

Joint Sorbonne Université - University of Sydney PhD - project proposal

Medieval female icons

Late-medieval female sanctity, like other forms of knowledge, was primarily transmitted orally before being recorded in manuscript form, often under the control of monastic and clerical institutions. The preservation and circulation of these texts were shaped by male-dominated religious structures, with most scribes attached to monasteries, cathedral schools, and, more rarely, royal courts, influencing how women's spiritual experiences were documented, framed, and interpreted. Unlike theological treatises that defined doctrinal orthodoxy, narratives of female sanctity were constructed around public piety, embodied suffering, and affective devotion, offering alternative models of religious authority while remaining embedded within patriarchal frameworks. These texts, however, were subject to institutional mediation, often presenting sanctity as a male-regulated category while simultaneously offering spaces in which women navigated and reshaped expectations of holiness. The result is a fragmented and contested textual record, requiring scholars to examine both the institutional forces that shaped these narratives and the affective, performative, and textual strategies through which women negotiated spiritual authority. Despite increased scholarly attention to female sanctity, studies have largely focused on textual mediation rather than the affective and embodied mechanisms through which saintly women constructed and asserted agency.

Despite these limitations, the study of medieval female sanctity, particularly in mystical and hagiographical writings, is a well-established field of investigation. The vernacular tradition in Middle English and Anglo-Norman is among the most extensive in late-medieval Europe, reflecting a sustained engagement with female spiritual authority. While many of these texts were shaped by monastic and clerical institutions, their transmission beyond ecclesiastical settings suggests a broader cultural presence. To this core body of mystical and hagiographical writings, contemporary adaptations add a crucial extension, demonstrating how these figures continue to be reworked in discussions of sanctity and power. The PhD must also examine these broader literary and cultural engagements, as they reveal how medieval female sanctity was framed, adapted, and reinterpreted over time.

The PhD will not focus on theological prescriptions of sanctity or clerical frameworks that dictate female religious experience. The role of male-authored doctrine in defining female sanctity has been extensively studied, particularly in relation to institutional control over mystics and saints. Instead, this project will examine how saintly and mystical women actively navigated power, reinterpreted submission, and asserted agency through their own narratives and practices.

Late-medieval female sanctity was a deeply interactive process, centered on public displays of suffering, ecstatic visions, and communal recognition. Scholarship has thoroughly examined how institutional forces shaped these narratives, often focusing on clerical mediation and control. This PhD will take a different approach, shifting the focus to how sanctity was actively negotiated between saintly women, their audiences, and the textual traditions that preserved their legacies. Unlike theological treatises that define sanctity as a fixed condition, mystical and hagiographical texts present holiness as fluid—continuously constructed through performance, reception, and textual reinterpretation. The primary concern of this study is to analyze how saintly women used suffering and public visibility to navigate patriarchal structures, turning imposed constraints into sources of authority. This research will ideally examine how these medieval frameworks persist in contemporary adaptations, revealing how performative sanctity continues to inform narratives of gendered power and identity construction for the marginalized figure.

A major difference between medieval and modern conceptions of sanctity is that medieval saintly women did not passively receive divine favour but actively demonstrated it through suffering, ecstatic visions, and public recognition. Authority was not conferred by institutions but constructed through acts of endurance and communal validation. Unlike modern spirituality, which often prioritizes private faith, medieval sanctity required external affirmation—whether through clerical mediation, written lives of saints, or public performance. These displays were not merely signs of devotion but strategic enactments that reinforced claims to divine favor. This PhD will examine how medieval women leveraged suffering as a means of self-authorship, demonstrating how imposed conditions of submission became tools for agency. One hoped-for outcome of this research will be to assess how contemporary reinterpretations of female sanctity engage with these medieval models, revealing how suffering and visibility continue to shape representations of women's religious authority.

The corpus for this PhD will consist of Anglo-Norman and Middle English lives of saints, mystical writings, and devotional texts from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. Key sources include *The Book of Margery Kempe* and *Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love*, as well as representations of saintly women in the *Canterbury Tales* and *Confessio Amantis*. Additional material to be selected by the candidate must include Latin *vitæ* and Middle English translations of Continental mystical writings, allowing for a comparative perspective on female sanctity. Mainstream theological discourse will not be a primary focus; rather, the study will examine how sanctity was constructed through narrative, performance, and communal reception. The selected corpus will provide a broad foundation for analyzing the mechanisms through which medieval women navigated institutional constraints, redefined submission as a site of power, and asserted spiritual authority within patriarchal frameworks.

The PhD student will be an active member of CÉMA (Centre d'Études Médiévales Anglaises) at Sorbonne Université, participating in its manuscript workshops, research seminars, and annual conference. They will have access to the resources of the MeCir ASU network (2025-2029) on Medieval Circulations. Their work will also be supported by the University of Sydney's Centre for Medieval Studies, fostering international academic collaboration. Given the project's focus on textual transmission, manuscript studies, and the performativity of sanctity, the candidate will benefit from access to the Parisian libraries and the proximity of British collections, as well as the Sydney node of the Medieval and Early Modern Centre (MEMC), which offers specialized research in medieval textual culture. This PhD will align with broader research initiatives in gender, textual transmission, and medieval cultural memory, contributing to both universities' ongoing inquiries into how medieval narratives are preserved, adapted, and reinterpreted.

The candidate must have a solid background in English medieval studies, including training at master's level, and excellent working knowledge of Middle English and writings in Middle English. They will be aware of recent work in the fields of literary criticism and gender studies. The candidate must display particular interest in issues pertaining to postmedievalism, and queer theory if so required by the corpus. The PhD will ideally be written in English.

The PhD will be co-supervised (within the framework of a formal *cotutelle*) by Florence Bourgne (Centre d'Études Médiévales Anglaises, Sorbonne Université) and Jan Shaw (Medieval and Early Modern Centre, University of Sydney). Fl. Bourgne is a specialist of Old and Middle English manuscript studies whose research focuses on the material circulation of medieval texts in English and Latin. J. Shaw has widely published on Middle English romance, and more specifically on issues of female leadership and identity.