

The illustration is a medieval-style painting. In the center, the Virgin Mary is depicted in a long, flowing white gown with a blue mantle. She holds a white lily in her right hand and has her left hand resting on the head of a man kneeling before her. The man is wearing a dark tunic with a red and black diamond pattern and is looking up at Mary with an expression of awe or devotion. In the background, to the right, a group of men in white robes are watching the scene. To the left, there is a large, ornate golden altar or shrine. The overall style is characterized by soft, blended colors and a focus on religious iconography.

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# READING THE JUGGLER OF NOTRE DAME

Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings





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Jan M. Ziolkowski, *Reading the Juggler of Notre Dame: Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0284>

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ISBN Paperback: 9781800643680

ISBN Hardback: 9781800643697

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800643703

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 9781800643710

ISBN Digital ebook (AZW3): 9781800643727

ISBN XML: 9781800643734

ISBN HTML: 9781800646698

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0284

Cover image: Leon Guipon, 'Lightly down from the dark descends the Lady of Beauty' (1907), published in Edwin Markham, 'The Juggler of Touraine', *Century Magazine* (December 1907), p. 231.

Cover design by Anna Gatti.

## 8. The Fiddler and the Bearded Lady

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Countless tales from the medieval period were never committed to parchment or paper. Of those that were recorded, many, perhaps even most, have perished since then through the ravages of time. Yet despite the incalculable losses, an immense corpus of stories has survived in extant manuscripts. One large and fascinating cluster of legends from the late Middle Ages and early modern period pertains to a supposed saint named [Kümmernis](#) as well as to other holy women related to her, none of them historically attested. These accounts offer insight into the intricacy and vibrancy of culture in those times, evident in both oral tradition and, at the risk of tautology, written literature.

In the classification system that folklorists developed over roughly a century of collaborative international research, this narrative was identified as a distinct [type of folktale](#). The type has been summarized as follows:

### St. Wilgefortis and Her Beard

A pagan king promises his daughter (Wilgefortis, Liberta, Ontkommer, Kümmernis), who is a Christian, in marriage to another pagan king who has conquered his country. In order to evade the forced marriage, she prays to God to alter her appearance, and suddenly she grows a beard.

Her angry father has her nailed to a cross, so that she will be like her beloved. As she dies, she prays for all who suffer pain or sorrow. Her father's palace burns down.

In some versions an old musician (fiddler) plays for the crucified woman before she dies. She (her picture) thanks him by giving him her gold (silver) shoe (ring).

The shoe is discovered in the possession of the musician, who is condemned as a thief. On his way to the gallows, he asks to be allowed to play again in the colonnade of the church. As soon as he begins to play, the holy picture of the crucified woman drops the other shoe to him, thus proving his innocence.

Despite all the erudite and energetic efforts to achieve clarity about these saintly females, confusions and uncertainties abound. An entry for one of these women found its way into a classic [twentieth-century compendium on saints](#), under the heading "St. Wilgefortis, or Liberata (No Date)," with the devastating caveat:

Her story is a curiosity of hagiology and is hardly worth including in a collection of lives of the saints but for the fact that it has the unenviable distinction of being one of the most obviously false and preposterous of the pseudo-pious romances by which simple Christians have been deceived or regaled.

Kümmernis, Wilgefortis, and Liberata belong to a considerable crew of pseudo-saints, nary a one of them historically verifiable. Their cults burgeoned from the fourteenth century on. In the eighteenth century they began to decline and eventually died out. Owing particularly to the fluidity in gender identity that these figures personify, they may well be ripe for attracting—or should we say engendering?—strong interest once again. Anyone who thinks that the binary opposition between female and male went uncontested in the Middle Ages should take a glance at these legends. At their heart, these stories have women who experience extraordinary beard growth. The phenomenon might be diagnosed today as resulting from hirsutism, an excess of the male hormone androgen; but here the condition is volitional.

In retellings of tales relating to the Holy Face, many adjustments were made. The cult of one saint, which may well have originated in Netherlandic regions but which honored a personage often supposed to have been Portuguese, made of the seemingly male figure a female. [These traditions are traceable](#) from the second half of the fourteenth century. According to this striking variation on the theme of the would-be runaway bride, the daughter of a king in Portugal defied the will of her staunchly pagan father by converting to Christianity and vowing to remain a virgin. When threatened with an unwanted arranged marriage to the king of Sicily, she was protected from matrimony by suddenly sprouting a luxuriant beard and moustache. Her facial hair repelled her princely suitor and caused him to withdraw the offer of betrothal he had tendered. Her non-Christian father, enraged at his daughter's disobedience, took the drastic step of putting her to the cross.

The outcome of the story about the persecuted princess would have helped to explain to perplexed viewers the peculiarity of the Holy Face as a form. In contrast to standard depictions of the crucifixion, this image shows on the crucifix a bearded individual who wears what could be mistaken for a nearly floor-length dress. Copies of the Luccan sculpture were disseminated widely throughout first the Italian peninsula and then all western Europe, from objects as small as pilgrims' badges and seals to others as large as full-size [replicas](#). Some of them could have been badly enough wrought to suggest the possibility that the person wearing a full-length robe was [a woman](#).

Whether thanks to the Volto Santo or not, at one point or another likenesses came to be made of clearly female figures nailed to crosses. The technical term "crucified maidens" is now used to denote them. The leading lady in these legends was called by various *noms parlants*. All of these "talking names" (to translate the French verbatim) are common nouns in the vernaculars where the saint's cults were based. All refer to the help and relief that the martyr can bring to petitioners, particularly wives burdened by husbands who mistreat them. The proper noun used of Saint Kümmernis or Kummernus in Germany points to the German common noun *Kummer* for "care" or "anxiety," from which these unfortunate women need to be liberated. Antithetically, the English Uncumber and Middle Dutch Ontkommer embody the idea of freeing

from care. Similarly, the Italian *Liberata*, Spanish *Librada*, and French *Livrade*, all imply being “freed.” Along similar lines, the French *Débarras* means “riddance.” The Middle Low German *Hülpe*, corresponding to the modern German *Hilfe*, signifies the “help” that can lead to (or be procured by) such liberation.

Another bearded lady from the same clan is *Wilgefortis*, perhaps the most well-known member of this saintly sideshow. Her gender-blending, -bending, and -crossing could well have been conceived for a twenty-first-century audience. Etymologically unrelated to the names of other such hirsute heroines in hagiography, hers may be a deformation from the Latin *virgo fortis* or French *vierge forte* for “strong maiden,” if not from the Germanic *hilge vartz/vratz* for “holy face.”

If the transsexuality of the protagonist gave the passion of Saint Kümmeris some vivid features, the jongleur involved in the major miracle after her martyrdom added other oddities to the narrative. The performer transitions into an impecunious fiddler whom the crucified image of a woman, man, or both sought to reward for his devotion by tossing him a golden shoe. A church official, such as a bishop, is introduced into the story to provide an antagonist in the ecclesiastic hierarchy who must be won over. The insertion of this element may have been welcomed by those, such as women and entertainers, who subsisted outside the conventional norms and the societal chain of command bound up with them.

The name of Saint Kümmeris alone has spawned a multitude of challenges to orthography. The most charming spelling may be *Kümmernuß* (the character ß, called *eszett*, stands for a double s). If these letters are misconstrued as a compound, the second seeming noun could mislead unwitting readers with a little German into inferring that a nut (German *Nuss*) was somehow involved in the onomastics. In the text to be discussed now, readers are notified that the protagonist is invoked as Kuminis but it is implied that her formal name is Kümernus. As in most sources, the assumption is that those would-be petitioners, particularly women who suffer from sorrows or grief (German *Kummer* or *Kümmernis*) would do best to turn for help to Saint Kümmeris.

### A. Hans Burgkmair the Elder, “Saint Kümernus”

A woodcut linked with the supposed martyr was carved by Hans Burgkmair the Elder. Although also a painter, this artist was known before all else as a prolific printmaker: his documented oeuvre encompasses around 800 block prints. This cutting, printed in Augsburg around 1507, survives in a single exemplar now preserved in Munich. The uniqueness of the piece should not lead us to underestimate its evidentiary value: no more convenient point of entry into the early modern cult of the alleged saint exists than the concise text and the vivid carving of a crucifix at Lucca that accompanies it. [The print](#), with its combined text and image, gives access to the cults of both the Holy Face and Saint Kümmeris.



province of North Brabant. Nothing survives to confirm or deny that this locale in the south of the Netherlands ever had a connection with the holy woman. Even so, it has been conjectured that the counts of this town were contracted as mercenaries to serve Italian city states such as Lucca and that these military ties, along with mercantile ones, may have encouraged Dutch people to import copies of the miraculous crucifix from Lucca and to install them in their [churches and homes](#). This intriguing hypothesis remains unproven.

The translation of the first account below hews close to the German text on the woodblock from 1507, but with paragraphing added and without adhering to its punctuation.

### [“God is wonderful in his saints”](#)

#### God works wonderful things in his saints

There was a pagan king’s daughter who was beautiful and white. For that reason, a pagan king desires her for a consort, which was loathsome to the maiden. When she prays to be chosen as a consort to God, that angers her father, who imprisons her. Then, in prison, she called upon God and prayed to him that he should come to help her. That happened, and God came to her in prison and consoles her. Then she desires to be changed into such a form that she would please no one on earth [except him alone](#) and that he should make her as she would please him best. Then he changes her and [makes her like him](#).

When her father saw that, he asks her why she should live so. Then she said, “The consort whom I chose for myself made me so.” When she wants no one other than the crucified God, then her father grows angry and says, “You too must die on the cross as your God did.” She was willing to do that and died on the cross.

And who calls upon her in trouble and worry, to him she comes to help in his need. And she is called by the name Kuminis and is named Saint Kümernuß and lies buried in Holland in a church named Stouberg.

Then a poor little fiddler came before the image and fiddled so long until the crucified image gave him a golden shoe. He took it and carried it to a goldsmith, and he intended to sell it. Then the goldsmith said, “I will not buy it. Maybe you have stolen it.” Then he answered, “No, the crucified image gave it to me.” They gave no credence to that and caught him, and they intended to hang him. The fiddler desires that they lead him again to the image. They do that and put the golden shoe again on the foot of the image. Then he fiddles as before. Then the crucified image made the shoe fall again. At that the fiddler became very happy and thanked God and Saint Kümernus.

### B. Brothers Grimm, “The Saintly Woman Kummernis”

The English here translates the German of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, who incorporated the [legend](#) into the first edition of their famous [fairy tales](#). For their version, the renowned Brothers drew upon a [seventeenth-century collection of exempla](#).



Fig. 12: Unknown artist, *St. Kummernis*, 1678. Oil on panel. Museum im Prediger, Schwäbisch Gmünd. Image from Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kuemmernis\\_museum\\_schwaebischgmueund.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kuemmernis_museum_schwaebischgmueund.JPG)

They reused the narrative in their “[German Legends](#),” which appeared in two volumes in 1816 and 1818.

Once upon a time there was a pious virgin who vowed to God not to wed and was wonderfully beautiful, so that her father would not allow it and wished to compel her to marry. In this dire strait she implored God that he cause her to grow a beard, which happened right away; but the king grew furious and had her nailed to a cross so that she became a saint.

Now it happened that a poor minstrel came into the church, where her image stood, and he knelt before it; then it pleased the saint that he recognized her innocence and that image, which was outfitted with golden slippers, let one come loose and fall down, so that it went to the pilgrim. He bowed thankfully and took the gift.

But soon the golden shoe was missed in the church and people looked all around until at last it was found with the fiddler, and he was condemned as a wicked thief and led out to be hanged. But on the way the procession passed by the house of God where the pillar with the image stood, and the minstrel longed to be allowed to enter so that he might take a good final leave with his little fiddle and could pour out the sorrow of his heart to his benefactor. This was then allowed to him. But hardly had he made the first stroke [of the bow] when, see, the image let the other golden slipper fall and by doing so showed that he was innocent of theft. Thus the fiddler was freed from irons and shackles and went merrily on his way; the holy virgin was named Kummernis.



### C. Justinus Kerner, “The Fiddler at Gmünd”

The final selection in this section is by Justinus Kerner, who lived from 1786 to 1862. In reference to the artistic and literary movement that began in the late eighteenth century, this German writer, a doctor by profession, has been classified as a romantic. More pejoratively, he has been pigeonholed as an embodiment of the so-called Biedermeier style. The epithet, taken from the name of a fictitious German provincial schoolmaster and wannabe poet, often carries connotations of placid or complacent mediocrity.

The real-life Kerner lived and worked in southwestern Germany, where he was affiliated with a circle of Swabian men of letters. In Schlechtbach, a village not too far from his home, he discovered a representation of Saint Kümmernis in a local church. He discussed the legend of the jongleur associated with her with Ludwig Uhland when this poet-friend of his was visiting him. Eventually Uhland prevailed upon him to compose a ballad about what he had found. Kerner completed the composition in October and brought it into print on December 9, 1816, in a regional cultural daily called the *Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände* or “Morning paper for educated classes.”

The twenty-six-strophe poem, entitled “[The Fiddler at Gmünd](#),” replaces Kümmernis with Cecilia, in her guise as patron saint of music, and sets the action in Schwäbisch Gmünd, a town that before Kerner’s versifying had had no special connection with either holy woman. Furthermore, it bears note that the balladeer, as a committed [Protestant](#), was not motivated by personal religious belief in either martyr, but that he was well informed about the veneration of saints. He regarded such piety as intrinsically medieval.

The ballad, which has enjoyed unbroken success since first being published, tells how a poor fiddle player enters a church dedicated to Saint Cecilia in Gmünd. While sounding his instrument before an image of the musical martyr, he complains of his destitution. Out of compassion, she gives the entertainer her right shoe, made of gold. When he goes to exchange the object for money, he is accused of theft and sentenced to death. He swears to his innocence before the judge and the crowd, and he is vindicated when Cecilia tosses to him her left shoe, it too made of gold.

Once Gmünd built an incomparable little church to tuneful Saint Cecilia; a stone from it still stands there. [5] Lilies of silver shone, moonlit on account of the saint; golden roses garlanded, bright as dawn, the altar. The saint wore shoes wrought of pure gold [10] and a dress bright from silver: for then times were still good—times when across the distant sea, not only in the homeland, [15] the honor of artisans from Gmünd was found bright in gold and silver. And many of the foreign pilgrims surged into Cecilia’s little church; [20] within, song and organ playing resounded, from an undetectable location.

Once a fiddler came along. Oh, great need oppressed him. Weak legs, pale cheeks, and no money, no bread in his bag! [25] He sang and played all his suffering before the image, he penetrated the saint’s heart: hark, her dress rustles melodiously! Smiling, the image bends down [30] from her lifeless stillness and throws her golden shoe, the right one, to the [poor son of songs](#).

Intoxicated with happiness, he rushes to the nearest goldsmith's house; [35] he sings and dreams of the best feast, when the shoe is swapped for money. But hardly has the goldsmith seen the shoe than he displays a rough tone, and the son of song is hauled off [40] harshly with abuse before the judge. The trial is soon concluded; it is apparent to all that the miracle was only contrived, that he was the most impudent of robbers. [45] Woe! You, poor son of songs, have probably sung your last song, flying fearfully up and down on the gallows, like a bird.

People hear a little bell ring out [50] and they see the [black procession](#) flow with you to the site where your flight is to begin. They hear nuns and the monks' choir sing penitential song, [55] but they also hear fiddle notes emerge brightly from there. The fiddler's last request was to bring along his fiddle: "Where so many make music, I, fiddler, will make music in company." Now the procession comes by Cecilia's chapel; he fiddles mightily in deep grief toward the entranceway of the little church.

[65] And who only shortly before still hated him, sighs, "The poor little fiddler!" "I have only one request," he sings, "just let me in, to the saint!" They allow him; [70] he again fiddles his sorrow before the image, and he stirs heavenly clemency: hark, her dress rustles melodiously! Smiling, the image bends down from her lifeless stillness [75] and throws down to the poor son of songs the second golden shoe.

The masses stand, full of astonishment, and now every Christian sees how the man of the folksongs [80] is dear, even to the saints. With song and dancing, they lead him, beautifully adorned with ribbons and garlands, well-fortified with money and wine, into the town hall.

[85] All wrong is forgotten, the hall lights up beautifully for the celebration, and the fiddler is seated at the head for the merry feast. But when they are full of wine, [90] he takes his shoes with his hand and wanders in this way in the moonlight merrily into another land.

Ever since, every little fiddler is received lovingly in Gmünd, [95] however poor he comes—and there must be dancing. For that reason too one hears fiddling, singing, and dancing there incessantly, and if a person has all the strings break, [100] he still clinks with the empty glass. And if soon the clinking of glasses, dance, and song die away all around, a merry sound will still always ring out at Gmünd, even from the broken pieces.