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Miraculous Bodies:

Gender, Power, and Tropes of Embodiment in Early Medieval Hagiographies from

Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England, and Francia

By

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Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Division of Religion
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An abstract of a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Division of Religion, Historical Studies in Theology and Religion, 2020

Abstract

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This dissertation identifies five tropes, or narratological motifs, in the hagiographic literature from Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England, and Francia from the early-medieval period that treat of saints, their bodies, and their embodied miracles. These tropes include the motif of holy fire, the motif of disability, the motif of enclosure, the motif of pregnancy, especially pregnant religious bodies, and the motif of shapeshifting. After providing an account of the development of sanctity in early-medieval Christianity, the project analyzes the way these tropes present gender, with a particular focus on the miraculous activities of female saints. Focusing on how the warrants for female spiritual authority are depicted within narrative, this study explores the ways in which the bodies of women and men become fields for the exercise of saintly power, and the ways in which gender performances are worked out in and on bodies in the text. After tracing the versions of these tropes in the extant hagiographic literature from the period, the project compares these themes across the three different early-medieval Christian cultures under discussion in order to contextualize these motifs in history. Next, I argue for an ascetical-theological reading of the narratives, in order to situate the narratological presentation of these themes within the discourse of the early-medieval valorization of the Christian monastic ideal. Finally, I conclude this study with a pastoral-theological reflection on the possibilities that each trope holds for reflecting on the lived experience of Christians in the present.

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I owe my interest in disability studies to the late Dr. Nancy Eiesland of the Candler School of Theology. I was very fortunate to work as Dr. Eiesland's teaching assistant, and her groundbreaking work on disability theology has influenced my own approach to narratives of disability in history. I dedicate my chapter on disability in early-medieval saints' Lives to her, in gratitude for her life and influence.

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I first developed my interest in the narrative trope of pregnancy during my studies at Harvard Divinity School. I am grateful to Dr. Kevin Madigan and Dr. Amy Hollywood for encouraging me to pursue this area of inquiry and for supporting me in my application to Emory's Graduate Division of Religion.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a narrative-historical study of gendered bodies in early-medieval European

hagiography. Primarily, it is a narrative study of women — how their bodies are

constructed and represented within narratives of female sanctity, how they are recognized

by and hidden from ecclesiastical and political authorities, and how they become

transformed or altered through supernatural encounters with the divine. Yet this project is

also a historical study of embodiment: how male and female bodies were imagined in the

saints' narratives of Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England, and Francia, within the cultural and

historical context of the early Middle Ages.

I draw upon such a seemingly wide geographic range of primary sources for two

important reasons. First, recent scholarship has argued that the cultures of early medieval

Europe were not nearly as isolated as historiography has heretofore suggested.[1] While an

earlier generation of scholars asserted that Western Europe was plagued by a period of

"Dark Ages" after the fall of the Roman Empire, current historiographic models observe the

high degree of cultural and material exchange, specifically between Francia, Anglo-Saxon

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[1] See, for example, Kathleen Verdun, "Medievalism" in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, Supplement 1 (New York: Scriber, 2004), ed. William C. Jordon, 389–397 (see also the sections on "Victorian Medievalism", "Nineteenth-Century Europe", "Medievalism in America 1500–1900", "The 20th Century", and, from the same volume, Paul Freedman, "Medieval Studies", 383–389). For a more precise account of cultural exchange, see Doris Edel, "Identity and integration: Ireland in the early Middle Ages," in *The Celtic West and Europe: Studies in Celtic Literature and the Early Irish Church*, ed. Doris Edel (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 19-34. See also William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman, *The Medieval World View: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford, 2004), 111-128, and Tim Pastell and Katharina Ulmschneider, *Markets in Early Medieval Europe: Trading and Productive Sites, 650-850* (London: Windgather Press, 2003). For a broad overview, see Tomás O'Sullivan, "Christianity and the European Conversions," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to World Christianity* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2016), eds. Lamin Sanneh and Michael J. McClymond, 54-66.

England, and Ireland, that occurred over the period in question (roughly, from 500 to 950

CE).[2] That these three areas maintained a complex relationship between the maintenance

of their own distinct languages and cultures, on the one hand, and the dynamic interchange

of ideas and trading of resources (particularly through the "international" vehicle of the

church) on the other, has become particularly apparent through recent archaeological

research, art history studies, and manuscript analyses.[3] For example, Irish scribes were

often trained in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria and Gaul,[4] and certain design motifs and

practices of metallurgy and stone carving were imported to Anglo-Saxon England

(particularly, but not exclusively, to Northumbria),[5] and from there, to eastern Ireland.[6] In

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[2] Pauline Stafford, "Historiography," in *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland c. 500-c. 1100*, ed. Pauline Stafford (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2013), 9-22. See also Jonathan M. Wooding, "Trade as a factor in the transmission of texts between Ireland and the continent in the sixth and seventh centuries," in *Ireland and Europe in the early Middle Ages: Texts and Transmission*, ed. Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 14-26. See also Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe, 300-1000*, 3rd ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2010), xxvii-xxix, 241-262.

[3] See, for example, Douglas MacLean, "Northumbrian Vine-Scroll Ornament and the *Book of Kells*," in *Northumbria's Golden Age*, ed. Jane Hawkes and Susan Mills (Gloucestershire, England: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1999), 152-167. See also Marie Herbert, "Sea-divided Gaels? Constructing relationships between Irish and Scots c. 800-1169," in *Britain and Ireland 900-1300: Insular Responses to Medieval European Change*, ed. Brendan Smith, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 177-198. See also Chris Wickham, "Systems of Exchange," in *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 693-824.

[4] Nancy Netzer, "The *Book of Durrow*: The Northumbria Connection," in *Northumbria's Golden Age*, ed. Hawkes, Jane and Susan Mills (Gloucestershire, England: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1999), 198-217. See also Henry Gough-Cooper, "Kentigern and Gonothigernus: A Scottish Saint and a Gaulish Bishop Identified," in *The Heroic Age*, no. 6 (Spring, 2003), http://www.mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/6/gough-cooper.html, accessed April 28, 2020. See also Colin Ireland, "Some Irish characteristics of the Whitby Life of Gregory the Great," in *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe: Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship: A Festschrift for Dáibhí Ó Cróinín*, ed. Pádraic Moran and Immo Warntjes (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 139-178.

[5] Susan Youngs, "'From Ireland coming': Fine Irish Metalwork from the Medway, Kent, England," by Susan Youngs, in *From Ireland Coming: Irish Art from the Early Christian to the Late Gothic Period and its European Context*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton: Princeton

the earliest centuries of the early medieval period, Christian missionaries were often trained in Gaul, and then sent to Ireland and Britain to evangelize – or, in some cases, "re-Christianize" – specific population sub-groups.[7] In succeeding centuries, missionaries and scholars were imported from the academic centers of Ireland to train clergy and to found new monastic centers in the northwest territories of the isle of Britain (Argyle) and on the Continent.[8] Yet this level of exchange does not equate to a total and uncontested cultural synthesis: as Bede notes in particular, the Gallican "Romanizing" influence on indigenous forms of Christian practice in Ireland and England encountered conflict, not only in a localized sense, but at the synodal level as well.[9] In this way, the connections between my three source locations are demonstrable, yet complex.

Second, my particular selection of sources reflects in new ways the fact of early medieval communication and ecclesiastical-cultural dispersion in Western Europe. The similarities that I identify between my hagiographical sources demonstrate a degree of cultural synthesis that has been overlooked not only in the older historiographic models of this period, but also in the current models that focus primarily on population movements,

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University Press, 2001), 249-260. See also Emmanuelle Pirotte, "Ornament and Script in Early Medieval Insular and Continental Manuscripts: Reasons, Functions, Efficency, in *From Ireland Coming*, 277-288; and Kees Veelenturf, "Irish High Crosses and Continental Art: Shades of Iconographical Ambiguity," in *From Ireland Coming*, 83-102.

[6] Liam De Paor, "Cultural Relations," in *Ireland and Early Europe* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 21-23.

[7] Simon Burnell and Edward James, "The Archaeology of conversion on the Continent in the sixth and seventh centuries: some observations and comparisons with Anglo-Saxon England," in *St. Augustine and the Conversion of England*, ed. Richard Gameson (Phoenix Mill, England: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 32-49. See also Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, "Palladius and the Roman Mission," in *Early Medieval Ireland, 400 – 1200* (London: Longman, 1995), 20-27.

[8] T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, Chapter Eight: "Columbanus and his disciples" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 344-390.

[9] Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iii. 26 (note the description of the Romanizing faction at the Synod of Whitby).

shared aesthetic themes and technologies, and missionary activity. The hagiographic

sources from Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England, and Francia in particular demonstrate a

sharing of narratological tropes, or motifs, which treat of embodiment and gender. This

observation contributes to the general study of early-medieval Europe, for no study to date

has traced these narrative-thematic connections within early medieval hagiography as a

genre.

I therefore turn our attention now to the literature itself. Certain tropes that emerge

from early medieval European hagiographic literature point up the inherent cultural

tensions at work in the narratological presentation of female bodies. Far from functioning

as simple literary devices, these tropes reveal the socio-historical modes in which readers

approached perspectives on gender within some cultures of the early Middle Ages. In

particular, the hagiographic narratives of female saints demonstrate both the anxieties and

anticipations implicit in the literary treatment of gender, and the practical implications for

gendered discourse within the lived experience of the religious life.

Strictly speaking, my focus here is on the tropic portrayal of the gendered body

within the *vitae* of female saints from Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England, and Francia.[10] In this

project, I examine five specific tropes that expose early medieval ecclesiastical portrayals of

gendered embodiment. These include, in order of presentation, (1.) the narrative trope of

saintly fire and fire-related miracles, and the nuanced and gendered differences between

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[10] While narrative parallels exist in the hagiographies of female saints from the Eastern
Mediterranean, I limit my focus here to texts that have been composed or written down in
the three areas under discussion (Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England, and Francia). This is due
to the fact that this study already encompasses a rather large range of sources,
geographically and culturally speaking, and to enlarge that focus to include Eastern sources
would be to expand this project beyond a manageable scope. I will discuss Eastern
influences briefly, but only insofar as they bear direct influence on the texts that I have
selected, and only as they relate directly to issues of possible narrative transmission.

the iteration of this theme in female and male saints' lives (for example, the saintly body, miraculously transfigured through the appearance of divine light and/or fire); (2.) the theme of disability and the nature of saintly interaction with persons that are presented as living with a disability (including the gendered implications of "disabled" bodies), with a special focus on saintly interventions on bodies that demonstrate a physical impairment (either through healing or cursing, for example); (3.) the narrative trope of women saints' miraculous demonstrations of power over and in response to pregnant bodies within the religious community (the "trope of the pregnant nun"); (4.) the narrative theme of enclosure (within the walls of monastic or religious space, but also in terms of additional, unconventional senses of the body enclosed and hidden); and (5.) the theme of shape-shifting saintly bodies, especially as this theme applies to the transformative processes of aging and rebirth.

These five themes are related through their focus on the saint's treatment of and relation to the gendered body. As Judith Butler has observed in her landmark theoretical work, gender is less a static physiological reality than a dynamic and elusive product of culture and discourse.[11] It is through the analysis of what a culture *says* about bodies — how these bodies are *narrated* — that an understanding of gender and its social warrants may be constructed for a specific historical context. These five tropes therefore work together to envision a model for the narrative construction and representation of gender in the hagiography of early-medieval Europe.

I examine these narratives in their historical context, in order to produce a nuanced picture of the operation of gender in hagiographical accounts of the body. The majority of

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[11] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge: 1999), xii-xvi ("Preface, 1999"), and 43-44, 179.

primary sources for this study exist in Latin, but I have also analyzed sources in two

vernaculars of early medieval Europe: Old English (also called Anglo-Saxon), and Old Irish

(a Celtic vernacular in use well into the period of the Viking invasions, ca. eleventh century

CE). I have noted in the footnotes where the translations are my own. The corpus of

material that I will focus on is limited to the Lives of saints, the *vitae*, as opposed to

homilies, hymns, martyrologies, or litanies, in the early-medieval period in Europe (roughly

400 to 1100 CE). Although I will make occasional reference to such genres as a means for

contextualizing the narratives of the Lives in history, the focus of this project is specifically

on the narratives contained within the *vitae* themselves. As to why I have chosen these

particular narrative examples, I offer the following rationale: these narratives all treat of

the body in ways that demonstrate interesting perspectives on the ways in which early

medieval European Christians in the three cultures under discussion navigated values that

have to do with the embodied practice of Christian virtue. Composed in a monastic setting,

the narratives point to an ascetical-theological approach to the body and its meanings.

I turn now to a chapter-by-chapter account of each trope in the narratives of early

medieval female saints, and to a discussion of the sources themselves. In the following

sections, I will introduce methodologies as they apply to each trope. Some themes, such as

the trope of "disability," require a methodology that is specific to that particular theme.

Others, such as the trope of "enclosure," require an assimilative methodology that draws on

a number of different models for analysis.

In chapter one, I contextualize my project by offering an overview of the state of the

field through a presentation of recent approaches to hagiography studies. After discussing

the narratological focus of my study, I offer a rationale for examining saints' Lives in early-

medieval Europe, and for focusing primarily on the narratives of female saints in particular. I then move to an exploration of the question of gender in these sources, and how the warrants for sanctity were worked out differently for male versus female saints. By looking at representative examples from the Lives of Martin of Tours, Patrick of Armagh, and Cuthbert of Northumbria, I show how the *vitae* of male saints differed in their presentation of gendered holiness. Next, I consider the social dimension of sanctity, and how saints' miraculous acts required an audience of witnesses. For female saints' narratives in particular, a spectating audience was required to attest to and remember the saint's deeds, in order to attest to and justify her spiritual authority. This *spectacular* function of the female saintly body was necessary for the formation of the saint's cult in the first place. Finally, I conclude chapter one with the argument that hagiography should be reclaimed as a body of literature that is inherently theological. Although it has become fashionable in recent scholarship to approach hagiography from the perspectives of social history, gender history, and queer history, I argue that the theological dimension of hagiography is equally important to consider. That is, these Lives tell us something about how early-medieval European Christians grappled with how human beings may receive power from, and be in communication with, God, and what that means for human experience and spiritual formation.

I begin chapter two by presenting a review of the scholarly literature on early-medieval hagiography. Here I trace the study of hagiography from the work of the Bollandists to the present, noting the development of key innovations in the conceptualization of why the study of saints' Lives represents a key are of academic inquiry in the field of medieval studies and how the field has changed over time. I then move to a

discussion of the Irish sources as a starting place. The study of early-medieval Irish

hagiography in particular has been troubled by questions of historical accuracy, focusing

narrowly on concerns related to philology, provenance, dating, and positivist concerns over

whether the saint in question actually did the miraculous deeds that her narrative claims as

proof of her spiritual authority. My position here is that a narratological approach to the

sources obviates such questions, because the essential function of the narrative is not to

prove the historical accuracy of the saint's alleged activity, but rather to demonstrate the

ways in which the saint's authority is justified. For female saints in particular, this authority

is demonstrated on and through the body, which functions in the text as a field for the

exercise of saintly power. I conclude this chapter with a brief review of the history of

Christianity in early-medieval Ireland as a way to contextualize my discussion of the Irish

hagiographic sources. In the chapters that follow, I consider the ways in which these

sources reflect the five tropes that I have identified, comparing the expression of these

tropes in sources outside of Ireland.

I begin my analysis of tropes with the narrative theme of fire in chapter three. Here I

present this trope as an opportunity for examining the "otherness" of the gendered, saintly

body. That is, female saintly bodies that exude fiery light, or that are placed in flaming

structures but remain miraculous unconsumed, demonstrate the power of the female saint

in ways that differ significantly from the general ways in which male saintly bodies justify

their spiritual authority. Moreover, this trope expresses itself in different ways across

early-medieval hagiographies from Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England, and Francia. After

concentrating in particular on the examples of the trope in early Irish saints' Lives, I trace

elements of fire imagery in the ascetical literature of early Mediterranean desert

monasticism. Arguing that the authors of the Irish sources would likely have been conversant with the literature of this larger ascetical tradition that associates fire with mystical communion with God, I suggest that these instances of the trope of fire should be analyzed along an ascetical-theological reading. That is, the trope of fire not only constitutes a unique theme in the hagiographies of early-medieval European female saints, but it also should be read from the perspective of ascetical theology and interpreted with an eye towards how these narratives speak to the process of spiritual formation.

Chapter four discusses the trope of disability. In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which female bodies within hagiographic narratives experience physical impairment. I locate my analysis in the area of medieval disability studies, a relatively recent intervention in the field, and I provide an overview of the development of this discipline by tracing its recent history. I then move to an exploration of terms, focusing in particular on the ways in which disability and physical impairment are named and described in my Irish and Latin sources. After exploring the ways in which disability features in the Lives of early-medieval Irish male saints, I provide examples from the Lives of Irish female saints as a way to contrast the differences in the gendered portrayal of sanctity. My argument here is that disability and physical impairment function as a trope that points to the ways in which women's bodies operate within the narratives as locations for the exercise of female saintly power and authority. For example, instances in which the female saint mutilates herself in order to avoid an unwanted marriage point to a particularly female concern with preserving holy virginity (male saints have no need to disfigure themselves to avoid an unwanted marriage; they simply refuse to be married and enter the cloister of their own free will). Disfigurement thus serves the female saint in her pursuit of chastity as an

ascetical ideal, even as her physical beauty is miraculously restored once she has safely

avoided the threat of an unwanted sexual encounter.

In chapter five, I further explore the idea of chastity by examining the narratological

motif of pregnancy in the Lives of female saints. Specifically, I have identified a unique

theme related to the practice of chastity in early medieval female sanctity: the trope of the

pregnant nun. After providing a general overview of the development of female sanctity in

the early medieval period, I discuss the versions of this trope in the lives of three abbess-

saints. I conclude that the trope demonstrates that the perception of chastity was of greater

significance for the female religious community than its actual practice, for pregnant bodies

in or related to religious communities visibly challenged perceptions of spiritual or

ascetical purity. A further example from the central Middle Ages suggests that the defense

of perceived chastity continued to remain an important theme in the Lives of female saints,

for it emphasized the ascetical-theological ideal of holy virginity, even if the expression of

this in actual communities of women religious was not always uniformly observed.

Chapter six looks at the theme of bodily enclosure in the Lives of female saints. Here

I explore enclosure not merely with regards to the architectural delineation of sacred space

around the female body of the saint, such as in the convent or anchorhold, but also in terms

of the female saint's dress. After noting that "enclosure" represents a growing area of

concern in hagiography studies, I examine its function in the Old English narratives of two

so-called "transvestite" saints – that is, women who transformed their outward appearance

so as to be understood to be men. Here I draw upon the idea of gender as performance, as a

series of coded messages in dress and manner that communicate gender identity to a

spectating audience. I then move to a wider consideration of enclosure in an additional Life

in Middle English, as well as in handbooks for female religious. After pointing out examples from the Lives of Irish female saints that contradict this theme in important ways, I discuss the ways in which the trope reinforces the ascetical-theological ideal. Female bodies in these narratives are enclosed behind the walls of the cloister and through their manner of dress in order to demonstrate the saint's devotion to an inner, spiritual transformation.

But what of outer, physical transformation? In chapter seven, I examine the transmogrification of the human body into other forms, particularly those of animals. Here I examine the narrative of a male saint from early Christian Ireland who shape-shifts into the forms of a stag, a boar, a bird, a salmon, and then returns to his form as a human. Against the prevailing scholarship, I argue that this is actually a Christian text and that it contains theological themes related to the ascetical ideal. Moreover, I explore the ways in which the text nuances the experience of aging, and how the protagonist in the text expresses the emotional and physical distress that he experiences in each of his forms as they grow to old age. The text becomes, then, a meditation not only on how the saintly body may miraculously change its form, but on how aging affects the body of the saint and opens the discursive space for a reflection on spiritual transformation.

By tracing the ways in which saintly bodies operate within these narratives, I will show that the body is an essential element in the justification for the spiritual authority early-medieval female saints. Moreover, I will demonstrate that these specific tropes of embodiment point to an emphasis in the narratives on ascetical-theological ideals, a point that has been generally overlooked in recent studies of early-medieval hagiography. I turn now to the state of the question: how has the study of hagiography changed over time?

How have the bodies of saints — especially of female saints — been read, analyzed, and interpreted within it?

CHAPTER ONE:

THE STATE OF THE QUESTION

The State of the Question – Or, Why Saints Need Bodies

The study of hagiography has gained popularity recently, thanks in part to the postmodern interest in the construction of the self within systems of authority, as well as to the need for the discursive analysis of powerful socio-cultural exemplars. Although the Bollandists compiled their magisterial *Acta Sanctorum* in the seventeenth century, most historians had rejected the academic study of hagiography by the nineteenth century. Saints and their *vitae* were generally thought to belong to the devotional culture of the church (and, in the Protestant universities, suspected of representing Catholicism), and thus the academy summarily ignored them. Even historical theology turned away from the narratives themselves, preferring instead to focus on questions of historical accuracy. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in particular, the major academic focus on hagiography was both "philological and positivist — to sort out historical fact and reliable text from legend and 'superstition.'"[12] In the 1960s and 1970s, a turn towards cliometric methods of analysis subjected saints' lives to the "unlikely tools of statistical analysis and quantification," but for the past forty years, "in tune with the post-modern attention to self-fashioning," saints' lives have been seen as stories – that is, narratives that tell us "more about their authors and audiences than about their heroes and heroines."[13]

As questions of gender became more prominent in the historical study of the medieval church, saints and their narratives were once more returned to the field of academic interest. Particularly in the 1980s, after the cultural changes of the 1970s generated new questions in American and European academe, stories about women — not necessarily by women — were mined for new data about the role of gender and authority

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[12] Carolyn Walker Bynum, review of Aviad Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), *Common Knowledge* 15.2 (2009): 208-209.
[13] Bynum, ibid.

in historical cultures. Moreover, Michel Foucault's interest in parsing structures of authority operative on the body led to a reinstatement of the heretofore "debased" genre of the saint's life as a rich source for new insight.[14]

Although my study therefore follows in the recent tradition of subjecting historical sources to the scrutiny of postmodern methods of analysis, I contend that the current academic focus on the body has too often ignored the ecclesiastical culture that shaped medieval understandings of the body. There is some justice to the claim that Foucault, in particular, has been accused of over-theorizing the body, creating what some reviewers disparage as the "disappearing body" of postmodernism, by using a theoretical approach that actually minimizes the lived and embodied experience of historical writers and readers.[15] This minute attention to authoritative systems of discourse of the body has, in effect, removed bodies from history, making them creatures of theory, rather than participants in particular times and cultures.

Saints *need* bodies: to curse, to bless, to work their miracles upon, to die to through ascetical practices of renunciation, to utilize in the quest for virtuous perfection, to be exhumed incorrupt through the influence of miraculous providence, to be transformed through divine power. Everywhere in early medieval hagiography, the body shows up as a narratological lodestone. The saint encounters leprous bodies, malnourished and impoverished bodies, wounded bodies, physically impaired bodies. Bodies in the lives of the saints are gendered, transvestite, adolescent, virginal, chaste — sometimes, all at the

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[14] See, for example, Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

[15] Greg Ostrander, "Foucault's Disappearing Body," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 11 (1987): 169-182. See also B. Hughes and K. Patterson, "The Social Model of Disability and the Disappearing Body: Towards a Sociology of Impairment," *Disability & Society* 12.3 (1997): 325-340.

same time, all in the same narrative. Even the saint's own body functions as a stage upon

which God's will is acted out, changing and being changed according to divine mandate. If

anything, the hagiographic evidence from the early medieval period restates the imperative

for analyzing the role of the saintly body *in history*: for evaluating not only the body's

discursive significance, but also the social context of its agency, the cultural representation

of its gender, and the narrative processes of its gendering in historical-theological writing.

The narratological focus of my project represents an additional contribution to the

current status of hagiographical research. Although scholars have offered a series of

studies of different tropes throughout the history of hagiography (for example, Benedicta

Ward's compilation of the narratives of "reformed wanton" female saints, as well as the

studies of female martyr saints by Barbara Newman and Kathleen Coyne Kelly[16]), no one

study has taken a particular period in history and analyzed specific narrative themes at

work in synchronous *vitae*. This project therefore offers a unique perspective in that it

focuses on narratives of female sanctity that operated contemporaneously to one another.

Why these *particular* saints of the early medieval period? I submit three reasons for

my use of these specific primary texts. First, the texts that I have selected demonstrate

traces of tropological "drift," or narrative sharing. That is, the narratives that I focus upon

show that certain portrayals of embodied sanctity were common to Ireland, Anglo-Saxon

England, and Francia. While this trend of narratological commonality may not demonstrate

a one-to-one cultural sharing — that is, not every hagiography of a female saint from this

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[16] Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*
(Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1987); Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing
Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000); Barbara
Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*
(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

period exhibits tropes from each of the three cultures under discussion — I detect enough

of an influence across these texts to suggest a process of tropic (thematic) exchange.

Although it is beyond the scope of this project to document the specific details or patterns

of this "drift," the tropic similarities I have identified unite my sources by offering points of

significant narratological comparison.

Second, although the early medieval period offers for analysis an almost

overwhelming number of male saints' lives, the number of women's lives is significantly

fewer.[17] A study of this kind must draw on the available data, and since comparatively little

writing survives from the early medieval period, the amount of hagiographic material that

treats of women is accordingly limited.[18] Although my project draws on the small number

of available narratives, it does so in order to present a comprehensive overview of the

available data for female saints in the early medieval period through the investigation of

common themes. The number of available sources necessarily limits the scope of this work

and therefore dictates its manageability.

Third, no study to date has focused so exclusively on the narrative ways in which

female saints' bodies are presented in hagiography prior to the twelfth century. Although

several recent studies have examined themes of sanctity in later *vitae* — most notably

those by André Vauchez, Carolyn Walker Bynum, Catherine Mooney, Dyan Elliott, and John

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[17] See, for example, Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg's study, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Here Schulenburg notes that, although the *vitae* of female saints from the early medieval period are not as numerous as they are in later periods, they suggest that women were allowed a greater degree of autonomy in earlier centuries (pp. 7 ff.). Tibbetts Schulenburg's massive study offers much narratological analysis, but it also focuses on a statistical survey of canonization.

[18] For example, of the 119 female Irish saints recorded in the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, the narratives of only four (Brigit, Íte, Moninne/Darerca, and Samthann) survive.

Coakley[19] — these projects draw on the convenience of the wide availability of narratives from the central Middle Ages. No project to date has attempted to investigate systematically the sources from an earlier period. The comprehensive nature of my project, then, introduces a crucial intervention in the current academic focus on high-medieval hagiography. Moreover, while I will concentrate mainly on the Lives of early medieval female saints, I will not exclude those narratives from the *vitae* of male saints which provide necessary counter examples to the tropes that I have identified in female Lives.

The Question of Gender: Women and the Warrants for Sanctity

As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has stated, "[o]ne way to think about feminist theory is to say that it investigates how culture saturates the particularities of bodies with meanings and probes the consequences of those meanings."[20] The same may be said for a gender-based approach to historical sources. The texts from this historical period under discussion reveal the cultural values imputed to bodies that are designated "female" and "male" in the discourse of early medieval Western Europe, and the hagiographic sources

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[19] André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Catherine Mooney, *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Dyan Elliot, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Barbara Newman, ed. and trans., *Thomas of Cantimpré, The Collected Saints' Lives: Abbot John of Cantimpré, Christina the Astonishing, Margaret of Ypres, and Lutgard of Aywières* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008); John Coakley, *Women, Men and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (Columbia University Press, 2006).
[20] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," in *Gendering Disability*, edited by Bonnie G. Smith and Beth Hutchison (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 75.

that comprise the focus of this project reveal this valuation in particular ways. On the one

hand, the lives of the saints reveal and reiterate the normative gender values of the

institutional church; on the other, these lives also represent the values implicit in popular

devotion, and thus reveal and claim meanings associated with bodies in the "secular" and

popular mind.[21]

What do we mean when we say that the narratives of *female* saints, in particular,

reveal and expand our understanding of early medieval European concepts of gender? A

cursory review of the extant *vitae* of male saints in this period demonstrates the striking

differences between the portrayal of male and female sanctity. In the early medieval

period in particular, male sanctity appears to depend on three narratively-constructed

"masculinities": the masculinity that is produced and recognized through systems of

martial or military power; the masculinity that is performed and confirmed through social

systems of patriarchal patronage and authority; and the masculinity that is practiced and

enforced through the public rejection of socio-cultural markers of "the feminine."[22] These

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[21] I do not mean to say here that the hagiographies in question clearly articulate a "popular" spirituality or "plebian" gender theory over against the dominant and normative gender theory of the historical, hierarchical church; nor do I argue that these narratives clearly demarcate an acute boundary between the "majority" piety of the early medieval common masses, versus the "minority" (yet authoritative) religion of the institutional church. Rather, I recognize that hagiography as a genre – particularly in this time period – reveals both the normative gender constructs endorsed by the church patriarchy *as well as* those gender constructs endemic to popular devotion, albeit in layered, nuanced, and procryptic ways.

[22] This discussion of masculinity within early medieval hagiography is abbreviated of necessity. Certainly, other tropes of "maleness" may be identified in the sources; see, for example, Emma Campbell, "Separating the Saints from the Boys: Sainthood and Masculinity in the Old French *Vie de Saint Alexis*," in *French Studies* 57:4 (2003): 447-462, as well as *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. H. Callum and Katherine J. Lewis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). The latter volume makes the case that masculinity served as both a source of validation for saintly authority and a source of anxiety, for some male saints were portrayed as "matronly" spouses of Christ (see chapter

masculinities work within the narrative as warrants for saintly authority, irreducibly connecting male expressions of sanctity to the discursively male-gendered body.

Gender, in the sense that I am using it here, therefore refers to those practices, performances, and discourses that assign and reiterate meanings and statuses upon the body within society. Most medieval texts exclusively identify gender according to a strict binary, such that bodies are placed within one of two gender categories (the binaries of "male" or "female"), according to a strong or absolute inherence between the subject's biological sex and his or her dress, manner, behavior, role, and "appropriate" performance of the corresponding gender option. In general, medieval texts identify gender as fixed or stable: it does not change over time, and it cannot be altered physically. Similarly, in the majority of hagiographies from the early medieval period, holiness itself appears to fall into either "male" or "female" gender categories: male saints exhibit a "masculine" sanctity, and female saints exhibit a "feminine" sanctity — or, as I will show in later sections, a sanctity that often transgresses the fixed boundaries of "feminine" or "female" through transvestism and other embodied performances.

Three representative *vitae* from the early medieval sources exhibit this gendering in terms of the masculinities mentioned above. First, the Life of Martin of Tours (written ca. 396 CE[23]) demonstrates the saint's authority through the three narrative exhibits of (a.) martial/warfare imagery, (b.) the saint's activity as spiritual patron, and (c.) the saint's rejection of "feminine" activities and manners. For example, one of Martin's first martially-

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four, "Matronly Monks: Attracting Divine Grace in Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*," by Christopher C. Craun).

[23] This particular *vita* falls earlier than the sources that I will be focusing on, but the life of Martin exerted a strong influence on subsequent male *vitae*, particularly in the early medieval period.

themed miracles is his donation of half of his soldier's cloak to a shivering beggar (who later turns out to be Christ in disguise);[24] moreover, Martin's spiritual power over the demons is described in terms of his martial prowess over them. He repels their violent physical attacks by making the sign of the cross,[25] and he is visited and ministered to by angels who appear in military dress.[26] Furthermore, Martin exhibits his saintly authority by acting as patron (according to the Roman system of patronage) to his community. That is, he converses with and banishes a ghost on behalf of the community, thus saving the community from an outbreak of misplaced local idolatry;[27] he miraculously rescues village buildings from fire;[28] and he even intercedes with the Emperor on behalf of his people.[29] Finally, Martin's sanctity is further communicated by his aggressive destruction of pagan shrines, his exemplary self-control in fasting and other ascetic practices, and his stoic demeanor (for "no one ever saw him angered, no one saw him excited, none saw him grieving, none saw him laughing," although he was observed weeping over his sins).[30] The last two characteristics, in particular, echo Roman expectations for masculinity, which were defined over against expectations for femininity. That is, the free-born Roman male citizen was expected to practice disciplined self-control (over-indulgence in food or in emotions

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[24] *The Life of Martin of Tours, by Sulpicius Severus,* as found in Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head, *Soldiers of Christ* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 7. Martin also describes himself as "Christ's soldier" (ibid., p. 8), and even threatens to walk unarmed into battle, to prove the extent of God's favor to him (p. 8).

[25] Ibid., 23.

[26] Ibid., 17.

[27] Ibid., 14.

[28] Ibid., 17.

[29] Ibid., 21. For Peter Brown's classic identification of holiness with the system of the Roman patronage, see "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 61 (1971): 80-101.

[30] *The Life of Martin of Tours*, 28.

was generally considered effeminate and weak) and keep careful guard over his emotions, lest he appear effete.[31]

In these ways, Martin's holiness is connected to his culture's expectations for his gendered performance of maleness. No woman of the time would dare knock down a pagan temple, as Martin did; no female saint of this time (or later) was reportedly visited by angels bearing weapons and clad in armor.

A second representative example further demonstrates the gendered nature of male sanctity. The life of Patrick of Ireland claims a number of these masculinities as essential warrants for Patrick's spiritual authority. Although a number of *vitae* exist for Patrick, an early life, written in the late seventh century by a monk named Muirchú, describes Patrick as a warrior against pagan magic: Patrick undertakes several contests of faith against prominent wonderworkers, proving the superiority of his God though his command over the elements. While not outright martial encounters *per se*, these confrontations are described in terms of the violence Patrick does to native superstition: he "shatters" the "dragon's head" of paganism, and, during his famous contest with the druid priests at Tara on Easter, miraculously halts the physical attack of the king and causes the instantaneous death of a number of dangerous "enemies."[32] Furthermore, Patrick takes on the (male) role of local spiritual patron, thus acting as substitute for the druids: he blesses fields with abundance, blesses the wombs of pregnant women and foretells the future greatness of their offspring, and speaks with the dead. Finally, Patrick's power is authenticated over

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[31] For a much more robust discussion of Roman expectations for masculinity, see Craig A. Williams' landmark study, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), especially 125-159.

[32] Muirchú, "Life of Saint Patrick," in Liam De Paor, ed. and trans., *Saint Patrick's World* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 182-187, especially 187.

against the "feminine" in direct and troubling ways: a disturbing misogynistic episode from

the later *Tripartite Life of Patrick* tells how Patrick, enraged that his sister, Lupait, had

become pregnant through an illicit affair, commanded his charioteer to run her over not

once, but three times, thereby killing her with particular brutality.[33] Patrick's sanctity and

authority are therefore discursively tied to the narrative expression of several

masculinities, including the masculinity that not only defines itself in contradistinction to

the feminine, but actively strives to subdue, control and punish the actions of women

and/or female-gendered subjects.

A final textual example of these themes will suffice. The prose life of Cuthbert of

Northumbria, written by Bede ca. 721 CE, further demonstrates the connection between

masculinities and sanctity in the lives of early medieval male saints. Initially, Cuthbert is

described as being boyishly athletic in his youth, fond of physical pranks;[34] after putting

away "childish things," however, Cuthbert the adult soon becomes a devout ascetic, known

for extreme displays of physical austerity (such as the famous episode in which he is

observed praying "the night vigil" in the waves off the beach at Lindisfarne, up to his neck

in freezing water).[35] This intense ascetical training prepares him for spiritual combat, for,

as Cuthbert himself admits,

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[33] *The Tripartite Life of Patrick, Volume One*, trans. Whitley Stokes (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1887), 235. Granted, this *vita* was likely composed in the eleventh century, and therefore may not be entirely appropriate as a source for narratives of early medieval Irish sanctity, due to its late date. The episode with Lupait could be interpreted to represent a *shift* in narrative representations of gendered sanctity: i.e., by the eleventh century, Patrick was being portrayed as a much more misogynistic saint than he was in earlier *vitae* (cf., Patrick's life by Tirechán).
[34] Bede, "Life of Cuthbert," in *The Age of Bede*, trans. J. F. Webb, ed. D. H. Farmer (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983), 43.
[35] Ibid., 56.

how often have the demons tried to cast me down from yonder rock; how often have

they hurled stones as if to kill me; with one fantastic temptation after another they

have sought to disillusion me into retreating from the battle-field; but they have

never yet succeeded in harming either soul or body, nor do they terrify me.[36]

Thus, like Martin and Patrick, Cuthbert's mission is described in terms of battle imagery:

his purpose is to do battle with evil, and to dodge and/or neutralize both the physical and

spiritual onslaughts of the demons. Moreover, Cuthbert operates as a spiritual patron to his

people, albeit primarily through his role as sage: always available to every visitor, Cuthbert

listens as "each soul unburdens itself," and "spirits that were chilled with sadness he could

warm back to hope again with a pious word."[37] Cuthbert continues his role as patron/sage

by advising in matters of political and domestic dispute; he seems especially open to

advising women, who come to him for advice in regard to their relatives.[38]

These representative *vitae*, and others like them, do not demonstrate the tropes that

I have identified in the extant lives of female saints from this period – rather, they focus on

portraying the male saint in entirely different terms, based, I argue, on gendered

expectations for male sanctity and power.[39] In this way, the narrative representation of

sanctity in the early medieval period is gendered, inasmuch as it is tied directly to the

gender of the saint: reinforced, produced, performed, and made intelligible through the

gendered saintly body. In other words, the gender of the saint participates in and supports

[36] Ibid., 71.
[37] Bede, "Life of Cuthbert," in *The Age of Bede*, trans. J. F. Webb, ed. D. H. Farmer (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983), 71.
[38] See, for example, his exchange with the royal abbess, Ælfflaed; ibid, 72-75.
[39] Where elements of my tropes do surface in the *vitae* of male saints – for example, Patrick appears to shoot fire out of his fingers, to light a late-night search for missing livestock (a possible iteration of the trope of fire) – the context and purpose of such episodes differs greatly from that surrounding the tropes in the *vitae* of female saints.

the warrants for the saint's spiritual power. Similarly, the gender of female saints is also profoundly connected to their performance of holiness, as well as to the justifications for their authority.

The Bodies of Early Medieval Female Saints — A Discursive Body of Evidence

Narratives of female sanctity in the early medieval period reveal both the extent to which women could make a claim to spiritual power and ecclesiastical status, and the limitations that the reality of church authority placed upon women and their bodies in actual practice. Although the church proclaimed the ideal of spiritual egalitarianism in heaven, the statistics of the population of holy men and women in earthly narratives reflect a definite gender-based disparity in numbers. This fact is borne out by simple comparison: according to Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg's statistical analysis, while "certain periods and places seem to have been more conducive to the making of women saints, nevertheless, male saints outnumbered female saints for the years c. 500-1500 by roughly six to one; women made up only approximately seventeen percent of the saints [in this period]."[40]

Indeed, from the sixth to the twelfth century, as northern Europe converted to Christianity and as monasticism spread as both a religious practice and a means for forming and managing Christian community, new opportunities and roles for women arose that could lead to sanctity.[41] Female religious in particular, especially from royal or aristocratic families, could exert considerable influence. Royal women, beginning with Clotilda, queen of the Franks and wife of Clovis (d. 544), and followed by a series of queen-

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[40] Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "Hagiography," in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Margaret Schaus (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 346.
[41] Schulenburg (2006), 349.

saints (for example, Clotsinda, Theodolinda, Bertha, Ethelberga, Ludmilla, Dubrawa, Olga, Anna, Sarloth, Gisela, and others), secured the recognition of their sainthood for their primary roles as "domestic proselytizers, or 'royal conduits' in the Christianization of their countries."[42]

As abbesses and founders of monastic communities, women could also function as public figures in leadership roles in both church and society. Central to the role of the female religious saint was the value placed on chastity or "holy virginity," which both protected the female saint from rumors of impropriety and allowed her to move throughout society with a certain degree of autonomy, unconcerned with the directives or expectations of a husband. In this way, the virginal or chaste body of the female saint functioned as a kind of social shield, freeing her from the demands of family life and protecting her from the expectations that society had for women of marriageable age.

This social dimension cannot be underestimated in any analysis of early medieval female sanctity. Saints' narratives were social constructs: they were "'made,' packaged, promoted, or advertised to the faithful. And although their promoters frequently focused on the otherworldly and intercessory aspects of their invisible patrons, sainthood was, in fact, a very 'this worldly' business."[43] Membership in the communion of saints reflected in many ways the power dynamics and signs of earthly status that were operative in medieval society. The reputation of the saint, recognized in community and immortalized in communal memory, was developed locally and then disseminated beyond the boundaries of the community by devout groups. "As Pierre Delooz emphasized in his studies of sainthood, one is only a saint 'for others' as well as 'by others.'. . . Therefore, one needed a

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[42] Ibid., 349.
[43] Schulenburg (2006), 347.

public role, a certain visibility, as well as the presence of others as witnesses and supporters, an audience to provide evidence of one's extraordinary acts and miracles to establish and support a saint's cult."[44]

This dynamic of visibility was essential to the warrants for the female saint's authority. Female saints needed to be *seen* by others; their miracles and miraculous, embodied transformations required a spectating audience to bear witness to and legitimate their spiritual power. In this sense, the bodies of female saints served a *spectacular* function within the community, and within the narratives of the Lives, their bodies play the role discursively of creating a *spectacle* for faithful observers.

This spectacular function of the female saintly body was necessary for the formation of the saint's cult in the first place. Although the first official papal canonization took place in 993, it was the local cult of the saint, and specifically her activities in a specific community, performed in front of witnesses, that eventually produced saintly narratives. Most saints won their recognition through popular devotion rather than by formal canonization procedures. Thus, for women to become members of the "holy elite," or what Schulenburg has called, "the celestial *gynaeceum*," they required a community "that encouraged, recognized, and valued their participation in the church and society; they needed a certain power, prominence, visibility, a charismatic authority, which would call attention to their extraordinary virtues and saintly lives."[45]

Female saints also needed hagiographers to formally record and preserve these memories. Often removed from their subjects by decades, hagiographers relied on the memory of the local community, with all of its inconsistencies, exaggerations, and folkloric

[44] Ibid.
[45] Schulenburg (2006), 347.

influences, to recreate the narrative of the saint's influence. In the case of Brigit of Kildare, for example, her hagiographer, Cogitosus, was removed by more than a century from the time of her alleged death until the approximate date of the composition of her Latin *vita*. The work of the hagiographer served to increase the visibility of the saint and her miracles through the text of her Life, thereby broadening the reach of her cult (and the scope of her influence) beyond local oral traditions.

The audience for "the Lives and miracle collections included both sexes: churchmen and religious females, especially members of the communities who served as guardians of the saint's tomb/cult; laity who lived in the vicinity of the saint's church; and pilgrims who visited the shrine."[46] Saints' lives served a pedagogical, homiletical and moral-educative function by inspiring their audience to emulate the virtues of the saint and to appeal to the saint's proximity to divine favor by supporting the saint's cult. In this way, the Lives

> were to serve as sources of edification for the faithful or models of proper behavior. They provided inspiration as well as *exempla* that were to be admired and, in some cases (i.e., if not too extreme) imitated. Through these means the Church hoped to inspire a certain modification of behavior, a religious conformity among the faithful, and to specifically mold or reinforce its concepts of ideal female behavior. However, unable to control the message, the *vitae* provided women with multivalent readings. They therefore used hagiography for their own purposes. Women learned what they wanted or needed to learn from the *vitae* and frequently took some liberties in

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[46] Schulenburg (2006), 348.

creatively adapting these behavioral models to their own specific situations and needs.[47]

Hagiography, then, is a socio-cultural production, but it is also a theological narrative, with specific pastoral and cultic significance, rather than merely the compilation of folklore or fairy tales. The theological implications of early medieval saints' lives in particular has the potential to illuminate our understanding of the lived experience of local Christian communities, who struggled with how to understand women and female bodies in conversation with doctrine, liturgy, and pastoral concerns.

Early medieval saints' lives therefore offer a discourse that takes into consideration the political, religious, moral, legal, and social dimensions of human experience. The question of gender, and of how gender is performed or enacted upon and by female bodies, pervades each of these categories. In this way, the Lives of early medieval saints function as discursive signifiers that point to the values, struggles, and desires of early medieval Christians in history. Hagiography, then, is a genre that is important for the study of early medieval history, and essential for expanding our understanding of the mentalities operative in the church communities of early medieval Europe.

A Final Word About Saints' Lives — Or, Why Hagiography Matters for History

The Lives provide unique historical insights not available from other sources, and they can be used to reconstruct social history for the early medieval Christian cultures under discussion.[48] In the case of early medieval Ireland, for example, the Lives were

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "Creating the Past: the Early Irish Genealogical Tradition," in *Peritia* 12 (1998): 177-208.

written to function as mechanisms for reinforcing authority in both secular and

ecclesiastical politics: they were composed in order to establish their subjects as religious

and political leaders, using the saints' miracles as powerful signs of divine favor and to

maintain their cults in order to distinguish their associated *paruchia*, or networks of

monastic communities, as politically and ecclesiastically influential. In this way, the Irish

Lives not only reinforce the narratives of Irish history that come across in the *Annals,*

Genealogies, and other works, but they also present a narrative grounded in ecclesiastical

history.[49]

Yet modern historians of the period still argue that the hagiographic evidence for

history is no evidence at all. Kim McCone has stated, for example, that at "no point do the

early Lives of Brigit transcend hagiographical commonplace into the realm of arguably

straight history."[50] Such evaluations fail to acknowledge the discursive significance of

hagiographic narratives in history, nor do they take seriously the potential for saints' Lives

to illuminate our understanding of what mattered most to the religious people of early

medieval Europe. Even so, McCone admits that "although their value as direct or literal

history may be negligible, the places and events, people and relationships presented in

saints' Lives are nevertheless of enormous interest and importance to the historian".[51]

Three examples from early medieval Ireland illustrate the need to take the historical

dimensions of hagiography seriously. First, in the hagiographic narratives of Brigit, we can

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[49] See, for example, Daniel F. Melia, "Irish saints' lives as historical sources," in *The Celts and the Renaissance: tradition and innovation. Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Celtic Studies, held at Swansea, 19-24 July 1987,* Glanmor Williams and Robert Owen Jones, eds. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1990).

[50] Kim McKone, "An Introduction to Early Irish Saints' Lives," *The Maynooth Review* 11 (1984): 26–59, at 46.

[51] Kim McKone, "An Introduction to Early Irish Saints' Lives," 56.

witness details of early medieval experience that point to the social customs of the period. Brigit miraculously provisions food, famously producing butter, beer, and bacon for a visiting bishop as a gesture of hospitality out of stores that are empty. Each of these food items were historically produced by Irish monasteries, and they are directly associated in particular with the domestic production activities of early medieval Irish women. In this way, then, Brigit's miracle of providing food *ex nihilo* simultaneously references the domestic activities of women in early medieval Ireland and reinforces the expectations in early medieval Irish society for providing hospitality to visitors (especially to visiting clerics). On a theological level, Brigit's provisioning miracle recalls the miracle of Christ himself at the wedding feast at Cana (cf. John 2:1-12), except that instead of turning water into wine, she turns a lake of water into a lake of beer – a particular detail that is unique to the historical context of early medieval Irish feasting conventions, as beer was more easily produced in the climate of Ireland.

Second, in the Life of Samthann of Clonbroney, the saint protects two women who are traveling from being physically assaulted by brigands. Here, too, the historical details matter: the narrative hints at the very real and historical dangers of traveling alone as a woman in early medieval Ireland, without the protection of a male relative (a husband, a patron, or a kinsman). Samthann's miraculous intervention in this dangerous situation is fanciful and folkloric (as I will discuss in Chapter Five, she causes a mist to obscure the women from the brigands' sight, and she miraculously encloses them within the hollow of a tree for their safety), but the narrative episode nevertheless hints at the lived experience of women, and their vulnerability in early Irish society, in a way that cannot be seen as anything other than historical.

Finally, the Lives of early medieval saints point to the ways in which bodies and their narratives have been pushed to the margins of early medieval church history. The hagiographic narrative associated with a male saint, Tuán mac Cairell, serves as just such an example. Here Tuán's own body becomes the stage for miraculous transformation, as he is changed from human to animal form, and back to human again. I will discuss this example in greater detail in Chapter Seven, but my point here is simply to note that while such an example of shape-shifting may seem ahistorical and fanciful, it nevertheless points to an experience of transformation that allows Tuán to grapple with the realities of his aging body. Tuán's story has been dismissed by historians as hagiography altogether, precisely because it seems too fantastic to be credible as an historical narrative. Yet even the most whimsical aspects of Tuán's narrative demonstrate the discursive significance of male bodies under duress, and the way that aging and despair can trouble the concept of a unified subjectivity.

These stories deserve to be reclaimed from the margins of church history, for they serve as powerful indicators of how early medieval European Christians grappled with what it means to be human. Hagiographic narratives can serve the church historian as well as any theological treatise, homily, or liturgical commentary, for they reveal the areas of ultimate concern that motivated early medieval Christians to turn to the saints in the first place. Yet recent studies of the saints' Lives in early medieval Europe have failed to consider the multiple ways in which these narratives uncover the mentalities of the very people who lived with these stories and who drew inspiration and motivation from their *vitae*. In this dissertation, I will argue that certain motifal tropes demonstrate how gender intersected with ascetical-theological practices and values in early medieval hagiographic

texts. I turn now to a consideration of recent scholarship on early medieval hagiography, with a particular focus on the Irish sources.

CHAPTER TWO:

TOWARDS A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF EARLY MEDIEVAL IRISH SANCTITY

The Development of a Historiography of Female Sanctity in the Early Middle Ages

The historiography of early medieval female saints has undergone radical changes over the past century. Although the word, "hagiography," means, "writing about the saints" (from the Greek words, *hagioi*, or "holy ones" and *graphē*, meaning "writing" or "writing about"), the term itself is a post-Renaissance category,[52] and it only came into common use following the publication of several important compilations of saints' Lives in the post-Reformation era. Chief among these were the work of the Bollandists, and especially of Père Hippolyte Delehaye, who in his seminal *Légendes Hagiographiques* maintained that

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[52] Thomas O'Loughlin, "'A Celtic Theology': Some Awkward Questions and Observations," in *Identifying the "Celtic:" CSANA Yearbook 2* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 49-65, at 51.

hagiographic narratives serve to set forth and underscore the expression of the saint's sanctity.[53]

Although for much of the twentieth-century hagiography was viewed with suspicion as a legitimate source of history, recent decades in particular have witnessed a shift in this trend.[54] Despite the challenges that hagiography presents as a genre — particularly around the issue of dating saints' Lives with precision, and the difficulty of how to interpret miraculous narrative episodes — "as historians turn increasingly from the history of events to that of perceptions and values, hagiography appears a kind of source superior to almost any other, because it seems to offer images of societies' ideal" vision for human virtue.[55] Dorothy Ann Bray has correctly observed that "the Lives of the saints may be explored with caution for historical data, but in a literary approach, the history which may be found in any literature is the history of attitudes and ideas."[56] Moreover, Jocelyn Hillgarth helpfully indicates the socio-religious dimension of hagiography, particularly insofar as it demonstrates the religious mentalité of a particular community: its values, hopes, and beliefs. "We are just beginning to glimpse how, through these Lives, we can hope to enter in the 'mental universe' of the time, how they can introduce us, as no other source can do, to

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[53] See, for example, David Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises and Problems in Monastic History* (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1963), 1-32.

[54] See, for example, Patrick Geary, "Saints, Scholars, and Society: The Elusive Goal," in Sandro Sticca (ed.), *Saints: Studies in Hagiography, Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies 141* (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1996), 4-10; see also John Kitchen, *Saint's Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3-22; see also Marie Ann Mayeski, "New Voices in the Tradition: Medieval Hagiography Revisited," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 21-22; for trends in the study of Irish hagiography in particular, see Máire Herbert, "Hagiography," in Kim McCone and Katherine Simms (eds.), *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies* (Maynooth: Department of Old Irish Studies, St. Patrick's College, 1996), 79-90.

[55] Geary, "Saints, Scholars and Society" (1996), 3.

[56] Dorothy Ann Bray, "Some Aspects of Hagiography in the Celtic Church," *Records of Scottish Church History Society* 21 (1982): 111-126, at 113.

the religion (that is the interpretation of the world and of the place of God and man in it) which was available to seventh-century" people.[57]

I have suggested that hagiography is a source for understanding theological attitudes towards the body in Christian community, and it is precisely this literary approach to hagiographic sources that reveals the complexities of theological discourse at work in saints' Lives. This is best illustrated through the miracle narratives in early medieval *vitae*. Miracle stories emphasized the direct relationship of the saint to God: proof of divine power and favor were conferred upon the saint and demonstrated visibly through the miraculous intervention of the saint in the world. This demonstration of divine power through the saint required a spectating audience: human witnesses were required both to see the visible manifestation of God's power through the saint, but also to remember and relay the narrative of the miraculous act to others (what I have referred to in the last chapter as the "spectacular dimension" of saintly performance).

The saint herself is presented within the narratives not as super-human, but rather as a human graced with a special connection to the divine.[58] Rather than originating in the saints themselves, the power to perform miracles comes from a higher authority altogether, in service to a divine agenda: God empowers saints with divine power so that

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[57] Jocelyn N. Hillgarth, "Modes of Evangelization of Western Europe in the Seventh Century," in Próinseás Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds.), *Ireland and Christendom* (Stuttgart: 1987), 311-331, at 316.

[58] See, for example, Dorothy Ann Bray, *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1992), 15, for a discussion of the human qualities of saints. See also Seán Connolly, "The Power Motif and the Use of Scripture in Cogitosus' *Vita Brigitae*," in Jean-Michel Picard (ed.), *Aquitaine and Ireland in the Early Middle Ages* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 207-213.

they may reveal God's care for the world.[59] Irish hagiography in particular emphasizes the power of God working through the saint. This emphasis typically follows a standard pattern.[60] First, the saint demonstrates her special closeness to God through miracles performed in infancy (thus showing that the power manifested through her is not within her control, but rather emanates from her close relationship to the divine from birth).[61] For example, in the Lives of Brigit, Brigit's closeness to God is directly referenced; in the Irish Life of Brigit alone (the *Bethu Brigte*), over half of the discrete episodes of miraculous action directly mention Brigit's connection with the divine as the motivating power behind miraculous acts.

Yet recent popular approaches to early medieval sanctity have made both female saints and female saintly bodies into the mirror of each author's best hopes for the genre. As Elva Johnston has noted, "Irish female saints, especially Brigit, are subject to feminist, religious, literary and historical speculations. They have been imagined as avatars of pre-Christian goddesses; they are celebrated as symbols of a lost matriarchal Ireland."[62]

Is there a "middle way" that steers away from such "eisegetical" readings of the extant sources in order to produce a more realistic picture of the lived experience of Christians in early medieval Europe? I proceed here with a review of the scholarly literature in the field that treats of saints' bodies in ways that not only take the historical

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[59] Katja Ritari, "The Image of Brigit as a Saint: Reading the Latin Lives," *Peritia* 21 (2011): 198-202.

[60] Kim McKone, "An Introduction to Early Irish Saints' Lives," *The Maynooth Review* 11 (1984): 29.

[61] Seán Connolly, "The Power Motif and the Use of Scripture in Cogitosus' *Vita Brigitae*," 212-13.

[62] Elva Johnston, "The 'Pagan' and 'Christian' Identities of the Irish Female Saint," in Mark Atherton (ed.), *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland*, ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 60.

context of the Lives seriously, but also parse the dynamics of gender in important and legitimate ways.

Recent Approaches to Early Medieval Hagiography: A Review of the Literature

Peter Brown's seminal article on the "holy man" in Late Antiquity renewed interest in the study of hagiography in the twentieth century.[63] Brown demonstrated that the desert ascetics of Christianity in the Late Roman Empire functioned as mediators between local communities and the divine. Inhabiting the role formerly held by Roman patrons, these so-called "holy men" operated as living "hinges," or fulcrums of authority, pivoting human concerns towards divine interest and advocating for divine intervention in human concerns. In this way, Brown reinvigorated interest in hagiography from the perspective of social history: saints made an actual difference in their communities, demonstrating leadership and influence through their perceived connection to spiritual power.

Brown followed this article with *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*.[64] Here Brown focused on the saintly body, tracing its influence through the cult of relics, shrines, burial sites and pilgrimages that provided both the necessary *foci* and *loci* for Christian devotion to the holy dead. Arguing that the growing belief in the merciful intercession of the saints produced pastoral benefits for Christians in the era of destabilization that immediately followed the deterioration of the Roman Empire, Brown challenged the prevalent notion that the cult of the saints represented a debased form of superstition among the common people, arguing instead that devotion to the saints

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[63] Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101.
[64] Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

permeated even the educated upper classes and resulted in remarkable theological, artistic, and hagiographic production. Brown's exclusive focus, however, was on the function of male saintly bodies. It would be left to other scholars to explore the implications of Brown's thesis in regard to holy women.

Lynda Coon's research on female saints in Late Antiquity continued Brown's project, but with a special focus on gender.[65] In *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*, she traced the dichotomies present in the narrative presentation of female saints in Late Antique and early medieval Christian literature. Here she identified three paradigms for female sanctity: the trope of repentant desert hermits, the trope of wealthy widows, and the trope of female ascetics or cloistered nuns, and she demonstrated how the multivalent and symbolic meanings that were placed on women's bodies within saintly narratives helped to shape Western gender constructs. An additional work, *Dark Age Bodies: Gender and Monastic Practice in the Early Medieval West*, continued Coon's focus on bodies within the discursive universe of early medieval Western monasticism.[66] Here Coon reconstructed the gender ideology of monastic masculinity in the Carolingian era by evaluating the embodied performances of bodies according to monastic rules, monastic liturgy, and monastic architectural space. She concluded that Carolingian monastic culture sought to feminize male lay bodies and masculinize priestly and monastic male bodies, in order to demonstrate the superiority of the monastic and clerical life over and against the laity. Yet even as Coon's work introduced the key question of gender to the socio-historical analysis of hagiography, it left behind the theological dimensions of saints' Lives, resulting

[65] Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1997).
[66] Lynda L. Coon, *Dark Age Bodies: Gender and Monastic Practice in the Early Medieval West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

in the misleading conclusion that *vitae* were merely the production of social institutions rather than faithful believers.

Other studies expanded the interest in the cult of the saints beyond the confines of the Mediterranean to Western Europe. Raymond Van Dam's study of saints in Merovingian Gaul (*Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul*) provided an essential overview of the most influential saints' cults in the region, particularly with regards to the tensions between pre-Christian systems of belief and culture and Christianity during the age of early European conversion.[67] Here his analysis of the function of the body within Gallic hagiography is especially useful, because he examined the dynamic of miraculous healings in light of the lived experiences of Merovingian Christians. Sean Gilsdorf continued this trend by exploring the dynamic of queenly sanctity and traced the intersection of saintly virtue with political influence in *Queenship and Sanctity: the* Lives *of Mathilda and the* Epitaph *of Adelheid*.[68] Providing both a translation and a textual analysis, Gilsdorf revealed the role of the female queenly saint as moral exemplar in the ecclesiastical culture and politics of Ottonian Germany.

Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg's masterful volume, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100*, provided a far-reaching and comprehensive account of the status of female sanctity in early medieval Europe.[69] Analyzing the extant material for over 2,000 female saints, Schulenburg pointed up the social and cultural dimensions of

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[67] Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[68] Sean Gilsdorf, *Queenship and Sanctity: The* Lives *of Mathilda and the* Epitaph *of Adelheid* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

[69] Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

female sanctity, locating her study at the intersection of the growing scholarly interest in the cult of the saints, and the burgeoning focus on women's religious history.

In the category of studies that focus on Anglo-Saxon female saints, Paul Szarmach has provided two important edited collections of essays that fill a major gap in the field of Anglo-Saxon studies. The first, *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*, provides a valuable resource for diverse approaches and methodologies.[70] Here E. Gordon Whatley's contribution, "An Introduction to the Study of Old English Prose Hagiography: Sources and Resources," sets forth a definitive guide to the study of Anglo-Saxon Lives, and Thomas D. Hill's article, "*Imago Dei*: Genre, Symbolism, and Anglo-Saxon Hagiography," introduces a helpful discussion of the generic forms operative in Old English hagiographic literature. Carol Neuman de Vegvar's article ("Saints and Companions to Saints: Anglo-Saxon Royal Women Monastics in Context") further explores the role of saintly queens in hagiography.

Szarmach's second edited volume, *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England*, further detailed distinct sub-genres in the narratives of female Anglo-Saxon saints.[71] Chief among these are the categories of mother saints, saints who were queens, and virgin martyrs. The collection also explored the *Old English Martyrology* and raised important theoretical questions about form and genre in Anglo-Saxon *vitae*. Of particular interest among the articles presented is Szarmach's own analysis of the Old English Life of Mary of Egypt, which inheres to the sub-genre of "repentant harlot" hagiographic narratives, and which focuses on the role of Mary's body in her encounter with the priest, Zosimus. Here

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[70] Paul E. Szarmach, *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Saints' Lives and Their Contexts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

[71] Paul E. Szarmach, *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

Szarmach parsed the power dynamics between Mary and Zosimus, suggesting an

"inversion of generic features" that forces the audience to "consider the boundaries of what

the holy might be and how it might be attained."[72] Szarmach's analysis of the transgressive

nature of female sanctity, then, offered an important innovation: unlike their male

counterparts, whose saintly performances generally reified and recoded prevalent norms

with regards to gender and authority, female saints could transgress social boundaries,

utilizing their gender and "Otherness" to present the mystery of divine power in ways both

startling and profound.

In the category of studies that focus on female saints in Ireland, Lisa Bitel's work has

focused particular interest on the bodies of women in the extant Irish *vitae.* Tying the cult

of the saints to the advancement of the monastic ideal in Ireland in *Isle of the Saints:*

Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland, Bitel traced how the bodies

of both male and female saints influenced the major monastic foundations of Ireland in

important social and cultural ways.[73] Bitel followed this work with *Land of Women: Tales of*

Sex and Gender from Early Ireland, which focused exclusively on the role of women in early

medieval Irish society and the construction of gender within early Christian Irish

literature.[74] This focus on gender in the Irish sources represented an essential innovation,

as scholarly interest in Irish hagiography had focused up to this point on issues of dating

and philological concerns. A third and more recent book, *Landscape with Two Saints: How*

Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe, explored how

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[72] Ibid., 164.

[73] Lisa M. Bitel, *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[74] Lisa M Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

these two foundress saints' cults influenced the built landscape in their respective regions

through the dual processes of Romanization and Christianization.[75]

The study of Irish hagiography was significantly advanced by the publication of

Pádraig Ó Riain's *A Dictionary of Irish Saints*.[76] This meticulous biographical reference tool

cataloged over 1,000 different Irish saints, providing comprehensive information about

parishes, place names, feast days, and documentary sources of information (e.g.,

martyrologies, geneaologies, annals, Lives of the saints, and other texts).

While many studies of gender in medieval hagiography have focused on women, the

volume edited by P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis, *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle*

Ages, explored the intersectionality of medieval constructions of masculinity with

sanctity.[77] The product of a conference on medieval masculinity organized by the editors at

the University of Huddersfield in 2001, the volume sought to integrate studies of

masculinity into the prevailing trends of recent hagiographical research. Here P. H.

Cullum's introductory article ("Introduction: Holiness and Masculinity in Medieval

Europe") reinforces the idea that gender studies in history is not merely a euphemism for

women's history, but rather should include the account of how masculinities are formed,

reinforced, and elided, especially in medieval saints' Lives. This collection addressed a very

real need in the academic study of hagiography, even as it expanded the recent focus on the

study of the body to include the ways in which constructs of masculinity varied across

different medieval contexts.

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[75] Lisa M. Bitel, *Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[76] Pádraig Ó Riain, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011).
[77] P. H. Cullum, and Katherine J. Lewis., *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

Anthologies of saints' Lives in translation have made the study of hagiography possible for a wider audience. Here the work of Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head (*Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, 1995), Thomas Head (*Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, 2001), André Vauchez (*Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, 1997), and Jo Ann McNamara (*Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 1992) deserve special mention, as each of these anthologies presented medieval saints' Lives to an audience of students and non-specialists.

An important intervention in recent scholarship on saints' Lives involves the discipline of folklore studies. This is particularly true for the Irish *vitae*, which scholars have understood to contain a higher degree of native folkloric themes than their counterparts on the Continent. Although the study of Irish hagiography has generally been dominated by philological concerns, textual analysis, and concerns about historical context, such as "the date and provenance of the texts, ecclesiastical and political issues related to the provenance of the texts, and the social and religious worlds which the texts might reveal," in the sphere of folklore and literature, "the Lives of the early Irish saints have always been a rich mine of material yet, also, a rich minefield."[78] As Bray has noted, the problems of authorship and dates, "while not the main interest of the folklorist, nevertheless circumscribe any folkloristic study. A [purely] literary analysis of the Lives is similarly circumscribed, and all too often falls into literary judgements: that the Lives at

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[78] Dorothy Ann Bray, "The Study of Folk-Motifs in Early Irish Hagiography: Problems of Approach and Rewards at Hand," in John Carey, Máire Herbert, and Pádraig Ó Riain (eds.), *Saints and Scholars: Studies in Irish Hagiography* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 268.

their best are good folklore; at their worst, they are bad literature and even worse history."[79]

Nevertheless, the narrative elements of saints' Lives have been deemed worthy of exploration. Within the discipline of folklore studies, the medieval hagiographical narrative is viewed as a literary construct, "composed according to narrative conventions similar to those of folktales: the structure is formalistic, the characterization is simple, the plot is linear."[80] Indeed, the conventions of folkloric narratives hold true for hagiography in significant ways: the episodic structure of hagiographic narratives "reveals no sub-plots or secondary narratives, and in this again resembles the traditional folktale. The focus, too, is always on the expression of the saint's sanctity, as Père Delehaye laid down in his seminal study on saints' legends."[81] In this sense, the narrative of the saint's *Vita* may be plumbed for folkloric motifs pertaining to the saint's holiness and authority, and here Dorothy Ann Bray's work on the classification of narrative themes within the Irish *vitae* proves particularly useful.

Following the categorizing methodology of folklorist Stith Thompson, Bray selected folklore motifs in Irish saints' Lives and organized them according to incidence and theme.[82] Bray identified generalized categories of "motif clusters" within the Irish *vitae*, and, in a survey of over 200 Irish saints' narratives, determined the statistical rate of incidence for each of these motifs across the Irish Lives.[83] On a purely statistical basis, Bray demonstrated that miracles of healing, of bodily resurrection (raising someone from the

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[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid., 269-270.
[82] Ibid., 271.
[83] Ibid., 272.

dead), and of the provision of food represent the dominant themes in each saint's Life. Concluding that while the *vitae* exhibit concerns that would have been natural in the context of early medieval Irish experience, Bray also identified what I want to call "Christo-typical" miracles – that is, miracle episodes that are based on and that take their formal structure from the miracles of Christ. In this way, while

> specific incidents do vary (which only proves that Irish hagiographers were not lacking in imagination when they drew upon oral and native tradition and 'shamelessly' reproduced miraculous events), in the general sphere such miracles reflect the major preoccupations of life in early Ireland: the maintenance of good health and of the food supply for survival. But more to the point, several miracles of the Irish saints have their precedents in the Scriptures, frequently in the gospel Lives of Christ, whose most important miracles were those of healing, provision of food, and resurrection of the dead.[84]

Yet however well Bray's work represents a statistical classification of folklore material in the Irish Lives, it is not a true discussion of their cultural significance or of their theological context. I turn now to a discussion of the particular problems, approaches and considerations that arise in the study of Irish hagiographic narratives in particular.

Irish Lives as a Starting-Place: A Methodological Consideration

On the one hand, the early medieval Irish Lives fall neatly within the genre expectations for hagiography across Western Europe in the era under consideration.

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[84] Ibid., 273.

As Donald Meek has suggested, "Christianity in the Celtic world, as elsewhere in Europe, generally placed very heavy emphasis on the ability of the 'holy person' to live an unblemished life, in which great discipline was exercised and the body was kept firmly under control. Some saints appear to have qualified for veneration because of this quality alone: for example, St Gall was an Irish saint who was renowned for his asceticism, and, when he went to the continent of Europe, a monastery was established in the location of his cell by those who had come to emulate his holy life."[85]

On the other hand, Irish saints' Lives were also produced with an awareness of the needs and experiences of specific local communities.[86] These local considerations within the texts have produced significant challenges for the study of Irish hagiography.

For the historian in particular, several problems present themselves with regards to Irish hagiographic narratives. On the one hand, Irish saints' Lives take place what Mircea Eliade called "sacred time" in *The Sacred and the Profane*:

> The sacred time periodically re-actualized in pre-Christian religions (especially in the archaic religions) is a mythical time, that is a primordial time, not to be found in the historical past, an original time, in the sense that it came into existence all at once, that it was not precede by another time, because no time could exist before the reality narrated in the myth.[87]

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[85] Donald E. Meek,, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 2000), 165.
[86] See Thomas O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* (London: Continuum, 2000), 59-65. O'Loughlin even goes so far as to identify "local theologies" within Irish hagiographic sources, arguing, for example, that Muirchú's *Vita Patricii* reflects local theological concerns, not merely the political motivations behind "the aggrandizement of the Uí Neill and Armagh" (65).
[87] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & World, 1959), 72.

In this sense, these are Christian narratives that clearly take place at a distinct point in Christian history: after the coming of Christ, after Christ's resurrection, after the period of the early Mediterranean spread of Christianity, and after the arrival of Christianity as a new religion in Ireland. Despite the mythical nature of the actual events in each individual hagiography, Irish saints' Lives clearly take place in a specific era of the past, however indistinct it may be according to the context of the narrative and however difficult it may be to date with precision.

The tension between this "mythical time" as described in the hagiographic narrative and its clear location within written history, discernable, with however much difficulty as such narratives may present, by style, manuscript provenance, and context of production within specific monastic communities, often proves so frustrating for the historian that the entire genre of early Irish hagiography is written off as useless to the aims of historical inquiry. For example, Dáibhi Ó Cróinín states that "most of the Lives are less than edifying, being little more than a catalogue of miracles and wonders, some of them amusing, most of them ridiculous."[88] Ó Cróinín even goes so far as to say that "with few exceptions, the saints' Lives are a dismal swamp of superstition and perverted Christianity, dreary litanies of misplaced reverence and devotion."[89]

Complicating the issue further is the prevalence of evidence for an oral tradition associated with early Irish saints that predates and influences later written versions of the

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[88] Dáibhí Ó Crónín, *Early Medieval Ireland, 400-1200,* Longman History of Ireland series (London: Longman, 1995), 210. In the second edition of this work, Ó Crónín does not deviate from his earlier assessment, although he allows that "several of the hagiographies have a strictly historical importance in that they sometimes bear witness to the undercurrents of political rivalry that lay behind the careers of their subjects" (Dáibhí Ó Crónín, *Early Medieval Ireland, 400-1200*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2017), 223-224). See. See also Bray (2001), 268.

[89] Ó Crónín (1995), 211.

saints' Lives. For example, in the earliest *vita* of St. Brigit, the Vita Prima, a white, red-eared cow appears, but this animal figure is omitted entirely from the later Life by Cogitosus, indicating that pre-Christian, native Irish folk motifs may have been associated with the saint in oral tradition, but later excised from the saint's narrative altogether.

Scholars of hagiography in the twentieth century were particularly keen to uncover mythologems from an earlier past now lost to history. For example, Dorothy Ann Bray has pointed out how Irish hagiography in particular draws on both pre-Christian narrative elements as well as Christian. According to Bray,

> The use of . . . native Irish motif, undoubtedly borrowed from a secular, story-telling tradition, shows the ingenuity on the part of the hagiographer in both Christianizing what appears to be a pre-Christian homegrown Irish feature, and in Hibernicizing a Christian literary genre. The milk of the brilliantly white cow, milked by a pious Christian virgin, is the only food the infant saint will take, not the druid's.[90]

Yet this analysis separates "secular" from "religious" narrative too easily. Although such folkloric elements connect the Lives with the heroic tradition of Ireland and its pre-Christian features, the simple fact of the matter is that it was Christian monks, working with painstaking care in their *scriptoria*, who committed the oral traditions of ancient Ireland to writing. In this sense, it is no wonder that the imagery and social performances of the ancient Irish cultural imaginary seeped into the telling of Christian tales. Indeed, Bray's classification of motifs

> reveals the kind of imagery that was used to portray the saints, the miracles which not only placed them in the Scriptural narrative tradition of Christ and his apostles,

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[90] Bray (2001), 274-275.

the patriarchs and the prophets, but also in the native storytelling tradition of Irish

heroes – the champions and protectors of their respective groups – and the

prophetic druids and poets.[91]

But the simple fact of the matter is that the vast majority of sources from early

medieval Ireland are ecclesiastical in origin. It is no accident, then, that the seminal works

in the area are studies of the sources, both in Latin and Old Irish. The most important of

these include, for the Latin sources, Michael Lapidge and Richard Sharpe's *A Bibliography of*

Celtic-Latin Literature, 400-1200. For Old Irish literature, the essential texts include

Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature;*[92] for Old Irish writings on

ecclesiastical themes, an essential resource is J.F. Kenney, J.F., *The Sources of the Early*

History of Ireland: Volume 1, Ecclesiastical.[93] Kenney remains essential, even though it is

necessarily outdated. Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: A Guide to the Sources*

introduces all the relevant sources.[94]

Yet research in early Irish hagiography has been limited largely to the approaches of

the folklorist, the philologist, and the historian, with the disciplines of critical studies in

literature and gender studies only the most recent guests to the table. No study to date has

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[91] Ibid., 276.

[92] Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009). See also James Carney, "Language and Literature to 1169," in Ó Cróinín, Dáibhí (ed.), *A New History of Ireland*, vol. 1: *Prehistoric and Early Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 452-510.

[93] J. F. Kenney, *The Sources of the Early History of Ireland*, vol. 1: *Ecclesiastical* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929).

[94] Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: A Guide to the Sources* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979). In addition, there has been an increase in recent years of archaeological excavation and surveys of early medieval sites throughout the island; see, for example, Aidan O'Sullivan, et al., *Early Medieval Ireland AD 400–1100: The Evidence from Archaeological Excavations* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2014).

taken the theological implications of the Irish Lives seriously, at least, not on a truly socio-historical basis.

To be sure, a number of popular books have attempted to extrapolate theological meaning from the Irish *vitae*, but without any reference to the actual texts themselves. For example, Edward Sellner's popular book on Celtic saints, now in its third printing, does not engage the individual recensions of the different Lives, nor does he work in the original languages (not, certainly, in Old Irish).[95] Similarly, non-academic devotional guides have attempted to reinterpret Irish saints' stories for the modern church, especially under the dubious category of "Celtic Christianity," but without any attempt to engage the social context of the Lives in their historical origins, nor with any sense of comparison with biblical thematic precedents or narrative similarities with contemporary Continental or Anglo-Saxon Lives.

Meanwhile, the academic field of Celtic studies has left behind the questions and methods of historical theology in favor of a rationalist approach to early medieval Irish sources that rejects the lived experiences and beliefs of the very Christians who wrote down the extant texts that exist from the period in manuscripts. Even as a great deal of the research in the field of Celtic studies has been done by those "whose training and dedication, as distinct from the faculty or department that employed them, gave them close links with Christian theology. . . . Celticists have benefited, and continue to benefit, from the work of theologians" and "without the expertise of theologians, Celticits run the risk of ignoring many dimensions of the works produced in their region and period".[96] Moreover, any historian seeking to enter the mental landscape of the Middle Ages "without an

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[95] Edward Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1996).
[96] O'Loughlin, "A 'Celtic Theology'" (2002), 52, 53.

awareness of how it was structured by Christian imagination, which requires an interdisciplinary acquaintance with the work of theologians, will fail to appreciate its most basic quality: its foreignness to the world we inhabit."[97] This has not prevented in recent decades what O'Loughlin describes as

> an explosion of interest in everything that can fit into the intersection of 'things Celtic' and 'things religious.' The evidence can be seen in theological and religious book shops, as well as in 'alternative' and 'new age' stores: 'Celtic' is a bookstore category description as well represented, and apparently as well-understood, as 'patristics', 'feminist theology' or 'spirituality: Christian'. . . . Indeed, one of the few constants linking all these areas of current interest is a deliberate lack of definition: 'Celtic" means what I want it to mean, what I feel it means, and no one can tell me what 'Celtic' cannot include.[98]

Yet O'Loughlin maintains that there "are three reasons why neither Celticists nor theologians should isolate themselves from the others' discipline."[99] These three points deserve more than passing reference, as each impacts my own methodology in significant ways.

First, O'Loughlin holds that especially "when the Latin material from the Celtic lands is included in the picture, then a very significant category [of historical texts] is formally Christian theology."[100] That is, on O'Loughlin's reading, the ecclesiastical and monastic production context of the source texts should be taken seriously, so much so that they

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[97] O'Loughlin, ibid., 51. See also Thomas O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* (London: Continuum, 2000), especially 1-24.
[98] O'Loughlin, "A 'Celtic Theology'" (2002), 49.
[99] O'Loughlin (ibid.), 50.
[100] Ibid., 50.

should be read in such a way as to search intentionally for theological themes. I am in full

agreement with O'Loughlin on this point, as I see the hagiographic narratives that I use for

this study as working to preserve the theological ideas, mentalities, and assumptions which

arose in the context of the local communities that produced the texts themselves. Second,

O'Loughlin holds that "Christian theology is, by its very nature, historically self-reflective: it

constantly goes back to its past to explain its content, to offer critiques of current positions,

and as a quarry for alternative models of understanding."[101] I agree that historians can

benefit from the historical quality of Christian theology itself, which constantly gazes back

into its past and reinterprets this past for the living Christian community. Third, "neither

theologians nor Celticists come to their materials afresh: the area has been a religious

battleground since the seventeenth century and the debris of battle is scattered

everywhere. Does one refer to the 'Celtic church' or 'the Celtic churches' or 'the church in

Celtic lands'? This is a problem for historians, but it is equally a matter of conflicting

religious allegiances."[102] Yet the very fact that theologians and Celtic scholars have been

debating about whether or not we can speak of a unified "Celtic church" in the Middle Ages

has meant that attention has been paid to recovering, translating, and interpreting primary

sources, many of them hagiographical in nature. This scholarship has recovered for

academic scrutiny the very texts and narratives that I will use directly in this present

study.[103]

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[101] Ibid., 51.

[102] Ibid., 52.

[103] The issue of whether or not we may legitimately speak of a "Celtic church," for the medieval era or for the present, is beyond the scope of this current project. However, I refer the reader to Donald Meek's argument in his sixth chapter of *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (2002), "Foundation or Fabrication? The Conception of the 'Celtic Church'" (Meek, 2002, 103-121). Here Meek traces the nuances of the modern search for a unified

Christianity in Ireland: Origins to the Fourteenth Century

I shall focus in this project on comparing tropes across the *vitae* of early-medieval European female saints. Yet every act of comparison must begin somewhere, and for this project, that "somewhere" is Ireland, where four female saints in particular present narrative traditions that contain rich potential for comparison and analysis. These four female saints include Brigit of Kildare, Íte of Killeedy, Moninne of Killeedy, and Samthann of Clonbroney.

To contextualize the narrative traditions of each saint (which I will do in detail in subsequent chapters), I offer a brief history here of Christianity in Ireland. Although the precise mechanisms by which Christianity arrived in Ireland remain obscure, evidence suggests three possible channels for its gradual introduction: a series of fifth-century migrations to and from Ireland; networks of trade and cultural exchange with Roman Gaul; and the trade in prisoners of war. References in the historical record indicate a series of evangelizing missions authorized by Rome and launched from Britain sometime in the early decades of the fifth century.[104] A certain Palladius, for example, is mentioned by name by Prosper of Aquitaine as undertaking a fifth century mission to the Irish, although the project was not as successful as had been hoped. This occasioned the mission made by Patrick, which tradition dates to the 430s (although the precise historical date remains contested). Patrick himself describes the tensions between the growing numbers of Christians and adherents to Ireland's indigenous religious culture in his fifth century

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"Celtic" church of the past, the justifications that often are employed to argue for the historical existence of such an entity, and the pitfalls inherent in making such claims over and against the available historical evidence to the contrary.
[104] Dáibhí Ó Crónín, *Early medieval Ireland: 400-1200* (London and New York: Longman 1995), 14-23.

Confessio. Although the legions of Rome never conquered Ireland, these early missions introduced religious practices and ecclesiastical organization structures that attempted to mirror the Roman Christian tradition of the Continent. Moreover, although parts of Ireland may have had, in the words of Elva Johnston, "limited vernacular literacy" before the advent of Christianity, the arrival of the new faith "was the single most important contribution to changing times," inasmuch as it introduced a new era of Latin literacy while simultaneously maintaining "the most extensive early vernacular literature in medieval Europe, going back to the sixth century at least."[105]

The Irish were therefore by no means an isolated people, cut off from Anglo-Saxon Britain and the Continent as earlier historiographical models have suggested; rather, a high degree of cultural sharing existed between these cultures, not only in terms of material exchange, but also with regard to literary production. For example, Kim McKone has observed that "hagiographic composition was an import to Ireland from the Continent . . . but very soon began to feel and show various influences from native tradition."[106]

By the seventh century, Irish Christianity had developed its own distinct character and narrative traditions. In the seventh century, the earliest extant Lives of Irish saints were committed to paper, although evidence suggests that a robust tradition of oral storytelling transmitted these narratives before they were written down.[107] Indeed, this

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[105] Elva Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland*, Studies in Celtic History 33 (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 11-16. See also Michael Richter, *Ireland and her Neighbours in the Seventh Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), 19, and Jane Stevenson, "The beginnings of literacy in Ireland," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* 89C (1989), 127-165. See also Patrick J. Burke, "Ireland: Savior of Civilization?" *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 5 (2013), 9-15.
[106] Kim McKone, "An Introduction to Early Irish Saints' Lives," *Maynooth Review* 11 (1984): 26–59, at 29.
[107] Ibid.

was the beginning of a true florescence of early Irish Christian culture. Organized according

to two systems of polity, the Irish church depended primarily on the parochial oversight of

influential monasteries and their abbots; the authority of bishops, though extant, was

influential only in particular localities.[108] A complicating figure in the polity of the early

Irish church was the abbot-bishop, whose influence extended both to monastic foundations

and, in some cases, to the oversight of smaller diocesan units. Under the monastic system, a

powerful abbot reigned over a series of daughter monastic houses in a *paruchia*, or

federation, which drew both identity and practice from the legacy of an eminent founding

figure.[109] Dynasties of monastic leadership, often related to the powerful ruling families of

specific territories, dominated much of Irish church leadership in this early period.

The monastic life was highly significant for early Irish Christianity, as it was the

great monastic houses that fostered a dazzling culture of education and produced such

treasures as the great illuminated manuscripts of the eighth and ninth centuries (such as

the Books of Kells and Durrow) and a plethora of early Christian texts, first in Latin through

the seventh century, and then in the vernacular thereafter. Armagh was the ancient

episcopal polestar of Irish Christianity, although as a cultic center, Kildare rivaled Armagh

for primacy.[110] Liturgical practice was heavily influenced by Continental forms, as attested

by such documents as the Lorrha (also called Stowe) Missal, with particularly Irish

additions, such as the invocation of native saints in apotropaic prayers and charms. The

uniquely Irish genre of penitentials, handbooks for penance and ascetical practice,

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[108] Donnchadh O'Corràin, *Ireland before the Normans. The Gill history of Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1972).
[109] Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 71-75.
[110] Ó Crónín, (1995), 154-56.

demonstrate the earliest Western application for private confession and a sensitive

appreciation for the care of souls. A robust hagiographic tradition narrated the lively

foundational activities of early Irish holy figures such as Patrick, Brigit of Kildare, and

Columcille of Iona, whose sixth-century mission to the inhabitants of northwest Scotland

(then under Irish control in the region known as the Dál Riada) included contact both with

native Picts and Irish colonists. A few intrepid clerics and religious undertook *peregrinatio*,

a form of voluntary exile, as a type of extended pilgrimage (or act of ascetical renunciation),

and pioneering Irish *peregrini* (literally, "strangers") such as Columbanus traveled as far as

Germany and Italy, establishing monastic centers according to Irish rules of life and

influencing the development of monasticism on the European continent.[111] A spirit of

adventure, artistic and intellectual achievement, rigorous biblical analysis, and an

exuberant interest in preserving the expressive and ancient narratives of Irish identity and

cultural history permeated this early period of Irish Christian writing and material

production.

     Ireland retained a thriving connection to English Christianity at this time, especially

via the strong patterns of cultural and material exchange that occurred between Irish

monasteries in modern-day Argyll and monastic communities in Northumbria.[112] At the

Synod of Whitby in 664, such associations came into conflict over the seemingly simple

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[111] Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003). See also Clare Stancliffe, "Red, White and Blue Martyrdom," in Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamond McKitterick, and David Dumville (eds.), *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 21-46.

[112] Cramp, Rosemary, "The Insular Tradition: An Overview," in Catherine E. Karkov, Michael Ryan, and Robert T. Farrell (eds.), *The Insular Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

issues of monastic tonsure style and the dating of Easter.[113] According to Bede,

representatives of the Irish *paruchia* of Iona met in 664 with Northumbrian

representatives who identified their practice directly with Rome; the synod resolved the

Easter issue in favor of the Roman calculation. Far from being a uniquely Irish problem, this

was an issue that had distressed many churches throughout Latin Christendom for

centuries, and therefore had resulted in a number of local synods and councils.[114] It was

only after the Reformation that the Synod of Whitby took on pronounced historic

significance, when Irish Anglican apologists sought to justify the break with the papacy by

referencing a so-called native "Celtic" aversion to Rome in historical precedent.[115]

The last years of the eighth century witnessed the commencement of a new era as

Viking raiders swept out of the North Sea and descended upon Ireland. Monasteries and

churches that had flourished in the new age of Christian cultural abundance were favored

targets because of their rich holdings in plate.[116] As the Scandinavians began to move

further inland and settle in the ninth century, they created urban centers such as Dublin

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[113] Richard Abels, "The Council of Whitby: A Study in Early Anglo-Saxon Politics," *The Journal of British Studies* 23.1 (1983): 1-25, at 25.

[114] Kenneth Harrison, "Episodes in the History of Easter Cycles in Ireland," in Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamond McKitterick, and David Dumville (eds.), *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 307-319, at 307. See also Hughes (1981).

[115] Alan Ford, "'Standing one's ground': Religion, Polemic and Irish History since the Reformation," in Alan Ford, James McGuire, and Kenneth Milne (eds.), *As By Law Established: The Church of Ireland since the Reformation*, eds. (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1995), 2-3; see also Thomas O'Loughlin, "A 'Celtic Theology': Some Awkward Questions and Observations," in *Identifying the 'Celtic': CSANA Yearbook II*, ed. Joseph Falaky Nagy (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 55-58.

[116] Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "Viking Ireland: Afterthoughts," in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, eds. H. B. Clarke, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh & Raghnall Ó Floinn (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998).

and gradually established the coastal cities of Cork, Waterford, Wexford and Limerick.[117] Initially, the native Irish fought to keep their lands from the invaders, but by the eleventh century, a period of relative stability was achieved through centuries of intermarriage and cultural exchange, and Viking settlers contributed felicitously to Ireland's trade economy.[118] Over time, the Vikings of Ireland were converted to Christianity, possibly by contact with the English church in York, and the first bishops of Viking Dublin were subject to the see of Canterbury rather than to Armagh.[119]

An organized diocesan system emerged in Ireland by the beginning of the twelfth century as a consequence of a new, intensified model for papal authority that was achieved at the conclusion of the eleventh. Although first articulated in 1110/1111 at a synod at Rathbreasil in Tipperary, it was not until the Synod of Kells-Mellifont in 1152 that this structure was implemented for the whole of Ireland.[120] Canterbury's influence did not receive the same amplification, for in this same year, four Irish archbishoprics received the *pallium* directly from the papacy: Armagh, Cashel, Tuam and Dublin. This solidified Ireland's growing relationship with continental European Christianity and with the papacy in particular.[121]

Such moves towards a more unifying effort of ecclesiastical organization proved important when, in the same century, Norman invaders from Britain and Wales began to

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[117] Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Ireland Before the Normans. The Gill history of Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1972).

[118] Mary A. Valante, *The Vikings in Ireland: Settlement, Trade and Urbanization* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008).

[119] John Watt, *The Church in Medieval Ireland*, second edition (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998), 231-233.

[120] John T. McNeill, *The Celtic Churches: A History, A.D. 200 to 1200* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 217.

[121] Watt, *The Church in Medieval Ireland* (1998), 110-129.

colonize portions of Ireland, beginning with areas along the eastern coast. In Britain, the

Anglo-Norman crown used the church as an instrument for exerting greater control over its

growing holdings in Ireland, and ecclesiastical reformers in Ireland sought to bring their

practices in line with those of England. To this end, the Synod of Cashel in 1171 mandated

that all offices of the Irish church should be performed according to English practice.[122]

Slowly, English clergy filled Irish ecclesiastical offices; by 1217, royal decree demanded

that only Englishmen should hold episcopal office or serve as cathedral deans, and native

Irish clergy found themselves maneuvered to an in increasingly marginalized position.[123]

By the fourteenth century, Anglo-Norman control of the Irish church was complete: in

1367, the Statutes of Kilkenny were established for the express purpose of preventing

Anglo-Norman cultural assimilation of native Irish customs, dress and language, to prevent

intermarriage between Irish and Anglo-Normans, and to preserve clear ethnic delineations

between the new English and the native Irish.[124] One of the stipulations prevented native

Irish from holding leadership positions in any church that happened to be located in the

area of English control known as "the Pale."

The glory days of hagiographic production now distant, Irish Christians began to

compile the extant fragments of the earlier narrative traditions of the saints into collections

of disparate texts. In the case of manuscripts like Oxford Bodleian Rawlinson B 512, saints'

lives were copied, often with an intentionally conservative Insular script, a style that

recalled the distinctive half-uncial of early medieval hagiographic source texts now lost to

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[122] Kenneth Milne, *A Short History of the Church of Ireland* (Blackrock: Columba Press 2003), 28.

[123] Wilfrid Lewis Warren, "Church and state in Angevin Ireland," *Chronicon* 1 (1997) 6: 1-17.

[124] Michael Richter, *Medieval Ireland: The Enduring Tradition*, 2nd edition (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2005), 164-165.

history, and then bound together in codex form with a diverse range of other texts of various genres (such as poems, narratives from the Irish heroic tradition, topographical verses, and prayers). For example, in Rawlinson B 512, the Irish Life of St. Brigit is mixed in with a poem about the kings of Ireland, a poem about Christ, a story about the character Queen Medb from heroic saga, and Latin notes about two 17th century personages with the surname, "Nugent."

The work of the historian of female sanctity in early medieval Europe must therefore involve a certain degree of *sifting*, inasmuch as the extant manuscripts, many of which date to the fourteenth century and beyond, must carefully be combed for any available evidence of the saint's narrative tradition. It is to the evidence for these narrative traditions that I now turn.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE TROPE OF FIRE – THE BODY INCANDESCENT, TRANSFIGURED, AND OTHER

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the trope of transfiguring fire not only

constitutes a distinct and discernible theme in early medieval hagiography, but also invites

us to distinguish the theme of the *otherness* of the gendered, saintly body. That is, in a

number of *vitae* from Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England, it is the body of the female saint

that is either infused suddenly and shockingly with divine light or overcome with an abrupt

exhibition of divine fire. Rather than serving as a demonstration of the saint's inherent

goodness or virtue, these episodes are placed within the hagiographic narrative to

demonstrate the alterity of the saint's power. The trope of transfiguring fire therefore

points up the ways in which the gender of the saint's body is re-negotiated in relation to

her separateness: unlike her male counterparts, whose miracles and bodies adhere both to

the norms of early medieval kinship groups and to the hierarchical structure of ecclesial

authority, the body of the transfigured female saint disturbs the order of human

relationships. Her authority is characterized as a divine gift, but one that scandalizes the

normative expectations of both family and church.

The childhood narratives of Irish female saints are remarkable for their frequent use

of fire imagery, a theme that appears rarely, and sometimes entirely absent from, the

hagiographies of male Irish saints. The adolescence of both Brigit and Ité, for example, is

marked with sudden and violent displays of miraculous flame. A passage from the Life of

Ité may be taken as a representative example of this trope:

> One day the blessed girl Ité was asleep alone in her chamber (*cubiculum*); and that
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> whole chamber appeared suddenly to people to be burning. But when the men

approached it to help her, that room was not burned; and all marveled greatly at this. It was said by them to be from above, what grace of God burned around that comrade of Christ, who was asleep there. And when holy Ité had arisen from sleep, her entire form changed as if it were angelic. For then she had beauty such as she had neither before nor after [this moment]. So also her aspect appeared then so that her friends could scarcely look at her. And then all recognized what grace of God burned around her. And after a short interval the virgin of God was restored to her own appearance, which was certainly pretty enough.[125]

Several elements in this narrative deserve immediate comment. First, the divine flame comes upon the prone body of the female saint as she sleeps: this underscores her status as holy vessel, for rather than generating the flame of her own accord, the fire expels from her passive body through the presumed activity of the divine. Second, the flame does not burn; this demonstration of divine power through the passive body of the holy girl is therefore shown to be miraculous, but ultimately not destructive. Her special spiritual connection to God is displayed without threatening too directly the literal and figurative security of the home, even as it temporarily changes the nature of that symbol from haven to place of theophany. Third, the witnesses to this miraculous fire are men: her supernatural ability is demonstrated to a male audience, thus establishing her autonomy from male authority figures, and thus the deviant status of her appearance as a holy person. Fourth, this fiery transfiguration occurs when Ité's father plans to marry her off to a wealthy lord. The fire, then, indicates that she belongs outside of expected kinship roles,

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[125] Trans. Dorothy Africa, *Vita Santae Ite (Life of Ita)*, caput II, Monasticmatrix.osu.edu/cartularium/life-saint-ita , accessed April 28, 2020 (not otherwise published yet).

and must therefore be dedicated to the church, rather than to married life. Finally, even as the fire has burned around her, she herself becomes, by the end of the narrative, transfixed with the divine light within ("God's grace"), so much so that she can hardly be looked at directly. Ité's transfiguration, then, troubles the supremacy of the "male gaze" – even as she is described by her (presumably male) hagiographer as being "pretty enough" in her natural state.

This dramatic inbreaking of divine favor in the adolescence of female Irish saints is represented as a fiery moment, a burning evanescence that does not destroy narrative representatives of normative society (home, kinfolk) but rather manifests the otherworldly authority of the young woman as separate from that context. The young female saint remains passive in the moment, even as this supernatural event unfolds around her, but she is also portrayed as being unnatural to her environment: her people can hardly stand to look at her. One wonders at the narrative timing of this event in the girl's life; it hardly seems coincidental that as the young saint reaches sexual maturity, her body is textually represented as a thing marvelously changed, as being transformed into energy itself by a power outside of her control.

Here the obvious scriptural precedent for Ité's experience of being within a structure that "burns, yet is not consumed" is the burning bush theophany described in Exodus 3. Several important differences between the hagiographic and biblical narratives deserve special mention. The first is that in the Exodus narrative, the object for theophany is a bush and not a house. The biblical theophany therefore takes place within a structure originating not from human construction, but rather in the natural world. The second is that in Exodus, the voice of God comes from within the bush itself, whereas in Ité's story, it is not God or an

angel who is contained within the burning structure, but rather the body of the saint herself. The narrative therefore substitutes the body of the female saint for the role of the angelic messenger. Third, the hagiographic narrative lacks any overt reference to "call": in the Exodus narrative, Moses is called by God directly to go to the people of Israel and release them from their bondage in Egypt. Ité's experience of transformation, by contrast, is portrayed as a justification and proof for her sanctity, foreshadowing the power of her miracles later in life. Finally, there is no sense of ritual return in Ité's story. Whereas in Exodus 3, God commands Moses to return to the very same spot on Mount Horeb to worship, Ité's childhood home does not become a place or worship or pilgrimage.

Instead, it is the structure surrounding the body of the saint that burns, and it is Ité herself, particularly her face, that is filled with divine light. The Middle English life of St. Edith of Wilton also demonstrates this theme of transfiguration. Here the saint is imbued with divine light in her early childhood. A "ray of sunlight shone out continuously from the crown of her head, and rose high, and clearly lit up the bedchamber."[126] The light does not burn the chamber, nor does it harm Edith; once again, the saint and her surroundings are preserved, even as her illuminated otherness indicates her status outside of the usual modes of family and church. Her spiritual authority is demonstrated by direct and supernatural means, without the sanction of ecclesiastical authority. She is therefore marked in the narrative as separate, "other" – a person set aside for later miraculous activity.

Yet in the Edith narrative, her hagiographer makes the immediate connection between this transfiguration and her eventual "betrothal" to Christ (i.e., her vocation as a

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[126] "The *Vita* of Edith," in Stephanie Hollis (ed.), *Writing the Wilton Women: Goscelin's Legend of Edith and Liber Confortatorius* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), ch. 3, 27.

religious). In fact, the divine light is portrayed as a kind of wedding gift: the infant Edith is to be "married to the infant Christ" in a kind of spiritual celebration of toddler nuptials. The hagiographer imagines this moment in rapturous verse: "Mary at the head of the virginal barracks and the flowery cohorts of chastity deems the beautiful one [Edith] worthy to be her daughter-in-law, and gives away her son [Christ]. Edith, the little child, weds the little king; let the flowery wedding chamber blossom with crocuses, privets, narcissi, blueberries, and cinnamon. Celebrate the pure nuptials with purity . . . Pour out a new song, . . . and bring the little child Edith to the little child Christ."[127] Edith's bright transformation, then, while not adhering to the domain of secular kinship relations, is cast as a prerequisite for her kinship (and status as child-bride) to Christ. Her transfiguration results in a marriage, albeit a spiritual one, and in this sense, her transfigured identity still maintains traditional elements of the gender category of "female."

One possible avenue of productive inquiry that would augment this study involves connecting these early medieval transfiguration narratives to similar themes of bodily illumination in the contemplative tradition of the Late Antique desert ascetics. Although some studies have preferred to associate hagiographic fire imagery with pre-Christian goddess worship,[128] no effort has yet been made to ascertain antecedents for this imagery within the Christian tradition. Even as some have hinted that the early medieval Irish relied

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[127] "*Vita* of Edith," ch. 4, 30.

[128] See, for example, Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins, and Mothers* (New York: George Braziller, 1996), 195-202; Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990), 175-178, 185-195; Mary Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 55.

directly on Greek and Coptic ascetical texts from Ephesus and Egypt,[129] I have not yet found definitive proof for this. Proving a connection between the trope of fire in Irish and Anglo-Saxon sources and the existence of a similar trope in the Greek sources would reveal much about the origin and dispersion of such themes.

A further question remains: in what ways does the trope of fire appear in the *Lives* of female saints from Frankish Europe? Is this trope a pan-European narrative theme that transcends the cultural distinctions between the Irish, Anglo-Saxon, and Frankish churches? If so, does this indicate that the ascetical tradition of early Desert Christianity had a far-reaching narrative influence over discrete religious communities across the Continent, in addition to Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England? In this chapter, I will argue that the trope of fire and bodily transfiguration allowed for the mystical dimension of religious experience to manifest narratologically in these early medieval hagiographies, reinforcing ascetical ideals by demonstrating the saint's miraculous and direct connection to God. First, I begin with a brief discussion of the general character of fiery miracles in early medieval hagiography.

Fire, Halo, Light: A Brief Overview of Fiery Matters in Early Medieval Hagiography

Traveling to Kildare in Ireland in the late twelfth century on one of his pilgrimage tours, the historian and chronicler Gerald of Wales found St. Brigit's sacred fire still burning within her monastic foundation, just as she had left it so centuries ago:

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[129] See, for example, Robert K. Ritner, Jr., "Egyptians in Ireland: A Question of Coptic Peregrinations," *Rice Institute Pamphlet - Rice University Studies*, 62, no. 2 (1976), Rice University: https://hdl.handle.net/1911/63225.

It is not that it is strictly speaking inextinguishable, but that the nuns and holy

women have so carefully and diligently kept and fed it with enough material, that

through all the years from the time of the virgin saint herself it has never been

extinguished.[130]

This pilgrim's account of the famous ritual fire kept ever-burning by the women religious of

St. Brigit's community, indicates the importance of fire within the semiotics of early

medieval Irish Christianity. Indeed, the attention given to Brigit's fire in Gerald's time

points to the emphasis Irish hagiographers placed on the dynamics of fire within the Lives

of important saints. As Dorothy Ann Bray has noted,

Miracles of fire and fiery events are common and commonly known in the

hagiographical traditions of the early Irish saints. The saints are frequently

surrounded by fiery signs, mysterious halos, or supernatural lights which point to

their heavenly nature; or, they manifest their sanctity by controlling fire, displaying

their power over the elements of creation. Like the Pentecostal flame which

descended on the apostles, filling them with the Holy Spirit, the sign of fire upon the

saint symbolized his or her association with the divinity of God.[131]

Fiery events and phenomena identified the saints within their narratives as having a

special connection with the divine. In particular, "miracles of fire and light in the Lives of SS

Brigit, Ité, Samthann and Lasair partake of the hagiographical motifs regarding fire as a sign

of divinity, as well as associations with pre-Christian fire cults."[132] Symbolizing not only the

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[130] Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John O'Meara (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 81–82.
[131] Dorothy Ann Bray, "Saint Brigit and the fire from Heaven," *Études Celtiques* 29 (1992): 105-113, at 105.
[132] Ibid.

presence of the divine on earth but also the "illumination of the mind and spirit, the similarity which appears between the saint and the goddess Brigit may connect her fiery miracles to the ancient cult of the goddess, patron of poetry, medicine and metalwork (a craft made possible by fire) and to the heart and foundation of Irish culture itself."[133] A number of theories that connect these narrative episodes of fire have associated Brigit with the cult of a pre-Christian fire goddess.[134] However, the prevalence of this trope in not only the Brigitine corpus, but also the hagiographic narratives of male saints, would indicate that this theme has decidedly Christian undertones that transcend the potential influence of pagan narratological remnants.

Nec Tamen Consumebatur: The Saint Transfigured and Not Consumed

I turn now to specific examples from early Irish hagiography, to better illustrate the prevalence of this theme in the Irish *Lives*. In the Life of Lasair of Aghavea (Achadh Beithe), from the Stowe MS B IV I, the trope presents itself in its most recognizable form: the young saint is portrayed as being engaged in a sacred activity (in this case, "melodiously chanting her psalms . . . and duly praising the Creator in her own cell," *laithe náoin dá raibhe Lasair ag Molaise ina réghles féin ag solusghabháil a psalm [agus] a psaltrach [agus] ag moladh an Dúileman*), when suddenly "spoilers and reavers" came to her dwelling and "set fire to every part with torches." The spectating audience (presumably, others in her monastic community) "all thought that the pious, innocent and noble virgin had been burned," but

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[133] Ibid., 1.

[134] See, for example, Lisa Lawrence, "Pagan Imagery in the Early Lives of Brigit: A Transformation from Goddess to Saint?" in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 16/17 (1996/1997), 39-54, as well as Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990), 161-178.

they found her sitting placidly, untouched by the flames, as though nothing had happened.

The Life in translation continues:

> Then said Molaise, "She shall have that name forever, Lasair"[135]; so thence the
> maiden was named Lasair; and even thus they found her, seated in a cool light and
> airy garment on the side of her couch and high bed, undefiled and unhurt, with her
> beautiful ancient golden-lettered book before her on the skirt of her mantle and her
> fair raiment, and her care and attention (fixed) on meetly praising the Creator.
> When all in common beheld the tower of Molaise on fire, and relics of the saints and
> the holy women without a roof over them, and the wonders worked on the virgin,
> God's name and Lasair's were glorified by reason of that deed.[136]

While this episode of heavenly fire may indeed recall pre-Christian themes of a fire

cult, the trope need not be limited to such a context. Rather, biblical precedents can be

found to restore the trope of fire to Christian tradition. As Bray has noted, "the motif of the

house on fire but not burned may recall the biblical story of Shadrah, Meshach and

Abednego in the fiery furnace . . . but more likely Moses and the burning bush, which

represented the spirit of God."[137]

Moreover, the fiery experience serves to give Lasair her name ("flame"), identifying

her further with the trope of fire and presenting her as having a mystical connection to God

through her miraculous deliverance. Far from merely surviving the flames, Lasair emerges

pristine and untouched, completely serene and impervious to the destructive forces of the

natural world. Thus, one flame, introduced by secular invaders with torches, is exchanged

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[135] From the Old Irish, *airlasair*, "great flame."
[136] Trans. Lucius Gwynn and David O'Duigenan, "The Life of St. Lasair," in *Ériu* 5 (1911): 73-109, especially at 77.
[137] Ibid., 109.

for an eternal, sacred flame: the saint herself, a bright and shining exemplar of contemplative focus (she never stops chanting and praising God) and ascetical fortitude.

Similar examples appear in the Lives of Brigit of Kildare. As a young girl, Brigit was asleep in her house when her father, a druid, and his maternal uncle, a Christian, were outside, stargazing. Suddenly the two men saw "a fiery column rising out of the house, from the precise spot" where Brigit was sleeping (*boi in drui occ airi na rind co n-accai colomain tentidi asin taig*), yet they found the girl unharmed. The Christian man affirmed that this was proof enough that Brigit must be a "holy girl" (*as-bert-side ba noeb filia*).[138]

Furthermore, according to the *Bethu Brigte*, Bishop Mel "accidentally" consecrated Brigit with the orders of a bishop ("intoxicated," as he was, "with the grace of God there," he became confused as to which rite he was reciting from his book: *ibi episcopus Dei gratia inebreatus non cognovit quid in libro suo cantavit . . . in gradum enim episcopi ordinis Brigitem*).[139] As a sign of her qualification for this office, a "fiery column" ascended from her head (*quandiu igitur consecraretur columna ignea de vertice eius ascendebat*).[140] Thus confirmed as worthy, the saint would become the only woman in Ireland to hold episcopal ordination. Once again, Brigit's unique and sacred qualities are demonstrated within the narrative through the appearance of divine flame.

The trope of fire is not limited exclusively to the Lives of Irish female saints, but it is expressed differently in the hagiographic narratives of male saints. For example, in the Life of St. Finan:

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[138] *Bethu Bridgte*, ed. and trans. Donncha Ó Aodha (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978), 1 and 20, at *caput* 3.
[139] Ibid., 6 and 24, at *caput* 19. Although the majority of the *Bethu Bridgte* is in Old Irish, this passage is in Latin in the manuscript.
[140] Ibid.

Another day when Finan was kneading bread for Brendan without his attendants, the house wherein he was, was seen by the monks to be on fire; and they all ran to save the house. Said Brendan, 'You need not hasten, yonder is no house-burning fire, but the fire of the grace of the Holy Spirit coming to the humility of Finan.'[141] Howbeit the brethren came to the house, and found no fire: they found Finan alone, kneading the bread as we have described.[142]

A very similar dynamic is depicted in the life of St. Senán:

So . . . the barn in which Senán lay seemed thus, as a tower of fire flaming. When that was seen, a great multitude came to rescue him. When they came near to the barn in which Senán lay, they perceived that he was safe from the fire. Some of them went into the barn and beheld the youth asleep. Some of them proceeded to slay him at once. 'Stay,' saith the good man in the barn; 'mayhap it is a friend or kinsman of ours that is there and it is he that has saved the barn.' They asked whence he was. Senán said that he was one of the host which had ravaged that country, and that he had neither friend nor kinsman in the country. So when they perceived that he was a man with the grace of God, they protected him and dismissed him from out of the district all unhurt.[143]

The same narrative episode is repeated in the Life of St. Féichín of Fore (Fobhar).

Left alone inside of his father's house, which was set ablaze, Féichín slept comfortably. The entire house appeared to be totally on fire, yet the young saint himself was not consumed

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[141] The Old Irish here is, *ni tine loisgthe tíghe súd, acht tinne ghrása an Sbioruid Naomhtha.* See R. A. Stewart MacAlister, trans., "The Life of Saint Finan," in *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, vol. 2, ed. Kuno Meyer and L. Stern (London: David Nutt, 1899), 545-564, at 552.
[142] Ibid., 553.
[143] Whitley Stokes, trans., *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), 205.

(*villam patris totam flammis conspexit ardere, non tamen consumebatur*).[144] In each case, the monastic community rushes to save the young male saint, only to find him peacefully unharmed: either engaged in his monastic chores, or gently sleeping. In the case of Senán, the spectators to the miracle blame the young man at first for instigating the fire and orchestrating its spread: how else could he escape without injury? In the case of Finan, an older, respected saint (no less than St. Brendan) must interpret the miracle for the audience as a way to prove his holiness. In the Lives of the Irish female saints, by contrast, the miracle suffices in and of itself to justify the saint's miraculous survival, and to prove her worthiness as a holy child of God.

Fire on the Continent: The Trope of Light in Frankish Hagiography

Although the trope of fire appears as a thematic element in the Lives of female saints from Merovingian France, its expression differs considerably from its expression in Ireland. Rather than a column of flame or a burning house, the divine flame manifests as orbs of light, beams of light, or as a general illumination of the saint's surroundings that defies logical explanation. I present here a number of case studies, each of which articulates the trope of fire along these lines.

For example, in the *vita* of St. Burgundofara, after taking Communion in both kinds one day, the saint began to sing a post-Communion anthem with the chorus of nuns. As she sang, "in her mouth, a globe of white fire shone, glittering and sparkling. While none of those who were near her spied the bright fire, two little girls whom innocence rendered

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[144] Charles Plummer, ed., *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae, Tomus Secundus* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968), 76, at *caput* 4. The very same Latin phrase is used for St. Declan (ibid., 36), and indicates a clear connection to the "burning bush" in Exod 3:1–6.

immaculate, standing hand in hand, saw the glittering and sparkling rays escaping from her mouth between the modulations of the song."[145]

Similarly, in the Life of St. Burgundofara, two girls who attempt to desert the monastery in favor of returning to their own people are found out in their flight and returned to the convent. Overcome with illness as divine punishment for their faithlessness, the girls die in misery, with their teeth chattering, and crying loudly. Burgundofara orders that they should be buried, but not in the convent cemetery; instead, they are to be buried apart from the monastic community, in a separate plot.

> During the next three years, a disc-shaped ball of fire frequently appeared over their graves, which flared up most brightly during the forty days before the coming of Holy Easter, or on Christmas Eve, when a tumultuous crowd of many voices also resounded. . . . Therefore, seeing the just sentence imposed by a just Judge on unjust souls, obviously a sentence of damnation, the mother of the monastery went to the tomb seeking to discover whether the cadavers were still there, however corrupt with putrescence. Six months after their bodies had been planted there, she discovered that the interior of the tomb had been burned out with fire. No vestige of earth or residue of the cadavers remained but glowing ashes.[146]

This phenomenon is interpreted by the hagiographer to be "a correction to the living and the health which threatened to fade from religion because of negligence or indifference or

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[145] Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halbord, trans., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 168; *in ore eius globus igneus candido fulgare rutilans micabat* (MGH, SRM vol. 4, 135).
[146] Ibid., 172.

even hardness of heart was thus increased through the energetic efforts of the survivors."[147]

In some cases, these "globes" of fire are exchanged for "spheres," as in the Life of St. Gertrude. Praying at the altar that held the relics of a martyr (perhaps St. Sixtus?), "she saw a sphere of bright flame descending above her so that the whole basilica was illuminated by its light for about half an hour. In a little while, it receded whence it came and afterwards in the same manner it appeared to other sisters."[148] The trope of fire in this case manifests in a fiery aerial phenomenon appearing above the body of the saint, but it is not produced from the saint herself.

In the case of Aldegund, Abbess of Maubeuge, the trope of fire manifested more like an intense sun or moon beam. "One day when she was in the secret chamber of her house, praying with the door to the outside closed, the Holy Spirit emitted rays upon her like the sun and the moon shining through the inserted windows."[149] An angel appears, declaring to her that "the Lord Jesus Christ is meant by the rays of the sun, even He Who said to you, 'I am the true light.' The moonlight must be understood as the reward of the just in eternity.'"[150] Yet in second iteration of the trope, the saint observes "gleaming globes of fire descending" while she is at prayer one night.[151]

Similarly, in the *vita* of St. Clothild, upon her death, "the house was filled with immense light, as though it were the sixth hour of the day. Such an aroma filled the nostrils and mouths of all that they thought they were enveloped in the odors of thyme and every

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[147] Ibid., 173.
[148] Ibid., 225.
[149] Ibid., 244.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid., 246.

other aromatic perfume. The brightness and fragrance remained for a long time until daylight illuminated the earth and the sun shone at its brightest."[152] The trope of fire manifests in this case more along the lines of divine illumination, demonstrating that even in death, the saint's spiritual authority endures through the powerful symbol of light conquering darkness.

These examples point to the differences in the way the trope of fire was expressed in Frankish hagiography versus the hagiographic narratives of early medieval Ireland. Here globes and rays of light illumine the immediate surrounding area of the saint's body; there is no appearance of a consuming fire or of a fiery column, nor is the immediate area destroyed, as in the Irish narratives. While these instances of holy fire serve to elevate the status of the saint as a special representative of divine authority, they do not portray the same sense of urgency or fear that manifests in the Irish Lives. In early medieval Ireland, it would seem, the manifestation of holy fire was a cause for alarm: members of the local community, be it monastic or secular, rush to save the saint and to control the flames. In Merovingian France, by contrast, holy fire serves more as a passive mechanism for transfiguration, demonstrating the unique alterity of the saint as a representative of the divine.

One additional point of comparison deserves mention. In chapter thirty-five of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, Book Two, which contains episodes from his Life of Benedict of Nursia, Gregory describes Benedict's vision, at night, of a sun-like light, in which the "whole world was gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of

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[152] Ibid., 50. Here the Latin describes this with the word *claritas* (*tam immensa claritas domum replevit*) (see also MGH, SRM vol. 2, 347).

light."[153] Benedict also sees the soul of Germanus, Bishop of Capua, borne heavenward by angels in a "fiery globe."[154] Here, however, the globe of light and the brightness of the world are external to the body of the saint himself. Benedict does not experience light emanating from his own body, nor is this witnessed by others, as is the case with Ité and Edith. Moreover, Benedict does not emit globes of light from his mouth, as is the case with Burgundofara. Instead, the light that Benedict experiences is external to his own body, and he is merely the witness to this dramatic vision. In this way, Benedict's experience of divine light differs considerably from the representations of light in the female *vitae* I have discussed.

Fire in the Desert: Mystical Flame in Early Desert Monasticism

Abba Joseph of Panephysis, a fourth-century contemplative of the eastern Egyptian desert who was sought out for his spiritual counsel on the mystical life, equated fire with transformation and transcendence. Two famous exchanges with his disciple, Abba Lot, are recorded in the *Apothegmata Patrum*, or Sayings of the Desert Fathers, a compilation of Desert Christian wisdom:

Abba Joseph said to Abba Lot, "You cannot be a monk unless you become like a consuming fire."

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, "Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" Then the old man stood up and stretched

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[153] St. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, trans. Odo Zimmerman (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959), 105

[154] Ibid.

his hand towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to

him, "If you will, you can become all flame."[155]

The image of fire, associated both with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and with the

ascetical transformation of the human subject, permeates the literature of the Christian

Desert Tradition. For example, the monastic writer and ascetical theologian John Cassian,

writing in the early fifth century, used fire to describe the highest form of contemplative

prayer:

> The Lord's Prayer lifts them up to that prayer of fire, known to so few. It lifts them
>
> up, rather, to that ineffable prayer which rises above all human consciousness, with
>
> no voice sounding, no tongue moving, no words uttered.[156]

But Cassian was describing the contemplative experience of the Christians in the deserts of

Egypt. Could there be an Irish connection to this Egyptian desert tradition? Could the trope

of fire have traveled from as far as Egypt to the *scriptoria* of Irish hagiographers?

While no definitive proof exists for such a connection, a number of hints from the

history of early Irish monasticism offer provocative clues. For example, the Litany of Irish

Saints-II, found in the Book of Leinster and likely originating in the monastery of

Lismore,[157] describes "three fifties of coracles of Roman pilgrims who landed in Ireland"

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[155] Benedicta Ward, trans. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: the Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 103, at 6 and 7. Benedicta Ward dates this text to the end of the sixth century, although the dating of the original text, as reproduced in the *Greek Alphabetical Series* of the *Patrologia Graeca* (PG 65), is notoriously difficult (Ward, ibid., xxix). The Greek here is, Εἰ θέλεις, γενοῦ ὅλος ὡς πῦρ (he said to him, if you wish, you can become all flame) and λαμπάδες πυρός· (lamps of fire), a possible reference to God's Spirit, as in Rev 4:5. See also PL 73:942.

[156] John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), Conference 9, 25.

[157] Kathleen Hughes dated the Litany to the late-eighth or early-ninth century, but this view has come under debate. Sarah Sanderlin, for example, argues for a much later date of

(*trí choicait curach di ailithrib Roman gabast hErinn*), as well as "the Romans in Achad

Galmae (*in Úi Echach*)" and "the Romans in Letair Erca" (*ind Romanaig I nAchud Galmae la*

hU Echach . . . ind Romanaig I lLetair Erca).[158] More tellingly, this same source identifies

"seven monks of Egypt in Disert Uilaig" (*morfesseor do manchaib Egipte I nDidiurt Uilaig*).

In this way, the Litany suggests that Irish monastic Christians were not only aware of their

coreligionists in Rome and Egypt, but that representatives from these places actively

visited Ireland, in sufficient numbers to be recognized in liturgical prayer.

Nora Chadwick has argued for "a strong intellectual influence operating on [the

Celtic Atlantic] islands from the East Mediterranean, whether directly or indirectly,

possibly through Aquitaine or Spain."[159] As Chadwick elaborates,

> [t]here can be little doubt that it was mainly through books that knowledge came to
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> Ireland from the Eastern Church, and that it was through books that they acquired
>
> their anchoritic discipline from the east. . . . Unfortunately, we have no Irish library
>
> catalogue for the sixth century; but . . . [w]e have seen reason to believe that our
>
> islands, and more especially Ireland, were not wholly cut off from the intellectual
>
> fellowship of the Continent in the fifth and sixth centuries.[160]

Another example of the Irish connection to the ascetical literature of Mediterranean

desert monasticism may be found in the ninth century *Rule of Columcille*. Written

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composition, ultimately settling on the tenth century. See Kathleen Hughes, "An Irish Litany of Irish Saints Compiled c. 800," *Analecta Bollandiana* 77 (1959): 305-331, especially 313-316. See also Sarah Sanderlin, "The Date and Provenance of the Irish LItény-II (The Irish Litany of Pilgrim Saints)," in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* 75 (1975): 251-262.

[158] Charles Plummer, ed. and trans., *Irish Litanies: Text and Translation* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1925), 60-61 and 64-65.

[159] Nora Chadwick, *The Age of Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 50.

[160] Ibid.

specifically for those practicing an eremitical form of monastic practice, the *Rule* commands

the hermit to "be alone in a desert place set apart, in the neighborhood of a chief

monastery, if you distrust your own conscience to be in the company of many" (*bith ind*

illuc fo leit i fail primh cathrac).[161] As Nora Chadwick has noted, this "injunction is just such

as guided the founders of the desert hermits of Lower Egypt and Palestine, and indeed

many of Upper Egypt also."[162]

It may, then, be possible that early medieval Irish hagiographers were conversant,

or at least aware of, the ascetical ideals and values of the monastic cultures of Egypt.

Certainly, as I have suggested, the hagiographic trope of fire speaks of transfiguration, but

also of transformation. In this sense, the theme is ascetical, inasmuch as it reinforces the

ascetical focus on changing the soul to become more mystically connected with the divine.

Conclusion: The Trope of Fire – An Ascetical-Theological Reading

If it is, in fact, the case that the trope of fire in early Irish hagiography comes, at least

in part, from early Desert Christianity, then the connection to ascetical theology is even

more pronounced. That is, these texts may be read as part of a larger ascetical tradition that

associates fire with mystical communion with God. In that sense, they are not merely the

product of ancient pre-Christian adumbrations of an early Irish fire cult, but rather deeply

theological, Christian narratives.

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[161] My translation, in consultation with the version of the text that exists in the manuscript Oxford Bodleian Rawlinson B 512, folio 40v. For the text itself and an early translation, see Arthur West Haddan and William Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. II, part I (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1869), 119. See also the translation by Ó Maidín, who translates *cathrac* as "city," and suggests that it might be "perhaps the seat of a bishop" (Uíseann Ó Maidín, *The Celtic Monk: Rules and Writings of Early Irish Monks* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1996), 39, n. 1).
[162] Nora Chadwick, *The Age of Saints*, 85.

Moreover, this ascetical-theological connection indicates that Irish hagiography was not composed in isolation from other sources of Christian imagery and practice. Although the texts preserve a uniquely Irish character (differing, as I have shown, in important ways from their counterparts on the Continent), their connection to Desert mysticism indicates that the communities of Irish monks and nuns that produced this literature were aware of their monastic heritage.

Finally, the trope of fire indicates that the transfigured saintly body is a scriptural body, connected to biblical imagery but also indicative of a state of sacred alterity, "set apart" in a speculative demonstration of communion with the divine. Fiery miracles demand an audience, to observe, to marvel, to witness, and to be convinced of the saint's Otherness. The body of the female saint experiences divine illumination, it is surrounded by holy fire, and it emits divine light as a sign of the saint's special connection to God.

Each instance of the theme of holy fire presumes, however, that the saint's body is healthy, whole, and unharmed by its fiery encounter with the divine. What of saintly bodies that exhibit weakness and infirmity? What of bodies that are physically impaired? In the next chapter, I explore the trope of bodily impairment and disability, and the ways in which saintly bodies were diminished and redeemed.

CHAPTER FOUR:

DISABILITY IN EARLY IRISH SAINTS' LIVES – THE BODY DIMINISHED AND REDEEMED

A number of early medieval hagiographies of female saints demonstrate the
narratological theme of the saint's miraculous intervention on bodies that demonstrate —
or that are forced to endure — physical impairment. This theme of "disability" — or
different ability — constitutes a distinct and discernible trope in early medieval Irish
hagiography, as it treats not only of narratives of miraculous healing but also of narratives
of miraculous punishment. That is, the trope of disability comprises two key activities: one,
in which the saint miraculously restores impaired bodies to a pre-impairment state (*salus*),
and the other, in which the saint miraculously curses able bodies, physically impairing

them. A third version of the trope, which is unique to the hagiographies of female saints in Ireland, involves the intentional wounding of the saint's own body as a defensive measure against the overbearing direction of a patriarchal figure. In this way, the trope of disability serves to reinforce both the sanctity and the divinely given authority of the female saint.

In many early medieval hagiographies, narratives that feature physical impairment serve to draw attention to difference: individuals who hold different views from those of the saint are cursed (with blindness, for example, or with a shriveling disfigurement of the arm), while individuals who believe in the powers of the saint and who are often of a different (often weaker) social status than the saint are "healed" (the Latin word, *salus*, for example, may also mean "restored" or "saved").

Much ink has already been spilled linking instances of saintly cursing in the Irish sources with elements of the so-called "heroic tradition" of early Ireland,[163] but my aim here is to take the analysis of these miracle narratives in a different direction. That is, I will examine the *theological* themes at work in the trope of disability. I am especially interested in probing the gendered ways in which narratives that feature this trope portray the spiritual authority of the saint and work out that authority on the bodies of others.

To situate these questions, I will first give a brief account of the development of Medieval Disability Studies, which is admittedly a very recent arrival in the constellation of post-modern studies of the body and culture. I will argue for the need to expand this field to better encompass the study of religion in the Middle Ages. Turning to specific examples from Irish hagiography, I will show how early-medieval religious texts raise unique

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[163] For example, see Lisa Bitel, "Saints and Angry Neighbors: The Politics of Cursing in Irish Hagiography," in Sharon Farmer and Barbara H. Rosenwein (eds.), *Monks and Nuns, Saints and Outcasts: Religion in Medieval Society (Essays in Honor of Lester K. Little)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 123-150, especially 137-139.

possibilities for the study of disability in historical Christianity. After discussing the ways in which the Irish sources connect disability with gender, I conclude that these tales of bodily disability demonstrate not only the power of the saint over physical impairment, but also the extent to which early medieval hagiography represents bodies as *fields* for the exercise of saintly power: in other words, persons with disabilities represent a particular type of medieval body, a particular category for the public demonstration of spiritual authority in the secular world.

Disability Studies in the Middle Ages: A Brief Overview

Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, a number of American scholars from the fields of cultural and literary studies have attempted to theorize the ways in which impairment and physical difference have been represented in literature and art. Rosemarie Garland Thompson in particular has analyzed the discursive processes of marginalization at work in narratives that represent disabled bodies as categorically Other, as a narrative field onto which the expectations and fears of both author and audience are projected.[164]

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[164] For example, Rosemarie Garland Thompson has coined the term "normate" to refer to the ways in which our expectations of bodies conform to cultural constructions of normalcy in a particular society. The normate body is more than ethically normative, meaning that it is more than an ideal that is either intentionally or unconsciously imposed on bodies in society. The normate body is also more than a "normal" body, meaning that it is more than representative of bodies that conform to a statistical average. Rather, "normate," as a term, refers to the discursive terrain of the body and recognizes that bodies never conform to what is expected. See, for example, Rosemarie Garland Thompson, *Extraordinary Bodies: figuring physical disability in American culture and literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 8.

What do we mean when we use the term "disability," and what of the disabled body in history? Cultural historian Lennard Davis has argued that disability as a category was not invented until the nineteenth century, because as the modern medical establishment began to standardize its practices and techniques on the body, the cultural understanding of bodies themselves began to shift.[165] Only some bodies were labeled "normal" and "good," as health and physical intactness or wholeness became the universal standard against which all bodies were measured. Bodies with impairments or permanent disabilities were therefore seen as deviating from this norm; modern medicine understood deviant bodies as objects upon which science's perennial agenda of improvement must intervene. Disabled persons therefore became a separate category, a separate and debased class of people whom society marginalized precisely because imperfect bodies could not measure up to the idealized scientific standard of human flourishing. Key to this process is the definitional distinction between impairment and disability. As Davis observes, while "an *impairment* involves a loss or diminution of sight, hearing, mobility, mental ability, and so on. . . an impairment only becomes a *disability* when the ambient society creates environmental barriers to human agency."[166] In other words, an impairment becomes a disability when a culture surrounds the impaired body with both discourse and practices that result in the marginalization and the diminution of that person's full participation in society.

Although Davis examined the development of disability as a category in the modern era, a number of recent studies attempting to theorize the socio-historical construction of

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[165] Lennard J. Davis, "Constructing Normalcy: the bell curve, the novel, and the invention of the disabled body in the nineteenth century," in L. J. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3-16.

[166] Lennard J. Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002), 41.

"disability" in the Middle Ages have struggled with the ways in which historical Christian texts and practices demarcated cultural definitions of physical difference. Although productive insofar as they raise important questions for the emerging field of Medieval Disability Studies, these approaches have too often prioritized the official position of the institutional church over the diversity of theological and practical attitudes toward physical impairment that characterize the wide expanse of medieval Christianity, particularly in the early medieval era.

The origins of the short history of disability studies in the Middle Ages as an academic discipline may be traced to the work of Edward Wheatley, who claimed in his influential 2002 article that "the Church largely controlled the discursive terrain of illness and disability."[167] Wheatley proposed that the medieval Church's "institutionalized relationship to disability was roughly analogous to (modern) institutionalized medicine's control of disability" under the "medical model" of disability in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "for both institutionally segregate and dis-empower the disabled."[168] Wheatley concluded that the most accurate paradigm for pre-modern constructions of disability is what he terms the "religious model" of disability – that is, that religion played the same regulatory role over the body in medieval society that science and medicine have played in the modern world.[169]

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[167] Edward Wheatley, "Blindness, Discipline and Reward: Louis IX and the Foundation of the Hospice des Quinze Vingts," in *Disability Studies Quarterly* 22.4 (2002): 194-212, especially 197.

[168] Wheatley, "Blindness, Discipline and Reward," 197. See also Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 12.

[169] Wheatley, Edward, "Blindness, Discipline and Reward", 197.

Wheatley analyzed the discursive tradition that led to the construction of the social identities of the blind residents of a medieval French hospital. Wheatley claimed that "before the foundation of the Quinze-Vingts, the Church largely controlled the discursive terrain of illness and disability" in three ways. First, "the Church's interest in the disabled was based on Jesus' role as a miraculous healer and spiritual 'physician'."[170] Second, medieval theologians such as Conrad of Zurich depicted "the blind" as "vile," "marked with a stigma," their bodies visible indications of the divine propensity for punishing sin with physical impairment. Third, Wheatley claimed that the medieval Church's "institutionalized relationship to disability was roughly analogous to institutionalized medicine's control of disability" under the "medical model" of disability in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "for both institutionally segregate and disempower the disabled."[171]

Wheatley's "religious model" of disability, though provocative, makes two problematic assumptions. First, it presupposes that the norms of the institution carried over into the lived experience of all European Christians, an inference that the historical record simply cannot support. Recent religious studies of the Middle Ages have slowly uncovered the great diversity of localized cultic activity, ritual practices, vernacular theologies, folk traditions, and material culture that characterized Christian Europe, particularly prior to the twelfth century.[172] In the early medieval period in particular, the church's institutional control over the churches of Western Europe varied considerably, so

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[170] Ibid., 202.

[171] Ibid., 207.

[172] See, for example, Carl Watkins, "'Folklore' and 'Popular Religion' in Britain during the Middle Ages," in *Folklore* 115.2 (2004): 140-150; see also Sita Steckel, "Historicizing the Religious Field: Adapting Theories of the Religious Field for the Study of Medieval and Early Modern Europe," in *Church History and Religious Culture* 99.3-4 (2019): 331-370; as well as Julia M. H. Smith, *Europe After Rome: A New Cultural History, 500-1000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

it is much more accurate to talk about "early medieval Christianities" than to assume one monolithic, united, all-encompassing rule of the Church. We cannot simply assume that the official doctrine of the medieval church, which on Wheatley's reading equated physical impairment with evidence of sin *tout court*, was a universal standard.

Moreover, Wheatley assumes that if the official church held to a particular model of disability or physical difference, then individual Christians must have adhered to this model out of either coercion or some sense of misplaced obedience to the church hierarchy. Even if the Church held to one "official" theology of the body, this does not mean that all believers agreed with or even understood the policies of the institution. Although Wheatley opens up an intriguing dimension in historical studies of disability by turning his attention to medieval religion, his assumptions about the power of the institutional church obscure the kind of "on the ground" data that have fascinated post-modern social historians.[173]

Wheatley focused on high-medieval case studies, specifically on the development of hospitals for the blind in Paris; yet much more work needs to be done on disability in the early medieval period in other religious institutional contexts. For example, Irina Metzler's recent study of disability in late medieval hagiography is very useful, but no study to date deals explicitly with early-medieval hagiography. Metzler's work represents a second development in the field of Medieval Disability Studies that takes a more theoretical approach in the analysis of medieval physical difference. In her influential 2006 book, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment During the High Middle*

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[173] Ronald Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), discusses the ways in which the posthumous miracles of the saints were an important partner to medieval medicine, especially insofar as most common people could not afford the services of a doctor, but makes no real attempt to theorize the role of disability in the Middle Ages.

Ages, ca. 1100-1400, Metzler wrestled with the categories of "impairment" (the Latin terms

here include *modus deficiens* or, as a category, *infirmi*, "the infirm") and "disability"

(*debilitas*) in late medieval hagiography, and she ultimately concluded that "the medieval

period had only an awareness of impairment [as a physical category] but not of disability

[as a social category]."[174] Here Metzler grounds her study in the rigorous definition and

separation of these terms, claiming that while medieval texts recognized impairment "as a

'fact' which exists independently of the social values attached to it," disability as a social

category was rare and "there were very few medieval disabled people."[175]

    As Joshua Eyler has noted, Metzler's claim that "there were very few medieval

disabled people" seems to be the product of defining the categories of "impairment" and

"disability" too narrowly, and however one defines these terms, Metzler's conclusion seems

"a bit extreme."[176] As Eyler observes, "Metzler is certainly not alone in mapping this kind of

definitional structure onto a subject of study; indeed, this frequently happens when

scholars use the social model of disability as their starting point."[177] Instead, Eyler

proposes the use of the cultural model for disability, a model that supersedes the medical

and social models by removing the word "impairment" from the discussion altogether and

thinking of disability in the Middle Ages as "something that is constructed by both bodily

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[174] Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment in the High Middle Ages, c.1100–c.1400*, Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture (London and New York: 2006), 6.
[175] Ibid., 190.
[176] Joshua R Eyler,, "Introduction: Breaking Boundaries, Building Bridges," in *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations* (Surrey, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 8.
[177] Ibid.

difference and social perception at the same time."[178] It is to his work, the third

development in the emerging field of disability studies in the Middle Ages, that I now turn.

Eyler is the editor of a recent volume of essays entitled, *Disability in the Middle Ages:*
Reconsiderations and Reverberations, and what is particularly impressive about this volume
is the wide array of methodological approaches and historical sources that it presents. For
example, Hannah Skoda analyzes what she calls "the diverse ontological levels of disability"
that may be found in the thirteenth-century *Miracles de Saint Louis*; Julie Singer offers a
further refinement of David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's notion of narrative prosthesis by
examining the emerging trope of the "blind virtuoso" in fourteenth-century song; and Scott
Wells explores what he terms the "exemplary blindness" of Francis of Assisi. These are
merely the outstanding representatives from the fourteen essays that constitute the book.
By offering such a diverse range of approaches and sources, the book succeeds in
considering disability from a number of related historical perspectives.

Above all, this anthology makes the case for the study of disability in the Middle
Ages as a discrete sub-category of inquiry by arguing for the necessity for understanding
the processes of social marginalization and social constructions of physical difference in
their historical contexts. While Eyler admits that the cultural model for disability currently
represents the best approach to medieval sources, each of the essays he includes in his
volume struggle with the terms, "disability," and "impairment," in different ways. This work
arose out of the roundtable discussions and collaborations of the Society for the Study of
Disability in the Middle Ages, a group founded by Eyler at the forty-third International

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[178] Ibid.

Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 2007, and that roundtable

atmosphere permeates the book as a whole.

Yet despite its benefits as an interdisciplinary work in medieval studies, *Disability in

the Middle Ages* neglects religion in the *early* medieval period altogether. This is a

significant omission, for it was precisely in this era that the seeds of medieval European

Christian social categories were sown through the practices and beliefs of diverse localized

Christian communities. Two significant points from my own study of physical difference in

early medieval Ireland illustrate the need for the intersection of disability studies with

historical studies in early medieval Christianity. The first is simply that early-medieval

religious sources, particularly within the genre of hagiographic literature, are fruitful

locations for harvesting narratological data regarding the operation of the categories of

"impairment" and "disability" within diverse religious cultures. That is, early-medieval Irish

hagiographies present different "readings" or interpretive lenses on bodies than do early

medieval hagiographies from Francia, and this difference points out the diversity of

Christian opinions in the period with regard to the social categories of "impairment,"

"disability," and "holiness."

The second point is that early-medieval religious texts, and saints' Lives in

particular, reveal *theological* approaches to the body in general, and to women's bodies in

particular. Far from belonging merely to the genres of folklore or heroic narrative, women's

Lives reveal the theological assumptions about grace, divine intervention, saintly holiness,

and religious authority that were operative within the socially constructed categories of

"impairment" and "disability." In this sense, early medieval hagiography, and the operation

of female bodies within it, has much to offer to the field as a source of information about

how early medieval Christians in different parts of Europe understood embodiment, gender, and divine authority.

Yet studies that have focused specifically on early-medieval Irish sources have emphasized an approach that elides unique narrative elements that point to the theological ramifications of disability. Previous attempts to categorize the motifs or tropes of early medieval hagiography, especially within the Irish sources, have too often conflated healing miracles with cursing miracles, under the general and categorically vague heading of "bodily miracles," or embodied demonstrations of power. For example, Dorothy Ann Bray identifies miracles of "saintly malediction" as a category that comprises not only the punitive cursing of unbelievers with physical impairments, but also the cursing of enemy fields with infertility.[179] Yet to date, no study has separated out the narrative trope of the *saintly* intervention on human bodies from the commingling of "blessings and curses", and so I will discuss the examples of this trope in the Lives of Irish saints below.

Medieval Disability Studies is a growing field, and there is a need to expand this field to better encompass the approaches of religious studies in the Middle Ages. The question for the present study is how early medieval hagiographic texts perform a particular set of narratological expectations for physical difference. If it is true, as Lennard Davis and Rosemarie Garland Thompson argue, that "disability" is a set of socially mandated discourses that frame physical difference according to specific narratives, then what do the saints' lives of early medieval Europe tell us about the narrative representation of bodies? In particular, what do early medieval theological models of health and the body reveal

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[179] Dorothy Ann Bray, *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints*, FF Communications, vol. CIX, no. 251 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica), 9-138.

about authority and power in Irish hagiography, and how are these models related to the construction and articulation of gender?

A Terminological and Linguistic Approach

First, let me begin by noting the significance of vernacular terminological descriptions of impairment or illness in early-medieval Christian texts. Many Latin writers from the Continent use broad terms like *debilitas* for what appears at first glance to be social categories of physical difference. Even Bede the Venerable refers to groups of *leprosi*, or lepers, in such as way as to discursively indicate their separation from the social majority. Later medieval hagiographies further emphasize the stigma of leprosy by directly assuming the Mediterranean social categories of the New Testament, where lepers in particular were relegated to a lower-status group based on the visible appearance of illness. Yet early-medieval vernacular sources lack this degree of separation or ostracization.

For example, the Old Irish word most often translated as "leprous" (both by modern English editions and by later medieval Latin commentaries) is *claimnach*, which does not indicate Hansen's disease *per se*, but rather refers to a skin condition that distinctively involves epidermal peeling. Thus, the word itself in its adjectival form is used in descriptions of the natural world to refer to the peeling of tree bark in the spring, or the mangy quality of animal hair. Groups of people with this condition are called *clamrad*, but this does not mean that they were marginalized on account of their infirmity; rather, *clamrad* is simply the plural form of the noun, meaning in its literal sense "the scratching ones" – so while the texts depict a socio-linguistic acknowledgement of *clam* as a category

of illness, this does not necessarily imply that this any attendant process of social

rejection.[180] In this way, early-medieval vernacular sources introduce subtle nuances in the

social categories of physical difference that disturb the totalizing effects of Latin terms and

their translation. The vernacular terminology associated with the Latin category of

*debilitas*in miraculous healing narratives suggests a more varied expression, and indeed a

more ambiguous representation, of disability as a social category or impairment as a

physiological category. Indeed, in Old Irish, there is no one term that equates directly to

debilitas; rather, a number of terms describe discrete physical symptoms.

Second, the narrative representation of bodies within early medieval texts troubles

the axiomatic categories of "disability" and "impairment" by presenting physical difference

in social terms that differ significantly from later medieval constructions. In several

hagiographies from early medieval Ireland, for example, a woman's unwanted pregnancy

places her in the role of social outcast. This is particularly apparent in the numerous stories

of "pregnant nuns" in early Irish monastic literature. Here physical difference indicates the

nun's relation to her monastic community: the visible protrusion of her pregnant body

marks her as unacceptable, a failure in the pursuit of the virtue of chastity and a pariah in

the religious community.

A passage from an early Latin *Vita* of St. Brigit of Kildare features this theme. Here

the text reads: "It is fitting to recall another miracle. In the potent strength of her ineffable

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[180] William P. MacArthur, "The Identification of Some Pestilences Recorded in the Irish Annals." *Irish Historical Studies 6* (1949): 169–88, has argued that *lobhar*, the word in Old Irish for leprosy used in the Annals of Ulster and Inisfallen, likely meant "little more than 'infirm'" (187), and that *clamh* likely referred to some sort of scabbing disease of the skin (187). He also identifies the words *blefed*, *belfeth*, and *belefeth* as referring specifically bubonic plague (172).

faith, Brigit blessed a woman who, though she had taken a vow of chastity, fell through

weakness into youthful lust so that her womb swelled with child. The fetus disappeared,

without coming to birth or causing pain, and the woman was restored to health and to

penance" (*potentissima enim et ineffabili fidei fortitudine, quamdam feminam, post votum

integritatis, fragilitate hu- mana in juvenili voluptatis desiderio lapsam, et habentem jam

praegnantem ac tumescentem uterum, fideliter benedixit: et evanescente in vulva conceptu,

sine partu et sine dolore eam sanam ad penitentiam restituit*.)[181] This passage implies that

through Brigit's intervention, the woman suffered a miscarriage – or even a divinely-

sanctioned abortion. This act has the double effect of preventing the birth of an unplanned-

for child while simultaneously providing for the restoration of the woman to the

community of "holy virgins."

In addition, the woman's postpartum state in the community is described as a state

of "health"; in effect, Brigit's blessing has the effect of returning the woman's body to its

status before the pregnancy - that is, to the status of *perceived* chastity and wholeness. The

disappearance of the woman's visibly pregnant abdomen has the effect of minimizing the

perceived damage done to her status as a religious, and indeed, to the status of holy

virginity as a value in the community at large. With the pregnancy conveniently removed,

the woman may once again present the appearance of a holy virgin - even if she were

virginal in appearance only. Thus, Brigit's intervention has the effect of removing the

physical indication of sexual sin in the body of the lapsed nun, granting her entry to the

process for rehabilitation in the religious community.

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[181] II.13, *Acta Sanctorum* vol. 4, entry for Feb I. col.136F; translation adapted from Liam de Paor, "Cogitosus' Life of St. Brigid the Virgin," in *St Patrick's World* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1993), 211.

In this sense, the body of the woman is "healed," but this is only a "speculative restoration," inasmuch as it is only the *visible* appearance of bodily chastity that is restored through Brigit's intervention. The woman's body becomes a mirror, a *speculum*, that reflects the virtue of chastity back to her own community, thereby reinforcing it, even as the woman herself fails to embody that virtue in physiological reality.

The hagiographer specifically calls this a miracle; the failed pregnancy is the evidence of Brigit's supernatural power, and indeed, when read in the context of the surrounding passages, it is yet another example of Brigit's miraculous generosity in provisioning the unfortunate. But what I find striking here is the communal dimension to the passage: the woman's health is only truly restored to her when she is once again welcomed back into the community. The "healing" ministrations of Brigit therefore have a social as well as physiological function in this text.

Stories of pregnant nuns constitute a unique trope in early Irish hagiography, which appears in a surprising number of early medieval Irish saints' lives. I submit that in each of these stories, the woman's pregnancy is represented as a gendered disability – as a contradiction to the entire social value system undergirding the normative performance of the female monastic life, for the pregnant body is a type of body that must be separated and rejected by the religious community. Perhaps most importantly, the *wanted* pregnancies of married *laywomen* are never represented on these terms. It is only pregnant religious bodies that threaten and destabilize the monastic ideal. The pregnancy is more than a physical impairment because it threatens and destabilizes the monastic ideal and troubles normative religious ideals for the body. Rather, the nun's pregnancy is a disability precisely

because this physical condition directly marginalizes the woman's participation in the monastic community.

Pregnancy as disability? In the hagiographies of early medieval Christian Ireland, yes. As the field of Medieval Disability Studies continues to develop, it must expand to include considerations of these kinds of texts, to further explore the questions they raise about physical difference. In particular, narratives from the margins of early medieval Christianity challenge the notion of a unified and consistent medieval theology of the body. Thus, by presenting vernacular alternatives to medieval Latin categories of physical identity, the religious texts of the early Middle Ages challenge our assumptions about disability history.

Miracles and the Body in the Lives of the Irish Male Saints

The lives of the male Irish saints frequently portray what Julia H. M. Smith calls miracles of "holy vengeance."[182] This theme of vengeance, taken against God's enemies on God's behalf, does intersect with the trope of disability in a number of texts, among them the life of St. Columba (Columkille) of Iona. In Book One of Columba's life, his hagiographer, Adomnán, relates the story of one Áed Dub, a violent warrior of Ulster who had shed much blood and butchered many (*valde sanguinarius homo et multorum fuerat trucidator*).[183] After passing some years in the monastery of Findchán, an Irish abbot in Britain, this Áed

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[182] Julia H. M. Smith, "The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe, c. 780-920," in *Past and Present* 146 (1995): 3-37, especially 30. For more on "holy vengeance" in the Irish *vitae*, see Máire Johnson, "Vengeance is Mine: Saintly Retribution in Medieval Ireland," in Susanna Throop and Paul Hyams (eds.) *Vengeance in the Middle Ages: Emotion, Religion, and the Discourse of Violent Conflict* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 13-63; and "Medicine and Miracle: Law Enforcement in the *Lives* of Irish Saints," in Wendy Turner and Sara Butler (eds.), *Medicine and the Law in the Middle Ages*, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 288-316.
[183] Adomnán of Iona, *Life of Columba*, I.38, trans. Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 138.

Dub was ordained to the priesthood, although Adomnán observes that the ordination was not valid (*quamvis non recte, apud presbyter ordinatus est*) because the bishop had not wanted to place his hands on Áed's head until Findchán had first placed his hand there in confirmation (*nisi prius idem Findchanus … suam capiti ejus pro confirmatione imponeret dexteram*). This was because the abbot Findchán apparently held a "carnal love" for the former warrior (*Aidum carnaliter amans*), and the bishop hesitated to ordain Áed Dub until the amorous abbot had first demonstrated his lascivious favor for the man through this liturgical gesture.[184]

Upon hearing of this ordination, Columba denounced it and prophesied that the right hand which Findchán had laid on the head of Áed Dub would "soon decay" (*mox computrescet*) and be amputated, and that the falsely-ordained murderer would return to his harrowing ways and eventually be killed by spear thrust and then drowning. Here the narrative represents the death of the bloodthirsty warrior as fitting punishment for his own murderous ways; Áed Dub's punitive destruction depicts the "eye for an eye" ethics of the Hebrew Bible, and it mirrors the vengeance miracles of St. Patrick.

The disfigurement of the abbot Findchán is not as clear-cut, however. On the one hand, the narrative represents the withering of his hand as righteous punishment for having exercised the spiritual authority of his office inappropriately; on the other hand, the narrative is careful to note that he transgressed his office in such a way precisely because of his "carnal love" for Áed Dub. The disfigurement of his limb therefore represents a punishment not only for bad liturgical intention, but also for misplaced and unbridled desire, certainly an affront to the monastic ideal of chastity, and in this way, the punitive

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[184] Ibid., 139.

disability is linked with sexual indiscretion (or at least with misplaced same-gender desire).

In a second episode from Book Two of the same text, Columba hears of a well that the local Pictish people claimed to be magical, for anyone who drinks water from the well or washes in it is struck down with illness. In particular, the people become leprous (*leprosi*) or half blind (*lusci*), or they develop mobility impairments (*etiam debiles*), or they are afflicted with "some other infirmity" (*quibuscunque aliis infestati infirmitatibus*).[185] Raising his hands and calling upon the name of Christ, the saint washes his own hands and feet in the diabolical waters, and then he and his disciples drink from the water. This action delights the local druids, who assume that the saint will fall prey to the disabling nature of the well, but the demons of the well flee from it and from that day forward, the well reversed its charms and became a place for healing and renewal, known as a holy place where ailments could be cured by drinking or soaking in the waters.

Here the impairments are not punitive so much as they are the direct result of malevolent forces. Columba functions as rescuer and patron to the people by banishing the demonic presence in the water and saving the people from harm, thus demonstrating the triumphant power of the Christian God over evil. The narrative proof for the efficacy of Columba's own spiritual power is first worked out on the bodies of Columba and his companions. Only when they wash themselves in the water, and when they themselves ingest it – only when their own bodies emerge from the frightening waters unscathed – only *then* do the local people believe in the power of the saint. The perfect body of the saint

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[185] Ibid., II.10, 162.

and the perfect bodies of his companions represent a contradiction in the narrative to the impaired and disfigured bodies of the unbelievers.

A different iteration of this trope in the context of punitive deformity comes from the ninth-century CE Latin *Navigatio* or *Voyage of St. Brendan*. Here, once again, impairment is associated with punishment for sin and unbelief. In one episode, Brendan and his companions come across a man *cispidum ac deformem*, that is, a "swarthy and disfigured" or "shameful" man crouching on a lonely rock, buffeted by waves.[186] This dark-skinned, deformed individual is Judas Iscariot, and the sea rock is his place of respite from the nightly torments he endures from the demons in hell, which tear at him and gnaw upon him.

Judas' disfigurement, therefore, is the product of his betrayal of Christ; his nocturnal punishment is the repeated physical torture and rending of his limbs: a mirror image, perhaps, of Christ's own crucifixion. Elsewhere in the *Navigatio*, the absence of physical and spiritual illness is described as due reward for exemplary monastic practice (*nullus ex nobis sustinuit infiritatem unquam carnis aut spiritus*).[187] Thus, in these narrative examples, physical deformity is associated with sin or imperfection, and health, be it physical or mental, is associated directly with perfected monastic or clerical practice. The unifying element in these narratives is the representation of a model of treating physical impairment as something earned through bad behavior, and health and wholeness (spiritual or physical) as the product of ascetical discipline.

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[186] Patrick F. Moran (ed.), *Acti Sancti Brendani: Original Latin documents connected with the Life of St. Brendan of Kerry and Clonfert* (Dublin: William Kelly, 1872), 123, at *caput* XI.
[187] Ibid., 106, at *caput* VI.

The Lives of Irish Female Saints: A Gendered Model of Disability?

By contrast, in the lives of Irish female saints, the cursing of bodies with physical impairment is much less common. Instead, these narratives demonstrate female saints' spiritual authority through healing miracles, and they describe the healings specifically as proof of the female saint's divinely given power. In Cogitosus' Life of Brigit, for example, Brigit heals a man born blind by miraculously restoring his sight "through the power of her faith," and the text notes that it was because of such feats that Brigit "merited the great authority and renown that came to her above all the virgins of her day."[188]

In chapter twenty-four of the Life of St. Ité, Ité herself makes a very clear statement about the theological relationship between bodily sickness, saintly authority, and eternal salvation. In this narrative episode, a nun named Rychena travels to Killeedy to receive a healing cure from Ité for an unnamed illness that has infected her "daughter," presumably a younger nun under Rychena's authority. Yet Ité's response to her is ambivalent: "Your daughter whom you have brought along, choose whether she is to be healthy in body, and shall die in sin, or whether she is to be in grief here, and shall live in eternal life: for so the apostle says, 'for virtue is brought to perfection in infirmity' [2 Corinthians 12:9]."[189] The company of people gathered there, including the girl herself, decide as a group that the girl should continue to suffer her illness, "opting that here she would be in pain and live in eternal rest, and thus it was done."

This episode reveals a number of important details concerning the theological depiction of illness in the text. First, and perhaps most obviously, physical illness – and not

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[188] Trans. Oliver Davies, "The Life of St. Brigit the Virgin by Cogitosus," in Oliver Davies (ed.), *Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 127.
[189] Trans. Dorothy Africa, *Vita Sanctae Ite (Life of Ita)*, https://monasticmatrix.osu.edu/cartularium/life-saint-ita , accessed March 25, 2020.

merely any illness, but an infirmity that causes great pain – is portrayed as a purgation, as a means for purifying the body of sin in preparation for eternal life. Health, in this case, is linked to potential sin, for only the healthy body has the vigor and the energy to engage in physical indiscretions. Moreover, painful illness is linked to salvation, for the weakened body takes on pain in imitation of Christ. The suffering born of illness is therefore valorized as the means for attaining the sinless state required for eternal glory: a kind of divinely-sanctioned ascetical purgation, located within the monastic community.

Second, the decision either to accept the healing ministration of Ité or to reject it in favor of intentionally continuing in this state of holy suffering is made not only by the girl who suffers the illness, but by her superior Rychena and the gathered group of Rychena's coreligionists, including St. Columbanus. The entire group makes the decision that the girl should remain in her state of physical suffering in order to save her soul. This episode demonstrates a public dimension, then, to the discourse of the valorized, suffering body.

Third, the biblical passage that Ité quotes in the narrative comes from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, and this is significant because the biblical verse appears in an autobiographical passage in which Paul himself describes his desire for God to remove an unnamed complaint that he describes as the "thorn in the flesh." It is in this passage that the Pauline theology of the body that equates suffering with God's will manifests itself most strongly, and so it is therefore no coincidence that this specific verse features in the hagiography exactly at this point.

Finally, the narrative representation of bodies within early medieval texts troubles the axiomatic categories of "disability" and "impairment" by presenting physical difference in social terms that differ significantly from later medieval constructions, specifically in

regard to gender. An example from the ninth century vernacular Irish Life of Brigit, the *Bethu Brigte*, illustrates this connection. In order to avoid an arranged marriage with a male suitor of her father's choosing, Brigit intentionally disfigures herself in order to make her physical appearance less appealing. Before performing this act of self-mutilation, however, Brigit attempts to reason with her suitor. "It is difficult for me," Brigit says, "since I have offered up my virginity to God. I will give you some advice. There is a wood behind your house where there lives a beautiful girl, and she will be betrothed to you." The man finds the girl just as Brigit has described, and he leaves Brigit and pursues her.

This angers Brigit's brothers, who had been counting on the bride-price that the man would have paid to the family, enriching all of them. As an insult, her brother Bacéne says to her, "the beautiful eye in your head will be betrothed to a man whether you like it or not." The text continues:

> Thereupon she immediately thrust her finger into her eye. "Here is that beautiful eye for you," said Brigit. "I think it unlikely that anyone will ask you for the hand of a blind girl."[190]

Rushing around her in dismay, her brothers attempt to help Brigit, but "there was no water" to wash the wound. Brigit instructs her brothers to push her staff into the ground, and miraculously, a stream of water bursts forth from the earth. Immediately, Brigit turns

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[190] Trans. M. A. O'Brien, "The Old Irish Life of Brigit: Part I, Translation," *Irish Historical Studies* 1.2 (1938): 121-134, at 125. Translation reviewed in consultation with my reading of the text in Oxford Bodleian MS Rawlinson B 512, fols. 314r-335v. The implication here is that the eye is now resting by a thread of flesh upon Brigit's cheek, a particularly gruesome and arresting image. See also *Bethu Bridgte*, ed. and trans. Donncha Ó Aodha (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978), pp. 4-5, at *caput* 15.

to her brother Bacéne and curses him. "Your two eyes will soon burst in your own head," she intones. As the text drolly concludes, "that is what happened."[191]

Horrified at the steps that his daughter will take to avoid a conventional marriage, Brigit's father gives his permission for her to enter the religious life. "Take the veil then, my daughter, for this is your wish. Take this for both God and for humanity," he pleads. Her campaign against patriarchal authority now complete, Brigit demurely responds, "Thanks be to God," and soon thereafter is consecrated as a holy virgin, never to marry a human spouse.[192]

The eighth-century Vita Prima (*Vita I S Brigitae*), a Latin life, restates Brigit's agency even more forcefully. Here she chooses "to lose her physical eye rather than the eye of her soul" (*magis . . . oculum perdere, corporis oculum quam oculum animae*), and to love the "beauty of her eternal soul more than that of the body" (*plus pulchritudinem animae quam corporis*).[193] In this way, Brigit chooses her own fate, even at the cost of her physical appearance and sight.

Biblical elements permeate the narrative, particularly with regard to prophetic exemplars and christological connotations. For example, Moses used his staff to strike the rock in the wilderness, from which water flowed (Exodus 17), and in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul identifies that rock was Christ. Such biblical allusions indicate that Brigit's spiritual authority comes directly from God's own power.

Irish standards of gendered beauty also inform Brigit's act of self-mutilation. Here the defense of Brigit's virginity occasions the need for the saint to pluck out her eye, the

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[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Seán Connolly, trans., "*Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae*: Background and Historical Value," the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 119 (1989): 5-49, at 18.

very symbol of physical beauty in medieval Irish culture, and she disfigures herself so that she will not become the object of desire. This at once reinforces her agency as a protagonist in the narrative, but this agency comes at the cost of her eyesight and her appearance. Stated differently, in order to prevent the perceived impairment of her holy virginity through the consummation of a marriage, Brigit disables the source and symbol of her own desirability (the eye as potent sign within the semiotics of beauty in early medieval Ireland). In terms of early medieval Irish family dynamics, she disrupts her own ability to see in order to disrupt the hegemony of her patriarchal spectators (that is, her father and brothers). Brigit is also the agent of her own healing; moreover, she curses her brother with a physical impairment that not only mirrors her own, but also doubles its destructive effects (whereas she merely plucks out one eye, her brother is cursed with the loss of both). This is a particularly Irish manner of cursing: to multiply the severity of the threat as a kind of scorched-earth policy, so that if anyone might dare challenge the spiritual authority of this woman, he will not walk away from the encounter whole.

Here disability and gender become the lenses through which holiness and miraculous power are filtered. As Máire Johnson has observed, "[o]f the more than four hundred ways in which saintly punishment manifests in the [Irish] *Lives*, the deliberate deprivation of sight is the second most numerous form."[194] Although blindness and the cursing of sight – that is, narrative examples of ocular cursing and impairment – occur mostly as the activity of a male saint against the body of an opponent, ocular self-mutilation only occurs in the lives of female Irish saints who are resisting arranged marriages. In this

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[194] Máire Johnson, "In the Bursting of an Eye: Blinding and Blindness in Ireland's Medieval Hagiography", in Larissa Tracy and Kelly DeVries (eds.), *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture (Explorations in Medieval Culture)* (Brill: Leiden, 2015), 448-471, at 449.

sense, the narrative trope of self-mutilation takes on a gendered power dynamic in which the female saint resists normative structures of authority in order to pursue her own unique agency as a woman, ironically freed by self-impairment to pursue her vocational goals.

A similar occasion is described in a short account of St. Cránaid of Kilcranathan (County Cork), preserved in the fifteenth-century Book of Fermoy. According to this brief narrative, which Charles Plummer optimistically referred to as a *vita* (but which is little more than a compilation of short narrative episodes), Cránaid avoided an arranged marriage by plucking out both of her eyes and delivering them into the care of her female companions.[195] As Máire Johnson has noted, "[a]s with Brigit's demonstration that such a deed marks the only penetration that [Cránaid] will ever experience, once [Cránaid's] sanctity is no longer questioned, she heals herself completely."[196] Cránaid asks her companions to return the eyes to her, whereupon she restores them to their rightful place, thereby demonstrating her physical integrity as a product of the purity of her soul. The eyes maintain the evidence of their removal, however, for the rest of Cránaid's life: one eye "retains a red hue to its vision as a result of having been carried by the saint's handmaiden in her cleavage. The other eye, for its part, has a fierce expression due to bits of bark stuck to it; this debris is a consequence of the eyeball having spent its time away from the saint's eye socket stowed in the crook of a tree."[197]

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[195] Charles Plummer, "Betha Cranatan: Life of Cranat", in C. Plummer (ed.), *Miscellanea hagiographica Hibernica: vitae adhuc ineditae sanctorum: Mac Creiche, Naile, Cranat*, Subsidia Hagiographica 1, (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1925), 157–169.
[196] Máire Johnson, "In the Bursting of an Eye," 461.
[197] Ibid., 461, n. 41.

A similar occasion of ocular disfigurement may be found in the hagiographic account

of St. Edith of Wilton, a tenth-century national English saint. According to the text of *The*

Wilton Chronicle, written in Middle English and dating to the 15th century, before the age of

fifteen, St. Edith was governing a large territory at the behest of her father, including

Wilton, Barking and Winchester.[198] Shortly after that, her father passed away and Edward

was made King at the tender age of ten. After Edward's coronation, Edith had a dream

about her eye falling out and made the connection between the loss of her own eye and her

brother's impending death. Indeed, Edward was murdered by his stepmother, and after

Edward's death, Edith was offered the throne. She remained instead at the abbey of Wilton,

where pilgrims came to pray for healing, especially of diseases of the eye. Yet unlike the

earlier Irish sources, Edith's narrative does not allow for the self-mutilation of the female

saint. In this way, the Irish sources represent a unique group of narratives that feature self-

inflicted ocular impairment as a discrete trope.

Indeed, "disability" and "impairment" were understood differently in specific early

medieval European contexts. In terms of early Continental sources, Caesarius' *Rule for Nuns*

setsforth specific expectations for the treatment of female religious who may "be troubled

by some mental disability" (*aliqua inbecillitate laborantium*).[199] The "weak" were to be

cared for by a fellow sister who was "faithful and full of compunction" (*uni satis fideli et*

conpunctae), one who would "serve the sick with devoted tenderness" (*infirmis cum pietate*

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[198] M. Dockray-Miller (ed. and trans.), "The Wilton Chronicle," in eadem, *Saints Edith and Aethelthryth: Princesses, Miracle Workers, and Their Late Medieval Audience*, Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts 25 (Brepols: Turnhout, 2009), 135.

[199] Maria Caritas McCarthy (trans.), *The Rule for Nuns of St. Caesarius of Arles: A translation with a critical introduction* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1960), 176 at *caput* 32. Here the Latin term, *inbecillitas*, may refer either to a physical "feebleness" or to a moral or intellectual weakness.

deserviate).[200] Here "the sick"(*infirmi*) and those with "weakness" (*inbecillitas*) are lumped together into one category; the Rule assumes that both will require the special ministrations of a vigilant and compassionate fellow religious. No mention of ocular disfigurement is made.

Conclusion: The Trope of Disability – The Body as Field for Saintly Power

Early-medieval Irish tales of female bodily disability therefore demonstrate not only the narrative power of the saint over physical impairment, but also the extent to which early medieval hagiography represents bodies as *fields* for the exercise of saintly power. In other words, persons with disabilities represent a particular type of medieval body to be gazed upon, a particular category for the public demonstration of spiritual authority to be worked upon, and a particular matrix on which to overlay specific narrative constructions of gender.

Indeed, in the Irish narratives, the female body represents a particular kind of saintly agency, authority, and power: Brigit disfigures herself in order to demonstrate her sacred connection to the Divine will, and she uses this performance to disrupt social expectations for her vocation and family allegiance. Inasmuch as her physical appearance is diminished, her status as a powerful wonderworker and servant of God is established, and her personal desire for a life of holy chastity (versus married life) is redeemed. I turn our attention now in the next chapter to the ways in which the valorization of chastity for female religious in early medieval hagiography redefined the reproductive dimensions of gendered experience. What more of pregnancy, and the trope of the pregnant nun?

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[200] Ibid. As Maria Caritas McCarthy notes, this portion of Caesarius's Rule is drawn from the *Regula sancti Augustini*.

CHAPTER FIVE:

THE TROPE OF PREGNANCY — THE BODY TRANSGRESSIVE AND PRODUCTIVE

Thus far, I have explored certain tropes, or motifs, that emerge in the hagiographic literature of early medieval Europe, with a special focus on Ireland. Far from functioning as simple literary devices, these tropes reveal the complex ways in which medieval writers and their audiences worked out issues of authority, gender, and the body. For the narratives of female saints in particular, chastity was an extremely important value in the practice of the religious life. Specifically, I have identified a unique theme related to the practice of chastity in early medieval female sanctity: the trope of the pregnant nun.

In this chapter, I will show that the theme of the pregnant nun constitutes a discernible trope in early-medieval hagiography. I will argue that this trope invites us to distinguish the theme of the defense of *perceived* chastity, over against the defense or valorization of "real" or physiological chastity or virginity. That is, what emerges in the trope of the pregnant nun is the magnitude of shame that pregnancy brought upon the religious community and the religious life in general. Although pregnancy among nuns was uncommon, it was a reality (albeit a marginal reality) in religious life, and pregnant nuns

were perceived to be an offense not only to the life that Christ had modeled, but to Christ himself. Pregnant religious contradicted the entire value system undergirding the actual performance of the holy life; the pursuit of spiritual perfection and virtue was made into a mockery by the visible protrusion of pregnant religious. In this sense, the investigation of this trope is an inquiry into the function of gender in the monastic culture of the early medieval period, and the prohibitions operative on the female religious body.

I will demonstrate the prevalence of this theme through hagiographic examples from the Lives of three abbess-saints. These narratives are important because they constitute the only hagiographic examples of the trope in the early medieval period. I will offer other examples of the trope from a later period to show that by the twelfth century, the trope became a significant theme, especially in the genre of Marian miracle-narratives. Although these later examples differ in genre from the three hagiographic attestations, I argue that they nevertheless support the existence of the trope of the pregnant nun in defense of perceived chastity.

I begin with an abbreviated discussion of the development of sanctity into the early medieval period, for the purpose of properly orienting the narratives within their contexts.

The Development of Sanctity: A Brief Overview

By the seventh century CE, the concept of Christian sanctity had undergone a gradual development. Initially, the cult of the saints in the first centuries of the early church was focused into two categories: those whom Scripture reported to be dominical associates (the Virgin, John the Baptist, and the Apostles), and those who had given their lives for their faith in Christ during the waves of Roman persecution. Martyrs were sought from very

early in the church's history for intercession; by virtue of the clear demonstration of their

devotion to Christ unto death, martyrs were viewed as being especially close to Christ, and

indeed as having a share in his suffering. During this time, the ranks of the martyr-saints

were drawn from all strata of society: women and men, bishops and catechumens, nobles

and slaves laid down their lives for their Lord.

From the third century on, Christian communities recorded and compiled the

martyrs' witness, and they developed a cultic attachment to their relics.[201] With the official

acceptance of Christianity under Constantine, the concept of sanctity underwent a

significant shift: as André Vauchez illustrates, over the course of the fourth century, the

"cult of martyrs was succeeded by the age of the confessors."[202] The demonstration of

Christian perseverance under the weight of persecution gave way to those exemplary

Christians who now battled the dangers of heresy, the evils of paganism, and the threat of

spiritual complacency. Such dramatic personages as Anthony of the Desert and Martin of

Tours became exemplars of the new class of saints; saintly bishops and ascetical masters of

the spiritual life became objects of veneration. This period of the great doctors and ascetics

of the church of Late Antiquity was characterized by a shift in emphasis. Sainthood was

becoming differentiated along gender lines; even as the *Vitae* of these ecclesiastical

authorities became popular reading, the inclusion of women's Lives in the genre decreased.

As Vauchez has demonstrated, with the expansion of Christianity into Northern

Europe, sanctity once again diversified. For the warrior clans of the Germanic and Celtic

peoples, it was the demonstration of God's authority through great miracles and feats of

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[201] André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13-16. See also Niamn Wycherley, The Cult of Relics in Early Medieval Ireland (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 13-36.
[202] Ibid, 15.

power in His servants that convinced new converts.[203] With the growing popularity of the cenobitic religious life, sanctity came to be understood along the axis of monastic values. Saints were now conceived of in terms of their separateness from normative society; the abbot or abbess miracle-worker, the virtuous monk or nun dedicated to extreme acts of ascetic devotion, and the itinerant missionary bishop became exemplars of sanctity. With the disintegration of the Roman empire, the veneration of saints became localized. In the monasteries, quill was put to vellum to record the exceptional deeds and outstanding character of local patron saints and monastic founders, rather than of martyrs or confessors.

In this way, a literature of holy people unique to the Christian West slowly developed. By the seventh century, on the islands which the Romans had called Britannia and Hibernia, sanctity was recorded and interpreted as a means for reinforcing essential monastic ideals. Chief among the ideals for female religious was the valorization of chastity. In order to maintain their separateness or "otherness" from the laity and, indeed, in order to prove the spiritual virtue of their particular *habitus* or practice, religious women carefully guarded their bodies under the veil and behind cloistered walls. In Ireland and Anglo-Saxon Britain, where so-called "double monasteries" were common, chastity was especially important.[204] In the sphere of sanctity, holy virginity was considered to be one of the highest possible achievements.[205]

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[203] Vauchez describes this somewhat disdainfully: "Incapable of understanding dogmas and theological discourse, the *pagani* and the barbarians preferred within Christianity the most obvious manifestations of the power of their new God, which they primarily experienced through military victories and miracles" (ibid., 16).

[204] Ineke van't Spijker shows how women of the aristocracy came to play an increasingly prominent role in Western European religious communities. "The founder – whether male or female – of a religious house was often venerated as a saint and that sainthood endowed

I turn our attention, then, to three *Vitae* of saintly women from these "barbarian" lands: Leoba, an Anglo-Saxon woman who founded a convent in Germany, and two Irish abbesses, Samthann, an Irish abbess of County Longford, and Brigit, the foundress of the abbey at Kildare. In each of these *Vitae*, we see the valorization of chastity result in a distinct question in the trope of the pregnant nun.

Leoba of Bischofsheim: The Liturgical Defense of Chastity

The *Vita* of Saint Leoba was written by Rudolf, a monk of Fulda, in the early ninth century. The details of Leoba's life were unknown even to her hagiographer (*Ego enim gesta illius omnia non didici, sed pauca quae refero a viris venerabilibus ad meam notitiam pervenerunt, qui ea quattuor discipularum eius, Agathae videlicet et Teclae, Nanae et Eoleobae[206]*). She lived in the mid-eighth century, although the exact dates of her life are not known. Rudolf apparently wrote in order to correct the short accounts of Leoba's life that had been recorded by a priest by the name of Mago, who had served as spiritual director to Leoba's female "disciples" and who left his work unfinished due to his death. "Therefore," Rudolf wrote, "I have tried to collect together all the scattered notes and papers . . . the

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the family with a certain prestige" (Ineke van't Spijker, "Family Ties: Mothers and Virgins in the Ninth Century," in *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1995), 165). Also, if a widow "preferred to enter a convent rather than remarrying, part of the motivation may have been to keep the family property intact, even though the hagiographers do not that that directly" (ibid., 166).

[205] Van't Spijker, "Family Ties," 169.

[206] *Vita Leobae abbatissae Bishcofesheimensis*, in *Monumenta Germaniae historica, scriptores*, XV vol. I, ed. Georg Waitz (Hanover: Anton Hiersemann), p. 122. The English translation is my own, with substantial help from C.H. Talbot, "The Life of Saint Leoba," in *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Thomas Noble and Thomas Head (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

sequence of events is based on the evidence I have gathered from others."[207] Rudolf's *Vita*

thus represents a reconstruction of an already-extant series of narratives concerning the

saint's life.

Leoba first entered the cenobitic life at the abbey at Wimbourne, in Dorset, near the

south coast.[208] The abbey was a double monastery, with special provisions made for the

careful separation of male and female religious from one another. Rudolf tells us that at

Wimbourne, "no woman was permitted to go into the men's community, nor was any man

allowed into the women's, except in the case of priests who had to celebrate Mass in their

churches; even so, *immediately* after the function was ended, the priest had to

withdraw."[209] Leoba's early religious life, then, was lived out in a community that observed

careful gender boundaries in service to chastity, but which nevertheless allowed for

women and men to live in close proximity to one another.

Leoba's first spiritual mentor was Tetta, the abbess of the women's community at

Wimbourne, a woman of noble family (*soror quippe regis erat[210]*) and fine character. Tetta

was described by Rudolf as ruling over both male and female communities (*quae utrumque

monasterium magna discretionis arte regebat[211]*); this may indicate that she had authority

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[207] *Quapropter ego non mea praesumptione, sed imperio . . . patris . . . mei Hrabani abbatis provocatus, cuncta quae ab illis breviter scripta et in scedulis sparsim relicta supra memoraveram, in unum colligere studui; et tam ex eis quae ibi adnotata reperi, quam quae ex aliorum relatione didici, ordinato breviter libelli textu, rerum gestarum seriem scire volentibus pandere curavi. Vita Leobae*, 122.
[208] C.H. Talbot, trans., 258.
[209] *Numquam enim virorum congregationem femina aut virginum contubernia virorum quisquam intrare permittebatur, exceptis solummodo presbiteris qui in aecclesias earum ad agenda missarum officia tantum ingredi solebant et consummata solemniter oratione* statim *ad sua redire. Vita Leobae*, 123, emphasis mine.
[210] Ibid., 123.
[211] Ibid.

over not only the women, who were about fifty in number, but also the male religious.[212]

Tetta's authority was apparently absolute; we are told that she denied even bishops entry

to the female abbey in her zeal to maintain the absolute separation between male and

female religious.

Leoba herself came from a noble English family (*igitur parentes eius, natione Angli,*

genere quidem nobiles erant[213]), although whether this means that she was of Anglo-Roman,

Saxon, or even Celtic extraction, we are not told.[214] Leoba's given name was Thrutgeba, but

she was nicknamed Leoba "because she was beloved, for this is what Leoba means."[215] She

was entrusted to Tetta for education (to learn the *divinis studiis*), and indeed Leoba proved

an enthusiastic student. Leoba's scholarship came to the attention of Boniface, the famous

Saxon bishop and evangelist sent by Gregory the Great to the people of Germany, who had

her brought to Monte Cassino to observe the Benedictine *Rule*.[216] Following a period of

study there, during which she absorbed the essential tenets of Benedictine monastic

practice, she was then appointed as a missionary abbess over the women of a newly-

established double monastery in Germany, at Bischofsheim, on the Tauber River. There she

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[212] It would not have been unusual for a woman to have exercised authority over both men and women in an Anglo-Saxon double monastery; we are told, for example, in the *De Virginitate* of Aldhelm (early eighth century) that both sides of the double monastery at Barking were ruled over by Abbess Hildelith, and Jonas' *Vita* of Columbanus reports that an Abbess Fara not only heard the confessions of both men and women at her double monastery but also had the power to excommunicate. Stephanie Hollis notes that the double monastery was "widely, perhaps universally, preferred to single-sex establishments for women in the early Anglo-Saxon period" (Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer Ltd., 1992), 75).

[213] *Vita Leobae*, 124.

[214] Her mother had a Saxon name (Aebba), and her father was called Dynno, a name that could have Welsh origins (Ibid.).

[215] *Cognomento Leoba, eo quod esset dilecta; hoc enim Latine cognominis huius interpretatio sonat.* Ibid., 124.

[216] Leoba may have been a kin-relation of Boniface; Hollis, 130.

continued her studies and became "a most educated woman" (*eruditissima*).[217] Leoba

memorized not only great portions of both the Old and New Testaments but also studied

the works of the Church Fathers, the decrees of the great ecumenical church councils, and

"the whole" (*totius*) of ecclesiastical law.

In Leoba, then, we find a woman who was not only educated, but who was related to

the noble families of England and came to Wimbourne under the patronage of an equally

noble woman mentor. Leoba was selected by virtue of her outstanding scholarship to

create a community for women on the Continent (following the double-monastery model of

her native English religious houses) in service to the larger evangelical mission to the

Germanic people. There it must be assumed that Leoba perpetuated the Benedictine *Rule*

that she had studied in Italy and took careful steps to enforce the absolute separation of

women from men in the double monastery.

As careful as her attention to the preservation of monastic chastity might have been, it

was the chastity of her community that soon came into question. A "poor little girl who had

contracted a disability" (*paupercula debilitate contracta*[218]) regularly stationed herself at

the monastery gates in order to beg alms from the community.[219] This young woman,

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[217] *Nam, cum ab ipsis infantiae rudimentis grammatica et reliquis liberalium litterarum studiis esset instituta, tanta meditationis instantia spiritualis scientiae perfectionem conabatur assequi, ut, consentiente cum ingenio lectione, duplicato naturae et industriae bono eruditissima redderetur. Vita Leobae*, 126.

[218] *Vita Leobae*, 127.

[219] According to Benedict's *Rule*, an individual gained entry into the monastic life by first waiting outside the monastery door for "four or five days," and then, once he had "shown himself to be patient in bearing his harsh treatment and difficulty of entry, and has persisted in his request," the individual was permitted to stay in the guest quarters and then begin his novitiate (Timothy Fry, ed., *RB 1980: The Rule of Saint Benedict in English* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 78). Was this *paupercula* simply begging alms from Leoba's community, or was she participating in the Benedictine ritual of entry? If she were seeking to join the female religious house, then she would have been closely

overcome by the "foul suggestions of the devil", soon committed fornication (*decepta*

suggestionibus diabolicis turpitudinem fornicationis incurreret); when her pregnancy had

come to the stage at which concealment became impossible, she feigned illness and gave

birth in secret. She then disposed of the infant by drowning it in the quiet shallows of the

nearby river.[220] The infanticide was soon discovered. At daybreak, when another woman of

the village came to the river to draw water, she was horrified to discover the corpse.[221]

Assuming the infant to be the discarded child of one of the nuns of Bischofsheim, the

woman filled the village with cries of injustice:

> Oh, what a chaste community! How admirable is the life of nuns, who beneath their
>
> veils give birth to children and exercise at one and the same time the function of
>
> mothers and priests, baptizing those to whom they have given birth. For, fellow
>
> citizens, you have drawn off this water [here] to make a pool, not merely for the
>
> purpose of grinding corn, but unwittingly for a new and unheard-of kind of baptism.
>
> Now go and ask those women, whom you compliment by calling them virgins, to

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associated with Leoba's nuns, making her pregnancy and infanticide even more of a stain
on the community's reputation.

[220] It seems strange that the girl could conceal her pregnancy so effectively from a
community of women, especially a community that prioritized the care of the sick and the
giving of alms to the poor, or that she could bear her child in secret without the news of the
birth reaching either the religious community or the village. Even more strange is the girl's
means of murder; the portion of the river which she chose for the drowning was accessible
to the entire local village, and used regularly for the grinding of corn. Strangest of all is the
fact that she left the body at the scene of the crime, thereby almost guaranteeing that the
crime would be found out.

[221] Although infanticide was outlawed by the church, there is evidence that the practice
was quite common in the early medieval period. "The likelihood of smothering the infants
was apparently quite great, and, judging from the frequency of occurrence of [the mention
of infanticide in the penitentials] . . . it seems to have happened quite often. . . . According to
the Theodoran penitential a woman who killed her child owed fifteen years penance"(Julie
Ann Smith, *Ordering Women's Lives: Penitentials and nunnery rules in the early medieval
west* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2001), 86). Also, the "intentional killing of
infants was regarded very severely and treated as homicide" (Ibid., 86-87).

remove this corpse from the river and make it fit for us to use again. Look for the

one who is missing from the monastery and then you will find out who is

responsible for this crime.[222]

These words inflamed the villagers into an uproar; an incensed mob raced to the river –

where the infant corpse still floated in the shallows – and cursed the nuns.

Leoba acted quickly. She immediately called the entire women's community together

to investigate the matter. After a quick roll call, she discovered no one absent – save for

Agatha, a young woman who had received prior permission to visit her family. Messengers

were dispatched and Agatha was swiftly called back to the convent. Upon hearing that the

village assumed her to be the murderess because of her absence, Agatha was thrown into

paroxysms of anxiety and swore her innocence, crying out to God to deliver her.

Convinced by the authenticity of Agatha's anguish that the girl was indeed innocent,

Leoba turned her attention to the false accusation still hanging over the religious house.

First, Leoba ordered the entire female community into the chapel, and directed them to

sing through the entire Psalter with arms extended in shape of a cross. Next, she

commanded them to make a solemn procession around the entire monastery compound

three times a day, at terce, sext, and none, carrying the crucifix at the head of the

procession and invoking God's mercy, that they might be freed from false accusation by

divine intervention. In the middle of one of these processions, Leoba stood before the high

altar and the crucifix (which was being prepared for another circumambulation), stretched

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[222] C. H. Talbot, trans., *The Life of Saint Leoba* (1995), 268.

out her hands to heaven, and prayed with tears and groans that Christ (whom she called

"*rex virginum, integritatis amator*") would deliver the community from false accusations.[223]

Upon this prayer, the young disabled girl (*miserrima paupercula illa*) "seemed to be

surrounded by flames" (*quasi flammis circumdata*), and calling out the name of the abbess,

confessed in the presence of the astounded villagers the crime she had committed. The

nuns were therefore exonerated, and weeping with grateful joy, they gave thanks to Christ

and to Leoba. The reputation of the nuns at Bischofsheim was never again put to question;

the unfortunate young woman who occasioned the entire incident, however, remained "in

the power of the devil" for the rest of her life.[224]

In this way, we may see that Leoba defends the perception of the nuns' chastity by

means of a liturgical intervention. Specifically, the chanting of Psalms and the procession

around the monastic compound are bodily, penitential operations. The act of holding out

the arms in cruciform position during the entire chanting of the Psalter is a physically

demanding task; in ordering this effort, Leoba functions as confessor: she orders her

community to perform a difficult, bodily penance (even when there is no sin). Leoba's role

as confessor is further solidified in the actions of the guilty woman; it is through Leoba's

prayer to Christ that the woman confesses. Leoba also functions as officiant, leading her

community in a visible display of contrition and hope. Here the procession functions along

the same *ordo* as the Great Litany in the seventh and eighth centuries.[225] The timing of the

procession according to certain hours of prayer also connects it to the Benedictine practice

of the daily office.

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[223] *Vita Leobae*, 127.

[224] Ibid.

[225] Marie Anne Mayeski, *Women at the Table: Three Medieval Theologians* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004), 78.

It is important to note that Leoba orders the cruciform chanting and the solemn procession not because sin has actually been *confirmed* in the community, but rather because the villagers *perceive* that sin has been committed. That is, Leoba's liturgical response to an unjust accusation is for the purpose of amending an error in perception, not the actual sin in reality. The defense of perceived chastity through liturgical (penitential) forms reiterates the norms and intentions supporting the very existence of the religious community.

In assuming the nuns to be the guilty party, the villagers call into question the justification for the religious life: if the nuns are at odds with their vows, then the religious life of spiritual integrity (as evidenced by chastity) is a sham. The tacit assumption is that nuns have rescinded the option of marriage to an earthly husband, and the sexual relations that that option entails, in order to be the *sponsae Christi*. To call the chastity of these *sponsae* into question is to question the entire foundation of their life together – a life lived free from earthly marriage. The villagers, in effect, are challenging the nuns' faithfulness to Christ.

The point becomes more transparent when we consider that most members of Leoba's community were no strangers to the experience of sexual intercourse. As Stephanie Hollis notes, Anglo-Saxon monasteries generally comprised a higher population of widows than of women who had never married.[226] Holy virginity, then, was understood differently in Anglo-Saxon cenobitic life than it was in the Mediterranean. Aldhelm of Sherborne shows, for example, "the manner in which the numerical weight of formerly married

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[226] Hollis, 81.

monastic women served to mitigate the high valuation of female bodily intactness."[227] That is, in Anglo-Saxon female religious communities, it was not physiological virginity so much as the practice of chastity that was valorized, precisely because convent populations were constituted primarily of non-virgins. The pursuit of spiritual virtue, then, as embodied by the practice of chastity in Anglo-Saxon religious houses, was a matter of persistently and constantly guarding the body from sexual sin. Any adumbration of unchaste behavior among the nuns would make the spiritual life a sanctimonious pretense.

As I have already noted, Leoba was well aware that her religious community had been founded as an Anglo-Saxon evangelistic endeavor among newly converted Germanic people. Thus, to have the community viewed as inauthentic in the very Christian life they proclaimed would be to jeopardize the entire missionary enterprise. It seems especially clever, then, given this factor, that Leoba would fight the false accusations of infidelity to Christ with an exhibition of ecclesial ceremony. In defending the perception of chastity through liturgical displays of penance, Leoba reinforced the outward manifestation of the church's power and relevance, in the form of liturgy, for the benefit of new converts.

Samthann of Clonbroney: The Pastoral Defense of Chastity

I turn our attention now to a very different example of the trope of the pregnant nun. The existing *Vita* of Samthann (pronounced "Safahn" or "Savan") is preserved in an early fourteenth-century manuscript but was almost certainly based on an earlier text (perhaps

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[227] Hollis, 81, 83. Aldhelm died in 709, and wrote in the late-seventh century.

in Irish) that was then redacted and translated into Latin. Richard Sharpe identifies the narrative as originating in the counties of Longford or Westmeath.[228]

Samthann was the abbess of Clonbroney, a women's community in County Longford. Although the text of her Life comes from a much later period, Samthann herself lived in the eighth century; the Annals of Ulster list her death at 739, making her a contemporary of Leoba.[229] Like Leoba, she was of a noble family which, according to the Tripartite Life of St. Patrick, originally hailed from Ulster and had in earlier generations bequeathed land to Patrick in County Down.[230] It is possible that her Life, if indeed it was originally composed in Irish, was written not long after her death.[231]

Samthann entered the religious life after first being married off by her foster father to a man of noble family; before their marriage was consummated, however, Samthann was rescued from sexual intercourse by a miraculous flame shooting from her mouth that appeared to set fire to the roof of the house.[232] Fleeing the scene of supernatural arson, Samthann hid herself in a fern thicket nearby until she was found by her foster father. After chastising the man for giving her away in marriage without her consent, Samthann declared her desire to choose the cloister instead of proceeding into married life.

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[228] Dorothy Africa, "Life of the Holy Virgin Samthann," in *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Head (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 97. Here I will be using Africa's translation, augmented by my own translation of the critical edition by Plummer (*Vita Sancte Samthanne*, in *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Charles Plummer (Oxonii: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1910).

[229] Ibid.

[230] Ibid., 98.

[231] I see this as a likely case, as the Latin of her *Vita* demonstrates certain themes characteristic of Irish vernacular hagiography, and employs a vocabulary and syntax that suggests a translation of an earlier Irish text. Generally speaking, the use of Latin in Irish hagiography went into a gradual decline in favor of a written vernacular in the ninth century, reviving again in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. See Africa (2001), 98.

[232] See Africa, 103.

Impressed by the miraculous fire – which somehow left the buildings unharmed despite its apparent ferocity – her foster father and her husband agreed.

Samthann began her cenobitic life at the women's community at Urney, in County Tyrone, where she served as steward of the community comestibles. In a related series of miraculous events involving the supernatural production of food, her early life in the convent was characterized by miracles of provisioning and generosity.[233] The foundress of Clonbroney, a woman by the name of Fuinech, was so impressed with Samthann that she sent for her and brought her to the Longford convent, eventually turning the rule of the community over to Samthann.

Unlike Leoba, Samthann's career as a religious was remarkable not for her scholastic accomplishments but for her supernatural demonstrations of clairvoyance and miraculous provisioning – as well as for her ambitious building projects. Samthann became well known not only as a wonder worker, but for the numerous construction projects she undertook to expand the Clonbroney community. In the narrative that follows, it is Samthann's miraculous manipulation of natural events (through her prayers to God) that safeguards the perceived chastity of women religious. The trope of the pregnant nun becomes more pronounced in this narrative.

We are told that in the area of Aghaboe, in County Laois, there were two nuns (*due moniales*) living near the monastery of Abbot Cainnech. One of the nuns "yielded to evil suggestion" (*quarum una diabolica suggestione concepit*) and became pregnant; eventually, she secretly gave birth to a son.[234] As she still desired to maintain the appearance of holy

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[233] Africa, 103-105.

[234] As with the Leoba narrative, we are not told how the nun kept her pregnancy (and the safe delivery of a healthy baby) secret. Note that in this narrative, the pregnant woman is

virginity, the new mother did not want to raise the child in the area (*set communi parcens honestati in illis partibus nutriri eum noluit*).[235] Having heard about Samthann's reputation for miracles, she consulted with her fellow sister religious, and the two undertook the journey to Clonbroney with the infant under the cover of night. After being presented with the situation, Samthann sympathized with the women and agreed to take the child and rear him herself in the Clonbroney community (*quibus illa compaciens, infantem nutriendum suscepit*).[236] Samthann also understood the mother's need to defend the perception of her chastity: she advised the two women to leave under the cover of night "to avoid scandal and suspicion" (*ac ipsis proter scandalum euitandum ac suspicionem noctu procedere precepit*).[237]

This would have been a necessary but risky move for the two women: the darkness would cloak their return journey, and thus cover the shame of the mother's lapse in chastity, but it would also subject them to possible violence by the bands of brigands that roamed the local roads. When the two women did set out, in fact, they caught sight of a group of bandits following them, whom they could not elude. Yet miraculously, a "huge tree close by opened itself, revealing to them its hollow interior, and then reknit itself on the outside, thus enclosing them."[238] In this miraculous act of compassion from the natural world, we see a further reiteration of the pregnancy theme: the nun who has given birth to

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actually a nun; in the Leoba narrative, the pregnant woman was not herself under religious orders, but was related to the religious house by association.

[235] *Vita Sancte Samthanne*, in *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Charles Plummer (Oxonii: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1910), 258.

[236] Ibid.

[237] Ibid.

[238] *Quia ingens arbor, cui tunc approximabant, aperiens se, concauum eis; sinum prebuit, et exterius reintegrata, eas sic miraculose inclusit*. Ibid.

a child and secretly entrusted him to a saint is now protected from her pursuers in the womb of a tree.

A miraculous fog also arose, obscuring them further from the bandits, whose search for the women was frustrated. The fog obscured the women's escape from the forest, and indeed continued to hide them throughout much of their journey. Here, too, we might say that the protective measures taken in the natural world symbolically reflect the reality of the woman's situation. Samthann, in aiding the women and, indeed, playing a complicit role in their intrigue, moves into a "gray area," a fog of pastoral mores. She does not hold to the absolute value system   of the monastic life, but ventures into nebulous moral territory.

We are told that Samthann raised the baby, and "saw to his instruction in letters" (*ac deinde literis imbui fecit*).[239] Upon reaching adulthood, the young man became a famous abbot in the monastery of Saint Cainnech - the male community, incidentally, that was closest to the convent of the boy's birth mother. Rather than living out his days under the oppressive identity of the "illegitimate" or "bastard" child, a designation that would have stigmatized him for the rest of his life in the complex web of Irish kin relationships, the young man becomes a powerful authority figure in the church. The power dynamics of the culture have therefore been completely - and secretly - overturned.

In this account, Samthann's pastoral initiative towards the nun who conceives and bears an illicit son is extraordinarily sensitive. Not only does she undertake the rearing of the child herself, even seeing to his education (and, we assume, advancement in the ranks of the clergy), but she makes sure that the reputation of the child's birth mother is kept intact. Here Samthann prioritizes the needs of the mother above the valorization of

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[239] Ibid.

chastity. The narrative does not mention whether Samthann chastises the woman or judges her in any way for her fornication; on the contrary, Samthann advises the nun to continue to hide her transgression from public discovery by stealing away from Clonbroney at night. Even God seems a coconspirator in this scheme; it is through the power of "the right hand of the Lord" (*sit tunc dextera Domini [fecit] virtutem*)[240] that the nuns are hidden away in the core of the tree (and thus saved not only from robbery at the hands of the bandits, but from certain rape as well). Thus, we see that the pastoral care of the nun who has given birth (and her friend and fellow-journey woman) takes precedence over the punishment (or even the awareness) of the actual sin of fornication. Indeed, the women's concealment in the tree protects them from sexual violence, directly defending their physical well-being as sexual bodies. It is clear that the nun who has given birth is viewed as a woman in need, and in this sense, the rescue of the pregnant nun may be seen to be in keeping with Samthann's other miracles of generosity and provisioning.

A secondary story concerning Samthann's pastoral care for the nuns of her community involves the *prevention* of an illicit affair between a nun and a cleric, thus forestalling the birth of an illicit child in the first place. A priest visiting Clonbroney was attracted to a young woman in the community; she, in turn, seems to have responded warmly to his advances (she "paid out love to the lover," *et amanti uicem amoris ipsa impendit[241]*). The two paramours arranged a secret tryst in the nearby woods, and the priest, perhaps thinking that his audacity would conceal his true intentions, asked Samthann to pray that his journey would be unobstructed before setting out. When Samthann asked him directly where he intended to go, he lied and said that his destination

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[240] Ibid.
[241] Ibid., 256. Here the translation is Africa's, 105.

was Connacht. Demonstrating her miraculous foreknowledge (or perhaps simply smelling a rat), Samthann replied, "Wherever you may go, do not trouble my sisters with sweet talk or misdeeds" ("*Quocumque ieris noli sorores meas uerbis illecebrosis aut factis malis uexare*"[242]). To which the lascivious priest replied that he would never think of it ("*Absit hoc a me, domina*" – lit., "may that be distanced from me, lady") and departed.

On his way to the trysting site, the cleric came upon a stream that he had to ford. As the waters came up to his waist, a "huge eel" (*mire magnitudinis anguilla*) circled his loins and cinched them tight. Terrified (and, we assume, in some degree of discomfort), the priest gave up his plans and returned immediately to Samthann; falling to his knees, he begged for her forgiveness. After she gave it, the eel suddenly fell away from the priest; he swore that he would never again visit the women's community.

Once again, Samthann's divinely bestowed power over the natural world is put to work for the defense of chastity. Yet here it is not the perception of chastity that is secured, but rather the actual status of the nun's physical intactness. While the unfortunate priest's predicament is comic, the significance of Samthann's intervention is not. Here Samthann has the power to pardon - and not just to pardon a nun of her own community, but a priest. Samthann is lied to, twice, by the priest, even when she confronts him, while the amorous nun commits a lie of omission. Yet Samthann forgives, and she teaches the man a lesson in the process (one might suppose that the activity of the eel would be a fitting penance). The priest amends his ways and never again approaches the women's community - perhaps not merely to avoid sexual temptation, but out of fear and respect for the power of God in Samthann.

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[242] Ibid.

What we may see in both the eel narrative and the story of the pregnant nun is the great shame that breached vows of chastity wielded over female religious. The defense of chastity in these narratives is so important that the miraculous assistance of the natural world is enlisted; the tree, the fog, and the eel become servants of the monastic ideal. Samthann's pastoral treatment of the pregnant nun serves to protect the perception of the nun's chastity, thus allowing the nun to continue in the religious life; Samthann's pastoral foresight in protecting the young nun from the lascivious priest serves to defend the physiological chastity of the young woman, permitting her to continue to remain in the Clonbroney community. In this way, Samthann's pastoral interventions prioritize the well-being of the nuns in her care.

Brigit of Kildare: The Miraculous Restoration of Chastity

A third example of the trope of the pregnant nun also comes from Ireland. According to her hagiographer, Cogitosus, who wrote her *Vita* in the period between 650 and 690, Brigit was born of noble Christian parents. [243] After a series of miraculous signs and a failed betrothal,[244] she offered herself to the religious life, kneeling "before the bishop and the altar" and touching "the wooden base of the altar."[245] She founded a double monastery on

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[243] Oliver Davies, trans., *Celtic Spirituality,* The Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 32. Brigit herself was said to have been a contemporary of Patrick; if this is the case, then she would have lived in the fifth century. The year of her birth, according to the Annals of Ulster, was 452; three different dates are given for her death.
[244] See Davies (1999), 123-125, for further elaboration.
[245] Davies (1999), 124.

the site of a former pagan shrine and became famous for her miracles of healing, provisioning, and power over animals.[246]

Brigit also guarded the perceived chastity of women in her community. In a passage from Cogitosus' *Vita* that falls within a series of narratives describing Brigit's provisioning miracles, we find the following:

> But speaking of this miracle [that is, the preceding miraculous production of beer from tubs of water for lepers], it is fitting to recall another one. In the potent strength of her ineffable faith, Brigit blessed a woman who, though she had taken a vow of chastity, fell through weakness into youthful lust so that her womb swelled with child. The fetus disappeared, without coming to birth or causing pain, and the woman was restored to health and to penance.[247]

This tiny passage seems to imply that through Brigit's blessing, the woman miscarried. This act had the double effect of preventing the birth of an unplanned-for child while simultaneously providing for the restoration of the woman to the community of "holy virgins."

Interestingly, the woman's postpartum state is described as a state of "health" (*salus*); in effect, Brigit's blessing had the effect of returning the woman's body to its status before the pregnancy - that is, to the status of *perceived* chastity.[248] Granted, we are told that the woman still had to perform penance for her sexual transgression in order to reach full restoration; yet the miscarriage had the effect of minimizing the *perceived* damage done to

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[246] See Davies (1999), 125-128.

[247] Davies, 126.

[248] Most interesting is the fact that Irish canons of the late seventh century explicitly forbade abortion. For example, the church required three and a half years of penance for the "destruction of the liquid matter of a child in a mother's womb" and seven and a half years' penance for "the destruction of the body and soul" (Smith, 84).

her status as a religious, and indeed, to the status of holy virginity as a value in the community at large. The visible effect of the woman's pregnancy pointed in an obvious way to her lapsed status, to her failure in the practice of chastity; with the pregnancy conveniently removed, the woman could once again present the *appearance* of a holy virgin – even if she were virginal in appearance only. Upon the completion of her penance, we are to assume that the woman was allowed to return to the convent.[249] Thus, Brigit's intervention had the effect of removing the *physical indication* of sexual sin in the body of the lapsed nun, opening for her the way to rehabilitation in the religious community.

Cogitosus does not report the sex of the infant (and surely the pregnancy would have been discernible if the woman had been in the second trimester of her pregnancy — the typical period when pregnancy is visible), nor does he describe what amounts to a divinely-sanctioned failed pregnancy in negative terms. On the contrary, for Cogitosus, this is a miracle; it is the evidence of Brigit's power, and indeed, when read in the context of the surrounding passages, it is yet another example of Brigit's miraculous generosity towards the unfortunate. The woman, then, is portrayed as yet another soul suffering a kind of lack. Like the flock of pilfered sheep whose numbers Brigit miraculously restores; like the lepers for whom Brigit miraculously provides beer; and like the salt that Brigit miraculously creates from rock for the poor, the woman is miraculously made whole again. A privation in the acceptable order of things is satisfied.

A second narrative in Cogitosus' Life of Brigit relates Brigit's interest in preserving the chastity of a lay woman in the nearby village.

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[249] The text does not explicitly describe the restoration of the nun to the community; however, I believe that this can be inferred from the text.

There was once a man of the world, noble by birth and deceitful in character, who burned with desire for a certain woman. Cunningly planning how he might possess her, he entrusted a silver brooch to her safe keeping, only to take it back from her secretly and throw it into the sea. Since she could not return it to him, she would have to serve as his maid to be used as he desired. He planned this evil deed for no other reason than to be able to demand either that his brooch should be returned to him or that the woman herself should become his slave on account of her guilt and should be subject to his lust.[250]

When she discovered the brooch to be missing, the much-distressed woman fled to Brigit "as a most secure city of refuge".[251] Brigit summoned a local fisherman who had already brought in his catch; she directed him to split open the fish, whereupon he was astonished to find the silver brooch in the belly of one of them. Then, we are told,

with an easy mind, she [Brigit] took the same brooch and went with the infamous tyrant to a meeting of the people that was gathering to consider who was to blame. There she showed them the brooch in the presence of many witnesses who recognized that it was the very same one of which all had been speaking, and thus she was able to free the chaste woman from the clutches of the cruel tyrant.

The man then confessed his guilt and "submitted" himself to Brigit.[252]

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[250] Davies, 132.

[251] Ibid.

[252] We are not told whether the man's "submission" entailed simply asking her for forgiveness, or whether he "submitted" to her by joining the male abbey at the double monastery of Kildare. The second option would add a provocative twist to the story: the man amends his life by undertaking the practice of monastic chastity himself, under the supervision of a female abbess.

In this way, Brigit not only protects a woman's chastity, but exposes an abuse of power over the bodies of Irish women. Under the laws of the land, a person to whom valuable property had been entrusted would be held accountable for that property; if the property were lost, stolen, or sold without the true owner's consent, then the trustee would be forced to make restitution. If the trustee were poor, or if the property were of such value that monetary or proprietary restitution could not be made, then the trustee herself would be sold into slavery to the owner, effectively making restitution with her own body as a slave. We may therefore infer that the woman in the brooch passage was either poor or of a low socioeconomic status relative to her would-be rapist. Brigit's miraculous acquisition of the burden of proof against the wicked man not only exposes his false motives and manipulation of the Irish legal system but inverts the power dynamics between opprobrious nobleman and virtuous serf.

In these two examples from the Life of Brigit, then, the familiar pattern appears. Like Samthann, Brigit does not judge or chastise the pregnant nun, but provides for her miraculous rescue – although with very different results. Instead of raising a child who has been brought to term, Brigit in effect provides the means for the fetus's removal. In the brooch narrative, Brigit foils a potential affair (again, like Samthann), although here again the details are quite different: the girl is not a willing lover, but the potential object of rape. Yet once again, we are confronted with the importance of chastity. Through her miraculous manipulation of the natural world, Brigit restores the pregnant nun's body and the village girl's innocence.[253]

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[253] Alice Curtayne has a lovely, if not a little overly-romanticized, take on Brigit's mission to women in early medieval Ireland: "She [Brigit] had personally tested that the Church in Ireland was already strong enough to protect communities of women. Her work, then, was

An Alternative Example: The Nun of Watton

In light of the hagiographic evidence, the theme of the pregnant religious body emerges as a distinct trope in the Lives of these three saintly women. Is there other evidence for this trope in later material? Writing in the twelfth century, Aelred of Rievaulx provides us with such an example: the story of the unnamed nun of Watton.

The account, which was written by Aelred himself (in Latin) as part of a treatise on the necessity of guarding the chastity of cenobitic religious, survives in a manuscript that may be dated to the late 1160s; it most likely describes events that transpired in the 1150s or early 1160s.[254] According to the narrative, a young girl was received into holy orders at the religious community of Watton[255] (not far from York, in East Riding) at the request of archbishop Henry of York. The girl developed into a "lascivious" young woman who "resisted all efforts at correction and remained without inclination for monastic life or love for God even after she became a nun".[256] Upon seeing a handsome young monk who had been dispatched to the convent to assist with manual labor, she flirted with him first through nods and "signs" (hand gestures? waving?) and then through words, until finally he agreed to arrange a secret assignation. The lovers soon began to meet regularly: he would

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to rescue the nuns of Ireland from the fortresses of chieftains and the hovels of bondwomen, offering them a haven [at Kildare]. They needed but a leader to summon them out and she sprang to their guiding" (Alice Curtayne, *Saint Brigid of Ireland* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, Ltd., 1955), 39).

[254] Giles Constable, "Aelred of Rievaulx and the nun of Watton: an episode in the early history of the Gilbertine order," in *Medieval Women*, Studies in Church History, Subsidia, vol. 1 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 207.

[255] Watton was a Gilbertine abbey; Gilbertines followed the double-monastery format, with a female abbess in charge of both male and female houses.

[256] Constable (1978), 207.

hail her from her room at night by throwing stones onto the wall or roof; she would then slip from the building in secret and go to meet him.

The other nuns soon grew suspicious of the "repeated noise of the stones," and directly confronted the young woman. Upon her confession to them, the other nuns flew into a furious rage and beat the poor woman, tearing the veil from her head, and were "prevented only by the senior sisters from burning, flaying, or branding her."[257] They then put her in fetters and cast her into a cell, permitting her only limited rations of bread and water; she would have received further beatings, but it soon became apparent that she was pregnant. The young man, meanwhile, fled from the monastery. Hoping to be reunited with him, the nun revealed his likely location to her captors, whereupon he was captured by a group of monks from the monastery, one of whom had donned a veil, pretending to be his paramour and luring him from hiding. The monks beat him and returned him to the monastery against his will.

What follows next is directly from Aelred's account, in translation:[258]

> Some [of the nuns], who were full of zeal for God but not of wisdom and who wished to avenge the injury to their virginity, soon asked the brothers to let them have the young man for a short time, as if to learn some secret from him. He was taken by them, thrown down, and held. The cause of all these evils [that is, the nun] was brought in as if for a spectacle; an instrument was put into her hands; and she was compelled, unwillingly, to cut off the virus with her own hands. Then one of the

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[257] Ibid.
[258] The translation is Constable's, including the parenthetical additions.

bystanders snatched the parts[259] of which he had just been relieved and thrust them into the mouth of the sinner just as they were befouled with blood.[260]

Aelred comments on this gruesome scene in the following way:

> You see how by mutilating him [and] by censuring her with disgraces and reproaches they avenged the injury of Christ . . . I praise not the deed but the zeal, and I approve not the shedding of blood but so great a striving of the nuns against evil.[261]

We are therefore meant to understand the entire event as a defense of the value of chastity.

The young man was led back to the monastery (at which point, Giles Constable notes, he then disappears from the narrative); the nun was returned to her prison cell – with her fetters reapplied, despite the fact that she was now visibly pregnant. As the time came for her to give birth, the nun experienced a vision of archbishop Henry, the very man who had given her over to the religious life when she was a child. She blamed him for forcing her into the convent, the locus of her misery, and he replied that she must confess her sin to him and recite certain psalms. This she did; he returned to her in vision form the following night accompanied by "two beautiful women," and as the nun was about to give birth, the women miraculously took the baby from her body. The next morning, the other nuns found the young woman relaxed and "girlish, not to say virginal" in appearance; they accused her of infanticide, yet after a thorough search of the cell, found no evidence that a birth had taken place. The fetters which had held the young woman were also miraculously opened.

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[259] Constable notes that the use of the plural here "suggests that the testicles were removed and not the penis" (ibid., p. 208, note 9); the removal of both penis and testicles would have most likely proved fatal, and the account suggests that the poor young man lived for some time after this ordeal.

[260] As quoted in Constable, 208.

[261] Ibid., 208.

Bewildered by these events, the nuns appealed to the authorities of the Church; Aelred of Rievaulx was himself sent to investigate. After visiting the nun in her cell, Aelred came to the conclusion that the nun could not have freed herself from her fetters, and so therefore a miracle must have transpired.

As Constable points out, what is important here for Aelred is the miraculous delivery of the child and the freeing of the nun from her fetters "which clearly showed God's desire to protect the community from the bad effects of the behaviour of two of its members".[262] Aelred accepted the evidence of divine intervention in the situation without question; in particular, the freeing of the woman from her fetters would have recalled the loosening of the Apostle Peter's chains in Acts 12:6-11. Following the biblical connection further, the miraculous appearance of the bishop and his angelic attendants to the pregnant woman also recalls the Annunciation of the angel Gabriel to the pregnant Virgin Mary.

Indeed, Constable notes that the supernatural delivery of the child has close parallels to the widely circulated story of a pregnant abbess whose child was delivered by none other than the Virgin Mary. This story, which J. A. Herbert notes as "one of the most popular of all the Mary-Legends, and practically all the great Latin collections include it,"[263] finds its earliest articulation in a collection of Mary miracles by Dominic of Evesham dating to the early 1120s.[264] This represents a departure in genre from our hagiographic narratives above: the miracle stories are neither hagiography nor treatises on normative conduct in the religious community, but constitute their own body of literature constructed for the

[262] Constable, 211.
[263] J.A. Herbert, "A New Manuscript of Adgar's Mary-Legends," *Romania* 32 (1903), 415-21; as found in Constable, 213 (note 25).
[264] Constable, 213.

purpose of inspiring Marian devotion. Nevertheless, the narrative elements of the story are

striking in their parallels to the account of the nun of Watton.

According to the tale, an unnamed abbess, overcome by her own weaknesses, fell prey

to temptation and became pregnant. Her pregnancy was subsequently discovered with

great outcry from the nuns of her community, the archdeacon, and the bishop. Before her

public trial, the nun was secretly delivered of her child by the Virgin, after which she was

discovered to have a virginal body herself, perfectly restored to its pre-pregnancy state.

Provoked by the shame and dishonor unnecessarily brought upon the religious community

by the debacle, the bishop ordered the nun's accusers (presumably the other nuns) to be

burned at the stake for defaming the holy woman; later, to his great surprise, he found the

child (who was a boy) living in the area, healthy and happily fostered by a goodhearted

local family. The bishop then took the boy under his wing, and the child grew up not only to

be a virtuous monk, but to succeed the bishop in episcopal office.[265]

Thus both in the story of the nun of Watton, and in the popular Marian miracle story

of the pregnant abbess, we see that the unwanted child is put away by means of a secret

divine intervention in the body of the pregnant woman. The miracle also provides the

opportunity for the restoration of the lapsed woman to the religious community; her body

is perceived to be virginal again, and so she may, after a period of necessary penance, be

welcomed back into the community of "holy virgins." In this way, we see that the

pregnancy itself, which threatens the monastic ideal of chastity, is done away with through

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[265] Ibid.

acceptable measures, and the woman's body is transformed back to its prelapsarian status.[266] The parallels to our hagiographic evidence are obvious.

Yet the story of the nun of Watton also offers a savagely different take on the defense of perceived chastity. The horrifying violence with which the religious community responds is almost unthinkable. Here both male and female religious take out their indignation over the crime of fornication on the very bodies of the transgressors. In a supreme act of cruelty (what Heloise called the "intolerable crime" against Abelard), the very apparatus for procreation is removed from the man and made an instrument of torture for the woman. Here the perception of uncleanness and moral filth associated with the crime of fornication is made explicit through the mutilation and humiliation of the lovers, mercilessly performed as though the act of butchery amends or makes satisfaction for the shame brought on the religious community by the sin.

Indeed, there is no mercy here in the human actors: we see no pastoral acceptance of the woman's indiscretion. There is no offer to raise the child, as with Samthann; rather, the Blessed Virgin (perhaps representing divine compassion as well as perfect chastity) must come and steal the child away. Mercy and compassion are accomplished by the divine, not by the human, in the form of the miraculous removal of the child from the woman's body. Neither do we see a liturgical, penitential response, as with Leoba. The brothers and sisters of the religious community become assailants, and they make no penance for their crime against the body of the man or for their torture of the woman. Finally, there is no blessing here, no miraculous restoration along the lines of the Brigit narrative. The nun of Watton is

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[266] I use the term "pre-lapsarian" throughout this chapter, not to refer to humanity's status before the original Fall according to the Genesis narrative, but to indicate the state of the religious woman's body before her sexual transgression. That is, "pre-lapsarian" refers here to the type of body that the woman maintained before her sin.

made acceptable to the community by means of the restoration of her physiological

intactness, but she is not blessed: on the contrary, she is imprisoned and beaten, her baby

is taken from her, and her lover is maimed. In the story of nun of Watton, then, we see the

trope of the pregnant nun expressed in its most horrifying iteration, and the defense of

chastity articulated in a remarkable and extreme dimension.

Conclusion: The Pregnant Nun as an Early-Medieval Theological Trope?

The development of a common theme manifests in the Lives of Leoba, Samthann, and

Brigit: a woman of (or related to) the religious community gives in to illicit sexual

temptation and becomes pregnant, and the consequence of her sin must be dealt with by a

sainted abbess. We have seen how in the Lives of these three abbesses, the situation was

amended in three very different ways; yet these three narratives demonstrate a common

interest in the preservation of *perceived* chastity. Leoba presents us with a liturgical model

for defending the perceived chastity of the entire religious community; Samthann presents

us with a pastoral model for preserving the perceived chastity of the lapsed woman while

simultaneously providing for the care and education of the offspring produced. The Brigit

narrative avoids easy classification, but I have chosen to call it a model of miraculous

restoration. In this case, the perceived chastity of the lapsed woman is bodily restored to

her through Brigit's blessing and the subsequent miscarriage - just as, in the narrative of

the silver brooch, Brigit defends the chastity of the lay woman from the evil nobleman by

means of restoring what was lost (the brooch as evidence), so that all may see what is right

and good. Similarly, Brigit restores the body of the lapsed woman to its pre-pregnancy state, so that all may observe that she may yet be returned to the religious community through penance.

Moreover, both Aelred's tale of the nun of Watton and the Marian miracle story of the pregnant abbess present us with evidence that the theme of the pregnant nun was prevalent and meaningful for the people of the twelfth century. Aelred in particular seems to relate the story of the nun of Watton as an account of an event that really happened. We may therefore see the development of this trope into succeeding centuries.

Neither Anglo-Saxon nor Irish hagiographic literature in general features the view of women as temptresses or seductress; rather, women (especially religious women) were viewed by their male hagiographers as fellow-laborers in the vineyard, partners in serving Christ through the practice of monastic ideals.[267] Thus, women were neither reduced to being mere objects of sexual temptation, nor were they conceived of as inherently unholy. The trope of the pregnant nun, therefore, must not be viewed as an example of male justification for women's moral inadequacy or weakness, but as a very poignant reflection of the reality of medieval sexuality.

Furthermore, from the frequent treatment of both abortion and infanticide in the Irish penitentials of the period, it is clear that a technology for disposing of unwanted children was widespread, and that women (including religious women) would have had means for dispatching their pregnancies. The *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*, an important Irish collection of canon law composed in the late seventh or early eighth century and which later proliferated on the continent, addressed abortion in a section on religious,

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[267] Hollis, 114.

rather than lay, women. It reiterated patristic and conciliar rulings against abortion which left the possibility of remedial penance open, but which broached abortion in terms less mitigated by considerations of communal visibility. The mid- to late sixth-century *Penitential of Finnian*, one of the oldest surviving penitentials or handbooks for confession, held out the possibility for reconciliation after sexual lapses by vowed virgins and clerics alike. After a canon on abortion or infanticide, which gave a half-year penance to any "woman who has destroyed someone's child by her *maleficium*" (a term which connects magic and poisoning), the author immediately turned to any professed virgin whose "sin becomes manifest." After six years of penance, she would be "joined to the altar, and then we can say that she can restore her crown and put on the white robe and be declared a virgin." Likewise, a cleric who had fathered a child would regain his office in the seventh year. Produced in a monastic setting, this penitential viewed sexual sin through the lens of communal visibility. It treated nuns and clerics whose sexual sin had become publicly disclosed through the birth of a child more stringently than those whose sin remained hidden. In fact, as Julie Ann Smith shows, in the secular population, "abandonment of unwanted children was encouraged to prevent the worse alternative of infanticide. Infants abandoned at church or monastery doors would be baptized".[268] Observing that "abortion took place, if not commonly, then at least often enough to appear without comment in both secular and ecclesiastical sources," Lisa Bitel has suggested that miracles that involve pregnant religious even go so far as to reflect a "blasé attitude toward abortion."[269]

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[268] Smith, 87.

[269] Lisa Bitel, "Sex, Sin and Celibacy in Early Medieval Ireland," Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium 7 (1987): 79.

Religious communities were therefore seen as places of refuge, or, at the very least, as places of deposit for unwanted children. Yet in the trope of the pregnant nun, the very refuge for abandoned children becomes the locus of shame for pregnant religious, and in the case of the nun of Watton, of severe penalty.

The three hagiographic examples given above therefore demonstrate that the *valorization* of chastity was of greater significance for the female religious community than its actual practice. By the time of the nun of Watton, this dynamic had taken on such magnitude that physical violence was paid out to lapsed bodies in response to the shame pregnant religious brought upon their communities. Clearly, bodies were important in medieval religious culture; the body of the pregnant nun represents a particular kind of medieval body – one that produces, as we have seen, a variety of responses, from the pastoral to the sadistic, from the miraculous to the liturgical.

In conclusion, the trope of the pregnant nun represents a significant factor for the study of gender in the early medieval period, for it transcribes the value of chastity in two unique ways. As we have seen, it is the perception of chastity and the dynamic of shame that the trope calls forth as significant ascetical elements of medieval religious life. In the pregnant nun, then, we have the meeting of all that the monastic, ascetical ideal represents with the reality of human sexuality. Moreover, the trope produces a moral or spiritual lesson concerning the reconciliation and "healing" of lapsed individuals. In this way, the transgressive body of the pregnant nun becomes a production site for the activity of redemption and restored chastity. In the next chapter, I will explore the ways in which this dynamic of redemption and restoration operated on female saintly bodies within the confines of the monastic community itself. I turn now to the trope of holy enclosure.

CHAPTER SIX:

THE TROPE OF ENCLOSURE – THE BODY ENCOMPASSED AND EXPOSED

A burgeoning area of inquiry in early-medieval studies in the last twenty years has

focused on the theme of bodily enclosure. Here I define "enclosure" not only as the space

delimited by the walls of the religious institution and its liturgical spaces (cloister, minster,

anchor-hold, chancel, nave, etc.), but as the space that is sealed off or hidden by culturally

significant boundaries (such as clothing: the habit of the nun, for example, or the "veil" of

the "holy virgin"). Shari Horner's wide-ranging 2004 analysis of the construction of

"femininity" in pre-Conquest English narratives demonstrates the centrality of this theme

in both secular and religious texts.[270] As Horner argues, "[t]he discourse of enclosure

prescribes, regulates, and thereby normalizes the female subject of early English literature,

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[270] Shari Horner, *The Discourse of Enclosure: Representing Women in Old English Literature* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2001), 6.

differentiating her from her male counterparts, and providing a historically and culturally specific matrix through which to view" these women.[271]

Yet most modern analyses of enclosure fail to view the extant religious texts as interrelated. For example, studies of the "transvestite saints" of Anglo-Saxon England have focused on questions of sexuality and gender identity, rather than on the complicated and nuanced ways in which clothing at once hides and reveals saintly authority.[272] Similarly, analyses of the Old English handbooks for anchorites have ignored similar versions of the theme of the enclosure of the body in Old English hagiography.[273] In this chapter, I relate these two genres under one theme: I will discuss the trope of enclosure in Old English hagiography in conversation with the same theme as it appears in other religious texts, such as rules for nuns and handbooks for anchorites. These handbooks, which were written specifically for female anchorites and which were contemporaneous with the *vitae* under discussion,[274] nuance the trope of enclosure by means of the practical attention they pay to the gendered anchorite body. Not only do the handbooks instruct the anchorite in her dress – in one text, comparing the robes of the anchorite to a kind of protective boundary (the

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[271] Ibid.

[272] Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Valerie Hotchkiss, "'Female Men of God': Cross Dressing in Medieval Hagiography" in *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 13-31,146-153; Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). See also John Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 5 (1974), 30.

[273] See, for example, Liz H. McAvoy, *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Wales Press, 2005); also, Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

[274] In addition to writing the life of Edith, for example, Goscelin also wrote the *Liber Confortatorius*, a book, written specifically for an anchoress named Eve, that instructs all anchorites in how they should pray, eat, and comport themselves.

thirteenth century *Ancrene Wisse*[275]) – but they also instruct her in her "outer manner" and her "inner heart," further complicating the theme of enclosure by introducing adumbrations of "the hidden" and "inner" realm of the soul versus the "outer" space of the body in community. I therefore introduce something new to the way medievalists think of religious "space" by expanding both the definition of enclosure and by widening the options for historical literature that discusses religious enclosure in medieval Christianity.

To illustrate this point concretely, I now turn briefly to the hagiographic sources themselves. I begin with an analysis of these themes in the hagiographies of so-called "transvestite" female saints in Old English.

Transvestism in the Cloister: The Examples of Eugenia and Euphrosyne in Ælfric's
Lives of the Saints

It has become fashionable to analyze the trope of female "transvestite saints" from the perspective of male sexual desire. John Anson, for example, has read the narratives of female transvestism in the male cloister from a psychological perspective, suggesting along Freudian lines that such stories serve to redirect monks' obsessions with female sexuality to the more productive context of the veneration of female saints. Thus, "quite simply, the secret longing for a woman in a monastery is brilliantly concealed by disguising the woman [saint] as a man and making her appear guilty of the very temptation to which the monks are most subject; finally, after she has been punished for their desires, their guilt is compensated by turning her into a saint with universal remorse and sanctimonious

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[275] Nicholas Watson, ed. and trans., *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), 202-203. See also Book Two of Goscelin's *Liber Confortatorius*, in which Goscelin instructs the anchoress to clothe herself in the "armor of prayer," undoubtedly a Pauline reference (Eph. 6:11).

worship."[276] In this way, Anson interprets the body of the female "transvestite saint" as serving to address heteronormative male sexual desire in the cloister.

Such an analysis falls short, for it imputes psychological motives into the texts that the narratives themselves cannot support. Moreover, this psychologizing tendency negates the themes and aims of these "transvestite saint" hagiographies in the actual historical context in which they were written. The Old English hagiographies that treat of this trope depict no trace of male monastic sexual obsession; rather, they valorize the dedication of the female saint to the monastic ideal, demonstrating the lengths to which she will go in order to attain to ascetical perfection.

The example of Eugenia suffices as a representative example of this trope. In the version of her hagiography found in Ælfric's homilies on the lives of the saints (dating to the late tenth century[277]), Eugenia disguises herself as a man in order to approach the local bishop in secret and declare her intent for baptism (a rite forbidden her under her pagan father's direct order). The bishop encourages her to continue in this costumed dissemblance until her catechesis is complete; once she has been baptized and received into a convent as a consecrated virgin, she may once again dress as a woman (albeit in the robes of a nun). She stays in the minster for her catechesis, "*mid wærlicum mode þeah þe heo mæden wære.*"[278] After a period of education in the contemplative theology of the early

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[276] Anson (1974), 30.

[277] Leslie A. Donovan, *Women Saints' Lives in Old English Prose* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 4.

[278] *Ælfric's Lives of the Saints*, Walter Skeat, ed. and trans. (London, 1881), 30. Skeat's translation reads, "with a man's mind, though she were a maid" (30); Mary Clayton and Juliet Mullins suggest instead, "with a masculine spirit . . . although she was a young woman" (Mary Clayton and Juliet Mullins, *Old English Lives of Saints, Volume One: Ælfric* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 51).

desert ascetics, she prepares herself to take the vows of the convent and reveal her true gender.

Yet before this may be accomplished, her superior in the minster dies, having been the only living soul who knew her "true" gender identity. Believing Eugenia to be male, and marveling at the severity of her asceticism and the authenticity of her virtue, the monks of the minster elect her as their new abbot. Although she is extremely apprehensive about taking on such authority (*Đa wearð þaet maeden mycclum hohful, hú heo æfre wæras wissian sceolde*[279]), she agrees to the abbacy, and presides over the minster with wisdom and grace.

Eugenia becomes known for her healing miracles, and she even becomes, upon healing a wealthy widow named Melanthia, the object of *female* desire, even enduring unwanted and aggressive sexual contact when Melanthia (thinking that Eugenia is a young man) embraces the saint "as a prostitute" (*myltestre*).[280] Shamed by the saint's rejection of her sexual advances, the widow falsely accuses Eugenia publicly of attempted rape, and Eugenia, still enclosed within her transvestite garb, is put to trial. As she defends herself, Eugenia's father, now the judge of the trial, somehow recognizes "the real Eugenia" and exclaims that the daughter he once thought lost has now been recovered. Eugenia is united with her family, and the charges against her are dismissed, but not before she dramatically rips open her monk's robes, exposing to all her naked breast and displaying her female body to the public gaze of the spectating audience.

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[279] Skeat translates this as, "then became the maiden extremely anxious how she was ever to direct men" (*Ælfric's Lives of the Saints*, trans Skeat, 1881, 32). I suggest the following translation: "then the young woman became intensely concerned how she henceforth ought to lead them" or "how she must shield them" (depending on whether *sceolde* is being used as an auxiliary verb or a noun).

[280] *Ælfric's Lives of the Saints*, trans. Skeat, 32.

Now identified once more as female, Eugenia continues to gain renown for her devout life and ascetical discipline. Eventually, she assembles a group of female followers, with whom she lives in holy virginity. Eugenia arouses attention of the Roman authorities when one of her followers refuses an arranged marriage, and no less than the Roman emperor himself orders that the women should make sacrifice to the pagan gods or "be cut in two with a hard sword" (*mid heardum swurde on twa*).[281] Eugenia herself is dragged to the temple of the goddess Diana and ordered to make sacrifice to the pagan deity. When she refuses, she is incarcerated, and on Christmas day, she is killed for her faith: "then she was martyred, and the Christian people buried her" (*heo wearð þa gemartyrod and Cristene men hi bebyrgdon*).[282] Eugenia's narrative therefore begins with her being identified as female, moves to an intermediate phase in which she is understood to be male, and then concludes with the martyrdom of the female saint.

A version of this trope is also evident in the Old English Life of Euphrosyne (included in Ælfric's homilies on the saints, but not, as many scholars have already noted, written by Ælfric himself[283]). Euphrosyne lived in Alexandria in the fifth century.[284] Raised in the minster (where her parents also live together, although in perfect chastity), Euphrosyne is to be married off to a wealthy suitor. Fleeing this betrothal and seeking the counsel of her father's monastic superior, Euphrosyne is exhorted by the abbot to clothe

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[281] Mary Clayton and Juliet Mullins, *Old English Lives of Saints, Volume One: Ælfric* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 68.

[282] Ibid., 70.

[283] See, for example, David Clark, "Unorthodox Desire: The Anonymous Life of Euphrosyne and the Colloquies of Ælfric Bata," in *Between Medieval Men: Male Friendship and Desire in Early Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: 2009), 195-230.

[284] Translated from Greek into Latin in the eighth century, the complete extant Old English version of the *Life of Saint Euphrosyne* survives in Ælfric's *Lives of the Saints.* The version of Ælfric's *Lives of the Saints* that I will be using comes from the manuscript London, BL, Cotton Julius E.vii., edited by Walter Skeat.

herself in the dress of the male monks, thereby to conceal her identity and escape

detection. Invested *mid munucreafe* ("with the dress of the monk"), Euphrosyne is free to

study theology, and to avoid the dangers of worldly marriage, taking the male name,

Smaragdus. Yet as Paul Szarmach has noted, her gender within the grammar of the text

itself is transformed: the pronouns shift from "her" and "she" to "him" and "he."[285] Rather

than merely serving a liberatory function, then, Euphrosyne's transvestism performs a shift

in the narratological and grammatical presentation of her gender within the text.

Moreover, Euphrosyne becomes the object of male desire within the monastery.

Finding the face of Smaragdus too beautiful, the monastic brethren complain that this new

youth distracts them from their concentration in worship. The abbot gently orders

Smaragdus to solitary confinement, warning the monk to stay away from the other

brothers, and not to venture out alone in the monastery at night.

Euphrosyne continues in her identity as Smaragdus for many years, eventually

revealing herself to be female right before her death by natural causes. She does not

undergo persecution of any kind: there is no trial, and no dramatic defense of her gender.

Rather, she simply identifies herself as female to her father, reassuring him that the

daughter whom he thought he had lost has been in the monastery for many years, pursuing

spiritual perfection. "Euphrosyne's life features all the hallmarks of a *vita*, . . . rather than a

passion, and underscore Euphrosyne's status as a confessor, rather than a martyr."[286]

Norris argues convincingly that "Euphrosyne dies a woman, and considering the scarcity of

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[285] Paul E. Szarmach, "St. Euphrosyne: Holy Transvestite," in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 357.

[286] Robin Norris, "Genre Trouble: Reading the Old English Vita of Saint Euphrosyne," in *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Paul Szarmach (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013),122.

female confessors in the Old English corpus, the most remarkable feature of her life may then be not her cross-dressing but her death by natural causes."[287]

Although both are transvestite saint legends, "one crucial difference between the lives of Euphrosyne and Eugenia is that these two texts represent two distinct subgenres of hagiography."[288] Following Michael Lapidge, who identified "two broad categories for a saint's life: the *passio* ('passion') and the *vita* ('life')," Robin Norris notes that "the subject of a passion is usually labelled a martyr, while *confessor* is the generic shorthand for a *vita*'s subject."[289] Recognizing that the "vast majority of female saints in the Old English corpus are, like Eugenia, the subjects of passions," Norris identifies the *Life of Euphrosyne* as following "the pattern of a typical *vita*."[290] As Andrew P. Scheil elaborates, the "prosaic, almost tranquil end to Euphrosyne's life stands in contrast to the deaths of other virgin saints . . . Euphrosyne's end is not as public, not as dramatic, and not the typical spectacular death of a virgin martyr."[291]

This awareness of the differences in generic conventions between the narratives of Euphrosyne and Eugenia is an important intervention in the prevailing focus on the acts of transvestism in the hagiographies. The significance of Euphrosyne's status as confessor, rather than martyr, "has escaped the notice of scholars whose focus on queer sexuality and the transgression of gender roles has led them to read her vita exclusively in conjunction with the martyrdom of Eugenia, a strategy that can also result in Euphrosyne's

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[287] Norris (2013), 123.
[288] See Michael Lapidge, "The Saintly Life in Anglo-Saxon England," in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, Michael Lapidge and Malcolm Godden, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 252. See also Norris (2013), 123.
[289] Norris, 123.
[290] Ibid.
[291] Andrew P. Scheil, "Somatic Ambiguity and Masculine Desire in the Old English Life of Euphrosyne," *Exemplaria* 11 (1992): 345-61, at 346.

defeminization."[292]

Paul Szarmach, for example, reads Euphrosyne's transvestism as an opportunity for the Old English author to "toy with" themes of homosexual temptation within the context of the monastic community, concluding that "Euphrosyne 'unwomans' herself."[293] Franzen agrees, identifying both Euphrosyne and Eugenia as examples of "the de-sexed holy woman."[294] Both Szarmach and Franzen fail to recognize that this interpretation, drawing, as it does, on postmodern critical gender theory, actually obscures the meaning of these texts for their medieval audiences. That is, medieval people would not have viewed these narratives as examples of *removing* gender, but rather as obscuring aspects of its normative performance. In other words, these texts are not about removing the saint's status as female. Rather, they focus on the *enclosure* of the signs of the saint's gender in order to prove her zeal for holiness and her unwavering dedication to the monastic life. In this way, both narratives underscore an ascetical-theological context for the performance of gender, for they emphasize gender performance only insofar as it serves the more profound goal of spiritual perfection.

Too often, the existing scholarship that treats of this literature has focused on the *limitations* imposed on the body by enclosure. Helene Scheck, for example, argues that while "they do not denounce the female body as vociferously as did their Latin sources, the Old English versions of Euphrosyne and Eugenia neither liberate nor empower women. Rather, recognizing the rich potential for subversion inherent in the device of cross-

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[292] Norris (2013), 124.

[293] Szarmach, "St. Euphrosyne: Holy Transvestite" (1996), 355.

[294] Allen J. Franzen, "When Women Aren't Enough," *Speculum* 68 (1993), 445-71, at 463. See also Elizabeth Nightlinger, "The female *Imitatio Christi* and medieval popular religion: the case of St. Wilgefortis," in *Representations of the Feminine in the Middle Ages*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Texas: Academia Press, 1993), 291-328.

dressing, the Old English versions expose the male imposter in more explicit ways than the earlier accounts do and literally and metaphorically redress these and all women who would be male, raising the possibility of transcending gender limitations or collapsing gender difference only effectively to dismiss it."[295]

Yet the performance of maleness through male dress does not limit the gender of female saint, but rather expands her agency by providing her with opportunities for leadership, authority, education, and spiritual growth. Here the female saint merely disguises the social markers of femininity not only to devote herself fully to the monastic ideal, but to excel in it. In this way, her agency within the narrative is expanded to encompass a superior expression of ascetical devotion: both Eugenia and Euphrosyne are recognized in their respective monastic communities for their exemplary dedication to ascetical practice.

For both female saints, their gender performance involves cutting their hair short, in order to pass themselves off as adolescent males. This narrative element also finds its way into Merovingian hagiography, in which a female saint's hair is cut short in order to prevent an unwanted marriage. Here an episode from the *vita* of Gertrude of Nivelles serves as a representative example. The daughter of Pippin the Elder, who later became mayor of the palace and the eventual founder of the dynasty that would be known as Carolingian,

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[295] Helene Scheck, *Reform and Resistance: Formations of Female Subjectivity in Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 96. Johnathan Walker arrived at a similar conclusion in his 2003 article: "As liberatory as they may at first seem, the transvestite characteristics of the subgenre [of Old English hagiography] function as a discursive system through which hagiographers fortify distinct and hierarchical gender categories, an act which helps to tether the spiritual social prospects of historical women to a degraded, female bodily form" (J. Walker, "The Transtextuality of Transvestite Sainthood: Or, How to Make the Gendered Form Fit the Generic Function," *Exemplaria*, vol. 15 (2003), 77-78).

Gertrude grew up under the watchful eye of her Christian mother, Ida. Upon Pippin's death, Ida sought to build a convent for her and her daughter, but this plan was met with opposition, not least by wealthy suitors who wished to unite their fortunes to the family's political influence by marrying Gertrude. Gertrude refused these suitors, and "to prevent violent abductors from tearing her daughter away by force into the alluring charms of the world," Ida "snatched up the barber's blade" and quickly cut Gertrude's hair "around her maidenly crown."[296] Gertrude remained "fair of face, but more beautiful of mind," focusing on giving alms to the poor, caring for the sick and pilgrims, "rigorous in support of the church," and "excelling in fasts and prayers"[297] — all from within the relative safety of the convent walls.

The difference here is that Gertrude's hair is cut in order to protect her holy virginity by making her physically undesirable to her male suitors. Gertrude does not try to pass herself off as male, whereas both Eugenia and Euphrosyne cut their hair in order to enter the male monastic enclosure. Gertrude alters her appearance to repel men's attraction; Eugenia and Euphrosyne both cut their hair to join men in the work of ascetical practice. The semiotics of hair-cutting in the lives of these female saints therefore changes according to the desired outcome: Gertrude merely hopes to avoid an unwanted marriage, but Eugenia and Euphrosyne both desire to attain to spiritual perfection by excelling in ascetical formation.

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[296] Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halbord, trans., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 224.
[297] Ibid.

Outward Performance Versus Inner Piety: Clothing as Enclosure in Goscelin's *Life of Edith* and *Liber confortatorius*

The trope of liberatory enclosure also surfaces in the more conventional lives of Old English female royal saints. In Goscelin's *Life of Edith*, for example (which I discussed in Chapter Three), the dress that encloses the female body becomes an object of episcopal concern. Edith secretly wears a hair shirt close to the skin of her chest as a form of private ascetic devotion to Christ's suffering, but she garbs herself in sumptuous outer robes, the better to conceal this aspect of her physical piety.[298] Her ornate outer dress soon draws the critique of bishop Æthelwold, who warns Edith that "not in these garments does one approach the marriage chamber of Christ, nor is the heavenly bridegroom pleased with exterior elegance."[299] Edith boldly replies:

> Believe, revered father, a mind by no means poorer in aspiring to God will live beneath this covering than beneath a goatskin. I possess my Lord, who pays attention to the mind, not to the clothing. Here the word of the Lord is declared: 'According to your faith, be it done unto you.' (Matthew 9:29)[300]

The bishop, duly corrected, departs, "recognizing also that it makes no difference whether a pure mind lives in purple or in sackcloth, nor is there any harm in keeping [something] in a golden vase."[301] Thus, the enclosure of Edith's body through dress – and the layering of this

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[298] According to the extant texts, the wearing of a hair shirt is a common ascetical discipline among female saints from Francia as well. For example, Rusticula secretly wears a hair shirt under her clothes, to abrade her skin as an act of ascetical discipline and renunciation. See Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halbord, trans., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 126.

[299] "Life of Edith," in *Writing the Wilton Women: Goscelin's Legend of Edith and Liber confortatorius*, ed. and trans. Stephanie Hollis (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004), 42.

[300] "Life of Edith," 43.

[301] Ibid.

sartorial enclosure, vis-á-vis the authoritative gaze of the bishop – preserves not only

Edith's unique agency as a secret ascetic, but also demonstrates her spiritual superiority, or

rather the superiority of her divinely-given authority, over against the ecclesiastical

authority of the bishop.

Recent scholarship has elided the ways in which clothing and personal appearance

creates a narrative "space" for the saintly protagonist to act out ascetical ideals, preferring

instead to focus on the ways that dress assists in the performance or expression of gender

ideals. Yet dress was a significant concern for early medieval religious, as it defined the

"space" of the woman's own body within the enclosure of her clothing as well as within the

physical space of her convent or anchorite cell.

For example, Caesarius of Arles' *Rule for Nuns*, written in the sixth century for his

sister's convent, is notable for its fascination with female monastic dress. Caesarius insists

that nuns' dress should not draw attention; it should be thoroughly unremarkable, and the

devout religious "should not aspire to please by [her] clothing, but rather by [her]

conduct."[302] Indeed, Caesarius reserves a special admonishment against unnecessary

extravagance when it comes to the garments of the women. Clothing within the convent

must be "very simple and of a good color, never of black nor of a bright color, but only of a

plain color or milk-white."[303] Lest there be any room for interpretation, garments may not

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[302] *Not sit notabilis habitus vester, nec affectetis vestibus placere, sed moribus, quod vestrum decet propositum* (*Regula*, caput 22). Maria Caritas McCarthy has demonstrated the affinities between this statement by Caesarius and a near-identical injunction in the *Regula Augustini* (Maria C. McCarthy, *The Rule for Nuns of St. Caesarius of Arles: a Translation with a Critical Introduction* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1960), 140.

[303] McCarthy's translation (1960), 185. McCarthy notes that Caesarius uses the terms "*laia vel lactina*" to indicate a plain white "as opposed to a shiny, or brilliant or transparent white fabric" (McCarthy, 185, note 16).

have "purple or beaver trim."[304] Clothing is to be made in the convent, and the fabrication

of fabric is to be carefully monitored by the sister in charge of wool work. Interestingly, no

dye work is to be undertaken in the convent other than to produce the "plain white" fabric

for clothing, "for the other colors do not befit the humility of a virgin."[305] No woman may

receive gifts of clothing from lay persons, relatives, or even clergy.[306]

Caesarius even makes provisions for the styling of the nuns' hair: "the hair should

never be tied up higher than the measure which we have made in this place with ink."[307]

The injunctions on personal appearance are so strict that even secular women and girls in

lay attire are prohibited from entering the convent, lest their jewelry and the bright colors

of their attire rile up the nuns' desire for personal ornamentation, distracting them from

their ascetical devotion.[308] Indeed, clothing "should be made in the monastery with such

great diligence that it will never be necessary for the abbess to provide from outside the

monastery."[309] If this results in "murmurings and contentions," because some of the nuns

"have received something perchance of less worth than you had formerly, examine

yourselves here on the great lack that is in you of that interior holy vesture of the heart,

when you murmur about the clothing of the body."[310]

Clothing, then, is to be simple and functional, but it should not distract from the true

work of religious life: the conversion of the heart. The clothing of female religious is an

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[304] McCarthy, trans. (1960), 189.
[305] McCarthy's translation (1960), 185.
[306] McCarthy, trans. (1960), 186.
[307] McCarthy, trans. (1960), 189. Ever the micro-manager, Caesarius intended to include a scale model of a line in the manuscript to demonstrate just how high the women's hairstyles could be.
[308] McCarthy, trans. (1960), 180.
[309] McCarthy, trans. (1960), 182.
[310] McCarthy, trans. (1960), 179-180.

important component of ascetical practice, in that it encloses the body in simplicity, so that

the soul may pursue spiritual goals without distraction. Clothing serves as a kind of

protective enclosure for the female body, so that the mind may be free to rise to higher,

theological concerns, unfettered by petty vanity.

Moreover, the trope of enclosure arises in these texts in terms of the spiritual

enclosure of the heart: the Old English manuals for anchorites are careful to delineate the

inner heart, the deepest portion of the psyche, from the outer performances of emotion and

devotion, that is, the outer representations of inner feeling and devotional practice. For

example, the late-eleventh century writer, Goscelin of Canterbury, wrote a manual for

female anchorites in which he views the anchorhold as a place of retreat, a place of

extravagant luxury, a place to enclose oneself and insulate oneself from the troubles of the

world. Specifically, the anchorhold is viewed as a place where one may retreat to study, to

read Scripture and the lives of the saints, and especially to write, to pursue a cultured life of

erudition. This space, this safe space where one may just concentrate on study, is viewed

as a great and wonderful extravagance — the luxury of time. Writing to the anchorite

named Eve, Goscelin admits, "Oh, how often I sighed for a little lodging like yours which . . .

had a little door for the purposes of going out to services, so that I should not be without a

very large church. . . . there I might escape the crowd that tears at my heart. There I might

place a law on my stomach at my own little table, so that I might pay attention to books

instead of feasts."[311] The anchorhold is a safe place, a serene enclosure where one may

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[311] Goscelin of Canterbury, *Liber confortatorius*, Stephanie Hollis et al., trans. and eds., *Writing the Wilton Women: Goscelin's* Legend of Edith *and* Liber confortatorius (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 109.

study without being troubled, and a place where one has the luxury of devoting every attention to the holy life.

Goscelin also describes the anchorhold as a place of journey. Goscelin describes his anchorites as "wanderers," as "an owl in the house" — that is, a traveling bird who only temporarily perches in one place on its way to higher things. The room of the anchorite is envisioned as both a resting place on the journey, and as the place of spiritual journey itself, an isolated road to heaven. The metaphor of journey is at once a practical one, inasmuch as the female anchorites have physically journeyed away from the familiar: they have literally turned away from family and secular life. It is also true in a spiritual sense: the door to the anchorhold is a door to new spiritual discovery, a door to conference and communion with the divine, a door to a new way of being, a new humanity. Goscelin writes, "people suffer migration . . . but you are migrating to eternal bliss."[312]

Finally, the anchorhold is a place of combat. Goscelin writes, "having come into this place, you have advanced to a single combat, to wrench away your [eternal] crown from the hands of the enemy with divine zeal. . . . We must conquer or die."[313] Both Goscelin and the author of the thirteenth-century manual for anchorites called the *Ancrene Wisse,* refer to Ephesians 6:12 ("put on the full armor of God") – and here the armor of God is the virtues,

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[312] Ibid., 117. Goscelin goes on to mention the virgin martyrs, not because their virginity is important, but rather because he believes that it is the courage of the virgin martyrs that should be emulated. Goscelin says these virgin martyrs "were found to be of such great bravery and endurance that they surpassed the strongest men and soldiers of Christ in constancy" (ibid., 145). And lest we think that these exemplars of courage are gendered, inasmuch as the virgin martyrs themselves are primarily female, Goscelin relates the tale of a male anchorite who refused to leave his cell even when invaders came to burn down the church (ibid., 149). It is therefore this dynamic of courage – not the dynamics of gender or holy virginity – that for Goscelin makes these saints exemplary.
[313] Ibid., 127.

and the anchorite requires that armor in order to do battle with the demons.[314] Indeed, the author of the *Ancrene Wisse* suggests that when faced with temptation, the female anchorite should take up a giant cross and start beating at the air, to slice into the wings of the invisible demons.

According to these manuals for religious practice, the space of the anchorhold encloses the female body, but not in a way that limits or subverts female agency. Rather, the anchorhold becomes a place where female bodies are actually given options for free moral action: in the enclosure of the anchorhold itself, women are free to study, to journey to the divine, and to take up arms against the devil. When read together with Eugenia's story, this broader definition of enclosure becomes clear. The space of religious experience therefore expands beyond the mere physical confines of the anchorhold or convent, to include the female religious' dress, her body, and even her inner heart.

There is significant textual evidence that the anchorites themselves read both the manuals and the lives of the saints together, so the actual historical people who became anchorites used these two genres and even associated one genre with the other, such that they viewed these texts as constituting one body of literature. Taking these two bodies of literature seriously enough to read them as interrelated therefore represents an intervention in the field of Old English religious studies. Most modern analyses of enclosure in Old English religious texts fail to see the whole story because they view the hagiographic texts and the manuals as separate. Such contemporary analyses fail to understand the complex gender messages encoded in the extra-hagiographical literature of Anglo-Saxon monasticism.

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[314] Ibid., 136.

Holding these Old English *vitae* in tension with the extant handbooks for Anglo-Saxon anchorites reveals a more complex understanding of the enclosed body. Moreover, hagiographical material from the Anglo-Saxon period often directly references enclosed anchorites as the subjects of embodied miracles. For example, Goscelin's *Translatio et Miracula s. Mildrethe*, written at St Augustine's, Canterbury, in the early or mid-1090s,[315] features the anchorite Ælfwen as the one of the female recipients of the saints' miracles.

The Cloister and Its Limits: Transgressing the Enclosure of Monastic Space

In both Anglo-Saxon England and Merovingian Gaul, the enclosure of the anchorhold or convent was no mere architectural boundary. Rather it served as a sacred delineation between secular and religious life, and even within the monastic campus itself, some spaces were off-limits. Caesarius concludes his Rule with this: "And because for the sake of guarding the monastery, I have closed and forbidden the use of some doors, in the old baptistery, in the *scola* and in the weaving room, and in the tower next to the *pomerium*, let no one ever presume under any pretext of utility whatsoever to open them: but it shall be allowed to the holy congregation to offer resistance, and they are not to permit that to be done which they know to be against their good reputation or peace."[316]

Enclosure within the walls of the convent, though taken as a given in Old English hagiography, was not strictly upheld in contemporaneous narratives of Irish female saints. In early-medieval Ireland, female saints transgressed the perceived boundaries of the cloister and ventured beyond the walls of their convents.

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[315] Tom License, "Evidence of Recluses in Eleventh-Century England," in *Anglo-Saxon England*, vol 37, p. 228.
[316] McCarthy (1960), 204.

The narratives of female saints from Merovingian Gaul reveal no such provision for travel beyond the walls of the monastic enclosure. Here the Benedictine virtue of *stabilitas*, or stability (which was understood as remaining in one monastic community for life), is reinforced throughout the Frankish Lives. The *vita* of Rictrude, for example, describes how the saint forced her own young daughter, Eusebia, to live with her in the newly-constructed convent at Marchiennes. Having grown accustomed to living in the original convent at Hamay throughout her childhood, Eusebia adjusted poorly to life in the new location, and in a state of adolescent rebellion, snuck out of the convent every night to walk to the old, familiar community, where she would pray the office of vigils in the Hamay chapel. Upon discovering her daughter's subterfuge, Rictrude had the girl beaten severely by her son, Maurontus. Eusebia's injuries from this punishment were so severe that "through the rest of her life, pus and blood sometimes mixed with the saliva which she spat from her mouth."[317] After witnessing her daughter's persistent state of misery at Marchiennes, Rictrude eventually allowed the girl to return to the convent at Hamay, albeit begrudgingly. Eusebia's joy at being allowed to return to her childhood home was short-lived, however, as she died in her teens, presumably from complications related to her traumatic beating.

The situation appears very different in early-medieval Ireland. According to her seventh-century *Life* by Cogitosus, Brigit is constantly on the move. She makes a journey across the plain of Mag Breg, north of modern-day Dublin, and after stopping to perform a provisioning miracle for a poor woman without food or fire, Brigit "continued on her way

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[317] McNamara (1992), 215.

in the manner of a bishop" (*pontifice in suam viam perrexit*).[318] St. Lasair also makes a

number of pastoral journeys, often in the company of male clerics (most notably, Bishop

Aodhán), in which she founds churches and monastic communities, giving them her

blessing.[319]

Similarly, the early sixth-century Irish saint, Darerca of Killeevy, makes a number of

pastoral journeys, traveling by night so that she would not be seen by people (*nocturno*

tempore, ne ab hominibus videretur, iter agebat).[320] If she encountered anyone along the

way, she was in the habit of veiling her face (*et si quos in via obvios habebat, velata facie*

alloqui solebat).[321]

Such examples point up a key difference between Old English, Frankish, and Old Irish

hagiographies. Although these three cultures shared several themes across their

hagiographic narratives, the transgression of female religious across the boundary of the

conventual enclosure was not one of them. In this sense, the Irish sources represent a

departure from the insistence on stability as an essential component of early-medieval

monastic practice for female religious.

Conclusion: Towards an Ascetical-Theological Reading of "Transvestite Saints" and

the Trope of Enclosure

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[318] Cogitosus, *Vita S. Brigitae*, PL 72: 786. See also Sean Connolly and J. M. Picard, "Cogitosus' Life of St. Brigit: Content and Value," *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 117 (1987): 5-27.

[319] The daughter of St. Ronan, Lasair is said to have lived in the sixth century, but the only surviving text of her Life exists in a seventeenth-century manuscript. See *The Life of St. Lasair*, ed. and trans. Lucius Gwynn and David O'Duigenan, *Ériu* 5 (1911), 73-109, at 83 and 89.

[320] "Vita S. Darercae seu Moninnae Abbatissae," ed. W. W. Heist, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae: Ex Codice Olim Salmanticensi* (Bruxelles: 1965), 87, *caput* 14.

[321] Ibid.

This performance of cross-dressing has been viewed as an example of the church's need to reject aspects of female agency; that is, the narrative of the "transvestite saint" is usually understood as a narrative that demonstrates how the Christian religious life demands the subversion of female identity in submission to male ecclesiastical authority. I argue this is a very narrow reading of these texts, especially when we read saints' lives in conversation with rules for female religious and manuals for anchorites. Such contemporary analyses fail to understand the complex messages about the value of the ascetical ideal encoded in the extra-hagiographical literature of Anglo-Saxon monasticism.

Eugenia encloses her body in the dress of a monk in order to do three distinct things: one, to avoid marriage; two, to study theology in the local minster; and three, to develop spiritual power and connection to the divine through the religious life. In doing so, she exercises agency and control over her own vocational options. Too often, the existing scholarship on this text has focused on the *limitations* that enclosure imposes on the gendered body of the saint, but in the case of these Old English Lives, the performance of transvestism increases the possibilities for the female saint to grow closer to God.

These stories are not about women who truly want to become men. Rather, they are about faithful women who truly want to become perfect, who want to excel in the ascetic life and become exemplary Christians, and who find the environment of their local male monastic communities to be the best spaces for ascetic practice. In this sense, the stories of "transvestite saints," read in conversation with extra-hagiographic religious texts, reveal the lengths to which female religious might go to attain an ascetical-theological ideal. To subject these narratives to the postmodern trend of "queering" the text and its gender semiotics is to ignore the profoundly spiritual transformation that each female protagonist

strives for within the narrative. In this sense, the embodied performances of maleness through transvestism point to a deeper conversion than the category of gender alone can account for. These women seek to perfect their souls, and the embodied performance of maleness, through dress and hair-cutting, and through enclosure in the male monastic space, simply serves this larger goal.

The change that is enacted is therefore not within the body of the saint herself, but rather within her spirit. Her outward appearance changes due to her performance, but she remains in the early-medieval category of "female," despite her outward presentation. What of physical bodily change, though? Do early-medieval saints change their physical form? In one intriguing case from Ireland, yes. In the next chapter, I will explore the story of Tuán, son of Cairell: a man who not only changed his soul, but whose body transformed as well.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

THE NARRATIVE TROPE OF SHAPE-SHIFTING — THE AGING BODY, TRANSFORMED

Introduction: The Question of Male Saintly Bodies and Aging

Thus far, I have discussed the ways in which saintly bodies that are identified as female within early-medieval hagiography experience miraculous, bodily transformations. But what about *male* bodies? Does the hagiographic literature from early medieval Europe provide for the transformation of saintly bodies that are identified within the text as male?

According to Dorothy Ann Bray's taxonomy of hagiographic tropes (which I discussed in Chapter Two),[322] the transformation of saintly male bodies is virtually nonexistent in the saints' lives of early medieval Ireland (as noted, the bodies of male lay persons are subject to both the healing and cursing activities of Irish saints, but the bodies of male saints themselves do not undergo significant changes within the extant texts). Similarly, as I discussed in Chapter Four, according to Thomas Kitchen, the bodies of Anglo-Saxon male saints do not undergo significant transformation or change (although both saintly male and female bodies and relics are represented in the texts as exerting healing

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[322] Dorothy Ann Bray, "The Study of Folk-Motifs in Early Irish Hagiography: Problems of Approach and Rewards at Hand," in John Carey, Máire Herbert, and Pádraig Ó Riain (eds.), *Saints and Scholars: Studies in Irish Hagiography* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 268-277.

influence over the bodies of lay persons, as in the example of Edward the Confessor).[323] It would therefore appear at first glance that saintly male bodies in early medieval Europe are not represented in hagiographic literature as undergoing a bodily transformation in and of themselves, as a general course.

One important exception to this rule may be found in early-medieval Irish hagiography, however, in the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* (the story of Tuán, son of Cairell)*.*[324] This narrative involves the miraculous bodily transformation of a male Irish saint, first from human form to the forms of different animals, and then back to human. Such corporeal shifts are experienced and narrated in the first person from the perspective of the saint himself, and the story, although thematically rare amongst the available hagiographic evidence from early medieval Ireland, demonstrates the potential for miraculous narratives of saintly embodiment to exceed and elide the parameters for human experience within the Irish Lives.

Moreover, this narrative of a shape-shifting male saint contains important implications for the understanding of the *aging* male body within the social-historical monastic context. Far from merely a tropological outlier, this narrative grapples with the transforming effects of human senescence and illustrates the imperative for passing on knowledge and wisdom to succeeding generations.

Tuán is identified within the text as a Christian hermit, but there seems to be some sense among Celtic scholars that the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* preserves thematic elements

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[323] John Kitchen, *Saint's Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3-22.
[324] Here I use the critical edition and translation provided by John Carey ("*Scél Tuáin meic Chairill,*" *Ériu* 35 (1984), 93-111), augmented where necessary by my own translations of the version of the narrative that appears in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 512.

from the early pre-Christian Irish imaginary, particularly in regard to both the mythological

trope of shape-shifting and the recounting of the pre-historical invasions of Ireland.[325] Yet

the text itself was likely recorded and preserved by Christian monks and therefore inheres

to the category of early Irish Christian writings. Additional evidence that the narrative

maintains a high degree of Christian influence may be found in the *Martyrology of Tallaght*,

wherein Tuán mac Cairill himself is catalogued by name for the feast day of April 1.[326] In

this way, then, Tuán is directly referred to as a Christian saint, whose entry the *Martyrology*

lists in full as *Tuán mac Cairell o Thamlachtain Bairchi*,[327] or "Tuán, son of Cairell, from the

Bairche burial ground region." Moreover, *Sanas Chormaic* (*Cormac's Glossary*), an early

Irish text containing the etymologies of Irish words, understands the name *Tamlachtae* to

refer to "plague graves":

> A plague that cut off the people in [the region of] that plain . . . that is, in a great
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> mortality [epidemic] during which the people used to go into the great plains that

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[325] See, for example, Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: National University of Ireland, 1990), 69. See also Gregory Toner, "Authority, Verse, and the Transmission of *Senchas*," *Ériu* 55 (2005): 59-84, at 79; and Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "Irish origins legends and genealogy: recurrent aetiologies," in T. Nyberg, I. Piø, P. M. Sorensen, and A. Trommer (eds.), *History and Heroic Tale: A Symposium*, (Odense: Odense University Press, 1985), 60-67.

[326] Richard Irvine Best and Hugh Jackson Lawlor (eds.) *The Martyrology of Tallaght: From the Book of Leinster and MS. 5100–4 in the Royal Library, Brussels* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1931), 29. Note that Tuán is listed here in this early medieval martyrology for the calendar day of April 1, along with the Irish saints Gobbán ("Gobbani sancti") and Aedán ("Aedan laech"). For the precise dating of the Martyrology of Tallaght, and its likely composition in the early ninth century, see Pádraig Ó Riain, "The Tallaght Martyrologies Redated," *Cambridge Medieval Studies* 20 (1990): 37-38.

[327] *The Martyrology of Tallaght*, 29. Tuán is also listed for the same day in the *Martyrology of Gorman*, although this particular text dates in its original manuscript form to the twelfth century, a period much later than the Martyrology of Tallaght. See Stokes, Whitley, ed. *Félire Húi Gormáin: The Martyrology of Gorman, from a Manuscript in the Royal Library, Brussels, with a Preface, Translation, Notes and Indices* (London: The Henry Bradshaw Society, 1895), 68-69. Here Tuán is described as "Tuan mac coir Cairill," or "Tuan, the just son of Cairill."

they might be in one place yet before death, because of their burial in those plains

by those whom the mortality did not carry off. For if each one of them were dead,

one after another in his own place, they would not bring them to churches, for the

people who were alive after them would not be able to bury them.[328]

The implication here is that Tuán is from an area not only associated with a famous

monastic settlement, but that the region itself is also associated with early medieval Irish

burial practices tied to the Christian church's provisions for mass burials due to

concentrated numbers of fatalities in local epidemics. Tuán's story, then, is located within

the memory and burial traditions of the local Christian community at Bairche, and despite

the brief hints at a pre-Christian origin for the tale, it nevertheless evinces strong Christian

elements, both topographically and indicatively. Moreover, according to the narratives

contained within the *Bethú Phadraig*, Cairell, the father of Tuán, himself converted to

Christianity, indicating a narrative association between Tuán and the ancestral, early

Christian converts and families of the region.[329]

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[328] Whitley Stokes (ed.), with John O'Donovan (trans.), *Sanas Chormaic: Cormac's Glossary*, (Calcutta: The Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society, 1868), 160. See also John Carey, "*Scél Tuáin meic Chairill,*" *Ériu* 35 (1984): 93–111, at 98.

[329] Kathleen Mulchrone (ed.), *Bethu Phátraic: The Tripartite Life of Patrick, Text and Sources* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1939), 134, at line 2663. The text that Mulchrone uses for her critical edition of the *Bethu Phátraic* comes from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 512, which I have also consulted. See also Pádraig Ó Riain, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 578. Here Ó Riain identifies Tuán as coming from "Tamlachta, an ecclesiastical site in the townland of Lisnacree, parish of Kilkeel, barony of Mourne, C. Down. . . . So famous did Tuán become that Giraldus Cambrensis devoted some paragraphs to him, albeit under the corrupt form of 'Ruanus', attributing to the saint baptism by Patrick and the attainment of an 'incredible' age of 1500 years."

Yet this particular saint is not one who necessarily participates in any of the established tropes or narratological standards of Irish hagiography.[330] I suggest a new reading of the *Scél* in conversation with Christian pastoral theology, drawing in particular on narrative psychology and recent theologies of aging, and demonstrating how the mythos of this early medieval tale of transformation can be used to depict a uniquely Christian ascetical and pastoral concern with the transformation of the aging body and the endurance of the soul. Even more importantly for this study, this text opens the potential for a novel interpretation of the hagiographic evidence, especially with regards to the hagiographic trope of transformation.

For example, the text can be used to frame the issue of the transformation of religious culture and the problems and openings that such transformations produced. Tuán's story describes his witness to the changing cultural and religious landscape of Ireland, as he witnesses a series of invasions and, eventually, the coming of Christianity to Ireland. Contained within this meta-narrative of the transformation of Ireland itself are a series of smaller stories of transformation: there is, on the one hand, the issue of the human body transformed through the miracle of shape-shifting, but then there is also the problem of the physical transformations brought about through bodily impairment in old age. The text also raises the issue of the transformation of physical space and the environment or location of religious practice, for Tuán's narrative provides the warrants for the foundation of the monastery at Mag Bile. The text points up additional concerns: the issue of history and how historical Irish Christian thought represented the significance of a narrative of the

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[330] John Carey, "*Scél Tuáin meic Chairill," Ériu* 35 (1984), at 97. Based on the specificity of Tuán's identification in the Martyrology, Carey concludes that "we cannot . . . exclude the possibility that Tuán was not an entirely fictitious figure" (98).

transformation of religious culture across time; the issue of authority, and the warrants for

a theological or ideological framework; the difference between lay and clerical; and the

spread of Christianity to new frontiers in the early medieval period.

Before I explore these possibilities, however, the question must be settled of

whether this is a pagan or a Christian text. As Kuno Meyer noted as early as 1867, the

narrative elements of shape-shifting and rebirth in the narrative point to a strong influence

of pre-Christian Irish mythology, and have caused some to wonder whether the inclusion of

such elements eliminates the text from the category of Christian historical writing

altogether.[331] A second question has more to do with *what to do* with the text: if this is a

Christian text, then how can it be evaluated theologically, or in what ways can this text

speak to the historical church and its doctrine? Can this narrative be read through a

Christian theological lens? If it can, how might this text speak to contemporary pastoral

concerns?

To begin to address these questions, I turn now to the text itself. John Carey dates

the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* to the second half of the ninth century CE.[332] Carey has

discussed at length the variations and congruencies between the five extant versions of this

text.[333] Of the five manuscripts in which this text appears, I have consulted the Middle Irish

version in MS Rawlinson B 512, a vellum manuscript currently held at Oxford University in

the Bodleian Library, consisting of 154 folios, in double columns, written by various hands

over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Carey identifies the story of Tuán

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[331] Kuno Meyer, *The Voyage of Bran, Son of Febal, to the Land of the Living: An Old Irish Saga*, Vol. 1 (London: David Nutt, 1897), 76. See also, for example, John Carey, "Time, space and the otherworld", *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 7 (1987), 1-18.
[332] Carey (1984), 97.
[333] Ibid., 93-96.

in this manuscript as a later iteration of the text; Carey's critical edition was based off the

text in MS Laud Miscellaneous (Misc.) 610, with modifications from the eleventh century

Lebor na hUidre (the "Book of the Dun Cow," Royal Irish Academy MS 23 E 25).[334] For the

purpose of this narrative overview, I follow Carey's critical edition, with some minor

additions and interpolations from the text as it appears on my reading of MS Rawlinson B

512.

The *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill: A Narrative Overview*

An overview of the narrative is as follows. A Christian priest and missionary named

Finnia[335] comes to Ireland with several companions, but he finds his potential flock less

than enthusiastic about his ministry: upon his arrival in the territory of the people of the

Ulaid, a wealthy layperson refuses to invite Finnia and his companions into his house.

Finnia reassures his companions, "*Dobicfa fer maith*" ("A good man, a moral or virtuous

man, is coming") and, "he will bring you comfort" ("*nob dídnabthar*" [cf. *dídnad*]). The Latin

cognate for *dídnad* is *consolatio*, a word used in Late Antiquity for a particular genre of

bereavement support rhetoric, and used in early Latin theology in discussions of pastoral

care for those in distress.[336] The wealthy layman who refuses hospitality to Finnia and his

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[334] Ibid., 95.

[335] Carey identifies this "Finnia" as the founder of the monastery of Mag Bile, suggesting that he may have also been known as "Finnén or Findbarr" which "connects him with the Dál Fiatach's ecclesiastical origins." Rivalled only by the monastery at Bangor for primacy among the Irish monastic houses in Dál Fiatach territory, Mag Bile was "the site of the Ulaid's chief church. . . . Finnia was himself of the Dál Fiatach" people (Carey, 1984, p. 97).

[336] The most famous example of this genre in early medieval Europe is Boethius's sixth century *De consolatione philosophiae*, or *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which went on to influence medieval Christianity, although it should be noted that Jerome also uses *consolatio* in his letters. For a full discussion of the role of *consolatio* in Jerome, see

fellow Christians is described with the phrase, "*nibu maith a chreitem in laich*," "the man was of bad faith" (or a "bad man"): the layman who refuses hospitality is, apparently, no Christian, and certainly appears to be hostile to the potential success of the project of Christian evangelization. Moreover, the narrative is clear at this point: this morally questionable layperson is out of step with the traditions of early medieval Irish hospitality rituals, for, according to the same, he should be offering hospitality to his uninvited guests, and to refuse Finnia and his companions entry is to trespass against them. However, Finnia predicts that a moral exemplar who will bring comfort to the people is coming, and he instructs his disciples to wait. In a moment of surprising precognition, Finnia adds off-handedly, "*agus adfii duib senchasa inna Hérend file ó cetagabath*" ("He will tell you the story of Ireland since first it was taken").[337] The stage is now set for the protagonist of the tale to arrive.

This good man who is to bring comfort is Túan son of Cairell, an aging hermit (Old Irish: *sruithchleirech*, or literally, "an old cleric"[338]) who mysteriously appears the next morning, unannounced, and approaches Finnia and his followers. In contrast to the inhospitable layman, Túan is the exemplar of Irish hospitality: although his resources are meager, he invites Finnia and his party back to his own hermitage for rest and refreshment (Old Irish: "'*Toet lim sa,' ol sé, 'dom disiurt'*,'" or, "'Come with me,' he says, 'to my desert cell'").[339] After celebrating the Eucharist as a gesture of hospitality returned, Finnia insists

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Scourfield, J. H. D., *Consoling Heliodorus: A Commentary on Jerome* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1993).

[337] Carey (1984), 101. Here I am relying on Carey's translation but also changing it slightly according to my own reading of the Old and Middle Irish in Rawlinson B 512.

[338] Ibid., 101.

[339] Ibid., my translation. Early-medieval Irish place names often feature the word, *díseart*, from the Latin *desertus*, meaning a desert or wilderness area (i.e., a place lacking regular

that Tuán must tell the visitors his story, and even threatens to fast against him if he will

not.[340]

After a mild and humble protest in which he admits that he would rather

contemplate the glories of the word of God rather than relate the long story of his own

residency in Ireland,[341] Tuán reluctantly complies, and the story that he shares astounds

his listeners. The narrative of Tuán's life is fantastic and strange. As the lone survivor of a

plague that decimated an ancient colony of settlers in Ireland (the only humans in Ireland

at the time), Tuán wandered the land, alone and afraid. Tuán relates that at this time, he

survived the predations of wolves and lived on hilltops and in caves until old age eventually

overtook him.[342] "I was shaggy, clawed, wrinkled, naked, wretched, sorrowful," Tuán

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human habitation), wherein hermits often would retreat for contemplative solitude. For example, Díseart Cléircheán (Modern English: "Saintclerns") in the parish of Lickerrig, County Galway, is named for the hermit Cléircheán, who made the area his retreat sometime in the sixth century CE.

[340] The medieval Irish hagiographical trope of *troscud*, that is, "fasting against" God or another person in order to effect a change in moral behavior (that is, in order to affect the moral agency of a particular person), is a common one.

[341] Old Irish: "*Is diliu dúnd briathar Déi adcois dún do imrádud*" (Carey (1984), p. 101), "it is better for us to have the Word of God in our thoughts" (my translation).

[342] Old Irish: "*Bá ssa iarum ó dangun do dangun agus ó aill do aill*" (Carey (1984), p. 101), "I was (running) from strength to strength and from cliff to cliff" (my translation). Carey's translation has the more poetic phrasing of, "from refuge to refuge," but here I detect an allusion to Ps 84:7, "they go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion" *New Revised Standard Version* (Vulgate, Ps. 83:8). Given that recent archaeological evidence attests to Psalm 84's use in Irish monastic communities, it seems likely that Tuán is referencing this Psalm as a framing device for his narrative, comparing his flight from the wolves to the flight of the Israelites out of Egypt. See, for example, the Faddan More Psalter, which was discovered in an Irish bog in County Tipperary in 2006, and which preserves the text of Psalm 84, presumably for a monastic reading audience (cf. John Gillis and Anthony Read, *The Faddan More Psalter: a progress update*, ICON News 11, 2011). See also Michael Herrity and Aidan Breen, *The* Cathach *of Colum Cille: An Introduction* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2002), p. 8. For the use of Psalm 84 in a monastic liturgical context, see also Martin McNamara, *The Psalms in the Early Irish Church*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 165 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 322.

admits.[343] In a dream state, Tuán passes from his elderly human body into the form of a

young, vibrant stag, and in this youthful, animal form, he witnesses the second wave of

ancient human settlement in Ireland, Nemed and his children.[344] In this way, Tuán's life is

miraculously extended: not only a survivor of the plague that killed his own immediate

family, he has now endured long enough in animal form to witness a major event in

Ireland's prehistory. This witness is not enough to sustain him, however; exhausted by this

experience, he flees both humans and beasts, and seeks shelter wherever he may find

respite.

Hunted in his stag form both by humans and wolves, Tuán pauses at the mouth of a

cave, where he shape-shifts again in relative peace, this time into the form of a wild boar.

Tuán summarizes (or perhaps elides) the mechanics of this process of transformation with

the simple phrase, "*cuman lim*," "I remembered".[345] Tuán simply "remembers" how to

transmogrify his body, first from human to stag, and then from stag to boar (Old Irish:

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[343] Carey (1984), p. 105. The word Carey translates as "sorrowful," "*imnedach*," can also have a theological and biblical connotation: "in certain contexts *imnedach* refers to miserable and damned characters in a Christian milieu: *clann imneadach Ádhoimh*, 'the afflicted children of Adam'" (Bondarenko, Gregory. "The migration of the soul in *De chophur in dá muccida* and other early Irish tales," in *Ulidia 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. Gregory Toner and Séamus Mac Mathúna, 2013, 17).

[344] Early-medieval sources list the colonization of Ireland according to six successive waves, each of which is mythological in origin. These waves of invasion are described in the *Lebor Gabála Érenn* (*The Book of Invasions*, or "The Book of the Takings of Erin"), compiled in an eleventh-century manuscript (the Book of Leinster) but dating in context to a much earlier century (possibly as early as the seventh or eighth centuries CE). See John Carey (1994), 1-4.

[345] Whitley Stokes identifies the meaning of *cuman*, "remembered," as being similar to the Latin gloss *nescio*, "I do not know," as well as with the Latin gloss *reminiscens*, "remembering," as found in the volume of parchment MSS. marked H. 2. 13 in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin. See Whitley Stokes, *Irish Glosses: A Medieval Tract on Latin Declensions, with Examples Explained in Irish* (Dublin: The Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society, 1860), 127, at entry 1110.

"*agus rofetar dul asin richt i n-araill*," "I knew how to go from one shape into another").[346] Neither the surrounding text nor Túan's first-person account of this transformation is very clear at this point. Rather, the process is described as a "remembering," an act of memory long dormant that has been activated miraculously in Túan's body under threat from his human and lupine pursuers.

Now in the form of a boar, Túan witnesses the third invasion of Ireland, that of Sémión, son of Stairai. He is in good spirits as a youthful boar, and he describes himself as "leader of the boar-herds of Ireland" ("*bassa urrae do thrétaib torc nÉrend*").[347] Physically restored to the strength of youth, Túan revels in his leadership role as the chieftain of the boars, and runs with wild, physical energy. But in due course, Túan is once again hunted by humans and then overtaken by old age, and this causes him great distress in his body and depression in his soul. He describes himself as "*toirrsech mo menma*," "sorrowful [in] my spirit," and he withdraws from the other boars in the herd and isolates himself "in the caves and cliffs".[348] Once again, under duress from his pursuers, Túan leaves behind the pleasures of youth so that he may withdraw into the sorrow of his animal senescence.

Overcome with grief and with physical pain, Túan fasts for three days. He once again "remembers" every shape he has been in ("*cuman lim cach rich i allaib imm oenur*," "I remembered each form"), and then changes into the shape of a large sea bird (again, after this process of "remembering"). In this avian form, soaring over Ireland, he witnesses the fourth and fifth invasions of Ireland: a series of new peoples entering and laying claim to the land, disrupting the culture of the peoples who came before. Despite witnessing such

[346] Carey (1984), p. 102; see also Carey's translation, ibid., 106.
[347] Ibid., 102.
[348] Carey's translation (1984), 106.

cultural disruptions, Tuán enjoys the youthful vigor of his seabird form, and describes his

spirit as "powerful" ("*ba fortrén mo menma*," "I was forceful in my spirit").[349] Yet his

familiar nemesis, old age, comes for him again, and once the physical aging process has

debilitated Tuán in his sea-bird form, troubling his mind ("*tuirsech mo menma*," "sorrowful

is my soul"), he once again seeks out a cave-like space in the side of a tree and rests there.

While gently resting, Tuán transforms once again, this time into the form a salmon, and he

recalls that "God places him in a river" ("*domchirethar Dia isin n-abaind*").[350] Tuán enjoys

his youthful vigor as a salmon, describing himself as "vigorous and happy" ("*basa setrech

sáithech*"[351]) and a "master of swimming" ("*basa urrae snáma*"),[352] but eventually, as is

often the case with salmon in early medieval Irish narratives, Tuán in his salmon form is

caught, cooked, and consumed by a human woman (in this case, the wife of a Christian man

named Cairell[353]). Tuán's final transformation involves a shift from salmon to embryonic

human form within the woman's body, and, after the usual period of human gestation, she

gives birth to him in human shape.[354] Tuán grows up as a human, until eventually, during

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[349] Carey (1984), 102; my translation. See also Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B 512, folio 97, b 2.

[350] Carey's translation (1984), 106.

[351] Ibid., 102; cf. Old Irish *séitrech*, "sturdy, vigorous."

[352] Ibid., 102, my translation, based on Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 512, f. 96 b. Here Tuán once again describes himself as "master" of something in the youthful phase of his animal form: in this case, he is master ([a]*urrae*) of swimming (as a salmon); in his previous form as a boar, he was master ([a]*urrae*) of the other boars.

[353] Carey identifies this Cairell as "king of the Ulaid at approximately the time of their conversation . . . to be understood as Cairell son of Muiredach Muinderg, one of the first recorded kings of the Dál Fiatach of Ulster . . . the first king of the Ulaid in the regnal lists and synchronism, and tradition asserted that he had been blessed by Patrick. Cairell is elsewhere said to have accepted Christianity" (Carey (1984), 97).

[354] This narrative theme can be found in the pre-Christian Irish mythological cycles. For example, in the ancient story of *Tochmarc Étaíne* ("The Wooing of Étaín"), the female beauty Étain is changed into a worm, and then that worm is ingested by a woman who subsequently gives birth to a new Étain, who is reborn once again as a beautiful human

the time of the mission of St. Patrick to the Irish (presumably in the fifth century CE), Tuán

accepts baptism and converts to Christianity. In this way, Tuán becomes a member of

Ireland's Christian community, but only after six cycles of old age and rebirth, and only

after taking new physical forms in each successive historical period.

The narrative of his progress now concluded, Tuán turns to his rapt audience and

blesses them with the words, "*Bith oirdnide do loc so*" – "this habitation/space will be

ordained/eminent/illustrious for you" – or, in John Carey's much more succinct and

melodious translation, "your house will be illustrious."[355] This particular formulation is to

be understood by the early medieval Irish audience as an allusion to the local foundation of

Finnia's monastery, thus providing a kind of origin story for the local monastic community.

The narrative ends, then, with a promise of sublime blessing that is tied to a specific

geographic place, that is, to the land where Finnia and his companions will build their own

monastic settlement and share Tuán's story with successive generations of Christians.[356]

To suggest that the text is rich with multiple themes and images would be a gross

understatement. Here we have a shape-shifting Christian sage who has witnessed the

mythological prehistory of Ireland through a series of reincarnations, but whose

experiences are filled with anxiety, the debilitating effects of old age, and constant physical

threat from the local environment. Tuán is hunted, both in his animal and human forms,

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female. For a critical edition of this narrative, see Osborn Bergin and R. I. Best, "*Tochmarc Étaíne", Ériu* 12 (1938): 137-196.
[355] Carey (1984), 107.
[356] The narrative "accordingly links Tuán with the beginnings of the Dál Fiatach polity and church in the later sixth century" (Carey (1984), 97). Carey concludes that the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* demonstrates that Tuán *himself* was involved with the founding of the church of the Dál Fiatach.

and while he initially enjoys the athleticism of his successive, youthful animal bodies, he is overcome with sorrow when his age advances to the state of physical debilitation.

In each form, Tuán experiences a withering of spirit and a disabling of his body as he physically enters extreme old age, and this happens both in his human and animal forms. Each new transmogrification follows a similar pattern: first, Tuán feels the physical pains of old age in his body. Next, he feels "depressed" or "withered" in his soul. Finally, he seeks out an enclosed, womb-like space – the cleft in a tree's trunk, for example, or a quiet, remote cave, or even the physical womb of the wife of Cairell. This retreat to a cave or enclosure perhaps recalls the early Christian eremitic practice of living in desert places, in tiny cells carved into hillsides or in caves, and it may be an adumbration of the trope of enclosure that I discussed in Chapter Four.

Notably, there is an aspect in the narrative that points to the benefits of brotherly community. That is, in both his stag and boar forms, Tuán delights in being among his own kind. He delights in the experience of running with other (grammatically male) stags and being with other (grammatically male) boars before he retreats to the transformative solitude of the cave. Could this homosocial imperative be an indirect reference to the joys of monastic community, or at least hint at an historical monastic context for both the production and the literary consumption of this text? To answer this question, I turn our attention now to a brief discussion of whether this text may be truly considered Christian, and specifically designed for a Christian monastic audience.

Narrative Elements Within the Scél Tuáin meic Chairill: Is it Christian or Not?

Hints within the text itself locate the narrative within an Irish monastic Christian context. For example, the Rawlinson B 512 version of the text identifies Tuán's father as Cairell son of Muiredach Muinderg, whom Carey identifies as "one of the first recorded kings of the Dál Fiatach of Ulster."[357] Such a reference indicates that Tuán's human lineage (or, rather, the human lineage that he is born into in his final form, after transforming through his successive animal bodies) is royal, according Tuán high status in early medieval Irish culture. Furthermore, Carey indicates that Tuán's royal family contributed to the monastic holdings of the Dál Fiatach, making their ancestral Christian connection to the local community explicitly clear.[358]

Also, the narrative itself refers to the mythological race of pre-Christian deities, the Tuatha De Danaan, not in the glowing or even sinister terms of other texts, but rather as fallen angels,[359] or, in the words of the text, "exiles from Heaven."[360] This seems to frame this ancient race of pre-Christian deities according to uniquely Christian theological categories.

The objection could be raised that the very nature of the narrative episodes of shape shifting within the text point to a pre-Christian origin for the story, or at least an origin in a shared culture of pan-European mythological symbolism. *After all*, such an objection might point out, *doesn't the* Colloquy of Columcille and the Youth *also feature shape-shifting*,

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[357] Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B 512, folio 97, b 2. See also Carey (1984), 97.

[358] "Tradition asserted that he [Cairell, the father of Túan] had been blessed by Patrick. Cairell is elsewhere said to have accepted Christianity" (Carey (1984), 97).

[359] Carey identifies the early medieval Welsh story, *Math uab Mathonwy,* as a much better example of a tale that preserves shape-shifting in pre-Christian mythology, although he notes that in the Welsh narrative *Hanes Taliesin*, the process of a protagonist's physical transformation into different animal forms is associated with a flood, as it is in Túan's narrative. See John Carey, "A British Myth of Origins?" *History of Religions* 31.1 (1991): 24-38, at pp. 34-38.

[360] "Acht ba dóich leo bith din longis dodeochaid de nim dóib" (Carey (1984), 102).

inasmuch as it describes the physical transformation of Mongán into a wolf, a stag, a salmon, a seal, a bird, and finally a king?[361] Might this not suggest at least a shared Irish tradition of human survivors of floods and plagues whose mechanism of self-preservation is shape-shifting into various animal forms? What about the early medieval Welsh story of the brothers Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, in which both men are transformed into animals as punishment for Gilfaethwy's rape of a young woman? And what about this issue of Tuán's rebirth? Writing in 1897, Alfred Nutt famously traced the trope of rebirth across so-called "pan-Celtic" narratives, suggesting a possible point of origin for medieval Irish rebirth narratives in ancient Greece.[362] Fourteen years later, J. A. McCulloch surmised that this trope of rebirth in animal form was due to a "Celtic totemism,"[363] a belief that Hutton rather infelicitously observed was a "crude belief in the transmigration of souls" and "found among most savage races."[364] More recently, Kim McCone suggested that the text belongs to the discrete genre of Irish "pseudo-history," that is, narratives that attempt to account for Irish pre-Christian history before the era of Christian enculturation[365] (a genre that

[361] John Koch, (ed.), *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales* (Malden, MA: Celtic Studies Publications, 1995), 208-209.
[362] Alfred Nutt, "The Celtic Doctrine of Re-Birth: With Appendices: the Transformations of Tuan Mac Cairill, the Dinnshenchas of Mag Slecht" in *The Voyage of Bran, Son of Febal, to the Land of the Living: An Old Irish Saga* (ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer,), Vol. 2 (London: David Nutt, 1897), 1-2.
[363] As MacCulloch observes, "in Irish sagas, rebirth is asserted only of divinities or heroes, and, probably because this belief was obnoxious to Christian scribes, while some MSS tell of it in the case of certain heroic personages, in others these same heroes are said to have been born naturally. . . . classical observers' . . . references to [the Celtic "doctrine" of] rebirth may be based on mythical tales regarding gods or heroes." J. A. MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, (London: Constable, 1911), 348.
[364] McCulloch, ibid., p. 360; see also Ronald Hutton, *Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 184.
[365] Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: National University of Ireland, 1990), p. 202. "It thus seems that, rather than placing much trust in an actual or idealized oral tradition's capacity to transmit their pre-Patrician

Francis Byrne gave the more optimistic term of "syncretic history"[366]). So where does this

narrative fit? Is this text Christian or not?

To be fair to McCone, the story of Tuán hits a number of significant narrative

markers in what is considered to be "pre-Christian" Irish narrative. Although these

narratives were written down by Irish Christian monks, the general consensus is that they

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traditions reliably, the clerical establishment adopted an obvious enough medieval solution
to the problem of authentication by claiming for the Church and her learned appendages
privileged access to the truth about the past through divine revelation. Classically liminal
heroes like Cú Chulainn and Fergus could then be enlisted as suitable messengers along
with other bridgers of gaps such as the patriarchal Fintan and Tuán or the angelic
Trefuilngid, the Church's essential controlling role being personified by a saintly go-
between or near equivalent. Through such interchanges between hero and saint on the
boundary between the two, knowledge of the dead or dormant pagan past could be
authoritatively channeled by the Church's allies and representatives into the Christian
present. In practice, this doctrine was a charter for the monastically oriented literary
reworking and invention of saga and other *senchus* as required, within the limits imposed
by the need to avoid straining credibility by unduly great or sudden divergences from a
received tradition increasingly bolstered by writing" (p. 202). Note here that McCone is
saying that the figure of the liminal character who assists in this transmission is not
handing over pagan tradition *in toto*, or even *tout court*, but rather *subverts* oral tradition
by handing it over. See also Eoin McNeill, "The Irish Synthetic Historians" in *Celtic Ireland*
(Dublin, 1921; reprint 1981), 25-42.

[366] Francis J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London: Batsford, 1973), 156: "The study of
Irish prehistory fascinated the medieval Irish, and over the centuries they elaborated a
detailed history of the successive invasions of Partholón, Nemed, the Fir Bolg, the Tuatha
Dé Danann, and the sons of Míl . . . preserved in the Lebor Gabála or 'Book of Invasions',
which was being constantly brought out in new and revised editions until the end of the
twelfth century . . . In the earliest version (already current in the eighth century only the
Connachta, together with their Uí Néill off-shoot, and the Eóganachta of Munster are
descended from the two sons of Míl: the other peoples of Ireland are sharply distinguished
from them and implicitly relegated to an inferior status. This reflects the widely held theory
that the country was divided into two spheres of influence: Leth Cuinn and Leth Moga – the
overlordships of Tara and Cashel respectively. Soon, however, other dynasties of local
importance were provided by the synthetic historians with a line of descent from other
sons of Míl, whose family underwent an alarming, if posthumous, increase. Even the more
prominent of the Cruithin and Érainn were brought into the Milesian scheme, until only a
few insignificant tributary tribes were still reckoned as 'Fir Bolg'." See also Francis J. Byrne,
"*Senchas*: The Nature of Gaelic Historical Tradition," in *Historical Studies IX: Papers read
before the Irish Conference of Historians*, ed. J. G. Barry (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1974), 147.
See also John Carey, *The Irish National Origin-Legend: Synthetic Pseudohistory* (Cambridge:
Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 1994), 3-13.

were preserving these stories as part of their concept of history. Notably, two important pre-Christian Irish narratives depict similar shape-shifting tropes that fall in line with the story of Tuán. I raise these examples as points of narrative comparison.

Two Narratological Comparisons with the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill*: The examples of Fintan Mac Bóchra and Mongán

Two examples from the mythological narratives of early medieval Ireland demonstrate the trope of shape shifting in a context that, while not explicitly Christian, anticipate the themes discussed above. The first narrative concerns Fintan Mac Bóchra, who, like Tuán, shape-shifts into multiple animal forms and lives into great old age, witnessing a number of significant changes in Ireland.

According to the narrative,[367] Fintan is the oldest man in Ireland. Like Tuán, he is a survivor of the great Flood that inundated the world, and like Tuán, he arrived with a group of colonists to the shores of Ireland. Having escaped the Flood, Fintan receives seven "chains of revelation" (cf. Tuán's five transformations), which he then passes on to a listening audience as a means for educating them about the prehistory of Ireland. Like Túan, Fintan survives over successive generations by shape shifting into animal forms.

The agreement with Tuán's narrative becomes particularly pronounced when these forms are compared across both narratives: both Fintan and Tuán survive in the form of a salmon (Fintan is changed into a salmon; then into an eagle (*ilar*) and a hawk (*sebac*); and then back to human form again). Furthermore, Fintan becomes a repository for all

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[367] As found in *Lebor Gabála Érenn* ("The Book of the Taking of Ireland"), a collection of narratives in both verse and prose which exists in several manuscripts, such as the Book of Leinster (Trinity College Dublin MS H 2. 18 (cat. 1339)) and Oxford Bodleian MS Rawlinson B 512, 76a-97b.

knowledge in Ireland, but gives this position up when Christianity enters Ireland. In this

way, Fintan recalls Tuán's role as sage and keeper of historical knowledge, but he

relinquishes this authority in the face of the new religion (Tuán, on the other hand,

represents the new religion, and therefore maintains his authority as a Christian sage).

Fintan's experience is closely connected with the manifestation of the history of

Ireland. Like Tuán, Fintan's narrative "refers to a transition from pre-written traditional

culture to a new written Christian culture with its deep Classical roots and historical

consciousness: from the time when the tradition was hidden to the period of its revelation

and fixation."[368] Perhaps most significantly, both stories are found in the same 11th century

manuscript, the *Lebor na hUidre* ("The Book of Dun Cow"), further suggesting a thematic

connection.

A second example from early Irish mythology that depicts the narrative trope of

shape shifting involves a man by the name of Mongan. Two extant texts describe Mongan, a

second shape shifter in early Irish myth. The *Imrain Bran* (or "Voyage of Bran"), dating

most likely to the late seventh century, mentions Mongan (identified by name in the text

with the variant, *Monann*) as a shape-shifting character who survives a number of

catastrophes in pre-Christian Ireland. "Mongan himself refers to his former life as a deer, a

salmon, a seal, and a (roving) wolf [*cu alldaich*] in the *Imacaldaim Choluim Cille agus ind*

Óclaig oc Carraic hEolairg [the "Colloquy of Colum Cille with the Youth at Carn Eorlairg"],

which [Kuno] Meyer places in the ninth and possibly in the eighth century".[369] Based on a

thorough linguistic analysis of the Old Irish verb forms contained within the extant

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[368] Grigory Bondarenko, "Fintan Mac Bóchra: Irish Synthetic History Revisited," *Studia Celto-Slavica* 6 (2012): 129-147, at 139.

[369] John R. Reinhard and Vernum E. Hull, "Bran and Sceolang," *Speculum* 11.1 (1936): 42-58, at 48.

manuscripts of the *Imacaldaim Choluim Cille*, John Carey dates the composition of the text to "not later than the eighth century,"[370] and the role of Mongan in it as forming a kind of origin story for the formation of Lough Foyle through a deluge that engulfed an ancient civilization.

Like Tuán, Mongan shape-shifts, and like Tuán, he takes multiple forms. His deer and salmon forms recall Tuán's animal transformations, and like Tuán, his shape shifting allows him to preserve his consciousness over hundreds of years, whereby he observes the changing cultural and social landscape of Ireland. In this way, Mongan serves as a protagonist who witnesses history first-hand: precisely like Tuán, his narrative serves as a mechanism for preserving Irish pre-history through the perspective of a shape-shifting narrator.

As John Carey has observed, *Lebar Gabála* and other medieval sources for Irish prehistory provide "a narrative extending from the creation of the world to the coming of Christianity, and beyond – a national myth which sought to put Ireland on the same footing as Israel and Rome. In the centuries which followed its writing, its doctrines served as foundation and background for legend, historiography, poetry, and political thought."[371] The *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* generally fits into this genre of national myth, inasmuch as Tuán claims to be an eye witness to Ireland's early history; similarly, the narratives involving both Fintan Mac Bóchra and Mongán share this emphasis on retelling history through a panoptic narrator, whose miraculous survival across generations is

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[370] John Carey, "The Lough Foyle Colloquy Texts: Immacaldam Choluim Chille 7 ind Óclaig oc Carraic Eolairg and Immacaldam in Druad Brain 7 Inna Banḟátho Febuil Ós Loch Ḟebuil," *Ériu* 52 (2002): 53-87, at 56.

[371] John Carey, "The Irish National Origin-Legend: Synthetic Pseudohistory," in *Quiggin Pamphlets on the Sources of Medieval Gaelic History 1* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1994), 1-2.

accomplished through a series of physical transformations into both human and animal

forms. Carey links these narratives by showing that they preserve the objectives of early

Irish Christian historiography. "Such native origin-legends as survived had now to be

harmonized with the model supplied by the book of Genesis, as interpreted and

embellished by the emerging discipline of Christian historiography – a process of

hybridization and invention whose results have been labelled 'synthetic history' or

'pseudo-history' by Irish scholars."[372]

On the other hand, Doris Edel has argued that the Irish format for "pseudo-history"

was actually derived from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, likely translated into Irish ca.

650 CE, and Jerome's translation of Eusebius' *World Chronicle*, both of which emphasize the

idea of a common chronology for an entire people (instead of the Irish genealogical

approach to narrating the development of individual local dynasties) and the origin of the

people from a common ancestor.[373] In other words, the possibility exists that early Irish

myths served as a narrative conduit for the preservation of memory, both in terms of a

larger origin myth for the peoples of Ireland, and with regards to Christian salvation

history.

While I certainly do not deny the possibility of a "synthetic" or "pseudo-historical"

purpose for the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* as a myth of early Irish origins, I maintain that a

theological-ascetical reading is more productive, and perhaps points to a uniquely Christian

context for the text as a foundational document for Dál Fiatach monasticism. Carey has

argued that the monastic founder, Finnia (or Finnian), with whom Tuán associates in the

text, is actually Finnian of Mag Bile, the founder of a monastery rivaled only by Bangor for

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[372] Ibid., 3-4.

[373] Doris Edel, *The Celtic West and Europe* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 117.

primacy among the houses in the Dál Fiatach region and the bringer of Gospel texts to Ireland.[374] This indicates a further connection to the historical context of early Christianity among the Ulaid. In other words, the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* is irreducible to its pre-Christian heritage; it cannot be simplified as a mere adumbration of pre-Christian mythological tropes. Furthermore, a theological reading has the capacity for taking the Christian context seriously.

At any rate, with regards to the shape-shifting episodes, Carey identifies the narrative about Tuán's transformations as a later interpolation. The only other reference to shape-shifting in a specifically Christian text in Ireland can be located in the prologue to Patrick's *Lorica*, which describes Patrick and his companions as being turned into deer in order to elude the Irish warriors who were hunting them (although, to be fair, the text of Tuán makes no direct mention of this particular episode in Patrick).[375] In this way, shape-shifting itself need not be understood as inhering *exclusively* to a pre-Christian or pagan symbolic universe.

More to the point, it seems to me that the text can support an ascetical-theological reading, as long as that reading is counted as merely a potential possibility. First, there are

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[374] As Carey observes, the tradition that Finnian brought biblical manuscripts to Ireland "finds its fullest expression in the commentaries to *Félire Oengusso*, where it is cited in explanation of the statement that Finnia came 'across the sea with law' (*tar sál co rrecht*; Sept. 10). Thus Laud Misc. 610 explains that 'it was Finnian of Mag Bile who brought the law of Moses (*recht Moissi*) into Ireland *prius*. Or else it is to the gospels (*soiscela*) that they give the name "law" here, for it is Finnia who brought *totum euangelium ad Hiberniam prius*'" (Carey, 204). This tradition is accepted as historical by John Ryan (J. Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, (London, 1931), 125). Carey points out that the preface to *Mugint's Hymn* "states that Finnia studied in Britain (cf. Lib. Hymn. 1. 22)" (Carey (1984), 107, note 2).
[375] See, for example, Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus: A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses, Scholia, Prose and Verse.* Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (1904, Cambridge University Press), vol. 1, 133-135, and vol. 2, 49-51.

actual instances of ascetical practice in the text: Tuán fasts before his transformation. In addition, once in animal form, Tuán's behavior contains a mnemonic element of the theme of eremitic practice: these are monk-ly animals, for Tuán delights first in the community of his brethren and then retreats into the transforming solitude of the eremitic cell before engaging in the next mode of being. The images of being hunted and then entering a cloistered world of transformation also find particular resonance with Christian ascetical literature, especially that of the Greek-speaking Christian desert tradition. Particularly in the Evagrian tradition, where the soul of the advanced contemplative is besieged and preyed upon by demonic suggestion and disturbing visions, the soul must withdraw into the stillness of one's cell, so that the entire being of the person must be changed, through fasting, through solitude in the monastic cell. In this way, the implicit references to the ascetical monastic experience are multiple.

Is there a precedent for this kind of ascetical reading? In early Greek monasticism, yes, although of course whether or not a direct connection can be drawn between that and the context of early medieval Irish monasticism remains to be demonstrated. I raise two points here in regard to an ascetical-theological reading.

An Ascetical-Theological Reading of the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill*

First, the literature of the Christian desert tradition accommodates pre-Christian and non-Christian symbolism and often re-appropriates it for a Christian ascetical context. Both David Brakke and Dag Endsjø have demonstrated that the Christian imaginary of the

desert is practically bursting with otherworldly beings.[376] Endsjø in particular has shown

how Christians in a monastic context appropriated pre-Christian Greek ideas of

embodiment and the geography of the desert as a narrative trope of liminality, and he

shows how this is particularly true in the *Life of Anthony*.[377] In this way, even the idea of

incorporating pre-Christian tropes of liminality and of bodily extremes has precedence in

ascetical Christian literature.

Second, Richard Valantasis has argued that it is precisely the power of personal

transformation that Greek ascetical narratives seek to release. As Valantasis has it, monks

reading the wonder stories of the masters of Christian asceticism engaged not merely in a

contemplative engagement with a text, but actually formed themselves according to the

symbolic universe of the narrative.[378] When "monastic practitioners" engage in the

contemplation of the *Lives of the Desert Fathers* for example, they are submitting their

subjectivity to a process of spiritual formation that is formed in the text. And, as Valantasis

observes, narrative texts in the desert tradition comprise three major themes: spiritual

combat, ascetical solitude, and the transformation of human subjectivity.[379] With the

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[376] See, for example, David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2006, as well as Dag Endsjø, *Primordial Landscapes, Incorruptible Bodies: Desert Asceticism and the Christian Appropriation of Greek Ideas on Geography, Bodies, and Immortality*, American University Studies series (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

[377] Endsjø, Dag (2007), 18-20 and 130-159.

[378] Richard Valantasis, *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 108-109 and 174-178.

[379] In particular, Valantasis suggests that the subjectivity of the ascetical self can be transformed and "recreated" through engagement with a text; see Richard Valantasis, "Is the Gospel of Thomas Ascetical? Revisiting an Old Problem with New Theory," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999): 55-81. Gavin Flood analyses the function of *memory* as it *re-creates* the experience of selfhood and subjectivity in the ascetical project; this bears directly on Tuán's narrative, where memory becomes the catalyst for transformation. See

exception of combat, these themes may be detected in Tuán, although, to be sure, Tuán's

transformation seems to be much more material and embodied than the more spiritual or

noetic transformation advocated in Greek ascetical texts. Moreover, although combat itself

never takes place in the narrative, Tuán is constantly under threat from both wild beasts

and predatory humans, so perhaps the threat of violence corresponds to the last of

Valantasis' themes: physical threat and subsequent emotional despondence. To be fair, for

Tuán, once again the threat is physical rather than the psychic/spiritual violence that

Evagrius describes. I suggest nevertheless that one way to read this text (in addition to

seeing it as a pseudo-history) is as a text that is indeed Christian, and that carries within its

symbolism the barest traces of an ascetical theology tied to the dynamics of memory and

the transformation of the ascetic self.

In addition, Margaret Miles has identified three attitudes in early Christian ascetical

literature about the human body: the body as foil for the soul, the body as problem, and the

body as human condition.[380] As Miles has observed, "ascetic practice consonant with

Christian faith requires that the only condition in which human beings can turn to the

source of life and being is as unities of body and soul in which the body is always the

'spouse,' the soul's intimate companion. . . . Christian asceticism must also presuppose the

permanent connectedness of body and soul."[381] Tuán is connected to his body, to be sure,

such that its physical impairment in old age causes him great pain within his soul. Yet in the

case of Tuán's narrative, his experience of such debilitation identifies a liminal moment in

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Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 144-174.

[380] Margaret Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 134.

[381] Ibid.

his personal transformation as a witness to the history of Ireland. Indeed, his successive rebirths over the course of Ireland's mythological history justifies his authority as the giver of blessing to Finnia and his companions for the foundation of Mag Bile: Tuán has been an embodied witness throughout the successive invasions of Ireland, and his bodily transformation into different animal forms serves only to legitimize his historical witness further. Yet his body is a constant problem: while it miraculously carries him throughout the ages of pre-Christian Ireland, it also causes him emotional distress. In this sense, Tuán's body inheres to the second of Miles' three Christian ascetical attitudes to the body: when his body fails him, it opens up the possibility for his spiritual and physical transformation.

It seems clear that the pattern of Tuán's transformation emphasizes the ascetical-theological values of retreat, solitude, and fasting, each of which precedes his actual bodily transformation into another form. While Tuán enjoys the monastic community of his fellow animals during his youth, he finds eremitic solitude to be the only antidote to the suffering that he experiences in old age. Each bodily transformation therefore follows a monastic pattern, as in each of his animal forms, he is pulled between (a.) the joys of cenobitic community in his youth and (b.) the need for individual, contemplative solitude in a monastic enclosure (a "cave" or "cell") in the debilitating experience of bodily senescence. The *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* is therefore a monastic text of early Christian Ireland which seeks to preserve mythological prehistory, validate the ecclesiastical warrants for the foundation of the monastic community at Mag Bile, and affirm the experience of the monk's body as it is transformed through Christian asceticism.

But if this *is* a Christian text, what does it *do* for Christians? In particular, does it have any use for modern pastoral concerns, or should it just be shelved as an exceptional

but wildly aberrant example of a uniquely Irish version of hagiography? Does the narrative

of a faithful survivor who preserves himself from a violent world by being transformed into

a new creation (as it were) hold any significance for ministry?

I want to propose that in this case, this narrative *can* have significance, especially

when it is applied as a practice of narrative intervention in pastoral psychotherapy and the

theology of aging. The narrative might be efficacious especially for the emotional

rehabilitation of trauma victims in a pastoral care setting, and for those experiencing the

traumatic effects of human senescence.

Narrative Psychology and Transformation in the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill*

A vast literature in the field of applied psychology exists that documents the efficacy

of storytelling and narrative in the care and rehabilitation of trauma survivors. As clinical

studies by both Van der Kolk and Stam have revealed,[382] the survivors of sexual violence in

particular experience a complicated relationship to their bodies after the trauma event. The

cognitive dissonance between body and mind becomes especially acute when *memory* of

the trauma event is invoked, as traumatic memories produces both active physiological

feedback and a distancing even from the *idea* of "body" and physical experience. According

to Frye and Shafer,[383] survivors describe their bodies as "alien," "other," "like it's just a

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[382] Bessel van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart,"The intrusive past: The flexibility of memory and the engraving of trauma," *American Imago* 48.4 (1991): 425-454. See also Bessel van der Kolk et al., "Dissociation, somatization, and affect dysregulation: the complexity of adaptation to trauma", *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 153.7 (1996): 83-93; and R. Stam, "PTSD and Stress Sensitization: A tale of brain and body. Part 1: Human studies," *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 31 (2007): 530-557.
[383] Marilyn Frye and Carolyn M. Shafer, "Rape and Respect," in M. Vetterling-Braggin, F. Elliston and J. English (eds.), *Feminism and Philosophy* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), 333–346.

piece of meat," "like it's an animal," and demonstrate strong resistance to narrating the memory in a therapeutic context because of such a visceral, intense, embodied reaction. Yet telling the story – even if successive iterations of the story compress details or rely on inconsistent hermeneutics – has documented therapeutic benefit. What if there were a text that could be used to mitigate the horror of remembering and then sharing the story? The fantastic quality of Tuán's transformations into bodies that are "Other" might give readers the appropriate amount of distance between the memory of past trauma and the experience of present embodiment – if they do the kind of ascetical reading that places them within the text.

Pastoral theology seeks to discover resources within the Christian tradition that can speak to people who are hurting now. Although the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* cannot speak *directly* to trauma survivors, it could conceivably be used to give survivors an emotional space to reconsider their personal narratives. For example, Tuán *is* a survivor, and he survives because his body *changes*, because memory stimulates a new *form* of embodiment after the experience of extreme duress. Survivors of traumatic events might find a sympathetic narrative exemplar in Tuán, for he emerges from such changes not as victim, but as sage, and as one who can speak back the story of a violent history but conclude his narrative with words of blessing. This is exactly what pastoral counseling, especially pastoral counseling affiliated with narrative psychology, hopes to help trauma survivors to do: to emerge from the experience of violence and the strangeness of a changed body to a new place of blessing, wellness, and hope. The text itself describes Tuán as one who will bring comfort; I believe the potential exists to use this text as a narrative for the comfort of

individuals whose own narratives of survived violence create painful dissonance between

memory and body.

One final word about the worthiness of such an application. Pamela Cooper-White, a

prominent voice in the field of pastoral psychotherapy, argues that human subjectivity *itself*

is multiple. That is, she resists the idea that our personhood is one nice, tidy little package,

and that the entirety of our being can be wrapped up in one linear narrative. Rather, our

subjectivity contains "multiple versions of self," each of which rise to the surface and

express themselves based on external forces.[384] For trauma survivors in particular, anxiety-

producing events in one's world trigger through association a linked series of

unmanageable and painful memories, which, in turn, stimulate a different kind of being in

the world, a different kind of agency, a different expression of selfhood, and a different

sense of identity.[385] Cooper-White advocates for greater pastoral sensitivity to the

expressions of these multiple selves, especially in a therapeutic context with trauma

survivors. As she states in *Braided Selves*,

> The extent to which we can become aware of our inner multiplicity and take
>
> seriously the host of voices crying from the margins of our own unconscious life
>
> may well be the extent to which we are able to recognize and withdraw projections

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[384] Pamela Cooper-White, *Braided Selves: Collected Essays on Multiplicity, God and Persons* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 100-129.
[385] Cooper-White emphasizes the need to address the "multiple meanings given to [sociocultural] experiences, both in the crucible of unconscious fantasy and the relational flux of co-created reality" (Cooper-White, 2011, 158). This requires "a conception of the psyche that is fluid, multiple, and relationally constituted," which will lead us "to awareness of our internal inconsistencies and complexities, which can in turn engender authentic empathy for the Other" (ibid.).

that demonize, dominate, and exclude actual other persons in the context of actual

political life.[386]

Could it be possible that the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* offers not only a text for practical

engagement in a narrative pastoral psychology setting, but also a window into how early

medieval Irish Christians might have imagined multiple subjectivity or the expression of

non-unitary selfhood?

    I maintain that a reading of the text from the perspective of ascetical theology —

and an application of the text in the context of pastoral counseling — reveals the potential

for bringing Tuán back in from the margins of historical Christian literature, so that his

story can give new shape to the multiple narratives we carry. Perhaps most importantly,

and in conversation with my discussion of disability in Chapter Five, the story of Tuán mac

Cairell holds out a model for an ascetical-theological understanding of the physical

limitations and difficulties present to the aging body. It is to this potential for addressing

the spirituality of aging that I now turn.

The *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* and the Spirituality of Aging

    As Eugene Bianchi has noted, recent decades have produced "a large body of

literature, in the form of both empirical investigation and theoretical analysis," that "has

focused on the personality changes, traumas, and potentials of individuals in midlife and

later maturity."[387] Indeed, "close attention to the problems of older people constitutes a

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[386] Ibid., 170.
[387] Eugene Bianchi, *Aging as a Spiritual Journey* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1987), 1.

relatively recent phenomenon. Theologians have only begun in very limited ways to

address the mounting research on aging."[388]

Yet the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* addresses elements of the aging body in provocative

ways. Tuán honestly addresses the depression, despair, and debilitation that his aging body

and mind experience in each of his multiple human and animal forms. He also links the

potential for positive transformation to memory: he simply "remembers" how to transform,

and as he does, a new chapter in his life unfolds, filled with the potential for a renewed

sense of wellbeing, a new sense of mastery in life, and a new community of fellow beings to

interact with.

This aspect of renewed and/or transformed memory finds particular resonance in

recent theological reflections on the formation of the self through liturgy. Richard

Schaeffler, for example, reflecting on the memorial/anamnetic dimension of the Eucharist,

attributes three powers to memory, one of which is "to discover ourselves among our

shifting experiences, so that we may construct, out of the abundance of stories we could

tell, that one story of our own individual and social life that allows us to attribute that

abundance of experiences to ourselves as their 'subjects.' This task is controlled by the idea

of the 'self': that is, by the conscious purpose of discovering within our life-situations the

one characteristic way in which we have appropriated the external circumstances and their

changes as our own story; how, in an equally characteristic way, we may have failed in that

task; or how we have lost ourselves in the flood of events and retrieved ourselves from

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[388] Ibid., 1-2. See also K. Brynolf Lyon, *Toward a Practical Theology of Aging, Theology and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) and William K. Hendricks, *A Theology for Aging* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986).

it."[389] Thus, according to this account, memory is both the vehicle through which the self

may be constructed anew, in which present experiences may be reformulated, and also the

apparatus by which the self is empowered to retrieve a sense of cohesive narrative.[390]

Moreover, Tuán is able to pass on his experience to succeeding generations of

Christians. He narrates his experience to Finnia/Finnian and his companions precisely in

order to bless them with knowledge and wisdom. Could Tuán's narrative example be used

as a story to encourage persons in the aging process to share their wisdom with others?[391]

Finally, Tuán's experience finds resonance in biblical narratives. For example,

Sheldon Isenberg has argued that aging is described in the Hebrew Bible as both "a source

of wisdom and a painful experience of suffering,"[392] which is in direct correlation to Tuán's

experience. Furthermore, Joel A. A. Ajayi has identified what he terms a "gerassapient

tradition" in the Hebrew Bible, in which biblical narratives depict a number of aging

individuals who function as wisdom-keepers for socio-religious values. As Ajayi elaborates,

> "The major function of the gerassapient tradition [in the Hebrew Bible] is didactic,
>
> by which social and religious orders are transmitted from generation to generation .
>
> . . . The transmission of these socio-religious values occurs mainly through oral
>
> education in the earliest days of the Israelite people. Certain textual evidences about

[389] Richard S. Schaeffler, "'Therefore We Remember . . .': The Connection between Remembrance and Hope in the Present of the Liturgical Celebration. Religious-Philosophical Reflections on a Religious Understanding of Time," in A. Haussling (ed.), *The Meaning of the Liturgy* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 20.

[390] See also Dale M. Schlitt, "Temporality, Experience and Memory: Theological Reflections on Aging," *Église et Théologie* 16 (1985): 79-105.

[391] See also Robert W. Carlson, "The Gift of Wisdom," in *Affirmative Aging: A Resource for Ministry*, ed. the Episcopal Society for Ministry on Aging (Milford, NJ: Winston Press, 1985), 64-65, at 76.

[392] Sheldon Isenberg, "Aging in Judaism: 'Crown of Glory' and 'Days of Sorrows'," in Thomas R. Cole, David D. van Tassel, and Robert Kastenbaum (eds.) *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging* (New York: Springer, 1992), 161.

these values attest to the use of memory, which is found primarily among the older

folk, who are esteemed as the 'repositories of the community traditions and folk

wisdom.' For example, each of the [Biblical] patriarchs in his old age recalls and

transmits the divine promise to the next generation (see Gen. 24:7; 28:4; 32:9-12;

35:1, 3; 47:9; 48:3-4, 15-16; 50:24; cf. 48:21). The Mosaic traditions also reflect such

attestation."[393]

Indeed, Tuán's function within the text of the *Scél* is to transmit both wisdom and blessing

to the local Christian community at Mag Bile, transmitting the divine promise to Finnia and,

by extension, to the generations of Christians who will come after him. In this sense, Tuán's

story may be understood as constituting a reference to the biblical gerassapient tradition,

but in the uniquely Irish context of early medieval Christian monastic writings.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have suggested the following: that the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* is a

Christian text; that it is a uniquely Irish Christian text that is not just about bodily

transformation, but also about the wisdom that bodies experience, internalize, and carry

when they are transformed; that an ascetical-theological reading helps us to understand

this potential for transformation within a specifically monastic context; and that the

transformative potential of the text has therapeutic potential when read in conversation

with narrative pastoral psychotherapy. Moreover, I have pointed to the pastoral potential

of the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* when it is read as a reflection on both the difficulties and the

benefits of aging (insomuch as a "gerassapient" application reveals the potential for

[393] Joel A. A. Ajayi, *A Biblical Theology of Gerassapience*, Studies in Biblical Literature, v. 134
(Peter Lang: Oxford, 2010), 128.

individuals to redeem the suffering caused by the aging process by sharing the wisdom that they have developed through lived experience, in imitation of Tuán himself).

Such revelations would be impossible without the body of the saint himself, however, and its function within the narrative. Throughout the *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill*, it is the body of the saint that produces the necessary space for transformation, for the transmission of wisdom and knowledge, and for the contextualization of this narrative as a Christian text. Tuán's story stands in solidarity with other early Irish hagiographic narratives of bodily transformation, inasmuch as his own body becomes the field for the spectacular activity of divine power. Apart from his miraculous bodily transformations, Tuán would be unable to live into succeeding centuries, and to witness, first-hand, both the arrival of Christianity in Ireland and the founding of the local monastic community at Mag Bile. In this way, it is Tuán's miraculous body — his aging, changing, ascetically-transformed body — that drives the hagiographic narrative.

<div align="center">CONCLUSION</div>

Bodies are wondrous things.

We wonder and marvel at bodies at their best: when they accomplish extraordinary feats of athleticism; when they perform powerful acts of heroism; when they engage in gentle acts of comfort and compassion; when a child takes her first steps. Bodies can also be terrible things. We grieve when they lose certain capacities for movement due to impairment or through the natural processes of old age; we curse them in dire illness; we lament their limitations. The way we understand bodies — the way we interpret them, the

way we "read" their value and efficacy — is the product of systems of power, for certain

bodies are valued in society more than others.

In this dissertation, I have examined the way that bodies change, are transformed,

and perform miraculous feats in the Lives of early-medieval saints. What unites these

narratives is their common focus on power and its limitation. Gender, inasmuch as it is

irreducibly bound to early medieval sanctity, is itself the product of systems of power in

society: for early-medieval Europe in particular, gender norms were the product of the

ruling elite, especially the patriarchal, institutional church. Yet certain tropes of female

sanctity at once challenge and reinforce these norms, in subtle, layered, and complex ways.

The careful contextual analysis of these themes within the narratives themselves and

within the Irish, Anglo-Saxon, and Frankish cultures of this period therefore produces new

insights into the representation of gender in early medieval Europe. The miraculous body

— of the saint herself, and of the persons upon whom she acts — reveals the multiple ways

in which gender and power, alterity and embodiment, are connected in narrative.

What I have shown is that there is evidence within these hagiographic narratives for

specific tropes, or motifs, which reveal the way saintly power was justified through

embodied gendered performances. These tropes reveal important distinctions about the

nuanced way bodies performed acts of spiritual authority for a spectating audience. For

example, the trope of fire reveals how the authors of female saints' Lives in early-medieval

Europe justified the saint's authority by showing how the saint was imbued with

supernatural power. Here the saint is a passive actor within the narrative, for the fire rises

up around her, or emanates from her body, but without harming her or consuming her. The

miraculous fire happens around her, but not to her: she is at the center of the fiery

emanation, but she remains unharmed and untouched, ablaze but not consumed. In this way, the saint's powerful connection to God is made clear in the text because the saint herself and her body become the locus for theophany.

The trope of disability demonstrates the saint's divinely sanctioned authority by making the female body the field for the exercise of miraculous power. Here the dynamic of blessing and cursing reveals itself along gendered lines, for persons with disabilities represent a particular type of medieval body to be gazed upon, a particular category for the public demonstration of spiritual authority to be worked upon, and a particular matrix on which to overlay specific narrative constructions of gender.

Similarly, the theme of pregnancy in early-medieval hagiography constitutes a distinct trope in the literature and invites us to distinguish the theme of the defense of perceived chastity, over against the defense or valorization of "real" or physiological chastity or virginity. That is, what emerges in the trope of the pregnant nun is the magnitude of shame that pregnancy brought upon the religious community and the religious life in general. My investigation of this trope is an inquiry into the function of gender in the monastic culture of the early-medieval period and the prohibitions operative on the female religious body. The trope produced a moral or spiritual lesson concerning the reconciliation and "healing" of lapsed individuals through the power of the female saint. In this way, the transgressive body of the pregnant nun becomes a production site for the activity of redemption and restored chastity.

The trope of enclosure also constitutes a discernable motif in the Lives, and here, too, it utilizes gender performance in order to justify saintly authority. Women who perform "maleness" in order to seek spiritual fulfillment in the male monastic community

reinforce the value of chastity, for they guard their bodies from sexual exploitation or objectification by men by hiding their female identity behind a different gender performance. Moreover, this transvestite performance creates the necessary space for the exercise of female agency: the female transvestite saint uses this performance to open up the opportunity for her own education and spiritual formation, so that she may excel in the ascetical life. She transcends the limitations that the male monastic enclosure places on female bodies by enclosing her female gender in the performance of maleness. This has the effect of transforming the perceptions of the spectating audience, who perceive her not only as male, but as the most accomplished among the male monastic community.

The theme of shapeshifting further elaborates this dynamic of transformation. Here the body of the saint is transformed from its human form to the forms of different animals, and then back to human, demonstrating the potential for miraculous narratives of saintly embodiment to exceed and elide the parameters for human experience within the early Irish Lives. Moreover, this narrative of a shape-shifting male saint contains important implications for the understanding of the aging male body within the social-historical monastic context. Far from merely a tropological outlier, this narrative grapples with the transforming effects of human senescence and illustrates the imperative for passing on knowledge and wisdom to succeeding generations.

My exploration of these themes contributes to the field of hagiography by opening up new perspectives into the way saintly bodies engage with and demonstrate authority. I have also argued that an ascetical-theological reading of these themes serves to contextualize these narratives within their monastic production context. That is, these motifs point to the ways early-medieval saints valorized and reified ascetical values. The

bodies of saints work within these narratives to exemplify chastity, pureness of heart, conversion to the monastic life, the rejection of secular values, and the rejection of secular power structures. Spiritual formation in the holy life is prioritized above all else, and the saint serves as a moral exemplar of how pure intention in religious practice may lead the soul into God.

These themes also contain implications for a pastoral-theological reading. The trope of fire, for example, suggests that women could be the living loci for theophany and the willing recipients of divine transfiguration. The trope of enclosure suggests that women could be agents of their own spiritual development, avoiding arranged marriages and choosing for themselves a life of education and ascetical discipline. These themes indicate that women, at least within the world of hagiographic narrative, were capable of far more than the prevailing patriarchal power structures of the church seem to have given them credit for. The narratives describe instances of saintly power, but they also describe empowerment. As churches today continue to struggle with ways to fully incorporate women into the power structures of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, these narratives point to how the empowerment of women was expressed through the dynamic of sanctity in early-medieval saints' Lives.

Similarly, the trope of the pregnant nun reveals how women in these narratives cared for other women. In the early-medieval texts, the female saint worked to restore the pregnant nun to the community, whether that might be through a liturgical intervention, a pastoral intervention, or miraculous healing. The early-medieval narratives therefore reveal the dynamics of saintly concern by women for women, including the healing of shame and the reintegration of the lapsed into the corporate life of the religious institution.

Moreover, the trope of disability reveals the ways in which impairment and disfigurement worked to code certain bodies within the text. As churches work to include persons living with disabilities in an ever more inclusive way, it is important to note how disability has been articulated in history. My analysis of this theme in early-medieval saints' Lives contributes to the ongoing work of recovering disability history, so that persons with disabilities may know these stories and reflect on how the values contained within them have influenced modern attitudes towards impairment and disability.

Even those among us with "normative" bodies, that is, with bodies that seem to be capable of attaining to society's dominant expectations for health and ability, are only temporarily able-bodied. Eventually, death come for us all, and as it does, our bodies begin to change and transform. The trope of shapeshifting, particularly as it is expressed in the narrative of Tuán mac Cairell, nuances the experience of aging by describing the dynamics of fatigue, debilitation, and memory through the saint's bodily transformations. My analysis of this theme holds out the possibility for pastorally engaging with aging persons in the church, so that persons encountering the challenges and wonders of the aging process may find a story from history that helps them to make sense of their own narratives of transformation.

I do not suggest the pastoral implications for these texts lightly. Over the course of the past decade or so, in my work as an Episcopal priest, I have presented these texts in teaching forums in churches, discussing them in Lenten series, Sunday morning adult education course offerings, and weekend retreats. I have marveled with teenage girls about the trope of holy fire, using examples from the hagiographies of early-medieval female saints to open up important questions for their burgeoning sense of autonomy and

personal agency: what places in your life is God filling with divine light? What are you being empowered to do? What powerful things are you capable of? What is burning around you, figuratively speaking, and yet you remain powerful and unconsumed? In what ways are you a powerful child of God? In what ways can you direct your fiery energy to change the world for the better?

In my role as hospital chaplain, I have marveled with geriatric hospice patients over the transformations of Tuán mac Cairell, and I have used his narrative to ask important questions about their own experience of aging: in what ways has your body changed? What do you remember? What changes in the world have you witnessed? What communities have welcomed you, and where were you at your strongest and happiest? What wisdom do you want to pass on to a new generation? What has been the source of your strength?

In my pastoral work with young, pregnant women transitioning out of the foster-care system, I have read through the narratives of pregnant nuns and used these stories to encourage single mothers to consider their own miraculous bodies and their own struggles with the dynamic of shame. To them, I ask: in what ways have you felt rejected by your community? In what ways have you felt shamed by society? In what ways can you claim your own narrative power, to redeem your own story and to make life choices that will bring healing and restoration to you and to your children?

In my pastoral counseling practice, I have shared the stories of early-medieval transvestite saints with LGBTQ persons who are struggling with full inclusion in the life of the church. To them, I ask: in what ways have you had to hide who you really are? What performances have you had to take on, in order to fit in? How can the church change so that you feel fully included and appreciated for who you are? What practices of spiritual

formation will help you to become the beautiful, integrated, accepted person that God wants you to be? How can the church listen to you and take your lived experience seriously?

Bodies are wondrous things, but so are stories. Sometimes the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves, or about the world around us, have the power to diminish us. We tell ourselves stories that harm our psyches, that wound our confidence, that erode our hope in ourselves and our faith in God.

Stories also have the power to redeem. Sometimes the stories that we tell have the power to transform our challenges and our struggles into narratives of empowerment and potential, so that we can become more compassionate, more motivated for change, more accepting of who we are and more hopeful for who we can become.

Hagiography as a genre treats of stories. These stories are not without their problems for modern audiences; they encode historical systems of power and assumptions about gender and performance that modern readers find difficult and problematic. Yet knowing that you are not alone, that your story finds resonance over centuries of time with the narratives of others, is a powerful thing.

The stories that I have presented here in my analysis of these hagiographic tropes are important for the study of theology in history. I have argued for an ascetical-theological reading of these narratives in order to better contextualize them within the value systems of early-medieval religious practice. The pastoral-theological dimension is equally important, for it gives these stories new life, even as it allows new generations of faithful people to reflect on their own miraculous bodies and engage with questions about their own spiritual formation. The stories that arise from my analysis of tropes of embodiment

from early-medieval Europe can open powerful possibilities for a deeper consideration of

our own narratives of embodiment and power, and they can inspire us to share those

stories with others.

A story, after all, is only a wondrous thing if it is told.

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