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# LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

MAY 2022

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We are proud to present to the public the second edition of *Dies Legibiles*, Smith's very own undergraduate journal of Medieval Studies!

After the initial success we had in receiving submissions for last year's edition, we were naturally worried that the journal might experience a lull—but this was, wonderfully, far from the case! Our submissions this year were numerous, and explore a number of extraordinarily unique and important topics.

We would like to note that this journal prides itself on not being constrained by the bounds of what is conventionally defined as scholarship. As always, we aim to include a diverse variety of media, and in this edition we are proud to include two book reviews, several interviews with authors, and (a first for us) a piece of artwork! (Check out the acrylic-reproduced 14th century manuscript on the first page.) One of our goals for this journal is to expand the definition of both what constitutes medieval studies and what constitutes scholarship in general.

As editors, our greatest joy is being able to read all of the work that is submitted to our journal, and our greatest trial is having to decide what makes the cut. In this vein, we would like to thank every single student who sent their work in—your scholarship has made us so excited for the future of the field!

In a recent development, this journal may now be accessed through ScholarWorks, as well as through the Smith College Libraries official website, expanding our potential audience.

We would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to our faculty advisor, Professor Joshua C. Birk, without whose endless support and encouragement this journal would not be possible. We additionally would like to thank all those people who volunteered their time to join the editing team. Your hard work was crucial to our success.

As we look to the future, we hope to see this journal grow and expand into an outlet where undergraduate students in medieval studies may publish their work and gain some recognition and renown in academia. We look forward to reading next year's submission!

The Dies Legibiles Team

We proudly present: Dies Legibiles Volume II

# An Acrylic Reproduction of a Fourteenth Century Manuscript

Jasmine Zhou  
Pomona College



# INTERVIEWS

*Lily Sickman-Garner*

*Smith College*

Below are several excerpts from interviews conducted for this journal over the past several months with medieval history and literature professors, researchers, and authors. I wanted to use these interviews as an opportunity to learn more about how different careers in medieval history can look, as well as why professionals in the field were drawn to medieval history, how they feel about the way the Middle Ages are commonly depicted in media, and what kind of advice they have for undergraduate students.

The professors, researchers, and authors featured are:

Kelly DeVries, a professor at Loyola University Maryland who specializes in medieval military history. Dr. DeVries has also written and contributed to several medieval history books and journals, and is frequently featured as an expert source on medieval history documentaries.

Matthew Gabriele, professor of medieval studies at Virginia Tech. Dr. Gabriele is also one of two co-authors of *The Bright Ages*, a history of the Middle Ages which was published in 2021 and is intended for non-academics as well as scholars.

Jamie Kreiner, professor of medieval studies at the University of Georgia. Dr. Kreiner is also the author of *Legions of Pigs* which explores the impact pigs had on culture and society in the early Middle Ages.

Arvind Thomas, a professor of English at University of California, Los Angeles who specializes in medieval literature. Dr. Thomas is also the author of *Piers Plowman and the Reinvention of Church Law in the Late Middle Ages*, which examines medieval interactions between literature and the law through William Langland's poem *Piers Plowman*.

Kelcey Wilson-Lee, a medieval historian and the author of *Daughters of Chivalry* a 2020 book which debunks common assumptions about the role of princesses in the Middle Ages by detailing the lives of the five daughters of Edward I.

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***Lily Sickman-Garner: Why do you think it's important to study medieval history today?***

*Kelly DeVries:* Well, I don't know that it's important, per se. It's funny, because I don't believe that history repeats itself, though I do believe stupidity repeats itself. And, in fact, all too frequently, people make the same mistakes. And I'd like to be the guy to prove that those who don't study history do repeat it, but unfortunately, there's far too many, and they won't listen to me or any other historians. So as much as we want to tell people what history explains, what it tells us, they're not bound to listen. So, more or less, it's just getting to learn about the past and learn about people who lived and what they did and find out interesting things. It's just knowledge of the past. And we should have knowledge of the past just because it is the past. It's our past. And it's full of evils and bad things and periodically brave men and women. I wrote a book on Joan of Arc, talking about how brave—maybe a bit mad, but certainly a brave person who was willing to give her life for what she believed in. If we could pass those stories along so somebody can remember them maybe at a time when they need them, that's the importance I think.

*Matthew Gabriele:* I think there's two parts of that. There's a general way that I would answer that, which relates to studying the past as a whole, and that could be true of any period. What the past does is it demonstrates possible worlds. What I mean by that is that you always remember, when you study the past honestly and with clear eyes, that people could have made decisions other than those they did, that we were not destined to have arrived at this moment that we're in. So you see kind of a field of possibilities that I think opens up not only horizons in the past, but horizons in the present and the future as well. But I think medieval history is especially important even for an American audience, even here in southwestern Virginia or in Massachusetts, in that so much of modern politics, culture, religion is dependent upon medieval traditions. And I don't mean that in a sense that you can draw a straight line between then and now. I mean, you can, but there are a lot of detours along the way that you need to account for. What I mean by that is that it's such a source. It's such a reservoir of justification for why we do things the way we do, and in order to understand those justifications and the modern political, cultural, religious ideas behind them, you have to understand exactly what they're referencing.

*Arvind Thomas:* One reason why medieval history is relevant is, not because we are similar to those living in the past, but because of the differences. I'm someone who's committed to recognizing and, not necessarily celebrating, but certainly recognizing and understanding differences that separate us from various others. And I do think medieval history and medieval literature offer us examples of radical differences, differences that we occasionally, perhaps more often than not, at the university, reduce to sameness. We think, 'Oh, well, we understand marriage.' And we try to see marriage from our own perspectives, and in the process fail to appreciate what distinguishes a particular time or a particular understanding of marriage that was dominant in a particular place. And I think that attention to

particularity of place, time, and institutions is something that can help us reflect critically upon our own present. So I think it's important to recognize the differences in order to see how things we take for granted were not taken for granted before and what we see as normal today might not be normal when seen from, you know, from the perspective of somebody living in the Middle Ages.

***Lily Sickman-Garner: What do you love about your work?***

*Kelly DeVries:* Well, first of all, I just love knowing the stories. I love the original sources. I love being able to read original sources in the original languages or even in translation. Especially in my dissertation and then ever since, [I've studied] the military conflicts. What are both sides saying about what happened? What are the people who are observing from outside saying? And ultimately it's thrilling for me to be able to interpret things like that, although I do think I just love the stories.

*Matthew Gabriele:* I love working through a problem with my students. Sometimes, and many times, in fact, [I'll bring] them a problem that I haven't really figured out yet and [ask] for them to help me figure it out. And just the way that they can, when they're made a part of that process of learning, the way that they can respond and open up and really start to dig into things and just puzzle it out and talk it out is really an exceptional thing. And there's no substitute. And I'm not saying that happens every time—sometimes it just doesn't work. But when it does work, it's a thing of beauty.

*Jamie Kreiner:* I like that you can read whatever you want, and ask whatever kinds of questions you want. I like the independent nature of being a historian. I like that, in this field, the work gets better the longer you do it. History is so complicated, [and] I like that historians keep building on their work because they mature into the profession. I think that's really cool. I also really like teaching. I think it's so exciting to explore a society that is unlike the one we're in. You find these unexpected connections where they're weirdly similar to twenty-first century America, and in other cases [you] see how differently people thought about stuff or how different their experiences were.

***Lily Sickman-Garner: Are there any misconceptions about medieval history or the work you do that you'd like to dispel?***

*Matthew Gabriele:* Oh, yes. One of the reasons that my colleague David Perry and I wrote *The Bright Ages* was that we were struck by this persistent myth, and this is the big one I'll kind of focus on, this myth that the Dark Ages, the period between the fall of Rome and this thing that we call the Renaissance, was a period that that is ultimately unknowable. That's the metaphor of darkness. Is it dark because we can't know it, because there's no sources, because it's hard to understand. And so what *The Bright Ages* tries to do is to show a medieval Europe that is fundamentally knowable. There are sources, there are texts that we

can draw on, there's architecture, there's art, there's archeology, there's incredible interdisciplinary work that's being done in the fields of genetics or environmental history that allows us to say something about that past and to really understand how people lived and why it mattered that they lived the way they did in that particular period.

*Arvind Thomas:* The Middle Ages were pluralistic. There were certainly tensions, and there were wars, and there were all kinds of hatreds, but on the whole, medieval culture was multilingual, and Arabic in particular played a significant role in the 12th and 13th centuries. Medievalists don't learn Arabic, and I think it's important to learn if you really want to appreciate the multilingualism, the multi-cultural background to the high late Middle Ages in particular. People often say, 'Oh, no, Arabic has no place, it's Latin and a few other languages,' but they miss quite a bit of the whole picture, particularly if you're studying the Crusades, it's important to read Arabic and also read from perspectives other than those offered by the Latin writers.

*Jamie Kreiner:* I think when we're first confronted with people who are really different from us, we tend to think they're not as smart as us, and this is a particular problem when looking at medieval history. So just dispelling the notion that they weren't inventive or creative or as complicated and diverse as we are is sort of an ongoing, perpetual challenge, I think.

***Lily Sickman-Garner:* What do you hope people who read your book will take away from it?**

*Matthew Gabriele (The Bright Ages):* That's a great question. I've had this question before, and I still don't really know how to answer it because I don't want them to love the Middle Ages. For me—and this is absolutely just me, I'm not even speaking for David, my co author—I don't think you should love the past. I think you should look at the past with clear eyes. And what I mean by that is that the past is messy because people are messy. They do great things and they do terrible things. And it's important to tell that whole story, so you should never look back upon a historical period, especially one like the European Middle Ages, with affection or nostalgia. The one thing that I do hope that they come out with instead is that they have a sense of wonder about the period. I don't mean that in a naive way, but just a curiosity, maybe not wonder, but curiosity about the period. They were interesting people who lived in the past, they did really interesting things, and they did curious things. They made decisions which seem odd to us but made perfect sense at the time. And you, the reader, if you kind of follow along with us, we're going to try to help you understand why they made the decisions they did and what the consequences of those decisions were. Some of them [were] minor, but some of them [were] kind of world changing. And I think that's ultimately what I hope people will get out of it—that they'll find something about Matilda of Tuscany, or they'll find something about Hildegard of Bingen, or, you know, or Pope Innocent II, or something like that, and they'll just say 'I

want to know more,' and then they'll go find more because there is a lot of great, great scholarship out there.

*Jamie Kreiner (Legions of Pigs):* I hope they'll take away the fact that early medieval humans really had sophisticated ideas about ecology. They really saw themselves as part of a system that was fluctuating and interdependent and changed over time, and they had a lot of respect for the ways that other pieces of those systems could influence them. Sometimes that was a big pain for them, and other times they were willing to accommodate those inconveniences or restrictions because it meant that there was some kind of cooperative outcome or profit that they could get. In addition to that, I also want to demonstrate how animals are as much historical actors as people are, and can make a big difference in history, even if it seems insignificant to us now.

*Kelcey Wilson-Lee (Daughters of Chivalry):* I hope they'll take away from it that the medieval period is not a bridge too far, that it is something that they can learn about and find interesting and find commonality with. I told you at the beginning about that book by Anya Seton, *Katherine*. [It's] a fictional book, but, for me, it was a gateway to the medieval era. It's trying to be that for somebody else, somebody who might read fictional books or somebody who might read tudor histories or histories of the 18th century but would never have thought to look at the medieval period and try to say to them, 'This is something you can do as well.'

***Lily Sickman-Garner:* Do you have any advice for undergrad students who are interested in pursuing medieval history?**

*Matthew Gabriele:* I would say two things. One's a little bit practical and then one's a little bit more fuzzy. The practical thing is simply languages, learn languages. If you want to do any sort of advanced work in medieval studies, regardless of what discipline you want to do that in—literature, history, art history, kind of whatever—learning the original languages is absolutely critical. One of the reasons for that, although stuff is increasingly being translated, and that stuff is wonderful, and I use that stuff all the time, is that some of the translations are not great. And you always get a different perspective when you go to the sources themselves, when you're able to go and try to really puzzle out, 'Okay, what is this guy actually really saying and why is he saying that.' And you can't do that kind of without, again, consulting the sources themselves. The other kind of fuzzy advice is read as voraciously as you can, and don't just read medieval history. I would say some of the most interesting ways that my research has changed dramatically have been [from] reading outside of my field and forcing myself to think about kind of theoretical or methodological insights from research on the American Civil War or on theories of religion on modern Buddhism or something like that.

*Arvind Thomas:* If one is interested in medieval [history], one should be curious about the past. If you're looking to the past to find versions of yourself, I wouldn't advise you to go there. Because, then, probably, and this is just my own subjective opinion, you're not going to do justice to the past, you're not going to recover the otherness of the past. If you're curious, genuinely curious, and willing to be surprised, even shocked at what you're encountering in the past, and willing to look at things differently from your own perspective, then I think certainly it's worth turning to the medieval period. And then on a related note, you also want to engage hard questions or confront hard questions, and not be happy with answers that sound morally correct, or that appeal to your politics. I think it's important to set that aside and do one's best to understand how people different from you thought about the problem. And then, of course, you can always reach a conclusion and make a decision, but before that it's important to submit yourself to the past in a way that might make one uncomfortable, might make one even angry. I think that is essential.

# REVIEW OF “THE SAINT AND THE COUNT: A CASE STUDY FOR READING LIKE A HISTORIAN” BY LEAH SHOPKOW

*Amy Kitmacher*  
*Smith College*

For anyone to effectively study history, they must first understand the process of identifying and interpreting sources with all their nuances, flaws, and limitations. In her book “The Saint and the Count: A Case Study for Reading Like a Historian,” Leah Shopkow walks students through a case study from a historian’s perspective. Using the twelfth century hagiography “The Life of Saint Vitalis” by Stephen of Fougères, Shopkow introduces readers to the types of sources a historian might encounter, as well as less tangible ideas like context, positionality, and bias. “The Saint and the Count” provides a practical exercise in critical thinking and interrogating a historical source “against the grain” to achieve a more complete and meaningful understanding.

The opening chapter of “The Saint and the Count” sets the stage for understanding how contemporary readers might understand Stephen of Fougères’ hagiography, in this case through biblical parallels which encourage the medieval reader to associate St. Vitalis with familiar representations of holiness. Shopkow introduces readers to the differences between primary sources and what she refers to as “ancient sources”, a source written after the recorded event but well before the modern day. She also differentiates between documentary and narrative sources and explains the importance of understanding types of sources and their limitations. The chapter also addresses missing sources- aspects of life which no one recorded, sources lost due to disaster or time, and the challenges and uses of oral histories. Importantly, Shopkow addresses the bias inherent to historical records, not intentionally, but due to their original intent, the limitations of the author, or simply because of what survives. Shopkow concludes this introduction with her own summary of the life of

St. Vitalis within the context of the sources available. This “worked example” lays the foundation for the questions she addresses in the rest of the book.

Chapter two addresses the sourcing heuristic of “The Life of St. Vitalis” by examining its author, Stephen of Fougères. Shopkow further elaborates on the importance of source type presented in the first chapter, noting that Stephen of Fougères wrote his account roughly eighty years after the events took place. She also presents two critical concepts: context and positionality. To situate these concepts for readers, Shopkow outlines the life of Stephen of Fougères within the church, the political and religious situation in England, and discusses what Stephen hopes to achieve in writing his hagiography. These factors illustrate Shopkow’s assertion that “Authors were not writing in a vacuum. If they wanted audiences to respond to their work, they had to meet at least some of the audiences’ expectations and desires.”<sup>1</sup>

Having presented her readers with the ‘backstory’ of “The Life of St. Vitalis,” Shopkow then turns to hagiography and genre. Here, she addresses how the medieval reader viewed Stephen of Fougère’s work in the context of saint’s lives. In more general terms, she addresses ideas of change and continuity, encouraging the reader to consider how ideas change and evolve over time to better understand what a source conveyed to its original audience. This chapter asks the important question ‘What is typical or unique about a source?’ and teaches students of history to read “against the grain” to “better understand people’s experiences and concerns in a given time or place.”

Chapters four and five delve further into understanding a source’s original context while identifying subjects which modern readers might find challenging. Chapter four deals with miracles and questions of veracity experienced by contemporary readers and how Stephen of Fougères addressed these concerns. Here she teaches modern readers to take perspective with ideas which might seem foreign or absurd and use them to better understand both the subjects and the author’s beliefs, concerns, and understanding of the world in which they live. In chapter five, Shopkow discusses issues of violence, culture, gender roles, the role of government, and property ownership. The author explains how medieval ideas of these subjects differ from our modern understanding and emphasizes the importance of context when interpreting historic sources. Both chapters highlight the importance of understanding a source from its author’s perspective rather than passing judgment on historic ideas and events from a modern position or morality.

Shopkow concludes her book with the hazards of translation and some additional questions we might ask to better understand accounts of historical events. While Shopkow acknowledges that her approach to history is not all encompassing, she creates an effective model for students to approach historical sources to better understand previous centuries. Critically, she reminds us of the pitfalls of applying modern understanding, expectations, or morality to historical events. While many sources teach us history, few teach us how to read and interrogate these accounts. “The Saint and the Count: A Case Study for Reading Like a Historian” equips student historians with the tools to succeed in their future efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> Shopkow 2021, pg. 58.

# REVIEW OF “ALONE TOGETHER: POETICS OF THE PASSIONS IN LATE MEDIEVAL IBERIA” BY HENRY BERLIN

*Marian Zens*

*Smith College*

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Working in response to a tradition of generalized accounts of medieval history, Henry Berlin's *Alone Together: Poetics of the Passions in Late Medieval Iberia* emphasizes the works of individual poets to capture the isolation resulting from classical views on emotional turmoil, and the use of creative prose and poetry to suggest an alternative to ethical solitude. In an effort to acclimate the reader to the tightly oriented lens with which he views the selected poems, Berlin begins *Alone Together* with a discussion of the roots of Iberian philosophy during the 14th and 15th centuries, proceeding from the debates on reason and emotion most familiar to a modern audience to those whose focus is more obscure.

The first chapter unfurls the backdrop of Aristotelian and Ciceronian Stoic conceptions of friendship to emphasize the medieval metaphysical hierarchies which eschew the demonization of sentiment as the enemy of rational behavior, notions that saw reason, and its encompassed relationships, as purified by positive, essentially emotional, intent. While Berlin spends little time on the details of conflict and intrigue in Iberian court life, the implication of strife facing the featured authors lends context to the stress placed upon relationships and mutual order as key redeeming components of personal affection. This theme continues throughout the second chapter, a close study of Alfonso de Madrigal, and into the first half of the third, which covers the work of King Duarte I of Portugal. In characterizing Alfonso de Madrigal, who ended his career as Bishop of Avila, Berlin begins with Madrigal's questions concerning divine friendship and self-reflection, painting him as viewing sentiment-founded relationships and the human requirement of company in a neutral spiritual light. In contrast, Berlin depicts King Duarte as presenting emotions as positive only when the dutiful subject of rational understanding. However, Duarte's and his subjects' approach to literature allows the book to progress to its true topic: the use of troubadour poems to explore and, in some cases, challenge the dominant hierarchy of

reason and sentiment as inimical inverses. More specifically, the concept of poetry, with its specialized vocabulary and alternative use of grammar, is displayed as a medium uniquely situated to grapple with the special case of love, linking the moral theories of medieval Iberians to their self-searching verses and capably transferring the reader's interest between ethics and poetics.

In addition to drawing connections between verse and medieval civic morality, the second half of the book begins by tying Iberian courtly poetics to monastic trends developed since the Desert Fathers, dwelling on the links between compassion, memory, and prayer which form the backbones of the lyrical expressions in question. In chapter four, which further contextualizes the poetry with a presentation of theories on the necessity of communal empathy for spiritual clarity and proper religious interpretation, Berlin acknowledges that an alternative to strict asceticism already existed in Christian philosophy, setting up the works of late medieval troubadours as continuations of both traditions, each distinctly aware of their place in the conflict between Stoicism and sympathetic piety. Beginning with an examination of the word *comunaleza*, a term referring to religious, political, and social bonds and their attached responsibilities, chapter five deepens Berlin's dive into the accepted, if somewhat scandalous, forms of empathetic invocation by presenting a variety of poems involving quotation and allusion, with sources ranging from other troubadours to Psalmic structures to Christ himself. These citations allowed poets to both form a consistent amorous vocabulary and adduce the love and sorrow present in Biblical narratives in their prayers to deified Love, capitalizing on the irreproachable status of the Passion while referencing their own suffering to incur pity.

After establishing the literary conventions of shared empathy, Berlin turns from poetry to sentimental fiction in chapter seven and presents a handful of early prose complaints against love — each seeking compassionate acknowledgement from their object of desire — in the context of political turmoil and a increase, perhaps linked to instability, in the general focus on morality. The chapter ends with close readings of *Sátira de infelice e felice vida* and *Tragédia de la insigne reina doña Isabel* by Don Pedro, Constable of Portugal. In the former, the personifications of Prudence and Discretion appear in a series of debates concerning the implications of having free will while allowing love to dominate one's life and the ethical status of the author's unloving beloved, and the latter returns to themes of inappropriate emotion, in this case grief, which might be amended by feelings of community. Berlin devotes the final section to the works of Ausiàs March, a Valencian poet known for his use of open self-reflection to convey individualism and his conscious response to troubadour lyrics.

Ultimately, *Alone Together* compiles an impressive number of close readings, translations, and glosses of era-specific poetic terms, providing a strong resource for scholars looking to compare works of the period. However, while the historical details of Iberian politics are clearly presented when directly relevant to the verses presented, the book itself would be best read by those with some knowledge of Spanish or Portuguese literature, as a certain number of untranslated or ambiguous terms permeate the text, which could prove confusing to monolingual English scholars or those unfamiliar with the field.

# HILDEGARD OF BINGEN: A SELF-MADE SAINT

*Jasmine Zhou*  
*Pomona College*

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It was a holy feast day around the year 1150. Standing in the Church with “unbound hair” and “white, silk veils...so long that they touch the floor,” Hildegard and her fellow virgins were adorned with “crowns of gold filigree...and...golden rings” when singing the psalms.<sup>2</sup> While it must have been a stunning scene, Hildegard’s decision to dress up her nuns so extravagantly risked violating Christian norms of female modesty and indeed was questioned—albeit in a subtle yet ironic manner without any direct accusations—in a letter by Mistress Tengswich, a superior of Hildegard.<sup>3</sup> Hildegard vigorously refuted Tengswich’s suspicions about her “unheard-of practices” and thus avoided any serious chastisement or penalty.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this anecdote captures only one of many occasions when Hildegard introduced such a novelty without provoking censure.<sup>5</sup> It was as if Hildegard’s reputation and aura of holiness were so well established that she could improvise with impunity, effectively beyond reproach.

This study explores how Hildegard of Bingen, a female mystic of the twelfth century, managed to gain such a universal reputation for saintliness from both the institutional church and ordinary Christians, despite the limitations under which she lived as a Christian woman and a nun operating in a male-dominated society. More specifically, this study aims to address how Hildegard managed to build such an extraordinary reputation and exercise such authority within the confines of a patriarchal church with deep suspicions about the spiritual potential of women.

Hildegard was born in 1098 toward the end of the so-called papal reform movement and lived a long life as a nun against the turbulent backdrop of political conflicts and church experimentation.<sup>6</sup> The tenth child of noble parents, Hildegard ended up serving as the

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<sup>2</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*. Trans. Joseph L. Baird & Radd K. Ehrman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 127.

<sup>3</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 127-128.

<sup>4</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 128-130.

<sup>5</sup> Such as Hildegard’s petition to the papacy to write down her visions. Anna Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 143.

<sup>6</sup> For more on her life, see *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources* by Anna Silvas.

family's "oblation to God" and was confined,<sup>7</sup> at a very young age, to the Abbey of Disibodenberg, with her *magistra* Jutta (1091-1136) and a few other girls of similar social rank. While Jutta instructed the young Hildegard in only the most basic religious songs and readings,<sup>8</sup> she "carefully fitted [Hildegard] for a garment of humility and innocence," Christian virtues that would later prove essential to Hildegard's success.<sup>9</sup> When Jutta passed away in 1136, Hildegard became her successor as both *magistra* and spiritual advisor to her fellow nuns. Ever since her childhood, Hildegard had been the recipient of holy visions,<sup>10</sup> which, for a long time, she hesitated to commit to writing. Eventually, in her later years, she began working with a monk by the name Volmar—a *magister*, secretary, and friend—to compose various literary and religious works to record the visions and events she had experienced.<sup>11</sup> The meticulous Volmar treated Hildegard's works with discretion at first; once he had confirmed their orthodoxy and holiness, he decided that they truly contained the words of God and sent them to various religious authorities for further review and public reading.<sup>12</sup> Hildegard's reputation for holiness then truly began to take off. Important figures ranging from Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) to Pope Eugenius III (1145-1153) formally acknowledged her writings as divinely inspired by God;<sup>13</sup> archbishops and kings sought her spiritual assistance and consolation on various matters;<sup>14</sup> even a certain Bishop Amalricus of Jerusalem, having heard of her extraordinary holiness from afar, requested her prayers in a personal letter addressed to her.<sup>15</sup> Though she was not formally canonized until modern times, Hildegard was essentially elevated to the position of a living saint in the eyes of her contemporaries. She was, for instance, acclaimed by Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204) as "[a] prophet, a healer, a mystic, [and] a saint."<sup>16</sup>

In order to appreciate Hildegard's accomplishments in this regard, it is important to realize how unusual it was for women, especially ones claiming such an unusually direct

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<sup>7</sup> "Making the most fitting provision they could, [Hildegard's parents] set her apart through their mutual decision and free offering as their own tithe to the same God who commanded that the tithes be offered him in law, in order that she might serve him in holiness and justice all the days of her life." While it was not mandated, offering the family's tenth child as a tithe, or "oblation," to God was a tradition Hildegard's parents decided to follow. Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 103.

<sup>8</sup> Hildegard confessed that she "had scarcely any knowledge of literature, since the woman who taught [her] was not a scholar." Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 160.

<sup>9</sup> Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 139.

<sup>10</sup> According to Hildegard herself, she did not perceive these visions "with bodily ears, nor...with the cogitations of [her] heart or the evidence of [her] five senses"; rather, she saw them "only in [her] spirit, with [her] eyes wide open, and thus [she] never suffer[ed] the defect of ecstasy in these visions." Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume II*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Such as the volume *Scivias*, an illustrated work which depicted 26 religious visions Hildegard had experienced. Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 141.

<sup>12</sup> Hildegard recounted that when she first expressed to Volmar her desire to write down her visions, he was "struck with fear and wondering what these things might be asked [her] to discreetly write down what [she] saw and heard, so that he could see their beginning and end and so that he could consider what they were and where they came from. But once he saw and concluded that they were from God, he made known these things to his Abbot, and from then on worked very keenly with [her] day and night in these things." Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 225.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Eugenius III not only "gave orders that the blessed Hildegard's writings be presented publicly," but also undertook the labor of reading out her works to a congregation of clerics. Bernard of Clairvaux, who was present on this occasion, also "intervened" to ensure the congregation's approval of her works. Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 143-144.

<sup>14</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 52-139.

<sup>15</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 101.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Gillan Muir, *A Women's History of the Christian Church: Two Thousand Years of Female Leadership*. (North York, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 89.

connection to God, to gain such official recognition and support from the church. In the medieval Christian world, an engrained and institutionalized misogyny denied religious women any significant role in “ordination and ecclesiastical responsibility.”<sup>17</sup> As a result, noblewomen “entered convents in droves around this time, searching for some other form of deep spiritual expression.”<sup>18</sup> The Abbey of Disibodenberg in which Hildegard grew up was profoundly influenced by the Hirsau Movement, a reformed German monasticism that recommended “separate cohabitation” of monks and nuns and mandated close observance of liturgical hours.<sup>19</sup> Such mandated proximity yet segregation between monks and nuns essentially ensured that women remain under the “surveillance” and jurisdiction of their male counterparts and hold little independence. Under these circumstances, it is no surprise that Hildegard would later have to seek the approval of her abbot both for writing down her visions and for moving to an independent community to rid herself and her fellow nuns—though not entirely—of male control.

Such biases and suspicions against females’ access to holy visions took a particular toll on Hildegard, apparently preventing her from making a name for herself earlier in her life. She recounted that “many were saying: ‘What is this? So many mysteries are revealed to this foolish and unlearned woman (Hildegard) when there are so many strong and wise men?’<sup>20</sup>” Even those who did acknowledge her holiness could not help marveling at the rarity of women being vessels of divine revelation. Guibert of Gembloux (1124/5-1213), a contemporary of Hildegard who had known her personally and later became her secretary, described Hildegard as a “delightful spectacle of the weaker sex triumphing with Christ’s help over itself, the world, and the devil” in one of his letters.<sup>21</sup> A certain Dean Philip, in his letter to Hildegard, expressed his surprise and marveled that “God works through such a fragile vessel, such a fragile sex, to display the great marvels of His secrets.”<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, the misogynistic undertone in these words of praise could not have been more obvious. On the other hand, shrinking “from feminine bashfulness...and being the butt of common gossip and the rash judgements of others,” Hildegard was so aware of the constraints and potential danger that came with her gender that she had not dared to write her visions down until divine revelations told her to do so in her forties, despite the fact that she had been seeing them since childhood.<sup>23</sup> Throughout her personal correspondence with important religious figures, she always insisted that it was the Holy Spirit—rather than herself—speaking and explaining divine revelations to them, as if to anticipate and deflect any suspicion.<sup>24</sup> It could be argued that it was precisely this immense difficulty for female mystics to receive both clerical and lay endorsement that made Hildegard a rarity of her age and all the more extraordinary in the eyes of both her contemporaries and posterity.

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<sup>17</sup> Muir, *A Women's History of the Christian Church: Two Thousand Years of Female Leadership*, 22-23.

<sup>18</sup> Muir, *A Women's History of the Christian Church: Two Thousand Years of Female Leadership*, 22-23.

<sup>19</sup> Constant J. Mews, “Hildegard of Bingen and the Hirsau Reform in Germany 1080–1180,” in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle, Debra L. Stoudt & George Ferzoco (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 66-68.

<sup>20</sup> Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 164.

<sup>21</sup> Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 225.

<sup>22</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Hildegard recounted that in a vision, she “was constrained by great pressure and many pains of [her] body to reveal openly those things which [she] had seen and heard. But [she] was very afraid and blushed at the thought of proclaiming these things which [she] had kept silent about for so long. Nevertheless, from then on, [her] veins and [her] marrow were filled with the strength which [she] had lacked from [her] infancy and youth” as she began writing her holy visions down. Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 225.

<sup>24</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 14.

In an effort to understand how Hildegard came to possess such extraordinary reputation and holiness as a female mystic supported by the twelfth-century Church, modern scholars have inevitably turned to Hildegard's writings and the hagiographies she inspired. Among them, Justin A. Stover explores Hildegard's role as a "deep and difficult thinker" and "visionary critic of the schools" through analyses of her complex yet consistently critical attitude toward scholasticism and human reason at the expense of faith.<sup>25</sup> Tova Leigh-Choate, William T. Flynn, and Margot E. Fassler turn to Hildegard's musical oeuvre and capacities, as they see her "remarkable body of songs" as an integral part to both her expression of holy visions and lifelong religious career.<sup>26</sup> Caroline Molina takes a rather innovative approach to the topic by paying particular attention to Hildegard's references to her chronic illness in her own mystic writings, arguing that Hildegard wittfully transformed her illness and female frailty—the "material cause" of her divinely inspired visions—into both a privilege in and subversion against the patriarchal society that she was living in.<sup>27</sup> Relevant to Molina's point, this paper aims to focus on how Hildegard attained wide acceptance and holiness and avoided misogynistic suspicions not just through ordinary Christian virtues such as piety, humility, and obedience, but specifically through the emphasis she put on the stress under which she operated as well as her own spiritual purity and corporeal frailty.

Part of Hildegard's strategy—if we can call it that—for transforming what would normally have been considered liabilities and weaknesses into advantages and power, was to project a deep sense of humility and obedience in both secular and religious affairs, thereby forestalling any accusations of pride. When she had been unanimously elected as the prioress after her *magistra's* death, she was reported to have "resisted it with all her strength" and only relented "by the command of the Abbot," fearing that she might be unworthy of her new office.<sup>28</sup> Once she had successfully moved her fellow nuns away from the Abbey of Disibodenberg into relative independence, she nonetheless pledged "deference towards the authorities of the monastery from which they had come" to show her unswerving loyalty and respect toward both her former superiors and church hierarchy.<sup>29</sup> Having cast out the demon from a woman's body, "she arrogate[d] nothing to herself," thus earning the blessing and sincere praise of many villagers and an abbot.<sup>30</sup> Thus it became clear that in spite of Hildegard's ability to receive extraordinary visions and perform miracles, she "kept guard over these gifts with the highest of all virtues, humility."<sup>31</sup> Her contemporaries' impression of her praiseworthy humbleness was the result of not only Hildegard's actions but also her words. In Hildegard's personal correspondence with popes and bishops, abbots and monks, she incessantly highlighted her "poorness" as a woman and ignorance of worldly knowledge. Her most famous contemporaries Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Eugenius III were among the very first persons whom Hildegard tactfully sought permission of and support for

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<sup>25</sup> Justin A. Stover, "Hildegard, the Schools, and their Critics," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle, Debra L. Stoudt & George Ferzoco (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 134-135.

<sup>26</sup> Tova Leigh-Choate, William T. Flynn, and Margot E. Fassler, "Hearing the Heavenly Symphony: An Overview of Hildegard's Musical Oeuvre with Case Studies," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle, Debra L. Stoudt & George Ferzoco (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 163.

<sup>27</sup> Caroline Molina, "Illness as privilege: Hildegard von Bingen and the condition of mystic writing," *Women's studies* 23, no. 1 (1994): 85-91.

<sup>28</sup> Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 111.

<sup>29</sup> Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 148.

<sup>30</sup> Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 202-206.

<sup>31</sup> Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 163.

writing down her works.<sup>32</sup> Hildegard called them, respectively, her “gentle” and “radiant” fathers while degrading herself as a “poor little woman...formed from a rib, ignorant of philosophical matters.”<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, it might seem like she was yielding to prevailing misogyny by abjectly acknowledging male superiority over the female sex, since Eve had supposedly been formed from Adam’s rib; yet on the other hand, by denying any knowledge of “philosophical” and worldly matters, Hildegard implied her expertise elsewhere: in holy and religious truths inaccessible to powerful and educated men of this world. When the monk Guibert read out Hildegard’s letter—in which she explained her visions in full detail—to a certain Lord Robert, “former abbot of Val-Roi and a man of great reputation and learning,” Robert was reported to have flatteringly remarked that “not even the greatest theologians in France today, however great their (worldly) intelligence, could completely understand the power and depth” of the holy words of Hildegard.<sup>34</sup> It did not matter to him “if she [was] ignorant of the liberal arts and grammar” when she already possessed the extraordinary knowledge of the Holy Scripture and her visions.<sup>35</sup> On the contrary, Hildegard’s worldly ignorance—or at least her humble claim of ignorance<sup>36</sup>—was a requisite for making people believe that she was delivering God’s message undiluted, as she was simply incapable of adding any untruthful detail of her own concoction. Such humbleness and willful subjection of herself to the inspection of her superiors in a hierarchal church structure not only secured Hildegard the authority’s acknowledgement of her saintliness but also gave credence and inculpability to her every word.<sup>37</sup>

While humility and obedience helped reinforce her image as a trustworthy sister who diligently served Christ, it was Hildegard’s spiritual purity and innocence as a virgin that elevated her to a level of intimacy with Christ, lending all the more credibility as Christ’s bride, in whom He would reasonably confide. The Christian identification of virgins as brides of Christ long predated Hildegard, rooted in patristic Christian interpretations of the erotic poetry in the Song of Songs. According to the fourth-century letters written by Pseudo-Ignatius, for instance, virgins were already selected to become the priestesses of Christ.<sup>38</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux also made explicit references to the divine relationship between the chaste Bride and her Bridegroom in his Sermons on the Song of Songs. The Spouse, that is, a virgin who has dedicated herself entirely to God, “petitions not for liberty, not for a reward, not for an inheritance, not even for knowledge, but only for a kiss (from her Bridegroom). And this request she makes after the manner of a most chaste spouse, burning with a most holy love.”<sup>39</sup> It is through this kiss, “the privilege of the Spouse,” that Christ reveals His secrets to her and her alone.<sup>40</sup> Thus, in the eyes of Hildegard’s contemporaries, Hildegard’s identity as a virgin betrothed to God symbolized her

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<sup>32</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume II*, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume II*, 31.

<sup>36</sup> Hildegard was the author of a medical work, *Causae et Curae*, despite denying her knowledge in any worldly matters.

<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting that Hildegard was not just a model of humility and obedience herself, she also actively exhorted and encouraged her religious counterparts to take on these virtues. For instance, Hildegard wrote to a congregation of monks in 1169 or 1170 to exhort them to be obedient to their religious superiors through an interpretation of biblical verses. Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 137.

<sup>38</sup> Muir, *A Women’s History of the Christian Church: Two Thousand Years of Female Leadership* 14.

<sup>39</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermon on the Canticle of Canticles* Sermon VII.

<sup>40</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermon on the Canticle of Canticles* Sermon VIII.

uncontaminated spirituality and intimate relation with Christ. It was the intimacy of this perceived connection to Jesus that gave Hildegard the unusual intercessory and healing power in the eyes of her contemporaries. In a letter addressed to Hildegard some time before 1157, five abbots beseeched the mystic to pray for a sterile noblewoman so that she could become fertile again: acclaiming Hildegard as “truly the unstained bride of Christ” to whom He had “graciously revealed his secrets,” they believed that the holiness and purity of virginity possessed by Hildegard could perform such a miracle.<sup>41</sup> Other healing miracles she was reported to have performed through her sanctity included curing a young woman and monk from a recurring fever, freeing a servant from a tumor in his neck, healing people from a distance, as well as restoring the health of those who were near their ends.<sup>42</sup> More importantly, Hildegard herself was also so well aware of the sanctity conferred by her virginity that she not only emphasized but used it to exempt her fellow nuns from the common Christian norm of female modesty. In response to Mistress Tengswich’s questioning, noted above, about Hildegard’s justification for adorning herself and her nuns with gold ornaments and white veils,<sup>43</sup> she argued that whereas a married woman “ought not to indulge herself in prideful adornment...or vanity[,] these strictures do not apply to a virgin, for she stands in the unsullied purity of paradise.”<sup>44</sup> Since Hildegard saw “virgins [as] married with holiness in the Holy Spirit,”<sup>45</sup> she essentially elevated herself and her fellow religious women to a higher and much holier status than their lay female counterparts who remained bound by the chains of earthly marriage and modesty. In such a way, Hildegard created a perfect balance between her humility toward Church authority, as discussed earlier, and undeniable superiority in both holy and secular affairs.

Although Hildegard was by no means the first and only holy woman to rely on humility and virginity to carve out a space for herself in the male-dominated world of the medieval Church,<sup>46</sup> far less common was the way she “manipulated” her own physical weakness to this end. Throughout both her mystical writings and personal correspondence, Hildegard frequently referred to her own physical frailty, which turned out to play a significant role in her consecration as a saint. Hildegard herself described in a 1175 letter to monk Guibert of Gembloux that throughout her life, her “body suffer[ed] ceaselessly, and [she had been] racked by such terrible pains that [she was] brought almost to the point of death.”<sup>47</sup> Yet in spite of the physical torments the illness had brought her, there are indications that Hildegard actually used it to advance her holy career. On one occasion, Hildegard was determined to transfer her fellow nuns, then growing in number due to her increasing reputation, to “more spacious quarters” away from Disibodenberg as instructed by the Holy

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<sup>41</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 153.

<sup>42</sup> For more details on Hildegard’s miracles, see Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 181-210.

<sup>43</sup> See the scene depicted in the first paragraph.

<sup>44</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 129.

<sup>45</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 129.

<sup>46</sup> “Many female mystics exercised a high degree of political power, counseling kings and popes. Considered feminine spirituality, their visions made it acceptable for them to have access to a spirituality unmediated by the ecclesiastics of the Catholic Church. They were thought to have received gifts of prophecy and clairvoyance, and while many women’s writings were not accepted by the church, most of the mystics’ literature was generally seen as inspired.” Muir, *A Women’s History of the Christian Church: Two Thousand Years of Female Leadership* 133.

<sup>47</sup> It was somewhat ironic that while Hildegard had performed so many healing miracles on other people, never was she able to heal herself. Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume II*, 23.

Spirit.<sup>48</sup> Her abbot and brothers denied her request to leave, because “they could scarcely tolerate the thought of her going at all,”<sup>49</sup> an understandable response given how much their monastery could lose without their sensational female mystic.<sup>50</sup> Of course, Hildegard was too stubborn to give up and feared going against divine wish. However, rather than directly going against the abbot’s command and risking disobedience, she simply and quite conveniently “fell into a long illness...and did not rise from her bed till the abbot and the others acknowledged that it was by divine command that they...give their consent...and indeed strove to help her as much as they could” to fulfill her sacred wish.<sup>51</sup> Seeing this “divine chastisement” for Hildegard, her abbot “would not offer any more opposition to the divine decree” brought about by her.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Hildegard’s chronic disease would constantly recur to act as a divine intervention to demolish the opposition against and ensure the fulfillment of her religious and earthly projects.<sup>53</sup> Guibert once remarked how marvelous it was that a prosperous monastery was founded not by any powerful man, “but by a woman who was poor, a stranger, and sick,”<sup>54</sup> but perhaps it was precisely Hildegard’s seeming weakness that made her appear all the holier and stronger.<sup>55</sup> Regardless of whether her illness was truly a divine intervention, Hildegard did transform her physical weakness into strength, or “privilege,” as Molina has argued, to battle against oppositions and further her cause.

In conclusion, having turned the tides of gender discrimination and physical weakness to her advantage, Hildegard transformed herself into an exceptional “female warrior battling against [the] injustice” of her time, as she so rightfully called herself.<sup>56</sup> Her humility in both words and actions as well as obedience to religious authority molded her into a living emblem of Christian virtues, which garnered immense favor from the Church. Her chastity and virginity freed her from the patriarchy’s common constrictions on women, and were the infallible proofs of her spiritual purity and complete devotion to the love of Christ. Even her female frailty and chronic illness showcased the mystic’s direct contact with God, implying extraordinary saintliness. Indeed, by emphasizing her advantages while making the best out of every difficult situation, Hildegard managed to shape herself into a living saint in the eyes of popes and bishops, kings and queens, monks and nuns; her aromatic reputation of holiness spread far and wide as they diligently sought her prayers, assistance, and advice. In the case of Hildegard, there was no conflict between creating one’s own rules, or “unheard-of practices” questioned by Mistress Tengsich, and simultaneously being an orthodox Christian woman who dedicated herself ungrudgingly to Christ, her

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<sup>48</sup> Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 144.

<sup>49</sup> Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 145.

<sup>50</sup> Prior Adelbert of Disibodenberg once complained about Hildegard’s departure, explaining to her that they “had hoped that the salvation of [their] monastery rested with [her].” Hildegard’s departure would lead to a drop in not only visitors but also consequently the monastery’s repute and revenue. Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 172-173.

<sup>51</sup> Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 145-146.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 101.

<sup>55</sup> A similar inversion of weakness and power could be found in the gospels. In 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, for instance, Paul remarked, “[God] has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” (New American Standard Bible).

<sup>56</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 79.

Bridegroom.

It is worth noting in closing that, while Hildegard's remarkable sanctity seems never to have been seriously doubted, she would not be canonized until 2012, more than eight hundred years after her death, effectively making her canonization process the longest in the history of the Church.<sup>57</sup> We could now only surmise the reasons for such a delay. For one, it could simply be written off as a case of bad timing. As the papal canonization process was, at Hildegard's time, just beginning to take shape, it took almost fifty years after Hildegard's death for the initial official papal investigation into her sanctity to be launched by Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241), while subsequent attempts to canonize her also failed supposedly due to either the undetailed accounts of the miracles she had performed or the deaths of the majority of her eyewitnesses.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, "the judicial document [the investigators] prepared in relation to Hildegard's life and miracles must surely be among the most meager and approximative of such texts ever submitted to the papacy for its examination," since "not only was it very short, but it was almost wholly lacking in fundamental details," thereby making any verification of Hildegard's holy deeds impossible.<sup>59</sup> However, another underlying factor might also be at work. Even though Hildegard's novelty in writing down her visions, applying her weaknesses as strengths, and being a rare female mystic of her time appealed to and was endorsed by the papacy,<sup>60</sup> formal canonization symbolized much more than simple acknowledgement of her orthodoxy. By making Hildegard a saint, the dogmatic and authoritative Catholic Church would essentially be acclaiming and commending religious innovations and novel interpretations of the Scripture, both a perilous step in an age rife with heresies and an unnecessary risk given that she was already a saint in the eyes of so many. As a matter of fact, when her sanctity was formally declared in 2012, "[m]any people were surprised...insofar as it was assumed by almost everyone that Hildegard had in fact been officially considered a saint by the Roman Catholic Church for many centuries."<sup>61</sup> To be sure, Hildegard's centuries-long journey to sainthood was an arduous one; but whether alive or posthumously, she made it anyway.

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<sup>57</sup> Hildegard was proclaimed as "Doctor of the Church" in that same year. George Ferzoco, "The Canonization and Doctorization of Hildegard of Bingen," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle, Debra L. Stoudt & George Ferzoco (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 305.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>60</sup> Pope Eugenius III was especially important for Hildegard's success, as his approval led to the Church's endorsement of the "deeply, disturbingly original" writings of both Hildegard and Bernard of Clairvaux; if the remarkable Eugenius "had not been sitting on the papal throne" at Hildegard's time, "[e]vents might well have been vastly different" and unfortunate for her. Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I* 32.

<sup>61</sup> Ferzoco, "The Canonization and Doctorization of Hildegard of Bingen," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, 305.

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# “VICTIM, COCKTEASE, WIMP”: RETHINKING CECILY CHAUMPAIGNE

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“... it's not the telling of the stories that we fear, it's what people will do when we tell our stories.”

Chanel Miller, *Know My Name*

In 1873, Frederick James Furnivall was doing research on the life of Geoffrey Chaucer when he discovered a document dated from 1380 and created in the name of a woman called Cecily Chaumpaigne. The document officially released Chaucer from legal consequences related to “de meo raptu”—a Latin phrase relating to both abduction and rape. Since this bombshell was launched into the world of Chaucer, hundreds of academics have attempted to grapple with the case of Cecily Chaumpaigne and what it implies for their much-beloved author. This paper analyzes the work of three feminist scholars who themselves analyze Chaucer scholarship’s relation to and treatment of the case.

In her article *Chaucer’s Women: Sex and the Scholarly Imagination*, Samantha Katz Seal explores what the scholarship around the Cecily Chaumpaigne case reveals about exploitation and treatment of women. She challenges Chaucer’s biographers to think about the way in which they have manipulated the stories of fictional and historical women as a means to an end. Specifically, she posits that the story of Chaumpaigne has been used as a device to make Chaucer seem more masculine and, perversely, more relatable to his (male) biographers and readers.

Seal examines Cecily Chaumpaigne in the context of the story of Chaucer’s largely fictional “courtly lover.”<sup>62</sup> This figure was popularized by William Godwin’s 1804 Chaucer biography, based on his personal reading of a poem titled *The Court of Love*— a poem which has never been conclusively attributed to Chaucer. Throughout the earlier Chaucer

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<sup>62</sup> Seal, Samantha Katz. *Chaucer’s Women: Sex and the Scholarly Imagination*, 334.

scholarship, writers liked to describe his potential encounters with this unknown woman, despite widely acknowledging that she probably did not exist. Even Godwin wrote that her existence was a matter of “conjecture.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, for these writers and researchers, the question of her existence was entirely irrelevant — it was what she represented for Chaucer’s reputation that mattered. Her existence was meant to popularize Chaucer’s writing, to add depth, drama, and a sense of romance to the poet’s personal life.

Eventually, Seal writes, scholars got tired of the devoted Chaucer, the one who maintained just one lady lover. They began pluralizing the objects of his affection, making his love life ever more salacious: for example, E.W. Edmunds wrote that, “indiscriminate love-making was the commonplace of the decadent chivalry of the time, and Chaucer’s various ‘complaints’ about unknown lady-loves must have had some basis in fact.”<sup>64</sup> The courtly lady was phased out in exchange for the imagery of a promiscuous, troublemaking Chaucer; her story abandoned as soon as academics found it unfashionable. Seal writes that, “It is hard to overstate how comprehensively women were marginalized within such a scheme:” despite the issues present in the courtly lady idea, the transition towards a Chaucer that lusted after many objects denied the personhood of any women he may have written about, making them interchangeable and representative.<sup>65</sup>

Eventually, to firmly establish Chaucer’s reputation as a paragon of virile masculinity, the (male) writers turned to his rape accusation. Reading the documents of release, they began to theorize about what this moment in time would have meant for Chaucer. Seal says they “saw the rapist Chaucer as a source of narrative drama, a means of shaping a biographical trajectory.”<sup>66</sup> For example, John Koch described the incident as a catalyst for Chaucer’s cynical attitude later in life: “He was no longer a devoted believer in women, and may have learned by experience the weaknesses of human nature in general.”<sup>67</sup> In his scholarship, Koch referred to the incident as a rape — yet he wrote that it was a moment of trauma for the rapist, a forced change in the worldview of the great poet. Other biographers took the quitclaim as an opportunity to assert that Chaucer was still having sex as he got older.<sup>68</sup>

The concern of these scholars in regard to Chaucer’s potential rape of Chaumpaigne was clearly not that he may have committed a sexual act with her, but rather that it could have led to some form of official criminality. Thus, their strategy was to encourage readers to feel excited by the depiction of Chaucer’s sexual activity while discounting Chaumpaigne’s experience just enough to ensure that their great poet did not end up stamped with the label of felony. Seal analyzes some truly disturbing examples of this kind of scholarship, including Howard describing the rape as occurring “in the heat of passion or exasperation” and John Gardner’s comment that the author could not be blamed for wanting to slip into bed with a

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<sup>63</sup> Seal, 331.

<sup>64</sup> Seal, 331.

<sup>65</sup> Seal, 332.

<sup>66</sup> Seal, 334.

<sup>67</sup> Seal, 334.

<sup>68</sup> Seal, 333.

“pretty and soft baker’s daughter.”<sup>69</sup> These writers, and others, use language fit for a romance novel, not the violent invasion of a woman’s body. Seal explains that hidden within this type of writing is a secret (or not-so-secret) feeling of shared masculinity and desire; that the men who describe the incident in this way do so because they wish to “fantasize themselves into the poet’s place.”<sup>70</sup> Like the fictional courtly lover, there is no evidence to suggest that Cecily Chaumpaigne was particularly “pretty and soft,” but there is no fun for the biographers in picturing it any other way. Here, the possible violent exploitation of a young woman is grossly transformed by writers into a source of male solidarity, a sort of fist bump back through the centuries.

The conclusion of *Chaucer’s Women* explains, in more general terms, what Seal believes has happened to the titular women, both fictional and historical, in scholarship on the poet:

The critics have treated women—and, more specifically, female sexuality—as if it were a universal lingua franca designed for the academic mind. Women become the texts through which men translate antiquity, the bodies upon which poet, reader, and critic gather as one.<sup>71</sup>

Seal expresses a vague sort of hope that this view could improve, and that the way we as a public read and understand Chaucer could be changed for the better.

Mary C. Flannery seems to agree. In *Good Fun: Cecily Chaumpaigne and the Ethics of Chaucerian Obscenity*, Flannery provides a substantial lens through which to look forward. First, though, she connects Chaucer’s humor to his rape case and examines how scholars have viewed the two.

Flannery begins by describing the trivialization of “raptus” by scholars. She notes the use of euphemisms like “escapade” rather than “raptus” or “rape,” as well as the common insistence that Chaumpaigne consented to the encounter and regretted it or blackmailed Chaucer afterwards—these she describes as examples of “himpathy”, which philosopher Kate Manne defined as “the excessive sympathy sometimes shown toward male perpetrators of sexual violence.”<sup>72</sup>

Flannery writes that scholars have behaved this way, purposely cultivating an environment of trust in the possible perpetrator and scorn for the potential victim, because “they want to be free to like Chaucer.”<sup>73</sup> Chaucer’s reputation in the literary world, she argues, hinges on his likability, his “congeniality.”<sup>74</sup> The possibility of his crime against Cecily Chaumpaigne troubles this image; the idea of having to reconcile the two is disturbing to biographers, who attempt to minimize it in response.

One of the reasons Chaucer maintains this likable image is his humor, which is generally perceived as both good-natured and raunchy enough to appeal to a variety of

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<sup>69</sup> Gardner and Howard, quoted in Seal, 336-7.

<sup>70</sup> Seal, 338.

<sup>71</sup> Seal, 339.

<sup>72</sup> Flannery, Mary C., *Good Fun: Cecily Chaumpaigne and the Ethics of Chaucerian Obscenity* 362.

<sup>73</sup> Flannery, 365.

<sup>74</sup> Flannery, 366.

readers. Flannery explores this humor and the ways in which it engages with his personal life — or, rather, how *we*, the readers, should engage with both of these things. She focuses on the Reeve's Tale, in which main characters John and Aleyn get revenge on a corrupt miller by raping his wife and daughter in the middle of the night. Particularly, Flannery pulls out one line: "Pley, Aleyn."<sup>75</sup> In this tale, the reader is invited to view sexual assault as entertainment, and to enjoy it.

So how are we meant to begin to change our engagement with Chaucer? In the final part of the paper, Flannery looks at Chaucer scholarship through the lens of Sara Ahmed's *Killjoy Manifesto*. The manifesto asks people to think critically about why the media they consume brings them happiness, and to be willing to kill that joy in order to examine it. This is not an argument that no one should read Chaucer ever again, or even that no one can enjoy his stories. Rather, Flannery wants to ensure that the enjoyment of Chaucer does not preclude any constructive conversation about the actions he may have committed or the less savory ideas he may have held.

Susan Morrison's paper *The Use of Biography in Medieval Literary Criticism: The Case of Cecily Chaumpaigne* attempts a unique approach to the case—Morrison seeks a way to foreground Chaumpaigne, rather than Chaucer, in scholarship related to the possible rape. She argues that the treatment of the quitclaim has always privileged Chaucer—not Chaumpaigne, and not the historical document—and that biographers have only used the claim to the extent in which it was convenient for their vision of the life of Chaucer. She describes how Cecily has been denied subjectivity by scholars, who attempt to "impose a single and uniform meaning" onto her.<sup>76</sup>

Morrison refers to the scholars' attitudes as a "politics of literary adulation": many who study Chaucer and wish to see him maintain his place in literature refuse to admit we will never know what happened. Instead, they construct elaborate scenarios in which their hero is innocent or, rather, in which he is guilty, but in a way the biographers can identify with. She next taps into the work of Louise O. Fradenburg, who wrote that feminist theory can disrupt the idea of the "other" by acknowledging those to whom the "other" is entirely normal. Fradenburg's work suggests that in regards to the *raptus* of Cecily Chaumpaigne, a female critic would likely find herself identifying with Chaumpaigne, rather than with Chaucer.<sup>77</sup> This would enable a different kind of connection to the past, one that centers the marginalized and mistreated. However, Morrison also notes the ways in which feminist criticism of Chaucer can itself delight in the idea of a rapist author. For example, Carolyn Dinshaw calls the existence of Chaumpaigne's *raptus* record a "very felicitous circumstance," because "it reminds us that there are not only figurative rapes...not only fictional rapes...but there are real rapes as well."<sup>78</sup> For Dinshaw, the rape is useful; despite feminist intentions, the possible violation of a woman's body is still a tool for the

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<sup>75</sup> Chaucer, quoted in Flannery, 369.

<sup>76</sup> Morrison, Susan, *The Use of Biography in Medieval Literary Criticism: The Case of Cecily Chaumpaigne* 71.

<sup>77</sup> Morrison, 77.

<sup>78</sup> Dinshaw quoted in Morrison, 79.

interpretation of her rapist's writing. Dinshaw reads and criticizes Chaucer instead of empathizing with Chaumpaigne.

Morrison wants to do the opposite of this: to privilege Chaumpaigne in readings of Chaucer. She suggests reading the poet's work as "a structure paralleling the construction of Cecily undertaken by critics from the legal documents."<sup>79</sup> As an example, she too examines the Reeve's Tale, specifically the character of Malyne. After her rape, Malyne wakes and gives an affectionate goodbye to her assaulter, Aleyne. Her speech in the tale is an example of the "dawn song" genre, which interrupts the fabliau of the rest of the tale. Morrison relates this to the study of Chaucer's life—if biographers "read" Chaucer's life, the Chaumpaigne release is a fundamental disruption of its genre.<sup>80</sup> Just as it is easier for Chaucer and his readers to believe that Malyne was a willing lover, despite the evidence otherwise, it makes biographers feel most comfortable to remove the issue of sexual assault from the case of Cecily Chaumpaigne.

The article now posits that the quitclaim could be read as a form of "life writing," a place in which to locate Chaumpaigne's voice.<sup>81</sup> Records of this nature must ascribe to a particular form, and much of what she said may have been lost in translation or in the scribe's copying. But it's still possible to locate a faint impression of Chaumpaigne herself. Within the document, she represents herself to the public; she calls herself the daughter of her own late parents, speaks for herself as an adult, and acts to release Chaucer from acts concerning her rape. She uses the phrase *de raptu meo*, which is different from other records of the time. These are signs of her; they're not much, but they indicate her presence.<sup>82</sup>

Lastly, Morrison engages with the idea of producing an "anti-biography," a work that refuses to consolidate all the information around a figure into one narrative. The work would instead speculate, theorize, and offer multiple interpretations of a life. The way to "deal with" the Chaumpaigne case, Morrison writes, is to create an anti-biography: not of Chaucer, but of Chaumpaigne herself.<sup>83</sup>

All three papers come to the conclusion that it does not particularly matter whether Geoffrey Chaucer committed the crime of which Cecily Chaumpaigne accused him. In fact, debate over the validity of the claim is both inconclusive and largely counterproductive. More important to modern-day Chaucer scholarship is a discussion of how *we* have treated Chaumpaigne and her story. The ways in which biographers have attempted to reconcile *raptus* with Chaucer's life—excusing, downplaying, and even romanticizing it—are about a lot more than just one man and his works of literature. They demonstrate how invested (male) scholars are in preserving the reputation of their favorite author, keeping him up on his pedestal, even (and often) at the expense of the voices of women. In the twenty-first century, we are more aware of this propensity than ever, in worlds far beyond the Chaucerian.

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<sup>79</sup> Morrison, 80.

<sup>80</sup> Morrison, 81.

<sup>81</sup> Morrison, 81.

<sup>82</sup> Morrison, 82.

<sup>83</sup> Morrison, 83.

Similarly, *this* paper does not engage with an impulse to “cancel” Chaucer or to prosecute him for a crime. Rather, it exists because of a desire to do right by every woman that has been discarded, invalidated, and sidelined for the sake of our favorite works of art. Morrison writes: “in discussions about gender, sexuality or female characters, present or absent, Cecily matters.”<sup>84</sup> There must be a thousand Cecily Chaumpaignes out there. By clearing the space to search for this one, we pave the way to finding the others. One of the most effective interventions into the treatment of women as a “lingua franca” is to individualize them, tell their stories—to refuse to allow them to be co-opted, commodified, or consolidated into a phrase. Another, as Flannery made clear, is to start asking questions: whose bodies are behind this writing? Whose exploitation enabled the creation of one’s favorite works?

In Marion Turner’s Chaucer biography, she commends the woman nearly every other biographer has written off: “Cecily Chaumpaigne sued [Chaucer], in her own name, and it paid off. She didn’t retreat or keep silent out of shame.”<sup>85</sup> I want to know more about this Cecily, the woman who, all the way back in the Middle Ages, was strong enough to bring a powerful man to court, to publicly state that he had violated her in some way. It feels unfair that her rape (or potential rape) is all that the world has of her; despite what history can teach, women are much more than the things that are done to them. I want to be able to look up Cecily Chaumpaigne and read about her life outside of the context of Geoffrey Chaucer’s.

It takes work. There’s a reason these women are so difficult to find within the margins of our history; they’ve been hidden. The task that scholars, academics, and readers—Chaucer or otherwise—must take on is to uncover them, to search for their stories beneath those of the men who have subsumed them. We must embrace the discomfort that we feel, and work to understand where it comes from. We must accept the fragmentary and the uncertain, and resist the urge to change the shape of a woman to fit a story. We must do it for Cecily.

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<sup>84</sup> Morrison, 80.

<sup>85</sup> Turner, quoted in Flannery, 373.

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<sup>86</sup> Used only for the epigraph.

# PERSIANS AT THE PORT OF PISA: DIPLOMATIC AND TRADE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CAROLINGIANS AND THE ABBĀSIDS DURING THE REIGN OF CHARLEMAGNE AND HĀRŪN AL-RASHĪD

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**Persians at the Port of Pisa: Diplomacy and Trade Relations between the Carolingians and the ‘Abbāsids during the Reigns of Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd**

Among the many commonly-repeated anecdotes about the reign of Charlemagne (r. 768-814 CE), his diplomatic and trade relations with the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809 CE) is particularly popular. This isn’t surprising, since it subverts modern expectations about medieval interactions between Christians and Muslims, and more specifically about Charlemagne’s attitude towards Muslims — ideas about which mainly

come from the 11th century *Song of Roland* which recasts his campaigns against the Basques as holy wars against the Umayyads — while also containing colorful details like Hārūn's gift of an elephant, who then lived in the Carolingian court until it died in 810. However, those who mention this event often relegate it to a footnote or a fun fact, rather than attempting to fully explore its implications. Was Charlemagne's diplomatic relation with Hārūn al-Rashid really so strange? Other than the elephant, what other goods did the two rulers trade? What might have prompted this diplomacy to take place, and what, if anything, resulted from it?

The trade missions between Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd — there were multiple — weren't the Carolingians' first diplomatic interactions with the 'Abbāsids, nor would they be their last. According to one continuation of the *Chronicle of Fredegar* Charlemagne's father Pepin III exchanged envoys and gifts with al-Manṣūr between 764 and 767, hosting the Caliph's ambassadors in Nantes.<sup>87</sup> Charlemagne's two embassies to Hārūn took place between 797 and 807 followed.<sup>88</sup> Finally, in the last recorded instance of diplomacy between the Carolingians and the 'Abbāsids, al-Ma'mūn's envoys appear at an assembly held by Louis the Pious in 831, though there are no records of Louis ever reciprocating this mission.<sup>89</sup> While diplomacy between Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd is notable for its length, it wasn't particularly remarkable for its innovation. Nor was it so disastrous that it soured either dynasty on exchanging diplomats again, at least on the 'Abbāsids' end. However, compared to those of Pepin III and al-Manṣūr and of Louis the Pious and al-Ma'mūn, the diplomatic missions between Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd are quite well-documented.

However, well-documented is a relative term. Primary sources on the decade's worth of trade and diplomacy between Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd amount only to about three contemporary Frankish accounts — those being the *Annales regni Francorum*,<sup>90</sup> Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni*,<sup>91</sup> and Notker the Stammerer's *Gesta Karoli Magni*<sup>92</sup> — all of which only somewhat agree on specifics, as well as a 9th century Arabic-language variant of the Tiburtine Sibyl, from an Arab Christian community in Syria unconnected to the 'Abbāsīd court, that somewhat off-handedly mentions the embassies.<sup>93</sup> Still, these sources provide enough information about the missions for scholars to start piecing together specific details like individual diplomats and the contents of some of the gifts exchanged between the two rulers. The Royal Frankish Annals, specifically, lay out a clear, year-by-year

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<sup>87</sup> Samuel Ottewill-Soulsby, "'Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy in Early Medieval Arabic Apocalypse,'" *Millennium* 16, no. 1 (2019): 213, <https://doi.org/10.1515/mill-2019-0011>

<sup>88</sup> "Royal Frankish Annals" in *Carolingian Chronicles*, trans. Bernhard Walter Scholz and Barbara Rogers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), page, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015015186805>

<sup>89</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby, "'Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,'" 214

<sup>90</sup> "Royal Frankish Annals," 82-87

<sup>91</sup> Einhard, "The Life of Charlemagne" in *Two Lives of Charlemagne* trans. David Ganz (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 29-30

<sup>92</sup> Notker the Stammerer, "The Deeds of Charlemagne" in *Two Lives of Charlemagne* trans. David Ganz (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 92-96

<sup>93</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby, "'Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,'" 217

timeline of the missions. They start with Charlemagne sending three emissaries, Lantfrid, Sigismund, and Isaac, to Hārūn in 797, to which Hārūn responded with his own envoys, “a Persian from the East” and “a Saracen from Africa” — potentially ‘Ibrāhīm ibn Aghlab, ‘Amīr of Egypt<sup>94</sup> — in 801, who also brought news of Lantfrid and Sigismund’s deaths.<sup>95</sup> Isaac returned later that year with Hārūn’s grand gifts to Charlemagne, most notably the elephant Abū al-‘Abbās.<sup>96</sup> Charlemagne sent yet another embassy, presumably in 802 or 803, as Hārūn’s second envoy Abdallah arrived in 807 bearing silk robes, perfumes, and an intricate water clock.<sup>97</sup> After this, the exchange of diplomats seems to have stopped, though Charlemagne may have sent yet another mission in 807, which Hārūn never responded to since he died in 809, likely before Charlemagne’s diplomats reached him.<sup>98</sup> All three Carolingian sources generally agree with this sequence of events, so while they might differ in other specifics like who was involved in which trade mission, or what goods were sent between Aachen and Baghdad, confirming that the embassies did happen, likely in the same order given in the Royal Frankish Annals.

The question of what gifts were exchanged is slightly more complex, as the three different Frankish accounts don’t completely agree on Hārūn’s presents, nor do they make any real attempt to record what Charlemagne had to offer. Einhard only vaguely records Hārūn’s “magnificent gifts [...] robes and spices and other riches of the East”, as well as the elephant, “the only one he possessed, to Charles, who had asked for one.”<sup>99</sup> Notker mentions the elephant, but also includes “monkeys, balsam, nard, unguents of various kinds, spices, scents and many kinds of drugs.”<sup>100</sup> Notker also provides the only list of Charlemagne’s gifts to Hārūn:

Horses and mules from Spain and Frisian robes, white, grey, crimson, and blue, which in Persia, he was told, were rarely seen and highly prized. Dogs too he sent him of remarkable swiftness and fierceness, such as the king of Persia had desired, for hunting and driving away lions and tigers.<sup>101</sup>

Because of the texts’ lack of detail and agreement on either ruler’s exact set of gifts, various scholars have theorized other unmentioned trade items. Lawrence Nees suggests that along with (or perhaps instead of) Notker’s list, Charlemagne might have sent Hārūn slaves and illuminated manuscripts, especially with covers of ivory, like the Dagulf Psalter he sent to Pope Hadrian in 795,<sup>102</sup> which he imagines might “have stimulated the Caliph to a triumph of one-upmanship by sending back the very beast itself.”<sup>103</sup> He also proposes,

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<sup>94</sup> F. W. Buckler, *Harun-ul-Rashid and Charles the Great* (Cambridge: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1931), 31

<sup>95</sup> “Royal Frankish Annals,” 82

<sup>96</sup> “Royal Frankish Annals,” 82

<sup>97</sup> “Royal Frankish Annals,” 87

<sup>98</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 214

<sup>99</sup> Einhard, “The Life of Charlemagne,” 30

<sup>100</sup> Notker, “The Deeds of Charlemagne,” 94

<sup>101</sup> Notker, “The Deeds of Charlemagne,” 95

<sup>102</sup> Lawrence Nees, “Charlemagne’s Elephant,” *Quintana: Revista de Estudos do Departamento de Historia da Arte* 5 (2006): 37, <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=65323971003>

<sup>103</sup> Nees, “Charlemagne’s Elephant,” 38

somewhat more realistically, that Hārūn might have sent elephant tusks along with Abū al-‘Abbās, since the arrival of both his own envoys and Isaac coincide with the production of many carved Carolingian ivories, many of which were quite large, whereas previously ivory carvings were both smaller and rarer.<sup>104</sup> Because no party involved in the diplomatic missions—neither local chroniclers looking to note down every single item, nor the individual envoys traveling between Aachen and Baghdad — kept records that historians deem satisfactory enough, we will likely never know the full inventory of these gift exchanges.

If determining what exactly Charlemagne and Hārūn exchanged is hard, pinpointing either ruler’s motivations is even harder. The only explicit mention of Charlemagne’s motivations can be found in Einhard’s writing, where he claims that Charlemagne simply wanted an elephant,<sup>105</sup> but the truth surely cannot be so simple — or can it? Dutton explains that, while not the main reason, obtaining an elephant might have still been important to Charlemagne, who collected exotic animals as symbols of his status and royal dignity.<sup>106</sup> More likely, though, is that Charlemagne’s trans-continental offer of friendship was politically motivated, even though nothing resembling the modern conception of a political alliance came out of it. Carolingian and ‘Abbāsīd interests were well-aligned. The Carolingians resented the Byzantines, the hostility between them stemming from intrafaith conflict, and maintained a “belligerent peace” with the Umayyads in Iberia; this situation was reversed for the ‘Abbāsīds, who despised the Umayyads who refused to recognize them and clung to their former title of Caliph, and were somewhat hostile towards the Byzantines.<sup>107</sup> Knowing this, Charlemagne might have imagined that an alliance between the two was only natural. Buckler lists three possible motivations for Charlemagne, all potentially overlapping: an attempt to position himself as the protector of ‘Abbāsīd interests in Western Europe (specifically against the Umayyads), a traditional alliance between the Carolingians and the ‘Abbāsīds against the Byzantines, or negotiations for the safety of Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem.<sup>108</sup> According to him, Charlemagne and Louis the Pious’ campaigns in Spain throughout the next decade corroborate the first motive,<sup>109</sup> while the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros’ attempts to make peace with Charlemagne in 803 and Hārūn in 804, suspecting the potential of an alliance between them, support the second.<sup>110</sup> These two goals together were extremely valuable to both rulers but slightly favored Hārūn, since Charlemagne’s offer to fight against the Umayyads seems to have been on behalf of the ‘Abbāsīds, and not beside them. While it’s impossible to know what Charlemagne might have been thinking as he sent Lantfrid, Sigismund, and Isaac off to Baghdad in 797, that he

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<sup>104</sup> Nees, "Charlemagne’s Elephant," 41-42

<sup>105</sup> Einhard, “The Life of Charlemagne,” 30

<sup>106</sup> Paul Edward Dutton, *Charlemagne’s Mustache: And Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 61

<sup>107</sup> Maurits S Berger, *A Brief History of Islam in Europe: Thirteen Centuries of Creed, Conflict, and Coexistence* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2014), 62, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/46342>

<sup>108</sup> Buckler, *Harunū’l-Rashīd and Charles the Great*, 22

<sup>109</sup> Buckler, *Harunū’l-Rashīd and Charles the Great*, 23

<sup>110</sup> Buckler, *Harunū’l-Rashīd and Charles the Great*, 26

conceived of the potential for diplomacy between them shows that the motivation to ally against their common enemies trumped the religious differences between them, at least theoretically.

Buckler's final proposed motivation, the protection of Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem, is slightly more complicated, as both Einhard and Notker claim that Hārūn's gifts included some sort of dominion over Jerusalem, either giving him "that holy and salvific place [the Holy Sepulcher] so it might be thought to be in his power"<sup>111</sup> or himself acting as "his [Charlemagne] representative [...] a faithful manager of the revenue of that province."<sup>112</sup> While Buckler believes that these sources "appear to leave little room for doubt,"<sup>113</sup> other scholars take issue. Runciman specifically questions why the Royal Frankish Annals would omit such an achievement, and instead proposes that "Charles asked for something in Jerusalem and was given it," such as more protections for Catholic pilgrims, permission for Latin priests to serve in the church of the Holy Sepulcher, or most likely, ownership of the church later pilgrims knew as Sancta Maria Latina.<sup>114</sup> Contemporary and later chronicles support parts of this claim, as "references [...] to pilgrimages to the Holy Land increased significantly."<sup>115</sup> Protections for Christian pilgrims against harm, along with material gains like that of the elephant, were likely secondary, and potentially included as a sign of thanks from Hārūn al-Rashīd.

While the three Frankish sources say little about Charlemagne's motivations, they reveal much about Frankish perceptions of the 'Abbāsids. The Royal Frankish Annals stay neutral, owing to its straightforward style, completely omitting any impression its author may have had of Hārūn al-Rashīd or his envoys. Einhard and Notker are less detached, and both use the 'Abbāsids as mouthpieces to portray Charlemagne's majesty, which is so great that even distant foreigners can perceive it. According to Einhard, Hārūn "held him in favor more than all the kings and princes in the world and thought that he alone was worthy of his honor and generosity."<sup>116</sup> While this may seem like Einhard portrays Charlemagne and Hārūn as equals, Latowsky disagrees, asserting that Einhard's writing is stylistically similar to that of Suetonius and Eusebius' depictions of Perso-Roman diplomacy, in which Persians submit to Roman emperors by sending them gifts, including animals, a connection Einhard further emphasizes by calling Hārūn *Rex Persarum*, "the King of the Persians."<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, Einhard's perception of Hārūn's immense power — he supposedly holds "almost all of the East except India"<sup>118</sup> — accentuates the significance of his deference to Charlemagne. By depicting Hārūn as subservient, Einhard demonstrates Charlemagne's

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<sup>111</sup> Einhard, "The Life of Charlemagne," 30

<sup>112</sup> Notker, "The Deeds of Charlemagne", 96

<sup>113</sup> Buckler, *Harun'ul-Rashid and Charles the Great*, 29

<sup>114</sup> Steven Runciman, "Charlemagne and Palestine," *The English Historical Review* 50, no. 200 ( 1935): 612, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/553491>.

<sup>115</sup> Richard Hodges, "Charlemagne's Elephant," *History Today* 50, no. 12, (December 2000): 27

<sup>116</sup> Einhard, "The Life of Charlemagne," 29

<sup>117</sup> Anne Latowsky, "Foreign Embassies and Roman Universality in Einhard's Life of Charlemagne," *Florilegium* 22 (January 2005): 39-40, <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/flor/article/view/12515>.

<sup>118</sup> Einhard, "The Life of Charlemagne," 29

immense power, which is consistent with his view of Charlemagne as Roman imperial authority reborn. Notker also looks down on the ‘Abbāsids, portraying Hārūn’s envoys with a condescending degree of child-like wonder at the Carolingian court. According to Notker:

[Charlemagne] received them with great kindness, and granted them this privilege—that they might go wherever they had a mind to go, as if they were his own children, and examine everything [...] they jumped with joy at this favor and valued the privilege of clinging close to Charlemagne, of gazing upon him [...] more than all the wealth of the East.<sup>119</sup>

They explore the Palace of Aachen and are so delighted by the things they see that “they could not refrain from laughing aloud; and they clapped their hands.”<sup>120</sup> He also includes a small interlude at the ‘Abbāsīd court, where he says Hārūn “understood the superior might of Charles from these very small matters [Charlemagne’s gifts].”<sup>121</sup> Notker uses Hārūn’s envoys, directly comparing them to children, to express Charlemagne’s magnificence, illustrating it through the sheer awe it inspires in them. In contrast with the hooting and hollering diplomats, he depicts Charlemagne as stoic yet generous, which together make him appear quite paternalistic. Charlemagne’s power is so apparent that even the renowned Hārūn al-Rashīd can sense it, despite only seeing his gifts. In both these texts, Carolingian writers undermine ‘Abbāsīd authority to prop up Charlemagne instead, showing that they clearly didn’t think very highly of them while also using these diplomatic missions with such a powerful political entity as proof of Charlemagne’s magnificence.

Although Charlemagne’s motivations and Carolingian perceptions of the ‘Abbāsids have enough textual sources for historians to start attempting to piece a narrative together, it’s impossible to do the same with Hārūn al-Rashīd. Until extremely recently in 2019, historians believed that no contemporary Arabic-language sources even vaguely referenced Hārūn al-Rashīd’s diplomatic trade missions with Charlemagne. Ottewill-Soulsby discovered a mention in an Arabic copy of the Tiburtine Sibyls, of all places!<sup>122</sup> These apocalyptic texts include both actual prophecy and history “made intentionally obscure and framed as prophecy,”<sup>123</sup> with the variants Arab III and Arab IV, dating roughly to 811-813 and 811-826 respectively,<sup>124</sup> containing the lines of interest. They read:

"A king shall reign there for twenty-three years but shall not complete the twenty-fourth. There shall come thither gifts from the islands of the sea, and from the countries of al-Ifranjīyya, since none of these things mentioned will occur in those lands. In his days the country of Syria shall flourish, but shall be ruined upon his decease.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Notker, “The Deeds of Charlemagne”, 92-93

<sup>120</sup> Notker, “The Deeds of Charlemagne”, 93

<sup>121</sup> Notker, “The Deeds of Charlemagne”, 96

<sup>122</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 217

<sup>123</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 217

<sup>124</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 221

<sup>125</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 222

In which Ottewill-Soulsby identifies the king as Hārūn al-Rashīd due to the source's internal chronology and biographical details,<sup>126</sup> and *al-Ifranjīyya* as Charlemagne's court, since contemporary Arabic ethnographers used the term *al-Ifranj* to refer to Western Europeans.<sup>127</sup> While this source is extremely limited, only vaguely referencing Hārūn's diplomatic missions with Charlemagne, it helps dispel many of the inferences past historians made using arguments of silence. For instance, Runciman takes this silence to mean that trade with the Carolingians was either inconsequential or shameful to 'Abbāsīd historians, who supposedly omit it because it either wasn't worth mentioning or they didn't want future generations to know of their diplomatic ties to non-Muslim rulers.<sup>128</sup> Some historians, like Pouqueville and Barthold, even suggested that the missions didn't take place in the first place, and that Frankish sources had fabricated the incident.<sup>129</sup> Others, like Buckler, tried to extrapolate Hārūn's motivations or perception of Charlemagne through his gifts—such as the idea that Hārūn's gifts of robes to Charlemagne shows that he considered the Carolingians to be his tributaries, due to the 'Abbāsīds' conception of the Byzantines in the same light, and a tradition of bestowing robes worn by “the lord” being given as a gift of honor to his “vassals.”<sup>130</sup> This last theory incorrectly applies the very specifically Western European concept of feudal vassalage to a culture that does not conceive of power structures in this way, and is also inconsistent with historical evidence, since 'Abbāsīd historians like al-Ṭabarī do actually mention the Byzantines. The lines within the Tiburtine Sybils, on the other hand, show that these diplomatic missions were somewhat widely-known since its authors were Christians in Syria, living far from Baghdad, and that they were so important to these Christians that they became the defining event of Hārūn's rule.<sup>131</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby also concludes that, given the potentially widespread knowledge of Hārūn's trade missions with Charlemagne, combined with the extravagance of Hārūn's gifts and al-Ma'mūn's attempt to replicate Hārūn's relationship with Charlemagne with the latter's son Louis the Pious just a few decades later, the 'Abbāsīds didn't see them as particularly taboo.<sup>132</sup> Additionally, he attributes their lack of documentation to al-Ṭabarī's narrow focus on the 'Abbāsīds, which led him to also exclude Muslim lands like Ifrīqiya and al-Andalus from his historical record.<sup>133</sup> Therefore, although the lack of sources makes it even harder to know Hārūn al-Rashīd's motivations for conducting diplomacy with Charlemagne, or how the 'Abbāsīds might have seen their Carolingian trade partners, recent scholarship is currently revolutionizing the way historians approach answering these questions.

Examining the details of the diplomatic and trade missions between Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd reveals several key insights about both rulers, the most important of which being that their political interests could override even the starkest differences, in this

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<sup>126</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 220

<sup>127</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 223-224

<sup>128</sup> Runciman, “Charlemagne and Palestine,” 607

<sup>129</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 214

<sup>130</sup> Buckler, *Harun al-Rashid and Charles the Great*, 32-33

<sup>131</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 227

<sup>132</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 228

<sup>133</sup> Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 216

case religion. In the case of Charlemagne, his biographers and chroniclers interpreted his doing so as a sign of greatness, proof that he was so powerful that even potential enemies could perceive it and want to be his ally. For Hārūn, this is less clear-cut, but Christian communities under his rule similarly used his trading with Charlemagne to demonstrate his magnificence. That Charlemagne and Hārūn overcame the divide between Christianity and Islam just by being far away enough that their political interests lined up instead of clashed also shows that the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable allies was much blurrier than we might imagine, especially since these trade missions weren't the only instances of such contact between the Carolingians and the 'Abbāsids.

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# Women and their Roles in Early Christianity

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Christianity burst onto the scene in the early centuries of the Common Era as a religion of the oppressed and marginalized members of society; the poor, the powerless, and women. In the early days, women found a level of power in Christian communities that they lacked in the Roman Empire at the time, and were instrumental in its success. However, as time went on, women lost the authority that they had had, and were increasingly subjugated and pushed out of important roles.

In the Greco-Roman world, there were more men than women due to a combination of female infanticide and deaths relating to pregnancy. However, more women than men converted to Christianity in its early days, constructing a community with a very different sex ratio. Additionally, a higher percentage of girls would survive infancy in Christianity because it disallowed infanticide, and a higher percent of women may have survived pregnancy due to marrying at a “substantially older age,” and a ban on abortions, which at the time were a “major cause of death among women.”<sup>134</sup>

Some attribute the greater authority that women had in Christian communities to the disparity of sexes that contrasted with that of the greater Greco-Roman world. Essentially, since there were more women, it follows that they would have more power—a pattern seen also in Sparta where the sex ratio did not favor men, and women had “status and power unknown in the rest of the classical world.”<sup>135</sup>

The role of women in early Christianity was explicitly countercultural, even beyond the subversive nature of the religion itself to wider Roman society at the time. Around the time that Christianity emerged, the Roman Empire made marriage mandatory for citizens between the ages of twenty to fifty in order to combat a declining birth rate, meaning that Christian emphasis on celibacy had legal implications.<sup>136</sup> Beyond that however, women remaining unmarried or choosing to be celibate within a marriage “became a major

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<sup>134</sup> Stark, Rodney, “The Role of Women in Christian Growth,” *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*, 98 & Stark, Rodney. “Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women.” *Sociology of Religion* 232, 236.

<sup>135</sup> Stark, *Reconstructing*, 235.

<sup>136</sup> Schenk, Christine, *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity*, 19.

challenge to the prerogatives and constraints of patriarchal marriage,” the stability of which “came to signify the stability of the body politic.”<sup>137</sup> Also undermining Roman patriarchal values was the discouragement of Christian widows to remarry. Roman law required the remarriage of widows under penalty of a fine, but if a widow remarried, she lost everything that she owned as it became the property of her new husband.<sup>138</sup> Christian women, by refusing to remarry, maintained a certain level of autonomy that subverted the social norms of the time.

Women were often the earliest adopters of Christianity in their communities, and they were instrumental in its spread. Pagan husbands of Christian women were a frequent source of converts, largely due to proselytizing within the home— particularly in upper class Roman marriages.<sup>139</sup> Since women typically converted first, they also tended to raise their children either as Christians or with some Christian influences, such as Saint Augustine’s mother; bringing up a new generation of Christians.

House churches, as well, were often the domain of women. Early Christianity was not a highly open and organized religion; meetings of believers often took place in private homes.<sup>140</sup> Women largely took on the role of “directing and running” meetings of Christians in their own homes, and those meetings served not only as worship for Christians, but also centers of conversion, “especially when believers and non-believers lived in the same home,” as they often did.<sup>141</sup> Women were therefore responsible for a large part of the construction of the Christian community before Christianity was allowed public meeting places.

Beyond organizing meetings, women in the early days of Christianity sometimes occupied the role of religious and spiritual leaders. Representations exist of Mary “standing to pray while [...] men prostrated themselves to pray,” implying her spiritual authority over them despite her gender.<sup>142</sup> That representation is not canonical (it comes from the Gospel of Bartholomew in the third century), but its existence in itself shows an early conception of women in positions of religious power. The same idea applies to passages in the Bible that forbid women to teach men— if women weren’t teaching men, they would not need to be reprimanded for it.<sup>143</sup> And reprimanded they were; several religious leaders in the fifth and sixth centuries complained about and spoke against women supposedly usurping men’s roles in religious ceremonies.<sup>144</sup> The involvement of women in officiating ceremonies does not appear to be an isolated, minor occurrence, devoid of endorsement by Church leaders; one denunciation from Pope Gelasius I suggests that at the end of the fifth century, “some women, having been ordained by bishops, were exercising a true and proper ministerial priesthood in a vast area of southern Italy, as well as perhaps in other unnamed regions of Italy.”<sup>145</sup> If women were serving in a sort of priestly capacity, that would suggest that not

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<sup>137</sup> Schenk, 19, 48.

<sup>138</sup> Stark, *Reconstructing*, 236.

<sup>139</sup> Stark, *Reconstructing*, 242.

<sup>140</sup> Moore, Rebecca, “Women and the Conversion of an Empire,” *Women in Christian Traditions*, 52.

<sup>141</sup> Moore, 53, 52.

<sup>142</sup> Kateusz, Ally, “2013 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza New Scholar Award First-Place Winner: Collyridian Déjà Vu: The Trajectory of Redaction of the Markers of Mary’s Liturgical Leadership,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 80.

<sup>143</sup> Schenk, 29.

<sup>144</sup> Kateusz, Ally, “She Sacrificed Herself as the Priest: Early Christian Female and Male Co-Priests,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 53.

<sup>145</sup> Rossi, Mary Ann, and Otranto, Giorgio, “Priesthood, Precedent, and Prejudice: On Recovering the Women Priests of Early Christianity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 84.

only certain Church officials, but also the communities that these women were serving accepted the possibility of women leading religious ceremonies— possibly suggesting a legacy of at least some female involvement in local Church activities.

Sometimes, women interested in spiritual leadership would engage in partnership ministries with men where they served as co-priests. Several early Christian artistic representations depict a “gender-parallel priesthood,” including the “two oldest surviving pieces of art depicting people inside a real church.”<sup>146</sup> A dual priesthood made sense from a practical perspective; to convert the greatest number of people possible, you need access to the greatest number of social spheres possible. Men were “more able, in terms of social acceptability, to speak in public places and proselytize on the streets,” while women could operate more behind the scenes, talking to people in private homes and other spaces from which men were generally excluded.<sup>147</sup>

The gender of female martyrs existed in an unusual middle ground for the time. The narratives of their lives emphasized both their “masculine fortitude *and* [underscored] their femininity” (italics not mine) in a Roman society where women were often expected to stick strictly within a feminine and submissive role.<sup>148</sup> Women who faced martyrdom often represented radical departures from the behaviors expected of them, however the retellings of their lives often depicted them “in the most passive, meek, and mild terms—like sacrificial lambs,” as if to balance out the masculine elements of resistance and defiance— as if those elements did not come naturally from her but from the strength of God.<sup>149</sup> Early Christians wanted women who exhibited defiance and strength of will as martyrs, but their upbringing within a deeply patriarchal society left them uncomfortable with women actually exhibiting those traits.

Perpetua, a woman martyred in Carthage in the early third century, dreamed of becoming a man for the purpose of partaking in violence, which paralleled the violence of her martyrdom and the masculine traits that she showed in her preparation for her martyrdom.<sup>150</sup> However, she remained distinctly tied to the feminine aspects of her personality through her role as a mother. On the surface, Perpetua’s actions— abandoning her son, refusing to save herself to save him— make her appear uncaring,<sup>151</sup> however, she shows by asking for him to be returned to her so that she could feed him, that she does in fact have a maternal love for him. Perpetua’s fluctuating maternal feelings and instincts are “poignant examples of the Christian community’s discomfort with a fully masculinized female martyr,” as she can at no point abandon her femininity completely despite masculinity representing the strength of her convictions.<sup>152</sup>

As Christianity went from a radical underground movement to the mainstream state religion, the religious roles officially available to women began to dwindle. If the theory about increased power of women being due to sex ratios within Christian communities is in fact true, the same phenomenon can then partially explain their loss of power. When Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, women no longer outnumbered men, meaning that they became subject to the same forces of the

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<sup>146</sup> Kateusz, *Co-Priest*, 54.

<sup>147</sup> Bellan-Boyer, Lisa, “Conspicuous in Their Absence: Women in Early Christianity,” *CrossCurrents*, 53.

<sup>148</sup> Cobb, L. Stephanie, “Putting Women in Their Place: Masculinizing and Feminizing the Female Martyr,” *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts*, 92.

<sup>149</sup> Bellan-Boyer, 55.

<sup>150</sup> Perpetua, 10.

<sup>151</sup> Perpetua, 6.

<sup>152</sup> Cobb, 103.

male-dominated society that subsumed them. Additionally, as converting to Christianity became the thing to do in the Roman Empire, many of the converts would maintain the oppressive and patriarchal ideas of Roman society that early Christians had rejected.

Representative of the increasing patriarchal subjugation of women, Benedict and Scholastica were siblings who each formed religious orders in which devoted believers could live an ascetic life with the support of others. The dynamic between the two siblings was distinct from that of the co-priests of the early days of the Church. Scholastica's order, despite being similar to her brother's, was more of a dependent than a partner; it operated under the supervision of her brother rather than being allowed to function independently.<sup>153</sup> While Scholastica was responsible for the day to day operations of her convent and still possessed considerable spiritual authority, she was still subject to male oversight, limiting her authority specifically due to her sex.

Christian women, as the religion emerged and for the first few centuries of its existence, enjoyed a level of authority that has since been largely forgotten. Eventually, as the years wore on and Christianity continued to grow in the mainstream, "the radical egalitarianism of [Jesus'] early followers was virtually banished by conformity to social norms and expectations," and women were forced out of religious leadership.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Birk, Joshua, "3.2 Emergence of Secular & Religious Orders," 1.

<sup>154</sup> Moore, 55.

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# Maryam, Androtokos: The Qur’anic Mary, Her Origins, and Her Implications

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Most, if not all writing about Mary’s role in the Qur’an begins with the statistic that the Qur’an mentions her more often than the Bible does—a fun fact for sure, though it somewhat ignores the history and intertextuality between the two scriptures that necessitates this to be the case. After all, the Qur’an has roughly 600 years of Marian arguments and exegesis to work with and therefore has to both establish a new interpretation of Mary while also contesting much of the existing Christian material about her, especially when it comes to theology. The Qur’an mentions Mary in a total of 6 surahs, but tells her story most extensively in the third surah, *Al-Imran* (“The House/Family of Imran”), following her birth, childhood, and the Annunciation, and the nineteenth surah, *Maryam* (“Mary”), covering the Annunciation and the birth of Jesus. The latter is especially notable, as it’s one of eight surahs to be named after a person (along with *Yunus*, *Hud*, *Yusuf*, *Ibrahim*, *Luqman*, *Muhammad*, and *Nub*) and the only one to be named after a woman. Its contents are also extremely interesting, as they seem to diverge sharply from the traditional Biblical or otherwise Christian stories of Jesus’ birth. Where did this new narrative come from, and more importantly, what does it suggest about Mary and her theological implications? Throughout *Maryam*, Mary’s character and role in Islamic theology are developed in dialogue with Christian beliefs, scripture, and Apocrypha, emphasizing some aspects while contradicting others, to create a uniquely Islamic view of Mary.

Although the Qur’an assumes familiarity with the Bible and various Apocrypha,<sup>155</sup> the presence of similarities between the texts does not necessarily imply that the Qur’anic narrative of Mary is directly derived from these sources. The Arabs of Pre-Islamic Hijaz—the region where the Qur’an originates—were an oral culture<sup>156</sup> leading to stories

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<sup>155</sup> Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: the Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 6.

<sup>156</sup> Firestone, 15.

becoming more mutable.<sup>157</sup> With the advent of the Qur'an, this culture transitioned into a highly literate one,<sup>158</sup> and with it, the once-Biblical stories solidified into their Qur'anic forms. It's important to emphasize that the stories within the Qur'an aren't derivative borrowings, but different variants influenced by their own cultural contexts.<sup>159</sup> However much the Qur'an might borrow or be inspired by Christian stories, it is also intent on challenging Christian, specifically Orthodox and Syriac, theology,<sup>160</sup> especially about Jesus, and therefore Mary. For example, the Qur'an refers to Jesus as the son of Mary (rather than the Biblical son of God) and compares him to Adam, who is similarly created, not fathered, by God,<sup>161</sup> negating Mary's status as Theotokos (God-bearer), a popular Marian title in Eastern Christianity. This cultural context must be kept in mind when analyzing *Maryam*.

The majority of Mary's story within *Maryam* does not appear in any Gospel verse or Apocryphal text.<sup>162</sup> The section of the surah concerning Mary begins with a depiction of the Annunciation, the second in the Qur'an.<sup>163</sup> After Mary has left the temple for "an eastern place", God sends to her "Our Spirit" (most likely Gabriel) in "the likeness of a perfect man", who has come to "bestow upon [Mary] a pure boy."<sup>164</sup> She asks how she'll have a child if she's a virgin, and the angel replies that it's easy for God to create new life and that Jesus will be a "sign unto mankind" of God's power as the Creator.<sup>165</sup> She conceives and withdraws even further from the temple, eventually going into labor in the desert, crying out in agony, "Would that I had died before this and was a thing forgotten, utterly forgotten!"<sup>166</sup> An unidentified voice calls "to her from below her" that God has sent her a stream under a date palm to "eat and drink and cool thine eye", and asks that she take a vow of silence in return for this help.<sup>167</sup> After giving birth to Jesus, she returns to the Temple and is chastised by "her people" for bearing a child out of wedlock, to whom she can't reply due to her vow of silence.<sup>168</sup> The infant Jesus answers in her stead, saying he is "a servant of God", "a prophet", and "dutiful towards [his] mother."<sup>169</sup> The text then identifies him as "Jesus son of Mary" before shifting its focus onto Jesus and his place among the other prophets of Islam.<sup>170</sup> Much of this new material develops or disputes many of the Marian characteristics established in the Gospels and various Apocrypha on top of introducing new elements to weave into the narrative.

Unlike the rest of the Surah, the Qur'anic account of the Annunciation is very similar to that of the Bible. As in the Bible,<sup>171</sup> Mary asks "How shall I have a boy when no man has touched me, nor have I been unchaste?"<sup>172</sup> emphasizing her virginity. Even though

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<sup>157</sup> Firestone, 16-17.

<sup>158</sup> Firestone, 17.

<sup>159</sup> Firestone, 21.

<sup>160</sup> Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam* (2nd ed. London: Continuum, 2010), 35.

<sup>161</sup> Qur'an, 3:59.

<sup>162</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Heroine of the Qur'ān and the Black Madonna." in *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*, (Yale University Press, 1996), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32bk7v.9>, 73.

<sup>163</sup> Qur'an 3:42-47.

<sup>164</sup> Qur'an 19:16-19.

<sup>165</sup> Qur'an 19:20-21.

<sup>166</sup> Qur'an 19:22-23.

<sup>167</sup> Qur'an 19:24-26.

<sup>168</sup> Qur'an 19:27-29.

<sup>169</sup> Qur'an 19:30-32.

<sup>170</sup> Qur'an 19:35.

<sup>171</sup> Luke 1:34.

<sup>172</sup> Qur'an 19:20.

the Qur'an provides reasons other than her virgin birth to revere her—she is said to be twice-chosen, once from birth and the second to bear Jesus<sup>173</sup>—Mary's purity is one of her defining characteristics. Additionally, the Qur'an never once mentions Joseph. Though it is impossible to know if he was deliberately left out of the Qur'an or removed from the story during oral dissemination, his absence implies that, at some point, his presence was interpreted as a threat to Mary's virginity.<sup>174</sup> However, the Qur'anic account of the Annunciation does differ theologically from that of the Bible, as Jesus is not the son of God. Instead of Gabriel declaring that Mary's son "will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end,"<sup>175</sup> the angel just calls him "a pure boy,"<sup>176</sup> undermining the idea of Mary as the Theotokos.<sup>177</sup> This, combined with the emphasis on her virginity, means that the Qur'an celebrates her not just for the importance of her son, or even her son's piety, but for her own devotion to God as well.

After the Annunciation, Mary withdraws herself from the Temple and into isolation,<sup>178</sup> bringing back the theme of loneliness established throughout *Al-Imran*. Mary's life leading up to the Annunciation is quite solitary and tragic. Soon after her birth, she is dedicated to the Temple,<sup>179</sup> growing up without her father and mother, whom many Qur'anic commentators believe to have died before and after her birth, respectively.<sup>180</sup> Her withdrawal from the Temple is justified later by the community's reaction to seeing Jesus when Mary returns from the desert, calling Mary evil and unchaste.<sup>181</sup> Her self-imposed isolation was to protect herself from the scorn of her community—after all, according to Johanna Marie Buisson, through her pregnancy and single-motherhood, "she not only broke with the religious rule of the Temple, but she also broke with the social rules of her community."<sup>182</sup> While the Biblical Mary has the support and help of Joseph and Elizabeth, both are absent from the Qur'an, meaning the Qur'anic Mary doesn't have anyone who supports her throughout her pregnancy despite her cultural transgression. This leads her to spend her pregnancy alone, highlighting her resilience in the face of hardship and societal rejection. Her pain and isolation are at their highest when she goes into labor in the desert, calling out "Would that I had died before this and was a thing forgotten, utterly forgotten!"<sup>183</sup>—her labor is so painful that she wishes for death. While Mary's emotional pain accentuates her strength, her physical pain during her labor emphasizes her vulnerability and therefore her humanity. Many Syriac hymns and texts claim that Mary's labor was painless and easy because of her purity, also confirming her holiness and the divinity of Jesus<sup>184</sup> In the Qur'an, however, Mary gives birth like every other woman, stressing that both her and Jesus are still human and that her importance comes not from

<sup>173</sup> Qur'an 3:42.

<sup>174</sup> Jonathan M. Reck, "The Annunciation to Mary: A Christian Echo in the Qur'ān," *Vigiliae Christianae* 68, no. 4 (2014), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24754391>, 370.

<sup>175</sup> Luke 1:32-33.

<sup>176</sup> Qur'an 19:19.

<sup>177</sup> Leirvik, 34-35.

<sup>178</sup> Qur'an 19:22.

<sup>179</sup> Qur'an 3:35.

<sup>180</sup> Johanna Marie Buisson, "Subversive Maryam or a Qur'anic View on Women's Empowerment," *CrossCurrents* 66, no. 4 (2016): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26605776>, 451.

<sup>181</sup> Qur'an 19:27-28.

<sup>182</sup> Buisson, 455.

<sup>183</sup> Qur'an 19:23.

<sup>184</sup> Autumn DeLong, "A Shared History: Representations of Mary in the Christian and Muslim Traditions," *Undergraduate Journal of Humanistic Studies* 8, (2020): 2.

Jesus' (or her own) godhood but from her role in the miracle of a virgin conception and birth.

The miracle of the date tree that answers Mary's cry of anguish further stresses her resilience by reinterpreting a story that makes her appear somewhat weak, and in the process turns Mary into a role model to be emulated. According to the Qur'an, the pain of labor drives Mary to the trunk of a date palm for support, and:

He called out to her from below her, "Grieve not! Thy Lord has placed a rivulet beneath thee. And shake toward thyself the trunk of the date palm; fresh, ripe dates shall fall upon thee. So eat and drink and cool thine eye. And if thou seest any human being, say, 'Verily I have vowed a fast unto the Compassionate, so I shall not speak this day to any man.'"<sup>185</sup>

Whom this voice belongs to is very ambiguous within the text, and while some interpretations favor Gabriel, many consider it to be the voice of the yet-unborn Jesus.<sup>186</sup> This, along with the date palm and the stream, suggests that this plot point may have been inspired or derived from a similar scene in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, taking place during the flight into Egypt. In the story, as Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are walking in the desert, Mary is "fatigued by the excessive heat of the sun in the desert" and sits under a palm tree, "full of fruit" which she cannot reach.<sup>187</sup> At hearing his mother wish she had some of the fruit, Jesus asks the palm tree to bend so that they can gather the fruit.<sup>188</sup> The Qur'an makes two major changes to this story, both of which have a great impact on how Mary is characterized: the timing of this particular episode, and how Mary gets the dates. The story takes place as she goes into labor, at her most vulnerable, instead of during travel. Rather than framing Mary as weaker than her husband and young child—the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew specifies that only Mary was tired—the Qur'an makes Mary's need for the dates and water literally life-and-death, as she needs them to sustain herself and calm down as she gives birth alone. Additionally, in the Qur'an Mary is told to shake the tree, rather than the palm bending down so she can pick the fruit as in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. Therefore, Mary is asked "to be proactive even in the midst of pain and exhaustion; she still has to shake the tree so that God may help her."<sup>189</sup> It's no wonder, then, that women are often told to read this surah in times of vulnerability, and especially during pregnancy<sup>190</sup>—the moral of these particular verses is that God will always help in times of need and hardship, but your own fortitude and resilience are still necessary and important. In this way, Mary is shown to be a figure to emulate, not just because of her virginity and her piety, but for her strength.

As mentioned above, when Mary gives birth to Jesus and takes him back to present him to the Temple, her community calls her unchaste and accuses her of adultery. Due to her vow of silence, Mary cannot answer them, and instead "point[s] to him [Jesus]" to

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<sup>185</sup> Qur'an 19:24-26.

<sup>186</sup> Karl-Josef Kuschel, "The Birth of Jesus in the Qur'an," in *Christmas and the Qur'an* (London: Gingko, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5vddnz.9>, 102.

<sup>187</sup> "The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, Volume VIII Fathers of the Third and Fourth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), <http://gnosis.org/library/psudomat.htm>, 20.

<sup>188</sup> The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, 20.

<sup>189</sup> Buisson, 452.

<sup>190</sup> Mona Siddiqui, "Reflections on Mary," in *Christians, Muslims and Jesus*, (Yale University Press, 2013), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32bxdr.8>, 149.

answer.<sup>191</sup> Although the Temple is incredulous at being told to speak to an infant, Jesus comes to his mother's defense, saying "Truly I am a servant of God. He has given me the Book and made me a prophet. He has made me blessed wheresoever I may be, and has enjoined upon me prayer and almsgiving so long as I live, and [has made me] dutiful toward my mother."<sup>192</sup> Only after this does the Qur'an finally identify him, calling him "Jesus son of Mary—a statement of the truth, which they doubt."<sup>193</sup> While these verses are mainly about Jesus and his (lack of) divinity, they are still important to the story of Mary in that they portray her rewards for her struggle, as well as once again denying the Theotokos title. A talking infant Jesus also shows up in the Arabic Infancy Gospel, where "said to Mary His mother: I am Jesus, the Son of God, the Logos, whom thou hast brought forth, as the Angel Gabriel announced to thee; and my Father has sent me for the salvation of the world."<sup>194</sup> Given that the Arabic Infancy Gospel is traditionally dated to the fifth or sixth century, but its first mention doesn't occur until the ninth century,<sup>195</sup> it is impossible to tell if the Qur'an might have been influenced by the Arabic Infancy Gospel, the Arabic Infancy Gospel by the Qur'an, if the two stories derive from the same original oral source, or if a talking baby Jesus was just a popular regional motif. Still, what these talking baby Jesuses say and their context within their stories is revealing. The Apocryphal Jesus declares his own identity as the Son of God, a blessing upon the whole world, while also summarizing the story of the Annunciation, showing that he is also the all-knowing God. The Qur'anic Jesus identifies himself as "a servant of God", blessed wherever he goes, and "dutiful to [his] mother"—in other words, a blessing upon Mary. Furthermore, by asking her to be silent and therefore giving himself a chance to speak, Jesus lifts Mary's burden of having to explain and defend herself against accusations of adultery. To extend the moral of the date tree and Mary's labor, Jesus' duty towards his mother, and his literal first act alive being to help and defend her, shows women that at the end of every hardship (pregnancy and labor) is a gift (a child, duty-bound to support you for the rest of your life), making the hardship worth it. Finally, naming Jesus "the son of Mary", and following it with "a statement of truth, which they doubt",<sup>196</sup> along with Jesus identifying himself as a "servant of God"<sup>197</sup>, reaffirms that Jesus is strictly human and that Mary is not the Theotokos but a highly-devout mother to an important prophet.

These characterizations of Mary, as well as opposition to her Christian interpretations, are not exclusive to *Maryam* but are spread out throughout the Qur'an. Other than mentioning her isolated upbringing, *Al-Imran* also features Mary's unnamed mother praying to God, "seek[ing] refuge for her in Thee, and for her progeny, from Satan the outcast"<sup>198</sup> and God "accept[ing] her with a beautiful acceptance",<sup>199</sup> reinforcing the theme of motherly hardship leading to a great reward—though in this case, the reward is Mary's protection, not her mother's. *Al-Imran* also holds the other account of the

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<sup>191</sup> Qur'an 19:29.

<sup>192</sup> Qur'an 19:30-32.

<sup>193</sup> Qur'an 19:34.

<sup>194</sup> "The Arabic Infancy Gospel," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, Volume VIII Fathers of the Third and Fourth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), <http://www.gnosis.org/library/infarab.htm>, 1.

<sup>195</sup> Elliott, J. K., "The Arabic Infancy Gospel," in *The Apocryphal New Testament: a Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 2009), 100.

<sup>196</sup> Qur'an 19:34.

<sup>197</sup> Qur'an 19:30.

<sup>198</sup> Qur'an 3:36.

<sup>199</sup> Qur'an 3:37.

Annunciation, corroborating the many events in *Maryam*, such as the angel explicitly tells Mary that “he will speak to people in the cradle”,<sup>200</sup> explaining why she pointed to him without having any (definitive) indication that he could speak. Mary’s conception of Jesus is also explained in further detail, where it is explained that “God create[s] whatsoever He will. When He decrees a thing, He only says to it, “Be!” and it is.”<sup>201</sup> *Al-Imran* also makes it clear that Mary would be a significant figure in Islam whether she was the mother of Jesus or not, as the angels tell her that “God has chosen thee and purified thee, and has chosen thee above the women of the worlds”,<sup>202</sup> which is often interpreted as Mary being chosen once from birth—likely meaning for the Temple, only young boys could receive a religious education<sup>203</sup>—and then again to bear Jesus. Elsewhere in the Quran, Mary is said to have conceived by the angel “breathed into her”,<sup>204</sup> paralleling the creation of Adam.<sup>205</sup> Mary “preserving her chastity” contributes to her status as one of the most pious women in the Islamic tradition (along with the wives of Noah, Lot, and the Pharaoh from the Exodus story),<sup>206</sup> and disputations of her virginity and purity are condemned by the text itself.<sup>207</sup> Finally, the Qur’an disputes Jesus’ godhood and therefore the Theotokos title every time it refers to him by the title “son of Mary”—making up fifteen of the twenty-five mentions of Jesus by name.

Islamic interpretations of Mary don’t stop at the Qur’an—much like early Christians, early Muslims used the scriptural depiction of Mary as a foundation rather than the final, unchanging product. Every commentator seems to have their own explanation for certain aspects of her depiction, and some elements, like Joseph, are even added back into the narrative within these extra-Qur’anic stories. However, the depiction of Mary within the Qur’an, as well as its similarities and differences with Christian sources like the Bible and various Apocrypha, is still revelatory. *Maryam* is a prime example of this because of the vastness of its potential influences, what Marian ideas it chooses to include, and what elements of Christian theology it chooses to refute or leave out. Analyzing not just which Christian writings may have inspired the Qur’an, but also which ones were ignored and discarded creates a fuller picture of the types of questions early Muslims were asking about Mary, both in her depiction and her role in theology.

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<sup>200</sup> Qur’an 3:46.

<sup>201</sup> Qur’an 3:47.

<sup>202</sup> Qur’an 3:42.

<sup>203</sup> Buisson, 453.

<sup>204</sup> Qur’an 21:91.

<sup>205</sup> Qur’an 15:29.

<sup>206</sup> Qur’an 66:12.

<sup>207</sup> Qur’an 4:156.

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# MARPUMGYFA, MÆGBURH, MEARCSTAPA: COLONIAL IDENTITY-BUILDING IN THE TEXT AND TREATMENT OF BEOWULF

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In the Old English translation of the Gospel according to Matthew, the word “genealogy” translates to *folctale*—literally, a story of a people.<sup>208</sup> Humanity has a long history of using the medium of fictional storytelling to convey factual information. Ostensibly, the practice has fallen out of fashion in contemporary academia, but it forms the foundation of what we today know as history. For people in the medieval past, folk legends could constitute historical fact: legendary ancestors legitimized claims to the throne and epic poems validated English tribal inclusion in Christendom.<sup>209</sup> In the incipient stages of the field of medievalism, English people looked to the same stories to try to build an ancestral national identity that aligned with the goals of the British imperial project. The imperial values and colonial mindsets they prioritized are encoded into our understandings of these historical texts, affecting the way people in the present conceive of Anglo-Germanic whiteness. The reception of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* presents an intriguing case study into the utility of historical literature in developing cultural and racial identity. Mindful of the ways in which it was used to legitimize colonial efforts, reading the poem through the lens of decolonial critical theory unveils significant parallels to more recent colonial thought.

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<sup>208</sup> Anlezark, Daniel. “Scaef, Japheth and the origins of the Anglo-Saxons,” *Anglo-Saxon England*, 31 (2002): 13-46.

<sup>209</sup> Anlezark, “Scaef, Japheth and the origins of the Anglo-Saxons,” 17.

Another audience recognizes and celebrates those same parallels: white supremacists appropriate medieval history and literature, including *Beowulf*, to legitimize their genocidal agendas in similar ways as British imperialists did over a century before. Using decolonial theory to recognize and confront the ways in which colonialist thought appears in *Beowulf* enables us to question the assumed convictions that underpin the text and reframe the narrative in a way that problematizes Scylding expansionism, exonerates the monsters, and discovers a rallying cry of hope in the poem's traditionally bleak ending.

Initially conceived by Latin American scholars and adopted by global colonial subjects, decolonial theory is predicated on the idea that in the process of colonization, dominating forces establish epistemologies that push out the epistemologies of subjugated populations.<sup>210</sup> In colonial and postcolonial societies, colonial epistemologies are taken as objective fact; they observe divinely ordained or empirical Truths about the world from a perspective allegedly free from bias. Santiago Castro-Gomez<sup>211</sup> names that perspective the "zero-point-of-observation." By instating a single version of Truth from the perspective of the zero-point-of-observation, colonial epistemologies can dismiss alternative epistemologies as heretical, primitive, and false. Walter Mignolo<sup>212</sup> refers to this phenomenon as "coloniality of knowledge." Decoloniality of knowledge, then, is the process of dislocating the zero-point-of-observation from the narrative—one part realizing that the narrators of history are not objective, situating them in their historical contexts, and identifying the biases in their observations, and another part re-centering the aforementioned marginalized epistemologies and honoring multiple, parallel, contradictory truths.

In the context of *Beowulf*, modern scholars have no marginalized epistemology to reinstate: the speaker of the poem makes no reference to the embodied culture of the Grendelkin, whose identity as other-than-colonizer exists solely in the context of their victimization by and conflict with colonial forces. However, the practice of identifying and interrogating how coloniality of knowledge manifests both within the text and in its historical and contemporary reception by readers offers insight into the utility of *Beowulf* as a tool of national and cultural identity-building. Many Indigenous scholars share perspectives on methods of knowledge accumulation and transmission that colonial academia discounts. Particular among these is the transmission of history through the medium of storytelling. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson ruminates on Nishnaabeg ways of knowing and being in her book *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*. She states, "The Seven Fires creation story confirmed to me [...] that everything we need to know about everything in the world is contained within Indigenous bodies [...] Nishnaabemwin itself is a continual generation and iteration of these stories and principles."<sup>213</sup> She goes on to

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<sup>210</sup> Quijano, Aníbal. "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies*, 21:2-3 (2007): 168-178.

<sup>211</sup> Castro-Gómez, Santiago. "Traditional Theory and Critical Theory," *Cultural Critique*, vol 49, (2001): 139-154.

<sup>212</sup> Mignolo, Walter D. "INTRODUCTION: Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking," *Cultural Studies*, 21:2-3 (2007): 155-167.

<sup>213</sup> Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 21.

juxtapose Indigenous knowledge systems with academic standards of theory and research as basic pillars of colonial institutions that make and remake the oppressive power structures we observe today. Simpson recognizes that the line between fact and fiction is not such a strict binary as colonial academia would have it be, particularly when observing the embodied effects of nonfactual histories on group cultures. My analysis of *Beowulf* is predicated on the idea that the work of building identity through art and literature has as significant an impact on human events as the domain of historical fact.

Understanding the place of *Beowulf* in Anglophone cultural history requires contextualizing the history of its scholarship. Although Europeans have always considered the time period we think of as the Middle Ages in the reckoning of their history, a turning point in the materialization of medievalism as a field occurred during the reign of Queen Victoria in Great Britain. To wit, excerpts from *Beowulf* were translated and published for the first time ever in Sharon Turner's 1805 history, with the first complete Modern English translation by John Mitchell Kemble appearing in 1837. Since the 1830s, scholars have published a steady stream of translations, to the tune of multiple translations into Modern English per decade.<sup>214</sup>

The Victorian Era was a time of major nation-building—both at home and abroad. As the British Empire extended its sphere of dominion ever farther, interpolating a vast swath of peoples as subjects, the tenets of English national identity became a pressing question. With the scions of noble houses being born and raised abroad, while immigrants and emigrants alike passed over England's borders in numbers never before seen, what characteristics made someone English? With colonial powers enforcing English cultural practices worldwide, shifting in response to the new cultural environments to which they were exported, what constituted English behavior? A significant faction of scholars looked to the past, seeking historical records of a time before immigration and significant cross-cultural interchange, for hints to the inherent national character of the English people. They landed on the so-called "Anglo-Saxon" period, after the fall of the Western Roman Empire and before the Norman Conquest, as the most pure progenitor of modern English civilization.

More sinister than the orphan's simple desire to know his parentage, however, the Victorian fascination with Anglo-Saxon culture aligned with the hegemonic goals of the British imperial project. Historian Reginald Horsman states it plainly: "A belief in Anglo-Saxon freedom, once used to defend popular liberties, had by the middle of the nineteenth century been transformed into a rationale for the domination of peoples throughout the world."<sup>215</sup> With some of its early roots in the break with Roman Catholicism and the establishment of a Church of England, the idea of "Anglo-Saxon freedom" had long been a propagandistic basis for the justification of English superiority, as well as that of

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<sup>214</sup> *Beowulf's Afterlives Bibliographic Database*, Center of Digital Humanities Research, Texas A&M University (n.d.).

<sup>215</sup> Horsman, Reginald, "Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain Before 1850," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37:3 (1976): 387-410.

other cultures of ancient Germanic descent.<sup>216</sup> Will Abberley discusses how Victorian philologists equated commonalities in linguistic origin with commonalities in race,<sup>217</sup> a marker of identity which was soaring to prominence as scholars passed around theories of evolution and cultural difference became more easily observable than ever before as the British Empire expanded. Horsman describes a related theory that, based on the cladogram of Indo-European language descent, posited an ancient Indo-European homeland, from whence the Germanic peoples traveled West, splitting into the ethnic groups we can trace through history. They carried with them the light of civilization, which they continued to spread, as much out of innate genetic impulse as magnanimity, to the savage peoples of the world through the tender auspices of the British Empire.<sup>218</sup>

The retrospective culling of the national past did not stop at historical records and linguistic trends. From Tennyson to Tolkien, scholars drew on the literary traditions of the past to help construct a national identity. While few accepted such mythologized narratives as the King Arthur cycles as factual history, the medievalists of the Victorian Era drew on a similar intellectual tradition to the Nishnaabeg practice of transmitting communal identity and historical records through the medium of folklore. In the search for evidence of their national character, they wrote a genetic history through national legend. The Robin Hood of Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* is a proud Saxon who fights for liberty from the oppressive Normans, modeling the so-called Anglo-Saxon freedom that the English claimed made them fit to subjugate other peoples. Tennyson's King Arthur will rise again, a new English Christ, and lead the nation to eternal prosperity—a prosperity that at present was manifesting from the global conquests of such modern national icons as the East India Tea Company.

This historical context spawns the scholarly discipline of medievalism. However much its motives have changed in the intervening century or so, the fact remains that the field was established with an intentional trajectory of validating Anglo-Germanic cultural supremacy on a global stage. With this in mind, contemporary scholars must revisit the canonical literature of the Middle Ages, rereading it with the knowledge that the scholars whose analyses form the basis of our understanding were reading these primary sources with the goals of justifying imperialism and inventing racially-charged categories of national identity.

The most influential contribution to the field of *Beowulf* scholarship to date is J. R. R. Tolkien's 1936 lecture entitled "*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics."<sup>219</sup> In it, Tolkien argues for the value of the poem as a piece of art, rather than a historical document, and claims that readers should interpret the monster battles as metaphorical conflicts that reflect on the nature of humanity, rather than dismiss them as childish fantasy. The field has transformed significantly since Tolkien's criticism, and with it, the valuation of the *Beowulf* poem. Now,

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<sup>216</sup> Horsman, "Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain Before 1850," 389.

<sup>217</sup> Abberley, Will, "Philology, Anglo-Saxonism, and National Identity" in *Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism* (Oxford University Press, 2020): 6.

<sup>218</sup> Horsman, "Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain Before 1850," 393.

<sup>219</sup> Davis, Craig R. "Beowulf," *Oxford Handbooks Online* (2014): 1-22.

rather than an old epic whose fabulous elements distract from tidbits of factual history that meticulous philologists and linguists can glean from its verse, the poem is touted in high schools across the Anglophone globe as the wellspring of English literature.<sup>220, 221</sup>

But like the fruits of English medievalism during Victoria's reign, Tolkien's *Beowulf* lecture is a product of its time as well as its author. Tolkien himself was born in colonial South Africa and fought in World War I before beginning his professional career at Oxford University.<sup>222</sup> His medievalism and philology descend directly from the Victorian search for "Anglo-Saxon" national identity in the language and literature of the early Middle Ages. With Simpson's Nishnaabeg perspective in mind, Tolkien *was* reading *Beowulf* as a historical narrative: not one that conveys the particularities of dates, events, and individuals, but a genealogy of identity and thought. As such, this most influential interpretation of *Beowulf* comes from a perspective surrounded by unquestioning nationalism, in the contexts of both the height of British imperialism and the ravages of the Great War. As a colonial power, Britain conceived of itself as a guiding light of civilization and industry. In the context of the First World War, it was David to the Axis Powers' Goliath, haunted by the horrors of war and, by 1936, creeping inexorably towards another global-scale conflict.<sup>223</sup> Like the Victorian medievalists, Tolkien sought a mirror for contemporary society in *Beowulf*, and his discovery—an exploration of the futility of human endeavors in a hostile universe bent towards entropy, and the cyclical corruption of violence even when undertaken towards honorable ends—rang true across generations of scholarship.

Now, nearly a century later, the story that resonated with Tolkien has lost a degree of relevance to the discussions in contemporary lecture halls. The perspective that the reader must assume in order to sympathize with the poem's protagonists rings alarm bells for a reader who has done work to recognize the covert biases that undergird life in present-day America. The arrival of a warlord on the shores of a new land, who seizes territory and power with all-out violence, calls to mind other conquering newcomers. An antagonist who resists the intrusion of a new political authority, characterized as an irredeemable, cannibalistic savage, reminds one of another group of people who, written off as violent primitives, were forced to surrender their sovereignty or die. Reading the relationship between the Scyldings and the Grendelkin in *Beowulf* as a microcosm of the interactions between colonizers and Indigenous colonial subjects is nothing new—Fabienne Michelet,<sup>224</sup> Adam Miyashiro,<sup>225</sup> and Catherine E. Karkov,<sup>226</sup> to name but a few, have all made notable contributions with this idea in mind. However, I posit that with colonial

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<sup>220</sup> Davis, "Beowulf," 8.

<sup>221</sup> "Literature and Beowulf Background," *Beowulf*, Sparknotes.com, (n.d.).

<sup>222</sup> Doughan, David. "J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biographical Sketch," The Tolkien Society (2021).

<sup>223</sup> "A patriotic home front?" *Britain and the War* (Web). *The National Archives* (2014).  
URL:nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/britain/patriotic\_home.htm

<sup>224</sup> Michelet, Fabienne. *Creation, Migration, and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>225</sup> Miyashiro, Adam. "Homeland insecurity: Biopolitics and sovereign violence in *Beowulf*" *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 11:4 (2020): 384-395.

<sup>226</sup> Karkov, Catherine E. *Imagining Anglo-Saxon England: utopia, heterotopia, dystopia* (The Boydell Press, 2020).

power dynamics in mind, decolonial critical theory is a helpful lens through which to analyze how interpretations of *Beowulf*, as a pillar of “Anglo-Saxon” literature in contemporary America, may impact constructions of “Anglo-Saxon” identity in white supremacist contexts.

In the prologue and first section of *Beowulf*, the Scyldings’ conquest of the surrounding Scandinavian tribes is an act of colonial domination. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* colonialism involves dominance and subjugation along political-group lines, the dominant group’s control of the politics and economics of the subjugated group, and settlement and/or economic exploitation by the dominant group.<sup>227</sup> The introductory stanzas of *Beowulf*, which describe Scyld Scefing’s rise to power and the establishment of the Danish proto-kingdom, describe all of these factors:

Scyld Scefing seized the mead-benches  
from many tribes, troops of enemies,  
struck fear into earls  
[...]  
until every one of the encircling nations  
over the whale’s-riding had to obey him,  
grant him tribute.<sup>228</sup>

Throughout the poem, mead-halls or “mead-benches” are synecdochic representations of distinct sociopolitical groups. Just as, later on, Heorot serves as a stand-in for the entire Danish proto-kingdom, the mead-benches of these other tribes represent their individual political territory and sovereignty. In taking control of their communal buildings, Scyld takes their independence and their powers of self-determination. The speaker refers to the other tribes as “troops of enemies”; however, Scyld himself initiates all the enmity between the tribes. The fabricated implication of a multi-sided conflict prevents the reader from condemning the actions of the power-hungry Scyldings. The echoes of colonial historiographical techniques in precolonial literature point to similarities in the goals of these parallel conquest movements: Benjamin Madley discusses a similar phenomenon, wherein colonizers in California and Oregon used Modoc resistance to the murder of their people as justification for both extrajudicial and state-sanctioned extermination campaigns.<sup>229</sup> By specifying that Scyld “struck fear into earls,” the speaker undermines his later assertion that the amassed subjects in Heorot show fealty to the Scyldings of their own free will;<sup>230</sup> rather, they are loyal to the Scyldings because Scyld terrorized their forefathers into obedience. Scyld exercises dominance through the mode of warfare, emphasizing that Danish control over the surrounding tribes is predicated on violence, rather than peaceful

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<sup>227</sup> Kohn, Margaret and Kavita Reddy, “Colonialism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Fall 2017 edition): Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

URL:<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/colonialism/>

<sup>228</sup> Liuzza, R.M. *Beowulf: second edition* (Broadview Editions, 2013), lines 4-11.

<sup>229</sup> Madley, Benjamin. “California and Oregon’s Modoc Indians: How Indigenous Resistance Camouflages Genocide in Colonial Histories” in *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America* (Duke University Press, 2014), 96.

<sup>230</sup> Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 22-24.

means like treaties or marriage-pacts. In specifically proclaiming that he forced the other nations to both “obey him” and “grant him tribute,” the speaker makes explicit Scyld’s political and economic subjugation of the conquered states. Robbed of their sovereignty, the former tribes must not only acquiesce to the Scyldings’ political intentions, but also surrender their resources to their new overlords. Scyld’s great-grandson, Hrothgar, inherits the territories that Scyld conquered, and continues his rule over the surrounding tribes:

Then success in war was given to Hrothgar,  
[...]  
It came to his mind  
that he should order a great hall-building,  
have men made a great mead-house  
which the sons of men should remember forever.  
and there within he would share everything  
with young and old that God had given him.<sup>231</sup>

In attributing Hrothgar’s “success in war” to divine authority, the speaker absolves Hrothgar of his intentional work in carrying on the violence of his forefathers in conquering and exploiting the surrounding tribes. If the Scyldings’ success can be accredited to God’s will, their dominance must be divinely ordained, and therefore, morally correct. This assumption echoes that of the 1493 “Inter Caetera” bull issued by Pope Alexander VI, which grants the kings of Spain possession of all territories a hundred leagues west of the Azores with the understanding that they will convert the Indigenous people of those territories to Christianity.<sup>232</sup> Reference to the will of God to justify political governance and exploitation is another parallel that ties the Scyldings’ conquests to the colonial process in the New World. In the context of the poem, “everything [...] that God had given [Hrothgar]” can only refer to that which he has inherited from his forefathers and that which he has personally taken in battle: i.e., the resources of conquered tribes, whether taken as tribute or loot. Although the speaker frames the sharing of goods in Heorot as a magnanimous act, it reinforces the subjugated tribes’ dependence on the Danes for their economic survival, recalling the description of colonies in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* “dependent territor[ies].”<sup>233</sup> The violence with which Scyld conquers the other tribes, the continuing transgenerational control of their resources and populace, the exploitation of their resources through the practice of taking tribute, and the tribes’ dependence on the Danes for access to their appropriated resources cements the Danes as violent conquerors, rather than magnanimous agents of civilization.

Kohn and Reddy’s definition of colonialism, in its careful applicability to all colonial scenarios, does not specify what factors distinguish colonial domination from standard-fare conquest. The theory work of Aníbal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh fill in some of the gaps. Quijano identifies a colonial structure of power that codifies and

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<sup>231</sup> Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 64-72

<sup>232</sup> Primary source translation via the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History Resources, URL: <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/T-04093.pdf>

<sup>233</sup> Kohn and Reddy, *Colonialism*, 1.

naturalizes sociopolitical categories of humanity that become concepts like race, ethnicity, and nationality, which come to exist in the universalized colonial epistemology independent of political power structures.<sup>234</sup> Mignolo and Walsh dive further into colonial use of strategic redefinitions of humanity to control subjugated populations.<sup>235</sup> Because the surrounding tribes assimilate into the culture of the Danish proto-kingdom, their cultural differences from the colonizing powers vanish along with their Indigeneity. Patrick Wolfe discusses the violence of assimilation as it functions to eliminate what differentiates a marginalized population from a dominant group, a kind of genocide that he terms a “logic of elimination.”<sup>236</sup> However, the colonial manipulation of humanness is most evident in relation to those who do not assimilate. In the context of *Beowulf*, the monster Grendel represents that class of non-assimilators.

No sooner do the Scyldings establish their claim over the land and people with the building of Heorot than Grendel manifests to challenge their dominance. The speaker asserts that Grendel’s motivation is hatred of the Danes and their joy and accord within the hall:

[He] wretchedly suffered all the while,  
for every day he heard the joyful din  
loud in the hall  
[...]  
The ancient tale of the origin of men  
[that] said that the Almighty created the earth.<sup>237</sup>

The text suggests that Grendel’s malignant nature compels him to quarrel with the Scyldings: Grendel is a “fiend from hell,” an “unholy creature,” a “misbegotten thing”—the speaker identifies him as a descendant of Cain, for which God condemns him to a life of extrasocietal monstrosity.<sup>238</sup> The speaker cites his motivation to attack the Danes as his displeasure with their songs about the Creation in Genesis, positioning his struggle against the Scyldings as part of a broader struggle against God and identifying his moral/political leanings as a symptom of his ancestry. By contrast, the speaker describes the Danes as a “lordly people,” whose music aligns them with God. By picking out the descendants of Cain as a separate, monstrous race of men, the Scyldings construct themselves as essentially, genetically superior to another class of people: favored by God, united against those born into iniquity. In establishing the two enemies as opposing due to their genealogy, the speaker suggests that Grendel is moved by a sort of proto-racism, jealous hatred towards those people whose ancestry allots them privilege over him.

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<sup>234</sup> Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” 168.

<sup>235</sup> Mignolo, Walter and Catherine Walsh. “The Invention of the Human and the Three Pillars of the Colonial Matrix of Power: Racism, Sexism, and Nature,” in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2018), 153-176.

<sup>236</sup> Wolfe, Patrick. “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8:4 (2006): 387.

<sup>237</sup> Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 87-92.

<sup>238</sup> Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 101-120.

The use of Biblical genealogies to justify the dehumanization and oppression of cultural others is intertwined with the history of racism, particularly as it manifests in the colonization of the New World. To say nothing of the Hamitic hypothesis, it is important to acknowledge how Spanish colonizers used the theory of polygenism to try to legitimize their territorial claims to the New World. In his chapter in *The Origins of Racism in the West* Anthony Padgen cites Paracelsus's assertion that the Indigenous people of the Caribbean islands may not be descended from Adam, as well as the idea that some of his contemporaries adopted that those people who were not European, Asian, or African had developed spontaneously from rotting matter—a separate creation not facilitated by God.<sup>239</sup> By placing Indigenous people in a non-human category, colonial powers could better justify their claims to land and resources in the New World—after all, non-human animals cannot own land or govern people. However, Padgen concludes, these theories were ultimately rejected because the stated goal of the colonial endeavor was to assimilate the Indigenous peoples into the Catholic kingdoms, thereby giving them a place in the course of human history.<sup>240</sup> Indeed, at the Valladolid debate of 1550-1551, Bartolomé de las Casas argued for the humanity of Indigenous peoples by referencing their rational souls, the inheritance of Adam.<sup>241</sup> It is telling that the rationale for treating other people humanely is the presumption of their common ancestry. Conversely, if humanity is predicated on Biblical ancestry, it is possible to designate entire races of people outcast or criminal based on what the Catholic majority decides is their Biblical parentage.

This intellectual process is reflected in *Beowulf*: those tribesmen who accept a role as tribute-givers to the Scyldings are fellow-men who are welcome in Heorot. However, Grendel chooses to resist assimilation, remaining outside of the new common Danish cultural entity. As such, in the Scyldings' conceptualization, there must be something in his genetic makeup that makes him other-than-human: an ancestor that God rejected. The protagonists' adoption of real-world intellectual justifications for racism and conquest in the fictional narrative of *Beowulf* lends insight into the development of early racist thought and how it manifests in discussions of personhood and politics.

The ancestry of Scyld Scefing represents a converse example. In his paper "Sceaf, Japheth and the origins of the Anglo-Saxons," Daniel Anlezark analyzes "Anglo-Saxon" genealogies, looking at the attempts of early English people to trace their ancestry back to a Biblical progenitor. They felt that in order to understand their place in global history, they had to contextualize themselves within Christian epistemologies of the time, which involved claiming descent from one of the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. In brief, the theory goes that Shem fathered the Semitic peoples of Asia, the felonious Ham passed his crimes down to his descendants, the African peoples, and Japheth's children became the Europeans. While in some cases early English historiographers were content to lump

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<sup>239</sup> Padgen, Anthony. "The peopling of the New World: ethnos, race, and empire in the early-modern world," in *The Origins of Racism in the West* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 308.

<sup>240</sup> Padgen, "The peopling of the New World," 311.

<sup>241</sup> Hernandez, Bonar Ludwig. "The Las Casas-Sepúlveda Controversy: 1550-1551," *Ex Post Facto* 10 (2001): 95-104.

themselves in with other European cultures and tie their ancestry to Japheth, some West Saxon accounts claimed exceptionalism, tracing their roots to a fourth, ark-born son: Scaef. Scaef in turn begat more local figures traditionally used to legitimize royal genealogies, often including characters like Bedwig, Heremod, and Hwala.<sup>242</sup> By syncretizing figures of both Christian and pre-Christian cultural significance in their lines of ancestry, early English people were able to link themselves to the inheritance of Adam and carve out a place for their culture to exist in broader Christian history.

The case of Scaef presents a parallel to the question of the Biblical ancestry of Indigenous people, highlighting the disparity in treatment between the two groups. When early English people found no allusion to their existence in the Bible, they invented themselves a genealogy that both preserved their unique cultural heritage and legitimized them in the annals of Christian historiography. When Europeans learned of other groups of people whose existence was not explained in the Bible, they debated whether Indigenous people could even be human. The use of Biblical genealogies throughout history to legitimize claims to authority and belonging is a tool whose cutting edge always seems to strike those people whose oppression and exclusion is most profitable to its wielders.

In the text of *Beowulf*, Scyld Scefing washes ashore an orphan: he has no familial ties to wealth or power.<sup>243</sup> What he does have is the name of his father: Scef, the ark-born son that links early English people to Biblical heritage. Scyld, son of Scef, is the founder of the new Danish proto-kingdom; he is the ancestor of the West Saxon kings and the heroic archetype after which they fashion themselves. When early English people heard the story of *Beowulf*, they surely recognized that they were to model themselves after its protagonists. But more than that, the evidence in Anlezark's genealogies suggests that they believed themselves to be the living legacy of Scyld Scefing, carrying on his bloodline and his conquests against the oblivion of *nyrd*.

Grendel's actions, contrary to the crude racialized vitriol of which the poem's speaker accuses him, indicate a more political motive. He has lived in these territories since before the Scyldings established their kingdom—on the strength of that description alone, Catherine Karkov describes the Grendelkin as “the [I]ndigenous inhabitants of the land.”<sup>244</sup> For the duration of his life, Grendel “waited in darkness,”<sup>245</sup> apparently bothering nobody, until the completion of Heorot. His lack of violence prior to Heorot's existence indicates that he had no issue with the tribal order before Scyld's conquest. Once the Scyldings build Heorot, Grendel attacks only those who sleep in the hall: the speaker specifies that “then it was easy to find a thane / who sought his rest elsewhere, farther away, / a bed in the outbuildings.”<sup>246</sup> If Grendel is intent on hunting the Scyldings to extinction or driving the people out of the land, the few dozen yards that separate the fortified hall from the smaller, unprotected outbuildings could not possibly stop him. By keeping his violence to Heorot,

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<sup>242</sup> Anlezark, “Scaef, Japheth and the origins of the Anglo-Saxons,” 13-46.

<sup>243</sup> Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 6-7.

<sup>244</sup> Karkov, *Imagining Anglo-Saxon England*, 170.

<sup>245</sup> Liuzza, *Beowulf*, line 86.

<sup>246</sup> Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 138-140.

Grendel sends a clear statement: he protests specifically what the hall represents. Heorot is the site of colonial domination via distribution of the tribute that the Scylding kings demand and the loot that the Scylding warriors seize. It is the apparatus through which they maintain economic control over the tribes they have conquered. In addition, Heorot's function as a mead-hall where people sing and drink together highlights the hall's capacity to serve as a site of dual culture-building and cultural erasure, where the conquered tribes assimilate into the broader Danish cultural entity, led and facilitated by the Scylding kings. In short, Heorot is a manifestation of the new sociopolitical order that the Scyldings impose on the land, and which Grendel opposes.

Adam Miyashiro draws in Giorgio Agamben's concept of the *homo sacer* to analyze the biopolitical significance of the Grendelkin to Scylding society.<sup>247</sup> Agamben's concept originates in Roman law: a *homo sacer* was an outlaw, who could be killed by anybody, but was considered sacred, and thereby could not be sacrificed in religious rituals. In Agamben's work, the *homo sacer* is a category of being who is not human enough to enforce or help make law (i.e., to have a political life), but is subject to the law and lawmakers. Mark Rifkin<sup>248</sup> and Scott Lauria Morgensen<sup>249</sup> each discuss different facets of the way that the process of colonialism forced Indigenous Americans into a *homo sacer* category, where colonizers worked simultaneously to bring them under control of colonizers' law and towards their elimination—within the political order, but only in a capacity to be explicitly excluded from it.

Miyashiro identifies Grendel as a similar political entity: a *mearcstapa*, or border-stepper, who exists on the border between man and beast, both inside and outside of society (386). Although Grendel could be said to have inherited his *homo sacer/mearcstapa* status from his progenitor Cain, who was marked by God to both outlaw him and protect him from harm, the Scyldings offer Grendel a route to inclusion. But Grendel will not entertain the idea: “[He never] ceased his deadly hatred, nor settled with money, / nor did any of the counselors need to expect / bright compensation from the killer's hands.”<sup>250</sup> It is possible for Grendel to attain human status according to the Scyldings only if he participates in the monetary transactions that will cement his place in the hierarchy of domination and subjugation that the Scyldings bring about. If he pays *wergild*, compensating the Scyldings for the monetary value of the men he has killed, his crimes will be forgiven. If he accepts tribute from them as a bribe to stop the killing, he becomes their new king, his violence now in the same valorous class as Scyld Scefing's. In short: if he assimilates into the Scyldings' economic and political system, he can become human by their standards.

Indigenous Americans in the earlier centuries of colonialism faced a similar ultimatum. Patrick Wolfe sums it up concisely: “have our settler world, but lose your

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<sup>247</sup> Miyashiro, “Homeland Insecurity,” 384-395.

<sup>248</sup> Rifkin, Mark. “Indigenizing Agamben: Rethinking Sovereignty in Light of the ‘Peculiar’ Status of Native Peoples,” *Cultural Critique*, 73 (2009): 88-124.

<sup>249</sup> Morgensen, Scott Lauria. “The Biopolitics of Settler Colonialism: Right Here, Right Now,” *Settler Colonial Studies*, 1:1 (2011): 52-76.

<sup>250</sup> Liuzza, *Beowulf*, 156-158.

Indigenous soul.”<sup>251</sup> The only route to peace with colonizers—Scylding or American—is through the disappearance of Indigeneity, either through death or through the total forfeiture of sovereignty and difference, adopting colonizer laws and lifeways instead. The colonizer’s logic manifests in an 1892 quote from Captain Richard H. Pratt, a self-proclaimed “Friend of the Indian,” as he describes his plan to institute residential schools to isolate Indigenous children from their families and cultures, forcing them to adopt white American language, dress, religion, and behavior: “all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”<sup>252</sup> Scholars who work with reference to Indigenous experiences have long theorized the essential violence of assimilation as a colonial tool. In a chapter from their forthcoming book, Manuela Picq and Andrew Canessa discuss Indigeneity as a relational category: one that only exists with reference to settler colonialism. The vast diversity of people who lived in wildly different, sometimes warring societies in the Americas prior to European arrival had no unified Indigenous identity until European colonizers grouped them into a monolith of people who existed outside the colonizing polity.<sup>253</sup> With the ideas that Wolfe elucidates about assimilation as a kind of death in mind, Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel define Indigenous identity as resistance to the colonial state, which works to dispossess and dehumanize the cultural others who lived on the land prior to colonial invasion.<sup>254</sup> Thinking with reference to these frameworks of identity, because of his struggle against Danish sociopolitical dominance as represented by Heorot and his further refusal to take tribute or pay *wergild*, Grendel represents the only polity that can be defined as Indigenous in relation to the conquering Scyldings.

The counter-argument to be made, of course, is the very one the speaker presents: in Heorot hall, the tribesmen who were once at war could sit at the mead-benches as allies, ending centuries of cyclical conflict and ushering the people from a primitive tribal age to a time of culturally rich monarchy. The speaker discusses Scyld’s heir, who cements his dynastic rule, saying, “God sent [him] / as a solace to the people — he saw their need, / the dire distress they had endured, lordless / for such a long time.”<sup>255</sup> The Scyldings’ role in history is as a centralizing force: under their dominion, there is one leader, one people. The speaker links the Scylding dynasty to the Christian God in the same breath: their mono-authority goes hand in hand with monotheism. Picq identifies this “oneness of authority” as a hallmark of co-constitutive colonialism and modernity.<sup>256</sup> In their chapter in *On Decoloniality*, Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh expand on this concept, pointing out

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<sup>251</sup> Wolfe, “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native,” 397.

<sup>252</sup> Pratt, Capt. Richard H. *Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction* (1892), 46–59. Reprinted in Richard H. Pratt, “The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites,” *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the “Friends of the Indian” 1880–1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 260–271.

<sup>253</sup> Picq, Manuela and Andrew Canessa. *Savages, Citizens, and Sodomites: Indigenous Peoples and the State from Thomas Hobbes to Evo Morales* (forthcoming), 46.

<sup>254</sup> Alfred, Taiaiake and Jeff Corntassel. “Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism,” *Government and Opposition*, 40:4 (2005): 597.

<sup>255</sup> Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 14–16.

<sup>256</sup> Picq, Personal communication, 29 Oct. 2021.

an epistemological shift around the time of the Enlightenment towards the adoption of universal binary oppositions—true vs. false, human vs. nonhuman, etc.—with the new search for Truth through empirical questioning. They assert that these oppositional structures privilege one system, one group, one way of being, over all others, with their goal being the elimination of incorrect or contradictory ways of being. It is this mindset that brings about the eliminatory violence of the so-called Age of Exploration and the colonization of the New World.<sup>257</sup>

In his 2007 article “Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking,” Mignolo names one of the ideological pillars of colonial thinking: “the assumption that there is no modernity without coloniality, the coloniality is constitutive of modernity [...] while modernity is presented as a rhetoric of salvation, it hides coloniality, which is the logic of oppression and exploitation.”<sup>258</sup> Mignolo’s observation urges us to question whether or not whatever sociocultural improvements colonialism has allowed us to make are adequate justification for colonial violence. We make the same assumption when we adopt the protagonists’ triumphalist perspective in *Beowulf*. Reading from a decolonial perspective, however, we question whether the Scyldings’ comparative intertribal peace justifies the subjugation, assimilation, and extraction of both human and material resources from the surrounding tribes. Rejecting the idea that modernity is either necessary or a justification for colonialism not only allows us to mourn the violence and suffering of the colonial past and present unconditionally, but also gives us the opportunity to imagine a radically different future, independent from the trappings of contemporary colonial modernity.

The end of *Beowulf* presents a singularly bleak theme: that all human efforts are ultimately futile, the last of every race is to be killed off and forgotten someday and every hard-won treasure destined to mold undergound. Craig Davis identifies this grim fate as the underlying principle behind the idea of *nyrd*, frequently translated as “fate,” a universal and inevitable force of entropy.<sup>259</sup> It is against this principle that the Scylding kings act: hoping to delay their eventual fate, they steamroller their enemies and hand down their histories in their mead-halls. The Scyldings enact their colonial practices to facilitate the other tribes’ meetings with *nyrd* in order that the Scyldings themselves do not face it.

The monsters in *Beowulf* represent the purportedly universal human flaws that assure our eventual meeting with *nyrd*. The speaker characterizes Grendel as a manifestation of violence fueled by ethnic hatred. But as we have seen, Grendel acts in protest against violent Danish political hegemony, not Danish people: the colonial project’s own sociopolitical trespasses inspire his violence. Grendel’s mother appears to avenge the killing of her son, following the old adage that mandates taking a life for a life. The most sympathetic monster in the poem, she plays by the same rules that the Scyldings do. In killing her, Beowulf only replicates the cyclical feud dynamics that she represents, ensuring they continue into the Danish proto-kingdom. Finally, the dragon that Beowulf fights fifty years down the line only

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<sup>257</sup> Mignolo and Walsh. “The Invention of the Human and the Three Pillars of the Colonial Matrix of Power,” 153-176.

<sup>258</sup> Mignolo, “INTRODUCTION,” 162.

<sup>259</sup> Davis, “Beowulf,” 5.

awakens and begins to ravage the countryside when a thief steals a treasure from his hoard. He represents the overpowering greed for gold that inspires the conquest of tribes and draws war-bands to a leader. Beowulf and the dragon annihilate each other, and the story ends with a Geatish woman wailing in anguish, knowing the Geats are bound for destruction without their heroic leader.<sup>260</sup> The dragon represents how the pursuit of material wealth is a path to ruin. Proto-racism, cyclical inherited violence, and greed are the components that ensure the inevitable failure of human endeavors: the meeting of every person with *nyrd*.

However, although these monsters plague the Scyldings and Geats, they are by no means essential to human society. The character of Grendel, in his refusal to assimilate into Scylding society, represents an alternative. He maintains strict boundaries in his warfare against the Danes, enacting violence only within Heorot in order to send a clear message against Scylding sociopolitical hegemony, rather than working to destroy the people as a whole. He does not engage in blood feuds and he shuns gold, refusing to partake in tribute-taking or giving *vergild*. Grendel stands as an example of how the inevitable destruction of peoples that the speaker describes is a result of colonial actions, not a base state of humanity.

In addition, the theme of inevitable *nyrd* reflects a cultural anxiety surrounding the idea of vanishing and a preoccupation with prolonging the lifespan of a people. It is for this reason that the stories of heroes like Beowulf live on. As in the case of the West Saxon nobility and their ancestor Scaef, these stories establish the continuity of a bloodline or people, and impress upon their audiences the necessity of preserving that people.

Though certainly not unique to the Scyldings' proto-empire, incorporating the practice of forced assimilation into the narrative lends a distinctly colonial bent to the story. Rather than simply maintaining their existence, the Scyldings' focus is on expansion and absorption. Even their allies the Geats are not safe: after Beowulf disposes of Grendel, Hrothgar adopts Beowulf as his own son.<sup>261</sup> Hrothgar's wife's concern for her own sons' inheritance after this move gives it legitimacy: no empty gesture of goodwill, Hrothgar has actually brought the Geatish royal heir into the Scylding line of succession. Literally and symbolically, the Scyldings take all people with whom they come into contact under their aegis.

The Scyldings' refusal to let external polities exist without eliminating or subsuming them calls to mind the colonial notion of the artificial binary between dominance and extinction. In his article "The Myth of the Vanishing Indian," Brewton Berry quotes "a prominent South Carolina statesman [who] declared in 1717, 'We must assist them in cutting one another's throats. This is the game we intend to play if possible... for if we cannot destroy one nation of Indians by another, our country must be lost.'<sup>262</sup> The colonizer's logic states that the mere existence of another people who are not under colonial control threatens the colonial polity. A colonial society can exist while exercising total hegemonic

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<sup>260</sup> Davis, "Beowulf," 1.

<sup>261</sup> Liuzza, *Beowulf*, lines 1175-1187.

<sup>262</sup> Berry, Brewton. "The Myth of the Vanishing Indian." *Phylon* 21:1 (1960): 52.

domination, or it cannot exist at all; coexistence with cultural others is impossible. Berry goes on to quote Charles Darwin, saying, “Wherever the European has trod, death seems to pursue the aboriginal. [...] The varieties of man seem to act on each other in the same way as different species of animals—the stronger always extirpating the weaker.”<sup>263</sup> Darwin and the *Beowulf* speaker both speak as if their thoughts are self-evident truths about the nature of the universe, rather than subjective observations based on their unique cultural perspectives—that is, they speak from a zero-point-of-observation. However, the phenomenon that Darwin describes of Europeans wiping out Indigenous peoples is a goal of colonial and imperial projects, not a universal fact of human existence, and the *Beowulf* speaker’s morose truism that all peoples will bring one another to ruin necessitates participation in a culture bent on domination and greed.

This distinctly colonial mindset is evident in contemporary narratives surrounding cultural vanishing, particularly in white supremacist circles. The Anti-Defamation League unpacks the “white genocide” conspiracy, which is based on the myth that the so-called white race is dying out due to the growth of non-white populations and the idea of “forced assimilation” into non-white cultures. They link it to what they cite as the most popular global white supremacist slogan: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.”<sup>264</sup> Central to this conspiracy theory is the idea that the existence of cultural others, in threatening white dominance, threatens white existence wholesale: the same false binary between dominance and extinction.

The white genocide myth manifests in many instances of white supremacist action, including the deadly 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The amassed racists chanted, “You will not replace us,” alluding to the prevalent theory of a global conspiracy to “replace” white people with unspecified cultural others.<sup>265</sup> The theme of the rally, broadly speaking, was the assertion of “white power” against an imagined threat of marginalization, disenfranchisement, and destruction. Another notable facet of the Unite the Right rally was the prevalence of medieval imagery among the protestors.<sup>266, 267, 268, 269</sup> The use of medieval-inspired imagery as mascots for white nationalism points to the function of medievalism in efforts to generate a historical lineage for whiteness. The association of this historical lineage with the white genocide/replacement myths displays the propagandistic

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<sup>263</sup> Berry, “The Myth of the Vanishing Indian,” 53.

<sup>264</sup> “Defining Extremism: A Glossary of White Supremacist Terms, Movements, and Philosophies,” *Anti-Defamation League* (n.d.): 15.

<sup>265</sup> “White Supremacists Adopt New Slogan: ‘You Will Not Replace Us,’” *Anti-Defamation League* (June 9, 2017).

<sup>266</sup> Kim, Dorothy. “Teaching Medieval Studies in the Time of White Supremacy.” *In the Medieval Middle* (blog). Aug. 20, 2017.

<sup>267</sup> “Deconstructing the symbols and slogans spotted around Charlottesville,” *The Washington Post* (Aug. 18, 2017).

<sup>268</sup> Fahey, Richard. “Marauders in the US Capitol: Alt-Right Viking Wannabes and Weaponized Medievalism.” *Medieval Studies Research Blog: Meet Us at the Crossroads of Everything* (blog). *University of Notre Dame’s Medieval Institute*. Jan. 15, 2021.

<sup>269</sup> Lomuto, Sierra. “Public Medievalism and the Rigor of Anti-Racist Critique,” *In the Middle: peace love & the middle ages* (blog). Apr. 04, 2019.

idea that medievalism represents a marginalized people and an erased cultural history of whiteness.

White supremacists tie their myth of a vanishing white society into Indigenous history in order to legitimize their conspiracies in contemporary discourse. Kalen Goodluck tracks the phenomenon in a 2019 article for the *High Country News*. He cites numerous iterations of the phenomenon, from right-wing extremists justifying anti-immigrant violence by pointing to the genocide of Indigenous Americans as a prior case of unchecked immigration, to a white supremacist mass murderer urging those who share his sentiments to shift away from Nazi talking points and towards Indigenous rights buzzwords so as to more effectively garner social support.<sup>270</sup> By invoking a history of suppression and disenfranchisement, white supremacists posit the purported return to a theoretical ancestral past as an objective moral imperative, rather than a political action.

Narratives like *Beowulf* are instrumental in characterizing that ancestral past: the neo-Nazi online forum Stormfront, which as of 2015 boasted over 300,000 accounts,<sup>271</sup> lists the poem as essential reading for insight into a mythic white warrior past.<sup>272</sup> The white supremacists reading *Beowulf* engage in the same work that the Victorians did when they looked to early English history: they are searching for precursors to themselves, finding analogues for their contemporary genocidal agendas in the Scyldings and Geats of the legendary past.

We base our contemporary identities on those we think of as our ancestors, creating for ourselves a cultural lineage that we make a part of ourselves. Literary history is as much a part of that cultural ancestry as factual chronologies are. Threatened by the new sense of globalism as the British Empire expanded, English scholars of the 19th and early 20th centuries matched their values and principles to their interpretations of Anglo-Saxon culture, thereby crystallizing their contemporary senses of nationalism and imperial thought in medievalist scholarship. Tolkien's ensuing work on *Beowulf* cemented it as the proverbial fount of English literature, a cornerstone of the Anglophone cultural history upon which successive generations base their understanding of Anglo-Germanic history. Today, looking at *Beowulf* without acknowledging the role that Anglo-Saxonism has played in the formation of white English and American identity makes it easy to avoid the parallels in the text to the same kind of colonial thought and praxis that was the impetus behind the oppressive expansion of the British Empire and the genocide of Indigenous people on the American frontier. The ostracization of a certain kind of people based on their ancestry calls to mind Enlightenment-era racisms. The systematic gate-keeping of a sociopolitical category of humanity contingent on assimilation into the dominant culture recalls ultimata colonizers presented to Indigenous Americans.

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<sup>270</sup> Goodluck, Kalen. "Far-right extremists appropriate Indigenous struggles for violent ends," *High Country News*, Aug. 27, 2019.

<sup>271</sup> "Stormfront," *Extremist Files*, *Southern Poverty Law Center*. (n.d.).

<sup>272</sup> Rambaran-Olm, Mary. "Anglo-Saxon Studies [Early English Studies], Academia, and White Supremacy," *M. Rambaran-Olm* (blog). *Medium*. June 27, 2018.

Contemporary white supremacists recognize and embrace these parallels, using them to fuel their efforts to create a mythic homeland for whiteness. We can dismiss the prevalence of medieval language and imagery in white supremacist circles as ignorant misappropriation, or we can confront it at its source. The entire field of medievalism has its roots in identifying the fictional actors of the distant past with our present selves as we construct cultural and genetic histories of Anglo-Germanic whiteness. We cannot write off the pseudo-histories which fuel white supremacist conspiracies as anachronisms that have nothing to do with us. We have a responsibility to read between the lines, to question those who write our histories, both factual and fictional, and to analyze how their unique perspectives and agendas morph their accounts.

The ultimate theme of *Beowulf* is a sense of resignation to an inevitable universal doom—but only if we take the poem's speaker at their word. Looking at the text from outside of the speaker's colonial perspective, we realize that this inevitable *nyrd* hinges on the espousal of the greed and ethnocentrism characteristic of colonial epistemologies, from the Scyldings in medieval Scandinavia to the white supremacists marching in Charlottesville. The figure of Grendel, an Indigenous precursor and outsider to Scylding society, represents an alternative to the colonial tautology that states that cultural others must be absorbed or killed. He resists Scylding domination, rather than Scylding existence, modeling a way forward against colonial hegemonies. The case of Grendel demonstrates that by applying decolonial critical theory to literary mainstays, it is possible to pinpoint tenets of colonial thought both as they appear in the literature and in our everyday lives. In noticing, questioning, and disrupting the colonial assumptions we have internalized as essential to our identities and our understandings of the world, we empower ourselves to envision and work towards the redress of colonial harms.

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# IMPAIRED GODS AND HOLY WOUNDS: DISABILITY IN THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE EARLY MEDIEVAL NORTH ATLANTIC

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The Pagan Lady of Peel Castle lived in a melting pot of cultures on the Isle of Man in the 10th century, surrounded by Norse pagans and Celtic Christians. She was one of the last vestiges of a dying religion which exalted the sexual power and wisdom of women in a world becoming more patriarchal in the religious and secular spheres by the day. The Pagan Lady was a powerful woman, possibly even a seeress. She and her possessions lay underground for a thousand years before being unearthed in the 1980s by archeologists. While many of her bones had disintegrated, one thing became clear: the Pagan Lady of Peel Castle had a physical impairment.

The Early Medieval Period in the European North Atlantic was home to many religious groups, including the Norse pagans<sup>273</sup> and the Anglo-Saxon Christians. These two groups come from vastly different cultures and their basic conceptions of the universe, including the end of time, are divergent. How these groups view and handle disability and

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<sup>273</sup> Norse paganism is an umbrella term for the various religions and cults practiced by the Norse people prior to their conversion to Christianity. As it stretched from the Volga River in modern Ukraine to Greenland, it should be expected that there is a diversity of practices, thought, and philosophies. Unfortunately, nearly all sources for the Norse people were written by Icelanders after their conversion. Therefore, the regional thoughts of the Norse pagans on disability have been lost. For the purposes of this paper Norse paganism refers to Icelandic Norse paganism as recorded by their Christian descendants unless otherwise indicated, as with the Pagan Lady of Peel Castle.

impairment,<sup>274</sup> and how disabled or impaired persons within these cultures view themselves, differ greatly as informed by their eschatology. The aim of this paper is to delve into how the textual and oral traditions of Christianity and Norse paganism relate to and interact with lived experience using both religious and secular textual sources. An examination of impairment among the lay person, the spiritually elevated mortal, and the godly through sacred texts, moral philosophy, prose sagas, mythic narratives, and hagiography shows a different understanding of impairment in Anglo-Saxon Christianity and Norse paganism stemming from differing cosmological outlooks on the end of the universe. Christianity's emphasis on a medical model of disability, drawn from its theological perspectives on time and earthly bodies, is vastly different from the Norse pagan idea of "usefulness."

Disability studies within the broader umbrella of Medieval Studies is an emerging field. The first serious inquiry into the topic was published in 2006.<sup>275</sup> As such, it is an overview of how impairment was viewed in the medieval world, particularly in the High Middle Ages, several hundred years after the focus of this paper. Therefore, I will only be using sections of this text which are based on sources prior to 1066. There is still a wealth of information in this text, but it does neglect to mention the "Dark Age" of the Early Medieval Period. In 2020, *The Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, was published.<sup>276</sup> This was a compendium of secondary essays and primary sources related to disability in Western Europe, .was published.<sup>277</sup> The text included both Christians and Norse pagans, but neglected to mention how fundamental differences in religious worldview may have impacted the views of disability within society. There are other isolated articles, but these are the two main sources for disability studies not related to blindness in the Medieval Period. Recently, the issue of Norse disability has been tackled by graduate students including in Katelin Anderson's Master's thesis, *Mediating the Other Through Language: Medieval Icelandic Sagas and Disability Discourse*,<sup>278</sup> and Catelin Scally's essay *An Examination of Physical Impairment in Norse Myth and Icelandic Saga*.<sup>279</sup> Other sources used include Jessica Chase's *Animal, Vegetable, Prosthesis: Medieval Care Networks in the Lives of Three Saints*,<sup>280</sup> and Lois Bragg's *From the Mute God to the Lesser God: Disability in Medieval Celtic and Old Norse Literature*.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Impairment is the physical and neutral difference in a person from most others, such as a missing arm or blindness. Disability results from when a society does not accommodate for impairments, and the quality of life for impaired persons is lowered due to their impairment. In other words, impairment is natural while disability is a social construct. Based on Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, c. 1100-1400*. (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>275</sup> Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*.

<sup>276</sup> Cameron Hunt McNabb, introduction to *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, (Punctum Books, 2020), 13–21.

<sup>277</sup> Cameron Hunt McNabb, introduction to *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, (Punctum Books, 2020), 13–21.

<sup>278</sup> Katelin E Anderson, Dissertation. *Mediating the Other through Language: Medieval Icelandic Sagas and the Construction of Disability Discourse* 2016.

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<sup>279</sup> Caitlin Scally, "An Examination of Physical Impairment in Norse Myth and Icelandic Saga." The (Not So) Dark Ages. Accessed October 3, 2021.

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<sup>280</sup> Jessica Chace, "Animal, Vegetable, Prosthesis: Medieval Care Networks in the Lives of Three English Saints." *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 1–20. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/10412573.2017.1284367>.

<sup>281</sup> Lois Bragg, "From the Mute God to the Lesser God: Disability in Medieval Celtic and Old Norse Literature." *Disability & Society* 12, no. 2 (1997): 165–77.

The primary sources for impairment and possibly disability in Norse culture are the *Prose Edda*,<sup>282</sup> *Poetic Edda* (especially the *Hávamál* and the *Völuspá*),<sup>283</sup> especially the *Hávamál* and the *Völuspá*, the *Grágás* law code,<sup>284</sup> and *Grettis Saga*.<sup>285</sup> While the *Poetic Edda*, *Grágás*, and *Grettis Saga* are all clearly rooted in oral tradition, the impact of Christian scribes should not be dismissed. These were written down, or composed in the case of the *Prose Edda*, in the late 12th or early 13th centuries, long after the official conversion of Iceland the island in the year 999. This literate Christian and literate filter means that the source material has been changed from its original pagan oral tradition by people who believed in a very different cosmological and societal order. There are, therefore, unavoidable biases present within the texts that are not necessarily true to the belief systems of the Norse pagans. This means that the beliefs regarding impairment presented in the texts may not be accurate to the lives of those who lived during the Viking Age, and may be a later invention, whether or not the changes were intentional. It is not possible to determine precisely the extent to which Christianity influenced these writings, but they are nonetheless the best sources available for the thought-process of Norse pagans on impairment.

The primary sources for Christian disability include Bede's *The Prose Life of Cuthbert*,<sup>286</sup> the Gospels,<sup>287</sup> Ælfric of Eynsham's *Homilies*,<sup>288</sup> and St. Augustine of Hippo's *The City of God against the Pagans*.<sup>289</sup> These sources include holy texts, teachings by Church Fathers, sermons, and hagiography. These different kinds of sources means that what different echelons of society would have been exposed to are represented. Both the texts that learned men would have read, including *The City of God* and the Gospels themselves, and information that common people would have had access to regardless of their literacy, like *Homilies*, are examined. This allows for a better understanding of impairment in the Anglo-Saxon church, because it does not exclusively investigate the resources available to the highest level of society.

### The Gods

“Why do you question me? Why do you test me?  
I know all about it, Oðinn, where you hid your eye  
In Mimir's famous well.”

-*Völuspá* 29.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*. Translated by Jesse L. Byock. New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2005.

<sup>283</sup> Carolyne Larrington, trans. *The Poetic Edda*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>284</sup> Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, trans. *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás, the Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from Other Manuscripts* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 1980).

<sup>285</sup> Jesse L. Byock, and Russell Gilbert Poole, trans. *Grettir's Saga*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>286</sup> Bede and Marit Ronen. “The Prose Life of Cuthbert (Ca. 721).” In *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, edited by Cameron Hunt McNabb, (Punctum Books, 2020), 190-205.

<sup>287</sup> Will Eggers. “Selected Episodes on Healing and Disability from the Vulgate Bible- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (Ca. 382).” In *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, edited by Cameron Hunt McNabb, (Punctum Books, 2020), 113-37.

<sup>288</sup> Ælfric of Eynsham and Brandon W Hawk. “Catholic Homilies 1.10 (Ca. 989-Ca. 992).” In *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, edited by Cameron Hunt McNabb, (Punctum Books, 2020), 147-56.

<sup>289</sup> Augustine of Hippo and Leah Pope Parker. “The City of God against the Pagans (413-26).” In *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, edited by Cameron Hunt McNabb, (Punctum Books, 2020), 157-61.

<sup>290</sup> Larrington, trans. *The Poetic Edda*.

“But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.”

-John 19:34.<sup>291</sup>

The gods Oðinn, Tyr, and HöðrHöðr, and Tyr are prominent impaired figures within the Norse pantheon. Oðinn is known as the one-eyed god, as he exchanged one eye at the well of Mimir in order to gain wisdom. Specifically, Oðinn is attempting to gain enough foreknowledge in order to prevent the end of the world through any means necessary, including the loss of his eye. He is never “othered” within his community for this.<sup>292</sup> That is to say, within his community Oðinn is impaired rather than disabled. Oðinn does not seem to have any negative experiences because of his missing eye aside from the initial pain of losing it, even though he is a god of war and an impact on depth perception would be expected. This lacuna is likely not because he does not experience these visual issues—it is even said that every morning he looks to the horizon from Hlidskjalf—but rather because Norse culture did not deem it worth mentioning. This loss of his eye is also a transactional sacrifice or a transaction as opposed to an accident or a punishment, which may affect how it was viewed both by his fellow gods and by mortals. Oðinn is trading a part of his body to heighten his knowledge. This is therefore a purposeful injury, and cannot be twisted to be a reflection of his skill in battle or his fortitude against illness or other danger. Oðinn draws his power from this sacrifice. His power is not only not lessened by disfigurement, but is actually increased. This would be an example of a holy wound, a common theme within Christianity, although not likely influenced by it. Holy wounds are inseparable from Oðinn, as he died a double death on Yggdrasil via strangulation and a spear wound in another bid to gain knowledge.<sup>293</sup> It is known that this self-sacrifice is not a later Christian addition, because Ibn Fadlan observed a human sacrifice being killed by a double death through spear and strangulation in what would become Ukraine along the Volga River in a Norse settlement along the Volga River.<sup>294</sup> This partial blinding, then, fits with Oðinn’s acceptance of injury in exchange for knowledge. These injuries are what give him the power to be the Norse god of wisdom. Impairment, then, in Oðinn’s case is a source of power, and is not a source of weakness. in any physical regard. HoweverAlthough, it should be mentioned that at Ragnarök, he is “blind-sided” by the giant’s attack in spite of millenia of preparation and information gathering in order to protect the world. While this battle is not a direct result of his lost eye, considering that the loss of the eye was made in part to prevent Ragnarök from coming, there is a poetic comparison to be made between the literal and figurative blindness of Oðinn.

Tyr lost his hand because the gods broke an oath with the great wolf Fenrir. Fenrir was suspicious of them trying to tie him up, so he demanded that Tyr put his hand in his

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<sup>291</sup> *New International Version*. Accessed October 3, 2021.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2012-13%2CMark%2011%3A15-18&version=NIV>.

<sup>292</sup> Anderson, *Mediating the Other*.

<sup>293</sup> Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*.

<sup>294</sup> Ahmad ibn Fadlan, and H.M. Smyser. “Ibn Fadlan’s Account of the Rus with Some Commentary and Some Allusions to Beowulf.” In *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr.*, edited by Jess B Bessinger and Robert P Creed, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1965), 92–119.

mouth as insurance. When the gods refused to untie him, he bit off Tyr's hand.<sup>295</sup> Very little is known about Tyr, as most stories involving him do not survive until today. This gap of information means that it is impossible to know whether this lost hand is an impairment or disability as it cannot be understood how it was received by Tyr's community. He was a widely-worshiped god, as evidenced by place-names in Scandinavia, especially Denmark, so there likely would have been stories about what happened after this episode that have been lost.<sup>296</sup> At Ragnarök, he is able to kill the Hel-hound Garmr in a Pyrrhic victory, as he also succumbs to the wounds wrought by the dog. Interestingly, he dies of is killed by blood loss when Garmr rips off his other arm. It appears that Tyr did not gain any power from this loss as Oðinn did, but it was still a show of his power. As a god of war, he was able to display his courage to his fellow gods. If he had said "no" to Fenrir, he would have lost their respect. To the Norse, honor was more important than life itself as honor was considered to be longer lasting than the body, as is said in the *Hávamál*, "cattle die, kinsmen die, but I know one thing which never dies: the reputation of a man".<sup>297</sup> The loss of his honor would have been infinitely worse for Tyr than the loss of his hand. This injury can be understood as a retention of power rather than a loss or gain. It should also be noted that Tyr is the god of oaths.<sup>298</sup> He was called upon at the Þing and to oversee agreements. That he is the one to be injured for a false oath on behalf of the gods is potent. It was also his right hand which was sacrificed, which is not only the sword hand—, important for a god of war—, but is also the hand used in sealing oaths. Like the loss of Oðinn's eye, there is a symbolism to this sacrifice. This crumbling of social conventions is seen elsewhere in the *Völuspá*, starting with the arrival of three giantesses to Asgard. The crumbling of social convention is ultimately what brings about the end of the world. The golden checkers, which represent order, are mentioned before the arrival of the giantesses and again after the end of the world when Baldr finds them again. Tyr, by attempting to avoid Ragnarök, brings it into existence.

There exists no story for why Höðr, the third god, lost his sight. Again, this might be due to lost stories and this explanation may have existed during the Viking Age. With the story that survives today, one can still analyze his position in society. It should be acknowledged that without knowing whether Höðr was born blind, if he gave up his sight, or if he was blinded the analysis will be incomplete. Höðr is a full member of society, as evidenced by his being near the game which ultimately led to the death of Baldr.<sup>299</sup> His inability to participate in the game could be considered a disability, but this does not seem to be a structural societal issue for him. He was participating in social events, and was on friendly enough terms with Loki to accept his help. Loki did take advantage of his impairment, which may in this case be called a disability because if he had sight he would not have been manipulated into murdering his brother. He was also prosecuted by the gods, meaning that he is not subject to different rules or infantilized due to his disability and is instead treated the same as the other gods. He is killed by his half brother Váli, who Oðinn begat on the giantess Rind for this purpose, as a full brother like Tyr would then have needed to be held accountable by the laws of revenge killing. On the other handflip side, Höðr was not given accommodations at court, considering that he could not see that Loki

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<sup>295</sup> Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*.

<sup>296</sup> Irina-Maria Manea, "Tyr." World History Encyclopedia. World History Encyclopedia, April 16, 2021. <https://www.worldhistory.org/Tyr/>.

<sup>297</sup> Larrington, trans. *The Poetic Edda*.

<sup>298</sup> Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Tyr." Encyclopedia Britannica. Encyclopedia Britannica, February 24, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tyr>.

<sup>299</sup> Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*.

was tricking him and that therefore the blame truly laid with Loki. That he was still prosecuted as the instigator for the murder in spite of not knowing that Loki was abusing his trust means that Höðr is not only impaired, but also disabled.

Christians, like the Norse pagans, also worshiped a wounded god. Christ was fatally wounded on the Cross, and, according to both the Bible and St Augustine of Hippo, those wounds did not heal upon his resurrection according to both the Bible and St Augustine of Hippo.<sup>300</sup> These wounds, or impairments on his hands, feet, and side, are not a disability to Christ, but are even considered to be holy, empowering, and pertinent to the redemption of humanity.<sup>301</sup> The wounds of Christ are like the wounds of Oðinn, in that they increase his power and godliness. They are, like Oðinn's wounds, the results of a sacrifice. Both sacrificed parts of themselves for the betterment of humanity. Christ gave up his life for people, while the sacrifice of Oðinn was his eye, strangulation, and a side wound for knowledge in the hope of preventing the end of the world, which would benefit all inhabitants of the universe including the gods and humanity. While only Christ is successful in saving his followers, as nothing Oðinn does can prevent Ragnarök, both deities obtain holy wounds with the hope of saving the world, humans, or both.

There is, in both religions, a clear line delineating what is acceptable for the gods and what is acceptable for humans. The gods operate on social spheres completely different from this world in acceptable norms in terms of gender, social interaction, and ability. This double-standard is most clearly defined in Norse paganism, although the feminine qualities of Christ's wounds and his acts of destruction while on Earth such as flipping the tables in the synagogue should not be disregarded.<sup>302</sup> The gods exist outside of gender roles, for example. Oðinn practices *seiðr*, a feminine magic, or sorcery, later considered to be degrading for men. Loki transforms into a mare, becomes pregnant, and gives birth to Sleipnir.<sup>303</sup> Þor wears a wedding dress to trick a giant into believing that he is Freyja.<sup>304</sup> These incidents are in the context of the *Grágás*, which makes even cross-dressing a valid reason for a woman to file for divorce from her husband.<sup>305</sup> Clearly, the gods do not operate within the human societal binaries. This distinction means that evidence in Norse theology should not be taken as evidence of the treatment of the impaired within mortal society, although one can and likely does influence the other.

### The People

“The lame man rides a horse  
The handless man rides a herd  
The deaf man fights and succeeds  
To be blind is better than to be burnt:  
A corpse is of no use to anyone.”

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<sup>300</sup> Augustine and Parker, “The City of God against the Pagans,” edited by McNabb, 157-61.

<sup>301</sup> There are many accounts throughout the Middle Ages, although particularly in the High Middle Ages, of worship centered around these wounds. The devout would pray to each of the drops of blood that were alleged to have fallen, and to kiss images of the wounds. Vibeke Olson, “Penetrating the Void: Picturing the Wound in Christ's Side as a Performative Space.” In *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, edited by Larissa Tracey and Kelly DeVries, (Boston, MA: Brill, 2015), 313–39.

<sup>302</sup> *New International Version*.

<sup>303</sup> Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*.

<sup>304</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>305</sup> Dennis et al., trans. *Laws of Early Iceland*.

“And as he was coming to him, the devil threw him down and tore him. And Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and cured the boy, and restored him to his father.”

-Luke 9:42-43.<sup>307</sup>

The *Grágás* shows how disability was viewed under the law. It is then a more reliable source than the Eddas for how humans with impairments were treated. It states that it is illegal for a person to not be attached to a household, which is defined as contributing to the function of the house. The punishment for not doing so was enslavement, fining, or becoming an outlaw.<sup>308</sup> However, this statute does not mean that impaired people were all subject to such punishments. It says that all people need to be useful in some way, but it does not define how. Hávamál 71, however, does, stating. It states that it does not matter if someone is impaired, so long as they are “of use.”<sup>309</sup> Norse society was, therefore, willing to accommodate impairment to a certain extent. It did not matter what one could not do, but rather what one could. This attitude is reflected in the theology, especially in the story of Höðr. It did not matter to the other gods that Höðr had no way of knowing that Loki had given him mistletoe to throw, but rather that he retained the ability to ultimately throw it. It can then be assumed that people within this society may have faced challenges like Höðr did, where people only cared what one can do, but not what one cannot do. Impaired people might have been unable to receive accommodations, which would have made them disabled.

A consequence of thinking of people in terms of their “usefulness” would certainly be the enslavement or outlawry of those who cannot be “of use” to their communities. While it is not defined what criterion is considered useful enough, the existence of this law implies that some people did not meet this measure. Those people would certainly have been considered disabled. Additionally, there is the issue of infant exposure. After the coming of Christianity, this practice was outlawed, which means that in pagan times it was still in use.<sup>310</sup> However, accounts say that both abled and impaired infants were exposed to the elements. Due to the nature of the fragility of infant bones, and the exposures not being done in burial grounds, it is not possible to archaeologically prove that impaired infants were exposed at a higher rate than abled infants.<sup>311</sup> If they were, that would be a case of ableism and disability within Norse pagan culture.

Onundar Trefotr in *Grettis Saga* is an impaired saga hero.<sup>312</sup> He was injured at war, and lost his leg. His epithet, Trefotr, literally means “tree-foot” or “wooden-leg.” While it may be tempting to say that this is a disparaging appellation, such descriptors are a common saga convention.<sup>313</sup> People are often referred to by physical characteristics, like Eirik the Red or Harald Bluetooth. This is no more a pejorative description than any other reference to a character’s appearance. Onundr often lamented that he felt that people thought less of him

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<sup>306</sup> Larrington, trans. *The Poetic Edda*.

<sup>307</sup> *New International Version*.

<sup>308</sup> Dennis et al., trans. *Laws of Early Iceland*.

<sup>309</sup> Scally, “An Examination of Physical Impairment.”

<sup>310</sup> Bragg, “From the Mute God.”

<sup>311</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>312</sup> Byock and Poole, trans. *Grettir's Saga*.

<sup>313</sup> Anderson, *Mediating the Other*.

now, but this is refuted by other characters in the story who gave him compliments and attempted to make him feel better about his missing leg. In the end, he killed his enemy who had made negative comments about his leg because the enemy got his sword stuck in the prosthetic. Therefore, his impairment saved his life and caused the death of a man who disrespected Onundr on the basis of it.<sup>314</sup> His worry about having lost honor seems to be Onundr's insecurities rather than the perception of him within the saga world, given that not only do other characters regularly defend him, but he is also still able to fight on the battlefield. In battle, his leg is even an advantage rather than a hindrance. In the writing of the saga, and the earlier skalds who told this story prior to it being written down, Onundr is clearly a well-respected and honored man. Onundr is impaired, not disabled. He does not face discrimination on the basis of his missing leg because he is still "useful" in the eyes of Norse society. It is said that "[h]e was the bravest and the most agile one-legged man ever in Iceland."<sup>315</sup>

Katelin Anderson discusses Ivarr inn Bbeinlausí, who suffered from some sort of bone disease which made his bones very weak.<sup>316</sup> While it is implied in the surviving narrative that this impairment is a punishment for his father not respecting the desires of his mother, no disparaging comments are made against Ivarr. This is not the only instance of the punishment of the parents being transferred to their children. In *Hrolfs Saga Kraka*, Bodvar Bjarki and his brothers Elk-Frodi and Thorir Hound's Foot are punished for their mother having accidentally cannibalized their father's bear form by being born part man and part beast.<sup>317</sup> Like Ivarr inn beinlausí, all judgment from society is cast on their parents rather than on them. Interestingly, this could be seen as a moral sin resulting in a physical punishment, a trend common within Christianity. However, society does not treat any of these characters like sinners or with any sort of disdain. While the lack of judgment could be due to the notorious nature of Icelandic sagas to use few descriptors, it describes Ivarr as handsome and wise, meaning that his impairment, while part of his epithet, is not his only quality. His weak bones mean that he is often carried by others, and that he cannot fight with an ax or sword. However, he has great knowledge of magic and is very good with a bow and arrow, making him "useful" according to Norse society. This use of magic is significant, considering that Óðinn, god of magic, is also physically impaired. It may not be that Ivar inn beinlausí is magic because of his impairment, but he does seem to use magic because of his impairment. In other words, the magic may not be inherent to impairment but there might be a greater likelihood that those with impairments turn to magic in order to contribute to society. Magic also sometimes has racial connotations as well. Characters like Queen Hvít, who is portrayed as an evil sorceress, are often said to be magic because of their racial identity as Sámi.<sup>318</sup> Magic can then be understood as a tool of those on the fringes of society; the impaired, women, and racial minorities.

Texts informed how Christians people viewed themselves as well. There are 31 instances of healing in the Gospels.<sup>319</sup> These mostly focus on the healing nature of the miracles, implying a medical model of disability. In other words, impairment was something to be fixed and not a diversity to be venerated. These episodes fall into two categories, either those who were impaired as a result of sin, or those who are born with an impairment. The

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<sup>314</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>315</sup> Byock and Poole., trans. *Grettir's Saga*, 25.

<sup>316</sup> Anderson, *Mediating the Other*.

<sup>317</sup> Jesse L. Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (Penguin, 2005).

<sup>318</sup> Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*

<sup>319</sup> Eggers, "Selected Episodes on Healing," edited by McNabb, 113-37.

historian Bede noted that the healing of the blind man in Mark 8:22-25 occurs as a metaphor for faith. So, as his soul begins to see the heavenly world, his earthly eyes begin to see as well.<sup>320</sup> The Bible also says that impairment is sometimes “the works of God... made manifest,” and is not always tied to sin, although it often is.<sup>321</sup> Those who are impaired from birth are understood to be part of God’s creation, but many of those who become impaired in life are understood to either be sinful or to be possessed by a devil. Therefore, medieval medicine is a holistic practice, with the health of the soul and a person’s connection to God directly correlated to their physical health. The body cannot be healthy if the soul is not healthy. Religious devotion was seen as a viable way to regain sight or use of the limbs, perhaps through pilgrimage to various shrines.<sup>322</sup> The information contained in the Bible was told to the faithful in the vernacular in England through sermons, as very few people would own the entire Bible. Some of these sermons survive, such as one from the 10th century by Ælfric of Eynsham. He, like Bede, relates the physical healing of blindness with the spiritual blindness suffered by non-believers. “All humankind was, as we said before, blind with lack of belief and error; but through Christ’s advent we were brought out of our errors,” he says.<sup>323</sup> Impairment is then sometimes used as a metaphor for spiritual lacking or wrongness in the Christian world, especially impairment of the eyes. There is a clear link between blindness of the body and blindness of the soul. Ælfric says that in order to learn from the blind man in the Bible, people must not only “sit by the path” where Christ would walk, but also pray.<sup>324</sup> Both things are necessary to see the holy light. The blind man in the story is not seen as a sinner being punished, but an example of the universal human condition for the congregation to emulate. His impairment does not prevent him from being viewed by society as a worthy example to follow.

Saint Augustine of Hippo wrote in *The City of God* in the fifth century about what happens to the resurrected body of the impaired. According to him, all people are made “abled” after Judgment Day. He says that the body is like clay, and the matter that made up a hand in life might make up the foot in death.<sup>325</sup> This substitution also applies to hair and fingernails, and presumably it is this excess material which will form limbs which did not exist in this world. The exception is the saints. They, while reforming from their bones scattered across myriad reliquaries, will retain their divine wounds, as will Christ.<sup>326</sup> The gap between impairment in earthly and heavenly realms is clearly delineated here. Impairment is holy, but only for those who are holy or become impaired through martyrdom, as the impairment then becomes a mark of sanctity and the extent of the saint’s devotion. Impairment is a medical condition that must be fixed for those who are not saints. The wounds of the holy are themselves spiritual objects worthy of veneration, but they are made so because of their connection to the divine. The divine are not made so because of their wounds, but rather the other way around, even though it is through their martyrdom that they become sanctified.

### The Holy Mortals

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<sup>320</sup> *ibid.* Eggers, “Selected Episodes on Healing,” edited by McNabb, 113-37.

<sup>321</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>322</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>323</sup> Eynsham and Hawk, “Catholic Homilies,” edited by McNabb, 147-56.

<sup>324</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>325</sup> Augustine and Parker, “The City of God against the Pagans,” edited by McNabb, 157-61.

<sup>326</sup> *ibid.*

“When she arrived one evening... about her neck she wore a string of glass beads and... She bore a staff with a knob at the top.”

-*Eirik the Red's Saga*.<sup>327</sup>

“Were I not, for my sins, held bound by this infirmity: for I have long had this painful swelling in my knee, and no physician, with all his care, has yet been able to heal me”

-The Venerable Bede, *The Life of Saint Cuthbert*.<sup>328</sup>

The Pagan Lady of Peel Castle on the Isle of Man is both similar to and different from the Norse pagan literary sources mentioned before. Primarily, she is a woman while the majority of these other examples are of men, and there are very few instances in literature of women with impairments. This could be due to there generally being far fewer women than men in general in sagas than men. Additionally, as seen above, many of these physical differences are also gained in battlewar, which is not a danger women were generally exposed to, so perhaps women were also more unlikely to become impaired.<sup>329</sup> Secondly, the Pagan Lady lived on the Isle of Man.<sup>330</sup> The rest of these figures are either Norse gods, or human as recorded through the eyes of Christian Icelanders. She lived in a mixed society of Catholics and Norse pagans in a Celtic nation, with the vestiges of Celtic their paganism still alive. Religion was also a political issue. The native Manx were Christians, but the invading Norsemen were pagans. Many Norsemen converted to Christianity, and some were likely already Christian, having arrived on the Isle while fleeing the Battle of Stamford Bridge in England. Regardless, Norse paganism was not an indigenous way of life, which and this fact may have impacted the Pagan Lady's life in a way that it would not have if she had lived in Scandinavia. However, there was at least some acculturation between the religions, as most of the graves in the Pagan Lady's cemetery did not contain grave goods.<sup>331</sup> While this does not necessarily prove that those graves contained Christians, it is very likely.

Based on the goods she was found with, The Pagan Lady was a very powerful woman, based on the goods she was found with. She was buried with dozens of glass beads, which were extremely valuable in Norse society as they were imported. As glass is not an organic material, it is difficult to place the beads' location of origin, but it is likely that many came from glassmaking centers in distant places, like Italy or the Islamic Caliphate. She likely did not travel the world herself, but instead received the beads as gifts, or as payment for her services. Also in her grave was what has often been misinterpreted as a mortar and pestle for a hallucinogen. However, analysis has revealed that there is no trace of organic matter within the stone. This is then likely a ritual object, perhaps to represent sexual intercourse.<sup>332</sup> The Pagan Lady was likely a *völva* 'seeress' or a *seiðkona* 'sorceress',

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<sup>327</sup> Leifur Eiriksson, “Eirik the Red's Saga.” In *The Vinland Sagas*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson, translated by Keneva Kunz, (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2008), 23–50.

<sup>328</sup> Bede and Ronen, “The Prose Life of Cuthbert,” edited by McNabb, 190-205.

<sup>329</sup> Brian Burfield, “The Mutilated, Lame and Blind.” *Medieval Warfare* 3, no. 4 (2013): 39–42.

<sup>330</sup> Leszek Gardela, and Carolyne Larrington, eds. *Viking Myths and Rituals on the Isle of Man* 1. Vol. 1. (Nottingham: Centre for the Study of the Viking Age University of Nottingham, 2014).

<sup>331</sup> David Freke, *Excavations on St. Patrick's Isle, Peel, Isle of Man, 1982-88: Prehistoric, Viking, Medieval, and Later*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002).

<sup>332</sup> Freke, *Excavations on St. Patrick's Isle*.

based on her iron rod. *Völvur* were female shamans who achieved Dionysian ecstasy, or an out-of-body experience, through a combination of hallucinogens, repetitive chanting, and sex. This experience was a technique of seeing the future, and *völvurthey* made their living by making predictions for farmers, traveling from farm to farm.<sup>333</sup> This is not a practice that is done alone, and they would recruit the women from the farms they visited to chant with them. They were considered to be important and powerful members of society, so much so that the *Völuspá*, or the *Seeress' Prophecy*, is spoken by a *völva* performing magic at the request of Oðinn himself.<sup>334</sup> This Eddic poem shows that sometimes *völvur* were considered to have more knowledge than even the god of wisdom and magic regarding the distant past and the far future. This magic is called *seiðr*, and it is widely considered to be a feminine magic. There are very few accounts of *seiðmenn* 'male wizards', and they did not seem to be respected in the position. It would have been considered emasculating, as part of the ceremony likely included sexual penetration.<sup>335</sup>

Peel Castle was the center of power on the Isle of Man for centuries, and it may have been a show of honor for the Pagan Lady to be buried there. Her grave itself was a mostly intact lintel grave, with one stone collapsed.<sup>336</sup> This is typical of the cemetery, with some bodies directly inhumated in just a coffin, and others in lintel graves. The Pagan Lady owes her preservation to the style of her grave, as most directly inhumated bodies directly inhumated were reduced to nothing more than imprints. The part of her grave which collapsed over one of her legs suffered this fate, and those bones were unsalvageable.<sup>337</sup> Looking at her physical remains, it has been determined that she suffered from severely bowed legs, and would have experienced a lot of pain while walking. This difficulty walking was because of rickets, a disease very uncommon in the Norse world.<sup>338</sup> Rickets is caused by a deficiency of vitamin D, found in the sun and in fish.<sup>339</sup> While it is not unbelievable for a person to not get enough sunlight in the far north, it is curious that the Pagan Lady apparently did not eat a diet high in fish. Fish bones were found in huge quantities during the excavations, and why the Pagan Lady did not partake is a mystery, though. It could be that her station was high enough to allow her to indulge in richer meats, like beef or mutton, to the extent that she suffered a vitamin deficiency. Her bowed legs and brittle bones would not have affected her work as a *völva*, as they used High Chairs or raised platforms to perform their rites.<sup>340</sup> Chairs were an anomaly in the Norse world, as most households used long benches for both sitting during the day and sleeping at night.

Comparing the Pagan Lady's remains to the literature, several theories emerge. First, because she is a religious figure, her impairment can be compared to those of the gods. Like Oðinn, giving up something in this world may have allowed her supernatural powers. However, rickets is not a sacrifice as it is not done intentionally. While what can be seen by the archaeological record shows that her disability was in her legs, and supernatural powers are often associated with sight, it should be remembered that eyes are soft tissue, so any evidence of an issue with her eyes would not have survived to the modern day. Additionally, the accuracy of the translation between idealized literary reconstructions and actual

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<sup>333</sup> Eiríksson, "Eirik the Red's Saga."

<sup>334</sup> Larrington, trans. *The Poetic Edda*.

<sup>335</sup> Neil S. Price, "Seiðr." In *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, (Oxbow Books, 2019), 55–190.

<sup>336</sup> Freke, *Excavations on St. Patrick's Isle*.

<sup>337</sup> *ibid.* Freke, *Excavations on St. Patrick's Isle*

<sup>338</sup> Barbara Holgate. *The Pagan Lady of Peel* St Patrick's Isle Archaeological Trust, 1987.

<sup>339</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>340</sup> Eiríksson, "Eirik the Red's Saga."

historical practice may not have been perfect. Without speaking to her and hearing her thoughts on the matter, it cannot be concluded that her power comes from her impairment as it does for Óðinn, but this is not an unreasonable possibility. A more apt comparison might be to Ivarr inn beinlausi, who also suffered a disease of the bone and practiced magic. Additionally, as a human, Ivarr operated on the same sphere of reality as the Pagan Lady. Another comparison could be made with Queen Hvit. While Queen Hvit was not physically impaired, she was seen as a foreigner in a foreign land. The ethnicity of the Pagan Lady has not been proven, but that she was practicing a Norse tradition, rather than a Manx one, tradition places her outside her religious sphere, physically. While her power may not come from her bowed legs, her career as a *völva* would have also satisfied the cultural need for every person to have a “use” in society. Her power does not come from supernatural forces in an exchange for the use of her legs, but rather from society itself, which empowered her to practice magic. Practicing magic would have been a job she could have had the ability to do despite her impairment. It, like Ivarr’s, would have also not been the only notable trait about her. Her impairment was a part of her, but it was not all of her and this was clearly reflected in how she was treated by society. The Pagan Lady was clearly a well-respected and wealthy member of the elite in Manx Norse society.

Less than forty miles from the Isle of Man, early medieval England had its own complex views of disability. Saint Cuthbert, who lived at Lindisfarne in the seventh century, was an impaired saint. This is the same monastery that was raided in 793 AD and marked the beginning of the Viking Age, linking Cuthbert and the Norse from the beginning of their expansion out of Scandinavia. The culture which Saint Cuthbert grew up and lived his life in was informed by the Bible primarily, in addition to philosophical texts by Saint Augustine of Hippo.

Saint Cuthbert, seventh century, became impaired as a child due to an injury to his knee.<sup>341</sup> The Saint developed what was referred to as “gout.”<sup>342</sup> Gout is a disease that strikes suddenly, limiting mobility, and then recedes again for a time. He spent his early years studying around England, often traveling long distances. Based on images of the Saint, he used a mobility aid similar to a cane.<sup>343</sup> He was therefore visibly impaired. The Bible, specifically Leviticus 21:16-23, prohibits those with disabilities from taking the priesthood.<sup>344</sup> However, there was a doctrinal announcement in the fourth and fifth centuries called the *Apostolic Constitutions* which “canceled out” the prohibition in Leviticus.<sup>345</sup> This allowed Saint Cuthbert to enter into the clergy. His *Life*, as recorded by Bede in the early eighth century, investigates the causes Saint Cuthbert believed to be behind his impairment. He seems to vacillate between believing that sin is the cause of his injured leg—, “were I not, for my sins, held bound by this infirmity,”— and believing that “not only the wicked but the innocent are sometimes permitted by God to be afflicted in body.”<sup>346</sup> Contradictory ideas about impairment were then present in his mind, and which he believed at a given time might have been related to his personal relationship with himself. In general, he believed that sin was a cause of impairment, but not the only cause. This is evidenced by true believers with

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<sup>341</sup> Chace, “Animal, Vegetable, Prosthesis.”

<sup>342</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>343</sup> Dominic Marnier. *St Cuthbert: His Life and Cult in Medieval Durham*. (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press Inc, 2000).

<sup>344</sup> Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*.

<sup>345</sup> *ibid.* Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*.

<sup>346</sup> Bede and Ronen, “The Prose Life of Cuthbert,” edited by McNabb, 190-205.

impairments receiving miracle healing.<sup>347</sup> His *Life* also establishes a known care network, where the impaired are helped by those around them instead of being left on their own.<sup>348</sup> While the *Life* by Bede is a good source, it should be noted that Bede changed several of the episodes from the original anonymous version. An episode from the anonymous version allows a boy with an impairment to seek healing on his own, while the same episode in Bede's version has his caregiver seek the healing for the boy.<sup>349</sup> Bede's *Life* should then be treated with some caution, as it contains the biases of someone who is not impaired recording the history of those who are.

During his life and also in his death, Saint Cuthbert had the power to heal others, but not himself. His *Life* states that he was able to heal infectious diseases, chronic illnesses, and paralysis.<sup>350</sup> However, Saint Cuthbert's own leg pained him for his whole life. There are multiple episodes where the pain in his leg leaves him bedridden for days at a time. In one such episode, an angel on horseback comes to tell him how to make the swelling go down.<sup>351</sup> In another, he is struck by an infectious disease which left him nearly paralyzed.<sup>352</sup> When he stands using his cane, frustrated that the prayers of his fellow monks did not seem to work, some of the swelling in his thigh traveled to his insides and remains there.<sup>353</sup> It is not clear whether this swelling is due to the gout or the infectious disease, but this episode does emphasize that he had a cane regularly available and used it even when not impacted by an infectious disease. In both of these cases, Saint Cuthbert is aided by an outside force and is unable to aid himself. Miracles then need a conduit—a miracle-worker—but the conduit cannot turn the power on themselves.

Saint Cuthbert should also be discussed in terms of his rarity. There are very few impaired saints from the Christian Early Medieval and Late Classical Periods, out of the hundreds who lived. His holiness in spite of his impairment is not the norm. There were many impaired people in the Early Middle Ages, who were impaired from birth, or who were injured in warfare, or who suffered from a disease such as leprosy. The lack of impaired saints is not due to a lack of impaired people in society, but due to a society that does not elevate impairment. The sainthood of Cuthbert and the handful of other impaired saints from the Early Medieval Period like Hermann of Reichenau and Alban are exceptions, not the rule. While impairment was not intrinsically tied to sin, that likely would have been a stereotype impaired people would have had to endure deal with, as can be seen in Saint Cuthbert's episodes of self-depreciation and internalized ableism wherein he blames himself for his impairment. The existence of internalized ableism necessitates the existence in this culture of disability, which is likely how Saint Cuthbert likely saw his own impairment as. This idea probably existed in the popular consciousness, possibly leading to differing treatment of the impaired.

While Saint Thomas Aquinas lived several centuries after Saint Cuthbert and Saint Augustine, his theories take into account the feelings of the impaired themselves. He says that souls must match the body in gender, impairment, and other features.<sup>354</sup> Therefore, if what Saint Augustine theorizes about Heaven is true, then there will be impaired souls in

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<sup>347</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>348</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>349</sup> Bede and Ronen, "The Prose Life of Cuthbert".

<sup>350</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>351</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>352</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>353</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>354</sup> Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*.

abled bodies and they would feel out of place. This change in body may give those who were impaired on Earth an identity crisis, as they may feel as though they are in the wrong body. While this is not part of the culture which Saint Cuthbert lived in, it may be worth mentioning because of how this idea was not yet part of popular consciousness. Saint Cuthbert would have had to think about the changes to his physical body in Heaven without the language or theory to conceptualize how he may feel about that emotionally. He certainly looked forward to the day, but he may have also felt a sense of loss at a part of his personal identity.

### The End of Time

“Brother will fight brother and be his slayer,  
Sister’s sons will violate the kinship-bond;  
Hard it is in the world, whoredom abounds,  
Axe-age, sword-age, shields are cleft asunder,  
Wind-age, wolf-age, before the world plunges headlong;  
No man will spare another.”

-Völuspá 44.<sup>355</sup>

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, and to repay every one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

-Revelation 22:12-13.<sup>356</sup>

It can be seen that there is a clear difference of outlook on impairment in these two religions. Both have impaired deities and holy figures, but how impairment is conceptualized and how the impaired are treated are different. To the Norse pagans, impairment was a normal variation in the human condition, either from birth or as a consequence of a violent lifestyle. There is no focus on miracles or cures otherwise, and the medical model does not seem to be utilized at all. There is no indication of attempting to fix the impaired, godly or mortal. The contrast with Christianity can be clearly seen in an episode from *Njáls Saga*, wherein a blind character is given sight by the Christian God for just long enough to kill his enemy.<sup>357</sup> The pagan gods did not and possibly could not do acts such as this. Christianity, on the other hand, places extreme importance on healing and miracles. Impairments are something to be fixed through faith in God, either in this life or the next.

Each religion has fundamentally different concepts of the body and of time. The Norse pagans did not believe in resurrection, but the temporary immortality of warriors in Valhöll and the return of Baldr after the events of Ragnarök. In Valhöll, warriors who died in combat spend their days locked in fighting and are resurrected each night for a feast.<sup>358</sup> However, at Ragnarök they will fight Loki’s army and cease to exist in any capacity. There is no eternity in this religion. While the world will rise again in a new cycle of creation, those

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<sup>355</sup> Larrington, trans. *The Poetic Edda*.

<sup>356</sup> *New International Version*.

<sup>357</sup> Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir, “Njáls Saga (13th c.)” In *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, edited by Cameron Hunt McNabb, (Punctum Books, 2020, 168–72).

<sup>358</sup> Sturluson. *The Prose Edda*.

who exist in this world will never see it. The afterlife for those who do not die in battle, Hel, is dark and cold. There is no better life after death, so this life should be lived well.

The Christian Apocalypse, however, is also salvation, accessible to all who repent their sins and live a holy life. This emphasis on eternal life and a new body shapes the way Christianity interacts with impairment. All earthly bodies are only temporary compared to an eternity in Heaven. Even though impairment is not seen as just a product of sin, but also part of God's creation, impaired bodies are considered impermanent and possibly insignificant in the face of eternity in a new body. After Revelation, impairment will no longer exist regardless of its ties to a person's identity. The impaired in Christendom are not treated the same as they are in the Norse world, with descriptions of the impaired seen dragging themselves or being carried towards shrines in hope of being cured, rather than attempting to focus on what they can still do. That impairment is also sometimes linked to sin likely fostered ill will towards the impaired from the rest of society.<sup>359</sup> Healing in this life and the next are closely tied, with both types of healing coming from divine power and is the main focus of any discussion of impaired people in the Christian Early Medieval Period. With very few exceptions—, consisting mainly of saints like Cuthbert or Hermann of Reichenau—, there are no stories of people with impairments who do anything but seek healing. This contrasts greatly with Norse gods, and heroes like Ivarr and Onundar, who were great warriors. It can be clearly seen that the lack of a medical model changes what was recorded and thought of the impaired in Norse society when compared to Christian society.

Through careful examination of deities, holy mortals, and lay people, it can be concluded that Norse paganism and Anglo-Saxon Christianity view disability and impairment through different lenses. Because of their contradictory concepts of eternity, the human body, and the end of time, Norse paganism views impairment through a lens of “usefulness” while Anglo-Saxon Christians use the medical model. The impermanence of the Christian earthly body and the guarantee of healing after Revelations leads to a focus on healing, while the lack of resurrection or a happy afterlife in general in paganism leads to a focus on this life rather than a non-existent next.

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<sup>359</sup> Eggers, “Selected Episodes on Healing,” edited by McNabb, 113-37.

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