

# **Encounters with Frideswide:**

**Adapting the Lives of the Saints**

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## **Abstract**

The creative part of this thesis comprises a long sequence of poems, *Embertide*, that engage with the many different versions of the written Lives of St Frideswide, and with the places associated with her lived life in and around Oxford. The sequence opens with the voice of Prior Robert of Cricklade, the author of a Latin version of her Life. The remainder of the text is in two voices: the saint, and an inquisitor who is looking for the saint, and trying to make sense of the alternative readings. The poems explore the gaps and contradictions between the different versions of the written texts, the landscape around Oxford associated with the saint, her presence and appropriations in modern Oxford. It is an ironic, witty, liminal, anachronistic and complex engagement with the contradictions of historical texts, the elusive nature of faith and ultimately, what the point of a saint is.

The critical analysis explores the adaptation of written saints' Lives, focusing on the different versions and interpretations of the life of St Frideswide of Oxford. Selected aspects of adaptation theory and related concepts form a framework to interrogate and explore the genre of hagiography, a specific approach to saints' life-writing. The analysis is applied to medieval and modern refashionings of Frideswide's Lives, and to other modern poetic engagements with other saints' Lives. It distinguishes works that are adaptations of extant texts from those that appropriate their original sources. I conclude with a proposed new category of 'appropriated Life' to distinguish some modern refashionings of saints' Lives, including my own, from others.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the adaptation of saints' Lives through the lens of my own poetic engagement with St Frideswide of Oxford.<sup>1</sup> I use selected aspects of adaptation and related theories as a framework to interrogate and explore the genre of hagiography, a specific and highly conventional approach to saints' life-writing, through medieval and modern adaptations and appropriations of Frideswide's Lives. I conclude with a proposed new category of 'appropriated Life' to distinguish some modern refashionings of saints' Lives, including my own, from others.

The lives of historical figures can be very attractive to the creative imagination, especially those whose lives are somewhat occluded and whose very existence may be more imagined than real. Engaging with such figures leaves plenty of scope for exploring the unknown and making lateral connections with parallel knowledge from other disciplines. Saints are a particularly intriguing category of real historical figures, or people believed to have lived in the past, because their faith is a fundamental and compelling dimension to their lives. Their faith is simultaneously a personal attribute of an individual saint, a representative of the spiritual connectivity of all saints, living and dead and a universal expression of the continuity of faith through time. For a person who invokes a saint, their shared faith is a means of intercessory access to God, and to the saint as a comforter, guide and healer.

St Frideswide of Oxford is a local and now largely forgotten saint. I was first attracted to her as a subject for creative engagement after seeing her image, a face peering through ivy leaves, on her reconstructed shrine in Christ Church Cathedral. She reminded me of the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I will distinguish typographically between a saint's lived life and a written version of a saint's Life, and its Latin equivalent, the *vita*. The term 'legend' is broader in scope, referring not just to a written Life, but also encompassing anecdote and folklore associated with a life or Life.

Green Man, that enigmatic and ancient figure that decorates many churches dating to the time of St Frideswide's own medieval cult. The surviving twelfth-century cloister at Christ Church is adorned with bosses of both Frideswide and the Green Man, offering the possibility of including an additional facet of mystery to her legend.

St Frideswide died around AD 727. The most memorable event of her legend was her flight into woods by river in a boat manned by an angel, pursued by a nobleman intent on marrying her.<sup>2</sup> Her pursuer was struck blind by divine intervention and, depending on which version of events you read, was or was not healed. Frideswide returned to Oxford to found a double monastery of monks and nuns on the site of what is now Christ Church Cathedral. She was never formally canonized, but her shrine became an important place of pilgrimage during medieval times. Pilgrims to her shrine included Catherine of Aragon who came to pray for a son.<sup>3</sup> The shrine was destroyed during the Reformation and Frideswide's bones were hidden in nearby Abingdon Abbey.<sup>4</sup> They were eventually reinterred in 1561 mingled with the bones of a Protestant former nun and wife of Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1542), the man brought in by Thomas Cranmer to 'protestantize' Oxford. This ironic act of settlement by Elizabeth I was the most memorable incident of Frideswide's afterlife.

It was through reading five different medieval and several modern versions of Frideswide's Life that I became interested in the process of adaptation of her Lives, in the rise and fall of Frideswide and her cult, and in the relevance and presence of this elusive saint in modern Oxford. The discrepancies, contradictions and conformities between the various versions of her written Lives was intriguing, and the tantalising sense of seeking but never quite finding her was compelling, as were the creative possibilities of exploiting rather than

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<sup>2</sup> The preservation of a woman's chastity was a central theme in most female saints' lives.

<sup>3</sup> J. R. L. Highfield, 'Catherine of Aragon's visit to the Shrine of St Frideswide,' in *Saint Frideswide's Monastery at Oxford* ed. by John Blair (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1990), pp. 274–275.

<sup>4</sup> Alderman Sayre of Oxford also demolished the well house at Binsey associated with Frideswide because it had a picture of the Virgin on the front. See Alexandra Walsam, *The Reformation of the Landscape* (Oxford: University Press, 2011), p. 123.



resolving these gaps, discrepancies and uncertainties. The power of poetic suggestion, of looking slantwise into a subject, of drawing together a range of assonant and dissonant resonances, weaving together past and present, fact, factoid and fiction and exploiting elision and illusion supported the choice of poetry as the preferred means of creative expression.

The resulting text, *Embertide*, is complex, ironic, liminal and anachronistic. It charts a revelatory journey for two characters: a conflated imagined and actual saint, and an inquisitive, counterpointing Inquisitor. The poetic sequence is not fully resolved, leaving open the possibility for the journey to be ongoing. The interweaving of different sources of Frideswide's life beyond the extant written texts, including the places associated with her legend and the past-in-present Oxford and environs underlines the continuity in the perceived presences of Frideswide through time, and by extension, all saints.

However, *Embertide* also acknowledges the impossibility of actually finding Frideswide or establishing certainties about her. It is more concerned with finding what Frideswide means to the Inquisitor than establishing absolute truths about her life. Frideswide's imagined responses to the Inquisitor's questing require her to renegotiate her own significance in today's world, which is very different from those prevalent in the eighth-century times of her lived life or the period of her medieval cult. She has been perceived by the faithful as immanent (rather than merely an echo from the past) for nearly fifteen hundred years. This afterlife prompts creative exploration of multiple possible interpretations, or identities, of her – a saint for all times or seasons or people, perhaps.

As *Embertide* emerged in its settled form, it became clear that it departed from many hagiographic conventions. In order to locate it in relation to the field of hagiographic writing, it was necessary to identify these departures. *Embertide* is the most recent in a series of refashionings of the Life of St Frideswide stretching back to the eleventh century.<sup>5</sup> It

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<sup>5</sup> Earlier versions of her Life have been lost.

therefore seemed appropriate to employ some aspects of adaptation theory to provide a framework for the critical analysis of *Embertide* and other adaptations of Frideswide's and other saints' Lives, but this was not straightforward. The critical analysis is framed by elements of three different approaches to the refashioning of texts: Linda Hutcheon's concepts of process, product and reception in adaptation theory; Liedeke Plate and H. G. Els Rose's concept of 'rewriting'; and John Miles Foley's concept of a core oral narrative with 'variation within limits'.<sup>6</sup>

The first chapter of this thesis provides contextual background on hagiography and the selected theoretical concepts. Chapter 2 addresses the process and strategies adopted by medieval and modern authors of versions of Frideswide's Lives. Chapter 3 analyses the adaptive strategies I employed in the writing of *Embertide* and examines the resulting text, including the further adaptations required for performance. In Chapter 4 a narrower analysis is applied to selected modern poetic refashionings of other saints' Lives in order to make a case for identifying *Embertide* and some of these other modern refashionings as a distinct form of modern personalised or appropriated Life.

There are two further introductory notes that require consideration at this point in the thesis. The first is the scope of the critical analysis. It was the inconsistencies and discrepancies between the extant medieval versions of Frideswide's Lives that generated the creative response, and therefore this forms the focus of the critical analysis. It could have gone in many other directions – for example, an analysis of poetic form, applied creative theology, or feminist perspectives on the rewriting of saints' Lives. Space has precluded

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<sup>6</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); Liedeke Plate and H. G. Els Rose, 'Rewriting, a literary concept for the study of cultural memory: towards a transhistorical approach to cultural remembrance', *Neophilologus* 97 (2013), 611–625; John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

consideration of these alternative perspectives: this thesis focuses specifically on adaptive strategies employed in rewriting the Lives of St Frideswide.

Secondly, the creative process involved in writing a work such as *Embertide* is complex. The critical analysis of the text and of my creative decisions and adaptive strategies might imply that such decisions were always consciously made with the critical analysis in mind, that the flow of the text was generated according to a predetermined plan, and that a critical study of alternative adaptive approaches (beyond experimenting with form) was made prior to writing the text. This was not strictly the case. *Embertide* emerged from an extended period of research on Frideswide and her Lives, the Lives of other Anglo-Saxon and medieval saints, the history of the church at the time she lived as well as during the rise and fall of her medieval cult, the archaeology and history of the physical localities she is associated with, the folk legends and modern anecdotes relating to her, and the ways in which her name crops up in different contexts at different times in her afterlife. Out of all this material, her voice emerged, then that of the Inquisitor. There was some experimentation with poetic form and textual structure, which were honed by editing with a focus on the poetry being written, rather than in the context of the work as an adaptation of existing Lives.

The questions arising about the nature of the work produced, whether it is hagiography and, if not, why not and what it might be instead, and the selection of elements of adaptation theory to structure the analysis are retrospective. They have, to some extent, done to *Embertide* what *Embertide* has done to its own source texts: unravelled its narrative to reveal its complexities and layers. It should therefore be borne in mind that where the following discussion refers to my creative choices and adaptive strategies, these are reflexively applied to a completed creative process that evolved independently of the context of the critical analysis. The poetic text was edited with an ear attuned to the poetic ‘music’

being created rather than to challenge (although challenge it does) selected theoretical frameworks later applied to it.

## CHAPTER 1: CONTEXT

This chapter sets out the hagiographic context and the theories of adaptation and rewriting that frame the analysis of the adaptive strategies and products in chapters 2 and 3.

### PART 1: HAGIOGRAPHY AND ITS CONVENTIONS

Hagiography is a particular form of saints' life-writing specifically designed to venerate or promote the veneration of a sainted individual, to spiritually edify the reader or audience, and to provide moral exemplars of good Christian living. In addition to such purposes, saints had great political and social significance within the medieval Church and through it, to the whole community. Saints were the celebrities of their day and their written Lives established, authenticated, affirmed and promoted their status.<sup>1</sup>

The veneration of holy individuals by a local community, whether or not such individuals were formally canonized by the Catholic Church, usually gave rise to a local cult which could attract significant revenue from pilgrims. The most popular cults claimed many miracles, which enhanced their importance and revenue-generating power. The power and wealth of the medieval church was immense and there was often political advantage in having a robust medieval cult associated with a particular place or institution.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Salih, 'Saints, Cults and *Lives* in Late Medieval England' in *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography* ed. by Sarah Salih (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), pp. 1–24; Thomas Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?* (Princeton: University Press, 2013), pp. 510–513; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 155–255; Cynthia Turner Camp, *Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives as History Writing in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), pp. 1–23.

In its earliest form, in the first to fourth centuries AD, Christian hagiography recorded the acts of martyrs whose *passiones* (their excessively prolonged and violent deaths) took up the greater part of the narrative. The death of a martyr was the point at which they were assumed into the kingdom of heaven, so their lives and deaths encouraged beleaguered Christians by assuring them of their heavenly rewards after enduring sufferings on earth. Once the time of persecutions had passed, hagiographies focused on the acts and spiritual battles of individuals considered to be holy: priests, confessors and ascetics. The genre was expanded in the centuries following the end of persecutions to include royalty, founders, leaders, mystics, warriors, virgins and widows, drawn from all walks of life; it was a ‘multilingual and multinational phenomenon’.<sup>3</sup>

Hagiography as a genre is highly conventional in its content and purposes, but at the same time is extremely flexible and, as a result, highly diverse in form and language.<sup>4</sup> This diversity arises from the different adaptive strategies adopted by successive authors over time. Hagiographies were continually rewritten and refashioned to render them more appropriate to specific needs or new audiences. In the twelfth century, the preference, and later requirement, for papal approval of putative saints emerged in order to control the flourishing of cults and set standards of proof for their claims. This meant that hagiographies settled into a more formulaic and standardised form that addressed the specific requirements of the sanctification process: details of a holy lived life as evidenced through lifetime

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<sup>3</sup> Salih, p. 12. See also Bartlett, pp. 504–510; Thomas D. Hill, ‘*Imago Dei*: Genre, Symbolism, and Anglo-Saxon Hagiography,’ in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints’ Lives and Their Contexts* ed. by Paul E. Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 35–50.

<sup>4</sup> Salih, pp. 1–11; James T. Palmer, *Early Medieval Hagiography* (Leeds: ARC Humanities Press, 2018) at p.14 comments on this widespread genre was particularly interesting as it spanned the whole of the culturally diverse European world. He does not, however mention that the church would have provided some degree of cultural homogeneity.

miracles, the all-important death transition from earthly to heavenly life, and the ongoing posthumous miraculous power of the saint's relics, all presented in a *positio*.<sup>5</sup>

Hagiographies were, and are still, written in and translated to and from many languages, in both prose and various forms of verse. In England, medieval hagiographies were generally written in Latin for church liturgical and monastic use, and later in vernacular Anglo-Norman, Old or Middle English for lay use. The choice of language and the impetus to refashion were a response to changing theological or cultural circumstances or to appeal to different audiences. Both the literate and illiterate in congregations would have heard saints' Lives in Church, but as literacy increased, lay readers created a demand for private textual versions. Saints' Lives were included in collections of exegetical works, homilies, compendia of saints' Lives as well as in adaptations for use in liturgies and for feast days. Saints' Lives in the vernacular were one of the most widespread and popular forms of literature in the medieval world.<sup>6</sup>

Saints' Lives were also manipulated for political reasons. The authority of an acknowledged saint was a powerful weapon in medieval ecclesiastical and political armouries; such a saint could be invoked to give authority to the foundation of orders and religious houses or to authenticate their liturgical or devotional practices. It gave power to legal arguments over land, relics and other assets; the establishment of a popular cult could also be highly remunerative for the host church through visits by pilgrims and by attracting endowments of land, goods and finance, including royal preferments. These matters often underlie or prompt the medieval refashioning of a saints' life, as was the case for Frideswide.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bartlett, pp. 576–578; Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 64–76.

<sup>6</sup> Salih, p. 10; Bartlett, pp. 580–586.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Mayr-Harting, 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century Shrine: The Miracles of St Frideswide', in *Studies in Medieval History presented to R. H. C. Davis*, ed. by Henry Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore (London: Hambledon Press, 1985). On p. 194 he cites a challenge in 1139 by the townsfolk of Oxford

Hagiographies are a unique form of life-writing not only in their purposiveness, but also in that they must address the issues of transcendence and immanence peculiar to saints. In other words, they must not only make their narratives appealing and accessible to audiences many centuries after the saints' deaths, but also render their subjects real and immediate, with ongoing active intercessory power that could be invoked by the faithful. The narratives, therefore, included conventional motifs and conceits – birth and family, lifetime struggles, miracles and acts, and, by far the most substantial part, their death, particularly with respect to the early martyrs.<sup>8</sup>

Later hagiographies still focused on deathbed scenes but instead of martyrdom, they included highly symbolic referents, such as dreams, visions and portents, lights in the sky and smells of flowers or incense often mirroring those attendant at birth.<sup>9</sup> The death of the desert hermit, St Mary of Egypt, features a sorrowful lion who helped to dig her grave in the stony ground.<sup>10</sup> The deathbed scene is key since death is the point at which the saint is united with Christ; the whole and only point of a saint's life was to die and be made one with Christ and thereafter act as a bridge between the faithful and God.

Hagiographies were written in the third person, either narrated by someone claiming to be a close associate or eyewitness around the time of their death, or retold, often by a monk or cleric, centuries later. Writing a saint's Life in the third person was significant:

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to the Prior of Binsey's ownership of the land on which Frideswide's well is located as a reason for the elaboration of later versions of Frideswide's *vita*.

<sup>8</sup> Martyrs' hagiographies often almost entirely consist of detailed accounts of tortures and the saints' endurance through suffering, written with almost sadistic and voyeuristic relish, particularly in the case of male-authored and curated female martyrs. Elizabeth Stuart, *Spitting at Dragons* (London, Mowbray, 1996), pp. 6, 14–15.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Bede, the main source of St Hilda of Whitby's life, records her mother dreaming of her unborn child wearing a necklace of light. Bede also cites a nun in a monastery established by Hilda having a vision foretelling her death, with her soul rising in a blaze of light. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English Peoples*, trans. by Leo Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), pp. 240–245.

<sup>10</sup> It alludes to the prophesy of Isaiah (11:1) that 'the lion shall lie down with the lamb' and to the Book of Daniel (chapter 6) in which Daniel was not eaten by the lions owing to God's protection.



saints demonstrated exemplary lives to which lay, cleric and monastic audiences could aspire. But, to accommodate such aspiration, there needed to be a spiritual distance between the sinful existence of the writer or audience, and the perfected holiness of the saint. The exemplary life of the saint would exhort their audience to strive to close this spiritual gap. Writing the saint in the third person also put intellectual space between the writer and their subject. To write in the first person is to think into the mind of your subject, to inhabit (in a literary sense) their thoughts and body.<sup>11</sup> To inhabit such a life would be to claim their holiness for oneself, but doing so would have demonstrated a lack of humility in the author that would have most likely precluded them from becoming a saint.<sup>12</sup> The distance between the aspiring faithful and the saintly subject was bridged by the intercessory power of the saint in response to petitions, not by a follower claiming that power or sanctity for themselves. Later Lives, particularly those written in the vernacular, made their subjects more approachable and normalised, but still distinguished as a model of exemplary behaviour.<sup>13</sup>

Miracles were an indication of the holiness of an individual but also served a didactic purpose. A person must be pure in heart and mind to enable God's power to work through them. The more numerous and dramatic the miracles, the greater the intercessory power the saint was perceived to have.<sup>14</sup> Some miracles were common to many saints' Lives, and the

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<sup>11</sup> Tom Wright, in *Paul: A Biography* (London: SPCK, 2018), observes that 'biography ... involves thinking into the minds of people who did not think the same way as we do. And history ... involves trying to think into the minds of ... individuals ... who thought in very different ways...' p. 133. Both observations hold true for creative engagements with historical figures.

<sup>12</sup> Some saints, such as Augustine, wrote about their own lives, but Augustine presents his as a confession, not as a claim to be a saint.

<sup>13</sup> Salih, (p. 11) describes the role of the hagiographic narrator as a mediator between saint and audience and between textual tradition and the present day in which he is writing. The narrator often addresses an audience directly eliciting a prescribed response.

<sup>14</sup> Benedicta Ward, in *Miracles and the Medieval Mind* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), pp. 3–19, sets out a theory of miracles as comprising daily events (many of which are explicable today); events in nature (many of which become understood as scientific understanding of the natural world progresses); God's direct intervention in the workings of humans which are not explicable (yet) by science; and the miracle of interior conversion of the faithful. Louise Wilson cites the thirteenth-century Archbishop of Armagh's distinction between miraculous cures effected by faith and cures effected by natural means in relation to the *Miraculæ* of St Edmund of Abingdon. Louise Wilson, 'Conceptions of the Miraculous: Natural Philosophy and Medical Knowledge in the

question of whether a particular saint performed a specific miracle reported in their Life is somewhat occluded by the standard practice of incorporating miracles from a universal menu of such occurrences, many with biblical precedent.<sup>15</sup> Healing miracles, such as the curing of blindness or leprosy, and practical miracles, such as the creation of wells, were common to many saints' Lives. Linking an individual saint's actions with events in scripture established or enhanced the perception of their holiness. The process of 'borrowing' miracles from other saints' Lives was justified by the doctrine of the 'community of saints' where actions by one were considered to represent actions by all or any of the saints.<sup>16</sup> This bound an individual saint into the body of sanctified people who together form the host of holies who intercede for humans before God. It was not necessarily the actual miraculous act which was important, so much as the idea that a particular individual was sufficiently holy that God would be able to perform miracles at their request.<sup>17</sup>

Miracles and the 'borrowing' of them between saints' Lives raised significant concerns about the historical truths and accuracy of hagiographic narratives. Modern scholars often see them as fantastic and implausible, but to the faithful the inclusion of borrowed miracles is acceptable as symbolic referents to the sanctity of all sainted individuals.<sup>18</sup> The

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Thirteenth-Century *Miracula* of St Edmund of Abingdon', in *Contextualising Miracles in the Christian West 1100-1500*, ed. by Matthew Mesley and Louise Wilson (Oxford: Medium Ævum, 2014), pp. 99–125. See also Bartlett, pp. 333–341; Woodward, pp. 191–220.

<sup>15</sup> Moses created wells at Meribah (Numbers 20:11) and Christ's own ministry in the Gospels, and that of his apostles in the Acts of the Apostles relate many examples of healing miracles. Bartlett, pp. 349–354.

<sup>16</sup> Bartlett, pp. 520–523; Benedicta Ward summarises the reasons for transference of miracles between saints and inclusion in later versions of texts arising from new witnesses authenticating miracles; correcting mistakes and omissions in earlier versions (*Miracles*, pp. 208–10) and for literary reasons, for example, that they would have been added because strange and unusual acts and wonders would attract readers and listeners (p. 205).

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Heffernan (p. 7) argues for the collective personality of saints, following Gregory of Tours who considered that all saints shared a single life.

<sup>18</sup> Salih (p. 21) comments on late nineteenth-century tendencies to focus on philology rather than content in writings on Middle English hagiographies but more recent work recognises the social and cultural values embedded in accounts of cults and activities associated with them. Katherine Lewis, 'History, Historiography and Rewriting the Past,' in Salih, pp. 122–140, acknowledges the importance of Lives as sources of socio-cultural and political detail.

kinds of miracles associated with a particular saint, as well as their lives or the manner of their deaths would contribute to identifying their attributes: Frideswide was invoked for healing and protection, especially by women.<sup>19</sup> Saints and their Lives are all, to a greater or lesser extent, constructed to the point where the underlying factual reality relating to an individual that may have formed the original basis of their lived lives is lost. This perception of saints' Lives as fabrications meant that Frideswide's legend was dismissed in the 1930's as unfounded, so it was largely ignored by scholars until more recently.<sup>20</sup>

There is always a tension between the actual facts of a lived life, and the version presented by a biographer. Life-writing is inevitably informed by the writer's perceptions and prejudices, which may result in bias in the narrative, or alternative, controversial or multiple interpretations of documentary evidence, or the perpetuations of unfounded myths.<sup>21</sup> In addition, an imaginative approach to life-writing, such as the fictionalised Life of a saint, do not necessarily (intentionally or otherwise) adhere to factual truth. This is clearly the case where there are few facts available, and creative inference and parallel referents are employed to fill out an otherwise bare narrative.

Such uncertainties and cloudy interpretations are common to all historical figures, especially those who lived before surviving documentary evidence. Uncertainty is also enhanced by the long periods of time between the lived life and its committal to written account. The historical distance makes it harder to prove or disprove alternative interpretations, and may increase reliance on lateral referencing to infill gaps in the record.

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<sup>19</sup> Simon Yarrow, 'The Miracles of St Frideswide of Oxford', in: *Saints and their Communities: miracle stories in twelfth-century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 169–189.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Stenton, 'St Frideswide and her Times', *Oxonensia* 1 (1936), 103–112, in which he describes Frideswide's legend as 'worthless'.

<sup>21</sup> One non-saintly example of myths-by-interpretation is the view that John Thompson, husband of Flora Thompson, author of *Lark Rise to Candleford*, was oppressive and cruel and deterred Flora from writing. This arose from incidental comments by biographer Margaret Lane's interpretation of letters and other documents, for which a later biographer, Richard Mabey, found no certain basis. Richard Mabey, *Dreams of the Good Life* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 87.

These tensions and uncertainties are amplified in the case of saints because so much is at stake – the sanctity of the subject and their influence over followers and the political, social and theological significance invested in them. Hagiographies are intentionally highly symbolic. Historical fact is less important than conveying the exemplar of holy living and the idea of the sanctified individual fit for veneration.<sup>22</sup>

The process of adaptation is further influenced by a biographer's or hagiographer's own prejudices and perceptions as well as the demands of the hagiographic genre itself. Successive reinterpretations and alterations to narratives also arise from translation, commonly from Latin into the vernacular, or transpositions from prose to rhyming verse as well as the inclusion of colloquial idiomatic and syntactic adjustments.<sup>23</sup> Translation, derived from the Latin *transfere*, to 'carry across', creates a distinctive and separate text from its source, involving a creative interaction between source and translation, in the same manner as that of transposing a source into a different writing genre.<sup>24</sup>

These issues all affect the perception of a *vita* or Life as 'truth'. In conventional biography there is a demand for truth, whether or not that is what is actually published, but for hagiographers the question of truth is less literal. A hagiography including borrowed miracles is still considered to be true in the context of the doctrine of the community of saints.<sup>25</sup> There is also a symbolic value to the motifs within all and any single hagiography:

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<sup>22</sup> Felice Lifshitz explores the emergence of history as a 'scientific' pursuit to which the 'ineffable, the unverifiable and the miraculous' had little to contribute. 'Beyond Positivism and Genre: Hagiographic Texts as Historical Narrative', *Viator* 25 (1994), 95–113 at p. 110. Heffernan also comments on the perception of hagiography as, essentially, unreliable (p. 54). Lewis notes that both hagiography and historical writing were concerned with the past, but also had didactic significance and the fact of their continual retelling (whatever their grounding in truth) is instructive (p. 125).

<sup>23</sup> Bartlett, pp. 518–523; Barbara Caine discusses the interpretation and construction of written lives in *Biography and History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Red Globe Press, 2019), pp. 82–98.

<sup>24</sup> The effect of translation on poetry has been much discussed. For example, see Matthew Reynolds, *Poetry of Translation: from Chaucer and Petrarch to Homer and Logue* (Oxford: University Press, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Benedicta Ward (*Miracles*, p. 211) comments that, regarding miracles, the truth is consistent within the context of the saints and their Lives and comprised an essentially subjective kind of truth.

miracles denote holiness; virginity denotes purity of both soul and body. These texts are metaphorical and allegorical as much as literal. Coon argues that hagiographical motifs are driven not by historical fact but by biblical *topoi*, literary invention and moral imperative. They have different bases in historical fact but all are, essentially, sacred fictions.<sup>26</sup> It is, perhaps, this which distinguishes the genre, and enables it to adapt and survive and to continue to fulfil its purpose of providing spiritual education for diverse audiences.

A *positio* prepared for formal canonization by the Catholic Church must include lifetime and posthumous miracles verified by eyewitness accounts in order to prove the holiness of an individual. This stimulated compilations of miracles kept at shrines whether or not the subject saint was formally canonized. Frideswide's own *Miraculæ* were recorded in the period immediately after the 1180 translation of her relics to a new feretory at the height of her cult when her shrine was a significant pilgrimage destination.

The Reformation suppressed many of the rich traditions of Catholic liturgical practices including formal veneration of saints and their cults.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, the hagiographic tradition survived and was adopted by the Protestant cause for their own martyrs, most notably by John Foxe.<sup>28</sup> John Wesley's biography is considered by some to represent a form of Methodist hagiography, albeit one distorted by his controversial reputation.<sup>29</sup> Modern hagiography, such as that published by the Catholic Church conforms to the traditions of

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<sup>26</sup> Linda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1977), pp. xv, 143.

<sup>27</sup> The impact of the Reformation on the church and its practices has been widely discussed. For example: Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars* and Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Peter Marshall, *Heretics and Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Nicholas Orme, *Going to Church in Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021); Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700* (London: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (first published 1554, and in English 1563) records the lives and, particularly, deaths of many of the Protestants who were killed during the Reformation. The entries conform to the principles of Catholic hagiography by stressing their unwavering faith to the Protestant cause and their trials, tortures and manner of their deaths.

<sup>29</sup> G. Lloyd, 'John Wesley and his biographers: an exercise in Methodist hagiography', *Bulletin of John Rylands Library* 82 (2000), 81–99.

medieval hagiography in that it sets out the lives, miracles, visions, trials and temptations, fortitude and faithfulness of its subjects, as well as their deaths.<sup>30</sup>

However, not all modern saints' Life-writing conforms to such traditions. The Lives of Saints Cuthbert, Brendan, Hilda of Whitby, Magnus and others have been fictionalised and written in the first person; biographical treatments of Hildegard of Bingen and several alternative versions of Mother Teresa's Life adopt modern, secular, biographical and historical approaches rather than specifically hagiographic approaches.<sup>31</sup> Some conform more closely to Peter Widdowson's ideas of contemporary re-visionary fiction as a means of scrutinising our perceptions of historical canonical texts by offering alternative accounts, acknowledging that historical narratives are never the whole truth.<sup>32</sup> Modern novels about saints often render their subjects in more human than divine terms, contextualising them in their earthly lived lives rather than their heavenly ones. As we shall see later in this thesis, modern poetic engagements are not necessarily specifically written for or by Christians, for devotional practices or Church liturgy, but are creative refashionings conforming to modern readers' expectations of fiction, biography and poetry. In all these cases, the hagiographic purpose they still achieve is to bring to the attention of modern readers the existence and stories of such saints.

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<sup>30</sup> A modern form of martyrdom arose from the Nazi incarceration of Christians, including Edith Stein and Maximilian Kolbe. The Catholic Church recognises 108 'blesseds and saints' of the Nazi era, but excludes those who suffered similar fates but were not Catholics, such as the Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Woodward, pp. 127–155.

<sup>31</sup> For example, fictionalised lives: Katharine Tiernan, *Cuthbert of Farne* (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2019); Frederick Buechner, *Brendan* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); George Mackay Brown, *Magnus* (London: Hodder & Staughton, 1973); Jill Dalladay, *Abbess of Whitby* (Oxford: Lion Fiction, 2015); biographical works such as: Fiona Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003); Kathryn Spink, *Mother Teresa – an authorised biography* (revised) (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015); Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013); and poetic engagements explored later in this thesis, including Bonnie Thurston, *Mary of Egypt* (Collegeville: Cistercian Press, 2022).

<sup>32</sup> Peter Widdowson, 'Writing back: contemporary re-visionary fiction', *Textual Practice* 20 (2006), 491–507.

## PART 2: APPROACHES TO REFASHIONING

The various Latin, medieval vernacular and modern refashionings of Frideswide's legend and their interrelationships will be analysed through the lenses of three different theoretical models, including theories developed to examine oral, rather than textual narratives. The three approaches employed here are: adaptation theory; the idea of a core narrative with variation within limits; and the broader concept of rewriting.

### *Adaptation*

Adaptation theory originated in the field of evolutionary biology to describe a linear process of change from one state to another. It implied that the new state was better adapted to the environment; the alternative was failure. Adaptation theory as applied to literary adaptations is a relatively new concept that emerged as a means of critically analysing the transposition of novels into films, although the creative practice of adapting mythological and theological narratives is much older.<sup>33</sup> Individual saints have been venerated for many centuries, so it is inevitable that their Lives will have been periodically refashioned during their afterlives. The principles that emerged from early models of adaptation theory were highly medium-specific, giving rise to concerns that, for example, as novels and films have a very different way of portraying a narrative they are incommensurable. Focusing on questions of fidelity – how true the new version is to its originals – is therefore not always appropriate. However, in the context of hagiography it is relevant as it can act as a measure of the extent to which a new version conforms to hagiographic conventions, as well as the degree of variation and embellishment the core narrative receives in later refashionings.

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<sup>33</sup> Timothy Corrigan, 'Defining Adaptation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. by Thomas Leitch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 35–48 at p. 38.

The transformation of prose hagiographies into poetry was a widespread phenomenon, despite the perception that verse forms might be less accessible to some audiences.<sup>34</sup> Poetry and prose can be as hard to compare as trans-media comparisons. Poetry approaches its subject in a different way and, as we shall discover in relation to modern refashionings of *Frideswide's Lives*, may not describe a narrative story as prose might. However, although the comparisons in this thesis are all intra-media, adaptation theory can still offer an appropriate framework for analysis.

Linda Hutcheon looks beyond the superficial concerns of transmedia adaptation and proposes a holistic approach to adaptation, integrating the new version (the product) with the process of creation, involving re-interpretation, appropriation and salvaging of original texts.<sup>35</sup> The features applied in the process of creating new versions include the alteration or revisioning of plot devices, such as characterisation and point of view which can inform motivation and dramatic tension, or changes to setting in time and space to make the new version more relevant or attuned to modern audiences, to appeal to audiences of a different culture, or to harness the original to new political circumstances.

Process and product are hard to separate in the analysis of *Frideswide's Lives*. They inform each other and are both means of responding to the impetus for change.<sup>36</sup> Hutcheon's idea of an interdigitated process-product-reception analytical approach is helpful, but not all of the paradigms in play apply to the present study – for example, I am dealing with originals and adaptations which are all texts, i.e. not transmedia, although linguistic translation and transposition between literary forms (prose and poetry) is relevant. However, the analysis

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<sup>34</sup> Bartlett, p. 545.

<sup>35</sup> Hutcheon (p. 8) cites a personal conversation with Priscilla Galloway on the idea of 'salvage': Galloway adapts mythic and historic narratives for children and young adults in order to preserve such stories, but in reanimated forms for new audiences.

<sup>36</sup> Much of Hutcheon and others' work is concerned with the critique and development of the theory of adaptation studies. The focus in this thesis is not to interrogate theories of adaptation but to employ appropriate paradigms to provide a structure for the analysis of the versions of *Frideswide's Lives*.



will include a note on the further adaptations needed to render the written text of *Embertide* into liturgical and performance versions.

In the context of hagiographic conventions, a change in point of view could not be applied to the protagonist saint, who must be represented in the third person, but only to another character. While this could enhance the role and efficacy of a witness, it could result in the work being insufficiently focused on the saint to remain identifiably a hagiography of that saint. Changes in setting and time do not really appear in hagiographies: saints are strongly embedded in place through their cults and places associated with them. In terms of time, they are transcendent and their narratives tend to ‘float’ chronologically. However, they are not immune to adjustments in contemporary language and social detail to suit new audiences, which is the central theme of this thesis. They are also subject to appropriation for political ends, as further discussed below.

There is also the question of the intention or catalyst behind an adaptation. Hagiographies have specific purposes – veneration and edification – and their conventions ensured that these purposes would be met. The authors of medieval saints’ Lives are unlikely to have had the same concerns or commercial objectives as modern adaptors. The congregations of the medieval Church were a captive audience, so competing for attention through dramatic effect, or achieving recognition through commercial success, would been less important than needing to conform to the didactic and exemplary functions of hagiography and the literary expectations of the time. Indeed, commercialism – even the identity of the author – was inappropriate if the author was a monk, for example, although this did not negate the value of a ‘good’ Life to promote a saint’s cult. In the medieval world, everyone understood what a hagiography was and what it was for. Now it is a form of literature relatively little known outside church and scholarship. The texts are full of symbolism, fantastic feats and impossible happenings, all laden with spiritual meanings that

are alien to modern readers. In the modern literary landscape they read more like magical realism to those who do not believe in God or miracles.<sup>37</sup> This is the key challenge in revisioning saints' Lives in the twenty-first century: the whole context of a Life as well as the Life itself must be made relevant. As we shall see, this has an impact on the extent to which modern refashionings may or may not, conform to hagiographic conventions and therefore, the scope of the adaptive strategies employed.

Later models of adaptation studies were more concerned with intertextuality than with medium-specificity. Intertextuality in this context refers to the inclusion of the original within the new version, or, alternatively, the incorporation of texts, symbols and elements from originals and other works into the new version to clarify or amplify meaning in the new version. These newer approaches recognized a more fluid interchange between text and screen, including inversions (the rise of the 'book-of-the-film') and also acknowledged the value of the study of texts that had been adapted repeatedly, which reflects the situation with Frideswide's Lives.<sup>38</sup>

The growing significance of intertextuality in adaptation studies opened up the field, acknowledging that adaptation was no isolated or linear phenomenon, but a dynamic process. In the case of the analysis of Frideswide's Lives (and by extension to hagiographies in general) intertextuality can operate at multiple levels: the relationship between various versions of Frideswide's Lives; between written texts of the Life and other sources, references and evidence; between the Lives and the genre and conventions of hagiography; and between Frideswide's Lives and those of other saints.

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<sup>37</sup> This lack of eity with symbolic meanings is not limited to Christian literature (including hagiography). For example, the loss of understanding of medieval and renaissance symbolism within other forms of literature and art can render it obscure.

<sup>38</sup> *Adaptation: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, ed. by Deborah Cartmell and Imelde Wheelan (London: Routledge, 1999).

Hutcheon proposes that intertextuality is generated through the experience of the audience in the reception of the new work.<sup>39</sup> As the audience reads, hears or sees the new version, they are reminded of other original or laterally incorporated works that resonate through – for example, the language, setting and characterisation in the new version. This approach to intertextuality is more problematic in the context of this study. Hutcheon’s view that reception is mediated through knowledge of the original pre-supposes knowledge of the original. A general public familiarity with the novels of Jane Austen, J. R. R. Tolkien or J. K. Rowling would mean that reception of their respective film adaptations would be informed by this prior knowledge, and give rise to expectations and judgements based on fidelity to the original, or whether the film is, subjectively, better or worse than the precedent novel. The reception of new versions of medieval saints’ Lives at the time they were written can only be guessed at. Hagiography was a universal and highly popular genre of literature during medieval times. Most people would have been familiar with the objectives and broad content of a saint’s Life, whether they had read it for themselves or heard it through oral transmission.

Today this is no longer the case. Authors cannot always rely on readers being able to identify their text as a rewriting of an extant, older version. This is particularly relevant in the case of hagiographies and saints’ life-writing in the context of the modern reception of rewritten or refashioned texts, but it is not unique. Carolyne Larrington, for example, observes that early translators of the Icelandic *Edda* struggled with the lack not only of Icelandic dictionaries, but also of an understanding of the complex mythology underlying an allusive poem.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Hutcheon, p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Carolyne Larrington, ‘Translating the Poetic Edda into English’ in *Old Norse Made New: Essays on the Post-Medieval Reception of Old Norse Literature and Culture*, ed. by David Clark and Carl Phelpstead (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007), pp. 21–42 at p. 23.

Reception of modern versions of saints' Lives, whether the written or performed versions, are equally hard to gauge. Prior knowledge of a saint such as Frideswide or of saints or their Lives in general cannot be assumed in the modern world. Readers might enjoy fictional renderings of, for example, St Magnus, St Cuthbert or St Hilda in isolation from, and without the need to know, the original medieval sources on which the text is based or the 'faithscape' which the originals represent. Frideswide is little-known within Oxford let alone beyond the city; saints' Lives are no longer the ubiquitous reading (or listening) of the majority of the population; and the Catholic Church, where saints are still primarily revered in the tradition of St Frideswide's day, is largely subordinated in a nominally Protestant and increasingly secular British society.<sup>41</sup>

*Embertide* is therefore challenged by the fact that it is engaging with a relatively unpopular and obscure subject. It is also interwoven with many particular referents – to Oxford, other poetic works, anecdotes and other documents, as well as the saint's Lives. As such, *Embertide* is more likely to be judged on its poetic and performance merits than as a rendering of the saint's life. Even then, the intertextuality that it displays between itself and a wide range of poetic, scriptural, geographical, historical, archaeological sources and documentary sources may also face the same challenge of obscurity, as many of these references are peculiar to Oxford, or assume knowledge of certain poets, for example.

My concerns with the relative obscurity of saints and their Lives and the particularity of many intertextual references played a material part in determining how *Embertide* evolved as it did. Such concerns informed the narrative so that it spoke of a voyage of discovery into

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<sup>41</sup> The results of Census 2021 show a fall of 13% in the number of people identified as Christians to 46.2% with a significant rise in the number identifying as of no particular faith at all. Census 2021, <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>> [accessed 10 December 2022]. The Faith Survey forecast for December 2022 is that only 25% of Christians in the UK will be Catholic and a further 11% Orthodox, which are the denominations most concerned with the formal veneration of saints. Faith Survey, <<https://faithsurvey.co.uk/uk-christianity.htm>>[accessed 10 December 2022].

the idea of the saint, rather than a rendering of a modernised version of her Life. It also brought to light an element of the resultant product which is not directly addressed by adaptation theory: the question of whether the adaptation actually tells the story contained in the original. Most adaptations refashion the way that a story or narrative is told, engineering a change in tone (mood) or perspective through altering plot devices and through whom the story is told. What happens, however, when the resultant work does not actually tell a story at all? *Embertide* is a journey narrative of sorts, but interrogates its sources. It unravels and juxtaposes multiple versions of the story, rather than actually constructing a new version. This anti-story approach gives rise to similar questions of incommensurability – how *Embertide* can be compared to its sources – that arise in the context of the fidelity of transmedia adaptations. But *Embertide* is more problematic than that, and requires additional approaches to its analysis.

### *Core and Variation*

A second approach to examining the variations between versions of the same legend is John Miles Foley's idea of 'variation within limits', a concept applied to the study of orally transmitted narratives. Foley identifies the idea of 'variation within limits' as fundamental to oral poetry: essentially it is flexibility within rules. Every story has a central core, understood by all, that each story-teller embellishes, embroiders, adds or omits scenes or events for dramatic effect, to engage audiences in an active and participatory manner.<sup>42</sup> The resultant versions represent individual communities identifying with the legend in different ways over time and space. Foley observes that oral poets are no slaves to conventions, i.e. the rules referred to above, but that these conventions or rules bring to the audience a wealth of

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<sup>42</sup> Foley, p.101.

additional implications, allusions and inferences that can be ‘transmitted in no other way.’<sup>43</sup>

The variations are not an inconvenience or an imperfection in transmission, but a fundamental element of oral poetry.

In applying Foley’s model to hagiography, and specifically to Frideswide’s Lives, a ‘core’ version of the legend can be identified which, for Frideswide at least, is coterminous with a core written text: the oldest extant version known as the *Gesta Life*. The ‘rules’ that frame each successive version are the conventions of the genre of hagiography, prescribing essential elements of content and delivery (e.g. including miracles and writing the saint in the third person). Conventional hagiography is formulaic and highly symbolic and often alludes to Scripture: reference to a period in exile in a narrative might allude to the Israelites’ wanderings or Christ’s sojourn in the wilderness to demonstrate God’s providence or his power against temptations.<sup>44</sup> Each successive version is, although textual rather than aural, a means of perpetuating the core legend, but in a contemporary context. Embellishments and changes of emphasis are employed to promote the saint within the context of the culture of the times.<sup>45</sup>

Foley’s concept encompasses the multiple sources that feed into the production of legends and keeps them alive and relevant by constant variation. It also embraces the idea of multiple possible truths, multiple facets and representations of a single subject, and multiple interpretations of the core legend as communities lay claim to their part in it. This approach gives rise to the idea of an intertextual network in which different versions and multiple sources exist simultaneously and equally – there is no privileging of any original beyond conformity to a common core. This is a particularly valuable way of scrutinising the

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<sup>43</sup> Foley, p.133.

<sup>44</sup> Exodus 12:33 onwards; Gospel of St Matthew 4:1–11.

<sup>45</sup> It may also be in response to availability of new material: Bartlett (p. 542) cites the example of later Lives of St Boniface being augmented by excerpts from his own letters.

adaptation of individual saints' Lives in the contexts of both different versions of their own Lives and the corpus of hagiographic writings on other saints, past, present and future.

Foley's ideas have very recently been applied to Frideswide's Lives themselves. Lori Ann Garner consciously steps back from a linear or chronological approach to focus on the idea of networks of associations between versions.<sup>46</sup> Garner applies the idea to the relative differences between versions of Frideswide's Lives in a search for the truth of the legend, but she does not consider the concept from the point of view of hagiographic conventions and the manner in which these 'rules' frame the creativity and flexibility of successive versions.

Michael Schmidt, in his analysis of adaptations of the ancient poem *Gilgamesh* raises similar points to those considered above.<sup>47</sup> He refers to each adaptor importing contemporary manners of their time and culture, and of a tendency to resolve symbols, add details and incidents and conceal breaks in the original.<sup>48</sup> This echoes the adaptation strategies of the authors of medieval Lives. Bartlett cites an example of Alcuin's rewriting of the Life of St Riquier in which he expanded the text, inserted biblical quotations and undertook 'a general flattening and smoothing' of earlier versions.<sup>49</sup> In other words, medieval adaptors used similar adaptive strategies as modern writers. Schmidt also notes that while scholars 'give due notice of interpolation and speculation', creative writers, including translators, have greater freedom.<sup>50</sup> Arguably it reflects a similar freedom for writers of saints' Lives who are no longer informed by hagiographic convention.

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<sup>46</sup> Lori Ann Garner, "If tradition can be trusted": pilgrimage, place and the legend(s) of Frideswide', *Modern Language Review*, 117 (2022), 581–607.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Schmidt, *The Life of a Poem: Gilgamesh* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>48</sup> Schmidt, p. 99.

<sup>49</sup> Bartlett, p. 541. The scholar Alcuin of York was writing in the late eighth and ninth centuries.

<sup>50</sup> Schmidt, pp. 102–103.

## *Rewriting*

The broader concept of ‘rewriting’ offers a means of encompassing both medieval and modern refashionings of saints’ Lives, and drawing together the approaches of Hutcheon and Foley in this analysis. Anthony Swindell in his study of the reworking, reforging and literary reception of biblical stories does not approach his analysis from the starting point of formal adaptation theory but focuses on (although does not call it) intertextuality; the relationship between original and new versions based on their contrasts or similarities. He considers that all reworkings or reforgings are new versions, which implies that copies are included as well as adaptations, which is a more inclusive concept than adaptation *sensu stricto*.<sup>51</sup>

Liedeke Plate and L. G. Els Rose also focus on rewriting, consciously incorporating a wider range of motives and strategies. They include editing and copying, which are not really adaptations *per se*, as well as an adaptive retelling of a narrative to create ‘consumer friendly (di)versions’.<sup>52</sup> The copying of manuscripts was the only means of dissemination of written medieval texts prior to the invention of the printing press. Although the objective of a copy is generally to replicate the original, there is scope for the copying of existing errors or the unintentional addition of new ones – these are passive processes undertaken by, perhaps, a scribe. Adaptation theory is concerned with an active authorial process of refashioning, editing, amplifying and embellishing an original, characteristic of the strategies adopted by medieval authors in their generation of new copies and new versions of saints’ Lives and other texts.

Plate and Rose explore their idea of rewriting in the context of the transmission of cultural memory and as an act of remembrance. They cite an example of the rewriting of

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<sup>51</sup> Anthony C. Swindell, *Reworking the Bible: the Literary Reception-History of Fourteen Biblical Stories* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2010) and *Reforging the Bible: More Biblical Stories and Their Literary Reception* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2014).

<sup>52</sup> Plate and Rose, pp. 611–625.



Merovingian hagiography in order to accord with the new political regime following what they term the Carolingian conquest.<sup>53</sup> Julie Sanders, however, considers that rewriting is a form of ‘writing back’ to the original with a new perspective.<sup>54</sup> Swindell interprets this as implying a ‘quarrel with the pretext [original]’.<sup>55</sup> I would suggest that writing-back does not need to invoke a quarrel so much as an engagement with an original text, and that medieval and modern rewritings of saints’ Lives, including my own, are not in opposition to, but in conversation with, one or more originals. In either case, the act of ‘writing-back’ is a form of intertextuality, or engagement between texts, that keeps the original in clear view, not as a hidden sub-text, but overtly and constantly involved.<sup>56</sup> Adrienne Rich sees writing as a form of ‘re-visioning’, an act of looking back into an extant text from a new perspective.

Understanding those perspectives is a form of self-knowledge that is at the heart of the exercise.<sup>57</sup> Re-writing produces a different, autonomous, new work that may be comprehensible whether or not the original text is known. This is relevant in the consideration of rewritten hagiographies because in the modern world, the originals predating extant texts may well be unknown.

Re-writing is an open and flexible concept and is a valuable contribution to the present study as it positively embraces the incidental and accidental changes arising from, for example, inaccurate copying, and the perpetuation of mistranslations and alternative interpretations which, we shall see, are relevant to the rewritings of Frideswide’s Lives.

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<sup>53</sup> Plate and Rose, p. 613. Bartlett (p. 541) notes that this was a particularly dynamic period of hagiographic refashioning.

<sup>54</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 126.

<sup>55</sup> Swindell, *Reworking*, p. 7.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Widdowson also applies the idea of ‘writing-back’ to the analysis of modern novels that rewrite historical fiction from the English canon (p. 501).

<sup>57</sup> Adrienne Rich, ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision’, *College English*, 34 (1972), 18–30 at p. 18.

### *Appropriation*

The boundary between adaptations and appropriations is blurred but the distinction is relevant to this study. The research involved in the writing of *Embertide* and the reflexive analysis of the work raises questions of where the boundaries of hagiography might be drawn, and when an adaptation morphs into an appropriation.

Julie Saunders distinguishes appropriations of style or meaning from adaptations, but places them both within a network of existing texts of various kinds. She views adaptations as intertextual, in that all reworkings invoke their originals and other texts, and are created through transposition, additions, omissions and changing of plot devices, such as point of view or voice, involving reinterpretation of the text and creation of the new.<sup>58</sup> Appropriation, on the other hand, represents a different relationship between source and new texts. It is a move away from a traditional refashioning of the source into the new version. It is a more complex, intricate and embedded relationship which may appear lateral or deflected.<sup>59</sup> The distance between the original and source and the more tangential embedding of the original means that the original is more elusive and no longer the obvious core of the new version.

The OED definition of appropriation takes the idea of de-centralizing the original a step further. It defines appropriation as ‘the selective extraction from an original for personal purposes’.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the most common appropriation of Lives is in sermons. The way in which Lives are used by individual priests in sermons can provide rich sources of information on contemporary cultural and social ideals – for example, evidencing changes in the role and status of women.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Saunders, p. 23.

<sup>59</sup> Saunders, p. 35.

<sup>60</sup> *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. by C. T. Onions, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

<sup>61</sup> Lewis, pp. 122–123.

The extant versions of Frideswide's Lives are clearly adaptations of the core *Gesta Life* and, to some degree, of each other. However, *Embertide* is not a straight-forward adaptation of these extant Lives and appropriates additional material from a range of sources. Appropriations are not limited to textual contexts. Frideswide is more apparent in modern Oxford through a variety of fleeting appearances in other contexts that adopt, incorporate and harness aspects of her character into diverse contexts, but which do not amount to an adaptation of her Lives.<sup>62</sup> This capturing of the fragmentary presence of the saint and its influence on my own work is discussed in more detail in the analysis of *Embertide*.

#### *Framework for the study of Frideswide's Lives*

Neither the idea of 'variation within limits' nor adaptation theory sit seamlessly with the analysis of hagiographies, but elements of these approaches are helpful in formulating a framework for the analysis of Frideswide's Lives and *Embertide*. This analysis will involve perspectives offered by the three different approaches introduced above.

Hagiographies are complex adaptations of adaptations, incorporating appropriations, symbolism and events from many sources, creating and consolidating their intertextual associations. The idea of 'rewriting' is the broadest context and can include copies and adaptations as well as versions that demonstrate significant departures from both hagiographic conventions and the originals on which the new version is based. Foley's idea of the 'core' and 'variation within limits' is particularly appropriate in the case of Frideswide's Lives because the earliest extant Life forms a common core in textual form that is identifiable in embellished and adapted forms in all subsequent versions. Adaptation theory

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<sup>62</sup> Both Jan Morris and Edward Thomas give passing reference to Frideswide in their respective guides to Oxford: the former comments that 'one can hardly escape her presence' although I would argue that one must have both eyes open to see her. The latter describes her rather glibly as 'King's daughter, virgin, martyr, saint', the third adjective of which is inaccurate. Jan Morris, *Oxford*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford: University Press, 1987), p. 8; Edward Thomas, *Oxford* (Oxford: Signal Books, 2005), p. 15.

offers specific ideas that shape the discussion, in the form of plot devices to demonstrate the variability of the adaptive strategies, and intertextuality to examine the relationship between the Lives and their sources and contexts. Appropriations of the Lives fall outside the frames of reference of adaptation theory and may or may not fall within Foley's 'core and variation' concept, but within the broader concept of rewriting. In the case of *Embertide*, the distinction between an adaptation and an appropriation and its intertextual relationship to extant precursors is an important part of the analysis below.

## CHAPTER 2: PROCESS AND PRODUCT: ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES OF AUTHORS OF FRIDESWIDE'S *LIVES*

The analysis of historical adaptations of the Lives of St Frideswide falls into the following sections: Part 1 provides an overview of the core text, the *Gesta Life* and an introduction to the medieval Lives to be examined, including the impetus for successive refashionings; Part 2 presents the adaptive strategies employed by medieval authors and Part 3 the adaptive strategies of selected modern authors. Each of Parts 2 and 3 will begin with an overview of the texts examined followed by the analysis that comprises four elements: characterisation of St Frideswide; dramatic tension arising from Prince Algar; reinterpretation in the context of the flight of Frideswide from Oxford, and; intertextuality focusing on the miracles in the texts. The chapter concludes with a summary of the adaptive strategies identified in this chapter and a consideration of appropriations of Frideswide's Lives.

### PART 1: THE CORE TEXT AND THE IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

The earliest surviving version of Frideswide's Life is that known as the *Gesta Life*. This is a brief account by William of Malmesbury in his *De Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* written around 1125, some 400 years after Frideswide's death. It is considered by John Blair to be the most reliable narrative and is probably a compressed summary of older material now lost.<sup>1</sup> It may have been written as part of a movement to defend local and native cults against

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<sup>1</sup> My analysis is based on the English translations of the three Latin *Vitae* by John Blair (1987) in 'St Frideswide Reconsidered'. Any older Lives are likely to have been lost in the fire at St Frideswide's Priory on the St Brice's Day 13 November 1002, recorded in the Cartulary of St Frideswide's Priory dated 1004, cited in Garner, (p. 583). The fire, in which Danes sheltering in the church were massacred and then burned, is the subject of an excavation reported in David Radford, *The Archaeology of Oxford in 20 Digs* (Stroud: Amberley, 2018), pp. 51–54. The original sources for earlier, lost, versions are likely to have included oral eye-witness accounts to lend authority to the text.

the Normanization of the church – perhaps protecting such cults against the kind of appropriative rewriting invoked by Plate and Rose.<sup>2</sup>

There must have been sufficient interest in Frideswide over and above being abbess of the local monastery to prompt the writing of an earlier Life predating the *Gesta Life*. There may have been a particular desire to establish and promote a cult in Oxford, or raise the status of the Priory dedicated to her.<sup>3</sup> The paucity of miraculous acts recorded in this unembellished *Gesta Life* lends greater credence in modern, secular terms, to the real existence of Frideswide.<sup>4</sup> The text provides the key features of the Life that are rehearsed in later versions: the existence of Frideswide, her pursuit by an unnamed king, her flight to a wood, the king being struck blind and later healed after repenting, and that she spends the rest of her life in a monastery in Oxford. This makes the *Gesta Life* equivalent to Foley's core narrative, which in this case is in a textual form.

Two twelfth-century Latin refashionings were written for clergy and religious communities who would have been able to read Latin and had access to books. Everyone else would have heard the story of Frideswide's Life on her feast day (19<sup>th</sup> October) and within sermons and the liturgy. They would also have had their own folk memories of her intercessory powers. The Latin refashionings of the Life demonstrate both conformity to hagiographic conventions, and individuality through variations. 'Life A' is attributed to John of Worcester and survives in one manuscript. It embellishes and amplifies Malmesbury's *Gesta Life* by adding miracles and divine intervention, and emphasising the excessive piety of the saint characteristic of *vitae*. It is not clear what prompted the production of this

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<sup>2</sup> Garner, pp. 589–590; Plate and Rose, p. 613.

<sup>3</sup> The Domesday Book refers to extensive landholdings in and around Oxford belonging to the Canon's of St Frideswide's Priory so there was clearly an extant foundation dedicated to her, with or without an active cult at this time. *Domesday Book: Oxfordshire*, ed. by John Morris (Chichester: Phillimore, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c.550-1307* (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. 105–35.

version. John Blair's analysis of the Latin Lives suggests that Life A may have been based on a source independent of that which the *Gesta Life* summarises.<sup>5</sup>

A second Latin *vita*, 'Life B', was written before the translation of Frideswide's relics to a new shrine in 1180, presumably in order to promote and consolidate her growing cult and may itself have, in part, inspired that translation.<sup>6</sup> The likely author, Prior Robert of Cricklade, intended his text to be established as the true and authoritative version. He overtly disregarded Life A and reconciled geographical and chronological disparities between Life A and other texts in order to present an unequivocally coherent and apparently authentic account of Frideswide's life. Prior Robert was also concerned that the poor quality of the Latin in Life A might have undermined the power and status of the text.<sup>7</sup> This intertextuality between Life A and Life B highlights how both of these Lives are constructs mediated by their authors. While they are of questionable historical accuracy, they do represent creative ingenuity in the use of extant material by the authors. Indeed, the Prologue to Life B refers to chronicles and authentic histories as well as previous Lives as primary sources.<sup>8</sup>

The *vitae* themselves were later adapted and transposed into Middle English verse and included in a collection of saints' lives called the *South English Legendaries* ('SEL') designed for individual study by a more literate population.<sup>9</sup> A longer SEL version ('LSEL') is based on Life B and dates to around 1300-1330. A shorter SEL version ('SSEL') dates to around 1400 and is closely modelled on Life A. Both respect the conventions of hagiography and the expectations of its contemporary medieval readership, but this did not prevent the

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<sup>5</sup> Blair (1987), p. 82.

<sup>6</sup> Blair (1987), p. 80. Blair notes that if Life B had post-dated the 1180 translation, it would surely have mentioned it.

<sup>7</sup> Blair (1987), pp. 73, 80.

<sup>8</sup> Life B, para. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Frideswide is included in three copies of the SSEL and four copies of the LSEL out of a total of forty SEL manuscripts and may be a late addition. *Rethinking the South English Legendaries*, ed. by Heather Blurton and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 194.

writers from demonstrating significant creativity in their efforts to create an appealing and accessible narrative in the language, idiom and socio-cultural context of the time of writing.

As literacy increased, so too the demand for versions accessible to lay people literate in the vernacular but not necessarily Latin. This was the key impetus behind the transposition of the Latin prose into vernacular verse. Most private reading in medieval times was by reading aloud, so a verse form would have given the text rhythm and momentum. Alliteration and rhyming patterns would have made the text more memorable and enjoyable – the Lives began to have a measure of entertainment value, augmented by the adaptive strategies employed by the authors.

## PART 2: MEDIEVAL ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES

There are other medieval versions of Frideswide's Lives, but Life A, Life B and the SEL versions introduced above are the oldest surviving versions and form the basis of later versions. Later pre-Reformation versions are also relevant in the context of modern adaptations, as we shall see later on.<sup>10</sup> John Blair offers the sole scholarly analysis and translation of the Latin lives and has also undertaken archaeological investigations to secure historical context.<sup>11</sup> Anne Thompson has made the most detailed consideration of the Middle

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<sup>10</sup> Rev. G. E. C. Rodwell, 'The Flight of St Frideswide', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 22 (1916), 85–89 refers to other versions of the Life, including: John of Tynemouth *Sanctilogium Angliae Walliae Scotiae et Hiberniae* a compendium of 156 British saints (printed 1516 and again in 1527) of which a single manuscript survives (British Library: Cotton Library MA Tiberius E.i); John Capgrave, who reorganised Tynemouth's *Sanctilogium* into his *Nova Legenda Angliae* (see also Hugh Chisholm's entry on John Capgrave in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* vol. 5, 11<sup>th</sup> edn (Cambridge University Press, 1911) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/33477/33477-h/33477-h.htm> [accessed 10 December 2022]); and the Bollandist's *Acta Sanctorum* of 1738. I have focused on the three earlier and relatively well known Latin *vitae* forming the basis of John Blair's studies, and the two Middle English versions based upon them, as a discrete corpus for the analysis of adaptive strategies in this study.

<sup>11</sup> *Saint Frideswide's Monastery at Oxford*, ed. by John Blair (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1990); *Binsey: Oxford's Holy Place; its saint, village and people*, ed. by Lydia Carr, Russell Dewhurst, and Martin Henig, (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2014).



English Lives.<sup>12</sup> Both of these authors' works are important starting points for the following analysis.

Before embarking on an analysis of the key changes to the texts, it is worth noting those literary components that remain constant throughout the successive adaptations and which conform to hagiographic conventions. The third person point of view of all the five extant medieval versions is the same as for all hagiographies, maintaining a distance between the saint and those invoking her that is bridged by faith. The narratives include other characters whose primary purpose is to witness Frideswide's acts and to provide the background to her life. These minor roles give the story credence and context but never override the presence of the saint.

The narrator of each version forms a bridge between text and recipient in the same way that the author spans the gap between the saint's lived life and the text, and the saint bridges the gap between God and human beings.<sup>13</sup> The narrator dramatizes, explains and comments on the story – for example, why the leper's request for a healing kiss was so extraordinary and why Frideswide should be ashamed to give it.<sup>14</sup> The narrator also elicits the participation and response of the audience, which was an important part of Anglo-Saxon liturgical practice.<sup>15</sup> This chain of connection from audience through author, narrator and saint to God is all aimed at bringing the saint within the comprehension of ordinary people, and demanding from them some kind of physical, emotional and spiritual response. Certain other important literary elements, however, change dramatically.

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<sup>12</sup> Anne Thompson, *Everyday Saints and the Art of Narrative in the South English Legendary* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 141–153, and Anne Thompson, 'Shaping a Saint's Life: St Frideswide of Oxford', *Medium Ævum* 63 (1994), 34–52.

<sup>13</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, 'Wreaths of Thyme: The Female Translator in Anglo-Norman Hagiography', *The Medieval Translator IV*, ed. by Roger Ellis and Ruth Evans (Binghampton: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 46–67, at p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Life B, para. 18.

<sup>15</sup> M. Bradford Bedingfield, *The Dramatic Liturgy of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002), p. 24.

### *Characterisation*

Frideswide is always named, and indeed is the only name that appears in the *Gesta Life*.

However, the *vitae* and the SEL Lives introduce details to give the legend the appearance of authenticity. Her father is identified as King Didan. Her mother, nurse, two companions and some of the beneficiaries of miracles are named.<sup>16</sup> In the Latin *vitae*, Frideswide is of royal birth, but in the SEL versions, she is portrayed as the daughter of ‘Sire Didan’, a prosperous Christian gentleman, making her more relatable to those ranks of society who were becoming increasingly literate.<sup>17</sup>

Daughters of eighth-century nobles had considerable value as diplomatic pawns, or ‘peaceweavers’. Strategic alliances between kingdoms were strengthened by intermarriage, so we might expect to see resistance from Didan to Frideswide’s vocation.<sup>18</sup> However, the *vitae* state that Didan rejoiced in his daughter’s intention to commit herself to God before she reached marriageable age and established her in a church built in his wife’s memory.<sup>19</sup> Establishing a religious house in the eighth century was often a family affair, on lands which reverted back to the family if the house dissolved. However, the Lives of St Frideswide reflect the later situation at the time of writing, where land was endowed to the church in perpetuity.<sup>20</sup> This alteration would have provided an emulatory hint to potential benefactors.

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<sup>16</sup> The names and details of Frideswide’s family varies between versions. Her mother is variously named as Sefride, Safrida, Sefreth and Saffride, and her nurse is called Aelgifu, Algiva or Algive (unnamed in SSEL). The two women accompanying her on her flight, Cecily and Catherine, may or may not be saints rather than real people.

<sup>17</sup> Several women from royal households founded monasteries: Queen/St Etheldreda of Ely is one example. Aligning Frideswide with a royal or noble family alludes to such important precursors.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Yorke discusses peace-weavers in *The Conversion of Britain 600-800* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2006), p. 83. Ironically, Frideswide’s name is *Freothwebbe* in Old English, which translates as ‘Peace strong.’

<sup>19</sup> Lives A and B, para. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Yorke, p. 167; Sarah Foot discusses the founding of religious houses by way of both grants of land to ecclesiastical establishments, or the founding of a religious house while retaining control of the land. The latter case would have conferred status on the family and gave them dedicated intercessory protection. *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England c.600-900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 77–87.

The portrayal of Frideswide transitions from a symbolic ‘type’ of saintly woman in the *vitae* into a more relatable individual in the SEL. While the SEL author(s) give Frideswide a unique character, there is still careful observance of the need to establish her credentials as a holy woman. Sherry Reames comments that the SSEL abbreviates and simplifies the narrative but retains a monastic tone assuming a level of literacy and asceticism in its readers for whom virginity and devotion to God would have been assumed. The LSEL, however, de-emphasises Frideswide’s virginity in order to appeal with relevance to married lay women and widows.<sup>21</sup> Piety and chastity are present as essential traits in a female saint, but are moderated in the SEL. However, all versions describe Frideswide as typically precociously holy, living on a simple diet. In Life A and the SSEL she wears a hair shirt; in Life B and the LSEL she learns the Psalter within a few months. Andrew Dunning also notes that, apart from emphasising her piety, Life B also makes much of her learning which accords with the teaching vocation of the Augustinian Canons of the Priory. Such an appropriation of Frideswide’s character is an example of how an association with a saint can authenticate the religious institution associated with it.<sup>22</sup>

Rendering Frideswide more relatable and individual also involved the revelation of some interior life, agency and independent thinking. In the *vitae* the holy woman is a symbolic cypher, completely submitted to God and through whom God is pleased to work. Such purity is an impossible act to follow, but it emphasised Frideswide’s holiness and intercessory potential. In the SEL versions, however, Frideswide is still set apart, but she provides a model that it was possible for a lay audience to emulate. There are several scenes

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<sup>21</sup> Sherry L. Reames, *Middle English Legends of Women Saints* (Kalamazoo, University of Michigan Press, 2003), p.24. In this thesis line numbers cited for the SSEL and LSEL refer to this publication.

<sup>22</sup> Para. 3. Andrew Dunning, ‘St Frideswide’s Priory as a Centre of Learning in Early Oxford’, *Medieval Studies*, 80 (2018), 253–296, at p. 263. He also notes that Prior Robert’s successor, Prior Philip, created a new seal for the Priory showing Frideswide seated holding a fleur de lys and an open book (p. 264).

in the Lives that illustrate this transition, one of which will be examined briefly here: her decision to escape to the forest.

In both Latin versions, an angel appears to Frideswide telling her to leave with two chosen companions and head for the river where God will provide a boat and boatman. In the SSEL the angel gives no specific instruction, only warns of Algar's approach. In response, Frideswide and two companions decide to go to the river and there they find a boat waiting in which they are transported upriver.<sup>23</sup> In the Latin *vitae*, Frideswide merely needs to listen and obey. However, in the SEL, and in the LSEL in particular, Frideswide makes and acts on her own *inwit* (inner wisdom) and makes a pragmatic decision to leave in an act of faith that God rewards with provision of the means to escape. Her obedience to God lies in deciding to act in a way that best protects her from an influence destructive to her chosen way of life, rather than simply doing as she is told. This was a model of good Christian living that a lay reader could understand and emulate.<sup>24</sup>

The core story remains the same, but the creative strategies adopted by the SEL authors render it interesting, exciting, readable, and relatable. Granting Frideswide her own agency and filling in the backstory for her life is only part of the adaptation story: it is also evident in the dramatic tension arising from realistic characterisation.

### *Dramatic tension*

The opposition of 'good' versus 'evil' is a universal feature of hagiographic texts, creating a form of battle or dispute which, of course, God always wins.<sup>25</sup> The inevitable success of God

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<sup>23</sup> Paras. 11, 12; SSEL, ll. 61–66; LSEL, ll. 87–88.

<sup>24</sup> This depiction of a kind of rational 'going with God' might inspire women to go on pilgrimage, as well as turn away from evil.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Altman, 'Two Types of Opposition and the Structure of Saints' Lives', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 6 (1875), 1–11, distinguishes between the overt oppositional good-versus-evil apparent in the courtroom scenes of martyrs' *vitae*, and the more graduated and complex developments in the Lives of confessors and hermits and other 'white' martyrs written in the Romance tradition. Others

is an element of the narrative that a medieval hagiographer could not alter. The legal and physical trials of the early Christian martyrs provided a stage for this drama. However, once the period of persecution had passed, the trials endured by saints were internalized: desert hermits' legends are full of temptations and the ascetic lengths taken to overcome them. These internal battles provided the dramatic tension required to make the narrative compelling.

By comparison, Frideswide's story is rather tame. Perhaps the authors had to work harder to create a compelling narrative. The main opposition comes from the presence of the devil, both as himself and as a power that inhabits Algar and incites his actions. The main dramatic tension therefore is not just between genders or secular versus sacred perspectives: the good-evil / God-devil dichotomies are an essential catalyst to demonstrate the divine intervention of God.

Prince Algar is transformed from an over-persistent young man in the *Gesta Life* into a wicked tyrant in the *vitae*, a change carried forward into the SEL versions.<sup>26</sup> Inflamed either by the devil or by his own tyrannical nature, Algar decides to take Frideswide as his wife. Life B and the LSEL place the altercation between Algar and Frideswide firmly in the context of a spiritual battle with the devil, but in Life A and the SSEL, she contends with a tyrannical man. Prior Robert's spiritual emphasis in Life B underlines the text's edifying role as the authentic version of an exemplary life.

The characterisation of Algar as the devil is perhaps less significant than the *inwit* which Frideswide is afforded in the SEL versions to deal with it. In both Latin Lives and the LSEL Algar enters the city and is struck blind, and remains so, plotting revenge on her for the

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consider the opposition to be more nuanced – good as opposed to better or worse. Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise* (Hanover, NE: University Press of New England, 1987), p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Lives A and B, para. 8. In Life B the devil departs from his encounter with Frideswide in the chapel and goes straight to Algar and possesses him.

rest of his life.<sup>27</sup> He does not benefit from the cure his repentant messengers were afforded. Algar threatens to turn Oxford ‘up-to-down’ and is struck blind as a result. God’s protection is extended beyond the saint to benefit the city, justifying her eventual adoption as its patron saint. While in the Latin *vitae* and the LSEL, Algar’s fate was to remain blind, chastened but unrepentant for the rest of his life, in the SSEL his horse stumbles and his neck is broken.<sup>28</sup> Whatever his fate, Algar’s pursuit provokes Frideswide to flight, an important dramatic turning point. He also represents the oppositional trial that impedes Frideswide’s desire to remain a religious, and which she must overcome.

#### *Reinterpretation: Frideswide’s Flight*

Frideswide’s escape from Oxford by boat assisted by an angel is perhaps the best known episode of her Life.<sup>29</sup> While the location of Frideswide’s monastery in Oxford is well established, the location of the woods to which Frideswide fled is still contested. This become known as the ‘Binsey episode’ and has given rise to much speculation over the years.<sup>30</sup>

Malmesbury’s *Gesta Life* merely places Frideswide in an unnamed wood. Life A relates that Frideswide travelled for about an hour and arrived at a town called Bampton from which she went on to a ‘wood called Binsey’ not far from Bampton, remaining there for three years during which she performed miracles on a girl from Bampton and a man from Seacourt.

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<sup>27</sup> Lives A and B, para. 13; LSEL, ll. 95–108.

<sup>28</sup> The authors/narrators of Life A and B comment that because of this, is no King of England has dared to enter Oxford ever since, a salutary lesson for those who defy God (para. 13). LSEL, l. 108; SSEL, ll. 88–90.

<sup>29</sup> The flight in this case would have invoked an understanding of the connection between full dependence on God and God’s power to work through an individual. The forest would have been a frightening place and Frideswide and her women would have needed to have faith in God’s provision for shelter, protection and sustenance.

<sup>30</sup> Blair (1987), pp. 83–85.

Bampton is thirteen miles west and Binsey two miles north of Oxford. Seacourt is barely half a mile from Binsey.<sup>31</sup>

In his prologue, Prior Robert explicitly justifies the correction of what he calls an error in Life A.<sup>32</sup> He would have had several reasons for this: to eliminate anything that might have weakened the apparent authenticity of his Life B; to eliminate any confusion over the location of sites to which pilgrims might come; to establish Frideswide unequivocally as ‘belonging’ to Oxford; and quite possibly in order to confirm and authenticate the ownership of the land at Binsey by the Priory.<sup>33</sup> Prior Robert overtly privileges the new version above an original source, although, presumably in order not to undermine the foundations of his own work, he does concede that the author of Life A ‘in many ways was far from error’.<sup>34</sup>

In order to accommodate the healings at Bampton and Seacourt, Prior Robert erased the words ‘called Binsey’ from Life A, and inserted an additional section in his narrative that enabled her to arrive at Bampton and perform the first miracle there, then move back to Binsey where she remained for three years, creating the well and performing further miracles including healing the Seacourt axeman. This probably accommodates extant miracle stories from both locations while underlining the Priory’s legitimate claim over the lands at Binsey.<sup>35</sup>

While Frideswide is hardly known outside Oxford and Binsey, the town of Frilsham near Newbury in Berkshire has a church dedicated to her and claims that they have a holy

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<sup>31</sup> Binsey was also called Thornbiri, meaning a ‘thorny place’. Archaeological evidence of a Roman enclosure reused during the Anglo-Saxon period supports the location of Frideswide’s oratory at Binsey. John Blair, ‘Thornbury, Binsey: a probable defensive enclosure associated with Saint Frideswide’, *Oxonensia*, 53 (1988), 3–20. It is not to be confused with Thornhill south of Oxford and now a park-and-ride.

<sup>32</sup> Life B, para. 1. Blair (1987) states that the author of Life A was clearly unfamiliar with the geography of Oxfordshire (p. 85).

<sup>33</sup> Blair (1987), pp. 84–85.

<sup>34</sup> Life B, para. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Blair (1987), p. 84. The erasure is evident in the Nero manuscript of Life B. The new section is at para. 16 of Life B. Seacourt was abandoned during the plagues and is now also the location of a Park-and-Ride.

well with ocular curative properties within their bounds. Frilsham's claim is founded on an interpretation in which the boat took the nuns downriver to Abingdon from where they travelled to a wood called 'Bentona' (now Yattendon) and established an oratory and well at a place that became known as 'Fritha's home' or Frilsham, before returning to Oxford.<sup>36</sup> In both this claim and Life B, a two-stage exile is created which is carried forward into modern versions.

### *Intertextuality: Miracles*

Malmesbury's *Gesta Life* does not recount any miracles, but there are four healing miracles that appear in the later four Lives: the blind girl at Bampton; Alward, the Seacourt axeman; Leowin, the demonised fisherman; and the leper in Oxford. The healing of the blind girl is omitted from the SSEL and the demonised fisherman is missing from both SEL Lives. Before considering the intertextual significance of the miracles, it is worth looking at how they have been expressed in each of the four Lives.

Where recounted, each miracle is located in the same, named location and the cure is for the same ill. Life A names the beneficiaries of some the miracles, but Life B does not. Instead, it amplifies and augments each story compared with Life A.<sup>37</sup> The SEL versions further enhance the dramatic and edificatory effect with narratorial commentary and exposition – for example, Alward of Seacourt worked on a Sunday and his hands stuck fast to the haft of his axe. Life B and the LSEL use this to admonish those who do not keep the Sabbath rest.<sup>38</sup> Specific details were important in authenticating miracles, which would

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<sup>36</sup> Rodwell, pp. 87–88.

<sup>37</sup> This is an interesting point: names imply authenticity, which is what Prior Robert was seeking. However, anonymity might suggest that the healing could be for all or anyone similarly afflicted.

<sup>38</sup> Life B, para. 16.



account for the similarities in the different accounts, but the way that the miracles is portrayed does vary.<sup>39</sup>

Frideswide's healing of the leper most effectively demonstrates the different approaches in the Lives. Life A and the SSEL make little more than passing reference to a leprous youth demanding a kiss of healing, which she duly gives after protecting herself (and her virtue) with the sign of the cross.<sup>40</sup> Frideswide has a passive role in these versions; God is seen to be working through her.

Life B and the LSEL make more of the dramatic and edifying value of this miracle.<sup>41</sup> Life B emphasises the leper's foul appearance – 'more like a monster than a man'. The narrator addresses his audience indirectly through chiding the leper for such an audacious demand, and directly by explaining that it is outrageous 'unless prompted by stupendous faith'. The leper responds to the narrator saying that it is Frideswide's purity (i.e. holiness) not her gender that prompts him to make such a request. Frideswide says nothing but does kiss him, after making the sign of the cross. The narrator steps in again to expound on the wonderful miracle and the virtue of the saint. The three-way interaction between leper, narrator and audience excludes any input from the saint herself. The narrator speaks for her, and draws the audience in to engage with the oppositional tension between foul and pure, evil

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<sup>39</sup> Prior Philip, a successor to Prior Robert, collected some one hundred posthumous miracles attributed to Frideswide which reveal information about the individuals seeking her help. Such collections, known as *Miraculæ*, were kept at the shrine as further evidence of the intercessory power of the saint. The details included the names and ills of the beneficiaries, what happened at the shrine, where they came from, whether they had sought help elsewhere, such as at the shrine of Thomas Beckett, and the witnesses present. Simon Yarrow's analysis of the *Miraculæ* reveals that most came from a forty mile radius, and many, but not all, were women (pp. 169–189). Dunning (p. 280) also concludes that the *Miraculæ* was intended to enhance and encourage the pastoral care of the Priory and cites Prior Philip's own prologue to the *Miraculæ* that the miracles were a gift from God and intended to strengthen faith. From the descriptions of the miracles, it must have been noisy, smelly, messy business, far from the aura of quiet and reverent meditation encouraged at many shrines now. The *Acta Sanctorum* devotes several column inches to a full report of her posthumous miracles.

<sup>40</sup> Life A, para. 18; SSEL, ll. 111–114; The almost dismissive summary of the leper miracle and Frideswide's death have a sense of haste (or perhaps slack of parchment) on the part of the writer!

<sup>41</sup> Life B, para. 18; LSEL, ll. 141–154.

and good. By contrast, the LSEL both credits Frideswide with her own power to act, and reveals a glimpse of her interior life. She admits to feeling ‘ofscamed sore’ for kissing the man.<sup>42</sup> The narrator of Life B is at pains to point out that the leper’s very repulsiveness afforded sufficient protection to Frideswide’s chastity, but in the LSEL Frideswide’s shame suggests humanity and compassion, that she saw the leper as a man, not a monster.<sup>43</sup>

The inclusion of miracles was vital in any *positio*, but there are none in the *Gesta Life*, so where did they come from, and why these in particular? They may have been present in older extant texts that the *Gesta Life* summarises, alongside anecdotal evidence for miracles, but they are common and universal miracles. As discussed in Chapter 1, the ‘borrowing’ of miracles from one saint’s Life to include in another was a symbolic exercise justified by doctrine. The point of including miracles was to demonstrate the holiness of the saint, not necessarily recount deeds undertaken by her specifically. The ‘truth’ is spiritual rather than actual. Frideswide’s exploits would have invoked the underlying scriptural referents, connecting Frideswide to Christ and God in the minds of the audience. Each miracle located in a specific place also connects Frideswide firmly to those localities, all possible pilgrimage destinations, in a form of non-documentary intertextuality.

This connectivity would have invoked the community of saints as well as God for medieval audiences. The symbolism present in the hagiographies would have been readily interpreted, as they were familiar in daily life. In the modern world, however, the symbolism is occluded by a different world view. The rise of Protestantism and subsequent decline in Christian belief has rendered much Catholic dogma obscure. Hagiographies may appear bizarre, repetitive and fantastical today, but they made perfect sense to the medieval mind.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> LSEL, ll. 148–149. Sorely ashamed.

<sup>43</sup> Reames (p. 47) comments that Frideswide also displays a sense of embarrassment at performing miracles on demand in public, so was fully and personally aware of her own spiritual proximity to God. This would have had considerable edifying value for a lay audience.

<sup>44</sup> Benedicta Ward (*Miracles*, p. 4) comments that ‘people asked how miracles related man to God, not how they could be defined.’

How, then, do modern adaptations of Frideswide's Lives manage to convey, but not debase, spiritual symbolism in a manner that makes sense to modern audiences?

### PART 3: MODERN ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES

The Reformation brought an end to the formal observance of Frideswide's cult, along with many liturgical practices that venerated her and other saints, creating a temporal gap in the succession of adaptations of her Lives. The twentieth century versions examined below demonstrate significant new adaptive strategies, possibly because some authors were less concerned with hagiographic conventions than with addressing a much less churched audience.

The core of the modern narratives remains generally true to the extant medieval Lives, but the model applied to the medieval versions above operated differently as a result of key changes of emphasis in the modern texts that distinguish them from their precursors. First, some modern versions display a significant step away from hagiographic conventions, particularly in the writing of Frideswide in the first person. There is also less didactic explanation and instruction in some versions.

Second, there are changes in structure that depart from a continuous prose or poetic rendering of a narrative story. There is an increase in complexity: the narrator loses omniscience as other characters are given a voice. This changes the tone of the work as a whole – a multiplicity of voices breaks down the simpler relationships in the medieval versions. Frideswide's voice and perspective becomes one of several – she is part of a community of voices rather than a lone voice opposing Algar. This in itself does not render the modern refashioning entirely unhagiographic, but does in some way secularise the

narrative. It does not compromise the holiness of the saint, but the audience has a realistic cast of characters to relate and respond to, including Frideswide.

Third, the story in each version is, for the most part, closely derivative of its precursors. However, Frideswide's flight to the woods is particularly interesting in what it reveals about the intertextual relationship between each modern version and its sources – it is not so much *how* it is conveyed as *what* is conveyed. It echoes Prior Robert's concerns and adaptive solutions evident in Life B in respect to conveying the (or a) 'truth' of the legend.

Finally, the inclusion of the miracles and the way in which they are presented is not markedly different between the modern versions and their respective sources. The difference in how they are presented is determined by the tone (or mood) of the work. In other words, the miracles form part of an expanded core text that is carried forward by subsequent refashionings. They carry the same inherent symbolic significance, but the manner in which they are portrayed reflects a different and more modern context and tone that evidence a departure from hagiographic renderings of Frideswide's legend into more secular forms.

The discussion of the modern adaptations will focus on three aspects: the characterisation of Frideswide and dramatic tension as indicators of the tone of the modern versions; reinterpretation evidenced by the flight to the woods; and intertextuality evidenced in relation to miracles.

The versions discussed below were all written in modern English, so the analysis is not based on translations as in the case of the Latin *vitae* and middle English SEL versions.

The following modern refashionings of Frideswide's Life will be considered:

- Sabine Baring-Gould: Life of St Frideswide in *Lives of the Saints*, a prose form within his sixteen volume collection of British Saints' Lives (first published 1872);
- Father Francis Goldie: *The Legend of St Frideswide*, a Catholic prose version (1881);

- Frances Hayllar: *The Legend of St Frideswide*, in verse (1904) which represents a significant step away from conventional hagiography; and
- Jackie Holderness: *The Princess who Hid in a Tree*, a recent prose adaptation for children (2019).<sup>45</sup>

There are further modern versions which will not be considered here – those of Ruth Buckley, for example, are direct translations of the Middle English SEL Lives into modern English without further adaptation or embellishment so have nothing new to offer in the context of this thesis.<sup>46</sup>

#### *Characterisation and the Tone of the Text*

The characterisation of Frideswide in each of these modern versions is closely tied to the overall style and tone, or mood implied by the choice of vocabulary and syntax, of the writing, and which varies significantly between authors.

Sabine Baring-Gould's exhaustive collection of British saints' Lives, published in 1872 includes a summary account of Frideswide's legend written in the third person in prose. It records the essentials of the legend, but does not dramatize it. Baring-Gould's language and portrayal of some incidents is contemporary – for example, she 'threw herself into a boat' to escape Algar.<sup>47</sup> No visions precede this. Algar tracks her relentlessly until, at the last moment, she 'bethought herself of the great saints' and finally calls upon Saints Catherine and Cecilia for protection, almost as a last ditch attempt to evade her pursuer – the

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<sup>45</sup> Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Lives of the Saints*, 16 vols (London: John C. Nimmo & Co, 1898) XII, pp. 484–487; Fr Francis Goldie, *The Legend of St Frideswide* (London: Burns & Oates, 1881); Florence Hayllar, *The Legend of Saint Frideswide and other poems* (Westminster: Archibald Constable & Co, 1904); Jackie Holderness, *The Princess who Hid in a Tree*, illus. by Alan Marks (Oxford: Bodleian Children's Books, 2019).

<sup>46</sup> Ruth Buckley, *The Legendary Life of St Frideswide* and *The Legendary Life of St Frideswide in Rhyming Verse* (both Oxford,: Palmcross Publications, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Baring-Gould, p. 485.

Frideswide of the *vitae* and the SEL Lives would have thought of this rather sooner! It emphasises the humanity of the saint to a much greater degree.

Baring-Gould offers some narratorial explanations, including comments on the context of the stories, rather than their spiritual interpretation – for example, when Frideswide hides in the forest in a swine hut, he explains that swine ‘then as later, went to eat acorns in the woods, and were one of the principle riches of the Anglo-Saxon proprietors’.<sup>48</sup> Such a comment would have been superfluous in any medieval version, but here indicates the different assumed knowledge of the audience.

Francis Goldie’s prose version of Frideswide’s Life is written in a hyperbolic and melodramatic manner, in a tone that bears resemblance to a Victorian child’s Sunday School story. He, too, feels it necessary to explain the presence of a swine hut in the woods: ‘it had been built as a cover for the herds of swine which roamed in search of acorns, and formed so large a source of revenue to the owners or tenants of the English forests.’<sup>49</sup>

Goldie presents Frideswide as an almost nauseatingly pious woman, miracles and all. She is written in the third person, but is given a voice. However, her responses are not her own: ‘To [the devil] the maiden, taught by the Spirit of Truth, made answer’.<sup>50</sup> In other words, it is God who speaks and acts through her rather than having her own agency.<sup>51</sup> This reverts back to the symbolism of the Latin *vitae*. She also receives long and specific instruction from angels, especially about the timing of her death.<sup>52</sup>

Goldie focuses a great deal more on Frideswide’s death in the style of early martyrologies than the unusually cursory treatment of the medieval texts. He also includes a

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<sup>48</sup> Baring-Gould, p. 485.

<sup>49</sup> Goldie, p. 19.

<sup>50</sup> Goldie, p. 13.

<sup>51</sup> For example, on p. 13 when Frideswide contends with the devil in the chapel.

<sup>52</sup> Goldie, pp. 28–29.

litany of her post-humous miracles based on Prior Philip's *Miraculae*, in a tone and form that reflects the *positio* required by the Vatican for formal canonization.<sup>53</sup>

Florence Hayllar's 1904 poem is the only discoverable verse version for this earlier modern period but is perhaps the most interesting in the context of adaptation.<sup>54</sup> Hayllar, like the SEL authors, uses rhyming couplets throughout, but her use of the couplets varies. The SEL is written in a consistent and continuous format, but Hayllar uses different arrangements of couplets for the different scenes with which she breaks up the text.<sup>55</sup> Hayllar's text opens with the narrator's voice in a continuous block of verse arranged in rhyming couplets, but the second scene about Algar's pursuit is arranged in four line stanzas, with alternating lines rhyming. In the third, the style shifts back to rhyming couplets again, but each couplet also forms a stanza. In scene four each stanza is five lines long, again with alternating line rhyming.<sup>56</sup>

This variation in poetic form contrasts strongly with the monoglot styles of the medieval and modern versions discussed above. Form becomes a more prominent feature of the text because of its variations. In a conventional hagiography this might distract from the edifying message it contains, and is one feature of Hayllar's work that demonstrates a step away from hagiographic convention.

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<sup>53</sup> Twenty-four pages are dedicated to her Life, of which four are concerned with her death. A further twenty-four set out a selection of posthumous miracles and a further ten pages mourns the ending of her cult, desecration of her shrine and hope for future glorification. This approach may be accounted for by his reference to an announcement in 1481 that Frideswide was 'raised to the altars' in response, he suggests, to petitions for formal sanction of her cult by the Vatican, and by his plea that she should be gloriously remembered in Oxford. pp. 56–7.

<sup>54</sup> Hayllar was secretary to the Bristol and West English Society of Suffragettes which may have inspired her choice of subject. The legend comprises the first thirty-four pages of a collection. The other poems consist of a selection of shorter verse on a variety of themes, including morality, women, historical figures, and reflections on nature, childhood, love and loneliness.

<sup>55</sup> Blair, (1987 at p. 102) notes that Life B is arranged in thirteen sections which Dunning (p. 263) suggests is to enable the Life to be delivered within the structure of the liturgy.

<sup>56</sup> Chapter 1 commences on p.1; chapter 2 on page 3; chapter 3 on p.13 and chapter 4 on page 15.

However, it is not so much Hayllar's choice of verse form which is interesting as her approach. It is the first adaptation which has rethought how to present the legend in a form other than a continuous narrative. The scenes resemble acts in a play. Each is titled with a short epilogue specifying what happens: 'How Saint Frideswide by her prayers healed the King Algar of his Blindness' for example.<sup>57</sup>

A third person narrator opens and closes the Legend and is manifest throughout the text. However, in a further significant break from hagiographic tradition, Frideswide is given a first person voice.<sup>58</sup> In addition, there are choruses of nuns, scholars and 'folk' who chant at length after her death, pleading to God and Frideswide not to forsake them. The chorus and characters address each other rather than the audience and as such, is more dramatic than didactic.

Hayllar is the first author to have taken the step of inhabiting the saint, as well as other characters, in order to bring them to life. In my view, she has created a version suitable for performance: i.e. a version for entertainment as much as, if not more than, the edification of its readers and veneration of its subject.<sup>59</sup> The verse is in places contrived and the rhymes somewhat forced, but it is of its time and has a dramatic energy derived from realistic interactions between the characters. Frideswide is no cypher and not primarily symbolic.

We leap a century before the arrival of Jackie Holderness's very different adaptation in her children's book, *The Princess Who Hid In A Tree*.<sup>60</sup> The period between Hayllar's 1904 version and Holderness's 2019 book was one of marked reduction in the importance of

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<sup>57</sup> Hayllar, p. 13.

<sup>58</sup> Frideswide's healing of Algar involves a long and direct exchange which contrasts with the medieval Lives where they never, in fact, meet. Hayllar, pp. 14–15.

<sup>59</sup> Hayllar, pp. 26–34. This extended elegiac epilogue perhaps provides a reflection on her afterlife which, in a literary sense, sets the scene for the rise of her medieval cult.

<sup>60</sup> The style of this book reflects the adaptation of many bible stories and other saints' legends into forms suitable for children. It is a simplification, not a 'dumbing-down' of the story.



faith and the Church.<sup>61</sup> Frideswide was still invoked, for example, through the appropriations discussed below, but no new versions of Frideswide's Life appeared, other than the publication of John Blair's translation of the *vitae* in 1987.

Holderness is writing for a very different audience. Her Frideswide is a devout princess, invoking the earlier *vitae*, rather than as a contemporary 'posh-girl-next-door'.<sup>62</sup> Holderness' version of the legend is an action story – Frideswide is no passive cypher: she is a tomboy who climbs trees and rows boats. She is completely human. She gets tired and frightened but is also brave and resourceful in a way that is utterly relatable to modern children. Holderness includes small, convincing practical details: Frideswide's hands get sore from rowing, and the village people help build the oratory, a practical aspect that no other versions address. They are the kind of details that children are likely to seek when hearing or reading a story.

### *Dramatic Tension*

With the broadening of the cast of active characters in some of these modern versions, particularly Hayllar's and Holderness' versions, the dramatic tension shifts. Frideswide and her companions engage directly with a variety of individuals. Both authors also refashion the interaction between Frideswide and Algar to create face-to-face encounters that are not recounted in the medieval versions. This has the effect of enhancing the dramatic tension between these two characters.

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<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Grace Davies, *Religion in Britain: a Persistent Paradox* (Chichester: Wiley, 2015) which charts the changing priorities, diversities and affiliations of religion in Britain in the twentieth century.

<sup>62</sup> Holderness, pp. 3, 7–8. Garner (p. 605) attributes the 're-royalisation' of Frideswide to an intention to tap into young girls' attraction to princess fairy tales, and the plethora of princess films created by Disney.

In Hayllar's version, Algar appears in Abingdon and is healed in a face-to-face encounter by Frideswide's prayers, before she retires to Binsey.<sup>63</sup> This encounter does not appear elsewhere: in other, earlier extant versions, where Frideswide heals Algar, it is done remotely. The introduction of an in-person healing of Algar supports my view that Hayllar's version may have been created at least in part, for performance. A scene where the opposing protagonists actually met would have provided more scope for dramatization than one in which the saint remotely heals her enemy. In the latter part of Hayllar's text, once Algar is healed, the dramatic tension focuses on Frideswide's other miracles and her own deathbed scene. Hayllar's version of Frideswide's death is dramatic and prolonged, supplemented by various intercessory prayers, which invokes early Christian martyrologies and something of Goldie's hyperbole.

Holderness handles dramatic tension in a balanced way, weighing risk and adventure against the possibility of confusing children or making the narrative implausible. The text is clearly driven by the very different needs of her audience. Algar's threat to 'attack Oxford and kidnap her by force' causes concern to Frideswide but also her parents.<sup>64</sup> Although Frideswide and her two friends decide to hide in the forest, there is a hint of security offered by the presence in the background of her parents. Algar makes repeated attempts to capture Frideswide: first his threat to sack the town, then his pursuit of her into the woods, and again pursuing her back to Oxford. Frideswide finally heals Algar of his blindness relatively late in the narrative and his redemption forms the culmination of Holderness' version of the story. Holderness follows Hayllar's lead and has this healing miracle conducted in person.

Holderness refashions the legend into a story of perseverance and sustained dramatic tension focusing on the two characters. This simplified version, without reference to

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<sup>63</sup> Hayllar, pp. 13–14.

<sup>64</sup> Holderness, p. 6. In the medieval versions Frideswide's parents are both dead by this point.

possession by the devil or aid from angels normalises the traditional legend without turning it into fantasy literature or undermining Frideswide's holiness.

*Reinterpretation: Frideswide's Flight*

All the modern versions include the story of Frideswide's flight into woods, but the confusion over the location of the wood to which she fled that concerned Prior Robert continues into the modern era. This more recent re- or mis-interpretation is revealing in terms of intertextuality between modern versions and their sources.

A 1916 analysis of this incident by Rev. Rodwell claims that there was no locational confusion between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries. Bampton was accepted as the location of the first part of Frideswide's exile from Oxford, as per Life B.<sup>65</sup> However, the publication of the Bollandist's *Acta Sanctorum*, written from 1738 onwards, gave rise to an alternative reading of this incident. An annotation to the *Acta Sanctorum*'s reference to *Bentona* interprets the text to mean that, in fact, Frideswide arrived at Abingdon. Subsequent writers, including Baring-Gould and Father Goldie followed suit, embedding this alternative reading into subsequent refashionings. Goldie even locates the healing of the blind girl in Abingdon rather than Bampton.<sup>66</sup>

Goldie also inserts an account of Frideswide fleeing to France and establishing the cult of St Frewisse there. This does not appear at all in the Latin or Middle English Lives, but Baring-Gould also refers to St Frewisse as an alter-ego of Frideswide and of a cult at Bomy to where 'according to Flemish legend' Frideswide fled from Algar. Goldie seems to have

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<sup>65</sup> Rodwell (p. 86) notes the various references to Bampton in Lives A and B and the SEL versions (as Bentona, Bentonia, Bentone) and that the miracle of the healing of the blind girl is essentially the only other reference to Bampton in the legends.

<sup>66</sup> *Acta Sanctorum* <<https://archive.org/details/actasanctorum56unse/page/n563/mode/2up>> [accessed 25 October 2022] pp. 533–549 at p. 540. Goldie, (pp. 20, 22–23) also identifies Binsey as Thornbury and Seacourt as Suckworth. Baring-Gould refers to both Binsey and Thornbury (p. 486) and calls the Thames by its old, upper reaches name, the Isis.

inserted this section in implied parentheses, immediately reverting back to the narrative at the point when Frideswide determines to return to Oxford. Although there is no evidence for Frideswide herself going to France, there is evidence for a cult of St Frewisse or Frevisse near Bomy.<sup>67</sup> The fact that Bomy first appears in early modern versions suggests that there is an amalgamation of legends operating here, just as there was likely to have been involved in the writing of the Latin *vitae*.<sup>68</sup>

Hayllar adopts the *Acta* version of events rather than the *vitae*, identifying Abingdon as the location of Frideswide's initial flight. Holderness has Frideswide and her two companions rowing themselves upstream, hiding in a barn and then up a tree before taking refuge with a family.<sup>69</sup> She also diplomatically and mysteriously says that they landed 'at Binsey, or at Frilsham'.<sup>70</sup> This enables Frilsham's claim to a part in the legend to stand.

While Prior Robert was overtly concerned with the correction of earlier inconsistencies and errors regarding the location of Frideswide's landing, these modern versions perpetuate a mis- or re-interpretation on this point. Rodwell comments that reference to Abingdon first appeared in the *Acta Sanctorum*.<sup>71</sup> That error or re-interpretation is carried forward in succeeding versions of her legend, suggesting that the *Acta* version, rather than the earlier Latin *vitae*, became the new core text for eighteenth-century versions including those of Baring-Gould, Goldie and Hayllar.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Goldie, pp. 25–26. Baring-Gould, p. 487.

<sup>68</sup> Blair (1987) discusses this at Appendix D (pp. 119–127). It is not impossible that Frideswide could have gone to France – many religious men and women of the time did so. St Boniface, for example, undertook missionary journeys to Germany in the eighth century and there are records of other women religious travelling overseas for pilgrimage and to join religious houses there.

<sup>69</sup> Holderness, pp. 7–14. She also has Frideswide work in disguise as a swineherd, which embellishes the SEL versions in which she takes refuge in a swineherd's hut, where the pigs did not waken and disclose her presence.

<sup>70</sup> Holderness, p. 14.

<sup>71</sup> Rodwell (pp. 85–86) blames the error on the fact that the *Acta* was written by foreigners in a curious echo of Prior Robert's concerns over Life A.

<sup>72</sup> In his introduction, Goldie considers that the Bollandist's version is exhaustive and has interpreted it in a similar way to Baring-Gould. Goldie is as complementary about Capgrave's poor copying of

Baring-Gould lists his authority as the version in Capgrave's collection, but he also includes Abingdon as the destination of the flight. His reference to the Bollandists' observation in the *Acta* regarding the lack of evidence for Frideswide at Bomy suggests that this is one of his principle sources. Goldie states that his version of the legend is based on Life B, but even if this is the case, he has also included Abingdon as the location of the flight, which first appears in the *Acta*.

#### *Intertextuality: Miracles*

Baring-Gould's condensed version devotes much less space to recounting the miracles – apart from the angel propelling the boat and the blinding of Algar, he only includes Frideswide's healing of the leper and that in a very matter-of-fact tone. He omits details of her death but relates that her monastery became a college, and describes the reburial of her bones with those of Catherine Martyr as 'brutal disrespect for the sacred relics'.<sup>73</sup> This reflects the longer period of the saint's afterlife he was able to draw upon in writing his account.

Goldie however, with no restrictions on space, gives an extended and fulsome account of all the lifetime and some of the posthumous miracles associated with her shrine, to promote the on-going intercessory power of the saint. He also recounts the destruction of the shrine, later re-interment of her relics, and petitions made for formal recognition of her cult (interrupted by the Reformation). Given the dedication to John Henry Newman, the Catholic language and overwhelmingly pious and hagiographic nature of the text, this is not surprising. Hayllar, by contrast, omits some of the healing miracles, but makes much of the leper story.

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Tynemouth as Prior Robert was about the quality and reliability of Life A, revealing their respective concerns with appearing to present the 'truth'. Goldie, p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Baring-Gould, p. 486.

Holderness emphasises the miracle of the well and its healing powers – unavoidably given its association with the ‘treacle well’ in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.<sup>74</sup> While Goldie’s Frideswide leaves Algar to his blind fate, Holderness and Hayllar both have Frideswide forgive Algar and heal his blindness following his repentance, which is likely to be more appealing to their contemporary audiences and also offers reclaims some of Frideswide’s own inherent power. Holderness normalises most of the other miracles that appear in Life B – people brought the blind, lame and sick to her ‘to be blessed by Frideswide’s prayers’ which suggests rather than invokes the concept of miraculous healing.<sup>75</sup>

Holderness’ approach creates a narrative for children that foregrounds the persistence and resourcefulness of a relatable Frideswide, retaining certain elements of wonder rather than potentially implausible miracles. She omits some of the more fantastical and theologically complicated aspects of the traditional story, and simplifies it to render it appealing and comprehensible to children.

It is not until John Blair’s 1987 translation and analysis of the original three Latin *vitae* discussed above that a new version of Life B approximating to a ‘standard’ version in modern English is generated. This version underpins the semi-dramatized version used by Christ Church Cathedral to celebrate Frideswidetide.<sup>76</sup> These same three modern translations of the *vitae* by Blair, along with the SEL versions in their original Middle English, informed the writing of *Embertide*.

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<sup>74</sup> Lewis Carroll (real name Charles Dodgson) appropriates the well at Binsey, with its association with healing, as the ‘Treacle Well’ in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (London: Macmillan, 1865). ‘Treacle’ is in fact derived from the Greek word ‘thēriakē’ meaning an ‘antidote to a poisonous bite’, so the name alludes to the perceived healing properties of the well.

<sup>75</sup> Holderness, p. 18.

<sup>76</sup> The celebrations include a pilgrimage from the Cathedral to the well at Binsey, and a telling of the legend in the Cathedral. There is also a Hymn to St Frideswide, and other music and artistic renditions of elements of her legend at Christ Church and at St Frideswide’s in Osney, but these are outside the scope of this thesis.

#### PART 4: SUMMARY OF ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES

Of the modern versions, Baring-Gould and Goldie conform to hagiographic conventions while making the saint accessible to modern audiences, as did the medieval authors. Hayllar's work is a departure from hagiographic conventions, and a step towards contemporary refashionings that are beyond the scope of such conventions. Modern adaptations of saints' Lives seeking a mainstream literary audience, such as Holderness' version, not only have to render a historical text comprehensible in modern English, idiom and context, but must also address the fact that their audiences are no longer likely to be familiar with the originals, with hagiography, with saints and their afterlives, or even the Christian God. The modern reception of saints' lives therefore is mediated through expectations that are different to those prevailing at the time of writing of the *vitae* or the SEL. Save where it is specifically produced for a Catholic readership – for example Goldie – or for the purposes of raising the profile of the saint in a church or in a tourist context, a modern refashioning of a saint's Life is as or more likely to be judged as a piece of narrative prose, verse or drama than as a representation of a saint's life in a hagiographic context.

All of the versions of the Lives share the same basic sequence of events as the *Gesta Life*, but each enhances, amplifies and embellishes in different ways and for a variety of purposes. The Latin *vitae* add elements required to establish the holiness of the subject saint, and therefore lend authenticity to her cult. The South English Legendary author (or authors), in response to a growing lay audience of individuals, have given the narrative a noticeably different tone beyond that due to its transposition into verse. They also include further embellishments in order to render the narrative more suited to the vernacular and its new audience. In summary, the Latin-SEL transition displays the following main features:

- Details are incorporated: Frideswide's parents and other characters are named and places identified;
- There is more of a backstory: Frideswide is presented as of noble rather than royal birth, her upbringing is more natural and realistic, rather than the excessive piety of the Latin versions;
- Frideswide is afforded a much greater degree of agency: in the Latin versions she is an empty vessel through whom God works. The Middle English versions afford her the power to make her own decisions informed by her own understanding of her relationship to God;
- Characterisation is more fully developed: rather than the individuals in the narratives simply being oppositional, their interactions are more nuanced. Something of Frideswide's inner life is revealed, including moments of decision, (mild) hesitation and self-doubt;
- Narratorial commentary is expanded, providing a means of amplifying, explaining or even some comic relief in the text.

The modern versions show the following further distinctions:

- Frances Hayllar's version transposes a prose narrative into one with characteristics of a dramatized version, including choruses that reflect, in some ways, the overbearing narrator in the medieval versions as well as classical scholarship;
- Hayllar's version also is the first to inhabit the saint, and write her in the first person;
- Miracles are retained; in full by versions published by and for the Catholic Church, and selectively by Holderness;



- Holderness familiarises and normalises (in accordance with twenty-first-century literary expectations) Frideswide and her world, but also re-elevates her to royal status, reflecting the influence of Disney’s popular refashioning of fairy tales.

The medieval strategies were employed in order to transform a formal Latin version of an impossibly pious woman whom a nun might aspire to emulate, into someone to whom ordinary lay women might relate as a companion, guide and support in daily life. The omission of episodes during the process of translation from Latin to the vernacular is common, and indicative of the intention to edit the text to focus on its primary objectives – exemplars of holy living – rather than the production of a faithful translation of an older extant source.<sup>77</sup>

There are additions as well as omissions in both medieval and modern rewritings. The medieval use of the vernacular and the narratorial commentary make the text more accessible. The inclusion of backstory, agency and characterisation make it both readable and appealing. Hagiography now has some entertainment value – indeed, saints’ Lives were one of the most popular genres in medieval Europe. Despite these creative adaptations, they all remain faithful to the expectations, purposes and conventions of hagiography until the advent of modern versions demonstrating a significant step away from hagiographic conventions. Hayllar’s approach in writing in the first person and Holderness’s revisioning for children are contemporary modern and refreshing approaches, and are an embellishment and extension of the earlier medieval adaptive strategies.

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<sup>77</sup> E. Gordon Whatley, ‘Lost in Translation: omission of episodes in some Old English prose saints’ lives’, *Anglo Saxon England*, 26 (1997), 187–208 at p. 208. He examines the omission of episodes in Old English prose versions of some saints’ legends, as compared with Old English verse versions. He concludes that this arises from editing out some controversial elements, such as questionable propriety in clerical conduct. Aelfric, in his efforts to provide a corpus of saints’ lives in the vernacular paid particular attention in his reshaping of Latin sources to provide incontrovertibly uplifting versions in the vernacular. Whatley suggests that he was merely developing and enhancing an established English tradition.

## PART 5: APPROPRIATIONS OF FRIDESWIDE'S *LIVES*

St Frideswide can be found in modern Oxford and the surrounding countryside in a number of guises. She appears in stained glass and medieval wall paintings, such as at the church in Shorthampton where she is depicted teaching a child to read; on the Diocesan Arms; and carved into the headstone of the gate of the old Gloucester Green Grammar School. St Nicholas' Orthodox Church in Old Marston stands on lands once belonging to her priory and the congregation there makes pilgrimage to St Frideswide's at Frilsham.<sup>78</sup> There is a choir and a primary school in Oxford named after her, and recently, the Victorian church in Botley that is dedicated to her has established a Community of St Frideswide comprising a group of young people living together to lead lives of prayer and service in the community. She also appears in unexpected places – Frideswide's Square is the name of the roundabout near the station in Oxford. Perhaps the most notable visible appropriation of her was the use of her image on the Oxford Suffrage Banner in 1908, that capitalizes on her status as patron of Oxford, as well as on an image of her as an independent and capable woman who had a position of authority in the Anglo-Saxon world.<sup>79</sup>

However, these are tangible appropriative representations of Frideswide, rather than textual appropriations. The appropriations I am concerned with here are written texts that incorporate some aspect of her legend, harnessed to some other end, and which do not constitute an adaptation of her Life. Such appropriations do not retell her Life in full, but select an event or a theme from it. The most obvious textual appropriation is of an individual

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<sup>78</sup> This adds to the confusions and possibilities surrounding the 'Bampton-Binsey' controversy arising from the alternative Latin versions of her life.

<sup>79</sup> It is possible that there is a connection with Hayllar's work, if only coincidental.

event from her legend used to illustrate the theme of a homily or sermon or, more recently, in popular church articles.<sup>80</sup>

There are other literary appropriations. Frideswide's name and her association with Oxford were adopted by Chaucer in the *Miller's Tale*, set in Oxford, in which the Miller invokes her aid for Master Nicholas who has apparently fallen into lunacy.<sup>81</sup> Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* were written between 1387 and 1400, at the time when Frideswide's cult was flourishing so it would have been natural for Frideswide to be invoked in the context of a tale set in Oxford. The Cathedral and St Frideswide are central to Elizabeth Gouge's *Towers in the Mist* set in Oxford during the reign of Elizabeth I.<sup>82</sup> It was at this time that Frideswide's bones were famously re-interred with those of Catherine Martyr. This would have been a notable event, so Frideswide would have been known in Oxford, even if her cult was no more. In both of these cases, it was Frideswide's popularity at the time in which the works were respectively set that would have made it natural, or even essential, for her to be included.

By contrast, later appropriations of her name and Life set in the twentieth century seem to have relied on her relative obscurity, allowing her story or the places associated with it to be more profoundly manipulated – for example, she features as part of the narrative context in an episode of the TV crime series *Midsomer Murders*, but her priory is located in an unspecified rural location, not in Oxford as in the Lives, and she provides only incidental

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<sup>80</sup> Henry George Liddell, *Saint Frideswide: Two Sermons* ([n. pub.], 1889). The first (1880) takes its theme from her name translated as 'bond of peace'; the second (1889) focuses on the remembrance of famous people and reflects on the desecrations of her shrine. Rev. Martin Henig's sermon on St Frideswide's Day 2011 uses her story to explore the counter-cultural nature of vocation, and 'islands of God' (personal copy from the author). Sarah Foot 'Inspired by these women', *Church Times* 15 December 2017, <<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2017/15-december/features/features/inspired-by-these-women>> [accessed 22 July 2019], uses Frideswide as a model of devotion and leadership in connection with the establishment of the new Mission community of St Frideswide in Oxford.

<sup>81</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Miller's Tale', in *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. by Nevill Coghill (London: Folio Society, 1956), pp. 119–120.

<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth Gouge, *Towers in the Mist* (London: Gerald Duckworth Ltd, 1938).

background.<sup>83</sup> The popular TV series *Call the Midwife* appropriates more accurately an episode long after the Lives. *Call the Midwife* is about a community of nuns and midwives serving Poplar in the post-war years written by a midwife who worked there. It is actually based on the St Frideswide's mission in London's East End between 1892 and 1988, supported by Christ Church, Oxford.<sup>84</sup>

For more universally known historical figures, such as Thomas Cromwell, historical accuracy would require an adaptation of their life into fictionalised form, or the adaptation of any surrounding narrative in which the historical figure appears, to reflect the known facts of the historical figure's life. The need to base the fictional narrative on the wealth of available facts is an important consideration for the adaptor or appropriator, much more so than in the case of more obscure figures such as Frideswide.<sup>85</sup>

*Embertide*, as we shall see, hovers on the boundary between adaptation and appropriation and is itself a quest for the many different versions of Frideswide represented in the adaptations and appropriations outlined above.

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<sup>83</sup> 'The Glitch', *Midsomer Murders: Complete Series 12* (ep 4) (Acorn Media, 2009) [on DVD].

<sup>84</sup> Ruby Flanagan, 'The Real Poplar Stories behind BBC's *Call the Midwife*.

<<https://poplarlondon.co.uk/call-the-midwife-real-stories/>> [accessed 29 December 2022]. There is a wooden door depicting Frideswide in a boat on the river, carved by Alice Liddell, the Alice of Wonderland fame, that originated from the mission house in Poplar. It is now kept in St Frideswide's Church, Botley.

<sup>85</sup> The late Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), a fictionalised biography of Thomas Cromwell, was based on and generally considered to be true to extensive and well documented historical records.

## CHAPTER 3 PROCESS AND PRODUCT: ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN *EMBERTIDE*

*Embertide* represents a significant step away from hagiographic conventions, but it is informed by them, and it connects with and alludes to its medieval and modern precursors. The following discussion begins with an overview outlining the evolution of *Embertide* and its structure, sources and intentionality. This is followed by an examination of: characterisation; dramatic tension; Frideswide's flight; and miracles.

As we shall see, the structure applied in Chapter 2 has been slightly modified and with different emphases. Aspects such as characterisation and dramatic tension do still apply but have a different significance because *Embertide* is no longer retelling a Life-story. Part 3 discusses the extent to which *Embertide* is hagiography, and is an adaptation of the source texts and Part 4 examines the refashioning of *Embertide* for liturgy and for performance.

### PART 1: ANALYSIS OF *EMBERTIDE*

*Embertide* opens with a memorandum in the voice of Prior Robert that ironises how he came to write his version, Life B, and why. This immediately draws attention to the fact that Life B and its sources are constructs mediated by his intentions, and that he has been deliberately selective in his use of sources. As such, this disabuses the reader of any idea that this is a straight-forward retelling of the legend, or that it claims to be authoritative or, indeed, certain.

The remainder of the text is in two voices, both in the first person – the saint, and an inquisitor who is looking for the saint, and trying to make sense of the alternative readings. The text explores the gaps and contradictions between the different versions of the written texts, the landscape around Oxford associated with the saint, her presence and appropriations in modern Oxford, and ultimately, what the point of a saint is. Frideswide, as her imagined

posthumous self, is also negotiating her place in a world which no longer has the church at its heart, where there are many religions and none, and where scientific and technological enlightenment privilege rationality over faith. The voices are not in direct dialogue, but resonate between parallel trains of thought.

### *Evolution of Embertide*

The first creative attempt comprised a series of dramatic monologues in the voice of Frideswide, reflecting back on her story. While this was a useful means of ‘becoming’ Frideswide in the sense of imaginatively inhabiting her, it became somewhat one-dimensional and self-absorbed. It lacked drama and complexity. It needed a counterpoint or sounding board, which first appeared in the form of the devil.

In medieval times, the devil and his temptations were as real and immanent as the saints, and a popular motif in hagiographies. Frideswide’s encounters with the devil in her Lives inspired the introduction of a second, counter-voice, in the person of the devil, called the ‘Screwe’ who intervened with a somewhat satirical commentary on Frideswide’s meditations.<sup>1</sup> While this enhanced both entertainment value and dramatic tension, it felt too obvious, and too close to the extant Lives to challenge their purported truths.

The monologues with the Screwe’s interventions were refashioned into an audio drama. This foregrounded the miracles associated with Frideswide, an element which had become a stumbling block in the monologues. It was hard to convincingly express the saint’s experience of performing miracles. I struggled to articulate a concept which was central to the saint’s life and Lives without making it appear as pure magical realism, which imported a

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Screwe’ is a medieval name for the devil or other evil spirit, and is the root of the phrase ‘to be screwed’ – to be subjected to pressure and coercion, including the physical use of thumbscrews as a torture instrument. The name was used by C. S. Lewis in his *Screwtape Letters* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942).

stronger sense of fictive make-believe than I intended. It was this struggle to articulate something as elusive and controversial as faith and miracles that made the idea of choosing a saint as a subject so alluring. My personal reluctance concerning the miracles side-lined a key element of Frideswide's story.

The audio drama, however, tackled the miracles head-on. The setting is a courtroom in which Frideswide is defending an action for damages brought by Prince Algar for not healing him of blindness. This played into the contradictions between different versions of her Lives, and required Frideswide to tell her own story in her defence, and explain the different nature of miracles – those she wittingly performed and those which were performed by God to protect her, and which were not of her asking. As Algar was struck blind by God and not by Frideswide, his action in damages fails, and he is also judged not to have mitigated his harm by repentance. The drama developed a substantial comic element, not out of character with mystery plays, enhanced by the devil forsaking Algar and escaping into the courtroom, causing havoc and misrule.

The very different approach involved in writing the drama was fun and enabled me to overcome two key barriers to the writing of *Embertide*. The first issue was that of fidelity: the drama enabled me to play more courageously with the texts, to change the setting, invent supporting characters, develop dialogue and characterisation – in other words, to break free of hagiographic conventions. The second, and arguably more important, issue was that the drama overcame my tendency to be overly sensitive about the possibility of irreverence.

Learning about the manner in which Catholics engage with their saints in a less serious way than perceived from outside the Catholic faith lessened the spectre of irreverence.<sup>2</sup> Writing

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<sup>2</sup> For example, some saints have quite ridiculous stories: St Denis, the third-century Patron Saint of France carried on preaching after he was decapitated. He is also the patron saint of headaches. Christina the Astonishing levitated out of her own coffin during her funeral service and went on to live a most peculiar life – resting (unscathed) in bakers' ovens when she was cold. She should probably be the patron saint of eating disorders!

the life of a saint in whom people still believe today had made me very cautious about unravelling her story, portraying her in a less pious light, or casting doubt on her sanctity. Writing the drama and engaging with the tradition of medieval mystery plays gave me the courage to write what I needed to write, and out of this hard-won freedom, *Embertide* emerged. The monologues and the drama told the story of Frideswide, but *Embertide*, although it inherited some parts of the monologues and the irony and satire of the drama, is entirely different. It interrogates rather than tells the story; it embraces rather than dismisses the different versions; and it probes the certainties offered in the hagiographic accounts, rather than supporting or rehearsing, or even embellishing them.

### *Characterisation*

Both Frideswide and the Inquisitor are women and written in the first person. Frideswide in *Embertide* is an individual, not a generic representation of sainthood, but her sanctity is an important part of her identity. She is an independent, self-motivated woman with her own agency, *inwit*, feelings and intentions. Her imagined inner life is revealed, including her honest engagement with the mystery and manifestations of her faith in the past and present. She is presented as a woman of both her own time and of the contemporary world of the Inquisitor.

The Inquisitor is not a narrator as in the medieval Lives, and not direct in opposition to Frideswide. She is inquisitive rather than inquisitorial, seeking the ‘unknowable, / unattainable’ saint through her engagement with the imagined and actual realities of the saint.

<sup>3</sup> Frideswide identifies the fact that they are on the same journey but

... We are back to back.

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<sup>3</sup> *Embertide*, p. 4, ll. 6–7.



She looks to the past and I  
to the interminable forthcoming.<sup>4</sup>

This portrayal of the two characters looking back and forward is illustrated by some of the language and contexts – Frideswide is ‘fascinated by her maps’ while the Inquisitor counters by defining Frideswide’s place of belonging as her ‘*hortus conclusus*’ and invoking traditional Catholic imagery for her pilgrimage, the scallop shell and the rosary.<sup>5</sup> The use of anachronistic colloquial and vernacular vocabulary by both characters is an important means of invoking the coalescence of past and present which runs throughout the text.

There are no surviving spiritual writings, letters or confessions for Frideswide which can be quoted.<sup>6</sup> In the *vitae*, Frideswide is voiceless and devoid of character. It is the narrator who has undisputed authority over the text. In the SEL, the narrator again takes centre stage. It is this authorial control that determines how we see the subject. Using the first person voices of the saint and the Inquisitor gives them an immediacy and immanence. It also allows depth of character and inner life, albeit imagined, to emerge. This reflects modern expectations of biographical and fiction writing in which the inner world of the characters is an important facet of characterisation and the basis for motivation and response to inciting incidents.

Some of the characterisation in *Embertide* is revealed through each protagonist reflecting on the other as well as themselves. Frideswide’s opening stanzas depict herself ‘on my knees / for an eternity’ and the Inquisitor as ‘no postulant’ but

... already alight

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<sup>4</sup> *Embertide*, p. 5, ll. 21–23.

<sup>5</sup> *Embertide*, p. 9, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza and p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Such as Augustine’s confessions, Boniface’s letters and Hildegard of Bingen’s dictations.

with wayward, hungry sparks.<sup>7</sup>

Although the saint and the Inquisitor are on similar journeys of *fidelis quaerens intellectum* and both are written in the first person, for the most part, they are not in direct dialogue with each other.<sup>8</sup> Their exchange of resonance is illustrated by the mirroring, echoing and circularity that are sustained between the two voices throughout the sequence. This dialogic distance reflects the lapse of time between their respective lived lives and the different historical and theological circumstances determining their respective perspectives. It also alludes to the importance of the spiritual gulf between a saint and their hagiographer or audience. When they are in dialogue, it is in a liminal manner as if the conversation is not between two separate individuals, but within the head of one or other of them, addressing a hypothetical ‘you’.<sup>9</sup> The ongoing exchange of resonance evidences a parallel and common quest for understanding, that is finally, if only incompletely, resolved at their mutual discovery of the point at which they can meet. This meeting point occurs when the saint realises that ‘I lived, believed, loved, grieved / in the same God’, which is something that the Inquisitor ‘can take hold of’.<sup>10</sup> As such, the Inquisitor and Frideswide appear at times to be the same person, or different facets of the same person – as they are both constructs of my own imagination, to some extent they are.

Writing the saint in the first person required me to inhabit the worlds of her lived life, her cult and post-Reformation changes to her status. It also required me to reflect back on my own imagined personae of Frideswide, which not only highlighted the inconsistencies and

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<sup>7</sup> *Embertide*, p. 5, ll. 2–3 and pp. 9, 12–13.

<sup>8</sup> Meaning ‘a believer seeking understanding’. Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: the Dynamics of Christian Theology* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020), p. 1. Hart has appropriated the phrase ‘fides quaerens intellectum’ meaning ‘faith seeking understanding’ which was originally part of the title to St Anselm’s ‘Proslogion’, a book to support the faith of a believer.

<sup>9</sup> For example, in Frideswide’s head, pp. 22–24.

<sup>10</sup> *Embertide*, p. 40, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza, ll. 5–6; p. 39, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza, l. 5.

gaps between versions, but also created its own circularity and counterpointing in a kind of call-and-response typical of liturgy. The Inquisitor's own perspective challenges, considers and comments on what she discovers about Frideswide. Frideswide reaches forward into the strange and technological world of the Inquisitor, in both wonder and consternation, at drones, pixels and computers, even using the concept of DNA herself.<sup>11</sup>

Although Frideswide and the Inquisitor do not address each other directly, they both address the audience, drawing them into the engagement, providing the stabilising third leg to this conversational stool. Both are immediate to the audience, and characters with which a modern reader can empathise and engage for themselves. Their individual characters and interaction change: with the advent of the Reformation involving the destruction of the shrine, exhumation of the relics and the advent of more and reliable documentary sources, the Inquisitor gains confidence in her narrative, while Frideswide becomes less certain of herself and understands the contingency of her own significance.

### *Dramatic Tension*

There is no interventional narrator in *Embertide*, commenting on or explaining the action, or commanding the audience's attention. There is also no Prince Algar or devil to provide the kind of dramatic tension present in the medieval and modern versions. Instead, the Inquisitor provides a counterpoint that doesn't comment on the saint's doings so much as provoke, challenge and unravel them, enhancing a sense of uncertainty as the reader is faced with multiple possible truths rather than a single 'authentic' version.

The Inquisitor is to Frideswide something of what Dr Watson is to Sherlock Holmes, or Sergeant Lewis to Inspector Morse. These pairings are a plot device enabling the main character to clarify or expound on the narrative for the audience's benefit without having to

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<sup>11</sup> *Embertide*, p. 9, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza ll. 2–3; 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza, ll. 1–6; p. 35, 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza, l. 1.

resort to long expository speeches, dramatic asides or footnotes as the context dictates. The Inquisitor replaces the narrator, revealing areas of uncertainty, contradiction and confusion – for example, by the use of rhetorical questions unravelling the original texts. She directs her concerns and her questions about Frideswide primarily to the audience – ‘Can I summon her?’ – but also in the second person to an imagined Frideswide – ‘Would you have made it today?’<sup>12</sup> There is a sense of the Inquisitor at different times either bridging the gap or reinstating the distance between audience and saint.

In turn, the saint directs her own questions to the Inquisitor and audience, seeking answers from others’ perspectives:

Was the prince tripped  
by the light  
of the world?  
Tell me your version –  
I was not  
there.<sup>13</sup>

The resulting triangular engagement creates a tension between the audience and the protagonists which is key: the audience is invited – even provoked – to respond, even if only to direct the question back to the protagonists. Even where there is a quasi-dialogue it is more a case of Frideswide paraphrasing the Inquisitor, than actual conversation.<sup>14</sup> The Inquisitor, therefore, has a complex, unsettling and interventionist role rather than a conventional and simple oppositional one.

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<sup>12</sup> *Embertide*, p. 8, 3<sup>rd</sup> stanza and p. 13, l. 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Embertide*, p. 8, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza and p. 14, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza.

<sup>14</sup> *Embertide*, pp. 22–24.

Dramatic tension is also generated by the uncertainty that undermines the neat logic of Prior Robert in his own prologue that forms the basis of the opening ‘memorandum’ of *Embertide*.<sup>15</sup> Prior Robert stresses the need to construct a new Life to suit specific purposes, to adapt and embellish it to serve specific ends, and to provide an authentic ‘true’ version that supersedes precursors. However, the memorandum twists this to highlight what we see as the contrived and constructed nature of the ‘authentic’ Life B, ironically written in Prior Robert’s own voice. In paragraph 8 of the memorandum he gives specific instructions to resolve the geographical errors:

We cannot afford any such confusion... I suggest you merge the Bampton and Binsey legends into some kind of coherent whole.

This, of course, is exactly what he did, although with a less ironic gloss. The memorandum, in its form and tone implies that Life B and anything based on it are essentially unreliable, rendering all the source texts for *Embertide* potentially suspect and unstable. It is this implication of uncertainty and instability that makes *Embertide* ironic and liminal, and the saint herself so elusive.

This writing/speaking into the inconsistencies between the extant Lives and other texts renders the *Embertide* narrative unsettled and open-ended, giving the reader a text which is neither uncompromisingly didactic like the Latin, or suggestively instructive like the SEL. Instead, it invites the reader to actively engage with the source material and the text itself, drawing them to respond to the rhetorical questions that the poems do not fully or directly address. The reader, therefore, creates their own dramatic tension in their engagement with, and response to, the text. The reader may ponder, or even debate, such

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<sup>15</sup> *Embertide*, pp. 2–3.

questions, but there may be no conclusive answer, and none is specifically offered by the text. Frideswide herself tells the Inquisitor:

You may not find it in books,  
lass, or in  
a battered shrine...<sup>16</sup>

This directly subverts the edifying principles of hagiography. The language is suggestive rather than persuasive, and the ending is unresolved. The relationship between the Saint and Inquisitor extends beyond the text on the page reflecting the ultimate unattainability of the Saint as a person but, potentially, as a spiritual ancestor rather than guide, not just to the Inquisitor but to the audience as well.

At the point where *Embertide* engages with the Reformation, there is a change in energy and an exchange of roles.<sup>17</sup> Frideswide's bones were removed from the Cathedral, her feretory demolished, and the liturgy expunged of reference to saints. The Inquisitor becomes more confident, drawing on a much wider range of documentary evidence, filling in the void left by the absent saint. Throughout the rest of *Embertide*, it is the Inquisitor who is more certain of what she understands. She now stands alongside, rather than behind, the Saint.

The Inquisitor brings the Saint to life: theologically by invoking her imaginatively and through the doctrine of the communion of saints; dramatically by counterpointing and fragmenting the voice of the saint through the sustained indirect dialogue; and poetically through the quest she undertakes to find a meeting point with a saint, distant both in time and doctrine. Their meeting point is engineered through moments of contact emerging from the

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<sup>16</sup> *Embertide*, p. 7, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza, ll. 1–3.

<sup>17</sup> The turning point is at p. 32.

‘pilgrimage’ the Inquisitor undertakes into the written lives, into the physical localities of connection, and finally through their lowest spiritual common denominator – that Frideswide is the Inquisitor’s spiritual ancestor, that they ‘both live, love, grieve, believe... in the same God’. The Inquisitor can accept the saint at this level. It is a proposition subversively put to the reader or audience who may have no faith, or may share in the Inquisitor’s original standpoint – ‘what can I offer her/(or she, me)...?’<sup>18</sup>

*Intertextuality: Frideswide’s flight*

There are numerous specific references to localities with which Frideswide was associated during her life and Lives, including Oxford, where she is ‘immortalised by a roundabout’ and ‘set in stone’ in the Cathedral, and at Binsey – ‘Was it here that I had my oratory?’ – and even Frilsham:

there is a church and a well  
at Frilsham  
which also claim my name.<sup>19</sup>

However the location of the forest remains unidentified in *Embertide*. Apart from the obvious omission of any specific place name, the sense of mystery is enhanced by the allusions in these stanzas. Frideswide is fully aware of divine assistance: ‘And how did I know it was an angel.... What is an angel if not light?’<sup>20</sup> Her choice of direction between the ‘elven highway paved with promise’ and the ‘deer-herd’s slots in soft earth’ represent a

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<sup>18</sup> *Embertide*, p. 8, 3<sup>rd</sup> stanza, ll. 4–5.

<sup>19</sup> *Embertide*, p. 21, 11; p. 19, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza; p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> *Embertide*, p. 14, 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza.

choice between what is false and unfounded, and what is certain and of God.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most powerful mystical motif is Frideswide's encounter with the Green Man:

There was a man,  
oak-hewn, his face alive  
with leaves.  
He showed me a cleft in his spear-struck  
side. *Come to me*, he said.  
*You are weary*.  
I put my hand  
In his wound and climbed inside.  
A veil of ivy  
unfurled, withholding me  
from the world.<sup>22</sup>

The Green Man's own enigma is conflated with that of Frideswide's flight in her Lives, and both further coalesce with the mystery of faith and what it means to be 'hidden in Christ'.<sup>23</sup> These layered allusions and uncertainties lend a sense of mystery as well as sanctuary to this scene.

The scenes addressing Frideswide's flight, therefore are given a profoundly liminal and elusive aura that not only acknowledges the actual uncertainty of these locations, but

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<sup>21</sup> *Embertide*, p. 16, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza. The elven highway is a folkloric motif of a path full of promise but which ends in disillusionment and disappointment. The deer herd refers to St Patrick who escaped captivity by turning into a deer and following the herd to safety.

<sup>22</sup> *Embertide*, p. 16, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza ll. 4–14.

<sup>23</sup> Being 'Hidden in Christ' (Colossians 3:3) is a theological concept that through faith, a believer dies to their old self and their new life is one embraced within the living God. Here the concept is conflated with the idea of being both physically and spiritually hidden and protected at a point of personal transformation.



enhances the theological mysteries of Frideswide's experience in the 'desert of the forest', her encounter with the living Christ and sense of apartness from the real world.<sup>24</sup> This would have been an important time of transition in her lived life, as it was after this that she began her healing ministry.

### *New Perspectives on Old Miracles*

Like its precursors, *Embertide* refers to the lifetime miracles of Frideswide, but approaches them from my own contemporary perspective, which is informed by both science and faith. This adds a further layer of intertextuality and cross referencing between disciplines. Although Frideswide is certain about the identity of the angel in the boat, she introduces the healing miracles tentatively, as potential rather than definite factual events. Some of the healing miracles are offered an alternative, scientific-based explanation by the Inquisitor – 'Water Crowsfoot / Is that not miracle enough?'<sup>25</sup> As in this example, the juxtaposition of scientific and faith perspectives creates rare points of direct dialogue between them, exchanging divine and scientific interpretations and past and present understandings of what might be miraculous, casting the intertextual net beyond the spiritual sphere of the medieval Lives.

Frideswide's own certainty about the nature of miracles is undermined by the demands of historical accuracy and truth by which her legend is measured in the modern secular and scientific world. This uncertainty arises from this ongoing evolution of perspectives on miracles. What defines a miracle remains unchanged, but what is explicable as a miracle changes through time. As discussed in chapter 2, some miracles can be rationalised by developments in scientific understanding since the medieval era. This,

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<sup>24</sup> *Embertide*, p. 16, 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza.

<sup>25</sup> *Embertide*, p. 24, 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza.

arguably, narrows the scope of those miracles that are, today, only explicable as interventions by God. However, in the clipped exchange in the stanza analysing the healing of the blind girl at Bampton a natural cure is proposed, that emphasises the point that even scientifically explicable happenings can still be regarded as miraculous.

*Embertide* therefore questions rather than simply relates or assumes miracles. It is part of the journey of understanding undertaken by the Inquisitor and, to some extent, by Frideswide herself. Challenging the basis of her perceived intercessory power offers a perspective of Frideswide as no more than a historical figure who happened to have a notable faith. It distances her from the community of saints, undermines her cult, and even disowns the power of God. This interrogative aperture reflects modern secular society. It goes to the heart of Frideswide's own identity and her perception of her own holiness. It prompts her to reassess her own legend and its significance today. Finding that she has no empirical answer, she turns the question, normalising the idea of miracles by analogy to modern technology which, from our perspective, is based on ideas and processes that are entirely rational but from hers is still miraculous:

All I can say  
about miracles is that they are...  
...Here there are just buses  
and cars.  
They, too,  
are miraculous.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Embertide*, p. 23, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza, ll. 8–14.

The Inquisitor cannot answer her own challenge, even on a hypothetical level: ‘They are uncanny as God.’<sup>27</sup> This avoids rather than denies the miracles, but stops short of the unquestioned evidence of divine favour that medieval saints’ Lives tend to demonstrate. *Embertide* exhibits the humility of the saint and the cautious questing of the Inquisitor, as well as some confusion for them both. Neither claims divine favour or submits to solely God’s agency, but both accept the possibility of it.

The narrative is not resolved on these points, but is open to the possibility of a coming to terms with matters that cannot be comprehended by reason. *Embertide* strips back the embellishments added to the Latin *vitae* and the later refashionings based on them. It raises the question of what a saint is without miracles – the Inquisitor asks of the Saint ‘Would you have made it today?’<sup>28</sup> It takes us back to the *Gesta Life* and the core of Frideswide’s legend – the existence of a devout woman of Oxford who became a prioress. These are the only certainties. These unembroidered facts create the meeting point between the Inquisitor and the saint. Their common ground is that they are both women of faith in Oxford. Everything else must be negotiated as an act of faith.

*Intertextuality: the referential scope of Embertide.*

The discussion of hagiographic intertextuality in the previous chapter focused on the connections between the Lives, scripture and other hagiographies. There would have been many other sources, such as other texts, eye-witness accounts and oral testimonies, now lost, so we cannot explore them in detail for Frideswide. However, *Embertide* draws its textual references much more widely. The extant medieval and modern Lives and appropriations from a variety of media and sources formed the starting point. The poetry also draws on

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<sup>27</sup> *Embertide*, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> *Embertide*, p. 13.

archaeological evidence and on intangible anecdotes and folklore.<sup>29</sup> Together, these additional sources create a network of associations that draws hagiography, history, archaeology and theology together, embedding their meeting points in the physical, documentary and spiritual spheres that reference Frideswide. As a result, *Embertide* brings the genre of hagiography, and the wider genre of saints' life-writing, into dialogue with concepts of adaptation and rewriting, the latter being the means by which the former can be reimagined in the light of the network of associations. *Embertide*, therefore, is located within several spheres: hagiographic and historic; physical and textual; and real and imagined.

The process of refashioning a historic narrative from a contemporary (i.e. modern) perspective means that the author has a wealth of posthumous material, contexts and interpretations – afterlife – to draw from. I could therefore incorporate all the post-Reformation activities relating to Frideswide after her cult was abolished, as indeed, Goldie in particular also included in his hagiography.<sup>30</sup> In addition, I could include modern referents, such as the naming of Frideswide Square, a recent burial at St Margaret's, Binsey and present day pilgrimage walks on St Frideswide's Day. Her legend continues through the places associated with her that have been rejuvenated and re-appropriated, such as the well at Binsey, the roundabout in Oxford, archaeological evidence and the ecclesiastical landscape in which her cult flourished.<sup>31</sup>

However, Frideswide as a historical person is much more remote to me than to her medieval hagiographers, temporally and spiritually. It is this distance that *Embertide* attempts

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<sup>29</sup> *Embertide*, p. 25. The toad in the well would spit if it did not approve of a woman's suitor. David Nash Ford, 'St Frideswide. Folklore or Fact?', *Royal Berkshire History* (2001), <<http://www.berkshirehistory.com/legends/frideswide02.html>> [accessed 29 December 2022]. Rodwell also refers to the spitting toad (p. 89). Hilary Powell discusses the significance of folklore in hagiography alluded to here: 'Re-evaluating Folklore in Anglo-Latin Hagiography', *Folklore*, 121 (2010), 171–189.

<sup>30</sup> *Embertide*, p. 20 and from p. 31. The modern burial was one in which a child was buried in a waterlogged grave, adding to the distress of the family.

<sup>31</sup> *Embertide*, p. 19, 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza.

to navigate in order to seek and understand something of her. I have drawn on other scholars' analyses of her and other saints' Lives, from both sacred and secular points of view. In joining the dots, I have been able to create an imagined three-dimensional framework of points of reference to Frideswide's presence: a network of the kind suggested by Plate in her concept of rewriting.

This attempt to bridge the gap between Frideswide and the Inquisitor/myself is manifest in the prevailing use of anachronism. The juxtaposition of widely separated time and perspective creates an unsettled lyric text, but also embraces the idea of the transcendence of saints – their continued presence to the faithful throughout their afterlives. *Embertide* is clearly written in the twenty-first century, using modern concepts and vocabulary, just as each of the earlier extant Lives is written in the context of their own time. While *Embertide* demonstrates a general progression from more distant temporal references to more recent ones as the sequence progresses, any linearity in the representation of chronological time is disrupted by the anachronistic juxtaposition of historic and modern contemporary referencing, intertextuality and vocabulary – for example, Frideswide is 'fascinated by her maps... pixels and drones'.<sup>32</sup> She observes that

I still navigate  
by the river; she by roads: streams  
of vehicles I'm glad  
I do not have to negotiate.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Embertide*, p. 9, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza ll. 1–2.

<sup>33</sup> *Embertide*, p. 9, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza ll. 10–13.

The Inquisitor, in her search for Frideswide adopts the vocabulary and rituals of the saint's lifetime and cultic afterlife. The Inquisitor's opening poem invokes the idea of *dustceawung*, the Old English word for the contemplation of old and dusty things.<sup>34</sup> She 'measures [herself] for a candle' being a medieval reckoning of time.<sup>35</sup>

A highly anachronistic text can be disorientating to read, but *Embertide* is firmly located in space, and in specific named locations, which gives the reader or audience a sense of security while allowing all times to co-exist within each spatial context. The text of *Embertide* presents its own temporal and spatial metaphor in the recurrent allusions to the river, which occupies a fluctuating space, meandering, braiding, flooding and subsiding, but it is always there but always flowing, a constant presence by which Frideswide can negotiate the changed world:

Always, we come

back to the river. It is her province.<sup>36</sup>

To return to Foley's model, the scope of the variations that I have drawn around the core text of the *Gesta Life* has been much more widely cast than those of conventional medieval hagiographers. This is primarily due to several key facts: I did not have to prove Frideswide's holiness; I was not seeking to venerate her or promote her intercessory power; I was not trying to create a new modernised and authentic Life; I was not intending to rewrite the story of her Life. Rather, I unravelled and challenged it. This freedom from hagiographic expectations takes *Embertide* beyond the boundaries of conventional hagiography, but

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<sup>34</sup> *Embertide*, p. 4, l. 9.

<sup>35</sup> *Embertide*, p. 8, ll. 9–15.

<sup>36</sup> *Embertide*, p. 20, ll. 9–11.

without severing all connection with that tradition. The core is still the *Gesta Life*, as for all the refashionings examined here.

*Embertide* places a much greater emphasis on Frideswide as an individual, just as Holderness has done. The starting point is not the community of saints, or proof of holiness, but an adventure into the reality of Frideswide without being a quest for authenticated truth. The many and varied ways in which she appears over space and time provide a multifaceted representation of multiple versions of Frideswide that point not just spiritually upwards towards God, Christ and the Bible, but also laterally to the historic contexts in which her lived life and posthumous afterlife existed and continue to exist, locating Frideswide not just in the religious sphere of her medieval or, indeed, modern existence, but also in that of the secular world through time. It is a kind of looking into the Life from outside as well as looking out of it from inside. The intertextual references are, therefore, open-ended and multiple, just as *Embertide* presents a text open to multiple interpretations, not a closed text such as Prior Robert's Life B, intended to be definitive and beyond question.

The intertextual references in *Embertide*, therefore, are complex, layered, inconsistent and at times, contradictory. The question of her existence and the truths of her legend are not fully resolved. The saint remains elusive but the continuing, sporadic presences invoking or alluding to her give her immanence, arguably more so than in the extant hagiographies.

## PART 2: FIDELITY: WHAT IS *EMBERTIDE*?

The process of analysing the medieval and modern adaptations of Frideswide's Lives has also been an exploration of the boundaries of hagiography. As discussed above, all the medieval versions and most of the modern versions are clearly hagiographic in terms of their implied intention to present Frideswide as a subject for veneration. Hayllar's poetic version is the first

in which an author steps away from strict hagiographic conventions in her approach to refashioning the legend. Nevertheless, even Hayllar's work, and that of Holderness in a subtler way, both celebrate the saint as an exemplar of good living. The question of fidelity in terms of a version being true to its hagiographic context, has not been decisively in doubt before the analysis of *Embertide*.

Identifying where *Embertide* stands in relation to the boundaries of hagiography *sensu stricto* is connected with the identification of where it sits in relation to adaptation theory. The latter question is addressed in the final chapter, but it is useful to summarise here how *Embertide* conforms to or departs from hagiographic conventions.

While *Embertide* incorporates much of Frideswide's legend, directly or by allusion, it does not tell it in a conventional sense. It engages with the Life in an interrogative way, unravelling it, rather than presenting a neat, unequivocal and authoritative version. This creates a text that is open and partially resolved rather than closed and complete. While God does, indeed 'win' at the end, that victory is a negotiated contract between the Inquisitor and the Saint, rather than an unequivocal divine victory of faith.

I have deliberately inhabited the Saint, writing in the first person, as Hayllar did. A change in point of view is a common approach to transposing older narratives into modern literature, but hagiography in its strictest sense still requires distance between saint and supplicant or author. Writing in the first person has allowed, even required, *Embertide* to focus strongly on the imagined interior life of Frideswide as well as the Inquisitor, but is outward looking, not introverted and confessional. Conventional hagiography, even the SEL versions, gives limited expression to the saint's interior life – the narrative is directed upwards to God and out to the audience.

*Embertide* skates over elements of the narrative that would be required for a conventional hagiography such as narrative exegesis and a focus on the death scene. The



conventional linear chronological narrative is replaced by a highly anachronistic one. Miracles are dissected and examined instead of standing as unassailable symbols of God's omnipotence.

Like some other modern versions, and Goldie's version in particular, *Embertide* explores Frideswide's long afterlife including her cult, the Reformation – when she was, effectively erased – her re-interment and, of course, her presence in modern times. However, it does not rehearse the wonders of Prior Philip's *Miraculæ*. Instead it strives to place Frideswide in an ongoing and ever changing historical context.

However, *Embertide* still celebrates Frideswide. It does not deny her existence or her holiness, but seeks to give her a footing in the context of a modern, secular society dominated by scientific rationality. It brings her into focus and into contact with new, contemporary audiences, just as each extant version has done. I have played with the text in the manner of medieval hagiographers, making the legend my own, in accordance with Foley's model of oral transmission – perhaps most notably in my revisioning of Frideswide's encounter in the forest. But, above all, *Embertide* challenges rather than resolves the versions and their nonconformities, exposing the constructed nature of the 'authorised' versions. Its open-endedness implies that the journey of the saint and the Inquisitor are not yet ended, that there is more to unravel and to understand, and the possibility of more evidence being unearthed in the future. It does not resolve itself in the traditional good/God prevails manner of hagiographies, yet it comes to a new understanding of the saint as a kind of spiritual ancestor, if not as the intercessor she was in the past.

*Embertide's* whole tone is different from that of conventional hagiography. The latter tends to be direct, earnest and unambiguous. *Embertide* is ironic, metaphorical, liminal and unresolved. It opens in irony with Prior Robert 'peer-reviewing' his own document, earnestly promulgating the contrivances which will be its downfall in the eyes of modern scholarship.

Three key elemental metaphors run throughout the text: the river, embroidered threads, and fire that allude, respectively, to: time, change and constancy; the embellishment and reworking of narratives; and to spiritual, destructive and rejuvenating fire.

The need for medieval writers to present the ‘truth’ of a saint through her hagiography has been discussed above. The emphasis in *Embertide* is to offer multiple possible truths that might be reinterpreted at different points in time. It is a personal quest for understanding, and of *fidelis quaerens intellectum*. It is ‘about’ Frideswide and engages with her story but radically relativises the saint by overtly engaging with many different versions in an ironic and interrogative rather than didactic manner. Frideswide, instead of being a representative of the community of saints, becomes a kind of hypothesis to explain or investigate the question of truth and belief. *Embertide* interrogates the facts rather than presents them as truths, especially with regard to the miracles as discussed above. This highlights the duality between established facts and their varied interpretations, and the creative, even speculative, nature of the extant Lives.<sup>37</sup> It brings the genre of hagiography alongside both history and the modern world and into contact with both faith and reason. It celebrates and challenges Frideswide and, through her, the idea of sainthood in the modern world.

I always intended that the engagement with St Frideswide would be in poetry rather than in prose, but, as discussed above, I never intended *Embertide* to be a simple retelling of her legend in today’s English. It took a number of attempts, however, to find a voice or voices to express and explore my own ‘private truths’. These ‘truths’ however, were not to remain private, but intended to be shared.

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<sup>37</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 51.

### PART 3: LIFE AFTER LIFE: ADAPTING *EMBERTIDE*

*Embertide* is a living, iterative, adaptable text. It has itself been further adapted and appropriated in order to serve specific audiences: an appropriation of a theme from the text was used as the basis of a liturgy written to celebrate St Frideswide's Day; and the whole text was adapted to render it suitable for performance. These refashionings are each considered below.

One of the several themes that emerged from my research and from the writing of *Embertide* was the idea that 'without wilderness there would have been no miracles'. This theme formed the basis for a liturgy for St Frideswide's Day delivered at Regents' Park College Oxford and St Frideswide's, Botley in October 2020.<sup>38</sup>

My reading of the extant *vitae* identified the flight from Oxford upriver into the forest as a critical spiritual turning point in Frideswide's life. She leaves a place of safety and becomes completely reliant on God. It is only after this flight that the miracles for which she was known start to be performed. It is a period of maturation for Frideswide as a woman and as a woman of God. In *Embertide* both the saint and the Inquisitor independently acknowledge this.<sup>39</sup> However, it is not a connection overtly drawn by the narrators of the extant *vitae*, possibly because the source of the idea – the parallel with Christ's sojourn in the wilderness before he began his ministry – would have been universally familiar to a medieval audience. My own interpretation of the spiritual journey that the saint undertook gives this theme contemporary relevance in the context of modern liturgy. It is a theme that the congregations who took part in the liturgy could relate to and understand in the contexts of their own spiritual lives more meaningfully than the impossible piety, or lack of agency

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<sup>38</sup> Friday Evening Chapel, Regent's Park College, Oxford, 30 October 2020 and an evening service for St Frideswide's Day at St Frideswide's, Botley, 19 October 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Inquisitor at p. 30, ll. 1–2; Frideswide at p. 40, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza ll. 7–8.

which, presumably, would have made more sense to a medieval Catholic congregation. The liturgy, therefore, was not a retelling or adaptation of the Life of St Frideswide, but an appropriation of a theme extracted from her legend, which has contemporary spiritual value.

The second refashioning of *Embertide* was its adaptation as a whole for performance. The idea of performance was inspired by the traditions of modern performance poetry, dramatized Anglo-Saxon liturgy, medieval mystery plays and the oral tradition of telling the lives of saints to largely illiterate medieval congregations. I was offered the opportunity to perform *Embertide* at Christ Church Cathedral on 20 October 2021. The Cathedral has, in recent years, expanded its activities celebrating Frideswidetide, and the performance took place the day after Frideswide's Feast Day in the nave of the Cathedral.<sup>40</sup>

Adapting *Embertide* for performance was an interesting reversal of the effect of committing an orally transmitted narrative to the printed page, an adaptation which creates an 'authentic' version and which renders the variety of spoken versions 'inauthentic'. The act of readapting opens the text itself up to further nuance and alternative interpretations. The tension between poetry studied on the page and poetry that is heard is well known.

The choice of form and layout on the pages of *Embertide* enables a clear distinction to be made between the voices of saint and Inquisitor for a reader. The different poetic rhythms contribute to the character of each voice and mark changes in tone and dramatic tension of the poetry. As the performance was given in three different voices, amendments to the written text were required to remove those features (such as 'she says') rendered superfluous by those different voices.

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<sup>40</sup> Because of ongoing Covid precautions, the audience present at the event was limited, but it was live-streamed on the Cathedral's website and can now be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCzuqt-tEOQ>

The act of speaking out and listening to *Embertide* brought different elements of the imagery to the fore, and a different pace and rhythm emerged. Prior Robert's memorandum was shortened in order to keep the delivery brisk, and to emphasise the irony and satire. There was an enhanced interaction between voices through inflexion and individual expression, adding an extra dimension to the reception of the text than that experienced by the mind of a single reader. When a single reader encounters the text, they 'hear' both characters in their own voice, so the poetic form and layout on the page must work hard to distinguish the two personalities. Performance in multiple voices therefore made the text more conversational. In order to maintain the liminal not-quite-in-dialogue sense of the written text, the Inquisitor and the Saint moved around each other and stood side by side, but at a distance, not looking at each other but at the audience, engaging them directly.<sup>41</sup> This enhanced the sense of and exchange of resonance rather than direct dialogue between them.

Performance also enabled music to be incorporated. As *Embertide* is a complex and multi-layered text, it benefitted from pauses. The music chosen comprised devotional and pilgrimage songs from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.<sup>42</sup> Four musical interludes were inserted, at beginning, end and at two locations within the text, which served to break up the sound of voices for the audience, given them time to assimilate what they had heard and to herald changes in tenor in the narrative – for example, where the Inquisitor takes precedence during the stanzas concerned with the Reformation. This pacing was controlled by the performance. By contrast, a reader is at liberty to choose the pace of reading, and to pick it up, put it down, re-read or skip over sections.

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<sup>41</sup> Ironically, this echoed the COVID-19 social distancing measured in place at the time of the performance.

<sup>42</sup> The pieces chosen were: 'Edi Bethu', an anonymous thirteenth century tribute to the Virgin Mary; 'Los Set Gotxs Recomptarem', a thirteenth century pilgrimage song from the *Libre Vermell* collection; 'Nova! Nova!', a fifteenth century song from Glasgow to the Virgin Mary; and 'La Rotta', a fourteenth century Italian dance tune. The first three were adapted from Star Edwards *Medieval Music for Celtic Harp* (Missouri: Mel Bay, 2004). My thanks to Harriet Earis for providing the fourth piece.

Adaptation for the written text into a performed version therefore resulted in a greater emphasis on characterisation and dramatic tension, which were achieved not by changing the words of the text, but by the immediacy of the performers and their own dramatic interpretations of the text. The limited changes required to bring *Embertide* into a performable state and the fidelity of the adapted version to the original clearly reflect this as an adaptation. This is not so clearly the case in respect of the appropriation of *Embertide* into a liturgical context.

Stephen Mitchell drew his version of *Gilgamesh* from nine extant poetic and prose versions. He likens the process to the flight of a bat, blindly sensing the extant texts' meanings by testing their resonances in order to create his own.<sup>43</sup> But his resultant narrative remains true to the core poem, albeit with different emphases to its precursors.<sup>44</sup> *Embertide* also arose from multiple source texts, but does more than transpose and adapt these multiple versions. It subverts and challenges them. It does not seek to tell the story of the legend in the way that the precursors and the audio drama discussed above *The Saint and the Screwe* do. The adaptation of *Embertide* for performance is clearly a retelling of *Embertide* – it is an adaptation of it. The liturgy appropriates one particular theme – the connection between wilderness and miracles that is latent in the source texts, is identified and defined in *Embertide* and put to use in the liturgy. This distinction between adaptation and appropriation is fundamental to locating *Embertide* and other works in relation to conventional hagiography, as discussed further below in chapter 4.

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<sup>43</sup> Schmidt, p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*, trans. ed. by Stephen Mitchell (London: Profile Books, 2004).

## CHAPTER 4: *EMBERTIDE* IN CONTEXT AND CONCLUSIONS

As discussed above, *Embertide* is not hagiography, but the question of whether it is an adaptation or appropriation of the original sources remains to be addressed. If it is not an adaptation, what is its relationship to its hagiographic sources? *Embertide* is not the only modern verse refashioning of a saint's Life. The adaptive strategies adopted in six recently published works about other saints have been selected for comparison to explore further the interaction between conventional hagiography and modern verse adaptations of saint's Lives.

### PART 1: SOME MODERN COMPARATORS

The focus of the following analysis is not quite the same as for the analysis of medieval and modern adaptations of Frideswide's Lives in Chapter 2. Those works are all hagiographies, albeit some more disguised than others, so the analysis broadly compares like with like. The analysis of *Embertide* in chapter 3 revealed the ways in which it departed from hagiography, but also how it stepped beyond the scope of adaptation theory. The objective of this chapter is to examine the selected contemporary Lives in order to identify whether these works are adaptations of their sources, or, like *Embertide*, a form of appropriation of their source Lives.

This discussion will be framed by some of the conclusions in Chapter 3, focusing on two questions in particular: first, to what extent each work conforms to hagiographic conventions (in particular, voice; point of view; miracles; the relationship between the saint and the reader and God; whether it venerates the saint): and, second, whether it retells the story of the Life of a particular saint, or whether it engages with the extant Life or Lives in some other way. For the purposes of this thesis, whether the new text is an adaptation or an appropriation is determined by the extent to which that new text tells the story of the saint, or

whether the story of the saint is incidental to some other purpose served by the new text. If the latter, a third question arises: for what purpose is the Life being appropriated? The answers to these questions, will enable me to locate *Embertide* in relation to other contemporary poetic engagements with saints' Lives.

The primary works selected for this specific analysis are:

- *Saint Mary of Egypt, a Modern Verse Life and Interpretation* by Bonnie Thurston (2021); and
- *The Caiplie Caves* by Karen Solie (2019).<sup>1</sup>

In addition, briefer reference will be made to the following:

- *Francis: A Life in Songs* by Ann Wroe (2018);
- *Christina the Astonishing* by Jane Draycott and Lesley Saunders (1998);
- *The Red Virgin: A Poem of Simone Weil* by Stephanie Strickland (1993);
- *Judas* by Damian Walford Davies (2015); and
- *Travellers of the North* by Fiona Smith (2022).<sup>2</sup>

#### *Bonnie Thurston: Mary of Egypt*

Bonnie Thurston's *Mary of Egypt* is a modern verse version of the Life of the fifth century former prostitute, pilgrim and hermit, St Mary of Egypt, whose Life comprises a typically exemplary hagiographic narrative of redemption. St Mary of Egypt is venerated throughout the Christian church. Thurston's *Mary* has at its heart the traditional hagiographic imperative – to present the saint as a redeemed and holy sinner, with intercessory power, whose narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Bonnie B. Thurston, *Saint Mary of Egypt, a Modern Verse Life and Interpretation* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2021); Karen Solie, *The Caiplie Caves* (London: Picador, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Ann Wroe, *Francis: A Life in Songs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018); Jane Draycott and Lesley Saunders, *Christina the Astonishing* (Reading: Two Rivers Press, 1998); Stephanie Strickland, *The Red Virgin; A Poem of Simone Weil* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993); Damian Walford Davies, *Judas* (Bridgend: Seren, 2015); Fiona Smith, *Travellers of the North* (Tadmorden, Arc Publications, 2022).



is presented as true. Benedicta Ward explicitly states at the beginning of her Foreward [*sic*] to *Mary* that it is a story that ‘contains the inner truth about salvation for all’ which is, after all, the edifying objective of reading a saint’s Life.<sup>3</sup> Thurston’s own intentions are clear in an introductory poem:

Hers is a tale  
that was often told...  
I tell it again only  
for love of her...<sup>4</sup>

Thurston had a number of extant medieval Lives to draw from: the earliest prose version dates to c.600 A.D. translated into Latin in the ninth century, and then into poetry in various vernacular languages in the tenth to thirteenth centuries.<sup>5</sup>

It is, as Benedicta Ward states, a good story full of symbolic imagery – a mortal sin, conversion, redemption, an ascetic life in the desert, typical of many women saints’ conversion stories.<sup>6</sup> Mary’s story is told by a monk, Zossima [*sic*], who visits her in the desert and later buries her with the help of a lion. As for most early medieval Lives, including Frideswide’s *vitae*, symbolism is more important than the temporal dimension.<sup>7</sup> It follows a

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<sup>3</sup> Benedicta Ward’s Foreward [*sic*] to *Mary of Egypt*, p. xiii.

<sup>4</sup> *Mary*, ‘To the Reader’ p. 13, ll. 1, 2, 5, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Flodoard of Reims *On Mary the Egyptian and Zosimas*; Hildebert of Lavardin *The Life of St Mary of Egypt*; and *The Life of St Mary the Egyptian* by an anonymous Spanish poet, all in *Saint Mary of Egypt: three medieval lives in verse*, trans. ed. by Hugh Feiss and Ronald Pepin (Minnesota: Cistercian Publications, 2005). Thurston discusses the various antecedents and the different ‘spins’ on the story that each adaptor employs, but this is not the focus of the present discussion.

<sup>6</sup> Benedicta Ward, *Harlots in the Desert* (Minnesota: Cistercian Publications, 1987) for example examines five such saints, including Mary of Egypt.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Magennis, ‘Conversion in Old English Saints’ Lives’, in *Essays on Anglo-Saxon and Related Themes in Memory of Lynne Grundy*, ed. by Jane Roberts and Janet Nelson (London: Kings College London Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 2000), pp. 287–310, p. 307.

typical journey narrative and includes a ‘story within a story’, that of Zossima.<sup>8</sup> Mary’s solitary life requires Zossima as its witness, and his own story is one of redemption from pride as a result of witnessing Mary’s exemplary life, which moves him to disseminate her story.

Thurston comments that traditional versions are dominated by Zossima as narrator, framing Mary’s story, to give the impression that it is told by a reliable eyewitness.<sup>9</sup> In each of the medieval verse versions, Zossima relates Mary’s own words, so she is given her own voice albeit mediated through Zossima’s retelling. Thurston’s Mary, however addresses us directly. She tells her story herself in a confessional style in the first nine poems: ‘I gifted my parents with grief’; ‘I threw away my spindle / any lingering respectability’; ‘I sang, sinned, enjoyed, / and was enjoyed by many.’<sup>10</sup> The chapter headings chart the chronological unfolding of her life – for example, in ‘Mary is Refused Entry’ she relates the scene that led to her repentance. The progress of Mary’s narrative is absolutely clear from the headings alone. There is no elision here, and no intention to offer alternative readings of the story.

Each of the other protagonists is secondary to Mary’s story, and in service to it – Zossima is a necessary witness to her ascetic life, but his telling of it includes its effect on his own life.<sup>11</sup> Even the lion has a voice and a Scribe who commits the story to writing.<sup>12</sup> Each have a character, agency and inner life that are more fully developed than those exhibited by,

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<sup>8</sup> One could argue that Algar’s story is a ‘story-within-a-story’ in Frideswide’s Lives, with its various redemptive or non-redemptive conclusions. This is most apparent in Holderness’s version in which Algar persists throughout the short book.

<sup>9</sup> Thurston, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> *Mary*, ‘Mary’s Origins’ (p. 15), ‘Mary in Alexandria’ (p. 18), and ‘Mary crosses the Sea’ (p. 21).

<sup>11</sup> Zossima tells of his three encounters with Mary (pp. 38, 48 and 52), in the third of which he finds her dead and buries her with the lion’s help.

<sup>12</sup> The lion watches (p. 36), buries (p. 54) and has his own last word (p. 58) announcing his own symbolic significance as the Lion of Judah and the symbol of St Mark. The scribe writes more than a century after the death of Zossima, neatly ensuring continuity of transmission of the earlier oral story (p. 60).

for example, *Frideswide* in the SEL. Thurston neatly balances the symbolic power of the hagiography with modern literary expectations.

The poems read like short chapters in the voices of the various characters, each reflecting an image or incident from the Life. This echoes Hayllar's approach to *Frideswide's* Life, distinguishing different characters with their own voices, and breaking up the text into a sequence of chronologically arranged scenes. Thurston's language is more modern and restrained than Hayllar's, but the imagery and details are set in the times of Mary's lived life. She does not refer to the present day or employ anachronistic imagery or vocabulary as I have in *Embertide*. She emphasises the redemptive nature of Mary's life, and the miracles at her death – the lion assisting at her burial. Biblical quotations form epigraphs to some of the chapters – for example, 'Mary Crosses the Sea' is prefaced by lines from Psalm 107. Elsewhere, Thurston incorporates lines from the Good Friday Liturgy.<sup>13</sup> These references anchor the narrative to scripture, just as conventional hagiography is grounded in scripture. Similarly, Thurston's work references earlier extant Lives, creating the intertextual connection between her work and its precursors.

There is no sense of liminality or alternative possibility in the narrative: it is, like all good hagiography, clear, unambiguous, and symbolic. The adaptive strategies that Thurston has adopted include telling the story from multiple, first person, points of view. Mary addresses prayers to the Virgin Mary (who also responds to Mary in her own voice) and confesses to Zossima. It is still an exemplary Life. There is no doubt that this text is clearly a modern hagiographic adaptation of Mary's Life and thereby distinguishable from *Embertide* on both counts.

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<sup>13</sup> *Mary*, p. 20, p. 28.

*Karen Solie: The Caiplie Caves*

Solie's work engages with, rather than retells, the story of St Ethernan, a seventh-century local saint in Fife, Scotland, about whom little is known. In her preface, Solie refers to the alternative identities that he is conflated or confused with – in this respect, he is more elusive than Frideswide.<sup>14</sup> One version of a Life refers to a hermit called Ethernan who withdrew to the Caiplie Caves to contemplate and decide between living as a hermit and establishing a priory on the Island of May, which can be seen from his cave on the coast of Fife. This is the primary event that Solie alludes to in her own writing.

Solie writes in two voices: her own and that of Ethernan. They are distinguished on the page by layout: Ethernan's poems are right-justified, double-spaced and headed by short epigraphs in italics; the remaining poems are left-justified, in a variety of poetic forms but with capitalized titles. This distinguishes the two voices for the reader. This structural approach resembles that adopted in *Embertide*. Solie also uses short, contextualising epigraphs to the poems in Ethernan's voice as additional signposting – for example, 'Efforts are made to dissuade him from his retreat' relates to a poem set in his lifetime, but 'Evidence of his own cult in Pictland exists in the distribution of carved stones bearing his name' is a poem in which the saint speaks reflectively back to his own posthumous cult.<sup>15</sup> This employs an anachronistic device that acknowledges the saint's transcendence and continued spiritual existence.

Just as Frideswide has been given her own voice, interior life and character in *Embertide*, Solie also freely inhabits Ethernan's thoughts and concerns. He has his own agency and tests his (assumed, imagined) vision of St Luke:

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<sup>14</sup> *Caves*, p. xi. Ethernan was a local Scottish saint who became conflated with another saint from the Isle of May called Adrian. Adrian was supposedly killed by Vikings in the ninth century, which may have been confused with Ethernan's death in the seventh century on the Isle of May at the monastic centre he founded there, or he may have died at the hands of the Picts and was buried on May. Such is the effect of centuries-long oral transmission of stories.

<sup>15</sup> *Caves*, p. 13; p. 14.

...he didn't seem right, St Luke  
in the dream...  
with my own voice he bade me look...<sup>16</sup>

Solie's other voice is her own. Each of her poems are titled. The subject matter embraces the geography and history of the East Neuk, the Fife headland where the Caves are located. Solie explores themes of loss, of grief and her own experience of living there, contemplating her own challenges in parallel with the deep history of the locality of which Ethernan is a key part. She and Ethernan are not 'in conversation' in the way that Frideswide and the Inquisitor, however indirectly, are. There is no exchange of resonance as demonstrated in *Embertide*, but their voices interweave and underpin each other, sharing some of the same spaces and some of the same confusions. Both evince a sense of temporary exile: Solie in 'the rented flat' and Ethernan like his 'fellow *peregrini* in self-exile'.<sup>17</sup> There is also mental transience – Solie's 'many regrets have become a passion for my life' while Ethernan reflects that 'we believed the things we said because we said them'.<sup>18</sup> These give both characters their own voices, and through them, the sequence acquires a shared, unsettled tone.

*The Caiplie Caves* is not an interrogation of Ethernan and all he represents in the way that *Embertide* is of Frideswide. Instead, Ethernan offers an undercurrent of stability and continuity to the sequence. His voice brings Solie's voice back to the Caves from its

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<sup>16</sup> *Caves*, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> *Caves*, 'Crail Autumn' p. 8; 'Having abandoned his mission...' p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Caves*, 'A Plenitude' p. 9; 'Evidence of his cult...' p. 14

wanderings through space, such in ‘Miscalculation’, and time in ‘Whose Deaths were Recorded Officially as Casualties of the “Battle of May Island”’.<sup>19</sup>

Ethernan is not the primary focus of the poetic interaction as Frideswide is in *Embertide*. But he is a constant presence threading through the poems, grounding the poet’s voice. This delicate interaction gives a similar sense of liminality, of telescoping past and present, and of stability and continuity that the river, for example, does in *Embertide*. Neither *Embertide* nor *The Caiplie Caves* are seeking to tell the story of their Saints. In each case, characterisation of the subject saint and dramatic tension are suborned by the voice of Solie or the Inquisitor each seeking out and engaging with their respective Saints, or an idea of the Saint, to make connections between them.

*The Caiplie Caves* does not address Ethernan’s whole life, only this brief period of withdrawal. It does not include any miracles or *passio*. This may in part be the result of the paucity of extant hagiographies for Ethernan – Solie works from the equivalent of the *Gesta Life*, without the benefit (or confusion) of later historical or modern refashionings of a sparse legend. She herself comments on the paucity of supernatural elements in his life, which reflects the miracle-free version of Frideswide’s legend in the *Gesta Life*.<sup>20</sup> The poems in Ethernan’s voice reveal a mind and spirit struggling with questions, a mind that wanders in a kind of stream of consciousness as a mind in solitude is wont to do. These characteristics are what set it apart from conventional hagiography, but, like Frideswide in *Embertide*, Ethernan is clearly found in, and bound to, both the locality and its history.

There is circularity and resolution – Solie’s sequence starts with ‘we’ at ‘Sauchope Holiday Caravan Park’, then changes to ‘I’ in the cottage in ‘Craig Autumn’ and returns back to ‘we’ in ‘Craig Spring’ with the promise of more light and better weather.<sup>21</sup> Ethernan’s own

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<sup>19</sup> *Caves*, pp. 24, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Solie’s Preface at p. xi.

<sup>21</sup> *Caves*, pp. 6–8, 87

journey is poised for resolution, although we do not get to hear the answer to his question: his last words in the collection:

... the May has struggled to its feet  
it's turned its face toward me  
and is about to speak.<sup>22</sup>

The marking of time in *The Caiplie Caves* is by reference to historical events attached to the specific locality. It is the place that connects them for this brief moment in time. Solie's use of Ethernan as a kind of conceit to ground her own voice, engaging with his story but not retelling it, renders *The Caiplie Caves* an appropriation of his Life, not a refashioning of it. Solie has employed Ethernan's existence as a means to anchor the journey and reflections that her own poems articulate.

Like *Embertide*, *The Caiplie Caves* departs from conventional hagiography by focusing a moment of Ethernan's Life, not all of it. But Solie still refreshes the saint, even if by means of an appropriation rather than an adaptation of his Life, bringing him into the modern world and to new audiences.

*Jane Draycott and Lesley Saunders: Christina the Astonishing*

Jane Draycott and Lesley Saunders explore aspects of the life of Christina the Astonishing. Born in Belgium in 1150, Christina is renowned for several remarkable incidents, such as levitating above her coffin at her own funeral service.<sup>23</sup> Draycott and Saunders' sequence is arranged chronologically but does not set out to simply retell her story. Instead, it reveals and

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<sup>22</sup> *Caves*, p. 102

<sup>23</sup> *Christina*, p. 3.

emphasises particular events and themes within it. Many of the poems in Christina's own voice, such as 'The girlhood of Christina' and 'The levitation of Christina', reflect back on and react to the extant written Life from Christina's own mystical point of view. Other poems are in different first person voices: 'Gifts' is spoken by a member of her family lamenting Christina's habit of giving away the family food, while others are in unknown voices that address Christina, such as in 'What she can't take'.<sup>24</sup>

This reflection and refraction of Christina's story creates a circularity that widens to imagine her in more contemporary contexts, as if she belongs to all time. In 'Up Here', Christina coasts through history from an aerial perspective, from an archaeopteryx to the angel of Mons, while in 'Salvation as a Diving Suit', she observes the world as if through the glass of a diving helmet.<sup>25</sup> In both cases she is set apart from the world she inhabits: flying above it, which was a central theme of her Life, or sealed up in isolation.

The sequence of poems is punctuated by quotations from extant Lives of Christina.<sup>26</sup> These allow the poems to indulge in the fantastic and the mystical while giving the reader a chronological sequence and context for the poems. A reference to Caroline Walker Bynum's work underlines the poets' preoccupation with the physical body.<sup>27</sup> Corporeality is a common focus in virgin martyr hagiographies.

The variety of voices witnessing and commenting on Christina's behaviour are not all worshippers by any means; 'Gifts' displays impatience and frustration at Christina's antics. The voices are witnesses, reflecting the oral tradition on which many hagiographies are based: de Chantimpré's Life was written only forty years after her death.<sup>28</sup> The poems in the

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<sup>24</sup> *Christina*, pp. 8, 20, 12, 24.

<sup>25</sup> *Christina*, pp. 42, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas de Chantimpré's *Acta Sanctorum* (1232) cited in *Christina*, pp. 39, 45, 57 and 79; the *Calendar of Saints* cited in *Christina*, p. 3; and Butler's *Lives of the Saints* cited in *Christina*, p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> Epigraph to 'Gifts' on p. 12 comes from Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>28</sup> *Christina*, p. 2.



voices of onlookers give a sense of actual witnesses of a kind who may have given Chantimpré the material for his Life.

Christina is very much the focus of the sequence. The authors do not create a new version of her Life, but reflect back on it, and explore a particular, dominant, aspect of her Life, that of corporeality. It is not, therefore an adaptation but an appropriation in which the Life is used as a basis to explore a particular theme. Draycott and Saunders incorporate quotations from Christina's hagiography to anchor their own text, but the poems themselves do not adapt it into a new version. The core narrative is embedded in the text by the incorporated quotations, to which the poems add embellishment, commentary and new perspective. It is a new way of seeing and interpreting the Life, but the poems are not variations, but reflections of it.

*Ann Wroe: Francis, a Life in Songs*

Ann Wroe's *Francis* has a much more complex structure, with four interwoven strands.<sup>29</sup>

Wroe introduces her work as a poetic biography which distinguishes it from the many extant Lives of St Francis.<sup>30</sup> Quotations from these extant Lives combined with Francis's own words create a hagiographic narrative thread running through the book. Woven around and through these quotations are poems that evoke, and others that reflect back on the scenes offered by the hagiographic quotations. Each scene or subject is linked by a short phrase or grace-note – for example, the section entitled 'Lepers' opens with a quotation from Thomas di Celano's Life, and another from Francis' own *Testament*.<sup>31</sup> The untitled poem that follows

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<sup>29</sup> Wroe explains in her Foreward [*sic*] that the four strands and the four-part poetic rhythm of Francis' poems echo the four arms of the cross and the rhythm of troubadour songs that Francis loved.

<sup>30</sup> Wroe is well known as a biographer of people and places. Her works include *Pontius Pilate* (New York: Random House, 1999) and *A Fool and His Money* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995) which tells the story of life in the partitioned medieval town of Rodez, France.

<sup>31</sup> *Francis*, p. 7–10. Wroe cites, amongst other sources, the work of: Thomas di Celano, *The Francis Trilogy*, ed. by Regis Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short (New York: New York

is addressed to Francis in the second person, reflecting back on an encounter with lepers that changed his heart towards them. Wroe addresses Francis' initial and instinctive reaction – 'You, what are you doing here? / You hardly know' – and its subsequent transformation:

But now you kiss that rotting flesh...  
Now you press close His bandaged love  
stunned, silent, burned.<sup>32</sup>

The meditation reflecting Wroe's own time and experience that follows this poem is about a homeless person in Brighton, 'given a wide berth at the checkout queue' and yet she too realises that:

Within the beard, his delicate small lips  
Murmur a silent word – might take a kiss –<sup>33</sup>

The grace-note that connects the ideas of love for the despised in 'Lepers' to Francis' own penitence and experience in the next section of the book, 'At Sam Damiano', employs an image of an old flour sack being made 'resurrection white' on a scarecrow.<sup>34</sup>

Wroe's structure clearly links the progress of the poems to the extant Lives through the quotations and connects each section to the next by the grace-notes. The incorporated hagiography is selective and abstracted. Although it is not complete, it remains true to the core narrative. The multiple strands amplify, explore and meditate upon, rather than retell or

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City Press, 2004); and Francis of Assisi *The Complete Writings*, ed. by Z El-Bey ([no place]: Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> *Francis*, p. 8, ll. 7–8, 17, 19, 20.

<sup>33</sup> *Francis*, p. 9, ll. 1, 13–14.

<sup>34</sup> *Francis*, p. 10.

vary the existing Life. Wroe herself classes it as biography, and it falls within the wider corpus of saint's life-writing and rewriting, even if it is not strictly hagiography. It is an adaptation, encouraging contemplation by the reader of selective, consecutive events in the Life, amplified by the additional reflective elements woven closely into and out from the extant sources.

*Stephanie Strickland: The Red Virgin: A Poem of Simone Weil*

Stephanie Strickland's poetic sequence about Simone Weil (1909-1943), *The Red Virgin*, rehearses a twentieth-century life, so there are rich primary sources, including Weil's own writings and eye witness accounts, as well as modern biographical material to draw upon. Weil was a French philosopher, political activist and mystic with a deep concern for, and empathy with, the marginalised, poor and exploited. Her work became more widely known following her death by self-starvation. Weil came from a French, non practising Jewish background, but she had an experience of Christ that penetrated all her subsequent thinking and writing. She is not a saint, but clearly had a deep faith, although one that she did not often articulate.<sup>35</sup>

Strickland uses her primary sources to create a sequence that is clearly biographical, almost hagiographical. There are no miracles, but there is a sense of a mystical, if unspoken, faith. Her death borders on martyrdom and through it, she shares an ascetic disposition common to many women saints.

There is a sense that *The Red Virgin* seeks to justify and venerate Weil's controversial behaviour. The sequence comprises poems in a variety of forms, incorporating Weil's own

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<sup>35</sup> Rowan Williams includes her in his *Luminaries: Twenty Lives that Illuminate the Christian Way* (London: SPCK, 2019). He notes the doctrinal controversies evident in her writing but he commends her never losing sight of the moment of her personal encounter with Christ. pp. 124–130.

words, extracted from journals and letters, in italics. However, these words are sometimes lost in the embellishments added to create a part-found poem:

She says *she knows*  
it is not, but she shudders, believing  
she is the barren, *the parable*  
fig tree...<sup>36</sup>

Stickland's incorporation of Weil's own writings and eye-witness accounts amounts to a kind of manipulative adaptation. Strickland has a wealth of contemporaneous and recent primary and recent secondary source material which other authors considered here did not have access to. However, she appears to lean lightly upon it. The scattered words and part-phrases appear to have been taken out of context, which raises the question of the degree of reinterpretation of the abundant source material, and how balanced or accurate, in a biographical sense, the resulting poetic narrative might be. This is a nuanced point, however. Both Strickland and Wroe engage with the whole of their respective subject's Lives, but there is something grounded and closely-connected in *Francis* that is absent in *The Red Virgin*. The latter has a slightly chaotic and self-justificatory tone, which may of course, arise from the controversial life of Weil herself.

In addition to the somewhat unconvincing manipulation of original material the sequence appears contrived by virtue of the arrangement of the poems in alphabetic order by title rather than in strict chronological order.<sup>37</sup> There is no explanation for this, and it adds to a sense of confusion.

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<sup>36</sup> *Red Virgin*, 'Fig Tree' p. 27, ll. 10–13.

<sup>37</sup> This is, perhaps a question of literary criticism rather than my concerns here, concerning adaptation and hagiography.

Contrivance and contextual queries aside, *The Red Virgin* affirms and rationalises the events of Weil's life rather than questions or contradicts them. This does not mean that Strickland does not question Weil's motives in her quest for understanding Weil's life. There is even a degree of frustration:

You won't eat. Not more  
than the prisoners in France –  
*Tell* the truth, you take less.<sup>38</sup>

*The Red Virgin* is clearly an adaptation of the original sources. It is biographical in its engagement with Weil's whole life. The relationship between Weil and God is ambivalent – hers is a life dedicated to causes, than overtly to, or in honour of, God. In 'Revelation' Strickland articulates the contradictions in Weil's faith – for example, she wants to be baptised but cannot, because she interprets what she sees as sanctioned genocide in the Bible and the church as the beast in Revelation.<sup>39</sup> Even her death from self-starvation in sympathy with the poor rations of French prisoners, seems ambiguous. It is almost a form of self-indulgence pursued with all the intensity of her character, not quite connecting with its social cause and hardly an exemplary life model.<sup>40</sup>

Overall, the resulting text has a sense of a *positio*, bringing together a variety of sources and accounts, including interviews and letters to, from, and about Weil, real and imagined. It echoes the assembling of information that a medieval or modern hagiographer, chronicler, historian or biographer undertakes when embarking on the writing of a Life, but its subject is not clearly a saintly one. In its manipulation and selection of found elements

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<sup>38</sup> *Red Virgin*, 'War Rations' p. 66, ll. 1–3.

<sup>39</sup> *Red Virgin*, p. 55.

<sup>40</sup> *Red Virgin*, 'Xeres: Take this Cup' and 'Xmas Pudding' illustrate this in particular. pp. 72, 73.

from its sources, *The Red Virgin* echoes faintly my own reimagining of Prior Robert's manipulation of his own sources to create Life B. However, my manipulation of Prior Robert's prologue was deliberately ironic, where Strickland's is decidedly not.

Strickland's sequence incorporates the core narrative of Weil's Life, and embellishes it with a variety of sources and with perspectives gleaned from witnesses and Weil herself. It is certainly a form of rewriting that is informed by the legacy of the genre of hagiography, perhaps identifiable as 'quasi-hagiography'.

*Damian Walford Davies: Judas*

Judas Iscariot plays a major part in the story of Christ's death. As the man who betrayed him to the Sanhedrin and Roman authorities, he is both reviled and celebrated. He is reviled for betraying Christ, but is also recognised as a key agent in enabling Christ's death, without which his redeeming sacrifice would not have taken place. He remains a complex, paradoxical and highly controversial figure, but he is not a saint.<sup>41</sup>

It is these uncertainties and ambiguities about Judas' motives that are explored in *Judas*. Walford Davies' engagement with Judas transcends time and space, and, like *Embertide*, exploits uncertainties and contradictions between the many varied accounts (including the variations between the canonical gospels' respective accounts) and interpretations of Judas' life, character and motivations. The poems are in the voice of Judas as he seeks to rationalise or justify, and even make sense of his own actions, and to observe and comment on the way that he has been portrayed:

You'll paint me gross –

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<sup>41</sup> Anthony Cane, *The Place of Judas Iscariot in Christology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005). Judas Iscariot should not be confused with St Jude, distinguished as Judas, not Iscariot (St John's Gospel 14:22) who is the patron saint of desperate causes.

gripping my shins,  
retching silver coins.

Let me put you straight.<sup>42</sup>

The allusions within the text are frequently anachronistic, granting Judas an immanence – a presence in the present – usually accorded to a saint. In ‘Suburbia’ Israeli conscripts’ radios crackle and the engines of buses tick over in the traffic jams of Jerusalem’s squares. In ‘Denominations’ Judas sees the city pixelated on mobile phone screens. The famous betraying kiss in the garden of Gethsemane is not mentioned, instead Walford Davies offers what may appear to be a redemptive interpretation: ‘I whispered: *Run!*’<sup>43</sup> The irony, anachronism and uncertainty together create an unresolved, ambiguous reading of the varied gospel accounts.

*Judas* is a comprehensive interrogation of conflicting versions of Judas’ life. The core of his gospel story is present, but it is unravelled and reinterpreted by multiple points of view, rather than simply being varied or rewritten into a single coherent narrative. It is not an adaptation of any one or combination of such sources. Certain events are mediated through different perspectives that refract back on the core gospel accounts. It highlights the reality that there are always multiple perspectives on and interpretations of, a historical event, and that the distinctions cannot be resolved. *Judas* is not hagiography, but it has a sense of a ghost-written, autobiographical attempt to justify and rationalise Judas’s actions.

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<sup>42</sup> *Judas*, ‘Denominations’, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> *Judas*, ‘Garden’, p. 52.

*Fiona Smith: Travellers of the North*

*Travellers of the North* is, as its author, Fiona Smith declares, ‘an attempt to liberate Sunniva from her story’. Sunniva was a tenth century Irish nobleman’s daughter who took to the seas to escape an arranged marriage. She travelled with companions, including her brother Alban, to Silje (Selja) Island off the coast of Western Norway. She was accused of stealing sheep and took refuge in a cave in which she and her companions were entombed by a rockfall. Miracles associated with the island led to the discovery of her incorrupt remains which King Olaf translated to Bergen in 1150. She is the patron saint of Western Norway.

In her introduction, Smith states that her intention was to explore Sunniva’s life as a navigator, sailor and farmer, to redress an extant narrative that was ‘formulaic and lacking in colour’.<sup>44</sup> It is, therefore, a deliberate attempt to engage with Sunniva as a woman, even to the point of Sunniva herself denying any faith in God.<sup>45</sup> Sunniva is portrayed as a resourceful and determined individual, suffering from seasickness but then resolving to ‘learn navigation by the sun, moon, stars...’ and to ‘vow to become a greater seaman / than any man of the sea...’. She resents the word that has spread that she is a holy woman:

Christ will get all the glory for what I build here in my own right  
which is most galling to me as I have struggled to plough  
my own furrow here on Selja...<sup>46</sup>

Sunniva’s journey takes her from island to island in search of a resting place and a new home. She is refused leave to land at Orkney and Shetland and is unwelcome elsewhere, which invokes today’s conflicted attitudes towards migrants crossing seas seeking

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<sup>44</sup> *Travellers*, p.7.

<sup>45</sup> *Travellers*, p. 29, ‘Holy Woman’.

<sup>46</sup> *Travellers*, p. 29, 6<sup>th</sup> stanza.



sanctuary.<sup>47</sup> Smith's poems are almost all in Sunniva's voice until the latter part of the collection where three other voices appear: Jarl Haakon, a local chief, who accuses her of sheep-stealing; her father, who may have had a part in her fate; and the voice of Smith in a kind of epilogue that merges her own voice with that of her imagined Sunniva:

For Sunniva, your glory,  
is not dead.

My life sings still  
in the ocean waves...<sup>48</sup>

*Travellers* does tell the story of Sunniva, and as such is certainly biographical, embellishing the hagiographic sources with rich emotional and physically visceral detail. However, Smith's approach in deliberately setting aside the piety of Sunniva the saint, in rationalising miracles and exploring Sunniva the woman, together suggest that this is a kind of anti-hagiography, reclaiming the humanity of a sanctified figure. Nevertheless, Smith realises the saint in a contemporary way that, arguably, augments the formulaic Life with the kind of detail that echoes the approach that Holderness has taken with Frideswide.

## SUMMARY

From the small sample examined above, I have identified a variety of adaptations and appropriations. *Mary* is clearly an adaptation and a hagiography, even though it departs from some hagiographic conventions. *Francis* is also an adaptation, a selective but coherent

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<sup>47</sup> *Travellers*, pp. 16, 22, 23.

<sup>48</sup> *Travellers*, pp. 30, 31, 35.

refashioning of the core narrative with additional reflections woven into the original – but it is a saint’s biography rather than a hagiography. *The Red Virgin* is a biographical adaptation and extrapolation of a variety of sources that amounts to a Life of a non-saint written with a nod to hagiographic conventions. *Travellers* is a biographical adaptation resulting in an ‘anti-hagiographic’ narrative. *Christina*, *The Caiplie Caves* and *Judas* are all appropriations of their respective original Lives. *Christina* explores corporeal matters from a variety of different perspectives. *The Caiplie Caves* exploits resonances between a period of Solie’s own life and Ethernan’s period of retreat, their connection being grounded in the locality of the Caves. *Judas* is an interrogation of his life in the voice of the subject himself, a kind of uncanny, dissociated autobiography.

## PART 2: CONCLUSIONS

Although *Embertide* is distinctly different from the other works discussed in this thesis, it does not stand in isolation. It is connected to each of the Lives in some way: the medieval *vitae* and the SEL versions informed the writing of *Embertide*; the modern refashionings of Frideswide’s Lives that bridge the gap between the medieval versions and the present day; and the modern engagements with other saints’ Lives connect *Embertide* laterally into a diverse corpus of modern saints’ life-writing that extends beyond the boundaries of both hagiography and adaptation.

### *Embertide and the extant Lives*

Adaptation theory is traditionally more concerned with trans-media adaptations, so in the comparison between the Latin *vitae* and medieval Lives of Frideswide, selected features of Hutcheon’s process-product model were analysed in order to reveal the adaptive strategies

adopted by their authors. These features were the characterisation of Frideswide, dramatic tension, the iconic event of Frideswide's flight, and miracles. This structure worked well in the analysis of the conventional hagiographies where I was comparing like with like – they were all written hagiographic texts.

The same approach and points of comparison also worked well for the modern versions of Frideswide's Life and served to identify the key differences that the versions created by Hayllar and Holderness represented and highlighted the way in which each of these works extended the boundaries of hagiography to include new approaches – for example, changes to voice.

However the same categories were more difficult to apply to *Embertide* because the work was approached from a very different angle. *Embertide* is incommensurable with conventional hagiography. My intention was not to retell the Life of the saint, but to interrogate it, to unravel the tightly woven narratives and expose the inconsistencies and multiple possible truths otherwise hidden by hagiographic conventions. It is not the representation of the relationship between God and the saint that predominates, but that between the saint and the Inquisitor. This interaction forms the basis of the engagement with the saint as an interrogative journey into the relevance and nature of the saint and her contemporary presence/absence.

As such, applying the selected model of adaptation theory to *Embertide* did not identify the critical distinctiveness of the poetic sequence. The fact that *Embertide* has been so difficult to categorise reflects the way in which work that one has written oneself can be much harder to analyse objectively. The criteria selected did not quite ask the right question: 'Does *Embertide* tell Frideswide's story?' It did, however, reveal that as the key question that needed to be asked. The answer of course, is no, *Embertide* does not, simply or directly, tell

Frideswide's story. The analysis concludes that this is because *Embertide* is an appropriation rather than an adaptation.

While *Embertide* may be located outside the conventions of hagiography and the scope of an adaptation, it still falls within the scope of the wider concept of 'rewriting' according to Plate and Rose, since it is, crucially, engaged with the legend, creating a text that attempts to hold all extant versions stand side-by-side, rather than privileging one extant version above others. By virtue of incorporating the core narrative represented by the *Gesta Life*, it can also be seen to fall within the scope of Foley's idea of 'core-and-variations'. Nevertheless, in the same way as each of the medieval and modern authors for the various extant Lives, I have made the story my own. It was a quest for my own understanding of the person of Frideswide and the concept of holiness that inspired the endeavour, not a call to venerate a saint and edify my audience.

#### *Embertide and the modern comparators*

The analysis of the modern comparators addressed the question of the difference between *Embertide* and its precursors in terms of the extent to which they were, respectively, hagiographies and adaptations. The sample of contemporary poetic engagements with historical Lives discussed above contains a hagiography (*Mary*); an adaptation in the form of an amplified, reflective biography (*Francis*); outward-looking appropriations exploring particular facets of, or places in, a Life but do not first and foremost set out to tell their stories (*Christina* and *The Caiplie Caves*); a quasi-hagiography (*The Red Virgin*); an anti-hagiography (*Travellers*); and an interrogative appropriation looking inwards to a conflicted self and outwards to its contradictory historical interpretations (*Judas*).

For the purposes of this thesis, this rather subjective categorisation makes it possible to locate *Embertide* not just in terms of whether or not it is hagiography, or whether it is an

appropriation rather than an adaptation on its own, but where it stands in relation to other creative engagements with historical lives. The works discussed here describe a spectrum between conventional hagiographic adaptation through to an appropriated Life. Each of the works along this continuum are connected in some way by their approach or subject matter, so *Embertide* is unique but not isolated from its comparators and precursors. The network of intertextuality suggested by Plate in her concept of ‘rewriting’ ensures that no work is independent; all are somehow connected through time, space, subject or approach.

Although these modern comparators share some similar approaches with *Embertide*, they each result in a very different work. In *The Caiplie Caves*, Solie uses a similar differentiation of voice through textual layout, but her work is more outward looking, reaching away from the personae of the poet and the saint into their external worlds. Walford Davies engages with anachronism and telescoping of time in a similar way to my own approach. His version of Judas is alone, an outcast, as he looks inwards to interrogate the fractured life of the historical figure of Judas Iscariot, a life that is further distorted and relativized by the multiple versions and interpretations created since the historic events. In *Embertide* the journey into the Life of Frideswide is a joint undertaking on the part of the imagined saint and the Inquisitor. It is their exchange of resonance that navigates the conflicting versions of Frideswide’s Lives and bridges the cultural and temporal space between their respective lived lives. However, in terms of radical and ironic interrogative engagement with extant written Lives and the places associated with the subject, *Judas* most closely resembles the approach that I adopted for Frideswide in *Embertide*.

The imaginative journey into the Lives of Frideswide was not undertaken in order to justify or rationalise the saint’s actions, as appears to be the case for both *Judas* and *The Red Virgin*, or to establish or any unequivocal truth, but to hold a multiplicity of truths in balance in order to understand the context of the holiness with which Frideswide is credited.

*Embertide* embraces the idea of Frideswide's holiness, in contrast to Smith's approach to Sunniva. It engages with all of Frideswide's lived life, not focusing on one particular aspect, in the way Draycott and Saunders focus on Christina's corporeality. But *Embertide* does not present a coherent, chronological structure in the manner of Wroe's *Francis* – instead the Lives and the reflections on it are more closely interwoven.

Although these contemporary engagements with saints' Lives are concerned with each saint as an individual, rather than as a representative of the community of saints, they remain connected. The connectivity between *Embertide* and both its precursors and the modern comparators extends further, of course, to the sources, written or otherwise, with which each work engages, and the physical places that are connected through subject and author.

#### *A Question of Fidelity*

While the intertextual connections map out a place for *Embertide* in relation to other works, past and present, there remains the question of fidelity. Adaptation theory is still (although less so than previously), concerned with the question of trans-media fidelity – how true an adaptation is to its source. Throughout the discussion of the medieval and modern adaptations of Frideswide's Lives, each version was assessed on the extent to which it accords with hagiographic conventions as the framework for the narrative, and how 'true' it was to the core text of the *Gesta* Life with regard to the story being told. If *Embertide* is not true to hagiographic conventions, and incorporates the core in a fragmented, unravelled form, then what is it true to?

Hagiographic fidelity is not only concerned with faithfulness to the conventions of the genre, but also to the objective of providing a single, unequivocal, authentic and authenticated truth in respect of a particular saint, as exemplified by Prior Robert's efforts in

generating Life B. *Embertide* challenges this by embracing a range of possible interpretations, or truths, rather than dismissing or overriding alternative versions. In addition, in writing the text, I was not constrained by the conventions of hagiography. The modern reader or audience is also unfettered by the conventions of hagiography or, indeed, faith, and so is free to interpret the text in accordance with their own beliefs and perspectives – *Embertide* might be judged by how true it is to dramatic or poetic, rather than spiritual, conventions.

This individualistic approach to multiple versions and interpretations of a text, each having equivalent value, reflects the position of faith in the modern world. There are many different perspectives on faith, beliefs, religion and spirituality today as, indeed, was the case in medieval times. The difference, perhaps, is that today religion, and particularly Christianity, is less culturally dominant in countries such as Britain. The church does not have the power or influence over the British population that it held in medieval times. Individuals are able to combine elements of religious practice drawn from more than one tradition to suit their own needs and perspectives – there is no general expectation or obligation on the population as a whole to adhere to specific doctrine and practices.<sup>49</sup> This kind of individualistic and private approach to religion means that many versions of private truths co-exist with more institutional religious practices that espouse public truths. In such a world, there is, arguably, a need for a new approach to hagiography if it is to remain fresh and relevant to an unchurched and disinterested audience.

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<sup>49</sup> Grace Davie (pp. 71–90) discusses the idea of ‘believing without belonging’ in which individuals can formulate their own doctrines and concepts of the divine or other, apart from institutionalised religion. The results from the 2021 Census indicate that now only 46.2% of the population of England and Wales describe themselves as ‘Christian’, while 37.2% describe themselves as having no religion at all.  
<<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021#main-points>> [accessed 20 December 2022].

The advent of the Enlightenment required that public truths required explanation or justification by reason to a greater extent than in the medieval or earlier periods.<sup>50</sup> Not all truths can be so justified, and those relating to faith and which cannot be seen or proven – miracles, for example – are viewed with suspicion and scepticism. As a result, hagiographies remained the domain of literary scholars rather than historians until relatively recently.<sup>51</sup> While hagiographies are being revisited for their social, cultural and historical content, there is also a refreshing of saints' Lives through modern creative engagements, as demonstrated by the selected modern comparators. Because of the potential for multiple interpretations, the creative arts are an effective means of interdigitating opposing spheres – public and private, sacred and secular, Christian and non-Christian, formal and informal.

The significance of overtly creative interpretations and imagined perspectives is not the sole province of religious works – it has emerged in other spheres, including medicine, physics, archaeology, and anthropology, demonstrating a complementarity between the creative arts and a variety of other disciplines.<sup>52</sup> Collections such as Adam Horowitz's *The Soil Never Sleeps* and Mario Petrucci's *Heavy Water*, engaging respectively with soil science and the Chernobyl explosion, exemplify the ability of poets to explore and communicate complex scientific concepts, just as the modern poetic engagements with saints explored in this thesis have introduced their subjects to new audiences.<sup>53</sup> This places *Embertide* within a wider corpus of poetic works that engage with established scholarly, literary and scientific disciplines and conventions. *Heavy Water* is a reflection on Chernobyl, just as *Embertide* is a reflection on Frideswide, hagiography and the significance of saints. Creative writing is a

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<sup>50</sup> Hart, p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> Katherine Lewis, in Salih, p.122.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001); Mark Edmonds, *Ancestral Geographies of the Neolithic* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999) and Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> Adam Horowitz, *The Soil Never Sleeps* (London: Palewell Press, 2019); Mario Petrucci, *Heavy Water: A Poem for Chernobyl* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2004).



medium in which imagination can reach out towards mystery and realities that are beyond empiricism and rationality and so has always been a language by which the truths of faith can be expressed.<sup>54</sup> Poetry, like prayer, can also transcend the basic communicative functions of language and engage with the other-worldly beyond empirical truth.<sup>55</sup>

The creative arts provide a lens through which to examine and reflect on what is presented as truth, but in order to do this the writer needs to step outside the conventions of their original disciplines. In order to write *Embertide*, I had to step outside the perceived boundaries of hagiography to enable me to challenge the versions of Frideswide's Lives that were historically presented and accepted as truths. It is this stepping beyond the boundaries of hagiography and looking back in that gives *Embertide* its freedom, irony and complexity as well as its liminality and elusiveness. Such an approach favours the creation of an appropriated version of an original, rather than an adaptation.

#### *An 'Appropriated Life'*

*Embertide* is still 'about' the saint, but not specifically or primarily with the objective of venerating her and promoting her cult. I articulate a personal – and therefore private – engagement with Frideswide, and with the concepts of sainthood and faith, in the places that, for many, are still imbued with the presence of that saint. However, my approach to Frideswide, like that of Solie's engagement with Ethernan, invokes the saint, but not in the traditional intercessory way inspired by hagiographies. Instead of calling on the saint as a guide, comfort or source of miraculous intervention, she has become a means of connecting

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<sup>54</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit: A Dialogue between Literature and Christian Doctrine* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1999), p. 11. The rich history of poet-priests such as George Herbert, R. S. Thomas and Gerard Manley Hopkins to mention a very few demonstrate the power of poetry to express the inexpressible.

<sup>55</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and its Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 127.

to a particular place, to a portal through which a new perspective on her lived life and written Lives and their spiritual significance might be attained.

Such an approach appropriates the life and Lives of the saint in order to explore or engage with alternative perspectives beyond the person of the saint herself. Solie's appropriation of Ethernan is based on their spatial coincidence for a limited time. For one brief moment, their respective lives are connected by a shared, temporary period of exile. My own engagement with Frideswide, mediated by the Inquisitor, is that of a person of faith seeking understanding. In neither case is the saint overtly venerated, nor the audience overtly spiritually edified. This is the conclusion that underpins the categorisation of *Embertide* as an 'appropriated Life'.

Perhaps it is better not to try to categorise such works too conclusively. 'Poetic' or 'artistic' licence enables the creator and their audience to create and interpret a work in the light of their own private truths and understandings or none. The consequence is that a work such as *Embertide* will be accessible to audiences who are not necessarily interested in seeking the kind of truths that were the currency of conventional hagiography. Publication and performance bring saints and the concept of sainthood, almost incidentally, into modern view. Audiences may only be interested in the poetic value of the work. But, for any audience, *Embertide* is capable of communicating profound theological ideas and perspectives to those who seek, or who stumble upon them, in the text – such as an understanding of the immanence and contingency of the community of saints:

A saint exists only in the immensity  
of God and in  
curtilage of someone's faith.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *Embertide*, p. 40, 1<sup>st</sup> stanza, ll. 1–3.

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