Wif, *Cwen*, *Ides*: Cultural Constructions of Femininity in Early Medieval England

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Abstract

In Old English literature, women often appear in recognizable roles like queen, peaceweaver, mother, and mourner. These figures serve as cultural signifiers through whom texts articulate, create, and reinforce societal beliefs. However, the positions, ideals, and expectations ascribed to these female figures are often contradictory. In order to explore the multiple and sometimes nebulous definitions of femininity in early medieval England, this dissertation approaches gender through paradox and intersection. The paradoxical roles and expectations at play in early English texts reveal that femininity cannot be understood within the concept of gender alone, but within frameworks of gender *and*: that is, models which contextualize gender in relation to other categories of social difference. Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding the various simultaneous positions that an individual occupies in relation to structures of power. This project takes an intersectional approach, leveraging feminist, queer, and transgender methodologies to illuminate a multifaceted portrait of medieval gender beyond a superficial binary arrangement, showing how seemingly coherent and singular categories like "man" and "woman" are socially constructed and historically contingent, then and now. Such observations in turn allow us to reexamine previous critical assumptions and to reach more nuanced understandings of femininity in early medieval England.

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Introduction

Wif, Cwen, Ides

In the Finnsburg episode of *Beowulf*, Hrothgar's *scop* sings of the sorrows of Hildeburh, a woman torn between two sides of an uneasy peace that devolves into violence in front of her eyes. A Danish noblewoman, she is married to Finn, the leader of the Frisians, to secure an alliance and end the fighting between the two peoples. However, battle soon breaks out between the factions, resulting in the death of Hildeburh's brother and son. Any remaining hopes for peace are obliterated when her late brother's thegn, Hengest, winters with the Frisians, and hostilities erupt once again in the mead hall, leaving her husband dead. While the underlying story concerns the politics of warfare, the narrative revolves around the emotional crux of Hildeburh and her sorrows:

> unsynnum wearð
> beloren leofum æt þam lindplegan
> bearnum ond broðrum; hie on gebyrd hruron
> gare wunde; þæt wæs geomuru ides!
>
> Guiltless, she was
> deprived of her dear ones in that shieldplay,
> her sons and brothers – sent forth to their fate,
> dispatched by spears; she was a sad lady![1]

In this episode, Hildeburh occupies a series of roles: she is a queen in her own right, wife to one king and sister to another. She is a mother to at least one son, who died with her brother Hnæf in

[1] *Beowulf*, ll. 1072-75. Old English text from *Klaeber's Beowulf* (ed. R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4th ed., University of Toronto Press, 2008); trans. R.M. Liuzza (Broadview, 1999, 2nd ed. 2012).

earlier Danish-Frisian conflict. She is a peaceweaver, a political marriage partner moving between warring factions and, at least in theory, cementing peace through kinship bonds. And perhaps most poignantly, she is a mourner, lamenting the deaths of family members on both sides of the conflict and standing witness to their passing.

These roles – queen, peaceweaver, mother and kinswoman, mourner – are all familiar depictions of women in Old English literature. Yet many of these roles exist in uneasy tension with one another or, in their seeming contradictions, reveal two sides of the same ideological coin. As a wife, Hildeburh is at a remove from the heroic world of lords and retainers, adjacent to but not thoroughly a part of that homosocial sphere. However, as a queen, she occupies a political position, and the notion of peaceweaving itself relies on the assumption that marriage, a heterosexual union, can and will affect relationships between men and even nations. Furthermore, Hildeburh's peaceweaving seeks to curb military violence; if successful, a new peace would end or lessen the threat of death under which these warriors – including her kinsmen – live. But when the alliance fails, not only are her kin dying, but the outbreak of violence pits one side of her family against the other; either way, she loses, with no recourse for vengeance or justice. So while peaceweaving and mourning may at first seem like oppositional roles, one for making peace and the other the result of war, in reality they are both predicated on and necessitated by violence, a threat which is never truly absent.

Hildeburh's example highlights the paradoxical definitions of femininity in Old English literary sources. Female figures, either fictional or historical, are carefully constructed within these texts to follow certain ideological conventions, representing early English perceptions of

gender in relation to the larger social systems in which they operate.[2] The gendered terms in my title, *wif, cwen* and *ides,* speak to the ambiguous ways in which early English culture perceived femininity: these terms – generally glossed as "woman," "queen," and "lady" – all denote femininity but are used in vastly different contexts throughout Old English literature, making their dimensions and signification ambiguous. Is the *ides* or lady noble in status, or in character? What can we make of the *Beowulf* poet describing Grendel's mother as *ides aglæcwif* or "monstrous woman"?[3] If *ides* connotes nobility, is this an example of irony, or does it speak to a different, less monstrous side of Grendel's mother? Even if *ides* only connotes femininity rather than status in this passage, how does its broader usage throughout the corpus change perceptions about this character, and conversely, what does this specific usage in the compound *ides aglæcwif* suggest about the definition of *ides* itself?

Given the variations and ambiguities in textual portrayals of femininity, literary and historical women serve as "imaginative figures," as Stacy S. Klein terms them, cultural signifiers through whom these texts articulate, create, and reinforce societal beliefs.[4] However, the positions, ideals, and expectations ascribed to these female figures are often contradictory: for example, Hildeburh's peaceweaving seems destined to fail, despite her own best efforts, creating

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[2] A note on terminology: throughout this dissertation, I use the term "early medieval England" to refer to the pre-Conquest period (roughly fifth to eleventh centuries) instead of "Anglo-Saxon." Many medievalists have expressed concerns about using "Anglo-Saxon" given the ways that modern white supremacists have co-opted the term in service of racism and fascism. The International Society for the Study of Early Medieval England (ISSEME), previously the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists, elected to change its name in 2019 in order to acknowledge and address this issue in terminology; see ISSEME's 2019 statement on the term "Anglo-Saxon" (https://isseme.org/2019/11/21/statement-on-the-term-anglo-saxon/) and its 2020 statement on racial justice (https://isseme.org/2020/06/21/racial-justice/). In this dissertation, the term "Anglo-Saxon" appears only within quotations of secondary sources. For further discussion of how early English authors perceived racial and ethnic differences and expressed them in writing, see Stephen J. Harris, *Race and Ethnicity in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Routledge, 2003).

[3] *Beowulf*, l. 1259.

[4] Stacy S. Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 2.

an innate link between peaceweaving and mourning. Alternatively, elsewhere we find that militancy is applauded in saintly virgins like Juliana and the queen mother Elene, but Grendel's mother is made monstrous for many of the same qualities, portrayed as a vicious killer whose threat must be contained. Cultural archetypes like the peaceweaver and the mourning woman, or social positions like queen and abbess, are useful categories to think with, but they also have their limitations. They are useful insofar as they serve as legible indexes for the often-conflicting gender expectations in early English culture, and insofar as they illustrate the ways that gender interacts with other categories of social difference (like status, age, religious affiliation, sexual and/or childbearing status, disability, etc.) to produce subjectivities that sit in diverse relation to existing systems of power. But these archetypes and roles are by nature generalizations: they cannot speak to unique subjectivities in nuanced ways. Therefore, my analysis begins with these generalizations not to uncritically accept them as coherent identities but to reexamine precisely the ways in which they do not cohere, the ways that literary figures complicate straightforward, abstract ideas about gender.

In order to explore the multiple and sometimes nebulous definitions of femininity in early medieval England, this dissertation approaches gender through paradox and intersection. No culture's gender conventions are wholly consistent and coherent, and thus disparities will inevitably arise. In early English texts, contradictory gender expectations are so entwined that representations of one model of femininity also invoke its alternatives, often implicitly. In Hildeburh's example, the duties of queen and peaceweaver – marry to cement an alliance, have children of mixed heritage to further secure that alliance, and maintain peace in the hall through diplomacy – center around cultivating and sustaining bonds between individuals and peoples; it is a generative role. However, as the Finnsburg episode illustrates, maintaining peace in a culture

that gravitates inexorably toward war is a thankless, and often hopeless, undertaking. Failed peace quickly becomes cause for lamentation: Hildeburh herself orders the pyre built for her brother and son, and the poem recounts the grisly details as she watches them burn. The role of the mourner centers around loss: it is the antithesis of the generative force behind peaceweaving, and yet the peaceweaver herself – by virtue of her position between two cultures – has the most to lose. In this way, peaceweaver and mourner become entangled and inseparable in the early English literary consciousness. This mutual imbrication means that, for peaceweavers, the specter of the mourner is never far from view, even in times of relative amity.

Given this entanglement, I argue that early English texts understood and expressed femininity in paradoxical ways – as Joan W. Scott puts it, these texts had "only paradoxes to offer" concerning the definitions (and value) of femininity. For Scott, early feminism "produced the 'sexual difference' it sought to eliminate."[5] In early English texts, we can observe a similar contest between feminine and masculine perspectives – or more generally, between marginalized and dominant voices. These texts illustrate the ways that medieval patriarchy often asserted binary sex/gender distinctions in order to foreclose the very plurality that those assertions implicitly make visible; conversely, the feminine perspectives in these texts are also operating from within existing systems of power and sometimes benefit from those systems even while remaining marginalized in other ways.

Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding the various simultaneous positions that an individual occupies in relation to social hierarchies. The term intersectionality was coined by civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw and further expanded by sociologist

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[5] Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Harvard University Press, 1996), xi, 3.

Patricia Hill Collins – at its core, intersectionality contends that "race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena."[6] Intersectionality theorizes "from the bottom up" to conceptualize how individuals experience marginalization in relation to systems of power; those with multiple marginal identities experience those effects in cumulative ways, not discretely. In other words, intersectionality does not theorize race and gender (as a "top-down" model might), but rather theorizes racism and sexism.

In medieval studies, applying an intersectional lens allows us to "explor[e] how these various categories overlap with one another—not as distinct identities but as enmeshed conditions that radically alter the lives of figures, both real and imagined," as Roland Betancourt explains.[7] Returning to the Finnsburg episode in *Beowulf*, Hildeburh's position in the Frisian hall is complex: as an outsider married into the tribe in the midst of a feud, she is a foreigner, and possibly unwelcome to the Frisian aristocracy; as a queen, she may hold some authority or wield a measure of indirect power, but her influence was likely delimited by her status as a foreigner; and as a woman, she does not participate directly in the (masculine) sphere of warfare, nor can she decisively alter the course of a skirmish. To consider a different example, virgin martyrs like Juliana lived under Roman rule and pagan persecution – as a woman, Juliana was expected to follow social custom and get married, while as a Christian, the civic authorities expected her to make sacrifices to their gods. In her resistance against these forces, Juliana's bodily purity becomes synonymous with her sanctity, showing that virginity is simultaneously a religious, sexual, and gendered identity.

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[6] Collins, "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemma," *Annual Review of Sociology* 41 (2015): 1.
[7] Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 2.

However, in recognizing the processes of marginalization, intersectionality does not reduce an individual's experience to only passive victimization: it also seeks to understand how individuals work against (or within) systems of power. In her lamentation, Hildeburh may seem like a tragic, helpless figure subject to the whims of her dual communities, with little ability to avert warfare or save the lives of her kin, but several studies have argued for a more active reading: for example, Hildeburh's song may have served as incitement for the Danes to avenge her brother Hnæf's death; alternatively, the act of public lamentation may have played a significant role in the process of constructing secular immortality through fame and remembrance, making Hildeburh's song an active, heroic phenomenon rather than a passive sign of her victimization.[8] While Hildeburh's sorrow – a defining feature of the *scop*'s tale – may offer a critique of the heroic world from a (partial) outsider's perspective, acknowledging her possible avenues for agency highlights the ways that Hildeburh (or exogamous queens like her) may also participate in systems of power that simultaneously privilege and marginalize her. Likewise, Juliana's virginity and sanctity give her the strength to endure tortures and withstand temptations; she can exercise a measure of autonomy over her circumstances, even though her oppressors have the power to narrow her choices to idolatry or death.

The paradoxical roles and expectations at play in early English texts reveal that femininity cannot be understood within the concept of gender *alone*, but within frameworks of

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[8] On Hildeburh as goader, see Robert A. Albano, "The Role of Women in Anglo-Saxon Culture: Hildeburh in *Beowulf* and a Curious Counterpart in the *Volsunga Saga,*" *English Language Notes* 32, no. 1 (1994): 1-10; John M. Hill, *The Cultural World in* Beowulf (University of Toronto Press, 1995); Leonard Neidorf, "Hildeburh's Mourning and *The Wife's Lament*," *Studia Neophilologica* 89, no. 2 (2017): 197-204; and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "Gender Roles," in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 311-24. On the role of lamentation in heroic culture, see Helen Bennett, "The Female Mourner at Beowulf's Funeral: Filling in the Blanks / Hearing the Spaces," *Exemplaria* 4, no. 1 (1992): 35-50; Carol Clover, "Hildigunnr's Lament," in *The Cold Counsel: The Women in Old Norse Literature and Myth*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (Routledge, 2002), 15-54; Scott Gwara, "Paradigmatic Wisdom and the Native Genre giedd in Old English." *Studi Medievali* 53, no. 2 (2012): 783-851.

gender *and*: that is, frameworks that contextualize gender in relation to other categories of social difference. Like all cultures, gender in medieval England was fundamentally defined through and ultimately inextricable from these intersecting identities. This dissertation argues that three major factors shape early English cultural constructions of femininity: social status, sexuality, and religious affiliation.[9] For example, an aristocratic woman's femininity is defined as much by her noble status as by any abstract notion of femaleness, and the divergences between women of different social status at times loom larger, or at least more visibly, than divergences between men and women of the same status.[10] The idealization of virginity also problematizes the relationships between the spectrums of gender, anatomical sex, and sexuality. Definitions of gender in early medieval England depend upon these factors not as adjacent or related identities but as integral to gender construction and expression. Each of the three chapters in this project explores a different vector of intersection – in reality, these factors do not exist independently and are always enmeshed; the intent of dividing the project in this manner is not to suggest that it is possible (or desirable) to isolate such variables, but rather to allow more detailed elaboration of ways in which intersectional categories shape, and are shaped by, constructions of femininity

Using the frameworks of paradox and intersection, we may interrogate textual examples through a series of key questions. Which behaviors were licit or illicit, laudable or condemned? Were these judgments based on a character's gender, and if so, what specific aspects of their behavior or person either conform to or deviate from gendered conventions and expectations? In

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[9] These are by no means the only meaningful intersections for defining early English gender, and other crucial intersections like race/ethnicity, age, and disability bear further investigation.

[10] A note on terminology: here and throughout I am following Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack in using the term "status" rather than "class," in an attempt to further distinguish between medieval and modern systems of social order, "taking care not to assume a priori that we know what the categories of domination were and how they worked." Farmer and Pasternack, introduction to *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xi.

what circumstances are potential deviations from the convention seen as transgressive or subversive; conversely, which deviations were permissible and under what conditions? As this project seeks to understand constructions of femininity, it follows that most of the figures under consideration are women, as well as feminine-coded creatures and objects. This line of inquiry also requires, if secondarily, a consideration of masculinity and masculine-coded figures, in order to assess how individuals navigated gendered social expectations, including the slippages and spaces between the perceived binary of masculinity and femininity.

(Non)Binary? Medieval Gender Plurality

Approaching gender through paradox and intersection also illuminates the plurality of medieval thought. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack observe that contemporary critical theory pushes us to reconsider "not only the fluidity and multiplicity of gendered identities but also the ways in which gendered constructs interact with other categories of difference."[11] Reading for multiplicity requires us to look beneath the surface of medieval texts, not simply to rediscover buried subversive intentions that have been repressed by the social context of the text, but to understand the ways in which medieval gender is already complicated by intersectional vectors of identity and thus cannot be mapped neatly onto a masculine/feminine binary. Reading against the grain of the gender binary allows us to acknowledge and account for both explicit and implicit medieval opinions on femininity, and the ways in which texts juxtapose, perhaps unconsciously, those explicit and implicit constructions in relation to existing systems of power.

On the surface, medieval thought sets femininity in binary opposition to masculinity, and femininity often serves as a foil for, or a defining oppositional element in the construction of,

[11] Farmer and Pasternack, *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ix.

masculinity. Dawn M. Hadley remarks that, while modern scholars may perceive multiplicities in gender expression, oftentimes medieval thinkers portrayed gender in dual and polarizing terms.[12] It is also certainly true that medieval understandings of gender were inherently hierarchical in many ways: dominant medical and scientific theories of the gendered/sexed body, for example, perceived the female body as an inverted and inferior permutation of the standard male body. In a recent article, Caz Batten outlines the binary construction of gender in many medieval texts, and the ways in which "male" and "female" are conceived hierarchically. They explain that medical, legal, and literary texts

> largely assume that physical sex and socially-constructed gender are binary and conflated – that is, an assessment of a person's physical sex based on genitalia and perceptible secondary-sex characteristics determines that individual's expected gender performance. Individuals who challenge these binaries are often described in ways that render them socially suspect, and which reify the two-term system.[13]

In pre-Conquest England, gnomic and wisdom literature like the *Maxims* set forth naturalized standards of behavior, purpose, and identity that encompass human and non-human alike, including the roles that men and women play. While the distinctions among different types of people cover many factors – the poem discusses the wise, the feeble, the young and the old, the prideful and the humble, those who live among friends and those who live in exile, among many others – it is worth noting which gendered figures and roles receive attention. *Maxims I* first introduces gender differences by speaking of men and women jointly: "Two are mates; / a woman and a man must bring forth into the world / a child through birth" ("Tu beoð gemæccan; /

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[12] Dawn M. Hadley, introduction to *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (Longman, 1999), 6-7.
[13] Caroline R. Batten, "Dark Riders: Disease, Sexual Violence, and Gender Performance in the Old English *Mære* and Old Norse *Mara*." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 120, no. 3 (2021): 354.

sceal wif ond wer in woruld cennan / bearn mid gebyrdum").[14] Though procreation requires two distinct parties, they are both participants, and are portrayal equally in this passage.

Later, the poem contrasts an earl and a maid: "The earl must ride the warhorse's arched back" ("Eorl sceal on eos boge"), while "[i]t is proper for a maid to be at her embroidery" ("Fæmne æt hyre bordan geriseð"). The poem also elaborates on what it is *not* proper behavior for a maid: "a wandering woman spreads words, often she is blamed for wrongs, / men speak of her with reproach, her cheek often withers" ("wid-gongel wif word gespringeð, oft hy mon wommum bilihð, / hæleð hy hospe mænað, oft hyre hleor abreoþeð").[15] These portraits speak not only to gender but also to status and sexuality: the earl is a nobleman, someone with the means to ride a horse, the authority to command troops, and the civic responsibility to take arms when necessity arises. The term "maid" (*fæmne*) does not denote social status explicitly, but it often connotes virginity; combined with the "wandering woman," the poem clearly connects femininity and sexuality, particularly the dangers of unruly sexual behavior.[16] Thus *Maxims I* makes clear how definitions of gender do not exist in isolation, but are shaped by other factors of identity.

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[14] *Maxims I*, ll. 23-25. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1936); trans. Robert E. Bjork (in *Old English Shorter Poems, Volume II: Wisdom and Lyric*, Harvard University Press, 2014, 64-81).

[15] *Maxims I*, ll. 61-64.

[16] Notably, the poem does not directly denigrate a woman's wandering, but describes the social consequences thereof: people will perceive her poorly and likely blame her for "wrongs." By focusing on the act of blaming rather than the actual motivations for wandering, the text implicitly asserts that acts gain significance within a social context, not in isolation; it raises the question, would wandering be so bad if no one knew? Curiously, the poem *Maxims II* (also known as the Cotton Maxims, found in a different manuscript than *Maxims I*) seems to address this possibility. It relates: "A woman, a maiden, must be secret skill / seek her friend if she does not want it to happen among the people / that someone should buy her with rings" ("Ides sceal dyrne cræfte, / fæmne hire freond gesecean gif heo nelle on folce geþeon / þæt hi man beagum gebicge"). The language here is certainly ambiguous, so I will not speculate on all the possible permutations of events the passage might describe; however, the passage does emphasize knowledge and perception, suggesting not that a woman should or should not behave a certain way for inherently moral reasons, but that she ought to be aware of the social consequences of her actions. *Maxims II*, ll. 43-45; Old English text from ASPR vol. VI (ed. Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1942); trans. Robert E. Bjork (in *Old English Shorter Poems, Volume II: Wisdom and Lyric*, Harvard University Press, 2014, 174-79).

Moreover, in enumerating the whole of creation and the roles each element performs, gnomic texts like *Maxims* are more than descriptive: they also prescribe what each person ought to do according to their identity and place in the world. By blurring the lines between what *does* happen and what *should* happen, gnomic works naturalize human social roles and present a fixed and stable portrait of the world. Yet despite the clear binaries constructed in such texts, gender is far more slippery in practice, both in the literary record and historical reality. The same sources which confidently assert these gender standards as natural and proper also showcase a broader variety of gender expression, demonstrating how mutable and malleable these categories are. The very fixity and stability of the world as it is portrayed in *Maxims* speaks to underlying anxieties about the ways in which human behavior and identity shift and flow across time, space, and context. Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing push a step further, arguing that *Maxims* and other wisdom texts focus less on the gender category of "woman" and more on social categories like status or sexuality: "A woman in this culture is a wife, a queen, a relative of a man or his family, a lover, but she rarely is 'woman' in either the misogynist or existentialist senses of the term."[17] Not only does this reading highlight the crucial intersections involved in constructions of early English gender, it also clarifies the ways in which these texts display a multiplicity of gender expressions even while they simultaneously signal their discomfort with such fluidity.

Moreover, the comfortable fiction of categorical stability in *Maxims* speaks to anxieties about the ways in which fluctuations of behavior and identity reveal and challenge asymmetrical social hierarchies and existing structures of power. Such texts are invested in portraying categories like gender as natural, fixed, and stable precisely because of their fluidity and

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[17] Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing, "The Clerics and the Critics: Misogyny and the Social Symbolic in Anglo-Saxon England." In *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 25.

instability in the world beyond the page. Returning to scientific and medical principles as an example, Thomas Laqueur outlines a premodern "one-sex" model in which "*sex*, or the body, must be understood as the epiphenomenon, while *gender*, what we would take to be a cultural category, was primary or 'real.' Gender – man and woman – mattered a great deal and was part of the order of things; sex was conventional." Upon this basis, Laqueur concludes that "there existed many genders, but only one adaptable sex."[18] Responding to Laqueur's work, Joan Cadden challenges the primacy of anatomy in medieval conceptions of sex difference, instead privileging physiology and function.[19] Where Laqueur denaturalizes the binary of male and female sexed bodies by reframing sex through the lens of premodern gender ideology, Cadden demonstrates that both gender and sex were conceptualized as multiple and fluid in medieval thought. As Farmer and Pasternack remark, "despite illusions of fixed and stable sexual identities, as constructed either by modern or by premodern dominant fictions, sexual behaviors and identities are, and were, fluid and unstable."[20]

Given both the binary and pluralistic thought processes at work in the early English worldview, I take a "show and tell" approach to reading gender in medieval texts: while the texts may say one thing, they often show another. Observing the disparities, convergences, gaps, and slippages between "show" and "tell" triangulates a more nuanced portrait of medieval understandings of gender beyond a superficial binary arrangement. This approach does not prompt us to disregard the "tell," the direct textual assertions that describe and prescribe

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[18] Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Harvard University Press, 1990), 8, 35.
[19] See Joan Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1993). For further critiques of Laqueur and the one-sex model, see Katherine Park, "Cadden, Laqueur, and the 'One-Sex Body'" (*Medieval Feminist Forum* 46, no. 1, 2010, 96-100) and Helen King, *The One-Sex Body on Trial: The Classical and Early Modern Evidence* (Ashgate, 2013).
[20] Farmer and Pasternack, eds., *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, xiv.

medieval attitudes, as these are invaluable touchpoints for understanding medieval thought. But explicit prescriptive statements are not the only datapoints available to us through textual analysis, and a more careful consideration of both the "tell" and the "show" will broaden our interpretive possibilities.

The first and perhaps simplest step in reorienting our thinking toward multiplicity is to embrace the plural in our terminology. Rather than speaking of "masculinity" and "femininity," which conjure a gender binary, we may instead speak of "masculinities" and "femininities." By moving from singular to plural terms, I do not mean to reproduce the male/female binary: considering multiple masculinities and femininities allows us to conceive of these identifiers as broader categories of gender expression that do not map perfectly onto persons or bodies that may be sexed as male or female. Plural terms also gesture toward further multiplicity: they are not comprehensive in themselves, as if all gender expressions can be boiled down to one flavor or another of masculinity or femininity. Instead, they remind us that other possibilities exist, though what shape those possibilities take is culturally contingent and not the same across time and space.

Theorists have long debated and reworked the terminology by which we conceptualize gender and sexuality. The term "gender spectrum" is often used to represent a broad variety of models which push back against binary notions of gender and its intersections. However, the general notion of a spectrum as a continuum between two poles (such as male and female) may also inadvertently reinforce a binary view: in other words, a simplistic gender spectrum would suppose that "male" and "female" lie at opposite ends of this spectrum, thereby positing their inherent polarity and implying that all other gender identities and expressions would necessarily fall somewhere between. Some scholars have combatted this reinforcement of the binary by

proposing a third gender model, which in turn has been criticized for simply turning the binary into a trinary without addressing the underlying problems of the binary itself. The more recent term "nonbinary" seeks to remedy these issues, yet has also received its share of criticism: in its insistence on distinguishing itself from previous modes of thought and expression, "nonbinary" may end up instating yet another duality, binary/nonbinary.[21] Binary thinking often feels inescapable, and it is therefore important to continually work toward conceptual models oriented around multiplicity. As Samantha Katz Seal and Nicole Nolan Sidhu contend, to do intersectional work "[t]he entangled whorls of our ideas must coexist without diminishing their complexity."[22] To that end, it is more useful to imagine gender not as a spectrum between two poles but as a network of related possibilities which are inflected by intersectional categories and which stand in complex relation to each other, to hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity, and to systems of power.

What Makes a (Medieval) Woman? Gender and Historical Contingency

Any discussion of premodern gender and sexuality is indebted to the work of Michel Foucault, in particular his admonition that we remain aware of our own distance from the subjects of our inquiry: "There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all."[23] Peter Brown offers a similar caution, that scholars "must not sink into the cozy, even arch, familiarity with which a modern person often feels

[21] See Kadji Amin, "We are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents," *Representations* 158, no. 1 (2022): 106-119.
[22] Samantha Katz Seal and Nicole Nolan Sidhu, "Feminist Intersectionality: Centering the Margins in 21st century Medieval Studies," *Postmedieval* 10, no. 3 (2019): 275.
[23] Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage Books, 1990), 8.

entitled to approach the sexual concerns of men and women in a distant age."[24] While Foucault himself often used the Middle Ages as a foil for modern notions of sexuality – "the dense, unvarying, and eminently obvious monolith against which modernity and postmodernity groovily emerge," as Carolyn Dinshaw puts it – medieval scholars have also long recognized the importance of Foucault's contention that sexuality is a product of historical contingency rather than a natural and independent category. As the introduction to *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* explains, "the medieval phenomena that answer to our interest in sexuality will also have been historical formations, produced by and embedded in specifically medieval discourses, customs, institutions, regulations, and knowledges. In this sense too, medieval sexuality is a construction, a medieval construction."[25] So too medieval gender: what constituted masculinity and femininity in early medieval England are phenomena equally embedded in their own cultural moment.

To do the work of thinking and perceiving differently, my perspective in this project is informed by the work of theorists in feminist, queer, and transgender/trans studies. Perhaps most fundamental is Judith Butler's assertion that gender (and sex) is performative: that is, that performative acts, accumulated over time, constitute the gender identity (or sexed body) they purport to express and thereby create the illusion of fixity and a natural origin, concealing the artificiality and historical contingency of their construction. Butler's conclusion has moved scholars to explore gender, sexuality, and the body according to their historical contexts and contingencies. Such exploration necessitates a reconsideration of categories that may feel ubiquitous and self-evident, like male and female or heterosexual and homosexual. Yet even

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[24] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 1988), xvii-xviii.
[25] Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz, *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), ix-x.

where medieval and modern thought share terminology, we cannot forget that the conceptualizations those terms represent are mutable, relative, and inequivalent. In their introduction to the *Transgender Studies Reader 2*, editors Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura question "why we think 'man' and 'woman' are any more transhistorical, or less contingent, than any other category of identity, and why we persist in the presentist fallacy of ontologizing a current framework and imposing it on the strangeness of the past."[26]

In medieval studies, research into the historical contingency of gender categories has often emerged from scholarship focused on denaturalizing heterosexuality and heteronormativity as fixed ahistorical frameworks. These efforts have called into question our understanding not only of medieval sexualities but also medieval notions of the sexed body. Drawing on Butler's contention that culture produces bodies, James A. Schultz argues that the medieval body and the modern body, while equally important to cultural signification, are not the same: "Because the criteria change, 'morphological possibilities' that are intelligible today would not necessarily have been intelligible in the past, and bodies that were intelligible in the past may not be so today."[27] The morphological possibilities that map a body as intelligible and categorizable, and which define a certain type of body, do not remain constant across culture.

Just as bodies are produced by culture, the normative forces by which that production occurs are likewise contingent and must be considered in culturally specific ways. According to Butler, the "regulatory schemas" which produce those "morphological possibilities…are not timeless structures, but historically revisable criteria of intelligibility."[28] Some studies have

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[26] Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, introduction to *Transgender Studies Reader 2* (Routledge, 2013), 6.
[27] James A. Schultz, "Bodies That Don't Matter: Heterosexuality before Heterosexuality in Gottfried's Tristan," in Constructing Medieval Sexuality, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 91.
[28] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (Routledge, 1993), xxii.

sought to investigate what such norms looked like in the Middle Ages, by turning to legal edicts and penitentials that purport to regulate sexual and bodily activity. Other scholars have pushed back against the idea of medieval gender and sexual norms altogether. Karma Lochrie explains that, like the concept of sexuality as a discrete identity category, the idea of a "norm" did not exist in the premodern world:

> Norms are the result of the science of statistics mainly in the nineteenth century – a science of numbers that produced concepts such as populations, minorities, and the 'average man'…. The history of the 'invention of heterosexuality,' therefore, is not complete without a history of normativity, since it is by means of normativity that heterosexuality becomes normalized. Heterosexuality, with all its 'definitional incoherence,' could not have achieved normative status before the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when statistics was developed and placed in the service of sexology.[29]

This conclusion does not assume that the Middle Ages were a time of permissive hedonism where "anything goes," or a period of history curiously devoid of regulatory schemas. Lochrie clarifies that medieval understandings of human difference did not function through a logic of averages but rather ideals. Medieval thinkers were more concerned with the concepts of "natural" and "unnatural": the former as the standard to which all humans aspire, despite our fallen status, and the latter as a capacious category encompassing all postlapsarian human failings. This differs distinctly from a norm, which speaks to prevalence and typicality; "Medieval Nature, by contrast, presupposes the *rarity* of natural behaviors because of the hard

[29] Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality when Normal Wasn't* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxi.

work that perfection requires."[30] The framework of natural and unnatural behavior complicates our understandings of medieval sexuality because it is not commensurate with heteronormativity. The natural/unnatural model does not presuppose a distinction between heterosexual activity and homosexual activity, as modern heteronormativity may lead us to assume. In fact, many sexual acts usually considered heterosexual by modern definitions were certainly "unnatural" by medieval standards: the "only natural and desirable sexual act" is "sex in the appropriate vessels, with the appropriate instruments, in the appropriate position, *without* inordinate desire."[31] By this definition, *most* sex acts fall into the "unnatural" category, sometimes referred to as "sodomy" in medieval texts (though, like "natural" and "unnatural," this term has a medieval definition distinct from its modern meaning).

Since heteronormative thinking has inflected decades of medieval scholarship, there is much work to do in reexamining and reimagining our approaches to the Middle Ages. Scholars like Lochrie and Schultz remind us that anachronism does not lie solely in applying contemporary theory uncritically to earlier periods, but also in assuming that fundamental cultural conceptualizations of gender have not changed from the medieval to the modern. Lochrie outlines the consequences of this form of presentism: "The heteronormativity of modern scholarship ends up creating its own modern categories where they did not exist before, minoritizing categories of acts, such as sodomy, where they were not minoritized before and flattening the gender dynamics of medieval sexualities."[32] Working against the grain of heteronormativity requires us to reconsider binary gender in the Middle Ages. In this vein,

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[30] Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, xxiii; emphasis original.
[31] Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, xxiii; emphasis original. See also James A. Schultz, "Heterosexuality as a Threat to Medieval Studies" (*Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no. 1, 2006, 14-29).
[32] Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, xvi.

medieval scholars return to the same questions posed by Stryker and Aizura: in what ways were premodern notions of gender shaped by their unique cultural contexts? In their introduction to *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern,* editors Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska challenge the perceived normativity of gender in the Middle Ages: "Insofar as our work as critics is partly to 'unmake common sense,' we have to ask ourselves both what culturally and historically specific senses of 'men' and 'women' consisted of, and what possibilities may have existed 'outside the natural' when it came to gender."[33] Unmaking the "common sense" of medieval gender means examining masculinity and femininity with the same scrutiny that Lochrie and others have directed toward heterosexuality and homosexuality. This dissertation seeks to address these gaps by broadening our understanding of medieval gender dynamics, to reconsider how early medieval English culture constructed "man" and "woman" in historically contextual ways.

Cherchez La Femme: From Finding Women to Defining Femininity

In addition to theorists in feminist, queer, and transgender studies, my work on medieval femininity is also clearly indebted to foundational research on medieval women and gender. Studies of medieval women in the mid- to late twentieth century often pushed back against the masculinist interpretive practices that were common in premodern scholarship of the time, as well as previous assertions about the dearth of evidence concerning medieval women.[34] These

[33] Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska, *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern* (Cornell University Press, 2021), 13.
[34] Judith M. Bennett traces the historiography of feminist medieval studies, noting that in the mid to late twentieth century, feminist scholars soundly rebutted previous assumptions about women's absence from the historical record: "information about women that scholars once proclaimed simply irretrievable has been sought out, recovered, and reported." See Bennett, "Medievalism and Feminism," *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (1993): 309-331, at 326.

earlier studies carved out a place for marginalized figures from the historical record within contemporary scholarship, arguing for the importance of women in shaping both the culture of their age and modern interpretive practices. Historians such as Christine Fell brought attention to the lives of women in pre-Conquest England from all walks of life.[35] Others turned their focus to certain categories of women, most notably queens and female religious: such explorations include Pauline Stafford's extensive work on queens in early medieval England and Europe and Stephanie Hollis's *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*.[36] In literary criticism, significant studies illustrated the centrality of women in the early English literary and cultural landscape: for example, monographs on the women of *Beowulf* by Helen Damico, Jane Chance, and Gillian Overing shaped early medieval literary scholarship of the late twentieth century.[37] By highlighting the important roles that women played in the history and literature of medieval England, premodern women's studies made gender-based marginalization more visible and demonstrated the ways in which women exercised agency in the face of oppression.

These early efforts have also been criticized for reinforcing the methodologies that feminism seeks to disrupt and failing to question existing structures of power, medieval and modern. In response to these critiques, as well as innovations in the emerging disciplines of queer and postcolonial studies (to name but two), "women's studies" evolved into the broader

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[35] Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (British Museum Publications, 1984).
[36] Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (University of Georgia Press, 1983) and *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Blackwell, 1997); Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Boydell Press, 1992).
[37] Helen Damico, Beowulf*'s Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse University Press, 1986); Gillian R. Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in* Beowulf (Southern Illinois University Press, 1990).

interdisciplinary study of gender and sexuality.[38] But the self-reflexivity inspired by this critique lives on: Seal and Sidhu contend that intersectional feminism in the twenty-first century must involve "a commitment not to be content simply with adding women on as an extra in conventional European patriarchal accounts, or with analyzing gender in history or literature without fundamentally reenvisioning the intellectual foundations upon which those fields of study have been built."[39]

Following a similar pattern to feminist medieval studies, earlier queer and trans scholarship often focused on identifying individuals from the past who did not conform to contemporary cultural standards for sexual behavior and/or sex-gender expression and embodiment. These studies seek to create a genealogy and history for gender- and sexually-nonconforming individuals, often in the face of modern attacks which claim that such historical figures did not exist.[40] While such approaches have their limitations, these efforts speak to the "immense power of identifying historical ancestors" for queer and trans communities today, and they complicate our received notions about how past societies conceived of, and responded to, marginalized identities and individuals.[41]

With the emergence of gender/sexuality studies in place of "women's studies," medieval scholarship has transitioned from "finding" historical women and gender-variant individuals to considering the ways in which culture shapes and is shaped by gender and sexuality in conjunction with the intersecting vectors of social status, race, disability, and spirituality in

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[38] Madeline Caviness describes the ways in which queer and postcolonial theory in particular problematized feminist conceptualization of its own "foundational terms," women and gender; see Caviness, "Feminism, Gender Studies, and Medieval Studies," *Diogenes* 57, no. 1 (2010): 32.
[39] Seal and Sidhu, "Feminist Intersectionality," 275.
[40] Often these anti-transgender attacks also claim, explicitly or implicitly, that trans people alive today do not or should not exist; the supposed lack of a historical record is thus an illegitimating move with serious consequences.
[41] Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (Columbia University Press, 2021), 9.

historically specific ways. Queens and female religious still feature prominently as subjects of study, with renewed focus on the ways in which these roles serve as critical points of entry for considering gender in the context of its historical intersections.[42] Other research focuses on modes of medieval interpretation and knowledge formation: in *Double Agents*, Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing clarify that "this is not a book about women *in*," working to avoid the shortcomings of earlier methods; "[r]ather, we are concerned with the formation of the cultural record itself and what this may tell us about these and many other, undistinguished (that is, unrecorded or partially recorded) women."[43] Furthermore, queer work on the Middle Ages, and early medieval England in particular, has proliferated in the past several decades: cornerstone studies of the late twentieth century by John Boswell and Carolyn Dinshaw set the stage for subsequent queer work by Karma Lochrie, David Clark, Tison Pugh, and many others.

On the one hand, increased attention to intersectionality has signaled, and also reinforced, the utility of critical theories of gender and sexuality for medieval studies as a whole: Mary Dockray-Miller has observed that "[t]he audience's facility with feminist and gender theory may not yet be taken as a given, but feminist explorations of Anglo-Saxon culture no longer need to assume a reader's indifference or even hostility."[44] On the other hand, our discipline still has far to go before intersectionality is thoroughly integrated into our scholarly methods, rather than

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[42] On queenship, examples include Klein, *Ruling Women*, and Elizabeth Muir Tyler, *England in Europe: English Royal Women and Literary Patronage, c.1000-c.1150* (University of Toronto Press, 2017). On religious women, examples include Virginia Blanton, *Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St. Æthelthryth in Medieval England, 695-1615* (Penn State University Press, 2007); Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); Helene Scheck, *Reform and Resistance: Formations of Female Subjectivity in Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Culture* (SUNY Press, 2008); and Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (Continuum, 2003).

[43] Clare A. Lees and Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

[44] Mary Dockray-Miller, "Old English Literature and Feminist Theory: A State of the Field," *Literature Compass* 5-6 (2008): 1051.

being viewed as an ancillary and optional "value add" to our research. Seal and Sidhu advocate for this continued attention as an ethical imperative:

> Intersectionality may be an essential paradigm for medieval studies, but it is one to which the field – majority white and still dominated by white men – has reacted with disproportionate hostility. Or, perhaps, this antagonism has been rather an acknowledgement of the fundamental power that an intersectional medieval studies wields against the ingrained hierarchies of established medievalisms.[45]

Literary and historical analysis still have room to move beyond "finding" marginalized figures in the past and to address the needs of contemporary ethical scholarship. Feminist, queer, and trans scholars have demonstrated how their approaches can be framed as methodologies, not only as identity categories to which historical individuals may or may not belong. Leah DeVun uses transgender as an analytic to think through medieval perceptions of what we might call nonbinary sex-gender today: "As an analytic tool, transgender can describe any movement away from an assigned sex or gender regardless of whether or not an individual in question has explicitly identified as transgender…. '[T]ransgender' brings into sharper focus the preoccupation with gender-crossing that pervades medieval writings on gender-challenging bodies and that animated medieval attempts to stabilize sexual and social practices."[46] Approaching gender as an analytical model rather than solely an identity category allows us to consider medieval femininities (and masculinities) as plural, multivalent, and historically contingent; it also allows us to stretch our considerations of femininity beyond women, and of masculinity beyond men. In my own work, I am drawn to terms like "genderfluid" and

[45] Seal and Sidhu, "Feminist Intersectionality," 272.
[46] DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 159-60.

"genderqueer" to discuss figures who seem to challenge, transgress, or move across gender boundaries, without assigning them a particular gender identity. These terms capture the multivalent and indefinable nature of medieval gender, and allow us to explore constructions of femininity without assigning specific identity labels.

Transgender studies has also afforded a critique of earlier queer work by outlining uncritical gender assumptions which are predicated upon an understanding of heterosexuality and homosexuality as other-sex or same-sex desire.[47] Such definitions of sexuality implicitly rely upon and thus reinforce stable and legible gender identification, which not only naturalizes current definitions of gender identity as historically consistent, but also precludes possibilities for gender fluidity and identification beyond a gender binary.[48] LaFleur, Raskolnikov, and Kłosowska explain that, "Insofar as broad understandings of queerness rely on assumptions of fixed sexual difference…there is much that queer critique, and early queer theory in particular, could not 'see' about the gender nonconformity of especially early writers and texts, reading this nonconformity as queerness to the exclusion of transness."[49] Just as a more expansive critical conception of gender enabled scholars to broaden feminist inquiry beyond women alone, transgender studies prompts us to attend to the interrelation of gender and sexuality in historically specific ways. I see this manner of self-reflexive critique not as a bug but a feature of the larger humanist enterprise: intersectional and interdisciplinary medieval studies should "destabilise traditional assumptions about how [its] methodologies work, questioning the

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[47] For a review of recent transgender medieval scholarship and reception of queer and trans theories in medieval studies, see Tess Wingard, "The Trans Middle Ages: Incorporating Transgender and Intersex Studies into the History of Medieval Sexuality" (*English Historical Review* 138, no. 593, 2023, 933-51) and Erik Wade, "Skeletons in the Closet: Scholarly Erasure of Queer and Trans Themes in Early Medieval English Texts" (*ELH* 89, no. 2, 2022, 282-316).
[48] Stryker and Aizura, *Transgender Studies Reader 2*, 9; DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 11, 160-61; LaFleur, Raskolnikov, and Kłosowska, *Trans Historical*, 5-6.
[49] LaFleur, Raskolnikov, and Kłosowska, *Trans Historical*, 6.

conclusions of previous scholars and revealing the modernist assumptions that clouded their judgment – all the while cognizant that their own conclusions will be subject to the same kinds of critique."[50] Every critical methodology will have its blind spots, and only by embracing an ecosystem of interdisciplinary exchange will we collaboratively create a more responsible and nuanced body of scholarship.

More intersectional focus is particularly crucial to the study of gender in the early Middle Ages, as this area is often overlooked or given short shrift. As Lees and Overing observe, "Specific histories of medieval women pay scant attention to the problematic evidence of the early period, and those of Anglo-Saxon society itself rarely consider the subject of Anglo-Saxon women in any detail."[51] While this observation is now more than twenty years old, the general trend still persists: Dockray-Miller makes a similar remark in her 2008 state of the field assessment, as does David Clark in his 2009 overview of sexuality in Old English literary studies.[52] Monographs like Michelle Sauer's *Gender in Medieval Culture* (2015), while admirable in scope and methodology, often begin with the high (or even late) Middle Ages and omit the pre-Conquest period entirely. More recently, essay collections and special issues devoted to the study of gender and sexuality in early medieval England have demonstrated the value of their work to the larger disciplines of medieval studies and intersectional humanities more broadly, and their publication indicates the ongoing need for work on early medieval English gender and sexuality.[53] This dissertation seeks to continue these efforts by considering

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[50] Robin Norris, Renée R. Trilling, and Rebecca Stephenson, "A Feminist Renaissance in Early Medieval English Studies," *English Studies* 101, no. 1 (2020): 5.
[51] Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 6.
[52] Dockray-Miller, "Old English Literature and Feminist Theory," 1051; David Clark, "Old English Literature and Same-Sex Desire: An Overview," *Literature Compass* 6, no. 3 (2009): 576.
[53] See *New Readings on Women and Early Medieval English Literature and Culture*, ed. Helene Scheck and Christine E. Kozikowski (Arc Humanities Press, 2019) and the special issue of *English Studies* titled "A Feminist

the paradoxes made visible in medieval portrayals of femininity. By approaching medieval gender at its intersections, by exploring its multiplicities and paradoxes, we may observe the slippages where individuals (real or fictional) navigate within, between, and beyond the narrow bounds of the male/female binary. Such observations in turn allow us to reexamine previous critical assumptions and to reach more nuanced understandings of constructions of femininity in early medieval England.

Chapter 1 explores aristocratic femininity through the dual figure of the peaceweaver-mourner and cultural valuations of war and peace. While peace was largely perceived as the prerogative of aristocratic women, especially queens, in contrast to the warrior-king, this chapter argues that peacemaking is primarily a political, diplomatic position rather than a specifically gendered role in early English textual sources. However, heroic masculinity heavily relied upon violence as a primary method of gender expression; as a result, not only did peace take on feminine associations, but war also became motivated by more than the necessity of national protection, in strikingly self-destructive ways. The paradoxical gender expectations that produced the peaceweaver-mourner's duality also make visible the ways in which aristocratic women stood both within and outside the dominant social order of the heroic world. As a figure who experiences both social privilege and gendered marginalization, the peaceweaver-mourner critiques secular heroic masculinity while remaining imbricated with the hierarchy of power within the hall. In this liminal position, the peaceweaver-mourner offers a glimpse of an alternative future that redefines gender identities and relations.

Renaissance in Early Medieval English Studies," ed. Robin Norris, Renée R. Trilling, and Rebecca Stephenson (*English Studies* 101, no. 1, 2020).

Chapter 2 begins its consideration of early English sexuality by evaluating a scholarly commonplace: that Old English literature is largely asexual. Previous scholars have noted a distinct disinterest in matters of sex in texts across genres, which they contrast to the sexually repressive attitude espoused by the church. While earlier studies have largely been content to accept this asexual hypothesis, this chapter extends the inquiry: if discourses of sexuality were not the primary framework by which early English people understood human relationships, what were? Given how thoroughly sexuality is entrenched in many western cultures today, reading with asexuality presents a scholarly paradox rather than a textual one: how can we, as products of a heavily sexualized culture, think through literary texts that do not similarly center sexuality? Modern asexuality studies offers methodologies for tackling these questions: by decentering sex in our own critical approaches, we counteract modern compulsory sexuality – that is, the assumption that sexuality is the default and most significant aspect of human relationships. Decentering discourses of sex in our approach to premodern cultures allows us to perceive different social and discursive priorities and to understand sexuality as one way among many that people relate to each other. Early medieval English texts more often depict heterosocial spaces and relationships rather than heterosexual ones, and they privilege discourses of emotion over sexuality. Given the intersections of sexuality and gender, revising our assumptions about the role of sexuality in defining medieval relationships also requires a revision of gender assumptions as well: these texts articulate differences in gendered subjectivity not through sexuality, but through experiences of emotion. This shift in focus – heterosexual to heterosocial, sexuality to affectivity – does not seek to deny the presence or importance of sexuality in early English culture, but to contextualize it alongside other forms of relationality, frameworks that include but are not reducible to sex.

Chapter 3 investigates variations of religious virginity to explore the intersections of gender and spirituality. In medieval theology, virginity is simultaneously a religious, gendered, and sexual identity. Virginity's multivalent liminalities require audiences to recognize the complex relations between different aspects of identity, and the relation of individual subjectivities to systems of power. Virginity's proximity to the divine – and the virgin's absolute orientation toward God – made virginal gender ambiguous. Since virgins were seen as living saints, they embodied both divinity and mortality, and therefore worldly gender roles only partially adhered to them. Medieval authors negotiated this gender ambiguity in their texts, leading to a range of virginal gender variations. Because virginity created variation, it also held the power to redefine gender transgression: behaviors or roles usually perceived as deviant become permissible (or even praiseworthy) by virtue of the subject's virginal identity. In order to understand how seemingly transgressive actions can create rather than inhibit holiness, narratives of virginity invite metaphorical reading practices. In recategorizing these actions, virginity highlights the paradoxical principles at work in the concept of transgression: by challenging the dichotomy of conformity and deviance, virginity shows that exceptional identities may be marginal but can also be venerated. Changing religious and social circumstances permitted certain transformations as it curtailed others; as a result, virginity's transformative power remained conditional and limited. As chaste monastic masculinity rose to cultural dominance, it sought to control unorthodox interpretations and reinscribed new notions of transgression. However, imaginative possibilities endured even in the face of misunderstanding and mediation.

Chapter 1

Guþ and *Friþ*: The Peaceweaver-Mourner

Many of the most recognizable female figures in Old English texts, both literary and historical, are queens. Conventions for poetic composition and historical record-keeping certainly contributed to the almost-exclusive presence of high-status women in these sources: epic and battle poetry like *Beowulf* or *The Battle of Maldon* had very limited interest in women, only insofar as they participated in the culture of the mead hall as Wealhtheow does. Chronicles and historical accounts privileged large-scale political and religious events, though what constituted an event worth recording differed somewhat across various sources due to regional and ideological interests.

The relatively small number of women who appear in historical sources raises questions about the kinds of power women might have wielded during this period. One traditional view argued that the dearth of female figures reflected the relative powerlessness of queens and other royal women, as political events appeared not to involve them in any noteworthy way and their actions must therefore have had little influence on those events. However, Pauline Stafford and Stacy S. Klein have challenged this position, instead arguing that the minimal female representation in these sources reflects a lack of a codified position for royal women, rather than a lack of investment or involvement in political affairs.[54] Queenship was not a clearly defined office in early medieval England: Klein remarks that "Anglo-Saxon England has left us no general tracts or treatises on queenship, no historical documents designating queenship as a

[54] Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Blackwell, 1997), 55ff; Stacy S. Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 14.

public office or position with attendant rights and responsibilities."[55] Some historical accounts acknowledge and even attempt to explain this phenomenon. Asser recounts in his *Life of Alfred* that, contrary to Germanic custom, early Wessex denied the king's wife the title of queen and any attendant political position altogether: "For the people of the West Saxons do not allow their queen to sit beside the king, nor do they permit her to be called 'queen' but 'king's wife'," supposedly due to the corruption of a particular historical queen.[56] Even when a royal wife was accorded a title or position, it remained ambiguous what responsibilities and authority such recognition entailed. This suggests that royal women exercised power through alternative means: in some cases, royal women may have wielded indirect "soft" power; in other cases, they may have acted more directly but in ways which were not ubiquitous among women of their status, and thus those actions were perceived by annalists and other writers not as a measure of queenship writ large, but as the idiosyncrasies of one individual.

Klein elucidates that queens' ambiguous position served as both a blessing and a curse: while a lack of codification diminished their formal authority, it also minimized the limitations on a queen's purview, providing a level of flexibility which allowed queens to strategically direct their own efforts and play a variety of roles in national governance and international politics.[57] Among these roles, one of the most recognizable in literary and historical texts is the figure of the peaceweaver, a woman whose strategic marriage forges peace between two hostile (or potentially hostile) factions. Wealhtheow, the Danish queen of *Beowulf*, is perhaps the most famous example of a peaceweaver in the Old English literary corpus, though the practice of

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[55] Klein, *Ruling Women*, 5.
[56] Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, trans. Albert S. Cook (Ginn & Company, 1906), 9.
[57] Klein, *Ruling Women*, 5-6; see also Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith*, 162ff, and John Carmi Parsons, *Medieval Queenship* (St. Martin's Press, 1993), 8-10.

exogamous intertribal marriages is well attested in early medieval historical records.[58] Many scholars have identified the female peacemaker as the "primary conventional secular role of Anglo-Saxon woman."[59] Furthermore, the potential for queens to serve as peacemakers is referenced, implicitly or explicitly, in other literary sources as well, including gnomic poems like the *Maxims* and lyric works like the Exeter Book elegies.

In this analysis, I use the term "peaceweaver" broadly, not only to describe women married across tribal or national boundaries, but also to identify royal or aristocratic individuals who actively work to ensure peace, within and outside their nation. The roles of queen, peacemaker, and exogamous bride all overlap in obvious ways, yet none of these roles are perfectly synonymous with the others: a woman in early medieval England could be a queen without working toward peace, even if she were married exogamously in the name of an alliance; likewise, peacemaking was not limited to queens, or even women.[60] As Megan Cavell, Larry M. Sklute, and others have pointed out, the Old English term for "peaceweaver," *friðuwebbe,* is only used three times in Old English poetry, and thus scholars should beware of uncritically applying the term to all exogamous alliance marriages in particular, or to women in general, in this

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[58] A note on terminology: for convenience, I generally use the words "tribe" and "nation" interchangeably to mean a people-group which sees itself as culturally and/or ethnically distinct from other people-groups. These terms overlap to a certain extent, but they were not wholly synonymous in this period; for further discussion, see Stephen J. Harris, *Race and Ethnicity in Anglo-Saxon England* (Routledge, 2003).

[59] Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse University Press, 1986), xiv; Alexandra Hennessey Olsen includes "peaceweaver" among her archetypal roles for women in early medieval English culture ("Gender Roles," in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, University of Nebraska Press, 1997, 311-24); also see Michael J. Enright, *Lady with a Mead-Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tene to the Viking Age* (Four Courts Press, 1996).

[60] For example, Carol Parrish Jamison summarizes four potential ways in which an exogamous bride might contend with her new circumstances: acquiescence and passivity; being perceived as a threat by her husband's kin; becoming a kingmaker and diplomat in the court; and breaking the alliance by rebelling, siding with her own kin, and/or seeking vengeance against her husband's people; see Jamison, "Traffic of Women in Germanic Literature," *Women in German Yearbook* 20, no. 1 (2004): 13-36.

culture.[61] I take seriously Cavell's and Sklute's caution: my use of the term does not limit peacemaking to women, and in fact serves to highlight precisely that distinction between peacemaking and femininity. I use "peaceweaver" to capture the peacemaking responsibilities – and potentials for agency – often assigned to royal women, which begin but certainly do not end with an intertribal alliance marriage. The work of peace far exceeds a marital exchange, and my usage of "peaceweaver" speaks specifically to those who *did* engage in peacemaking activities, or were positioned to do so (in cases where the evidence is scarce or ambiguous, as is so often true in Old English poetry).

This chapter explores constructions of aristocratic femininity by juxtaposing the roles of peaceweaver and mourner and the cultural forces of war and peace. The first section argues that peaceweaving was, at heart, a political position primarily based on noble or royal status. In other words, peaceweaving was a feminine-coded political role rather than a politically-coded female role. Peaceweaving was most often performed by royal women and thus the role (as well as the concept of peace in general) became associated with femininity, but neither peace nor peacemaking were inherently gendered concepts. The fact that peacemaking activities were often the purview of high-status individuals like queens shows that peace carried significant cultural value – at least in theory. However, in a culture that valorizes war, peace seems almost bound to fail. In literary contexts, the peaceweaver is already a mourner – another recognizable literary role – because the possibility of a lasting peace and cessation of violence have already been precluded.[62] Peaceweaver and mourner are not two separate roles but rather two sides of the

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[61] Megan Cavell, "Formulaic *Friþuwebban*: Reexamining Peace-Weaving in the Light of Old English Poetics." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 114, no. 3 (2015): 355-72; John M. Sklute, "'Freoðuwebbe' in Old English Poetry" (*Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 71, no. 4 (1970): 534-41.

[62] Joyce Hill argues that the *geomuru ides*, the mourning woman or "woman-as-victim," is "the dominant female stereotype in Old English heroic poetry"; see Hill, "Þæt wæs geomuru ides! A Female Stereotype Examined," in

same paradoxical coin: positioned at the heart of alliances that will inevitably be broken, this dual figure has the most to lose and only limited power to alter the course of events. The duality of peaceweaving and mourning demonstrates the ways that royal women experienced social privilege and gender marginalization at the same time: the power afforded by their high status was also constrained by patriarchal social structures.

The peaceweaver-mourner makes visible the high cost of war and, in so doing, questions the necessity of such endless and unavoidable violence. The second section outlines the demands of militant heroic masculinity and the ways that aristocratic femininity's position both within and outside the dominant social order of the heroic world enabled the peaceweaver-mourner to critique masculinity's excessive violence. On the surface, the needs of national security seem an obvious motivation for war: in the face of neighbors who are always potentially hostile, a nation must be ready and willing to fight to protect its people. However, the purported goals of intertribal violence in *Beowulf* and other literary sources exceed these reasonable explanations. As the *scop*'s retelling of the Fight at Finnsburg illustrates, the call to arms may arise from slighted honor and the boiling-over of old resentments never fully put to rest. Rather than national security being the primary aim of such incidents, the demands of aristocratic masculinity drive warriors and armies to battle, even in the face of hard-won alliances. Heroic masculinity, as defined by these literary sources, relies upon the willingness and ability to commit violence, even when those violent impulses conflict with other values within the heroic ethos. In addition to loss of life, the casualties of renewed violence sometimes include other aspects of the heroic honor

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New Readings on Women in Old English Literature, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Indiana University Press, 1990), 242.

code like oath-making: better to break your oaths of peace than fail to avenge your fallen comrades and forefathers.

Due to heroic masculinity's reliance upon violence for its expression and affirmation, femininity becomes linked to peacemaking. Moreover, based on the strength of the connection between secular aristocratic masculinity and war, the link between aristocratic femininity and peace is made to seem innate as the perceived masculine/feminine binary becomes conflated with the dichotomy of war and peace. Furthermore, the duality of the peaceweaver-mourner figure highlights the consequences of violence's cultural primacy. The mourner brings social visibility to the costs of continued and unrelenting warfare, implicitly criticizing the level of violence that masculinity demands and thereby revealing the gendered motivations which underlie those violent impulses. Thus it is from this stance as outsider and witness, "involved observers rather than direct participants" in this gendered violence, that the peaceweaver-mourner's perspective enables a critique of secular aristocratic masculinity.[63]

Despite this grim portrait, a hope for the future remains, albeit implicitly. The third and final section argues that within the diplomatic activities of royal peaceweavers, we can glimpse possibilities for a world in which peace might prevail and violence lessen. For the author and audiences of *Beowulf,* for example, who look back on a narrative set in the mythic past, their present moment arrived through the influence of Christianity, which offered alternative models of masculinity and reoriented which masculinities would take cultural precedence. Within the world of the poem, however, an alternative future arises from the perspective of the peaceweavers, who work against the current of heroic masculinity's impetus toward violence. These hopes are not borne out for many of our literary peaceweavers, but the potentiality they

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[63] Klein, *Ruling Women*, 10.

envision still persists. And while these are quiet hopes, expressed implicitly and often precluded by the narrative, they are more radical than they first appear: given heroic secular masculinity's reliance upon violence, to imagine a world in which peace succeeds requires imagining a world in which masculinity defines itself through other means, breaking (or at least revaluating) the connection between masculinity and violence. Such a vision revises the cultural value of war and peace, and consequently the ways that femininity and masculinity are constructed in relation to those values. This analysis uses modern theories of queer and transgender temporality as methodological models to explore normative and nonnormative experiences of time, and how dominant and alternative temporalities produce different futurities. The peaceweaver-mourner's alternative reimagining, glimpsed *in potentia*, expresses a genderqueer form of futurity, arising as it does from a critique of gendered power structures and a call for a transformation of secular aristocratic masculinity.

The Politics of Peaceweaving

The role of peaceweaver, while no more codified than queenship, nevertheless offered significant power and demonstrated how royal women might exercise that authority in the context of the court or the mead hall. Although spaces like the mead hall have often been interpreted as wholly homosocial in contrast to the heterosexual domestic sphere, women occupied a crucial place in spaces of rulership.[64] Beyond simply a passive presence at the king's

[64] Chapter 2 will expand on the contrasts between the homosocial and heterosexual, or perhaps more accurately hetero*social*, spheres of early English culture. Traditionally, the "hall vs. hearth" dynamic has juxtaposed a male homosocial space with a domestic heterosexual space, rather than characterizing it as a heterosocial space more in parallel with the homosociality of the mead hall. However, I will argue that focusing on heterosociality over heterosexuality in regard to Old English texts is the more accurate alternative.

side, a symbol for a political alliance, a queen could shape the actions of the men in the hall and was entirely imbricated in the sociopolitical relationships of national governance. Queens were active participants in shaping and maintaining the bonds upon which elite social structure relied. Within this schema of lords and retainers, the queen had a seat at the table: such women were not excluded from the locus of national rule, but played an integral part in its operations, including the diplomatic tasks that a peaceweaver might undertake.

As Wealhtheow is perhaps the most detailed depiction of a peaceweaver in the Old English corpus, many analyses of the peaceweaving role take her as their primary example. However, as Peter S. Baker has wisely cautioned, it is unwise and inaccurate to generalize from a single text in order to make broad generalizations about an entire culture.[65] One element of the overgeneralization of the "peaceweaver" concept in modern scholarship is the conflation of queen, exogamous bride, and peacemaker: there is an assumption that queens (and women in general) are emblems of peace, and that a woman married across nations must be a symbol of peace, regardless of whether the terms of the exchange or the bride's actions in her new home support that supposition or not.[66] Since some famous figures like Wealhtheow appear to represent all of these categories, scholarship has seemed content to collapse them into one identity, the "peaceweaver." In contrast, I wish to differentiate these roles, and this chapter will focus on peacemaking and its relation to aristocratic secular femininity, rather than assuming that

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[65] Baker, *Honour, Exchange, and Violence* (D.S. Brewer, 2013), 103ff.

[66] Baker elaborates on this idea in his chapter on the queens of *Beowulf*, by redefining peacemaking as one political option alongside other available routes, including warfare and other forms of subjugation. He argues that some intertribal marriages established a hierarchical relationship between parties through a gift economy, possibly creating tension rather than fostering genuine peace; furthermore, royal women could and did participate in violence in addition to peacemaking. "The queen wielded power, and for any early medieval ruler, male or female, using and maintaining power could mean shedding blood. Performing work like that of the violence she was able to deploy, her trove of honour and treasure gave her a peaceful way of binding the warriors of the mead hall to herself and inducing them to do as she bade them"; Baker, *Honour, Exchange, and Violence*, 155.

peace and femininity are intrinsically linked. My use of the term "peaceweaver," while broad in its inclusivity of various peacemaking activities, intends to speak only to one of these three elements: the peacemaker as a political figure and diplomat. For my purposes, the term encompasses queens and women exchanged in intertribal marriage only to the extent that such figures participate in peacemaking.

Though Wealhtheow's detailed description provides considerable space to examine the peaceweaver role, her singular example cannot be wholly representative: one example alone is insufficient to substantiate a cultural trend, and no individual (fictional or otherwise) perfectly epitomizes an archetype without idiosyncrasies, variations, and exceptions. Likewise, *Beowulf* alone is by no means the comprehensive encapsulation of early English culture: it is a singular text in a particular genre, invested in portraying certain aspects of life and disinterested in others. The examples that *Beowulf* offers, while significant, must be considered in relation to its cultural contexts. Yet as one of the more extensive fictional portraits of secular aristocratic life, the poem gives us insight into the cultural imaginary – not life as it was, but life as it was envisioned to have been. Using the poem as a "point of departure for social analysis" allows us to interrogate early English attitudes toward individuals and larger social structures as they were imagined (or idealized) to exist.[67] As Clare A. Lees explains, while we must consider the ways in which the poem provides only partial answers to our questions about early English culture, "*Beowulf* as a poem is, nevertheless, part of this culture's social formation."[68] In similar fashion, Joyce Hill

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[67] Enright, *Lady with a Mead-Cup*, 2. Numerous scholars have used *Beowulf* as a representative example to speak about particular aspects of early English culture more broadly: see Chance, *Woman as Hero*; Olsen, "Gender Roles"; Hill, "Þæt wæs geomuru ides." Also see John D. Niles, introduction to *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (University Nebraska Press, 1997) and *Homo Narrans* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Gillian R. Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in* Beowulf (Southern Illinois University Press, 1990); and Helen Damico, Beowulf*'s Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

[68] Clare A. Lees, "Men and *Beowulf*," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 141.

argues that, "despite the stylization of their presentation," the women of Old English poems like *Beowulf* and *Widsith* "have a recognizable reality which, like the recognizable reality of the material objects of heroic poetry, establishes a relationship between the temporally imprecise world of legend and the world of the Anglo-Saxon audience."[69] Given *Beowulf*'s importance within the Old English literary corpus, it can provide useful evidence of broader cultural attitudes when considered not as the definitive answer to our critical questions but as a significant voice amid other witnesses. This chapter places *Beowulf* at the center of its analysis while contextualizing the poem within its larger cultural milieu through examination of additional literary examples. Gnomic poetry like the *Maxims* and *Precepts* give insight into the ways contemporary audiences understood the world worked, or ought to work; battle poetry like *The Battle of Maldon* frames the heroic warrior ethos also evident in *Beowulf*, and helps triangulate the dominant form of masculinity as a secular, aristocratic model built around violence, in contrast to models of femininity as well as alternative models of masculinity (as illustrated in Ælfric's *Life* of Saint Edmund). By reading across genres, we can understand the peaceweavers of *Beowulf* as both representative and idiosyncratic, as participating in larger cultural themes while also existing as unique figures in the poetic record.

Jane Chance outlines the conventional image of the peacemaking queen in *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*. The queen would circulate the mead cup and grant treasure to warriors in the hall, cementing the bonds between lord and retainer, while maintaining an appropriate persona for her station: "in addition to being cheerful in dealing with others, she was also closed-mouthed, loving, loyal, and most of all wise."[70] Chance also argues that the queen's

[69] Hill, "Þæt wæs geomuru ides," 237.
[70] Chance, *Woman as Hero*, 1.

relation to her husband and to the retainers in the hall resembled the *comitatus* bonds among men, predicated on the giving of treasure which "reinforced that bond between king and queen analogous to that between king and retainers and between queen and retainers."[71]

Yet despite all the activity described here, Chance characterizes peaceweaving as a passive role. To the contrary, the diplomatic duties she attributes to peacemaking queens offered them an avenue for significant political agency, one in which they could expect to effect real change in the kingdom's political arena.[72] From an intersectional perspective, the royal status of peaceweavers like Wealhtheow mediated their gender marginalization: while the patriarchal structure of heroic society certainly constrained them, they simultaneously held considerable social privilege. Wealhtheow's management of Hrothgar's adoption offer to Beowulf illustrates a peaceweaver's active role in national governance. After Beowulf defeats Grendel, Wealhtheow attends the celebration, stepping in after Hrothgar's speech. She praises both Beowulf's deeds and Hrothgar's noble leadership, while also subtly reinforcing the appropriate hierarchy and roles within the hall and curbing Hrothgar's potentially overgenerous impulses.

Onfoh þissum fulle, freodrihten min,
sinces brytta. Þu on sælum wes,
goldwine gumena, ond to Geatum spræc
mildum wordum, swa sceal man don.
Beo wið Geatas glæd, geofena gemyndig,

[71] Chance, *Woman as Hero*, 6.
[72] This argument does not ignore the precarity of a queen's position and power, especially in real historical politics outside the pages of literature. For further discussion of the ways in which real queens' responsibilities and opportunities for agency succeeded and failed, see Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith*; "The King's Wife in Wessex 800-1066," *Past and Present* 91 (1981): 3-27; *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (University of Georgia Press, 1983); and "Powerful Women in the Early Middle Ages: Queens and Abbesses," in *The Medieval World*, ed. Peter Linehan, Janet L. Nelson, and Marios Costambeys (Routledge, 2018), 473-90.

nean ond feorran [þa] þu nu hafast.
Me man sægde þæt þu ðe for sunu wolde
hereri[n]c habban. Heorot is gefælsod,
beahsele beorhta; bruc þenden þu mote
manigra medo, ond þinum magum læf
folc ond rice þonne ðu forð scyle,
metodsceaft seon. Ic minne can
glædne Hroþulf, þæt he þa geogoðe wile
arum healdan gyf þu ær þonne he,
wine Scildinga, worold oflætest;
wene ic þæt he mid gode gyldan wille
uncran eaferan gif he þæt eal gemon,
hwæt wit to willan ond to worðmyndum
umborwesendum ær arna gefremedon.

Take this cup, my noble courteous lord,
giver of treasure! Be truly joyful,
gold-friend of men, and speak to the Geats
in mild words, as a man should do!
Be gracious to the Geats, mindful of the gifts
which you now have from near and far.
I have been told that you would take this warrior
for your son. Heorot is cleansed,
the bright ring-hall – use your many rewards

while you can, and leave to your kinsmen
the folk and kingdom, when you must go forth
to face the Maker's decree. I know that my own
dear gracious Hrothulf will hold in honors
these youths, if you should give up the world
before him, friend of the Scyldings;
I expect that he would wish to repay
both our sons kindly, if he recalls all
the pleasures and honors that we have shown him,
in our kindness, since he was a child.[73]

In the first portion of this passage, Wealhtheow sets out the expectations of a lord in the hall, enumerating each appropriate action and playing her own complementary part. After an encouraging start, she then moves to address Hrothgar's offer. Her reasons for redirecting the terms of the relationship between Hrothgar and Beowulf center on the communal good. Where the opening lines subtly reiterate the lord's duties to his retainers and theirs toward him by narrating the rituals of passing the mead cup and distributing treasure, her next advice explicitly recalls Hrothgar to his responsibilities as ruler: it is in the best interest of "the folk and the kingdom" ("folc ond rice") for the succession to remain with Hrothulf and their sons. Her admonition implies that Hrothgar's offer may have been made in acknowledgement of Beowulf's personal excellence, an individual's wish rather than a king's decision.

[73] *Beowulf*, ll. 1169-87. Old English text from *Klaeber's Beowulf* (ed. R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4th ed., University of Toronto Press, 2008); trans. R.M. Liuzza (Broadview, 2013).

As king, it is Hrothgar's duty to reward Beowulf with lavish treasure befitting the great service he has done for the Danes. As a guest in the hall, Beowulf occupies the place of retainer, performing deeds in service of his lord (even a temporary one) and receiving gifts in return. Wealhtheow encourages appropriate treasure-giving: she instructs Hrothgar, "Be gracious to the Geats, mindful of the gifts / which you now have from near and far," and "use your many rewards / while you can." This acknowledges Hrothgar's role and supports his generosity, within reason. However, she implicitly contrasts suitable treasure-giving with the adoption offer: while Hrothgar should use his "many rewards" to bestow honor and wealth on the Geats, he should keep the "folk and kingdom" to bestow on his kinsmen. This draws a line between what rewards are fitting gifts for a king to give (material treasure) and which are not (the throne). The gifts offered should be generous and commensurate with the magnitude of Beowulf's actions; within that commission, giving treasure is appropriate and falls within the lord's purview; giving away the kingdom, Wealhtheow cautions, is not a wise or appropriate choice.

Wealhtheow's actions in this speech are multivalent and serve several purposes. As a queen, she is a high-status member of the social structure; ensuring her heirs inherit the Danish throne protects her own dynastic interests and secures her continued power. Furthermore, it is perfectly understandable for a mother (regardless of status) to look out for her children's best interests. In addition to these two aspects of her identity, Wealhtheow also serves as a diplomat and peaceweaver: she considers the nation and its people alongside personal and familial concerns. Hrothgar adopting Beowulf as his heir would certainly harm her children's prospects, but it might also jeopardize the existing Danish-Geatish alliance and spark a succession crisis. Her admonition to Hrothulf in this passage also functions in these multiple registers: by one measure, she protects her children's inheritance from the potential avarice of their cousin; by

another measure, ensuring the smooth transition of rulership prevents future violence for their nation.[74] Her speech reminds all parties present that many lives across tribes are at stake should existing alliances fail or new hostilities arise. Maintaining goodwill with the Geats includes rewarding Beowulf for his remarkable deeds, which Wealhtheow encourages; appointing an outsider to inherit the kingdom with three Danish heirs in the room creates entanglements that invite trouble on an international scale. Wealhtheow's positions as queen and mother do not prevent her from acting as a diplomat: her speech takes intertribal political concerns into account in addition to her personal and familial interests.

Helen Conrad-O'Briain contends that Wealhtheow's speeches presume a belief that "her audience will cede power to her because of the wisdom of her words." Moreover, the narrative context reinforces this agency: "her interventions are, as they occur, neither rejected outright, nor are they without effect. The poet develops her as such a woman who can and will do what she believes is right and necessary, [and] whose sense of what is right or necessary is large-minded."[75] As this reading shows, queens and royal peaceweavers not only had the power to create change, but exercising that power was perceived as entirely appropriate and perhaps even expected within the spaces of rulership. Other literary examples illustrate that Wealhtheow is not alone. Hygd, queen of the Geats in *Beowulf*, is described far more briefly than Wealhtheow, but some similar characteristics emerge in the scant details: despite her young age and relative

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[74] Building on details from Norse sagas and other historical sources, many scholars have concluded that Hrothulf later kills his elder cousin Hrethric and usurps the Danish throne. In this interpretation, the references to Hrothulf in *Beowulf* are dramatic foreshadowing of the Danes' future hardships; this passage, for example, is often read as a tragic irony, in which Wealhtheow's admonitions to Hrothulf to care for her sons anticipates his later kinslaying. Other scholars have questioned this interpretation, instead arguing that the poem's allusions to future treachery are ambiguous at best; see Marijane Osborn, "The Alleged Murder of Hrethric in *Beowulf*," *Traditio*, vol. 74 (2019): 153-77.

[75] Helen Conrad-O'Briain, "Listen to the Woman: Reading Wealhtheow as Stateswoman," in *New Readings on Women and Early Medieval English Literature and Culture*, ed. Helene Scheck and Christine E. Kozikowski (Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 193, 198.

inexperience at the beginning of the poem, she is "yet not poor for that, / nor stingy of gifts to the Geatish people."[76] Upon the death of her husband Hygelac later in the poem, the narrator attributes the succession decision to Hygd as well:

> Þær him Hygd gebead hord ond rice,
> beagas ond bregostol; bearne ne truwode,
> þæt he wið ælfylcum eþelstolas
> healdan cuðe, ða wæs Hygelac dead.
>
> Hygd offered him [Beowulf] the hoard and kingdom,
> rings and royal throne; she did not trust
> that her son could hold the ancestral seat
> against foreign hosts, now that Hygelac was dead.[77]

Though she does not adopt rulership herself, the fact that it is the widowed queen who makes such a momentous decision (or at least is credited with doing so in the poem) demonstrates Hygd's status as regent within the sociopolitical landscape of the Geatish court and that the exercise of such power rightfully fell within her purview. Outside of *Beowulf*, other literary sources concur: the titular husband of *The Husband's Message* wishes his wife to return to his side explicitly so they might rule together. As the messenger-speaker of the poem relates to her, the husband's greatest desire is that they should be reunited and "together may afterward / to warriors and companions [distribute treasure], / the studded bracelets" ("secgum ond gesiþum s[inc brytnian] / næglede beagas").[78] This example blends the personal and the political: the

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[76] *Beowulf*, ll. 1929-30.
[77] *Beowulf*, ll. 2369-72.
[78] *The Husband's Message*, ll. 34-35a. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University, 1936); trans. Robert E. Bjork (in *Old English Shorter Poems, Volume II: Wisdom and Lyric*, Harvard

yearning husband articulates his desire for his wife's return not only as a personal fulfillment, but also by appealing to the roles they both play within the community, the duties they hold toward their people. Marital happiness is intertwined with civic responsibility, and only by ruling justly together and appropriately performing those duties can his desires be fulfilled perfectly. Once again, it is not only permissible but proper for a queen to actively participate in governance.

The skills that made a royal woman an effective peaceweaver – diplomacy, mediation, the ability to provide wise counsel – did not fundamentally center around her identity as a woman, but rather her identity as a *states*woman. Sklute and Cavell have both argued in favor of a less gender-bound view of the peaceweaver figure. Sklute posits that *freoðuwebbe* (peaceweaver) is not limited only to a woman entering a political marriage, but can be defined more broadly as "a poetic metaphor referring to the person whose function it seems to be to perform openly the action of making peace by weaving to the best of her art a tapestry of friendship and amnesty…. If it reflects anything of the social system of the Anglo-Saxons, it is that of the diplomat."[79] Erin Sebo and Cassandra Schilling have further elaborated that the business of making peace may be carried out regardless of gender. Sebo and Schilling explain that "peace-weaving as a term refers to a practice – the active fostering of peace through diplomacy – and not to a category of women," and that peacemaker was a role "usually filled by aristocratic women in political marriages" but not one that was inherently a *female* role.[80] This understanding of peaceweaver as diplomat highlights two important factors missing from some scholarly considerations of peaceweavers in general and Wealhtheow in particular. First, a

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University Press, 2014, 114-17). I have supplied the most common restoration of this missing half-line according to Krapp and Dobbie.

[79] Sklute, "'Freoðuwebbe' in Old English Poetry," 540.

[80] Erin Sebo and Cassandra Schilling, "Modthryth and the Problem of Peace-Weavers: Women and Political Power in Early Medieval England," *English Studies* 102, no. 6 (2021): 638.

peaceweaver is by no means a passive figure, but an active agent within the landscape of the court or mead hall. Second, perceptions of gender are inextricably interwoven with and shaped by other intersecting factors like social status; gender may even be a secondary concern. As Klein argues, "Anglo-Saxon writers' insistence on situating royal women in the midst of cultural debates over non-gender-specific issues speaks to these writers' belief that gender, however central to identity, was not the only, or even the major, force that made people the way they were."[81]

Gnomic and wisdom literature offers some insights into these intersections. Many scholars have cited the *Maxims* as evidence for standards of lady-like behavior, standards that encapsulate gender roles for women in general and for queens and peacemakers in particular. As Chance explains, "the *ides* manifested personal qualities characteristic of the peacemaker: in addition to being cheerful in dealing with others, she was also close-mouthed, loving, loyal, and most of all wise."[82] Gnomic texts articulate how the world operates, or perhaps how it should operate, and are therefore invaluable to understanding cultural abstractions such as gender expectations. However, comparing the tenets of gnomic texts with depictions of literary and historical characters reveals several disjunctions, suggesting that we need to reevaluate to what extent these tenets define standards for appropriate gender performance; or rather, we need to reconsider the ways in which modern assumptions about gender may have colored earlier scholarship to better interpret how the principles expressed in these texts represent medieval notions of gender.

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[81] Klein, *Ruling Women*, 230.
[82] Chance, *Woman as Hero*, 1.

The first disjunction arises from contradictory impressions of a peacemaker's responsibilities. While we might not reasonably expect consistent principles throughout these texts, the contradictions here seem glaring. For example, Chance argues that a queen can remain "close-mouthed" even while giving wise counsel by offering advice in private. However, Wealhtheow – who is often held up as the quintessential representation of a peaceweaver – does precisely the opposite. Unless we assume that Wealhtheow is unusual in this matter, remaining close-mouthed and only offering counsel in private cannot be the standard. In fact, many of the archetypes commonly associated with aristocratic women in Old English texts revolve around speaking, including public speech, which suggests that remaining quiet in public settings is not a holistic marker of femininity. Alexandra Hennessey Olsen identifies five such roles: hostess, peaceweaver, ritual mourner, counselor, and goader.[83] Wealhtheow falls into three of these categories (hostess, peaceweaver, and counselor), and her direct speech in the poem functions in all of these registers as well. She does not silently pass the cup, for example, but narrates her own actions, drawing attention to the observance of appropriate custom. The roles of mourner and goader also involve speech, and both of these roles lend themselves to public performance, not exclusively operating behind closed doors.[84] Thus we must reevaluate how we interpret the description of the *ides* in *Maxims I*: if not "close-mouthed," what might she be? Robert E. Bjork

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[83] Olsen, "Gender Roles," 314.

[84] On the roles of mourner and goader: the mourner serves a memorial function in Old English literature and culture, in which fame constitutes immortality; public mourning, often portrayed as largely a woman's role, is the first step of this postmortem fame. While the traditional view maintains that the mourner is a passive and victimized role, Helen Bennett argues that the public function of mourning positions this role within the heroic ethos; see Bennett, "The Female Mourner at Beowulf's Funeral: Filling in the Blanks / Hearing the Spaces," *Exemplaria* 4, no. 1 (1992): 35-50. The goader or whetting woman is more often seen in Old Norse sagas, in which women incite their male kinsmen to make war or take revenge, challenging their masculinity by implying that their current inaction represents a failure to uphold the masculine imperative of vengeance; see Carol Clover, "Hildigunnr's Lament," in *The Cold Counsel: The Women in Old Norse Literature and Myth*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (Routledge, 2002), 15-54.

translates this half-line, "rune healdan," as "[to] hold secrets," which raises very different connotations than "close-mouthed."[85] This translation suggests that some things ought to be kept secret, without implying that all female speech belongs outside of public spaces. The speech of a peaceweaver, hostess, or counselor serves social and civics functions and therefore has a place in public spaces.

A second disjunction concerns the assignment of certain traits to women, primarily or exclusively: such analysis presumes that gender is the predominant vector of social difference in these texts. The impulse to consider such passages in *Maxims* and elsewhere is understandable insofar as it speaks to their rarity: since we have relatively few passages in any literary context that portray women and these few are therefore very valuable in drawing conclusions about gender, it may be tempting to assume that such mentions primarily articulate differing gender roles, assumptions, and expectations. However, as Klein explains, texts often depict women even while discussing far more than simply gender, and sometimes gender is not even the predominant factor.

This trend can be observed by expanding our reading of the aforementioned *Maxims* passages and by comparing them to other gnomic texts where advice or prescriptions are offered for men as well. In the *Maxims I* excerpt, it is worth noting that the woman being described is a queen, a sociopolitical identity that is central to this depiction. While a king "must buy a queen with goods," the next lines also assert that "both must first / be good at giving gifts."[86] Thus, kings and queens have different roles in courtship but share (some) duties as rulers. The passage

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[85] *Maxims I*, l. 86. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1936); trans. Robert E. Bjork (in *Old English Shorter Poems, Volume II: Wisdom and Lyric*, Harvard University Press, 2014, 64-81).
[86] *Maxims I*, ll. 80-82

continues to describe both differences and similarities: where a man must wage war, a woman has numerous responsibilities (maintain a lighthearted mien, distribute treasure, circulate the mead cup appropriately, etc.).

Guð sceal in eorle,
wig geweaxan, ond wif geþeon
leof mid hyre leodum, leohtmod wesan,
rune healdan, rumheort beon
mearum ond maþmum, meodorædenne
for gesiðmægen symle æghwær
eodor æþelinga ærest gegretan,
forman fulle to frean hond
ricene geræcan, ond him ræd witan
boldagendum bæm ætsomne.

Battle, war must grow
in a man, and a woman must thrive,
dear among her people, be lighthearted,
hold secrets, be open hearted
with horses and with treasures; always, everywhere
in dealing out mead before the band of warriors
she must greet first the chief of the nobles,
instantly offer the first cup
to her lord's hand, and know what is good sense for them

both as holders together of the homestead.[87]

The passage concludes its recitation of these roles by speaking of the queen as counselor, and she must be able to speak for both rulers. Beyond the advising described here, these lines also articulate that the two operate together in order to hold the homestead, demonstrating that there is a shared duty between them. Despite the use of *wif*, a word of ambiguous social status, other more specific terms like *cyning*, *cwene*, and *eorl* make clear that the poet refers to people of status, those who would be responsible for ruling a hall, managing retainers, and dispensing treasure. And within that context, the woman's role described here is a political one; while gender may in some cases differentiate between sociopolitical roles, like making war or passing the mead cup, all duties are performed in service of the larger nation and its people. In other words, it is not that a woman must be lighthearted simply because that is what women ought to do, what is appropriately feminine. Being lighthearted maintains internal civic relations within the atmosphere of the hall, allowing her to "thrive, / dear among her people" ("geþeon / leof mid hyre leodum").

A further example is illustrated by the *Precepts* of the Exeter Book. This poem, which narrates a father's advice to his son, also describes the traits a person should possess and the actions they should perform. Once again, some of the instructions seem tailored to a son (that is, a masculine individual), while some seem gender-neutral, and others even carry feminine resonances. Attributes that are praised in a queen or peaceweaver are likewise valued in a young man, according to this poem: "A sensible man, cautious in speech, must / ponder in heart, never

[87] *Maxims I*, ll. 83-92.

be loud with noise" ("Wærwyrde sceal wisfæst hæle / breostum hycgan, nales breahtme hlud").[88] Being sensible and cautious, and measuring one's speech, is clearly good advice for more than young men alone. A crucial part of diplomacy is weighing when to speak and when to remain silent, and this is especially pertinent to the advisory responsibilities often attributed to queens. Other traits commonly associated with femininity – moderation, wisdom, prudence – are encouraged for the *Precepts*' young addressee, in similar terms to the prescriptions for the *wif* in *Maxims I*.

> Hæle sceal wisfæst
> ond gemetlice, modes snottor,
> gleaw in gehygdum, georn wisdomes,
> swa he wið ælda mæg eades hleotan.
>
> A man must be sensible
> and moderate, wise of mind,
> prudent in thoughts, eager for wisdom,
> so he can obtain happiness among people.[89]

The similarities in advice cross gender and status boundaries, suggesting that these traits may carry fewer gendered connotations than previously assumed. A good queen should embody these characteristics, but those characteristics are not only admirable in a queen, or even a person (man or woman) of lesser status.

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[88] *Precepts*, ll. 58-59. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1936); trans. Robert E. Bjork (in *Old English Shorter Poems, Volume II: Wisdom and Lyric*, Harvard University Press, 2014, 20-27).
[89] *Precepts*, ll. 86b-89.

Beyond similarities alone, the final line of the passage above further highlights a critical distinction between the *wif* of *Maxims I* and the son of the *Precepts*: he is an everyman, a youth receiving a general citizen's advice, whereas she has responsibilities greater than her own conduct. The father wishes his son to "obtain happiness among people," a hope focused upon the youth as an individual. In contrast, the prescriptions for the *wif* also dictate that she will (or ought to) thrive amongst her people, with the connotation that she must carry out her duties in order for herself *and her people* to thrive: her actions have far-reaching consequences beyond her individual happiness. These are the actions of a ruler and politician, not simply a person gendered female. As these traits are laudable in women and men, in people of lesser and greater social status, they must serve as more than a simple definition of conventional femininity.

We may draw similar conclusions regarding the "peaceweaver" role. While queenship is the role most often associated with peaceweaving, queens are not the only peacemaking figures. The angelic messenger of *Elene* illustrates this fluidity. While sleeping, Constantine receives a vision of an angel:

> He wæs sona gearu
> þurh þæs halgan hæs, hreðerlocan onspeon,
> up locade, swa him se ar abead,
> fæle friðowebba.
>
> He was immediately prepared
> from the command of the holy one – he opened his breast –
> and looked up as the messenger, the true peace-weaver,

had bid him.[90]

The angel in *Elene* can serve as a peaceweaver because he offers Constantine a covenant (*wære*) from God, creating a pact that forges a relationship between the earthly and the divine. He commands Constantine "Do not dread" ("Ne ondræd þu ðe") and "Look to the heavens…where you will find help, a symbol of victory" ("Þu to heofenum beseoh… / þær ðu wraðe findest, / sigores tacen").[91] In fulfillment of this covenant, Constantine wakes and immediately orders a sign of the cross be made in the image of his vision and borne into battle. Beyond simply narrating the signs of God's favor toward Constantine, this passage emphasizes the terms of the covenant offered by the angel and the means by which Constantine fulfills those terms, cementing his allegiance to God.

According to Cavell, the lexical formulae in this passage "impl[y] that the angel…may be designated a *friþuwebba* in order to emphasize a poetic association: that is, the link between textile imagery, locking, binding, the chest/knowledge, and treasure." In this sense, the metaphorical "weaving" represents an agreement between two parties, and oath-making becomes the instrument of that agreement. Cavell elaborates that the adjective *fæle*, often linked with religious figures, may indicate how peaceweaving imagery can be used to represent oath-making. She suggests that "peace is the key function for all people of status and morality who enter into such compacts."[92] In practice, the "people of status" who most often fulfilled this peacemaking role were royal women, and exogamous marriage constituted one model that those agreements might take. Yet as this example demonstrates, early English thought could entertain other forms

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[90] *Elene*, ll. 85b-88a. Old English text from ASPR vol. II (ed. Krapp, Columbia University Press, 1932); trans. Robert E. Bjork (in *The Old English Poems of Cynewulf*, Harvard University Press, 2013, 142-263).
[91] *Elene*, 81b-85a.
[92] Cavell, "Formulaic *Friðuwebban*," 367-68.

of peacemaking. By aligning peaceweaving primarily with status rather than gender, we reorient our perspective: this role is accessible but not limited to women, and therefore not inherently or exclusively a feminine role. As Cavell notes, "[s]ince the diplomatic role is one that is available to women in Old English poetry, it makes sense for us to find some of them described as *friþuwebban*."[93] The diversity of models shows that peacemaking may be taken on by the appropriate diplomatic intercessor regardless of gender.[94]

As a diplomat, a royal peaceweaver's success relied upon their political savvy and ability to create and maintain the interpersonal connections that enabled the (seemingly) homosocial framework of the hall to function. In the political sphere, a royal figure's interpersonal relationships were inherently also political affiliations, and these relationships both constitute and symbolize the social structures that make up the nation: "in an age where individuals and families embodied the institutions of state in a more than a figurative sense," peacemaking and diplomacy is "a political discourse performed within a vocabulary based on the familial."[95] Just as kings were also warriors and fathers, queens were mothers and were often peacemakers as well. Alongside the dynastic self-interest of a queen and the protective instincts of a mother, a royal peaceweaver must also consider the needs of the nation and its people. By reinforcing these bonds between individuals within the hall, the peaceweaver reminds all those present of the civic weight of their interpersonal relationships, underscoring the social role each person is to play so that the political value of those relationships can be realized in support of communal wellbeing.

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[93] Cavell, "Formulaic *Friðuwebban*," 368.
[94] Hrothgar's offer to adopt Beowulf also constitutes an act of peacemaking: both men would enter into a familial compact, resulting in a more formal alliance between their peoples.
[95] Conrad-O'Briain, "Listen to the Woman," 202; see also Hill, "Þæt wæs geomuru ides," 236.

Mourning and Masculinity

Acknowledging that the role of peaceweaver is not an inherently gendered position is not to deny, however, that war and peace carried gendered connotations in early medieval England. In fact, masculinity was closely tied to militancy, specifically the bearing of weapons: the term *wæpenmann* and its relatives (*wæpned*, *wæpnedcyn*, *wæpenlic*, etc.) used to denote maleness or masculinity make this association plain. Textual depictions often rely upon weapon- or war-related imagery to reinforce the masculinity of a character or their actions. Because of the deep ties between masculinity and militancy, social policing fell more heavily on war-making than peacemaking; a woman taking on a militant role was more likely to be perceived as transgressive, while a man could more easily take on a peacemaking role without automatically becoming less masculine.[96] Nevertheless, heroic (that is, secular aristocratic) masculinity was predicated on war-making where secular aristocratic femininity was associated with, but not dependent upon, peacemaking. Literature across the Old English corpus illustrates the ways in which willingness to commit violence could make – or break – one's gender: *The Battle of Maldon* showcases the demands of heroic masculinity, while Ælfric's *Life* of Saint Edmund recounts a king caught between two masculine models, the strong warrior-king and pious Christian ruler.

Despite the strength of the association between heroic masculinity and militancy, war-making – like peacemaking – was not an inherently gendered position. Just as the traits of an effective peacemaker arise from politically focused skills like diplomacy and mediation, so too

[96] Regarding the social perception of female violence as transgressive, religious women often prove an exception in Old English literature. Chapter 3 discusses the example of Judith in the Old English verse hagiography, but she is certainly not the only example. A future expansion of this project will include a more detailed discussion of gender and violence in early English culture.

the traits of a successful warrior depend more upon morality and right action (and a healthy dose of strength) than on the actor's fundamental masculinity. Thus, being a warrior was not wholly reliant upon being male or masculine, but being masculine (or being perceived as such in one's community) came to rely upon expressions of militancy. Battle poetry like *The Battle of Maldon* showcases the correlation: the repeated references to a warrior's ability to hold his weapon follow the tide of the battle, demonstrating English prowess and courage while also documenting the battle's turn against them. The early lines of the poem describe several characters: the young "kinsman of Offa" would remain strong and "would not weaken at battle, when he took up weapons" ("þa se cniht nolde / wacian æt þam wige, þa he to wæpnum feng")[97]; Eadric likewise "had a stout heart / as long as he might hold in his hands / board and broad sword" ("He hæfde god geþanc / þa hwile þe he mid handum healdan mihte / bord and bradswurd).[98] As the battle progresses, the English doggedly attempt to hold their position "as long as they might wield weapons" (repeated almost verbatim at lines 83, 235-36, and 272). And in the fateful moment when Byrhtnoth, the brave ealdorman of the English, falls, the line recurs with a poignant reversal: "The gold-hilted sword fell to the ground; / he could no longer hold the hardened blade, / or wield a weapon" ("Feoll þa to foldan fealohilte swurd; / ne mihte he gehealdan heardne mece, / wæpnes wealdan").[99] Beyond the obvious phallic connotations of sword imagery and the potential emasculation associated with being penetrated by an enemy's blade, the weapon references in *Maldon* make a series of links: holding a weapon symbolizes a warrior's loyalty to his lord and their shared cause, and those personal relationships and *comitatus* bonds form the

[97] *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 9-10. Old English text from ASPR vol. VI (ed. Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1942); trans. R.M. Liuzza (in *Old English Poetry*, Broadview, 2014, 243-55).
[98] *Maldon*, ll. 13b-15a.
[99] *Maldon*, ll. 166-68a.

backbone of male social structure in early English culture, even off the battlefield. The ability and willingness to wield weapons – unto death if necessary – constitutes a defining element of gender performance for aristocratic men in heroic culture.

Since the performance of this type of masculinity hinges upon war-making, the inverse seems innate and essential: because performing the warrior role served as an indicator (and perhaps the chief indicator) of aristocratic masculinity, that role seemed innately masculine. Despite this assumption, however, the two were not mutually inclusive: while a person could theoretically be a successful warrior without being male, as the biblical narrative of Judith suggests, one could not be a "successful" man (that is, deemed masculine or manly) according to the secular heroic ethos without participating in war-making. When war and violence become synonymous with masculinity, peace takes on feminine connotations, not only because women often play the role of peaceweaver but also through contrast with this militant masculinity. Just as reliance upon war for gender definition makes war seem inherently gendered, the strength of the connection between masculinity and war makes the association of peace with femininity seem innate, as though peace were already inherently feminine. The militancy-as-masculinity model imposes a gendered framework onto the political roles of both warrior and peacemaker; increasing the perception of peacemaking as a gendered role also delimits the diplomatic power afforded to female peaceweavers. The aristocratic male elite had a vested interest in maintaining its power, leading to far more anxiety about clearly delineating and policing expressions of masculinity than femininity.

This gender anxiety becomes visible in poems like *Maldon* which epitomize the heroic ethos, as well as in sources which negotiate between multiple models of masculinity. Ælfric's portrait of Saint Edmund, for example, depicts a king torn between the needs of his nation and

his duty as a Christian. When the Danish chieftain Ivar attacks and issues an ultimatum, Edmund confers with one of his bishops to determine how to act. The bishop advises him to submit to the invader and preserve his own life. Edmund responds, "the poor people of this land are shamefully mistreated, and now I would prefer to fall in battle, provided that my people were able to possess their land" ("to bysmore synd getawode / þas earman land-leoda, and me nu leofre wære / þæt ic on gefeohte feolle, wið þam þe min folc / moste heora eardes brucan").[100] On the surface, Edmund's words seem entirely appropriate for his status as king: his people are his primary concern, and he will protect them and their homes even unto his own death. He further reiterates that he does not wish to outlive his men: "It was never my custom to take flight, but I would rather die, if I must, for the sake of my own land" ("Næs me næfre gewunelic þæt ic worhte fleames, / ac ic wolde swiðor sweltan, gif ic þorfte, / for minum agenum earde").[101]

However, Edmund's sacrifice will not serve to protect his people as he envisions: without an intermediary or a treaty, his lands and the inhabitants will all fall prey to the Danish invaders. Instead, another motive becomes clear: Edmund refuses to submit to, or even to fight, a pagan king because either path would go against his Christian faith. To Ivar's messenger he declares:

> Witodlice þu wære wyrðe sleges nu,
> ac ic nelle afylan on þinum fulum blode
> mine clænan hande, forðan þe ic Criste folgie,
> þe us swa gebysnode; and ic bliðelice wille beon
> ofslagen þurh eow gif hit swa God foresceawað.

[100] Ælfric, "Saint Edmund," ll. 52-55; in *Old English Lives of Saints*, ed. Mary Clayton and Juliet Mullins, vol. 3 (Harvard University Press, 2019), 186-205.
[101] Ælfric, "Saint Edmund," ll. 66-68.

> You certainly deserve to be put to death now, but I refuse to corrupt my clean hands with your foul blood, because I follow Christ, who has set us this example, and I will gladly be killed by you if God so ordains it.[102]

As Ivar advances, Edmund throws away his weapons before being captured, tortured, and finally beheaded. In this scenario, faced with an enemy force he cannot hope to defeat, Edmund has three choices. First, if he submits as Ivar demands, he will live and presumably so will his people, whom he will rule over as a vassal-king (*undercyning*) to the Danes. Second, if he chooses to stand and fight, he will fulfill the secular warrior's role, holding his weapon until the last moment like the combatants of *Maldon;* however, his meagre forces will be overwhelmed quickly and he will likely die in combat, after which his people will be at the mercy of the Danes. Instead, he chooses the third option: to refuse to fight but still stand defiant, in which case he is killed, his remaining forces are possibly spared, and his people are once again under direct Danish control. These choices represent three different perspectives: the politician, the warrior-hero, and devout Christian martyr.[103] If the primary aim were to preserve the land and its people, then submitting to Danish over-rule while maintaining local authority would offer the most protection. Secular masculinity within the heroic ethos demands that he fight, even if it is a futile endeavor, to defend his cause. Christian values position Edmund as a servant to a higher power, in which case it is his duty to follow not the demands of secular kingship but instead the commandments of God, which instruct him not to fight for worldly gain and to turn his focus

[102] Ælfric, "Saint Edmund," ll. 73-77.
[103] While this chapter is primarily concerned with secular heroic masculinity, chapter 3 will further investigate alternative masculinities, including religious models.

toward heavenly rewards. As Edmund himself declares, his faith will endure "whether I die or live" ("swelte ic, lybbe ic").[104]

The conflicting value systems underlaying these choices demonstrate the ways in which secular and religious masculinities converge and diverge. If Edmund serves God like a thegn serves a lord, then his decision to throw aside arms is laudable, even if Edmund's pacifism falls outside of traditional standards of heroic behavior. Ruth Mazo Karras explains that in the late Middle Ages, clergy "lacked some of the aspects of masculinity available to men in other segments of society" yet they "not infrequently chose rather to imitate the aristocracy from whose ranks many of them came."[105] Dawn M. Hadley observes the same phenomenon in the pre-Conquest period, remarking that "even for monks who had abandoned the secular life and laid aside their weapons, the language of battle continued to be important to expressing their power and position within society."[106] Saint Edmund's *vita* illustrates this trend: while Christian values were not wholly commensurate or compatible with heroic culture, secular imagery informed the religious imagination and offered useful metaphors for alternative masculinities.[107] Thus while Edmund does not entirely conform to the standards of secular heroic masculinity, the alternative religious model shown here uses the heroic ethos metaphorically to reinforce and police other forms of masculinity.

Edmund's example also illustrates another conflict of values: the pursuit of masculinity, whether as a traditional warrior or as a spiritual devotee, focuses on the individual often to the

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[104] Ælfric, "Saint Edmund," ll. 70.
[105] Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 1.
[106] D.M. Hadley, "Masculinity," in *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies*, ed. Jacqueline Stodnick and Renée R. Trilling (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 130.
[107] There are numerous other examples of this trend in Old English literature, such as the warrior Christ in *Dream of the Rood*; see chapter 3 for further discussion of early English religious syncretism and the redefinition of masculinity within a Christian monastic framework.

detriment of the communal. In claiming that he "would prefer to fall in battle, provided that my people were able to possess their land," Edmund purports to make his choice according to what will be best for his people and homeland, but he refuses the pragmatic option most likely to achieve that aim. Capitulating to Danish invaders is certainly not a desirable outcome, but if national protection were truly the goal, it may have proved the most effective. Byrhtnoth in *The Battle of Maldon* faces a similar crossroads. As John D. Niles explains, the poem revolves around an implicit political question: "how should the English nation respond to the threat posed by an aggressive army of Vikings, by offering fight or tribute?"[108] The narrative of the poem presupposes one answer: Byrhtnoth and his men have been sent to face the Vikings in the belief that fighting will prove more honorable – and politically efficacious – than offering tribute. Yet this narrative presupposition in turn raises a specter of other choices:

> By presenting Byrhtnoth as scorning the path of accommodation, the poet is able to show what the alternative to payment was. By this means, the grievous English losses that ensue are presented as by no means an inevitable consequence of the Vikings' presence. Instead, they are the result of a policy decision…. One by one, Byrhtnoth and a group of his best retainers are cut down. In retrospect, such an unremitting sequence of losses, even if glorious ones, casts into doubt the practical wisdom of a purely hawkish response to the Viking threat."[109]

Heroic masculinity insists on inevitability in this circumstance: faced with an army they are unlikely to defeat without significant casualties, honor and duty require Byrhtnoth and his men to stand and fight regardless, come what may. Byrhtnoth owes fealty to his king and cause just as

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[108] Niles, "Maldon and Mythopoesis," in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. R.M. Liuzza (Yale University Press, 2002), 448.
[109] Niles, "Maldon and Mythopoesis," 455.

his own retainers should remain loyal to him (a lesson the poem delivers via positive and negative examples). While it is not Byrhtnoth's place to broker peace where his lord has ordered him to fight, Niles draws attention to the fact that an alternative did exist, even if that policy decision must occur at a higher level than the ealdorman himself. Amidst praise of English bravery, *Maldon* also suggests "the practical necessity of a policy of peacemaking that Æthelred pursued for many years, no matter how painful and repugnant this policy must at times have been."[110] The poem simultaneously valorizes heroic masculinity while also implicitly positing peace as a viable political alternative to violence, a perhaps less glorious but possibly more effective strategy for the nation and its people. And in doing so, *Maldon* highlights the potential conflicts between the good of the nation and the imperative for heroic masculinity to prove itself: the choice that would maintain the valor of Byrhtnoth and his warriors may have been self-destructive and ultimately dire on a national scale.

As these examples demonstrate, upholding honor and maintaining the standards of masculine identity often come into conflict with the communal aims of national security. War purportedly serves both purposes, but when such conflicts arise, the choice to pursue war despite its devastating consequences reveals that investing in heroic masculinity overshadows the concerns of state. The lack of balance suggests that violence becomes excessive when motivated primarily by gender anxiety to the neglect of community wellbeing. Peacemaking, political in its purview, cannot keep military violence in check when the motivations for war exceed political necessity. René Girard explains that recurrent patterns of violence may distort any original aims and violence itself becomes the goal, creating a self-perpetuating cycle. "Once caught in the cycle of violence, the initial impetus or object of desire which originally motivated the violence

[110] Niles, "Maldon and Mythopoesis," 460.

becomes a secondary consideration: It is no longer the intrinsic value of the object that inspires the struggle; rather, it is the violence itself that bestows value on the objects, which are only pretexts for a conflict."[111] If men in early medieval England waged war chiefly to protect the nation and its people, then peacemaking could have offered logical arguments and viable avenues to support these goals; however, if men waged war as a demonstration of masculinity, then peacemaking could not offer valid alternatives that meet the same needs. In this way, the desirability of war as an expression of masculinity blurs the lines between necessary and excessive violence.

Beowulf himself articulates the ways in which the imperative toward violence outweighs the communal concerns of peace. Much like Hildeburh's sorrowful example in the retelling of the Finnsburg episode, Beowulf predicts that the Danes' future will hold equal hardship, and the peaceweaver figure becomes the vehicle for capturing that loss. As Beowulf recounts his time in Heorot to Hygelac, he remarks upon the betrothal of Wealhtheow and Hrothgar's daughter Freawaru to Ingeld, prince of the Heathobards. Hrothgar has arranged this

> þæt he mid ðy wife wælfæhða dæl,
> sæcca gesette. Oft seldan hwær
> æfter leadhryre lytle hwile
> bongar bugeð, þeah seo bryd duge.
> that he might settle his share of feud and slaughter
> with this young woman. But seldom anywhere
> after the death of a prince does the deadly spear rest

[111] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 144.

for even a brief while, though the bride be good![112]

As an exogamous bride, Freawaru is also intended to serve as peaceweaver, her betrothal a gesture of good faith from Hrothgar that he will "settle his share" of the previous hostilities.[113] But the olive branch of marriage apparently does not suffice as restitution for the death of a prince, regardless of the bride herself. Beowulf instead narrates a hypothetical story of what their future may hold: the Heathobards, displeased to see Freawaru's Danish relatives bearing the ancestral arms seized from them in battle, will abide the insult no longer and begin the slaughter once again. In his tale, an older warrior incites the younger retainers to "awaken war" ("wigbealu weccean") until the Danish thegn is killed.

Þonne bioð abrocene on ba healfe
aðsweord eorla; syððan Ingelde
weallað wælniðas, ond him wiflufan
æfter cearwælmum colran weorðað.
Then on both sides the sworn oaths of earls
will be broken, once bitter violent hate
wells up in Ingeld, and his wife-love

[112] *Beowulf*, ll. 2028-31.

[113] Since this episode occurs in a prediction of the future and has not yet come to pass, we do not have any knowledge of Freawaru's own actions in her new home, nor her feelings toward the marriage or her betrothed. Thus we cannot conclude that she would have taken up the peacemaking activities which fall within my definition of "peaceweaver." However, Hrothgar's intention to "settle his share" of their feud suggests that peace is the end goal, and as the new lady of the Heathobards, Freawaru would be positioned (though not necessarily obligated) to take on the role of maintaining peace within her new nation and between nations. Furthermore, Beowulf's juxtaposition of Ingeld's "wife-love" and his "bitter violent hate" clearly aligns Freawaru with peace, not only via the marriage itself (a singular point in time) but also through Ingeld's feelings for his wife (the ongoing relationship between spouses, whatever the character of that relationship may be). This reference to their marriage as a continuing factor in the intertribal conflict illustrates that Freawaru would have some measure of influence over the politics of the hall. Therefore, I consider her a potential peaceweaver by virtue of her future position and the opportunities it would afford her within the hypothetical context Beowulf recounts.

grows cooler after his surging cares.[114]

Again Beowulf sets the marriage – intended as a gesture of peace and an investment in ongoing peaceful alliance – against the impulse toward violence: Ingeld's "wife-love" does not overcome the hatred he or his retainers hold for the Danes, and when peace offerings cannot hope to erase or assuage old enmity, peace itself is a lost cause and further violence is inevitable. Such long-lived and seemingly unending animosity constitutes what Girard terms reciprocal violence, a "vicious circle" of "vengeance and reprisals": "As long as a working capital of accumulated hatred and suspicion exists at the center of the community, it will continue to increase no matter what men do. Each person prepares himself for the probable aggression of his neighbors and interprets his neighbor's preparations as confirmation of the latter's aggressiveness." He elaborates that, despite seeming like an externally-focused force, cyclical violence poses its greatest threat internally.[115] The Heathobards' example demonstrates that peace necessitates a change in thinking; simply signing a treaty or entering a marriage will not resolve long-standing animosities. A genuine peacemaking effort would require Ingeld and his people to relinquish their desire for vengeance, a feat complicated by understandable emotional upheaval as well as the potential threat to heroic masculinity. Ingeld's betrothal speaks to some measure of pragmatic diplomacy: the Heathobards have at least considered nonviolent options, implicitly acknowledging that further warfare will be detrimental to their own people. However, Beowulf predicts that pragmatism and communal wellbeing will not ultimately outweigh vengeance, motivated as it is by gender anxiety. Such anxiety will restart the cycle of violence and may lead

[114] *Beowulf*, ll. 2063-66.
[115] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 53, 81.

to devastating losses of their own; though Beowulf acknowledges this possibility, he believes the Heathobards will still choose violence.

Just as Freawaru symbolizes peace, Beowulf uses the ancestral sword, a clearly gendered symbol, to signify the bad blood motivating further warfare. This blade, he says, was "once a Heathobard treasure / as long as they were able to wield their weapons" (Heaða-Beardna gestreon / þenden hie ðam wæpnum wealdan moston"), language highly reminiscent of *Maldon*'s repeated refrain.[116] The old warrior inciting his fellows emphasizes the sword's lineage alongside famous Heathobard heroes and the young thegn's own father, uniting the sword and the warfare it represents with the people who wielded it, both near and distant to those alive in the hall. This logic conflates the instrument of violence with the warriors themselves on both a personal level (the thegn's father) and a national level (via mention of Withergyld, presumably a famous ancestral figure). According to this reasoning, should the young thegn take the bait and instigate further violence, he would avenge personal wrongs as well as defend the honor of his people. Such conflation underscores the close ties between the performance of masculinity and violent action, and further illuminates the highly personal stakes a man may have in ensuring his performance of masculinity occurs in appropriately public venues.

Beowulf's narration presumes that intertribal violence is inherently cyclical, a violence fueled by the "working capital of accumulated hatred and suspicion," to use Girard's phrase. Yet his hypothetical tale also suggests that Freawaru's marriage is doomed in this particular circumstance due not to any failing on her part, but to an excessive and unchecked need for vengeance that, while honorable, does not serve a greater political aim. In fact, Beowulf heavily implies that further warfare will destroy all involved. The young retainer in the hypothetical tale

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[116] *Beowulf*, ll. 2037-38.

escapes the hall after killing the Danish thegn, but the implication persists that this is simply the next link in the chain of renewed violence. Men on both sides forsake their oaths, caring more for the satisfaction of personal wrongs than the strength of their word, much less a practical consideration of what is best for the kingdom. In contrast, Hrothgar is described as "the kingdom's shepherd" ("rices hyrde")[117] during the earlier betrothal negotiations because he sues for peace: he is willing to set aside his own presumed enmity for past grievances in order to forge a more tenable arrangement, and thus places the good of his people above any shortsighted vengeful impulse.

The grim prospects for Freawaru's marriage demonstrate the consequences of failed peace-making. When peacemaking founders, the figures at the center of these alliances suffer the most. Many scholars have noted that royal peaceweavers occupy an untenable position in which their ability to achieve their diplomatic purpose is already curtailed. For an exogamous queen in this position, the accord her marriage sought to build may fail due to cultural investment in gaining power through violence, and she and her children – with ties to kindred on both sides – have the most to lose. As Sebo and Schilling argue, such figures are "often charged to maintain peace by making those around them happy. Yet their own position as women married, sometimes to strangers, sometimes to an enemy of their family or people, is complex, conflicted and, presumably, often one of sadness."[118] In this way, peaceweaving and mourning are two sides of the same coin.[119] The correlation between making peace and mourning the casualties of war

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[117] *Beowulf*, l. 2027.
[118] Sebo and Schilling, "Modthryth and the Problem of Peace-Weavers," 639.
[119] Like the peaceweaver, the mourning woman is a recognizable archetype in Old English poetry – however, like peaceweaving, mourning is not simply another female role. While women often serve as public mourners in texts, we do see examples of men mourning their loved ones too, in ways that seem reminiscent of the lamentation that is often associated with femininity; see the description of the Hrethel's sorrow over the un-avengeable death of his son in *Beowulf*, ll. 2444-59. Grendel's mother is also a mourner: as she approaches Heorot, she "remembered her

highlights the paradox at the heart of secular aristocratic femininity: the same cultural forces which conferred upon these figures the responsibilities (or opportunities) of peacemaking also position them to mourn the consequences past and future violence, and to take on the visible, social performance of grief.

The perspective of the mourner is wholly imbricated within heroic culture, as its byproduct and as a part of its social structure: the violence at the heart of this culture produces mourning, and lamentation in turn becomes an element of the heroic lifecycle, as perhaps the first step toward immortality through memory.[120] Yet the familiarity of the mourner archetype in the Old English literary corpus does not denote acceptance of this cycle of violence; rather, it suggests a critique of a war-centric social structure. It demonstrates that no labor of peacemaking would or could succeed in curbing violence when the price of peace is the perceived sacrifice of heroic masculinity. Thus the marginalized perspective of the peaceweaver-mourner, often but not always feminine, enables a revaluation of dominant masculinity. Klein argues that female viewpoints in texts often provide such commentary: "Placing a woman in the middle of a text…is an effective strategy for upsetting an audience's expectations, forestalling their primary reactions and creating a space of cultural critique."[121] The peaceweaver-mourner's view undermines the assumption that this level of violence is necessary or inevitable. The visibility of grief and the empathy it stirs in audiences make plain the costs of war and provoke questions about the necessity and true motivation of such a degree of violent escalation.

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misery" ("yrmþe gemunde," 1259b), but she also turns her sorrow into the pursuit of vengeance, blending traditionally feminine and masculine responses to loss and grief.

[120] The theme of gaining a form of immortality through fame and cultural memory is illustrated in poems like *Widsith*, in which a *scop* recounts the names of royals and other famous figures he has met. Lees also argues that continuity and futurity for a king or leader functioned "through the memory of his actions and through his sons," linking personal fame to dynastic succession; see Lees, "Men and *Beowulf*," 144.

[121] Klein, *Ruling Women*, 9

This critique of self-destructive masculinity also functions in a temporal register, juxtaposing the consequences for the textual present with the imagined cultural future.[122] In the present moment of the text, the failures of a war-centric social model manifest in failed alliances, death and loss (especially of leaders and elite figures), and the lamentation these events occasion. The future resonances of these failures are visible in the deaths of children and heirs, or a lack thereof altogether, symbolizing how the impact of present losses will reverberate through successive generations. Yet the peaceweaver-mourner's critique of heroic masculinity also contains a seed of hope: amid the systemic failures to which these figures attest, we can glimpse the possibilities of a less violent future, one that builds peace upon a radical reassessment of heroic masculinity.

The Potentiality of Peace

The first and most obvious symbol of a culture's future is its children. In early medieval England, heirs were a crucial part of dynastic rule, and the queen's ability to bear children was a necessary and important element of her role. For an exogamous queen, children further cemented alliances and symbolized a future for the nation which she helped rule. Royal heirs embodied the ideal for which cross-cultural peace marriages were forged: the ideal that war and peace could coexist. Furthermore, the political aims of warfare (namely national security and prosperity) encompass both the present and the future: a culture invests in its future *for* its heirs and *through* its heirs. Yet if, or perhaps when, these alliances fail, children – like peaceweavers – stand at the

[122] Sarah McNamer makes a similar claim about later medieval depictions of the Virgin Mary: Marian laments for Christ's death "seem to protest even the most 'valiant' form of violence – that of self-sacrifice in the service of a worthy cause – as a destructive ruse." See McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 166-67.

epicenter of the conflict, and often fall casualty to rekindled hostilities. Hildeburh demonstrates this harsh reality: she mourns her son as well as her brother in the first wave of Danish-Frisian conflict.

> Het ða Hildeburh æt Hnæfes ade
> hire selfre sunu sweoloðe befæstan,
> banfatu bærnan, ond on bæl don
> eame on eaxle. Ides gnornode,
> geomrode giddum.
>
> Then Hildeburh commanded at Hnæf's pyre
> that her own son be consigned to the flames
> to be burnt, flesh and bone, placed on the pyre
> at his uncle's shoulder; the lady sang
> a sad lament.[123]

Even while the *scop*'s tale glorifies Hnæf's honorable death, the image of Hildeburh presiding over her son's funeral pyre makes plain how war takes its toll on a culture's children and its future. In this way, militancy-as-masculinity once again undermines its own purported aims: the very warfare intended to secure a future for the nation and its heirs instead extinguishes those children along with the prosperity meant for their birthright.

In the face of the seeming inevitability of war and violence, however, the peaceweaver-mourner imagines a different future. Where masculinity's excessive investment in violence as a measure of gender performance leads to cultural self-destruction, the peaceweaver's alternative perspective steps outside of this framework: to work for peace, and to believe in its efficacy,

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[123] *Beowulf*, ll. 1114-18a.

challenges the assumption that war is inescapable. Striving for peaceful solutions demonstrates that national protection can be achieved through multiple avenues; war is only one option among several. Since the work of making peace posits another obvious alternative, it questions the primacy of war as the default response to conflict. In so doing, it reveals the less-transparent motivations for violence: while war is not always necessary for national protection, it *is* always necessary to define the masculinity of the nation's aristocratic men. Moreover, by highlighting the constructedness of the masculinity-as-violence model, the perspective of peaceweavers like Wealhtheow creates room to imagine a future that functions on different logic. In order to believe that peace may genuinely succeed, one must also envision a society that defines masculinity through different means.[124]

The critique enabled by the peaceweaver-mourner's perspective, and the possibilities that critique invokes, are inherently gendered, not because the activities of peaceweaving or mourning are innately feminine, but because the peaceweaver-mourner figure is positioned in contrast or even opposition to the dominant heroic masculine ethos. Such a perspective thus constitutes a "'disenfranchised' or, one might say, 'feminized' voice," as Klein says, a category which includes "the voices of most women, old men, children, monks, poets, and all those deemed 'unmanly' by virtue of their inability to occupy the heroic position prescribed by the narrative."[125] I favor the term "disenfranchised" over "feminized" because these voices occupy a more liminal gendered space: while they are less than masculine by the standards of the heroic

[124] As this chapter has illustrated, critiquing dominant masculinities is not the sole purview of feminine perspectives: other alternative masculinities certainly existed, including religious masculinities which also eschewed violence. Chapter 3 will further explore how religion inflects gender in early medieval England.
[125] Klein, *Ruling Women*, 10.

militant model, this perceived deficit does not necessarily feminize them.[126] Rather, gender becomes one vector among numerous other categories of difference, an important factor but not the predominant one. Put simply, all disenfranchised voices are not necessarily feminine, though feminine voices are often disenfranchised. Under the capacious header of "disenfranchisement," gender is a crucial vector of distinction that interacts with other categories of social difference like status, age, and spirituality to create a plurality of masculinities and femininities, which hold differing levels of privilege and power within early English culture. Positioned against the predominant model of secular heroic masculinity, voices from multiple gendered positions may speak, voices that eclipse a neat gender binary.

Among these, the peaceweaver-mourner stands as an often-female but not entirely feminized voice, one that can reflect critically upon heroic masculinity and its overreaching and destructive cultural consequences. Returning to Klein's argument that feminine textual perspectives are prime sites for social commentary and critique, she elaborates that "[i]t is a strategy that works particularly well in heroic poetry, where queens are typically relegated to a position outside, or rather, just alongside, the cycle of violent action that organizes heroic life. Forced to act as involved observers rather than direct participants in heroic violence, queens are thus able to offer powerful commentary upon it."[127] Expanding this to encompass a wider breadth of gendered subjectivities, we might say that the peaceweaver-mourner is ideally positioned to comment upon its corollary in dominant culture – that is, war-making – and in so

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[126] Culturally subordinate masculinities also fall within this liminal space. Karras observes that "[m]edieval masculinity involved proving oneself superior to other men," and the basis of comparison revolved not only around one's participation in masculine- or feminine-coded behavior, but also around status and age. As Karras notes, "[i]n some cultures when a man thinks of being a man, he thinks of not being womanish; in others, however, he may think first of not being childish"; see Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 10-11. In relation to *Beowulf* specifically, Lees asserts that the poem is "arguably as much preoccupied with the ways in which aristocratic warriors dominate other men as they do monstrous Others" and other marginalized categories; see Lees, "Men and *Beowulf*," 142.
[127] Klein, *Ruling Women*, 9-10.

doing, critiques a model of masculinity predicated upon violence. It is this positionality, working against the grain of dominant heroic masculinity, that offers a gendered critique of social hierarchy and in turn envisions an alternative futurity.

Wealhtheow's diplomatic maneuverings illustrate the potential for this alternative futurity. As she advocates for productive alliances that would sustain her people, she builds a hypothetical future that reflects and seeks to correct the flaws of the existing system. Her management of Hrothgar's adoption offer, as well as the circumstances of Freawaru's betrothal to Ingeld,[128] demonstrate that she is willing and able to take action to create more harmonious prospects for the nation and her family. Her final speech illustrates what such prospects might look like. As Beowulf departs Heorot, Wealhtheow bids him farewell, telling him to prosper (*geþeoh*, the same word used to describe the queen/*wif* in the *Maxims I* passage previously discussed) and to counsel her sons mildly ("þyssum cnyhtum wes / lara liðe").[129] She continues:

> Ic þe an tela
> sincgestreona. Beo þu suna minum
> dædum gedefe, dreamhealdende.
> Her is æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe,
> modes milde, mandrihtne hol[d];
> þegnas syndon geþwære, þeod eal gearo;
> druncne dryhtguman doð swa ic bidde.
> I wish you well
> with these bright treasures. Be to my sons

[128] While the poem identifies Hrothgar as the one who arranged the marriage, the maintenance of the alliance would be within the shared purview of both Hrothgar and Wealhtheow.
[129] *Beowulf*, ll. 1218-20.

kind in your deeds, keeping them in joys!

Here each earl is true to the other,

mild in his heart, loyal to his liege-lord,

the thegns united, the nation alert,

the troop, having drunk at my table, will do as I bid."[130]

The prosperity she wishes for Beowulf mirrors the joys she asks him to safeguard for her sons. She reaffirms the goodwill fostered by his presence in Heorot, smoothly redirecting the earlier incautious adoption offer toward a more sustainable arrangement, one that retains the peacemaking benefits without the incumbent succession anxieties. She also highlights the unity between individual and community, emphasizing that each person's loyalty has a place within the grander scheme of the hall and the nation and serves loftier aims than personal honor alone. Her speech calls upon bonds of loyalty not only between different strata within a nation (each earl is "loyal to his liege-lord," "mandrihtne hold") but also between nobles of equal standing ("each earl is true to the other…the thegns united," "is æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe… þegnas syndon geþwære"); notably, the main factor in these loyalties is a mild heart ("modes milde"), implying that strength comes from unity, and that unity arises from level-headed consideration and not hot-headed impulsivity. She concludes by sealing this pronouncement with a diplomatic admonition: those who have benefitted at her hand will take her advice and act accordingly. The tone here is neither wholly authoritarian nor purely reciprocal, though both certainly factor into her speech; Wealhtheow reminds everyone present that her role is to provide wise counsel and implies that her successes in this endeavor speak for themselves.[131] The thegns will presumably

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[130] *Beowulf*, ll. 1225b-31.

[131] Gillian R. Overing also discusses the multiple possible valences of Wealhtheow's speech; see *Language, Sign, and Gender in* Beowulf (Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 88-101.

follow her advice, not simply because it is a direct order from an authority or because she has given treasures that require compensatory action, but because loyalty also occasions trust. Just as all the lords and thegns in her speech have a designated role to play, she subtly reminds her audience that dispensing counsel – and being heeded – is *her* role, a role that serves the aims of the nation and at which she excels.

Wealhtheow's final lines paint a portrait of what a future of peace might entail, a future in which alliances hold and violence is not a foregone conclusion. Conrad-O'Briain highlights Wealhtheow's image of alternative futurity by examining the poem's temporal multiplicities:

> Whatever we, participating in the poet's audience across time, may know from the text's narrative voice (or think we know from later texts) of the future, she is within a narrative; the narrator's past and ours is still her future and that of her audience in Heorot. Fred Robinson may write that she should know what is bound to happen, but for Wealhtheow those events are not inevitable. She approaches interventions boldly…intending and believing she can seize the moment and with it an alternative to our assumed inevitable outcome. Violence in pursuit of power is there and then an open potentiality not inevitability. When we see her, Wealhtheow has freedom of movement and power. The inevitable is not yet inevitable if she can persuade.[132]

Here Conrad-O'Briain isolates Wealhtheow's experiences within the poem from the tragic context that narrator and audiences share. Free from the assumption that violence is unavoidable, Wealhtheow has room and agency to act. It is precisely this freedom of thought, this insistence that the future is malleable, precarious but not yet lost, which represents a radical reimagining of

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[132] Conrad-O'Briain, "Listen to the Woman," 193.

warrior culture. The peaceweaver-mourner's perspective, adjacent to but outside the cycle of heroic violence, allows us – characters, narrator, and audiences – to envision a world that operates on fundamentally different principles.[133]

Because the peaceweaver-mourner's critique arises from a position of social and political power mediated by gendered disenfranchisement, and because it challenges existing structures of power which are predicated upon a particular form of secular masculinity, the futurity enabled by such critique represents a genderqueer perspective – in other words, a perspective that uses gender as the primary vector by which it disrupts dominant social structures. Much work has been done by queer and transgender scholars to consider how temporalities, including models of futurity, function in normative and non-normative ways. In *Time Binds,* Elizabeth Freeman coins the term "chrononormativity" to designate "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity." She elaborates that chrononormativity functions through processes of social regulation by constructing certain "teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals," and these narratives create "properly temporalized bodies."[134] In contrast to these normative narratives, theorists like Freeman and Jack Halberstam explore non-normative temporalities that disrupt these

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[133] For the narrator and audiences of the poem, the cultural ethos depicted in *Beowulf* is already a thing of the past, and an imagined past at that. Medieval readers were living in a different present, and many of the potentialities for the characters within the poem had already become realities for its audiences, while other possible futures had been precluded. Thus the form of secular aristocratic masculinity which dominates *Beowulf* had adapted and/or been replaced by the time of its inscription. Janet L. Nelson observes that, in the ninth and tenth centuries, "a warrior aristocracy became a Christian elite…. [T]here was a new preoccupation with monastic purity, and, at the same time, there were new kinds of positive attitude to secular power. Alongside the warlike king (and he did not vanish), a peace-loving and humble king was being constructed." See Nelson, "Monks, Secular Men, and Masculinity," in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. Dawn M. Hadley (Longman, 1999), 141. The layers of temporality in *Beowulf*, and their implications for reading gender in the poem and in early English culture more broadly, bear further investigation.

[134] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010), 3-4.

"teleological schemes" and examine how queer and gender-nonconforming perspectives "challenge conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood, and responsibility."[135] Modern theories of queer and transgender temporality may appear extremely distant and perhaps irrelevant to the study of the early Middle Ages; however, their methodologies offers insights into the ways that non-normative experiences of time converge and diverge from a culture's dominant narratives. We can leverage the insights of modern theory while remaining sensitive to the specificities of premodern cultures by focusing on the analytical models such theories proffer, rather than adopting their conclusions (arising as they do from examination of modern cultures) as ahistorical truths. Considering what constitutes normative or dominant time for a particular culture ,[136] and how differing temporalities function in relation to gender and sexuality, can help us understand how marginalized voices in history grappled with dominant notions of time, as well as the ways they modified or pushed back against the cultural scripts that dominant temporality dictated.

In many ways, the queens and royal peaceweavers of early medieval England participate in the temporality of the dominant culture: they marry according to the political aims of their aristocratic kin, produce heirs, distribute treasure alongside the king, and mourn the dead. In particular, those intertribal marriages which are arranged for the purpose of alliance and peacemaking are intended to secure a future for both peoples, who might otherwise fight to the point of mutual destruction. Queens, regardless of the circumstances of their marriage, are

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[135] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (Duke University Press, 2005), 30-31.

[136] As my introduction explains, I avoid using the term "normative" in relation to the Middle Ages, following Karma Lochrie's assertion that our modern notion of normativity did not exist until centuries later. Since many theoretical models are developed in relation to modern cultures in which normativity operates, I retain the term when discussing those theories directly, and adapt terminology as necessary when considering those concepts in relation to the Middle Ages.

expected to produce children to continue the dynastic line. For exogamous marriages, children further cement the original agreements of the alliance. None of this is inherently genderqueer: all these events function according to the dominant temporal logic of reproduction, family, and inheritance in early English culture. However, even within this framework, transformative thinking is possible. Halberstam argues that "queers use space and time in ways that challenge conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood, and responsibility."[137] The alternative futurity imagined by Wealhtheow does not accomplish this by disavowing the dominant temporal logic altogether, nor is Wealhtheow is "a queer" in any identificatory sense. But her vision of the future emphatically overturns the meaning of, and the methods for determining, secular aristocratic masculinity. As Freeman elaborates, "[q]ueer temporalities…are points of resistance to this [normative] temporal order that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others."[138] Reconfiguring the cultural regulatory schemas which produce gender affects not only the adult men of the poem but also the children who will inherit those nations and cultures, and the means by which the culture perpetuates itself across generations. In order to break the cycle of violence, the existing systems those children are meant to inherit and sustain, as well as the social development by which they become fit inheritors of those systems, would require radical changes. Thus, while not overtly "queer," Wealhtheow's imagined future *does* challenge conventional logics and propose other possibilities in specifically gendered ways.

Wealhtheow both participates in and challenges dominant temporality: on the one hand, she is invested in the wellbeing and dynastic prospects of her heirs, thus protecting the existing

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[137] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 10-11.
[138] Freeman, *Time Binds*, xxii.

hierarchies through which she and her family maintain power; on the other hand, her peacemaking efforts demonstrate that the temporal social order is unstable and unsustainable. In the world of *Beowulf,* conventional logic expects that men perpetuate war in order to prove their masculinity, fathers bequeath their feuds and tenuous alliances to their sons alongside their ancestral weapons, so that the new generation might continue making war. The image of a more peaceful future disrupts this logic, if fleetingly, breaking the cycle of violence and positing a new order that would require new standards of masculinity. The multiple temporal layers in Wealhtheow's speech demonstrate the genderqueer potential of this transformative thinking. M.W. Bychowski highlights that the space between layers of time is fruitful ground for considering nonnormative alternatives and disenfranchised perspectives, especially queer and trans voices. "Our present moment is only one of many potentially imagined (or, rather, imaginable) futures for those living in moments of the past. Being able to think with asynchronicity, even speculatively, about the uncertainty of the future of the past allows us to better appreciate the significance of decisions, actions, and consequences of the past in the subsequent history."[139] Although these alternatives are often precluded by the narrative of a text, and certain voices remain largely silent, such temporal spaces allow us to see those alternatives and hear those voices, if only briefly.

In *Beowulf,* alternative perspectives arise both within and outside the world of the poem. For the narrator and medieval audiences, heroic culture may have ended but life goes on: they live in a world transformed. Within the narrative's setting, Wealhtheow challenges the

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[139] M.W. Bychowski et al., "Trans*historicities: A Roundtable Discussion," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2018): 668. In a similar vein, Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici argue that "Imagination often functions…as a means to rethink the past and our relationship to it: speculation about what might have happened, strategic anachronisms, and even defiance against the 'tyranny of historicism'…have all become hallmarks of queerly temporal projects"; see DeVun and Tortorici, "Trans, Time, and History," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2018): 520.

inevitability of such a hopeless outlook in her present moment. The possible future glimpsed within Wealhtheow's political maneuverings offers an alternative in which war – portrayed as ubiquitous, inevitable, and essential within early medieval English culture – is *not* inevitable, and the actions of peacemakers can alter this course. For the peaceweaver, imagining a world of peace means divesting war of the inherited weight of gender-making that it carries. Such a future reconceptualizes the relationship between war and peace, and the ways in which gender shapes and is shaped by these opposing forces. Scholars of queer/trans futurity agree that we can – and should – imagine the future(s) in more positive ways. José Esteban Muñoz asserts that queer futurity asks us to "dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds."[140] Wealhtheow's efforts to manage Danish relations with the peoples around them in ways that prevent further warfare represents an attempt to contemplate what a new world or new way of being in the world would entail. This more hopeful narrative operates by questioning the cultural scripts of heroic masculinity and their seemingly inevitable conclusions in death, mourning, and cultural annihilation. To imagine a future beyond self-immolation requires re-envisioning the social system itself, and the demands of heroic masculinity in particular.

Despite all Wealhtheow's efforts, the Danes have a bleak future ahead, as narrator and audiences know well. Yet the imaginative exercise enabled by her actions remains. By showing that existing temporal logics are not the means for guaranteeing a cultural future, the peaceweaver-mourner's perspective offers genderqueer potentiality. It fundamentally re-envisions what is possible by denaturalizing the seemingly inevitable, exposing the

[140] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 1.

constructedness of current systems of power, and raising possibilities for (re)constructing in profoundly different ways. Muñoz remarks that "utopian feelings can and regularly will be disappointed. They are nonetheless indispensable to the act of imaging transformation…. The eventual disappointment of hope is not a reason to forsake it as a critical thought process."[141] The peaceweaver-mourner attempts to imagine such a transformation, even if a different future cannot be realized within the bounds of Old English literary expression.

[141] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9-10.

Chapter 2

What's Love Got to Do with It? Asexuality as a Literary Ethos

In his 1995 article, "'No Sex, Please, We're Anglo-Saxons'?" Hugh Magennis argues that Old English secular poetry shows disinterest in sexuality as a dimension of human existence: "in their treatment of sexuality, most Old English literary texts reflect either…the lack of concern with sexual themes, characteristic of the Germanic heroic tradition, or the 'sexual pessimism' inherited from patristic teaching, an attitude which receives expression in particularly acute form in Anglo-Saxon England."[142] He is not alone in this supposition: Magennis briefly summarizes several other voices who similarly characterize Old English literature as "largely asexual" (Michael Swanton) or influenced by "prudery" (Morton Donner); likewise, David Lampe states that Old English "seems to show very little interest in sex," and Magennis himself concludes that these texts show a "clearly evident reticence…in dealing with matters of sex and love."[143] This reticence, according to Magennis, is reflected in texts which are largely secular as well as narrative religious texts. In contrast, religious texts with didactic and instructional aims reflect the "negative and repressive" attitudes commonly attributed to medieval discourses of sexuality.[144] This latter category of texts comments on sexuality as a matter of theological concern and for the purpose of pastoral care. Sermons, homilies, and guides for pious living outline appropriate sexual behavior, while penitentials enumerate the consequences of sexual transgressions; all together, they reinforce a Christian regulatory framework governed by a very

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[142] Hugh Magennis, "'No Sex Please, We're Anglo-Saxon'? Attitudes to Sexuality in Old English Prose and Poetry," *Leeds Studies in English* 26 (1995): 14.
[143] Magennis, "No Sex Please," 1; David Lampe, "Sex Roles and the Role of Sex in Medieval English Literature," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (Garland, 1996), 401.
[144] Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe* (Routledge, 2005), 1.

narrow definition of licit sexual activity and much anxiety about the threat sex poses to human salvation.[145]

In this chapter, I revisit Magennis's thesis: do secular Old English texts demonstrate a lack of interest in sexuality? If so, why might this be? If sexuality was not a noteworthy dimension of human existence worth writing about in such texts, why not? And what *were* the important dimensions? Since sexuality and gender are intertwined, attitudes toward sexuality clearly have implications for the ways people perceived gender: if sex was not the main dimension connecting men and women in the larger cultural consciousness, then what were those connective forces? What does that tell us about how people related to one another – or rather, how this culture imagined that people related to one another?

In Western cultures today, discourses of sexuality are a given: we have sex "on the brain," so to speak. The term "heteronormativity," now ubiquitous in critical conversations about modern cultures, addresses the ways in which heterosexuality inflects aspects of our society that seem unrelated to sex at first glance; it is "heterosexuality that has become presumptive…both descriptive and prescriptive."[146] As a result, our understanding of desire has become rooted in sexuality: we view desire as an aspect of sexuality, rather than sexuality as an aspect of desire.[147] From this viewpoint, omissions of sexual content are often read as signs of coyness or repression. A text may be hinting at more salacious material off the page, one might conclude, or an author may be averse to including content deemed inappropriate or immoral. Yet these

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[145] Chapter 3 will consider in more detail how religious investment in sexuality impacted early medieval views of gender.
[146] Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality when Normal Wasn't* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xii.
[147] Elizabeth Hanna Hanson, "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. KJ Cerankowski and Megan Milks (Routledge, 2014), 347.

perspectives still position sex at the center of the text: they assume that sex, while undepicted, is significant to the narrative in some fashion and, moreover, that sex may be made more significant by the omission, rather than in spite of it. However, as Karma Lochrie and others have persuasively argued, heteronormativity – and the concept of the "norm" itself – did not exist in the Middle Ages; other regulatory schemas certainly did, and these scholars argue that we should rely on those historically grounded models rather than reading the past through the eyes of modern heteronormativity. To that end, I wish to reconsider the extent to which early English culture had sex "on the brain," and to investigate what other ways of relating this culture valued.

This chapter argues that secular and/or non-didactic Old English texts reflect an asexual literary ethos: not the kind of simple disinterest invoked by Magennis, but instead a valuation of social and affective relationships for which sex is not a primary motivator, at least in their literary depiction. This model does not denigrate sexuality, in discourse or in practice, nor does it suggest that early English culture devalued or rejected sexuality wholesale, though certain perspectives certainly did. Rather, it challenges the primacy and ubiquity of sexual discourses, within cultures (medieval and modern) as well as in our scholarly approaches. My proposed framework of an asexual literary ethos is informed by modern theories of asexuality. Such models offer "a promising language for discussing forms of intimacy that are simply not reducible to sex and sexuality," which in turn "open[s] up different paradigms for thinking about relating."[148] Sex is certainly an important way to relate and be intimate, but it is by no means the only way. Centering sexuality in our critical approaches to premodern texts often presumes that

[148] Ela Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* (Ohio State University Press, 2019), 20-21.

sex was equally central to those texts and the cultures that produced them; as a result, we unconsciously reaffirm that sex is the most fundamental or basal way of relating, one that either encompasses or overshadows other forms of intimacy, relegating them to the sidelines or positioning them in subordination to sexual relationships. In order to question these assumptions, we need to reorient our interpretive methods to establish the primary discursive values of a given culture. Direct descriptions of interpersonal relationships serve as one starting point to identify which factors mattered most to early medieval authors and audiences in defining such relationships, across a variety of relationship dynamics and literary contexts. These primary discursive factors may include sexuality, upon examination of the evidence, but we should not assume *a priori* that such is the case. With the primary factors mapped out, discourses of sexuality may be visualized intersectionally, that is, within the complex tapestry of other categories of social difference; within this interwoven network, sexuality is an important but not necessarily the *most* important matter under consideration for early medieval texts. Rather, attitudes toward sexuality in literature are grounded in depictions of specific characters and personae.[149] The ways that sexual desires and behaviors are portrayed – the genres deemed suitable to discuss sexuality, the discursive and social registers within which these texts situate sexuality, and the language these texts use to describe sex – vary markedly depending on the desiring subject. Gender certainly contributes to this variance, as do social status, age, and ethnicity, among other characteristics. In early medieval England, when sexuality as a coherent

[149] Here I draw on the concept of the "persona" from marketing and customer service: companies often develop semi-fictional characters who represent different hypothetical customers or buyers, in order to better define their particular niche audience. Personae help companies determine several factors: what kinds of people want their products or services (or who they wish to target); what specific products or services those groups actually need; and how to reach those audiences with targeted marketing. For my purposes, the concept of "personae" bridges the gap between more developed literary characters who are unique and three-dimensional vs. less developed prototypical figures such as those found in didactic and gnomic literature, for example.

discourse did not yet exist, sex only becomes legible (and can be judged licit or illicit) when grounded in particular embodiments and relationships.

For Magennis, the asexuality of Old English poetry takes two forms: the first thread reflects the "sexual pessimism" promulgated by Christianity, and the second arises from the attitudes of the Germanic heroic world, whose textual production is "highly modest in content and has no overt interest in sexual themes," with a few notable exceptions.[150] This chapter follows the latter thread: while I generally agree with Magennis's characterization of this attitude as "asexual," I wish to intervene in several ways. Definitions of asexuality have changed in the past several decades, not only in relation to modern gender and sexual identities, but also in critical theory; my analysis draws on the more detailed and nuanced definitions that modern studies of asexuality offer, in order to deploy an asexual analytic in a historically contextualized way. Considering early English (a)sexuality reveals a scholarly paradox rather than a textual one: how can we, as products of a heavily sexualized culture, think through literary texts that do not similarly center sexuality?

As one entry point for tackling this conundrum, I want to leverage the ways that asexual models ask us to reorient our focus from sexuality to relationality. This shift in focus does not remove sexuality as a consideration, but positions sex as one way, among others, that people relate to each other. This perspective not only allows us to explore the multiplicity of medieval views on sexuality, but also puts them in conversation with other discourses of relation and intimacy. Magennis's article traces multiple attitudes toward sexuality represented in the Old English literary corpus beyond the two "asexual" threads described above, yet the framework of the article remains sexually oriented, implicitly categorizing these various attitudes as sexual or

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[150] Magennis, "No Sex Please," 11, 14.

asexual. Ironically, this approach still largely centers discourses of sexuality, and unconsciously reinforces the idea that human relationships (and their textual depictions) are primarily measured by sex: how much, what kind, and maybe a lack thereof. Instead, my analysis centers relationality and consequently considers sexuality and asexuality as constituent elements – that is, as possibilities among a greater range of relational options.

This chapter investigates texts across a variety of genres to reconsider how different discourses portray interpersonal relationships, especially cross-gender relationships, and the role of sexuality within those portrayals. These texts demonstrate varying levels of apparent interest or disinterest in sexuality; sex is often (though not always) a secondary or tertiary consideration in how these texts understand human relationships. Furthermore, by centering relationality, my analysis will also address and rework the common scholarly comparison between the homosocial and heterosexual spheres of early English society. Because an asexual approach asks us to reject *a priori* assumptions about the primacy and ubiquity of sexuality as an undercurrent in all things sociocultural, it also asks us to question the unconscious reduction of all male-female relationships to the category "heterosexual," regardless of the character of those relationships. The consideration of masculine and feminine sexuality is clearly mismatched in the traditional scholarly comparison: while male-male relationships are often labeled "homosocial," denoting a wider range of potential characteristics, the same is not true for male-female relationships, which are pigeonholed into the "sexual" category. Instead, I argue that most cross-gender interactions in secular Old English texts are heterosocial. In tandem with my focus on relationality, I take "sociality" as a capacious term that de-emphasizes sexuality as the defining characteristic of relationship dynamics, especially cross-gender relationships. Just as sexuality and emotion are

discursive modes that fall within the larger scope of relationality, the category of "sociality" includes but is not limited to sexual, romantic, or erotic relationships and desires.

By decentering sex in our critical methodologies, we can better identify the ways of relating which were most prominent in early medieval England's textual culture, and better observe how sexuality functioned in relation to those other forms of intimacy. And with sexuality recontextualized in this fashion, we can in turn build a more nuanced picture of the ways sexuality (or lack thereof) influenced early medieval constructions of femininity. In particular, this chapter explores the centrality of emotions in the Old English elegies to argue that expressions of love overlap significantly across same-gender and cross-gender relationships. In these poems, a retainer may speak of his affection for his lord in much the same terms as a wife for her husband; these congruencies suggest that early English culture perceived fewer discrete distinctions between types of love than we do today. Between the decentering of sex and shared emotional-linguistic frameworks, these literary examples minimize certain gendered differences in human relationality, particularly those concerning affection and intimacy. Yet even amid these congruencies, other gendered divergences appear: the elegies depict marked differences in the speakers' ability to change the circumstances which produce their sorrows. The distinctions between the female- and male-voiced elegies indicate that gender circumscribes individual agency to affect material change: these poems imply that men and women may experience similar emotions, and may share ways of communicating those emotions with others through language, but their experiences are resoundingly different. This manifests in the elegies as a feminine rejection of gnomic consolation, illustrating the limitations of heroic language in articulating the experiences of marginalized subjectivities. Yet poetry itself also acts as a form of

consolation, creating empathetic connections between speaker and audience and thus reinforcing the importance of, and desire for, meaningful human relationships.

Literary Asexuality

In their introduction to *Representing Medieval Genders and Sexualities in Europe*, Elizabeth L'Estrange and Alison More explain that "perceptions of gender are often shaped by relationships *between* the sexes."[151] Women's relationships in literary texts constitute a defining aspect of their identity and gender expression. In order to understand how texts embody, construct, and perform femininities, we must examine women in relation to others, as these relationships are integral to the definitions of gender itself. Given that most female characters in Old English literature are defined in relation to men, it is no surprise that heterosexuality and heteronormativity have long been the unstated assumptions of most scholarship. After all, female characters are wives, mothers, lovers – all roles that imply a sexual relationship with a man, even if children are the only evidence of such in some cases. However, assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality are perhaps a more modern phenomenon than a medieval one, as more recent queer studies of Old English texts have shown. To push this analysis a step further, we should question not only compulsory heterosexuality, but compulsory sexuality altogether.

Modern theories of asexuality seek to problematize unspoken cultural ideas about the ubiquity and primacy of sex. In *Asexual Erotics*, Ela Przybylo challenges the assumptions of compulsory sexuality by making visible "the ways in which sexuality is presumed to be natural and normal to the detriment of various forms of asexual and nonsexual lives, relationships, and

[151] Elizabeth L'Estrange and Alison More, *Representing Medieval Genders and Sexualities in Europe: Construction, Transformation, and Subversion, 600-1530* (Ashgate, 2011), 4; emphasis original.

identities."[152] While human experience and textual depiction alike encompass a wide variety of ways that people interact with one another and form meaningful bonds, sexual relationships are often seen as the standard, or the most intimate, or the peak of emotional fulfillment. Theories of asexuality push back against the notion that sexual relationships and sexual desire are the only meaningful expressions of intimacy, and that they should be or will always, naturally, be the most meaningful.

Medieval texts provide a unique example of an asexual ethos, since compulsory sexuality was not ubiquitous in the European Middle Ages.[153] The veneration of virginity and celibacy as an ecclesiastical reality or devotional aspiration point toward a culture for whom a lack of sex was not only imaginable but sometimes preferable. While sexual relations and sexual attraction were certainly present in medieval societies, in lived experience and cultural consciousness alike, sexuality was not *compulsory* as in many modern societies. An asexual approach offers a corrective to previous interpretive frameworks by "critiquing sexually overdetermined modes of relating."[154] Ruth Mazo Karras explains that we must understand medieval texts on their own terms: "[w]hatever desires may lurk beneath the language of friendship and love, it is not useful historically to label medieval people who did not recognize them as victims of false consciousness who were unable to come to terms with their own sexuality. Rather, it is more helpful to use such texts to understand how they approached friendship, love, and sex."[155] Thus the Middle Ages present an uncommon opportunity to explore what modes of human relations flourish without the omnipresence of sexuality as the default.

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[152] Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 1.
[153] In this analysis, I refer to asexuality as a literary ethos in order to frame larger cultural discursive practices, rather than to draw conclusions about individuals' identities or behaviors.
[154] Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 3.
[155] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 20.

Returning briefly to the example of Wealhtheow from *Beowulf*, we can observe the asexual ethos of early English literature. The Danish royal couple's relationship primarily takes place in a political register rather than a domestic one. As the previous chapter explains, her portrayal focuses on certain elements of her person – namely, her roles as queen and peaceweaver – over others. These other facets of her characterization are present but secondary: she is clearly a wife, and in particular a king's wife.[156] She is also very clearly a mother: her cautions to Hrothgar against adopting Beowulf function to protect the interests (and lives) of her own children. The presence of Hrethric and Hrothmund during her speech reminds audiences of Hrothgar's familial ties, but the context of Wealhtheow's speech positions them as princes in the line of inheritance – that is, as political figures tied by lineage. This portrayal privileges the political and in doing so mutes the personal, or at least positions personal concerns as parallel but subordinate to matters of state.

The only hint we see of a personal relationship between Wealhtheow and Hrothgar is when the king retires on the eve of Beowulf's confrontation with Grendel.

> Ða him Hroþgar gewat mid his hæleþa gedryht,
> eodur Scyldinga ut of healle;
> wolde wigfruma Wealhþeo secan,
> cwen to gebeddan.
>
> Then Hrothgar and his troop of heroes,
> protector of the Scyldings, departed the hall;

[156] As Pauline Stafford and others have argued (and as the previous chapter discussed), there was no clear conception of queenship as a coherent status throughout the early Middle Ages in western Europe. Therefore, the role of "king's wife" was in some cases a more accurate descriptor, and this title grants status by explicitly positioning a royal woman in relation to her husband. See Stafford, "The King's Wife in Wessex," *Past and Present* 91 (1981): 3-27.

the war-chief wished to seek Wealhtheow,

his queen's bedchamber.[157]

As Hrothgar leaves the hall, it seems he also leaves his position as king, surrendering those roles to Beowulf. At that moment, Hrothgar transitions from warrior to husband, yet the poet's focus remains on Hrothgar's social status: he is "war-chief" and "protector of the Scyldings" throughout his exit. Likewise, Wealhtheow begins to transition in this passage from diplomat to wife, but her royal and political qualities still remain in focus: Hrothgar seeks his *queen* when he retires to bed.[158] These descriptors of both Hrothgar and Wealhtheow suggest addition rather than transition: they take on new domestic characteristics without surrendering their previous positions within the hall. This reading is corroborated by the thin and permeable line between state and royal family in this period: not only did the royal family represent the state metaphorically, in many ways it *was* the state.[159] It is not unreasonable to assume that Wealhtheow and Hrothgar's political and social roles would remain visible to medieval audiences even as they move off the page and into a new, more personal and domestic context.

The terms in which the poem portrays Wealhtheow and Hrothgar's relationship do not emphasize sexual or romantic undercurrents. Though the presence of children demonstrates that sex was a part of their relationship off the page, the practical fact of sex does not meaningfully enter the world of the poem in this instance. The absence of the personal in Wealhtheow and

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[157] *Beowulf*, ll. 662-65. Old English text from *Klaeber's Beowulf* (ed. R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4th ed., University of Toronto Press, 2008); trans. R.M. Liuzza (Broadview, 2013).
[158] Bosworth-Toller translates this half-line as "[seek] the queen as bed-companion." Other meanings for *gebedda* (f) are "bedfellow, consort, wife."
[159] See for example Helen Conrad-O'Briain, "Listen to the Woman: Reading Wealhtheow as Stateswoman," in *New Readings on Women and Early Medieval English Literature and Culture*, ed. Helene Scheck and Christine E. Kozikowski (Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 202; Joyce Hill, "Þæt wæs geomuru ides!' A Female Stereotype Examined," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Indiana University Press, 1990), 236; and C. Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 23.

Hrothgar's relationship – that is, the way the interpersonal facets of the familial bonds are subsumed beneath the political relevance of those bonds – may be attributed to the conventions of heroic poetry, at least in part. Nevertheless, the portrayal of their relationship primarily in a public, civil register illustrates how the poem deprioritizes discourse around sexuality, even while depicting relationships in which sex was presumably taking place.

This asexual reading of *Beowulf* demonstrates how models of asexuality can offer a corrective to previous heteronormative assumptions in medieval studies. Yet asexuality has not been investigated as thoroughly as other interpretive possibilities. Queer scholars have long recognized the heteronormative bias in earlier scholarship and seek to unmake its unstated logics, often by interrogating alternative modes and expressions of sexuality. This perspective holds that our previous inability to perceive sexuality in medieval texts was the result of scholarly aversion toward sexuality as a topic of critical discussion, or of unconscious assumptions that render everything but straightforward heterosexuality invisible or illegible. John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980) marked a pivotal moment in critical discussions of medieval sexuality; though the book has received plenty of critiques, its influence can still be felt in the field today.[160] The late 1990s and early 2000s also saw the publication of several other collections focused on premodern sexualities, which have been enormously important in broadening our understanding of medieval discourses around sexuality and have thoroughly demonstrated that medieval attitudes about sex were far more numerous (and messy) than previously realized.[161]

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[160] See, for example, the essay collection *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, ed. Mathew Kuefler (University of Chicago Press, 2005), published 25 years after Boswell's landmark study.

[161] See *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (Garland, 1996); *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (University of

Yet in championing more capacious and diverse understandings of sexuality, these approaches have swung the scholarly pendulum to its opposite extreme: where once the dominant critical voices refused to contemplate sex, today sexual frameworks underlie much of our scholarship. Just as compulsory heterosexuality has led to the elision of alternative sexualities in earlier studies, so too has compulsory sexuality led us to focus on sex as the primary vector of human relationships, thereby eliding other forms of relationality and intimacy. C. Stephen Jaeger notes that in the modern perspective, "[t]he sexual gains an explanatory power uncontested by any other realm or source of motivation."[162] But medieval examples belie this assumption: in Jaeger's study of male friendship, authors like Anselm and Alcuin often use language that modern readers would likely view as implicitly or explicitly erotic, yet that conclusion is antithetical to the authors' pious sensibilities. As Jaeger explains,

> A precritical glance at [these texts] calls up a picture of homosexuality legitimized and fully accepted among the lay and clerical nobility. But that poses a problem for the Freudian reader, whose interpretive mode lives from thwarting concealment. These texts act as if they had nothing to hide. Any psychological reading would have to explain why their authors did not try in any way to veil tabooed behavior. Far from disguising and masking, all these writers proclaimed openly feelings that would be perceived at any period of the Middle Ages as shameful and damnable, if coupled with libidinous desire and ambition.[163] (17-18).

Minnesota Press, 1997); and *Queering the Middle Ages*, ed. Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, (University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[162] Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 16.

[163] Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 18.

Since the letters of Anselm and Alcuin were intended not as private documents but for public consumption, it stands to reason that such texts would not be the venue for any potential "libidinous desires" or taboo behavior, whatever the authors' private feelings or actions may have been. Similarly, Karras observes that medieval authors "tended to write with an emotionality that would seem out of place today except between lovers." When we read such emotional language outside the context of a romantic and/or sexual relationship, Karras prompts: "Do we then say that this language is not erotic? If so, do we discount the eroticism of similar language between a man and a woman? Or do we say that such language must always be erotic on some level, even if not consciously? If so, we are going to find eroticism in a lot of places in medieval Europe."[164]

Textual examples which "thwar[t] concealment" call for different methodologies than studies of sexuality often employ, methodologies that account for what the texts make known to their readers. Sharon Marcus refers to this approach as "just reading" – that is, "attend[ing] to what texts make manifest on their surface" – in order to discover more organically how these texts portray human relationships.[165] In their introduction to surface reading methodologies, Marcus and Stephen Best elaborate that this family of interpretive practices arose in response to the dominant critical trends of previous decades, especially psychoanalysis and Marxist theory in the 1970-80s: "It was not just any idea of interpretation that circulated among the disciplines, but a specific type that took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter."[166] This interpretive practice is often called "symptomatic reading,"

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[164] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 19.
[165] Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 3.
[166] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1.

or less generously, "paranoid" or "suspicious reading." In contrast, Best and Marcus advocate for surface reading as a model that approaches texts without these assumptions: "we take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding…. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*."[167] In particular, Marcus's "just reading" approach – one of the types of surface reading that Best and Marcus summarize in their introduction – seeks to encounter a text "without construing presence as absence or affirmation as negation."[168]

The contrasting principles of symptomatic reading and surface reading highlight the different strengths of sexual and asexual approaches to medieval literature. While many studies seek to reveal medieval attitudes toward sex by uncovering latent desires beneath or beyond the language of the text, an asexual approach takes texts at their word: how do they depict relationships and feelings? What do these depictions communicate about the relational cruxes of early English culture? The confluence between surface reading and an asexual analytical model is no coincidence: surface reading methodologies are especially useful for understanding medieval sexuality precisely because the medieval world was less "sex-saturated" than modern western cultures; while "the modern episteme is a sexual one," premodern societies operated under different frameworks.[169] At the level of discourse, Pierre J. Payer notes that "[i]n the strictest sense, there are no discussions of sex in the Middle Ages" because "medieval Latin had no terms for the English words 'sex' and 'sexuality.'" This does not mean that considerations of what we call sex and sexuality did not exist, but rather that medieval thinkers conceived of such

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[167] Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," 9.
[168] Marcus, *Between Women*, 75.
[169] Mark Alan Smith, "Bypassing the Asexual Paradox: A Strategic Retelling of the History of Asexuality," PhD diss. (Emory University, 2017), 197, 22.

topics in fundamentally different ways: "[t]he concept of sex or sexuality as an integral dimension of human persons, as an object of concern, discourse, truth, and knowledge, did not emerge until well after the Middle Ages."[170] Considerations which we group under the modern heading of "sexuality" were instead viewed as components of other "human dimensions" that were legible in medieval thought; for example, ideals of virginity and chastity not only functioned in a religious register, but also as a crucial element of a woman's honor within secular contexts as well.[171] Given this lack of a coherent sexual discourse in the western Middle Ages, our critical approaches to medieval sexuality must also attend to the ways in which discussions of sexuality are embedded in other discourses, and to the particular "human dimensions" which bear meaning in medieval thought. To this end, an asexual analytics redirects critical attention away from sex as the presumptive common denominator of human experience and focuses on relationality. By employing surface reading methodologies – that is, by attending to what these texts actually say – we can position sexuality within the larger social discourses that medieval texts privilege.

To argue for asexuality as an Old English literary ethos does not suggest, however, that we discard consideration of sexuality as unimportant; to the contrary, it encourages continued exploration of how sexual discourse operates in relation to gender and other social constructions. In other words, this approach decenters discourses of sexuality not in order to ignore sex but to more accurately position it within the larger cultural milieu, and to make space for further consideration of forces beyond sexuality which may carry more cultural weight in understanding

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[170] Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (University of Toronto Press, 1993), 14.
[171] See Peter Baker, *Honour, Exchange, and Violence in* Beowulf (D.S. Brewer, 2013), 152-53; and Nira Gradowicz-Pancer, "De-Gendering Female Violence: Merovingian Female Honour as an 'Exchange of Violence'," *Early Medieval Europe* 11, no. 1 (2002): 18.

human relationality. As Megan Milks and Karli June Cerankowski explain, theorizing asexuality "does not simply mean *not* thinking about sex." In fact, critical models of asexuality are indebted to work on gender and sexuality: "Without feminism, the sexual revolution, and the LGBT and queer movements, or the academic disciplines that emerged in relation to them, we would never have the tools we have now to think about why asexuality matters so much today in Western society," or what potential it holds for studying the past.[172]

Perhaps the most commonly cited example of sexual and romantic desire in Old English are the two female-voiced elegies, *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*. Magennis takes them as an exception to his "asexual" thesis, arguing that they portray "passionate love": "The very fact that they are poems about sexual love, an area of experience which we have seen to be normally ignored in the secular heroic tradition and to be treated with distrust and extreme circumspection by religious writers, makes *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* unusual among surviving Old English poems."[173] Magennis is not alone: many scholars concur that these two poems are unique in deviating from the established patterns of either ignoring sex or vilifying it.[174] These poems certainly portray a perspective not visible elsewhere in the corpus:

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[172] KJ Cerankowski and Megan Milks, introduction to *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (Routledge, 2014), 2.
[173] Magennis, "No Sex Please," 18, 20.
[174] For example, Dolores Warwick Frese labels *The Wife's Lament* a "telling accoun[t] of sexual intrigue" unusual in Old English poetry more broadly; see Frese, "Sexing Political Tropes of Conquest: 'The Wife's Lament' and Laȝamon's *Brut*," in *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Memory of Daniel Gillmore Calder*, ed. Carol Braun Pasternack and Lisa M. Weston (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), 203. Similarly, Anne L. Klinck describes the two female-voiced elegies as "an interesting case, because they are to be found in a corpus that is overwhelmingly male in its subjects and ethos, and which, with the exception of a few bawdy riddles and some bits of proverbial poetry about male-female relationships, simply does not treat the subject of sexual love"; see Klinck, "Lyric Voice and the Feminine in Some Ancient and Medieaval *Frauenlieder*." *Florilegium* 13 (1994): 20. Clare A. Lees contends that "heterosexuality – though naturalized – is not as normative as homosociality," and thus the "erotic love-longing of some of the elegies" stands in counterpoint to the general trends of Old English poetry, which "hardly celebrat[e] human love"; see Lees, "Engendering Desire: Sex, Knowledge, and Christian Identity in Anglo-Saxon England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27, no. 1 (1997): 23. For further discussion of this critical consensus, see Marilynn Desmond, "The Voice of Exile: Feminist Literary History and the Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Elegy," *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 3 (1990): 572-90.

the first-person accounts and interior experiences of women. Upon closer inspection, however, the language these poems use to depict the speakers' relationships is not primarily sexual; instead, they operate in a predominantly emotional register. Moreover, their focus on "passionate" cross-gender relationships does not remove them from the interconnected social world of heroic poetry, as Magennis implies. In each poem, the relationship between the speaker and her lover and/or husband cannot be isolated from other social relationships: these poems position their subjects (and the subjects' romantic travails) within a wider social context, including kin groups and hostile parties. These poems demonstrate that "passionate love" exists alongside, and is wholly imbricated with, a broad variety of social relations, none of which are primarily or inherently sexual.

In *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the speaker recounts her past with Wulf (presumably her lover) as well as her current circumstances with Eadwacer (possibly her husband), toward whom she bears some hostility. As she sorrows for Wulf's absence, she relates: "when the bold warrior's arms embraced me – / it was sweet to me, yet I also despised it" ("þonne mec se beaducafa bogum bilegde / wæs me wyn to þon, wæs me hwæþre eac lað").[175] The verb for "embrace," *belecgan* (here *bilegde*) carries meanings of surrounding and also affliction, which are mirrored in the next line where the speaker contrasts both joys and sorrows (*wyn* and *lað*). These lines could pertain to Wulf, so that the sweetness arose from his presence and the despair due to his absence or their parting; this contrast suggests that their previous time together is now bittersweet in remembrance. Alternatively, these lines could pertain to Eadwacer, expressing ambivalence or mixed feelings toward their relationship (be it a marriage or otherwise): some part of their bond

[175] *Wulf and Eadwacer*, ll. 11-12. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1936); trans. R.M. Liuzza (in *Old English Poetry: An Anthology*, Broadview, 2014, 40).

was positive, or maybe once had been, but her longing for the absent Wulf robbed those joys of their sweetness. From a modern perspective, we would likely read "embrace" to imply a sexual relationship, and this meaning is certainly plausible. However, the speaker's language revolves around emotion: feeling hope (*wenum*), joy/delight (*wyn*), and pain (*lað*).[176] In the next lines, the speaker laments her lovesickness:

> Wulf, min Wulf, wena me þine
> seoce gedydon, þine seldcymas,
> murnende mod, nales meteliste.
> Wulf, my Wulf! My wanting you
> has made me sick – your seldom coming,
> my mourning heart, not lack of meat.[177]

Once again, we see language oriented around emotion: a repetition of the word *wen* (hope/expectation) and the speaker's "mourning heart" (*murnende mod*). In a modern sense, the phrase "my wanting you" suggests a possible sexual dimension to the speaker's desire, though the use of Old English *wen* evokes a more general hope: her wish to see Wulf again, in contrast to his "seldom coming" (*seldcymas*). By drawing attention to the emotional content of this poem, I do not mean to deny the possibility of a sexual relationship, but to refocus on the ways in which the narrator depicts her own relationship, which trend toward the emotional rather than the sexual. To use modern parlance, we may reasonably describe this poem as "romantic," but describing it as "sexual" would seem to miss the point.

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[176] Other possible meanings for *lað* include misfortune, harm, and injury, which show that this word can carry emotional and bodily/physical connotations, as well as larger metaphysical connotations (re: misfortune). While emotion is therefore not the only experience evoked in this line, the juxtaposition of *lað* alongside other emotion words like *wyn* and *wen* suggests that the emotional register is the most immediate context.
[177] *Wulf and Eadwacer*, ll. 13-15.

Critical work on male relationships in the premodern past have also sought to contextualize sexuality within other structures of feeling and intimacy. In *Queer Friendship: Male Intimacy in the English Literary Tradition,* Haggerty traces notions of friendship from the classical world to the eighteenth century. He defines friends as "physical, emotional, and psychological partners, who love and are loved in ways that culture at large has always preserved for cross-gender relations…. Friendship models offer writers the opportunity to contain this emotional excess in intimately personal terms." Haggerty articulates that friendship models are multiple even within a given culture, and operate on different "central rationales for intimate relations"; some models include sexual and erotic desires, but other "platonic" and "elegiac" forms function by different logics.[178] In similar fashion, Jaeger repositions medieval sexuality within larger structures of love and friendship. He challenges the primacy of sex as the default framework through which we understand human experience, prompting us to "put the question of sexuality to one side" in order to consider the potential social functions of love expressed between men. Haggerty elaborates that many of our frames of reference are "colored by the erotic"; instead, he prefers the term "homosocial" because it "eliminates [sexuality's] automatic inclusion, while holding it in readiness."[179] In our modern mindset, informed as it is by Freud, sexuality "set[s] the modality of intimate relations"; in contrast, he concludes that "[t]he peculiar character of homosocial desire in the Middle Ages emerges from a criticism and problematizing of the paradigm which takes sexuality as the grounding of love, desire, and friendship."[180] For Old English literature in particular, it is difficult to construct distinct and coherent paradigms of

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[178] George Haggerty, *Queer Friendship: Male Intimacy in the English Literary Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 2.
[179] Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 6, 15.
[180] Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 15, 17.

friendship, romantic love, and sexual/erotic desire with any confidence, given the scarcity of our sources and the ways in which textual depictions often intertwine these relationship dynamics. David Clark cautions that "it is necessary to look at both erotic and non-erotic relationships, and indeed to leave open the questions of where platonic and erotic love part company (if indeed they can truly be said to do so), and how far sexual and emotional relations coincide."[181]

These studies by Haggerty, Jaeger, and Clark stand adjacent to my own analysis, given that they all focus exclusively on male-male relationships. And while they do not explicitly address theories of asexuality, these studies question the ubiquity of sexuality as a basal framework for modern scholarship on the premodern past. In these studies, sexuality is not the common denominator or primary motivator behind men's relationships or the variety of affections and intimacies that underlie those bonds; instead, they suggest that those emotional bonds deserve further elaboration in their own right rather than as variations on a sexual theme. By putting studies like these in dialogue with asexuality, we can better observe the full tapestry of human relations and the ways that early English culture distinguished (or not) between forms of intimacy that we perceive discretely today.

In *Wulf and Eadwacer*, personal intimacies hold power – for better and for worse – in shaping individuals' lives and the larger social structures they inhabit. The (presumably) romantic tensions at the heart of the poem gain meaning within the context of a broader social world, one comprised of a complex network of interpersonal relationships of all stripes. This fact suggests a deep connection between the personal and the communal: changes to one realm affect the other, and neither can be wholly understood in isolation. The exact narrative of *Wulf and*

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[181] David Clark, *Between Medieval Men: Male Friendship and Desire in Early Medieval English Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 18.

Eadwacer is ambiguous, and scholars have long debated the dynamics of its characters and the events which take place. Yet even amid this murky portrait, the poem clearly depicts tensions between several parties, and these background details provide context for the interpersonal conflict at the center of the poem. The speaker recounts that one group – possibly her own people ("leodum…minum") – "will kill him if he comes to the troop" ("willa hy hine aþecgan, gif he on þreat cymeð"); most translators assume that the man in question is Wulf, who the speaker names several lines later. She describes her separation from Wulf – "Wulf is on an island, I on another" ("Wulf is on iege, ic on oþerre") – and the dangers he faces: "The men on the island are murderous and cruel" ("Sindon wælreowe weras þar on ige"), echoing the same line again, "they will kill him if he comes to the troop."[182] We might speculate about the nature of the hostilities described here: perhaps Wulf and Eadwacer belong to two tribes who are at war, and the speaker is caught in the middle; perhaps the interpersonal disquiet among these three characters is driving the larger conflict between peoples. Regardless of the precise dynamics, these tensions show that the poem does not imagine personal relationships in isolation. Instead, they are a constituent element of larger social networks. The characters of *Wulf and Eadwacer* and Wealhtheow and Hrothgar's relationship in *Beowulf* are two sides of the same coin. Both texts illustrate the social valences of interpersonal relationships: *Beowulf* contextualizes the royal couple within the political sphere, and thus its descriptors focus on the characters' status and pay less attention to interiority and affect; *Wulf and Eadwacer* uses intense emotions and the immersive interiority of the elegiac genre to connect personal experience to the shared social world.

Comparing these two examples illustrates the paradox of reading with modern (hetero)sexuality: most audiences today would not hesitate to call these relationships

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[182] *Wulf and Eadwacer*, ll. 2, 4, 6-7.

heterosexual, yet they differ markedly in character. The formal, public, and sedate nature of Wealhtheow and Hrothgar's marriage seems entirely distant from the highly personal and passionate recollection of *Wulf and Eadwacer*'s speaker. Why, then, is it so easy to lump them together under the banner of heterosexuality? In order to complicate this easy assumption, my analysis thus far has highlighted the ways in which these texts are precisely *not* sexual, at least not in any fundamental way. Without the presumption of (hetero)sexuality as a defining feature of male-female relationships, the seemingly essential differences between same-gender and cross-gender bonds dissipate. By de-emphasizing the apparent gendered differences in these relationships, I do not suggest that early English people perceived these relationships in equivalent ways, or that gender was an unimportant factor in how they conceptualized interpersonal bonds; rather, I posit that gender's more meaningful influences only become clear once we unmake our assumptions about (hetero)sexuality's role in relationality. In early English culture, marital and/or sexual relationships comprise one subset of social bonds among many, including the familial bonds of parents, children, and siblings; larger kinship groups; and intertribal alliances (or hostilities). As these relationships intertwine, the resulting network constitutes the social structure of early medieval England. Thus to characterize early English society as primarily masculine and homosocial, as traditional scholarship maintains, not only omits women altogether but also ignores the variety of relationships which hold cultural value, eliding relevant distinctions between male-male relationships in the process. Instead, examining heterosociality in addition to homosociality puts this variety of interpersonal bonds in conversation with each other as parts of a larger social system.

Hall and Hearth: Early English Heterosociality

Both *Beowulf* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* offer a non-sexualized view of cross-gender relationships, and human relationships more broadly, albeit in very different ways. Sex and desire, or even romantic feelings, are not the salient descriptors of these relationships. In the absence of sex as a defining feature, describing these relationships as "heterosexual" seems a misrepresentation, especially given the term's modern uses. As these examples attest, men and women relate to each other in many ways that do not rely upon sex or sexuality for their definition. To encompass such portrayals more accurately, I find the term "heterosocial" more useful because it allows room for sexual and erotic dynamics in a given relationship without dictating or assuming their existence. In *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that in earlier academic discourse, the term "homosocial" often signified a platonic circumstance distinct from homosexuality; Sedgwick, however, argues that homosociality actually represents a spectrum of relations that encompasses both the erotic and the platonic.[183] In this vein, I use the term "heterosocial" to describe a range of relationships – while heterosociality may include elements of desire or love, it is not reliant upon them nor chiefly defined by them. Moreover, by shifting terminology from sexuality to sociality, we resist the implication that sexuality is the defining characteristic of a given relationship, or of human relations in this culture more broadly.

The traditional scholarly view of early English social structure posits a gendered distinction between "hall" and "hearth": the hall is the site of male homosociality where the

[183] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia University Press, 1985, reprint 2016), 2-3. Sedgwick theorizes that female homosociality and male homosociality function differently: she argues that, in patriarchal societies, the concepts of homosocial and homosexual are less discrete for women, while the homophobia that characterizes patriarchal heteronormativity keeps the concepts discrete when applied to men. "[T]he adjective 'homosocial' as applied to women's bonds…need not be pointedly dichotomized as against 'homosexual'; it can intelligibly denominate the entire continuum" (2-3).

comitatus of lords and retainers is forged and maintained, while the hearth represents the heterosexual (and female) domestic and familial sphere. However, medieval historians and literary scholars alike have questioned the accuracy of describing early English society according to a gendered public vs. private dichotomy.[184] Clare A. Lees contends that, "where Anglo-Saxon society is concerned, these spheres of social action cannot easily be separated into public and private. Family life *is* public, social and cultural; the lives of the women we do know about are bound up with those of their families, and these families, so often, are ruling and upperclass. If there is a private, domestic world where the interests of class and gender are managed differently, then our sources are largely silent about it."[185] Historical sources also suggest a greater commingling of supposedly "male" and "female" spheres: some domains of work were shared among men and women, such as food preparation; other crafts like spinning and weaving were consistently associated with women, but these tasks and their products were not relegated to a purely private or domestic setting.[186] For example, Christine Fell argues that goods like wall

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[184] For example, Stacy S. Klein notes that in his edition of *Beowulf*, Friedrich Klaeber often glosses descriptive words applied to women with a broad brush, e.g. grouping together numerous terms under the rubric "kind"/"kindness" which actually have particular and nuanced meanings; Klein likens this editorial move to "transforming the powerful and accomplished Queen Wealhtheow into a sort of Victorian 'angel of the house'." Klein, "Feminism and Early English Studies Now," in *New Readings on Women and Early Medieval English Literature and Culture*, ed. Helene Scheck and Christine E. Kozikowski (Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 11.

[185] Clare A. Lees, "At a Crossroads: Old English and Feminist Criticism," in *Reading Old English Texts*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 155. Klein concurs: "Unlike modern Western culture, which tends to assume a sharp separation between domestic life and national politics, Anglo-Saxon England was a culture in which diplomacy and public politics were conducted within the home, and in which domestic 'confinement' located one squarely within the centres of public political power"; see Klein, "Centralizing Feminism in Anglo-Saxon Literary Studies: *Elene*, Motherhood, and History," in *Readings in Medieval Texts*, ed. David F. Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford University Press, 2005), 154.

[186] See Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (British Museum Publications, 1984), especially her chapter on "Daily Life," 39-55; see also Helen Jewell, *Women in Medieval England* (Manchester University Press, 1996) and Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995). Megan McLaughlin discusses this trend in reverse, examining the ways in which male homosociality was arranged in "domestic" fashion: "the military, which was part of what we would consider the public sphere of life, coincided with the private sphere to an unusually large degree" in early medieval England; see McLaughlin, "The Woman Warrior: Gender, Warfare and Society in Medieval Europe," *Women's Studies* 17, no. 3-4 (1990): 201. For the overlaps of "public" and "private" spheres in Merovingian culture, see Gradowicz-Pancer, "De-Gendering Female Violence," 4-5.

hangings served a cultural function beyond their practical utility: “The subjects of such hangings may well have been events in which ancestors or near kin were thought to have played a glorious role. The East-Saxon leader Byrthnoð was killed at Maldon in 991. His defeat and death form the basis of a heroic poem, ‘The Battle of Maldon’, but we are told also in the *Liber Eliensis* that his widow gave a wall-hanging depicting his deeds to Ely in his memory.”[187] This example blends the homosocial and heterosocial worlds, demonstrating that the hall and the hearth were not so isolated, spatially or conceptually.[188]

In current scholarship, the term “heterosociality” often functions sociologically, referring to mixed-gender dynamics in the public sphere.[189] Occasionally, studies will use “heterosociality” to describe individual interpersonal interactions, though in some cases “sociality” becomes synonymous with “platonic,” denoting an absence of sexuality within the relationship.[190] Since early English social structure blurred the lines between public and private,

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[187] Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, 46.

[188] It is worth noting, following Lees’s observation, that much of our evidence for women’s lives in early medieval England relates to women of moderate or high status; Gale Owen-Crocker remarks that both textual records and even archaeological evidence like grave goods only represent women of means; see Owen-Crocker, “Anglo-Saxon Women, Woman, and Womanhood,” in *New Readings on Women and Early Medieval English Literature and Culture*, ed. Helene Scheck and Christine E. Kozikowski (Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 28, 32-33. Inferences about daily life for men and women of lower classes, including free and enslaved people, are very few, though lived realities like taxing physical labor likely cut across gender.

[189] For example, Miranda K. Wojciechowski explores the “heterosocial public sphere” in Victorian novels, which she argues “signifies the modern expansion of women’s participation in professional and public life”; see Wojciechowski, “Plotting Heterosocial Possibility in the Victorian Novel,” PhD diss. (Indiana University, 2022) vii. Ellen E. Kittell characterizes medieval Flanders as a highly heterosocial society in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In her analysis, Kittell argues that Flanders is “exceptionally heterosocial” because “both women and men were participating constituents,” as represented by public acts and performances; see Kittell, “Women, Audience, and Public Acts in Medieval Flanders,” *Journal of Women's History 10*, no. 3 (1998): 75. Similarly, Kate Chedgzoy situates the early modern poetry of Jane Cavendish within the heterosocial context of the court of Charles I and Henrietta Maria, characterizing the court as heterosocial due to the many opportunities for men and women to socialize and interact with each other in a public, political sense; see Chedgzoy, “Cavalier and She-Majesty: The Cultural Politics of Gender in Jane Cavendish's Poetry.” *The Seventeenth Century* 32, no. 4 (2017): 393.

[190] M.J. Ailes argues that in literary depictions of male friendships in the high Middle Ages, “the language is often passionate,” but the relationships are homosocial rather than homoerotic; he contends that critical readings of homosexuality “proceed from a series of fundamental misunderstandings of the conventions of medieval literary texts”; see Ailes, “The Medieval Male Couple and the Language of Homosociality,” in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. Dawn M. Hadley (Longman, 1999), 214. Moving into early modernity, Matthieu Dupas argues that the formation of gallantry in seventeenth-century France created a delineation between premodern “erotic friendship”

societal and familial, the term "heterosocial" can speak to both interpersonal relationships between individuals as well as larger sociocultural patterns. Additionally, my use of the term does not exclude love or sex: rather than dividing relationships into categories based on predetermined factors, the breadth of the term "heterosocial" allows us to evaluate the tenor of different relationships using the characteristics which medieval texts find noteworthy. Furthermore, framing our reading through heterosociality instead of heterosexuality helps us to conceptualize and analyze literary relationships without presupposing a sexual or even romantic context.

Numerous Old English sources – literary and historical – offer glimpses of a heterosocial culture.[191] Among the elegies, *The Husband's Message* portrays cross-gender relationships operating within the larger tapestry of social relations. In *The Husband's Message*, the narrator – a messenger sent by the titular husband to his wife, encouraging her to return to him after a long parting – speaks of the lord's "heart's love" ("modlufan") and his "glorious fidelity" ("tirfæste

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and "the modern division between sexual love and social friendship," a shift which redefined friendship as heterosocial and love as (hetero)sexual. In essence, Dupas positions heterosociality in opposition to sexuality; he uses the former term to describe platonic friendships in which desire is distinctly *not* a component, in contrast to earlier periods when friendships may have contained erotic potential; see Dupas, "Gallantry and Matrimonial Heterosexuality: Love and Friendship in Scudery's *Carte de Tendre* (1654)," *Exemplaria* 32, no. 2 (2020): 140.

[191] In addition to the poetry cited here, the fragmentary tale *Waldere* (based on the Latin *Waltharius* legend) contains a passage in which the heroine Hildegyð encourages the titular hero to fight an upcoming battle; while we have few literary examples of secular women engaging in warfare, Hildegyð and *Beowulf*'s Hildeburh illustrate that women had significant stakes in military victories and losses. Furthermore, the prose adventure romance *Apollonius of Tyre* (discussed later in this chapter) alters its Latin source by staging the meeting between Apollonius and the princess Arcestrate in the king's hall rather than her bedchamber; the beginning of their romance becomes a public matter, and her words and actions in the hall indicate that her presence there is neither inappropriate nor uncommon. Beyond literary sources, legal documents also show congruencies between same-gender and cross-gender relationships: for example, the quasi-legal source *Be wifmannes beweddunge*, "Concerning the marriage of a woman," describes a woman's consent to her betrothal agreement using an oath-making formula that is used to describe a retainer's oath of fealty to his lord in another quasi-legal text, *Swerian* (on swearing oaths). As Klinck observes, "[t]he implication is unmistakable that the relationships dealt with in the two texts are essentially similar"; see Klinck, "Anglo-Saxon Woman and the Law," *Journal of Medieval History* 8, no. 2 (1982): 114. The *Textus Roffensis* codex (Rochester Cathedral Library, MS A.3.5) contains both of these texts, showing that multiple kinds of oaths across gender were viewed within the same conceptual frameworks, even where the relationships themselves differed.

treowe") to his wife during their separation.[192] The messenger reminds her of the oaths the pair had sworn to each other:

> þæt þu sinchroden sylf gemunde
> on gewitlocan wordbeotunga,
> þe git on ærdagum oft gespræcon,
> þenden git moston on meoduburgum
> eard weardigan, an lond bugan,
> freondscype fremman.
>
> that you, treasure-adorned, should yourself remember
> in your mind the promises
> that you two in earlier days often spoke,
> while you could occupy a dwelling
> in the mead cities, abide in the same land,
> improve your friendship.[193]

The prefix *meodu-* in the compound word *meoduburgum* ("mead cities") evokes the imagery of the mead hall and its connotations of male *comitatus*. However, this poem's speaker uses this language to describe a cross-gender relationship: in happier times, the married couple shared a home in a seemingly heterogeneous locale; moreover, this was a welcoming place, where their friendship could flourish. Given the present separation of husband and wife in the poem, this nostalgic remembrance connects the feelings of joy and mutual affection to their shared living

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[192] *The Husband's Message*, ll. 10, 12. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University, 1936); trans. Robert E. Bjork (in *Old English Shorter Poems, Volume II: Wisdom and Lyric*, Harvard University Press, 2014, 114-17).
[193] *The Husband's Message*, ll. 14b-19a.

space. Their (presumably romantic) love seems entirely at home in the "mead cities," implying that multiple types of bonds formed the basis of this society, thereby creating an image of heterosocial prosperity in which same-gender and cross-gender relationships coexisted, and perhaps intertwined.

In contrast to this previous harmonious arrangement, hostilities arose between the husband and his kinsmen, prompting him to journey far away for a long while. Eventually he has settled in a new location; the messenger recounts that "Now the man has / overcome woe; there is no lack of delights for him" ("Nu se mon hafað / wean oferwunnen; nis him wilna gad") because he has achieved some measure of security in this new place: "he has enough / of burnished gold / . . . in a foreign country he holds his home" ("he genoh hafað / fædan gold[e]s [. . . . / . . . .]d elþeode eþel healde").[194] Yet even with his re-established wealth, he wishes for his lady to return to his side, so that together they might bestow treasures to "warriors and companions" ("ætsomne siþþan motan / secgum on gesiþum … / næglede beagas").[195] The husband expresses his desire for her return through the language of joint rule, specifically in giving treasure. This poem imagines an ideal aristocratic relationship as two individuals who reinforce their bonds to each other through the social ritual of giving rings to their retainers. Such an image not only resonates with the portrait of cross-gender joint rulership discussed in the previous chapter,[196] but also illustrates the blurry boundaries between the homosocial world of

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[194] *The Husband's Message*, ll. 43b-44, 35b-37. Krapp and Dobbie offer "[þæt he mi]d elþeode" as a plausible reconstruction of 37a.
[195] *The Husband's Message*, ll. 30-35a.
[196] See, for example, the passage from *Maxims I* in which both king and queen must "be good at giving gifts" ("geofum god wesan") and describes them as "holders together of the homestead" ("bold-agendum bæm ætsomne"), ll. 82b, 91. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1936); trans. Robert E. Bjork (in *Old English Shorter Poems, Volume II: Wisdom and Lyric*, Harvard University Press, 2014, 64-81).

lords and retainers and the domestic sphere of family and marriage.[197] In this view, homosocial and heterosocial bonds are mutually constitutive: in order for the husband's idealized future to arise, he requires the wealth to support his community as a lord should (which he has obtained); warriors to serve as his retainers (who are either already present or who he anticipates will arrive); and his partner in rule (whom he exhorts to join him). According to this portrait, the lord's marriage – and his lady's active participation in the hall – strengthens his bonds to his men, and having loyal retainers presumably makes his home and family more secure.

Far from a sexualized portrait of erotic longing, *The Husband's Message* frames personal desires within the larger social contexts in which those bonds operate. While the poem's exhortations may feel romantic to a modern reader – and they may well have held such a valence for medieval audiences too – the actual language used to express those desires is primarily social, referring to the roles each partner plays in relation to each other and the broader community. The messenger requests that the lady journey "over the ocean track, / where your lord is waiting in expectation of you" ("ofer mere-lade … / þær se þeoden is þin on wenum").[198] The lord's expectations (*wenum*) mirror the hopes of *Wulf and Eadwacer*'s speaker when she contemplates Wulf's absence; in each case, we see a lover eagerly awaiting a reunion with their absent beloved. In *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the speaker's emotions (joy, pain, sickness) gloss the narrated phenomena of presence and absence, embraces and isolation. In *The Husband's Message*, the

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[197] This blurriness of public and private also manifests as potential narrative ambiguity. Sung-Il Lee argues that this poem has been fundamentally misinterpreted: rather than a husband exhorting his wife to join him, Lee finds a thegn exhorting a beloved retainer, or maybe one loyal retainer (the messenger-narrator) encouraging a comrade; thus the poem's message is addressed to "a retainer that the thegn in refuge, trying to have his former political power restored, wishes to join his newly-built military camp"; see Lee, "The Old English 'Husband's Message': Is It an 'Elegy'? Is the One Sending the Message a 'Husband'? Is the Addressee His 'Wife'?" *Journal of Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance English Literature* 20, no. 2 (2012): 160. While I do not find this reading wholly persuasive, Lee's argument speaks to the ways in which early English texts portray different types of relationships in similar and overlapping ways, producing this kind of narrative ambiguity.

[198] *The Husband's Message*, ll. 28-29.

narrated phenomena (both the reality of their separation and the imagined circumstances of their future reunion) are communicated through a vision of shared social life, one in which the couple's resumed happiness is reflected in communal wellbeing.

Sites of Early English Sexuality

Alongside the foregoing discussion of an asexual literary perspective, it is worthwhile to consider the exceptions – that is, the texts in which sexuality *does* feature as a central topic. In the Old English corpus, sexuality appears most directly in three areas: in religious texts, in the Exeter Book riddles, and in the romance adventure *Apollonius of Tyre* (translated from a Latin source into Old English, of which only the beginning and end survive). While all of these sources discuss sexual activity and/or desire more or less explicitly, they represent distinct and diverse attitudes toward sexuality. Moreover, the ways these texts handle sexual topics illustrate that medieval thought did not perceive sexuality as we imagine it today – that is, as a legible and cohesive category of human experience. Instead, elements of the modern category "sexuality" operate as constituent parts of other human dimensions which were legible to the medieval mind. Lees explains that "[s]exual representation in an age before the formation of modern notions of sexuality is a product of other more culturally dominant discourses, whether literary or social."[199] A brief examination of the three aforementioned examples reveals both the diversity of perspectives as well as the ways in which elements of modern sexuality function within other medieval discourses.

Religious texts, especially those with didactic aims, make discourses of sexuality most visible in early medieval England: elements of modern sexuality were most widely dispersed

[199] Lees, "Engendering Desire," 18.

among theological, devotional, and pastoral discourses in this period. Yet we can still observe the ways that sexuality was incorporated into these discourses not as a unique and coherent concept, ubiquitous and of utmost importance, but rather as one aspect of human experience among many that must be managed. Peter Brown explains that, during the transition from late antiquity to the Middle Ages, Augustinian theology subordinated the concerns of the body to concerns of the soul: "[d]etached from nature, preoccupation with the human body was eclipsed by concern for the frail workings of the human will." According to Augustine, "the most humble details of the body's experience of sexuality…mirrored a failure of the will." Brown describes that, as a result of this shift, "[p]rohibitions that were directly linked to the physical state of the body weakened, if only a little."[200] To illustrate this trend, Brown cites Pope Gregory I's guidance to Augustine of Canterbury, in which Gregory emphasizes that bodily infirmities and corruptions are lesser than, and sometimes symptomatic of, internal sin.[201]

This model positions sexuality through a series of principles: first, sexuality is one of many bodily functions that must be managed; second, all bodily corruptions, including sexual ones, are subordinate to the concerns of the soul and the will; and third, these bodily concerns still carry weight despite their subordinate position. In this way, religious discourses emphasize sex as a dimension of human life worth attention while not centering sexuality itself in the way that modern western cultures presume: as Lees argues, "the sins of the flesh provide an epistemology of sex closely connected with social formations such as class and gender, but chastity, and Christian behavior in general, is a practice regulating desire, of which sexuality is

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[200] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 1988), 432-33.
[201] In particular, see the eighth question of Augustine and Gregory's dialogue in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, Book I, chapter XXVII (ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, Clarendon Press, 1991).

but one expression."[202] For Lees, desires that operate beyond sexuality are those which have been translated from a sexual context into other outlets, such as desire for the divine; an analytics of asexuality instead posits that desires need not be fundamentally sexual in origin, and that sexuality itself is but one outlet or expression among many. This does not mean that sexual and non-sexual desires are mutually exclusive, or that sexual desires cannot be transmuted or redirected – for example, numerous medieval scholars have demonstrated how devotional practices illustrate sexual(ized) and erotic(ized) desire for the divine. However, these overlaps should not be interpreted as evidence of mutual inclusivity either: just because sexual desire *can* be translated, transformed, and redirected into new registers does not mean that all desires are sexual at their core. Przybylo articulates this divergence by contrasting the terms "erotic" and "sexual": "[t]he erotic fuels sexual desire rather than sexual desire being at the base of the erotic. Sublimation, in this sense…is not the sublimation of sexual desires or a sexual drive into other life pursuits, but rather involves the transference of the erotic into various activities, sex included."[203] Medieval religious discourses do not decenter sex altogether in the same way that secular Old English texts demonstrate, but by positioning sexual behaviors and desires within a larger framework of bodily corruptions, which are in turn subordinate to more cerebral, interior considerations, sexuality becomes part of a greater whole instead of the singular, most basal element which makes human experience legible.

Apollonius of Tyre shares many of its attitudes toward sexuality with early English religious discourses, yet as a romance – what Lees calls "the first heterosexual love narrative in English"[204] – it also deviates markedly from traditional Christian textual genres. Several scholars

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[202] Lees, "Engendering Desire," 21.
[203] Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 22.
[204] Lees, "Engendering Desire," 18.

have positioned *Apollonius* within its manuscript context in Cambridge Corpus Christi College, MS 201, which also contains the *Regularis Concordia* (a foundational text in English Benedictine reform), numerous texts by Wulfstan, other guides for pastoral care, and several law codes. Patrick Wormald questions *Apollonius*'s inclusion among so many religious instructional works: "there is no denying the appeal of this saga…. But what was it doing in a Wulfstanian primer of Christian standards? If broadly edifying in so far as virtue is rewarded and vice finally punished, it is not even obviously Christian. As literature, it may not tend to corrupt, but nor does it do much to instruct."[205] He concludes that, while its presence is "startling," the text was also "regarded as exemplary," at least enough to merit inclusion.[206]

Melanie Heyworth takes up Wormald's question and proposes that the text's focus on "marital morality" places it in dialogue with the manuscript's pastoral (and even legal) contents. Heyworth describes that early English authors sought to syncretize "ambiguous and often contradictory" beliefs about marriage, especially as inherited from different cultural and religious traditions. These authors "not only strove to reconcile Germanic customs with Christian ones, but also to answer the questions which would preoccupy the greatest Christian thinkers until well into the twelfth century: what constituted marriage; what defined marital experience; what was a moral marriage; and what made Christian marriage inherently different from and better than non-Christian marriage."[207] She highlights the different permutations of marriage and sexual relationships portrayed in the text, in comparison to marital ideals found elsewhere in the manuscript: the prohibition against incest and cautions regarding spousal consanguinity are

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[205] Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century* (Blackwell, 1999), 208-9.
[206] Wormald, *The Making of English Law*, 208, 209.
[207] Melanie Heyworth, "*Apollonius of Tyre* in Its Manuscript Context: An Issue of Marriage," *Philological Quarterly* 86, no. 1-2 (2007): 6, 8. See also Lees, "Engendering Desire," 38.

exemplified by the evil King Antiochus at the beginning of the narrative; additionally, both Apollonius and his wife Arcestrate remained celibate, even though both believed themselves widowed.

Since *Apollonius* is a romance and seems to exemplify the syncretic marital mores of medieval England, one might expect that the narrative would have much to say on the topic of love. However, several scholars have argued that the Old English adaptation instead minimizes the affective dimension of Arcestrate's relationship with the titular hero. Anita R. Riedinger contends that the English translator modifies descriptions of both Apollonius and Arcestrate: for the former, the translator "delet[es] actions that might be deemed emotional or, less often, obsequious" in a "deliberate attempt to help him [Apollonius] conform to Germanic heroic tradition"; for the latter, "her whole demeanor grows more sedate" through the removal of emotive descriptors and even the deletion of a whole passage that recounts her lovesickness.[208] In a similar vein, Carla Morini argues that the *Apollonius* narrative "has been retold in Old English without any 'love words'," noting that descriptions of Arcestrate's burgeoning feelings for Apollonius tend to downplay her emotions and instead emphasize other aspects of her person or their relationship, such as her advanced learning and desire for more tutelage.[209] Morini concludes that "the banishing of the emotional and sexual aspects of marriage from the *Apollonius* seems to imply the desire by the translator to conform to medieval ethics which equated them with vice."[210]

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[208] Anita R. Riedinger, "The Englishing of Arcestrate: Woman in *Apollonius of Tyre*," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Indiana University Press, 1990) 294, 298.
[209] Morini, "The First English Love Romance without 'Love'! The Old English Apollonius of Tyre," *SELIM* 12, no. 1 (2003): 116.
[210] Morini, "The First English Love Romance," 121.

These readings implicitly decouple sex and love from marriage while simultaneously reinforcing the conflation of affect and sexual desire. According to this logic, medieval religious and moral thinking wished to distance marriage from sexual sins, and the proximity of emotions like love to sexual desire meant that they were suspect by association and likewise "banished" from the marital exemplar of *Apollonius*. However, *Apollonius* does not eschew love wholesale.[211] When Arcestrate is reunited with Apollonius after many years apart, she confirms her identity by reminding him of their youthful relationship: "you are the shipwrecked man that I loved, not for lust but for wisdom" ("þu eart se forlidena man ðe ic lufode, na for galnesse ac for wisdome").[212] Here Arcestrate herself distinguishes love motivated by lust from another kind of love motivated by admiration for other personal qualities, in this case wisdom. Her distinction also posits that one person might love another for many admirable qualities that have nothing to do with lust or sex. Thus I would argue that *Apollonius* distinguishes all three elements – sexual desire and behavior, love as an emotion, and the institution of marriage – and draws more complex connections between them than previous interpretations have allowed.

In contrast to the foregoing discussion of marital morality, the riddles of the Exeter Book proffer an earthier look at bodies and sexuality. Sex in the riddles often takes the form of double entendre, in which both a sexual and non-sexual answer are plausible. Magennis contends that the riddles "express a playful and frank attitude to sexuality," one of "good-humoured impudence rather than of hostility."[213] He explains that the riddles "lack an obvious moral

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[211] Religious texts across genres also often use the language of love in positive ways, so this perspective is not limited to *Apollonius*, nor does it conflict with the shared themes between this narrative and the religious texts found in the same manuscript.
[212] *Apollonius of Tyre*, ed. Peter Goolden (*The Old English Apollonius of Tyre*, Oxford University Press, 1958), 38; trans. Michael Swanton (*Anglo-Saxon Prose*, J.M. Dent & Sons, 1975), 171.
[213] Magennis, "No Sex Please," 16-17.

dimension," but are not wholly absent of moral themes or philosophical musings: "They approach the subject of love-making between men and women both jokingly and with a sense of the mutuality of sexual pleasure.... These riddles are not lacking in morality, however, though their morality is not that of the early medieval Christian orthodoxy. They are underlain by a reassuring social morality which does not deny or repudiate sexuality but gives it a place in everyday life."[214] By this measure, sexuality is a fit subject for riddling because sex is an expected part of human existence, and it becomes remarkable through the riddle's ruminations rather than through any topical exceptionalism. In other words, sex is mundane, and the mundane world is the riddle's wheelhouse.

Magennis's characterization of the riddles' sexuality as playful, frank, and impudent suggests a certain flippancy: the riddles are significant because they portray sex at all, but their attitudes toward sexuality "are not subversive" and therefore of lesser interest.[215] I agree that riddles, by virtue of their attention to the everyday material world, view sex as their purview in ways that other genres do not; however, the riddles' portrayal of sex as mundane is far from uninteresting, and is in fact quite telling. Riddling is all about connecting seemingly unrelated things: on a basic level, a riddle relies on the relation between the metaphorical vehicle and tenor; in the Old English literary tradition in particular, riddles connect the material and metaphysical worlds, bridging the familiar and the unfamiliar, the abstract and the tangible. They use the familiar phenomena of everyday life to pose deep intellectual questions: for example, Riddle 43 uses the language of human relationships (guest and host, lord and servant, brothers/kinsmen and sisters/mothers/kinswomen) to enact the relationship between soul and

[214] Magennis, "No Sex Please," 17-18.
[215] Magennis, "No Sex Please," 18.

body.[216] This riddle, along with other soul and body poems, represents a sustained philosophical consideration of materiality and its troubled connection to the soul, mind, or will; they implicitly engage with theological notions of soul and body like those cited above, while also nuancing any easy binary division. Where some riddles make their philosophizing more explicit than others, even the "playful" riddles which describe seemingly less serious topics belong to a tradition that revels in duality.

Within the riddlic worldview, sexuality is one manifestation of bodily materiality that resonates with larger meanings. In the riddles, sex is both mundane *and* profound, like any other riddle subject. For example, Lees argues that the riddles underscore "the association of sex with knowledge,"[217] tracing the epistemological implications of making meaning through and with sex. Moreover, the representations of sex in the riddles are not limited to cheeky double entendre: John W. Tanke points out that "of the fourteen riddles which deal in one way or another with sexuality, only seven…fit the definition of the 'classic' double-entendre riddle, in which there is an ambiguity, sustained throughout the text, between a sexual and a nonsexual content," while the remaining seven "treat sexual subjects, but for one reason or another do not fit the double-entendre genre."[218]

Riddle 12's portrayal of the *wonfeax wale* or dark-haired slave girl links sexuality to issues of gender, race, and status. This riddle is usually solved as "leather" or "ox hide," and its first-person speaker begins as a living creature who, after death, serves humans in a series of

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[216] Riddle 43. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1936); trans. James Paz, "Exeter Riddle 43" (in *The Riddle Ages*, ed. Megan Cavell et al., 2019, https://theriddleages.bham.ac.uk/riddles/post/exeter-riddle-43/).
[217] Lees, "Engendering Desire," 17.
[218] John W. Tanke, "*Wonfeax wale*: Ideology and Figuration in the Sexual Riddles of the Exeter Book," in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections*, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Indiana University Press, 1994), 30-31.

vignettes. Notably, the poem portrays people of various social stations: there is a "brave man" (*deorum…beorne*) who drinks from the speaker, likely in the form of a leather flask or vessel; a "bride" treads "proudly" (*bryd…felawlonc*) on the speaker; alternatively, the speaker "binds fast / swarthy slaves" ("fæste binde / swearte wealas"), and the *wonfeax wale*, a *dol druncmennen* ("dim drunken maid") uses the speaker for her own pleasure through several lines of implicitly masturbatory language.[219] On one level, the riddle clearly presents its own biases, attributing positive features to men and women of higher status and offering a far less complimentary portrait of servants and slaves.[220] The *wonfeax wale* is described as drunken and lustful (*hygegalan*); given the overlaps between Old English terms for "slave" and "Welsh," these negative descriptors of male and female slaves also invoke racial or ethnic prejudices as well. But our understanding of this riddle's attitude toward sexuality is also shaped by our own biases. Descriptions of the *wonfeax wale* in the riddle have been variously translated, often with certain ideological assumptions: Tanke explains that many translators and editors supply narrative or descriptive details to this vignette that the original riddle does not support. For example, Craig Williamson glosses this episode by describing how the riddle subject "thrusts against the lecherous slave-girl who comes to warm, wet, and work over her lord's new skin."[221] Tanke terms this gloss a "wholesale rewriting of the text": "The *wale* has been rendered a slave *girl*, the

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[219] Riddle 12, ll. 3-4, 5, 6-9. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1936); trans. Cameron Laird, "Exeter Riddle 12" (in *The Riddle Ages* ed. Megan Cavell et al., 2019, https://theriddleages.bham.ac.uk/riddles/post/exeter-riddle-12/).

[220] It is also worth noting that in the riddles, characters of noble status (or at least those who are free and of moderate means) are generally described in positive terms even when they are engaged in sexual activity, regardless of gender. For example, the "very beautiful daughter of a churl, / a maid proud in mind" ("ful cyrtenu ceorles dohtor, / modwlonc meowle") roughly handles the speaker of Riddle 25, a double entendre riddle typically solved as onion (or penis). Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1936); trans. Megan Cavell, "Exeter Riddle 25" (in *The Riddle Ages*, ed. Megan Cavell et al., 2019, https://theriddleages.bham.ac.uk/riddles/post/exeter-riddle-25/).

[221] Craig Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 170; Tanke, "*Wonfeax wale*," 34.

job of "thrusting" has been given to the riddle subject, a "lord" has been invented for the servant woman, and the sexual activity described in the riddle is transformed into what sounds very much like the *wale*'s service to her lord's penis."[222] In the actual language of the riddle, the speaker is acted upon by the *wonfeax wale*, just as the brave man and proud bride of higher status are the active parties in earlier lines. While the *wale*'s behavior is not given the same approbation as these other figures, Tanke argues that her activity is precisely the point: "her sexual gratification does not involve men, it lies outside the circuit of production and procreation," a subversiveness which other readings elide by attributing the leather a masculine owner and transferring the activity of sex to this imaginary figure.[223]

Thus in Riddle 12, we can observe not only the intersections of gender, race, and status in shaping perceptions of sexuality, but also the plurality of medieval attitudes toward sex, even within a single genre. Given the difference in tone between this riddle and the double entendre riddles, it is clear that these texts do not share a singular view of sexuality; rather, their depictions of, and reactions to, sex are predicated upon the contexts in which sex appears and the characters involved. Even within the riddle corpus, where these varied depictions still fall under the category of everyday experience, these examples subtly illustrate that someone's experience of daily life depends greatly on who exactly they are, and what social privileges they enjoy. Notably, the riddles seem to distinguish appropriate sexual activity from inappropriate based primarily on social status and then secondarily on gender: "sexual pleasure clearly lay within the province of women," like the *ceorles dohtor* of Riddle 25 and even the *wonfeax wale* of Riddle 12, both of whom take an active role in the sexual activity narrated in the poems. In the former

[222] Tanke, "*Wonfeax wale*," 34-35.
[223] Tanke, "*Wonfeax wale*," 37.

case, where the woman's actions receive a lighthearted description, "there was no sanction against this pleasure since women are not portrayed as degraded nor exploited in this context."[224] The fact that this trend does not hold true for the *wale* of Riddle 12 suggests that her status as a slave complicates her access to licit sexuality, at least as an active, desiring participant.

The Exeter Book riddles share with *Apollonius* a willingness to discuss sexuality – not as a coherent, unified concept, but by positioning sexuality within other discourses and frameworks of experience. For *Apollonius*, sex surfaces in relation to marriage and family life; sex also informs the lives of unmarried individuals, though the narrative mainly portrays characters for whom celibacy is a temporary life stage rather than a permanent circumstance (e.g. Apollonius as the chaste widower, Arcestrate as the chaste widow *and* celibate priestess, Tharsia as the unmarried virgin). For the riddles, sex appears as a facet of daily life for people of all stations, though not equally. Yet the riddles also suggest that the mundanity of sex, like the mundanity of many other bodily and material realities, does not make sexuality inherently repulsive or trivial; instead, it is potentially transformative, even when it is also playful. The diversity of sexual attitudes illustrated by these texts operate within the discourses around pious living, secular law and social organization, philosophy and theology, and the embodied realities of everyday life. In each of these discursive realms, sexuality is present but often does not take center stage, and medieval thinkers and writers position sexuality as part of a whole, or a means to an end. In this way, these textual examples stand adjacent to the literary asexuality we observe in other texts:

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[224] Eith Whitehurst Williams, "What's So New about the Sexual Revolution? Some Comments on Anglo-Saxon Attitudes toward Sexuality in Women Based on Four Exeter Book Riddles," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Indiana University Press, 1990), 13; see also Williams' brief discussion of Riddle 12 on p. 141.

while these examples discuss sex directly in ways that other texts do not, they still illustrate a worldview in which sexuality does not lie at the center of the sociocultural mindset.

Love Languages: Emotion and Intimacy

When we decenter sex in our interpretive practices and begin with human relationality more broadly, expressions of affection become strikingly apparent in the Old English corpus. Today, members of queer communities often differentiate between sexuality and romanticism, so that a person may identify along both axes. For example, someone may identify as asexual and homoromantic, or bisexual and aromantic, or any number of combinations. While it would be anachronistic to apply such delineations to medieval sources, the multiplicity of modern gender and sexual identities highlights the assumptions we often take for granted when considering interpersonal relationships, now and in the past. In western societies today, dominant cultural scripts often place the monogamous couple on a pedestal, implicitly asserting that one will find the most intimacy and personal fulfillment with a romantic and sexual partner; this model also assumes that romantic love and sex go hand in hand. However, this modern model is not reflected in medieval understandings of human relationships. As Karras explains, "[w]e expect the most intense emotional relationships in our lives to be with our sexual partners, especially spouses. They [medieval thinkers] did not. For them the erotic was not equated with the carnal."[225] When Arcestrate cries out that she fell in love with Apollonius "not for lust but for wisdom," she voices this distinction. Her desire – her love – is not sexual, despite the fact that she and Apollonius had been married and conceived a daughter. During this reunion, after years of separation, Apollonius does not recognize Arcestrate, and thus the purpose of her speech in

[225] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 19.

this scene is to identify herself sufficiently to spark his memory. To this end, she reminds him of their youthful relationship, which she narrates by describing her feelings for him. Since Arcestrate chooses to frame her story through emotion, it stands to reason that she perceives their emotional connection as the most memorable aspect of their relationship; otherwise it would not serve to effectively spur Apollonius's memory. Moreover, that she explicitly describes her love as a desire of the mind rather than the body demonstrates that early medieval authors could envision a deep and abiding love between spouses without imagining that sex was a primary motivator, even when the relationship involved sex.

Such an attitude seems expected given the moral bent of the *Apollonius* narrative, but a similar focus on the emotional register of relationships also appears throughout the Old English poetic corpus. Many of the Old English elegies take interpersonal bonds as a central subject and a vehicle for rumination on personal experiences. While some scholars debate the utility of the term "elegy" in regard to Old English poetry, most agree that the lyric poems of the Exeter Book typically labeled as elegies have certain generic qualities in common, and no other unified genre category has been widely accepted.[226] Stanley B. Greenfield's well-known definition describes the Old English elegy as "a relatively short reflective or dramatic poem embodying a contrasting pattern of loss and consolation, ostensibly based upon a specific personal experience or observation, and expressing an attitude towards that experience."[227] Anne L. Klinck defines the sense of separation as the essential element of elegy, a separation which results in a "longing that

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[226] Haruka Momma and others have noted that many Old English texts, including the elegies, often borrow from multiple genres; for example, *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* each "begins in an elegiac mode and switches to a homiletic mode in the middle." Nevertheless, Momma contends that "the shorter poems in the Exeter Book seem to be loosely connected by shared generic traits and exhibit a set of family resemblances"; see Momma, "Old English Poetic Form: Genre, Style, Prosody," in *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 286-87.

[227] Stanley B. Greenfield, *Hero and Exile: The Art of Old English Poetry*, ed. George H. Brown (Hambledon Press, 1989), 94.

springs from unsatisfied desire."[228] As the elegiac narrators process and communicate their experiences through the language of poetry, they use emotion – such as sorrow for their losses or the solace of consolation – as the primary method of depicting and understanding human relationality.

As previously mentioned, the general scholarly view maintains that the two female-voiced elegies are unique in portraying "passionate" and "sexual" love (to use Magennis's terms); my foregoing reading of *Wulf and Eadwacer* has demonstrated that this poem, at least, does not conflate the emotion of romantic love with sexual desire or activity. In distinguishing the two, my intention is not to suggest that they are always or inherently separate, but to argue that we ought not to immediately conflate them either; romantic love and sex are neither mutually inclusive nor exclusive in the examples considered thus far. While my preceding analysis has focused on reading asexually – that is, unmaking critical assumptions about the centrality and primacy of sexuality as a discursive framework in the early Middle Ages – I now turn to considering the elements of human relationality that Old English poems *do* center. Expressions of intense personal feeling illuminate the value placed on interpersonal relationships, not only as profound influences for the individual but also as uniting forces that bring together members of a community. Emotions reinforce interpersonal relationships, and they also create new pathways for human connection: shared emotions, like shared experiences, offer opportunities for people to relate to one another.

The female-voiced elegies may seem like a strange starting place for exploring how emotions create human connections, since both of these poems dramatize relational rupture.

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[228] Anne L. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 225.

However, the intensity of emotions in these poems, positive and negative, demonstrates how important these relationships were and speaks to the personal and social functions these relationships performed. Positive depictions of happier days establish how meaningful bonds had enriched the speaker's life. Negative emotions arise when good relationships end or when bad relationships continue; both circumstances have ramifications for the individuals and their communities. Like Arcestrate, the elegiac speakers center emotions: instead of using emotions to give depth to a narrative, they supply narrative details to contextualize their feelings. In this model, the goal is not to offer a coherent, linear story; thus the narrative opacity of both poems is a byproduct of prioritizing emotion, an intentional choice rather than an omission or flaw. [229]

The speaker of *Wulf and Eadwacer* anchors the ambiguous events of her recent life in her emotional upheaval: she feels hope, joy, and pain in turns, oscillating through experiences that are both sweet and despised, sometimes simultaneously. The poem's final lines bring past and present together, encapsulating a fundamental truth about her relationship to Eadwacer (or Wulf, or possibly both): "One can easily split what was never united, / the song of the two of us" ("Þæt mon eaþe tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs, / uncer giedd geador").[230] Whichever relationship these lines invoke, the speaker declares that not only is the bond broken now, but in fact it never truly existed. If these lines refer to a lost lover, they may indicate that this love was doomed from the start, perhaps due to hostilities between their peoples or other social factors that make a permanent relationship unrealistic. If these lines apply to an unwanted husband, they suggest that

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[229] For example, Klinck remarks that in *The Wife's Lament*, "the relationship of these events [in ll. 6-28] to one another in time is not entirely clear" because "it is the effect that is emphasized," i.e. the speaker's emotional suffering, rather than the chronology of the narrative; see Klinck, *The Old English Elegies*, 52. Patricia A. Belanoff offers a similar assertion: "[n]arrative is irrelevant to poems which express such potent present feeling; emotional memory is rarely chronological"; see Belanoff, "Women's Songs, Women's Language: *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament*," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Indiana University Press, 1990), 98.
[230] *Wulf and Eadwacer*, ll. 18-19.

the social institutions which bind the couple are not sufficient to create a meaningful relationship (symbolized by the *giedd* or song).

In *The Wife's Lament,* the speaker describes her relationship with her husband in an equally emotional register. As Klinck argues, "[t]he speaker's feelings, not the events of her life, nor even in any exact sense her physical surroundings, are the focus."[231] The speaker recounts her loneliness after their initial parting, which is redoubled when her husband turns against her and exiles her to a solitary subsistence far from him and their community. She refers to him according to his worldly status and his personal meaning to her: *min hlaford* and *frean* ("my lord"); *min leodfruma* ("my leader of men"); *ful gemæcne monnan* (my most fitting man); *mines felaleofan* ("my dearest one"); *min wine* ("my friend/lord/husband"); *min freond* ("my friend"); she also calls their bond *freondscipe uncer* ("our friendship" or "the friendship of us two").[232] These word choices, along with the consistent use of possessive pronouns, underscore the speaker's longing for her beloved and the bond they once shared, defining that bond with words of affection and friendship.

But happier days lie in the past, and the poem begins and ends with her sorrows: only within the framework of grief and suffering can the speaker convey the value of what she has lost. The opening lines define the poem:

> Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre,
> minre sylfre sið. Ic þæt secgan mæg,
> hwæt ic yrmþa gebad, siþþan ic up weox,

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[231] Klinck, *The Old English Elegies*, 54.
[232] *The Wife's Lament*: *hlaford* ll. 6, 33; *frean* l. 15; *leodfruma* l. 8; *ful gemæcne monnan* l. 18; *felaleofan* l. 26; *wine* l. 50, *freond* l. 47; *freondscipe uncer* l. 25. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1936); trans. R.M. Liuzza (in *Old English Poetry: An Anthology*, Broadview, 2014, 41-42).

niwes oþþe ealdes, no ma þonne nu.
A ic wite wonn minra wræcsiþa.
I make this song of myself, deeply sorrowing
my own life's journey. I am able to tell
all the hardships I've suffered since I grew up,
but new or old, never worse than now –
ever I suffer the torment of my exile.[233]

This introduction establishes the emotional tone of the poem: this song (*giedd*) will speak about her experiences (*minre sylfre sið*), specifically her sorrows, hardships, and suffering (*geomorre, yrmþa gebad, wite wonn*). The precise details of her experiences are less important than their effects, namely, how they have devastated her emotional wellbeing. At the end of the poem's first-person narrative, the speaker returns to ruminate on her present circumstances, once again focusing not on the events themselves but the emotions those events have engendered: "and so I can never / escape from the cares of my sorrowful mind, / nor all the longings that seize me in this life" ("forþon ic æfre ne mæg / þære modceare minre gerestan, / ne ealles þæs longaþes þe mec on þissum life begeat").[234]

Just as the personal travails of *Wulf and Eadwacer*'s speaker gesture to the larger social milieu of kin groups and other factions, the personal emotionality in *The Wife's Lament* likewise operates with a broad social network. While emotions often seem like a uniquely personal experience which have the greatest impact on the individual alone, historical studies of emotion have sought to understand not only the function of emotion within the individual, but also the

[233] *The Wife's Lament*, ll. 1-2a.
[234] *The Wife's Lament*, ll. 39b-41.

ways in which emotions affect and are influenced by social and cultural structures writ large. William Reddy proposes the concept of "emotives," a category analogous to "performatives" (as defined by J.L. Austin). Emotives, like performatives, are not purely descriptive statements, but create change: "[e]motives are influenced directly by, and alter, what they 'refer' to," so that a statement like "I am angry" may actually heighten or diminish that emotion within the speaker.[235] In this view, emotions have rippling effects beyond the individual: emotives "creat[e] the emotion both in the speaker and in his or her audience, and thereby alte[r] individual subjectivities and the groups, institutions, and cultures they inhabit and help to construct."[236] Reddy's model works from the individual outward to broadening spheres of social and cultural impact. Barbara Rosenwein instead begins with social groups: she defines the concept of "emotional communities" to articulate the power of emotions to connect people at a greater scale than interpersonal relationships alone. Rosenwein's model underscores the "social and relational nature of emotions," arguing that "if emotions are assessments based on experience and goals, the norms of the individual's social context provide the framework in which such evaluations take place and derive their meaning."[237]

We can observe this bridging of individual and sociocultural registers of emotions in our medieval sources: as Juanita Feros Ruys and colleagues argue, "different writers across the long period from late antiquity to early modernity, albeit in different ways, thought that *affectus* could

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[235] William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 105.
[236] Juanita Feros Ruys, Michael Champion, and Kirk Essary, *Before Emotion: The Language of Feeling, 400-1800* (Routledge, 2018), 1.
[237] Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Cornell University Press, 2006), 25, 15. Rosenwein defines emotional communities as "groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value – or devalue – the same or related emotions" (*Emotional Communities*, 2).

make and remake social relations and structures."[238] Yet, as Rosenwein's work suggests, we must look at the historically contingent ways that emotions effected such changes. In early English literature, the elegy genre showcases emotionality, drawing attention to affective expressions and structures. Alice Jorgensen contends that "[t]he prominence of the mind and emotions in Old English poetry thus, on the one hand, makes thousand-year-old texts seem immediate and accessible and, on the other hand, remains in need of careful scrutiny and contextualisation; we must not forget that that our own assumptions may lead us wrong."[239] Jorgensen cautions that our readings of medieval emotional expressions must account for the historical frameworks in which they operated. Jaeger's analysis of Anselm's and Alcuin's correspondence offers an example of a historically contextualized reading: emotional expressions we might be tempted to read as sexual or homoerotic may not have seemed thus to a medieval audience. By examining a text's attitude toward such gestures – that is, by taking texts at their word and seeking the historically specific emotional value systems of these communities – we can more accurately interpret the valences and meanings of emotional expressions and avoid inadvertent assumptions that medieval emotional frameworks are congruent with modern ones.

Reading for medieval attitudes and emotional value systems in the Old English elegies shows that the duality of joys and losses cut across gender. The elegies dramatize the consequences of relational successes and failures, and the emotions that arise when relationships are flourishing or when they sour and rupture. Within these portrayals, we find several veins of

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[238] Ruys, Champion, and Essary, *Before Emotion*, 5. In fact, the authors contend that emotions offer an analytical framework which has often been overlooked in historical scholarship: "[m]odern historians should not think of affect as a less primary category of analysis than, for example, political structures, subjectivity, religion, or gender" (5).

[239] Alice Jorgensen, Frances McCormack, and Jonathan Wilcox, introduction to *Anglo-Saxon Emotions: Reading the Heart in Old English Language, Literature, and Culture* (Routledge, 2016), 2.

shared language: different speakers use similar terms to describe a variety of relationship dynamics. One of the more striking comparisons appears between the descriptions of cross-gender romantic relationships in the female-voiced elegies and the same-gender bonds of lord and retainer in male-voiced elegies like *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Vocabulary from the heroic sphere features notably in *The Wife's Lament*, such as the references to lords and leaders (*hlaford*, *leodfruma*, *frean*), retainers (*folgað*), kinsmen (*magas*), and oaths (*beotedan*).[240] Similar terms appear in the aforementioned male-voiced elegies as well: in *The Seafarer*, the speaker refers to lords, kings, emperors, and gold-givers (*dryhten*, *cyningas*, *caseras*, *goldgiefan*).[241] *The Wanderer*'s narrator frequently invokes his lost lord through direct, personal reference (such as "my gold-giving friend" *goldwinne minne* and "lord of men" *mondryhten*), or in oblique terms (naming the roles of "treasure-giver" *sinces bryttan*, "hall-holders" *selesecgas*, as well as "hall-companions" *secga geseldan* and kinsmen *maga* / *freomægum*).[242] By employing similar modes of address, the female speaker draws a correlation between the husband-wife relationship and the lord-retainer relationship, though scholars debate the connotations of this correlation.

One reading suggests that these references demonstrate an attempt to assert a place for cross-gender relationships within a male-dominated heroic culture that privileges the bonds of the hall and the battlefield. For example, Ashby Kinch contends that "by injecting the voice and perspective of a woman into the discourse of warrior culture, [*The Wife's Lament*] implicitly argues that the ethics of warrior culture ought rightly to apply to male-female interpersonal

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[240] For citations from *The Wife's Lament*, see note 232 above.
[241] *The Seafarer*, ll. 41, 82-83. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1936); trans. R.M. Liuzza (in *Old English Poetry: An Anthology*, Broadview, 2014, 32-36). It is worth noting that several of these terms appear not in reference to the speaker's personal situation, but in his rumination on the fall of the world, the end of "all the pomp of this earthly kingdom" ("ealle onmedlan eorþan rices"), l. 81.
[242] *The Wanderer*: *goldwine minne* l. 21, *mondryhten* l. 32, *sinces bryttan* l. 25; *selesecgas* l. 34, *secga geseldan* l. 53, *maga* l. 51, *freomægum* l. 21. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1936); trans. R.M. Liuzza (in *Old English Poetry: An Anthology*, Broadview, 2014, 28-31).

relationships as well."[243] By this measure, depictions of cross-gender relationships may utilize the same rhetoric and language common in describing same-gender relationships in order to assert the value of the former by analogy with the latter. A second, related interpretation suggests that the heroic vocabulary of kings and vassals served as a common rhetorical and formulaic framework for describing any variety of relationships, operating literally (i.e. the bonds of lord and retainer) as well as metaphorically (e.g. husband-wife relationships, or the connection between the individual and God).[244] However, an alternative reading suggests that the use of heroic language instead offers a critique of, rather than participation in, heroic culture. According to this view, the commonness of heroic language outside of a strictly heroic, literal context illustrates a hierarchy in which homosocial bonds within the hall are valued above other forms of connection; when depictions of other relationships borrow these dominant formulas, those relationships become subordinated to heroic masculinity and aristocratic male homosociality. In other words, cross-gender relationships are perceived as imitations of male homosocial bonds, and second-rate imitations at that. In the process of linguistic conflation, the complexities of cross-gender relationships are collapsed, and the ways in which they differ from male-male relationships are elided through reliance on discursive formulas that are not attentive to such nuances.

However, the metaphorical use of heroic vocabulary and literary formulas extend beyond *The Wife's Lament*. Framing the relation of humans to God in lord/retainer language also implies

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[243] Ashby Kinch, "The Ethical Agency of the Female Lyric Voice: *The Wife's Lament* and Catullus 64," *Studies in Philology* 103, no. 2 (2006): 125-26.
[244] For examples of the latter, see *The Dream of the Rood* (an extended prosopopoeic narrative in which the holy cross is depicted as a loyal retainer and Christ as a bold warrior; additionally, Riddle 43 (commonly solved as "soul and body") employs earthly relationships, including lord/retainer language, to metaphorically describe the relation of the body and the soul.

that such vocabulary cannot be inherently subordinating, since a connection to the divine would logically fall higher in the hierarchy than any earthly relationship.[245] The fact that similar comparisons between same-gender and cross-gender relationships are found in diverse sources indicates that early English culture likely perceived these relationship dynamics in overlapping ways as well. This further suggests that many interpersonal bonds shared similar characteristics, and all contributed (albeit in different ways) to the larger network that constituted early English social structure. While we have plenty of literary examples that valorize the homosocial male bonds of *comitatus* and markedly fewer examples which discuss (much less valorize) cross-gender relationships, these overlaps suggest that cross-gender relationships *were* valued, and were understood to be more than pragmatic associations entered solely for economic, reproductive, or political purposes (though they certainly held those valences as well).

The linguistic convergences observed here also illustrate that early English culture may have embraced more fluid understandings of love and intimate affection than we do today. While medieval people no doubt perceived clear differences between a marriage and an oath of fealty, for example, the fact that the emotions associated with those relationships were portrayed in strikingly similar terms suggests that this culture did not distinguish between types of love and affection as concretely or discretely as many modern cultures do. In this way, the love of friends may not be much distinct from the love of spouses or sexual partners. Literary historians note that the concepts of desire, pleasure, and love bridge across relationship dynamics, sometimes in surprising ways for the modern reader. For example, Lees argues that early English culture is not "bereft of a language of love. In addition to the homosocial bonds of the heroic literature and the

[245] In another example, the shared oath-making language in *Be wifmannes beweddunge* and *Swerian* unites the marriage vow and the oath of fealty; see note 191 above.

estranged heterosexual relations of the female-voiced elegies, there is also the complex relation between man and God, woman and God."[246] While my foregoing analysis challenges the idea that the female-voiced elegies portray "estranged *heterosexual* relations," Lees usefully points out that cross-gender relationships exist within a milieu of other bonds, socially and spiritually, and that a "language of love" infuses many. Cross-gender relationships – marital, sexual, or otherwise – did not exist in isolation in the medieval mind, nor were they so dissimilar to other kinds of relationships as to occupy an entirely different conceptual framework.

The emotions inspired by a range of relationships likewise occupied the same conceptual frameworks, as we can observe in the elegies. Like *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament*, male-voiced poems that portray homosocial relationships also rely on emotions to communicate their experiences. Two trends illustrate the emotional similarities across female- and male-voiced elegies – that is, across elegiac portrayals of cross-gender and same-gender relationships: ruminations on an exile's isolation, and emphasis on the speaker's sorrow and the loss of happier feelings. The former pattern situates the speakers within a community, even if that community is now lost to them; this demonstrates how interpersonal relationships collectively constitute a larger social whole. The latter trend shows the centrality of emotions as a key conceptual framework through which these poems attempt to communicate highly subjective experiences and make them apprehensible to those who have not shared those experiences themselves.

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[246] Lees, "Engendering Desire," 17. Lees continues that "the psycho-sexual investment of the warrior in battle, the bonds between man and lord, and the expression of affect expressed by the erotic love-longing of some of the elegies remind us of the breadth of any definition of pleasure, even when it is bound to cultural representations of heroic life or to the pervasive sociocultural metaphor of exile" (23). Beyond medieval studies, Haggerty contends that "at the beginning of the longer eighteenth century, it was becoming possible to read these outpourings of emotionality [between male friends] as expressions of a love that is none other than the love that we recognize as existing between men and women" in sources from the period; see Haggerty, *Queer Friendship*, 9.

Of the male-voiced elegies, *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* focus most explicitly on themes of exile and isolation. *The Seafarer* begins as the speaker mourns the loss of his community, as exemplified by the torments of his exile. He himself has been "deprived of dear kinsmen" (*winemægum bidroren*) with "no sheltering family" (*ne ænig hleomaga*) for comfort.[247] He then ruminates on what every exile has lost: "He has no thought of the harp or the taking of rings, / nor the pleasures of woman nor joy in the world" ("Ne biþ him to hearpan hyge ne to hringþege, / ne to wife wyn ne to worulde hyht").[248] The speaker also bemoans that the sounds of nature are only a pale imitation of human communities and serve to underscore his isolation.[249] The narrator of *The Wanderer* is "cut off from my own homeland, / far from dear kinsmen" ("eðle bidæled, / freomægum feor").[250] He recounts that he

> sohte sele dreorig sinces bryttan,
> hwær ic feor oþþe neah findan meahte
> þone þe in meoduhealle min mine wisse,
> oþþe mec freondleasne frefran wolde,
> weman mid wynnum.
> sought, hall-sick, a treasure-giver,
> wherever I might find, far or near,
> someone in a meadhall who might know my people,
> or who would want to comfort me, friendless,

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[247] *The Seafarer*, ll. 16, 25.
[248] *The Seafarer*, ll. 44-45.
[249] "[T]he wild swan's song / sometimes served for music, the gannet's call / and the curlew's cry for the laughter of men, / the seagull's singing for mead-drink" ("Hwilum ylfete song / dyde ic me to gomene, ganetes hleoþor / ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor wera, / mæw singende fore medodrince"); *The Seafarer*, ll. 19b-22.
[250] *The Wanderer*, ll. 20-21.

accustom me to joy.[251]

In this passage, the lonely exile is "hall-sick," experiencing his isolation as an embodied pathology, not unlike the speaker's (love)sickness in *Wulf and Eadwacer*. His tone rings of desperation: he most desires to find a "treasure-giver" (*sinces bryttan*) who would provide him a place in society through the lord/retainer bond, but he also yearns for rumor of his people, or at least some temporary comfort. In similar fashion, the narrator of *The Wife's Lament* mourns her solitude when her lord sends her into a second exile: "I had few loved ones or loyal friends / in this country, which causes me grief" ("ahte ic leofra lyt on þissum londstede, / holdra freonda. Forþon is min hyge geomor").[252] *The Wanderer* compounds the speaker's personal loss with gnomic contemplation of the end of all earthly things: the wise man asks, "where is the giver of gold? / Where are the seats of the feast? where are the joys of the hall?" ("Hwær cwom maþþumgyfa? / hwær cwom symbla gesetu? Hwær sindon seledreamas?").[253] By drawing on the same symbols in both passages – the treasure-giver, the merry hall, "dear warriors" ("leofre duguþe") – the poem links the personal to the social.[254] This is not simply an analogy of microcosm to macrocosm, in which the interpersonal relationship synecdochally represents society; rather, the personal *is* the social, and individual connections form the structure of society.

Both of these male-voiced elegies likewise focus on emotions as the vehicle for communicating their personal experiences. Like *The Wife's Lament*, *The Seafarer* begins its

[251] *The Wanderer*, ll. 25-29a.
[252] *The Wife's Lament*, ll. 16-17.
[253] *The Wanderer*, ll. 92b-93.
[254] *The Wanderer*, ll. 97.

introduction by centering the speaker's suffering. In fact, the opening lines are remarkably similar to *The Wife's Lament*:

> Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan,
> siþas secgan, hu ic geswincdagum
> earfoðhwile oft þrowade,
> bitre breostceare.
> I can sing a true song of myself,
> tell of my journeys, how in days of toil
> I've often suffered troubled times,
> endured hard heartache.[255]

The speaker contrasts the cold of his physical surroundings with the "cares [that] seethed / hot around my heart" ("þære þa ceare seofedun / hat ymb heortan").[256] His emotional state transforms the tactile sensations of cold into an interior heat, showing causality (events cause suffering) while also prioritizing the emotional register: no matter how cold the environment becomes, the seething heat of his cares only increases. In *The Wanderer*, the narrator laments that there is no one to hear his suffering:

> Oft ic sceolde ana uhtna gehwylce
> mine ceare cwiþan. Nis nu cricra nan
> þe ic him modsefan minne durre
> sweotule asecgan.
> Often alone, in the first light of dawn,

[255] *The Seafarer*, ll. 1-4a. Compare *The Wife's Lament* at notes 232 and 240 above.
[256] *The Seafarer*, ll. 10b-11a.

I have sung my lament. There is none living

to whom I would dare to reveal clearly

my heart's thoughts.[257]

As a result of his isolation, he recounts: "I have had to take my own heart…and bind it fast in fetters" ("ic modsefan minne sceolde…feterum sælan").[258] As this poem dwells at length on the speaker's exile from human community, this emotionality illustrates a cycle of increased isolation and suffering: his distance from lord and hall causes his sorrows, and the absence of anyone to hear his tale (and thereby gain some measure of comfort through catharsis, perhaps) only heightens his pain. The speaker of *The Wife's Lament* similarly describes her own lonely dwelling, where she sits alone and weeps "for all my exiles, / my many troubles" ("mine wræcsiþas, / earfoþa fela").[259] Like the seafarer, she "can never / escape from the cares of my sorrowful mind, / nor all the longings that seize me in this life" ("forþon ic æfre ne mæg / þære modceare minre gerestan, / ne ealles þæs longaþes þe mec on þissum life begeat").[260]

But, like the female-voiced elegies, isolation and sorrow are not the only emotions *The Wanderer* depicts. In a dream sequence, the speaker imagines kissing and embracing his lord and resting his head on his lord's knee:

þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten

clyppe ond cysse, ond on cneo lecge

honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær

in geardagum giefstolas breac.

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[257] *The Wanderer*, ll. 8-11a.
[258] *The Wanderer*, ll. 19, 21b.
[259] *The Wife's Lament*, ll. 38b-39a.
[260] *The Wife's Lament*, ll. 39b-41.

it seems in his mind that he clasps and kisses
his lord of men, and on his knee lays
hands and head, as he sometimes long ago
in early days enjoyed the gift-throne.[261]

In his imagination, "the memory of kinsmen flies through the mind; / he greets them with great joy, greedily surveys / hall-companions" ("maga gemund mod geondhweorfeð; / greteð gliwstafum, georne geondsceawað / secga geseldan").[262]

In many ways, this description of intimacy mirrors *Wulf and Eadwacer,* when the speaker feels both joy and pain from the warrior's embraces. The pain of broken bonds speaks to the power those relationships held and the intensity of the affection and intimacy therein; without such deep love, the pain would be less acute. Klinck contends that such "impassioned intimacy" distinctively characterizes the two female-voiced elegies: "[t]hough *The Wife's Lament* displays some important structural affinities with *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, its subject links it with the love poems: *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Husband's Message*."[263] As my analysis shows, however, "impassioned intimacy" is by no means unique to cross-gender relationships in the elegies, and is equally visible in depictions of homosocial relationships like *The Wanderer*. Furthermore, I would argue that scholarship often perceives the depth of intimacy in the elegies' portrayals of cross-gender relationships as unique and distinctive precisely because they are also perceived as romantic. Put simply, our modern assumption that romantic and sexual partnerships represent the most intimate and meaningful human relationships has colored previous readings of these poems. Yet upon closer inspection, the elegies – and the larger Old English corpus –

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[261] *The Wanderer*, ll. 41-44; the full dream sequence spans ll. 37-57.
[262] *The Wanderer*, ll. 51-53a.
[263] Klinck, *The Old English Elegies*, 52-53.

proffer numerous expressions of interpersonal intimacy and deep affection within multiple relationship dynamics. These poems illustrate that people feel desire, passion, and affection in many directions, toward multiple individuals who play diverse roles in their lives, and that personal fulfillment does not rely solely on sexual or even romantic love for its realization.

The Old English elegies also create meaningful interpersonal relationships beyond the page. In these poems, emotional connectivity operates on two levels: the relationships described *within* the texts and the potential relationships formed *by* the texts, those which unite speaker and audience(s). In some instances, the speaker imagines that the audience has shared similar life experiences; for example, *The Wanderer*'s speaker commiserates that "he who has long been forced to forego / his lord's beloved words of counsel will understand" ("wat se þe sceal his winedryhtnes / leofes larcwidum longe forþolian").[264] However, in many cases these poems offer emotions as a communicative bridge where life experiences do not coincide. The elegy implicitly extends a metaphorical hand: while the audience may not have suffered the speaker's tribulations, the elegiac form expects that the audience can understand the speaker's feelings about those experiences, because surely the audience has felt the same way before. The emotions described within a poem – sorrow, pain, joy, heart-sickness – build a pathway of empathy and recognition between speaker and audience.

Given the first-person interiority of the elegy genre, the emotions in these poems may strike the modern reader as more "real" or "honest" than those expressed in more formulaic and overtly constructed ways: we often perceive that certain genres "reveal how a person 'really' feels" while others do not.[265] However, the elegies operate according to their own generic

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[264] *The Wanderer*, ll. 37-38.
[265] Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, 28.

formulas; their interiority does not exempt them from such constraints. Yet constraints are not purely limitations, nor are genre conventions absolute. Ruys and her colleagues explain that emotion and genre are mutually influential: while "genre limits and constrains emotional practices…emotional practices themselves create and help modify genres."[266] Moreover, formulaic expressions of emotion are not inherently less genuine. Jaeger illustrates this point using the example of a general delivering a speech to his troops: "The fervor proclaimed must *be seen* as deriving from fervor felt and experienced – and if it actually does derive from it, so much the better." He concludes that "[a]cting according to a widely idealized pattern…does not mean that social gesture is empty, ceremonial posturing. Just the opposite: in order to have weight and meaning, the gesture must be grounded in experienced emotion."[267]

Far from an empty gesture, genre conventions and literary formulas actually enable texts to create emotional connections with audiences. Rosenwein observes that "[e]motions are always delivered 'secondhand'" through "gestures, bodily changes, words, exclamations, tears. None of these things *are* the emotion; they are symptoms that must be interpreted – both by the person feeling them and by observers."[268] One's internal experiences of emotion may seem incommunicable – how can one person truly feel how another feels? In order for emotions to serve their connective functions, those emotions must be articulated in ways that an audience can successfully interpret; for the Old English elegies, a "successful" interpretation inspires recognition and engenders empathy in the audience. In these texts, shared linguistic and generic

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[266] Ruys, Champion, and Essary, *Before Emotion*, 5.
[267] Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 18-19; emphasis original. Rosenwein also addresses the critical utility of "artificial" and "insincere" emotions: see *Emotional Communities*, 29.
[268] Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, 27.

formulas do this work: they allow a narrator to translate highly personal, individual, subjective emotions into recognizable and legible experiences.

This emotional translation defines the Old English elegy: these texts dramatize the emotional affiliations between author and audience by staging a paradox of community, because the elegy's themes are intrinsically at odds with its structure. Even though exile and isolation are hallmarks of the elegiac genre, elegies presume an audience because they seek to verbalize and translate personal experiences and emotions. Thus the elegy creates a paradox: on the one hand, the poem takes the loss of community as its central theme, while on the other hand, the very composition of the poem presupposes the narrator's membership in a community.[269] This dichotomy becomes visible in passages where the elegiac speakers contrast their own suffering with others' happiness. In *The Seafarer* and *The Wife's Lament*, glimpses of happier times are not the speakers' purview, but belong to luckier people: several times, the speaker of *The Seafarer* references this lucky individual, "he who has tasted life's joy in towns" ("him gelifeð lyt, se þe ah lifes wyn"), and enumerates the contrasts between their life experiences.[270] The narrator of *The Wife's Lament* compares her solitary walking and weeping with the luckier lives of "friends on earth, / lovers living who lie in their beds" ("Frynd sind on eorþan, / leofe lifgende, leger weardiað"), who cannot imagine her hardships.[271] These observations outline three rhetorical positions: the speaker, their audience, and the happier parties living in blissful ignorance. When the elegiac speaker contrasts their sorrow against a third party, they enfold the audience into their own experiences. They do not say in the second person that "you" (the audience) cannot understand their experience; instead, the speakers assert that others (in the third

[269] In this case, the reference to the poem's composition focuses on the narrator rather than the author or transcriber.
[270] *The Seafarer*, l. 27. Similar sentiments occur in ll. 12-13 and 55-56.
[271] *The Wife's Lament*, ll. 33b-34.

person) cannot. This tripartite model assumes that the audience *can* understand, through shared experiences – or rather, through connective emotional expressions. While all elegies presuppose an empathetic audience, these comparative passages make plain the audience's participation in the emotional exchange of the poem.

The elegies examined thus far – that is, those which center human relationships – all strive to create emotional connections with an audience. The character of the relationships portrayed within the poem, be they same-gender or cross-gender, employ shared vocabulary and familiar images to translate experiences of love and loss. In these texts, affection and intimacy transcend distinctions of gender and status: homosocial relationships are portrayed with no lesser depth of emotion than romantic bonds. However, this argument does not deny gender's influence in shaping these depictions. Rather, an asexual lens – that is, the decentering of sex in favor of other forms of relationality like emotion – reveals the paradoxical distinctions between masculine and feminine subjectivities as they were imagined in literature. Although male and female speakers shared the same emotions, and even shared similar lived experiences, the texts show that they felt the impacts of those circumstances in distinct ways. To conclude this chapter, I will suggest one way that the elegies illuminate how early English culture understood gendered subjectivity. The two female-voiced poems deny and critique the consolation found in the male-voiced elegies and, in doing so, illustrate the limitations of language, especially heroic language, to articulate subjective experience, especially from marginalized perspectives.

In *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the elements of loss and sorrow eclipse any possibility for consolation. *Wulf and Eadwacer* ends with the image of two people who are paradoxically linked (via the dual pronoun *uncer*) but are also divided (*toslitеð*) so fundamentally that they may never have been truly linked (*þætte næfre gesomnad wæs*). The

speaker of *The Wife's Lament* recounts how her husband's kinsmen turn him against her, leading him to banish her to a remote wilderness. This poem has a slightly longer contemplative passage at its end, and seems to almost approach the consolatory air of elegies like *The Wanderer* or *The Seafarer*. The speaker admonishes a young man to bear (or perhaps to hide) his sorrows with a smile: "let him have / a smiling face along with his heartache" ("swylce habban sceal / bliþe gebæro, eac þon breostceare").[272] However, the poem turns away from dwelling on any happier thoughts and instead returns to the experience of exile and suffering. Like *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the final image of *The Wife's Lament* puts any happiness or hope in the past, while the present and future hold only woe for those who wait for absent love: "Woe to the one / who must wait with longing for a loved one" ("Wa bið þam þe sceal / of langoþe leofes abidan").[273]

In each of these poems, the poet acknowledges the common elegiac convention of offering consolation to the sorrow described in the earlier lines, as both move from personal experience to universalizing language. The idea of learning from one's suffering may seem little comfort, but elegiac consolation contends that universalizing gestures nevertheless offer practical wisdom by reframing the personal in terms of the universal. However, the speakers in the female-voiced poems offer a consolatory gesture only to retract it, anchoring each poem's closing in personal language once again. The traces of gnomic generalization observed in *The Wife's Lament* passage above demonstrate the speaker's awareness of the rhetorical possibility for consolation and aphorism that the elegy genre invites. Given this awareness, the lack of consolation or universal wisdom does not represent a failure to meet certain generic conventions, but rather a pointed rejection of those possibilities. Marilynn Desmond attributes this rejection to

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[272] *The Wife's Lament*, ll. 43b-44.
[273] *The Wife's Lament*, ll. 52b-53.

the place of women at the margins of early English culture. She argues that the female speaker "seeks consolation in language…[attempting] to construct a linguistic representation of the world from which she has been exiled," but consolation is thwarted by her status as a "subordinate if not marginal member of her culture."[274] In consciously rejecting the gnomic generalizations of the male-voiced elegies, the female speakers assert that this form of consolation inadequately addresses the depth of the sorrows it intends to assuage, or that the continuing circumstances which create such suffering preclude a hope for the future.

The feminine denial of gnomic consolation may illuminate gender differences in the material circumstances of the speakers' lives. Based on the scant narrative details contained within the poems themselves (and generally corroborated by historical evidence), men seemed to have more autonomy or influence over such circumstances than women could exercise.[275] For example, in *The Husband's Message*, the messenger explains that "[a] feud drove him [the titular husband] / from the victorious people" ("Hine fæhþo adraf / of sigeþeode"), indicating some level of precarity in their previous home. Now, however, "the man has / overcome woe; there is no lack of delights for him" ("Nu se mon hafað / wean oferwunnen; nis him wilna gad").[276] These narrative details hint that, while the husband found himself at the mercy of a situation he could not resolve at home, his ability to leave and improve his fortunes distinctly differs from the stasis which characterizes the poem's addressee – she was presumably left behind, to weather the consequences of the feud.[277]

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[274] Desmond, "The Voice of Exile," 587.
[275] Gender is by no means the only delimiting factor in shaping an individual's level of autonomy and agency. As the previous chapter explored, social status often produced the greatest disparities in relative power; ethnicity, religious affiliation, age, and (dis)ability all contribute.
[276] *The Husband's Message*, ll. 19b-20a, 43b-44.
[277] Klein makes a similar distinction between the ways that male and female elegiac speakers perceive space: "For the male exile, place is unstable, yet productively so: the world's instability impels him toward spiritual change as it simultaneously figures the ephemerality of earthly life and his own spiritual progress. For the female exile, place is

Underscoring these gendered divergences in agency, the perceived sources of suffering also differ in female-voiced and male-voiced elegies. The gnomic perspective of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* generally attributes the speakers' suffering to macroscopic causes beyond the human realm: *wyrd*,[278] the passage of time, and most importantly divine will.[279] In contrast, the narrative details in the female-voiced elegies assign blame to specific people in the speakers' lives, even if their precise identities are not clear: *Wulf and Eadwacer* references the "murderous and cruel men" ("wælreowe weras") who will kill Wulf (a refrain repeated twice, emphasizing the danger) as well as Eadwacer, whom most interpretations view as the agent of (or at least complicit in) the speaker's isolation.[280] In *The Wife's Lament*, the husband's kinsmen are the speaker's first enemy, as they scheme to break up the marriage. They soon convince the husband to turn against the speaker, and he becomes the second hostile party: he is "concealing his mind, plotting murder / with a smiling face" ("mod miþendne, morþor hycgendne. / Bliþe gebæro"), so that "[f]ar and near, I must / endure the hatred of my dearest one" ("Sceal ic feor ge neah / mines felaleofan fæhðu dreogan").[281] These differences may contribute to the refusal of gnomic generalization in the female-voiced elegies: female speakers emphasize the consequences of human actions while male speakers focus on forces beyond human control. Christian consolation may be sufficient solace for a cruel world, but such equanimity may be harder to accept when the

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all too permanent, a space from which she can never escape and that does not prompt spiritual change but simply embodies her spiritual inertia and psychological torment"; see Klein, "Gender and the Nature of Exile in Old English Elegies," in *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, ed. Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing (Penn State University Press, 2006), 115-16.

[278] *Wyrd* appears in *The Wanderer* (ll. 5, 15, 100, 107) and *The Seafarer* (l. 115); R.M. Liuzza clarifies the meanings of *wyrd*: "a powerful but not quite personified force. It is related to the verb *weorthan*, meaning roughly 'to occur.' Its meanings range from a neutral 'event' to a prescribed 'destiny' to a personified 'Fate'; it is useful to think of *wyrd* as 'what happens,' usually in a negative sense" (*Old English Poetry*, 28, note 2).

[279] *The Wanderer*: on the passage of time, ll. 63-35, 95-96; on divine will, ll. 84-85. *The Seafarer*: on the passage of time, ll. 66-67, 70, 80-81, 89, 91; on divine will, ll. 43, 103ff.

[280] *Wulf and Eadwacer*, ll. 2, 6-7.

[281] *The Wife's Lament*, ll. 20-21a, 25b-26.

authors of one's suffering still live in joy. This is not to argue that men did not suffer from personal hostilities, as many other literary and historical sources can attest. Rather, this pattern demonstrates that early English culture perceived men's and women's subjectivity differently. Because elegiac poetry seeks to dramatize experiences of suffering, the gendered differences in causation indicate that women defined and experienced suffering differently than men – or at least that this culture perceived such a distinction.

This reading also reveals how the poetic impetus itself is a potential form of consolation, in which the speaker may find comfort in the solidarity of shared experiences. Desmond suggests that the female speaker searches for, but fails to find, any solace in the act of sharing her story. These speakers certainly encounter many obstacles in attempting to generalize their experiences and emotions, or perhaps more specifically, to translate those experiences and emotions into intelligible terms. But because the elegy genre presumes an empathetic audience, literary consolation provides a sure avenue for human connection, one removed from the vagaries of lived reality. Belanoff argues that the female-voiced elegies "ask their audiences to share emotions with them, to be present at the creation of meaning which can never be fully articulated. Far from being weak, these women triumph because they have created emotional and psychological bonds with their audiences."[282] Finding community in emotional expression may seem an especially appealing prospect for these speakers in the face of the sundered relationships narrated within the poems. While language may never perfectly represent the interior experience

[282] Belanoff, "Women's Songs, Women's Voices," 200. Belanoff seems to include certain elegies like *The Wanderer* in her definition of heroic poetry.

of emotion, the symbiosis of genre and gender in the female-voiced elegies provide these speakers an alternative relationality.[283]

In conclusion, gender differences in Old English secular literature revolve far *less* around sexuality than the modern reader might expect. Romantic love features occasionally in these texts, alongside many other expressions of affection and intimacy; these emotional expressions share cultural and linguistic frameworks, so that forms of love which we view today as distinct and dissimilar show striking similarities in early English texts. Across humanity, we share the desire for meaningful connections with other people, and our search for these relationships defines us. We characterize our relationships through culturally-specific emotional frameworks, and we process our feelings through language, as we come to understand our own emotions and communicate them to others. In early medieval England, gender delineates the agency that subjectivities may exercise outside the realm of self-expression. The emotional and material impacts of relationships are felt differently by men and women, at least as these gendered subjectivities are portrayed in literature. Gender divergence occurs not because this culture used markedly different emotional-linguistic frameworks to interpret differently gendered relationships, but because the circumstances which shape personal relationships and experiences differ. While both men and women can experience – or empathetically imagine – the crushing loneliness of exile, gender delimits an individual's ability to control their material circumstances. In the female-voiced elegies, this difference results in a rejection of consolation: for these speakers, the reminders of their embodied reality and the human enmities which brought them low remain too immediate to permit consideration of a nebulous afterlife, or even the room to

[283] For further discussion of how models of asexuality make room to consider alternate relationalities, see Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Duke University Press, 2013).

take a metaphorical step back and view their situation more dispassionately. The present (and the past) preoccupy these female speakers' minds to the exclusion of the future.

Significantly, these descriptions of malicious separation and inconsolable loss are shared through elegy, a genre which dramatizes interiority and the search for connection by building bonds of recognition and empathy between speaker and audience. It seems tragically ironic that such a highly relational genre becomes the vehicle for these voices: the female speakers position people as the cause of their suffering rather than *wyrd*, cruel fate, or a divine plan, yet the elegiac form continues to reach out, hoping for human connection. And maybe irony is the point. As Belanoff remarks, "[w]hat has endured through [the female-voiced elegies] is a message about the value, strength, and universality of our connections to others in a world characterized by strife and alienation, both physical and emotional, from other human beings – no matter what might be the causes."[284] By staging this contradiction between viewing people as a source of harm and as necessary and desirable community, the female-voiced elegies perform a kind of vulnerability, one that resounds with hurt and betrayal, yet perhaps maintains a glimmer of desperate optimism that meaningful connections may still be possible, if only through poetry itself.

[284] Belanoff, "Women's Songs, Women's Voices," 201.

Chapter 3

"Lord of Maidens": Virginity as Gender Variance

In his homily on Judith, Ælfric commends the heroine to his audience because of her purity and spiritual cleanness. Ælfric appends several interpretations to the end of his narrative, explaining the message his audience should take away from the story.

> Heo eadmod 7 clæne, 7 ofercom þone modigan, lytel 7 unstrang, 7 alede þone miclan. Forðan þe heo getacnode untweolice mid weorcum þa halgan gelaðunge þe gelyfð nu on God, þæt is Cristes cyrce on eallum Cristenum folce, his an clene bryd þe mid cenum geleafan þam ealdum deofle of forcerf þæt heafod, æfre on clænnysse Criste þeowigende.
>
> She was humble and clean, and overcame pride, little and not strong, and laid down the great one. Therefore she signifies the faithful with works, the holy congregation who now lives in God, that is the church of Christ in all Christian people, his one clean bride who with keen belief cuts off the head from the old devil, ever in cleanness serving Christ.[285]

For Ælfric, Judith represents cleanness and chastity, two virtues often associated with virginity in medieval religious texts. Despite her literal status as a widow, Ælfric describes Judith as Christ's "one clean bride" ("an clene bryd") who wields her faith like a weapon. In doing so, Ælfric draws connections between sexual continence, steadfast faith, and spiritual (and even physical) strength. Judith's inviolable faith allows her to cut off Holofernes's head, just as devoted Christians can metaphorically cut off the devil's head by remaining strong in faith and

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[285] Ælfric, homily on Judith, ll. 344-50. Old English text ed. Stuart D. Lee (in *Ælfric's Homilies on Judith, Esther, and the Maccabees*, University of Oxford, 1999, https://users.ox.ac.uk/~stuart/kings/main.htm); trans. Brandon Hawk ("Ælfric's Sermon on Judith," 2017, https://brandonwhawk.net/2017/01/17/aelfrics-sermon-on-judith/).

overcoming temptation. But in Ælfric's homily, Judith's spiritual purity grants her a metaphorical virginity as well: because the term "clean/ness" ("clæne", "clænnysse") resonates with both spiritual and bodily meanings, Ælfric's Judith slides between the literal (as a chaste widow) and the metaphorical (as a virgin).

Ælfric's homily on Judith illustrates the complex and multivalent meanings of virginity in medieval theology. On a literal level, virgins were those who remained sexually abstinent their whole lives, but virginity also extends conceptually and metaphorically to those like Judith who, by virtue of their exceptional faith and sexual continence, demonstrate a spiritual purity equivalent to virginal bodily purity. Judith's example also demonstrates the ways that virginity functions as a spiritual, gender, and sexual identity simultaneously: she is gendered feminine through her seduction of Holofernes – as Aldhelm remarks in his retelling of Judith's story, "the adornment of women is called the depredation of men!"[286] – which links gender to sexuality in a manner that virginity itself problematizes, since virginity signals a refusal of sexual (and thus gender) roles. And virginity's sanctifying qualities further disrupt the simple alignment of gendered and sexual expectations: as Christ's "one clean bride," Judith can adopt the roles of both feminine seductress and sword-carrying warrior without earning the social opprobrium that either behavior might otherwise earn her.

Medieval virginity encompassed all these possibilities, representing a broad spectrum of variation – the possibility for the "virgin" to be a widow, a seductress, a literal warrior as well as a metaphorical one. Virginity also gave license for the figures of legend to perform many other seemingly transgressive behaviors like rejecting the social responsibility of marriage, cross-

[286] Aldhelm, *De Virginitate*, LVII; in *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, ed. and trans. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (D.S. Brewer, 1979), 127.

dressing, or even suicide, and moreover, to be received by hagiographers and their audiences with approval in spite of (or perhaps because of) their unconventional and exceptional deeds.[287] A virgin's seeming transgressions reshaped social roles in several registers, including hierarchies of status and civic authority as well as gender expectations. Removed from sexual activity and its incumbent social roles, virgins were marked as neither entirely masculine nor entirely feminine according to predominant secular definitions. Given that a person's gender is defined not only by what sexual parts they have, but also how they choose to use them, then the virgin's choice to not participate in sex and reproduction thus represents a choice to not participate in (traditionally) gendered life writ large.[288]

With these apparent transgressions in mind, this chapter argues that religious virginity is inherently genderfluid or gender-ambiguous in early medieval England. Although textual sources often insist on assigning a binary gender identity to their virgin protagonists, that insistence is never complete: because of virginity's proximity to the divine and distance from earthly life, a virgin can never be entirely masculine or entirely feminine by earthly standards. Moreover, religious texts portray virginity in diverse ways, with differing relationships between virginal purity, sanctity, bodily sex, and social gender expression/perception. These variants also have differing relationships to structures of power: because virginity negotiates between, and in part redefines, traditional forms of masculinity and femininity, models of virginity can be used by writers and audiences to challenge binary ideas of gender, while other variants are put in service

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[287] For discussion of suicide in defense of virginity, see Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*, XXXI (Lapidge and Herren 90-91).

[288] As Karma Lochrie has argued, "[a]t the heart of all the proscriptions about moral sexual relations is first and foremost a fear of gender perversion in the form of an abandonment of the positions and roles that make feminine and masculine *mean* in the Middle Ages." If, as many medieval thinkers maintained, "the only reason for gender differences in the first place...was for the purpose of procreation, there is no threat to procreation that is not also already a threat to gender difference"; see Lochrie, *Covert Operations: : The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) 186.

of maintaining and naturalizing the binary. My analysis seeks to recontextualize variants of religious virginity within a broader range of gender alternatives, including but not limited to the dominant models of masculinity and femininity, in order to understand the intersectional constraints at play in different circumstances.

Virginity does not simply create gender variation but also redefines the ways in which particular variants were perceived as transgressive, acceptable, or even laudable. One primary method by which virginity gives license to seemingly transgressive actions is the virgin's orientation toward God. In a religious sense, one *becomes* a virgin through a continual process of signification. Understanding virginity as orientation highlights how the medieval virgin's focus on the divine can rewrite cultural scripts, disavowing certain aspects of secular life and reshaping others. And just as virginity is defined by participation in and/or rejection of particular behaviors and roles, virginity in turn reframes the meanings of the behaviors and roles that virgins undertake. In this way, virginity transforms transgression by changing social reception of particular acts and consequently transforms the idea of transgression itself.

To explore this transformative potential, this chapter traces the ways in which virginity creates gender variation in early medieval England. The first section establishes the theoretical framework by which virginity shapes gender. In many medieval sources, virginity is synonymous with faith, and actions which support and defend one element necessarily involve the other. Defending one's virginity and proving one's faith are an exercise of willpower and personal fortitude; since medieval theology generally held (following Augustine) that virginity dwells in one's internal mind or spirit more than in one's body, the exercise of will to maintain one's virginity also constitutes that virginity. Moreover, the spiritual understanding of virginity made virginity metaphorical: virgins were those of the highest faith, not simply those practicing

lifelong sexual abstinence. In this way, actions that serve one's faith – even actions that may seem transgressive by secular standards – become permissible or even admirable. My analysis draws on queer and transgender frameworks to understand how "the qualities of transness and genderfluidity…could be valorised as exemplary models of devotion within normative discourses of medieval Christian asceticism and monasticism."[289]

Within this framework, virginity has the power to redefine gender transgression. At its simplest, this redefinition means that behaviors or roles usually perceived as deviant become permissible (or more) by virtue of the subject's virginal identity. In recategorizing these behaviors and roles, virginity highlights the paradoxical principles at work in the concept of transgression: narratives of virginity question the criteria by which any action is deemed transgressive, opening up a wider range of potential perceptions not limited to the black and white notions of conformity and deviance. The second section explores how virginity transforms potential transgressions by analyzing several virginal gender variants in Old English literature. The verse hagiographies *Juliana* and *Judith* translate cultural values from the heroic world into a Christian context. As militancy becomes metaphorical, it transforms from transgressive to idealized; in the process, gender transforms from binary and socially determined to multiple and fluid. Turning to prose hagiography, the *Lives* of the cross-identified saints Eugenia and Euphrosyne position gender transformation at the center of the narrative.[290] Because the saints' gender variance becomes the vehicle for their sanctity, these legends require metaphorical

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[289] Tess Wingard, "The Trans Middle Ages: Incorporating Transgender and Intersex Studies in to the History of Medieval Sexuality," *English Historical Review* 138, no. 593 (2024): 949.

[290] A note on terminology: when describing the saints themselves, I use the descriptor "cross-identified" rather than "transvestite" to acknowledge the potential connections between outward appearance and self-identity. While we cannot definitively know how these saints understood their own gender in relation to their dress, "cross-identified" makes room for possibilities that the term "transvestite" may foreclose.

reading practices in order to understand how seemingly transgressive actions can create rather than inhibit holiness. And by asking audiences to read metaphorically, these narratives reframe the meaning of transgression in the face of diverse gender possibilities.

However, changing religious and social circumstances which permitted certain transformations also curtailed others, and thus virginity's transformative power remained conditional and limited. Just as the idea of unity in Christ does not erase social differences, so too for medieval virginity: in one light, removal from the marital and reproductive economy brought certain freedoms, enabled certain behaviors, and allowed for even greater imaginative possibilities. Yet earthly gender difference never disappeared from view: as Julie Bond Hassel explains, "[n]either 'man' nor 'woman' captures the gender of medieval religious, in part because of their attempt to withdraw, at least to some degree, from the world, and because of their own attempts to ignore their own sexuality as well," but nevertheless "the categories of male and female matter even for religious, and cannot be transcended by thought or prayer."[291] The final section of the chapter discusses the social and discursive limitations on virginity's gender-variant possibilities, as well as their enduring imaginative power.

While these gender variants did not necessarily replace or overshadow more dominant forms of masculinity and femininity, their existence as positive alternatives rather than as subordinated lesser options blurs the boundary between center and margins. They illustrate the multiplicity of gender in early medieval England and point to the ways that notions of subversion and conformity stand in tension with each other. If there are multiple acceptable and even idealized ways to be feminine (or masculine, or not quite either), then gender plurality looks less like a stark divide between the dominant binary gender model and subversive and/or

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[291] Julie Bond Hassel, *Choosing Not to Marry: Women and Autonomy in the Katherine Group* (Routledge, 2002), 10.

subordinated alternatives, and more like a broader spectrum of alternatives, some of which stand at closer proximity to dominant models and some at a greater distance. Such a framework shows how gender variants exist in complex relation to each other and complicates the idea of gender transgressions by more closely examining the exceptional figures in the margins of early English culture.

"I Will Fix My Mind Upon the Lord": Faith, Orientation, and Transgression

Following the patristic tradition, medieval theology positioned virginity as the state of highest spiritual purity, with chaste widowhood and continent marriage as secondary and tertiary states.[292] Virginity brought one as close to God as mortals could aspire – it was "the life of the angels lived on earth," and through virginity, "the mortal human flesh is transformed into the vessel of the divine."[293] In early medieval England, Aldhelm explains in *De Virginitate* that "the glory of holy virginity is believed to be next kin to angelic beatitude," a way of life that "scorns the other baubles of the world and counts at naught the ornamented trappings of this life." For Aldhelm, virgins desire nothing more than to leave "the prison of the body" and join the heavenly host.[294] In this way, Aldhelm and other medieval authors saw virgins as those with one foot in the heavens and the other still on earth. As these authors negotiated virginity's liminality between mortal and divine – that is, virginity's position within (or in relation to) the worldly

[292] Ruth Mazo Karras explains that instead of using "marital intercourse to combat sexual temptation…[many] Christians would urge prayer and fasting, allowing marital intercourse to avoid greater sin only if absolutely necessary." Christian authors from late antiquity and the Middle Ages often held contradictory views of marriage and virginity: for example, chaste widowhood was a way to "do penance for their earlier involvement in the flesh, which some authors considered a pollution even though they also taught that marriage was a good." See Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe* (Routledge, 2005), 37, 42.
[293] Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (D.S. Brewer, 2001), 21.
[294] Aldhelm, *De Virginitate*, VII, IX, XVI (Lapidge and Herren 63, 66, 71).

social order of early medieval England – they also had to consider how virginity potentially transcended or reshaped earthly gender differences as part of that social order.

In particular, medieval theology saw virginity not just as a marker of faith, but as synonymous with faith. For example, Ælfric's *Life* of Saint Æthelthryth aligns her virginity with her sanctity in several passages, specifically through miracles. The opening lines relate that she "had two husbands and nevertheless remained a virgin, as the miracles that she frequently performs demonstrate" ("wæs mid twam werum and swaðeah wunode mæden, swa swa þa wundra swuteliað þe heo wyrcð gelome").[295] Ælfric makes similar observations after her second marriage, and once again during the translation of her remains: "It is clear that she was an unblemished virgin when her body could not decay in the ground" ("Hit is swutol þæt heo wæs ungewemmed mæden þonne hire lic-hama ne mihte formolsnian on eorðan").[296] Catherine Cubitt explains that "[s]o closely are the ideas of virginity and Christianity associated in the mind of Ælfric that his narrative slides silently from the defence of one to the defence of the other."[297] It seems that Ælfric found the connection between virginity and faith self-evident and thus in need of no further explanation: it is entirely reasonable that miracles give proof of Æthelthryth's continued virginity despite her marriages.

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[295] Ælfric, "Saint Æthelthryth," in *Old English Lives of Saints*, ed. Mary Clayton and Juliet Mullins, vol. 3 (Harvard University Press, 2019), 194-203.
[296] Ælfric, "Saint Æthelthryth," 200-201. It is worth noting that, while Bede's account of Æthelthryth in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* does not make the same immediate connection between her virginity and the miracles, he instead inserts a hymn on virginity after narrating her life which is roughly the length of her narrative. David A. Pelteret claims this insertion "serves only to distract us from Æthelthryth's physical presence and her accomplishments by shifting our focus away from her to the abstraction celebrated by the poem, Virginity"; see Pelteret, "Bede's Women," in *Women, Marriage, and Family in Medieval Christendom*, ed. Constance M. Rousseau and Joel T. Rosenthal (Medieval Institute Publications, 1998), 38.
[297] Catherine Cubitt, "Virginity and Misogyny in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England," *Gender and History* 12, no. 1 (2000): 7.

This idea of virginity as synonymous with faith also appears in the anonymous Old English saints' lives, although in subtler fashion. In the *Life* of Saint Margaret, the saint prays for divine protection from temptation and pollution when the reeve Olibrius seeks her out: she asks God, "do not allow me to be deceived in any way, or my mind to be turned away from you, or my virginity to be defiled" ("ne læt þe me naht beswican, ne næfre min gewit fram þe gehwerfan, ne min mægþhad afylan").[298] Later, after she has vanquished the dragon, another devil appears to threaten her. Yet before he can actually issue any threats, Margaret physically subdues him and declares, "Give up, wretch! You cannot entrap my virginity and bring it to naught, for I have my Lord to help me" ("Geswic þu, earming! Ne miht þu to nahte minne mægþhad me to beswicenne, for ic hæbbe minne Drihten me to fultume").[299] In the first instance, the reeve's advances show a direct threat to Margaret's virginity, so it makes sense that her prayers encompass both mental and physical protection. In the second instance, neither the dragon nor his more humanoid brother make any sexual threats toward her; instead, her virginity represents her faith as a whole, and thus any kind of temptation or corruption threatens her virginity.

Several elements of patristic theology greatly influenced medieval perceptions of virginity in relation to gender, sexuality, and sanctity. Following Augustine, most ecclesiastical authorities in the Middle Ages understood virginity as a function of the will more than a condition of the body. In this view, bodily purity is a support for, and perhaps a consequence of, a more fundamental purity of faith: Aldhelm opines that "the stainlessness of bodily purity by itself cannot unlock the gates of the heavenly kingdom," but instead, "the pure steadfastness of

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[298] "Saint Margaret," Corpus Christi version, in *Anonymous Old English Lives of Saints*, ed. Johanna Kramer, Hugh Magennis, and Robin Norris (Harvard University Press, 2020), 322-23.
[299] "Saint Margaret," 334-35.

uncontaminated virginity is made a servant of God through the tireless constancy of contemplation."[300] By highlighting "steadfastness" and "tirelessly constancy," Aldhelm and other medieval authors portrayed virginity as an act of volition through which an individual proves and strengthens their faith. The *vitae* of virgin martyrs often narrate instances of attempted sexual violation, material temptations of many kinds (including sexual seduction, lush garments and costly jewelry, as well as fine foods), and demands for idol worship. The prevalence of these tropes show how hagiographies conflate bodily inviolability, strength of will, and religious devotion. Moreover, the breadth of temptations emphasizes the virgin's rejection of earthly things, not just their sexual abstinence. Thus virginity serves as an ascetic sacrifice for one's faith, and a further level of martyrdom through voluntary suffering.[301] Saint Agatha rejects temptation by prostitutes through "steadfast intention" ("fæst-ræde geþanc"), bolstered by her desire "to suffer deadly torments for Christ's name" ("gewilnode to ðrowigenne for Cristes naman þa cwealm-bæran wita"). Aphrodosia, the leader (and mother) of the prostitutes, reports back to Quintianus: "Stones can become soft, and hard iron like lead, before the faith can ever be extinguished from Agatha's breast" ("Stanas magon hnexian, and þæt starce isen on leades gelicnysse, ær ðan þe se geleaga mæge of Agathes breoste beon æfre adwæsced").[302] Like the synonymy of virginity and faith in the *Life* of Æthelthryth, Agatha's iron will upholds her spiritual integrity.

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[300] Aldhelm, *De Virginitate*, XVI (Lapidge and Herren 72-73).
[301] Many scholars have noted the multivalent – and potentially desirable and empowering – aspects of suffering in medieval devotional practice: see Cubitt, "Virginity and Misogyny," 7; Sarah Salih, "Performances of Suffering: Secular and Devotional Eros in Late Medieval Writing," in *Cambridge Companion to Erotic Literature*, ed. Bradford K. Mudge (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 34-46; Jo Ann McNamara, "The Need to Give: Suffering and Female Sanctity in the Middle Ages," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Klara Szell (Cornell University Press, 1991), 199-221.
[302] Ælfric, "Saint Agatha," in *Old English Lives of Saints*, ed. Mary Clayton and Juliet Mullins, vol. 3 (Harvard University Press, 2019), 250-53.

However, locating virginity in the will does not divorce it from embodiment, and theologians had to negotiate the ways in which virginity transforms "mortal human flesh" into "the vessel of the divine." Medieval notions of "male" and "female" generally relied upon anatomical differences in sexed bodies, differences which center around sexual activity and reproduction.[303] But the sexed body lay at the heart of medieval debates not only about gender but about humanity itself. As early Christian theologians sought to reconcile the two narratives of Creation in Genesis, they grappled with the implications of sex/gender (un)differentiation in defining human essence – is humanity fundamentally gendered, or is the human soul genderless in the heavenly realm? The debate over the gendered/sexed nature of humanity was more than academic: as "living saints" or "angels on earth," virgins were perceived to transcend earthly materiality in some ways while remaining firmly a part of the mortal world in others. One school of thought argued that "the first humans were incorporeal and undifferentiated," a model often referred to as the "primal androgyne."[304] In this model, sex/gender differentiation only arose after the Fall, and humans would return to undifferentiation after the Resurrection. Peter Brown explains that certain patristic authors, including Jerome, Ambrose, and Gregory of Nyssa, saw sexuality and marriage as "the result of a sad decline, by which Adam and Eve had lapsed from an 'angelic' state into physicality, and so into death."[305]

Yet other theologians took issue with the primal androgyne model: Augustine maintained that humans "were always corporeal and heterogeneous" from their creation; he linked

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[303] See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Harvard University Press, 1990) and Joan Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).
[304] Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (Columbia University Press, 2021), 21. Among the proponents of this model were Origen and Gregory of Nyssa.
[305] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 1988), 399.

androgyny not to prelapsarian humanity but to hermaphroditism, in which a combination of traditionally male and female anatomical characteristics produced "something monstrous."[306] If the primal human spirit is androgynous – what we might term "agender" or "polygender" today – then divine transcendence may bring virgins closer to this undifferentiated state; however, if humans are fundamentally sexed/gendered in spirit, then transcending mortal flesh may alter the terms of gender difference but would not exempt virgins from differentiation altogether.[307] As Brown summarizes, Augustine understood Adam and Eve "as physical human beings, endowed with the same bodies and sexual characteristics as ourselves." Sexed bodies also represent human society writ large: just as humanity was created with sex/gender differentiation, so too were social hierarchies naturalized in Augustine's theology: "central features of the social landscape of Paradise, marriage and the rule of the father over his children, would have been recognizable to a Roman of fourth-century Africa."[308]

As Augustine's views became generally accepted as medieval orthodoxy, later authors continued to adapt the idea that human culture mirrored the heavenly realm, albeit imperfectly. The precise extent to which human and divine social structures converged was a point of ongoing debate. For example, in Galatians 3:28, Paul states, "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in

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[306] DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 22-23; Augustine's reference to monstrosity occurs in *De Trinitate* XII.vi.8.
[307] In modern usage, "agender" refers to a lack of gender while "polygender" (and other similar terms like "pangender") refers to a multiplicity of gender, experienced sequentially and/or simultaneously. Many theological descriptions of the "primal androgyne" model seem more aligned with the modern definition of "polygender" in that they emphasize a blending of masculine and feminine characteristics, though some descriptions of the androgyne's undifferentiation imply that certain aspects of worldly gender do not exist (or do not matter) in the primal state, which may indicate a closer alignment with the modern term "agender." My purpose here is not to attempt to align modern and medieval terminology or argue for a one-to-one relationship between medieval concepts and modern definitions; instead, I find modern terminology useful in its specificity, to help distinguish discrete aspects of medieval thought within their historical context.
[308] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 400.

Christ Jesus."[309] In Paul's words, true faith collapses all earthly distinctions, including race, social status, and gender. This statement holds the potential to significantly alter the structure of society, but Augustine stressed the spiritual rather than social valence of the passage in his commentary: "difference, whether of peoples or of legal status or of sex, while indeed already removed in the unity of faith, remains in this mortal life."[310] Faith may grant all people a path to salvation, but it does not erase social distinctions. Yet virginity's disruptive power endured: many scholars have shown "the importance of virginity in patristic writing as a mechanism for female empowerment by means of a transcendence of rigid gender distinctions."[311]

If virginity did not lead to undifferentiation so much as redifferentiation – that is, a change in gender rather than a removal from gender – what did such changes entail for medieval constructions of virginity? Perceiving virginity as a multivalent identity with spiritual, gendered, and sexual dimensions has several ramifications. First, it highlights how directionality functions to produce identity. Robert Mills posits virginity as "a distinct identity and orientation, a manner of being toward God." He plays on the sexual and literal/directional meanings of the term "orientation": sexual orientations, in modern parlance, define one's sexual identity based on object choice, usually in terms of gender. This object-based model of sexuality implies directionality, in which one person directs themselves (in attraction, desire, action, etc.) toward another. Yet, as the previous chapter discussed, sexuality is far from the only way that people relate to or desire one another, and religious desires were abundant and diverse in medieval

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[309] Gal. 3:28 NRSV.
[310] Augustine, *Commentary on Galatians*, ed. and trans. Eric Plummer (Oxford University Press, 2003), 175.
[311] Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 15. See also Jo Ann McNamara, *A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries* (Haworth Press, 1983) and "Chaste Marriage and Clerical Celibacy," in *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (Prometheus Books, 1982), 22-33.

thought. Virginity as orientation makes explicit the gender fluidity inherent in medieval models of religious identity: "medieval societies associated trans and genderqueer identities with proximity to, rather than distance from, the divine."[312] Given that virginity constitutes faith through acts of volition, "[d]irectionality and willful acts of turning [toward God]" perform "the translation of direction into identity, orientation into a way of life." In other words, virginity as an spiritual/gender/sexual identity is not static but constantly produced and reinforced by the repeated reorientation toward the divine, a "manifestly willful" gender practice.[313]

Second, the reframing of an embodied concept (virginity as sexual abstinence) into a spiritual concept (virginity as purity of faith) gives virginity symbolic force. When virginity becomes metaphorical, it implies that, in theory, anyone who is extremely faithful could be labeled a virgin, regardless of their sexual status; thus virginity comes to define a person of the highest faith rather than a person who has never had sex.[314] Metaphorical virginity still generally relied upon sexual continence – for example, a chaste widow(er) or an individual who joins a

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[312] Wingard, "The Trans Middle Ages," 941; see also Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt, *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

[313] Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 249, 253. Regarding virginity as an identity, scholars generally agree that virginity constituted a legible identity for women in the Middle Ages but not for men, across both religious and secular modes of life. While hagiographies of male saints may describe the saint's virginity, many argue that male sanctity did not revolve around their virginity to the extent that female sanctity did; for example, Salih contends that for male saints, "their sexual status is rarely the locus of their sanctity, as is often the case for women.... There are other things men can do to demonstrate their sanctity; women's choices are fewer"; see Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 17. However, others claim that this distinction oversimplifies the role of virginity in saintly masculinity: according to Cassandra Rhodes, "the often perceived binary division...is illusory and has led to an underestimation of the significance of virginity for male saints"; see Rhodes, "'What, after all, is a male virgin?' Multiple Performances of Male Virginity in Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives," *Representing Medieval Genders and Sexualities in Europe: Construction, Transformation, and Subversion, 600-1530*, ed. Elizabeth L'Estrange and Alison More (Ashgate, 2011), 16. See also Jacqueline Murray, "Masculinizing Religious Life," *Florilegium* 36 (2019): 79-86; and Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (Routledge, 1999).

[314] Textual sources assign metaphorical virginity more often to women than men, though the concept could be applied more broadly: for example, though Ælfric's *Life* of Constantia and Gallicanus never labels the latter a virgin, the parallels between the virginal women of the narrative and Gallicanus's conversion aligns his new faith with his new purity in eschewing both killing and sex/marriage. Gallicanus has presumably killed and had sex before, but through conversion, he renounces those aspects of secular life and becomes quasi-virginal (i.e. pure of faith).

monastery after living a secular life might not enter with perfect bodily purity, but extraordinary faith might transform their continence into a form of metaphorical virginity. Nevertheless, this metaphorical redefinition of virginity opens the door for a greater range of sexual and gender variation to receive religious approbation and possibly veneration. Moreover, given the correlation between virginity and faith, demonstrations of sanctity enact identity through gender and spirituality simultaneously: following Judith Butler's model of performative gender as an accretion of repeated actions, a saint's miraculous deeds collectively constitute their holiness, in which sanctity is both a spiritual and gendered identity.

Third, by perceiving virginity and faith as an act of willpower, virginity provides license and approbation for an individual to assert their autonomy. Many medievalists have explored how virginity and religious vocation in general allowed women opportunities for self-determination that may have been limited or nonexistent in the secular realm.[315] This forms an interpretive link between the medieval women audiences for these texts and the legendary women they portray, opening imaginative possibilities for women to admire and emulate a variety of gender positions, even if the threat of gender transgression relegated those possibilities to imagination and metaphor rather than mimicry.[316] Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff argues that the exceptional nature of sainthood makes these figures inherently transgressive: "The women saints

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[315] In addition to Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, and Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, see also Leslie Donovan, *Women Saints' Lives in Old English Prose* (D.S. Brewer, 1999); Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Boydell Press, 1992); Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "Cynewulf's Autonomous Women: A Reconsideration of Elene and Juliana," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Indiana University Press, 1990), 222-34; Helene Scheck, *Reform and Resistance: Formations of Female Subjectivity in Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Culture* (SUNY Press, 2008); Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100* (University of Chicago Press, 1998); *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (University of Toronto Press, 2014); and Steven Vanderputten, *Dark Age Nunneries: The Ambiguous Identity of Female Monasticism, 800-1050* (Cornell University Press, 2018).

[316] The scope of this chapter focuses largely on the contents of the textual sources rather than the circumstances of their production and reception, which other studies have explored in depth; however, my analysis occasionally references these aspects of textuality where relevant to understand the constructions of gender within the text.

of the Middle Ages were transgressors, rule-breakers, flouters of boundaries, and yet they were also saints. Of course, in a way all saints are transgressors, in the sense that a saint lives by excess, lives in a beyond where ordinary measure does not hold."[317]

In its equation of exceptionalism and transgression, Petroff's framework asks us to question the definition of transgression itself. Transgressors are rule-breakers, those who flout the conventions of their society; the term thus carries a negative connotation regarding social perception of the transgressor, and a potentially neutral or positive valence depending on the perception of the individual using the term. In the context of medieval female saints, modern critics tend to align their perception of transgressions in relation to the saint's seeming complicity with medieval ecclesiastical patriarchy: in other words, a female saint's transgressions are laudable to the extent that they subvert patriarchal gender mores, and less so (to varying degrees) when viewed as a tool or a recuperated product of those expectations.

However, I wish to carry this questioning a step further: as medieval religious virginities make otherwise transgressive behaviors licit, they also redefine the category of "transgression" itself. The notion of "transgression" as outlined above assumes a fixed and static concept of hegemonic social expectations, the rules that transgressors are perceived to break. Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, for example, outlines "different types, models, or notions of female saintliness and variants of anti-social, 'aberrant,' or 'deviant' behavior [that] transcen[d] the boundaries of permissible diversity."[318] In Schulenburg's schema, these social expectations allow a narrow range of "permissible diversity," outside of which variants become "aberrant" and "deviant" – in short, transgressive. Yet medieval understandings of sex/gender acknowledged a breadth of

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[317] Elizabeth Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 161.
[318] Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 9.

variations, and particular variants were not deemed impermissible simply by virtue of their rarity; in fact, by the metric of prevalence, gender ideals often lay in the margins. In considering the spectrum of medieval gender variation, then, we must remain attentive not only to the diversity of gender positions but also the multivalence of concepts like "transgression" and "marginality."

Recent transgender scholarship has offered new ways to reconceptualize religious gender variation in the Middle Ages. In their introduction to *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, editors Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt explain that earlier analyses often fall short of truly challenging the masculine/feminine binary. "Whilst underscoring that transgression of gender boundaries was commonplace in medieval religion, 'pre-trans studies' feminist analyses tended to emphasise a limited fluidity, a movement between fixed male and female polarities, subverting but not surpassing the binary itself." They argue that transgender studies provides a corrective to these limitations: "trans studies indicates where such readings have overwritten or erased trans potentialities, while continuing to insist on the paramount importance of the availability and co-existence of multiple interpretations."[319] In this fashion, I argue that a metaphorical understanding of virginity also creates genderfluidity. A definition of virginity as sexual abstinence and bodily purity suggests that virginity is a religious identity which both men and women can adopt; however, if virginity is a spiritual state of highest faith, proximate to divinity and oriented wholly toward God, then earthly genders can only partially adhere to virgins. This partial adherence creates gender variation and fluidity because narratives differ in emphasis, thus depicting a range of possible virginities. Virginity makes space to read

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[319] Spencer-Hall and Gutt, *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, 25. See also the special issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum* titled "Visions of Medieval Trans Feminism," ed. M.W. Bychowski and Dorothy Kim (*Medieval Feminist Forum* 55, no. 1, 2019).

medieval gender variation beyond the dichotomies of dominant and subordinate, central and marginal, conformative or transgressive. Instead, variations carry a breadth of cultural perceptions in different registers, so that a particular variant can be both the highest moral ideal and also the least attainable. By viewing medieval gender variations through multiple registers of perception, we create conceptual space in our scholarship for gender variations which lay outside the traditional binary, yet were not inherently transgressive or rule-breaking. Rather, medieval religious figures show that rules may be bent or redefined, which makes the category of "permissible diversity" much broader than previously realized.

"I Have Never Met…Any Woman Like You": Virginal Gender Variation in Early English Hagiography

Old English saints' lives capitalize on the fluidity of spiritual metaphor to represent a range of virginities; in turn, spiritual fluidity also creates a similar gender fluidity. The verse hagiographies *Juliana* and *Judith* ask audiences to engage with the heroines by reading on multiple levels, and by translating meanings across different contexts. As vernacular poetry, these texts negotiate and synthesize pre-Christian and Christian values in form and in content. For both heroines, their virginity (literal in Juliana's case and metaphorical in Judith's) enables these translation efforts: virginity syncretically makes Germanic values permissible and even praiseworthy in a Christian world. Moreover, virginity transforms gender transgressions like waging war and rebelling against authority into gender ideals – and because virginity makes saintly gender ambiguous, these spiritual warriors become idealized precisely for, rather than in spite of, their seemingly transgressive actions.

Early English religious poetry often used secular or pre-Christian values as spiritual metaphors, drawing on familiar themes in order to convey a Christian message in a unique cultural syncretism. For example, in *The Dream of the Rood*, the Cross (who narrates the poem) takes on the role of martyr, describing his physical and mental suffering during the Crucifixion as well as his eagerness to endure these hardships for his faith. He narrates, "They drove dark nails through me; the scars are still visible, / open wounds of hate" ("Þurdrifan hi me mid deorcan næglum. On my syndon þa dolg gesiene, / opene inwidhlemmas"), and as the followers of Christ take down his body, "I was beset with sorrow, yet I sank into their hands, / humbly, eagerly" ("Sare ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed, hnag ic hwæðre þam secgum to handa, / eaðmod elne mycle").[320] In contrast, Christ is portrayed as a bold warrior keen to face this new battle:

> Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð, (þæt wæs god ælmihtig),
> strang ond stiðmod. Gestah he on healgan heanne,
> modig on manigra gesyhðe, þa he wolde mancyn lysan.
> Then the young hero made ready – that was God almighty –
> strong and resolute; he ascended on the high gallows,
> brave in the sight of many, when he wanted to ransom mankind.[321]

Christ is a young, brave hero, not unlike Beowulf or the warriors of *The Battle of Maldon*; while he does not wield a sword, his battle is far more important: his actions will save not only a people or a nation, but all of mankind. In a heroic context, the Cross acts as Christ's retainer, supporting his lord (perhaps ironically) in his holy mission and willing to die by his side. In a religious sense, the Cross's role as martyr also provides a mortal counterpoint to divine fortitude:

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[320] *Dream of the Rood*, ll. 46-47a, 59-60a. Old English text from ASPR vol. II (ed. Krapp, Columbia University Press, 1932); trans. R.M. Liuzza (in *Old English Poetry: An Anthology*, Broadview, 2014, 163-69).
[321] *Dream of the Rood*, ll. 39-41.

like the human martyrs of the saints' lives, the Cross acutely feels the pain of his torments, giving a model for the faithful to follow. While humans may not be able to face torture and death with the warrior Christ's eagerness or equanimity, they can demonstrate their faith through voluntary suffering.

The Dream of the Rood also uses the poetics of Old English verse to frame its hagiographical and devotional content: as a lyric poem, it shares a contemplative tone and elements of lamentation with the elegies of the Exeter Book. Many religious poems in this corpus similarly blend genres and topoi, using familiar vernacular formulas to shape the retelling of inherited stories like saints' lives and biblical narratives. Andrew Scheil argues that Old English religious verse "exhibit[s] both the eclectic capaciousness of the vernacular and the singularity of poetry," thus dramatizing the ambiguities inherent in human interpretations of divinity and making available "an almost free-form imaginative vernacular theology."[322]

In Cynewulf's *Juliana*, the heroine's orientational faith, defended by her steadfast will, serves as the crux of its syncretic logic. In the process of recontextualizing heroic values within a Christian framework, the poem dramatizes the interpretive act through Juliana's keen perception, which allows her to distinguish between truth and deceit. The poem imbues both Juliana and her adversaries with familiar features from the heroic world, requiring the audience to discern the meaningful differences: if both pious and impious figures can appear heroic on the surface, one must determine the correct example through deeper means. Juliana acts as interpreter, guiding

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[322] Andrew Scheil, "Sacred History and Old English Religious Poetry," in *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 408, 416. As a further example, Lisa M.C. Weston examines the verse narrative of Saint Guthlac, noting how the poem transforms secular kinship into religious kinship by drawing on militant language, thereby charting the saint's transition from a secular warrior into a *miles Christi*; see Weston, Friendship, Kinship, Gender and Sexuality," in *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 390-397.

the other characters and the audience through the ignorance and idolatry of the pagans as well as the malicious temptations of the devil.

In *Juliana*, the heroic ethos inflects both Roman society and the denizens of hell. During Juliana's interrogation of the devil, the poem describes him and his "kinsman" ("magas") as the "servants of darkness" and "servants of torment" ("þegnas of þystrum", "susles þegnum").[323] However, the hierarchy of hell distorts the lord/retainer bond: their lord mistreats them, doling out torments rather than treasures; instead of valiantly volunteering for their missions, the thegns operate under fear of punishment. The devil tells Juliana, "I was constrained by necessity to this boldness / in seeking you out, tortured by unhappy times" ("ic þisse hoþe wæs nyde gebæded, / þrag-mælum geþread, þæt ic þe sohte." Sent out away from his abusive lord, the servant of darkness is a "faithless exile" ("wræcca wærleas") twice over, since heaven is forever closed to him and his kinsmen too.[324] This portrait contrasts with the eager pursuits of the faithful: for example, Aldhelm describes monastics as industrious bees, who embody a "spontaneous inclination to voluntary servitude," such that "out of reverence for their leader they set out for foreign parts (in search) of a residence more willingly than they would remain at home in their cells." In this, the faithful oppose the unhappy devils, "exile(s) driven from their own homeland."[325]

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[323] *Juliana*, ll. 333, 558. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1936); trans. Robert E. Bjork (in *The Old English Poems of Cynewulf*, Harvard University Press, 2013, 78-127).
[324] *Juliana*, ll. 343-44, 351. For further discussion of Satan as a bad lord, see Jill Frederick, "Warring with Words: Cynewulf's *Juliana*," in *Readings in Medieval Texts*, ed. David F. Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford University Press, 2005), 68-70.
[325] Aldhelm, *De Virginitate*, VI (Lapidge and Herren 62-63). Similarly, in *Guthlac A*, the saint declares that the devils tormenting him "have lived long on the exile's track" ("in wræcsiðe / longe lifdon") and "will suffer shelterless of home, calling out cares, / longing for death" ("hy hleolease hama þoliað, / in cearum cwiþað"); ll. 623b-24a, 222-23a. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University, 1936); trans. Ophelia Eryn Hostetter (in *Old English Poetry Project*, Rutgers University, 2023, https://oldenglishpoetry.camden.rutgers.edu/).

Juliana also portrays a mediated version of the pagan perspective, describing some of the reasons for their belief in their own gods. Juliana's father admonishes her that her pride has led her to "reject those who are dearer to us, / who stand as a help to this people" ("þa forlætest þe us leofran sind, / þe þissum folce to freme stondað"). Eleusius makes a similar claim, that Juliana's rebellion pits her against "the best and / the mildest whom men know, whom this people have / long worshipped among themselves" ("þa selestan… / on þa mildestan þara þe men witen, / þe þes leodscype mid him longe bieode").[326] Both male authority figures stress that worship of their gods is cultural tradition, and that these gods have supported them; while obviously misguided from a Christian perspective, the Romans have clear motivations for their beliefs.

However, none of these figures – the Romans nor the hellish thegns – are sympathetic in their ignorance or their suffering. The Romans hear the truth of God from Juliana herself and still double down on their own beliefs. The devil has already known the might of God and rejected him; he might not take up his missions eagerly, but nevertheless he corrupts and kills of his own volition. Even the few moments where Juliana (or the audience) might be moved to pity, such as when the devil twice entreats Juliana to have mercy on him in the name of God, those sentiments quickly fade in the face of the devil's continuing evil: he returns during her execution to encourage her torture as repayment for his own suffering at her hands.[327] In aligning familiar poetic topoi with the unrighteousness of the devils and their earthly followers, the poem highlights the danger that existing cultural beliefs may be misleading, no matter how traditional or logical.

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[326] *Juliana*, ll. 122-23, 206b-208.
[327] The devil's two pleas for mercy are at ll. 446-53 and 539-53; his return during Juliana's trial occurs at ll. 613-34.

However, the heroic world does not rest solely with the pagans: Juliana herself becomes a *miles Christi*, taking on the familiar traits of warriors in early English literature. Her adoption of this role enacts a translation of the heroic ethos from a literal phenomenon into a spiritual metaphor.[328] In so doing, Juliana's purity of faith – anchored in her virginity – makes her both the ideal warrior and yet still a woman, what Lisa M.C. Weston calls "her heroic and almost but not quite transgendering virginity."[329] Therefore, in the process of syncretic translation, virginity creates a new form of genderfluid metaphorical warrior. In her final speech, Juliana entreats the onlookers, "Remember the joy of warriors and splendor of glory, / the hope of the holy, the God of the heavenly angels" ("Gemunað wigena wyn ond wuldres þrym, / haligra hyht, heofon-engla God").[330] Here she explicitly links heroic valor to the holiness of God: being a true warrior means being a true Christian, and by implication, any other form of valor is idolatry. The only way to experience the "joy of warriors" and the "splendor of glory" is to put one's faith firmly in God. Juliana's own actions align her with the steadfast faithful, those impervious to the devil's temptations. The "courageous warrior of the measurer" ("ellen-rofne gemete modigne") who "raises a board, a holy shield against me [the devil], / spiritual battle gear, not willing to fail God" ("hefeð hyge-snottor, haligne scyld, / gæstic guð-reaf, nele Gode swican") and who remains "steadfast in the troop" ("fæste on feðan") can force the devil to move on to weaker targets.[331] By the devil's own admission, Juliana surpasses all these spiritual warriors: he marvels that she became "so daring in battle above all womankind" ("þus wig-þrist ofer eall wifa cyn")

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[328] Clare A. Lees argues that syncretism in Old English literature often performs translation from literal into metaphorical; she focuses on the translation of sexuality and erotic desire; see Lees, "Engendering Desire: Sex, Knowledge, and Christian Identity in Anglo-Saxon England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27, no. 1 (1997): 25-35.
[329] Weston, "Saintly Lives," 396.
[330] *Juliana*, ll. 641-42.
[331] *Juliana*, ll. 382b-83a, 386-87, 389.

that she was able to bind him as no other could.[332] Later, as she drags him out of her cell, he exclaims:

> ic ær ne sið ænig ne mette
> in woruld-rice wif þe gelic,
> þristan geþohtes ne þworh-timbran
> mægþa cynnes.
> I have never met
> in the worldly kingdom any woman like you,
> more daring of thought nor more resolutely made
> among young women.[333]

In both cases, the devil's recognition of Juliana's superlative nature rests within her femininity. Yet his statements imply that she is not simply resolute and bold "for a woman," that is, courageous in comparison to women but implicitly not comparable to men. In the form of spiritual warfare she undertakes, the warriors on the field include both men and women; that she can lay hands on this devil and force him to spill his secrets indicates that she exceeds all other warriors of God. She may be unique among women, but she is also unique among the faithful.

To underscore the translation of literal warfare into spiritual metaphor, *Juliana* locates faith within the heart and mind of the pious. Given Juliana's identity as a virgin, her faith and her purity entwine as interior conditions; the condition of the body matters less than the strength of the will. Juliana's virginity – that is, her purity of faith and intention – allow her to perform translation: she can discern truth from lies. Donald G. Bzdyl explains that the poem "reveals to

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[332] *Juliana*, l. 432.
[333] *Juliana*, ll. 548-51a.

the audience through the behavior of Juliana how one can attain the wisdom to perceive the universe as it really is."[334] This is no easy task, which makes Juliana's ability remarkable, a sign of her sanctity and orientation toward God. Bzdyl argues that the poem proceeds in stages, slowly moving the audience's perspective from seeing only earth-bound appearances at first to divine revelation by the end. He locates the turning point at the beginning of Juliana's confrontation with the devil in her cell: while the devil's angelic disguise does not fool her, she must reject his flattery in order to perceive his real nature and intentions. "Having overcome the final source of temptation, Juliana is ready to learn the true nature of reality."[335] In this sense, the devil represents the most significant test of Juliana's faith and, having met the challenge, Juliana reaches the full measure of her sanctity.

Juliana's unwavering orientation toward God acts as a gravitational force, drawing her toward the divine and allowing her to gain her perceptive powers. In moving toward divinity and away from the worldly affairs which blind one to the truth, her gender also becomes more divine – that is, less anchored in earthly distinctions between men and women. Though many medieval theologians believed that souls in heaven still retained gender, earthly gender distinctions did not carry the same significance after death; if there is gender in heaven, in other words, it surely does not perfectly resemble gender on earth. Therefore, Juliana gains the ability to perceive truly as she becomes more genderfluid; her sanctity transforms her gender as well as her sight, and her new perspective on the material world becomes genderfluid as well.

Some modern studies assert that medieval virginity's distinction from the dominant gender binary constitutes a "third sex" or "third gender." For example, Rhonda McDaniel argues

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[334] Donald G. Bzdyl, "Juliana: Cynewulf's Dispeller of Delusion," in *The Cynewulf Reader*, ed. Robert E. Bjork (Routledge, 2001), 199.
[335] Bzdyl, "Juliana: Cynewulf's Dispeller of Delusion," 202.

that medieval lives of Roman martyrs depict a "new third gender of Christian virtue," which she defines as "a gender based not upon earthly political, legal, sexual, or military power, but upon moral virtue defined by steadfast belief in, love of, and loyalty to Christ and the ability to reproduce spiritually by means of example and teaching."[336] McDaniel and others contend that positing a third category disrupts the gender binary and makes room for critical consideration of other gender alternatives. Marjorie Garber clarifies that the "third" functions as a capacious and destabilizing force rather than a specific category: "the 'third term' is *not a term*…. The 'third' is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility."[337] For Garber, the "third" need not be narrowly defined (and in fact, *should* not be) to achieve its disruptive function; like the third actor in ancient Greek drama, a figure who plays numerous roles rather than occupying a single character, Garber asserts that the "third term" is labile, flexible, and potentially infinite.

However, more recent voices – especially from the fields of queer and transgender theory – highlight the limitations of "third category" models: in such models, the introduction of a third term makes a binary into a trinary without truly disrupting the original dyad while also precluding additional possibilities. Jack Halberstam explains that "'thirdness' merely balances the binary system and, furthermore, tends to homogenize many different gender variations under the banner of 'other'"; to insist on a "third" space "close[s] down the possibility that there may be a fourth, fifth, sixth, or one hundredth space beyond the binary."[338] To return to Garber's

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[336] Rhonda L. McDaniel, *The Third Gender and Ælfric's Lives of Saints* (Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), xxi. For other definitions of virginity as an alternative or third gender, also see Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (University Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Jo Ann McNamara, "Chastity as a Third Gender in the History and Hagiography of Gregory of Tours," in *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Brill, 2002) 199-210; Theodora Jankowski, "Virgins and Not-Women: Dissident Gender Positions," in *The Lesbian Premodern*, ed. Noreen Giffney, Michelle Sauer, and Diane Watt (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 75-89.

[337] Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (Routledge, 1992), 11; emphasis original.

[338] Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998), 26-28. In a recent essay, Martha G. Newman revisits her earlier work on Joseph of Schönau, offering a revised reading that shifts focus from female

metaphor of Greek drama, the third actor can only play one role at a time; the many roles they inhabit cannot coexist with each other, but only with the two primary actors. By analogy, at any given cultural or discursive moment, a particular "third" form of sex/gender variation may challenge or blur the dominant gender binary, but other possible variants fade into the background, elided or ignored. In medieval studies, scholars have posited several "third genders," including virgins, eunuchs, and intersex individuals (commonly termed "hermaphrodites" in medieval sources); yet all of these conceptual categories existed simultaneously in western Christian thought, and stood in complex relation to each other and to masculinity and femininity.[339] And although masculinity and femininity are themselves multiple, the "third category" model unconsciously assumes a static, singular identity for the binary terms against which the third stands. Thus, "third category" models situate the new third term in the context of an existing binary, rather than seeking to complicate the binary categories themselves and contextualize them within a broader range of variation.[340]

In order to situate medieval religious models of virginity within a broad range of potential gender variations, I read virginity as genderfluid or gender-ambiguous. Instead of promoting a single monolithic notion of religious virginity, I follow Salih in imagining virginity as a "large

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transvestism to transgender masculinity: "Although the concept of a 'third gender' remains useful, I now recognize the essentialist assumptions in the concept of transvestism and the way an emphasis on disguise can erase transgender possibilities." See Newman, "Assigned Female at Death Joseph of Schönau and the Disruption of Medieval Gender Binaries," in *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, ed. Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt (Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 44 note 3.

[339] For discussion of eunuchs as a third gender, see Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (University of Chicago Press, 2001); for discussion of hermaphrodites as a third sex, see Cary J. Nederman and Jacqui True, "The Third Sex: The Idea of the Hermaphrodite in Twelfth-Century Europe," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, no. 4 (1996): 497-517.

[340] These limitations also reverberate beyond gender and sexuality: Evan B. Towle and Lynn M. Morgan describe the colonialism implicit in many anthropological deployments of a "third gender" model, which "ignores the diversity of experience within categories and glosses over the often contentious processes through which social formations, relations, and hierarchies are created, lived, negotiated, and changed"; see Towle and Morgan, "Romancing the Transgender Native: Rethinking the use of the 'Third Gender' Concept," *GLQ* 8, no. 4 (2002): 477.

and complex category" and not a singular or coherent "established identity."[341] Religious texts portray virginity in diverse ways, with differing relationships between virginal purity, sanctity, bodily sex, and social gender expression/perception. In *Juliana*, the saint's bodily purity is produced by her unwavering faith as she continues to defend herself from repeated threats. Her bodily purity also produces faith because it draws her closer to God and consequently grants her a measure of divine perception.[342] Juliana's genderfluidity is imbricated with her increasing proximity to God and the resulting perception she gains – thus Juliana's newly enlightened sight derives from a position partially outside of earthly gender distinctions.[343]

Juliana begins the poem as steadfastly faithful: she tells her oppressors, "I will fix my mind upon the Lord" ("Ic to Dryhtne min / mod staþelige").[344] She will not turn from her faith, a point that the poem's language makes abundantly clear. The poem uses verbs of turning and (re)directing to frame its dramatization of her faith: compounds of *cyrran* "to turn" appear seven times, while other turning verbs like *hweorfan* "to turn, change" and *onwendan* "to turn, change, divert" appear an additional five times.[345] Because of the narrative focus on interpretation, the pagan authorities' attempts to turn her from her beliefs become opportunities for Juliana to

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[341] Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 17.
[342] Aldhelm makes similar claims for divine sight as a direct result of virginal purity in his retelling of Daniel: "To him above other mortals, as a reward in exchange for his chastity, hidden things lie open and things closed in the mystical coverings of the sacraments are divinely unlocked" (*De Virginitate*, XXI, in Lapidge and Herren 77).
[343] To clarify Juliana's genderfluidity: standing partially outside of earthly gender does not necessarily mean she stands partially outside of gender altogether. Rather, this fluidity encompasses interpretations that lean toward the belief of basal human undifferentiation (in which proximity to the divine entails a movement away from all gender) as well as interpretations that lean toward the belief in humanity's fundamentally gendered nature (in which proximity to the divine entails a redifferentiation from earthly gender roles). In the latter case, many believed that earthly gender roles mimicked those in heaven, but the limits of human perception mediated claims of definitive equivalence, in part because earthly gender expectations are a product of human society. Given that Juliana's narrative (like many virgin martyrs) revolves around a rejection of gendered social expectations like marriage, the poem allows for both interpretations: genderfluidity as moving toward undifferentiation or toward redifferentiation.
[344] *Juliana*, ll. 221b-22a.
[345] *Juliana*: *acyrre* (l. 139), *oncurran* (l. 226), *oncyrren* (l. 326), *oðcyrreð* (l. 338), *oncyrre* (l. 363), *acyrred* (l. 411), *oncyrre* (l. 439); *onwende* (l. 56), *onwend* (l. 144); *ahwyrfen* (l. 327), *ahwyrfan* (l. 360), *hweorfan* (l. 381).

reframe their demands from a Christian perspective, showing the wrongness of their thinking. To her father, Juliana rejects her suitor – and their gods – out of pride, valuing herself too highly and speaking above her station. Juliana reverses their logic: the gods they worship are "idle, useless, vain" ("idle, orfeorme, unbiþyrfe"), and anyone seeking favor from these false idols will not "obtain benefit there, true peace" ("þær freme meteð … / soðe sibbe").[346] In the language of warrior culture, these false gods are bad lords: they cannot reward their retainers appropriately because they do not actually hold divine authority, and they will never lead their followers to victory in the face of God, the "true King" ("soð cyning").[347] Juliana uses familiar cultural references to demonstrate how to tell truth from deception – she is a thegn who serves the only true Lord, one who will never waver from corruption or mortality. In reversing their logic, she also reverses the earthly social hierarchies of gender and status, positioning herself as morally superior to her oppressors not by virtue of pride and inflated self-worth, but in the humility of her service to God. From the pagan perspective, she has betrayed the loyalty she owes to her father and their lord, and failed in her feminine duty to marry and bear children. But in the Christian mindset, these transgressions are not transgressions at all: they are wholly appropriate responses, and her exceptional adherence to her faith elevates her status above the rest of humanity.

While steadfast, her faith is not static: rather, it is oriented, directed, driving her toward God with every trial she endures and temptation she overcomes. In the crucial scene of her first interaction with the devil in her prison cell, Juliana senses that her visitor is not what he seems, but she cannot yet perceive his true nature. In that moment, she is "young and innocent" ("geong grondorleas"), but not misguided: when her own perception does not suffice, she "began firmly /

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[346] *Juliana*, ll. 217-19.
[347] *Juliana*, ll. 224b.

to fix her heart, to call out to God" ("Ongan þa fæstice ferð staþelian, / … to Gode cleopian").[348] The heart serves as the locus for human faith in the poem: the poem repeatedly refers to Juliana firming her heart in order to reinforce her faith and prepare her to endure torments. When Eleusius orders her hung by the hair and beaten for six hours before being led to prison, "[t]he praise of Christ, / an inviolate power, was firmly enclosed / in her heart, in her gentle mind" ("Hyre wæs Cristes lof / in ferðlocan fæste biwunden, / milde mod-sefan, mægen unbrice").[349] This imagery continues in the devil's recitation of his corruption strategies in contrast to the courageous warriors who rout the devils tempting them, weaker people may have cracks in their spiritual armor. For each person, the devil tests "how fortified his heart may be inside" ("hu gefæstnad sy ferð innanweard").[350]

In the interrogation, the devil makes explicit the metaphorical translation at the heart of the poem. He tells Juliana, "I care more for the soul, / more earnestly about the destruction of the spirit, / than of the body" ("Ic þære sawle ma / geornor gyme ymb þæs gæstes forwyrd / þonne þæs lic-homan").[351] In this statement, he outlines the first part of this translation, moving the stakes from literal battle to spiritual warfare. Juliana's own keen sight completes the change. As a holy virgin oriented toward God, she stands distant enough from earthly matters to become unmoored from social gender expectations, occupying a space of ambiguous gender between earthly femininity and divine undifferentiation/redifferentiation. At this distance, her perspective from (nearly) outside the material, social world allows her to see clearly and pierce through even the most convincing of deceptions.

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[348] *Juliana*, ll. 270-71.
[349] *Juliana*, ll. 233b-235.
[350] *Juliana*, l. 400. As Bzdyl points out, the devil reveals in his interrogation that "delusion is his main weapon against the righteous"; see Bzdyl, "Juliana: Cynewulf's Dispeller of Delusion," 202.
[351] *Juliana*, ll. 413b-15a.

The Old English *Judith* provides a different model of gendered syncretism and spiritual transformation: the heroine embodies both the literal and spiritual warrior simultaneously. The poem characterizes Judith in overlapping and sometimes contradictory registers, which require an alternative kind of interpretation to that which Juliana performs. Juliana's divine discernment enables her to guide audiences (characters and readers alike) through an interpretive process of translation, transforming the literal values of secular society into spiritual metaphors, carrying forward the positive valences of heroic warfare into a new Christian context. Judith, however, does not replace the literal warrior figure with a spiritual *miles Christi* – she performs both roles at once, and together they grant her victory.

Like *Juliana*, *Judith* also connects the heroine's triumph to her inviolable faith. Her prayer immediately before beheading Holofernes makes this connection clear: "Prince of heaven: / give me triumph and true belief" ("Forgif me, swegles ealdor, sigor ond soðne geleafan").[352] Here her plea asks for God to grant both victory and belief, but her prayer does not arise from a crisis of faith or any hesitation. Rather, it reveals that faith and victory are synonymous terms in the poem: when God grants her victory, he also enhances her belief. Elsewhere the poem clarifies that she already possessed great faith, which enabled her to carry out her mission. The narration describes that "our heavenly Father / in glory bestowed an outstanding gift, / thanks to her full belief, her faith in the Almighty forever" ("fæder on roderum / torhtmod tiðe gefremede, þe heo ahte trumne geleafan / a to ðam ælmihtigan").[353] But unlike Juliana, whose victories are verbal, Judith's "outstanding gift" is literally the bloody head of her enemy.[354] After she beheads

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[352] *Judith*, ll. 88b-89a. Old English text from ASPR vol. IV (ed. Dobbie, Columbia University Press, 1953); trans. Stephen O. Glosecki (in *Old English Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. R.M. Liuzza, Broadview, 2014, 229-42).
[353] *Judith*, ll. 5b-7.
[354] The comparison between Judith's militance and the violence of other Old English women bears further analysis. Many critics have drawn parallels between the spiritually-motivated violence of women like Judith and the militant

Holofernes, the poem states, "she won foremost fame as a fighter there: / God gave Judith glory at war ("Hæfde ða gefohten foremærne blæd / Iudith æt guðe, swa hyre god uðe").[355] In this way, the poem aligns faith with both physical and spiritual warfare, and Judith's purity of purpose is rewarded through her own safe deliverance from enemy territory as well as the salvation of her people.

Where Juliana's orientation toward God pulls her away from secular society, Judith's faith in God refracts, becoming dual: she can turn toward God and toward her people. For Juliana, as a virgin martyr living among Roman pagans, God alone held her loyalty – her society sought to turn her away from her faith. For Judith, as a pious Old Testament figure living within an equally pious society, her loyalties are not divided. Her social and spiritual purposes align, and protecting her people becomes an act of faith. After making her escape from the Assyrian camp with her bloody trophy, Judith announces her return at the gates of Bethulia. Her declaration extends her own glory to her whole community: "Toward you the Wonder-Prince is well-disposed … to you is glory given and great honor" ("Eow ys metod bliðe, / cyninga wuldor; … þæt eow ys wuldorblæd / torhtlic toweard on tir gifeðe").[356] Judith's orientation toward her

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women of *Beowulf*, the queen Thryth and Grendel's mother. While on the surface, it appears that Judith's holy purpose contrasts the wicked and transgressive behavior of Thryth and Grendel's mother, some have questioned the criteria by which each of the latter figures transgresses social roles, potentially creating new congruencies between the women of *Beowulf* and the militant Judith. For a reconsideration of Thryth's transgressiveness, see Peter Baker, *Honour, Exchange, and Violence in* Beowulf (D.S. Brewer, 2013); Mary Dockray-Miller, "The Masculine Queen of *Beowulf*," *Women and Language* 21, no. 2 (1998): 31-38; and Erin Sebo and Cassandra Schilling, "Modthryth and the Problem of Peace-Weavers: Women and Political Power in Early Medieval England," *English Studies* 102, no. 6 (2021): 637-650. For a reconsideration of Grendel's mother's monstrosity, see Christine Alfano, "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother," *Comitatus* 23, no. 1 (1992): 1-16; M. Wendy Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel's Mother," *English Studies* 89, no. 5 (2008): 503–523; and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "Gender Roles," in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 311-24.

[355] *Judith*, ll. 122-23.

[356] *Judith*, ll. 154-57.

people does not detract from her orientation toward God but rather intensifies it, and the glory she wins likewise refracts, reflecting outward.

Judith's rich adornment also signals the duality of her character. The poem depicts her wearing gold in three passages: when Holofernes orders her brought to his bed, Judith arrives "in circlets rich all ring-adorned" ("beagum gehlæste, hringum gehrodene"). During their flight from the Assyrian camp, Judith and her maidservant are again "adorned with rings" ("beahhrodene"). Finally, Judith enters her city "adorned with gold" ("golde gefrætewod").[357] In the first passage, the source of Judith's attire is unclear: she may have been dressed in finery at Holofernes's command, which would suggest that the adornments are tainted by pagan association.[358] But in the second and third passages, gold carries the positive connotations typically associated with noble women in heroic culture like Wealhtheow.

This creates a contradiction: gold may elevate a secular queen, but early English religious sources often disavowed such adornments as symbolizing the desire for material wealth over spiritual enlightenment. Aldhelm uses the image of gold and fine jewelry to distinguish between those who are pure of faith and those who remain fixated on worldly materiality: "The latter strives that her neck be decorated with necklaces and her arms with bracelets and that she be adorned with gem-studded rings on her fingers; the former desires to be radiant with the most beautiful adornment of shining modesty and to gleam with golden necklaces of virtues."[359] Gold

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[357] *Judith*, ll. 36b-37a, 136b, 171b.
[358] This reading mirrors the end of the narrative, when Judith receives Holofernes's war gear and "devote[s] it all / to the glorious God of high hosts" ("Ealles ðæs Iudith sægde / wuldor weroda dryhtne," ll. 341b-42a). Interestingly, the poem does not emphasize Judith's rejection of these spoils of war, a detail that Ælfric considers in far more detail in his homily on Judith. One possible explanation is the poem's focus on heroic culture: a victorious warrior commonly seized the arms and armor of his conquered foe. As a heroic warrior who vanquished her enemy, Judith rightfully receives Holofernes's equipment after the Assyrians take flight, and thus she can devote them to God without explicitly rejecting them as sinful heathenism (as Ælfric describes).
[359] Aldhelm, *De Virginitate*, XVII (Lapidge and Herren 73).

imagery continues to serve as a spiritual distinction in later religious works as well, including hagiographies. For example, Ælfric's *Life* of Saint Eugenia contrasts the saint's reluctance to wear gold during life with her spiritual radiance after death. After the revelation of Eugenia's identity, the saint's family "adorned the virgin with gold, against her will" ("Hi þa gefretewodon þa fæmnan mid golde, hyre unþances"). But after the saint's death, Eugenia appears to her mother Claudia in a vision "adorned with gold, with the heavenly host" ("on gasticre gesihðe, mid golde gefrætewode").[360] For Eugenia, it is only after spiritual ascension that gold can retain its positive connotations. In another example, the English queen and saint Æthelthryth connects the fine jewelry of her secular youth with a painful (and ultimately terminal) tumor later in life.

> Ic wat heare þæt ic wel wyrðe eom þæt min swura beo geswenct mid swylcere untrumnysse, forðan þe ic on iugoðe frætwode minne swuran mid mænigfealdum swur-beagum. And me is nu geþuht þæt Godes arfæstnyss þone hylt aclænsige, þonne me nu þis geswel scynð for golde and þæs hata bryne for healicum gym-stanum.
>
> I know for certain that I well deserve that my neck should be afflicted with such sickness, because in youth I adorned my neck with many necklaces, And it seems to me now that God's mercy may cleanse that guilt, when this tumor now shines in place of gold for me and this hot burning in place of precious gemstones.[361]

For Æthelthryth, gold necklaces are sinful, and God cleanses her through physical suffering. Yet Judith returns to Bethulia in triumph, bearing the head of her enemy and adorned with gold, and

[360] Ælfric, "Saint Eugenia," in *Old English Lives of Saints*, ed. Mary Clayton and Juliet Mullins, vol. 2 (Harvard University Press, 2019), 62-63, 70-71.
[361] Ælfric, "Saint Æthelthryth," 198-99.

the poem suggests we should read these actions as valorous. Just as Judith can wage both literal and spiritual warfare, her spiritual purity allows her to wear gold without incurring sin.

Paradoxically, the poem anchors Judith's multivalent valor in her virginity, despite the fact that the biblical Judith is a widow. The poem elides her widowhood while repeatedly underscoring her virginal status, providing constant reminders to the audience that she is a *mægð*, a maiden or virgin.[362] This identification appears in compounds that highlight different salient aspects of her spiritual purity. Some epithets speak to her divine favor directly: she is the "blessed maiden" and "holy maid" ("þa eadigan mægð", "seo halige meowle"), and four additional times she is identified as a servant of God in compounds like "the Savior's handmaid" ("nergendes þeowen").[363] In other cases, her epithets draw attention to personalizing features: descriptors like "bright maiden" and "brilliant maid" ("torhtan mægð", "beorhte mægð", "snotore mægð") play on meanings of beauty as well as intelligence and wisdom.[364] Though striking, this contradiction is not unique to *Judith* – as Cassandra Green explains, female saints were commonly identified with the title of virgin in liturgical and devotional materials like calendars, masses, and litanies, regardless of their actual histories. For example, Æthelthryth's sister, Saint Seaxburh, "who was openly married with a daughter, is always categorised as a virgin in litanies mentioning her and is identified as such in eleven of the sixteen calendars which commemorate her."[365] For widows like Judith and Seaxburh, their sexual continence enabled

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[362] Since the beginning of the poem is lost, it is possible that the original introduction labeled her as a widow. It is clear from the remaining text, however, that the narrative emphatically aligns her with virginity and spiritual purity.
[363] *Judith*, ll. 35, 56, 160, 73-74; in the other three instances, she is "the Shaper's maid" ("scyppendes mægð", 75); "the Prince's maid" ("þeodnes mægð", 165); "the holy woman, God's handmaid" ("ða halgan magð … / metodes meowlan", 260-261).
[364] *Judith*, ll. 43, 254, 125.
[365] Cassandra Green, "King, Mother, Soldier, Whore: Multiple Performances of Virginity in Anglo-Saxon Prose Saints' Lives: The Heterogeneity of an Ideal," PhD diss. (University of Manchester, 2007), 20.

them to achieve metaphorical virginity, yet these figures illustrate how the spiritual dimension of virginity could blur the lines of bodily sex and sexuality.[366]

By virtue of her spiritual virginity, Judith's duality allows her to behave as a literal and metaphorical warrior. Like Juliana, she battles temptation and sin by preserving her purity of body and of faith. But unlike the virgin martyrs, she infiltrates an enemy encampment, slays their leader, and returns victorious carrying the head of her foe. Judith's refracted orientation toward God means that her faith moves her in multiple simultaneous directions: instead of movement toward God carrying her away from earthly matters altogether, eschewing materiality in favor of spirituality, her orientation redirects Judith to cleanse evil within the earthly realm. In the process, Judith's gender also refracts: she does not move toward agendered sanctity but toward a multivalent, polygendered spirituality. Judith's refractions require a new kind of translation, asking audiences to read within multiple contexts at once.

Throughout the narrative, the poem insists on the heroine's femininity while also imbuing her with masculine qualities. Her mission relies upon her feminine identity as much as her martial strength – both aspects of her character promote her success. At first, Judith's early portrayal in the text seems to suggest passivity and feminine objectification because, unlike the biblical narrative, the poem downplays Judith's seduction of Holofernes. The narrative begins

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[366] The spiritual strength of chastity serves as a central theme in Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* as well. He revises the tripartite patristic model of virginity, widowhood, and marriage, replacing widowhood with chastity, which he defines as "the state attained by someone who has once been married but who has rejected this marriage for the religious life." Lapidge and Herren remark that this innovation "allowed Aldhelm to praise by implication those Barking nuns such as Cuthburg who had spurned their marriages; at the same time it allowed him to praise 'pure' virginity in traditional terms" (Lapidge and Herren 56). In particular, Aldhelm venerates chastity by suggesting that virginity may lead to the sin of pride while chastity, being the lesser state, keeps one humble: some virgins "because they judge themselves to be chastely celibate and to be thoroughly free from all the dregs of filth, inflated with (over-) confidence in their virginity they arrogantly swell up and in no way do they turn away the most cruel monster Pride, devourer of other virtues, with the nose-ring of humility" (Aldhelm, *De Virginitate*, X, in Lapidge and Herren 67).

with the grand feast in the Assyrian camp four days after Judith's arrival. Having thoroughly steeped himself in food and wine, Holofernes retires to bed and demands Judith be brought to him – she does not join his drunken revelry. In his bedchamber, the poem reports Holofernes's lascivious intentions, but he quickly collapses, "so drunk on wine that his wit-locker / was of sense empty" ("wine swa druncen / … swa he nyste ræda nanne / on gewitlocan").[367] Nowhere in this scene does Judith speak or act, presenting a more sedate (and arguably disempowered) portrait than other versions of the narrative; in contrast, Ælfric's homily on Judith describes the heroine donning rich garments and jewels before approaching the Assyrians, prostrating herself at Holofernes's feet to offer him tactical information, and joining the feast. By this measure, the poem distances its heroine from the dangerous implications of sexuality, but it also reinforces her femininity through other means: in this passage, she is described as "wise" and "brilliant" ("ferhðgleawe", "snoteran"), and similar mentions of her intelligence occur throughout the poem.[368] Judith's most common descriptors involve mental acuity, beauty, nobility, courage, and purity, often appearing clustered together: the poem introduces Judith as "radiant lady, elf-lovely Judith" ("gleaw on geðonce, ides ælfscinu") and her people achieve victory over the Assyrians "thanks to the wise counsel of the keen Judith, bold-minded maid" ("þurh Iudithe gleawe lare, / mægð modigre").[369] Given the heroic world's association of femininity and wisdom, seen in the archetype of the queen as counselor, these clusters further underscore Judith's femininity.[370]

Some scholars have read Judith's militance as an assumption of masculinity, in which her spiritual virtue makes her essentially male. Alfred G. Litton argues that Judith undergoes a "role

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[367] *Judith*, ll. 67-69.
[368] *Judith*, ll. 41a,
[369] *Judith*, ll. 14-15, 333-34.
[370] See Stacy S. Klein, "Gender," in *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies*, ed. Jacqueline Stodnick and Renée R. Trilling (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 48-50.

reversal" in the moment she beheads Holofernes: "Judith, whose masculine/aggressive transformation is now complete, returns to her people and reinvigorates them with her newly gained 'manly' courage." For Litton, Judith's gender transformation demonstrates "the apparent inability of the medieval poet to offer his audience a female warrior figure without first investing her with the stereotypically 'male' characteristics."[371] This portrait of Judith as *virago* eclipses femininity, positioning Judith as either outside of gender or, in Litton's argument, as transitioning to masculinity. Barbara Newman contrasts the gender variance in *virago* and *virgo* models of religious womanhood: "The virago was an honorary male, aspiring to the unisex ideal, while the virgin aspired to a highly gendered ideal embodied in the Virgin Mary. Though more than female, she was neither less nor other."[372]

Judith, however, is a woman and a warrior, *virgo* and *virago* – she does not relinquish her femininity in order to perform a traditionally masculine role. In her moments of greatest violence, the poem directs attention to her hair, first as she unsheathes the sword ("Her locks entwined, she took a sword"; "Genam ða wundenlocc / … scearpne mece") and again as she delivers the first blow ("Then with her hair knotted / she hacked the fearsome foe"; "Sloh ða wundenlocc / þone feondsceaðan").[373] In the face of Holofernes's lust, Judith remains subtly feminine, wise and noble; with a sword in her hand, she is *ides ellenrof*, a brave lady,

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[371] Alfred G. Litton, "Heroine as Hero: Gender Reversal in the Anglo-Saxon *Judith*," *CEA Critic* 56, no. 1 (1993): 41-42.
[372] Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 5-6.
[373] *Judith*, ll. 77b-78, 103b-4a. The term *wundenlocc* (wound or braided hair) is also used to describe the Bethulians as they haul back the spoils of war: "the whole nation of noble clans – / foremost families – … / proud, hair-knotted" ("Þa seo cneoris eall, / mægða mærost, … / wlanc, wundenlocc", 323b-35a). Just as Judith's glory reflects onto her people, they also share a mark of her femininity. Because the poem aligns her spiritual purity with metaphorical virginity, the attribution of a descriptor with feminine connotations to the Bethulians seems to suggest that they share in that spiritual purity, using virginity and femininity as a vehicle. Interestingly, the term *mægða* (meaning family or kin group) greatly resembles the word *mægð* (maid or virgin); these words do not share an etymology, but the similarities were likely apparent to audiences, given the number of times the poem describes Judith as a *mægð*. Thus the Bethulian *mægða* share the holiness, and the *wundenlocc*, of their holy *mægð*.

personifying the courageous warrior without effacing femininity in the process. Stacy S. Klein argues that, in *Judith*, these aspects of the heroine's identity are not at odds with each other, nor with her spiritual purity: "the poem effectively constructs femininity as coextensive with divine love and martial success."[374] Judith's refracted orientation manifests as refracted gender, allowing her to embody aspects of multiple genders: noble secular femininity, heroic masculinity, and the spiritual fortitude of the virgin saint.

Modern queer and transgender theories ask us to look more closely at cross-gendered behavior and expression in order to understand how they constitute gender variation. Halberstam posits female masculinity among these variants, explaining that "female masculinity is not simply the opposite of female femininity, nor is it a female version of male masculinity."[375] Instead of attempting to become male, female masculinity insists on aspects of feminine identity while also incorporating culturally masculine gender expression, creating a uniquely gendered subjectivity beyond an imitation of, or transformation into, maleness. In medieval syncretism, a similar process occurs in which recognizable gender variants are recombined, metaphorized, and revalued in the process of cultural translation. Medieval religious texts often employed mixed-gender metaphors to create religious gender variants that remained legible within secular value systems but without reproducing them. Alison More highlights that "[w]hile the hagiographers of the *mulieres sanctae* often portray their spirituality in masculine imagery, their religious behaviour is generally characterized as feminine. Similarly, the hagiographers of their

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[374] Klein, "Gender," 51.

[375] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 29. To illustrate this point, Halberstam cites the example of performing artist Peggy Shaw and her performance piece *You're Just Like My Father*. "Shaw moves easily back and forth between various personae: she is the fighter, the crooner, the soldier, the breadwinner, the romeo, the patriarch. In each of these roles, she makes it clear that she is a female-bodied person inhabiting each role and that each role is part of her gender identity. To play among a variety of masculine identifications, furthermore, Shaw is not forced to become her father or to appropriate his maleness; she is already 'just like' her father, and their masculinities exist on parallel plains" (32).

aforementioned male contemporaries often use feminine imagery or portray their subjects as 'brides of Christ', yet never diminish the inherent masculinity of their subjects."[376] In one view, the authors' continued attention to the saints' "true" gender speaks to medieval gender essentialism. Yet religious definitions of gender could not be so strictly binary, since they allowed room for productive cross-gender identification: the *mulieres sanctae* were encouraged to view themselves in masculine ways, and likewise male monastics had to reconcile their masculinity with the adoption of a feminine subject position.[377] Religious gender variants were more than imitations of secular models, just as female masculinities are not synonymous with male masculinities.

Crossdressing is another category of supposedly inimitable but imaginatively fertile gender variance in medieval hagiography. The Old English prose *Lives* of Saints Eugenia and Euphrosyne add new depth to the interpretive translation strategies observed in the verse narratives. Both of these legends dramatize gender transformation as their central theme: the saints take on a new gender in order to pursue their religious calling. Like the verse hagiographies, these texts also ask audiences to translate meanings across contexts: in this case, perceiving divine truth requires reading beyond the accoutrements of earthly gender to see the sanctity beneath. The virgin saints' orientation toward God draws them away from earthly gender distinctions, enabling them to behave (and dress) in ways most aligned with their holiness. By embracing new clothing, the saints become closer to God, not because masculinity

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[376] Alison More, "Convergence, Conversion, and Transformation: Gender and Sanctity in Thirteenth-Century Liège," in *Representing Medieval Genders and Sexualities in Europe: Construction, Transformation, and Subversion, 600-1530*, ed. Elizabeth L'Estrange and Alison More (Ashgate, 2011), 35.
[377] According to Rebecca Stephenson, Judith herself is put to precisely this purpose in Ælfric's homily: "the epilogue of Ælfric's *Judith* allows monks to identify with a female figure without being emasculated themselves"; see Stephenson, "Judith as Spiritual Warrior: Female Models of Monastic Masculinity in Ælfric's *Judith* and Byrhtferth's *Enchiridion*," *English Studies* 101, no. 1 (2020): 88.

is inherently more proximate to the divine, but because *all* worldly things – masculine and feminine alike – impede orientation's gravitational pull. These *Lives* demonstrate that in God's eyes, deeper truths may be found in metaphor than in material reality.

In Ælfric's *Life* of Saint Eugenia, two trends illustrate the saint's gender transformation: first, the legend literalizes her orientation toward God through her travels, which recur at several points in the narrative.[378] Second, the text repeatedly contrasts the positive valences of secrecy against public displays of falsehood, suggesting that spiritual truths may lie in those things which are concealed as well as those which the saint makes manifest.

The narrative begins with two reciprocal movements: Eugenia's father Philip had previously expelled all Christians from Alexandria, and Eugenia travels to seek them out. The *Life* recounts, "[s]he asked her father to be allowed to travel throughout his estates in the region of Alexandria: she desired in this way to seek the teaching of the Christians because in the city she did not have any person of the true faith who knew how to teach her" ("Heo bæd þa hyre fæder þæt heo færen moste geond his hames on Alexandiscre scyre: wolde swa cepan þætre Cristenra lare, forðan þe heo næfde on ðære byrig nænne geleaffulne mann þe hi læren cuþe").[379] Eugenia's previous education instilled in her the desire to learn – the narrative reports that she "made excellent progress in wisdom and philosophy" before finding the teachings of Paul ("wel þeah on wisdome and on uðwytegunge") – and her new faith drives her to seek new knowledge.[380]

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[378] A note on names and pronouns: in general, I follow the texts, using she/her pronouns for Eugenia and alternating she/her and he/him pronouns for Euphrosyne/Smaragdus depending on context. In following textual pronoun use, I do not intend to reinforce the (often binary and essentialist) authorial interpretations of the hagiographers, but nor should we assert any definitive conclusions about the saints' gender identities. Instead, my analysis seeks to explore the plurality of possibilities these texts inspire us to consider.
[379] Ælfric, "Saint Eugenia," 46-47.
[380] Ælfric, "Saint Eugenia," 46-47.

United in purpose, Eugenia and her servants Protus and Hyacinth move through the narrative together: Upon finding the Christian community, Eugenia wishes to join them, so "[t]he three then set out and left their companions behind" ("færdon ða þry and heora gefæran forleton"). Eugenia expresses her desire to join the community to the priest Eutropius through the language of turning: "We three brothers wish to turn from foul heathenism to the savior Christ and we never want to be separated" ("We ðry gebroðra wyllað gecyrran fram þam fulan hæðenscype to hælende Criste and we nellað nateshwon us næfre totweman").[381] Their shared orientation toward God draws them together and toward other faithful servants of Christ; unlike Juliana, portrayed as a singular bastion of Christianity among pagans, Eugenia orients herself toward the divine by finding a new place among likeminded believers.

Finally established in a place conducive to her faith, Eugenia has the chance to grow in new ways. Her physical movement ceases and her spiritual movement increases dramatically.

> Eugenia þa wunode on þam mynstre mid wærlicum mode, þeah þe heo mæden wære, mid hyre twam cnihtum, uncuð gehwam, and heold on hyre þeawum halige drohtnunge ðurh modes liþnesse and mycelre ead-modnesse, and þurh halige mægnu þam hælende gecwæmde. Heo þeah on lare þæs rihtan geleafan and on godcundlicum gewrytum mid godum wyllan and weað awend of wulfe to sceape.
>
> Eugenia then, with a masculine spirit, remained in the monastery, although she was a young woman, along with her two servants, unknown to anyone, and observed a holy manner of living in her habits with gentleness of spirit and great humility, and by her holy virtues she pleased the savior. She progressed in the

[381] Ælfric, "Saint Eugenia," 48-49. The verb *gecyrran* is also used liberally in *Juliana*; see note 345 above.

> knowledge of the true faith and in divine writings with virtuous intent and was changed from a wolf to a sheep.[382]

Here Ælfric puts his thumb on the scale of gender interpretation: in his view, Eugenia remains a woman, but takes on manly spiritual virtue.[383] But the movement within the text tells a different story: she was moved by her faith to leave her pagan family and find Christianity, only settling when she found the right environment for her faith to grow, where she "progressed in the knowledge of the true faith" just as she had progressed in her classical education before. She "remained" in the monastery in order to "observ[e] a holy manner of living" that would have been unavailable elsewhere. This implies that Eugenia "remains" a woman to the extent that her earthly gender enables, or at least does not impede, her monastic way of life. Ælfric seems to assign her "masculine spirit" as an enabling factor, while the role her femininity plays in performing her faith remains ambiguous.

This passage also highlights the role of secrecy in Eugenia's pursuit of a virtuous life. On a practical level, life as a male monastic may have been her only avenue for a life removed from worldly concerns – since Christianity was persecuted in the city of Alexandria, the Christian community Eugenia finds in the region may not have supported any opportunities for female monasticism. But within the monastery, Eugenia flourishes: her masculine dress assimilates her seamlessly into the community, and her exemplary behavior leads the monks to elect her as the new abbot when her predecessor passed away. Her exemplarity speaks to her sanctity, a degree of holiness that the average Christian cannot attain, and the monks clearly recognize such in

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[382] Ælfric, "Saint Eugenia," 50-51.
[383] Weston argues that gender transformation in the *Lives* of Eugenia and Euphrosyne "polices as well as troubles the distinction between genders: the very rejection of femininity that implies the superiority of masculinity also reveals a failure of stable difference and the permeability of the boundaries between male and female"; see Weston, "Saintly Lives," 399.

Eugenia; however, it also indicates that she is able to achieve this level of virtuous living because her environment, including her dress, is conducive to holiness. Sheltered from most societal concerns (notwithstanding the social structure of the monastery itself), Eugenia can excel in her chosen vocation by virtue of her "gentleness of spirit and great humility," and her masculine garb enables this lifestyle. This is not to argue for either Eugenia's essential femininity beneath a masculine "disguise," as Ælfric states, or her internal identification with masculinity, which the text does not report directly. Rather, Eugenia shapes her own path to sanctity by navigating the obstacles of human society and materiality. Her clothing is as changeable as her physical location, and she chooses the path which orients her most firmly toward the divine. This suggests that things which seem all-important in secular life, like choice of dress, matter little in the eyes of God.

Still, the promotion to abbot momentarily gives Eugenia pause. The narrative relates that "the virgin became very anxious as to how she should govern men at all; however she did not dare trouble them all and reject their plan, but she accepted the office" ("wearð þæt mæden mycclum hohful hu heo æfre wæras wissian sceolde; ne dorest swaþeah hi ealle gedrefan and hyra geþeaht forseon, ac fæng to ðam hade").[384] Her hesitation seems to underscore her humility, but also evinces doubt about transgressing established hierarchies of masculine authority. Nevertheless, Eugenia accepts the position and her spiritual journey progresses even further as she gains the ability to heal the sick and perform exorcisms. She seems to trust that the monks' plan aligns with God's plan, and the miraculous outcome corroborates the rightness of their decision and her own acceptance. The monks' recognition of Eugenia's purity fulfills the foresight of the bishop Helenus, who originally encouraged her to maintain masculine dress and

[384] Ælfric, "Saint Eugenia," 52-53.

enter the monastery. While the monks do not know of Eugenia's birth gender, Helenus had received divine knowledge of her situation in a dream before her arrival. Eugenia's path to sanctity thus receives the approbation of the spiritual authorities on earth who have the greatest insights into the will of God, elevating her choice of dress from a gender transgression to a genderfluid manifestation of her holiness.[385]

In the past, scholarship on cross-identified saints like Eugenia has tended to focus on gender crossing in a binary fashion, debating the consequences of their gender crossing for definitions of feminine sanctity and masculine virtue. One view holds that these saints never truly transcend their femininity. For example, Salih concludes that "although their masculine or at least monkish disguise fools all around them," cross-identified saints "are nevertheless represented by the texts as women in disguise, rather than regendered creatures."[386] Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing concur: "As icons of chastity, these saints remain resolutely female, however much they invite cross-gendered identification."[387] Within this perspective, the narrative insistence on the saints' femininity may indicate that hagiographers wished to highlight feminine virtues like humility; these saints do not need to escape their femininity because their sanctity relies upon it. Alternatively, it may represent attempted authorial control over the

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[385] Teresa Hooper makes a similar point about monstrosity: unusual or seemingly unnatural figures indicate the limits of human perception in discerning divine will, and the need for alternative interpretive processes to better access spiritual truths. Drawing on the example of Nicea and Aquilina in the *Life* of Saint Christopher, Hooper argues that, of all the characters who meet Christopher, only these two women can correctly interpret the divine symbolism of his monstrous appearance: "Since monsters are contrary only to *known* nature, their bodies can also signal to the beholder that their view of nature, and by extension, the God of nature, is insufficient"; see Hooper, "The Missing Women of the *Beowulf* Manuscript," in *New Readings on Women and Early Medieval English Literature and Culture*, ed. Helene Scheck and Christine E. Kozikowski (Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 169.
[386] Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 104.
[387] Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 130.

interpretation of potentially transgressive behaviors, allowing for admiration without encouraging imitation.

Another school of thought accepts the saints' gender transformation, arguing that these saints effectively transcend femininity and adopt a male identity or escape gender altogether. In this view, cross-identified saints "do not so much repudiate woman's sexuality as to elevate it to the blissful state of sexlessness described in Galatians 3:28," as Paul E. Szarmach describes.[388] Yet for many critics, this form of gender transformation reifies masculinity – rather than providing autonomy or imaginative possibilities, these narratives idealize female subordination. Valerie R. Hotchkiss remarks that for cross-identified saints, "success – which is often attributed to the 'manly spirit' of the heroine – is contingent upon suppression of femaleness."[389] Building on this idea, Helene Scheck elaborates that these *Lives* "simply reinforce masculinist constructions of female subjectivity by validating women who reject their femininity quite literally."[390] By this measure, hagiographies of cross-identified saints paint a picture of patristic misogyny in which masculinity is the only route to virtue and thus holiness.

However, by framing narratives of crossdressing as either empowering or oppressive for women, these perspectives all reinforce binary gender by assuming that these saints navigate across a limited spectrum: one can be feminine, or masculine, or somewhere in between, but the latter category remains largely a product or permutation of the binary poles. Moreover, these perspectives tend to center the hagiographer more than the saints themselves, a trend which often privileges authorial intent over the diversity of interpretations that medieval audiences may have

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[388] 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 (University of New York Press, 1996), 361.
[389] Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross-Dressing in Medieval Europe* (Garland, 1996), 4.
[390] Scheck, *Reform and Resistance*, 24.

perceived. Spencer-Hall and Gutt point out that scholarship generally characterizes the saints' change of dress as disguise or deception. "This pernicious trope – often a product of the critic rather than the text itself – forecloses the affirmative interpretation of trans identities. This is not to say that characters in medieval texts do not cross-dress. Rather, the reflexive assumption that non-normative gender expressions can *only* ever indicate cross-dressing is reductive."[391] For the Old English *Life* of Eugenia, the saint's choice of dress aligns her not with a purely masculine model of virtue, but a genderfluid one: all earthly gender roles restrict one's movement toward God, even if worldly masculinity may provide social benefits usually less accessible to women.

Notably, Aldhelm's retelling of the *Life* of Eugenia also underscores the holiness of Eugenia's secrecy: "the author of the virginity herself had resolved to hide away her virginal gift in secret corners, and had taken care that it was known only to the observation of the divine majesty to whom the hidden mysteries of all secrets are revealed." In contrast, Aldhelm recounts that the saint's family, looking for answers about Eugenia's disappearance, sought "some stupid advice from the soothsayers and sorcerers, who babble out the ravings of falsehood (and) who vainly flatter themselves on possessing a knowledge of hidden things beyond that of other mortals."[392] This narrative connects the soothsayers' "babble" to their mistaken belief that they have supernatural perception of "hidden things," as if their eagerness to reveal their knowledge signals that their beliefs are in fact false. Eugenia proffers the opposite model: her "virginal gift" derives from God and is known only to divine omniscience. This gift needs no public recognition nor social approbation, and its secrecy strengthens its spiritual force rather than diminishes it.

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[391] Spencer-Hall and Gutt, *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, 26-27.
[392] Aldhelm, *De Virginitate*, XLIV (Lapidge and Herren 111).

As a symbol of sanctity, Eugenia's gender expression constitutes a holy secret rather than a deception. In this fashion, Ælfric's *Life* enacts a spiritual translation between the literal and the metaphorical. Eugenia's crossdressing does not falsely conceal something sinful – it permits those around her to perceive the divine truth of her spiritual purity. *Juliana* also makes this distinction between falsehoods and pious secrecy: in her speech before her execution, Juliana tells the faithful to "hold / a true belief and peace among you / in your hearts, holy secrets / with purpose of mind" ("soðe treowe ond sibbe mid eow / healdað æt heortan, halge rune / þurh modes myne").[393] Whereas the devil spins plausible lies, Juliana represents belief as the secrets of one's heart, an internal surety that is no less true for its lack of public reception. In the *Life* of Eugenia, the widow Melantia plays the role of deceiver. After Eugenia heals her, Melantia reveals her own lustful orientation: she tells Eugenia, "[n]ow my heart is directed very much to you" ("Nu is min mod awend mycclum to ðe").[394] In response, Eugenia seeks to reorient Melantia in the right direction. Significantly, she uses the language of deception to explain the workings of sin: Eugenia advises Melantia that "the desires of this present world are very deceitful, though they may be pleasant, and that the desires of the body frequently deceive and bring to sorrow those who love them most" ("ða gewylnunga þissere andweardan worulde synt swiðe swicole, þeah þe hi geswæse beon, and þæs lic-homan lustas gelome bepæceð and to sarnissum gelædað þa þe hi swiðost lufiað").[395] In Eugenia's perspective, desires lead people to sin because they are pleasurable and therefore seem good to the uncritical mind. But pleasant

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[393] *Juliana*, ll. 655-57. In *Guthlac B*, the titular saint is also called "the stout secret keeper" ("rof runwita") in reference to his great sanctity and the divine perception he shares on his deathbed; l. 1095. Old English text from ASPR vol. III (ed. Krapp and Dobbie, Columbia University, 1936); trans. Ophelia Eryn Hostetter (in *Old English Poetry Project*, Rutgers University, 2023, https://oldenglishpoetry.camden.rutgers.edu/). NB: while ASPR continues line numbering from part A to part B, Hostetter's translation numbers each part individually; this passage occurs in Hostetter ll. 276ff.
[394] Ælfric, "Saint Eugenia," 54-55.
[395] Ælfric, "Saint Eugenia," 54-55.

things are sins in disguise. By this definition, Eugenia's masculine attire is not deceptive because she did not adopt it out of personal pleasure or to hide her sins. To the contrary, her choice of dress serves God's will, not simply her own, and it enables her to remain sinless herself and to cleanse the sins of others. Thus, while an uncritical or unenlightened interpreter may view her masculine attire as a falsehood, Eugenia's divinely sanctioned genderfluidity constitutes a spiritual and metaphorical truth.

Like Eugenia's *vita*, the anonymous Old English *Life* of Saint Euphrosyne also insists on metaphorical readings over literal ones. This narrative focuses on the saint's monastic lifestyle and the incumbent rejection of earthly ties. And unlike most other Roman virgins, Euphrosyne does not die a martyr: as Smaragdus, s/he lives in the monastery for almost forty years as the epitome of a devoted monk. By focusing on a life of idealized mundanity rather than persecution and temptation, the *Life* of Euphrosyne offers an imitable model of genderfluid sanctity.

In this narrative, the saint's entry into monastic life involves a somewhat convoluted process and the assistance of several outside parties. Upon her betrothal, Euphrosyne's father Paphnutius takes her to visit the nearby monastery which he patronizes. She stays for several days and becomes fascinated by the monastic lifestyle; later, when a monk pays a visit to their home, she asks him many questions about the community. In response to her questions, the monk replies, "We all chant in common together, but each of us fasts according to what is fitting for him so that none of us is rebellious against the holy way of life but does what he does voluntarily" ("Ealle we singað gemænelice ætgædere, ac ure æghwilc fæst be þam þe him to anhagað þæt ure nan ne beo wiþerrade wiþ þa halgan drohtnunga ac wilsumlice do þæt he

do").[396] His explanation shows the unity of monastic faith as well as the opportunity for variation in the path each individual might take on their journey toward holiness.

Euphrosyne wishes to voluntarily commit herself to the same way of life (*drohtnunga*), though she knows that her own path will be more unusual than most. The monk praises her wish, instructing her to "betroth yourself to Christ, who in place of these transitory things can give you the heavenly kingdom" (bewedde þe sylfe Criste, se þe mæg for þisum gewitenlicum þingum syllan þæt heofonlice rice"). To help Euphrosyne follow this injunction, the monk advises, "go now secretly to a monastery and lay aside your worldly clothes and dress yourself in monastic clothing" ("far nu to mynstre digellice and alege þine woruldlican gegyrlan and gegyre þe mid munucreafe").[397] The monk sees no conflict in advising a change of dress: Euphrosyne's exchange of "worldly clothes" for monastic attire explicitly signals her movement toward spiritual purity and her widening distance from materiality, the trappings of earthly gender roles included.[398]

Together, the monk and Euphrosyne construct a plan to deliver her to her new life. Paphnutius accompanies the visiting monk back to the monastery, where he stays for several days. In the meantime, Euphrosyne sends a servant to fetch another monk, who clothes and

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[396] "Saint Euphrosyne," in *Anonymous Old English Lives of Saints*, ed. Johanna Kramer, Hugh Magennis, and Robin Norris (Harvard University Press, 2020), 32-33.
[397] "Saint Euphrosyne," 34-35.
[398] The saint's orientation also manifests in her repeated rejection of her father's wealth. Euphrosyne promises her inheritance to the monastery when she comes to live there, but the text does not portray this as a monetary transaction, a sign of Euphrosyne buying her way into the community. Instead, the text shows Euphrosyne's disdain for her father's material goods as a marker of her movement toward God. Although her financial resources enable Euphrosyne to successfully reach the monastery without detection and smooth her transition into a new, holier lifestyle, the money serves a worthy purpose only indirectly and not for its own sake. Euphrosyne uses wealth only insofar as it directs her toward God and not away from him, and thus her use of wealth does not represent the temptation of material attachments. Her clothing functions in a similar fashion: she adopts masculine dress because it assists her spiritual goals, not for selfish or subversive purposes. For further examples of saints eschewing material wealth, see Aldhelm's description of the virgins Demetrias, Anatolia, and Victoria (*De Virginitate*, XLIX, LII, in Lapidge and Herren 116, 119-20), as well as *Guthlac A*, in which the saint "cared nothing for life-wealth loaned through covetousness" ("nales þy he giemde þurh gitsunga/ lænes lifwelan"), ll. 150-51a.

tonsures her before departing. The night before Paphnutius's return home, Euphrosyne leaves and spends the night hidden away; once Paphnutius leaves the monastery, Euphrosyne presents herself at the gates as a eunuch seeking to join the community. "I was in the king's household and am a eunuch, and I have always wanted to enter into the monastic life, but such a life is not at all customary in our town. Now I have learned of your glorious way of life and my desire is to live with you, if that is your desire" ("Ic wæs on cinges hirede and ic eom eunuchus, and ic symle wilnode to munuclicum life gecyrran, ac þyllic lif nis na gewunelic on ure ceastre. Nu geaxode ic eowre mæran drohtnunge and min willa is þæt ic mid eow eardian mote, gif eower willa þæt bið").[399] (Here the saint adopts the name Smaragdus and the text switches to he/him pronouns.)

Although this statement is not wholly truthful on a literal level, the text emphasizes its metaphorical truths: Euphrosyne lived under circumstances much like those described here (albeit not in the king's household), and Smaragdus resembles a eunuch insofar as he stands adjacent to the social categories of male and female while belonging to neither.[400] Smaragdus also subordinates his desires (joining the community) to the abbot's judgment, knowing that the abbot's own holiness grants him greater knowledge of divine will. Smaragdus thus seeks to orient himself in the direction most pleasing to God and, while he knows his own mind, he affirms the rightness of that path with an earthly spiritual authority as an intermediate sign of

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[399] "Saint Euphrosyne," 38-39. Once again, the verb *gecyrran* is used to describe a person's turn toward faith.
[400] In further research, I wish to more closely consider how the text negotiates Smaragdus's sexual allure among his fellow monks. On one hand, the onus is placed on Smaragdus to alter his habits in order to avoid inciting the brothers' lust, which resonates with religious rhetoric surrounding the dangers of female sexuality – women were often made responsible, implicitly or explicitly, for the sexual desires of men. On the other hand, Smaragdus is not actually blamed or punished for their lustful thoughts, and the new (and extreme) ascetic habits he adopts as a result actually elevate his spiritual purity. Moreover, as a "eunuch," Smaragdus already occupies a gender-ambiguous position in the eyes of his fellow monks, which adds further complexity to any reading of this scene as evidence of Smaragdus's latent femininity.

God's endorsement. Just as the monk advises Euphrosyne to eschew secular clothing as worldly temptation, the abbot's acceptance of Smaragdus into the community confirms that this change of dress promotes Smaragdus's sanctity, serving not as a deception but an enactment of deeper spiritual truth.

Smaragdus receives another worldly affirmation that his current path aligns with God's will in the spiritual tug-of-war between his father's prayers and his own. Paphnutius, distraught at his daughter's disappearance, prays fervently for her safe return and entreats the monastery's inhabitants to assist his prayers.[401] The monks assent, but "no revelation came as usually happened for them when they prayed for something" ("ac him nan swutelung ne com swa him gewunelic wæs þonne hi hwæs bædon"). This unusual turn of events indicates to the abbot that some higher reason outweighs their desire for answers: he tells Paphnutius, "I know she has chosen some good course for herself and for that reason nothing was revealed to us about her" ("Ic wat þæt heo sumne godne ræd hire geceas forþy us be hire nan þincg ateowod wæs"). The abbot consoles him that no news is good news: his daughter is in good hands. The text provides the audience with additional insight: "it was the holy woman Euphrosyne's prayer to God, day and night, that she would never be revealed in her life" ("Witodlice þære eadigan femnan Eufrosinan ben wæs to Gode dæges and nihtes þæt heo næfre on hire life gecyðed wære").[402] In the face of this trial of her/his faith, Euphrosyne/Smaragdus maintain her/his course, oriented

[401] Paphnutius's lamentations for his lost daughter are not unlike the distress expressed by some parents of transgender and gender-nonconforming children today. Anecdotally, these parents describe feeling that they have lost a child when their children come out as trans or make gender-affirming choices. Often these concerns come from a place of fear, sadness, and/or confusion rather than outright hostility. Paphnutius remains similarly unseeing in this text: while he is a Christian (and thus not hostile to Euphrosyne's faith), he cannot see God's will at work in her disappearance, and his lack of understanding inhibits him from recognizing his own child.
[402] "Saint Euphrosyne," 44-45.

toward God, and because this desire is aligned with God's will, her/his prayers are answered where Paphnutius's are not.

Euphrosyne/Smaragdus's monastic way of life (*drohtnunga*) serves as the central focus of the narrative. While her/his spiritual journey necessitated unconventional measures, the text lauds Euphrosyne for going to great lengths to devote herself fully to God, and Smaragdus exceeds the monastic standard of holy living. By praising the saint's journey toward holiness, the text also demonstrates approval for the genderfluidity which made that journey possible. In this narrative, changing dress does not constitute a transgression but an admirable way to distance oneself from the obstacles (and temptations) of worldly life in favor of an asceticism which brings one closer to God. Smaragdus is not more proximate to divinity by virtue of his masculinity alone, but by virtue of his distance from the material world; in the logic of this text, his identity as a eunuch also creates further distance, transforming potentially suspect characteristics into symbols of piety. And as an ideal monk, Smaragdus sets an example that is both admirable and imitable for his fellow monks and audiences alike. Salih explains that saints like Euphrosyne/Smaragdus achieve holiness not through superhuman feats, but through embodying their social role to its greatest extent. These saints "enact to the full the duties of their state, [to] be an ideal monk, or queen, or bishop. Such saints exemplify the virtues expected of all Christians to the highest degree."[403] Because Smaragdus lives his life as the epitome of monastic piety, he serves as a model for a broad variety of people, lay and monastic, male and female, and the saint's genderfluidity is part of that paradigm.

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[403] Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 43. In this, Euphrosyne/Smaragdus fulfills the role of confessor, a role usually represented by male saints but not unheard of for female saints. For example, in Aldhelm's narrative of Scholastica, he reports that she lives "under the title of a confessor, even though no opportunity for a bloody martyrdom presented itself, lived in a manner worthy of praise among the company of the faithful" (*De Virginitate*, XLVII, in Lapidge and Herren 113).

Smaragdus's gender goes unquestioned and he lives out his life as a monk for thirty-eight years. At the end of the saint's life, Paphnutius visits the monastery to speak with him, but Paphnutius's mind is still caught up in his own sorrows. In mourning the saint's imminent death, he weeps for his loss: "Up until now we had some comfort through you, and now you want to abandon us. What misery! Who is to comfort me in my old age?" ("Efne nu we hæfdon sume frofre þurh þe, and þu wylt us forlætan. Wa me, hwa sceal mine yldo afrefrian?"). By speaking of his own continuing sadness, Paphnutius demonstrates that he has never fully accepted Smaragdus's divine consolations for the loss of his daughter. That a parent's sorrow should last a lifetime is certainly understandable, but less than ideal from the perspective of saintly dissociation from worldly ties. When Paphnutius returns for the final time, Smaragdus reveals that he is actually Euphrosyne, Paphnutius's daughter. He explains, "Almighty God has arranged my wretched life well and has fulfilled my wish that I might end the course of my life as a man" ("God ælmihtig hæfð wel gedihtod min earme lif and gefylled minne willan þæt ic moste þone ryne mines lifes werlice geendian").[404] (Here the narrative switches back to the name Euphrosyne as well as she/her pronouns.)

Like Eugenia's decision to accept promotion to abbot, here Euphrosyne aligns her/his own life choices with a higher authority. God has fulfilled her/his wish to live (and die) as a man because those wishes are congruent with his will. Euphrosyne requests that Paphnutius keep her/his birth identity a secret, including barring others from burial preparations. S/he specifically states: "don't let anyone know this and don't permit anyone to wash and prepare my body except you yourself" ("ne læt þu þis ænigne witan, ne ne geþafa ðu þæt ænig man minne lichaman þwea

[404] "Saint Euphrosyne," 48-49.

and gyrwa buton þe sylf").[405] Euphrosyne makes her/his own wishes explicitly clear: because God has allowed her/him to live as a man, s/he wishes to die as s/he has lived and attempts to ensure that her/his masculine identity is preserved.

However, Paphnutius does not heed the request in the fresh wave of his own grief and self-absorption. When the abbot sees Paphnutius's distress and seeks to console him, Paphnutius's lamentations reveal Euphrosyne's secret, and he bemoans their lost time: "Why did you not want to make yourself known to me so that I could live with you of my own will? What misery for me, that you kept yourself hidden so long!" ("For hwam noldest þu ðe sylfe me gecyðan þæt ic mihte mid þe sylfwilles drohtian? Wa me, þæt þu swa lange þe sylfe dyrndest").[406] Paphnutius still has not acknowledged the supremacy of God's will; he cannot recognize that Euphrosyne's choices were not simply personal self-determination. For all his own dearest wishes, the saint's orientation toward God – and his own inability to align himself accordingly – ensured that Euphrosyne's life path would diverge from his.

The change in name and pronouns during Euphrosyne's final conversation with her father mirrors the narrative's preoccupation with the "revelation" of the saint's female identity in its closing pages. At first, the switch seems to suggest that Euphrosyne's femininity ultimately reasserts itself at the end of her life, providing emotional closure for Paphnutius and the means for the saint's veneration.[407] Yet even amid the explicit statements about Euphrosyne's female

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[405] "Saint Euphrosyne," 50-51.
[406] "Saint Euphrosyne," 50-51.
[407] Robin Norris argues that "[t]his reticence is a sign of the saint's humility, for she knows that it is only with the revelation of her female nature that she will be hailed as a saint"; see Norris, "Genre Trouble: Reading the Old English *Vita* of Saint Euphrosyne," in *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (University of Toronto Press, 2014), 136. Beyond the potential for gender essentialism, this argument also seems to break the fourth wall of the hagiographical genre: saints do not seek sanctity as an end in and of itself, but they receive praise and veneration as a byproduct of their exceptional virtue. Implying that Euphrosyne makes a deathbed decision based purely on her likelihood of being canonized seems to conflate the hagiographer's project with the saint's own motivations and self-identity.

identity, Smaragdus's long life cannot be entirely erased. The abbot entreats, "Euphrosyne, bride of Christ and offspring of holy people, do not be forgetful of your fellow servants or of this monastery, but pray to the Lord for us that he may cause us to come manfully to the harbor of salvation and make us partakers with him and his saints" ("Eufrosina, Cristes brid and haligra manna tuddor, ne beo þu forgitende þinre efenþeowa and þyses mynstres, ac gebide to Drihtne for us þæt he gedo us werlice becuman to hælo hyðe, and us do dælnimende mid him and his halgum").[408] Although the abbot now sees Euphrosyne as a more literal "bride of Christ" than her monastic brothers, he still acknowledges her place among the male community, as one of their "fellow servants." He asks that she lead them "manfully" toward salvation, reinforcing her own divinely oriented sanctity as well as her identity as Smaragdus. The adjective *werlice* is the same term by which Smaragdus refers to his own masculine identity in his final request to die "as a man"; thus the narrative creates a parallel between Smaragdus's life and the example he sets for his brethren. Implicitly, the monks are encouraged to follow a holy exemplar which now includes the role of *sponsa Christi* as well, complicating the essentialist logic of the saint's gender "reveal." Whether Euphrosyne is "really" a man or a woman, the abbot's final prayer suggests that, while the saint's gender may have changed in the eyes of the community, her/his pious example remains largely unchanged.

As these textual sources have shown, medieval virginities are more than simply the exceptions which prove the rule, that is, which inscribe the line between social gender conformity and transgression.[409] New or redefined gender variants may be licit or laudable (i.e., non-transgressive) while still being infrequent or exceptional. M.W. Bychowski illustrates this

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[408] "Saint Euphrosyne," 50-53.
[409] For the argument that saints are the extraordinary exceptions which prove the rule, see Garber, *Vested Interests*, 213.

complex interplay between frameworks of permissibility and marginality in medieval religious thought. She contends that hagiography as a genre seeks to represent a wide range of lives and experiences: "a saint whose *Life* seems relatively obscure and marginal, such as a trans saint, serves the wider goals of hagiography because their story speaks to the authenticity of people whose way of being might likewise be considered obscure or marginal."[410] Bychowski shows that the marginality or exceptionality of a particular *Life*, and the way of living it represents, does not innately hinder the recognition or reception of its gender variance.

In modern transgender communities, individuals often discuss their trans identities through the concepts of authenticity and inner self-realization. For most medieval saints, we have no first-person narratives, and thus their interiority and understanding of their own gender are not accessible to modern audiences.[411] However, as Bychowski points out, textual clues like genre conventions can help us access notions of authenticity from a different direction. In this vein, the concept of virginity as an ongoing act of willpower signifies that virgin saints adopt gender-variant behaviors and roles voluntarily as constitutive acts of faith. In essence, to be authentically faithful is also to be authentically gender-variant – the magnitude of a saint's orientation toward God loosens their ties to earthly expectations and renders their gender ambiguous. Therefore, while the exceptionalism inherent to sanctity may keep certain ways of being firmly in the

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[410] M.W. Bychowski, "The Authentic Lives of Transgender Saints," in *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, edited by Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt (Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 248.

[411] Exceptions are few and far between, but do exist: for example, several scholars have argued that Christina of Markyate's *vita* should be considered an autohagiography, even if the extant texts are necessarily mediated. Lisa M. C. Weston also highlights that hagiographies written by close companions and intimates of the saint may provide more insights into the saint's self-understanding, especially in cases like Baudonivia's *Life* of Saint Radegund where a woman writes the story of a female saint; see Weston, "Elegiac Desire and Female Community in Baudonivia's *Life of Saint Radegund*," in *Same Sex Love and Desire among Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Francesca Canade Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 85-100.

margins, the diversity of gender possibilities that saints embody illustrate that the margins may be far broader than they seem.

"With One Governing and the Other Obeying": Patriarchal Limitations on Gender Possibilities

Despite the breadth of gender variation that virginity makes accessible, however, the necessities of earthly life and social organization delimited virginity's transformative potential. Literature's imaginative possibilities may inspire audiences to think outside of the box, broadening their understanding of what gender could look like, but material circumstances for marginalized groups frequently fell short of this optimism. For the Roman martyrs, Christians living under the tyranny of a pagan emperor, defying mortal authorities constituted an act of faith because it represented a rejection of the world and reaffirmed their orientation toward God. By rebelling against civic and religious authorities, these martyrs put their lives at risk and thus put their faith to the test, demonstrating their sanctity in the face of temptation and tribulation. But for Christians living in medieval western Europe, orientation toward God no longer entailed rebellion against the state because the state itself was Christian: "[b]y the end of the fourth century, Christianity was the established religion of the Roman world…[and] a persecuted sect was transformed into a dominant and later an established church." This drastically changed the structure of Christian social life, since "[m]embership in a state church bears little resemblance to identification with a persecuted minority," and the example of the Roman martyrs became a spiritual metaphor reserved for the elect few: "Christians were quickly redivided into classes and

degrees based on sex and status; the zeal once shared by all, with their willingness to die for the faith, became the property of a new elite."[412]

In early medieval England, conversion progressed disjointedly at first, with some rulers adopting Christianity only to be succeeded by pagan heirs, while warfare and political alliances redrew regional boundaries. As Christian and pre-Christian value systems syncretized, the landscape of masculinity fundamentally changed. While heroic masculinity revolved around military prowess and sexual virility, Christianity's emphasis on sexual purity "reduced masculine potency to the species of vice," which impacted definitions of masculinity and femininity alike.[413] For men, Christian chastity could be emasculating; for women, however, it presented an opportunity. During the conversion period when contradictory value systems were in flux, virginity and chastity allowed women a potential measure of moral superiority over men: "[t]he virgin or widow, in firm control of her physical and emotional integrity, challenged the power structure that rested on sexual potency," while for men, "[t]he sexual act proved their authority but robbed them of the virgin's self-command."[414]

In the face of such potential demasculinization, Christian men had to derive their masculinity from other sources. These efforts followed two general strategies, often deployed in tandem: the adoption and rebranding of previously "feminine" or "unmasculine" traits, and the transformation of pre-Christian masculine traits into spiritual metaphors. Mathew Kuefler explains that early Roman Christianity "offered assurance to its followers that they might find manliness and an escape from their worries of unmanliness in accepting the demands of the

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[412] Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 64-65.
[413] McNamara, "An Unresolved Syllogism," 6; see also Murray, "Masculinizing Religious Life," 72.
[414] McNamara, "An Unresolved Syllogism," 5-6.

Christian religion." This created a paradox of masculinity: "Christian leaders assured the faithful that they might find manliness even in behaviors and attitudes previously considered unmanly."[415] Jo Ann McNamara concurs, noting that Christian purity "challenged men to seek an acceptable access to womanly virtue."[416] In the endeavor to rebrand previously unmasculine traits and behaviors, the leaders of the church reoriented masculinity as first and foremost the control of oneself, with authority over others following naturally. And a man's battle for self-control became the new battleground: "[m]en who actively resisted seduction transformed their vulnerability into virile ascendancy."[417]

In poems like *The Dream of the Rood,* religious syncretism offered Christian men a way to carry forward the pre-Christian martial and sexual valences of masculinity into new spiritual contexts. As *milites Christi*, both lay and monastic men fought moral battles against "sin and temptation – against the unmanliness of vice within themselves" and thus "did not require further bloodshed in actual combat."[418] The *Lives* of certain male saints make this translation plain by juxtaposing the literal battles of their younger years with their transition into spiritual warfare against sin in service of God. In Ælfric's *Life* of Saint Martin, the saint requests that the emperor release him from military service after he is baptized: "till now I have fought for thee; suffer me henceforth to fight for God, and let him who fights for thee receive thy gift. I am God's champion; I must not fight."[419] When the emperor accuses him of cowardice, he walks onto the

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[415] Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, 2.
[416] Jo Ann McNamara, "An Unresolved Syllogism: The Search for a Christian Gender System," in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray, (Garland, 1999), 6.
[417] McNamara, "An Unresolved Syllogism," 9. See also Jacqueline Murray, "Masculinizing Religious Life," and Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).
[418] Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, 105.
[419] Ælfric, "Saint Martin," in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. Walter W. Skeat (Oxford University Press, 1966), ll. 103-106; also see the previous analysis of Saint Edmund in chapter 1. As might be expected, Aldhelm's vignette on Saint Martin in *De Virginitate* focuses on the saint's purity; however, in many of Aldhelm's stories of male saints, virginity

battlefield with no weapons nor armor as a sign of his faith; not only does he survive the event, but his example causes the heathen army to subject themselves willingly to Roman forces. The English saint Guthlac was also a warrior in his youth before taking up the ascetic life of an anchorite in the wilderness. The two Old English verse *Lives* of Guthlac use heroic epithets to frame the saint's holiness: he is called "glory's worthy warrior" ("weorðlice wuldres cempa"), "the holy Host-thane" ("halig husulbearn"), "the Lord's precious thane" ("dyre dryhtnes þegn"), and "the champion of the Lord, the bold battle-leader" ("Dryhnes cempa, from folctoga").[420]

As the foregoing analysis has shown, Christian purity was not solely the purview of men; people of all genders had access to various gendered models for faith, including the *miles Christi* and *sponsa Christi* archetypes, which further blurred distinctions between religious masculinities and femininities. As traits of secular masculinity became metaphors for spiritual fortitude, religious women could emulate those traits (to a degree) without transgressing beyond permissible gender variation. In reverse, religious men were encouraged not only to adopt traditionally "feminine" traits, but to consider themselves as brides of Christ: the analogy between wife/husband and human/divine dichotomies created a space for men to productively imagine themselves in feminine ways.[421]

However, this imaginative landscape still remained rooted in material society and gendered hierarchies of power. The institution of a religious elite who embodied a new form of

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is often a small or less central narrative element than his treatise's topic might indicate. Thus it is significant that he attributes Martin's miracles directly to his chastity: "because of the crown of integrity he had acquired and the blessed distinction of virginity – which he was able to preserve with tireless efforts right to the end, like a royal diadem or the jewelled necklaces of amulets – is said to have shone forth in the marvellous miracles of his virtues" (*De Virginitate*, XXVII, in Lapidge and Herren 85).

[420] *Guthlac A*, ll. 324, 559, 693; *Guthlac B*, ll. 901b-2a (Hostetter ll. 76ff).

[421] In the later Middle Ages, Sarah McNamer traces a similar identification within devotional texts like Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, which "initiate[s] the reader into feminine identity through inviting identification with Mary" in a form of *imitatio Mariae* rather than *imitatio Christi*; see McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 132-33.

chaste masculinity also redefined the boundaries of gender transgression. On the one hand, the metaphorical nature of spiritual virginity created a multiplicity of gender variants, because virginity's orientation toward and resulting proximity to divinity consequently distanced the virgin from earthly life, including earthly gender distinctions. And because medieval theology primarily understood heavenly human gender as a redifferentiation of earthly gender expectations rather than a state of undifferentiation, this proliferation of virginal gender variants underscores rather than minimizes gender as a meaningful dimension of spiritual identity; in this case, ambiguity does not indicate a lack of significance but instead calls attention to the ways in which gender variation constructs and/or influences sanctity itself. Among the range of virginal gender possibilities, a form of chaste masculinity arose which came to dominate early medieval England (and western European Christianity writ large).

On the other hand, as that particular variant of masculinity gained hegemonic power, a new religious elite – what Cubitt calls a "veritable…old boy network" – had a vested interest in maintaining their own authority, which necessitated the curtailing of other gender variants.[422] This involved redefining what was permissible or transgressive, reinscribing a narrower range of "permissible diversity" and making some gender variants transgressive or illegible. Steven F. Krueger highlights that the church recognized many potential threats to its power, including religious movements from within Christianity itself: "too vigorous an embracing of poverty, too stark a renunciation of worldly power, too strong a movement out of the realm of 'masculine'

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[422] Cubitt, "Virginity and Misogyny," 18. Cubitt also clarifies that ecclesiastical opinions stretched beyond monastic contexts and into secular governance as well: "[w]hile Ælfric's attitudes may not have been typical of all Anglo-Saxon churchmen, and indeed may have been anathema to the laity at large, they mattered to many of those who held power" (22). For further discussion of the changing landscape of religious masculinity in the Conquest period, see Jo Ann McNamara, "The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Univ. Minnesota Press, 1994), 3-29; and Jennifer D. Thibodeaux, *The Manly Priest: Clerical Celibacy, Masculinity, and Reform in England and Normandy* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

authority, could come to be viewed with suspicion, even as 'heretical,' because potentially critical of the Church and its real power."[423] Though virginity's proximity to the divine may produce gender ambiguities in theory, the new fathers of the church insisted that earthly binary gender distinctions prevailed in practice. After all, a virgin is still a *living* saint, and thus bound to material gender concepts; no degree of proximity could surmount those bindings in this life.

In literary discourse, theological admonitions abound in hagiographies, homilies, and other religious texts that legends of exceptional women are to be admired but not emulated, attempting to control the audience's interpretations and subsequent behavior (if not, perhaps, their imaginations). While religious men benefitted from a new kind of spiritual virility through the metaphorical emulation of female exempla, medieval (male) authors seemed concerned that the women in their audiences might do the same. Mary Louise Fellows contends that, in Ælfric's *vitae*, men "have the power to redefine manhood to match their Christian beliefs," while women "do not have that luxury."[424] Cubitt adds that Ælfric "used the late antique virgins as vehicles for ideas of virginity, not as exemplars of femininity," and in doing so, he "pays lip service to spiritual equality for men and women, but underneath the rhetoric regards monasticism as primarily a male activity and views women with suspicion."[425] In one view, the observation that Ælfric emphasizes the sanctity of his examples over their gender may seem to be an equalizing strategy, conveying that saints of all genders can be metaphorical role models to audiences of all

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[423] Krueger, "Becoming Christian, Becoming Male?," in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (Routledge, 2000), 27-28.
[424] Mary Louise Fellows, "Æthelgifu's Will as Hagiography," in *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (University of Toronto Press, 2014), 91. This resonates with the argument of the previous chapter, in which female elegiac voices portrayed the constraints of their material circumstances while rejecting the consolation of the next life.
[425] Cubitt, "Virginity and Misogyny," 12, 15-16. Helene Scheck concurs, remarking that "[i]ndividual women may excel, primarily by demonstrating their virility and thereby escaping the taint of their gender, but the female gender as a whole remains suspect" (*Reform and Resistance*, 17).

genders; however, Cubitt posits that Ælfric's focus on virginity over femininity makes the legends' moral paradigm more accessible to men than women.

Ælfric's homily on Judith seems to follow this pattern: his exegetical interpretations target particular behaviors he wishes to support or discourage. But the features of Judith's story trouble his intended meanings. For example, he asserts that "she signified the faithful with works, the holy congregation who now lives in God...his one clean bride who with keen belief cuts off the head from the old devil, ever in cleanness serving Christ" ("þe heo getacnode untwelice mid weorcum þa halgan gelaðunge þe gelyfð nu on God...his an clene bryd þe mid cenum geleafan þam ealdum deofle of forcerf þæt heafod, æfre on clænnysse Criste þeowigende").[426] But Judith is a chaste widow, not a virgin, a fact that Ælfric mentions several times in his retelling. While the foregoing analysis has shown the broad metaphorical utility of virginity as a concept in medieval hagiography, Ælfric does not omit Judith's widowed status as the verse *Judith* does, and moreover, his exegesis stresses the literal meaning of virginity in direct contradiction to Judith's example. As Rebecca Stephenson argues, "Ælfric implies that the typological reality of Judith's figurative virginity as the clean bride of Christ should apply to the literal lives of these religious women, and thus conflates many levels of interpretation."[427] Ælfric cautions nuns against unruly behavior, reminding them: "But she is not a virgin afterward, if she fornicates once; nor might she have the hundredfold reward of increase" ("Ac heo ne bið na eft mæden, gif heo hi æne forligð; ne heo næfð þa mede þes hundfealdan wæstmes").[428] Clearly Ælfric did not feel that this admonition lessened Judith's own purity, which makes her a peculiar choice to exemplify his message.

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[426] Ælfric, homily on Judith, ll. 345-50.
[427] Stephenson, "Judith as Spiritual Warrior," 86.
[428] Ælfric, homily on Judith, ll. 363-64.

Following Cubitt's logic, Ælfric remains suspicious of women's sexuality even among the celibate. His heavy-handed intervention seeks to foreclose misguided readings of Judith's story, but it also reveals his anxieties about precisely those interpretive possibilities. Mary Clayton concludes that the conflicts between narrative and exegesis "seem to betray Ælfric's sense that the obvious meanings of the story, even when slanted by his emphases, were less than appropriate for the audience whom he was addressing. All of these elements are undermined within the text, however, by those parts of the story which cannot be altered or omitted." Where the verse *Judith* employs heroic imagery to paint the heroine as a spiritual warrior, Ælfric remains concerned that such comparisons may be misunderstood: "Ælfric is unable to think himself free of how such behaviour would normally be construed in his own society and he seeks, to little avail, to limit those aspects of his biblical source."[429] While his anxieties prompt him to explicitly curtail the potential "obvious meanings" of the Judith legend, especially the implications for women's sexuality, his protestations ironically attest to those very possibilities.

Aldhelm presents another example of explicit authorial interpretation: he opens *De Virginitate* by comparing his female audience (the female community at Barking) with classical athletes: they "exercise the most subtle industry of their minds and the quality of (their) lively intelligence through assiduous perseverance in reading," just as athletes strive for physical excellence. While he dwells at some length on the portrait of athletes in strenuous competition, he also takes care to frame the metaphorical terms of the analogy.[430] His explanation may function as a caution and corrective against potential misreading by his (female) audience; however, as Carol Braun Pasternack contends, Aldhelm's overall project "attempts to sweep

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[429] Mary Clayton, "Ælfric's 'Judith': Manipulative or Manipulated?" *Anglo-Saxon England* 23 (1994): 224-25.
[430] Aldhelm, *De Virginitate*, II-III (Lapidge and Herren 59-61).

males and females equally into the sexuality and gendering of virginity," offering a more genderfluid portrait of virginity.[431] These male authors are clearly preoccupied with the interpretive practices of their audiences, but their admonitions evince the very imaginative possibilities they seek to curtail.

These literary examples neither fully endorse nor fully curtail the gender variation they portray. We can recognize both sides of the "show and tell," the imaginative possibilities and the authorial constraints, and hold them in productive tension without foreclosing either facet. Regarding the literary figures themselves, Mills asks us to "imagine virgins as subjects and *at the same time* as objects."[432] In a similar way, we must also acknowledge that medieval reception of these texts may have been equally multivalent. Martha G. Newman discusses the example of Joseph of Schönau and his hagiographer Engelhard of Langheim. She argues that "Engelhard's choices in constructing and narrating his tale undercut his normative assumptions and display transgender possibilities that he did not have the conceptual vocabulary to acknowledge." Like the English authors of the foregoing analysis, Engelhard navigated between offering spiritual exempla and inviting transgressive interpretations: "Engelhard may have employed Joseph's tale to limit female behaviours and assert normative genders, but his tale also undermines fixed binaries, and it suggests that medieval religious communities could provide a space for transgender possibilities and expressions of gender fluidity."[433]

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[431] Carol Braun Pasternack, "The Sexual Practices of Virginity and Chastity in Aldhelm's *De virginitate*," in *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Memory of Daniel Gillmore Calder*, ed. Carol Braun Pasternack and Lisa M.C. Weston (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), 97.
[432] Robert Mills, "Can the Virgin Martyr Speak?" in *Medieval Virginities*, ed. Anke Bernau, Sarah Salih, and Ruth Evans (University of Toronto Press, 2003), 201. Mills also highlights the ways in which Christianity enacts violence, in part through virginity and hagiography: "the sexual politics of virgin martyr legends are also tangled up in other networks of power, such as class, religious identity and race," and therefore "Christianity's self-representation as victim should not obscure from view its simultaneous alignment *with* violence" (202, 203).
[433] Martha G. Newman, "Assigned Female at Death," 44, 60; for discussion of how Newman revises her earlier work on Joseph in this essay, see note 338 above.

As Newman's example suggests, imaginative possibilities endured even in the face of misunderstanding and mediation. Because hagiographies venerate individuals who are by nature exceptional, they complicate the relationship between the cultural center and the margins. Sanctity is simultaneously rare and idealized, illustrating that unusual does not always mean transgressive, and that marginal identities always exist in complex relation to dominant hegemonic categories, not simply as subordinated minorities. Social changes like reform movements often negatively impacted the material lives of women and gender-variant individuals, but religious texts venerating genderfluid figures continued to be copied and adapted for new audiences. Through hagiographies and other texts, "trans lives could be envisioned and, therefore, trans lives could be lived."[434]

[434] Spencer-Hall and Gutt, introduction to *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, 27.

Conclusion

Throughout this project, I have considered the ways in which queer and transgender approaches can change how we perceive constructions of femininity in early English literature. In particular, I have explored gender through the lens of paradox and intersectionality in order to investigate the contradictions and congruences among different variations of femininity. Understanding medieval gender plurality allows us to acknowledge and account for explicit and implicit medieval opinions on femininities, that is, what the texts "show" as well as what they "tell." Even as didactic sources like hagiographies and the gnomic *Maxims* attempt to constrain gender expression, imposing certain interpretations and disavowing others, these texts nevertheless make visible the alternative interpretations they seek to foreclose and, by implication, gesture to further possibilities beyond their ken. These texts may only endorse a narrow spectrum of gender variation, but they recognize that other ideas about gender exist, and the range of possibilities may exceed the limits of authorial perception.

Navigating between what texts tell and what they show highlights one of the main tenets of intersectionality: constructions of gender are imbricated with other social categories, and these interrelated identities stand in complex relation to systems of power. Didactic texts provide authoritative interpretations of the narratives they relate; these explicit textual perspectives often seek to reinforce existing patriarchal structures. However, marginalized voices still remain visible in the gaps: Ælfric's exegetical reading of Judith cannot fully account for her gender slippages, nor can his admonitions entirely foreclose the imaginative alternatives her narrative inspires. An intersectional approach makes these gaps and slippages visible, and thus makes space for alternative concepts of gender to endure even in the face of recuperation and exclusion.

Intersectional gender and sexuality studies – including feminist, queer, and trans methodologies – show how seemingly coherent and singular categories like "man" and "woman" are socially constructed and historically contingent, then and now. Considering gender and sexuality in plural and capacious ways "help[s] us to remember that societies in the distant past thought about sex and gender deeply and creatively, just as we do now."[435] Queer and trans methodologies reexamine earlier critical conclusions while also remaining cognizant of their own inevitable blind spots. At their core, these methodologies ask us to "questio[n] the conclusions of previous scholars and revea[l] the modernist assumptions that clouded their judgment" while understanding (and welcoming) that "their own conclusions will be subject to the same kinds of critique."[436]

In the endeavor to study early medieval gender through its intersections, this project represents a starting place but certainly not an end. In future iterations of this project, I intend to explore social roles and gender expectations that further complicate the intersections that the current project traces. For example, the theme of motherhood highlights questions of kinship, reproduction, nurturing, and authority. Mothers are arguably both sexual and asexual figures, and thus medieval notions of motherhood have to navigate the ambivalent perceptions of female sexuality. Spiritual motherhood adds further complexity: as the image of motherhood transforms from literal to metaphorical, gender and sexual expectations get renegotiated in the process. Additionally, feminine violence also appears in the texts considered here, and it bears further investigation, especially in light of religious redefinitions of gender transgression and

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[435] Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (Columbia University Press, 2021), 11.
[436] Robin Norris, Renée R. Trilling, and Rebecca Stephenson, "A Feminist Renaissance in Early Medieval English Studies," *English Studies* 101, no. 1 (2020): 5.

transcendence. As Judith's example suggests, violence by women might represent a form of female masculinity and/or a model of militant femininity, among other possibilities. Cross-gendered identifications like female masculinity also offer opportunities to explore gender variations as well: do we find models of male femininity in early English literature?

Beyond the continued exploration of gender in relation to status, sexuality, and spirituality, I am also interested in expanding the scope of this project to encompass other crucial intersections, especially race/ethnicity and disability. Medieval notions of ethnicity were often (though not exclusively) rooted in the ideas of nation/tribe and religious affiliation. As such, racial thinking influences issues of gender as well as sexuality and social status, as the *wonfeax wale* of Riddle 12 illustrates. Exogamous royal marriages may have crossed perceived ethnic boundaries, complicating the position of the queen in her new home and mediating her agency and authority. Ideas of race shape Christian depictions of non-Christians, especially Jews and Muslims, as well as the pagans featured in many religious narratives. All of these groups are not only racially Other but also sexually suspect and dangerously gender-ambiguous. The Grendelkin of *Beowulf* show how many of these intersectional categories overlap: their descent from Cain makes them both human and inhuman, aligning monstrosity with a sense of ethnic marginalization; Grendel's monstrous strength is no match for Beowulf's own supernatural abilities, which draws intriguing parallels between "hero" and "villain"; and Grendel's mother poses both a military and sexualized threat to Beowulf and Danish society as a whole. Monstrosity also invokes ideas of disability: in *Beowulf*, some non-normative bodies are extra-abled (the Grendelkin and Beowulf himself), while others are disabled (arguably Hrothgar, where age and possible infirmity may have prevented him from stopping Grendel's attacks for twelve years). The traditional scholarly view holds that Hrothgar becomes feminized by age,

connecting masculinity to able-bodiedness and femininity to disability, but more recent studies have problematized this conflation of binaries.

In the study of history, queer and trans methodologies allow us to look forward as well as backward: just as we can leverage modern insights to better understand the past in historically contingent ways, more nuanced histories enable us to reflect critically on modernity in new ways and to "mobilize the past as grounds for envisioning alternative futures."[437] Studying medieval systems of power and oppression makes visible the ways that intersectional factors shape our cultures today. Ela Przybylo describes how compulsory sexuality becomes entangled with racism and sexism in the incel ("involuntary celibate") mindset: "it is only within a social context of compulsory sexuality that masculinity can feel wounded by not receiving sex. If sex was not understood as an indelible right, and an indelible right for white men in particular, then an absence of sex would not be experienced as a wounding and incel rage on these terms would not be conceivable."[438] Studying cultures that understand sexuality or gender or race in fundamentally different ways than modern western societies reminds us that our own cultural norms are social constructs too, denaturalizing received ideas that make categorical distinctions seem innate and ahistorical.

Likewise, addressing systemic racism, misogyny, and homophobia is an ethical imperative for the field of medieval studies. We cannot separate the study of the Middle Ages from modern white supremacist fantasies that co-opt medieval history to fuel their idea of a morally sacrosanct and racially "pure" Anglo-Saxon identity. These racist ideologies also rely on

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[437] Stacy S. Klein, "Feminism and Early English Studies Now," in *New Readings on Women and Early Medieval English Literature and Culture*, ed. Helene Scheck and Christine E. Kozikowski (Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 4.
[438] Ela Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* (Ohio State University Press, 2019), 139.

"medieval" ideas of naturalized patriarchy and repressive (hetero)sexuality in their constructions of white masculinity. And as Przybylo demonstrates, these ideologies do not remain abstractions: they mobilize hatred and violence at the individual and systemic levels. Erik Wade makes these connections plain: "[t]here are life-and-death consequences to the white cultural narratives that impute shame to homoeroticism, gender nonconformity, and disease." Medieval studies as a scholarly discipline is implicated in these struggles: we have the opportunity, and the responsibility, to work against harmful misappropriations of the medieval past. Wade recounts that during the AIDS crisis, medievalists (intentionally or unintentionally) "lent academic authority to narratives of white heterosexual masculinity…that fueled the deaths of marginalized people."[439] Although academic endeavors alone cannot solve these complex problems, we as scholars can no longer comfortably imagine ourselves and our work as insulated from public discourse and perception. My dissertation seeks to make a small contribution to this much larger endeavor by questioning the ways we think about – and think with – the medieval past in order to reconceptualize the present and creatively imagine the future.

[439] Erik Wade, "Skeletons in the Closet: Scholarly Erasure of Queer and Trans Themes in Early Medieval English Texts." *ELH* 89, no. 2 (2022): 299.

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Vita

Kayla Shea fell in love with the Middle Ages for its alterity as well as its sometimes surprising familiarity. A childhood love for Tolkien's Middle Earth blossomed into academic enthusiasm during her undergraduate studies, where she discovered the literature and history that inspired Tolkien's worldbuilding. Passion for medieval literature carried her into an M.A. in English literature from Western Washington University, and she experienced the joys of working with manuscripts and the intricacies of the Old English language. After five years in IT project management, she returned to academia to pursue a doctoral degree at the University of Tennessee, where she focused on early medieval England and Old English poetry, with particular interest in gender and sexuality. Kayla is also interested in Digital Humanities and public scholarship – she has participated in collaborative projects with the R/18 Collective and the *Burney Journal*, and she has several personal projects in progress.