

Raising John's Body: Ælfric's Homily for the Assumption of John the Apostle*

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Introduction

Ælfric, Abbot of Eynsham, was a Benedictine monk, educated at Winchester in Wessex, which was refounded by Bishop Æthelwold for the Benedictine Reform movement in 973. The Benedictines under Æthelwold had received unprecedented support, material and devotional, from King Edgar and Queen Ælfhryth in the mid to late tenth century (Yorke 65-68).¹⁾ In 987 when Cerne Abbas was founded, Ælfric was commissioned by Æthelmær, the son of the powerful alderman Æthelweard, to serve as mass-priest there. He was soon asked to translate Latin homilies into English, and the result was the *Catholic*

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1) See Godden's "Money, Power and Morality."

Homilies (ca. 992-995; *CH* hereafter). Manuscript evidence suggests these homilies were read to congregations throughout Anglo-Saxon England.²⁾ Ælfric was later appointed to the abbacy at Eynsham, also in Wessex, and while he lived he was sought out by the best educated and most influential men in the country to explain doctrine and write subsequent texts and translations.³⁾ Elaine Treharne shows that more than one hundred years after the Norman Conquest (1066), after the official language of the English courts had been French for many generations and parlance was changing from Old English into Middle English, Ælfric's homilies were still read and distributed in English. Moreover, Aaron Kleist points out that in the sixteenth century, in the service of Henry VIII, Matthew Parker used *CH* as a "historical precedent" for an English church that differed from the Catholic Church (312). Thus, *CH* not only reached its intended contemporary audience of the Anglo-Saxon masses, but also the English living a century after Ælfric had died, and certain *literati* and elite in the ensuing millennium who were undaunted by the alienness of Old English. *CH* is an extremely important work worthy of scholarly attention. Malcom Godden shows that *CH* I (the First Series) is the first part of a teaching program, the part that was written to include the least educated among the laity attending mass (*Ælfric's CH: Introduction* xxii-xxiii).

Ælfric's homily for the Assumption of John ("Assumptio Sancti Johannis Apostoli," see Clemons) tells his story from his pledge of lifelong virginity to his miraculous raising of a widow's son, his capture and attempted execution by Emperor Domitian, and his assumption to heaven, soul and body together.

2) See Godden's "Ælfric and the Vernacular Prose Tradition," esp. 110.

3) See Ælfric's correspondence with bishops and archbishops in Whitelock and Fehr. See also his acknowledgements of commissions to write or translate texts in Wilcox, 107-08, 111, 116, 120, and 122-25.

The assumption of John is the fourth homily (*CH* I.4 hereafter) in the first volume of a two-volume, two-year cycle of homilies. *CH* was written in English to be read for mass on Sundays and feast-days. *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture* by Clare Lees and Gillian Overing fruitfully applies a “feminist patristics” to Anglo-Saxon religious prose, “placing gender at the most basic structural level of critical discourse” (10). Essays in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages* argue that certain early medieval religious texts reflect a desire to masculinize Christian performance for recently converted warrior cultures.⁴⁾ Clare Lees’s *Tradition and Belief* puts gender representation in dialogue with religious teaching, and observes that “Ælfric cannot avoid addressing women (and their bodies) even if he wishes, ambivalently, that he could” (136).

CH I invites gender analysis because its gender asymmetry is atypical of its genre, the *sanctorale*, and period. Typical male lives focus on the saint’s refusal to worship pagan gods, while typical female lives showcase their rejection of pagan suitors in favor of lifelong virginity. Unusually, none of the forty homilies in *CH* I includes a female saint’s life, nor even a story about Mary or Eve. This should also be considered in view of the fact that Ælfric’s own *Lives of Saints (LS)* includes a parity of male and female saints’ lives. E. Gordon Whatley and Virginia Blanton show how Ælfric’s principles of selecting and editing texts for *LS* reflect a desire to appeal to his noble patrons and present a positive image of the monastic life (Whatley 182, esp.; Blanton 105-22, esp. 122). However, the utter absence of female actors from *CH* cannot be explained by a desire to attract men to Benedictine monasticism. Unlike *LS*, *CH* concerns commoners rather than the powerful, which implies

4) See Pettit, 8-23; Murray, 24-42; and Christie, 143-157.

a greater anxiety on Ælfric's part over the ways in which the uneducated laity might read the boundaries of gender in religious texts.

I am interested in how *CH* I.4 makes John an ideal example for masculine Christian performance. First, John's journey begins in a dangerously unstable earthly life and ends in a static heaven. Second, the text magnifies John's willpower, actions, and the final disposition of his remains beyond his Latin sources, and in juxtaposition to women who include his abandoned bride and the widow whose son he raises from the dead. In short, this pattern of juxtapositions with female figures produces a masculinity that, properly performed, signifies the eternal heavenly life and invites the audience's desire for it, and a femininity that signifies the time-bound earthly life of suffering and loss, and invites the audience's rejection.

The Vulnerable Male Body

The homily for the assumption of John creates dramatic interest in men's bodies, in the first place, by depicting them as vulnerable. *CH*'s attention to the vulnerability of the male body and inattention to the vulnerability of the female body reverses typical Christian constructions of gender, creates the need for masculine merit as the means of salvation, and generates interest in salvation as a masculine drama. The typical gender binary in western Christian culture encodes the female body as a vulnerable and anxiously contested site: for example, historically, women of certain classes could be urged to remain virgin, avoid public places, and cover their bodies. The same demands have not been made of men. Rather, the male body is not traditionally a concern, and this is likely because the male body is not often thought of as penetrable.

Indeed, Anglo-Saxon Benedictine interest in the bodily integrity of the female is given a material dimension by archeologist Roberta Gilchrist's findings that women's dormitories were located in the center of female Benedictine monastic houses, where they would be the most protected, while administrative offices were centrally located in male houses (56-57).

On the other hand, Ælfric's anxiety over the integrity of the male body is well illustrated in *CH* I.33, "Dominica XVII post Pentecosten" (The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost). This homily cautions men in particular to guard the bodily apertures that house their senses:

Þæt portgeat getacnað sum lichlamlic andgit. þe men þurh syngiað; Se man þe tosæwð ungeþwærnyssse betwux cristenum mannum. oððe se ðe sprecð unrihtwisnyssse on heannysse. þurh his muþes geat he bið dead gefeod; Se þe behylt wimman mid galre gesihðe 7 fulum luste. þurh his eagen geat he geswutelað his sawle deað; Se þe ydele spellunge. oððe talice word lustlice gehyrð: þonne macað he his eare him sylfum to deaðes geate; Swa is eac be þam oþrum andgyttum. to understandenne. (Clemoes 460, ll. 28-35)

That city gate signifies a certain physical sense through which people sin. The man that sows discord among Christians, or who speaks unrighteousness in high places through his mouth's gate, he is the departed dead. He who gazes upon a woman with flirtation and impure desire, through the gate of his eye he reveals his soul's death. He who hears vain speech or slanderous words with delight makes his ear a gate of death to himself. So is it also to be understood of the other senses.⁵⁾

Though the passage does admonish gender-neutral border violations, the second example selects out male heterosexual desire as the impure impulse, while no

5) All translations not credited to others are my own.

caution is directed to any other sexuality. Thereby, heterosexual male congregants are invited to identify with its admonitions. The sequence of this series of bodily border crossings, ingresses and egresses alike, each of which leads to destruction, has a cumulative effect. Christian subjects whose potential experiences cannot mirror every example in the list—women most prominently because they are the objects of the lustful gaze—may feel marginalized. A final point of interest in this passage is the fact that, unlike the cliché Eve-Delilah-Pandora trope, woman is not made the scapegoat to man’s desire. Rather, men are consistently held accountable in *CH I* for their own impulses and actions.

As a result, dramatic tension, and the threat of pollution, sit at the borders of the male body rather than the female body. Indeed, John’s first act is to abandon his bride and commit to lifelong virginity,⁶⁾ which act not only signifies John’s reverence and love for Jesus, but also marks his body as a permeable container that must be sealed in order to make him holy. According to Mary Douglas, Christians value virginity because their beliefs “symbolise the body as an imperfect container which will only be perfect if it can be made impermeable” (158). Christ changes water to wine at John’s wedding (the groom is not named in the Bible), and John simply has a change of heart:

Þa wearð iohannes swa onbryrd þurh þ[æt] tacn. þ[æt] he þærrichte his bryd on mægðhade forlet: 7 symle syððan drihtne folgode: 7 wearð þa him inwerdlice gelufod. for ðan þe he hine ætbræd þam flæsclicum lustum. (Clemoes 206, ll. 13-16)

6) See also Wright. He points out that Ælfric’s *CH I.21* translates Luke 14.26: “He who comes to me may not be my disciple unless he hates his wife,” retaining *uxorem* and deleting *patrem* and *matrem*.

Then John became so inspired by that miracle that he immediately left his bride in virginity, and ever afterwards followed the Lord, and became loved by him inwardly because he had drawn himself away from carnal desires.

Ælfric's narrative on this point was selected with care. His main source for *CH* I.4 was the *Passio Johannis* (wrongly believed to have been written by Mellitus in the Middle Ages). It tells of John attempting to marry three times, and each time being thwarted by God (Volfing 27). Ælfric preferred the version in Bede's homily I.9 on this point (Godden, *Ælfric's CH: Introduction* 29-30). Whereas *Passio Johannis* depicts a John forced to submit to the greater will of God, *CH* I.4 insists that John's own will led him to Jesus and virginity.

It is not only John's lifelong virginity that signifies his need to purify his body, but also his use of prayer and gesture to seal his body against each threat, danger, or difficulty, and to perform God's will in the world. John is challenged to withstand the poison Emperor Domitian orders him to drink:

7 he mid rodetacne his muð 7 ealne his lichaman gewæpnode. 7 þane unlybban on godes naman halsode. 7 syððan mid gebyldum mode. hine ealne gedranc. (Clemoes 214, ll. 223-25)

And having armed his mouth and all his body with the sign of the cross, he exorcized the poison in God's name, and afterwards, with a courageous mind, drank it all.

The gesture of making the sign of the cross symbolizes vigilant protection against bodily invasion. In addition, presumably God protects John both because he is dear to Christ for his virginity and because of his prayer, so the poison he takes into his mouth does no harm inside his body.⁷⁾ In addition,

se hét afyllan ane cyfe. mid weallenndum ele. 7 þone mæran godspellere
 þæron besceofon: ac he þurh godes gescyldnysse ungewemmed of þam
 hatum bæðe eode. (Clemoes 207, ll. 23-25)

He commanded a vat to be filled with boiling oil, and the great
 evangelist to be thrown into it; but he, through God's protection, went
 uninjured from that hot bath.

The emperor does not yet yield, in spite of the miracles he has witnessed on John's behalf. He sends him into exile, expecting him to starve (207, ll. 25-29), Ælfric's own embellishment (*ÆCH: Introduction* 30), perhaps added to heighten the drama and fix attention upon the boundaries of John's body. In addition, soon before his death, John prays to God saying, "Ðu heolde minne lichaman wið ælcere besmitennysse: 7 þu symle mine sawle onlihtest. 7 me nahwar ne forlete" (Clemoes 215, ll. 259-60). (You have preserved my body against every pollution, and you have always enlightened my soul and have nowhere abandoned me.) This passage assures the congregation of John's constant faith, but it also implies that John is deserving because he has kept his body free of pollution, though he humbly credits God. Ælfric adds, "He gewat swa freoh fram deaðes sarnysse of þisum andwerdan life: swa swa he wæs ælfremed fram lichamlicere gewemmednysse" (215, ll. 274-76). (He passed on so free from the pain of death of this present life, just as he had been alienated from physical defilement.)

John's body is variously represented in the fashion of virgin martyrs as being impassible (though always through his own agency) and not subject to the laws of the physical world. John conforms to the ideal of the ascetic life.

7) For a discussion on early Christian interest in surviving the drinking of poison, see Kelhoffer, 417-72. See also Mark 16.18.

Carolyn Walker Bynum explains as follows:

In [Jerome's] polemic for asceticism, the living body becomes less fertile and friable, less involved in nutrition, generation, process, and aging; it becomes, in a sense, less alive. Thus the earthly body, whether alive or dead [as in a relic], moves toward heaven while still on earth. (94)

John's disciplined body makes him the ideal representative for the ascetic, monastic life Ælfric wishes to impart to the brothers, but also to the clergy and the laity in his audience at Cerne and across Anglo-Saxon England. The absence of female ascetic bodies in *CH* triumphantly approaching heaven on their own meritorious steam, combined with the overdetermined presence of John's disciplined body, masculinizes salvation and transcendence for the unlearned audience.

The Masculinization of Merit

CH teaches that human obedience begins with human agency—explicitly opposing Augustine of Hippo's teaching on grace—as he casts men as divine agents in the conversion mission who inspire their audiences to embrace Christian teaching. In “Ælfric: Nativitas Sanctae Mariae Virginis,” Ælfric offers a rather surprising interpretation of Matthew 20.1-16:

Nu segð Augustinus [. . .]
þæt se penig bið forgifen þam wyrhtum gelice
on þam ecan life, þonne hi of deaðe arisað, [. . .]

þæt hi ealle habbon heofonon rice him gemænelice. [. . .]
 Ðas micclan geþincðu hi moton geearnian
 on þyssere worulde [. . .].

(Assmann III, 44-45, ll. 510, 512-13, 518-19, 526-27)

Now says Augustine . . . that the penny is given for the work alike in the eternal life, when they rise from death [. . .] that they all have the kingdom of heaven mutually [. . .]. These great ranks they must earn in this world!

This parable is usually understood to teach that the eternal reward of heaven is to be shared equally among the saved, though everyone will not have labored equally: indeed, the text of Matthew is fairly clear on this point. However, this homily (which Ælfric included in later versions of *CH I*), disputes this and instead claims that rewards will reflect the differences in the amount of labor.

In his favoring of merit over grace, Ælfric also opposes Augustine implicitly by referencing Paul's biography. A classical rhetor by training, Augustine denies that human merit could assert its own salvation in the face of an omnipotent and omniscient God, since it would undermine God's theoretically unlimited power and foresight. Augustine's *Against the Pelagians* asserts that, while a person may freely choose to disobey God, fallen humans lack the capacity to choose to obey, but may pray for God's grace to shield them from temptation and lead them to obedience. Paul is Augustine's example of one whose will was turned to God by God, not by his own agency: "Tell me, I pray, what good, not to say rather great evils, Paul wanted when, breathing slaughter, he went forth to destroy Christians in the horrible blindness and fury of his mind? What shall I say, when he himself said, 'Not

by works of the law that we perform, but by [God's] grace we are saved?"⁸⁾
In spite of Paul's great crimes, he is redeemed by God's grace.

However, Ælfric's homily for Paul's nativity instead describes a Paul who has always been worthy of salvation so that he could model meritorious behavior and earn the grace that God bestows upon him. Making no mention of Augustine's text, he states,

He wæs fram cildhade on þære ealdan æ getogen. 7 mid micelre gecnyrdnysse. on þære begriwen wæs; Æfter cristes þrowunge þa ða se soþa geleafa asprang þurh ðæra ápostola bodunge: þa ehte he cristenra manna þurh his nytennysse. 7 sette on cweartene. 7 eac wæs on gefafunge æt þæs forman cyðeres stephenes slege: nis þeahhwæðere be him geræd þæt he handlinga ænigne mann acwealde. (Clemoes, *CH* I.27, 400, ll. 7-13)

He had from childhood been brought up in the old law, and by great diligence was steeped in it. After Christ's passion, when the true faith had sprung up through the preaching of the apostles, he persecuted Christian men through his ignorance, and imprisoned them, and was also consenting to the slaying of the first martyr Stephen: it is not, however, read of him that he killed any man with his own hands.)

He sanitizes the cruelties of Paul in the same way he sanitizes the marital ambitions of John, and for the same reason: so that both apostles would serve as stainless examples of monastic virtue to his less learned audience.

8) I thank Kimberly Starr-Reid for her eloquent translation of Augustine: "Dic mihi, obsecro, quid boni Paulus [. . .] volebat, ac non potius magna mala, quando spirans caedem pergebat ad vastandos horrenda mentis caecitate ac furore Christianos? [. . .] Quid ego dicam, quibus meritis, cum ipse clamet, 'Non ex operibus iustitiae quae nos fecimus, sed secundum suam misericordiam salvos nos fecit?'"

As has been said, *CH* I magnifies the actions of men by narrating their deeds at every opportunity, and reduces the actions of women by avoiding their narration. This is not an unusual circumstance in biblical or western literature, broadly speaking. Nevertheless, this gender asymmetry is not at all typical of the *sanctorale*. Thus, it behooves readers to consider, in particular, the places in which female figures interact with the male figures which dominate the story. In view of this, three homilies in *CH* I set masculine merit against feminine redundancy by dramatizing a widow's grief. The holy man demonstrates his value in this way in *CH* I.4, *CH* I.33, and *CH* I.26, "Passio Petri et Pauli" (The Passion of Peter and Paul). Only the story in *CH* I.33, concerning Christ's ministry, appears in the Bible (Luke 7.12-15), though the *Passio Johannis* contains the passage Ælfric adduces and translates from the Latin in *CH* I.4 (see Volfgang 50). John finds a widow grieving over her dead son, Stacteus:

[. . .] Ða bær sum wudewe hire suna lic to bebyrgenne: Se hæfde gewifod þrittigum nihtum ær; Seo dreorige moder þa samod mid þam licmannum rarigende hi astrehte æt þæs halgan apostoles fotum. biddende þ[æt] he hire sunu on godes naman ærærde. [. . .]; Iohannes þa ofhreow þære meder 7 þære licmanna dreorignyssse. 7 astrehte his lichoman to eorðan on langsumum gebede. (Clemoes 210-11, ll. 129-36)

[. . .] then a certain widow was taking her son to be buried: he had been married thirty days earlier. The sorrowful mother, alongside the mourning pallbearers, prostrated herself at the holy apostle's feet, praying that he would, in God's name, raise up her son [. . .]. John then pitied the grief of the mother and the mourners, and prostrated his body on the earth in long prayer.

Although the widow's prostration preempts John's, she submits to the holy man while he submits to an omnipotent God. John's charitable act sets him above her, as does his superior power to restore her family, in place of her presumably defunct ability, as a widow, to reproduce. The youth's recent marriage also points to the loss of fertility for the family cut short by his premature death, emphasizing the ultimate failure of biological reproduction. Therefore, it seems that Ælfric encodes men as the producers of souls for the church at the same time he encodes women as physical bodies particularly responsible for the earthly life cycle. *CH* I.33 more explicitly asserts the triumph of the church and of the holy man, Jesus, performing the resurrection over the failed reproductive capacity of the widow:

Se cniht wæs ancenned sunu his meder. swa bið eac gehwylc cristen man gastlice þære halgan gelapunge sunu: seo is ure ealra moder 7 þeahhwæpere ungewemmed mæden; for þan ðe hire team nis na lichamlic ac gastlic. (459, ll. 19-23)

The youth was the only-born son of his mother, just as is also every Christian spiritually a son of the holy church, which is the mother of us all, and nevertheless an undefiled virgin because her child-bearing is not physical but spiritual.

“Only son” is juxtaposed with “us all” to draw attention to the limitations of physical reproduction vis-à-vis the unlimited spiritual fertility of the church. Spiritual child-bearing, defined here as within the purview of the church, is appropriated by the holy man who performs resurrection miracles, and set in opposition to the women “gewemmed,” defiled, by sexual intercourse. In addition, the failing of the female body described above is more than

compensated for by the superior male-generated miracle that converts dozens of witnesses at once, and thereby enlarges the (synthetic) Christian family.

Indeed, John primarily desires to raise Stacteus to increase the church. He commands the revived man to tell the brothers Atticus and Eugenius of their fate since they strayed from God's service so that they would, in turn, recommit to the ministry, again perform miracles, and convert more witnesses (211, ll. 141-48, 153-56). Thus, John is the originary father who fathers converts that father other converts, forming a synthetic all-male heredity who become the church (cf. *Double Agents* 15-39). Surely there are implied women converts, but since they do not perform miracles in *CH*, they have little capacity to reproduce the church within the gender paradigm Ælfric provides for the masses. So, any value the lay audience may place upon women and their bodies in the affairs of family and reproduction is assumed, rhetorically, by holy men.

A spectacle is made of the widow's helplessness in the face of corporal death, of her inability to recoup her loss through physical reproduction, and of the holy man's power to perform miracles and thereby increase the membership of the church. These public spectacles show a great disparity between the powers of the widow and the holy man to replenish the church with new members, and reveal a superior ability of men over women to achieve merit and be worthy of salvation. The repetition of this scene on three different dates in the liturgical calendar spectacularizes male action, feminizes the life cycle and, at the same time implies the inferiority of biological life (presumptively a product of the female body) to the heavenly (presumptively masculine, spiritual) exemption from it.

Raising John

CH I.4 opens with the claim: “Iohannes se godspellere cristes dyrling wearð on ðysum dæge to heofenan rices myhðe þurh godes neosunge genumen” (206, ll. 3-4). (John the Evangelist, Christ's favorite, was taken to the joy of the kingdom of heaven on this day through God's visitation.) Since this statement is absent from his source for this passage, Ælfric may well have added it for dramatic effect (*ÆCH: Introduction* 29-30).

When John is ready to die, toward the end of *CH* I.4, he seeks protection: “Geopena ongean me lifes geat. þæt ðæra ðeostra eldras me ne gemeton” (215, ll. 265-66). (Open life's gate to me so that the princes of darkness do not find me.) His expression “lifes geat” suggests a desire to pass from one life to another. In addition, “Het ða delfan his byrgene wið ðam weofode. 7 þæt great utawegan. 7 he eode cucu 7 gesund in to his byrgene” (215, ll. 253-55). (He then ordered his grave to be dug opposite the altar, and the dust to be removed; and, alive, he went into his grave.) John is not only a willing agent in ending his earthly life, but he also apparently enjoys physical vigor at the age of ninety-nine (214, l. 244), as if he were protected from the pain and inconvenience of an aging body (Ælfric laments aging in *CH* I.32, 458, ll. 208-15).

While John's virginity and intimacy with Christ predisposed some theologians to accept his corporal assumption upon his death (Clayton 7-24), Ælfric's preferred sources, Bede, Smaragdus and Haymo, “took issue” in their homilies for John with the “implication” that John would never meet death (*ÆCH: Introduction* 28). Quite uncharacteristically, Ælfric omits the cautionary words of these homilists whom he otherwise considered most authoritative. Rather, his description of John's assumption is vivid, declarative, and mystical:

Æfter þysum gebede æteowde heofenic leoht bufon þam apostole binnon þære byrgene ane tid: swa beorhte scinende þæt nanes mannes gesihð þæs leohtes leoman sceawian ne mihte 7 he mid þam leohte his gast ageaf þam drihtne þe hine to his rice gelaðode [. . .] Soðlice syððan wæs his byrgen gemet: mid manna afylled [. . .] Nu wæs se bigleofa gemet on iohannes byrgene. 7 nan þing elles. 7 se mete is weaxende on hire: oð ðysne andwerdan dæg. (215-16, ll. 271-80)

After this prayer, for an hour a heavenly light appeared above the apostle within the grave, shining so bright that no one's vision could look upon the rays of light, and with that light he gave up his spirit to the Lord, who had summoned him to his kingdom. [. . .] Truly, hereafter, his grave was found filled with manna. [. . .] Now this food was found in the grave of John, and nothing else, and the food is growing in it to this present day.)

The lack of a body in Christ's tomb is commonly used to assert that his body went to heaven with his soul, so the same is understood of John. In addition, the light in the grave is a sign of God's presence, and the manna implies Christ personally escorted him. Ælfric associates manna with Christ in *CH* II.12: "Soðlice se meteðe him of heofenum com. hæfde cristes getacnunge . . ." (116, ll. 208-09). (Now the food that came to them from heaven was a type of Christ [. . .].)" Moreover, Robert DiNapoli finds only seven references to manna in the collections of Old English homilies; all in *CH*, six in *CH* II, and only this one in *CH* I (62). In addition, that John gave up his spirit ("gast ageaf") means he died, but it happens "mid þam leohte," which makes the time and cause of death ambiguous. Did John happen to die at the instant he entered the grave, or did he "die" to this world as he was being raised? Ælfric leaves this a question and offers no word of caution to his audience.

It seems that Ælfric selected the more sensational parts from each of his sources. He used Bede's and Haymo's homilies for the occasion for the beginning of *CH* I.4, which sources overstate John's commitment to virginity. He used the *Passio Johannis* for the assumption episode because it amplifies the circumstances of John's assumption.

Conclusion

Ælfric's lay audience would learn how John's attributes illustrate monastic standards as his character develops through a series of juxtapositions with female figures in which John is always found superior. These include the bride in the face of whom he vows to remain virgin and therefore cut off from earthly procreation and the widow whose procreative ability is limited by the circumstances of the earthly life, and in the face of whom he raises the dead and converts the masses. These juxtapositions with the feminine masculinize merit and its resulting salvation; feminize the life cycle as John's bodily stability is cast against it; and portray the feminine as "other," lesser in value and even redundant to the Christian mission. The anxiety over John's vulnerability to sin and pollution, which is notably absent from his discourse on female figures, masculinizes the drama of salvation, where masculinity is performed specifically as a body that neither penetrates nor is penetrated, but is maintained in an inviolate and static state. Ælfric many times insists that merit be achieved through bodily discipline, but the women in *CH* I are not given opportunities to do so, nor does he generate any interest in their bodies.

It is tempting to give this argument the egg wash of the destructive Danish invasions. For example, although *CH* I was written at Cerne Abbas (*ca.* 992)

under the umbrella of Æthelweard's protection, the Benedictines had less royal support after Æthelwold's death (984), and the Danish raids on ecclesiastical establishments had apparently grown in severity. Ælfric makes the tiniest mention of his tardiness in completing *CH* II because of "pirates" (Godden, *CH* II, 1, ll. 13-15). Indeed, it had become obvious by this time that England could not prevent intrusion at its coastlines or river ports. Douglas postulates that a society may be inclined to treat the bodily border as a signifier for its own limitations, in the interest of preventing mixing, or diluting the body, with outsiders. Ælfric's homily depicts John as an idealized body that thwarts all intrusions and expands the Christian church through conversions. As such he might symbolize the restoration of the (imagined) political body of the English nation *qua* the English Christian church.

Nevertheless, the prefaces and homilies in *CH* are largely silent on specific matters of state. Instead they testify to Ælfric's extreme concern to correct errors in teaching for the mass-priests and their congregations; his deep anxiety that *CH* was to be copied and disseminated whole and exact; and his deeper anxiety that unlearned people should not gain access to the fallibilities and foibles of the apostles and saints but only know exemplary models. *CH* is a tightly controlled text in which even saints' lives must be sanitized. The female body in particular is tightly controlled: it is seen, ever so briefly, as an object of impure desire, a bride that must be rejected, and a pitiable widow. The female body would seem to serve as the antithesis to the ascetic body since it signifies birth, aging, and decay: it is unstable and uncontrollable. Yet at the same time, it symbolizes family and the generations. So, wherever women appear in *CH*, they must be made ineffectual, as are the widow and the bride. Consequently, this text locates personhood, penance, and salvation in man. Woman is a shadowy backdrop because she can neither participate in

the triumph of heavenly salvation, nor be used as a displaced locus for men's failings. Since these gender representations differ from those in Ælfric's own *LS*, I would not suggest that they reflect what he himself believed about women, or men. They more likely reflect his concern to keep his Christian teaching untarnished by influences and interpretations he could not control.

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Raising John's Body: Ælfric's Homily for the Assumption of John the Apostle

Abstract

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Ælfric was a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon Benedictine monk and Abbot of Eynsham. Ælfric's Old English *Catholic Homilies*, the First Series (ca. 992) invites gender analysis because its gender asymmetry is atypical of its genre and period. Homilies of this period include a *sanctorale*, and typical male lives focus on the saint's refusal to worship pagan gods, while typical female lives showcase their rejection of pagan suitors in favor of lifelong virginity. Strangely, this text avoids narrating female actions while glorifying the lifelong virginity of men, especially John's. Indeed, the homily for the assumption of John the Apostle dramatizes the saint's bodily vulnerability as a male, while ignoring any female vulnerability. In addition, a prominent theme in *CH I* is that heavenly rewards are earned through merit. Since male figures act to demonstrate their merit, and female figures do not, in effect, merit is masculinized. In addition, the text works to align reproduction and the earthly life with the female body and against a spiritualized male body. While this effect is commonplace in western literature, it is beyond rare in the *sanctorale* genre. Finally, whereas caution is usually Ælfric's constant companion, *CH I.4* depicts the assumption of John rather overenthusiastically. Ælfric consistently chose the most sensational passage in each of his sources in order to depict John as a perfect example of pious monastic behavior. On the other hand, there seems to be a desire on Ælfric's part to reduce and control the significance of the female body so that it could not suggest other meanings to his audience,

meanings which they might find more attractive than those with which he associates his holy men.

Key Words

Ælfric of Eynsham, the *Catholic Homilies*, the Benedictine Reform, homily, assumption, *sanctorale*, feminist patristics, *Passio Johannis*

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