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Author: Anna Czarnowus

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Anna Czarnowus

University of Silesia, Katowice

A Saint Who Never Existed: Extrahistorical Texts about St Wilgefortis

The figure of the bearded Wilgefortis escapes all classifications. She cannot be discussed along with other masculinized saints, such as St Pelagia, St Margaret or St Galla, since in opposition to them she is an extrahistorical figure. She transcends the limits of gender to a disconcerting degree due to the ambiguity of both literary texts and icons "telling" her story and referring to her cult. Its origin and the cause of its popularity remain a mystery, since the figure of the androgynous saint can neither be univocally interpreted nor assigned to any specific hagiographic category. As far as texts associated with the figure of Wilgefortis are concerned, they can be classified as either hagiographic texts preserved in the written form, or as iconographic ones functioning within the domain of visual arts: sculptures, engravings and paintings. The logical explanations of the cult offered by various researchers seem to be insufficient. The hagiographic texts themselves try to explain the bearded saint's significance, but they remain secondary to the icon and fail to grasp the ineffable.

The two types of texts representing saints: the hagiographic and the iconographic ones co-exist in the medieval culture, within which a visual image was at least as important as a literary text, or even more significant as painting was a more accessible kind of art than literature. In multiple representations of saints some

ironic touches may be spotted and in many others the grotesque looms large from an apparently stereotypical hagiographic icon. David Williams thus conveys that plurality of the saint's representations within the culture:

The saint's life is a particularly useful kind of text for the exploration of the concept of the monstrous, since its literary structure is fully polymorphic, involving the cult of the saint, the biography or legend, and the visual representation. Not surprisingly, it is in the fabulous, extrahistorical saints' lives that grotesque elements are most prominent, and the question has long ago been raised whether such legends come into being first through an iconographic representation that gives rise to a narrative that in turn creates a cult, or whether the text begins as a story that produces visual representation that becomes the object of a cult.¹

The two types of texts having St Wilgefortis as their object of representation clearly present a fabulous, extrahistorical life which involves monstrous or at least transgressive elements. The question Williams asks can be answered straightforwardly in the case of Wilgefortis, since the iconographic text remains basically uniform, with only minor variations concerning insignificant details, whereas the hagiographic text cannot even be reconstructed in its "primary" form. All the researchers examining the topic, such as Father Cahier, Louis Réau, or the author of the latest study on Wilgefortis, Ilse E. Friesen, agree that the hagiographical legend was a result of the existence of the image that was already an object of cult at the time.² Thus the question of the hagiographical text's origin seems uncomplicated. Yet, the differ-

¹ David Williams, *Deformed Discourse. The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Montreal and Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), p. 285

² Father Cahier, "Caractéristiques des saints", Louis Réau, "L'Iconographie de l'Art Chrétien", quoted in: D. Williams, *Deformed Discourse...*, Ilse E. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix. Images of St. Wilgefortis Since the Middle Ages* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001).

ences between the versions have been difficult to explain and there is no uniform rendering of the androgynous saint's tale which could be universally quoted. The graphic representations of the saint have been displayed in numerous churches in Holland, Bavaria and Tyrol, but there are hardly any written texts referring to Wilgefortis. As for England, her cult sites existed in Worstead, Norwich, and Boxford, Suffolk, yet, they were "reformed" by Edward VI and hardly any artifacts remain except for a hymn included in a prayer book published in 1533. Moreover, a sculpture of the "draped" crucifix, albeit with its head missing, was preserved in Langford, Oxfordshire. Ilse E. Friesen maintains that the vandalism that removed Wilgefortis from the English churches was partly incited by the "not always positive direction" of the veneration for the saint which "degenerated into gross superstition".³ Nevertheless, all the visual representations of the saint can be defined as belonging to folk art and none of them is particularly "correct", hence most of the existing iconographic texts might be analysed here as valid texts to interpret. The case of the Polish representations of Wilgefortis is significant here, since there exist only two of them. The one which is more famous is the crucified woman statue in the sanctuary in Wambierzyce, and the one which is less known is situated in the countryside in the Kłodzko region. Here the former representation will be discussed.

The saint in question is known by her multiple names, which depends on the country where her cult existed. She is known as Uncumber in English, Ontkommer in Dutch, Kümmeris in German, Viergeforte, Liverade or Débarras in French, and Liberata in Spanish. The etymology of the name Wilgefortis, treated as the most frequently used version of the name from the whole group, is usually explained as deriving from: *virgo fortis*, or alternatively, as *hilge vratz* [the holy face].⁴ The phrase *virgo fortis* already conveys the gender opposition associated with

³ I.E. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix...*, p. 58.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

stereotypically conceived gender binaries. Wilgefortis would thus be both a female virgin and a virile character due to her strength. Alternatively, the etymology of her name referring to the holy face motif points to the significance of the saint's visual representations.

The iconographic text is as ambiguous from the point of view of gender as the name itself. The saint is represented as a bearded woman crucified on the same type of cross as Christ was (in comparison with other crucified saints, whose crosses were *tau*-shaped). Wilgefortis is wearing a long robe and a crown. She also has shoes on, or specifically one shoe, whereas the other one looks as if it has fallen off from her foot since it is lying below the cross. She resembles Christ to a disconcerting degree, but on some of the icons her female breasts are clearly visible underneath her robe. Her feet are bound in some of the images, most frequently when the robe is short enough to display them. What is significant is the fact that she is not the only figure in her visual representations. There is also a fiddler kneeling below the cross and she remains in a direct visual contact with him.

Friesen explains the direct origin of that extrahistorical saint as a consequence of the confusion associated with a Byzantine representation of Christ. In Friesen's words,

About one in every ten of these monumental wood carvings [representing Christ as *imperator triumphans* or *Christus Dominator*] portrays Christ dressed in a long robe, rather than being covered by the more frequently depicted loincloth. This type of fully robed, crucified Christ reflects an eastern or Syrian-Palestinian tradition which tended to portray Christ in the role of the divinely ordained High Priest.⁵

The author of *Female Crucifix* points to the *Volto Santo* [Holy Face] sculpture preserved in the cathedral of Lucca in Italy as the most famous representative of that image of Christ. The original name of the sculpture was *La Santa Croce* [The Holy Cross]. The faith-

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

ful were not accustomed to such a crucifix as it was displayed only for a few feast days a year, dressed in a richly embroidered robe, with a crown and shoes. The confusion resulted in the wrong interpretation of the *Volto Santo*-type iconography: such images were perceived as representations of a female saint.

The images representing Wilgefortis were considered to be highly disruptive since the figure they depicted was neither fully masculine nor feminine. Thus it realized the cultural ideal of bisexuality interpreted as a perfect asexuality. Androgyny is monstrous, it escapes all categorization and causes the feeling of anxiety in the spectators since the category of sex seems to be intrinsic for humans and its absence is considered to be dehumanizing. In the Middle Ages and later on the image of Wilgefortis provoked anxiety on the part of the Church officials, but simultaneously it was very attractive for large audiences of the faithful. The mysterious saint was not merely the product of a confusion, but she was also the embodiment of a certain ideal, that of a God who is both masculine and feminine. Christ represents all the humanity, hence his ideal representation should imply the two genders instead of simply one of them. In the image of a feminized Christ God transcends the limits of gender. David Williams maintains that the iconographic texts having Wilgefortis as their object revealed specific expectations towards an ideal icon representing God: "Far from being the product of a confusion of Christological iconography, Wilgeforte may be seen more informatively as a symbolic encodement of the concept of a hermaphroditic Jesus as God".⁶ The image of a feminized Christ takes into account the feminine reception of the religious cult and becomes a response to the expectations of women concerning a visual representation of God. Such attitudes found probably their fullest expression in the literary works created by the famous female English mystics, Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich.

As for the visual representations of Wilgefortis, two images reproduced in Baron Sloet's *Heilige Ontkommer* are representative

⁶ D. Williams, *Deformed Discourse...*, p. 311.

of the whole tradition of portraying her. The first icon which will be of interest for us here is entitled "St Wilgeforte and the fiddler" where the motif of the fiddle is visualized. The crucifix with the saint on it resembles the images of Christ, yet, the figure does not appear to be suffering which is implied by her benign facial expression. The saint's figure is a triumphant one with no indication of her body being contorted. Despite her physical position in the picture she remains in a close visual contact with the fiddler who is situated considerably below the crucifix because of the dais. He is kneeling with his face upturned and his facial expression doubles that of Wilgefortis. The relationship between the two characters in question is idyllic. The only disturbing elements in the icon are the objects situated close to the saint's feet: a chalice and one of Wilgefortis' shoes. They are lying on the dais below the cross and the fiddler is kneeling as close to them as possible. The opposition between high and low is not valid here since the distance between the two characters is as small as it is at all possible when the saint is hanging on the cross. The crucifix is not similar to the ones that are placed in the vicinity of the ceiling of some Gothic cathedrals. As for the hagiographic story justifying the existence of the fiddler below the crucifix, the shoe was a golden one and Wilgefortis herself let it fall off to reward the musician with it. Significantly, the reward was granted to him for the music he played to display his veneration. In some versions of the legend the second shoe fell off as well in order to save the fiddler's life when he was accused of having robbed the statue of the saint.

The second object, a chalice, would seem to be a typical object found in churches and chapels if not for the fact that it remains the only element in the picture which could not be interpreted metaphorically. However, the authors discussing the visual representations of Wilgefortis indicate the uniformity of the imagery as a system of metaphors. Indeed, there is a group of juxtapositions in the visual representations of the saint that do not have to be read only literally. The bearded face suggesting virility is contrasted with the chalice which is a container typically imply-

ing femininity. The shoe might be the symbol of the female sex, especially when the opposition: empty shoe – full shoe is considered. Hence the cup may also be interpreted as a metaphorical representation of the female sex organ in the light of Aristotle's theory of conception based on Plato's *Timaeus*. According to the philosopher during the act of conception the man provides the form and the woman is the source of matter for the newly-formed being. The female element becomes a container for the form supplied by the male part. The woman only performs in the role of a container, she does not influence the shape of the child. She constitutes a matrix onto which new forms are inscribed.

Furthermore Williams stresses the fact that "the choice of fiddler and fiddle to expand the narrative is significant (...) since in the Middle Ages the bow and the fiddle were common scatological metaphors for the male and the female and their erotic relationship".⁷ The iconographic text is a realization of the dynamic of oppositions characteristic of the Middle Ages since it combines the elements that superficially remain in opposition: female identity and a bearded face, crucifixion as a result of failure and the crucified figure who is triumphant, the saint's virginity and a metaphoric representation of an erotic relationship, elevation on the cross and the closeness of the two figures. Hence it may be inferred that the saint realizes the ideal of completeness, her figure unites opposing elements. Such a statement corroborates with the apparently paradoxical patronage of Wilgefortis over two groups of women. She was treated as a patron saint of virgins and of women during childbirth, which was depicted through the image of her legs being bound, constituting a metaphor for a difficult labour.

Unfortunately, no such undertones can be found in the Polish representation of Wilgefortis, which is a sculpture situated on the way of the cross in Wambierzyce. The figure adorns only one of the 74 chapels that can be visited there. It is a stereotypical depiction of a young woman wearing a fashionable blue dress with a clearly visible female waist and breasts. The depiction is

⁷ Ibidem, p. 313.

entitled "a virgin martyr", yet there are no attributes of the saint's androgynous nature: there is no beard or any other feature indicating her similarity to a man. The statue does not display any sign of gender anxiety associated with Wilgefortis on the part of the creator, which may be attributed to the fact that it is not a medieval work of art, but a much later one: the sanctuary was built in the 18th century. Hence it may be stated that the Polish representation of Wilgefortis is not an appropriate text for our discussion here. It lacks the complexity that can be found in other folk representations of the saint since the only indication of the woman's identity is the fact that she is crucified on the same type of cross as Christ was.

St Wigefortis' association with opposing stages of femininity: virginity and pregnancy has its mythological ancestry. The goddess Diana was another figure symbolizing both of those periods in feminine life. As J.A. Burrow maintains in relation to Chaucer's *Knight Tale*, a literary work where ancient gods perform in the role of literary characters, "virginity is [...] only one of the stages of female life over which [Diana] presides. She is also Luccina, goddess of childbirth".⁸ In the light of such a juxtaposition of apparently contrasting concepts embodied in one figure it has to be pointed out that as a matter of fact they do not exclude each other. Virgin Mary was the paragon of femininity in the Middle Ages and the inclusion of the two stages: virginity and motherhood in one person made her an example to follow, even though it was a paradoxical ideal. As for the mythological origin of Artemis/Diana, her patronage is smoothly justified by Robert Graves, who formulates an explanation of such a state of affairs and puts it into the goddess's mouth: "Unfortunately, women in labour will often be invoking me, since my mother Leto carried and bore me without pains, and the Fates have therefore made me patroness of childbirth".⁹ Saint Wilgefortis seems to continue

⁸ J.A. Burrow, *Essays in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), p. 36.

⁹ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 83.

that tradition of a virgin supporting future mothers, who constitutes an archetype rather than a specific mythological character.

Wilgefortis' cult reached its height in the 15th century, when literary references to her hagiographic legend were made. The first written track of the saint was found in a Dutch *Martirologio* from 1476, where she was described as the daughter of the king of Portugal. In 1568 Johannes Molanus, a professor at Louvain, merged her with the historical figure of the Spanish martyr Liberata and wrote that Wilgefortis was a princess from Portugal who preferred death on the cross to the loss of her virginity by marrying the king of Sicily.¹⁰ The whole tale was included in a hymn written in the saint's honour and included in a prayer book published in 1533 for the use by the diocese of Salisbury, known as *Enchiridion Sarisburnensis*:

Hail, holy servant of Christ, Wilgefortis, you loved Christ with all your soul; as you spurned marriage to the king of Sicily, you kept to the crucified Lord. You suffered the torments of imprisonment by order of your father; a beard grew on your face, a gift you obtained from Christ because you wished to be His; you confounded those who wished you to marry. When your impious father saw you thus deformed, he raised you up on the cross, where you quickly in your virtue gave back your pleasing soul, commended to Christ. Therefore, we reflect on your memory with devout praise, O virgin; O blessed Wilgefortis, we request you to pray for us.¹¹

The hagiographic text involves some details that are typical of female saints' legends. There is a father who forces his daughter to marry an older man and a stigmatization of sorts consisting in the bearded face and its consequence, wounding as a result of crucifixion. Death is a typical end of such stories and here it also

¹⁰ Elizabeth Nightlinger, "The Female 'Imitatio Christi' and Medieval Popular Religion: The Case of Saint Wilgefortis", in: *Feminea Mediaevalia: Representations of the Feminine in the Middle Age*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler, quoted in: I.E. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix...*, p. 59.

¹¹ I.E. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix...*, p. 59.

takes place. The death is unnatural, but it becomes a means of uniting with Christ, the divine lover. The disturbing image of a female version of Christ becomes rationalized and incorporated into the body of texts describing female martyr saints. The anxiety associated with the unstable gender identity of the saint is smoothed and the figure of Wilgefortis is inscribed into the patriarchal culture.

Friesen does not indicate the misinterpretation of the *Volto Sancto* as the main source of the Wilgefortis' cult. The ideal of God situated outside the gender binary was also realized in the representations of female-looking Christ where he was beardless and displayed long locks of curly hair or where a slight swelling of his breasts was visible. The tradition of portraying Christ as potentially female started in the 12th and continued till the 15th century, when, in Friesen's words again, "Christ's flesh was seen as simultaneously male and female. He was male insofar as he was the son of God and of Mary; however, his body was also regarded as female in that his flesh had been fashioned from the womb of his mother".¹² A child originating from a female body is already monstrous even though the father also contributes to the newly-formed human. The image of Christ deriving only from the female matter is highly disturbing since it makes him a double of his mother, which renders him partly female. In the light of that theory Wilgefortis is in fact an androgynous version of Christ. God transcends the limits of gender in such an image. He is simultaneously infinite and finite by representing all that exists in nature in terms of sexuality.

The image of St Wilgefortis speaks louder than the words of the legend. The iconographic text transcends the limitations associated with hagiographic legends and allows for a fuller understanding of the bearded saint's significance. To quote Williams again, it

[w]ork[s] to undermine the apparent meaning of the saint's biography so as to begin a decoding of its narrative that leads

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 25.

to an understanding beyond the historical, literary, and devotional.¹³

As a result of the image's significance the apparent meaning of the saint's biography is undermined. The ultimate emphasis in interpreting that extrahistorical figure should not be placed on the literary text secondary to the icon, but on the series of juxtapositions present in the iconographic text. All of them can be read as representatives of the gender binary. They attempt to express the ineffable and capture the phenomenon impossible to describe by dint of any hagiographic text's words.

¹³ D. Williams, *Deformed Discourse...*, p. 16.