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Ilse E. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix: Images of St Wilgefortis Since the Middle Ages*. Waterloo, Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001, 208 pp., 22 colour, 4 black-and-white illus., $45.00 Cdn, ISBN 0-88920-365-2

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reason very closely. His well-written text is a model for the medieval art historian and yet is entirely accessible for the non-specialist.

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Notes

1 Malcolm Thurlby, "Roger of Pont l'Évêque, Archbishop of York (1154–81), and French Sources for the beginnings of Gothic architecture in Northern Britain," *England and the Continent in the Middle Ages: Studies in Memory of Andrew Martindale*, ed. John Mitchell (Stamford, 2000), 35–47, with further bibliography.

2 J. Haselock and D.E. O'Connor, "The Medieval Stained Glass of Durham Cathedral," in Nicola Coldstream and Peter Draper, eds, *Medieval Art and Architecture at Durham Cathedral: The British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions*, III (Leeds, 1980), 105–29 at 105.

3 For Easby, see Richard Marks, *Stained Glass in England during the Middle Ages* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1993), 46, 140, pl. VIII(b); for the Christ in Majesty at St Mary the Less, Durham, see George Zarnecki, *Later English Romanesque Sculpture 1140–1210* (London, 1953), ill. 131.

Ilse E. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix: Images of St Wilgefortis Since the Middle Ages*. Waterloo, Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001, 208 pp., 22 colour, 4 black-and-white illus., $45.00 Cdn, ISBN 0-88920-365-2.

The focus of Ilse Friesen's interdisciplinary and cross-cultural study is the images associated with the cult of Saint Wilgefortis also known as Liberata, Ontcommer, Uncumber, or Kümmernis. This is the saint referred to in Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business* as a "curious specimen".[1] Indeed she is, for Wilgefortis grew a man's beard in order to save her virginity, a miracle which prevented her marriage and so enraged her father that he had her crucified. Despite the potentially sensational nature of the subject matter, Friesen adopts a matter-of-fact tone in her praiseworthy attempt to chart the long and rather confusing history of a unusual cult that is for the most part today consigned to oblivion.

Broadly speaking, the first three chapters of *The Female Crucifix* are devoted to a "misunderstanding" seen at the origin of the Wilgefortis cult of images. The type of the bearded, virgin martyr on the cross is "triumphal" and derives from a large, reliquary crucifix, the Romanesque *Volto Santo* or Holy Face in Lucca. This miracle-working, almost life-sized, wooden crucifix depicts a robed, live Christ, with open glass eyes. In its original form – the extant crucifix is a medieval copy – the *Volto Santo* can be dated to the early years of the twelfth century. The display of the statue dressed and ornamented on only a few feast days each year and its symbolic purple robe would, we are told, have "contributed to the growing misunderstanding that the statue was, in fact, that of a woman rather than of Christ. Specifically, this misunderstanding was linked to the growth of a fourteenth-century legend concerning a crucified princess who had miraculously grown a beard in order to preserve her chastity and to more closely resemble Christ in her suffering on the cross" (p. 15).

Relying on the research of Caroline Walker Bynum, Barbara Newman and others, Friesen interprets the cult of the saint in her second chapter as an essentially feminine phenomenon fed by late medieval mysticism. *Minnemystik*, "crucifixion piety", and the *Imitatio Christi*, especially eucharistic union with the sacred body of Christ, are invoked to explain the advent of a bearded, but frankly female, figure to the cross.

The third chapter introduces the legend of the poor fiddler that was to have combined with the image of the crucified saint to produce her late medieval, Renaissance and Baroque iconography. "During the later Middle Ages, and once the robed crucifix had come to be understood – or rather, misunderstood – to represent a female martyr, the fiddler became an increasingly integral part of the iconography of this saint" (p. 35–36). The fact that fourteenth-century depictions of the robed crucifix show the crucified looking at a small second figure, a musician kneeling lovingly at the foot of the cross, is taken as evidence of the mutation of the more hieratic, male *Volto Santo* into the more sympathetic and courtly Saint Wilgefortis. However, the story of the fiddler given a precious shoe by the Lucca image "was apparently already widely popular during the twelfth century" (p. 36). Various versions of the tale of the fiddler are traced in text and image from the Romanesque period to "Der Geiger zu Gmünd", the famous 1816 poem of Justinus Kerner, where the benefactress of the musician is Saint Cecilia, rather than Wilgefortis.

Chapters four through seven deal with manifestations of the cult of the saint in Northern Europe. According to the text of Hans Burgkmair's woodcut of 1502–07, the saint lies buried in a church in "Stouberg", probably Steenbergen in North Brabant. Friesen speculates "that the church of Steenbergen once housed a medieval statue of a robed crucifix, which may have been a copy of the *Volto Santo*. Apparently, this image came to be venerated as a female bearded saint around 1400" (p. 48). The earliest of the surviving documents indicates that an altar

was dedicated to Sente Ontcommer (Ontkommer = "one who escaped" fetters) in the Church of Our Lady in Ghent in the year 1400. During the course of the fifteenth century, the iconography of Saint Ontkommer began to diverge substantially from that of the *Volto Santo*. Several examples of Netherlandish works show a comely and aristocratically dressed, but none the less bearded, female saint crucified out-of-doors without the gift of the shoe and the presence of the minstrel. Furthermore, the Netherlandish saint is often tied with ropes rather than pierced with nails. Identifiable by her beard and the cross she holds, Ontkommer is present on a liturgical vestment of the Order of the Golden Fleece dating to ca. 1450. Other portrayals of her are found on a 1480 triptych shutter by Hans Memling and in an altarpiece by Hieronymus Bosch in the Doge's Palace in Venice. Unfortunately, none of these fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Netherlandish examples is reproduced in the volume.

The discussion of the saint's images in England, where most were destroyed during the Reformation period, is also not illustrated. The cult is thought to have been brought by Flemings to English regions having strong commercial ties to Flanders sometime after 1400. Saint Ontkommer became Saint Uncumber and figured among the remaining 95 statues of saints of Torrigiano's elaborate tomb for Henry VII in Westminster Abbey (ca. 1512). But for Friesen, the English cult "degenerated into gross superstition" (p. 58) sometime after 1500, when it was "used by women for self-serving, sometimes even devious ends" (p. 60). Here Friesen may be influenced by Thomas More's satirical attitude, for she quotes his damning assertion that wives have changed the name of Wilgefortis to Uncumber, because for a peck of oats she will not fail to unencumber them of their husbands. Oats were a common offering to the saint who not only protected victims of domestic violence, but also farm animals.

Why are the pleas and gifts to the saint from unhappily married Englishwomen of the fifteenth century denounced as grossly superstitious, whereas elsewhere cult prayers and practices, however popular, are presented sympathetically? More's clear association of the veneration of Uncumber-Wilgefortis with women should lend support to Friesen's thesis of a primarily feminine following for the "female crucifix". In an age when battered women could phone no help line, marriages were arranged, divorce impossible, and husbands enjoyed legal dominion over wives and daughters, appeal to a saint for relief from a brutal spouse or unwanted suitor seems no more illogical and reprehensible than appeal for release from the pain of childbirth or from imprisonment. Wilgefortis' martyrdom was after all a miraculous "escape" from the bonds of marriage. The forthright logic of the English cult piques the curiosity, as do the brief allusions to the "draped" crucifixes of England, especially since mention is made of destruction of shrines and images under Edward VI for the value of the saint's clothes (p. 58).

Chapters six, seven and eight, devoted to Bavaria and the Tyrol, are rich in examples and material relating to the Wilgefortis cult. The Baroque pilgrimage church of Neufahrn contains a twelfth-century crucifix, ceiling frescoes, pictorial ex-votos, and most interestingly a series of panel paintings with inscriptions from ca. 1527. These narrative works "explain" how the cult was brought to the area. The wooden crucifix was found floating down the Isar river by woodcutters, who wounded it with their axes and drew blood. It was then retrieved by order of the Bishop and began immediately to work miracles. The figure on the crucifix depicted in the Renaissance panels looks less like a Romanesque wood carving than like a live saint, as Friesen points out. The panel with the inscription "A painter gave the image the wrong color red, and as soon as it was done he went blind" (p. 72) provides an intriguing parallel to the fabrication of the *Volto Santo*. Legend held it to have been sculpted by Nicodemus, eye witness to the crucifixion, using the shroud imprinted with Christ's body. Unable to sculpt Christ's face, he fell asleep, and the work was done by angels. The temporary "blindness"of the Renaissance artist is a miraculous punishment guaranteeing the accuracy of the representation, its divine origins, and the real presence of the saint in her relics.

The Kümmernis Chapel of Burghausen was consecrated in 1865 to both the Virgin Mary and Saint Wilgefortis, although an earlier chapel to the latter is thought to have preceded it. During the course of the nineteenth century the saint lost her independent identity, and ironically, today the chapel is a marriage chapel, especially favoured for celebrating silver or golden wedding anniversaries.

Friesen's quest for the bearded lady, like that of Robertson Davies' academic hero, leads her at last into the Tyrolean Alps where many vestiges of the Wilgefortis cult are still to be found. One might expect that southern Tyrol, today part of Italy but traditionally German-speaking, could afford clues to the transformation of the "triumphal Christ" to the "female crucifix". An astonishing old photograph of a crucifix now in a Bressanone museum shows a Romanesque Christ clad in a woman's folk costume (pl. 12).

One begins to suspect that the relationship between the *Volto Santo* and depictions of Saint Wilgefortis is based on more than a mistaking of the twelfth-century robed Christ for a woman, however ambiguous the robed, Romanesque Christ may have seemed to later worshippers. There is even possible support for the book's *parti pris*, that the cult appealed especially to women, in another aspect of the *Volto Santo* phenomenon. Richard Trexler makes the case for the dressing and undressing of this and other miraculous cult figures to have implied a hierarchy of power and to have been primarily the province of

women.[2] The fact that the *Volto Santo* Christ was robed, both with a carved and polychrome priestly garment and with added costly fabric garments and ornamented with jewellery, meant that the statue had to undergo the indignity of being robed and disrobed. When priests dressed and undressed Christ, they necessarily assumed a dominant male ritual role. Trexler maintains that few cult figures of the adult Christ or patriarchal saints were ever ritually robed or disrobed. His evidence seems to indicate that this practice was, and continues to be, performed by women on statues of a dependent nature. The Catholic cult figures most often treated as "dolls" are Infant Christs or Virgin Marys. Furthermore, the clothing given to them is very often the handiwork of women, votive garments that can subsequently be reworn to miraculous effect. This fact brings to mind the legendary shoe bestowed by the Luccan crucifix on the poor minstrel, especially since in most versions of the tale this item of apparel circulates and is not a unilateral gift. In other words, the act of dressing and undressing the Luccan Christs may have been instrumental in their transformation from male to female.

Although there is some discussion in the seventh chapter of the *Female Crucifix* concerning the overtly cross-dressed presentation of a Romanesque – but not particularly triumphal – Christ from Lamprechtsburg (pl. 12), Friesen concludes that it is a late and isolated northern Wilgefortis phenomenon, distinct from the *Volto Santo* cult: "Therefore the custom of robing nude statues of crucifixes such as the ones in Brixen and in Rankweil cannot be attributed to the veneration of the *Volto Santo*, but instead appears to have been part of a separate development found only north of the Alps" (p. 100).

Equally puzzling is the tendency to separate the legend of the fiddler from the sacred reliquary statue associated with it as early as the twelfth century. As soon as a dialogue of gazes is established between fiddler and crucifix, it is Wilgefortis that Friesen sees depicted. In the first plate, that of a fresco from ca. 1330–50 from a cemetery chapel near Prutz, Austria, the reader can find no proof other than the author's statement that the figure is Kümmernis-Wilgefortis rather than the *Volto Santo* Christ. While Friesen does concede that the decorative fleurs-de-lis design "is clearly connected with that of the *Volto Santo*, which also features such a fleurs-de-lis arch", she nevertheless refers to the crucified figure as "she" (p. 41). Other early examples appear to be equally equivocal. In fact, the book's illustrations do not provide a clear example of Kümmernis-Wilgefortis earlier than Hans Burgkmair's woodcut of 1507, which is labelled both "Santkümernus" and "Die Bildnis zu Luca", and shows the shoe-shedding *Volto Santo* above its altar in Lucca. Did the cult of Kümmernis-Wilgefortis exist independently of the Italian cult before the sixteenth century or even the seventeenth century? The Netherlandish images from the beginning of the fifteenth century that should provide this assurance are not reproduced. Crucial also to Friesen's presentation of the cult as distinct from that of the *Volto Santo* is the putative sex change undergone by the male crucifix. But already in chapter two she undermines the masculinity of the *Volto Santo*, seeing on it breasts and postulating as a cause of the development of the Wilgefortis cult the desire for an androgynous Christ with whom both sexes could identify.

One cannot help thinking that the problem of the relationship between the Italian cult and the northern veneration of Wilgefortis has not been resolved in a definitive way. Perhaps a closer look at Burgkmair's woodcut and its political and religious context could have provided an answer. In 1513 Hans Springinklee produced a similar print that is not mentioned. Or maybe it is necessary to go further back and delve deeper into the significance of the *Volto Santo* cult from which that of Wilgefortis emerged. What, for example, did the Lucca Holy Face reliquary have to do with other miraculous Romanesque pilgrimage reliquary statues, for example the masculine-looking Sainte Foy, containing the head of a virgin martyr who was closely associated with fiddle-playing minstrels?[3]

Similarly, the complexities of the slipper legend deserve more intense scrutiny. In *The Female Crucifix* the miracle is rationalized in the following way:

> It is interesting to note that the story of the shoe slipping from the foot of the *Volto Santo* may originally have been based on practical considerations rather than on a miraculous event. The carved figure on the crucifix originally wore no shoes, since the bare feet were pierced directly by nails. At some later point, shoes were added to the festive clothing of the statue; these had been brought by pilgrims or donated by wealthy citizens as votive offerings to the supposedly miracle-working image.
>
> Since the crucifix, although hanging above an altar, had apparently been placed low enough to be touched, it became increasingly necessary to protect the feet from the hands of eager pilgrims who tended to kiss those parts of the statue that were within easy reach. Once the right foot, in particular, began to show signs of wear and tear, the shoe would no longer fit or stay on properly. In order to prevent the shoe from slipping off, a chalice was placed under the right foot as a supportive device. (p. 38)

Thus the slipper, so important in legend, would originally have been merely prophylactic and the chalice, in keeping with Schnürer and Ritz, a meaningless prop, used to collect coins. This fails to explain why pilgrims were so intent on kissing the statue's right foot that they wore it out, or why a chalice, of all things, was chosen "as a supportive device" and "container for coins".

In an essay provocatively entitled "Cinderella crucified" ("*Cendrillon crucifiée*") Jean-Claude Schmitt analyses in great detail the textual traditions surrounding the *Volto Santo*, especially that of the minstrel and slipper.[4] Schmitt tells us the disposition of the right foot, slipper and chalice is attested to in even the oldest existing representations of the *Volto Santo*, those on coins issued by the city from the beginning of the thirteenth century. Furthermore, the right foot, slipper and chalice are to this day important ritual elements of the Holy Face, although the chalice never formed part of its written heritage.[5] With arguments and examples that cannot be repeated in full here, Schmitt relates the legend of the *jongleur* to nuptial ritual and the yearly civic ceremony meant to reconcile the citizenry of Lucca to its religious authority, the bishop, through symbolic re-possession of the holy object, the *Volto Santo*. The slipper is given to the citizenry in order to be relinquished to legitimate authority and then returned to the crucifix. The *Volto Santo* ultimately serves as "bride" and protectress of the city while Lucca's male ecclesiastical authorities are cast in the patriarchal role of legitimate "husband", playing Prince Charming to Christ's Cinderella. Suffice it to say that gender "confusions" already lie at the heart of the cult of the *Volto Santo*.

Friesen's presentation of the later legend of the fiddler of Gmünd stresses that the fiddler "was singled out as a hero in his own right, and eventually came to symbolize, among other things, civic pride, self-accomplishment and the promotion of music and the arts. From the early nineteenth century on, statues, illustrations, coins, posters and souvenirs of various types were produced in Gmünd, where the fiddler was celebrated as a civic emblem of the town" (p. 40). Taking Schmitt's findings into account, it might have been possible to link northern and southern, medieval and later functions of the "female crucifix". Surely, the ardour of the male serenader cannot be proof in itself of the transformation from a masculine Christ to a feminine saint, nor is the minstrel more important to the legend of Wilgefortis than to that of the *Volto Santo*.

The final two chapters of *The Female Crucifix* deal with more contemporary concerns, the phenomenon of hirsutism and modern-day gender blending. Although fascinating, the discussion of hirsutism seems somewhat at odds with the earlier efforts to derive the "female crucifix" from a misunderstanding of the *Volto Santo* crucifix. If the legend alone of a hair-growing virgin were the source of an entirely separate cult, searching for its medical basis would seem more justified. But even then, the reality of virilizing adrenal carcenoma would scarcely serve as a rational justification for the cult's images. The author is on firmer ground when postulating an identification with and imitation of Christ – also seen in contemporary movements – as underlying the Wilgefortis images. But the question remains: which Christ, when? The problem of representing an incarnate, visible Son of God at once human and divine, physical and spiritual, was a recurring one for the Western Church. As Steinberg, and especially Wirth, have shown, the iconographic system in which Christ, the Church, its clergy, the Virgin and saints were presented used gender and gender relations to express concepts very different from that of straightforward biological difference. This study might have profited from a closer look at the theological stakes involved in gendering Christ.[6] Nevertheless, it remains a useful addition to the scholarship of hagiography, providing a number of unedited Germanic works and updating the 1934 study of Schnürer and Ritz, unavailable in Canadian libraries.[7]

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Notes

1 Robertson Davies, *Fifth Business* (Middlesex, England, 1970), 142.
2 Richard Trexler, "Habiller et déshabiller les images: esquisse d'une analyse," *L'Image et la production du sacré*, eds Françoise Dunand, Jean-Michel Spieser and Jean Wirth (Paris, 1991), 195–231.
3 For the cult of Sainte Foy as that of a "*jongleresse*" saint sung by *jongleurs*, see Jean Wirth, *L'image médiévale. Naissance et développements (VIe-XVe siècle)* (Paris, 1989), 171–94.
4 Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Cendrillon crucifiée. À propos du *Volto Santo* de Lucques," *Miracles, Prodiges et Merveilles au Moyen Âge*, XXVe Congrès de la S.H.M.E.S. (Orléans, juin 1994) (Paris, 1995), 241–70.
5 Schmitt, "Cendrillon crucifiée," 264.
6 Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2nd edn (Chicago, 1996). Jean Wirth, *L'image à l'époque romane* (Paris, 1999).
7 Gustav Schnürer and Joseph M. Ritz, *Sankt Kümmernis und Volto Santo* (Düsseldorf, 1934).