

The Severed Breast:  
The Legends of Saints Agatha and Lucy in  
Medieval Castilian Literature

*by*

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## Preface

**A**CCORDING TO POPULAR TRADITION, the Sicilian virgin martyr, Agatha, died in Catania at the height of the Decian persecutions (250-53). Desired by Quintianus, the low-born Roman consul, she spurned his advances and was imprisoned in a brothel, where its keeper, the appropriately named Aphrodisia, was charged with the responsibility of shattering her sexual resolve. When the attempt at coercion failed, Agatha was summoned once again before Quintianus, and after further interrogation, was subjected to a series of gruesome tortures—the most infamous being the severing of her breast. That night, while suffering in prison, Saint Peter appeared before her, and, in a miraculous act of intervention, healed her wounds and restored her breast. The following day, humiliated and enraged, Quintianus inflicted further pains upon her, and having borne her suffering with exemplary courage and steadfast devotion, she eventually yielded up her soul.

Agatha's fame spread far and wide, but is most notable in relation to a second Sicilian saint, Lucy of Syracuse, who, inspired by her example, prayed at her tomb and received a cure for her mother's illness. Taking advantage of the situation, Lucy persuaded her mother to disburse her fortune amongst the poor, but was denounced by her fiancé to the Roman consul, Paschasius, who tried her for being a Christian. Confronted by threats and intimidation, Lucy refused to renounce her faith and was condemned to suffer the ignominy of prostitution. Paschasius, employing various stratagems, attempted to have her moved, but found in each instance that she had been made immobile. In desperation, he had her basted and burned, but was forced eventually to have her put to the sword. Her martyrdom, which is believed to have

taken place during the Diocletian persecution of 302, is commonly celebrated on 13 December, several weeks in advance of Agatha's feast, which falls on 5 February.

The legends of Agatha and Lucy circulated in various forms before they were incorporated into Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea* (ca. 1260), a compendium of 182 religious feasts arranged according to their position in the liturgical-sanctoral calendar. Voragine's collection, which is the most important and influential of all of the great medieval hagiographic anthologies, devotes some of its attention to Christ and Mary, but is most notable for its explorations of male sanctity. Female saints are comparatively few in number, and in contrast to the diverse roles and occupations of their male equivalents, they have traditionally been classified according to the application of simplistic parameters based largely on questions of social function, sexual status, or relationship to men. Martha and Mary Magdalene, for instance, are famed for their dealings with Christ, while Petronilla is Saint Peter's daughter. Sophia and Julitta, on the other hand, are the mothers of saintly offspring, while Paula and Elizabeth fall into the category of the pious widow. A third group, including penitent whores such as Thaïs and Mary of Egypt, and transvestites such as Margaret and Eugenia, offers more sensationalized accounts of the female religious experience. Yet the dominant category, accounting for more than half of Voragine's forays into the realm of female sanctity, is that of the virgin martyr. These legends share a good deal of common ground and are developed in similar ways; acts of borrowing are frequent—notably in formulaic descriptions of torture and resistance—but despite this, they remain self-contained. The major exceptions are those of Agatha and Lucy, which are linked not simply at the level of character, but in the elaboration of theme. Surprisingly, however, despite the uniqueness of their status, the relationship between them has not yet been subjected to scrutiny.

The *Legenda aurea* was reworked twice into Castilian in the fourteenth century in the form of anthologies that have come to be known as Compilations A and B. The former, which is studied in Chapters 1-2, provides comprehensive coverage of the liturgical-sanctoral cycle

by interpolating a significant number of additional materials garnered from alternative sources. Its treatment of Voragine's Latin suggests that some of its sections were designed to be delivered orally, possibly in the context of sermons celebrating individual feast days, or to clerics as they sat in the refectory. This can be seen most clearly in the adoption of a refined and eloquent register, a relative absence of syntactic complexity, and the inclusion of oral formulas. Its treatment of Agatha and Lucy (whose legends are preserved in an identical sequence of manuscripts) shows that its texts were constructed according to the application of an identical methodology of translation, for in each instance the emphasis falls on clarity, economy, and precision. This is accompanied by a tendency towards sensationalism, notably with regard to the representation of the bond between the virgin martyr and her celestial spouse and its corresponding impact on the sexualization of the female religious experience.

This characteristic can also be seen in Compilation B, which is studied in Chapters 3-4, with an appraisal of context followed by source studies of the extant Castilian recensions. The analysis shows that the texts of the Compilation can be found in six medieval manuscripts, which, unlike those of its counterpart, display a significant degree of internal adaptation and development. This could in part be regarded as the product of a tendency towards linguistic modernization, with the earliest extant versions dating from the late fourteenth century, and others, the latter portion of the fifteenth. The process of development, however, also extends to syntax and expression (which are by no means as polished or eloquent as they are in Compilation A) and the representation of sanctity, which appears in certain instances to have been tailored to suit the demands or requirements of differing audiences. A further significant factor is a tendency towards simplification, with a reduction in the overall number of narratives and the omission of many of the more flowery elements of Voragine's style. The result is that the legends of Agatha and Lucy can be found in a series of recensions, which despite in some ways departing relatively little from another, deserve nonetheless to be read in their own right.