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THE PERSISTENCE OF HAGIOGRAPHIC THEMES IN MODERN CULTURE:
Parallels Between Selected Medieval Saints' Lives and the Life of Elvis Presley

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

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Mary Alice Keebler

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Abstract

This research attempted to draw parallels between certain medieval French texts concerning the lives of saints and particular modern English texts concerning the life of Elvis Presley. Its goal was to establish that many of the themes and conventions of the genre of medieval hagiography still exist and are in use in the twentieth century. Further it sought to suggest that the sociological and literary processes by which medieval saints were created are being applied specifically to the case of Elvis Presley, for similar reasons.

Such an endeavor necessitated an exploration of the history of sanctity and saints to determine how the concepts have been understood and recognized. It was also important to survey the genre of medieval hagiography in order to understand how the idea of sanctity is expressed in the literature. An in-depth reading of several of these texts confirmed that certain recognizable patterns and themes do exist in the genre. In addition, study of several versions of Elvis Presley's life and impact was important, as was an exploration of other phenomena associated historically with sainthood.

It was concluded that parallels between the two types of texts do indeed exist. It was further concluded that the mechanisms involved in saint-making in each of the two cases (medieval saints and Elvis), both sociological and literary, are similar enough in nature and in style as to support the belief that they are, in fact, the same processes.

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Introduction

When I first read excerpts from the *Vie de Saint Alexis* in an Old French class I became immediately intrigued by the genre of saints' lives in medieval literature. As the year progressed the class studied in other genres: epic poetry, lyric poetry, romance, each fascinating in its turn, but it was the saints and their stories to whom I returned. Despite a feeling of familiarity which continued to draw me to these stories, I perceived myself as an outsider, looking into a world and a way of seeing the world that seemed, in some essential way, not my own. Who were these saints? Who were these people so devoted to them? What sort of world was this, where miracles occurred at every turn, and people recognized holiness in places I would never even think to look? I was determined to make these saints' lives the focus of my research, but months of speculation yielded very few ideas on which aspect of the literature I should study. One day, however, a friend, knowing of my interest in saints, left an article on my desk. The article proclaimed a new saint, Elvis Presley, saying "people are being healed by simply touching a portrait of The King," and that "a crusade to make Elvis a saint is reported to be gaining more support in the Vatican every day."[1] When I shared this find with my advisor he did not laugh, but suggested that I read a book by Bruce Rosenberg, *Custer and the Epic of Defeat.*

Rosenberg's book studies the form and the components of a certain kind of heroic story, which he names the "epic of defeat," in which the hero does not win the day. These losers, however, "are magnificent, for they lose with dignity and *élan.* An aura of sublime glory gathers about their names and deeds while forgetful mists

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[1] *The Sun*, 16 June 1992.

enshroud those who defeat them."[2] They fight against unbeatable odds, they know the inevitable outcome, they perish, but the stories of the deed live on. Among these heroes Rosenberg places Roland of the twelfth-century *Chanson de Roland*, the Hebrew king Saul who died on Mt. Gilboa, the Spartan king Leonidas at Thermophylae, the Serbian king Lazar on the plains of Kossovo, and many others. The accounts of these heroes reveal parallels between the events and circumstances which surround the fateful battles: the incredible odds, the courage of the leader, the loyalty of the warriors, the dramatic last stand, the lone survivor who recounts the tale, the betrayer who has given the advantage to the enemy. Into this framework also fits General George Custer, hero of the story of Custer's Last Stand at the Little Bighorn, but with one important difference - we know not only the popular story of this event (the epic), but also a great number of the facts of the story, and they are not the same. Rosenberg systematically explores the evidence concerning what happened in those last days, and compares them with the newspaper reports, the poems, even the history book accounts of the episode, showing where and in what manner the events have been altered to fit into "a traditional and recognizable heroic pattern."[3]

Such an approach provides a two-fold service. First it helps illuminate the processes by which, even in modern times, we shape and reshape history to suit our beliefs and needs. How is it that a man who was recognized by most of his colleagues as arrogant, foolhardy, and patently unworthy of imitation as a military commander becomes a popular hero?[4] Perhaps we can conclude that even if we can not explain away the sociological need that prompts this process, at least we can recognize that it has been present in our Western culture for many hundreds of years. It has more to do with us, than with Custer. Second, it can shed a little light on the literature and the

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[2] Bruce Rosenberg, *Custer and the Epic of Defeat*, (University Park, 1979), p. 1.
[3] Ibid., p. 3.
[4] Ibid., pp. 115, 116.

heroes of the past. No longer need we marvel at the primitivism of past cultures, where Roland, the foolishly brave and proud, is valued above Oliver, the wise, for that culture is our own.

If the themes of the heroic epic, or the epic of defeat, persist at least to the nineteenth century, might not also the themes and devices of other genres? Do the themes and the devices of medieval French hagiography persist as well in the stories of our day? Is the story of Elvis being told from the perspective of that genre, even if it means remaking certain parts of the story as it truly happened? These questions inspired me to look deeper into the hagiographic genre itself, to discover what patterns were found there and what their purposes might be. Once done, I had also to look at the stories about Elvis Presley. Was the "miracle portrait" simply a tabloid attention-getter, like any two-headed baby or UFO? Or was it an indication of a larger trend - a tendency to remember Elvis as a holy man, perhaps as someone and something he was not, for whatever reason? And if so, was this phenomenon indeed a modern chapter in a story which was begun hundreds of years ago, in another land?

Chapter I: Toward an Understanding of Sanctity

The Christian concept of "saint" as someone set apart from the rest of humanity by his or her special holiness or virtue, or by a spiritual proximity to God generally unavailable to most, has origins traceable to several cultures and religions. In Judaism and Islam, for example, there exists a distinction between a transcendent god, largely occupied with the operation of the universe as a whole, and other, lesser beings, often "local or ancestral spirits."[1] These beings are more easily accessible to the populace and willing to occupy themselves with the concerns of the day to day lives of believers. In Judaism these intermediaries are called angels. They are "the agents through whom the universe operates," and they are "both representatives and defenders of their earthly charges in heavenly courts."[2] This role of heavenly advocate is one of the roles assumed by the Christian saint as well. Islamic saints are commonly referred to as *awliya*, the "friends of God," also a familiar title for Christian saints. Wilson also notes likenesses between the activities and the miracles performed by Buddhist saints combatting Bonism in Tibet, and Saint Patrick struggling against paganism in Ireland, or Saint Martin doing the same in Gaul.[3]

In Christianity there is belief in spiritual beings, both good and evil, such as angels and demons, but the saint (excepting the archangels) is truly human.[4] The beginnings of this elevation of fellow humans, an elevation which would become sainthood, can be found very soon after the beginnings of Christianity itself.

As members of a religion born into persecution, almost all of Christianity's early heroes were martyrs - those who had died, often brutally, rather than forsake their

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[1] Stephen Wilson, ed., *Saints and Their Cults*, (Cambridge, 1983), p. 2.
[2] Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, (New York, 1961), p. 69.
[3] Wilson, p. 41.
[4] Wilson, p. 2.

religious convictions. Of course, the first and greatest hero, and the original Christian martyr, was Jesus himself, and the pattern of his life and death became the truest model of holiness for all who would follow. This "baptism of blood" shared by Christ, the apostles, and the martyrs, removed from the martyr all threat of sin and rendered the soul forever unassailable.[5] Solidarity is often born of persecution, and so it was with these early Christians. With their martyred comrades as a rallying point they survived and, if it can be so phrased, prospered during three hundred years of oppression. It does not seem very surprising under these circumstances that the martyrs were accorded an elevated status among believers and were honored on the anniversaries of their glorious deaths with solemn remembrance. In time special powers came to be ascribed to them, and the cult of the martyrs was born.

Once Emperor Constantine granted religious tolerance and even favor to the Christians around AD 313 the days of large scale martyrdom were ended. With such a drastic change in the conditions under which Christianity existed, the criteria for sanctity were also forced to change. The task for the Christian community was to find a way to shift from being a temporary social order based on the premise of the fast-approaching end of the world, into a permanent social order in which somehow the solidarity of the group had to be maintained.[6] The result of this shift was monasticism, and a new kind of sanctity.

The successors to the holy victims of external persecutions were the "heroes of self-persecution."[7] The martyrs had been revered because of their deaths, and the virtues and courage expressed by the manner in which they accepted, even sought, death for the sake of their faith. Their successors, the desert fathers and the confessors (those who suffered but did not die), came to be revered on the merit of their lives. The

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[5] Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les Origines du culte des martyres*, (Brussels, 1912), p. 5.
[6] John M. Mecklin, *The Passing of the Saint*, (Chicago, 1941), p. 12.
[7] Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, (Hanover, 1987), p. 42.

shift of emphasis was from one culminating moment of holiness - martyrdom - to a long and ever-deepening holiness - the career of the monk .[8] One of the earliest documents demonstrating this shift is the *Life of Antony* by Athanasius, written in the mid-fourth century. This work encouraged the growth of the monastic ideal, emphasizing that the hermit-monk, toiling alone to subdue his worldly nature, was a hero for God. Such ones, the author writes, "are lamps to lighten all," and they encourage others to "be zealous in the path of virtue."[9]

From these earliest times the saints inspired fervent reaction from the community of the faithful. What began as small gatherings at the martyrs' tombs on their "heavenly birthdays," [10] documented as early as AD 156 with the martyrdom of Polycarp, soon blossomed into devotion. The remains of the martyrs were treated with great respect, as befits the bodies of heroes, and then themselves became objects of devotion. Soon the burial places became centers of worship, with the tomb sometimes being used as an altar.[11]

According to Eric Kemp, the theological basis for the development of the belief in the efficacy of relics within the strictly Christian context can be found in a 396 AD treatise by Victricius, bishop of Rouen. Victricius maintains that any part of a saint's body, living or dead, no matter how small, or any other relic of a saint, shares fully in the virtue of the whole saint, and thus "saints are to be venerated for their holiness which, through intimate union with the Godhead, enables them to become channels of grace to the faithful. Further, soul and body are so closely joined together that the relics of a saint, particles of his body, or objects which have been in contact with him, become as it were sacraments, material signs through which grace is conveyed."[12] In

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[8] Ibid., p. 42.
[9] Eric Waldram Kemp, *Canonization and Authority in the Western Church*, (Oxford, 1948), p. 2.
[10] Ibid., p. 6.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., p. 5.

AD 404 Jerome upholds the belief in the powers of advocacy held by the saints, saying that "martyrs still pray for the Church militant after they have been killed; indeed their prayers are more potent because they have overcome and triumphed."[13] In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas reaffirmed the merit of relics, claiming that "by means of their relics we retain a personal friendship with the saints." [14] Thus we see that the martyrs, and later all saints, became for the Christian community intermediaries between heaven and earth, who were at once sympathetic, powerful, and, through their relics, accessible.

As the Church grew and spread during the Middle Ages so did the cult of the saints. Although the original cult of the martyrs was centered around the tomb of the saint, the belief in the real and total presence of the saint in each of his or her relics made it possible for even a limited number of saints to be in a practically unlimited number of places at one time. Holy corpses were dismembered and disitributed among the churches. Finucane notes that by the arrival of the eighth century Pope Paul I "was magnanimously opening graves and giving away bones," all previous prohibitions against the disturbing of graves apparently ignored.[15] Added to this generosity was the convenient occurrence of miraculous dreams in which saints, some very well-known (like Stephen, the first martyr), many more previously unheard of, revealed the locations of their remains.[16] The importance of relics is illustrated by the fact that the Second General Council of Nicaea in 787 had mandated that a relic should be placed in the altar of every consecrated church. [17] Thus the beliefs and practices described above stood the Church in good stead as it spread throughout Europe, because the original supply would surely have fallen far short of demand. The relics not only ensured in

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[13] Ibid., p. 3.
[14] Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, (Totowa, 1975), p. 24.
[15] Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, (Totowa, 1977), p. 23.
[16] Sumption, p. 26.
[17] Wilson, p. 5.

each church the presence of a saint with all of his or her attendant powers, but they were quite useful as objects upon which to swear oaths, and as devices to strengthen the religious devotion of the masses. [18]

The definition of relic expanded to include not only parts of the saint's corpse but anything with which the saint had had physical contact, and eventually, anything which had had physical contact with the tomb or with another relic. These relics "emitted a kind of holy radioactivity which bombarded everything in the area," writes Ronald Finucane, "and...it was believed that objects placed next to them would absorb some of their power...They affected oil in lamps which burned above them, cloths placed nearby, water or wine which washed them, the entire church which surrounded them, and of course the hopeful suppliants who approached to kiss, touch, pray before, and gaze upon them." [19]

Saints and their relics had become, by the Middle Ages, not only heroes but also tourist attractions. The churches, monasteries or towns which boasted these assets could expect temporal as well as spiritual wealth, as pilgrims (and their money) came to visit them. This lucrative coincidence, as well as the spiritual advantage and holy reputation one might attain from possession of such a relic, prompted continued demand for relics with impressive pedigrees. To meet this need, monasteries sometimes "were forced to deal with middlemen," whose job it was to "secure" for the monasteries the desired relic.[20] Such acquisitions were very often achieved through simple theft. In fact, to avoid the possibility of purchasing a false relic, serious parties often preferred to steal the desired relic themselves.

One of the most famous of the thefts was the ninth-century acquisition by the monastery of Conques of the relics of Saint Foy, which rested at Agen. Since

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[18] Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra*, (Princeton, 1978), p. 49.
[19] Finucane, p. 26.
[20] Geary, p. 50.

Conques was not well located, it desperately needed a saint or some other attraction to encourage visitors. It was decided that in light of such need, the relics of Saint Foy should be attained. The monks sent an infiltrator to Agen. He joined the community and stayed a long time, perhaps even years according to one source, and was eventually entrusted with the guardianship of Saint Foy's tomb. Sometime after that, he opened the tomb, took her body, and returned to Conques.[21] The church subsequently became one of the greatest pilgrimage churches in Europe, along one of the pilgrimage routes to Compostela. There Saint Foy performed many miracles, apparently indifferent to the method by which she came to rest at Conques.

As one might suspect, the popularity of relics gave rise to many abuses (besides theft). Relic dealers took advantage of the credulous, selling and displaying their relics, which certainly could not be proven to belong to a saint. Some of the more bizarre claims included the existence of the blood of Christ in a phial, the hair and even the milk of the Virgin Mary,[22] and the breath of Christ in a bottle, or the tip of Lucifer's tail.[23] Despite the Church's attempts to regulate the flow of relics and to verify their authenticity, such abuses were impossible to stop altogether.

One of the greatest manifestations of Christian piety in the Middle Ages was pilgrimage, although it too, like the saints themselves, was not entirely a product of medieval Europe. One author refers to pilgrimage as "one of civilized man's oldest habits" naming the Egyptians, the Hittites, the Greeks, the Muslims, and the Jews as among the participants in their own versions of pilgrimage.[24] Pilgrimage seems based on the idea that places too can be holy, and that such a place is a "sacred centre, marked off from the profane space surrounding it, where heaven and earth intersect and where

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[21] Ibid., pp. 70-76.
[22] Sumption, pp. 46, 50.
[23] Finucane, p. 31.
[24] Ibid., p. 39.

stands still, where there exists the possibility of breaking through to the realm of the transcendent;"[25] in short, a place where contact with the spiritual or the holy is more likely to occur than in other places. The medieval Christian belief in the complete presence of the saint in any of his or her relics also implies that in these sacred places a saint might be all the more available, and more responsive to prayers of the faithful .[26] These sites could be places where a holy person had lived or died, or locations where mysterious events had occurred, but generally they were the tombs of saints. The higher incidence of miraculous intervention in these places ensured a steady flow of pilgrims, arriving for a variety of reasons. Some made pilgrimages because of a simple desire to travel, others as a fulfillment of a penance, some from honest piety, and others in hope of a miraculous cure for some ailment. [27] An interesting characteristic that set Christian pilgrimage to saints' tombs apart from the pilgrimage habits of other religions or cultures was that ideally they were timed to coincide with the death anniversary of the saint. Pagan custom tended to prefer birth date commemorations. [28]

One important function of pilgrimage was very likely its ability to contribute to the pilgrim's sense of identity and to the feeling of unity among the pilgrims.[29] It both underscores the pilgrim's conscious decision to ally himself or herself with one community as opposed to another (thus establishing identity), and solidifies that person's "awareness of belonging to a larger whole."[30]

At the center of each of these cults is a saint, the one who inspires devotion and works miracles - the ultimate insider. They range from the purely invented virgin martyr or Christianized pagan hero, to the wild-eyed hermit, to some of the greatest

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[25] John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred*, (London, 1991), p. 6.
[26] Finucane, p. 39.
[27] Ibid., p. 48.
[28] Kemp, p. 6.
[29] J.G. Davies, *Pilgrimage Yesterday and Today*, (London, 1988), p. 202.
[30] Ibid., p. 203.

martyr or Christianized pagan hero, to the wild-eyed hermit, to some of the greatest intellectuals of all time. They are surely among the most ingriguing figures in human history, all the more so because the veneration of saints continues today.

What does it take to be a saint? In the earliest history of Christianity the answer was simple: a saint was a martyr. Martyrdom was the one all-inclusive criterion, and those who met it were easily identified. A person's fulfillment of that requirement was indisputable, and other aspects of the martyr's life had little relevance. Because of martyrdom's undisputed merit, and the highly localized nature of the cults, centralized approval was neither possible nor necessary.[31] Later, as the fervor of cultic activity spawned abuses, and especially as Donatism spread in the African church, some proof of true martyrdom (not suicide) and the confession of Christ as cause for the martyrdom, was required.[32] However, even after the age of the martyrs was over, a community's saints continued to be selected and venerated by these localized groups. When the members of a community perceived that a saint was among them they took the initiative and venerated the one they deemed worthy. If they felt strongly enough about their saint they would pressure the local bishop to elevate the then-dead saint's relics. The bishop thereby affirmed the choice of the people and the saint was "official."[33]

Methods of this sort continued in practice for nearly a thousand years. The first known papal canonization occurred in AD 993 (Saint Ulric of Augsburg), simply as a way to enhance the saint's status in the eyes of the people, but it was not until AD 1234 that Pope Gregory IX reserved the right to canonize saints exclusively for himself and his successors.[34] Soon afterward a complicated and codified procedure was

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[31] Pierre Delooz, "Towards a Sociological Study of Canonized Sainthood in the Catholic Church," in *Saints and Their Cults*, (Cambridge, 1988), p. 191.
[32] Kemp, p. 15.
[33] Delooz, p. 191.
[34] Kemp, p. 10.

established by which prospective saints were investigated and, if found worthy, canonized.[35]

The process at this point involved the establishment of local tribunals at the place where the prospective saint was venerated. Papal delegates listened to testimony of the virtues and miracles of the saint. A century later canonization had been made into a "full-blown legal trial between the petitioners, represented by an official procurator, or prosecutor of the cause, and the pope." [36] A request for a candidate's consideration had to come from prominent people, such as kings or bishops. In the one hundred years after the institution of papal control, only 26 saints were canonized.[37] After the Protestant Reformation there were increased controls on canonization and even on veneration: Urban VIII decreed that only saints papally canonized or saints whose cults had existed for at least a hundred years could be venerated. Finally, in 1734-1738, Pope Benedict XIV published his *On the Beatification of Servants of God and the Canonization of the Blesseds*, which, in five volumes, set forth the now-accepted theory and method of making saints.[38] These guidelines remain the basis for modern canonization.

During the centuries between Christianity's birth and the modern era canonization evolved from a spontaneous acclamation of a small community to a very formal bureaucratic series of proofs and testimonies. There are several possible reasons for this change. One theory is that perhaps Church officials, being the beneficiaries of a powerful, wealthy, and highly structured institution needed to control popular piety in order to preserve the status quo. Perhaps they sought to regulate, and sometimes dispel potentially disruptive cults, fallen under the influence of rabble-

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[35] Wilson, p. 6.
[36] Kenneth Woodward, *Making Saints*, (New York, 1990), p. 68.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., p. 77.

rousing, or anarchistic would-be saints who threatened their authority. As Weinstein and Bell note, sainthood served a need of the hierarchy as a teacher of religious values or as a means of reward, but the saints themselves were not "merely conplacent supporters of papal policy." [39]

Another theory is that the Church was acting from a sincere desire on the part of educated, more sophisticated clergy to guide their gullible charges, and protect the so-called credulous masses from the dangers of heresy and idolatry which might be associated with cultic devotion. Whatever one's evaluation of the mentality of medieval folk in general, such a fear was apparently not entirely unfounded. The fervor for saints in the Middle Ages seemed at times out of control, and just about anyone with an extraordinary characteristic or two could be hailed by his or her fellows as a saint . Many a local hero who would not necessarily successfully undergo the scrutiny of Church officials has been venerated by the people. Whatever the established criteria for sainthood, a study of the literature dedicated to the saints reveals "that people had their own way of deciding whom they would venerate," and their choices have often conflicted with the choices of Church leaders.[40] Although the official proofs for sanctity might be theological orthodoxy, heroic virtue and so on, in the eyes of the common folk such notions were often of secondary importance. The people tended to want miracle workers .[41] Such a tendency opened the door for all manner of "undesirables," who seem to have wandered freely into popular veneration quite unheeding of the sanction or condemnation of the pope.

One such saint was investigated by a Dominican friar named Stephen of Bourbon sometime between AD 1235 when he was named an inquisitor, and 1261

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[39] Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society*, (Chicago, 1982), p. 4.
[40] Ibid., p. 142.
[41] Ibid., p. 143.

when he died. [42] Traveling through the Dombes, a rural region about 40 kilometers north of Lyons, Stephen heard the confessions of several women who claimed to have taken their children to one Saint Guinefort for healing. Further investigation revealed to Stephen that Saint Guinefort was not some holy person but in fact a greyhound. The story he discovered held that a dog who was guarding his master's infant had been gravely injured while fending off the attack of a serpent. When the family members entered the room where the dog and the child were they saw the dog covered with the serpent's blood, lying near the cradle. Mistakenly assuming the blood to be that of the child, the master killed the dog. After discovering his tragic error, the man threw the dog's body down a well, covered it with stones, and planted trees about it to honor the dog and commemorate the event. The manor was subsequently destroyed "by divine will" and abandoned, but the peasants who heard the story visited the grave and honored the dog as a martyr. After that mothers brought ailing children there, and performed certain rites which were supposed to ensure that the sickly child, often believed to be a changeling, would be reclaimed and the true, healthy child returned in its place. The "saint" thus gained his reputation as a healer of children. Although Stephen destroyed the tomb, cut down the sacred wood and burned it, along with the dog's remains, the cult persisted. As late as the nineteenth century a form of it still existed.[43]

There are many aspects of this phenomenon that are worthy of study,[44] but the point relevant to this paper is the astonishing "canonization" of Guinefort, and the vast gulf that seems to separate the simple populace from the educated elite. No more or no

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[42] Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound,* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 1-13.
[43] Ibid., p. 125.
[44] In the book Schmitt provides an exploration of some of these aspects, including the origins and history of the narrative of the "faithful dog" which exists in many cultures, the development of the rites associated with Guinefort, and the ethnography of his believers.

less than was Stephen of Bourbon, we are at once appalled and amused that Christian people, even so many centuries ago, could venerate a dog.

Incidents like this one illustrate how difficult it is to understand what sanctity really means and has meant. It is certainly more complicated than simply looking at the Church's calendar of saints. Then and now what is called "popular culture" or "folk culture" exists alongside what is known as "learned culture," and they are not necessarily in harmony. Tension in the Church over excesses in veneration and cultic activity began as early as the fourth century, and Finucane writes that "rustic tendencies to overdo saint worshipping grew more irksome and embarrassing" to the Church hierarchy.[45] In our own age these tensions continue, and many of us look askance at practices, religious and secular, of those within our own culture who are considered to be intellectually less enlightened.

Whatever the reasons for the increasing ecclesiastical control of canonization - fatherly concern, or simple self-interest - the process continued. The uniformity of the new processes did not, however, produce uniform saints. It is really no surprise that over the course of the fourteen hundred years from the birth of Christianity to the end of the Middle Ages, and under the changing circumstances of canonization policy, the type of person who was recognized as a saint changed with the times.

As already noted, the earliest saints were martyrs, and could hail from any social background, and be male or female. The ascetic and the bishop were also popular during late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, but in the later Middle Ages the saint was more usually a member of a religious order.[46] Certainly much of this shift can be attributed to the increasingly elaborate and time-consuming canonization process. Wilson notes that "only well-established pressure groups, and particularly,

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[45] Finucane, pp. 31, 32.
[46] Wilson, p. 5.

the religious orders, could in effect have saints made." [47] Only they could offer the sustained support necessary to see their candidate through the lengthy procedure which could last anywhere from a few years, as in the case of Thomas Becket (died in 1170, canonized in 1173), to the six centuries necessary to canonize Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (died in 1109, canonized in 1720).[48] Another reason for this shift to members of religious orders, or perhaps members of royal families and wealthier clerics, was the increasing cost of making saints. The cost of paying investigators, clerks, witnesses and the like could soar well out of the range of any less-than-wealthy group petitioning on behalf of its favorite. Finucane lists the recipients and their fees for a typical Mass of canonization from 14th century England:

To the pope in gold or silver	100 Ducats
To the three commissioners of canonization	190 Ducats
For constructing a "parco" in the church	100 Ducats
Notaries who will record the process	20 Ducats
Clerks of the ceremonies	12 Ducats
Papal chamberlains	20 Ducats
Fiscal procurator	4 Ducats
For bulls	60 Ducats
For images of arms, shields and spears to be hung up	15 Ducats[49]

[47] Ibid., p. 6.
[48] Finucane, pp. 37, 38.
[49] Ibid., p. 37.

On a less concrete level, the saints from a particular time and place can tell us about the circumstances, needs, and ideals of those by whom they were venerated, since saints "belong to and reflect the societies which produce and honor them."[50] In their study *Saints and Society*, Weinstein and Bell have presented a complex and detailed analysis of the relationship between medieval saints and their followers, and even a summary would be impossible in these pages. However, a few examples will help illustrate the types of relationships and shifting roles one can expect to find in such an inquiry.

Economic situation, physical environment, and political structures can all be seen reflected in the roles of a region's saints. For example, in areas where nature was a benevolent force, offering plenty of rainfall, abundant crops, and little need for hard labor, the intercessory function of the saint was largely unneeded and other attributes were emphasized. However, in times or areas of great poverty, the saint who manifested the greatest ability in miraculous intervention for the people was more popular. While the harsh conditions of much of Iberia necessitated a higher percentage of saints with supernatural power, in France, where the "ideal of saintliness served the purposes of national state formation and the self-interests of an elite power structure," saints tended to rank about average in supernatural power, but quite high in temporal power. Interestingly one characteristic that remains largely the same across the time and culture of the Middle Ages is social class. There is an overwhelming predominance of upper class over lower class saints. Of the French saints studied, the researchers found that 55 percent were known to be of royal, noble, or "good family" background. When the categories of "urban patrician" and "probably well-off" are added, the percentage rises to 82 percent.[51] They are careful to point out that since their

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[50] Wilson, p. 7.
[51] Weinstein and Bell, pp. 181-192.

information comes from the written saints' lives of the era, the predominance of any characteristic may be due as much to the hagiographer's notions of propriety as to the needs of the lay people, a topic which will be discussed in more detail later.[52]

Briefly, Weinstein and Bell conclude that eleventh-century saints were usually upper-class males possessing great temporal power, "kings, princes, great prelates, and leaders of monastic orders", reflecting perhaps a longing and support for a stable social order. The twelfth century was one of reform and "a new dedication to the life of Christ and the *vita apostolica*," a reaction against the previous century's "simple equation of power and sanctity." The idea was to get back to basics, and emphasis was on orthodoxy, crusade, and the ideal of monasticism. The authors propose Bernard of Clairvaux as the twelfth century's "ideal saint." In the thirteenth century the trend away from earthly power continued and the mendicant Francis of Assisi was the ideal saint. In him was embodied the ultimate expression of the separation of holiness from earthly power. The ascetic was once again valued as in earlier times and holiness was pursued in public places rather than in the cloister. Further, there was a dawning emphasis on private as opposed to institutionalized conscience, which the authors refer to as a new "piety of personal commitment," and this new taste is reflected in the life stories of thirteenth-century saints which are "enriched with the details of inner discourse," and the trend becomes the dominant theme for the piety of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[53] Weinstein and Bell propose that the increasing popularity of the saints throughout the Middle Ages and the consistant evolution away from institutionalized piety toward more personal piety and personal authority mirror the laity's search for spiritual fulfillment in the context of a social order and religious hierarchy which prove increasingly unable to provide it for them.[54] This type of

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[52] Ibid., p. 205.
[53] Ibid., p. 247.
[54] Ibid., pp. 246, 247.

inquiry leads one to consider saints and their roles in modern times, even in the present century. What types of saints do we favor now and why? What aspects of the saintly ideal have changed? What has remained the same?

Although we learn much about a society by studying its saints we must remember that a saint is, by definition, unrepresentative of his or her contemporaries, and whose "conduct. . .radically differs from the norm, in nature as well as in quality." [55] Thus a saint may be someone to be admired for one reason or another, but someone one might not be entirely comfortable with as a family member. In fact, if we judge by the admittedly modern psychological standard of social integration as an indicator of mental health, many saints would be found lacking.[56] Asceticism and mysticism, even in eras when such practices are valued, set the practitioner apart from the rest of society. The isolation of the hermit, the cloistered or celled saint says as much about the subject's profound isolation from humanity as it does about his or her imtimacy with God. Even if we make allowances for the variety of contexts and social milieux in which saints exist, and the relativity of the term "normal," the difference between certain signs of sanctity and signs of eccentricity or even insanity is largely one of perception. True, not all saints are ascetics or hermits. Some dedicated their lives to engagement and service. Even so, saints in any time are not like the rest of us.

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[55] Brigitte Cazelles, *The Lady as Saint*, (Philadelphia, 1991), p. 22.
[56] Delooz, p. 205.

Chapter II: Reading the Saints

Flourishing alongside the saints and their cults in the Middle Ages was their literature. At the end of the Middle Ages, however, new ideas concerning the natural order, rationality, historicity, and so on brought about a drop in the popularity of saints' lives. The stories were regarded as too fantastic, simplistic, and untrue. About the *Golden Legend*, an extremely popular collection of lives in the vernacular compiled by Dominican friar Jacobus de Voragine in the thirteenth century, one author wrote that it contained "a great number of facts, most of them fictitious." [1] This attitude toward the *Golden Legend* and medieval hagiography in general more or less prevailed for the next several hundred years, and if the saints themselves somehow escaped total discredit and retained much of their influence within the Catholic tradition, their literature did not. Even those sympathetic to the presumed intentions of the medieval hagiographer and supportive of the devotion to the saints found it difficult to be complimentary of the legends which had been so popular. Hippolyte Delehaye, known as an avid defender of the honor of the saints, is not so generous with those who recorded their lives, calling them "semi-barbarous scribes...lacking in the very first qualification for exercising the critical faculty in however slight a degree."[2] He further excuses the unrealistic nature of much of medieval hagiography, reminding us that the "confusion between history and legend was never-ending. History, in the Middle Ages, meant everything that was told, everything that was written in books." [3] We see then that the legends often were considered at best to be unfortunate blemishes on the reputations of the holy people who had inspired them; at worst, they were ridiculous

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[1] Sherry L. Reames, *The "Legenda Aurea,"* (Madison, 1985), p. 44.
[2] Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints*, (Norwood, 1974), p. 66.
[3] Ibid.

fables, indicative of the taste for excess and the intellectual impoverishment of the Middle Ages.[4]

The causes for this disenchantment, and, in some cases, even contempt, become obvious to the modern reader after having read only a few of the lives. One notes "their lack of historical perspective,...their improbable miracles,...their ubiquitous sameness." [5] When it is viewed in the light of our modern sensibilities there seems to be very little in medieval hagiography to hold our interest, much less to merit serious literary study. However, despite some persistent condescension, a closer look at the genre has convinced most modern scholars that these works do indeed deserve serious study.

Each of those characteristics which distress us, when considered within the context in which the legends were written, reveals not necessarily a mass cultural naïveté, but the conventions of the genre. Equally important to bear in mind is the purpose of the genre. Delehaye defines a hagiographic document as one that is "of a religious character" and that has as its goal the edification of its audience. It is "inspired by devotion to the saints and intended to promote it."[6] Such a definition makes clear hagiography's distinction from history or biography as we now understand them. Its purpose is not to transmit certain verifiable facts about certain individuals, but to demonstrate to the community of believers what is holy.[7] If a certain saint performed a certain miracle or a different one; if a given event actually took place at the location stated or at another; if an episode is lifted from a legend already recorded and grafted onto a new one - all these things do not make the story fictitious in the medieval mind,

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[4] Reames, pp. 44, 45.
[5] Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, (Hanover, 1987), p. 2.
[6] Delehaye, p. 2.
[7] Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, (New York, 1988), p. 16.

because the illuminating truth behind the *topoi* in a saint's legend is more important than the mundane facts of any one individual's life.[8]

The "non-factual" nature of the texts and their striking repetitiveness must also be considered in light of the difference between the medieval ideas about what constitutes authority and our own. While we tend to embrace the theory that "seeing is believing," equating what is observable and provable with authority, such was not the case for the medieval person. When we read the legends we notice that the history, adventures, temptations, and miracles of the saints resemble each other as closely as to seem in many cases interchangable. In fact this is very likely what has happened, since in the eyes of the hagiographer and his audience authority rested not in observation but in tradition . It was, quite honestly, all the same to them, as we can see in the entreaty of one writer who asked for "understanding if he should mistakenly ascribe to his hero deeds performed by another, for if such things were not literally true of one saint, they were of another, and all were equal in Christ."[9] Not only were the patterns in the stories not considered to be faults, they were in fact even essential to the integrity and efficacy of the narrative. It will help us to remember that the saints' lives were more than entertainment for their audiences, they were the vehicles through which the ultimate truth of Christ was transmitted in an illiterate society, the means by which the people had access to the message of Christianity, which was present in every story. The more closely the "new" stories mirrored the "old" stories, and ultimately the story of Christ, the more powerful they were. The actions in the stories were more than history, they were ritual, and "the repetitiveness of actions taken from Scripture or from earlier saints' lives (often...appropriating the exact language) ensured the authenticity of the subject's sanctity." [10] In essence, the elements that in our eyes make the saints'

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[8] Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra*, (Princeton, 1978), p. 10.
[9] Elliott, p. 6.
[10] Heffernan, p. 6.

lives unbelievable made them, to the medieval participants, more believable, and worthy of trust. In addition, the fact that there are cases where the medieval authors acknowledge and even defend their methods and choices demonstrates, I believe, that we are not necessarily dealing with naïve writers who could not distinguish fact from fiction, or with a benighted and superstitious public who could only appreciate the fantastic. Rather we may consider the possibility that it is in fact the pattern of the stories, the repetition of certain elements, as well as the words themselves, which convey the meaning of the text, even if it was not in every case done or received consciously.

The structure of the text also varies depending on the type of saint about which it is written. Most medieval French saints' lives are based upon earlier Latin texts. In some cases they are translated from Latin to the vernacular rather faithfully, in other cases they are based more loosely on the original and embellished by the hagiographer. The structure of the vernacular text remains the same as its Latin source.

In his article "Two Types of Opposition and the Structure of Latin Saints Lives" Charles Altman distinguishes between two types of structure in medieval texts, which seem to express two types of contrast presented by the texts.[11] The first type of contrast Altman labels "diametrical opposition." Here the contrast is between absolute virtue and absolute vice, with no middle ground, no doubt about the choices offered to the hero of the story. Into this category fall the legends of the martyrs, or *passiones*. Altman notes as well that this diametrical opposition is also the kind found in many medieval epics. In this type of text we see the clash between two diametrically opposed cultures, world views, or sets of religious values. Neither can be compromised. Neither can tolerate the existence of the other. One must vanquish and the other fall.

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[11] Charles Altman, "Two Types of Opposition and the Structure of Latin Saints Lives," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, series 6, 1975, pp. 1-11.

Some of the earliest of these *passiones*, written in Greek or Latin, may indeed be considered historical in the sense that we understand the term; that is, they were adapted with relatively few alterations from the *procès-verbaux* of the interrogations and trials of the martyrs.[12] Many others exist, however, which, like their medieval successors, cannot be considered historical . Early or late, created or historical, these *passiones* do have in common the relatively simple structure noted by Altman. Allison Elliott, expanding Altman's argument, describes the *passio* as "a unified narrative depicting a single, heroic action...It opens with a confrontation scene between saint and tyrant during which the government representative tries to convince the future martyr to recant and sacrifice to the pagan gods." [13] Despite all attempts at persuasion, and even torture, the hero remains faithful, and is eventually killed. But the climax of the narrative, says Elliott, is not the death of the martyr but the verbal confrontation between the martyr and the representative of the pagan culture.[14] The death of the martyr actually occurs after the martyr's, and through him or her, the community's, moral victory over the tyrant. Likewise, the details of the martyr's life prior to this confrontation, the circumstances which led to this moment, are all incidental to the story, and are rarely present in the narrative. Although the names of the martyrs may be known, they are unimportant, and often denied by the martyr, who says only "I am a Christian." [15] The personal identity of the martyr is insignificant, and his or her words are the words of all Christians, not the words of any individual personality. Thus, except for the duration of the confrontation and the variety of tortures devised by the tyrant, there is relatively little room or need for elaboration.

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[12] Delehaye, p. 111.
[13] Elliott, p. 17.
[14] Ibid., p. 24.
[15] Ibid., p. 20.

The second type of opposition is the one Altman calls "gradational" opposition. In this form of contrast the opposition in not between good and bad, but between what is good, what is better, and what is best. In texts where this type of opposition is present, such as the *vitae* of the confessor saints and the medieval romances, shades of gray exist. The protagonist has many choices, all representing different levels of virtue and heroism. Between the *passio* and the *vita* even the role of the miracle, always an important proof of sanctity, differs, says Altman. "Miracles no longer demonstrate the difference between martyr and persecutor, between God and the Devil; instead they identify the exceptional characteristics of a single man and the extent to which he has progressed along the continuum stretching from the cares of the world to those of the spirit."[16] Because it is the life and the choices of the saint which are important, as opposed to the circumstances surrounding his or her death, the chronicler of that life often begins at the birth of the saint and sometimes even before.

It is this type of saint's legend, the *vita*, that is of interest in this paper. Here are found the repetitious patterns which give the modern reader so much difficulty, and it is precisely these patterns, along with certain of the cultic phenomena, which will be my focus in the next chapters.

Before moving on, a quick survey of French saints' lives is perhaps in order. Of interest to anyone who studies these legends is Paul Meyer's "Légendes hagiographiques en français."[17] He offers an overview of the verse and prose legends which have survived into modern times. In the section concerning the verse lives Meyer notes that he includes all poems having for their subject Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. Here he provides for each saint a description of the poem and whatever was known at that time of its date and authorship. Also listed are the manuscripts in

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[16] Altman, p. 4.

[17] Paul Meyer, "Légendes hagiographiques en français," *Histoire Littéraire de la France*, 33, pp. 328-458.

which the legends are found, the location of the manuscript(s), the poem's first line, and information on editions which have been done (if there are any). Since his work was published early in this century it does not contain all work completed on the legends, but it is the obvious starting point for those who have an interest in French saints' lives.

Meyer places the poems into three groups. First, the largest group, which consists of legends from very early in the history of Christianity. Because they existed so early they found their way into the liturgy, and thus spread with the faith itself. They are the most commonly known legends; however, they are very often among the most fantastical, and are of dubious historical merit. These lives, says Meyer, were the greatest successes, and generally survive in several versions and numerous manuscripts.

The second group consists of legends whose subjects were venerated on a predominantly local, rather than Church-wide, scale. They were translated into French for specific dioceses or congregations. Among these are Saint Evroul, Saint Mathurin, Saint Eloi, and Saint Alban. The third group contains the legends of saints who were contemporary with those who wrote their lives: Saint Thomas Becket, Saint Francis, Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, and the like. In addition, Meyer says, there are other poems which have for subject Jesus, the Virgin Mary, Joseph, and other characters from the Old and New Testaments. All in all, he counts well over two hundred poems which he classifies as saints' lives.

The form of the French poems is greatly varied: there are poems in all types of rhyme and meter, destined to be recited, read, and even sung on pilgrimages.[18]

A more recent count of the poems considered to be saints' lives fixes the number at approximately 205, excluding legends concerning Christ and the Virgin

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[18] Meyer, "Légendes hagiographiques en français," pp. 332-334.

Mary.[19] By the century in which they were written their numbers are: from the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries we have only three poems: Eulalie (ninth), Léger (tenth), and Alexis (eleventh). The twelfth century leaves us 28 verse lives; the thirteenth century, 114. From the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries we have 37 and 23, respectively. Of these poems I have chosen three to study in detail. These three poems concern three male saints: Saint Fiacre of Brie, Saint Giles of Provence, and Saint Thomas Becket of Canterbury. Their lives date from the mid-twelfth century to the fifteenth century.

The life of Fiacre, called *La Vie et legende de sainct Fiacre en Brye*, is an octosyllabic poem of 928 lines. The 8-line stanzas are rhymed *ababbcbc*. It originates in the fifteenth century and is preserved in a Gothic edition by Jehan Trepperel. All that is known of the historical Fiacre is that he emigrated to France, near Meaux, from Ireland in the 7th century, and died there around 670. [20]

The *Vie de Saint Gile* was written in 1170 by Guillaume de Berneville, based on a Latin *Vita Sancti Egidii*. It is 3794 octosyllabic lines arranged in rhyming pairs. It has been edited by Gaston Paris and Alphonse Bos and published by *La Société des anciens textes français* in 1875. The only manuscript of this life is in Florence at the Laurentienne Library. The historical Giles never was. The Latin *vita* was created in the 10th century in an effort to add prestige to a certain monastery in the Flavian Valley.[21]

The principal version of Thomas Becket's life studied is that of Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence, written in 1174. It has been edited by Emmanuel Walberg using

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[19] Paul Barrette, "Fifteenth Century Hagiographic Poems in French," in *Le Gai Savoir*, (Madrid, 1983), pp. 55-68.

[20] Jacques DuBois, *Un Sanctuaire monastique au moyen-age*, (Geneva, 1976), p. 259.

[21] Phyllis Johnson and Brigitte Cazelles, *Le vain siecle guerpir: A Literary Approach to Sainthood Through Old French Hagiography of the Twelfth Century*, North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, No. 205, (Chapel Hill, 1979), p. 258.

all six of the known manuscripts. The poem consists of 6180 alexandrine lines, in 5-line stanzas, mono-rhymed. It was written shortly after the death of the saint, and Guernes gathered much of his information from eye witnesses and those who knew Becket. A second version of Becket's life, written by a Benedictine monk named Beneit around 1184 is referred to for certain comparisons with Guernes' version. It is 2124 lines long, arranged in 6-line stanzas of tail-rhyme. It survives in six manuscripts, and is based on a Latin life.

These particular lives were chosen for two principal reasons. The saints were male, and they were associated with a pilgrimage to a specific site. Their gender and the fact that they were the focus of pilgrimage are both important links to their modern-day counterpart to whom they are compared.

As I read the lives I noticed characteristics, themes, and events which are common to most saints' legends. The next chapter, *The Patterns of a Saintly Life*, explores those themes and the stories which contain them. The chapter which follows it, *The (re)Making of Saint Elvis*, traces those same themes through several stories of the life of Elvis Presley. Since there is an enormous amount of writing about Elvis, the books and articles studied were only those concerning his life, family, and personal influence. Materials on his musical impact were excluded. Also in that chapter we will look at other elements, such as pilgrimage, common to both the saints and Elvis.

Chapter III: The Patterns of a Saintly Life

The events and circumstances which characterize a saint begin around the time of his or her conception or birth. First of all, as noted earlier, the majority of saints whose lives were recorded in the Middle Ages come from the upper classes. It is possible that saints truly did tend to have such backgrounds, the upper classes having perhaps the leisure to contemplate the condition of their souls that the hard-working lower classes did not enjoy. Michael Goodich, in a study of thirteenth-century saints, explores the home environments of well-to-do families and the circumstances which might have tended to produce saints - absent parents, fostering practices or monastery rearing, large families where a particularly quiet or sensitive child might be overlooked or ignored, early onset of adult responsibilities, and so on. The extreme religiosity which makes a saint and leads him or her to a life of self-denial, Goodich believes, could be an unhappy child or youth's response to the conditions of such a childhood.[1] It is also true that a noble background is one of the motifs typically occurring in the genre. Elliott notes that many saints are known to have had humble beginnings, but the "facts" of their heritage have been subordinated to the convention of noble birth, which she says hagiography borrows from the heroic epic or the fairy tale.[2] Such a theme "heightens the contrast of ...saintly humility."[3] Interestingly, this pattern is dramatically different from the archetype presented by Jesus, whole life is generally the model for most saints' *vitae*.

Among the French saints' *vitae* treated here an interesting variety was found. Fiacre, the relocated Irishman, springs from nobility, as he was "filz d'ung conte" (line 33). Saint Giles, the fictional Greek, also boasted a noble heritage.

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[1] Michael Goodich, *Vita perfecta*, (Stuttgart, 1982), p. 83.
[2] Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, (Hanover, 1987), p.77.
[3] Ibid., p. 78.

De Gréce fud, Giles out non;

Ne fud pas nez de basse main,

De vavasseur ne de vilain:

Nez fud de princes e de reis;

Tuz ses lignages fud gregeis. (lines 18-22)

An example of the altering of facts to suit the accepted standard is presented in the two versions of the Life of Saint Thomas Becket. The earliest French version is written by Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence, around 1174, only 4 years after the saint's death. In it we read:

E Gilebert Beket fu sis pere apelez,

E sa mere, Mahalt; de nette gent fu nez. (lines 169,170)

"Nette" can be translated as "clean" or "decent"- acknowledging what Johnson and Cazelles call Becket's "well-known bourgeois background" (p.177). A later version of the life, written by Beneit, a Benedictine monk , around 1184, follows more closely the pattern we have come to expect from a *vita*. He writes:

Il esteit de Lundres né,

Des plus nobles de la cité. (lines 19-20)[4]

In their book *Saints and Society*, Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell note that "stories of supernatural signs before birth or in early infancy are not uncommon" in the life of a saint, and serve to mark the saint as exceptional from the outset.[5] The Christian archetype of this characteristic is found in the story of Jesus. Angelic visitors, dreams, and a star shining over the birthplace all figure into the tableau of

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[4] Phyllis Johnson and Brigitte Cazelles, *Le vain siecle guerpir: A Literary Approach to Sainthood Through Old French Hagiography of the Twelfth Century*, North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, No. 205, (Chapel Hill, 1979), p. 177.

[5] Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society*, (Chicago, 1982), p. 18.

Jesus' birth, and such portents are also present in classical works perhaps imitated by the hagiographer, such as those by Sulpicius Severus and Suetonius.[6] Thomas Becket's mother had several dreams. One was at conception:

> Quant la dame conçut primes l'enfant, sunga
> Ke l'eve de Tamise tut' en sun sain entra.
> Uns mestres li espunst a cui el le mustra:
> "Mult pueples, fist li il, cist eins guvernera". (lines 171-174)

After his birth she dreamed that the baby was uncovered in his cradle. When she went in her dream to cover him, she saw that he was, in fact, covered. As she began to unfold the coverlet it started to grow larger. At first it outgrew the room, then the house, then the road. Then

> ...a Smethefeld turnerent.
> Uncor fu Smethefeld de cel palie mult mendre.
> Une voiz unt oie desur eles descendre;
> Dist que tut' Engletere ne purreit pas comprendre
> La grandeur de cel palie. Mult poum bien entendre
> Li sanc al seint se deit par tut le mund estendre. (lines 195-200)

Saints are typically only children, says Elliott, and there are several possible reasons for this. The first, and most obvious reason is the tradition which holds that Jesus had no brothers or sisters. Another reason may be that the birth of the saint is considered miraculous, often the answer to the prayers of the parents .[7] Since the child is a special gift from God, to the parents and to the world, it seems logical that he or she be unique. Saint Giles, Saint Alexis, Saint Genevieve are all only children, and

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[6] Goodich, p. 83.
[7] Elliott, p. 79.

there are others whose status in this regard is simply not mentioned. A study of the French lives of Fiacre by Porter and Baltzell notes that while all the French versions present Fiacre as an only son, the Latin legends say that he was the younger son of the King of Scotland. Later, according to these versions, when he had already fled to Meaux, his older brother was overthrown and he was offered the throne, which he renounced. For this reason Fiacre is sometimes represented with a crown at his feet.[8] That this tendency is a method of underscoring the child's uniqueness, and is not simply coincidence, is illustrated, according to Elliott, by the fact that "the more obviously fictional the biography, the greater the likelihood that the saint will be an only child."[9] Again, the two versions of Becket offer illustration of the license of the hagiographer to the "necessary" changes. Guernes' version makes no mention of brothers or sisters, but in Beneit's version Thomas is a gift from God to his parents, who had prayed for a child.

> Kant il fu né de sa mere,
> Mult esteit joius sun pere,
> E par resun,
> Kar il n'aveit sorur ne frere. (lines 67-70)[10]

As the saintly child grows he or she is frequently described as being different from all the other children. The child is a *puer senex* or *puella senex*, "a boy or girl with the wisdom of old age."[11] This child often spends an inordinate amount of time

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[8] M.E. Porter and J.H. Baltzell, "The Medieval French Lives of Saint Fiacre," *Modern Language Quarterly* 17, pp. 21-27.
[9] Elliott, p. 80.
[10] Johnson and Cazelles, p. 177.
[11] Ibid., p. 78.

in church and shows none of the bad habits most other children do, such a "vain pursuits, absentmindedness, pettiness, pouting, shamelessness and changeability."[12]

The child Fiacre shows the wisdom of the aged quite clearly. God claimed him early in life, and Fiacre responded, abandoning normal play and other childish pursuits.

Son cueur a Dieu du tout donnoit,
Son penser, son intelligence,
Et par penitance junoit
Souvent et faisoit abstinence
De chasteté, de continence...

Toujours devotement prioyt
Jhesus pour sa salvation.
Jamais ou bien petit ne riot,
Ne prenoit jubilation,
Mais toujours en devotion
Estoit vers Dieu ou il pensoit,
Et de ceste condition
Son pere fort se esbahissoit. (lines 57-61, 65-72)

When his father remarks on Fiacre's unusually serious nature, the future saint responds that he would gladly be joyful and seek pleasures if his father could tell him with certainty that death had no power to claim the young as easily as the old (lines 73-88). He cautions his father:

Fol est qui ne pense de l'ame;
Quant est du corps terre devient
Soit de noble homme ou gentil fame. (lines 102-104)

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[12] Goodich, p. 89.

and announces his intentions to depart and lead a life of abstinence.

Saint Giles, at the age of seven, is already "pleins...d'espiritel science" (line 51). The other noblemen's sons often tease him because he does not want to play with them, but he accepts their teasing calmly, as he takes his joy from the spiritual.

The saint as a child should also begin to show other qualities expected of one of his or her future stature. Saint Giles' compassion and generosity as a child are notable, and even lead to his first miracle. As he walks to school one day he sees a poor dying child. When Giles inquires into his plight, the boy replies:

"Sire," feit il, "jo nel puis meis;
C'est merveille ke jo m'en teis.
La faim m'occist, le freit me gréve:
Deu doinst ke ma vie seit bréve!
Trop ai vescu, ço est dolur:
Deu la me doinst einz demain jur!
La mort merreit mun desirer
E jo l'avrei sanz demurer;
Ne puis vivre plus lungement:
La mort m'est près, trop bien le sent." (lines 115-124)

Young Giles is so moved by this speech that, although he carries no money, he gives what he has - his coat - to the boy. Immediately the boy jumps up, healed and whole. When Giles returns home, his father notices that he no longer has his coat, and asks about it. Giles says that he has given it to a poor boy. By way of a lengthy sermon on the Last Judgment , and the fate of those who show no sensitivity to the poor, Giles explains his reasons. In essence, it was the least he could do. At these words his father marvels "ke humme do son aage Deit en tant d'ure estre si sage" (lines

241,242). The young saint is rewarded with a new, better coat, which he soon also gives away to the poor.

As the saint grows up and goes through life there are typically several virtures that he or she practices with much more vigor than the average Christian, among them generosity, humility, and chastity. Very important is the virtue of generosity, especially toward the poor. Over and over we see these saints - most often very wealthy and powerful - renouncing their goods and their status, giving their possessions to the needy, and trying to retreat to a simpler life.

After the death of his parents Giles takes stock of all the worldly goods he has inherited. These include vineyards, gold, silver, many horses, and fine vessels. He begins to give them away to the worthy poor, which excludes lechers, prostitutes, and *jongleurs*. But to others,

> ...as povres abbeies,
> As punz e as maladeries,
> As malades e as contreiez
> E as leprus e as defeiz:
> A cels departi sa richaise. (lines 273-278)

His largesse alarms his peers and advisors, and they urge him to restrain himself - how will he support himself if he continues to give away all he has? A wiser course of action, they counsel, is to marry a nice girl from a good family, have children, and secure an heir to avoid war; or, if not, become a monk. But, they say, continuing in this manner could lead to a bad reputation as a weakling and a disgrace to his honorable ancestors. It is interesting to note that Giles' first great act of generosity - giving his coat to the dying beggar- seems to be motivated primarily by compassion. This second act, dispensing even more goods of much greater value, seems to be

primarily an act of renunciation, motivated by Giles' desire to be unencumbered by the cares of the world than by a need to help the less fortunate.

In the case of Thomas Becket, however, we see a much more complex situation. His *vita* presents a man who apparently enjoys many of the pleasures his rank and wealth afford him, and he never renounces it all (although he chooses not to participate in any of the immorality common among those of his rank). Yet this wealth does not truly tarnish him, but enables him to be even more generous to others. We read in line 416 that "En la terre n'aveit plus large viandier," and unlike Giles, he does not necessarily exclude prostitutes and lechers from his generosity. It is not duty that prompts Thomas to give, but love.

> Vedves e orphanins e povres avait chiers;
>
> Mes asise n'en sot serganz ne almoners,
>
> Mes tut adès les pot, e fist bien volentiers. (lines 422-424)

Throughout all of his troubles and conflicts with the king, even when he is in fear for his own life, Thomas never loses that love, or his zeal for giving. Indeed, he wishes for more opportunities to give.

> Vedves e orphenins e povres guverna,
>
> Dras, viande e sollers e deniers lur dona;
>
> E trop poi en veneient a lui, ço li sembla (lines 4758-4760)

At one point Thomas is verbally attacked in the court by various nobles, and flees back to his monastery. Upon his arrival, he attends services and then sits down to supper. When he realizes that all his followers have fled and there is no one to share his meal with him, he again demonstrates his giving nature.

> Dunc rova qu'um fesist les povres enz venir.
>
> Les tables en fist l'um del refreitur emplir.
>
> Jo crei qu'il pensa d'el que des ventre farsir;

Nepurquant il manja assez, tut a leisir,

E ad fait bel semblant pur les suens esbaudir. (lines 1981-1985)

A saint must also be humble, acknowledging that his or her great powers and piety come not from the self but from God. The *vita* of Saint Giles offers quite a bit of evidence of the saint's humility. The second miracle attributed to him is the healing of a snakebite victim. When the man seeks him out, having heard of his great holiness, and begs for healing, Giles weeps and responds that he has no power at all, but suggests that they pray. God heals the man, and all the witnesses cry to Giles for help. The saint answers:

"...Ço ke avez ici veut

N'est mie par mei avenut;

Pur veir sachez, e jol vus di,

Par sa creance est cist gari.

Loez en Deu, ne mie mei,

Kar par la fei ke jo vus dei

Jo n'ai plus de vus poesté

De doner a hume santé;..." (lines 469-476)

Later Giles is sharing a mountaintop with the holy hermit Veredemius, wanting only to lead a quiet life of devotion, and "Entr'els n'out arguill ne buffei" (line 1295). After two years of this holy lifestyle, there arrive four men seeking healing, which they ask of Giles. Although he has been the instrument of divine healing before, Giles remains humble and tells them that if they want to be healed they should address themselves to Veredemius (lines 1341-1354). However they insist that it is Giles they seek. The holy man agrees to pray for the sick fellow but says modestly, "Ne sai si lui vaudra neent." (line 1368). The man is healed, but Giles now faces a dilemma: if he stays he will become more famous than Veredemius, who has been so kind to him; in

addition, all his efforts to renounce the cares of the world as a hermit will have been in vain. His great humility leaves him with only one course of action: he must leave.

Becket is also praised for his humility, although it may not always be obvious to the casual observer. Guernes tells us that Thomas

> Mult ert humbles de quer, e de vis ert mult fiers
>
> As povres huemles ert, as halz de fier reguart...
>
> Mes quel qu'il fust dehors, n'i ot puint de mal art;
>
> A Deu guardot adès la dedenzeine part.
>
> Ja sait ceo que il fust e orguillus e vains
>
> En cures seculers e en semblanz forains,
>
> Chastes ert de sun cors e en espirit sains. (lines 290, 291, 294-298)

Since a saint must be humble, Guernes assures us that Thomas is humble at heart. However , his semblance of pride and vanity ultimately serve God's purpose: these surface qualities help endear him to the king and enable him to occupy the high position from which he will protect and defend the Church, and which will make possible his holy martyrdom.

If saints' levels of generosity or poverty vary, or if their humility is more, or less, prominant, or if their future sanctity manifests itself early or late, there is one characteristic which is not optional and admits no degree. That virtue is chastity. Weinstein and Bell write that it among all other Christian virtues is essential not only to the practice of a saintly life, but also to others' perception of the saint's holiness.[13] The stringency of this requirement stems, they hold, from the dualistic ideas of Hellenistic culture which passed through Hellenized Jews like Paul into Christian culture. This dualism between mind and body led to the idea "that the body polluted the

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[13] Weinstein and Bell, p. 73.

spirit, and that nothing polluted the body more than sex."[14] Of course the most desirable option for saints is virginity, but it is also possible to convert to a life of chastity after having known the flesh. In fact, this configuration does fulfill an important function when it occurs, since "the intercessive role of the repentant sinner brings new hope to mankind." [15]

One saint who knew from a conveniently early age (that is, before it became an issue at all) that he was called to chastity was Fiacre. We have already seen that he was somber and chaste in childhood, and his biographer tells us that it was in this period of his life that "il renunça mariage" (line 64). The saint not only stands firm in his resolve to defy his father's wishes for his marriage to "une fille de hault lignage, fille de conte et de contesse" (lines 117,118), he also resists the pleas of this lady herself. She comes to Fiacre in person and offers her self and her service to him. Fiacre remains firm but gentle.

> Fiacre respondit, "Ma belle,
> Ma volenté je vous diré,
> Sans vous en mentir, qui est telle
> Que jamais ne me mariré,
> En chasteté Dieu serviré,
> Mais ma belle je vous mercie
> De ce que m'avés desiré
> Avoir en vostre compagnie." (lines 129-136)

As do many saints, Fiacre attempts to persuade her of the advantages of chastity. He urges her to retain her virginity "car c'est une fleur tresfort belle" (line 139). Fiacre is forced to flee his home, father, and fiancee in order to maintain this

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[14] Ibid., p. 74.
[15] Johnson and Cazelles, p.152.

vow he has made. Even after this episode his father and his fiancee are unable to understand his decision, and continue to search for him. But Fiacre, on the road to perfect sanctity, is unmovable.

There is also no doubt about Giles' commitment to a life of holy chastity. Although seeming to capitulate to his companions' urgings to settle down with a wife, Giles' inner desire to lead a chaste life compels him to flee under cover of night. From that moment on women play very little role in any aspect of Giles' life.

Even Thomas Becket, that lively saint with his abundance of very human qualitites and contradictions, seems to have been impervious to sexual desire and the temptations of women. In one instance, for example, after he has been made Chancellor but before his consecration as Archbishop, Thomas receives messages from a woman who has lately been the king's lover. She loves him still, but senses his dwindling affection for her, and seeks consolation from the Chancellor. The man with whom Thomas is staying, whom Guernes refers to as "mult legiers" (line 310), decides that he will catch Thomas in the midst of what he assumes to be grave indiscretion. One night he sneaks into the Chancellor's room, expecting to find him in the bed with the woman, which he will then report to the king. When he enters the room , he is shocked

Car de tut le lit n'iert un des draz remuez
D'eissi cum ot esté le seir tart aturnez.
Donc quida que il fust a cele dame alez;
Mist la chandeile avant pur plus estre acertez:
Lez le lit a la terre jut Thomas li senez.
Cuvert ert d'un mantel de menu haubergié,
E descuvert li erent les jambes e li pié.
En ureisuns avait sun cors must travaillié;

De dreite lasseté s'a a tere culchié,

E dormi fermement, pur ceo k'ot tant veillié. (lines 321-330)

This episode, which concerns only a suspected breach of chastity, and not even a true temptation, is the only hint of sexuality in the *vita*. Whatever Thomas' other weaknesses or temptations, he meets this most crucial requirement for sainthood with apparently little difficulty.

Perhaps the most obvious and awe-inspiring outward sign of sanctity is the miracle. The lives of the saints are full of them - healings, control of nature, bizarre relationships with wild beasts, and so on. These activities not only manifest a saint's compassion and "social commitment," according to Johnson and Cazelles, but are also acts "which verify the saints' intercessive power." [16]

The accounts of the miracles of Giles and Fiacre, having heroes who are either fictional or so distant in time and place from the time of the writing of their French *vitae* that the men themselves are lost, flow with practically no interruption by other, more mundane events. Becket's *vita*, however, chronicles more realistically the life of an actual man, though he be a saint, who was still remembered by the people who heard the story read. Consequently, the author focuses more on his heroism and other saintly virtues and less on supernatural events. However, Thomas was gifted with healing power. For example, in one instance, one of the monks under his care has been suffering greatly from a terrible stomach malady. Continuous prayer to the Virgin has been unsuccessful in bringing any relief, until one night Mary appears to him in a vision and tells him to seek out Thomas and have him touch the monk's stomach "tut entur" (line 3660). He goes to the saint the next morning. He begs Thomas so that the saint agrees to place his hand upon the monk's stomach, and gives him some unknown thing to drink. At this point

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[16] Ibid., p. 169.

Guaires ne demura que li freres chaï
Venim e pureture, grant merveille, vomi,
E jut mult lungement. Tuz greilles sus sailli.
Par les mains al saint humme de s'enferté guari. (lines 3667-3670)

Guernes goes on to say that many people, including the daughter of a rich man, were cured by eating the food left over from Thomas' meals.

One miraculous ability that recurs in the stories about the saints is that of knowing of their own impending deaths. Saints, being human after all, must die like everyone else, but perhaps this knowledge of the time of their deaths does symbolize a kind of power over death. They may prepare themselves and their followers, use the occasion to expound upon some theological point, or to demonstrate once again their courage.

Giles, after a lifetime of service and asceticism, is in ill health. The Holy Spirit announces to him the day when he will die.

Nostre sire l'ad bien mandé:
Par saint esperit a nuncié
Quel jur il deit prendre congé:
Ben sout le jur k'il deit finer
E de cest siecle returner; (lines 3499-3502)

Saint Thomas has a vision in which the Lord tells him of his impending martyrdom saying, "...Tu glorifieras M'iglise par tun sanc, e eshaucié seras." Lines 3858-3859)

Later he has a dream in which the king orders him seized "E escorchier le chief a cutaus tut entur" (line 3877), which does indeed foreshadow the way he is to die. In this dream, however, he feels no pain and even laughs aloud, which angers the king.

When the day does arrive for Thomas' martyrdom, he seems more ready than ever. When he is seized he makes no protest, and Guernes writes that

> ...puis qu'il repaira d'essil d'ultre la mer,
> Dist il, oiant plusurs qui l'ai oï cunter,
> Qu'il murreit en cel an, bien le volt afermer.
> Or n'i out mais de l'an que dous jurs a passer:
> Li tierz ert pres alez, u il deveit finer.
> Nis le jur de Noel li oï un gehir.
> Oiant pluisurs qu'i erent pur sun sermun oïr:
> "Ci sui venuz, fait il, entre vus mort suffrir." (lines 5421-5428)

It is perhaps the death of the saint which is the most important single event of his or her life. Not only is this the day that the saint goes to dwell forever in heaven, but it also marks the point at which the saint's power and benevolence can become, at least theoretically, universal. The miracles, the signs, the special manifestations of God's favor and the saint's power, do not cease. In fact, the death and burial of a saint are perfect opportunities for supernatural phenomena. At Saint Agnes' burial thunder and lightning threaten pagans who seek to prevent Christians from venerating her. [17]

At a saint's death there is often some mysterious transformation of his or her body . This transformation may manifest itself as sudden recognition of someone who was unrecognizeable by those who had known him or her, as in the case of Alexis. Sometimes the saint has been disguised, and his or her true identity becomes known .[18] Since saints, being quite frequently ascetics, attempt to subdue and mortify their bodies they tend to grow ugly. From fasting and lack of sleep they become thin, wrinkled,

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[17] Ibid., p. 98.
[18] Elliott, p. 121.

and unhealthy. From ignoring the comfort of the bath and the worldly concern of fashion they become dirty and vermin-infested, and sometimes their clothes become rags, then rot away completely. When Saint Thomas is prepared for burial the monks discover that underneath the finery, albeit subdued, of his rank, he wore a hair shirt and drawers. In these garments they find

> ...de menue vermine,
> Qu'a granz torches i ert par tut, e a traine;
> E sa char guerreout, ke merveille esteit fine
> Que il poeit suffrir einsi grant discipline. (lines 5807-5810)

Yet it is known that the effects of all these ravages strenghten the soul, and after death, the soul's beauty and power are transmitted back to the body. The holy corpses often remain uncorrupted, in death exempt from the return to dust suffered by most mortal bodies, perhaps as a reward for the suffering to which they are subjected in life. Saint Mary of Egypt's body lies exposed in the desert for a year before it is discovered by Zozimas and buried, but it has not decomposed, and emits no odor. Not only do the mortal remains not give off the odor of decay, they often actually give off sweet odors (*odor sanctitatis*). Uitti suggests that this miracle of uncorrupted body "symbolizes the purity of their souls."[19]

After his death Fiacre performs "des grans miracles inumerables" (line 697) including the spectacular river rescue of two drowning children and their father who were on a pilgrimage to his tomb, their mother praying to Fiacre the whole time from the shore (lines 713-800). Other posthumous miralces are attributed to Fiacre in this

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[19] Karl D. Uitti, *Story, Myth, and Celebration in Old French Narrative 1050-1200*, (Princeton, 1973), p. 22.

vita, including his thwarting of an English king who comes to take Fiacre's body back with him to England, and the author stresses that

Tant d'aultres miracles Fiacre
A faiz qu'on ne le sçauroit dire. (lines 865-866)

The miracles of Thomas Becket begin very soon after his death, and Guernes marvels at this sign of God's favor, unparalleled in the recent centuries.

Ne fu unches oï des le siecle primur
Que Deus a humme mort mustrat si grant amur;
Mult granz miracles fait pur lui e nuit e jur.
En terre est Deus od nus pur amur al martyr,
E les morz fait revivre, mutz parler, surz oir,
Les contraiz redrescier, gutus, fevrus guarir,
Ydropikes, leprus en santé restablir,
Cius veer, en lur sens les desvez revenir. (lines 5883-5890)

Not all of the saint's miracles were chronicled by the *vitae*. Some were also recorded much later, at the tombs or shrines by the monks who guarded them.[20] Many of these miracles took place far away, and when the grateful petitioner made a pilgrimage to the shrine, the miracles were reported to the monks, often bringing an offering as well.

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[20] Ronald Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, (Totowa, 1977), p. 10.

Chapter IV: The (re)Making of Saint Elvis

There are quite a few biographies of Elvis Presley, some by family members, some by "very close" friends, even some by medical personnel who remembered him. These biographies report many facts about Elvis, many of which disagree. There are at least three or four, however, in which certain characteristics and episodes of Elvis's life bear a striking resemblance to the lives of the saints. In this chapter I will explore some of those characteristics which seem to link the stories of Elvis with the stories I have studied in the previous chapter.

Noble Birth

As with most saints, Elvis's story begins with the events surrounding his birth. Most saints, as we know, are born of noble families. In this detail the life of Elvis differs from the traditional. The family of Elvis Presley was poor and of very low social standing, and I have found no evidence of any altering of their socioeconomic status in order to raise it; rather, there are numerous stories which seem to exaggerate their poverty. Certainly there are no claims that he was, even secretly, of aristocratic lineage. In *Elvis Presley: A Bio-Bibliography*, Patsy Guy Hammontree refutes what she calls the "Presley legend" which holds that the family was so poor that Elvis "had nothing to play with except an old guitar, bought in place of a bicycle which his parents could not afford." [1] He had many toys, she says, and as a teenager even owned a car. In addition, Hammontree claims, "they had a close family relationship that insulated them from some of the horrors of being poor."[2] Indeed the story of Elvis's early life has been altered, although not according to the pattern popular in

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[1] Patsy Guy Hammontree, *Elvis Presley: A Bio-Bibliography*, (Westport, 1985), p. 6.
[2] Ibid., p. 7.

medieval hagiography, but apparently in conformance with another standard. In the largely Protestant milieu of the American south Elvis's poverty surely calls to the minds of believers the childhood and life of that most prominent of all saintly heroes, Jesus. Without the background and popular tradition of the legends of the saints in which one participates within the Catholic tradition, the life of Jesus is the most accessible model of saintly virtue. In addition to this argument, there is also the fact that the ideal of nobility is not one generally held in traditional or modern American society, as perhaps it was in medieval society. Since a saint does in many ways reflect the values and mythology of the society from which he or she arises it does not seem surprising that an American saint of the twentieth century hails not from nobility but from the meek of the earth.

Mysterious Signs at Birth

A saint's birth is often heralded by miraculous signs indicating his or her future greatness. In at least two accounts of Elvis's life such portents are mentioned. One of these supernatural signs was an aura surrounding the house when Elvis was born. In Ed Parker's account *Inside Elvis*, it is Elvis himself who relates this detail, as he heard it from his father. He says, "I had a still-born twin brother...and at the time of our birth, my father said that there was a canopy of light over the house. Its aura lighted his way to the well outside the home in Tupelo. My father was amazed...He wondered in his mind what manner of occurrence this was. What was its significance? What did it mean?...Could it have been for me?" [3] The second account presents the episode, with a few embellishments, as spoken by Elvis's father. He says to Elvis: " The whole area around the house itself was lit up with a blue light...And at that very moment, the wind stopped blowing...You were born at the very moment the wind

[3] Ed Parker, *Inside Elvis*, (Orange, 1978), pp. 133, 134.

stopped howling. " [4] Later in the same episode Vernon Presley reveals another mysterious sign. " I know the exact night Elvis was conceived. I knew something special was happening because at the moment of conception my mind blanked out - it went into complete darkness. " [5]

The Saint as Only Child

In the stories of Elvis Presley's life, much is made of the fact that he was an only child, largely because of the unusual circumstances of his birth. Accounts disagree on the presence or absence of a doctor, but it is certain that Elvis was born at home. Although this fact in itself is not unusual given the times or circunstances, Hammontree relates the stranger events of the night: "The Presleys did not have modern technology to warn them that Gladys Presley carried twins. When the baby they expected arrived on January 8, 1935, it was dead. Vernon Presley, in a interview...remarked on the difficulty of the birth, mentioning that it was extraordinarily protracted...(R)ecalling his sorrow when after the long labor the baby boy was delivered stillborn, Vernon remarked, 'I was desolate at the loss of our child. But then my father put his hand on my wife's stomach and announced, "Vernon, there's another baby here".' The Presleys named both babies...Jesse Garon and Elvis Aron." [6] The stillbirth of his twin brother remained an event of great significance for Elvis throughout his life, even heavily influencing his ideas of his own destiny. Jesse Garon represented for Elvis a link between his life and the spiritual world, according to the version written by Stearn. Through his dead brother Elvis received a divine mandate. He says " ' It was my brother's voice that came to me. It was like a guiding light, I could have been no more that 4 or 5 years old, when I started hearing his voice

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[4] Jess Stearn, *Elvis, His Spiritual Journey*, (Norfolk, 1982), p. 212.
[5] Ibid., pp. 212, 213.
[6] Hammontree, pp. 4, 5.

plainly...he told me what he wanted me to do...He wanted me to care for other people, to put myself in their place, to see their point of view. To love them. It was like the voice of conscience.' " [7]

Different as a Child / *Puer Senex*

As children saints are already different from their peers, often quiet, wise, and spiritual. Of the young Elvis we read that he "developed a sensitive nature." [8] He did not engage in hunting with his father or friends like most southern boys do, insisting that he did not want to kill birds. His father remembers him as extraordinarily well-behaved, needing punishment in childhood only once or twice, and then for "minor offenses."[9] Family members recall the boy Elvis's neatness and reliability. Friends comment on his "strong sense of identity." [10] People who knew him as a teenager and pre-star remember most particularly his niceness, sensitivity, and good manners.

Another theme common to the popular stories of Elvis, as well as to the stories of the saints, is that he was often lonely as a child, due no doubt to his difference from his age-mates and his extraordinarily close relationship to his parents. Hammontree refutes this legend, however, presenting actual details of the lives and movements of the Presley family which show that, in reality, Elvis grew up in the midst of a large and fairly close-knit group of cousins, aunts, and uncles.[11] Again, evidence of apparent alteration of fact to fit a "standard" of saintly childhood. This altered image persists and spreads, as one biography written for young people says: "No one has ever described Elvis as a particularly normal little boy, and he certainly didn't have a normal

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[7] Stearn, p. 13.
[8] Hammontree, p. 7.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., p. 9.
[11] Ibid., p. 8.

childhood. He was quiet and shy and had few friends."[12] Later this biographer mentions that Elvis showed "an early interest in gospel singing" and loved church, and preferred religious music programs on the radio.[13]

Although no miracles have been attributed to him as a child, stories reveal that Elvis also practiced saintly generosity at an early age. Stearn's book relates an episode from Elvis's sixth year. The Presleys had saved money for quite a while to buy a tricycle for their son. Elvis loved his gift, and his parents deem the money spent "well worth the sacrifice."[14] One day the tricycle is missing, and his mother asks Elvis if he has loaned it to a friend.

> "No," said young Elvis, hanging his head a little, "I gave it away."
>
> "You gave it away?" She was incredulous.
>
> Vernon was equally taken aback. He shook his head. "I don't understand the boy. He loved to ride it, and yet he gave it away."
>
> He went off, still shaking his head, and came back in a few minutes with the tricycle...
>
> Elvis rode the tricycle down the block once more, and the next day, the tricycle was missing again.
>
> Elvis had found somebody else to give it to.
>
> This time, the Presleys, with a sigh, let him have his way.
>
> "We can't punish him," said Gladys,"because he puts others before himself. It is a good Christian trait." [15]

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[12] Richard Wootten, *Elvis!*, (New York, 1985), p. 10.
[13] Ibid., pp. 10-13.
[14] Stearn, p. 69.
[15] Ibid.

Saintly Qualities: Generosity, Humility, Chastity

Of all the saintly qualities attributed to Elvis, generosity is probably the most widely touted. Most Americans know stories of Elvis giving Cadillacs as tips to waitresses and others he deemed in need, bestowing jewelry and other expensive items upon complete strangers, as well as providing quite nicely for many friends and relatives. Those who have written the *vitae* of Elvis provide abundant details of Elvis's legendary generosity. Ed Parker devotes several pages to the descriptions of the most lavish of the gifts he received from Elvis, emphasizing in each case his own reluctance to accept the gift and Elvis's insistance, and on Elvis's pure, Christlike motives. In one example when Elvis wants to give Parker a car, Parker tries to refuse, stating, "I love you for you and not for your money." [16] Elvis will not be dissuaded from his decision, however, and Parker is presented with an expensive Cadillac. "The happiness and surprise he had given me brought him joy," writes Parker. "It was as simple as that. There was no question of his buying my love or friendship. He already had both. There will never be another Elvis...never! God made him from a very special mold." [17] Hammontree also offers numerous examples of this characteristic of Elvis's. She states that he possessed "an unusual lack of avarice" and concludes that Elvis "viewed himself as an intermediary - redistributing his wealth." She relates that he often gave secretly to charities and provided medical care to several needy people he encountered, especially the crippled, unbeknownst to most around him . In one case, when Elvis heard about a poor, severely crippled woman who lived in the area, he ordered a state-of-the-art motorized wheelchair which he presented to her along with

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[16] Parker, p. 126.
[17] Ibid., p. 127.

some money. At Evis's funeral his minister discovered that he had been paying the medical bills and living expenses of a young cerebral palsy patient.[18]

In this respect Elvis seems to be rather unlike Giles and many of the saints, particularly the open ascetics: he does not seek to renounce earthly pleasure or free himself from daily engagement in the world. However, he is quite like Thomas Becket, as they both possess wealth and distribute it freely. Neither of them leads an outwardly simple or ascetic life (indeed Elvis's life, as the more objective of us realize, was far from simple or ascetic, but so was Thomas in outward appearance). Although Thomas, after his transformation into a model archbishop, wears a hairshirt and practices mortifications in secret, we read that

> Chiens e oisels ama e deduit seculer.
> Mult fu larges e proz, de vif sen e de cler;
> Mes pas ne refusa, s'um li voleit doner,
> Cum li autre qui poent nuire e amander,
> E ki volent al mund par lur aveir munter. (lines 276-280)

All through his life Becket maintains a high standard of living for himself and his dependents. Further, in both of these cases the writers are explicit in their insistence that each of these two men gives out of genuine love, as well as out of a sense of Christian duty, and that they both enjoy spending time in the company of their beneficiaries.

This habit of giving freely causes problems for Elvis, just as it did for Giles, by arousing the disapproval and distrust of those who do not understand this behavior. Elvis's father Vernon often frowned upon his son's open-handedness, and was known

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[18] Hammontree, pp. 159-162.

by many of those around him as stingy. One observer speculates that perhaps he simply remembered too well the poverty of the days before Elvis's fame .[19]

As Christ was humble, so must a saint be. Yet, as noted earlier, humility may or may not be obvious to casual onlookers. Giles was outwardly humble, but Thomas Becket's was a more inward and private humility, typical of the stories of the holy prelates of his time, where "traces of humility are hard to find." [20] Elvis, too, sometimes appeared to be vain and proud to outsiders. For example, Elvis's lifelong habit of addressing elders or strangers as "sir" or "ma'am" was seen by some as an affectation, to draw attention to himself.[21] One author claims that what was important to Elvis was a reputation for generosity, not generosity itself, and it was that which prompted him to give, and holds that Elvis gave token gifts to people who did not need them, and did it in an ostentatious manner, in order to maintain that reputation.[22] Yet those who have written Elvis's *vitae* present a different story. In their stories Elvis, like Giles, gives freely, and will accept no praise or personal glory for the good deeds he does. In one episode, related by Hammontree, Elvis gives a car to a friend, and the woman tells Elvis that she plans to put a plaque on the dash stating that it had been a gift from him. "Elvis immediately told her not to put his name anywhere on the plaque, insisting that all gifts come from God and that she was not in any way to attribute it to him." [23] Parker's work too mentions Elvis's continued humble nature despite his great fame. Just as did Becket, "Elvis wore fame like an old shoe. He was polished...outwardly he was relaxed and comfortable with his role. The trappings of stardom were handled with casual aplomb...But, inwardly, much of the country boy

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[19] Ibid., p. 159.
[20] Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society*, (Chicago, 1982), p. 155.
[21] Hammontree, p. 6.
[22] Sue Bridwell Beckham, "Death, Resurrection and Transfiguration: The Religious Folklore in Elvis Presley Shrines and Souvenirs," *International Folklore Review* 5, p. 89.
[23] Hammontree, p. 161.

remained." [24] Another writer who interviewed visitors at Graceland and residents of Memphis after Elvis had died reports that when asked what they admire most about Elvis, most reply that it is his humility. They describe him as "honest and sincere", "modest...(not) a big head," and note that he "never thought that he was better than anybody else," and "never forgot where he came from." The were impressed with his "ability to remain humble." [25]

Parker too makes mention of Elvis's humility, despite the adoration shown him by his fans. Once during a concert in Detroit an audience member shouted to him, "Elvis, you're the King." Parker says Elvis immediately responded, "No, I'm not the King. Jesus Christ is the King of all." [26]

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to Elvis's sanctity in the eyes of the public is the issue of chastity. Indeed Elvis is as famous for his sexuality as for his music, and one writer has even stated that "Elvis wiped out four thousand years of Judeo-Christian uptightness about sex in fifteen minutes of TV," a dubious distinction for a saint.[27] This "uptightness" is the very same belief referred to earlier in a citation of Weinstein and Bell - nothing pollutes the body, and through it the soul, quite as much as sex does. And yet there <u>are</u> cases of saints who were less than chaste at different points in their lives. Fiacre, Giles, and Thomas were blessed with the ability to resist the flesh, but others - the young Augustine, for example - led rather dissolute lives before gaining their reputation as saints. In his *Confessions* Augustine tells us: "In my youth I burned to get my fill of hellish things. I dared to run wild in different darksome ways of love." [28] At age sixteen, he says, "the madness of lust...took me completely under

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[24] Parker, p. 71.
[25] James W. Davidson, "Graceland: More Than a Hit Song - A Twentieth-Century Mecca," *Studies in Popular Culture* 10, pp. 51-63.
[26] Parker, p. 66.
[27] Kevin Quain, ed., *The Elvis Reader*, (New York, 1992), p. xiv.
[28] Augustine *Confessions* (translated by John K. Ryan) 2.1.

its scepter, and I clutched at it with both hands." [29] Two famous female sinners who became saints were, of course, Mary Magdalene and Mary the Egyptian. Teresa of Avila, although resisting some of the more wicked behaviors no doubt indulged in by the Marys, does, after the death of her mother, slip from austere living into worldly vanities such as using cosmetics and jewelry, and "reading books about the heroes of chivalry."[30] The key, it seems, to surviving a sexual or otherwise worldly period of one's life and going on to achieve sanctity, is penitence.

How might one reconcile Elvis's most glaring flaw - his blatant sexuality - with the criterion of chastity? One possible answer is to focus on one of the favorite themes of his followers , and even of the general public, since his death: the idea that Elvis did not really die. At various times since his alleged death, speculations have circulated that Elvis faked his death and is in hiding. Although this possibility is not mentioned in any of the *vitae* that I read, it abounds in the less "literary" realm of popular culture. Almost weekly articles appear in tabloid magazines which expore this idea, and variations of the theme pervade television shows, cartoon, and commercials. There is at least one book entirely devoted to the belief that Elvis is not dead, and the author offers many clues and amazing coincidences as "proof" of her theory.[31] This phenomenon, although not an uncommon reaction to the death of a hero, provides a means for Elvis's fans and hagiographers to resolve the problem of Elvis's unsaintly sexual behavior. Future "biographers" and the growing Presley legend might suggest that, like Giles who threw a big party and sneaked away during the festivities, or Alexis, whose family gave him up for dead for thirty-four years, or Mary the Egyptian who disappeared from public view for years before she was discovered living a life of penitence in the desert, perhaps Elvis too finally felt the need to renounce the cares and

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[29] Ibid., 2.2.
[30] Ibid., p.41.
[31] Gail Brewer-Giorgio, *Is Elvis Alive?* New York and Los Angeles: Tudor Publishing, 1988.

sinfulness of the secular world, and lead a new life atoning for his excesses. Several accounts already speak of his growing dissatisfaction with the lifestyle he had chosen. In Stearn's book Elvis actually reaches the conclusion that he must withdraw from the world in order to do God's will. He says

> "I can't go on the way I have,...Now that I have seen Christ I know the truth...I have to do something meaningful...I have come to a decision. I have decided to join a monastery, and serve God."[32]

After his death his father is quoted as saying "He loved people...But the fans wouldn't leave him alone, so he built his own world and retreated into it." [33] Priscilla, his wife, writes that during his spiritual quest Elvis asked her support for his struggle to conquer worldly temptations. One of his suggestions was that they practice sexual abstinence.[34] Stearn writes that later in his life Elvis practiced celibacy, even as he was planning ro remarry. "In some way," he says, "Elvis had persuaded himself that sexual abstinence and morality went together," and even compares Elvis's reform with Augustine's.[35] Later the author analyzes Elvis's change of heart. He tells us that Elvis "had tried to love through himself alone, in a sensuous way, but found that was not enough. He had to give more, and he could do it only through God. He didn't care if others scoffed, any more than the Apostles did in following Christ down that dusty road to glory." [36]

Could Elvis, like Giles, Fiacre, and hundreds of others before him, finally have needed to renounce all he had and retreat entirely from the world in which he was almost irrevocably engaged? According to Elliott, the motif of secret flight is one of

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[32] Stearn, p. 39.
[33] Wootten, p. 118.
[34] Priscilla Presley, *Elvis and Me*, (New York, 1986), p. 206.
[35] Stearn, p. 98.
[36] Ibid., p. 198.

the most common of all motifs in the lives of the saints, especially for desert saints. The fact that the flight is secret "emphasizes the purely personal, individual nature of the hero's journey. He travels alone...and leaves behind all artifacts of civilization - the bonds of family life, friends, possessions - for all are impediments on the journey to salvation." [37] Certainly Elvis's position in the public eye, and his elaborate involvement in the lives of his family and live-in friends and staff make solitude and contemplation difficult. Several of those who depended on Elvis for their livelihoods showed little tolerance for Elvis's budding interest in things spiritual. Colonel Parker, Elvis's manager, summarily dismissed Larry Geller, who had been Elvis's spiritual advisor, from that duty, and he soon left the household entirely. After that, Elvis was pressured to destroy his religious books, and Priscilla admits that she was glad, since in her view they were "literally destroying" her relationship with Elvis.[38] Indeed for Elvis the journey to salvation would have been impeded in such an environment.

Giles and Fiacre and Alexis all slip away from their homes in order to avoid the temptations and cares of the life of this world, and to escape the pressure to conform applied by their friends or family. Thomas flees in secret to save his life. Should future hagiographers of Elvis choose to exploit the motif of secret flight, both of these reasons could be claimed as support for a decision by Elvis to abandon his lifestyle and seek the desert.

There is also another possible solution to this difficulty, and that is time. It may be that as years pass, and those who knew or knew of Elvis during his lifetime are no longer around, history, or more correctly, hagiography, will rid the stories of Elvis of those troublesome sexual details which do not behoove a saint. Already those who

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[37] Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, (Hanover, 1987), pp. 85, 86.
[38] Presley, p. 234.

revere him seem perfectly able to overlook or deny allegations which tarnish the image that they hold of him.

Miracles

That Elvis had special powers not held by most, even beyond his talent for entertainment, is attested to by several biographers, and at least one actually attributes miracles to him. Hammontree, the most conservative (that is, concerned with reporting the "facts" about Elvis) of the biographers I read, relates a story about Elvis and a young fan named Tony Cooper, dying of cancer.

> In 1960, when Elvis returned from Germany, Tony was ...in the final stages of the disease. (Mayor) Loeb told Elvis about the youngster, and to Teresa Cooper's surprise, Elvis Presley phoned her son. By that time, Tony was in a semiconscious state, and his mother was uncertain whether she could very easily arouse him, even by telling him who was calling. Elvis told her to take her time in trying to get Tony to the phone, insisting that he did not mind waiting. Amazingly, the news that Elvis Presley was on the phone awakened Tony. His grandmother, who was sitting with him, said that his eyes opened wider than they had for days, and a beatific smile covered his face; he began struggling to sit up...His mother carried him to the phone, and he actually was able to talk with Elvis. Tony died within days of the call, but his mother is still grateful to Elvis...." [39]

Although not a miraculous healing such as might have been performed by Giles or Fiacre under these circumstances, the "miraculous" response of the boy to Elvis's phone call, his "beatific smile," and his mother's avowal of abiding gratitude all tend to

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[39] Hammontree, p. 161.

point to this event as something beyond the ordinary. Another account offered by Hammontree relates what she calls "an extreme example" of Elvis's uplifting power in the lives of fans. In this case, a woman who suffers from severe arthritis claims that Elvis's music alleviates her pain. In one instance, she has had to go to bed, nearly paralyzed with pain. Soon her husband enters the room to find her dancing. In response to his surprise she says that her Elvis records "work wonders" and "after I listen to him singing for awhile I lose the pain" [40] Stearn's account is somewhat less cautious about claiming miraculous powers for Elvis. In each of the five healings he relates, Stearn does leave open the possibility of coincidence, or of other factors at work, but he does end with the conclusion that "Elvis' healings were an expression of his love." [41] The first of these miracles was an attempt with help from a friend, to heal his grandmother. When she expresses her doubts that she will live much longer due to an asthma-related illness, Elvis decides he will try to heal her. Praying to God to give the necessary power, and visualizing a blue light, Elvis lays his hands upon the woman. She reports that she feels only a slight improvement just afterward, but the next day she "was up and around for the first time in days."[42] The second story involves a bus driver experiencing chest pain. Elvis sees him suffering and puts one arm around his shoulders, the other on his heart. When the man realizes who his rescuer is, his face shows "a look of astonishment, then joy." The driver jumps up in his astonishment, his pain forgotten. He marvels "I've had these spells before. But when I saw your face, I snapped right out of it ."[43] Another time, one of his aides is in bed with a back injury. Elvis is in another room, but perceives the man's pain, and comes to him. He touches the aide and prays. The next morning, "the pain had

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[40] Ibid., pp. 163, 164.
[41] Stearn p. 229.
[42] Ibid., p. 229.
[43] Ibid., p. 228.

subsided and was almost gone. He felt healed." [44] The man believes without question that Elvis has healed him.

Elvis, like Giles, Thomas, and Alexis seemed to sense his approaching end. About two months before he died he began to show an increasing interest in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and a preoccupation with his own death .[45] Several of Elvis's friends attest that he spoke to them concerning his death. To Kathy Westmoreland he states that he would know when the day had arrived, and predicts that his death day will be very close to the day his mother died (and in fact Elvis died on August 16, two days after the anniversary of his mother's death on August 14). Stearn relates the following encounter between Elvis and his stepbrother:

> Two days before he died, his stepbrother David Stanley said casually: "Goodnight, Elvis, I'll be seeing you."
>
> Elvis looked up from his bed with a trace of a smile.
>
> "No, you won't David. You won't be seeing me *here* anymore."
>
> David stopped in his tracks. "What do you mean, Elvis?"
>
> Elvis' smile widened. He appeared to enjoy the younger man's confusion. He held up a finger for emphasis. It was his last lesson for the twenty-two-year-old he loved as a son.
>
> "It won't be *here*, David, but in another time and space." [46]

Many times during his last few days and weeks Elvis tried to prepare those who would be left behind after his death, assuring them of God's love and the soul's immortality. After his death, they recalled these words of comfort, such as those offered to David Stanley: "Death is the last enemy...and we will triumph. Our

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[44] Ibid., p. 229.
[45] Ibid., p. 240.
[46] Ibid., p. 241.

soul...goes on when the body dies. We have nothing to fear, for God will take the last journey with us." [47]

The most astonishing phenomenon at Elvis's death was, of course, public reaction, which will be discussed at more length in the next chapter. However, there were other, less widely recognized, events which underscored Elvis's saintly status. Those attending Elvis's body and readying it for burial noticed odd occurrences. One believed he saw a blue light, halo-like, surrounding Elvis's head. Another felt that Elvis's spirit was there with him "giving him strength for what he had to do."[48] At the funeral service there were other happenings deemed "mysterious" by the authors: during the singing of "How Great Thou Art" lights went out and recording equipment stopped working; a branch fell from a tree onto one car carrying friends in the funeral procession. From Memphis and from around the country there were reports of strange events on the night of Elvis's death: a tape of his music snapped in the cassette player; the night watchman at Graceland reports that the lights in the Meditation Garden (where Elvis and his parents are now buried) went out. Stearn writes that "there were reports of darkening skies and strange thunderbursts, of shooting stars and the trembling of the earth. In Southern California, where it hadn't rained for months, even the heavens wept for Elvis."[49]

At Elvis's funeral there were, of course, the usual comments on his look of peacefulness, even on the "serene...almost blissful expression on his face." [50] But perhaps the most miraculous transformation was noticed as Elvis's body was being prepared for burial.

Charlie kept staring into the coffin. "He's thin now," he said in a

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[47] Ibid., p. 246.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., p. 125.
[50] Ibid., p. 248.

lifeless tone. "All the excess weight has left him." And so it had. He looked lean and hard, like the Elvis he had known a few years before...

Larry recalled how Elvis had looked at his swollen hands in distaste and said, "I'll look like my old self one day." [51]

In the sixteen years since Elvis's death, there have been reports of apparitions, miracles, and events that one author refers to a "psychic experiences."[52] These experiences range from a truck driver's encounter with a hitchhiker he believes to be the spirit of Elvis, to the vision of a dying child who sees Elvis come down from heaven to meet her, to the mysterious appearance of Elvis's face on the pantry door of a woman in Massachusetts.[53]

An example of Elvis's supposed intercessory power is related by a woman who in 1979 finds herself unmarried, pregnant, and alone in the world. Abandoned even by her parents, she goes to the hospital alone when labor begins. During her labor, Elvis Presley appears among the doctors and nurses surrounding her, and winks. He stays next to her and speaks to her throughout the afternoon, offering support and comfort, even announcing "It's a boy!" before her doctors do.[54] In another instance Elvis appears in a dream to a man whose son has run away and is in trouble in another state. In this dream Elvis takes the man to the city and the house where the son is, and counsels him to get some help for his son because he is on drugs. When the man wakes up, he goes to the city, and finds the street that he remembers from his dream. In the exact house Elvis had indicated he finds his son, who wants to come home. The boy tells his father that twice since he has been there, Elvis has appeared in his dreams,

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[51] Ibid., p. 246.
[52] Raymond A. Moody, *Elvis After Life*, (Atlanta, 1987), p. i.
[53] Ibid., pp. 34-39, 49-56, 93-100.
[54] Ibid., pp. 43-46.

telling him that his father would soon be there to get him. The boy overcomes his drug addiction, and all is well.[55]

The tabloids, too, report miracles, like the portrait that heals, and more recently, the woman whose throat cancer was healed after licking several of the commemorative Elvis stamps.[56] In a recent television comedy, a woman was granted the power to heal when an image of Elvis's face appears on her snow shovel. When she becomes proud and arrogant because of her ability, the face disappears and she loses her gift.

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[55] Ibid., pp. 83-91.
[56] *The Sun*, 16 February, 1993.

Cultic Activities

If there is any one phenomenon that we can point to as indicative of Elvis's saintly status, it is the existence of cultic practices centered around him. About 500,000 people visit Graceland, Elvis Presley's home and burial site im Memphis, each year. But it is not only the quantity of visitors that makes Graceland a pilgrimage site, but the nature of that visit for some of the people who come - why they come, what they seek, what they do. Many of the 500,000 are indeed casual tourists. Others, however, can only be called pilgrims. Many of these visit every year, and some even move to Memphis permanently to be near Elvis's tomb.[57]

As we would expect in the case of a saint, the preferred day among pilgrims to visit Elvis's tomb is the anniversary of his death, August 16. All through the month of August the number of visitors is substantially greater than in the other months of the year, with fans coming from all over the world to be present on what, to all appearances, can only be a holy day.[58] This commemoration began on the day Elvis actually died in 1977, when thousands gathered outside his home, and it continues today.

That these visits are indeed pilgrimages is attested to by Davidson, who has concluded that the reasons these fans visit is love.[59] During their visits, and especially during August, they hold "numerous events throughout the city...to memorialize their hero," such as prayer meetings, charity auctions, and formal banquets.[60] The fans

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[57] Davidson, p. 51.
[58] Beckham, p. 89.
[59] Davidson, p. 61.
[60] Ibid.

themselves make such comments as, "if there is a heart of the world it's Graceland," where "love is generated so much...it can really touch you."[61]

The reasons for pilgrimages to Graceland resemble the reasons given for other religious pilgrimages. On pilgrimage to the Holy Land, for example, people often express the desire to be in the actual places where Jesus was, to walk where he had walked. Sumption's book offers these words of Paulinus of Nola, written in the fourth century:

> No other sentiment draws men to Jerusalem than the desire to see and touch the places where Christ was physically present, and to be able to say from our very own experience "we have gone into his tabernacle and adored in the very places where his feet have stood" (Ps. CXXXII). [62]

For those who travel to Graceland, too, this desire exists. One woman from Georgia states: "I want to walk where he walked, to see the things his eyes saw when he looked around his home."[63] Like medieval pilgrims at the shrines of saints who believed that the one they venerated was truly there, Elvis fans feel that while at Graceland they are spiritually close to Elvis. They stress that "his presence is there," and that he is aware of what is going on. Several have even expressed the fear that the tours of his house are intruding upon him, and feel that if people who visit casually don't really care about Elvis "they have no business going through his house."[64]

Many other of the practices associated with "Elvis veneration" will seem familiar to those who have studied medieval Christianity. People visit Elvis's grave

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[61] Ibid., p. 56.
[62] Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, (Totowa, 1975), p. 89.
[63] Patsy Guy Hammontree, *Elvis: A Bio-bibliography*, (Westport, 1985), p. 53.
[64] Davidson, p. 54-56.

and leave offerings or pray or meditate silently.[65] Shortly after his death the inhabitants of Tupelo, Mississippi, Elvis's birthplace, turned the little house where he was born into a museum, and built the Elvis Presley Memorial Chapel nearby. In this chapel a stained-glass window presents figures which, to one author, are ambiguous in their symbolism. Some are obviously Christian symbols but other, she says, could as easily refer to Elvis rather than to Christ. For example, throughout the window are "wispy bits of white glass" which suggest to her the scarves Elvis used to distribute at concerts.[66]

As mentioned in Chapter 2, one of the functions that pilgrimage may have performed for the participants is the instilling of a feeling of unity. Indeed, according to records kept about pilgrimages to the tomb of Saint Fiacre, one of the notable characteristics of the pilgrims who came there was their camaraderie, and the good will they encountered from those who lived along the pilgrimage route.[67] Likewise Elvis fans feel themselves to be members of a family, and for them the times they come together are "communions of the faithful."[68] Davidson notes that one factor that enhances the appeal of the pilgrimage to Graceland is the "special kinship" the fans feel when they are there.[69] These feelings inspire acts of piety and philanthropy in Elvis's followers. One fan club, boasting 30,000 members, has the status of a non-profit organization. This club raises money to buy expensive medical equipment, and donates it to hospitals. Its leader says, "we cannot call ourselves Elvis fans and do less. We ask only one thing - if there's publicity, any glory, and credit, don't give it to us - it's all *Because of Elvis*."[70]

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[65] Beckham, p. 91.
[66] Ibid., p. 92.
[67] Jacques DuBois, *Un Sanctuaire monastique au moyen-âge*, (Geneva, 1976), p. 164.
[68] Van K. Brock, "Images of Elvis, The South and America," *The Elvis Reader*, p. 153.
[69] Davidson, p. 61.
[70] Jac Tharpe, ed., *Elvis: Images and Fancies*, (Jackson, 1979), p. 8.

In the area of relics, too, Elvis takes his place among the saints. There are the true relics - items which belonged to Elvis and actually came in contact with his body, such as the scarves and rings he gave to fans. There are also the souvenirs, which, like the mementos sometimes purchased by medieval pilgrims, take on the status of relics in the minds of those who possess them. At the pilgrimage site itself, one finds all manner of items which may be acquired, the sort by which "common men have always sought to bring themselves closer to the supernatural."[71] There are tee-shirts and postcards proclaiming, like pilgrims' badges, "I've been to Graceland." For those more devout, there are "crucifixlike pendants and plaster-of-paris devotional statues."[72] Shortly after Elvis's death one enterprising marketer offered vials of Elvis's sweat, for a modest fee.[73]

In addition to pilgrimage and relics, there is one other cultic aspect surrounding Elvis that merits attention, and that is the Elvis impersonator. In this phenomenon Lynn Spigel sees a kind of religious ritual, which offers to participants "a means through which to reinvent their ...history and to participate in a community of shared values." [74] Throughout the performance, the impersonator often relates personal experiences concerning Elvis, praising all the qualities he possessed which endear him to his fans. The fans themselves engage in "a very specific and very repetitive ritual with the performers," including the giving of gifts, crying, receiving scarves or kisses from the impersonator, and other actions reminiscent of actual Elvis performances.[75] The impersonators are careful to point out that they are not Elvis, even though they strive to be like him. Spigel maintains that the entire ritual is indeed a form of religious

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[71] Nick Tosches, "Elvis in Death," *The Elvis Reader*, p. 279.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Greil Marcus, *Dead Elvis*, p. 152.
[74] Lynn Spigel, "Communicating With the Dead: Elvis as Medium," *Camera Obscura* 23, pp. 177-204.
[75] Ibid., p. 181.

worship, as she writes that "the structure and content...is laced with appeals to faith, and the impersonator is often considered a medium who channels the spirit of Elvis, which in turn, channels the will of God."[76] She concludes that, in the eyes of believer, Elvis is "a concrete example of Christian morality...generous, kind of spirit,...benevolent, but never so for worldly ends...someone who...mediates between heaven and earth and fills his followers with love."[77] In short, a saint.

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[76] Ibid., p. 191.
[77] Ibid., p. 192.

Chapter V: Conclusion

This history of sanctity and saints is one of great variety and scope. There have always been what we may call "people's saints," who often are not canonized but nonetheless inspire their followers, and "church saints," who are acceptable to the Church but may have little meaning for the laity. These divisions persist to this day. In his research for his study *Making Saints*, Kenneth Woodward spoke to one priest who lamented: "Formal canonization procedures no longer give us the saints we need."[1] I do not believe that this is a recent development. Rather, given what we know about the variety of saints who have been venerated and how they were chosen, one might better say that throughout its history the Church has given us many saints, and the people have given us many saints, and sometimes they are the same ones. Hagiography, too, has had a varied history, sometimes greatly valued, sometimes scorned. However, I would say that after only briefly studying both saints and their literature, and after exploring the literature of Elvis and the beliefs and actions of his followers, many parallels are present. The ways we perceive holiness, the ways we talk about holy people and holy things, and how we react to them have in many ways remained largely the same, even across such a gap of time and culture as separates the twentieth century and the Middle Ages.

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[1] Kenneth Woodward, *Making Saints*, (New York, 1990), p. 36.

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