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**Swansea University**

**ALDHELM'S *DE VIRGINITATE* –  
FROM PATRISTIC BACKGROUND  
TO ANGLO-SAXON AUDIENCE**

**Tereli Askwith**

Submitted to Swansea University  
in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**Vol. I**

**2009**

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## ALDHELM'S *DE VIRGINITATE* – FROM PATRISTIC BACKGROUND TO ANGLO-SAXON AUDIENCE

### ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*, considering its historical, social and literary background. *De Virginitate* was a paean to virginity in prose and verse. Although Aldhelm's obtuse Latin makes it difficult to understand, it was one of the most influential texts in Anglo-Saxon England, and vital in understanding the development of ecclesiastical influence in the period.

This study discusses the development of a discourse of virginity from the Bible into late antiquity. It then considers the Aldhelm's use of his source material, his adoption and adaptation of certain themes and tropes. Primarily using gender and queer theory to analyse Aldhelm's text, it examines the way in which he constructed a performative virginity that would contain his addressed audience of nuns. Whilst commentators have discussed Aldhelm's innovations in promoting chastity in deference to his audience, most of whom were not virgins, they have not fully considered the similarities between *De Virginitate* and Aldhelm's source material. This thesis argues that despite Aldhelm's innovation, *De Virginitate* is part of the movement within Anglo-Saxon England to constrain and enclose women within the monastic system. Throughout, Aldhelm stresses the need for female dependence on male ecclesiastical authority, and warns against independence and pride. Thus despite acknowledging the ontological status of his addressed audience as non-virginal, Aldhelm's message is as orthodox as his late antique sources – female autonomy was dangerous to the individual and the community.

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## INTRODUCTION

Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* was one of the most popular texts in early medieval Europe, studied throughout western Christendom. Yet, by the later middle ages it had fallen out of favour, and only recently have scholars begun again to consider it in any detail.<sup>1</sup> This thesis aims to place the construction of virginity and gender in *De Virginitate* in a literary, social and historical context. It takes an interdisciplinary approach, informed by literary and historical studies through the framework of gender and queer theory, specifically Judith Butler's ideas of performativity and identity construction. This thesis will undertake a reading of *De Virginitate* that focuses on virginity and gender, how Aldhelm understands these concepts and presents them to his audience.

*De Virginitate* is unique in many ways, but has not received the attention it merits, largely because of its obtuse Latin. In this thesis I hope to demonstrate why *De Virginitate* is so important to our understanding of the tensions surrounding both ideas about virginity and gender as they were formulated in early Christian Anglo-Saxon England, and the rise of a more patriarchal church, increasingly focused on female enclosure. Hence this thesis will focus on different aspects of *De Virginitate* using gender and queer theory, as they relate to these issues. It will begin with an outline of the historical and theoretical background that has informed my interpretation of *De Virginitate*, briefly reviewing Anglo-Saxon historiography as it particularly applies to the study of gender in history and literature. It will also offer a background to the theory deployed in analysing the text, and discuss why I have chosen this theoretical stance. This thesis will then outline Aldhelm's background and work within his

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst working on *De Virginitate*, I became aware of Emma Pettit's PhD thesis, but was unable to read it before completing my own thesis. However I was able to consult her article, 'Holiness and Masculinity in Aldhelm's *Opus Geminatum De virginitate*', in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. by P. H. Cullum and K. J. Lewis (Cardiff : University of Wales Press, 2004); See below for a brief review of the secondary literature.



historical situation, including the likely audience for *De Virginitate*. This is necessary as Aldhelm is neither well-known nor easily accessible to many modern readers.

In discussing the text itself, this thesis will outline the sources, imagery and ideas on which Aldhelm drew and from which he formulated his ideas about virginity and gender. *De Virginitate* particularly lends itself to such a study as it offers male as well as female examples of virginity, enabling a wider reading of virginity. This allows the student to compare the manner in which Aldhelm chooses to gender virginity, what qualities he considers as suitable for a female virgin, and whether they differ from those attributed to the male. In doing this it will also compare the differences between the late antique ideal of virginity and Aldhelm's construction.

I intend to look in depth at the prose and verse rendering of *De Virginitate*, particularly Aldhelm's literary formation of a gendered Christian virginity. Thus this study will examine how Aldhelm differentiates between virginity and chastity, and uses implied gender differences to portray these qualities. Beginning with virginity itself as theorised by the Church Fathers, and subsequently re-interpreted by Aldhelm in deference to his audience, it will then consider gender and sanctity through the hagiographical element of the text, and finally the martial virginity of Aldhelm's *psychomachia*. This thesis will also reflect on the importance of Aldhelm's work in relation to the changing situation for the religious woman through the establishment of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England, and the increasing Roman Catholic orthodoxy of its hierarchy.

By approaching *De Virginitate* in this manner, I hope to demonstrate that Aldhelm uses virginity in a number of ways, but ultimately intends to restrict the autonomy of his female audience. His construction of virginity may at times appear unorthodox, especially when one considers his audience of mainly non-virgin nuns, but

his portrayal of virginity, and the differing types of virgin, within the text, clearly demonstrates a desire for orthodoxy within the monastic arrangement. His constant themes are the submission of the female monastic to the male ecclesiastical authority of the Church, the danger of autonomy and independence, and the need for co-operation within the monastic community. Thus he encourages a coenobitic sanctity in contrast to the dangers of the outside, secular world.

## ALDHELM<sup>2</sup>

Aldhelm (c. 630 - 709/710) was one of the most prolific Anglo-Saxon writers, yet today little is known about him. Michael Lapidge states, 'Aldhelm was the first English man of letters. He was also perhaps the most widely learned man produced in Anglo-Saxon England during its first four centuries of Latin Christendom.'<sup>3</sup> The only near contemporary accounts of Aldhelm are from Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, but both offer little in the way of detail about his life. There are two later *vitae*, the first written between 1080-1100 by the Italian bishop of Abingdon, Faricius. The second, written around 1125, was by William of Malmesbury, a monk at the monastery at which Aldhelm had been abbot. William devoted a whole book of his *Gesta Pontificum* to Aldhelm's life.<sup>4</sup> However, both sources must be treated with caution, as they contain much that is, at best, questionable, as they relate the legends that had arisen around Aldhelm.

Yet an understanding of Aldhelm is vital when studying Anglo-Saxon Christianity, Anglo-Latin, and even Old English texts. Andy Orchard comments,

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<sup>2</sup> Aldhelm's life and works are discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works*, trans. by Michael Lapidge and James L. Rosier (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), p.1.

<sup>4</sup> *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* V.

‘Since he wrote at the very beginning of recorded English history and yet maintained an active influence almost to the time of the Conquest, Aldhelm is perhaps the most important figure in the history of Anglo-Latin, indeed of Anglo-Saxon, literature’.<sup>5</sup> Aldhelm’s influence spread beyond England, as the Anglo-Saxon missionary Boniface and his contemporaries established missions and schools in Frisia and Frankia, with Aldhelm as an important part of the curriculum.<sup>6</sup> Their writings, and those of their pupils, often demonstrated an Aldhelmian influence in vocabulary and style.

Aldhelm was the product of a classical education; his modes of reference are overwhelmingly the Church Fathers, Latin Christian poets, and the authors of classical antiquity.<sup>7</sup> Notable studies have been made on Aldhelm and his sources, principally by Michael Lapidge, Andy Orchard and Sinead O’Sullivan. This study will build on their investigations to examine the ways in which Aldhelm rewrites his source material to appeal to, and influence, his audience of Anglo-Saxon noble and royal monastics.<sup>8</sup> Any attempt to understand Aldhelm, his work and his motives, must consider his source material, the ways in which he adapts that material, his background (both social and educational), the historical background to Christianity in general in Anglo-Saxon England, and more specifically, the monastic movement it engendered. Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing correctly argue that to study Anglo-Saxon England one must historicise Christianity in detail. Indeed, the Christianity of Anglo-Saxon England c.

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<sup>5</sup> Andy Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> For example, among the Boniface correspondence is a request by Lul for writings by Aldhelm, to soothe Lul’s exile. See *The English Correspondence of Saint Boniface*, trans. by Edward Kylie (London : Chatto and Windus, 1911), p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> Whilst Aldhelm interacted with his contemporary vernacular culture, this study is concerned with his Latin sources.

<sup>8</sup> See M. Lapidge, ‘Aldhelm’s Latin Poetry and Old English Verse’, *Comparative Literature* 31 (1979), 249-314; Lapidge, ‘Beowulf, Aldhelm and the *Liber Monstrum* and Wessex’ *Studi Medievali*, 23 (1982), 151-92; M. Lapidge and B. Bischoff, *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1994); Orchard, *Poetic Art*; Sinead O’Sullivan, ‘Aldhelm’s *De Virginitate* – Patristic Pastiche or Innovative Exposition?’ *Peritia*, 12 (1998), 271-95; O’Sullivan, (2001) ‘The Image of Adornment in Aldhelm’s *De Virginitate*: Cyprian and his Influence’ *Peritia*, 15 (2001), 48-57.

700, in which Aldhelm flourished, is very different from the Catholic hegemony of western Christendom in, say, 1300. And, 'Christianity is, after all, intimately connected to social practice throughout the medieval period and is crucial to any historical understanding of such variable categories as self, psyche, and body.'<sup>9</sup>

## **EARLY ANGLO-SAXON HISTORIOGRAPHY AND LITERARY STUDIES**

As an interdisciplinary examination of virginity and gender in *De Virginitate*, I will divide the historiographical and literary background, first, up to the mid-twentieth century, then up to date. The lacunae in Anglo-Saxon studies, primarily relating to women, in the mid-twentieth century serves as a useful division, before renewed interest in the topic encouraged by twentieth century feminism.

As a defining term 'Anglo-Saxon' is fairly broad, covering the events in England between 500 and 1100, a period of 600 years. Evidently there was much variation during this era, between the different kingdoms and between the early and late Anglo-Saxon periods. From the Renaissance onward, there were scholars interested in the Anglo-Saxon period, indeed, from the sixteenth century onwards, men and women such as Matthew Parker (1504-1575), Robert Bruce Cotton (1571-1631), Elizabeth Elstob (1683-1756), William Elstob (1673-1715), and Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin (1752-1829), sought out the Anglo-Saxon past.<sup>10</sup> However, it was in the nineteenth century that Anglo-Saxon history and literature became a popular area of academic study particularly in the fields of philology and etymology. In this period, scholars such as Sharon Turner (1768-1847), Joseph Bosworth (1789-1876), and Anna Gurney

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<sup>9</sup> Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing, *Double Agents : Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Carl T. Berkhout's website <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~ctb/saxon.html>, though out of date now, is an excellent place to start when studying the Anglo-Saxon antiquarians.

(1795-1857) came to the fore.<sup>11</sup> The Romantics reinvigorated the study of Anglo-Saxon literature, searching for a native poetry that reflected the wider Germanic culture studied and lionised on the continent. The historians of Germany and England became fascinated by their Germanic past, seeking a purity of nation and culture that would stand apart from Classical Greece and Rome.

One striking aspect of the early historiography of this period was the degree of interest taken in Anglo-Saxon women, a significant contrast with historiography of other periods.<sup>12</sup> There was great interest in the role of women in early medieval England as they had seemingly enjoyed a freedom greater than at any other time in British history up to that point. For example, in 1869, T. Wright commented that the Anglo-Saxon clergy attempted 'to destroy, or at least to diminish, the old patriarchal spirit, and to emancipate the female sex from the too great authority of fathers and husbands'.<sup>13</sup> The written account of history is always refracted through the cultural lenses of the authors and the times in which they live. In the nineteenth century, as women were striving for greater legal and political rights, the study of Anglo-Saxon society appeared to demonstrate that the position of women in society was not unalterable.<sup>14</sup> For example, in 1893 Florence Buckstaff argued that women had greater legal rights before the Norman period.<sup>15</sup> Similar conclusions were reached in the

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<sup>11</sup> For example Noah Webster (1758-1843), Walter William Skeat (1835-1912) and Henry Sweet (1845-1912).

<sup>12</sup> For example T. Wright, *Womankind in Western Europe* (London, 1869); Mrs. Matthew Hall, *The Queens Before the Conquest*, 2 Vols (London, 1854); D. H. Haigh, 'On the Monasteries of S Heiu and S Hild', *Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journal*, 3 (1875), 349-91; G.F. Browne, *The Importance of Women in Anglo-Saxon Times* (London : SPCK, 1919).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in C. E. Fell, C. Clark and E. Williams, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066* (London : British Museum Press, 1984), p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture : The Archaeology of Religious Women* (London and New York : Routledge, 1997), p. 22, discusses this, commenting that 'during the era of suffrage', in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women historians studied medieval religious women, and she lists as examples, L. Eckenstein (1896); M. Bateson (1899); R. Graham (1903); R. M. Clay (1909 and 1914); E. Power (1922).

<sup>15</sup> F. Buckstaff, 'Married Women's Property in Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman Law and the Origin of the Common Law Dower', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 4, (1893), 233-64. She considered the legal position regarding property and the relative positions of husband and

1940s-50s by the pioneers of twentieth century Anglo-Saxon studies, Sir Frank and Doris Stenton, and Dorothy Whitelock, discussing the position of women in secular and religious society.<sup>16</sup> Doris Stenton, in her book *The English Woman in History*, concluded that women in the Anglo-Saxon period enjoyed greater legal rights than women after the Norman Conquest, in what she referred to as a 'rough and ready partnership' between husband and wife.<sup>17</sup>

Alongside the nineteenth century interest in Germanic history, attention was also given to Germanic literature, initially studied for its philological interest. Anglo-Saxon culture produced a wide range of literature, from hagiography to epic poetry to risqué riddles. As with

Anglo-Saxon historiography, in the late nineteenth century there were several analyses of the depiction of women in this literature, such as Richard Burton's 1895 article 'Woman in Old English Literature'.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the philological emphasis in Anglo-Saxon studies remained paramount into the twentieth century, and was not seriously challenged until 1936, with the publication of J. R. R. Tolkien's essay, 'The Monsters and the Critics'.<sup>19</sup> Tolkien argued that *Beowulf*, the most famous of all Old English poems, should be studied as a literary work and not just as a means to study the language. In so doing, he reinvigorated the study of Anglo-Saxon literature and a flurry

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wife as fair, but also noted the sexual double standard whereby a man was allowed concubines, but a woman would be severely punished for adultery.; See Paula J. Bailey, 'Daughters, Wives and Widows : A Study of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman Women', *Academic Forum Online*, 19a (Henderson State University, Arkansas, 2001-2) <http://www.hsu.edu/default.aspx?id=3455> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> June 2006).

<sup>16</sup> F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 162, notes of Hild, 'No woman in the middle ages ever held a position comparable with that of Hild of Whitby.'; Cf. Stenton, 'The Historical Bearing of Place-Name Studies : The Place of Women in Anglo-Saxon Society', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4<sup>th</sup> Series 25 (1943), 1-13; See also Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. by M. M. Postan, (Cambridge, New York : Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> D. M. Stenton, *The English Woman in History* (London : Allen and Unwin, 1957), See especially pp. 1-28, quotation at p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> R. Burton, 'Woman in Old English Literature', *Sewanee Review*, (1895), 1-14.

<sup>19</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, 'The Monsters and the Critics', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 22 (1936), 245-95.

of studies followed.<sup>20</sup> However, for much of the twentieth century studies of women in Old English literature were few in number, and largely ignored by the wider academic community.

Similarly, the Anglo-Latin texts were, for a long time, overlooked. Students of the period examined the historical import of writings such as Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, or Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi*, but rarely did they consider the literary importance of such texts. Yet, scholars are now discovering the literary complexity and linguistic sophistication of many of these texts. A pioneer in the field remains Michael Lapidge, whose studies, collected in the two volumes, *Anglo-Latin Literature (600-899, 900-1066)* are both comprehensive and insightful.<sup>21</sup> Aldhelm, one of the foremost Anglo-Latin writers of the period, has not been widely studied in the modern period, largely because of the complexity and density of his Latin. Yet his style proved influential for centuries, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Lapidge, along with Michael Herren and James L. Rosier, have been at the forefront of translating the writings of Aldhelm into modern English, introducing Aldhelm to a wider audience.<sup>22</sup> One of the first, and still most important literary studies of Aldhelm, is Andy Orchard's *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, in which he discusses the metrical features of Aldhelm, and considers the source material for some of Aldhelm's major works.<sup>23</sup> Sinead O'Sullivan has also discussed Aldhelm in the context of his late antique source material.<sup>24</sup>

Even when Anglo-Latin texts were mined for their literary significance, the range of such studies was limited, yet it is a field demanding feminist consideration.

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<sup>20</sup> Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge : D. S. Brewer, 2003) includes an excellent bibliography for *Beowulf* (pp. 327-369).

<sup>21</sup> M. Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature 900-1066* (London and Rio Grande : Hambledon Press, 1993); Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature 600-899* (London and Rio Grande : Hambledon Press, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> *Aldhelm : The Prose Works*, trans. by M. Lapidge and M. Herren (Cambridge : D. S. Brewer, 1979); Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic Works*.

<sup>23</sup> Orchard, *Poetic Art*.

<sup>24</sup> O' Sullivan, *Patristic Pastiche*; O' Sullivan, *The Image of Adornment*; O' Sullivan, *Psychomachian Tradition*.

For example, there are no known female authors of Old English poetry, but we have the names, and at times the life stories, of women who wrote letters and poems in Anglo-Latin, such as, Eadburg, Bucge, Leoba, Aelflaed, Berhtgyd.<sup>25</sup> These women lived in monastic communities, and were clearly well educated and motivated. Stephanie Hollis and others have demonstrated from the extant textual evidence, the extent to which Anglo-Saxon nuns were literate.<sup>26</sup> Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* is directly addressed to such women, as they had embraced the monastic life.<sup>27</sup>

## FEMINISM AND ANGLO-SAXON HISTORIOGRAPHY

A new impetus in the study of women, both in history and literature, occurred in the later twentieth century with the rise of feminism in academic studies, though by this time, the study of Anglo-Saxon women lagged behind the broader interest in medieval women.<sup>28</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s, 'women's studies' became an accepted discipline. This early feminist scholarship grew out of the political left, thus was closely allied with Marxist historical theory.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Marxism was a jumping-off point rather than a guide. Feminist scholars contended that an understanding of

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<sup>25</sup> Marilyn Desmond, 'The Voice of Exile : Feminist Literary History and the Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Elegy', *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (1990) 572-590; However see Shari Horner, *The Discourse of Enclosure. Representing Women in Old English Literature* (New York : State University of New York Press, 2001); Jane Stevenson, *Women Latin Poets : Language, Gender, and Authority, from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, New York : Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church : Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1992); Patrick Wormald, 'The Uses of Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and its Neighbours', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5<sup>th</sup> ser. 27 (1977), 95-114.

<sup>27</sup> Aldhelm evidently expected his audience to be well read, and outlined the sort of type of reading and study he presumed of them. See Chapter 1.

<sup>28</sup> There are as many definitions of feminism as there are feminists, but within this study it is a philosophy intended to empower women, advocating the equality of men and women, socially, economically, legally and politically.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. C. Mackinnon, 'Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State : An Agenda for Theory', *Signs*, 8 (1982), 635-658; Mackinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 3, 'Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism : that which is most ones own, yet most taken away'; Cf. p. 30, 'feminism stands in relation to marxism as marxism does to classical political economy: its final conclusion and ultimate critique.'



gender construction was vital in understanding contemporary society, and historians such as Joan Kelly-Gadol argued for this to be brought into the understanding of historical periods and periodisation.<sup>30</sup>

The historical study of Anglo-Saxon women was revitalised in 1979 with Sheila Dietrich's essay 'An Introduction to Women in Anglo-Saxon Society'.<sup>31</sup> Dietrich called for a renewed study of the Anglo-Saxon sources, 'stripping away the accretions of another writer's bias or orientation, and asking new questions of very old records'.<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, much work has been done, evaluating and re-evaluating the evidence. Historians such as Pauline Stafford and Barbara Yorke took up the challenge, demonstrating the complexities behind the position of the Anglo-Saxon woman in society, as her social and marital status affected her freedoms and limitations within society.<sup>33</sup> Recent work has also highlighted the differing circumstances of women in Anglo-Saxon England, with specific analyses detailing the situation of women within kingdoms, within the Church, or within particular historical periods.<sup>34</sup> Thus the broad brush of the Stentons and Dorothy Whitelock has been narrowed to a more sophisticated understanding of the variable circumstances under which Anglo-Saxon women existed.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> J. Kelly-Gadol, 'The Social Relations of the Sexes : Methodological Implications of Women's History', *Signs*, 1 (1976), 809-24.

<sup>31</sup> S. C. Dietrich, 'An Introduction to Women in Anglo-Saxon Society', in *The Women of England from Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present*, ed. by B. Kanner (Connecticut : Hamden, 1980), pp. 32-56.

<sup>32</sup> Dietrich, Introduction, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> P. Stafford, 'The King's Wife in Wessex, 800-1066', *Past and Present*, 91 (1981), 3-27; B. Yorke, 'Sisters Under the Skin'? Anglo-Saxon Nuns and Nunneries in Southern England', in *Medieval Women in Southern England*, ed. by K. Bate *et al.* (Reading : University of Reading Press, 1989), pp. 95-117; Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith . Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England*, (Oxford : Blackwell, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers*; Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*; M. Clunies Ross, 'Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England', *Past and Present*, 108 (1985), 3-34; S. Millenger, 'Anglo-Saxon Nuns in Anglo-Norman Hagiography : Humility and Power', in *Distant Echoes, Medieval Religious Women*, vol. 1, ed. by J. A. Nichols and L. T. Shanks (Kalamazoo : Medieval Institute Publications, 1984), pp. 115-129.

<sup>35</sup> This clearer understanding is traced in Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, pp. 1-10.

## FEMINISM AND ANGLO-SAXON LITERARY STUDIES

In the twentieth century, feminism entered the field of literary studies.<sup>36</sup> Whilst feminist literary studies were often dismissed as biased and revisionist, scholars working in the field maintained that,

all literature and literary criticism are shaped by gender. What has been presented as universal 'received opinion' in the interpretation and evaluation of the literary canon and in the recording of literary history has been, in fact, male opinion, prescribed and determined by male experience, and articulated for a community of readers who were predominantly male.<sup>37</sup>

Those in the field approach literature from many angles, for example, linguistic, psychoanalytic, structuralist and queer theory. Whatever the theoretical principles used, such studies consider gender identity as a key dynamic in the determination of literature, the literary canon and subsequent literary criticism.<sup>38</sup> Such theoretical studies are a necessary addition to our interpretation and understanding of the literary evidence of Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>39</sup> Over the past quarter of a century, there has been a re-examination of the portrayal of women in Old English literature, raising important

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<sup>36</sup> For example Katherine M. Rogers' groundbreaking book, *The Troublesome Helpmate : A History of Misogyny in Literature*, was published in 1966 (Seattle : University of Washington Press).

<sup>37</sup> Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* (Bloomington and Indianapolis : Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Elaine Showalter, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', in *The New Feminist Criticism : Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. by E. Showalter (New York ; Pantheon, 1986). Showalter notes, p. 249, with tongue only slightly in cheek, 'English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French feminist criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American feminist criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression.'; Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory – Second Edition* (Hemel Hempstead : Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), p. 51, neatly defines feminist literary criticism, 'Criticism is feminist if it critiques existing disciplines, traditional paradigms about women, nature and social roles, or documents such works by others, from the point of view of women.'

<sup>39</sup> This is nicely, and briefly, demonstrated by Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women. A Social History of Women in England 450-1500* (London : Phoenix Orion, 1996). In her short review of the evidence for Anglo-Saxon England, archaeology forms the shortest of four chapters, whilst the other three concentrate on literary and textual evidence.

questions about the depiction of female sexuality, female autonomy and the literary stereotyping and idealisation of women.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, in the focussed study of women in literature, there is a danger, outlined by Damico and Olsen, that such a narrow debate, 'reduces [women] to comfortably familiar entities. It rehabilitates stereotypes rather than 'deconstructs' them'.<sup>41</sup> Hence, a welcome development is the widening of gender studies: as the creation of the female is a cultural construct, so too is the creation of the male.

Unlike the historiography of Anglo-Saxon women, studies of Old English literature initially tended to emphasise female dependence and passivity: the underlying assumption was that the heroic nature of Old English literature had little to say about women, who were then perceived as merely the tragic victims of heroic society.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, a key debate in the current study of Old English literature is the degree of passivity/agency in female characters. As this debate illustrates, our interpretation of the evidence differs depending on the extent to which we expect women to possess agency, and the Anglo-Saxon sources used. Several studies have appeared that closely examine the characterization of women in Old English poems and prose, for example Jane Chance's *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*. Chance argues that whilst the religious poems such as *Judith* and *Elene* allowed for women to behave in an active, even martial manner, on the whole passivity was the most important quality in Christian Anglo-Saxon society. The ideal woman was the Virgin Mary, who thus

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<sup>40</sup> H. Damico, *Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* (Madison : University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); J. Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (New York : Syracuse University Press, 1986); Damico and Olsen, *New Readings*; C. Alfano, 'The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity : A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother', *Comitatus*, 23 (1993), 1-16; Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*.

<sup>41</sup> Hollis, *Women and the Church*, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> For example *Beowulf* includes a number of female characters within a secular and masculine milieu. Traditional scholarship assumed them to be peripheral to the story, referred to in terms of their relationships to men, and fated to suffer passively at the hands of the male 'heroes'. Yet within the last fifteen years or so, scholars have demonstrated their centrality, for example through the thematic importance of the mother-son relationship. See discussion in Damico and Olsen, *New Readings*, pp. 2-3.

influenced the literary depiction of women.<sup>43</sup> Chance noted that many of the active women, especially in secular literature were depicted as aberrant.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen argue that Anglo-Saxon culture accepted a more active literary woman, also citing examples such as *Elene* and *Juliana*.<sup>45</sup> In *Beowulf*, Chance contests that the female peace-weaver, or *freoðuwebbe*, was the link between opposing clans, joining their blood through the children she bore to her husband.<sup>46</sup> Yet, none of the peace-weavers can genuinely unite the clans, and their role is passive. When, never if, war breaks out, the peace-weaver can only watch as the two opposing kin-groups destroy each other. Chance describes Hildeburgh, as she places her son on the pyre, as the supreme example of the passive and tragic peace-weaver, unable to halt the cycle of violence and fated to sorrow for her brother and son.<sup>47</sup> Chance notes, ‘the peace pledge must accept a passive role precisely because the ties she knots bind *her* – she *is* the knot, the pledge of peace.’<sup>48</sup> There is no agency for the peace-weaver, who can never act but only react. Against this view, Helen Damico considers the transgressive female figures in *Beowulf*, Grendel’s Mother and Modthryth, seeing in their depiction echoes of the Valkyrie. The ‘grim battle-demon’ of Grendel’s Mother and the ‘progression of fierce war-demon to gold-adorned warrior-queen’ which ‘parallels the evolution’ of Modthryth, are both active characters.<sup>49</sup> They enjoy the agency to influence events, initiating conflict with the male characters.

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<sup>43</sup> See Chance, *Woman as Hero*, in particular Chapter 2, pp. 13-30.

<sup>44</sup> Chance, *Woman as Hero*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>45</sup> Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, ‘Cynewulf’s Autonomous Women. A Reconsideration of *Elene* and *Juliana*’ in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. by Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington and Indianapolis : Indiana University Press, 1990)

<sup>46</sup> Jane Chance, in *Woman as Hero*, argues that the peace-weaver is a passive role, in contrast, Larry J. Sklute, in ‘*Freoðuwbbe* in Old English Poetry’, in *New Readings*, ed. by Damico and Olsen, pp. 204-210, contends that it is an active role, analogous with that of a diplomat. See also discussion below.

<sup>47</sup> *Beowulf* ll. 1071-1124.

<sup>48</sup> Chance, *Woman as Hero*, p. 100.

<sup>49</sup> H. Damico, ‘The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature’, in *New Readings*, ed. by Damico and Olsen, pp. 176-192, particularly pp. 179 –181.

As has been discussed, the Victorian and earlier twentieth century historians generally considered the Anglo-Saxon period to have been a 'golden age' for women, one of unprecedented autonomy, a view subsequently qualified by a greater understanding of the conflicting evidence relating to women.<sup>50</sup> Again, the apparent degree of agency enjoyed by women is influenced by the texts considered: the depiction of a woman in poetry is not representative of the status of a woman in law, nor, for example, the artistic portrayal of a queen in a manuscript. Stephanie Hollis, in a balanced analysis of this period, assesses both literary and historical evidence for religious women, and while acknowledging, 'that the history of women under Christianity has not consisted of unrelieved repression', by her reading, 'finds persuasive indications of conflict between women and churchmen and of clerical disesteem.'<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, though more attention has recently been given to women in Old English and Anglo-Latin literature, much remains to be done on their representation and characterisation in literature, and this thesis is intended to be part of that work.<sup>52</sup> Hence this study will consider Aldhelm's construction of gender as he represents it primarily through his formation of femininity and virginity, but also masculinity, placing that construction within a historical, social and literary context.

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<sup>50</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, trans. by C. H. Talbot (London, New York : Sheed and Ward, 1954). Talbot wrote, pp. xii-xiii, 'Never, perhaps, has there been such an age in which religious women exercised such great power.'; Dietrich, Introduction.

<sup>51</sup> Hollis, *Women and the Church*, p. 2; I agree with Hollis' appraisal of the position of women in Anglo-Saxon society.

<sup>52</sup> A welcome start has been made by Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing, *Double Agents*, p. 116, who point out, for example, that Andy Orchard has discussed the poetic language in Aldhelm, but does not consider the implications of the language in the portrayal of women tortured in hagiography; Cf. also Shari Horner, *Discourse of Enclosure*, a fascinating deconstruction of Anglo-Saxon texts.

## VIRGINITY

The study of virginity lies between history and literature, encompassing historical sources, hagiography and literature, and has been widely debated, particularly in relation to the later medieval period.<sup>53</sup> I follow Sarah Salih in acknowledging that virginity can be privileged as a third gender within the text, but that virginity lacks stability as a gender.<sup>54</sup> The tensions created through constructing virginity as a self-evident gender ultimately lead to its re-gendering, as the author favours either a masculine or feminine reading of the virginity they describe. This is particularly evident in Aldhelm, in the discord manifest between his exposition of virginity as a quality in itself, and virginity as represented through hagiography. Aldhelm's hagiographical examples encompass male and female virgins, demonstrating some qualities in common, but clearly differentiated in their gendered virginity.

Salih also acknowledges that virginity is 'not a denial or rejection of sexuality, but itself a sexuality, by which I mean a culturally specific organisation of desires'.<sup>55</sup> Considering virginity in this way enables the reader to consider how virginity is directed within the text. Christ as the bridegroom becomes the object of desire, but how does the author present this? To what extent does Aldhelm use virginity to create a queer subject, situated outside the gender binary by disassociating virginal, spiritual desire from physically sexual and gendered desire? All virgins, male and female, must

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<sup>53</sup> Some examples are, John Bugge, *Virginitas : An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague : Martinus Nijhoff, 1975); Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage, *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church* (Buffalo : Prometheus Books, 1982); Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London and New York : Routledge, 2000); Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge : D.S. Brewer, 2001); *Medieval Virginites*, ed. by Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih (Cardiff : University of Wales Press, 2003); The topic will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>54</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, pp. 1-15, 242-244; Bernau, Evans and Salih, *Medieval Virginites*, p. 1-13.

<sup>55</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, p. 10.

put their desire for Christ above any earthly love, thus texts about virginity can exploit this fissure in gender construction.

In this study I will be concentrating on the construction of gender; the representation of the passive/active virgin; the depiction of gendered sexuality, and how this is influenced by the Church; genre stereotyping; and the comparative autonomy and authority of men and women within the text, and within the Church.

## GENDER AND THEORY

Anglo-Saxon studies, literary and historical, have tended to be empirical rather than highly theoretical. However, particularly in the field of gender, scholars are increasingly using feminist and queer theories; Judith Butler's ideas concerning gender construction and performativity are useful for grappling with the literary manufacture of gender and virginity.<sup>56</sup> For example, Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing, and Shari Horner, have demonstrated how useful Butler's theory of performativity can be in interrogating Anglo-Saxon literary texts.<sup>57</sup> And although this thesis began as a feminist study of *De Virginitate*, ideas about the construction and performance of gender, and the 'queerability' of virginity became increasingly important to my understanding of

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<sup>56</sup> Butler, in turn, is influenced by Sigmund Freud, and the post-structuralists Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser, J. L. Austin and Jacques Lacan. These men used theories about language, personality and sexuality in different ways, and with different ends in view, but their ideas have been widely adopted for discourse and textual analysis. To understand Butler's arguments, one must be aware of the theorists on whom she draws, and to whom she is indebted. See J. Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1974); D. Spender, *Man Made Language* (London : Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1980); M. Jacobus, *Reading Women : Essays in Feminist Criticism* (London : Methuen, 1986); E. Showalter, *Speaking of Gender* (London : Routledge, 1989).

<sup>57</sup> See further discussion below. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London : Routledge, 1990); Butler, *Bodies That Matter : On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York and London : Routledge, 1993); Butler, *Excitable Speech : A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London : Routledge, 1997) are particularly relevant. I had begun to apply Butler's ideas in textual analysis before reading Lees and Overing or Horner. Their success in re-examining texts demonstrated the extent to which Butler could be used in Anglo-Saxon texts.; Although see Toril Moi's critique of Butler, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1999), especially pp. 3-5, 33-34, 40-57, 72-77, 89-90, 144, 146.

Aldhelm's figure of the virgin. Throughout this study I have drawn on appropriate theoretical concepts and discourses, where they provide a productive interpretative framework for the texts.<sup>58</sup>

Maggie Humm suggests that, 'Polarity is essential to gender construction since each gender is constructed as the opposite of the other.'<sup>59</sup> Whilst such polarity is evident in the tensions created by Aldhelm's representation of subversive virgins, nevertheless, queer theory allows us to factor many genders, enabling us to consider the irrationality, the queerness, of the virgin.<sup>60</sup> As Claire Colebrook asks,

Why has the polarity of gender been represented as incontrovertible and rigidly dualist, when physical sexuality is more often than not far from dichotomous? Even before the twentieth century acceptance of trans-sexuality, trans-gendering, cross-dressing, drag, hermaphroditism and other disruptions of supposedly natural sexual boundaries, there has been a long-history of sexual confusion and ambiguity. Even so, despite the existence of bodies that cross gender boundaries, those boundaries have remained in place.<sup>61</sup>

Virginity can appear to both cross the gender boundaries, exposing and undermining the patriarchal ideology behind the Christian construction of gender in this text, and be deployed to support that ideology. In this way it is queer, enabling a multiple identity as virginity is exploited in differing ways through the text. Hence, this study will draw

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<sup>58</sup> Although this is not intended as an entirely Butlerian or queer analysis of *De Virginitate*, which would have proved a rather tight straitjacket for an interdisciplinary work.

<sup>59</sup> Humm, *Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, p. 106 S.v. Gender; Cf. Mackinnon, *Feminist Theory*, p. 23, 'Sex in nature is not a bipolarity, it is a continuum; society makes it into a bipolarity', and in so doing, constructs gender.

<sup>60</sup> See discussion on Butler's theory of parody below.

<sup>61</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Gender* (Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 10; See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex : Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge Mass., London : Harvard University Press, 1990).



on both gender and queer theory in assessing the manner in which Aldhelm positions virginity vis-à-vis gender.<sup>62</sup>

Performativity, gender and queer theories have a convoluted background, arising from Sigmund Freud's ideas around the development of identity as shaped by lack, the removal of access to the body of the mother, the lack of a penis and penis-envy. This lack – the castration complex - becomes the focus of nostalgia; from our lack, we desire. Jacques Derrida, Jaques Lacan and Michael Foucault, among others, drew on the psychological work of Freud and the linguistic study of Ferdinand de Saussure to connect this loss to our entry into language.<sup>63</sup> Saussure had noted that language is a relational system of difference, or *différence*; each word, or 'sign' has no intrinsic meaning but is defined by others, that is, by what it is not, and the consequent meaning is 'signified'. Apart from dividing word and meaning, Saussure also argued that as we understand the world through language, we are equally constricted in our understanding by language. Language both allows perception and creates perception, including our perception of gender.<sup>64</sup> In feminist and gender studies in the 1970s and

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<sup>62</sup> Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, p. 2, comment, 'The category of "woman" engages issues of gender, class, representation, history, belief, and difference.'; Humm defines gender, *Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, p. 106, 'A culturally shaped group of attributes and behaviours given to the female or the male.'

<sup>63</sup> J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by G. C. Spivak (Baltimore : John Hopkins University Press, 1976); Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1981); Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Brighton : Harvester, 1982); J. Lacan, *The Language of the Self : The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Anthony Wilden (Baltimore : John Hopkins University Press, 1968); Lacan, *Four Fundamental concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London : Hogarth Press, 1977); Lacan, *Écrits : A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London : Tavistock Publications, 1977); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London : Allen Lane, 1977); Foucault, *History of Sexuality* vol. 1, trans. by Robert Hurley (London : Allen Lane, 1979); Foucault, *Power*, trans. by James D. Faubion (London : Allen Lane, 2001).

<sup>64</sup> This led to the development of cultural studies, extending beyond literature to media studies, popular culture, art criticism. Humm, *Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, p. 54, notes of 'culture', 'Feminist theory extends the definition to include all symbolic products of society. This frees women from being defined by the expression "sub-culture".'; One of the crucial figures in the early development of 'cultural studies' was Louis Althusser, whose work on *interpellation* informs Butler's ideas of citation. Although this study does not closely engage with these theories, it is hoped a future examination of *interpellation* and citation will open up an understanding of Aldhelm's audience, as these theories raise the issue of agency. The individual is subject to *interpellation* from the various discourses encountered that construct identity,

1980s, gender was considered a site of power relations, thus it became a focus of sociological study, historical study and literary study.<sup>65</sup> Catherine Mackinnon argued that sexuality is crucial in creating gender, and gender inequality, as it presumes the culturally constructed qualities assigned to the genders are 'natural'.<sup>66</sup>

The theoretical framework for this thesis thus draws heavily on such post-structuralist concepts of gender construction in language. Luce Irigaray understands social language as masculine, and that the female voice is shaped by the female body, female sexuality. Hence, as the penis dominates male sexuality, so the masculine voice is more unitary; female sexuality is not centred in any one part of the body, so the female voice is multiple.<sup>67</sup> This connexion between the body and the female voice has been exploited by Caroline Walker Bynum in her groundbreaking studies of female medieval religious culture.<sup>68</sup> Yet throughout western literature, the male voice has dominated, suppressing the female. Gayle Rubin has argued that in order for gender stereotypes to appear fixed, the binary gender system, with its polarity between

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such as the description of 'virginal' behaviour. The individual can maintain or subvert identity by their iteration of the actions and qualities linked to the identity through discourse. The debate continues as to the extent identity is formed and transformed by the reception of discourse. See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London : NLB, 1971).

<sup>65</sup> Gender study grew out of the pioneering anthropological work of Margaret Mead. She studied the New Guinea Arapesh, Mundugumor and Tchambuli tribes, and the different gender characteristics demonstrated by each tribe. Mead concluded, 'Standardized personality differences between the sexes are of this order, cultural creations to which each generation, male and female, is trained to conform.' Further work has led to a more sophisticated understanding of gender construction, but Mead's studies demonstrated the historical plasticity of the categories, and her analyses allowed theorists of culture to consider the construction of gender, initially studying contemporary culture, then drawing on literary and historical evidence. M. Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York : Morrow Quill, 1935), pp. 279-280.

<sup>66</sup> See her discussion in Mackinnon, *Feminist Theory*.

<sup>67</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New York : Cornell University Press, 1985); Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York : Cornell University Press, 1985); See also *écriture féminine*, that through deconstruction, French feminist theory attempts a female discourse nearer to the body and emotions, for example in the work of Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' in *New French Feminisms : An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Hemel Hempstead : Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981).

<sup>68</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast : The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1987); Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption . Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York : Zone Books, 1992); Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity 300-1336* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1995).

masculine and feminine, is dependent on the repression of one or the other. She further links this repression with the negativity associated with women in the west.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Sylvia Walby argues that gender inequality is created and reinforced by the social construction of femininity and masculinity. The imagery and qualities associated with the genders underlines that inequality.<sup>70</sup>

Lacan argued for the creation of the subject within language; as the child enters into language, so the division between signified and signifier is representative of the 'lack' discussed by Freud, their loss of the real and its substitution by the relational, and the suppression of primal desires. The individual identity is created in the constant quest through language to fill this 'lack', hence the subject is never completed; there is no *telos*.<sup>71</sup> Identity, gender, sexual and otherwise, is consequently an ongoing process, creating multiple, even contradictory selves, and enabling the subject to subvert as well as support the hetero-normative assumptions of western society. This opens up our understanding of gendered identity, and of the ways in which authors can use virginity to reinforce and critique gender. Aldhelm's construction of virginity is ongoing and variable through the text.

Foucault, another crucial theorist in the field of gender studies, studied the power relationships that are evidenced through sex and gender. He characterised such relationships as persuasive rather than prescriptive, thus power is not unilateral, but multiple and dispersed. This means that power cannot be simply repressive, but one must interact with the power structures in order to employ them. Again this raises issues of agency that are useful when considering *De Virginitate*. Foucault's concept of 'genealogical' theory, in which fundamental categories, such as power or sex, are

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<sup>69</sup> G. Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women : Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex', in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. by Rayna R. Reiter (New York : Monthly Review, 1975), pp. 157-210.

<sup>70</sup> S. Walby, *Theorising Patriarchy* (Oxford : Blackwell, 1990) p.

<sup>71</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990), p. 33.

created by the discourses that purport to analyse them, is also valuable. Foucault saw discourse analysis as the investigation of the power structures and beliefs that form the foundation of language practice.<sup>72</sup> He applied this analysis to the discourse of sexuality, to the political construction of sexuality, and the use of discourse to repress.<sup>73</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s feminist and gender theorists concentrated on gender and class as the locus of power relations within society, analysing discourse, and language itself, as a channel for masculine power.<sup>74</sup>

Queer theory developed from gender theory, gay and lesbian studies. It questioned assumptions of sexuality and gender construction.<sup>75</sup> If gender is a social construction, does this also apply to sexuality? Drawing on Foucault and his arguments of the power of discourse to create the subject, queer theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Anne Fausto-Sterling and Judith Butler widened the scope from sexuality to identity.<sup>76</sup> Queer theory does not look for a stable subject but traces the fissures and instabilities of subject creation, be that social or literary as defined through and by language. Anne Marie Jagose comments, 'Queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire'.<sup>77</sup> It has highlighted the heteronormative

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<sup>72</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*.

<sup>73</sup> Though theorists of modern culture, such as the film or magazine have developed this idea, for example, A. Kuhn, *The Power of the Image* (London : Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1985), it has also been instrumental in medieval studies, for example the study of courtly literature, or medical texts.

<sup>74</sup> For example see Nancy Chowdrow, *The Reproduction of Mothering : Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1978); Mackinnon, *Feminism*; Mackinnon, *Feminist Theory*; Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1973).

<sup>75</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory : An Introduction* (New York : New York University Press, 1996); *Feminism meets Queer Theory*, ed. by Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor (Bloomington, Ind. ; Indiana University Press, 1997); Max Kirsch, *Queer Theory and Social Change* (London : Routledge, 2000); Iain Morland and Annabelle Willox, *Queer Theory* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>76</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1990); Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London : Routledge, 1994); Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender : Biological Theories about Women and Men* (New York, N. Y. : Basic Books, 1985); Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body : Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York, N. Y. : Basic Books, 2000); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Butler, *Bodies That Matter*; Butler, *Excitable Speech*.

<sup>77</sup> Jagose, *Queer Theory*, p. 3

matrix within which the subject in western society is constructed, created in large part by the Judeo-Christian religious framework. Clearly this is the framework within which Aldhelm existed and from which he created his virginal subject.

But, is it fair to use post-modern theory when studying Aldhelm? How else do we ask 'new questions of very old records'?<sup>78</sup> Robert Mills notes of using queer theory to scrutinize medieval hagiography, ' "Queering" is a method of contestation, primarily employed in relation to literary texts, by which the paradigms of heteronormativity are resisted/undermined'.<sup>79</sup> It can also be used, as it is in this study, to expose those paradigms. Aldhelm's heteronormative understanding of gender drew on his classical sources, the Bible and the Church Fathers, as well as Anglo-Saxon society and literature. Indeed, an awareness of the representation of gender and sexuality in Aldhelm's source material is vital in understanding Aldhelm's own interpretation and depiction of gender.<sup>80</sup> But his topic was virginity, a status with the potential to position the subject outside of the gender binary. This is evident in Aldhelm's construction of the ideal and subversive, or queered, virginity. Aldhelm can potentially construct three genders – male, female and virginal - within the text, and each allows him to represent the ideal and subversive: the strong, manly wrestlers in his introductory comments, and the feminised saint Malchus, the female virgin martyr and the transvestite, the anthropomorphised virtues and vices. Despite his use of subversive examples, it will be argued that Aldhelm's construction of virginity – straight and queer - perpetuates the gender norms that he received from late antiquity.

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<sup>78</sup> Dietrich, Introduction, p. 33.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Mills, ' "Whatever you do is a delight to me!": Masculinity, Masochism and Queer Play in Representations of Male Martyrdom', *Exemplaria* 13.1 (2001), 1–37, quotation at p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> See discussion in Chapter 2.

## BEAUVOIR, BUTLER AND DESTABILISING GENDER

One of the first, and most influential, writers for twentieth century feminism was Simone de Beauvoir, whose book, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, was initially published in 1949. Her famous dictum, 'One is not born but rather becomes a woman', was a call to arms,

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is ascribed as feminine.<sup>81</sup>

De Beauvoir argues that the qualities assigned to the feminine are neither natural nor intrinsic, but created and maintained by society. Thus, femininity is culturally constructed, not biologically determined. De Beauvoir also argued that patriarchal society created a binary division between the positive masculine, as the norm, and negative feminine, as the deviant, 'the Other'. She wrote, 'humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him.... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he in reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to his essential. He is the Subject, the Absolute – she is the Other.'<sup>82</sup> She linked this 'otherness' with the female body, specifically the female reproductive capacity that she argued was alien to masculine understanding.

This concept of the female body as alien forms a useful interpretive tool when considering the depiction of virginity and gender in *De Virginitate*, a text that both revels in the fecundity of the Church, and Christ, and praises the asexual and non-procreative body of the virgin. It is particularly useful to interrogate such a text that is

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<sup>81</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H. M. Parshley (London : Vintage, 1997) p. 281.

<sup>82</sup> De Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, p. 16.

fixed firmly in the patriarchal institution of the Church. In the middle ages, the Church, while ostensibly a religious organisation, was, by its very size, one of the most important social, economic and political institutions throughout Europe. Hence Foucault's arguments about the multivalency of power are important in understanding the agency of women in medieval society, within both the secular and religious domains.

Butler takes the concept of cultural construction a step further and argues that not only are the gender-assigned character and qualities culturally constructed, so is the gendered body.<sup>83</sup> Butler argues that the gendered body is discursively produced, that is, that our perception of the gendered body is created by and through our culture, thus it remains mutable even whilst seeming stable.<sup>84</sup> She writes,

Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive facts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.<sup>85</sup>

If gender is created through action, therefore, we must consider the behaviour ascribed masculine or feminine by a society. Butler writes, 'gender is not something one is, it is

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<sup>83</sup> Again though, see the criticism of this idea by Toril Moi, *What is a Woman?*. For example Moi states, p. 4, that Butler's books are 'massive attempts to hammer the sex/gender distinction into poststructuralist shape.' Her views on poststructuralism are laid out on pp. 40-57 of *What is a Woman?*.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 24. Butler does not deny the material body, but considers the physical body to have no status beyond discourse, as she comments, p. 9, that the body is 'a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter' (Butler's emphasis); Cf. Salih, *Judith Butler*, pp. 80-1.

<sup>85</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 33.

something one does, an act, or more precisely a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a “doing” rather than a “being”.’<sup>86</sup>

Butler’s reply to de Beauvoir is that if one is ‘created’ as female, the category of woman is ‘a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end’, that is, gender is ‘an ongoing discursive practice’.<sup>87</sup> Her idea of gender ‘performativity’ is not that the subject chooses an action that in turn creates gender, as this would imply there is a subject outside of gender and outside of language. Rather, identity is an ongoing process of signification, and culturally intelligible subjects are the effects of cultural discourse; the subject emerges from, and as part of, the nexus of cultural gender interaction.<sup>88</sup> Butler’s concept of the binary division of gender occurs within what she calls the ‘heterosexual matrix’ as created by society, hence it remains mutable.

Butler differentiated between ‘performance’, for example, drag, and ‘performativity’, how we perform our gender, within the heterosexual matrix, creating a socially intelligible being.<sup>89</sup> However, in applying her ideas to a text, the two are blurred in that the author’s choice dictates the gendered behaviour described. Thus whilst Aldhelm makes deliberate decisions in the manner in which he portrays gendered behaviour and virginity, he can only work within the available discourses. In this way, Butler, can be adapted to the performative nature of literary virginity. Aldhelm’s choices create a ‘performance’ of gender and virginity within the text, rather than elaborating their performative nature, although this performativity underscores his

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<sup>86</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 25. She argues, ‘Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through a stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self time’ (Italics Butler’s own).

<sup>87</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 33.

<sup>88</sup> Butler *Gender Trouble*, p. 145.

<sup>89</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler’, *Radical Philosophy : A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy*, 67 (1994), 109-125.



entire discourse. Thus Butler's ideas form a particularly rich method of interrogating a text, enabling a discussion of identity, gender and agency. If gender can be described as the repetition of culturally proscribed acts, comparing the behaviour acceptable for virgins through the texts of late antiquity and the medieval period can be a useful method of exploring the construction of gender and virginity.<sup>90</sup>

## VIRGINITY, PERFORMANCE/PERFORMATIVITY AND PARODY

Butler argues that the subject is created through language, thus the language of the text creates the distinctions it merely appears to describe.<sup>91</sup> It also generates the potential for virginity to be represented as a self-evident gender within the text, destabilising the binary construction of gender.<sup>92</sup> Hence the virgin is removed from the 'heterosexual matrix', with the possibility of creating a new gender. For Butler, then, gender is a process of signification – the subject becomes female through the signifiers of femininity, be they dress, action, or behaviour.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, the subject becomes a virgin through the signifiers of virginity.

Virginity itself is a problematic and complex category, differentiated in discourse, enabling multiple identities, for example, male virginity differs in its depiction from female, as does religious virginity and secular. Thus it constantly has the potential to queer the subject. There is also difficulty in studying virginity *per se*,

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<sup>90</sup> Indeed as Butler sees the repetition of actions creating and maintaining the gendered self, a study of hagiography particularly lends itself to this method of enquiry. The required performative elements of the 'ideal' virgin, and the virgin martyr are repetitive to say the least. Also, as Shari Horner, *Discourse of Enclosure*, p. 31, comments, such an approach allows us to 'bypass questions of authority and authorship and examine instead the ways in which the repeated "acts" of gender ... produce their feminine speaking subjects.'

<sup>91</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 135; This raises the question of agency, for to what extent does Aldhelm describe virginity and gender, and what extent do constructions create gender for his audience. To what extent is the audience interpellated into Aldhelm's gender construction?

<sup>92</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, pp. 1-15, 242-244; Bernau, Evans and Salih, *Medieval Virginites*, pp. 1-13.

<sup>93</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 68.

as Anke Bernau *et al* comment, 'A virgin described and seen is thereby no virgin. Virginitate has no ontological security.'<sup>94</sup> The construction of virginitate in a religious text such as Aldhelm's differs from its construction in a medical text. This multivalency continued with the virgins themselves, who could function as signs, for example signifying the inviolate Church. Similarly virginitate could signify perfection, either prelapsarian, and representing the perfect life lost in Eden, or angelic, and portending the life to come.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, virgins, by the very fact that they are removed from the heterosexual matrix, are transgressive, and subversive, and their presentation in *De Virginitate* allows the reader to interrogate the text through a consideration of Butler's concept of parody.

By highlighting the disjunction between body of performer and gender performed, parodic performances, such as drag, effectively reveal the performative nature of all gender identities.<sup>96</sup> Parody is especially important when considering what Sarah Salih calls the 'reclamation of virginitate', the ability of non-virginal women, such as widows, to claim the status of virgin through their performance of 'virginal' qualities.<sup>97</sup> Butler argues, 'The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is performed.... *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.*'<sup>98</sup> Taking this idea, we can say that the performance of virginitate plays upon the distinction of between the ontological status of the body and status performed. Thus the parodical element of 'reclaiming' virginitate demonstrates the construction of

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<sup>94</sup> Bernau, Evans and Salih, *Medieval Virginitates*, p. 5.

<sup>95</sup> See discussion in Kelly, *Performing Virginitate*; P. Brown, *Body and Society. Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>96</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 137, italics Butler's own; Salih, *Versions of Virginitate*, p. 65.

<sup>97</sup> See Salih, *Versions of Virginitate*, particularly her discussion of Margery Kempe, pp. 166-241.

<sup>98</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.187. She elaborates, 'If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance'.

the category of virgin. Similarly, in a couple of Aldhelm's *vitae*, there is a direct use of parody, for example Eugenia's cross-dressing and abbatical role, or the highly feminised depiction of Malchus.<sup>99</sup> Considering the manner in which Aldhelm uses the parodical nature of cross-gender dress and attributes is important in a complete understanding of his overall messages through *De Virginitate*.

Parody *per se* is not subversive. Butler, drawing on contemporary culture to illustrate her argument, discusses the film *Tootsie*, in which cross-dressing serves to reinforce heterosexual power structures. Using parody as an interrogative tool is particularly apposite when contemplating a text that seeks to construct the ideal, in Aldhelm's case the ideal virgin, but also questions that ideal through its subversion, for example the transvestite virgin. In reading the text one must consider whether the hagiographical clichés serve a parodical function, which reinforces, rather than destabilises, the patriarchal power structure of the Church. This study develops that argument, relating the literary construction of the virgin to the examples of virgins, both real and legendary.

Though Butler argues for the creation of the physical gendered body through performativity, this study constructs its own performance and restricts this idea to the creation of the textual body. The literary gendered body is portrayed directly and indirectly; it is the body of the saint, tortured yet whole; it is the body of the virtue and the vice, frequently female, as his initial audience was female, yet all encompassing. It is translated as a relic, contained by language and elided by metaphor. Feminist post-structuralism does not consider agency and identity as fixed and unified, rather they are culturally constructed and fragmented. It will be argued that within *De Virginitate*, they are subjected to the culture clash between the Germanic and authoritative noble

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<sup>99</sup> See accounts in Chapter 4.

Anglo-Saxon nun, and the passive 'ideal' Christian (female) virgin of late antiquity. This study will draw on the work of Butler to consider the portrayal of the gendered virgin as 'a function of repeated rhetorical patterns within Anglo-Saxon clerical culture'.<sup>100</sup>

Hence, as it encompasses these issues, Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* is a vitally important work, especially as it enjoyed great influence through the Anglo-Saxon era, not just in England but also on the continent.<sup>101</sup> As a religious text it encompasses the belief systems of western Christendom, and to 'study culture, and to study the differences by which the gendered subjects of history are made, without recourse to paradigms of belief is to empty both past and present cultural formations of a significant element of their meaning.'<sup>102</sup> Scott Gwara describes the text as 'a foundational document for the Anglo-Saxon missionary movement and for English belles-lettres', underlining its importance for our understanding of the role of women in the early Anglo-Saxon Church, and of the conception of gender and virginity at this time.<sup>103</sup>

This study will address the construction of religious virginity, and how virginity is gendered through the text, and will differentiate between the depiction of virginity as an identity in itself, and the portrayal of male and female virgin saints through Aldhelm's hagiography.<sup>104</sup> It will consider the construction of virginity, and the depiction of virgins, in the late antique period, discussing the themes and motifs that

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<sup>100</sup> Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, p. 2.

<sup>101</sup> See further discussion in Chapter 2.

<sup>102</sup> Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, p. 7.

<sup>103</sup> Scott Gwara, *Aldhelmi Malmesbiriensis Prosa de Virginitate : Cum Glosa Latina Atque Anglosaxonica* (Turnholt : Brepols, 2001), p.47.

<sup>104</sup> The study of virginity largely arose through feminist scholarship, so is heavily biased toward female virginity, nevertheless some work has been done on male chastity and virginity. See for example Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, pp. 91-118; Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie, *Menacing Virgins : Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages* (Newark : University of Delaware Press, London : Associated University Presses, 1999); C. Carlson and A. J. Weisl, *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke : Macmillan, 1999).

Aldhelm inherited from the Church Fathers, and then reflect on Aldhelm's own construction of virginity, and his representation of virgins.

The first chapter will be an outline of Aldhelm's life and work, situating him in an historical context. It will argue that in the period in which Aldhelm wrote was also one in which, as a bishop, he lacked authority over monastics, as the ecclesiastical structure was not as disciplined as it later became in the medieval period. This was important in his construction of *De Virginitate*, as it necessitated Aldhelm flatter and exhort rather than command his audience. The second chapter then offers a review of Aldhelm's source material. His ideology was drawn from the Church Fathers, and even where he demonstrably differed from them in his construction of chastity, he stresses many of the same themes to his audience. The third chapter discusses the development of virginity as a praised quality within the Church, and Aldhelm's construction of a theoretical virginity in *De Virginitate*. It demonstrates that Aldhelm's concept of virginity, particularly in highlighting mental purity, whilst apparently empowering, is used to contain female authority within the double monastery. The fourth and fifth chapters then consider his depiction of hagiographical virginity, arguing that Aldhelm clearly genders sanctified virginity. He also concentrates on bodily integrity, which divides the sanctified virgins whose lives he discusses, and the Anglo-Saxon audience of non-virginal monastics. Ultimately the performance of virginity allowed by Aldhelm is gendered according to the patriarchal norms of Judeo-Christian ideology. The sixth chapter discusses the *psychomachia* Aldhelm creates in the *Carmen De Virginitate*, arguing that whilst it offers a martial construction of virginity, it also highlights the need for female dependence on masculine authority.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ALDHELM IN CONTEXT – ANGLO-SAXON CHRISTIANITY

This chapter is intended to situate Aldhelm in his historical context. It discusses his life and works, demonstrating that he wrote at a time when the Church hierarchy lacked authority over abbots and abbesses, therefore Aldhelm had to treat his audience with deference, whilst exhorting them to obedience. It will also outline his works, as they are not well known to the modern reader.

Aldhelm was probably born c. 640, and, given that he spent almost all his life in Wessex, was probably Wessex-born. He died in either 709 or 710. Wessex was converted to Christianity in the years around or just before his birth, thus Aldhelm was at most a second generation Christian, and his parents would have been raised pagan.<sup>1</sup> Though likely of noble birth, even the frequently unreliable William of Malmesbury admits that the story that Aldhelm was the nephew of West Saxon King Ine, was unproven opinion.<sup>2</sup> The paucity of evidence available means we cannot say for sure where, when, or to whom, Aldhelm was born, merely discuss possibilities and probabilities.<sup>3</sup> The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* includes a brief reference to Aldhelm for the year 709, 'Here Aldhelm passed away: he was bishop to the west of the wood. And in the early days of Daniel, the land of Wessex was divided into two dioceses – and earlier it had been one; Daniel held one, Aldhelm the other. After Aldhelm, Forthere

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<sup>1</sup> As will be discussed the usual pattern of conversion began with the royal family, and trickled down through society. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the king of Wessex, Cynegils, was baptized in 635.

<sup>2</sup> *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* V.188; *Aldhelm : The Prose Works*, trans. by M. Lapidge and M. Herren (Cambridge : D. S. Brewer, 1979), p. 6; See also M. Lapidge, 'Beowulf, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum* and Wessex', *Studi Medievali*, 23 (1982), 151-192.

<sup>3</sup> *Aldhelmi Malmesbiriensis Prosa de Virginitate : Cum Glosa Latina atque Anglosaxonica*, ed. by Scott Gwara, *Corpus Christianorum* vols. 124-124a (Turnhout : Brepols, 2001). See especially vol. 24, pp. 19-28.

succeeded'.<sup>4</sup> However this date could be a year out, with Aldhelm dying in 709 or 710.

Bede's reference to Aldhelm is worth quoting in full,

When Haedde died, the bishopric of the [West Saxons] was divided into two dioceses. One was given to Daniel, who governs it to this day, the other to Aldhelm, who presided over it energetically for four years. Both were fully instructed (*sufficienter instructi*) in ecclesiastical matters and in the knowledge of the Scriptures. For example, Aldhelm, when he was still priest, and abbot of the monastery known as Malmesbury (*Maildubi Urbem*), by order of a synod of his own people wrote a remarkable book against the British error of celebrating Easter at the wrong time, and of doing many other things to the detriment of the pure practices and the peace of the Church; by means of this book he led many of those Britons who were subject to the West Saxons to adopt the Catholic celebration of the Easter of the Lord. He also wrote a most excellent book on virginity both in hexameter verse and in prose, producing a two-fold work after the example of Sedulius. He also wrote several other books, for he was a man of wide learning. He had a polished style (*sermone nitidus*), and, as we have said, was remarkable for his erudition in both ecclesiastical and in general studies. On his death Forthere became bishop in his place; he was also a man most learned in the Scriptures.<sup>5</sup>

Bede's need to denigrate the indigenous Christianity does not disappoint, and we learn more about his prejudices than about Aldhelm. The first treatise referred to in the extract is the *Epistle* to Geraint, king of Dumnonia, and its call for orthodoxy would no

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<sup>4</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, trans. and ed. by Michael Swanton, (London : Phoenix Press, 2002), pp. 40-41.

<sup>5</sup> *Historia Ecclesiastica* V.18; *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. and ed. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford : Oxford Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 514-515. (Hereafter known as *H.E.*).

doubt have appealed greatly to Bede.<sup>6</sup> Thus from Bede we discover Aldhelm was a supporter of orthodoxy, well-read, the author of some well respected books, and that he exerted himself for the Church, but not much more.

Aldhelm himself adds very little. He does not discuss his background, but from a handful of references we can make a few informed guesses. For example, among the list of nuns at the beginning of the prose *De Virginitate*, is Osburg. Aldhelm states ‘Osburg too, who is related (to me) by the family bonds of kinship (*nec non osburgae contribulibus necessitudinum nexibus conglutinatae*).<sup>7</sup> However, the phrase is too vague for us to trace the degree of kinship, so their exact relationship remains unclear.

His friendship with Aldfrith, king of Northumbria (685-705), is evident by the opening comments of Aldhelm’s *Epistola ad Acircium*.<sup>8</sup> He reminded Aldfrith, referred to by the pseudonym, Acircius, of a long-standing bond between them,

I do not doubt...that the provident heart of your Wisdom may recall that twice-two revolutions of the *lustra* ago [i.e. nearly twenty years ago] we made the unbreakable pledge of a binding agreement, and through the bond of spiritual association we established a comradeship of devoted charity. For a long time ago, in the era of our young manhood (*tempore pubertatis nostrae*), when your talented Sagacity was equipped with the septiform munificence of spiritual gifts by the hand of a venerable bishop, I recall that I acquired the name of ‘father’ and that you received the appellations of your adoptive station together with the privilege of heavenly grace.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep. IV*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 155.

<sup>7</sup> *Prosa Praefatio*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 59; Presumably Osburg is the main connexion between Aldhelm in Wessex and Barking in Essex.

<sup>8</sup> Discussed in more depth below.

<sup>9</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep ad Acircium I*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 34.



The *Epistola* can be dated to 685-695, and refers to events nearly 20 years before. *Pubertas* does not cover an exact time; whilst clearly referring to puberty, its meaning includes being of marriageable age, and of manhood. Michael Lapidge and James Rosier suggest *pubertas* 'would seem best to refer to an age from the late teens to the early thirties', a very broad window.<sup>10</sup> As Joseph H. Lynch comments, the reference is unlikely to be to a baptism, rather to Aldhelm's sponsorship at Aldfrith's confirmation. This is more important than at first glance it may appear, and demonstrates an aspect of Aldhelm's 'worldly business'.<sup>11</sup> Aldfrith's father, Oswiu, was later king of Northumbria, but at the time of Aldfrith's conception he was exiled in Ireland. Oswiu's mother was Fin, an Irish princess, but Oswiu and Fin never married.<sup>12</sup> When Aldfrith became king of Northumbria in 686, Lynch raises the possibility that Aldfrith's (likely Irish) baptism was not acceptable to the Northumbrians, 'The Celtic liturgies were part of widespread family of Gallican liturgies, which did not reserve a postbaptismal anointing for a bishop. Instead, the baptizing priest anointed the neophyte once after baptism with oil consecrated by a bishop, who was present through the material used in the anointing.'<sup>13</sup> Thus to the Catholic Northumbrians his baptism lacked episcopal authority. It is possible, therefore, that Aldhelm refers to Aldfrith's confirmation, with attendant bishop, and Aldhelm standing as sponsor, which likely occurred at the time Aldfrith ascended the Northumbrian throne. This would indicate that Aldhelm's religious and political influence reached far outside of Wessex.

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<sup>10</sup> *Aldhelm : The Poetic Works*, trans. by M. Lapidge and J. L. Rosier (Cambridge : D. S. Brewer, 1985), p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Prosa LIX, pastoralis curae sarcina gravatus negotiorumque terrenorum ponderibus oppressus ita perneciter, ut satagitis, dictare vobisque destinare nequiverim, quia securae quietis spatium et morosam dictandi intercapidinem scrupulosa ecclesiastici regiminis sollicitudo denegabat et tumultuans saecularium strepitus obturbabat*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 130; The fact that Aldhelm mentions worldly business along with pastoral and ecclesiastical administration, demonstrates how intertwined these roles were in this period.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph H. Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship, Ritual Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ithaca and London : Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> Lynch, *Christianizing Kingship*, p. 115.

## EDUCATION

Aldhelm's initial education was probably by an Irish tutor, though, as Michael Herren comments, whilst Aldhelm consistently denigrates his early education, he never explicitly acknowledges an Irish element. There has been some debate around Aldhelm's 'Irish' education, beginning with Michael Winterbottom's work. Winterbottom argued that Aldhelm's prose style had more in common with continental models than the extant Hiberno-Latin texts.<sup>14</sup> The links between Wessex and the continent are well known, for example, the first bishop of Wessex was Agilbert, a Frank, the second, Wine, was consecrated in Gaul, and the third, Leuthere, was again a Frank.<sup>15</sup> However, Andy Orchard has redressed the balance by demonstrating parallels between Aldhelm's poetry and Hiberno-Latin poetry.<sup>16</sup> To this we can add a letter from an anonymous Irishman, who requests instruction from Aldhelm, 'especially because you were nourished by a certain holy man of our race.'<sup>17</sup> William of Malmesbury names Maildubh as Aldhelm's tutor in Malmesbury, but the identification is conjecture. Without firm evidence, the identity of Aldhelm's Irish teacher must remain a matter of speculation; nevertheless, that Aldhelm's early education was Irish seems more likely than not.<sup>18</sup>

Aldhelm also studied under Archbishop Theodore and Abbot Hadrian at Canterbury, one of the foremost schools in Europe in the early medieval period.<sup>19</sup> In a letter to Abbot Hadrian, he mentioned two periods of instruction at Canterbury,

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Winterbottom, 'Aldhelm's Prose Style and its Origins', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 6 (1977), 36-76; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 6-7.

<sup>15</sup> Aldhelm clearly knew Leuthere, as we have the letter to him (*Ep. I*); Patrick Sims-Williams, *Britain and Early Christian Europe: Studies in Early Medieval History and Culture* (Aldershot: Varorium, 1995), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Andy Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep. VI, insuper quod a quodam sancto viro de nostro genere nutritus es*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 164.

<sup>18</sup> Orchard, *Poetic Art*, pp. 4-5; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 6-7, 181-2.

<sup>19</sup> See further discussion below.

referring to an illness that caused him to return home, ‘when I was with you the second time after the elementary instruction (*post prima elementa*)’.<sup>20</sup> Hadrian arrived in England late 669 or 670.<sup>21</sup> As it is assumed Aldhelm was born c. 640, he would have been around thirty when Hadrian arrived in England, hence this cannot be a reference to his early education. Aldhelm’s time at Canterbury does not appear to be extensive, but he evidently valued the time spent there.<sup>22</sup> Theodore and Hadrian, as Greek speakers, could have taught Greek, as Bede mentions, hence Aldhelm may have read Greek, though there is no unequivocal evidence of this. The anonymous Irish student who requested instruction from Aldhelm, praised him: ‘you are distinguished in native ability and for your Roman eloquence, and for various flowers of letters, even those in the Greek fashion (*Graecorum more*)’.<sup>23</sup> However, as Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren note, *Graecorum more* need not refer to anything more than Aldhelm’s fondness for Graecisms.<sup>24</sup> In his letter to Leuthere, Aldhelm describes his education at Canterbury, referring to the study of law, the metrical arts, calculus and astrology at the school.<sup>25</sup> Herren notes that the letter appears to be written during his stay in Canterbury.<sup>26</sup> Certainly Aldhelm’s knowledge of patristic and classical writers was excellent. Some evidence of the depth of his education in late classical authors is

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<sup>20</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep. II*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 154.

<sup>21</sup> *H.E. IV.1*; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 331; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 138.

<sup>22</sup> If Hadrian arrived in 669/670 and Aldhelm likely became abbot of Malmesbury 673/674, his two periods of study at Canterbury occurred within a three-year period. This short time does not explain how Aldhelm became one of the most learned men of his generation.

<sup>23</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep. VI*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 164.

<sup>24</sup> *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Leuthere was Leutherius, the West Saxon bishop, 670-6; see below; Aldhelm, *Ep. I*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren pp. 152-153; *Ep. I*; Aldhelm also takes the opportunity to denigrate his earlier (Irish) education, ‘I regarded all my past labour of study (as being) of little value, when I thought all along that I knew the secret compartments of that study, and, to cite the phrase of the blessed Jerome... “shall I begin again to be a student, who thought myself learned?”’ *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 153.

<sup>26</sup> *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 137.

evident in his *Epistola ad Acircium*, to Aldfrith, who was also noted for his education, having studied at Iona.<sup>27</sup>

## CHURCH CAREER

Aldhelm became abbot of the monastery of Malmesbury some time between late 672 and 674. As there is no evidence of a monastery at Malmesbury before Aldhelm, Lapidge raises the possibility that it was created as an *eigenkirche* on royal lands.<sup>28</sup> Aldhelm became bishop of Sherborne in 705 or 706, a post Bede tells us he held for four years before his death.<sup>29</sup> At some point in his career he travelled to Rome, but we have no information as to why, or when, this trip occurred.<sup>30</sup> Apart from this we know little about his church career, though he clearly remained busy in secular and ecclesiastical matters.

As an aristocrat, his political influence was as important as his religious. Wessex had seen internal conflict in the 670s, as several families had vied for the throne. Around 676 Centwine (William of Malmesbury's Kenten) became king, and Scott Gwara notes, 'under his aegis, Wessex became an ambitious political entity, challenging Mercians to the North and Celts to the south.'<sup>31</sup> His relationship with Aldfrith has already been discussed and in the introduction of the *Prosa De Virginitate*, Aldhelm greets Cuthburg, possibly Aldfrith's ex-wife, and sister of King Ine of

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<sup>27</sup> Bede, *H.E.* V.15, describes Aldfrith, 'He was a good and wise man with an excellent knowledge of the scriptures (*Erat enim vir bonus et sapiens et scientia scripturarum noblissime instructus*).'; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 506-7.

<sup>28</sup> *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> *H.E.* V.18.

<sup>30</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep.* VI; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 164.

<sup>31</sup> *Aldhelmi*, Gwara, p. 35; See also B. Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester : University of Leicester Press, 1995).

Wessex.<sup>32</sup> Michael Lapidge has suggested that Aldhelm was a prince of Wessex, but as an aristocrat he would certainly have known the royal family.<sup>33</sup>

At the end of *De Virginitate*, Aldhelm states that the problems of pastoral care and worldly business have been onerous, 'I have been weighed down with the burden of pastoral care and overwhelmed with the weight of worldly business, (and) because the demanding responsibilities of ecclesiastical administration did not allow any space of undisturbed peace and a leisured interval for writing, and the noisy bustle of practical matters interrupted it'.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, he described himself to Aldfrith, as 'one established in the midst of so many and such loud tumultuous uproars in secular affairs and weighed down by the ecclesiastical concerns of pastoral care by which the meticulous and scrupulous mind is constrained as though by the tightest sort of bolt and chains.'<sup>35</sup> Bede corroborates this description, saying Aldhelm administered his bishopric 'with great energy (*strenuissime*) for four years.'<sup>36</sup> We know little about these responsibilities, but can surmise that as a royal abbot and bishop, his political and ecclesiastical roles went hand in hand, as evident in the sponsoring of Aldfrith.

Scott Gwara argues that Aldhelm had an important role in consolidating Christianity in England.<sup>37</sup> He rightly contends that, taking Bede at face value, 'scholars writing about the seventh century too eagerly trumpet the views of Christian proselytes and dismiss competing evidence of heathenism in acclaiming the advent of Christianity among the Anglo-Saxons.'<sup>38</sup> Gwara discusses the glimpses of evidence from which we

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<sup>32</sup> Assuming this is the same Cuthburg.

<sup>33</sup> Lapidge, 'Beowulf, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum* and Wessex', pp. 151-192, especially p. 155.

<sup>34</sup> *Prosa* LIX; See footnote 10; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 130; A few lines later Aldhelm adds that his reply to the nuns has been delayed, '(because) the distractions of various business affairs were weighing down the neck of a tired mind with the heavy burden of their load (*divesarum rerum distentionibus fessae mentis cervicem gravi fascis sarcina deprimentibus*)'.

<sup>35</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep ad Acircium* CXLII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 45-46.

<sup>36</sup> *H.E.* V.18.

<sup>37</sup> *Aldhlemi*, Gwara, p. 35.

<sup>38</sup> *Aldhelmi*, Gwara, pp. 42-43.

can deduce residual paganism.<sup>39</sup> As always, history is written by the victors, and the Christian writers of Anglo-Saxon England did not write at length regarding lingering pagan practices in their territories. Aldhelm, through his aristocratic, secular and religious roles, would have come into contact with pagan and Christian, Anglo-Saxon and British. His position as bishop to the 'west of the wood' was a frontier outpost, at the edge of Wessex and close to Dumnonian territory. His relations with Geraint, and with the court of Wessex, would have placed him at the centre of a relationship that was at best tense, and at worst violent. Hence his comments in *De Virginitate*, describing 'the burden of pastoral care', 'the weight of worldly business', and, 'the demanding responsibilities of ecclesiastical administration' are understandable.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, Aldhelm was responsible for the construction of churches and monasteries in Wessex, including in Malmesbury itself, near the river Frome, at Bradford-on-Avon, at Bruton, and at Wareham.<sup>41</sup> Again, as Wessex had been converted around the time of Aldhelm's birth, churches and monasteries were needed for the new Church.

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<sup>39</sup> It is ironic that when studying the early conversion, scholars concentrate on the success of Christianity, but in the later period are more open to the difficulties faced by the Church in eradicating what has, by the later period, been termed 'superstition'. See Blair's discussion on Benedictine writers addressing the worship of wells and groves. John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 481-489.

<sup>40</sup> *Prosa* LIX; See footnote 10; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 130.

<sup>41</sup> *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* V.197-198, 216 (Hereafter known as *G.P.A.*); *William of Malmesbury. The Deeds of the Bishops of England*, ed. and trans. by David Preest (Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester, NY : The Boydell Press, 2002); William of Malmesbury also lists lands given to Aldhelm, either for construction or the support of foundations, see *G.P.A.* V.199-211.

## LITERARY WORKS

Aldhelm's extant literary works have survived in a variety of manuscripts, both of English and European origin.<sup>42</sup> They are, *Carmina Ecclesiastica*, *Epistola ad Acircium*, *De Virginitate* (prose and verse), *Epistolae*, and *Carmen Rhythmicum*.<sup>43</sup> Aldhelm's literary reputation was also based on his Old English poetry, none of which has come down to us. William of Malmesbury referred to a book written by King Alfred in which he described Aldhelm using vernacular poetry to draw in the common people, enabling him to preach the Christian message to them.<sup>44</sup> William also notes that Alfred the Great thought Aldhelm the greatest English vernacular poet, and Alfred's love of poetry is well attested.<sup>45</sup>

The *Carmina Ecclesiastica* is a collection of 5 *tituli*.<sup>46</sup> The first in Ehwald's list is a dedication for a church to Peter and Paul. William of Malmesbury records that Aldhelm rebuilt a church in Malmesbury and dedicated it to Peter and Paul, so possibly this is a poem for Aldhelm's own church.<sup>47</sup> The second is a church dedication to the Virgin Mary, and again William states that Aldhelm built and dedicated a church to the Virgin Mary.<sup>48</sup> The third is a dedication for a church built by Bugga, daughter of West Saxon king Centwine, also indicating the interlinked nature of the religious and

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<sup>42</sup> *Aldhelmi Opera Omnia*, ed. by Rudolph Ehwald (MGH AA 15, Berlin, 1919), pp. 211-215. Ehwald discusses Aldhelmian manuscripts. Ehwald has been augmented by Gwara's work in *Aldhelmi*, vol. 124 pp. 74-187; See also M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2006), which offers insights on manuscripts within England, and also the manuscripts available to Aldhelm.

<sup>43</sup> *De Virginitate* will be discussed in more depth under the next subheading.

<sup>44</sup> *G.P.A.* V.190.

<sup>45</sup> *G.P.A.* V.190; Asser relates the story of Alfred as a child learning a book of poetry by heart before his older brothers in order to win the book in *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 23. Alfred's appreciation of poetry is also evident in his involvement in translations of the Psalms and Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*.

<sup>46</sup> Their title comes from Ehwald, who drew them together from various European manuscripts.

<sup>47</sup> *G.P.A.* V.197.

<sup>48</sup> *G.P.A.* V.216.

political worlds. The fourth concerns the dedications of twelve altars for the twelve apostles, and the fifth is a dedication for a church honouring Matthew.

The *Epistola ad Acircium* is less a letter and more a treatise, addressed to 'illustrious Acircius, who governs the kingdom of the northern empire', identified as Aldfrith, king of Northumbria.<sup>49</sup> It includes a consideration on the number 7 in biblical typology, two studies of metrics, a collection of one hundred *enigmata*, and concludes with a call to Aldfrith to rule fairly and not neglect his studies. The studies of metrics (*De Metris* and *De Pedum Regulis*) and the *enigmata* became popular individually, and circulated independently of the *Epistola*. *De Metris* is of great use for the literary historian of Anglo-Saxon England. Michael Herren notes that Aldhelm demonstrates knowledge of many of the late antique and early Christian grammarians: Priscian, Audax, Donatus, Servius, Sergius, Pompeius, Maximus Victorinus, Diomedes, Nonius and Julian of Toledo; indicating the grammarians available to Aldhelm and his contemporaries.<sup>50</sup> Herren comments on its importance, adding, 'Aldhelm's metrical treatise should be understood as a pioneering effort in this field and as the first of several such treatises by Anglo-Saxon authors, notably Boniface's brief *De Caesuris* and the *De Arte Metrica* by Bede.'<sup>51</sup> The *Carmen Rhythmicum* is a poem of 200 octosyllables dedicated to Helmgils, about whom nothing is known. It describes a storm striking a church in Dumnonia, probably at Lyme Regis, while the congregation is at worship.

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<sup>49</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep ad Acircium I*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 34; *G.P.A.* V.196; The identification of Acircius with Aldfrith is not contested, not only does William of Malmesbury explicitly name Aldfrith, but Aldfrith is the only likely recipient. Cf. Bede, *H.E.* IV.26, *vir in scripturis doctissimus*; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 430-1, 'a man most learned in the scriptures; Bede, *H.E.* V.15 *Erat enim vir bonus et sapiens et scientia scripturarum nobilissime instructus*; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 506-7, 'He was a good and wise man with an excellent knowledge of the scriptures.'

<sup>50</sup> *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 31-2.

<sup>51</sup> *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren. p. 13; *De Pedum Regulis* is a catalogue of metrical feet and Latin words to fit the various feet.



The *Epistolae* includes letters to and by Aldhelm. Ehwald collected thirteen letters, though the final one included, from Aldhelm to Wynberht, is of dubious provenance. Unfortunately, seven of the letters, extant only in William of Malmesbury, are extracts only. The letters are a mixture of formal and friendly. The first (I) is to a bishop, most likely Leutherius of the West Saxons, in which Aldhelm mentions his education at Canterbury and comments on his desire to return to Malmesbury for Christmas. The letter to Hadrian (II) is an extract referring to his two periods of study at Canterbury. Letter III is to Wihtfrith, a former student of Aldhelm's. Wihtfrith intended studying in Ireland and Aldhelm warned him against the many dangers there awaiting the unwary, such as the Irish reliance on pagan classical literature, describing it, 'the foul pollution of base Prosepina... Hermione, the wanton offspring of Menelaus and Helen'.<sup>52</sup>

Letter IV is one of the most important and the longest. Though it had been lost by the time of William of Malmesbury, Bede referred to it, so it presumably was well known to Aldhelm's contemporaries.<sup>53</sup> Bede wrote, '[Aldhelm] was directed by a synod of his own people to write a notable treatise against the errors of the Britons who were subject to the West Saxons to conform to the Catholic observance of our Lord's Resurrection.'<sup>54</sup> In the letter, Aldhelm addresses Geraint, king of Dumnonia (Devon and Cornwall), explaining that he was requested to write by 'an episcopal council [made up of] almost the entirety of Britain'.<sup>55</sup> He calls for the Dumnonian bishops to follow Catholic practice, primarily over the form of tonsure and dating of Easter.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep. III; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 154; See also discussion in Chapter 6 on Aldhelm's use of Virgil; Aldhelm, *Ep. III; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 155. Aldhelm also begged Wihtfrith, 'that you in no wise go near the whores or the trumpery of bawdy houses.' With such a negative view it is no wonder Aldhelm avoids discussing his own early Irish education.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. *H.E.* V.18.

<sup>54</sup> *H.E.* V.18; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 515.

<sup>55</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep. IV; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 155.

<sup>56</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep. IV; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 156; Most of Aldhelm's writings cannot be accurately dated, but Theodore of Canterbury called a Council of Hertford in 672, which called for unity within the

Aldhelm reminds Geraint that the Catholic Church was founded on Christ and Peter, thus 'he who does not follow the teaching and rule of St Peter boasts idly about his Catholic Faith.'<sup>57</sup>

Letter V, to Heahfrith, has a separate manuscript tradition to the rest of the letters. Ehwald notes that the letter is only extant in seven manuscripts, and is usually found with the *Prosa de Virginitate*.<sup>58</sup> We know nothing about Heahfrith outside of the information contained in the letter.<sup>59</sup> He had studied in Ireland and was presumably coming to Aldhelm to continue his education, and Aldhelm takes the opportunity to again denigrate Irish education and learning.<sup>60</sup> Letter VI is by an anonymous Irish student, and, although it refers to Aldhelm's journey to Rome, it does not help us date, or guess at, a motive for the trip. Letter VII is by Aethilwald to Aldhelm. Aethilwald composed some *Carmina Rhythmica*, which he sent to Aldhelm with the letter.<sup>61</sup> It is a reminder of previous education and a request for further instruction. Letter VIII is to Sigegyth, a nun about whom nothing is known, and refers to a petition to the bishop for a nun's baptism. It corresponds to his emphasis on education in the *De Virginitate* as Aldhelm entreats Sigegyth, 'that you do not cease to occupy your mind with continual meditation on the Scriptures'.<sup>62</sup>

Letters IX and X are extracts of the correspondence between Cellanus and Aldhelm. Cellanus, an Irish monk living in northern France, requested 'a few little

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Church, and, according to Bede, *H.E.* IV.5, 'That we all keep Easter Day at the same time, namely on the Sunday after the fourteenth day of the moon of the first month.' *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 351; Possibly then the letter was written soon after this synod.

<sup>57</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep.* IV; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 160; This stress on orthodoxy is the overarching theme through Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*.

<sup>58</sup> *Aldhelmi Opera Omnia*, Ehwald, pp. 486-7; Aldhelm *Ep.* IV; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 156.

<sup>59</sup> See discussion in A. S. Cook, 'Who was the Ehwald of Aldhelm's Letter', *Speculum*, 2 (1927), 363-373.

<sup>60</sup> In *Ep.* V, Aldhelm describes Irish students in England, 'although Theodore [of Canterbury] who pilots the helm of the high priesthood, be hemmed in by a mass of Irish students, like a savage wild boar checked by a snarling pack of hounds, with the filed tooth of the grammarian – nimbly and with no loss of time – he disbands the rebel phalanxes'. *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 163.

<sup>61</sup> *Aldhelmi Opera Omnia*, Ehwald, pp. 528-537.

<sup>62</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep.* VIII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 166.

sermons' from Aldhelm.<sup>63</sup> Letter XI is from Aldhelm to Aethilwald but is not a reply to the earlier letter, rather a warning against the 'deceptive enticements of this world', and encouragement to 'be always attentive to divine readings and sacred discourse'.<sup>64</sup> Letter XII is again an excerpt, and addressed to the monastics who had been under the authority of Bishop Wilfrid. Wilfrid was easily the most controversial figure of the early Christian period in England, and Aldhelm's defence of him may seem surprising given Aldhelm's links with Aldfrith.<sup>65</sup> Aldhelm calls on the abbots to remain with Wilfrid, even in exile. Letter XIII is an excerpt from William of Malmesbury, but Ehwald doubted its authenticity. It is a petition for land previously offered to Aldhelm.

Aldhelm's literary reputation was established within his lifetime.<sup>66</sup> By the time Aldhelm was bishop, the Anglo-Saxons began their missions to the continent. In the 690s Wilibrord (658-739) travelled to Frisia, and Boniface (c. 675-754) began his mission in Frisia in 719. Anglo-Saxons (men and women) soon established themselves as preachers and teachers in Europe, which was crucial in spreading Aldhelm's influence as the Anglo-Saxons taught his works in the schools they established. Many of the manuscripts we possess today of his works are of continental provenance.<sup>67</sup> Booklists and library catalogues attest to Aldhelm's popularity, especially in Europe.<sup>68</sup> In England, it seems Viking incursions and the destruction of monasteries meant Aldhelm's works had to be re-imported from the Continent in the later Anglo-Saxon

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<sup>63</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep.* IX; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 167; The sermons (*sermones*) could be lost homilies or sermons, or Cellanus could be using the term merely to mean the writings of Aldhelm.

<sup>64</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep.* XI; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 168; Again themes that Aldhelm constantly stresses through *De Virginitate*.

<sup>65</sup> Aldfrith not only exiled Wilfrid, but also refused to allow his return, even after Wilfrid had successfully appealed to the papacy.

<sup>66</sup> For example, Cellanus' request for sermons above; Aldhelm was certainly aware of his reputation. In the *Ep. ad Acircium*, CXLII, he writes that he does not consider it pride on his part to liken himself to Virgil, for as Virgil was the first Latin writer to compose *Georgic*, Aldhelm is the Anglo-Saxon equivalent; Cf. Virgil, *Georgics* III.11-13; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 46.

<sup>67</sup> See *Aldhelmi Opera Omnia*, Ehwald, pp. 211-215; *Aldhelmi*, Gwara, vol. 124, pp. 74-187; Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Library*.

<sup>68</sup> For further discussion see G. Becker, *Catalogi Bibliothecarum Antiqui* (Bonn, 1885); See also *Aldhelmi Opera Omnia*, Ehwald, pp. 211-225; *Aldhelmi*, Gwara, vol. 24, pp. 74-187; Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Library*.

period. His importance to early medieval education is evident not only from the number of manuscripts extant, but also from the detailed glossing on many of these manuscripts, both in Old English and Latin.<sup>69</sup> Only with the Norman Conquest does Aldhelm fade from fashion, both in England and Europe more generally.

## ALDHELM'S STYLE

However, Aldhelm's verbose and arcane Latin remains notoriously hard to penetrate for the modern reader, thus his audience in the modern period has been small. Although Aldhelm's corpus of writings is as wide-ranging in style and topic as Bede's, for modern scholars of Anglo-Latin, the works of Bede are more accessible and well known. Michael Lapidge notes about Aldhelm's style,

His sentences are tediously long and complicated; his vocabulary is often bizarre and arcane, sometimes inscrutable. Indeed, Aldhelm's love of verbiage for its own sake – he calls it 'verbose garrulity or garrulous verbosity' – must often exasperate the well-intentioned reader who, having penetrated the lexical and syntactical obscurities of a two-page long sentence, finds that he is left with a trivial apophthegm of the merest banality.<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, a study of Aldhelm's texts is vital in our understanding of the representation of gender and the understanding of virginity in Anglo-Latin writing. Alcuin, for example, imitated Aldhelm's *Carmina Ecclesiastica*, and Aldhelm's prose influenced later writers such as Boniface and Felix. In the tenth and eleventh centuries,

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<sup>69</sup> *Aldhelmi*, Gwara, vol. 24, pp. 74-187.

<sup>70</sup> *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 4; Colgrave and Mynors, *Ecclesiastical History*, p. 515, note, 'Aldhelm's style seems to us fantastic, bombastic, and obscure. He shows the influence of that peculiar of ornate Latin derived in part from commentaries on Virgil and Lucan, garnished with new words of Greek and even Hebrew origin, of which the *Hisperica Famina* is the best-known example.'

Aldhelm was almost universally imitated. His arcane vocabulary and complicated syntax was much copied by writers in the ‘hermeneutic’ style.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, to list the Anglo-Saxon writers demonstrably influenced by Aldhelm, is to list almost every writer known to us. *Vitae, tituli*, even charters, display Aldhelmian vocabulary and style. His style could also have influenced some Old English writing, for example, his *Enigmata* could have been the model for the collection of Old English riddles in the Exeter Book.<sup>72</sup> Andy Orchard remarks that whilst Aldhelm’s prose can be difficult, his poetry certainly lives up to Bede’s assessment of ‘*sermone nitidus*’, which Orchard translates as ‘sparkling in style’, and he describes Aldhelm as ‘...not merely the first but the finest of the Anglo-Latin poets’.<sup>73</sup>

It is evident from the forgoing that Aldhelm was indeed an exceptional scholar and politician for his day, yet as Orchard points out, for Bede he was merely ‘adequately learned’ (*sufficienter instructus*) in church matters.<sup>74</sup> When comparing say, Bede’s treatment of Wilfrid, with that of Aldhelm, it is clear that Bede skims over the surface of Aldhelm’s career, whereas Wilfrid’s life story is told in some detail.<sup>75</sup> One can only guess at why this may be. Lack of knowledge could be a factor, nevertheless, Bede could access information from Pecthelm, ‘who was a fellow-monk or deacon for a long time with Hedda’s successor Aldhelm’, and later became bishop of Whithorn.<sup>76</sup> Whilst Bede may have disapproved of Aldhelm’s willingness to work with the Church in Dumnonia, both men stood firm for Catholic orthodoxy and denigrated native

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<sup>71</sup> Michael Lapidge, ‘The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 4 (1975), 67-111.

<sup>72</sup> *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 1-2; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> Orchard, *Poetic Art*, p. 2; *H.E.* V.18; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 514.

<sup>74</sup> A phrase Colgrave and Mynors disingenuously translate as ‘well acquainted’, see *Ecclesiastical History*, p.515.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. *H.E.* V.18 on Aldhelm with *H.E.* V.19 on Wilfrid; Among the events in Wilfrid’s life were his trip to Gaul for episcopal consecration and the subsequent struggle to take up his see once back in England. He was expelled as bishop of Northumbria by Egfrith, half-brother of Aldfrith, and suffered a later expulsion by Aldfrith. See *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*, ed. and trans. by B. Colgrave (Cambridge : University of Cambridge Press, 1927).

<sup>76</sup> *H.E.* V.18; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 513.

learning.<sup>77</sup> Also, despite his friendship with Aldfrith, Aldhelm publicly supported Wilfrid after Wilfrid's removal from his diocese by Aldfrith. Bede wrote of Wilfrid, 'But five years later he was again accused by the king and several bishops, and expelled from his diocese. He travelled to Rome, and was given opportunity to defend himself in the presence of his accusers before the apostolic Pope John (VI) and several bishops.'<sup>78</sup> Though cleared of all charges, Aldfrith still refused to receive Wilfrid, a situation only rectified with the death of Aldfrith and accession of his son Osred.<sup>79</sup> Aldhelm seems to have been friendly to both sides of the dispute. Whatever the reasons for Bede's skimming over Aldhelm's career, as the Venerable Bede became renowned as England's first historian, Aldhelm disappeared into obscurity.

### **ALDHELM'S *DE VIRGINITATE***

*De Virginitate* is a vast work; the prose (*Prosa de Virginitate*) section is some 60 chapters long and the verse (*Carmen de Virginitate*) 2904 hexameters. The *Prosa* is addressed to Hildelith, assumed to be the abbess of Barking, and nine other women.<sup>80</sup> Although the *Carmen* lacks a dedication, in the *Prosa* Aldhelm promises to send a poem on virginity, and in the *Carmen* he refers to his previous work in prose, and adds that he will now praise chastity in verse.<sup>81</sup> Thus it is assumed both works were intended for the same audience. Exactly what link Aldhelm had to Barking, outside of

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<sup>77</sup> Aldhelm's *Carmina Rhythmicum* refers to a trip in Dumnonia, and apparently worshipping in a church in the territory.

<sup>78</sup> *H.E.* V.19; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 517-531. The findings of this court, plus an earlier hearing under Pope Agatho, meant that 'all including the pope [John] declared that a man of such authority, who had been bishop for nearly forty years, ought not to be condemned but should return to his own land with honour, entirely cleared of the charges laid against him.' (quotation at p. 527).

<sup>79</sup> *H.E.* V.19.

<sup>80</sup> Justina, Cuthburg, Osburg, Aldgith, Scholastica, Hidburg, Bergith, Eulalia, and Thecla. *Prosa Praefatio*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 59; See Gwara's argument for widening the scope of addressees discussed below.

<sup>81</sup> *Prosa* LX; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 130-131; *Carmen* ll. 18-22; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 103.

his kinship with Osburg, remains speculation, though another of the dedicatees, Cuthburg, could have been the erstwhile wife of Aldfrith.<sup>82</sup>

Bede wrote of *De Virginitate*, '[Aldhelm] also wrote a most excellent book on virginity both in hexameter verse and in prose, producing a two-fold work after the manner of Sedulius.'<sup>83</sup> Aldhelm's two-fold work on virginity, Bede described it, *geminato opere* - imitated the fifth century Christian poet, Caelius Sedulius.<sup>84</sup> Sedulius was an Italian Christian living about two hundred years before Aldhelm. He composed a life of Christ both in epic verse, and in prose, which were immensely popular in the medieval period.<sup>85</sup> The literary tradition of the *conversio*, whereby prose was turned into verse paraphrase dates back to third century BC Greece.<sup>86</sup> In the Anglo-Saxon period, the genre of *opus geminatum* was admired, for example, we have Alcuin's verse adaptation of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. However, Aldhelm's *geminato opere* was the first. Nevertheless, Aldhelm does not make a strict correlation between the two versions. Although both include a discussion of virginity and a list of female and male virgins the comments on virginity itself are compressed down to 247 lines in the *Carmen*. The *Prosa* also includes a lengthy diatribe against inappropriate dress, and the *Carmen*, a *psychomachia*, based around the primary virtues and vices of Christian tradition. The *psychomachia*, enjoyed an independent manuscript tradition as *De Octo Vitiis Principalibus*.<sup>87</sup>

The dating of *De Virginitate* is at best vague; the *Prosa* came first on the basis of the promise for a verse rendition, but the length of time between the two works is

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<sup>82</sup> *Prosa Praefatio; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 59; 'Osburg too, related (to me) by family bonds of kinship (*nec non osburgae contribulibus necessitudinum nexibus conglutinatae*)'.

<sup>83</sup> *H.E.* V.18; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 515.

<sup>84</sup> *H.E.* V.18; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 514.

<sup>85</sup> See discussion in Carl P. E. Springer, 'The Manuscripts of Sedulius: A Provisional Handlist', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 85 (1995), i-xxii+1-24. It was one of the most well-known works in the medieval period.

<sup>86</sup> *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 97. Lapidge names the first example extant as Soterichus who turned the works of Plato and Xenophon into verse.

<sup>87</sup> *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 98.

unknown. Hildelith was the second abbess of Barking, ruling from c. 675 until after 716, and Aldhelm died 709-710, so *De Virginitate* was composed between c. 675 and 710. In the *Prosa* Aldhelm refers to attending an episcopal synod, 'some time ago (*iamdudum*)'<sup>88</sup>. This could have been the council of Hertford of 672, but unfortunately 'iamdudum' adds nothing to the dates gleaned from Hildelith's abbacy. Michael Lapidge has considered parallels in the language of the letter of Cellanus to Aldhelm with the *De Virginitate*.<sup>89</sup> Though we cannot date the letter exactly, Cellanus refers to Aldhelm as *archimandrita* therefore still an abbot, so the letter must have been written before 706, and could indicate *De Virginitate* was written some time before Aldhelm's elevation to bishop.

#### **ALDHELM'S CARMEN DE VIRGINITATE AND ANGLO-LATIN POETRY**

The *Carmen* is vital to our understanding of the development of medieval Latin poetry.<sup>90</sup> It is almost 3000 hexameters of quantitative verse – the earliest and the longest Anglo-Latin poem.<sup>91</sup> Andy Orchard notes that throughout Aldhelm's work, his love of poetry is evident, noting that many of the features 'which apparently mar Aldhelm's Latin prose style ... are clearly derived from verse.'<sup>92</sup> Aldhelm is the first medieval non-native Latin speaker to compose quantitative as opposed to rhythmical verse.<sup>93</sup> This is significant because Aldhelm was not a native speaker of Latin, so

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<sup>88</sup> *Prosa I; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 59.

<sup>89</sup> *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 12-13.

<sup>90</sup> The following discussion is indebted to Michael Lapidge in *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 19-24; See also Orchard, *Poetic Art*; Michael Lapidge, 'Aldhelm's Latin Poetry and Old English Verse', *Comparative Literature*, 31 (1979), 209-231.

<sup>91</sup> A hexameter is made up of six metrical feet: each of the initial four may be dactyls (one long then two short syllables) or spondees (two long syllables) in combination, the fifth is usually a dactyl and the sixth a spondee or trochee (one long then one short syllable).

<sup>92</sup> Orchard, *Poetic Art*, p. 8. Orchard cites rhyme, alliteration, the use of verse cadence and vocabulary.

<sup>93</sup> Quantitative verse uses a mixture of metrical feet, each alternating long and short syllables, rhythmical verse is based on stress-patterns of words.



would not have known the quantities of the Latin words he learned. The grammarians of late antiquity assumed their readers knew quantitative scansion, so were of little use on such a basic matter. However at the Canterbury school, Theodore and Hadrian were qualified to teach the subject. Bede notes they were fluent in Greek and Latin, and both had lived in Italy (Hadrian near Naples, and Theodore in Rome), and they taught Latin metre (*metricae artis...disciplina*).<sup>94</sup> Aldhelm evidently absorbed these lessons on prosody, writing in his letter to bishop Leutherius that he was learning 'to distinguish among the hundred types of metres according to their divisions of feet'.<sup>95</sup> His *Carmen* is evidence that he absorbed the lessons, and it also allows us to see how he dealt with the difficulty of composing Latin quantitative verse.

In his hexameter poem, Aldhelm had a choice of sixteen combinations of dactyl and spondee in the first four metrical feet, but he demonstrates very little variety, and then usually only in the first two feet.<sup>96</sup> He also relied heavily on formulas and end-stopped lines; only occasionally does he use an internal pause, carrying the phrase or sentence into the next line. Thus, Aldhelm's work displays a regularity that borders on monotony, as rhythmically and verbally there is little variance. But these weaknesses indicate that Aldhelm concentrated on fully comprehending scansion and the quantities of syllables to the detriment of employing variety and embellishment.<sup>97</sup> As Michael Lapidge comments, 'The use of such a technique makes Aldhelm's poetry exceedingly repetitious, but one can see that the technique was designed by Aldhelm as a sort of helpmeet, to help him master the difficulties which hexameter-composition entailed.'<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *H.E.* IV.1-2; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 328-337.

<sup>95</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep. I*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 152; Aldhelm comments, 'the more the inextricable obscurity of this subject is put forward to studious readers, the smaller the number of scholars becomes' and no doubt learning 'the hundred types of metre' proved to strenuous for many.

<sup>96</sup> For an in depth discussion see *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 21-24; Orchard, *Poetic Art*, pp. 73-125.

<sup>97</sup> *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 23.

<sup>98</sup> *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 24; Orchard, *Poetic Art*, p. 124, offers an insight into Aldhelm's creative process, comparing the *Carmen* with *Beowulf*, 'But since the same formulaic patterning of

Aldhelm saw himself as a pioneer; as Virgil had been the first to compose a *Georgic* in Latin, so, 'no one born of the offspring of our race and nourished in the cradles of a Germanic people has toiled so mightily in a pursuit of this sort before our humble self and has committed to the structure of letters the statements of earlier minds regarding the discipline of the metrical art'.<sup>99</sup> In the poetic register Aldhelm clearly demonstrates his debt to the classical writers, but he also displayed his intention to move beyond Virgil,

I do not seek verses and poetic measures from the rustic Muses, nor do I seek metrical songs from the Castalian nymphs who, they say, guard the lofty summit of Helicon; nor do I ask that Phoebus, whom his mother Latona bore on Delos, grant me a tongue expressive in utterance; never do I deign to speak by means of unutterable verses, as the clear-sounding poet is once said to have proclaimed: 'Open Helicon now, goddesses, and direct my song!'

*Non rogo ruricolae versus et commata Musas*

*Nec peto Castalidas metrorum cantica nimphas,*

*Quas dicunt Elicona iugum servare supernam,*

*Nec precor, ut Phoebus linguam sermone loquacem*

*Dadat, quem Delo peperit Latona creatrix;*

*Versibus infandis non umquam dicere dignor,*

*Ut quondam argutus fertur dixisse poeta:*

*'Pandite nunc Elicona, deae, cantusque monete!'*<sup>100</sup>

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phraseology occurs in Aldhelm as in *Beowulf* it seems reasonable to describe both as products of a traditional (and oral-derived) system of versification.'

<sup>99</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep. ad Acircium* CXLII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 45.

<sup>100</sup> *Carmen* ll. 23-30; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 103.

This plea, with its density of classical references, creates a powerful image of the Christian poet stepping up to and then passing the classical works. Aldhelm's reference to 'rustic muses (*ruricolae Musae*)' is reminiscent of Virgil's *Eclogue VI*, in which Virgil returned to 'lightweight pastoral verse' after writing of 'kings and war'.<sup>101</sup> Apollo drew Virgil back to pastoral, telling him that enough poets wished to write of 'the sorrowful theme of warfare', so Virgil should take up 'a rural subject'.<sup>102</sup> In *Eclogue VI*, a drunken Silenus sings of the classical myths, including Pasiphaë, Scylla, and Philomela: bestiality, monsters, rape, and murder. Apollo is the source of poetic inspiration and the conduit of stories: Apollo 'tweaked the ear (*aurem vellit*)' of Virgil, directing him to specific myths, and Silenus sings 'All the songs that of old time his favourite river, Eurotas, Heard Apollo compose and made its laurels learn (*Pheobe quondam meditante beatus adviit Eurolas iussitque ediscere lauros*)'.<sup>103</sup> Aldhelm however, does not seek such verses, or inspiration from either rustic Muses or Phoebus/Apollo, he does not wish to speak that which to a Christian were, 'unutterable verses (*Versibus infandis*)'.<sup>104</sup> Instead, he relies on God and Christ for inspiration, to relate upbuilding stories of saints and martyrdom, 'I seek the word from the Word', 'Thus may the propitious spirit of the Father and the Son mercifully grant aid to a weak servant.'<sup>105</sup> And he clearly expected others to follow, hence his *De Metris* and *De Pedum Regulis*, which formed part of the *Epistola ad Acircium. De Pedum Regulis*

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<sup>101</sup> Virgil, *Eclogue VI*; Virgil. *The Eclogues, The Georgics*, trans. by C. Day Lewis (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 25.

<sup>102</sup> Virgil, *Eclogue VI*; Virgil, Day Lewis, p. 25.

<sup>103</sup> Virgil, *Eclogue VI*; Virgil, Day Lewis, pp. 25, 28.

<sup>104</sup> *Carmen* ll. 23-30; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 103; Ironically, in *Eclogue IV*, Virgil aims to 'keep his poetry spare', the one aspect Aldhelm does not incorporate. See Virgil, Day Lewis, p. 25.

<sup>105</sup> *Carmen* ll. 33a, 36-37, *Verbum de verbo peto... Sic patris et prolis dignetur spiritus almus/ Auxilium fragili clementer dedere servo*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p.104; Cf. Aldhelm's use of the epithet 'the Thunderer' (*Tonantem*) for God, which he may have taken from Prudentius. Originally it was used for Jupiter, but Aldhelm was not alone in using it for the Christian God - Bede used it in his life of Cuthbert.; *Aldhelmi Opera Omnia*, Ehwald, p. 354.

included a catalogue of the various metrical feet, and a list of Latin words to fit each foot.

## **CHRISTIANITY IN BRITAIN – BEDE AND THE PROCESS OF CONVERSION**

In order to understand Aldhelm and his intentions, one must understand the position of Christianity in Britain during his lifetime. Catholic Christianity and British Christianity co-existed, which created tensions, but neither had paganism been completely eradicated. Episcopal authority was weak, both over monasteries, and in relation to secular authorities. Not until long after Aldhelm's death was episcopal authority secure, as demonstrated during the Benedictine revival. For Bede, the history of the English was the history of their conversion, a process that stuttered its way across England over around a century. Roughly, the process began in the south east, with Aethelberht of Kent, who had converted by 601, when Gregory wrote to him as a Christian king.<sup>106</sup> From Kent, Christianity spread through East Anglia, then north to Northumbria, and finally back down to Mercia and Wessex. England was 'officially' converted from the top down, as kings, queens and their aristocratic retinues accepted the new religion and forced it onto their subjects. In 640, Eorcenberht became king of Kent. Bede tells us, 'He was the first English king to order idols to be abandoned and destroyed throughout the whole kingdom. He also ordered the forty days fast of Lent to be observed by royal authority.'<sup>107</sup> So it took forty years to reach the point of actively destroying the markers of paganism in Kent. The difficulty in assessing when

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<sup>106</sup> D. P Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, rev. edn. (London : Routledge, 2000), p.24.

<sup>107</sup> *H.E.* III.8; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors p.237; Around this time Aldhelm was born.

conversion occurred is compounded by the lack of evidence relating to the 'common people'.<sup>108</sup>

Nevertheless, for the Roman mission, British Christianity remained a problem, particularly the differences in date for the celebration of Easter. In 634 Pope Honorius (625-38) had written to the Irish warning them about their 'error' regarding the date of Easter. Pope John (640-2) had also warned about the teachings of Pelagius.<sup>109</sup> According to Bede, it was not until 715 that Iona changed its celebration of Easter to unite it with Rome.<sup>110</sup> In the 660s the divisions between the British and Roman beliefs came to a head, and Bede relates his account of the Synod of Whitby in 664, where ultimately the Catholic faction, who claimed the authority of Saint Peter, won.<sup>111</sup> The Synod of Whitby also demonstrates the extent to which religious leaders lacked authority during this period as it was the secular authorities who decided which form of Christianity their kingdoms would follow, creating a Catholic England. Also in 664, the secular authorities chose the supreme religious ruler of England; Deusdedit, Archbishop of Canterbury died, and kings Oswiu (of Northumbria) and Egbert (of Kent) picked Wigheard as his replacement. The political import of this is evident, and Wigheard, travelled to Rome for consecration, as it was expected the Pope would

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<sup>108</sup> *H.E.* II.14; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 187; Cf. the dithering Christians so hated by Penda in *H.E.* II.15.

<sup>109</sup> *H.E.* II.19; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 119-203; Pelagius lived in the later fourth century. Though born and at least partly educated in Britain, he was firmly part of the Roman world, and spent most of his life outside of his home country. He argued that rather than the Grace of God being the only path to salvation (as Augustine contended), man had been given freewill and was therefore responsible for his own salvation. He was eventually declaimed a heretic by the Church, yet it was a heresy that remained popular for centuries. Bede, *H.E.* I.17, noted that in the fifth century, British Christians had invited Gaulish bishops to overturn the teaching within Britain; See also B. R. Rees, *Pelagius, a Reluctant Heretic* (Suffolk : Boydell Press, 1988), for a detailed discussion of the topic.

<sup>110</sup> *H.E.* II.4; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p.225.

<sup>111</sup> *H.E.* III.25; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 295-297; Bede explains that in Northumbrian 'in these days it sometimes happened that Easter was celebrated twice in the same year. So that the king had finished the fast and was keeping Easter Sunday, while the Queen and her people were still in Lent and observing Palm Sunday.' (quotation at p. 297); Colgrave and Mynors, *Ecclesiastical History*, p. 296, note that the difference could be up to a month, as in 631, when the Roman Easter occurred on March 24<sup>th</sup> and the British on April 21<sup>st</sup>.

rubber-stamp the choice.<sup>112</sup> By chance, Wigheard died of the plague whilst in Rome and the Pope took the initiative as to whom to send to England, Theodore and Hadrian.<sup>113</sup> Finally arriving in England in 669, Theodore held the Archbishopric for a little over twenty-one years.<sup>114</sup> Theodore and Hadrian were noted scholars, and the school they established at Canterbury became famous throughout Europe. As noted earlier, Aldhelm studied there on two occasions, and valued his time at Canterbury.<sup>115</sup> For Bede this was the golden age for the English Church.<sup>116</sup>

Bede concluded his account of the conversion of the England: 'In this way, after all the kingdoms of Britain had received the faith of Christ, the Isle of Wight received it too, yet because it was suffering under the affliction of alien rule, it had no bishop nor see until the time of Daniel, who is now bishop of the West Saxons.'<sup>117</sup> Bede later commented that in 705, with the death of Bishop Haedde, the province of the West Saxons was divided into two dioceses, one of which went to Daniel, the other to

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<sup>112</sup> *H.E.* III.29; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 319, 'At this time the most noble English kings, Oswiu of Northumbria and Egbert of Kent consulted together as to what ought to be done about the state of the English Church ... so with the choice and consent of the holy Church and of the English people, they took a priest named Wigheard ... and sent him to Rome'; *H.E.* IV.1; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 229, 'a priest named Wigheard was sent to Rome by Egbert and also by Oswiu, kin of the Northumbrians, with a request that he might be consecrated archbishop of the English Church.'

<sup>113</sup> *H.E.* IV.1; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 331; Hadrian accompanied him because he knew the road through Gaul, 'also, being a fellow labourer in his teaching work, he would take great care to prevent Theodore from introducing into the church over which he presided any Greek customs which might be contrary to the true faith.'

<sup>114</sup> *H.E.* IV.2; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 333; Bede gives the very exact timing of twenty-one years, three months and twenty-six. Bede also notes that Theodore 'was the first of the archbishops whom the whole English Church consented to obey (*isque primus erat in archiepiscopis, cui omnis Anglorum ecclesia manus dare consentiret*).'; See *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on his Life and Influence*, ed. by Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1995).

<sup>115</sup> *H.E.* IV.2, Bede mentions that they soon attracted a crowd of students; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 335, 'Never had there been such happy times since the English first came to Britain; for having such brave Christian kings, they were a terror to all the barbarian nations, and the desires of all men were set on the joys of the heavenly kingdom of which they had only lately heard, while all who wished for instruction in sacred studies had teachers ready to hand.'; Aldhelm, *Ep.* I; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 137; Aldhelm described his education at Canterbury, referring to the study of law, the metrical arts, calculus and astrology.

<sup>116</sup> Hild (d. 680), Cuthbert (d. 687) Benedict Biscop (d. 690), Theodore (d. 690), Wilfrid (d. 709), Aldhelm (d. c. 709), Hadrian (d. 710) and Bede (d. 735) were all part of this renaissance.

<sup>117</sup> *H.E.* IV.16; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, pp.383-385.

Aldhelm, the conversion of England took around a century.<sup>118</sup> Aldhelm's bishopric was on the borders of Wessex and Dumnonia, which remained in British hands. Aldhelm travelled in Dumnonia, as his *Carmen Rhythmicum* describes worshipping in a church in British territory whilst travelling through the territory.<sup>119</sup> He also addressed a letter to King Geraint of Dumnonia regarding Geraint's bishops, exhorting them to Catholic orthodoxy.<sup>120</sup> Hence, from Bede and from Aldhelm's own writings it is clear that his life and career occurred at a time and in a place that did not allow him to take the authority of the Catholic Church for granted as Catholic Christianity was far from firmly established.

## MONASTICISM AND THE DOUBLE HOUSE

During the fifth century, monasticism had begun spreading through Western Europe, and by the sixth century was well established in Britain and Ireland. For example, Oliver Davies discusses the lack of a diocesan and parochial structure in Wales, and instead 'there existed a considerable number of "monastic" foundations of different kinds with different rules of life which combined parochial duties with a communitarian life-style.'<sup>121</sup> Similarly, Colgrave and Mynors note, 'The monastic system in Ireland developed independently of any scheme of diocesan organization. So bishops were considered to be the highest ecclesiastical order but not necessarily associated with jurisdiction'.<sup>122</sup> The Church in Anglo-Saxon England underwent a

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<sup>118</sup> *H.E. V.18; Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 515; Cf. *ASC. 709; Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, Swanton, pp. 40-41.

<sup>119</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep. IV; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 155-160; *Aldhelmi Opera Omnia*, Ehwald, pp. 480-486; Cf. Blair, *Church*, p. 33.

<sup>120</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep. IV; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 155.

<sup>121</sup> Oliver Davies, *Celtic Christianity in Early Medieval Wales : The Origins of the Welsh Spiritual Tradition* (Cardiff : University of Wales Press, 1996), p. 9.

<sup>122</sup> *H.E. III; Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 224.

similar development, and where monastic networks co-existed with episcopal, it was not always an easy relationship.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, Bede describes Iona, founded by St Columba, ‘This island always has an abbot for its ruler who is a priest, to whose authority the whole kingdom, including even bishops, have to be subject.’<sup>124</sup> Theoretically, bishops possessed authority over abbots, yet the wealth of some larger monasteries undoubtedly skewed the power nexus of the Church, in Celtic and Anglo-Saxon areas. As some abbots and abbesses became powerful landowners, particularly from the seventh century, there could be conflict between the episcopal and monastic authority, especially where spheres of authority were uncertain, as it was not always evident where power was divided between the episcopal spiritual authority and the monastic secular lordship over the families living on monastic lands. The authority of ‘sainted’ monastic founders would have further exacerbated such power struggles.<sup>125</sup>

This largely remained the pattern until the conquest and the imposition of ‘orthodox’ Catholicism during the later Anglo-Saxon period, and the Norman and Plantagenet rulers. John Blair notes, ‘All the major mission leaders up to the 630s – Augustine and Mellitus in Kent and Essex, Paulinus in Northumbria, Felix in East Anglia, Birinus in the upper Thames valley – came direct from Italy or Gaul.’<sup>126</sup> This was around the period in which Aldhelm was born. Such men saw the role of bishop not only as a religious teacher and administrator, but also a political figure, administering his lands as would any secular lord.<sup>127</sup> A bishop’s pastoral responsibility featured strongly on the continent, but in England, as in the lands of the British, the role of the bishop was less clearly defined, especially vis-à-vis the role of abbot/abbess.

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<sup>123</sup> Blair, *Church*, p. 21.

<sup>124</sup> *H.E.* III 4; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p.223-225, quotation at p. 224.

<sup>125</sup> See Blair, *Church*, p. 21.

<sup>126</sup> Blair, *Church*, p. 34.

<sup>127</sup> P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom : Triumph and Diversity, 200-1000 A.D.* (Cambridge, Mass. : Blackwell, 1995), pp. 61, 104, 112-117.



There were also fewer bishops compared with, for example, the Frankish church.<sup>128</sup> Hence we see Aldhelm attempting to address this discrepancy in authority between episcopal and monastic authority through *De Virginitate*.

The initial impulse to establish monasteries in England was largely driven by royal and aristocratic dynasties. By the time the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had been firmly established and began looking to the Romanised culture of the continent, they lacked the physical remains to develop an equivalent episcopal system. English bishops could not equal the authority of their continental counterparts, within the church and within society in general. Lacking *civitates* and episcopal structures to patronise, the aristocracy turned to monasticism.

Monasteries encompassed kinship bonds, as entire families were involved in their foundation and maintenance. Blair comments, 'Fundamentally, monastic property was conceived as a special kind of family property: it had a religious status, but one that was interpreted in traditional terms.'<sup>129</sup> Hence, monasteries could enhance the status of a family of a family, or an individual founder, through the construction of a religious community, plus the economic and academic achievements of that community. When founded by religious families, they could augment status when founders were acclaimed as saints, or the community became resting place of saints' relics and the sites of family tombs.<sup>130</sup>

The major expansion in English monasticism occurred at the end of the seventh century, into the eighth, the period in which Aldhelm lived.<sup>131</sup> This growth took place

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<sup>128</sup> When Theodore arrived in 669, there were 3 bishops in England, one of whom (Wilfrid) was in exile and therefore without a see. By Aldhelm's own episcopate, there were at least 12, nevertheless Gregory had originally planned for 25.

<sup>129</sup> Blair, *Church*, p. 82.

<sup>130</sup> See Susan Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England : A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>131</sup> Dagmar Schneider, 'Anglo-Saxon Women in the Religious Life : A Study of the Status and Position of Women in an Early Medieval Society' (unpublished Ph.D thesis, 1985), p. 302. She notes that we only have sound evidence for double monasteries for the period 649-796.

as royal families sought to display their faith in the new religion, and use the authority available through Christianity to support their dynasties.<sup>132</sup> Royal patronage of monasteries is understandable within the social and political arenas, and one must remember that these were not the enclosed monks and nuns of later medieval history.<sup>133</sup> A monastery could be a home for widowed queens, or unmarried princesses, and, just as a strategic marriage could strengthen a dynasty, a double house could promote dynastic interests, especially as the influence of monasteries could extend across kingdoms, as a parent house had authority over dependents many miles away, opening the way for secular influence in these areas.<sup>134</sup>

At the same time, the finances were available to support such foundations. It was also period of trade growth and the coastal ports grew in size and importance. There was widespread use of silver currency, thanks to the silver mines of the Rhineland.<sup>135</sup> During Aldhelm's lifetime therefore, monasteries were many and varied - of different sizes, wealth, and organisation - thus generalisations are best avoided where possible.<sup>136</sup> By 750, there were hundreds of monastic communities across England, but as yet, no regular Rule; rather the founder of a monastic house would

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<sup>132</sup> B. Yorke, 'The Reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon Royal Courts', in *St Augustine and the Conversion of England*, ed. by R. Gameson (Stroud : Sutton, 1999), pp. 152-173, see particularly pp. 161-163; Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London : Continuum, 2003), pp. 23-30. Barbara Yorke has shown that after the initial conversion, many kings, despite church disapproval, abdicated to join or found a monastery, whilst the next generation preferred to donate land and have monasteries established on their behalf, often under the authority of a daughter or niece. See also Blair, *Church*, pp. 102, 106-7.

<sup>133</sup> The synod of Clofesho (747) forbade clerks to live among secular men, requiring them to return to the monastery at which they received their habit. This suggests that they were accustomed to live among secular society. See also J. Godfrey, 'The Place of the Double Monastery in the Anglo-Saxon Minster System', in *Famulus Christi : Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Century Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede*, ed. by G. Bonner (London : S. P. C. K., 1976), p. 348.

<sup>134</sup> Blair, *Church*, p. 93. He refers to *Medeshamstede* (Peterborough) with satellites at Breedon-on-the-Hill, Woking, Bermondsey, and perhaps Hoo and Brixworth.

<sup>135</sup> This was the period in which we find widespread use of the sceatta, a silver coin, until the 740s.

<sup>136</sup> Wessex was relatively late in developing a network of monasteries – not until around the year 700 were many of the important establishments founded, in part as a political statement of the ownership by the Wessex royal family, and in part to distinguish them from the British Christians in Dumnonia. See Blair, *Church*, p.151.

establish their own regime.<sup>137</sup> Blair summarises, 'The English monastic landscape, as it had formed by c. 750, was diverse and complex. ... The strength of the insular monastic model was that it was infinitely extendable and flexible, and could appeal in different ways to learned bishops, successful war-leaders, widowed queens, royal servants, and spiritually minded peasants.'<sup>138</sup>

## THE FEMALE HOUSE AND *DE VIRGINITATE*

There is no evidence for a purely female house in early Anglo-Saxon England. Every female community for which we have evidence is a double-monastery and all were linked with a royal dynasty and ruled by royal or noble abbesses.<sup>139</sup> The abbesses were either of the founder's family or of the royal family supported by the monastery. As sites for royal burial, and hence the memorial cult, they became the sites of council and synod meetings.<sup>140</sup> Dagmar Schneider called them 'the most important political and cultural centres of their respective kingdoms.'<sup>141</sup> Yet even in this early period some were uncomfortable with the mixed house; Theodore, for example, disapproved, but did nothing to dismantle them.<sup>142</sup>

The first difficulty for the student of Anglo-Saxon religious women is that of terminology. Sarah Foot comments, 'There is no gender-specific noun in Latin or old

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<sup>137</sup> *H.E.* IV.23; Bede comments, on Whitby '[Hild] established the same Rule of life as in the other monastery, teaching them to observe strictly the virtues of justice, devotion, and chastity and other virtues too, but above all things to continue in peace and charity.' Bede also notes that at Whitby everything was held in common, a feature that must have been unusual to elicit comment. See *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 409.

<sup>138</sup> Blair, *Church*, p. 83.

<sup>139</sup> Some examples of double monasteries are Amesbury, Barking, Romsey, Shaftesbury, Wilton, Nunnaminster (Winchester), Bradford-on-Avon, Horton, Wherwell, Wilton Bardney, Coldingham, Ely, Hartlepool, Much Wenlock, Repton, Thanet, Wimbourne, Whitby; See *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 51; F. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 161-3; Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women*, vol. I (Aldershot, Burlington : Ashgate, 2000), pp. 6, 11-12; Godfrey, 'The Place of the Double Monastery', pp. 344-350.

<sup>140</sup> See Ridyard, *Royal Saints*.

<sup>141</sup> Schneider, 'Anglo-Saxon Women', p. 302.

<sup>142</sup> Godfrey, 'The Place of the Double Monastery', p. 346.

England that means a convent of devout women'.<sup>143</sup> The complexity of the evidence is exacerbated by the variety of religious life available to women, but not necessarily differentiated in the evidence. Thus a widow who opted to devote herself to chastity in her own home and the vowed virgin in a community of like-minded women living under a rule are on a continuum of religious experience in Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>144</sup> The ephemeral nature of many communities is also a problem when considering the religious opportunities available to women, for example women of a noble family may have established a family community to serve God, lasting maybe one or two generations, until the family decided the land was better used elsewhere.<sup>145</sup>

*De Virginitate* is addressed to Hildelith of Barking, and a named list of women. Barking, in Essex, was a double monastery, that is, it housed monks and nuns under the rule of an abbess.<sup>146</sup> Initially, English women who wished to dedicate themselves to the religious life had to travel to Frankish double-monasteries, which created links between these houses and the incipient female monastic movement in England.<sup>147</sup> Patrick Sims-Williams notes of Chelles, during Bertilla's (d. c. 705) time, roughly contemporary with *De Virginitate*, that it produced teachers, and remained an important

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<sup>143</sup> Foot, *Veiled Women*, vol. I, p. xii, and see also Foot's discussion at pp. 35-60; Blair, *Church*, p. 80, comments, 'Monasterium/mynster is a non-specific term, and the rules and lifestyles followed in most early English minsters are irrecoverable.'; See also R. Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture. The Archaeology of Religious Women* (London and New York : Routledge, 1994), p. 34.

<sup>144</sup> Foot, *Veiled Women*, vol. I, p. 3, offers the example of William of Malmesbury commenting on the three daughters of Edward the Elder. One is 'a virgin dedicated to Christ' (*sacrata Christo virgo*), one living as a monaster (*in sacrata tegmine*) and the youngest lived in 'the lay habit' (*in laico tegmine*), but he does not describe how their lives differed.; Cf. comments in Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*, pp. 33-35.

<sup>145</sup> This also raises questions about the physical evidence, or lack of it, in the archaeological record. See discussion in Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*.

<sup>146</sup> *H.E.* IV.6, IV.10; Barking was founded by Bishop Eorcenwald of London (c. 675-693) for his sister Aethelburh and Hildelith was the second abbess; Foot, *Veiled Women*, vol. II (Aldershot, Burlington : Ashgate, 2000), p. 27; Foot notes there is a 'relatively good' charter evidence for a foundation in the late 680s; There is reference to Hildelith in a letter from Boniface (*Ep.* 10) to the abbess of Thanet, Eadburg, dated around 716, so she outlived Aldhelm (d. c. 709).

<sup>147</sup> *H.E.* IV.23; Bede comments that Hild originally intended to join her sister Hereswith, at Chelles, but Aiden persuaded her to remain at Northumbria and found a monastery.

centre of Bible study and manuscript production into the Carolingian period.<sup>148</sup> Hildelith was said to have been educated in a Frankish monastery, and only returned to England (Barking) at the request of Bishop Eorconwald.<sup>149</sup> Bede was aware of the education of the early nuns, for example he dedicated his commentary on Habbakkuk to a 'dearly beloved sister in Christ'.<sup>150</sup> Aldhelm certainly assumed a high level of learning among the nuns he addressed.<sup>151</sup>

An awareness of the role of abbess is important in understanding the position of women in Anglo-Saxon society. It is in the monastic sphere 'that the different cultural influences (Germanic and Christian) clashed most immediately'.<sup>152</sup> Dagmar Schneider explains, 'The fluidity of sacramental theology at this time, the lack of priests, and the absence in Germanic society of any prevailing concept of female impurity, allowed women religious a wide scope of activity in their own monasteries and in the Church at large.'<sup>153</sup> Royal and noble women could found monasteries, establishing their own rule, and with complete political, social, economic and pastoral control over the community: male and female, religious and secular.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, as Schneider notes, double monasteries were the only institutions or communities of the period 'that by

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<sup>148</sup> Patrick Sims-Williams, *Britain and Early Christian Europe : Studies in Early Medieval History and Culture* (Aldershot : Varorium, 1995), p. 8; Bertilla herself was noted for her learning, and Queen Balthild asked her to become abbess of Chelles when Balthild refounded it. See Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex. Female Sanctity and Society ca.500-1100* (Chicago and London : University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 97; Cf. *Vita Bertilae* c.5 (MGH SRM VI pp. 105-6), which describes the Anglo-Saxons who travelled to be taught by Bertila; Bertila's *vita* notes 'even from over the seas, the faithful kings of the Saxons, through trusted messengers, asked her to send some of her disciples for the learning and holy instruction they heard were wonderful in her that they might build convents of men and nuns in their land.' Translation taken from *Sainted Women in the Dark Ages*, ed. and trans. Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halborg with E. Gordon Whatley (Durham and London : Duke University Press, 1992), p. 286; Schneider 'Anglo-Saxon Women', p. 147.

<sup>149</sup> Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex*, p. 98; See also Schneider, 'Anglo-Saxon Women', pp. 130-142.

<sup>150</sup> *Bede, On Tobit and on the Canticle of Habakkuk*, trans. by Seán Connolly (Dublin : Four Courts Press, 1997), p. 65.

<sup>151</sup> See discussion in Chapter 3; Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex*, p. 98.

<sup>152</sup> Schneider, 'Anglo-Saxon Women', p. 4.

<sup>153</sup> Schneider, 'Anglo-Saxon Women', p. 308.

<sup>154</sup> Schneider, 'Anglo-Saxon Women', p. 305; *H.E. IV.23; Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, p. 409; Bede notes of Whitby, for example, '[Hild] established the same Rules as in the other monastery, teaching them to observe strictly the virtues of justice, devotion, and chastity and other virtues too, but above all things to continue in peace and charity.'

*design* were governed by women on their own. In this sense the abbess was the only female of the time who held an office (*officium*) which entailed both power and authority'.<sup>155</sup> The most famous abbess of Anglo-Saxon England was probably Hild, of whom Bede wrote, '[Hild] gained possession of ten hides in the place known as *Streanaeshealh* (Whitby) and there built a monastery (*monasterium construxit*); in it the king's daughter was first a pupil and then she became a teacher, of life under the Rule (*in quo memorata Regis filia primo discipula vitae regularis, deinde etiam magistra extitit*)'.<sup>156</sup> Many of the women who founded monasteries were considered saints, for example Aethelthryth, who founded Ely. The abbesses achieved sanctity by founding or ruling monasteries, protecting and promoting them, benefiting both religious and community and secular family. The abbess held the same authority over her domains as a secular lord. She offered protection (*mund*) to those under her authority, and was entitled to the wergild, should any under her authority be injured or killed.<sup>157</sup> Those who lived on the land belonging to the monastery owed her their allegiance and obedience, often as rent or services.<sup>158</sup> The abbess would also have overseen the pastoral work of the monastery, as there were not, as yet, the parish priests to fulfil the need.

The double monasteries were either self-sufficient economically, or traded to support themselves. Roberta Gilchrist notes, 'Like any secular manor, the nunnery estate was an administrative unit' which included, 'the "home farm" adjacent to the religious house, and more distant holding could include granges, fisheries, mineral

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<sup>155</sup> Schneider, 'Anglo-Saxon Women', p. 4.

<sup>156</sup> *H.E.* III.24; Whitby and Hartlepool were later founded on two of those estates; The king's Aefflaed, when King Oswiu of Northumbria faced Penda in battle, he vowed to offer his daughter, Aefflaed, as 'a holy virgin (*sacra virginitate*)'. Aefflaed was barely a year old when she was sent to Hild 'to be consecrated to God in perpetual virginity (*perpetua ei virginitate consecrandum*)'; *Ecclesiastical History*, Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 290-293.

<sup>157</sup> Schneider, 'Anglo-Saxon Women', pp. 264-269. Schneider discusses the legal technicalities and language of this relationship. Also see Ridyard, *Royal Saints*.

<sup>158</sup> Schneider, 'Anglo-Saxon Women', p. 269. She notes that at some monasteries at least, the abbess also had judicial power over the lay and monastic community.

workings and mills.<sup>159</sup> All of these were under the authority of the abbess. Barbara Yorke notes that double monasteries were often built on the coast, or heads of rivers, receiving tolls from traders.<sup>160</sup> Schneider lists some of the economic evidence for Minster-in-Thamet, noting its agriculture and trade with ships.<sup>161</sup> She concludes, 'In respect to their economic activities the monastic houses of women did not differ from those of men.'<sup>162</sup>

As noted earlier, *De Virginitate* was studied throughout Europe for hundreds of years. Andy Orchard comments, 'The influence of Aldhelm's prose style on later Anglo-Latin is profound and unsurpassed, while in the field of verse his influence is still more extensive, and it would be fair to say that almost every Anglo-Latin poet owes Aldhelm some debt.'<sup>163</sup> *De Virginitate* was thus important in the literary history of early medieval Europe, but it is also important to consider the themes that Aldhelm highlights in the light of the historical situation. Whilst the *Carmen* broke new ground for Anglo-Latin poetry, did it equally break new ground in the construction of virginity? Undoubtedly, in *De Virginitate* Aldhelm created a widely inclusive version of virginity to accommodate his non-virgin, mixed-sex audience. He acknowledged and incorporated the Church Fathers, but constructed a virginity that was relevant to his message and his audience. Aldhelm's addressees were potentially powerful women, and his stress on their need to be subservient to male ecclesiastical authority foregrounds the gradual decline in the autonomy and position of women within the

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<sup>159</sup> Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*, p.69; Granges could be specialised, Gilchrist lists 'agrarian farms, bercaries (sheep farms) vaccaries (cattle ranches), horse studs and industrial complexes'.

<sup>160</sup> Barbara Yorke, '“Sisters Under The Skin?” Anglo-Saxon Nuns and Nunneries in Southern England', in *Medieval Women in Southern England*, ed. by K. Bate *et al.* (Reading : University of Reading Press, 1989), pp. 95-111, quotation at p. 103.

<sup>161</sup> Schneider, 'Anglo-Saxon Women', p. 270.

<sup>162</sup> Schneider, 'Anglo-Saxon Women', p. 270.

<sup>163</sup> Orchard, *Poetic Art*, p. 1.

Anglo-Saxon Church. In the next chapter I will consider Aldhelm's source material, and the ideas on which he drew to construct a gendered virginity that both flattered and attempted to contain his audience.

## ALDHELM'S AUDIENCE

The assumption that the named addressees of the *Prosa* were all nuns at Barking has been challenged by Scott Gwara. Gwara has convincingly suggested that *De Virginitate* could be dedicated to abbesses across Wessex.<sup>164</sup> Gwara argues that the fact that several of the names on the list are also names of abbesses of double monasteries is too much of a coincidence to ignore. He states, "it defies coincidence that three (or four) women who were abbesses during Aldhelm's life and who shared names with dedicatees of [*De Virginitate*] are not those mentioned in the work".<sup>165</sup> Gwara's hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that Aldhelm's overarching themes of female submission and masculine ecclesiastical authority carry more weight if we assume his addressees were women in authority within the Church. His stress on the safety of the monastic enclosure and his warnings about inappropriate dress and pride, could well have their initial audience in those most likely to have the political and social authority to display independence from church authority. Thus, although there is room for discussion, as Gwara cannot provide absolute proof of his claims, that the addressees were abbesses seems probable.

Certainly, whether Aldhelm primarily addressed abbesses or nuns, his broader audience was the monastic audience as a whole, following on from his source material. At one point Aldhelm notes, 'Therefore the future eminence of the angelic life is now

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<sup>164</sup> *Aldhelmi*, vol. 124, Gwara, pp. 47-55.

<sup>165</sup> *Aldhelmi*, vol. 124, Gwara, p. 53.



in a certain sense seized by violence beforehand by the male and female followers (*sectatoribus ac sectatricibus*) of intact virginity'.<sup>166</sup> Aldhelm wrote *De Virginitate* in the context of his late antique sources, all of which were intended for wide distribution and readership, no matter who was the initial dedicatee. Hence Ambrose's treatise on virginity dedicated to his sister Marcellina, or Jerome's for Eustochium, were intended to encourage families and individuals to embrace or support the virginal life.<sup>167</sup> Also, as will be discussed, texts exhorting, encouraging and celebrating virginity had a long history in Christianity, and Aldhelm evidently saw himself as part of a tradition. He alludes to, cites, and quotes earlier Biblical and Christian writers on virginity.<sup>168</sup> Nevertheless, his addressees, and thus his primary audience, are women.<sup>169</sup>

While remaining largely orthodox in his depiction of virginity, in a couple of important aspects Aldhelm innovates, departing from his models. The Church Fathers often addressed virgins directly in their texts and tended to differentiate between the chaste widow and virgin. Aldhelm is writing to an audience in which only a minority at best are virgins, hence he tends to collapse the categories of virginity and chastity, dissolving the hierarchy that had been established by writers such as Ambrose.<sup>170</sup> Again, whereas in the Biblical canon and the Church Fathers, marriage cannot be dissolved for the sake of the religious life, Aldhelm must acknowledge that at least some in his audience have left their spouses in order to dedicate themselves to God, hence he substitutes chastity for widowhood, eliding the difference between those who had lost husbands and left husbands.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> *Prosa XVII*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 74.

<sup>167</sup> See further discussion in Chapter 2.

<sup>168</sup> For example, when dismissing ornate dress he quotes from Cyprian's *De Habitu Virginum*; See further discussion in Chapter 3.

<sup>169</sup> *Prosa Praefatio*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 59.

<sup>170</sup> Although as it will be seen, Aldhelm is not consistent in this. At times during the text he differentiates between virginity and chastity.

<sup>171</sup> Romans 7:2 For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage.; 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 To the married I

Aldhelm was also writing to a double monastery (or monasteries), hence, though he addresses women by name, his wider audience also includes men. Aldhelm recognises this by including male virgin exempla as well as female; indeed his section on male virgins is more extensive than that on female. His prolixity and wide range of virgin exempla make it hard to distinguish any pattern to his choice of saints, aside from assuming he includes those saints whose *vitae* he had to hand.<sup>172</sup> However throughout the texts he emphasises certain themes. Most importantly for this thesis, he concentrates on male authority, particularly ecclesiastical authority, and female dependence on that authority. Also, stereotypically, the men are more active and the women more passive in their sanctity.<sup>173</sup> These themes will be explored through the thesis.

Gender cannot be divided from the issue of class.<sup>174</sup> As William O. Frazer comments, 'it is fruitful to recognize explicitly the broad concept "social identity" as multi-layered and to understand that identities derive from the circumstances of social interaction.'<sup>175</sup> In the Anglo-Saxon period, as with much of medieval history, poor women did not become nuns. The literary depiction of noble women and poor women, noble men and slaves is very different, and even the modern stereotyped view of history

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give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.; *Prosa Praefatio*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 59.

<sup>172</sup> He includes Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, Daniel (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) John the Baptist, John the Evangelist, Didymus/Thomas the Doubter, Paul, Luke, Clement, Silvester, Ambrose, Martin of Tours, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Cappadocia, Felix, Antony, Paul the Hermit, Hilarion, John the Hermit, Benedict, Malchus, Gervaisus, Protasius, Narcissus, Athanasius, Babilas, Cosmas and Damianus, Chrysanthus (Daria), Julian (Basilissa), Amos (unnamed wife), Apollonius, Jerome, Joseph, David, Samson, Melchisadech, Mary, Caecilia (unnamed husband and brother-in-law), Agatha, Lucia (her mother), Justina, (Cyprian), Eugenia, Agnes, Thecla, Eugenia, Scholastica, Christina, Dorothea (Theophilus), Constantina (Gallicanus, Attica, Artemia), Eustochium, Demetrias, Chionia, Irene, Agape, Rufina, Secunda, Anatolia (unnamed snake-charmer), Victoria, Judith. 47 male exempla, 29 female.

<sup>173</sup> See further discussion in Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>174</sup> *Class and Gender in Early English Literature : Intersections*, ed. by Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>175</sup> W. O. Frazer and Andrew Tyrrell, *Social Identity In Early Medieval Britain* (Leicester : Leicester University Press, 2000), p. 3.

reflects this, for example, only the serving wench would be described as bawdy.<sup>176</sup> That Aldhelm's primary audience of noble nuns were rich and aristocratic is reflected in his description of the bejewelled and beautified wife.<sup>177</sup> But as a nun, she should shun such ostentatious dress.<sup>178</sup> Her secular position, that she should have rejected on entering the monastery, is demonstrated by her dress.

Thus Aldhelm's addressees were first and foremost authoritative women, used to ruling a monastery. Aldhelm, as a bishop or even fellow abbot, had little direct influence over them, thus through *De Virginitate*, we see him balancing flattery and commendation with counsel and warnings, particularly warnings against the dangers of pride and independence. Writing within the discourse of virginity, he uses the ideology, the images and the stereotypes he has inherited from the Church Fathers to shape the performance of virginity within *De Virginitate*, adapting it to his audience of noble nuns.

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<sup>176</sup> Cf. Exeter Riddle 12 and discussion by John W. Tanke, 'Wofax Wale: Ideology and Figuration in the Sexual Riddles of the Exeter Book', in *Class and Gender*, Harwood and Overing, pp 21-42; Cf. Carol Braun Pasternak, 'Negotiating Gender in Anglo-Saxon England' in Carol Braun Pasternak and Sharon Farmer *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages* (Minnesota : University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 107-142.

<sup>177</sup> Cf. *Prosa* LVII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 125-126.

<sup>178</sup> Cf. Bede, *H.E.* IV.25, describing the destruction of Coldingham, not for any sexual sin, but a worldliness that included weaving elaborate clothes.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE CONSTRUCTION OF VIRGINITY IN THE CHURCH FATHERS<sup>1</sup>

Observe what the happiness of that state must be in which event the distinction of sex is lost. The virgin is no longer called a woman.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will discuss the Biblical and late antique development of a discourse of virginity, in which Aldhelm was thoroughly immersed. It will also consider four of the most important writers on virginity in late antiquity, Cyprian, Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine. Their writings remained popular through the middle ages. Between them they demonstrate a cross-section of the views on virginity available to Aldhelm, and on which he drew. Using Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the reader can consider the manner in which virginity was portrayed as an ongoing differentiating process in the Church Fathers, and compare the ways in which Aldhelm followed his source material, or innovated.<sup>3</sup>

From Jerome's comments above, the desire to remove the virgin from the social categories of gender and sex is evident, yet the writings of the Church Fathers demonstrate the tension between 'woman' and 'virgin', where the former was taken to

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<sup>1</sup> The following chapter builds upon research undertaken for my M.A. thesis, *The Gift of Virginity: The ideal Virgin in Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine* (University of Wales Swansea, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Jerome, *Against Helvidius* 22; *Jerome - Letters and Select Works*, trans by P. Schaff & H. Wace (Grand Rapids: Mich, Eerdmans. T & T Clark: Edinburgh, 1989), p. 344.

<sup>3</sup> As noted previously, literary texts break down the boundary between performative and performance, as the Church Father consciously choose which elements to use in their construction of virginity, but can only

mean a sexually active woman, and the latter a celibate one. This tension is apparent in the literary construction of ‘virgin’ when compared with the lives of the most renowned ‘virgins’ of the day. Hence the texts raise the issue of subversion, for to what extent do they reinforce the heterosexual matrix whilst purporting to remove the ‘virgin’ from its nexus? Is this how women used or viewed virginity, as an opportunity to remove themselves and create an independence from the heterosexual expectations of society? This discussion will therefore concentrate on texts on virginity by the above writers, but will also consider the examples of contemporary woman such as Paula and Melania.

Cyprian (c. 200 – 258) lived during a period of active persecution, some 150 years before the other writers. Having been a well-known pagan rhetorician, he converted to Christianity as an adult, becoming bishop of Carthage in 248. He went into hiding and survived the persecution of Emperor Decius (249 - 51), who required all citizens to obtain a *libellus* or certificate, proving that they had sacrificed to the gods of Rome.<sup>4</sup> Persecution of Christians was rekindled under Valerian (253 - 60), and in 258 Cyprian was beheaded for his faith. About 13 of his works are extant, and he is probably most well known for his call for unity within the Church, arguing that there is no salvation outside of the Church.<sup>5</sup> His *De Habitu Virginum (On the Dress of Virgins)*

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select from within Christian heteronormativity. Although this chapter is primarily a review of the authors and themes available to Aldhelm.

<sup>4</sup> S. Siker, ‘Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries’, in *The Early Christian World*, vol I, ed. by Philip F. Esler (London & New York : Routledge, 2000), pp. 231- 257, at p. 246.

<sup>5</sup> G. Bray, ‘The Early Theologians’ in *The Early Christian World* vol. I, ed. by Esler, pp. 552-579, at p. 573.

begins with a consideration of the Godly discipline that leads humankind to its heavenly reward, but, Cyprian warns, once one has come to know God, there is no pardon for sin.<sup>6</sup>

Jerome (c. 347 - 420) became a spiritual teacher for an influential group of noble Roman women, the most prominent being two widows, Marcella and Paula. They surrounded themselves with groups of like-minded women, many already following the ascetic lifestyle advocated by Jerome. Their Christian asceticism was demonstrated through a withdrawal from secular society, and avoiding worldly luxuries and comforts, such as fine foods and hot baths. The women fasted, neglected personal appearance, to a greater or lesser degree, and embraced chastity where possible.<sup>7</sup> Though he was not a virgin, Jerome frequently wrote in praise of virginity and against marriage. His most famous text on virginity was the letter to Eustochium (*Ep. 22*), probably written before the death of Eustochium's sister Blesilla, during the spring of 384.<sup>8</sup> Whilst it was a letter addressed to a young woman Jerome knew personally, it was also a tract delineating the 'ideal' virgin, and intended for a wide readership; thus it is a mix of advice, comment, personal confession and general criticism of marriage and urban life in Rome. Jerome felt that the virgin enjoyed the most blessed state within Christianity, hence virginity should be the aim of every young person, and something to prepare for from an early age.

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<sup>6</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 3; All translations taken from *The Treatises of Cyprian*, trans. by A. Roberts & J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids : Mich, Eerdmans. Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1990), p. 431.

<sup>7</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome – His Life, Writings and Controversies* (London : Duckworth, 1975), p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 233.

Ambrose (c. 339 - 397) held the bishopric of Milan from 374 to 397. His elder sister, Marcellina, became a consecrated virgin in the 350s, and when his mother was widowed, she too opted to dedicate herself to celibacy.<sup>9</sup> It appears Ambrose, if not a virgin himself, certainly leaned toward celibacy.<sup>10</sup> He was nominated for the bishopric of Milan, though not even a priest, as he was considered to be neutral in the Nicæan controversy that was dividing the congregation at the time.<sup>11</sup> Throughout his time as bishop he was equally concerned with the political role of the bishop in a major city such as Milan, as he was with theology. Between 377 and 385 he wrote four texts on virginity, but this chapter will deal particularly with the first, and longest, *De Virginibus ad Marcellinam*.<sup>12</sup> *De Virginibus* is divided into three, the first part is in praise of virginity, the second is about the virginal life itself, and the third offers practical advice for virgins.

Augustine (354 - 430), like Tertullian and Cyprian, was born in North Africa and spent most of his life there. In his younger days he was much influenced by Manichaeism, a dualist faith positing that physicality was ultimately corrupted, whilst

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<sup>9</sup> J. Moorhead, *Ambrose. Church and Society in the Late Roman World* (New York : Pearson Education Inc., 1999), p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Moorhead, *Ambrose*, p. 23; Until selected as bishop, Ambrose had pursued a secular career, yet unusually, had not married.

<sup>11</sup> The Nicæan controversy related to the substance of Christ, and his divine nature. For the Nicæans, following the Council of Nicæa, Christ was of the same substance as God, for the anti-Nicæans, Christ was part of creation and therefore of a different substance. See R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1988); D. H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Nicene-Arian Conflicts* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> The others are *De Virginitate*, *De Institutione Virginis*, *Exhortatio Virginibus*. See Neil Mclynn, *Ambrose of Milan. Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1994); Mclynn comments, p. 60, that Ambrose may have written so extensively on virginity as it was a 'safe' topic for a bishop caught up in the Nicæan controversy.

spirituality was of the light, and from God.<sup>13</sup> As he grew older, he repudiated the sect, and was drawn toward ascetic Christianity, but was still accused by his enemies of having Manichee leanings. Augustine's education drew him toward rhetoric and philosophy, in particular neo-Platonism, as evidenced by his writings on Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Augustine, unlike the other writers discussed here, experienced a long-term sexual relationship; from his late teens until his early thirties he had an unnamed partner, with whom he had a much-loved son.<sup>15</sup> This experience greatly influenced his writings on marriage, virginity and sexuality. Peter Brown, for example, has noted that Augustine, unlike other Christian writers, did not see sexuality as related to the Fall of mankind, rather he considered it part of human nature as created by God, thus, Augustine argued, sexual intercourse would have occurred in Eden.<sup>16</sup> Augustine, therefore, had a more realistic view of sexuality and marriage because of his life experience, but he was also influenced by his philosophical and ascetic leanings, arguing that such carnality was a distraction from Christian contemplation. This chapter will concentrate primarily on two of his texts, *De Bono Coniugali* and *De Sancta Virginitate*, both probably written around 401.

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<sup>13</sup> Manichees taught that there were two principles, God/Light and Satan/Dark. They taught a dualist account of creation in which the physical universe, hence the physical body, was created by Satan, which thereby subverted the light of God's creation of the spiritual, including the human soul. They also considered physical procreation as the work of the Devil. See S. N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism* (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1985); *Augustine of Hippo De Bono Coniugali: On the Good of Marriage. De Sancta Virginitate: On Holy Virginity*, trans. by P. G. Walsh (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 2001), p. xviii; H. Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 11-15.

<sup>14</sup> Garry Wills, *Saint Augustine* (London : Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999); Wills notes, p.49, whilst 'it was possible to be a Christian but not an ascetic, that did not fit in with late antique views of what was proper for a *philosophical* adherent to any serious moral program.'

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 4.ii.2.

<sup>16</sup> P. Brown, *Body and Society. Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 399-401; Although in *De Civitate Dei*, 14.23ff, Augustine argued that pre-Lapsarian sexual intercourse occurred without lust or concupiscence.



## NEW TESTAMENT VIRGINITY

Christianity was initially described as the religion of 'unschooled, ordinary men'.<sup>17</sup>

However, the highly educated Paul and his contemporaries began the process of integrating the philosophical ideas of the period with teachings of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup> From the very beginning though, virginity was a privileged state within Christianity. Christ referred to virginity in terms of a gift,

Jesus replied, 'Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given [*dedotai*]. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept this.'<sup>19</sup>

This comment was offered after a discussion on divorce. Pharisees had inquired of Jesus, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'<sup>20</sup> The topic had become controversial; divorce was permitted to the Jewish man, 'If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent [or 'a thing of disgrace'] about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and

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<sup>17</sup> Acts 4:13 When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.; The apostles here had been brought before the Sanhedrin, the highly educated elders and leaders of the Jewish community.

<sup>18</sup> Acts 22:2b-3 Then Paul said: 'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city [Jerusalem]. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.'; Cf. Acts 5:34 But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honoured by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 19:11-12.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 19:3b.

sends her from his house....<sup>21</sup> Yet, the prophet Malachi (fl. c. 450 B.C) complained that the Jews of his day were divorcing on a whim,

you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith [or 'deal deceitfully'] with the wife of your youth. 'I hate divorce', says the Lord God of Israel.<sup>22</sup>

So the question to Jesus was loaded – to agree would put him against Malachi, yet 'Moses permitted ... divorce'.<sup>23</sup> Jesus' reply acknowledged a husband's right to divorce solely on the grounds of his wife's adultery, and his followers interpreted this as negative view of marriage, 'The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."'<sup>24</sup> Jesus replied by encouraging, though not prescribing, virginity, in the comments above. Thus the initial invitation to Christian virginity was constructed not as a Christian requirement of celibacy, but in direct contrast to marriage, and followed on from a discussion on the potential failure of marriage. It was presented as an active choice not to marry, and offered to, rather than

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<sup>21</sup> Deuteronomy 24:1 (See *The Interlinear Bible* (U.S. A. : Hendrickson Publishers, USA, 2005); This unspecified wrongdoing was not adultery, which was a capital offence; Cf. Deuteronomy 22:22-24 If a man is found sleeping with another man's wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel. If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death – the girl because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man's wife. You must purge the evil from among you.

<sup>22</sup> Malachi 2:14b-16a (See *The Interlinear Bible*); Cf. Proverbs 5:18 May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.; Proverbs 2:16-17 It will save you from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words, who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 19:8a.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 19:10.

imposed on, those who had a suitable personality and appropriate personal circumstances.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, we know the apostle Peter was married, as he asked Christ to heal his mother-in-law.<sup>26</sup> In the New Testament book of Acts we have the names of married couples serving in the newly founded Christian congregations, for example, Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1).

Paul, like Christ, remained single for the sake of his ministry, and his writings demonstrate a greater emphasis on virginity and celibacy as positive lifestyles for a Christian.<sup>27</sup> Though he never denigrated marriage as such, it is clear he viewed marriage as a secondary state, 'Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.'<sup>28</sup> These comments are part of a broader discussion on marriage, in which Paul argued that marriage created hardship for the individuals, and divided loyalties between one's partner and one's God, nevertheless it was better to marry than remain single if one were tempted to fornication. Importantly, Paul addressed both men and women,

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<sup>25</sup> Such a vow, 'renouncing marriage because of the kingdom of heaven' could have its background in the Jewish Nazirite vows, as recorded in Numbers 6:2 Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the Lord as a Nazirite'.; These vows would have been well known to Jesus and his followers. The vow was for a specified length of time, according to the circumstances and personal choice of the individual. The vows were to avoid alcohol, and the fruit of the vine; avoid contact with a dead body; not to cut one's hair. Interestingly, abstention from sexual intercourse was not a requirement. Numbers 6:1-21.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 8:14 'When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother-in-law [*pentheran autou*] lying in bed with a fever.'; Cf. Mark 1:30 'Simon's mother-in-law [*penthera simoonos*] was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her.'; Whilst some argue that Peter left his wife in order to chastely devote himself to Christianity, he would still not have been a virgin. Neither is there any biblical evidence for his leaving his wife.

<sup>27</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:7 I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God [*kharisma ek theou*]; one has this gift, another has that. Again here is the idea of virginity as a gift, and the emphasis on masculine virginity as Paul is commending his decision to remain single.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:27-28.

I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man [*ho agamos*] is concerned about the Lord's affairs – how he can please the Lord. But a married man [*ho gamesas*] is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin [*he agamos kai he parthenos*] is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman [*he de gamesasa*] is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.<sup>29</sup>

And though Paul put greater stress on virginity than Christ had, he still did not demand it of Christians. Rather he wrote, 'So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better.'<sup>30</sup> Paul's view therefore appears to have been that virginity enabled whole-souled devotion to God, but for those who would be tempted to sin through fornication, it was better to marry, 'If anyone thinks he is acting improperly towards the virgin he is engaged to (*askhemonein epi ton parthenon autou*), and if she is getting on in years (*ean e hyperakmos*, literally 'over the bloom of life') and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married.'<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, here it is the man who is tempted to fornication, that is a sexual

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<sup>29</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:32-33; Paul here acknowledges those of both sexes who might remain unmarried for the sake of the Lord. This would include those who had previously been married, as Paul comments in vss 39-40, A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. In my judgement, she is happier if she stays as she is – and I think I too have the Spirit of God.; Although Cf. 1 Timothy 5:14 So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:38.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 7:2 But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.

relationship outside of marriage, and it is his decision to marry. The woman in the relationship is interpellated as 'virgin', and must remain passive in the decision to marry. Hence, for Paul, as for Christ, virginity was constructed as the absence of marriage, although he equated marriage with a sexual relationship, and intended for those with the character and circumstances to accept the 'gift'. Paul also warned his audience that every marriage would experience difficulties, so even without reaching the point of divorce, marriage might not be as personally fulfilling as celibacy enabling whole-souled dedicated to doing the will of God.

In Revelation, John the Divine stressed the virginity of the heavenly masses worshipping God,

These are those who did not defile themselves with women [*meta gynaikon*], for they kept themselves pure [lit. for they are virgins/*parthenoi gar eisin*]. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men [*outoi egorasthesan apo ton anthropon*] and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to Christ and Paul, he specifically constructs this virginity in contrast to a defiling sexual relationship. The Greek clearly implies that the virgin is male, using masculine forms, but *anthropos* can also be used to incorporate women, in the same way that 'mankind' has been used as the universal signifier in English.<sup>33</sup> Whatever the gender of the virgins, their purity derives from avoiding defilement with women (*gynai*). Only a sexual relationship with a woman has the power to disbar Christians from becoming members of the heavenly choir, able to sing the New Song of praise to God;

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<sup>32</sup> Revelation 14:4.

<sup>33</sup> See also the comments on Cyprian above.

their virginal status marks them as apart from the bulk of Christian worshippers who, whilst they enjoy salvation, can only watch the 144,000.<sup>34</sup>

Thus in the New Testament we see virginity contrasted with marriage and encouraged for those with the self-control and maturity to abide by a vow, and only with John the Divine is the idea of sexual experience as defiling to the Christian rather than distracting from worship of God. Virginity therefore becomes associated with moral purity rather than whole-souled devotion to God, hence sexuality tarnishes the Christian's relationship with God through corruption. This corruption is visualised as female. By the time we reach Aldhelm, this negative view of sexuality as corrupting, and associated with women had become the accepted opinion.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF VIRGINITY - FIRST FIND YOUR VIRGIN**

There is much discussion of the nature of virginity in primary and secondary literature, as it was a topic that exercised Christian writers not only throughout late antiquity, but also into the medieval and early modern periods.<sup>35</sup> The debate on how exactly virginity was constituted and thus could be assessed, was a major theme for late antique and medieval authors, for how do you define a virgin? The technical definition is one who

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<sup>34</sup> Revelation 14:3; Revelation 7:9 describes a separate group, 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language', presumably the rest of the faithful.

<sup>35</sup> There is an extensive literature on the relationship between the body, gender and virginity. A few examples are John Bugge, *Virginitas : An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague : Martinus Nijhoff, 1975); Vern L. Bullough & James Brundage, *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church* (Buffalo : Prometheus Books, 1982); Joyce Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, (London & New York : Verso, 1991); Joan Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages : Medicine, Natural Philosophy, and Culture* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1993); Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London & New York : Routledge, 2000); Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge : D.S. Brewer, 2001); *Medieval Virginites*, ed. by Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans & Sarah Salih (Cardiff : University of Wales Press, 2003).

has never experienced penetrative sexual intercourse, or a woman whose hymen is intact. However, this definition creates considerable difficulties, for example, how would one assess male virginity? The hymen itself is problematic, more signified than signifier. Kathleen Coyne Kelly notes, 'Considered to be the physiological mark par excellence of virginity, the hymen is in fact a notoriously unstable and ambiguous concept, with an anxious and uncertain history.'<sup>36</sup> After discussing the convoluted medical history of the hymen, she adds, 'perhaps it would be more accurate to identify the hymen as a site than as an anatomical part.'<sup>37</sup> But a site of what? Inexperience? Purity? Entirety? Importantly for this consideration, how does performance define the possession or lack of an intact hymen?

As a definition of virginity is so slippery, the demonstration of virginal 'qualities' became the standard test, as discussed below. Virginity is both constructed and demonstrated by performance; hence Judith Butler's theory of performativity is useful in examining the way in which virginity is linguistically constructed. Butler argues that gender is created through and by the constant iteration of actions conceived of within the gender binary. There is no agent behind the performance, but it does enable a degree of agency.<sup>38</sup> One cannot pick and choose at random how to create a gender in order for it to be intelligible, but one acts and re-acts within the heterosexual nexus. Butler herself distinguishes between performance and performativity, drawing on Louis Althusser's and J. L. Austin's theories of performative speech and interpellation.<sup>39</sup> However, this

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<sup>36</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, pp. 10, 25-28; Kelly comments, pp. 17-18, Joan of Arc was tested for her virginity, and it was noted that she had at one time 'injured' herself horse riding, presumably breaking the hymen.

<sup>38</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York : Routledge, 1990) p. 34.

distinction breaks down somewhat when considering the literary depiction of gender as there is an agent – the author. The author has chosen certain tropes and behaviours, description and dress, to highlight in creating a gendered character. The virgin can be discussed as a gender in itself, and as a gendered identity.<sup>40</sup> The Church Fathers and Aldhelm constructed virginity via gender in differing ways through their writings.

Hence, the Church Fathers spent a great deal of effort in describing a virgin, creating a visible virginity that would be evident to the onlooker. Whilst the church authorities in late antiquity and the medieval period accepted various tests for virginity, they acknowledged such tests were fallible, thus proof was inferred through dress, behaviour and demeanour - performance.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the performance was intended to reflect an intactness of mind as well as body, for the demeanour of the virgin was more evident a marker than the body. And such visible evidence of 'intactness' in the attitude of the virgin was of equal, if not greater, importance than the physical state of the body. Virginity was necessarily performative; it was constituted an active quality in that it relied on the actions and appearance of the virgin in order for her (and overwhelmingly it was 'her') interpellation into sanctified virginity, for her virginity to be recognized and validated by others.

Judith Butler sees gender as a continued performance, a congealing of action into gender.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the repetition of behaviour expected from a virgin, created the virgin. Even women who were clearly not virgins – for example Paula – would be

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<sup>39</sup> L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London : NLB, 1971); J. L. Austin, *How to do things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. by J. O. Urmson (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1962).

<sup>40</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, pp. 1-15, 242-244.

<sup>41</sup> See discussion in Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*; Cf. Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 3.3.13.

<sup>42</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 33.



labelled 'virgins' by conforming to the expected behaviour of a virgin.<sup>43</sup> In using the virginity to their own ends, women such as Paula, queered it, by making evident the multiplicity of the category. Their reclaiming of virginity serve also parodied the status, as their performance of the qualities outlined by the Church Fathers enabled them to elide the ontological status of their bodies, and access the respect and autonomy available to virgins. Thus they made the performative nature of virginity evident. Yet, there was also the possibility of subversion, as the performance could be manipulated, and twisted through the re-interpretation of virginity. The continued tension between the proscriptive description of virginity in the writings here examined, and their adoption, and more importantly, adaptation by individual women, demonstrate the potential for subversion.

## CHRISTIAN VIRGINITY IN LATE ANTIQUITY

During the late antique period, as writers sought a more academic understanding of their faith, they used their intellectual ideas to explore and discuss virginity, debating theological and philosophical arguments about the nature of God and of the soul, the disposition of mankind, and the importance of gender differences.<sup>44</sup> In the pagan culture of late antiquity, though virginity itself may not have been seen as particularly beneficial, self-control and continence were considered praiseworthy.<sup>45</sup> Stoicism, for example,

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<sup>43</sup> The ability of non-virgins to reclaim the significance of virginity was also important for Aldhelm. See discussion in Chapters 4 and 5 on his differentiation of sanctified virginity.

<sup>44</sup> See discussion in Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass : Harvard University Press, 1996); Brown, *Body and Society*.

<sup>45</sup> *Augustine*, Walsh, p. xii. Walsh comments, 'The practice of ritual virginity had little appeal in the traditional Roman culture.'; According to Peter Brown in *Body and Society*, p. 170, virginity was

stressed the importance of detachment from the emotional world, and urged self-control and self-containment - *enkrateia*.<sup>46</sup> From the convergence of such philosophical ideas and the New Testament writings developed an intellectual environment that allowed for texts on virginity to flourish in the early church. Ideas absorbed from Stoicism, Platonism and neo-Platonism were re-interpreted through Christian doctrine, and influenced the development of a doctrine of virginity, particularly in aspects relating to continence.<sup>47</sup> Indeed such ideas enabled the intersection between virginity and celibacy in Christianity and the reclamation of virginity, as women who had been married, and even had children, were able to utilise the status accorded virginity in taking control of their lives.<sup>48</sup> Through the performance of virginity, women could empower themselves within society, even though they might be widows and mothers.

Christians had rapidly gained a reputation for celibacy. The pagan writer and physician, Galen (129-199), noted the sexual continence of early Christians.<sup>49</sup> From the second century, Christian leaders extolled virginity in their writings - Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Methodius, Pope Damasus, Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine. Aldhelm considered himself as part of this discourse, deliberately drawing on patristic imagery and conventions in his *De*

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perceived in paganism as, 'a physical concretisation, though the untouched body, of the pre-existing purity of the soul'.

<sup>46</sup> Marcia L. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the early Middle Ages* (Leiden & New York : E.J. Brill, 1990); *Stoicism : Traditions and Transformations*, ed. by Steven K. Strange & Jack Zupko (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2004); Gretchen Reydam-Schils, *The Roman Stoics : Self, Responsibility, and Affection* (Chicago, Illinois, London : University of Chicago Press, 2005); Tad Brennan, *The Stoic Life : Emotions, Duties, and Fate* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> Luther H. Martin, 'Graeco-Roman Philosophy and Religion', in *The Early Christian World*, vol. I, ed. by Esler, pp. 53-79.

<sup>48</sup> See Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, particularly her discussion of Margery Kempe, pp. 166-241; Cf. Jerome's depiction of Paula outlined below.

<sup>49</sup> Quotation taken from Brown, *Body and Society*, p. 33, although Brown acknowledges in a footnote that this may be 'a later Christian interpolation in the Arabic tradition.'

*Virginitate*.<sup>50</sup> The Church Fathers argued that humankind's original state was virginity, thus through virginity Christians could approach the pre-Lapsarian perfection of humankind. Virginity came to signify the ultimate Christian lifestyle, one to which everyone should theoretically aspire, but it was particularly held up as the best of all possible lifestyles for women. This is evident by the number of tracts intended to encourage women to virginity. Although the Church Fathers vary in their depiction and application of virginity, overwhelmingly they associate it with women and construct it in a way that separated the vowed virgin from the (sexualised) woman.<sup>51</sup> Hence they drew on the imagery of John the Divine, rather than Jesus or Paul, to create a virginity of sexual purity which both sought to free women from the perceived inferiority of their gender, and to gain control over them, for single, independent women were an uncomfortable anomaly in the patriarchal society of late antiquity. Joyce Salisbury points out that, for the Church Fathers, the defining characteristics of femininity were sexuality and passivity.<sup>52</sup> The underlying assumptions represented in their writings were that sex defiled, and indulgence in it demonstrated a weakness of character. Hence carnality, in any form, divided mankind from God.<sup>53</sup> The very appearance of a woman had the potential to create sexual indiscretion in a man, and, as it was Eve who tempted Adam, women retained this responsibility for temptation, and needed the most supervision from the Church authorities.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> For example Aldhelm quotes from Cyprian's *De Habitu Virginum* on the dress of the consecrated virgin.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, p. 6, 'The choice of the virgin life necessarily requires a rejection of childbearing and lactation'.

<sup>52</sup> Salisbury, *Church Fathers*, p. 28.

<sup>53</sup> Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 102; See further discussion below.

<sup>54</sup> A notable exception is Augustine, who, as noted, had enjoyed a long term sexual relationship.

In the theoretical discourses virginity was portrayed as enabling women to achieve parity with men that related to the theological idea of equality of the souls.<sup>55</sup> Jerome, for example, addresses Eustochium as 'daughter, lady, fellow servant, sister - for one name suits your age, another your rank, another our religion, another my affection'.<sup>56</sup> Whilst all are equal in Christ, she retains her social and gendered status in this list, 'fellow servant' notwithstanding. The physical woman could never attain real equality with the physical man, with the legal, social and economic rights of men, as this would disrupt society. Instead, this parity was constructed as moral or spiritual. Jerome wrote,

While a woman serves for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wants to serve Christ more than the world, then she shall cease to be (called) a woman and will be called man.<sup>57</sup>

In leaving behind the physical and social role of the woman, she can 'cease' to be a woman, but she cannot become a man, rather she is interpellated into a new category of spiritual equality. If the woman was removed from the heterosexual matrix by withholding her sexuality and fecundity, she ceased to operate within society as a woman, but this did not make her a man. And, despite the rhetoric of equality, for the Church Fathers the virgin needed guidance, even controlling, as she remained in essence female, and prone to the failures associated with femininity.

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

<sup>56</sup> Jerome, *Ep* 22.26.1; All translations taken from *The Letters of Saint Jerome*, trans. by C. Mierow (London : Longmans, 1963), p. 159.

<sup>57</sup> Jerome, *Commentarium in Epistolam ad Ephesios*, PL26: cols459-554, col 533, *quamdiu mulier partui servit et liberis, hanc habet ad virum differentiam, quam corpus ad animam. Sin autem Christo magis voluerit servire quam saeculo, mulier esse cessabit, et dicetur vir.* Translation taken from Jocelyn Wogan Browne, 'Chaste bodies : frames and experiences', in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. by Sarah Kay & Miri Rubin (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 166.

Nevertheless, even the spiritual ideal of being one in Christ, or equal in spirit, was subverted to reinforce male dominance. Cyprian, for example, does this subtly when discussing Revelation 14:4, quoted above.<sup>58</sup> Cyprian states that while referring to men, the scripture applies to women as well, because woman was taken from man (Cf. Genesis 2:21-22) but, 'God in scripture almost always speaks to the Protoplast, the first formed, because they are two in one flesh, and in the male is at the same time signified the woman also'.<sup>59</sup> So whilst they may be 'one flesh', as 'Protoplast', the man is primary. The woman is a secondary figure, defined in relation to the man.

However the construction of virginity is multivalent, and thus queer. Sarah Salih comments, 'Religious discourses posit virginity as a continuing, lived and unstable identity ... an ongoing process'.<sup>60</sup> Virginity itself was (and is) discourse specific, for example, the virginity of the medical text did not carry the weight of meaning of religious virginity. Peter Brown described the symbolism of the virgin in relation to the late antique Church,

Her physical integrity came to carry an exceptionally high charge of meaning. To late antique males, the female body was the most alien body of all.... When consecrated by its virgin state, it could appear like an untouched desert in itself: it was the furthest reach of human flesh turned into something peculiarly precious by the coming of Christ upon it.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb.

<sup>59</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginitatis* 4; *Treatises of Cyprian*, Roberts & Donaldson, p. 431.

<sup>60</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Brown, *Body and Society*, p. 271.

Thus the virgin could be constructed as 'other', and also as 'signifier', depending on context. Yet she was also signified, as virginity was performative, as delineated through the texts. Indeed that performativity created a crossover between strict virginity and celibacy, as practised by those who had once been married.<sup>62</sup> Hence the performative character of virginity blurred the boundaries, not only gender boundaries, but also the boundaries between the chaste and virginal. Again, the physical state of the body was not as important as the performance.<sup>63</sup> Through this study the two categories are, at times conflated, as Aldhelm and the Church Fathers create a tension between the two physical states by concentrating on performance rather than the physical status of the woman.

## **VIRGINITY AS MARTYRDOM**

In late antiquity, the idea of the 'long martyrdom' helped to create a culture in which virginity and continence were much admired within Christianity. The last major persecution of Christians occurred at the beginning of the fourth century. The Emperor Diocletian reigned from 285 to 305, a time of increasing military and financial difficulties for the Roman Empire. Diocletian was a superb administrator, and introduced a number of innovations in the organisation of the army and provinces, as well as changes to the taxation system, all of which reinvigorated the Empire, at least in

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<sup>62</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, pp. 2, 17. Queer theory argues for a variable gender made visible by performance, which could radically undermine the Judeo-Christian norms lying behind the discourse on virginity. Hence Aldhelm, among others, deliberately closes off such freedoms through his construction of hagiographical virginity.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Jerome's encomium for Paula, discussed below.

the short term.<sup>64</sup> He also realised the importance of religion in unifying an Empire encompassing peoples with cultures as diverse as the Britons, Egyptians and Jews. Hence he attempted to suppress those religions and cults that were not thought to support the Empire, such as Manichaeism and Christianity.<sup>65</sup> Diocletian inaugurated what became known to Christians as the 'Great Persecution', and which lasted from 303 - 312. The suffering of the Church was relatively short lived, and very quickly after it ended, Christianity began its advance to becoming the principal religion of the Roman Empire. In 324, Constantine became sole emperor, and chose to align himself with Christianity. While the debate continues on exactly where, when, and to what extent Constantine became a Christian, his behaviour toward Christianity clearly indicated its change in status.<sup>66</sup>

The Great Persecution had long-lasting consequences for individuals, the Church, and State, and one of the deepest occurred within the Christian conception of piety. The surest proof of being a faithful and pious believer had been to suffer torture, even martyrdom, for the Faith. After 312, as the threat of persecution receded how a Christian displayed piety had to be renegotiated. Through the fourth century an ideology of self-inflicted deprivation and suffering developed; extreme asceticism and self-denial became

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<sup>64</sup> T. D. Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1982); S. Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery* (London : Batsford, 1985); R. Rees, *Diocletian and the Tetrarchy* (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

<sup>65</sup> Early Christianity for example, urged the faithful to concentrate on the Kingdom of God, rejecting a military career and placing religious loyalty above state, thus undermining civic responsibility.; Cf. John 17:14 I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.; Cf. Hebrews 11:15-16 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.; See Siker, 'Christianity', p. 248.

<sup>66</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians : In the Mediterranean World from the Second Century A. D. to the Conversion of Constantine* (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1988); H. A. Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine* (London : Routledge, 1986); Samuel N. C. Lieu & D. Monserrat, *Constantine : History, Historiography and Legend* (London : Routledge, 1988).

important in signifying Christian credentials.<sup>67</sup> It was only in 320 that Constantine repealed the laws of Augustus that penalised those who did not marry.<sup>68</sup> There was a radical shift in the expectations of society, whereby self-denial became more important than supporting the community. Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260 – c. 340) wrote,

Two ways of life were given by the Lord to his Church. The one is above nature, and beyond common living; it admits not marriage, childbearing, property nor the possession of wealth.... Like some celestial beings these gaze down upon human life, performing the duty of a priesthood to Almighty God for the whole race....

And the more humble, more human way prompts men to join in pure nuptials, and to produce children, to undertake government, to give orders to soldiers fighting for the right; it allows them to have minds for farming, for trade and for the other more secular interests as well as for religions.<sup>69</sup>

The ascetic life as advocated by Eusebius and others related back to the *enkrateia* of the stoics, the self-mastery that demonstrated one had overcome an attachment to the world, which was augmented by a perceived reliance on the power of God.<sup>70</sup> And through both the martyrdom of the earlier age, and the later emphasis on asceticism, the Church

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<sup>67</sup> St. Anthony prayed for martyrdom during the 'Great Persecution', but after that persecution had passed he 'again withdrew to his cell, and was there a martyr to his conscience.... And his discipline was much severer.' *Vita Antonii* 46-7. Translation taken *St. Athanasius : Select Works and Letters*, ed. and trans. by P. Schaff, & H. Wace (Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans, Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1975), pp. 208-9.

<sup>68</sup> *CT* 8.16.1 'Those who were classed by the old law as *caelibes* (unmarried) shall be freed from the coming terrors of the laws', quoted in G. Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity, Pagan and Christian Life-Styles* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 51.

<sup>69</sup> Eusebius, *Demonstratio Evangelica* 1.8, quoted in Brown, *Body and Society*, p. 205.

<sup>70</sup> Philippians 4:13 I can do everything through him who gives me strength.; 2 Corinthians 4:7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.



constructed a sanctity that was available to all. Those who could receive the gift of virginity were more than human, they were as angels. The conception of virginity as a reflection of the angelic was a major theme in late antiquity, for example Augustine wrote, 'This enhancement to your virginity demonstrates the life of angels to men, and the ways of heaven to the regions of earth'.<sup>71</sup> Peter Brown quotes Athanasius describing consecrated virgins as 'a picture of the holiness of the angels ... [called] the brides of Christ'.<sup>72</sup> The quotation from Eusebius also demonstrates the concept that a Christian, by his or her lifestyle, that is by performing their faith, could demonstrate that they were no part of the world, rather they lived for the world to come, as Christ described his followers, 'They are not of the world, even as I am not of it'.<sup>73</sup>

Yet, as Susanna Elm comments, 'Asceticism began as a method for men and women to transcend, as virgins of God, the limitations of humanity in relation to the divine. It slowly changed into a way for men as men and women as women to symbolize the power of the Church to suppress human weakness.'<sup>74</sup> The appearance of what could be termed an equalising activity actually created a site of gendered performance that became increasingly divergent. Virginity developed into the most important marker for female sanctity, whilst merely being an additional box to tick for male adherents. Women were defined as the 'weaker partner', and their attempts to overcome perceived weaknesses tended to highlight female failings rather than demonstrate the power of God

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<sup>71</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 54; Augustine, Walsh, p. 143.

<sup>72</sup> Brown, *Body and Society*, p. 259.

<sup>73</sup> John 17:16.

<sup>74</sup> Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God – The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 384.

to overcome.<sup>75</sup> In order for virginity to be privileged, therefore, femininity had to be increasingly disparaged, creating tensions in the representation of virginity.

Virginity was the ultimate sacrifice for women, and conceived of in terms of a gift or a sacrifice. Paul had said that childbirth would be the salvation of women, 'But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.'<sup>76</sup> But adopting this maternal role in society removed women from the highest level of salvation as delineated in the patristic texts. These concepts were important themes in the patristic writings, for example Ambrose wrote, 'A virgin is a gift of God, a protection for her family, a priesthood of chastity. A virgin is an offering for her mother, by whose daily sacrifice the divine power is appeased.'<sup>77</sup> Virginity was, *inter alia*, the sacrifice of fecundity, a fundamental renunciation for the young woman and her family in late antiquity. This renunciation was instrumental in constructing the power of virginity.

The concept of sacrifice in relation to young women can be traced back to the Old Testament story of Jephthah.<sup>78</sup> Before fighting the Ammonites, Jephthah vowed, 'If you give the Ammonites into my hand, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.'<sup>79</sup> On his return, 'who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for

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<sup>75</sup> 1 Peter 3:7.

<sup>76</sup> 1 Timothy 2:15.

<sup>77</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 2.1.1 p. 392. All translations taken from *St. Ambrose - Select Works and Letters*, trans. by H. De Romestin, E. Romestin & H. T. F. Duckworth (Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans, 1989); *De Virginibus* 3.3.13; *De Virginibus* 1.7.32; Cf. Augustine writing of virgins in *De Sancta Virginitate* 54, *Augustine*, Walsh, p. 143, 'And finally, you already fulfil that noble criterion of love in laying down your lives for your brethren'.

<sup>78</sup> Judges 11:30-40.

<sup>79</sup> Judges 11:30b-31.

her he had neither son nor daughter.’<sup>80</sup> Jephthah, though broken-hearted, kept his vow, and his daughter accepted her fate.<sup>81</sup> As with the more usual animal sacrifices to God in the Old Testament, it was important the victim was without fault and intact, so her virginity is explicitly mentioned, ‘After two months, she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin.’<sup>82</sup> Ambrose gave greater prominence to the image of sacrifice, perhaps because he was aware of all that his older sister had given up in her decision to be a consecrated virgin. He concluded his *De Virginibus* with the examples of Pelagia and her mother and sisters, who chose to drown rather than lose their virginity (or chastity in the case of the mother). As they entered the river, holding hands, the mother prayed, ‘I offer these victims to you, O Christ, as guardians of chastity, guides of our journey, companions in suffering.’<sup>83</sup> They were not passive sacrificial victims, they actively went to their deaths, demonstrating that women too could emulate Christ and overcome the world. It was a powerful image for women, and it is not surprising that death rather than defiling is a feature of many of the female saints’ lives.<sup>84</sup>

Yet, for Aldhelm’s audience, this element of sacrifice and martyrdom was secondary to the privileges and power virginity enabled. What had they sacrificed? Many were widows or divorcees and mothers. They had chosen the virginal life, but not

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<sup>80</sup> Judges 11:34b.

<sup>81</sup> Judges 11:36-37 ‘My father,’ she replied, ‘you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. But grant me this one request,’ she said. ‘Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry.’

<sup>82</sup> Judges 11:39; Cf. Judges 11:37; Cf. Leviticus 22:17-24; Malachi 1:8.

<sup>83</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus*. 3.7.35; *St. Ambrose*, H. De Romestin, E. Romestin & H. T. F. Duckworth, p. 116.

<sup>84</sup> As Ambrose used the story of Agnes in the opening of his treatise. Aldhelm does not dwell on the sacrifice of virginity, presumably in deference to the sexual status of the nuns he was addressing. Nevertheless, his use of the saints’ lives, in which virginity is a sacrifice, is evident that this remained an important part of the concept of virginity for both Aldhelm and his audience.

virginity. They had dedicated themselves to the Church, but at little personal sacrifice. Hence, Aldhelm wastes little time on these themes, rather he takes from the Church Fathers what he feels is relevant to his audience and his message, adopting and adapting his source material.

## **GENDERED VIRGINITY AND THE INVISIBLE VIRGIN**

As noted, the Church Fathers primarily related virginity to women, hence the means by which they proclaimed spiritual equality through virginity was increasingly constructed around the qualities (and frailties) associated with femininity. Graham Gould comments, 'Much patristic teaching about women is affected by [the] tension between recognition of the equality of women with men in the Christian life and the influence of inherited beliefs about female inferiority on the language employed to describe the religious achievements of women.'<sup>85</sup> Consequently, the tracts on virginity are frequently prescriptive in nature, and as has been discussed, were often strictly controlling. Most imply, even if they do not specifically state, that women should be under male control at all times, corresponding to Paul's counsel to the married woman: 'Wives, submit to your

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<sup>85</sup> Graham Gould, 'Women in the Writings of the Fathers: Language, Belief, and Reality', in *Women and the Church*, ed. by W. J. Sheils & D. Woods (Oxford : Blackwell, 1990), pp. 1-13; But this comment does not address the fact that such 'inherited beliefs' were as likely to be from the Scriptures as from classical culture. Though there are positive examples of women in the Old Testament, such as Sarah (Genesis 16-23), Rachel (Genesis 29-35), Deborah (Judges 4-5), and the 'wife of noble character' (Proverbs 31:10-31), there are plenty of warning examples, such as Eve (Genesis 2-4) and the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28). The sexual danger of women is also highlighted in the Old Testament, with specific examples such as Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1-15), and also metaphorical, such as the wanton foreign woman (Proverbs 2:16-19, 6:23-32); 1 Timothy 2:11-15 'A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing - if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.'

husbands as to the Lord.’<sup>86</sup> The vowed virgin necessarily rejected the social requirement to marry, which placed her outside the heterosexual matrix and the traditional structure of social control, thus these texts stress the need for control and enclosure, primarily within the family.<sup>87</sup> Thus submission to masculine authority was doubly important in relation to the consecrated virgin’s potential for dangerous independence from male authority. This is one of Aldhelm’s major themes through *De Virginitate*. His arguments about female obedience to the masculine ecclesiastical authority of the Church echo the late antique worries about female independence.

The Church Fathers used their writings to construct an ‘ideal’ virgin, one who not only submitted to the authority of the Church, but also became a cipher of female obedience and passivity.<sup>88</sup> For example, despite her elevated status within the congregation, the virgin should be ‘compliant and subject to men just as other women were’.<sup>89</sup> Thus the sanctified virgin was to be under the control of her immediate family, if she lived at home, a religious superior if in a monastic environment, and always the Church – a masculine authority. The life of the virgin was constructed as enclosed, ascetic, and, most importantly, passive, within these writings.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, by describing the ideal virgin, with her meek and modest demeanour, the patristic writers created an archetype of virginity that could not exist outside of the discourse of the Church’s masculine authority. In order to qualify as a sanctified virgin, the woman had to present the performance required by such writings. Joyce Salisbury notes that any freedom

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<sup>86</sup> Ephesians 5:22.

<sup>87</sup> Interestingly Brown, in *Body and Society*, p. 193, argues that the upsurge of consecrated virginity in this period as a consequence of young Christians who were unable to find a suitable partner within the Christian congregation and so chose to remain single.

<sup>88</sup> See further discussion below.

<sup>89</sup> Salisbury, *Church Fathers*, p. 28.

<sup>90</sup> Jerome, *Ep. 22*.

enjoyed by virgins was curtailed by the demand they obey their heavenly spouse through obedience to his earthly representative – the (masculine) Church authorities.<sup>91</sup>

In the *Historia Lausiaca*, Palladius offered the example of Piamoun, a virgin prophetess.<sup>92</sup> She lived at home with her mother, thus theoretically under the authority of a guardian, albeit a female one. When her prophetic powers warned her that a neighbouring village was about to attack, she had the authority to summon her village elders and warn them. Their reaction was to fall at her feet and request her intervention.<sup>93</sup> Women such as Piamoun could gain authority and respect, and achieved the sort of esteem enjoyed by Israelite prophetesses, or pagan priestesses.<sup>94</sup> In ancient Israel, the prophet Joel records a promise from God, ‘And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.’<sup>95</sup> But, in a patriarchal church, it was dangerous for women to be allowed the role of prophet, especially as many of the heretical movements encouraged female prophecy, for example the Montanists.<sup>96</sup> Such a role for women also bypassed the masculine authority of the Church by seemingly allowing a woman to connect directly to the divine rather than through the priestly hierarchy, and therefore, questioned the role of the priest within the congregation. Thus even this

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<sup>91</sup> Salisbury, *Church Fathers*, p. 34.

<sup>92</sup> Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 31. See *Lausiaca History*, trans. by R. T. Meyer (London : Longmans, Westminster, Md. : Newman Press, 1965), pp. 90-91.

<sup>93</sup> *Historia Lausiaca* 31.1-4.

<sup>94</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, pp. 315-6.

<sup>95</sup> Joel 2:28-29; Cf. Acts 2:1-12, especially 16-18, where Peter applies the Joel’s prophecy to the newly created Christian congregation (men and women) speaking in tongues.

<sup>96</sup> See Siker, ‘Christianity’, pp. 251-2.

charismatic role, which had been enjoyed by women in the highly patriarchal Jewish system, was ultimately denied Christian women.<sup>97</sup>

Consequently, from the late fourth century, monastic institutions for women as well as men became more common, especially in the east. Women were enclosed within institutions rather than within a family or household. Although the potential to found and manage a religious community was available to a rich woman, such as Paula, these opportunities were unavailable for the vast majority of consecrated virgins. Interestingly, despite the Biblical example of a woman such as Deborah, Aldhelm does not link female virginity with prophecy. His prophets are men such as Daniel.<sup>98</sup> Their virginity empowers them to prophecy, but Aldhelm denies such a direct link to the Divine for his female examples.

Jerome warned Eustochium that she should live at home, under the authority of her parents, and should rarely be seen in public, heeding the example of Dinah (Genesis 34), 'Dina went out and was ravished'.<sup>99</sup> A virgin should never leave the house unaccompanied, travelling only with female family members or fellow virgins. Such companions should be serious about their commitment to virginity, thin from fasting and pallid in countenance, yet maintain a joyful appearance.<sup>100</sup> Despite this, virginity still

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<sup>97</sup> For example the prophetesses Deborah (Judges 4:4) and Anna (Luke 2:36). The early Church, particularly in the east, included the position of Deaconess, but the office decreased rapidly with the expansion of the Church, and often amounted to no more than assisting other women through baptism.

<sup>98</sup> *Prosa XXI*; See discussion in Chapter 4.

<sup>99</sup> Jerome, *Ep. 22.17.1*; *The Letters of Saint Jerome*, Mierow, p. 148; Cf. *Ep. 22.25.2*; Genesis 34:1-2 'Now Dinah, the daughter Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the land. When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, ruler of that area, saw her, he took her and raped her.'; Likewise for Cyprian, a lavishly-dressed virgin will 'invite her own risk', hence any sexual danger she faces is of her own making. See also Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum 5*.

<sup>100</sup> Jerome, *Ep. 22.17.1*; *Ep. 22.16.1*; *Ep. 22.17.1*; Elm, in *Virgins of God*, pp. 333-334, discusses Athanasius of Alexandria's *Letter to the Virgins who went to Jerusalem to pray and have Returned*. Athanasius described the ideal lifestyle of the urban virgin: to eat to sustain themselves, not for pleasure, avoid perfume; walk without letting her tunic trail and her feet dance; not greeting those she meets; only leaving the house to go to church; either being silent or using measured tones when speaking.; It should be

offered opportunities, especially to women able to support themselves independently. Monique Alexandre discusses celibacy as a means by which women could avoid pregnancy, and enable some to practise estate management.<sup>101</sup> Women used the status of virginity/celibacy to become a patron of others, create and control a community of celibate women, undertake journeys and pilgrimages, and devote themselves to study.<sup>102</sup> The theory of enclosure and obedience, and the reality of some women's lives are radically different. Of course, these secular advantages were not incompatible with a genuine religious desire for celibacy as a sacrifice for God. The examples of women like Paula, discussed below, make obvious their genuine faith and desire to do their utmost in serving their God.

As noted above, physical virginity was difficult to prove, thus, the Church Fathers emphasised the importance of a pure mental state. Augustine, for example, commented, 'For continence is a virtue not of the body but of the mind.'<sup>103</sup> The Fathers emphasised the spiritual nature of virginity, evidenced by demeanour and appearance, thus a performative quality. Ambrose, for example, noted, 'Her gravity is what should first announce a virgin to me – her obvious modesty, her sober gait, her chaste visage: let these tokens of purity precede the other indications of virtue. A virgin who is inquired after when she is seen is not sufficiently virtuous.'<sup>104</sup> This implies that the perfect

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noted that all the texts considered here are addressed to the urban virgin; Cf. also Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 5.

<sup>101</sup> Monique Alexandre, 'Early Christian Women', in *A History of Women in the West* vol I, ed. by P. Schmitt Pantel (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1992), pp. 409-444, at p. 415.

<sup>102</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.

<sup>103</sup> Augustine, *De Bono Coniugali* 25; Augustine, Walsh, p. 47; Cf. Matthew 5:28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.; Thus the mental attitude that precedes the physical action is also equivalent to it.

<sup>104</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 3.3.13; *St. Ambrose*, De Romestin, De Romestin & Duckworth, p. 109; Cf. Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 5.



performance of virginity created an invisible virgin, who was no part of secular society, passing through the world unnoticed, yet also evidently a virgin. Likewise Cyprian comments that a virgin should not seek company with those in the outside world, avoiding 'marriage parties' and the 'promiscuous baths', with their lewd associations.<sup>105</sup> Such a performance of these signifiers of virginity were possible for the continent woman as well as the virgin. As will be seen below, women could negotiate the construction of virginity, utilising its potential for autonomy.

## EDUCATION

The Fathers dictated the education of the virgin; she should be well read and study religious texts.<sup>106</sup> However this should never give cause for pride, a particular fear of Jerome.<sup>107</sup> They also stated that the study of classical texts should be viewed with caution, as they open the virgin up to corruption.<sup>108</sup> Interestingly, although Aldhelm warned frequently against pride, and in his letters cautions against a classical education, he did not take the opportunity to directly warn the Anglo-Saxon monastics against secular education. Rather it was one of the themes he highlighted within the hagiographical section of *De Virginitate*. Indirectly, therefore, he foregrounds Christian education and denigrates secular learning, and as his hagiographical examples include

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<sup>105</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 4; *Treatises of Cyprian*, Roberts & Donaldson, p. 431; Cf. Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 18-19.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 22.17.1; *Ep.* 22.17.2.

<sup>107</sup> Jerome stated that the virgin should not flaunt academic ability by wasting time composing 'humorous themes in lyric verse'. *Ep.* 22.9.6; *The Letters of St. Jerome*, Mierow, p. 164.

<sup>108</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.29, relates the story of a dream in which, because of his love of pagan literature, especially Cicero, he is charged with being a 'Ciceronian' rather than a 'Christian'; Cf. Matthew 6:21 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

men and women, he does not differentiate to the same extent as some of the Church Fathers, between male and female education.<sup>109</sup>

Nevertheless the rigid employment of Christian learning was intended to contain any potential for freedom available through education. Jerome, for example, warned Eustochium that if she had questions, she should approach a reputable older man of the church, and if there were none available, rather than inquire of someone disreputable, or research the question herself, ignorance was preferable to the risks of independent female study.<sup>110</sup> One of the most striking examples of a well-educated celibate woman was Jerome's friend Paula. Jerome praised her studies, her knowledge of Hebrew and desire to search deeply in the Scriptures. But in his account of her, Paula's studies were conducted within the ideology of the dependent woman, as Jerome commended her for not risking independent study, rather she sought his guidance in reading and studying.<sup>111</sup>

## VIRGINAL VICES

Through their writings the Fathers highlighted different vices that would destroy virginity – mental as well as physical. Jerome, for example, represented desire as the greatest danger, whereas Augustine emphasised pride, a vice that was particularly important to Aldhelm.<sup>112</sup> Aldhelm's theme of female submission and avoidance of

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<sup>109</sup> See discussion in Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>110</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.17.1; *The Letters of St. Jerome*, Mierow, p. 149; *Ep.* 22.29.2; *The Letters of St. Jerome*, Mierow, p. 163; *Ep.* 22.9.6; *The Letters of St. Jerome*, Mierow, p. 164.

<sup>111</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108; It is interesting to see how Aldhelm expects a broad education of his audience, see further discussion in Chapter 3.

<sup>112</sup> Augustine felt so strongly about the topic that, in his consideration of virginity, he included what P. G. Walsh refers to as 'virtually a mini-treatise on humility', see *Augustine*, Walsh, p. 106; Jerome's views are discussed below.

autonomy and independence repeat the arguments of Augustine and others. In both *Prosa* and *Carmen*, Aldhelm warns against Pride in the strongest terms.<sup>113</sup>

The Fathers had to balance praising and encouraging women to virginity, with advocating modesty.<sup>114</sup> From Augustine's comments to Proba about her daughter's decision to become a sanctified virgin, the potential for pride in the status is evident.<sup>115</sup> Augustine stated that a young girl who had chosen virginity enjoyed spiritual benefits, but also conferred them on her family, benefits of greater worth than the physical increase to the family by descendants.<sup>116</sup> In just a few lines, Augustine summarised some of the most important ideas relating to consecrated virginity that we read in the Church Fathers: it is the most blessed state, it is in itself a marriage and one without end, her example as a noble can inspire the lower classes.<sup>117</sup> Hence, a pride in the status of consecrated virginity was understandable.

It is worth considering this aspect of writings of virginity in some detail as Aldhelm also presented pride as the most destructive vice to virginity in his *De Virginitate*. The crux of Augustine's argument is that Christ recommended humility above all, both by his example, and in his teaching; indeed, he taught that to enter the Kingdom of heaven, one should be as a child.<sup>118</sup> Thus, as the elite of the Church, virgins

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<sup>113</sup> Aldhelm particularly addresses the danger of pride in chapters X and XI of the *Prosa* (see discussion in Chapter 3), and the *psychomachia* in the *Carmen* (see discussion in Chapter 6).

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 22.3.1.

<sup>115</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 150.

<sup>116</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 150, 'how incomparably greater is the glory and advantage gained by your family in giving to Christ women consecrated to his service, than in giving to the world men called to the honours of consulship'. Translation taken from *The Confessions and Letters of St Augustin*, trans. by P. Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans, Edinburgh : T & T Clark. 1988), p. 504.

<sup>117</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 150.

<sup>118</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 32; Matthew 18:3 And he said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter into the kingdom of heaven'.; Cf. John 3-17 which records the account of Jesus washing the feet of the apostles.

must beware of pride, and excel in humility.<sup>119</sup> This was expanded in Augustine's conception of God's Grace, as he stressed that those who possess the gift of virginity do so 'by the gift of God; not by your own works lest anyone boast.'<sup>120</sup> Several times in *De Sancta Virginitate* he alluded or referred to Wisdom 8:21, 'but I saw that there was no way to gain possession of her [Wisdom] except by *gift of God* – and it was a mark of understanding to know from whom that gift must come. So I pleaded with the Lord, and from the depths of my heart I prayed to him in these words' (italics mine). This text is crucial in understanding Augustine's conception of Grace, chastity and self-control. One is a virgin by gift of God, and can only maintain that state by gift of God. For example, Augustine warned that though the virgin can reflect on her higher calling, she should not consider herself above married women on an individual basis as 'she does not know whether a particular married woman can suffer for Christ whilst she herself cannot.'<sup>121</sup>

Ambrose also discussed the danger of pride to the virgin, but warned against asceticism practised for ostentation rather than religious devotion, constructing a pride that was defined through the performance of ascetic virginity by extreme self control.<sup>122</sup> Similarly, Aldhelm linked ostentation and pride in *De Virginitate*. However, Aldhelm concentrated on the ostentation of physical appearance rather than pious behaviour, portraying it as outward evidence of a dangerous independence and autonomy.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 33.

<sup>120</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 33; Augustine, Walsh, p. 111.

<sup>121</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 47; Augustine, Walsh, p. 135.

<sup>122</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 3.4.17.

<sup>123</sup> Aldhelm, *Prosa de Virginitate* LVII.



## VIRGINITY AND THE BODY

Susanna Elm comments on female asceticism, 'If through asceticism a woman achieves 'male' virtue (*arete*), and is thereby transformed into a 'manly woman', then she had not only achieved the equality with her male counterparts, but has been transformed into an ideal, complete human being.'<sup>124</sup> As we have seen, even theoretically the Church Fathers did all they could to thwart this transformation, but the implication of the potential of virginity to generate a female masculinity that would divide the virgin from the woman, created a sanctity in which women had to lose their femininity to fully experience spirituality.<sup>125</sup> For the reader, though, it opens a space into which a queer reading can be inserted. The qualities associated with virginity were not necessarily concomitant with those associated with femininity, therefore in allowing for this variant reading of virginity, further opportunities were offered to the consecrated virgin, as demonstrated in the lives of some of the women examined in this chapter. This division between what could be defined as 'feminine' and 'virginal', highlights the queer quality of virginity, by demonstrating the multiple identities women would express as they negotiated their performances.

Dress was one way in which women could subvert gender expectations, and is discussed below. Another, more fundamental subversion was created through extreme asceticism. This altered the appearance of the female body, and caused amenorrhoea

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<sup>124</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, p. ix.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. the earlier quotation from Jerome, 'While a woman serves for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wants to serve Christ more than the world, then she shall cease to be called woman and will be called man.'

(cessation of periods), thus removing the most obvious mark of physical femaleness.<sup>126</sup> Thus virginity, performed ascetically, could be written on the body. This was particularly applicable to women who chose the life of the Egyptian hermit, as the harsh rigours of desert life would obscure their female physical characteristics.<sup>127</sup> In removing the visible markers of womanhood, the woman could appear to approach the angelic virginity urged by the Fathers. Cyprian argued that the greatest attack to a virgin's purity would be from her own body, for she 'has no struggle greater than that against her own flesh, and no contest more obstinate than that of conquering and subduing the body'.<sup>128</sup> Thus he stresses the need to continually subjugate one's physical desires. Whilst some women, through asceticism and dress, may have changed their appearance to demonstrate their renunciation of the female role, for others it could be a way to defy convention or as an escape. Hence this physical inscription of virginity on the body could enable women to subvert the freedoms available through virginity for their own ends.<sup>129</sup>

Clearly the most obvious way to counter any potential for independence via the ascetic virginal body was to emphasise the extent to which the spiritual quality of

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<sup>126</sup> M. Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York : Vintage Books, 1976), p. 75; Pelagia, a reformed prostitute or 'holy harlot' is able to pass as a eunuch, having fasted to the point where 'her astounding beauty had all faded away, her laughing and bright face ... had become ugly, her pretty eyes had become hollow and cavernous as the result of much fasting and keeping of vigils.' Account taken from *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, ed. by S. P. Brock & S. A. Harvey (Berkeley & London : University of California Press, 1987), p. 60.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Palladius, *Historia Lausica*, written to honour monks and, 'commemorate women...who have performed feats of virtuous asceticism in strong and perfect intention, as exempla and models for those women who wish to wear the crown of self-abnegation and chastity'. *The Lausiac History*, Meyer, p. 17); Elm, *Virgins of God*, pp. 262, 269; Hermits and monks struggled to control 'night-time emissions' and sexual longing, yet although periods were also considered indicative of sexuality, amenorrhoea was rarely commented upon, again indicating the 'otherness' of women to many of the writers.; See Brown, *Body and Society*.

<sup>128</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum 5; Treatises of Cyprian*, Roberts & Donaldson, p. 431.

<sup>129</sup> See, for example, the account of Piamoun, above.

virginity needed to be carefully guarded, as we have seen in the warnings on pride. Jerome maintained that virginity, once lost, could never be regained, thus the importance of protecting mind and body.<sup>130</sup> Hence inscribing virginity on the body was an ongoing process that could be subverted at any time, with the constant potential for failure. And again it must be remembered that not all of the late antique virgins were ‘virgins’, some had ‘reclaimed’ their virginity through performance, for example Paula. Despite this correspondence with his Anglo-Saxon audience, Aldhelm mostly avoids the female virginal body. When he writes of the physical body, it is the athletic male body that he describes. Only when describing the torture of the virgin martyr does he in any sense address the physical virginal body.<sup>131</sup>

## DRESS AND ORNAMENTATION

All these authors warn against inappropriate dress, a caution given to women from Paul onward.<sup>132</sup> Aldhelm also considers this as a problem, and he equates what he considers to be inappropriate dress with pride. But Aldhelm is highly unusual in including male dress within his comments.<sup>133</sup> P. G. Walsh rightly refers to comments on female dress in the Church Fathers as ‘an obsessive motif’.<sup>134</sup> Though clearly representative of the fixation of the male writers, such a body of writing also indicates that some consecrated

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<sup>130</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.

<sup>131</sup> In large part this divides the Anglo-Saxon audience from their behaviour and autonomy of the virgin martyrs. See further Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>132</sup> 1 Timothy 2:9-10 I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

<sup>133</sup> See discussion in Chapter 3.

<sup>134</sup> *Augustine*, Walsh, footnote 81 p. 112.

virgins and celibates wore clothing that was considered, by the church authorities at least, to be inappropriate. The major part of Cyprian's treatise centres on dress and adornment. He stated that if the consecrated virgin had her thoughts on the kingdom of God, what need she of earthly ornament? Rather her demeanour and dress should reflect her modesty and continence, demonstrating again the performativity of virginity.<sup>135</sup> Augustine condemned those who sought to please by their appearance rather than meet the needs of their virginal calling.<sup>136</sup> Hence the difficulty in testing virginity was avoided in the construction of a virginal appearance, which became the commonplace in these texts, and was more achievable than the androgyny of physical asceticism.

As with the other writers, Cyprian explicitly links inappropriate dress and ornamentation with sexual temptation. This connexion between female sexuality and appearance was clearly influential for Aldhelm in his construction of the sexualised woman/wife, whom he places in opposition to the virgin.<sup>137</sup> For Cyprian, a lavishly dressed virgin will 'invite her own risk' and any sexual danger she faces is of her own making.<sup>138</sup> A virgin who dresses so as to incite lust in effect becomes a sword or poison to those who see her. Her very appearance is a danger for spectators.<sup>139</sup> By her dress and adornment, she draws attention to herself and stokes the lust of those who see her, damning them to Hell. Cyprian constructs an ever more extreme condemnation of female appearance, 'The characteristics of adornments, and of garments, and the

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<sup>135</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 5; Indeed for Cyprian demeanour is inseparable from dress, raising interesting issues about the interiority of virginity and its outward representation.

<sup>136</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 34; *Augustine*, Walsh, pp. 112-113. This could be either through ornamentation or wearing a head covering so thin it did not cover.

<sup>137</sup> See discussion in Chapters 3 and 4. Again, by making obvious the division between woman and virgin, whilst addressing non-virgins, opens up a space for a queer, multiple reading of the topic.

<sup>138</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 5; *Treatises of Cyprian*, Roberts & Donaldson, p. 431.

<sup>139</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 9.



allurements of beauty, are not fitting for any but prostitutes and immodest women'.<sup>140</sup> Such virgins are like diseased animals and should be driven out of the midst of the holy lest they infect others.<sup>141</sup> Cyprian's diatribe about clothing and purity climax with a threat to all women, not just consecrated virgins, that those who use jewellery, hair-dye and make-up may not be recognised by God at the Resurrection, as they will no longer be reflecting God's image.<sup>142</sup> But inappropriate dress did not just flaunt sexuality, it could be indicative of wider issues, and this is how Aldhelm interprets dress.<sup>143</sup>

Jerome warned Eustochium that she should not draw attention to herself by dress or action, and avoid women who claimed to be virgins but used that status to gain attention for themselves, or to disregard their femininity by refusing to dress or act as women.<sup>144</sup> The 'ideal' virgin should never stand out, as noted above her virginity was evident in her invisibility, and her performance should ensure that she disappeared into the background, unnoticed yet also differentiated from women in general. Jerome elaborated in his description of those subverting their appearance as virgins, 'Other women change their garb to male attire, cut their hair short and blush to be seen as they were born – women; they impudently lift up faces that appear those of eunuchs'.<sup>145</sup> Jerome makes explicitly the tension between the 'ideal' virgin whose physical signifiers of virginity were fundamentally female, even if the intention was to dissociate them from femininity, and the ascetic, androgynous virgin. To intentionally ape masculinity or

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<sup>140</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 12; *Treatises of Cyprian*, Roberts & Donaldson, p. 433.

<sup>141</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 17.

<sup>142</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 17; *Treatises of Cyprian*, Roberts & Donaldson, p. 434; Aldhelm directly quotes from Cyprian's argument when addressing his audience, for example, *Prosa de Virginitate* LV.

<sup>143</sup> Despite Aldhelm's condemnation of the sexual woman and her dress, when discussing the dress of his monastic audience, sexuality is only one element in his diatribe. See further discussion in Chapter 3.

<sup>144</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.27.8.

<sup>145</sup> Jerome *Ep.* 22.27.8; *The Letters of St. Jerome*, Mierow, pp. 161-2.

androgyny was to step outside of the gender binary of Christianity. Created as the 'weaker partner', women should not attempt to look like men, though they may, as a consequence of self denial, no longer display the markers of femininity.<sup>146</sup>

Jerome here also warns his audience that no amount of dress and demeanour could make them men, at the most they can appear as eunuchs, lacking the masculinity and sexuality associated with men. But why a woman would chose to defy scriptural injunction and Church teaching and dress as a man raises interesting questions about negative perceptions of femininity in late antiquity.<sup>147</sup> To what extent had women internalised negative assumptions about femininity, and used the implied equality/masculinity of the virginal state to deny their gender, attempting to present themselves as a third gender?<sup>148</sup> That Jerome links a false virgin with the eunuch, does not undermine this attempt, rather is queers the position of virgin as neither male nor female. No matter how much *arete*, the woman aquired through her performance of virginity, she would not be a man, but neither did she have to present herself as a woman. Nevertheless, whilst Jerome's warning demonstrates that some women negotiated these concepts, using them for their own ends, 'impudently' in the view of the Church, they were forced to do this without the sanction of the Church, and therefore risked not having their virginity validated by Church and secular authorities.

Finery and ornamentation, argued the Fathers, demonstrated the wrong heart condition for a virgin, and was representative of the performative aspects of virginity.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> 1 Peter 3:7

<sup>147</sup> Deuteronomy 22:5 A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this.

<sup>148</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, p. 2.

<sup>149</sup> Cf. Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 34.

This is particularly relevant for Aldhelm, who equates inappropriate dress with pride and independence.<sup>150</sup> Equally, dressing in the shabbiest rags could be demonstrative of a proud heart. Jerome described such women, dressing down in order to gain attention and admiration: they wear black and sackcloth, have dirty hands and feet, disfigure their faces so that they appear to be fasting, and when they know someone is looking at them, they lower their eyes and groan.<sup>151</sup> At the same time, the correct dress need not signify a submissive spirit; a woman could negotiate the extent to which she conformed to the social norms, adapting dress to expose or cover performance. Melania the Younger wore a coarse woollen tunic under her clothes before she was able to vow herself to chastity. Such garb was, for Melania, as much a rebellion against the demands of her family to marry, as compliance with the dictates of the patristic writers.<sup>152</sup>

## SEXUALITY AND SENSUALITY

The potential of virginity to enable female agency meant the Church Fathers had to balance their praise of virgins with reminders that women could never fully overcome their inherent female nature, and concomitant sexuality. Thus in these texts we see sexuality as an obsession for the Church Fathers, presented both as the antithesis to virginity, and yet essential to the (female) temperament of the virgin. Ambrose commented, 'But what is virginal chastity if not a purity untouched by contamination?'<sup>153</sup> Therefore virginity was non-existent without the sexuality it denied,

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<sup>150</sup> See further discussion in Chapter 3.

<sup>151</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.27.6-7.

<sup>152</sup> Salisbury, *Church Fathers*, p.76

<sup>153</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 1.5.21; *St Ambrose*, Romestin, Romestin & Duckworth, p. 79.

and that latent sexuality remained a constant risk to the virgin. Fleshly desires were to be controlled to avoid all temptation of mind and body, and this was primarily to be achieved through asceticism. Performance, therefore, reinforced virginity as well as defining it.

The early Christian writers constructed sensuality as a continuum; opening the senses to pleasure of any kind would ultimately lead to lust.<sup>154</sup> Jerome went into the desert, wore sackcloth, neglected himself, went without sleep, and fasted, yet still suffered visions of dancing girls and the delights he had known in Rome.<sup>155</sup> From this he concluded, 'But if those with emaciated frame are assailed by their thoughts alone, endure such trials, what must a girl endure who is thrilled by such luxuries?'<sup>156</sup> Consequently, Jerome warned virgins they should never eat until replete, and should be fasting constantly.<sup>157</sup> This continuum of pleasure meant that yielding to the desire for (luxury) food was a mere step away from yielding to sexual temptation.<sup>158</sup> On the other hand, Ambrose was more balanced in his discussion of food. Whilst he also represented frugal eating habits as necessary for a young woman, an older woman should temper her efforts, so she may be able to teach the next generation.<sup>159</sup> This could also have been

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<sup>154</sup> For example, in the *apophthegmata* an elderly monk explains why he is not bothered by lust, 'Since I became a monk, I have never eaten bread bread to satiety, nor drunk water, nor slept to satiety, and attention to these things has so weighed me down that it has not let me feel [lust].' Taken from *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers – Apophthegmata Patrum*, trans. by B. Ward (Oxford : S.L.G. Press, 1975), p. 16.

<sup>155</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.7.2-3.

<sup>156</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.8.1; *The Letters of St. Jerome*, Mierow, pp. 140-41; Interestingly Jerome used his own example of suffering erotic and sensual visions, and does not offer a comparative event in the lives of the women he praises and eulogises.

<sup>157</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.8.2.

<sup>158</sup> The ancients also thought that food fed the body's heat, a heat that in turn created lust, so there was a physical reaction to food that was to the detriment of virginity.

<sup>159</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginitibus* 3.4.16; *St Ambrose*, Romestin, Romestin & Duckworth, p. 109; This is also an acknowledgement of the extent to which some women at least starved themselves, for example Blesilla died from her strict asceticism. It therefore raises the issue of anorexia in these women. For the later period see Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1987).

because the older woman was assumed not to suffer so severely from sexual desire. On the other hand, Aldhelm says little about this interlinking of sensualities. For him sexuality was a discrete category, to be controlled by the virgin with little reference to food or drink.

In his letter to Eustochium, Jerome discussed four biblical examples of individuals who fell prey to sexual temptation – Samson (Judges 16:1-21), David (2 Samuel 11:1-15), Solomon (1 King 11:1-6) and Amnon (13:1-16). Interestingly all of these are men: the women may tempt, but Jerome offers no instance of a woman being falling prey to sexual temptation. These men were unable to resist sexual temptation, even when that temptation was not overt, demonstrating the potential for failure even when one did not appear to be in danger. Jerome also warns virgins that their inherent sexuality as woman is a constant menace to others, for as women they personify temptation, whatever their intention may be. David, for example, not only committed immorality, but was also responsible for murder merely by seeing Bathsheba, and Bathsheba was guilty merely by being a woman.<sup>160</sup> Samson, on the other hand, suffered not only from Delilah's sexual attraction, but also her machinations. The fears of female sexuality and deceit were contemporary commonplaces, and used by writers as a reason for the control of women. Without male authority and scrutiny, women would be a danger, condemning themselves and others to damnation. Hence, despite the tantalising offer of spiritual equality through virginity, which Jerome elsewhere describes as 'that

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<sup>160</sup> 2 Samuel 11:2-15.

state ... in which ... the distinction of sex is lost', women could never be allowed forget their sex and gender.<sup>161</sup>

## SPIRITUAL VS PHYSICAL MARRIAGE

The patristic writers had to balance discouraging women from marrying, whilst not overly denigrating marriage. Such denigration opened them to the charge of heresy, as sects such as the Manichees argued that marriage was against the Divine will.<sup>162</sup> Hence they argued that whilst the Scriptures did not condemn marriage, they certainly promoted virginity. Also, they were not able to condone those who left marriages for the religious life, as there was no Biblical precedent for this.<sup>163</sup> Rather they damned with faint praise, for example they portrayed marriage as a safeguard for the sexually incontinent, and grudgingly acknowledged that only by mutual consent should a marriage be celibate.<sup>164</sup>

Harking back to Paul, the primary reason the Church Fathers considered as a personal motivation for marriage, was sexual desire, although they acknowledged the

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<sup>161</sup> Jerome, *De Virginitate Beatae Mariae* 22; Jerome, *Against Helvidius*; *St. Augustin*, Schaff & Wace, p. 344; Surprisingly this is an element largely lacking in Aldhelm. His fears of pride and independence are not ostensibly constructed around female sexuality, although throughout *De Virginitate* he disparages any sexual relationship. However his virgin martyrs are inextricably implicated into female sexuality through their inherent sexual attraction. See further discussion in Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>162</sup> They were not always successful in avoiding these charges. Jerome in particular had to defend himself from such charges in his condemnation of marriage.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. Matthew 19:6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.; Mark 10:7-9 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' So they are no longer two but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 7:4-5 The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.; Augustine warns would-be celibates, 'Therefore a loving partner in marriage should beware that in pursuit of greater personal merit he is not the cause of the damnation of his spouse.' See *Augustine*, Walsh, p. 15. It is interesting here, given the general stress on female celibacy, that Augustine assumes the husband is the most likely partner to opt for celibacy, leaving the wife in danger of adultery.

social, political and economic advantages sought by the wider family.<sup>165</sup> Indeed, where they did not have to convince the daughter of eschewing sexual desire, the secular plans of the parents might pose more of a challenge. Marriage, particularly among the upper classes, could be a means of securing financial or political support. Jerome and Ambrose, in particular, were aware of the familial and social pressures on young girls to marry, and they both encouraged such girls to defy parents if necessary in order to undertake vows of virginity.<sup>166</sup> Ambrose admitted that he had known many virgins prevented from undertaking vows of virginity by their parents.<sup>167</sup> He presented the situation of parents desiring marriage and offspring explicitly as a business proposal, commenting that they would have to buy a son with their daughter's dowry.<sup>168</sup> Legally, daughters were under the authority of fathers/guardians, and Ambrose's treatise in part answered those who charged him with interfering in family and property affairs.<sup>169</sup> This was not a difficulty for Aldhelm, as the 'virgins' he addressed were widows or divorcees rather than young, marriageable women. Yet his awareness that some had divorced on account of their religious sensibilities, despite the Scriptural requirement to remain

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<sup>165</sup> They rarely refer to other reasons a woman in late antiquity might choose to marry, for example, to leave an unhappy situation, to run a household, companionship, security, to achieve greater status, for family advancement. Augustine, who had been in a long-term relationship, acknowledges the friendship that could be enjoyed between couples, but did not present this as the primary reason a woman might opt for marriage. See *De Bono Coniugali* 1; Cf. 1 Corinthians 7:2 But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.

<sup>166</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.24.3; Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 1.10.58.

<sup>167</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 1.10.58; B. Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London : Routledge, 1997); Jerome likewise hints at family opposition to Asella's choice of virginity. When commenting on Asella's suitably drab clothes he notes, 'She thus showed to her relatives that they need hope to wring no farther concessions from one who, by her very dress, condemned the world.' *Ep.* 24; *St. Augustin*, Schaff & Wace, p. 43.

<sup>168</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 1.7.33; Cf. *De Virginibus*. 1.11.64; The social situation created by wealthy virgins, in particular, was problematic in an age where infant and child mortality was such that one could not take the existence of heirs for granted, thus a child dedicated to virginity increased the chances of the family line running out.

<sup>169</sup> McLynn, *Ambrose*, pp. 63-64.

married, created a conflict within the text, as he cannot praise this behaviour, yet needs to flatter his audience.<sup>170</sup>

One method of dissuasion from marriage was to describe the hardships it entailed. For example, Jerome summarised marriage as pregnancy, crying children, the unfaithful husband, household cares, and finally death.<sup>171</sup> Ambrose explicitly linked matrimony and slavery for women, describing marriage as ‘women’s heavy service and the slavery that binds them to their husbands, since God commanded them to serve before he did slaves’.<sup>172</sup> Part of this slavery was the need to look attractive for one’s husband, and Ambrose followed Cyprian in condemning the craft of female adornment.<sup>173</sup> However, Cyprian represented make-up and hair colour as artifice, a falsity against natural creation introduced by apostate angels.<sup>174</sup> Ambrose restricted his condemnation to the theme of slavery, for example, he described a wife’s jewellery,

Observe the ears torn with wounds and pity the neck weighed down with burdens. The differences among the metals do not lighten the pain. In one case a chain binds the neck, in another it is fetters that confine the

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<sup>170</sup> See discussion in Chapter 3. Aldhelm certainly denigrates marriage through his comparative section in *Prosa IX*.

<sup>171</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.1.2; *The Letters of St. Jerome*, Mierow, p. 135; In *De Virginibus*, Ambrose similarly wrote, (1.6.25) ‘With marriage comes lamentation. How many are the desires that are wept over’; *St. Ambrose, De Romestin, De Romestin and Duckworth*, p. 80.

<sup>172</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 1.6.27; St. Ambrose, *De Romestin, De Romestin & Duckworth*, p. 80; Cf. Genesis 3:16 To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.’; 1 Timothy 6:1 All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God’s name and our teaching may not be slandered.; Again this is a theme that Aldhelm takes up, the link between ornamentation, jewellery and slavery. See further discussion in Chapter 3.

<sup>173</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum*; Aldhelm follows Ambrose in this representation of jewellery, *Prosa de Virginitate* LVII.

<sup>174</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 14; *Treatises of Cyprian*, Roberts & Donaldson, p. 434; The implication is that the make-up and adornment of women are parallel with some magical or arcane ability.



foot. It makes no difference whether a body be burdened by gold or by iron.<sup>175</sup>

For Ambrose, jewellery signified the subjugation of female freedom within marriage through the pressure to appear pleasing. Thus he equated the role of the wife with the slave, the most restricted and abased status, a thought echoed in Aldhelm. Aldhelm similarly links marriage and slavery, but as noted, he is writing to women who were likely widows or divorcees. His comments were intended to remind women that marriage was part of the secular world they had left behind, rather than warn young virgins away from the temptation to marry.<sup>176</sup>

In some tracts, marriage itself was represented as demeaning for the Christian.<sup>177</sup> Jerome warned that for those liable to be incontinent, it was better to walk on the level, submitting to marriage, then strive for virginity and end up damned to Hell.<sup>178</sup> Thus he considers marriage as denigrating for a woman, requiring submission on her part, which echoes the idea of wifely servitude seen in Ambrose. The mundanity marriage embodies is evident in the woman only being able to walk 'on the level', and unable to strive after the heights of sanctity. Furthermore, Jerome describes marriage, 'Let him marry and be given in marriage who eats his bread in the sweat of his face, for whom the earth brings forth thorns and thistles, whose crops are choked with brambles.'<sup>179</sup> His understanding is informed by conflating three biblical accounts: the exile from Eden (Genesis 3:17-19); the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-8, 19-23, Cf. Mark 4:3-8,14-20, Luke 8:5-8,11-

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<sup>175</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 1.9.55; St. Ambrose, *De Romestin*, De Romestin & Duckworth, pp. 88-89.

<sup>176</sup> See Chapter 1. This does raise issues around the pressures and expectations on women to re-marry. Cf. Aethelthryth.

<sup>177</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.21.1-2. For example, Jerome warned Eustochium against consorting with rich married women, in case she be tempted to renounce her asceticism.

<sup>178</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.19.1; *The Letters of Saint Jerome*, Mierow p. 150; Cf. *Ep.* 22.21.9; *Ep.* 22.6.3.

<sup>179</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.19.2; *The Letters of Saint Jerome*, Mierow p. 150.

15); and Jesus' comment on the apathy in Noah's day (Matthew 24:38).<sup>180</sup> These all create negative connotations. Jerome associates marriage primarily to the punishment of Adam and Eve, which resulted in their exile from paradise and humankind's depraved state. Additionally, he links it to the failure of allowing daily worries to crowd out spirituality, thus to spiritual apathy and a desire for the world rather than God.<sup>181</sup> Finally he connects marriage with the punishment of mankind by Flood. There is no positive element to this construction, rather Jerome correlates marriage and alienation from God.

Augustine was more balanced in his representation of marriage, though he still portrayed virginity as the best way of life. He argued that marriage and procreation had been necessary to increase the human race in the pre-Christian era, but by his time, as Christians could be found in every race, those who can, should embrace virginity.<sup>182</sup> Nevertheless, Augustine did not denigrate marriage in the manner of Jerome or Ambrose. Instead he emphasised the angelic nature of the virginal life, succinctly summarising the difference between the two views, 'As if it were better not to marry solely to be released from today's hardships, and not because there will be some advantage for the age to come.'<sup>183</sup> Augustine even wrote positively about the sexual relationship between husband and wife, almost unheard of in the writings of the Church

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<sup>180</sup> Genesis 3:18-19 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.; Matthew 13:22 The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.; Matthew 24:38-9a For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away.

<sup>181</sup> Cf 1 Corinthians 7:34.

<sup>182</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 9; Augustine, Walsh, p. 75.

<sup>183</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 12-13; Augustine, Walsh, p. 79; Cf. Revelation 14: 1, 3-4b Then I looked, and, there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song but the 144,000 who had been

Fathers.<sup>184</sup> He argued that sexual desire in marriage, whilst a defect in humankind, enabled the begetting of children.<sup>185</sup> Augustine's more positive representation of marriage arose from his understanding of the *sacramentum*, which differentiated Christian from pagan marriage.<sup>186</sup> For Augustine, the *sacramentum* was evidence of God's blessing on marriage. Thus, though virginity was an elevated state, that elevation could not be used to denigrate marriage.<sup>187</sup>

Augustine also differed from the other writers here considered in his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:34, 'An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband.' From Paul onward, marriage was presented as distracting for the Christian wife. It prevented her dwelling constantly on spiritual matters, as she had to keep in mind the needs of her husband. Augustine, however, argued that it indicated even

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redeemed from the earth. These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure [lit. for they are virgins - *parthenoi gar eisin*].

<sup>184</sup> This is not to say Augustine did not warn virgins against lust, rather he warned that they must overcome feelings of lust if they had vowed themselves to virginity, though he again links lust and pride – these virgins are too proud to lose their privileged status thus will not marry, though they desire to. Hence whether they devote themselves to pleasure... or to labours and fasting, they receive no divine reward. *De Sancta Virginitate* 34; *Augustine*, Walsh, pp. 110-113.

<sup>185</sup> Augustine, *De Bono Coniugali* 3; *Augustine*, Walsh, p. 7; Cf. *De Bono Coniugali* 23, where Augustine explains the need for purification after sexual intercourse in terms of the potential for procreation rather than as evidence that sexual intercourse was sinful. Importantly, he equally condemned husband and wives who abused the sexual relationship, husbands who exploited their wives sexually, wives who were too licentious in their marriage. Thus he acknowledged both sexes could fall prey to concupiscence – see *De Bono Coniugali* 1-12.

<sup>186</sup> Augustine, *De Bono Coniugali* 7. He states, 'My belief is that the bond [of marriage] would certainly not have been so strong had not some sacred symbol of something more profound than this feeble mortality of ours become attached to it'; *Augustine*, Walsh, p. 17.

<sup>187</sup> Similarly, Clement of Alexandria argued that whilst virginity was important, it was not vital for the pious Christian, also that sexual relations were acceptable in marriage for procreation, but should cease once procreation was no longer possible. See discussion in Brown, *Body and Society*, p. 181.

married women had the opportunity to think on spiritual matters, whereas there was a danger that a virgin could, through love of luxury, not think on the Lord at all.<sup>188</sup>

Aldhelm thus had a broad range of views on marriage on which to draw. Whilst he does not outrightly condemn marriage, he certainly denigrates it in comparison to chastity. As noted, his audience were likely to have experience marriage, hence would be aware of the positive and negative associated with the experience. But his audience of monastics had opted for the monastic life after marriage – whether that marriage had ended through divorce or death. The danger was on the attraction/pressure to remarry, consequently Aldhelm denigrates the experience and returns to the theme of slavery when discussing marriage.<sup>189</sup>

## **SPIRITUAL MARRIAGE AND EROTICISM**

After denigrating physical marriage, the Church Fathers offered the virgin a spiritual marriage in place of physical. Paul had described the relationship between Christ and the Church as analogous to that of a loving husband to a wife.<sup>190</sup> Through this construction of spiritual marriage Church authorities could imply that virgins did not miss out on what was portrayed as ‘normal’ life; they did not marry in the flesh, but they could marry in

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<sup>188</sup> Augustine, *De Bono Coniugali* 13; Aldhelm’s difficulty was in acknowledging the previous marital station of his audience, rather than warning them against marrying again, so this is a theme he rather glosses over.

<sup>189</sup> *Prosa IX*; See discussion in Chapter 3.

<sup>190</sup> Ephesians 5:23-33, especially v. 25, Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. This was drawing on the Jewish tradition of likening God to a husband of Israel.; Cf. Isaiah 54:5, Jeremiah 31:32.

the spirit, and enjoy the perfect bridegroom in Christ.<sup>191</sup> Consequently, their spiritual marriage was better, as it lacked the misery associated with physical marriage. This interpretation of the relationship between the virgin and Christ also emphasised the seriousness of the vow of sanctity; to be a consecrated virgin was not to be considered an occupation to engage a young lady until she found a (physical) husband, but, like Christian marriage, it was a sacrosanct covenant lasting for life.<sup>192</sup> Ambrose offered the example of Agnes, emphasising her age, as she was reputedly 12 when she died.<sup>193</sup> He compared Agnes facing her torturers with a bride proceeding to her wedding, and reminded his readers that she chose a heavenly bridegroom, and joyfully went to her death in order to be united with him.<sup>194</sup>

Despite the vilification of physical sexuality, these writers constructed the marital relationship between the virgin and Christ through erotic language. Such eroticism was appropriated from the Old Testament Song of Songs, for example 'My lover is to me a satchet of myrrh resting between my breasts.'<sup>195</sup> Jerome, in particular, constructs the spiritual experience of Christ erotically, 'when sleep comes upon you, He will come behind the wall and He will put his hand through the opening and will touch your body.

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<sup>191</sup> Cf. Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 1.11.63; *St. Ambrose, De Romestin, De Romestin & Duckworth*, p. 90, 'you have a wealthy bridegroom and, content with the riches of his ancestral inheritance, you shall not want for gain.'

<sup>192</sup> Cf. Matthew 19:6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate; Cf. Mark 10:6-9.

<sup>193</sup> Agnes was, however, of an age to marry, see K. Hopkins, 'The age of Roman Girls at Marriage', *Population Studies*, 18 (1965), 309-327; Brent D. Shaw, 'The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage : Some Reconsiderations', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 77 (1987), 30-46; Cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 24; Asella was 12 when she dedicated herself to sanctified virginity.

<sup>194</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 1.2.8-9; Aldhelm relates the *vita* of Agnes in his hagiographical section, see further discussion in Chapter 3.

<sup>195</sup> Song of Songs 1:13; Ambrose also drew on the Song of Songs, but did not use the eroticism, rather he stressed the love between bride and groom, romanticising the marriage.

You will arise trembling, and will say: I languish with love'.<sup>196</sup> Whilst this eroticism remained a minor aspect of writings on virginity through late antiquity and into the early medieval period, it grew in importance in the later middle ages. Aldhelm largely ignores it as a feature of the spirituality, though his descriptions are in general highly sensual.

## THE HIERARCHY OF SANCTITY

The Church Fathers created a hierarchy of sanctity, drawing on Christ's parable of the sower and the seed – the scattered seed fell in different places, some grew and flourished, some briefly sprouted and died, some failed to germinate. Christ explained that the germination of the seed is the response of the 'good news' in the heart. Some are receptive, others, for various reasons, are not.<sup>197</sup> He concluded, 'Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.'<sup>198</sup> Jesus did not explain exactly what the crop represented, but the early Christian writers used the motif to construct a hierarchy of sanctity within the congregation. Yet, they did not all use it in the same way and the emphasis changed over time. Broadly, while Christians were persecuted, the highest reward was given to martyrs, but as persecution disappeared, it was allotted to virgins,

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<sup>196</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.25.1; *The Letters of St. Jerome*, Mierow, p158; Cf. Song of Songs 1:2-4 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth – for your love is more delightful than wine. Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the maidens love you! Take me away with you – let us hurry! Let the king bring me into his chambers.; 5:4-5 My lover thrust his hand through the latch-opening; my heart began to pound for him. I arose to open for my lover, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh, on the handles of the lock.; 7:10-13 I belong to my lover, let us go to the countryside, let us spend the night in the villages. Let us go early to the vineyards to see if the vines are budded, if their blossoms have opened, and if the pomegranates are in bloom – there I will give you my love. The mandrakes send out their fragrance, and at our door is every delicacy, both new and old, that I have stored up for you my lover.

<sup>197</sup> Mark 4:3-20; Luke 4-15; Matthew 13:3-23.

<sup>198</sup> Mark 4:20.

those who had metaphorically martyred themselves for the faith. Hence, initially the hundredfold reward was bestowed on the martyrs, the sixtyfold to virgins and the thirty to widows; later, the hundredfold went to virgins, the sixtyfold to widows and the thirty the rest of the congregation.<sup>199</sup> Ambrose allocated the hundredfold reward to virgins, therefore the sixty to widows and the thirty to those married with a well-regulated conjugal relationship.<sup>200</sup>

In Augustine, this hierarchical arrangement is more understated; whilst he differentiates between non-virgins and virgins, he does not stratify between those in chaste relationships and those in normal marriages, regarding their heavenly reward. He describes them all as ‘the rest of the faithful, who have lost their virginity’, and refers to them in relation to the virgins who make up the 144,000 of Revelation, ‘They will not be able to sing that new song which belongs to you alone, but they will be able to hear it and to take delight in that good of yours which is so surpassing.’<sup>201</sup> As a result, Augustine offers a more positive depiction of marriage, which was, after all, the reality for the majority of Christians.

Aldhelm, on the other hand, does not follow any of the Church Fathers in his interpretation of this hierarchy. He innovates in describing the levels of sanctity available within the Church. Aldhelm ranks virgins, widows, and those who have left

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<sup>199</sup> Methodius and Basil of Ancyra considered vowed virginity comparable with martyrdom. See discussion in S. J. Musurillo, ‘The Problem of Ascetical Fasting in the Greek Patristic Writers’, *Traditio*, 12 (1956), 1-64, especially p. 58.

<sup>200</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 1.11.60. He describes those who have travelled from Bononia to become sanctified virgins, ‘...Not being of the sex which lives in common, attaining in their common chastity to the number of twenty, and *fruit to an hundredfold*, leaving their parents dwelling they press into the houses of Christ, as soldier of unwearied chastity’. (italics mine); In his *Ep.* 22.15.2, Jerome described Blesilla, who opted for celibacy after being widowed, as keeping the ‘second degree of chastity’, and comments, ‘While it is harder for her to do without the pleasure she has experienced, she receives less credit for continence.’; See *Augustine*, Walsh, p. 147.

<sup>201</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 28-29; *Augustine*, Walsh, pp. 103-5; Revelation 14:1-5.

their marriages for the sake of their faith. Strictly speaking, dissolving the sacrament of marriage to become a monastic should be condemned as it directly contravenes the Bible, yet Aldhelm is aware he lacks the authority to censure such divorces.<sup>202</sup>

## THE UNAPPROACHABLE VIRGIN

Virginity was constructed through stereotypes, which were used to contain female behaviour, by creating the 'ideal' by which all women, virgins or not, could be judged. Through stereotypes, the patristic authors ensured that whatever the theoretical conception of virginity vis-à-vis gender, or the potential it appeared to offer for surmounting gender, the virgins were firmly gendered as female.

Ambrose constructed a virginity heavily reliant on Christ and the Virgin Mary as examples, and also, allegorically, the Church, as *Ecclesia*. Yet these are impossible role models for the virgin to emulate, for example Ambrose described the Church, 'unsullied by intercourse, fruitful in bearing, a virgin in chastity and a mother in offspring'. Despite opening up the discourse to queering through these multiple images, Ambrose appropriates the imagery of femininity, applies it to the Church, and presents it back to women in a manner that distances them from their own experiences as women, as they cannot encompass all of these qualities.<sup>203</sup> Similarly, Aldhelm uses nurturing and maternal imagery and applies it, not just to *Ecclesia*, but also the masculine ecclesiastical

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<sup>202</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>203</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 1.6.31; *St. Ambrose, De Romestin, De Romestin & Duckworth*, p. 82.



hierarchy. Consequently, he distances the maternal imagery from the women he addresses.<sup>204</sup>

The Church Fathers depict Christ as a virgin, the bridegroom of the virgin, and virginity itself. He is also the virgin who bore the Christian congregation and nursed it with his milk. The fluidity of gender imagery and the appropriation of feminine symbols occurred from late antiquity into the medieval period. Caroline Walker Bynum has discussed such imagery in the light of ancient beliefs about female physiology, for example, a mother's milk was thought to be refined from her blood, therefore Christ's blood spilt at the Crucifixion, and consumed in the Eucharist, nurtured the Christian as a mother's milk did her child.<sup>205</sup> This mix of purity and fecundity in Christ was impossible for the consecrated virgin to emulate in any real sense, as Sarah Salih comments, 'The choice of the virgin life necessarily requires a rejection of childbearing and lactation', distancing her from such imagery.<sup>206</sup>

The other major exemplum for virgins was the Virgin Mary, although in these texts she is not especially prominent.<sup>207</sup> Augustine presented her through her roles of mother and virgin, though he acknowledged that no virgin could live up to both these roles, as Mary had the unique role of bringing forth the Christ.<sup>208</sup> Jerome emphasised

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<sup>204</sup> See further discussion in Chapter 3.

<sup>205</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York : Zone Books, 1991), pp. 100-101.

<sup>206</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, p. 6; See also discussion on Aldhelm's appropriation of female imagery in his conception of virginity in Chapter 3.

<sup>207</sup> P. G. Walsh discusses the probable influence of Ambrose on Augustine's depiction of the Virgin Mary, though in considering these few texts, there is little apparent crossover. See his comments in *Augustine*, pp. xvi-xvii. As Mary is not prominent in Aldhelm's texts either, though he includes an abbreviated *vita* in the *Carmen*. I am not going to discuss the development of Marian doctrine in great detail. See rather M. Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York : Vintage Books, 1976); M Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>208</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 2, 5.

gender in his depiction; he wrote that whilst continence was once a male virtue, with the benefits flowing from the Virgin Mary, 'a richer gift of virginity has flowed upon women because it began with a woman'.<sup>209</sup> Ambrose used Mary as a template for the behaviour of the female virgin, even if she could not emulate the virginal fecundity and perfection of Mary. He provided a list of qualities exemplified by the Virgin Mary: she spoke only when necessary, did not make abrupt gestures, did not walk with a slack gait, she was sparing in her use of food, industrious, restricted her sleep, only the left the house to go to church, and then never alone, and never offended or argued with her family.<sup>210</sup> All of these qualities could be performed by a consecrated virgin, thereby creating her as 'virgin', but also would serve to constrain her behaviour. The virgin was to be in constant control of every aspect of her behaviour, as loss of control, at any level, threatened the integrity of mind and body, and as previously noted, this is an especial fear for Jerome. The Fathers constructed virginity around a personal requirement for containment that would be reflected in society; hence they stressed the need for virgins to remain under the authority of the Church.<sup>211</sup> This alarm is most evident in Ambrose's conception of virginal speech and silence. The stereotypical depiction of a woman was garrulous and gossipy, thus her speech was a failing, and in a virgin such speech should be contained. This also echoes the concept of the closed mouth signifying the closed body.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Jerome, *Ep 22.21.7*; Jerome, Schaff & Wace, p. 154.

<sup>210</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus 2.2.7-8*; The reference to not arguing with the family implies that some virgins, in Milan at least, were more independent in spirit than their families preferred.

<sup>211</sup> This is also Aldhelm's overarching theme, though he is of necessity, less direct in his warnings against independence.

<sup>212</sup> Brown, *Body and Society*, pp. 259-84, 341-65.

Virginia Burrus notes this rhetoric was used to ‘define and enforce the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour and belief’.<sup>213</sup> Again, a virgin who did not perform her role in silence risked being branded unchaste or heretical. Denying women a voice in the church, through texts (overwhelmingly written by men), socially and politically, merged into the image of the closed mouth and closed body. This rhetoric therefore enabled these men to condemn that behaviour which they constructed as un-virginal, or worldly. It was a powerful social religious control, as is demonstrated by the increased enclosure of celibate women from late antiquity into the medieval period.<sup>214</sup> Aldhelm’s addressees were not cloistered in the manner that we expect of the medieval nun. Nevertheless, Aldhelm stresses the need for a coenobitic sanctity, and warns against independence and autonomy. He rarely gives women a voice, even in the *vita* he relates, likely because these women did have a voice, especially in the political sphere.<sup>215</sup>

## SUBVERSION AND VIRGINITY

Cyprian appeared to have a positive attitude toward the status of sanctified virgins within society and the Church. He reminded them that as virgins they were not subject to a husband, but ‘your Lord and Head is Christ, after the likeness and in the place of the man; *with that of men* your lot and your condition is equal’.<sup>216</sup> A little later he expands

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<sup>213</sup> Virginia Burrus, ‘The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Jerome’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 84 (1991), 229-48, quotation at p. 246.

<sup>214</sup> Burrus, ‘The Heretical Woman’, pp. 29-48.

<sup>215</sup> See discussion in Chapter 5. Similarly, Bede silences women such as Hild. This is particularly evident in his account of the Synod of Whitby (*Historia Ecclesiastica* III.25); In contrast, Aelfric’s virgin martyrs are more vocal. Aelfric wrote during the Benedictine Revival, when women had less power in the Church.

<sup>216</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 22; *Treatises of Cyprian*, Roberts & Donaldson, p. 436. Italics mine.

on this, calling them equal to the angels of God.<sup>217</sup> Nonetheless, Cyprian was writing over a century earlier than the other Fathers considered here. He wrote in a time of persecution, and before Christianity had become an acceptable religion among the wider Roman populace, so his exhortation to virgins is intended to encourage them to ‘fight the good fight of the faith.’<sup>218</sup>

Gillian Cloke notes that, although the Church Fathers encouraged women to reject the social obligations of marriage, by the fourth and fifth centuries they were trying to consign consecrated virgins to an acceptable place within the Church hierarchy.<sup>219</sup> Anne Yarborough examined the situation of many Christian women, particularly in Rome, and noted that Jerome and Ammianus Marcellinus described a society ‘of idle and wealthy women living in a ghetto peopled by children, servants and sycophants. The frustrated productivity of these aristocratic women sought outlets in what [Keith Hopkins] described as the “competitive salon culture”’.<sup>220</sup> In vying for positions of prestige within this ‘ghetto’, they manipulated the ideology and respect granted to virgins for their own ends. These ‘false’ virgins, and dangerously autonomous widows created a fear that their independence threatened not only the Church, but also society, hence Augustine stated that obedience is more important than celibacy, ‘for whereas marriage is nowhere condemned on the authority of our scriptures, disobedience

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<sup>217</sup> Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 22; *Treatises of Cyprian*, Roberts & Donaldson, p. 436; Such a positive view of women was not supported throughout all his writings, rather it was a specific comment in praise of the consecrated virgin.

<sup>218</sup> 1 Timothy 6:12.

<sup>219</sup> Gillian Cloke, ‘*This Female man of God*’ – *Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450* (London & New York : Routledge, 1995), p. 26; Or as Sarah Salih, in *Versions of Virginity*, p. 24, succinctly comments, ‘At this point in the argument, the fathers begin to stuff cats back into their bags, with a visible struggle’.

<sup>220</sup> Anne Yarborough, ‘Christianization in the Fourth Century: The Example of Roman Women’, *Church History*, 45 (1976), 149-165, quotation at p. 153.

is nowhere condoned'.<sup>221</sup> Nevertheless, from repeated warnings against the autonomy of virgins in patristic writings, it is evident that some used their standing as consecrated virgins to gain a status unavailable to married women. Jerome, for example, condemned idle and inquisitive virgins and widows who visited the houses of married women.<sup>222</sup> These women ignored the directive to remain contained within the house, and manipulated the status of virginity to enjoy freedoms unacceptable to the Church authorities. Hence the Fathers delineated a 'false' virgin, who exemplified the inappropriate behaviour for a virgin. Augustine describes such false virgins as 'garrulous, inquisitive, drunken, argumentative, greedy and arrogant.'<sup>223</sup> Interestingly he does not condemn these virgins for sexual misdemeanours, rather his censure relates to abuses of their status as consecrated virgins. Thus, it seems at least some virgins used the parodical performance of virginity for their own ends, subverting male direction of their role and position.

Yet, we can see from the descriptions of real women in some of the texts the extent to which women negotiated the construction of the ideal virgin. This was particularly evident in Jerome's writing, as he became close to several women. Jerome praised a young virgin called Asella, and presents her as an example for others, but his description of her life demonstrates the tension between ideal and reality, for example, the literary Asella rarely ventured outside and always moved at a moderate pace, whereas the real Asella left the house in a hurry as she hastened to the shrines of martyrs.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Augustine, *De Bono Coniugali* 29; Augustine, Walsh, p. 53; This is an important theme for Aldhelm, writing to women who were from important families and used to authority and independence.

<sup>222</sup> Jerome, *Ep. 22.29.4-5*; *The Letters of St. Jerome*, Mierow, p. 164.

<sup>223</sup> Augustine, *De Bono Coniugali* 30; Augustine, Walsh, p. 55.

<sup>224</sup> Though admittedly without being noticed. See Jerome, *Ep. 24.1*; *Ep. 24.4-5*.

Jerome also highlights the conflict between different conceptions of sanctity, hence, Asella remains a figure of absence, remaining within the house, but also is driven by piety to publicly display her religious enthusiasm. Jerome is forced to acknowledge this more dynamic profession of sanctity.

This dichotomy is even more pronounced when Jerome wrote about Paula. His eulogy for Paula is one of his longest letters, indicating his depth of feeling for her as a friend and fellow worker in Christ.<sup>225</sup> Jerome obviously considered Paula an exemplary celibate and pious woman, yet it is clear from his description of her behaviour that she exploited the opportunities available to her through celibacy.<sup>226</sup> Jerome constructed the literary 'ideal' Paula through the usual themes of sanctified celibacy: Paula underwent terrible deprivation, remained humble and cheerful, displayed lavish charity, sought solitude, cried frequently, spoke rarely and studied deeply.<sup>227</sup> Yet Jerome's writings also demonstrate the reality of Paula's circumstances. For example, he acknowledged that Paula's family background necessitated her marriage, yet he does not make the belittling comments about her position as widow vis-à-vis virginity that he does when describing her widowed daughter Blesilla.<sup>228</sup> Instead Jerome wrote, 'Thus nobly born, Paula through her fruitfulness and her chastity won approval all, from her husband first, then from her relatives, and lastly from the whole city'.<sup>229</sup> Paula bore five children, the last a boy, 'You can thus see that it was not her wish to fulfil a wife's duty, but that she only

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<sup>225</sup> The eulogy was addressed to Eustochium, Paula's daughter.

<sup>226</sup> Paula is an excellent example of what Salih calls 'the reclamation of virginity', using her vowed chastity, and paradoxical performance of virginity to access the status of the consecrated virgin. Jerome certainly portrays her as if she were a virgin. See Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, pp. 166-241.

<sup>227</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.1, 3, 5, 15, 17.

<sup>228</sup> Cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 22.15.2.

<sup>229</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.4; *Jerome*, Schaff & Wace, pp. 196-7.

complied with her husband's longing to have male offspring'.<sup>230</sup> Jerome therefore replaced 'lust' with 'duty', and highlighted, not Paula's position as a sexual woman, or mother, but her obedience to her husband.<sup>231</sup>

Jerome also related an account of Paula's visit to a community of monks in Egypt that is so removed from the behaviour of his representation of an ideal virgin, one wonders how Jerome could use it to praise Paula,

Was there any cell that she did not enter? Or any man at whose feet she did not throw herself? ... Forgetful of her sex and of her weakness she even desired to make her abode, together with the girls who accompanied her, among these thousands of monks. And, as they were all willing to welcome her, she might perhaps have sought and obtained permission to do so; had she not been drawn away by a still greater passion for the holy places.<sup>232</sup>

Any conception of female enclosure and segregation is absent, as is any fear of female sexuality.<sup>233</sup> And it must be remembered that despite the piety and sanctity in Jerome's description, Paula is not a virgin, but rather celibate. Consequently though Jerome attempts to deploy the paradigm of ideal virginity in his portrayal of Paula, his account instead highlights the discrepancies of Paula's performance, and through parody, the queer nature of the virginal status. She subverts the ideal to her own ends, and despite Jerome's attempts to manipulate his presentation in certain sections, for example his

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<sup>230</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.4; *Jerome*, Schaff & Wace, p. 197.

<sup>231</sup> Cf. Ephesians 5:22 Wives, submit to your husbands, as to the Lord.

<sup>232</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.14; *Jerome*, Schaff & Wace, p. 202.

<sup>233</sup> And, by reason of association, the sexuality of the girls accompanying Paula.

reinterpretation of her marriage and role as a mother, he clearly accepts her actions as fitting for such a eulogy.<sup>234</sup>

Whilst the Fathers argued that virginity was a precious gift, which once lost, was lost forever, women like Paula and Melania the Younger conceived of chastity as a reclamation of virginity, enabling them to regain the status and freedom of the sanctified virgin, and they possessed the wealth to ensure respect and autonomy.<sup>235</sup> They subverted the ideal for their own ends, with the collusion of the Fathers who knew them personally and therefore saw them as individuals rather than as the generic 'women' or 'virgin'. Nevertheless, despite allowing exceptions for individual women, the Fathers were clearly uncomfortable with the possibility that such autonomy could be available to all virgins or celibate women. Jerome warned Eustochium against women who preferred the liberty of widowhood, who, in his opinion, were merely pretending to a life of religious continence; their freedom as widows should come second to their roles as respectable widows, but for Jerome they had inverted that balance.<sup>236</sup> Aldhelm's intended audience of powerful and independent nuns seemingly required great counsel on obeying the church authorities, and it is interesting to see how he balanced his exhortations to

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<sup>234</sup> Melania the Younger was a contemporary of Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine. She persuaded her husband to accept a chaste marriage, and took control of their lives as ascetics. In her *vita*, reputedly written by a priest in a community that she set up and to whom she acted as a spiritual mentor, her religious life is described: she chose her activities and what books she wished to study. Her *vita* makes clear that Melania was no less dedicated in her devotion to God than the ideal virgin, but *she* chose how to develop and perform that devotion. Joyce Salisbury quotes from the *vita*, 'She lived as she pleased.' See Salisbury, *Church Fathers*, p. 92.

<sup>235</sup> Salisbury, *Church Fathers*, p. 119; Cf. Egeria, a nun, possibly from Spain, who exploited the opportunities available through chastity. She undertook a three-year pilgrimage in the 380s, travelling around the Holy Land. Hers is one of the few women's voices from late antiquity, as she left an account of her travels. Her pilgrimage appears to be largely a sightseeing tour of Biblical and Christian locations, and it is evident she travelled in some luxury. She describes the ascetics she met, but did not feel obliged to adopt their way of life. See discussion in H. Sivan, 'Who was Egeria? Piety and Pilgrimage in the Age of Gratian', *Harvard Theological Review*, 81 (1988), 59-72, especially pp. 67-70; E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire A. D. 312-460* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1982).

<sup>236</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.16.3; *The Letters of St. Jerome*, Mierow, p. 148; Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:33.



obedience, drawn from texts such as the ones here discussed, with an awareness that in reality he had little control over their behaviour.

## MISOGYNY AND RHETORIC

Much of the apparent misogyny in the Fathers can be ascribed to rhetoric. Graham Gould considers the function of rhetoric to be ‘persuasion and communication, not precise argument and definition’.<sup>237</sup> Jerome, for example, in his letter to Eustochium, described virginity as ‘natural’ when compared with marriage because marriage did not occur until after the Fall.<sup>238</sup> Yet, in the same text he described it as ‘against nature’, trying to explain why it is not compulsory – the nature of man impels him to marry, thus to remain a virgin is a superhuman action which requires ‘of mankind the life of angels’.<sup>239</sup> Hence his construction of virginity is dependent on the argument he wishes to formulate. Nevertheless Gould’s analysis is a little simplistic, for through the power of rhetoric to persuade, an audience can be encouraged to accept the arguments and definitions employed. Hence the patristic writers manipulate their arguments to suit their ends, as we see in Jerome’s depiction of Paula, and his construction of virginity as presented to Eustochium.

Thus, this review has revealed that where the Church Fathers wrote about virginity they could conceive of it as enabling women to conquer gender, as the opening

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<sup>237</sup> Gould, ‘Women in the Writings of the Fathers’, p. 5; Rhetoric was a vital aspect of the education system of late antiquity. It was the art of speaking or writing in such a way as to persuade your audience. The style was as important as the content in constructing an argument.

<sup>238</sup> Jerome, *Ep. 22.19.4*; *The Letters of St. Jerome*, Mierow, p. 151.

<sup>239</sup> Jerome, *Ep. 22.20.3*; *The Letters of St. Jerome*, Mierow, p. 152.

quotation from Jerome demonstrates, 'Observe what the happiness of that state must be in which event the distinction of sex is lost. The virgin is no longer called a woman.'<sup>240</sup> Yet this conception was in tension with their negative understanding of female nature and female sexuality. The early Christian writers constructed virginity through the prism of misogyny. Death came to humankind through the woman Eve, and despite the positive representation of the Virgin Mary, women could not overcome the link with Eve, nor the perceived disability of their female nature. Hence the construction of an ideal virgin attempted to contain virginity within a tightly controlled performance of enclosure and passivity.

Virginia Burrus has explored the way the Fathers constructed femininity through the opposing paradigms of the virgin and harlot/Mary and Eve/Mary the Mother of God and Mary Magdalene, frequently presented as a prostitute. They then used these paradigms to support traditional social and religious roles. Burrus argues that the 'obedient and retiring virgin represents a church that is properly ordered according to the traditional model of the separation and subordination of the private sphere to the public sphere and of women to men', which was part of the process by which the Church became assimilated to the State and came to understand itself as a public institution.<sup>241</sup> Hence the construction of virginity was deployed to reinforce women's roles in society.

Still, it must be remembered that women in late antiquity and beyond, differed in social situation and standing, beliefs, ethnic background, life experience. Those who could actually read the treatises made up a tiny proportion of the Christian congregation. Though the information about women is restricted, there is evidence for women from the

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<sup>240</sup> Jerome, *Against Helvidius* 22, Jerome, Schaff & Wace, p. 344.

<sup>241</sup> Burrus, 'The Heretical Woman', p. 245.

lower classes, even slaves, embracing virginity.<sup>242</sup> Ultimately we cannot know the extent to which women internalised the patristic ideal of virginity as we lack their voices. And although Christianity absorbed many pagan ideas, especially about asceticism and virginity, literary evidence can skew our understanding of the motivations of many. Many monks and nuns were uneducated peasants, who did not read philosophical treatises, debates about virginity or the nature of the body or soul, nor did they leave a record explaining their motivations and inspirations. From the extant evidence of treatises, saints' lives, correspondence, secular sources and so forth, it seems the virgin described by the Church Fathers was an ideal shaped by scriptural precedent and Classical rhetoric. The women for whom we have evidence, with the caveat that they had the resources to enable independence, could manipulate the ideal to suit their circumstances and aspirations.

The rhetoric of the Fathers clearly demonstrates the downgrading of female independence and authority in the church that occurred in late antiquity. Ambrose, for example, offers the Virgin Mary and the saint Thecla as examples for female virgins. Mary, as has been discussed, is the perfect example, grave, silent and self-contained. Thecla is more interesting: she was converted to Christianity, and consecrated virginity, by overhearing Paul preaching. She spurned her fiancé, and was thrown into the arena, but the animals did not harm her. She baptised herself in a pool in the arena, cut off her hair and dressed as a man to follow Paul. Paul sent her to preach, but she decided to travel elsewhere, teaching and baptising.<sup>243</sup> Ambrose, though, elides her preaching or baptising work, but instead commented that even lions marvelled at her virginity and so

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<sup>242</sup> For example Perpetua was followed to martyrdom by her slave Felicitas; Cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 22.29.3.

<sup>243</sup> See also discussion of Thecla in Chapter 4.

did her no violence.<sup>244</sup> He ignored her teaching, and instead describes her as taught by Paul, thus he highlights that she was taught rather than her role as a teacher, signifying her passive role in religious education.<sup>245</sup> Ambrose's Thecla was constructed to fit the 'ideal' virgin of the fourth century, in which women were no longer needed to preach the Christian message.<sup>246</sup>

As Augustine argued, the obedience of women to the Church authorities was paramount.<sup>247</sup> This ideal was probably the most important aspect that Aldhelm carried on into *De Virginitate*. The virginal ideal, whilst it could offer a freedom from social responsibilities and an improved status within the community, also undermined freedoms enjoyed by women, a feature which was exacerbated by doctrinal and ecclesiastical developments in the Church. Celibacy for clergy was officially supported by the Church from the Council of Elvira (306), and Ambrose certainly encouraged it in Milan.<sup>248</sup> The rejection of marriage and sexuality became the distinguishing mark of the clergy and monastic. In the West, it became increasingly popular among the higher echelons of the Church from the fourth century. Henry Chadwick stated, 'The motive was mainly ascetic, but was in part connected with the greater authority which, in antiquity, attached to such renunciation.'<sup>249</sup> As celibacy became a requirement for the clergy, men's actual experience of women decreased, thus female nature and sexuality were increasingly demonised. The virgin/harlot dichotomy was increasingly used in Christian rhetoric, and

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<sup>244</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 2.3.19-21.

<sup>245</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 2.3.19-21; *St. Ambrose*, De Romestin, H., E De Romestin and H. T. F. Duckworth, p. 96.

<sup>246</sup> Nonetheless, his audience would have known the full story and could fill in the gaps.

<sup>247</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 42.

<sup>248</sup> *Augustine*, Walsh, p. xii. Nevertheless chastity did not become Church law for clerics and monastics until the second Lateran Council (1139).

<sup>249</sup> Chadwick, *Augustine*, p. 63; Such renunciation gave power to the female virgins, but did not allow them the authority of the male clergy.

the requirement for enclosure of nuns and women vowed to the Church became overwhelming. By the high middle ages, Thomas Aquinas combined the classical biological notions about men and women with patristic theological ideas, and described women in terms of sexuality, 'Her sexuality, identified with her essence as a woman, involves a weaker and more imperfect body and affects the intelligence upon which moral judgement is based; the inequality between men and women thus extends to the moral as well as physical and intellectual.'<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Quoted in E. C. McLaughlin, 'Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes : Women in Medieval Theology', in *Religion and Sexism : Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. by R. R. Ruther (New York : Simon & Schuster, 1974), pp. 213-66, quotation at p. 218.

## CHAPTER THREE

### VIRGINITY, GENDER AND SANCTITY

The previous chapters discussed the background to Aldhelm and his work, the context in which he lived and wrote, and the source material on which he drew. This chapter will consider Aldhelm's construction of virginity in and of itself in both the *Prosa* and *Carmen De Virginitate*. It will discuss the imagery and ideas he uses to present virginity as a quality, in contrast to the manner in which he portrays virgins in the hagiographical section of the text. For example, he utilises masculine military and athletic imagery, and also nature imagery, such as the bee. Aldhelm also takes the opportunity to offer extended comparisons between virginity, chastity and marriage, and this chapter will review these, and the manner in which Aldhelm denigrates marriage in the same way as many of his late antique sources. Finally the chapter will consider Aldhelm's linking of ostentatious dress and pride as dangers for the virgin.

In the opening section of the *Prosa*, Aldhelm initially appears to offer an open reading of virginity, using masculine and feminine imagery, in his presentation. But ultimately he depicts a gendered virginity intended to remind his female audience of its role under male authority within the Church. Indeed it will be argued that whilst Aldhelm innovates and alters the patristic ideal of virginity in order to flatter his Anglo-Saxon audience, he presents the same message of obedience as his late antique sources, as discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter will then address the configuration of gender and virginity in *De Virginitate*, by considering Aldhelm's opening discussion of virginity, in chapters II-XIX of the *Prosa* and lines 45-247 of the *Carmen*. It will be apparent that Aldhelm's theoretical depiction of virginity

differs radically from his hagiographical virginity, that is, the description of male and female virgins. This creates a tension within the text that he does not resolve, and which opens the way for a more subtle reading of virginity on the part of the reader.

## VIRGINITY

Virginity as a theoretical entity can be used to obscure gender identity, potentially approaching the ideal of a third gender, and echoing the Church Fathers' portrayal of virginity as angelic. Sarah Salih argues that virginity creates a sexual type, marked not by the absence of sexuality but a redirection of that sexuality toward God.<sup>1</sup> This enables a queer reading of virginity, one in which its non-normative sexuality is to the fore. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that queer signifies, 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's 'gender', anyone's sexuality aren't made (*or can't be made*) to signify monolithically'.<sup>2</sup> Virginity is not monolithic in its signification of desire or gender, it is queer, demonstrated by its multivalency. If the sexual desire of the virgin is directed to the divine, the individual is removed from heteronormativity, but at the same time, the heteronormative matrix, of which the orthodox Church is a supporting pillar attempts to re-insert the individual. This can be seen, for example, through the imagery of marriage in the texts on virginity, as has been discussed in the previous chapter. But to what extent is that redirection controlled through gender in Aldhelm? As has been demonstrated,

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2001); Salih suggests, p. 1, that 'there is more to virginity than sexual inexperience, and that virginity may be conceptualised as a gendered identity which can be constituted in culturally significant action.'

<sup>2</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London : Routledge, 1994), p.8.

there are still questions around gender expectations in the Anglo-Saxon period, as the paucity of evidence allows for widely differing readings.<sup>3</sup> Yet, Aldhelm's virginity is clearly indebted to his patristic models, even though he markedly diverges from their hierarchy of virginity and sanctity.

Through much of the introductory section in the *Prosa*, Aldhelm refers to his audience as 'virgins', although, as has been noted, very few of them were. Again this reminds us of the importance not only of performance, to act the virgin was to be the virgin, but also of the power of rhetoric - to write the virgin, was to create the virgin. Nevertheless, it raises questions as to the extent to which the women (and the wider audience of the mixed double monastery) were interpellated as virgins, or internalised the description.

Carol Braun Pasternak argues that texts negotiate the conflicts between new cultural and religious ideas, and can demonstrate the fluidity and conflictual nature of gender definition in a culture undergoing profound changes.<sup>4</sup> Aldhelm demonstrates this in his varying depictions of virginity through the theoretical virginity considered in this chapter, and the virginity of his saints. In the latter, he clearly reflects the Church Fathers, and the ideal virgin, passive and enclosed as he presents his female exempla. As will be discussed, whilst we may see aspects of non-gendered virginity in Aldhelm's theoretical construction, it is not his final stance, and his presentation of gendered virginity is underlined throughout his retelling of the lives of virgin saints. It is this highly gendered virginity that he ultimately recreates for his Anglo-Saxon audience, reminding them of their place within the Church, as Aldhelm uses gender to underline his overarching themes of male authority and female obedience.

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<sup>3</sup> See Introduction; Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church – Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge : The Boydell Press, 1998), pp. 1-5.



## THE INTRODUCTION TO *PROSA DE VIRGINITATE* - STUDY AND SUBMISSION

Looking first at the *Prosa De Virginitate*, Aldhelm begins by explaining why he wrote the text and by commending the nuns for their studiousness. Aldhelm notes that he writes at the request of the nuns. Their letters to him demonstrated their spiritual studies, and he commends them for their efforts and exhorts them to further study. However, when we examine the language used by Aldhelm in his opening comments, we see how he uses gender to distance the women from their achievements, and introduce two of his major themes throughout the text, submission and obedience.

Aldhelm expresses his admiration for the nuns' 'extremely rich verbal eloquence and the innocent expression of sophistication', flattering their literary efforts.<sup>5</sup> He continues by commenting that God

rejoices with an inexpressible exultation on seeing, thus, the heavenly catholic maidservants of Christ – or rather adoptive daughters of regenerative grace brought forth from the fecund womb of ecclesiastical conception through the seed of the spiritual Word – growing learned in divine doctrine thought (the Church's) maternal care.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Carol Braun Pasternak, 'Negotiating Gender in Anglo-Saxon England', in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Sharon A. Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternak (Minnesota : University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 107-145.

<sup>5</sup> *Prosa II; Aldhelm : The Prose Works*, trans. by M. Lapidge and M. Herren (Cambridge : D. S. Brewer, 1979), pp. 59-60.

<sup>6</sup> *Prosa II, Cumque singulos epistolarum textus recitans pernicibus pupillarum obtutibus specularer atque naturali quadam, ut mihi insitum fertur, latentium rerum curiositate contemplerer uberrimamque verborum facundiam ac virginalem urbanitatis disertitudinem magnopere admirarer, en, inquam, ineffabili gratulatur tripudio ille superi regnator Olympi et rector caeli, cum taliter catholicas Christi bernaculas, immo adoptivas regenerantis gratiae filias ex fecundo ecclesiasticae conceptionis utero*

Here femininity is directly related to the Scriptures and the Church but although such imagery is not unusual, Aldhelm's choice of language serves to foreground images of femininity and motherhood, yet at the same time, disassociate the women from their gendered bodies, and their potentiality or reality of motherhood. *Ecclesia*, as a feminine noun, has enabled writers to depict the Church as female, mothering and nurturing, but from earliest times the Church authorities were male. We cannot ignore the masculine authority such female imagery undercuts, and in effect, the Christian Church is queered from the earliest descriptions. It is the Bible, written by men, the exegetical writings of men, and the men who make up the Church hierarchy who offer the 'maternal care' that nurtured the nuns' spiritual growth. The nuns themselves are 'maidservants of Christ', highlighting their 'virginal' status, and servile station. Phrases such as 'fecund womb' and 'maternal care' are related to the Scriptures and Church rather than the nuns, who are, in turn, relegated to the position of children. Indeed the feminised description of spiritual creation, growth and 'regenerative grace' is removed from the female sphere, applied as it is to the Church authorities and writings. Aldhelm's reminder that the nuns are 'adoptive daughters' similarly underlines this distinction, which disassociates the women on another level from motherhood, as it denies the fleshly link between mother and child. Within the spiritual family there can be no blood tie, and they were conceived within the 'ecclesiastical' womb. But not only does Aldhelm remove the women from the maternal sphere, he denies them the autonomy of adulthood, reminding them that they are children under the authority of the Church. As 'adoptive daughters', it is not, as Paul said, by bearing children they would be saved, but by being children.<sup>7</sup> Thus

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*spiritalis verbi semine progenitas per maternam viderit solitudinem divinis dogmatibus; Prose,* Lapidge and Herren, pp. 59-60.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 2:15 But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

Aldhelm's theme of the importance of submission to the authority of the Church is introduced at the very beginning of the text.

Through his introductory comments, Aldhelm redirects female physicality. After segregating the feminised ideals of motherhood and nurturing from the nuns, he linguistically removes them from their female bodies. The fecundity and nurturing of the Church gives way to the male body, male athleticism, and male martial ability.<sup>8</sup> The non-virginal bodies of the addressees are elided, and metaphorically re-gendered male. As with the *Ecclesia* as mother, the Christian as athlete was a cliché of Christianity. Paul in particular used the metaphor.<sup>9</sup> The athlete in the ancient world was exclusively male, and Aldhelm here directs our attention to the body of the athlete. The extract is worth quoting at length,

like talented athletes under some experience instructor training in the gymnasium through wrestling routines and gymnastic exercises, who eagerly win the crown of the laborious contest and the prize of the Olympic struggle by the strenuous energies of their own exertions; so that, let's say, one (athlete), smeared with the ointment of (some) slippery liquid, strives dextrously with his partner to work out the strenuous routines of wrestlers, sweating with the sinuous writhings of their flanks in the burning centre of the wrestling-pit.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Although it must be remembered that Barking was a double monastery, hence Aldhelm was addressing men and women.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 9:24-26 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man running aimlessly.; 2 Timothy 2:5, 4:7; Hebrews 12:1.

<sup>10</sup> *Prosa II, erudiri ac velut sagaces gimnosofistas sub peritissimo quodam agonitheta palestricas disciplinas et gimnicis artibus in gimnasio exerceri, qui laboriosi certaminis coronam et olimpiaci agonis triumphum duffucukkimis propriae exercitationis viribus naviter nanciscuntur, ita dumtaxat, ut alius strenua anthletarum luctamina cum aemulo sinuosis laterum flexibus desudans in meditullio scammatris flagrante delibutus lubrici liquoris nardo solerter exercere studeat; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 60.*

In this passage, the nuns are gendered male. The male body is, throughout this section, the default, and the description is sensuous in its physicality. Aldhelm follows Paul in describing the exertion required of the Christian athlete, but he creates a vivid image of the physical body. The gaze of the audience is directed to the oiled bodies of (male) wrestlers, writhing as they struggle together, yet such detailed observation is intended to describe the female mind.<sup>11</sup> Aldhelm does not always clearly differentiate between the external and internal experience, as here, but he does consistently link active Christianity and masculinity, particularly in the *psychomachia*.<sup>12</sup> To compete or to fight, one must be masculine, as much a social norm as Christian formula, and here Aldhelm uses the clichéd metaphor of the male athlete to avoid an active feminine sanctity.

Aldhelm expands on Paul's description of strenuous training by introducing the 'experienced instruction' needed by the athlete in order to succeed. As well as working alone, achieving by 'their own exertions', they must also work together in harmony, each 'with his partner', themes that Aldhelm enlarges upon in his bee simile.<sup>13</sup> Again, part of Aldhelm's overarching theme of masculine authority. From wrestlers we move to archers, runners, riders and sailors. Aldhelm begins with the gymnastic instructor, and he ends this section by reference to the 'steersman urgently inciting (them) and the master-rower beating time with his truncheon'.<sup>14</sup> The phallic imagery of the truncheon/*portisculus* emphasises that their trainers are masculine. Strenuous effort itself is not enough, for even 'talented athletes', it must be directed by others. And those others are masculine.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Clare Lees and Gillian Overing, *Double Agents : Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia : University of Philadelphia, 2001), pp. 117-118.

<sup>12</sup> The external and internal divide will be discussed further below.

<sup>13</sup> See further discussion below.

<sup>14</sup> *Prosa II, Instanter hortante proreta et crepitante naucleru portisculo*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 60.

‘And truly all these things..., are not, according to the industry of your discipline, performed with the motions of the outer man (*exterioris hominis motibus aguntur*) but with the actions of the inner man (*sed interioris gestibus geruntur*)’.<sup>15</sup> Despite the stress on the physicality of the athlete’s body, it is the ‘inner man’ who must strive for salvation. His employment of the ‘inner man’, of course, enables Aldhelm to elide the physical nature of virginity, and raises issues of gender. As noted in the Introduction, Judith Butler argues that the physical body is created through the continued performance of actions that are considered by society to be gender specific.<sup>16</sup> To what extent does Aldhelm use the performance required of the ‘inner man’ to define the ‘outer man’? Does he differentiate between the ‘inner man’ and the ‘inner Christian’?

Though Aldhelm wants to remind the nuns of the importance of their spiritual studies, he uses masculine terms. Whilst studiousness as such is not gender-defined - Jerome, for example, praised Paula for her studies - Aldhelm cannot erase the images of the male body that have dominated this section.<sup>17</sup> He further undermines any idea that the ‘inner man’ might mean equality in female Christianity with reference to the Genesis account of creation. ‘...so the quality of the inner man – who is believed to have been breathed in by the divine Spirit according to the account of Genesis – has, I think, been subtly investigated ... by your intelligence.’<sup>18</sup> His audience, male and female, would have been aware of the Genesis account, that Adam was created by

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<sup>15</sup> *Prosa III, Et quidem universa haec, quae per gimnosofistas exerceri deprompsimus inter scolares saecularium disciplinas, apud vestri discipulatus industriam non exterioris hominis motibus aguntur, sed interioris gestibus geruntur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 60.*

<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York : Routledge, 1990). She writes, p. 33, ‘Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’.

<sup>17</sup> Galatians 3:28.

<sup>18</sup> *Prosa III, ita interioris qualitatem, qui caelesti afflatus spriaculo iuxta geneseos relatum creditur, a vestra prudentia membratim et particulatim subtiliter investigatam reor; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 60-61.*

divine breath, but Eve was created from Adam, a second hand creation. Thus Aldhelm supports the late antique ideas of gendered sanctity; whilst masculine virginity is active, athletic, and offers direct contact with God, feminine virginity only offers a second-hand sanctity.

A little later, whilst again flattering female intelligence, he maintains the gaze of his audience on the male athletic body, gendering intellectual rigour as masculine, ‘the examples of athletes, who with (their) bodily agility (*agilitate corporis*) win popular honours ... might properly pertain to a comparison of those who, traversing the spacious racecourses of the Scriptures, are known to exercise the most subtle industry of their minds and the quality of (their) lively intelligence through assiduous perseverance in reading’.<sup>19</sup> Female physicality has been elided, and despite comments on spiritual qualities and mental ability, the emphasis on the masculine body means that his commendation for, and encouragement to, study has gendered the bodies of the ‘reverend virgins of Christ’ as male, though reminding them that as women they need to submit to the Church’s authority.

Nevertheless, the identity of the virgin is queered in this opening section, as both male and female readers are included in the wider audience. Monks and nuns are gendered as female through the addresses and comments, and male in the imagery of the athletes. This double aspect of the text needs to be kept in mind throughout. The opening up of gender and identity demonstrates the slipperiness of virginity in its literary form, and the varying constructions of virginity used by Aldhelm through the text.

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<sup>19</sup> *Prosa III, Et quamvis gimnicorum exempla, qui agilitate corporis theatrales populi pompas et praeconia circensium adipiscuntur, rite congruant ad comparationem eorum, qui per ampla scripturarum stadia decurrentes sagacissimam animorum industriam et vivacis ingenii qualitatem assidua lectionis instantia exercere noscuntur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 61.*

## VIRGINITY AND THE *MILES CHRISTI*

Aldhelm segues from the athlete to the soldier, another image taken originally from the Bible, and one on which he enlarges upon a little later in the *Prosa*.<sup>20</sup> ‘And truly, that most celebrated proponent of the name of Christ suggested the contest of athletes (*gimnicorum*) as an example for the Christian army (*militiae Christianorum*), saying: ‘And they indeed that they may receive a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible one’.<sup>21</sup> The *miles Christi* was a commonplace through the writings of the Church Fathers, and encompassed all members of the Christian congregation. Aldhelm’s repetitive phraseology iterates the message of unity and co-operation, such as ‘the throngs of Christ’s recruits and the warlike squadrons of virgins (*tironum Christi catervas et bellicosas virginum cohortes*).<sup>22</sup>

But if virgins must be active soldiers of Christ, they must be masculinised; just as the ancient athlete was male, so was the ancient soldier.<sup>23</sup> In this he previews the *psychomachia* of the *Carmen*, continuing the link between masculinity and active Christianity. Andy Orchard notes that virginity itself is a more active and martial quality in the *Carmen*, and here we see flashes of this active quality in the *Prosa*, most obviously in this extended martial metaphor.<sup>24</sup> The virgins are ‘young soldiers of Christ’ forming a ‘monastic army’ who ‘fight strenuously in the forefront of the

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<sup>20</sup> See discussion below.

<sup>21</sup> Aldhelm is quoting 1 Corinthians 9.25, *Prosa* III, *Etenim celeberrimus ille nominis Christi gerulus ad exemplum militia Christianorum agonem protulit gimnicorum decens: ‘Et illi quidem, ut corruptibilem coronam accipiant, nos autem incorruptam’ et alibi ‘non quasi aerem verberens’; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 61.*

<sup>22</sup> *Prosa* XI; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 68. The language in this section will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, though Aldhelm draws on classical imagery, he at no times employs the image of the Amazon in describing a soldier of Christ.

<sup>24</sup> Orchard, *Poetic Art*, p. 17; Aldhelm’s verbosity can make it hard to follow his structure, and the martial section peters out into various scriptural examples of Divine victories and comments on the dangers of the vices.

battle as rulers of the world or as warriors of the Lord'.<sup>25</sup> Aldhelm returns to the image of the spiritual soldier after introducing Pride as the greatest danger to virgins.<sup>26</sup> 'Virgins of Christ and raw recruits of the Church must therefore fight with muscular energy against the horrendous monster of Pride ... [and] the virulent vices'.<sup>27</sup> The 'muscular energy' reminds the reader of the male athlete described earlier. 'Rather, as combatants in the monastic army ... carrying tightly the warlike instruments of armament ... if we now fight strenuously in the forefront of the battle as rulers of the world or as warriors of the Lord'.<sup>28</sup> The performance associated with martial virginity highlights the gendered divide of masculine activity – to be encouraged - and feminine passivity – to be avoided. The virgins should be active, 'boldly offering out foreheads', 'fight with muscular energy', 'struggle zealously' and 'fight strenuously'. In contrast, Aldhelm employs the cliché of effeminacy and weakness to warn the nuns they must avoid appearing as 'timid soldiers effeminately fearing the horror of war'.<sup>29</sup> Thus femininity is demeaned.

Aldhelm follows Paul in describing the spiritual armour available to the *miles Christi*.<sup>30</sup> As Paul offered the breastplate of faith, and the sword of the Holy Word, as his primary protection against the machinations of the Devil, so does Aldhelm, but he also diverges from Paul at times, and concentrates on virginity and its concomitant

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<sup>25</sup> *Prosa XI; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 68.*

<sup>26</sup> Pride as a danger to virgins will be discussed further below, but for now it should be noted that this is an ongoing battle for the Christian virgin, 'For the enemies [Pride and the vices] – who were thought to have been cut down to the point of extermination... - again ... renew a horrendous war', *Prose, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 68-9; Prose XII, Nam hostes, qui putabantur usque ad internicionem suprema strage obruncati et optatis eventuum successibus feliciter superati, denuo versa vice victores ad importunum praelium prevocant, arma cruenta cappessunt, bellum horrendum iinstaurant, rediviva certamenta voti compositibus intruunt.*

<sup>27</sup> *Prosa XI, Idcirco virginibus Christi et tirunculis ecclesiae contra horrendam superbiae bestiam simulque contra has virulentorum septenas vitiorum beluas; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 68.*

<sup>28</sup> *Prosa XI, Quin potius coenubialis militiae pugiles frontem vexillo cruces armatam audaciter aemoulorum agminibus offerentes et armorum instrumenta bellica; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 68.*

<sup>29</sup> *Prosa XI; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 68; See further discussion in Chapter 6.*

<sup>30</sup> Ephesians 6



virtues as protective armour. Aldhelm can set the scene for comments on vices and virtues, which are expanded into the *Carmen's psychomachia*. Hence the 'breastplate of virginity', 'shield of modesty', 'arrows of spiritual armament', and 'spears of the virtues' links virginity with Christian safeguards. Performing the qualities associated with virginity through the literary heritage available to Aldhelm and his audience, such as modesty, would generate a virginity that would protect the individual and promote the harmony of the coenobitic institution and the wider Church.

### **VIRGINITY, OBEDIENCE, AND THE BEE – ALDHELM AND AMBROSE**

Aldhelm also makes use of another well-known Christian metaphor for virginity, that of 'the highly ingenious bee'. From Classical antiquity, the bee was a symbol of industriousness, and was particularly apposite as a metaphor for virginity because it was thought to procreate asexually, hence it became popular among Christian writers.<sup>31</sup> Aldhelm describes it thus, 'The bee, I say, by virtue of the special attribute of its peculiar chastity, is by the undoubted authority of the scriptures agreed to signify a type of virginity and the likeness of the Church'.<sup>32</sup>

Ambrose used the image of the bee in his *De Virginibus ad Marcellinum*, to describe the behaviour expected of a virgin. Performativity here revolves around the passive qualities of feminised virginity,

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<sup>31</sup> See the discussion on Ambrose in Chapter 2; The section on the bee falls between the two sections on the virgin as soldier. See Augustine Cassiday, 'St. Aldhelm's Bees (*De virginitate prosa* cc. IV-VI) : some observations on a literary tradition', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 34 (2005), 1-33.

<sup>32</sup> *Prosa V, Apis, inquam propter peculiaris castimoniae privilegium pudicissimae virginitatis tipum et ecclesiae portendere speciem indupitata scripturarum auctoritate assitipulatur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 62.*

‘...for virginity is fit to be compared to bees, *so laborious is it, so modest, so continent*. The bee feeds on dew, it knows no marriage couch, it makes honey. The virgin’s dew is the divine word, for the word of God descends like the dew. The virgin’s modesty is unstained nature. The virgin’s produce is the fruit of the lips, without bitterness, abounding in sweetness. They work in common and their fruit is in common. How I wish you, my daughter, to be an imitator of these bees, whose food is flowers, whose offspring is collected and brought together by the mouth. Do imitate her, my daughter. Let no veil of deceit be spread over your words; let them have no covering of guile, that they may be pure, and full of gravity.’<sup>33</sup>

These are the qualities Ambrose wishes to highlight for ‘ideal’ virgins: to be industrious, modest or humble, and continent, or self-controlled. For Ambrose, this self-control particularly applied to the speech of women, and in this extract Ambrose again attempts to control the female voice, ‘Let no veil of deceit spread over your words’.<sup>34</sup> Aldhelm, whilst also directing the bee motif to control the behaviour of his

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<sup>33</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* I.viii.40-41 *Favum itaque mellis tua opera componant; digna enim virginitas quae apibus comparetur: sic pudica, sic continens. Rore pascitur apis, nescit concubitus, mella componit. Ros quoque virginis est sermo divinus; quia sicut ros, Dei verba descendunt. Pudor virginis est intermerata natura. Partus virginis fetus est labiorum, expers amaritudinis, fertilis suavitatis. In commune labor, communis est fructus. Quam te velim, filia, imitatricem esse hujus apiculae cui cibus flos est, ore soboles legiture, ore componitur! Hanc imitare tu, filia. Verbera tua nullum doli velamen obtendant, nullum habeant fraudis involucrem; ut et puritatem habeant, et gravitas plena sint; St. Ambrose, H. De Romestin, E De Romestin and H. T. F. Duckworth, p. 369.*

<sup>34</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus* I.viii.41; Ambrose, H. De Romestin, E De Romestin and H. T. F. Duckworth, p. 369; Ambrose, *De Virginibus* III.iii.9-11, 13, *Meritorum quoque tuorum tibi aeterna posteritas tuo ore pariat. Nec soli tibi, sed etiam pluribus congreges, (qui scis enim quando a te anima tua repostatur?) ne receptacula horreorum frumentis coacervata dimittens, nec vitae tuae usui profutura, nec meritis, rapiaras eo quo thesaurum tuum ferre non possis. Dives igitur esto, sed pauperibus: ut naturae participles sint etiam facultatum; ‘I should prefer, therefore, that conversation should rather be wanting to a virgin, than to abound.... The virtue of silence, especially in Church, is very great...if you give ear, restrain your voice, utter no word with your lips which you would wish to recall, but let your boldness to speak be sparing.... ...to the virgin it must be said, ‘be silent lest thou sin.’ ...and do you, when any passage is read where Christ is announced as about to come, or is shown to have come, not make a voice by talking, but attend.... Let virginity be first marked by the voice, let modesty close the mouth.... Let her gravity first announce a virgin to me, a modest approach, a sober*

audience, highlights obedience rather than silence. He reminds his audience that bees are known for obeying their hierarchy, thus he foregrounds the importance of the need for the coenobitic unity of the monastery.

‘This also is to be remembered...I mean the spontaneous inclination to voluntary servitude which they are known to exercise in obedience to their rulers. In respect of this sort of consideration, are not all the disciplines of the monastic way of life and the regular practices of monasteries indicated by an extremely close comparison.... What, I ask, in the nature of visible things can be seen, that obeys the command of its begetter and strives to fulfil the order of its king with such great desire that appropriately because (it is) a symbol of unstained virginity and (because of its) spontaneous acceptance of devout servitude – whereby it offers an example of obedience to mortals living in this vale of tears’.<sup>35</sup>

Aldhelm’s call for unity and obedience was no doubt relevant within the double house. The monks and nuns owed their immediate allegiance to the abbess, but in the wider Church, the chain of authority was masculine, fitting the late antique and medieval assumption that the hive was controlled by a ‘king’ rather than a ‘queen’.

The historical reality for Aldhelm and his Anglo-Saxon contemporaries was a distinct lack of authority on the part of the Church hierarchy. The noble nuns of powerful double houses had a degree of independence from the upper echelons of the

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gait, a bashful countenance.’ *St. Ambrose*, H. De Romestin, E De Romestin and H. T. F. Duckworth; See discussion in Chapter 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Prosa VI, Illud etiam memorandum de apum concordia sodalitate et theatri quodam spectaculo stupendum autumo, ultroneum videlicet voluntariae servitutis affectum, quem erga suorum obsequia principum exercere noscuntur. Nonne sub huiusmodi contemplationis intuitu omnis monasticae conversationis disciplina et regularia coenubiorum instituta simillima collatione declarantur? ... Quid enim, quaeso, in rerum visibilium videri valet natura, quod tam ingenti studio auctoris sui praecepto paraet et Regis imperium implere contendat, ut merito propter intactae virginitatis tipum et spontaneum devotae subiectionis famulatem; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 62.*

Church that was never to be repeated in medieval England.<sup>36</sup> Theodore's acknowledgement that Anglo-Saxons, male and female, left marriages on account of the religious life is evidence of this.<sup>37</sup> Despite his position as Archbishop, he condoned what was in fact unorthodox behaviour, as he lacked the authority to halt such institutions. Aldhelm's own orthodoxy is demonstrated in his letter to the Celtic king Geraint, in which he commends Roman Catholic practise and doctrine to Geraint and his bishops.<sup>38</sup> Again it was a call to submission to the Catholic Church, and a denial of the right to independence of the Celtic bishops, in line with Aldhelm's constant call to obedience. The Church Fathers had assumed such obedience to masculine authority for their sanctified virgins, either commending them to paternal authority within the family, or the ecclesiastical authority of the church.<sup>39</sup> But Aldhelm was addressing the powerful, independent nuns of a double monastery, used to wielding royal or noble power, and unaccustomed to submitting to church hierarchy.

Yet, it is surprising that though Aldhelm recalls them to obedience, he does not use the emphasis on speech that he found in Ambrose. In early Anglo-Saxon England abbesses could be advisors to kings and nobles, as was Hild; they had not only a public voice, but also a political voice.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the words of women

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<sup>36</sup> See discussion in Chapter 1; B. Yorke, 'The Reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon Courts', in *St. Augustine and the Conversion of England*, ed. by R. Gameson (Stroud : Sutton Press, 1999), pp. 161-163; B. Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London : Continuum, 2003), pp. 23-30; John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 102, 106-107; Cf. Bede's account of Hild founding Whitby, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV.23; Dagmar Schneider, 'Anglo-Saxon Women in the Religious Life : A Study of the Status and Position of Women in Early Medieval Society' (unpublished Ph.D thesis), pp. 147, 264-269, 305.

<sup>37</sup> J. Godfrey, 'The Place of the Double Monastery in the Anglo-Saxon Minster System', in *Famulus Christi : Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede*, ed. by G. Bonner (London : S.P.C.K., 1976), p. 346.

<sup>38</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep.* IV.

<sup>39</sup> See discussion in Chapter 1.

<sup>40</sup> Bede, *H.E.* IV.23; *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. by B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 409, 'So great was her prudence that not only ordinary folk, but kings and princes used to come and ask her advice in their difficulties.'; Cf. *Maxims* II.81-102; S. A. J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London : Everyman, 1982), p.348, 'Both [i.e.

became increasingly contentious, as Stephanie Hollis argued in her study of Bede's account of the Synod of Whitby.<sup>41</sup> Bede clearly silences Hild in his account of the Synod, yet for Aldhelm obedience is the pressing issue.<sup>42</sup> Bede and Aldhelm moved in different circles, as Bede was a monastic scholar, and Aldhelm was an abbot and later bishop. Hence Aldhelm was probably more accustomed to the political role of women, their role as advisors and as protectors and promoters of dynastic interests, hence their political agency.<sup>43</sup>

Using a metaphor such as the bee also enables Aldhelm to focus on the internal qualities of virginity. Virginity, as we have seen, is performative, and relies on the individual demonstrating the qualities of the virgin. The qualities highlighted by Aldhelm are significant in understanding his potential motives in writing *De Virginitate*. Obedience is clearly the most prominent, submission to the 'king', but also study, 'roaming widely through the flowering fields of scripture'.<sup>44</sup> Both of these are ongoing qualities, to be constantly demonstrated. Aldhelm again is very sensuous in his depiction of their studious endeavours - at dawn the bees leave the hive, 'dense armies of rejoicing throngs in swarms through the open fields ... they gather honeyed moisture drop by drop in their mouths ... they struggle eagerly to fill the greedy receptacles of their stomachs; ... they transport their fertile booty in

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the king and queen] must be pre-eminently literal with gifts. In the man martial warlike arts must burgeon; and the woman must excel as one cherished among her people, and be buoyant of mood, keep confidences, be open-heartedly generous with horses and with treasures; in deliberation over the mead, in the presence of the troop of companions, she must always and everywhere greet first the chief of those princes and instantly offer the chalice to her lord's hand, and she must know what is prudent for them both as rulers of the hall...'

<sup>41</sup> Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women*, p. 151-178; see discussion in Chapter 1.

<sup>42</sup> Bede, *H.E.* III.25 184-5. Although he acknowledges Hild took the part of the British Church, Bede uses Bishop Colman to lay out the argument.

<sup>43</sup> See discussion in Chapter 2; Susan Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England : A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>44</sup> *Prosa VI; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 61.

numerous loadings of their thighs and hips'.<sup>45</sup> Aldhelm delights in the sensuality of food, linking virginity with the richest, most delectable foods.<sup>46</sup> The physicality of this section reflects the stress on the body in the previous section.

Obedience and studiousness are not gendered *per se*, but Aldhelm's use of imagery, as has been seen, serves to gender the qualities associated with virginity, whilst simultaneously removing the nuns from the text. The mouth, thighs and hips are not those of women, but of bees. Aldhelm continues, 'she produces her sweet family and children, innocent of the lascivious coupling of marriage, [as] the Church... fertilizes through the chaste seed of the Word (*casto verbi fecundat semine*) the offspring who are lawful heirs of eternity'.<sup>47</sup> As with the introductory section where fertility and children are linked to the Church rather than the nuns, the physicality of motherhood and fertility is removed and placed elsewhere. In these observations Aldhelm reminds us of the link between fertility and femininity, yet relates neither to physical women. The asexual bee and the virginal Church enjoy the fertility denied to the women of his address. Hence, Aldhelm clouds our gaze, the female body is both invoked and removed from the text.

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<sup>45</sup> *Prosa VI, Apis, inquam, propter peculiaris castimoniae privilegium pudicissimae virginitatis tipum et ecclesiae portendere speciem indubitata scripturarum auctoritate asstipulatur, quae florentes saltuum cespites ineffabili praeda depopulans dulcia naturom pignora, nesciens coniugii illecebrosa consortia, fetosa quadam suavissimi suci concretionem producit: ecclesia vero bis acuto testamentorum mucrone hominum vitaliter corda tranverberans hereditariam legitimae aeternitatis sobolem casto verbi fecundat semine; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 61.*

<sup>46</sup> *Prosa VI, prae ceteris creatures nectareum conficiat edulium et mulsae dulcedinis alimoniam flavescens ararum gurgustio recondat, quae non modo cuncta diliciarum fercula et piperatas pulmentorum saginas praecellat omneque fragrantis ambrosiae thimiama ac nardi spirantis olfactum vincat, verum etiam, ut omissa specialitate ad generalitatem sermonis oratio decurrat, universam mundanae suavitatis dulcedinem opulentique luxus exquisite superses oblectamenta et haustum defrutum despiciat?; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 63, 'above all other creatures it may produce nectared food and store up the nourishment of honeyed sweetness ... which may excel all dishes of delicacies and the seasoned riches of sauces, and surpass all the incense of sweet ambrosia and the odour of fragrant balsam, ... may exceed all delights of worldly sweetness and the exquisite pleasures of sumptuous gourmandising and may leave far beneath it the gulping down of sweet wine?' Cf. *Prosa VII; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 63* 'just as the taste of honeyed sweetness quite incomparably excels everything that is experienced as pleasing and delectable when brought to human mouths and the palate of mortals, so the divine majesty ... set the special attribute of virginity before all the ranks of virtues'. Again the link between the angelic and virginal.*

<sup>47</sup> *Prosa V; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 62.*

Yet again we must consider Aldhelm's audience. Primarily non-virgins, Aldhelm flatters them by removing the female physical body, so physical virginity loses its significance. The 'inner man' becomes the primary site for virginity, gendered male through the active virginity Aldhelm has constructed, and female through the feminised bees and their sensuous, fecund, studies. Consequently, Aldhelm's use of male and female imagery opens the identity available through virginity and offers the potential for a queer reading, as his refusal to utilise the female body in his lengthy introductory address is a sophisticated method of constructing an inclusive virginity, encompassing his entire audience, male and female, virgin and non-virgin.

## VIRGINITY VS. MARRIAGE

Aldhelm acknowledges the role of marriage for the faithful: 'we do not consider that the immaculate cohabitation of matrimony and the legitimate union of lawful wedlock is to be scorned, as the ravings of heretics blather.'<sup>48</sup> In this he directly followed his late antique exempla, balancing the exhortation to virginity and the disincentives to marriage, as was seen in Chapter 2. For example he describes the 'patriarchs who maintained the bonds of marriage according to the precept of divine decree'.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, his audience of addressed nuns and the larger monastic family, are single for the sake of the Lord, and his subsequent comparisons between marriage and virginity, ensure that marriage is depicted as a secondary station for the Christian.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Prosa VIII, instigantes immaculate matrimonii contubernia et legitimum legalis tori conubium; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 64.*

<sup>49</sup> *Prosa VIII, priscis temporibus patriarchas divinae sanctionis praecepto coniugii; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 65.*

<sup>50</sup> *Prosa IX; See discussion below.*

Aldhelm states, ‘there is as great a distance between the flowers of virginity and the virtues of marriage as is between east and west.’<sup>51</sup> This is clearly a great divide, but the gulf is greater than the modern reader may comprehend. Aldhelm echoes Psalm 103:12 ‘As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.’ Reading the quotation in context, Psalm 103 is David’s acknowledgement of God’s forgiveness and healing of sinful humanity.<sup>52</sup> David contrasts the lowliness and transience of humankind with the omnipotence of God’s forgiveness and love.<sup>53</sup> In echoing the chasm described by David in verse 12, Aldhelm undercuts the seeming equivalence he hints at in his introductory comments, destroying any parity between the two states.

This inequality is compounded through the text. Aldhelm’s comparison between marriage and virginity commences with items that both appear attractive and desirable, but the disparity between marriage and virginity becomes ever more evident as he continues through his list. For example his first two comparisons are silver (marriage) and gold (virginity); marble (marriage) and ‘a red-glowing jewel’, presumably a ruby (virginity).<sup>54</sup> But marriage is soon compared to the more utilitarian, such as ‘the rough anvil’ (marriage) and ‘the studded girdle’ (virginity) or ‘the greedy ouzel’ or ‘black ... crow’ (marriage) and ‘the multi-coloured glory of the peacock, with the smooth perfection of its (feathered) rings’ (virginity).<sup>55</sup> The

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<sup>51</sup> *Prosa VIII, grantia tantum inter virginitatis flores et iugalitatis mores distare dicimus, quantum distat oriens ab occasu; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 65.*

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Psalms 103:10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Ps 103:15-17 As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field: the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children.

<sup>54</sup> *Prosa IX, Non enim splendid meri argenti species turpiter deformatur, quamvis obrizum rutilantis auri metallum praeferatur, neque marmoris candidi venustas detrimentum decoris patitur, cum formisior rubentis gemmae pulchritude praedicatur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren p. 65.*

<sup>55</sup> *Prosa IX, Non enim furva voracis mergulae facture confunditur et atra cornicis creatura contempnitur, licet versicolor pavonis gloria tereti circolorum rotunditae praecellat; Prose, Lapidge and Herren p. 66.*



descriptive language supports the disparity between the two estates – marriage is represented by that which is lesser and utilitarian. It is useful, necessary even, but lacking the beauty and delicacy of virginity.

Aldhelm also inverts the traditional association of marriage with fertility and so echoes his earlier comments relating to virgins and fecundity. Again Aldhelm removes fertility from the woman, in this section through nature imagery. His final comparison between marriage and virginity is between ‘the nature of woodland trees and the sterile greenness of leaves or the sappy stems of terrestrial vegetation’ (marriage) with ‘purple and crimson flowers ... with the sweet fragrance of scent’ (virginity).<sup>56</sup> The sterility Aldhelm associates with marriage is contrasted with the fruitage that develops from the flowers, ‘since it is well known that from the flowers, the rewards of the fruits which are to follow ripen in a wonderful fashion’. Aldhelm makes this contrast explicit by reminding his audience that the ‘flourishing leaves on young branches and the dense tendrils of vines’ – all images of lushness – ‘miserably wither once the sap in the inner cortex has stopped flowing, and with the torrid heat of autumn advancing they fall in large numbers like the thickest of slaughter.’ Thus the seeming verdure of the leaves withers and dies, but the apparent fragility of the flowers is able to generate fruits. Marriage is ultimately arid, and virginity fertile.

Later in the text, Aldhelm compares virginity, chastity and marriage. This is an innovation, as Aldhelm stratifies sanctity using chastity rather than widowhood. The comparisons continue to denigrate marriage, for example, virginity is gold,

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<sup>56</sup> *Prosa IX, Num arborum silvestrium natura foliorumque indecunda viriditas aut succulentus herbarum terrestrium cauliculus contempnitur, cum purpurei et rubicund flores ex ipsis lignorum ramusculis exorti seu vernantis prati holusculis progeniti pulchrius rubescant et suavi odoris flagrantia dulcius redoleant, cum constet ex floribus secutura fructuum emolumenta exuberante reditu et multiplici quaestu mirabiliter maturescere, frondentia vero surculorum folia et spissos palmitum pampinos cessante librorum suco miserabiliter marcescere et torrid adventante autumnu fervore in modum denissimae stregis catervatim cadere?; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 66.*

riches, freedom, a queen; chastity is silver, an average income, a ransom, a lady; conjugality is bronze, poverty, captivity, a servant.<sup>57</sup> The belittling of conjugality is evident. To compare, for example the sun, a lamp and darkness is not to offer gradations of a quality, rather the light of the sun and darkness are opposites.<sup>58</sup> In comparison to the sun and a lamp, darkness can only be a negative quality. Aldhelm does not draw on gender for these comparisons; rather he relates the beautiful and noble to virginity, the utilitarian, drab and negative to marriage. His audience, female and male, were drawn from the higher strata of society. The assumption that members of society accepted their roles, yet worked for the common good supports Aldhelm's themes of unity, co-operation and obedience. Hence, virginity, 'the dignity of the prefecture', compares with chastity, 'the baseness of the muleteer', and marriage, 'he who keeps the mules' know their places in society yet 'all these are known to bear arms for the one commander-in-chief'.<sup>59</sup>

## **GENDER AND SEXUALITY - DRESS AND ORNAMENTATION**

The danger of pride is also reflected in Aldhelm's lengthy comments on dress. Dress occupies him both in his introduction, and at the end of the text. The extent of these comments, particularly as Aldhelm has already directed his audience to the importance of the inner qualities of virginity, demonstrates that this is a topic on which Aldhelm feels particularly strongly. He writes,

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<sup>57</sup> *Prosa XIX; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 75.*

<sup>58</sup> *Prosa XIX, ut sit virginitas sol, castitas lucerna, iugalitas tenebrae; ut sit virginitas dies, castitas aurora, iugalitas nox; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 75.*

<sup>59</sup> *Prosa XIX, sed aliter sedet in carruca praefecturae dignitas, aliter mulionis vilitas, aliter qui pedibus continent mulas, et tamen sub uno imperatore militare noscuntur, et reliqua; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p.75.*

The [married woman] strives that her neck be decorated with necklaces and her arms with bracelets and that she be adorned with gem-studded rings on her fingers; the [virgin] desires to be radiant with the most beautiful adornment of shining modesty and to gleam with golden necklaces of virtues and at the same time to be decked out with the dazzling pearls of her merits. The one is busy being alluringly coiffed with the twisted curls of her ringlets curling round the tongs, and to paint her cheeks and lips after her own fashion with the scarlet rouge of artificial colour; the other, with an uncombed mane of hair and with her tresses carelessly matted bears the crown of glory with the palm-wreath of virginity on her head; the one, parading with the senseless pomp of her ornaments – in the likeness of that woman offering the lethal drink of the brothel in a golden chalice, whom the Apocalypse describes as having sat on the beast.<sup>60</sup>

Aldhelm therefore begins with Paul's comments about the division between the married woman and virgin, and continues his theme of inner and outer qualities.<sup>61</sup> His construction of femininity within the confines of the monastery is as virgin or whore, spiritual woman or worldly woman. The female physicality that he has so carefully avoided up to this point, is finally introduced as we are presented with the female body, adorned and decorated. Introducing the female body enables Aldhelm to concentrate on the licentious appearance of the sexual woman. Wearing

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<sup>60</sup> *Prosa XI, Ista collum lunulis et lacertos dextralibus ornari ac gemmiferis digitorum anulis comi concupiscit, illa pulcherimo fulgentis pudicitiae cultu splendescere et auratis virtutum monilibus rutilare simulque candidus meritorum margaretis decorari desiderat; ista tortis cincinnorum crinibus calamistro crispantibus delicate componi et rubro coloris stibio genasac mandibulas suatim fucare satagit, illa inculta crinicolorum caesarie et neglegenter squalente capillatura cum palma virginitatis coronam gloriae in capite praefert; ista stolidis ornamentorum pompis indruticans adinstar illius mulieris aureo calice prostibuli poculum letiferum propinantis, quam apocalipsis super bestiam sedisse describit; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p.73.*

<sup>61</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:34-35.

‘Necklaces’, ‘bracelets’, and ‘gem-studded rings’, ‘alluringly coiffed’, with the ‘twisted curls of her ringlets’, painted cheeks and lips ‘with the scarlet rouge of artificial colour’, ‘parading with the senseless pomp of her ornaments’. Both virgin and married woman are bejewelled and adorned, but one relies on the worldly decorations of jewellery and make-up, the virgin desires the radiance of ‘shining modesty’ and ‘necklaces of virtues’ and the ‘pearls of her merits’. This compares with the virgin who cares nothing for her appearance, wearing ‘an uncombed mane of hair and with her tresses carelessly matted’ to demonstrate ‘the palm-wreath of virginity on her head’. The virgin’s inner qualities are fairly vague, and the only specified attribute is modesty – the obvious counterpoint to pride. Otherwise, Aldhelm’s virgin is a cipher, a blank page. This link between artificial beauty and the unkempt natural state of the virgin seems to be of particular importance to him as can be seen in his hagiographical description of the ornaments of Victoria and Anatolia.<sup>62</sup>

Although Aldhelm includes male and female saintly exempla, he only discusses worldliness in relation to women; there is a wife, but no husband. The wife, as a woman of the world, is portrayed as an over-painted harlot. It must also be emphasised that Aldhelm is using this imagery not in comparing a harlot and a virgin, but a wife and a virgin. Aldhelm has already reminded his audience that there is nothing wrong in marriage, but moving from a wife to the Whore of Babylon presumes there is no difference between the sexualised woman, married and contained within the family, and the prostitute.<sup>63</sup> This is a link he maintains,

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<sup>62</sup> As discussed below, they sell their ornaments ‘both the hair-pins for their coiffure and the anklets for their legs as well as their perfume bottles of balsam and the pendants hanging from the neck with gem-studded bangles’. *Prosa LII, sed omne patrimonium et ornamentorum gloriam tam discriminalia capitum et periscelides crurum quam olfactoriola nardi et crepundia collo gemmiferis lunulis pendentia ad stipem mancis et matriculariis prodiga liberalitate contulerunt*; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 119-120.

<sup>63</sup> He makes the same comparison with Judith and the prostitute of Proverbs; Revelation 17:3-5 Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast

implying that the performance of marriage revolves around sexuality and titivation, the performance of virginity around neglect of the physical to concentrate on the internal. As will be discussed, this is quite possibly a reaction to the noble, rich, richly dressed and powerful nuns of the double monastery.<sup>64</sup>

In the *Prosa*, his final female exemplum is Judith, a widow who ‘like a bright lily in her devout chastity and hiding from the public gaze she lived a pure life in an upstairs solar.’<sup>65</sup> Yet Aldhelm’s account of Judith is extremely ambiguous, reflecting his discomfort with the active woman and the sexual woman. She protected her people by defeating Holofernes ‘by ensnaring him by means of the innate beauty of her face and also by her bodily adornment’. Judith made herself attractive to gain access to Holofernes, and, pretending to be seduced, was able to decapitate him as, only through ‘the innate beauty of her face and also by her bodily adornment’ could the enemy be defeated. He continues,

Of her it is written in the Septuagint: ‘And she clothed herself with the ferments of her gladness, and put sandals on her feet, and took her bracelets, and lilies, and earlets, and rings, and adorned herself with all her ornaments’ and tricked herself out to prey on men. You see, it is not by my assertion but by the statement of Scripture that the adornment of women is called the depredation of men.<sup>66</sup>

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that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with adulteries. This title was written on her forehead : MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

<sup>64</sup> See further discussion below.

<sup>65</sup> *Prosa* LVII, *quasi candens lilium pia castitate florescens atque a publicis spectibus delitescens in cenauli solario pudica conversabatur*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 127 No doubt many in his audience were widows, thus she served to collapse categories as a chaste widow.

<sup>66</sup> *Prosa* LVII, *cum horrendum Assyriorum principem, qui innumeris manipulorum milibus equitatu et peditatu gloriantibus orbem trementem terruit, Abra comitante circumvenire moliretur, haud secus decipiendum credidit nec aliter obtruncandum rata est, nisi cum native vultus venustate ornamentis etiam corporalibus caperetur. De qua in LXX translatoribus scriptum est: ‘Induit se vestem*

As she acted for the good of the community, Aldhelm grudgingly acknowledges that she ‘kept the honour of her modesty intact’, but, Aldhelm’s final female exemplum is the predatory sexual woman, or more specifically the sexually voracious widow. She has exchanged widow’s weeds for ‘the garments of her gladness’ and ‘tricked herself out to prey on men.’<sup>67</sup> Jewellery and ornamentation are the instruments of her predation. And as previously he segued between the wife and the Whore of Babylon, here he links the sexual Judith with a harlot, continuing,

‘Similarly, that stubborn and insolent woman (*procax et pertinax*) in Proverbs who foreshadows the figure of the Synagogue, who promised that her own husband would (only) return when the moon was full (and who), in the trappings of a harlot and with alluring luxury, is described as having enticed a foolish young man and, when she had deceived him with the fraudulent delights of her promises, destroyed him pitiably’.<sup>68</sup>

The linking ‘Similarly (*necnon*)’ informs the audience that Judith’s behaviour is really that of the woman of Proverbs. But it is not performance *per se*; Judith does not act as a prostitute, she preserves her modesty, but in dressing as a worldly woman, Aldhelm infers the qualities that he associates with the worldly woman. This raises

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*iocunditatis suae et impouit periscledides et dextralia et anulos et omnia ornamenta sua et composuit se nimis in rapinam virorum.’ En, non nostris assertionibus sed scripturae astipulationibus ornatus feminarum rapina vivorum. Vocatur! Verum quia hoc in arta Betuliae obsidione pro contribulibus dolitura compatientis affect, non castitatis defectu fecisse memoratur, idcirco salva pudoris reverentia celebre meticulosis municipibus tropeum et inclitum oppidanis trepidantibus triumphum teste tyrannico capite et conopeo reportavit; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 127. Michael Lapidge, p. 197, notes that the final comment supposedly quoted from the Septuagint, ‘et composuit se in rapinam virorum’, is not in the Vulgate, but in *Vetus Latina*. Presumably it clearly makes the point he wishes to highlight.*

<sup>67</sup> *Prosa LVII; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 127.*

<sup>68</sup> *Prosa LVII, Necnon in proverbii mulier illa procax et pertinax synagoga tipum obumbrans, quae virum proprium integro plenilunio reversurum spondit, ornate meretricio et luxu lenocinante vecordem iuvenem pellexisse et fraudulentis verborum oblectamento deceptum lugubriter elisisse describitur, ut merito quasi bos ductus ad victimam caecae cupiditatis petulantia captus nefandum prostitutae lupanar aggredi minime vereretur ignorans, quod ad vincula stolidus traheretur, ‘donec transfigat sagitta iecor eius, velut si ales perneciter festinet ad laqueum’; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 127; Proverbs 7:7-23.*

two points for his construction of gender and virginity. Firstly, his conceptualisation of femininity outside of the monastery cannot be divided from sexuality, particularly the woman as temptress. Secondly, performance of gender is inclusive of dress. Both aspects are crucial to understanding Aldhelm's continued invective against dress.

Thus Judith performs as a prostitute primarily through her alluring dress, but as dress serves to identify her as a prostitute, it becomes inseparable from performance. Her choice of dress is indicative of her mental qualities, and in acting as a temptress and murderess, she demonstrates an independence that Aldhelm is uncomfortable with, and at odds with his overarching theme of female obedience and submission. Aldhelm's uneasiness and linking of Judith with the woman in Proverbs reveals much about his earlier musings on the wife's dress. Neither are prostitutes, the unnamed woman is a married woman intent on having fun whilst her husband is away.<sup>69</sup> She is *procax et pertinax*, impudent and stubborn, exactly the qualities the 'ideal' virgin must avoid.<sup>70</sup> In committing adultery she is no different, for Aldhelm, than a prostitute, and in her depravity, she destroys the young man she has drawn into her web of deceit.<sup>71</sup> Aldhelm compounds this negative image by reminding his audience she also stands for the Synagogue: not just a type of false religion, but the religion of the Jews, the people Aldhelm and his audience would consider as originally chosen by God, but who later rejected Him and were responsible for the death of His Messiah. Hence, by using 'similarly', Aldhelm sets up a most negative

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<sup>69</sup> Proverbs 7:19-20 My husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey. He took his purse filled with money and will not be home till full moon.

<sup>70</sup> Proverbs 7:11-13 She is loud and defiant, her feet never stay at home; now in the street, now in the squares, at every corner she lurks.

<sup>71</sup> Proverbs 7:10 Then out came a woman to meet him, dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent.; 7:21-23 With persuasive words she led him astray; she seduced him with her smooth talk. All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter, like a deer stepping into a noose till an arrow pierces his liver like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life.

comparison for the one female exemplum he includes, who is not a virgin. His construction of either a virginal or sexualised femininity is absolute.

Towards the end of the text, just before introducing Judith, Aldhelm returns to the appearance of the sexual woman.

‘For the exterior, adorned with the precious finery of clothing flaunts itself in a worldly manner, in vain does the interior rejoice uselessly over its own beauty .... For what reason do the virgins of Christ, living in the servitude of the convent, bother about adorning themselves with a luxurious gaudiness of dress? ... Therefore, the forbidden finery of a world which is to be destroyed, coloured with precious dyes of purple tincture, cannot be duly and appropriately suited to disciples of the convent, to handmaidens of Christ’.<sup>72</sup>

Purple is, as always, a marker of worldly riches, but in this section also links back to the Whore of Babylon; to dress as if one were still in the world was to appropriate the appearance of the sexual woman, tantamount to prostitution, and the life a nun should have left behind. Aldhelm reminds his audience of their role within the church as ‘disciples’ and ‘handmaidens’, in servitude and within the convent, for if they do not demonstrate their servile attitude by their dress, their actions are in vain. There was no monastic uniform at this time, and rich and noble nuns, likely with maidservants, may well have continued with their love of fine clothes. This is likely given the later, and detailed, emphasis Aldhelm gives the topic.<sup>73</sup> But why is it so important? It could indicate female agency: women chose to dress in the manner in which they felt

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<sup>72</sup> *Prosa LV, Si enim exterior pretioso indumentorum comptus ornate saeculariter gloriatur, frustra interior de pulchritudine propria inaniter gratatur. Ob quam rem virgins Christ coenubii famulatu conversantes ornamentis vestium dilicatis decorari satagunt? Non ergo ruituri vetita munda ornamenta purpureae pretiosis tincturae muricibus colorata alumnis coenubii, bernaculis Christi, virginibus esseleciae; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 124.*

<sup>73</sup> *Prosa LVII; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 127-128.*



comfortable, and which they felt reflected their position within society, even though men like Aldhelm did not approve. Thus dress could indicate a level of independence that Aldhelm wished to negate. To obey the Church Fathers, who encouraged plain and modest dress, and heed Aldhelm's warnings against 'precious finery' would demonstrate the submissive character of the 'ideal' virgin. We cannot, of course, know whether Aldhelm's comments had any effect on his immediate audience.

Aldhelm's main theme in his warnings against dress is pride, specifically female pride. He echoes John's words, 'For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does (*he epithumia ton ophthalmon, kai he alazoneia tou biou*, 'literally the lust of the eyes and the pride of life') – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.'<sup>74</sup> What will be destroyed is the 'forbidden finery', linked to pride. In linking themselves to such prideful displays, they ally themselves against God. Aldhelm also warns that the 'disgrace of inexcusable arrogance and the sign of ostentatiousness' is evident in that 'no one wishes to be dressed in precious and colourful clothing when she can be seen by no one.'<sup>75</sup> The warnings of the Church Fathers find an echo in Aldhelm's words. To dress in any way that would draw attention to one-self demonstrates 'inexcusable arrogance'. The implication is that choosing to dress in fine clothes is a conscious decision to draw attention to one-self, and emphasise one's performance of independence.

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<sup>74</sup> 1 John 2:16-17.

<sup>75</sup> *Prosa LVI, Evidens namque, ut mihi videtur, inexcusabilis arrogantiae probrum et ostentationis indicium ex eo declaratur, quod nemo ibi pretiosis et coloratis vestibus indui desiderat, ubi a nullo valet videri; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 125.*

## PRIDE, SEXUALITY AND SUBMISSION – DRESS IN ALDHELM AND CYPRIAN

Aldhelm also returns to the theme of inner and outer qualities in relation to virginity, calling again for virginity to be adorned with ‘the pious chastity of the interior’. As with the earlier description, virginity is a vacant category, signified by ‘chastity’, therefore by abstinence from sexual intercourse. Aldhelm’s subtext is that the chaste nun should do nothing and be nothing that might create attention. Otherwise she is disobeying the precepts of the Church Fathers, and thus her showy dress is evidence of a dangerously independent frame of mind. In its non-conformity, such display is confirmation of a lack of obedience to the hierarchy of the Church. Stephanie Hollis, looking at Aldhelm’s comments on dress, argues that Aldhelm here differs Bede, in his warnings of secular activity and the destruction of Coldingham. Bede, in decrying Coldingham is openly undermining the double-monastery as an institution.<sup>76</sup> Aldhelm however is warning against nuns as a class, ‘giving currency to the view that women embody the temptations of the flesh’.<sup>77</sup> Thus Aldhelm, whilst paying lip-service to the role of women and the double-monastery, effectively undermines it, though with more subtlety than Bede.<sup>78</sup>

Aldhelm continues his diatribe against dress by paraphrasing Cyprian’s *De Habitu Virginum*,<sup>79</sup>

It is not acceptable for a virgin to be adorned to the beauty of her appearance, nor for her to take pride in the flesh and its attractiveness  
.... For the regalia of jewellery and clothing and the allurements of

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<sup>76</sup> *H.E.* IV.25.

<sup>77</sup> Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women*, p. 103.

<sup>78</sup> Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women*, p. 103.

<sup>79</sup> See also discussion in Chapter 2.

physical appearance are not appropriate to any but prostitutes and wanton women.... Let chaste and modest women flee from the dress of adulteresses, from the appearance of strumpets, from the furbelows of prostitutes and the trumperies of whores! ... Besides, if you dress yourself sumptuously and go out in public so as to attract notice, if you rivet the eyes of young men to you and draw the sighs of adolescent after you, and nourish the desire of carnal lust, and arouse the fires of sexual anticipation.... Your shameless dress and your immodest jewellery condemn you, nor can she who lives in such a way as to be the subject of passion be counted among the virgins of Christ.'<sup>80</sup>

Aldhelm expands upon his construction of the feminine as virgin or whore, one is either a virgin, at least in attitude and dress, or an 'adulteress', 'strumpet', 'prostitute' or 'whore'. Theoretically these comments apply to men and women, but Aldhelm constructs a polarity between the sexually active wife, a role that most of the women he addressed had performed, and the virgin, without reference to the husband or sexualised man.<sup>81</sup>

Cyprian combined dress and demeanour, one was indicative of the other, and as we have seen, Aldhelm followed this idea, using dress as part of the performance of gender and virginity or sexuality. The woman who dresses luxuriously is demonstrating 'inexcusable arrogance', and is performing the role of Eve, tempting

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<sup>80</sup> *Prosa LVII, Neque enim virginem fas est ad speciem formae suae comi aut de carne et eius pulchritudine gloriari...Ornamentorum enim ac vestium insignia et lenocinia formarum no nisi prostitutas et impudicis feminis congruent et nullarum fere pretiosior cultus est, quam quarum pudor vilis est. Eugiant castae virgins et pudicae incestarum cultus, habitus impudicarum, lupanarum insignia, ornatamenta metricum! ...si tu sumptuosius comas et per publicum notabiliter incedas, oculus in to iuvenum illicias, suspire adolescentium post te trahas, consupiscendi lubidinem nutrias sperandi fomenta succendas.... Redarguit te cultus imporbis et impudicus ornatus ne computari iam potest inter virgins Christi, quae sic vivit, ut posit adamari; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 125-126.*

<sup>81</sup> This is not to say Aldhelm does not include any husbands/ sexually active men, for example he discusses David, Joseph and Samson, all of whom engaged in sexual activity. As with Judith, they are

men by her appearance and drawing them to damnation, performing the role of the prostitute.<sup>82</sup> Any attempt to appear beautiful therefore marks one out as a prostitute. For Aldhelm, as for the Church Fathers, any woman who uses ornaments of dress, makeup or hair, can only be doing it to be attractive to men, thus risks being the cause of their damnation, as any reaction to her appearance will be her fault. The reference to women going out in public is interesting, as noted previously, this was a time in which nuns had much greater freedoms, particularly those with noble connexions.<sup>83</sup> Aldhelm is, of course, writing to only a tiny minority of physical virgins, so, having stressed the importance of the inner qualities of virginity, inadvertently questions his interior/exterior dichotomy by reminding the nuns that any inner quality is negated by outer appearance: 'even if you yourself don't perish, you nonetheless destroy others and present yourself to your onlookers as if you were poison or the sword, you cannot be excused as if you were of a chaste and modest mind.'<sup>84</sup> Aldhelm thereby indicates that the outer person is evidence of the inner; dress represents state of mind.

### **ALDHELM'S INNOVATION IN GENDER AND DRESS**

Cyprian was not the only Church Father who commented on, and condemned, female dress. It was a feature of such writings about virginity, and Aldhelm's tone, even at its most extreme does no more than reflect earlier writings. However, Aldhelm differs from his sources in considering, and denigrating, male dress – a major innovation. Aldhelm's awareness that his wider audience included men is again

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presented in a more ambiguous manner, but none of them are sexualised to the degree of the female models.

<sup>82</sup> See Jerome's comments that virgins should not be elegant, unbecoming, or conspicuous. *Ep.* 22.27.3.

<sup>83</sup> See discussion in Chapter 1.

<sup>84</sup> *Prosa* LVII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 125

evident in his construction of the text and his innovative comments. He quotes Gregory the Great, arguing that Christ praised John the Baptist for the roughness of his dress (Matthew 11.7-9), thus 'Consider what a fault it would be for men to want what the shepherd of the Church took care to avert even women from'.<sup>85</sup> The men within the monastery would have been drawn from the same social class as the women, and would have known the fine clothes of the court, and, at least some, would likely still enjoy wearing such dress. When Aldhelm describes the flashy dress of the world, he again includes men, referring to the 'forbidden ornaments and charming decorations' adopted by 'those of both sexes, not only those living cloistered under the discipline of the monastery but even the ecclesiastics whose clerical sphere of duty is under the control of a bishop'.<sup>86</sup> Clearly men and women are dressing inappropriately, and despite the historical emphasis on female dress, Aldhelm cannot ignore this challenge to the virginal life, to which he adds the reminder of episcopal authority. He delineates in some detail what such ornamentation constitutes for both sexes,

fine linen shirts, in scarlet or blue tunics, in necklines and sleeves embroidered with silk, their shoes are trimmed with red-dyed leather; the hair of their forelocks and the curls at their temples are crimped with a curling-iron; dark-grey veils for the head give way to bright and coloured head-dresses, which are sewn with interlacings of ribbons and hang down as far as the ankles. Fingernails are sharpened after the manner of falcons or hawks, or more properly, to the likeness of the

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<sup>85</sup> *Hom in evang I. Vi. 3; Prosa LV, Pensate, quae culpa sit, hoc etiam viros appetere, a quo curavit pastor ecclesiae et feminas prohibere!*; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 125.

<sup>86</sup> *Prosa LVIII, Pudet referre quorundam frontosam elationis impudentiam et comptam stoliditatis insolentiam, quae in utroque sexu non suum santimonialium sub regimine coenubii conversantium, verum etiam ecclesiasticorum sub ditione pontificali*; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 127.

night-owl, whom the innate need for food naturally incites to pursue and attack with cruelty small mice and birds with the curved trident of their feet, and the ravenous grappling hook of their talons.<sup>87</sup>

Interestingly, as he becomes ever more detailed in his diatribe, we see him moving back to female dress. Men might be wearing bright shirts and tunics, but they are not wearing veils or sharpening their nails. The pulls of Church Fathers and the description of the harlot are too strong. The greatest threat to the orderly life of the monastic is female vanity, as it is demonstrative of the greater disobedience of an independent spirit. In Aldhelm's construction of gender, he acknowledges the dress of men, indicative of pride and vanity, but it is primarily a female fault, because of Aldhelm's overarching themes of female obedience and submission. The images handed down to Aldhelm from John the Divine onwards, stress female vanity. Thus dress serves to reinforce gender roles, not subvert them despite Aldhelm's seeming inclusivity in his denigration of fashionable dress.

Aldhelm is clearly aware of the need to be deferent to his noble audience, and defends his lecture, 'since the wounds of love are better than the kisses of hatred'.<sup>88</sup> He adds a little later, 'But as I was about to speak of the glory of intact virginity, I began to harangue unnecessarily about the covering of garments – almost superfluously'.<sup>89</sup> Almost, but not quite, superfluously.

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<sup>87</sup> *Prosa LVII, Nam cultus Gemini sexu huiusmodi constat subucula bissina, tonica coccinea sive iacintina, capitium et manicae sericis clavatae; galliculae rubricatis pellibus ambiuntur; antiae frontis et temporum cincinni calamistro crispantur; pulla capitis velamina candidis et coloratis mafortibus cedunt, quae vittarum nexibus asutae talotenus prolixius dependunt. Ungues ritu falconum et accipitrum seu certe adinstar cavanorum accuuntur, quos naturaliter ingenita edendi necessitas instigat obunca pedum fuscinula et rapaci unguarum arpagine alites et sorices crudeliter insectando grassari; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 128.*

<sup>88</sup> *Prosa LVIII, quia meliora sunt vulnera diligentis quam oscula odientis; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 128.*

<sup>89</sup> *Prosa LVIII, Sed de intactae virginitatis gloria dicturi propemodum superflue de peplorum amiculo rethoricamur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, pp.128-9.*

## *CARMEN DE VIRGINITATE*

The *Carmen de Virginitate* does not include a list of addressees, as discussed in the first chapter. Instead, Aldhelm begins with a prayer, and compresses the theoretical discussion of virginity down to 247 lines.<sup>90</sup> Many of the introductory arguments of the *Prosa* are referred to in the *Carmen*, but the discussion is truncated, merely reminding the reader of the *Prosa*. Hence, Aldhelm does not construct a gendered virginity to the same extent as in the *Prosa*, although he incorporates the motifs of fertility and fecundity, and the martial imagery associated with virginity.

Aldhelm's introduction is radically different in the *Carmen*; in the poetic register he revels in classical citation and allusion.<sup>91</sup> Yet, he refers to his classical forebears only to dismiss them, stating that he will rely on inspiration from God and the Word, as did the Psalmist.<sup>92</sup> As David was moved by God to sing of his praises, so Aldhelm's *Carmen* will exalt God through the praise of his saints and virgins. Aldhelm adds, 'Behold, let these promised songs be composed in new verse!'<sup>93</sup> This is 'novo verso' or 'new verse' in several senses. As Michael Lapidge points out, Aldhelm is writing Christian verse in hexameter, the first Anglo-Latin writer to do so. However this is also 'new verse' in that it is Christian, compared with the classical poetry referenced in the preceding lines.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1-127; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 98.

<sup>91</sup> See discussion in Chapter 1; Orchard, *Poetic Art*.

<sup>92</sup> *Carmen* ll. 33-44; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 104.

<sup>93</sup> *Carmen* l. 45, *En promissa novo scribantur carmina versu!*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 104.

<sup>94</sup> *Carmen* ll. 76-83; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 104-5. Cf. Isaiah 6:6, where Isaiah had his lips cleansed by the Seraphim with a burning coal, so that, 'straightaway, glowing deservedly with heavenly inspiration...and with the white heat of scripture'.

## THE HIERARCHY OF SANCTITY IN THE *CARMEN*

Aldhelm introduces virginity by referring to the three states of humankind, which he places in three orders, 'matrimonial life', 'a second order of the chaste', and 'virgins whose distinction surpasses the customs mentioned above.'<sup>95</sup> We saw how Aldhelm's innovation in creating a category of the chaste rather than widows was an important feature in acknowledging his largely non-virgin Anglo-Saxon audience. In the *Carmen*, the idea is expanded. Aware that there were some, even in his immediate audience, who had left their spouses in order to dedicate themselves to God, he includes them in his hierarchy of chastity. These women (and men) have disobeyed Paul's injunction to remain married, but just as Theodore had to acknowledge their deeds, Aldhelm lacks the authority to chastise them. Instead he must accept that this is the situation. Thus he situates them within the hierarchy of sanctity, implying that those who have left marriages for the religious life must be a considerable minority. He describes them as those, 'who having once been married reject the union and sever the restraining bonds of indulgence allowed to them, abandoning the lurid associations of impure flesh so that they may preserve a lasting age when they rend the chains of marriage previously enjoined.' He later describes the second order of the chaste as those 'who now break the yoked union of marriage'.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> *Carmen* ll. 80-98, *Humani generis triplex distantia fertur;/ Quae modo per mundum triquadro cardine degit/ Et studeat in terris mercari regna Tonantis;/ Denique nonnullos sortitur vita iugalis;/ Qui recte vivunt concessa lege tororum/ Et praecepta Dei toto conamine mentis/ Conservare stuent thalami sub iure manentes;/ Post haec castorum gradus alter et ordo secundu/ Subsequitur, nupti qui iam conubia spernunt/ Ac indulta sibi scindunt retinacula luxus/ Lurida linquentes spurcae consortia carnis;/ Ut castis proprium conservent moribus aevum;/ Dum conexa prius thalamorum vincula rumpunt;/ Tertia virgineis fulgescit vita lucernes;/ Cuius praecellit praefatos infula ritus; Cf. Matthew 13:23 But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.*

<sup>96</sup> *Carmen* ll. 121-124, *Qui modo dirumpunt conubia nexa tororum/ Et demunt proprias devote metna lecebras/ Mundanae licita spernentes gaudia pompae; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 105; Thus they



Clearly this includes men and women and is not a gender specific action. And although gender is not as important in these representations of sanctity, Aldhelm continues to blur the division between virginity and chastity. He wrote, 'Chastity is called the queen of virtues, so long as it is joined in chaste will to the companies of angels.'<sup>97</sup> Such a description is reminiscent of virginity in its association with the angelic life, and the use of 'chastity' as a description serves to include those who have left a marriage and those who have lost their marriage mate in death. As has been seen in the *Prosa*, the elision between virginity and chastity enables Aldhelm to create an inclusive category of inner virginity, one that reflected the parody and queer performance of the status. Yet, despite virginity's multiple identities, Aldhelm described a performance of virginity that suits his wider ideas of the roles of men and women within the Church.

Aldhelm continues, 'Purity of mind ruling a chaste body is a virgin flower'.<sup>98</sup> Although virginity and chastity may be approximate equivalents in Aldhelm's construction, marriage remains a poor third, for example, Aldhelm echoes some of his *Prosa* comparisons, as marriage is equated with 'the dark-winged diver, filling the maw of its stomach with scaly fish' or 'the talkative black jackdaw, which tried to plunder the husks of corn and the crops', whilst virginity is still represented by the peacock, 'it is a sign and symbol of beloved Virginity, which by the devout disposition is accustomed to tread down the wicked filth of the world'<sup>99</sup> Similarly, an

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also turn from the worldly temptations encapsulated in marriage and achieve this through a devout mind.

<sup>97</sup> *Carmen* ll.185-185, *Integritas quoque virtutum regina vocatur./ Lungitur angelicis dum casta sponte manipulis; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 107.

<sup>98</sup> *Carmen* ll. 191-192a, *Integritas animae regnans in corpora casto/ Flos est virgineus; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 107.

<sup>99</sup> *Carmen* ll. 222-230, *Mergula nec penius nigris contemnitur alis/ Ingluivem ventris squamosis piscibus implens/ Garrulus aut etiam vilescit graculus ater./ Qui segetum glumas et laeti cespitis occas/ Depopulare studet carpens de messe maniples/ Quamquam versicolor flavescat penna pavonis/ Et teretes rutient plus rubro murices cycli./ Cuius Formosa species et fulva venustas/ Omnia fabrorum porro molimina vincit; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 108.

interesting comparison can be made between the activity of virgins and the chaste, and the corresponding passivity of the married.<sup>100</sup> The virgins are ‘trampling on the fetid contagion of impure flesh’, and the chaste ‘break the yoked union of marriage’. In contrast, the married are portrayed as passive and clearly gendered male, ‘he does not wholly tread under the (sexual) engagements of wedded life

## GENDER AND ACTIVE VIRGINITY

Thus, in the *Carmen*, Aldhelm creates a more active and aggressive description of virginity, than he offered in the *Prosa*, using the image of virginity trampling down enemies,

Virginity, treading upon the false frivolity of worldly indulgence, appears at the highest station of the virtues, since it is the most chaste sister of the angelic life: in her the false wantonness of this world does not hold sway, but rather her spirit struggles to curb rebellious flesh so that it can constrain hideous sins, and thus, gaining victory destroys the enormous act of sin, which is normally accustomed to overcome even iron-clad minds, even though they appear to be as strong as whetstone.

*Mundani luxus calcans ludibria falsa*

*Virginitas summo virtutem vertice paret,*

*Dum soror angelicae constet castissima vitae.*

*In qua non regnat fallax pertulantia saeculi,*

*Sed potius certat carnem frenare rebellem*

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<sup>100</sup> *Carmen* ll. 121ff; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 105-106.

*Spiritus, ut tetras posit compescere noxas*  
*Et facinas scelerum superans explodat inorme,*  
*Quae plerumque solent ferratas vincere mentes,*  
*Quamlibet existant praedurae cotis adinstar.*<sup>101</sup>

The motif of virginity fighting is continued through the work, to a much greater extent than in the *Prosa*, and culminating in the *psychomachia*. This aspect of Aldhelm's construction of virginity in the *Carmen* will be considered in greater depth in Chapters 5 and 6. The martial imagery of the *psychomachia* is important in our understanding of the manner in which Aldhelm balances the call to arms with his theme of female submission and obedience.

Aldhelm also continues with his use of fertility and fecundity in his construction of virginity. 'Upon these [virgins, the chaste and the married] also from fecund seed He bestows fruits'.<sup>102</sup> The most fruitful of the three categories are, of course, the virgins, 'He promised fruitful bundles by the hundred-fold to the blessed virgins'.<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless, as Aldhelm considerably reduced his discussion of theoretical virginity, there is no room for a gendered virginity or the construction of gendered Christian behaviour equivalent to his discussion in the *Prosa*. Nor is it easy to trace the recurrent themes of submission and obedience.

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<sup>101</sup> *Carmen* ll. 100-107; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 105.

<sup>102</sup> *Carmen* ll. 111-113, *His quoque fecund largitur semine fruges./ Quas pia perpetui praedixit Gloria regni/ Glascere sulcati per squalid iugera ruris*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 105; These are the thirtyfold, sixtyfold and hundredfold fruits of Matthew 13. See discussion above and in Chapter 2.

<sup>103</sup> *Carmen* ll. 114-115, *Sanctis centenos meritorum iure maniples/ Virginibus iugiter secundos sorte spondit*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 105.

## TEXTUAL THEMES – PRIDE, SUBMISSION AND OBEDIENCE

Thus in Aldhelm's opening discussion on virginity, he employs certain themes. His theoretical virginity includes elements that cross gender, but it is undercut by Aldhelm's orthodox ideas of female submission within the Church. He introduces the importance of authority – masculine – and the concomitant need for obedience – female – a theme he constantly returns to in *De Virginitate*. The physical, gendered, body is a problematic construction, but the physicality of bodily experience is celebrated. In eliding female corporeality Aldhelm can concentrate on the inner quality of the virgin rather than the problematical physicality of the virgin's body. Yet Aldhelm's stress on the 'inner man' also serves to invert gender expectations. The nuns, as women, lack the physical strength of the 'outer man', whether athlete or soldier, their power is internal, relying on God and their spiritual qualities.<sup>104</sup> He further problematises the female body by constructing it through fertility and reproductive capacity, but the virgin body denies its reproductive ability. He also constructs virginity itself through fertility, likening it to the flower that generates fruit. Throughout the text Aldhelm's sensuality is apparent, whether he is describing oiled wrestlers, bees struggling to fill greedy stomachs, or food. So whilst Aldhelm plays with physicality, revelling in the bodily sensations he evokes, his elision of the female body serves to construct a virginity that initially appears to approach a third sex, offering an experience negotiated through elements that are gendered both male and female.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Salih, *Versions of Virginity*; It would be interesting to compare the sensuality of religious experience as constructed in Aldhelm with that described by later mystics and female saints, especially in the light of work by Caroline Walker Bynum.

Aldhelm's fears regarding authority and female obedience continue to shape his text, just as he reminds them of the need to submit to masculine authority, so he warns that the opposite would be to succumb to pride. Virgins, aware of their exalted position, are most at risk, 'inflated with (over-)confidence in their virginity they arrogantly swell up and in no way to the turn away the most cruel monster Pride, devourer of the other virtues.'<sup>106</sup> He describes Pride, 'yet like a fierce queen she is known to usurp for herself the authority of tyrannical power and the sway of government'.<sup>107</sup> So 'fierce' female authority is automatically deviant. Aldhelm began *De Virginitate* by describing 'Hildelith, teacher of the regular discipline and of the monastic way of life'.<sup>108</sup> This is female authority in its correct place, the abbess teaching the monastic way of life. Pride though, usurps power, appropriating authority that is not rightfully hers. After the reference to Hildelith, the comments on rightful and beneficial authority in the text have all related to masculine authority. Aldhelm also reminds his audience, 'Lucifer ... fell reeling into the profound abyss of pride'.<sup>109</sup> Hence even the brightest of angels fell to the seductions of feminised Pride. Aldhelm's subtext warns that the unwarranted authority of women is lethal. As part of his warning, Aldhelm returns to the theme of acceptable authority. 'Therefore let the true and not trivial glory of delicate virginity be protected by the true and not false precaution of humility, and let it be restrained as if (it were) the gentlest playfulness

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<sup>106</sup> *Prosa X, quod se caelibes castos et ab omni spurcitiæ sentina funditus immunes arbitrentur, fiducia virginitatis inflati arroganter intumescunt et nequaquam cruelissimam superbiae balenam, ceterarum virtutum devoratricem, humilitatis cercilo declinant; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 67.*

<sup>107</sup> *Prosa XI, Nam in conflictu octo principalium vitiorum, licet ultima ponatur, tamen quasi atrox regina tyrannicae potestatis imperium et dominandi monarchium prae ceteris sibi usurpare dinoscitur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 67.*

<sup>108</sup> *Prosa Praefatio, Hildelithae, regularis discipline et monasticae conversationis magistrae; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 59.*

<sup>109</sup> *Prosa XI, quod prius Lucifer parasitorum sodalibus vallatus et apostatarum satellitibus glomeratus in profundum superbiae barathrum; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 67.*

of a noble infancy (restrained) by the stern tutorship of discipline'.<sup>110</sup> Unusually Aldhelm describes virginity as 'delicate', which serves to emphasise the importance of 'humility' as protective. Again, 'tutorship', hence the need for submission to the authority and training of others is mentioned. From the text we see that the performance of virginity revolves around such submission and is as evident from the dress of the virgin as their behaviour.

Finally, we see that Aldhelm, whilst demonstrating an innovative awareness of his mixed audience, is firmly focused on virginity as a female quality. Though he includes his male audience, for example using masculine imagery invoking the male body, and in his tirade against dress, primarily his themes of submission and obedience are intended for the religious women. Whilst vital for the unity of the monastic house that all submit to the hierarchy, the danger of pride and usurpation of authority are presented as dangers for the female. Again, following Scott Gwara's suggestion that the addressees are heads of double-houses, Aldhelm's unease with female independence is to the fore.<sup>111</sup> Consequently, Aldhelm's theoretical virginity may approach or appear to reveal itself as a third gender, opening up multiple, queer virginal identities in aspects of Aldhelm's construction, such as his encouragement to education and study, but the practice of the qualities he associates with virginity, the performance of virginity that he tolerates, emphasises his concentration on female virginity. By describing his addressees as 'reverend virgins of Christ', he praises their chaste commitment to serve God. Through his introduction, he creates a virginity highlighting the many of the qualities we saw associated with women in the Church

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<sup>110</sup> *Prosa XVI, Igitur vera et non fribula delicatae virginitatis gloria vera et non falsa humilitatis cautrela tutetur et quasi tenerrima nobilis infantiae lascivia duro disciplinae pedagogio refrenetur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 72.*

<sup>111</sup> See discussion in Chapter 1.

Fathers. For all the active martial imagery, the women are 'handmaidens', serving a patriarchal Father under the guidance of a patriarchal Church.

Hence in the *Prosa* Aldhelm creates a theoretical virginity that draws on masculine and feminine imagery. He avoids, where possible, any association between virginity and the female body, and so evades the problematic relationship between physical virginity and the spiritual qualities associated with virginity. The brevity of the opening address in the *Carmen* makes it more difficult to trace such ideas. Nevertheless, this theoretical construct is only one aspect of Aldhelm's depiction of virginity. In contrast his formation of hagiographical virginity in both texts, is highly gendered, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ALDHELM'S HAGIOGRAPHY AND GENDERED VIRGINITY

Aldhelm, in the opening sections of the *Prosa* and *Carmen*, drew on gender imagery to construct a virginity he could relate to his immediate audience of largely non-virginal nuns. Does he differ in his hagiographical construction of virginity? The theoretical spiritual equality implied by Galatians 3:28 opens up the potential for the construction of a third gender, a state in which men and women could overcome social gender in their quest for the angelic sanctity of virginity.<sup>1</sup> This chapter therefore begins with a brief overview of the development of virginal sanctity, and then argue that Aldhelm's hagiographical depiction remains strictly within the heteronormative gender of early Christianity. A general discussion of the types of sanctity Aldhelm employs, and a close reading of several of the *vitae* will demonstrate that Aldhelm constructs a more active virginity for his male examples, and a more passive, subservient virginity for the female, in line with the stereotypes he inherited from the Church Fathers.<sup>2</sup> By considering the themes Aldhelm uses through the *vitae* this becomes evident, for example his connexion of female saint with enclosure, and male saints with teaching and shepherding the flock. Even in his depiction of the miraculous in the *vitae*, Aldhelm differentiates between his male and female saints. This chapter will show that he chooses examples, particularly male examples, which enable him to support the masculine and hierarchical authority of the Church, which additionally emphasises the need for female submission. Hence, although Aldhelm innovates by including a large section on male virgins, indeed his section on male

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> The more transgressive saints will be considered separately in the next chapter.



sanctified virgins is considerably longer than that on female exempla Aldhelm, perpetuates the late antique construction of gender and sanctity.

During the middle ages, redactions of earlier *vitae* included fewer specifics from the original accounts; rather there was more emphasis on the spiritual issues exemplified by the saint. The saints themselves became idealized ciphers, without their individuality; often nobly born, always handsome or pretty, wise and virtuous, and, even through the most horrendous torture, they never display doubt or fear but trust to God, if not to save them then to sanctify them. In their anonymity they are useful tools for examining medieval ideas of gender construction, as they rely on stereotype and cliché. The repetitive formulae that make up the *vitae* lend themselves particularly to Judith Butler's theory of performativity. As with virginity, the performance of sanctity was created and perpetuated through the repetition of certain actions within the text: to act the saint was to be the saint. And as with virginity, the validation of the wider community was necessary to achieve and retain status.

Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, examining the reception of saints' lives in a later period, comments that whilst one might argue that these women merely exchange secular patriarchy for spiritual patriarchy, 'Choice metaphorically and allegorically conceived within patriarchal structures still makes the choice explicit'.<sup>3</sup> This is undoubtedly true, as it is impossible to step outside of the patriarchal structures, but it is equally true that in the case of the majority of these saints, this choice can only be made because they also choose to die. For example, Christina destroys her father's idols, and is immediately tortured and martyred.<sup>4</sup> Thus even though these women may appear to challenge patriarchal authority, they are not a long-term threat to this

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<sup>3</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, 'Saints Lives and the Female Reader', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 27 (1991), 314-332, at p. 323.

<sup>4</sup> *Prosa XLVII; Aldhelm : The Prose Works*, trans. by M. Lapidge and M. Herren, (Cambridge : D. S. Brewer, 1979), p. 114.

authority. Where they demonstrate transgressive or queer behaviour, they are tightly controlled through the expectations of the text. The virgin martyr may demonstrate, for example, seemingly 'masculine' behaviour with the encouragement of the Church, but this is temporary, and curtailed through the necessary martyrdom of the saint.<sup>5</sup>

Emma Pettit correctly notes of Aldhelm's virgins, 'only male saints are masculinized; in contrast female saints are aligned with culturally female characteristics'.<sup>6</sup> Despite the range of virgins in *De Virginitate* - Old Testament, New Testament, late antique, papal, virgin martyrs, transvestite, and married couples - this remains a feature of Aldhelm's construction of virginity vis-à-vis hagiography, in contrast to his rather slippery exploitation of gender when discussing virginity in the opening section of the *Prosa*.<sup>7</sup> Although the women demonstrate some masculine behaviour, Aldhelm constantly contains their performance, bringing them back to acceptable feminine behaviour within the text. He is deeply uncomfortable with female autonomy. For example, although Caecilia converts her husband, it is not by her preaching and teaching, as in the original *vita*, but through her example (and the threat of 'angelic weapons').<sup>8</sup> Aldhelm restricts her performance to fit the Christian norms he inherited from his late antique sources, and Caecilia is firmly positioned as a wife and therefore subordinate to her husband.<sup>9</sup>

Aldhelm's verbosity, and the variety of saints he selects, creates difficulty in finding connecting themes between the *vitae*, though this is not impossible. Thus, the *vita* of Agnes' is specific and detailed, and that of Eulalia is highly abbreviated, yet

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<sup>5</sup> See further discussion below.

<sup>6</sup> Emma Pettit, 'Holiness and Masculinity in Aldhelm's *Opus Geminatum De Virginitate*', in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. by P. H. Cullum and K. J. Lewis (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Aldhelm's male saints are drawn from a wider range of examples than his female, for example he takes no female examples from the Bible.

<sup>8</sup> *Carmen* l. 1729, *Sed mox angelicis ulciscens vindicat armis; Aldhelm: The Poetic Works*, trans. by M. Lapidge and J. L. Rosier (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), p. 141.

<sup>9</sup> Agatha, Lucia, Caecilia, and Eugenia are discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

both *vitae* highlight the endurance of a woman against social expectation and pressure.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, it is evident that he uses the *vitae* to stress the themes he has already introduced, particularly importance of male authority and female submission, the image of carnal filth versus virginal purity, and warnings against pride and ornate dress. These issues will be demonstrated in the following discussion.

Over and over again Aldhelm presents us with beautiful/noble women, refusing to capitulate to marriage, being tortured and ultimately dying to retain their physical integrity, or priest and bishops standing guard over the congregation. Neither group challenges gender expectations, but confirms them through their clichéd performance of virginal sanctity. This is a different presentation of virginity from that noted in Aldhelm's introductory section. Whilst in that section he acknowledged the largely non-virginal status of his audience, by eliding the physical body of the female virgin. In the hagiography he remains within the motifs of the genre, and stresses the importance of physical integrity for his female saints. This serves to distance the lives of the saints from the reality of Aldhelm's audience. The independence available to the saint through her virginal status is not accessible to the non-virginal nuns, a fact that Aldhelm is able to highlight by concentrating so intently on the intact physical bodies of the saints.

Crucially, for our understanding of the relative roles and power of autonomy of his saints, Aldhelm introduces his hagiographical section by describing the relationship between Jesus, his mother Mary, and the apostle John. Jesus, from the cross, entrusts his mother to the care of John; the female virgin is placed in a subservient position to the male, and even the Mother of God must acknowledge

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<sup>10</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2009-2023, 1925-1969; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 145, 147; *Prosa* XLV and XLVI; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 111-112.

masculine authority.<sup>11</sup> These examples enable to Aldhelm to remind his female audience of the need to remain obedient to male authority, offering them, and us, a prism through which to read the hagiography. In both the *Prosa* and *Carmen* there are more male examples, and Aldhelm discusses them at greater length. He also uses a surprising number of educated saints, presumably to echo the experiences of his audience noble nuns (and monks).

## THE CREATION OF HAGIOGRAPHICAL SANCTITY

The origins of the literary saint's *vita* lie in late antiquity, in a very different culture and milieu to Anglo-Saxon England. The cult of the saint was an important feature of early Christianity, arising in the east from the persecution suffered by Christians. It was thought that a Christian martyred for his or her faith possessed special intercessory powers with God, hence they were venerated and their powers invoked and celebrated.<sup>12</sup> Initially, sainthood was achieved by merely by being acclaimed a saint by the local population of Christians, and miracles, particularly healing miracles, were considered to be 'proof' of the sanctity of the saint.<sup>13</sup> However by the fourth century saints' cults were becoming widespread in the west, and concomitant with this, the nature of sainthood was changing, as Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg notes, 'The making of saints did not occur within a social or cultural vacuum.'<sup>14</sup> As state persecution had ceased and Christianity had become the dominant religion, a martyr's death was unlikely, and instead a life of asceticism became the required proof of

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<sup>11</sup> *Prosa VII*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> P. Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); See also Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100* (Chicago and London; University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 1-9.

<sup>13</sup> There was a move to increasing formalisation and episcopal involvement from the eighth century, and the first papal canonisation occurred in 993; See Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex*, p. 5.

piety. David Hugh Farmer comments, 'the ascetic, monastic life came to be regarded as something of a substitute for martyrdom, and those who pursued it faithfully as worthy of the same honour'.<sup>15</sup>

With the change in what was considered sanctified behaviour, there was also a change in the emphasis of saints' *vitae*. Rather than reinforce the believers' faith against paganism, the *vita* became the method by which Christian doctrine was explained and validated, and Christian behaviour exemplified, though taken to extremes. Schulenburg states, 'The alleged purpose or expressed end of all saints' Lives was, however, pastoral and didactic: to edify the faithful, to teach Christian virtue, and strengthen Christian resolve'.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Leslie Donovan argues that 'Embedded in the formulaic conventions and stereotypical characters of these texts, individual secular Christians, church authorities, and monastic caretakers discovered ways to understand the function of their ordinary lives within the larger scope of their extraordinary Christian heritage as illustrated by the saints' lives'.<sup>17</sup> The performance of sanctity by the saint was excessive, as they refused to be contained by social expectations. In this way, a queer reading can be imposed, as the saint, albeit temporarily, moves outside of heteronormative expectations of behaviour. This did not mean the lives of saints were automatically to be emulated; the excessive performance of sanctity was of necessity extreme and anti-social, for saints had their focus on the world to come not on the secular world of the everyday.<sup>18</sup> Jocelyn Wogan Browne notes that hagiography was less about the regulation of sexual activity and desire, rather it formed a 'more complicated and reciprocal investigation, for both

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<sup>15</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, ed. by David Hugh Farmer (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1987), p. xix.

<sup>16</sup> Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex*, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> *Woman Saints' Lives in Old English Prose*, trans. by Leslie Donovan (Woodbridge : D. S. Brewer, 1999), p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Matthew 25:34 then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.'

male and female, of the social and cultural boundaries to identity'.<sup>19</sup> This identity could be multiple and queer.

## **GENDER AND HAGIOGRAPHICAL SANCTITY – FEMALE SEXUALITY AND VIRGINITY**

The late antique *vitae*, which Aldhelm uses as sources, were frequently anonymous, nevertheless, they were most likely written by men, and were certainly copied and adapted within the male monastic community.<sup>20</sup> Evidently this influenced the manner in which men and women were depicted, and what male and female behaviour was considered acceptable. For example, in the stereotypical world of hagiography, women were depicted in two ways: the virgin and the whore. On the one hand, through the physicality of their bodies and their (frequently feared as rampant) sexuality, they were linked to the fallen Eve. On the other hand, that very physicality linked them to Mary, the Mother of God, and as it was from her matter the Christ was born, redemption came via the female body.<sup>21</sup> Hence the female body was both a woman's curse and her salvation, but any aspect of female physicality or 'nature' was 'other' to the male writers, particularly the reproductive ability of the woman.

Virginity became the most important aspect of the portrayal of the female saint, eliding the 'otherness' of femaleness, and empowering the saint to demonstrate cross-gendered behaviour.<sup>22</sup> Thus, as noted in Chapter 2 the male writers of the

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<sup>19</sup> Jocelyn Wogan Browne, 'The Virgin's Tale', in *Feminist Readings in Middle English*, ed. by Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (London : Routledge, 1994), p.178.

<sup>20</sup> There are some Merovingian *vitae* written by women, which have been studied by Susan Wemple and Jo Ann McNamara. They argue that there is a clear difference between *vitae* written by women and those by men, and John Kitchen who argues against such evident differences.

<sup>21</sup> A common biological argument regarding the conception of children was that men provided the life force as it were and women the matter out of which the foetus was formed.

<sup>22</sup> See Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist : Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

Church depicted the female nature as something to be overcome by the truly pious woman, as Ambrose wrote

Who does not believe is a woman, and is designated thus by the name of the sex of her body; for who believes attains the perfect man, to the degree of the fullness of the age of Christ, now being empty of name of the world, the sex of her body, the slippery slope of youth, the chattiness of old age.<sup>23</sup>

Whilst male and female saints were seen as equally sanctified, there were differences in their lives and the ways in which they were presented. This was especially the case as through the dissemination of female *vitae*, the Church sought to mould ideas of the laity about the role of women in the church and in society.<sup>24</sup> The Church Fathers warned frequently about female sexuality, hence whilst both men and women saints struggled to remain chaste, for women this was usually the crucial component of the *vita*. Elizabeth Robertson notes, 'In most male saints' Lives, where sexual temptation might be one problem for the male contemplative, it was subordinated in a progressive series of temptations, usually culminating in a temptation to pride. In female saints' lives, sexual temptation was either the saints' sole or her central temptation'.<sup>25</sup> This is a little disingenuous however as the female saint is never sexually attracted to her tempter; he may tempt her with marriage and wealth, but the sexual element is always presented as a threat rather than a temptation. Indeed, the temptation is usually the other way around, as the saint's very existence as a woman tempts the men around her, pagan and Christian. Even when she is passing as a man,

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<sup>23</sup> Ambrose, *Expositionis in Evangelium secundum Lucam Libri X*, PL 15.

<sup>24</sup> See discussion in Chapter 2

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the female Audience* (Knoxville : University of Tennessee Press, 1990), p. 40.

she is a sexual temptation, for both men and women. This is a clear feature of Aldhelm's exempla, as will be demonstrated below.

## ALDHELM AND FEMALE VIRGINITY

Virginity is central to women's *vitae*, the be-all-and-end-all of their sanctity. Thus, it is frequently the reason for their martyrdom as they preserve their virginal state against pagan (or Christian) lust. The patristic writers depicted the virginal woman as 'virile', yet they viewed female nature as driven by sensuality and weak in comparison to the male.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, female desire, and desire of the female, was seen as something to be overcome by women and avoided by men, leading to some of the most misogynistic writings about women. As has been discussed, the Church Fathers created an ideal virgin in their writings, one whose performance of virginity required her to remain enclosed, avoid male company, weep frequently, eat sparingly, and laugh infrequently.<sup>27</sup> But this does not seem to have been reflected in the hagiography. How does Aldhelm construct his saintly virgins through the gender norms passed down to him from the Church Fathers?

The gender construction of even a sanctified woman revolves around her sexuality, for example Eugenia, having assumed the identity of a man, still tempts others sexually.<sup>28</sup> Female sexuality is never absent; it is portrayed as inescapable. The women, despite their virginal status, are defined by their sexuality, and whilst their gift to God is the renunciation of reproductive sexuality, it is impossible to

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<sup>26</sup> See Newman, *Virile Woman*.

<sup>27</sup> See discussion in Chapter 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Prosa XLIV; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 110-111. *Carmen* ll. 1883-1924; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 144-145.



renounce their inherent sexuality as women.<sup>29</sup> Hence the virgin martyrs do not typically opt for the monastic life in these *vitae*, as their renunciation is of marriage and children. Again, female sexuality is inherently part of the construction of saint as the bride of the lamb, an element that is removed from the orthodox male experience of sanctity, although, whilst the virgin herself might direct her desire to God and Christ, she remains a danger to others. Aldhelm uses this motif on occasion, along with the erotic imagery of the Song of Songs, to describe the marriage relationship between the saint and Christ, which sexualises the religious experience of the female saint.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, men renounce the world, opting out of secular society for the religious or contemplative life.<sup>31</sup> Yet they continue to have access to authority through the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church, a factor which Aldhelm highlights throughout the male exempla.

## THE QUESTION OF MALE CELIBACY

Only relatively recently have scholars considered the construction of masculine identity within the Church.<sup>32</sup> Much of the work concentrates on the high middle ages, as there is more available evidence. Also, during the medieval period, the issue of male chastity came to the fore as the Church began legislating on celibacy. Although clerical celibacy was *expected* from the Council of Elvira (306), it did not become

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<sup>29</sup> See Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginité in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge : D. S. Brewer, 2001). She argues, p. 10, that virginité itself is 'not a denial or rejection of sexuality, but is itself a sexuality, by which I mean a culturally specific organisation of desires'; Cf. the use of erotic language in the Church Fathers or the medieval mystics, for example.

<sup>30</sup> This is a particular element of Agnes' *vita*.

<sup>31</sup> Aldhelm includes several male saints who choose the eremitic life, for example, Anthony, Hilarion, Apollonius. There are no female equivalents.

<sup>32</sup> *Medieval Masculinities : Men in Medieval West*, ed. by C. A. Lees with Thelma Fenster and Jo Ann McNamara (Minneapolis and London : University of Minnesota Press, 1994); D. M. Hadley, *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London : Longman, 1999); *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities : Men in the Medieval West*, ed. by Jacqueline Murray (London and New York : Garland, 1999); *Holiness and Masculinity*, Cullum and Lewis.

Church law until the second Lateran Council (1139). This created centuries of confusion in which the Church promoted celibacy, but could not enforce it, sending a mixed message for the behaviour expected by a 'holy' man. As celibacy became first an expectation and later a requirement for the clergy, men's actual experience of women decreased, thus femininity and female sexuality were increasingly demonised and perceived as a threat.

Male saints are usually depicted as celibate, but their sanctity, unlike the female saints, lies elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> Celibacy, for the male saint, is merely a box to tick, and Aldhelm is unusual in emphasising it strongly as a feature of their sanctity.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, whilst a female saint may face marriage as a temptation, for her male counterpart, it is more likely to be lust.<sup>35</sup> For example, Chrysanthus is tempted by 'very beautiful girls adorned in sumptuous dresses had prepared the luxurious delights of wine and the sumptuous entertainment of a feast, combining unrestrained shrieks of joy with the light-hearted embraces of sexual play, so that they might soften the iron resolve of the youth with such blandishments.'<sup>36</sup> Whilst women are indivisible from sexuality, female virgin martyrs never face such explicitly erotic temptation. The account does not just describe the temptation of Chrystanthus by female beauty, but interpellates him as a voyeur as the women perform their femininity through sexual play. That they are *virgines* stresses their youth, but also interpellates all women, even the 'virgins of Christ' addressed by Aldhelm, into the category of sexual, and therefore dangerous, woman. In contrast, Agnes is desired by

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<sup>33</sup> See discussion above.

<sup>34</sup> Though this is not surprising given the subject of the text.

<sup>35</sup> For example, Hilarion, 'bridled his wanton body with a strict rule, removing the torrid burning of his lascivious flesh', *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 120; *Carmen* ll. 803-804, *Hic stricta corpus frenebat lege petulcum/ Torrida lascivae demens incendia carnis*.

<sup>36</sup> *Prosa XXXV, ubi pulcherrimae virgines pretiosae comptaie cicladibus dilicatas defruti dilicias et sumptuosa ferculorum convivial praepararent effrenatos laetitiae cachinnos et iocosos ludorum amplexus miscentes, ut in talibus blandimentis ferrea iuvenis praecordia mollescerent; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 97.

a suitor who 'sought through earnest prayers to take noble Agnes in marriage. He offers a golden amulet with ruby gems, also promising many talents of silver'.<sup>37</sup> Her temptation is wealth and status, rather than sexual play.

In Chapter 2, it was noted that women are warned to control their desires – even eating until replete can stoke lust. However, for Aldhelm, it is the men who display asceticism and self-control, and importantly, need to perform their sanctity in this way to avoid lust. Hilarion 'bridled his wanton body with a strict rule, removing the torrid burning of his lascivious flesh. He repulsed the very beginnings of titillating lust, treading severely upon the first playfulness of youth'.<sup>38</sup> This is also the case when men withdraw from the world, as it is often directly linked to self-control.<sup>39</sup> Paul the Hermit entered the Egyptian desert, 'where the attractions of carnal filth grow faint and the pleasures of worldly delight become worthless'.<sup>40</sup>

Emma Pettit has examined the way in which Aldhelm creates a masculine quality for his saints, within the milieu of the double monastery. She notes that in opting for the monastic life, men were expected to make a radical break with their secular lifestyle, thus with the secular markers of masculinity, 'Men were prohibited not only from carrying weapons and engaging in active combat (including hunting), but also from the physical potency, aggression and heroism associated with the warrior status.'<sup>41</sup> This was clearly a problem in affirming a masculine identity, and Pettit compares Aldhelm's depiction of male and female saints, demonstrating that

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<sup>37</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1934-1935, *Aurea cum rubris offert crepundia gemmis/ Necnon argenti spondendo plura talenta*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> *Carmen* ll. 803-806, *Hic stricta corpus frenebat lege petulcum/ Torrida lasciviae demens incendia carnis;/ Quique titillantis spreuit primordial luxus/ Prima iuventutis calcans ludicra severus*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 120.

<sup>39</sup> See further discussion below.

<sup>40</sup> *Prosa* XXVIII, *qua carnalis spurcitiae blandimenta fatescunt et mundane luxus oblectamenta vilescent*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren p. 87.

<sup>41</sup> Pettit, 'Holiness and Masculinity', p. 9.

the male saints are more dynamic and active in their performance.<sup>42</sup> Hence the performance of masculine and feminine virginity in the hagiography of Aldhelm is quite different.

Male saints are required act rather than merely react to the pagans and the temptations around them.<sup>43</sup> This is in part because they are more likely to hold a specific position within the Church, affording them a status and authority within the social and religious structure that is unavailable to women.<sup>44</sup> Hence they do not need the special dispensation afforded by the *ancilla dei* motif, discussed below; there is no masculine equivalent as society allows them the authority to act publicly on the basis of their gender. Similarly, as will be discussed in more detail below, while miracles occurring in female *vitae* are more likely to benefit the saint herself, men are more likely to act on behalf of the community, be it an individual or a group. For example, a repeated feature of female hagiography, and one that Aldhelm highlights, is the threat of the brothel. The saint is protected in some way, as Agnes, for example, is protected by a Divine covering.<sup>45</sup> In male *vitae*, a recurring theme, again used by Aldhelm, involves the saint defeating paganism or heresy. Consequently, the female saint is protected by divine power and her integrity is protected, while the male saint benefits the Christian community and the Church's integrity is protected.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Pettit, 'Holiness and Masculinity', p. 17. Pettit discusses Aldhelm's preference for the word *virtus* in male *vitae*.

<sup>43</sup> For example, Babilas refuses to allow the Emperor Numerianus Augustus into his church, after the latter is guilty of bloodshed; *Prosa XXXIII*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 94; *Carmen* 1039-1047; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 125-126.

<sup>44</sup> Aldhelm includes many episcopal, even papal examples, as discussed below.

<sup>45</sup> *Prosa XLV*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 111.

<sup>46</sup> For example Martin destroyed pagan shrines and built temples, *Carmen* ll. 690-693; *Prosa XXVI*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 118; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 85; See discussion below.

## FEMININE TRANSGRESSION AND THE *ANCILLA DEI* MOTIF

Although the more transgressive saints (male and female) will be discussed in detail in the following chapter, it is worth noting a few points about transgression, as all saints are to some extent transgressive, as they defy secular authority, and/or family authority, and even religious norms. This is even more the case for female saints, as Elizabeth Alvida Petroff notes,

The women saints of the Middle Ages were transgressors, rule-breakers, flouters of boundaries, and yet they were also saints. Of course, in a way all saints are transgressors, in the sense that a saint lives by excess, lives in a beyond where ordinary measure does not hold; all saints, by their lives, stretch the boundaries of what we have conceived of as human possibility and their zeal in breaking through conventional limitations can be both attractive and repellent, pointlessly mad and unshakeably sane at the same time. Women saints, it seems to me, were doubly transgressors – first, by their nature as saints and, second, by their nature as women.<sup>47</sup>

The very fact that these women transgress against their natures was seen as part of their sanctity from early on in the history of *vitae*, it was a way of denying the femininity that linked them to Eve. Nevertheless, any potential for queered autonomy in this transgression is tightly controlled by the theme of the *ancilla dei*, or handmaid of God, a motif which both empowers and contains the female saint. In the construction of sanctity, the *ancilla dei* motif validates her actions on behalf of God, bestowing on her the authority to defy society, but it also indicates that as an

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<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 161.

individual she acts because of a special relationship with God, reminding the audience that such behaviour is not an option for all women.<sup>48</sup> The independence of the female saint could be threatening for the Church, as there was the potential she could dispense with the priest as intercessor, and ignore the patriarchal authority of the priesthood, setting a dangerous precedent for other women. Obviously, as Aldhelm is intent on stressing the need for masculine authority to his audience, this possibility is one that he negates at every opportunity.<sup>49</sup>

Also it is important to note that whilst female saints appear to demonstrate a degree of autonomy within the patriarchal power structures of Church and state, her agency is contingent on her death. For the majority of female saints, it is the choice of martyrdom that enables them to defy social and gender expectations. As noted above, whilst Christina acts against her father by destroying his idols, in Aldhelm's account this immediately leads to her torture and martyrdom. The female saint's defiance of masculine power must be contained, which it is ultimately by her death. Thus even though these women may appear to challenge patriarchal authority through their actions, demonstrating cross-gender qualities and autonomy, they are not allowed to be a long-term threat to the Church or heteronormative society, as one way or another, their apparently 'masculine' performance is curtailed through the construction of the *vita*.

## **CASE STUDY – AGNES: SILENCE AND ENCLOSURE**

Shari Horner has demonstrated that in much of the Old English corpus, female subjects are constructed 'by means of a discourse of enclosure derived from the

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<sup>48</sup> See further discussion in the following chapter.

<sup>49</sup> See further discussion below.

increasingly restrictive conditions of early medieval monasticism.’<sup>50</sup> Horner argues ‘the female subject of early English literature is enclosed by many layers – textual, material, discursive, spatial – all of which image and reinforce the powerful institutions of the Christian church that regulated the female body.’<sup>51</sup> Although *De Virginitate* is earlier than the texts she discusses in depth, Horner does comment on Aldhelm’s emphasis on spiritual and bodily protection and enclosure when warning against pride.<sup>52</sup> She notes, ‘Aldhelm’s language here [Prosa XI] is typically sensational, but nonetheless emphasizes the ways in which the protection and enclosure of the female religious body are at once spiritual and corporeal. The virtues of virginity and modesty require a physical sort of protection against penetration, and the battle is strenuous and constant.’<sup>53</sup> Whilst she concentrates on later texts, her method of interrogating the text can elucidate the manner in which Aldhelm constructs his female saints. His careful construction of Agnes in particular, displays the theme of enclosure, as Agnes is enclosed on multiple levels in the text, and is also used by Aldhelm as an enclosure.

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<sup>50</sup> Shari Horner, *The Discourse of Enclosure. Representing Women in Old English Literature* (New York; State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Horner, *Discourse of Enclosure*, p. 6; She adds that the bodies themselves could be enclosures, see further discussion below.

<sup>52</sup> Horner, *Discourse of Enclosure*, p. 12; See also her discussion in ‘Spiritual Truth and Textual Violence : The Old English Juliana, Anglo-Saxon Nuns and the Discourse of Female Monastic Enclosure’, *Signs*, 19 (1994), 658-675.

<sup>53</sup> Horner, *Discourse of Enclosure*, p. 12, quoting *Prosa XI*, ‘*Idcirco virginibus Christi... contra horrendam rabidis molaribus et venenosis genuinis inermes quosque ac virginitatis lorica spoliatos pudicitiaque parma exutos atrociter discerpere nituntur, lacertosis viribus dimicandum est et quasi adversus ferocissimas barbarorum legiones, quae manipulatam tironem Christi testudinum strofosae fraudis ballista quater non cessant...*’, ‘Virgins of Christ... must...fight with muscular energy against the horrendous monster of Pride and at the same time against those seven wild beasts of the virulent vices, who with rabid molars and venomous bicuspidis strive to mangle violently whoever is unarmed and despoiled of the breastplate of virginity and stripped of the shield of modesty; and they must struggle zealously with the arrows of spiritual armament and the iron-tipped spears of the virtues as if against the most ferocious barbarians, who do not desist from battering repeatedly the shieldwall of the young soldiers of Christ with the catapult of perverse deceit.’; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 68.

Aldhelm used Ambrose's *De virginibus ad Marcellinum* as a model for his own treatise.<sup>54</sup> He does not slavishly follow Ambrose, but includes some of the same topics, and emphases. Ambrose began *De Virginibus* with the *vita* of Agnes as his excuse for composing the text, '...that since to-day is the birthday of the virgin, I have to speak of virgins and the treatise has its beginning from this discourse'.<sup>55</sup> He introduces Agnes, 'Let men admire, let children take courage, let the married be astounded, let the unmarried take an example', setting her up as an example for all.<sup>56</sup> He then narrates Agnes's story in great detail; it is clearly intended to set the tone for his treatise. In contrast, Aldhelm merely includes Agnes as one of his female virgins, although he does expend more attention on her than on some of the other women. The two men treat the story very differently though, constructing different versions of Agnes, a young virgin martyr well known from late antiquity.<sup>57</sup>

Whilst Ambrose allots a chapter to Agnes, he concentrates largely on her *passio*, particularly in relation to her age and the effect her example might have on onlookers. He is not interested in her actions in facing Simpronius, or his son, or her courage in speaking out against the religious system of the day. Instead he depicts her bravery in facing death,

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<sup>54</sup> See discussion on *De Virginibus ad Marcellinum* in Chapter 2.

<sup>55</sup> Ambrose, *De Virg.* 1.2.5; All translations taken from *St. Ambrose – Select Works and Letters*, trans. by H. De Romestin, E. Romestin and H. T. F. Duckworth (Grand Rapids, Mich. ; Eerdmans, 1989), p. 364.

<sup>56</sup> Ambrose, *De Virg.* 1.2.5; *St. Ambrose*, Romestin, Romestin and Duckworth, p. 364.

<sup>57</sup> A beautiful and noble virgin of 13, she is wooed by the son of Simpronius, but rejects him saying that she already has a heavenly bridegroom. The young man takes to his bed with love sickness, and Simpronius, who is Prefect of Rome, discovers Agnes is the cause of his son's malaise, and a Christian. As Agnes so determinedly desires to remain a virgin, Simpronius tries to force her to worship Vesta, but Agnes blasphemes against the gods of Rome, and Simpronius orders she be stripped and sent to a brothel. Miraculously, her hair grows to cover her naked body, and at the brothel a brightly shining angel protects Agnes. The would-be suitor (now recovered) and his retinue, arrive at the brothel intent on rape. He is killed as he enters and Agnes is accused of being a prostitute and a witch. Simpronius will only believe her innocent if she can resurrect his son. Agnes does so, but the resurrected son flees, praising the Christian God. Agnes is lynched, survives burning, and is ultimately despatched by the sword.



But maidens of that age are unable to bear even the angry looks of parents, and are wont to cry at the pricks of a needle as though they were wounds. She was fearless under the cruel hands of the executioners, she was unmoved by the heavy weight of the creaking chains, offering her whole body to the sword of the raging soldier, as yet ignorant of death, but ready for it.<sup>58</sup>

His Agnes is a child, a 'maiden', but braver than her contemporaries; they cry at pin-pricks, she braves the sword. Ambrose creates the impression of innocence, with her seeming 'ignorance' yet readiness for death. He also sets up a contrast between her youth, and the sexualisation of her execution, as the gaze of the audience is on her body, offered to the phallic sword of the soldier.<sup>59</sup>

The importance of spiritual marriage as a topos in texts on virginity has already been discussed.<sup>60</sup> Whilst removing sexual agency from the woman, the imagery of spiritual marriage enabled the Church to position the woman back within the heterosexual matrix. A woman could avoid the sorrows of physical marriage, and the Church could portray the relationship between the virgin and Christ as better than earthly marriage. It also served to remind the virgin of her submissive position to her husband, experienced through submission to the hierarchy of the Church, thus enclosing her within its patriarchal system. Though not all the Church Fathers stressed the sexual, or erotic, element of the marriage, nevertheless the imagery of marriage, eroticism and spiritual offspring was a way for the Church to acknowledge the importance of marriage in society. Although in doing this it emphasised the

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<sup>58</sup> Ambrose, *De Virg.* 1.2.7; *St. Ambrose*, Romestin, Romestin and Duckworth, p. 364.

<sup>59</sup> Ambrose comments, 1.2.7, 'She is said to have suffered martyrdom when twelve years old'; *St. Ambrose*, Romestin, Romestin and Duckworth, p. 364.

<sup>60</sup> See discussion in Chapter 2.

sexual nature of women, as it implied they could not achieve a relationship with the divine outside of a sexual framework.

Ambrose's Agnes calls for death, in order that she might join her bridegroom, 'He who chose me first for Himself shall receive me. Why are you delaying executioner? Let this body perish which can be loved by eyes which I would not'.<sup>61</sup> Ambrose creates Agnes' sanctity by portraying her desire for a heavenly bridegroom over an earthly one, with the concomitant issue of retaining bodily virginity as a motivating force for her martyrdom. Thus Ambrose contains her autonomy as he clearly relates it to her physical virginity and death. In addition, he only permits her this single speech, addressed to her executioner, and restricted to her desire for Christ and death; the political element of Agnes' *vita*, her denunciation of the gods of Rome, is silenced. He accentuates her purity and her decision to die rather than compromise that integrity, and her agency is restricted to choosing death, not in subverting social roles or gender expectations. Indeed Ambrose makes this explicit in his conclusion, explaining that Agnes had achieved 'a twofold martyrdom, of modesty and of religion. She both remained a virgin and she obtained martyrdom'.<sup>62</sup>

Aldhelm introduces the story of Agnes for 'the celibate imitators of her purity...the despisers of carnal filth', immediately linking Agnes and his audience, presuming they feel the same way.<sup>63</sup> His account is more rounded, including the spurning of the suitor and the brothel scene, and the resurrection. However he also restricts Agnes' language, containing her verbal autonomy to her refusal of marriage to Simpronius' son,

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<sup>61</sup> Ambrose, *De Virg.* 1.2.9; *St. Ambrose*, Romestin, Romestin and Duckworth, p. 364.

<sup>62</sup> Ambrose, *De Virg.* 1.2.9; *St. Ambrose*, Romestin, Romestin and Duckworth, pp. 364-5.

<sup>63</sup> *Prosa XLV, Sed et operae pretium videtur, ut gloriosum illustris Agnae exemplar caelibes integritatis aemulatores et carnalis spurcitiae contemptores minime lateat, quinimmo eiusdem virginalis propositi participibus et castae sodalitatibus innotescat*; Aldhelm's audience is thus also interpellated into sharing the 'same virginal understanding' as Agnes, presumably to choose death before dishonour; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 112.

Depart from me, oh incentive to sin, nourishment of evil, food of death; for I am already engaged by another lover who has betrothed himself to me with a ring of his good faith, surrounded me with glowing and glistening gems, and dressed me with a robe woven from gold; whose father knew no woman, whose mother is a virgin, whom the angels attend and whose beauty the sun and moon admire.<sup>64</sup>

This speech highlights the theme of heavenly purity, in the person of her heavenly bridegroom. The temptation to marriage and worldly goods are spoken of in terms of disgust, and inducement to marriage is by status and wealth rather than sexual temptation. Just as spiritual marriage was presented to virgins as an alternative to earthly marriage, so spiritual treasures compensated for earthly. Biblical imagery is rich in vivid descriptions of gold and precious stones.<sup>65</sup> The robe of gold given by Christ echoes the 'Lord's robes', shining brightly, which protect her in the brothel. The divine becomes visible in protecting Agnes, enclosing her whilst she remains passive.

Yet, turning to Shari Horner's work, it is evident that while seemingly allowing Agnes greater freedom than Ambrose, Aldhelm attempts throughout the *vita* to silence and enclose her. Aldhelm silences her public voice, as her only speech is directed to her suitor, and of a domestic and private nature. There are references to enclosure through the text. She is 'surrounded' by the spiritual gems and golden

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<sup>64</sup> *Prosa XLV, Discede a me, fomes peccati, nutrimentum facinoris, pabulum mortis, quia iam ab alio amatore praeventa sum, qui me anulo fidei suae subarravit, circumdedit me vernantibus atque coruscantibus gemmis, induit me ciclade auro texta, cuius pater feminam nescit, cuius mater virgo est, cui angeli serviunt, cuius pulchritudinem sol et luna admirantur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 112; Cf. Babilas speaking out against Emperor Numerianus Augustus, but there is no female equivalent.*

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Matthew 6: 19-21 Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.; Revelation 4:2-6, 21:10-11; Proverbs 16:16, Malachi 3:3.

robe, 'walled about' by angelic light, and finally entombed after death.<sup>66</sup> Aldhelm also associates her with ensnared enclosure, referring to the temptations offered by her suitor as 'the glue of gifts, as a bird-catcher snares a bird in intricate traps' and 'a mouse-trap'.<sup>67</sup> The virgin martyr, as discussed above, can reject gender expectations temporarily, speaking out and denying authority, before accepting death, yet her agency is conditional on her death, when societal norms reassert themselves. The saint is permanently silenced. Once this occurs and Agnes is interred, enclosed within a tomb, Aldhelm removes her power completely.

Ambrose constantly refers to the martyrdom of Agnes, building up the account by contrasting her bravery and the executioner's fear. Aldhelm, however, only briefly notes her death, and then in direct relation to her miracle of resurrection, 'Agnes brought the same young man back from the abyss of hell with renewed health to the threshold of life. And straightaway, drenched with the rosy blush of crimson blood, she offered the immaculate sacrifice of virginity to Christ in martyrdom'.<sup>68</sup> In the original *vita*, Agnes is not immediately killed, but Aldhelm links her miracle and death. Resurrection is a powerful miracle, one Aldhelm usually restricts to male saints.<sup>69</sup> Though Agnes is able to perform such a potent miracle, her power is immediately contained by her death, and the Church takes control of that miraculous force. In the coda to the story, Constantina, daughter of Emperor Constantine, is cured and converted to Christianity. But she is *not* cured by Agnes, rather by that which encloses her, 'And the tomb of the sepulchre, the grave wherein the limbs of

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<sup>66</sup> *Prosa XLV, tamen corusco immensi luminis splendore vallata angelicis fruitur conspectibus et peplis donatur dominicis; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 112.*

<sup>67</sup> *Carmen II. 1936-1938, Nitiur intactam donorum fallere visco./ Sicut avem nectit nodosis retibus auceps; l. 1941, Muscipulam metuens spreuit sermone petulcum; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 146; Cf. Psalms 91:3; See further discussion below.*

<sup>68</sup> *Prosa XLV, eundum redivivia sospitate subnixum de inferni voragine reduxit ad lumina vitae et mox roseo purpurei cruoris rubore perfusa immaculatam virginitatis victimam Christo offerens martirizavit; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 112.*

<sup>69</sup> Elisha, John the Evangelist, Silvester (albeit a bull rather than a human), Martin, Benedict, and Julian all perform resurrections, but Agnes is the only female saint who performs this miracle.

the maiden rested, cured Constantina'.<sup>70</sup> The power has passed from the person of Agnes to the Church's memorial of her, thus it now belongs to the Church, and Constantina's cure occurs via Agnes' tomb not Agnes herself. Agnes is safely enclosed, entombed, and the power lies in the territory of the Church rather than the body of a woman.

Agnes is not only enclosed, she is the enclosure, likened to the ark of the testament.<sup>71</sup> As a blessed vessel, she represents heavenly purity in contrast to the suitor's foul carnality. He attempts to kiss Agnes, to 'impose with his impudent lips the foul sports of his lechery on the sacred virgin', but is struck down,

...and paid on the spot the penalty of an untimely death, just like Uzzah, who had not feared to touch with his profane hands the ark of the testament, where the pontifical rod which had flowered, and golden urns filled with celestial bounty, and also the tablets inscribed with the letters of the decalogue, were hidden.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1970-1974, *Nam Constantinam sanavit tumba sepulchri/ Et sarcophagus, qua pausant membra puellae./ Ut merito posset regnantis filia regis/ Aeterno regi regum, qui regnat in aethra./ Reddere magnificas pro vita sospite grates; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 146; In the *Prosa*, XLV, Aldhelm makes the same point, *Cuius tumba in cimetario posita gravissimam Constantinae virginis valitudinem, cuius mentionem infra caraxabimus, velut caelesti medicamine fotam incolomitati pristinae restituit; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 112, Her tomb (was) placed in a cemetery, where it restored to pristine health, as if by celestial medicine, the serious illness of the virgin Constantina, whose mention we shall pen below.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Daria in the *Carmen* ll. 1237-1242, *Si quisquam cuperet sacrum temerare pudorem/ Gestibus obscenis contrectans corpus honestum./ Arcam ceu quondam probrosus contigit Oza./ Protinus oppeteret confuses fronte petulcus/ Rictibus et rabidis, corrosus dente leonis./ Ultricem poenam sentiret morte farina; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 130, If anyone should desire to dishonour her holy chastity by violating her pure body with illicit actions, as once the infamous Oza touched the ark, immediately the lewd man, his face confused, would die by fierce jaws and, gnawed by the lions teeth, he would feel an avenging punishment in meeting (such as) savage death.

<sup>72</sup> *Prosa* XLV, *Nam cum praefatus obscenitatis amator flammis carnalibus succensus lupanar cum sodalibus scelerum aggredereetur, ut virgini sacratissimae spurca lenocinii ludibria labris procacibus irrogaret, caelestis irae mucrone pernicious percussus occubuit et, veluti Oza arcam testamenti, ubi virga pontificalis, quae fronderat, et urna aurea caelesti munere referta simulque tabulae decalogi litteris sulcatae recondebantur, profanes minibus contingere non metuens, ilico immaturae mortis vindictam exsolvit; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 112; 2 Samuel 6:6-7 When they came to the threshing floor of Nachon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act, therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God.

Aldhelm here equates the body of the virgin with the most holy possession of the ancient Jews, the container built for the precious items relating to the Jewish faith, and assembled to the specifications given to Moses by God.<sup>73</sup> There could be no greater example of a holy vessel, emphasising the impudence of the individual who dared to lay his hand on it. Uzziah is an example of impudence and independence, acting against the command of God, and again Aldhelm reminds his audience of the need of submission to authority. Aldhelm's Agnes is herself an enclosure, representing holiness and sanctity, as her body becomes the holy vessel, enclosing virginal sanctity. In his introductory comments to *De Virginitate*, Aldhelm removed the female body from view - his language served to divorce body and gender as he likened the nuns to athletes, soldiers and bees. Here, the saint's body is emphasised as it is sanctified, but she is defined by the holy space that body encloses.

Noticeably Aldhelm is choosing different aspects of the Agnes story from Ambrose. Ambrose begins *De Virginibus* with the story of Agnes, emphasising her brave martyrdom. At the end of his treatise, he relates the account of Pelagia, who, when threatened by pagans, opts for suicide, arguing, 'God is not offended by a remedy against evil, and faith permits the act'.<sup>74</sup> Her mother and sisters likewise opt for suicide, drowning together. As with his account of Agnes, the emphasis of the account is on the death of the women, and that they opted for death before (sexual) dishonour.<sup>75</sup> Clearly Ambrose is offering examples of defiance centred on a dignified and suitable martyrdom, the sacrifice of virginity is made explicit in martyrdom. Aldhelm, certainly with Agnes, is offering an example of virginal defiance against

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<sup>73</sup> Exodus 25:10-20. The Ark contains the flowering rod of Aaron, containers of Manna, and the stones on which were inscribed the 10 Commandments. The importance of the Ark is evident in Exodus 25:22 There, above the cover, between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.

<sup>74</sup> Ambrose, *De Virg.* 3.7.33; *St. Ambrose*, Romestin, Romestin and Duckworth, pp. 386-7.

<sup>75</sup> Ambrose, *De Virg.* 3.7.38-39, *St. Ambrose*, Romestin, Romestin and Duckworth, p. 387; He also mentions the martyrdom of Sotheris.

social expectations, but one that is enclosed and contained within the *vita*. Her performance of virginal sanctity is restricted by enclosure within the text. Agnes' political language is silenced, and she comments only on marriage, that is, the domestic. This contrasts with the political role of the noble abbess in early Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>76</sup> Agnes' textual containment signifies the role of the saint within the Church, representative of sanctity and grace, and reminding Aldhelm's audience of the need for enclosure, and separation from secular society. The outside world, represented by Simpronius and his son, is linked to pollution, and filth, from which virginity needs protecting, physically and spiritually. Against this, Aldhelm constructs a coenobitic sanctity, equating virginity and enclosure, a female saint whose sanctified virginity enables her to act against masculine secular authority, transgressing social norms, but contained through her death, which allows her power to pass to the Church. She is also a cipher representing sanctity and purity, whose enclosure signifies heavenly purity in comparison to the pollution of carnality.

## **ENCLOSURE – PRISON AND THE BROTHEL**

Agnes is an outstanding example of textual enclosure in *De Virginitate*, but enclosure is a feature throughout the hagiographical section, and a theme that is representative of Aldhelm's construction of a gender divide. Men possess the agency to choose enclosure, whereas it is imposed on women, thus the performance of virginal sanctity is differentiated. Moreover, Aldhelm chooses to foreground mental integrity for male saints, verses the physical integrity necessary for female saints, as they are threatened

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<sup>76</sup> See discussion in Chapter 1 on Hild; Susan Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England : A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1988).

not only with imprisonment, but also with rape.<sup>77</sup> We see this looking at the two most common forms of physical enclosure for the saints, the prison and the brothel.

Both men and women saints are imprisoned. Gaol separates them from society at large, frequently deprives them of human interaction, and forces them to rely on their faith. Imprisonment means they face the darkness and stench of the gaol, which corresponds to the portrayal of the secular world as one of filth and degradation in Aldhelm's work. However, they are frequently protected from these elements. Women are more likely to be imprisoned and only women are sent to a brothel, but again they are divinely protected. For example, in the account of Chrysanthus and Daria, Aldhelm presents prison and the brothel as a comparative persecution, '[Chrysanthus] was bound in iron and put in the murky recesses of a rock-prison .... [Daria] was thrust into a brothel of harlots and the fellowship of whores'.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, the brothel is a direct menace against a woman's virginal status in a way that the prison was not, as it explicitly incorporates a sexual element. The brothel represents rape, a threat against the bodily integrity of the women, rather than a temptation. Where men, for example Chrysanthus, may face the temptation of beautiful women, there is no threat of force as there is for the female saint. As has been discussed, the difficulties of certifying male physical virginity meant physical

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<sup>77</sup> Again this follows on the theoretical importance of the intact female body. See Peter Brown, *Body and Society. Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 259-284.

<sup>78</sup> *Prosa XXXV, Ille in latebrosam lautumiae latibulum, ubi cloacarum cuniculi putores stercorum ingesserunt, ferro constrictus mittitur; sed putor et caligo luce serena et odoramentis fugantur nectareis. Ista ad prostibula scortorum et meretricum contubernia truditur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 99; Carmen ll. 1229-1236, Impiger ast ille strictus molimine ferri/ Truditur in tenebras laturus carceris atras./ Lurida quo putridis fluxerunt stercora criptis;/ Nectare sed fetor cedit ceu luce latebrae./ Traditur interea sceleratis Daria scortis/ Prostibulum mechae penetrans sine crimine scaevo;/ Sed leo de clatris rugibundus mittitur artis/ Virgineos artus tutos servare puellae; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 130, But he who was unwearied, bound by the force of iron (chains), was thrust into the dark recesses of prison to suffer where the stinking excrement flowed through the fetid crypts; yet the stench gave way to nectar as shadows to light. Meanwhile Daria was handed over to corrupt harlots, and she who was without perverse sin was made to enter a lewd brothel; but a roaring lion was sent from the narrow grates of a cage to keep safe the virginal limbs of the girl.*



integrity was less important in the *vitae*. The danger of the world is thus constructed in terms of social position and lust rather than rape for the male saint.<sup>79</sup>

Hence Aldhelm uses the gendered performance of virginity to support a gendered sanctity, highlighting mental integrity for male saints, as they confront the temptation of beauty, and physical integrity for female saints, as they are threatened with rape.<sup>80</sup> This divide serves to separate Aldhelm's audience further from any potential for autonomy through the status of virginity. He has moved back from his flattery of his non-virginal addressees in the opening section of *De Virginitate*, and clearly demonstrated that the transgressive freedoms of sanctified virgins are not available to Anglo-Saxon nuns, even if they are capable of demonstrating the qualities of internal or mental virginity. The potential for queered and multiple identifications with virgin martyrs is neatly but completely closed off to the women. They may be able to perform a parody of virginity, in the Butlerian sense, and expose Aldhelm's gendered construction, but they cannot copy those saints who were physical virgins, and who died in order to retain that status. Aldhelm's conflation the brothel/threat of rape and the temptation to marriage (for women) and the temptation of beauty (for men), to construct a sexuality that is entirely negative, and overwhelmingly female, for whether they are under threat, or serving as a temptation, women are associated with sexuality.

## **MASCULINE ACTIVE ENCLOSURE**

As noted, Aldhelm consistently constructs an active male sanctity and passive female sanctity, which he supports in his depiction of captivity. Masculine performance of

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<sup>79</sup> See discussion in Chapter 1.

<sup>80</sup> Brown, *Body and Society*, pp. 259-284.

virginal sanctity, even where it involves enclosure, is active in tone. Thus, although men are imprisoned, Aldhelm's male examples demonstrate agency as they usually choose to imprison themselves, either by fleeing society, or by enclosing themselves.<sup>81</sup> Hence, the hermit John, 'bur[ies] himself away in a remote hut for the space of fifty years, he led the contemplative life of seclusion.'<sup>82</sup> This is a decision he makes in middle age, demonstrating an autonomy not reflected in any of the female accounts. Apollonius makes a similar decision as a teenager, and Aldhelm specifically draws our attention to his agency, 'for at the age of fifteen he fled from mortals *of his own will*.'<sup>83</sup> Athanasius, 'relying on the protection of Christ, now evaded the envious deceits of those perverse men. Going down into the deep recesses of a cistern – which, being empty of water, provided the covering of a roof (for him) *he hid himself* inside for a period of six years.'<sup>84</sup> Women also sometimes attempt to flee persecution, for example Rufina and Secunda escape Rome, but are forced back by their suitors.<sup>85</sup> Victoria opts to live in a cave once she has defeated the dragon, but this is temporary, and conditional on the permission of secular powers.<sup>86</sup> Women

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<sup>81</sup> John the Baptist and Julian are also imprisoned.

<sup>82</sup> *Prosa XXIX, miro devotionis fervore exegit ac demum quinquies bilustris temporum circulis in remoto deilitescens turgurio theoricam anachoresseos transegit vitam; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 89.*

<sup>83</sup> *Carmen ll. 1508-1509, Et pubertatis desertum tempore quaerit;/ Namter quinquennis mortalis aufugit ultro; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 136.*

<sup>84</sup> *Carmen l.1029, Qua latuisse ferunt lustris volventibus ipsum; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 125.*

<sup>85</sup> *Prosa LI; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 118; Carmen ll. 2279-2301; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 153-4.*

<sup>86</sup> *Prosa LII; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 120-121; Carmen ll. 2400-2411, Et procul in vacuas iussit reptare salebras;/ Mox draco crudelis sermonum pondere pressus / Deserit obscurum squamosa pelle tigillum./ Sic virgon felix aethrali freta triumpho/ Ingentem explodit sancta virtute colubrum,/ Ut numquam ulterius serpens irrumperet antrum;/ Sed procul abscondens incultis exulat arvis,/ Iusserat ut gypsam verbo terrente migrare/ Civibus impendens expulso natrice palmam./ Tunc rogitat cives felix bernacula Christi./ Quatenus in cripta sibi, natrix unde nefandus Aufugit, pariter dignentur condere cellam; Ironically it is the dragon that is described as withdrawing like an exile, rather than the female saint; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 156.*

cannot choose to imprison themselves - incarceration is either forced on them, or temporary.<sup>87</sup>

## WOMEN AS ENCLOSURE

In general, Aldhelm associates women with enclosure and captivity, positive and negative. As discussed above in the *vita* of Agnes, they can be both enclosure and enclosed.<sup>88</sup> Mary is referred to as ‘a temple for Christ and (as) a sanctuary of chastity’, and also in terms of the Song of Songs, ‘(My sister, my spouse) is a garden closed up... a fountain sealed up’.<sup>89</sup> The idea of women as enclosure, as absence or space, substantiates the connection between their gender and their sexuality by foregrounding the womb as the notable aspect of the female. That Mary is likened to a ‘temple’ highlights her purity, and reminds the audience that she was a space in which Christ could grow. Women are bound and imprisoned, they risk being trapped, and they are traps, but are not offered the agency of the male examples. They are enclosed or enclosure.

They are particularly associated with the ties of worldly comforts and family bonds, the captivity of secular society, either as representative of the temptation, or enduring the temptation, especially via the offer of marriage. As discussed above, Agnes’ suitor offers secular comfort and marriage, which Aldhelm depicts as a trap,

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<sup>87</sup> One interesting comparison is offered by Chrystanthus, who is imprisoned by his father. Aldhelm queers Chrysanthus through his depiction of the saint. See the discussion in the following chapter.

<sup>88</sup> This is not to say men cannot play both roles, for example, in the *Carmen*, ll. 723-4, Gregory is told by Wisdom and Chastity, ‘For you have offered to us a pure sanctuary in your heart, where we both will always be joyful. (*Nam nobis mundum tribuisti in corde sacellum, / Quo iucundantes semper laetabimur ambae*)’; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 119; Rather enclosure is more associated with women.

<sup>89</sup> *Carmen* l. 1685, *Dum dilubra dedit Christo atque sacella pudoris*; ll. 1698-1699, *Hortus conclusus florenti vertice vernans, / Fons quoque signatus caelesti gurgite pollens*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 140; Cf. *Prosa XL*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 106; Song of Songs 4:12 You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.

as the suitor ‘undertook to seduce the chaste girl with the glue of gifts, as a bird-catcher snares a bird in intricate traps. But quickly the young virgin realized the deadly risk ... fearing this mouse-trap, she spurned the wanton man with her words.’<sup>90</sup> Agnes avoids the trap but ultimately at the cost of her life. Similarly, Justina denies the ‘earthly bonds of a matrimonial union’.<sup>91</sup> However, not every tie is depicted as harmful, Scholastica’s relationship to Benedict is described, ‘her brother, who was bound to her by a brotherly bond.’<sup>92</sup> But this is not portrayed as a dangerous bond. Anglo-Saxon women did not face the threat of a forced marriage as many of the depicted in many of the late antique saints’ lives. The role of abbess could be a beneficial to the family as supportive of the Church. Susan Ridyard discusses the importance of the role of double monasteries in defending and promoting the family or dynasty.<sup>93</sup> Those bound by familial kinship and spiritual kinship, could receive support in their religious duty.<sup>94</sup>

## BINDING AND RELEASING

Aldhelm constructs an active performance of sanctity for his male virgins, which enables them to tie and release the various bindings, a power that he denies the women. The male saints are also bound in various ways, for example of Babilas we

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<sup>90</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1936-1941, *Nititur intactam donorum fallere visco,/ Sicut avem nectit nodosis retibus auceps./ Sed mox letiferam sensit virguncula cladem,/ Crebrius hauriret si spurcas aure loquelas/ Aut pulsaretur probrosis virgo labellis:/ Muscipulam metuens spremit sermone petulcum;* *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 146; Cf. Psalms 91:3 Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence.

<sup>91</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1844-1845, *Quae terrena tori disruptit vincla iugalis/ Florida mundanae calcans commercia vitae;* *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 144.

<sup>92</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2030-2031, *Quod fratrem sibimet germano foedere vinctum/ Subnixis precibus gestit compellere virgo;* *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 148.

<sup>93</sup> Ridyard, *Royal Saints*.

<sup>94</sup> Although Lisa Weston commented at a recent conference that the names of some of Aldhelm’s audience could indicate a step away from family responsibility. To what extent did adopting a late antique name such as Thecla, distance a woman from her family and family responsibility by aligning her with the saint. (GMS January 2009).

are told, 'they bound a yoke on his neck and shackles on his feet'.<sup>95</sup> Amos is urged by his parents 'to the nuptial bonds of marriage'.<sup>96</sup> Elijah can both bind and release the rain, 'He also was compelled to close up the starry sky in (its) four quarters for forty-two months, so that the dry heavens would not let rain fall.... And then with his command he broke open the obstacle of the clouds, so that rain-showers might flow abundantly'.<sup>97</sup> Elisha released 'the corpse constricted with horrible death'.<sup>98</sup> Silvester 'once fettered a scaly dragon, binding it in strong chains with iron links'.<sup>99</sup> Amos cures a rabid boy, 'bound in tight bonds because [he was] out of his mind'.<sup>100</sup> The male examples are also active in non-physical unbinding and opening. For example, Cosmas and Damianus were 'opening the door of silence in the dumb'.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>95</sup> *Prosa XXXIII, Mox imperante Augusto ad calumniam pontificis et infamiam cleri boias in collo et compedes in cruribus nectunt*; Thus it is at the command of Augustus, whereas women tend to appear before officials much lower down the political and social scale. It is also representative of masculine secular authority.; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 94.

<sup>96</sup> *Prosa XXXVII, Huius ergo parentes amantissimam sobolem cum adultam et iam pubescentem in annis iuvenilibus deprehenderent, quasi secuturae posteritati consulentes ad nuptials thalami copulas licet magnopere refragantem invitant*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 102; To some extent Aldhelm queers Amos by stressing his affection for his family, which runs counter to Jesus' comments at Luke 14 : 26 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple.'

<sup>97</sup> *Carmen ll. 258-266, Quique quarter denis et binis mensibus actus/ Astriferum clausit quadrato cardine caelum,/ Aridus ut nullis roraret nubibus aether/ Atque negarentur lattices morientibus herbis/ Nec sitiens pratum caperet nutrimenta limphae;/ Tunc iterum nutu nimborum obstacula rupit,/ Ut fluerent imbres ubertim ex aethere furvo/ Glesceret et rursus fecundo germine tellus/ Pabula densa ferens vulgo vernantibus arvis*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 108.

<sup>98</sup> *Carmen l. 290, Excitat horrenda constrictum morte cadaver*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 109; Cf John the Evangelist, *Carmen ll. 470-471, Suscitata interea sopita cadavera leto./ Quae gelidae strictim nodabant vincula mortis*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 113, From death he raises corpses put to sleep, which the fetters of chill death had bound tightly.

<sup>99</sup> *Carmen ll. 545-546, Denique squamigerum vinxit virtute draconem/ Fortia ferratis constringens vincla catenis*; l. 550-552, *Natricis horrendi cultum praestare putantes./ Sed cum strinxisset beluam collaribus artis/ Morbida pestiferi compescens flabra draconis*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 115; *Prosa XXV*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 83 He also overcame necromancy, *Carmen ll. 587-589, Mox igitur tauri prostratum morte cadaver/ Suscitata exertis absolvens vincula nodis/ Et mitem armento fecit succedere taurum*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 116 'Silvester straightaway raised the bull's body, prostrate in death and, releasing and throwing off the chains and bonds of the spell, he made the gentle bull return to the herd.'

<sup>100</sup> *Carmen ll. 1480-1481, Vertitur in rabiem fraudatus mente sagaci./ Ferrea quem strictis nectebant vincla catenis*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 135; *Prosa XXXVII, Nam quidam iuvenulus rabidis molosi rictibus in vesaniam versus strictis catenarum nexibus ad eum deductus actutum incolomitati pristinae donatur, sed ea conditione prius interposita*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 103, For a certain young man, turned to insanity by the rabid bites of a dog, was brought to him bound tightly in chains; he is immediately restored to his pristine health.

<sup>101</sup> *Prosa XXXIV, mutis taciturnitatis valvam reserando*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 95.

Basil uses rhetoric for its effect of ‘disclosing the secrets of the minds... unlocking what was hidden in the depths of their hearts’.<sup>102</sup>

Aldhelm’s male examples can influence the behaviour of others in a more direct manner than the women. Whereas Caecilia converts by example and divine threat, Paul compels the sorceress to silence.<sup>103</sup> Men are also able to open the secrets of prophecy, for example, ‘To [Daniel] above other mortals, as a reward in exchange for his chastity, hidden things lie open and things closed in the mystical coverings of the sacraments are divinely unlocked.’<sup>104</sup> This denies to women the role that they had enjoyed in prophecy in the Bible.<sup>105</sup> Thus the performance of masculine virginity as fashioned by Aldhelm facilitates the agency and activity of male examples on through action and word. They are allowed opportunities and abilities that are denied the female virgins.

## EDUCATION

Saints of both genders are described as well educated, no doubt reflecting Aldhelm’s audience. Gregory of Nazianzus ‘was incomparably educated (*incomparabiliter eruditus*) in letters in Athens ... (and was) a fellow student of Basil [of Cappodocia] in philosophic doctrine’.<sup>106</sup> Aldhelm also associates, and rewards, Gregory’s virginity

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<sup>102</sup> *Prosa XXVII, atque attonitis auditoribus ignarisque auscultatoribus arcane mentis ipsorum recludentes et abstruse praecordiorum reserantes facundi sermonis clave patefaciant; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 86.*

<sup>103</sup> *Prosa XXIV; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 81.*

<sup>104</sup> *Prosa XXI, Cui pro vicissitudine castitatis rependsanda prae ceteris mortalibus abdita patescunt et mysticis sacramentorum operculis clausa caelitis reserantur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 77; See further discussion below.*

<sup>105</sup> Judges 4:5 Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.; Notably, Deborah is married, and thus presumably not a virgin.

<sup>106</sup> *Prosa XXVII, Gregorius, Nazanzenae ecclesiae gubernator, apud Athenas, qua idem tempus rumigerula grammaticorum Gloria et clandestinum academiae disputationis sofisma pollebant, litteris incomparabiliter eruditus; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 85-86; Prosa XXVII; He is fellow student of Basil at Athens.*

and learning, ‘Because of the virginal resolve of his purity and his strenuous pursuit of philosophy, Chastity and Wisdom are described as having appeared to him’<sup>107</sup>. This is an acknowledgement of his audience – it is not the virginity itself that is rewarded, but the resolve for purity – hence it is the mental quality not the ontological status of the body. The striving for knowledge reflects Aldhelm’s earlier comments about the need for arduous effort in study. Chrysanthus was a very promising student, ‘handed over to the philosophers and rhetors at Rome and had him instructed in all liberal studies of the arts.’ Aldhelm continues, ‘He was, so they say, of so burning an intellect and so retentive of memory that, whatsoever he investigated through reading and studying diligently very quickly stick – as if fashioned by glue – in his young intelligence, and would cleave, firmly rooted, within the receptacle of his subtle mind.’<sup>108</sup> Athanasius was educated by bishop Alexander, in Alexandria, and Cosmas and Damianus were students of medicine, not a field of enquiry open to women.<sup>109</sup> Eugenia is ‘instructed in the liberal arts, she had learned perfectly all the syllogisms of the philosophers and the doctrines of Epicurus and the arguments of Aristotle, together with the five-year silence of the Stoics, according to the teaching of these wise men’.<sup>110</sup> Aldhelm notes that Scholastica, took her name ‘because of her

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<sup>107</sup> *Prosa* XXVII, *Cui propter virginalē pudoris propositum et gymnīcū philosophiāe studiū in geminō feminīni sexus simulcro Castitas et Sapientia per soporem apparuisse describuntur*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 86.

<sup>108</sup> *Prosa* XXXV, *quem pater ab Alexandria proficiscens Romae gymnosophists et rethoribus traditum cunctis liberalibus litterarum studiis erudiri fecit. Erat enim, ut fertur, tam ardentis ingenii et capax memoriae, ut quicquid lectitando et scrutando enixius rimaretur, velut visco glutinatum praepropere in praecordiis lentesceret et intra sagacis animi conclave radicatum haeresceret*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 96; Cf. *Carmen* ll. 1125-1130; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 127; Cf. the education of Julian, *Prosa* XXXVI, in dialectic, rhetoric and philosophy. See *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 99.

<sup>109</sup> *Prosa* XXXII, XXXIV; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 93, 95; Chrysanthus, *Prosa* XXXV; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 96; Cf. *Carmen* ll. 1123-1138; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 127; Julian, *Prosa* XXXVI, was sent ‘to be a master of the dialectic art as well as to be a participant in the arts of rhetoric ... [and] the various disciplines of philosophy’. *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 99; *Carmen* ll. 1259-1261, *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 130.

<sup>110</sup> *Prosa* XLIV; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 110; Interestingly, unlike the male saints, whose education is usually explicitly mentioned in the *Prosa* and *Carmen*, Aldhelm tends to mention the education of his women exempla in one or the other, but not both, for example, Eugenia’s education is not mentioned in the *Carmen*.

learning.’<sup>111</sup> Eustochium was renowned ‘for the brilliant quality of her book-learning’, and famous through the works dedicated to her by Jerome.’<sup>112</sup> Demetrias similarly, was ‘imbued with instruction in letters from across the sea’, and renowned from a work dedicated to her and relating her life.<sup>113</sup>

Of Daria, Aldhelm writes, ‘since Daria was said to have been so well trained in dialectical arts and so well versed in the sophisticated procedures of the syllogisms that even the most eloquent orators feared to test the sagacious intellect of the young girl in an argument.’<sup>114</sup> However, Aldhelm points out that as soon as she is converted to Christianity her studies cease, ‘Abandoning at once the disciplines of dialectic, with which she had been occupied in her school-studies, she is instructed in canonical writings and exegetical commentaries.’<sup>115</sup> This makes explicit an aspect of education that is at least implied in other saints, male and female, that secular advancement in scholarship ceases with conversion, and subsequent learning is restricted to Scripture and Christian writings.<sup>116</sup> She is also ‘instructed’; this is not independent learning. Compared with the freedom Aldhelm assumes for his Anglo-Saxon audience in their learning, Daria is strictly controlled through the text. Daria, as a saint, offers a

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<sup>111</sup> *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 147; Her education is not mentioned in the *Prosa*.

<sup>112</sup> *Prosa XLIX, Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 115-116; Although he relates the books that Jerome wrote for Eustochium, Aldhelm does not describe her as learned in the *Carmen*.

<sup>113</sup> *Prosa XLIX, Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 116; Again in the corresponding account in the *Carmen*, her learning is not mentioned, instead Aldhelm notes, ‘she ascended the highest beacon of virtue on the virginal stairs of her merits; since indeed, at her mother’s request, a volume written in a developed and elegant style was sent over the sea to the aforesaid servant of Christ, in which the principles of her life were thus described.’ It is interesting that he links the ‘highest beacon of virginity’ with being the subject of writing, in a treatise written for ‘virgins of Christ’ in Barking.

<sup>114</sup> *Prosa XXXV, eo quod Daria dialecticis artibus imbuta et captiosis sillogismi conclusionibus instructa fuisse ferebatur ita dumtaxat, ut disertissimi oratores tam sagax virginis ingenium alterno experire conflictu vererentur; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 97.

<sup>115</sup> *Prosa XXXV, Mox relictis dialecticorum disciplinas, quibus dudum in gimnasii studio exercebatur, canonicis scriptures et commentis spiritalibus instruitur; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 97.

<sup>116</sup> This is because Christian education is considered superior to secular. In *Prosa XXXV*, Chrysanthus, once his studies in the liberal arts had been completed, ‘he came to the most holy scripture of the Gospels, ... he rejected all the arguments of the Stoics and the Aristotelian categories ... as soon as he shrewdly perceived how much the doctrine of celestial philosophy excelled the teachings of the world’. *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 96. In the *Carmen* account Daria, ll. 1182-1183, upon conversion, ‘rejected the lessons of ancient books and followed the doctrines of the four-fold Gospels. *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 129.



greater threat to the *status quo* of the Church, through demonstrating the qualities of sanctity, as noted. She could be in a position, as a saint, to bypass the masculine authority of the Church in a manner unavailable to the Anglo-Saxon nun, hence, Aldhelm contains her performance of educational activity, though not her ability. Also, Daria, despite her reputation for disputation, is converted by the Christian reasoning of Chrysanthus, thus her learning is kept in check by a man, the man with immediate authority over her – her husband.<sup>117</sup>

## TEACHING AND SHEPHERDING

Aldhelm's male saints take the lead in preaching and teaching the Christian message, demonstrating a far more active performance of sanctity. They open the gospel to pagans in a manner that the female saints cannot emulate. Aldhelm uses them to reinforce his themes of masculine authority and female submission. This is particularly evident when we consider the differences in the manner in which he constructs male and female saints in relation to preaching the Christian message. Whilst Aldhelm allows both genders an education, he clearly differentiates their roles as teachers. Although some women are allowed to teach, it is only ever a temporary situation, mostly within their social class, and are not allowed to teach men. In this Aldhelm demonstrates his orthodoxy. For example, Constantina, though the daughter of the most powerful man in the world, performs her role as teacher/educator within the norms of Christianity, and Aldhelm does not subvert gender or social expectations. Constantina cannot teach or even influence her father, Constantine, rather, 'did she not incite with her conversation, persuade with her speech and arouse

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<sup>117</sup> *Prosa XXXV*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 97, 'At length [Chrysanthus] achieved the palm of victory in their reciprocal debates, not by an argument of deception, but through a demonstration of reason'. Aldhelm here highlights masculine reason.

by her example nearly all the daughters of Roman praetors, nearly all the high-born offspring of the feminine sex.’<sup>118</sup> It is the pope, Silvester, who has the authority to teach the Emperor, ‘Thus Silvester fully adorned the world with his conduct when he instructed the king of Rome [Constantine] with the teachings of Christ.’<sup>119</sup> Such interaction is denied to Constantina, despite her familial relationship.

The *vita* of Silvester demonstrates the agency and authority of many of Aldhelm’s male saints, demonstrating the active male performance of sanctified virginity - he is ‘renowned for his miracles’, including the defeat of a dragon, which then gave him the opportunity to convert/reform Rome.<sup>120</sup> At a synodal council, Silvester defeated by argument ‘twelve instructors of the Jews and rabbis of the Pharisees’.<sup>121</sup> He cured Constantine, which led to the destruction of pagan shrines in Rome, and the inhabitants of Rome seeking ‘the more powerful heights of the new [i.e. Christian] temple’.<sup>122</sup> Silvester, as a man and as Pope performs sanctified virginity in a more active manner, teaching, performing miracles, and able to defeat paganism/heresy, build up the Church and tear down pagan sanctuaries. As will be further discussed below, these male examples also benefit the wider community, not just the saint himself.

The themes developed through the *vita* of Silvester become tropes for Aldhelm’s construction of many of his male saints. He stresses their shepherding roles for the congregation, or their defiance against paganism. The male examples have a more clearly defined access to multiple identities that enable not just

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<sup>118</sup> *Prosa XLVIII*; Lapidge and Herren, p. 115; *Carmen*, ll. 2111-2112, *Plures nam Christo convertit dogmate turmas/ Exemplo simulet celebri rumore coruscans*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 149, ‘She converted great multitudes to Christ by her teaching and also, shining with renowned fame, by her example.’

<sup>119</sup> *Carmen* ll.565-566, *Sic mundum propriis ornat moribus amplum./ Dum regem Romae correxit dogmate Christi*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 115; Cf. Babilas standing up to Numerianus Augustus, *Prosa XXXIII*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 94.

<sup>120</sup> *Prosa XXV*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 82.

<sup>121</sup> *Prosa XXV*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 83.

<sup>122</sup> *Carmen* l. 562, *Et potiora rudis sectatur culmina templi*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 115.

autonomy but religious authority. A surprising number of his male saints are bishops or popes, that is, they perform an official role, with the authority of rank, within the Church. This is reflected in their active performance of teaching, preaching, writing, and protecting the congregation in ways that are closed to the female saints. This masculine, active performance of sanctity by saints who were part of the Church hierarchy underlines Aldhelm's theme of male authority and female submission. Clement and Silvester are popes, Ambrose, Martin, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Cappodocia, Felix, Narcissus, Athanasius, and Babilas are bishops. Understandably, as so many of his male examples have an official role within the Church, Aldhelm refers to their teaching of Christian doctrine. Clement, for example, is compared with Peter, 'who continually teaches doctrines and often makes clear the divine teachings of God.'<sup>123</sup> Hence his role is to explain Christian doctrine to the congregation. Martin spread the Christian message to the countryside, 'Often he improved country-folk with health-giving doctrine, so that they might be more willing to eradicate their abominable rites and believe in Christ'.<sup>124</sup> Paul 'was the pre-eminent doctor and teacher of the world, who converted barbarian multitudes with his sacred teaching.'<sup>125</sup> Ambrose 'taught numerous times in his discourse, leading many souls into the heavenly realm.'<sup>126</sup>

Athanasius and Babilas are described as 'shepherds' for the Christian flock, protecting the congregation. In the *Carmen* Aldhelm describes Athanasius, 'as pastor of the flock he kept watch over the sheepfold against the injury of beasts and the jaws

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<sup>123</sup> *Carmen* l. 531-533, *Nam sacrum iugiter doctorem dogma docentem/ Atque superna Dei crebro praecepta serentem/ Discipulus fidis devotus passibus aequat*; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 114.

<sup>124</sup> *Carmen* ll. 687-689, *Saepe salutifero correxist dogmate pagos,/ Ut ritus vellent magis extirpare nefandos/ Atque creatorem regnantem credere Christum*; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 118.

<sup>125</sup> *Carmen* ll. 501-502, *Hic erat egregious doctor mundique magister/ Barbara convertens doctrinis agmina sacris*; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 114.

<sup>126</sup> *Carmen* ll. 675-676, *Haec, inquam, docuit crebro sermone sacerdos/ Plures perducens ad caeli regna falanges*; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 118.

of wolves.... This bishop, by uprooting the teachings of the stupid endured perverse schismatics and a thousand dangers.’<sup>127</sup> This is a very active performance of sanctified virginity in the care of the congregation. In contrast, even where women convert through their teaching, they cannot shepherd the flock. Caecilia converts only those closest to her, her husband and brother-in-law, whereas in the original *vita*, she converts many by her teaching.<sup>128</sup> Interestingly, Aldhelm allows his female saints greater freedom to teach if they are clearly confined by male authority, usually by their husbands. For example, many are converted ‘as a result of the instruction (of Daria and Chrysanthus).<sup>129</sup> Similarly, ‘what a crowd of believers of either sex, ... having been converted to the catholic faith by the instruction of Julian and Basilissa.’<sup>130</sup> Bearing in mind the context of Aldhelm’s audience for *De Virginitate*, primarily the women named in his address, and secondarily for the mixed audience of the double monastery, what message is Aldhelm sending? Again, the emphasis is on the secondary role of women within the Church. The teaching role of women is enabled, supported, and ultimately contained, by the masculine authority of their husbands, as nuns are by the masculine authority of the Church.

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<sup>127</sup> *Carmen* ll. 991-995, *Qui gregis excubias ut pastor ovile tuetur/ Contra belvarum fraudes rictusque luporum,/ Qui lustrare solent mandras et saepta bidentum./ Hic ergo praesul stolidorum dogmata demens/ Scaevos scismaticos et mille pericula perfert*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 124; Cf. *Prosa* XXXII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 93; John 10:11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.; Cf. Acts 20:28; Cf. Babilas, *Prosa* XXXIII, ‘who kept the watches over the Lord’s flock, and the sheep-folds of the Church, against the cruel madness of tyrants, ... not in the manner of a hireling, but with a shepherd’s care?’ *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 94; John 10:12 The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it.

<sup>128</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1710-1735; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 141.

<sup>129</sup> *Prosa* XXXV; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 98; *Carmen* ll. 1184-1185, *Quis poterit vulgi tantas numerare catervas, / Quantas exemplis egerunt credere Christo?*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 129, ‘Who would be able to count the mighty multitudes of people Chrysanthus and Daria led to believe in Christ through their example?’

<sup>130</sup> *Prosa* XXXVI; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 100.

## BREAKING DOWN AND BUILDING UP – MASCULINE PROTECTION OF THE COMMUNITY

Just as Aldhelm's more active male virgins can bind and release, so to they can destroy and build-up. They destroy paganism by their teaching, and build-up the congregation by their shepherding. Aldhelm describes them as performing this role physically, by demolishing temples and building churches, again actions that are for the benefit of the wider community. Whilst women may occasionally physically act against paganism, this is usually linked directly to their martyrdom, and occurs within the domestic sphere, for example, Christina and her twelve companions 'smashed to tiny pieces' her father's statues of Jupiter, Apollo and Venus.<sup>131</sup> This is as much a rebellion against her father as a stance for her Christian faith, and firmly situates her within familial territory. Her father had her 'confined, without her consent' in a 'tower that stretched aloft with a menacing height and was constructed with a strong framework of cement'.<sup>132</sup> The overweening abuse of masculine authority is evident in the strength and size of the tower. In Aldhelm's version of the *vita* Christina's action immediately lead to her torture, but Aldhelm again stresses that the events take place in the domestic arena, 'this blood-thirsty butcher and savage infanticide rather than affectionate father cruelly devised on the spot various sorts of torture to harness his daughter.' His political role as *magister militum* is irrelevant, it is his role as father that creates the tension and desire for revenge. Thus Christina's actions are against his authority as father, not as political pagan.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> *Prosa XLVII; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 114.*

<sup>132</sup> *Prosa XLVII; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 114.*

<sup>133</sup> *Prosa XLVII; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 114;* Her torture is described in some detail, see further discussion below.

In contrast, Apollonius threw down the idols placed in a sanctuary linked with Christ in Egypt, attacking the apparatus of the State.<sup>134</sup> Julian ‘destroyed to its very foundation the lofty temple so solidly constructed, together with the fifty metal images which stood there... But the temple’s marble statues tottered with crumbling surfaces, and the building, its stones broken to pieces, fell headlong to the ground.’<sup>135</sup> Martin, having ‘destroyed the unholy holies of the pagans, rightly casting down the sanctuaries of guilty despots, and straightaway, having broken up the deceit of the ancient shrine, this venerable priest built a temple to the high-throned God.’<sup>136</sup> Benedict, ‘after the sanctuaries of idols had been destroyed and the ceremonies of fanatical paganism had been routed ... is said to have constructed twelve monasteries’.<sup>137</sup>

The gender divide between Christina and these male examples undermines any potential for a female performance of active and challenging virginity. The performative and highly repetitious nature of sanctity is more tightly controlled for the female saints, and what freedom to rebel against secular authority they do demonstrate is within the domestic sphere. Women are unable to confront the paganism of society, but can defy familial authority.<sup>138</sup> Nor can women build up the congregation, by shepherding or organise the construction of churches, as Martin and Benedict demonstrate. The potential for a truly queered or transgressive iteration of sanctified performance is negated by Aldhelm’s positioning of his female exempla

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<sup>134</sup> *Prosa XXXVIII; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 103-4.

<sup>135</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1324-1337; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 132; Aldhelm continues at length, describing the fall of the gods and the destruction of the temple.

<sup>136</sup> *Carmen* ll. 690-693, *Nam paganorum destruxit fana profana/ Iure tyrannorum sternens dilubra reorum/ Et mox antiqui confracta fraude sacelli/ Fabricat altithrono venerandus templa sacerdos* *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 118; Aldhelm expands, ‘he also destroyed a notorious pine tree with green-sprouting trunk to which the senseless chiefs were wont to offer incense’.

<sup>137</sup> *Prosa XXX; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 90; *Carmen* ll. 850-845; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 121 ‘Often he destroyed the temples of former tyrants... he immediately fixed the conquering sign of Salvation in those same places.... ... restoring the basilica for the Lord and rebuilding the church.’

<sup>138</sup> See further discussion on this divide in the following section.

into the familial arena. Nevertheless, as was evident in the teaching role of women, a wife may assist her husband, so Basilissa and Julian 'constructed through Christ's assistance many monastic workhouses' for ten thousand Christians.<sup>139</sup> Aldhelm thus exhorts his monastic audience within the double monastery to Christian co-operation

## THE SPOKEN VERSUS THE WRITTEN WORD

One of the major differences Aldhelm creates between the male and female virgins is that although men can write, and are written about, women usually only interact verbally. Of the female saints, only Demetrias and Eugenia are acknowledged as subjects of a written text, and in both of these examples, Aldhelm undercuts any gender equality implied through his associations with the text. Thus, Aldhelm mentions, 'a book written in an elegant style, which tells about the extraordinary life of this virgin [Demetrias] in prose, a writing which the girl's holy mother requested through earnest entreaties'.<sup>140</sup> Here, Aldhelm clearly links the work with Demetrias' family, as it was requested by the mother, creating a domestic link that is irrelevant to the male examples. It is intended for the family and at the appeal of the mother, so it is firmly placed within the feminine sphere. Hence just as Caecilia is allowed to convert her immediate family, rather than the wider community, Demetrias' life is

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<sup>139</sup> *Prosa XXXVI; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 100; *Carmen ll.1300-1303, Virginibus quoque condunt gurgistia cellae./ Quas licet inferior sexus discriminet ordo./ Non tamen inferior virtutum cardo sequestrat./ In quis nempe decem monachorum milia florent; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 131, 'they... founded monasteries for the followers of Christ. They also established lowly cells for (female) celibates. Even though these celibates were kept separated by the lower order of their sex, yet they were not made separate by the lower rank of their virtues. Indeed in these monasteries ten thousand holy monks flourished'.

<sup>140</sup> *Carmen ll. 2187-2193; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 151; *Prosa XLIX; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 116, 'at her mother's request, a volume written in a developed and elegant styles was sent over the sea to the aforesaid servant of Christ, in which the principles of her life were thus described.' Aldhelm notes, 'she ascended the highest beacon of virtue on the virginal stairs of her merits; since indeed, at her mother's request, a volume written in a developed and elegant style was sent over the sea to the aforesaid servant of Christ, in which the principles of her life were thus described.' In doing this Aldhelm implies that the greatest compliment to a virgin was to be the focus of a written text, an interesting comparison when considering his audience.

associated with her immediate family, and lacks the general import of the male examples. When referring to the *vita Eugeniae*, Aldhelm's comments restrict the text in the same way that he restricts the female voices of saints like Agnes; the *vita* is not intended to up-build and enlighten a Christian audience, but explain the sexual accusations against the saint, as he explains how she overcame the allegations of debauchery.<sup>141</sup> His reference to the text strengthens the connexion between the transvestite saint and her sexual temptation of others, in this case the widow Melanthia, enabling Aldhelm to perpetuate ideas of inherent female sexuality. Although Eugenia dressed as a monk, Aldhelm reminds his audience that she could not prevent her sexual attraction to others.

In contrast, Aldhelm refers to literature written about Elijah, Gregory, Basil, Benedict, Antony and Athanasius.<sup>142</sup> Such works are intended for a wider readership, as Scripture, biography, prophecy and exegesis. For example, Aldhelm describes Elijah, 'whom the four books of Kings record as trusting in the distinction of virtue'.<sup>143</sup> Of Antony, Aldhelm notes, 'Those who wish to know of his glorious life ... let him not be slow to look at the narration of the little book in which his abundant virtues are written [i.e. Athanasius's *vita S. Antonii*].'<sup>144</sup> The men are also authors, a feature again denied to female saints. Obviously there are the Biblical writers, Old and New Testament, for example Daniel 'made known the prophetic times of Christ more certainly than all the ancient prophets'.<sup>145</sup> Luke 'wrote lucid doctrines in the

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<sup>141</sup> *Prosa XLIV*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 111.

<sup>142</sup> *Prosa XXVII*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 86; *Carmen* ll. 8740-860; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 122; *Prosa XXVIII*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 87; *Prosa XXXII*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 93.

<sup>143</sup> *Carmen* ll. 247-250, *Helias vates, quem tetra volumina regum/ Insignem memorant virtutum tenia fretum, / Virgo sacer fuerat fama per saecula notus*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 108.

<sup>144</sup> *Carmen* ll. 766-774; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 120.

<sup>145</sup> *Carmen* ll. 327-328, *Certius idcirco promulgat tempora Christi/ Omnibus antiquis praesaga voce recto*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 110; Daniel 9:24-27.



sacred book', and John was 'the author of the fourth part of the (Gospel) story'.<sup>146</sup> In his discussion of Ambrose, Aldhelm concentrates on the account of bees flying in and out of the infant Ambrose's mouth, to link Ambrose's 'sweet' writing and his 'pure virginity'.<sup>147</sup> Clement 'wrote up, clearer than daylight, the *itinerarium Petri* [i.e. the pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones*], ... which Rufinus translated into Latin from the Greek text.'<sup>148</sup> Basil of Cappadocia is described, 'at one time the greatest author of learned works, in his divine doctrine founded an excellent law [i.e. Basil's Rule]'.<sup>149</sup> Jerome is only mentioned in the *Carmen*, and Aldhelm describes him as 'the virgin guardian and interpreter of chastity, who translated the Hebrew prophecies into Roman words.... Moreover he composed tractates rightly to be marvelled at; he unravelled the secret words of the prophets in a certain commentary'.<sup>150</sup> Jerome's fame and sanctity come from his literary corpus, 'As a renowned teacher he continues to live throughout the ages by his writings, which are now duly copied throughout the four-cornered world. Indeed, he is celebrated by a throng of readers all over the world.'<sup>151</sup> Thus whilst Demetrius may be celebrated by her family, Jerome's fame traverses the world.

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<sup>146</sup> *Carmen* ll. 504, *Lucida divino scripsit qui dogmata libro*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 114; *Prosa* XXIII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 80.

<sup>147</sup> *Carmen* ll. 651-676; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 117; *Prosa* XXVI; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 84.

<sup>148</sup> *Prosa* XXV; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 82.

<sup>149</sup> *Carmen* ll. 730-750; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 119; Aldhelm also writes, 'He also composed a book in fluent language revealing the first sees of created things [Basil's *Homiliae on the Hexameron*]; *Prosa* XXVII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 86, 'Relying on the marvellous refinement of his eloquence he also produced his *Erga ta ex emeron* or *Hexaameron* ... which (may be) read in Latin translation [i.e. that of Rufinus].'

<sup>150</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1622-1630; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 139.

<sup>151</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1631-1633, *Inclitus hic constat scedis per saecla magister, / Quae nunc per mundum dcribuntur rite quadratum, / Scilibet illustris lectorum turma per orbem*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 139; Ironically, Jerome achieves this fame without retaining his virginity.

## MIRACLES, MAGIC AND GENDER

Aldhelm's language ensures that the masculine authority of the Church strictly controls many of the female miracles, whilst allowing more autonomy for the male saints. Emma Pettit, having examined the way in which Aldhelm uses the term *virtus* in his hagiography, concludes that female saints 'wield less power than the men and are less autonomous. It is thus the predominately male saints who are *virtus*-empowered miracle-workers.'<sup>152</sup> There is also a gender difference in the type of miracle described, and the manner in which they are related. Female miracles often relate to the woman herself, or other women, rather than society at large, restricting the sphere in which women act. As demonstrated when considering the preaching of women, they are unable to act on behalf of the community. Also the miracles of women more often occur post-mortem, which further serves to divide the saint from the power demonstrated. All of these elements to the performance of sanctified virginity in Aldhelm constrain the autonomy of women. Just as the motif of the *ancilla dei* both enabled and confined the saint, so Aldhelm's gendered division of miracles emphasises the authority of male saints, and concomitantly the subservience of female.

Aldhelm controls the power of his female saints by constructing them as conduits of power rather than enjoying autonomous agency, which is most evident in miracles that occur after death. The only clear male post-mortem miracle mentioned by Aldhelm, is the corpse resurrected on touching Elisha's bones, yet there are several miracles ascribed to the women after they die.<sup>153</sup> Agatha, for example, is

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<sup>152</sup> Emma Pettit, 'Holiness and Masculinity', p. 17.

<sup>153</sup> Aldhelm refers to the biblical miracle. 2 Kings 13:20-21 Elisha died and was buried. Now Moabite raiders used to enter the country every spring. Once while some Israelites were burying a man, suddenly they saw a band of raiders; so they threw the man's body into Elisha's tomb. When the body

clearly a channel for power when she saves Sicily from Mount Etna, as the miracle occurs by the action of a priest: 'Then a Sicilian priest, seeing the flashes of flame, placed the holy tomb containing her body in the path of the fire'.<sup>154</sup> Agatha does nothing, the Church, through the action of a priest, wields the power, and the tomb enclosing her body enables the miracle. Similarly, Lucia's mother is healed 'through the merits of Agatha'.<sup>155</sup> Thus, Agatha herself is distanced from the miracle, and it is created through her 'merits', that is through her performance of virginity and sanctity. Constantina is also cured through Agnes' tomb rather than through the power of the saint, 'And the tomb of the sepulchre, the grave wherein the limbs of [Agnes] rested, cured Constantina'.<sup>156</sup> In all of these miracles, including Elisha's, Aldhelm linguistically constructs the saint as conduit rather than miracle worker. Ultimately the performance of power is controlled by those who relate the *vitae* of female saints, that is, the Church.

As noted, the miracles of the female exempla are more likely to protect the saint, whereas those of male exempla benefit others. As both genders are enabled to face torture impassively, if not without pain, I will instead concentrate on women who are shielded from lust rather than pain. There are two examples, Agnes, and the sisters, Chionia, Irene and Agape, but Aldhelm does not describe the miracles as created by the women, rather, in these accounts, Aldhelm does not even allow his

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touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet.; Though this is the only miracle, there is a question over whether John the Evangelist dies or not, and Elijah and Amos are seen ascending to heaven, either as they die or just after death.

<sup>154</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1775-1776; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 142; In the *Prosa* XLI, the action is by 'these men'. *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 107.

<sup>155</sup> *Prosa* XLII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 108; In the *Carmen* l. 1784, she is healed 'through the holy power of the tomb'. *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 142.

<sup>156</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1970-1971, *Nam Constantinam sanavit tumba sepulcri/ Et sarcophagus, qua pausant membra puellae*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 146; *Prosa*, XLV, 'Her tomb (was) placed in a cemetery, where it restored to pristine health, as if by celestial medicine, the serious illness of the virgin Constantina'. *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 112; Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex*, p. 102, notes that in many cases the cures effected by female saints are for women, often for 'female problems'. These few examples demonstrate her argument.

female saints to be conduits for an outside force, the power is completely removed from them, and remains outside of their control. A divine covering protects Agnes's body while in the brothel, and when her suitor attempts rape, he dies on the spot, because 'God, Who justly brings victory to the innocent, punished his guilt with the sword of heaven's anger.'<sup>157</sup> Chionia, Irene and Agape are protected from Dulcitus when he hallucinates that the pots and pans in the kitchen are the three women.<sup>158</sup> Aldhelm explicitly notes, 'God, however, was keeping watch, and the evil creature was blinded in his heart, as foolishly he bestowed kisses on black cooking-pots.'<sup>159</sup> When Dulcitus later orders the women stripped, 'God on high ... defended His helpless servants with his strong right hand so that no one was able to remove the robes from their bodies.'<sup>160</sup> The women possess no power, the miracles come directly from God.

Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg has noted that many of the early Germanic female saints, the founder-abbesses, enjoyed visions or the ability to prophecy.<sup>161</sup> As noted in Chapter 2, virginity, prophecy was a channel open to women in the Jewish system, and among the early desert fathers.<sup>162</sup> Yet Aldhelm does not include any female prophets. In line with his emphasis on male teaching and authority, it is only the male saints who prophesy. From the Old Testament he takes Elijah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Joseph.<sup>163</sup> From the New Testament, John the Baptist is several times referred to as a prophet.<sup>164</sup> Silvester is able to explain Constantine's dream, and John the Hermit is

<sup>157</sup> *Carmen ll. 1960-1961, Sed Deus, insontes qui semper iure triumphat, / Irae caelestis punit mucrone reatum; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 146.*

<sup>158</sup> *Prosa L; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 117.*

<sup>159</sup> *Carmen ll. 2236-2240; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 152.*

<sup>160</sup> *Carmen ll. 2261-2263, Sed Deus ex alto, qui sanctos iure triumphat, / Cum forti famulas dextra defendit inermes, / Ut nullus posset membris auferre ciclades; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 153; Prosa L; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 118.*

<sup>161</sup> Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex*, pp. 102-104.

<sup>162</sup> Judges 4:4; Luke 2:36; See discussion in Chapter 2.

<sup>163</sup> Although Elisha is also a prophet, Aldhelm does not mention his prophetic ability.

<sup>164</sup> *Carmen ll. 395-459; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 111-113.*

able to prophesy.<sup>165</sup> Aldhelm also makes clear the link he constructs between purity and prophecy in his male virgins, for example Elijah is introduced as, ‘a prophet adorned with the favour of virginity and inspired by the prophetic spirit’.<sup>166</sup> Daniel is described, ‘To him above other mortals, as a reward in the exchange for his chastity, hidden things lie open and things closed in the mystical coverings of the sacraments are divinely unlocked.’<sup>167</sup> Such a ‘reward’ is denied to Aldhelm’s female virgins, although textually available through the example of biblical women and *vitae*.<sup>168</sup> This echoes the ability of the male virgins to unbind and release, in a manner closed off from Aldhelm’s female exempla.

In contrast to the spiritual miracle of prophecy, Aldhelm constructs a physical link between the female body and nature. For example, when Elijah created rain, he ‘opened the locks of heaven and the obstacles of the clouds ... with his prayers’.<sup>169</sup>

Whereas Scholastica,

by means of profuse fountains of tears she immediately changed the serenity of the sky into a stormy tempest; and arousing thunder to terrify the trembling earth with horrific rumbling, and at the same time eliciting fiery flashes of lightning, she displayed a marvellous spectacle to the world.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> *Carmen* ll. 617-650; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 116-117; *Prosa* XXV, XXIX; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 83-84, 89.

<sup>166</sup> *Prosa* XX; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 76.

<sup>167</sup> *Prosa* XXI; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 77; In the *Carmen*, ll. 302-306, Aldhelm says about Jeremiah, ‘This man ... possessed a holy celibacy ... and presages sent from on high filled the rich prophet of God so that he could perceive things enclosed in darkness and could unlock the innermost secrets of heaven in understanding’. *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 109

<sup>168</sup> For example Deborah in Judges 4-5.

<sup>169</sup> *Prosa* XX; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 76; *Carmen* ll. 258-266; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier p. 108. Aldhelm continues, ‘then with his command he broke open the obstacle of the clouds, so that rain-showers might flow abundantly from a darkened sky’.

<sup>170</sup> *Prosa* XLVII, *statim profusis lacrimarum fontibus serenitatem aetheris in procellarum turbines commutans et tonitrua fragore horrisono orbem trementem terrentia concitans simulque igniferas fulminum coruscations eliciens mirum mundo spectaculum exhibu<er>it*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 113; However, this link is played down in the *Carmen*, ll. 2038-2040, *Tum virgo Christum pulsabat corde benignum, / Ut sibi dignetur vulnus sanare doloris. Mox igitur caelum nimbo turbine totum*;

The physicality of the female body is portrayed through the immediate interaction with nature. Scholastica's performance of emotion directly links to the environment, contrasting with the usual experience of the female saint to be unable to influence wider world. The final sentence in the extract fuses the virgin and the weather, as she becomes the spectacle as much as the miracle, but this is subverted by the knowledge that the miracle only influences her brother, hence it is a domestic miracle, unlike Elisha's.

Through the themes considered in this chapter, we can see how Aldhelm uses hagiography to perpetuate the gender norms he inherited from late antiquity. Whilst, in his opening discussion on virginity, he innovated and flattered his audience, creating a virginity that enabled multiple identities for the women, in his hagiographical section – by far the longest section of *De Virginitate* – he refuses such a queer reading of virginity. Butler's performativity is demonstrated through a highly gendered and restricted iteration of acts, even more so for the female exempla, who are contained within the personal and domestic to a far greater extent than their male counterparts. In hagiography, Aldhelm does not innovate, rather he demonstrates an orthodox construction of sanctified virginity, with passive female saints, active male saints and a clearly differentiated, gendered virginity. He stresses the masculine agency and activity, and feminine passivity in describing their performance of virginity. Even where a more active performance is possible, for example the tradition of female prophecy, Aldhelm avoids it. His theme of female submission underlines his strictly controlled female sanctity. In the following chapter, these themes will be discussed in relation to Aldhelm's more transgressive saints.

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*Poetic*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 148, 'Thereupon the girl besieged Christ in her heart that He might deign to heal the wound of her sorrow. At once the whole heaven grew dark with a cloudy storm'.

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**ALDHELM'S *DE VIRGINITATE* –  
FROM PATRISTIC BACKGROUND  
TO ANGLO-SAXON AUDIENCE**

**Tereli Askwith**

Submitted to Swansea University  
in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**Vol. II**

**2009**





## CHAPTER FIVE

### GENDERED VIRGINITY – THE TYPICAL AND THE TRANSGRESSIVE

This chapter will consider further Aldhelm's construction of virginity and gendered sanctity in his hagiography. It will examine three 'typical' virgin martyrs, and the importance of torture in such *vitae*. It will also discuss the married couples Aldhelm includes, and the most transgressive of the saints, male and female. The previous chapter traced Aldhelm's orthodox use of gender in his construction of virgin exempla, arguing that he created a more active sanctity for his male virgins and a more passive sanctity for his female, which enabled him to emphasise the ecclesiastical authority of many of his male saints. This argument will be expanded, through a discussion of his female virgin martyrs. Despite the potential for autonomy in some of the female virgin martyr accounts, Aldhelm's relating of the *vitae* stresses that their rebellions tend to be domestic rather than political, and short-lived. This is particularly evident when Aldhelm's *vitae* are compared with accounts related by the later Anglo-Saxon writer Ælfric, and some of these will be discussed below.

This chapter will also consider the sensuality Aldhelm associates with the female body, contrasting it with the self control and abstinence he links with his male saints. After Aldhelm's elision of the female body in the opening of *De Virginitate*, his *vitae* demonstrate the division between the sensations Aldhelm associates with the female body, and the self-control of the male, particularly evident in his depiction of

torture.<sup>1</sup> Although he discusses marriage, he rarely moves into the eroticism of spiritual ecstasy, concentraing instead on the potential for suffering.

This chapter will then discuss the transgressive and potentially queer saints, such as Thecla, one of the most transgressive female saints in the late antique canon, and Eugenia, cross-dressing saint, and consider the manner in which Aldhelm contains their autonomy. Similarly, whilst the paired saints of married couples could potentially open out the identities available through the text to Aldhelm's audience, again, Aldhelm uses the *vitae*, to reinforce his views of the importance of obedience and harmony within the monastic community. The sheer variety of exempla included by Aldhelm means tracing meaning can be difficult, particularly in these accounts which do not appear to 'fit' the normal saint's Life, but certain conclusions can be drawn from Aldhelm's presentation of the virgins in his hagiography, primarily his constant return to the theme of masculine authority.

## AGENCY AND THE VIRGIN MARTYR

Among the virgin martyr accounts that Aldhelm includes are Agatha, Lucy and Agnes. Agnes was discussed in the previous chapter through the lens of containment and enclosure, but along with Agatha and Lucy, these *vitae* incorporate many of the same themes.<sup>2</sup> The saints are determined to protect their virginity, despite the threat

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<sup>1</sup> See discussion on Scholastica in Chapter 4.

<sup>2</sup> As Agnes' life has already been discussed, I will briefly outline the other two virgin martyrs. AGATHA - In Sicily, Quintianus plans the seduction/rape of Agatha. He sends her to a brothel, intending her corruption by the prostitute Aphrodisia, but the plan fails. Quintianus threatens Agatha with torture, but she refuses to submit and blasphemes the Roman gods, which results in a beating. Thrown into a windowless prison, her breast is cut off, but is subsequently healed by St Peter. Quintianus commands Agatha be rolled naked over burning embers and shattered tiles, however an earthquake shakes Sicily preventing the torture. Agatha dies, and Quintianus flees the city by ship but, somewhat bathetically, is kicked overboard by a horse. A year later Etna erupts, but the city is saved through the intercession of Agatha. LUCY - Lucy and her mother, Euthycia, visit the tomb of Agatha, seeking a cure for Euthycia. Lucy receives a vision of Agatha informing her that Euthycia is cured

from pagan men; they are sent to brothels; and they are finally martyred because they refuse to submit to male authority. There is also a lack of characterisation, and a use of generalisation through their *vitae* at the expense of the narrative, and the agency of the martyrs within the text. They rarely demonstrate details of personality and verbal interaction is kept to a minimum. This also applies to the other characters in the *vitae*, for example Aldhelm does not even name Agatha's opponent, which serves to anonymise and generalise the secular powers against which she takes her stand for her virginity. It also emphasises the suffering of Agatha, that she withstands such persecution through the power of virginity, and the torturer is less important than the torture.

#### **ALDHELM, ÆLFRIC, *ANCILLA DEI* AND AUTONOMY**

The previous chapter discussed the transgressive nature of sanctity, as virgin martyrs refused to submit to social pressure, and frequently family pressure, to marry and bear children. Their performance of sanctified virginity requires that they take a stand against society, speaking out against figures of authority, but always on the understanding that they will die for their freedom. Nevertheless, the autonomy of the saint broke social and ecclesiastical conventions, thus required containment, which the authors managed in a variety of ways.<sup>3</sup> As noted previously, one of the most common was the use of the *ancilla dei* motif.<sup>4</sup>

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thanks to Lucy's virginity. Euthycia reluctantly agrees not to force Lucy to marry and to donate their wealth to the poor. Three years later, the pagan Pascanius pursues Lucy, but she refuses him. He sends her to the brothel but she cannot be physically moved, so he orders her execution but Lucy survives until she is given the last rites. Pascanius is executed for his cruelty, and a church is built on the spot where Lucy died.

<sup>3</sup> For example in the enclosure evident in Agnes' account.

<sup>4</sup> See discussion in Chapter 4.

The autonomy and agency of female saints is often evident through their speech, which represents public evidence of their transgression of gender norms. For example, in the *vitae* and homilies written by Ælfric of Eynsham in the tenth century, the women speak out in public, speak against individuals, against pagan gods, and speak out in support of their faith and their stand as virgins.<sup>5</sup> The very public nature of their speech defies the expectation of women's containment within the domestic sphere, and initiates them into the political sphere, in contrast to Aldhelm's continued efforts to restrict his female saints to the domestic and family arenas. Yet, by Ælfric's time the role of women in the Church and secular society had been greatly restricted in comparison with that of Aldhelm's.<sup>6</sup> Whatever agency these women demonstrate is possible because they are about to meet their deaths, and because they are 'handmaids of God'. All of the women selected by Ælfric demonstrate this, though they are largely silent for Aldhelm. Reference to the woman as *ancilla dei*, or 'handmaid of God' validates her speech and actions, but also contains the saint by reminding the audience that the saint can speak in this way only because God allows it in these specific circumstances. The examples of bold speech by female saints are never intended as paradigms for public speech by women in general, hence as Ælfric creates a greater degree of verbal autonomy in his versions of the *vitae*, he uses the *ancilla dei* motif more frequently to explain and contain his virgin martyrs.

One example of this is Ælfric's version of Lucy's *vita*. She describes herself as a handmaid of God, using the motif to facilitate her actions, but the phrase also

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<sup>5</sup> Ælfric (c. 950-1010) related some of the same virgin martyr accounts as Aldhelm in his *Lives of the Saints*. He offers the accounts in greater detail, translating them into the vernacular for the benefit of a lay patron.

<sup>6</sup> David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England: A History of its development from the times of St. Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council (940 – 1216)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963); Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church – Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998); Mechtild Gretsch, *The Intellectual Foundations of the English Benedictine Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); H. R. Loyn, *The English Church 940-1154* (New York: Longman, 2000).

highlights her dependence on her special bond with God, as she reminds her audience that she speaks by means of the Holy Spirits, she is a conduit of the Divine.<sup>7</sup> Ælfric thereby enables and restricts Lucy's performance of virginal sanctity, and her stated relationship with the Divine facilitates and contains her autonomy. Similarly, Jerome described Paula as deferring to male authority when she was questioned on points of theology. She used the qualification as a justification to answer as woman; hence it both empowered and contained her authority to speak on theology.<sup>8</sup> Lucy is able to defy her mother, social expectations, gender expectations, and Pascanius, the official representative of secular authority. But the *ancilla dei* motif also signifies her special relationship with God, separating her from women in general and blocking their access to this freedom.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, whilst in the *vitae* of virgin martyrs, the inevitability of death constrains the autonomy available to these women, Aldhelm restricts it still further. For example, in his highly abbreviated account of Agatha, he excises her public speech with Quintianus, and her verbal taunting of Quintianus. In the full version of the *vita*, Agnes demonstrates her 'masculine' ability to reason, and her superior facility for language, verbally manipulating Quintianus until he reacts with violence toward her, rewarding her with the martyrdom she has sought since the beginning of the *vita*.<sup>10</sup> Thus her power through verbal reasoning, stereotypically depicted as masculine in literature, enables her to control not just a man but a man representative of secular

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<sup>7</sup> Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, ed. by W. W. Skeat, Early English Text Society, (London : N. Trübner and Co/EETS, 1881-1900), p. 215; *Women Saints' Lives in Old English Prose* trans. by Leslie Donovan (Cambridge : D. S. Brewer, 1999), p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.

<sup>9</sup> Ælfric's Agatha also refers to herself as a handmaid of God. Following the original Latin *vita*, she speaks publicly against Quintianus, the Roman official, and blasphemes the gods he worships, an element that Aldhelm removes entirely from the text. Aldhelm removes the political element from the story entirely.; *Women Saints' Lives*, Donovan, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> A point that Ælfric nicely brings out through the flying element of the Old English. See *Women Saints' Lives*, Donovan, p. 38.

authority. Yet Aldhelm, possibly aware of the political voice of women like Hild, eliminated this voice in his *vitae*.<sup>11</sup>

## THE SEXUAL FEMALE BODY AND EROTICISM

As has been noted in the previous chapter, women were constructed in many of the patristic sources as enslaved to their sexuality.<sup>12</sup> All of these virgin martyrs tempt men and face a physical threat to their virginity. As noted in the previous chapter, Aldhelm clearly differentiated between the worldly, sexual woman and the non-sexual virgin. He presents the woman who dressed in a worldly manner as desirous of a sexual relationship and actively striving to tempt men, for example the prostitute wife of Proverbs that Aldhelm linked with Judith.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, although female saints encompass a potential sexuality that creates a temptation for the men around them, they feel no sexual desire for men. Any sexual feeling attributed to these virgins is queered through its re-direction to their relationship with the Divine. Aldhelm excises bodily sexuality when constructing female sanctity, despite his, at times, sensuous descriptions. The women are offered social status/worldly goods by marriage rather than a sexual relationship.

The denial of the female sexual body is evident in Agatha's *vita*. In the original version, her breast is cut off, maiming her sexual and nurturing physical body, but it is subsequently healed by Peter. The loss of the breast is one of the most noteworthy elements of the *vita*, yet Aldhelm refers to it briefly in the *Carmen* and only vaguely in the *Prosa*. In the *Prosa* he refers to the 'cruel rendering of her limb',

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<sup>11</sup> See discussion in Chapter 1; Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV.23.

<sup>12</sup> See discussion in Chapter 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Prosa* LVII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 127.

excising the latent sexuality and motherhood signified by the breast.<sup>14</sup> This suits Aldhelm's division between the virgin and the sexual/worldly woman, and his seeming discomfort with the female body evident in his use of the athlete and bee in order to discuss the nuns. Aldhelm therefore elides the sexual female body from the text.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast Agnes, though only thirteen, uses the erotic language of the Song of Songs to describe her relationship with Christ.<sup>16</sup> She refuses her earthly suitor by stating that she already has a bridegroom in heaven, yet, although Aldhelm's Agnes uses the word 'lover', her description is without sexual overtones.

For I am already engaged by another loves who has betrothed  
himself to me with a ring of his good faith, surrounded me with  
glowing and glistening gems, and dresses me with a robe woven  
from gold; whose father knows no woman, whose mother is a virgin,  
whom the angels attend and whose beauty the sun and moon  
admire.<sup>17</sup>

Aldhelm's Agnes interprets the marriage relationship in terms of wealth and standing, which compares with his general delineation of marriage as a temptation of status. In such a depiction, Aldhelm's efforts to separate the sexual woman from the virgin creates a performance of virginity that does not just redirect female sexuality, but denies it physically and mentally.

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<sup>14</sup> *Prosa XLI, nec membrorum crudelis dilaceratio; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 107*

<sup>15</sup> *Prosa XLI; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 107.*

<sup>16</sup> It must be remembered that 12 was the age of consent, thus she was old enough to be betrothed and married.; K. Hopkins, 'The age of Roman Girls at Marriage', *Population Studies*, 18 (1965), 309-327; Brent D. Shaw, 'The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage : Some Reconsiderations', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 77 (1987), 30-46; Cf. Jerome, *Ep. 24*; Asella was 12 when she dedicated herself to sanctified virginity.; See discussion in Chapter 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Prosa XLV, quia iam ab alio amatore praeventa sum, qui me anulo fidei suae subarravit, circumdedit me vernantibus atque coruscantibus gemmis, induit me ciclade auro texta, cuius pater feminam nescit, cuius mater virgo est, cui angeli serviunt, cuius pulchritudinem sol et luna admirantur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 112.*

The closest Aldhelm comes to an erotic depiction of the relationship between the virgin martyr and Christ is in his account of Constantina.<sup>18</sup> Aldhelm writes, ‘did she not incite with her conversation, persuade with her speech and arouse with her example (*colloquio incitavit, sermone suasit, exemplo instigavit*) nearly all the high-born offspring of the feminine sex’. As noted in the previous chapter, Aldhelm restricts her interaction to the correct social class, and to other young ladies.<sup>19</sup> Also she does not teach, as such, she speaks, persuades and arouses by example. Her performance is entirely orthodox as a virgin example. As Constantina draws the young women from physical marriage, she offers a spiritual equivalent. Their spiritual bridegroom is portrayed in the same manner as an earthly husband, and the sexual experience signifies their connexion with the divine. Constantina also draws young Christian women,

‘to such an extent that they confessed that each one, rejecting their marriage bed and the self-indulgent intercourse of wedlock, yearned more eagerly for the embraces of a heavenly bridegroom, and were hastening, with shining lamps and frequently uttered sighs, among the wise virgins’.<sup>20</sup>

This is the most sexual understanding of female spirituality in Aldhelm. The erotic charge is just visible, yet the depiction is uncomfortable. Physical sexuality, even within marriage is self-indulgent, and the word used, *luxus*, carries overtones of

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<sup>18</sup> The pagan daughter of Constantine visited the shrine of Agnes and was healed of leprosy. Constantina became a consecrated virgin, and an example to many other young girls. She avoided marriage to Gallicanus by sending him her two Christian servants, who convert him to Christian celibacy, and, at the same time, she converted Gallicanus’ two daughters.

<sup>19</sup> See discussion in Chapter 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Prosa XLVIII, nonne cunctas propemodum Romanorum praetorum filias omnemque paene generosam feminini sexus sobolem ac pulcherrimam pubertatis indolem famosae virginitatis rumore comperto ad culturam Christianae religionis et coronam castitatis colloquio incitavit, sermons suasit exemplo instigavit, ita dumtaxat, ut unamquamque spreto nuptiali thalamo et maritali luxus commercio caelistis sponsi amplexus enixius satagere et inter virgines sapientes cum limpidis lampadibus properare ducta crebro suspiria faterentur, quod plenius de conversatione illius scripta dogmatibus opuscula produnt?; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 115.*



debauchery. In contrast then, the young girls yearning for heavenly embraces, 'hastening' to the bridegroom with 'frequently uttered sighs'. The sound of *limpidis lampadibus* that they carry echoes the sibilant *suspiria* and Aldhelm's sensuous style creates the eroticism that he attempts to avoid. The tension between Aldhelm's determinedly non-sexual portrayal of virgins and the erotically constructed spirituality of many virgin martyr *vitae* creates an uncomfortable mix.

### **THE SENSATIONAL FEMALE BODY – PROTECTED AND COVERED**

The miracles that occur within these *vitae* largely relate to the women themselves, in line with the miracles discussed in the Chapter 4. They are also linked to the protection of their virginity, as, for example, all three of these saints face the sexual threat of the brothel. Women run and work in brothels, hence they are female spheres, representative of female sexuality. The brothel genders the women as they must overcome their inherent sexuality, represented by the brothel, but it requires divine intervention, they cannot do it alone. But Aldhelm's discomfort with female sexuality leads him to restrict this motif. For example, in the full account of her *vita*, Agatha is sent to Aphrodisia's brothel to be corrupted, hence there is no overt violence in the initial threat to her virginity, rather it pivots on the female deceit and manipulation of Aphrodisia. Yet in the *Prosa* and *Carmen*, Aldhelm ignores the brothel element. Instead he concentrates on her endurance of torture and the importance of her coffin in protecting Sicily.

Agatha faces three threats to her intactness; the overt threat to her virginity represented by the brothel, the removal of the breast, and Quintianus' attempts to have her body penetrated by being rolled over potsherds. All three fail. As noted,

Aldhelm ignores the brothel, and the healing of the breast that enables Agatha to proceed to her martyrdom whole. Aldhelm concentrates on the power of her ‘innocent purity’ to overcome penetration, to the point where he implies she is tortured when she in fact escapes, saved from the potsherds by an earthquake.<sup>21</sup> Whilst Aldhelm’s early comments on virginity relate to inner purity rather than physical intactness, most likely in deference to his audience, when discussing sanctified virginity he concentrates on the protection of the physical status of the body. Lucy’s *vita* evidences Aldhelm’s division of his non-virginal audience from the autonomy and experience enjoyed by female saints.

Pascanius threatens Lucy with the brothel and the concomitant rape he associates with it, aware that her power resides in her virginity.<sup>22</sup> Aldhelm does not use this opportunity to discuss the issues about mental and physical virginity, although elsewhere his interest in the virginity of the mind is to the fore. He argues ‘For every privilege of pure virginity is preserved only in the fortress of the free mind rather than being contained in the restricted confines of the flesh.’<sup>23</sup> Aldhelm also quotes Augustine to support the importance of mental virginity, ‘Thus the sanctity of the body is not lost provided that the sanctity of the soul remains, even if the body is overcome, just as the sanctity of the body is lost if the purity of the soul is violated,

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<sup>21</sup> *Prosa XLI, Cuius integritatis castimoniam nec membrorum crudelis dilaceratio compescere nec lictorum atrox vexatio praepedire nec acria testularum fragmina infringere vel torrida carbonum incendia ullatenus vincere vincere valuerunt; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 107, The cruel rendering of her limbs could not subdue, the vicious persecution of the lectors could not impede, the sharp splinters of potsherds could no weaken, the searing heat of coals could not in any way overcome (Agatha’s) innocent purity.*

<sup>22</sup> *Prosa XLII, Pascasius consu ltribunica potestate fretus acri angore afficiture, eo quod Christi triuncula nec sermonum severitate castigata nec lenonum fallacy lenocinio tradita a rigido virginitatis proposito penitus inflecti valuit, quamvis restibus constrictam ad detestabile prostibulum et invisum lupanar scortorum trahere vel trudere niterentur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p.108, Paschasius, the consul with tribunal power, was troubled with bitter anguish because he was not able to deflect Christ’s recruit at all from her rigid resolution of virginity, neither by castigating her with the harshness of reprimands nor by giving her over to the deceptive seductions of panders – even though they attempted to drag (or thrust) her, bound in ropes, to a detestable brothel and a loathsome bawdy-house of whores.*

<sup>23</sup> *Prosa LVIII, Omne etenim purae virginitatis privilegium potius in solo liberae mentis praesidio servatur, quam in arto carnis clustello continetur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 129.*

even if the body is intact'.<sup>24</sup> Finally, in the same section, Aldhelm cites Prosper of Aquitaine to substantiate his view on the necessity of inner purity. Prosper states that just as the body is not stained if the mind is unwilling, so the body is defiled if 'the soul is guilty without the flesh'.<sup>25</sup> Clearly this weight on mental purity would flatter his audience, yet, he rarely includes it during the *vitae*.<sup>26</sup> In a Butlerian sense, the body is constructed through the discourse, and it is the intact body that Aldhelm wishes to highlight. Throughout the hagiography, Aldhelm highlights the potential power of physical virginity as an enabling force, distancing his audience from the female exempla of the text.

In Agnes' *vita*, Simpronius orders Agnes stripped before being taken to a brothel, but her hair grows to cover her body. This image enables the author to expose the female body to the audience, whilst demonstrating the threat to defile it. Agnes is protected as her hair grows and her physical body remains unavailable to the gaze of the textual male onlooker. Hair is a heavily gendered aspect of appearance within the context of biblical and Christian ideology. Leslie Donovan comments that while long hair is considered a woman's glory in the Bible, in late antiquity and the medieval period, it was also associated with female sexuality.<sup>27</sup> In addition, Aldhelm describes the brothel, 'the loathsome harlotry of a brothel, where the detestable wantonness of prostitutes runs wild and the shameless impudence of whores is

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<sup>24</sup> *Prosa LVIII, Ita non amittitur corporis sanctitas manente animi sanctitate etiam corpore oppresso, sicut amittitur sanctitas corporis violata animi puritate etiam corpore intacto; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 129, quoting Augustine, De Civitate Dei 1.18.*

<sup>25</sup> *Prosa LVIII, Mens illaesa nihil violato in corpore perdit, / Invitam carnis vulnera non maculant; Nec crimen facti recipit non mixta voluntas: / Velle magis facinus quam tolerare nocet. / Sic autem ad cordis penetralia cuncta recurrunt, / Ut plerumque animus sit sine carne reus, / Cum, quod ab intacto submotum est corpore, solus / Concipit et tectis motibus intus agit; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 129.*

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of Aldhelm and the importance of internal virginity, see Sinead O'Sullivan, 'The Image of Adornment in Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*: Cyprian and his Influence', *Peritia*, 15 (2001) 48-57.

<sup>27</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:15 A woman's hair is referred to as περιβολαίου, which literally means 'the thing thrown around', that is that the hair is a covering. Donovan (1999) p.

disgustingly flaunted'.<sup>28</sup> The negativity and disgust Aldhelm promulgates with regard to the brothel is entirely related to women, and female sexuality. One would have no idea that the establishment in question is frequented by men. Aldhelm therefore covers one body against the sexual gaze, but implicates an entire sex in prostitution.

## THE SENSATIONAL FEMALE BODY – TORTURED AND EXPOSED

The tortured female body has been widely discussed by scholars of hagiography. Scholars have debated the extent to which the torture is titillating, and whether that titillation is a result of authorial intention.<sup>29</sup> And, though he does not reach the descriptive heights of later medieval writers, Aldhelm does at times dwell on the torture of women.<sup>30</sup> Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing discuss the danger of concentrating on the language and rhetoric of Aldhelm to the detriment of the substance of the text. Lees and Overing argue that Andy Orchard, comparing Aldhelm's language in the *Prosa* and *Carmen* accounts of Thecla, reduces our understanding of Thecla's suffering by concentrating on 'this rich display of rhetorical (and largely verse-derived) pyrotechnics' in the *Carmen*.<sup>31</sup> For all that his

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<sup>28</sup> *Prosa XLV, Et licet huius rei gratia ad invisum prostibuli lupanar, ubi scortorum detestanda obscenitas bachatur et frontosa mecharum impudentia turpiter stupratur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 112.*

<sup>29</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1985); K. Gravdal, *Ravishing Virgins: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia : University of Philadelphia, 1991); Shari Horner, 'Spiritual Truth and Sexual Violence: The Old English *Juliana*, Anglo-Saxon Nuns, and the Discourse of Female Monastic Enclosure', *Signs*, 19 (1994), 658-75; Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London and New York : Routledge, 1995); Brent D. Shaw, 'Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs', *Journal of Early Christianity*, 4 (1996), 269-312.

<sup>30</sup> Aldhelm does not highlight the torture of male saints to the same degree, but his male *vitae* offer some of the same themes. Robert Mills discusses the 'queering' of male torture/suffering in hagiography. See Robert Mills, ' "Whatever you do is a delight to me!": Masculinity, Masochism and Queer Play in Representations of Male Martyrdom,' *Exemplaria* 13.1 (2001), 1-37; See further discussion below.

<sup>31</sup> Andy Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 11.

text is *sermone nitidus*, Aldhelm is describing horrific tortures inflicted on his virgins, primarily on his female virgins.<sup>32</sup> However there is a difference between arousal, intentional or not, created by the persecution of the saint, and that created by her suffering.

The earliest *vitae* concentrate on the impassivity of the saint in the face of terrible affliction.<sup>33</sup> For female saints, such detachment from pain was evidence that she had overcome her female gender, a demonstration of the power of sanctified virginity, as endurance of pain was a quality associated with men.<sup>34</sup> Hence the saint Perpetua suffered the agonies of childbirth, as a woman, yet remained unaffected by the torture she faced as a martyr, as the pain of childbirth was considered necessary punishment for women after the sin of Eve.<sup>35</sup> Later medieval saints not only suffer agonies from torture, they inflict suffering on themselves.<sup>36</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum's groundbreaking work on the body in the middle ages argues that women experienced and described religion through bodily sensation, not denying their physicality but embracing it.<sup>37</sup> Aldhelm's saints, both male and female, remain impassive despite horrific persecution, though he does not explicitly state that they do

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<sup>32</sup> Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* V. 18, as quoted in Orchard, *Poetic Art*, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Some saints feel pain but with divine support can stoically withstand it, whilst others do not even feel the tortures inflicted on them. See Peter Brown, *Body and Society. Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 73-75.

<sup>34</sup> Esther Cohen, 'The Animated Pain of the Body', *The American Historical Review*, 105 (2000). 36-68, especially pp. 61-63; Perkins, *The Suffering Self*; Shaw, 'Body/Power/Identity', pp. 269-312.

<sup>35</sup> See discussion in Cohen, 'Animated Pain', pp. 44-45; Genesis 3:16 To the woman he said, 'I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.'

<sup>36</sup> For example, the medieval saints Christina the Astonishing, and Catherine of Sienna; Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist : Studies in Medieval Religious Literature* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 108-135; Jo Ann McNamara 'The Need to Give: Suffering and Female Sanctity in the Middle Ages', in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. by R. Blumenfeld-Kosinski and T. Szell (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 212-221; Cohen, 'Animated Pain', pp. 36-68.

<sup>37</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast : The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1987); Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York : Zone Books, 1991); See also Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity 300-1336* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1995).

not suffer, any titillation therefore is created by the persecution rather than the anguish of the saint. Although Bynum does not discuss Anglo-Saxon sensibilities, it is interesting that Aldhelm creates a sanctity in his hagiography in which women are more likely to be tortured, and for that torture to be explicitly stated, and in general the men are more likely to demonstrate abstinence in their *vitae*.<sup>38</sup> Thus Aldhelm links sensation with the female body and denial with the male.<sup>39</sup>

Although some of Aldhelm's male exempla are tortured, in contrast to his female virgins, such scenes are dealt with very briefly, and largely glossed over. In the *Prosa*, for example, Aldhelm relates of Felix, 'he was tortured by torturers and was agonizingly martyred by the horrendous torments of his executioners'.<sup>40</sup> This is a generalised description, with no sense of suffering and no detail of the torture or agonising martyrdom.<sup>41</sup> Yet, in the account of Rufina and Secunda, Rufina is tortured whilst Secunda is made to look on. Aldhelm directs the gaze of the audience through the description of Rufina's torture, and Secunda's experience of Rufina's torture, making the audience complicit in its voyeurism. Rufina, 'was being flogged in the presence of the raging governor, beaten up with very harsh blows of the whip and bloodied by the livid weals of the lash.'<sup>42</sup> Secunda retorts 'Lay on fire, stones, swords, whips, cudgels and rods: however many penalties you inflict, that many glories shall I number; however many savageries you impose, that many palms of

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<sup>38</sup> See discussion below.

<sup>39</sup> As has been argued in previous chapters, Aldhelm writes in a very sensual manner at times, see particularly his descriptions of honey-collecting bees (*Prosa* IV; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 61) and dress (*Prosa* LVIII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 127-8); See also the comments on self-control and lust above.

<sup>40</sup> *Prosa* XXVII, *Extitit quidam pontificali dignitate deocratus merito Felix et nomine, qui cum pro fidei Constantia a tortoribus torqueretur et horrendis carnificum cruciabatibus agonizans martirizaretur, exclamasse fertur: Gratias tibi ago, Christe, L et VI annos in saeculo virginitatem meam servavi*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 87; Aldhelm refers to Felix's episcopal authority, but concentrates on his endurance of torture.

<sup>41</sup> This is not to say Aldhelm never describes injuries inflicted on his male exempla, see below.

<sup>42</sup> *Prosa* LI, *Post haec Rufina cum durissimis verberum ictibus caesa et caerulea flagrorum vibice cruentata in conspectu furentis satrapae vapularet*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 119.

martyrdom shall I count.<sup>43</sup> Through her speech, Aldhelm constructs a sanctity for Secunda that depends on torment for its compensation, hence such torment is welcomed, even sought out by the saint; protecting her virginity is indivisible from public maltreatment, as she directly links her experience of suffering with a heavenly reward.

The torments endured by Aldhelm's exempla are evidence of their sanctity. In this way it is interesting that the women are more likely to be tortured, and for that torture to be explicitly stated, and the men are more likely to be abstemious.<sup>44</sup> Judith Butler argues for the construction of the body through the iteration of performative acts, 'That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality'.<sup>45</sup> Through the examples of female virgin martyrs, we see that Aldhelm does not only construct the ontological status, but the sanctified status, as the performance of virginal sanctity by these saints requires fortitude and endurance of agonising torment. The torture of Justina is explicit,

But even when she was afflicted with diverse instruments of torture  
she did not give, (being) harder than adamant for the sake of laying  
hold of the prize of suffering since she had in no way placed the  
foundations of her unvanquished mind on the powdery grains of sand,

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<sup>43</sup> *Prosa* LI, *Applica ignes, saxa, gladios, flagella, fustes et virgas; quot tu poenas intuleris, tot ego glories numerabo; quot tu violentias irrogaveris, tot ego martirii computo palmas*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 119; *Carmen* ll. 2310-2317, *Affer cuncta simul nobis tormenta cruenta./ Ignis et macheras et rubras vibice virgas./ Restes et fustes et dura grandine saxa/ Caerula sanguineis arpagans vulnera rivis;/ Ast ego tanta feram victo tortore tropea./ Quot tu poenarum genera crudeliter infers;/ Quot tu concinnas crudi discrimina leti./ Tot nos in supera numerabimus arce coronas!*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 154, Secunda replies, 'Inflict all bloody tortures on us at the same time – fires and swords and blood-drawing switches; ropes and clubs and rocks in hard hailstorms drawing blue-black weals with rivers of blood – but I shall carry away as a great prize when the executioner is defeated: however many kinds of torture you harshly inflict, however many dangers of violent death you cause, that many crowns shall we have in the heavenly region!'

<sup>44</sup> See discussion below.

<sup>45</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York : Routledge, 1990), p.136.

shifting this way and that, but had established the lofty structure of her dwelling on the most solid rock, just like the wise man whom the Gospel parable describes. While she was being cruelly lashed with rough scourges of leather, and was being beaten with plentiful blows of the fist, she was ordered at length to climb into an iron cauldron which was sizzling with tallow and pitch, to order that she, the gentlest of virgins, be cremated in such a torture-chamber.<sup>46</sup>

The torment is equated with the reward, and the reward is only available through the endurance of torment. Her acceptance of this is evident as she is complicit in the torture, climbing into the cauldron. Aldhelm compares her to rock, the strong and the solid.

Ultimately Justina's strength flows from the Divine, channelled through her resistant body by her virginity and her faith in a heavenly reward for her virginity. By enduring anguish she is constructed as a sanctified virgin and demonstrates the strength of virginity. Yet, Aldhelm compares her adamant intention with her gentleness – she is *tenerrima virgo*, a phrase carrying overtones of youth and weakness, which is picked up in the next section as Aldhelm reminds his audience that Christ is their protector. It also highlights her gender, as a gentle woman. Nevertheless, though these tortures are terrible, there is no sense of the suffering body, indeed the body is largely absent.<sup>47</sup> Any sense of the physical suffering of the saint is immediately negated by Christ's protection, as he checked 'the force of the

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<sup>46</sup> Prosa XLIII, *Iustina vero non solum intergritatis gloria fine tenus favorabiliter praedita permansit, verum etiam ad capissendam passionis palmam adamante durior diversis tormentorum cruciatibus macerata non cessit, quia invictae mentis fundamina nequaquam arenosis sablonum glareis ultro citroque nutabundis sub diderat editam aulae structuram, ut ille sapiens, quem evangelicum describit oraculum, robitissimae petrae imposuit; quae dum crudis nervorum flagris truciter caederetur et crebris palmarum contusionibus exalparetur, tandem in sartagine ferream sevo et pice crepitantem, ut in tanto termento tenerrima virgo torreretur, scandere iussa est; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 110.*

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Thecla, and the parallel account in *Carmen*; Aldhelm's verbosity though means one cannot read anything into this, for every body that is not described, there is one that is, cf. Rufina and Secunda, whose bodies are referred to at every opportunity.



flaming furnace and protected with his power the virginal limbs'.<sup>48</sup> Thus the 'limbs', that is the sense of the Justina's tormented body, is secondary to the power and protection of Christ that enables the saint to endure, invigorated by divine potency.<sup>49</sup> Aldhelm continues that Christ protects Justina 'from the threatening death of the cauldron, to the illustrious glory of his own name'.<sup>50</sup> The torture is removed in the final analysis, and it is 'death' that she (temporarily) avoids. As with all saints, her achievements are for divine glory, not personal benefit.

Gender is amorphous, so too the body. Following Butler again, we can see the formation of hardened virginal body, impervious to penetration, through Aldhelm's construction of Justina. The power of virginity is made physical in the might of the virgin to defy her torturers, and demonstrated in the resoluteness of body (and mind). In repeatedly overcoming 'diverse instruments of torture' her sanctified virginity is created, maintained and verified. But does this enable her to overcome her gender? To what extent is she like the 'wise man' of the Gospel? Justina is introduced as 'a handmaid of justice', *iustitiae bernacula* similar to the *ancilla dei* motif and serving to individualise her behaviour.<sup>51</sup> It is by God and on behalf of God that she endures. Aldhelm notes, 'Her suitor could not force her from the citadel of her purity', intimating that Justina does not so much act as react to much that occurs around her, and foregrounding the passivity demonstrated when she climbs into the cauldron.<sup>52</sup> Later Aldhelm contains her autonomy by stating, 'Cyprian... recognised on the spot - through the chaste virginity of Justina, by which she had cast out and

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<sup>48</sup> *Prosa XLIII, Sed Christus clementia sua solita, qua mediocribus consulens et contritis corde ultro misereri scit, flammantis foci potestatem compressit et ad inclitam nominis sui gloriam virgineos artus ab ingruenti sartaginis exitio potenter protexit; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 110.*

<sup>49</sup> Cf. the manner in which Christ is emphasised in the *psychomachia*. See further discussion in Chapter 6.

<sup>50</sup> *Prosa XLIII; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p.110.*

<sup>51</sup> *Prosa XLIII; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p.109.*

<sup>52</sup> *Prosa XLIII; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p.109.*

nullified all the instruments of his opposing features – the unconquerable victory of Christ and his ineluctable prize'.<sup>53</sup> Thus Aldhelm stresses that Justina's power is through her virginity, and it is that which serves to open Cyprian's eyes to Christ.<sup>54</sup> This miraculous strength is therefore directed to converting her suitor, keeping Justina within the private and domestic spheres. She does not benefit the community, but one individual in personal contact with her. Finally, Aldhelm slots her back onto a portrayal of more generalised torture, and she becomes just one of many, 'In the end, when Claudius Caesar was torturing these voluntary martyrs of God... (Justina) received the sentence of decapitation, together with Cyprian'.<sup>55</sup> Even her martyrdom is undercut by Cyprian's involvement, as Cyprian is mentioned by name, but Justina's name must be inserted by the reader/listener. Aldhelm wishes to stress virginity, and the power it creates in his exempla, at the expense of divinely sanctioned behaviour, and the extreme examples of behaviour offered in the sources of his exempla in the face of paganism.

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<sup>53</sup> *Prosa XLIII, Hanc, inquam, cum Cyprianus, qui per idem tempus aruspicum celeberrimus et post Soroastren et Simonem magorum praestantissimus fuisse momoratur, adhibitis Leviathan argumentis strososique deceptionum muscipulis ad thalami copulam et maritale consortium flectere nequiret, ilico per castissimam Iustinae virginitatem, qua omnes contrariorum virium machinas exterminans eliminaverat, invictum Christi tropeum et ineluctabile bravium licet paganus prudenter intellexit ita prorsus, ut actutum ecclesiastico exorcismo catacizatus et parturientis gratiae vulva in baptisterio regeneratus*; Again, Aldhelm uses the nurturing image of the Church; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p.109.

<sup>54</sup> *Prosa XLIII*; Justina is then removed from the conversion of Cyprian. He is 'straightaway catechized' and baptised and 'came to know the divine sacraments sent from heaven and became a fearless preacher... and so proceeding slowly through the seven offices of the Church, he arrived blessedly at the highest summit of the episcopacy.'; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp.109-110; This role within the Church is, of course, denied to Justina, thus she plays no part in Cyprian's Christian education.

<sup>55</sup> *Prosa XLIII, Postremo Claudio Caesare ultroneos Dei martires ergastuli squaloribus cruciante et edictis crudelibus ad delubrorum caeremonias cognente sententiam decollationis accipiens una cum Cypriano non iam necromantia fredo, sed pontificatu praedito sacrosancto cruoris ostro purpureescit*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 110.

## GENDERED ENDURANCE OF TORTURE

Emma Pettit argues that ‘in those miracles in which saints remain unharmed during torture, Aldhelm’s choice of adjectives associate male saints with power and manliness, females with relative weakness and passivity’.<sup>56</sup> This can be expanded when we consider the references to strength and solidity Aldhelm intends to demonstrate the power of virginity – mind over matter, virginity over torture – augmented by Divine aid. The weakness and malleability associated with women in classical and patristic literature is transformed into the potency of virginity, but this creates a tension that Aldhelm must negotiate. For example, Agatha, whose tortures are related at length in the *Carmen*, is given Divine aid, ‘At once the merciful Protector of the needy gave help to the first so that she might become stronger than those who were viciously torturing her.’<sup>57</sup> In the instant of need, power is supplied, emphasising female reliance rather than virginal autonomy. In the *Prosa*, Agatha faces ‘vicious persecution’, but ‘like an adamant rock, she became harder than iron in the face of the tortures imposed by the executioners.’<sup>58</sup> So again Aldhelm signifies female virginity by the performance of solidity and strength, passive qualities.

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<sup>56</sup> Emma Pettit, ‘Holiness and Masculinity in Aldhelm’s *Opus Geminatum De virginitate*’, in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. by P. H. Cullum and K. J. Lewis (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p. 17.

<sup>57</sup> *Carmen* ll.1761-1766, *Tum pater omnipotens, devotae virginis altor./ Arcibus aethereis defixit lumina terries/ Femineum indolis gaudens spectare triumphum; Mox dedit auxilium clemens defensor egentum./ Fortior ut fieret truciter torquentibus illam; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 142; God therefore sustains and aids the virgin.

<sup>58</sup> *Prosa* XLL, *uius integritatis castimoniam nec membrorum crudelis dilaceratio compescere nec lictorum atrox vexatio praepedire nec acria testularum fragmina infringere vel torrida carbonum incendia ullatenus vincere valuerunt, quin potius ut adamantinus scopulus contra illata carnificum tormenta ferro fortior induruit; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 107; The torture is described, ‘The cruel rending of her limbs could not subdue, the vicious persecution of the lectors could not impede, the sharp splinters of potsherds could not weaken, the searing heat of coals could not in any way overcome (Agatha’s) innocent purity’. Thus it is not Agatha’s body that risks penetration in this scenario, but her purity, dividing the physical body of the woman from her purity. Also Aldhelm iterates the link between female strength to endure and virginity.

Similarly, Aldhelm highlights that not only is the virgin martyr's body impervious to penetration, her *mind* also remains firm, despite the physical torture. Of Christina, we are told, 'the (young) mind devoted to God did not shrink from the stinking filth of the dungeon', nor did the tortures endured 'influence her state of mind'.<sup>59</sup> Of Thecla, Aldhelm comments, 'in this pursuit [of virginity] the favour of heaven strengthened her mind, which the things of the world could not soften at all, so that she was harder than iron when it came to bloody torturers.'<sup>60</sup> Lucy 'did not yield to the harsh goading of words: nor could she be persuaded by the flattering deceitfulness of pimps'.<sup>61</sup> Aldhelm constructs a sanctified virginity that is signified in these women by a demonstration of strength of mind and body, a rigidity in the face of persecution that enables them to overcome verbal abuse and flattery.<sup>62</sup> In the words of the governor in Rufina's and Secunda's story, 'Either these (two virgins) conquer us by magic powers, or else the sanctity of virginity reigns in them.'<sup>63</sup> The power of virginity is evident through in the might of the mind of the virgin to defy her torturers, and demonstrated in the resoluteness of body (and mind), as Aldhelm creates a sanctified virginal identity reliant on the performance of female virginity as an unyielding quality in the face of opposition.

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<sup>59</sup> *Prosa XLVII, Verumtamen mens Deo dedita nec olidos ergastulorum squalors horrescit nec scopulum collo conexum et marinis gurgitibus immersum pavescit nec sudibus crudeliter tenerrima membra caedentibus mollescit nec venusti capitis deformatio, quamvis flava caesaries raderetur et per publicam decalvata traheretur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 114, She is tortured and humiliated through the public shaving of her head. But this does not remove her femininity any more than the loss of Agatha's breast masculinises Agatha. Aldhelm's interest is more in the gendered performance of virginity, that is the endurance by a female virgin of torture rather than whether they overcome their gender.*

<sup>60</sup> *Carmen ll. 1981-1983, In qua fundavit caelestis gratia mentem,/ Saecula quam penitus numquam mollire valebant,/ Durior ut ferro foret ad tormenta cruenta; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 147.*

<sup>61</sup> *Carmen ll. 1818-1819, Tum nec sermonum stimulis cedebat acerbis/ Neu blanda flecti lenonum frude valebat; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 143.*

<sup>62</sup> This is not to say that Aldhelm, verbose as ever, never refers to male saints in this way, for example he says of Athanasius, *Prosa XXXII, mens Deo dedita cote durior, ferro fortior, Adamante rigidior...* Rather Aldhelm associates such strength more with women; *Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 94, 'his mind dedicated to God – harder than whetstone, stronger than iron, more rigid than adamant steel'.*

<sup>63</sup> *Prosa LI, Ista aut magica arte nos superant aut virginitatis in eis sanctitas regnat; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 119.*

Nevertheless, Aldhelm's women 'suffer' and 'endure' to a greater extent than his men, demonstrating their performance of these passive qualities.<sup>64</sup> Aldhelm introduces his female exempla, 'the second sex, who continually endured in the perseverance of holy virginity', hence they are all within the category of 'enduring'.<sup>65</sup> Rufina 'suffer[s] dreadful lashings', and the sisters 'suffer torment' and ultimately 'suffered death for Christ'.<sup>66</sup> Agatha 'suffered the terrible pains of a wound-inflicting sword'.<sup>67</sup> Chionia, Irene and Agape are ordered 'to suffer tortures and to endure filthy prisons'.<sup>68</sup> Thecla faces torture by fire, 'so that the holy virgin could suffer the pyre's torments'.<sup>69</sup> Anastasia 'suffered bloody martyrdom' Lucy is described as 'a certain young virgin among those who were to suffer'.<sup>70</sup> In Justina's *vita*, Cyprian is converted 'having discovered what dangers the virgin could endure', enabling Aldhelm to highlight that it was Justina's example that affected Cyprian, in line with

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<sup>64</sup> Again, it is not a clear divide between the genders, as men suffer too, but Aldhelm concentrates more on female suffering as a passive quality. For example in the *Carmen*'s account of Babilas, l. 1065, Babilas 'suffered capital punishment', (*Tunc demum capital perpessus sorte sacerdos*); *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 126; In *Prosa* XXXII, Athanasius, 'suffered impassively with the constancy of an unbending spirit', (*adamantine rigidior omnes calmaitatum insectationes*); *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 99-100; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 94.

<sup>65</sup> *Prosa* XXXIX; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 106.

<sup>66</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2304-2308, *Caeditur idcirco cum lentis femina flagris,/ Ut soror aspiciens mollescat mente Secunda,/ Verbera dira pati cum sanctos cerneret artus; Sed secus evenit, quam tortor credit atrox*; Rufina endures the pain, and Secunda endures watching the suffering of her sister; *Carmen*, ll. 2318-2319, *Tunc iterum carcer lanternae luminis expers/ Passuras claudit fimoso stercore poenam*; ll. 2344-2345, *Quamvis ossa tegat tellus et tumba sepulcri/ Artus includat pro Christo funera passos*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 154.

<sup>67</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1748-1749, *Horrida vulnifici patitur discrimina ferri,/ Quod castum lacerat corpus mucrone cruento*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 141.

<sup>68</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2207-2208, *Mox tormenta iubet sanctas perferre paellas/ Lurida passuras strictis ergastula claustris*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 152.

<sup>69</sup> *Carmen* l. 1992, *Ut virgo felix ferret tormenta rogorum*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 147.

<sup>70</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2218-2220, *Pertulit idcirco poenas matrona cruentas,/ Quas nunc in cartis biblorum digerit ordo/ Et legitur felix descriptis passio scedis*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 152; *Carmen* ll. 1782-1783, *Passureos inter fuerat virguncula quaedam,/ Lucia, quae dominum dilexit sedula Christum*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 142.

New Testament and late antique Christian norms.<sup>71</sup> Anatolia ‘endured exile at the hands of a savage tyrant’, emphasising her passivity and lack of agency.<sup>72</sup>

Though the idea of endurance is used for men and women, for Aldhelm’s male exempla, endurance is more likely to be presented in such a way that it becomes an active quality. As male sanctified virgins, it is not that they endure, but they are, for example, ‘ready to endure’. For example, John the Baptist ‘was ready to endure the putrid squalor of a prison’.<sup>73</sup> Chrysanthus ‘willingly endured torments’, and Martin ‘was prepared to endure the dangers of death’.<sup>74</sup> Finally Narcissus ‘wished to endure exile after slander’.<sup>75</sup> Hence, despite Aldhelm’s verbosity, even the performance of endurance and suffering is more likely to be constructed actively in his male virgins, which highlights, in turn, the passivity of the female.<sup>76</sup> The one glaring irregular example is Jesus Christ, whose endurance and suffering is

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<sup>71</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1865-1868, *Poenituit tandem magus idola spurca relinquens/ Expertus, virgo quid posset ferre pericli./ Quae numquam valuit superari mille nocendi/ Artibus, incesti sed fugit crimen iniquum; Poetic*; Lapidge and Rosier, p. 144; Cyprian is also linked to Justina, ‘together they had endured the most terrible torments of death.’ *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p.144, (ll. 1881-1882, *Sicque poli pariter scandebant sidera sancti./ Ut praedira necis pariter tormenta tulerunt*); Likewise, Cecelia and her husband are described as ‘suffering the tortures of the flesh’, *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 141; *Carmen* ll. 1731-1735, *Sic devota Deo convertit femina sponsum/ Necnon et levirum solvens errore vetusto./ Donec credentes sumpsissent dona lavacri/ Facti municipes in summis arcibus ambo./ Martires effecti carnis tormenta luentes.*

<sup>72</sup> *Carmen* ll.2426-2427, *Sic quoque famosis felix Anatolia signis/ Claruit exilium scaevi perpassa tyranni; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 156.

<sup>73</sup> *Prosa* XXIII, *Quique torrido castitatis ardore flagrans vetitos regalis tori hymeneos composescent olidarumque polluta nuptiarum contubernia aporians asperrimae invectionis severitate coercuit et huius rei gratia putidos ergastuli squalors libenter laturus purpureo carnis cruore rubris fibrarum rivulis decurso sacram redemptoris passionem mysticis praesagminibus portenderat*; Some sense of Aldhelm’s sensuality is evident even in this bloodthirsty description of John’s *passio*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 80; Although in the *Carmen*, this active endurance is absent, and ‘he endured the filth of prison and gloomy dungeons without light’, *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 112. (*Carmen* ll.439-440, *Plurima pro Christo patiens tormenta prophetes/ Carceris illuviem et furvas sine luce latebras*).

<sup>74</sup> *Carmen* l. 1143, *Sed cum mens iuvenis ferret tormenta libenter; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 128; *Carmen* l. *Dum mens parta fuit mortis discrimina ferre; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 118.

<sup>75</sup> *Carmen* l. 941 *Propterea exilium voluit perferre sacerdos; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 123.

<sup>76</sup> See discussion in Pettit, ‘Holiness and Masculinity’; More generally this is a theme Aldhelm appears to concentrate more on in the *Carmen*, and he also uses passive examples of groups of martyrs, for example in the *vita* of Justina, the saints in general during the reign of Claudius, ‘suffered the cruel torments of death!’ *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 144, (*Carmen* ll. 1872-1873, *Nolentes autem sectari scita tyrannus/ O quam dura necis graviter tormenta luebant*); Anastasia donates money ‘to martyrs who endured the perils of death’, *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, (*Carmen* ll. 2212-2213, *Quae stipem questus simul et patrimonia gazeae/ Martiribus confer mortis discrimina passis.*)

highlighted in the *vita* of John the Baptist.<sup>77</sup> To some extent the result is to queer Christ by stressing this quality that Aldhelm usually associated with women. Caroline Walker Bynum discusses the fluidity of gender imagery in the later medieval period, but here Aldhelm demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the Christ figure, active and passive, masculine and feminine, that would find an echo in later medieval writings.<sup>78</sup>

## GENDER AND SELF-CONTROL

The Church Fathers stressed the need for constant self-control in order to contain lust, and such warnings were particularly associated with women.<sup>79</sup> Women were linked with abandonment and sensuality, whereas men were linked with rationality and self-control. Therefore, a common feature in the *vitae* of virgin martyrs, intended to signify that the women have overcome their gender, is the rational argument of the saint contrasted with the irrational loss of control on the part of the pagan persecutor. Nevertheless, as the female saint performs masculinity through reason and the male persecutor is feminised through irrationality, the feminine is denigrated. The broad links in literature of women with senselessness and garrulity underpinned the ability

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<sup>77</sup> Carmen ll. 450-459, *Sic igitur Christum signavit sanguinis ostro / Horrendum mundi medicantem vulnere vulnus, / Dum crucis in patulo suspensum stipite poenas / Cogeret insontem violentia ferre reorum / Sed tamen optatam senserunt saecla salutem, / Dum Deus ad hereby vagas descenderit umbras / Ferrea vectiferae fractures limina valvae, / Aerea portarum quassavit claustra tetrarum, / Ut psalmista prius praesaga voce canebat / Passurum mundi promens in calce Tonantem.*; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 113, Now this horrible wound, with its bloody purplish gash, signified Christ as the Healer of the world: while suspended on the spreading branch of a cross He Who was innocent had to endure the violence of criminals. Nevertheless, generations experienced the salvation they desired, when God as Christ descended to the wandering shade of the underworld to break open the iron entrance of its bolted door. He shook the bronze bolts of the abominable gates, just as the prophetic Psalmist has previously proclaimed in song [Ps. CVI.16], saying that the Thunderer was to suffer at the end of the world.; This section demonstrates a mix of the active and passive, as Aldhelm slips between Christ and God-as-Christ. Christ endures and suffers, God-as-Christ breaks and shakes. Empowered directly as God, Christ is active, but in his role as Redeemer, he must suffer on the cross for the salvation of generations.

<sup>78</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, especially pp. 79-117; Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*.

<sup>79</sup> See discussion in Chapter 2.

of the individual saint to overcome her feminine weakness. Indeed, the Butlerian parody of gender through this performance of cross-gendered qualities does not subvert the gender binary, rather Aldhelm confirms the heteronormative expectations of Christian hagiography.<sup>80</sup>

Despite the efforts of individual saints to overcome gender, gender is inscribed by the author on women as a whole. This is evident when reading the account of Agnes. Aldhelm and Ælfric include the death and resurrection of the suitor, highlighting his blasphemous intention, which draws attention to his loss of control. Aldhelm, who takes great pains throughout the text to separate his virgins from any taint of sexuality, takes the image further and likens Agnes to the Ark of the Covenant.<sup>81</sup> He thus separates Agnes and her performance of sanctified virginity from his audience. The use of the Ark as an image highlights the gulf between the pure virginity of Agnes and the non-virginal status of Aldhelm's audience.

In Aldhelm's account, Agnes' resurrection of the suitor is intended to stop the mocking of the crowd,

But again, to the greater glory of God, so that the mockers of the catholic faith, who had plotted a scheme which they could not execute, might fall silent with the stammering lips of their mouths, and the swinish snortings of the pagans, raging with foaming teeth against the stainless chastity of the Church, should cease from their violent grunting, Agnes brought the young man back.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Butler argues that as gender is created performatively, parody through performance such as drag can expose the imitative nature of gender. See her discussion in *Gender Trouble*, pp. 136-140, in particular. parody does not have to be subversive though, and in the virgin martyr *vitae* parodic performance exposes the construction of virginity, whilst still supporting stereotypical female virginity. For example, the stereotypes of masculine and feminine speech – the rational and irrational – ultimately serve to support the social construction of male and female behaviour.

<sup>81</sup> *Prosa XLV; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 112; 2 Samuel 6:6-7; See discussion in Chapter 4.

<sup>82</sup> *Prosa XLV, Sed rursus ad potiorem Dei gloriam, ut insultatores catholicae fidei, qui cogitaverunt consilium, quod non potuerunt stabilire, balbis buccarum labellis obmutescerent et porcinus*



Aldhelm piles on words indicating a loss of control over speech, representing the wordless rage of the pagans against the virgin, their verbal incoherence reflecting their physical inability to destroy the ‘stainless chastity’ of Agnes. This creates a performance of paganism that steps beyond the femininity connected to irrationality, to an animalistic quality, in contrast to the resolute Christian virginity of Agnes.

### **TRANSGRESSION, THECLA AND THE *MILES CHRISTI***

Though Aldhelm emphasises virginity as the source of a saint’s power, that power is clearly gendered in his hagiography. The performance of the qualities demonstrative of their status as virgins and saints enables them to defy society, and this is more evident in the female examples as they are required to overcome their sex in a way the men are not.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, the women are contained within their *vitae*, Aldhelm carefully controls their agency and autonomy through his narration of the Life. This is evident in Aldhelm’s account of Thecla. Thecla’s story is originally recorded in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*:

Paul, at the house of Onesophorus in Iconium (2 Timothy 3:11), speaks in praise of virginity. Thecla overhears his sermon from a neighbouring house, and immediately

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*paganorum strepitus contra immunem ecclesiae castitatem saeviens spumosis dentibus acriter grunnire desisteret, eundem rediviva sospitate subnixum de inferni voragine reduxit ad lumina vitae et mox roseo purpurei cruoris rubore perfusa immaculatam virginitatis victimam Christo offerens martirizavit*; Clearly Aldhelm links her resurrection of the young man with her martyrdom. See *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 112.

<sup>83</sup> See discussion in Chapter 2; Elizabeth Alvida Petroff notes, ‘The women saints of the Middle Ages were transgressors, rule-breakers, flouters of boundaries, and yet they were also saints. Of course, in a way all saints are transgressors, in the sense that a saint lives by excess, lives in a beyond where ordinary measure does not hold; all saints, by their lives, stretch the boundaries of what we have conceived of as human possibility and their zeal in breaking through conventional limitations can be both attractive and repellent, pointlessly mad and unshakeably sane at the same time. Women saints, it seems to me, were doubly transgressors – first, by their nature as saints and, second, by their nature as women.’ Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 161.

converts to Christian virginity, renouncing her family and her fiancé. During her subsequent adventures she is miraculously saved from execution twice. When thrown to the animals in the amphitheatre, she takes the opportunity to baptise herself in a trench of water. She then dresses as a man and travels with a large company to find Paul. She encounters him in Merou, and tells Paul, 'I have received baptism, for he who commanded thee to preach, the same commanded me to baptize'.<sup>84</sup> Paul accepts this and sends her back to Iconium to preach, but she continues to Selucia and preaches there.<sup>85</sup>

There are several aspects of this *vita* that do not fit the ideal virgin as described by the Church Fathers, and passed to Anglo-Saxon religious writers. Thecla dresses as a man, against the biblical injunction at Deuteronomy 22:5, claims heavenly dispensation to baptise, and ignores Paul's order for her to preach in Iconium, choosing instead Selucia.<sup>86</sup> Thecla is possibly the most autonomous female saint in the hagiographic canon. Her virginity empowered her to ignore social expectations of female (Christian) behaviour, and ignore the authority of the Church, through Paul. Most unusually, she lived a long life, preaching and teaching, she did not have to pay for her freedom with her life. She demonstrated not only the qualities associated with virginity, but took the agency associated with male saints to create her own performance of sanctified virginity.

Aldhelm mentions Thecla in both the *Prosa* and *Carmen*. In the *Prosa* he notes that she was a young girl, 'in the first bloom of adolescence' (*primo*

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<sup>84</sup> J. Anson, 'The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism : The Origin Development of a Motif', *Viator*, 5 (1974), 1-32.

<sup>85</sup> Anson, 'Female Transvestite', p. 3; Later texts speak of her performing miracles and living as a hermit.

<sup>86</sup> Deuteronomy 22:5 A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this.

*pubesceret*), when she heard Paul.<sup>87</sup> Although in the *Prosa* Aldhelm diminishes the persecution by her family, referring to ‘her mother’s coaxing and her suitor’s entreaties’, in the *Carmen*, their persecution more evident, ‘her parents descended upon her with a storm of words, just as the heavens pour down showers of rain.’<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, both versions serve to situate Thecla within the domestic sphere. Finally she preserves her virginity despite the lions and bears of arena, and the ‘funeral pile ... quenched by the fountain of the celestial clemency.’ And here, in the *Prosa*, her story ends. In the *Carmen*, Aldhelm expands the torture, so Thecla also faces mutilation on the rack. Yet, in the heightened language of the *Carmen*, Aldhelm stresses her femininity, by referring to her female body:

Evil men sought to mutilate her female frame up on the rack so that limb by limb, her bloody bones would be emptied of marrow, if that were possible. But God from His eternal citadel protected the virgin so that she, having her prayers answered, would escape the flames of the fire. Then the virgin was thrust towards the jaws of lions to be torn asunder, so that they would gnaw her feminine limbs with ferocious bites. But the beast(s) did not dare to mangle her holy body,

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<sup>87</sup> *Prosa* XLVI, *Quarum Tecla, devota Christi virguncula, cum desponsata primo pubesceret aevo et castis pudicitiae moribus nondum lavacri baptisterio renata adolesceret, audita egregii dogmatistae doctrina de integritatis dono disserentis nec maternis coacta blandimentis nec proci compulsa precibus ad tori contubernia et nuptiale triclinium inclinatur. Quae ante theatrales spectaculi clatros cruentis carnificum minibus allata, ut pudicitiae praemio privaretur, enixe nitentibus indisrupta tamen castitatis crepundia et pretiosam virginitatis stolam inter severos leonum rugitus et feroces ursinae rapacitatis rictus Christo patrociniū praestante inviolabilem conservavit; sed et crepitantes inormium rogorum torres et semiustas pyrarum faculas caelestis clementiae fontibus restinctas incolomis ac sospes feliciter evasit; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 113.*

<sup>88</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1984-1989, *Hanc pater et genetrix pactis sponsalibus ambo/ Ad stirpem generis satagebant dedere nuptis./ Sed mens virgineis ardescens torrida flammis/ Gurgite mundane perfusa tepescere nescit./ Quamvis verborum rorarent imbre parentes./ Sicut nimboris stillabant aethera guttis;* Clearly although this is a stronger depiction of verbal persecution, as it relates to her refusal to marry and is from her parents, it still domesticates the situation.; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 147.

since God was protecting her devout limbs, although they would never spare her tender flesh of their own accord.<sup>89</sup>

It is in the repeated performative tortures, both threatened and enacted, that her virginal body is constructed. Her performance of sanctified virginity is to suffer agonies, and suffer them in the sexed body of a woman, in a 'female frame' and with 'feminine limbs', as Aldhelm describes torments that are at the edges of possibility – 'if that were possible'. But Thecla's integrity – mental and physical - is protected by God, therefore she is not autonomous in her struggle but entirely dependent on God.

In the *Carmen* Aldhelm concludes, 'This maiden adorned the last hours of her life: bathing her holy body in red blood, as a martyr she ascended to the threshold of eternal heaven.'<sup>90</sup> Whilst some, later, versions of Thecla's *vita* include her martyrdom, Aldhelm implies her death occurs as a direct result of these early events and tortures. In neither account does Aldhelm make reference to her baptism, cross-dressing, acceptance by Paul, travels to Selucia, or her preaching, teaching, and miracles. By ignoring and denying the more transgressive aspects of Thecla's story, Aldhelm keeps her firmly constrained and within accepted the gendered behaviour he has received from his late antique sources. Thecla is shoe-horned into the template of the virgin martyr as Aldhelm constructs a female virgin who opposes her family to avoid marriage, is tortured and miraculously protected, and dies as a result. The supremacy of the male authorial voice drowns out the agency expected of Thecla. Aldhelm's discussion of virginity in the opening of the *Prosa* include slippage of gender norms, as the nuns were compared with athletes, and at times individual

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<sup>89</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1994-2003, *Tali femineam sontes molimine spinam/ Excruciare student, membratim quatenus ossa./ Si fieri posset, vacuarent cruda medullis; Sed Deus aeterna defendit ab arce puellam./ Ut voti compos flammam evaderet ignis. Truditur ad rictus virgo laceranda leonum, Diris ut rodant muliebres morsibus artus;/ Bestia sed sacrum non audet carpere corpus/ Defensante Deo devotae membra pullae./ Dum tenerae carni non usquam sponte pepercit; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 147.*

<sup>90</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2006-2008, *Haec suprema suae decoravit tempora vitae/ Purpureo sanctam perfundens sanguine carnem./ Martira perpetui dum scandit limina caeli; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 147.*

female saints may demonstrate masculine qualities in performing their sanctity, but even in this most transgressive female saint, Aldhelm does not create a masculinised virgin martyr, rather he stresses her female physicality. Again he separates the ability of the saint to step outside of the gender binary from his Anglo-Saxon audience.

Despite Aldhelm's initial use of the *miles Christi* imagery, in his hagiographical section, he tends to retain such descriptions for male virgins, and particularly in the *Carmen*. For example he says of Silvester as, 'this soldier let fly the iron-tipped arrows of Scripture'.<sup>91</sup> Hilarion is a 'soldier of Christ', as is Benedict.<sup>92</sup> The women are not described in this manner, rather in female *vitae* military language refers to the entire congregation of saints, for example in Eulalia's *vita* Aldhelm writes, 'He Who is accustomed to arm the chaste with continual victories and to open the gate of heaven to His soldiers when these saints win the battles of this deceitful world'.<sup>93</sup> Female saints may take on a few masculine qualities, or vice versa, and the women may demonstrate that they have overcome some female failings before they die, but this is the extent to Aldhelm's gender subversion - male saints and female saints remain gendered, as noted above by Emma Pettit.

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<sup>91</sup> *Carmen* l. 576, *Ferrea scripturae direxit specula miles*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 115.

<sup>92</sup> *Carmen* l. 853, *Sic miles Christi devicto hoste triumphat*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 121; *Carmen* l. 825, *Sic miles Christi frenebat marmora ponti*.

<sup>93</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2020-2022, *Qui solet assiduis castos armare triumphis/ Militibusque suis portam reserare per aethram,/ Dum vincunt sancti fallentis proelia mundi/ Atque coronatis gestant vexilla manipulis*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 147; Cf. *Carmen* ll. 1716-1720, *Quamvis armoniis praesulent organa multis/ Musica Piero resonant et carmina cantu,/ Non tamen inflexit fallax praecordia mentis/ Pompa profanorum, quae nectit retia sanctis, ne forte properet paradisi ad gaudia miles*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 141, 'Even though musical instruments vibrate with many harmonies and songs resound with melody sacred to the Muses, even so the deceitful pomp of the impious – which fixes snares for saints so that a soldier of Christ may not attain the joys of Paradise – did not move the depth of her soul.' Despite referring to Cecilia overcoming the temptations of deceitful pomp, the reference to a soldier of Christ is a universal reference to the Christian in general.

## THE CHASTE MARRIED

As he addresses a double monastery, it is not surprising that Aldhelm includes paired saints. However his continued stress on the authority of the husbands, and the submission, even silence, of the wives, is evident in all his married exempla. Aldhelm includes four married couples, Caecilia and her husband, Chrysanthus and Daria, Julian and Basilissa, Amos and an unnamed virgin. As has been noted previously, as wives, these women enjoy marginally greater authority, for example, Caecilia's instruction, and Daria's preaching and example brings in multitudes.<sup>94</sup> Whilst the roles of the wives are largely secondary in Aldhelm's narration, they differ in importance; Caecilia and Daria are important figures in their respective *vitae*, Basilissa and Amos' wife are almost irrelevant to the account.

In the account of Daria and Chrysanthus, although Chrysanthus has greater authority, they are broadly depicted as equals in faith.<sup>95</sup> Both are highly educated and intelligent, and convert multitudes. However, Aldhelm does not allow Daria to overstep gender expectations. Though the pagans 'feared to test the sagacious intellect of the young girl in an argument', Chrysanthus, with Christ on his side, enters 'a very lengthy debate and a reciprocal exchange of ideas' and overcomes her arguments 'through a demonstration of reason'.<sup>96</sup> Aldhelm therefore uses the account

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<sup>94</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1721-1735; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 141; *Prosa* XL; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 107; *Prosa* XXXV; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 97-98; *Carmen* ll. 1183-1184; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 129.

<sup>95</sup> Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

<sup>96</sup> *Prosa* XXXV, *Oritur namque inter eos satis prolixa sermonum concertatio et reciproca sententiarum disputatio, eo quod Daria dialecticis artibus imbuta et captiosis sillogismi conclusionibus instructa fuisse ferebatur ita dumtaxat, ut disertissimi oratores tam sagax virginis ingenium alterno experire conflictu vererentur. Quid plura? Tandem vir vitae venerabilis non fraudis argumento, sed ratiocinationis documento in reciprocis conflictibus victoriae palmam adeptus eandem Dariam iam Catholicae fidei sacramenta credentem suscipiens simulato hymenei commercio simul conversantur;* *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 97; This appears to be a marriage of minds, both well-educated and intelligent saints, but Daria has been defeated in debate by Chrysanthus, thus cannot be accused of

to confirm the stereotype of masculine reason, and remind his audience that the masculine authority of the Church, to which they should submit, has Christ on its side. Aldhelm also describes the greater extent of the torture Chrysanthus undergoes, eventually Daria is sent to a brothel whilst Chrysanthus is gaoled, and their separate incarcerations are portrayed as equivalent. They are martyred and buried together in the same crypt.<sup>97</sup>

Cecilia is the main character in her *vita*, thus she is presented in more detail than her husband, however, Aldhelm severely curtails her role in the account, as he does Thecla.<sup>98</sup> In the original Latin version, Cecilia reacts in the orthodox manner for a virgin martyr to the threat of marriage – fasting, wearing haircloth, and praying to avoid marriage.<sup>99</sup> However, she does not stubbornly refuse marriage, as for example Agnes. Nonetheless, Aldhelm implies as much, saying she ‘refused the companionship of conferred marriage and the betrothal ceremonies of her suitor on the grounds of her chastity, and scorned, despised and rejected them with laudable spiritual fervour, just as the foul excrement of the latrine.’<sup>100</sup> Aldhelm brings out the idea of defilement from marriage through his imagery, echoing his earlier comments

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overstepping her role as a woman in the Christian congregation, and teaching her husband.; Cf. 1 Timothy 2.12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.

<sup>97</sup> *Prosa XXXV; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 98.*

<sup>98</sup> Cecilia is married against her will to the pagan Valerian. She warns him on their wedding night that if he lives chastely with her, her will be rewarded by heaven, but if he attempts to force himself on her, an angel will strike him down. Thanks to her teaching, Valerian and his brother, Tiburtius, are converted to Christian celibacy until they are martyred. Cecilia then teaches a crowd in public and her house is used as a church. Eventually Cecilia is martyred and her house, now consecrated as a church, becomes the site of miracles.

<sup>99</sup> Her fasting and wearing haircloth may be to make herself unattractive, or it could represent what we would now term anorexic behaviour, which, simplistically, could be Cecilia’s attempt to control one aspect of her life. Cf. Blessilla, the sister of Eustochium, who starved herself to death; R. M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>100</sup> *Prosa XL, indultae iugalitatis consortia ac pacta proci sponsalia obtentu castitatis refutans velut spurca latrinarum purgamenta laudabili spiritus fervore contempserit, despexerit, respuerit; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 107; Indeed, Aldhelm does not acknowledge their relationship as marriage, for when discussing the conversion of Valerian, he defers it to some future possibility, ‘... she converted her own suitor and her future brother-in-law – if the condition of virginity were to allow (it)’ (*Quamobrem procum proprium et futurum, si virginitatis fortuna pateretur*).*

comparing virginity, chastity and marriage. The disgust he links with marriage is part of his attempts to turn his addressees away from any thoughts of rejoining the secular world, of remarrying and leaving the monastic life.<sup>101</sup>

In the original *vita* her preaching and teaching convert her husband and brother-in-law, and she subsequently instructs many more. Aldhelm's Cecilia though, is not allowed such authority. Her ability to convert comes about through her example as a virgin, not her capability to teach. It is supported by her warning about angelic vengeance should her husband attempt to seize her, and enforce his sexual rights as her husband.<sup>102</sup> Aldhelm silences Cecilia completely in the *Prosa*, and implies that it is her example that converts Valerian. In the *Carmen*, it is her initial apologia and threat of angelic retribution that converts her husband. In neither account does Aldhelm allow Cecilia to discuss her faith, let alone Christian doctrine, as she does in the original *vita*. Aldhelm's Cecilia follows Peter's recommendation, 'Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives.'<sup>103</sup> This serves to silence the voice of the woman, and, in the *Prosa*, restricts her to a mime performance of virginity and Christian virtue. Rather, Aldhelm uses the *vita* to again remind his audience that women should be the taught not the teachers

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<sup>101</sup> See discussion in Chapter 2.

<sup>102</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of control.

<sup>103</sup> 1 Peter 3:1-2 Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.



In the account of Julian and Basilissa Aldhelm creates a sharp division between hero and heroine.<sup>104</sup> Julian is clearly modelled on Christ as he heals and raises the dead, but also with echoes of Christ's cleansing of the temple, passion, and the Harrowing of hell.<sup>105</sup> In contrast Basilissa is largely dismissed - she is 'beautiful in the features of her face, yet more beautiful in the chastity of her heart (*formosa frontis effigie, sed formiosior cordis castitate*)', but Aldhelm tells us nothing about her intelligence or education.<sup>106</sup> She is there as a cipher, merely to demonstrate that chaste marriages are possible. Husband and wife convert many not just to celibate Christianity, through monasticism, but to martyrdom. Nevertheless whilst Aldhelm describes Julian's tortures and martyrdom, Basilissa is despatched halfway through the narration, without any detail or explanation, 'And Basilissa, (equally) dedicated to God, reaping one thousand sheaves of the holy harvest with the scythe of gospel preaching, took them to be threshed on the threshing-floor of the executioner and to be stored in celestial granaries'.<sup>107</sup> Thus Basilissa is just one of a thousand martyrs. Aldhelm constructs her similarly to Caecilia, she is an example to others, exhorting them to Christianity and virginity by her mute performance and subsequent death.

In the final pair, Amos and his unnamed wife, this division is even more apparent, as Aldhelm excises her completely from the *Carmen*. In Aldhelm's version, the wife has no function, so it is not surprising that when he came to write the *Carmen*, she vanished. In the *Prosa*, Aldhelm introduces the marriage by denigrating it, noting that Amos resisted 'detested marriage, as if it were the contagion of squalid

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<sup>104</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1257-1449; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier pp. 130-135; *Prosa* XXXVI; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 99-102.

<sup>105</sup> Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-17.

<sup>106</sup> *Prosa* XXXVI; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 100.

<sup>107</sup> *Prosa* XXXVI, *Basilissa vero Deo decata bis quingentenos sanctae messis manipulos evangelicae praedicationis falce metens in area tortoris triturandos et horreis caelestibus condendos invexit*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 100.

filth or the poisonous bite of an asp.’<sup>108</sup> This echoes Aldhelm’s constant portrayal of female sexuality, even within marriage, as foetid. The asp takes the audience back to Eden and reminds them of the Fall of Man. Nevertheless to please his parents, he ‘unwillingly chooses a young virgin’ and they enter a chaste marriage, to some extent feminising Amos, as such submission to family authority is usually associated with women.<sup>109</sup> The unnamed wife is silent and passive in this, ‘Complying with his prayers and admonitions she aspires to the highest summit of virginity.’<sup>110</sup> This is not her choice, it is Amos’, and she is compliant to the marriage and the expectations her new husband places on her. Far from the ‘contagion of squalid filth’ feared by Amos, he has chosen a virgin who is not allowed to even desire becoming a sexual woman. In her silence and compliance she is infantilised. Together they convert many, but ‘when Amos had prevailed in practical affairs through the favourable outcome of his merits, he set out for the wilderness of the dreadful desert, where he practised the contemplative life of an anchorite.’<sup>111</sup> As discussed earlier, this option is not available to Aldhelm’s female saints, so we do not find out what happened to this woman. As Chrysanthus could demonstrate reason, so Amos is practical, as Aldhelm attempts to undo the tension in gender he created by exposing Amos to feminisation at the start of the account.

So although Aldhelm seemingly presents a positive version of marriage – a chaste partnership that creates converts of both sexes, all his women are constrained within the *vitae*. The concept of marriage in general, which we could interpret as a

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<sup>108</sup> *Prosa XXXVII, magis magisque inuisi oblatum matronii sortem acsi squalentis ceni contagia vel venenatum aspidis morsum refragabatur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 102.*

<sup>109</sup> See further discussion of queered male saints below.

<sup>110</sup> *Prosa XXXVII, Qui proluxa temporum intercapidine pariter in castimonia Deo tantum teste vixisse feruntur et in rigido sanctae conversationis propositio cum virtutum incrementis usquequaque prosperabantur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 102.*

<sup>111</sup> *Prosa XXXVII, Huius itaque Amos spritum Antonius heremita, cum carnalis ergastuli vinculis enodaretur, caelestis militiae manipulo astriferis inferri caelorum orbibus conspexit; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 103.*

sexualised relationship, is dismissed as rank, indeed the status of marriage is queered by his removal of the heterosexual relationship which should consummate the marriage contract. His construction of the virgin wife is as passive as her single counterpart in the performance of sanctified virginity. Daria may assist her Chrysanthus in building monasteries as well as converting multitudes, but she is a minor character in comparison to her husband.<sup>112</sup> Aldhelm does not allow any equality in these partnerships, despite the egalitarianism implied by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. How was this read by the audience of the double monastery? The conflict that Aldhelm had previously created between wife and virgin seems to have thrown him to the point where such women needed to be silenced or expunged completely. One could not be both, not unexpectedly as Aldhelm had constructed such an extremely sexualised 'wife' in his general comments about marriage and virginity. But this also reflected the tension inherent in these women possessing authority over men within a Church structure. Aldhelm's answer was to make the women increasingly irrelevant until their existence could be removed without altering the account, as he ultimately does with Amos' wife.

## **TRANSGRESSIVE AND QUEERED SANCTITY**

Whilst Aldhelm has used elements of masculinity and femininity in the saints discussed above, and demonstrated some cross-gendering depiction of qualities, there is no real sense of queerness. Instead Aldhelm promotes the binaried gender he inherited from his late antique sources. Queerness implies a movement toward non-normative desire, and subversion and multiplicity of sexual and gender identity.

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<sup>112</sup> *Prosa XXXVI; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 100.

Aldhelm, however, clearly genders his saints, and diminishes the opportunities for identification with them by his audience. Hagiographical parody of masculinity in female saints may highlight the constructed nature of virginity, and at times gender, but it does not subvert Christian ideas of gender. It is also contained through Aldhelm's use of motifs such as the *ancilla dei*. Where Aldhelm has given feminine elements to male characters, it frequently serves to denigrate femininity in some way, for example in the incoherence of male pagan speech when attacked by a female virgin.

Nevertheless, there are several highly transgressive saints in Aldhelm, both male and female, and Aldhelm constructs them with various degrees of queerness. Queer theory embraces those elements which cross boundaries and muddle seemingly unbreakable categories.<sup>113</sup> Although for some theorists, queer cannot, or should not be used without an element of same sex desire, Robert Mills notes that Judith Butler foregrounds gender as the site for queering.<sup>114</sup> For example, Butler argues that because homophobia frequently operates through the attribution of 'damaged, failed or otherwise abject gender... that is calling gay men "feminine" or calling lesbians "masculine"... it seems crucial to retain a theoretical apparatus that will account for how sexuality is regulated through the policing and shaming of gender.'<sup>115</sup> Thus, queer can include a consideration of the depiction of transgressive gender. And whilst Aldhelm's application of gender in these saints is certainly queer, he continually attempts to perpetuate orthodox ideas of gender and sanctity, and his

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<sup>113</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory : An Introduction* (New York : New York University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor, *Feminism Meets Queers Theory* (Bloomington, Ind. : Indiana University Press, 1997); Riki Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory* (Los Angeles : Alyson Books, 2004); Iain Morland and Annabelle Willox, *Queer Theory* (Houndmills, Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>114</sup> Mills, ' "Whatever you do is a delight to me!"', p. 1

<sup>115</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter : On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York : Routledge, 1993), p. 238.

constant themes of male authority, female submission. Nevertheless, that Aldhelm constructs such queer examples creates a tension in the text that enables the audience to infer a more subversive reading of the multivalency of virginity. The cross dressing saint Eugenia, for example, offers an explicitly masculinised performance, allowing the potential for a queer reading, although Aldhelm clearly uses this parodying of masculinity to support orthodox gender roles, and is followed in this by Ælfric, who also includes Eugenia's *vita*.<sup>116</sup> This section will therefore examine the *vitae* of four saints, Eugenia, Chrysanthus, Apollonius and Malchus, and the extent to which Aldhelm queers them.<sup>117</sup>

## CHRYSANTHUS

Following on from the previous section on married virgins, Chrysanthus is an interesting example of the manner in which Aldhelm uses gender expectations to queer his subjects. Aldhelm stresses his youth, referring to his 'young intelligence' and describing him as 'a young neophyte', which initially separates him from the men of authority who form the bulk of his hagiographical examples.<sup>118</sup> Along with his youth, he is also detached through his primary situation in the domestic sphere. Chrysanthus is imprisoned by his father, 'against (all) laws of nature – restricted to the confines of a cellar'.<sup>119</sup> As noted, women are tempted by the wealth and status of marriage, so this is what Chrysanthus represents to his father, who fears, 'both

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<sup>116</sup> Judith Butler argues that one can act in a way that makes apparent the constructedness of gender, just as drag demonstrates the disjunction between the performer's body and gender. She writes, '*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*'. See *Gender Trouble*, p. 137, Butler's italics.

<sup>117</sup> Eugenia and Apollonius appear in both *Prosa* and *Carmen*, but Malchus is only mentioned in the *Prosa*.

<sup>118</sup> *Prosa* XXXV; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 96.

<sup>119</sup> *Prosa* XXXV, *Quod genitor affinium et contubernalium relatione {cum} comperit, eundem filium contra iura naturae latibulis carceralibus artandum et famis inedia macerandum includit*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 96.

proscription of his property and the loss of his patrimony'.<sup>120</sup> Thus Chrysanthus is positioned as female from the start of the account.

When 'tortures' fail, his father tempts him 'with the allurements of pleasures. Taking him from his squalid prison, he dressed him in silken garments and sent him into the dining room' in which were beautiful women and luxurious food.<sup>121</sup> Chrysanthus is physically enclosed by masculine authority, within the domestic sphere, just as, for example, Christina is imprisoned by her father.<sup>122</sup> He is forced to acknowledge the authority of his father. His father attempts to incorporate Chrysanthus into heterosexual masculinity through temptation, with 'very beautiful girls adorned in sumptuous dresses had prepared the luxurious delights of wine and the sumptuous entertainment of a feast, combining unrestrained shrieks of joy with the light-hearted embraces of sexual play'.<sup>123</sup> But Chrysanthus refuses, situating himself outside of this binary, and therefore in a queer position vis-à-vis heteronormative desire. As a male saint he does not face a no sexual threat, as there is when women are threatened with the brothel, rather the temptation of 'blandishments'. Instead, Aldhelm incorporates masculine and feminine elements, positioning Chrysanthus as a female saint, but then facing a typically male

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<sup>120</sup> *Prosa XXXV, alioquin et proscriptionem rerum et patrimonii iacturam, insuper et capitale discrimen perhorrescit, ut ab imperatoribus locuples gazarum opulentia cum vitae detrimento funditus fiscaretur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 96.*

<sup>121</sup> *Prosa XXXV, Ergo cum animadverteret, Christianos acerbitatem poenarum libenter laturos, iam non tormentorum supplicio, sed blandientorum lenocinio natum as suos libitus flectere ninitur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 97.* Thus all Christians are assumed to be willing to withstand torture.

<sup>122</sup> *Prosa XLVII; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 114.*

<sup>123</sup> *Prosa XXXV, ubi pulcherrimae virgines pretiosis comptae cicladibus dilicatas defruti dilicias et sumptuosa ferculorum conviva praepararent effrenatos laetitiae chachinnos et iocosos ludorum aplexus miscentes, ut in talibus blandimentis ferrea iuvenis praecordia mollescerent; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 97.*

temptation. This multiplicity of gender tropes serves to queer Chrysanthus, as his *vita* demonstrates the potential of virginity for multiple genders.<sup>124</sup>

In Chapter 4, I argued that women are associated with bondage, and Aldhelm uses this theme to continue his queering of Chrysanthus, ‘some of the relatives urge the father that his son be bound with the pleasant chains of marriage and be fastened down by the seductive allurements of matrimony’.<sup>125</sup> Daria is selected, and it is stressed that she is a virgin, and ‘radiant with jewels and gold’.<sup>126</sup> Thus she represents the wealth and status of marriage, although here the status is as much that of adult man in the world as noble. Only in his interaction with Daria does Chrysanthus demonstrate his authority, that is, with a young female virgin, albeit one ‘well trained in dialectical arts and ... the sophisticated procedures of the syllogism’.<sup>127</sup> Having been tortured by the domestic masculine authority of his father, Chrysanthus is then tortured by the secular masculine authority of the tribune. He is required to offer incense at a pagan temple, again a feature that is more commonly associated with women in Aldhelm’s hagiography. As women convert through example, so does Chrysanthus, converting soldiers by his stoicism under torture.<sup>128</sup> His tortures are described in some detail, again serving to associate him with feminine qualities, especially as his torture involves more binding, as ‘the soldiers bound him fiercely with wet, raw thongs of leather, so that when the thongs dried out gradually in the torrid heat of the sun, he would both be able to bear the force of the binding; but in the nick of time the cruel bindings of the thongs came undone through divine

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<sup>124</sup> *Prosa XXXV; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 97; There is an undertone of threat though as Aldhelm writes, ‘he avoids the girls’ soft lips as if they were the baleful venom of vipers’ (sed mollia puellarum labra ut novica viperarum venena declinat).*

<sup>125</sup> *Prosa XXXV; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 97.*

<sup>126</sup> *Prosa XXXV, quantenus Daria, virgo vestalis satis pulchra et elaganti formi, gemmis auroque radians; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 97.*

<sup>127</sup> *Prosa XXXV, eo quod Daria dialecticis artibus imbuta et captiosis sillogismi conclusionibus instructa fuisse ferebatur ita dumtaxat; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 97; However, it is obviously a detailed debate as Chrysanthus only succeeds ‘at length’.*

<sup>128</sup> *Prosa XXXV; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 98.*

command'.<sup>129</sup> Thus Chrysanthus does not have the power to unbind, rather, like his female counterparts, must rely on Divine force for freedom.<sup>130</sup>

Through the *vita*, Chrysanthus is feminised by association not only with the qualities, but also with the experiences usually ascribed to women. But this enables the reader to infer a queer reading, as Aldhelm does more than denigrate femininity, he opens up the gender binary that he has constructed through the hagiography of virginity. Chrysanthus demonstrates passivity in reacting rather than acting in the face of temptation and torture. Even his 'instruction' of many is differentiated from Aldhelm's male examples of authority, as he teaches alongside his wife.<sup>131</sup> And as they taught together, they die together as martyrs.<sup>132</sup>

And possibly this latter point explains Aldhelm's unusual presentation of Chrysanthus. He describes two highly educated saints who serve together in their virginal sanctity, preaching and teaching. They are also tortured and martyred together, 'ready to receive together the rewards for their merits, just as they had shared their torments'.<sup>133</sup> As representative of the coenobitic unity that the double monastery should encompass, Chrysanthus and Daria are portrayed as equal in many ways, but ultimately Chrysanthus demonstrates the greater reason, and Aldhelm concentrates on his side of the account. The audience is offered a non-normative presentation of a male saint, and the slippage between genders could enable a queered reading of the experiences of Chrysanthus, as both male and female, and potentially

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<sup>129</sup> *Prosa XXXV, Tunc milites refragantem udis et crudis nervorum nexibus crudeliter vinciunt, ut in torrido solis caumate sensim siccantibus nervis vim stricurae ferre nequiret; sed in puncto temporis dira vincurolo ligamina caelesti nutu enodantur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 98.*

<sup>130</sup> *Prosa XXXV, Mox relictis dialecticorum disciplinas, quibus dudum in gymnasii studio exercebatur, canonicis scripturis et commentis spiritalibus instruitur, nec laterculo dinumerari nec calculo computari ullatenus valet, quanta multitudo promiscui sexus illorum magisterio a fanatica delubrorum superstitione ad fidem catholicam caatervatim confluerit; Prose, Lapidge and Herren p. 98.*

<sup>131</sup> *Prosa XXXV; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 98.*

<sup>132</sup> *Prosa XXXV; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 99.*

<sup>133</sup> *Prosa XXXV, Post haec decreto Numeriani Augusti pariter in una cripta martirizantes occubuerunt in consortio sanctorum simul percepturi praemia meritorum, sicut simul participles extiterunt tormentorum; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 99.*



neither. Nevertheless, Aldhelm's concluding message is that masculine reason is of greater benefit than female education.

## EUGENIA<sup>134</sup>

Eugenia opts to live as a monk, 'not like a woman, but, against the laws of nature, with her curling locks shaved off, in the short crop of the masculine sex'.<sup>135</sup> However, despite changing her appearance, she cannot overcome her gender, and remains a sexual temptation. Aldhelm restricts his account to Eugenia's background and education, her decision to become a monk and disgust at marriage, and the accusation of Melanthia; there is no reference to her abbacy, miracles or martyrdom. Thus, despite the potential for transgression of gender norms in the *vita*, Aldhelm constructs her within the parameters of accepted female sanctity, and initially she differs little from her more orthodox counterparts, as, for example, he uses the *vita* to denigrate marriage, which Eugenia flees as if it were excrement.<sup>136</sup> However, Aldhelm draws on male and female, martial and maternal imagery, signifying the role of the Church and the dual roles undertaken by Eugenia, and enabling a multivalent performance of virginity. She runs 'to the maternal bosom of the holy Church ... to

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<sup>134</sup> Eugenia, the daughter of Philippus, the Prefect of Alexandria, desires to know more about Christianity, so she dresses as a man, and along with two eunuch servants, travels to Bishop Helenus. Helenus has been informed of her identity in a vision, and tells her to enter a monastery. Three years later she is made abbot of the monastery and it noted for her healing powers. Melanthia, a widow, comes to Eugenia for healing, but falls in love with the 'abbot'. When her advances are rebuffed, Melanthia accuses Eugenia of trying to seduce her. The case is taken before the Prefect of Alexandria, and Eugenia demonstrates her innocence and true identity by baring her breasts to her father. Her family become Christians, and her father becomes bishop before being martyred. The rest of the family move to Rome, where they convert many to celibate Christianity, beginning with the young girl, Basilissa, before martyrdom.

<sup>135</sup> *Prosa XLIV, non muliebriter quaesitura rasis cincinnorum crinicus sub tonsura masculini sexus contra iura naturae*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 110.

<sup>136</sup> *Prosa XLIV*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p.110.

receive the sacrament of baptism and take service in the monastic army.’<sup>137</sup> The Church is the nurturing mother, and the monastery the martial arm, protecting the spirituality of those inside its walls. Nevertheless this hint at queerness, at opening up male and female, is a minor part of the *vita*. Despite cross-dressing, which Aldhelm admits is ‘against the laws of nature’, Eugenia is ‘recruited to the troops of Christ’s army with the seal of her purity unbroken’.<sup>138</sup> Thus Aldhelm brings her virginity and the martial trope to the fore, reminding his non-virginal audience of the gulf between them and Eugenia.

In the original Latin account, it was made clear that her decision to cross-dress is sanctioned by the Church and God as the bishop Helenus validates it. Despite the biblical injunction against cross-dressing, the *vita* makes clear that she does not act against the Church authorities, and her actions are a form of parody.<sup>139</sup> Judith Butler argues that ‘Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmic and mimetic – a failed copy as it were.’<sup>140</sup> Eugenia’s behaviour as a man demonstrates the performative nature of masculinity, but although her performance is parodic, Aldhelm clearly intends his account to perpetuate gender norms, not subvert them. Unsurprisingly, given Aldhelm’s discomfort with women’s authority, he avoids Eugenia’s role as an abbot, which would find an echo in the role of the abbess of a double monastery, and would have included, for example, organising the financial affairs of the monastery, overseeing the religious lives of the

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<sup>137</sup> *Prosa XLIV, ad maternum sanctae ecclesiae gremium, spreto basternae vehiculo et relictis parasitorum pedisequis, duobus tantum comitata spadonibus perrexit ibique baptmatis sacramentum perceptura ac coenubialis militiae tirocinium; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 110.*

<sup>138</sup> *Prosa XLIV, et militonum Christi catervis sine castitatis cicatrice salvo pudoris signaculo adsciscitur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 110.*

<sup>139</sup> Deuteronomy 22:5 A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this.

<sup>140</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.200; Butler writes, p. 187, about drag, ‘*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*’ (Butler's italics).

monks, even shoving them. He moves straight to the attempted seduction, which is introduced as necessary to 'expose' her as sanctified, but equally serves to reinforce the connexion between women and sexuality.<sup>141</sup>

Yet, despite Aldhelm's warnings against female sexuality, he uses Eugenia (and the additional story of Susanna) to comment on slander rather than female sexuality. The debased sexual behaviour of Melanthia is almost a given, as he describes her, 'whom the amusements of wanton obscenity and the impulses of the flesh impelled with their tantalising goads, and who, forgetful of her own matronly modesty, deceitfully tried to force upon the same Eugenia the false debauchery of the bawdy-house and the wickedness of the polluted brothel.'<sup>142</sup> Aldhelm moves from the sexual accusations against Eugenia to Susanna, and the elders incriminating her. Aldhelm interprets the experiences of both women, linking them to the slanders suffered by Christ.<sup>143</sup> Christ, as the virgin *par excellence* provides one of the most positive connexions for women, through *De Virginitate*. Eugenia and Susanna are not defined by their sexuality, but by the defamation suffered through the assumptions of patriarchy toward female sexuality. In suffering unjust slander they are correlated to Christ, but there is a complexity around the depiction of Christ and gender. Christ is masculine and feminine, he is a virgin yet Father of the Church, he tends and nurtures the congregation to which he is husband.<sup>144</sup> In this aspect

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<sup>141</sup> Prosa XLIV, *Dum de scaevo infamis calumniae improperio latentis pudicitiae praeconium propalatur*; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 111.

<sup>142</sup> Prosa XLIV, *Nam cum eidem Eugeniae falsum prostibuli struprum et lupanaris incesti piaculum Melanthia nigro nominis praesagio traducta matronalis pudicitiae obliviscens, quam lascivae obscentitatis ludibria carnisque incentiva illecebrosis stimulis agitabant, pellaciter impingere moliretur, velut ferrato apologeticae defensionis clipeo retundens strofosae accusationis catapulta de falsitatis faretra prolata in ipsos, a quibus diriguntur, retorsit, quod textus libelli Eugeniae uberius explanat*; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 111.

<sup>143</sup> Prosa XLIV, *ut merito psamigrafi sentential de utrarumque prosperis vitae successibus historialiter quadrare et congruere videatur, quamvis de redemptore secundum anagogen vaticinatum credatur Insurrexerunt in me testes iniqui et mentita est iniquitas sibi*; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 111.

<sup>144</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*; Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*.

Eugenia's *vita* is subversive, and offers multiple readings of virginity, but, as has been demonstrated, Aldhelm's intention was to support gender roles through his use of parody. Given again the need for coenibitic unity, a stress on the danger of slander is understandable.

## APOLLONIUS

Apollonius is partially queered through the sheer amount of feminine associations in the *vita*, rather than being described in subversive terms. He mirrors the construction of Eugenia as he is grounded in Aldhelm's interpretation of sanctified masculinity despite the feminine markers within the account. Aldhelm narrates the story at length in both *Prosa* and *Carmen*:

As an adolescent, Apollonius became a hermit in the Egyptian desert, and remained there for forty years, during which time his clothes did not rot and he prayed almost constantly. Whilst in the desert he 'froze' a procession of pagans, who then agreed to convert if he released them, which he did. When attempting to solve a violent dispute between Christians and non-Christians, he was thwarted by one man, but Apollonius foretold the man's death, which promptly occurred, and the rest put faith in Apollonius as a prophet. At one Easter celebration, he commanded his fellow hermits to join together. After mass they ate their rations, but Apollonius, despite being famed for his ascetic lifestyle, prayed for food, and a banquet appeared. Finally, there was famine in Egypt, and, through prayer, he fed the people who had come to him.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 136-138; *Prosa XXXVIII*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 103-106.

Apollonius, as a male saint, is active and performs miracles that benefit the community. Nevertheless, many of the markers of his sanctity create gender ambiguity and queerness. Aldhelm mentions Christ's fulfilment of Isaiah 19:1, which he quotes and discusses in relation to Mary, "The cloud" [Isaiah] says, "is swift": it prefigures, that is, the most chaste bosom of the Virgin Mary which is devoid of the filth of human corruption and masculine embrace.<sup>146</sup> This reference to Mary in the *vita* links her with Apollonius, hence, as Aldhelm queerly linked Eugenia with Christ, he connects Apollonius with Mary, the pre-eminent female virgin. Although in the later medieval period it became a commonplace for monastics to identify with Mary, in the early Anglo-Saxon period, she had not risen to the paramount position she later held.<sup>147</sup> Aldhelm also mentions a 'masculine embrace', as he is writing ostensibly to women, but again the reference appears in this male *vita*. Finally, Apollonius is involved in food miracles, again not specifically feminine, as Christ miraculously provided food, but within the context of this queered saint, it reinforces the female aspect.<sup>148</sup>

Apollonius' clothes do not fall to pieces despite a life of hardship in the desert.<sup>149</sup> This is a feature mentioned in both accounts, but expanded in the *Prosa*,

'Although his tunic (*colobrium*) was produced (*ordiretur*) from the threads or rather the husk of flax without any ostentatious variety of threads, (his) robe of muslin (*sindonis peplum*) (was made) from a

<sup>146</sup> *Prosa XXXVIII*, 'Nubs', *Inquit*, 'levis': *castissimum videlicet Mariae virginis gremium humanae corruptionis spurcitia et virili complexu carens praefigurat*; *Prose*, Lapidé and Herren, p. 104.

<sup>147</sup> Mary Clayton, *The Apocryphal Gospels of Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1998); Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2002)

<sup>148</sup> Cf Matthew 14:15-21; Aldhelm notes that Apollonius deliberately imitated 'the baskets and hampers of the Gospel', Matthew 14:20 They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over; *Prosa XXXVIII*; *Prose*, Lapidé and Herren, p. 106.

<sup>149</sup> Reflecting also the Israelites in the wilderness; Deuteronomy 29:5 During the forty years that I led you through the desert, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet.; Deuteronomy 8:4 Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during those forty years.

smooth ball of thread, and was woven (*texebatur*) from the spindle, made into cloth with the shuttles humming and the read beating; these vestments, although he was so long in retreat in desert places through so many revolutions of time, never came to pieces at all through old age.<sup>150</sup>

The *colobrium* was an undergarment, the *peplum* an outer garment, hence we have an outfit described rather than a mere reference to a garment. Whilst we must approach such lengthy descriptions with caution, given Aldhelm's inability to be concise, the drawn out reference Apollonius' dress, particularly its emphasis on the creation of the cloth, links him with the feminine. Weaving is women's work, in classical times and Anglo-Saxon.<sup>151</sup> Aldhelm's use of words such as *texti*, *texebatur*, and *ordiretur* refer to the weaving process, thus connect Apollonius not just to the miraculous nature of the clothes, but also to the (usually female) production of cloth. The account is also largely passive in tone; it is not that an individual weaves, but that the clothes are woven. Again this passivity, rather than dividing Apollonius from the feminised weaving, queers him.

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<sup>150</sup> *Prosa XXVIII, Cuius colobrium, cum de stuppae stamina vel potius putamine sine pompulenta panucularum varietate ordiretur, sindonis peplum ex tereti filorum glomere fusoque netum radiis stridentibus et pectine pulsante texebatur; quae {indumenta} longiuscule illo in desertis delitescente per tot temporum volumina penitus numquam vetustate extricabantur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 104.*

<sup>151</sup> For the use of women weaving as a literary topos in the classical period, see Maria C. Pantelia, 'Spinning and Weaving: Ideas of Domestic Order in Homer', *The American Journal of Philology*, 114 (1993), 493-501; At an assembly of bishops in Nantes (895) it was decided, 'It is astounding that certain women, against both divine and human law, with bare-faced impudence, act in general pleas and with abandon exhibit a burning passion for public meetings, and they disrupt, rather than assist, the business of the kingdom and the good of the commonweal. It is indecent and reprehensible, even among barbarians, for women to discuss the cases of men. Those who should be discussing their woolen [sic] work and weaving with the residents of the women's quarters, should not usurp the authority of senators in Public [sic] meetings just as if they were residents of the court.' (Council of Nantes, 895, canon 19, *Acta Consiliorum*, ed. by Harduin (Paris 1714), quoted in 'The Power of Women through the Family in Medieval Europe: 500-1100', by Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, *Feminist Studies*, 1 (1973), 126-141, at p. 135; Sue Hamilton, 'Stirring Women, Weapons and Weaving – Aspects of Gender Identity and Symbols of Power in Early Anglo-Saxon England', in *Archaeology and Women: Ancient and Modern Issues*, ed. by Sue Hamilton, Ruth D. Whitehouse and Katherine I. Wright (California: Left Coast Press, 2007).

Apollonius is an ascetic, preferring ‘green bunches of herbs and freshly picked garden vegetables’ to ‘cooked or roasted food prepared in the oven for his nourishment.’<sup>152</sup> This links him to Aldhelm’s construction of the masculine through self-control and abstention. Also Apollonius is not described as preparing the food himself, yet the references to the production and supply of food in the *vita* expand on the feminine aspects of the virgin, as they echo the correlation between food and food preparation and women.<sup>153</sup> The first miracle is the provision of a banquet at Easter, but Aldhelm changes the emphasis between the *Carmen* and *Prosa*. In the *Prosa*, he accentuates the miracle - the prayer is generalised, uttered by all the monks, and for protection rather than food.<sup>154</sup> In the *Carmen*, Aldhelm separates Apollonius, and it is his prayer, ‘If we truly bear believing hearts, brothers, let us now besiege with prayers the Lord ... and let us seek worthy consolation so that the Judge may provide sustenance to us poor men; on this feast day the reins of severity shall be relaxed!’<sup>155</sup> At once, the food appears, ‘And thus, they beheld at the entrance of a cave splendid feasts and plentiful services of food, of which it is wonderful to tell.’<sup>156</sup> The food is described in both accounts, in the *Prosa* Aldhelm reminds his audience that the unseasonable fruit denotes its miraculous nature - autumn fruits appear in the spring -

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<sup>152</sup> *Prosa* XXVIII, *Cuius alimonia, immo parsimonia tam frugalis fuisse ferebatur, ut potius viridibus herbarum fasciculis et recentibus hortorum holusculis vesceretur, quasi condito culinae pulmentario potiretur cum tamen cocturam et assaturam alimentorum in focularibus praeparatam ad edulium refutaret*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 104.

<sup>153</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*; John C. Super, ‘Food and History’, *Journal of Social History*, 36 (2002), 165-178; Helen M. Jewell, *Women in Dark Age and Early Medieval Europe* (Basingstoke : Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>154</sup> *Prosa* XXXVIII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 105; The miracle is described, ‘Christ, with his usual compassion in abundance for his hungry servants, sent to the cave-entrance porters (*gerulis*) ... bearing such an abundance of delicacies (*tantas diliciarum affluentis*) that they were plentifully nourished with this divinely-sent gift of food up to the day of Pentecost.’

<sup>155</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1586-1591, *Credula si vere gestamus pectora, fratres,/ Nunc precibus dominum, caeli qui regnat in arce/ Et regit imperium, mundi dum scepra gubernat,/ Pusemus pariter solamina digna petentes,/ Quatenus impendat iudex alimenta misellis;/ Nempe die festo laxantur frena rigoris!*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 138.

<sup>156</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1592-1593, *Ecce dapes lautas et munera larga ciborum/ Ante fores antri cernunt – mirabile fatu*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 138.

pomegranates, dates, honeycombs, grapes and figs.<sup>157</sup> Thus Apollonius is associated with the creation of food, the relaxation of masculinised abstemiousness and the sensual enjoyment of exotic tastes and textures. Later, during famine, ‘they came in throngs, tightly packed in groups, so that all of them in their misery might together in the same manner seek nourishment of food’.<sup>158</sup> The *Prosa* makes it clear the people are specifically seeking Apollonius out for food.<sup>159</sup> Aldhelm uses echoes of Christ feeding of the multitudes, and Elijah is explicitly mentioned in both *Prosa* and *Carmen*, thus Aldhelm is drawing on Biblical exempla.<sup>160</sup> Nevertheless, in the *Prosa* Aldhelm also includes the motif of fertility, again associated with femininity. He writes, ‘he gave them the power of increase through a fertile benediction.’<sup>161</sup>

Apollonius performs his sanctity in a manner that fits Aldhelm’s construction of masculinity: he is active, he works against pagans and converts them, he provides for the entire community, and he instructs and commands others. All of these qualities and abilities demonstrate his masculinity within the Aldhelmian corpus, but Aldhelm also depicts him through qualities and associations that are gendered feminine, in order to construct Apollonius’ sanctity. Thus Aldhelm uses the imagery of weaving, food and food production, and finally references to fertility, constructing a male saint through feminised motifs. But how queered is Apollonius, as he is performatively male in action and agency? When compared with Malchus, discussed Below, Apollonius demonstrates a degree of tension in Aldhelm’s use of gender to construct sanctity, but he does not subvert expectations to any great degree.

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<sup>157</sup> *Prosa* XXXVIII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 105-6; *Carmen* ll. ; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 138.

<sup>158</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1608-1610, *Iam famis Aegypti multivit clade cohorts:/ Ecce catervatim densis venire maniples./ Ut pariter miseri peterent alimenta ciborum*; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 138.

<sup>159</sup> *Prosa* XXXVIII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 106.

<sup>160</sup> Cf. Matthew 14:13-21; Matthew 15:29:38; Mark 6:35-44; Mark 8:1-10; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:5-13; 1 Kings 17:7-16.

<sup>161</sup> *Prosa* XXXVIII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 106.



However, he does function as a stepping stone, for example he is the last of the male virgins in the *Prosa*.<sup>162</sup> From the feminine imagery used in Apollonius Aldhelm moves on to his female exempla, beginning with Mary, whom he discusses in terms of her perpetual virginity and role as Theotokos.

## MALCHUS

Aldhelm took the *vita* of Malchus from Jerome, who writes that he heard the story from Malchus himself, when Malchus was an old man.<sup>163</sup> Aldhelm offers a very truncated version of his life story, which I will outline in full:

Malchus flees his parents' attempt to marry him off, and becomes a monk, but later leaves the monastery, against the advice of his abbot, to receive a family inheritance. On the way home he is kidnapped by thieves and sold into slavery. Working as a shepherd, he is forced by his master to marry a fellow slave, who had been married before her enslavement. Malchus threatens suicide, but discovers that the woman, not wishing a bigamous marriage, desires to live chastely, so they remained as platonic partners for some time, until escaping and avoiding recapture thanks to a lion protecting their cave. Malchus sends his wife to a nunnery, and he returns to the monastery, where he remains.

Malchus is not constructed as a typical saint, even in what appears to be his own account, as narrated to Jerome. As Katherine Scarfe Beckett notes, he is forced into a being a desert monk, and lacks anchoritic spiritual authority, 'nor did he even live as an exemplary monk in the first place, since stability, poverty, renunciation of family ties, and obedience to his abbot were evidently not among his strong points.

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<sup>162</sup> In the *Carmen*, the final male virgin is Jerome.

<sup>163</sup> *Vita Malchi*. See *Jerome – Letters and Select Works*, trans. by P. Schaff and H. Wace, (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Eerdmans, T and T Clark, 1989).

He appears, rather, to have been a character to whom things happened, redeemed only by his determination to preserve his chastity under duress.<sup>164</sup> This is probably the most feminine topos in hagiography. It is worth quoting the *vita*, in Latin and Michael Lapidge's translation of Aldhelm's version of the *vita*:

*Unde Malchus, cum paternae severitatis violentia simulque maternal gravitate, qui successurae posteritati consulebant, ad carnale consortium cogereetur, castitas obtentu et regni caelestis causa contempnere decrevit; sed cum ob cognatae propinquitatis curam accepto conversationis fervore paulatim tepesceret et torrido coenubialis vitae rigore, instinctustrofosi hostis discessurus, sensim refrigesceret, a Saracenis praedonibus et Ismaelitis grassatoribus obviam quaeque atrociter vastiantibus captus ut servilis berne famulari iubetur, iusto valde iudicio, ut, qui interdictum repetebat postliminium, serviret ut vile mancipium quaetenus, qui Sodomitanum pereuntis feminae dispendium minime pertimesceret, prolixae servitutis detrimentum et invisum heri famulatum atrociter sentiret et, dum aratri stibam postergum respiciens negligenter regeret, ruptis sulcorum glebulis iugerum occa nugaciter deperirit, cumque ibidem optatae castitatis insignibus, que ingenitali solo servaverat, carere stricta machera extorqueretur, malluit mucrone transfossus crueliter occumbere quam pudicitiae iura profanando vitam defendere, nuquaquam animae periculum pertimescens, si integer virginitatis status effusione sanguinis servaretur.*

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<sup>164</sup> K. S. Beckett, 'Worcester Sauce: Malchus in Anglo-Saxon England', in *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, vol II, ed. by Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe and Andy Orchard (Toronto, Buffalo, London : University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 212-231, at p. 213; Beckett goes on to compare Hilarion 'a physical, moral, and spiritual example to inspire awe – but Malchus is not awe-inspiring.' Rather an understatement.

Hence Malchus, when he was being forced into carnal union [i.e. marriage] by the violence of paternal severity and at the same time by maternal pressure - they being concerned about the offspring that were to result – he decided to scorn (the marriage) on the pretext of chastity and for the sake of the heavenly kingdom. But when, from the fervour he entertained for the monastic way of life, he began little by little to decrease in ardour, and was slowly cooling off from the torrid intensity of cenobitic life, and, at the prompting of the deceitful Enemy, he was ready to leave, out of concern for his family ties, he was captured by Saracen pirates and Ishmaelite robbers (who were) ravaging violently whatsoever was in their way, so that he was commanded to serve (as) a submissive slave, by a very appropriate turn of events, seeing that he was seeking a forbidden journey homewards, was in bondage as a base slave, (and) he who in no way feared that loss of the woman perishing at Sodom, suffered painfully the handicap of a protracted slavery and the loathsome servitude of a master. And, while, glancing backwards, he was guiding the handle of the plough without a care, the harrow pointlessly shattered among the sods of furrowed earth; and, when, in the same place, he was forced at the point of a sword into abandoning the glories of the chastity he longer for – which he had preserved in his native land – he preferred to die transfixed cruelly by the sword rather than to defend his life profaning the laws of chastity, fearing in no way the danger to his soul if the status of his virginity were preserved intact.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> *Prosa XXXI; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 91; Cf. Amos, whose marriage is excised completely*

What makes Malchus' *vita* particularly unusual is that it appears to follow the conventions of the Hellenistic Greek novel rather than hagiography, and Malchus is situated in the position of the female protagonist of the novel. Generally these novels follow a pattern of love thwarted and reunited, frequently involving kidnap by pirates or robbers. They also feature attacks on the chastity of the lead characters, who have vowed to remain virgins until marriage, and attempts at forced marriage.<sup>166</sup> Hence, Malchus is an unusual saint through the narration of the text, and in Aldhelm's retelling of the *vita*, an extremely queer virgin exemplum.

Aldhelm introduces Malchus to his audience through the motif of forced marriage, 'being forced into a carnal union [i.e. marriage] by the violence of paternal severity and at the same time by maternal pressure'.<sup>167</sup> Though the pressure to marry is felt by male and female saints, it is more typically associated with the struggle of female saints to remain sexually pure. For example, Eugenia is urged by her father and sought by a suitor'.<sup>168</sup> Thecla is 'a betrothed bride in the first bloom of adolescence', but refuses to marry after hearing Paul preach about virginity.<sup>169</sup> Caecilia marries, but remains in a chaste marriage.<sup>170</sup> Aldhelm therefore sets up marriage/family ties as Malchus' primary temptation, situating him within the domestic sphere and foreshadowing his threat of suicide when later faced with forced marriage, and emphasising his queered status.

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from the *Carmen*.

<sup>166</sup> Cf. Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon* as an example of the Hellenistic novel; *Achilles Tatius Leucippe and Clitophon*, trans. by Tim Whitmarsh (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2001); See J. R. Morgan and Richard Stoneman, *Greek Fiction : The Greek Novel in Context* (London and New York : Routledge, 1994).

<sup>167</sup> *Prosa XXXI*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 91; Cf Amos in *Prosa XXXVII*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 102.

<sup>168</sup> *Prosa XLIV*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 110.

<sup>169</sup> *Prosa XLVI, cum desponsata primo pubesceret aevo*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 113.

<sup>170</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1710-1735; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 141; *Prosa XL*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 107.

Malchus is then captured by Saracens and Ishmaelites, and enslaved.<sup>171</sup> The reference to the Ishmaelites brings us back to Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers to Ishmaelite traders.<sup>172</sup> In the *Prosa*, Aldhelm relates the story of Joseph, noting that ‘For as long as he was a companion of pure virginity and a despiser of the enticing bawdy-house, divine protection guarded him from the menacing danger of multifarious calamities’. One of those dangers was, of course, a threat to his chastity through the ‘depraved advances of his master’s treacherous wife’.<sup>173</sup> Aldhelm uses this reminder of the patriarch to stress his constant denigration of sexuality in any form, even within the marriage arrangement. In Genesis Joseph married and there is no mention of his frequenting brothels, yet Aldhelm implies as much in his account. Through Joseph, Aldhelm queers the link between the Malchus and chastity as Joseph does not face merely a seduction, as may be expected of a male saint, but suffers punishment for retaining his chastity, a characteristic of female sanctity.<sup>174</sup> It also supports Aldhelm’s fears about women abusing and usurping power, as Potiphar’s wife uses her position to sexually tempt Joseph, and subsequently to punish him for refusing her.<sup>175</sup>

Aldhelm also queers Malchus linguistically. For example, Aldhelm writes, ‘he was commanded to serve (as) a submissive slave (*servilis berna*)’.<sup>176</sup> Emma Pettit’s comments on male and female agency in Aldhelm, are apposite, she argues

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<sup>171</sup> Aldhelm’s brigands are Saracens and Ishmaelites. The references to Saracens would remind the audience of the Muslim advance. This is not, however, an exotic and far away pagan - there was a fear of Muslim encroachment in Europe, which was realised soon after Aldhelm’s death with the invasion of Visigoth Spain. By 725 Muslim forces had advanced as far as Burgundy, and in 732 were attacking Bordeaux, until defeated by Charles Martel at the battle of Poitiers.

<sup>172</sup> Genesis 37:25-28.

<sup>173</sup> *Prosa* LIII, *Quem ab ingruenti multiformium calamitatum discrimine, quas non solum lividorum conspiratio germanorum graternum nequaquam exosa parricidium intentabat, verum etiam obscena fallentis dominae fribula matronalis pudicitiae oblitae machinabantur*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 121.

<sup>174</sup> For example the three sisters, Chionia, Irene and Agape are imprisoned for rejecting the advances of Dulcitus.

<sup>175</sup> Genesis 39:7-20.

<sup>176</sup> *Prosa* XXXI; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 91.

that male saints demonstrate power whilst female saints display passivity.<sup>177</sup> Yet here Aldhelm creates a ‘submissive’, or ‘servile’ male saint, one ‘in bondage as a base slave (*serviret ut vile manicum*).’<sup>178</sup> Through the text, Aldhelm constructs Malchus’ experiences through submission and capitulation, reinforcing his representation of passivity.<sup>179</sup> For example, Malchus, ‘suffered painfully the handicap of a protracted slavery and the loathsome servitude of a master’.<sup>180</sup> As was argued in Chapter 4, Aldhelm often links his female examples with bondage as well as a lack of agency.<sup>181</sup>

Malchus is even more queered in his *passio*. In the original, as has been noted, Malchus, as an old man, relates his experiences directly to Jerome. When faced with death or marriage – the chastity issue usually faced by female saints – Malchus ultimately opts for marriage. Indeed, Jerome initially spies Malchus together with his ‘wife’, before he speaks to Malchus, ‘both of them so zealous pious and such constant frequenters of the Church’.<sup>182</sup> There is no *passio*. Yet, Aldhelm concludes,

‘when, in the same place, he was forced (*extorqueretur*) at the point of a sword (*machera*) into abandoning the glories of the chastity he longer for...he preferred to die transfixed (*transfossus*) cruelly by the sword (*mucrone*) rather than to defend his life by profaning the laws of chastity, fearing in no way the danger to his soul if the status of his virginity were preserved intact’.<sup>183</sup>

<sup>177</sup> *Prosa XXXI; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 91.*

<sup>178</sup> *Prosa XXXI; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 91.*

<sup>179</sup> In this short section of the *vita* Aldhelm includes, *servilis berna, serviret, servitutis, famulatum, serviret.*

<sup>180</sup> *Prosa XXXI; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 91; As discussed earlier it is women who suffer.*

<sup>181</sup> See discussion in Chapter 4.

<sup>182</sup> *Vita Malchi; Jerome, Schaff and Wace, p.151.*

<sup>183</sup> *Prosa XXXI; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 91.*

Aldhelm is being disingenuous, for although he does not explicitly state that Malchus was martyred, the implication is clear – death before dishonour. Katherine Scarfe Beckett discusses how well known the story was in early Anglo-Saxon England – Aldhelm is the first to mention the *vita*, and, as *De Virginitate* was widely read, she suggests ‘Malchus’ virtue was potentially known to many readers, ‘at least those who had successfully navigated Aldhelm’s extraordinary language for the first thirty chapters.’<sup>184</sup> But does this mean that for Aldhelm’s initial audience of Anglo-Saxon nuns and monks, this was the only version they knew?

In shaping his narrative in this way, Aldhelm describes a typically female martyrdom, particularly the references to the sword, with all its phallic associations. Compare, for example, Lucia who ‘preferred to spill out her crimson blood, having been pierced by the sword, rather than lose her precious virginity.’<sup>185</sup> Lucia is pierced, penetrated by the sword, which is representative of secular, and thus masculine, authority. Malchus also faces the sword, a point Aldhelm underlines by mentioning it twice, the drawn sword (*stricta machera*) and edge of the sword (*mucrone*), the latter phrase highlighting its penetrative capacity. This penetrative force is emphasised by *transfossus*, ‘pierced through’, thus he is fully penetrated. As the sword in Lucia’s *vita* was representative of the secular authority, so in Malchus’ *vita* it represents the authority of his slave master, again a secular masculine authority. Returning briefly to the issue of passivity, initially Malchus seems forced by the sword to take a stand on his chastity, but linguistically Aldhelm ensures that the sword removes his ability to make such a decision. His use of *extorqueretur*, ‘obtain’ or ‘to take away by force’ emphasises his passivity. Thus Aldhelm’s

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<sup>184</sup> Beckett, ‘Worcester Sauce’, p. 216.

<sup>185</sup> *Prosa XLII, Igitur beata Lucia salvo pudoris signaculo et consummato vitae curriculo gloriosum martirii triumphum meruit, dum mucrone confossa maluit purpureum sanguinem fundere quam pretiosam pudicitiam perdere; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 109.*

language suggests that the decision is taken from Malchus by the sword, in effect the sword, that is, the phallus, decides for him. The agency apparent in the male saints discussed earlier, is removed, and Malchus is emasculated.

Clearly, compared to even the transgressive saints such as Apollonius, the extent to which Malchus is queered is unusual, and Malchus to some extent, remains an oddity within Aldhelm's hagiography. Although tracing a pattern is difficult amid Aldhelm's 'forest of Latin', I would argue Aldhelm's queering of Malchus is indicative of the emphasis on chastity and obedience as markers of sanctity. Thus, when we examine the events leading up to the threat to Malchus' virginity, we see how Aldhelm shapes the story. For Jerome, it was, as noted above, Malchus's skill as a shepherd, which led to the reward of a wife. Aldhelm radically changes this, and the incident occurs after Malchus makes an error in his ploughing. 'And while, glancing backwards, he was guiding the handle of the plough without care, the harrow (*occa*) pointlessly (*nugaciter*) shattered among the sods of furrowed earth (*Ruptis sulcorum glebulis iugerum occa nugaciter deperiret*)'.<sup>186</sup> Like the sexual imagery of penetration by a sword, the motif of ploughing the earth also has sexual overtones. The point is, of course, that Malchus does not plough correctly, and the masculine harrow (*occa*) shatters in the feminine earth. Again, Malchus has been queered, he is both passive and any latent sexuality has been 'shattered', (*ruptis sulcorum*). *Deperiret* can mean destroyed by love as well as merely destroyed, thus Malchus leaves behind all the family ties that pulled him from the monastery. As noted previously, women are not tempted by a sexual relationship; they are offered marriage, and all that it stands for, social standing, wealth, children. Malchus marries, but can remain chaste, as the broken plough is indicative of his lack of power

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<sup>186</sup> *Prosa XXXI; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 91.*



as a slave, that is his submissive and therefore feminised position, and his chaste condition within marriage. Aldhelm demonstrates that Malchus has conquered such temptation. Hence Aldhelm constructs a saint whose *vita* speaks of chastity, and powerlessness, features that were gendered feminine in the late antique hagiography and Anglo-Saxon England.

One reason why Aldhelm might have selected this unusual saint is the emphasis in Jerome's *vita* on obedience, a quality we have seen is important in the *De Virginitate* as a whole. Malchus' woes began when he disobeyed his abbot, to leave the monastic life, and until he flees his slave-master, he obediently follows others rather than relying on his own choices. When forced to marry, he decided on suicide, but his wife suggested that instead they live chastely together, and again Malchus obeyed. Only when they try to escape does Malchus begin to take decisions for himself. Hence the *vita* offers an example of a man who suffered the consequences of disobedience, slavery, and the rewards of obedience, life and sanctity. The contrast is clear.

## **GENDER, HAGIOGRAPHY AND SANCTIFIED VIRGINITY**

Aldhelm's hagiographical virgins are undoubtedly gendered. He may incorporate qualities associated with both genders, but their performances of virginity tend to be within the norms of heterosexually gendered hagiography. Nevertheless, this does not preclude the ability of the reader to impose a queer reading on his sanctified virginity. But to what extent is their apparent independence and personal relationship with the Divine available to Aldhelm's audience? In the hagiographical section,

Aldhelm stresses physical virginity, a quality unavailable to most of his audience, however they perform or attempt to reclaim virginity. This acts to divide the Anglo-Saxon monastic from the independence of the biblical or late antique saint.<sup>187</sup> Similarly with the queered saints. Eugenia's queerness is sanctioned by both God and the Church, removing it from the reach of other women. The most transgressive male saint is clearly queered through constant association with female qualities, but to what end? Malchus' *vita* teaches the audience the importance of obedience. This was a factor within the monastery - as male monastics would have to obey their immediate superior, the abbot - and in the broader church - as Aldhelm encouraged women to 'know their place'.

Miracles are sharply divided between the genders as men are active on behalf of the community and women tend to be miraculously preserved in the face of sexual threats. Men can shepherd and teach, as they hold official roles within Church hierarchy. Women, even when performing as an abbot, are restricted in the text to the acceptable activities of the Christian woman. Women are more likely to be described as conduits for divine power rather than miracle workers. Both are empowered by their virginity, which is the *sine qua non* of their sanctified status, but, as Emma Pettit notes, the men are active in their activities and the women passive. Aldhelm's stress on virginity highlights the importance of bodily virginity, but never to the detriment of mental purity.

Overall, Aldhelm's use of gender confirms the assumptions of gender he inherited from the Church Fathers. His use of parody and drag does not subvert, but

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<sup>187</sup> The virgin martyrs are allowed a degree of autonomy but it is tightly controlled, which is evident when Aldhelm's exempla are compared with Ælfric's. The latter allots a freer voice to his female virgins than Aldhelm, thus underlining the silencing Aldhelm undertakes in his accounts, particularly stopping the potential political voice of women.

perpetuates gender stereotypes. The queerness of several saints does not point to a multiplicity of genders available through virginity, but a categorically gendered sanctity, which serves to place women clearly within the secondary sphere. The performance of sanctified virginity is used to support the gender divide, and remind women of the importance of obedience to the male Church hierarchy, which is in place to protect and defend as much as nurture and support. Thus Aldhelm is able to use female imagery more easily queering his male saints than vice versa. The performance of masculinity by female saints is more tightly controlled, as it opens the door to the chaos of female independence. Female virgin martyrs must die in order to fulfill their role as exempla, thus, even where they do not, for example, Thecla, Aldhelm ensures they do.

## CHAPTER SIX

### ALDHELM'S *PSYCHOMACHIA*

Having discussed the different virginities created by Aldhelm in his theoretical sections and hagiography, this chapter will consider the extent to which Aldhelm constructed an active, even aggressive virginity in the *psychomachia* in his *Carmen*.<sup>1</sup> Previously, it was argued that Aldhelm does not allow for virginity to be a third gender, enabling greater autonomy for the virginal woman. Rather, despite his wide ranging use of virginity as an aspiration and identity, he uses it separate women from their bodies and from possessing authority. Despite the potential of virginity to enable multiple identities, and queer the subject, Aldhelm returns to his themes of masculine authority and female submission, placing his audience back within the heteronormative hierarchy of the Church.

This chapter will begin with an overview of three of Aldhelm's most important sources for the *psychomachia* – John Cassian, Prudentius and Virgil. Aldhelm draws on the Christian writers Cassian and Prudentius throughout the *De Virginitate*, not just in the *psychomachia*, therefore it is useful to understand how these two men constructed the literary Christian, and meld the internal and external qualities expected of the chaste believer.<sup>2</sup> Virgil is also an influence throughout the text, and here I will be considering one aspect of the *Aeneid*, the personification of *Fama*, or Rumour. Using the poetic register, Aldhelm constructs a virginity that is an active force in the fight against the *gloria mundi*; it tramples down its enemies, as

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Sinead O'Sullivan notes that Aldhelm includes John the Baptist, John the Evangelist, Elijah, Jeremiah and Daniel in his hagiographical section, all of whom Cassian uses as exempla. See her discussion in 'Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* and the Psychomachian Tradition', *Mediaevalia*, 20 (2001), 313-337.

well as raising its devotees. The athletic and martial imagery used of virginity, the Christian as *miles Christi* or *athleta Christi*, is more to the fore through the *Carmen* as a whole, and Aldhelm employs ideas and themes from the Bible, Christian, and epic poetry.<sup>3</sup> This chapter will therefore discuss the vices and virtues Aldhelm takes from his sources, and his use of examples in relating those qualities, culminating in his primary vice of Pride, and the need for the virgin to rely on Christ for protection. It will demonstrate that Aldhelm's construction of virginity remains overwhelmingly gendered, and to maintain their virginal status, Aldhelm's virgins must avoid independence and submit themselves to Divine authority.

As part of his more active depiction of virginity, Aldhelm includes the short *psychomachia* at the end of the *Carmen*. A *psychomachia* is a depiction of the allegorical battle between the major virtues and vices in the Christian soul. The word itself means a 'soul battle', that is a struggle within the individual soul, and developed by the amalgamation of two threads of Christian writing – martial imagery used of the individual Christian, and the discussion of behaviour befitting a Christian, the qualities they should develop and the vices they must avoid.<sup>4</sup> Sinead O' Sullivan has traced the 'Psychomachian tradition' used by Aldhelm back to Tertullian's *De Spectaculis*.<sup>5</sup> Tertullian incorporated the image of the arena, which was widely used in early Christian writing, from the time of Paul onward. It was also widely used in hagiography, for example, the late antique saint Perpetua died in the arena, whilst

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<sup>3</sup> The *Carmen* is written in hexameter verse, the metre of epic and therefore warfare.

<sup>4</sup> ψύχημαχία – to fight/battle in the soul. The word was created by Polybio, to describe the fight for one's life in the death-bed struggle. See Macklin Smith, *Prudentius's Psychomachia: A Reexamination* (Princeton, N. J. : Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Psychomachian Tradition', p. 323; See also Gernot Weiland, 'Aldhelm's *De Octo Vitiis Principibus* and Prudentius's *Psychomachia*', *Medium Aevum*, 55 (1986), 85-92.

Thecla escaped it.<sup>6</sup> Tertullian's depiction, though, was not the extended battle of virtue and vice within the Christian soul of a *psychomachia*, as exemplified later by Prudentius' work. Rather, this developed by mixing the martial imagery of the New Testament and the struggle of the Christian to remain faithful with the personification of qualities, good and bad, which was a feature in classical and Christian writers, as the gendered structure of Latin lent itself to such personification.

Aldhelm's *psychomachia* circulated as part of the *Carmen*, and separately, when it was usually referred to as the *De Octo Vitiis Principalibus*, or sometimes *De Virtutum Pugna cum Vitiis* or *Bella Vitiorum*.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly it occurs in some manuscripts with Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, one of Aldhelm's major sources.<sup>8</sup> This chapter will discuss the source material Aldhelm draws on, and the manner in which he adapts the genre of the *psychomachia* to his intentions. It will examine Aldhelm's use of a martial depiction of virtue and virginity in greater detail, particularly the manner in which he conflates the two. The amalgamation of virginity and virtue enables Aldhelm to return to his opening presentation of virginity as a quality available to all, whether physical virgins or not, thus applicable to his entire audience. The warlike expectations created by the *psychomachia* raise questions of performance and gender, yet Aldhelm, even at his most martial, seems committed to a more passive virginity than some commentators have allowed, it seems that this is again a demonstration of his unease with the independent nuns of his acquaintance.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 4:9 For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men.

<sup>7</sup> See O' Sullivan, 'Psychomachian Tradition', p. 314; Weiland, 'Aldhelm's *De Octo Vitiis Principalibus*', p. 55.

<sup>8</sup> See O' Sullivan, 'Psychomachian Tradition', p. 314; Weiland 'Aldhelm's *De Octo Vitiis Principalibus*', p. 55.

## CHRISTIAN WARFARE – PAUL AND THE *MILES CHRISTI*

From the New Testament onward, Christian writers used martial imagery to describe the Christian's battle, not only with the outside forces of the Devil and the world, but also the internal battle against sinful flesh. We have seen how Aldhelm uses these ideas in the opening to the *De Virginitate*.<sup>9</sup> Paul in particular used such imagery, for example, writing of his inner warfare against sin,

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being (*eso anthropon*) I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war (*antistrateuomenon*) against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner (*aikhmalotizonta me*) of the law of sin at work within my members.<sup>10</sup>

Paul also used the metaphor of spiritual armour, the qualities and behaviour that would protect the Christian against 'the flaming arrows of the evil one.'<sup>11</sup>

Along with these martial metaphors, Paul discussed the concept of clothing oneself in a new personality, one that reflected the Christian qualities expected of the believer, and the abandonment of dangerous vices,

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<sup>9</sup> See discussion in Chapter 3.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 7:21-23.

<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 6:10-17 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God (*ton panoplian tou theou*) so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle (*he pale*, lit. a wrestling) is not against flesh and blood, but against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground (*antistenai*, lit. resist), and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness (*ton thoraka tes dikaiosunes*) in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith (*ton thureon tes pisteos*), with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation (*ton perikephalaian tou soteriou*) and the sword of the Spirit (*ton machairan tou Pneumatos*), which is the word of God.; Cf. 2 Corinthians 10:4 The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life to put off your old self (*ton proteran anastrophēn, ton palaion anthropon*, lit. the former behaviour of the old man), which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self (*endusasthai ton kainon anthropon*), created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.<sup>12</sup>

The Greek gives the sense of constant action; the process is ongoing. To be a Christian is continual effort, a relentless battle against the pull of the world, against one's own failings, and against the forces of darkness. Judith Butler's formulation of the gendered subject as a 'doing', created by constant repetition, is particularly apt when unpicking this construction, which is taken up by Cassian in his formation of the Christian subject, and by Aldhelm, as will be discussed.<sup>13</sup> Although it must be noted that this is performance rather than performative, as the behaviour is the conscious choice of the Christian.<sup>14</sup>

This conception of Christianity as a state of warfare is an important topos, for example Paul writes to Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (*ton agona ton kalon egonismai ton dromon teteleka ton pistin tetereka*).<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, the depiction of the Christian as *miles Christi* became an important image of sanctity, whether the Christian was male or female, and one used by Aldhelm in both the *Prosa* and *Carmen*.

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<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 4:22-23; Cf. Aldhelm's comments on dress discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York : Routledge, 1990), p. 34

<sup>14</sup> Butler stresses that there is no subject behind the performance of gender, rather 'identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'. See, *Gender Trouble*, p.34. However, in the written text, the author lies behind the construction of gender thus it breaks down the divide between performance and performative.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Timothy 4:7; Cf. 1 Timothy 6:12 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.



## CHRISTIAN VICES AND VIRTUES

Whilst Paul did not create a *psychomachia*, he listed the qualities expected of a Christian, and those vices they should avoid,

The acts of the sinful nature (*ta erga tes sarkos* lit. the works of the flesh) are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery (*porneia, akatharsia, aselgeia*, lit. fornication, uncleanness, lustfulness/loose conduct); idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions (*haireseis*, lit. heresies) and envy; drunkenness, orgies (*komoi*, lit. revelries), and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love (*agape*), joy, peace, patience (*makrothumia*, lit. long-suffering), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness (*praotes*, lit. meekness) and self-control. Against such things there is no law.<sup>16</sup>

These qualities formed a basis on which the performance of a Christian could be judged. The performance of the correct qualities, the avoidance of the negative vices, joined with spiritual armour and constant struggle, and the new personality, created a Christian personality whose internal qualities were demonstrated by external behaviour. Clearly, the martial imagery and vices/virtues were not gender specific, as the letters of Paul were addressed to congregations, thus they were intended for all Christians. Gender becomes more important when the qualities considered were personified.

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<sup>16</sup> Galatians 5:19-23.

Paul's list also formed the basis of the vices and virtues of later writers, beginning with Evagrius of Pontus (c. 345 - 399). Evagrius had been appointed a deacon by Gregory of Nazianzus (in 379), but had become obsessed by a woman, and fled to Jerusalem where he joined the monastery of Melania the Elder and Rufinus. Desiring a stricter regime he travelled to Egypt, where he became a noted *abba*. Evagrius wrote about the difficulties of the monastic life, and in the *Praktikos* listed the eight *logismoi*, or tempting thoughts: gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, ennui (*acedia*), vainglory and pride.<sup>17</sup> Although the Church later condemned his works, his *logismoi* remained influential. Each vice is specific to the work and worship of the monastic: gluttony overcomes asceticism; lust contaminates the soul, especially attacking those who practise self-control; avarice indicates a fear of poverty, old age and helplessness; sadness arises from disappointment with the sinful self; anger detracts from worship, particularly attacking the soul and distracting the monk when he is praying; ennui, or 'the noonday demon' leads the monk to hate his ascetic life and wish he were elsewhere, reminding him of his previous luxuries; vainglory tempts the monk with fame and glory, then abandons him to despair; and pride is the worst, for it encourages independence of God and the fellow monks, and leads ultimately to madness.<sup>18</sup> In order to overcome these vices, Evagrius suggests, prudence, understanding and wisdom, temperance, charity and self-control, courage, patience and justice – internal qualities that must be demonstrated through constant action. Again they are performed.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); See discussion in Columba Stewart's 'Monasticism', in *The Early Christian World*, vol I, ed. by Philip F. Esler (London and New York : Routledge, 2004), pp. 344-366, at p. 351.

<sup>18</sup> See Evagrius of Pontus *Praktikos* ch. 6; Excellent website with translation by Luke Dysinger [http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/00a\\_start.htm](http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/00a_start.htm) (10/09/2006).

<sup>19</sup> Evagrius *Praktikos* ch. 89.

John Cassian (c. 360 - 433) also catalogued the Christian virtues and vices, and influenced Aldhelm.<sup>20</sup> Cassian, like Evagrius, was particularly concerned with the life of the desert monks. Cassian never mentioned Evagrius by name, but his list of vices is identical. In the *Institutiones*, Cassian dealt with the monastic vices and how to overcome them in some detail.<sup>21</sup> In his *Collationes (Conferences)* 5, Cassian attributed the list to *abba* Serapion, and Columba Stewart suggests Serapion could be Evagrius.<sup>22</sup> These sins were 'deadly' because, unlike venial sins, a Christian who committed one (or more) of these would need to make a confession and receive absolution, or they would be damned to Hell at death.<sup>23</sup> As Aldhelm used the ideas of Cassian and others not just as the basis for his *psychomachia*, but more generally through *De Virginitate*, it is worth reviewing how they construct the Christian subject in the text, through martial imagery, virginity, vice and virtue.

### JOHN CASSIAN'S *INSTITUTIONES*

John Cassian's *Institutiones* was written about and largely for, the monks of the Egyptian desert, hence it emphasises certain vices.<sup>24</sup> It does not use the battle motif expected in a *psychomachia*, rather Cassian works through the most dangerous vices and how one can overcome them on a personal level. Aldhelm similarly considers many of the vices in the *Carmen* in this way, rather than creating a straight *psychomachia*. Indeed, in many ways Aldhelm's *psychomachia* seems more indebted

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<sup>20</sup> As did Gregory the Great, but in this thesis I am concerned with the influence of late antique writers on Aldhelm. In his *Moralia in Job*, Gregory catalogued what became known as the seven deadly sins: pride/*superbia*, envy/*invidia*, anger/*ira*, avarice/*avaritia*, sadness/*tristitia*, gluttony/*gula*, lust/*luxuria*.

<sup>21</sup> Again they are gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, listlessness, vainglory, and pride.

<sup>22</sup> Certainly there was more than one Serapion, hence identification is difficult. See Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 11, 149.

<sup>23</sup> Although the practice of annual confession was not inaugurated until the Fourth Lateran Council in 1214.

<sup>24</sup> Whilst there were monastic women in the desert, the works of Cassian, and Evagrius before him, were primarily intended for a male audience.

to Cassian's style than Prudentius, an important element to his construction of vices and virtues that seems overlooked by commentators. For example, Cassian emphasises the internal intention of the Christian, which is displayed outwardly, and performance therefore mirrors intent. The correct performance of virtue is necessary for the Christian to engage with the behaviour expected of their faith, and a protective against the vices that could draw them from salvation. Cassian examines each vice in detail, offering practical advice on how to conquer temptation leading the Christian to 'refreshment and perfection'.<sup>25</sup>

Cassian first discusses gluttony. In a subsistence society, such as the desert, and an ascetic culture, food could become an overwhelming passion for the monks. Indeed, it was the first vice to overcome, before one could progress to defeating the other vices.<sup>26</sup> Cassian argued that fasting overcomes gluttony, but each to his own abilities, as each body had its own strength.<sup>27</sup> However he expanded this, stating that one must guard not only against the amount one eats, but also the quality. Like Jerome, he linked gluttony and lasciviousness; Cassian warns that too much of any food affects the mind and 'robs it of every possibility of integrity and purity.'<sup>28</sup> Thus restraint is vital at all times. However even with gluttony, possibly the most physical and bodily of the vices, Cassian is interested in the interior qualities necessary for the monk, which provides the link between his examination of qualities, and advice, and the *psychomachia* as a 'soul battle'. Throughout his discussion on the vices, interiority plays a crucial part in his representation of the struggle for virtue. Cassian stressed that mental and physical integrity required not just abstinence from food, but

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<sup>25</sup> Cassian, *Institutiones* 5.II.3, All translations taken from *John Cassian. The Institutes*, trans. by B. Ramsey (New York: Newman Press, 2000), p. 118; Ramsey, p. 142, notes 'the prophet' refers to Psalms 66:12, which says, 'You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance.'

<sup>26</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 5.XIV.3; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 125.

<sup>27</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 5.V.1; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 119.

<sup>28</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 5.V.2; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 120; Cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 22.8.2, see discussion in Chapter 2.

for the Christian to cultivate all of the virtues.<sup>29</sup> Hence his construction of the pure body is inextricable from the purity of the mind, thus the virtues are intertwined, retained and maintained through continual performance.<sup>30</sup> From the outset then, the importance of interior strength for the desert monk echoes that expected from the sanctified virgin, a feature that Cassian explicitly links with performance: ‘The chastity of the inner man is discerned in the perfection of this virtue [abstinence].’<sup>31</sup>

Again this is the same idea we have seen in the Church Fathers and Aldhelm – the importance of the outward performance of chastity; virginity is signified through the expression of internal qualities by external performance. Cassian juxtaposes the physical and mental qualities of the Christian in his construction of the believer as bodily temple, stating that God dwells in a pure heart rather than corruptible flesh.<sup>32</sup> The flesh cannot be perfected, for man has Fallen from Grace, but the internal qualities can be absolute, opening the way for communing with the Divine.<sup>33</sup> Thus the internal is privileged, but needs to find expression through the external. For Aldhelm, the ontological status of the body is of secondary importance, as his non-virginal audience needed to demonstrate their virginity by self-control and strenuous activity. These are the watchwords of the conscientious Christian, in Aldhelm as in Cassian.<sup>34</sup>

Finally Cassian offers examples from the desert fathers, but he does not concentrate on those who demonstrate incredible feats of starvation. Rather he includes examples of good sense and balance, such as those who adapted their fasting

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<sup>29</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 5.X; Cassian, Ramsey, p. 122.

<sup>30</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 5.XI.1; Cassian, Ramsey, p. 122, ‘For it is impossible for the fiery impulses of the body to be extinguished until the shoots of the other principle vices have themselves been cut off at the root’.

<sup>31</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 5.XI.1; Cassian, Ramsey, pp. 122-123; Cassian, *Inst.* 5.XX.1, also equates physical and mental effort, stating that the physical effort means nothing without a ‘fasting of the soul’, see Cassian, Ramsey, p. 130.

<sup>32</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 5.XXI.5; Cassian, Ramsey, p. 131.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Matthew 5:8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>34</sup> As Aldhelm demonstrates in his example of the bee. See discussion in Chapter 3.

to accommodate their responsibilities of hospitality to others, and those who behave badly, misjudging themselves. This forms the pattern for the succeeding chapters of Cassian's work. Similarly, Aldhelm's hagiographical examples demonstrate the accepted clichés of sanctity, and in his *psychomachia*, he offers paradigms, primarily drawn from the Bible, to serve as exempla. As noted above, Cassian does not describe the sort of battle expected in a *psychomachia*, yet throughout his *Institutiones* he interconnects interior and exterior qualities, in a manner that opens the way to such a construction of vice and virtue; the quality being represented through the actions it undertakes.

Somewhat surprisingly, considering the emphasis given to fornication in the Church Fathers, Cassian's chapter concerning the subject is one of the shortest in the text.<sup>35</sup> Yet, Cassian stresses interior and exterior integrity, which we also see in Aldhelm. Cassian structures the physical experience on a continuum, linking gluttony and fornication, as we saw in the Church Fathers.<sup>36</sup> He states that physical fasting is not enough to gain 'the purity of perfect chastity unless it is preceded by a contrite spirit' and prayer.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly the assumption that the monk is striving for chastity/*castitas* implies they were not virgins. The implication is that these men, non-virgins, could achieve integrity through the performance of virtue and Christian qualities is echoed in Aldhelm's amalgamation of virginity and chastity in *De Virginitate*.<sup>38</sup> Cassian's most important argument is that, as with gluttony, physical control of the body is not enough. 'For it is one thing to be abstinent – that is, *εγκρατη* – and another to be chaste and, to put it this way, to pass over to a

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<sup>35</sup> Although it must be remembered the text was primarily aimed at monastic men, not women.

<sup>36</sup> See discussion in Chapter 2.

<sup>37</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 6.I; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 153.

<sup>38</sup> However Cassian is not assuming virginal status, rather chastity leading to integrity, in this he foreshadows Aldhelm, and this may have been an influence on Aldhelm.

disposition of integrity and incorruption, which is called ἀγνῶν'.<sup>39</sup> Cassian includes a quotation from Basil of Caesarea, 'I do not know woman, but I am not a virgin', noting that physical purity needs integrity of the heart, which comes from both Godly fear and the love of chastity.<sup>40</sup> The constant repetition of interiority and exterior integrity reinforces the construction of the complete Christian.<sup>41</sup>

Some of the vices Cassian considers are depicted as virtues that have been corrupted.<sup>42</sup> For example he says that anger enables us to be displeased with our behaviour when it is wrong. But corrupted, anger will exclude the Holy Spirit from the heart, for prayer means nothing if the Christian is divided from his brother.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, sadness can be a positive quality, when grief at our behaviour causes us to repent and strive for perfection, but negatively it cuts us off from contemplation of the divine and weakens mental abilities.<sup>44</sup> It does not allow prayer, contemplation, or peaceableness, rather one becomes irritable and abrupt.<sup>45</sup> In Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, patience was paired to negate anger, but for Cassian it is directed against feelings of a lack of worth and depression, as he warns such feelings of sadness could be used as an excuse to alienate ourselves.<sup>46</sup>

*Acedia*, or 'a wearied or anxious heart', is a particular danger for desert monks.<sup>47</sup> Cassian approaches the vice in a practical manner, offering warnings and

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<sup>39</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 6.VI.1; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 154.

<sup>40</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 6.XIX; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p.161; Aldhelm, also interested in internal qualities, uses this quotation in his *vita* of Basil in *Prosa* XXVII.

<sup>41</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 6.IV.2; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 155.

<sup>42</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 8.IV.3; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 195.

<sup>43</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 7.III.3; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p.170; Cassian also writes of divine anger, 'Thus, when we read of God's anger and wrath, we must not think of it as ἀνθρώποπαθῶς – that is in terms of lowly human disturbance, but in a manner worthy of God, who is free of all disturbance'; Cassian, *Inst.* 8.XII; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 199; Cassian, *Inst.* 8.XII-XIV; *Cassian*, Ramsey, pp. 199-200; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; Matthew 5:23-24.

<sup>44</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 9. XI; *Cassian*, Ramsey, pp. 213-4; Cassian argues that, *Inst.* 9.I, Positively, sadness comes from a love of God and includes the fruits of the spirit, '...love, joy, peace, forbearance, goodness, kindness, faith, mildness, continence'. See *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 211.

<sup>45</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 9.I; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 211.

<sup>46</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 9.VII; *Cassian*, Ramsey, pp. 212-213; See discussion on Prudentius below.

<sup>47</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 10.I; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 219.

advice, and referring to Paul's comments in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, as *acedia* leads to various problems, such as disquietude, leading to gossiping.<sup>48</sup> This is a vice which clearly worries Cassian as he draws attention to the various comments of the New Testament about working for a living, quoting Ephesians and Acts. Similarly Aldhelm encourages his audience to keep up their studies with vigour, which would help them avoid wasting their time in fruitless endeavours.<sup>49</sup>

The two final vices are very similar, vainglory and pride. Vainglory is a dangerous vice because even when it seems to have been defeated, 'it changes its previous garb and appearance, like the multiform evil that it is'.<sup>50</sup> Aldhelm portrays pride in the same manner in his *psychomachia*, always ready to fight back when it appears beaten.<sup>51</sup> Vainglory is multiform for it attacks 'the soldier of Christ in dress and in appearance, in bearing, in speech, in work, in vigils, in fasts, in prayer, in reclusion, in reading, in knowledge, in silence, in obedience, in humility, and in longsuffering.'<sup>52</sup> It is so dangerous because it can strike those who openly fast, for example, and those who secretly fast, thus performance is not enough, the heart condition is paramount. Another danger is that whilst the other vices grow weaker once conquered, vainglory does not.<sup>53</sup>

Of pride, Cassian notes that it is the fiercest of the vices.<sup>54</sup> One is never free of the potential for pride to attack, as it challenges Christians of every level and all experience.<sup>55</sup> To combat pride, the Christian must remember that all they have

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<sup>48</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 10.XIII; *Cassian*, Ramsey, pp. 227-228; Paul uses his own example as someone who worked to support himself, see 1 Thessalonians 2:9 and 2 Thessalonians 3:8-13.

<sup>49</sup> See discussion in Chapter 3.

<sup>50</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 11.II; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 241.

<sup>51</sup> See further discussion below.

<sup>52</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 11.III; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 241.

<sup>53</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 11.VII; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 243.

<sup>54</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 12.1; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 255.

<sup>55</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 12.1; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 255.



achieved has been by God's Grace.<sup>56</sup> Cassian describes the effect of pride: the monk becomes disobedient and harsh, ignoring the discipline of the monastery, they become agitated, high-handed and capricious, lacking patience and love. These views are echoed in Aldhelm's fears of pride and independence in his audience, the refusal to accept the authority of the Church. But Aldhelm's warnings do not just apply to those under monastic rule, but primarily his addressees. Following Scott Gwara, I would argue that these are the women in charge of monasteries, whose pride could lead them to greater independence from the Church.<sup>57</sup> As a vice, pride is particularly deadly because it negates whatever other virtues have been achieved. Indeed for Cassian, pride is so dangerous, that it is not just opposed by individual humility but by God himself.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Aldhelm highlights the need for Christ in order to combat pride.<sup>59</sup>

Thus Cassian does not fashion a *psychomachia*, as such. Whilst he examines the vices and virtues, he does not create a pitched battle between them, but explores the vices and how developing virtues and performing the personality expected of a Christian, and relying on God, the monk can overcome the negative qualities that will tempt them. The inner and outer man is formed though the interplay of practical advice and an understanding of the attacking vice acquired through reading a text like the *Institutiones*. Aldhelm also concentrates on how the individual should fight the vices rather than creating a battle between vice and virtue, as will be argued below. Prudentius took the ideas of writers like Cassian, and drew also on classical authors

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<sup>56</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 12.IX; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 259; Cf 1 Corinthians 4:7 For what makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?; Cassian stressed this point through the book, for example he points out that if Christ, God incarnate said. 'I am not able to do anything of myself... but my Father who abides in me himself does the works', thus how much more should the individual Christian feel this way?; Cassian, *Inst.* 12.XVII.1; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 263.

<sup>57</sup> See comments in Chapter 1.

<sup>58</sup> Cassian, *Inst.* 12.VI.1; *Cassian*, Ramsey, p. 257.

<sup>59</sup> See discussion below.

such as Virgil in order to develop the personification of qualities and the battle scenes of the true *psychomachia*.

## LATIN, VIRGIL AND PRUDENTIUS

Virgil was probably the most popular classical author in Anglo-Saxon England, and very influential on Aldhelm's work.<sup>60</sup> Prudentius (348 - c. 410) composed his *Psychomachia* at the beginning of the fifth century, and it quickly became an influential and widely read work, with an influence lasting beyond the middle ages.<sup>61</sup> His representation of the internal battle became much imitated, as we see for example in Aldhelm, as it fitted with the construction of the Christian as *miles Christi*. Macklin Smith notes of Prudentius' work, 'Considered merely as personification allegory, the *Psychomachia* is manifestly original; and it is revolutionary in its impact, being the major source of a rich allegorical tradition extending through the middle ages and into the eighteenth century.'<sup>62</sup> Prudentius took the concept of vices and virtues and constructed a battle around them. The vices and virtues were personified, and their performance demonstrated the individual qualities he considered.

Using epic meter, as Virgil had in the *Aeneid*, Prudentius created an heroic poem describing the inner struggle of the Christian soul. As Paul had listed virtues as

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<sup>60</sup> For example, Aldhelm quotes from the *Aeneid*, XI.875, in the opening of the Prosa (II) 'The field shook and crumbled under the four-hoof beat of the horses' (*Quadripedante putrem cursu quatit ungula campum*).

<sup>61</sup> Prudentius wrote during the period in which the Roman Empire was fragmenting, a time of political, social, religious and economic upheaval. As Christianity was the dominant religion, the threat of persecution had passed and the emphasis turned to the internal struggle against bodily desire. This is not to say that paganism had been eradicated, rather pagan mysticism was one of many influences on developing Christian belief, alongside neoplatonic philosophical beliefs and heretical ideas such as gnosticism. Such ideas, can be seen in both Christian and pagan writings of late antiquity, for example, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*.

<sup>62</sup> Smith, *Prudentius' Psychomachia*, p. 5.

well as vices, and Evagrius had suggested the qualities a Christian should demonstrate in order to overcome temptations, the way was open to construct an opposition between the vices and virtues.<sup>63</sup> Latin, as a gendered language, lent itself to the personification of these vices and virtues as female warriors. Adding in the martial imagery of Christian warfare was a gradual process, creating the idea of a battle between them for the soul of the believer. These strands met in the innovation of the *psychomachia*. Prudentius' personifications echo Virgil; in the *Aeneid*, Virgil, describes and personifies, *Fama*/Rumour in his account of Dido and Aeneas, (IV.173-198),

Rumour did not take long to go through the great cities of Libya. Of all the ills there are, Rumour is the swiftest. She thrives on movement and gathers strength as she goes. From small and timorous beginnings she soon lifts herself up into the air, her feet still on the ground and her head hidden in the clouds. They say she is the last daughter of Mother Earth who bore her in a rage against the gods, a sister for Coetus and Encleadus. Rumour is quick of foot and swift on the wing, a huge and horrible monster, and under every feather of her body, strange to tell, there lies an eye that never sleeps, a mouth and a tongue that are never silent and an ear always pricked. By night she flies between earth and sky, squawking through the darkness, and never lowers her eyelids in sweet sleep. By day she keeps watch perched on the tops of gables or on high towers and causes fear in great cities, holding fast to her lies and distortions as often as she tells the truth. At that time she was taking delight in plying the tribes with all manner of stories, fact and

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<sup>63</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Psychomachian Tradition', p. 315.

fiction mixed in equal parts.... When the foul goddess has spread this gossip all around on the lips of men, she then steered her curse to king Iarbas to set his mind alight and fuel his anger.<sup>64</sup>

In this extended description of *Fama* there are features that were taken up by writers of *psychomachia*, such as Prudentius and, to a lesser extent, Aldhelm. There is a physical description of *Fama*, her monstrous body reflecting her character, with eyes that see all and mouths that mix truth and falsehood. Virgil also describes *Fama*'s behaviour, as she perches on gables, spying, or flying through the air, 'squawking' her 'lies and distortions'. *Fama*'s performance and appearance intertwine as Virgil creates her character; one is demonstrative of the other. Finally he includes mention of the emotion of *Fama*, she takes delight in the trouble she causes.<sup>65</sup> However, *Fama* is not merely a personification of an abstract quality, but, within Virgil's utilisation of Classical theology, she is a goddess, the last daughter descended from Mother Earth through the Titans, and encompasses divine power and authority.

In contrast, Prudentius' vices and virtues are more strictly personifications. His interest is not the influence of the divine on the behaviour of man, or even the explanation of human behaviour through the divine, but the inner struggle of the soul. His *Psychomachia* is, at least in part, a depiction of the process of Christian conversion, but it is also an exposition of the qualities one needs to follow Paul's

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<sup>64</sup> *The Aeneid* IV, ll. 173-197, *Extemplo Libyae magnas it Fama per urbes./ Fama, malum qua non aliud uelocius ullum:/ Mobilitate uiget uirisque adquirit eundo,/ Parua metu primo, mox sese attollit in auras/ Ingrediturque solo et caput inter nubila condit./ Illam Terra parens ira inritata deorum/ Extremam, ut perhibent, Coeo Enceladoque sororem/ Progenuit pedibus celerem et pernicious alias,/ Monstrum horrendum, ingens cui quot sunt corpore plumae,/ Tot uigiles oculi subter (mirabile dictu),/ Tot linguae, totidem ora sonant, tot subrigit auris./ Nocte uolat caeli medio terraeque per umbram/ Stridens, nec dulci declinat lumina somno;/ Luce sedet custos aut summi culmine tecti/ Turribus aut altis, et magnas territat urbes,/ Tam ficti prauisque tenax quam nuntia ueri./ Haec tum multiplici populos sermone replebat/ Gaudens, et pariter facta atque infecta canebat:/ Uenisse Aenean Troiano sanguine cretum,/ Cui se pulchra uiro dignetur iungere Dido;/ Nunc hiemem inter se luxu, quam longa, fouere/ Regnorum immemores turpique cupidine captos./ Haec passim dea foeda uirum diffundit in ora./ Protinus ad regem cursus detorquet Iarban/ Incenditque animum dictis atque aggerat iras; *The Aeneid*, trans. by David West (London : Penguin, 1990), p.86; Cf. Smith, *Prudentius' Psychomachia*, p. 151.*

<sup>65</sup> See below as Prudentius uses such description in his portrayal of *Luxuria*.

command to put on the 'new personality' and become a mature Christian who can withstand the pressures of the world, and the weaknesses of the flesh, which are manifest in the eight principal vices.<sup>66</sup> The struggle of the *psychomachia* is also an attempt to reach eternal life, fighting the fine fight to its end.<sup>67</sup> The vices he personifies are the qualities one must overcome, and the virtues are those qualities one must adopt, in order to perfect one's faith.

Considering Prudentius' depiction of *Luxuria*, he constructs a figure that encapsulates the qualities of the vice. For example, he describes *Luxuria*, 'her locks perfumed, her eyes shifting, her voice listless (*delibuta comas, oculis vaga, languida voce*)'.<sup>68</sup> He also describes her behaviour, 'she lived only for pleasure, to make her spirit soft and nerveless, in wantonness to drain alluring delights, to enfeeble and undo her understanding.'<sup>69</sup> Such language describes the vice, but also highlights the inherent weakness of the quality. There is a difficulty in creating a vice that does not undermine itself, detracting from the struggle necessary within the soul to overcome the temptation encapsulated. Hence Prudentius, whilst drawing on Virgil, must balance the derogatory description of the vice with a sense of its danger to the Christian soul, not an issue for Virgil's construction of *Fama*.

Prudentius' virtues and vices are female, as the nouns they represent are gendered female in Latin. Thus the battle is gendered on two levels, linguistically and through description and performance. His virtues are also virgins, and Prudentius constructs them by using the late antique ideas of gender and virginity that we saw in the Church Fathers, thus they are self-controlled and humble, and their strength of

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<sup>66</sup> Eph 6:10-17; Cf. 2 Corinthians 10:4 The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. 2 Timothy 4:7.

<sup>68</sup> Prudentius, *Psychomachia* l. 312; Prudentius, trans. by H. J. Johnson (Heninemann, Cambridge Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1949-53), pp. 300-301.

<sup>69</sup> Prudentius, *Psych.* ll. 313-315, *perdita deliciis, vitae cui voluptas, elumbem mollire animum, petulanter amoenas haurire inlecebras et fractos solvere sensus*; Prudentius, Johnson, pp. 300-301.

will is seen as a masculine quality. Masculinity is a positive quality, femininity is negative and associated with weakness and frivolity.<sup>70</sup>

Prudentius' *Psychomachia* was certainly known in England, and in places echoed by Aldhelm.<sup>71</sup> Aldhelm draws on Prudentius throughout the *De Virginitate*, *Prosa* and *Carmen*, for example in the biblical characters he includes. Whilst a few studies have been done on this section of the *De Virginitate*, I would argue that Aldhelm is not creating a full *psychomachia*, his interest is in the power of virginity when protected by Christ, rather than the struggle of the virtue. Hence, despite the concentration on the psychomachian element by scholars such as Sinead O'Sullivan, we have to consider this section as drawing more on Cassian's discursive *Institutiones* than Prudentius' martial *Psychomachia*.

## **PRUDENTIUS' PSYCHOMACHIA**

After an introductory section, the *psychomachia* proper begins with a request to Christ, 'say, our King, with what fighting force the soul is furnished and enabled to expel the sins from within our breast.... Thou thyself doest command relieving squadrons to fight the battle in the body close beset'.<sup>72</sup> Christ therefore is the commander and final power in the fight against the vices, as he is for Aldhelm.<sup>73</sup>

Prudentius creates a series of well-balanced battles where each vice is matched with a corresponding Christian virtue, and they struggle for ascendancy. On

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<sup>70</sup> See further discussion below

<sup>71</sup> *Aldhelm : The Poetic Works*, trans. by M. Lapidge and J. L. Rosier (Cambridge : D. S. Brewer, 1985), p. 100; O'Sullivan, 'Psychomachian Tradition'.

<sup>72</sup> Prudentius, *Psych.* ll. 22-23; *Prudentius*, Johnson, pp. 278-281.

<sup>73</sup> For example, in the battle against Despair, Aldhelm warns of failure, l. 2657, 'if [the soul] lacks the strong foundation in our own Christ (*Si firmo careat nostri fundamine Christi*).'

the whole it is a series of discrete battles, with little overlap between the characters so the reader can see the actions of each virtue and vice. The battles are as follows,

*Fides vs Cultura Deorum Veterum;*

*Pudicitia vs Sodomita Libido;*

*Patientia vs Ira;*

*Mens Humilis and Spes vs Superbia;*

*Sobrietas vs Luxuria;*

*Ratio vs Avaritia;*

*Fides vs Discordia Cognomento Hereses.*<sup>74</sup>

Thus *Fides* or Faith opens and closes the battle; it is the ultimate virtue, following Paul.<sup>75</sup> *Fides* fights paganism, and heretical Christian teaching, which demonstrates the increasing need of the Church to control orthodoxy as Christianity spread and came into contact with (hence was altered by) other belief systems. Ultimately, then, *Fides* fights in order to create the Christian soul, and to protect it against unorthodox Christians, and it rouses the other virtues, warning them against complacency. In contrast, Aldhelm portrays virginity itself as the primary virtue, creating an interplay of ideas of virtue, gender and virginity that alters the emphasis of his *psychomachia*.<sup>76</sup>

Some of Prudentius' battles are quite gory, for example, *Fides* stamps on the head of *Veterum Cultura Deorum*, who suffers, 'a hard and agonising death.'<sup>77</sup> In the next battle, *Pudicitia* stabs *Sodomita Libido*, 'Then with a sword-thrust she pierces the disarmed harlot's throat, and she spews out hot fumes with clots of foul blood,

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<sup>74</sup> However, these are merely the main characters, there are unnamed foot-soldiers on both sides. At, *Psych.* ll. 104-105, for example, in the first battle *Fides* is joined by, 'the conquering host which Faith [*Fides*], their queen, had assembled from a thousand martyrs and emboldened to face the foe' See *Prudentius*, Johnson, pp. 280-1.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exist and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

<sup>76</sup> See further discussion below.

<sup>77</sup> Prudentius, *Psych.* ll. 96-102; *Prudentius*, Johnson, pp. 280-1; Cf. Genesis 3:15.

and the unclean breath defiles the air near by.’<sup>78</sup> The imagery is vivid, and more violent than in Aldhelm’s *psychomachia*. In contrast, *Patientia*’s fight with *Ira* is rather one-sided: *Ira*’s javelins and sword thrusts are ignored by the well-armoured virtue, until, exhausted and frustrated, *Ira* kills herself. *Patientia*, like *Fides* aids all other virtues, ‘no Virtue enters on the hazard of the struggle without this Virtue’s aid, for she has nought to lean upon, whose strength Long-Suffering does not uphold.’<sup>79</sup> Hence while *Fides* may be the most important virtue, for ‘without faith it is impossible to please God’, *Patientia*, is also necessary to overcome internal vices, the outside world and the Devil.<sup>80</sup>

Prudentius’ construction of *Superbia* or Pride contrasts sharply with Aldhelm’s, evident from the moment she enters the field of battle,

all puffed up... on a mettled steed which she had covered with a loin’s skin, laying the weight of shaggy hair over its strong shoulders, so that being seated on the wild beast’s mane she might make a more imposing figure.... High on her head she had piled a tower of braided hair, laying on a mass to heighten her locks and make a lofty peak over her haughty brows.<sup>81</sup>

*Superbia* is a sham, dressing to impress. Dress and performance are used to initially create an impression of menace, but *Superbia*’s easy defeat undermines her façade.<sup>82</sup>

Prudentius is evidently influenced by descriptions such as we saw in Virgil, but the impression he creates is not of the danger to the Christian, but the delusion of the

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<sup>78</sup> Prudentius, *Psych.* ll. 109-113; *Prudentius*, Johnson, pp. 282-3.

<sup>79</sup> Prudentius, *Psych.* ll. 242-243; *Prudentius*, Johnson, p. 291.

<sup>80</sup> Hebrews 11:6.

<sup>81</sup> Prudentius, *Psych.* ll. 246-255, *Forte per effuses inflata Superbia turmas/ Effreni volitabat equo, quem pelle leonis/ Texerat et validos villis oneraverat armos./ Quo se fulta iubis iactantius illa ferinis / Inferret tumido despectans agmina fastu./ Turritum tortis caput adcumularat in altum/ Crinibus, extractos augetur ut addita cirros/ Congeries celsumque apicem frons ardua ferret; Prudentius, Johnson, pp. 291-293.*

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Aldhelm’s emphasis on Pride above all other vices. See further discussion below.



vice. This idea is expanded by *Superbia*'s opposite numbers, *Mens Humilis* or Lowliness and *Spes*, or Hope, and an army, 'small in number and scantily armed'.<sup>83</sup>

*Superbia* scorns her enemy,

Is Chastity's cold stomach of any use in war, or Brotherly Love's soft work done by stress of battle? What shame it is ... [to] engage with troupes of girls (*virgineis*), among them beggarly Righteousness and poverty-stricken Honesty, dried up Soberness and white-faced Fasting, Purity with scarce a tinge of blood to cover her cheeks, unarmed Simplicity exposed with no protection to every wound, and Lowliness humbling herself to the ground.<sup>84</sup>

Prudentius lists many of the qualities highlighted by the Church Fathers as particularly appropriate for the sanctified virgins of the Church. These are not qualities that interest Aldhelm; his virgin is not required to starve herself or cede all worldly riches.<sup>85</sup> But Prudentius demonstrates the weakness of the genre, as the virtues must rely on Faith and Christ to protect them, and the threat of some of his personified vices is diluted by their limitations, as Prudentius tries to incorporate the negative consequences of the vice into his description. This could be why Aldhelm avoids a straight *psychomachia*, but rather melds Cassian and Prudentius in his version of the genre.

Though *Spes* denounces the dead *Superbia* by referring to an example of Pride in the Old Testament, Goliath, for Prudentius it appears that *Luxuria*, or Indulgence,

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<sup>83</sup> Prudentius, *Psych.* ll. 306-316; *Prudentius*, Johnson, pp. 295-297, especially at p. 293.

<sup>84</sup> Prudentius, *Psych.* ll. 306-316, *Anne Pudicitiae gelidum iecur utile bello est?/ An tenerum Pietatis opus sudatur in armis?/ Quam pudet, o Mavors et virtus conscia, talem/ Contra stare aciem ferroque lacessere nugas./ Et cum virgineis dextram conferre choreis./ Iustitia est ubi semper egens et pauper Honestas./ Arida Sobrietas, albo Ieiunia vultu./ Sanguine vix tenui Pudor interfuses, aperta/ Simplicitas et ad omne patens sine tegmine vulnus./ Et prostrata in humum nec libera iudice sese/ Mens Humilis, quam degenerem trepidatio prodit!*; *Prudentius*, Johnson, pp. 295-297.

<sup>85</sup> See further discussion below.

is the greatest threat. Whereas *Superbia's* appearance is the sort of exaggeration that accompanies pride, *Luxuria's* ability to enervate is represented through her appearance, 'her locks perfumed, her eyes shifting, her voice listless, abandoned in voluptuousness she lived only for pleasure, to make her spirit soft and nerveless, in wantonness to drain alluring delights, to enfeeble and undo her understanding.'<sup>86</sup> *Luxuria's* weapons are flowers, 'scattering baskets of flowers over her adversaries. So the Virtues are won over by her charms; the alluring breath blows a subtle poison on them that unmans (*labefacta*) their frames'.<sup>87</sup> Prudentius' description of *Luxuria* is thus the most successful of his personifications, demonstrating a real danger to the virtues, as she is the only vice who really affects them. The virtues begin to fall victim to her charms. Importantly, her effect is to unman the virginal virtues, as they lose the masculine strength they have gained through their performance of virginity. But the danger is not death, a noble martyrdom in the face of pagan persecution, it is ignominious defeat and self-imposed slavery, 'And by this time the whole array, its standards turned about, was treacherously submitting of its own will to a desire to surrender, wishing to be the slaves of Indulgence, to bear the yoke of a debauched mistress, and be governed by the loose law of the pot-house.'<sup>88</sup> Prudentius sets up the clichéd opposition between virginal self-control and harlotry, just as Aldhelm compares the virgin with the sexual woman, assumed to be a prostitute, and likens the condition of the wife to that of a slave. It appears that Aldhelm's depiction of the worldly wife in slavery was influenced by Prudentius as well as Ambrose, for

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<sup>86</sup> Prudentius, *Psych.* ll. 380-383, *delibuta comas, oculis vaga, languida voce,/ perdita deliciis, vitae cui causa voluptas,/ elumbem mollire animum, petulanter amoenas*; Prudentius, Johnson, p. 301; See previous discussion on Virgil.

<sup>87</sup> Prudentius, *Psych.* ll. 394-397, *sed violas lasciva iacit folisque rosarum/ dimicat et calathos inimica per agmina fundit./ Inde eblanditis Virtutibus halitus inlex. Inspirat tenerum labefacta per ossa venenum*; Prudentius, Johnson, p. 303.

<sup>88</sup> Prudentius, *Psych.* ll. 408-411, *Et iam cuncta acies in deditiois amorem/ sponte sua versis transibat pefida signis/ Luxuriae servire volens dominaeque fluentis/ iura pati et laxa ganeorum lege teneri*; Prudentius, Johnson, p. 303.

Prudentius continues with *Sobrietas*, or Soberness, addressing the virtues, ‘To whom are you bowing the neck?... Is it to chains like these [i.e. garlands of flowers] you will give up hands trained to war, with these bind your stout arms, to have your manly [virilem] hair confined by a gilded turban’.<sup>89</sup> The slavery implied is implicitly associated with weakness and femininity, as the sexual woman is, *ipso facto*, a slave.

Evidently Aldhelm’s sensuous descriptions are also influenced by such comments. But his condemnation of the world as scum and filth through the hagiographical section draws on Prudentius as well as hagiography. In Prudentius, *Luxuria* is eventually thrown from the chariot and trampled, her face smashed in with a rock by *Sobrietas*. Her minions flee, strewing their jewels and finery on the battlefield, but *Sobrietas* and her soldiers do not, ‘let their austere gaze turn a blind eye towards the joys of plunder’.<sup>90</sup> Hence the final tone is one of many hagiographical stories, the things of the world are scorned by the virtuous.

Clearly Aldhelm’s *De Virginitate* is indebted both to Prudentius, and Cassian. One example of this is Aldhelm’s use of the Judith story. Prudentius introduces the story after the death of *Sodomita Libido*, setting up a contrast between the fornication of the vice and the chastity of Judith in the face of Holofernes’ lust. Aldhelm’s discussion of the story is more problematic. In the *Prosa*, he is not comfortable with the behaviour of Judith and links her to the sexual woman/prostitute. Aldhelm’s fears at independence – and Judith acted independently to protect her community – colour

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<sup>89</sup> Prudentius, *Psych.* ll. 420-427, *Quis furor insanas agitat caligne mentes?/ Quo ruitis? Cui colla datis? Quae vincula tandem/ pro pudor, armigeris amor est perferre lacertis,/ lilia luteolis interlucentia sertis/ et ferugineo vernantes flore coronas?*; Prudentius, Johnson, pp. 303-305.

<sup>90</sup> Prudentius, *Psych.* ll. 309-311; These include *Jest/Iocus*, *Sauciness/Petulantia*, *Desire/Amor*, *Ostentation/Pompa*, *Allurement/Venustatis*, *Strife/Discordia* and *Pleasure/Voluptatem* - all qualities associated with femininity.

his interpretation, hence he emphasises her sexuality in contrast to Prudentius. Yet, in his *psychomachia*, he follows Prudentius in commending her chastity.<sup>91</sup>

Aldhelm, like Cassian, offers advice and comment rather than a series of pitched battles. He also highlights the chastity necessary by the individual striving for the virtue, as Cassian does. Like Prudentius he stresses the virginal status of the virtues. But whilst Prudentius describes the power of the virtues, Aldhelm concentrates on the power of virginity, constructed as a mental purity that all can achieve.

### **ALDHELM'S *PSYCHOMACHIA***

Aldhelm introduces his *psychomachia* after the hagiographical section of the *Carmen*, 'Now that holy praises of the blessed, whose fame blazes under the summits of heaven, have been set forth, it remains for the poem to present the battles ensuing from the Vices, which will deny the realm of heaven to the Virtues and the virgins of Christ.'<sup>92</sup> This latter point is the pivot for Aldhelm's account, this is not so much an allegorical exposition of the struggle of the soul for salvation, as another means for praising virginity, flattering the 'virgins of Christ', and demonstrating his literary knowledge and skills. He advises his audience, to guide them to behaviour that will open heaven, primarily through offering negative examples of the vices he discusses. The *psychomachia* is only 315 lines of the *Carmen*, a small portion of the text. Also Aldhelm appears at times to be unsure of what he is doing; his battle scenes are perfunctory, and his interest appears to lie in the Biblical examples he offers to

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<sup>91</sup> See further discussion below.

<sup>92</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2446-2450, *Digestis igitur sanctorum laudibus almis./ Quorum rumores sub caeli culmine flagrant./ Restat, ut ingentes depromant carmina pugnas/ Ex vitiis procedentes, virtutibus atque/ Virginibus Christi quae caeli regna negabunt; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 157.

illuminate the Vices. Yet, Aldhelm carries through some specific and surprising ideas, as will be discussed. And the very popularity of the *psychomachia* implies that his ideas had a receptive audience.

Gender is obviously important as the vices and virtues are portrayed as female, yet the majority of the exempla he uses are men.<sup>93</sup> Aldhelm moves between gender, which disrupts the active and martial virtue and virginity of this section. Gender and performance are thus important components of the *psychomachia*, as Aldhelm's language reflects his intentions in presenting a gendered quality and a martial virginity. But to what extent does Aldhelm open this martial virginity to his 'virgins of Christ'?

Aldhelm follows Cassian more than Prudentius in his explication of vices and virtues, for example he does not always pair the vices and virtues, and he seems more interested in the vices. His style is also that of Cassian, as he does not present a series of battles, but offers warnings against the vices, along with examples, good and bad, largely taken from the Bible. Cassian used the Desert Fathers for many of his examples, but Aldhelm preferred Scripture. In order he considers,

*Ingluvies, and Ebrietas (vs. Integritas),*

*Stuprum,*

*Philargiria/Cupido*

*Ira (vs. Patientia)*

*Tristitia*

*Accidia and Inquietudo (vs. Pervigil)*

*Cenodoxia/Vanagloria,*

*Superbia and Fastus*

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<sup>93</sup> For example his use of Lot, Joseph and David.

Aldhelm begins with the virtues and vices lined up in battle formation, ‘Behold, the troops gather in companies for battle – the companions of Justice and the holy battle-line of the Virtues; opposite them stands the malignant camp of Vices’.<sup>94</sup> The vices are outnumbered, as the virtues stand in ‘dense formation’, and are well armoured, ‘they bear the war-standard, the helmets with breastplates as well as the shield of battle and the Sword of the Word (for) killing the manifestations of sin’.<sup>95</sup> There is no passivity, fighting appears to be an activity expected of all, but it is achieved via the written Word of God, which undercuts the martial activity of the virtues, and reminds the audience of Aldhelm’s praise for their learning. It is also a reference to Hebrews 4:12.<sup>96</sup> Hence, it is the Word, the Bible, which is the active force; the wielder of the Scriptures, the virtue itself is irrelevant. In the same way that the title ‘handmaid of God’ serves to authorise and legitimate seemingly subversive behaviour in the female saints, so the use of the Bible as the ‘sword’ for killing vices, diminishes the role of the female virtue.

Indeed, Aldhelm’s description of the virtues concentrates on their armour rather than arms, they are well-protected to defend, not attack. This is echoed in Aldhelm’s description of the opening of the battle, ‘When they had taken position by joining spears, the Virtues beat back the cruel thrust of the wicked spears.’<sup>97</sup> The default position of the virtues appears to be defence. They do not attack the vices, but protect themselves from the ‘cruel thrust’ of spears. This passivity and defensiveness

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<sup>94</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2454-2456, *Ecce catervatim glomerant ad bella falanges./ Iustitiae comites et virtutum agmina sancta; His adversantur vitiorum castra maligna; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 157.

<sup>95</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2462b-2464, *gestantes bellica signa./ Cassida cum thoracis necnon ancile duelli/ Et macheram verbi peccati monstra necantem; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 157; Ephesians 6:17.

<sup>96</sup> Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirits, joints and marrows; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

<sup>97</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2466-2467, *Virtutes quoque parmarum testudine sumpta/ Saeva profanorum contundunt tela sparorum; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 157.

subverts the assumptions of martial virtues, and active virginity. Aldhelm's opening battle serves to contain any active or martial qualities.

Just as Aldhelm refashioned chastity in the *De Virginitate*, he alters the emphasis of the *psychomachia*. Prudentius was describing the internal struggle of the Christian, but for Aldhelm this is the 'battle for the world'.<sup>98</sup> This should broaden the scope, but Aldhelm does not explain how it is a 'battle for the world (*ad proelia mundi*)', and the idea goes nowhere. However, it may indicate how broadly Aldhelm views the danger of vice, specifically the primary vice in his *psychomachia*, Pride. In turn, whereas Prudentius emphasised *Fides*/Faith as the supreme virtue, Aldhelm innovates by presenting virginity itself as a virtue. The mental purity of chastity is thus available for all Christians, or at least all monastic Christians. More importantly, as this is the most important quality, it is the virtue for which all monastic Christians should be striving. Having used the hagiographical section to divide virginity from his non-virginal audience, he returns to his more sweeping portrayal of virginity as applicable to all through performance. For example, Aldhelm writes,

Therefore may Virginity, which tramples the sins of debauchery, (and)  
whom the evil scar of vice never disfigures, be eager to contend  
against the battle-troops, and may the virgin with armed force strive to  
defeat those eight leaders to whom the savage battle-lines adhere.<sup>99</sup>

Thus performative virginity will fight both with the virgin and for the virgin. Virginity *per se* can never fall prey to the vices, it remains unscarred, though the individual virgins must remain ever alert to the dangers. It is also active in a manner that is closed off to the virgins themselves. This serves to detach virginity from the

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<sup>98</sup> *Carmen* l. 2464; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 157.

<sup>99</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2468-2472, *Virginitas igitur, quae calcat crimina strupri, / Quam non deturpat peccati scaeva cicatrix, / Contra bellantes studeat certare catervas / Octenosque duces, quibus haerent agmina saeva, / Viribus armatis nitatur vincere virgo!*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 157.

purely nominal virgins Aldhelm addresses, which enables Aldhelm keep internal virginity to the fore, flattering his chaste audience. So Aldhelm's stress on virginity as a virtue does not privilege the body, as might be expected, but divides the external and internal, removing the potential of these martial qualities from his addressees, as did his emphasis on bodily virginity in the hagiography. Hence Aldhelm subverts the active element of the *psychomachia* through his discomfort with what such active qualities could offer the monastic women.

## GLUTTONY AND GENDER

Aldhelm discusses *Ingluvies*/Gluttony and *Ebrietas*/Drunkenness as vices at length, as Cassian had. Aldhelm stated that as the Red Sea swallowed the Egyptians, 'Therefore may the virgin, subduing the wicked army, defeat this foul plague in the first combat.'<sup>100</sup> He describes the struggle of the individual rather than the struggle within the individual, which again reflects Cassian rather than Prudentius. The battle against vice begins with self-control. Once the appetite is curbed, the virgin can face any threat.

Like Cassian, Aldhelm offers advice to help the individual overcome the vice, suggesting the performance expected but not explaining or detailing the performance, as Cassian had done, 'this enemy is destroyed by the powerful weapon of fasting'.<sup>101</sup> But too what extent? Avoiding 'excess of food, drunkenness and intoxication of the soul' is not fasting. How abstemious must the virgin be? Aldhelm concludes the section,

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<sup>100</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2485-2486, *Quapropter pravus expugnans virgo cohorts/ Hanc pestem primo diram certamine vincat!*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 157.

<sup>101</sup> *Carmen* l. 2494, *Ieiunii valildis pallax prosternitur armis*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 158.



Indeed, the Virtues continually wage harsh wars against Gluttony which overcomes iron-clad hearts; Integrity, however, opposes it with strength of fasting, so that the fortress of the spirit may not be overwhelmed by feasting. Thus the virtuous virgin scorns honey-sweet draughts of nectar and flees from sumptuous banquets for the sake of Christ, in order that blessed Virginity may be able to serve the Thunderer.<sup>102</sup>

Integrity is added almost as an afterthought, and there is no explanation of how Integrity aids the virgin in fasting, or again to what extent the virgin should fast. For Aldhelm, the importance is that Integrity is available to aid the virgin, not how they should use it. Despite the contention that virtues ‘wage harsh wars’, the defensive position is again stressed, Gluttony is opposed by self-control through ‘strength of fasting’, that the ‘fortress of the spirit may not be overwhelmed’. The inner quality is emphasised by ‘spirit’, and it is a defensive ‘fortress’ rather than an attacking battle formation. Activity and performance is restricted to avoiding excess, the ‘honey-sweet draughts’ and ‘sumptuous banquets’, not the stricter fasting expected by late antique writers such as Jerome.<sup>103</sup> Such banquets relate to the world Aldhelm’s audience, should have left behind – the secular grandeur and politics of the noble classes to which they belonged before their dedication to God. The subtext is Aldhelm’s discomfort with the nuns’ potential for influence within the secular and political sphere, and what it could mean for their independence of the masculine ecclesiastical authority of the Church. Aldhelm thus does not construct a virginity

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<sup>102</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2537-2543, *Dura quidem iugiter virtutes bella facessunt/ Ingluuiem contra vinventem ferrea corda./ Sed tamen integritas ieiunis viribus obstat./ Fragantur dapibus ne propugnacula mentis./ Nectaris idcirco contemnit pocula mulsa/ Atque opulenta fugit pro Christo fercula virgo./ Virginitas felix queat ut servire Tonanti; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 159.*

<sup>103</sup> See Chapter 2.

that overcomes Gluttony by abstinence from food and drink, but abstinence from excess of banquets, and all they encompass on the secular stage.

Aldhelm offers the example of Adam as a glutton. He here reflects a more Germanic view of the Fall of man, one that is not saturated in the misogyny of the Church Fathers. Aldhelm does not mention Eve, but states that Adam, 'plucked the forbidden apple from the tree; from him a pestilent seed grew up in the world, whence sprang a harvest thick with foul grain.'<sup>104</sup> Adam is given sole responsibility for the consequences to the rest of mankind.<sup>105</sup> The Anglo-Saxon poem *Genesis B* rewrites the account of Eve tempting Adam. Her danger lies in bad advice rather than sexual temptation.<sup>106</sup> One wonders why Aldhelm did not adopt this portrayal of Eve, as it would suit his theme of the dangers of female authority, especially as later he returns to the dangers of female authority in his construction of Pride.<sup>107</sup> Instead, Aldhelm echoes the nature imagery he employed when describing the nuns in the opening of the *Prosa*, but now directs it toward Adam. In the *Prosa*, Aldhelm divorced the female body from fecundity, by appropriating it for the masculine hierarchy of the Church.<sup>108</sup> With his description of Adam, he uses the imagery to reinforce the subversion of gender. Associating a man with the seed, via a forbidden fruit, creates detrimental and unwholesome fruitage.<sup>109</sup> Thus Aldhelm continues to flatter the

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<sup>104</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2498-2500, *Dum vetitum ligni malum decerperet ambro;/ A quo pestiferum glescabat semen in orbe;/Unde seges spissa spurcis succrevit aristis; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 158.

<sup>105</sup> He continues this theme when discussing Vainglory, see further discussion below.

<sup>106</sup> The topic has been considered in some detail for example J. M. Evans, 'Genesis B and its background', *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 14 (1963), 1-16; R. E. Finnegan, 'Eve and "Vincible Ignorance" in Genesis B', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 18 (1976), 329-39; Karen Cherewatuk, 'Standing, Turning, Twisting, Falling: Posture and Moral Stance in Genesis B', *Neophilologische Mitteilungen*, 87 (1986), 537-44; Eric Jager, 'Tempter as Rhetoric Teacher: The Fall of Language in the Old English Genesis B', *Neophilologus*, 72 (1988), 434-48; Jager, 'The word in the "breost": Interiority and the Fall in Genesis B', *Neophilologus*, 75 (1991), 279-90.

<sup>107</sup> Just as Bede silences Hild in the account of the Synod of Whitby, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III.25.

<sup>108</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>109</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2498-2500, *Dum vetitum ligni malum decerperet ambro;/ A quo pestiferum glescabat semen in orbe;/Unde seges spissa spurcis succrevit aristis; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 158.

women he addresses by removing Eve from this account of the Fall, and highlighting Adam's role.

Aldhelm expends more energy warning against drunkenness than gluttony, and one wonders to what extent that is for the benefit of his audience, especially as two of his three examples are of a sexual nature, and all are male. Noah, whilst drunk, 'exposed his private parts', which led to the cursing of his son Ham.<sup>110</sup> Lot, whilst drunk, had sexual intercourse with his daughters.<sup>111</sup> Nabal, whilst drunk, snubbed David, but was rescued by the quick wit of his wife, Abigail.<sup>112</sup> Interestingly the first two are good men who make a slip, rather than wicked men. Noah and Lot are the warnings that even when one is a devout worshipper of God, the danger of falling into sin remains, and unguarded behaviour can have long-term consequences.<sup>113</sup> After relating the story of Noah, Aldhelm comments, 'then may the virgin fear cups of new wine all the more, lest she lose the triumph of the heavenly crown', yet Noah did not lose such a crown, but was commended by Paul for his faith.<sup>114</sup>

Nabal is not only a wicked man, he is stupid and saved only by his resourceful wife, possibly a nod to Aldhelm's audience, as the story ends with Abigail's marriage to David, her submission to a God-fearing man.<sup>115</sup> It is certainly an odd example to choose, as in the Biblical story, Nabal's drunkenness is incidental, and the account

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<sup>110</sup> *Carmen* l. 2505, *Atque bibens nectar nudabat turpe veretrum*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 158; Genesis 9.

<sup>111</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2515-2524; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 158; Genesis 19.

<sup>112</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2525-2533; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 158-9; 1 Samuel 25:1-44; The only example in the Bible of a drunken woman is Babylon the Great, a prophetic image rather than a character, at Revelation 17:6.

<sup>113</sup> E.g. Noah's behaviour leads to the cursing of Ham/ Canaan, at Genesis 9:25.

<sup>114</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2512-2513, *Nunc potius metuat defruti pocula virgo./ Aethralem linquat ne victrix forte coronam*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 158; Hebrews 11:7 By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

<sup>115</sup> Certainly it is a flattering example for a female audience, as Nabal and Abigail are introduced (1 Samuel 25:3b). She was an intelligent and beautiful woman, but her husband, a Calebite, was surly and mean in his dealings

revolves around Abigail to a far greater extent than Nabal.<sup>116</sup> Nabal is sober when he snubs David. Abigail cannot tell Nabal that she has acted to protect the household because at that point he is drunk, and the following morning, when Nabal is again sober (and the account in Samuel specifically tells us this) Abigail explains ‘all these things’, therefore presumably how close Nabal came to being murdered by the man he affronted.<sup>117</sup> Aldhelm implies that the insult to David occurred whilst Nabal was drunk. Either Aldhelm misremembered, or, more likely, he was caught up in the wider picture of a seemingly independent woman who demonstrated submission to male authority, especially in her language, which was that of compliance and obedience. For, after Nabal’s death, ‘[David]’s servants went to Carmel and said to Abigail “David has sent us to you to take you to become his wife.” She bowed down with her face to the ground and said, “Here is your maidservant, ready to serve you and wash the feet of my master’s servants.”<sup>118</sup> Thus Abigail moves from the necessity of independent action in order to protect her household, to an acceptable submissive role within the heterosexual economy, willingly accepting her role as wife and servant to David.

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<sup>116</sup> The chapter in Samuel (1 Samuel 25) tells of David requesting food and drink from Nabal and reminding him that during David’s time as an outlaw in the surrounding area, he had never harmed Nabal’s livestock. Nabal, whilst sober, refuses, and David makes ready to slaughter Nabal and his household. Abigail immediately takes supplies to David, without telling Nabal. Throughout her address to David, Abigail refers to herself as ‘your servant’, for example, 1 Samuel 25:24 She fell at his feet and said: ‘My lord, let the blame be on me alone. Please let your servant speak to you; hear what your servant has to say’. (Also translated ‘handmaid’ (King James)) When she explains her behaviour to Nabal, he collapses and later dies.

<sup>117</sup> 1 Samuel 25:37 Then in the morning, when Nabal was sober, his wife told him all these things....

<sup>118</sup> 1 Samuel 25:40-41.

## SEXUALITY AND TEMPTATION

Although Aldhelm introduces Debauchery by referring to the 'seductive wars', he strikes an aggressive note through this section.<sup>119</sup> He employs the language of degradation and filth that he used through the hagiography, and Debauchery is the obvious enemy of virginity, 'Truly, chaste virginity tramples with her feet upon the house of prostitutes in the likeness of stinking filth (*Verum virginitas scoturum casta lupana/ Conculcat pedibus caeni fetentis adinstar*)'.<sup>120</sup> Aldhelm echoes Cyprian and some of his earlier descriptions about the degradation of human sexuality, 'From this monster are born the foulest words as well as lewd jesting, sports with ridiculous gestures, trifling and false affection, and excess of (sexual) desire.'<sup>121</sup> As noted, Aldhelm's portrayal of sexuality, even within marriage, is always negative and linked to prostitution.<sup>122</sup> One is either a virgin – in mind if not in body – or one is a prostitute, he does not allow for a middle ground. For Aldhelm, as for many church writers, sexual desire can only be excessive, which makes greater sense within the context of a vice than elsewhere in the text. Also it is 'virginity' that tramples vice, not the virgin. Again the two are distanced in the text.

Aldhelm discusses Joseph and Judith as exempla overcoming Debauchery.<sup>123</sup> As with the hagiographical examples Aldhelm includes, it is not Judith or Joseph who suffer sexual temptation, but those around them. Joseph does not fight lust within himself, he flees from the desire of Potiphar's wife, 'he rejected the mistress who set

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<sup>119</sup> *Carmen* l. 2455; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 159.

<sup>120</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2546-2547; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 159.

<sup>121</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2548-2550, *Ex hoc nascuntur monstro turpissima verba/ Necnon scurrilitas et scaevo ludicra gestu./ Frivolus et fallax amor ac petulantia luxus*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 159.

<sup>122</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>123</sup> The fact that Aldhelm uses a male and female example here implies that we cannot necessarily read too much into the lack of female example elsewhere in the *psychomachia*, for example on Gluttony and Drunkenness.

snare of sexual allurements for him', thus the 'appearance of beauty was not able to force the excellent Joseph to lose his crown of virtue'.<sup>124</sup> Joseph flees from the woman's snares and outer appearance, as Aldhelm reminds his audience that it is the inner qualities that are important; the 'appearance' (*forma*) of beauty implies a falsity of outward appearance. A subtle nod to their 'inner' virginity, and reminder that worldly beauty, and the concomitant wealth we would assume Potiphar's wife could access, should never be a temptation. The sexual snare of beauty is spoken of as being deployed deliberately, and having the potential to 'force' loss of virtue, so although at no point is Joseph spoken of as tempted by this beauty, it is clearly intended to have the latent power of devastation. Knowing that the *Carmen* was written after the *Prosa* though, shifts our view of Joseph. In the *Prosa*, Aldhelm wrote of Joseph, 'For as long as he was a companion of pure virginity and a despiser of the enticing bawdy house, divine protection guarded him'.<sup>125</sup> Joseph later married, but the Bible does not recount any visits to bawdy houses.<sup>126</sup> Yet the implication of 'For as long as' again equates a legitimate sexual relationship within marriage with the brothel in Aldhelm's black and white construction of sexuality.

Similarly, Judith, in the *Prosa*, is an ambiguous figure, portrayed as deliberately acting as a sexual temptation. In the *Carmen* she preserves her honour and is chaste at all times.<sup>127</sup> Aldhelm thus follows Prudentius' representation of Judith, as he describes her, 'the unbending Judith, spurning the lecherous captain's

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<sup>124</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2554-2555, *Non sic egregium virtutis perdere palmam/ forma venustatis valuit compellere Ioseph; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 159.

<sup>125</sup> *Prosa* LIII, *Quem ab ingruenti multiformium calamitatum discrimine, quas non dolum lividorum conspiratio germanorum fraternum nequa quam exosa parricidum intentabat, verum etiam obscena fallentis dominae fribula matronalis pudicitiae oblitae machinabantur; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 120.

<sup>126</sup> Genesis 41:45, 50 Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphara, priest of On, to be his wife. And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt. Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphara, priest of On.

<sup>127</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2560-2570; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 159.

jewelled couch... and woman as she was, won a famous victory over the foe'.<sup>128</sup> Prudentius sets her up as a 'mere' woman who achieves a victory over a sexually motivated man. Aldhelm writes, 'with her pure body [she] scorned the king's brothel and despised with her heart the loathsome disgrace of sin'.<sup>129</sup> This is a radically different reading of Judith's body from the *Prosa*. Aldhelm was not comfortable with Judith as a woman willing to use sexual wiles to trap a man, and linked her with the 'stubborn and insolent woman' in Proverbs who prostituted herself whilst her husband was away.<sup>130</sup> In the *Carmen* she is presented as an example of one who resisted debauchery by resisting Holofernes' lechery, indeed Aldhelm implies the decapitated head of Holofernes was proof of her chastity, 'the chaste girl carried the blood-spattered trophy in a sack, while she devoutly preserved undefiled her womanly honour.'<sup>131</sup> Aldhelm is more interested in her example of a woman remaining pure, than her bravery in killing Holofernes.

'Thus pure chastity rejects in blessed triumph the vice of wicked flesh with its defiled filth'.<sup>132</sup> Chastity, conflated with virginity, is constructed as an active force through Joseph and Judith; it tramples, rejects, flees, scorns, despises. At the end of the section on Debauchery, Judith is both woman and girl, as she exemplifies chastity/virginity, Joseph is a virgin, but we know that Aldhelm also implied his sexual activity, hence Aldhelm has included virginity, chastity, virgin, spouse, widow – offering the quality to all categories of his audience. This conflation of stations and qualities queers the example as it subverts and opens out the individual categories.

<sup>128</sup> *Psych.* ll. 128-37; *Prudentius*, Johnson, p. 283; For Prudentius, Judith, ll. 135-6, 'prefigured our times, in which the real power has passed into earthly bodies'.

<sup>129</sup> *Carmen* ll.2560-2563, *Quid referam Iudith generosa stripe creatam,/ Prostibulum Regis temnentem corpore puro/ Et stuprum sceleris calcantem corde profanum?*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 159.

<sup>130</sup> *Prosa* LVII; See discussion in Chapter 3.

<sup>131</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2564-2565, *Casta cruentatum gestavit bulga tropeum/ Servans integrum devota mente pudorum*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 159.

<sup>132</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2566-2570, *Sic vitium carnis polluta sorde nocentis/ Intergritas almo contemnit casta triumpho/ Aemula virgineis proturbans bella sagittis,/ Lurida prostibuli ne possit serpere virus/ In fibres fragiles succensis torre medullis*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 159.

Aldhelm here allows for a multiplicity of identities that reflects the positionings of his audience, and parodically demonstrates the constructed nature of virginity. Yet, in both examples the woman is the temptation, and deliberately so. What message would this send to his primary audience of independent nuns, and the wider monastic audience? Aldhelm implies female authority and female sexual wiles are indistinguishable. As the latter should be shunned by the chaste monastic, so to should the former.

### **GENDER, AVARICE AND SEXUALITY**

Next Avarice ‘foments a battle’, accompanied by forces armed with weapons ‘smeared with poison’.<sup>133</sup> Such poisons include false witnesses, lies, frauds, thieves, and ‘worthless characters with deceitful actions, passions for ugly gain, empty oaths and profits stained with the violence of robberies.’<sup>134</sup> Again he offers male examples of Avarice – Judas, Ahab and Achar.<sup>135</sup> Judas, of course, is the primary example for accepting 30 pieces of silver to hand over Christ. Thus his guilt and its consequences almost demand his use as a warning.

Ahab is the more interesting example, as the primary role in the story is played by a woman, Jezebel, who enacts a masculine performance. The account in Kings relates Ahab’s greed in desiring Naboth’s vineyard, which leads Jezebel to forge a document demanding Naboth is falsely accused of cursing God and the king,

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<sup>133</sup> *Carmen ll. 2571-2580, Post Philargiria producit tertia bellum,/ Interpretatur vitium quod forte cupido./ Haec ductrix pugnae stipatur milite denso,/ Non sola graditur per publica strata pedestris/ Arma cruenta ferens et specula lita veneno;/ Haec comites pravos, id est mendacia mille,/ Frudes et fures ac falsis fribola gestis./ Appetitus turpis lucri et periuria inepta/ atque rapinarum maculantes crimine quaestus/ Conglobat in cuneum cum falsis testibus ardens;* Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 159-160.

<sup>134</sup> See previous footnote.

<sup>135</sup> He could have used Ananias and Sapphira – Acts 5:1-10.



and executed. ‘So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth’s city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them.’<sup>136</sup> Hence the deceitful actions of a woman, who is obeyed by men, inverts the gender binary and causes the death of an innocent man. Jezebel’s role in advising the king, and assuming the active role, is the central theme of the biblical account. When Naboth refuses to sell or exchange his land, Ahab ‘lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat.’<sup>137</sup> Jezebel takes charge of the situation, ‘Jezebel his wife said, “Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I will get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”’<sup>138</sup> Ahab performs the passivity associated with women, and Jezebel becomes the masculine character. But as she is a woman, she abuses her role as queen, and usurps the authority of the king. Her performance crosses the boundary of acceptable gender roles, and causes the death of Naboth, and ultimately her own downfall. Aldhelm contrasts their deaths, describing Naboth as ‘the innocent leader who had harmed no-one with weapons’ with Jezebel’s gruesome death, ‘The savage dogs, however, fiercely tore Jezebel to pieces with their teeth and crushed her limbs, drenched with purple gore, into the ground’.<sup>139</sup> This offers his audience the sort of bloodshed expected in a *psychomachia*, but it is a description taken from an exemplum, rather than a battle between vice and virtue. The various images of female sexuality that Aldhelm has drawn on from the Bible echo in the phrase ‘purple gore’, reminding the audience of the dress and makeup that had been associated with sexual women. It also links to Jezebel’s appearance before her death, her attempt to avoid death by sexual allure. ‘Jezebel...painted her eyes, arranged her hair and looked out of a

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<sup>136</sup> 1 Kings 21:11.

<sup>137</sup> 1 Kings 21:4b.

<sup>138</sup> 1 Kings 21:7.

<sup>139</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2601-2606, *Qua dudum occubuit scopulorum grandine vasta/ Innocuus princeps, qui nullum laeserat armis; Iezabel vero, quae tomum scripsit ad urbem/ Atque probos domini multavit dira profetas./ Acriter horrendi discerpunt dente molosi/ Membraque purpureo tabo perfusa ruebant;* *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 160.

window.<sup>140</sup> Thus Aldhelm has cleverly taken an example, ostensibly of a greedy man, and given his audience a warning against female usurpation of male authority, and their use of sexual temptation to achieve their own ends.

## ANGER AND AUTHORITY

Aldhelm portrays Anger as aggressive in attacking the virtues, and pairs the vice with Patience in battle. Anger is 'always raging [and] lusts for the perils of war and arouses by means of her contentiousness the hearts of brothers to conflict, as she breaks treaties joined to righteous peace'.<sup>141</sup> Thus, Aldhelm links Anger to disunity, breaking from Prudentius, who linked such internecine war to Greed. But like Prudentius, Aldhelm describes Anger as defeated by Patience, in one of the few battles in the *psychomachia*,

Yet, temperate Patience carried a small shield in opposition and, prepared to fracture the skull of rampaging Anger made blood by the sword, she silences the loud cry lest the greatest of the furies be able to conquer minds – even though this fury, stained with Gorgon blood, hisses and gnashes, biting with her poisoned snakes, as this daughter of black Night raises her head from the infernal regions and so rising out of murky Styx into the world Allecto incites stupid minds to sin.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> 2 Kings 9:29-31.

<sup>141</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2625-2628, *Ast vero quaram trux congregat Ira catervam,/ Quae semper furibunda cupit discrimina belli/ Et ciet ad pugnam mentes discordia fratrum,; Dum copulata piae dirumpit foedera pacis; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 161.*

<sup>142</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2630-2639, *Sed moderata gestat cetrum Patientia contra/ Atque cruentatum ferro fractura cerebrum/ Irae bacchantis strepitum compescit inormem,/ Vincere ne valeat furiarum maxima mentes,/ Quamvis Gorgoneo stridat maculata cruore/ Atque venenatis mordendo sibilet ydris,/ Dum caput ex herebo nigrantis filia Noctis/ Tollit et in mundum Stydiis emersa latebris/ Suscit Allecto scaevas ad scandala mentes; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 161.*

This has more in common with Virgil than Prudentius, particularly in the description of Anger. Patience was more passive in Prudentius, and ultimately Anger died by her own hand.<sup>143</sup> Aldhelm's martial imagery falls short of the pitched battle of Prudentius; we are told Patience silences anger, but there is no death blow described, nor is there a declamatory speech by the victorious virtue, as in Prudentius. Instead Aldhelm takes the opportunity to remind his audience that the real protector of the faithful against Anger is 'the Lord [who] protects our defenceless breasts'.<sup>144</sup> This again highlights his themes of male authority and female submission. It is not so much virginity that can protect, or any quality of the individual, but Christ. As individuals, for all the power of virginity/chastity, the women are defenceless without masculine authority.

## DESPAIR AND SLOTH

Aldhelm continues the martial imagery as he moves on to Despair, and demonstrates that his construction of virginity remains gendered. He writes, 'the advancing attacks of Despair break down the defences and battlements of the virtues and harass the soldiers of God with savage weapons.... But with his shield the soldier of Christ quickly checks the spears of Despair.'<sup>145</sup> Thus Aldhelm has slipped from the female virtue to the default of *miles Christi*, and the battle is not between vice and virtue, but the individual must struggle against the trait. In this he is closer to the idea of the *psychomachia* as a 'soul battle'. Twice in this section he refers to the virgin as

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<sup>143</sup> See discussion above.

<sup>144</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2642, *Nostras ni dominus mentes defendat inermes*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 161.

<sup>145</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2643-2649, *Tristitia quinto grassantia bella tumultu/ Virtutum muros et propugnacula frangunt/ Tironesque Dei vexant crudelibus armis/ Quaeque pusillanimis trux desperatio mentis/ Opprimit incautum obtentu rancoris amari;/ Bellator Christi sed mox umbone retundit/ Gessa tristitiae – pariter genus omne mucronum*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 161.

‘soldier of Christ’.<sup>146</sup> Yet, any martial activity is grounded on Christ, as the soul risks ‘ruin if it lacks the strong foundation in our own Christ, Who by His grace always generously protects those in fear and trembling and permits no-one to fall from this mortal wound’.<sup>147</sup> Again a reminder that the individual needs to rely on Christ, and there is the possibility that they may reject this support, ‘unless the sick and despairing man should reject the Physician (*Ni desperatus medicantem spreverit aeger!*)’.<sup>148</sup> Despite this sudden slip of gender, Aldhelm begins his discussion of Despair with battle imagery and speaks of the virgins as *milites Christi*, his emphasis is on the need to rely on Christ, the ultimate male authority.

Aldhelm’s short section on Sloth eschews the martial imagery for the maternal. Sloth ‘nourishes leisure and idle sleep as well as the distressing emptiness of careless words and fickle attitudes of mind and actions of the body.’<sup>149</sup> Aldhelm clearly links body and mind, as the capricious mind is reflected in the activity of the individual. Performance then is demonstrative of the internal emotion of the virgin. This idea is expanded as Aldhelm links Restlessness with Sloth, creating the impression of constant movement reflecting mental inconstancy. To counter this, ‘Perseverance of the mind’ is necessary. One must change ones inner state, but again reliance on Christ is vital as Perseverance ‘seeks to defend its life with the shield of Christ’. Thus it is Christ himself rather than the ‘shield of faith’ on which the virtue relies.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2678, 2654; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 161.

<sup>147</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2656- 2659, *Ne ruat in praeceps mentis statura labantis./ Si firmo careat nostri fundamine Christi./ Qui semper tremulos tutatur gratia gratis/ Et nullum patitur letali vulnere labi;* *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 161.

<sup>148</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2660; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 161.

<sup>149</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2667-2669, *Otia quae fovet et somnos captabit inertes./ Importuna simul verborum frivola sontum./ Instabiles mentis gestus corporis actus;* *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 162.

<sup>150</sup> Cf Ephesians 6:10-17.

Again Aldhelm moves between genders, possibly acknowledging his wider audience. 'For this vagrant spirit desires that a man's mind seek leisure and that sleepiness seize upon his dulled senses, so that attentive reading may not harass his troubled heart nor the eyes of he wakeful follow the path of the Scriptures.'<sup>151</sup> The studies that Aldhelm commended and recommended to the virgins of Christ in the *Prosa*, are expanded to include all servants of Christ within Aldhelm's wider monastic audience.

## VAINGLORY AND PRIDE

Pride and Vainglory are the final but most dangerous vices, similar in action and outcome. With Vainglory, Aldhelm returns to Adam and *his* guilt for the Fall of mankind, but gender is subsidiary to the implication that it is self-reliance that causes mankind's downfall. Aldhelm contrasts the female vice and the male victim, 'Vainglory entered the first man by deception, when words such as these broke from her black heart: On whatever day you are willing to pluck the fruit, the eyes of your face will be opened at once and divine honours will follow you.'<sup>152</sup> The words of the serpent are given to the female vice. This more evidently follows the image of the woman giving bad advice that is found in Genesis B.<sup>153</sup> It is not Eve though, whose advice causes Adam to sin, but a vice that 'entered' him, reflecting his own heart condition, yet the contrast between the female voice and male obedience, the skewing

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<sup>151</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2674-2677, *Spiritus ille vagus cupit, ut mens otia quaerat/ Occupet et stupidum iam somnolentia sensum, Sedula sollicitum pulset ne lectio pectus/ Lumina nec vigilum scripturae tramite tendant; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 162.*

<sup>152</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2681-2686, *Haec protoplaustum pellexit fraude colonum/ Dirum persuadente scelus fautore malorum/ Tales ex atro dum rupit pectore voces: 'In quacumque die vultis decerpere fructum,/ Mox patefacta fiunt vestratis lumina frontis/ Necnon divini vobis comitantur honores.'*; *Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 162; Genesis 3:5.*

<sup>153</sup> See discussion above.

of expected gender roles, emphasises the depravity of the situation.<sup>154</sup> Thus, although the man is responsible, the message of this section is that he listened to a deceitful female voice and did not rely on Christ. Aldhelm has constantly stressed the need to rely on Christ throughout the *psychomachia*, and finishes his section on Vainglory with that message, but again it is the defensive protection rather than the attack that is at the heart of his image, ‘But the soldier, protected by the unbroken shield of Christ fends off the horrible point of this wounding spear.’<sup>155</sup>

Pride is ‘ferocious’ (*truculenta Superbia*) from the outset.<sup>156</sup> Her threat is highlighted by Aldhelm’s sliding between genders, as Pride is accompanied *Fastus*, *Disdain*, a masculine noun. This masculine and feminine attack underlines the menace of the vice, and its all-encompassing threat, as this most dangerous of vices is queered through her multiple attacking identities. Pride also uses both ‘her own spears’ and ‘the weapons of others’, hence she is always ready to attack, and can use what is at hand, just as Cassian portrayed Pride as a constant danger to the Christian.<sup>157</sup> As noted with the example of Adam and Gluttony, Aldhelm subverts nature imagery, as the vice develops by stages within the individual like ‘a black and leafy bush’.<sup>158</sup> Aldhelm concentrates on the internal qualities, ‘Contempt’ ‘pride of mind’, ‘a conceited breast’, ‘envious hatred’ and ‘swelling arrogance’.<sup>159</sup> Pride is thus multi-gendered and multi-faceted, and ‘the sin of the heart which refuses to obey commands’. Thus Aldhelm again returns to the importance of obedience – Pride creates disobedience, and was the cause of the first fraternal strife. Unity and

<sup>154</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2700-2701, *Sed tiro infracta tectus testudine Christi/ Horrida vulnifici detrudit specula ferri; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 162.

<sup>155</sup> *Carmen* l. 2702; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 162.

<sup>156</sup> *Carmen* l. 2705; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 162.

<sup>157</sup> See discussion above.

<sup>158</sup> *Carmen* l. 2710, *nascitur atra frutex ex ista radice frondens; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 163.

<sup>159</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2711-2716, *Et nemus umbrosum diro de semine surgit:/ Primo contemptus procerum praecepta docentum,/ Dum mentis typhus ventoso pectore turget;/ Necnon invidiae pestis progignitur inde,/ Quae solet aequales tumido contemnere fastu/ Atque satellitibus spretis regnare superba; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 163.

compliance are what will protect the virgins of Christ, and Aldhelm encourages his audience to coenobitic harmony.

Aldhelm's final exemplum is Lucifer, the angel who fell from Heaven. As representative of the vice, Lucifer demonstrates why Pride is so dangerous; the other vices 'originate among mortal men', but Lucifer/Pride 'took his beginnings on the high summits of heaven'.<sup>160</sup> Aldhelm conflates example and vice, contrasting his previous emphasis on internal qualities. Lucifer's beautiful appearance is a factor in his over-arching Pride; 'bedecked with the lovely shape of nine-gem-stones he began, in vain, to swell up against the Creator as he pondered a horrendous crime in his dark breast, namely that in his boldness he might equal the Lord with his own powers.'<sup>161</sup> Again Aldhelm links showy appearance and disobedience. In losing their heavenly place, the angels who follow Lucifer, lost their light. Only Lucifer is described as having adornment, the other angels 'in their brilliance glowed with angelic light', reflecting Divine glory.

Aldhelm concludes his discussion of Pride, and of the *psychomachia*, with a call for humility,

A humble man who does not know how to swell with arrogance of mind is able to overcome such monsters and (hence) treads upon the offences of their proud habits. In vain does chastity obtain the distinction of renown if a gnawing worm burrows into the integument of the heart; if empty pride fills the centre of the mind, it is in vain

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<sup>160</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2730-2733, *Cetera, quae dudum numeravimus, agmina septem/ Inter mortals terrena strirpe creantur;/ Ast vero monstrum, de quo nunc pagina fatur;/ Principium sumpsit super alta cacumina caeli; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 163.*

<sup>161</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2737-2740, *Iamque novem lapidum forma faleratus amoena/ Conotra creatorum frustra turgescere coepit;/ Dum scelus horrendum tertro sub pectore versat;/ Ut dominum propiis aequaret viribus audax; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, p.163.*

that virtue find praise in the words of men: the humble virgin is able  
to climb to the lofty heights if he or she follows Christ.<sup>162</sup>

Again gender is unstable in the face of Pride, but is united through plurality in the final comment, *Si sequitur Christum*. The amalgamation of gender, example and vice as Aldhelm considers Pride is reflected in his portrayal of virginity, through its performance by the individual.

Aldhelm's apparently active and martial virginity, overcoming and treading on vices, is subverted by the encouragement to a passive following of Christ, and reliance on him to protect the defenceless breast. Though there are linguistic flashes of the more active portrayal of virginity and chastity, a close reading of the text demonstrates the extent of Aldhelm's emphasis on obedience and the need for a subservient acceptance of Christ as protector and tutor, returning the audience to masculine authority and feminine submission he highlighted in the opening section of the *De Virginitate*.

Aldhelm draws on Prudentius for the vices and virtues, and the genre of a *psychomachia*, and Cassian for the advice and use of examples. Cassian supplies the manner in which Aldhelm approaches his psychomachian examination of vice and virtue. But he innovates by concentrating on virginity as a virtue that refracts and enables all the other virtues, complicating the performance and performative nature of the quality. In doing this he can distance the active virtue of virginity from his 'virgins of Christ'. Aldhelm also innovates through his constant refrain of the need to rely on Christ and on defence rather than attack against vice. Both of these elements serve to remind the monastic audience, especially his addressees, of their secondary

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<sup>162</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2752-2760a, *Talia monstra potest humilis superare satellis./ Qui tumido nescit mentis turgescere typho/ Atque superborum conculcat crimina morum./ Nequiquam integritas famae praeconia captat./ Si cordis peplum corrodens tineas sulcat./ Si mentis gremium ventosa superbia facit./ Frustra virginitas laudem rumoribus aptat./ Culmina celsa valet humilis conscendere virgo./ Si sequitur Christum; Poetic, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 163-4.*



and submissive role within Church hierarchy. Priests and the episcopate are necessary to access Christ and the full protection of the Church.

## CONCLUSION

### ALDHELM, PATRISTIC VIRGINITY AND THE DOUBLE MONASTERY

This study is intended to contribute to our understanding of gender and virginity in early Anglo-Saxon Europe. Aldhelm is important as a writer because he bridged late antiquity and the early medieval period, and of his innovation as a Latin poet, and his importance on the curricula of European monasteries.<sup>1</sup> His work on virginity was influential linguistically rather than thematically, but the emphasis he placed on female submission and obedience served to foreground ideas around the greater restrictions and clausturation placed on women through the medieval period. His insistence on the importance of the coenobitic community and antipathy to female independence within the church was echoed by later writers such as Ælfric. By situating Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* in its literary, social and historical background, his orthodoxy becomes apparent despite the seeming unorthodoxy of his construction of chastity in the text. Aldhelm's dense and complex Latin creates difficulties for the reader, especially in an attempt to follow through any consistent use of language or argument. Nevertheless, these themes of submission and obedience can be discerned through both his construction of virginity and his depiction of virgin exempla. In considering the manner in which Aldhelm used virginity and gender to construct his exemplary virgins and his portrayal of virginity itself, Aldhelm's anxiety about the position of women within the Church becomes evident.

Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender has underpinned my analysis. Her idea of gender congealing around repeated actions is particularly apposite in studying a text that revolves around the necessity to demonstrate virginity. The performativity of

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<sup>1</sup> M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford and New York : Oxford University Press, 2006).

virginity in *De Virginitate* is vital as Aldhelm uses it to flatter his largely non-virgin audience.<sup>2</sup> By concentrating on the performative aspects of virginity, it becomes a quality all can strive for, and one that will, for Aldhelm, lead to the correct gender hierarchy within the monastic movement, as he encourages his addressees to accept the need for masculine guidance and shepherding. This creates a conflict in the text as the *vitae* of his female exempla stress bodily integrity. Consequently, Aldhelm creates two virgins within the text, the virgin demonstrative of the qualities associated with virginity and equated with his audience, and the sanctified virgin of hagiography. In separating the two by his stress on the ontological status of the saintly virgin's body, he maintains the tension between audience and text, using that bodily integrity to distance his audience from the saintly virgins of the text. Thus the behaviour sanctioned in the lives of virgin martyrs was not available to the women of Anglo-Saxon England.

### ALDHELM'S AUDIENCE AND ORTHODOXY

The audience for *De Virginitate* remains an interesting question. It is usually assumed to be addressed Hildelith, abbess of the double monastery at Barking, following from William of Malmesbury's identification of her as the named recipient.<sup>3</sup> However, Scott Gwara has suggested that rather than direct the text at a single monastery, Aldhelm addressed abbesses across his diocese, arguing that four of the list of dedicatees can be identified as Wessex abbesses.<sup>4</sup> We lack the evidence to identify all the dedicatees, so the debate is not likely to end in the near future. Nevertheless, Gwara's suggestion is more

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<sup>2</sup> With the caveat that a literary text breaks down the division between performative and performance, as Aldhelm consciously constructs a performance of gendered virginity, but can only do so from within the heteronormative sources and society available to him, thus it is not a completely free choice.

<sup>3</sup> *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* II.5; Aldhelm. *The Prose Works*, trans. by M. Lapidge and M. Herren (Cambridge : D. S. Brewer, 1979), p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Aldhelmi Malmesbiriensis Prosa de Virginitate : Cum Glosa Latina atque Anglosaxonica*, ed. by Scott Gwara, *Corpus Christianorum* 124a (Turnhout : Brepols, 2001), pp. 47-55.

than plausible. For a text to reach such a wide audience and as quickly as *De Virginitate* appears to have done, such a broad list of addressees makes sense. Aldhelm's constant themes of female submission to the masculine hierarchy of the Church would carry more weight if *De Virginitate* was primarily addressed to the women in charge of double monasteries. Aldhelm's interest in Roman Catholic orthodoxy, evidenced by his letter to Geraint, supports the idea that he is attempting to contain his audience.<sup>5</sup> The double monastery was, by its very nature, unorthodox.<sup>6</sup> It enabled Anglo-Saxon abbesses to play an important role in political and religious affairs, and placed all of the men within the monastery, including any that were acting as priests for the women, under the authority of the abbess.<sup>7</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, the initial stages of Christian expansion in Anglo-Saxon England made greater freedoms available to noble and wealthy women who dedicated themselves to the church.<sup>8</sup> Dagmar Schneider's in depth study of the status and position of women in the Anglo-Saxon Church confirms this, discussing a very wide range of evidence for the Anglo-Saxon period.<sup>9</sup> Thus Gwara's argument that Aldhelm addressed abbesses across the diocese, seems borne out through the themes Aldhelm highlights in *De Virginitate*.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, without a strong ecclesiastical authority over the nuns he

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<sup>5</sup> Aldhelm, *Ep. IV; Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. by R. Ehwald, MGH AA (Berlin, 1919), pp. 480-487.

<sup>6</sup> S. E. Rigold, 'The "Double Minsters" of Kent and their Analogies', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd ser. 31 (1961), 27-37; S. F. Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500-900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, 'Strict Active Enclosure and its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience (ca. 500-1100)', in *Medieval Religious Women*, vol I *Distant Echoes*, ed. by J. A. Nichols and L. T. Shank (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984), pp. 51-86; S. Horner, 'Spiritual Truth and Monastic Violence: The Old English Juliana, Anglo-Saxon Nuns, and the Discourse of Monastic Enclosure', *Signs*, 19 (1994), 658-675.

<sup>7</sup> J. Nicholson, 'Feminae Gloriosae: Women in the Age of Bede', in *Medieval Women: Essays Presented to Rosalind Hill*, ed. by D. Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), pp. 15-29.

<sup>8</sup> It must be remembered these are the wealthiest and most powerful women in the kingdom, a tiny minority to whom the opportunities of the double monastery were available.

<sup>9</sup> D. B. Schneider, 'Anglo-Saxon women in the Religious Life: A Study of the Status and Position of Women in an Early Medieval Society' (unpublished Ph.D thesis, 1985); Cf. Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church – Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Although Gwara sees its importance in supporting women to spurn (pagan) husbands and encouraging the evangelising work of monastics. See his discussion in *Aldhelmi*, p. 62.

addressed, Aldhelm's language had to take their relative positions within the church and society into consideration as he constructed the text.<sup>11</sup>

However, to what extent is Aldhelm writing with his named addressees mind, or the entire monastic community of the double monasteries, or even the wider audience of monastics in general? Aldhelm situated *De Virginitate* within a genre of texts on virginity that were written for the more general Christian audience, but were also frequently addressed to an individual or individuals.<sup>12</sup> Aldhelm's choice of topic, format, virginal exempla and intertextuality, demonstrate this kinship. Thus it seems likely that Aldhelm also intended *De Virginitate* to be read by a wider audience than his initial addressees. Again this would relate to his message of female submission, regulation and male ecclesiastical authority. It also helps us to understand why he highlighted the requirement for authority and discipline, and included such a queer saint as Malchus, whose *vita* demonstrates the need for coenobitic protection against the secular world. Indeed Aldhelm's stress on obedience and discipline, masculine authority and female submission, is a message for all Christians. Even the safety of the monastery had broader implications when it is compared with its opposite, the dangers of the secular world. Bearing in mind Aldhelm's complaints about how busy he was in worldly affairs, the worry of being sucked into the secular at the expense of one's religious activities is likely to be a factor.

This means that we must read *De Virginitate* as a text intended to describe the regularised relationship between the monastery and the masculine ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church, and encourage those within monasteries to engage with this representation. It encouraged claustration through accounts such as the *vita* of Malchus. Reading *De*

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<sup>11</sup> Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV.25; John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2005); Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women*.

<sup>12</sup> Jerome addressed his letter on virginity to Eustochium (*Ep.* 22) but intended the text to be read by others, and Ambrose, similarly, directed his first treatise on virginity to his sister, *De Virginibus ad Marcellinum*, but again wrote for a wider audience, evidenced in his discussion of parental opposition to vowed virginity.

*Virginitate* as a text intended to promote orthodoxy, it is evident that despite commentators' discussions of Aldhelm's more unorthodox innovations, his message is little different from that of his sources. *De Virginitate* is unusual as few writers of Aldhelm's time wrote on virginity, but the themes that Aldhelm highlights are entirely typical for his contemporaries.<sup>13</sup> Bede, Eddius Stephanus, Benedict Biscop all saw Rome as the font of the Church and were part of the movement toward greater regulation within the Church.<sup>14</sup>

Aldhelm evidently enjoyed his time as a student at Canterbury, and may have been influenced by his teacher, Theodore's, aversion to the Germanic double monastery. Although Theodore had said regarding the double monasteries of England, 'we shall not overthrow that which is the custom in this region', his discomfort is obvious, as he considered them 'not permissible'.<sup>15</sup> Gwara notes, 'It is not certain exactly what Aldhelm took away with him from his years at Canterbury, but the indebtedness could range from mere vocabulary to the comprehensive ideas espoused in [*De Virginitate*]'.<sup>16</sup> Certainly through the language and metaphors deployed throughout the text, as Aldhelm takes every opportunity to highlight orthodoxy and the masculine authority of the Church, he could well be influenced by Theodore's concerns.

However, Aldhelm not only inherited the views of the Church Fathers and classical writers about women and virginity, but also the Germanic view of women. The role of women, such as Hild, as advisors to kings and princes, demonstrates that women, and women's voices, were respected in Germanic society.<sup>17</sup> Glimmers of the Germanic system can be seen in his references, for example, to Adam as a glutton, or his linking of Cain's

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<sup>13</sup> For example Bede's condemnatory comments about Coldingham, *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

<sup>14</sup> J. F Webb, *Lives of the Saints : The Voyage of St. Brendan, Bede : Life of Cuthbert, Eddius Stephanus : Life of Wilfrid* (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1965).

<sup>15</sup> Theodore's *Penitential* II.vi.8, translation taken from *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, trans. by J. T. McNeill and H. M. Gamer (New York : Columbia University Press, 1938), p. 204.

<sup>16</sup> *Aldhelmi*, Gwara, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> Bede, *H.E.* IV.21.

murder of Abel and Adam's descending to sin.<sup>18</sup> But they are brief and secondary to his assimilation of Judeo-Christian ideology. Aldhelm seems to have internalised the views of the Church Fathers, their construction of the ideal virgin and their warnings against female independence. Yet, it seems that Aldhelm was more influenced by the Christian and classical construction of femininity, and more comfortable with the image of submissive female virginity within the Church. This submissive, dependent virgin is the orthodox figure he constructed from the late antique paradigms.

### LATE ANTIQUE VIRGINITY

Aldhelm drew on late antique sources to create his version of virginity, and was particularly indebted to the ideal female virgin created by the Church Fathers. Aldhelm's virgin exempla are strictly demarcated by the gender norms he inherited from his Christian heritage. Even the transgressive and queer virgins do not fully step outside the heteronormative depiction of gender.<sup>19</sup> The late antique ideal was highly performative – she demonstrated her virginal status by being passive, silent, obedient and self-controlled, all qualities that we have seen Aldhelm encouraged in his audience of noble nuns. The masculine equivalent was not as clearly delineated in the late antique literature, as the Church Fathers were more concerned with controlling female virginity than extolling

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<sup>18</sup> See discussion in Chapter 6; *Carmen* ll. 2494-2500; *Carmen* ll.2720-2729, *Scanderet ad superas arces ne turba nepotum;/ Sic quoque livoris tabo corruptus inormi/ Splendida germani disruptit foedera frater,/ Pingua qui primus combusserat exta bidentum,/ Dispiciente Deo cruelis munera Cain:/ Inde prava seges glitibus densescet acerbis,/ Sanguine purpureo dum scaevus rura cruentat./ Inde superbarum nascuntur murmura vocum/ Et crimen cordis dicto negantis/ Ac lacerans homines trux detractatio linguae; Aldhelm. *The Poetic Works*, trans. by M. Lapidge and J. L. Rosier (Cambridge : D. S. Brewer, 1985), pp. 158, 163, '[Pride] enticed the author of the human race with vain trickery, so that the throng of his descendents would not ascend to the high citadels of heaven. Thus corrupted by the immense putrefaction of malice, one brother broke off the splendid covenant with his brother'.*

<sup>19</sup> Expect possibly for Malchus who will be considered below.

male.<sup>20</sup> For men, virginity was never the central pivot of their sanctity, and they were expected to perform their sanctity in different ways, for example as priests teaching and caring for the congregation. For his ideal of male virginity Aldhelm turned to such examples through late antique hagiography. Quite deliberately he used the examples of men of the Church, able to wield the authority of their official roles to benefit the wider community. But by constructing male/masculinised and female/feminised virginites, Aldhelm created a conflict that he does not fully solve through *De Virginitate*; that of the gender status of virginity itself. If men and women must perform virginity differently, where does this leave virginity *per se*?

The construction of late antique virginity revealed the tension between the assumed equality of Galatians 3:28 and the (primarily negative) qualities connected with femininity by the Church Fathers.<sup>21</sup> Compare, for example, Ambrose's comment, 'She who does not believe is a woman and should be designated by the name of her bodily sex, whereas she who believes progresses to complete manhood, to the measure of the adulthood of Christ' with his emphasis on the passivity and silence of the Virgin Mary in *De Virginibus*.<sup>22</sup> Ambrose's ideal is no *virago*, and female virgins from late antiquity onward, are simultaneously required to be masculine in their virginity, but feminine in their behaviour and demeanour.

Yet, virginity as a performance enabled women to place themselves outside the heterosexual matrix, and women of all classes took up the virginal lifestyle. Even in their role as mothers they could utilise the deference associated with virginity, by 'reclaiming' it

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<sup>20</sup> See discussion in Chapter 2.

<sup>21</sup> Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

<sup>22</sup> Ambrose, *Expositio evangelis secundum Lucam*, quoted in Vern L. Bullough, 'Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women', *Viator*, 4 (1973), 485-501, quotation at p. 499.



through their performances.<sup>23</sup> Many of the rich and noble women who opted for the religious life set up their own monasteries, or households of monastics; refusing to cede their independence to the Church, they expanded it via the performance of virginity.<sup>24</sup> Women like Paula and Melania demonstrated an agency and independence that would be unthinkable in the textual ideal of virginity, for example, as delineated by Jerome in his letter to Eustochium, and on which Aldhelm drew.<sup>25</sup> But in doing so, they demonstrated a parodical performance of virginity that highlighted its performative construction and maintenance.

Women were therefore able to negotiate the expectations placed upon them by the Church, and found strategies to create agency through the performance of virginity, whether they were virgins or not. Despite the constant warnings of the Fathers that once virginity was lost – mentally or physically – it could never be reclaimed, mothers and widows were able to exploit the reverence for sanctified virginity to their own ends.<sup>26</sup> Although there was a tiny minority of women with the resources to act in this way, the warnings of Augustine and others about independent virgins demonstrate that other women perceived the opportunities available through virginity, though on a smaller scale.<sup>27</sup> It is this potential for independence through virginity that drives Aldhelm's constant warnings against pride and emphasis on the importance of masculine authority.

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge : D. S. Brewer, 2001), particularly pp. 166-241.

<sup>24</sup> For example Paula created a nunnery in Jerusalem, over which she had authority (Jerome, *Ep.* 108).

<sup>25</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22; Marcella demonstrated the manner in which a woman could subvert male authority. Jerome acknowledged (*Ep.* 127) that Marcella answered questions giving her own opinion, but as if it was from him or another male authority. Marcella would have been aware of Paul's injunction against women teaching, and used her performance of virginity to manipulate the situation so that she did not appear to teach. See *Jerome - Letters and Select Works*, trans. by P. Schaff and H. Wace (Grand Rapids : Mich, Eerdmans. T and T Clark : Edinburgh), p. 255-56.

<sup>26</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, pp. 166-241; Jerome, *Ep.* 108. Paula, for example, despite the fact that she had been married and was a mother, used the position of the sanctified virgin to enable her travels, studies and found a nunnery.

<sup>27</sup> Gillian Cloke, *This Female man of God – Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450* (London and New York : Routledge, 1995), pp. 6-7. Cloke notes of a slightly different category of women (ascetics rather than virgins) 'humble women from the lowest levels of the social strata adopting harsh lives as

## THE NEED FOR CONTEXT

As demonstrated, *De Virginitate* cannot be understood without an awareness of the historical situation in which Aldhelm wrote. In the early period of Anglo-Saxon Christianity, abbesses such as Hild, Ælfflaed, and Æthelthryth enjoyed great influence within the religious and political spheres. During the early period of Anglo-Saxon Christianity, the abbess of a double monastery enjoyed complete power over those under her authority, or *mund*.<sup>28</sup> She organised the economic resources of the monastery, hence her government was that of the secular lord over the lay workers on monastic lands. Equally, her responsibilities to the kings and princes of the province in which the monastery was based were equivalent to those of a secular lord with corresponding lands under his control. Yet from the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon Church, the entrenchment of masculine ecclesiastical hierarchy was evident, initiating the reduction of the female role within the Church, and concomitantly, within the State.<sup>29</sup> Most radically, the rejection of marriage placed women outside the traditional structure of social control, outside the heterosexual matrix. This paradox was only 'solved' by the increasing development of monastic institutions and the enclosure of these women behind the walls of a nunnery, and the increased regularisation of such communities.<sup>30</sup> Just as the monastic communities of women like Paula in late antiquity increasingly came under Church control, so in Anglo-Saxon England the initial independence of the double monasteries was gradually

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hermits with such frequency that priests and monks tripped over them at every turn; middle class *Hausfraus* planting ideological tripwires in the consciences of their children and turning out priests, monk and bishops by the seminary load; on up to the elite women of the very top-drawer who gave up on secular life and their worldly possessions to such an extent that they precipitated economic crises at the heart of the empire'. This is some indication of the appeal of such a lifestyle and the opportunities available to women.

<sup>28</sup> Schneider discusses the legal technicalities and language of this relationship in 'Anglo-Saxon Women'.

<sup>29</sup> Hollis demonstrates this in *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*.

<sup>30</sup> V. Burrus, 'The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Jerome', *Harvard Theological Review*, 84 (1991), 229-48, at p. 247.

undermined as episcopal governance asserted itself. Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* was part of this movement, which he makes obvious through his textual restriction and enclosure of the autonomy of female virgin, and his limitation of active virginity to his male exempla. Theodore's unease with the double monastery perhaps had a greater influence on his fellow ecclesiastics than has been acknowledged, as from the beginning of monasticism, women are encouraged to live by the ideology of virginity constructed centuries before by the Church Fathers.<sup>31</sup> Similarly Bede, Eddius Stephanus and Wilfrid felt that Church regulation was important.<sup>32</sup>

Aldhelm demonstrates a keen awareness of his lack of authority over his addressees. His references to obedience and male authority, and his warnings against pride in dress and demeanour, remonstrates with the autonomy enjoyed by his female audience. The call for sanctified virginity contrasted with the expected social role of women as wives and mothers, as the enclosed and passive virgin contrasted with the independence available through the ascetic and celibate movement. In the period in which Aldhelm wrote, episcopal authority was weak and fragmentary. His influence as a bishop was heavily reliant on his social position, his (probable) royal background, and his close connexions with the court.<sup>33</sup> Bede's account of the spread of Christianity through England demonstrates this integration, as again and again he describes religious leaders converting secular leaders, rather than the common folk.<sup>34</sup> This demonstrates the lack of authority of

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<sup>31</sup> See Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, pp. 93, 103, 111, 273.

<sup>32</sup> Bede's concentration on Roman Christianity and constant denigration of insular Christianity through *Historia Ecclesiastica* demonstrates these attitudes.

<sup>33</sup> His role in the accession of Aldfrith demonstrates his political influence, hence the role a well-connected bishop could play in the secular sphere.

<sup>34</sup>; Bede, *H.E.* III.25, also reveals the uneven power relationship between Church and State, for example in his account of the Synod of Whitby (664) The final decision was taken by Oswiu, king of Northumbria.; Similarly, Bede records, *H.E.* III.29, that when Archbishop Deusdedit died (also 664), Kings Oswiu (of Northumbria) and Egbert (of Kent) picked Wigheard as his replacement, and assumed the pope would approve their choice without question. Deusdedit was the first native archbishop, some 60 years after Augustine's mission arrived, demonstrating how long it took for Christianity to fully incorporate the upper reaches of the Anglo-Saxon nobility; *H.E.* IV.1.

Christianity through Aldhelm's life; indeed, Bede discusses relapses into paganism and the conversion of kingdoms as late as the 680s.

## **VIRGINITY VS. THE VIRGIN**

Virginity is multivalent, as the vast literature on the topic demonstrates. The discourse of virginity can be religious, secular, voluntary, imposed, used to empower and contain women, to destabilise and reinforce gender construction. It perpetuates and critiques gender and social structures. Aldhelm's virginity reflects the different characteristics he takes from the Church Fathers, from classical writings, and his Germanic background. Encouraged by Christ, promoted by Paul, and advocated by the Church Fathers, virginity was the ideal state for the Christian, reflecting the angelic state of pre-Lapsarian humankind. But simultaneously virginity incorporated the misogyny of Biblical and classical texts, which portrayed women as inherently evil. Eve sinned first, picking and eating the forbidden fruit, so women were thought to lack the self-control necessary to reflect the angelic life, which, in turn, could be demonstrated through abstinence and continence. In apparently offering women the opportunity to overcome their gender, virginity reinforced the negative qualities, iterating their association with women. This duality is reflected through the Church Fathers' construction of virginity.<sup>35</sup> As noted, they concentrated on the female virgin, who was considered to be most in need of such control and guidance. With the potential for autonomy and independence, she posed a risk to phallogocentric social structures, thus required regulating through the patriarchal texts that reinforced female subjugation, in the Church, in the family, and in the monastery.

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<sup>35</sup> Averil Cameron, 'Virginity as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Early Christianity', in *History as Text : The Writing of Ancient History*, ed. by Averil Cameron (London : Duckworth, 1989), pp. 181-205.

Nevertheless in becoming a sanctified virgin within the Church, women could achieve an elevated status, reflected in Augustine's praise of Proba's daughter.<sup>36</sup>

However, as Sarah Salih acknowledges, 'virginity may aspire to being a gender, but rarely manages to achieve it securely'.<sup>37</sup> As discussed previously, the qualities of the ideal virgin were passive and gendered feminine. More importantly, these qualities were to be demonstrated through her demeanour, her dress, and her daily activities. Her virginity was thus signified by its performativity. The difficulties of assessing whether a woman was a physical virgin or not was elided by creating a performative virginity in which outer accomplishment signified inner purity.<sup>38</sup> Aldhelm uses the significance of virginity, innovating by applying the concept to his non-virginal audience by emphasising chastity as much as virginity, and mental qualities, particularly those associated with education and learning. It is a positive quality, assigned to his audience as a whole, as he describes them, 'the most reverend virgins of Christ (*Reverentissimis Christi Virginibus*)', and their physical integrity is irrelevant.<sup>39</sup>

Yet this study has demonstrated that Aldhelm clearly differentiates between virginity and the sanctified virginity of the saints. The virginity he exhorts for all is available no matter what one's sex or sexual experience. They can all be 'virgins of Christ' through performance. But the sanctified virginity of the saintly examples, particularly as demonstrated by the female saints, is divided from the reality of Aldhelm's audience. Sanctified virginity is highly gendered, as shown by Emma Pettit's study of

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<sup>36</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 150, 'how incomparably greater is the glory and advantage gained by your family in giving to Christ women consecrated to his service, than in giving to the world men called to the honours of consulship.' Translation taken from *The Confessions and Letters of St Augustin*, trans. by P. Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans, Edinburgh : T and T Clark, 1988), quotation at p. 504.

<sup>37</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, p. 242.

<sup>38</sup> This particularly evident in Ambrose's comment, 'Her gravity is what should first announce a virgin to me', where virginity is visible to the spectator. Ambrose, *De Virginibus* 3.3.13, translation taken *St. Ambrose - Select Works and Letters*, trans. by H. De Romestin, E. Romestin and H. T. F. Duckworth (Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans, 1989), p. 109.

<sup>39</sup> *Prosa Praefatio; Prose*, Lapidige and Herren, p. 59.

masculinity in Aldhelm, and as discussed in this thesis. Aldhelm's male saints perform an active and authoritative virginity, which enables them to uphold and protect the Church. The female saints are more passive and their *vitae* are more likely to revolve around protecting themselves (or being protected) from a sexual threat, than aiding others, especially the congregation of believers. Female sanctified virgins are defined by their bodily integrity, which must be maintained at all costs. Virginity is the be-all and end-all of their sanctity, and at no time does Aldhelm construct a female saint in fully masculine terms.<sup>40</sup> Thus his attempts to reintegrate his saintly virgins into heteronormativity closes off much of the autonomy seen in the original *vitae*, and his emphasis on their physical virginity distance these female exempla from Aldhelm's addressees, thus their demonstrations of divinely-authorized independence are unavailable to Aldhelm's nuns.

## MASCULINE AUTHORITY

This study has also demonstrated Aldhelm's unease with female physicality in relation to virginity as a quality. Aldhelm's lengthy discourse on virginity in the introduction of the *Prosa* elides the female body, as he exploits the imagery of the male athlete and male soldier, and the asexual bee. It appears that he is constructing an amorphous virginity, beyond gender, which could open a queer space in the construction of virginity, but this study has demonstrated that all of his examples require oversight and training, which is constructed as masculine. Consequently, Aldhelm's use of such images does not create a third gender for virginity, but reinforces his message of the necessity of male authority. He uses the image of the athlete training to remind them of the need for guidance. He refers, for example, to an 'experienced instructor' for wrestlers, or the 'steersman' or

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<sup>40</sup> For example his denial of the more transgressive and masculine elements in Thecla's *vita*.

‘master-rower’ directing rowers.<sup>41</sup> Similarly bees are obedient; they are to be admired for their ‘harmonious fellowship’ and the ‘inclination to voluntary servitude which they are known to exercise in obedience to their rulers.’<sup>42</sup> Although he uses gendered terms during his discussion of the Church, for example it provides a ‘fecund womb’, taken with Aldhelm’s concentration on ecclesiastics in his male virgins, the refrain of obedience must be taken to mean obedience to Church authority, which is male.<sup>43</sup>

## MARTIAL VIRGINITY

Throughout his *psychomachia* Aldhelm warns against the dangers of the vices to the virgin, but he does not consistently explain how one can overcome these vices. In constructing his *psychomachia*, Aldhelm owes more to Cassian than Prudentius, a feature overlooked by many commentators. Aldhelm does not systematically create a series of battles between vice and virtue, as would be expected in a *psychomachia* proper, rather, like Cassian, he highlights what can go wrong when the virgin yields to vice rather than describing how the virgin can defeat the vices themselves. He innovates in bringing virginity to the fore as a quality to be cultivated, and again this differentiates between

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<sup>41</sup> *Prosa II, velut sagaces gimnosofistas sub peritissimo quodam agonitheta palestricis disciplinis et gimnicis artibus in gimnasio exerceri; Instanter hortante proueta et crepitante naucleru portisculo; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 60.*

<sup>42</sup> *Prosa IV, Illud etiam memorandum de apum concordii sodalitate et theatriali quodam spectaculo stupendum autumo, ultronem videlicet voluntariae seruitutis affectum, quem erga suorum obsequia principum exercere noscuntur; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 62; Just to ensure the nuns understand, Aldhelm continues, Prosa IV, ‘In respect of this sort of consideration, are not all the disciplines of the monastic way of life and the regular practices of monasteries indicated by an extremely close comparison? For as long as that bee who among the others discharges the office of magistrate, shall decree that they should inhabit their ancient dwellings, ... no bee from the immense multitude roams through the air on wandering routes or with undirected flights’ (*Nonne sub huiuscemodi contemplationis intuitu onnis monasticae conversationis disciplina et regularia coenubiorum instituta simillima collatione declarantur? Quamdiu enim antiquas inhabitare sedes et exigua fovere tuguria gracillimis contexta viminibus seu cavatis consuta codicibus ille, qui inter ceteras magistratus officio fungitur, decreverit, nulla ex immensa multitudine fugitivas discursibus et passivis volatibus per aethera vagatur*); Thus the bees/nuns must remain obedient, and within the monastery; a reminder to enclosure as well as obedience.*

<sup>43</sup> *Prosa II, ex fecundo ecclesiasticae conceptionis utero; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 59, The fecund womb surrounds the ecclesiastical conception of these spiritual, adoptive daughters of grace.*

virgin and Virginitate. The virgin must rely on Virginitate, itself conceived of as a virtue in this section, and Divine aid, particularly the 'shield of Christ' (*scutum Christi*).<sup>44</sup> Thus Aldhelm indirectly warns against independence. The struggle of the soul has become a further paean to virginity, and a re-articulated reminder for obedience to those who must protect themselves, and be protected, from vices, especially Pride, the source of independence from Satan onward.<sup>45</sup>

Aldhelm's depiction of virginity as a concept relies on a rather fluid use of gender, but where he constructs it as active, it tends to be masculine rather than feminine.<sup>46</sup> The default for active virginity *per se* is masculine, and this particularly evident in the heightened poetic language of the *psychomachia*. Yet this masculine reading is undercut by the knowledge that his primary audience is female. To what extent does this influence Aldhelm's elision of the martial elements expected of the *psychomachia* genre? This study has shown that throughout *De Virginitate*, Aldhelm lays emphasis on the importance of female obedience to the masculine Church authorities, those who are ultimately representative of God. In the *psychomachia*, he is able to stress Divine authority directly, as it is only through Divine aid that the virgin can overcome vice. Her autonomy is limited, as independence, for the female virgin, is equated with pride, and is therefore deadly.

Warnings against autonomy and pride form a large part of Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*. In the *Prosa* Aldhelm notes, 'For in the conflict of the eight principal vices, although Pride is placed last, yet like a fierce queen she is known to usurp for herself the authority of tyrannical power'.<sup>47</sup> For Aldhelm then, female authority has, at the least, the

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<sup>44</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2672; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 162.

<sup>45</sup> *Carmen* ll. 2730-2751; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p.163.

<sup>46</sup> For example in his athletic and apian imagery.

<sup>47</sup> *Prosa* XI, *Nam in conflictu octo principalium vitiorum, licet ultima ponatur, tamen quasi atrox regina tyrannicae potestatis imperium et dominandi monarchiam prae ceteris sibi usurpare dinoscitur*; *Poetic*,



potential to usurp the correct hierarchy. In both *Carmen* and *Prosa* Aldhelm constructs a battle against pride, returning to the martial imagery of Paul in the New Testament. Virginité is constructed actively, defending the nuns against vices, thus Aldhelm is pulled back to the masculine qualities he associated with active virginité throughout the hagiographical section. The nuns are soldiers in this battle under Christ, and masculine authority is brought to the fore, so they can 'receive the due triumph of victory from Christ'.<sup>48</sup> Aldhelm uses 'we' including himself and all Christians in this army of Christ, 'fight strenuously in the forefront of the battle as rulers of the world or as warriors of the Lord'. The religious and secular, male and female are united in the fight. Yet through this section he also reinforced the Judeo-Christian gender binary by placing the nuns, his primary audience, in a passive relationship of reliance on their Divine Protector.

## THE REDEPLOYMENT OF SEXUALITY

Throughout the text Aldhelm clearly delineates between the virgin and the wife, constructing the latter in terms of prostitution. The sexual element of marriage, though Scripturally legitimate, is constructed entirely in terms of degradation and filth.<sup>49</sup> For example Cecilia 'despised and rejected [betrothal ceremonies] with laudable spiritual fervour, just as the foul excrement of the latrine.'<sup>50</sup> Cecilia demonstrates Aldhelm's construction of virginité as a redeployment of sexuality rather than the negation of it, as her warnings to her husband occur in the 'inner chamber as the law of marriage

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Lapidge and Herren, p. 67.

<sup>48</sup> *Prosa XI, a Christo remuneratore nostro debitum victoriae triumphan percepturi in supernis sedibus et caelesti gloria gratulabundi feliciter tunc tripudiabimus, si nunc adversus principatus Leviathan et potestates tenebrarum mundique rectores cue bellatores dominici pertinaciter pertinacibus repugnantes in fronte duelli fortiter dimicemus; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 68.*

<sup>49</sup> Genesis 1:28a God blessed them and said to them, 'be fruitful and increase in number'.

<sup>50</sup> *Prosa XL, indultae iugalitatis consortia ac pacta proci sponsalia obtentu castitatis refutans velut spurca latrinarum purgamenta laudabili spiritus fervore contempserit, despexerit, respuerit; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 107.*

permitted'.<sup>51</sup> The juxtaposition of the bridal chamber and her 'scorning sweet sports of carnal excess, since she loved instead the sweet kisses of Christ' make this evident.<sup>52</sup> Just as ultimately Aldhelm offers no gender between masculine and feminine, he does not allow a femininity between virgin and prostitute; to be a sexual woman is to be a whore. His clear delineation of even the marital sexual relationship in terms of degradation is at least in part to distance his audience from their secular ties. Many would have been married, and some presumably could be tempted back into the world through the pressure if not the desire to remarry.

Aldhelm equated marriage with slavery and independence, depending on the rhetorical point he wished to highlight. Certainly the married woman was not only sexual, she was dangerous. This is particularly evident in his construction of Judith in the *Prosa*, whom he links with the prostitute of Proverbs 7.<sup>53</sup> Hence, Aldhelm links pride and ornate dress, ornate dress and prostitution. Women who do not submit to Church authority do not just stand outside the category of virginity, they also place themselves within the category of prostitutes. Thus, this study has argued that although Aldhelm initially appears to innovate by incorporating those who had been married as one of the groups rewarded through the three-fold division of sanctity – virgins, the chaste, and the married, his constant construction of the woman's role in marriage as akin to a prostitute actually serves to reinforce the orthodox message behind his tripartite division. His addressees and his wider audience should be completely chaste and obedient, rejecting independence and pride.

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<sup>51</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1721-1722, *Taliter interea compellans vocibus inquit, / Dum secreta petunt concessa lege tororum*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p.141; See also Leslie Donovan's comments on Ælfric's *Cecilia* in *Women's Saints' Lives in Old English Prose*, trans. by Leslie Donovan, (Cambridge : D. S. Brewer, 1999) p. 130.

<sup>52</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1712-1715, *Mellea carnalis contemnens ludicra luxus, / Basia dum potius dilexit dulcia Christi / Candida praepulchris complectens colla lacertis*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 141.

<sup>53</sup> *Prosa* LVII; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 126-127.

## APPEARANCE AND PRIDE

Aldhelm's discussion of dress makes it evident that he links appearance and performance, inappropriate dress and autonomy/independence.<sup>54</sup> Women should dress modestly as well as behave modestly; performance was as much about costume as action. Aldhelm's comments include men, an apparently important innovation, but superficially so. He is primarily warning against female autonomy, thus his emphasis is on how this is manifested in dress. Pride was a danger, as the proud nun will not heed ecclesiastical authority. Her self-regard and disobedience were evident in her dress and demeanour.

Hence the warnings against pride in the *Carmen's psychomachia* are paralleled in the *Prosa's* diatribe against dress. Aldhelm's tirade is summarised, 'the evident disgrace of inexcusable arrogance and the sign of ostentatiousness is made clear from the fact that no one wishes to be dressed in precious and colourful clothing when she can be seen by no one.'<sup>55</sup> Dressing as a woman of the world signified the worldliness of pride, the refusal to submit to one's place in Church hierarchy. For Aldhelm, as for the Church Fathers, the performance of virginity included dress and demeanour. He writes, 'the forbidden finery of a world which is to be destroyed, coloured with precious dyes of purple tincture, cannot be duly and appropriately suited to disciples of the convent, to handmaidens of Christ, to virgins of the Church'.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Cf. the time he also spends discussing Apollonius' dress – See discussion in Chapter 5.

<sup>55</sup> *Prosa LV, Evidens namque, ut mihi videtur, inexcusabilis arrogantiae probrum et ostentationis indicium ex eo declaratur, quod nemo ibi pretiosis et coloratis vestibus indui desiderat, ubi a nullo valet videri; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 125.*

<sup>56</sup> *Prosa LV, Non ergo ruituri vetita mundi ornamenta purpureae pretiosis tincturae muricibus colorata alumnis coenubii, bernaculis Christi, virginibus ecclesiae, contra apostolica statuta et legalia scita rite et regulariter congruere queunt; Prose, Lapidge and Herren, p. 124.*

## HAGIOGRAPHY : GENDERED SANCTIFIED VIRGINITY- MASCULINE

### ACTIVITY AND FEMALE PASSIVITY

Aldhelm's many examples of men and women included in his hagiography enable him to briefly outline the *vitae*, highlighting only that which he considers important for a text in praise of virginity. In the medieval period scholars discussed the etymology of words relating to gender: *virtus* (power) was semantically related to *vir* (man), and the qualities associated with *virtus* were masculine.<sup>57</sup> Emma Pettit has demonstrated the way in which Aldhelm constructs masculine saints who are more active and autonomous than their female counterparts.<sup>58</sup> Aldhelm's male saints demonstrate *virtus* to a far greater extent than the female saints, as his construction of masculine sanctity is more active. For example, male saints protect the congregation and defeat paganism. This motif enables Aldhelm to return to his constant theme that masculine authority is necessary for the well-being of the Church. Popes, bishops and priests perform virginity by demonstrating their ecclesiastical power; they protect the Church from paganism and heresy as shepherds of the congregation and destroy temples and establish churches as *milites Christi*. They are able to act through their official roles within the Church, hence, whereas men can take a stand to protect the integrity of the congregation, women are denied such authority. Their stand against paganism is constructed instead around the protection of their bodily integrity. Aldhelm therefore separates personal integrity, and constructs it as feminine, and the integrity of the congregation, which can only be protected by men.

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<sup>57</sup> *virago* came from the same source but eventually came to be a derogatory term for a woman. See Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Julian M. H. Smith, 'The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe c. 780-920', *Past and Present*, 146 (1995), 3-37; Patricia-Ann Lee, 'Reflections of Power : Margaret of Anjou and the Dark Side of Queenship', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 39 (1986), 183-217.

<sup>58</sup> E. Pettit, 'Holiness and Masculinity in Aldhelm's Opus Geminatum *De Virginitate*', in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. by P. H. Cullum and K. J. Lewis (Cardiff : University of Wales Press, 2004).

The prime example of an active male saint is Pope Silvester.<sup>59</sup> In the *Carmen* Aldhelm describes him, ‘As a priest he displayed many signs of virtue (*Plurima hic fecit virtutum signa sacerdos*)’.<sup>60</sup> Through his defeat of a dragon, protecting the populace of Rome, ‘he reformed Rome, the worshipper of deceitful idolatry, from the fatal practice of offering victims by his evangelical declarations and by miracles of equal luminosity.’<sup>61</sup> The *Carmen* amplifies this representation by stating that the dragon had plagued Rome, ‘justly so, because they had disdained to accept the one Christ, thinking that veneration of a horrifying serpent was preferable.’<sup>62</sup> This echoes the Dragon of Revelation expelled from heaven by the Archangel Michael.<sup>63</sup> Thus Aldhelm links the paganism of Rome with Satan, and enables Silvester to defeat wickedness and convert the populace through his teaching and miraculous powers; both elements signifying his virginal sanctity.

Silvester also cured and baptised Constantine, Emperor of Rome.<sup>64</sup> Aldhelm explains, ‘and the fever of the interior man as much as the condition of the exterior was healed by a double remedy through the celestial poultice’.<sup>65</sup> Hence Aldhelm conflates all the elements of Silvester’s masculine sanctity – miracles, teaching, converting the populace, addressing Emperor Constantine. The interiority and exteriority of Silvester’s virginal sanctity are mirrored by the diseased internal and external condition of the

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<sup>59</sup> *Prosa XXV*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp. 82-84.

<sup>60</sup> *Carmen* l. 543; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 115; Note Aldhelm’s use of *virtus* for Silvester.

<sup>61</sup> *Prosa XXV, et Romam, fallacis idolatriae cultricem, a funesto victimarum ritu evangelicis assertionibus et signis pariter coruscantibus correxit*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 83.

<sup>62</sup> *Carmen* ll. 547-550, *Qui prius e crypta funesto flamine spirans/ Romani regni vexabat iure catervas,/ Dum contempserunt Christo famularier uni/ Natrices horrendi cultum praestare putatantes*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 115.

<sup>63</sup> Revelation 12:9 The great dragon was hurled down – that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

<sup>64</sup> *Prosa XXV*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 83.

<sup>65</sup> *Prosa XXV, Illud etiam non opmittendum reor, in quo praecipuum conservatae castitatis documentum declaratur, videlicet quod imperatoris Constantini diuturna valitudo et elephantiosa corporis incommoditas accepto baptismatis sacramento statim ab eodem salubriter dicto citius curaretur et tam interioris hominis aestus quam exterioris gestus per caeleste cataplasma duplici medicamine sine tricarum obstaculo sanaretur*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 83.

emperor, who is in turn representative of his people.<sup>66</sup> The microcosm of the Emperor's health is indicative of the macrocosm of Rome itself. Silvester also refuted 12 Rabbis, and again Aldhelm expands this in the *Carmen*, 'This same teacher waged a conflict with and fought against twelve masters of artifice'.<sup>67</sup> Silvester is thus not just debating but fighting on behalf of the faith, the active *miles Christi*.<sup>68</sup> Finally, through a vision Silvester explains Constantine's dream, which relates to the re-founding of Byzantium as Constantinople, a Christian city.<sup>69</sup> Thus Aldhelm constructs a performatively active saint who speaks out and defeats false religion, defeats a dragon, converts a city, and heals and directs the most powerful man in the Roman Empire. Such an active performance of virginity is denied his female exempla. Constantina is not allowed to preach to her father, but instead exhorts her peers. Throughout the hagiographical examples of virginity, women are tightly constrained in their performance of virginity and the opportunities offered by their sanctity. Aldhelm refuses to allow them the independence of a saint such as Thecla.

Aldhelm's emphasis on mental qualities whilst encouraging virginity, gives way to a bodily virginity in the hagiography that is at odds with his audience. Aldhelm's inability

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. *Carmen* ll. 560-564, *Quapropter Roma fregit dilubra sacelli/ Prisca nefandorum contemnens fana deorum/ Et potiora rudis sectatur culmina templi./ Quae salvatoris signata cruore coruscant/ Perpetuosque Dei produunt per saecula triumphos; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 115, 'For this reason Rome destroyed the shrines of the ancient sanctuary, rejecting the ancient worshipping places of evil gods, and eagerly sought after the more powerful heights of the new [i.e. Christian] temple'.

<sup>67</sup> *Prosa XXV; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 83; *Carmen* ll. 567-568, *Porro conflictum gessit dedasculus idem/ Contra bis senos certantes arte magistros; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 115.

<sup>68</sup> Aldhelm continues, *Carmen* ll. 572-576, *Quapropter cunctos fretus caelestibus armis/ Vicerat extemplo voti certamine compos/ Ac velut adversus frendentes ore moloso,/ Frustra qui superas implent latratibus auras,/ Ferrea scripturae direxit spicula miles; Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 115, 'Silvester gained his wish and immediately gained victory in the struggle; and, as if struggling against mighty dogs gnashing their teeth which in vain fill the lofty air with howling, this soldier let fly the iron-tipped arrows of Scripture'. A vivid description of the ferocity of the battle.

<sup>69</sup> *Prosa XXV; Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 84; *Carmen* ll. 594-650; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 115; Aldhelm emphasises that Silvester succeeded where others had failed, '[Constantine] gathered together in a group sophists eloquent in their skill, who cast about philosophical speculations with windy words. ... As it happened, however, they produced nothing by their vapid haranguing, but rather fashioned many trivialities with their false words.' (*Conglobat in coetum disertos arte sophistas,/ Gymnica qui iactant ventoso dogmata fatu./ Quos rogat, ut rerum sibi fata latentia solvant, Quae dudum in stratis signant arcana futura./ Sed cum forte nihil stoido sermone referrent,/ Plurima sed falsis finxissent frivola verbis*).

to accept the independence of the addressed nuns creates a tension in his construction of virginity. Aldhelm's *vitae* of virgin martyrs demonstrate a rigidity and repetitiveness of structure that enables the reader to trace the performativity of female sanctified virginity, through his repeated depictions of sexual menace, the threat of the brothel, the torture of the body, and subsequent martyrdom. The *vitae* of female virgin exempla are also reduced to those elements that Aldhelm considers essentials, that is, the protection and maintenance of physical virginity. The performance of female sanctity is tightly controlled as female saint after female saint faces the same threats and torture and is quickly despatched by martyrdom. This enables Aldhelm to construct a passive female sanctity that relies on bodily integrity, protected where necessary by God, rather than the active sanctity available to the male saints. The women are ciphers, signifying the power of virginity, not powerful saints defying social and political authority. Thus Aldhelm, even more than Ælfric, ensures his female virgins are contained by the text, and his sanctity is clearly gendered. Aldhelm's female sanctity is thus greatly restricted, especially when compared with the male sanctity discussed above. Though he includes a wide variety of male and female saints, the multiplicity of masculine sanctity far outweighs the repetitiveness of the female virgin martyr. Male saints include ascetic desert fathers and Old Testament prophets, apostles of Christ and ecclesiastical figures. Female saints are overwhelmingly virgin martyrs.<sup>70</sup>

Aldhelm's description of Cecilia follows this theme, and emphasises the importance of male authority. She converts her husband to Christianity by threats and flattery, not through her exposition of Christian dogma.<sup>71</sup> Although Aldhelm accepts that Cecilia's speech converts her husband, in his version of the *vita*, that speech is restricted to

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<sup>70</sup> Eustochium, Demetrias, Constantia and Scholastica are not martyred.

<sup>71</sup> Although Rosier's translation strengthens this idea as the Latin states (l. 1712) *Quae sponsum proprium convertit dogmate sancto*; Within the *vita* as a whole, Aldhelm relies on her example for convert her husband, not her teaching; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 141.

the threat of the angel, and the speech to her brother-in-law is eliminated completely. Yet, Cecilia is an unusual virgin, as she is a wife, albeit against her will, and Aldhelm almost shoe-horns her to fit his restricted construction of the virgin martyr, by implying she did not actually get married.<sup>72</sup> Thus Cecilia demonstrates many of the themes this study has traced within *De Virginitate*'s female sanctity. She is constrained to the domestic sphere, largely silenced and Aldhelm stresses her stand for virginity rather than her teaching or miracles.<sup>73</sup>

## FEMALE CONTAINMENT

Aldhelm's very contained female saints signify his unease with the freedoms of women available through the double monastery. He constrains Agnes's voice, and silences Agatha completely. This contrasts with Ælfric's depiction of the saints. Ælfric wrote at a time when the female voice had been largely silenced in the Church, and episcopal authority well established, yet Ælfric allowed his virgin martyrs more of a voice. Having removed women from the political and religious sphere, it was safer to portray their fictional voices.

When relating the *vita* of Agatha, Aldhelm ignores all elements of the story apart from her torture and martyrdom, ensuring her performance of sanctity is restricted to the most obvious themes of the virgin martyr. He excises her stand against secular authority in the person of Quintianus, and her ability to overcome Aphrodisia in the brothel. In the

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<sup>72</sup> *Prosa* XL, Lapidge and Herren, p. 107; Although in the *Carmen*, Aldhelm refers to her entering 'the inner chamber as the law of marriage permitted (ll. 1721-1722, *Taliter interea compellans vocibus infit,/ Dum secreta petunt concessa lege tororum*); *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 141.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. for example, Aldhelm's retelling of Thecla's *vita* in *Prosa* XLVI, in which he constructs a virgin martyr, ignoring all non-typical aspects such as her cross-dressing, and referring to a martyrdom. See *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 113; *Carmen* ll. 2006-2008, *Haec suprema suae decoravit tempora vitae/ Purpureo sanctam perfundens sanguine carnem, Martira perpetui dum scandit limina caeli*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, pp. 435-436 'This maiden adorned the last hours of her life : bathing her holy body in red blood, as a martyr she ascended to the threshold of eternal heaven.'



*Prosa* he describes her strength in the face of torture as an aspect of her virginity.<sup>74</sup> In the *Carmen* he emphasises her reliance on God, ‘At once the merciful Protector of the needy gave help to the girl so that she might become stronger than those who were viciously torturing her.’<sup>75</sup> This study has demonstrated that for Aldhelm, sanctified female virginity is performed through withstanding torture and retaining bodily and mental integrity, rather than defying social or political authority. Aldhelm moves quickly to Agatha’s martyrdom and the protection of Sicily from the volcano. As noted earlier, Aldhelm implies this miracle is created by the men who ‘opposed the holy coffin ... and ... with the virgin’s assistance, they straightaway calmed the terrifying inferno of flames’.<sup>76</sup> Agatha thus aids the miracle, but is clearly constructed as a conduit for the power that is available to the men. It is the men who act, for example in the *Carmen* ‘a Sicilian priest, seeing the flashes of flame, placed (*opposuit*) the holy tomb containing her body in the path of the fire’.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Prosa* XLI, *Cuius integritatis castimoniam nec membrorum crudelis dilaceratio compescere nec lictorum atrox vexatio praepedire nec acria testularum fragmina infringere vel torrida carbonum incendia ullatenus vincere valuerunt, quin potius ut adamantinus scopulus contra illata carnificum tormenta ferro fortior induruit*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 107, ‘the searing heat of coals could not in any way over come (Agatha’s) innocent purity; rather, like adamantine rock, she became harder than iron in the face of the tortures’.

<sup>75</sup> *Carmen*, ll. *Tum pater omnipotens, devotae virginis altor, Arcibus aethereis defixit lumina terris/ Feminum indolis gaudens spectare triumphum;/ Mox dedit auxilium clemens defensor egentum,/ Fortior ut fieret truciter torquentibus illam*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 142.

<sup>76</sup> *Prosa* XLI, *Scintillantibus bullirent sulfureisque flammaram globis fervida torrentum flumina in praeceps currentia crepitarent, sacram sarcofagi tumbam, qua virginale corpusculum claudebatur, quasi turris obstaculum et muri propugnaculum ruituris ignium imbribus opposuerunt et mox horrendos focorum ardores obvia quaeque crematuros et liquefactas scopulorum congeries voraturos dicto citius cum virginis suffragio sopierunt*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, pp.107-108. The priests create the miracle with the virgin’s assistance.

<sup>77</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1775-1776, *Tum sculus cultor flammaram fulmina cernens/ Ignibus opposuit sanctam cum corpore tumbam*; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 142.

## PARODY AND QUEERNESS

Judith Butler's theory of performativity has been useful in interrogating these texts.<sup>78</sup> She argues, 'That the gendered body is performative suggests it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality'.<sup>79</sup> This idea is particularly apt when considering the virginal body, and the manner in which Aldhelm constructs virginity as a quality. Her arguments about parody can also be illuminating, contrasting the performance of the subject with their gender and anatomy. When these elements don't match, they make obvious the constructed nature of the identity, again an idea which lends itself to the study of virginity as a category.<sup>80</sup> Butler notes that parody is not necessarily subversive, so although, for example, Aldhelm includes the transvestite saint Eugenia, she does not destabilise social and gender norms, but reconfirms them.<sup>81</sup> Aldhelm suggests that Eugenia 'by disguising her sex, her male tonsure could by this new plan hide the female concealed underneath (*Ac sexum simulans posset tonsura virilis/ Hac ratione rudis occultare latentem*)'.<sup>82</sup> Yet this attempt to pass as a man is exposed as an ontological impossibility as Eugenia's inherent female sexuality is a temptation for Melania, which no change of outward appearance can conquer. The potential parody of transvestitism reinforces the danger of female sexuality as Eugenia tempts Melania, and Melania is corrupted by her sexual desire.<sup>83</sup> Gender cannot be concealed or overcome by dress or even virginal sanctity. Hence, Aldhelm does not allow the queerness of transvestitism to subvert gender and social categories.

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<sup>78</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York : Routledge, 1990); Butler, *Bodies that Matter : On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York : Routledge, 1993); Butler, *Excitable Speech : A Politics of the Performative* (New York : Routledge, 1997).

<sup>79</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 185.

<sup>80</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 187.

<sup>81</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 189.

<sup>82</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1893-1894; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 145.

<sup>83</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1918-1919; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 145.

Nevertheless, he inadvertently allows parody as a route to independence and esteem, despite his constant themes of humility and submission. As noted, late antique widows and mothers who performed virginity were able to access the respect and autonomy it could offer. Similarly, by interpellating his largely non-virginal audience as virgins, and offering a performative virginity through the text, Aldhelm enables his readers to access the category of virgin. Hence we see him containing the independence available through virginity and dividing the Anglo-Saxon non-virgin from the saintly female martyr of hagiography in order to keep this liberty to a minimum.

Queer theory allows for a multiplicity of identities and imagery when discussing gendered or virginal subject, and Aldhelm also queers his male saints. Apollonius is queered through constant association with female activity through the text. Nevertheless he does not subvert expectations of masculine virginity as he is active and aids the community, for example in providing food.<sup>84</sup> More subversive is the *vita* of Malchus, as he is situated in the text as a female heroine and more clearly parodies femininity.<sup>85</sup> Aldhelm's use of female and male imagery and stereotypes mark Malchus as queer, offering multiple readings of his identity through the *vita*, for example, his passivity is the primary marker of his virginity. Where Malchus acts independently, it is to the detriment of his sanctity, for the bulk of the *vita*. Aldhelm also implies that Malchus is martyred for his virginity, rather than living into old age.<sup>86</sup> Ultimately, though, Malchus is a warning, encouraging Aldhelm's audience to coenobitic unity and obedience. Aldhelm uses his

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<sup>84</sup> *Carmen* ll. 1577-1618; *Poetic*, Lapidge and Rosier, p. 138.

<sup>85</sup> *Prosa XXXI*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 91.

<sup>86</sup> *Prosa XXXI, cumque ibidem optatae castitatis insignibus, quae in genitili solo servaverat, carere stricta machera exorqueretur, maluit mucrone transfossus crudeliter occumbere quam pudicitiae iura profanando vitam defendere nequaquam animae periculum pertimescens, si integer virginitatis status servaretur*; *Prose*, Lapidge and Herren, p. 91, 'in the same place, he was forced at the point of a sword rather than defend his life by profaning the laws of chastity, fearing in no way the danger to his soul if the status of his virginity were preserved intact.'

account not to allow multiple readings of the virginal subject, but to stress the importance of co-operation and obedience to masculine authority.

### ***DE VIRGINITATE AND THE WAY AHEAD***

Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* is an important text in understanding the development of ideas of virginity and purity, masculinity and femininity into the medieval period. His construction of virginity as a concept avoided, where possible, any association with the female body, and so evaded the problematic relationship between physical virginity and the spiritual qualities associated with virginity. Aldhelm took the ideas and images of late antiquity and refashioned them for his Anglo-Saxon audience, constructing a virginity that, whilst it appeared to encompass male and female qualities, ultimately gendered its practitioners. For Aldhelm's primary audience, his female addressees, as Sarah Salih acknowledges, 'Virginity and femaleness attempt a total separation, which, however, is deferred to the next life'.<sup>87</sup> Yet, Aldhelm's primary audience were not virgins, despite his constant appellation to them of the status. This opens out the queerness of the status, the multiplicity of the identities these women could negotiate. It also made explicit the parodic elements of performing virginity, vis-a-vis the 'reclamation' of the category by non-virgins. But it is impossible to know the extent to which Aldhelm's audience read *De Virginitate* 'queerly'.

Aldhelm's message, directed to the powerful nuns of early Christian Anglo-Saxon England, was one of submission and obedience. His examples of virginity, as demonstrated, reinforced the gender polarities he inherited from the Church Fathers. Any masculine behaviour on the part of female exempla signified within the text is contained,

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<sup>87</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, p. 342.

as with Eugenia's ultimate martyrdom. In the original *vitae* of the virgin martyrs, death was the price for independence, but in Aldhelm it is more often the price for virginity itself, and it is too dangerous for the virgin to demonstrate independence or defiance of social and political norms. His comments clearly resonated in the developing Catholic Christianity of Western Europe as his works were widely studied for centuries.

This study was informed by Judith Butler's ideas about the performativity of gender, queerness and parody, although it offers a broader reading of the text than one strictly adhering to Butler's ideas. Gender and queer theory offer the reader questions with which to interrogate the text, creating a reading that focuses on Aldhelm's construction of virginity and chastity as a repeated set of actions. This thesis has demonstrated the extent to which Aldhelm's orthodox ideas of masculine ecclesiastical authority influenced his construction of virginity and chastity, constantly closing off virginity's multiple and queer identity as he returns to his strongly gendered late antique model. The virgin/whore stereotype is often considered passé or simplistic, but it is clearly important to Aldhelm as he uses it to support his promotion of unity, obedience and submission, and the need for masculine jurisdiction.

Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Latin studies have not utilised literary or gender theory to any great extent. Shari Horner, Gillian Overing and Clare A. Lees have initiated this type of textual analysis, but much remains to be done in the field. The emphasis that remains on linguistic investigation restricts our understanding of Anglo-Saxon ideas about gender. What little work that has been done has largely concentrated on women, therefore it is to be hoped that in the future, scholars consider in more detail the textual construction of masculinity. Nevertheless, through *De Virginitate* we see Aldhelm negotiate Christian and classical ideas about women, virginity and sexuality. The popularity of the text demonstrates its influence through the medieval period. This is not to say *De Virginitate*

was a foundation text for the misogyny of the high middle ages, rather that it reflects the contemporaneous fears of female autonomy and sexuality that served the misogyny of later centuries.

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