Rutger Kramer and Ekaterina Novokhatko

Dead Authors and Living Saints
Community, Sanctity, and the Reader Experience in Medieval Hagiographical Narratives

for Jan Westerbos – teller of stories, seeker of God

Abstract In this paper, the ‘Gesta Sanctorum Rotonensium’, a ninth-century foundation legend of the Breton monastery of Redon, and the ‘Vita Geraldi’, a hagiography of St Gerald of Aurillac, serve as a point of departure for a discussion of how the experience of reading shaped early medieval communities. By realigning communal forms of hagiographic texts as media, the authors identify and analyse the parts of those texts where the meta-narrative is carefully inserted. By calling into question the ideas of both authorship and audience in the hagiographical context, this paper shows how the use of topoi in those texts created a reading experience that was rooted in the local small worlds of the monastic communities and also connected them to the universal world of Christendom. Finally, the authors show that a narratological analysis of community-creation in early medieval hagiographic texts can also help us better understand how those communities experienced their relationship with God.

Zusammenfassung Im vorliegenden Aufsatz dienen die ‚Gesta Sanctorum Rotonensium‘, eine Gründungslegende des bretonischen Klosters Redon aus dem 9. Jahrhundert, und die ‚Vita Geraldi‘, eine Hagiographie des Heiligen Gerald von Aurillac, als Ausgangspunkt für eine Diskussion darüber, wie die Erfahrung eines Textes durch Lesen oder Zuhören frühmittelalterliche Gemeinschaften prägte. Die Autoren identifizieren die für die mönchische Gemeinschaft gedachten Stilmittel der hagiographischen Texte und verbinden ihre Analyse mit denjenigen Textstellen, die die Meta-Erzählung vorantreiben. Auf diese Weise stellen sie Vorstellungen von Autorschaft und Publikum in der

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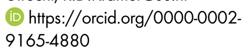
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Hagiographie in Frage. Darüber hinaus zeigt der Aufsatz, wie die Verwendung von Topoi im hagiographischen Kontext eine Leseerfahrung schuf, die in den lokalen Welten der klösterlichen Gemeinschaften verwurzelt war, diese aber auch mit der universellen Welt der Christenheit verband. Schließlich behaupten die Autoren, dass eine narratologische Analyse der Gemeinschaftsbildung in frühmittelalterlichen hagiographischen Texten uns auch helfen kann, die Art und Weise besser zu verstehen, in der diese Gemeinschaften ihre Beziehung zu Gott erlebten.

Introduction

From the beginning God chose not eloquent philosophers, or fluent rhetoricians, but untaught fishermen to save the world by their teaching, and instructed them, saying, 'Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creatures'. These words were said not to Virgil, or to Cicero, or to the wisest Homer, but to St Peter the Fisherman. This, dear brothers, I have said for this reason, that none of you should despise my stupidity [insipientia], particularly as I knew these holy men well, who brought me up from my boyhood and taught me in the knowledge [scientia] of God. And to strengthen your faith and love in the Lord Jesus Christ, I must not hide what I saw and heard from them.

With these words, the anonymous author of the 'Gesta Sanctorum Rotonensium' (GSR) prefaces the second book of his work, a late ninth-century foundation legend of the monastery of Redon in present-day Bretagne.[1] This work sets up the story of the monastery to ensure that Redon would become and remain more than a monastic institution: it was written to turn every subsequent generation of monks into a veritable community, more than just a gathering of cloistered individuals, but a group moved by their affection towards one another to work towards the same goal, eager to emulate and mirror the deeds of the "founding fathers" of the monastery. [2]

1 Gesta Sanctorum Rotonensium, ed. and trans. Caroline Brett, Woodbridge 1989, pp. 106–219, at pp. 144–145.

2 Christina Lutter, Social Groups, Personal Relations, and the Making of Communities in Medieval *vita monastica*, in: Jörg Rogge (ed.), Making Sense as Cultural Practice. Historical Perspectives (Mainzer historische Kulturwissenschaften 17), Bielefeld 2013, pp. 45–61. It is useful in this regard to consider the membership of a community as a kind of "affirmative freedom" as explained by Roberto Esposito; see Greg Bird and Jonathan Short, Community, Immunity, and the Proper. An Introduction to the Political Theory of Roberto Esposito, in: Angelaki 18 (2013), pp. 1–12.

It is difficult to say anything with certainty about the intentions behind the GSR, as the beginning and the end are missing. The only clue about authorship is given by the hints dropped throughout the narrative in the first person singular; the only clue about its importance is that the oldest manuscript shows that the stories had remained part of the monastic community after the monks had been driven into exile under the pressure of Viking attacks, and were recopied after the monastery was 're-founded' in the late tenth century.[3] Around that time, the GSR was also subject to a *réécriture*, resulting in the early eleventh-century 'Vita Conwoionis'. This *vita* presents a re-interpretation of the role of the community within the Breton political landscape in the post-Viking era. It follows a different narrative structure and appears to have a different audience, so it will, unfortunately, be left out of the equation for this article.[4]

From the intra- and contextual clues in the GSR, we can infer that this author intended the learning process to start not from the saints themselves, nor from himself as an author, but from the text that would be copied and reused through the ages without his agency. The use of a classic *humilitas* topos addresses the audience – and allows the author to forge a direct connection between the readers / listeners and the saints described.[5] The author presents himself as *insipiens* but also as an active conduit between the "holy men" who trained him and the people hoping to be educated by reading or listening to these words.[6] More importantly, the author pushes the audience to reflect on what exactly constitutes that lack of wisdom.[7] The explicit

3 On the composition and transmission of the GSR, see Caroline BRETT, The Deeds of the Saints of Redon, pp. 20–62 and Caroline BRETT, Redon, abbaye carolingienne, in: Daniel PICHOT and Georges PROVOST (eds.), Histoire de Redon. De l'abbaye à la ville, Rennes 2015, pp. 50–65; Rutger KRAMER, Many Lives, One Story. The 'Gesta Sanctorum Rotonensium and the Making of Redon', in: Medieval Worlds, forthcoming.

4 Vita Conwoionis, in: The Monks of Redon. Gesta Sanctorum Rotonensium and Vita Conuuoionis, ed. by Caroline BRETT, Woodbridge 1989, pp. 226–245; on this text, see Claire GARAULT, L'abbaye de Redon, entre horizon local et ouverture culturelle (IXe–XIIe siècle), in: Daniel PICHOT and Georges PROVOST (eds.), Histoire de Redon. De l'abbaye à la ville, Rennes 2015, pp. 82–97.

5 This article relies on the theories of audience by Peter J. RABINOWITZ, Truth in Fiction. A Reexamination of Audiences, in: Critical Inquiry 4, 1 (1977), pp. 121–141, which, for narrative reasons, we will explain below. On interactions between author and audience, especially in a monastic setting, see Hugh MAGENNIS, Audience(s), Reception, Literacy, in: Phillip PULSIANO and Elaine M. TREHARNE (eds.), A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature, Oxford 2001, pp. 84–101. On the use of *humilitas* to efface one's role as author, see Elisabeth GÖSSMANN, Die Selbstverfremdung weiblichen Schreibens im Mittelalter. Bescheidenheitspolitik und Erzählungsbewusstsein: Hrotsvith von Gandersheim, Frau Ava, Hildegard von Bingen, in: Akten des internationalen Germanistenkongresses 10, München 1990, pp. 193–200.

6 For a recent reflection on the nature of teaching and learning in the Carolingian and post-Carolingian era, see John J. CONTRENI, Learning for God. Education in the Carolingian Age, in: The Journal of Medieval Latin 24 (2014), pp. 89–129, who on p. 104 characterises monastic learning as "culminating in the ability to speak to God correctly".

7 BRETT has translated this as "stupid", but in the context of the narrative it also carries connotations of being unwise due to a lack of education. The only other time the word occurs in the GSR is in c. 3.7, at pp. 204–205, where the author approvingly quotes (a slightly modified

reference to the text gives the audience an incentive to develop their own perspective on the narrative.[8] Thus, the author provides the audience with a reason to become a monastic community.[9]

In another, slightly later text, we see a similar strategy. The early tenth-century *vita* of the aristocrat-turned-ascetic Gerald of Aurillac, written by Abbot Odo of Cluny (VG), starts with the following question to the audience:

> Many doubt whether the things that are said about the blessed Gerald are true, and some think that they are certainly not true but fantastic. Others, as though seeking excuses for their sins, extol him indiscreetly, saying that Gerald was powerful and rich, and lived well, and is certainly a saint. They strive indeed to excuse their luxurious lives by his example. It seemed to me therefore that I ought to reply a little to these according to my ability. For I too, formerly, hearing the fame of his miracles, was nevertheless in doubt, and for this reason chiefly, that stories get about here and there, though I know not what channels, and are then gradually discredited as empty.[10]

By opening like this, readers or listeners are invited to consider several things simultaneously. Firstly, they wonder if they are among the "many" who know enough about St Gerald to even doubt his sanctity. Secondly, they reflect on whether they counted as a doubter, a believer, or someone waiting to be convinced by the following story. While the text presents an answer to these questions – the fact that a *vita* was written in the first place is a clear indication as to the sanctity of the protagonist – the author's implication that doubt was an option engaged the audience more fully with the *vita*'s message.[11] By presenting himself as a doubting Thomas, Odo invited the audience to lay bare their vulnerabilities. This, in turn, could be the start of a conversation that would strengthen rather than diminish their faith – in God, but also in their fellow believers, who would help them achieve certainty.[12]

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version of) Prov. 12:1: "He who hates reproofs is foolish" (*Qui increpationes odit insipiens est*). Its counterpart in the introduction quoted above, *scientia*, also only occurs in one other point, in c. 2.10 at pp. 178–179, indicating that lack of knowledge does not preclude piety.

8 Fredrik Barth, An Anthropology of Knowledge, in: Current Anthropology 43, 1 (2002), pp. 1–18.

9 See also Pierre Riché, En relisant l'*Histoire des Saints de Redon*, in: Landévennec et le Monachisme Breton dans le Haut Moyen Âge, Landévennec 1986, pp. 13–18.

10 Vita Geraldi, Prefatio, in: Odo of Cluny, Vita sancti Geraldi Auriliacensis. Édition critique, traduction française, introduction et commentaires, ed. and transl. by A. M. Bultot-Verleysen (Subsidia Hagiographica 89), Bruxelles 2009, pp. 130–132. For an English translation, see St. Odo of Cluny. Being the Life of St. Odo of Cluny by John of Salerno and the Life of St. Gerald of Aurillac by St. Odo, transl. and ed. by Gerard Sitwell, London, New York 1958, p. 91.

11 See also the remarks on this strategy by Dennis H. Green, The Beginnings of Medieval Romance. Fact and Fiction 1150–1220, Cambridge 2003, pp. 72–76.

12 Mathew Kuefler, The Making and Unmaking of a Saint. Hagiography and Memory in the Cult of Gerald of Aurillac, Philadelphia 2014, pp. 62–67, and Karol Szejgiec, Creating the Past and

The link between hagiographical narratives and community formation has been the subject of many studies.[13] However, the actual relationship between the two is often taken for granted. It is assumed that the collective experience of a narrative leads to a 'community', and subsequently the text is probed for the mechanisms behind this process.[14] Drawing a direct connection between the composition of a narrative and the formation of a stable community, however, is a leap of faith.[15] Even if we adjust for scale and exclude Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" – nations in which feelings of togetherness clash with the fact that most inhabitants have no personal acquaintance – communities are more than people who happen to live together or who may be defined by geographic or demographic factors.[16] Affection for the other members of the in-group and feelings of mutual obligation play a role as well as, for instance, the shared memory of specific rituals, a specific version of the past, or implicit agreements to deal with future challenges collectively.[17]

A community may be bound together by rules, by shared intellectual interests or by doctrines. In either case, the fabric of a community is shaped by the idea, held by its members, that memory and calamity – present, past and future – affect those on the inside differently from those on the outside. This internal conviction need not be spoken out loud or made explicit in a text.[18] Therefore, when looking at the construction of a community in a written narrative, the question is whether it presents a community

Shaping Identity – Angevin Dynastic Legend ('Gesta consulum Andegavorum'), in: Andrzej Pleszczynski et al. (eds.), Imagined Communities. Constructing Collective Identities in Medieval Europe, Leiden 2018, pp. 144–151.

13 Examples from the medieval West include Janneke Raaijmakers, The Making of the Monastic Community of Fulda, c.744–c.900, Cambridge 2012; Thomas Head, Hagiography and the Cult of Saints. The Diocese of Orléans 800–1200, Cambridge 2005; Christina Pössel, The Consolation of Community. Innovation and Ideas of History in Ratpert's 'Casus Sancti Galli', in: The Journal of Ecclesiastical History 65 (2014), pp. 1–24.

14 Rutger Kramer, Introduction. Spiritual Communities across Medieval Eurasia, in: Eirik Hovden, Christina Lutter and Walter Pohl (eds.), Meanings of Community across Medieval Eurasia. Comparative Approaches, Leiden 2016, pp. 271–288.

15 On this dynamic, see Emma Campbell, Medieval Saints' Lives. The Gift, Kinship and Community in Old French Hagiography, Woodbridge 2008, esp. pp. 1–24 and 223–230, where she explains how hagiographical narratives are a tool for renegotiating an existing system of (reciprocal) relations within a community.

16 Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, London, New York 1983; extended and rev. ed. 1991.

17 Walter Pohl, Comparing Communities. The Limits of Typology, in: History and Anthropology 26, 1 (2015), pp. 18–35; Walter Pohl, Introduction: Meanings of Community in Medieval Eurasia, in: Eirik Hovden, Christina Lutter and Walter Pohl (eds.), Meanings of Community across Medieval Eurasia. Comparative Approaches, Leiden 2016, pp. 1–23. See also Victor Turner, Liminality and Communitas, in: Victor Turner, The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure, Chicago 1969, pp. 94–130.

18 The idea of "silential relations" as a way in which (non-)use of language establishes relations between people was put forward by A.L. Becker, Biography of a Sentence. A Burmese Proverb, in: A.L. Becker, Beyond Translation. Essays towards a Modern Philology, Ann Arbor 2000, pp. 185–210, at p. 186.

that is already there or if the author intended their work to be a stepping-stone towards building a sense of togetherness. The community-building aspects inherent in a text are not a given. Instead, they reflect potential modes of interaction catalysed by a narrative which, as a product of the same kind of communal thinking that it hoped to catalyse, instilled a sense of togetherness among the audience.

A text like the GSR catered to a face-to-face community. The identity of the intended audience was tied up with the 'saints of Redon' in the monastic burial ground.[19] The VG was composed to establish the authority of a recently deceased abbot – and to assure the monks that life could continue as their founder intended (under the auspices of the text's author) – but also to link together ideals of aristocratic and saintly behaviour in order to educate a lay audience and further elevate the ascetic ideals represented by the community.[20] In either case, justifying the existence – and explaining the persistence – of a monastery was never the sole *raison d'être* for such narratives. The predictability of the genre and the way authors manipulated their audience by playing with those conventions open up creative means for the author to interact with audiences across time and space.

This essay represents a meta-modern reflection on the authorial choices underpinning hagiographical narratives: a way to react to certain all-encompassing assumptions about hagiography as a genre and use those assumptions productively by speculating that our authors were as aware of them as we are.[21] Going beyond post-modern critiques of grand narratives, our approach demonstrates how the choices made by an author may amplify ongoing affective community formation processes. We are looking at the 'embeddedness' of these texts: how they represent a relation between the way individuals imagine the world while being part of that same world; how narrative structures affect worldviews and vice versa; and how this interplay, in turn, influences our interpretation.[22]

Both these texts present specific ideals of religious life in small, restricted communities but also show the challenge of remaining virtuous and holy within the turbulent, emergent and highly public community of 'the Church' between the late ninth and

19 Julia M. H. Smith, *Aedificatio sancti loci.* The Making of a Ninth-Century Holy Place, in: Mayke de Jong, Frans Theuws and Carine van Rhijn (eds.), Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages (Transformation of the Roman World 6), Leiden 2001, pp. 361–396.

20 Andrew J. Romig, Be a Perfect Man. Christian Masculinity and the Carolingian Aristocracy, Philadelphia 2017, pp. 132–154.

21 See David James and Urmila Seshagiri, Metamodernism. Narratives of Continuity and Revolution, in: PMLA 129, 1 (2014), pp. 87–100; Michial Farmer, 'Cloaked In, Like, Fifteen Layers of Irony'. The Metamodernist Sensibility of 'Parks and Recreation', in: Studies in Popular Culture 37, 2 (2015), pp. 103–120; and, most fundamentally, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, Notes on Metamodernism, in: Journal of Aesthetics and Culture 2, 1 (2010), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677 (29 October 2021).

22 Jibu Mathew George, Philosophical Meta-Reflections on Literary Studies. Why Do Things with Texts, and What To Do with Them?, London 2020, esp. pp. 53–92.

early eleventh century.[23] These narratives, in short, address one or several levels of community: face-to-face communities; mid-level communities that transcend local boundaries without claims to universality; (idealised) universal communities based on the idea that certain ideological norms apply to all of humankind.[24] We focus here on several narrative strategies the authors used to engage with their actual audience and affect their ideal audience while bearing in mind all possible 'audiences' of a text. The authorial intention thus overcomes the contextual framework of medieval authors and includes us as readers in their potential audience reacting to the ideas the authors wanted us to believe.[25] Hagiographical texts shape relations between the author, the audience (and its shared memories), and God. In studying these intersections, it is all too easily forgotten that we, as the potential audience, become part of the same super-structure – at least as the author envisaged it. The stories of the lives of saints and how their deeds mirrored the ideal set by Christ in the Gospels provide great test cases for studying interactive structures, as their predictability allows the author to signal the message – the Truth – to the intended audience.[26] Analysing them shows how the application of narratological concepts to the field of medieval hagiography can be helpful,[27] for instance when studying the longer (meta-)history of the genre or, as we will do in what follows, to explore how texts connect authors and audiences.[28]

23 Mayke de Jong, The Two Republics. *Ecclesia* and the Public Domain in the Carolingian World, in: Ross Balzaretti, Julia Barrow and Patricia Skinner (eds.), Italy and Early Medieval Europe. Papers for Chris Wickham, Oxford 2018, pp. 486–500.

24 Andrew Mason, Community, Solidarity and Belonging. Levels of Community and their Normative Significance, Cambridge 2000.

25 Carlo Ginzburg, Clues. Roots of an Evidential Paradigm, in: Carlo Ginzburg, Clues, Myths and the Historical Method, transl. by John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi, Baltimore MA 1989, pp. 96–125.

26 See James T. Palmer, Early Medieval Hagiography, Leeds 2018; Rico G. Monge, Saints, Truth and the 'Use and Abuse' of Hagiography, in: Rico G. Monge, Kerry P. C. San Chirico and Rachel J. Smith (eds.), Hagiography and Religious Truth. Case Studies in the Abrahamic and Dharmic Traditions, London 2016, pp. 7–22; and, in the same volume, Rachel J. Smith, Devotion, Critique, and the Reading of Christian Saints' Lives, pp. 23–36.

27 See Cynthia Hahn, Portrayed on the Heart. Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of Saints from the Tenth through the Thirteenth Century, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2001; Barbara Abou-el-Haj, The Audiences for the Medieval Cults of Saints, in: Gesta 30, 1 (1991), pp. 3–15, and The Medieval Cult of Saints. Formations and transformations, Cambridge 1994, working on narratives in pictorial hagiographies; Monika Fludernik, Metanarrative and Metafictional Commentary. From Metadiscursivity to Metanarration and Metafiction, in: Poetica 35 (2003), pp. 1–39; Monika Fludernik, The Diachronization of Narratology, in: Narrative 11, 3 (2003), pp. 331–348; and Monika Fludernik, 1050–1500. Through a Glass Darkly; or, the Emergence of Mind in Medieval Narrative, in: D. Herman (ed.), The Emergence of Mind. Representations of Consciousness in Narrative Discourse in English, Lincoln 2011, pp. 69–100; and Eva von Contzen, Why do we need a medieval narratology?, in: Diegesis 2 (2014), https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/view/170 (29 October 2021), studying texts in the framework of cognitive narratology with an accent on diachronisation. See also the contribution by Andreas Abele in this volume.

28 See, among others, Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, Postclassical Narratology, in: Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck (eds.), Handbook of Narrative Analysis, Lincoln 2019, pp. 110–300, especially

Narratology and Mediality

Both our authors employ the humility topoi in their texts in order to connect with the audience by being at the same time creative and predictable. As tools of authorial intentions, these topoi become structural elements. The act of engaging the audience like this raises questions in their minds. Are they supposed merely to look at (or listen to) words, or should they imagine a story? And if their imagination was to be spurred by predictable structures, what purpose is there for breaking the mould and adding surprising words, sentences, or chapters?[29] Or should there be no surprises at all, and is the community best served by predictability?[30]

Both our narratives are dedicated to local saints and address a primarily monastic audience while also catering to the laity. In all cases, the primary aim of the texts would have been to discuss ideals of sanctity and norms for life at a local level, meaning they would have been structured in such a way as to resonate with an intended local audience.[31] This audience would share memories, contexts and ideals and therefore could be regarded, analytically, as a "discourse community",[32] a "textual community",[33] or a "reading community".[34]

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the remarks on pp. 276–300 about "Everyday life as a narrative process". Methodologically we rely on Gabrielle Spiegel, History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the text, in: Speculum 65 (1990), pp. 59–86; see also J. M. Bryant, On Sources and Narratives in Historical Social Science. A Realist Critique of Positivist and Postmodernist Epistemologies, in: British Journal of Sociology 51 (2000), pp. 489–523

29 See, for instance, Karin Kukkonen, Metalepsis in Popular Culture. An Introduction, in: Karin Kukkonen and Sonja Klimek (eds.), Metalepsis in Popular Culture, Berlin 2011, pp. 1–22, esp. pp. 12–18.

30 Lawrence S. Cunningham, Hagiography and Imagination, in: Studies in the Literary Imagination 18, 1 (1985), pp. 79–88. On the role of interruptions and interactivity to stimulate the imagination of the audience, see Jelena Kleut et al., Emerging Trends in Small Acts of Audience Engagement and Interruptions of Content Flows, in: Ranjana Das and Brita Ytre-Arne (eds.), The Future of Audiences. A Foresight Analysis of Interfaces and Engagement, London 2018, pp. 123–140 and, in the same volume, Jannie Møller Hartley et al., Interruption, Disruption or Intervention? A Stakeholder Analysis of Small Acts of Engagement in Content Flows, pp. 141–160.

31 Marie-Céline Isaïa, L'Hagiographie. Source des normes médiévales, in: Marie-Céline Isaïa and Thomas Granier (eds.), Normes et hagiographie dans l'Occident latin (Ve–XVIe siècles). Actes du colloque international de Lyon, 4–6 octobre 2010 (Hagiologia 9), Turnhout 2014, pp. 17–44.

32 A. M. Johns, Text, Role, and Context. Developing Academic Literacies, Cambridge 1997, pp. 51–70; Robert Wuthnow, Communities of Discourse. Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism, Cambridge MA 1989, pp. 9–19; Karin Evans, Audience and Discourse Community Theory, in: Mary Lynch Kennedy (ed.), Theorizing Composition. A Critical Sourcebook of Theory and Scholarship in Contemporary Composition Studies, Westport CT 1998, pp. 1–5; John M. Swales, Other Floors, Other Voices: A Textography of a Small University Building, Mahwah NJ 1998, pp. 194–207.

33 A term coined by Brian Stock in his work: The Implications of Literacy. Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries, Princeton 1983, pp. 88–240.

34 Wendy Scase, Reading Communities, in: Greg Walker and Elaine Treharne (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English, Oxford 2010, pp. 557–573.

Three elements are essential for our analysis of this intersection between narrative conventions, community interests, and authorial intent. First, the correlation between author, audience and text; second, the way the context influenced the 'shared experience' of the collective audience; and third, the universalising or equalising function of God, whose influence was believed to be present in author, audience, text and protagonist alike. In going over these elements, we will assess the role of the hagiographer in shaping a meta-narrative of sanctity while also looking at how the resulting text served – and influenced – the perceived needs of the communities addressed.

All of this becomes more understandable if we consider hagiography as media. Whether intended to be read in silence or as the basis of sermons or *lectiones* during mealtimes, the immersive nature of hagiographic narratives engenders the affection and experience needed to forge a community.[35] It is the act of recognising the mediality of stories as a tool that invites communication between author and audience, facilitating community formation processes – not their mere existence or that somebody recorded them.[36] Hagiographic media thus becomes 'immanent': formulas and recognisable patterns take on a life of their own when the audience engages with them. The use of traditional, predictable patterns dictates the aesthetics of the story and steers the imagination of the audience.[37] Alicia Spencer-Hall takes this one step further by stating that hagiography is an inherently immersive or 'cinematic' genre: "they solicit interactions with readers, and open up spaces of virtuality in which their hagiographic personas live and into which the reader can project themselves".[38] Moreover, she explains, the experience of hagiography is by definition multi-modal, invoking all the senses to tap into a process of collective memory-making.

Ideally, local hagiographical narratives manage to 'install' this mediality in a way determined by each audience member individually: the delivery method (everybody asynchronously read the same text or simultaneously experienced the same story)

35 Alicia Spencer-Hall, Medieval Saints and Modern Screens. Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience, Amsterdam 2017, p. 44.

36 On this phenomenon (from an anthropological approach to modern media): Birgit Meyer, Religious revelation. Secrecy and the Limits of Representation, in: Anthropological Theory 6, 4 (2006), pp. 431–453. See also Jørgen BRUHN, The Intermediality of Narrative Literature. Medialities Matter, London 2016, pp. 13–37, esp. p. 17, where he explains "medialities" as "specified clusters of communicative forms […] seen in relation to the fact that human beings exist in a fundamentally mediating and communicating relationship with the world and other human beings", and p. 30, where he proposes that focusing on such (inter- or hetero-)medialities provides "a method of analyzing narrative written literature that is […] sufficiently open toward improvisation and creativity to be useful when analyzing the individual complexities of specific narrative texts".

37 John Miles Foley, Immanent Art. From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic, Bloomington 1991, especially pp. 38–60, and John Miles Foley and Peter Ramey, Oral Theory and Medieval Literature, in: Karl Reichl (ed.), Medieval Oral Literature, Berlin 2012, pp. 71–102.

38 Spencer-Hall (note 35), p. 13, invoking W.J. T. Mitchell, What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images, Chicago 2005, pp. 201–221.

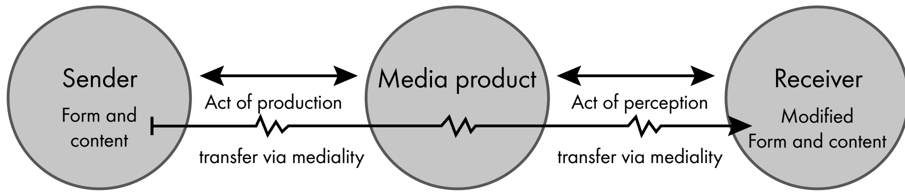

Fig. 1 | Media and Mediality (Jørgen Bruhn, The Intermediality of Narrative Literature. Medialities Matter, London 2016, p. 17).

meant that everybody had an equal chance to formulate their own thoughts on the matter and share these with the other members of the community: the author's role was to give direction to these thoughts, not prescribe them altogether (Fig. 1).[39] For this to happen, the message contained in the medium is made visible by invoking a shared past within the story and creating a new shared memory through the collective immersive experience of partaking in the story. The evocation of narrative structures ensured that everybody would get, and be able to explain, the point. Despite – or even because of – this, we must assume that the authors were aware of the impact of their writing on their audience.

Dead or Alive: The Author

It is complicated to think of medieval hagiographic narratives – or indeed any text – in terms of their authorship. Many medieval texts have been transmitted to us anonymously, and even if we can identify an author, authorial intentions remain elusive.[40] The assumption is that (monastic) authors are intrinsically linked to the audience in that the texts they produce represent a potential horizon of expectations for their community. For example, in the VG, the author, Odo of Cluny, is explicitly present throughout the text through a series of meta-narrative insertions that guide readers

39 On this aspect of mediality: Cornelia Epping-Jäger, Voice Politics. Establishing the 'Loud/Speaker' in the Political Communication of National Socialism, in: Ludwig Jäger, Erika Linz and Irmela Schneider (eds.), Media, Culture, and Mediality. New Insights into the Current State of Research, Bielefeld 2010, pp. 161–186, esp. pp. 179–180. Writing on the performative context of Dudo of Saint-Quentin's Historia Normannorum, Benjamin Pohl, Poetry, Punctuation and Performance. Was there an Aural Context for Dudo of Saint-Quentin's 'Historia Normannorum'?, in: Tabularia 15 (2016), points out that manuscripts may also contain clues as to the way the texts would usually be experienced by a given audience.

40 Stuart Airlie, 'Sad stories of the death of kings'. Narrative Patterns and Structures of Authority in Regino of Prüm's *Chronicle*, in: Elizabeth M. Tyler and Ross Balzaretti (eds.), Narrative History in the Early Medieval West, Turnhout 2006, pp. 105–131, at pp. 109–119; Walter Pohl, Introduction. Ego trouble?, in: Richard Corradini et al. (eds.), Ego Trouble. Authors and Their Identities in the Early Middle Ages (Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 15), Wien 2010, pp. 9–23.

or listeners intent on understanding the saint's holiness. As seen in Table 1, each insertion acts as a type of commentary on the sanctity of the protagonist – a kind of 'epic' voice-over (in a Brechtian sense) or running commentary as the plot unfolds.[41]

Tab. 1 | Meta-narrative insertions on sanctity in the VG

Features defining Gerald's sanctity in the VG	Meaning / understanding within the narrative
References to holy ancestors[i]	Audience has to follow examples from the past
Belief that having the gift of prophecy defines the 'saint'[ii]	To be holy, one needs knowledge and understanding beyond standard human capacity
Divine force as a burden, acting like a poison[iii]	Inverse relationship between soul and body – the stronger the divine power in the soul, the weaker the earthly power of the body
Role of relics and virtues (as respectively the material substance and the spiritual one) in shaping sanctity[iv]	Sainthood defined by virtue in life and an imperishable body in death (inverted schema of material and spiritual)

i *Nonnulli namque patrum, cum et sanctissimi et pacientissimi essent, iusticie tamen causa exigente, viriliter in aduersariis arma corripiebant, ut Abraham qui pro eruendo nepote ingentem hostium nultitudime, fudit, et rex David qui etiam contra filium legiones direxit.* Vita Geraldi I, 8 (note 10), p. 146.

ii *Nam si fortasse prophetie spiritum habuisset, nullus eum, ut puto, sanctum esse negaret.* Ibid. II, 34, p. 240.

iii *Iam vero spiritalis virtus que pleniter in eo succreverat corporeas vires poene trucidaverat; quippe cum iste mos sanctorum sit, quia virtus divina minus in eis valida fuisset, si corporeum robur non extenuasset* and also *Cum ergo his et huiusmodi virtutibus anima saginaretur, corporis efficaciam amittebat.* Ibid. III, p. 244.

iv *Id credimus quod ita per sancta pignora sanitatem beneficia tribuuntur, ut virtus quoque beati Geraldi cooperatrix non negetur.* Ibid. IV, 9, p. 272.

Table 1 lists the narrative insertions used in the VG to signal the sanctity of the protagonist. At its core, these features simply constitute an informative message designed by the author to represent the criteria of sanctity so his intended audience would understand. It shows how Odo used narrative insertions similar to the GSR, where individual chapters are used to highlight features of sanctity. However, this list goes beyond convincing the audience what it means to be a saint. These insertions emerge from ideas rooted in beliefs evolving within Christendom and therefore do not depend exclusively on the author expressing them. Moreover, once formulated, these ideals shape the author's intentions rather than being shaped by them. A text like the VG thus unifies past and present by mapping 'common' models of sanctity

41 On Brecht's use of "epic theatre" as a means to "exploiting creatively its self-conscious awareness of being a theatre" (which, we contend below, applies to reading hagiographical stories), see Phoebe von Held, Alienation and Theatricality. Diderot After Brecht, Abingdon 2010, pp. 76–90. On reading hagiography see Wolfert van Egmond, The Audience of Early Medieval Hagiographical texts. Some Questions Revisited, in: Marco Mostert (ed.), New Approaches to Medieval Communication, Turnhout 1999, pp. 41–67.

onto a person that contemporaries could believe in and emulate. These models, in turn, reflect the beliefs held by those same people and thus are also expected by them. As much as such narratives did not represent any specified agenda planned by its author; they were part of a complex skein of notions, beliefs and ideas formed by, and catering to, society.[42]

The schema above, of the meta-narrative insertions in the VG, demonstrates how author and audience belong to the same community, not because of any shared historical realities, but because the expectations of his audience steered the narrative created by Odo.[43] When Odo takes a step back to comment on the events described, he signals to the audience he is aware of his status as a storyteller. The author of the GSR also relies on the more highly educated members in the audience – the senior monks – to understand the biblical references and use this as a pretext to explain the moral of a given chapter.[44] Both authors have made their self-insertions explicit. Such instances of *mise en abyme* are what makes texts work, inviting the audience to engage without breaking the immersive spell or suspending their (dis)belief.[45] In this vein, an author's significance is due less to the composition itself than to the sense of familiarity they created among the audience.

In both cases, the realistic depictions of life in the ninth and tenth century represent a choice. Knowing these were texts meant for repeated consumption, they emphasised the familiarity between the saints, the collective audience (including past audiences), and individual media consumers. The GSR is exemplary in this regard: not only does the author insert himself on several occasions, he also shows the monks working and travelling together, and in one instance even has a saint (in a vision) postpone a miracle so that the whole community may be present to witness it.[46] Even if all such instances were one-time occurrences, the message contained in the medium was one of nostalgia, a memory of a time when piety and saintliness

42 Jamie Kreiner, The Social Life of Hagiography in the Merovingian Kingdom, Cambridge 2014. See Yitzhak Hen, Religious Culture and the Power of Tradition in the Early Medieval West, in: Carol Lansing and Edward D. English (eds.), A Companion to the Medieval World, Chichester 2009, pp. 67–85.

43 Proposed in 1967 by H. R. Jauss as the *Erwartungshorizont* of the audience: Hans Robert Jauss, Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft, Konstanz 1967. See also Jens Westemeier, Hans Robert Jauss: Jugend, Krieg und Internierung, Konstanz 2016, on Jauss' controversial and problematic past. See also Hannelore Link, Rezeptionsforschung. Eine Einführung in Methoden und Probleme, Stuttgart 1975, for a different take on the interaction between author and audience.

44 Rutger Kramer, *In divinis scripturis legitur.* Monastieke idealen en het gebruik van de Bijbel in de 'Gesta Sanctorum Rotonensium', in: Millennium: Tijdschrift voor Middeleeuwse Geschiedenis 22, 1 (2008), pp. 24–44: it should not be assumed that all members of a monastic community are homogeneous in their education and intellectual prowess.

45 For instance in GSR II.5 (note 1), pp. 162–163, where the author tells how the monk Fidweten cured him of a severe toothache: *Quale uero meritum ille sanctus uir habuerit cum Deo in memetipso bene expertus sum.*

46 Ibid. 2.9, 3.8, etc.

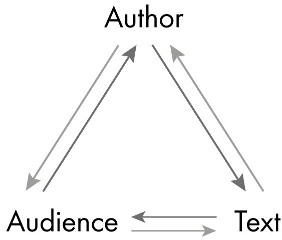

Fig. 2 | Flow of Ideas between Author, Text and Audience (Fig: Kramer / Novokhatko).

were seen to knit together the community. Throughout all this, the author remained present to remind the audience that, while real people had lived through the events depicted, the message was universal.[47] The average hagiographer would have been aware of this effect on the intended authorial audience, which in turn signifies that this phenomenon was crucial for the whole genre and not for a single text and its single author; reading *and* writing hagiography meant engaging with the expectations of both writers and readers.[48]

Thus, it is important for researchers to acknowledge this reciprocal effect between ideas circulated in society, the author's ideas committed to parchment, and the audience's expectations of the medium.[49] Summarised in Figure 2, this means that researchers dealing with the interaction between author and audience have to be aware where their own starting point is located. Who, in the terms provided by Barthes' famous article on the "death of the author", is 'alive', and who is 'dead'? Are the audience members the prime movers behind the interpretation of the narrative – the *auctores* of its meaning?[50] Or were the monks in medieval Redon or Aurillac as aware of authorial intentions as we are today?

Strangely Familiar Saints: Shared Hagiographic Experiences

Moving on from a (hypothetical) author to the text itself, its structure could tell us volumes about its audience. The division proposed by Peter J. Rabinowitz is helpful in this regard, as it explicitly incorporates the author's imagination of the audience – something that allows us to project the audiences into the past as well. According to Rabinowitz, there are four types of audience: the actual audience ("the flesh-and-blood people who read the book"); the authorial audience (intended audience,

47 M. A. Mayeski, New Voices in the Tradition. Medieval Hagiography Revisited, in: Theological Studies 63 (2002), pp. 690–710.

48 Amy K. Bosworth, Learning from the Saints. Ninth-Century Hagiography and the Carolingian Renaissance, in: History Compass 8/9 (2010), pp. 1055–1066.

49 See Jorge J.E. Gracia, A Theory of Textuality. The Logic and Epistemology, New York 1995, pp. 23–24.

50 In the GSR, the abbot Conwoion is described as the *auctor* of the monastery.

for whom the author makes "certain assumptions about [their] beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions"); the narrative audience (an "imitation audience" to whom the author is speaking in the voice of the in-story narrator); and finally, the ideal narrative audience ("for which the narrator wishes he were writing").[51] It is seldom possible to classify individuals as belonging to a single category, but this should not stop modern scholars from trying. Everyone reading this – and indeed everyone reading the GSR or the VG – is at least part of the actual audience of these respective texts.

As mentioned, the authorial audience of these texts was likely not purely monastic. The readings contained in *vitae sanctorum* and miracle stories could easily reach a secular audience.[52] If monks and nuns represented an "ideal Christian", the authorial and the narrative audience of any hagiography would encompass the whole of Christendom: the lessons contained within were universal. Anyone could – in theory – learn them and attain perfection by practicing what was preached.[53]

Nevertheless, as much as the message of a hagiographical narrative was intended to be universal and timeless, these narratives were localised and adapted to the audience's needs known as they were known to the author. In the case of the GSR, individual chapters seem to have been intended as kernels of sermons and could have been read during mealtimes at the monastery.[54] If the miracle stories were meant as *lectiones*, their power over the imagination of the immediate authorial intended audience would have been considerable, but only to the extent that they had enough starting points to relate to the stories, their protagonists, and their setting.[55] Thus, the GSR's author also used the landscape by depicting a monk walking across a local river; referred to local people and places by their Breton names; and inserted scenes from everyday life, for instance when a local farmer is gravely injured (and miraculously cured) while renovating a house.[56] The instances where the author self-consciously plays with the medium, such as when explicit moral lessons are (diegetically) added to the narrative or biblical quotations are quoted throughout the chapters, made

51 Rabinowitz (note 5), p. 126.

52 Bernard Merdrignac, The Process and Significance of Rewriting in Breton Hagiography, in: J. Cartwright (ed.), Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults, Cardiff 2003, pp. 177–197.

53 Ilana Friedrich Silber, Virtuosity, Charisma and Social Order. A Comparative Sociological Study of Monasticism in Theravada Buddhism and Medieval Catholicism, Cambridge 1995, pp. 1–56; the reference was found in Steven Vanderputten, Imagining Religious Leadership in the Middle Ages. Richard of Saint-Vannes and the Politics of Reform, Ithaca 2015, pp. 1–13.

54 Often, the death dates of the saints are given, indicating commemorative purposes similar to a *legendarium*. GSR, lib. II, chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8; lib III, chapters 3, 4, and 8. See E. Ann Matter and Thomas J. Heffernan, The Liturgy of the Medieval Church, Kalamazoo 2005, p. 408.

55 Noted, albeit specifically for the martial aspects of monastic spirituality, by Katherine Allen Smith, War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture, Woodbridge 2011, pp. 156–157.

56 GSR, lib. II, c. 2 (note 1), pp. 150–153 and c. 8, pp. 166–171. The strong ties between Redon and its immediate surroundings are also evident in the famous Redon Cartulary: Wendy Davies, The Composition of the Redon Cartulary, in: Francia 17, 1 (1990), pp. 69–90.

these stories timeless.[57] The local detail and the authorial self-insertion reminded the audience that "this could happen to you".

The audience was subjected to the full array of the common topoi of hagiography. These topoi are non-original narrative units,[58] common among all saints' lives (e.g. birth and childhood; supportive or obstructive families of saints; death-bed scenes with the subsequent burial and miracles on the tomb).[59] They were used to flatter and entertain the audience – but also guided their expectations, making the message easier to digest.[60] Through the power of these timeless elements, combined with other mutually agreed-upon, meta-narrative insertions about sanctity, a type of 'perfection' emerged that would have been seen as crucial to contemporaries. Thus, the VG constructs Gerald's sainthood in a way that made sense in the tenth and eleventh centuries: the emphasis on pilgrimages, illustrated by Gerald's journey to Rome to visit the tombs of martyrs;[61] the promotion of a pious and fair secular governor, as an idealised reflection of the Peace of God;[62] and propaganda for the improvement of monkish behaviour – pre-empting the so-called 'Gregorian' reforms proposed in the later eleventh century. Ostensibly mere topoi, they should nonetheless be read as contextualised effects of sanctity. The depiction of his saintly behaviour – the deeds of the protagonist – demonstrates that holiness, while timeless in principle, retains a certain degree of historicity by never losing sight of chronological specificities. They reflect current issues and the narratives are fitted to the (mental and actual) landscapes surrounding the audience. To harness this flexibility and strengthen the structures they wanted to remain inviolate, hagiographers needed to walk a fine line between universal Christian values and localised narratives.[63]

57 Heinz Meyer, *Intentio auctoris, utilitas libri.* Wirkungsabsicht und Nutzen literarischer Werke nach Accessus-Prologen des 11. bis 13. Jahrhunderts, in: Frühmittelalterliche Studien 31, 1 (1997), pp. 390–413.

58 Hahn (note 27), pp. 41–42 and Ernst R. Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, New York 1963 [1948], pp. 79–105.

59 Robert Bartlett, Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation, Princeton 2013, pp. 523–535.

60 Lynda L. Coon, Sacred Fictions. Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity, Philadelphia 1997, pp. 1–27.

61 *Consuetudinem sibi fecerat ut Romam frequentibus adiret. [...] Vir iste, cum esset spiritualis, illa duo mundi luminaria – Petrum scilicet et Paulum – spiritaliter ambiebat spectare.* Vita Geraldi II, 17 (note 1), p. 220. This journey can be reconstructed through the places mentioned in the text. Diana Webb, Medieval European Pilgrimage c.700–c.1500, Basingstoke 2002, pp. 15–16; Chris Wickham, Medieval Rome. Stability and Crisis of a City, 900–1150, Oxford 2015, p. 169. Both the GSR and the 'Vita Conwoionis' prominently feature a pilgrimage to Rome, here meant mostly as a pretext for furnishing the community with papal relics: GSR, lib. II, c. 10 (note 1), pp. 174–183; 'Vita Conwoionis', cc. 9–10 (note 4), pp. 238–241.

62 Geoffrey Koziol, The Peace of God, Leeds 2018.

63 Ellen F. Arnold, Negotiating the Landscape. Environment and Monastic Identity in the Medieval Ardennes, Philadelphia 2013, p. 212.

However, contextualising the hagiographical narrative does not necessarily 'historicise' it. On the contrary, this contextualised sanctity helps structure a fictionalised reality, allowing the readers / listeners to become part of the narrative through a shared immersive experience. For the Breton monks partaking in the miraculous stories in the GSR, historicity was relevant mostly to justify the longevity of the community and its renaissance after a period of Viking-induced exile.[64] It is a reflection of 'reality', but also a utopia based on imagination – an attractive fantasy due to its appeal to accuracy.[65] Still, the GSR appealed to an audience belonging to the 'small worlds' around a specific monastery in early medieval Bretagne.[66] The same happens in the VG, where miracles, battles, and Gerald's pilgrimage occur in a world the intended audience could recognise.

In both cases, the hagiographical world is 'real' in that it is familiar through specific names and places, but it is also subject to the different imaginations of authors and audiences because it is the setting of a narrative which does not first and foremost aim at reproducing 'reality'.[67] In the end, it could become 'real' again, as the audience experiences a 'new real' world enriched with the holy presence of Gerald or the Saints of Redon. The saints walked the roads and traversed the rivers known to the audience. Their stories focused not on monasteries but on communities of people living in and near them. References to 'historical reality' become rhetorical tools meant to evoke patterns: creating a landscape within the text for the community around it.[68]

The repetition of such structural elements, the appeal to topoi, and the invocation of a world that was both historical and utopian turned hagiographic reading into an almost cinematic experience.[69] Immersing oneself into the hagiographic text made the saints familiar, easy to imagine even if they remain unknowable as people who actually existed. This was less important to an audience guided by their own beliefs and prompted by the shared knowledge of narrative conventions, allowing them to 'fill in the gaps' left by the text.[70] If authors read their (authorial, narrative, ideal) audience right, individual readers / listeners would experience a positive emotional

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64 See Wendy Davies, Small Worlds. The Village Community in Early Medieval Brittany, London 1988, pp. 22–23.

65 Implied by Peter Seyferth, Neither Fact nor Fiction. *Made in Secret* as a Utopian Education in Desire, in: Simon Spiegel, Andrea Reiter and Marcy Goldberg (eds.), Utopia and Reality. Documentary, Activism and Imagined Worlds, Chicago 2020, pp. 56–84.

66 Davies (note 68).

67 See on fiction Sonja Glauch, Fiktionalität im Mittelalter: Revisited, in: Poetica 46, 1 (2014), pp. 85–139.

68 Hayden White, The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality, and by the same author, The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory, both in Hayden White (ed.), The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, Baltimore 1987, pp. 1–25 and 26–57.

69 Spencer-Hall (note 35), pp. 43–47.

70 These ideas were inspired by Luke Shelton's presentation at the 56th ICMS in Kalamazoo, MI taken from his PhD thesis 'Small Hands Do Them Because They Must'. Examining the Reception of 'The Lord of the Rings' Among Young Readers, Glasgow 2020, https://theses.gla.ac.uk/81312/

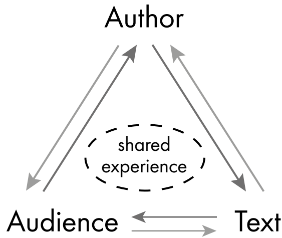

Fig. 3 | 'Shared Experience' at the Core of the Correlation between Author, Audience and Text (Fig: Kramer / Novokhatko).

response to the familiar as well as the extraordinary – the world they lived in and the lives of the saints they knew.

These two reinforce one another. The familiar in both stories is, paradoxically, rooted in the observation that sanctity is both normal and extraordinary – like hagiographical world-building is simultaneously utopian and realistic. The aim is not to personally know the saints, but to establish a parasocial relationship through their stories: a relationship with characters only known from media which "can be experienced and also continues to exist even if the mediated other is not present".[71] This is an effect, if not a goal, of narratives such as the (repetitive) GSR or the (immersive) VG: by turning the saintly protagonists into 'familiar strangers', their extraordinariness is normalised. This leads to an imbalance between the real-life audience and the ideal protagonist and, *ipso facto*, a confrontation with one's own failings, hopefully stimulating a conversation with fellow audience members about these shortcomings.[72]

This confrontation within the individual and with the community occurs at the intersection between author, audience and text, forming the 'core' of the cinematic experience. The synergy between textual patterns, authorial intentions and the expectations of the audience produces a 'shared experience' (Fig. 3) among those open to its immersive effect: the experience of the story, but also the *experience* of the (shared) cinematic experience: the awareness that you are not the only person in the audience – and that nobody is perfect.[73]

(6 December 2021). The authors take to heart Shelton's recommendation, on p. 149 and repeated on p. 245, that scholars "revel in the messiness that complex storytelling can achieve".

71 Tilo Hartmann, Parasocial Interaction, Parasocial Relationships, and Well-Being, in: Leonard Reinecke and Mary Beth Oliver (eds.), The Routledge Handbook of Media Use and Well-Being, New York 2017, pp 131–144, at pp. 132–133.

72 Borrowed from Stanley Milgram and John Sabini, On Maintaining Social Norms. A Field Experiment in the Subway, in: A. Baum, J. E. Singer and S. Vallins (eds.), Advances in Environmental Psychology, vol. 1, New Jersey 1979, pp. 31–40; see the "long history" of these ideas in Tim Madigan and Anastasia Malakhova, "Familiar Strangers" Versus Friends, in: Tim Delaney and Tim Madigan (eds.), A Global Perspective on Friendship and Happiness, Wilmington 2019, pp. 9–17.

73 See Patrick Phillips, Spectator, Audience and Response, in: Jill Nelmes (ed.), An Introduction to Film Studies, 3rd ed., London 2003, pp. 91–128, esp. pp. 92–95 and 108–116.

The Perpetuum Mobile: God

The boundaries of the 'collective audience' established by shared experience are fluid. Limited to a single local community in practice, in theory the narrative audience would be the entire Christian community. To reflect this, our diagram lacks one more structural element, which is crucial for understanding medieval hagiographic narratives such as the ones analysed here.

It is important to realise that, from an anthropological point of view, medieval discourse communities would define saints' lives as a model for the Truth – that was, in a way, their point.[74] Simultaneously, the operationalisation of Truth lay at the heart of the intended narrative effect of hagiographies.[75] This implies that such texts were media meant to engage through the audience's emotions with the message borne by its protagonists by creating a compunctive effect among readers / listeners.[76] Ideally, feelings of compunction would open people's hearts to conversion or reform.[77] But compunction also functions as a structural element in medieval narratives: as an expression of emotion, it was an aspect of the patterns enhancing the 'shared experience'. It encouraged the collective audience to empathise with the characters and thereby work through their hopes and fears, internalising their faith.[78] For texts like the GSR or the VG, featuring people whose level of sanctity seems impossible to attain, this was the main point. Considering that the didactic goal of hagiography was to inspire imitation or emulation – *imitatio sancti* or *imitatio Christi* – what should be emulated were not the protagonist's actions but their motivations.[79] Authors used their texts to inspire audiences by tapping into their shared experiences. The object of that inspiration was the relationship between the saints – local heroes, historical actors – and the timeless, immutable-yet-dynamic

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74 Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion. Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam, Baltimore, London 1993, pp. 37–38.

75 Hahn (note 27), p. 32.

76 See Susan E. Wilson, The Life and After-life of St. John of Beverley. The Evolution of the Cult of an Anglo-Saxon Saint, Aldershot 2006, p. 82: Barbara Rosenwein, Emotional Communities in the Middle Ages, Ithaca 2006, pp. 26–29.

77 Katie Barclay and Bronwyn Reddan, The Feeling Heart. Meaning, Embodiment, and Making, in: Katie Barclay and Bronwyn Reddan (eds.), The Feeling Heart in Medieval and Early Modern Europe. Meaning, Embodiment, and Making, Berlin 2019, pp. 1–17; Piroska Nagy, Le don des larmes. Un instrument spirituel en quête d'institution au Moyen Âge (Ve–XIIIe siècle), Paris 2000; Michel Zink, L'humiliation, le Moyen Âge et nous, Paris 2017.

78 See Frances McCormack, Those Bloody Trees. The Affectivity of Christ, in: Alice Jorgensen, Frances McCormack and Jonathan Wilcox (eds.), Anglo-Saxon Emotions. Reading the Heart in Old English Language, Literature and Culture, London 2016, pp. 143–162, at pp. 144–145.

79 See Catherine M. Mooney, *Imitatio Christi* or *Imitatio Mariae*? Clare of Assisi and Her Interpreters, in: Catherine M. Mooney and Caroline Walker Bynum (eds.), Gendered Voices. Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters, Philadelphia 1999, pp. 53–77.

presence of God: a relationship that meant that the protagonists are already out of this world and in the heavenly realm.[80]

While the saints take many actions in their stories, their agency depends on their role as conduits of God's grace. The characters in the narration enact God's will, and by acting embed this will into the text. God's influence was thus implicitly interpreted by the author, who effectively communicated His message. For instance, in the GSR, the Breton names of Redon's monks may have identified actual individuals, but their main purpose was to anchor divine providence to lived experience. While the author of a medieval narrative was one of the creators of the world on the pages, nobody in the community would forget that it took place in the real world, which was created by God. God was responsible for both the world of the story and the world in which it was narrated. The implication always was that if a story was too good to be true, it was never too good to be told.

Hagiographies represent a vital medium between the human world, the monastic 'internal cloister' that monks built to protect their relation to the Divine, and the Heavenly City they aspired to reach after death.[81] As Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel, a ninth-century abbot and courtier declared in his 'Diadema Monachorum': "When we pray, we talk to God; but when we read, God speaks to us".[82] And God's voice was heard by all, his omnipresence enhancing the cinematic experience of hagiography.[83] The audience would partake in the same words, listening to God, who thus became an active participant in the storytelling exchange. This was a first step towards the kind of relationship with God experienced by the saints.

In the VG the plot is defined by expressions of divine actions. Miraculous dreams sent to Gerald's parents (retroactively) predicted his holy future.[84] God challenges Gerald, blinds him to strengthen his faith, allows the devil to tempt him, and grants him miraculous powers.[85] God is in the background, organising the plot structure in lieu of the author. He is the catalyst for the story. As suggested by the author,

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80 Campbell (note 15), p. 20, describes this as "a form of alternative, inherently excessive kinship that replaces and redefines the saint's relationships in the human world".

81 Mayke de Jong, Internal cloisters. The case of Ekkehard's *Casus sancti Galli*, in: Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz (eds.), Grenze und Differenz im frühen Mittelalter, Wien 2000, pp. 209–221.

82 Smaragdus, Diadema Monachorum, c. 3: *Nam quam oramus, ipsi cum Deo loquimur: cum vero legimus, Deus nobiscum loquitur*; translation quoted from David Barry, Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel. Diadema Monachorum – The Crown of Monks (Cistercian Studies Series 245), Kalamazoo 2013.

83 Bernard McGinn, The Flowering of Mysticism. Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200–1350), New York 1998, pp. 20; summarised by Spencer-Hall (note 35), pp. 43–47.

84 *Quadam vero nocte monitus in sompnio perhibetur quatinus uxorem cognosceret quia filium generaturus esset. Aiunt etiam quod ei iussum sit ut illum nomine suo Geraldum vocaret, dictum quoque quoniam futurus magni meriti foret.* Vita Geraldi I, 2 (note 10), p. 136.

85 *Itaque per septem et eo amplius annos lumen oculorum ammisit, quos tamen ita perspicaces habebat ut nichil cecitatis pati crederetur.* Vita Geraldi III, 3 (note 10), p. 246. For the miracles see ibid., II, 26–34, pp. 230–240). For the temptations of the Devil see, for example, how Gerald resists lust in ibid., I, 9, pp. 146–150).

"the divine dispensation, which glorifies holy men, sometimes makes them known against their will".[86] The GSR invokes a similar idea, invoking an explanatory model presented in Gregory the Great's 'Dialogues'.[87] Good deeds, Gregory writes, should be performed out of love for one's fellow man, in unquestioning humility; if God wants your deeds to be known, He will make it so. The very existence of a hagiographical narrative proves that the story was deemed to be worth telling.[88] Divine omnipresence is obvious for the narrative audience, but also for the authorial, enhancing the emotional engagement and the desire to imitate the character, in turn affecting the flesh-and-blood audience.

Authorial self-insertions, appeal to a shared world, and familiar topoi about familiar saints all enhanced the immersive effect of a good story, but God was never part of that process. He stood above it as the ultimate Author of the story of storytelling.

The presence of God in the story and as the purveyor of holiness in the world thus complicates Gérard GENETTE's influential tripartite focalisation model.[89] On the surface, hagiographical narratives fit with his category of "zero focalisation", meaning that we are reading the words of an omniscient narrator who controls every move of the characters in the story. This changes, however, if we consider how God is inserted in our narratives as an active presence: to what extent is the character of God, as narrated by the author, a product of a human mind, impinging on the experience? To what extent is the God inside the narrative the same as the God who (presumably according to the author) provided the inspiration for the story in the first place? To what extent is the narrative God the same as the one who, according to the audience, caused the actual events to happen in the first place? Wondering about God enables a kind of "internal focalisation", in which the divine presence in the narrative is all-knowing. Within the confines of the story, this means that He knows exactly as much as the author. The author, meanwhile, must deal with the actual God in the 'actual audience'. The focalisation thereby transforms into 'external focalisation', meaning that the narrator knows less than even the characters in the story. Understanding this God as the creator of all the stories is a *conditio sine qua non* to understanding the narrative. For a medieval audience, God is not only a character but also the author, and the creator of the author (Fig. 4). As such, the exteriority of God interacts with the way belief has been internalised within specific communities: God in the story is only universal in the minds of the audience present. Reading hagiography presents a way of coping with this realisation, by channelling this divine presence to move towards a shared experience that would cement a Christian community.

86 *Sed eadem res pluribus paulatim innotuit quoniam divina dispensatio, que sanctos quosque glorificat, eos etiam contra suum velle nonnumquam manifestat.* Ibid., II, 30 (note 10), p. 236.

87 GSR, lib. 2, c. 4 (note 1), pp. 156–161, at p. 157.

88 Gregory the Great's views are explained in his Dialogues, lib. 4, c. 1.9; see also Conrad LEYSER, Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great, Oxford 2000, pp. 131–188.

89 Gérard GENETTE, Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method, transl. by J.E. LEWIN, Ithaca 1983 (originally: Figures, III: Discours du récit, 1972), pp. 189–194.

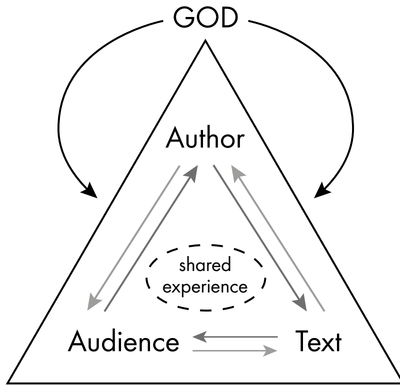

Fig. 4 | God Above All, an Omniscient Narrator (Fig: Kramer / Novokhatko).

Alienation: An Epilogue

This essay aimed to explore medieval hagiography using narratological prompts, including an audacious suggestion that anyone reading these texts is also part of their intended audience. We have outlined three factors underpinning the idea that a text strengthens a community: the controversial role of the author as a living presence within and behind the narrative; the cinematic 'shared experience' established through the interplay between audience expectations and narrative structures; and the crucial factor of God organising the plot and installing the mediality between author and audience. Awareness of the synergy between these three elements is a necessary step to explore hagiographies beyond their historical context. Texts like those considered here should be understood as a body of ideas forged in a particular way to memorialise the past and appeal to any (contextualised) present.

As researchers, we are not immune to this. Whereas a hagiographical text could be seen as a historical *opus*, a structured package transmitting the expectations of its audience, the intentions and strategies of the author defined its structural aims. The function of any hagiographical narrative was to be a timeless medium, and as such it was suffused with established (i.e. patriarchal) discursive structures at the time.[90] As far as medieval monastic authors are concerned, their narratives still fulfil that function if we read them today. Regardless of personal beliefs, we are part of their intended audience, and any attempts to study them requires us to be aware of this simple observation.

Perceived as a medium, medieval hagiographical narratives were – and still are – tools to enable their recipients to share emotions and ideas, discuss patterns, and compare experiences. This communicative aspect is important, as it allows the audience to disentangle itself from the universe shaped in, by, and through the narrative. In embracing alienation and accepting that being a spectator to the story is

90 Gail Ashton, The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography. Speaking the Saint, London 2000, pp. 1–13. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Congress of Wo/men. Religion, Gender, and Kyriarchal Power, Indianapolis 2016.

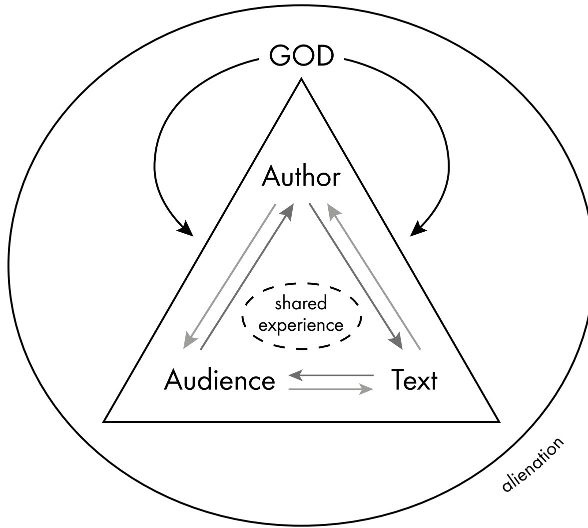

Fig. 5 | Researchers, Estranged (Fig.: Kramer / Novokhatko).

different from watching how the story is being communicated, it may become possible to set up new modes of communication about the mediality of the narrative: not taking its role in establishing a community or pushing a specific set of beliefs onto a contemporary audience for granted, but taking into account the active role of said audience as well.[91] Awareness of structure means defamiliarising yourself with the story or loosening yourself from the audience. Defamiliarisation helps with finding your own place *vis-à-vis* your research object, establish your own focalisation: what exactly do you want Odo of Cluny or the anonymous author of the GSR to tell you? What do you want them to tell others? Like the discussion of holiness within the stories would have strengthened the communities formed by the authorial audience, answering this question would help us figure out new methods of reading medieval hagiography in the twenty-first century (Fig. 5).

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91 See Rutger Kramer and Eirik Hovden, Wondering about Comparison. Enclaves of Learning in Medieval Europe and South Arabia, Prolegomena to an Intercultural Comparative Research Project, in: Networks and Neighbours 2, 1 (2014), pp. 20–45.