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THE *VIRAGO* PARADIGM OF FEMALE SANCTITY:
CONSTRUCTING THE MASCULINE WOMAN IN
MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY

by

Angela R. Bolen

A DISSERTATION

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THE *VIRAGO* PARADIGM OF FEMALE SANCTITY:
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MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY

Angela R. Bolen, PhD

University of Nebraska, 2021

Advisor: Jessica Coope

The Latin word *virago*, in its simplest definition, means “a man-like, warrior woman.” For Christian men and women in the Patristic era and the central Middle Ages, the *virago* represented a woman who denied all biological characteristics of her womanhood, fiercely protected her virginity, and fully embodied the virtues of Christian masculinity. The *virago* paradigm of female sanctity, a creation of male writers, reconciled a pervasive fear of the female sex with an obvious admiration for holy women. Additionally, the *virago* model maintained the supremacy of masculine virtues, upheld a patriarchal hierarchy, and created a metaphorical space that validated women’s spiritual authority and activity.

This dissertation identifies and explores the significance of the medieval construction and implementation of the *virago* paradigm of female sanctity in the central Middle Ages. The *virago* model of female sanctity emerges in the medieval creation of the legends of virgin martyrs and in a small corpus of letters influential men wrote to religious women. The *virago* paradigm also appears in striking detail in two medieval texts associated with the twelfth-century holy woman, Christina of Markyate. In constructing the narrative of Christina’s life, commonly referred to as *Life of Christina of*

Markyate, the anonymous male author describes Christina's transformation from a young girl into a heroic, wise, and fearless *virago*. The second text associated with Christina of Markyate, *St. Albans Psalter*, serves as a medieval guidebook or manual for the *virago*. The three major components of the *Psalter*, the cycle of miniatures, the story of St. Alexis, and the commentary on spiritual warfare provided the female reader with visual, allegorical, and scriptural representations of the *virago*. The culminating analysis of medieval hagiographies, letters written by men to women, and the *St. Albans Psalter*, demonstrates the presence of the *virago* paradigm of female sanctity in the central Middle Ages.

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List of Illustrations

Figure 1 The “C” Initial	<i>page</i> 182
Figure 2 “The Nativity” <i>The St. Albans Psalter</i>	186
Figure 3 “The Nativity” <i>The Winchester Psalter</i>	187
Figure 4 “The Nativity” Unnamed Psalter	187
Figure 5 “The Massacre of the Innocent” <i>The St. Albans Psalter</i>	188
Figure 6 “The Massacre of the Innocent” <i>The Huth Psalter</i>	189
Figure 7 “The Massacre of the Innocent” Unnamed Psalter	189
Figure 8 “The Massacre of the Innocent” <i>The Oscott Psalter</i>	190
Figure 9 “Descent from the Cross” <i>The St. Albans Psalter</i>	192
Figure 10 “The Ascension” <i>The St. Albans Psalter</i>	193
Figure 11 “Presentation at the Temple” <i>The St. Albans Psalter</i>	194
Figure 12 “The Pentecost” <i>The St. Albans Psalter</i>	195
Figure 13 <i>Psychomachia</i>	203
Figure 14 <i>Psychomachia</i>	203
Figure 15 Two Knights Fighting <i>The St. Albans Psalter</i>	206

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Patristic Creation of the <i>Virago</i> Paradigm	13
Chapter 2: The Construction of <i>Virago</i> Martyrs in the Middle Ages.....	45
Chapter 3: Evoking the <i>Virago</i> in Twelfth Century Letters to Women.....	93
Chapter 4: Christina of Markyate, a <i>Virago</i> for Medieval England	133
Chapter 5: The <i>St. Albans Psalter</i> , a Manual for the <i>Virago</i>	174
Conclusion	216
Bibliography	221
Manuscripts.....	221
Printed Primary Sources	221
Secondary Sources	222

INTRODUCTION

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 she will be called male.¹

Why do you revere your female sex? Clothe yourself in a masculine soul and mount that horse like a man!²

These words, written by two different men eight centuries apart, convey a provocative idea regarding the intersection of gender, sex, and Christian ideology. In the fourth century, the theologian St. Jerome wrote a letter to his female protégé, Eustochium, in which he conveyed his belief in the potential for women's religious transformation. Jerome declared that when a woman puts aside all things female in service of the Lord, she becomes male. Eight centuries later, an anonymous writer wrote a biography of the recluse and noblewoman Christina of Markyate, and, as he recounted the story of her bravery and Christian resolve, he mirrored Jerome's words and emphasized Christina's potential to put aside the vestiges of her female sex and become male. These two passages emphasize a curious model of sanctity. For Christian men and women in the Patristic era and the central Middle Ages, the *virago* represented a woman who denied all biological characteristics of her womanhood, fiercely protected her virginity, and fully embodied the virtues of Christian masculinity, which included intelligence, spiritual strength, courage, and constancy. The *virago* paradigm of female

¹ Jerome, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, Lib. III, cap. V, no. 658, Patrologia Latina 26: 533.

² British Library, London, Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.152v *Quid sexum feminei vereris? Virilem animum indue. Et more viri in equum ascende.*

sanctity—a creation of male writers—reconciled a pervasive fear of the female sex with an obvious admiration for holy women. Additionally, the *virago* model maintained the supremacy of masculine virtues, upheld a patriarchal hierarchy, and created a metaphorical space that validated women’s spiritual authority and activity.

In the Middle Ages, the term *virago* became a laudatory epithet that male authors applied to women—both secular and religious—whom they admired. The term appears in a variety of Latin classics. Ovid, Cicero, Vergil, and Seneca each employed the word in their writing to convey images of strong, warrior women.³ During the central Middle Ages, scholars began to use the word to describe the exceptional women who, though biologically female, acted, spoke, and behaved like men. In her 2005 essay, “Gendering Viragos: Medieval Perceptions of Powerful Women,” Kimberly LoPrete argues that, in the Middle Ages, the term *virago* was used most often by male authors who wanted to describe and praise lordly women in positions of political power who were, because of their influence in a male-dominated realm, considered manly.⁴ LoPrete’s essay focuses only on the *virago* designation as it applied to “sexually active aristocratic women.” Moreover, LoPrete claims that “the term *virago*, [...] was used most often by medieval authors to praise lordly women who wielded authoritative powers that were generally conceived as male.”⁵ Looking beyond aristocratic women and women in positions of secular power, medieval men also used this term to describe holy women who proved,

³ A *Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “virago,” Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, accessed May 2020. See: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2.765, Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.18, Vergil, *Aeneid*, 12.468, Seneca, *Phaedra*, 54.

⁴ Kimberly LoPrete, “Gendering Viragos: Medieval Perceptions of Powerful Women,” in *Victims or Virgaos*, ed. Catherine Lewis and Christine Meek (University of Virginia Press, 2005), 21.

⁵LoPrete, “Gendering Viragos,” 21.

through various spiritual experiences and ordeals, that they had ascended to a status of male-like women. Additionally, as this dissertation establishes, medieval men used the term to celebrate virtuous women, to provide women in religious vocations with an ideal of spiritual progress and perfection, and to construct the hagiography of an authoritative and influential twelfth-century holy woman.

The concept of the *virago* relied on established ideas about the physical nature of sex and gender. The Aristotelian and Galenic views of biological sex perpetuated an idea of woman as a flawed or incomplete version of man, and this concept permeated gender politics throughout the Middle Ages.⁶ In his groundbreaking 1990 work, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Thomas Laqueur offers what he calls the “one-sex model,” which defined the male and female as two versions of the same sex; Laqueur further argues that before the seventeenth century, biological sex was a “sociological and not an ontological category.”⁷ In her 1993 work, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, Joan Cadden explores the significance of Laqueur’s findings and posits that, though medieval people did accept the female as an inferior version of male, they also had a concept of gender that was much more complex than a simple, binary model permits.⁸ In recent decades, scholars have attempted to address the limitations of a binary gender model and some have suggested that medieval writers created a third sex to explain the existence of masculine women.⁹ These studies

⁶ REFERENCES

⁷ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 8.

⁸ Joan Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁹ Jacqueline Murray, “One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?” In *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe* eds., Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 34-

emphasize the general acceptance of fluid sex models in the Middle Ages and suggest that sex existed on a hierarchical continuum with the male as the pinnacle of perfection, but they do not address the potential for the female to fix, or perfect, the inherent deficiencies of her lesser female sex. I argue that religious men constructed a masculine model specifically for women. The process of fixing, or perfecting, the flawed female sex created for women a transcendental gender paradigm of the *virago*, or male-woman.

The *virago* was a woman still biologically female, but one who had earned—through various corporeal and spiritual practices—the soul of a man. In her work, Cadden identifies the existence of the *virago* in medieval culture and writes, “the masculine woman, especially when honored with the title ‘*virago*,’ took on the glow of manly virtues, although she was unambiguously on the female side of the anatomical spectrum and thus clearly distinguished from a hermaphrodite.”¹⁰ In her 2012 work, Karina Ash expands on Cadden’s definition by explaining that the hagiographic ideal of the *virago* was “a woman so devoted to God’s love that she overcomes the perceived failings of her sex to take on the virtues of a man.”¹¹ Trends in scholarship demonstrate a clear, undisputed definition of what *virago* meant in the Middle Ages, but they do not explore its creation, function, or significance in the religious sphere.

Virago was not a status conferred on women at birth; rather, it was a status earned through rigorous spiritual exercise and performance, and a rank founded in the roots of

51; 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.

¹⁰ Joan Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 205.

¹¹ Karina Marie Ash, *Conflicting Femininities in Medieval German Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 110.

Patristic-era Christianity. The concept of women “being made male,” appears in a few notable studies, namely Elizabeth Castelli’s essay on Christian pieties of the body and Grace Jantzen’s book on gender and Christian mysticism.¹² Although Castelli and Jantzen both identify an undeniable admiration for women who embodied masculine virtue in early Christian history, neither scholar fully identifies how Patristic writers affirmed the *virago* paradigm or the influence the *virago* model had on Christian concepts of gender past the fifth century. Moreover, scholars have not investigated how medieval men employed the concept of the *virago* as they wrote to, for, and about women in the central Middle Ages. Medieval religious texts reveal that men co-opted the term and built around it a model, or paradigm, of female sanctity that both “fixed” the problem of female imperfection and upheld the supremacy of the patriarchy. The belief that a woman could fix her flawed sex emphasized a ubiquitous fear among religious men of the perceived licentious, fickle, and sinful nature of the female sex.

A growing population of women entering religious vocations in the twelfth century forced men to confront well-established, misogynistic ideas regarding women. Joan Ferrante and Amalie Föbel argue that an obvious prejudice against women dominated medieval gender politics in the public and private spheres, as well as the secular and religious realms.¹³ Ferrante argues that despite these beliefs, evidence demonstrates that men and women worked together in both spheres.¹⁴ Thus, men created

¹² Elizabeth Castelli, “‘I Will Make Mary Male’: Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, eds. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (London: Routledge, 1991); Grace Jantzen, *Mystics, Martyrs, and Honorary Males* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹³ See Föbel, *The Political Traditions*, 69; Joan Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women’s Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 4.

¹⁴ Ferrante, *To the Glory*, 4.

a model of female sanctity that reconciled their obvious anxieties over the female sex with a growing admiration for their female contemporaries. In 1987, Caroline Walker Bynum's exploration of female sanctity in medieval Europe successfully ended the notion of widespread theological and ecclesiastical hostility towards women in the Middle Ages. In her work, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Bynum argues that women shaped for themselves a unique, corporeally focused Christian faith that created an impressive range of positive associations between the feminine and the divine.¹⁵ Bynum's work focuses on the specific ways that women controlled their spiritual experience and roles within the framework of the Church, but not how men reacted to these feminine constructs of religious experience. Conversely, this dissertation examines the role that *men* played in creating a new model of sanctity for women, one that authorized and validated women's spiritual practice, authority, and influence within the realm of medieval Christianity through a process of spiritual gender transformation.

The emergence of the *virago* model of female sanctity coincided with a significant upheaval to the gender system in the eleventh and twelfth century. In her essay, "The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150," Jo Ann McNamara identifies a masculine identity crisis triggered by a philosophical conflict between celibate and married men during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹⁶

McNamara argues that, as old social hierarchies started to change in the eleventh century,

¹⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Bennet and Karras, "Women," 12.

¹⁶ JoAnn McNamara, "The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 3.

professions, social roles, and gender ideologies also changed.¹⁷ These changes led to a growing population of displaced men who had to reestablish their position in the secular and religious sphere. To emphasize their masculine dominance, men began to reassert the old Galenic and Aristotelian ideas of woman as defective man. Moreover, McNamara argues that the papal reforms of the late eleventh century reinforced clerical celibacy and emphasized an ideal of a woman-less space.¹⁸ Regardless of the ideal, the sources prove that women still participated actively in male-dominated spaces, and, in some cases, men welcomed a woman's presence, influence, and guidance. The *virago* paradigm provided these religious men with a method to permit women's active presence in the church, while simultaneously affirming the superiority of masculinity and manhood. Therefore, a woman's active participation in the public, religious sphere depended on her ability to prove her masculine spirit.

To permit women's participation in male-dominated religious spaces, and to accept the spiritual advice and authority of women, men created a theology that both addressed the perceived failings inherent in the female sex and upheld the patriarchy rather than undermining it. Margret Miles notes, "In orthodox Christianity, two roles were acceptable for women—virginity or motherhood."¹⁹ Within the role of virgin, a variety of archetypes and vocational possibilities existed. The maternal and feminine Virgin Mary represented the most well-recognized model. However, the increasing popularity of the stories from the third and fourth century virgin martyrs depicts a model

¹⁷ McNamara, "Herrenfrage," 4.

¹⁸ Ibid, 5.

¹⁹ Miles, *Carnal*, 67.

of sanctity that celebrated a heroic, stalwart, and militant version of the virgin archetype. Moreover, the Church accepted and validated this paradigm of female spirituality because it legitimized the growing number of women entering religious vocations while simultaneously validating the superiority of the masculine gender.

The roots of the *virago* paradigm, as it applied to female spirituality, serve as the focus of Chapter One. Though the idea of masculine women has always existed in some fashion, the Christian model of the *virago* was not fully articulated and established until the Patristic era. St. Jerome and St. Ambrose blended Gnostic theology, Jewish philosophy, and biblical scriptures to create a model of female spirituality centered on the idea that the male form represented the pinnacle of perfection. Moreover, the *virago*, as it appears in the Patristic-era texts and Latin Vulgate, justified the Christian patriarchy and substantiated misogynistic ideas regarding women while simultaneously permitting the active participation of women in the Church, so long as these women fit into this archetype of masculine womanhood.

This model of heroic womanhood continued into the central Middle Ages and medieval writers espoused the ideals of the *virago* as they crafted and re-created the stories of Patristic-era martyrs. To support the spiritual supremacy of the *virago* paradigm, medieval men looked to the virgin martyrs of the second and third centuries and re-established their narratives, casting them as heroic, man-like figures. Chapter Two explores the medieval narratives of seven of the virgin martyrs and explores the creation of these women as masculine people. The medieval narratives of the virgin women martyrs follow a *topos* that both validated and exemplified the *virago* model. Moreover, these legends emphasized the role of the female body in the process of

transforming—or perfecting—the gender of the soul. These narratives also promoted a belief in the transformative opportunities of spiritual warfare. Though scholars have started to examine the heroic themes in the stories of women martyrs, no one has yet examined the *topoi* of these medieval narratives specifically as they support the construct of female masculinity.²⁰ Read together, the medieval accounts of these stories provide important insight on how men constructed the *virago* and what men believed women could attain by modeling their lives after these examples of manly women. The legends of these extraordinary, heroic women also served as Christian archetypes that men used to instruct their female contemporaries on how and why to act like men.

A small collection of extant twelfth-century letters that were written by influential men to religious women reveals that the *virago* paradigm lasted well into the central Middle Ages. A close reading of these letters reveals men's wide-spread anxiety about the female sex and their fervent belief in the superiority of the *virago* over other women. Additionally, these letters expound the transcendent possibilities available to women who put aside their female sex and acted like men. A detailed examination of these letters, and their gendered implications, serve as the focus of Chapter Three. Some of these letters, written by well-known medieval clerics and theologians, have captured the attention of scholars. Barbara Newman attempts to disentangle and unpack the language of what she identifies as the *femina virilis*, or virile woman, arguing that the emphasis on

²⁰Jennifer Bray, "The Medieval Military Order of St. Katherine," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 56 (1983), 1-6; Katherine Lewis, *The Cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2000); Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Medieval England* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2001); Karen Winstead, "St. Katherine's Hair," *St Katherine of Alexandria: Texts and Contexts in Western Medieval Europe*, eds. Jaqueline Jenkins and Katherine J. Lewis (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003).

virile women created a sort of “gender free” religious model.²¹ I disagree with this assessment; rather, the *virago* paradigm specifically as it existed in twelfth-century letters emphasized the supremacy of Christian masculinity and the female potential to reach the status of male-woman, or *virago*.

The most arresting and explicit use of the *virago* paradigm exists in two medieval texts associated with the twelfth-century recluse and holy woman, Christina of Markyate. Near the end of the eleventh century, an Anglo-Saxon noble family welcomed the birth of a daughter, whom they named Theodora. This couple planned to marry their daughter to an influential Norman nobleman to secure their political status in an era of uncertainty for the recently dethroned Anglo-Saxon nobility. But the young Theodora had a different idea for her future; at around ten years of age, she took a vow of celibacy and dedicated her life to pursuing a religious vocation. Eventually, Theodora changed her name to Christina as a signifier of her metamorphosis. Christina’s story survives in a single fourteenth-century manuscript, which an anonymous cleric copied from a now-lost twelfth century original. The text reveals layers of truth about the nature of religion, life, love, and politics in twelfth century England and, most significantly for the purposes of this dissertation, elucidates exactly how men constructed a living example of the *virago*. As Chapter Four reveals, the *Life of Christina of Markyate* begins with a young girl called Theodora and follows her as she endures trials and triumphs to become Christina, a *fortissimo militis Deo* or “powerful soldier for God.” The language of Christina’s *vita* is unequivocal; she is a woman who puts aside her womanhood and becomes a *virago*.

²¹ Barbara Newman, “Flaws in the Golden Bowl: Gender and Spiritual Formation in the Twelfth Century,” *Traditio* 45 (1989), 111-146, 115.

A second medieval text associated with Christina of Markyate, *The St. Alban's Psalter*, offered the anchorite a detailed guide on how to become a *virago*. Currently held and administered by the Dombibliothek at the St. Godehardkirche in Hildesheim, Germany, the ornately decorated and perfectly preserved *St. Albans Psalter* provided Christina of Markyate with a devotional text and, as argued in Chapter Five, an unambiguous handbook on how to take on a masculine soul and become a *virago*. Three components of the Psalter emphasize the *virago* paradigm: a pictorial cycle of miniatures, which portray women as figures of authority; the inclusion of the *Chanson of St Alexis*, which details a narrative of a heroic virgin who was a man; and finally a commentary on spiritual warfare, which encourages the female reader to clothe herself in masculine virtue. The Psalter itself has garnered a fair amount of attention from art historians over the last century and a half.²² Scholars have discussed a variety of issues and themes, namely the Psalter's creator, audience, and date of creation. But no one has yet to explore the obvious gender implications in the text. Moreover, scholars seem uniformly confounded by both the inclusion of the story of St. Alexis, a man and ascetic martyr, and the overt masculine tones of the miniatures and the illuminated "Beatus Vir."²³ Jane Geddes suggests that the masculine perspective occurs because of its male patron, Abbott Geoffrey; I contend that Abbott Geoffrey commissioned the manuscript as a gift for Christina, in order to provide her with a detailed guide on exactly how and why she

²² Jochen Bepler, Peter Kidd, Jane Geddes, *Dombibliothek Hildesheim: The Albani Psalter* (Simbach am Inn: Verlag Müller & Schindler, 2008); Adolf Goldschmidt, *Der Albani-Psalter in Hildesheim und seine Beziehung zur symbolischen Kirchensculptur des XII. Jahrhunderts* (Verlag von Georg Siemens: Berlin, 1895); Otto Pächt, Charles Reginald Dodwell, and Francis Wormald, *The St. Albans Psalter: Albani Psalter* (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1960).

²³ Jane Geddes, *The St Albans Psalter: a Book for Christina of Markyate* (London: British Library, 2005).

should transcend to the status of *virago*. Additionally, this perspective clarifies the most mysterious and perplexing aspects of both the *Psalter* and the *Life of Christina of Markyate*. As I argue in both Chapters Four and Five, the men who constructed the *St. Albans Psalter* and wrote *The Life of Christina of Markyate* present her as medieval England's most unambiguous *virago* in the twelfth century.

The *virago* paradigm of female sanctity as it existed in the central Middle Ages is a new idea in modern scholarship but was an established gender construct for medieval men and women. An all-encompassing examination of the *virago* requires a starting point. This dissertation is precisely that: a starting point. Many of the manuscripts that detail the medieval narratives of the virgin martyrs owe their provenance to England, as do most of letters examined in Chapter Three. Additionally, *The Life of Christina of Markyate* and the *St. Albans Psalter* both originate in twelfth-century England and provide a clear and unequivocal example of the *virago* paradigm. Therefore, *The Life, The St. Albans Psalter*, the twelfth-century letters, and the medieval narratives of virgin martyrs situate the scope of this study firmly within England during the central Middle Ages. Undoubtedly, this model of female spirituality existed beyond England, and it changed as Europe moved into the centuries of the late Middle Ages and Early Modern Era. However, before scholars can discern the how the *virago* appeared across time and place, the constructs of this model of sanctity must first be delineated and explored. Examining the *virago* paradigm as it existed in twelfth-century England provides a clear, definitive representation of the manly woman as she existed in the minds of medieval men.

CHAPTER 1 PATRISTIC CREATION OF THE *VIRAGO* PARADIGM

Simon Peter said to them, ‘Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘look, I shall guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter heaven’s kingdom.’²⁴

The Latin word *virago*, in its simplest definition, means “a man-like woman.”

When the verb *-ago* is added to the Latin noun for man, or *vir*, the word becomes a feminine noun used to label a subset of women who demonstrate masculine characteristics. Often, the word means “warrior woman;” however, as post-structuralists argue, the meaning of a word often changes as the social structures around that word require new definitions.²⁵ For holy women in the early and high Middle Ages, *virago* became a description, a way for religious men to understand, legitimize, and classify women who lived outside of social normative boundaries in the five centuries of Christian history. Religious men used the word to describe women who chose to follow Christ with undying and fearless devotion. Often this term applied to women who rejected the duties of womanhood and gave up their husbands and children.

Two of the most prolific patristic writers—St Jerome of Stridon and St. Ambrose of Milan—drew on traditions rooted in Jewish philosophy, Gnostic theology, and the Latin Vulgate to create a model of female spirituality. The *virago* paradigm did not liberate women; it was not a Patristic vision of feminism. Rather, the *virago* model

²⁴ Gospel of Thomas, Saying 114.

²⁵ For a full discussion of post-structuralist theory see: James Williams, *Understanding Poststructuralism* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

upheld the ideal of masculine supremacy, reified the Christian patriarchy, and substantiated misogynistic ideas regarding women. But it also allowed men to accept the active participation of women in the Church, so long as these women fit into this archetype of masculine womanhood. In the second century, a remarkable narrative emerged detailing the life and ministry of Thecla, and her story provided Christians with an example of the virago paradigm in action, emphasizing the possibilities of this masculine archetype while also subduing men's anxieties over wanton female sexuality.

For the past five decades, scholars have examined the phenomenon of female-to-male transition. In 1958, the Belgian philologist Marie Delcourt published a study on gender fluidity in classical antiquity. Delcourt concluded that the function of female-to-male transition was to uphold an ideal of masculine perfection.²⁶ In 1974, John Anson responded to Delcourt's provocative ideas with an exploration of what he termed the "transvestite motif" in early-Christian female spirituality. Anson agreed with Delcourt's original arguments and augmented her findings by identifying a model of spirituality in early Christianity that praised and accepted transvestite, or cross-dressing women, as uniquely holy.²⁷ Anson also argued that this archetype of cross-dressing women appears in several accounts of the female saints and martyrs in the first four centuries of Christian history.²⁸ Additionally, Anson is the first scholar to suggest that men created these

²⁶ Marie Delcourt, *Hermaphrodite: Myth and Rites of the Bisexual Figure in Classical Antiquity*, trans. Jennifer Nicholson (London: Studio Books, 1958, 1961), 84-102.

²⁷ John Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, no. 5 (1974): 1-32, 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

stories for a male audience as “a psychological opportunity to neutralize the threat of female temptation.”²⁹

In her work on Christian pieties of the body, Elizabeth Castelli identified a gender phenomenon and referred to it as a “women-becoming-men” *topos* grounded in Greco-Roman tradition.³⁰ Additionally, Castelli identified the trend as a movement towards gender ambiguity.³¹ However, because it is a paradigm applied only to women and one that clearly identified them as male-like women, a “women-becoming-men” *topos* is not a model of gender ambiguity. Moreover, there is nothing vague about the transformation: when a woman proved her soul is masculine, she became unequivocally male, or a *virago*. Though important and influential, Castelli’s work does not address the evolution of the model, nor does she examine the theme of the *virago* after the end of the patristic era. Additionally, Castelli does not explore how and why the *virago* archetype lasted well into the renaissance of the twelfth century. In a similar study, Jacqueline Murray argued that the acceptance of gender fluidity in the early Christian and medieval world actually allowed for the creation of a third, gender-less category.³² Similarly, in an examination of transgender history, Holly Devor argued that early Christians embraced female-to-male transformations, but Devor does not investigate how religious writers

²⁹ Anson, “The Female Transvestite,” 5.

³⁰ Elizabeth Castelli, “‘I Will Make Mary Male:’ Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, eds. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Jacqueline Murray, “One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?” in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, eds. Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 42-43.

may have created them or what these transformations meant.³³ Despite the growing body of scholarship on gender in the Patristic era of Christianity, scholars have not yet examined exactly how men used existing philosophy and theology to create the *virago* paradigm, which was a specific gender category created only for women and one that permitted, even encouraged them, to act like and become men.

The *virago* paradigm, as it was created in the Patristic era, was not a movement towards androgyny or gender ambiguity. As this chapter demonstrates, Patristic writers used a variety of established philosophies and theologies to create a distinctly masculine identity that they applied only to women. Men could not become and were never referred to as a *virago*. Moreover, the *virago* status relied on a patriarchal hierarchy that clearly defined the parameters of masculine and feminine performance. In creating the *virago* paradigm, the Patristic writers provided an archetype of a woman who remained biologically female but became spiritual male through rigorous and often violent means. Subsequently, in the minds of men, the process of becoming *a virago* perfected the perceived weaknesses of women and brought them to salvation and into unity with God. For Christians in the Patristic era, manliness was akin to godliness and the *virago* was the closest a woman could come to achieving spiritual manliness.

Patristic Writers on Gender and Christian Theology

In the first centuries of Christianity, before the mysterious Jewish sect became a distinct and separate faith, women had a notable amount of authority and autonomy

³³ Holly Devor, *FTM: Female to Male Transsexuals in Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 7.

within the growing church. McNamara argues that, despite later misogynistic regulations, Christian women appeared to have experienced more religious independence and influence in the earliest centuries of the church than they would in later years.³⁴ Moreover, McNamara states that, until the third century, women taught as prophetesses and that the earliest statutes of the church supported equality between men and women within the congregation.³⁵ In his work *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination*, Gary Macy argues that, after the fourth century, men began to *remove* women from the ministry and barred them from performing functions that later clerics would reserve only for the male clergy.³⁶ As the hierarchical structure of the priesthood began to emerge, male leaders totally excluded women and based their prohibition on the notion that the “natural pollution of the female body rendered women ineligible to participate in the sacrifice of the altar.”³⁷

In the fourth century, Christian philosophers and writers began formulating a theology that addressed gender as it functioned within Christian doctrine. These Patristic writers based their ideas on the Aristotelian notion that women existed as imperfect versions of men, and women, due to their flawed nature, required the guidance, oversight, and dominance of men.³⁸ Subsequently, these ideas reinforced a patriarchal hierarchy

³⁴ McNamara, Jo Ann. "Sexual Equality and the Cult of Virginitly in Early Christian Thought," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 3/4 (1976): 145-58, 145.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 145-146.

³⁶ Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 49.

³⁷ McNamara, "Sexual Equality," 146.

³⁸ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 21-6; Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 19-20.

and strengthened the notion of masculine perfection and supremacy. McNamara argues that “substantial numbers of Christians embraced the extremist position that women were to be identified with the flesh, the flesh with the world, and the world with evil itself.”³⁹ Additionally, the two of the most influential Patristic writers, St. Jerome and St. Ambrose, used a variety of religious ideas to construct the *virago* paradigm for women, which simultaneously emphasized the perfection of man and denigrated the essential features of womanhood.

Of the Patristic era writers, Jerome of Stridon and Ambrose of Milan contributed to the creation of the *virago* paradigm more than any other theologians. Jerome and Ambrose each held a dualistic view of the world that influenced their concept of sex and gender. In the minds of these men, the postlapsarian world split into two opposing and mutually exclusive realms:⁴⁰ the carnal, represented by the material world, and the spiritual, which exemplified the perfection of heaven. These ideas were not a new creation of Patristic thinkers; in truth, they borrowed heavily from the Gnostics, Manicheans and from the second century Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria.

The Gnostic sects appeared in the first centuries of the Common Era and blended Christian and Jewish thought in a theology that emphasized spiritual knowledge, or *gnosis*. Additionally, in the Gnostic cosmology the temporal, earthly realm symbolized imperfection and stood in opposition to the perfect spiritual or heavenly sphere. Furthermore, Gnostics believed that the world, steeped in imperfection, could not be

³⁹ McNamara, “Sexual Equality,” 146.

⁴⁰ Joyce Salisbury, “The Latin Doctors of the Church on Sexuality,” *Journal of Medieval History* 12 (1986): 279-289, 279-82.

saved and that redemption from the defective world required a process of setting the divine spirit free and rejecting the control and influence of imperfect and evil forces.⁴¹ Many of the Gnostic ideas would fall out of favor with later Christian theologians, but some of the most provocative concepts would remain in the construction of gender and sex within Christian doctrine.

The second century Gnostic text, *The Gospel of Thomas*, outlines a unique perspective on gender and explicates an aspect of Gnosticism that mainstream Christian theologians would preserve. Unlike the New Testament, the Gospel of Thomas presents an untraditional view of Jesus, one in which he bestows wisdom in the form of cryptic sayings. Thus, the text is a collection of sayings rather than a narrative or compendium of letters. The creation of the book took nearly a century, likely beginning in 30 CE and ending around 110 CE, though scholars do not agree on this point.⁴² The book represents a version of Christ as a teacher and a philosopher and not a crucified savior. Marvin Meyer has worked extensively with the original texts and states, “Thomas’s Jesus is a teacher of wisdom, and the value of Jesus lies in what he has to say and how his sayings lead to wisdom and understanding [...] The Gospel of Thomas is an interactive gospel, and wisdom and knowledge come when readers creatively encounter sayings of Jesus and respond to the sayings in an insightful manner.”⁴³

⁴¹ Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 15.

⁴² Richard Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas* (London: Routledge, 1997), 12.

⁴³ Marvin Meyer, “Introduction to *The Gospel of Thomas with the Greek Gospel of Thomas*,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 134.

In this Gospel, part of this wisdom concerns the role and status of women. In the text, Jesus speaks to his disciples about the nature and process of salvation. Saying 22 reports Jesus as declaring,

when you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image then you will enter [the kingdom].”⁴⁴

Elizabeth Castelli argues that this saying provides evidence that within the Gnostic traditions of Christianity, women could only gain access to salvation by transforming into men.⁴⁵ However, an alternative interpretation suggests that this passage does not convey a message of salvation, but expounds on the transformational possibilities of salvation and union with God. Women do not become men as a salvific act; rather, the progression of salvation, of attaining *gnosis*, pulls the Christian out of their temporal body and into a state of unity in which all things are made perfect and whole by God. The scripture states that “the male will not be male, nor the female be female,” which suggests that salvation removes gender and sex distinction.

⁴⁴ Gospel of Thomas, Saying 22.

⁴⁵ Castelli, “I Will Make Mary Male,” 30.

Saying 114 of the Gospel of Thomas takes a much more decided position on the issue of women within the church. The passage contains a discussion between Simon Peter and Jesus on the status of Mary Magdalene:

Simon Peter said to them ‘Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘look, I shall guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males, For every female who makes herself male will enter heaven’s kingdom.’⁴⁶

The statement “I will guide her to make her male,” does not imply that Mary’s salvation is dependent on transformation; rather, it suggests that the agency to change, to become perfected, resides with Mary. If Mary can prove she is as virtuous as Christ’s male disciples, then she too will become male. Moreover, this passage suggests that the act of salvation, of becoming reconciled with Christ appeared as a transformation of Mary’s gender, from the imperfect female to the perfected male, or the *virago*.

The first century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria promulgated similar ideas regarding the transcendent nature of gender. As the most “universally read Jewish philosopher of the time,”⁴⁷ Philo offered early Christians a philosophical paradigm by which to understand the relationship between gender and God. In Philo’s commentary on Exodus, he explains the function of spiritual progress, stating:

⁴⁶ Gospel of Thomas, Saying 114.

⁴⁷ Constance Parvey, “The Theology and Leadership of Women in the New Testament,” in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Tradition* ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 126. Philo Judaeus, also referred to as Philo of Alexandria, lived from 20 BCE to 50 CE. He was a Jewish philosopher from the school of Middle Platonism and wrote extensively on religious philosophy.

For progress is indeed nothing else than the giving up of the female gender by changing into the male, since the female gender is material, passive, corporeal and sense-perceptible, while the male is active, rational, incorporeal, and more akin to mind and thought.⁴⁸

In a separate commentary on Genesis, Philo continues his philosophical exploration of the relationship between the soul and gender. Philo writes,

But when just the right time has come for the cleansing and there is a drying up of all ignorance and of all that which is able to do harm, then it is fitting and proper for it to bring together those elements which have been divided and separated, not that the masculine thoughts may be made womanish, and relaxed by softness, but that the female element, the senses, may be made manly by following masculine thoughts and by receiving from them seed for procreation, that it may perceive things with wisdom, prudence, justice and courage, in sum, with virtue.⁴⁹

Both of these statements emphasize two things: a belief in the impurity and imperfection inherent to the female sex, and the possibility to overcome female deficiencies. Castelli makes careful mention that in Philo's gender system, movement between the female and

⁴⁸ Philo Judaeus, *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Exodum*, I.8; Richard Baer Jr., *Philo's Use of the Categories Male and Female* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 46. Translation provided in text by Richard Baer Jr.

⁴⁹ Philo Judaeus, *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesin*, II:49; Baer, *Philo's Use*, 48. Baer's translation.

male is not reciprocal and that the goal is for the female to ascend to the male.⁵⁰ Castelli continues by arguing that “for Philo, the categories of male and female are not balanced but rather represent superior and inferior states; the movement from femaleness to maleness is understood to be a progressive movement to a higher state of virtue [...]”⁵¹ Indeed this singular idea became an inarguable aspect of the *virago* paradigm because to become a *virago* meant that a woman moved, spiritually, from an imperfect state to a perfected form that closely aligned her with God. Thus, this paradigm both emphasized the possibility for gender transition and simultaneously upholds a gender hierarchy based on the Aristotelian idea of the male as the flawless form of human.

Philo’s philosophy and the Gnostic emphasis on transformation had an obvious effect on the fourth century theologian and philosopher, Ambrose of Milan. Ambrose unequivocally promulgated a doctrine that celebrated the spiritual supremacy of the male sex and encouraged women to emulate the Gnostic model of striving for masculine excellence. In a fourth century letter, Ambrose writes,

But who is a perfect man, but he who, being delivered from
the weakness of a childish mind, from the unstable and
slippery ways of youth, and from the unbridled passions of
adult age, has attained to the strength of full manhood
[...]⁵²

Fitting women into this idea Ambrose writes,

⁵⁰ Castelli, “Make Mary Male,” 32.

⁵¹ Castelli, “Pieties of the Body,” 32.

⁵² Ambrose of Milan, “Letter LXXVI” in *The Letters of S. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan*, trans. Rev. H. Walford (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1881), 447.

[...] she who does not believe, is a woman and should be designated by the name of her bodily sex, whereas she who believes progresses to complete manhood [...] she then does without worldly name, gender of body, youthful seductiveness, and garrulousness of old age.⁵³

Ambrose believed that the postlapsarian world consisted of a spiritual and a carnal realm, and that achieving spiritual victory over the flesh served as the primary goal for all Christians. For women, this often meant a complete renunciation of the flawed female flesh in order to become spiritually male.⁵⁴ Ambrose stated unequivocally that the Christian woman—through a process of proving her Christian virtue—could transcend the imperfection of her flawed sex and become male. In the Ambrosian concept, reaching a perfected status subsequently frees women of the limitations of their sex.

Similarly, the fourth century theologian Jerome expressed an unequivocal position on spiritual potential available to women. In his fourth century letter to Eustochium, St. Jerome writes on the virtues of virginity and encourages his young female reader to adopt the ascetic life.⁵⁵ Echoing the Gnostic position on gender and salvation, Jerome said to his female protégé,

⁵³ Ambrose, *Expositionis in evangelium secundum Lucam libri X*, PL 15:144) *Quae non credit, mulier est, et adhuc corporei sexus appellatione signatur: nam quae credit, occurrit in virum perfectum, in mensuram aetatis plenitudinis Christi, carens jam nomine saeculi, corporis sexu, lubrico juventutis, multiloquio senectutis*. Cited and translated: Joyce Salisbury, “The Latin Doctors of the Church on Sexuality,” *Journal of Medieval History* 12 (1986): 279-289, 280.

⁵⁴ Ambrose, *Expositionis in evangelium secundum Lucam libri X*, 15:1938 in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.P. Milne (Paris: Garnier), 1887.

⁵⁵ Saint Jerome, *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Ephasios*, 16: 567 in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: Garnier, 1884).

As long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she desires to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man.⁵⁶

Jerome's ideas succinctly describe the Christian *virago*: a woman so dedicated in her faith that she changes the sex of her inner person. Like Ambrose, Jerome borrows heavily from Gnosticism and Philo's ideal of progression towards masculine perfection. In conjunction with Ambrose, Jerome emphasizes a woman's agency in directing her own spiritual improvement.

Jerome's Latin Vulgate on Christian Womanhood

Of the written works that came out of the Patristic era, perhaps the most influential and revealing text is Jerome's translation of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures into what became the Latin Vulgate. In 382, Pope Damasus I commissioned Jerome to revise the *Vetus Latina* (old Latin) Gospels, which the Church had been using in the first three centuries of its existence. No single, uniform *Vetus Latina* scripture existed in late antiquity; rather, it was an amalgam of Biblical scriptures and Latin translations of the Greek Septuagint and New Testament passages.⁵⁷ The *Vetus Latina* contained a wide variety of variant readings of familiar Gospels. For example, Bruce Metzger counts at least 27 variants of Luke 14:4-5 in the extant manuscripts of the *Vetus Latina*, and Metzger argues that the texts were created on an "as needed" basis, which suggests that

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ W.E. Plater and H.J. White, *A Grammar of the Vulgate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), 4.

different versions and translations of the scriptures existed.⁵⁸ Eventually, Jerome's work extended to include most of the books of the Bible, including his Latin translation of the Hebrew texts that became the standard version of the Old Testament. After Jerome finished his translation of the Hebrew, Greek Septuagint and New Testament passages, the Latin Vulgate became widely adopted, reaching its zenith as the most popular version of the bible by the thirteenth century.

In his translation of Genesis, Jerome included the noun *virago*, which reveals a curious detail regarding his view of women. Jerome translated Genesis 2:23 as “Dixitque Adam hoc nunc os ex ossibus meis et caro de carne mea haec vocabitur *virago* quoniam de viro sumpta est.” The choice to use *virago* instead of *mulier*, which means “woman,” seems deliberate. On the matter, Helen Kraus argues, “The word *virago* was often understood in Jerome's time as a ‘professional’ virgin and therefore related to lifestyle, be it as pagan goddess or priestess, or a Christian woman living a celibate life.”⁵⁹ In truth, the word or label meant much more than “professional virgin.” Moreover, the meaning of *virago* varied depending on time, place, and context. Kraus comments that “Jerome may simply have preferred *virago*, ‘a woman having qualities of a man, physically strong, warlike, and heroic,’ and therefore the perfect companion ‘opposite’ the man.”⁶⁰ In the fourth century, the Christian connotation of the word would begin to correlate with female masculinity, virtue, and spiritual progress. Though virginity

⁵⁸ Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Translation, Corruption, and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 72.

⁵⁹ Helen Kraus, *Gender Issues in Ancient and Reformation Translations of Genesis 1-4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 89.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

became an invaluable status Christians used to identify strong, virile women, the term *virago* had less to do with a virginal state and more to do with signifying a special class of women who had proved that they had ascended to a masculine state. Kimberly LoPrete posits that Jerome chose the word because he was “looking for a Latin word to capture the Hebrew pun in the name given by Adam to the woman (*mulier*) created from his flesh and bone [...]”⁶¹ Essentially, LoPrete determines that Jerome used *virago* to emphasize the belief that woman came from man.

An alternative explanation, and one that logically correlates with Jerome’s ideas about women, suggests that he picked the word to define a perfect, prelapsarian woman. The word itself comes from the Latin noun *vir*, or “man,” and the verb *ago*, or “to act.” Thus, the simplest definition of *virago* is “a woman who acts like a man” and not “a woman who comes from a man.” Additionally, the Eve to whom Jerome ascribes the *virago* moniker is an Eve who had yet to bite the fruit and convince Adam to sin, which occurs in the third chapter of Genesis in the Latin Vulgate. Simply put, a prelapsarian Eve exists as a perfect woman. The ideal of virginity does not apply to this Eve because she has not yet sinned and therefore does not need to redeem herself through sexual renunciation. It appears that Jerome used the epithet to describe Eve, a woman who espoused masculine virtue but lives in the body of a woman.

Jerome’s anxieties and ideas about women suffuse his translation and construction of the Vulgate. Jane Barr examines, in detail, several passages of Jerome’s translation to identify the nuances of Jerome’s viewpoint towards women. She argues that “Jerome’s

⁶¹ Kimberly LoPrete, “Gendering *Viragos*: Medieval Perceptions of Powerful Women,” in *Victims or Viragos? Studies on Medieval and Early Modern Women, Vol. 4*, eds. Christine Meeks and Catherine Lawless (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 22.

attitudes towards women were such a powerful and all-pervasive influence upon him that the accuracy of the Vulgate translation itself has been affected.”⁶² Barr is responding to a view of Jerome that portrays him as profoundly anti-woman.⁶³ Throughout Jerome’s translation of Genesis, she identifies myriad examples that demonstrate “a great warmth and sensitivity on his part to the women concerned in the [Genesis] passages.”⁶⁴ Additionally, in Barr’s assessment, Jerome conducted his translations of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures with relative objectivity, except when the passages involved women.⁶⁵ To support her position, Barr makes careful mention that overall Jerome did not “freely” translate the Greek into Latin, and that he was careful to stay true to the original scripture except in the case of adverbs, about which Barr comments that Jerome “often inserted these [adverbs] gratuitously.”⁶⁶ For example, Barr notes that in Genesis 44:18, Jerome inserted the adverb *propius*, or “almost,” which she states does have “some basis in the Hebrew verb,” but that the second adverb, *confidenter*, or “boldly,” does not and is therefore “pure addition,” according to Barr’s findings.⁶⁷ Though Barr provides a solid foundation of evidence that strongly suggests Jerome held some affinity for women, he also seemed repulsed by the female form. For example, Barr comments that “Jerome found the sight of pregnant women disgusting, and in his letters speaks with distaste of

⁶² Jane Barr, “The Vulgate Genesis and St. Jerome’s Attitudes Towards Women,” in *Equally in God’s Image: Women in the Middle Ages*, eds., Julia Bolton Holloway, Joan Bechtold, and Constance S. Wright (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 122.

⁶³ Barr is responding to a 1964 study of Jerome’s commentary on Isaiah by David Wiesen. See: David Wiesen, *St. Jerome as Satirist* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964).

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 122.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 123.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*.

⁶⁷ Barr, “The Vulgate Genesis,” 124.

the *tumor uteri*.”⁶⁸ Jerome both despised women (or at least the female body) and simultaneously admired them. For Jerome, the *virago* existed as model or a method by which women could cast off the limitations of their sinful, flawed, and repulsive sex and espouse the glory of Christian manhood.

Jerome’s translation of the Pauline Epistles serves as a foundational and influential text in the creation of the *virago* paradigm. A controversy about the legitimate authorship of the letters written by Paul has emerged in the scholarship surrounding the history of the scriptures. According to David Aune, “seven of the letters attributed to Paul are almost universally accepted as authentic [...] four are just as widely judged to be pseudepigraphical.”⁶⁹ Aune lists the seven undisputed epistles as Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, I Thessalonians, and Philemon, and states that the disputed texts that Paul like did not write are I and II Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews.⁷⁰ However, because Jerome accepted the Apostle Paul as the genuine author of all of the letters attributed to him, the distinction between the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline texts is of little consequence when interpreting the gendered implications of the New Testament as a reflection of Jerome’s work as the translator. Moreover, because Jerome’s Latin Vulgate served as the standard scripture throughout the Middle Ages the authorship of the Pauline Epistles does not influence or effect the argument discussed below.

In Jerome’s translation of the Pauline Epistles, the Christian ideals of gender, patriarchal hierarchy, and women appear unambiguous. I Corinthians 11: 3-5 states, “But

⁶⁸ Ibid, 126.

⁶⁹ David E. Aune, *The Blackwell Companion to The New Testament* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 9.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ: and the head of the woman is the man: and the head of Christ is God.”⁷¹ A hierarchy, ordained by God, places women as the servants of man, and this is reified by the preceding verse which reiterates the creation story of Eve, whom God created from Adam to serve him, just as it is man’s duty to serve God.⁷² For Christians, this hierarchy provided order and stability to the Church. Thus, by divine order, women could not lead, nor could they usurp a man’s God-given right to shepherd the church.⁷³ In these scriptures, Jerome translates Paul’s ideas of gender, power, and hierarchy as pragmatic and functional rather than philosophical or moralistic.

The ideal behavior for women also appears in Jerome’s translation of Paul’s letters. I Corinthians 14: 34-35 states that in the church women should remain silent, passive, and obedient; moreover, women should not speak or preach in public spaces and they should always defer to their husband’s instructions.⁷⁴ Additionally, Ephesians 5: 22-24 emphasized the subservient role women played and their required passivity within the context of the church.⁷⁵ I Timothy 2:11-15, reiterates the Christian directive that women should never speak out, they should always remain quiet, and should continually display

⁷¹ Latin Vulgate, I Corinthians 11: 3. *volo autem vos scire quod omnis viri caput Christus est caput autem mulieris vir caput vero Christi Deus.*

⁷² I Corinthians 11: 9-11. *etenim non est creatus vir propter mulierem sed mulier propter virum ideo debet mulier potestatem habere supra caput propter angelos verumtamen neque vir sine muliere neque mulier sine viro in Domino.*

⁷³ Romans 12: 4. *sicut enim in uno corpore multa membra habemus omnia autem membra non eundem actum habent.*

⁷⁴ I Corinthians 14: 34-35. *Mulieres in ecclesiis taceant non enim permittitur eis loqui sed subditas esse sicut et lex dicit si quid autem volunt discere domi viros suos interrogent turpe est enim mulieri loqui in ecclesia.*

⁷⁵ Ephesians 5: 22-24. *mulieres viris suis subditae sint sicut Domino, quoniam vir caput est mulieris sicut Christus caput est ecclesiae ipse salvator corporis sed ut ecclesia subiecta est Christo ita et mulieres viris suis in omnibus.*

the utmost deference and obedience to their husbands.⁷⁶ Titus 2: 3-5 explicitly states that even older women must consistently demonstrate modesty, chastity, gentility, and obedience.⁷⁷ In his translation of these passages, Jerome confirms the established belief that the sin of Eve saddled women with an innate inclination for immorality, which made them incapable of holding leadership positions within the church.

Within Jerome's translations of Paul's letter exists an obvious anxiety regarding the danger of unbridled or unprotected woman. Building off the Aristotelian and Gnostic ideals of women's salvation, and supported by Philo's commentaries on Genesis and Exodus, a belief pervaded the New Testament scriptures that women, by their nature, were weak and prone to sin. Moreover, Christians believed that, left to their own devices, all women would eventually be led astray and that their fall would take good men with them.⁷⁸ To prevent this, Jerome's translation of the New Testament provided instructions on how to avoid gender-based corruption within the church. All of these scriptures direct women to submit to the authority of their husbands.⁷⁹ To disregard these directives posed a threat to a well-established social order that relied on adherence to traditional gendered roles and behavior. Yet, despite these unequivocal directives on keeping women silent, passive and obedient, many women participated actively and vociferously with the support of influential men.

⁷⁶ I Timothy 2: 11-15. *mulier in silentio discat cum omni subiectione docere autem mulieri non permitto neque dominari in virum sed esse in silentio Adam enim primus formatus est deinde Eva et Adam non est seductus mulier autem seducta in praevaricatione fuit salvabitur autem per filiorum generationem si permanserint in fide et dilectione et sanctificatione cum sobrietate.*

⁷⁷ Titus 2: 3-5. *anus similiter in habitu sancto non criminatrices non vino multo servientes bene docents ut prudentiam doceant adulescentulas ut viros suos ament filios diligant prudentes castas domus curam habentes benignas subditas suis viris ut non blasphemetur verbum Dei.*

⁷⁸ Parvey, "Women in the New Testament," 126.

⁷⁹ Ephesians 5:22-24, I Timothy 2:11-15, Colossians 3:18, Peter 3:1-6, and Titus 2:4-5.

In his translations, Jerome created a space for women's active involvement in the Church that paralleled the scriptures calling for women's silence and involved a doctrine of transformation. In the Acts of the Apostles, the story of Paul's radical spiritual conversion unfolds. According to Jerome's translation of the narrative, before he was called Paul, the Apostle lived as Saul of Tarsus, an avid persecutor of the Christians.⁸⁰ While on the road to Damascus to visit the high priest, a bright light shone from the sky and blinded Saul.⁸¹ A voice from heaven shouted down to Saul, asking why he persisted in persecuting the followers of Jesus Christ.⁸² Saul remained sightless for several days, and the experience changed him and forced him to accept Jesus Christ as the promised messiah.⁸³ Soon after his conversion, the account of Saul's spiritual transformation was marked by calling the Apostle by the Roman version name, Paul, and the text begins to refer to the Apostle as Paul.⁸⁴ Thus, transformation and transformational imagery becomes a defining feature of Christianity in the Patristic era and Paul's story, as it exists in the Latin Vulgate, indicates that any person—through salvation—could progress from the imperfect to the perfect.

Overall, Jerome's translation of the Pauline Epistles emphasizes the transformational nature of salvation. II Corinthians underscores a process of transformation and transition and suggests that this process of change occurs once the

⁸⁰ Acts 8:3. *Saulus vero devastabat ecclesiam per domos intrans et trahens viros ac mulieres tradebat in custodiam.*

⁸¹ Acts 9: 3. *et cum iter faceret contigit ut adpropinquaret Damasco et subito circumfulsit eum lux de caelo.*

⁸² Acts 9: 4-5. *et cadens in terram audivit vocem dicentem sibi Saule Saule quid me persequeris qui dixit quis es Domine et ille ego sum Iesus quem tu persequeris.*

⁸³ Acts 9: 7-22.

⁸⁴ Acts 13: 9. *Saulus autem qui et Paulus repletus Spiritu Sancto intuens in eum.*

Christian accepts Christ and joins him by unifying with him. II Corinthians 5:17 states, “Anyone in Christ becomes a new creature, the old things falling away. Behold, all things made new.”⁸⁵ The scripture continues,

All things are of God who has joined himself with Christ
and has bestowed to us the ministry of reconciliation.

Indeed, for God was in Christ, joining the world to himself
and not holding one’s sins against them, but giving us the
word of reconciliation.⁸⁶

In the Latin Vulgate, Jerome uses the phrase *nova creatura* or “new creature,” choosing the genderless “creature” rather than the masculine “man.” The choice implies that Jerome believed the salvific power to transform applied to women as much as it applied to men. Additionally, the various forms of the verb *reconcilio*, used four times in the passage, means “to restore” or “to repair.” Thus, Jerome’s translation indicates that by unifying with Christ, or giving oneself over to him, the Christian is repaired, or transformed. For women, the repaired version of their female body is the male form. This idea also appears in the book of Romans. Romans 8:9-11 states,

But, you are not in the flesh but in the spirit, if the Spirit of
God dwells within you. If anyone does not have the Spirit
of Christ, he is not his. And if Christ is in you, then the
body is dead because of sin; but, the spirit lives on because

⁸⁵ II Corinthians 5:17. *si qua ergo in Christo nova creatura vetera transierunt ecce facta sunt nova.*

⁸⁶ II Corinthians 5:18-19. *Omnia autem ex Deo qui reconciliavit nos sibi per Christum et dedit nobis ministerium reconciliationis. quoniam quidem Deus erat in Christo mundum reconcilians sibi non reputans illis delicta ipsorum et posuit in nobis verbum reconciliationis.*

of justification and if the Spirit of he who raised Jesus from the dead dwells within you that same spirit will quicken your moral body because the Spirit dwells within you.⁸⁷

Jerome's translation of this passage implies that salvation and the power of the Holy Spirit render the body meaningless. The body is corruptible and temporal, but the soul has the opportunity to become one with Christ and perfected, even in the body of a woman.

Constructing Masculinity in the Latin Vulgate

Understanding the significance of transformation and the intersection of gender and Christian salvation necessitates a deeper inquiry into the meaning of masculinity and gender performance in late antiquity. For men and women of that era, masculinity represented an achievement that required constant proof. Grace Jantzen argues that, for Christians, masculinity became a status that was both descriptive and honorific, a truth that lasted well into the Middle Ages.⁸⁸ In some social realms, men proved their manliness through competitions with other men, while in other contexts a man's virility served to demonstrate his masculine prowess. However, these definitions and social guidelines were constantly changing.⁸⁹ The rules by which social groups defined

⁸⁷ Romans 8:9-11. *vos autem in carne non estis sed in Spiritu si tamen Spiritus Dei habitat in vobis si quis autem Spiritum Christi non habet hic non est eius si autem Christus in vobis est corpus quidem mortuum est propter peccatum spiritus vero vita propter iustificationem quod si Spiritus eius qui suscitavit Iesum a mortuis habitat in vobis qui suscitavit Iesum Christum a mortuis vivificabit et mortalia corpora vestra propter inhabitantem Spiritum eius in vobis.*

⁸⁸ Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 52-54.

⁸⁹ Frederick Ivarsson, "Christian Identity as True Masculinity" in *Exploring Early Christian Identity* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 165.

masculinity and femininity did not remain constant; rather they varied greatly across time and space, and as Christianity began to spread, the meanings of maleness and femaleness transformed.

In his translation of the New Testament, Jerome seemed to advocate for a masculine construct that made room for women's participation. Jerome likely used an archetype of masculine virtue that rejected and accepted paradigms of manliness influenced by the Greco-Roman era. Fredrick Iverson defines the foundational "rules" of Greco-Roman masculinity as: "[...] defined as dominance and self-mastery, [...] the opposite of effeminacy, [...] depend[ing] on corporal and sexual integrity."⁹⁰ Setting themselves apart from the men of the Greco-Roman world, Christians defined manhood as one proved through self-control and sexual abstinence.⁹¹ These components stood in diametrical opposition to the masculine paradigms that relied on biology—or more directly the penis—as the primary mode of proving manhood. By removing the need for a penis, sexual virility, and physical strength, Christian writers provided women a path to ascend to a masculine status. I Corinthians 16:13 states "stay vigilant in the faith, act manfully and brave."⁹² In his translation of this passage, Jerome deliberately chose the word "viriliter," which explicitly means "manly" or "manfully. Moreover, this passage does not only apply to men, but to women as well. Thus, in his translation Jerome interprets the letter to the church at Corinth as a directive to all Christians, male and female, to act like men.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 160-161.

⁹¹ Ibid, 165.

⁹² I Corinthians 16:13. *vigilate state in fide viriliter agite et confortamini*

Jerome's translations repeatedly emphasize the link between masculine virtue and sexual abstinence. In I Corinthians, Jerome proclaims that through a process of rigorous self-denial, a true Christian man proves he is beholden only to God and not subservient to any person.⁹³ A celibate man—or woman—is in complete control of their body and is free of any impediments that might prevent the Christian from progressing toward mystical union with God. Celibacy is a state so revered by Jerome that in his translations of the Pauline epistles, he emphasized and exalted Paul's unmarried and abstinent status.⁹⁴ Underscoring the eminence of celibacy and its role in defining virtue and masculinity, Jerome uses the Pauline epistles to distinguish the Christian man from the "other." Ivarsson states, "True masculinity [in the New Testament] is possible only for those who have died and risen with Christ. They have crucified their flesh and are capable of self-mastery and sexual abstinence."⁹⁵ To be masculine became a status available to anyone—man or woman—who could prove their spiritual dominance over the flesh and earn the status of manhood. Iverson affirms "This masculinity is both accessible and attainable for those who are weak and marginalized in society [...] Even women and slaves could, at least theoretically become 'real men' according to Paul's

⁹³ I Corinthians 4: 32-40. *volo autem vos sine sollicitudine esse qui sine uxore est sollicitus est quae Domini sunt quomodo placeat Deo qui autem cum uxore est sollicitus est quae sunt mundi quomodo placeat uxori et divisus est et mulier innupta et virgo cogitat quae Domini sunt ut sit sancta et corpore et spiritu quae autem nupta est cogitat quae sunt mundi quomodo placeat viro porro hoc ad utilitatem vestram dico non ut laqueum vobis iniciam sed ad id quod honestum est et quod facultatem praebeat sine impedimento Dominum observandi si quis autem turpem se videri existimat super virgine sua quod sit superadulta et ita oportet fieri quod vult faciat non peccat nubat nam qui statuit in corde suo firmus non habens necessitatem potestatem autem habet suae voluntatis et hoc iudicavit in corde suo servare virginem suam bene facit igitur et qui matrimonio iungit virginem suam bene facit et qui non iungit melius facit.*

⁹⁴ I Corinthians 7:8. *dico autem non nuptis et viduis bonum est illis si sic maneant sicut et ego; I Corinthians 6:12 omnia mihi licent sed non omnia expediunt omnia mihi licent sed ego sub nullius redigar potestate.*

⁹⁵ Ivarsson, "Christian Identity," 171.

redefinition of masculinity.”⁹⁶ Thus, for women who chose an ascetic life and rejected the biological imperatives of womanhood, Christian masculinity was an attainable status.

The most explicit passage from the New Testament regarding the theology of transformation exists in the book of Galatians. Galatians 3:26-27 reads,

But after the faith has come, we are no longer under a pedagogue; for all of you are the children of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus, for every one of you that have been baptized are clothed in Christ.”⁹⁷

Immediately following this passage, Jerome translated Galatians 3: 28 as, “There is neither Jew nor Greek: nor is there slave or freeman: there can be neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ.”⁹⁸ In Jerome’s interpretation, salvation renders biological sex as insignificant. Moreover, even though the verse claims that in Christ there is neither male nor female, the passage emphasizes the transformational power of salvation and creates a space for women to transcend the limitations of their sex through the salvific power of Jesus Christ.

In recent decades, scholars have grappled with the meaning of this passage. In his essay “The Gender of the Religious,” Albrecht Diem calls the passage “revolutionary,” and remarks that scholars have not studied how this specific scripture traveled from

⁹⁶ Ivarsson, “Christian Identity,” 171.

⁹⁷ Galatians 3:26-27. *At ubi venit fides iam non sumus sub pedagogo omnes enim filii Dei estis per fidem in Christo Iesu quicumque enim in Christo baptizati estis Christum induistis.*

⁹⁸ Galatians 3:28. *non est Iudaeus neque Graecus non est servus neque liber non est masculus neque femina omnes enim vos unum estis in Christo Iesu.*

Christian Antiquity to the Middle Ages.⁹⁹ Wayne Meeks argues that in Galatians 3:28 Paul is advocating for equality amongst the sexes in the Church; he argues that the directive that there is ‘no male and female’ “suggests that somehow the act of Christian initiation reverses the fateful division of Genesis 2:21-22.”¹⁰⁰ Similarly, McNamara argues that the declaration to the Galatians and his unwavering adulation for celibacy created at the very least an opportunity for sexual equality in the early Church.¹⁰¹ Additionally, both Meeks and McNamara suggest that the Pauline notion about the relationship between gender, body, and soul meant that Paul envisioned a church that included both men and women in its leadership roles. The caveat, of course, rests on the public and correct performance of masculine virtue.

The Acts of Paul and Thecla

The second-century legend of the female apostle, Thecla, most prominently demonstrates the burgeoning Christian theology of transformation and transcendence. The account of Thecla’s life and ministry first appeared in the Acts of Paul and Thecla,¹⁰² written at some point in the latter half of the second century CE.¹⁰³ The *ATh* are considered a portion of the larger Acts of Paul, though they very likely existed as a

⁹⁹ Albrecht Diem, “The Gender of the Religious: Wo/Men and the Invention of Monasticism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, eds. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 433.

¹⁰⁰ W.A. Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity,” *History of Religions*, no. 13(1974): 165-208, 185.

¹⁰¹ Jo Ann McNamara, “Sexual Equality and the Cult of Virginity in Early Christian Thought,” *Feminist Studies* no. 3(1976): 145-158, 145-146.

¹⁰² Hereafter referred to as *ATh*

¹⁰³ Scott F. Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thekla: A Literary Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1.

separate document.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, scholars believe that the separate *ATH* had a broad and controversial reception among men and women in late antiquity.¹⁰⁵ This belief is based in part by the cultic devotion to Thecla that flourished in the East and the fifth-century recreation of the *ATH* titled *The Life and Miracles of Saint Thekla*, of which the original *ATH* are reported to have inspired.¹⁰⁶

The story begins in Thecla's youth when, according to the narrator, Paul's apostolic mission inspired Thecla to abandon her family and convert to Christianity.¹⁰⁷ As a young girl, Thecla chose to renege on her betrothal after hearing the Apostle Paul preach on the virtues of chastity, prayer, and faith. For three days Thecla sat at the window, unmoving, listening to the apostle speak and "desired that she might be thought worthy to appear in his presence, and hear the word of Christ."¹⁰⁸ As a result, Thecla's betrothed had the Apostle Paul thrown in prison, and it was there that Thecla visited with him, secretly at night, and her faith and determination grew. In retaliation for renegeing on her betrothal and choosing to follow the apostle Paul, the governor sentenced Thecla to the martyr's arena and condemned her to burn to death. Before the flames could touch her, an act of God extinguished the flame and she escaped and soon fled, meeting Paul in the city of Antioch. While in this city, Thecla captured the attention of the town

¹⁰⁴ Peter-Ben Smit, "St. Thecla: Remembering Paul and Being Remembered Through Paul," *Vigiliae Christianae*, no. 68(2014): 551-563, 555-556.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ This overview of Thecla's story is a summary pulled from a variety of modern editions of *ATH* including: Richard I. Pervo, *The Acts of Paul: a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 2-13.; Jan N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1996).; Jeremiah Jones (trans.). *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: The Life of the Holy Martyr Thecla of Iconium, Equal to the Apostles*, 1820.

¹⁰⁸ *ATH* 2:4

Councilor, Alexander, and, overcome with lust, he attempted to rape her. Thecla managed to fight him off and, in the process, tore his ceremonial robes. Angered by her insolence, the Councilor sentenced Thecla to the martyr's arena and once again she faced certain death.

It is after the second clash with death that Thecla's transformation was complete. During her second trial, the *ATH* describes how Thecla called out to God in a moment of divine inspiration.¹⁰⁹ Feeling desperate and inspired by her belief in the power of God's mercy, Thecla then threw herself into a pool, surrounded by vicious sea creatures, and baptized herself.¹¹⁰ She emerged, unharmed, and the miraculous events inspired the emperor to release her. After this second, miraculous escape, the *ATH* describes a physical transformation of Thecla. She cut her hair and from that point would only wear men's clothing. This physical transformation embodied the inner, invisible change Thecla experienced as she transformed from a girl to a man. According to the *ATH*, Thecla received praise and support from the Apostle Paul to travel as an apostle, preaching and teaching in her own right for the remainder of her life.

Likely, Thecla was not a historical person, but this notion does not diminish the impact her story had on the view of women within the Christian Church. Understanding Thecla as a reflection of Paul has inspired scholars to argue that Thecla's story, or the section of the Acts of Paul that discusses Thecla, says more about the memory of Paul and his position on women in the Church than it does about the truth of Thecla's

¹⁰⁹ Anonymous, "The Acts of Paul and Thecla," in *New Testament Apocrypha*, eds., Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Scheemelcher (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), 361.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 362.

existence.¹¹¹ Paul, especially as Jerome portrayed him in the Latin Vulgate, promulgates the virtues of celibacy and the transformative possibility available to all Christians who follow a virtuous path. Thecla emerges from the arena transformed and reborn, echoing the sentiments in the Galatians 3:28 passage. Additionally, the figure of Thecla serves as an example of how a “weak” woman might transform herself into a ‘strong’ man, communicating to the reader that anyone born with the limitations of a ‘weak’ female sex can transcend into spiritual manliness.¹¹²

Thecla’s story provides an interesting allegory that explains the Christian position on women in the New Testament scriptures. In Galatians 3:28 Paul proclaimed that all are one in Christ, even women, because in Christ there is no female, no male. The second-century text *The Gospel of Thomas* expands on this concept by explicitly stating that through salvation, “she will be made male,” suggesting that the process of salvation and achieving union with Christ would perfect the imperfect. Yet, the directives to women, as they appear in Jerome’s translation of Paul’s letters, required that women remain passive, obedient, and silent because of the inherent flawed and sinful nature of their sex. Additionally, *Corinthians I and II* uphold the idea that adherence to strict gender norms restores and maintains social order. The Pauline proclamations forbidding women from preaching in the Church seemed to eliminate the possibility of women teachers and leaders and reduced their roles to the silent outskirts of a rapidly growing religious movement. Peter Ben Smit claims that, “By writing¹¹³ the story of Paul and

¹¹¹ Smit, “St. Thecla,” 555.

¹¹² Smit, “St. Thecla,” 561.

¹¹³ The authorship of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is not known.

Thecla, Paul's image as mentor of others, as it appears in the authentic letters of Paul and especially in the pastoral epistles, is expanded and supplemented, or in other words: rewritten in order to suit a new audience."¹¹⁴

The narrative of Thecla's transformation further supports a foundational Christian belief that masculinity was a state akin to spiritual perfection. In Jerome's translation of the Pauline epistles, celibacy, and the act of demonstrating self-control and self-mastery served as the highest form of masculine fortitude. Moreover, the Christian image of the Apostle Paul, enhanced in the *ATH*, supports a paradigm of attainable maleness.¹¹⁵ Additionally, in the *ATH*, Thecla separates from her female sex and through a violent performance, transforms into a masculine apostle and is accepted as a masculine preacher and leader.¹¹⁶ The work offered women a model of salvation that reflected a gnostic emphasis on transformation and masculine supremacy, one that seems to pervade Jerome's translations of the Pauline epistles. Ben Smit argues that, "By remembering Paul as Thecla's mentor and subsequent colleague in the apostolic ministry, the Acts of Thecla make the Pauline ministry relevant and accessible for those whose un-masculine bodies would not otherwise have presented them as plausible, or even viable candidates for this 'job'"¹¹⁷ The *ATH* ultimately alters the image of Paul, from a man demanding the silence and submissiveness of women to one in which he endorsed the

¹¹⁴ Peter-Ben Smit, "St. Thecla: Remembering Paul and Being Remembered Through Paul," *Vigiliae Christianae* 68, 5 (2014): 551-563, 553.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 561.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 556.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 552.

transformation of women into masculine figures endowed by Christ with the same authority as male apostles to carry forth his mission.

The *ATH* also presented a controversial perspective on women for the Patristic writers. Ambrose and Jerome both accepted elements of Thecla's story, specifically the components related to virginity. In her work on Thecla's narrative, Léonie Hayne argues that for the Church Fathers—Jerome and Ambrose specifically—Thecla existed as a name, rather than a person.¹¹⁸ But that name carried a significant amount of influence with regard to their position on women in the church. In his sermon, *de Virginibus*, Ambrose proclaimed that the Virgin Mary is a supreme example of how a woman should live, but that Thecla offered women a perfect model of how one should die, or sacrifice themselves for the sake of the Lord.¹¹⁹ Similarly, Jerome viewed Thecla as an allegorical archetype of heroic virginity, though he rejected the baptism story as quoted in the *ATH*, as it defied Christian convention for a woman to perform baptism, even on herself.¹²⁰ Similarly, Tertullian—though he admired the Thecla's heroic commitment to virginity—was overtly hostile to the elements of Thecla's story that involved her baptism, primarily because she, a woman, assumed the sacred authority to baptize herself.¹²¹ Hayne argues that all of the Church Fathers accepted that some truth existed within the *ATH* and this allowed them to pick and choose the components of the Thecla narrative that agreed with their ideological agenda when it came to women in the Church. Though they may have

¹¹⁸ Léonie Hayne, Thecla and the Church Fathers in *Vigiliae Christianae* 48 (1994): 209-18, 210-211.

¹¹⁹ Ambrose *de virginibus* 3.19-21: ergo Sancta Maria disciplinam vitae informet, Thecla doceat immolari.

¹²⁰ Hayne, "Thecla," 211.

¹²¹ Hayne, "Thecla," 209.

rejected Thecla's autonomous baptism, or her role as a female preacher, they celebrated her masculine and heroic dedication to Christ.

Conclusion

Though the Gnostic sects of Christianity eventually faded and evolved, and the enigmatic *Gospel of Thomas* never made it into Jerome's Latin Vulgate, their influence on the Christian concept of gender and the creation of the *virago* paradigm persisted. Eventually, Thecla's legend withered into obscurity in the West, but the elements of her story that celebrated her masculinity would continue to influence the way that later writers and theologians would understand the nature of women's religious history.

Jerome's translation of the Greek and Hebrew texts into the Latin Vulgate shows an unwavering support of male supremacy and female imperfection. Yet his declaration to Eustochium in a fifth-century letter also broadcast his belief that women could achieve perfection. St. Ambrose advocated a similar idea of spiritual development. Ambrose believed that, if a woman proved her faith, her dedication to Christ, then she also progressed to perfect manhood. Both created a unique space for women while simultaneously upholding the legitimacy of a patriarchal hierarchy and an explicit disgust and fear of the female sex. For these Patristic writers, permitting and encouraging women to "become male" did not dilute or undermine the superiority of masculinity; rather, it enhanced it. It communicated that within Christianity, the male sex reigned supreme, and the female form would always remain subordinate, less-than, and imperfect. As Christianity moved into the Middle Ages, it brought with it the *virago* paradigm and this archetype of female sanctity.

CHAPTER 2
THE CONSTRUCTION OF *VIRAGO* MARTYRS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Because of the love of God, the Christian soul acts manly and in my boldness, I did not want to be a woman. I have thought about it, and it is not dishonest for a woman to pretend to be a man, but it is punishable for a man to pretend to be a woman for the pursuit of vice. And, this law is praiseworthy, if, for the love of virtue, the weaker sex imitates masculine glory.¹²²

Reading the medieval legends of the virgin martyrs reveals more about the patterns of religious and spiritual practice in the Middle Ages than it does about the reality of early-Christian history. Whether real or not, saints are always socially constructed and, in the words of Sarah Salih, “their lives are written and rewritten in accordance with existing models of sanctity, which themselves vary between time and place.”¹²³ The twelfth century bore witness to a burgeoning religious and spiritual fervor throughout England and continental Europe, which affected women as well as men. To establish a model of sanctity for this new era of religiosity, clerics, hagiographers, and theologians turned to established patterns, written in the lives and passions of saints and extant in the collective representations of holy women. For the purposes of this study, the reality of a saint’s life or experience is irrelevant; rather, the way in which men constructed and recreated the lives and passions virgin martyrs reveals the method by which men legitimized and categorized women’s religious experience in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries.

¹²² Boninus Mombritius, “Passio Sanctorum Prothi et Hiacynthi Martyrum,” in *Sanctuarium sue Vitae Sanctorum, Vol. I*, (Paris, 1910), 396. *Quia viriliter in amore dei agit animus christianus: confidentiam meam nolui esse foemineam. Consideraui enim inimicam honestati simulationem. Per quam femina virum simulat, sed magis hoc iure puniri, si pro affectu vitiorum vir foeminam fingat. Et hoc iure laudandum, si pro amore virtutum sexus infirmior virile gloriam imitetur.*

¹²³ Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2001), 42.

In the fourth century, St. Jerome delineated an ideal model of sanctity for Christian women. Echoing the Gnostic belief in spiritual progress as expressed in the mysterious Gospel of Thomas, Jerome urged his female acolyte to put aside female vocations and in doing so to “be called male.”¹²⁴ The idea emphasized a possibility for women, whose female sex represented the sin of Eve, that they could become perfected, male-like, through Christian dedication and virtue. Jerome emphasized this ideal in his fourth-century Latin translation of the Apocryphal Book of Judith which declares, “you have acted manfully, and your heart strengthened because you love chastity [...]”¹²⁵ Jerome’s use of the phrase, “*fecisti viriliter*,” depicts his admiration for Judith’s masculine conduct. Coupled with the Patristic-era tradition of valorizing masculine behavior in women, Jerome’s translation emphasized a pattern of spiritual practice that lasted into the medieval period.

As religious excitement mounted in medieval Europe, the Patristic-era paradigm of the *virago* pervaded the medieval creation of the virgin martyrs. Male clerics, hagiographers, and poets spent their careers recreating, constructing, and detailing the gruesome passions, ascetic lives, and fearsome Christian devotion of the female saints who represented an ideal of perfect masculine spirituality. For the medieval author, these legends encapsulated an ideal of masculine bravery and virility that men desired their female contemporaries to emulate. Moreover, the excruciating suffering and resolute Christian bravery that made up the medieval hagiographies underscored a process of

¹²⁴ Jerome, *Commentary on the Ephesians*, PL 26: 533.

¹²⁵ Latin Vulgate, Judith 15:11. *The translation is my own. quia fecisti viriliter et confortatum est cor tuum eo quod castitatem amaveris et post virum tuum alterum non scieris ideo et manus Domini confortavit te et ideo eris benedicta in aeternum.*

purification, which transformed imperfect women into worthy, female men of God. The *vitae* of some of the virgin martyr saints created by medieval men reveal that the *virago* model of sanctity, established by the Patristic-era writers, continued into the medieval era. Moreover, in upholding the *virago* as an ideal of female sanctity, these medieval men substantiated a paradigm and a process that simultaneously legitimized female sanctity while maintaining the supremacy of Christian masculinity.

The narratives dedicated to St. Katherine, St. Margaret, St. Juliana, St. Cecilia, St. Agnes, St. Apollonia, and St. Eugenia, serve as the examples, or case studies, for this chapter. Rather than conducting an exhaustive, quantitative assessment of every female saint, I opt for a qualitative analysis of seven of the most influential saints whose narratives contain some general similarities and who fit into the paradigmatic construct of the medieval *virago*. Conducting a qualitative study further offers the opportunity to analyze the specific language that male authors and scribes used to construct these narratives and showcase their female subjects as ideal and masculine exemplars of Christian piety. Additionally, each of these seven saints has a narrative written, or copied, in Latin during the high medieval period in England or continental Europe, proving that they remained influential and revered well after the Patristic era. Furthermore, each saint appears in Jacobus de Voragine's thirteenth century *Legenda Aurea*, which speaks to their popularity and cultural diffusion, because Voragine's compendium served as a reference guide, a sort of encyclopedia of Christianity's most important saints, for busy clergyman as they prepared sermons, wrote letters, and crafted

works of instruction in the Middle Ages.¹²⁶ As Valerie Hotchkiss argues in her work on medieval cross-dressing, “the numerous translations and adaptations of Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* [...] firmly established the disguised [cross-dressing] saint in western hagiography.”¹²⁷ Before 1500, Voragine’s work had been printed over one hundred and fifty times, which—at that time—was more than the Bible.¹²⁸ Each of the seven saints investigated in this chapter has an entry in the Bollandist’s *Acta Sanctorum*, J. P. Migne’s *Patrologia Latina*, or (in some cases, and) in Boninus Mombritius’s *Sanctuarium seu Vitae Sanctorum*. Moreover, each of these seven saints appeared in Anglo-Saxon, English, German, Low German, French, or Italian texts throughout the Middle Ages, which speaks to their cultural dissemination.¹²⁹ Often, early modern, and nineteenth-century authors based their printed editions on medieval manuscripts that still exist in libraries across the world. All the original, extant manuscript sources are consulted in this chapter. Finally, and most simply, the geographic and temporal pervasiveness of these seven saints makes them worth examining in this specific context.

To understand the process of constructing the *virago* in the legends of saints’ lives, text analysis proved the most valuable tool. In hagiography, certain terms, phrases, and words appear that denote a decidedly masculine character. For example, the Latin word *virilis* in all its various forms means “manliness” or “manly,” and, as this chapter demonstrates, medieval hagiographers used this word to indicate a woman’s masculine

¹²⁶ Eamon Duffy, “Introduction to the 2012 Edition,” in *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, Jacobus Voragine, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, 2012), xi.

¹²⁷ Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc.), 14.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 148 n.16.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 14.

character. Often, modern translations of medieval hagiographies attempt to gender neutralize these words and interpret them to mean “strong” or “powerful.” Rather, in the context of women’s spirituality in the Middle Ages, the word *virilis* always referred to the characteristics that defined masculinity. Similarly, the various forms of the word *fortis*, which means “steadfast” or “courageous,” described virtues associated with manliness as opposed to a gender-neutral or generic bravery. Thus, all Latin translations in this chapter are my own. A basic textual analysis of the source documents reveals widespread use of these words to describe women saints as masculine. Additionally, when an author uses the word *virago* in any context, he meant exactly “a manly woman,” not an intelligent woman, or a strong woman, but a masculine, male-like woman. A truer definition does not exist. It only dilutes and weakens the meanings of each *vitae* to suggest that the moniker meant anything other than a woman who performs or displays the characteristics of a virtuous man.

The vivid detail and abundance of sources that depict the lives and deaths of the virgin martyr saints has continued to capture the attention of historians and literary scholars in recent decades. The latest trends in scholarship indicate a growing interest in exploring the intersections of gender, sexuality, and religious practice as they appear in the medieval narratives of the most well-known of these saints. In her 2001 work, *Versions of Virginity*, Sarah Salih explores the constructs and meanings of virginity and identifies a specific theme running through the Middle English narratives of St. Katherine, St. Margaret, and St. Juliana. Salih identifies a subset of virgin martyr saints whose narratives depict what Salih classifies as a heroic commitment to preserving their

virginity.¹³⁰ Salih also argues that virgin martyrs had the potential to unsettle gender and “in the tradition of making Mary male, women gain access to sanctity by reworking their gendered identities.”¹³¹ Though there is a measure of truth to this statement, it is not the female saint who is reworking her gender. Rather, it is her male hagiographer who is creating and constructing her into a new and fluid gender role. This perspective, the male perspective, and its influence on the construction of women saints in the model of the *virago* is an unexplored avenue of inquiry and requires intervention.

Histories of the virgin martyrs tend to focus on the saints individually and thematically, and rarely examine them as a group. A litany of scholarship exists on the legend, influence, and texts associated with St. Katherine of Alexandria. Scholars widely accept that in the Middle Ages Katherine’s legendary intellect and bravery set her apart as uniquely heroic.¹³² Yet, as Jaqueline Jenkins states, there is not any significant scholarship that explores the medieval narratives of Katherine in the context of masculinity in the medieval period.¹³³ Similarly, St. Cecilia has captured the attention of several literary scholars, but no one has yet studied the Latin editions of her narrative as they reflect and reify the *virago* paradigm. The same can be said of St. Eugenia, St. Juliana, and St. Margaret, who receive significantly less attention than Katherine or Cecilia, yet the medieval Latin narratives of their legends prove that medieval men

¹³⁰ Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2001), 44.

¹³¹ Salih, *Versions*, 46

¹³² Jaqueline Jenkins and Katherine J. Lewis, “Introduction,” in *St. Katherine of Alexandria: Texts and Contexts in Western Medieval Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 1-16; Salih, *Versions*, 42, 56-57; Karen Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹³³ Jenkins, “Introduction,” 17.

viewed them both as paragons of Christian masculinity. In 2007 Gopa Roy published a comparative analysis between Ælfric's *Life of Eugenia* and the eleventh century Latin *Passio S. Eugeniæ*. In her analysis Roy argues that the Old English *Life* is "more sympathetic towards women than the Latin."¹³⁴ The problem with Roy's analysis rests in the fact that she does not acknowledge or discuss the paradoxical nature of gender in medieval Christianity. Medieval Christians did view the female sex as inferior; they also believed women had the capacity to progress towards a state of spiritual perfection and become inwardly male. Roy argues that because Ælfric did not use masculine language to describe Eugenia that meant Ælfric had a more sympathetic view of women.¹³⁵ Ælfric's omission of the masculinized language does not indicate his position on women; it indicates that he did not have the same admiration for the masculine aspects of Eugenia's story as the Latin authors did. Unlike the aforementioned saints, St. Apollonia and St. Agnes do not have lengthy Latin *vitae*, but the medieval narratives that detail their legends, reveals a decidedly masculine portrayal of both women. Thus, the paucity of scholarship dedicated to identifying and exploring the masculinization of these seven virgin martyrs demands intervention.

A detailed reading of the Latin narratives of the virgin saints reveals a medieval belief in the supremacy of masculinity and the idea that, through a process of purification, women could achieve a level of spiritual manliness. Yet, scholars have not explored this concept, nor have they examined the Latin texts of these seven women as a cohesive

¹³⁴ Gopa Roy, "A Virgin Acts Manfully: Ælfric's *Life of St. Eugenia* and the Latin Versions," *Leeds Studies in English* 23 (1992): 1-27, 1.

¹³⁵ Roy, "A Virgin," 4-5.

group. In many cases, scholars have transcribed some of the Latin manuscripts, but they have not translated them. Moreover, scholars have not explored how male authors shaped women's stories or why men's perceptions of masculinity and femininity influenced the narratives of the virgin martyrs. Focusing on the male perspective does not diminish female agency, nor does it temper the feminist perspective of spirituality. Rather, by underscoring the influence of masculine anxiety and by emphasizing the perspective of the man who crafted the legend, experience, and legitimacy of the saint, a more complete picture of female spirituality emerges.

Broken Betrothals and Valiant Virgins

Virginity stands as a key feature of the narratives of all these seven saints. Moreover, it is the resolute commitment to celibacy that provides the catalyst of change for each woman. As discussed in Chapter One, in the Patristic era, philosophers and theologians emphasized virginity as a desired status for Christians, especially women. Similarly, medieval Christians believed that virginity carried with it the weight of salvation and possibilities for spiritual perfection. The status of "virgin" allowed women to remove themselves from the heterosexual economy.¹³⁶ No longer of value as a wife, because they could not or would not become mothers, the virgin was free to create a life in a space outside of gendered norms. Thus, virginity became a device medieval writers used to set holy women apart and to distinguish them as exceptional Christians.

To emphasize the value of virginity, most of the narratives open with a statement on the martyr's beauty, noble lineage, and marriage opportunities. Thus, the cost of

¹³⁶ Salih, 64.

rejecting a marriage in favor of a life of celibate service to Christ increases. Typically, refusing a marriage served as the catalyst for the martyr's persecution and torture. Additionally, by repudiating marriage and removing herself from the heterosexual economy, a virgin martyr had the potential to unsettle gender norms and, in the traditions of the Gnostics, gain access to a heightened sanctity by enduring a process of transformation.¹³⁷ However, it is not the female saint who is reworking her gender; rather, it is her male hagiographer who created and constructed the virgin martyr into a heroic, male-like figure.

The medieval narratives demonstrate that, to become a valiant virgin, a woman first had to break an advantageous betrothal and prove her loyalty to Christ. In the legend of St. Margaret, the story opens with a comment on Margaret's beauty and that at the age of fifteen she attracted the attention of a Roman prefect called Olybrius.¹³⁸ Subsequently, Olybrius—a pagan—demanded that Margaret become his wife, and she refused, having recently converted to Christianity.¹³⁹ Similarly, St. Juliana of Nicomedia refused a marriage to the provost of Nicomedia, Eulogius, as arranged by Juliana's father, the prefect Africanus.¹⁴⁰ St. Cecilia similarly devoted her life and body to Christ; but rather than rejecting her spouse she successfully convinced him to commit to a celibate marriage.¹⁴¹ St. Eugenia also refused a marriage proposal, opting instead to commit herself to an ascetic life and escaped her marriage by dressing like a man and living in a

¹³⁷ Salih, 46.

¹³⁸ Jacobus de Voragine, "De sancta Margareta," in *Legenda Aurea*, ed. J.G. Graesse (Leipzig, 1801), xciii: 400.

¹³⁹ Voragine, "De sancta Margareta," 401.

¹⁴⁰ Voragine, "De sancta Juliana," 177

¹⁴¹ Voragine, "De sancta Caecilia," 771.

monastery.¹⁴² By including these stories of broken betrothals, the authors of each of these narratives creates an opportunity to showcase each of these women as putting aside, or sacrificing womanhood in service of Christ.

In addition to rejecting marriage, male writers also heavily emphasized virginity in the hagiographies of women saints. For the male authors, virginity legitimizes the qualities of strength, valor, and power they ascribe to their female subjects. In Voragine's entry on Katherine in the *Legenda aurea*, he lists her most admirable virtues, citing her virginity among them.¹⁴³ Similarly, both Margaret and Juliana receive praise from their medieval hagiographers for their unyielding commitment to celibacy. In an eleventh-century Latin edition of Juliana's life, her hagiographer credits Juliana's success in spiritual battle to her virginity, stating that, as she defeated a demon, he cried out "O virginity, that which is strengthened against us!"¹⁴⁴ In the various medieval narratives of St. Cecilia, her hagiographers credit Cecilia's commitment to celibacy for her ability to persuade her husband, Valerian, to convert to Christianity.¹⁴⁵ Equally, Eugenia's hagiographer claims that virginity protected her and allowed her to become an example of Christian virtue to men.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, in Eugenia's story, the author cites virginity as a primary justification for Eugenia's strength and ability to live as a man.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² Voragine, "De sanctis Protho et Jacincto," 602-605.

¹⁴³ Voragine, "De sancta Catharina," 789.

¹⁴⁴ Harley MS 3020 ff. 105v. *O virginitas quae contra nos armature!*

¹⁴⁵ Voragine, "De sancta Caecilia," 772; CCCC MS 000 ff. 162r-163r.

¹⁴⁶ *Vita Sanctae Eugeniae*, PL 73: 611; Mombritius, "Eugeniae," 393. *Quis enim eam deprehenderet quod esset femina, quum ita virtus Christi et virginitas immaculata protegebat, ut imitabilis esset etiam viris.*

¹⁴⁷ Mombritius, "Passio Sanctorum Prothi et Hiacynti Martyrum," 396. *et virum gessi perfectum, virginitatem Christo fortiter conservando.*

Voragine's admiration of virginity applied also to his treatment of the martyr Apollonia whom he describes as

adorned with the virtues of chastity, abstinence, and purity,
she stood like a formidable column strengthened by the
spirit of the Lord and recognized by the Lord for her merit
of faith and virtue; she was admired by the angels and
provided a spectacle and example for men.¹⁴⁸

For St. Agnes, her commitment to preserving her virginity cost her life and inspired her medieval reputation as a *virago*. Known in the Middle Ages as *Sancta Agnete Virgine*, Agnes lived and died at the turn of the fourth century. Noble by birth and beautiful beyond compare, in her adolescence Agnes attracted the lust of a young nobleman, Valerius and he demanded to have her. When she refused, Valerius persisted and resolved to rape her. He tormented Agnes, but according to her hagiographer, she never wavered and after a series of failed attempts to take her by force, Valerius had her arrested. She died at the hands of her captor, Aspasius, who grabbed the young girl and slit her throat open.¹⁴⁹ In the eleventh century, Alfano I, Archbishop of Salerno, wrote a song celebrating the life and death of Agnes. In his *carmina*, Alfano explicitly mentions the masculine character of Agnes writing, "*quae mulier, vel forte magis robusta virago,*" or "this woman, indeed a powerful, learned, robust warrior woman."¹⁵⁰ It is a simple

¹⁴⁸ Voragine, "de Sancta Apollonia," 293. *Castitatis, sobrietatis atque munditiae floribus redimita, tanquam columna fortissima ipso spiritu domini confirmata pro fidei suae merito et virtute a domino percepta admiranda angelis et hominibus praebens spectacula*

¹⁴⁹ Voragine, "De sancta Angete virgine," 115.

¹⁵⁰ Alfano I, Archbishop of Salerno, *Carmina* PL 147:1243B.

sentence, but illustrates that Agnes's commitment to Christ and to preserving her chastity was enough to earn the *virago* epithet from the eleventh century archbishop

Purification Through the Corporeal Ordeal

For the virgin martyr saints, virginity represented only one avenue by which men justified the masculine character of the women martyrs. A common theme running throughout most of the martyr narratives concerns a process of bodily purification. As discussed in Chapter One, theologians and philosophers in the Patristic era held disparaging beliefs about the flawed and sinful nature of the female sex. These ideas carried well into the Middle Ages and inspired the hagiographers of women saints to focus on a process of violent torment for the purpose of purifying and perfecting the polluted, defective, and sinful female sex. Though the details of their stories vary, in suffering the virgin martyrs each experienced a transformation and purification that accentuated their courage, wisdom, strength, and spiritual perfection. In the stories of Margaret and Juliana, the violent ordeals provide them with a supernatural, superhuman ability to defeat their demonic enemies in spiritual warfare. In the discourse of their legends, these women manage to escape misogynist denunciation because, in the minds of their male hagiographers, they transcend the limitations and defects of their imperfect female sex through rigorous masculine performance. They prove themselves to be female men.

Margaret's story, as it appears in the medieval accounts of her life and death, emphasizes a process of transformation from a girl, to a masculinized, strengthened soldier of Christ. This process of perfection begins and ends in a gruesome ordeal of

corporeal torment. The authors of Margaret's various narratives recount in graphic detail the torture she endured and reiterate the notion that, in order for a woman to transform, to achieve salvation, and to become a *virago*, she must also endure some form of bodily agony. In the Latin editions of Margaret's narratives, the authors apply a distinctly masculine persona to Margaret only *after* she experiences purification through torture and martyrdom; furthermore, the act of becoming a *virago* validates her position as a spiritual role model for women *and* men in the Middle Ages.

In the Latin narratives, after Margaret's capture and during her torture, she engages her captor Olybrius in a debate regarding the nature of the body and the soul. Though variations on this event occur across the various Latin editions of Margaret's *passio*, the significance of what she says in the different editions does not fluctuate. An emphasis on Margaret's physical body occurs in all versions of her story. In the *Legenda aurea* the prefect Olybrius arrests Margaret when he discovers she converted to Christianity. The prefect sends her to a prison cell and demands that she recant, which she refuses to do.¹⁵¹ Unsatisfied, the prefect orders his soldiers to hang Margaret from a rack and beat her body with rods and iron rakes. Voragine's description leaves little to the imagination:

By the orders of the prefect, she was hung on a rack, and
she was first cruelly beaten with rods and then torn with

¹⁵¹ Voragine, "De sancta Margareta," 401.

iron rakes so viciously that her bones laid bare, and her
blood emanated from her body as a pure fountain.¹⁵²

Voragine emphasizes the brutality committed on her body and then inserts a metaphor to sanctify her sacrifice, noting that Margaret's blood poured from her body as a *fonte purissimo*, pure fountain. The early thirteenth-century Middle English version of the event provides an interesting contrast to Voragine's edition. The text in the Bodley 34 manuscript reads,

[the prefect] said to his executioners, "strip her stark-naked
and hang her up high, and beat her bare body with cruel
rods." Then the accursed scoundrel laid so miserably on her
lovely body that it burst forth overall and was lathered in
blood.¹⁵³

Utilizing the image of a fountain to describe the ravages of Margaret's torment—an image that does not appear in the Middle English version—contributes to an overall depiction of transformation because of Margaret's agony. Margaret's body transforms so that it becomes a pure fountain, emanating blood. In the Middle English edition, the beaten body does not become anything more than a bloody demonstration of pain. The difference in language between the Middle English account and Voragine's narrative

¹⁵² Voragine, "De sancta Margareta," 401. *Tunc praefectus jussit eam in equuleum suspendi et tam crudeliter primo virgis, deinde pectinibus ferries usque ad nudationem ossium laniary, quod sanguis de ejus corpore tamquam de fonte purissimo emanavit.*

¹⁵³ Bodley MS 34 f. 21v. 'Neometh hire swithe,' quoth he to his cweleres. 'Strupeth hire steort-naket ant hongeth hire on heh up, ant beteth hire bere bodi with bittere besmen.' *Tha awariede werlahen leiden se lutherliche on hire leofliche lich thet hit brec overall ant litherede o blode.* Translation found in: Emily Rebekah Huber and Elizabeth Robertson trans. and ed., *The Katherine Group: MS Bodley 34* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Press, 2016), 93.

suggests that Voragine, whose audience consisted of priests, clerics, and religious men, deliberately chose the fountain metaphor to underscore the necessity of such aggressive violence. The Middle English version was part of a larger text written for a female audience.¹⁵⁴ It seems, therefore, that the need to rationalize and glorify the devastating violence committed upon Margaret's body applied primarily to men.

After the bloody ordeal, Margaret's jailers return her to her cell and, using Margaret's voice, her hagiographers address the status of her soul. Beaten and bloodied, Margaret stood resolute and refused to submit to the desires and commands of Olybrius. He demanded that she recant and implored her to take stock of her ravaged body. In Voragine's account, Margaret responds,

‘O wicked counselors, turn and leave! This, the torture of the flesh is the soul's salvation!’ And to the prefect she said, ‘impudent dog and shameless lion, you may have power over the flesh, but the soul is reserved for Christ himself!’¹⁵⁵

Voragine uses Margaret's words that declare that her body, her female flesh, is insignificant. Through the process of torture, Margaret's soul is freed of the limitations and confines of her female flesh. Margaret responds to Olybrius and declares that any

¹⁵⁴ Huber Robertson, "Introduction," 1.

¹⁵⁵ Voragine, "De sancta Margareta," 401. *o mali consilarii, recedite et abite, haec carnis cruciatio est animae salvation, dixitque ad praefectum: impudens canis et insatiabilis leo, in carnem potestatem habes, sed animam Christus reservat.* The Mombritius version is slightly different but maintains the same emphasis on Margaret's soul belonging exclusively to Christ: *o inique impudens. Si ego carni meae misereor anima mea uitque in interitum audit sicut et tua. Sed imo carnem meam tradidi in tormentis ut anima mea coronate sit in caelis.* P. 192.

attempt to persuade her through violence, pain, and torment will prove meaningless because her soul, the most important element of the Christian, belongs only to Christ.¹⁵⁶

In his version of Margaret's story, Voragine includes an additional passage that does not appear in any of the Latin versions. In the opening paragraph of the *Legenda aurea*, Voragine writes,

Therefore, the blessed Margaret had power over the shedding of her blood [menstruation] by her constancy, because in her own martyrdom she was steadfast. She defeated the passions of the heart, that is, by conquering the temptations of demons because she defeated the devil. By her own education she strengthened the spirit, and her teaching empowered many souls, converting them to faith in Christ.¹⁵⁷

This opening paragraph serves as a prologue and reveals what the author, Voragine, understood about Margaret and how he wanted the reader to see her. The words *constantiam* and *constantissima* appear, both variations of the word *constantia* that means “steadfast, unchanging, resolute,” which are all facets of medieval masculinity.¹⁵⁸ The

¹⁵⁶ Voragine, “De sancta Margareta,” 402.

¹⁵⁷ Voragine, “De sancta Margareta,” 400. *Sic beata Margareta habuit virtutem contra effusionem sui sanguinis per constantiam, quia in suo martirio constantissima exstitit, contra cordis passionem, id est, daemoneis tentationem per victoriam, quia ipsa dyabolum superavit, ad spiritus confortationem per doctrinam, quia per suam doctrinam multorum animos confortavit et ad Christi fidem convertit.* In the Mombritius version, the same interaction reads: Mombritius, p. 191. *Tunc jussit Oliberius quaestionariis sui seam in aere suspendi: et virgis subtilibus eam caedi praecepit. Beatissima autem Maragrita aspeiciens in caelum dixit: In te domine speravi non confundar in aeternum. Neque irrideant me inimici mei. Et enim qui sustinent propter nomen tuum domine non confundentur*

¹⁵⁸ John Coakley, “Friars, Sanctity, and Gender: Mendicant Encounters with Saints, 1250-1325,” 91-105 and Jo Ann McNamara, “The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150,” 3-23 in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of

passage “Sic beata Margareta habuit virtutem contra effusionem sui sanguinis per constantiam” means that Margaret’s constancy, her steadfastness, allowed her to stop menstruating (*contra effusionem sui sanguinis*). During this era, male hagiographers often made specific mention that holy women ceased to menstruate.¹⁵⁹ For example, in the thirteenth century, Albert the Great commented that some holy women stopped menstruating when their spiritual practice reached an admirable level of rigor.¹⁶⁰ In the medieval understanding of female biology, some women ceased menstruating due to a process of purifying the body and correcting of her flawed female form.¹⁶¹ Thus, to convincingly portray Margaret as a heroic, masculine woman, Voragine needed to first “correct” the most telling sign of her femaleness: menstruation. Additionally, Voragine carefully states that Margaret brought about the “*contra effusionem sui sanguinis*” or “ceasing of the shedding of her blood” through constancy and virtue, two masculine characteristics. She acted male and thus ceased to be a woman.

Just as with Margaret, the medieval narratives of Juliana’s story detail a violent process of corporeal torture. Juliana’s father, Africanus, was a famed persecutor of the Christians and, after finding out his daughter had converted to Christianity, Africanus

Minnesota Press, 1994); P.H. Cullum, “Introduction: Holiness and Masculinity in Medieval Europe,” in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, eds. P.H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

¹⁵⁹ Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 211.

¹⁶⁰ Albert the Great, *De animalibus libri XXVI nach der Cölner Urschrift*, vol. 1, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters: Texte und Untersuchungen 15 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1916), book 9, tractate 1, chapter 2, p. 682.

¹⁶¹ Jane Tibbets Schulenberg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, 500-1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 396.

reportedly begged Juliana to recant, but she refused.¹⁶² Africanus responded by betrothing his daughter to a nobleman called Eleusis.¹⁶³ Initially, Juliana agreed to the marriage but declared that she would not sacrifice her faith or her virginity, and claimed that she would only enter into a celibate marriage.¹⁶⁴ Eleusis responded by having her violently tortured. The eleventh-century Latin text reads,

Upon hearing this, the prefect [Eleusis] moved by his
anger, ordered that Juliana be stretched out on the ground
naked, and six soldiers began to beat and shred her body
until they were ordered to stop [...]¹⁶⁵

Eleusis continued to beat Juliana's body and resumed his efforts to convince her to recant and to believe in the god Apollo once again.¹⁶⁶ In the text, Julian responds, "I do not believe," and proclaims again that her she believes only in Jesus Christ and that no form of bodily torture would her turn away from the true faith.¹⁶⁷

Juliana's torment continued. Enraged by Juliana's obstinate faith, Eleusis ordered his soldiers to hang her by her hair, which they did, and he left her there for six hours.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶² AS Feb II Vol. 5: 879; BL Harley MS 3020 f. 98v; C.W. Kennedy, *The Legend of St. Juliana: Translated from the Latin of the Acta Sanctorum and the Anglo-Saxon of Cynewulf*, (Princeton: The University Library, 1906), 8-9.

¹⁶³ London, British Library, Harley MS 3020 f. 98v; Bonitius Mombritius, "Passio Sancte Julianae Martyris," in *Sanctuarium seu Vitae Sanctorum* Vol. II (Paris, Albertum Fotemoing, 1910, 1430) 77-80, 77.

¹⁶⁴ Harley MS 3020 ff. 99r-v; Mombritius, "Passio Sancte Julianae," 77; Kennedy, *The Legend*, 9.

¹⁶⁵ Harley MS 3020 f.99v; Mombritius, "Passio Sancte Julianae," 77. *Audiens hoc praefectus commotus iracundia jussit eam caedi extensa vero in terra sancta juliana a quatuor viris nuda coepit caedi ita ut in ipsa sex milites vicissim caedentes mutarentur post haec jussit cessari*

¹⁶⁶ Harley MS 3020 f. 99v; Mombritius "Passio Sancte Julianae," 78.

¹⁶⁷ Harley MS 3020 f. 99v. *Noli credere; quod persuasionibus tuis me revocare possis a domini mei Jesu christi praeceptis.*

¹⁶⁸ Mombritius "Passio Sancte Julianae," 78.

At this point in her story, Juliana dug further into her faith reportedly crying out “*Christi fili dei vivi adiuua me*.”¹⁶⁹ Once again the prefect, Eleusis, pulled a bloodied and ravaged Juliana down, and again demanded she recant her faith.¹⁷⁰ Juliana remained steadfast in her faith and proclaims to Eleusis, ‘I myself may not be able to overcome your tortures. But I, in the name of Jesus Christ, will conquer my mind and make your father, Satan, ashamed.’¹⁷¹ Angered by her response, Eleusis ordered his men to pour molten bronze over Juliana’s head until it flowed down her legs.¹⁷² Just as with Margaret, the torture functioned in the medieval narrative as a process of purification. It demonstrated to the audience that, because Juliana relied on her faith and inner strength, she emerged from the ordeal spiritually strengthened and ready to fight. Moreover, the author of her story repeatedly includes passages in which Juliana speaks out and acknowledges that she alone did not overcome the pain and torment being wrought upon her; that the strength came from her unwavering faith. The more Eleusis beat her, the stronger and more resolute Juliana became.

In the medieval narrative of St. Cecilia, a similar account of corporeal torment and torture occurs after Cecilia engages with the Roman prefect Almachius. Unlike Juliana, Cecilia managed to convince her husband, Valerian, to commit to a celibate

¹⁶⁹ Harley MS 3020 f. 99v; Mombritius “Passio Sancte Julianae,” 78. *Tunc praefectus iussit eam capillis appendi. Appensa vero per sex horas clamabat dicens: Christe fili dei vivi adiuua me.*

¹⁷⁰ Harley MS 3020 f. 99v; Mombritius “Passio Sancte Julianae,” 78.

¹⁷¹ Harley MS 3020 f. 99v; Mombritius “Passio Sancte Julianae,” 78. *Juliana respondit ‘vincere me non poteris per tormenta tua. Ego in nomine domini Jesu Christi vincam mentem tuam et erubescere faciam patrem tuum diabolum.*

¹⁷² Mombritius “Passio Sancte Julianae,” 78. *Praefectus itaque ira commotus iussit aeramentum conflari et a capite perfundi. Quod dum factum fuisset nihil ei nocuit. Item iussit ligamenta ferrea per femora eius mitti et sic eam in carcerem recipi.*

marriage on their wedding night.¹⁷³ Soon after, she led Valerian and his brother Tiburtius to convert to Christianity, and they began working with a bishop called Urban burying the bodies of martyred Christians.¹⁷⁴ As a result of their conversions and work with Urban in the catacombs, the prefect, Almachius, condemned Valerian and Tiburtius to death. After the deaths of the brothers, Almachius summoned Cecilia and tried to force her to recant. Rather than surrender, Cecilia stood strong against Almachius's threats. According to the medieval sources, Cecilia chose to submit to a rigorous interrogation. In the Latin account of Cecilia's narrative, Almachius opens the inquisition by asking Cecilia to give her status in life, to which Cecilia claims "*ingenua nobilis clarissima*" or "I am famously noble born," insinuating the Almachius knew the answer to his question.¹⁷⁵ Almachius responds "*Ego te de religions*" ("I am asking you about your religion!").¹⁷⁶ Cecilia boldly replies "*interrogatio tua stultum sumit initium quae dua responsiones una putat inquisition conclude*" (your question is stupid because it calls for two answers.).¹⁷⁷ Almachius, angered by her insult, demands that she show respect for his power and authority. Cecilia responds, "your power is like a man filled with wind; one puncture and it deflates, and what was once rigid is now limp!"¹⁷⁸ The comment questions Almachius' masculinity, his manhood, insinuating that he, a Roman man, is

¹⁷³ Boninus Mombritius, "Passio Sanctae Ceciliae Virginis et Martyris," in *Sanctuarium sue Vitae Sanctorum, Vol. I*, (Paris, 1910), 332.

¹⁷⁴ Mombritius "Passio Sanctae Ceiliae," 333-4.

¹⁷⁵ Mombritius "Passio Sanctae Ceiliae," 340.

¹⁷⁶ Mombritius "Passio Sanctae Ceiliae," 340.

¹⁷⁷ Mombritius, "Passio Sanctae Ceiliae," 340.

¹⁷⁸ Mombritius, "Passio Sanctae Ceiliae," 340. *Omnis potestas hominis sic est quasi uter vento repletus. Quem si acus pupugerit omnis rigor ceruicis eius euanescit et quidquid in se rigidum habere cernitur incuruatur.*

impotent. Moreover, the comment indicates that Cecilia did not fear him, or his threats which positioned her in the interchange as courageous, resolute, and masculine.

As punishment for her impudence, Almachius condemned Cecilia to a litany of bodily torments. According to the Latin text, Almachius orders his men to plunge Cecilia day and night into a bath of boiling water; but Cecilia emerges unscathed and unaffected.¹⁷⁹ When Almachius learns of Cecilia's bravery and determination, he orders her execution by decapitation. In the narrative, the swordsman appears and strikes Cecilia's neck three times, but he is unable to cut off Cecilia's head. Legal convention in Rome at the time forced the executioner to stop and he left Cecilia to languish with a nearly severed head.¹⁸⁰ In gruesome medieval fashion, the narratives detail how Cecilia bravely suffered for three days with a partially severed head.¹⁸¹ Moreover, the medieval hagiographers write that during these final days, Cecilia, strengthened by her faith in Jesus Christ, managed to make arrangements for her wealth to go to the poor and her house to be consecrated and turned into a Christian church.¹⁸² As with Margaret and Juliana, the bodily torment and gruesome death did not dissuade Cecilia from her faith, nor did it diminish the strength of her resolve. Rather, by the end of her narrative, the authors portray her as a person made stronger by the violent ordeal.

In the *Legenda aurea*, Voragine assigns the epithet *fortissimo columna* to the third century Alexandrian martyr, Apollonia, precisely because of her corporeal ordeal.

Voragine's account of Apollonia's life does not include her parentage or any remarks on

¹⁷⁹ Mombritius, "Passio Sanctae Ceiliae," 340; Voragine "De sancta Caecilia," 773

¹⁸⁰ Mombritius, "Passio Sanctae Ceiliae," 341; Voragine "De sancta Caecilia," 774.

¹⁸¹ Mombritius, "Passio Sanctae Ceiliae," 341.

¹⁸² Mombritius, "Passio Sanctae Ceiliae," 341; Voragine "De sancta Caecilia," 774.

her marriage prospects. Rather, he opens her story by stating that she lived during the reign of the emperor Decius, a savage persecutor of the Christians in Alexandria.¹⁸³ After describing the carnage wrought by the persecutions, Voragine introduces Apollonia, and describes her character, stating that she was,

adorned with the virtues of chastity, abstinence, and purity,
she stood like a formidable column strengthened by the
spirit of the Lord and recognized by the Lord for her merit
of faith and virtue; she was admired by the angels and
provided a spectacle and example for men.¹⁸⁴

As with Margaret, Juliana, and Cecilia, Apollonia did not waver under the pressure to recant her Christian beliefs. Voragine describes a mob of persecutors descending on the homes of Alexandrian Christians; they captured Apollonia and carried her off to the tribunal for sentencing and punishment.¹⁸⁵ Voragine again uses the adjective *fortissimo*, a word whose root means in its most accurate definition “strong, powerful, mighty, vigorous, firm, steadfast, courageous, brave, and bold,” all words associated with masculine character. Voragine states that because of Apollonia’s *virtute fortissima* (steadfast virtue) she had the courage to offer her corporeal body to the persecutors because she had already given her soul to God.¹⁸⁶ After enduring a period of bodily

¹⁸³ Voragine, “de Sancta Apollonia,” 293.

¹⁸⁴ Voragine, “de Sancta Apollonia,” 293. *Castitatis, sobrietatis atque munditiae floribus redimita, tanquam columna fortissima ipso spiritu domini confirmata pro fidei suae merito et virtute a domino percepta admiranda angelis et hominibus praebens spectacular.*

¹⁸⁵ Voragine, “de Sancta Apollonia,” 293.

¹⁸⁶ Voragine, “de Sancta Apollonia,” 293. *beata Apollonia simplicitate innocens, virtute fortissima, nihil sane aliud deferens quam suae intrepidae mentis constantiam et illaesae conscientiae puritatem, devotem Deo offerens animam et castissimum tradens persequentibus corpus ad poenam.*

torture, Apollonia's captors built a pyre and, strengthened by her faith, Apollonia fearlessly threw herself onto the fire, proving that her female body could not unman the *fortissimam martirem*, or courageous martyr.¹⁸⁷ After her death, Voragine calls her a *validissima virgo martir Christi* or a "powerful virgin martyr of Christ," another masculine epithet to emphasize Apollonia's status as a *virago*.¹⁸⁸

The final passage of Voragine's narrative of Apollonia's story secures her legacy as a female man of Christ. Voragine describes Apollonia's merit, or worth, as triumphant and exceeding that of the martyrs who died before her, because she so willingly committed her body to the torments of death in the name of Christ.¹⁸⁹ Voragine then writes that, because of her suffering, Apollonia earned a *virilis animus*, or "masculine soul."¹⁹⁰ Thus, Voragine proclaims, in this specific instance, that Apollonia did not just act like a man; rather, by virtue of her strength and ability to withstand the corporeal ordeal, she proved that she had a masculine soul.

The *Fortissimo Militis Deo*

For Margaret and Juliana, their purification through violent corporeal ordeal prepared them both for the next phase of their transformation: spiritual warfare. The medieval narratives of both women provide vivid accounts of their battles with demonic

¹⁸⁷ Voragine, "de Sancta Apollonia," 293. *fortissimam martirem Christi nec incumbentium tormenta poenarum et saevissimorum persecutorum superare flamma potuit, quia longe ardentius Veritatis radiis mens ejus accensa feverbat.*

¹⁸⁸ Voragine, "de Sancta Apollonia," 294.

¹⁸⁹ Voragine, "de Sancta Apollonia," 294. *praeminet ergo et praefulget inter martires meritum hujus virginis tam gloriose et feliciter triumphantis.*

¹⁹⁰ Voragine, "De sancta Apollonia," 294.

and mythic forces. At the end of the struggle, both women emerge victorious and stand as newly transformed soldiers of God. In all the medieval accounts of Margaret's story, including the Middle English Bodley 34 manuscript, Voragine's *Legenda aurea*, and in the early twelfth century Caligula manuscript, a detailed fight between Margaret and a vicious dragon occurs. Juliana did not battle a mythical beast; rather, her contest brought her face to face with the demon Belial. The encounter appears in the Middle English Bodley 34 manuscript, Voragine's *Legenda aurea*, Mombritius' *Sanctuarium seu Vitae sanctorum*, and the eleventh-century Harley MS 3020. At the end of both battles, the defeated demons proclaim their female opponents as victors and credit a divine, masculine, inner strength for their triumphs.

Margaret's encounter with the demonic dragon occurs moments after her physical torment ends. According to Voragine's account, after Olybrius sends Margaret back to her prison cell, she prays that God might reveal her enemy and at once a dragon appears.¹⁹¹ The Middle English Bodley 34 provides description of the beast, "His locks and his long beard gleamed all with gold, and his grisly teeth seemed made of blackened iron."¹⁹² Voragine's account of Margaret's battle with the dragon mirrors the earlier Harley 3020 narrative and proves to be less loquacious than the Bodley 34 version. Voragine states that the dragon appears to Margaret, and she rebuffed his first attack by making the sign of the cross. When the dragon returned, it successfully swallowed Margaret, and once again she armed herself with the cross. The belly of the dragon burst

¹⁹¹ Voragine, "de Sancta Margareta," 401.

¹⁹² The Bodleian Library, Oxford, Bodley MS 34, f. 24v. Translation provided by: Huber and Robertson, *The Katherine Group*, 97.

open, and Margaret emerged, unharmed.¹⁹³ With the demon defeated, the Devil appeared to Margaret as a man, and without hesitation she threw the Devil to the ground, overpowered him, stood on his neck, and declared, “lay down, arrogant demon, under the foot of a woman!”¹⁹⁴ By including this proclamation in his account, Voragine reminds his audience that a woman defeated the devil. According to Voragine’s account, the Devil cries out,

Oh blessed Margaret, I have been defeated! If a young man
had conquered me, I would not have cared, but I was
beaten by a young girl and it is all the worse, since your
mother and father were my friends!¹⁹⁵

Again, Voragine emphasizes Margaret’s remarkable victory and reminds his audience that she fought like a warrior even though she was only a young girl. The next day, the jailers brought Margaret before the judge, who ordered his men to brand Margaret’s body with hot irons. When the torture again failed to dissuade Margaret, the spectators marveled at her strength. Olybrius ordered her execution.¹⁹⁶

Similarly, Juliana met the demon Belial in her prison cell and, like Margaret, the confrontation served to prove her masculine fortitude. In early Christianity the form or

¹⁹³ Voragine, “de Sancta Margareta,” 401. *Ubi dum esset, oravit dominum, ut inimicum, qui secum pugnat, sibi visibiliter demnstraret, et ecce draco immanissimus ibidem apparuit, qui dum eam devortaurus impeteret, signum crucis edidit et ille evanuit, vel, ut alibi legitur, os super caput ejus ponens et linguam super calcaneum porrigens eam protinus deglutivit, sed dum eam absorbere vellet, signo crucis se munivit et ideo draco virtute crucis crepuit et virgo illaesa exivit. Istud autem, quod dicitur de draconis devortatione et ipsius crepatione, apocryphum et frivolum reputatur.*

¹⁹⁴ Voragine, “De sancta Margareta,” 402. *Illam autem cum per caput apprehendit et sub se ad terram dejecit et super cervicem ejus dexterum pedem posuit et dixit: sternere, superbe daemon, sub pedibus feminae.*

¹⁹⁵ Voragine, “De sancta Margareta,” 402. *O beata Margareta, superatus sum; si juvenis me vinceret, no curassem, ecce a tenera puella superatus sum et inde plus doleo, quia pater tuus et mater tua amici fuerunt.*

¹⁹⁶ Voragine, “De sancta Margareta,” 402.

entity called Belial served as the ubiquitous form of satanic evil.¹⁹⁷ The name Belial occurs once in the New Testament, in a letter from Paul to the Corinthians, when he addresses the existence of demonic power and evil in the world.¹⁹⁸ In the Latin account of Juliana's martyrdom, Belial appears to Juliana as a familiar and entirely evil creature that she fights in order to prove her constancy and faith. According to the medieval Latin accounts, after Juliana's arrest she waits in the dark and dank cell, and calls out to her enemy to show his face. Juliana demands that her supernatural enemy reveal himself in his true form; without hesitation, the demon issues forth and she orders that he state his name, to which he responds, "Belial."¹⁹⁹ For a medieval reader, this name would have symbolized the epitome of satanic evil and strength. Moreover, the name Belial told the medieval audience that the enemy Juliana fought was more vicious than the worldly torments inflicted on her by the pagan prefect and his horde of soldiers. The author writes,

Then, Juliana tied both of his hands behind his back and
threw him to the ground, grabbing one of the ligatures with
which she had been bound and beat the demon with it until
the demon cried out, imploring her to stop.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Michael Floyd, *Minor Prophet: Part 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 46.

¹⁹⁸ Latin Vulgate II Corinthians 6:15. *quae autem conventio Christi ad Belial aut quae pars fideli cum infidele*

¹⁹⁹ Harley MS 3020 f. 99v.

²⁰⁰ Harley MS 3020 ff. 104v-105r. Mobritius "Passio Sancte Julianae," 79. *Sancta Juliana ligauit eum minibus retrorsum et posuit eum super terram. Appreahendens unam partem ferri de quo ipsa ligata fuerat caedebat ipsum. Daemon autrm clamans rogabat eum*

The prefect and his soldiers were able to subdue Juliana, but in this passage the author demonstrates how Juliana, now purified through the corporeal torment, and transformed by her faith and Christian strength, was able to overpower Belial and bind his hands with the ties by which the prefect had restrained her.

In the final interaction between Belial and Juliana, the author confirms Juliana's masculine character. After binding and beating Belial, the infamous demon and son of Satan, Juliana stood on his back and inflicted such excruciating pain on him that he cries out,

And when I committed all of these evils, no one dared to torture me as you have done. Not one of the apostles bound my hands as you have bound me. Not one of the martyrs beat me as you have beat me, not one of the prophets injured me as you have injured me. Not one of the patriarchs laid hands upon me. Even when I tempted the Son of God in the desert and forced him to climb to the highest mountain, he did nothing to me, but you torture me with suffering. O virginity, that which is strengthened against us!²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Harley MS 3020 ff. 105r-v. Mombritius "Passio Sancte Julianae," 79. *Ut cum tanta mala fecissem et peccata nullus me ausus fuit caedere sicut tu. Nemo apostolorum manum meam tenuit tu autem et ligasti. Nemo martyrum caecidit me nemo prophetarum iniurias mihi fecit nemo patriarcharum in me manum misit. Necnon et ipsius filii dei uiui expedimentum temptaui in deserto et posui illum montem excelsum et nihil mihi fecit. Et ostendi ei omnia regna mundi et tu tormentis consumes. O uirginitas quae contra nos armature!*

The passage, which appears in the Mombritius version and in the Harley manuscript, directly and inarguably compares Juliana with the greatest male figures of early-Christian history. The battle with Belial occurs after Juliana endured the physical torture, which sequence strongly implies that the author created the scene of bodily torture in order to delineate the process of purification and to justify Juliana's ability to overpower the satanic entity even more powerfully than her male predecessors had done. In this passage, the author portrays a powerful soldier of Christ, a woman so transformed by her faith in Christ and purified by bodily suffering that she subdues and defeats an enemy of Christ more effectively than the most well-known men of Christianity. Juliana's story ends with her death by beheading.

Ascribing the Masculine Virtues to the *Virago* Martyrs

In addition to providing detailed accounts of the martyrs' dedication to virginity, purification through corporeal ordeal, and victory in spiritual battles, medieval authors also used distinct language to ascribe masculine characteristics, virtues, and behaviors to the virgin martyrs. In recent decades, scholars have started to examine the creation and evolution of the hagiographies of some of the most well-known virgin martyr saints. These scholars have identified several significant changes that support a distinct acceptance and proliferation of the *virago* model of female sanctity in the high Middle Ages. Jaqueline Jenkins notes that, in the Middle Ages, religious men and women looked at St. Katherine as an exemplar of Christian piety and that this view created a gender-fluid perception of Katherine. However, as Jenkins notes, exploring the masculine portrayal of St. Katherine is an avenue of research that scholars have not fully

explored.²⁰² Additionally, in her examination of the many late medieval and early modern breviaries and images of St. *Katherine*, Karen Winstead finds that in many images of Katherine the artists show the saint as completely masculinized. Focusing on the portrayal of Katherine's hair in a variety of medieval depictions, Winstead argues that a short-haired Katherine, who looked male, likely made it easier for a man to view Katherine as a spiritual role model.²⁰³ Sherry Reames examines the fifteenth-century perception of St. Katherine and finds that devotionals "tend rather to masculinize than feminize her [Katherine], increasing both her apparent agency and her resemblance to a well-trained cleric. In fact, at least half of the manuscripts seem to envision her solely as a model for men."²⁰⁴ Similarly, in her study of St. Cecilia, Gale Ashton argues that St. Cecilia's life was "written in Latin for a privileged clerical audience, their [the author's] stress is upon the saint as a teaching aid, a text which supports masculine, and more specifically, clerical status or prestige."²⁰⁵ Moreover, Ashton finds that later representations of Cecilia and editions of her narrative tend to feminize, subdue, and "deactivate," Cecilia.²⁰⁶ What scholars have not yet fully explored is how male writers in the high medieval period, writing from their male-centered perspective, used overtly

²⁰² Jaqueline Jenkins and Katherine J. Lewis, "Introduction," in *St. Katherine of Alexandria: Text and Contexts in Medieval Europe*, eds. Jaqueline Jenkins and Katherine J. Lewis (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 16-17.

²⁰³ Karen A. Winstead, "St Katherine's Hair," in *St Katherine of Alexandria: Text and Contexts in Western Medieval Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 188.

²⁰⁴ Sherry Reames, "St. Katherine and the Late Medieval Clergy," in *St Katherine of Alexandria: Text and Contexts in Western Medieval Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 201-220.

²⁰⁵ Gail Ashton, *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 55.

²⁰⁶ Ashton, *The Generation*, 56.

masculine language to create representations of women saints that fit into the *virago* paradigm.

St. Katherine's story appears in several notable medieval texts, but it is in the twelfth-century Latin text extant in the Caligula MS A. viii that Katherine fully emerges as a *virago*. The earliest Latin edition of Katherine's life appeared in the mid-eleventh century. Written by Ainard, a monk at the Ste Catherine à la Trinité au Mont Abbey, this work serves as a point of reference for the various editions that followed in later centuries.²⁰⁷ The eleventh-century edition, now lost, provides the version upon which clerics based all later Latin editions of Katherine's *vita*.²⁰⁸ The extant twelfth-century version, housed in the Caligula manuscripts of the Cotton collection in the British Library, contains a long Latin rendition of her life that, according to recent scholarship, resembles the original Latin version.²⁰⁹ Notably, this Latin version appears in nearly one hundred extant manuscripts across Europe, with slight degrees of variation.²¹⁰ In the mid-thirteenth century, Jacobus Voragine compiled the *Legenda aurea* and included an entry for Saint Katherine that closely follows the narrative of the Latin version as it appears in the Caligula manuscript.

In the prologue of the Caligula version the author overtly describes Katherine as a masculine woman. The male scribe states emphatically that the memory of her powerful

²⁰⁷ Katherine J. Lewis, *The Cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England* (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2000), 52.; S.R.T.O. d'Ardenne and E.J. Dobson, *Siente Katerine: Re-Edited from MS Bodley 34 and other Manuscripts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), xv.

²⁰⁸ Lewis, *The Cult*, 52.

²⁰⁹ d'Ardenne and Dobson, *Seinte Katerine*, xvi.

²¹⁰ For a list of these manuscripts and their locations see: d'Ardenne and Dobson, *Siente Katerine*, 133-134.

deeds inspired his work.²¹¹ The author then states that Katherine's legacy stands out because she defied the constraints of her *infirmioris sexus* or "weaker sex," and that she, through a test of will and intelligence, proved her faith more than *barbati homines* or "bearded men."²¹² Moreover, the author quickly reminds his audience that at the time of her ordeal, Katherine was merely a *puella* or "young girl," and that it was by her faith in Christ and willingness to serve God above all others, she gained the strength of a man and in her performance acted manfully. All of this language echoes Jerome's fourth-century statement to Eustochium.²¹³ Nearing the end of the prologue, the author refers to Katherine as a *generosa virago* ("noble warrior-woman"), male-like because of her Christian strength and virtue.²¹⁴ From the outset, the author of the Caligula text emphasizes Katherine's masculinity and deliberately sets her apart from the "weaker sex." The writer also stresses her manliness by comparing her to an overtly masculine symbol of the male sex, the bearded man, and claims that in her masculine virtue Katherine exceeded the manliest of men.

²¹¹ London, British Library, Cotton MS Caligula A. viii f. 169r. *Cum sanctorum fortia gesta ad memoriam posteriorum transscribimus quid aliud agimus, nisi, ut ita dicam, quoddam incentivum bellicum promovemus per quod imbelles animos auditorum ad bella dominica accendamus?*

²¹² BL Cotton MS Caligula A. viii ff. 169r-v. *Hec mihi causa extitit qua gloriose virginis Katerine memorabilem certaminis agonem stili officio proposui enarrandum ut, dum infirmioris sexus constantiam et imbecille etatis virtutem attendimus, hoc nobis ad ignominiam et opprobrium iure quis esse dicat, quod puellas teneras per ignem et ferrum ad patriam celestem tendere videmus et nos barbati homines nec per pacem Christum sequi curamus.*

²¹³ Saint Jerome, *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Ephasios*, PL 16: 567.

²¹⁴ BL Cotton MS Caligula A. viii f. 169v. *Porro hec generosa virago, gemina oppugnantium acie circumsepta, et furentem persequentium rabiem constanter evicit et conglobatas viciorum acies viriliter debellavit.*

In Jacob Voragine's thirteenth-century account of Katherine's life and death, hallmarks of her masculine character remain evident. Though Voragine omits the prologue and does not use the term *virago* to describe her, he does proclaim that

It is worthy of note that blessed Katherine is admirable in five respects: first in wisdom, second in eloquence, third in constancy, fourth in the cleanness of chastity, fifth in her privileged dignity.²¹⁵

Of the five characteristics Voragine lists, the first three—wisdom, eloquence, and constancy—all represent the ideals of masculine behavior for people in the Middle Ages and specifically for religious men.²¹⁶ It appears, in this way, that Voragine replaced the epithet *virago* in favor of a more detailed and comprehensive description of her masculinity.

Expanding on his assessment of Katherine's masculine character, Voragine speaks in detail about her wisdom. In his *Legenda aurea*, Voragine writes,

Firstly, she is seen to be admirable in her wisdom, for she possessed every kind of philosophy. Philosophy, or wisdom, is divided into theoretical, practical, and logical. [...] Saint Katherine had the theoretical in her knowledge of the divine mysteries, which knowledge she put to use especially in her argument against the rhetoricians, to

²¹⁵ "Saint Catherine" in *The Golden Legend*, ed. and trans. Eamon Duffy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 725.

²¹⁶ Emma Pettit, "Holiness and Masculinity in Aldhelm's *Opus Geminatum De virginitate*," in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, eds. P.H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 9-17.

whom she proved that there is only one true God and who she convinced that all other gods are false. She possessed natural philosophy in her knowledge of all beings below God, and this she used in her differences with the emperor, as we have seen.²¹⁷

In this passage, Voragine describes the common element of Katherine's narrative in which the emperor Maximian ordered that she debate fifty skilled orators. According to each of the accounts of Katherine's legend, the emperor Maximian knew of Katherine's intelligence and hired the greatest masters of logic and rhetoric to engage Katherine in a debate.²¹⁸ The emperor's intent, according to her legend, was to humiliate Katherine and persuade her to abandon her Christian faith. The debate, according to Voragine's account and the Caligula text, reveals a woman so wise and courageous she defeated the fifty orators and proved her intellect surpassed them all.²¹⁹ Thus, the authors of the medieval accounts emphasize Katherine's masculine intelligence and wisdom.

The medieval authors of Katherine's legend also focus on her constancy. Recent scholarship on the construction of masculinity in medieval Europe demonstrate that, of the varying and sometimes contradictory qualities that make up manhood, constancy stands at the top.²²⁰ In both the Caligula text and in Voragine's account, the authors state

²¹⁷ Jacob Voragine, "Saint Catherine," in *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, Jacobus Voragine, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, 2012), 725-726.

²¹⁸ Cotton MS Caligula A viii, ff. 175v-176r; Voragine, "Saint Catherine," 722.

²¹⁹ Cotton MS Caligula A viii, 176r; Voragine, "Saint Catherine," 723.

²²⁰ See: P.H. Cullum, "Introduction: Holiness and Masculinity in Medieval Europe," 1-6; Emma Pettit, "Holiness and Masculinity in Aldhelm's *Opus Geminatum De virginiate*," 8-18; Jaqueline Murray, "Masculinizing Religious Life: Sexual Prowess, the Battle for Chastity and Monastic Identity," 24-37, in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. P.H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Jo Ann McNamara, "*The Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System,

that, in the face of threats of violence from the emperor, Katherine always stood strong and brave. When the emperor threatened her with all manner of torment so that she would recant her faith, Katherine proved her constancy by challenging the emperor to inflict any cruelty he could imagine because she would not renounce her faith.²²¹ The authors mention Katherine's constancy again when describing her violent death. The Caligula text and the Middle English Bodley 34 text both describe a wheel fashioned with rows of spikes and designed to inflict unyielding pain as it slowly ripped Katherine's body apart.²²² Though he does not describe the device, Voragine does state that Katherine endured the gruesome death with courage and constancy, stating "she was constant under tortures, overcoming them, as we saw when she was put in a dungeon or on the wheel."²²³ With every test, Katherine proved to her hagiographer that she was male in spirit, steadfast and strong.

As with Katherine, Cecilia also earned the adoration of religious men in the medieval period and in the earlier Latin accounts; they all portray her as decisively masculine. Because of her popularity, a litany of texts concerning Cecilia's narrative still exist. The modern scholarship that surrounds Cecilia's legend focuses on her story as it appears in English prose from the later medieval period.²²⁴ In 1898, Bertha Allen Lovell published a complete transcription of Cecilia's life and death taken from two Middle

1050-1150," 3-23; Vern Bullough, "On Being Male in the Middle Ages," 31-43, in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

²²¹ BL Cotton MS Caligula, f. 180r-v

²²² Bodley MS 34 f. 13v; BL Cotton MS Caligula f. 187r.

²²³ Voragine, "Saint *Catherine*," 726-727.

²²⁴ Leslie A. Donovan, "Cecilia," in *Women Saints Lives in Old English Prose* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999); Bertha Ellen Lovell, *The Life of St. Cecilia* (New York and London: Lamson, Wolfe and Company, 1898); Sarah Salih ed., *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006).

English manuscripts, the Ashmole MS 344 and the Cotton MS Tiberius E. VII, currently housed in the British Library in London. In Lovell's edition, she mentions the older, Latin editions, but does not offer any comparisons between the Latin and the Middle English.²²⁵ In her 1999 study on the Middle English and Latin texts concerning Cecilia's narrative, Ashton argues that two very distinct versions of the saint emerge: a passive, feminine figure in the Middle English and an assertive, masculine character in the Latin.²²⁶ Ashton dedicates a majority of her essay to delineating the submissive, overtly feminine Cecilia in the Middle English text, leaving an opportunity to fully explore the assertive, strong, and masculinized vision of Cecilia in the Latin text.

The influence of this passive figure appears prominently in Lovell's 1889 summary. In Lovell's summary, Valerian and Tiburtius emerge as the bold victors and the heroes of the story. Conversely, Cecilia fades into the background. She becomes, in Lovell's summary, a docile, secondary figure who exists only to encourage her husband and brother-in-law as they pursue Christian greatness.²²⁷ Only at the end of Cecilia's story, after the martyrdom of Valerian and Tiburtius, does Cecilia show any "Christian boldness" Upon being summoned by Almachius.²²⁸ In her translations and analysis, Lovell makes no attempt to offer a gender analysis; however, she published her work in 1889, nearly a hundred years before critical gender theory influenced the readings of historical texts. Moreover, Ashton explains that "[...] later medieval piety demanded a more abject, humble figure, one patiently enduring suffering, while textual tradition

²²⁵ Lovell, *The Life of St. Cecilia*, 9-11.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

²²⁷ Lovell, *The Life of St. Cecilia*, 9-10.

²²⁸ Lovell, *The Life of St. Cecilia*, 10.

itself, anxious to defuse the threat of the female and idealize a model of femininity, portrayed a reduced, inactive Cecilia, the springboard for later versions.”²²⁹ Ashton states that this passive, demure, seemingly anemic version of Cecilia originated from an active, strident, masculine figure most apparent in the Mombricitus edition and an eleventh-century version of Cecilia’s life.

The eleventh-century Latin and Mombricitus versions of Cecilia’s life are remarkably similar, suggesting that they originate from a single source. The oldest surviving Latin version of Cecilia’s story, the *Passio Sanctae Caeciliae*, exists in one of the two volumes that make up *The Cotton Corpus Legendary*, created in the early eleventh century in England. An earlier version of this manuscript, created in the late tenth century, no longer survives. It seems that Mombricitus used this manuscript to compose the *Passio Sanctae Ceciliae Virginis Et Martyris* in his *Sanctuarium sue Vitae Sanctorum*, because the two texts are strikingly similar. A partial or complete translation of either Latin text does not exist, despite the numerous transcriptions and translations of the various Middle English texts. It is likely that, because so many English versions of Cecilia’s martyrdom are extant and because her life is the basis of Chaucer’s famed *Second Nun’s Tale*, scholars have not considered it necessary to examine the Latin in its own context, as a stand-alone text. Ashton states that Middle English text was the definitive version created for a privileged, elite clerical audience, yet not a single piece of scholarship examines the varying gender and power implications of the Latin versions. Ashton describes Cecilia’s *vita* as a “fissured text,” because the variant representations of

²²⁹ Ashton, *The Generation*, 56

her life offer two disparate and contradictory versions of the same woman. Ashton states that the Middle English variation occurred because “the narrator’s role was to ensure that the example of his holy woman was brought into line with the values and expectations of his own culture.”²³⁰ Ashton’s statement offers a valid and important explanation for the opposing representations of Cecilia, but Ashton’s focus remains on the English texts. Moreover, Ashton claims that the Latin text supports a masculine status but does not explore specifically how Cecilia appears more defiant and masculine in the Latin editions. Many medieval clerics and religious scholars used the lives of the virgin martyr saints as teaching aids when instructing their female acolytes, and often Cecilia appears as the paragon of masculine virtue.²³¹ Thus, a vacancy in the scholarship of Cecilia’s life demands to be filled, and, in order to understand the masculine, aggressive, *fortissimo* version of Cecilia, a full accounting of the Latin text must first be examined.

The version of Cecilia that exists in the Latin versions appears strong, authoritative, disruptive, and masculine. In the Mombritius and Legendary versions, Cecilia does not fade into the background during the conversion experiences of Valerian and Tiburtius; rather, Cecilia stands as a vocal, intelligent, authoritative *virago*. The most explicit passages that underscore Cecilia’s masculinity concerns her conversations with men. The four moments in the Mombritius and Legendary version are: her appeal to live a chaste marriage with Valerian, the conversion of Tiburtius, the discussion of Christian doctrine, and her final confrontation with Maxentius. Rather than disappearing into the background, Cecilia figures prominently in all four conversations. Variations of the

²³⁰ Ibid, 55.

²³¹ This argument is discussed at length in Chapter Three.

phrase “*Respondit Cecilia*” and “*Cecilia dixit*, or “Cecilia responded” and “Cecilia said,” occur repeatedly throughout the text and demonstrate that, in the context of the Latin *passio*, Cecilia remains a strong, active, and manly character.

In the first conversation between Cecilia and Valerian, she convinces him to live in a chaste marriage and converts him to Christianity. In the Voragine version, Cecilia does not appear demure; she confidently approached Valerian on their wedding night and, before revealing to him her vow of celibacy, she asked him to promise to keep it a secret, which he did in the form of an oath.²³² According to the Latin versions, Cecilia then explains that she had taken a lover in the form of an Angel of God and that, should Valerian ever look at Cecilia with lust, the angel would strike the flower of youth from him.²³³ In the earlier Latin version, a similar interaction between Cecilia and Valerian occurs.²³⁴ Cecilia speaks with such conviction, such force, that rather than arguing or responding with anger, Valerian becomes overwhelmed by the fear of God and asks Cecilia to reveal the angel to whom she spoke. When she did, Valerian converts and follows Cecilia’s orders to find the bishop, Urban.²³⁵ In this first interaction, it is Cecilia who led Valerian to Christianity by her words and by her conviction. She did not shrink

²³² Ashton, *The Generation*, 55.

²³³ Voragine, “De sancta Caecilia,” 772. *Hic si vei leviter senserit, quod tu me pollute amore contiugas, statim feriet te et amittes florem tuae gratissimae iuventutis, si autem cognoverit [...]*

²³⁴ CCCC MS 009 f. 163r; Mombritius “Passio Sanctae Ceiliae Virginis et Martyris,” in *Sanctuarium seu Vitae Sanctorum Vol. I*, 332-341, 333. *Tunc illa ait Angellum dei amatorem habeo qui nimio zelo corpus meum custodit. hic si uel leuiter senserit quod tu polluto amore contingas me statim contra te suum furorem exagitat et amittes florem tuae gratissimae iuventutis. Si autem cognouerit quod me sincero animo dilligas et uirginitatem meam integram illibatamque custodias ita quoque te dilliget sicut et me et ostendet tbigratiam suam.*

²³⁵ CCCC MS 009 f. 163v; Mombritius “Passio Sanctae Ceiliae,” 333. *Tunc Valerianus nutu dei timore correptus ait Si uis ut uere credam sermonibus tuis ostende mihi ipsum angelum. Et si probauero quod uere angelus sit faciam quod hortaris. Si autem uirum alium dilligas et te et illum gladio feriam.*

from away Valerian in fear; rather, she stood up to him, and then commanded him to find the bishop Urban.

After Valerian converts, the author introduces another male character, Tiburtius, but maintains Cecilia as an active part of the story. According to the Latin texts, Tiburtius becomes aware of his brother's conversion by the presence of roses that he could smell but could not see.²³⁶ According to the legend, after Valerian's conversion, Christ crowns Cecilia and Valerian with wreaths of fragrant flowers to symbolize their chastity, virtue, and faith.²³⁷ When Tiburtius asks about the odor, Valerian and Cecilia both explain that the smell comes from a mystical, heavenly crown of flowers that indicates their purity and faith, and explain that Tiburtius will be unable to see the flowers until he accepted the Christian God.²³⁸ When Tiburtius responds that he did not understand, Cecilia steps forward to explain and, in doing so, demonstrated her keen intelligence and spiritual knowledge, a masculine virtue.²³⁹ Cecilia speaks up again when Tiburtius questions her about the Holy Trinity and, according to the Latin accounts, she explains the nature of God's unity and wisdom as if she were a trained theologian.²⁴⁰ Her words convince Tiburtius and he converts, joining Valerian and Urban in their work

²³⁶ Voragine, "De sancta Caecilia," 773; Mombritius p. 335, CCCC MS 009 f. 164r.

²³⁷ Mombritius, "Passio Sanctae Ceiliae," 334-5

²³⁸ CCCC MS 009 f. 164v. Mombritius, "Passio Sanctae Ceiliae," 335.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Mombritius, "Passio Sanctae Ceiliae," 336. *Respondit Cecilia: unus Deus est, in quem ita in maiestate sua sancta trinitate dividimus: ut uno homine esse dicimus unam sapientiam quam ingenium habere memoriam dicimus sapientiam et intellectum. Nam ingenio adinvenimus: non quod didicimus, memoria tenemus, quod docemur: aduertimus intellectu uidere uel quicquid contigerit nobis. uel audire: Quid facimus modo? nunquid non una sapientia ista tria sunt in homine possidet. Si ergo homo possidet ac trina beatissimorum trium in una sapientia quomodo non Deus omnipotens nomen trinitatis in una deitate sua maiestatem obtineat.*

burying martyred Christians. In these interactions, Cecilia remains an authoritative and an active participant in the conversion and spiritual growth of two men, one being her husband.

Though the passage is not as extensive, Juliana also receives adoration from her male hagiographers for demonstrating undeniable masculine qualities. The eleventh century edition of Juliana's *passio* and, subsequently, the entry on Juliana in the *Acta Sanctorum*, open with an account of Juliana's masculine virtue. In the Harley MS 3020, the anonymous male author writes,

Moreover, Juliana having a rational soul, a prudent sense of judgement, being of great virtue and worthy of conversation, thought about the truth of God and if he created the heavens and the Earth [...] ²⁴¹

In this opening statement, the author immediately assigns Juliana the masculine virtue of rationality, intelligence, wisdom, and eloquence. Additionally, these manly features lead Juliana, raised a pagan, to decide that the Christian God is the truth and the creator of heaven and earth. Thus, before the author even begins to describe the events of Juliana's torture, he positions her in the minds of his audience as a masculine woman.

St. Eugenia as *Virum Perfectum*

In the medieval narratives of St. Eugenia, male writers create a succinct, overt, and idealized version of the *virago*. The most explored element of Eugenia's story

²⁴¹ BL Harley MS 3020 fols. 96r-96v. AS Feb. II Vol. 5: 879. *Juliana autem habens animum rationabilem, prudensque consilium, et Dignam conversationem, et virtutem plenissimam, hoc cogitabat apud se quoniam verus est Deus, qui fecit coelum et terram [...]*

concerns her male clothing, and often scholars refer to Eugenia as a “transvestite saint.”²⁴² This moniker derives its meaning from the Latin word “trans” meaning “across” and “vestis” meaning “clothing”: thus, the title “transvestite saint” refers to a saint who dressed “across” her sex. Classifying religious women as “transvestite saints” serves to identify a unique group of religious women who broke with convention by masquerading as men. In the mid-1990s scholars began examining the fluid nature of gender in medieval Christianity. They immediately focused their attention on female cross-dressing. Vern Bullough, in 1993, stated that for Christian women crossdressing served as a vehicle to move from an undesirable life to a desired Christian vocation.²⁴³ In his study, Bullough maintains his focus on women’s personal motivation to dress like men, and he argues that desire to preserve chastity and virginity inspired each woman to assume a male identity. Bullough argues against the notion that a desire for power served as a driving factor for women to cross dress.²⁴⁴ In 1996, Valerie Hotchkiss focused on the significance of female cross dressing as it affected the meaning and function of gender in the Middle Ages. Like Bullough, Hotchkiss focuses on the female expression and implications of cross-dressing and though her research uses texts about both fictional and

²⁴² Laila Abdalla, “Theology and Culture,” in *Varieties of Devotion in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Susan Karrant-Nunn (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 17-37; John Anson, “The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif,” *Viator*, 5 (1973): 1-32; Vern L. Bullough, “Transvestites in the Middle Ages,” *American Journal of Sociology* 79 (1974): 1381-94; Roy Gopa, “A Virgin Acts Manfully: Ælfric’s *Life of Saint Eugenia* and the Latin Versions,” *Leeds Studies in English* 23 (1992): 1-27; Valerie Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1996, 2012); Jonathan Walker, “The Transtextuality of Transvestite Sainthood: Or, How to Make the Gendered Form Fit the Generic Function,” *Exemplaria* 15 (2003): 73-110.

²⁴³ Vern Bullough, “Cross Dressing and Social Status in the Middle Ages,” in *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, ed. Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 51-55.

²⁴⁴ Bullough, “Cross Dressing,” 57. The emphasis is my own.

historical women, she views the meanings and readings of cross-dressing through the perspective of the women Hotchkiss examines. Her thesis rests on the idea that women took for themselves a new, masculine disguise and persona in an effort to engage in a new form of self-expression.²⁴⁵ In his essay on transvestite sainthood, Jonathan Walker examines the exemplar hagiographies of the most notable female saints whose male dress served as a defining feature of their legends. He suggests that the act is not about personal empowerment but about representing the perfect, or male, sex.²⁴⁶ Additionally, Walker contends that the texts emphasize a masculine ideal and opportunity for gender mobility toward that ideal, but he does not fully explore how that ideal applied to the virgin martyr narratives or how twelfth-century men used these narratives when writing to and about medieval women.²⁴⁷

Identifying a group of women saints by their physical appearance tends to reduce the saint to her male clothing, which, in the context of spiritual experience and gender modeling, is only one small aspect of a more complex story. Additionally, focusing primarily on the significance of cross-dressing does not explain or clarify the religious implications of women who dressed, lived, and were accepted as men. Nor does it delineate the influence of the male perspective in creating narratives that praised women for passing as men. By looking beyond Eugenia's male disguise and by examining how medieval men wrote the narrative of this so-called "transvestite saint" allows another, more overt model of the *virago* to appear. In the Latin texts written about Eugenia in the

²⁴⁵ Hotchkiss, "Clothes," 3-13.

²⁴⁶ Walker, "The Transtextuality," 77.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 84.

medieval period, an obvious admiration for her masculine soul, perfect male actions, and piety emerges. As she existed in the minds of medieval men, Eugenia represented the spiritual opportunities available to women who rejected their womanhood to serve Christ.

In general, Eugenia's story follows a pattern that mirrors the narratives of Margaret, Katherine, Juliana, and Cecilia. According to her legend, Eugenia lived in Alexandria in the third century and her father was a prefect and nobleman called Philip. Also like the other virgin martyrs, the author of Eugenia's *vita* describes her as exceedingly beautiful, and states that at the age of fifteen, after converting to Christianity, Eugenia caught the attention of a young nobleman, Aquilinus, who decided to force her into marriage.²⁴⁸ Eugenia chose to run away. Rather than convincing her betrothed to enter into a chaste marriage, like Cecilia, or opting for a prison cell, like Margaret, Katherine, and Juliana, Eugenia adopted a male disguise, entered an all-male monastery, and changed her name to Eugene.²⁴⁹ In this monastery, Eugene/Eugenia proved her worth as a Christian man to the point that her fellow brothers appointed her head of the monastery when the former abbot died.²⁵⁰ Eventually, a conflict occurred that forced Eugene/Eugenia to reveal her true sex and as a result she was condemned to death by the Romans for converting to Christianity and inspiring the conversion of other Romans. To honor the *virago* Eugenia, her fellow Christians buried her as they would a bishop.

Eugenia's story serves as evidence that medieval Christians accepted divinely sanctioned gender transformation; however, the way in which the authors construct her

²⁴⁸ Mombritius, "Passio Sanctorum Eugeniae, Prothi et Hiacynthi Martyrum," 391.

²⁴⁹ Mombritius, "Passio Sanctorum Eugeniae, Prothi et Hiacynthi Martyrum," 392.

²⁵⁰ Mombritius, "Passio Sanctorum Eugeniae, Prothi et Hiacynthi Martyrum," 392.

story allows the *virago* to emerge clearly. When Eugenia met Helenus, headmaster of the monastery, for the first time, Eugene/Eugenia states, “I am presently called Eugene. The blessed Helenus replies, ‘It is right to call you Eugene, because by acting manfully, you offered yourself as a perfect man to the struggle of the Lord.’”²⁵¹ The author uses this passage to communicate to the reader that Eugenia, assumed a masculine name and clothing, earned her masculine identity. Moreover, the term *viriliter agendo* means to act manfully; this is the most accurate translation of the word, especially in the context of what Helenus, a man of God, says to Eugenia. Additionally, in the passage, the author uses *te* which is the reflexive form of you, so the author constructs the interaction to mean “you, yourself are the *virum perfectum*” or “perfect man.”

In another passage, the author invokes the concept of the *anima*, or soul, to emphasize that Eugenia’s transformation was spiritual and not just a functional disguise. After detailing Eugenia’s move into the monastery, the author writes, “blessed Eugenia stayed at the monastery of men in the dress and soul of a man.”²⁵² In book XI of his seventh century *Etymologies*, Isadore of Seville discusses the origin and meaning of the word “soul,” or *anima*. Isidore determined that *anima* derived its name from the pagan idea that the soul is the wind that gives human beings life.²⁵³ Thus, by stating that Eugenia had a *virile animo*, the author of her narrative declares that the characteristic of her life and the sex of her soul, was male.

²⁵¹ Mombritius, “Passio Sanctorum Eugeniae, Prothi et Hiacyinthi Martyrum,” 393; *Vita Sanctae Eugeniae*, PL 73: 610. ‘ego Eugenius nuncupor.’ Cui beatus Elenus: Recte, inquit, vocaris Eugenius, quis viriliter agendo, virum perfectum in agone dominico te obtulisti.

²⁵² *Vita Sanctae Eugeniae Virginis ac Martyris*, PL 73: 611; Mombritius, “Passio Sanctorum Eugeniae,” 393. *Beata autem Eugenia virili habitu et animo, in praedicto virorum monasterio permanebat.*

²⁵³ Isidore of Seville, “Book XI: De homine et portentis,” in *Etymologies*, trans. and eds. Stephen A. Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 231.

To authorize Eugenia's life as a man, the medieval accounts of her legend detail an encounter that illustrates specifically how Eugenia earned and defended her status as *virago*. While Eugenia lived at the monastery as Brother Eugene, a noblewoman called Melanthia fell in love with the monk, completely unaware that the beautiful monk was actually a woman.²⁵⁴ Melanthia, overwhelmed with lust, attempted to seduce Eugenia/Eugene, who thoroughly rebuffed Melanthia's advances, thus enraging the noblewoman.²⁵⁵ Melanthia retaliated by accusing Eugene/Eugenia of rape and the indictment led to Eugene/Eugenia's arrest. Melanthia's servants bore false witness against Eugenia/Eugene, and all claimed they watched the rape occur.²⁵⁶ In the Latin account, the author states that Eugene/Eugenia stood before the prefect stating,

The power of His name is so great, that even a woman who fears his name, may achieve the dignity of a man. Indeed, in faith, no difference between the sexes can be found, because the blessed Paul, teacher of all Christians, says that that in the Lord, there is not male or female, that we are all one in Christ.²⁵⁷

In the medieval account of Eugenia's narrative, the author employs Galatians 3:28 as scriptural justification for Eugenia's male identity, which strongly suggests that the

²⁵⁴ *Vitae Sanctae Eugeniae* PL 73:612.

²⁵⁵ *Vitae Sanctae Eugeniae* PL 73: 612-613.

²⁵⁶ *Vitae Sanctae Eugeniae* PL 73: 613.

²⁵⁷ Galatians 3:28; *Vitae Sanctae Eugeniae* PL 73: 614. Tanta enim virtus est nominis eius, ut etiam femine, in timore eius posite virilem obtineant dignitatem. Neque enim diversitas sexus inveniri potest in fide, quum beatus Paulus, magister omnium christianorum, dicat quod apud Deum non sit discretio masculi et femine: omnes enim in Christo unum sumus.

Patristic era ideal of the *virago* paradigm significantly affected the medieval recreation of Eugenia's story.

At the end of Eugenia's monologue, the author includes a response to the Deuteronomic law, which forbids cross dressing. Deuteronomy 22:5 states, "A woman shall not dress in men's clothing, neither a man dress in women's clothing: for he that does these things is an abomination before God."²⁵⁸ Acknowledging this biblical law, the author of her narrative reports that Eugenia argued with the prefect. The author records Eugenia/Eugene's response,

Because of the love of God, the Christian soul acts manly and in my boldness, I did not want to be a woman. I have thought about it and it is not dishonest for a woman to pretend to be a man, but it is punishable for a man to pretend to be a woman for the pursuit of vice. And, this law is praiseworthy, if, for the love of virtue, the weaker sex imitates masculine glory. Therefore, for the love of divine faith, I assumed masculine clothes and the conduct of a perfect man and with strength, maintained my virginity for Christ. And with saying this, pulled down her tunic and revealed herself to be a woman.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ Latin Vulgate, Deuteronomy 22:5. *non induetur mulier veste virili nec vir utetur veste feminea abominabilis enim apud Deum est qui facit haec.*

²⁵⁹ Mombritius, "Passio Sanctorum Eugeniae," 396. *Quia viriliter in amore dei agit animus christianus: confidentiam meam nolui esse foemineam. Consideravi enim inimicam honestati simulationem. Per quam femina virum simulat, sed magis hoc iure puniri, si pro affectu vitiorum vir foeminam fingat. Et hoc iure laudandum, si pro amore virtutum sexus infirmior virile gloriam imitetur. Id circo nunc ego, amore divino*

The justification for Eugenia's male disguise concerned her soul and not her body. The author, using Eugenia's words to explain it, affirms that the male clothing reflected Eugenia's inner, masculine virtue and that she earned the right to dress as a man because she conducted herself as a perfect man or "*virum perfectum*."²⁶⁰

Conclusion

The medieval narratives of these seven women represent the *virago* paradigm of female sanctity as it existed in the medieval era. The emphasis on virginity, of casting aside the occupations of womanhood to serve Christ directly, mirrors Jerome's fourth century statement to Eustochium. The ability to withstand bloody and excruciating corporeal torment served to emphasize a willingness to endure a process of purification. It also demonstrates an unwavering courage and constancy. Images of ferocious battles with demons proved to the medieval audience that these women fought as stalwart soldiers of God. To reinforce the virtues of Christian masculinity, medieval writers applied the merits of constancy, intelligence, and courage to these women and demonstrated how they served, in life and in death, as examples even to men. For Eugenia in particular, her commitment to Christ inspired her hagiographers to depict her as actually becoming a man. The *virago* paradigm that the Patristic-era writers created and supported with scripture appears in striking detail in these medieval legends. This

religionis accensa, virile habitum sumsi, et virum gessi perfectum, virginitatem Christo fortiter conservando. Et hec dicens, scidit a capite tunica qua erat induta, et apparuit femina

²⁶⁰Mombritius, "Passio Sanctorum Eugeniae," 396.

strongly suggests that the idealization of female men and the influence of Gnostic notions of gender and salvation carried well into the high medieval period.

The narratives of these seven women also inspired medieval men who wrote to, for, and about holy women. In their letters to influential women, several twelfth century men used the examples pulled from the medieval hagiographies and encourage their female contemporaries to emulate the virgin martyrs by becoming like men.

Additionally, these narratives had an enormous and obvious effect on the creation of Christina of Markyate's *vita* and on the composition of the *St. Alban's Psalter* as argued in Chapter's Four and Five. Moreover, it is the specifically masculine aspects of these medieval narratives that have the most substantial impact as they established a model of female masculinity in the Middle Ages.

CHAPTER 3 EVOKING THE *VIRAGO* IN TWELFTH CENTURY LETTERS TO WOMEN

Therefore, let your soul be male, though your sex remains female!²⁶¹

These are the deeds of that remarkable woman that must be celebrated; they do not reflect a womanly mind but demonstrate the freedom of masculine devotion.²⁶²

During the twelfth century, a renewal of religious fervor dominated the landscape of Christianity throughout England and continental Europe. Simultaneously, women experienced a re-birth of spiritual exploration, and a burgeoning population of women began entering monastic institutions.²⁶³ These expanding religious communities of women created a need, in the minds of medieval men, for proper guidance and a Christian model for female sanctity that addressed the inherently flawed and sinful nature of the female sex. This specific task became the focus for many male clerics and theologians during the twelfth century. They relied heavily on the established *virago* paradigm, created in the Patristic era of Christianity, and influenced by Gnostic, Jewish, and scriptural ideals of masculine supremacy. The belief in male perfection pervaded twelfth-century Christian philosophy, specifically regarding the relationship between men

²⁶¹ London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A. xvii, f. 72v. *Virilis itaque sit spiritus tuus, cum sit muliebris sexus tuus.*

²⁶² BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii, f. 65r. *haec sunt praedicanda insigniter illius admirabilis feminae opera, quae femineam mentem non aspirant, sed virilem constantiam in illius redolent libertate.*

²⁶³ Fiona Griffiths, *Reform and Renaissance for Women in the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); R.N. Swanson, "A Renaissance for Women," in *The Twelfth Century Renaissance* (Manchester and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Carol Dana Lanham, Giles Constable, and Robert Louis Benson, eds. *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1982). Some women willingly entered into convents and monastic institutions of their own free will; for others, the choice was made for them by their Fathers, uncles, and sometimes former husbands. Female religious communities offered families a place to send young women they could not afford to marry off or a place to send widows whose sexual experience made them a threat to social morality. See: Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Broken Vows and Cloister Lives in the Renaissance Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1-20.

and women. Yet, men could not deny the authenticity and legitimacy of many women's spiritual influence and experience. A small collection of letters, written by men, overtly demonstrates that the *virago* model, the ideal of women becoming men in Christ, did not fade after the end of the Patristic era, nor did it apply only to the legendary female martyrs. Rather, these letters showcase how men used the ideals of Christian masculinity to uphold the *virago* paradigm of female sanctity. Using overt and specific language, each man instructed his female acolyte on specifically why and how they should put aside the imperfections of their sex and espouse the virtues of manhood. Often, religious men used the examples found in the medieval narratives of women martyrs to legitimize their direction and admiration of these female men of God. Moreover, the ennoblement of the *virago* further served to uphold a rigid patriarchal hierarchy that reified the supremacy of men and the imperfect nature of women, while simultaneously creating a space for the growing presence of women in medieval Christian institutions.

Five influential and important letters written by prominent men to religiously significant women serve as the focus of this chapter. The paucity of extant source material prevents a quantitative analysis of letters written by men about the *virago*. Additionally, because each letter is several folios long and overflowing with textual evidence to examine, a qualitative approach proves the most fruitful. Each of these letters appear in numerous studies and editions regarding women's spirituality in the Middle Ages, but scholars have not yet provided a comparative study of these letters or examined how they support and enforce the *virago* paradigm of female sanctity. Moreover, as Rosalyn Voaden reminds her audience, there is never only one reading of a

text.²⁶⁴ Thus, in the spirit of this assertion, these medieval letters become an illuminating repository of exactly how men used the ideals of Christian masculinity to de-feminize their female audience and instruct them on how to become like men. When read in concert, these five letters accentuate a supreme admiration for the *virago*, and in their laudatory prose they uphold the tenets of the *virago* paradigm, one that scholars have not yet explored.

The first extensive modern transcript of Osbert of Clare's twelfth-century letters exists in a single volume. In 1929, E.W Williamson published the first full transcription of the extant corpus of Osbert's letters.²⁶⁵ When compared to the twelfth century manuscript folios, all housed in the Vitellius A. xvii manuscript of the Cotton collection held at the British Library, Williamson's transcripts follow the original manuscripts verbatim; moreover, Williamson does not stray from the text or editorialize on Osbert's poetic grammar. Williamson provides an excellent introduction to Osbert's corpus of written works as well as some historical context, but he does not engage in a meaningful analysis of Osbert's works and he does not examine the social, political, or religious implications of Osbert's instruction to women. Finally, in his edition, Williamson does not provide a translation, leaving the challenge of deciphering Osbert's complicated use of Latin grammar and emotional prose to future scholars.

The seven letters between Peter Abelard and Heloise and the letters written by Peter of Blois exist in several printed editions. The first published corpus of the letters

²⁶⁴ Rosalyn Voaden, *God's Word's, Women's Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries* (Suffolk and Rochester: York University Press, 1999), 2.

²⁶⁵ Osbert of Clare, *The Letters of Osbert of Clare, Prior of Westminster*, ed. E.W. Williamson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929).

between Peter Abelard and Heloise appeared in Paris in 1616 and then in England in 1728 in their original Latin.²⁶⁶ In the following centuries, between fifty and sixty editions of these letters have emerged all over the world in various languages and collections. Similarly, the letters written by Peter of Blois exist in several published editions and, as Elizabeth Revell argues, for Peter of Boise “the most famous and most original of his writings were his letters [...]”²⁶⁷ Thus, his letters have received similar attention by medieval scholars as the letters of Peter Abelard, and, because so many editions of their letters exist over so many centuries, I chose to consult the most recent published editions and translate the original Latin from these versions.

In most cases, the modern translations of each of these letters remain relatively faithful to the original Latin; however, with the exception of Barbara Newman, scholars do not acknowledge the significance of the masculine-centric language in each letter. A translation of Abelard’s letter to Heloise and Osbert’s letter to Adelidis, Abbess of Barking Abbey both appear in Vera Morton and Jocelyn Wogan-Brown’s compendium *Guidance for Women in Twelfth-Century Convents*. For the most part, the translations provided by Morton offer a fairly accurate interpretation of the original materials; however, Morton chooses to eliminate all phrases that either call to a woman’s masculine nature or encourage her to take on a masculine spirit. For example, in Osbert’s letter to Adelidis, Morton translates the word *virago* to mean “noble,” which might be the least

²⁶⁶ H.M. *The Love Letters of Peter Abelard and Heloise*, (J.M. Dent, 1901), ii.

²⁶⁷ Elizabeth Revell, “Introduction,” in *The Later Letters of Peter of Blois*, ed. Elizabeth Revell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), xv.

accurate translation of the word.²⁶⁸ Morton's translations, unfortunately, appears anemic when compared to the original letter, in which Osbert's tone emerges emphatic and unflinching in intent to promote the *virago* paradigm. Moreover, because Morton's translations are found in several recent works covering issues of gender, women, and Christian spirituality, her inaccurate translation serves only to suppress the emphasis on female masculinity in the twelfth century.

The issue of female masculinity has not completely eluded scholars. In her essay, "Flaws in the Golden Bowl: Gender and Spiritual Formation in the Twelfth Century," Barbara Newman identifies that masculine behavior did exist as the normative ideal for religious communities in the Middle Ages.²⁶⁹ She also acknowledges that some medieval men, namely Peter Abelard, used Jerome's letters as a model for understanding the Christian concept of women.²⁷⁰ However, rather than focusing on how medieval men constructed the *virago* paradigm, Newman centers on how the use of terms like *virago* and *femina virilis* supported inverted misogyny or internalized sexism.²⁷¹ Newman examines how these ideas affected the way women perceived their own female sex. She argues that androcentric ideas caused women to adopt misogynistic ideas and accept their fate as inherently flawed human beings.²⁷² Newman also supports the notion that by encouraging women to act like men, male writers were actually pushing for a gender-

²⁶⁸ Vera Morton and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Guidance for Women in Twelfth-Century Convents* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 24.

²⁶⁹ Barbara Newman, "Flaws in the Golden Bowl: Gender and Spiritual Formation in the Twelfth Century," *Traditio* 45 (1989): 111-146, 114

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 114-115

²⁷¹ *Ibid*, 121

²⁷² *Ibid*, 112-113

neutral religious environment. However, the language of the letters strongly supports an ideal of masculinity that men explicitly encouraged women to emulate.²⁷³ Rather than bringing men and women into a similar genderless state, male writers are asking women to bring themselves into an overtly masculine status.

The *virago* was not ambiguous in her gender; rather, men saw her as spiritually male. Newman continues by stating that medieval men perceived themselves to be brides of Christ and women saw themselves as soldiers in Christ's army.²⁷⁴ This is not indicating a gender-neutral ideal; rather, it speaks to the fluidity of gender within spiritual communities. She further asserts that the religious ideal transcends gender and, again, I disagree. If this is the case, then why did writings to women discuss gender and sex so often, and why did authors use inherently gendered language and imagery when talking to or about women? As a *virago*, a woman maintained her outward female appearance but inwardly espoused all of the masculine virtues, making her inwardly, or spiritually, male. The dual-sex existence does not negate gender all together, nor does the male and female cancel one another out; rather, it becomes something that exists outside of the binary paradigm of sex.

In her work on Benedictine women in England during the Middle Ages, Katie Bugyis also identifies the existence of the *virago* paradigm. Bugyis mentions that men viewed extraordinary women who espoused male virtues as male-like, and often ascribed them the epithet of *virago*.²⁷⁵ Bugyis further identifies the *virago* status as one applied

²⁷³ Ibid

²⁷⁴ Newman, "Flaws" 114

²⁷⁵ Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, *The Care of Nuns: The Ministries of Benedictine Women in England During the Central Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) 112

only to women who could prove their bodies were un-female and women who proved the aspects of their character deemed virile by male writers.²⁷⁶ Bugyis does not explore the meaning or significance of the *virago* any further than identifying the term as a the highest form of praise a medieval writer could bestow onto his subject.²⁷⁷ However, the fact that, by the twelfth century, the word *virago* had become a ubiquitous moniker of admiration suggests that rather than advocating for a gender-less or gender-neutral state, medieval writers wanted their female acolytes to espouse masculinity. The *virago* is a female man. She is not only male or only female; she is both. In appearance, the *virago*, is female, but in character and spirit the *virago* is enlightened, pure, and manly, because of her ability to demonstrate self-control, strength, and intellect.

A proper understanding of the gendered significance of these letters requires a clear picture of the world in which men wrote them. Charles Haskins argues that the twelfth century witnessed a reemergence of Greek medicine, science, and philosophy, most notably the Aristotelian ideas concerning the nature of sex.²⁷⁸ A major Aristotelian idea explored in this new era of learning and discovery concerned the nature of biological sex. In her 1994 work, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, Joan Cadden investigates the medieval concept of male and female within the structure of the Christian Church. Cadden argues that the Aristotelian idea that the female body represented an imperfect and inferior version of the male body became standard belief amongst educated

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Bugyis, *The Care of Nuns*, 114.

²⁷⁸ Charles Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), viii.

men in the Middle Ages.²⁷⁹ Moreover, religious men borrowed heavily from the Patristic-era writers and emphasized a divine order to a patriarchal hierarchy. Man, because he represented the image of God, existed as the perfect sex and woman, because she inherited the sins of Eve, represented the flawed sex.

Because men excluded women from formal education during the Middle Ages, women's academic knowledge and understanding came to them through educated men. These men based their ideas about the nature of gender, religion, and society on the Classical Latin literature they transcribed and translated. They centered their justification of women's spiritual authority on the ideas Jerome expressed in his Latin translation of the Vulgate seven centuries earlier. What the educated class of men knew about the physiology and medical philosophy of the female sex, they learned in the medieval traditions of education. Religious institutions became synonymous with education and reinforced the defining features of Christian patriarchy in the Middle Ages, and this patriarchal hierarchy relied on an interesting amalgam of Aristotelian logic and Christian doctrine. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter One, the foundations of Christian masculinity and a male-dominated patriarchy really take root in Jerome's translation of the Pauline Epistles. Christian masculinity and the stories of the virgin martyrs, as celebrated by medieval male theologians, exemplify a belief in masculine superiority that dominated religious life throughout the twelfth century. The models for religious patriarchy that defined the environment in which women lived, worked, and prayed had their roots deeply embedded in the academic environments in which religious men lived,

²⁷⁹ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 204-5.

worked, and learned, and the *virago* paradigm gave them an additional layer of legitimacy.

Osbert's Letter to Ida, a Nun at Barking Abbey

In the twelfth century, Osbert of Clare endured a tumultuous career as first a monk and then later the prior of Westminster Abbey. Historians know very little about Osbert as he actually lived. At various times in his life, he engaged in heated debates about the nature of church authority and at one point found himself exiled from the Abbey he later called home.²⁸⁰ Anything we do know about Osbert comes from the extant collection of the letters, sermons, hymns, and *vitae* he wrote before his death in 1160. Like many male theologians and church leaders in the twelfth century, Osbert concerned himself with the religious life of women; moreover, he took it upon himself to understand the biblical history of women and use this knowledge to educate, advise, and encourage the religious women in his circle. Specifically, Osbert focused his epistolary work on issues concerning women's bodies, the importance of virginity, and spiritual progress.

Of all the letters Osbert wrote, one of the most significant went to Ida, a nun at Barking Abbey. Unfortunately, Ida's legacy begins and ends in the letter Osbert wrote to her sometime in the first half of the twelfth century. Given the context and Osbert's deep affection for Ida, she must have lived an exemplary life or made an impression on her male counterparts as a woman of significant religious virtue. Osbert opens the letter by

²⁸⁰ Frank Barlow, "Clare, Osbert of (d. in or after 1158), prior of Westminster Abbey and ecclesiastical writer," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 21 Jun. 2019.

underscoring his intent to inspire and ignite a growing adoration for the religious vocation in Ida, his *generosa progenies* or “noble offspring.”²⁸¹ Osbert then declares:

I desire that you become this: a splendid and brilliant
virgin, or rather uncorrupt *virago*, manly from Christ the
man, so that to him you are bound body and mind in stable
marriage; you may appear illuminated with a bright
lamp.²⁸²

In this statement, Osbert clearly and plainly invokes the *virago* paradigm. Osbert believes that Ida, already a virgin committed to Christ, could become more; she could achieve a higher status, that of *virago*, and he encourages her to become virile or manly through Christ. Moreover, Osbert emphasizes the humanity and maleness of Christ by stating *immo de viro Christo virilis* or “from Christ, the man,” which underscored the manliness of the human Christ.

In evaluating Osbert’s letter to Ida, Newman is less concerned with what he meant by his proclamation that she become a *virago* and instead sees his writing as an example of internalized misogyny. Newman identifies this as an “inverted hierarchy which leaves men behind.”²⁸³ In Newman’s assessment, rather than lifting Ida up with praise, Osbert reinforces androcentric ideas and causes her to accept a level of disdain towards her female sex. Alternatively, Osbert’s letters declares the possibility and the opportunity

²⁸¹ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii, f. 140r.

²⁸² BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii, f. 140r. *Talem te fieri cupio, splendida et clara virgo, immo de viro Christo virilis et incorrupta virago, ut ei clara lampade illustrata appareas cuius stabili conubio copulata concordas.*”

²⁸³ Newman, “Flaws,” 120.

for women to rise to greatness, but that they first must overcome the weaknesses of the female sex and the hindrances of feminine characteristics, just as a man might. Women may start with a disadvantage, but they also have the possibility of rising above these sex-based limitations. Women could, through certain religious performances, demonstrate virility and become male in spirit.

Another important grammatical aspect of Osbert's opening passage is his use of the vocative case. He opens his letter with the adjective *talem*, which can mean "of such a great kind"; in this context, *talem* takes its meaning from the vocative nouns in the sentence, *virgo* or "virgin" and *virago* or "warrior woman." By employing this grammatical device, Osbert emphasizes his belief that a *virago* is a virgin made even greater because she is also a male-like woman. In the second half of his statement to Ida, Osbert justifies his valorization of the *virago* by arguing that she, a woman and a virgin, is elevated to the status of warrior woman through Christ, and that she is made manly by him. The last section of the statement, Osbert says to Ida that once the virgin becomes the *virago*, she will then join Christ in a mystical union and will be bound to him body and mind, the highest status for a Christian.

Following Osbert's petition that Ida become a *virago*, he uses the body of his letter to substantiate his position, primarily by relying on a tradition of denigrating the biological functions of femaleness. Newman identifies a tradition, rooted in Graeco-Roman antifeminism, in which male writers used the feminine, metaphorically, to lambaste all things feeble, carnal, and sensual.²⁸⁴ According to Newman, male writers

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

used this tradition whether they were writing to men or women. In her argument, Newman suggests that medieval authors subscribed to an idea of fixed gender, that female attributes were always feminine regardless of who performed them.²⁸⁵ Thus, a woman could transcend the natural or inherent weakness of the sex into which she was born by rejecting all female behavior and performance, most notably childbirth, and prove her *animus* or masculine soul.

In Osbert's letter to Ida, the first and most obvious argument against the female nature concerns the process of pregnancy and childbirth. Osbert claims that from the moment a woman conceives, she falls away from her initial, virginal state, transforming into a completely different person.²⁸⁶ To reinforce his appeal, he provides a detailed description of the physical degradation a woman goes through when she becomes pregnant. Osbert describes pregnant women as pale and swollen, with a face gaunt and sallow; the skin around her eyes is dark and the veins at her temples protruding.²⁸⁷ He continues by offering a bleak vision of the pregnant body, claiming that her distended belly causes her organs to shift and become an uncomfortable burden on her body.²⁸⁸ Osbert further warns Ida that childbirth debased even the most noble of women. All the titles and honors bestowed upon the highest queen meant nothing once she became pregnant; all birthing chambers, regardless of their finery and comfort, are equally

²⁸⁵ Newman, "Flaws," 115.

²⁸⁶ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii, f.140r; *The Letters of Osbert of Clare, Prior of Westminster*, ed. E.W. Williamson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929, 1998) 135-140 *cum terrestrem parens concipit sobolem totius naturae suae mutat consuetudinem et in alteram transmigrat quam prius extiterat qualitate.*

²⁸⁷ BL, Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii, f. 142v; Osbert of Clare, *The Letters of Osbert of Clare*, 135-140. *pallida facies eius efficitur et oculorum claritas densa caligine concavatur: apparent venae circa tempora lividae et pallescit vultus deformitate obnoxius et aufugit color decidua mutabilitate fuscatus : pellicula rugas in facie contrahit et rotunditas digitorum in manibus tabescit.*

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.* *uterus intumescens impregnantis distenditur, et viscera intrinsecus gravidata dissipantur.*

abhorrent.²⁸⁹ By Osbert's account, the physical deformations caused by pregnancy are the effect of its status, inferior to virginity. It seems that Osbert found his inspiration in Jerome's similar aversion to motherhood. Additionally, Osbert mirrors Jerome's belief that once a woman "puts aside" motherhood, she will truly understand the joy of knowing Christ and become male in him.

These statements demonstrate Osbert's antipathy to, and anxiety about, the female sex. His grotesque descriptions of the pregnant body and his dire images of the birthing chamber serve as a warning to Ida of the inherent flaws of her female body. He claims that giving into the inclinations of her sex will debase her spirit. He expresses anxiety over the sin of sex and the pain of childbirth by claiming that in the process of childbirth, all women are lowered to the same, pitiful level and that nothing they have accomplished can save them from the limitations of their female sex. In this specific way, Osbert mirrors Jerome's proclamation to Eustochium that motherhood separates women from God. However, Osbert does not at any point in his letter suggest that Ida may be doomed because of the unfortunate and inferior disposition of her sex. Rather, he celebrates her womanhood because of its potential to transcend its limitations and reach heavenly perfection. Katie-Marie Bugyis argues that *topoi* of transcending motherhood appeared often in the instructional literature and letters that men wrote to women.²⁹⁰ Moreover, Bugyis contends that the archetype of the *virago* often coincided with the ideal of moving

²⁸⁹ BL, Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii, f.140r. *haec sunt taedia quae terrestres nuptiae generant; haec sunt onera quae filias Evae parturientes conturbant. praeterea si regina quaelibet vel imperatrix aut comitissa in saeculari maiestate nominis sui fastigium obtinuerit, non minus quam mulier paupercula in generatione sua fastidium anxietatis incurrit, nec alio modo onusta gemmis et auro concipit aut parit in palatio quam inops et pannosa mulier in tugurio.*

²⁹⁰ Bugyis, *The Care of Nuns*, 112-113.

beyond, or above, motherhood; however, Bugyis does not engage in a thorough examination of the masculine ideal as men applied them to women.

In the third section of the letter, Osbert moves from a warning about the pitfalls of pregnancy and motherhood to praise for Ida's virtue. His first comment reflects his joy that she avoided the misery and burdens of womanhood, and emphasizes a belief that femaleness means weakness. Osbert writes,

Thanks be given to God and to your moral resolve that you have avoided this great distress and misfortune: there can be nothing of this in you, in all that I have said above, no womanly weakness in you, no mortal pleasure of the flesh, certainly, because you are called both the attendant and considered the handmaiden to the virgin mother.²⁹¹

Osbert is unequivocal. He praises Ida for not having any *muliebris infirmitas*, or “womanly weakness,” in her. He comments on her lack of femaleness in the same fashion as Jerome. The female sex represented the lower, weaker, and imperfect version of a human being. But in this same passage Osbert distinguishes Ida as the *famula*, or handmaid, to the Virgin Mary. It may seem that Osbert contradicts himself, that he praises Ida as both a handmaid and a person of no womanly weakness; rather, in praising Ida as a *famula* to the Virgin Mary, Osbert reifies the *virago* paradigm, because she is a woman so constant and masculine in her virtue that she becomes a *male-like* woman.

²⁹¹ BL Cotton MS Vit. A xvii, f. 141r. *Sed gratias deo et gratias tuae bonae voluntati quod aerumnas tantae calamitatis evasisti: nihil ex omnibus quae superius diximus in te potest muliebris infirmitas, nihil mortalium in carne voluptas, quippe quae virginis matris.*

Osbert includes the moniker *famula* to remind his reader that Ida was worthy to be called a servant to the Virgin Mary.

Osbert devotes the third section of his letter to a discussion of the Virgin Mary's chastity and role as the exemplar Virgin. Osbert refers to the Virgin Mary as the primary example of female chastity and he continues by stating that for women who choose to follow the example of the Holy Mother, the vow allows them to become both mother and bride of Christ.²⁹² Osbert expresses to Ida that she, in her constancy and dedication to chastity, is so like the Virgin Mother and that Ida is no longer the daughter of Eve, essentially he is commenting on her progression towards spiritual perfection.²⁹³ In the remainder of this third section, Osbert provides Ida a description of the glory of festooning herself with the robes of chastity, and emulating the virtues of vigilance, love, and voluntary servitude. He described a vision of her mystical marriage to Christ, one in which she is dressed in gold and illuminated by Christ.²⁹⁴ He continues by suggesting that through her mystical union with Christ, Ida will be completely transformed. He writes,

²⁹² BL Cotton MS Vit. A xvii, f. 141v. *et quia prima omnium feminarum votum virginitatis deo noverat, et sponsa et parens dei efficitur et gemina dignitate gratulatur.*

²⁹³ BL Cotton MS Vit. A xvii, f. 141v. *sponsa quidem si castis eius nuptiis officio sedulitatis adhaeseris, verbum dei concipiendo et pariendo mater eris, concipiendo ut retineas, pariendo ut proferas. adhibita est propter hoc in claustris diligentia, in moribus disciplina, custodia in muris, ferrea instrumenta et firma in seris. multae sunt ex filiabus Evae quas si huiusmodi observatio non constringeret sexus sui reverentia nullo modo cohiberet.*

²⁹⁴ BL Cotton MS Vit. A xvii, f. 142v. *in illa die bona recipies corpus tuum a sponso tuo glorificatum, florens ut lilium in resurrectione iustorum, vitro purius, nive candidius, sole splendidius.*

Thus, you must hurry sacred virgin, devoted *virago*, so that
 by the light of the flashing lamp you run to those nuptials
 where you may fully enjoy the vividness of eternal light.²⁹⁵

This passage also marks the second time that Osbert uses the word *virago*. In this third passage, Osbert conveys that, by assuming a masculine spirit, Ida will enter a perfect union with Christ.

The first use of the masculine epithet, *virago*, occurs in the opening section of the letter and serves as the thesis of Osbert's epistle. Osbert is clear that he is writing to encourage Ida to become better and to achieve a status higher than a virgin. He explicitly urges Ida to elevate herself to the masculine status of *virago*. He then explains that she must separate herself from other women who are resigned to a life of menial childbirth and earthly motherhood. He describes in vivid detail the reward of becoming a bride of Christ as he closes the third section of the letter by once again invoking the moniker *virago* as if to proclaim that by joining herself to Christ, Ida would progress to an elevated state of spiritual manliness.

Osbert does not call Ida a *virago* again in this letter; rather, he implores her, as he closed his epistle, to conquer her sex. He writes, "Do not let purple or flax turn you back to the world, do not let wanton delights lead you back to your sex."²⁹⁶ Osbert encourages Ida to live in the fully realized model of the *virago*, a woman so masculine in spirit and so divorced from the weakness of her flesh that not even the allure of royalty and or

²⁹⁵ BL Cotton MS Vit. A xvii, f. 142v. *festinandum itaque est tibi virgo sacra, virago devota, ut ad illas nuptias occurras cum corusca lampade ubi perennis diei perfruaris claritate.*

²⁹⁶ BL Cotton MS Vit. A xvii, f. 143r. *non te purpura vel byssus reflectat ad saeculum, non te lasciva iocunditas reducat ad sexum.*

status can lure her away. He continues, “conquer the woman, conquer the flesh, conquer lust.”²⁹⁷ In this simple phrase, Osbert explicitly outlines his view on female spirituality and his adoration of the *virago* model for female sanctity. He believes that Ida, celebrated as a virgin and a woman, must elevate herself to the status of a manly woman, a woman who was female only in her physical body. Moreover, he states explicitly that to maintain this holy and celebrated status of *virago*, Ida must *vince mulierem* or conquer the woman. In this letter, Osbert outlines a spiritual strategy meant to separate Ida from the imperfections of femaleness, embrace the virtues of Christian masculinity, and become a *virago*.

Osbert’s Letter to Adelidis, abbess at Barking Abbey

During the same period that Osbert wrote to Ida, he wrote a similar letter to Adelidis, abbess at Barking Abbey; however, in this letter, Osbert invokes the medieval image of St. Cecilia to reify his ideas about the *virago*. At some point between 1136 and 1138, King Stephen appointed Adelidis as abbess of Barking Abbey, in an effort to win political favor with her influential FitzJohn family.²⁹⁸ Regardless of the motive behind her appointment, Adelidis served as abbess of a prominent, twelfth century abbey, a position of esteem and influence. Around 1170, Osbert wrote a lengthy letter to Adelidis to encourage her in her new profession and to detail the spiritual benefits of virginity. Osbert opened his letter, following the traditions of medieval letter writing, by calling

²⁹⁷BL Cotton MS Vit. A xvii, f. 143r. *vince mulierem, vince carnem, vince libidinem*.

²⁹⁸ Paul Dalton, “Eustace Fitz John and the Politics of Anglo-Norman England: The Rise and Survival of a Twelfth-Century Royal Servant,” *Speculum* 71.2 (1996), 366

attention to her familial and professional status, and offering her well-wishes in her new position.

The body of Osbert's letter serves as a treatise on the spiritual benefits of virginity and the supreme status of the *virago*. To support his ideas of the merits of female masculinity, Osbert evokes the medieval image of St. Cecilia, the third-century virgin martyr. Osbert proclaims that she was a "Brilliant virgin, nay more: a *virago*, whose white rose of virginity is shown through the redness of passion, we read of the fruits she brought forth for the Lord."²⁹⁹ Osbert applies the term *virago* to Cecilia and, as the letter to Ida proves, Osbert's viewed the status of *virago* with the highest esteem. It appears that Osbert drew his information from the eleventh-century Corpus Cotton Legendary source, since the image of Cecilia he portrays in his letter to Adelidis appears strong, fearless, and masculine. Osbert continues by claiming that the "redness of passion," or Cecilia's gruesome torture and bloody death as a martyr, confirms her status as both a virgin and *virago*.³⁰⁰ Osbert elicits a well-established convention of imagining the early-Christian martyrs as manly women, made masculine by the extreme demonstration of their faith and commitment to Christ.

Osbert continues his treatise on Cecilia by offering specific examples of her manliness. Osbert writes,

Thus, because she performed the holy office of preaching,
not like a woman, but like a pontiff, she was, by the gifts of

²⁹⁹ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii. f. 63v. *Clarissima virgo, immo generosa virago, beata Cecilia, quot fructus domino legitur peperisse, Candida cuius virginitatis rosea decoratur passione.*

³⁰⁰ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii. f. 63v. *Candida cuius virginitatis rosea decoratur passione*

the Lord, given a burial place amongst the greatest bishops of the Roman Church. No woman before her had gained this great distinction of privilege, nor will any woman after her.³⁰¹

Osbert emphasized the masculine performance of Cecilia's influence and preaching, which were two activities forbidden to women, according to the Latin Vulgate New Testament scriptures.³⁰² Osbert certainly did not contradict the scriptures; rather, he communicates to Adelidis the spiritual benefits of emulating Cecilia's masculinity. To Osbert, Cecilia provides the perfect example of how to enact Jerome's idea of becoming male. Cecilia earned the right to act as a pontiff because she, through a bloody ordeal and commitment to Christ, demonstrated that she was a perfect *virago*. Moreover, Cecilia's masculine behavior was such that, when she died, her male contemporaries buried her among the greatest bishops, the nonpareil of third-century Christian men.³⁰³ This is the example Osbert wants Adelidis to emulate. He includes the story to offer his female protégé a clear, uncompromised example of how to act and die as a *virago*.

To reiterate his point, Osbert outlines specifically how Cecilia constantly proved her worth as a *virago*. He stated that daily, Cecilia wore a hairshirt beneath her golden

³⁰¹ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii. f. 63v. *femineum in sancta praedicatione gessit officium, inter summos ecclesiae Romanae pontifices donante domino sortita est sepulcrum nulla ante illam femina huius praerogativae dignitatem obtinuit, neque post illam obtinebit ulterius.*

³⁰² Latin Vulgate, I Timothy 2:11-12. *mulier in silentio discat cum omni subiectione docere autem mulieri non permitto neque dominari in virum sed esse in silentio; I Corinthians 14:34-35 mulieres in ecclesiis taceant non enim permittitur eis loqui sed subditas esse sicut et lex dicit si quid autem volunt discere domi viros suos interrogent turpe est enim mulieri loqui in ecclesia.*

³⁰³ Boninus Mombritius, "Passio Sanctae Ceciliae Virginis et Martyris," in *Sanctuarium sue Vitae Sanctorum, Vol. I*, (Paris, 1910), 341; Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, CCCC MS 009, f. 168v.

vestments as reminder of Christ's suffering.³⁰⁴ In lauding tones, Osbert remarks that through "the constancy of a masculine soul" Cecilia converted her husband Valerian and his brother Tiburtius to the Christian faith.³⁰⁵ The phrase, *virilis animi constantia*, or "a steadfast, masculine soul," stands out as particularly important. Osbert's intentional use of the noun *animus*, or soul, reflects an idea articulated by Isidore of Seville in Book XI of his seventh-century *Etymologies*, in which Isidore identifies the function of the *animus*. As discussed in Chapter Two, in his *Etymologies* Isidore states that the term *animus*, which derives its name from the pagan understanding of wind, refers to the soul.³⁰⁶ Additionally, Isidore states that the soul is alive,³⁰⁷ and it seems that Osbert believes that the soul could also have a sex. Moreover, Osbert emphasizes that the perfect soul is male when he employs the two descriptors *virilis* and *constantia*, or masculine and steadfast. Osbert acknowledges that Cecilia was a woman; in his letter, he does not doubt the biological representation of her sex. Insofar as Cecilia was a Christian, however, and in her *animus*, Osbert presents her as masculine to Adelidis, and encourages his acolyte to follow the example of this holy *virago*.

Osbert closes his section on Cecilia with his most straightforward, masculine representation of the female martyr. He writes,

³⁰⁴ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii. f. 63v. *legisti de illa quomodo sub deauratis carnem suam cilicio trivit induviis*

³⁰⁵ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii. f. 63v. *quomodo sponsum suum Valerianum cum Tyburcio fratre suo convertit ad fidem, quam virilis animi constantia evangelicam intonabat veritatem.*

³⁰⁶ Isidore of Seville, "Book XI: De homine et portentis," in *Etymologies*, trans. and eds. Stephen A. Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 231

³⁰⁷ Isidore of Seville, "De homine et portentis," 231. "The spirit (*spiritus*) is the same as what the Evangelist calls the 'soul' [...] for the soul is called so because it is alive."

These are the deeds of that remarkable woman [Cecilia] that must be celebrated; they do not reflect a womanly mind but demonstrate the freedom of masculine devotion. Thus, she is absolutely above the female sex and when women are instructed by her, they escape the downfall of their sex. The Holy Scripture does not cease to instruct you, woman of virtue, with these examples, and may you create deep, religious friendships with holy men, as we read that glorious virgin created with the blessed Pope Urban.³⁰⁸

In this final passage on Cecilia, Osbert offers a succinct summary of exactly what qualities he sees in Cecilia that he wants Adelidis to emulate. He admires the fact that even though Cecilia was born and remained biologically female, she acted like a man. Osbert declares that her actions did not reflect the female sex but provided proof of her masculine *animus*. Finally, as Osbert closes this section, he states plainly to Adelidis, that he desires that she aspire to a similar status of masculine fortitude and create friendships with influential men.

In addition to Cecilia, Osbert also discusses the heroic and militaristic actions of the Old Testament *virago*, Judith. In Jerome's Latin translation of the Old Testament, the

³⁰⁸ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii. f. 65r. *haec sunt praedicanda insigniter illius admirabilis feminae opera, quae femineam mentem non aspirant, sed virilem constantiam in illius redolent libertate. iccirco utique et tota supra feminam est et per eam edoctus ruinam sexus potest vitare femineus. hoc te instruere sacra scriptura, femina virtutis, exemplo non desinit, ut cum sanctis viris familiarem et religiosam parias amicitiam, sicut cum beato papa Urbano virginem peperisse legimus gloriosam.*

legacy of Judith rested in her ability to act manfully.³⁰⁹ In Osbert's letter to Adelidis, he refers to the Old Testament heroine as another example of the glory of becoming a *virago*. Osbert pulls his summary of Judith's story directly from Jerome's Latin Vulgate. In the Old Testament of the Latin Vulgate, Judith appears as a beautiful, young widow facing the rising power of King Nebuchadnezzar and his increasing threat he posed to Israel; at the King's side sat his sycophantic and sadistic general Holofernes.³¹⁰ Judith's village, Bethulia, stood in the path of Holofernes and his fearsome army, and when she realized how afraid the men in her village were, Judith decided to act. Osbert recounts the story to Adelidis, commenting that before moving into action, Judith stayed in the camp for three days and purified herself in a stream of water.³¹¹ Osbert emphasizes Judith's ritual of purification, because in the following passage he recounts the story of how Judith used her charm and beauty to seduce Holofernes. Osbert cleverly downplays Judith's use of her beauty and sexual appeal to gain access to Holofernes' bed; instead, Osbert underscored Judith's bravery, her steadfast faith, and her spiritual strength.³¹²

Osbert closes his homily on Judith with a directive to Adelidis that she must embody the most masculine aspects of Judith's story. He encourages his female acolyte,

³⁰⁹ Latin Vulgate, Judith 15:11. *quia fecisti viriliter et confortatum est cor tuum eo quod castitatem amaveris et post virum tuum alterum non scieris ideo et manus Domini confortavit te et ideo eris benedicta in aeternum.*

³¹⁰ Latin Vulgate, Judith 1-7.

³¹¹ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii. f. 68v. *Mansit, inquit scriptura, Iudith in castris triduo, et exibat per noctem in vallem Bethuliae, et baptizabat se in fontem aquae.*

³¹² BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii. f. 68v. *triduum hoc mortem et sepulturam et resurrectionem domini intelligimus, quibus subnixi in castris peregrinationis nostrae congressum cum hoste certamenque subimus. tridui huius etiam nomine fidem, spem et caritatem novimus figurari, quibus victrix femina virtutis praeconio meruit insigniri: fide etenim vicit, quia dei potentiam dextrae femineae vires praestitutam indubitanter credidit; spe etiam ad Olofernis iugulum victorem erexit animum, quia propugnatores in mundo non quaerebat visibiles, sed invisibiles e caelo sperabat adiutores.*

“Therefore, be like Judith and stay in the camp for three days so that by this spiritual struggle you will prevail as a steadfast woman.”³¹³ Osbert uses the word *fortis* to describe the type of woman he desires Adelidis to become. I translate *fortis* to mean “steadfast,” as it is the most genuine translation of this word in this specific context. Osbert uses *fortis* to describe an overtly masculine virtue; thus, by persuading Adelidis to become a *mulier fortis*, Osbert tells her once again to become a manly woman.

In his penultimate section on Judith as exemplar *virago*, Osbert emphasizes his adoration of Judith, declaring,

Therefore, in Judith, there is a pattern impressed upon you, a woman of virtue, that you should first descend into the valley and bathe in the stream, by this you will be purified and ascend to the lord offering prayers. He will guide your life with purpose if you follow his path and through you, he will liberate people, if you are chaste when you enter the tabernacle.³¹⁴

By purifying herself in the stream, Judith became the *virago* God used to liberate his people. Osbert uses the genitive form, *virtutis*, which translates simply as “of virtue.” Additionally, the various forms of *virtus*, from the root *vir* or “man,” can also mean “manliness,” “manly,” or “manfully” in equal measure. In this passage, Osbert offers an

³¹³ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii. 69r. *seque pro salute populi sui morti opponere non formidavit. ita triduo sicut Iudith debes manere in castris, ut in spiritali certamine victrici palma decorata praevaleras existere mulier fortis.*

³¹⁴ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii., 70v. *iccirco in Iudith, virtutis femina, forma tibi est salubris impressa, ut prius descendas in valle et baptizeris in fonte: ex quo purificata ascendas et sic orationem ad dominum facias, diriget in beneplacito suo vitam tuam, si secuta fueris viam suam; liberabitque per te populum suum, si munda introieris tabernaculum tuum. munda introeas et munda permanes.*

explicit statement on his belief that Adelidis had not only the potential to become a “woman of virtue,” but that her ascension to this spiritual status would allow her to become an effective leader.

In the closing section on Judith, Osbert makes one final statement on the virtues of female masculinity. Osbert titles this section, “The garments that adorn glorious virginity in the victorious battle”³¹⁵ and in it he provides Adelidis with instructions on how to perform or demonstrate ascetic or heroic virginity. Continuing to use Judith as the example of militaristic chastity, Osbert explains that because Judith clothed herself in the garments of faith, purity, and faithfulness, she protected herself against Holofernes and his cunning lechery.³¹⁶ At the close of this homily, Osbert provides his most explicit declaration. To Adelidis, he declares,

Therefore, let your soul be male, though your sex remains female! Ecclesiastes proclaims, ‘one man in a thousand I have found, but I have not found a woman among them all.’³¹⁷ The pure reflection of humans is described mystically under the name ‘man,’ but, feeble thinking is

³¹⁵ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii. *Quibus vestibus sit ornanda in victorioso certamine virginitas gloriosa.*

³¹⁶ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii., 71r. *Si ergo ad hanc civitatem dei viventis cum triumphalibus signis conaris ascendere, ornata quemadmodum Iudith pretiosis vestibus procede, ut cum irruerit Olofernes super stragulam te reperiat, quam acceptam a spadone tua tibi ancilla substernat. Olofernes autem typice figuram exprimit diaboli: Bagao vero eunuchus formam gestat ecclesiastici viri. stragula itaque, quia diversis coloribus in textura respargitur, virtutum sanctarum diversitas figuratur. ancilla quae tibi huius exhibeat ministerium caro tua est, quae se spiritui subiciat ut iumentum. in cotidianum proinde usum huius tibi stragulae assume induvias, ut super illam manduces et discumbas. de hac veste in Apochalipsi scriptum est: Beatus qui custodit vestimenta sua ne nudus ambulet et videant turpitudinem eius. fides et vitae innocentia et praecipua caritatis opera pretiosa sunt animae vestimenta, quibus apparere debet adornata.*

³¹⁷ The New Jerusalem Bible, Ecclesiastes 7:27-29. This is what I think, say Qoheleth, having examined one thing after another to draw some conclusion, which I am still looking for, although unsuccessfully: a man in a thousand, I may find, but a woman better than other women—never.

described as ‘womanish.’ We ascribe good deeds to the male, and we represent destructive works by the designation of the inferior sex; whence the poet Virgil says, ‘whatever is inconstant and changeable is always woman.’³¹⁸

Drawing on familiar literary conventions, Osbert explains that the female represents weakness, wickedness, and inconstancy and that the male exemplifies intellect, strength, and virtue. In his final statement, Osbert restates his position and declares,

From adolescence, every heart of man is prone to evil and injustice; however, a woman is always more susceptible to sink into ruin. Therefore, from a thousand rational minds you must seek out the man, you must find that man whose flesh has not been polluted by stain, whose body has not been inflected by the blemish of sin.³¹⁹

Though the passage is a bit obscure, Osbert seems to encourage Adelidis to seek out the man or pursue a life in which she will become inwardly male. To Osbert, putting on the *animus virilis* meant ascending to a higher level of Christian understanding or *gnosis* and that through masculine performance, Adelidis would become one with Christ.

³¹⁸ Virgil, *The Aeneid* 4.569. BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii., 72v. *Virilis itaque sit spiritus tuus, cum sit muliebris sexus tuus. Virum, inquit, de mille unum repperi, mulierem ex omnibus non inveni. pura hominis meditatio sub viri nomine mystice describitur; infirma vero cogitatio mulieris titulo praenotatur. bona vero opera ad masculum referimus; actus autem noxios sexus inferioris caractere figuramus: unde poeta, Varium, inquit, et mutabile semper femina.*

³¹⁹ BL Cotton MS Vit. A. xvii. f. 72v. *cum omne cor hominis ab adolescentia malitiae et iniquitati sit fere obnoxium, in hac ruina generis humani facilius semper mulier declinat ad casum. iccirco in mille intellectibus, qui ad infirmitatem mulieris non appropinquant, vir ille quaerendus, vir ille tibi reperiendus est, cuius carnem in mundo nulla humana macula polluit, cuius animam in corpore nulla peccati labes infecit.*

Abelard's Letter to Heloise on the History of Women in Christianity

Unlike Osbert and his female counterparts, historians have an extensive epistolary corpus that illuminates the relationship between the twelfth century monk, Peter Abelard, and his paramour, Heloise.³²⁰ The tragic love story of Abelard and Heloise provides historians with an intimate story of heartbreak, longing, and devotion within the socio-religious background of twelfth-century Christianity. Born in Brittany in 1079 to a minor noble family, Abelard enjoyed a rigorous education and became a prolific scholar. Eventually, his professional pursuits brought him in the path of Heloise d'Argenteuil. During this time, Heloise lived under the care of her uncle, the secular canon Fulbert. At some point in 1115 or 1116 Abelard and Heloise began a passionate love affair that resulted in a pregnancy. Eventually, under pressure from Fulbert, the two agreed to a secret marriage, but the union interfered with Abelard's career and after Fulbert disclosed the marriage to protect Heloise, Abelard sent her to a convent at Argenteuil. At the convent, Heloise lived and worked as a nun, though she did not at that time formerly take orders. Outraged that Abelard sent his niece away, Fulbert had a band of men break into Abelard's room in the middle of the night and castrate him. As a result, Abelard retired to St. Denis in Paris and became a monk, while Heloise took official vows as a nun. Seven letters written between the lovers, three by Abelard and four by Heloise, offer historians insight into this latter, religious phase of their relationship.

³²⁰ The summary of Heloise and Abelard's relationship comes from the following sources: James Burge, *Heloise and Abelard: A New Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006); Constant J. Mews, *Abelard and Heloise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1-57; Ralph Fletcher Seymour, "The Story of Abelard and Heloise," in *The Love Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. and ed. Ralph Fletcher Seymour (Chicago, 1903), 2-3.

Of the extant letters, Letter 7, authored by Abelard, offers the most explicit demonstration of the growing medieval fascination with the *virago* paradigm.³²¹ In the letter, Abelard offers a detailed justification for women's religious vocation and authority. The letter serves as a response to a request issued by Heloise in Letter 6, in which she reiterates the medieval concept of female inferiority and asks Abelard to explain why the subordinate sex should be allowed, with all of her weakness and avarice, to serve God.³²² Rather than agreeing with Heloise that the inherent weakness made her incapable of Godly service or spiritual authority, Abelard implicitly refers to the *virago* model to encourage and defend women's religious vocation. Newman argues that Abelard had a complicated *sic et non* approach to gender; for Abelard, "on the one hand, women are the weaker sex and need to be under male authority; on the other, they are the privileged sex and men are responsible for serving them while they enjoy pure contemplative leisure."³²³ In his defense of women's religious vocation, this cognitive dissonance seems to have led him to the conclusion that a woman must embody a masculine soul, or *animus*, and perform her duties manfully, following the examples he provides from the Old Testament.

Before launching into a philosophical and theological justification for the religious vocation of women, Abelard opens his letter expressing a firm belief that women are as worthy of redemption as men. He explains to Heloise,

³²¹ This numbering convention is a creation of Betty Radice, who transcribed and translated the entirety of Heloise and Abelard's extant epistolary correspondence. This convention is used by scholars after 1947 and in the following seven decades it has become the standard.

³²² Heloise, *Letter 6*, in *The Letter Collection of Peter Abelard and Heloise*, ed. David Luscombe with Betty Radice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 213-220.

³²³ Newman, "Flaws in the Golden," 122.

Just as he [Christ] came to call on and redeem both sexes, so he saw fit to join them both [men and women] in the monastic life of his true congregation, so that after men and women should be granted the authority for their vocation and have set before them, a perfect way of life to emulate.³²⁴

Abelard drew on the conventions laid out in Luke 8:1-3, Acts 1:14 and 2:44-5, which created a scriptural foundation for religious communities, composed of both men and women.³²⁵ Abelard impresses on his female counterpart that Christ redeemed equally both men and women, and that in Christ both men and women have the authority to pursue a monastic profession.

The overarching theme of Abelard's letter rests on an analogous discussion of the inner and outer being. In the analogy Abelard provides Heloise, he states that the flesh represented the inner man, and the skin signified the outer person, or physical body. Abelard departs from the religious convention that equates the flesh with the outer, sensual, sinful part of man and the soul with the inner person. Nevertheless, Abelard creates an easily recognizable analogy for which to explain his position. He says to Heloise, "By nature, the male is stronger in mind and body than the female, thus a man's

³²⁴ Abelard, "Letter 7" in *The Letter Collection of Peter Abelard and Heloise*, ed. David Luscombe with Betty Radice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 260. *sicut utrumque sexum uocare uenerate atque redimere, ut utrumque sexum in uero monachatu sue congregationis dignatus est adunare, ut inde tam uiris quam feminis huius professionis daretur auctoritas, et omnibus perfectio uite proponeretur quam imitarentur*

³²⁵ Latin Vulgate, Luke 8: 1-3. *et factum est deinceps et ipse iter faciebat per civitatem et castellum praedicans et evangelizans regnum Dei et duodecim cum illo et mulieres aliquae quae erant curatae ab spiritibus malignis et infirmitatibus Maria quae uocatur Magdalene de qua daemonia septem exierant et Iohanna uxor Chuza procuratoris Herodis et Susanna et aliae multae quae ministrabant eis de facultatibus suis.*

nature is akin to the flesh because it is nearer to the bone, and a woman's weakness is akin to the skin."³²⁶ In this passage, Abelard follows a similar convention as Osbert, equating women with the weaker, sinful nature of humankind and men with the stronger, steadfast aspect of the inner being. He continues,

The flesh is the inner part of the body, the skin the outer,
and so the Apostle [Paul] whose concern is to preach with
the inner food of the soul and the women who provides
necessities for the body are compared with flesh and
skin.³²⁷

By addressing this analogy in the first section of his letter, Abelard sets a logical stage on which his ideas play out. He agrees with Heloise: the female is a weaker sex, more strongly associated with the outer or sinful nature of humankind, but she also has the power to rise above or overcome this weakness.

Like Osbert, Abelard refers to the Old Testament to find examples of women exemplifying the *virago* archetype. Rather than focusing specifically on Judith, Abelard examines the ancient tribes of Israel in the book of Exodus. Abelard writes,

To the Lord, both men and women sang the first song of
Liberation of the tribes of Israel, and from these songs they

³²⁶ Abelard, "Letter 7," 273. *Sunt et viri naturaliter tam mente quam corpore feminis fortiores. Unde et merito per carnem, que vicinior est ossi, virilis natura, per pellem muliebris infirmitas designatur.*

³²⁷ Abelard, "Letter 7," 274. *Caro autem in corpore pars interior est et pellis exterior. Apostoli ergo interior anime cibo predicando intendentes et mulieres corporis necessaria procurantes carni comparantur et pelli.*

[women] won for themselves the authority to celebrate the divine offices in the Church.³²⁸

Abelard underscores his position and says to Heloise,

Therefore, it seems that the ecclesiastical life of women was not separate from the order of the clergy, and certainly, the women were connected to the men by name since we speak of deaconess as well as deacon, as if we see in them a kind of female Levite alongside the tribe of Levi.³²⁹

In this passage, Abelard suggests that biblical precedent for women's spiritual authority existed in the Old Testament. In his examination of the history of women's ordination, Gary Macy argues that in some cases women actually did enjoy a form of ordination, one often overlooked by scholars.³³⁰ Macy contends that because the definition of the term "ordination" changed dramatically over the two thousand years of Christianity, and because the meaning varies according to who is studying it, we can assume that women did experience some type of ordination throughout Christian history.³³¹ Rather than suggesting that Heloise had permission and authority to administer the sacraments, Abelard uses the Old Testament example to encourage Heloise to continue her pursuit of

³²⁸ Abelard, "Letter 7," 287. *Primum quippe canticum de liberatione Israelitici populi non solum viri sed etiam mulieres Domino decantauerunt, hinc statim divinorum officiorum in ecclesia celebrandorum auctoritatem ipse adeptae.* Exodus 15:1-21

³²⁹ Abelard, "Letter 7," 288. *Unde nunc a clericorum ordine mulierum religio disiuncta videtur. Quas etiam ipsis nomine coniunctas esse constat, cum videlicet tam diaconissas quam diaconos appellemus, ac si in utrisque tribum Levitae et quasi Levitae agnoscamus.*

³³⁰ Gary Macy, *The Secret History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), vii, 3-7.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

a religious vocation. Moreover, this passage strongly suggests that Abelard believed Heloise had a divine right to exercise some spiritual authority.

Abelard's pronouncement on the ordination of women was not a medieval form of proto-feminism; rather, he uses the justification to begin a discussion of becoming male. Medieval Christianity upheld a patriarchal hierarchy that relied on the supremacy of masculinity. Moreover, this hierarchy, delineated in the New Testament, relied on the notion that women existed as imperfect versions of men. However, Osbert and Abelard both believed that women had the potential to "correct" their imperfections and ascend the hierarchy. To substantiate this claim, Abelard discusses the relative masculinity displayed by male and female martyrs. To Heloise, Abelard writes,

From these observations, Saint Gregory prepared a vessel of remorse and reflected on the virtue of holy women and the victory won in martyrdom by the weaker sex and he asked, 'what do bearded men have to say when delicate girls endure so much suffering for Christ, and their fragile sex is triumphant in such great agony, that we know it is they who frequently win the double crowns of virginity and martyrdom.'³³²

In this passage, Abelard says quite a bit. To legitimize his position, Abelard states that he is repeating the observations of the esteemed St. Gregory, a seventh-century bishop of

³³² Abelard, "Letter 7," 292. *Ex his profecto speculis vas sibi ompunctionis beatus parabat Gregorius cum, sanctarum virtutem feminarum et infirmi sexus in martyrio victoriam admirans et ingemiscens, querebat quid barbati dicturi sint viri, cum tanta pro Christo delicate puelle sustineant et tanto agone sexus fragilis triumphed, ut frequentius ipsum gemina virginitatis et martyrii corona pollere noverimus.*

Rome. Thus, it is not Abelard's opinion, but the reflections of a revered saint. Abelard then remarked that St. Gregory deeply admired the heroic virtue of these holy women, which they proved through passionate suffering. Finally, and most importantly, Abelard specifically mentions that St. Gregory held these women in higher esteem than the *barbati sint viri* or bearded men, a bearded man being a representation of ultimate masculinity. Thus, in this passage, Abelard explains to Heloise that through specific, and extreme, spiritual performance, the *delicate puelle* or "delicate girls" who embodied the *sexus fragilis* "fragile sex" became masculine in their martyrdom. By using the authority of St. Gregory, Abelard provides another layer of legitimacy for the *virago*.

To reinforce his point, Abelard, like Osbert, finds inspiration in the Old Testament. Unable to ignore the legacy of Eve, Abelard provides Heloise with three strong, biblical *viragines* to emulate. Abelard says, "After Eve, we should consider the virtues of Deborah, Judith, and Esther, and we will make the male sex, for all of its manliness, blush deeply in shame."³³³ He opens his discussion of these Old Testament women in the context of masculinity, implying that the virtue of these three women surpassed even the most masculine of men. Abelard then mirrors Osbert's ideas, recounting the bravery and masculine fortitude of Judith, saying,

Great power is ascribed to [King] David when he attacked
and defeated Goliath with a sling and stone; however, the

³³³ Abelard, "Letter 7," 312. *Quod si post Euam Debbore, Iudith, Hester virtutem inteumur, profecto non mediocrem robori virilis sexus inferemus erubescantiam.*

widow Judith set out against a hostile army with neither a sling nor stone, and entered the fight without any armor.³³⁴

In the medieval period, King David represented the pinnacle of Christian manhood.³³⁵ In this example, Abelard acknowledges David's masculinity and his strength as a warrior, but to his female audience, Abelard compares the biblical icon of manliness to Judith. By offering this contrasting example, Abelard implies that Judith, by defeating Holofernes, was as manly, if not more so, than King David.

Abelard furthers his justification of women's religious authority by including a foundational piece of scripture from the Old Testament. Throughout his letter, Abelard agrees with Heloise, and medieval convention, that all women are born into an inherently inferior, weaker, imperfect sex. However, Abelard also states that the Bible provides unquestionable support for women in positions of power if they adhere to a specific, masculine archetype. Abelard says to Heloise, "However, as I have said, since the nature of the female sex is inferior; but, to God her virtue and honor are worthier and more acceptable."³³⁶ He continues by stating that the narratives of women martyrs often portray these women as braver, stronger, more resolute, and more masculine than many

³³⁴ Abelard, "Letter 7," 312-313. *Magne ascribitur virtutis, quod David in funda et lapide Goliath aggressus est et devicit: Iudith vidua ad hostile procedit exercitum sine funda et lapide, sine omni adminiculo armature dimicatura.*

³³⁵ Ruth Mazzo Karras, "David and Bathsheba: Masculine Sexuality in Medieval Judaism and Christianity," in *God's Own Gender?: Masculinities in World Religions*, ed. Daniel Gerster and Michael Krüggeler (Baden-Baden, Ergon-Verlag, 2018), 202. In her essay, Karras states that in the Middle Ages, King David represented the model of behavior for religious men and stood as the embodiment of masculine ideal even though he often engaged in behavior antithetical to the Christian standard of manhood he remained repentant, which accentuated his virtue.

³³⁶ Abelard, "Letter 7," 316. *Sed quia, ut diximus, quo naturaliter femineus sexus est infirmior, eo virtus eius Deo est acceptabilior et honore dignior.*

of the male martyrs.³³⁷ Abelard closes his letter with a scripture from the Old Testament Maccabees II. Quoting the Latin Vulgate, Abelard writes,

But the mother was especially admirable and worthy of good remembrance because she watched the death of her seven sons in the course of a single day and bore it heroically because of her hope in the Lord. Filled with manly wisdom and feminine thinking, she embodied a masculine soul and encouraged them in the language of their Fathers.³³⁸

Abelard chooses to include this passage in his closing remarks to Heloise because it exemplifies the *virago* paradigm. Abelard opted for a passage that expressed the power of developing a *masculinum animum*, or masculine soul. Thus, in Abelard's homily to Heloise, he explicitly conveys that she too must embody a *masculinum animum*.

To reinforce his veneration of the *virago*, Abelard closes his letter with an excerpt from the *Vita sanctae Eugeiae*, the famous holy woman who lived as a man. As discussed in Chapter Two, the early-Christian story of St. Eugenia legitimized a tradition of women dressing and acting as men after a significant conversion or trial period caused them to ascend into the perfect, male sex metaphorically and spiritually. After a lengthy letter intended to encourage Heloise to pursue her religious vocation and offer her a

³³⁷ Abelard, "Letter 7," 316. *nequaquam martyrium illud in festiuitate memoriam meruit cui femina non interfuit, quasi pro magno non habeatur si fortior sexus fortiter paciatur.*

³³⁸ Latin Vulgate, II Maccabee 7:20-21. *supra modum autem mater mirabilis et bonorum memoria digna quae pereuntes septem filios sub unius diei tempore conspiciens bono animo ferebat propter spem quam in Deum habebat. singulos illorum hortabatur patria voce fortiter repleta sapientia et femineae cogitationi masculinum animum inserens.*

justification and model for religious authority, Abelard underscores his argument with a well-known story of a legendary *virago*. Abelard writes,

A great many virgins have so emulated chastity that they dressed in male clothing in defiance of the law, in an effort to preserve their purity, but they demonstrate such masculine virtue amongst the monks that they have become abbots. We see this in the case of St. Eugenia, who dressed in male clothing with the knowledge and indeed by the command of her Bishop, St. Helenus, and then was baptized by him and entered a community of monks.³³⁹

Here, Abelard ends his letter. He offers Heloise a final piece of encouragement and explains that the *infirmio sexui*, or “inferior sex,” can live a life of chastity and Christian virtue, but that she must first transcend the limitations of her sex and embrace a *masculinum animum*.

Matilda, abbess of Wherwell

The twelfth century saw a rise in the prominence of religious women, including abbesses, whose authority often elicited the guidance and praise of prominent theologians, monks, and priors. One of these abbesses, Matilda of Wherwell, drew the attention of Peter of Blois, a French cleric and theologian. Most of what scholars know

³³⁹ Abelard, “Letter 7,” 350. *Quarum etiam plerique tanto ad castimoniam zelo sunt accense ut non solum contra legis decretum pro custodienda castitat virile presumerent habitum, verum etiam inter monachos tantis preminerent virtutibus ut abates fieri mererentur. Sicut de beata legimus Eugenia, que sancto etiam Heleno episcopo conscio, immo iubente, virile habitum sumpsit, et ab eo baptizata monachorum collegio est sociata*

about Peter of Blois comes from the corpus of letters he wrote during his career, a few to prominent women including Eleanor of Aquitaine and Matilda, the abbess of Wherwell. Matilda left a lasting impression on her contemporaries as a formidable religious figure, and she captured Peter's attention during the conflict between King John of England and the papacy in the first decade of the thirteenth century. King John refused to accept the papal appointment of Stephen Langton as Archbishop of Canterbury, and as a result Pope Innocent III imposed an interdict that prohibited all clergy from performing all church services and rites, apart from baptism for the young and final rites for the dying.³⁴⁰ The injunction deeply affected men and women living in religious communities and it seems, according to Peter's letter to Matilda, the abbess grew discouraged during this time.

To offer some comfort and encouragement to Matilda, Peter of Blois wrote a letter in which he calls immediate attention to her status as a heroic religious figure. In the opening of his letter, he pays deference to her status, writing,

Even though you are a noble and wise *virago*, and you transcend the souls of formidable men in constancy and counsel, yet, because a good and faithful messenger has been offered to you and to me, I hastily decided to send this letter of consolation to you.³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ For more detailed exploration of the relationship between King John and Pope Innocent III and the interdict imposed on England as a result of their tumultuous relationship see: Ralph V. Turner, *King John: England's Evil King?* (Stroud, UK: History Press, 2009), and Christopher Harper-Bill, "John and the Church of Rome," in *King John: New Interpretations* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999).

³⁴¹ Peter of Blois, "Letter 17," in *The Later Letters of Peter of Blois*, ed. Elizabeth Revell (Oxford: Oxford University, 1993), 100. *Licet sitis nobilis sapiensque virago fortiumque virorum animos constantia et consilio transcendatis, quia tamen nuntii fidelis vobisque et michi oblata est opportuna et grata occasio, vobis consolatoriam hanc festinanter destinare decrevi.*

Peter offers a lot to explore in this brief passage regarding the construction of the *virago*. He opens by explicitly calling Matilda a *nobilis sapiensque virago*, an epithet applied to her again after death, in an elegiac couplet discussed below. To emphasize his admiration of the *virago* in relation to the male sex, Peter then says to Matilda that she transcends the souls of formidable men in both constancy and counsel. Like Osbert and Abelard, Peter ascribes an overtly masculine spiritual persona to his female reader. He says explicitly that Matilda, a woman, is so strong in her constancy and counsel, both male virtues, that she transcends the feminine and possesses a masculine soul with greater virtue than those of formidable men.

To further his purpose of consolation and encouragement, Peter of Blois offers Matilda several male biblical figures to emulate. He reminds Matilda first of the apostle Peter, who was viciously martyred, and then Noah, who faced frightening storms and met the overwhelming fear by relying on the comfort and strength of the Lord.³⁴² Peter then recalls a common figure of biblical masculinity, King David, and states that even as David faced defeat, God favored him, and the victory caused David to dance for joy.³⁴³ Peter continues and encourages Matilda, stating that she must remain faithful and in constant prayer because her faithfulness will bring about a resolution between King John

³⁴² Blois, "Letter 17," 100. *Navis Petri gravissima tempestatis inundatione concutitur, dormit autem Christus in navi nec est qui eum excitet atque dicat: 'Exurge, quare' obdormis domine? Adiuva nos quoniam perimus.' Navis operitur fluctibus, et nisi, o Iesu, evigilas, absorbet nos profunditatis abyssus. Impera, domine, ventis et mari. Recordare quod olim inundante diuvio archa Noel violentia fluctuum nunc deprimebatur inferius, nunc elevabatur in altum, tandemque propitiante domino super montes Armenie requievit.*

³⁴³ Blois, "Letter 17," 100. *Archa etiam federis ab Allophylis capta apud eos otiosa non fuit nam propter eam deus confregit Dagon hostesque suos percussit in/ posteriora eorum, prodigiisque et signis David coram archa saltante et populo exultante in Hierusalem requievit. Surge domine in requiem tuam, tu et archa sanctificationis tue. Quamvis enim dura sint nobis flagella que patimur, nos tamen durioribus dignissimos reputamus.*

and Pope Innocent III.³⁴⁴ It is clear in this brief letter that Peter saw Matilda as a peer and not a protégé. He does not call her daughter or refer to her as a handmaid; moreover, he sought out her spiritual intervention after stating unambiguously that he sees her as a *virago* and more masculine in spirit than even the most formidable of men. In all likelihood, Peter speaks to Matilda with such overt deference because of her elite social status, and that may have inspired him to apply the *virago* status to the abbess.

Matilda's masculine reputation appears in a similar unambiguous form in a simple eulogy written after her death in 1212. On the final folio of a liturgical calendar, produced at St. Albans, an anonymous author composed eleven elegiac couplets in praise of the Matilda's life. The elegiac poem reads,

Matilida, by nature a mother, by merits a wife,
 Though not a virgin in the flesh, she was a *virago*
 Married to a man but issued no offspring, she outlived him
 She labored for Christ, and became a parent in piety
 A gem of her people, and a woman only in sex
 In character and merit she was completely manly³⁴⁵

³⁴⁴ Blois, "Letter 17," 100. *Recole abbatissa, nobilis genere sed nobilior mente, quod rex, Assuerus suggestione et consilio Aman populum Israel morti addixerat, eratque crux parata in supplicium et exitium Mardochei. Porro regina Hester noctem illam deduxit insompnem, regemque precibus et lacrimis inclinans ad misericordiam revocavit a crudeli proposito, Aman quoque affixus est cruci quam preparaverat Mardocheo. Vigila et ora, sponsa regis altissimi, tuasque sorores ad orationem et cetera exercitia religionis exemplo et salutaribus monitis opportune et importune instiga, ut dominus hanc ecclesie procellam convertat in auram. Cor regis in manu dei est, qui ad pacem et benevolentiam vertet illud si procedent vestre orationes ex intimo devotionis affectu.*

³⁴⁵ Katie Ann-Maire Buggy, *The Care of Nuns: The Ministries of Benedictine Women in England During the Central Middle Ages*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 113. St. Petersburg, National Library of Russia, MS Lat.Q.v.I.62, fol. 12v. A transcription of this source is provided in Antonio Staerk, *Les manuscrits latins du Ve au XIIIe siècle conservés à la Bibliothèque impériale de Saint-Pétersbourg*, 2 vols., St. Petersburg, 1910, 274–275. *Affectu mater, meritis matrona Matildis, Etsi non carne uirgo,*

The anonymous author of this poem created an unequivocal depiction of Matilda as a true *virago*. In her work on Benedictine female monastic communities, Katie-Marie Bugyis examines Matilda's legacy as she represented a class of religious women who transcended motherhood, both spiritually and physically. Bugyis maintains that the ability to become a mother in spirit allowed monastic women to express the virile aspects of their religious performance. Bugyis does not delve into a full examination of the *virago* construct, or the role those religious men played in its creation, but she does maintain that virility, or masculine characteristics, became a form of highest praise for medieval holy women.³⁴⁶ In truth, before she became the abbess of Wherwell, Matilda had married and mothered several children. But, after the death of her husband, she "put aside" motherhood and devoted the remainder of her life to celibacy and Christ. The overt rejection of her womanhood earned her the admiration of her male contemporaries and, as Peter's letter affirms, proved that she espoused the virtues of the *virago*.

Conclusion

The sum of these letters, written across France and England in the twelfth century, demonstrates an unflinching male adoration and preoccupation with the *virago* paradigm of female sanctity. Osbert wrote to women he adored and admired; to one he implored her to strive for spiritual perfection, and to the other, he provided a litany of biblical examples to inspire her as she transcended the spiritual hierarchy towards manliness.

uirago fuit, Nupta uiro sine prole uirum premisit eumque, Christo parturiens, fit pietate parens, Gemma sui generis, et solo femina sexu, Moribus et meritis tota uirilil erat.

³⁴⁶ Bugyis, *The Care*, 112-114.

Though he never used the term *virago*, Abelard employed the paradigm to ease Heloise's anxieties about women's religious authority and to encourage her spiritual progress as she worked towards masculine perfection. Finally, in Peter of Blois's letter to Matilda and the anonymously written elegiac poem written after her death, we see male admiration for a woman who, through spiritual exercise and performance, achieved the masculinization of her *animus*, or soul. The poetic eulogy serves as evidence that during her life she lived as a *virago* and that, at the time of her death in the early thirteenth century, the archetype had become an established part of women's spirituality.

CHAPTER 4
CHRISTINA OF MARKYATE: A VIRAGO FOR MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

Why do you revere your female sex? Clothe yourself in
 masculine soul and mount that horse like a man!³⁴⁷

Thus, being a true servant of God, the archbishop grieved
 over the anguish and afflictions of the virgin but gave
 thanks to God for her perseverance as a valiant soldier of
 Christ.³⁴⁸

A little more than three decades after a Norman won the English throne in 1066, an aristocratic Anglo-Saxon family welcomed the birth of a daughter. The pair, Autti and Beatrix, named their daughter Theodora and quickly began devising an advantageous marriage to a prominent Norman, hoping the union would save and solidify their precarious political position. The young girl would bring notoriety and political attention to the doorstep of her family's ancestral home; however, she would do so in a manner unexpected and unwanted. By her fifteenth birthday, the girl would devote herself in mind, body, and spirit, to God and would begin a perilous and physically harrowing journey towards a monastic life.

Sometime in the first decade of the twelfth century, this young woman became Christina of Markyate, taking the name shortly after a new baptism signified her solemn dedication to pursue a religious vocation. The story unfolds in vivid detail in the story of Christina's life, which exists in the final folios of the Tiberius E. I manuscript housed in the Cotton collection at the British Library in London. The original title page no longer

³⁴⁷ London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius MS E. I, f.152v; *The Life of Christina of Markyate, a Twelfth Century Holy Woman*, ed. C.H. Talbot (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959, 1997), 90. *Quid sexum feminei vereris? Virilem animum indue. Et more viri in equum ascende.*

³⁴⁸ BL Cotton Tiberius MS E. I, f.152v; *The Life*, 90. *Tunc ille verus Dei servus super angustiis afflicte virginis ingemuit. Ceterum de perseverancia eiusdem fortissimo militis Deo gracias egit.*

exists, lost to either time or the devastating fire that took out a sizable portion of the Cotton Library in 1731. In its place C.H. Talbot, the first modern scholar to transcribe and translate the text in its entirety, offers readers the following heading, *De. S. Theodora, Virgine, Quae et Christina Dictur, or Of Theodora, a Virgin, Who is also Called Christina*. Colloquially, scholars refer to the text as *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, or simply *The Life*. A blend of hagiographical tradition and medieval romance, the text reveals a layered, complex story that inspires a variety of readings.

For decades, Christina's story has occupied the attention of medievalists and, though scholars focus on a range of themes present in her narrative, they do not address the explicit process of gender transformation evident in the text. The anonymous author of the *Life of Christina of Markyate* constructs the story in progressive stages that exemplify Christina's transformation from a young girl, into a courageous *virago*, and then finally into a wise and influential advisor. Christina's ability to persuade and participate in religious and political affairs serves as one of the most remarkable aspects of her story. Moreover, her powerful status and relationship with politically important men underscores an intriguing question put forth by the text and not yet answered by scholars: how did a woman, hindered by the weakness of her sex, become such an influential leader? Simply put, she became, in the eyes of her male contemporaries, spiritually male. By employing the *virago* paradigm, the author of *The Life* transformed Christina, released her from the constraints of her *muliebris inconstancie*, or feminine inconstancy, and legitimized her authority by ascribing her with the soul of a man.

The process of transformation in the text is a gradual one. It begins with Christina's vow during her first visit to St. Alban's Abbey and is affirmed as she endures

a process of bodily torment when she refuses to marry. To emphasize Christina's spiritual transformation, the author relied on the conventions of medieval hagiography, recalling the medieval narratives of the virgin and ascetic women martyrs whose hagiographers transformed them into female men of God. Throughout the text, the author also compared Christina to biblical holy men and emphasized her masculine spirit by applying the masculine ideals of strength, bravery, and intellect to Christina. By constructing Christina as spiritually male, the author created a viable method for the clerical elite to reconcile their fear over the female sex with their undeniable admiration for spiritual women. By becoming a *virago*, Christina's irrefutable influence over powerful men and unquestioned spiritual authority become admirable byproducts of her religious experience rather than the reproachable behavior of a woman acting out of her place. Finally, the *Life of Christina of Markyate* offers the modern reader a clear, undeniable example of the *virago* paradigm as it effected the memory of medieval holy women.

Historiography

The earliest histories of Christina of Markyate are summaries of the only extant copy of *The Life*. In the fourteenth century, Thomas Walsingham produced the *Gesta abbatum moasterii Sancti Albani* in which he included an eleven-page summary of Christina's life that follows the narrative structure of the Tiberius text and, according to Rachel Koopmans, an earlier text that no longer exists.³⁴⁹ Similarly, John of

³⁴⁹ Thomas Walsingham, *Gesta abbatum moasterii Sancti Albani*, Vol. I, 793-1290 A.D., ed. Henry Thomas Riley (London: Longman, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867), 97-108; Rachel Koopmans, "The Conclusions of Christina of Markyate's *Vita*," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 41, no. 4 (2000): 671.

Tynemouth's fourteenth-century *Nova legenda Anglie* includes a summary of Christina's life that Nicholas Roscarrock used in 1607 to recreate a narrative of Christina's life.³⁵⁰ Talbot referred to both summaries when transcribing the badly damaged manuscripts and he observed that they both end where the Tiberius texts cuts off, suggesting that Walsingham's summary and Rosacarrock's narrative relied on the Tiberius document as source material.³⁵¹ Walsingham's and Rosacarrock's summaries are extremely important when constructing the historical Christina because unlike Talbot, or any scholar after him, these early-modern writers saw the manuscript before the 1731 fire. After 1959, Talbot's translation quickly became the preeminent text on which all scholars base their histories of Christina of Markyate.

After 1960, a renewed interest in understanding the complexities and nuances of medieval women's religious experience brought attention to Christina of Markyate. In 1977, R.W. Hanning wrote of Christina's story that it is "perhaps the twelfth century's most effective and revealing personal history of a woman."³⁵² In her seminal work, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Caroline Walker Bynum mentions Christina's rejection of marriage and her occupation as a spiritual advisor to powerful men, but she does not fully explore the significance of Christina's life and legend.³⁵³ Similarly, Joan Cadden, Jane Schulenberg, Joann McNamara, and Sarah Salih, all focus on Christina's remarkable commitment to virginity and unflinching rejection of marriage in spite of the severe

³⁵⁰ The summaries appear in Carl Horstmann, *Nova legenda anglie* (Oxford, 1901), 532-7.

³⁵¹ C. H. Talbot, "Introduction," in *The Life of Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Recluse*, ed. and trans. C.H Talbot, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959, 1998), 1-4.

³⁵² R. W. Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (London: Yale University Press, 1977), 50.

³⁵³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 27, 222, 247, 281.

violence she faced as a consequence.³⁵⁴ Overall, the most recent histories of Christina tend to focus on her experience with sexual and domestic violence, her relationship with prominent religious men, her dedication to celibacy in the context of twelfth-century Christianity, and the psalter associated with her life.

The first, and at this writing the only, work dedicated to the life and legend of Christina of Markyate is a compendium of essays focused on unraveling the complexities and mysteries of Christina's *Life* and the *St. Albans Psalter*. Edited by Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser, *Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman* includes the work of fourteen scholars, each examining a specific aspect of her life and the texts associated with her religious experience. Of primary concern for the contributing authors are Christina's experiences with physical, sexual, and emotional abuse afflicted by both her parents and her husband; the legal nature of marriage in twelfth-century England; Christina's unusual relationships with men; the meanings of celibacy for women's piety in the Middle Ages; and finally a discussion of Christina's life as a recluse in the broader tradition of hermits and ascetics in medieval Christianity. Despite the impressive breadth in a succinct body of scholarship, none of the fourteen essays explores Christina's masculine image or her transformation into a *virago*.

Christina of Markyate was born into a world of conflict, uncertainty, and renewed spiritual vigor. In his historical survey of twelfth-century Europe, John Cotts argues that

³⁵⁴ See: Joan Cadden, *The Meaning of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 266; JoAnn McNamara "The *Herrenfrage*: Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150" in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 11, 13, 16; Sara Salih, *Versions of Virginitly in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 43-47; Jane Tibbets Schulenberg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, 500-1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 55, 161, 259.

the new Norman kings of England enjoyed a measure of success in the eleventh and twelfth centuries due in large part to the centralized and relatively sophisticated administration created by the Anglo-Saxons.³⁵⁵ However, as the Norman kings installed loyal men as barons, they essentially eliminated the Anglo-Saxon nobility.³⁵⁶ In the introduction of his translation of *The Life*, C. H. Talbot writes that Christina's ancestors likely held positions as Thegns under the Anglo-Saxon regime. Thus the changing administration would have severely compromised her families political position³⁵⁷ Subsequently, H. Ellis's thorough examination of William's *Domesday Book* in 1833 reveals that the name of Christina's father, Autti, appears repeatedly in the Danelaw and in the survey of surrounding counties, suggesting that Christina hailed from Danish and Anglo-Saxon ancestry and that by the time of her birth her father had amassed a large fortune built through the benefit of his noble lineage.³⁵⁸

William I died in 1087 and left the throne to his third son, William II, or William Rufus. This king ruled when Autti and Beatrix married and welcomed the birth of their children. But, on November 2, 1100, a hunting accident killed William Rufus, which paved the way for his younger brother, Henry I, to ascend the throne. Three days after William's death, Henry had himself crowned king by the bishop of London at Westminster Abbey.³⁵⁹ The unexpected death of William II and the installation of his

³⁵⁵ John D. Cotts, *Europe's Long Twelfth Century: Order, Anxiety, and Adaptation, 1095-1229* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 50-51.

³⁵⁶ Cotts, *Europe's Long*, 50.

³⁵⁷ Talbot "Introduction," 10.

³⁵⁸ Talbot, "Introduction," 10; H. Ellis, *A General Introduction to Domesday Book* (London, 1833), 45. Ellis finds the name of Autti in Sussex, Hampshire, Gloucestershire, Shropshire, Derbyshire, Lincoln, and Norfolk.

³⁵⁹ Cotts, *Europe's Long*, 51.

younger brother Henry, must have unsettled the already precarious political position of Christina's Anglo-Saxon parents. The Tiberius manuscript includes a variety of politically impressive allegiances Autti worked hard to secure, namely with the bishop of Lincoln, Robert Bloet, and the bishop of Flambard, Ranulf. In addition to decades of political upheaval and transition, the English monarchy soon followed their royal counterparts on the continent of Europe and engaged in a destructive struggle with the Church.

William II fought endlessly with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm of Bec. They quarreled over the king's habit of leaving abbacies and bishoprics unoccupied, a tactic William employed to collect the revenues from the abbeys and parishes during the vacancies. After William's sudden death, Henry I resumed the Church-State struggle and fought with the archbishop over the issue of lay investiture. The conflict came to a resolution in 1107 when Henry and the bishops agreed that the king would give up investiture and the bishops would continue to perform homage for their fiefs. Bishops served as counselors, judges, and legal consultants to the king of England and remained an intrinsic part of secular rule.³⁶⁰ The issue indirectly affected Christina and her family as the fighting emphasized the need for beneficial political and religious allies. If Autti and Beatrix remained in favor with the Norman lords and the Norman-allied bishops, their social status remained favorable. But should they fall out of favor with the leadership, or side with a bishop embroiled in the fight with the king, they risked losing their fortune and prominence. Unfortunately for Autti and Beatrix, their daughter

³⁶⁰ Cotts, *Europe's Long*, 54-55.

Christina would bring their precarious social position to the brink of disaster, and all for the sake of a spiritual calling.

General Notes on Translation

Since its publication in 1959, Talbot's translation of the Tiberius text has served as the standard for scholars across a variety of disciplines. In 2008, Fanous and Leyser used it exclusively when they published a new edition of *The Life of Christina of Markyate*. A comparative reading between the two texts, Talbot's 1959 original and the 2008 edition by Fanous and Leyser, reveals only minor differences. However, a return to the original fourteenth century manuscript and the Latin text as transcribed by Talbot, shows that the translation created in 1959 reflects an era of historical study indifferent towards issues of gender and power. For example, Talbot frequently translates the noun *virgo* as "handmaiden" when a more accurate definition of this word is "virgin." This difference is significant for several reasons, namely, the epithet *virgo* can be applied to men as much as women. In the *St. Alban's Psalter*, the story of St. Alexis proves that medieval writers ascribed the status of "holy virgin" to men as well as women. Additionally, in the seventh chapter of I Corinthians, the Apostle Paul exhorts men to remain celibate, to dedicate themselves as virgins to God.³⁶¹ Moreover, though medieval writers typically applied the word to women, *virgo* is a much more gender-neutral term than "handmaiden." Finally, the Latin noun *ancilla* means "handmaiden" and the author occasionally employs that signifier when discussing Christina, which suggests that when

³⁶¹ Latin Vulgate, I Corinthians 7:1, 2, 26, 32.

the author used the word “*virgo*” he explicitly meant “virgin.” Thus, the nouns *virgo* and *ancilla* are not interchangeable.

The most obvious oversight in Talbot’s translation is his treatment of the word *virago*. Talbot does not offer any translation for the word *virago*; perhaps because the word only appears once in the entire text. Instead, he uses the passage to express Christina’s masculine behavior in one specific moment and compared her reaction as being more manly than the man who lusted after her. Even in the revised edition of the translation provided by Fanous and Leyser 2008, the word “*virago*,” with all its significance, receives no attention or acknowledgement.³⁶² Additionally, there are other moments, as discussed below, that require a new reading and a new translation of the original text.

Christina’s Vow and Betrothal

The first significant moment of Christina’s evolution into a *virago* occurs in the first folios of the text. To emphasize the sincerity of Christina’s devotion, the author opens her story by describing the moment she first observed the monks at St. Albans. The author writes,

Autti and Beatrix brought with them their beloved daughter
Christina to our monastery to venerate the bones of the
blessed martyr St. Alban [...] Thus, when the young girl
gazed upon the holy place and observed the religious

³⁶² C. H. Talbot ed., *The Life of Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Recluse*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959, 1998), 114-115; Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser eds., *The Life of Christina of Markyate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 46-47.

performance of the monks who lived there, she announced how fortunate the monks were, and expressed a desire to participate in their community.³⁶³

The significance of this passage exists in the author's choice to use the word *monochorum*, the genitive plural of the masculine noun *monachus*, or male monk. The choice seems deliberate as the author opted not to use the female form of the word, *monacha*, which translates to "nun" or "female monk." The scene describes a young Christina, likely around ten or eleven years old, admiring the male monks and then unequivocally expressing a desire to become just like the men.

Immediately after Christina professed her vow at the St. Alban's abbey, the author introduces her first major adversary in the form of Ranulf of Flambard. From 1087 to 1100 Ranulf, bishop of Flambard, served as the chief minister to King William II; he also became royal chaplain and for a short time chief justiciar.³⁶⁴ Though Ranulf did fall out of political favor from 1101 to 1106, he returned to occupy the bishopric of Durham and then quickly began a long-term, sexual relationship with Christina's maternal aunt Alveva, with whom he had several children.³⁶⁵ This relationship brought some measure

³⁶³ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 145v; *The Life*, 39. *Autti ac Beatricem sumpta secum sua karissima filia Christina nostrum adire monasterium ac beati martiris Albani cuius inibi sacra venerantur ossa [...] Percutans ergo puella sedulo visu locum. Et considerans reverendam maturitatem inhabitantium monachorum. Pronunciavit felices et consorcii eorum optavit fieri particeps. Denique exeuntibus parentibus suis de templo. Postquam expleverint propter que venerunt. Illa signum crucis uno unguium suorum scripsit in porta scilicet quod in illo specialiter monasterio suum reondidisset affectum.*

³⁶⁴ Britannica, Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Ranulf Flambard." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 1, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ranulf-Flambard>.

³⁶⁵ J. F. A. Mason, "Flambard, Ranulf (c. 1060–1128), administrator and bishop of Durham." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 20 Mar. 2020. <https://www-oxforddnb-com.libproxy.unl.edu/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-9667>.; Talbot, *The Life*, 41.

of political prestige back to Autti and Beatrix and helped elevate them into a new, but precarious, social status. Eventually, Ranulf grew bored of Alveva and around 1112, when Christina was sixteen, Ranulf noticed her and decided that he wanted to make Christina his newest concubine. The author states, “Satan filled his [Ranulf’s] heart with lust for her [Christina].”³⁶⁶ Because Ranulf was a powerful Norman, and his liaison with Alveva had ended, a relationship between Ranulf and Christina offered Autti and Beatrix a new opportunity for political security and status, and they encouraged the affair.³⁶⁷ To deny Ranulf would mean jeopardizing her family’s political position, their wealth, and possibly their safety. The future of Christina’s family rested in her willingness to renege on her vow of celibacy and become the concubine of a powerful man.

Christina immediately refused and the author uses her obstinance to showcase her intellect, one of many masculine virtues. Immediately after their first meeting, Ranulf ordered his men to bring Christina to his bed chamber where he intended to rape her.³⁶⁸ To emphasize Christina’s intellect and pragmatism, the author notes the mismatch in their physical strength and power, stating “the wolf and the lamb, together in the same room.”³⁶⁹ The scene continues with a drunk and violent Ranulf grabbing after Christina to overpower her. Christina quickly realized she could not match Ranulf’s physical strength and knew that if he caught her, he would rape her. Desperate to preserve her

³⁶⁶ BL Cotton Tiberius MS E. I, f. 146r; *The Life*, 43. *Ceterum hoc Invidia diaboli ferre diu non potuit. Unde ad conturbandam illam exardescens. Hoc incium sumpsit. [...] Quodam tempore cum esset illic. Et de more venisset ad eum amicus suus Aucti cum liberis suis: factum est ut episcopus elegantem puellam intencius consideraret. Continuo misit in cor eius inceptor libidinis Satanas u team male concupisceret.*

³⁶⁷ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 146r; see also: Talbot, *The Life*, 43.

³⁶⁸ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 146r; see also: Talbot, *The Life*, 43.

³⁶⁹ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 146r. *lupum videlicet et agnum in una domo simul dereliquerunt.*

celibacy, Christina managed to outsmart him and pretended to bolt the door. but escaped instead. To gain access to the door, Christina first had to convince Ranulf to let her go. The author comments, “hear how wisely she acted” before detailing how Christina convinced Ranulf that she wanted to lock the door lest anyone walk in on them mid-coitus.³⁷⁰ Christina managed to outwit Ranulf, unlocked the door, shut it behind her, locked it, and then ran home. The scene bears some resemblance to St. Katherine’s victorious debate against the fifty orators, in which she managed to outsmart and outspoke them all.³⁷¹ In his essay comparing Christina of Markyate to the virgin and ascetic martyrs, Samuel Fanous argues that the author included this scene specifically to accentuate the similarities between St. Katherine and Christina, emphasizing that the confrontation becomes Christina’s first encounter with spiritual combat.³⁷²

As a response to Christina’s insolence and refusal to submit to the bishop, Ranulf and Christina’s parents quickly arranged a politically advantageous marriage between Christina and a young Norman nobleman. For Christina’s parents, the marriage meant undoing the damage she had caused by refusing Ranulf’s sexual advances and securing their social rank and wealth. Ranulf’s intent, according to the author, was to deprive Christina of her virginity and penalize her for rejecting him.³⁷³ The ensuing confrontation between Christina, her parents, and Burthred gave the author of *The Life* the opportunity to showcase Christina’s masculine virtue and strength. Most

³⁷⁰ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.146v. *Audi ergo prudenter egit.*

³⁷¹ London, British Library, Cotton MS Caligula A viii, ff. 175v-176r.

³⁷² Samuel Fanous, “Christina of Markyate and the Double Crown,” in *Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser (London: Routledge, 2005) 54.

³⁷³ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 146r-v

significantly, the marriage provided an opportunity to prove Christina's heroic commitment to virginity and, as Fanous argues, offered a venue for Christina to perform a "martyrdom of the will."³⁷⁴ Moreover, the betrothal signals Christina's break from her temporal or earthly life and provides the catalyst that will propel her towards a complete, spiritual transformation.

To emphasize Christina's increasing masculine spirit, the author explicitly compares her to St. Cecilia, the prolific *virago* who, according to the medieval narratives, convinced her husband to commit to a celibate marriage. According to the author of *The Life*, Christina resolved to emulate St. Cecilia and attempted to convince her new husband, Burthred, to commit to a chaste marriage.³⁷⁵ In the medieval narrative of St. Cecilia's life and death, the third-century martyr convinced her husband, Valerian, to convert to Christianity and live with her in a celibate marriage.³⁷⁶ Initially, Valerian refused Cecilia's offer, but her virtue and constancy convinced Valerian and he agreed. Cecilia also led Valerian's brother, Tiburtius to convert to Christianity and, according to the medieval accounts, both men converted because of Cecilia's wisdom, strength, and spiritual authority.³⁷⁷ In her work on medieval hagiography, Gail Ashton argues that the twelfth-century versions of St. Cecilia's *passio* emphasized her masculine, clerical status

³⁷⁴ Fanous, "Double Crown," 68.

³⁷⁵ Fanous, "Double Crown," 54.

³⁷⁶ Boninus Mombritius, "Passio Sanctae Ceciliae Virginis et Martyris," in *Sanctuarium sue Vitae Sanctorum, Vol. I*, (Paris, 1910), 333-4

³⁷⁷ Jacobus de Voragine, "De sancta Caecilia," in *Legenda Aurea*, ed. J.G. Graesse (Leipzig, 1801), 773. *Sancta Caecilia sic coelesti est dono resplesa, ut martirii palmam assumeret; ipsum mundum est cum thalms exacrata; testis est Valeriani conjugis et Tiburtii provocata confession, quos, domine, angelica manu odoriferis floribus corenasti, viros virgo duxit ad gloriam, mundus agnovit, quantum valeat devotion castitatis.*

and that clerics used the martyr as a teaching aid.³⁷⁸ Similarly, Fanous identifies a significant connection between Cecilia and Christina and argues that by invoking the image of St. Celia, Christina reframes her virginity within the context of martyrdom.

A closer look at this passage in the text reveals that the author chose to use the most masculinized or authoritative memory of Cecilia as he compared her to Christina. In the passage, the author opted to phrase the relation of Cecilia and her husband, Valerian as “beate Cecilie et sponsi sui Valeriani,” or “the blessed Cecilia and her husband Valerian.”³⁷⁹ This phrasing situates Valerian in a submissive role and Cecilia as the dominant spouse. In this story, Valerian is only important as he relates to the “blessed” Cecilia. Additionally, only Cecilia receives the moniker, *beata* or “blessed,” even though the medieval Church recognized them both as saints. Finally, in *The Life*, the author does not present Cecilia as the passive and submissive saint that appears in later medieval English texts; rather, this Cecilia is the dominant figure in her celibate marriage. Moreover, in the twelfth-century narrative, Cecilia is the person responsible for the activities that eventually earned sainthood for both herself and Valerian. By making this explicit comparison, the author conveys a strong, undeniably authoritative example of the *virago* for comparison to Christina.

The author reifies the connection by including a scene between Christina and Burthred on their wedding night. Describing the night of their nuptials, the author writes,

³⁷⁸ Gail Ashton, *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 55

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

[...] she welcomed the young man [Burthred] into her room as if he had been her brother. Sitting on her bed with him, she strongly encouraged him to live a chaste life, offering the saints as examples. She described to him in detail the story of St. Cecilia and her husband Valerian, telling him how at their death they were accounted worthy to receive crowns of unsullied chastity from the hands of an angel.³⁸⁰

The author explains that, though Burthred was Christina's husband and he had a legal right to consummate the marriage, she refused to share her body with him.³⁸¹ According to the author, Christina and Burthred spent nearly the entire night talking about her proposed arrangement, but she could not convince her husband. Eventually he left her alone and untouched.³⁸²

As the scene in the bedroom progresses, the author presents another opportunity to accentuate Christina's authority and dominance. According to the Tiberius text, after Burthred left her parents quickly realize that the pair had not consummated the marriage. Fearing that Christina's vow of celibacy will cost them another politically advantageous opportunity, they turn on Burthred, calling his manhood into question. The author writes,

When those who had forced him [Burthred] into the room
[Christina's bedchamber] and the men had heard what had

³⁸⁰ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.146v; *The Life*, 44. *At vel providencia cui se commiserate inventa vigilans atque vestita. Iuvenem quasi germanum letabunda suscepit. Et apud lectum suum cum ipso residens. Multum ad caste vivendum exhortans. Exempla quoque sanctorum ei proposuit. Historiam ordine retexuit illi beate Cecilie et sponsi sui Valeriani. Qualiter illibate pudicie coronas eciam morituri meruerunt accipere de manu angeli.*

³⁸¹ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.146v.

³⁸² BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 147r.

happened, they joined together in calling him a pathetic and weak man. With a bevy of rebukes, they provoked him, and forced him back into her bedroom the next night, and warned him not to be deceived by her cunning tricks and foolish words, and warned him not to lose his masculinity. He was to have her, either by force or flattery, and if neither of these worked, then they would be there to help: all he had to mind was to be a man.³⁸³

In this instance, Burthred's masculinity becomes the focus, and Christina's power to unman him becomes the issue. The author clarifies that, even though Christina emulated the virtue of Cecilia, Burthred was not a parallel to Valerian. Moreover, by choosing to walk out of the room and not force himself on Christina, Burthred quickly aroused the ire of Christina's parents and many of their guests, culminating in the scene where a hoard of drunken men leveled insults at Burthred and proclaimed that he must "*modo meminerit esse virum*," or "remember to be a man."³⁸⁴ Thus, in refusing to consummate her marriage, Christina jeopardized Burthred's manhood while simultaneously espousing strength and constancy, two characteristics of masculinity.

Christina and Biblical Men

³⁸³ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.147r; *The Life*, 50. *Per eum edocti qui introduxerant illum quid factum fuerat. Ignavum ac nullius usus iuvenem conclamant. Et multis exprobracionibus animum eius denuo accendentes: alia nocte impingunt in thalamum magnopere prestructum. Ne infinitis ambagibus et candidis sermonibus fallentis effeminetur. Sed omnio seu prece seu vi voto suo pociatur. Quod si neutron prevaleat per se: sciat Ipsos protinus sibi suffragio adesse. Modo meminerit esse virum.*

³⁸⁴ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.147r

The author of Christina's life makes several parallels between Christina and biblical figures. In his essay, "Christina of Markyate and the Double Crown," Fanous makes a convincing argument that the author of *The Life* models the work on the medieval narratives of both the virgin and ascetic martyrs.³⁸⁵ However, that anonymous author also uses the narratives of biblical men to construct the image of Christina of Markyate and to provide the reader with unequivocally male archetypes in which to compare Christina. After Burthred faced the ridicule of the drunkards, those men descended on Christina with the intent of raping and beating her into submission. According to the author's account, Christina heard the approaching men and managed to evade them by hiding behind a tapestry. The author commends her courage and reminds the reader that a lesser person would have trembled in fear, but Christina remained strong and in her fear whispered a prayer that invoked the legacy of the Old Testament King David.³⁸⁶ The author writes, "Then, this handmaiden of Christ, with a renewed spirit, prayed to God: 'Turn them backward, those who would harm me.'"³⁸⁷ Her prayer mirrors Psalm 69: 4, which reads "convertantur retrorsum et erubescant qui volunt malum mihi revertantur ad vestigium confusionis [...]," or "Let them be turned backward, and blush for shame that desire evils to me: Let them be presently turned away blushing for shame."³⁸⁸ By portraying Christina praying the same prayer as King David while she

³⁸⁵ Fanous, "Double Crown," 53.

³⁸⁶ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.146v-r.

³⁸⁷ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.147r; Talbot, *The Life*, 52. *Tunc ancilla Christi resumpto spiritu oravit ad Dominum dicens: Avertantur retrorsum qui volunt michi mala.*

³⁸⁸ Latin Vulgate and Douay-Rheims Translations, Psalms 69:4.

clings to a wall behind a tapestry, the author creates a direct and distinct parallel between the young girl and the famed biblical hero.

After successfully eluding the gang of angry men, Christina's mentor and friend, Sueno the canon of Huntingdon, heard about the events. Sueno served as Christina's first spiritual advisor and the first person in whom she confided after making her unofficial vow. Even though she was a young girl, Sueno confirmed her decision to remain celibate and promised to protect her, should that need ever arise.³⁸⁹ However, when news reached Sueno that Christina had rejected her husband and refused to submit to him as a wife, the canon gave in to the political pressure of his Norman lords and accused her of *muliebris inconstancie* or "feminine fickleness."³⁹⁰ The author remarks that, devastated by the betrayal, Christina "heaved deep sighs and erupted into a flood of tears."³⁹¹

Despite her emotional turmoil, Christina remained committed to her vow and the author commends her strength, contrasting it with Sueno's weakness. The author writes, "and where the man failed, the girl persevered."³⁹² The author's choice of words is deliberate. Rather than using the noun *mulier* or "woman" the author uses the weaker word, *puella* or girl, to compare Christina and Sueno, a powerful man and, for a brief time, one of her enemies. In this way, the author reifies his position that Christina, a young girl, was empowered by the spirit of God and acted like King David, who is also

³⁸⁹ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 145r; *The Life*, 37.

³⁹⁰ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 148r; *The Life*, 55.

³⁹¹ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 148r; *The Life*, 55. *Post hec trahens alta suspiria in profusionem lacrimarum erupit.*

³⁹² BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.148r; *The Life*, 55 *Et ecce iam puella perseverante vir deficit.*

described as a “young boy” (*adulescens*) when he faced down Goliath.³⁹³ Similarly, Christina rose victorious against Sueno; she stood tall, just as David stood tall over the toppled corpse of his giant enemy.³⁹⁴ Thus, the author emphasizes Christina’s *virago* spirit by comparing her to a famously powerful young man.

The author also compared Christina to Christ. The author remarks that Christina prayed for strength when she realized that her only friend, the person she trusted, had abandoned her.³⁹⁵ Rather than proving Sueno right in his assertion that she would give in to feminine inconstancy, Christina reaffirmed her vow and was “strengthened by the Holy Spirit.”³⁹⁶ At this moment in *The Life*, the author signifies a significant spiritual change and states that Christina marked the transformation by changing her name from Theodora to Christina. The author closes the scene by comparing Christina to Christ, writing,

Thus, as Christ was rejected by the Jews, and then was denied by Peter, the leader of the apostles, who loved Christ more than the others, and he became obedient to God, even after death; similarly, this virgin was first repeatedly beaten by her parents, then she was forsaken by Sueno, her only friend.³⁹⁷

³⁹³ Latin Vulgate I Samuel 17:42. *cumque inspexisset Philistheus et vidisset David despexit eum erat enim adulescens rufus et pulcher aspectu.*

³⁹⁴ Latin Vulgate I Samuel 17: 50. *praevaluitque David adversus Philistheum in funda et in lapide percussusque Philistheum interfecit cumque gladium non haberet in manu David.*

³⁹⁵ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 148r. See also: Talbot, *The Life*, 57.

³⁹⁶ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 148r. *Spiritu sancto roborata.*

³⁹⁷ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.148r. *The Life*, 56. *Nimirum sicut Christus prius a Judeis reprobatus. Post ab ipso apostolorum principe Petro qui eum ardentius ceteris amaverat negates. Factus est obediens*

The comparison to Jesus elevates Christina to a status of Christ-like devotion and spirit. Like Christ, Christina faced betrayal from both her family and her most trusted friend. When Sueno learned that this girl had endured the duplicity of everyone she trusted and remained resolute in her commitment to Christ, he acknowledged his own personal weakness and asked Christina to forgive him.³⁹⁸ Christina, like Christ, forgave her friend and welcomed him back into her life.

After this reconciliation, Autti brought his daughter before Fredebert, the prior of St. Mary's in Huntingdonshire, in another attempt to persuade her to marry Burthred. According to the author, Autti framed his appeal to the prior by stating that, in rejecting the marriage, Christina dishonored her parents and brought shame and misfortune to her family.³⁹⁹ Autti implied that, by refusing her marriage to Burthred and bringing dishonor to her parents, Christina violated the scriptures.⁴⁰⁰ After hearing Autti's plea, Fredebert sent Autti away and spoke to Christina privately. According to *The Life*, it seems, at first, that Fredebert agreed with Autti and said to Christina, "We know that you are married according to ecclesiastical custom. The sacrament of marriage, which is sanctioned by divine law, cannot be dissolved."⁴⁰¹ Christina responds to Fredebert and vehemently proclaims that her father had forced the marriage on her and then declares, "I have never been a wife and have never considered becoming one. I have known from birth that I

Patri usque ad mortem. Sic et hec virgo prius a parentibus afflicta. Post ab unico amico suo Suenine derelicta."

³⁹⁸ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 148r.

³⁹⁹ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.148r. *Nos scimus te fuisse desponsatam ecclesiastico more. Nos scimus sacramentum ciniugii divina sancitum institutione non posse solvi.*

⁴⁰⁰ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.148r.

⁴⁰¹ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 148r.

have chosen celibacy and vowed to Christ to remain a virgin.”⁴⁰² The passage reflects Jerome’s fourth-century declaration that, once a woman desires to serve Christ, “she will cease being a woman and be called male.”⁴⁰³ According to the author, Christina never wavered. She remained resolute, constant, and strong. Eventually, her efforts proved worthwhile and the bishop of Lincoln, Roger Bloet, promised to release Christina from the marriage.

Christum nuda sequere

The cavalcade of horrors that followed the dissolution of Christina’s marriage to Burthred provide some of the most transformative moments in *The Life*. Both of Christina’s parents serve as antagonists in her struggle, but her father proves the most brutal. After Robert Bloet agreed to release Christina from her marriage, he quickly reversed his decision and ordered Burthred and Christina to appear before him.⁴⁰⁴ According to *The Life*, Robert of Bloet repealed his judgement after accepting a bribe from Autti; moreover, Christina’s refusal to submit to Robert’s judgement reversal infuriated and humiliated the bishop.⁴⁰⁵ Christina maintained her objection to the marriage and she attempted to leave the room, refusing to obey Burthred’s orders. Angered by her obstinance, Burthred angrily pulled at her cloak and attempted to hold her down, but when he realized he would never be able to force her to submit, Burthred

⁴⁰² BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 148v; *The Life*, 60. *Non tamen uxor ante extiti. Nec unquam fore cogitavi. Quantocius scitote quod elegerim ab infancia castitatem et voverim Christo me permansuram virginem.*

⁴⁰³ PL 26:533.

⁴⁰⁴ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 150r.

⁴⁰⁵ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, 149v; Talbot, *The Life*, 65.

released Christina and handed her over to her father.⁴⁰⁶ Soon after, Autti engaged in a vicious cycle of imprisoning Christina, then exiling her, then hunting her down, and then confining her again. In the midst of this cycle, the author recounts a moment between Autti and Christina that mirrors a topos of transformation present in the medieval narratives of female martyrs: the stripping of the virgin.

In the medieval narratives of the virgin martyrs, nakedness is a central theme and typically signifies a major moment of transformation when the woman martyr disassociates from her corporeal sex. In her work on the medieval construction of virginity, Salih argues that, in the stories of the virgin martyrs, the act of stripping them naked served both to humiliate the virgins and provide them with an opportunity to prove their indifference to being paraded in public completely nude.⁴⁰⁷ Salih continues by stating that “By being unashamed of their nakedness, the virgins in the Katherine Group likewise deny that they are sexually desirable females. They make their nakedness mean not sexuality, but virginity.”⁴⁰⁸ Similarly, Margaret Miles examines the meaning of nakedness for medieval woman and argues that “[...] these women [Virgin Martyrs] used their nakedness as a symbolic rejection, not only of sexuality, but also of secular society’s identification of the female body with male desire, its relegation of the female naked body to spectacle and object.”⁴⁰⁹ Additionally, the act of stripping, or being stripped naked, provided the medieval writers a way to symbolize the total rejection of

⁴⁰⁶ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 150v.

⁴⁰⁷ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 84.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 85.

⁴⁰⁹ Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston; Beacon Press, 1989), 24.

womanhood, the first step in the process of becoming male. No longer an object of sexual desire or a vessel for procreation, the woman is freed from the biological limitations of her sex. She is free to transform, to become a *virago*.

In the medieval legends of St. Juliana and St. Margaret, the act of stripping the virgin naked provides an opportunity to showcase their masculine resolve. In Voraigue's thirteenth-century account of St. Margaret's legend, he writes,

She [Margaret] was presented before the judge and again she refused to sacrifice to the pagan gods, as a result the judge ordered that she be stripped naked and burned with torches; 'all wondered how so delicate a girl could withstand such torture.'⁴¹⁰

In this account, Margaret's nakedness reminds the reader, or listener, that the person enduring the torment was a woman; she did not act like a delicate girl, but a strong and resolute *virago*. Similarly, in Juliana's legend, when she refused to marry the nobleman, Eleusis, her father, Africanus, orders his men to strip her naked and beat her flesh.⁴¹¹ When this failed to deter Juliana, Eleusis then ordered soldiers to stretch her naked body on the ground and mutilate her flesh.⁴¹² In both cases, the act of stripping these women naked only seemed to galvanize their faith and resolve.

⁴¹⁰ Voraigue, p. 370.

⁴¹¹ London, British Library, Harley MS 3020 f.99fr; Bonitius Mombritius, "Passio Sancte Julianae Martyris," in *Sanctuarium seu Vitae Sanctorum* Vol. II (Paris, Albertum Fotemoing, 1910, 1430), 77.

⁴¹² Harley MS 3020 f.99fr; Mombritius, "Passio Sancte Julianae," 77. *Audiens hoc praefectus commotus iracundia jussit eam caedi extensa vero in terra sancta juliana a quatuor viris nuda coepit caedi ita ut in ipsa sex milites vicissim caedentes mutarentur post haec jussit cessari*

The author of *The Life* mirrors this convention when he describes a violent interaction between Christina and her father. Christina's obstinance drove Burthred away and Autti, incensed at the potential economic loss, intensified his efforts to subdue and control his daughter. Daily Autti would berate and beat his daughter, and Christina would run to her bedchamber for respite. On one occasion, Autti ran after her, cornered her in her room, and stripped off her clothes.⁴¹³ As Christina stood before him, naked and resolute, he drove her from the house and screamed "get out as fast as you can. If you want to have Christ, then naked follow the naked Christ!"⁴¹⁴ Fanous argues that Autti's act of stripping his daughter naked "accords perfectly with Juliana's father's fury and the wrath of the authorities from virgin-martyr lives, who angrily strip their prisoner as an expression of their failure to influence her will."⁴¹⁵ Moreover, by displaying the naked female flesh, Christina and the virgin martyrs are both removed from the heterosexual economy and, by remaining unphased at the public display of their nude flesh, they demonstrate their indifference to their female sex. The process of public humiliation allows the virgin martyr to separate their spiritual identity from their physical appearance. Similarly, once Christina's father has stripped her naked, he forces her out of the house and calls after her to "Christum nuda sequere," or "follow Christ, naked," a variation of the Franciscan directive to "nudus nudum Christum sequi" or "naked follow

⁴¹³ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.150r; *The Life*, 72. *Tunc pater suus vehementer iratus omnibus eam indumentis preter camisiam expoliavit et claves suas quas eii commendaverat rapiens: ipsam de nocte sic expellere de domo sua disposuit.*

⁴¹⁴ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.150r; *The Life*, 72. *Si enim Christum vis habere: Christum nuda sequere.*

⁴¹⁵ Fanous, "Double Crown," 59.

the naked Christ.” By stripping Christina, Autti freed her to reject womanhood for the sake of Christ and become a *virago*.

The *fortissimo militis Deo*

After beating his daughter and stripping her naked, Autti brought Christina back to his house to endure another program of torture and abuse. When the beatings and humiliations failed to convince Christina to obey the commands of her parents, Beatrix turned to other methods of persuasion, consulting crones for potions and charms that might supernaturally change Christina’s mind.⁴¹⁶ But when a Jewish soothsayer informed Beatrix that Christina had two heavenly bodyguards and that any attempt to bribe, change, or harm the young virgin would not change her mind, Beatrix turned to violence once again.⁴¹⁷ Day and night Beatrix beat her daughter, at one point throwing her beaten, bloody body into a crowded banquet hall for everyone to mock.⁴¹⁸ But, just as the medieval narratives of St. Margaret and St. Juliana demonstrate, the bodily suffering and public humiliation only served to strengthen Christina’s spirit and eventually, as the author determines, allowed Christina to transform into a *fortissimo militis Deo*, or the “strongest soldier for God.”

To emphasize the divine sanction of her spiritual change, the author weaves accounts of Christina’s visions throughout the text. In the folios that account for the period of physical torment and torture, the author narrates a vision Christina experienced

⁴¹⁶ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 150v.

⁴¹⁷ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 150v.

⁴¹⁸ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f 150v.

in which the Virgin Mary visited her and offered her a biblical example to admire and emulate. The author describes Christina ascending a staircase to a heavenly chamber where she met the Virgin Mother and sat beside her, laying her head in the Virgin's lap.⁴¹⁹ When Christina began to weep, the Virgin Mother calmed her and invoked the name and image of Judith, the Old Testament heroine who assassinated Holofernes and helped liberate her people from the Assyrians.⁴²⁰

By invoking Judith's name as a source of comfort and inspiration for Christina, the author likens his medieval contemporary to the famously gallant Old Testament heroine. In Jerome's Latin Vulgate, the story of Judith's courageous conquest to defeat the general Holofernes reaches its conclusion with a simple verse,

For you have acted manfully, and your heart has been strengthened
because you have loved chastity and knew no other man after your
husband; thus, the hand of the Lord has strengthened you and you will be
blessed forever.⁴²¹

The verse praises Judith's faith and strength, commending her for acting manfully; moreover, the passage indicates that she will reap the spiritual benefits of her masculine actions and receive the blessings of God as a result. By invoking Judith's name, the author makes a clever reference to Christina's own spiritual battles and similarly, constructs an image of Christina as a twelfth-century Judith.

⁴¹⁹ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 151r.

⁴²⁰ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 151r; Latin Vulgate Judith

⁴²¹ Latin Vulgate, Judith 15:11. *quia fecisti viriliter et confortatum est cor tuum eo quod castitatem amaveris et post virum tuum alterum non scieris ideo et manus Domini confortavit te et ideo eris benedicta in aeternum.*

Eventually, the stories of Christina's torment and her courage in the face of brutal violence reached the monastery at St. Alban's. The canon Sueno, who had once championed Autti's causes against Christina, told the prior of St. Albans, Fredebert, about Christina's experiences. According to the author, Christina described to Sueno and Fredebert the violence and torment she endured because of her commitment to God.⁴²² Christina also shared the vision of laying her head on the Virgin's lap and the comfort she received from that vision.⁴²³ Christina's courage in the face of constant violence and her vision of the Virgin convinced Sueno and Fredebert to champion her cause. They approached Christina's father and asked him to release her, but Autti responded with obstinacy and continued to persecute his daughter. Ultimately, word of Christina's courage and strength reached Roger the Hermit and Eadwin, a recluse at St. Albans, and, inspired by the strength of her spirit, they traveled to Canterbury to advocate for Christina's release.⁴²⁴ They spoke with the Archbishop, Ralph, and described how Christina had devoted her virginity to Christ as a young child and that for years she had withstood the brutality of her parents.⁴²⁵ When the archbishop asked if Christina had ever surrendered her innocence as a result of the violence, Eadwin replied that "she was pure of both mind and body."⁴²⁶ The archbishop grieved over Christina's anguish and

⁴²² BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 151r

⁴²³ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 151v.

⁴²⁴ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 152r-v.

⁴²⁵ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 152r.

⁴²⁶ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 152r. *quod mented et corpore sit incorrupta.*

torment, but offered thanks to God for her perseverance and then proclaimed Christina a *fortissimo militis Deo* or “powerful soldier of Christ.”⁴²⁷

The interaction between Eadwin and the archbishop of Canterbury precedes the next significant moment of Christina’s transformation. After returning from his audience with the archbishop, Eadwin and Christina begin secretly conspiring and arrange for her rescue. The author provides a detailed narrative of Christina’s final and successful escape. The author writes,

[Christina] covertly took the male clothing, which she had secretly readied beforehand, and disguised herself as a man. She walked out of the house shrouded in a long cloak that reached to her heels. [...] But, as she walked out, a piece of cloth beneath her cloak slipped to the ground, either on accident or on purpose, I do not know. When Matilda [Christina’s sister] saw it, she said: ‘Theodora, what is this that you are trailing on the ground?’ But she replied with an innocent look: ‘Sister dear, take it with you when you go back to the house for it is getting in my way.’ And she handed over to her a [woman’s] veil and her father’s keys.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁷ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.152v. *The Life*, 84. *Tunc ille verus Dei servus super angustiis afflicte virginis ingemuit. Ceterum de perseverancia eiusdem fortissimo militis Deo gracias egit.*

⁴²⁸ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.153r-v. *The Life*, 90-92. *Sumptisque clanulo vestimentis virilibus que preparaverat sibi et eludens in sexum virilem vestita cappa talari exivit foras. [...] Et dum iret ecce una de manicis fustanii quod occulte sub cappa gerebat cecidit in terram sive incuria gestantis sive industria nescio. Qua visa Matildis: ait. Quid est hoc Theodora unde verris terram? At illa blande dixit ad eam. Cara mihi soror accipe. Regrediensque deferto domum quoniam impedit me. Et baiulavit illi bombicinum*

In 1959, Talbot translated the phrase “et dum iret ecce una de manicis fustanii quod occulte sub cappa gerebat cecidit in terram,” to mean “one of the sleeves of the man’s garment which she was hiding beneath her garment slipped to the ground. However, the word in the manuscript, *fustanii*, does not have a definition in any modern Latin dictionary. An alternative, and more accurate translation of the noun, *fustanii*, is “cloth” rather than sleeve.⁴²⁹

Another point of contention with the 1959 Talbot translation concerns Christina’s veil. As mentioned, in Talbot’s translation, the fallen cloth that catches Matilda’s eye was a piece of a “man’s garment,” but there is nothing in the context of the passage to indicate that a part of Christina’s male garments fell off.⁴³⁰ In Fanous and Leyser’s 2008 translation, they use Talbot’s version and offer a similar translation of the passage. However, in the following interaction, Christina picks up the fallen cloth, and according to the author, “handed over to her [Matilda] a veil and her father’s keys.”⁴³¹ This concluding sentence implies that rather than a man’s sleeve, Christina’s veil slipped off and almost foiled her escape.

The handing over of the keys and veil, along with Christina’s remarks about their insignificance, indicates a significant moment of transformation. It is possible that the author included this scene as a reference to Tertullian’s early third-century treatise *De*

clavesque patris: dicens. Et has partier dulcis michi anima. Ne si pater noster interim venerit. Et in qualibet archarum suarum videre quippiam affectaverit non inveniens claves ad manum moleste ferat.

⁴²⁹ Thanks are due to Dr. Robert Gorman, professor in the Religious and Classics Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for working through the mystery of this word with me. After careful deliberation, Dr. Gorman determined the most accurate translation of this word is “cloth.” Thus, moving forward I accept Dr. Gorman’s translation and include it in my interpretation of the text.

⁴³⁰ Talbot, *The Life*, 90-91.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*

virginibus velandis, in which he endorsed the practice of veiling unmarried and married women in the church.⁴³² Filtered through approximately nine centuries of Christian tradition, Tertullian's ideas on head coverings for women equate the practice of veiling women with modesty and obedience.⁴³³ By the twelfth century, the veil signified womanhood and femininity. In the passage, the author mentions the *fustanii*, or "cloth" slipping from Christina's sleeve; in the next passage, Christina hands her sister a veil, presumably the cloth that slipped from her cloak, and says to her sister, "take this for it is getting in my way."⁴³⁴ A metaphorical reading of this passage suggests that Christina hands her sister the remaining vestiges of her womanhood, the veil, and accentuates this symbolic act by proclaiming that it is her womanhood that is getting in the way of her religious vocation.

The transformation of Christina from young maiden to *virago* reaches its completion in the following passage. After successfully escaping Autti's house, Christina met with her companion and, as she mounted the horse, her man's cloak falls away revealing her naked body.⁴³⁵ Instinctively she covered her body in embarrassment. According to the author, her companion then turns to her and says,

Why do you revere your female sex? Clothe yourself in a
masculine soul and mount that horse like a man! After that,
she jumped on the horse like a man and set the spurs to his

⁴³² Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, ed. and trans. S. Thelwall (The Ante-Nicene Christian Library, 1870), 154-180.

⁴³³ Tertullian, *De virginibus*; F. Forrester Church, "Sex and Salvation in Tertullian," *Harvard Theological Review* 68 (1975), 83-101, 91.

⁴³⁴ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 153v.

⁴³⁵ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 152v.

flanks. She said to the servant: ‘follow me: for I fear that if
you ride with me and we are caught, they will kill you.’⁴³⁶

This short excerpt holds the entire weight of Christina’s transformation. After leaving behind the symbol of her womanhood, the falling robe forced her to confront the physical embodiment of her sex. When the male cloak fell away, Christina stood before her male companion naked. Instinctually, she attempted to cover herself, but her friend quickly admonished the action, asking her: “*quid sexum veninei vereris?*” or “why do you revere your female sex?”⁴³⁷ He declared to Christina that from that moment her female body had lost its social meaning; she had fulfilled Jerome’s directive and put aside her womanhood to serve Christ. Her friend then urged her to clothe herself instead in the soul of a man. Through the voice of the author, Christina’s companion directs her to clothe herself with a masculine soul. Christina leapt on the horse, transformed, and then took command as a fully transformed *virago*.

Christina’s spiritual transformation is affirmed in a pivotal interaction after she has entered her enclosure cell at Markyate. For several years after she escaped from her father’s house, Christina lived in hiding to avoid being discovered.⁴³⁸ Shortly after Christina’s final escape, Burthred released her from the marriage.⁴³⁹ Soon after, Christina traveled with her friend and mentor, Roger the Hermit, to visit the Archbishop, Thurstan, to seek an annulment from her marriage, an official confirmation of her vow, and

⁴³⁶ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.152v; *The Life*, 92. *Quid sexum feminei vereris? Virilem animum indue. Et more viri in equum ascende. Dehinc ab animitate: viriliter super equum saliens atque calcaribus eius latera pungens famulo dixit. Sequere me a tergo. Timeo ne si mecum equitaveris: de nobis tu moriaris.*

⁴³⁷ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.152v.

⁴³⁸ *The Life*, 113.

⁴³⁹ *The Life*, 109.

permission for Burthred to marry another woman with church consent.⁴⁴⁰ Christina's continued efforts to rid herself of Burthred angered her father and Robert Bloet, even after Burthred had released Christina from their marriage.⁴⁴¹ Because of this, Christina lived in hiding for many years in a tiny cell.

While at Markyate, Christina met a young cleric the author refuses to identify because, as he states, he was compelled to not reveal his name.⁴⁴² Upon meeting Christina, the cleric reportedly felt an intense sexual attraction to her and began a relentless campaign of sexual assaults.⁴⁴³ According to the author, Christina initially felt a similar sexual desire for the cleric and prayed constantly for the strength to resist the cleric's advances.⁴⁴⁴

Christina, unlike the unnamed male cleric, managed to resist temptation. Lauding Christina with praises for her stalwart ability to deny her flesh, the author used the episode to award Christina with the *virago* epithet. He writes,

[the cleric] sometimes said that she was more like a man than a woman, and she, the *virago* with her masculine virtues could have justifiably called him a woman. Would you like to know how manfully she behaved in looming danger? Violently, she resisted the desires of her flesh, for fear that her own genitals should become agents of evil

⁴⁴⁰ *The Life*, 113.

⁴⁴¹ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f 155v.

⁴⁴² BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 156 v.

⁴⁴³ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 156v.

⁴⁴⁴ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 156v.

against her. Violently she scourged her flesh, drank very little water, endured long periods of fasting by eating only herbs, and spent nights without sleep.⁴⁴⁵

In this passage, the author accomplishes two objectives: he assigns Christina the epithet “*virago*” and explains how she constantly battled the weakness of her female sex. Additionally, the author emphasizes Christina’s masculine soul by offering a religious, biologically male figure to whom he could compare her. At the opening of the excerpt, the author states that Christina performed her manliness with such vigor that she could have justifiably called the lusty cleric a “woman.” The author further accentuates the power of Christina’s virtuous, masculine soul when he writes, “nothing repelled his [the unnamed cleric] attacks so effectively as the prayers and tears of the lowly ascetic virgin.”⁴⁴⁶

Christina and the Fellowship of Men

In the latter half of Christina’s *vita*, her relationships with men become the mechanism through which the author emphasizes her fully realized status as *virago*. As Christina endured the physical torments that allowed her to progress through a process of transformation, she developed a series of antagonistic relationships with men. Autti, Burthred, Ranulf, the bishop of Lincoln, and even Sueno for a time, served as Christina’s

⁴⁴⁵ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.156v; *The Life*, 114. *Unde nonnunquam virum illam non feminam esse dicebat quem virago virtute virili predita recte effeminatum appellare poterat. Vis scire quam viriliter ipsa se continuerit in tam grandi periculo? Violenter respuebat desideria sue carnis. Ne propria membra exhiberet adversum se arma iniquitatis. Protracta ieiunia. Modicus cibus isque crudarum herbarum. Potus aque ad mensuram. Noctes insomnes. Severa verbera.*

⁴⁴⁶ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f.156v; *The Life*, 116. *Nichil enim suas tam retundebat sagittas quam in oracione et lacrimis sese virginea mactaret humilitas.*

persecutors. The constant physical violence, abuse, torture, and sexual assaults created a spiritual arena in which Christina demonstrated her inner manliness. Just as with the virgin martyrs, the process of corporeal torment purified Christina's soul and allowed her to become, in the eyes of the author, masculinized. During her voluntary internment at Markyate, Christina continued to suffer from extreme bouts of fasting, harsh weather, and painful illnesses that contributed to the strengthening and purification of her soul.⁴⁴⁷ Both of these processes of corporeal ordeal elevated Christina, in the mind of the author, and in the latter half of *The Life*, Christina's relationships with men change and evolve. The author uses these male relationships to underscore and reify Christina's masculine image.

The relationships Christina developed after beginning her religious life as a recluse have earned a fair amount of attention from scholars in recent years. In his essay "The Loves of Christina of Markyate," Stephen Jager argues that the male friendships Christina forms in the latter half *The Life* play out like a medieval romance and suggests that Roger, the unnamed cleric, and Geoffrey each exist in her story as romantic lovers.⁴⁴⁸ Stephanie Hollis and Joycelyn Wogan-Browne note that Christina's friendships with men reflect an early Anglo-Saxon tradition of close relationships between bishops and abbesses in double monasteries.⁴⁴⁹ Dyan Elliot looks to St. Jerome's friendship with Eustochium to demonstrate that monastic traditions did support platonic friendships

⁴⁴⁷ Talbot, *The Life*, 103-107.

⁴⁴⁸ C. Stephen Jager, "The Loves of Christina of Markyate," in *Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser (London: Routledge, 2008), 100-101.

⁴⁴⁹ Stephanie Hollis and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "St. Albans and Women's Monasticism: Lives and their Foundations in Christina's World," in *Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser (London: Routledge, 2008), 33-35.

between men and women despite the limitations and barriers of Christian gender hierarchies.⁴⁵⁰ Despite the depth of these works, however, the issue of Christina's status as *virago* and its implications for her friendships with men, specifically Abbot Geoffrey, have yet to be explored.

To understand the significance of Christina's relationship with Geoffrey de Goran, abbot of St. Albans, the reputation of this man must first be outlined. In the Tiberius text, Geoffrey has a legacy of nobility, power, and intelligence.⁴⁵¹ Regarding his demeanor the author writes, "[...] he became more arrogant than was reasonable and he relied more on his personal judgement than on the judgement of his monks, over whose religious guidance he presided."⁴⁵² Abbot Geoffrey presented himself as a proud and arrogant man who repudiated the advice and counsel of those around him.⁴⁵³ He reportedly paid little attention to Christina when he first encountered her and, according to Talbot, "brushed aside with disdain what he considered the pious vapping of a hysterical woman."⁴⁵⁴ According to the author, the focus on material wealth ultimately led Abbot Geoffrey into a spiritual crisis: though he had amassed great fortune and prominence, he had abandoned his role as spiritual caretaker for the people at St. Albans.⁴⁵⁵ But, as his relationship with Christina deepened, he began to respect and

⁴⁵⁰ Dyan Elliot, "Alternative Inimacies: Men, Women, and Spiritual Direction in the Twelfth Century," *Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser (London: Routledge, 2008), 170-171.

⁴⁵¹ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 159r; *The Life*, 134. *Disposuerat tamen subtilis ille rerum provisor et virginis inopie per virum illum occurrere virique mores per suam virginem ad se funditus revocare.*

⁴⁵² BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 159r; *The Life*, 134. *ex parentum tamen nobelium confluentia ridenteque fortuna plus iusto forsitan ceperat insolescere ac suo sensui quam monachorum.*

⁴⁵³ Talbot, "Introduction," 28.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁵⁵ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 159v.

admire her, and often relied on her for guidance. Furthermore, according to the author, “[...]it was through God’s virgin that God decided to engender this man’s [Abbot Geoffrey’s] full conversion.”⁴⁵⁶

In the interactions between Christina and Geoffrey, the author always portrays Christina as the wiser, more spiritually progressed of the two. The author writes, “he [Geoffrey] went to the maiden of Christ for advice as if she were place of refuge and he received her answer as if she were a divine oracle.”⁴⁵⁷ In her analysis of female spirituality in medieval Europe, Jane Tibbets Schulenburg notes that in general powerful men believed that the prayers of religious women were especially efficacious; thus, it is not especially unique that Geoffrey sought the prayers of Christina.⁴⁵⁸ However, Geoffrey’s reliance on Christina as a source of answers and insight is highly unusual and bears consideration.

Over time, Christina became Abbot Geoffrey’s most important and influential advisor. Regarding their relationship, the author writes,

She [Christina] did not make a secret of harshly reproaching Geoffrey in his presence, when she knew that he had sinned; she believed that the wounds of a friend are better than the flattery of the enemy [Proverbs 227:6].⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁶ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 159v.

⁴⁵⁷ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, 160r; *The Life*, 138. *et ancillam Christi ac si asyllum suum adeundo consulens. Responsum illius pro divino suscipiebat oraculo illud recolens evangelicum.*

⁴⁵⁸ Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, 500-1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 72-73.

⁴⁵⁹ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 160v. *Nec dissimulabat cum terrore presentem arguere. Quando senciebat absentem gravies deliquisse. Meliora reputans amici vulnera.*

Calling attention to Christina's unique position as a female advisor to Geoffrey the author added, "and he did not put his hope in man; however, he was very hopeful in God by means of a man, one may know the handmaiden of God, Christina."⁴⁶⁰ In this passage, as the author describes Christina as a spiritual advisor to Geoffrey, she becomes in that moment a *hominem* or "man," and then the author clarifies by stating that he is speaking of the "man" known to the reader as the "handmaiden of God, Christina." This single passage explicitly underscores Christina's position as a masculine woman.

In the remaining folios, as the author describes and expounds on Christina's relationship with Geoffrey, the author states emphatically, over and over, exactly how Abbot Geoffrey saw his female colleague. The author writes, "He [Geoffrey] had a deep respect for the maiden and saw in her something divine and extraordinary."⁴⁶¹ In 1136, when Stephen ascended to the throne of England, he chose to send Abbot Geoffrey to Rome to obtain the episcopal authorization of Stephen's rule.⁴⁶² Before embarking on the journey, Geoffrey consulted his most trusted advisor, Christina. Initially, she dissuaded him, offering dire warnings of a failed mission.⁴⁶³ But, since the order to travel came from his new king, Geoffrey set out for Rome and begged his wisest and most trusted female counselor to pray for his success.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶⁰ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 160v; *The Life*, 140. *Et licet spes eius non esset in homine. Set tamen spes eius multa in Deo per hominem. Ancillam scilicet Dei Christinam.*

⁴⁶¹ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 161r. *Veneratur ille virginem et divinum quid solito amplius in eadem amplectitur.*

⁴⁶² BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 162v.

⁴⁶³ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 162v-163r.

⁴⁶⁴ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 163r.

In 1139, Pope Innocent II called the Second Lateran Council and sent a letter to England requesting Abbot Geoffrey's attendance. In the text, the author states that Geoffrey longed to attend the council, but that before he committed to attending, Geoffrey first sought Christina's sanction.⁴⁶⁵ According to the author, Christina reluctantly offered her approval and stated that in her heart she did not approve and felt strongly that the mission to Rome held the possibility for danger.⁴⁶⁶ In the end, a letter sent by the apostolic legate to Theobald, the Archbishop of Canterbury, recalled Geoffrey's invitation to Rome.⁴⁶⁷ According to the author, Geoffrey responded to the rescindment of his invitation by reflecting on Christina's spiritual wisdom. According to the author, Geoffrey proclaimed that "the pure heart of the virgin [Christina] had more of God's power than the divisive and intelligent cunning of the great men of this world."⁴⁶⁸ In this statement, the author acknowledges Christina's sex by calling her *virago* and contrasts her with other lesser men: he affirms her masculine *virago* status by claiming that, through the power of God, she stood above the "cunning and great men of this world."

To uphold Christina's masculine status and justify her influence over Abbot Geoffrey, the author presents a new male character to affirm Christina's male spirit. Near the end of the text, the author introduces Simon, a monk from the Cluniac monastery of Bermondsey. The author portrays him as a fiercely devout and holy man. Over the years

⁴⁶⁵ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 163v; *The Life*, 160. *Gaudebat tamen virginis in hoc assensum comprobare.*

⁴⁶⁶ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 163v.

⁴⁶⁷ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 163r.

⁴⁶⁸ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 164r; *The Life*, 164-166. *Sentitque plus apud Deum virginis posse puritatem quam potentum seculi factiosam vel prudentem calliditatem.*

of Christina's residency at St. Albans, Simon initiated a friendship with her after hearing of Christina's Christian devotion and the spiritual efficacy of her prayers and guidance.⁴⁶⁹ In the text, the author describes a specific moment when Simon prayed and asked God to reveal the complete truth about Christina. Simon fasted and prayed, and for his efforts God gave him a vision in which he showed the authenticity of Christina's soul. The author writes,

One day, while the venerable man, Simon, celebrated Mass at the altar, he was deep in prayer and he saw, with surprise, Christina standing near the altar. He was astonished to see her there, for the virgin [Christina] could not have come out of her cell and it was near impossible that any woman would be allowed to approach the altar.⁴⁷⁰

The author uses this interaction to accentuate Christina's masculine soul. When Simon prayed and asks God to reveal the definitive truth about Christina, God gave Simon a vision in which Christina appeared before Simon standing at the altar. Additionally, the author remarks that the vision astonished Simon because Christina, a woman, stood in a place that the Church forbade women to occupy. Thus, in Simon's vision, in the final folios of the manuscript, Christina stands transformed in a space reserved for only the worthiest *virī Dei*, or "men of God."

⁴⁶⁹ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 165r.

⁴⁷⁰ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 165v; *The Life*, 176. *quadam die dum idem vir venerandus Simon altari astans missam celebraret sue postulacionis non immemor. Mirum dictu ipsam Cristinam videt altario consistere. Obstupefactus in hoc: neque enim virgo cellam egredi. sed nec ad altare illud mulier quelibet facile valebat admitti non multa sine admiracione rei prestolabatur exitum. Cum illa. Scias inquit carnem meam omnis corrupcionis immunem.*

Conclusion

The final years of Christina's life, and the final extant pages of her *vita*, remain a mystery to scholars. The Tiberius manuscript ends mid-sentence as the author describes Christina's constant affection for Abbot Geoffrey. Talbot offers an ellipsis to emphasize the abrupt and inconclusive ending. The Tiberius manuscript, though badly damaged from the 1731 fire, proves that the incomplete sentence is not a result of destruction but rather an unknown distraction that pulled the fourteenth-century scribe away from the manuscript, mid-sentence, and prevented him from finishing the text.⁴⁷¹ The subject of the incomplete text serves as the focus of Rachel Koopmans's 2001 essay, "The Conclusions of Christina of Markyate's *Vita*," and while Koopman does not provide a definitive answer to the mystery of the missing ending, she does offer a surprising analysis as to why this remarkable woman never achieved the fame and adoration the author wanted for her.

An obituary in the *St. Albans Psalter* memorializes the date of Christina's death, but not the year. She died on December 8 between 1155 and 1166, and the fact that no record exists to indicate in what year she died or where her body is buried suggests that perhaps not everyone felt the same admiration for Christina as Abbot Geoffrey or the anonymous man who wrote *The Life*.⁴⁷² Koopmans argues that "Christina's story has no conclusion," and regarding the legacy of her life after death, Koopmans states

⁴⁷¹ BL Cotton MS Tiberius E. I, f. 166v.

⁴⁷² Talbot, *The Life*, 15; Koopmans "Conclusions," 665.

emphatically, “there was a deliberate blackout.”⁴⁷³ She supports this position by noting that, after abbot Geoffrey’s death in 1146, St. Alban’s fell into a period of fighting and factionalism over the management of the monastery, and that the monks soon severed their connection to the priory at Markyate and refused to acknowledge, include, or commemorate Christina of Markyate.⁴⁷⁴ Perhaps this was a byproduct of Christina’s influence over abbot Geoffrey, or possibly the men in Christina’s life did not appreciate her constant presence, power, and authority in their male-dominated world.

The author of Christina’s *vita* presented a woman who lived entirely outside of the medieval conventions of femininity. In 1977, R.W. Hanning wrote of Christina’s story that it is “perhaps the twelfth century’s most effective and revealing personal history of a woman.”⁴⁷⁵ Hanning’s remarks ring especially true regarding Christina’s portrayal as a medieval *virago*, because *The Life* provides the clearest and strongest example of how male clerics applied the *virago* paradigm when constructing the lives and memories of their female contemporaries. The author repeatedly affirms that, because of the way Christina conducted her life and defied all earthly temptations, she was more masculine than most of the men in her life. Indeed, by the end of the incomplete manuscript, Christina appears completely transformed, from a young girl to a steadfast and virtuous *virago*.

⁴⁷³ Koopmans, “Conclusions,” 665.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 665-66.

⁴⁷⁵ R. W. Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (London: Yale University Press, 1977), 50.

CHAPTER 5
THE *ST. ALBANS PSALTER*: A MANUAL FOR THE *VIRAGO*

If at some time we are struck through by sword or spear or flying arrow, yet we shall not fall to the ground in vain, if we are proved manly, but we shall only be made more perfect in God, and shall be doubly encircled with faith and hope, so that, safe in the presence of God, we may be crowned.⁴⁷⁶

In the twelfth-century text detailing *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, the anonymous author describes a story in which the young anchorite sat in her tiny cell as throngs of toads spilled in through the walls. The author offers a descriptive account of the terrifying creatures with nefarious eyes as they crawled across a heavy psalter, laid across Christina's lap. According to the author's account, Christina cried out and prayed for spiritual victory over the demonic toads. She focused her attention to the devotional book and asked God for the strength and power to fight off the creatures. At once, according to the author, the fiendish amphibians disappeared from the cell, and Christina gave thanks to God for his mercy. The *St. Albans Psalter*, ornately decorated and meticulously illustrated, serves in this story as the impetus of spiritual power. The book provided the recluse with a triad of illustrated and textual instructions on how to arm herself with the virtue of spiritual manliness and become, as the *Psalter's* sponsor Abbot Geoffrey desired, a *virago*.

Three components of the *St. Albans Psalter* allow it to serve as a medieval instruction manual for the *virago*: the pictorial cycle of miniatures, the *Chanson of St*

⁴⁷⁶ Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St. Godehardkirche 1, p. 72. *Si aliquando gladio aut lancea seu volatili sagitta percussi fuerimus non tamen inanes decidemus si viriles probati sumus, sed tantum in deo perfectiores efficiemur, et fide et spe dupliciter accingemur. ut salvi coram deo coronemur.*

Alexis, and finally, the commentary on spiritual warfare. The miniatures, which illustrate in detail crucial passages from the New Testament scriptures, emphasize vocal, authoritative, and active female characters. The *Chanson of St Alexis*, a unique addition to the *Psalter*, provides a male example for the female reader to follow. The commentary on spiritual warfare, which immediately follows the St. Alexis story, provides a blatant and explicit description of how the reader might assume the spiritual armament of masculinity in order to find victory on the holy battlefield. Thus, this *Psalter*, a creation commissioned by Abbot Geoffrey in the early twelfth century, illuminates both his adoration of the female warrior, or male woman, and his intention to have his female disciple assume a masculine soul.

The *St. Albans Psalter* emerged in the twelfth century, during the tenure of Abbot Geoffrey at St. Albans Abbey and it required the skill of six different scribes to complete, though scholars do not agree as to which specific scribes created which specific sections.⁴⁷⁷ It is composed of 418 pages in 209 folios,⁴⁷⁸ Organized into five distinct sections, starting with the calendar, a standard feature of any medieval psalter. The second section is forty pages and consists of a series of full-page miniatures, which represent the most extensive of the English cycles and the earliest surviving work of its kind.⁴⁷⁹ After the miniatures, the third section contains the *Chanson de St. Alexis* or “Alexis quire” and an excerpt from a letter written by Gregory the Great defending the

⁴⁷⁷ Kidd, “Contents,” 116, 137.

⁴⁷⁸ The St. Godehardkirche scholars at the Dombibliothek who oversee the care of the manuscript, along with the scholars at the University of Aberdeen, both distinguish each folio, or quire, of the *Psalter* by a standard, modern pagination system rather than a folio designation. Therefore, all citation of the *Psalter* will refer to the “page” rather than “folio” as is standard in all scholarship related to this specific *Psalter*.

⁴⁷⁹ Peter Kidd, “Contents and Codicology,” *Dombibliothek Hildesheim: The Albani Psalter*, Jochen Bepler, Peter Kidd, Jane Geddes (Simbach am Inn: Verlag Müller & Schindler, 2008), 41.

use of images in liturgical practice. The fourth section follows and includes three images depicting the Gospel Emmaus story from Luke 24:13-35, which details Christ's encounters with his disciples on the road to Emmaus, after the Resurrection and before the Ascension. After the Emmaus pictures comes a miniature of two knights with a commentary on spiritual warfare, and the *Beatus Vir* image with the continuing commentary from the previous page. The fifth and concluding section of the *Psalter* is three hundred and forty-one pages and includes the Psalms, Canticles, and Litany. At the very end, two full-page miniatures appear depicting the martyrdom of St. Alban and King David with his musicians.

Historiography of *The St. Albans Psalter*

For more than a century, the *Psalter* has captured the attention of a variety of art historians and medievalists anxious to understand the mysteries of the text and some of its more peculiar features. In 1895, Adolph Goldschmidt produced the first comprehensive examination of it and started a detailed study of this devotional book. Additionally, Goldschmidt is the first scholar to link the *Psalter* to Christina of Markyate by way of her mentor, Roger the Hermit.⁴⁸⁰ In 1959, C.H Talbot published the first transcribed edition of the *Life of Christina of Markyate*, from the severely damaged, fourteenth-century Tiberius manuscript. In the introduction to his edition, Talbot

⁴⁸⁰ Adolf Goldschmidt, *Der Albani-Psalter in Hildesheim und seine Beziehung zur symbolischen Kirchensculptur des XII. Jahrhunderts* (Verlag von Georg Siemens: Berlin, 1895), 36-37.

discusses the *Psalter* and proclaims definitively that the creator of the book produced it for Christina's personal use.⁴⁸¹

Following the inquiry started by Goldschmidt and later Talbot, Otto Pächt, C.R. Dodwell, and Francis Wormald jointly published a conclusive study of the *Psalter*, each addressing a unique aspect of the manuscript.: Pächt examined the miniatures, Dodwell analyzed the initials and the dating of the book, and Wormald provided the preface and a description of the manuscript, detailed the calendar entries, and addressed the paleographic evidence of the text.⁴⁸² The resulting work is less a discussion of their analyses and more a compendium of their rigorous attention to the *Psalter*'s details and a painstaking examination of the material composition of the text. Regarding the relationship between the *Psalter* and Christina of Markyate, Pächt, citing Goldschmidt's seminal study, notes that both Roger the Hermit and Christina were intimately connected to the *Psalter*, but that Roger must have died before its completion as his obituary is listed in the text.⁴⁸³ Wormald maintains that a male confessor, likely Roger, commissioned the *Psalter* specifically for Christina and that the book belonged to her exclusively.⁴⁸⁴

In the latter half of the twentieth century, scholarly focus remained primarily within the domain of art historians and focused heavily on the provenance and ownership of the *Psalter*. In 1978, C. J. Holdsworth published an essay in which he argued for a

⁴⁸¹ C.H. Talbot, "Introduction," in *The Life of Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth Century Recluse*, ed. and trans. C.H. Talbot (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959, 1997), 22.

⁴⁸² Otto Pächt, Charles Reginald Dodwell, and Francis Wormald, *The St. Albans Psalter: Albani Psalter* (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1960).

⁴⁸³ Pächt, "Full-Page Miniatures," 136.

⁴⁸⁴ Pächt, "Full-Page Miniatures," 136.

correlation between the Emmaus miniatures and Christina's visions as they appear in her *Vita*.⁴⁸⁵ In 1988, Ursula Nilgen claimed that the addition of the Alexis quire, which parallels Christina's life, provides proof that the creator of the *Psalter* made it specifically for the recluse and that production of the manuscript likely occurred between 1123 and 1135.⁴⁸⁶ Famously, Nilgen refers to the manuscript as *The Psalter of Christina of Markyate*. In an essay published in 1995, Kristine E. Haney examined the miniatures to understand the production sequence, patronage, intended recipients, and the dates of the *St. Albans Psalter*.⁴⁸⁷ Based on a variety of technical evidence, namely paleography and the materials used, Haney reasons that someone crafted the entire Alexis quire before it was added to the partially complete *St Albans Psalter*; moreover, Haney concludes that the *Psalter*'s creator meant for the Alexis quire to serve as the frontispiece to a different *Psalter*, but decided to add it to the *St. Albans* manuscript after its completion.⁴⁸⁸ Additionally, Haney argues that a completely different scribe created the Calendar separately from the original *Psalter* and added it much later; to support her position, Haney points out that St. Margaret appears in the Litany but was not included in the original Calendar. Similarly, Haney points out that St. Alexis is entirely absent from the Calendar, even though his story figures prominently in the *Psalter* itself.⁴⁸⁹ Haney

⁴⁸⁵ C.J. Holdsworth, "Christina of Markyate" *Medieval Women*, ed. D. Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 193-195.

⁴⁸⁶ Ursula Nilgen, '*Psalter der Christina von Markyate (sogenannter Albani-Psalter)*' *Diözesan-Museum Hildesheim, Der Schatz von St Godehard*, (69: 152-65), 162-64

⁴⁸⁷ Kristine E. Haney, "The *St Albans Psalter*: A Reconsideration," in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 58 (1995): 1-28, 1.

⁴⁸⁸ Haney, "The *St Albans Psalter*," 19.

⁴⁸⁹ Haney, "The *St Albans Psalter*," 22.

suggests that the divergence between the Calendar and Litany indicates an overall lack of “coordination and planning in the two sections.”⁴⁹⁰

The most recent additions to the historiography of the *Psalter* focus on unraveling the meanings of the images and texts included in the manuscript. In 2003, aided by advancements in digital technology, a team of scholars at the University of Aberdeen led by Jane Geddes digitized the entire *Psalter* and provided a series of accompanying commentaries, analyzing each image, initial, and text in exhaustive detail.⁴⁹¹ In 2005, Geddes followed up the digital facsimile of the *Psalter* with a published monograph.⁴⁹² As an art historian, Geddes focuses her inquiry on the construction of the images and texts, as well as the myriad methods by which various scribes constructed the book. The scholarship focuses on the technical aspects of the *Psalter* to provide logical conclusions regarding the date of creation, provenance, and intended audience. Though minor disagreements occur within the various discussions, scholars focus primarily on details that concern art historians and their conclusions do not alter the significance or meaning of the text. Moreover, as Kidd concludes, “examining the *Psalter* as it survives today might be compared to encountering a chessboard on which a game of chess has been halted.”⁴⁹³ Kidd’s metaphor underscores the major trend that has dominated the research regarding the *Psalter*: scholars have been preoccupied with the form of the manuscript and not the subject matter. The content presents an explicit celebration of Christian

⁴⁹⁰ Haney, “*The St Albans Psalter*,” 22.

⁴⁹¹ University of Aberdeen, “*The St Albans Psalter*,” 2003.
<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/index.shtml>

⁴⁹² Jane Geddes, *The St Albans Psalter: a Book for Christina of Markyate* (London: British Library, 2005).

⁴⁹³ Kidd, “Contents,” 143.

masculinity and the specific virtues associated with spiritual manliness. Moreover, because Abbot Geoffrey commissioned the *Psalter* for a woman, Christina of Markyate, he intended to provide her with a devotional work that instructed and encouraged her to espouse masculine virtues. The book functions as an instructional manual on how to become a *virago*. This avenue of research regarding the *St. Albans Psalter* has not yet been explored.

While scholars unanimously concur that the manuscript first appeared in the first half of the twelfth century, as commissioned by Abbot Geoffrey for Christina of Markyate, they dispute other aspects of the work. First, exactly how the text was associated with her remains a point of dispute. Second, scholars question whether the book as it currently exists was planned as a whole or is the result of alterations, substitutions, and additions. Finally, the debate concerning the exact date of creation continues, since scholars cannot determine when exactly the *Psalter* first appeared as a complete document.⁴⁹⁴ Thus, the next question that must be asked of the *Psalter* concerns its purpose and intent.

The various sections of the *Psalter*, which each employ heavily gendered language, mimic a prevailing pattern in medieval theology regarding the male perception of women. Talbot notes that the creator who composed the prayers in the *Psalter* wrote them using masculine words, as if the text was meant to be read by a man.⁴⁹⁵ Citing the *Iona Psalter* as an example, Kidd observes that, in *Psalters* written specifically for

⁴⁹⁴ This discussion is the focus of Peter Kidd's essay: Kidd, "Contents," 41-142.

⁴⁹⁵ Talbot, "Introduction," 22.

women, the feminine forms are always used.⁴⁹⁶ Additionally, Kidd argues that “the use of masculine forms in places where feminine forms could have been employed, show that in at least one respect it was not deliberately tailored for one.”⁴⁹⁷ Therefore, it seems apparent that Abbot Geoffrey commissioned the *Psalter* to provide its female reader with an allegorical examples of *virago* paradigm. Along with its various other functions, the *St. Albans Psalter* offered Christina a method and a manual on how to become a courageous and masculine *fortissimo militis Deo*.

A Book for Christina

For more than a century, art historians and scholars who examined the manuscript have debated the ownership and patronage of the *St. Albans Psalter*. Kidd argues that the *Psalter* was indeed “connected” to Christina of Markyate, but objects to the use of the term “owned” because *The Rule of St Benedict* forbade the vice of personal property within a monastery.⁴⁹⁸ Whether the terminology “connected,” “owned,” or “intended for” is employed, the significance remains the same. The clearest evidence that the *Psalter* belonged to Christina exists in the Calendar, Geddes points out: textual examination proves that the creator of the Calendar listed the deaths of Christina’s family members, the death of her mentor, Roger the Hermit, the founding of the priory at Markyate, and Christina’s death.⁴⁹⁹ The inclusion of Christina’s family members strongly implies that she used the *Psalter* during her lifetime, and the fact that someone recorded her death in

⁴⁹⁶ Kidd, “Contents” 99.

⁴⁹⁷ Kidd, “Contents,” 100.

⁴⁹⁸ Kidd, “Contents, 44.

⁴⁹⁹ Geddes, “St Albans,” 197; Hildesheim, Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1, pp. 3-14.

the Calendar suggest that they wanted to posthumously link the *Psalter* to Christina or at least recognize the connection.

The second significant piece of evidence that the *Psalter*'s creator made the book specifically for Christina resides in a unique and distinguishing feature of the illuminated initial "C" that opens *Psalms* 105 and was pasted into the book after the completion of the *Psalter* (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The 'C' initial.
St. Albans Psalter
 (Hildesheim, Dombibliothek
 MS St. Godehardkirche 1, p.

Art historians have posited a number of theories as to why this, and only this, initial was added post-production.⁵⁰⁰ An extensive study of the manuscript leads Geddes to a plausible conclusion that the letter "C" was commissioned during or slightly after the completion of the *Psalter* and then added once Abbot Geoffrey decided to give the book

⁵⁰⁰ Peter Kidd argues that the creator of the *Psalter* hired an artist, who created this one piece, on a trial basis but did not retain his services but chose to use the initial because the book had always been intended for Christina. C.R. Dodwell found the late insertion of the initial to be one of the many confounding mysteries of the *Psalter* and suggests that perhaps the initial was added many years after the construction of the book as an addendum. For more on this discussion see: C.R. Dodwell, "The Intitials," *The St Albans Psalter (Albani Psalter)*, ed. Otto Pächt, C. R. Dodwell, and Francis Wormald (London: Warburg Institute, 1960), 200; C.R. Dodwell, *The Pictorial Arts of the West, 800-1200* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), 328-9; Kidd, "Contents," 106-108.

to Christina.⁵⁰¹ Essentially, Geddes claims that Abbot Geoffrey initially commissioned the *Psalter* before he knew he wanted to gift it to Christina. Geddes argues that “the letter C was specially chosen for Christina, and the elegant style was preferred, to complement her elegant and spiritual nature.”⁵⁰² Scholars typically refer to the initial “C” on page 285 as the “Christina initial.”⁵⁰³ Goldschmidt identified this picture as an image of Christina as she interceded with Christ on behalf of Abbot Geoffrey and other the other monks at St. Albans.⁵⁰⁴ Geddes argues that the initial is proof that the *Psalter* was intended for Christina’s personal use.⁵⁰⁵ An alternative theory, posited by Hanns Swarzenski, suggests that the author inserted both the Alexis Quire and the *Psalms* 105 initial when Christina took her official vow or when she became the first prioress of Markyate.⁵⁰⁶ Yet another theory, offered by Larry Ayers, argues that a scribe inserted the initial after Christina’s death, sometime around 1150, and that the image represents her passing from the earthly realm to the heavenly sphere.⁵⁰⁷ A unifying theme of these theories rests on the argument that the initial “C” signified that The *St. Albans Psalter* was deeply and personally connected to Christian of Markyate. Moreover, the authority the woman in the

⁵⁰¹ Geddes, “St Albans,” 199.

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ Kidd, “Contents,” 104

⁵⁰⁴ Goldschmidt, *Der Albani-Psalter*, 118-119.

⁵⁰⁵ Jane Geddes, *The St Albans Psalter: a Book for Christina of Markyate* (London: British Library, 2005), 95, 200.

⁵⁰⁶ H. Swarzenski, “Review of Otto Pächt et. al., *The St. Albans Psalter*,” *Kunstchronik* 14(1963): 77-85, 80.

⁵⁰⁷ Larry M. Ayers, “The Role of an Angevin Style in English Romanesque Painting,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstwissenschaft*, 37(1974): 214-217, 215-217.

initial demonstrates as she reaches out for the hand of Christ signifies that this woman, a rendering of Christina, was a powerful and authoritative *virago*.

The Miniature Cycle

The miniatures provide the most striking feature of the manuscript, and most clearly demonstrate Abbot Geoffrey's adoration of the *virago*. Geddes argues that the images present a strong feminine content, because in 18 of the 39 miniatures women serve as the active participant.⁵⁰⁸ Additionally, all the images depicting biblical women portray them in positions of authority, with the male characters assuming a submissive posture. In two of the pictures, the artist *adds* a female presence to a biblical scene in which women traditionally do not appear. Thus, the *Psalter* provides the female audience with a variety of images emphasizing the authoritative potential in pursuing a virtuous, masculine Christian life. Furthermore, the images, commissioned by a man, provide scriptural and theological justification for women's spiritual authority. In the following examples, the images portray medieval renderings of biblical women as strong, militant *viragines*.

In her various publications, Jane Geddes discusses the gender implications of the eighteen miniatures. She argues that the unique inclusion of women and the artistic license that depict them as active agents provided the reader, Christina, with a sense of spiritual authority. She continues by arguing that "the female reader was intended to meditate on these images, and to participate on a strong emotional and spiritual level in

⁵⁰⁸ Geddes, "St Albans," 204.

Christ's experience."⁵⁰⁹ Geddes continues on by stating emphatically that "this cycle shows a distinctively feminine bias."⁵¹⁰ Geddes' assertion of the feminine bias and the portrayal of active females is correct; however, Geddes does not assess how the portrayals of women also show them as strong, masculinized versions of the *virago* archetype. Moreover, Geddes does not examine the *St Albans Psalter* images as they compare to similar miniatures created during the same era. For example, in the *Oscott Psalter* created at the end of the twelfth century and in a psalter held at the British Library in Royal MS 2 B VII, the images of women in authoritative positions simply do not exist. In the *Golden Psalter*, created at St. Albans during the same time as the construction of Christina's *Psalter*, the creator left out a miniature cycle and only historiated initials decorate the text. Historiated initials, the recognizable feature of illuminated manuscripts, are the large initials that open a paragraph and contain a picture of an identifiable picture or scene. In the aforementioned psalters, the included images do not masculinize their female figures, nor do they include women in biblical scenes where they are traditionally not mentioned. Thus, The *St. Albans Psalter* remains unique in its overt use of images of authoritative women.

One of the most apparent examples appears in the miniature of "The Nativity" on page 21 (Figure 2). The image shows Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus surrounded by the city of Bethlehem. Rather than a submissive portrayal of Mary, the St. Albans artist depicts Mary speaking to a silent, passive Joseph. Additionally, Mary appears higher and larger than Joseph and she addresses him with a raised finger while he sits below her with

⁵⁰⁹ Geddes, "The *Psalter*," 205.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*

his hand posed pensively on his chin, slightly covering his mouth to emphasize his silence. The artist positions the infant Christ in the background of the miniature behind Mary, making it clear that in this picture, Mary is the active, dominant figure.



Figure 2. “The Nativity”
The St. Albans Psalter
 Hildesheim, Dombibliothek MS
 St. Godehardkirche 1, p. 21.

The image communicates to its reader that God sanctified and authorized the dominant position of the Virgin. Mary’s dominant presence on the page legitimizes a woman in a position of authority and influence. By way of contrast, in two miniatures pulled from two other psalters (Figures 3-4), the image of Mary appears starkly different. In both paintings, Mary sits in bed below Joseph, and remains quiet and subservient to a dominant Joseph.⁵¹¹

⁵¹¹ “*The Winchester Psalter*,” London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero C IV f. 10v; BL Royal MS 1 D.x f.1v



Figure 3. "The Nativity"
The Winchester *Psalter*
British Library, London, Cotton MS Nero C IV f. 10v



Figure 4. "The Nativity"
Unnamed *Psalter*
British Library, London, Royal MS 1 D.x f. 1v

The most obvious depiction of the *virago* in the *Psalter* occurs on page 28 in the miniature of "The Massacre of the Innocent (Figure 5)" The second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew tells the story of Herod and his attempt to kill the infant Christ by ordering the execution of all boys aged two and under.⁵¹² In the *Psalter*, the artist recreates this story, showing Herod giving the order on the right side of the panel and his soldiers carrying out his command with unbridled violence on the left side of the panel.

⁵¹² Latin Vulgate, Matthew 2:16-18.

Most of the mothers appear despondent, helplessly watching as the soldiers eviscerate their sons. But two of the women, one in the top right corner and the other in the bottom right corner of the panel, fight back. A woman in an orange dress appears in the lower righthand corner biting a soldier as he plunges his sword into the belly of a baby. In the upper righthand corner, the artist shows a mother in a green dress holding the arm back of a bearded soldier as he lifts his weapon aiming it at a baby in his mother's arms. In illustrated *Psalters*, the "Massacre of the Innocent" typically appears in the miniature cycles, but the *St. Albans Psalter*, with its uniquely aggressive mothers, remains distinctive.



Figure 5. "The Massacre of the Innocent"
The St. Albans Psalter
 Hildesheim, Dombibliothek MS St.
 Godehardkirche 1, p. 30

The *Huth Psalter* only portrays two women, who appear passive as the soldiers eviscerate their babies (Figure 6).⁵¹³

⁵¹³ London, British Library, Add MS 38116 f. 10r.



Figure 6. “The Massacre of the Innocent”
The Huth Psalter
 London, British Library, Add MS MS 38116 f.
 10r

In the *Psalter* housed in the Add MS 50000 manuscript, only one mother appears below a soldier’s feet, trampled and helpless as he plunges a sword into her baby’s belly (Figure 7).⁵¹⁴



Figure 7. “The Massacre of the Innocent”
 Unnamed Psalter
 London, British Library, Add MS 50000 f. 13r

In the *Oscott Psalter*, two women appear timid, afraid, and clutching their babies in helpless passivity. (Figure 8)⁵¹⁵ None of these three *Psalters* offer any attempt to portray the women as strong or active.

⁵¹⁴ London, British Library, Add MS 50000 f. 13r.

⁵¹⁵ London, British Library, Royal MS 1 D X f. 3r.



Figure 8. “The Massacre of the Innocent”
The Oscott Psalter
 London, British Library, Royal MS 1 D X f. 3r

A reason for the glaring difference between *The St. Albans Psalter* and the three similar *Psalter*s concerns the deliberate intent to illustrate the *virago*. During the high medieval period, more men began using the term *virgo* to signify women who espoused uniquely masculine qualities but remained physically women. In the image of the “Massacre of the Innocent” as it appears in *The St. Albans Psalter*, the women fighting back are mothers; they represent the most feminine occupation a woman could hold. In the three similar psalters mentioned above, the mothers embody the standard medieval concept of femininity. They are passive, weak, and incapable of fighting back. In the *St. Albans Psalter*, the artist portrayed the mothers as physically female, but active, strong, fierce, and fighting back as warriors—all the hallmarks of the medieval *virago*. Additionally, medieval authors often employed the term *virago* to describe the uniquely masculine woman who achieves her strength because of her dedication to God. Most notably, in his twelfth-century *carmina*, Alfamus explicitly mentions the masculine character of St. Agnes writing, “*quae mulier, vel forte magis robusta virago,*” or “this

woman, indeed a powerful, learned robust warrior woman.”⁵¹⁶ Thus, in *The St. Albans Psalter*, in the violent carnage depicted in the “Massacre of the Innocent” miniature, the artist singles out two women to fight back, drawing on a growing adoration of the militant *virago* who fights the enemies of Christ.

The author chooses to insert active women into two other well-known biblical images, “The Descent from the Cross,” and “The Ascension” (Figures 9-10). Page 47 of the *Psalter* contains a portrayal of “The Descent from the Cross” pulled from the narrative as told in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In each version of the story, not a single woman is mentioned as having any significant role in taking down Christ’s body; rather, the only person who seems to carry out any action is Joseph of Arimathea.⁵¹⁷ However, in the miniature, two women appear and, rather than portraying them in a submissive posture, weeping in the background, the artist reveals a woman, likely Mary, holding Christ’s arm and assisting in the process of pulling him down from the cross. Behind her stands another woman watching the events unfold.

⁵¹⁶ PL 147:1243B

⁵¹⁷ Matthew 27:57-59, Mark 15: 43-46, Luke 23: 50-53.



Figure 9. “Descent from the Cross”
The St. Albans Psalter
 Hildesheim, Dombibliothek MS St.
 Godehardkirche 1, p. 47

The first chapter of Acts details “The Ascension,” in which Jesus, surrounded by his apostles, ascends into heaven. In the *Psalter*, a group of men surround an image of a pair of feet disappearing at the top of the panel, and in the center of the group, contrary to the scripture, is an image of the Virgin Mary. She stands taller than the apostles and her center position in the picture suggests that the artist intended to emphasize her importance and active role in this part of the Gospel.



Figure 10. "The Ascension"
The St. Albans Psalter
 Hildesheim, Dombibliothek MS St.
 Godehardkirche 1, p. 54

In addition to portraying women as active, authoritative, and warrior figures, the creator of the miniatures also chose to simply insert or emphasize the female presence in biblical stories where women either do not appear or their involvement is marginal at best. While presence does not necessarily denote masculinity, the choice to deliberately include women in important biblical stories suggests that the male creator wanted to emphasize women's religious or spiritual authority where it did not traditionally exist. Additionally, when the creator introduced women, he typically underscored their presence by making them the largest or most dominant figure in the scene. For example, the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke narrates the story of the Presentation of Christ at the Temple. In the scripture, Mary and Joseph are both present at the Temple when they introduce the infant Christ to Simeon and a pair of doves emerge as an offering.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁸ Luke 2:22-26.

On page 28 of the *Psalter*, a full miniature of this scene appears (Figure 11). However, contrary to the scripture, the artist leaves Joseph completely out of the picture. In the image, there is only Mary, holding Christ as he lifts a finger and blesses Simeon. On either side of Mary, two women appear, each holding a pair of doves as an offering.



Figure 11. “Presentation at the Temple”
The St. Albans Psalter
 Hildesheim, Dombibliothek MS St.
 Godehardkirche 1, p. 28

The artist breaks with convention by removing Joseph from this picture and inserting two female attendants, whom the scriptures do not mention, as the bearers of the doves. This image provides an opportunity for interpretation. Geddes argues that leaving Joseph out of the picture signified an emphasis on the active female role.⁵¹⁹ Though in the image, Mary is simply present, she is the largest figure in the picture. Moreover, by removing Joseph from the scene the artist bestows unique authority and agency to Mary, implying

⁵¹⁹ Geddes, “The *Psalter*,” 204.

that Joseph in this moment is irrelevant, though the scripture makes specific mention of him.

On the following page, the artist breaks with scriptural convention again and inserts Mary in the story of the Pentecost (Figure 12). The second chapter of Acts opens with a description of The Pentecost, “And on the day of the Pentecost, they all gathered in one place. And suddenly, a sound came from heaven and blew in like a mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And tongues of fire appeared to them and sat upon their heads.”⁵²⁰ In the miniature of this scriptures, Mary sits in the center surrounded by the apostles. The artist positioned the apostles so that only their profiles appear; conversely, he placed Mary in the center facing forward and depicted her as the largest figure in the scene.



Figure 12. “The Pentecost”
The St. Albans Psalter
 Hildesheim, Dombibliothek MS St.
 Godehardkirche 1, p. 55

⁵²⁰ Latin Vulgate, Acts 2:1-3. *et cum conplerentur dies pentecostes erant omnes pariter in eodem loco, et factus est repente de caelo sonus tamquam advenientis spiritus vehementis et replevit totam domum ubi erant sedentes, et apparuerunt illis dispartitae linguae tamquam ignis seditque supra singulos eorum.*

This positioning is contrary to the story of the Pentecost in the Book of Acts, where Mary does not appear at all.⁵²¹ According to Anne Geddes, “theological justification for this was explained by Odilio of Cluny whose homily on Mary at both the Ascension and Pentecost emphasizes her role in the incarnation.”⁵²² Pächt states that Mary’s presence and center position at the Pentecost does not conform to any Byzantine or Western tradition, and states that in Byzantine custom the center of the picture is always left empty and the Virgin is always absent.⁵²³ In Western traditions, the center is typically occupied by Peter, whom Acts 2:38 explicitly proclaims as the speaker of the disciples.⁵²⁴ In this *Psalter*, however, Mary is a dominant and authoritative figure. Pächt, emphasizing Cluny’s adoration for the Virgin, states that the center position of Mary “reflects the new emphasis on the Virgin’s rank in Christian thought and worship.”⁵²⁵ Additionally, given the pattern of blatant, masculinized female agency throughout the miniatures, inserting a visible Mary in the center of the picture emphasizes the spiritual authority and strength of women.

On their own, each of these six miniatures provides a striking portrayal of active female agency, but when read together a theme emerges that underscores an emphasis on female authority and masculinity. Geddes argues that these images reflect Christina’s personal view of her encounters with Christ.⁵²⁶ In her visions as recorded in *The Life*, the

⁵²¹ Acts 2:1-3

⁵²² Anne Geddes, “Page 55 Commentary: Pentecost Acts 2:1-3” *St Albans Psalter*, 2003, accessed March 2019, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/commentary/page055.shtml>

⁵²³ Pächt, “Full-Page,” 68.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Pächt, “Full-Page,” 70.

⁵²⁶ Geddes, “The *Psalter*,” 203-204.

author recalls Christina as she describes holding Christ as a baby and serving him as a pilgrim.⁵²⁷ When the miniatures are read in conjunction with Christina's *Vita*, a strong masculine ideal emerges. The authoritative Virgin addressing her passive husband, the combative mothers fighting Herod's soldiers, the women assisting the deposition of Christ's body, and the bold figure of Mary at the center of Pentecost all offered Christina vivid examples of what a powerful, steadfast, *virago* looked like. Moreover, if, as Geddes argues, this *Psalter* delineated Abbot Geoffrey's perception of Christina and his relationship with her, then including images of such powerful women conveyed Geoffrey's intense desire that Christina become male in spirit.

The Chanson of St Alexis

The *Chanson of St Alexis*, or the Alexis quire, appears immediately after the miniature cycle and represents a unique aspect of the *Psalter*. The legend, written in Old French, details the story of the fifth-century recluse who abandoned his bride on their wedding night and spent his entire life living in poverty as a monk. For more than a century, the inclusion of this story in the *St. Albans Psalter* has confounded scholars, leading many of them to conclude that Abbot Geoffrey had the story added because the life of St. Alexis so closely mirrored Christina's experiences. In the introduction to his edition of *The Life*, Talbot argues that the addition of the Alexis quire proves that the *Psalter* belonged to Christina, specifically because the addition of the work "is quite

⁵²⁷ Anonymous, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, ed. and trans. C.H. Talbot (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959, 1997), 182.

irrelevant to a purely liturgical book.”⁵²⁸ Talbot continues by arguing that the story of St. Alexis, “mirrors exactly the experiences of Christina, that it is a kind of *piece justificative* of her action in leaving her husband and retiring to the hermitage.”⁵²⁹ Like Alexis, Christina refused to consummate an arranged marriage; she also abandoned her betrothed on their wedding night and ultimately fled her family while in disguise, and Christina, like Alexis, lived the remainder of her life as a devout anchorite in a small cell.

In his analysis, Pächt agrees with Talbot’s findings and argues that the stories’ similarities offer some literary proof that the *Psalter* belonged to Christina. He writes, “In reading this story nobody familiar with the Alexis legend can fail to be struck by the parallelism of the opening chapters of the two biographies: Alexis’ marriage too is enforced; he too leaves his spouse on the eve of the wedding in order to obey a higher calling.”⁵³⁰ Pächt continues by stating that he finds the two stories similar and suggests that perhaps Christina of Markyate’s *vita* was a reinterpretation of the Alexis narrative.⁵³¹

Pächt argues that

to see the presence of the Alexis Song in a book which was Christina’s *Psalter* merely as an accidental occurrence seems no longer possible. To the medieval mind, all events experienced or witnessed in one’s own life had their prefiguration’s in the lives of the biblical personages or in those of the saints [...] no story can have impressed

⁵²⁸ Talbot, “Introduction,” 26.

⁵²⁹ Talbot, “Introduction,” 26.

⁵³⁰ Pächt, “Contents,” 136.

⁵³¹ *Ibid*, 136

Christina's contemporaries as a more perfect metaphor of her tribulations than the legend of Alexis, the homo Dei.⁵³²

Geddes agrees in part with Pächt, but suggests that rather than being about Christina, the Alexis story is an allegory of Abbot Geoffrey's relationship with Christina. Geddes argues that aside from rejecting her marriage bed and abandoning her husband on their wedding night, there are no other similarities between Christina and Alexis.⁵³³ Geddes' proposed an alternative explanation, pointing out that like Alexis, Abbot Geoffrey left his natal home for a spiritual life in a foreign land and that he also gave away all of his worldly possession and chose a life of poverty.⁵³⁴ Geddes continues by postulating that the scene in which Alexis leaves his bride on their wedding night serves as a simile for an event in 1136 and 1139 when Abbot Geoffrey left a despondent Christina for a journey to Rome.⁵³⁵ Geddes also believes that the character of the bride, who does not speak in the entirety of the chanson, represents Christina and suggests that Abbot Geoffrey included the poem to offer both an analogy, explaining his unique relationship with Christina, and to offer her some consolation when he left her to travel to Rome.⁵³⁶ Though Geddes' analysis offers some logical addendums to Pächt's preliminary arguments, Geddes seems too intent on characterizing the Alexis quire in neat, gender specific terms. She views Geoffrey as Alexis, the male figure in the story, and Christina as the bride, the female character. If, as scholars have determined, Abbot Geoffrey did

⁵³² Ibid, 137.

⁵³³ Geddes, "St Albans," 208.

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ Ibid, 209.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

create the book for Christina and intentionally added the Alexis Quire for her to read and meditate upon, then it is far more likely that the meaning behind its inclusion extends far past a simple consolation story. A much more probable explanation suggests that Abbot Geoffrey included the narrative and subsequent commentary to praise Christina's eschewing of marriage, to encourage her pursuit of an ascetic life, and to offer her a male example to follow.

The first point of similarity exists in the three-panel illustration that precedes the chanson and seems to offer an illustrated representation of the entire story. The picture shows Alexis and his bride standing above their marriage bed fully clothed as he hands her a sword and ring, medieval symbols of fidelity, before departing from her in the following panel. In the righthand side of the page, Alexis appears on a boat, sailing for his new life.⁵³⁷ The chanson reads,

They fix the day of their wedding.

When it came to the doing of it, they do things handsomely,

Lord Alexis marries her in fine style.

But it is an arrangement he would have preferred nothing of

So completely are his thoughts fixed on God.⁵³⁸

Though the scene is not a direct parallel to Christina's, since her betrothed refused to concede, the emphasis on maintaining celibacy remains a central theme. Contrary to Geddes's argument, Abbot Geoffrey never had a moment in his life where he rejected a

⁵³⁷ Ibid, 57.

⁵³⁸ Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1, pp. 58-59. *lur dous amfanz/ volent faire asembler · Doment [rubricator's error for Noment] lur terme de lur adaise/ment · quant vint al fare dunc le funt gentem[en]t · danz alexis/ l'espuset belament · mais co est tel plait dunt ne volsist nient/de tut an tut ad a deu sun talent.* The translation is from: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/translation/trans058.shtml>

spouse, nor did he abandon a bride or live in hiding for any part of his life. Additionally, at no point in either the *Psalter* or in *The Life* is Geoffrey described as a husband to Christina. Rather, Pächt's assertion seems the most likely and the Alexis quire served as an allegory for the most defining moment of Christina's life: her escape.

Though, unlike Christina, Alexis did not have to face an angry mob, a violent father, or a gang of rapists, he did have to escape the pressures of his family to follow a religious calling. The chanson reads,

He tortured his body in the service of Our Lord.
 Not for the sake of any man or woman,
 Nor for any honors that might come to him,
 Will he turn away from this service, for as long as he has to live.
 When he has so fixed his whole heart on God
 That he has no desire to leave the city,
 God, because of his love for him, made the statue speak
 To the attendant who served at the altar.
 It orders him: "Call the man of God!"
 The statue said: "Send for the man of God,
 For he has served God well and in a way pleasing to him
 And he is worthy to enter Paradise"⁵³⁹

⁵³⁹ Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1, pp. 60-61. *ne pur honors ki l'en fussent tramise · n'en volt turner tant cum/ il ad a vivre · Quant tut sun quor en ad si afermet · que ja sum voil/ n'istrat de la cited · / deus fist l'imagene pur sue amur parler · al/ servitor ki serveit al alter · có li cumandet apele l'ume deu · / Có dist l'imagena fai l'ume deu venir · q[ua]r il ad deu bien servit & a gret/ & il est dignes d'entrer en paradis.* <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/translation/trans060.shtml>

The message of the story appears explicit. Alexis received the blessings of God because he sacrificed all earthly comforts to serve him. Moreover, near the end of his life, because he had served God in so holy a manner, he earned the epithet “man of God.” By including this story in the *Psalter*, the message to Christina seems to commend her decision to abandon her family and marriage, applaud her commitment to pursuing a celibate life, and encourage her to continue following the ascetic path, one that will allow her to become, in some measure, a “man of God.”

Psychomachia and the Beatus Vir

Immediately following the Alexis quire sits what is the most explicit petition and metaphor for spiritual manliness. On the final page of a pictorial cycle illustrating the Emmaus story from the Gospel of Luke, an anonymous scribe began a commentary on spiritual warfare, a theme drawn from the fifth century poem *Psychomachia* written by the Late Antique lyricist, Aurelius Clemens Prudentius. By the twelfth century, Prudentius’ theology of a holy or divine war gained a considerable amount of attention and it became a popular metaphor, appearing in around 300 illustrated medieval manuscripts.⁵⁴⁰ Undeniably, Prudentius’ allegory had a significant impact on the theologians at St. Albans, as one of the most well-preserved and detailed editions of the *Psychomachia* owes its provenance to St. Albans Abbey in the first quarter of the twelfth century.⁵⁴¹ The text, currently held at the British Library in the Cotton MS Titus

⁵⁴⁰ The British Library, “Prudentius, *Psychomachia*,” date accessed, March 19, 2020. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/prudentiuss-Psychomachia>.

⁵⁴¹ London, British Library, Cotton MS Titus D XVI, ff 2-34.

collection, follows the original fifth century poem. Accompanying the text, several images appear (Figures 13-14), enhancing the violent metaphors in the poem. In most of these images, the artist depicts the virtues as women, and for the reader, or viewer, the image of a powerful, brave, and victorious woman, clad in battle armor, accompanies a clear message valorizing holy warfare.



Figure 13. *Psychomachia*
British Library, London, Cotton MS Titus
D. xvi fol. 5v



Figure 14. *Psychomachia*
British Library, London, Cotton MS
Titus D. xvi fol. 6r

Additionally, Peter Damian wrote his panegyric of the eremitical life while at St. Albans; the text is now preserved in Oxford, Christ Church MS 115. In his tome, Damian equates the anchorite's cell to the spiritual battlefield.⁵⁴² Thus, the idea that the anchorite could prove their fidelity and spiritual strength on a battlefield held especially true for the men and women at St. *Albans* Abbey.

⁵⁴² Oxford, Bodleian Library, Christ Church MS 115f. 20v. *O cella sacrae militiae tabernaculum [...] Tu camps divini proelii, spiritualis arena certaminis, agelorum spectaculum.*

In the *St. Albans Psalter*, the image and discussion of a spiritual war begins on page 71 and contains some of the most explicit language regarding the masculinization of the soul. Next to the final image in the Emmaus pictorial cycle, in alternating blue, green, and red ink, a commentary appears and announces a holy war that is being waged on earth and in the church.⁵⁴³ The passage refers to the image of two armor-clad knights, which appear on the following page and proclaims, “*Ideoque sancte figure in spiritu virili armate*” or “thus, the holy figures have been armed with a masculine spirit.”⁵⁴⁴ This phrase is definite and leaves no room for uncertain or gender-neutral translations. The author states clearly that the knights have armed themselves in masculine virtue in the service of God. After this declaration, the author includes an invocation stating anyone who desires to become a son of God, a worthy heir of the heavens, must fight in this spiritual war as his soldier.⁵⁴⁵

The passage continues, offering an allegory of the physical and the spiritual world, designating the similarities between the corporeal and the divine. The author states that just as actual, or visible weapons are forged with iron and wood, spiritual armaments are strengthened by faith and love.⁵⁴⁶ Similarly, the author writes that as much as the physical body becomes inflated with pride and malice, the spirit must be

⁵⁴³ Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1, p. 71. *De sancto terreno bello in ecclesia est comparati[o, trimmed off] et magna jocundita[s, trimmed off] / cum angelis in celo.*

⁵⁴⁴ Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1, p. 71.

⁵⁴⁵ Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1, p. 71. *Qui cumque vult esse filius dei et dignus heres ce lorum et quicumque vult ad imere gloriam et here ditatem, quas diaboli a regno dei elapsi amise runt, nocte ac die oculo et corde speculetur illud bellum et equitation [em, trimmed off] / quae hic viderit protract[a, trimmed off].*

⁵⁴⁶ Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1, p. 71. *Sicut hec visibilia arma ferro et ligno sunparata ut malum et humanam occisionem facian[t, trimmed off] similiter autem quemque nostrum in bello et penitentia constitutum, fide et caritate*

tamed by humility and heavenly blessings.⁵⁴⁷ Finally, the author proclaims that even though the body, or flesh, may be easily consumed by madness and anger, the spirit must use the eyes of the heart to bolster Christian virtue against an enemy that is always lying in wait, ready to strike.⁵⁴⁸ Pächt convincingly argues that the *Psalter's* author added the *Psychomachia* metaphor and commentary as a message specifically intended for Christina.⁵⁴⁹ Thus, in creating an analogous comparison between a corporeal battle and a spiritual war, the author provides the reader, especially the female reader, a method by which to arm themselves in Christian manliness and prepare for a spiritual battle as a soldier of Christ.

The following page continues the commentary and the *Psalter's* creator punctuates the text with the large, “Beatus Vir” initial, ushering in the beginning of the *Psalms*. The “Beatus initial,” which typically accompanies the *Beatus Vir* at the beginning of *Psalms* 1 is a common component of the medieval psalter. However, in the *St. Albans Psalter* specifically, the *Beatus Vir*, or “Blessed is the Man,” shares the page with a small image of a pair of knights, clad in armor, fighting at the top, righthand side of the page (Figure 15).

⁵⁴⁷ Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1. *et sicut ipsi corporaliter sunt tu mentes superbia et male dictione. similiter nos spiritualiter oportet esse mansuetos in humilitate et deica benedictio[ne, trimmed off]*

⁵⁴⁸ Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1. *Sicut ipsi dati sunt in ira[m, trimmed off] et visibilem rabiem corporali[ter, trimmed off] similiter nos oportet esse in pace et sapientia spiritualiter. Sicut ipsi ad omnia membra sua oculo coporis non sinunt in vicem extendere. nos autem similiter oculis cordis cu[m, trimmed off] omni virtute semper oportet oculis cordis circumspicere contra adversarium nostrum nobis insidiantem conti nuo tempore.*

⁵⁴⁹ Pächt, “Contents” 150.



Figure 15. Image of two knights clad in armor fighting.
The St. Albans Psalter
 Hildesheim, Dombibliothek
 MS St. Godehardkirche 1, p. 72

Pächt remarks that the *Beatus Vir* commentary serves as “a unique case of a medieval artist describing and interpreting his own work.”⁵⁵⁰ The artist explains that the image of the two mounted knights sparring is a simile of the spiritual war, or “*bellum spirituale*.” The creator of the initial further clarifies that the image appears as two knights dressed in the physical vestments of war, but in truth they are clothed in manly spirits and Christian virtues.⁵⁵¹

In the middle of the large, ornate “B” sits the pinnacle of biblical masculinity, King David. The following text accompanies the image,

Here we have declared the highest truth, and if he desires it,
 let him hold it as for himself. Just as those are manly and
 prudent in the pursuit of equal justice, so to we must be
 manly and perfect in the constancy of our steadfastness.⁵⁵²

This passage makes an explicit call to the reader, Christina, to become male in spirit for the benefit of achieving victory in spiritual warfare. Moreover, the author, in using the

⁵⁵⁰ Pächt, “Contents,” 149.

⁵⁵¹ Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1, p. 71. *Ideoque sancte figure in spiritu virili armate. facte sunt Christi amice et celestes atlete.*

⁵⁵² Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1, p. 72. *Hic summam veritatem declaravimus, quam qui voluerit, teneat ut sibimet. Sicut isti viriles sunt and prudentes in cursu equitationis similiter et nos oportet esse viriles and perec tos in perseverantia stabilitatis.*

plural first-person, “we,” acknowledges that this status of perfect manhood applies to all readers of the *Psalter*, male and female. In the next sentence, the author continues,

If at some time we are struck through by sword or spear or
flying arrow, yet we shall not fall to the ground in vain, if
we are proved manly, but we shall only be made more
perfect in God, and shall be doubly encircled with faith and
hope, so that, safe in the presence of God, we may be
crowned.⁵⁵³

The author proclaims that if the spiritual soldier is properly, or effectively armed by God, then they will not fall by the weapons of the enemy; rather, “*viriles probati sumus*” or “we will be proven manly.” Again, the author uses the first-person plural, which strongly implies that he associates himself with the reader, whether male or female. Thus, in this statement the author is authorizing and encouraging a female reader to assume a manly spirit, one approved by God. Another striking implication in this statement concerns the phrase “*sed tantum in deo perfectio res efficiemur*” or, “the thing is made more perfect by God.” Geddes translates the phrase as, “we will be made more perfect in God.” Both translations arrive at the same meaning and suggest that by engaging in spiritual warfare, God perfects the Christian, male and female, and they become manly in spirit.

In the follow-up passage, the author recognizes the role of the physical body in the spiritual war. He writes,

⁵⁵³ Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1, p. 72. *Si aliquando gladio aut lancea seu volatili sagitta percussi fuerimus non tamen inanes decidemus si viriles probati sumus, sed tantum in deo perfectio res efficiemur, et fide et spe dupliciter accingemur. ut salvi coram deo coronemur.*

But in our spirits we must set in order every art which these two warriors prepare in their bodies. Because the blood of the holy martyrs and worthy virginity illuminate the book of life and go before the love of heaven, [...] Upon that war and divine inheritance there meditate, by day and night, good people of the cloister and manly hearts that are temperate and chaste, and every faithful disciple.⁵⁵⁴

The passage, “*Quia sanguis sanctorum martyrum et digna virginitas illuminant librum vite. et precedunt amorem celeste*” or “because the blood of the sacred martyrs and their worthy virginity illuminate the book of life, they surpass the love of heaven,” communicates an admiration for the suffering of the virgin martyrs and an adoration for the perfection their dedication to Christ brought them. Their bodies, purified by celibacy and bloody sacrifice, gave them manly hearts.

Near the end of the *Psychomachia* commentary the author, once again, invokes the concept of masculinity. He writes,

⁵⁵⁴ Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1, p. 72. The scholars at the University of Aberdeen who worked on digitizing the *St Albans Psalter* provide the following transcription of the passage. The brackets indicate additions that are not included in the original text. Having examined both the original manuscript and the modern transcription I agree with all of the modern edits made in the digitized version. *Nos autem oportet omnem artem quam hi duo bellatores parant corporibus suis: ordinare spiritibus nostris. Quia sanguis sanctorum martyrum et digna virginitas illuminant librum vite. et precedunt amorem celestem. [...] Suus ictus erit multum honestus et omnes vincet. de illo bello et divina hereditate meditantur die ac nocte boni claustrales et virilia corda sobria et casta et quisque fidelis discipulus.*

Upon that war and divine inheritance there meditate, by day
and night, good people of the cloister and manly hearts that
are temperate and chaste, and every faithful disciple.⁵⁵⁵

The *virilia corda* or “manly hearts,” the author speaks of does not apply only to male Christians; anyone, male or female, can prove through constant meditation, chastity, and faith, that they are male in spirit. Geddes notes that, “the passage itself is convoluted, making allusions which were probably understood by the recipient, but which are now hard to grasp.”⁵⁵⁶ Geddes is not clear about which specific passages she deems “convoluted,” but, if the author’s intent is to encourage the reader, male or female, to become male in spirit and in turn assume a manly heart, the passage becomes much clearer. Additionally, Geddes states that “the author speaks with his own voice, directing his words to a single reader, and producing a classic passage on the meaning of art to a medieval audience.”⁵⁵⁷ This further underscores the likelihood that the author, directed by Abbot Geoffrey, wrote specifically to Christina, sharing with her the benefits of spiritual manhood and encouraging her to prepare for imminent spiritual warfare.

The reference to the blood and suffering of the virgin martyrs calls attention to two saints mentioned in the *Psalter’s* calendar. The calendar’s creator(s) lists only eight women saints in the calendar, and of those eight, St. Juliana and St. Margaret represent the most militant women. The medieval narratives of St. Juliana of Nicomedia and St.

⁵⁵⁵ Dombibliothek MS St. Godehardkirche 1, p. 72. *Suus ictus erit multum honestus et omnes vincet. de illo bello et divina hereditate meditantur die ac nocte boni claustrales et virilia corda sobria et casta et quisque fidelis discipulus*

⁵⁵⁶ University of Aberdeen, “The Alexis Quire: Illustrations and Discourse on Good and Evil,” 2003, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/essays/alexisquire.shtml>

⁵⁵⁷ University of Aberdeen, “The Alexis Quire: Illustrations and Discourse on Good and Evil,” 2003, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/essays/alexisquire.shtml>

Margaret of Antioch both detail violent battles with supernatural, demonic forces. In medieval England, both Margaret and Juliana's legend received a significant amount of adoration. The scribe who composed the *Psychomachia* commentary and the *Beatus Vir* initial was likely familiar with the militant legacy of St. Juliana and St. Margaret. As I discuss above, the medieval Latin sources that detail the lives and deaths of Margaret and Juliana also portray them as soldiers of Christ and masculine women. They provided religious men in the Middle Ages with definitive examples of how a woman could, through a violent ordeal, become purified and embody the *virago* ideal. Additionally, both Margaret and Juliana prove their masculine spirit by engaging in spiritual warfare in the tiny confines of their prison cells.

For Margaret, the enemy came in the form of a dragon. In Middle English Bodley 34 manuscript, the author detailed a vicious fight with a fearsome beast that appeared to Margaret after a bloody and violent ordeal. The Middle English text reads,

And there came quickly out of a corner toward her a demon
of hell like a dragon, [...] his locks and his long beard
gleamed all with gold, and his grisly teeth seemed made of
blackened iron. [...] from his disgusting mouth fire
sparkled out, and from his nostrils smoldering smoke
pressed out, most hateful of stinks.⁵⁵⁸

Unfazed, Margaret stood resolute against the beast and armed herself in her faith in God. She prayed to God, asked for strength, and made the sign of the cross, repelling the

⁵⁵⁸ MS Bodley 34 f. 24v. Translation from: Emily Rebekah Huber and Elizabeth Robertson, *The Katherine Group: MS Bodley 34* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan Press, 2016), 97-8.

beast.⁵⁵⁹ When the monster swallowed her whole, Margaret made the sign of the cross and burst out of his belly, unharmed, and destroyed the dragon.⁵⁶⁰ At that moment the devil appeared as a fiendish man and once again, Margaret found herself drawn into battle.⁵⁶¹ The Middle English author writes,

That mild maiden Margaret gripped that grisly thing [...] and grabbed him cruelly, took him by that hideous hair anon his head and, heaved him up and flung him straight to the earth, and set her foot on his shaggy neck [...] ⁵⁶²

In that moment, Margaret stood victorious like a soldier on the battlefield though she remained confined to a prison cell.

Similarly, St. Juliana faced the demon Belial and proved her worth as a soldier of God, clothed in manly virtue. Just like Margaret, Juliana's battle came after a vicious period of bodily torment. Sent back to her small cell, Juliana prayed out that her enemy might reveal himself to her. In the Middle English account, the author wrote, "And at that moment he began to change shape and became such as he was, a fiend of hell."⁵⁶³ In the next scene the author described Juliana's spiritual battle. The author writes,

And she grabbed a great chain that she was bound with and bound both his two hands behind his back so that each of

⁵⁵⁹ MS Bodley 34 f. 25r.

⁵⁶⁰ MS Bodley 34 f. 25v.

⁵⁶¹ MS Bodley 34 f. 26r.

⁵⁶² MS Bodley 34 f. 27r. Translation from: Huber and Robertson, *The Katherine*, 101-2.

⁵⁶³ MS Bodley 34 f. 43r. Translation from: Huber and Robertson, *The Katherine*, 153.

his nails twisted painfully and became black from the blood
and flung him backwards straight down to the earth.⁵⁶⁴

Just like Margaret, Juliana victoriously defeated her demonic enemy. In both stories the women armed themselves with spiritual protection, which enables them to fight and defeat their enemies.

The image of a militant Juliana and Margaret fighting as soldiers in a spiritual war appears in Christina of Markyate's *vita* as the author transforms Christina's cell into a battlefield and the anchorite into a soldier. The author describes a moment in Christina's cell as she prayed with the *St. Albans Psalter* in her lap. At a moment of deep contemplation, the author describes a hoard of toads invading Christina's cell,

To terrify the handmaid of Christ, toads invaded her cell in
an attempt to divert her attention by all means of ugliness.
The sudden appearance of the toads, with their large and
horrible eyes, was frightening, they jumped everywhere,
grabbing the middle of the *Psalter*, what was open on her
lap as it was all day long. But, she refused to move and
would not relent in singing the *Psalmss*, because of this
they disappeared, which means that they were demons sent
from the Devil.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶⁴ MS Bodley 34 f. 45v. Translation from: Huber and Robertson, *The Katherine*, 157.

⁵⁶⁵ BL Cotton Tiberius MS E. I, f. 154v. Talbot, *The Life*, 98. This section of the Tiberius manuscript is very badly damaged and difficult to transcribe. I have included Talbot's transcription as he was able to decipher the damaged text with a UV light. The brackets indicate his insertions of the missing text. *Qui ad deterrendam [rever]endam ancillam Christi: bufones ir[rumpe]bant in carcerem: eo quod averterent virginis obtutum. Speciem illa per omnem deformitatem. Ap[pare]bant subito teterima. Terribili[bus] ac spaciosis orbibus oculorum. Se[debant] hinc et hinc: spalterio vendicantes medium locum in gremio*

Though the scene does not play out as exactly as Juliana's battle with Belial or Margaret's fight with the dragon, it does offer a vision of Christina in which she confronts a physical manifestation of the Devil and arms herself with a manly heart. In this instance, the demons take the form of horrifying toads, which harkens back to the Old Testament story in Exodus about the plague of frogs sent to torment the Pharaoh.⁵⁶⁶ Christina's ability to demonstrate her steadfastness, through singing the *Psalms*, serves as her victory and the end of the battle. In this way, she does imitate Juliana and Margaret by emulating the masculine virtues as they are spelled out in the *Psalter*, the very *Psalter* that sat on her lap as the toads poured into her cell.

Conclusion

The seemingly discordant components of the *St. Albans Psalter*, when read as a whole, provide an illuminating perspective on the intersection of gender and Christianity in twelfth-century England. For more than a century this *Psalter* has occupied the attention of art historians, and they largely agree that Abbot Geoffrey had this book created specifically for Christina of Markyate at some point in the first quarter of the twelfth century. Additionally, scholars remain convinced that the most unique aspects of the *Psalter*, its miniature cycle, the addition of the Alexis quire, and the commentary on the *Psychomachia*, set it apart from other *Psalters* created at St. Albans during the twelfth century. The point of departure for some scholars concerns the meaning of these

virgi[nis] quod propemodum omnibus horis iacebat expansum in usum sponse Christi. At cum illa nec se moveret nec psalmodiam dimitteret: iterum a[bibant]. Unde magis credendum [est eos] fuisse demones.

⁵⁶⁶ Exodus 8.

distinctive features: the explicit use of masculine language and images that dominate a book intended for a woman. In his introduction to the *Life of Christina of Markyate*, Talbot comments that the author of the *Psalter* used the masculine form for all the prayers in the text as if he composed the text for a man.⁵⁶⁷ In her work on the text, Geddes remarks that “the *Psalter* is a book created for Christina, but its contents are strongly controlled by her mentor and patron, Abbot Geoffrey de Gorran. [...] Geoffrey was creating not exactly the book Christina wanted, but the book he thought she should have.”⁵⁶⁸ This observation suggests that the *Psalter* can tell us much more about how Abbot Geoffrey understood and accepted his female companion than how Christina understood her own spirituality. Abbot Geoffrey, and the scribes who created the manuscript, emphasized the supremacy of Christian masculinity, and provided a litany of allegories, commentaries, and pictures to show the female reader how and why she should espouse a *virilia corda* or “manly heart.” Thus, it appears that the *St Albans Psalter* existed as an illuminated manual for the medieval *virago*.

The miniature cycle, the *Chanson of St. Alexis*, and the commentary on the *Psychomachia*, each provide a paradigm and method for enacting St. Jerome’s famous directive that women who cast aside the trappings of womanhood in service of Christ will “be called male,” which was the highest form of praise for women in the Middle Ages. In six of the forty miniatures, the artists made the deliberate choice to prominently portray women, either by depicting them as authoritative figures or by inserting them in

⁵⁶⁷ Talbot, *The Life*, 22.

⁵⁶⁸ Jane Geddes, “The *St. Albans Psalter*: The Abbot and the anchoress,” in *Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser (London: Routledge, 2005), 197.

biblical scenes in which women do not traditionally appear. When compared to similar psalters, created in the twelfth century, the artists' choices prove to be a unique characteristic of the *St. Albans Psalter*. The most plausible explanation for this choice becomes obvious when the images are “read” in conjunction with the Alexis quire and the commentary on the *Psychomachia*.

The *Chanson of St. Alexis*, the most unusual feature of the *Psalter*, has confounded scholars for more than a century. Earlier specialists, like Pächt and Talbot, correctly asserted that the *Psalter*'s creator included the story because it so closely resembled Christina's story. Decades later, Geddes proposed an alternative theory suggesting instead that Abbot Geoffrey requested the addition of the quire because it provided a simile for his relationship with Christina. The piece of the story that causes so much confusion concerns the relationship between sex and spirituality. The creator could have chosen a female example to include in the *Psalter*; indeed, in the twelfth century, myriad examples of female anchorites who rejected marriage in favor of a spiritual life existed. It seems, however, that the author deliberately chose a male example because Abbot Geoffrey, by way of the *Psalter*'s creator, wanted to give Christina a male example to follow. The overt, gendered language of the *Psychomachia* completes the presence of the *virago* in the *Psalter*. The miniatures offer an illustrated representation of female masculinity, the Alexis quire provides a narrative model on how to emulate a man of God, but the *Psychomachia* commentary spells out how Christians must arm themselves in masculine virtue as they prepare to fight as soldiers of Christ. A woman may have been born into the flesh of the weaker sex, but a spiritual battle offered her an opportunity to prove her manliness and become a *virago*, a female “man of God.”

CONCLUSION

She who does not believe, is a woman and should be designated by the name of her bodily sex, whereas she who believes, progresses to complete manhood.⁵⁶⁹

In the twelfth century, a burgeoning population of women entering religious vocations inspired a medieval reconsideration of the gender system and its models of sanctity. For twelve hundred years, Christian men burdened women with the weight of Eve's Original Sin. Borrowing from the Aristotelian and Galenic ideas about the natural imperfection of the female sex and the supremacy of the perfect male form, religious men created a model of female sanctity that simultaneously upheld a patriarchal hierarchy and created a *subordinate* space for women to participate in the religious sphere. The *virago* model of sanctity emphasized a process of women becoming male and subsequently reconciled a pervasive male anxiety over the female sex with a growing admiration of women's spiritual experience.

The *virago* paradigm owes its roots to the Patristic writers, namely St. Jerome and St. Ambrose, who borrowed ideas from Gnostic sects of Christianity, Jewish philosophy, and the scriptures in the Latin Vulgate. In the Patristic era a fully articulated concept of the *virago* emerged. The Christian *virago* relied on the belief that if a woman could prove her faith and dedication to Christ then she would progress to perfect spiritual manhood. In a letter to his female protégé, Eustochium, Jerome expanded on this idea

⁵⁶⁹ Ambrose, *Expositionis in evangelium secundum Lucam libri X*, PL 15:144) Quae non credit, mulier est, et adhuc corporei sexus appellatione signatur: nam quae credit, occurrit in virum perfectum. Cited and translated: Joyce Salisbury, "The Latin Doctors of the Church on Sexuality," *Journal of Medieval History* 12 (1986): 279-289, 280.

and emphasized that women had to put aside the vestiges of femininity, namely sexuality and motherhood, to prove herself worthy of being called male. The Patristic writers created a unique model of female sanctity that emphasized the superiority of Christian masculinity by encouraging women to become spiritually male.

The dissolution of the Roman empire and the chaotic years of the early Middle Ages did nothing to thwart the ideal of female masculinity. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries male writers created and recreated the stories of the third and fourth century virgin martyrs and cast them as the paragons of constancy, intelligence, and courage. Moreover, the vivid and violent accounts of the torture and torment endured by the virgin martyrs provided another facet to the *virago* paradigm. As the male authors crafted the stories of these legendary women, they emphasized a spiritual purification that resulted from the arduous torment and bloody ordeals the martyrs endured. For the authors, the violence was not gratuitous; rather, it provided the venue through which a woman proved the manliness of her soul. The medieval accounts of these stories provide unambiguous evidence that the idealization of the *virago* lasted well into the high medieval period.

The medieval narratives of the virgin martyrs also inspired medieval men who wrote to, for, and about holy women. In a small collection of letters written by influential men in the twelfth century, the virgin martyrs served as the exemplars of female masculinity. Moreover, in these letters, men consistently and fervently extolled the virtues of the *virago* and implored their female acolytes to reject the limitations of their female sex and put on the soul of a man. In two letters written by Osbert of Clare, he implored his female reader to strive for spiritual perfection, and he provided a litany of biblical examples of the *virago*. Similarly, Peter Abelard employed the *virago* paradigm

as he wrote to his spiritual paramour, Heloise. Abelard encouraged her to work towards masculine perfection so that she may be worthy of a religious vocation. In Peter of Blois letter to Matilda, he explicitly called her a *virago* and supported the epithet by reminding her of her masculine strength, courage, and constancy.

Finally, in the two texts associated with Christina of Markyate, the *virago* appears in arresting detail. In 1977, R.W. Hanning proclaimed that Christina's story is "perhaps the twelfth century's most effective and revealing personal history of a woman."⁵⁷⁰ Another reading proves that her story also presents Christina as a clear and unequivocal example of a woman made male by the pen of her hagiographer. Just as with the medieval stories of the virgin martyrs, Christina suffered torments of the body and mind, but remained vigilant in her dedication to God and never wavered. By the end of her story, Christina emerges as a powerful soldier of God.

The *St. Albans Psalter*, the devotional book given to Christina by her friend Abbot Geoffrey, served as a spiritual instructional guide on becoming a *virago*. Abbot Geoffrey, and the scribes who created the manuscript, emphasized the supremacy of Christian masculinity, and provided a litany of allegories, commentaries, and pictures to show the female reader how and why she should espouse a *virilia corda* or "manly heart." The *Psalter* proves that in the twelfth century, men believed that though a woman may have been encumbered with the sins of Eve, she could equip herself with masculine virtue, embrace a manly heart, prove her strength in spiritual warfare and become a *virago*.

⁵⁷⁰ R. W. Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (London: Yale University Press, 1977), 50.

Twelfth-century England is not the end of this story. Unquestionably, the ideals of female masculinity existed throughout the European continent and influenced the female religious in communities beyond England. Specifically, the way in which the *virago* appeared in different regions presents an important avenue for further research. The same questions asked of the texts studied in this dissertation must be asked of texts written in Latin and vernacular languages created across Europe throughout the Middle Ages. Additionally, the fate of the *virago* as she evolved and transformed after the twelfth century presents another important opportunity for further research. The female voice is notably absent from this dissertation. Focusing on the male perspective does not diminish female agency, nor does it temper the feminist perspective of spirituality. Rather, by underscoring the influence of masculine anxiety and by emphasizing the perspective of the men who crafted and sustained the *virago*, a more complete picture of female spirituality emerges. However, a thorough exploration of the female perspective on the *virago* paradigm does not yet exist and offers another necessary prospect for research.

In 1973 Simone de Beauvoir famously declared in her book, *The Second Sex*, “one is not born a woman [...]one becomes one.”⁵⁷¹ Her words call attention to the notion that gender, of being any gender, is an identity that one embraces or, as these medieval texts prove, an identity that men bestowed on women. In the Patristic era and in the central Middle Ages, men created a new gender ideal for women; an ideal that required women negate the essence of their sex for the benefit of their soul. Men

⁵⁷¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 301.

assigned masculine gender ideals to women they admired and, in the process, manipulated the legacy and image of powerful and influential women. The *virago* paradigm upheld an established patriarchal hierarchy, reinforced the supremacy of masculinity, and created a space for women to actively participate in Christian practices and vocation so long as she adhered to a strict and violent paradigm of female sanctity. Thus, in the spirit of Simone de Beauvoir's proclamation, a woman was not born a *virago*, she became one.

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