

Body, Mind and Spirit:
The Expression of Female Sanctity in Gonzalo de Berceo's *Vida de Santa Oria*
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Gonzalo de Berceo's *Vida de Santa Oria* is praised by scholars as much for its poetic charm and emotionality as for its expression of thirteenth century ecclesiastical interests. That the *Vida* possesses such depth makes it a valuable and engaging source of study. Although little is known about the author, the numerous hagiographic poems he left behind speak to the reader of a society that valued the intense, God-seeking and self-denying piety of the saintly life, a life that acted as exemplar and guide to the average Christian. The *Vida* suggests not only that this common devotion to saints existed in Berceo's thirteenth century Spain, but also a specific notion of female sanctity and sainthood that pervaded western Christian thought. In her article "Writing, Sanctity and Gender in Berceo's *Poema de Santa Oria*," Julian Weiss demonstrates that the focus on female spirituality as primarily physical is evident in the *Vida*. Furthermore, she suggests that the work inscribes the dominance of male clerics and their privilege of literacy over female holy figures that was typical of the Christian church at the time.¹ That Oria's sanctity is determined by Berceo's rendering of her life is undeniable, as is the physical emphasis of her story. His vernacular poem, written as an accessible and entertaining guide to instruct the common Christian through a pious life, was almost certainly intended to advocate a male dominated church.

More than this, the *Vida* is an expression of the particular setting in which Berceo wrote, and the particular feelings and interests of its author, which permeate almost every line of the poem with intensity. Spain in the thirteenth century was still a divided land, and although the Moors had been driven far from the northern region of Rioja in which Berceo lived, the threat of instability the Muslim presence presented was still a part of Christian cultural life. Furthermore, the Christian territories of northern Spain experienced internal religious tensions throughout Berceo's lifetime. Anthony Lappin points out that the threat of heresy, particularly that of the Cathar dissent, was felt in nearby Léon. The internal danger of heretical movements was likely made all the more real by the recent Muslim presence. While it is evident that Berceo's *Vida* is

¹ Julian Weiss, "Writing, Sanctity and Gender in Berceo's *Poema de Santa Oria*," *Hispanic Review* 64, no. 4 (1996): 449.

shaped by thirteenth century notions of female sanctity prominent in western Europe, it is not as clear why the poet chose to write Oria's life in his final days. Given the didactic nature of hagiographies and the inconstant setting in which Berceo wrote, it is likely that the poet wished to emphasize a hierarchical and male dominant church structure to the laypeople and clerics of his social world through his final poetic work.

The *Vida* recounts the life and visions of an eleventh century *emparedada*, or anchorite, who lives much of her short life enclosed in a cell attached to the Monastery of San Millán.² In her cell, Oria undertakes a life of self-inflicted penance and constant prayer that earns her a series of three visions. The narration of these visions form the body of Berceo's poem and the foundation for Oria's claim to sanctity. In the first and longest vision, Oria is visited by three virgin martyrs, Agatha, Eulalia, and Cecilia, who take Oria from her cell and lead her on a journey up to heaven. There, Oria is presented with hosts of holy figures who have earned their place in the afterlife through their saintly lives, because, like Oria, they "restrained their desires in the world."³ The throne she is to occupy amongst them is revealed to her, a "very rich chair finely wrought in gold, set all over with very precious stones."⁴ However, Oria is not yet allowed to take her place in heaven—despite her pleas to God, her virgin companions convey her back to her cell, where she is to continue her life of asceticism. Some months later Oria receives a second vision, in which she is again visited by three virgins, different from the martyrs of her last reverie, and the Virgin Mary. Mary tells Oria that she is to experience an illness, which is a sign of her imminent death and subsequent journey to heaven and her "honoured chair."⁵ The reader is then suddenly transported to Oria's enclosure, where she lies on her death bed, and experiences her final and shortest vision, of the Mount of Olives, a summit surrounded by "a beautiful plain, [and] upon it, a great thicket of olive trees."⁶ Oria is approached by companies of men that appear to be dressed like angels, but she is woken by her mother before she is able to speak to them. The poem ends with Oria's death, and a final vision experienced by her mother,

² Anthony Lappin, *Berceo's Vida de Santa Oria: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Oxford: European Humanities Research Center, 2000), 3.

³ Lappin, *Commentary*, 57.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

Amunna. Amunna is visited by her departed daughter and assured of the anchorite's reception into heaven after a night of vigil at the doors of "the mansion."⁷

The little biographical information available suggests that Berceo lived from the end of the twelfth century until the middle of the thirteenth, and that he was connected to the Benedictine Monastery San Millán de la Cogolla—likely as a secular cleric rather than a cloistered monk and perhaps as the notary to the monastery's abbot.⁸ He likely wrote the *Vida* in the last years of his life, the late 1250s.⁹ While it is disputed whether Berceo was a young oblate when he entered the monastery, it is certain that he received much of his education at San Millán.¹⁰ In the thirteenth century library of the monastery, the shelves were lined with works essential to contemporary Christian scholarship. Simina M. Farcasiu points out that the *Moralia on Job* and the homilies on Ezekiel of Gregory the Great, the sixth century pope and exegete, Paulus Diaconus' *Life of St. Gregory*, as well as the *Commentary on the Apocalypse* by the Beatus of Liébana, the eighth century monk of Asturias, were at Berceo's disposal.¹¹ While Farcasiu elaborates on the detailed influence these works had on Berceo's *Vida*, it is enough to say here that texts essential to western Christian doctrine and education were available to Berceo at home. Lappin suggests in his biography of the poet that Berceo may have been trained as a canon lawyer at the university in Palencia, and even postulates that, based on the complex symbolism and allegory typical to western educated ecclesiastics that is displayed in his work, Berceo may have been educated in Paris or Bologna.¹² Clearly, the Rioja was not a region isolated from thirteenth century doctrines of Christendom, despite its history of conflict with and sometimes conquest by Muslim forces.¹³

Berceo's close contact with the Christianity of broader Europe is prominent in the *Vida*, particularly in the poem's depiction of sainthood and holiness. Believed to embody spiritual

⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57. Anthony T. Perry, *Art and Meaning in Berceo's Vida de Santa Oria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 1.

⁹ Perry, 4.

¹⁰ John Esten Keller, *Gonzalo de Berceo* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), 26.

¹¹ Simina M. Farcasiu, "The Exegesis and Iconography of Vision in Gonzalo de Berceo's *Vida de Santa Oria*," *Speculum* 61, no. 2 (1986): 309–310.

¹² Anthony John Lappin, *Gonzalo de Berceo: The Poet and his Verses* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2008), 81; 90.

¹³ Derek W. Lomax, *The Reconquest of Spain* (New York: Longman, 1978), 41.

purity, the saint could successfully resist the material and carnal thoughts and acts that the lay Christian felt plagued by throughout his or her life.¹⁴ The saint was also a figure of ideal reverence, who felt the emotions of love, awe and fear that come with a spiritual connection and sometimes direct communication with divinity. God privileged the saint with supernatural power, allowing the figure to enact miracles on earth through divine intercession. As such, it was believed that every day piety could be practised vicariously through the special power and prayer of saints.¹⁵ However, the saint's life also served as exemplum, a means of guiding the lay person through a holy life. The written hagiography was often particularly designed for instruction. Although not to be exactly emulated, the self-sacrificing, humble and pious saint informed the reader or auditor of the sort of acts and attitudes one must strive for in order to achieve a place in heaven.¹⁶

The *Vida* is clearly a didactic work, intended to promote popular piety and teach the common man or woman the way to heaven through rejection of worldly desire.¹⁷ That it is written in the vernacular attests to this, as does its familiar and approachable poeticism. Moreover, the poem is clearly intended to educate the layperson about the hierarchical structure of the church, and communicate a notion of female sanctity as physical and inferior to that of the male cleric. This didactic design is evident in Oria's first vision, in which the different ranks of the holy stand in ascending order according to their authority within the institution of the church, as well as their holiness. Thus, as Oria ascends through the heavens, she encounters first the male canons, next the bishops. That the anchorite is introduced to a band of holy virgins, not part of the official church hierarchy, after the bishops and male saints, can be attributed to Oria's own status as a virgin, and Berceo's effort to honour this status. Oria is then led past this company and encounters the martyr saints. At this point, the girl no longer moves physically, but simply "raise[s] her eyes to the North,"¹⁸ to indicate the high rank of the martyrs. The reader follows her eyes further upward as she sees the holy hermits, above them the apostles, and finally the

¹⁴ Rudolph M. Bell and Donald Weinstein, *Saints and Society: Christendom, 1000–1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 4.

¹⁵ Bell, 5.

¹⁶ Perry, 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Lappin, *Commentary*, 63.

evangelists. The delineation is clear, and the ordinary man or woman can perceive a structure that is definitive in heaven, and reflected on earth.

The perception of holiness exemplified in the saint was therefore shaped largely by social values and concerns of the general Christian population. One of these concerns was the divide between the genders; many scholars of medieval hagiography have noted the distinct differences between male and female saints. Men and women enacted very different holy lives, and women were often subjected to a far more rigid type of holiness than were men. Chastity and marital status were emphasized strongly in the female holy life, and devotion from childhood was of greater significance.¹⁹ While the fact that there were far fewer female saints than male canonized in the medieval period suggests the patriarchal and misogynistic cast of that society, it was also a symptom of a world that found religious inspiration in its church leaders. Only men could become members of the clergy, reaching high and venerable offices within the church such as bishop, archbishop or pope.²⁰ The majority of female saints canonized in Oria's day were queens, princesses or high born nobles, rarely members of peasant society like our anchorite.²¹ It is not surprising, then, that Oria chose a life of enclosure—not necessarily because she wished to become a saint, but because few spiritual vocations were available to women of the eleventh century. Although it was not uncommon in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries for women to become Benedictine nuns or abbesses, their religious significance was often marginalized, and very few were made saints.²² Women were essentially forbidden from the man's world of the institutionalized church, forced instead to choose lives of severe asceticism and bodily discomfort.

Not only was the female saint limited in her path to perfect piety, her life was almost always recorded by a male author. As Caroline Walker Bynum notes, male biographers tended to emphasize the physical in their representation of female spirituality, far more than in the commonly cerebral representations of male spirituality. Women's access to God and admission

¹⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (California: University of California Press, 1987), 25.

²⁰ Bell, 221.

²¹ Renate Blumenfeld-Osinski and Timea Szell, ed., *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 203.

²² Blumenfeld-Osinski & Timea Szell, 207.

to heaven was dependent on the body and their struggles to overcome the temptations of the flesh.²³ This belief was based on certain notions of the unstable character of female flesh. Some patristic figures argued that woman in essence was not created in God's image, while woman in figure was, although such a statement was diversely interpreted and not often absorbed by the general population.²⁴ A more influential belief that Bynum suggests is that, allegorically, "woman is to man as matter is to spirit": thus woman, or the feminine more generally, "symbolizes the physical, lustful, material, appetitive part of human nature, whereas man symbolizes the spiritual, or rational or mental."²⁵ Furthermore, ancient scientists declared woman's contribution in conception to be the physical or material stuff of the body, while man's the spirit or soul.²⁶ Given these ancient and allegorical associations between women and the flesh, it is not surprising that both men and women of medieval society espoused a view of female sanctity as physical rather than mental. That the mental and contemplative aspect of piety was denied the female saint implied their inferiority to men as pious figures, and forced the female further from the official positions within the male dominated church hierarchy. The reasons for the vocation of anchorite being dominated by women is thus twofold: it was one of few spiritual paths available to women, and the strict enclosure, necessary chastity and physical hardship of the lifestyle incorporated the materiality of female sanctity completely.²⁷

Berceo, immersed as he was in popular notions of female sainthood and sanctity, is no exception to this. While he does not mention sexual temptation, and although he does not comment on Oria's womanly weakness, even at times depicting her as steadfast and tough, the fact that Oria is a virgin is repeated constantly throughout the poem. That she was committed to an ascetic life "as soon as she lost her milk teeth, while still very young," is also stressed.²⁸ Furthermore, the physical aspect of the anchorite's life is central to the *Vida*. When Berceo states at the beginning of the poem that Oria was a "child of spiritual deeds/who fought and struggled with her flesh./She never loosened the reins to give in to her body,"²⁹ he links the anchorite's spirituality directly with her physical character. The opening of Oria's second vision is dedicated

²³ Bynum, 29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 261.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 262.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Bynum, 15.

²⁸ Lappin, *Commentary*, 51.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

to stressing the bodily discomfort that characterizes her holiness. The three virgins that visit her insist that she:

‘Get up from the earth that is cold and hard,
Climb onto this bed: you will lie in more softness.
Here is the Queen, be assured of this,
if she finds you on the ground, she will be annoyed with you.’³⁰

That Oria sleeps on the cold, hard ground of her cell, her “bed not softened by down,”³¹ is of the utmost importance to the saint. Although the queen to whom the virgins refer is the Virgin Mary, Oria insists that she cannot leave her painful station:

‘Ladies,’ Oria said to them, ‘that is not right.’
I am strong and young enough to undergo anything.
If I were to lie down there, God would be displeased.
I want a bed rough with prickling bristles.³²

Although she is a “temple of patience and of humility,”³³ and although she prays with dedication, these aspects of Oria’s piety are mentioned only in passing by her male hagiographer. In this passage, Berceo demonstrates that it is directly through Oria’s physical suffering that she pleases God. Despite the devotional aspect of the text, the author, perhaps unconsciously, implies that Oria’s physical path to sanctity designates her as inferior to the male saint or member of the clergy.

Berceo’s own authority as male cleric is also made clear throughout the *Vida*. Given the male dominant structure of medieval society, and particularly that of the medieval church, many scholars express wariness regarding male-authored depictions of female saints, which are likely to reveal at least an idealized notion of female sanctity, if not a patriarchal inclination. Men, and clerics in particular, were endowed with complete control over the composition of women’s words and lives, largely due to women’s lack of formal education.³⁴ Careful analysis and comparison of examples of hagiographies written by female saints, and interpretations by their male transcribers, reveal that even those who claim they remain true to what the women dictate had manipulated their stories. Subtle changes in emphases were not uncommon, and sometimes

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

³² *Ibid.*, 71.

³³ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁴ Catherine M. Mooney, ed., *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 7.

vast alterations to stories were made.³⁵ Of course, their intention was not necessarily malicious. The values of their medieval world were simply inseparable from their literary renderings.

Again, Berceo is no exception. As a male author of a female saint's life, he imbues the text with the values of his medieval world. Weiss argues that Berceo places emphasis on the importance of the written over the spoken word throughout the *Vida*, and thus ensures the power of the male cleric over the female saint. Berceo crowds his poem with figures of male authority figures—bishops, monks, the apostles, the evangelists—whose connection to the divine is institutionalized and hierarchized by their command of the sacrament and liturgy and strengthened by their dominion over the written word. Furthermore, Weiss associates the curious grammatical slip in stanzas 149 and 150 with Berceo's interest in hierarchical order.³⁶ The poet abruptly adopts the voice of Munno, Oria's male confessor and author of the original Latin *vitae*, now lost, on which the work is based.³⁷ Although many scholars have suggested a variety of reasons for this momentary narrative shift, Weiss' is perhaps the most convincing. The slip occurs just as Oria is being encouraged to relate her final vision, of the Mount of Olives. While "[o]ther good women who sat near her/saw that she was murmuring, [but] they did not understand her,"³⁸ and although her mother and a group of nuns who attend her at her sick bed try to wake her, it is only when her confessor enters the cell that the girl wakes from her reverie and is able to relate her final vision. Several stanzas later, Oria's mother again urges the anchorite to speak of her revelations, but Oria refuses:

'Mother,' said her daughter, 'you bother me so much!
Leave me alone, so God, the holy father, may protect you:
I have enough in my suffering and pain;
my tongue weighs upon me more than a heavy stone.
I want to speak to you: I cannot speak.'³⁹

The anecdotal quality of this interaction is an example of the familiarity that characterizes much of the *Vida*. A daughter, severely ill, is frustrated with her mother's infringement on her privacy. However, this section also reinforces the importance of her earlier confession to Munno. She cannot form her words in the presence of a woman. It is thus only the male cleric to whom Oria

³⁵ Mooney, 8.

³⁶ Weiss, 461.

³⁷ Perry, 3

³⁸ Lappin, *Commentary*, 75.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

can speak, because it is he who then commits her vision to writing. Berceo's repeated insistence that he draws from the original text by Munno, a "very learned man"⁴⁰ who "told the whole truth,"⁴¹ emphasizes the male cleric's role. Berceo implies that it is through this transcription that the saintly story is rescued from the confusion of the feminine realm.⁴²

But why did Berceo, a prolific author of hagiographies, choose to compose the *Vida de Santa Oria*, as his final work, and as his life was ending? He was certainly not choosing from a limited selection of Iberian holy figures. Oria, and her holy mother Amunna, are buried at the Monastery of San Millán, so perhaps Berceo felt a personal connection to the anchorite. Brian Dutton argues that Berceo wrote the *Vida* as a form of propaganda, when San Millán was affected by the rise in popularity of new pilgrimage sites throughout Spain. Faced with a dwindling number of devotional visitors, Berceo hoped to restore San Millán's prestige as a pilgrimage site.⁴³ Although comprehensive, this theory does not account for the depiction of female sanctity as physical and inferior, or the emphasis placed on the male dominated and hierarchical church structure, that are central to the work. Berceo may have sensed encroaching instability in both church structure and the place of female holiness in the Rioja of the thirteenth century, and felt the need to demonstrate the proper order. His choice to compose the *Vida* was not accidental. It was a careful decision, or perhaps an intuitive selection, based on the specific climate in which the work was written.

While most of Berceo's works, the *Vida* included, make little reference to the conflict that was unfolding throughout southern Iberia during the thirteenth century, or to the events that shaped the peninsula's history, the climate of the Reconquest inevitably affected the author's mind and work. The northern region where he lived had for some time been under Christian rule, but parts of Andalusia, and centres like Granada and Malaga, remained a centre of Spanish Islam and Moorish civilization. It would be another two centuries before Ferdinand and Isabella completely and finally removed the Muslim presence.⁴⁴ The Reconquest had originated in Asturias, near Berceo's northern home, led by Pelayo, the Christian son of a Visigothic duke.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴² Weiss, 461.

⁴³ Lappin, *Berceo*, 99.

⁴⁴ Keller, 17.

According to the tenth century *Chronicle of the Alfonso III*, Pelayo led an uprising against the Muslim invaders in Asturias and saved the region from conquest.⁴⁵ This famous tale of combat between Muslims and Christians on Asturian soil was a reminder. As heirs to the Visigothic kings, and to the great insurgent Pelayo, the Christian north of Spain felt the presence of the Reconquest keenly. Great cities like Seville and Cordoba were seized by Christian rulers during Berceo's lifetime—the history of recent conflict in his own land was likely closer to his thoughts than his poetry reveals.

Perhaps Berceo felt that the volatility of ongoing war throughout Iberia was a threat to the organized structure of the church at home. However, the Muslim presence had never been strong in northern Spain, and in the thirteenth century, Christian rule was well-established in the Rioja.⁴⁶ The real significance of the Reconquest, and the influence it had on Berceo's *Vida*, was that historical and ongoing hostilities increased the fear of new heretical movements growing in the neighbouring city of León. Berceo's knowledge of these new heretical movements is not evident in the *Vida*, but in another work, the *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* or Miracles of Our Lady. Berceo indicates in the *Milagros* that the miracle depicted took place in a church close to Çohinos, a village that lay during the thirteenth century within the diocese of León.⁴⁷ The fact that the record of the event was preserved in a manuscript in León, in the possession of the bishop of that diocese, or his chapter, is therefore intriguing.⁴⁸ How could the Berceo have read the manuscript and versified the story? Lappin suggests that, based on the origin of the *Milagros* manuscript, some connection between León and Berceo must have existed.

Precisely what this link was is of less importance to the *Vida* than the connection itself. Heresy was spreading within the walls of León and surrounding suburbs, likely furnished by the Way of Saint James, the pilgrimage route that led many Christians, heretics and otherwise, through the city from southern France.⁴⁹ The threat of the Albigensian or Cathar heresy propagating nearby must have been known to our poet, just as the story of *Milagros* was known to him. To make matters worse, the structure of the Cathar church was not as hierarchized or

⁴⁵ Lomax, 25–26.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁷ Lappin, *Berceo*, 82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

male dominated as the Catholic church to which Berceo belonged.⁵⁰ Women could be accepted as members of the prefect, the groups of wandering mendicants whose primary concern was to proselytize and minister for the church. This was a higher status for women than they could ever achieve in the Catholic church.⁵¹ Berceo felt the pressure of the emerging doctrine as a threat to the male dominated church to which he belonged, made uneasy by the memory of another heresy, that of the Muslims, that was still at Spain's back door. Understanding the didactic function of the hagiography, the *Vida* offered him reassurance that the social structure of his religious world—if carefully indicated in his poem—could maintain stability when confronted with a heretical doctrine.

Berceo was undeniably immersed in the world of western Christian doctrine typical of the thirteenth century, and the attitudes towards sainthood, female holiness and church structure he espouses in the *Vida* are a direct result of this religious tutelage. As a specifically didactic work, the poem is intended to educate the audience regarding the specific structure and hierarchy of the church, and its patriarchal cast, as well as teach the exclusively bodily path to holiness that women were to strive for. The *Vida* is naturally a text that emulates notions of female sanctity as inferior and physical, a male conception typical of the medieval world: Berceo was influenced by a comprehensive and complex tradition of male scribes controlling the representation of female saints' lives. Oria's physical suffering is emphasized throughout the poem over her cerebral piety, as is the authority, through the stability of the written word, of the male confessor and translator over Oria's feminine holiness. Her tongue is heavy and cannot form words in the presence of her mother, while her male confessor easily elicits a narration of her final vision from the suffering girl. It is clear that the *Vida* is a highly gendered text, designed to convey a patriarchal church structure and the dominance of male clerical authority over female sanctity to the common Christian. That Berceo chose to write the story of Oria as his final poem is indicative of the climate of thirteenth century Rioja in which he wrote. His last poem is an effort to establish both church hierarchy and the place of the female saint within it, in an environment he felt was unstable. If not directly or imminently, the Muslim presence on the one hand, and

⁵⁰ Joseph Reese Strayer, *The Albigensian Crusades* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 31.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

more significantly and immediately, the Albigensian heresy on the other, threatened to change Berceo's world.

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