CHAPTER 3

THE FEMALE PATIENCE FIGURE AS COUNTERFEIT

Let us examine him by outrages and tortures that we may know his meekness and try his patience.

—Wisdom 2:19

Take all that shall be brought upon thee: and in thy sorrow endure, and in thy humiliation keep patience.

—Ecclesiasticus 2:4

The Apex of Patience Literature:
Jacobus de Voragine’s Legenda Aurea

The compiling of Jacobus de Voragine’s Legenda Aurea announces the height of the patience literature genre. The years 1260–70, when Jacobus’s compendium first appears, also work well as a rough marker for the apex of patience literature because the criteria for sainthood, and consequently attitudes toward saints’ lives, underwent significant changes during this decade as the cults of Francis, Dominic, and others began to transform the previous definitions of saints and began to reach into hitherto uncharted political territory. Of course Jacobus did not invent the later medieval attitudes towards the content of saints’ lives. As the revolutionary rhetoric of Christianity began to lose its immediacy and as the hierarchy of the church began to take an increasing interest in and control over the making of saints, the typical vitae and passios had already undergone many changes in the centuries before 1260, and, as a compendium of hagiography from well-established sources, the Legenda Aurea must partake in movements such as the feminization of suffering and the gendering of patience as an attribute that had rapidly increased between 300 and 1260. Ambrose had turned Agnes’s body into a fetish of male
fantasies, such as youth, virginity, modesty, and unquestioning loyalty, all miraculously preserved at the moment of martyrdom (*De Virginibus*, 1.2.5–4.19); Prudentius had turned Eulalia’s body into a manuscript leaf, upon which spectators could read her sensational wounds like the text of Prudentius’s *Peristephanon* itself (*Peristephanon*, 3.131–40);³ the anonymous writer of the fifth–century *Life of Syncletica* had turned Syncletica’s body into a *memento mori* of abjection: putrefaction, stench, disintegration, and absence.⁴ In addition, the *Legenda Aurea* exhibits a tendency towards the abstraction of characters and situations and,⁵ as a collection of “readings” concerning saints’ days and other notable festival days of the church, this work tends to absorb, synthesize, regularize, and ritualize such attitudes, so that the individual lives of martyrs become items in a comprehensive and generally approved homiletic encyclopedia. Daily use of this work by many believers means that its influence was immense. Indeed, hailing the manner and scope of the *Legenda Aurea*’s reputation, availability, and reception as unique in literary history has become a standard critical refrain.⁶

**The Patience Attributes of Later Medieval Saints**

Despite the many changes from early hagiography to late that one may observe in the *Legenda Aurea*, the patience attributes of the figures in this collection exhibit many of the traditions of the early martyrologies. For instance, Jacobus retains the connections between martyrs, soldiers, and arena–style athletes established in the early passios (245, 293–94, etc.), and the saints in the *Legenda Aurea* often gain the “crown” of martyrdom—often referred to as simply a crown, with the idea of martyrdom implied—at the end of their lives (129, 204, 264, 704, etc.). Yet, despite the inclusion of many contemplative figures, bishops, and popes in the *Legenda Aurea*, when such figures would be expected to mitigate the more blood-drenched lives of the martyrs, motifs of violence, suffering, and endurance dominate this collection as compared to their incidence in the early passios.⁷ For instance, Jacobus ratchets up the competitive machinery of sainthood by representing the many martyrs in his collection as contending with one another for glory, just like oral–heroic figures, but by means of suffering instead of battle–exploits. He even names a winner of the contest: *Notandum, quod passio beati Laurentii inter caeteras sanctorum martyrum passiones excellentissima esse videtur . . . Primo in passionis aceritate* (496) [It may be noted that the passion of Saint Laurence is seen to stand out above the passions of the other martyrs . . . (for) the bitterness of his sufferings] (2.70), a reference to this saint being roasted on a gridiron. Such competitiveness seems to be standard even if the results of