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Epicene and the Bearded Woman Saint

When Morose acquiesces to his nephew's demands for financial security in Ben Jonson's *Epicene*, Dauphine offers the following guarantee before revealing the titular "Silent Woman" to be a cross-dressed boy: "If I quit you not presently and for ever of this cumber, you shall have power instantly, afore all these, to revoke your act, and I will become whose slave you will give me to for ever."[1] Modern editors, if they gloss the word at all,[2] have explicated *cumber* variously as "burden,"[3] "trouble,"[4] "burden, trouble,"[5] "burden, distress,"[6] "encumbrance, distress,"[7] "encumbrance, load of care,"[8] or simply "encumbrance,"[9] and, in the case of the Cambridge Edition, further identifying the "encumbrance" in question as "the marriage."[10] The word *cumber* does not appear elsewhere in Jonson's works,[11] and scansion alone cannot explain this unique usage, given the available two-syllable alternatives (e.g. *anguish*, *burden*, *distress*, *problem*, *torture*, *trouble*, and so on). One possible explanation for *cumber* which has hitherto escaped editorial and critical consideration, I argue, is that Jonson is invoking the legend of a bearded woman saint.

When a Portuguese princess devoted to a pious life of Christian chastity is pledged by her father to marry the king of Sicily, her

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prayers for divine intervention are answered when she sprouts a prolix beard on the eve of the wedding. The match is abandoned and the young woman is promptly crucified; "while on the cross she prayed that all who remembered her passion should be liberated from all encumbrances and troubles."[12] This is the legend of Saint Uncumber, also known variously across Europe as Ontcommer, Kümmernis, Liberata, Livrade, Débarras, Virgeforte, and Wilgefortis – names derived from "a corruption of the Latin phrase *vigo fortis*, that is, 'strong virgin' or 'valiant maid'" or "play[ing] on the belief that anyone invoking the martyr will be liberated or unencumbered from their burdens."[13] Art historians have suggested that the legend may have in fact originated when pilgrims, unfamiliar with the Byzantine iconography of the Volto Santo and other depictions of the crucified Christ wearing a long robe, mistook the figure for a bearded woman martyr.[14] Whatever her origins, the cult of this saint was well developed by the fourteenth century, with statues, tapestries, murals, rood screens and painted panels for her veneration found in churches throughout England.[15]

Some of these images survived the Protestant programmes of iconoclasm, including a striking statue once prominently displayed in the Henry VII Chapel, Westminster Abbey (Figure 1), recovered in 1803 during renovations,[16] in which Uncumber is "characterized by a full beard and a wreath-like crown" and "immersed in reading a book which rests on a Tau-shaped cross which has been placed in front of her body."[17] Many others were not so lucky: a lavish statue of Saint Uncumber in St Paul's Cathedral, "with her gay gown and silver shoes on,"[18] was despoiled after the Royal Injunctions of September 1538,[19] while "two of *maide Uncumbres* best Cotes & an orfreys of green damaske" and another "Cote of *Maide Uncumber* of redde silk" – presumably also to adorn her statues – were entered into an inventory of church goods returned from St Peter de Parmentergate, Norwich, by Edward VI's commissioners in 1552.[20]

Elsewhere in Europe, "people saw Uncumber as a saint who would give people a good death, with no prolonged suffering," but in England, as Carole Levin notes, "[w]omen prayed to Uncumber, and brought her wild oats as an offering, if they wished to be rid of their husbands disencumbered, as it were."[21] This popular belief was scorned by polemicists on all sides. John Bale

Figure 1. Statue of Saint Uncumber, Henry VII Chapel, Westminster Abbey. Photo courtesy of the Courthauld Institute of Art, Conway Collections.

mocked saints like "Vncumber" and those "deluded with their images,"[22] sneering at unhappy wives seeking her intercession in his interlude, *The Three Laws*: "If ye can not slepe but slumber / Geve Otes vnto saynt Uncumber."[23] Even Catholic apologists found this votive practice difficult to defend against charges of superstition: Sir Thomas More, for instance, joked that women instigated the change in moniker from Wilgefortis to Uncumber "bycawse they teken [that] for a pek of otys she wyll not fayle to vncu[m]ber the[m] of theyr husbo[n]d[ys]," presumably using the oats to "prouyde an horse for an euyll husbonde to ryde to

the deuyll vppon."[24] More had little sympathy for these "peuysh" women and their prayers, supposing their time better spent "yf the[m]self p[er]adue[n]ture chau[n]ge theyr co[m]ber[ous] to[n]gues," or, "yf they ca[n] not be vnco[m]bred but by deth," that it should at least be "theyr owne" – with their "husbo[n]d[ys] sauf ynough."[25] Other commentators were more charitable: while he scoffed at "an ymage inuented and set vp" for "euery sundry dysease," Nicholas Wyse felt nonetheless "it was great pyte that saynt Vncombre in poules [=St Paul's Cathedral] was pulled down, for she was a gret comforte and helper vnto all good wyues whiche were troubled with shrewde husbandes."[26]

The cultural memory of Uncumber, like that of other saints, persisted in England long after the break with Rome.[27] Knowledge of Saint Uncumber's legend was still sufficiently widespread in Elizabethan England for the vice figure Covetous in William Wager's *Enough is as Good as a Feast* to jest, "In faith the same day that Midsommer was maried, / I neuer laughed better in my life: / For euen sudainly away *Saint Vncumber* caried, / Bothe the Bridgroome and the Bride his wife."[28] In the same year as the accession of James VI and I, Samuel Harsnett's *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* cited belief in Saint Uncumber as an example of the sorts of "Heathenish dreames," "hel-worke, deuil-worke, and Elue-worke" that continued to characterise Catholic credulity:

> [W]hat girle, boy, or old wisard would be so hardy to step ouer the threshold in the night for an half-penny worth of mustard amongst this frightfull crue, without a dosen *auemaries*, two dosen of crosses surely signed, and halfe a dosen *Pater nosters*, and the commending himselfe to the tuition of S. *Vncumber*, or els our blessed Lady?[29]

Jonson may or may not have read Harsnett's tract, now familiar to critics as a source for Shakespeare's *King Lear*,[30] but its treatment of "fraudulent religious contrivances" is "of a piece" with "the fake exorcism at the end [of *Volpone*]."[31] References to Saint Uncumber in her various guises even turn up after the Restoration. In 1674, for example, John Patrick sarcastically praised Catholic doctrine as having an "advantage" over Protestantism since, by privileging imagination over reason, it allowed devotion to be "as well

exercised, and as comfortably, when a Man is asleep, as when he is awake":

> [N]ay, what if I say better, and more to a Man's content? For there is a certain scurvy troublesome thing called *Reason*, which is wont uncivilly at other times, to disturb the pleasing Visitations of those *Imaginary and Chimerical Saints*, and to blaspheme the raised and rapturous fancies of the *true ones:* but in Dreams of the Night, when reason is laid asleep, then is the season to entertain sweet communion with them. . . . That grace which before was as hard to be discerned as an invisible Hair, may now as plainly be perceived, as the downy Beard that covered so gracefully the Lip and Chin of S. *Wilgefortis*.[32]

Epicene was "the last play he wrote as a convinced Catholic,"[33] and while Jonson's Catholicism and its impact on his writing "has been a surprising neglected topic,"[34] it should be unsurprising to find that he was clearly not averse to invoking saints in this works, as oaths by and references to Saints Agnes,[35] Andrew,[36] Anne,[37] Antony,[38] Bridget,[39] Faith,[40] George,[41] Luke,[42] Mark,[43] Peter,[44] Swithin,[45] and others attests.[46] Saint Uncumber's legend and its controversy were also certainly available to early modern English readers, as the preceding survey of references suggests, but why should Jonson invoke her in *Epicene*?

Like Saint Uncumber, Morose is to be unhappily wed: Epicene, once a "fair gentlewoman" (2.5.16) speaking only when given leave and with "a divine softness" (2.5.29), now proves a "manifest woman," "Amazonian," and shrew (3.4.36, 3.5.31). His attempts to find legal or theological grounds to vacate the marriage are tediously comic but ultimately prove fruitless, even going so far as to admit being "unabled in nature, by reason of frigidity, to perform the duties or any the least office of a husband" (5.4.37–8). Despairing his fate, to "Marry a whore! And so much noise!" (5.4.122), Morose can only be delivered by a kind of divine intervention: Dauphine's removal of Epicene's peruke (5.4.165sd), like the miraculous appearance of Saint Uncumber's beard, disrupts normative gender identities and renders both brides unsuitable for marriage. As is perhaps typical of Jonson's comedy, the invocation of Saint Uncumber in *Epicene* playfully reverses the original legendary device:[47] it is the husband, Morose, who is

unencumbered by the revelation that his betrothed "is – almost – of years" (5.4.200) and might "within this twelvemonth" (5.4.201) expect to grow a beard – without heavenly assistance.

That previous scholarship on *Epicene*, even studies of beards and the instability of gender signifiers in the play,[48] has failed to notice the reference to Uncumber perhaps speaks to "a critical climate where we are often more attune to the implications of cross-dressing and a transvestite theatre for gender identity" than to issues of religion.[49] If, as Alison Searle urges, we would do well "to remember the religio-political resonance" of Jonson's words, we might add *cumber* to the list of terms such as "silence," "equivocation," "exercise" and "plot" with especial topical significance "for Catholic recusants, silenced Puritan ministers, and their audiences."[50]

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NOTES

1. Ben Jonson, *Epicene, or The Silent Woman*, ed. David Bevington, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3: 5.4.150–52. All subsequent quotations from Jonson are taken from this edition.

2. On this term, for example, the Oxford edition of *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–52), is silent.

3. Ben Jonson, *Epicene*, ed. Katharine Eisaman Maus, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington, Lars Engle, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Eric Rasmussen (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 5.4.182n.

4. Ben Jonson, *Epicoene*, in *Ben Jonson's Plays and Masques*, ed. Richard Harp, 2d ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 5.4.169n.

5. Ben Jonson, *Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, in *The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson*, vol. 1, ed. Johanna Proctor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5.4.209n.

6. Ben Jonson, *Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, ed. L. A. Beaurline (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 5.4.165n; Ben Jonson, *Epicoene*, ed. Edward Partridge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 5.4.165n.

7. Ben Jonson, *Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, in *Four Comedies*, ed. Helen Ostovich (New York: Longman, 1997), 5.4.159n.

8. Ben Jonson, *Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, ed. R.V. Holdsworth (London: Ernest Benn, 1979), 5.4.171n; Ben Jonson, *Epicene, or The Silent Woman*, ed. Richard Dutton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 5.4.182n.

9. Ben Jonson, *Epicene, or The Silent Woman*, ed. Gordon Campbell, in *The Alchemist and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 519n; Ben Jonson, *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman*, ed. Simon Barker and Hilary Hinds, in *The Routledge Anthology of Renaissance Drama* (London: Routledge, 2003), 5.4.199n; Ben Jonson, *Epicoene; or, The Silent Woman*, in *Drama of the English Renaissance*, vol. 2, ed. Russell A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 5.1.638n.

10. Jonson, *Epicene, or The Silent Woman*, ed. David Bevington, *Cambridge Edition*, 5.4.150n.

11. As confirmed by searching the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online*, currently available at https://universitypublishing online.org/cambridge/benjonson/.

12. David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 538–39.

13. Robert Mills, "Recognizing Wilgefortis," in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern*, ed. Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 133–59, at 139; see also Elizabeth Nightlinger, "The Female *Imitatio Christi* and Medieval Popular Religion: The Case of St Wilgefortis," in *Representations of the Feminine in the Middle Ages*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Dallas: Academic Press, 1993), 291–328; Lewis Wallace, "Bearded Woman, Female Christ: Gendered Transformations in the Legends and Cult of Saint Wilgefortis," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30.1 (2014): 43–63.

14. See Neil MacGregor, *Seeing Salvation: Images of Christ in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 98; Catherine Sanok, "About Face: Addressing the Vernicle in Late Medieval England," in *The Practice and Politics of Reading 650–1500*, ed. Daniel Donoghue, James Simpson, Nicholas Watson, and Anna Wilson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2022), 84–109, esp. 99–100.

15. See Harry S. Lipscomb and Hebbel E. Hoff, "Saint Uncumber or *La Vierge Barbue*," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 37.6 (1963): 523–27; Carole Levin, "St. Frideswide and St. Uncumber: Changing Images of Female Saints in Renaissance England," in *Women, Writing, and the Reproduction of Culture in Tudor and Stuart Britain*, ed. Mary E. Burke, Jane Donawerth, Linda L. Dove, and Karen Nelson (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 223–37, at 228; Ilse E. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix: Images of St. Wilgefortis since the Middle Ages* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2001), esp. 58–62.

16. Lipscomb and Hoff, "Saint Uncumber," 523.

17. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix*, 59.

18. Letter from George Robynson to Thomas Cromwell, 16 July 1538, reprinted in *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 13, Part 1*, January–July 1538 (London: H.M.S.O., 1892), 515 (item 1393).

19. W. Sparrow Simpson, *S. Paul's Cathedral and Old City Life* (London: Elliot Stock, 1894), 246–52.

20. Reported in Henry Harrod, "Goods and Ornaments of Norwich Churches in the Fourteenth Century," *Norwich Archaeology* 5 (1859): 89–121, at 118.

21. Levin, "St. Frideswide and St. Uncumber," 228.

22. John Bale, *A dialogue or Familiar talke* ([London], 1554; STC 10383), C3r.

23. John Bale, *A newe comedy or enterlude, concernyng thre lawes of nature, Moises, and Christe* (London, 1562; STC 1288), C3v. Bale also remarks snidely about this popular practice in *The image of both Churches* (London, [1580]; STC 1301), I, S4r.

24. Sir Thomas More, *A dyaloge of syr Thomas More knyghte* (London, 1529; STC 18084), L2v.

25. Ibid., L5v.

26. Nicholas Wyse, *A consolacyon for chrysten people to repayre agayn the lordes temple* (London, 1538; STC 26063), G1r.

27. Representative cultural and intellectual histories of this period include Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971); Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400–c.1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Margaret Aston, *Broken Idols of the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

28. William Wager, *A comedy or enterlude intituled, Inough is as good as a feast* (London, 1570; STC 24933), B2v.

29. Samuel Harsnett, *A declaration of egregious popish impostures* (London, 1603; STC 12880), S3v–S4r.

30. See Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Routledge, 1985), 163–87; F. W. Brownlow, *Shakespeare, Harsnett, and the Devils of Denham* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993).

31. Martin Butler, "Ben Jonson's Catholicism," *Ben Jonson Journal* 19.2 (2012): 190–216, at 205. See also Richard Dutton, "Jonson, Shakespeare and the Exorcists," *Shakespeare Survey* 58 (2005): 15–22.

32. [John Patrick], *Reflexions upon the devotions of the Roman Church*, 3 vols (London, 1674; Wing P732), I, N1v–N2r. Patrick reproduces the Catholic liturgy for Saint Wilgefortis, in Latin and English translation, under "Devotions to Fabulous Saints, or where the ground of them, is Fabulous" (I, B1v–B2r).

33. Alison Searle, "Ben Jonson and Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ben Jonson*, ed. Eugene Giddens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), author accepted version, 1–27, at 13.

34. Butler, "Ben Jonson's Catholicism," 194.

35. Ben Jonson, *A Particular Entertainment … at Althorp*, ed. James Knowles, *Cambridge Edition*, l. 63 ("Saint Anne's").

36. Jonson, *Epicene, or The Silent Woman*, ed. David Bevington, *Cambridge Edition*, 4.2.14.

37. Ben Jonson, *The King's Entertainment at Welbeck*, ed. James Knowles, *Cambridge Edition*, l. 77.

38. Ben Jonson, *A Tale of a Tub*, ed. Peter Happé, *Cambridge Edition*, 3.1.49 ("Saint Tony's").

39. Ben Jonson, *The Case is Altered*, ed. Robert Miola, *Cambridge Edition*, 4.2.55.

40. Jonson, *The Case is Altered*, ed. Robert Miola, *op. cit*., 5.1.35 ("Saint Foy's").

41. Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. John Creaser, *Cambridge Edition*, 2.4.18; *Epicene, or The Silent Woman*, ed. David Bevington, *Cambridge Edition*, 4.2.14; *Every Man In His Humour*, folio version, ed. David Bevington, *Cambridge Edition*, 1.4.61, 1.5.74, 2.1.689, 3.1.13, 3.1.105, 3.5.104, 3.5.130, 4.2.118; *Every Man In His Humour*, quarto version, ed. David Bevington, *Cambridge Edition*, 1.3.133, 3.4.131, 4.2.90; *The Magnetic Lady, or Humours Reconciled*, ed. Helen Ostovich, *Cambridge Edition*, 1.1.54; *The Speeches at Prince Henry's Barriers*, ed. David Lindley, *Cambridge Edition*, l. 133; *A Tale of a Tub*, ed. Peter Happé, *Cambridge Edition*, 3.6.3, 5.9.62; *Volpone, or The Fox*, ed. Richard Dutton, *Cambridge Edition*, 4.2.54.

42. George Chapman, Ben Jonson, and John Marston, *Eastward Ho!*, ed. Suzanne Gossett and W. David Kay, *Cambridge Edition*, 4.1.4, 4.1.7, 4.1.224.

43. Jonson, *Every Man In His Humour*, folio version, ed. David Bevington, *Cambridge Edition*, 3.1.92; *Every Man In His Humour*, quarto version, ed. David Bevington, *Cambridge Edition*, 2.3.86, 3.6.22; *Volpone, or The Fox*, ed. Richard Dutton, *Cambridge Edition*, 3.2.17.

44. Jonson, *Every Man In His Humour*, folio version, ed. David Bevington, *Cambridge Edition*, 2.4.37, 2.4.38, 2.4.39; *Every Man In His Humour*, quarto version, ed. David Bevington, *Cambridge Edition*, 2.1.34, 2.1.35, 2.1.36.

45. Ben Jonson, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, ed. Randall Martin, *Cambridge Edition*, 1.3.22.

46. References to ailments, herbs, washbasins, parishes, hospitals, and London landmarks named for saints have been excluded.

47. Anne Barton, for example, thought it "like Jonson to reverse Shakespeare's favorite device of the heroine who masquerades as a boy, in doublet and hose, as he does with Epicoene's pretense in *The Silent Woman*"; see "Shakespeare and Jonson," in *Shakespeare, Man of the Theater: Proceedings of the Second Congress of the International Shakespeare Association, 1981*, ed. Kenneth Muir, Jay L. Halio, and D. J. Palmer (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983), 155–72, 163.

48. Mark Albert Johnston, "Prosthetic Absence in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene, The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*," *English Literary Renaissance* 37.3 (2007): 401–28; Johnston elsewhere discusses the cultural impact of Uncumber and other bearded women saints in "Bearded Women in Early Modern England," *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 47.1 (2007): 1–28, 18.

49. Searle, "Ben Jonson and Religion," 11.

50. Ibid., 11.