Aelfric's female Saints and the borderlines of sanctity[*]

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Feminist scholars have looked to the *Lives* of female saints, from late antiquity and the medieval period, as evidence that women were able to subvert the patriarchal societies in which they lived, arguing that these saints used their holy status, to defy male authority and make their own life decisions. However, with later redactions of the *Lives* it is clear that the, usually male, authors are structuring stories that frequently deny female autonomy, emphasising the particular and unique circumstances of the women saints so that they become ever more distant as role models for the female readers. This essay will examine the issue of female autonomy and male authorial control specifically through the women saints included in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*.

Aelfric of Eynsham lived through the second half of the tenth century, and was one of the most accomplished writers of the later Anglo-Saxon period. This was the period of the Benedictine reform of the monastic movement. The Benedictines emphasised monastic worship, singing and prayer, and, in order to be pure for such activities, greater emphasis was placed on their separateness from the world, especially from the women of the world. As men from Benedictine backgrounds were promoted through the ranks of the clergy, these attitudes became more widespread, and in Anglo-Saxon England monastic bishops played a vital part in spearheading the drive to divide clergy and laity, especially by encouraging celibacy for the priesthood.

Aelfric, like many of his contemporaries, felt Armageddon was imminent, especially as he lived during the 'second Viking age', a time when monasteries and lay settlements feared attack from these pagan invaders. Consequently he thought there was a great need for orthodox teaching, especially in the

vernacular. He commented in the preface to his *Catholic Homilies*, his earliest known work (990-5), that 'men particularly require good teaching in this age which is the end of the world'.[1] Aelfric intended both the *Catholic Homilies* and the *Lives of the Saints* to be heard and read by a largely lay audience, hence he wrote in the preface to the *Lives of the Saints*:

> This book also I have translated from the Latin into the usual English speech, desiring to profit others by edifying them in the faith whenever they read this relation, as many, namely, as are pleased to study this work, either by reading or hearing it read.[2]

Aelfric was narrating stories popular in the monastic community, rewriting them for a lay audience. The *Lives of the Saints* includes eight lives of female saints: from late antiquity, Agnes, Agatha and Lucy (virgin martyrs); Cecilia (married virgin); Euphrosyne and Eugenia (transvestites); Mary of Egypt (desert hermit); from Anglo-Saxon England, Aethelthryth (married virgin and, later, abbess). The *Lives* of Euphrosyne and Mary of Egypt were not written by Aelfric, but added later by an anonymous author/s. Nevertheless these two saints quickly became integral to the work, hence their inclusion here.

The literary saint's *Life* evolved in late antiquity, in a very different culture to that of Anglo-Saxon England, yet all but one of the female saints' included in *Lives of the Saints* originated in late antiquity. The cult of the saint was an important feature of early Christianity, arising in the east from the persecution suffered by Christians. It was thought that Christians martyred for their faith possessed intercessory powers with God, hence they were venerated and their powers invoked and celebrated.[3]

By the fourth century, saints' cults were becoming widespread in the west, and, concomitant with this, the nature of sainthood was changing. As state persecution had ceased and Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, a martyr's death was unlikely, and a life of asceticism

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[1] Whitelock (1979) 924.

[2] Skeat (1881) 3.

[3] For a discussion of saints' *Lives* see Peter Brown, (1981) *The Cult of Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago). For female saints in the medieval period, Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg, (1998). *Forgetful of Her Sex : Female Sanctity and Society*, ca. 500-1100 (Chicago and London; University of Chicago Press).

was instead the required proof of piety.[4]

Yet the examples offered by saints were not necessarily to be emulated; their behaviour was necessarily extreme and anti-social for they had their focus on the world to come, not on the secular world of the everyday, in line with, 1 John 2:15-17.[5]

In the male-authored, clich-driven world of hagiography, women were generally depicted in two ways: the virgin and the whore. Whilst women were linked to the fallen Eve through the physicality of their bodies and their (frequently feared as rampant) sexuality, at the same time that very physicality linked them to Mary, the Mother of God, from whose matter the Christ was born, thus redemption came via the female body. Hence the female body, and female nature, were both a woman's curse and her salvation, but male writers frequently depicted 'femaleness' as something to be overcome by the truly pious woman. For example Ambrose wrote,

> Who does not believe is a woman, and is assigned so by the name of the sex of her body; for who believes reaches the perfect man, to the extent of the fullness of the age of Christ.[6]

The Church used female saints' *Lives* to mould lay ideas about the role of women in the church and in society, for example, whilst a man may face sexual temptation in striving for sanctity, for women, the struggle for chastity was central. Elizabeth Robertson writes:

> In most male saints' lives, where sexual temptation might be one problem for the male contemplative, it was subordinated in a progressive series of temptations, usually culminating in a temptation to pride. In female saints' lives, sexual temptation was either the saints' sole or her central temptation.[7]

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[4]David Hugh Farmer writes, 'the ascetic, monastic life came to be regarded as something of a substitute for martyrdom, and those who pursued it faithfully as worthy of the same honour.' *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (1987) xix.

[5]1 John 2:15-17 'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust therof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.'

[6]Ambrose *Expositionis in Evangelium secundum Lucam Libri* X, PL 15 (1938) 'Quae non credit mulier est et adhuc corporei sexus appellatione signatur; nam quae credit occurrit in virum perfectum, in mensuram aetatis plenitudinis Christi ...'.

[7]Robertson (1990) 40.

This is a little disingenuous however, as the female saint is rarely depicted as tempted sexually, but rather exists as a passive tempter, her very existence as a woman entices the men around her, pagan and Christian, and defines her, despite her sanctity.

Virginity is frequently the entirety of female sanctity, to be preserved even to the death. But while the virginal woman was considered 'virile', female nature was still thought weaker than the male, and driven by sensuality. The patristic writers wrote at length on the importance of virginity, and though it was seen as the highest calling for both sexes, their works normally address women.[8] They described the ideal (female) virgin as one who remained enclosed, avoided male company, wept frequently, ate sparingly, and seldom laughed. This ideal was frequently exploded through the female saint's *Life*, offering a different ideal of sanctity. The sanctity of saints is necessarily transgressive as they defy secular authority, and/or family authority, and even religious norms. Elizabeth Alvida Petroff highlights this transgression,

> The women saints of the Middle Ages were transgressors, rule-breakers, flouters of boundaries, and yet they were also saints. Of course, in a way all saints are transgressors, in the sense that a saint lives by excess, lives in a beyond where ordinary measure does not hold ... Women saints, it seems to me, were doubly transgressors—first, by their nature as saints and, second, by their nature as women.[9]

The very fact that these women transgress against their natures was seen as part of their sanctity, a way of denying the femininity that linked them to Eve.

The women in the Aelfrician corpus demonstrate very different circumstances and reactions to the obstacles of the world, some are martyrs, some are married, and one is a hermit. Nevertheless, in some way they all transgress responsibilities, social and sexual, family and political. The late Anglo-Saxon Church, influenced by the Church Fathers, feared the female 'potential to cause spiritual and social destruction'.[10] Consequently it was

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[8] A few examples of writings on virginity in late antiquity include Jerome—*Epistle 22* and *Against Jovinian*; Ambrose—*De Virginibus*, *De Virginitate*, *De Institutione Virginis*, *Exhortatio Virginibus*; Augustine—*On Holy Virginity*.

[9] Petroff (1994) 161.

[10] Donovan (1999) 121; Donovan notes this is a latent power, but was always there.

up to women to control their bodies and repress their desires. Sanctified virginity was clearly the most extreme form of self-control, and therefore the most powerful. These *Lives* depicted the struggle necessary to maintain virginity, and also the great rewards it offered.[11] Consequently many scholars have seen virginity as enabling female autonomy, and as affirmative for women. Leslie Donovan, for example, writes,

> By appropriating the same ideal of virginity that was intended to limit women's bodies and autonomy, these women saints take control of their bodies by transforming their sexuality. In so doing, they establish authority over the direction of their lives and, especially, of their souls.[12]

However, these women are limited by the structure and language of the *Lives*; the power of virginity must be contained, and in these lives we see the ways in which Aelfric, and the anonymous writer(s) of Euphrosyne and Mary of Egypt, ensure this force is controlled.

This containment of the power of virginity is evident in the *Life of Cecilia*. She is *sponsa intacta*, and her virginity enables her to teach privately and publicly, despite Paul's ban on women teaching publicly at 1 Timothy 2:12.[13] Nevertheless, she never attempts to take over the sacerdotal functions of the priesthood. After she has taught Valerian and Tiburtius, the matter is passed on to the (masculine) church authority. Baptism and further instruction is performed by the Pope, and Cecilia is entirely excluded. When Cecilia is later empowered to preach to the 400, a priest is on hand to baptise and take Mass. Benedictine teachings emphasised the division between clergy and laity, and the *Life* of Mary of Egypt, like that of Cecilia, stresses the sacerdotal role of the clergy. Zosimus, as monk and priest, represents Church patriarchy, and in this role recognizes and acknowledges the holiness of Mary. Her sanctity is that of the Biblical prophetesses, women such as Deborah in Judges 4 and 5, and Anna in Luke 2. Yet Mary repeatedly reminds Zosimus, and consequently the audience, of the sacerdotal role of the clergy, placing that above her own miraculous state. Though alone in the desert for 47 years before dying, Mary wishes to take communion once more and for that requires a male priest. The (masculine) Church authority also displays its

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[11]cf. Schulenburg (1998) 135.

[12]Donovan (1999) 123.

[13]1 Timothy 2:12 'But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.'

ultimate authority as Zosimus buries Mary,'he performed the burial service, with psalm-singing and other prayers that belonged to that matter'.[14] A subtle reminder that no female, however saintly or holy, enjoys the power to perform religious rites, rather such rites remain with the male clergy.

Also important in containing the women is the motif of the *ancilla dei*, or 'handmaid of God'. The *ancilla dei* acts on behalf of God, who gives her the authority to defy society, but her title also reminds the audience that, because she enjoys a special relationship with God, such behaviour is not an option for women in general. An example from the *Life* of Lucy, neatly summarises this: Lucy answers the pagan protagonist

> I am the Almighty's handmaid, and therefore I speak God's words since He says in His gospel, It is not ye who speak there, but the Holy Ghost speaks in you.[15]

Lucy defines herself as a handmaid of God, and explains that she does not speak as a woman but through the power of the Holy Ghost. Her boldness is therefore strictly defined as dependent on God, and consequently unavailable to the women reading or listening to the story.

Concomitant with female virginity is female sexuality. Agnes, Agatha and Lucy die because they refuse to offer their sexuality to men, having presented it to God. Euphrosyne's beauty, even when disguised as a man, creates temptation for the men around her. To protect the men from sexual temptation, she willingly accepts a life of solitary confinement, taking upon herself the blame for the lusts of others. This confirms the Church view that the danger of female sexuality remains the fault of the woman, who must therefore take responsibility for it, suffering to erase it where possible.[16]

Eugenia's disguised beauty tempts another woman, thus neither of these transvestite saints can fully overcome their gender by dressing and acting as men. The sexuality contained within their female nature causes others to

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[14]Skeat (1900) 49.

[15]Skeat (1881) *Lucy of Syracuse*, 215; cf. Agatha 'Agatha answered, "I am God's handmaid, and great nobility is it to be Christ's servant." Skeat (1881) 199; *Mary of Egypt* "Oh thou spiritual mother, reveal now who thou art in that appearance, because thou art verily God's handmaiden." Skeat (1900) 17.

[16]Euphrosyne actually changes her appearance through her asceticism, 'Then, when she looked on her father, she became all suffused with tears; and he thought that it had been from devotion, and recognised her not, because she was much thinned by reason of the severe and austere life; and she covered her head with her cowl, that he should not know her ...'. Skeat (1900) 349.

stumble. Mary, as a pagan, is depicted as a victim to her rampant sexuality, and to atone for this she spends her life in solitary confinement in the desert. It is also evident that their sexuality is generally a problem for men —these saints, even Mary once converted, find it easy to be continent, though the men they meet are sometimes driven to distraction by desire. Again the message is that female sexuality is a danger to men, perhaps unsurprising when one remembers these stories are refracted through the eyes of monks striving to remain celibate.

Another important method of suppression in these *Lives* is the dismissal of the responsibilities some of these women enjoyed. A clear example is Aethelthryth's Life.

> and she was then again instituted an abbess in the monastery at Ely, and set over many nuns, whom she trained as a mother by her good example in the religious life, fasting save for one meal in the day unless it were a feast-day, and she greatly loved solitary prayer and wore woollen garments. She would seldom bathe her body save at high festivals, and then she would first bathe all the rest who were in the convent, and would wait upon them with menial service, and then wash herself (last).[17]

Ely was not only founded on land owned and controlled by Aethelthryth, it was a double-monastery, therefore Aethelthryth had authority over monks and nuns. The only evidence of this in the text is the later comment that Sexburg sent monks to find a suitable coffin for Aethelthryth.[18] The abbesses of such double-monasteries were largely drawn from the upper levels of society, used to consorting with the wealthy and powerful, and with servants to aid their daily chores.[19]

Susan Ridyard has studied the royal saints of East Anglia and observes that when an abbess enjoyed royal status, it was nominally renounced but

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[17]Skeat (1881) 435; Leslie Donovan offers '... when she would bathe first all those who were in the monastery, minister to them with her maid-servant, and then bathe herself.' Donovan (1999) 33.

[18]'Then she sent the brethren to seek a stone suited to that purpose ...'. Skeat (1881) 437.

[19]cf. Dagmar Schneider, writing about double monasteries, 'they were communities of aristocratic women who modelled their religious life more according to their social background than to any nebulous monastic ideal.' Schneider also refers to their use of servants. Schneider (1985) 73.

never ignored, and as the royal abbess of a powerful monastic community Aethelthryth would have enjoyed incredible status in the community.[20]

Yet all Aelfric tells us is that she set a good example to the other nuns. The same dismissal is evident when Eugenia is made abbot.[21]

Though the monks believe her capable, she doubts her own ability. Also her rule is described in similar terms to that of Aethelthryth's, there is no mention of the religious and administrative duties she would have undertaken as abbot, which would highlight the unorthodox nature of her position. In both cases, Aelfric's writing must be seen in the light of Benedictine teaching, which espoused increased enclosure and containment of religious women, and disapproved of the double-monastery.

Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, examining the reception of saints' lives in a later period, comments that whilst one might argue that these women merely exchange secular patriarchy for spiritual patriarchy,'[c]hoice metaphorically and allegorically conceived within patriarchal structures still makes the choice explicit'.[22] This is undoubtedly true, but it is equally true that in the case of the majority of these saints, this choice can only be made because they also choose to die. For example Cecilia's unorthodox teaching remains something enjoyed only temporarily before she is executed. Thus even though these women appear to challenge patriarchal authority, they are not a long-term threat because, one way or another, their apparently'masculine' behaviour is curtailed, and usually in the most extreme manner—by death. Of the two late antique saints who do not die before their time, Mary and Euphrosyne, one spends her life alone in the desert, the other alone in her cell. Eugenia reverts to conventional female spirituality; her role as abbot, and thus ruler over men, is only short term, and she founds a nunnery instead. Indeed the orthodoxy of Eugenia's Life is remarkably unsubtle. At first it seems to overturn social and gender norms, as Eugenia transforms herself into a eunuch and her servants are called'brethren' or'friends'.[23] By the end of

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[20]Ridyard (1988) 237.

[21]'Then became the maiden extremely anxious how she was ever to direct men; yet durst she not offend them all and despise their election, but accepted the office. Well, then, Eugenia set an example to them all with good devotion to God's service, and with carefulness governed the community' Skeat (1881) 33.

[22]Wogan-Browne (1991) 323.

[23]Eugenia refers to herself and her servants, 'We three brethren...' Skeat (1881) 29; the priest addresses the sevants, 'I call ye not servants, but ye are my friends.' Skeat (1881) 31.

the text, it is evident that standards are not only maintained, they are strengthened:

> By means of the two maidens [Eugenia and Basilla] many others turned to faith in Christ, and to a pure service. By Claudia's [Eugenia's mother] means also pure widows turned with good will to faith in God; and many youths believed in Christ by means of the two saints, Protus and Jacinctus [Eugenia's servants].[24]

Each member of the evangelising team preaches to their own gender and social group, not only re-establishing these divisions within the story, but also reinforcing for the audience the gender and social norms of their society.

The most transgressive of the saints' in this collection are the cross-dressers, but it is still their virginity, not their transvestism which sanctifies them; the cross-dressing is merely a means to an end. Eugenia is explicitly told by the bishop Helenus,'how she, by the virginity which she had chosen, greatly pleased the heavenly King'.[25]

Nevertheless, in denying their femininity, they remind the audience that to truly serve God women had to deny their gender, in line with the teachings of the Church Fathers.[26]

Therefore a woman, living as a woman in the world, could never be among the first rank of Christians, she had to deny her gender, her sexuality, her capacity for motherhood. The seemingly positive choice of Eugenia and Euphrosyne reinforce this idea, and the transvestite saints, were to be admired for defending their virginity, not imitated in their cross-dressing.

These *Lives* would have been well known in Anglo-Saxon England, familiar and accepted by both lay and monastic audiences. And just as we know a story beginning'once upon a time' must end'and they all lived happily ever after', Aelfric's audience knew the women, whose actions were so outstanding, had to suffer and die that they might bring glory to God. The borderlines of sanctity were not ultimately breached, and conventional

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[24]Skeat (1881) 45; Leslie Donovan offers 'servants' for 'youths', a translation supported by the language, *cnihta*, and the tone of the text. Donovan (1999) 75.

[25]Skeat (1881) 29.

[26]Jerome, for example, said 'As long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man'. *Commentariorum in Epistolam ad Ephesio Libri* 3, quoted in Bullough (1973) 499.

female religiosity within the confines of Church patriarchy was encouraged for the laity. The reality for many noble women may have been that the nunnery allowed them access to secular power and a better education, but none of these saints chooses that. Even Eugenia only becomes an abbess because she can no longer remain in the monastery. There is no saint here in the mould of Thecla, who defied state and Church, and lived a long life. These *Lives* did not offer a true, alternative lifestyle to the laywomen of late Anglo-Saxon England, rather they reinforced the power of the male clergy, and the idea that women were sexually dangerous and must control themselves. Aelfric, it must be remembered, supported the celibate, patriarchal authority of the Church, so maybe this is not surprising. Also unsurprising is his implication that to die defying pagan tyranny bought glory to God. In a society where Viking attack was a very real danger, Aelfric may have considered this to be his most important message.

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