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How the ‘Abortion Miracle’ Motif in Medieval Irish Hagiorgraphies Structured Gender Roles in Relation to Female Reproductivity and Sexual Sin

Lora Lynn Horner

Abstract

Focused Areas of Study: I focused in on the stories of St. Brigid of Kildare, Ciarán of Saigir, Ad mac Bríc, and Caiminnech of Aghaboe, and read the story of the Nun of Watton. These particular saints are all known to have performed abortions in which a similar ‘abortion miracle’ motif is taking place. Each story contains a different version of abortions taking place. Examples of such abortions include a baby being removed from the mother's womb before giving birth by the aid of Saintly figures. In another story, the Saint simply blesses the woman's bump and she is described as no longer having any indication of being pregnant. In another instance, the woman is restored to a complete virginal status after she is announced as no longer being pregnant by the intervention of a Saint. These ‘abortion miracles’ created structured gender roles in which a masculine figure would partake in the intervention of a female who has committed ‘sexual sin.’

Research Question

• What is the ‘Abortion Miracle’ Motif?
• Which Saints are accredited to performing abortions?
• How is gender roles structured by the actions of the abortions taking place?
• How are these abortions defined/structured in these texts?
• What resulted after these abortions took place? Example being: restoration of virginity.

Conclusion

• Medieval beliefs of abortion in relation to how abortion is understood today are two different entities.
• The sexual “sin” or shame always fell on the women for becoming pregnant.
• By performing abortions a female’s body would, in some cases, be restored to a complete virginal status.
• St. Brigid of Kildare shared unique characteristic as well as similarities to that of the male Saints who performed abortions: Ciarán of Saigir, Ad mac Bríc, and Caiminnech of Aghaboe.
• By understanding the intervention that was acted upon to these women receiving abortions asserts a patriarchal dominance over female sexuality.

Acknowledgements

Image from the portrayal of the Nun of Watton found on the website entitled: purplemotes.net
St. Brigid of Kildare and the image of an abortion scene found on: irishcentral.com
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Textual Evidence

“Medieval Irish hagiography and penitentials demonstrate remarkable flexibility in attitudes toward abortion, virginity, ‘illegitimacy,’ and the female body as a site of saintly action” (Callan, 284).

“Bruinnech’s body was the battlefield for a war waged between religious and secular male authority” (Callan, 290).

“Male incursion into reproductive matter, like those of Ad and Caiminnech, were failed attempts to appropriate control of female zone of reproductive labor” (Mistry, 608).

Bibliography