



Chaste Passions: Medieval English Virgin Martyr Legends

Karen A. Winstead

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Virgin martyrs make up one of the largest categories of medieval saints. To judge by their frequent appearances in art and literature, they also figure among the most venerated. The legends of virgin martyrs, retold in various ways through the centuries, illuminate trends in popular piety, values, and literary tastes. *Chaste Passions* contains sixteen English virgin martyr legends, each of a different saint and each translated into colloquial, modern English prose. Faithful in tone and meaning to the originals, Karen Winstead's lively translations allow contemporary readers to appreciate why virgin martyr legends thrived for hundreds of years. Winstead presents the tales in chronological order, tracing the effects of the composition and tastes of the audience on the development of the genre. The virgin martyr, Winstead tells us, escapes the confining female stereotypes—demure maiden or disruptive shrew—prevalent in writings of the period. Because nearly all of the texts were written by men but addressed to women, they exhibit a fascinating interplay between male views of so-called women's literature and the demands of their intended audience. Familiarity with this widely read genre is essential to a full understanding of medieval culture, and *Chaste Passions* is an excellent introduction to these often racy, sometimes comic, tales

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