

DISMEMBERED VIRGINS AND INCARCERATED BRIDES:  
EMBODIMENT AND SANCTITY IN THE KATHERINE GROUP

by

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For  
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## ABSTRACT

One of the most peculiar developments of the wave of women's spirituality that swept across Europe during the thirteenth century was the popularity of the anchoritic lifestyle in England, a lifestyle that had a particular appeal for women. The anchorhold seems to epitomize the medieval (male) desire to enclose and control a woman's body to the maximum degree possible; it is an amazingly accurate metaphor for the tightly circumscribed lives of medieval religious women. Why, then, did so many women eagerly seek out and embrace such a confining lifestyle? Did women internalize the endless medieval rhetoric about bodily control and woman's lustful nature, to the point where they sought lifelong incarceration to avoid temptation and possible loss of control? Or is it possible that they had a higher motivation - that they sought a more intense experience of union with the divine, and believed that only in strict isolation could such a union be achieved?

The popularity of anchoritic spirituality led to the creation of a specialized literary genre in Middle



English: vernacular devotional prose for women. These mostly male-authored texts included guidebooks for enclosed life, meditations and prayers, lives of saints, and treatises on virginity. They describe and encourage a religious life for women that is both relational and mimetic: the bride of Christ is also encouraged to emulate Christ through her life of solitary penance and suffering. These two roles are analyzed through an examination of the texts of the Katherine Group, alongside the two themes that dominated medieval religious discourse as it applied to women: virginity and enclosure.

Approaching the task from a broad interdisciplinary perspective, I employ a variety of theoretical tools, including cultural/historical, theological, linguistic, and feminist theories. My study analyzes medieval constructions of gender and virginity, and examines the anchoress as both a spiritual person and an embodied creature. In challenging traditional scholarship on and accepted views of medieval English women, I pose new questions about embodied spirituality from a medieval perspective, and offer a different perspective on a period

of English history in which women recluses set the standard for holiness and sanctity.

## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps He has chosen *her* body to inscribe His will, even if she is less able to read the inscription, poorer in language, "crazier" in her speech, burdened with matter(s) that history has laid on her, shackled in/by speculative plans that paralyze her desire. Her soul is at fault, vis-à-vis the body, because . . . it seems not to have understood . . . that the delicacy and sensitivity of the "body" have great importance, that the division at the "heart" of man is the fault, the crack, in which love is lost in controversies that merely scratch the surface of the problem.

Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*

Saintly women have stolen my soul and hidden it under big mounds of stardust. From those heights, I would like to cry into their hearts.

Emile Cioran, *Tears and Saints*

The thirteenth-century guide for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse*, first captured my attention during my undergraduate years. Fascinated by the text and the lifestyle it described, I promised myself that someday I would have time to examine it in detail and learn more about these

women and their lives of solitary asceticism. The present work has grown from that fascination.

I eventually expanded my focus to include other medieval texts dealing with anchoritic spirituality, and I discovered that the timing of my project was fortuitous; recent years have seen a veritable explosion of scholarship on medieval women, mysticism, spirituality, virginity, and the varieties of medieval women's religious experience. Works like *Ancrene Wisse*, *Hali Meiðhad*, and *The Wooing of Our Lord* are receiving considerable scholarly attention, not only as fine examples of Middle English vernacular literature, but also for what they reveal (and conceal, suggest, imply, and allude to) about the lives of medieval women. These premodern texts are being analyzed within the framework of postmodern questions about power, sexuality, subjectivity, embodiment, and the sociocultural construction of gender, with interesting and occasionally startling results.

I am intrigued by these questions, but I also have other questions that are equally compelling. These include questions about the history of anchoritism in England, about how and why the movement became popular

among medieval English women, and also about medieval women's spiritualities and their embodied relationships with the divine 'Other,' and how these relationships might have been shaped by the discourse of anchoritism. The texts of the Katherine Group, written specifically for enclosed English women,<sup>1</sup> constitute a substantial portion of this discourse, and it is these texts that are the central focus of this work.

The Katherine Group texts, along with *Ancrene Wisse*, provide a framework for a spirituality that is both relational (*sponsa Christi*) and mimetic (*imitatio Christi*). Interwoven throughout the texts are the twin themes of virginity and enclosure, gendered themes which appear in all medieval religious prose and which have their origins in the earliest patristic theology of Christianity. But the anchoritic texts incorporate these themes in ways that make virginity and enclosure the prerequisites for enacting both roles: the sexual purity of the Bride of Christ is of paramount importance and must therefore be rigorously safeguarded, and the anchoress

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, eds., *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), Introduction, 7-8.

imitates Christ both by remaining virginal and by suffering a symbolic death through lifelong enclosure. It is the gendered nature of these theological constructions that I find particularly fascinating.

It should be noted at the outset that these texts were, with one or two possible exceptions, written by men for women. It would therefore be foolhardy to make too many generalizations about the lives of anchoresses based on the texts themselves; all we may reasonably deduce from them are male ideas about women, and male directives about how women religious ought to conduct themselves. Unlike their continental sisters, medieval English women left very little in the way of religious treatises or autobiography, and so we have to imaginatively reconstruct the anchoritic lifestyle based on the available—and sharply limited—textual evidence.<sup>2</sup> These male-authored texts do, however, provide a wealth of information about constructions of marriage and family, virginity and its perceived value, gender and its ambiguous and occasionally interchangeable

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<sup>2</sup> The works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe are the notable exceptions, and they lived and wrote in the fifteenth century – at least two centuries later than the period herein examined.

interpretations, and medieval notions of what it meant to be an embodied creature.

The opening chapters examine the development of eremitism in Western Europe, how the anchoritic movement evolved in England, and why women might have been attracted to it. The chapters that follow examine *Ancrene Wisse* and several of the Katherine Group texts, in the following order: *Hali Meiðhad* presents the advantages of the virginal *sponsa Christi* lifestyle, offering as a supporting argument a grimly realistic description of earthly marriage. *Hali Meiðhad* affirms the virgin in her chosen lifestyle and explains why it is a superior choice. *Ancrene Wisse* provides the enclosed virgin with a method for structuring her life within the anchorhold; it is essentially a set of guidelines for achieving that exalted state described and promoted in *Hali Meiðhad*. Finally, the saints' lives—Katherine, Margaret, and Juliana—offer examples of the terrible heroics of virginity, as the virgin martyrs demonstrate the performance of *sponsa Christi* and *imitatio Christi* through their holy lives and brutal deaths.

Moving from virginity (*Hali Meiðhad*) to embodiment and enclosure (*Ancrene Wisse*) and finally to theory-based performance (saints' lives) with some necessary intermingling of the three, my analysis will center on two primary ideas. First, there is a two-fold paradox at the heart of the *sponsa Christi* construction. Although spiritual desire, that is, the desire of the soul for connectedness to divinity, seems to occur outside the confines of binary gender identity, the anchoress was never permitted to forget her "essential" femaleness and its relationship to Christ's maleness. Thus a relationship between God and the soul that was not, at its core, gender-inflected, was continually and intentionally gendered in myriad ways by the anchoritic devotional texts. At the same time, the spiritualities and sexualities of medieval virgins and their hagiographic role models positioned them outside of the standard heterosexual construction of marriage and family, and the anchoritic texts support a peculiar fluidity of gender roles, not only for the (female) reader but also for the (male) heavenly Bridegroom. It is thus possible to examine texts that describe what at first glance seems to



be an 'ordinary' spousal relationship between a woman and a man, and view them through a queering lens that suggests something rather different—something that is, at the very least, ambiguously gendered.

Second, the anchoress, enclosed in her cell, embodied *imitatio Christi* in three important ways: virginity, enclosure, and suffering. All three involved the active participation of the body as well as the soul of the anchoress. Despite the endless exhortations in the anchoritic texts about the vileness of the body and the need to be ever vigilant in its control, it was in her embodiment that the anchoress was most like Christ; it was her body that suffered and was imprisoned, even as Christ's body had suffered and been imprisoned; and it was her body that enabled her to approach him as lover and spouse. Anchoritic spirituality was embodied spirituality, consisting of an intensely erotic relationship between two gendered bodies, and the corporal as well as the spiritual imitation of the beloved Bridegroom. Thus the medieval concepts of *sponsa Christi* and *imitatio Christi*, both discursively constructed, were

inextricably intertwined in the female body of the anchoress.

I. THE EREMITIC TRADITION FROM EAST TO WEST:  
A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Beguiling and deceptive is the  
life of the world, fruitless  
its labor, perilous its delight,  
poor its riches, delusive its  
honors, inconstant,  
insignificant; and woe to those  
who hope in its seeming goods:  
because of this many die without  
repentance.

Blessed and most blessed are  
those who depart from the world  
and its desires.

Nazarius the Elder

Like so many other aspects of medieval Christianity, the solitary asceticism of the anchoress seems very strange to a modern reader. To the medieval Christian, however, the decision to withdraw permanently from the world into the seclusion of the anchorhold was seen as the sanest possible choice, and one virtually guaranteed to insure the soul's salvation. Anchoresses were the true *mulieres sanctae* of the High Middle Ages.

As peculiar as the lifestyle were the demographics of the anchoritic movement. Although anchorites existed throughout Europe in the early Middle Ages, by the twelfth century their numbers in England had increased

dramatically compared to the continent. Anchoritism has thus long been thought of, perhaps erroneously, as a distinctively English phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> The lifestyle had a particular appeal for women, who outnumbered male anchorites by considerable numbers throughout the Middle Ages. Several factors, some social and cultural, others political, combined to make the anchorhold an attractive option for medieval English women. In order to answer the

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<sup>3</sup> See Anneke Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the anchoresses* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). In this recently-published study of the lives of five continental recluses, Mulder-Bakker maintains that medieval women throughout Europe lived as recluses and/or anchoresses, and that "dozens, more likely hundreds, of devout women converted to this way of life," 6. Mulder-Bakker's findings are supported by the earlier research of Margot King, who argued in *The Desert Mothers* that "these women numbered in the thousands -- indeed, I would venture to say in the tens of thousands" (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1989), 2. The textual evidence suggests, however, that the *anchoritic* movement (and I am distinguishing between *recluses* and *anchoresses*, the latter term describing a specific religious role for women that included formal rituals and compulsory lifelong enclosure, and was referred to in the enclosure rites as "the order of ancre") was established with more ecclesiastical recognition, structure, and support in England than elsewhere. Further, the texts that make up the corpus of medieval devotional prose that is addressed specifically to anchoresses all originated in England, and were either written in Middle English or translated into Middle English from Latin originals; no comparable body of work exists for continental women. Only in England was female anchoritism so widespread that it spurred the development of an entire sub-genre of vernacular religious literature specifically targeted at a female audience.

questions, "Why England? Why the twelfth century? And why women?" it will be helpful to consider the historical development of the eremitic tradition in the Christian West, and to trace its transcontinental migration from the harsh Egyptian desert of the fourth century to the urban centers of medieval England.

#### 1. Sanctity, Solitude, and the Desert: The Anchorite's Ancient Predecessors

The history of Christianity is filled with accounts of devout and intrepid individuals, male and female, who fled the temptations and distractions of communal living and abandoned the comforts of human companionship to pursue God in solitude. The anchorite's cell was a medieval manifestation of the desert wilderness of the earliest Christian hermits, a place of spiritual as well as physical isolation in which the pious soul, hungry and longing for God, might approach him alone and in peace, stripped of the trappings of a corrupt and sinful society.

The human desire to embark, alone, upon a literal or figurative journey of self-discovery and spiritual awakening is neither exclusively nor originally Christian,

of course. Stories of solitary pilgrims and reclusive ascetics appear throughout history and across cultures. Bruno Bettelheim, in his analysis of the symbolism of wilderness journeys and their psychological significance, describes a number of similarly themed stories, including a fairy tale from ancient Egypt that dates back to 1250 B.C.E.<sup>4</sup> The solitary seeker also appears in the literature of many religious traditions, including, among others, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Native American spirituality. The yearning for the kinds of inner growth, self-knowledge, and spirituality that can best be achieved in solitude seems to be a transcultural phenomenon.

In Christian history and literature, however, the solitary spiritual journey of the religious recluse metamorphosed into a respected permanent lifestyle, and was elevated to the status of sanctity in the vitae of saints.<sup>5</sup> Eremitic spirituality preceded cenobitic, or

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<sup>4</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 91.

<sup>5</sup> Savage and Watson mention that in the medieval hierarchy of saints, "holy hermits" merited their own category, just after kings and before bishops and abbots. See Giles Constable and Bernard Smith, ed. and trans., *Libellus de Diversis Ordinibus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) 38-39; also Savage and Watson, Introduction, 4-5.

communal, monasticism in early Christianity,<sup>6</sup> at least for men, although for women, the evidence suggests otherwise. When St. Antony fled to the desert in the third century to escape from women and the temptations of the flesh, he first arranged for his sister to enter an already-existing community of consecrated virgins.<sup>7</sup> Like many other venerated ascetics, Antony soon attracted a group of devoted followers and imitators, and he was forced to move to locations more and more remote in order to remain in seclusion.<sup>8</sup> St. Antony is credited with establishing the hermit's lifestyle as a viable option for devout Christians. The first of the Desert Fathers, Antony must have been surprised to discover that his life of solitary

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<sup>6</sup> 'Eremitic' spirituality refers to the solitary religious life; the word 'hermit' derives from 'eremite.' The life of the cenobite was a religious life lived in community; thus 'cenobitic.'

<sup>7</sup> H. Ellershaw, *Life of Antony, Select Writings of Athanasius*, Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers II.4 (New York, 1957), 195-221; citation refers to 197. Margot King argues that these communities of women, which had obviously already been in existence for some time, actually represent the nascent beginnings of Christian monasticism. See King's *The Desert Mothers* (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1989), 11.

<sup>8</sup> This turned out to be a common occurrence, as religious recluses often attracted acolytes; hermitages tended to become colonies and occasionally monasteries over time, as groups of ascetics and pilgrims collected around a holy hermit.

asceticism appealed also to women. The Desert Fathers were soon joined by the Desert Mothers in considerable numbers, of whom the most famous is Mary of Egypt, a reformed prostitute also occasionally referred to as Mary the Harlot. Although women embarked upon the solitary life for many of the same reasons as men - to escape the distractions of urban life, to pursue greater self-knowledge, and to deepen their relationships with God through extreme penitential asceticism - Laura Swan contends that there may have also been more pragmatic reasons behind women's flight to the desert.

Initially Christianity afforded many opportunities for women to take significant leadership roles in the ministry of the new religion. Christianity was at first a marginal, home-centered movement that allowed and even encouraged women to act as evangelists and teachers and to exercise levels of power and authority not readily available to them in Roman society. Women are mentioned in the New Testament in the roles of prophet, deacon, and presbyter, and the Pauline letters recognize many women as heads of home-based churches. Romans 16, for example, names several women as Paul's helpers and coworkers; in



fact, as Ben Witherington notes, "The overall impression one gets from Rom. 16 is that a wide variety of women were involved in the work of the church, and that they were doing a variety of things including acting as missionaries, carrying letters, serving at charitable tasks as deaconesses, providing aid or shelter for traveling apostles, etc."<sup>9</sup> Phoebe is addressed in Paul's letter to the Romans as "a deacon of the church," and the same letter describes Junia as "prominent among the apostles" (Rom, 16:1, 7.)<sup>10</sup> Euodia and Syntyche are elsewhere referred to as Paul's "co-workers" (Phil. 4:3-4.) Luke mentions the four daughters of Philip, who "had

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<sup>9</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.) The topic of women in leadership roles in the early church is one that has received considerable attention in the last two decades. For more detailed descriptions, analyses, and evidence, see Dorothy Irvin, "The Ministry of Women in the Early Church: The Archeological Evidence," *Touchstone* (January 1986), 24-33; Ross Shephard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999); Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000); Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993); and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, this and all subsequent biblical references are taken from Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

the gift of prophecy" (Acts 21:9). The home of Lydia became an important Christian center in the early church (Acts 16:13-40), and Priscilla's home was also the site of a Christian congregation (Acts 18).

Other evidence attests to the leadership roles held by women in the first centuries of the church. The apocryphal text *Acts of Paul and Thecla* describes a woman, Thecla, who baptized herself, appointed herself a missionary preacher, and was largely autonomous in both her interpretation and her performance of her religious duties.<sup>11</sup> Nino was another woman who engaged in teaching, preaching and missionary work; she is referred to in hagiographical accounts as "apostle and evangelist" and identified as a missionary preacher by Rufinus in his ecclesiastical history.<sup>12</sup> Eusebius refers to the daughters of Philip as prophets, as well as Ammia of Philadelphia, whom he identifies as one who "prophesied under the new

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<sup>11</sup> Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha* Vol. II (Louisville, KY: Westminster-John Knox, 1991), 239-46.

<sup>12</sup> Eva Schulz-Fluegel, ed., *Rufinus of Aquileia: Historia monachorum, sive, De vita sanctorum patrum* I (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1990), 20; David M. Lang, ed., *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956), 13-39; see also Eisen, 52-54.

covenant.”<sup>13</sup> Ancient epigraphs indicate that women may have even served as bishops; the mother of Pope Paschal I is entombed in the chapel of St. Zeno with a tomb inscription that identifies her as “*Theodora episcopa*.”<sup>14</sup> Numerous other examples might be cited; suffice to say that recent scholarship has uncovered substantial evidence of women’s leadership roles in the ancient church.

As the new religion gradually gained status and merged with the dominant culture, however, women began to be systematically excluded from their former high-status positions within the church and increasingly confined to narrow gender-defined roles within their homes. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* of the mid-third century recognized that women deacons in the church made a valuable contribution, but specified that their ministry was to be restricted exclusively to other women.<sup>15</sup> Later Tertullian

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<sup>13</sup> Eusebius, *The Church History of Eusebius*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol. 1, book V, online <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-01/TOC.htm>> [8-25-05].

<sup>14</sup> Eisen, 200-203. Eisen notes that many, perhaps most, scholars interpret the title “*femina episcopa*” to designate the wife of a bishop, but she contends that this is a misidentification, especially in the case of Theodora, who was *not* the wife of a bishop. See her detailed analysis, 202-205.

<sup>15</sup> R.H. Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), vol. III, 12.

contended rather stridently that women were not entitled to hold any "manly" religious office: "It is not permitted for a woman to speak in church; but neither is it permitted her to teach, nor to baptize, nor to offer, nor to claim for herself any manly function, not to say in any sacerdotal office."<sup>16</sup> Tertullian's sentiments were echoed by Origen, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and various others.<sup>17</sup>

As the churches moved out of private homes and into other quarters, teaching, preaching, and sacerdotal functions were subsumed under the ever-expanding clerical hierarchy, and women's roles were greatly diminished. With few if any official religious functions to perform, women may have seen flight to the desert not only as a way to imitate Christ but also as a way to regain a sense of self-determination. As Swan notes, "as leadership

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<sup>16</sup> Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, chap. IX, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. IV, online <[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-04/anf04-09.htm#P618\\_144445](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-04/anf04-09.htm#P618_144445)> [8-25-05].

<sup>17</sup> See Origen, "Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans," tr. T.P. Scheck (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press 2001); St. Ambrose, "Select Works and Letters," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 10, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series (Grand Rapids: Erdmans Publishing, 1976), 174-192; John Chrysostom, "On the Priesthood," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I Series IX, books 2 and 3, online <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-09/TOC.htm>> [9-02-30].

opportunities within mainstream Christianity decreased, the desert . . . offered women a greater sense of physical and spiritual autonomy."<sup>18</sup> Despite the relative lack of scholarly interest in the lives of these early women recluses, evidence exists that suggests that their numbers were substantial.

Margot King notes that Palladius mentions 2,975 women in his *Lausiac History*, including lives of desert hermitesses Alexandria, Amma Talis, and Taor.<sup>19</sup> Other women hermits whose lives were recorded include Mary of

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<sup>18</sup> Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 10.

<sup>19</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiac History*, ed. Cuthbert Butler (Cambridge: University Press, 1898-1904), chap. V and LIX; see King, 3.

Egypt,<sup>20</sup> Anastasia,<sup>21</sup> Athanasia,<sup>22</sup> Apollinaria,<sup>23</sup> Theodora,<sup>24</sup> and numerous others.<sup>25</sup>

King's careful tracing of the history of solitary female ascetics subsequent to the fourth century reveals that the eremitic life was especially popular among the Celts, and that the British Isles seem to have had more than their share of women hermits throughout the early Middle Ages.

When we reach the fifth century, a rather strange situation seems to occur. I found only one Gaulish recluse in contrast to at least fifteen Celtic recluses. At the end of the fifth century I found three recluses who lived near Rheims but they were of Irish origin. In the sixth century there were six recluses living in Gaul . . . one in Belgium, and three in Italy . . . Against these ten continental recluses, there are eighteen Celtic saints. Moving into the seventh century, we find four female solitaries living in the Lowlands, two of whom

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<sup>20</sup> "The Life of St. Mary of Egypt," trans. Maria Kouli, in *Holy Women of Byzantium*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C.: Dunbarton Oaks, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> "Life of Anastasia," in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, trans. Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 142-149.

<sup>22</sup> "Life of St. Athanasia of Aegina," trans. Lee Frances Sherry, in *Holy Women of Byzantium*, 137-158.

<sup>23</sup> "Vita s. Apollinaris Syncletica," in *Acta sanctorum* 5 Jan. I, electronic database <<http://gateway.proquest.com>> [10-10-05].

<sup>24</sup> "Theodora Alexandrina in Ægypto," in *Acta sanctorum* 11 Sept. III, electronic database <<http://gateway.proquest.com>> [10-10-05].

<sup>25</sup> King, 4.

were of Irish origin; three in Gaul, all Irish; two in Italy, both English; and ten in England. By the eighth century the ratio begins to even out: two in Belgium, one of whom was Irish; three in Gaul; two in Italy; two in Ireland and seven in England.<sup>26</sup>

According to King, there followed a waning of enthusiasm for the hermit's life in the ninth and tenth centuries, after which ensued a resurgence in the eleventh century, especially in Ireland and England.<sup>27</sup> The next two centuries would see the anchoritic movement in England blossom into full flower, a movement in which women at times outnumbered men by ratios as high as four to one. The possible reasons for the disproportionate numbers of recluses, both male and female, in the British Isles warrant a closer look.

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<sup>26</sup> King, 4-5.

<sup>27</sup> King does not comment on the possible reasons for the decline during this period, but it seems likely that the Viking invasions of the ninth century had a negative impact on the eremitic lifestyle, at least in Britain. In addition, the Benedictine reforms of the tenth century provided more monastic opportunities than had previously existed, although their impact on female monasticism was not entirely positive, as will be seen.

## 2. The Uneven Growth of Early English Christianity

We know that Christianity came to Britain fairly early; Tertullian noted that there were a few Christians in Britain by the end of the second century.<sup>28</sup> It was not, however, firmly established there, and the stability of the Roman church in Britain would be compromised repeatedly through the next several centuries. By the time Christianity became the religion of state in the fourth century Roman Empire, of which Britain was a part, that empire was already showing signs of disintegration. When the Romans departed England for good in 450 C.E., they left behind a fragile Christian community that was almost completely helpless against invading Saxons, Picts and Scots, and paganism continued to flourish in Britain for at least another century, despite the continued presence of small Christian communities. The chief claim to fame of the English church in this early period seems to be its association with the Pelagian heresy in the early fifth

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<sup>28</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Judeos*, trans. S. Thelwall, chap. 7 online <<http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-19.htm>> [10-14-05]. Tertullian refers to "the haunts of the Britons--inaccessible to the Romans, but subjugated to Christ." See also Nora K. Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (Felinfach, Ireland: Llanerch Publishers, 1990), 12.



century.<sup>29</sup> Prosper of Aquitaine stated that Pope Celestine "regarded Britain as the stronghold of those holding the so-called Pelagian views."<sup>30</sup> The heresy was eventually wiped out by Rome's efforts, but its elimination did little to strengthen Christianity in Britain; Celestine's missionary zeal was directed only at purging heresy, not at proselytizing for the faith. As a result of the combination of pagan incursions and Rome's lack of attention, "England as it stood at the end of the sixth

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<sup>29</sup> Named for Pelagius, a fifth-century monk believed to have been from Britain, the Pelagian heresy denied original sin, questioned the efficacy of and necessity for heavenly grace, and maintained that men possessed sufficient strength of will and moral character to achieve the highest state of virtue. Pelagius's chief contribution to Christian heresy, the idea that men's salvation was justified by faith alone, would be hailed—and condemned—as new when it reappeared several centuries later in the theology of Martin Luther, but it didn't originate with Pelagius; it was in fact rooted in the Stoicism of the Greeks. For a brief but enlightening discussion of Pelagianism, see J. W. C. Wand, *A History of the Christian Church to A.D. 500* (London: Routledge, 1994), 230-233. See also Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, Second Ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 52-55.

<sup>30</sup> Prosper Aquitanus, "Epistola ad Augustinum," in *Patrologia Latina* Vol. 5 Col. 0067, electronic database <<http://gateway.proquest.com>> [10-31-05]; see also Chadwick, 15.

century was one of the few almost totally pagan countries of Europe."<sup>31</sup>

Christianity fared somewhat better in Wales, an area that was geographically more easily defended and thus less attractive to invaders. Romanized Celts fled into Wales to escape the pagan invaders, taking Christianity with them. As Bede noted, these Briton Christians "refused to share their own knowledge of the Christian faith with the English," and the christianization of the Anglo-Saxons would have to come from another venue.<sup>32</sup> It was not until the pontificate of Gregory the Great (590-604) that Rome began to take a serious interest in the conversion of England's barbarian tribes. Gregory's emissary, Augustine, arrived in England in 597 and discovered that the Irish Christians were already making inroads with their own brand of ascetic devotion, which, despite the missionary efforts of St. Patrick and his allegiance to the Roman Church, retained its original Eastern flavor. To uncover the origins of the English anchoritic tradition, then, it is necessary to trace the evolution of

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<sup>31</sup> Brendan Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity* (London: Constable and Company, 1994), 137.

<sup>32</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Leo Sherley-Price (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 321.

Christianity in Ireland, as it appears to have been Irish Catholicism, rather than Roman, that had the most decisive impact on the shaping of eremitic spirituality in England.

### 3. St. Patrick

Christianity arrived in Ireland a bit later than in Britain, although well before the arrival of St. Patrick. Most scholars agree that Christianity first made its way into Roman Britain from Gaul, and then into Ireland from Britain, via Patrick's predecessors. By the early fifth century, Pope Celestine recognized a Christian community in Ireland that was large and well organized enough to justify sending them their own bishop, Palladius, to combat the Pelagian heresy.<sup>33</sup> When in 432 C.E. St. Patrick returned to the island where he had been enslaved as a boy, he occasionally encountered established Christian communities in his travels.<sup>34</sup> Patrick's thirty-year

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<sup>33</sup> "Ternanus, Ep. Pictorum, in Scotia," in *Acta sanctorum* 11 June, electronic database  
<<http://gateway.proquest.com>> [10-31-05] See also Bede, 66-67; Chadwick, 17.

<sup>34</sup> St. Patrick, *Confessio*, online  
<<http://www.cin.org/patrick.html>> [9-22-05]; see also Lehane, 47. The 432 date is still hotly debated by Irish historians; see Lehane, 44-46.

mission in Ireland was a huge success, although he hardly accomplished the conversion of Ireland single-handedly; as Brendan Lehane mentions, "he appears to have stolen the thunder of his contemporaries and those who went before him."<sup>35</sup> Indeed, although Patrick claimed to have baptized thousands, his *Confessio* is a long, rather petulant account of how he was much despised and maligned by the Irish, and of how he was continuously being robbed, arrested, assaulted, or threatened with death during his long sojourn there.<sup>36</sup> Patrick apparently found that his version of the "true faith" was less attractive than he had hoped, although if his missionary persona matched his authorial voice, it may have been his delivery, rather than his message, that was distasteful.

Unlike Britain, Ireland was not and had never been colonized by Rome. The structure of Patrick's Roman Christianity was based on the civil framework of the continent's urban areas, and this framework constituted a fairly rigid ecclesiastical hierarchy in which power and authority were concentrated in the bishop. In contrast to continental Europe, however, Ireland had no cities or

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>36</sup> St. Patrick, *Confessio*.

urban areas, and the diocesan hierarchy of the Roman church proved to be a poor fit for Ireland's tribal system, based as it was on hundreds of small rural kinship groups.<sup>37</sup> It was in the monasteries, rather than in the churches, that the power of the Irish Church resided, and it was abbots, rather than bishops, who exercised spiritual authority over their flocks. Despite the attempts of Palladius and Patrick to bring the Irish Christians more closely into alignment with Roman hierarchy and organization, the church in Ireland maintained its own unique structure for several centuries, and was not forced to comply with Roman-style governance until the Synod of Whitby. Irish resistance to Rome's rather heavy-handed approach continued until the mid-eighth century.<sup>38</sup> The absence of both a strong Roman religious influence and the accompanying complex

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 325-326; Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London: B.T Batsford, Ltd., 1991), 86; Lehane, 49.

<sup>38</sup> Chadwick, 3; see also John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development* (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1972), 152; Brown, *Western Christendom*, 361-362.

ecclesiastic structures almost certainly had an affect on the shape assumed by Irish Christianity.<sup>39</sup>

#### 4. East Meets West on the Emerald Isle

The fourth and fifth centuries saw dramatic changes across continental Europe. The empire of Rome was crumbling, social institutions were disintegrating, and barbarian tribes spread out across Gaul and the surrounding areas.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the intellectual influence of the Greek Church, combined with the severe asceticism of the Egyptian and Syrian deserts, was having a major impact on Christian spirituality. It was from these Eastern influences that the monastic eremitic movement developed, fired by the ascetic enthusiasm of

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<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting that scholars differ widely in their perceptions of the differences between the Celtic Church and the Roman Church, with views that range from major and dramatic differences to relatively few and insignificant differences. Despite their differences, major or minor, it is important to keep in mind that, as Chadwick mentions, "the Celtic church was never outside the framework of the Roman church," 64. It must also be stated that, notwithstanding its perspectives on penitential asceticism, the Irish Church, with the exception of its brief excursion into Pelagianism, was completely orthodox in its theology. It was not Irish theology that was in question, even at Whitby, but rather issues of ecclesiastical structure and ultimate clerical authority.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 93-98.

John Cassian, Jerome, Evagrius, and others who drew their inspiration from both the lives of the desert fathers and the intellectual prowess of the Greeks.<sup>41</sup> This Eastern asceticism found a warm welcome in Ireland.

As it happened, Irish Christians had a special affinity for the solitary pursuit of holiness, and in fact for harsh penance and asceticism in all its forms. The first penitentials came out of sixth-century Ireland, cataloguing a wide variety of sins and prescribing penances for every possible carnal permutation.<sup>42</sup> During the sixth and seventh centuries, Ireland produced so many

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<sup>41</sup> See John Cassian, "The Benefits of the Desert," Conference XIX:V, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Paulist Press, 1997); 667-689; Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, trans. John Eudes Bamberger (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981). See also Chadwick, 9-10; Brown, *Western Christendom*, 242, 246-247.

<sup>42</sup> The best known of these Irish penitentials is probably that of Columban (around 591 C.E.) but there were numerous others. The penitential of Theodore, from the Anglo-Saxon period, was loosely based on its Irish predecessors. See "The Penitential of Theodore" and "The Penitential of Columban," in John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, ed., *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Liber Penitentiales* (New York: Octagon Books, 1979), 179-214 and 249-256, respectively. See also Thomas O'Laughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World, and God in Early Irish Writings* (London: Continuum, 2000), 48-67, and Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550-1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 7; Brown, *Western Christendom*, 248-256.

noteworthy ascetics that the period is commonly referred to in Irish history as "the age of the saints."<sup>43</sup> King mentions that at the beginning of the sixth century, "the Irish ascetic practices of solitude and peregrination had become so widespread and hermits so numerous as to pose a problem to the organized Church."<sup>44</sup> Of course, the concerns of the organized Church in Rome would not have had a substantial impact on Irish Christians; by this time Ireland was once again isolated from the influence of Rome as a result of barbarian raids across Europe, including the Anglo-Saxon occupation of England, and as Lehane observes, "for a long period of incubation she [Ireland] developed Christianity in her own particular way, suited to her own character, not that of a relinquished Roman colony."<sup>45</sup> The solitary asceticism of the Eastern Church was apparently well suited to the Irish character, Roman disapproval notwithstanding.

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<sup>43</sup> Chadwick, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Columbanus reported that Finian of Clonard questioned Gildas about monks who were leaving their monasteries to become hermits against the wishes of their abbots; see "Gregorius I: Sancti Gregorii magni registri epistolarum," in *Patrologia Latina*, electronic database <<http://gateway.proquest.com>> [10-08-05]; see also Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 26; King, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Lehane, 50.



Geographically isolated from the continent, Ireland more than England, the northern island countries nevertheless had access to patristic writings and continental doctrinal works; neither England nor Ireland lacked contact with the outside world, and clerics of both countries boasted a relatively high level of literacy. However, Irish theology was uniquely shaped by exposure to two distinct threads of Christian thought: Roman Christianity, with its emphases on canonicity, orthodoxy, and hierarchy, and the somewhat more intellectually sophisticated writings and traditions of the Eastern Church, which tended to focus on penitential asceticism and encouraged the solitary pursuit of individual holiness.<sup>46</sup> High literacy, combined with the Irish passion for scholarship and intellectual stimulation, produced what Peter Brown has called "a remarkable variant of Christianity,"<sup>47</sup> a Christianity with a decidedly ascetic flavor. Exposure to the writings of Eastern ascetics produced in the Irish a fascination bordering on obsession with solitary asceticism.<sup>48</sup> As Nora Chadwick writes:

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<sup>46</sup> Chadwick, 9; Lehane, 52.

<sup>47</sup> Brown, *Western Christendom*, 326.

<sup>48</sup> Brown, *Western Christendom*, 242.

We must postulate a strong intellectual influence operating on our islands from the East Mediterranean, whether directly or indirectly, possibly through Aquitaine or Spain. There can be little doubt that it was mainly through books that knowledge came to Ireland from the Eastern Church, and that it was through books that they acquired their anchoritic discipline from the east.<sup>49</sup>

Although earlier scholarship maintained that anchoritic spirituality traveled to Ireland through Gaul,<sup>50</sup> Chadwick disagrees. She maintains that solitary asceticism never achieved the popularity in Gaul and Western Europe that it enjoyed in Eastern Christendom, and she makes a persuasive case for an Eastern influence in

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<sup>49</sup> Chadwick, 38, 50. It is impossible to say with certainty which Eastern texts might have traveled to Ireland. In *The Rise of Western Christendom*, Brown mentions specifically the writings of John Cassian (242) and some of Jerome's letters (247-48). Chadwick mentions the writings and correspondences of Jerome, Augustine, and Cassian, but does not provide specific references, and she adds, "Unfortunately we have no Irish library catalogs for the sixth century." (Ibid.) Chadwick also briefly describes fascinating similarities between the religious art of the early Irish church and various Coptic and Syrian manuscripts from the same period, similarities which are also noted by J. N. Hillgarth in *Visigothic Spain, Byzantium, and the Irish* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), 443-444. Interestingly, in reference to textual transmission, Hillgarth mentions that many early Irish writings appear to have been heavily influenced by the work of Isidore of Seville, among other Spanish authors. See her discussion in Chapter VII, 173-183.

<sup>50</sup> Peter F. Anson, *The Call of the Desert: The Solitary Life in the Christian Church* (London: SPCK, 1964), 54-55; Ryan, 259-260.

Ireland via a less direct route, arguing that " . . . the more fully developed forms of anchoritism in the Celtic Church do not appear to have developed from the anchorites of the mountains and forests of eastern Gaul. . . its affinities are surely with the solitaries and the little communities of the *larvae* of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia."<sup>51</sup>

Chadwick further argues that the evidence indicates that Gaul in the fifth century was hardly a hotbed of solitary asceticism. The Roman Church was suspicious of eremitism and reluctant to advocate or even condone such a lifestyle, influenced as it was by the examples of Pachomius, Basil, and Benedict, all of whom had abandoned their hopes for the life of a hermit in favor of communal monasticism. St. Martin of Tours, a strong advocate for eremitism who was credited with establishing monasticism in Gaul in the fourth century, was continually at odds with church authorities; his biographer, Sulpitius Severus, mentions several episodes of ecclesiastic persecution.<sup>52</sup> There was at that time a profound

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<sup>51</sup> Chadwick, 86-87. See also King, 5-6.

<sup>52</sup> Sulpitius Severus, *Life of St. Martin*, trans. Alexander Roberts, online

institutional distrust of the ascetic solitary life and of those who embraced it, a distrust that apparently centered on the election of bishops and the privileges attached thereto.<sup>53</sup> Although there were hermits and ascetics in Gaul, as well as in other areas of continental Europe, it nevertheless seems unlikely that the highly developed eremitism of Ireland arrived by that route.

Ireland, as we have seen, was not initially tightly bound by the ecclesiastical structures of the Roman Church and thus not overly influenced by its negative view of eremitic spirituality. Its religious structure was more monastic than episcopal; sensitive political questions of episcopal preferment seem not to have been at issue among the Irish. Much like the hermits of the Egyptian desert, Irish monks preferred lives of solitary contemplation, perceiving communal monasticism as a preparatory stage on the path to eremitism. Irish enthusiasm for the desert was sometimes so strong that the discipline of the monastery was threatened, as it was not uncommon for monks

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<<http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~eknuth/npnf2-11/sulpitius/lifemart.html>> [06-02-05]. See Chapter VI, interestingly titled, "The Devil throws himself in the Way of Martin."

<sup>53</sup> Chadwick, 30-31.

to depart for the hermitage without the permission of the abbot.<sup>54</sup> Along with this passion for the hermit's life, there also developed in Ireland a fondness for the wandering life of peregrination, a form of solitary pilgrimage described by Chadwick as the "chief legacy" of Irish monasticism.<sup>55</sup>

How did the eremitic ideals and the harsh penitential asceticism of Eastern Christianity make their way to Ireland, if not via Gaul? Some scholars have hypothesized, as Chadwick suggests, that Visigothic Spain might have been the link between these geographically remote areas.<sup>56</sup> John Saward makes a strong argument for such a theory, while acknowledging that, due to the lack of solid evidence, the idea remains little more than a tantalizing conjecture:

Spain was a natural meeting place for Far West and East. The south of Ireland had ancient commercial links with the northwest of Spain, which in turn, on its other seaboard, had dealings with the eastern Mediterranean. . . . The crucial area is Galicia, from which Egeria traveled to the East in the fourth century and which was thought to be of Greek origin.

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<sup>54</sup> See *"Gregorius I: Sancti Gregorii magni registri epistolarum;"* also Ryan, 260-261.

<sup>55</sup> Chadwick, 32; see also Saward, 43-45, Ryan, 261-262; Brown, *Western Christendom*, 414-415.

<sup>56</sup> Chadwick, 58.

Galicia is also the province closest to Ireland and linked to it by the ancient trade route already mentioned.<sup>57</sup>

Saward's argument is supported by the work of J. N. Hillgarth, who agrees that Galicia would have been the most likely point of connection between Spain and Ireland. Hillgarth mentions that Galician monasticism was very similar to Irish monasticism from the fifth through the seventh centuries, and she also mentions the strong Byzantine influence on the art of Visigothic Spain, an influence evident in early Irish religious art as well.<sup>58</sup>

Margot King agrees with Chadwick's theory that Irish anchoritism was based on the Eastern model, arguing that such a theory "goes far to explain the disproportionate number of Irish recluses in relation to their continental counterparts."<sup>59</sup> King further maintains that Irish monasticism, with its emphasis on eremitic spirituality, exerted a "profound influence" on the Anglo-Saxons, and she suggests that this influence established the foundation for the development of the anchoritic movement

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<sup>57</sup> Saward, 33.

<sup>58</sup> Hillgarth, *Visigothic Spain, Byzantium, and the Irish*, 454. Hillgarth develops her theory at some length, in two very well-researched essays in this volume; see chapters VI and VII.

<sup>59</sup> King, 5.

in England during the High Middle Ages.<sup>60</sup> There is considerable evidence to substantiate such a claim, as the close ties between the Irish Christians and the Anglo-Saxons are mentioned in Bede's history; these ties can also be identified in documents such as the penitentials.<sup>61</sup>

With limited influence from the affluent Roman church, Irish Christianity was relatively unpolluted by the wealth, excess, and corruption of Rome, offering a purer asceticism that appealed to the newly converted Anglo-Saxons. It also presented fewer challenges to Anglo-Saxon government and authority, since monastic authority was less likely to usurp civil and secular authority than Roman ecclesiastic structures—a matter of some significance. As we will see, Irish missionaries made a substantial contribution to the conversion of Britain.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Bede, 143-147, 321-324; see also McNeill and. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*; Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 127-128; Lehane, 136-142; Ryan, 148-166.

## 5. The Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons

Despite the arrival of Christianity in Britain by the second century and its more or less firm establishment there by the fourth century,<sup>62</sup> its growth there did not proceed smoothly and without interruption. It was disrupted at intervals over the next several centuries by invasions of pagan tribes, tribes that had their own religious practices and as victors, saw no reason to relinquish them. England's final conversion came about as the result of a two-fold approach, with missionary efforts aimed at the Anglo-Saxons coming from both the Roman Church and from Ireland. This dual effort would succeed in transforming England from an "almost totally pagan" country to a stronghold of Christian orthodoxy within a single century.<sup>63</sup>

That favorite son of Ireland, St. Columba, journeyed in the late sixth century from Ireland to Scotland on a pilgrimage, and stayed to found a monastery at Iona. It

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<sup>62</sup> Blair, 127.

<sup>63</sup> The subsequent invasion of the Danes in the ninth century, many of whom had already been exposed to Christianity, temporarily disrupted the cohesiveness of the English church and resulted in the destruction of many monasteries, but the conversion of England was, for all intents and purposes, complete by that time.



was Iona that provided another Irishman, St. Aidan, with his monastic education, preparing him to convert the Anglo-Saxons in the northern part of England. Claimed by Ireland as the "Apostle of England," Aidan settled on the island of Lindisfarne in 634, established a monastery there, and initiated his conversion efforts in earnest. A school was developed and missionary efforts continued; many Anglo-Saxons in the north were converted as a result of Aidan's work. His brand of asceticism was considered mild by Irish standards, although it may have seemed harsh when compared to the laxness of continental monasticism. Committed to providing all with an equal opportunity to serve God, Aidan encouraged English women to become nuns if they desired, although the Lindisfarne facility admitted only men. As Christianity became more firmly established in England, double monasteries (those admitting both men and women) became common, and were, as far as can be determined, all headed by women.<sup>64</sup> The period from the seventh through the ninth centuries was

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<sup>64</sup> Doris Mary Stenton, *The English Woman in History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977; originally published 1957), 13. Stenton writes, "The one principle observed everywhere in the government of these double monasteries was the subjection of both communities to the rule of an abbess."

the age of the great Anglo-Saxon abbesses, including St. Leoba, well known for her missionary work, and Aidan is credited with 'discovering' the famous abbess Hild, who eventually became the head of the abbey at Whitby.

Meanwhile, the paganism of the Anglo-Saxons was not particularly troublesome for Rome until the pontificate of Gregory the Great. Gregory's concern for the lost souls of England grew until finally in 597, coincidentally the year of the death of Columba, he dispatched Augustine and a party of missionaries to England to convert the Anglo-Saxons. With some trepidation Augustine made his way to Kent with his party of missionaries, where they were well received by King Ethelbert, whose wife was the Frankish princess Bertha, herself a Christian.<sup>65</sup> Augustine became the first archbishop of Canterbury in 601, and Gregory

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<sup>65</sup> Bede, 75. Bertha was betrothed to Ethelbert on the condition that her bishop would accompany her to England, and that she would be allowed to practice her religion without interference. Several other Christian women sought by Anglo-Saxon men either claimed the same prerogative or insisted that their suitors convert before the marriage. See Janemarie Luecke, "The Unique Experience of Anglo-Saxon Nuns," in *Medieval Religious Women, vol. 2: Peaceweavers*, Lillian Thomas Shank and John A Nichols, ed. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 55-65; Brown, *Western Christendom*, 344-345.

authorized him to create twelve bishoprics, although he actually established only two, at Rochester and London.

Augustine's contributions to the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons have perhaps been overrated. Gregory was almost wholly ignorant of the condition of the Celtic church, both when he dispatched Augustine to England, and in their later correspondence, and Augustine's attempts to establish authority over the Celtic bishops of Wales and Ireland were rebuffed. Bede reports that when Augustine inquired of Gregory what his relations with them should be, Gregory responded, "All the bishops of Britain . . . we commit to your charge. Use your authority to instruct the unlearned, to strengthen the weak, and correct the misguided."<sup>66</sup> As Peter Blair notes, such an approach was probably not conducive to securing their cooperation, and Augustine made little effort to obtain their support.<sup>67</sup>

Aside from his friendly relationship with Ethelbert, Augustine was not popular in England; Ethelbert's subjects were largely indifferent to religion and converted as a matter of civic responsibility and political expediency. When Augustine died in 605, he had succeeded in

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<sup>66</sup> Bede, 76.

<sup>67</sup> Blair, 126.

introducing Christianity into the areas of Kent, Essex, and East Anglia, although in Kent, as noted, it was merely a temporary victory.<sup>68</sup> After Ethelbert's death in 616, paganism reasserted itself among the Anglo-Saxons of Kent.

Christianity established a toehold in Northumbria during the reign of Edwin, who also married a Christian woman - a daughter of Ethelbert - but lost ground after Edwin was slain in 632. That ground would be regained under the rule of two Northumbrian kings, the brothers Oswald and Oswy, who had spent time in exile among the monks of Iona. Once Oswald had secured his throne in 633, he extended an invitation to the monks of Iona to send missionaries to Northumbria. The leader of the group that came in 634 was none other than St. Aidan, whose missionary efforts were far more successful than those of Augustine had been. The church in Northumbria was revitalized as a result of Aidan's efforts, and there also occurred a revival of Roman Christianity in the south of England.<sup>69</sup>

It is difficult to determine whether the Irish or Roman missions had the greater role in the conversion of

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.; Brown, 347.

<sup>69</sup> Bede, 166-171; Blair, 126.

the Anglo-Saxons. Most of our information about the conversion of England comes from Bede's history, and Bede was hardly an unbiased reporter; he was, as Blair notes, a "hostile witness" regarding the conversion efforts of the Irish church as well as those of the Britons.<sup>70</sup> Bede maintained that the Britons never made any attempt to convert the Anglo-Saxons, a failure he refers to as one of their many "unspeakable crimes."<sup>71</sup> This assertion has been challenged by later historians, however, and it seems likely that Celtic Christians (both Briton and Irish) had some impact on the Anglo-Saxons even before the arrival of Augustine and Aidan.

The fusion of Celtic and Roman Catholicisms produced a distinctively English variety of Christianity that blended the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Rome with the monastic asceticism of Ireland. The influence of Rome gradually increased in England until (and after) the time of the Norman Conquest, but the Battle of Hastings did not immediately usher in a new era of continental-style monasticism. Norman spirituality, thoroughly continental in form and structure, was resisted by the Anglo-Saxons

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<sup>70</sup> Blair, 125.

<sup>71</sup> Bede, 66.

for as long as possible, and other changes that occurred in the wake of the Conquest, legal and political as well as religious, further strengthened English enthusiasm for Celtic asceticism. We will now turn to some of these post-Conquest changes.

## II. WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

O excellent grace of  
virginity, which like a rose  
grown from thorny shoots  
blushes with a crimson flower  
and never withers with the  
defect of dread mortality, and  
although the tired fragility  
of the moribund flesh droops  
and ages with stooping and  
bent senility as the terminus  
of death approaches, virginity  
alone in the manner of happy  
youth continually flourishes  
and is constantly growing!

Aldhelm, *De Virginitate*

It is tempting, and for the most part accurate, to argue that English women fared reasonably well under the Anglo-Saxons and suffered major setbacks under the Normans. However, such an argument is an oversimplification, and fails to take into account the changes in late Anglo-Saxon culture that impacted the lives of women. There is evidence that the status of Anglo-Saxon women, especially professed religious women, had already deteriorated sharply by 1066, due at least partly to the misogynist influence of the Roman church. As Stephanie Hollis observes, "the ecclesiastical bases

for eventually undermining the position of women were already being laid in the conversion period."<sup>72</sup>

### 1. Anglo-Saxon Women and Christianity

In the early seventh century, Anglo-Saxon women enjoyed a number of social and legal privileges that carried over into their religious lives. The Germanic cultures of their ancestors had held women in high regard, and Anglo-Saxon women could own land in their own right, and inherit property, both as daughters and as widows.<sup>73</sup> During the conversion period in the seventh century, Anglo-Saxon women, influenced by Irish monasticism, began to become nuns, and quickly assumed leadership roles within their monasteries, which housed both men and women. According to Henry Mayr-Harting:

The founding of double monasteries . . . represented the female response to the inspiration of St. Columbanus in the early seventh century. Highborn women founded nunneries on their own estates and communities of men became associated with them in order to offer mass, give the sacraments, and to assist in the administrative and manual tasks which it

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<sup>72</sup> Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 1992), 35.

<sup>73</sup> Hollis, 58.



was difficult for women to perform alone. . . .  
 In England the superior was—where the fact is  
 ascertainable—without exception an abbess.<sup>74</sup>

These Anglo-Saxon abbesses were wealthy, well-educated women, and they exercised considerable authority over monastic life in the early Anglo-Saxon church. The late seventh and early eighth centuries constituted a 'golden age' of female monasticism in England, and as Talbot states, "Never, perhaps, has there been such an age in which religious women exercised such great power."<sup>75</sup>

The great abbesses Hild and Leoba, for example, were renowned throughout Europe for their wisdom and learning. Leoba, the kinswoman of Boniface, joined Boniface at the continental missions, and the two of them maintained a lively correspondence and a long and intimate friendship; Boniface requested that the two of them be buried in the same grave, despite a church law prohibiting the burial of a male corpse next to a female corpse.<sup>76</sup> Hild was the

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<sup>74</sup> Bede, 155-157; Mayr-Harting, 151. Mayr-Harting notes that "double monasteries originated among the Eastern monks." Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> C.H.Talbot, *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954), Introduction, xii-xiii.

<sup>76</sup> "The Life of Saint Leoba," in Talbot, 205-227; see also Sheila C. Dietrich, "An Introduction to Women in Anglo-Saxon Society (c. 600-1066)" in Barbara Kanner, ed., *The*

abbess of Whitby during the Synod in 664, and hosted and attended the council as a representative of the Celtic church.<sup>77</sup> Another abbess, less well-known but no less influential, was the princess Frideswide (c. 680-727) who was responsible for the founding of Oxford; her cult flourished in England until the reign of Henry VIII.<sup>78</sup> The double monastery at Barking was first headed by the abbess Ethelburga, who was succeeded by Hildeleth; it was for this learned community that Aldhelm wrote *De Virginitate*. These women had no continental counterparts during this period; the only woman who comes close in stature and reputation, the famed German abbess and visionary Hildegard von Bingen, would not appear until the twelfth century, some five hundred years later.

The increasing influence of the Roman church and its attitudes toward women, rooted in patristic doctrines that

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*Women of England: From Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present*, 32-56 (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979), 37.

<sup>77</sup>For Bede's account of the Synod of Whitby, including a mention of Hild's attendance, see *The Ecclesiastical History*, 187. See also Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984), 117; Blair, 131.

<sup>78</sup>Rosemary Rader, "St. Frideswide: Monastic Founder of Oxford," in *Medieval Women Monastics: Wisdom's Wellsprings*, ed. Miriam Schmidt and Linda Kulzer (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 33-47.

saw women as threats to male salvation, caused a gradual erosion of the high esteem enjoyed by Anglo-Saxon religious women, although the official stance of Rome was not always reflected in the relationships between Anglo-Saxon monks and nuns.<sup>79</sup> Hollis maintains that later accounts written by Bede and other historians intentionally fail to accurately describe the full extent of the power and authority wielded by the early Anglo-Saxon abbesses, and they also imply that monasteries were more strictly segregated than would have been realistic or practical:

. . . the hagiographical records appear to have significantly underrepresented the contribution made by women to the growth of the church because their authors are . . . concerned to bring their accounts into line with orthodox conceptions of the role of women . . . Given the actual power and influentiaity of royal abbesses and queens, Bede's near silence on the activities of reigning queens and his scanty, unforthcoming coverage of the double monasteries assumes a meaningful aspect . . . his underrepresentation of women's social participation reflects an aspiration towards their marginalization. . . Rudolph's eulogy of Leoba's learning, like Aldhelm's praise of the Barking nuns' scholarship in *De Virginitate*, also throws into high relief Bede's unforthcomingness concerning monastic women's pursuit of knowledge. No less than Bede, however, Rudolph is at pains to give the impression that monastic

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<sup>79</sup> Dietrich, 37; Mayr-Harting, 240.

women, even in double monasteries, had no form of contact with monastic men - if this is true, it is difficult to understand why abbesses should have been placed in charge of mixed communities, much less how they contrived to govern them.<sup>80</sup>

There are other indications that Bede and his contemporaries imposed a patristic bias on their interpretations of English church history. Antonia Gransden mentions a twelfth-century history of the church in Durham, the author of which maintains that Cuthbert, the seventh-century bishop of Lindisfarne, "excluded all women from his church, his shrine, and the cemetery of his church." There is, however, no evidence of such misogyny in sources from Cuthbert's own time (although there is considerable evidence to the contrary), and Gransden contends that "the author was trying to provide historical precedents for contemporary attitudes."<sup>81</sup> Hollis compares the Anonymous Life of Cuthbert with Bede's version, noting that Æffled is described in the former as the close friend

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<sup>80</sup> Hollis, 12-13.

<sup>81</sup> Bertram Colgrave, ed. and trans., *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England* (London: Routledge, 1982), 119-20. Henry Mayr-Harting refers more than once to the close friendship between Cuthbert and Æffled, noting that the two of them "met frequently to talk about spiritual matters." 150-151, 167.

and confidant of Cuthbert, while in Bede's Life she is presented less positively; it appears that "Bede rewrote the Anonymous Life of Cuthbert . . . in accordance with his own pedagogic and hagiographical tastes . . . The intimate friendship of Æffled and Cuthbert gives way under the combined pressure of Bede's antifeminist bias and his elitist alterization of episcopal saints."<sup>82</sup>

There were other aspects of patristic theology that impacted the lives of Anglo-Saxon religious women. The twin themes of the privileging of virginity and the necessity of strict enclosure would become more and more apparent in English monasticism, as they had long been on the continent. The enclosure of women religious was an old theme in patristic sources; Jerome's *Letter to Eustochium* in the fourth century included this admonition: "*Cave ne domum exeas, ne velis videre filias regionis alienae . . . Dina egressa corrumpitur.*" ("Go not from home nor visit the daughters of a strange land. . . Dinah went out and was seduced.")<sup>83</sup> Jerome and his contemporaries were equally committed to the idea of

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<sup>82</sup> Colgrave; Hollis, 188-189.

<sup>83</sup> "Letter XXII: *Ad Eustochium*," in *Select Letters of Jerome*, E. A. Wright, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 52-159.

virginity for both men and women, although the discourse of female virginity tended to have a more strident quality. Referencing John Chrysostom, another fourth-century theologian, Eileen Power comments on the gender-inflected ideology of enclosure and its relationship to virginity:

Strictly speaking this system of enclosure applied equally to monks and nuns; but from the earliest times it was considered to be a more vital necessity for the well being of the latter; and the history of the enclosure movement is in effect the history of an effort to add a fourth vow of claustration to the three cardinal vows of the nun. On the one hand, the immense importance attached by the medieval church to the state of virginity, exemplified in St. John Chrysostom's remarks that Christian virgins are as far above the rest of mankind as are the angels, made it all important that this priceless jewel should not be exposed to danger in a wicked world. On the other hand the medieval contempt for the fragility of women led to a cynical conviction that only when they were shut up behind the high walls of the cloister was it possible to guarantee their virtue.<sup>84</sup>

Despite the inexorable advances of patristic theology, which included a relentless push for the

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<sup>84</sup> Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries, c. 1275 to 1535* (London: Biblo and Tannen, 1988), 342. It is interesting that Power chose Chrysostom, as his treatise on virginity is one of the very few that seems to argue in favor of virginity for both men and women. See John Chrysostom, *On Virginity: Against Remarriage*, translated by Sally Rieger Shore (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1983).

complete enclosure of religious women throughout Europe, abbesses continued to head double monasteries in Anglo-Saxon England for another century. Pressure mounted to segregate men and women in monastic communities as the eighth century drew to a close, however, and when the Viking invasions resulted in the destruction of many double monasteries, those that were rebuilt were rebuilt as segregated communities, according to the dictates of the Second Nicean Council in 787.<sup>85</sup>

Peter Blair notes that the Vikings had no particular hostility toward Christianity as a belief system, and thus the church was not completely destroyed in England by the arrival of the Danes.<sup>86</sup> But the material losses to the English church were enormous. The Danes wreaked incredible havoc on the monasteries, and the invasions took an especially high toll on women's houses; the community at Barking, for instance, was completely destroyed in 870, burned to the ground with the nuns alive

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<sup>85</sup> "The Second Council of Nice: 787," *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, trans. H.R. Percival, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, XIV, 2nd Series. ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955), 523-587; see Canon XVIII, which specifically prohibits men and women living in the same monastic community, 567.

<sup>86</sup> Blair, 166.

inside. The women at Coldingham suffered the same terrible fate, despite their valiant attempts to safeguard their virginity by cutting off their noses to disfigure themselves.<sup>87</sup> Schulenberg states that "at least forty-one houses for women (including double monasteries) were destroyed by the Danes. Very few of the English women's communities survived these repeated onslaughts by the Vikings"<sup>88</sup> The double monasteries were not refounded after the Danelaw period, and the 'golden age' of women's monasticism in England ended with their destruction. It was not until after the Norman Conquest, however, that women's flight to the anchorhold began in earnest.

## 2. Women Solitaries

As we have seen, English spirituality was heavily influenced by the Irish, before and during the Anglo-Saxon conversion period. One of the Irish customs that found a

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<sup>87</sup> Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg, "Women's Monastic Communities, 500-1100: Patterns of Expansion and Decline," in *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages*, ed. Judith M. Bennett, Elizabeth A. Clark, Jean F. O'Barr, B. Anne Vilen, and Sarah Westphal-Wihl, 208-239 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 222-223. After the invasions, the Barking monastery was rebuilt as a women's house.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 223.



ready home among the English was their enthusiasm for the solitary life. Rotha Mary Clay noted that Celtic eremitism had a history in England that dated back to the Diocletian persecutions in the early fourth century.<sup>89</sup> Hermits and recluses, both male and female, were fairly common on the English landscape from the Anglo-Saxon era until well after the Conquest.

During the conversion period, it was possible for women to choose from a variety of eremitic lifestyles as alternatives to the convent. A devout woman might remain in her home, living in chaste seclusion. She might choose to be a hermitess, eschewing enclosure in favor of a more varied and unfettered religious life. She might live in a small community of reclusive women. Or she might choose the more restrictive life of the anchorite. Ann Warren discusses these terms and the evolution of their distinctive meanings, drawing mainly from twelfth century documents, since, as she mentions, it is from these documents that "the earliest clear picture of anchoritism in England emerges":

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<sup>89</sup> Rotha Mary Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (Methuen & Co., 1968), xviii.

The words 'anchorite' and 'hermit' were synonymous in primitive usage. To be an anchorite or a hermit was to be a solitary, to withdraw (*anachōrein*) to the desert (*eremus*). Such a life could imply total seclusion and stability or allow considerable freedom of movement and social intercourse. One could live quite alone or with a group of like-minded solitaries. One was *anachoreta* or *eremita* interchangeably; the Greek roots turned into first declension Latin nouns which, moreover, included both genders.

During the Middle Ages, the word 'hermit' continued to express the general meaning initially sustained by both words, while the word 'anchorite' became more restricted in use. To be a hermit was still to be able to encompass a wide variety of behavioral patterns, while to be an anchorite meant to take on a narrowly defined vocation: the anchorite was *inclusus* or *reclusus*, enclosed and stable, with limited access to the outside world. Thus, to be an anchorite meant to limit oneself to only one of the possibilities available to hermits; to be a hermit meant to exclude a rigid anchoritism in favor of more varied, if still ascetic, lifestyles.<sup>90</sup>

Although a few women lived as hermitesses even after the Conquest, they seem to have disappeared after the twelfth century; no records of female hermits exist after that time.<sup>91</sup> Male hermits still lived and roamed in England, but by the twelfth century, women's lives were more tightly circumscribed, partly due to the ever-present possibility of male violence, and it was no longer safe

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<sup>90</sup> Warren, "The Nun as anchoress," 198.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

(if it had ever been so) for a lone woman to wander about begging alms, or to live in the forest, as her male counterpart might do.<sup>92</sup> Increased ecclesiastical pressures for the enclosure of women also contributed to the disappearance of the English hermitess, and thus the anchoritic life gradually became the only available alternative for religious English women who wished to pursue solitary asceticism. Despite its restrictions, in the period of sharply diminished opportunities for women that succeeded the arrival of the Normans, the anchorhold may have had a particular appeal.

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<sup>92</sup> Feminist theorists and historians have written at length on the male use of violence or the threat of violence as a method of controlling women. While life in the twelfth century posed dangers for men as well as women, the fear of rape served to sharply curtail women's freedom, much as it does today, and probably presented an especially horrible possibility for women vowed to chastity. It would be difficult (although not impossible) to argue that there was some sinister male intent behind that circumstance, but the net effect was the same: control of women's movement. See Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), 11-112. For a thought-provoking and more recent discussion of male control of women through sexual violence or the threat of it, see Robin Morgan, *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989).

### 3. English Women and the Norman Conquest

In the century after the Norman Conquest, England experienced major social and cultural shifts. The imposition of Norman rule on the Anglo-Saxons resulted in dramatic changes in language, domestic life, law, and religion. In general, these changes did little to enhance the status of women, and in many areas, women lost considerable power and privilege under the Normans. As Doris Stenton notes, "The evidence which has survived from Anglo-Saxon England indicates that women were then more nearly the equal companions of their husbands and brothers than at any other period before the modern age . . . this rough and ready partnership was ended by the Norman Conquest."<sup>93</sup>

Many of the legal rights that had protected women under Anglo-Saxon law were summarily eliminated by the Normans, making marriage far less attractive.<sup>94</sup> The legal

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<sup>93</sup> Doris Mary Stenton, *The English Woman in History* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1957), 348.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 23, 26, 29-30; Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984), 57-58, 61, 66, 149-151, 154, 163-164. See also Marc A. Meyer, "Land Charters and the Legal Position of Anglo-Saxon Women," in Barbara Kanner, ed., *The Women of England* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979), 63-64; Kathleen

and social status of an unmarried woman, especially a woman from a landed family, was uncomfortably precarious unless she entered a convent.<sup>95</sup> However, according to the Domesday survey, only eight Anglo-Saxon nunneries remained in England after the Conquest, and these were crowded with noblewomen who had fled the violence of war. New orders that were established in England during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries included the Cistercian order, which saw itself as exclusively male and was notoriously hostile to women.<sup>96</sup> Although several new convents were founded under the Normans, mostly under the auspices of the Benedictines, this monastic expansion was short-lived, and the imposition of Norman monasticism was very likely met with Anglo-Saxon resistance in the early post-Conquest period.<sup>97</sup> English convents had long been centers of

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Casey, "Women in Norman and Plantagenet England," in Kanner, 83, 98-99; Ruth Kittel, "Women and the Law in Medieval England, 1066-1485," in Kanner, 129-131; Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 13-30.

<sup>95</sup> Casey, 102-104.

<sup>96</sup> Daniell, 46-47.

<sup>97</sup> Casey, 86; Elkins, 1. Elkins explains that the Normans founded a number of monastic communities after their arrival, and by the mid-twelfth century, women had many more options. She states, "By 1200, the religious houses of England could accommodate more than three thousand

learning for women; with fewer convents, intellectual opportunities for women, already diminished after the Viking invasions, declined sharply after the Conquest.<sup>98</sup> For lower-class women, the nunnery had never been an option. Convents welcomed only noblewomen whose families could make substantial contributions to the support of the community.<sup>99</sup>

The Normans imported the custom of male primogeniture, which made it difficult for women to inherit and retain control of land and property. A

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women . . . After 1200, the expansion ended as abruptly as it had begun." Intro., xiv. Elkins does not comment on the chronological juxtaposition of the end of female monastic expansion with the Fourth Lateran Council's ban on new orders (1215), nor with the signing of Magna Carta, also in 1215, which significantly improved the legal rights of married women and widows, but it seems likely that these events were at least indirectly related.

<sup>98</sup> Robertson, 15.

<sup>99</sup> P. H. Sawyer, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1968); see in particular 310, 860, 1380, 1198. Both before and after the Conquest, the endowment of a nunnery was a popular way for a landed family to provide security for an unmarried daughter. Marc A. Meyers analyzes the transfer of land to women via royal charter (the forerunner of the present-day deed), and the subsequent assignment of that land to monastic communities, and he traces changes in this process from Anglo-Saxon times through the early Anglo-Norman period. See Meyers, "Land Charters and the Legal Position of Anglo-Saxon Women," in Kanner, 57-82; also Sally Thompson, *Women Religious: The Founding of English Nunneries After the Norman Conquest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 177-181.

daughter's inheritance, in the absence of sons, was hers only until she married. During the course of the marriage, she had no rights over her property; her husband might dispose of it as he saw fit. A married woman might achieve some autonomy after the death of her husband, but with widowhood came increased responsibility, squabbles with children over property, and the possibility of another marriage arranged by her late husband's lord, in which case the control of and profit from her property would be transferred to her new husband.<sup>100</sup> Christine Fell explains: "When an heiress married . . . her husband acquired for as long as the marriage lasted full control of all her properties and, if he fathered a live child, retained it all his life. A widow's remarriage likewise conveyed all her holdings, including the 'dower' due from her late husband's estate, to her new one."<sup>101</sup> To make

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<sup>100</sup> See Richard of Hexham, *The Acts of King Stephen and the Battle of the Standard, 1135 to 1139*, in *Contemporary Chronicles of the Middle Ages*, trans. Joseph Stephenson (Felinfach, Dyfed, 1988), 55-56.

<sup>101</sup> J.H. Round, ed., *Rotuli de dominabus et pueris et puellis de xii comitatibus [1185]*, Series 1:35, (London: Pipe Roll Society, 1913.) This interesting twelfth-century document specifically mentions widows "in the king's gift" and stipulates that the king is responsible for arranging the marriages of widows and minor children; see Fell, 149. See also Frederick Pollock and Frederick

matters worse, a widow with property was not usually at liberty to choose her next husband; failure to secure royal approval of the proposed marriage subjected the widow to a substantial fine.<sup>102</sup>

Choosing not to remarry was not always an option. In the years before Magna Carta, it was a fairly common practice for the king to extort substantial sums of money from widows for the right to live unmarried. It was equally common for the king to reward his friends and servants with marriages to wealthy widows.<sup>103</sup> These abuses occurred fairly regularly under Richard, but they become rampant under John Lackland; Article 6 of the Magna Carta specifically protects widows and heirs from "disparagement," a forced marriage to a person of lesser rank, while Articles 7 and 8 provide additional protection for widows, including those choosing to remain single; Article 8 states clearly that "No widow shall be compelled to marry, so long as she prefers to live without a

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W. Maitland, *The History of English Law*, vol. 2 (London: Cambridge UP, 1911), 363-64.

<sup>102</sup> Fell, 149.

<sup>103</sup> Stenton, 35.



husband.”<sup>104</sup> Magna Carta curtailed but did not eliminate the selling or ‘gifting’ of landed widows by the king.

It can thus be seen that the lives of twelfth-century English women were often shaped by and subject to forces almost entirely beyond their control. The anchorhold may have provided a welcome haven for women who wished to avoid the responsibilities of lifelong domesticity or the possible unpleasant consequences of a forced marriage or remarriage, and who lacked the means, the inclination, or the opportunity to enter a convent. While the anchoress, enclosed in her cell, sacrificed a great deal to pursue such a life, at the same time she gained a large measure of privacy and personal autonomy (what Bella Millett refers to as “the peace and privacy of a room of her own”<sup>105</sup>), two things that were unavailable to her within the constraints of the larger culture. The anchoress chose her own Bridegroom, and she need not cook or clean for him, submit to his temper, or bear him children; all

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<sup>104</sup> *Magna Carta*, online

<<http://www.cs.indiana.edu/statecraft/magna-carta.html>> [10-02-05]; Christopher Daniell, *From Norman Conquest to Magna Carta, 1066-1215* (London: Routledge, 2003), 99.

<sup>105</sup> Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, ed., *Medieval English Prose for Women* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), xxi.

he required was that she commit herself, body and soul, to him. In exchange for her fidelity, she became the recipient, not only of his tender love and care, but also of his impressive estate: the entire world.

### III. MATERIAL ASPECTS OF THE ANCHORITIC LIFE

Christine, daughter, of  
 William called the carpenter  
 . . . has besought us by her  
     humble petition, that  
 whereas, desiring . . . to  
     remove herself to the  
     fulfillment of a better  
     life, she wishes to vow  
     herself solemnly to  
     continence and perpetual  
     chastity and to let herself  
 be shut up in a narrow place  
     in the parish church of  
 Schire, that therein she may  
     be able to serve Almighty  
     God the more worthily, we  
     should consider her worthy  
     to be granted our favorable  
     assent and consent.  
 -- Letter to officials of the  
 Archdeacon of Surrey on behalf  
 of Christine Carpenter, 1329

Just what was an anchoress?<sup>106</sup> Lina Eckenstein  
 provides the following explanation in her discussion of  
*Ancrene Wisse*: "The 'āncer,' or recluse, called in Latin  
*inclusa*, is the nun who . . . lives a holy life away from  
 the nunnery."<sup>107</sup> The word 'anchorite' comes from the Greek

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<sup>106</sup> The terms 'anchoress' and 'anchorite' are often used interchangeably, although only 'anchoress' is marked as female.

<sup>107</sup> Lina Eckenstein, *Women Under Monasticism* (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1963), 68. Eckenstein

*anachoretēs*, "one who has withdrawn." In an interesting bit of word play, the author of *Ancrene Wisse* used *āncer*, or recluse, and *ancer*, the O.E. word for 'anchor,' interchangeably, suggesting that the anchoress was herself an anchor, attached to the church both literally and metaphorically to keep it from sinking:

þe nihtfuhel i þe euesunges bitacneð recluses.  
 þe wunieð for þi under chirche euesunges. ð ha  
 understonden ð ha ahen to beon of se hali lif ð  
 al hali chirche. þ is al christene fole leonie  
 wreoðie up on ham. ant heo halden hire up. wið  
 hare lif halinesse hare eadie bonen. for þi is  
 ancre ancre icleopet. under chirche iancret as  
 ancre under schipes bord. forte halden þ schip.  
 þ uðen ne stormes hit ne ouerwarpen. alswa al  
 holi chirche þ te is schip i cleoped. schal  
 ancren oðer ancre. ðet heo hit so holde deofles  
 puffes. þ beoð temptations. ne hit ouerwarpe.

[The bird of night under the eaves symbolizes recluses, who dwell under the eaves of the church because they understand that they should be of so holy a life that the whole of Holy Church, that is, Christian people, can lean upon them and trust them, while they hold her up with their holiness of life and their blessed prayers. This is why an anchoress is called an anchoress, and is anchored under a church like an anchor under the side of a ship, to hold that ship so that waves and storms do overturn it. In the same way all Holy Church, which is called

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mistakenly identified recluses as 'nuns'; not all were. Anchoresses came from all walks of life, and many were laywomen. See Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 25.

a ship, must anchor on the anchoress, in order that she may so hold it that the devil's blasts, which are temptations, do not overturn it.]<sup>108</sup>

The anchoress, then, was a devout woman who chose to live a secluded life, enclosed in a cell and 'anchored' to the church. The definitive feature of the anchoritic lifestyle was lifelong enclosure.

The women entombed within the cells left no first-hand accounts of the conditions of their lives. However, there are other documents - the rituals of enclosure that were in use, for example, and the anchoritic devotional texts - that offer a tantalizing glimpse of life within the anchorhold. From them it is possible to develop a fairly detailed picture of female anchoritic life.

### 1. Formal Enclosure: The Process

The decision to live as an enclosed recluse in medieval England was not one that could be made lightly, or even alone. It was a rather complicated process to become an anchoress. A nun or pious lay woman first had

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<sup>108</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, ed., *Ancrene Wisse; The English Text of the Ancrene Riwle*, MS Corpus Christi 402, EETS (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 75; translation from Savage and Watson, 101.

to obtain permission and approval from the bishop, and from the nobleman who was responsible for the church or monastic house to which she wanted to become 'anchored,' in some cases the king. She had to then be examined as to her faith and beliefs, to ensure that she was not harboring any heretical notions, and her reasons for wanting to become an anchoress were questioned at length. She had to have members of her religious community, or in the case of a lay woman, her family and neighbors, as well as anyone else who knew her and was willing to vouch for her character, testify to her purity and fitness for solitary religious life. Clay includes two enclosure rites in her appendices, one from the fifteenth century and the other from the sixteenth century; both confirm these guidelines.<sup>109</sup> No earlier rituals have survived, but Clay believes there were probably several in use in the preceding centuries, and that these later versions were based on earlier rites.<sup>110</sup> The letters exchanged on behalf

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<sup>109</sup> "Servitium Includendorum," (The Office for the Enclosing of Anchorites) from the *York Manual* [*Manuale ad Usus Sarum*], Surtees Society, 63)]; "The Office for the Benediction of Hermits (According to the Rule of St. Paul the First Hermit)", Folio 68," cited in Clay, Appendix A, 193-198 and 199-202, respectively.

<sup>110</sup> Clay, 90-94.

of the anchoress Christine Carpenter, which mention an investigation of the applicant's faith and moral character as well as her appeal to the bishop for permission to be enclosed, are dated 1329.<sup>111</sup>

Perhaps the most important characteristic of the aspiring anchoress was humility. The anchoritic cell was not described by ecclesiastical authorities as a private space reserved exclusively for the especially devout, but rather a place of self-imposed isolation in which the penitent sinner might profitably contemplate her own sinfulness and repent. The penitential aspect of the anchorite's chosen path is made clear in the instructions provided for enclosure:

But let the one who is enclosed learn not to think highly of himself, as though he deserved to be set apart from the mass of mankind; but rather let him believe that it is provided and appointed for his own weakness that he should be set far from the companionship of his neighbors, lest by more frequent sin he should both himself

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<sup>111</sup> The exquisitely crafted but wildly inaccurate film *Anchoress* and the recent novel by Paul Moorcraft, *Anchoress of Shere*, have brought Christine Carpenter and the anchoritic lifestyle into public awareness. Both are works of semi-historical fiction, loosely based on actual letters exchanged in reference to Christine's application to become an anchoress. See "Letters from the Church at Shere," online <<http://people.bu.edu/dklepper/RN212/anchoreess.html>> [10-02-05].

perish and do harm to those who dwell with him, and should thus fall into greater damnation. Let him therefore think that he is convicted of his sins and committed to solitary confinement as to a prison, and that on account of his own weakness he is unworthy of the fellowship of mankind. This rule must be observed with both sexes.<sup>112</sup>

The actual enclosure was an elaborate religious ceremony, which included a Requiem Mass and a procession which escorted the postulant to the anchorhold. The cell was blessed and censed by the celebrant, and since the anchoress would henceforth be 'dead' to the world, she was given the Last Rites. Finally, after she had affirmed one last time her desire for enclosure, she was enclosed within her cell, ostensibly to live in solitude for the rest of her life. As noted, Clay states that several enclosure ceremonies were in use, and although the prayers and minor details differed slightly, the ritual form was essentially the same in all of them, a peculiar combination of initiation and entombment.<sup>113</sup> The

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<sup>112</sup> "Servitium Includendorum," Clay, 193.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 94, 96. See also Francis D. S. Darwin, *The English Mediaeval Recluse* (Folcroft, PA: Folcroft Library Editions, 1974), 71-78. The giving of Extreme Unction to the anchoress upon her enclosure probably had a practical purpose as well as a symbolic one. If the isolated recluse, alone in her cell, were to sicken and die, it was



ceremonies often referred to the anchoress being admitted to "the order of ancress."<sup>114</sup> The reference must have been to the consecrated lifestyle, rather than to a specific order, as no formal order for anchoresses ever existed, nor did anchoresses take vows (other than chastity and stability of abode); women entered the *reclusoria* from several religious orders, and occasionally from no order at all.<sup>115</sup>

## 2. Support and Patronage

Once the fitness of her character had been ascertained, the aspiring anchoress had to prove that she had some way to support herself, so as not to be a burden on the church or the community. She might accomplish this by placing money or future income from land holdings in trust with the lord, and arranging for those monies to be paid to her as a pension for the rest of her life.<sup>116</sup> Less

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possible that no one would be available to give her the Last Rites on her deathbed.

<sup>114</sup> See "Servitium Includendorum," Clay, 193.

<sup>115</sup> Clay, 96. The author of *Ancrene Wisse* specifically addresses the women's concerns about not being members of any established religious order; see Savage and Watson, 49-50.

<sup>116</sup> Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patron*, 42.

commonly, a woman might persuade a wealthy relative or friend to act as her patron, and guarantee her a small income, sufficient to feed and clothe her.<sup>117</sup> If a woman became ill or impoverished after enclosure, the bishop or lord would usually see to it that she was cared for. The anchorhold sometimes attracted widows who had found communal life in a convent less than satisfying; these women usually had at least some control over their husbands' estates, and could arrange an income for themselves. It was not uncommon for women to have royal patronage, as such benevolence provided kings with a way to demonstrate their own virtue, and it might also serve as a kind of penance for royal behaviors of questionable ethics and morality. The anchoress earned heavenly grace for both herself and her patron.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 25-26.

<sup>118</sup> Warren, 73-74, 127-128. Warren cites the Pipe Rolls of Henry II, John, and Richard I, among numerous others, noting that the support of anchorites via royal alms was extremely common under these and subsequent monarchs. See *The Pipe-Rolls, or, Sheriff's Annual Accounts of the Revenues of the Crown [During the Reigns of Henry II, Richard I., and John]* (Newcastle: T.J. Hodgson, 1847). Warren's bibliography includes a very thorough list of primary source documents, including cartularies, municipal records, royal records of the exchequer, and wills; see 313-326.

Once sealed inside her cell, the anchoress was largely dependent upon the good will of her patron for the necessities of life. Unlike nuns, who were mostly from aristocratic families, anchoresses came from every social group. It was not unusual for the servant of an anchoress to succeed her mistress in the anchorhold.<sup>119</sup> If the recluse was without funds or property of her own, patronage became her primary means of support. Patronage assumed many forms, from bequests and one-time gifts to cells endowed in perpetuity. An endowed cell was greatly to be preferred, since the patron and his heirs were under a contractual obligation to provide alms to the cell inhabitant.<sup>120</sup> An under-endowed anchoress could usually count on at least minimal support from the surrounding community after her enclosure. She might also work at embroidery or other hand work in her cell and sell her products if need demanded. The *Ancrene Wisse* makes

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<sup>119</sup> Clay, 124, 132. Clay mentions Matilda, a twelfth-century anchoress who willed her cell to her handmaid, Gertrude (British Museum, Cotton Faust B IV, *Vita S. Wulfrici*, II, n. 97), and Agnes Vertesance, a maid-companion to anchoress Katherine Dytton and her successor into the cell (British Museum Cotton Nero D vii, f. 137). See also Warren, 26. Both Clay and Warren maintain that this was a fairly common occurrence.

<sup>120</sup> Warren, 46-47.

provision for such a circumstance, while cautioning the anchoress against trading for profit:

Na chaffere ne driue 3e. Ancre þ is chelpit. þ is buð forte sullen efter biðete ha chepeð hire sawle þe chapmon of helle. þing þah þ ha wurcheð ha mei þurh hire meistres read for hire neode sullen. Hali men sumwile liueden bi hare hon.

[Do not conduct business. An anchoress fond of bargaining, that is, who buys to sell for gain, sells her soul to the merchant of hell. Things that she makes, with her director's advice, she may sell for her needs. Holy men often used to live by their hands.]<sup>121</sup>

Although the anchoress took no formal vow of poverty, she lived a very frugal life. Warren noted that "the typical royal rate for an anchorite pension during the twelfth century and on into the thirteenth was one penny per day (30s. 5d. per annum) and it was adequate to sustain an anchorite household."<sup>122</sup>

### 3. "Solitary" Life

Descriptions of the enclosure rituals suggest a life of extreme asceticism and deprivation in almost total isolation, and some anchoresses actually lived solitary,

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<sup>121</sup> Tolkien, 213; Savage and Watson, 201.

<sup>122</sup> Warren, 50.

ascetic lives. For the most part, however, the reality was somewhat different than one might expect. A life of 'solitude' usually included at least two female attendants, as is clear in Aelred's *De Institutione Inclusarum*. Aelred provided detailed instructions on the duties of the anchoress's attendants and on the criteria for their selection:

Chese an honest anxient woman in lyuyng, no iangler ne royler-about, noo chider, noo tidynge-teller, but such oon that may haue witness of hir good conuersacyon, and honest. Hir charge shal be to kepe thyn houshoild and thy lyflod, to close thy doores and to resceyue that shuld be resceyued and to void that shuld be auoided. Vnder hir gouernaile shuld she haue a yonger woman of age to bere gretter charges, in fettyng of wode and water and sethyng and greithyng of mete and drynke. And that she be ouerlooked vnder gret awe, lest thurgh hir wantownes and dissolucyon thyn holy temple be defouled and sclaundred.

[Choose for yourself some elderly woman, not someone who is quarrelsome or unsettled or given to idle gossip; a woman with a well-established reputation for virtue. She is to keep the door of your cell, and as she thinks right, to admit or refuse visitors; and to receive and look after whatever provisions are needed. She should have under her a strong girl capable of heavy work, to fetch wood and water, cook vegetables, and when ill health demands it, to prepare more nourishing food. She must be kept under strict discipline, lest, by her frivolous behavior she desecrate your holy dwelling place

and so bring God's name and your own vocation  
under contempt.] <sup>123</sup>

The author of *Ancrene Wisse* provided similar guidelines for his charges: "Ancre þe naud nawt neh honed hire fode beoð bisie twa wummen. An eauer þe leaue ed hame an oþer þe wende ut." ["An anchoress who does not have food at hand must be careful to have two women, one who always stays at home and another who goes out when necessary."] <sup>124</sup>

The anchoress was responsible for teaching her attendants their prayers, reading to them, providing them with the necessities of life, and settling disputes between them. Like *De institutione inclusarum*, *Ancrene Wisse* provides lengthy instructions regarding the selection, training, and supervision of attendants, indicating that the anchoress had regular, frequent interactions with them throughout the day. <sup>125</sup>

In addition to their serving women, anchoresses had occasional visitors either at their windows or in their

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<sup>123</sup> John Ayto and Alexandra Barrett, ed., *Aelred of Rievaulx, De Institutione Inclusarum*, (London: Oxford University Press for Early English Text Society, 1984), [MS Bodley 423], 3. Translation from Aelred of Rievaulx, "A Rule of Life for a Recluse, in *The Works of Aelred of Rievaulx*, Vol. I, *Treatises: The Pastoral Prayer* (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 49

<sup>124</sup> Tolkien, 218; Savage and Watson, 204.

<sup>125</sup> Savage and Watson, 204-206.

cells. Each cell contained a window looking into the church, from which the anchoress might receive the sacraments, and another window facing the outdoors, through which she might converse with visitors. Most communication with the outside world took place from the anchoress's small outward-facing window, and this provided many opportunities for socialization with visitors and passers-by, opportunities so tempting that *Ancrene Wisse's* author cautioned the anchoress to "þe leaste þ 3e eauer mahen luuieð ower þurles" ["love your windows as little as you possibly can"] and provided detailed instructions for the draping and fastening of the window.<sup>126</sup> Although at one point the *AW* author says, "in wið ower wanes ne leote 3e namon slepen" [let no one sleep in your house"], apparently the anchoress could and did have occasional overnight company; he later stipulates the length and frequency of such visits: "Twa niht is inoh þ ei beo edhalden. ant þ beo ful seldene." [Two nights are enough for anyone to stay, and let that be very seldom.]<sup>127</sup> Family members were not to be treated any differently, since, as the *AW* notes, "tender of cun ne limpeð nawt

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<sup>126</sup> Tolkien, 30; Savage and Watson, 66.

<sup>127</sup> Tolkien, 221; Savage and Watson, 207.

ancre beonne" ["family feeling is not proper for an anchoress."]<sup>128</sup>

#### 4. A Contradiction in Terms: Communities of Solitaries

An anchoress might share her enclosure, not only with servants, but also with other like-minded women, and a number of anchorholds existed which housed more than one woman. Warren states that anchorhouses which housed two women were most common,<sup>129</sup> but three or more women sometimes shared a single house. The *Ancrene Wisse* was written for a group of three women, who shared their space with two female servants.<sup>130</sup> Usually in such an arrangement, each woman had her own cell, much as in a convent, but although the women prayed and said the Office in private, they often shared a dining area and other common living space.<sup>131</sup> They heard Mass as a group, and

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<sup>128</sup> Tolkien, 216; Savage and Watson, 203.

<sup>129</sup> Warren, 33.

<sup>130</sup> Mabel Day, ed., *The English Text of the Ancrene Riwe*, Cotton Nero A.xiv (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 85.

<sup>131</sup> Warren, 34-34. Warren mentions that anchoresses were sometimes forced to share quarters because there were not enough cells to accommodate them all. See, for example, *The Register of William, Archbishop of York, 1317-40* (York: Canterbury and York Society, 1977), vol. II, 64,



engaged in other communal activities. These women could hardly be considered "hermits," although certainly they were anchoresses -- they were 'anchored' to the church, and had vowed to remain so. But with a staff of servants, a roommate or two, and an occasional overnight guest, their lives were hardly solitary.

The multi-occupant anchorhold occasionally became the site of a larger religious community. The group of three women for whom the *Ancrene Wisse* was originally written had expanded to "twenty or more" by the time of the Corpus Christi revision, and that version acknowledges this larger community of recluses and indicates that their example has inspired the formation of other similar communities in England, all living under one "riwle" and as members of one "ordre":

3e beoð þe ancren of englond swa feole  
 togederes. twenti nuðe oðer ma. godd I god ow  
 mutli. þ meast grið is among. Meast annesse  
 anrednesse, sometreadnesse of anred lif efter a  
 riwle. Swa þ alle teoð an alle iturnt  
 anesweis. nan frommard oðer. efter word is. for  
 þi 3e gað wel forð spedeð in ow er wei for euch  
 is wiðward oþer in an manere of liflade. As þah  
 3e weren an cuent of lindene of oxnefort of

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which provides an account of an anchoress who moved in with a woman already in residence at a cell in Yorkshire in 1321. Warren notes that this happened with some frequency as the anchoritic life gained in popularity.

schreobsburi oðer of chester. þear as alle beoð  
 an wið an imeane manere. ant wið uten  
 singularite. isanful frommardschipe. lah þing i  
 religium. for hit to warpeð annesse manere  
 imeane ah to beon in ordre. þis nu þenne 3e  
 beoð allew as an cuent. is ower hehe fa me.  
 þis is godd iewemme. þis is nunan wide cuð swa  
 þet ower cuent biginneð to spreaden toward  
 englondes ende. 3e beoð as þe moderhus heo beoð  
 of istronet.

[You are, you anchoresses of England, very many  
 together - twenty now, or more. May God  
 increase you in goodness - you who live in the  
 greatest peace, the greatness oneness and  
 constancy, and in the accord of a steadfast life  
 following a single rule, so that all pull one  
 way, and all are turned in the same direction—so  
 it is said. And so you are journeying well and  
 making good speed along your way; for you are  
 all turned toward one another in a single manner  
 of living, in London, Oxford, Shrewsbury, or  
 Chester. Since all are one, with a common way  
 of life and without singularity - which is a  
 foul turning away, a low thing in religion, for  
 it breaks apart oneness and a common way of  
 life, which there ought to be in an order—the  
 fact that you are all like a single convent now  
 makes you greatly honored; it pleases God and is  
 now widely known, so that your convent is  
 beginning to spread toward the end of England.  
 You are like the mother-house from which they  
 have sprung.]<sup>132</sup>

In contrast to this image of a web of anchoresses,  
 separated geographically but connected through their  
 common lifestyles and following a common rule, communities  
 of recluses occasionally formed around a single anchoress.

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<sup>132</sup> Tolkien, 130; Savage and Watson, 141.

Because of their reputations for holiness, anchoresses often attracted disciples who sought them out for spiritual guidance, and it was not uncommon for the disciples to form their own groups, with the anchorhold and its occupant at the center of their community. Christina of Markyate, for example, began her religious life as a solitary recluse, but she eventually attracted a group of followers, and she and her group established Markyate Priory in 1145, under the sponsorship of St. Albans Abbey.<sup>133</sup> Markyate Priory was far from unique; a good number of English convents began in just this way.<sup>134</sup>

## 5. Life in the Anchorhold

Clay noted that the anchorite's cell was known by several names: "*domus anachoritae, reclusorium, inclusorium, reclusagium, and anchoragium.*"<sup>135</sup> All of these words meant the same thing: a small, enclosed dwelling. While anchoritic accommodations were not

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<sup>133</sup> C. H. Talbot, ed., *The Life of Christina of Markyate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 145. See also Elkins, 46-47.

<sup>134</sup> Thompson, 16, 161.

<sup>135</sup> Clay, 73.

gracious by any means, they often included some private outdoor space.

Grimlaic . . . directs that the dwelling be very small and surrounded, if possible, by an enclosed garden. Two anchorites might share a single chamber. If the recluse had disciples, they dwelt in a separate apartment and served [her] through the window. . . . A Bavarian rule directs that the cell be of stone, 12 feet square. Through one window, towards the choir, the recluse partook of the Blessed Sacrament; through another, on the opposite side, she received food; a third, closed with glass or horn, lighted the dwelling.<sup>136</sup>

The cell was attached to the church or cathedral wall, or less often, the wall of a monastery. Not all cells were as small as twelve feet square, but none were spacious. A few cells actually became the burial chamber of the inhabitant; most were passed on to a new occupant after the death of the anchoress.

Much of the daily routine of the anchoress was taken up with a series of prayers and devotions. Anchoresses were under exhortation to always keep busy, even if they had a secure income; the *AW* tells them, "As sein Ierome leareð ne beo 3e neauer longe ne lihtliche of sum þing al

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<sup>136</sup> Clay, 79. See also "Grimlaici presbyteri regula solitariorum," in *Patrologia Latina* vol 103, col. 0573D, electronic database <<http://gateway.proquest.com>> [04-16-05].

lunges idel" [As St. Jerome teaches, never be too long or too easily altogether idle from some kind of work.]"<sup>137</sup>

They were thus instructed to engage in sewing and other handwork in their free time: "Ah schapeð seowið mendið chirche claðes poure monne hettern" ["cut out and sew and mend church vestments and poor people's clothes.]"<sup>138</sup> If their funds were adequate, they simply gave the clothing away or turned it over to the church for distribution.

In the "outer rule," the *Ancrene Wisse* addresses practical issues of daily life. The clothing of the anchoress was to be plain, comfortable, and appropriate to the weather. No ornaments were permitted: "Ring ne broche ne habbe 3e. ne gurdle imembret. ne glouen ne nan swuch þing þ owne deh to habben" ["Have no ring, brooch, or patterned belt, gloves, nor any such thing you ought not to have.]"<sup>139</sup> Dainty linen undergarments are not for the anchoress: "Nest flesch ne schal nan werien linnene clað bute hit beo of hearde of greate heorden" ["Next to your skin you must not wear linen cloth unless it is harsh

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<sup>137</sup> Tolkien 216; Savage and Watson, 202.

<sup>138</sup> Tolkien 215; Savage and Watson, 203.

<sup>139</sup> Tolkien, 215; Savage and Watson, 203.

and coarse flax refuse.”]<sup>140</sup> Harsh physical penances were not encouraged. The author notes that “sum wummon inohreaðe wereð þe brech of here ful wel icnottet” [“a woman will sometimes wear breeches of haircloth very firmly knotted] but he says that it is better for the anchoress to have “þe swete te swote heorte” [“a sweet and tender heart”] than to engage in such bodily torments.<sup>141</sup> For headwear, the AW author prefers plain caps to elaborate wimples; apparently the wimple had become something of a fashion accessory among some religious and thus women who wore them were guilty of the sin of pride.<sup>142</sup>

The diet of the recluse consisted mostly of grains and vegetables; she was not to have meat unless she was ill.<sup>143</sup> She might fast on bread and water for one day, with her advisor’s permission. She was not permitted to eat outside with her guests, although whether they might enter the cell to share her meal is unclear. Male dinner guests were of course prohibited unless special permission had been obtained: “Na mon ne eite biuoren ow bute bi ow

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<sup>140</sup> Tolkien, 214; Savage and Watson, 202.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Tolkien 211; Savage and Watson, 199.

er meistres leaue" ["Let no man eat in your presence except with your director's leave."]<sup>144</sup>

There are also directives about bathing, grooming, and health care. The anchoress was to have her hair cut or shaved four times a year. She was encouraged to keep her belongings, her space, and her person clean: "nes nea uer fulde godd leof" ["dirt was never dear to God."]<sup>145</sup> The anchoress was cautioned against "unnatural doctoring" in case of illness, but she might have blood let whenever she felt the need, provided that she rested afterwards for several days.<sup>146</sup> Many of these instructions also applied to the anchoress's attendants, as she was responsible for not only their spiritual development but also their physical well being. The AW author stipulated, however, that all of these aspects of the 'outer rule' were only suggestions, and might be changed or even ignored if the situation demanded.<sup>147</sup>

Anchoresses who were former nuns had had formal religious training in the convent, and had made a profession of vows to an order prior to enclosure, but

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<sup>144</sup> Tolkien, 213; Savage and Watson, 201.

<sup>145</sup> Tolkien, 217; Savage and Watson, 204.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

little in their earlier training prepared them for the anchoritic life. Formal rules, such as the Benedictine and Augustinian, focused primarily on the problems of communal living. Enclosed recluses did not live under the constraints of these rules, and despite the AW author's references to a "common riwle," there was never a formal or official rule devised specifically for anchoresses. Male clerics occasionally undertook the writing of handbooks for female anchoritic life, usually at the request of one or more anchoresses. These clerics included Aelred of Rievaulx, Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, and the anonymous author of *The Myrour of Recluses*. The best-known of these handbooks, however, is the above-mentioned *Ancrene Wisse*, and the accompanying texts of the Katherine Group.



IV. MEN WRITING FOR WOMEN: ANCHORITIC SPIRITUALITY AND  
VERNACULAR DEVOTIONAL TEXTS

I will converse with you,  
Theodora, about the flowers  
of paradise and the fruit of  
the Church's crop—that is,  
the holiness of the virginal  
life and the consummation of  
chastity in Christ's  
members.

*Speculum Virginum*

Sharpen your mind with the  
whetstone of books.

Goscelin, *Liber  
Confortatorius*

The popularity of the anchoritic lifestyle among women in England in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries created an audience for an entire sub-genre of religious prose, comprised of texts that were written and/or translated for these female recluses. Since the anchorhold attracted many women who lacked the benefits of a convent education, some of these texts were rendered accessible via Middle English translations of Latin works; others, like *Ancrene Wisse*, were actually composed in Middle English for this highly specialized readership. Primary works of Middle English religious prose include hagiographies, autobiographical accounts of mystical

experience, works of religious instruction authored by mystics, handbooks for the solitary life, the methodology of the contemplative life, and affective meditations. An extraordinary number of English religious instructional and devotional texts were written specifically for enclosed women. It was, in fact, texts such as these that made up the overwhelming majority of medieval English religious prose, and Anne Clark Bartlett suggests that these works were written to meet the demands of what she calls "the first generation of English female readers."<sup>148</sup> Wolfgang Riehle, while failing to note anything remarkable about this phenomenon, did give it a few lines in his discussion of English mystics:

The first great English text with a theme related to contemplation is the *Ancrene Wisse*, which was originally written as a rule of life for three women who had decided to live as recluses. Richard Rolle wrote his *English Psalter* and his tracts *Ego Dormio*, *The Commandment*, and *The Form of Living* for nuns or recluses. It is a recluse who asks Richard Misyn to translate Rolle's *Incendium Amoris* into the vernacular for her, and the first part of Hilton's *Scale* is addressed to a nun. . . . In

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<sup>148</sup> Thornton, 179, Anne Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female, Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995) 7. Bartlett mentions that literacy was generally high in Anglo-Saxon convents and in wealthy households; her comment refers to a more general female readership.

addition there are numerous tracts, including such important works as *The Chastising of God's Children* and William Flete's *Remedies Against Temptations*, where the individual reader is addressed as "religious sister" or "sister in God."<sup>149</sup>

Rolle and Hilton were latecomers to the genre of devotional prose for women; both are part of the group commonly referred to as the "fourteenth-century English mystics," a group which includes the anchoress Julian of Norwich, while *Ancrene Wisse* and the texts associated with it were produced at least a century earlier, during the period in England's history when female anchoritism was at its zenith.

#### 1. Devotional Prose for Anchoresses: Dates, Provenance, Authorship

*Ancrene Wisse* was widely circulated throughout Europe; existing manuscripts date from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, and no fewer than seventeen versions survive: nine in English, four in

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<sup>149</sup> Wolfgang Riehle, *The Middle English Mystics*, 14.

Latin, and four in French.<sup>150</sup> Along with *Ancrene Wisse*, two other groups of devotional texts are considered part of the corpus of Middle English anchoritic literature for women. The Wooing Group consists of four prayerful meditations, chief among them the title piece, *De Wohunge of ure Lauerd* (The Wooing of Our Lord). The Katherine Group texts include *Hali Meiðhad* (Holy Maidenhood), a treatise on virginity; *Sawles Ward* (The Care of the Soul), allegorical guidelines for the custody of the inner self; and the lives of three virgin martyrs: Margaret, Juliana, and Katherine.

Nicholas Watson and Anne Savage identify six English anchoritic manuscripts from the thirteenth century: Bodley 34, Corpus Christi 402, British Library Royal 17.A.xxvii, Cotton Cleopatra C.vi, Cotton Nero A.xiv, and Cotton Titus D.xviii.<sup>151</sup> *Ancrene Wisse* appears in all except Bodley and Royal. The Katherine Group texts make up Bodley 34 as well as a part of Cotton Titus. The Wooing Group texts appear only in Cotton Titus, although Cotton Nero contains

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<sup>150</sup> Yoko Wada, "What is *Ancrene Wisse*?" in *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Yoko Wada, 1-28 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), 1.

<sup>151</sup> Savage and Watson, 7-8.

meditations that are similar in style and language.<sup>152</sup> The saints' lives are included with Bodley 34, Royal, and Cotton Titus.<sup>153</sup>

All are believed to have been written in the early thirteenth century in the West Midlands area of England.<sup>154</sup> Beyond that, little is known with certainty about the authorship of these texts. The dating and authorship of all of the anchoritic texts, especially *Ancrene Wisse*, have been the subjects of much scholarly debate and conjecture, spanning well over a century, and as Roger Dahood notes in reference to *Ancrene Wisse*, "During the past fifty years, few works in Middle English have been so painstakingly investigated."<sup>155</sup> While E. J. Dobson has argued for Augustinian authorship, placing the probable site of its writing at Wigmore Abbey, Bella Millett makes an equally compelling case for Dominican authorship.<sup>156</sup>

Some scholars believe that all of the anchoritic texts are

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>155</sup> Robert W. Ackerman and Roger Dahood, ed., *Ancrene Riwle: Introduction and Part 1* (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Text Studies, 1984), 4.

<sup>156</sup> E. J. Dobson, *The Origins of Ancrene Wisse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 130-133; Bella Millett, "Origins of *Ancrene Wisse*: New Answers, New Questions," *Medium Ævum* 61:2 (1998), 206-228.

the work of a single author; others maintain that while they were probably composed within the same general area during the same time frame (between 1215 and 1226), multiple authors were involved.<sup>157</sup> To date many of these questions and issues remain unresolved; precise information about the provenance of these texts has yet to be discovered.

## 2. Sources, Content, and Feminist Analyses

As Millett and Wogan-Browne point out, the anchoritic works contain very little that can be considered original.<sup>158</sup> The author of *Ancrene Wisse* drew from a variety of earlier Latin works, including Aelred's *De Institutione Inclusarum*, also written for women, and *Speculum Inclusorum*, originally written for male recluses.<sup>159</sup> The saints' lives were also taken from Latin

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 14-15; Millett and Wogan-Browne, ed. *Medieval English Prose for Women*, xii-xiii.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>159</sup> The translator of *Speculum Inclusorum* edited the Middle English version to make the text more appropriate for women. See Marta Powell Harley, ed., *The Myroure of Recluses: A Middle English Translation of Speculum Inclusorum* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1995), Introduction, xvi. Other rules for solitaries include, as mentioned, Aelred of Rievaulx, *De Institutione*

sources; the life of St. Katherine, for example, is a translation of an older Latin version from the eleventh century known as the "Vulgate" version.<sup>160</sup> The author of *Hali Meiðhad* may have drawn from Innocent III's *De Miseria Humanae Conditionis*, but this connection is uncertain, and in any event, its rhetoric comes from older patristic sources, including the writings of Augustine, John Chrysostom, Jerome, and Ambrose.<sup>161</sup>

*Hali Meiðhad*, in the style of earlier treatises on virginity, not only enumerates the special graces of the chaste virgin, but also offers a scathing critique of marriage and childrearing, apparently intended to discourage young, impressionable women from pursuing a life of domesticity. *Ancrene Wisse* is essentially a

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*Inclusarum*. ed. John Ayto and Alexandra Barratt (London: Oxford University Press for Early English Text Society, 1984); Grimlaic, *Regula Solitariorum*, in *Patrologia Latina*, 103: 573-664; and Goscelin of St. Bertin, *The Book of Encouragement and Consolation* [*Liber Confortatorius*], trans. Monika Otter (London: Boydell and Brewer, 2004).

<sup>160</sup> Savage and Watson, 261. See also Katherine J. Lewis, *The Cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England* (Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2000), 9-10.

<sup>161</sup> Bella Millett, ed. *Hali Meiðhad*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1982), Introduction, xvii, xxiv-xxv. In much of its anti-marriage rhetoric, *Hali Meiðhad* is almost identical to the treatise of John Chrysostom on virginity; see John Chrysostom, *On Virginity; Against Remarriage*, trans. Sally Rieger Shore, LV-LIX (Lewiston, NY: Edwon Mellen Press, 1983), 89-96.

handbook for life within the cell. It consists of an 'inner' rule and an 'outer' rule, and while it is loosely based on existing monastic rules such as the Rule of St. Benedict, its author stipulates that it is not to be construed as a 'rule' in the formal sense. It is rather a "compilation of useful materials for living the anchoritic life."<sup>162</sup> The lives of Sts. Katherine, Juliana, and Margaret are standard hagiographical passion narratives; they are mentioned in *Ancrene Wisse* as well as in *Hali Meiðhad*, suggesting that the author assumed that the anchoresses owned or had access to them.<sup>163</sup>

Feminist criticism has occasionally been overzealous in its identification of misogynist elements of these texts, citing the repeated directives about controlling the body as evidence of the low esteem in which the female body, and by inference, the female person, was perceived. But such an assessment is problematic; treatises directed at male recluses stressed bodily self-control to at least as great an extent as those written for women, a fact usually overlooked in feminist criticism. For example, Elizabeth Robertson writes: "Texts written for women . . .

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<sup>162</sup> Savage and Watson, 43.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 259.



focus on training the willful body," and further, "Women are taught to control their bodies."<sup>164</sup> Her statements are true, but misleading, in that they imply that *only women* were instructed to control their bodies. Men received the same kinds of admonitions. The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, for example, entreated his young disciple: "For the love of God control your body . . . with great care," and further instructed him: "Unless it is ruled by grace in the will, and controls its strong desires, [sensuality] will wallow, like some pig in the mire, so wretchedly... in the filth of the flesh, that the whole of its life will be animal and physical rather than human and spiritual."<sup>165</sup> Richard Rolle wrote treatises for men as well as for women. In his best-known work, *The Fire of Love*, he elaborates so extensively on the theme of the dangers of male lust and lack of self-control that the reader can discern an autobiographical quality, reminiscent of Augustine, in his words:

He who looks at a woman with natural affection  
yet not with lustful desires finds he is unable

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<sup>164</sup> Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 9, 74.

<sup>165</sup> Clifton Wolters, trans., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 109, 140.

to keep free from illicit urges or unclean thoughts. . . . Be wise, then, and flee from women. Do not ever think about them, because even if a woman is good, the devil's attack and his insinuations, the attraction of her beauty, and *the weakness of your flesh* can beguile your will beyond measure (emphasis added).<sup>166</sup>

A comparison of *Ancrene Wisse* with texts that were ostensibly written for a male audience reveals that nearly all of the prohibitions and cautions that were directed at women were also directed at men. Even the admonitions against too much talking are mirrored in other texts. Robertson writes, "The idea of a female audience guides the author's choice of structure, theme, and imagery. [Women] are to be silent. The cackling Eve must be transformed into the passive, silent Mary."<sup>167</sup> Again the implication is that *only women* were so instructed. Nothing could be further from the truth. Most devotional texts emphasized the importance of silence for all contemplatives, male or female. *The Rule of St. Benedict* devotes an entire chapter to the subject.<sup>168</sup> Benedict directed, "On account of the great value of silence

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<sup>166</sup> Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 136.

<sup>167</sup> Robertson, 74.

<sup>168</sup> Saint Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. Cardinal Gasquet (Cooper Square Publishers, 1966), 25-27.

(*propter taciturnitatus grauitatem*), let leave to speak be seldom granted to observant disciples."<sup>169</sup> Silence was necessary for the contemplative both as a way to avoid sin and as an enhancement to meditation; this directive was not by any means restricted to female audiences.<sup>170</sup>

However, despite the fact that instructions about controlling the body were not confined to texts written for women, the discourses of enclosure and virginity display some clearly gender-inflected elements, suggesting that women's chastity was understood to be different from that of men. This is demonstrated more clearly in the anchoritic texts than in any other devotional works from the late Middle Ages. The devotional texts written for female recluses placed a tremendous emphasis on safeguarding virginity by maintaining strict seclusion within the anchoritic cell. Despite the anti-body rhetoric that was so prevalent in medieval religious literature, the female recluse was repeatedly told that

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<sup>169</sup> Ambrose G. Wathen, *Silence: The Meaning of Silence in the Rule of St. Benedict* (Washington, DC: Cistercian Publications, 1973), 29. Wathen provides a fascinating discussion of the significance of silence for Benedictines.

<sup>170</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982), 43-45.

the thing she guarded, her physical chastity, would earn her the highest place in heaven. Her virginity was the most precious thing in the world—the thing most valued by Christ, the thing He most desired. She had nothing to achieve or accomplish—her virginity, hers through no action on her part, need only be maintained. The seclusion of the anchorhold facilitated that maintenance.

The anchoritic texts exhort the anchoress to focus her loving attentions on Christ, her heavenly spouse, providing prayerful meditations on his virtues as a husband and encouraging her to “choose Christ as a lover in a literal, one might even say a physical, way.”<sup>171</sup> The potential effects of this kind of rhetoric on ‘normative’ heterosexual relationships and the construction of the medieval family raise interesting questions, although the questions were hardly new in the twelfth century; the Christian debate about lifelong chastity versus marriage and family can be traced back to the earliest centuries of the Church. It might be argued that a young woman choosing Christ—a man—as a lover/bridegroom poses no real challenge to the heterosexual economy, but the

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<sup>171</sup> Savage and Watson, 246.

complexities of the discourse of virginity provide some interesting twists, and the gender roles of Christ and his virgin spouses are not so easily categorized as might be supposed.

V. VIRGINITY AFFIRMED: *HALI MEIÐHAD*

As long as a woman is for  
birth and children, she is  
different from man as body is  
from soul. But when she  
wishes to serve Christ more  
than the world, then she will  
cease to be a woman, and will  
be called man.

Jerome

Virginity is one of the  
secrets that men find most  
exciting.

Simone de Beauvoir,  
*The Second Sex*

*Hali Meiðhad* is a treatise in support of virginity as a permanent life choice. Although it is one of the Katherine Group texts and is usually considered alongside them, it has some interesting stylistic differences from *Ancrene Wisse*, *Sawles Ward*, and the saints' lives.<sup>172</sup> It can be assumed that the intended audience of the text was female, but whether the women in question were already professed or enclosed is difficult to determine; the content suggests that the author is attempting to influence the life choices of young women who may have

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<sup>172</sup> Bella Millett, ed., *Hali Meiðhad* (London: Oxford University Press, 1982), Intro., xxi.

been undecided about a lifelong commitment to chastity. *Hali Meiðhad* argues in favor of the chaste virginal life by presenting a harsh indictment of earthly marriage. It depicts a view of marriage and childbearing that is almost comical in its pejorative descriptions, and encourages the maiden to choose Christ as a bridegroom instead, recommending him as the one man who might be counted upon to never inflict such torments on his bride. The argument is brilliant in its simplicity: why settle for an ordinary man, when you can marry God?

#### 1. The Ideology of Virginity in the Middle Ages

The issues surrounding medieval virginity are complicated, and have received considerable scholarly attention in recent years. Earlier feminist criticism of works like *Hali Meiðhad* tend to emphasize the prohibitions of the virgin/*sponsalia Christi* ideology and the intense medieval focus on the female body as the source of sin, arguing that many of these texts were authored by male clerics as part of their unrelenting campaign to control women's bodies, sexualities, and reproductive capacities. Certainly this is an argument that has some merit,

although in fairness it bears repeating that many of the same "control your body" exhortations also appear in works intended for male audiences. The current scholarly debate seeks to determine whether the *sponsa Christi* role created opportunities for women to circumvent and/or reconfigure traditional gender roles, or whether it simply reinforced the hierarchical heterosexualizing imperative by encouraging a more or less traditional male-female marriage relationship, with a male Christ as husband to a female virgin bride. However, Christian virginity in general and *sponsalia Christi* in particular are extremely complex concepts, especially as they appear in the anchoritic texts, and lend themselves to multiple interpretations which resist a tidy either-or analysis.

Clarissa Atkinson maintains that Christian ideas about virginity can be divided into two categories: the physiological state of a person who has never had sexual intercourse, and the moral condition of spiritual purity.<sup>173</sup> Thus the status of "virgin" is spiritual as well as physical, and has as much to do with mental and

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<sup>173</sup> Clarissa W. Atkinson, "'Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass': The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages," *Journal of Family History*, Summer 1983, 131-143.



spiritual chastity as with physical intactness. It is entirely possible to have one without the other; widows living in chaste seclusion, for example, are said to be spiritually virginal even though no longer intact, while *Hali Meiðhad* cautions against losing one's chastity through sinful thoughts and lustful desires even in the absence of physical contact.

It is argued in other treatises that virginity (or at least a state of spiritual purity) can be partially, if not wholly, restored through penance and a renewed commitment to chastity, although *Hali Meiðhad* insists that virginity, once lost, can never be regained, and further, can be damaged or compromised by impure thoughts even if the woman remains technically chaste:

Meiðhad is þet tresor þet, beo hit eanes  
forloren, ne bið hit neauer ifunden. Meiðhad is  
þe blostme þet, beo ha fulliche eanes forcoruen,  
ne spruteð ha eft neauer (ah þah ha falewi  
sumchere mid misliche þonkes, ha mei eft grenin  
neauer þe leatere). Meiðhad is þe steorre þet,  
beo ha eanes of þe est igan adun i þe west,  
neauer eft ne ariseð ha. Meiðhad is þet an  
3eoue i3ettet te of heouene; do þu hit eanes  
awei, ne schalt tu neauer nan oðer al swuch  
acourin.

Virginity is the treasure which, if it is once lost, will never be found again. Virginity is the blossom which, if it is once cut off, will never grow again (but though it may wither

sometimes through indecent thoughts, it can grow green again nevertheless.) Virginity is the star which, if it has once traveled from the East to sink in the West, will never rise again. Virginity is the one gift granted to you from heaven; if you once dispose of it, you will never regain another quite like it.<sup>174</sup>

Clearly the "withering" refers to spiritual virginity, the state of a woman's mind in which her chastity is most frequently endangered. But the physical aspect of virginity—the hymen—was considered vitally important, and was referred to as "the seal" binding the virgin to Christ; as *Hali Meiðhad* admonishes, "Ant tu þenne, eadi meiden, þet art iloten to him wið meiðhades merke, ne brec þu nawt þet seil þet seileð inc togederes." ["And you then, blessed maiden, who are assigned to him with the mark of virginity, do not break the seal which seals you both together."] <sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, eds., *"Hali Meiðhad,"* in *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 8-11. All *HM* translations are from this text.

<sup>175</sup> Millett and Wogan-Browne, *"Hali Meiðhad,"* 8-9.

## 2. History of the Virgin Ideal

A woman's virginal status has always represented a certain archetypal quality of power and authority; this has historically been true across cultures, and is not specific to medieval Christianity.<sup>176</sup> The ideology of female virginity actually predates Christianity by several centuries, as does the notion of the soul (individual or collective) as the bride of God.<sup>177</sup> The definition of the word 'virgin' has undergone some changes, of course. Pagan cultures venerated virgins because of their perceived magical powers, but their powers derived from the fact that they were not controlled by men, not from

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<sup>176</sup> Female virginity cults existed in Egyptian, Greek and Roman cultures long before the time of Christ; they also appeared in ancient Asian cultures. Celibacy for both men and women has been and still is advocated in many religious traditions, although female virginity has always been viewed differently. See Elizabeth Abbott, *A History of Celibacy* (New York: Scribner, 1999), for a thorough treatment of the celibate ideal across cultures.

<sup>177</sup> The Song of Songs is often cited by scholars of Jewish theological history, as well as various other commentators, in this context; John Bugge makes the following useful distinction: "The Jewish conception of a nation wedded to God describes a public, covenantal relationship, while the *sponsa* motif . . . is concerned with a spiritual bond of union that is private, personal, and ultimately mystical." See Bugge, *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 66.

their real or presumed chastity. Chastity was not considered particularly virtuous by such cultures. Marina Warner writes:

. . . in the case of pagan goddesses, the sign of the virgin rarely endorses chastity as a virtue. Venus, Ishtar, Astarte, and Anat, the love goddesses of the near east and classical mythology, are entitled virgin despite their lovers, who die and rise again for them each year. . . .their sacred virginity symbolized their autonomy, and had little or no moral connotation. They spurned men because they were preeminent, independent, and alone, which is why the title virgin could be used of a goddess who entertained lovers. Her virginity signified she had retained freedom of choice: to take lovers or reject them.<sup>178</sup>

The association of female chastity with the virgin state and the Christian conflation of virginity with holiness are generally associated with the mythology of Mary and the virgin birth, an idea that Warner identifies as "classical in spirit" and derived from Hellenistic culture.<sup>179</sup> Warner notes that pagan cultures also utilized the miraculous asexual birth motif; she writes, "the virgin birth of heroes and sages was a widespread formula in the Hellenistic world. . . it became the commonplace

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<sup>178</sup> Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 47-48.

<sup>179</sup> Warner, 34.

claim of a spiritual leader.”<sup>180</sup> It is hardly surprising, then, that the early Christians would have seized upon this idea to validate their claims about the divinity of Jesus.

In spite of its serious credibility issues, the virgin birth myth was treated as factual by the Church fathers and became dogma by the fifth century, and the “virginal” Mary became the quintessential role model for women in the religious life. Thus the lifestyle of the consecrated virgin became popular among Christians very early in the development of the Church (celibacy for both men and women was advocated, although not privileged, by Paul; Paul in fact stipulated that there were no commandments regarding virginity, and that his counsel in favor of chastity was nothing more than his own opinion<sup>181</sup>), and the Church fathers fine-tuned the idea over several centuries. *Hali Meiðhad* was therefore part of a long and revered tradition in western Christianity.

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>181</sup> I Corinthians 7:25: “Now concerning virgins: I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.”

Like other medieval treatises on virginity, *Hali Meiðhad* contains almost nothing that is new and original; formal Christian arguments against marriage and in favor of lifelong chastity go back at least as far as the late second century, when Tertullian devised the "*sponsa Christi*" motif and applied it to consecrated virgins.<sup>182</sup> By the fourth century this discourse had assumed a position of some prominence in Christian theology, and over the centuries Jerome, Augustine, Cyprian, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, and various other church fathers had written extensively on the topic; the *HM* author borrows freely from these treatises, revealing the depth and breadth of his own scholarly theological background.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Millett, *Hali Meiðhad*, Intro., xxiv, xxxliii; Tertullian, "Liber de Virginibus Velandis," in *The Writings of Tertullian* 3, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., S. Thelwell, trans. (Edinburgh, 1895), ch. 16.

<sup>183</sup> A few of these treatises include the aforementioned John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*; Ambrose of Milan, *On Virginity*, trans. Daniel Callam (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing: 1996); Jerome, "Ad Eustochium" in *Select Letters of Jerome*, trans. F.A. Wright (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 52-159; Aldhelm, "De laudibus virginitatus," in *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, ed. Michael Lapidge and Michael W. Herrin (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979), 59-135; Conrad of Hirsau, "*Speculum Virginum*: Selected excerpts," trans. Barbara Newman, in Constant J. Mews, ed., '*Listen, Daughter*': *The Speculum Virginum and the Formation of Religious Women in the*

Although both the ideology and the rhetoric of female virginity were established early in Christian theology, it would be misleading to imply that the idea did not evolve through the centuries. Changes in cultural norms, political structures, and religious allegiances demanded that the discourses of marriage and virginity be reshaped from time to time. For example, Peter Brown has demonstrated that the circumstances created by consecrated virgins in the early Church who effectively withdrew their reproductive capacities from a national economy that counted them as objects of exchange posed a serious threat to the hegemonic structure, a threat that was only eliminated as the male-dominated interests of church and state gradually became more closely aligned.<sup>184</sup> The

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*Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 270-296. Similar treatises were also produced by Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Cyprian, and various others. For an interesting analysis of *Hali Meiðhad* and the virginity texts that preceded it, see J. C. Unrue, "*Hali Meiðhad* and Other Virginity Treatises," Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1970.

<sup>184</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); 37-42, 162-164; see also Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 51. It is interesting to consider what effect this may have had on the Church-state partnership that developed in the Middle Ages. It is equally interesting—and more than a little disturbing—to consider the same question in view of the

appearance of continental heretical sects which eschewed marriage as a point of doctrine, such as the Cathars, also forced the Church to clarify its doctrines on marriage and celibacy.<sup>185</sup> Despite these challenges to the virgin ideal, however, the church fathers continued to advocate virginity with incredible zeal.

It has been convincingly argued by feminist scholars such as Sherry Ortner and Luce Irigaray that female virgins are vital to the development of patriarchal institutions such as the Church; not only are virginal women prized for their exchange value, but their presence within a culture confers a symbolic ideological honor upon the group.<sup>186</sup> Female virginity is thus understood as a commodity for which various groups of men have historically vied for control. Ortner maintains that female chastity is "secured by the exertion of direct

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current "partnership" between the U.S. government and the Religious Right.

<sup>185</sup> Jeffrey B. Russell, "Summary of Catharist Beliefs," in *Religious Dissent in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Burton Russell, 57-59 (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1971), 59

<sup>186</sup> Sherry B. Ortner, "The Virgin and the State," in *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 43-58; Luce Irigaray, "Women on the Market," in *This Sex Which is Not One*, Catherine Porter, trans. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 170-191.



control over women's mobility to the point of lifetime seclusion, and/or through severe socialization of fear and shame concerning sex."<sup>187</sup> It would be difficult to find a better illustration of the successful employment of both of these tactics than the lives of medieval anchoresses.

### 3. *Hali Meiðhad* and the Virgin Estate

Certainly there were several advantages for women in the virginal lifestyle, a fact of which the author of *Hali Meiðhad* is well aware. For one thing, the virgin state enabled the lifelong virgin to claim the highest status in heaven. The three states enumerated in *Hali Meiðhad*, marriage, widowhood, and virginity, are ostensibly defined by a woman's relationship to a man and her level of sexual activity or the lack thereof.<sup>188</sup> *Hali Meiðhad* lists the heavenly rewards of each state, with virginity on top and marriage, a poor third, on the bottom:

3et of þes þreo hat-meid ant widewehad, ant  
wedlac is þe þridde-þu math bi þe degrez of hare  
blisse icnawen hwuch ant bi hu muchel þe an

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<sup>187</sup> Ortner, "The Virgin and the State," 47.

<sup>188</sup> Millett, *Hali Meiðhad*. Millett notes that this idea of the three states and their graduated status was a construct developed in the early Middle Ages. Intro, xxxviii.

passed þe opre. For wedlac hauerð hire frut  
 þrittifald in heouene; widewhad, sixtifald;  
 meiðhad wið hundretfald ouergeað baþe. Loke  
 þenne herbi, hwa se of hire meiðhad lihteð into  
 wedlac, bi hu monie degrez ha falleð dunewards.

[Yet of these three states—virginity and  
 widowhood, and marriage is the third—you can  
 tell by the degrees of their bliss which one is  
 superior to the others, and by how much. For  
 marriage has its fruit thirtyfold in heaven;  
 widowhood, sixtyfold; virginity, with a  
 hundredfold, surpasses them both. See then from  
 this, whoever descends from her virginity into  
 marriage, by how many degrees she falls  
 downwards.]<sup>189</sup>

The author apparently realizes that the loss of  
 heavenly status (the downward plunge) may not prove to be  
 a sufficient deterrent to earthly marriage, and *Hali*  
*Meiðhad* does not rely exclusively on the virgin's hope of  
 heaven to make its points. In fact, the arguments  
 presented in favor of virginity focus on the earthly  
 rewards of virginity and betrothal to Christ as much as  
 the heavenly ones. As Millett observes:

The author concentrates on those rewards of  
 virginity which are either temporal or capable  
 of being expressed in temporal terms. Even the  
 heavenly reward of virginity is described  
 largely in terms of earthly prosperity and  
 status: traditional imagery—Christ as  
 bridegroom, spiritual offspring, the special  
 crown of virgins—is used in a way which deprives  
 it of much of its rhetorical function, offering

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<sup>189</sup> Millett and Wogan-Browne, 20-21.

the virgin a picture of heavenly gratifications differing in degree rather than kind from what she is renouncing on earth.<sup>190</sup>

The rewards of virginity are thus not limited to the spiritual gain to be derived from the virgin state.

Further, the author of *Hali Meiðhad* stresses that even if a woman is indifferent to spiritual concerns, sex is still something to be avoided:

For Gode, þah hit nere neauer for Godes luue, ne  
for hope of heouene, ne for dred of helle, þu  
ahtest, wummon, þis were for þi  
Flesches halschipe, for þi licomes luue, ant ti  
bodies heale, ouer alle þing to schunien. . .  
þis sunne . . . uncumelicheð þe ant unwurðged þi  
bodi, suleð þi sawle ant makeð schuldi towart  
Godd, ant fuleð þi flesch ec. Gultest o twa  
half: wreaðest þen Alwealdent wið þet suti  
sunne, ant dest who to þe seolf, þet tu al  
willes se scheomeliche tukest.

[By God, woman, even if it were not at all for the love of God, or for the hope of heaven, or for the fear of hell, you should avoid this act above all things, for the integrity of your flesh, for the sake of your body, and for your physical health. . . . This sin. . . disfigures you and dishonours your body, defiles your soul and makes you guilty in God's sight, and pollutes your flesh too. You offend on both sides: you anger the Almighty with that filthy sin, and do harm to yourself, mistreating yourself quite voluntarily in such a shameful way.]<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Millett, *Hali Meiðhad*, Intro., xxxlv.

<sup>191</sup> Millett and Wogan-Browne, 30-31.

Despite, however, these practical exhortations and the frank appeal to the maiden's self-interest, the goal of virginity was arguably the development of a deeper spirituality. Virginity makes the anchoress like the angels: "Engel ant meiden beoð euening i uertu i meiðhades mihte" ["Angel and maiden are equal in virtue through the power of virginity"]; virginity keeps the "feble flesche" in "hal halinesse"; and its purpose "is to help the soul develop the power of seeing God."<sup>192</sup> Virginity was also an important aspect of *imitatio Christi*; the virgin was not only the spouse of Christ, but was also "ilich him in halschipe, vnwemmet as he is" ["like him in integrity, spotless as he is"]; "i þe menske of meiðhad ant in hire mihte ne muhe nane folhin him. . .bute meidnes ane." ["in the honor of virginity and in its virtue nobody may follow him . . .except virgins alone."]<sup>193</sup> It is these rewards that the virgin earns with her chastity—these, and lifelong freedom from the trials of marriage.

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 10-11, xv.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 4-5, 20-21.

#### 4. Anti-Marriage Rhetoric

In his efforts to persuade maidens to embrace the enclosed life of consecrated virgins, the author of *Hali Meiðhad* presents a picture of domestic misery that is so painfully discouraging that the reader wonders whether there might be an experiential aspect to his description. As with other elements of the text, however, the author is not constructing any new arguments, but rather takes his cue from earlier patristic writings. Diatribes against marriage had been a standard part of the Christian literature on virginity since before the time of Jerome, and were a frequent accompaniment to literature advocating lifelong virginity. *Hali Meiðhad* is no harsher in its disparagement of marriage than earlier treatises; the author is drawing from an old tradition firmly rooted in patristic sources in arguing that the difficulties of marriage and childrearing far outweigh the benefits, especially when they can be avoided altogether through the more admirable choice of virginity.<sup>194</sup>

The author was careful to maintain an orthodox position regarding marriage and marital intercourse,

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<sup>194</sup> See Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, 89-101.

although he occasionally compromised orthodoxy for the sake of rhetorical effect.<sup>195</sup> The following description, for example, adds a parenthetical orthodox nod at the end, which seems very much like an acquiescent afterthought:

"þet ilke unhende flesches brune, þet bearninde 3eohðe of licomliche lust biuore þet wleatewile werc, þet bestelich gederunge, þet scheomelese sompnunge, þet ful of fulðe, stinkinde ant untohe dede. (Hit is þah i wedlac summes weies to þolien, as me schal efter iheren.)" ["that indecent heat of the flesh, that burning itch of physical desire before that disgusting act, that animal union, that shameless coupling, that stinking and wanton deed, full of filthiness. (It is, nevertheless, to be tolerated to some extent within marriage.)"]<sup>196</sup>

*Hali Meiðhad* reminds the maiden that once she marries, she forfeits the opportunity to change her mind, regardless of how unsuitable her chosen partner might be: "beo þe enotte icnut eanes of wedlac, beo he cangun oðer crupel, beo he hwuch se he eauer beo, þu most to him halden." ["once the knot of wedlock is tied, even if he is an idiot or a cripple, whatever he may be like, you

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<sup>195</sup> Millett, *Hali Meiðhad*, Intro., xxxiii.

<sup>196</sup> Millett and Wogan-Browne, 8-9.

must be faithful to him."]<sup>197</sup> Life with an unpleasant husband is truly a dreadful thing to contemplate:

Hwen he bið ute, hauest a3ein his hamcume sar care ant eie. Hwil he bið et hame, alle þine wide wanes þuncheð þe to nearewe. His lokunge on ageasteð þe; his ladliche nurð ant his untohe bere make þe to agrisen. Chit te ant cheoweð þe ant scheomeliche schent te, tukeð þe to bismere as huler his hore, beateð þe ant busteð þe as his ibohte þrel ant his eðele þeowe. Þine banes akeð þe ant ti flesch smeorteð þe, þin heorte wiðinne þe swelleð of sar grome, ant ti neb utewið tendreð ut of teone.

[When he is out, you are filled with anxiety and fear of his homecoming. While he is at home, all your wide halls seem too narrow. His attention makes you nervous; his detestable clamor and his ill-bred shouting frighten you. He rails at you and scolds you and abuses you shamefully, treats you disgracefully as a lecher does his whore, beats you and thrashes you like his bought slave and his born serf. Your bones ache and your flesh smarts, your heart within you swells with violent rage, and your outward countenance burns with anger.]<sup>198</sup>

But even a happy marriage to a good man, rare as such a circumstance might be, is full of grief and misfortune and ultimately ends with loss: "Moni þing ham schal twinnin ant tweamen. . . ant deaðes dunt on ende, eiðer from oðer; swa þet ne bið hit nanes weis þet tet elne ne schal endin in earmðe." [Many things will separate and divide them

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid, 28-29.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

one from the other . . . and the stroke of death at last; so that there is no way their happiness will not end in misery."]<sup>199</sup>

The maiden need not think that having children will make all that suffering worthwhile; indeed, children bring with them a whole new series of misfortunes. When a woman conceives a child, "hire flesch wið þet fulþe ituket" ["her flesh is at once defiled with that filth"]; pregnancy involves "heuinesse ant heard sar eauer umbe stunde" ["heaviness and constant discomfort"]; labor will bring "alre stiche strengest, ant deað oðerwiles" ["the cruelest of all pains, and sometimes death"]; and as soon as the baby is born, "mare hit bringeð wið him care þen blisse" ["it brings with it more anxiety than joy."]<sup>200</sup> A sickly or handicapped child brings incessant grief; a healthy child must be constantly guarded lest it become ill or sustain an injury. Babies are noisy and dirty, expensive and demanding; they require endless hours of watchful care, and even under the best of circumstances,

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 30-31.



often grow up to be disappointments to their longsuffering mothers.<sup>201</sup>

As if all that isn't enough, the author then describes one of the more tedious episodes in the life of an overworked housewife—a domestic scene like one that might well have been witnessed by the reader in her mother's home:

Ant hwet 3ef Ich easki 3et, þah hit þunche  
egede, hu þet wif stoned, þe ihereð hwen ha  
kimeð in hire bearn schreamen, sið þe cat et te  
fliche and ed te hude þe hund, hire cake bearnen  
o þe stan ant hire kelf suken, þe crohe eornen i  
þe fur—ant te cheorl chideð? Ðah hit beo egede  
i sahe, hit ah, meiden, to eggī þe swiðre  
þerfrommart, for nawt ne þuncheð hit hire egede  
þet hit fondeð.

[And what if I should ask, though it may seem  
ridiculous, what kind of position the wife is in  
who, when she comes in, hears her child  
screaming, sees the cat at the flitch and the  
dog at the hide, her loaf burning on the hearth  
and her calf sucking, the pot boiling over into  
the fire —and her husband is complaining?  
Although it may sound ridiculous, it ought,  
maiden, to discourage you from it all the more,  
because it is no joke to the woman who tries  
it.]<sup>202</sup>

How much better for the maiden to take Christ as her  
spouse, and avoid all that domestic horror! As *Hali*  
*Meiðhad* notes, "lutel wat meiden of al þis ilke weane,"

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

[“a virgin knows little of all this misery”]. Marriage to a “mon of lam” [“man of clay”] is portrayed as slavery for a woman: “ant of Godes brude ant his freo dohter (for ba togederes ha is), biki með þeow under mon ant his þrel, to don al ant drehen þet him likeð,” [“from being God’s bride and his free daughter (for she is both together) becomes a serf to a man and his slave, to do and suffer all that he pleases”] “Nis þeos witerliche akeast?” [“Is not this woman truly cast down?”]<sup>203</sup> The theme of marriage as servitude, with the threat of violence ever lurking in the background, is repeated throughout the text, while virginity is described as freedom and escape from slavery.<sup>204</sup>

## 5. Jesus Christ: The Perfect Spouse

The virgin who takes Christ as her spouse has a life that is idyllic compared to the trials of earthly marriage; she is, after all, *always a bride*—she need never assume either the title or the duties of a *wife*. One of the most fascinating aspects of the *sponsa Christi*

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 4-5, 34-35. Chrysostom also describes marriage as slavery; see *On Virginity*, 61-62.

relationship is the virgin's role as perpetual bride. Insisting that the enclosed virgin maintain a kind of permanent relational immaturity, the anchoritic texts encourage a loving spousal relationship with Jesus that is intensely erotic, but utterly devoid of any possibility of physical consummation: the virgin's marriage to Christ will be consummated spiritually, either via mystical union as she contemplates the perfection of her heavenly bridegroom in her cell, or at her death, when she is joined to Christ in eternity. Because Christ and his mother, Mary, were believed to exemplify the perfected virgin (i.e., sexless) life, it should come as no surprise that the heavenly bridegroom will not engage in "that stinking and wanton deed" with any of his brides.

Christ is apparently able to carry out his conjugal responsibilities without any of the messiness or inconvenience of ordinary sex, so that the virgin remains intact even after spiritual 'childbirth': "Eadi is his spuse, hwas meiðhad is unwemmet hwen he on hire streoneð, ant hwen ha temeð of him, ne swinkeð ne ne pineð."

["Blessed is his spouse, whose maidenhood is unblemished when he begets on her; and when she gives birth by him she

neither labors nor suffers." ]<sup>205</sup> The virgin's 'children' are the virtues she cultivates through the grace of her exalted state:

3ef þe were leof streon, nim þe to him under  
 hwam þu schalt, I þi meiðhad, te men dehtren ant  
 sunen of gasteliche teames . . . rihtwisnesse  
 ant warschipe a3eines unþeawes, mesure ant mete  
 ant gastelich strengðe to wiðstand þe feond ant  
 a3eine sunne, simplete of semblant, buhsumnesse  
 ant stilðe, þolemodnesse ant reowfulnesse of  
 euch monnes sorhe, gleadshipe i þe Hali Gast ant  
 pes i þi breoste of onde ant of wreaððe, of  
 3isceunge ant of euch unþeawes weorre, meokelec  
 ant miltschipe, ant swotnesse of heorte, þe  
 limpeð alre þinge best to meiðhades mihte.

[If you would like children, devote yourself to him with whom you shall, in your virginity, give birth to spiritual sons and daughters. . . such as justice and prudence against vices, moderation and temperance and fortitude of spirit to withstand the Devil and against sin, simplicity of manner, obedience and silence, patience and compassion for everyone's misery, joy in the Holy Ghost and peace in your heart from envy and anger, from avarice and from the attack of every vice, meekness and mildness, and sweetness of heart, which belongs best of all things to the virtue of virginity.]<sup>206</sup>

The maiden thus imitates Mary in giving birth to her spiritual offspring asexually, and her marriage to Christ is a spiritual coupling, an endless holy courtship with

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

its consummation postponed until she dies and meets her bridegroom in heaven.

## 6. The Body of the Bride

The virgin's body would seem to be almost irrelevant to this spiritual marriage construct, although it can hardly be deemed insignificant. The body, after all, is that which affords the devil an opportunity to take hold of the spirit. The text insists that the virgin's body is untrustworthy and will betray her if given a chance; all of her physical senses—sight, hearing, speech, touch—conspire against her in endless attempts to persuade her to forfeit her virginity.<sup>207</sup> As the author states, "Vre flesch is ure fa, ant heaneð se ofte as ha us fuled." ["Our flesh is our foe, and oppresses and harms us as often as it defiles us."] The devil is outraged "þet þing se feble as flesch is, ant nomeliche of wummon, schal him ouerstihen," ["that something as weak as flesh is—and especially a woman's—should be able to surpass him,"]<sup>208</sup> and so he is relentless in his efforts to compromise the

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

virgin's chastity: "ant scheoteð niht ant dei his earewen,  
 idrencte of aan attri healewi, towart tin heorte . . .  
 each fleschlich wil ant lust of leccerie þet ariseð i þe  
 heorte is þes feondes fla." ["Night and day he shoots his  
 arrows, dipped in a venomous poison, towards your heart .  
 . . every carnal impulse and lecherous desire which arises  
 in your heart is the Devil's arrow."]<sup>209</sup>

Paradoxically, however, the virgin's chaste body is  
 the vehicle that will carry her to heaven. "For in hire  
 ant þurh hire þu ofearnest, meiden, to beon englene  
 euening i þe eche blisse of heouene . . .Engel ant meiden  
 beoð euening i uertu i meiðhades mihte." ["For in it [the  
 flesh] and through it, maiden, you earn the right to be  
 the equal of the angels in the eternal bliss of heaven .  
 . . Angel and maiden are equal in virtue through the power  
 of virginity."]<sup>210</sup> Virginity, clearly described and  
 understood as not only a chaste state of mind but also as  
 a physical characteristic of young womanhood (the "seil"  
 which binds the virgin to her heavenly spouse), is the  
 thing most valued by Christ, "mihte ouer alle mihtes and  
 cwemest Christ of alle." ["a virtue above all virtues,

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

and most pleasing of all to Christ."]<sup>211</sup> Greater and more highly valued than any spiritual quality—justice, mercy, charity, or compassion—is the intact maidenhead of the virgin, precariously contained and zealously guarded within the female body. Only humility is more valuable: "For al meiðhad, meoklec is mucche wurð; ant meiðhad wiðuten hit is eðelich ant unwurð, for alswa is meiden i meiðhad bu/te meokeschipe as is wiðute liht eolie in a lampe." [For all virginity, humility is precious; and virginity without it is a poor and worthless thing, for a maiden in virginity without humility is like oil in a lamp that has not been lit."]<sup>212</sup>

## 7. Virginity and Gender

Julie Hassel argues that the didactic characteristics of *Hali Meiðhad*, with their emphasis on maintaining chastity by diligently safeguarding bodily integrity, are not really gender-inflected in quite the same way as is usually assumed. She maintains that a reading of the text that focuses on the female body and privileges female

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

virginity denies the importance of chastity for men and distorts the subversively protofeminist elements of the treatise; she further argues that concerns about the body are subordinated to the life of the spirit and the development of the intellect in *Hali Meiðhad*.<sup>213</sup> While Hassel's analysis raises a number of interesting questions, her stance on the importance of male chastity is one that demands rebuttal.

It is certainly true that chastity was encouraged for men as well as women, both in the patristic era and throughout the Middle Ages. But female virginity was perceived differently, and nearly all virginity treatises stress the importance of female chastity to a much greater extent than male chastity; many of them, like *Hali Meiðhad*, were written specifically for women, and there are few if any comparable texts written for male audiences.<sup>214</sup> Further, as Maud McInerney points out, even

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<sup>213</sup> Hassel, 38-39.

<sup>214</sup> I say "nearly all" only because I hesitate to make an absolute statement; I cannot pretend to be intimately familiar with every patristic and medieval virginity treatise. Of the many with which I am familiar, however, all without exception emphasize female virginity. To date I have not encountered a single text like *Hali Meiðhad* that was written for a male audience.



in texts that would seem to privilege male and female virginity equally, the *language* is invariably gendered:

. . .Albertus [Magnus] argues that virginity 'is an integrity of the flesh which bears witness to the integrity of the mind,' a genderless virtue, only to give as an example of the primacy of mental over physical integrity the instance of a virgin woman who may be injured or wounded in the vagina by a stick or a sword without losing her virginity. . .Aquinas's discussion of virginity works especially hard to maintain the possibility of virginity equally for male and female bodies. . . . Nonetheless, even in Aquinas, the word *virgo* itself tends to pull toward the feminine; in his argument, grounded in Cyprian, that virgins participate in a 'more sublime glory' than widows or married women, all the pronouns (and indeed the nouns themselves) retain their normative feminine gender.<sup>215</sup>

Kathleen Kelly concurs, noting that patristic writers such as Ambrose, Tertullian, and Augustine, who were so influential in shaping the medieval ideology of virginity, "make it very clear that their subject is *female* virginity." Kelly mentions that although these writers advocate virginity for both men and women, "they write

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<sup>215</sup>Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins From Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 144; see also Cyprian, "Liber de habitu virginum," in *Patrologia Latina* Vol. 4, 173:0439, electronic database <<http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.arizona.edu/>> [11-02-05].

either directly to women or to men about women."<sup>216</sup>

Further, the discourse of virginity details a particular set of behaviors, including those applying to dress, speech, hair, and demeanor (as well as enclosure) that do not appear in treatises directed at male audiences.

Virginity is thus performed through a series of gendered behaviors that apparently either do not apply to men or are not usually associated with men. Tertullian, for example, argued that rape was less serious (and, he implies, less compromising to a woman's virginity) than walking about in immodest dress; it is clear that he was referring specifically to women when he wrote, "Every public exposure of an honourable virgin is (to her) a suffering of rape: and yet the suffering of carnal violence is the less (evil), because it comes of natural office."<sup>217</sup> Tertullian acknowledges the value of male chastity, but describes it in very different terms,

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<sup>216</sup> Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000), 33.

<sup>217</sup> See Tertullian, "De virginibus velandis," in *Patrologia Latina* 2:0887, electronic database <<http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.arizona.edu/>> [2-21-05]; above translation from *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 4, trans. S. Thelwall, online <[http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf04/anf04-09.htm#P545\\_113997](http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf04/anf04-09.htm#P545_113997)> [10-15-05].

drawing a careful distinction between (male) continence and (female) virginity:

Sure we are that the Holy Spirit could rather have made some such concession to *males*, if He had made it to *females*; forasmuch as, besides the authority of sex, it would have been more becoming that males should have been honoured on the ground of continency itself likewise. The more their sex is eager and warm toward *females*, so much the more toil does the continence of (this) greater ardour involve . . . For is not continence withal superior to *virginity*? For constancy of *virginity* is maintained by *grace*; of *continence*, by *virtue*. For great is the struggle to overcome concupiscence when you have become accustomed to such concupiscence; whereas a concupiscence the enjoyment whereof you have never known you will subdue easily, not having an adversary (in the shape of) the concupiscence of enjoyment.<sup>218</sup>

There seems to be a presumption here that a male who decides to live chastely will be doing so only *after* sexual experience, and so will have to struggle mightily to deny himself a familiar pleasure, and will thus acquire and practice virtue; a female virgin, on the other hand, by definition lacks sexual experience, and so she will find that grace alone is sufficient to maintain her virginal status. Barbara Newman suggests that this kind of rhetoric resulted in a kind of stasis of women's spiritual growth,

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

since they apparently had no 'virtues' to acquire,  
only one to maintain:

The novice monk is never perceived as sacrosanct in quite the same way; although his profession is holy, he is himself only a converted sinner who must struggle painfully to acquire virtues. The virgin, on the other hand, already has the exalted virtue that defines her state, and must only apply herself to preserving it. . . . Unlike monks, nuns were consistently imagined, and encouraged to imagine themselves, in gender-specific roles based on the sexuality they were renouncing.<sup>219</sup>

*Sponsa Christi* might certainly be described as a gender-specific role, especially as it is described in the anchoritic texts. It is also very much an embodied role. John Bugge, in an influential study on the medieval construction of virginity, argues that these texts, particularly *Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meidhad*, describe a spousal relationship that is dependent, not only on a body, but specifically on a female body, to the extent that the men are virtually excluded from participation in the *sponsa* mystery.<sup>220</sup> Yet as we will see, the gendered ideology of virginity was not without ambiguity, and the fluidity of medieval constructions of gender and embodiment allowed for some peculiar and unexpected

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<sup>219</sup> Newman, 29, 31.

<sup>220</sup> Bugge, 66.

reversals. Bugge's conclusions have been challenged by more recent scholarship that poses new questions about medieval genders and bodies.

VI. VIRGINITY ENCLOSED: *ANCRENE WISSE*

You vindicated me with your body,  
 and made of me, a wretch, your lover  
 and spouse. You have brought me from  
 the world to the bower of your  
 birth, locked me in a chamber.  
 There I may sweetly kiss and hold  
 you, and in your love take pleasure.  
*Wohunge of Ure Laured*

If a mad lion was running through  
 the street, would not a sensible  
 woman shut herself in at once?  
*Ancrene Wisse*

The thirteenth-century guide for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse*, was written for, and perhaps with considerable input from, three young women who were living as anchoresses.<sup>221</sup> These women had requested a "rule" from the author, who is thought to have been their spiritual advisor, and who was probably a Dominican cleric.<sup>222</sup> As noted above, the *Corpus Christi* manuscript mentions that participation in the anchoritic lifestyle was increasing,

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<sup>221</sup> In a recent article, Anne Savage argues that these three women may have contributed substantially to both the structure and the content of *Ancrene Wisse*. See "The Communal Authorship of *Ancrene Wisse*," in *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse*, Yoko Wada, ed. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), 45-55.

<sup>222</sup> Bella Millett, "Origins of *Ancrene Wisse*: New Questions, New Answers," *Medium Ævum* 61:2, 1992, 206-228.

and subsequent editors thus adapted the text for a wider audience, aware that the anchoritic lifestyle was gaining in popularity among English women.

The author of *Ancrene Wisse* drew heavily from Aelred's earlier work, *A Rule of Life for a Recluse* (*De Institutione Inclusarum*). Like Aelred, the author of *Ancrene Wisse* was not free of the prejudices of his time. His sentiments, "I þe lieome is fulðe unstrengðe. ne kimeð of vetles swuch þing as þer is in? . . . Nart tu incumen of ful slim? Nart tu fulðe fet?" ["In the body there is filth and weakness. Does not there come out of a vessel whatever is in it? . . . Are you not come from foul slime? Are you not a vessel of filth?"] are not exclusive to this text, or even very unusual.<sup>223</sup> Thoroughly immersed in the theology of his day, the author railed against the intrinsic evils of the sinful body with the same fervor exhibited by any other medieval religious writer. The text, however, also reveals the medieval ambivalence about the female body; the "vessel of filth" is also the secret dwelling place of Christ, housing the precious balm of the

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<sup>223</sup> Tolkien, 142-142; Savage and Watson, 149.

woman's virginity, the shining gold fired in the crucible of the cell.<sup>224</sup>

Although some anchoresses had previously been professed nuns, there was no officially recognized order of anchoresses, nor were they under the care or sponsorship of any existing order, a matter which occasionally caused some anxiety among the women. The *Ancrene Wisse* author makes note of the women's concern about their lack of affiliation with any established order, and he stresses that their membership in the holy community of recluses is sufficient. He expresses a suspicion of formal rules in general, stating that to do good and to love God is the only rule they really need.<sup>225</sup> The women are vowed only to obedience, chastity, and stability of abode, and the "rule" is actually more of a handbook, a loose set of guidelines for life in the anchorhold. The text consists of two parts, one dealing briefly with the "outer" rule (the first and last, "outer" chapters), and the other addressing the "inner" rule (the "inner" chapters) in much greater detail. Of the 'outer rule,' the author stipulates that it should only be kept

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<sup>224</sup> Aelred, 61.

<sup>225</sup> Savage and Watson, 51.



insofar as it enhances the strengthening of the 'inner rule,' and that his suggestions might be followed or not, at the discretion of the anchoress and the dictates of her individual circumstances. The author clearly believed that outer observances were merely the vehicle by which the more important inner observances might be more easily attained.

The cell of the anchoress encompassed multiple metaphorical meanings, as did the body of the anchoress locked within. The sealed and impenetrable cell was a fitting representation of the inaccessible virgin body. The virgin's constantly endangered chastity was protected by imprisonment, as the "fragile glass" containing that "precious balm" was fortified by the stone walls of the cell.

#### 1. *Imitatio Christi*: Enclosure as Crucifixion

The imitation of Christ was an integral part of religious life for both women and men during the High Middle Ages, and this was no less true for the anchoress. The most popular form of *imitatio Christi* involved meditations on the Passion, and it was Christ's physical

sufferings that pious women sought to emulate. The anchorhold became the site of the anchoress's 'crucifixion'; narrowness and bitterness were to be her rewards, and in her enclosure she mimicked the bitter sufferings of the embodied Christ, both as unborn child and as crucified martyr:

Ant nes he him seolf recluse I maries wombe?  
 þeos twa þing limpeð to ancre. nearowðe,  
 bitternesse. for wombe is nearow wunun ge, þer  
 ure lauerd wes recluse. ant tis word marie as  
 ich of te habbe iseid spealed bitternesse. 3ef  
 3e þenne I nearow stude þolieð bitternesse, 3e  
 beoð his feolahes recluse as he was I Marie  
 wombe. Beo 3e ibunden inwið fowr large wahes?  
 He in nearow cader. I neilet o rode. I stanene  
 þruh bi cluset hete feste. Marie wombe þis þruh  
 weren his anre huses.

[And was he not himself a recluse in Mary's womb? These two things belong to the anchoress: narrowness and bitterness. For the womb is a narrow dwelling, where our Lord was a recluse; and this word "Mary," as I have often said, means "bitterness." If you then suffer bitterness in a narrow place, you are his fellows, recluse as he was in Mary's womb. Are you imprisoned within four side walls? And he in a narrow cradle, nailed on a cross, enclosed tight in a stone tomb. Mary's womb and this tomb were his anchorhouses.] <sup>226</sup>

Physical enclosure was thus a form of *imitatio Christi*, and confinement was the anchoress's crucifixion: "for 3e

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<sup>226</sup> Tolkien, 192-193; Savage and Watson, 186.

beoð wið iesu crist bitund as I sepulcre, bibarret as he  
 wes o þe deo re rode" [" For you are buried with Jesus  
 Christ as if in a sepulcher, enclosed as he was on the  
 precious cross."<sup>227</sup>

Like all of the devotional texts, *Ancrene Wisse*  
 includes directives for meditation on the passion.  
 Passion devotion had a special appeal for women, as it was  
 in his death agony, broken and bleeding, that Christ's  
 body was most like women's bodies. Caroline Walker Bynum  
 was among the first to recognize and comment upon the  
 significance of women's devotion to Christ's passion and  
 the relationship of his broken, very human, body to their  
 own bodies, in her study, *Fragmentation and Redemption*:

No religious woman failed to experience Christ  
 as wounded, bleeding, and dying. Women's  
 efforts to imitate this Christ involved *becoming*  
 the crucified, not just patterning themselves  
 after or expanding their compassion toward, but  
*fusing with*, the body on the cross. . . . Illness  
 and asceticism were *imitatio Christi*, an effort  
 to plumb the depths of Christ's humanity at the  
 moment of his most insistent and terrifying  
 humanness—the moment of his dying.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Tolkien, 88; Savage and Watson, 111.

<sup>228</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 131.

Illness was thus welcomed by the anchoress, as a form of *imitatio Christi* and a way to share in the sufferings of Jesus. The author of *Ancrene Wisse* encourages this view, with a list of the advantages of illness:

Secnesse godd send . . . deð þeose six þinges.  
 (i)wescheð þe sunnen þe beoð ear iwrahte.  
 (ii)wardeð toðein þeo þe weren towards.  
 (iii)Pruueð pacience. (iv)halt in ead modnesse.  
 (v)Muchleð þe mede. (vi)euened to martir þene  
 þole mode. þus is secnesse sawlene heale, salue  
 of hire wunden. . . Secnesse is þi goldsmið þe i  
 þe blisse of heouene ouergul deð þi crune.

[Sickness that God sends . . . does these six things: 1) washes the sins that have already been committed, 2) protects one against those that were threatening, 3) tries patience, 4) keeps one humble, 5) increases one's reward, 6) makes the patient person equal to a martyr. In this way sickness is the soul's health, a salve for her wounds. . . Sickness is your goldsmith, who, in the joy of heaven, gilds your crown.]<sup>229</sup>

It was thus through sickness and suffering, narrowness and bitterness, that the anchoress imitated the Passion of the crucified Christ, for the more she endured bodily suffering, the more she became, in her tormented embodiment, like Christ.

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<sup>229</sup> Savage and Watson, 115-116.

## 2. Body and Soul: The Paradoxical Virgin Body

It is the body of the anchoress that, like Christ's body, is buried and crucified, and it is her body that provides the medium for her approach to God. Despite the occasional disparagement of the body into which he lapses, the author of *Ancrene Wisse* acknowledges that the anchoress is an embodied creature, and rather than denying the primacy of the body, advises her to consider her body the sanctified dwelling place of Christ and to maintain it accordingly. As Catherine Innes-Parker writes:

Spirituality which claims to transcend the flesh often simply denies it. *Ancrene Wisse*, on the other hand, begins with the acceptance of the body and a recognition of its sinfulness, and centers the spirituality of the anchoress on the physical. . . . The author of *Ancrene Wisse* deals with the very practical problem of living in the body by making the body itself the vehicle of redemption as the anchoress transforms the body in which she is imprisoned into the bower in which she keeps tryst with Christ."<sup>230</sup>

The body houses the heart of the anchoress, the heart which is the dwelling place of Christ and the only place where he will come to her:

He cleopeð þe his schaware, swa his þet nan opres. for þi he seið in canticis, 'Ostende michi faciem tuam.' Schaw þi neb to me he seið

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<sup>230</sup> Innes-Parker, *Virgin, Bride, Lover*, 305-306.

a to non oþer. bihald me 3ef þu wult habbe  
 briht sihðe wið þine heorte ehnen. Bihald  
 inward þer ich am. ne seche þu me nawt wið ute  
 þin heorte. Ich am wohere scheomeful. Ne nule  
 ich nohwer bicluppe mi leofmon bute i stude  
 dearne. O þulli wise ure louerd spekeð to his  
 spouse. . . for heo is godes chambre.

[He call you his mirror—so much his that you are  
 nobody else's. For this reason he says in the  
 Canticles: *Ostende michi faciem tuam* (Canticles  
 2:14)—'Show your face to me, he says, 'and to no  
 one else; look at me if you would have clear  
 sight with your heart's eyes. Look within where  
 I am and do not seek me outside your heart. I  
 am a bashful lover, I will not embrace my  
 beloved anywhere but in a secret place.' In this  
 way our Lord speaks to his spouse... for she is  
 God's chamber.] <sup>231</sup>

This secret place is the heart of the anchoress, and she  
 is admonished to make and to keep her heart and her body,  
 "God's chamber," ready to receive her spouse.

Accordingly, the *Ancrene Wisse* author does not  
 suggest that the anchoress should purge herself of fleshly  
 desires and erotic feelings. Instead, he redirects her  
 tender feelings to Christ, the heavenly bridegroom. For  
 all of the author's apparent disdain for sex, for the  
 body, and for carnality, he weaves an intensely erotic web  
 in describing the "lover and Beloved" relationship between  
 the anchoress and Jesus: "þe schuldest iþin heorte bur

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<sup>231</sup> Tolkien, 48-49; Savage and Watson, 82.

biseche me cosses as mi leofmon seið to me I luue boc,  
*Osculetur me osculko oris sui*, i is, Cusse me mi leofmon  
 wið þe coss of his muð muðene swetest" ["You should  
 beseech me for kisses within your heart's bower, as my  
 lover, who says to me in the book of love, '*Osculetur me  
 osculo oris sui*,' that is, Let my lover kiss me with the  
 kiss of his mouth, the sweetest of mouths."] And Jesus is  
 a jealous and possessive lover: "Ah ure lauerd wið þis  
 coss ne cusseð na sawle þe luueð ei þing buten him" ["Our  
 Lord kisses no soul with this kiss who loves anything but  
 him."] <sup>232</sup>

The image of Jesus as lover is woven throughout the  
 entire text of *Ancrene Wisse*. Within this framework, a  
 comparison of two feminist analyses is instructive.  
 Elizabeth Robertson's interpretation of the text finds  
 that "the work defines a woman's relationship to Christ in  
 terms of her body," that the *Wisse* author emphasized his  
 "assumption that his female audience cannot escape its  
 essentially lustful nature," and that through the text,  
 "women are taught to control their bodies." <sup>233</sup> Anne Clark

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<sup>232</sup> Tolkien, 55; Savage and Watson, 86.

<sup>233</sup> Robertson, 73-74.

Bartlett, however, identifies a different focus. She quotes from *Ancrene Wisse*:

Stretch out your love to Jesus Christ. You have won him! Touch him with as much love as you sometimes feel for a man. He is yours to do with all that you will. . . . So exceedingly does he love that he makes her his equal. I dare to say even more -- he makes her his sovereign and does all she commands, as if from necessity.<sup>234</sup>

Bartlett notes that this text provides an interesting reversal of the courtly love theme, in that it presents the female lover as the one with agency, rather than as a passive object, while Christ is portrayed as the "acquiescent partner." She argues: "This scenario fully legitimizes the physical desires of the female audiences, an extraordinary move in a gender system that routinely associates the feminine with the uncontrollable flesh and sexual excess."<sup>235</sup> The author of *Ancrene Wisse* may well have perceived the female nature as essentially and inescapably lustful, but it is clear that he was quite comfortable with encouraging the anchoress to think of herself as the literal spouse of Christ—a relational

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<sup>234</sup> Bartlett, 69. Bartlett is quoting from MS Corpus Christi College 402, *The Ancrene Riwe*, trans. M.B. Salu (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1955), 180.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 70.



construction in which recognition of the gendered body is implicit.

It might be argued that this construction describes a relationship with Christ to which *only women* had access. Assuming a heterosexual model, if an individual wanted to be Christ's bride, it was clearly an advantage to be female. The possibility of union with Christ in a passionate spousal relationship was one that ostensibly could only be *legitimately* pursued by women. John Bugge gives this idea considerable attention in *Virginitas*. He traces the evolution of the *sponsa Christi* motif from its earliest roots in Origen's commentaries on the Song of Songs, and he concludes that the reshaping of the *sponsa* construction during the Middle Ages, powerfully impacted by Bernardine mysticism, effectively excluded men from legitimate participation in the spousal relationship:

The overall effect of the confluence of the Anselmian doctrine of atonement, the Victorine speculation over the nature of marriage, and Bernard's commentary on the song was the "sexualization" of the sponsa metaphor and the feminization of religious psychology for a substantial period of time in the Church's history. It was a view which demanded at least the acknowledgement of [Christ's] human sexuality, something which henceforward made it inappropriate to apply the idea of nuptials to the spiritual relationship between the monk and

Christ. . . It made an unavoidable distinction as to gender in respect of Christ's love for the human race . . . The effect was in some sense to disqualify male monasticism from the fullest measure of that love.<sup>236</sup>

Is the gendered body, then, inescapable—for men as well as for women? The promise of female autonomy held out in *Hali Meiðhad* seems to be somewhat compromised, as the *sponsa Christi* relationship begins to look very much like a traditional heterosexual marriage, dependent on a female body to complement Christ's maleness. "As emphasis on Christ's humanity focused attention on his male sexuality," writes Bugge, "so the latter provoked increased interest in the femaleness of the professed virgin."<sup>237</sup>

### 3. Gender-Bending: The Androgynous God and the Virile Bride

Bugge is not alone in his belief that the literalization and sexualization of the *sponsa* motif presumed a male-female spousal relationship. Other scholars have made much the same observation; Catherine

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<sup>236</sup> Bugge, *Virginitas*, 66, 109.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

Innes-Parker comments at length on the eroticism of the mystical union described in the anchoritic texts, noting that it is "expressed in terms which exploit the sexuality of the female mystic."<sup>238</sup> Bynum contends that for a man to imagine himself as Christ's bride, a complex intellectual reversal had to take place so that he could perceive himself as feminized, whereas for a woman, the male-female marital imagery came more or less naturally.<sup>239</sup>

The woman mystic, because of her femaleness, was "other," and the entire construction of mysticism is based on a supposition of radical otherness. The woman "other" was united with the ultimate Other, in a union that not only validated, but in fact might be seen as dependent upon, her femaleness, her "otherness"; as Jane Chance explains:

Mysticism inscribes the concept of female as different. The transcendence of the soul over the corruptible (female) body and of the mortal world . . . permits ascendance to God as other. When the soul is imagined as female to a God imagined as male, the gender of the mystic resolves the problem of otherness differently. . . . Not only did it mean a different thing for a man to see himself as a "bride of Christ," but such use of symbol involved a different mode of

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<sup>238</sup> Innes-Parker, *Virgin, Bride, and Lover*, 304.

<sup>239</sup> Bynum, "And Woman His Humanity," in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, 273.

symbolic operation, one grounded in contradiction rather than in continuity.<sup>240</sup>

The symbolism of the spousal union thus appears incontrovertibly gender-inflected. However, this heterosexual construction has been problematized in recent scholarship by Karma Lochrie and Sarah Salih, among others. It must be acknowledged that many twentieth century scholars have demonstrated a tendency to read medieval texts through a lens that is clouded with Victorian ideas about sexuality and the body. Allowing for the possibility of a misreading based on possible differences in perceptions of sexuality in the Middle Ages is a fairly recent development in medieval scholarship, and any suggestion of homoeroticism still creates intense anxiety, anxiety which is compounded by the shape-shifting nature of the heterosexual *sponsa* coupling. As Lochrie writes, "The instability of the heterosexual paradigm of mystical desire requires constant vigilance and correction on the part of the scholar to maintain it and to occlude

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<sup>240</sup> Jane Chance, ed., *Gender and Text in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), 8.

the queer tendencies."<sup>241</sup> Such vigilance is apparent in much of the scholarship involving the anchoritic texts.

The presumption of a heterosexual marital union in the *sponsa Christi* relationship is further complicated by two significant questions that have yet to be answered satisfactorily: first, is Christ, in his humanity, consistently a male figure? In other words, is he 'really a man'? And secondly, is the anchoress, in her female body, consistently female? Is she 'really a woman'? While I cannot propose a definitive resolution one way or the other, the answer to both questions seems to be a qualified "no."

Medieval portrayals and descriptions of Jesus suggest a character that in both body and spirit is often androgynous and at times effeminate. Lochrie mentions that the feminization of Christ's body "is usually considered to be one of the most distinctive features of late medieval piety."<sup>242</sup> This feminization suggests the possibility of a transgendered and/or androgynous

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<sup>241</sup> Karma Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," in *Constructing Medieval Sexualities*, Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 188.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

divinity, a notion that has recently been explored by scholars such as Caroline Walker Bynum. Most of these analyses focus on the motherhood of God, and are based on a number of medieval texts that develop the Jesus-as-mother theology. Bynum credits Bernard of Clairvaux with developing this imagery to its highly sophisticated twelfth-century level.<sup>243</sup> She proposes that this image may have been useful for monks (all, she apparently assumes, heterosexual men) struggling with the bridal metaphor: "For if the God with whom they wished to unite was spoken of in male language, it was hard to use the metaphor of sexual union unless they saw themselves as female. . . . [one] solution . . . was of course to see God as female parent, with whom union would be quite physical (in the womb or at the breast.)"<sup>244</sup> Imagining God as a female parent is not the same thing as imagining God as bridegroom. Bynum seems to be confirming Bugge's assertion regarding the inappropriateness of men envisioning themselves with Christ in a spousal

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<sup>243</sup> Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 115-120. Bynum refers to Bernard's Sermons on the Song of Songs, in particular Sermon 9. See Killian Walsh, trans., *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Vol. 1, *On the Song of Songs I* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981), Sermon 9, 53-60.

<sup>244</sup> Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 161.

relationship, suggesting that they may have preferred a feminized Christ to a feminized self.

The idea of Christ as ambiguously gendered can certainly be seen in the anchoritic texts. Images of Christ as mother are sprinkled throughout *Ancrene Wisse*; for example: "Ure lauerd hwen greui sare he þoleð we beon itempt he pleið wið us as þe moder wið hire 3unge deorling" ["Our Lord, when he allows us to be tempted, is playing with us as the mother with her young darling,"] and "þe feorðe acheisun is hwi ure lauerd hut him þ tu seche him 3eornluker cleopie wepe efter him as ðeð þe lutel baban efter his moder" ["The fourth reason why our Lord hides himself is so that you will seek him more eagerly, and call and weep after him like the little baby does its mother."]<sup>245</sup> These rather tame allusions to maternal characteristics that might be attributed to any nurturing male take on a heightened significance when examined alongside medieval art that suggests that not only the gender of Christ but also his sexed body could be perceived as female. In late medieval devotional art, it was fairly common to see portraits of Christ lifting the

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<sup>245</sup> Tolkien, 119-120; Savage and Watson, 132-133.

wound in his side, with blood spilling out in a manner that suggests lactation. The *Double Intercession* painting, for example, with Christ lifting his wound and Mary offering her bared breast, seems to make this gesture unmistakable.<sup>246</sup> Lochrie comments on the juxtaposition of the erotic with the maternal in such images, noting that emphasis on images of the lactating Christ suggest that his feminization "is chiefly expressed through his maternal and spiritual qualities, and his maternity, in turn, is assumed to be asexual."<sup>247</sup>

However, another medieval image that is not so easy to interpret as asexual maternity is the wound in Christ's side, often pictured with an unmistakable resemblance to a vulva. Lest we dismiss this resemblance as coincidental, Wolfgang Riehle argues that the likeness was in fact quite intentional:

Since the wound in Christ's side is given a new interpretation as the opening through which it is possible for the mystical lover to enter into his beloved and thus become completely one with him, this gives rise . . . to a typical and quite consciously intended analogy between the wound of Christ and the female pudenda: the

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<sup>246</sup> See Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*; "Double Intercession" is reproduced on page 208, a similar image, titled "The Savior" appears on page 110.

<sup>247</sup> Lochrie, 189-192.



vulva, as the place of sexual ecstasy, has, so to speak, been transformed into the *vulnus* of Christ as the place of mystical ecstatic union of the soul with its divine beloved. This is confirmed by the following statement of the Monk of Farne . . . 'latus meum aperio ut osculatum introducam ad cor meum, et simus duo in carne una.' [I open my side to draw you into my heart after this kiss, that we may be two in one flesh.] <sup>248</sup>

Riehle also mentions James of Milan's *Stimulus Amoris*, in which "the union of the soul and God is described in terms of the joining of both their wounds: 'vulnus vulneri copulatur.'" <sup>249</sup>

Riehle's views are expanded by the work of Lochrie, who also finds erotic imagery in *Stimulus Amoris*. Lochrie notes that in this text "the wound is an object of the speaker's desire for union (*copulo, copulari*)". <sup>250</sup> She notes that the author of *Stimulus Amoris* compares the

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<sup>248</sup> Wolfgang Riehle, *The Middle English Mystics* (London: Routledge, 1981), 46. Riehle is quoting from *The Meditations of the Monk of Farne*, ed. Hugh Farmer (Rome: Studia Anselmiana 41, 1957), 182. Riehle mentions two other English texts in connection with this vulva-vulnus comparison: *A Talkyng of the Love of God*, ed. Maria Sylvina Wester (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1950), 52, 24; and Richard Rolle's *Incendium Amoris*, 152.

<sup>249</sup> Riehle, 46.

<sup>250</sup> Lochrie, 189. See also the Middle English version of *Stimulus Amoris*, attributed to both Bonaventure and Walter Hilton, *The Prickyng of Love* (Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1983).

wound to the "garden enclosed" of the Song of Songs, in such a way that "Christ's wound is the open garden through which the *locus deliciarum* is achieved."<sup>251</sup> Referring to the line in *Hali Meiðhad*, "break not the seal which seals you both together," Lochrie suggests that this vulva-like wound in Christ's side is that to which the virgin is sealed via her intact hymen, "vagina to vagina," so to speak.<sup>252</sup>

Posing the question, "What does it signify when a female mystic desires and adores the feminized body of Christ?" Lochrie provides an answer of sorts: in the medieval mind, it may well have signified nothing at all. If, as Valerie Traub has argued, female homoerotic desire "did not signify," it certainly seems possible that any elements of lesbian desire involving women and the

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.; quoting from Quaracchi, ed. *Stimulus Amoris* (Bibliotheca franciscana ascetica medii aevi, 4: 1905), 71: "Ideoque ibi habito et, quibus vescitur, cibus vescor ac ibi inebrior suo potu; ibi tanta abundo dulcedine, ut tibi non valeam enarrare."

<sup>252</sup> Lochrie, 190-191. See 191-193 for examples of medieval religious art depicting the wound of Christ looking very much like a vulva. It should be noted that Sarah Salih takes issue with Lochrie's reading of the *Hali Meiðhad* "seal" passage, noting that the sealed virgin body is marked as other to "the conventionally leaky, open female body," and that the virginity thereby represented is "not identical to femaleness." See Salih, "Queering Sponsalia Christi," 168.

feminized Christ may have been "illegible for medieval culture because of the very gender and sexuality imperatives they appropriate."<sup>253</sup> This argument, however, is problematic on several levels, and the question of whether or not lesbian desire did in fact 'signify' will be addressed in greater detail below.

Approaching these questions from the other direction requires that we examine the construction of the masculinized woman, the *virago*. The virginal woman could become male, or at least take on the 'virile' characteristics of maleness, but only by denying her sexuality, according to Barbara Newman.<sup>254</sup> Newman cites the writings of several church fathers who suggested that it was indeed possible for a woman to rise above her sex into maleness; virginity conferred masculine characteristics of strength and fortitude that were unavailable to the unchaste woman. In the fifth century C.E., for example, Jerome wrote, "while a woman serves for birth and children, she is different from a man as body is

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<sup>253</sup> Lochrie, 194. Lochrie refers to Valerie Traub's article, "The (In)Significance of 'Lesbian' Desire," in *Queering the Renaissance*, Jonathan Goldberg, ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 80.

<sup>254</sup> Newman, "Flaws in the Golden Bowl," 26.

from soul. But when she wants to serve Christ more than the world, then she ceases to be a woman and shall be called man."<sup>255</sup> Sarah Salih argues that while this statement "imposes a rigid hierarchy of binary gender," at the same time it renders more permeable these same categories of gender, so that "traffic between them is possible."<sup>256</sup>

The social construction of gender is implicitly acknowledged in the rhetoric of virginity. As Salih states, "The very rigidity of gender *roles* requires a corresponding fluidity of gender *identities*: a woman who is a man seems less troublesome than a woman who does not have a man."<sup>257</sup> If a woman was defined as female based on the presence of a husband and children, what kind of a woman was a virgin? Did she cease to be woman and become, as Jerome maintained, a man? Apparently not; the virgin, in spite of her perceived 'virility,' was not, after all,

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<sup>255</sup> Jerome, "Commentarium in Epistolam ad Ephesios," *Patrologia Latina*, cols. 459-554. translation from Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "The Virgin's Tale," in Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson, eds., *Feminist Readings in Medieval Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect* (London: Routledge, 1994), 166.

<sup>256</sup> Salih, "Queering Sponsalia Christi," in *New Medieval Literatures*, vol.5, 160.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

permitted to assume the power and privilege that 'real' men took for granted. If the defining characteristics of 'woman' were husband and children, the defining characteristics of 'man' were rather more significant, and not wholly represented by nor contained within relationships, nor nullified by their absence. How, then, to identify the woman who has opted out of the heterosexual economy?

Monique Wittig addresses this issue in her essay, "One is Not Born a Woman": "To refuse to be a woman . . . does not mean that one has to become a man . . . even if she would like to, with all her strength, she cannot become a man. . . For becoming a man would demand from a woman not only a man's external appearance but his consciousness as well."<sup>258</sup> Wittig is describing another group of women who decline to participate in compulsory heterosexual relationships: lesbians. The virgin must be, *has to be*, like the lesbian, "a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature, for there is

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<sup>258</sup> Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 12-13.

no nature in society."<sup>259</sup> If, as Wittig argues, "the category of sex is the product of a heterosexual society which imposes on women the rigid obligations of the reproduction of the 'species,'" then a 'woman' who intentionally sidesteps that obligation is not a woman. It is significant that, as Wittig notes, only lesbians and nuns (i.e., virgins) escape the period of compulsory sexual service to which all women are subjected.<sup>260</sup>

I am not arguing that medieval anchoresses and other consecrated virgins were all lesbians, although, as we shall see, some of them may well have been. What I am suggesting is that virgins, like lesbians, either occupied a nongendered or ambiguously gendered space, or else they constituted a third gender that was neither defined nor constricted by the man/woman gender construction imposed by presumed heterosexuality. They were, in effect, "not-woman, not-man."

#### 4. Lesbian or "Lesbian-Like"?

If there were lesbians living as anchoresses in the Middle Ages, it must be assumed that they did not define

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>260</sup> Wittig, "The Category of Sex," in *The Straight Mind*, 7.

themselves as such, as such an identity would have been strange and unfamiliar to them. The term, however, may not have been. While the use of the word 'lesbian' has occasionally been deemed anachronistic for premodern studies,<sup>261</sup> it actually has an ancient history, predating 'homosexual' by many centuries, and the evidence indicates that it has always meant more or less the same thing it means now.<sup>262</sup>

That is not to say that the word itself is easy to define, and in fact it seems to have become less so in the postmodern era. The other terms sometimes employed, like 'same-sex relationships' and 'woman-identified women,' are not entirely satisfactory either, and seem to be even more anachronistic than 'lesbian.' Judith Bennett's term,

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<sup>261</sup> Michelle M. Sauer, "Representing the Negative: Positing the Lesbian Void in Medieval English Anchoritism," *Thirdspace* 3:2, (March 2004), online <[http://www.thirdspace.ca/articles/3\\_2\\_sauer.htm](http://www.thirdspace.ca/articles/3_2_sauer.htm)> [04-15-05].

<sup>262</sup> Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 5. Brooten cites a medieval commentator on Clement of Alexandria who "equates *tribades*, *hetairistrai*, and *Lesbiai* . . . which is the earliest known attestation of 'lesbian'. . . for a woman erotically oriented toward other women." Ibid. See Arethas, "Scholion to Paidagogos" 3.3.21.3, in *Clemens Alexandrinus*, Otto Stahlin, ed., vol. 1 (Berlin: Akademie, 1972), 337.

'lesbian-like,' may be the most appropriate descriptive term for analysis of potentially erotic relationships between women,<sup>263</sup> since it is considerably more inclusive and allows for various kinds of relationships, circumstances, and intimacies of the sort that fall along the "lesbian continuum" originally described by Adrienne Rich.<sup>264</sup> Bennett's definition includes "women whose lives might have particularly offered opportunities for same-sex love; women who resisted norms of feminine behavior based on heterosexual marriage; women who lived in circumstances that allowed them to nurture and support other women."<sup>265</sup> Based on this broad definition, the circumstances and lifestyle of the anchoress would certainly qualify as 'lesbian-like.'

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<sup>263</sup> Judith M. Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9:1-2, January/April 2002, 1-24. Bennett cautions that care must be taken not to interpret 'lesbian-like' too broadly

<sup>264</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Journal of Women's History* 15:3 (Autumn 2003), 11-48, 27 (originally published in 1980).

<sup>265</sup> Bennett, 10.



## 5. The Significance of Lesbian Eroticism in the Middle Ages

Although it is not easy to determine whether or not lesbian desire was recognized as such in the Middle Ages, there is evidence that sexual activity between women may indeed have 'signified,' at least to a certain limited extent. In England we need only turn to the penitentials, which not only acknowledged that sexual activity between women was possible, but also prescribed penance for it. The terminology employed is different, however, from that used to describe sex between men, and the penances are much lighter, suggesting that sex between women was perceived to be less serious. The Penitential of Theodore stipulates that "if a woman practices vice with a woman, she shall do penance for three years."<sup>266</sup> This brief directive comes after several lengthy descriptions of sexual sins committed by men, including sex with other men, which carries with it a penance of ten years, while sodomy requires seven years of penance.<sup>267</sup> Fornication between two men was serious enough to warrant two separate

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<sup>266</sup> "Penitential of Theodore," in McNeill and Gamer, 185.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

entries, and bestiality, sodomy, and other "unnatural" sexual interactions involving men are also detailed, but overall references to sex between women are sparse.<sup>268</sup> Clearly there were differences in the perceived seriousness of same-sex sexual activity, depending on whether those involved were men or women, but the penitentials nevertheless indicate that there was some ecclesiastical acknowledgement that sexual activity between women was possible.

How widespread such activity may have been is, of course, impossible to determine. During the fourteenth century, legal proceedings begin to appear on the continent in which women are tried for sodomy.<sup>269</sup> But there are very few such trials compared to the number of similar trials involving men, and no evidence exists that

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> For example, see "The Trial of Katherina Hetzeldorfer," Stadtarchiv Speyer, 1 A 704/II, fols. 12r-14r, cited by Helmut Puff in "Female Sodomy: The Trial of Katherina Hetzeldorfer (1477)," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30:1 (Winter 2000), 41-61. See also Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), for an account of the life of Benedetta Carlini.

any English women were involved in comparable proceedings in the Middle Ages.<sup>270</sup>

Many feminist scholars, among them Judith Bennett and Edith Benkov, argue that medieval lesbians had no legal identity, since the medieval notion of homoerotic activity between women usually specified the use of some instrument of penetration, and that it was only this usurpation of the phallic prerogative that was specifically prohibited. John Boswell notes that Hincmar of Rheims mentioned such instruments in his statements about female homoeroticism:

Even females have this sordid appetite, as Ambrose says in expounding the apostle (Romans 1:26) on the subject of females engaging in filthy acts. They do not put flesh to flesh in the sense of the genital organ of the one in the body of the other, since nature precludes this, but they do transform the use of the member in question into an unnatural one, in that they are reported to use certain instruments (machinas) of diabolical operation to excite desire. Thus they sin nonetheless by committing fornication against their own bodies.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Bennett, 3; see also Edith J. Benkov, "The Erased Lesbian: Sodomy and the Legal Tradition in Medieval Europe," in *Same-Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Francesca Canade Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 101-122.

<sup>271</sup> Hincmar of Rheims, "Hincmari archiepiscopi rhemensis de divorto lotharii regis et tetbergae reginae," in *Patrologia Latina* 125:692-693, electronic database <<http://gateway.proquest.com>> [11-02-05]; for Boswell's translation, see John Boswell, *Christianity, Social*

Benkov argues that since nonpenetrative acts were either ignored or easily dismissed, a space existed for lesbian sex: "this very erasure—that is, the elision of lesbian into sodomite and the emphasis on a material instrument—may well have been the mechanism that allowed female homoaffective/homoerotic relationships to flourish."<sup>272</sup>

Although Benkov suggests that certain privileged spaces were exempt from suspicion, or at least from legal attack (convents, for instance),<sup>273</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx certainly recognized the potential for homoeroticism between women in the anchorhold. In *De institutione inclusarum*, he maintains that such a sin is worse than any other:

Do not think this means that a man cannot be defiled without a woman or a woman without a man, since that abominable sin which inflames man with passion for a man or a woman for a

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*Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 204.

<sup>272</sup> Benkov, 116. See also E. Ann Matter, "'My Sister, My Spouse' Woman-Identified Women in Medieval Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2:02 (2004), 81-93. Matter suggests that "intimate relations between women were most despised—and perhaps only noticed—when they challenged male cultural prerogatives." 90.

<sup>273</sup> Benkov, 116.

woman meets with more relentless condemnation than any other crime. But virginity is often lost and chastity outraged without any commerce with another if the flesh is set on fire by a strong heat which subdues the will and takes the members by surprise.<sup>274</sup>

This is interesting indeed, coming from Aelred, whose own same-sex friendships shaped his life and spirituality and provided the basis for some of his best-known writings.<sup>275</sup>

The *Ancrene Wisse* author is more circumspect than Aelred, but he slips in an odd little statement in his discussion of the outer senses: "Of hire ahne suster hauled sum ibeon I temptet" ["Some have been tempted by their own sisters"].<sup>276</sup> The author does not elaborate or explain, and there are few other clues as to what he may have had in mind, so we will have to look elsewhere for evidence of "lesbian-like" behaviors within the cell.

## 6. "The Oneness of a Single Heart"

If we revisit Lochrie's question, we might rephrase it as, "What does it signify when a female recluse desires

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<sup>274</sup> Aelred, *De institutione inclusarum* 64.

<sup>275</sup> Boswell, 221-226. As Boswell notes, "There can be little question that Aelred was gay and that his erotic attraction to men was a dominant force in his life." 222.

<sup>276</sup> Tolkien, 35; Savage and Watson, 71.

and adores the body of Christ (feminized or otherwise), and the only living, breathing person close at hand is another woman?" This shifts the potential for female homoerotic desire from fantasy to possibility, and provides us with an inquiry that might reasonably be addressed within the context of the anchoritic texts and the lifestyle they describe. How might an anchoress, having forsaken the possibility of intimate contact with men, and permanently confined in a small space with two or three other women, have met her very human needs for closeness and intimacy? Or to put it another way, to what degree can we say that the virgin in the anchorhold was "like the lesbian"? Although the obvious answer presents itself immediately, the questions demand more than a superficial response.

The anchoritic cell provided a perfect space for the enactment of female intimacy. The cell had one important characteristic that was lacking in virtually every other structure and environment that existed in the Middle Ages: it was private. Michelle Sauer contends that the privacy and female exclusivity of the anchorhold constituted a "'lesbian void' in which the anchoress could explore

woman-woman erotic possibilities."<sup>277</sup> Further, it is conceivable that the spiritual guidance provided in the anchoritic texts actually encouraged such explorations.

The exhortations in *Ancrene Wisse* about guarding chastity seem to apply exclusively to possible contacts with men. While the custody of the senses is addressed at great length, the dangers attendant with looking and touching are specifically linked to men.<sup>278</sup> Interactions with men other than with the recluses's confessor and/or spiritual advisor are prohibited, and even visits from her confessor are to be strictly regulated; not even the bishop might see the anchoress without her permission, and then only for the briefest moment, through her window.<sup>279</sup> He could not enter her enclosure at any time for any reason, and the anchoress was cautioned to avoid even the touch of his hand.<sup>280</sup> Women visitors, on the other hand, could seek guidance and comfort from the anchoress, and they might also reciprocate as appropriate. She could invite them inside to share her meal, and in some circumstances might even invite her female guests to spend

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<sup>277</sup> Sauer.

<sup>278</sup> Savage and Watson, 67-71.

<sup>279</sup> Savage and Watson, 67-68.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 91.

the night.<sup>281</sup> Any potential negative effects of contact with women are mentioned only insofar as such contacts might be distractions from the spiritual life; they do not apparently present any threat to the maiden's chastity.

It has already been noted that anchorhouses sometimes housed two or three women, but even the solitary recluse had close daily contact with at least one other woman: her maid. The *Ancrene Wisse* suggests that these women shared much more than physical proximity. The very same kinds of contacts that the *AW* author warns against with men are actually expected and encouraged for the anchoress and her attendants; they might read together, comfort one another, embrace, even kiss: "3ef ei strif ariseð bitweone þe wummen, þe ancremakie eiðer rihte up oþer cussen on ende," ["if any strife arises between the women, the anchoress should make each say *I have done wrong* to the other, kneeling on the ground; let each lift up the other and finally kiss."] <sup>282</sup> Sauer thus contends that "while heterosexual contact is spiritually damaging, homosocial

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>282</sup> Tolkien, 219; Savage and Watson, 205.



contact (and perhaps, by extension, homosexual contact?) is spiritually restorative."<sup>283</sup>

Finally, close physical contact, even potentially erotic activity, with one's female cellmate would not have presented any real threat to the recluses's chastity. If, as McInerney argues, "a virgin is a woman who has not been penetrated,"<sup>284</sup> then nonpenetrative sexual activity would not have compromised the virgin's status. The "seal" - the hymen - would remain intact.

In summary, here we have a woman permanently locked into a small private space with another woman. The two women have chosen a lifestyle that removes them forever from the companionship of men; they have permanently declined to engage in the heteronormative construction of marriage and family, or if they had participated previously, they had abandoned it. The women are together for many years, usually until one of them dies. They eat, bathe, dress, read, and pray together. Much of their reading includes what we would refer to now as a kind of spiritual erotica, describing a passionate spousal relationship with an absent bridegroom. This reading is

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<sup>283</sup> Sauer.

<sup>284</sup> McInerney, 189.

supplemented by the lives of the virgin martyrs, which contain their own peculiar brand of eroticism. Deprived of all other companionship, the only opportunities these women have for closeness and intimacy would of necessity be with each other. Certainly their virginity must be diligently safeguarded, but the rhetoric of virginity (including that of the Katherine Group texts) seems to suggest that only intimate contact with *men* presents a threat to the virgin's maidenhood; similar contact with women is viewed as either insignificant or fairly innocuous, and in certain instances is actually encouraged. Finally, their shared space is impenetrable and completely private; within it they might do whatever they like, without fear of censure or observation. In the absence of any other evidence to support such a claim, these conditions in and of themselves are not only conducive to but also suggestive of female intimacy. It thus seems likely that at least some anchoresses must have engaged in activity which might be described as "lesbian-like."

It nevertheless behooves us to be cautious about making any hasty assumptions about lesbian sexual activity within the anchorhold. As Judith Bennett says:

Many lesbian-like behaviors—such as the deep attachments formed between some medieval nuns—were not necessarily sexual in xpression...same-sex relations are not a sine qua non of lesbianism, and if we treat lesbianism as rooted primarily or even exclusively in sexuality, we create very limited histories.<sup>285</sup>

The idea that we can or should or must somehow discover whether, how, and with whom a woman had sex seems not only a product of heteronormative thinking but dangerously ahistorical. We must not seek to impose upon medieval women an "identity" that they would not have embraced or even understood. There are a hundred ways to live a "lesbian-like" life as a woman-identified woman; genital sex is but one. There was no more a stable lesbian identity in the Middle Ages than there is now.

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<sup>285</sup> Bennett, 15-16.

## 7. Spiritual Marriage and Gender

All of this gender ambiguity - the feminized or androgynous Christ, the virago, the "not-woman, not-man" status of the virgin anchoress-- makes it rather more difficult to assert that the *sponsa Christi* relationship was simply a replica of heterosexual marriage. Such a construction would be dependent upon a binary oppositional gender system, in which desire "differentiates itself through an oppositional relation to that other gender it desires."<sup>286</sup> But the desire of the soul for union with God seems to occur outside of the boundaries of binary gender; it is, as Salih notes, "difficult to contain within a heterosexual framework."<sup>287</sup>

Judith Butler maintains that "gender as substance, the viability of *man* and *woman* as nouns, is called into question by the dissonant play of attributes that fail to conform to sequential or causal modes of intelligibility," and that the gendered self "is produced by the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of

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<sup>286</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 22.

<sup>287</sup> Salih, "Queering Sponsalia Christi," 156.

coherence."<sup>288</sup> I would like to suggest that the mystical union of the virgin with Christ represents just such a "dissonant play of attributes," and further, that it so disrupts the "established lines of coherence" that the gendered self ceases to exist as such. Both the virgin and her spouse can then be understood as "not-man, not-woman." Of course, this de-gendered disruption creates a space in which males might also assume the *sponsa* role, despite Bugge's arguments to the contrary; mystical union was not, after all, an exclusively female experience, and as we have seen, was not contingent upon feminine attributes in either the mystic or the deity.

The attributes of conventional femininity were largely absent in both the enclosed virgin and in her literary heroine, the virgin martyr. The bodies of the virgin martyrs, with their amazing recuperative and salvific properties, were marked as distinctly unfeminine in the hagiographic discourse. Thus the virgin martyr legends further complicate the questions of gender identity in the anchoritic texts.

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<sup>288</sup> Butler, 24.

## VII. VIRGINITY PERFORMED: LIVES OF THE VIRGIN MARTYRS

In addition to its treatises,  
 letters, and rules for living,  
 virginity has a major narrative  
 form in the virgin saint's life.  
 The hagiographic genre of the  
 virgin martyr passion extends  
 through two millennia, in Latin  
 and all the European vernaculars.  
 It is, perhaps, the major Western  
 form of representing women.

Jocelyn Wogan-Browne,  
*Saint's Lives and  
 Women's Literary Culture*

Desire clings to violence and  
 stalks it like a shadow because  
 violence is the signifier of the  
 cherished being, the signifier of  
 divinity.

Rene Girard, *Violence and the  
 Sacred*

Holy virgins seek their true  
 spouse in blood.

Hildebert of Lavardin

Among the various hagiographies read by enclosed  
 women were the lives of the virgin martyrs, and the  
 Katherine Group includes Middle English translations of  
 the lives of Sts. Katherine, Juliana, and Margaret.  
 Virgin martyr legends were extremely popular among  
 anchoresses, as they generally described the lives of

young virginal Christian women who had declined offers of marriage, pledged their troth to Christ, been unjustly imprisoned, and suffered terribly in the defense of their faith and the preservation of their chastity, presented in the vitae as the representative emblem of their religious faith. The virgin martyrs performed few deeds of charity or acts of mercy, and with the notable exception of Katherine, rarely participated in sophisticated theological discourse. As brides of Christ, the defining quality of their religious lives was their willingness to perish before yielding to defloration. They prayed, evangelized, quoted scripture, and defended their faith and their virtue against agents both human and diabolical. They were also brutally murdered, usually after a period of bloody and graphically depicted torture at the hands of men. Despite angelic intervention and/or miraculous heavenly rescue, the numerous descriptions of men inflicting ferocious violence on women, violence which often included genital mutilation, are so vicious and sexually explicit that they would be considered pornographic by a modern reader. In this chapter, I want to consider the possible reasons for the popularity of

this genre, and to determine what, if anything, these accounts of incredible violence and brutal death might have contributed to the positive self-image of their readers.

### 1. Problematizing Hagiography

Hagiographies, particularly the lives of virgin martyrs, are among the most interesting, if most problematic, of the texts available to medieval recluses. While they can be and often are extremely useful as barometers of medieval attitudes regarding female sanctity, as historical documents, they have certain limitations. As Jane Schulenberg observes, "it is necessary to note that hagiographers were not necessarily historians or biographers. Their works were panegyrics, conscious programs of persuasion or propaganda, meant to prove the particular sanctity of their protagonists."<sup>289</sup> The Life of Saint Katherine, one of the most popular texts among anchoresses and lay readers alike, provides a case in point. The editors of the Middle English version of

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<sup>289</sup> Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1500* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 17.



this hagiography introduce the work by noting, "It [the legend of Saint Katherine] has long been recognized as an outstanding example of the category of saints' lives which have probably no historical kernel whatever, and it may well be a pious fiction."<sup>290</sup> Despite their weaknesses as historical documents, however, these "pious fictions" made up a substantial part of the anchoritic library.<sup>291</sup>

The purpose of the medieval hagiography was primarily didactic: to provide an exemplum of holiness and fidelity, a model of saintly behavior that a woman might profitably contemplate, and presumably imitate, to the extent that her circumstances permitted. Widely read by laywomen as well as 'professional' religious, medieval hagiographies provide important information about those values considered essential to a female life of sanctity.

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<sup>290</sup> S. R. T. O. d'Ardenne and E. J. Dobson, eds. *Seinte Katerine* (London: Oxford University Press, 1981), Intro., xiii. Savage and Watson mention, in the "Editor's Note" prefacing St. Katherine's *vita*, that "Katherine of Alexandria. . . almost certainly never existed in fact." 260.

<sup>291</sup> Bartlett provides a detailed list of books owned by medieval English nuns, and *Seinte Katerine* and other saints' *vitae* were very popular; see "Appendix," 149-171. See also David N. Bell, *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995).

Karen Winstead explains the additional significance of such narratives for the anchoress:

The legends of the Katherine Group were especially well suited to the spiritual needs and circumstances of enclosed women. Katherine of Alexandria made an excellent model for anchoresses, for she eschewed the frivolous pastimes that anchoresses were warned against: "Ne luude ha nane lithe plohen ne nane sotte songes" (*Seinte Katerina*, 8) (She did not enjoy trivial games or foolish songs.) Moreover, in always having "on hali writ ehnen oðer heorte, oftest ba togederes" (8) (her eyes or heart on holy scripture, often both together), Katherine displays the same abiding devotion to scripture that Aelred urged anchoresses to cultivate.<sup>292</sup>

Winstead also notes that these hagiographies focus on the activities of the saints in their cells, after their imprisonment. It seems logical that an anchoress, confined for life in the anchorhold, would find appealing parallels in stories about chaste holy women pursuing lives of devotion from the confines of a prison cell.<sup>293</sup>

Although there were several characteristics associated with holiness and described in the various hagiographies (i.e., seriousness of purpose, meekness,

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<sup>292</sup>Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 39. Winstead is quoting from D'Ardenne, S.R.T.O., and E.J. Dobson, ed. *Seinte Katerine*. M.S. Bodley 34. E.E.T.S. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 8.

<sup>293</sup> Winstead, 39.

humility, pious demeanor), for the female religious none was more important than the preservation of virginity; the heavenly reward for virgin martyrdom was a double crown, one for virginity, the other for the martyr's death.<sup>294</sup> The peculiar conflation of sexual purity with religious faith and their association with torture and death occurred early in the development of the Christian canon; as Susan Brownmiller writes, "Dating roughly from the third century and the Diocletian persecutions, the Church ingeniously began to dramatize a virgin role model that embodied two critical tenets, chastity and defense of the faith, in one lurid act of annihilation."<sup>295</sup> Thus did the martyred virgin assume the bloody crown of sainthood and the status of exemplar for professed women. The martyr's death was the ultimate *imitatio Christi*.

## 2. The Plot

The stories of the virgin martyrs differ appreciably only in the minor details. They are usually set in the early centuries of the church, at a time when the struggle

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<sup>294</sup> Newman, 27.

<sup>295</sup> Brownmiller, 329.

for religious supremacy between Christianity and paganism was as yet unresolved. A young, beautiful virgin (they're always young and beautiful; old, fat, plain virgins are never martyred) catches the eye of a pagan man, generally a man with some secular power.<sup>296</sup> The man wants to seduce her, convert her, or marry her—sometimes all three. He promises her wealth and status if she will denounce her faith and yield to him. She refuses. He tries persuasion, and when that fails, he is predictably infuriated and has her seized and imprisoned. The maiden is then tortured, both by men and by demons. Angels usually arrive to save her from the worst of the agony, although in the end, the virgin always dies (thus the 'martyr'). Her courage and stoicism, along with her faith, convert many witnesses, who are then martyred along with her. After her death, her corpse might display miraculous qualities, such as exuding healing fluids and being resistant to ordinary decomposition.

This sounds like a romance script gone awry, but Jocelyn Wogan-Browne argues that hagiography is not just another version of romance. As she says, "Hagiography

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<sup>296</sup> Kim M. Phillips, "Maidenhod," in *Young Medieval Women*, 10-11.

begins where chivalric literature leaves off: it is the retrospective display by the victor (God) of his rights to the virgin and his control of the rival."<sup>297</sup> The intervention of Christ and/or of angels in the scenes of torture does not end the torture, but rather transforms its meaning, so that the virgin's death is a triumph: Jesus gets the girl, as is his right, and the girl gets heaven, and a marriage that is quite literally made there. The objectified virgin's participation in the sequence of events seems almost superfluous—except that her speech positions her in center stage, transforming her from object into speaking subject.

The contest is between Christ (the hero-subject) and the pagan would-be suitor (Christ's rival); the virgin is the object of desire of both, an object that in her utter unavailability is perceived as even more desirable to the pagan rival. Although, according to Rene Girard, such a mythic contest between rivals usually involves episodes of physical violence interspersed with spoken debate, during which the rivals attempt to assert verbal superiority, Christ does not speak or fight in his own behalf; the

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<sup>297</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saint's Lives and Women's Literary Culture*, 106.

virgin is empowered to make his arguments for him, and she makes them so skillfully that the winner of the contest is never really in question.<sup>298</sup> There is no physical contest between the two male rivals; the requisite violence is not inflicted on Christ, but rather is perpetrated on the female object of desire, so that the stage of the enactment of the divine rivalry becomes the body of the object/virgin.

The virgin's assumption of Christ's role as verbal defender of his chivalric honor results in some interesting reversals in the legends, as the feminine virtues of obedience and silence are summarily discarded in favor of defiant verbosity. Much of the text of the saints' lives consists of their spoken narratives in response to their imprisonment and torture; these female narratives are in some respects the most significant aspects of the legends. The martyrs argue, in the face of substantial evidence to the contrary, that Christ is the superior suitor, but they do more than sing the praises of the heavenly bridegroom. They pray, preach and soliloquize; thousands of onlookers are converted by the

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<sup>298</sup> Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 150-151.

courage of their demeanor and the eloquence of their speech. It is through their spoken communication that they most thoroughly frustrate the intentions of their torturers.

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry observes that one effect of torture and unrelenting pain is to destroy language and the capacity for speech in the victim.<sup>299</sup> "World, self, and voice are lost, or nearly lost, through the intense pain of torture," says Scarry.<sup>300</sup> However, despite the horrendous tortures to which they are subjected, the virgin martyrs not only miraculously retain their speech, but through their speech acts they reclaim their selves for Christ, in effect recreating the world that their torturers attempt to destroy.

### 3. St. Katherine

While all three saints in the Katherine Group are motherless, Katherine is the only orphan. Unlike the others, she is not courted by a pagan, but rather seeks an

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<sup>299</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 54.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

audience with Maxentius, the king, because of her concern for the persecution of Christians. Katherine is thus "virgin" in the truest pagan sense: she is completely without male control, with no father, no husband, and no suitors. It is significant that Katherine is the best educated and most articulate of the Katherine Group martyrs. Confronted by fifty philosophers summoned by Maxentius, she defeats them all in debate, quoting scripture and demonstrating a broad knowledge of classical philosophy. Impressed by the breadth of her knowledge, Maxentius offers her a position second only to the queen, and promises that she will be worshipped as a goddess if she will bow to his pagan gods. Citing her betrothal to Christ as the chief impediment to such an arrangement, she replies:

Ful we lich chulle tu wite ne math tu wið na  
 whit wende min heorte from him þich heie  
 wulleherien. Bihat al tu wult þrep þrefter  
 inoh. Þrea te tu beo weri ne mei me wunne ne  
 weole ne na worlðes wurðshipe ne mei me nowðer  
 teone ne tintreohe turnen from mi leofmones luue  
 þicon leue. He haueð iweddēt him to mi meiðhad  
 wið þe ring of rihte. Bileauē ich habbe to him  
 treowliche itake me. Swa wit beoðiestnet  
 iteiet in an swa þe cnotte is icnut bituhhen us  
 tweien. Ne mei hit listen e luðer streng ðe  
 nowðer of na liuiende mon lowsin ne leoðien. He  
 is milif mi luue. He is gleadeð me misoðe  
 blisse-bune me weole al mi wunne ne nawt ne



wilni ich elles. Mi swete lif se swoteliche he  
 smecheð me smealleð. Ðal me þuncheð sauure  
 softe he sent me. Stute nu þenne stew be.  
 Stille þine words for ha beoð me unwurð wite þu  
 to wisse.

[I want you to know full well that you can in no  
 way turn my heart from him whom I exalt and will  
 praise forever. Promise me all you want, then  
 take me to task and threaten me until you are  
 weary; neither prosperity nor riches nor any  
 worldly honor nor any suffering or torture can  
 turn me from the love of my lover in whom I  
 believe. He has married my maidenhood with the  
 ring of true faith, and I have committed myself  
 to him truly. We are so fastened and tied as  
 one, and the knot so knotted between us two,  
 that no desire, or mere strength either, of any  
 living man, will loosen or undo it. He is my  
 life and my love; he is the one who gladdens me,  
 my true bliss above me, my prosperity and my  
 joy, and I want nothing else: my sweet life, so  
 sweetly he tastes and smells to me, that  
 everything that he sends me seems savory and  
 sweet. So stop now, be silent, and still your  
 words, for they are worthless to me - you may  
 know that for certain.]<sup>301</sup>

Katherine is so convincing that thousands of onlookers are  
 converted, including the fifty philosophers and the queen.  
 Stunned by the queen's defection, Maxentius threatens his  
 own wife with torture and death:

Hv nu dame duteþ tu. Cwen a-cangest tu nu mid  
 al le þes oðre? Hwi motest tu se meadliche?  
 Ich swe rie bi þe mahtes of ure godes muchele.  
 Bute 3ef þu þe timluker do þe iþe 3ein-turn ure

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<sup>301</sup> S. R. T. O. D'Ardenne, ed. *The Katherine Group*. M.S.  
 Bodley 34 (Paris: Université de Liège, 1977), 36-37;  
 Savage and Watson, 275.

godes grete tu gremest nuþe. Ic schal schawin  
 hu mi sweort bite iþi swire. Leote to0luki þi  
 flesch þe fuheles of þe lufte 3et ne schalt tu  
 nower neh se lihtliche etstertenah strengre þu  
 shalt þolien. For ich chulle leote lu ken teo  
 tittes awei of þine beare breosten ant þrefter  
 do þe to deð deruest þing to drehen.

[Now lady, are you out of your mind? Queen,  
 have you gone insane now with all these others?  
 Why do you reason so madly? I swear by the  
 great powers of our gods that unless you turn  
 back promptly, and pay honor to our gods whom  
 you now anger, I will show you how my sword can  
 bite into your neck, and let the birds of the  
 air scatter your flesh. And yet you will not  
 escape nearly so lightly, but suffer more  
 severely; for I will have the nipples torn and  
 rent from your bare breasts, and then put you to  
 death, the cruelest thing to suffer.]<sup>302</sup>

He is as good as his word, and the unrepentant queen is  
 put to death in the manner described. Katherine is  
 imprisoned without food or water for twelve days, and is  
 fed by an angel. Several scenes of brutal beatings and  
 torture are described, but Katherine merely laughs and  
 reaffirms her faith. Eventually the wheel of torture is  
 constructed, and Katherine is placed on it and nearly torn  
 apart, but she is rescued at the last minute by angels.  
 The wheel is shattered, and four thousand pagans are  
 killed by the explosion. Finally Katherine is beheaded.

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<sup>302</sup> D'Ardenne, 46, Savage and Watson, 311.

Just before her death, she is summoned to her bridegroom  
by a voice from heaven:

Cum mi leoue leofmon cum nu min iweddēt leouest  
an wummon. Low þe 3ete of eche lif abit te al  
i-openet. Þe wununge of euhe wunne kepeð copneð  
þi cume. Lo al þe meidene mot tet hīrd of  
heouene kimeð her agein þe wið kempene crune.

[Come my dear lover, come now my spouse, dearest  
of women! See, the gate of eternal life waits  
for you all open, the home of every happiness  
waits and watches for your coming. See, the  
whole company of maidens, and the household of  
heaven is coming here to meet you with the  
conqueror's crown.]<sup>303</sup>

#### 4. St. Margaret

Margaret is also motherless, and her father,  
Theodosius, places her with a foster-mother at an early  
age. She becomes a Christian and a shepherdess, and at  
age fifteen is spotted by Olibrius, the local sheriff, who  
immediately wants her for his wife. Betrothed to Christ,  
Margaret rebuffs his advances and calls out to Christ for  
protection, reminding him that he is the guardian of her  
chastity:

Ich habbe a deore gimstan, ich hit habbe igeue  
þe mi meiðhad imene. Blostme brihtest ibodi þe

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<sup>303</sup> D'Ardenne, 52, Savage and Watson, 283.

hit bereð biwit wel. Ne let tu neauer þe unwhit  
warpen hit i wurðinc for hit is þe leof.

[I have a precious jewel, and I have given it to  
you—I mean my maidenhood, the brightest blossom  
in the body that bears it and keeps it well.  
Never let the evil one throw it in the mire, for  
it is dear to you.]<sup>304</sup>

Olibrius offers Margaret a share in his wealth and power,  
but she is unmoved. He has her thrown into prison, where  
she is confronted by a dragon, which she vanquishes with  
the sign of the cross:

Droh þa ende-long hire þwertouer þrefter þe  
deorewurðe taken of þe deore rode he on reste.  
Ant te drake reasde to hire mit et ilke. Ant  
sette his sariliche muð, unmeaðlich muchel on  
heh on hireheaued rahte ut his tunge to þe ile  
of hire Helen ant swengen hire in forswelh into  
his wide wombe. Ah criste to wurðmund him to  
wraðer-heale, for þe rode taken redliche arudde  
hire ha wes wið iwepnet warð his bone sone. Swa  
his bodi tobearst o-midhepes otwa. Ant þet eadi  
meiden allunge unmerret, wið-uten eauer each wem  
wende ut of his wombe.

[And then she drew on herself from top to bottom  
and then from side to side the precious sign of  
the beloved cross he rested on. And with that  
the dragon rushed on her, set his massively huge  
and horrible mouth high over her head, reached  
his tongue down to the souls of her feet,  
swallowing her into his huge belly – but to the  
glory of Christ and to his evil fate! For the  
sign of the cross which she was armed with  
quickly rescued her and was his instant death,  
so that his body burst in two in the middle.

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<sup>304</sup> D'Ardenne, 57; Savage and Watson, 289.

And that happy maiden, entirely unhurt, without  
a single blemish, came out of his belly.]

A demon takes the dragon's place, and Margaret wrestles  
him to the ground and forces him to tell her his name and  
the methods by which he steals souls away from Christ.  
Meanwhile, more tortures are planned by Olibrius, and the  
townspeople turn out to watch: "Striken men sorhe þider  
ward of eauer euch strete for to seo sorhe þet me Walden  
leggen on hire leofliche bodi 3ef ha to þe reues read ne  
buhe ne ne beide." ["People headed that way from every  
street to see what pain would be inflicted on her lovely  
body if she would not bend and bow to the sheriff's  
advice."] <sup>305</sup> Finally Margaret is beheaded, and at the  
moment of her death, she, too, is summoned by a heavenly  
voice:

Cum nu for ich kepe þe brud to þi brudgume. Cum  
leof to þi lif, for ich copni þi cume. Brihtest  
bur abitt te leof hihe þe to me. Cum nu to mi  
kinedom. Leaf leode se lah, tu schalt wealde  
wið me al ich iwald ah.

Come now to your bridegroom, Lady, for I await  
you. Come, beloved, to your life, because I  
long for your coming; the brightest chamber  
waits for you. Dear, hurry to me; come now to  
my kingdom. Leave these lowly people, and you  
will rule all that I own with me. <sup>306</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> D'Ardenne, 84; Savage and Watson, 301.

<sup>306</sup> D'Ardenne, 90, Savage and Watson, 303.

## 5. St. Juliana

Juliana is betrothed against her will to a pagan, Eleusius, by her father, whose name is African. Unlike Katherine and Margaret, Juliana has not committed her virginity to Christ. She will marry, but only if Eleusius will convert to Christianity. African is not moved by her religious devotion and has her beaten, and then hands her over to Eleusius, who is stricken with love and pity when he sees her. She gives him her ultimatum:

3ef þu wult leauen þe lahen þet tu liuest in ant  
leuen igodd feader in his deorwurðe sun e, iþe  
hali gast folkene froure, an godd is igret wið  
euches cunnes gode. Ich chule wel neome þe.  
3ef tu nult no, þu art windi of me, ant oðer  
luue sech þe.

[If you will leave the law you live in, and believe in God the Father and his precious Son, and in the Holy Spirit, the comforter of the people, one God who is glorified with every kind of good, I will be glad to take you. And if you are not, you are rid of me; look for another lover.]<sup>307</sup>

Eleusius explains that his position would be compromised if he abandoned the gods of Maxentius, the emperor, but Juliana is uncompromising. She is then beaten, tortured, and imprisoned. She is defiant in the face of torture:

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<sup>307</sup> D'Ardenne, 98; Savage and Watson, 307.

"Haldeð longe ne leaue 3e neauer, for nulle ich leauen his luue. Ich on leue ne for luue nowðer ne luðer eie."

[Keep it up, don't ever stop! For I won't leave the love of the one I believe in, either for love or for evil fear."]<sup>308</sup>

Juliana is also tormented by a demon while in prison, who appears in the guise of an angel to try to persuade her to give in. When she prays for instructions, the 'angel' is revealed to be Belial, the worst demon of hell. Juliana converses with the demon and then binds him with chains. Her human torturers are not finished with her, and she is stripped and beaten until she is covered with blood, hung up by her hair and beaten again. She is ordered to be burned, but she stands amidst the flames laughing and unharmed. Doused with boiling pitch, she experiences it as tepid water. She is tortured on the wheel so brutally that "Bursten hire bones ant meari bearst ut imenget wið þe blode." ["Her bones were crushed and the marrow burst out, mixed with blood."]<sup>309</sup> An angel appeared after she was nearly dead and shattered the wheel, and Juliana's body was

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<sup>308</sup> D'Ardenne, 104; Savage and Watson, 311.

<sup>309</sup> D'Ardenne, 118; Savage and Watson, 317.

restored to wholeness. She proceeded to give a lengthy speech glorifying God and affirming her love for him, and many of her torturers were instantly converted. Finally Juliana was beheaded. Like the other virgin martyrs, Juliana could not be stripped of self and voice by mere torture; to silence her, her tormentors literally had to cut off her head.

Interestingly, Juliana is the only one of the martyrs who is not called to her bridegroom by a voice from heaven at her death. This may be because she had not dedicated her virginity to Christ; she was, after all, willing to marry Eleusius, and although she died with her maidenhood intact, she did not at any time argue that her virginity was committed elsewhere.

## 6. *Imitatio Christi*

The scenes of gruesome torture and death portray the virgin martyrs engaging in the most extreme form of *imitatio Christi*. As Christ remade the world through his brutal death and miraculous resurrection, the virgin martyrs remake the world, reclaiming self and voice, through their courageous speech: regardless of the pain



inflicted on them, they refuse to compromise, and they refuse to be silenced. If torture is seen as a kind of unmaking, the torture of the virgin martyrs "unmakes the unmaking."<sup>310</sup>

The medieval mind may have had a better grasp of the significance of this reversal than modern critics. It is the virgin's purity that empowers her speech, and gives her the strength to withstand terrible pain and suffering; voice and agency are thus the rewards of her chastity. In spite of scenes of torture so violent, graphic, and gendered that they might accurately be described as pornographic, the point of these gruesome hagiographies would seem to be that in the face of horrendous suffering, the virgin martyr was able to "speak truth to power," and in so doing, thwart her torturers, vanquish demons, convert the misguided, and ultimately die a victorious heroine's death, whereupon she went immediately to join Christ in heaven as his beloved spouse and assume the glorious crown of the martyr. It might be argued that for a medieval anchoress, a virgin bride of Christ impatiently

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<sup>310</sup> I am indebted to Julia Balen for this apt turn of phrase.

awaiting ecstatic union with her heavenly bridegroom, this would be construed as a love story with a happy ending.

What other appeal might such tales have had for enclosed women? Obviously the texts are problematic from a feminist perspective. The tortured women, while ultimately victorious, are not at any time free from male control. They disdain marriage to an earthly man in favor of heavenly betrothal to a divine man, but the gendered relational dynamic is essentially the same. Their bodies are publicly displayed and sexualized for the voyeuristic entertainment of the torturers and the onlookers, as well as for the pornographic fantasies of male clerics who wrote and presumably read the legends. Yet it is still possible to discover elements of female autonomy in these representations of virginal women.

It is interesting that none of the virgins in the legends are actually raped. Despite several scenes of 'symbolic rape,' the women die with their virginity intact, having overcome every assault on their chastity and every effort to force them into sexual compliance.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> A good example of this 'symbolic rape' is the dragon that swallows Margaret, after first licking her feet with what Catherine Innis-Parker calls "his phallic sword-

The inadequacies of their pagan suitors are publicly revealed, making them look foolish and ineffectual, and affirming the strength and courage of the virgins. The message to the female reader is clear: if one is steadfast in her devotion, firm in her faith, and unflinchingly loyal in her commitment to Christ, her virtue will remain undamaged in spite of every effort to strip it from her, and her reward in heaven will be assured. Virginity is presented in these legends as a choice; it is one the women have made freely, and it is one they are willing to suffer and die for.

Suffering was a key component of medieval spirituality; in the medieval view, there could be no salvation without suffering. The torments of the virgin martyrs were seen as redemptive, as the price they paid for admittance to the heavenly bridal chamber. The maiden in the arena was protected by her chastity, as her virginity clothed her with armor to withstand any assault; despite repeated attempts to injure and/or kill her, her body is time and again miraculously restored to wholeness

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tongue." See "Sexual Violence and the Female Reader: Symbolic 'Rape' in the Saints' Lives of the Katherine Group," *Women's Studies* (1995:24, 205-217), 208.

through divine intervention. Both *Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meiðhad* include descriptions of the protective and salvific properties of virginity, and the virgin martyr legends aptly and at great length illustrate these properties.<sup>312</sup> Armed only with her faith and her virtue, the virgin martyr demonstrates the power of both over the weapons, might, and determination of her adversaries.

#### 7. Young, Beautiful, Chaste: The Perfect Sacrifice

The ages of the murdered women are not usually considered worthy of comment in hagiography scholarship, but their extreme youth is a significant factor in the legends. Katherine, for instance, at eighteen, is the oldest of the martyrs; Margaret is fifteen. Other saints' vitae (Agnes, Lucy, etc.) describe girls as young as twelve. Kim Phillips suggests that the 'maidenhood' years were considered the perfect age for medieval women, and that the legends thus portray women who died while they were still in the bloom of perfection. Their youth, along with their incomparable beauty, suggests that they were not sexually neutral figures, but rather were

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<sup>312</sup> Bugge, 120-121.

representative of the ideal woman in all her youthful feminine glory; as Phillips maintains, "they provided images of the perfected female body at death."<sup>313</sup> The significance of women in the perfect bloom of virginal youth is related to their role as sacrificial victims. Girard notes that for a victim to be an acceptable sacrifice, it must be young, innocent, unblemished, and as nearly perfect as possible.<sup>314</sup> This is true in religious sacrifices across cultures, and the precedent for the perfect unblemished sacrifice within the Judeo-Christian tradition goes back as far as Genesis, with Christ, of course, representing the ultimate in innocence and perfection and thus the quintessential victim, the definitive sacrificial lamb.<sup>315</sup>

Girard, perhaps revealing a lack of familiarity with legends of virgin martyrs, maintains that women were

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<sup>313</sup> Kim M. Phillips, "Maidenhood," in *Young Medieval Women*, 10-11, 15. Interestingly, Phillips mentions that St. Apollonia, an elderly matron at the time of her death, was portrayed as a young maiden in Middle English hagiography.

<sup>314</sup> Girard, 4.

<sup>315</sup> See Genesis 4 for a comparison of the sacrifices of Cain and Abel (one acceptable, one not), and Genesis 22 for an account of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. I Peter 1: 20 says, "you know that you were ransomed . . . by the blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish."

almost never selected to be sacrificial victims. However, he ties his argument exclusively to the status of *married* women, with kinship ties to two clans: that of their families of origin, and that of the husband's family.<sup>316</sup> The property rights of the two families would thus be violated by the sacrificing of a married woman. These constraints obviously would not apply to unmarried virgins, whose betrothal to Christ would have removed them from the pool of marriageable women and whose defiance of parental wishes regarding their marital status would have removed them from the protection of family. Young virginal women were thus ideally suited to this role of sacrificial victim.

With this in mind, it becomes easier to understand the popularity of these legends among religious women if we consider the medieval fascination with *imitatio Christi*.<sup>317</sup> The imitation of Christ, the perfect chaste

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>317</sup> Oddly, very little scholarship on the virgin martyr legends addresses this issue. It is perhaps significant that the one text that does provide an in-depth discussion of *imitatio Christi* in reference to medieval hagiography is authored by a man, and is *not* a work of feminist criticism. See Thomas J. Hefferan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 185-230.

and ultimately victorious victim, nearly always involved meditations on his Passion; it was not his holy life, but rather his gruesome death, that was most often the subject of religious devotion. The legendary virgin martyr enacted the sacrificial death of Christ in scenes of violation and torture designed to make her an enviable role model rather than an object of pity; this was *imitatio Christi* par excellence.<sup>318</sup>

The virgin martyrs of medieval hagiography were strong women who demonstrated freedom and autonomy even as they were imprisoned, tortured, and executed. They resolutely refused marriage to earthly men despite promises of wealth and position, they defied parental and

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<sup>318</sup> So popular was devotion to Christ's Passion among medieval women that a few women on the continent actually made a physical reenactment of his torture and death a regular part of their religious practice. The vitae of the beguine women Dorothy of Montau and Elizabeth of Spalbeek include descriptions, documented by clerics and confessors, of their strange Passion performances. See Jonahhes Mariaewerder, ed, *The Life of Dorothea von Montau, a Fourteenth Century Recluse* (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 1997); Margot King, tran, *The Life of Elisabeth of Spalbeek*, in *A Leaf from the Great Tree of God* (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1994), 244-275. See also Marsha Waggoner, "Corpus Mysticum: Embodiment and Sanctity," conference paper, Founders' Day Symposium (University of Louisville, 1999); Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Zeigler, eds. *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

secular authorities in pursuit of religious freedom, and they faced horrific torture, public humiliation, and gruesome death with equanimity, serenely certain of their heavenly reward. They modeled the powerful salvific and transformative power of female chastity and represented the epitome of the imitation of Christ. It should, then, come as no surprise that their stories would have had a tremendous appeal for the medieval anchoress, vowed as she was to lifelong chastity and imprisonment.



## VIII. CONCLUSION

Through transhumanization, when  
the experience of being  
specifically female is elevated to  
a superhuman level, the female  
mystic speaks the body.

Jane Chance,  
*Gender and Text in the Later  
Middle Ages*

The entire corpus of anchoritic texts, including but not limited to the texts of the Katherine Group, has been subjected to a barrage of feminist and deconstructionist criticism within the last two decades. The texts are sometimes simply included with that enormous category of religious literature labeled "medieval misogyny," and the analyses proceed from that basis. Feminist scholars have at times been harshly critical of some of the admonitions directed at the recipients of *Ancrene Wisse*; one writer refers to the "singularly tactless regulations" imposed on the women by the author, and another describes the work as "obsessed with the body, and especially with marking its boundaries through prohibitory practices."<sup>319</sup> It can be

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<sup>319</sup> Sarah Beckwith, "Passionate Regulation: Enclosure, Asceticism, and the Feminist Imaginary," *The South Atlantic*

argued, however, that such criticisms fail to accurately assess the text within its cultural and historical context. Certainly the text is "obsessed with the body," but nearly all religious literature (and a great deal of secular literature) of the Middle Ages was similarly obsessed; the anchoritic texts are hardly remarkable in this regard.

The audience of and demand for a particular literary form tends to determine the genesis of that art form, not only in terms of the time and place of its appearance, but also of its form and content. The anchoritic texts provide a case in point. These treatises were shaped by their readers as well as by their authors, as Jocelyn Wogan-Browne astutely observes:

The politics of writing and authority are complex here, not a straight top-down mediation of Latin authority to vernacular ignorance. What is phrased as learned response to female requests for information and guidance may well dignify clerics, chaplains, and confessors writing on command for women patrons as authoritative interpreters and mediators of texts. The textual construction of authorized virginity has frequently conferred authority on its producers, but it provides for an audience

whose requirements and responses also leave their mark.<sup>320</sup>

One of the chief problems, in my view, with analyses of anchoritic texts is that all of the critics seem to be English language scholars and literary critics; while their work is extremely valuable and makes important contributions, anchoritic spirituality has received almost no critical attention from scholars in other disciplines. As Nicholas Watson (himself an English professor) observes, "These anchoritic works are of great interest in several disciplines—philology, stylistics, literary criticism, cultural history, and the study of religious devotions. Yet the scholarship so far devoted to the works rather oddly does not reflect this wide-ranging importance."<sup>321</sup> Watson's article appeared in 1987; amazingly, his statements are still applicable. Aside from Rotha Mary Clay's study, first published in 1914, only Francis Darwin and Ann K. Warren have published monographs on the anchoritic lifestyle in England.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Jocelyn Wogan Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c 1150-1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>321</sup> Watson, "Methods and Objectives," 133.

<sup>322</sup> Other studies addressing medieval Englishwomen and their religious lives (although not focusing on

A major part of my own work with these texts has involved my struggle to contextualize anchoritic spirituality within the religious, political, social, and cultural systems that shaped it. This has required me to go somewhat farther afield in my research than straightforward textual analysis and criticism would warrant. But texts do not appear in a vacuum. I opened with chapters on the history and background of anchoritic spirituality because I am convinced that without such a background, our understanding of the anchoritic texts and the lifestyle they describe is sharply limited. Ultimately, however, these texts are religious; they present a particular theological perspective, grounded in a particular time and place, and with a highly particularized audience in mind: enclosed solitary religious women.

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anchoresses) include Sharon K. Elkins, *Holy Women of Twelfth Century England* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1988); Sally Thompson, *Women Religious: The Founding of English Nunneries After the Norman Conquest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); and of course the classic by Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries* (London: Biblo and Tannon, 1988), originally published in 1922. The recently published *Lives of the Anchoresses*, by Anneke Mulder-Bakker, makes an exciting and much needed contribution to this field, and her focus on continental women opens up new areas for inquiry and comparative analysis.

The anchoritic lifestyle is perhaps difficult to understand, from a twenty-first century perspective. The impulse to pursue God (and to evade domesticity, a motivation that must be considered) must have been very strong indeed if it led medieval women to consent to be confined to a tiny anchoritic cell for life, in effect 'dead to the world,' and to give up family, friends, activities, community, socialization opportunities, and freedom of movement. Aside from the minimal housekeeping tasks involved in maintaining her quarters, tasks that were for the most part seen to by servants, the life of the anchoress was entirely made up of prayer and reading. Her prayers were mostly routine formulaic recitations, many of which are still in use in Roman Catholic liturgy and devotion and have survived almost unchanged since the Middle Ages.

With the exception of Julian of Norwich, English anchoresses left no writings of their own, and no records of the circumstances of their confinement, so that, apart from the scant archeological evidence and certain legal documents (wills, for example), the only information we have about their lives must be gleaned from the books they

read. The knowledge thus obtained must be analyzed with a critical eye; as previously noted, it is generally agreed that these texts were authored by men, and they must therefore be considered with that in mind, a circumstance that presents a particular set of analytic problems and requires that a hermeneutic of suspicion be employed in their interpretation.<sup>323</sup>

I have examined the works of the Katherine Group, not only to add yet another voice to the cacophony of feminist criticism of medieval devotional texts, but also in an effort to understand the religious lives of medieval English women. Their lives of asceticism were shaped by their culture, by their faith, and by patristic theological discourses on virginity, embodiment, holiness, marriage and family, heaven and hell, and martyrdom. These discourses resulted in a perspective that was in many ways paradoxical: freedom in enclosure; sanctity in degradation; spirituality in embodiment; joy in deprivation; prosperity in poverty; eroticism in virginity. It is within these paradoxical spaces that

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<sup>323</sup>Paul Ricoeur's term for a method of interpretation that assumes that the literal or surface-level meaning of a text conceals the political interests that are served by the text.

anchoresses lived their lives of religious devotion to their heavenly spouse, and it is these spaces I have sought to illuminate.

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