

VIRGINITY AND CHASTITY FOR WOMEN IN LATE ANTIQUITY, ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND, AND LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND: ON THE CONTINUITY OF IDEAS

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the continuity of ideas regarding virginity and chastity from Late Antiquity through late Medieval times in England, with special focus on how two Anglo-Saxon clerical authors, Aldhelm (c. 639-709) and Ælfric (c.955-c.1020), reflect the thinking of patristic writers, tailor their ideas to fit their respective Anglo-Saxon contexts, and influence later medieval thought. Claire Lees's and Gillian Overing's argument for approaches that emphasize continuity between Anglo-Saxon England and the later medieval period prompted the author to ask these questions: What themes and images of virginity and chastity from Anglo-Saxon writings were present in 14th- and 15th- century England? Where did Anglo-Saxon writers such as Aldhelm and Ælfric get their ideas of virginity and chastity and were they different from earlier conceptions? The author draws connections between the ideals of virginity represented in the figures of St. Æthelthryth (d. 679) and Margery Kempe (c. 1373- c.1440).

VIRGINITY AND CHASTITY IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Aldhelm and Ælfric's ideas are clearly derivative, coming from the Latin texts of patristic writers such as Tertullian, Augustine, Cyprian, Clement, Jerome, John Chrysostom, and Ambrose – men who lauded – and cautioned – virgins and widows. The Church Fathers were heavily influenced by women: Virgins and widows, as their followers, provided them with inspiration through their learning and were a living example of what the Fathers themselves preached (Clove 15-24).

Women in Late Antiquity were divided into three classes: virgins, widows, and wives. Virginity was regarded as the highest state, widowhood was second, wifehood, last. According to Jerome and other patristic writers, virgins received a one hundred-fold reward in heaven; widows a sixty-fold reward; wives, thirty. There were those who disagreed with this doctrine; Jovinian, for example, believed that the three classes were equal in baptism and that chastity should not be so prized. Jerome attacked him for this, but Jovinian's ideas appealed to many (Clove 45-46).

Following the teachings of Paul, chastity was promoted in order that one might emulate Christ and the Virgin Mary, and thus virgins and widows were thought to have a special connection to God. "The virgin's body was described as a jewel, a treasure, a sacred vessel, a temple of God which was to be cherished and honored. As bride of Christ the virgin needed to be carefully guarded so as to remain 'unwounded' or 'untarnished' for her eternal bridegroom" (Schulenburg 128). A married woman might also practice chastity (after all, she was a potential widow), but she needed the consent of her husband first.

Marriage was seen as a potential problem, as one's spouse came between one and God. Continence in marriage was desirable, and "[m]arriage for the purpose of incubating piety was eminently praiseworthy" (Clove 43). For example, Jerome likes marriage only "because it brings me virgins" (qtd. in Cloke 39); otherwise he lists many reasons against it, although he allows that is a lawful, if lesser, path that has its rewards. Augustine believes that marriage exists to prevent sin, since not everyone will have the grace of God to remain virgins, although he also lists positive points of marriage, such as companionship and love between husband and wife (Gulley

136). Augustine welcomes the end of procreation, because it will hasten the end of this world and the arrival of the heavenly kingdom. Chrysostom, because he believes the end of the world is near, dismisses fears about the effects of mass chastity (Cloke 41).

A woman practicing chastity distanced herself from the negative qualities associated with women. Because of Eve's sin, women were thought to be carnal and deceitful, easily susceptible to pride, loquacious, and the source of the world's problems. If a man lusted, it was always the woman's fault. Women were seen as being so tied to their sexual nature that to renounce it was to go completely against that nature; a phenomenal achievement representing a completely altered, as it were sexless, state like that in which the angels were said to live. Choosing celibacy broke the bond of their subjection to original sin; but those not able to encompass this, or those attempting it and failing were represented as an actual danger to the Christian life; therefore any woman was inherently dangerous.... (Cloke 28) Alternately, a virgin might become a man, as Ambrose believed. The parts of the word virgin, "vir" and "ago," suggest a woman acting like a man (Carlson 12). Jerome says that a virgin "will cease to be a woman and will be called a man" (qtd. in Schulenburg 128).

A virgin or widow was free from a husband's authority and from the inferior legal and social status a woman suffered as a wife; thus she had a degree of independence and selfhood not known to a wife (Carlson 2). Virgins were thought to be the most susceptible to temptation and sin, never having experienced sexual relations. They were to be kept secluded with their activities highly curtailed in order to protect them from being tempted or from *tempting* celibate men. All women were viewed with suspicion and virgins did not escape that view.

Many virgins lived with, and were supervised by, their parents, and even so were urged by Chrysostom to be supervised by a priest (Cloke 62). They spent their time in fasting, prayer, study, and hard work to put themselves in the right frame of mind, although there were no systemized rules for observance at the time (Cloke 65).

Virginity was not just a physical phenomenon, but a spiritual one as well, and one bad thought could condemn a virgin forever. For example, Jerome writes, "Virginity can be lost even by a thought," and Gregory of Nyssa observes, "Virginity of the body is devised to further such disposition of the soul" (qtd. in Cloke 58). Jerome also advises that "although God can do all things, He cannot raise up a virgin after she has fallen" (qtd. in Schulenburg 130). A virgin must have *integritas*, or total virginity, meaning both body and mind were uncorrupted and pure (Schulenburg 127). It was considered better for a woman to aspire to virginity or chastity within marriage and not be able to attain it than it was for a virgin to fall.

Although treatises on virginity were addressed to both women and men, most of them concerned women's virginity, both because of the example of the Virgin Mary and women's questionable capacity for virtue. Jerome remarks, "For this reason virginity is more abundantly poured on women, because it began with a woman" (qtd. in Cloke 60). Cloke suggests that the audiences for the treatises were probably mothers and not the virgins themselves, because those women still eligible would be young girls who would need the permission of their parents. Families and society expected young women to marry; Christian girls usually did so between the ages of fifteen and eighteen; pagan girls, between twelve and fifteen. Mothers who were thwarted in their own plans for a chaste life often dedicated their daughters to the Church (Cloke 50).

While virginity was considered a grace given by God (and thus it was sinful for virgins to take credit for remaining chaste, although, paradoxically, it was their fault if they failed in that endeavor), widowhood was an active choice, one that gave widows leader status in their communities, through which they were expected to look after and counsel virgins. The Church Fathers chastised women who chose not to remarry for the wrong reasons, such as to receive independence from men (although they often touted this latter point to entice women to remain chaste).

Patristic writers had different responses to virgins who suffered the loss of their virginity through sexual assault. Jerome and Ambrose suggest that suicide is appropriate to preserve

one's virginity. Augustine disagrees. He assures virgins that "violation of chastity, without the will's consent, cannot pollute the character"; however, if lust or pleasure is introduced instead of merely pain, the virgin's mind might have consented to it. Therefore, virgins are not permitted to commit suicide "to prevent themselves, and not others, from sinning for fear that their own lust might be excited by another's and they might consent" (qtd. in Schulenburg 131, 133). Officially, Pope Leo I (440-61) decreed that while violated women were not to be blamed or punished, they could no longer compare themselves to either virgins or widows and would only be readmitted into their communities if they could prove they were committed to their chastity (Schulenburg 133).

ALDHELM'S DE VIRGINITATE

Aldhelm's work *De Virginitate* draws on the patristic writers Cyprian, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine, and thus follows traditional thinking on virginity. However, one common aspect of contemporary Anglo-Saxon life, that of husband and wives abandoning their marriages to serve God, goes against the teachings of Paul, who, praising both virginity and marriage, forbids the dissolution of marriage by either party, even to preserve virginity. The Church Fathers dared not completely disparage marriage because of this pronouncement, although all celebrated virginity more highly. Even Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury (669-690), had difficulty reconciling Paul's teachings with his people's proclivities and cites a Greek Father for the theological argument that a woman could only leave her husband to enter a monastery. In light of this trend, Aldhelm substitutes *chastity* for *widowhood*, so his three orders become virginity (*virginitas*), *chastity* (*castitas*), and conjugality (*iugalitas*) (Lapidge 53- 55).

Aldhelm, in his verbose but poetic language, makes it clear that all three states are acceptable, although virginity is still clearly the best, as evidenced through his diction and imagery:

The sublimity of praiseworthy virginity, like a lofty lighthouse placed on the uprearing promontory of a cliff, does not shine so resplendently that the strict moderation of chastity, which is the second grade, is scorned as completely inferior and grows vile; or so that the legitimate fertility of marriage, undertaken for the issue of children, becomes perceptibly foul. Nor by a comparison of this sort do I see that what is good is disparaged but rather – which is better – I think that it is more willingly praised. (Aldhelm, *De Virginitate*, 66)

Aldhelm then delineates how these three ranks differ from each other: "that virginity is gold, chastity silver, conjugality bronze; that virginity is riches, chastity an average income, conjugality poverty; that virginity is freedom, chastity ransom, conjugality captivity... (Aldhelm, *De Virginitate*, 75). He relates stories of both male and female virgin saints, male saints outnumbering female.

Such a catalog of male saints had no precedent in patristic writings (Lapidge 56). Why does Aldhelm include them here? While *De Virginitate* is addressed to the abbess and nuns at Barking, it may have been directed at both the monks and the nuns, since Barking was a double monastery. Or is it, as Lees and Overing suggest, that the "Barking nuns are encouraged to think of themselves as sometimes embodied and gendered – sometimes male, other times female" (329). Perhaps Aldhelm wants to emphasize the importance of virginity in a double monastery, even one as learned as Barking, in an age when Anglo-Saxon religious women were not so strictly enclosed and separated from men. Spiritual corruption and laxity in some monasteries was rampant; Aldhelm warns against excesses in personal attire and appearance, a common temptation for Anglo-Saxon royal women monastics (Neuman de Vegvar 60). Yet, Aldhelm acknowledges that the Barking nuns asked him to write this treatise on their behalf, and he tells them that he will produce a version in verse as well, if they write more letters to prod him (Aldhelm, *De Virginitate*, 131). Lapidge suggests that "the structure of the *De Virginitate* is determined by [an] audience of noble ladies-turned-nuns, some at least of whom had rejected their worldly marriages" (52). I believe that the nuns, who would have been familiar with

patristic writings, specifically asked him to write his own virginity treatise to validate their experiences.

VIRGINITY AND CHASTITY IN ÆLFRIC'S WORKS

Aldhelm lived in a century when women were important participants in monastic life; however, during the Benedictine Reform of Ælfric's time (in tenth and eleventh centuries), women monastics were marginalized: Female monasteries were reformed more slowly than male houses or were refounded as male and dissolved altogether, and the rules for separating and enclosing women from men were strictly enforced. Thus, while Aldhelm addresses women and writes at their request, Ælfric, as Cubitt argues, writes primarily for male monks and male patrons, even though he intended his works for general circulation. Even though Ælfric emphasizes chastity for both men and women, Cubitt suggests that because of the values of the Benedictine Reform "it is more likely that the virginity which the reform promoted as the highest spiritual value was associated with the male rather than the female religious life" (Cubitt 102).

Ælfric's focus on male virginity seems to signal a shift from the patristic period when exhortations of virginity were directed more toward women. Does this suggest that he regards virginal or chaste women as men, or does it suggest a lesser interest in women? Lees argues the former when discussing how virginity and chastity are universalized in his homilies: In the Homily on the Purification of Mary (CH I, 9), for example, two specific examples of female virginity give way to the male (Christ) and then are universalized as examples for all Christians; in the Sexagesima homily (CH II, 6), Ælfric focuses on male chastity only; in "De Doctrina Apostolica" (Pope 1968 XIX) chastity is placed within the context of Christian law, in relation to other Christian observances such as tithing (140-145). She concludes that chastity "subsumes gender" but that "there is no doubt that the universal Christian is first male and only secondarily female" (Lees 146).

In contrast to the homilies, however, *Lives of Saints (LS)* exemplifies virginity as female, where "[w]omen have sexuality, men don't, and women who become saints redirect it toward God" (Lees 147). Men in the collection are saints for various reasons – the women, however, are all virgins. Instead of virginity and chastity having no gender, the female saints, "seemingly represented as not-sexual, not-women, even not-human, in fact remain female, sexed, and human" (Lees 150).

Women aren't posited as the primary audience for *LS*. While Catherine Cubitt argues that Ælfric "uses female images to create a male monastic elite, to promote the authority of the male virgin order over the clergy and the laity," the translation of *LS* for Æthelweard and Æthelmær puts the ideal of chastity in the hands of male noble laymen as well (19). This latter condition is perhaps the reason that Ælfric concludes his version of Æthelthryth's tale with the story of a chaste nobleman entering a monastery without mentioning what happens to his similarly chaste wife. His rationale (perhaps besides her being a local saint) for including Æthelthryth, the only non-martyred virgin in *LS*, is that she is an example of, and thus promotes, virginity in the secular and monarchic realm – an ideology Ælfric was disseminating (Waterhouse 344), influenced by his belief that the apocalypse was imminent and that the people should thus live rightly.

Below I present (with brief commentary) some representative quotations illustrating Ælfric's view of virginity, or *mægðhad*. Translations are my own. I chose to search *mægðhad* in the Old English Corpus, as opposed to *clænysse* (chastity) and *mæden* (virgin), because *mægðhad* is a term more frequently associated with women. *Mæden's* "semantic field drifts its basic signification to include not only virginity, but also physical chastity, celibacy, and the broad general sense of avoiding mortal sin of both men and women; so although not gender specific, it seems to be more commonly associated with men, whereas *mægðhad* is more frequently used for women" (Waterhouse 351). The uses I quote below, however, refer to both men and women. The majority of the occurrences of *mægðhad* occur in Ælfric's works; all uses of its variant spelling *mæigðhad* are Ælfric's.

Ælfric, following the Church Fathers (and not Aldhelm), lays out in the homily on the Purification and Presentation (CH I, 9 l. 198) three grades of chastity:

Pry hadas syndon. þe cyðdon gecyðnesse be criste. þæt is mægðhad & wydewanhad. & riht sinscype, Mæden is cristes moder: & on mægðhade wunode iohannes se fulluhtere. þe embe crist cydde. & manega oðre toeacan him.... [There are three orders that announce the Testament according to Christ: that is virginity and widowhood and right marriage. A virgin is Christ's mother, and in virginity St. John the Baptist lived, who reported about Christ and many others in addition to him.]

"Right marriage" would be sexual intercourse for procreation only.

In the "Homily for the Nativity of the Virgin Mary," Ælfric discusses *mægðhad* extensively. In fact, the word is used eighteen times. Here Ælfric emphasizes that a virgin, like the Church, must be holy in both body and spirit:

Seo gelaðung is halig on lichaman and on gaste, ac heo nis na eall mæden swa þeah on lichaman, ac heo is swa þeah mæden soðlice on gaste, and heo is eall halig for þam halgan geleafan, and heo is swiðor halig on þam halgum mannum, þe on mægðhade wuniað on lichaman and on gaste." (l.168) [The church is holy in body and spirit, but it is not entirely a virgin in the body in this way, however, unless it is truly a virgin in spirit, and it is entirely holy on account of holy faith, and it is holier by means of the holy person who lives in virginity in body and in spirit.]

Here Ælfric stresses virginity for both men and women; he also appears to be addressing and encouraging laypeople because he specifically mentions monastics as examples of virginal living:

Se mægðhad is gemæne ægþrum, cnihtum and mædenum, þe clænlice lybbað æfre fram cildhade oð ende heora lifes for Cristes lufon, swa swa þa clænan munecas doð and ða clænan mynecena on mynstrum gehwær wide geond þas woruld, swa swa hit awriten is on *Vitas Patrum* and on fela bocum be manegum þusendum on mynstrum and on westenum. (l. 224) [Virginity is shared by both boys and girls, who live chastely from childhood to the end of their lives for the sake of Christ's love, just as chaste monks and chaste nuns do in monasteries throughout the world, just as it is written in the *Vitas Patrum* and in many books about many thousands in monasteries and in the desert.]

The same message is echoed in his *Letter to Sigefyrth*:

Mægðhad is witodlice se þe wunað on clænnysse æfre fram cildhade gesælig for Criste, ge wæpmenn, ge wimmenn, þa þe wurðiað Crist mid swa micelre lufe, þæt him leofre byð, þæt hi mid earfoðnysse hi sylfe gewyldon to þære clænnysse, þe hi Criste beheton;...swa swa þa godan munecas and mynecena doð, þa þe on clænnysse Criste æfre þeowiað. (l. 162) [Virginity truly is those who, blessed, always live in chastity from childhood for the sake of Christ, both men and women, who thus honor Christ with greater love, that are more beloved to him, who with hardship subdue themselves to their chastity, who promised themselves to Christ...just as good monks and nuns do, who serve Christ eternally in chastity.]

Virgins will receive the best room in God's house and will have a name superior to sons and daughters (*De Doctrina Apostolica*, l. 66):

God behet þurh þone witegan Isaiam þam mannum þe on mægðhade wuniað, and þa clænnysse gecuron þe him gecweme is, þæt he wolde him forgifan þa selestan wununge on his huse, þæt is on heofonan rice, and þone selran naman him gesettan, toforan sunum and dohtrum, se þe ne byð næfre adilegod. [Through the prophet Isaiah, God promised men who live in virginity and chose chastity, which is acceptable to Him, that He would give them the best dwelling in His house that is in the heavenly kingdom, and would decree the better name to them, superior to sons and daughters, He who never is destroyed.]

Ælfric uses formulaic phrases in his work, and the following themes are articulated over and over: virgins are both men and women, they live in virginity from childhood, they do so for Christ's love, and they do so like monks and nuns.

VIRGINITY AND CHASTITY AFTER THE CONQUEST

While Aldhelm continued to be cited as an authority and Ælfric's *Lives* continued its circulation, women patrons and their need for information led to the writing of new treatises on virginity after the Conquest by clerics, chaplains, and confessors (Wogan-Browne 20, 15, 3). Saints' lives were written not only for women but *by* women, and in the thirteenth century such works were as likely to be written in either French or English. For example *Ancrene Wisse* was circulated in both English and Anglo-Norman but was still being exchanged in French in fifteenth-century England (Wogan-Browne 12, 13).

As in earlier periods, virginity was not a static construct. The division of virginity into physical and spiritual states continued, as did claiming honorary forms of virginity for widows and wives, because virginity was "too powerful and prestigious a cultural ideal to be ignored or discarded" (Wogan-Browne 44). The division of women into the three categories of virgins, widows, and wives developed into a continuum of degrees and attributes. The state of virgins in heaven evolved to reflect the ideals of medieval society: In the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they are represented as living in "eternity as elegant young noblewomen at God's high medieval court, just as the iconography of heaven itself shifts from that of paradise garden to celestial city" (Wogan-Browne 22).

Ideas from Late Antiquity are elaborated in treatises such as *Hali Meidenhad*. The rewards for virgins in heaven are enthusiastically presented: Virgins will be accorded a special place in heaven, wear a special crown that shines brighter than the sun, be like angels, sing songs that only virgins are allowed to sing and at which all will wonder, walk next to God, and wed the fairest bridegroom of all, Christ. The writer warns against pride and fallen virgins, reminds maidens that virginity is voluntary, and painstakingly catalogs the disadvantages of marriage, to which they might be tempted. Once maidenhood is lost it is irrecoverable, and the writer ends by exhorting the virgins to resist temptation.

Virgin martyr stories likewise changed to reflect the tastes of their readers, contemporary women who consisted more and more of a lay, middle class, and contemplative audience. These narratives were infused with political meaning and ambiguities, and thus could promote different interests and have different meanings for different people (Winstead 4, 10). For example, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, laypeople became increasingly involved in religious life, which threatened ecclesiastical control. While earlier hagiographers encouraged identification with virgin martyrs, those of the later Middle Ages wanted to distance the martyrs from their audience to discourage radicalism. "By the early 1400s, concerns about the uses that people such as Kempe were making of virgin martyr legends may have prompted hagiographers to tone down the themes of conflict and confrontation that dominated earlier legends and to portray secular institutions, such as marriage and family, more positively" (Winstead 15).

VIRGINITY, CHASTITY, AND MARGERY KEMPE

Margery Kempe lived in England at a time when contemplation became the devotional ideal and laypeople had more involvement in religious life. Religious literature circulated back and forth among the clergy, the cloistered, and laypeople, and a host of writers were translating and adapting religious classics for consumption by lay audiences (Dickman 156-7). While she claimed she could not read or write, Kempe was certainly familiar with several religious texts popular at the time, as well as with the Bible, as she consorted with such people as Julian of Norwich and other mystics, confessors, priests, and other religious people.

Kempe herself was a married mother of fourteen children, the daughter of a mayor and prominent citizen of Lynn, and a sometime businesswoman. In her *Book*, she relates how Jesus

comes to her in a vision after an illness induced by the birth of her first child, but it takes her many years to give up her worldly ways. After about twenty years of marriage, she gets her husband John to agree to live a chaste marriage, which he does reluctantly and with conditions.

Margery admits that when younger she had been sinful in enjoying her husband's body, but now chastity is of utmost importance so she can dedicate herself to Christ. For example, when John asks her if she would have sex with him if his life depended on it, Margery responds she would rather see him dead than forgo her chastity. They take a private vow of chastity and then seek to make it official with a trip to Philip Repingdon, Bishop of Lincoln. It is debatable whether he officially sanctions the request or not (Vandussen 284). Nevertheless, Margery and John live chastely, first under the same roof and sharing the same bed (John's part of the bargain), and then separately in different lodgings to avoid the gossip of the community, which doubts Margery's chastity.

In chapter 21 of *The Book*, Margery relates a story that occurs before John agreed to be celibate. Jesus comes to Margery and notices she is pregnant. Her physical state obviously troubles Margery, as she bemoans the fact that she is unworthy and must lie with her husband, even though it gives her great pain and distress. Jesus answers that it is His will that she bear him more fruit, and for that she has His grace. Margery is still not convinced, saying that such grace belongs instead to "thy holy maydens." Jesus answers:

Ya, dowtyr, trow thow right wel that I lofe wyfes also, and special tho wyfys which woldyn levyn chast, yyf thei mygtyn have her wyl, and don her besynes to plesyn me as thow dost, for, thow, the state of maydenhode be mor parfyte and mor holy than the state of wedewhode, and the state of wedewhode mor parfyte than the state of wedlake, *yet dowtyr I love the as wel as any mayden in the world.* (Kempe 59) [italics mine]

Although she is married and at the moment not chaste despite her desires, Jesus tells her she is to Him as a virgin, which corresponds to the Church Fathers' view that God acknowledges the intentions of women who want to live chastely but cannot. The comparison of the degrees of virtue for women is reminiscent of Aldhelm.

Yet this exchange fails to comfort her, for in the next chapter, she bemoans her lack of virginity:

As this creatur lay in contemplacyon, sor wepyng in hir spirit, sche seyde to owur Lord Jhesu Cryst, "A, Lord, maydonys dawnsyn now meryly in hevyn. Shal not I don so? For becawse I am no mayden, lak of maydenhed is to me now gret sorwe; me thynkyth I wolde I had ben slayn whan I was takyn fro the funtston that I schul nevyr a dysplesyd the, and than schuldyst thu, blyssed Lorde, an had my maydenhed wythowtyn ende. (60).

Here we can hear echoes of Ælfric: Margery's virginity is obviously "for the sake of Christ," and she would rather have been slain than not to have lived in chastity "from childhood to the end of [her life] for Christ's love."

Jesus reassures her (again) that all her sins are forgiven and that she is a singular love of His. He seems to impart an "honorary virgin" status upon her, as she will receive in heaven what is due virgins: "And forasmech as thu art a mayden in thi sowle, I schal take the be the on hand in hevyn and my modyr be the other hand, and so scalt thu dawnsyn in hevyn with other holy maydens and virgynes, for I may clepyn the dere abowte and myn owyn derworthy derlyung" (62). Jesus' words also echo Ælfric: In singling her out, Jesus sees Margery as "superior to sons and daughters," and he values that she is a virgin in her soul, which Ælfric emphasizes above in the "Homily for the Nativity of the Virgin Mary."

Margery is obsessed about her sexual status in the eyes of God and her community. While thanking Jesus for his goodness to her, Margery compares his love of her to his love of virgins: "Thu art as gracyows to me as thei I wer as clene a mayden as any is in this worlde and as thow I had nevyr synned (139). Alison Gulley argues that Margery has placed too much of an emphasis on her chastity, for as Jesus above says, "I lofe wyfes also." Margery lived

against a backdrop of shifting social and religious views of wedlock. Significantly, Margery lived and dictated her *Book* during an age of seemingly conflicting values: an anti-feminist and anti-matrimonial tradition continued on the one hand while at the same time the Church was in the process of officially recognizing marriage as a sacrament....Since Margery and John wed in 1393, we can easily conclude that Margery entered into her marriage believing it a sacrament. (134)

Gulley suggests that Church, society, and Jesus (by his own words in several places in *The Book*) recognize Margery's marriage as a "vocation exclusive of any other" (qtd. 137), one that is worthy and sacred. Thus it is highly interesting to note that even with Jesus' reassurances and the Church's approval of her marriage, Margery still craves chastity and laments her non-virginal status. In line with Church teachings, especially the Church Fathers, she feels guilty about the frequent and enjoyable sex she used to have with her husband. By being chaste with her husband, she can "enjoy a single-minded intimacy," as Augustine said, with the Lord (qtd. in Gulley 40). As a female laywoman presenting herself hagiographically, perhaps she found authority and validation by internalizing the views of earlier male clerics such as Aldhelm and Ælfric, whose works would have influenced later medieval texts on virginity, such as *Hali Meidenhad*, with which Margery may have been familiar.

Jesus asks Margery to clothe herself in white, a color reserved for virgins, several times in *The Book*. She is often met with resistance because of this. When Margery and John go to Bishop Repingdon, she tells him that he should "gyve me the mantyl and the ryng and clothyn me al in whyght clothys" (Kempe 46). The bishop must seek counsel for this unusual request because Margery, a wife with a living husband, is asking for the white clothes of a *virgin* and the mantle and ring of a *widow*, two statuses for which she is ineligible. Archbishop Arundel refuses her request as outlandish and without precedent (Vandussen 278).

Yet, eventually Margery does procure white clothing and a ring. On her trip back from Jerusalem, Jesus tells her He will make sure she arrives at Rome and returns to England safely, but on condition that she clothe herself in white. Margery is well aware of the trouble this will cause her, for in "gret hevyness and gret diswer" she answers, "...I scal obey thi wille, and yf thu bring me to Rome in safté, I schal weryn white clothys, thow alle the world schuld wondyr on me, for thi lofe." She knows that she will stand out from the others and that she will be seen as a fraud or a heretic. When Jesus tells her to stop wearing white and return to wearing black for a while, she is conscious that people will notice and make fun of her. Indeed, the Archbishop of York sharply asks her when she is brought in for heresy: "Why gost thu in white? Art thu a mayden?," seemingly annoyed by her self-presentation. Yet, she endures these conditions of virginity "for the sake of Christ."

By wearing white, Margery obviously makes a statement about her virginity that others do not understand. Vandussen suggests that through her sartorial exegesis—a reading of self that corresponds to her reading of Scripture—she allegorizes her selection of traditional garments so that they represent her supposed spiritual condition...while in material terms that same garb serves as a visible sign to set herself apart from "worldly" women. In this way Margery defines a place for herself within the Church which is *unofficial*, but not *anti-official*. (276) She acts within the expanded notions of the "states of the flesh" that Wogan-Browne discusses, somewhere between virgin, widow, and wife (44).

CONCLUSION

The texts explored above show how attitudes toward virginity and chastity from Late Antiquity to the late Middle Ages in England are highly consistent. The same points are emphasized: Virginity is extolled as the highest order for women, receiving the hundred-fold reward in heaven; pride is unacceptable in virgins because virginity is a gift from God; a wife is better than a fallen virgin. Chastity is preferred for both widows and wives. Anglo-Saxon and late medieval writers adapted their homilies and treatises for their times: Aldhelm substituted "chastity" for "widowhood" to accommodate the large numbers of noblewomen and men abandoning their marriages to serve Christ; Ælfric universalized virginity and chastity for both men and women,

whether monastic, clerical or lay; the writers of Late Medieval England adopted their imagery for a more courtly and then a more worldly, middle-class and religiously involved lay audience.

In the life of St. Æthelthryth, Ælfric is aware of the incredulity that will meet his claims that Æthelthryth remained a virgin after two marriages, evidenced by the fact that he spends a quarter of the life establishing that claim (Waterhouse 344). Similarly, Margery Kempe is aware that her proclamation (by wearing white) of spiritual if not actual virginity will be challenged by those around her. Virginity is problematic – St. Æthelthryth's is validated through the telling of her story by Bede first, then Ælfric; Margery's is only through Christ's conversations with her. Virginity (or the lack thereof) and chastity are essential to the conceptions of being a good Christian, especially if one is a woman.

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