  
 Chryst with his blud our ransonis dois indoce:  
*Surrexit Dominus de sepulchro.*'<sup>75</sup>

Here, the dragon is clearly equated with the evil of Satan, for the next verse begins: 'Dungin is the deidly Lucifer...' and the liberated souls are described as being the fettered 'presoneris' of the dragon whose evil is represented by the colours 'blak' and the cross is the victory sign. This is the conventional imagery for the harrowing of hell which culminates in the slaughter of the dragon, who, as in hagiography, is the symbolic embodiment of evil.

The chivalric world impacts on the legend of St George and upon the medieval perception of Christ as mankind's champion, Alexander Barclay's poem, a translation of the '*Georgius*' by Baptista Spagnuoli, 'the Mantuan', printed shortly after 1515 under the title, *The Life of St George*, presents a saint as the epitome of chivalric life. It is a long poem, for Barclay himself has made additions to the original so that with the inclusion of the saint's passion, it runs to over 2,700 lines. The poem shows how the basic legend has been embellished with descriptive detail of scene and emotion and didactic interpolations added. Spagnuoli, like Caxton, took the *Legenda Aurea* as his source but has used pagan gods, often individually named, to provide an unfavourable contrast with the vigour and effectiveness of St George and the power of Christianity. For instance, the saint's bravery and fighting skills exceed those of the heroes of

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<sup>75</sup> William Dunbar, *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose*, ed. Douglas Gray (Oxford, 1985), pp.315-6.

classical mythology, Hercules or Mars, thus suggesting the saint's superhuman qualities. Also, whereas Christ responds to St George's prayers, the pagan gods are silent, although they are shown in a meeting, led by Minerva actively planning to frustrate and destroy Christianity. Curiously, the reason for the dragon's appearance in Silene is stated as being uncertain, an authorial stance at odds with hagiographic tradition:

' It is thyng secrete and very harde to tell  
 Whether god had sende suche plage for punysshment  
 Or it were done by damnyd spirites of hell  
 Or by the bodyes of the fyrmament  
 But in this mater I wyll nat argument  
 But to be brefe this deedly dongyon  
 Brought forth a monstre a great and foule dragon.' (ll. 505-511) <sup>76</sup>

The dragon, portrayed unusually as a female beast, can be interpreted in three possible ways, each given by the author: she has been divinely sent as a punishment or she is an embodiment of hell or the result of planetary influence. And yet each possibility suggested to the reader suggests a provenance for the monster which has metaphysical implications. However, the detailed description of the dragon, her repulsiveness and strength, occasion the means by which the bravery of the saint is extolled and it is in the creation of a handsome, chivalric hero, worthy of imitation, that the emphasis of the poem lies. Indeed in a didactic exhortation, Barclay uses the example of the saint to rouse idle English young men to emulate the saint's good works. The dragon is killed straightaway and this is watched by the multitude so that the impact of the heroic fight can be mythologised. There is a greater concentration on the paganism of the people and of the maiden, which allows for the saint to lecture them on their blindness and to promote the true faith. In this poem paganism is a hagiographic feature which is developed as an overtly didactic lesson and explored in a dramatic way. The people pray to their gods to advance the

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<sup>76</sup> Alexander Barclay, *The Life of St George*, EETS, OS, 230 (London, 1955).

saint's honour; Alcyone, the named princess, believes she will become a goddess if she is killed by the dragon, and the idols are cast down after the mass conversion. Interestingly, the saint is offered the princess in marriage but refuses because he insists on a life of chastity and then those poisoned by the dragon are made whole again by the holy water. But while this version is deliberately constructed along innovative lines, the earlier versions of the legend follow more closely the narrative established by the *Legenda Aurea*.

From the brief examination above, the different versions of St George's legend have developed and exploited different aspects of the narrative, although most later versions are dependent primarily on the emphasis on the saint as a medieval chivalric knight/saint, whose iconographic image supported this. The impact of the legend of St George on popular literature of all kinds is clear; the saint as a chivalric knight has been viewed as an appropriate protagonist for romance and its total adaptation to hagiographic conventions would have to deny those very elements which had long constituted the story's interest.<sup>77</sup> The image of the dragon-slayer becomes less and less able to be controlled within the confines of the saint's legend. I believe that while the *Golden Legend* and the *Legenda Aurea* showed the emergence of conflicting topoi, other later writers and redactors working from these popular texts and possibly seeing in them a release from the standard hagiographic format, departed from it, thus setting the legend further along the path to romance.

While the genres of hagiography and romance cannot be regarded as being mutually exclusive and while there is a cross-fertilization of literary conventions and topoi which can be accommodated successfully within either genre, I would maintain that, in spite of the modification of his sources, Caxton's translation of the legend of St George still reveals tensions between the two genres. The etymological explanations of the saint's name point to a hagiographic account but the opening of the narrative reflects the milieu of romance: the plot, the focus on royal

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<sup>77</sup> John E. Matzke has argued that there is a fusion between the respective romance and hagiographic traditions to be found in *Bevis* and the St George legend and has traced the latter's development into a romance: "'The Legend of Saint George"; its development into a roman d'aventure.' *PMLA* 19 (1904), 449-478.

characters and the absence of the saint as protagonist suggest a development of the story along the lines of romance. Also, the descriptive and affective tone, while not the sole prerogative of romance, is concentrated on the king and the princess and on the commoners. The sympathetic attention of the reader or listener is demanded for people who are suffering from the despoilation and predatory demands of the dragon and yet, in the overall hagiographic scheme of the story, it can be argued that their plight is ephemeral, as is their importance. Caxton's *Life of S. Matthew* in the *Golden Legend* provides an effective contrast in the way in which the narrator states objectively how the eponymous saint dealt with two dragons: 'the enchauntours were comen with two dragons, which caste fyre & sulphur by theyr mouthes and nostethrellys, and slewe alle the men. Thenne the Appostle garnyssed hym with the signe of the Crosse and went out surely to them. And anone as these dragons sawe hym, anone they cam and slept at his feet. Theune sayd Mathewe to the enchauntours where is your craftte awake them if ye maye.'<sup>78</sup> There is no attempt to describe the suffering caused by the dragons or to single out from the people individuals whose misfortune might be exploited affectively. The simple economy of the passage and the muted way in which the episode is concluded, the dragons falling to sleep immediately, indicate a concern to include salient elements only. Throughout, the lack of descriptive detail distinguishes it from the legend of St George.

At the heart of the tensions between romance and hagiography is the fight between a saint who has been subsumed in part by the role of chivalric hero and a dragon which is largely from romance and not from hagiography. The topos itself has been extended to include the town's past and present attempts to placate the dragon. Because of the foregrounding of characters who are irrelevant to the legend's didacticism, the opening and first part of the account resembles more the Greek myth of the encounter between Perseus and the dragon which celebrates the heroic rescue of the beautiful maiden, Andromeda, which is rewarded by marriage. Not surprisingly what should be the main thrust of the St George legend, the salvation

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<sup>78</sup> *GL folio CC lxxxv; GL vol.v p.151.*

of souls, is supplanted largely by the rescue of the king's daughter. Not until later is the hagiographic course established. The dragon-fight topos lends itself to embellishment and development as few other topoi do and therefore there is a danger that its use in hagiography may exceed the boundaries of appropriateness and so put a strain on the integrity of the legend. The influence of the romance dragon fight convention has its attendant dangers in the depiction of the saint as the chivalric hero whose role is not the symbolic '*miles christi*' but the errant knight confronting a challenge to be resolved by weapons and not by the cross. Clearly, what characterizes the St George legend is the recognition of the demands of established hagiographic conventions which are then compromised by the introduction of romance topoi.

## CHAPTER 5 - SAINT MARGARET

The legend of St Margaret was being disseminated in Europe from the late eighth century. Rabanus Maurus was the first to include her feast day (July 13th) in his Latin martyrology of the ninth century but it was under the name of Marina that her life and martyrdom were familiar to the Byzantine Church. The legend of St Margaret became increasingly popular in England during the Middle Ages when numerous churches were dedicated to her. She was an important saint whose feast day was designated a holy day on which only essential agricultural work was permitted. Many accounts of her life and martyrdom exist, in Latin, French and other vernaculars but there is no authentic account of her passion and indeed her existence has been called into question; in 1969, her name was removed from the Roman Catholic Calendar of Saints. St Margaret's passion follows the conventional pattern of saints of the early church who suffered during the joint rule of Diocletian and Maximian in the first decade of the fourth century, saints whose staunch refusal to worship pagan gods incurred the wrath of the Roman leaders who used torture to persuade the saints to change their minds and whose stories end with their martyrdom and the mass conversion to Christianity of those who witnessed their deaths. In most, but not all, versions of her passion the imprisoned Margaret endures the sudden appearance of a horrific dragon which swallows her but, confronted by the sign of the cross, he bursts open, allowing her to make a spectacular escape, unharmed. The 1483 folio edition of Caxton's *Golden Legend* illustrates her emergence from out of the back of what appears to be a hollow dragon. This episode is a significant one in the events which lead up to her martyrdom and so St Margaret is often depicted in art accompanied by a dragon and carrying the cross which saved her. Although many saints and not just martyrs encounter dragons and deal with them successfully, St Margaret appears to be unique in being swallowed by such a monster.

Like the addition of the dragon to the St George legend, this episode must have ensured the popularity of this saint's life, although it proved to be an embarrassing inclusion for some of the clergy. Many of the earliest versions feature these supernatural elements, the dragon, the

devouring and the black demon, although the Latin version of St Margaret's life in BL, Cotton Caligula A. viii includes the dragon, but he does not swallow the saint. The Latin versions of her legend drew on the original Greek texts and a Greek version, ascribed to Metaphrastus, omits the demon, while the dragon is presented in a vision, as he also appears in the Latin Rebendorf version.<sup>1</sup> The 'pre-Mombritius' Latin account of the saint's passion provides the basis for the two extant Old English texts and the ninth century Latin Mombritius version itself also makes a very significant contribution to accounts in the vernacular. It is in Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, written in the latter part of the twelfth century, that the reader is warned that the swallowing of the saint is '*apocryphum et frivolum*' but nevertheless the compiler includes it. The *Legenda Aurea* reads sparsely and unemotionally, '*.....et ecce draco immanissimus ibidem apparuit, qui dum eam devoraturus impeteret, signum crucis edidit et ille evanuit, vel, ut alibi legitur, os super caput ejus ponens et linguam super calcaneum porrigens eam protinus deglutivit, sed dum eam absorbere vellet, signo crucis se munivit et ideo draco virtute crucis crepuit et virgo illaesa exivit. Istud autem, quod dicitur de draconis devoratione et ipsius crepatione, apocryphum et frivolum reputatur.*'<sup>2</sup> Mirk's *Festial*, while including the attempt of the dragon to swallow the saint, describes him as having her head in his mouth when he bursts in two: 'Then anon come þer out of a hyrne of þe prison a gret horryble dragon and ȝeonet on her, so þat his mowthe was on her hed, and his tong last downe to her hele, and he wold haue swolyt her. And when he had her al yn hys mowth, Margret anan made þe sygne of þe cros, and anon þe dragon barst on-sondyr.'<sup>3</sup>

The most detailed account of the dragon and its swallowing of the saint which capitalizes on this part of the story is the version of the legend found in the thirteenth century text in the

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<sup>1</sup> An examination of the treatment of the Latin versions of the legend of St Margaret and a comparison between these and the Old English versions are given in Mary Clayton and Hugh Magennis: *The Old English Lives of Saint Margaret* (Cambridge, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> *Legenda Aurea*, Cap. XCIII, p.401.

<sup>3</sup> *Festial*, p.200.



Katherine Group and it is this text in which I am interested.<sup>4</sup> The Latin source from which this version is adapted is the Mombritius version which describes the dragon's physical appearance in considerable detail when most versions do not. However, the writer of the Katherine Group text, while retaining the colour and vividness of the source, increases the horror of the beast's presence and the terror he inspires.

Although St Margaret's passion poses different problems from the accretion to the St George legend it, too, possesses underlying tensions which are created by uncertainties of focus. In general, when established hagiographic conventions are modified or even changed or their emphases altered, then the underlying direction of the original hagiographic thrust can threaten the coherence of the new perspective. The accretion to the St George legend swings between the ethos of romance and that of hagiography and unsettles the hagiographic focus. However, the Katherine Group text develops ambiguities because the emphasis is on Margaret's overwhelming concern to protect the purity of both body and soul, not only from the threats of Olibrius and his henchmen but also from weaknesses inherent in her own sexuality. She fears her own human frailty may result in her capitulation to the devil. The problems, originating with the presentation of the saint's temptation overlying the theme of paganism, reach a climax with the manifestation of the dragon. My interest in the legend lies principally in the way in which the dragon in particular, but also the black demon, both long-established in the passion of St Margaret, have been used and adapted by the author whose intent is to foreground the virginal state. The basic structure of the passion is not altered and many of the hagiographic conventions which celebrate martyrdom are in place, but the emphasis on the value of virginity creates a different focus which, at times, will not be accommodated easily within the framework of the familiar, hagiographic martyrdom. Caxton's version, based closely on the *Legenda Aurea*, makes a useful comparison with the twelfth century text for it follows the basic hagiographic pattern. It focuses on the passion of a young girl whose faith cannot be shaken by threat, torture or

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<sup>4</sup> The text to which I shall refer is entitled *Sainte Marherete, Pe Meiden ant Martyr* ed. Frances Mack from MS. Bodley 34, Oxford, EETS, OS, 193 (1934). Although Mack's title uses the spelling 'Marherete', this form of the saint's name is not used in MS. Bodley 34 where 'Margarete' is used.

ferocious beast, a familiar hagiographic theme. It is about St Margaret who holds fast to Christianity although surrounded on all sides by unbelievers and opposed by pagans who are in authority over her. The strength of the young girl is supported by Christ himself during her many tortures. There are here the oppositional forces exemplified in the battle of wills between the saint and the pagan ruler and the saint and the black demon who has hoped to persuade her to paganism, between the only true faith and false gods, between spiritual and temporal power.

The earlier female martyrs' struggles were not against sexual temptation but mainly against paganism and any attacks on virginity were not concerned with concupiscence but symbolized the state of their souls. However, the Katherine Group text from the thirteenth century gives a prominence to the vulnerability of the virgin state from the start. In the opening there is an indication that martyrdom for the Christian faith does not have the immediacy in the thirteenth century that it had in the early church for the author remarks that the numbers of infidels are fewer: 'þe 3et weren monie ma þene nu beon mis-bileuede men, þe heheden and hereden heþene maume<sub>3</sub>, of stanes & of stockes wrecches iwrahte.' <sup>5</sup> However, it is within the parameters of the struggle between Christianity and paganism that the author then turns to that which interests him, the promulgation of the ideals of the virgin life, the state of virginity being emphasised as being the virtue dearest to God. Significantly, while *Hali Meidhad*, another text which forms part of the Katherine Group, resorts to a vehement depiction of the trials of marriage and the horrors of childbirth, the redactor of St Margaret's passion makes clear at the beginning he is writing for the widows and the married as well as for virgins: 'widewen wið þa iweddede, & te meidnes nomeliche lusten swiðe 3eorliche hu ha schulen luuien þe liuiende lauerd & libben i meidhad....' <sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, his purpose is to promote and commemorate virginity and the saint is then introduced as 'þurh þet eadie meiden þe we munneð to-dei wið meidhades menske' <sup>7</sup> She

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p.2 ll.11-13.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p.4 ll. 8-10.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p.4 ll. 11-12.

is presented in this version as an exemplar of the virginal state, which she courageously advocates, and her testimony to the Christian faith is inseparable from this.

In the Middle Ages women were always characterized by their marital status as virgins, wives or widows. A woman's physical relationship, or lack of such a relationship with a man, determined her status. Historically, women were linked physiologically with matter rather than spirit (*animus*) for, according to Aristotle, in reproduction they provided the material, the womb, in which men implanted the spirit. Caroline Walker Bynum argues that this scientific association with the corporeal, as well as cultural and biological associations, gives medieval female piety a somatic quality. As Christ's incarnation was realized through a woman, the female religious approached the Godhead through Christ's humanity which was also demonstrated by his bodily suffering on the cross. Although mystical empathy with the crucified Christ was not an experience unique to women, nevertheless, it was much more common among them, giving female piety its own special significance. Nevertheless, Bynum makes plain the derogatory connotations of 'body' with 'woman': 'It is also clear that theological, scientific and folk traditions associated women with body, lust, weakness and irrationality, men with spirit or reason or strength.'<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding, Bynum argues against such simplistic, misogynistic and dualist conclusions which were sometimes drawn from such concepts. She says that medieval thinkers also extrapolated 'an association of woman with the body or the humanity of Christ' and therefore they 'expected woman's expressiveness to be more physical and physiological than men's.'<sup>9</sup>

Henrietta Leyser also emphasizes the corporeal approach of the religious to Christ: 'The stress placed by women on a physicality that linked them in this, as in other ways, to Christ as man, gave them claims to be powerful conduits of his grace; as such they attracted veneration and reverence on the one hand, envy and suspicion on the other.'<sup>10</sup> Thus, paradoxically, by virtue

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<sup>8</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1992), p. 202.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* pp. 200-202.

<sup>10</sup> Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England, 450-1500* (London, 1995), pp. 216-217.

of her corporeal empathy, the pious woman achieved a nearness to God otherwise not within her reach.

In his study of virginity in the Middle Ages, John Bugge offers a view which contrasts with those critics like Bynum and Leyser who view female sanctity in corporeal terms and who see this as a feature which marks the difference between the male and female religious experience. He argues that the medieval Christian's approach to God meant a fight against the flawed physical nature of humankind and therefore, the 'body' could not be the means of nearing the Godhead. Bugge examines the concept of virginity which, he says, demanded an aggressive stance to be taken against evil. He argues that the concept does not distinguish between the sexes and woman, as does man, comes into the presence of the divine only by a fierce rebuttal of Satan. Clearly Margaret's physical attack on the black demon is consistent with the assault of the *miles christi* on the forces of evil: 'þet milde meiden Margarte<sup>e</sup> grap þet grisliche þing þet hire ne agras nawiht, & heteueste toc him bi þet eateliche top & hef him up & duste him dunriht to þer eorðe, ant sette hire riht-fot on his ruhe swire...' <sup>11</sup> This kind of robust, physical response to evil is the foundation of Christian gnosticism which looked on the created world as sinful and so humanity must fight its own flawed physical nature, the flesh, in order to combat evil, within and also without. <sup>12</sup> Bugge stresses that the 'soldier of Christ was essentially a virgin' and he refers to Origen: 'In Christian gnosis, Origen is an important spokesman for the view that the Christian soul is pitted against some kind of "embodied" evil, <sup>13</sup> either its own body or, more commonly, the person of the devil.' <sup>14</sup> Bugge states that virginity transformed women, empowering them and making them impregnable to the snares of the devil, which is borne out by the complaint of the

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<sup>11</sup> *Sainte Marherete*, p.28 ll. 9-13.

<sup>12</sup> See John Bugge, *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague, 1975), pp. 47-58.

<sup>13</sup> This is demonstrated clearly in the embodiments of evil in St Margaret's legend.

<sup>14</sup> John Bugge, p.48.

black demon to Margaret.<sup>15</sup> Bugge also recognises that virginity could be seen as transcending the gnostic dualistic principle so that in the legends of the Katherine Group, it is synonymous with Christianity itself.

Frances Beer's exploration of the role of the female saint in the Old English poems, *Juliana*, *Judith* and *Elene* not only contributes to our perception of the virgin saint as part of a hagiographic development but also, by demonstrating the qualities of the virgin saint in Old English, those different qualities are highlighted, which, in general, characterize St Margaret's virginity. Although, of the three, Juliana only was a virgin, all devoted their lives to chastity and she says that: 'far from being a passive virtue, it is a source of martial prowess, to be used in defeating the forces of evil.'<sup>16</sup> These three female saints are powerful, spirited and courageous and Beer stresses that they belong to a tradition of the warrior saint, one which she says became supplanted by the influence of *amour courtois* and the concomitant 'new eroticism'.<sup>17</sup> She says: 'All of these three women then, though chaste, are not valued chiefly for their chastity; rather, their chastity is valuable because it gives them added strength, and represents the power of their will.'<sup>18</sup> Both Bugge and Beer view the role of woman, and specifically the female virgin, as a martial one, as a fight against sin. When Margaret struggles physically with the demon and tramples him underfoot, it is as if, in this episode, she has inherited the traits of the Anglo-Saxon female saint.

Because the first appearance of the saint suggests a defencelessness and a vulnerability which provide the catalyst for a demonstration of the opposing values of virginity and sexuality,

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<sup>15</sup> Ferrante points out that in medieval exegesis, the whore was identified with heresy since in her unashamed exploitation of her 'superficial beauty' she became representative of the rejection of God and the embracement of idolatry, in contrast with the virgin whose state was synonymous with the true faith. Joan M. Ferrante, *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature, From the Twelfth Century to Dante* (Columbia, 1975), p.2.

<sup>16</sup> Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1992), p.59.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p.67.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p.64.

critics have fixed on the physical threat as being the focus of the episode. Unless we understand what virginity means for the saint in this text, in conjunction with its medieval, theological connotations, then, in Bugge's words, virginity becomes wholly 'sexualized' and the confrontation is reduced in significance. Such a reduced significance is indeed proposed by feminist critics like Caroline Innes-Parker who interpret the despoliation of the saint's body as a kind of 'gang-rape', the virgin saints being victims of male aggression and just because they will not submit to male hegemony.<sup>19</sup> She also sees the dragon's assault as 'a symbolic rape of the virgin as the dragon attempts to impose his lust upon her and consume her with it.'<sup>20</sup> While this interpretation has a certain validity, it denies the spirituality of the saint's experience, as I shall argue later. It also ignores the complexity of the dragon's symbolism. Innes-Parker sees virginity as conferring choice: the virgin has control over her earthly and heavenly destiny and, resisting the dictates of men, the submission to violence and death becomes a means of transformation and not destruction, the 'transformation of sexual attack into a symbol of empowerment...'<sup>21</sup> The focus is thus upon the saint as a forceful woman so diminishing the relationship of Margaret with Christ and his intervention in her suffering. In similar vein, according to Elizabeth Stuart: 'A vow of virginity in itself provokes desire and violence from men which women must resist again to the point of death.....'<sup>22</sup> Both Innes-Parker and Stuart view the passion and the events which lead up to it as an external physical threat to the virgin and neither interprets the dragon's attack as other than a demonic embodiment of Olibrius's lechery. Both critics regard the saint as facing physical rape from Olibrius, replicated in the symbolic threat from the dragon. Neither takes account of the implications behind the concept of virginity. They concentrate on the vulnerability of woman who must endure the violence of lustful man and view Margaret's rejection of Olibrius'

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<sup>19</sup> Caroline Innes-Parker, 'Sexual Violence and the Female Reader: Symbolic "Rape" in the Saints' Lives in the Katherine Group' *Women's Studies* 24 (1995), 205-217 (.209).

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p. 209 .

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p.211.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Stuart, *Spitting at Dragons: Towards a Feminist Theology of Sainthood* (London and New York, 1996), p.15.

offer of worldly status and wealth, her denunciation of paganism and Olibrius's lust as a defeat of the devil.

This antagonistic polarization of the sexes puts great emphasis on the vulnerability of the saint's physical intactness but ignores the theological implication of that virgin state which is clearly symbolic of the integrity of her Christian faith; by becoming the bride of Christ she testifies to a transcendent love which is greater than any to be found in a sexual relationship, let alone marriage to a pagan, as she tells Olibrius, when she is first summoned to him: 'Ich hehe", quod ha, "heh-feader, healent in heouene, & his deorwurde sune, lesu Crist hatte; & him ich habbe, meiden, mi meidhad i3ettet, & luuie to leofmon & leue ase lauerd.' "<sup>23</sup> Margaret's prayers reveal both her fear of Olibrius's lust, that is her physical vulnerability and also her own inner vulnerability. She fears the loss of her virginity and also her moral purity, as if both states are mutually dependent: for Margaret, the determined retention of her virginity confers upon her a unique power derived from Christ which is capable of triumphing over evil. How far the intact state was important to the medieval view of virginity is explored by Clarissa Atkinson and goes some way to explain Margaret's dual fears. Atkinson states that while the importance of intact virginity could not be denied, it was not the sole criterion. Indeed, she makes clear the extreme positions taken by the Church Fathers: 'At one extreme, virginity is understood as a physiological state.....At the other extreme, virginity is defined as a moral or spiritual state, as purity or humility, or that quality of spirit belonging to those whose primary relationship is with God. These two ways of looking at virginity, the physical and the moral, were present throughout the history of medieval Christianity, and they frequently overlapped, sometimes in the same thinker.' "<sup>24</sup> She instances the author of *Ancrene Riwe* and St Augustine who looked upon virginity as a spiritual state but significantly, both regarded the physical state as being a powerful symbol of the former.

In the latter part of the seventh century, Aldhelm, writing to Abbess Hildelith and her nuns

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<sup>23</sup> *Seinte Marherete*, p.8 ll. 24-27.

<sup>24</sup> Clarissa Atkinson, ' "Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass": The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages.' *Journal of Family History* 8 ( 1983), 133.

at Barking, quotes Didymus in praise of chastity which is more than the chaste life; it is the fount of faith: 'You have integrity, which is the queen of all virtues and the fruit of perpetual virginity. Virginity is the sister of the angels and the possession of all good things; virginity is victory over desires, the trophy of faith, a triumph over enemies and the surety of eternal life.'<sup>25</sup> This accords well with the passion of St Margaret and the events which lead up to it. In addition, the martial image at the beginning of *Seinte Marherete* from the Katherine Group reinforces the historic tradition for both male and female martyrs to be aggressively active in the cause of Christianity: 'icudde kempen, ouercomen & akeasten hare þreo cunne uan, þe ueont, & teos wake worit ant hare licomes lustes.....'<sup>26</sup>

However, the legend from the Katherine Group reflects the changing cultural associations of virginity over the century when the Christian recognized the battle was not with pagan authorities but with personal wickedness and the temptation to evil. Marina Warner points out that the 'Christian struggle now concentrated on the enemy within. And concupiscence, as Augustine had defined it, was the root of sin, and one of its principal manifestations was lust. Virginity and martyrdom became complementary ideas, and the physical subjection of the body to the pains and ordeals of ascetic discipline was an integral part of sanctity.'<sup>27</sup>

The *Legenda Aurea's* version of the legend, as does Caxton's, recognizes that Margaret was tempted but remained constant: '*Sic beata Margareta habuit virtutem contra effusionem sui sanguinis per constantiam, quia in suo martirio constantissima exstitit, contra cordis passionem, id est, daemonis tentationem per victoriam....*'<sup>28</sup> Following the conventions of virgin saints' passions, both narratives reveal the struggle between the pagan ruler and the saint over her

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<sup>25</sup> Aldhelm: *The Prose Works*, p.81.

<sup>26</sup> *Seinte Marherete*, p.2 ll.7-9.

<sup>27</sup> Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*, Picador edition (London, 1990), p.70.

<sup>28</sup> *Legenda Aurea*, T. Graesse, Cap. XCIII p.400.



tenacious refusal to adopt Olibrius's religion: there is no development or illustration of Margaret's '*cordis passionem*' (passion of the heart) which is referred to in the introductory paragraph of the *Legenda Aurea* and the implication is a general one, that Margaret did not succumb to temptation to renounce either her virginity or her faith. However, there are problems which are raised by the Katherine Group's redaction of Margaret's passion because of a specific emphasis on the spiritual self-doubt of the virgin within the hagiographic convention of the confrontation between paganism and Christianity.

The consistent emphasis in the Katherine Group legend is on the temptation of Margaret to yield to the attempts of either Olibrius or the devil to persuade or force her to renounce her life of chastity and also her faith, for the two are bound up together: ' "He haeuð his merke on me iseiled wið his inseil; ne mei vnc lif, ne deð noþer twemen otwa." ' <sup>29</sup> The black demon stresses that the corruption of virgins is especially pleasurable to him and his explanation of his methods shows that the pious priest or the devout anchoress is not immune from sexual temptation.<sup>30</sup> When the two 'clene' people are left alone together, the devil works his mischief: ' "Lihtliche on alre earest, wið luueliche lates, wið steape bihaldunge eïðer on oðer, & wið plohe-speche sputte to mare, se longe þet ha toggið & tollið to-gederes." ' The temptation to lust is presented as insidious and strong in the woman and the man also. However, while the theme of sexual temptation is apparent throughout, strain is put on the narrative's coherence for the nature of the saint's temptation and its relevance to the dragon's function remain ambivalent as is revealed by the differences of interpretation put forward by critics.

Elizabeth Robertson identifies the sexual temptation of Margaret as being at the heart of the legend. She argues that while the temptation of the male saint to carnality may be one of a variety of temptations to assail him, in female saints' passions it is the only temptation or it is the

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<sup>29</sup> *Seinte Marherete*, p.12 ll. 12-14.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p. 32 ll. 16-19.

prime focus.<sup>31</sup> She argues that, of all the three saints' passions in the Katherine Group, it is the passion of St Margaret which deals most fully with sexual temptation and also demonstrates that woman's redemption is shown to be possible through her innate corporeality: 'Central to the conception of sanctity presented in this work is an assumption that a woman's essentially corporeal nature determines both the nature of her confrontation with temptation and the means of her salvation.'<sup>32</sup> As women are physical beings, they must achieve their deliverance from the flesh through the very corporeality which is their weakness. Thus, Robertson sees the saint's avowal of her betrothal to Christ as transforming the temptation of lust into a spiritual longing for union with her Lord and it is through this relationship, expressed in overtly erotic language, that she achieves her redemption. Moreover, she claims that the bodily torture of the female saint provides another means by which she can redeem herself: 'women can overcome sexual temptation through the body- that is, through the endurance of extreme physical torture.'<sup>33</sup> Robertson ignores the fact that Margaret welcomes martyrdom and willingly undertakes the suffering of the flesh because she is repelled by Olibrius's lust, his paganism and his material offers. Further, Robertson does not take account of the similar hagiographic topos of the prolonged and varied tortures of male saints. Robertson's interpretation of the text is so gendered that the saint's experiences are circumscribed by this single perspective: 'the work's representation of femininity'.<sup>34</sup> However, while I would agree that the weakness of the flesh is a significant theme, I would argue that it is but one aspect of a much more complex exploration of the saint's vulnerability in a fallen world. By filtering the text through the concept of the corporeality of the female saint, Robertson gives to lust a predominance within the text which at

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Robertson, 'The Corporeality of Female Sanctity in the "Life of Saint Margaret"', *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, eds. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Cornell, 1991), Chapter 13, pp. 271-2.

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Knoxville, 1990) Chapter 6, p.116.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p.107.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* 107.

times distorts its meaning. She says: 'That the fiend tempts women primarily through the flesh is stressed by the Middle English version's emphasis, not prominent in the Latin original, on the lust of Margaret's tormentor, Olibrius.'<sup>35</sup> Unquestionably the provost's carnality is an important feature of this vernacular version and it is the catalyst of Margaret's martyrdom. Margaret's first meeting with Olibrius reveals her revulsion for all that Olibrius offers: paganism, wealth and status as his wife. Significantly, she is shown as a young girl who is neither weak nor an easy prey to temptation. I believe that while the redactor uses this situation to demonstrate the extent of the evil unleashed by lust, Margaret too has an involvement in this theme, but largely as the victim of carnal desire. Although Robertson maintains that sexual temptations beset Margaret, she neither uses convincing quotations to prove that this is so, nor clarifies what prompts them. She says: 'Margaret herself fears her vulnerability in the face of others' lust. Yet in this work, lust is overcome specifically by her alliance with Christ; indeed, the work suggests that rather than overcome lust, the female saint substitute for it a prior spiritual and bodily commitment to Christ.'<sup>36</sup> Presumably, Robertson means by Margaret's 'vulnerability in the face of others' lust' the physical threat of rape, but I would suggest that the vulnerability Margaret feels involves also her awakened consciousness of her part in the arousal of Olibrius's lust. In the light of Robertson's foregrounding the saint's sexual temptation, the second part of the sentence suggests the way in which Margaret can save herself from her own sexual weaknesses but any connection between these two references, the lust of Olibrius and his knights and her claim of Margaret's own sexual frailty is not made. Likewise Robertson constrains the significance of the demon's appearance to accommodate her argument that the text highlights woman's propensity to fall prey to sexual desire although the example the demon gives shows man is equally vulnerable. Robertson's 'corporeal' perspective attempts to force the saint into a role which I believe is not reinforced by the text, for Margaret, far from showing an instinctive dependence on her bodily senses, is fully aware of the need to guard her reason against the devil's wiles', as

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p.107.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p.108.

is revealed in her prayers: ' "...þæt tu wite to þe mi meidhad unmerret, mi sawle from sunne, mi wit & mi wisdom from unwitlese wiht." ' <sup>37</sup>

While I acknowledge that the theme of sexual temptation is explored in this vernacular version, Margaret herself is not shown to be struggling actively to reject impious thoughts, even though there are glimpses given of her concern for her soul in her prayers which may imply temptation. Nevertheless, although Margaret admits to a fear of 'licomes lust', it is unclear how, unless prompted by Olibrius's behaviour, she has been brought to envisage her own possible capitulation to sensuality. The exploration of the workings of sexual desire on the object of that desire is, I believe, significant in that opening scene, in which Margaret is made forcibly aware that she is the cause of Olibrius's evil attentions and I would suggest that this means she is fearful of inspiring lust in others so that her vulnerability before Olibrius is bound up with a sense of her own fallen nature. Up until the meeting with Olibrius, she has led a sheltered life as a shepherdess but his attentions have forced her to recognize that she belongs to a world where sexual temptation is a powerful force to which she too could be subject and which could compromise her faith.

Clearly, Olibrius and his knights make Margaret fear for her own physical safety: she is afraid of the brutality of rape but the act of violation brings with it the stigma that she, the victim, is somehow responsible for the act. Thus, ironically, the saint may be unwittingly the cause of evil in others. Joan Ferrante writes of medieval woman's position regarding male desire: 'Woman, as the most obvious object of male concupiscence, is made to represent lust and thus is held responsible for it; the object of temptation becomes the cause.' <sup>38</sup> In addition, the reality of Margaret's virginity means more than a symbol of her commitment to Christ; there is also the idea that even if her virginity were taken by force, her body and soul would be defiled by the ravishment: ' "...ne ne let tu neaure mi sawle for-leosun wið þe luðere mi lif, þe beoð al blodi bi-

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<sup>37</sup> *Seinte Marherete*, p.20 ll.11-13.

<sup>38</sup> Joan Ferrante, *Woman as Image*, p. 2

blodeget of sunne. " ' 39

Margaret's recognition of evil means that she is afraid for her own human weaknesses because they may be a barrier to her union with Christ in heaven and it is in Margaret's four principal prayers before her swallowing by the dragon that she reveals her human frailty which I maintain is not limited to carnal desire, but which may encompass it. She shows a determination to resist the power of the devil, with Christ's help. Significantly, Margaret's self-professed fallibility is presented as co-existing with her adamant witness to the Christian faith. In the four prayers her doubts are revealed but by contrast her public statements affirm the strength of her loyalty to Christ. Between the two responses tensions are created. It is as if there are two Margarets which cannot be reconciled, the fallible young girl and also the established saint. Similarly, she is confident in her lover, Christ, to uphold her and yet she expresses vividly her fear and loneliness, surrounded as she is by the embodiments of temporal power, Olibrius's knights and henchmen. The tensions created militate against any easy resolution of the nature of Margaret's fallibility such as Robertson's depicts.

When Margaret is seized by the knights, on Olibrius's orders, she is surrounded by them and her first prayer describes her position as a 'lomb wið wedde wulues'.<sup>40</sup> While wolves are associated with ferocity and voracity and are the traditional enemies of domestic livestock, Margaret, as a shepherdess, herself looks after sheep which carry biblical associations with Christ, the shepherd, and the 'lamb of God'. The roles of herself and Olibrius are captured in these images which are inherent in the text and which, I believe, suggest a strong polarity of values and faiths. By contrast, Robertson views these biblical images and indeed other 'domestic and concrete' images as further evidence that 'reinforce a circumscribed view of female spiritual

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.* p.6 ll.21-22.

<sup>40</sup> *Sainte Marherete*, p.8 l.8. Herbert Musurillo makes a significant connection between the beasts which Christians fought in the arena, testifying to their faith and the Beast himself, the devil, the arch-opponent of mankind. Thus, witnessing to the faith is encapsulated in such a confrontation. See *Symbolism and the Christian Imagination* (Dublin, 1962), p.47.

potential.'<sup>41</sup> Women can respond spiritually only through the perception of their senses and not their minds. Unlike Robertson, I do not have this 'circumscribed view' of St Margaret whom she includes in a generalized view of women. I maintain that rather than being presented as subject to carnal desire which must be 'transformed' by her spiritual union with Christ, she is revealed as a young girl whose innocence and beauty (the vernacular text places significant emphasis on her beauty) attracts evil but more importantly, Margaret's shimmering appearance denotes her essential spiritual purity: 'þe schimede & schan al of wlite & of westume.'<sup>42</sup> Her first fear, as has been discussed earlier, appears to be that she may be harmed or raped: "biwite<sup>u</sup> mi bodi, þet is al bitaht to þe, from ulche fulþen; þet neauer mi sawle ne isuled beo in sunne þurh þet licomes lust þet lulle hwile likeð."'<sup>43</sup> However, it is in the first prayer particularly that there are uncertainties of interpretation for, while it may be posited that the text suggests Margaret's actual temptation and struggle to resist carnal desire, 'licomes lust', I would argue differently, that she recognizes because she is human, she knows that she is capable of sinning in this way. Significantly, she then makes clear what she perceives as a clear association between virginity, her 'deore ʒimstan', and the purity of her soul which she fears may be corrupted by carnal pleasure. She addresses Christ: "Lauerd, lustu to me. Ich habbe a deore ʒimstan & ich hit habbe iʒeue þe, mi meiðhad..."<sup>44</sup> revealing that she is conscious that the devil possesses tricks and wiles to destroy her chastity: he "weorreð & warpeð euer þertoward, wið willes, wið werkes, wið alles cunnes wrenches; Lauerd, þu were me, and wite euer to þe; ne þole þu neuer þe unwiht þet he wori mi wit ne wonie mi wisdom."'<sup>45</sup> Her recognition and awareness of the evil of lust and how the devil might tempt her suggests that she is on her guard but that she needs Christ's help,

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<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience*, p.107.

<sup>42</sup> *Sainte Marherete*, p.6 ll. 11-12.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* p.6 ll.25-28.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* p.6 ll. 28-29.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.* p.8 ll.1-5.

too. I would argue that Margaret's strongly expressed faith in Christ and her responses to Olibrius work against her being viewed as innately lustful, like all womankind. The second expressed fear is that her reason may be assailed by the devil by which it can be inferred that he will tempt her to carnality. Robertson ignores this element of Margaret's spiritual awareness which contradicts her perception of the saint who, by virtue of being a woman, is seen as incapable of mental activity. I would argue that Margaret's prayers reveal a young girl who now has a sophisticated and heightened consciousness of evil which makes her afraid for her own fortitude in facing up to temptation. Her concern that she may lapse into fleshly weakness characterizes her prayers although she herself is repelled by Olibrius. The witnessing of carnal desire has brought her knowledge and concomitant fear: she belongs to the fallen world and so is also subject to the evils of concupiscence.

Margaret's preoccupation with the workings of her reason in the fight against evil can be explained in the light of the exploration of the 'rational basis for virginity' in Aquinas's commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics* who, Heffernan claims, provided 'an unimpeachable rational basis for celibacy.' Aquinas argued that although mankind is human, human beings have the faculty of reason which enables them to learn about God and make moral decisions which involve both the individual and the larger social group. To embrace the celibate life means a greater exercise of the reason and those who do so make the best decision by ordering their lives in complete subjection to Christ.<sup>46</sup> Implicit in the saint's prayer is the knowledge that virginity is the highest calling and to maintain such a state is the most rational decision, if only her reason is strong enough to withstand the devil and Olibrius, whose satanic allegiance is often referred to: 'pe ueondes an foster' (narrator), ' "pes schuckes schireue" ' (Margaret) ' "grisliche gra" ' (Margaret).<sup>47</sup> I would argue that while the emphasis is on Margaret's awareness of her own

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographies in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 244-46.

<sup>47</sup> *Seinte Marherete* p.6 l.6; p.8 ll. 6-7; p.14 l.32. The last phrase is used later to describe the black demon who visits Margaret in prison and so a parallel is put in place between the enraged Olibrius and the demon and a correspondence between the visible and the embodied spiritual evil.

potential for human frailty in general, there is no indication of an active internal struggle to combat concupiscence, in particular. Up to the appearance of the dragon and the demon which raise their own problems of interpretation, there is no indication of any such confrontation of her own carnality working to destroy the purity of her faith but she does express a need to be on her guard against any temptation, as if it were lurking in the shadows waiting to strike when least expected, as the appearance of the demon suggests.<sup>48</sup>

When Margaret is brought before Olibrius, she testifies to a belief in Christ but this hagiographic convention, the declaration, introduces another element, the *sponsa christi*. She says that she is promised to Christ: ' "& him ich habbe, meiden, mi meiðhad iþettet, & luuie to leofmon...." ' <sup>49</sup> The erotic imagery which is used extensively in the text immediately affects the focus of the scene for it develops further the underlying difference between physical desire which drives Olibrius to sexual union by force, if necessary, and the love Margaret has for Christ which welcomes a spiritual union with him in heaven. It is the contrast Margaret makes between Christ and the pagan provost, whose violent lust Margaret recognizes as evil, and whom she reviles in the strongest of terms which reinforces one of the mutually dependent themes: ' "Ah þu wurchest..... þine feader werkes, þe feondes of helle." ' <sup>50</sup> The didactic message makes clear that to eschew evil for good with its promise of eternal life in heaven is the rational choice. It is Margaret's heightened awareness of evil which helps to refute Robertson's view of her as a woman, like any other woman, and therefore to be reached through her corporeal senses and not her mind. Rather than seeing this relationship as an example of the means woman has to redeem herself through a transference of desire as does Robertson, I believe it illumines the relationships between the sexes in general and helps to underpin the theme of the wisdom of choosing the everlasting love of Christ in preference to any the physical world has to offer, a

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<sup>48</sup> *Seinte Marherete*, p.24 ll. 20-24.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* p.8 ll. 26-27.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.* p.14 ll. 26-28.



message appropriate to the audience of anchoresses. Thus, it is the rejection of Olibrius as a suitor in favour of Christ as the perfect lover which appears to fuel the governor's rage more vehemently than any refusal to worship his gods. Margaret is then cast into prison 'a-þet he hefde betere bi-þoht him o hwucche wise he walde merran hire meiðhad' <sup>51</sup> and Olibrius's role as an evil persecutor is made further apparent; foremost, he is the corrupter of the virgin state and only then the worshipper of idols. Almost as an afterthought we are told that, after imprisoning the saint, Olibrius went to Antioch and worshipped his 'heþene godes, as hit lomp & lei to his luðere bileue.' <sup>52</sup> However, standing firm in the face of bodily suffering and likely death, the female saint can look forward to a future life as Christ's bride and Margaret expresses the hope of this reward in heaven: ' "þet ich mote meidene mede hebben in heouene....He haeuð his merke on me iseiled wið his in-seil ...' " <sup>53</sup> The importance to the saint of her virginity informs the perspective of this legend, in sharp contrast with Margaret's succinct declaration from the *Legenda Aurea*, at the same point in the story, which does not mention her virgin state: "*Christus in mortem semetipsum pro me tradidit et ideo pro Christo mori desidero.*" <sup>54</sup> Coloured by the exploration of the implications of virginity, there is a preoccupation with sexual relationships: between Margaret and the knights, Margaret and Olibrius and Margaret and Christ and not least between men and women in general, as described by the black demon. So, while the established hagiographic topos, the opposition between Christianity and paganism is present, it becomes subsumed in a narration about virginity, the virgin's resistance to the devil's temptations and her submission to Christ. Present in this passion are stronger polarities, those of virginity and sexuality, which the writer clearly views as so important to be worthy of demonstration, particularly when the loss of virginity means an undermining of faith and victory for the devil. Indeed, in her prayers, Margaret makes a specific connection between any submission to bodily lust and loss of faith, a subject

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* p.10 ll.3-5.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* p.10 ll. 6-7.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* p.12 ll. 9-13.

<sup>54</sup> *Legenda Aurea* ed. T. Graesse, Cap. XCIII p. 401.

emphasized by the black demon who says anyone about to submit to temptation should think:  
 ' "...hwas luue ha forleteð; hu lufsum þing ha leoseð, þet is meiðhad, meidenes menske & te luue  
 of þe luueliche lauerd of heouene..." ' <sup>55</sup>

Having been put in prison after her first refusal of Olibrius, Margaret is summoned to  
 appear the next day and she states publicly before the provost how powerful her Lord is: " for  
 him ane ich luue & habbe to bileue, þe weld & wisseð wið his wit windes & wederes, & al þet  
 biset is wið se & wið sunne.....ne his <sup>makeloss</sup> lufsumlec neuer mare ne mei lutli ne aliggen." ' <sup>56</sup> The  
 image which underlies the comparison is of rival suitors who represent contrasting values,  
 between the physical and the spiritual and between the temporal and the eternal. The second  
 rejection of Olibrius is swift and certain and her affirmation of Christianity reveals the strength  
 and resolution which identify martyrs of both sexes in the hagiographic genre: she cannot be  
 intimidated nor seduced from her commitment to Christ and she shows no weakening: " þet tu  
 ne maht nans-weis, wið weole ne wið wune, wið wa ne wið wontreþe ne wið nan worldlich þing,  
 wenden me ne wrenchen of þe wei þet ich am in bigunne to ganne." ' <sup>57</sup>

In her second prayer, having been flayed, Margaret asks the Lord: "Hald me mi wit wel  
 swa, & mi wil, to þe, þet hit ne forwurðe naut for wa þet me do me, ne for wele nowþer; ne lef þu  
 neuer mine fan, þe feondes.....habben ne holden hare hoker of me..." ' <sup>58</sup> The steadfast public  
 saint contrasts with the young girl, one in need of reassurance and at times privately fearful of  
 her own spiritual infirmity and this inconsistency occurs with the attempt to fuse the convention  
 which stresses the absolute firmness of purpose of the martyr and now celebrated saint with that  
 of the spiritual struggle of the ascetic saint against the temptations of the flesh. The early  
 passions of virgin saints offer little insight into their inner spiritual lives for doubt and human frailty  
 do not have a real place there. If doubt is expressed, it lacks convincing immediacy and reality.

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<sup>55</sup> *Seinte Marherete*, p.34 ll.8-10.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.* p.10 ll. 21-27.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* p.10 ll.17-20.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* p.12 ll. 22-26.

While the saint needs the help of Christ to withstand the vicissitudes of her passion and not least the tortures, there is no hagiographic convention built into the saint's passion which allows for any display of human weakness or the revelation of an active struggle in the face of the devil's enticements. Nevertheless, by contrast, in the Katherine Group version we are given some suggestion that Margaret is human as well as being superhuman, which carries with it implications which pull the hagiographic conventions in different directions. The convention which is used to portray the life of a desert saint like St. Anthony allows for the saint's temptations to form a major part of his legend, since a successful rejection of sin, and particularly that of the flesh, ensures his sanctity. In *Seinte Marherete* there are two hagiographic conventions being used in conjunction. Firstly, there is that of the martyr's declaration of faith before the pagan ruler whose tortures of the saint follow, secondly, there is the legend of the ascetic hermit who resists various temptations to vice, including lust, which are presented usually as external demonic attacks. Interestingly, the first devil who tempts St Anthony is the devil of fornication, in the form of a black child. The saint is also beaten and attacked by devils, some of whom are embodied as wild beasts; then, he is tempted by a silver plate and a mass of gold deposited by the devil in the desert. These two kinds of hagiographic encounters with evil represent the inner and the outer arenas of spiritual life. Margaret is shown in the Katherine Group text to be aware that she is under threat from temptation, weakness and doubt, all of which she has recognized as possibilities within herself and yet another co-existent Margaret gives no indication of these inner tensions and to the calls of the shocked witnesses to her tortures to give in to Olibrius and save herself from further pain, angrily cries out: ' "O," quod ha, "wrecches, unweoten bute wit, weila, hwet wene 3e? 3ef mi lich is toloken, mi sawle schal resten wið þe rihtwise; sorhe & licomes sar is sawulene heale." ' <sup>59</sup> It could be suggested that the persuasive words of the spectators form their own kind of temptation to avoid suffering but rather this reply follows the hagiographic convention of the saint approaching martyrdom to whom any weakness in the face of the

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* p.14 ll.18-21.

heathen is abhorrent and unthinkable.

Thus, in this text, St Margaret's passion seeks to demonstrate not only the physical trials but also the spiritual ones which she endures on her way to her martyrdom and yet, the hagiographic convention of martyrdom stresses solely the unwavering heroic strength of those physically tested by torture. The conviction of the martyr, a hagiographic commonplace, is weakened when combined with doubt and temptation. While it can be argued that virginity is that very virtue which is shown to best advantage when it has been tested and tried and emerges unsullied, the account is not structured to reveal a developing strength within the saint. The pull between the saint's expressed strong faith and her uncertainty is found in those four prayers where her pleas are at odds with the public asseverations of faith, which occur, one following the other, in a pattern of balanced repetition. Not until after she bursts forth from the dragon is there a movement forward which resolves this tension.

The older Latin versions of the legend, the Mombritius and the pre-Mombritius versions, emphasize the unshaken steadfastness of Margaret in her faith: she is presented as if her sanctity preserves her from human frailty and the usual vulnerability of adolescent girls. Clayton and Magennis's examination of these texts finds that the language used by the saint in her prayers fails to acknowledge the possible fear of a frightened fifteen-year-old girl. They look at the prayer in which the saint compares herself to various animals surrounded by predators and maintain that it is 'already the assured and timeless utterance of the perfected saint speaking in the public language of God's church.'<sup>60</sup> Although Clayton and Magennis are concerned specifically with these much earlier Latin versions, their conclusions do highlight the way in which Margaret's humanity poses problems for the Katherine Group text. Both vulnerability and fallibility sit uneasily alongside other established hagiographic elements; there are literary problems in the depiction of the young, unproven saint, aware of her own human weakness, with the conviction of faith which is associated with a saint already confirmed in her sanctity. In the early versions,

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<sup>60</sup> Mary Clayton and Hugh Magennis, p.32. The Latin prayer is the same in all the essentials as that in Mack's edition.

Clayton and Magennis argue that Margaret articulates her fear of Olibrius and what he can do to her but they maintain that this fear is not conveyed as having a basis in a real emotional experience: '....the self-conscious and stylized presentation of this fear militates against any feeling of the real vulnerability of the saint and suggests her remoteness from personal emotion.'

They summarize the effect of the biblical language which they find instrumental in preventing any presentation of the young girl's personal feelings: '.....there is a sense that Margaret is impregnable in that she is outside the experience.'<sup>62</sup>

I maintain that Clayton and Magennis's commentary illuminates problems found in the Middle English text from the Katherine Group. These are created by the inclusion of three elements in the presentation of Margaret which are not consonant with each other. Firstly, there is the saint, destined to follow resolutely the hagiographic course of her passion, protected by her armour-like sanctity. Secondly, there is the vulnerable Christian girl assailed by a cruel, pagan ruler. Lastly, aware of her own sexuality, she is also shown to experience an inner concern about the temptation of lust into which she may be tricked by the devil. Her portrayal moves between the impregnable saint, the Christian virgin who must confront a cruel and powerful ruler, alone, and the weak female, subject to human frailty.

Before the advent of the dragon, Margaret reiterates her prayer to preserve her soul from sin so that she will not be persuaded to worship idols, against her reason: ' "For an þing i biseche þe <sup>er</sup> eau & oueral, þet tu wite to þe mi meiðhad unmerret, mi sawle from sunne, mi wit & mi wisdom from unwitlese wiht." '<sup>63</sup> In anticipation of the evil about to be embodied, she fears her lack of spiritual strength may result in her submission to paganism and evil. She recognises that paganism is not a rational choice and yet she is afraid her reason may not prevail. Although in the passion of St Katherine, also found in the Katherine Group, we are given an example of a woman gaining victory in an argument over those who would insist on her abandonment of the

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.* p.33.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* p.33.

<sup>63</sup> *Seinte Marherete*, p.20 ll. 11-13.

virgin life, Margaret's concern about her reason underlines the patriarchal perception that woman's reasoning power is weak and therefore suspect and it is significant that a contrast is made with Olibirus, 'He o wraððe warð for-neh ut of his witte' <sup>64</sup> when Margaret refuses to submit to his will. It is the arguing and talking with the devil that will test her resolution and yet, ironically, it is not the dragon but the demon who provides her with this opportunity to discover more about the strategy of the devil which will test her commitment to the chaste life. When she faces the dragon, her prayer is also an anxious one for she says she has no strength to resist this evil and she needs the help of Christ: ' "þet ich þurh þi strengðe mahe stonden wið him, & his muchele ouergart þet ich hit mote afeallen." ' <sup>65</sup> The plea that she may resist evil implies temptation and suggests that her spiritual state has been further weakened by the prolonged assaults on her strength of purpose. Indeed, rather inappropriately, the dragon is referred to as the 'þen sleheste deouel of helle' <sup>66</sup> as if, like the black demon, he tempts and traps his victims to a lust which can undermine the purity of the Christian faith. We are told that the black demon has appeared because of the failure of the dragon to drag the saint to hell but the demon also fails and before he can tempt her from the virgin life, with divine help she trounces him in an act which represents literally and metaphorically that she has beaten temptation. Again, there is the tension between the portrayal of a young girl, subject to the age-old devices of the devil, and the saint whose life has been retrospectively constructed as an exemplar of steadfastness.

Now I want to come to the compelling, central episode, the visit of the dragon and the prayer that leads up to it. The interpretation of the role of the dragon is informed by Margaret's reactions to events and more particularly by her prayers, which express any spiritual irresolution she has. Having been tortured further and then cast into prison, Margaret prays for a third time, asking for help: ' "Send me þi sonde i culurene heowe, þe cume me to helpe, þet ich mi meiðhad

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid.* p.16 ll.1-2.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.* p.24 ll. 3-4.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.* p.28 l.2.

mote wite to þe unwemmet." ' <sup>67</sup> She continues by asking if it is Christ's will, to see ' "þe awariede wiht þe weorred aȝein me.." <sup>68</sup> and she entreats Christ's help to overcome him, ' "swa þet alle meidnes eauer mare þurh me þe mare trusten on þe." ' <sup>69</sup> Her loss of her virginity preoccupies her and, at this point, it seems that evil can be equated with lust and therefore, the attendant victory over this vice has a specific application to virgins. However, the many interpretations which critics have imposed on the dragon suggest an inherent ambivalence, attributable largely to the way in which Margaret's recognition of her own human frailty is viewed.

Elizabeth Alvida Petroff views female saints as being particularly vulnerable to the devil who aims to attack their virginity. In an article in which she explores the symbolic representation and development of the encounters with the serpent and the dragon in legends of female saints, she begins by looking at the St Margaret legend in an anonymous Tuscan version of the fourteenth century which appears to follow in general the familiar legend. She finds that in this version 'sexual tension and violence are undisguised' <sup>70</sup> and she refers to the 'highly charged sexual context' when the dragon and demon appear to the saint.<sup>71</sup> She says of the lives of virgin saints that 'the essence of female sanctity..... is to be found in the heroic defense of virginity'.<sup>72</sup> Petroff says their virginity is defined by placing more importance on a '...sense of emotional independence than by an intact hymen.'<sup>73</sup> For Petroff, the key to the saint's passion lies in the 'Images of transformation and rebirth which dominate the rest of the story', <sup>74</sup> an

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<sup>67</sup> *ibid.* p.16 ll.15-17.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.* p.16 ll.17-18.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.* p.16 ll.19-21.

<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, 'Transforming the World: The Serpent-Dragon and the Virgin Saint' *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford, 1994), p.99.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.* p.100.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.* p.99.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.* p.99.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.* p.101.

interpretation which Robertson also suggests and which I discuss later in the chapter. Indeed, Petroff maintains 'the images of transformation and rebirth' dominate the legends of two other Italian saints, the Blessed Umiliana and St Verdiana, both of whom in their cells confront serpents (but significantly not dragons) who threaten the loss of their virginity. Petroff says: 'There can be little doubt that for most medieval persons the serpent and dragon imagery in these female saints' lives was symbolic of the threat of sexuality' <sup>75</sup> The Italian legend of St Umiliana reveals a simple equation of the serpent with both sexual lust and also satanic rape; Petroff quotes from a translation: 'A few days passed, and there was Satan again, and he brought with him a great serpent, not incorporeal as he was, nor an imaginary creation, but truly corporeal, terrible and terrifying. This produced great terror and fear in her, but still she paid attention to her praying. When she rested, he wrapped his tail around her feet, and leaned his head against her cheek. This frightened her so much that she could neither pray nor sleep securely. When she went to lie down, she wrapped her clothes around her feet and tied them with a belt, so that the serpent couldn't enter from below, at her feet, and get to her nude body.'<sup>76</sup> This description recalls the distraction by the serpent of the praying St Leonard referred to in Chapter 3 but it also suggests a physical attack, like that of the dragon in the Katherine Group version, but in terms which are more explicit of the physical destruction of Umiliana's virginity. She says: 'If we read the encounter with the serpent as a sexual attack, a confrontation with the dark obsessive aspect of sexuality, we see the woman saint's victory as the triumph of moral purity.'<sup>77</sup> The contrast between what happened to Umiliana and Margaret respectively, reveals the complexity of the latter's experience and the ambivalence of interpretation. While the serpent's role in the legend of St Umiliana is a traditional one, that of the insidious tempter who finds a susceptible victim in the religious recluse, as I shall argue later in the chapter, tensions

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<sup>75</sup> *ibid.* p.103.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.* p.102.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.* p.106.



are created in the Katherine Group legend with the appearance of the dragon, largely because its role is atypical.

Robertson claims the dragon 'poses a direct physical, if not a particularly sexual, threat' to the maiden.<sup>78</sup> While Robertson says the temptation of Margaret and woman's fleshly desires are at the heart of the text, she sees the dragon in more general terms, as representing the physical world, presumably with all its attendant evils. She does not provide the dragon with a convincing function in accordance with her claim that the text's fundamental theme is sexual temptation. Other critics interpret the dragon differently, Catherine Innes-Parker and Elizabeth Stuart, to whom I referred earlier in the chapter, interpret the dragon as the satanic embodiment of Olibrius's lust or even a symbolic rape and so Margaret is perceived as fighting an external attack on her virginity and not an inner temptation. I maintain that this interpretation has the effect of reducing her triumph to a physical conquest, depriving it of a spiritual dimension and it also runs counter to the concerns of her troubled prayers in which she reveals the fear that her human weakness may be attacked successfully by the devil. While it can be argued that the actions and the description of the dragon do suggest the power of lust in general, but not necessarily that of Olibrius specifically, the perception of the dragon as representing the devil who tempts virgins to sensuality would be difficult to accept in relation to Margaret. There is no explicit evidence that she experiences temptations of the flesh above all other worldly temptations. Although the demon places the dragon in the role of the tempter to fleshly desire, the dragon by his behaviour belies this claim. Traditionally the dragon's symbolic role has been that of cosmic evil and, in hagiography, paganism; the serpent's role is that of tempter.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose*, p.111.

<sup>79</sup> See Chapter 1. The medieval bestiary associates the devil with the dragon '..... the air around him blazes, for the Devil in raising himself from the lower regions, translates himself into an angel of light and misleads the foolish with false hopes of glory and worldly bliss... he is the King of Pride...' He ensnares the unwary by the 'toils of crime' and having strangled them they go to Hell. *The Book of Beasts*, p.197. This blazing dragon has some similarities with the archetypal tempter in the luring of the weak into sin with false promises. However, the dragon's methods are not revealed and the bestiary only gives a general explanation of the way evil traps the unsuspecting soul; the dragon is not shown as an embodied voice luring people to sin. Significantly, in the bestiary there is no reduction of the dragon's evil to sensuality alone, to sins of a sexual kind.

Discussing the Katherine Group text,<sup>80</sup> Susan Withycombe widens what she sees as the polarized battle between virginity and carnality, between Margaret and Olibrius/dragon, to embrace the 'conflict between Heaven and Hell' and Margaret in her prison is linked with the legends of anchorite saints who confront the devil or demons in their cells, and triumph over them.<sup>81</sup> Further, I would suggest that when Margaret is in prison, she appears not so much to be tempted by carnal desire but by the onlookers who advise capitulation to the evil of Olibrius in order to bring an end to her bodily suffering. By rejecting the crowd's pleas, Margaret embraces the route of martyrdom to heaven: ' " for 3ef ich wrahte þe wil of þe flesch as tu fearest as þu wult wið, mi sawle schulde sinken, al swa as þu schalt, to sorhen in helle..." ' <sup>82</sup> This decision is another stage in her conquest of the world, the flesh and the devil and her resolution in the face of torture is the rejection of all that Olibrius stands for, including paganism. The evil of Olibrius cannot be reduced simply to that of lust: it is but one aspect of his evil which is allied to his paganism and indeed once Margaret has consistently stood firm against him, any carnal desire for her is not evident in his words or behaviour,

It is clear that there are problems associated with the dragon and his role which defy an easy and consensual interpretation in which the key elements of this text are accommodated coherently, by which I mean the underlying theme of sexual temptation and its application to Margaret, her responses to Olibrius and the appearances of the dragon and the black demon. I want now to explore in more detail the interpretations placed on the connections between these elements, bearing in mind that more ambivalences begin to emerge with the dragon's appearance.

After Margaret's tortures, <sup>according</sup> to hagiographic convention, the threat of death by the sword is issued by Olibrius and, denouncing him, she is led down into the darkest of the dungeons,

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<sup>80</sup> Susan Withycombe refers to the text of *Seinte Margarete*, in *MS Bodley*<sup>34</sup>, EETS, OS, 247 (1960) and also to *Seinte Marherete*, EETS, OS, 193 (1934). <sup>Facsimile of</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Susan Withycombe, 'Seinte Margarete: A Late Old English Perception of Feminine Sanctity' *Parergon* ns 10.2 (December, 1992), 177.

<sup>82</sup> *Seinte Marherete*, p.18 ll.11-14.

suggesting the depths of evil to which she will be exposed. Before the appearance of the dragon, she prays again: 'Bihald me & help me, & lef me þæt ich mote legge mine ehnen o þe lūðere unwiht þe weorred aþein me, & lef <sup>me</sup> deme wið him'.<sup>83</sup> The *Legenda Aurea* records simply, in reported speech, that she prayed to see the enemy who <sup>was</sup> attacking her: *Ubi dum esset, oravit dominum, ut inimicum, qui secum pugnat, sibi visibiliter demonstraret*,<sup>84</sup> while the Latin '*Passio S. Margaretae*' is more specific: '*Da mihi, Domine, fiduciam ut dimicem contra aduersarium meum, ut uideam eum facie ad faciem qui mecum pugnat, ut uincam eum et uideam eum proiectum ante faciem meam...*'<sup>85</sup> The prayer in the Latin text is expressed in militant language, familiar to the struggle against vice expressed in the earlier versions of the lives of virgin saints. In the vernacular text she wants to pronounce judgement ('deme') against the devil because it seems by confronting the source of evil<sup>86</sup> she will learn more about its nature and its working, particularly against herself: this evil, she says, hates and humiliates her although she "neauer nuste þæt he ewt of min hearm eauerþete hefde."<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, she seems to know already why evil works against her for, in words which anticipate the black demon's, she says that the devil hates all that is good. There is a more personal feeling of puzzlement and injustice expressed by the saint in the Katherine Group version but while she cannot be regarded as an individual personality, there is an impression of interiority, a greater freedom in the expression of her thoughts and fears in this text, largely because the theme of evil which is allied to personal doubt and temptation, requires to be revealed.

The focus placed by the redactor on virginity as an ideal colours the interpretation of the dragon encounter, putting a strain on its accommodation within this theme. The *Legenda Aurea*,

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<sup>83</sup> *ibid.* p.20 ll.1-4.

<sup>84</sup> *Legenda Aurea*, ed. T Graesse, Cap. XC111, p.401.

<sup>85</sup> Printed in *The Old English Lives of St Margaret* by Mary Clayton and Hugh Magennis, p.202.

<sup>86</sup> The legend of St Anthony in the *Golden Legend* contains this same request that he should see the devil that has been tormenting him, as if confronting him will enable him to understand the working of the devil.

<sup>87</sup> *Sainte Marherete*, p.20 ll.5-6.

and Caxton's translation of it, present the dragon in his conventional hagiographical role as the embodied evil of Olibrius's cruel paganism. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne views the dragon as a 'sign', which I accept in a general sense, although I would argue that the ambivalence and theatricality of the dragon prevent its being contained within a single symbolic role. She explores the framework of signs which she maintains characterizes this legend of St Margaret in comparison with *St Iuliane*: 'Margarete has a plethora of external messengers and signs...' and she cites the dove, the crosses and the angels among others.<sup>88</sup> These signs provide a connection between the visible and the invisible worlds 'between heavenly power and corporeal human existence. In this context, Margaret's dragon makes a fittingly explicit appearance as the saint's and heaven's opponent.'<sup>89</sup> Wogan-Browne does not elaborate but I maintain that the dragon's silent, threatening movement, its colour and its size, all of which are emphasized, undermine any simple view of it as a 'sign'. Indeed, the experience to be confronted would appear to suggest the nightmarish reality of rape and in that sense the dragon would seem to represent less an adversary of cosmic evil than a supernatural rapist, and the attempted assault a satanic rape. Nevertheless, I reject the simple equation of the dragon with rape because it is reductive of the saint's spiritual experience within the monster's body as I shall argue later, and also it runs counter to the text's theme which is about temptation. His appearance becomes inextricably linked with Margaret's defence of her virginity and her faith, entitling her to become Christ's betrothed. When the dragon suddenly manifests himself, he is described graphically with emphasis placed on the horror of his physical appearance.<sup>90</sup> In general, hagiographic dragons are not described in such detail and length, although there are exceptions like the monster subdued by St Martha but in that account there is no fear of the supernatural conveyed.<sup>91</sup> The

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<sup>88</sup> Jocelyn Price (Wogan-Browne), 'The Virgin and the Dragon: The Demonology of 'Sainte Margarete'', *Leeds Studies in English* 16 (1985), 337-357 (352).

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.* 352.

<sup>90</sup> *Sainte Marherete*, p.20 ll.20-34.

<sup>91</sup> *GL folio CC viiii; GL vol. iv p.136.*

witnesses, watching Margaret from outside the prison, see the emergence of the monster and are horrified. The writer continues to intensify the fear and the horror: ' 3ef ha agrisen wes of þet grisliche gra, nes na mucho wunder. Hire bleo bigon to blakien for þe grure þet grap hire.'<sup>92</sup> It can be argued that the terror the monster engenders is a device for enhancing the impression of repellent evil and the subsequent triumph, but I want to suggest that although it possesses some of the essential characteristics of the medieval hagiographic dragon for it exhales fire and smoke and a powerful stench accompanies it, it goes beyond any conventional symbolic role associated with the dragon. The manner of the description suggests the terror is caused by more than its potential for physical destruction which is usually the monster's most characteristic attribute. There are sinister notes sounded: in some respects the creature is manlike for it has hair and a long beard and a hooked nose but the light which emanates from it has a supernatural quality and it is referred to as an 'unwiht of helle'<sup>93</sup> and this is what it resembles, those creatures of the imagination which inhabit the nether regions and which are often shown in art to have a compilation of grotesque bestial features.<sup>94</sup> The devouring of the damned by demons and devils is an artistic convention in medieval doom paintings and the creature's intention is clearly to take the saint to hell, suggested by the stench and smoke which accompanies him. The vast, hideous mouth, resembles the entrance to hell in paintings and the mystery plays, but it is the lingering description, the slowness of some of the dragon's actions combined with the suddenness of attack which is frightening. The neck stretches and arches to bring its jaws close, and, revealing the gleaming tongue, compared to a sharp sword, the mouth opens. The dragon is the representation of the stalking of the victim by the devil; it depicts his tenacious aim of targeting the virgin, to bring her down to hell. The knights who intimidate Margaret physically at the

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<sup>92</sup> *Seinte Marherete*, p.22 ll. 3-5.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.* p.20 l.21.

<sup>94</sup> Fra Angelico's painting of the *Last Judgement* (fifteenth century) in San Marco, Florence, creates a horrific vision of hell, with Satan stuffing the bodies of the damned into his mouth.

beginning of the legend prefigure this later, supernatural threat:<sup>96</sup> ' "for ich iseo me, lauerd, bistedped & bistonden ase lomb wið wedde wulues..." ' <sup>96</sup> Surrounded by them, her first prayer refers specifically to the devil's hatred of virginity above all: ' "...ne let tu neauer þe unwiht warpen hit i wurðinc; for hit is þe leof, & him þinge loþest." ' <sup>97</sup> Of all the sinister details, the sharp, sword-like tongue, of immense length, capable of being twined round its neck, is perhaps the most memorable. This suggests a reptilian repulsiveness and combined with its predatory stalking of the saint: 'He strahte him & sturedede toward tis meoke meiden...' <sup>98</sup> creates an image of predatory man and the victim, virginal woman. The tongue winds round the saint and she is then swallowed. I would agree with Stiller that the dragon 'appears to symbolize a threatening phallic maleness' <sup>99</sup> and the tongue, particularly, reinforces the symbolism of sexual evil. The stomach too becomes both a convenient symbol for sexual appetite as well as carrying the familiar connotation with hell. There is an overwhelming sense of the dragon's power and all-consuming determination which shows a passion out of control and the complete picture suggests that this is the way male lust works; driven by appetite, it must possess the object of desire, if necessary by force, by rape.<sup>100</sup> Joyce Salisbury, writing about the animal in medieval

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<sup>96</sup> *þe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd* contains an image familiar to *Seinte Marharete*. John Bugge quotes this, referring to the 'wolves' to which the soul is about to yield as 'a kind of dark night of the soul' which is relieved by the prospect of being saved by Christ as his betrothed: '....hwen þai sehen me swa wak 7 swa foruhande 7 buhande toward ham, þei.....grenede for gladschipe euchan toward oðer as wode wulues þe fainen of hare praie. Bote þer þurh understonde i þe tu wult hauei me to leofman 7 to spuse. þe tu ne þoledes ham noht fulli fainen of me.' (Bugge, p.126) Also, *The Life of St Martin* from Caxton's *Golden Legend* records how the saint's disciples, fearful about his imminent death, bewail being left to 'ravishing wolves' which will attack the flock, which carries iconographic associations. The surrounding of the young virgin by the knights suggests, however, more of a physical threat: she fears that force may be used to abduct her for Olibrius's pleasure. Clearly, the established image has been weighted at this point with the threat of rape for Margaret. *The Life of St Martin*, GL folio CCC lvi; GL vol.vi pp.141-158 (p.154).

<sup>96</sup> *Seinte Marherete*, p.8 ll.7-8.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.* p.6 ll. 30-1 and p.8 l.1.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.* p.20 ll.34-35.

<sup>99</sup> Nikki Stiller, *Eve's Orphans: Mothers and Daughters in Medieval Literature* (Westport, Connecticut, London, 1980), p.22.

<sup>100</sup> St Margaret's enforced descent into the dragon and her re-emergence recalls the abduction and rape of Proserpina by Pluto and his carrying her off to hell.

literature, singles out the boar as an example of animal lust in the male: 'From the early Middle Ages, male sexuality had been linked to power and an active expression of desire.' Having quoted a description from Oppian of a boar 'in a frenzy of desire', in maddened pursuit of a female, she says: 'This description of the boar's behaviour.....demonstrates in an extreme way this medieval view of male sexuality, with its emphasis on power and dominance.' This illustration could be applied to the frenzy of Olibrius who becomes more animal than human and indeed if we include the conclusion of the quoted passage about the boar from Oppian, the application is even more appropriate: 'But if she refuses intercourse and flees, straightway stirred by the hot and fiery goad of desire he either overcomes her and mates with her by force or he attacks her with his jaws and lays her dead in the dust.'<sup>101</sup> Olibrius becomes a means by which man in general is seen to be debased by lust and even more so when contrasted with the dignity and control of a young virginal girl.

And yet, the dragon is not merely an animal, like the boar, for it is in the combination of both the dragon's supernatural and its animal qualities that the terror lies and indeed from which any ambivalence emanates. Significantly, devils and demons do not experience sexual desire because they are not corporeal beings with human feelings, they are spirit, only borrowing bodily forms to perpetrate their evil.<sup>102</sup> I would argue that the dragon cannot be looked upon as a simple and straightforward embodiment of Olibrius's lust but a more complex supernatural representation of evil desire, bent on bringing Margaret to hell. Nevertheless, the attack would seem to depict the destruction of the virgin state, a kind of rape perpetrated by the devil because hagiographic convention forbids the pagan villain to violate the virgin martyr. Superficially, this accords with the thematic emphasis of this text, of virginity besieged, and would appear to confirm the views of critics who see the dragon's attack as a symbolic rape. However, I agree

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<sup>101</sup> Joyce Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York and London, 1994), p. 80.

<sup>102</sup> Jeffrey Burton Russell, p.183.

with Wogan-Browne that this approach is a 'counsel of despair'<sup>103</sup> (p175) although she is less concerned with the theme of temptation than she is with the exploration of the meaning of 'virginity' within the female saint's legend. She argues that the threatened rape and the violent tortures mean more than the infliction of bodily pain and humiliation because the saint's virginity implies more than physical intactness and her body represents more than her corporeal frame.

She says: 'This does not mean that the readings of such narratives as rape fantasies are impossible.....' but it does mean that the narratives cannot be explained fully in this way (p.176). She goes on to argue that the saint's sufferings are a positive spiritual triumph, a theme I also develop later: '....to gaze on the heroine is to confront a transforming source of power (further testified to by the mass conversions of torturers, spectators and executioners...)' (p.179) Like Wogan-Browne I hold the view that the wider concept of virginity which, as patriarchal authority confirms and Margaret herself intimates, is synonymous with faith itself and her commitment to Christ.

In this way the dragon threatens her faith when he threatens her virginity for his evil intimidation represents the force of Satan determined to wrest her from Christ and take her to hell. Because physical intactness represents the reason in control of corporeal weaknesses and passions, by renouncing her virginity, she will subscribe to that fallen world which this vernacular text characterizes by being governed by the flesh, by desire and irrationality. It is a frightening world made familiar in *Hali Meïðhad*. However, when the saint escapes from the monster, she does so by tracing on her body the cross, an ambivalent intention, since it is unclear whether she is protecting her body from physical violation or from a spiritual assault: '& droh þa endelong hire, & þwertouer þrefter, þe deorewurðe taken of þe deore rode þet he on reste.'<sup>104</sup> At times there is tension between the impression of a direct physical assault on the virgin's body and the supernatural implications that the event must mean more than this. It is this tension between the

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<sup>103</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, 'The Virgin's Tale' : *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and her Sect* eds. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (London, 1994) pp. 175, 176, 179.

<sup>104</sup> *Seinte Marherete*, p.24 ll.7-9.



literal and the metaphorical which creates a barrier to a straightforward and coherent interpretation of the dragon's role. This confusion of perspective is also illustrated when Margaret's prayers articulate her fear of bodily defilement and yet, when she prays, in prison, to see the enemy, she also speaks of evil in general terms: ' "Ah swuch is his cunde, & swa is ful of atter his ontfule heorte, þet he heatedð euch god; & euch hali þing & halewinde is him lað." ' <sup>105</sup> Also, importantly, in the saint's last prayer as the dragon starts to devour her, Margaret refers to evil generally, relating it to the sin of pride and arrogance, making a biblical link with the pride of the fallen angels: ' "þet ich þurh þi strengðe mahe stonden wið him & his muchele ouergart þet ich hit mote afeallen." ' <sup>106</sup> She continues the prayer made before the dragon's visit by requesting that her virginity be guarded: ' "For an þing i biseche þe eauer & oueral, þet tu wite to þe mi meiðhad unmerret, mi sawle from sunne, mi wit & mi wisdom from unwitlese wiht." ' <sup>107</sup> Clearly, she is terrified by the dragon's physical presence and therefore she may fear a physical attack but also she is face to face with the satanic power of evil which has just emerged from hell and so I would argue that the intensity of the supernatural implications override any sense of a simple equation with Olibrius's carnality. Immediately before the dragon's manifestation she prays that she might see the enemy in order to <sup>pronounce judgement against</sup> :  $\text{A ('deme')}$   $\text{A}$  him and we may assume to overthrow him by the force of her reason supported by her faith. However, the dragon is mute and any discussion, such as she has with the demon, is outside the dragon's more usual iconographic attributes. In addition, his behaviour suggests he operates by force, although the black demon informs Margaret that Ruffin, his brother, is cunning: ' "þe rehest & te read-wisest of alle þeo in helle" ' <sup>108</sup> which is contradicted by the dragon's brutishness. Indeed, it is left to the demon himself to explain the function of the dragon which is to harm Margaret: ' "& merren wið

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<sup>105</sup> *ibid.* p.20 ll. 6-8.

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.* p.24 ll.3-4.

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.* p.20 ll.11-13.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.* p.30 ll.21-22.

his muchele mein þe mihte of þi meiðhad...."<sup>109</sup> However, 'merren' (to harm or injure) is ambivalent, suggesting either the possibility of a physical or a spiritual assault. The graphic impression of the dragon episode is that of a grotesque physical assault on the virgin yet the demon's words explain Ruffin's cunning being used in the role of tempter. It is the gap in this part of the narrative between what the dragon's appearance suggests and the didactic thrust of the text which disturbs the perspective. Nevertheless, in the dragon episode and even more so in Margaret's altercation with the demon, there is no positive indication of any interior struggle to overcome the kind of insidious temptation to lust as described by the black demon. I suggested above that the demon's appearance to Margaret after Ruffin's failure to take her to hell appears to encode her temptation which she overcomes at once, the demon speaking of the might of her chastity and his shame at being overcome by a young girl. However, her immediate vanquishing of the demon suggests that Margaret's role reverts to that of the resolute and assertive saint who knows no spiritual wavering, which the black demon has already witnessed. This is borne out by her unshaken confidence on first noticing the black demon, in contrast with her terror on seeing the dragon. Margaret praises Christ with an unshaken confidence: "' 3e, iseo ich, Lauerd, blowinde mine bileaue.'" <sup>110</sup> I would argue that this change is accounted for by her experience within the dragon and encapsulates her renewal of faith. Before she listens to the demon Margaret celebrates God's power in images concerned with abundance and with coming to fruition: "' Brihtest bleo of alle þet eauer weren iborene, blostme iblowen & iboren of meidenes bosum..." <sup>111</sup> This prayer is in preparation for the saint's death which must conform to the topos of the hagiographic martyrdom, namely that she dies heroically declaring her faith so that mass conversions take place.

The concepts of evil embodied in the two supernatural appearances are explained by the demon as being the seduction of the chaste to sensuality by the use of sophisticated snares, a

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<sup>109</sup> *ibid.* p.28 ll.3-4.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.* p.26 ll.1-2.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.* p.24 ll. 27-28 .

process which reveals an insight into the psychology of gender relationships and humankind's carnal weaknesses. The dragon, however, is presented in a way which contradicts the demon's explanation. The wording of the text suggests that the monster is spirit, threatening Margaret's spiritual steadfastness in the face of temptation and not just assaulting her physical intactness: ' " Wið þis uuel wite me, for ich truste al o þe, & ti wil iwurðe hit, deorwurðe lauerd; þet ich þurh þi strengðe mahe stonden wið him, & his muchele ouergart þet ich hit mote afeallen" ' <sup>112</sup>, but the very power and flamboyance of its huge physical presence militates against its being viewed as a demonic tempter and gives it a prominence as a sexual attacker: the text elides seduction and rape. Margaret's fear is understandably attributable to the beast's presence but it is not clear whether this symbolizes the power of the universal vice of lust itself and concomitantly the power of her own sensuality and bodily temptations, even to the renunciation of her virgin state. As a long-established element in St Margaret's legend, the dragon has been developed in this text so that it resonates with an aggressive sexuality and, while the black demon illuminates the dragon's role, it also unsettles our perception of the dragon somewhat. There is a contradiction between the dramatic presentation of the dragon and the demon's explanation of his function. This creates a further dissonance in the overall comprehension of the embodied evil and how it is to be interpreted in terms of Margaret's tempting. One might even present a case for the irrelevance of the dragon for it can be argued that we witness Margaret's overpowering the evil of desire, as represented by the black demon. The two episodes replicate each other in intent, if not in the manner of depiction. Patently, the demon is the vehicle for the didactic message to the anchoresses and other women and the ambivalence of the dragon's mute attack on Margaret perhaps necessitates this subsequent explanation.

The problem facing the writer is that of the portrayal of Margaret as a young, fallible girl, subject to human desires, with the celebration of Margaret's saintly destiny: she is 'þeo þet godd luuede, þe heouenliche lauerd, & ʒef hire þe grace of þe hali gast, swa þet ha ches him to luue

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<sup>112</sup> *ibid.* p.24 ll.1-4.

& to lefmon...'<sup>113</sup> Margaret has been singled out as being one who is loved and valued by God and therefore there is little room for undermining Margaret's determined stance against evil for this is built into the hagiographic convention of the male and female saint's opposition to paganism and the welcoming of martyrdom. Any intensification of doubt and any pronounced indication of sexual desire would weaken the theological impact the author obviously intends the martyrdom to have. While in theory the saint may be subject to the frailties of human nature, in practice this cannot be shown as such an all-consuming spiritual struggle, the outcome of which appears to be in doubt. Also, the convention of temptation which relies on a swift rebuttal of the devil who has manifested himself in order to trick and entrap the virtuous is at odds with the interiority of Margaret's fears of temptation which demand a more appropriate depiction of an inner struggle. In the Red<sup>b</sup>ford version in the sixth century *Acta Sanctorum*, the saint is not physically devoured by the dragon and the episode is presented as a vision which is not given prominence; also the demon does not appear.<sup>113A</sup> By making the dragon a visionary experience enables the temptation of Margaret to be given an interiority more in keeping with a spiritual struggle against temptation. However, I believe the redactor of the Katherine Group version cannot resolve these conflicting demands because he cannot make significant changes to his basic hagiographic framework of martyrdom. Moreover, he not only retains the embodiment of the dragon but endows it with a carnal significance and an intensity of description which creates uncertainties of focus because it cannot be linked coherently with other elements of the legend. Although, in simple terms, the theme of lust connects Olibrius, the dragon, the demon and Margaret, each element's connection with another element raises questions of interpretation, of role and significance.

An interesting contrast is provided by John Lydgate's poetic version, *The Legend of Seynt Margarete*, which follows hagiographic conventions and treats Margaret's martyrdom as a battle of wills between herself and Olibrius. In following this established focus on the martyr's

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<sup>113</sup> *Sainte Marherete*, p.4 ll.23-26.

<sup>113A</sup> See also 'The Old English Martyrology' and the South English Legend in which doubts are expressed in the latter concerning the devouring by the dragon.

constancy of faith and commitment to Christ in the face of torture, her virginity has a reduced emphasis. While Margaret's chastity invests her with power which Satan is quick to recognise, she is not at risk from Olibrius's desire to destroy her virginity. Because virginity is not of paramount importance to the development of the narrative and because Margaret herself expresses no fears about this, the dragon episode is integrated into the narrative without ambivalence. It is presented as an extension, in supernatural terms, of the conflict between the devil/idolatry and the Christian faith. The meaning of the dragon's appearance is stated in clear terms which underline the biblical conflation of dragon and serpent:

'And sodeynly appered in hir sight,  
 Where as she lay bounden in prisoun,  
 In the lykenesse of a felle dragoun  
 The olde serpent, whiche called is Sathan,  
 And hastyly to assayle her he began;  
 With open mouthe, the virgyne to deuour...' (ll.283-288) <sup>114</sup>

Problems occur if we accept the limited interpretation which equates Margaret's triumph over evil with sexual evil alone, although it must be considered a significant, if not overt, contribution to the theme. The implications of the swallowing by the dragon need to be explored in order to determine what Margaret has achieved in her defeat of the monster. I believe that Margaret's emergence from the dragon must suggest more than simple physical salvation, particularly when the text is about the maintenance of the soul's purity. Robertson, in pursuing her theme of transformation through the corporeal, interprets the swallowing of Margaret thus: 'transforming the central confrontation into an image of birth; a woman could be said to give birth to her own spirituality....' <sup>115</sup> This limits the interpretation of this motif to being specific to the female sex and her corporeal weakness and so denies the wider import of an image which has

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<sup>114</sup> *The Minor Poems*, pp.173-192.

<sup>115</sup> Elizabeth Robertson, 'The Corporeality of Female Sanctity', pp. 278-9.

an ancient provenance. I agree in part with Robertson but claiming that this signifies not a spiritual birth but a spiritual re-birth for Margaret. She has an increased understanding of God's universe and the position of evil in it but Margaret's praising of the Creator's universe embraces a wider vision of Christianity than the narrower concern for the defeat of carnality alone which occupied the demon's monologue. She says: "Ich habbe sehen blisse, & ich blissi me þrof..."

<sup>116</sup> If we look at the swallowing *myth*, as studied by the anthropologist Mircea Eliade, it yields up a particular significance for this saint's legend, associated with spiritual rebirth. Eliade states that the 'scenario of initiation-comprising tortures, being put to death and resurrecting- was repeated whenever there was a mystery; that is, a process of spiritual regeneration.'<sup>117</sup> He sees the process as 'symbolic of death and rebirth' and while the swallowing is 'equivalent to dying'..... it also 'signifies the re-entry into a pre-formal embryonic state of being.' Initiatory death becomes 'a transition to another mode of being, a trial indispensable to regeneration; that is, to the beginning of a new life.' By the process of dying, Eliade says: 'death comes to be regarded as the supreme initiation, namely, as the beginning of a new spiritual existence' which is possible because knowledge has been gained from the initiatory descent into hell. While Margaret does not comment on her experience within the dragon, her paean in which she praises Christ after she bursts forth has an added significance. She says: " 3e, iseo ich, Lauerd, blowinde mine bileaue" <sup>118</sup> which indicates that her faith has blossomed and developed. It is as if she has experienced a divine revelation of God's power and control over creation, that power to which she prayed and which she described in all its aspects prior to being devoured, has been shown to her. This experience has given her a new perception of evil and its place in the created universe which fortifies her against the devil for with renewed assurance she realizes that God is omnipotent and she is protected by him. The text reveals that the destiny of Margaret is interwoven with her love and dedication to Christ and that will lead her to martyrdom. The

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<sup>116</sup> *Sainte Marherete*, p.26 ll.12-13.

<sup>117</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, transl. Philip Mairet (London,1972), p. 222.

<sup>118</sup> *Sainte Marherete*, p.26 ll.1-2.

dragon's swallowing of the saint can be interpreted as a fundamental rite of passage in preparation for martyrdom. It is at the point of the dragon's swallowing of Margaret and her emergence that the implications of what has happened to her widen.<sup>119</sup> The archetypal image of a descent like Christ's into hell after his passion symbolizes a confrontation of evil and his victorious emergence with the redeemed souls reinforces my claim that also in this vernacular text, the concept of evil implied is not a narrow one, linked to one vice, but it suggests a cosmic evil which is antagonistic to the faith. The images of 'swallowing' and 'descent' cannot be constrained by this preoccupation with concupiscence and so work to unsettle the significance of the event.

Tensions are marked by the text being pulled in different directions: by the dragon's appearance and predatory behaviour which graphically conjure up the burning, immediate desires of lust in contrast with the mystical implications of Margaret's experience within the monster and then, in another by the black demon's narrower focus on virginity which effectively circumscribes the saint's experience as a threat to her virgin state. In addition, Margaret's prayers link the state of virginity with complete faith in God and union with him so implicitly a wider concept of virginity is embraced which undermines that expressed by the demon. To reiterate Aldhelm's all-embracing concept of virginity, although from a different passage in *De Virginitate*: 'there are certain aspirants to the blessed life, who from the very commencement of first infancy never cease from perservering indefatigably in the high pursuit of virginity, and (who) strive blessedly to preserve to the very end, the unbreached barrier of their modesty without any disparagement of their purity; and yet they are so goaded by the spur of divine love and inflamed by the blazing

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<sup>119</sup> The bestiary is a source of images whose import would not have been lost on congregations. Jonah's swallowing by the whale was interpreted as a descent into hell from which God saved him: 'Jonah himself remarked: "He heard me out of the belly of Hell."' T.H. White, *The Book of Beasts*, p.167. A twelfth century representation of Jonah and the whale in Ravello Cathedral shows a sea-creature which is more like a dragon, indeed like Leviathan himself, an iconographic representation which demonstrates the significance of Jonah's experience. (Plate 15.)

Another bestiary describes the panther who symbolizes Christ: 'He falls asleep and rests in his grave, and descends to the underworld, where he chains the great dragon.' Richard Barber, *Bestiary* (Woodbridge, 1993), p.32.

torch of heavenly ardour, that every day they eagerly long to depart from the prison of the body, transported from the adversity of this world.<sup>120</sup>

Once the preparations are underway for Margaret's death which she confidently and happily anticipates, the passion takes the prescribed hagiographic course, a celebration of her faith. Though I have maintained also that the emphasis of this passion is not on the battle between Christian martyr and pagan ruler, it is clear that loss of virginity for the saint would be synonymous with the loss of her betrothed, Christ. Her faith is expressed in longing for Christ who is eternal, more beautiful and more loving than ever Olibrius could be; thus, his paganism and his temporal, carnal world are no match for what Christianity can offer. Christianity is the rational choice for the saint who, however, does fear that her reason may succumb to doubt and meretricious temptation. She is forcefully made aware that she is part of the fallen world and not immune from the temptations waiting to corrupt her soul. Nevertheless, to see her solely as a virgin at war with her own sensual nature is to misread the nature of the human frailty to which she admits. This is seen in the tension between the assurance in Christ which she exhibits publicly in confrontation with Olibrius and the uncertainty and fear expressed privately in prayer. However, her inherent humility, her awareness of her potential to sin singles her out as an exemplar of virtue which has been tried and tested.

At the heart of the ambivalence of the text lies the concept of the dragon as tempter or sexual seducer, for, in spite of the demon's claim, it is at odds with both its aggressive behaviour and its iconographic role. Also, I would maintain its portrayal, while foregrounding the theme of sexuality and virginity, does so in a way which betrays a sexual frisson which in turn does much to reduce the dragon's role from one as a powerful advocate of evil to one of a flamboyant rapist. To interpret the dragon as exclusively concerned with sexual sin works against its mythological and scriptural connotations as an embodiment of all-embracing cosmic evil and also Margaret's words, in prayers and publicly, indicate, albeit at times implicitly, that the evil which surrounds her

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<sup>120</sup> *The Prose Works*, pp. 70-71.



cannot be defined simply as the vice of lust. Indeed, I would argue that the dragon, while suggesting the sensuality of humankind and its debasement, by extension stands for the evil of the fallen world, which Margaret rejects.

To take the established form of St Margaret's passion and adapt it to the specific needs of the advocacy of virginity puts pressure on the long-established hagiographic depiction of the unblemished martyr. The prevailing metaphor which runs through the first part of this text is of the besieging of a young girl by sin, an image familiar to the *Ancrene Wisse*, and aimed at conveying the dangers and difficulties of the unprotected soul. In doing this, the redactor has shown Margaret's human vulnerability which is at odds with the familiar presentation of the Christian martyr, thus creating a fractured perspective from which the saint is viewed. This particular passion cannot be read as one reads the passions from the *Golden Legend* for the hagiographic formulae are often given a different emphasis or focus which creates ambivalence. In addition, theological, metaphorical and archetypal connotations and *topoi* work against each other at times and frustrate a clear, coherent understanding of parts of the text in relation to others. Nevertheless, the drama of events and, most significantly, the supernatural appearances, work to carry the passion along so that it is possible for the entertainment to obscure the ambivalences and tensions which appear in the narrative.

## CONCLUSION

Not unexpectedly, hagiography has reduced the dragon's multivalency, accrued over the centuries, to one primary valency, that of Satan the adversary. Moreover, because the dragon carries with it a penumbra of mythological, biblical and theological connotations, the confrontation of the protagonist with the dragon becomes a more problematic episode than it would appear at first. As we have seen in both legend and romance, a confrontation with a dragon carries with it all sorts of complex symbolic associations, some of which are conflicting. While the adaptations made to the topos of the dragon-fight in the process of cross-fertilization, demonstrate clearly, as few other topoi do, the different value systems which underpin hagiography and romance, the attempt to fuse the components of the topoi from hagiography and romance within a dragon fight/encounter often creates ambivalence and a shifting narrative focus. The archetypal dragon-fight of the romance genre, borrowed by the hagiographers of the later Middle Ages, undergoes a significant change in order to make it appropriate to the life of the saint. Nevertheless, the way in which the established dragon motif is used is limited by both the dragon's role and function and also that of the respective protagonists in these two genres. The 'fight' is transformed into an 'encounter' when the saint dispatches the monster by means of the power of God, symbolized by the cross, rather than the might of the sword. The romance hero saves a community from the ravages of a marauding monster while the saint delivers a people from the dangers of paganism, symbolized by the dragon. These differences define and underline the role of both hero and saint and the values their respective worlds represent. Fundamentally, it is their approach to life, death and God which determines the difference between the fight and the encounter, between what is viewed as a feat of arms for the romance hero but a miracle for the saint. Both protagonists are human beings who stand out above others but even when showing the bravery of the chivalric knight, the saint can never become the 'hero' of the dragon encounter, just as the chivalric knight can never be seen as a saint, in spite of his innate virtue. The authority of the church which lies behind the hagiographic format meant that basic structures of the legends were not changed and the hagiographic dragon encounter is repeated in many

saints' legends according to a set pattern which, as I have said earlier, is marked by small changes only, usually in the way in which the established symbolism is developed. The limitations placed on the hagiographic dragon are determined by biblical and theological symbolism, even when such symbolism is embellished. At the end of Chapter 3, I summarized the typical hagiographic dragon motif as it functions particularly in those saints' legends which reflect the influence of the popular *Legenda Aurea*, and I demonstrated that within the established constraints of the convention, it could achieve a variety of didactic emphases.

The romance dragon does not have such constraints imposed upon it: there is a certain freedom allowed in its description, and the fight itself can achieve a prominence denied to the saint's dragon which submits immediately to the greater power of the Christian faith, signified by the cross. The fight in romance is stylised, following a formula which is accepted practice. However, this very freedom of description accompanying the dragon-fight allows the dragon's many symbolic biblical associations to seep into the romance narrative; these associations may be residual but they cannot be divorced completely from the monster. Indeed, the introduction of such supernatural elements, however muted, creates an ambivalence which suggests that the fight transcends the physical. By hinting at deeper implications, the focus of the fight is shifted away from the chivalric demonstration of military skill towards a combat between good and evil, in a cosmic sense. These tensions are most clearly seen in the dragon-fight in *Bevis* where the latter takes on an adversary which has its origins in hell. The loading of this fight with significations of good and evil is at odds with the behaviour of Bevis himself who, during the fight, appears unaware of what his opponent might be. The values of Bevis, the knightly hero, are incompatible with the underlying implications of the fight he undertakes. In other romances, less problematic descriptions of romance dragons do, however, often hint at the dark and fiery regions from which the creatures come which again reinforce the dragon's attendant connotations, both as a physical creature and also as a symbol of evil.

As I have discussed in Chapter 3, the dragon can function in one saint's legend as

both an aggressive carrier of the plague and also a specific symbol of paganism or Satan or cosmic evil, the metaphorical blurring with the literal. This occurs in romance also, for in *Bevis*, the dragon's function is first as the leprosy-bearing poisoner of the unknown, young knight and then Bevis, himself, and finally as the hagiographic dragon who is vanquished by Christian prayer before being killed by Bevis. In this way the perspective from which the dragon is viewed may shift.

In the last two chapters, I examined two saints' legends which reveal some of the problems which beset the redactor. By focusing on the dragon episode in both, I have shown how complications occur when firstly in the legend of St George, the dragon is forced out of its symbolic role into that of physical adversary, destined to be killed by the protagonist. Although usually the dragon episode in hagiography is consistently uniform, the legend of St George reveals an ambivalent presentation of the topos for the protagonist himself oscillates between the role of romance hero and that of saint, largely because the saint becomes the heroic dragon-slayer. Most significantly, the romance fight is not changed to an encounter, although George's signing of the cross makes the subsequent killing redundant. In this way the dragon's symbolic role as an embodiment of the evil of paganism is undermined by its treatment as a physical monster, attacked by the saint. Clearly, there was a popular demand for the appearance of the saint of the Crusaders in action, which took priority over the hagiographic ethos. The cracks that are revealed in this accretion to the passion of the saint are due to the pull against each other of two divergent systems of generic values which also are brought into sharp contrast with the values of St George, the martyr, whose passion follows.

Secondly, the legend of St Margaret from the Katherine Group also shows what narrative tensions emerge when there is an attempt to alter the traditional theological emphasis of the virgin martyr's legend, namely the celebration of the saint's faith in the face of torture. While the problems are not the same as in the legend of St George, by foregrounding the virtue of virginity and promulgating the dangers of falling prey to the

temptations of the flesh, the redactor has, ironically, created a problematic focus within the text for the accumulated effect of this emphasis is to make uncertain how the intensified and dramatic appearance of the dragon is to be interpreted. What the dragon represents is unclear largely because the exploitation of the theme of virginity within the parameters of the standard legend has shaken the established hagiographic iconography by raising sexual implications concerning the dragon's significance and relationship to the theme. Olibrius's lust, more specifically Margaret's own behaviour and responses and the dragon's own sensual movements colour our reaction to it. However, the monster remains a terrifying but puzzling part of the narrative for it does not have a symbolic coherence associated with temptation or sexuality which can be accommodated within the propagandist narrative and neither can it be viewed from a traditional hagiographic standpoint.

The dragon topos can function within the genres of romance and hagiography without disturbing the ethos of the respective narratives, providing it is carefully controlled. If the dragon and protagonist function according to the tacitly accepted rules for each genre, and clearly there were perceptions of what was considered appropriate, then the underlying generic values are not disturbed. By developing the topos beyond its appropriateness, any romance redactor perhaps unwittingly opens up the narrative to the dragon's great symbolic heritage and by doing so introduces images which have a more profoundly supernatural import than is consistent with romance. However, the hagiographic redactors of the two saints' legends in question, in all probability encouraged by the prospect of entertaining their readers, have allowed the respective dragon episodes to dominate and unbalance the didactic message. Ironically, what can be perceived as defects of redaction have proved to be the cause of the legends' continued success.

**PLATE 1**



St George and the dragon, the twelfth century tympanum, Ruardean Church.

PLATE 2



St George and the dragon, a twelfth century panel on the doors of Ravello Cathedral.

**PLATE 3**



Mithraic tauroctone, St Clement's Rome.



## PLATE 4



St Michael fifteenth century rood screen, Ranworth Church.

PLATE 5



St George, fifteenth century wood screen, Ranworth Church.

PLATE 6



Detail from the fifteenth century Valencia altarpiece.

PLATE 7



Detail from the fifteenth century Valencia altarpiece.

## PLATE 8



St Martha and the tarasque,  
fourteenth century stone  
altar-piece, the Cathedral of  
St Sauveur,  
Aix-en-Provence.

## PLATE 9



St George fighting the Muslim forces, twelfth century tympanum, Fordington, Dorset.

PLATE 10



St George and the dragon, a fifteenth century wall-painting, Pickering Church.

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**PLATE 15**



Jonah and the Whale, the twelfth century pulpit, Ravello Cathedral.



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