

Victorious Virgin; Accursed Appetites: The Wages of Scopo-philia in the *Lives* of St Etheldreda of Elyⁱ

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It is a frequent charge levelled against feminist ... scholars ... that they fail to appreciate the problems of judging texts and their authors by a philosophy which would be meaningless to them. However, saints and the virtues which they embody are presented to us as representing not simply the values of their age but eternal values and therefore they must be open to analysis and questioning by philosophies from different ages than their own (Stuart 23).

If indeed the body has always been a problematic site in white patriarchal culture it is of importance to see how the problems are defined for each age—what is our age saying through the bodies of women, especially marked as they are under patriarchy, and what are women saying with their bodies? Whom do they address in their complex utterances of refusal, denial and sacrifice? Where are they taking up a position in this struggle for control and power over their place in the world? And how does what they say seem to demand to be read as a protest both against femininity and feminism? (Bartkowski 77).

This essay considers at three versions of the life of St Etheldreda. Bede's *A History of the English Church and People*, in Latin and completed in 731, is the earliest written source for the events, written fifty years after the saint's actual words, acts and death in 679. Bede's account was reworked by Ælfric in Old English during the years 992 to 1002 in his *Old English Saints'*

Lives (Natale Sancte Æpeldrype Uirginis). A Latin verse life of St Æthelthryth, *De Vita et Gestis Beatae Aedeldrydae Uirginis*, written by Gregory of Ely between 1083 and 1170, appears in Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 393.ⁱⁱ Although these *vitae* follow the conventional hagiographic pattern—origins, birth, adoption of religious vocation, catalogue of the saint’s virtues, miracles, visions and prophecies, the final illness, the premonition, death and burial, the *miracula* and the *translatio* (Schulenburg 296)—each reveals a close inter-relationship with the theological and social context of its period; each has become increasingly more distanced—Ricoeur’s term (132)—from the concrete reality of that life and so produced a text with contemporary significance; and each portrays the saint as a virgin even after two marriages. This paper examines the significance of Etheldreda’s choice of virginity, seen particularly against the background of patristic theology, and the essence, in the light of current feminist thinking, of three posthumous miracles, induced by what Gregory calls the ‘hunger’ and ‘thirst’ for gold,ⁱⁱⁱ in which the saint swiftly and violently punishes those who threaten her purity and violate the sanctity of her shrine and the holiness of her feast day. It concludes that, whereas the saint depicted in Bede’s text cannot be seen as a feminist heroine, a feminist reinterpretation of Gregory’s thirteenth-century verse *Life* reveals the saint’s posthumous confrontation and rebuttal of phallogocentric, post-Benedictine ecclesiastical politics.

Bede’s retelling of the life of Etheldreda of Ely in his *History*, seen as a positive account by most modern commentators (e.g. Colgrave and Mynors 38; Walsh 61-64), is informed by the phallogocentric discourse of patriarchal society: it narratively marginalizes monastic women, especially the early abbesses, who tended to be widows or women separated from their husbands. It mentions only five communities of monastic women, one of them in a report of the scandalous behaviour of monks and nuns at Coldingham (Sherley-Price 48-51). Bede’s text reveals an early ‘insistence on the rigidly segregated character of double monasteries’ (Hollis 245-47), something which became particularly evident after the tenth-century Benedictine reform; for instance, he emphasizes the separation of the monks and nuns on opposite sides of the shrine for the translation of Etheldreda’s body. This configuration of spatial arrangements reflects a distinctive hierarchy, inscribing gender into the symbolic representation of space. In this text, therefore, the body becomes an obvious site of social inscription (Higonnet 5, 6, 111, 194) and the *History* not so much condemns the union, social or otherwise, of monastic men and women, but monastic women’s social involvement with secular society.

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Of the monastic women Bede writes about, Etheldreda alone resembles his idea of female sanctity. He foregrounds what he sees as the saint's legitimate claim to sainthood because 'she preserved the glory of perpetual virginity' through two marriages.^{iv} To him, the 'miraculous preservation of her body from corruption in the tomb' is evidence that she remained 'untainted by bodily intercourse'. Further proof is supplied: the incision made by a physician to lance the tumour which eventually killed her, has healed; even 'the linen clothes in which the body had been wrapped appeared as fresh and new as on the day when they had been placed around her pure body'. The body of the saint continues to be developed as the site of social inscription: it is only by remaining bodily pure that she is considered worthy to be the 'virginal spouse of Christ'. In honour of her Bede includes, in a separate chapter, an unusual acrostic poem, which he calls 'an elegiac hymn in praise of virginity ... in honour of this same queen and bride of Christ—all the more a queen because a bride of Christ'.

Significant elements in Bede's poem representative of early medieval perspectives are the prominence of the Virgin Mary, 'who gav[e] the whole world's Parent birth', the power of virginity, by the grace of God, in the face of extreme trials and torments, as embodied in a list of virgin Roman martyrs, the view of Etheldreda's scorning of the marriage bed in martial terms as 'triumphs' and 'victories' for 'our age' (in other words for the English people of Bede's time):

Our age at length in triumphs such as these
Partakes through ETHELDREDA'S victories....

and the view of the virgin as the bride of Christ and her conquering of the source of evil, 'Eve's tempter':

Yea, from their touch Eve's Tempter flees dismayed,
Zealous for evil, vanquished by a maid....
Ah bride of Christ, bright fame on earth is thine.
More bright in Heaven thy bridal torches shine.
Exultant hymns proclaim in glad accord:
No power henceforth may part thee from thy Lord.
(Bede's *History* 242)

The poem conveys ambivalence towards the saint: Bede's deep personal and cultural admiration for a remarkable Anglo-Saxon female hero of the faith who remained a virgin through choice and divine grace and, conversely, a deep-seated belief in the duality inherent in woman as revealed in the patristic view of the Eve-Mary relationship.

This division of the sexes, the mind/body opposition associated with the opposition between male and female, is established on 'the foundations of a profound somatophobia' (fear of the body) already evident in the thinking of Plato and through to Descartes. It despises the body and somehow identifies it with nature and the female (Bynum 6) and, eventually with sin. Such dichotomous thinking, says Grosz, 'hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart' (7). In the Christian tradition in which Bede was writing, the separation of mind and body, apart from that social devaluing of the body that goes hand in hand with the oppression of women, was also correlated with the distinction between the mortal and the immortal (Grosz 5). Elizabeth Stuart, arguing for a feminist theology of sainthood, maintains that the classification of saintly women according to their sexual 'purity' is 'symptomatic of the body-hating, anti-sexual ideology that has diseased Christianity for most of its history'. She refers to the guilt associated with this phenomenon and the penances that women wrought on their own potentially evil bodies to subject them to the soul (17). Etheldreda conforms: Bede says that

... from the time of her entry into the convent, she never wore linen but only woollen garments, and that she washed in hot water only before greater festivals.... She seldom had more than one meal a day except at the greater festivals or under urgent necessity, and she always remained at prayer in the church from the hour of Matins [at midnight] until dawn unless prevented by serious illness. (Sherley-Price 133-34)

By remaining a virgin, Etheldreda could 'achieve spirituality, personhood and equality with the male' even though this was at the expense of crushing out her bodily female nature (Reuther 164). However, in renouncing one hegemony, one form of submissiveness, that of the female-dominating patristic hierarchy which expects her to fulfil her wifely and queenly duties, she opts for another which equally demands renunciation: she becomes the 'bride of Christ, obedient only to him and victorious through his power'. She 'follows the mores of the patriarchal hegemony and reveals herself to be completely subordinated to the patriarchy' (Walsh 17). She never fully escapes her female dependence and weakness, for in Bede's idealized portrait of her as the Bride of Christ, her weakness by nature is overcome by the power of her perfect spouse. From a modern perspective, this

image is, in some respects at least, particularly unappealing. Elizabeth Stuart points out that, unlike men, women of medieval hagiography such as Etheldreda could not escape their embodiment and had to win sanctity through their bodies. She continues that some of the saints lived as if they were dead,

denying themselves all of those things generally thought necessary for life. When women saints obviously internalize the theological and societal construction of women ... they become even less appealing to today's Christian feminists.... [I]mpressive women are often credited in hagiography with having lost their femaleness altogether and achieved the heights of manliness. (27-28)

The concept of the 'Bride of Christ' adds another significant dimension to the discussion of guilt and penance associated with female sexuality I mentioned earlier. A feminist analysis of the Bride-of-Christ phenomenon by Sarah Maitland offers a significant link between violence and sexual eroticism:

She notes that the devaluation of women in the Christian tradition goes hand in hand with a relationship of passionate intimacy with the divine expressed in the language and imagery of heterosexuality [W]omen were associated with all that was evil and dangerous, ... and yet their perfect spouse Jesus was too good to punish them—indeed he suffered for them. This induced guilt ... could only be soothed by self-inflicted punishment, and thus the erotic and the violent became intricately confused ... (quoted in Stuart 17).

Misogynist thought has found a convenient self-justification for women's secondary social position by containing them within bodies that are represented as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, while these very functions render women vulnerable, in need of protection or special treatment, as variously prescribed by patriarchy (Grosz 14). Patriarchal oppression, in other words, justifies itself by connecting woman much more closely than men to the body, and through this identification, restricting women's social ... roles to (pseudo-) biological terms The coding of femininity with corporeality in effect leaves men to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order while at the same time enabling them to satisfy their (sometimes disavowed) need for corporeal contact through their access to women's bodies and services (Grosz 14). 'As lived bodies, women are not "open" and "unambiguous transcendences", that move out to master a world that belongs to us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projects.' Rather, they are 'physically handicapped' in a 'sexist society' (Young 153). It is this social inscription of the female body, and the link

between violence and eroticism, as identified by Sarah Maitland, which makes it vulnerable to violent, sadistic physical abuse.

But the social inscription of the body in Bede's text continues: before it is translated into the church, the undecomposed, and therefore untainted, body of the saint is placed in what seems to be a miraculous, God-sent 'white marble sarcophagus of very beautiful workmanship with a close-fitting lid of similar stone' which is said 'to fit the virgin's body in a marvellous way, as though it had been especially made for her, and the place cut out for the head exactly fitted the measurements of her own'. I want to suggest that the ritual confinement of the saint's body in this way functions as a further social—and psycho-logical—inscription. There is a significant link here: in Freudian terms, 'the female genitalia are symbolically represented by ... objects that share with them the property of enclosing a space or are capable of acting as receptacles' (Higonnet 8-10). This suggestion becomes increasingly plausible in the light of the violent posthumous defence by the victorious virgin saint of the sanctity of her tomb—and, by implication, her virginity—in Gregory's version.

Read intertextually with the theological thinking of his time, therefore, the world of Bede's poem reflects ambivalent patristic theological views of woman at the heart of the sources of medieval history: high praise of the virginal woman versus an undeniable antifeminism (Stafford 24) or misogynism which sees woman as the symbol of the fall and sin, requiring denial of her female sexuality to achieve salvation and sanctity.

Ælfric's *Natale Sancte Æpeldrype Uirginis* underscores and echoes Bede's theological argument that *swutele wundra/hyre mærdā cyðað and hire mægð-had gelome*: 'evident miracles/ often make known her sacred relics and her virginity' (16-17).^v Furthermore, it was God who did not wish her to be despoiled:

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*ac hit nolde se ælmihtiga god þæt hire mægð-had wurde/
mid hæmede adylegod ac heold hi on clænnysse/
forðan þe he is ælmihtig god and mæg don eall þæt he wile/
and on manegum wisum his mihte geswutelað .*

[but Almighty God would not that her virginity should be destroyed through cohabitation, but preserved her in continence, because He is God Almighty and can do all that He will, and in divers ways showeth His might.] (9-12)

The corporeal inscription is repeated: the marvellous coffin lid *ðær-to gelimlice gefeged ... swa swa hit macode god* ‘fitted excellently unto it, ... even as if God had made it’ (82-83). Female guilt and bodily suffering are linked: Etheldreda sees her suffering from the swelling in her neck as punishment for the guilt she incurred through her youthful joy in adorning her neck *mid mænig-fealdum swur-beagum* ‘with manifold neck-chains’ (57-58). The narrative, like Bede’s, diminishes the sense of her own agency: God’s action, rather than Etheldreda’s, is foregrounded; she remains dominated by the phallogocentric hegemony.

In her feminist analysis of the legend of St Juliana, Arlene Walsh concludes that the image of the female Anglo-Saxon warrior lies at the heart of Cynewulf’s late eighth- or early ninth-century poetic portrayal of Juliana:

She closely resembles, in her self-confidence, power and radiance, the Germanic warrior-woman or Valkyrie figures of legend. Juliana’s strength emerges from herself and is not provided by God or some external source. Cynewulf has therefore created a saintly, virginal heroine who combines the Christian virtues with the innate power and fearlessness of the Germanic heroine (125).

It is possible that the cultural fusion of the same two traditions is revealed in Gregory of Ely’s verse *Life* (written in the second half of the twelfth century) of St Etheldreda. Contrary to the versions of Bede and Ælfric, Gregory’s text places unusual emphasis on the saint’s militant virginity – in Book I she is predominantly *regina, virgo, victrix* – and foregrounds her own victories, rather than the power of God exalted in them. She is compared to the conquering Judith and her triumph against ‘the god of marriage’ is hailed as cause for exultation:

Exulta gemino uictrix bellona triumpho!
Iam tibi, uirgo, tuus geminatur in hoste triumphus.
Ut prius, exulta! Uicisti, plaude, resulta!

[Exult, oh conqueress in war, in your twin triumphs!
Now, virgin, your triumph over the enemy is repeated by you.
Exult, as before! You have conquered: clap your hands, leap in joy!]^{vi}
(82-84)

Here again, however, bodily renunciation represents penance for perceived sinful female sexuality:

Uincitur his armis petulans lasciuia carnis;

[With these weapons the wanton lasciviousness of the flesh is conquered.]
(157)

St Æthelthryth's defence of the sanctity of her shrine and her virginity is the major thrust of Gregory's poem. Several of the miracles he describes in Book II emphasize her wrath and power in the defence of her tomb. Gregory carefully develops her *praesentia* and *potentia* into a powerful defence of the monastic community, where her body becomes the site of an immense ideological struggle.

The first step in this process occurs when the saint severely and cruelly punishes a servant girl who picks vegetables on her feast-day. The servant's impious act is a betrayal of an ancient sense of deep consensus in the religious community, where the saint's festival

... made plain God's acceptance of the community as a whole: his mercy embraced all its disparate members, and could integrate all those who had stood outside ... (Brown 100).

Two further miracles continue this process and relate more pertinently to the shrine as representative of the saint's virginity. The phallic image suggested briefly in Book I, lines 87-88,

Quoque magis fortis insurgit fortius hostis
Fortius egisti; cum fortibus arma tulisti.

[The stronger the strong enemy rises up,
the stronger have you acted; you have borne arms against the strong]

is developed more extensively, suggesting an attempt at humiliation, demeaning and mastery of the saint, and hence of the unity, *consensus omnium*, of the monastic community. The delicate equilibrium between distance and proximity is dashed through violent acts and symbolic attempted rape of the virgin's body in the tomb inspired by scopophilia—'the act of looking'—where 'the gaze enacts the voyeur's desire for sadistic power, in which the object of the gaze is cast as its passive, masochistic, feminine victim' (Moi 180).

The first miracle (99-130) occurs when an unworthy priest, 'panting for blood and murder' and blinded by a passionate hunger for gold, repeatedly strikes the tomb with an axe, opening up a small hole. Retribution is swift: his demeaning look is appropriately punished when he is immediately struck by blindness in both eyes.

In a second violent attempt at opening the tomb, a priest in charge of the church bribes four young monks, one of whom drives a fennel stick—an obvious phallic symbol—through the previous hole to ascertain the presence of the saint's body. He touches the hidden limbs of the body, as do the others. Still not content, he drops a lamp into the hole to ascertain whether the clothes have also remained uncorrupted; with a sharpened stick he hooks out the vestments which he touches with his hands. The robe which has been pulled out by the villains is drawn back into the grave as if with the great strength of a living person. The wages of this deed follow swiftly. A deadly disease comes over the home of the evil plunderer: his offspring and his concubine are killed. Two of his accomplices die in the same way. The third becomes insane. The fourth suffers from palsy for eight months, whereupon his prayers and tears on the grave of the virgin earn him restored health.

It is necessary to understand the dual nature of scopophilia in order to examine its manifestation in these events. Laura Mulvey invokes psychoanalysis to examine how the fascination of film derives from the unconscious of patriarchal society, namely pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him (9-16). She comments on the 'paradox of phallogocentrism in all its manifestations' which 'depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world'. She concludes that woman

stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier of the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions ... by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning.

It is this silent iconic image of woman as bearer of meaning that lies at the heart of two contradictory pleasures of looking: on the one hand, 'investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery', or scopophilia as sadistic voyeurism which devalues the object; on the other hand, 'overvaluation', or 'fetishistic scopophilia', where the erotic instinct is focused on the look alone, and which gives rise to the 'cult of the female star'(11). I submit that both of these instincts are at work in Gregory's text.

Fetishistic scopophilia seems to inhere the cult of the virgin, later modulating into the exalted image of the female beloved in the convention of courtly love. The female object remains at a distance, and relics or the presence of the saint in the tomb are turned into a reassuring fetish, 'an object of devotion or blind affection' which 'may be induced or compelled magically to help and safeguard ... and protect ... from harm or disease' (*Standard Dictionary*). I believe that this reading is echoed by Carol Bynum's assertion, related to the presence of the saint in the tomb, that

[w]hen medieval thinkers spoke of the saints 'in the tomb' ('or reliquary') and 'in heaven', they understood (as Giles and Rome tell us) that they used synecdoche in both cases: but they understood something else as well. Whereas remembering lets the spirits rest and be forgotten, relics (including what the Middle Ages called contact relics—physical bits that were not body but touched the body—clothes, that is...) keep the person present (11).

The presence and potency of the saint in the shrine is one of the ancient cornerstones of the cult of saints. Even in late antiquity, as Peter Brown has shown, the cult of the saints enabled an examination of the nature of power and of the relation between power, mercy and justice (63). The careful tension between proximity and distance, between the *praesentia* of the saint in the shrine or the relics and their physical inaccessibility to the general religious community, lay at the heart of pilgrimage and ritual.

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This phenomenon at work in Gregory's portrayal makes Etheldreda's uncorrupted presence in her shrine the embodied representative of her unified monastic—and, by the time of Gregory's writing—male, Benedictine community.^{vii} But, as Brown points out 'a yearning for proximity kept so carefully in suspense occasionally exploded' (88). It is this impulse, fed by sadistic scopophilia, which induces the intrusive attempts at violation of the saint's presence in her shrine.

Æthelthryth emerges from Gregory's poem as a saint who brooks no interference with her person, her resting-place, or the proper observance of religious ceremony within her foundation (Thompson and Stevens 344). In death the saint preserves her sexually untainted state even more forcefully than in life. There could be a double reason why the narrative stresses the enshrining of the saint so firmly in her marble tomb: after the stricter separation of the sexes in the Benedictine reform 'she is an alien presence in her own monastery; yet it is precisely that alienness, and the defensive psychological measures it forces, that make her an embodiment of her community' (Otter 163). Thus her body becomes the site of a struggle between her own community and ecclesiastical forces which threaten its unified existence.

Gregory's text, seen within the context of his time—for instance the recent spoliation of the monasteries and the confusion over the division of monastic properties—seems to serve a very specific ideological purpose. It provides a defence of Ely's right to retain its dignity and riches unspoilt and contains a powerful warning to any who would fail to show due reverence to Etheldreda's monument and memory (Thompson and Stevens 346-47). On this level, the saint's closely enshrined body plays out the male monastic community's struggle with the facts of ecclesiastical power in a changing world. On a deeper, psychological level, the saint's violent and swift posthumous defence against the voracious scopophilic and phallogocentric acts, inspired by the desire to diminish the sanctity of her closely inscribed embodiment in the shrine, confirm her as a heroic woman in the tradition of Germanic warrior women, as a symbol of her community and, to the modern feminist reader, as ultimately triumphant against the oppression of the power structures of the dominant patriarchal hegemony.

NOTES

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ⁱⁱThe manuscript also includes a long anonymous prose life of the saint. The version in the *Liber Eliensis*, written between 1131 and 1174, adds substantially to Bede's account but is not considered here.

ⁱⁱⁱBy the time of the Norman invasion, Ely was the second wealthiest foundation (after Glastonbury) in England (Thompson and Stevens 335)

^{iv}All quotations are from Sherley-Price.

^vQuotations and translations are from Skeat.

^{vi}Translations from the Latin are by Emeritus Professor Dawie Kriel, formerly from the University of South Africa, Pretoria. I am further indebted to Professor Kriel both for his helpful summary of the text and for his valuable comments and insights.

^{vii}For many of the minsters such as Ely, the late ninth century was a time of loss, disruption and change. Many communities changed in composition from double houses of nuns and monks, or nuns and priests, to colleges of male canons (Blair 3).