



Women Saints' Lives in Old English Prose (Library of Medieval Women)

Leslie A. Donovan

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Devout, virtuous and independent, the heroines of Old English saints' lives (one of the most popular literary genres of the middle ages) provided exemplars of personal and public inspiration for medieval Christians. The eight lives translated here are the earliest known vernacular accounts of the biographies of Æthelthryth, Agatha, Agnes, Cecilia, Eugenia, Euphrosyne, Lucy, and Mary of Egypt. They depict women escaping unwanted marriages, communicating with male relatives, acquiring an education, living autonomously as hermits, and achieving positions of leadership; such lives document not only the importance of spiritual faith to early Christian women, but also testify to how these women (and their audience) employed faith as a tool for empowerment. Each life is preceded by a brief description of the saint's cult from its early Christian origins to its presence in Anglo-Saxon culture. The translation is accompanied by an introduction establishing the general background for the genre, the conventions of women saints' lives, and women's religious culture in Anglo-Saxon England; and an interpretive essay exploring the relationships between explicit presentations of the female body and the strength of spiritual authority as exhibited in these texts completes the volume. LESLIE A. DONOVAN is Associate Professor at the University of New Mexico.

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