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**False Knights and True Blood:
Reading the Traitor's Body in Medieval England**

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Eva Amanda McVitty

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ABSTRACT

From the late thirteenth century, traitors in England were subjected to spectacular rituals of public execution that could include drawing, hanging, disembowelling, beheading, quartering and bodily display. These executions took place within a context in which the human body was saturated with significance. The body of Christ, the body politic imagined through the body of the king, and the whole and perfect body of the perfect knight were all central constructs in medieval thought. This thesis considers the polyvalent cultural meanings and responses that could be generated when the traitor's broken and divided body was read in relationship to these other, idealised bodies.

The ritualised processes of the traitor's execution were intended to send a message about hegemonic power, particularly the king's power over the bodies and lives of his subjects. However, the public and performative nature of these spectacles meant that they could provoke unpredictable and unexpected interpretations. Through a close analysis of documentary accounts of a number of high-profile executions that took place in late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century England, this study explores the ways the traitor's body could work to destabilise and subvert dominant notions and relationships of status, gender, and political authority that the ritual of execution was intended to reinforce.

The work that follows is structured around three thematic chapters. In Chapter Two, it examines the ways the trial and punishment of traitors made manifest deep uncertainties surrounding the social status of 'kighthood', in the process publicly exposing cultural and political conflicts over claims to power. Chapter Three turns to the challenges the traitor posed to the construction of aristocratic masculinity. Beginning from a premise that the categories of 'knight' and 'traitor' were ostensibly wholly oppositional but in reality mutually constitutive, it examines the potential for slippage from the masculine ideal of kighthood to the monstrous feminised inversion represented by the traitor. Chapter Four considers the complicated relationship that could develop between the traitor's body to the bodies of Christ and the martyrs. It analyses a number of accounts that actively engage with the Passion topos in ways that invite alternative interpretations and resistant responses to acts of spectacular public execution.

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A NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION

Transcriptions have been provided as they appear in the original sources, including all spelling, punctuation and capitalisation. The exception is the replacement of the Middle English characters 'þ' and 'ȝ' with the modern English 'th' and 'gh'. Translations are provided in the footnotes. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.