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*The Yogin & the Madman: Reading the Biographical
Corpus of Tibet's Great Saint Milarepa*

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A Review of *The Yogin and the Madman:
Reading the Biographical Corpus of Tibet's
Great Saint Milarepa*

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The Yogin & the Madman: Reading the Biographical Corpus of Tibet's Great Saint Milarepa. By Andrew Quintman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, 336 pages, ISBN 978-0-231-16415-3 (paperback), \$35.00 / £24.00; ISBN 978-0-231-16414-6 (cloth), \$105.00 / £72.50.

Andrew Quintman's study of the literary transformations of the life story of the renowned Tibetan yogin Milarepa is a welcome adaptation of his 2007 doctoral thesis, a piece of research that, albeit unpublished, had already been a key source to at least three further doctoral works on Milarepa's legacy which, to varying extent, all build on Quintman's work (Larsson 2009, then published in 2012, DiValerio 2011, and Rondolino 2014). Concerned primarily "with the figure of Milarepa, his representation, and his biographical tradition as they evolved inside Tibet," the book offers a systematic reading of the works on the yogin composed in the first four hundred years after his death (11). In this perspective, Quintman is not concerned with the reconstruction of the historical Milarepa, who, "despite the considerable uncertainty surrounding his

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dates, there is little doubt once lived” (19). Instead, by means of an extended analysis of Milarepa’s biographical tradition, Quintman offers, for the first time, “a study of an entire corpus of Tibetan writing about a single individual, tracing the lines of its textual production and dissemination” (20).

The analysis conducted in the book is preceded by means of some concise inter-disciplinary considerations on the study of religious life writings. In particular, after a few brief references to hagiological studies in medieval Christianity, Quintman focuses on an exposition of Patrick Geary’s approach to the study of hagiographic sources (Geary 1996). Specifically, Quintman builds on Geary’s observation that hagiological studies seem to have become primarily concerned with the study of the saints and of their society, often ignoring the hagiographic tradition within which the texts were produced—their authors, their rhetoric and their intertextuality. Consequently, Quintman intends for his book “to advance our understanding of Tibetan life writings by taking seriously Geary’s approach” (24-25). This is achieved by focusing on the textual production of a plurality of authors who have worked “within Milarepa’s biographical tradition” up to and including the most famous account of the yogin’s life and deeds: Tsangnyön Heruka’s 1488 “standard version” (25).

Arguably, Milarepa is the most famous Tibetan Buddhist “saint.” As Quintman notes, his tales of repentance, great devotion, and extreme asceticism, “had a profound impact on the development of Buddhism” in Tibet (3). Similarly, the narrative of Milarepa’s life and deeds (at least as rendered in the standard version) has been the object of scholarly studies and translations in western languages for over a century (11-17).² Yet, up until the publication of Quintman’s book, there has never been any study that traced the history of the narrative tradition that devel-

² Notably, Andrew Quintman also produced the latest translation in English of the *Life of Milarepa* by Tsangnyön Heruka (Quintman 2010).

oped among Milarepa's closest disciples shortly after his death, and reached its literary climax with Tsangnyön's works.

The book traces this literary development and its underlying compositional dynamics, presenting a detailed study of the construction of Milarepa's biographical corpus. To this end, Quintman likens the analysis offered in the book to "a metaphorical anatomy of the biographical corpus," where "broad structural similarities in versions across anatomical planes" are identified, and "their relationship to the body of literature as a whole" is mapped (25). In this perspective, the earliest narrative forms on Milarepa constitute skeletal structures on which the *bio* (bio-logical and bio-graphical) material of later literary contributions adds strata and complexity, ultimately fleshing out the figure of Milarepa into a life-like portrait. Hence, as Quintman aptly titles the book's epilogue, "Milarepa comes alive!" (184-187).

Notably, in the book's final pages Quintman offers one more anatomical metaphor that helps to further clarify the methodological implications of this imagery. "The principal aim of this book" writes Quintman, "has been a kind of extended autopsy of the corpus that Tsangnyön has crafted" (185). Significantly, as Quintman observes, the term *autopsy* implies a forensics motive: something unusual has occurred and a body needs to be dissected and minutely analyzed to ascertain the presence of any abnormality or, to maintain the forensic simile, whether any *foul play* has occurred. Quintman notes that an anomaly is indeed present, and it is precisely the apparent naturalness and the distinctive life-like character of Tsangnyön's Milarepa, despite having been compiled four centuries after the yogin's death. "What seems wrong, then," Quintman concludes, "is that this late work, so mediated, could appear so immediate as to cast centuries of biographical traditions into obscurity" (185).

Thus, from a preliminary and underlying observation of the coherent and life-like "anomaly" of the standard version of Milarepa's story, Quintman dissects the yogin's narrative corpus, through strata of

biographical tissue to its proto-biographical bones. The material thus dissected is then presented in the book in the form of a chronological analysis of the sources that, nevertheless, effectively represents, so as to pursue the closing autopsical analogy, the reassembly of the dissected biographical body, until it is, once again, whole: from “biographical birth” (Chapter one), to “skeletal biography” (Chapter two), to biographical “flesh” (Chapter three), to “life” (Chapter four and five).

Chapter one offers an analysis of the earliest known narratives on Milarepa: two texts authored by Ngendzong Repa and Gampopa respectively, both dating from the mid-1100s. Here Quintman introduces two of the book’s core and defining themes in his analysis of the sources. On the one hand, both texts by Ngendzong Repa and Gampopa “make explicit and repeated claims about their authenticity by stressing the close association of subject and biographer, teacher and disciple” (33). Significantly, although this specific trait is absent from later versions, its crucial function in the compositional process as a link between present (the author) and past (the portrayed subject, Milarepa) is also central in Tsangnyön’s standard version. On the other hand, by means of a further reference to the earliest evidence of Rechungpa’s Aural Transmission, Quintman also notes how Tibetan Buddhist life writings function as recordings and transmissions of specific tantric lineages.

Chapter two proceeds with the discussion of biographical works that Quintman classifies as “proto-lives”: “signifying the basic literary structure that influenced the writing of Milarepa’s life story for centuries to come” (28). The texts here analyzed are mostly dated from the late 1100s to the late 1300s, and include: the works on Milarepa by Lama Zhang (whose narrative is closely modeled on Gampopa’s), Dönmo Ripa, Sangyé Bum, Gyalthangpa, and the second Zhamar Khachö Wangpo, and the anonymous collection of lives known as *The Kagyu Rosary*. Quintman, however, notes that, even if not explicitly identified as such in their titles, most of these texts are, or can be classified as, Golden Rosaries—collections of life narratives of realized masters of the past arranged so

as to form a single transmission lineage. Thus, such texts were not intended as life writings of individual personalities; rather, they “served to document the transmission of instructions through an authentic lineage down to the time of writing” (58). From a biographical perspective, therefore, they are concise, being principally concerned with asserting that so and so had received the lineage from given teachers, and had in turn transmitted it to specific disciples. Ultimately, in the perspective of the development of Milarepa’s narrative tradition, these texts “matured but did not achieve (and perhaps never aspired to achieve) the fine polish of biographical grain witnessed in the later compendia or the standard version centuries later” (81). Significantly, the primary function of these proto-narratives was to promote the legitimacy of the transmission lineage and to reaffirm its unbroken succession of teachers and disciples, and, Quintman notes, the detailed account of an individual life “was of less concern than the integrity of the rosary itself” and therefore of the transmission lineage (81).

Chapter three moves on to the treatment of sources that, while roughly contemporary to some of the later texts analyzed in the previous chapter, nevertheless offer a new and critically influential step towards the formation of the narrative corpus of Milarepa. Quintman refers to this type of texts as “biographical compendia”: “mature versions of the proto-works” that “combine structured and well-crafted biographical narratives from the early life with extensive song collections, and conclude with elaborate descriptions of the yogin’s death” (28). In particular, the chapter offers an analysis of the *Twelve Great Disciples* (dated to the late 1200s to early 1300s) and *The Black Treasury* (dated to the late 1300s). Although, contrary to the Golden Rosaries, these new biographical accounts fleshed out the narrative of Milarepa’s life and deeds, they also continue to demonstrate an underlying and defining concern with the defense and promotion of the lineage. In particular, Quintman notes that at the times of the composition of the compendia, Tibetan Buddhist lineages began to become institutionalized, a phenomenon that necessarily led to “a growing need to represent their

founders not merely as beads in a golden rosary, but as autonomous figures serving as an authoritative source for their tradition” (84). At the same time, and possibly as a necessary result of the need to confirm the legitimacy and purity of the lineage, “the compendia increasingly drape Milarepa's life story in a miraculous light, emphasizing his role as enlightened emanation and revealing his life to be a performance staged for the benefit of ordinary beings” (86). This is a defining characteristic of the early narratives of Milarepa's life that was critically altered in Tsangnyön's standard version. The compendia's claim to the yogin's position as a miraculous emanation, though, is not a new narrative development, being “ubiquitously found throughout the proto-works” (119). What Quintman notes is new in the compendia is the text's strong emphasis on Milarepa's extraordinary status, significantly highlighted “through the continued use of prophecy, introduced by both mother and guru as well as authorial narrator at regular intervals throughout the life story” further “fram[ing] episodes of the story in comparison on the Buddha's own exemplary life” (119).

Chapters four and five are both concerned with an analysis of the standard version of Milarepa's life story by Tsangnyön Heruka, by means of an assessment of his two works on the yogin, *The Life of Milarepa* and the *Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, in light of their relationship with the earlier sources and their author's doctrinal positions and religious agenda. In particular, Chapter four examines the texts in the context of Tsangnyön's life, further exploring his active role in the production and distribution of the texts. Chapter five, instead, focuses on an analysis of the relationship between author and portrayed subject, further highlighting Tsangnyön's close relationship, and even identification, with Milarepa and his spiritual legacy, and the influence that these had on the writing of the standard version of the yogin's life and deeds. In this respect it is important to note with Quintman that, although he frequently refers to Tsangnyön's works as the standard version of Milarepa's life, this denomination “could well be replaced with canonical, pointing to the text's role as both the benchmark for and measure of the

yogin's life" (122). Tsangnyön's goal was not merely to reshape the life story of the yogin, but rather to "redefine the entire biographical tradition, creating a canonical standard" (132). Thus, some of the alterations implemented by Tsangnyön seem to have been aimed explicitly to drape the narrative of Milarepa's life in canonical garb. *The Life of Milarepa*, for example, famously opens "with the formula 'thus did I hear at one time' evoking Ānanda's own perfect recitation of the Buddha's teachings" (137). Similarly, Tsangnyön also reframed the yogin's life on the model of the Buddha's twelve great deeds—although this framework, as Quintman notes, "is a general conceit, bearing little relationship to the actions commonly attributed to the Buddha," it nevertheless contributes to establishing "a categorical equivalence to the Buddha's life" that further strengthens the canonical character of the standard version (138).

Yet, like all other earlier sources, Tsangnyön's works on Milarepa are also concerned with the defense and promotion of the lineage. In this perspective, the new depiction of the yogin as a regular human being acquires a central role. Although Tsangnyön did not originate the description of Milarepa's liberation in one lifetime and a single body, he was famously "the first [and, as Quintman notes, perhaps the only] author to categorically deny the yogin's status as a previously awakened Buddha, contradicting numerous works in the biographical tradition including most of his principal sources" (142). Tsangnyön's repudiation of an understanding of the human source of his own lineage, Milarepa, as an already enlightened emanation, is significant. Seen from a historical perspective that considers Tsangnyön's iconoclastic religious agenda in the context of Tibet's heavily politicized Buddhist sectarianism in the fifteenth century, the act of considering Milarepa as an emanation is spiritually and politically charged. Although it may be a sign of devotion, it "ultimately serves as an impediment to spiritual progress tantamount to the root mental affliction of wrong views" (149). What, in the earlier sources, had been the crowning descriptive of Milarepa's greatness and, by extension, of the greatness of his lineage and of the authors of his life

story, becomes in Tsangnyön a hindrance to their very recognition and promotion.

Not only do these literary works establish authentic and authorized accounts of the power and validity of the lineage, but they also effectively offer a model for the successful practice of the teachings themselves, further offering a social critique of the increasingly popular practice of reincarnate lamas: the tulku system. Thus, the entirety of Chapter five is dedicated to a discussion of Tsangnyön's identification with Milarepa, his life, his places, and his practices, and to a reading of his life of Milarepa as a form of autobiographical text. Tsangnyön is not seen as "merely mimicking his own position(s) vis-à-vis the text" (172). Instead, as the exceptional author of the yogin's life and songs who also strove to live his religious and spiritual life as Milarepa, Tsangnyön "can claim to record the life as a witness to Milarepa's own words" but also, "as biographical subject, he speaks as the agent of the life itself" (172). Therefore, in highlighting the intimate connection between narrator and narrated, between Tsangnyön and Milarepa, Quintman also points out how these new texts no longer merely described the life of a single individual but also promoted specific religious and political views. Most strikingly, they also offered an overview of the path from birth to liberation that can be adopted by anyone who intends to follow in the yogin's footsteps and the practice of his lineage. The underlying functions of promoting the legitimacy of the transmission lineage, and reaffirming its unbroken succession of teachers and disciples that was central in the earlier sources are fundamentally also maintained in Tsangnyön's canonical version, if not made stronger and more vivid, consecrated "with the yogin's living presence" (174.)

Reflecting on the life accounts of Tsangnyön written by some of his most prominent disciples as sources for his life and deeds, Quintman warns that however "illuminating though they may be, these accounts of biographical production should be read with caution" as they effectively "offer a metanarrative emphasizing the legitimacy of [his] literary

creation” (125). This consideration well encapsulates the underlying theme of Quintman’s book on the biographical corpus on Milarepa. As Guy Philippart notes (1994), it is not the personas of the saints, or the world in which they have lived, or the cults that developed around their memory, that is at the center of the study of hagiographic traditions. Rather, it is the texts themselves, their narratives, their internal dynamics, and their authors. Reading the life and deeds of Milarepa is, therefore, reading the memory, the lineage, and the living presence of the yogin as it was felt and understood by its authors. In a similar way, Quintman shows in this book that reading the texts on Milarepa is also, and most importantly, reading the life of the author of the most famous among yogin’s life narratives. Here, he offers us a reading of Tsangnyön’s Milarepa, and of Tsangnyön through Tsangnyön’s Milarepa, that is made even clearer and more complex by bringing together and analyzing Tsangnyön’s own sources.

In this perspective, the title of the book, *The Yogin and the Madman*, is an apt summation of its content. Yet, upon reading Quintman’s work, one is also left with the impression that the author intended to offer more than a simple reading of Tsangnyön’s Milarepa and of Milarepa through Tsangnyön. Indeed, Tsangnyön’s work has become the standard, if not the canonical, version of the life of Milarepa, and it is indeed often treated as the only one. But, as Quintman notes, alternative narrative traditions existed and have survived to the present day. The distinction between reading the entirety of Milarepa’s biographical corpus and the corpus of one particular narrative tradition, therefore, should have been made clearer and it should have been sustained more sharply throughout the book. At times Quintman’s work reads as a literary and historical analysis of the making and development of the different narrative traditions where later compositions build and respond, as in a hagiographic dialogue, to earlier and contemporary ones. At other times, it reads like an investigation geared at understanding the intimate dynamics that characterized the making of Tsangnyön’s standard version. Quintman indeed declares the latter as the intended focus of

the book, and the discussed anatomic analogy and its further forensics reinterpretation strengthen this view. But the way in which the earlier narrative material is presented and discussed is not as consistently clear and unambiguous as it could be. In particular, the pre-Tsangnyön sources are often presented per-se, each as but one among the many other narrative strands in the long and complex history of the hagiographic tradition on Milarepa. Nevertheless, as the main focus of the book is a critical reading of Tsangnyön's biographical corpus on the yogin, the earlier sources are also necessarily presented as conditional elements to a complete understanding of Tsangnyön's project. Overall, the book does not distinguish as explicitly and effectively as it could between these two aspects, thus leaving the impression that the earlier lives of Milarepa may be of lesser relevance in absolute terms, rather than being so only relative to Tsangnyön's work, to which they are both a source of biographical data and of competing readings of Milarepa's life.

Reflecting on Quintman's approach to the source texts and their analysis and presentation, one also wonders about his methodological references as stated in the opening comparative reflections on studies in hagiographic literature. While Geary has certainly offered significant contributions to specific aspects in the study of medieval Christian religious life writings, no explanation is offered as to why his approach is considered to be more effective or apt than others who are more prominent in the same field (such as Peter Brown or André Vauchez, to name but two of the most influential) or how it may be representative of the entire field. Furthermore, it is not entirely clear how this particular approach to the sources is preferable to others in light of its application to the study of Tibetan Buddhist life writings and to the specific case of the narrative tradition on Milarepa. Nor does he address whether considerations in medieval Christian studies can or should be applied to a different religious and historical context, and how this may be achieved.

Overall, the detailed analysis of Tsangnyön's own sources and of his intimate relationship with the portrayed subject is exactly what sets Quintman's work apart from other research so far conducted on life writings in Tibetan Buddhism, offering a detailed reading of a hagiographic source in light of an analysis of its own sources. From the perspective of future research, the book presents a first clear account of a large number of texts that had not yet been examined together. The books' appendixes also contain a new complete translation of Gampopa's life of Milarepa (a first translation was offered by Francis Tiso in *Liberation in One Lifetime*, first published in Italy in 2010 and reprinted by North Atlantic Books in 2014); a translation and transcription of the original Tibetan of all the colophons from each of the sources discussed in the book; and a comparative list of the text's outlines and concordances.

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