

## HELENA OF BRITAIN IN MEDIEVAL LEGEND

St Helena, mother of Constantine the Great and legendary finder of the True Cross, was appropriated in the middle ages as a British saint. The rise and persistence of this legend harnessed Helena's imperial and sacred status to portray her as a romance heroine, source of national pride, and a legitimising link to imperial Rome. This study is the first to examine the origins, development, political exploitation, and decline of this legend, whose momentum and adaptive power are traced from Anglo-Saxon England to the twentieth century. Using Latin, English and Welsh texts, as well as church dedications and visual arts, the author examines the positive effect of the British legend on the cult of St Helena and the reasons for its wide appeal and durability in both secular and religious contexts. Two previously unpublished *vitae* of St Helena are included in the volume: a Middle English verse *vita* from *The South English Legendary*, and a Latin prose *vita* by the early-thirteenth-century hagiographer Jocelin of Furness.

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HELENA OF BRITAIN  
IN MEDIEVAL LEGEND

Antonina Harbus

D. S. BREWER

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# Contents

Preface	vii
List of Abbreviations	viii
Introduction	1
Chapter I: Helena in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages	9
The life of Helena according to late Roman sources	10
<i>Inventio</i> legends and the cult of the Cross	20
Legends of Constantine and Pope Silvester	23
Chapter II: The Legend in Anglo-Saxon England and Francia	28
The Cross and Helena in the North	28
Helena in Old English literature	34
Aldhelm, histories, and chronicles	37
Helena in Trier and Hautvillers	44
Chapter III: Magnus Maximus and the Welsh Helena	52
Elen in the Welsh genealogies	52
Magnus Maximus and <i>The Mabinogion</i>	55
Helena and Elen	61
Chapter IV: Popularisation in the Anglo-Latin Histories and the English Brut Tradition	64
Helena at Colchester	64
William of Malmesbury and the British Constantine	71
Henry of Huntingdon and Old King Cole of Colchester	73
Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Arthurian connection	78
Helena in the Brut tradition	82
Later vernacular chronicles	86
Chapter V: Late Medieval Saints' Legendaries	91
The <i>Vita sancte Helene</i> of Jocelin of Furness	96
National Legendaries	106
The Middle English Verse <i>St Elyn</i>	111

Chapter VI: The Legend Beyond the Middle Ages	119
Henry VIII and the imperial connection	121
Morant, Gibbon, and the eighteenth century	130
The legend revisited by Evelyn Waugh	134
Conclusion	142
Appendices – Note	149
1 Jocelin of Furness, <i>Vita sancte Helene</i>	150
2 The anonymous Middle English verse <i>St Elyn</i>	183
Bibliography	193
Index	211

## Preface

I would like to acknowledge my thanks to the librarians of the British Library, London; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; and the Forschungs- und Landesbibliothek, Gotha; and the Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, who made the relevant manuscripts available for consultation; provided copies of the the pages containing the texts edited in the appendices; and granted permission to publish those texts. I am grateful to the Rev. David Wiseman for granting permission to view and photograph the St Helena windows at the Parish Church of St Michael and All Angels, Ashton-under-Lyne, and to Karin Olsen and Jennifer Neville for accompanying me on a memorable journey there.

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## Abbreviations

<i>ASE</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i>
<i>ASPR</i>	Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. G.P. Krapp and E.V.K. Dobbie (New York, 1931–53)
<i>AASS</i>	Acta sanctorum (Antwerp etc., 1643–1940; Paris, 1863–67)
<i>BHL</i>	<i>Bibliotheca hagiographica latina antiquae et mediae aetatis</i> , ed. Bollandists, <i>Subsidia hagiographica</i> 6 (Brussels, 1898–1901); <i>Novum supplementum</i> , ed. H. Fros, <i>Subsidia hagiographica</i> 70 (Brussels, 1986)
<i>CSASE</i>	Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England
<i>CSEL</i>	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum (Vienna, Leipzig, Prague, 1866– )
<i>EETS</i>	Early English Text Society (os = original series; ns = new series; ss = supplementary series)
<i>GCS</i>	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte (Leipzig and Berlin, 1897– )
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
<i>MGH</i>	Monumenta Germaniae historica (Hanover, Leipzig, Berlin, etc., 1826– )
<i>NLA</i>	<i>Nova legenda Anglie</i>
<i>NM</i>	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
<i>PL</i>	Patrologiae cursus completus, Series latina, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1841–64)
<i>PLRE</i>	<i>Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire</i> , vol. I, ed. A.H.M. Jones, J.R. Martindale, and J. Morris (Cambridge, 1971)
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>
<i>RE</i>	<i>Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> , ed. A.F. von Pauly, G. Wissowa, et al., 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, 1893–1955)
<i>SEL</i>	<i>South English Legendary</i>
<i>TYP</i>	<i>Trioedd Ynys Prydein</i>
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vita Constantini</i>

Note: Where the cited edition contains a translation, that translation has been used; otherwise all translations are my own.

## Introduction

St Helena's fame during the Middle Ages was assured both by the historical circumstance that she was the mother of Constantine the Great, and also by the legendary attribution to her of the finding of the Cross on which Jesus was crucified. Through accretion, her status was further elevated: she was considered to have actively participated in the conversion of Constantine to Christianity and thereby to have played a considerable part in the recognition of Christianity as the dominant religion of the Roman Empire. These excellent credentials for renown span both the secular and religious spheres and must have been very appealing to a wide range of communities wishing to associate themselves with Helena or to appropriate her more directly for their own rhetorical and political purposes. In the context of her multifaceted value as Roman empress and Christian saint, there arose in England from Anglo-Saxon times a further cause for Helena's celebrity: the audacious claim that she was a native of Britain, in some cases the daughter of King Cole of Colchester (the 'merry old soul' of the nursery rhyme). For at least one thousand years, this legend of a noble, British birth was invoked, modified, and elaborated by writers of histories, chronicles, poetry, saints' calendars, and hagiography, depicted by visual artists, and kept alive as a tradition, both in England and abroad.

Typically of both legend and hagiography, the story of Helena developed some outlandish manifestations: Helena as disguised princess, Jewish convert, or Welsh dawn goddess. The form of the legend changed as often as the vehicle for transmission, and varied according to genre, audience, and circumstances. Because the story was contingent upon the immediate factors of reception for its shape and contents, there is no single legend, but rather a large number of constructions of the idea of a British princess Helena which served a variety of uses. At some stages, the patriotic concept became subordinated to wider forces, such as the vigorous cycles of legends surrounding Constantine and Pope Silvester which were widely promulgated for ecclesiastical and political reasons. In other instances, Helena's life-story was given priority and was reconstructed by writers of the national literature of Francia and Wales as well as England. As the legend gathered momentum during the central Middle Ages, Helena came to be revered not only as a high-profile saint of the Christian church, but also, in a secular and political context, as the provider of an imperial link with Rome which outshone the legendary appeal even of King Arthur in British national consciousness.

## Introduction

Several scholars have discussed the origins and growth of the British legend, though only briefly or selectively, and almost exclusively as a minor part of the Constantine cycle of legends.<sup>1</sup> The legend is peripheral to two recent examinations of St Helena's alleged finding of the Cross, by Stephan Borgehammar and Jan Willem Drijvers,<sup>2</sup> and the studies by Susan Larkin and Hans Pohlsander make only preliminary investigations into Helena's British connections.<sup>3</sup> It is a fair indication of Helena's multivalent associations that all these examinations of her life and legends treat other aspects of her fame which have overshadowed the British legend. Relatively little attention has been paid to the persistent creations of a British Helena and the infiltration of the story into church and state records and histories as well as into more overtly creative texts and works of art.<sup>4</sup> One major reason for the reduced interest in her origins and in Helena herself is her usual roles as an auxiliary rather than the key figure in legendary narratives: she is an accessory rather than the centre of attention in the feast of the *Inventio crucis* (the finding of the Cross), as she is in legends treating Constantine's conversion in the cult of St Silvester. Certainly, her fame relies on her relationship with Constantine and his conversion to Christianity, topics which have received far more critical attention.<sup>5</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Existing studies are quite brief or treat the British Helena legend only tangentially: W. J. Mulligan, 'The British Constantine: An English Historical Myth', *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 8 (1978), pp. 257–79; Geoffrey Ashe, *Mythology of the British Isles* (London, 1990), pp. 152–64; and Marie-Françoise Alamichel, 'La Légende de Sainte Hélène de Cynewulf à Evelyn Waugh', *Études Anglaises* 48 (1995), pp. 306–18. Mulligan's discussion includes a particularly valuable but necessarily selective treatment of the growth of the legend between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, though early sources are either omitted or treated scantily. Mulligan does not endeavour to uncover the origins of the myth and the contention that 'it is most likely that the legend developed innocently' through confusion and 'wishful thinking' (p. 258) is vague and unsupported. Ashe's claim that 'genuine misunderstanding may have played a part, since the legend adopted and confused other persons bearing the same names' (p. 156) may account to some extent for the rise of the legend, but does not factor in the political and rhetorical agendas of writers and users of the legend. Alamichel's article briefly recounts the Cross and British legends throughout the eighth to twentieth centuries, focusing on a comparison between the accounts of Cynewulf and Waugh.
- <sup>2</sup> Stephan Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross was Found: From Event to Medieval Legend*, Bibliotheca theologiae practicae, Kyrkovetenskapliga studier 47 (Stockholm, 1991); Jan Willem Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of her Finding of the True Cross* (Leiden, 1992).
- <sup>3</sup> Susan Larkin, 'Transitions in the Medieval Legends of Saint Helena' (unpub. Ph.D. Diss., Indiana Univ., 1996). Larkin's concentration on the Anglo-Latin writers leads her to position the legend solely in the context of nationalism and romance. Hans A. Pohlsander, *Helena: Empress and Saint* (Chicago, 1995), examines cults and legends dealing with Helena, and their expression in art and literature, devoting only eleven pages to 'The Traditions of Britain', and accumulating rather than synthesising information or drawing conclusions from it. There are several other studies which examine a portion of the topic: F. Arnold Foster, *Studies in Church Dedications, or England's Patron Saints*, 2 vols (London, 1899), I.181–9; S. Baring-Gould and John Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, 4 vols (London, 1911), III.255–60; and John J. Parry, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Paternity of Arthur', *Speculum* 13 (1938), pp. 271–7.
- <sup>4</sup> The legend is often just briefly mentioned as a traditional tale: e.g. Mary-Catherine Bodden, ed. and trans., *The Old English Finding of the True Cross* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 2, 54; and Michael Swanton, trans., *Anglo-Saxon Prose* (London, 1993), p. 114.
- <sup>5</sup> Amnon Linder, 'The Myth of Constantine the Great in the West: Sources and Hagiographic Commemoration', *Studi medievali*, 3rd ser. 16/1 (1975), pp. 43–95, at pp. 84–93; and John Matthews,

## Introduction

The British legend, however, developed a life of its own within the central Middle Ages and situated Helena in a position of importance in her own right in much the same way as the cult of Mary more spectacularly developed its own legitimacy, an analogy which was not lost on medieval writers about St Helena. The rise in her status as an individual saint is observable in the move from her role as an agent in the feast of the *Inventio* (3 May), to the later acquisition of her own *vitae* and feast day in the Western Church (18 August); in the Eastern Church, she shared and still shares Constantine's feast day, 21 May. The British legend played a demonstrable role in this shift of focus in the West. The sites of this legend are so numerous and diverse that the development of its rhetorical power deserves scrutiny, even if it cannot be completely disentangled from myths of Constantine and the legend of the *Inventio*. The creation of various Helenas is worth examining in detail not only because of her status as a saint and imperial progenitor, but also because of her wide appeal and flexible application to local, national, ecclesiastical, and political agendas.

The range of texts, artefacts, and cultures in which the British Helena legend is found suggests a level of importance and degree of transmission enjoyed by few saints, particularly because she is featured in historiographical as well as hagiographical traditions, in vernacular as well as Latinate discourse, in visual as well as textual representation, and in popular, oral contexts as well as learned, scribal ones. The many secular and religious witnesses to the legend show that it is both much older than is usually acknowledged and also was transmitted much farther afield than England. The full array of sources needs to be assembled and assessed in the light of all available evidence. The early written sources, particularly the Anglo-Saxon texts, have not yet been adequately explored, nor have their implications for vernacular literary culture been considered, probably because these allusions to Helena are brief and predate the major vehicle for the legend's dissemination, the *Historia regum Britannie* of Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1138). Cumulatively, the very early references to Constantine's British birth, and by implication Helena's British origins, are significant in that they indicate the growth of a new legend; sources include Aldhelm's *De virginitate* (c. 700), the Old English translation of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* (c. 890), and the tenth-century Welsh genealogies. The concept underpinning these manifestations, that there is rhetorical value in claiming a famous personage as a compatriot, becomes more widely appealing during this period of the growth of vernacular literature, including narrative hagiography. More intriguing still is the evidence that the legend was not confined to British sources and acquired the durability and wide dissemination of a traditional story. It motivated a conflict in the tenth century between York and Trier, and is alluded to in a thirteenth-century Latin redaction of a Byzantine obituary list (the *Necrologium*)

'Macsen, Maximus, and Constantine', *Welsh Historical Review* 11 (1983), pp. 431–48; repr. as text XII in John Matthews, *Political Life and Culture in Late Roman Society* (London, 1985).

## Introduction

originally compiled in the mid-tenth century.<sup>6</sup> These non-insular witnesses of the legend signal that the story survived, and perhaps even arose, outside British patriotic contexts. The concept was transferred between cultures, and association with Helena was sought intently enough to produce rivalry and to warrant official intervention. As the range of uses to which the legend was put grew, Helena's fame and therefore her rhetorical value also increased. The development of the legend, however, did not enjoy an unbroken upward trajectory, but rather was subject to the changing fortunes and the fluctuating degree of mutual tolerance between the forces with which it was inherently implicated: the perceived legitimacy of written sources, the cult of saints, the momentum of tradition, and the persuasiveness of nationalist rhetoric.

The British legend seems at times to have flourished independently of the myth that Helena found the Cross on which Jesus was crucified, although the two stories are often recounted together. The exclusive concentration on Helena's secular accomplishments is most prominent in the Anglo-Latin histories of the twelfth century, most notably Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britannie*, which develop the persona of a noble British princess. After Geoffrey, there are a great many redactions of the British legend, most of which are remarkable in that they share Geoffrey's secular focus on Helena's lineage rather than on her conversion, baptism, and finding of the Cross. This suppression of religious material arises from Geoffrey's vigorous and conscious nationalistic agenda, and affords Helena's supposed British origins even greater significance. It also allows Geoffrey to develop other aspects of the legendary persona which would be cited by later writers and eventually mesh with earlier portrayals: Helena's spotless character, noble birth, worldly accomplishments, and her location in Colchester.

Geoffrey's priorities, however, were not the only ones operating in the transmission of the British Helena legend during the Middle Ages. Alongside his version, there existed parallel biographies of Helena: the account based on Roman sources; a distinct hagiographic tradition of Helena; and her continued role in the feast of the *Inventio*. In the English religious context, the British legend helped Helena attain the credentials of sanctity; in turn, the legend was disseminated to an even wider range of contexts, including church dedications and visual art. Several extant saint's lives feature a British Helena. These, together with her (rather late) acceptance into saints' calendars and national legends and her representation in monuments, stained glass, and paintings reflect the developing, but fluctuating, interest in the subject.

The conventions of hagiography helped to shape the treatment of Helena's life and accomplishments in a broad range of medieval texts outside the strictly religious sphere. Indeed, the conceptual importance of the saint's birth and early experiences in the hagiographic tradition no doubt raised the issue of Helena's

<sup>6</sup> This source merely says that Constantine was British, but implies that this nationality was acquired from his British mother, Helena.

## Introduction

origins to a position of significance in other biographical texts. Not only are her early circumstances and later achievements treated in the most favourable light in the hagiographic context and standard miracles claimed on her behalf, but a completely new biographical legitimacy is promoted. A royal pedigree is rebuilt from the ground up with little respect to historical veracity or logical likelihood. Such treatment is not unique, but in the case of Helena, her secular status and imperial position made this kind of fabrication particularly bold, even within the conventions of hagiography. The process was self-perpetuating: her British origins, once established, allowed her to be included in national legends and this led finally to her acceptance by the Church as a British saint. This dissemination of the legend in turn led to greater attention being paid to her by histories and a more general acceptance of the story as truth by both writers and congregations. For church-goers in particular, visual reminders of the saint's status and the local associations which these depictions implied would have reinforced the legend.

Because a large portion of the legend's vitality in the later Middle Ages depended upon ecclesiastical acceptance and commemoration in liturgy, authorised texts, and artistic representations, the Reformation had a detrimental impact upon further development. The confluence of historiographic, hagiographic and popular traditions, however, proved a durable combination, and the tale was kept alive in secular contexts. When it was questioned during the humanistic rigours of the eighteenth century, the legend did not succumb easily and prompted some fairly energetic argumentation before being discredited in historical accounts. Nevertheless, the legend continued to live on in less formal contexts, in popular imagination and visual representations in public places. Despite the general muting of the legend, the town of Colchester continued to regard Helena as its patron and erected a twelve-foot high bronze statue of her on the tower of the Town Hall in 1902.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the sequence of 20 fifteenth-century panels of stained glass at St Michael's Church in Ashton-under-Lyne depicting Helena's British birth and later biography is a permanent visual reminder of the legend, though even this material manifestation of the story has been subject to modification as a result of fluctuating opinion.<sup>8</sup> Helena, for some of the British at least,

<sup>7</sup> In advertising material, Colchester promotes itself as 'Britain's oldest recorded town' (boasting an eleventh-century Norman castle) and still claims Helena as its patron saint. The other, smaller statues of the Town Hall similarly invoke prestigious historical connections: Queen Boadicea, King Edward the Elder, and Eudo Dapifer, Steward to William the Conqueror (on Eudo Dapifer, see below, p. 67).

<sup>8</sup> The windows can, and have been, changed to reflect changing public attitude. In 1872 they were dismantled from the east window of the church to make room for a memorial window and repositioned (out of order) in the windows of the south aisle. This cavalier treatment was subsequently counterbalanced by restoration work undertaken in 1913 (H. Reddish, 'The St Helen Window Ashton-under-Lyne: A Reconstruction', *Journal of Stained Glass* 18 [1986–87], pp. 150–61, at p. 151). Another indication of Helena's waning fortunes in this particular location is the likelihood that the church was rededicated from St Helena to a conventional choice, St Michael and All Angels, in the early fifteenth century; yet the stained glass was commissioned and produced in 1499, after the rededication (Alan F. Bacon, 'The History of the Windows', *The Saint Helen Windows in the Ancient*

## Introduction

had become a sort of national treasure not to be relinquished, thereby enabling the power of tradition to assume the force of historical validity.

Legends of a British St Helena evolved from her especially abundant and wide-ranging appeals as a literary and dedicatory figure: imperial connections, a significant contribution to the Christian Church, and a well-documented later life compared with obscure origins. The genesis of the legend, and more importantly its reception history and the circumstances of its ongoing momentum, deserve to be examined fully. The specific reconstructions of a local empress saint for diverse audiences and situations says much about the cultural milieu and encoded agendas of each of its manifestations. But more broadly, the legendary British St Helena functions as a repository of a wide range of unlikely but rhetorically useful secular and sacred attributes, as a protagonist in key narratives, and as a source of local importance and pride.

My examination of the development and deployment of the British Helena legend is chronological, though the material has been further divided according to geographic, generic, and thematic criteria. In Chapter I, I attempt to produce the most likely version of Helena's life based on the evidence of late Roman historical sources, moderated by modern interpretations. This chapter will also discuss myths of Constantine as they relate to Helena and the rise of the *Inventio crucis* legend, and the development of the cult of the Cross in Western Europe. Chapter II covers the manifestation of the legend in Anglo-Saxon England and in contemporary continental Europe, in an attempt to locate its written origins. The cult of the Cross seems to have overshadowed Helena's presence in Anglo-Saxon England, though she attracts reflected glory from this phenomenon. At the end of this period, Britain was competing with Trier as Helena's recognised place of origin, but both traditions worked together to bring Helena's birthplace to the West and to move her origins up the social scale. The chapter closes with an examination of this contest and its extraordinary outcome.

The Welsh also appropriated Helena, but the picture here is more complex because it incorporates the intermingling of imported Roman and British literary culture with native Welsh legend. In Chapter III, I try to gauge the Welsh contribution to the legend's heritage by disentangling the fusion of two identities in Welsh literature: the Welsh goddess Elen and the historical Helena transformed by the British legend. The place of King Cole and the rise of Colchester in the legend are also explored in this chapter, as well as the arrival of another borrowed Roman personage into the Welsh manifestations of the story, the imperial usurper Magnus Maximus. This chapter analyses the impact of the legend's Welsh reception and transformation on its subsequent career in England.

In Chapter IV, I discuss the popularisation of the British Helena legend in the

*Parish Church of Saint Michael and All Angels Ashton-under-Lyne* [Ashton-under-Lyne, 2000], pp. 7–8, at p. 7). On the windows, see below, pp. 94–5.

## Introduction

twelfth-century Anglo-Latin histories of Henry of Huntingdon, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and William of Malmsbury, and the life of the legend in later vernacular chronicles. These writers have been wrongly credited with the origins of the legend. Understanding their active embellishment of selective portions of the legend, rather than their creation of it, sheds new light both on their methodologies and agendas and also the status of the legend at this time. Helena has been reinvented in these texts as the daughter of 'Old' King Cole and is based in Colchester. From this time, a British Helena is firmly situated in the national consciousness and is now ripe for patriotic exploitation. The final sections of the chapter treat the fate of the legend in the Brut tradition and national chronicles of England. These vernacular texts are examined for their role in legitimating a British Helena as part of national history and their contribution to the rise of her star as a saint.

Chapter V explores the fate of the legend in religious literature, art, and culture. Helena's late entry into saints' calendars and legendaries was closely tied to the association of her legends with those of St Silvester, who is credited with curing Constantine from leprosy and converting both the emperor and Helena to Christianity. In this version of events, Helena is converted from Judaism; the cultural implications of this new legend are considered here. Two texts containing these episodes are examined in detail in the chapter, the prose Latin *Vita sancte Helene* by Jocelin of Furness, and the Middle English verse *St Elyn*. Both are previously unedited and unstudied. To facilitate discussion, I provide transcriptions of these two texts in my appendices. These texts are not only witnesses to the interconnectedness of Helena's fame with that of Constantine and Silvester, but are also examples of the medieval trend of taking Helena's British nationality for granted and using it for specific rhetorical reasons.

The legend's life beyond the Middle Ages in literature and popular culture is the subject of Chapter VI. The imperial connection to the British throne offered by a British Helena was exploited by the Tudors, and created a revival of interest in British history, at least amongst antiquarians. Later debate in which national pride was a key ingredient ensured the longevity of an otherwise unlikely story, which also enjoyed a subterranean existence in popular tradition. Even the subjection of the legend to humanist scrutiny in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not immediately or permanently discredit it except in the most learned circles. The vigorous debate over the veracity of the British Helena story during the eighteenth century is explored, as well as the continuing vitality of the legend in popular imagination and, to a lesser extent, in literary culture. The mid-twentieth century witnessed a minor resurgence of interest in the legend, in the consciously theological productions of the well-known writers Evelyn Waugh (in his 1950 novel, *Helena*) and Dorothy L. Sayers (in her 1951 play, *The Emperor Constantine*). The chapter closes with a consideration of how several strands of the legend were manipulated by Waugh and Sayers to produce narratives for the twentieth century which proved too theological for modern tastes, but by no means too Anglocentric.