

Gabrielle Lis

The Astonishing Persistence of the Virgin Martyr Plot: From Middle English legends to twenty-first century fiction

This thesis applies principles of diachronic narratology (Fludernik 2003, Kuhn-Treichel 2024) to interrogate how the medieval virgin martyr plot persists in contemporary fiction and compare the fitness, for this purpose, of a dialectical conception of plot (Lévi-Strauss 1955), to the sequential, eventful models of plot currently predominant in diachronic narratology (Huhn et al. 2023). I define the virgin martyr plot type through close reading and computer-assisted quantification of the plot motifs of twelve virgin martyr legends from a Middle English adaptation of Voragine's *Golden legend* (Caxton 1483, 1900), testing both sequential and dialectical models of plot, then demonstrate transmissions and transformations of both versions of the plot type in four English-language novels linked by documented lines of literary influence: *Pamela* (Richardson 2001 [1740]), *Clarissa* (Richardson 1985 [1747–8]), *Daniel Deronda* (Eliot 1995 [1876]), and *Normal People* (Rooney 2018). While sequences, endings, and the realisation of specific motifs vary across these texts, all establish an initial opposition between exceptional, young, unmarried women and powerful men, mediated by marriage, sexual violence, debate, wealth, humiliation, and death, transforming female rebels into intercessors who operate within an expanded patriarchal system. My analysis demonstrates that sequential descriptions of the virgin martyr plot type obscure diachronic persistence because of the emphasis sequential descriptions place on endings, while a dialectical description illuminates powerful consistencies between diverse iterations, illustrating the utility of dialectical models of plot for diachronic analysis.

Works Cited

- Caxton, William (1900 [1483]): *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints*. Ed. by F.S. Ellis. 7 Vol. London.
- Eliot, George (1995 [1876]): *Daniel Deronda*. Ed. by Terence Cave. London.
- Fludernik, Monika (2003): "The Diachronization of Narratology." In: *Narrative* 11 (No. 3), pp. 331–348.
- Huhn, Peter et al. (eds.) (2023): *Handbook of Diachronic Narratology*. Berlin / Boston, MA.
- Kuhn-Treichel, Thomas (2024): "Poeta Necans: The Metalepsis of Killing a Character in Diachronic Perspective." In: *Narrative* 32 (No. 3), pp. 317–338.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1955): "The Structural Study of Myth." In: *The Journal of American Folklore* 68 (No. 270), pp. 428–444.
- Richardson, Samuel (2001 [1740]): *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. Ed. By Thomas Keymer / Alice Wakely. Oxford.
- Richardson, Samuel (1985 [1747–8]): *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady*. Angus Ross (ed). London. Reprinted 2004.
- Rooney, Sally (2018): *Normal People*. London.

Gabrielle Lis

University of Wollongong, Australia

E-mail: gjl05@uowmail.edu.au