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Virginal Apprehensions Within The Liminal Monastic Space Of The Nun Of Watton

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VIRGINAL APPREHENSIONS WITHIN THE LIMINAL MONASTIC SPACE OF THE *NUN
OF WATTON*

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University North Dakota, 2018

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

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of the degree of

Master of Arts

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This thesis, submitted by Aimee Alicia Melicher in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved

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Chris Nelson
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Aimee Alicia Melicher
December 9, 2021

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To my son, Liam
Never let them tell you the odds

ABSTRACT

The *Nun of Watton* is a treatise by Ælred of Rievaulx focusing on the scandalous affair of a nun becoming pregnant by a lay brother, and through a series of events is miraculously transformed back into a virgin like state. In my thesis, I will be examining the properties of the space that the nuns of Watton inhabit and how the functions of the space affected the events that occurred by applying Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory. Additionally, I will be arguing that the Nun received a miraculous abortive churching. Those actions protected the purity of the monastery and the people within it and allowed the Nun to become virgin-like so that she could re-enter the monastic community. These events give a clear representation of how important the virginal state was in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, it not only shows how important virginity is for an individual, but also demonstrates how the virginal status affects the surrounding community and the larger communal space.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

My first reading of the *Nun of Watton* in my graduate coursework inspired me to view the construction and function of monastic spaces being focused on the virginal status of the nuns within the space. The *Nun* is a historical text and is one of the few texts that shows what the implications and reactions are when the monastic setting is a permeable space instead of an enclosed space. An enclosed monastic space functions as a barrier protecting the space and the nuns within from being exposed to the sin of the outside world and from the sight of men. The nuns within the enclosed space function and work as they are meant to by dedicating their lives to God and preserving their chastity. However, when an enclosed space becomes permeable sin is able to leak through the barrier and the space becomes liminal. A liminal space is a hybrid space, a space of in-between. Liminal spaces look and semi act like the space they are trying to be. If a monastery is a liminal space, it will continue to try to function as if it were still enclosed despite being vulnerable and potentially penetrated by sin. I discovered that the double monastery with the text was a liminal space, not an enclosed space as it should have been. Throughout the text, there is of liminal spaces within liminal spaces surrounding the Nun, who is also in a liminal state. The layering of liminality within the monastic virginal space created a growing and far-reaching severe problem that created social difficulties and political worries.

A double monastery¹ is a nun monastery (a convent), and a male monastery are joined together by a shared, common church. The use of double monasteries started early in the sixth century.² In the seventh century, double monasteries started to be established in England. The first English double monastery was founded c. 650 CE in Hartlepool, in Northern England, and was governed by Abbess Hilda of Whitby (c. 614-680).³ English double monasteries were always under the rule of the abbess or prioress. This was not always the case in other countries; sometimes the abbess ruled both sexes in the double monastery in others the abbot did.⁴

The Gilbertine double monasteries were governed differently than others in England. Gilbertine double monasteries had one prior to rule over the canons and lay brothers, three prioresses to rule over the nuns and lay sisters, and they were all under Gilbert of Sempringham (1085-1190 CE), the master of the order. Canons are ordained priests who belong to a monastic order and have taken a vow of chastity; they are also responsible for the protection of the nuns and the liturgical services of the entire community.⁵ Lay brothers also took vows of chastity but were

¹ The term double monastery, dual monastery, double houses, or dual houses are used interchangeably within scholarship. In my work, I will use the terms double monastery.

² Bateson, Mary. "Origin and Early History of Double Monasteries," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 13 (1899): 137-198.

³ Bateson, "Origin and Early History," 169.

⁴ Bateson, "Origin and Early History," 164.

⁵ Rosof, Patricia J.F. "Anchorite Base of the Gilbertine Rule," *American Benedictine Review* 33 no. 2, (June 1982): 182-194.

not ordained priests and were in charge of the manual labor for the monastery. Nuns and lay sisters also took vows of chastity. Nuns dedicated themselves to God through prayer, reading, and maintaining their chastity. Lay sisters assisted the nuns with their day to day life, such as cooking, cleaning, and mending of clothes. The Gilbertine Rule⁶ stated that the canons and lay brothers will follow the Augustinian Rule, whereas the Nuns and lay sisters will follow the Benedictine Rule. Gilbert was known as the “*magister*”⁷ of the Gilbertine Order and never held the title of abbot. He did not formally enter into the order until sometime in the 1170s at the urging of his order because he was very ill and nearing death.⁸ It was very unusual for Gilbert to remain *magister*, not join his order and become an abbot of a Gilbertine monastery. Normally, *magisters* are a prior who is elected to the position and then leaves his community to travel and serve his order. As *magister*, Gilbert traveled with two canons visiting each monastery within the order at least once a year⁹. As *magister*, Gilbert was responsible major and many minor discissions, regulate the spiritual life of each community, act as confessor to the nuns as

Canons are different than regular priests because of their vow of chastity. Priests were still allowed to have wives and families until the Second Lateran Council in 1139. Priests who already had wives when this decree was passed were required to abstain from having sexual relations with their wives, but not abandon them leaving them destitute.

⁶ Every monastic order has a Rule which governed the order in how, what, and when to pray, how to dress, when and what to eat, etc. The first religious order was the Benedictine Order. The Benedictine Rule is the foundation for all other monastic order rules. To be discussed more later.

⁷ Sykes, Katherine. *Inventing Sempringham: Gilbert of Sempringham and the Origins of the Role of the Master*. Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, 2011.

⁸ Golding, Brian. *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine Order, C. 1130-1300*. Clarendon Press, 1995.

⁹ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 103.

necessary, was in charge of the economic activity of each monastery, his approval was required for large transactions and his seal was required on all official order documents.¹⁰ The structure of command within the Gilbertine Order is important to the text the prioresses did not have as much authority as other abbesses in English double monasteries. By not having authority over both sexes in the double monastery, it jeopardized the nuns' ability to preserve their chastity and maintain enclosure of the nun monastery.

The double monastery at Watton is described in the *Nun of Watton* by Ælred of Rievaulx (1110-1167 CE) is said to house nuns and lay brothers. Ælred makes no mention of canons within the double monastery. There is evidence that Henry Murdac (d. 1153), Archbishop of York, approved for canons to be at the monastery in Watton in 1153, but there is no way of knowing or evidence that there were any canons present at the time of the events described in the text. For consistency purposes, I will be referring to the men in the Watton monastery as lay brothers, as Ælred does. If Ælred's text is accurate in that there were no canons at the Watton monastery and no prior to govern over the lay brothers to keep order. Since the nuns and prioresses had no authority over the lay brothers, they had no way to maintain their enclosure and keep the lay brothers out of their monastery.

Ælred wrote the *Nun of Watton* as a letter to a fellow unnamed priest a few years after the event occurred. Ælred was born in Hexham in the North of England,

¹⁰ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 103.

close to the border of Scotland. He spent ten years in the court of King David I of Scotland and entered the Cistercian Order in 1134 at Rievaulx. Ælred went on to become the founding abbot of Revesby Abbey in 1144, and in 1147 became the elected abbot of Rievaulx.¹¹ In his lifetime, Ælred wrote several spiritual texts as well as histories, biographies, and *vitae*. Ælred's *Nun of Watton* gives an outside view of the Gilbertine Order because Ælred is a Cistercian monk writing about the monastery. Ælred is able to give a less biased account of events and the workings of the double monastery at Watton. Additionally, no official Gilbertine documents were produced until the early thirteenth century.¹² Gilbert did write the Gilbertine Rule in 1147 CE, but it was vague and often times contradicted itself. It was not until after Gilbert's death that the Order was able to construct documents clarifying roles and rules within the Order.

There are not many scholarly works on the *Nun of Watton*, and there is very little known about the manuscript. There is only one manuscript of the Nun of Watton, and it is within Simeon of Durham's (fl. c. 1090-c. 1128) *Historia Regum*. *Historia Regum* now resides at Cambridge, Corpus Christi College as CCC MS 139. The Nun of Watton¹³ is within a collection of texts that give historical contexts to

¹¹ Dunn, Caroline. *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction, and Adultery, 1100-1500*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

¹² Freeman, Elizabeth. "Nuns in the Public Sphere: Ælred of Rievaulx's *De Sanctimoniali De Wattun* and the Gendering of Authority." *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 27, no. 1 (1996): 55-80.

¹³ Within the manuscript the text is called *Miraculum de quadam sanctimoniali de Watton*. The text is colloquially referred to by scholars as *The Nun of Watton*, and I will be using the colloquial title throughout my work.

the history of Durham, Northern England, and Scotland.¹⁴ During the production of *Historia Regum* it was “ascribed to the religious houses of Fountains, Hexham, Sewley, and Durham.”¹⁵ The *Historia Regum* focuses on the history of Northern England and the Gilbertine Order was founded and resided in Northern England. The *Nun* seems out of place next to texts like *An Account of the Battle of the Standard* (1153)¹⁶ and *History of the Foundation of the Abbey of St. Mary of York*¹⁷, which both record historical events. The *Nun* is not a traditional historiographical or bibliographical text, it does belong with the *Historia Regum* because it is the earliest and one of the few authentic accounts to the inner workings of the Gilbertine Order (1130-1539 CE). Although scholars do not know much about the *Nun* or why it is in the *Historia Regum*, Elizabeth Freeman argues that Ælred intended the text to be read as a history and not as a formal letter.¹⁸ As a history, it gives historical context to a monastic order that was active in Northern England, and it records a post-humorous miracle by Henry Murdac.

The *Nun of Watton* recounts the events of a scandal at the double monastery of Watton. A young nun began a sexual affair with a lay brother which resulted in

¹⁴ “Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 139: Simeon of Durham OSB, *Historia regum*. Richard of Hexham OSA, *De gestis regis Stephani et de bello standardii*. John of Hexham OSA, Nennius,” Parker Library on the Web: Manuscripts in the Parker Library at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, <https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/qj220gv8417>.

¹⁵ “Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 139,” <https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/qj220gv8417>.

¹⁶ *Relatio de standard* by Ælred of Rievaulx

¹⁷ *Historia fundationis abbatis Sanctae Mariae Eboracensis*

¹⁸ Freeman, Elizabeth. “The Medieval Nuns at Watton: Reading Female Agency from Male-Authorized Didactic Texts.” *Magistra* 6 no. 1 (Summer 2000): 3-36.

her becoming pregnant. Upon learning of the pregnancy, the lay brother decided to leave the monastery and abandon the Nun. The other nuns in the community became enraged when they found out about the affair and pregnancy. The other nuns beat the Nun and imprisoned her within a cell in the monastery. The nun community wanted to give the Nun to the lay brother whom she had an affair with, but when the Nun implied that she was raped the community decided to take revenge on the lay brother for defiling the Nun and putting their virginal status in jeopardy. With the help of the other lay brothers, the lay brother was lured back to the monastery and was attacked. During the attack the other nuns forced the Nun to castrate the lay brother and they shoved the castrated member into her mouth. The Nun was returned to her prison cell and the community of nuns constantly prayed for help and a solution to their problem. When the Nun was about to give birth, Henry Murdac, Archbishop of York, came to her in a dream. Murdac had brought the Nun to the monastery at Watton when she was four years old and he asked her why she was blaming him for her situation. Murdac ordered her to confess her sins and recite certain psalms.¹⁹ When the Nun woke, she recited the psalms but was unable to confess her sins. Murdac returned the next night with two angelic women, and left with a bundle of white cloth, which she thought was a baby. When the Nun woke, her stomach was flat, and her complexion returned to a healthy hue. The community of nuns accused the Nun of infanticide and deferred to

¹⁹ Which psalms were not specified in the text.

Gilbert. Gilbert declared the event a miracle and asked Ælred of Rievaulx, a neighboring Cistercian abbot, to come and confirm the miracle. Ælred went to Watton, confirmed the miracle, and later recorded it in a letter to a fellow priest.

Many scholarly texts only mention the Nun and the text in passing. A majority of scholarship is focused on Gilbert and Ælred. Instead of focusing on Gilbert or Ælred, I will be focusing on the Nun, the spaces surrounding her, how her virginal status affects those spaces, and how the text's purpose was to preserve and protect the monastic space. Freeman also discusses space in her 1996 article "Nuns in the Public Sphere" by exploring conflicting authoritative power when public and private realms are invoked within the monastic setting. Canons, priests who are a part of a religious order and had taken vows of celibacy, were in the public realm and could interact with the outside world, yet nuns, women belonging to a religious order, resided in the private realm and lived an enclosed lifestyle. Freeman explores how in the *Nun*, public and private realms are "not separate and exclusive, but rather, permeable."²⁰ Having permeable spaces creates tension in authority. Freeman examines how in the *Nun*, the nuns hold authority throughout most of the text, and only referred to a male authority, Gilbert, at the end of the text. Freeman argues Ælred was worried the nuns' actions claim monastic authority for themselves even though the nuns "recognized that not all forms of public authority could be theirs."²¹ Women having monastic authority in the public realm was not endorsed

²⁰ Freeman, "Nuns in the Public Sphere," 79.

²¹ Freeman, "Nuns in the Public Sphere," 80.

by Ælred and other male religious because their own public authority would then be challenged.²² Freeman concludes her argument by stating that while the *Nun* gives legitimate evidence and, publicly recognized religious vocations for women, the text also shows how deeply gendered religious authority was.²³

Freeman resumes her work with the *Nun* in her 2000 article "The Medieval Nuns at Watton." Freeman continues to explore the gendering of authority within this text and she examines two different ways women are represented within historical texts: women are used as overt exemplars, and women's actions not having any clear approval or disapproval attached to them.²⁴ By using the *Nun* as an example, Freeman examines how Ælred treats the Nun as a negative model and the other nuns in the community as good models to provide a clear lesson on what was acceptable behavior within the monastic setting. Freeman explains further that Ælred neither approved nor disapproved of the nuns' use of authority at Watton. In the *Nun*, there are matron nuns, who have more authority than younger nuns. The matron nuns held authority over how to punish the Nun. Ælred never describes the matron nuns' tasks or responsibilities and does not indicate whether or not their actions towards the Nun adequately passed judgement. Freeman argues that Ælred's main goal was to make the matron nuns, and all other nuns in the community, into "exemplary models for friendship but not as models for monastic

²² Freeman, "Nuns in the Public Sphere," 79.

²³ Freeman, "Nuns in the Public Sphere," 78.

²⁴ Freeman, "Medieval Nuns," 9.

authority."²⁵ Freeman concludes by stating that even though Ælred does not endorse female authority within the monastic setting, he indicates that the nuns taking the authority was acceptable within the Gilbertine community at the time. Although all the women involved remained anonymous, their show of authority gives important insight to the female experience within the community.²⁶

Giles Constable also investigates the Gilbertine community, but he examines it from mostly a historical standpoint. The Nun is not the main focus of his 1978 text "Ælred of Rievaulx and the Nun of Watton: An Episode in the Early History of the Gilbertine Order." As the title suggests, Constable focuses more on history than on the event at Watton, and the parallels that can be drawn between the Watton scandal and other historical events. Constable's textual analysis of the *Nun of Watton* centers on his claim that the Nun having a miraculous birth, and the resulting actions of the other nuns in the community towards the Nun. Constable claims that the miraculous event was "God's desire to protect the community from the bad effects of the behaviour of two of its members."²⁷ Constable does not explain why or how the event was a miraculous birth. He draws a parallel between Ælred's text and the abbess who received a miraculous birth from the Virgin Mary, and he states that the miraculous birth was an acceptable way of disposing of an

²⁵ Freeman, "Medieval Nuns," 9.

²⁶ Freeman, "Medieval Nuns," 9.

²⁷ Constable, Giles. " Ælred of Rievaulx and the Nun of Watton: An Episode in the Early History of the Gilbertine Order." *Studies in Church History Subsidia* 1 (1978): 205-26.

unwanted child.²⁸ Constable continues to argue that the arrangement of the double house, male and female monasteries connected through a common church, is the principle value of the text, and the lack of ridged legislation within the order for double houses at the time.²⁹ Constable does contradict himself with a key factor about the *Nun*. At first he implies that Gilbert was present at the time of the incident because he sent for some brothers to seize and beat the lay brother who had an affair with the nun.³⁰ Later on, Constable states Gilbert was “apparently not there at the time.”³¹ Constable concludes his text with more history about Gilbert and the Gilbertine Order, and he states that the event at Watton clearly promoted stricter discipline within the order.³²

Isaac Slater takes a very different approach to the *Nun* than Freeman or Constable. While Freeman examines gendered spatial authority and Constable explores the text historically, Slater applies Renè Girard’s (1923-2015 CE) theory which focuses on the workings of envy, violence, and the creating of a scapegoat.³³ By applying Girard’s theory to the *Nun*, Slater shows how the other nuns in the community persecuted the Nun because they felt exposed due to her sinfulness, and how the community was envious that the Nun possesses something that the

²⁸ Constable, “Ælred of Rievaulx,” 212-3.

²⁹ Constable, “Ælred of Rievaulx,” 219.

³⁰ Constable, “Ælred of Rievaulx,” 208.

³¹ Constable, “Ælred of Rievaulx,” 209.

³² Constable, “Ælred of Rievaulx,” 225.

³³ Slater, Isaac. "The Last Fetter: A Girardian Reading of Ælred of Rievaulx's "De Quadam Miraculum Mirabili"." *Literature and Theology* 26, no. 1 (March 2012).

others lack. The community is not envious because they also wanted sexual experiences; rather, they are envious and angry that the Nun is different from the rest of them and therefore sets her apart.³⁴ Ælred is also angry with the Nun and at first endorses the violence that she received.³⁵ Slater continues to explain how Ælred shifted the text from being persecuting to forgiving by implementing the miracle of God's forgiveness and the removal of the Nun's fetters. Slater concludes that it was critical for Ælred to shift the attention of the community away from their envy and anger at the Nun and the fear of social status loss.³⁶ By shifting the community's attention, they can live a life of gratitude and not a life of envy, fear, and anger.³⁷

Salih also discusses the use of violence, like Slater, and has an interest in Gilbert, like Constable. In Salih's text "Monstrous Virginit: Framing the Nun of Watton," (2001) she argues that the Nun already had an incoherent body before her rape by the lay brother, and that the Nun has never acted with the obedient disposition of a nun's virginal body.³⁸ Salih argues that when the other nuns discover the sexual transgression of the Nun, and remove the Nun's veil, it is a way to deny her identity as a member of the virginal house and destroyed the evidence of failed monastic discipline.³⁹ Salih continues to argue that when the other nuns

³⁴ Slater, "Last Fetter," 29.

³⁵ Slater, "Last Fetter," 29.

³⁶ Slater, "Last Fetter," 33.

³⁷ Slater, "Last Fetter," 34.

³⁸ Salih, Sarah, "Monstrous Virginit: Framing the Nun of Watton." *Mediaevalia* 20 (2001): 49-72.

³⁹ Salih, "Monstrous Virginit," 56.

imprisoned the Nun, isolated her, and beat her, it helped improve the Nun's disposition and helped her see herself as a part of the virginal community.⁴⁰ During the Nun's isolation, Salih argues that the late Henry Murdac, Archbishop of York, removes the child from the Nun, revirginizes her, and re-veils her so that she can rejoin her community.⁴¹ Salih continues by arguing that the violence the Nun endured produced virginal effects (not a production of virginity but a product that is similar to virginity), and the production of virginal effects is another act of violence.⁴² Coming to the end of the narrative about the Nun, Salih begins to explore Gilbert's role, or non-role, within the text and the Order itself. Salih further explores how Ælred has connections to Gilbert and how Ælred might be providing a smokescreen for Gilbert to protect him from any repercussions from the incident with the Nun.⁴³

Salih expanded her arguments on "Monstrous Virginity" in her 2001 book *Versions of Virginity*. Salih keeps her same line of argument with violence producing virginal effects, and expands on it by stating that the Nun voluntarily subjugating herself through non-sacramental confession to her community is a replication of the "production of a monastic subject in the veiling ceremony."⁴⁴ Salih continues by stating that Henry Murdac performs the ceremonial revealing within the Nun's

⁴⁰ Salih, "Monstrous Virginity," 58.

⁴¹ Salih, "Monstrous Virginity," 61.

⁴² Salih, "Monstrous Virginity," 63.

⁴³ Salih, "Monstrous Virginity," 65.

⁴⁴ Salih, Sarah, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*. D.S. Brewer, 2001.

dream.⁴⁵ Salih argues that virginity “is marked as feminine, despite the gender-neutral basis of monastic theory; the practices which produce monastic virginity are those which are specific to nuns rather than monks.”⁴⁶ Salih further argues that the feminization of virginity is found in social spaces, and monastic virginity is based on the practices of individual nuns and is constantly renegotiated.⁴⁷ Salih concludes by stating that monastic virginity is difficult to attain, and while the process for obtaining monastic virginity is clear, there is much that can go wrong which will result in chaos and abjection instead of renegotiation, as seen in the *Nun*.⁴⁸

My work will examine how the monastic space in the *Nun* was a liminal space at its creation and not an enclosed space as it was supposed to be. Furthermore, I will explore how the liminality of the space affects the virginal status of the nuns, how the Nun of Watton herself was in a liminal state, and how layers of constructed liminal spaces attempt to preserve their virginal statuses. The layered liminality allowed the Nun to receive a “miraculous abortive churching.” Most scholars do not discuss what happened when the Nun was no longer pregnant. They avoid the issue by stating something to the effect of “the pregnancy was no more” or claiming there was a miraculous birth or abortion without giving evidence. I argue that because time was of the essence, the Nun received an “all in one” miraculous

⁴⁵ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 159.

⁴⁶ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 164.

⁴⁷ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 164.

⁴⁸ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 165.

abortion and churching (purification),⁴⁹ which I will refer to as a miraculous abortive churching. Through the process of having a miraculous abortive churching the Nun was returned to a virgin-like state. A virgin-like state is when a woman appears and performs as a virgin, but in reality, she is not virginal. Because this text is one of a kind, I hope that my work with the *Nun* will spark new conversations and scholarship about the text. I believe that this text is extremely important because it gives explicit details of what happens when a monastic space is permeable and no longer fully enclosed.

⁴⁹ To be discussed more later.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Enclosure is a means of male control over female monastic spaces and their bodies. Through this control, the Church was able to dictate how monastic women dressed, ate, behaved, etc. But the Church desired male control over all women's bodies and spaces, not just monastic women. The Patristic writers and other theologians heavily discussed the expectations of women. The Patristic writers all agreed that the most ideal state for a woman to be in was a virginal state. The Nun, in Ælred's text, should represent the most ideal state for a woman because she is a Bride of Christ, and as a Bride of Christ the Nun should be modeling herself after the Blessed Virgin Mary, the ideal woman and role model for perpetual virginity.

However, there were many questions surrounding Mary from the patristic era to around the fourteenth century. Theologians questioned Mary's virginity, whether or not she had original sin, if she was conceived by immaculate conception, and if she had immaculate animation. Answering these questions was paramount to Mary becoming the perfect model for virginity. Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury (1033-1109 CE), in his text *Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became Man)* (c. 1098 CE), debated that Mary did not contract original sin *in utero*.⁵⁰ He argued that "original sin cannot begin at conception but only at animation. Because the parents produce only the flesh and not the soul, original sin cannot be seminally transmitted in

⁵⁰ Adams, Marilyn McCord. "The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary: A Thought-Experiment in Medieval Philosophical Theology." *The Harvard Theological Review* 103, no. 2 (April 2010): 133-59.

conception itself.”⁵¹ Anselm also explains this point through a “juridical or quasi-legal explanation of inheritance.”⁵² He hypothesized that God intended for Adam to reproduce the same way that he was created; however, since Adam fell, his offspring would reproduce in the conditions in which he fell. Anselm’s argument makes biological descent relevant not because of the actions of the biological parents, “but because it makes the offspring members of the class to whom the laws apply.”⁵³ Anselm put Mary in a different class than the rest of humanity⁵⁴, because she was all conceived “outside the scope of natural human reproductive powers.”⁵⁵

However, being conceived outside of natural human reproductive powers does not mean that Mary or any of the others were immaculately conceived. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153 CE) argued that to say Mary was conceived through immaculate conception would be giving her a false honor and it “would undermine the preeminence of Christ.”⁵⁶ The question of her conception then introduced on questions as to whether she had original sin and if she received immaculate animation. Duns Scotus (d. 1308 CE), a thirteenth century Franciscan friar, gave the most straightforward definition of immaculate animation. Marilyn

⁵¹ Adams, “Immaculate Conception,” 136.

⁵² Adams, “Immaculate Conception,” 137.

⁵³ Adams, “Immaculate Conception,” 137.

⁵⁴ Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah, and John the Baptist, son of Zachariah and Elizabeth, were also conceived outside the scope of natural human reproductive powers, which also puts them in a different class than the rest of humanity.

⁵⁵ Adams, “Immaculate Conception,” 137.

⁵⁶ Adams, “Immaculate Conception,” 138.

McCord Adams states that for Scotus, "immaculate animation is achieved by infusing grace in the soul from the first moment of existence."⁵⁷ This means that Mary would be cleansed of original sin when her soul entered her body, which is when her body began to have a human resemblance (about sixty days in utero). There were many theologians who argued about this matter-some being for immaculate animation and some not. Bonaventure (1221-1274 CE), Cardinal Bishop of Albano and Franciscan theologian, argued for immaculate animation with three main points. First, that it only fits that Christ's mother would be exempt from original sin for she is worthy of it. Second, because she is the mother of Christ, she is marked with having a higher degree of holiness than all the other saints but lower than Christ's. And thirdly receiving immaculate animation does not violate the preeminence of Christ and her grace is dependent on Christ; meaning that if it were not for him, she would not have it. Where Christ always had grace, Mary received it independently, just as other saints did. However, what sets Mary apart from the other saints is that they were freed and given grace by Christ after they fell (already had original sin), but she was given immaculate animation and freedom from original sin to sustain her so she would not fall.⁵⁸

Essentially, Mary receives many merits and gifts of grace because of Christ. Another one of these merits is her intact virginity through conception and birth of Christ. Mary's virginity postpartum was another heavily debated subject among

⁵⁷ Adams, "Immaculate Conception," 153.

⁵⁸ Adams, "Immaculate Conception," 143.

theologians. Radbertus (785-865 CE), an early medieval Carolingian theologian and abbot of Corbie, in fiercely argued that Mary's virginity remained intact after the birth of Christ. Radbertus's main point in this argument was that Mary "had experienced none of the travails linked with ordinary childbirth."⁵⁹ In addition, she did not have any of the bodily impurities associated with childbirth, and he draws attention to the fact that her hymen is still intact.⁶⁰ There are in fact biblical stories to reenforce Radbertus's argument of Mary's intact hymen. In the *Protevangelium of James* (c. 150 CE), an apocryphal gospel, the midwife Salome and another unnamed midwife are called to attend to the Virgin Mary during the birth of Christ. However, upon their arrival Christ had already been born. The unnamed midwife instantly believed that it was a miraculous virgin birth, but Salome doubted this, and attempted to verify Mary's virginity; this was usually completed through a postpartum visual and tactile examination. But when Salome attempts to perform the examination, her hand and arm wither. She immediately repents, an angel tells her to touch the infant or his clothing, and by doing so she is healed.⁶¹ The apocryphal gospel serves as textual evidence for Mary's virginity and her divinity, and also serves as a warning for doubt the divine. Their goal was to define her

⁵⁹ Elliot, Dylan. "The Priest's Wife: Female Erasure and the Gregorian Reform." In *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*, 81-106: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

⁶⁰ Elliot, "The Priest's Wife," 109.

⁶¹ Swann, Alaya. "'By Expreste Experiment': The Doubting Midwife Salome in Late Medieval England." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 89, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 1-24.

divinity compared to Christ's divinity, and her virginal status was highly bound up within her divine status because she was the weaker gender.

As theologians continued to discuss the Virgin Mary's perpetual virginity and divinity, her status of having freedom from sexual pollutions and the taint of original sin solidified, and it "exacerbated the dichotomy between Mary and the mundane woman."⁶² This dichotomy propelled Mary into the optimum role model for virginity and chastity for women. The debates surrounding the Virgin Mary continued and was not settled until December 8, 1854 when Pope Pius IX (1792-1878 CE) "declared the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary her exemption, at the moment of her conception, for the inheritance of original sin."⁶³ The acceptance of the Virgin Mary being conceived through immaculate conception has gained support throughout the centuries. The University of Paris started requiring scholars to take an oath to defend the doctrine of Mary's immaculate conception in 1497, and in 1708, Pope Clement XI (1649-1721 CE) decided to elevate the feast celebrating Mary's conception to a holy day of obligation for the Church instead of it being an optional feast day.⁶⁴ However, Pope Pius IX did not make the decision to resolve the debates surrounding Mary because of a theological breakthrough; Pius resolved the debate as a political move while exiled in Gaeta in

⁶² Elliot, "The Priest's Wife," 114.

⁶³ Alvarez, Elizabeth Hayes. "The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary: Conflict and Conversation, 1854-1855." In *The Valiant Woman: The Virgin Mary in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*, 17-38: University of North Carolina Press, 201

⁶⁴ Alvarez, "The Immaculate Conception," 20.

1849.⁶⁵ Pius used his papal authority to declare the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception as dogma of the Church, and it was not contested by the bishops of the Church.⁶⁶ While the debates surrounding the Virgin Mary have a foundation within theology, it was politics that decided Mary's role within the Church. The ideals of virginity also have a foundation within theology, but politics have a deciding factor as to how to apply those ideals. This is reflected in the *Nun* by the Nun apparently losing her virginal status but becoming virgin-like after receiving a miraculous abortive churcing. Ælred has political control via his gender and his position within the Church, and through his text Ælred dictates what the status of the Nun's virginity. Political control is focused on how men control society compared to theology which is the study of how God wants society to live. Politics influencing the application of the ideals of virginity means that men have shifted the focus of virginity away from serving God and instead use virginity as a means of control over women.

After the tentative establishment of the Virgin Mary's virginity and immaculate animation in the Middle Ages, she not only became the role model for virginity, but also became a defender of virginity. In the fourteenth-century, imagery of the Virgin Mary enclosed in a garden (*hortus conclusus*) became common in Western Europe. Thus, was inspired from verse 4:12 of the *Song of Songs*, which was first interpreted as expressing Mary's perpetual virginity: "hortus

⁶⁵ Alvarez, "The Immaculate Conception," 20.

⁶⁶ Alvarez, "The Immaculate Conception," 21.

concludes soror mea sponsa hortus conclusus fon signatus. [My sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up.]”⁶⁷ The interpretation of the verse later expanded to include Mary being the embodiment of the virginal Church, and thus, a Bride of Christ in addition to being the Mother of Christ.⁶⁸ Mary was the ideal woman. She was “obedient to God and to her spouse, a loving and nurturing mother, chaste and virtuous and humble and kind.”⁶⁹ Being the ideal woman made her perfect for being the model of virginity and for every medieval woman to attempt to be like Mary. Not only was Mary the ideal model for female virginity, but also she was the champion of priestly chastity. Some priests devoted themselves to Mary as a spouse similarly to how nuns became brides of Christ. For example, Edmund Rich (1175-1240 CE), future archbishop of Canterbury, was encouraged to seal his chastity through a marriage to the image of the Virgin. Edmund had a marriage ceremony with a statue of the Virgin, and he had a ring engraved onto the statue as a symbol of his commitment. While not everyone claimed Mary as a substitute wife, this motif increased throughout the Middle Ages.⁷⁰

While Mary represents humanity’s rebirth and the ideal virgin, Eve became the antitype of that image.⁷¹ While Eve has never been looked upon kindly by

⁶⁷ “Canticum Canticorum-Chapter 4.” Vulgate.Org. https://vulgate.org/ot/songofsolomon_4.htm.

⁶⁸ Sauer, Michelle M., *Gender in Medieval Culture*. Bloomsbury, 2015

⁶⁹ Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 50.

⁷⁰ Elliot, “The Priest’s Wife,” 114.

⁷¹ Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 51.

theologians, becoming the Mary antitype made her irredeemable. Eadmer (c. 1060-1128 CE), secretary to and biographer of St. Anselm, argued that Eve's transgressions in the Garden suggested that she wanted to be like God and automatically aligned her with Lucifer, the Devil. She became the seduced of the serpent, the seducer of Adam, and therefore man, and overall, the downfall of humanity to make it stand on "sullied menstrual rags (Isa. 64.6)"⁷² in relation to God. In order for medieval women not to follow the footsteps of Eve, patristic writers heavily discussed the virtues of a virgin and what was required for a woman to be the ideal virgin. The root of medieval Christian virginity ideals stems from ancient Israeli beliefs and from the Jews of the Talmudic era, "who esteemed female virginity enough to verify its presence or absence."⁷³ according to chastity narratives that are recorded in the Pentateuch and the Talmud. Kathleen Coyne Kelly warns in her book *Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (2000), that these recordings of virginity tests have the potential to be literary inventions, but even if the narratives are inventions, they are not to be discarded. The presence of virginity and chaste narratives within religious texts shows the great cultural importance of virginity and virginal testing (to be discussed more later).

Virginity was a primary subject for the patristic writers; however, it was more than just virginity itself. It was how virginity was connected with spirituality,

⁷² Elliot, "The Priest's Wife," 113.

⁷³ Kelly, Kathleen Coyne. "Hymenologies: The Multiple Signs of Virginity." In *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, 17-39: Routledge, 2000.

whether a virgin was or was not a bride of Christ, how virginity affected people socially, and how virginity was viewed differently for men and women. Ambrose (d. 397 CE), Jerome (d. 420 CE), and Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) collectively believed in the importance of virginity, but all for very different reasons. While Ambrose and Jerome overlap in some ways, Augustine takes a completely different view on the matter. Kate Cooper accurately argues that the discussion around virginity is not really about women or about sexual continence, but rather authority and social order.⁷⁴ The patristic writings on virtue and virginity will “tell us more about the thinking of the men who wrote the texts (and about their own struggles for status and authority) ...”⁷⁵ This struggle is particularly evident within Ambrose and Jerome’s writings.

While the two writers had their differences, Joyce E. Salisbury argues that they shared the view that there are two realms: the spiritual realm that is heaven and the earth after the fall. They further state that each realm is represented within a person, and that “each person had to choose at any moment to what degree he or she would participate in each realm.”⁷⁶ Men represented the mind and were naturally closer to the spiritual realm; whereas, women were of the physical realm, carnal in nature, and naturally sexual beings.⁷⁷ While men were closer to the

⁷⁴ Hunter, David G. “The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine.” *Church History* 69, no. 2 (Jun. 2000): 281-303.

⁷⁵ Hunter, “The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church,” 283.

⁷⁶ Salisbury, Joyce E. “The Latin Doctors of the Church on Sexuality.” *Journal of Medieval History* 12 (1986): 279-89.

⁷⁷ Salisbury, “The Latin Doctors,” 280.

spiritual realm, they did become sexual in the presence of women. However, both writers did agree that this sexual temptation could be overturned for both men and women through the perseverance of the mind. Jerome states that “the love of the flesh is overcome by the love of the spirit.”⁷⁸ Jerome pushed this idea that the spirit, therefore the mind, can overcome sexuality. Jerome states that if a woman “wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man.”⁷⁹ This is truly not only a very interesting idea but also could be viewed as a heretical one and in fact, was viewed that way by some. While Jerome is often cited for being very critical of women, he did defend, and apologized at the same time, for teaching of holy scripture to women.

Many of Jerome’s closest associates were women widows,⁸⁰ and in Letter 54 to the widow Furia, he gives her spiritual agency because she is achieving the struggle of a celibate ascetic lifestyle.⁸¹ In Letter 65, Jerome responds to criticism that he associates more with women, than men. He justifies himself by listing biblical women who have distinguished themselves for virtue and learning and assures Principia, the recipient of the letter and a lifelong virgin, that he has “provided this litany of female saints so that she will not be ashamed of her female sex.”⁸² He goes further by presenting “Principia’s companions, Marcella and Asella,

⁷⁸ Jerome, "Letter 22: To Eustochium." New Advent, 2020, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001022.htm>.

⁷⁹ Salisbury, “The Latin Doctors,” #. Originally from: *Commentariorum 3* in MPL 26:533

⁸⁰ Hunter, “The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church,” 292.

⁸¹ Hunter, “The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church,” 291.

⁸² Hunter, “The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church,” 292.

as 'instructors both in the study of scripture and in chastity of mind and body."⁸³

Again, Jerome gives women not only spiritual agency but also appoints them to stations to instruct other women in being virtuous and chaste. Jerome believed that biblical study and an ascetic, chaste lifestyle was the key to optimal spirituality. Furthermore, he believed that this could not only be achieved by virgins, those who have never had sexual experiences, but also by widows as well.

While Ambrose and Jerome agreed that the mind could overcome the desire of the flesh, they had very different views on virginity and the best way for a woman to live her life. While both Jerome and Ambrose do acknowledge that some sex is necessary for the continuation of humanity, but as a whole, they both discouraged it. Ambrose took the matter further than Jerome. He praised women for being virginal, he also gave just as much praise to those who were widowed and living an ascetically chaste lifestyle. However, Ambrose encouraged young women to embrace the life of perpetual virginity to become a "virgin bride."⁸⁴ Ambrose argued that the church itself was a virgin; he states, "And so holy church, who is free from the stain of intercourse and fruitful in childbirth, is a virgin by her chastity, a mother by her offspring."⁸⁵ Ambrose uses this argument and applies it to the desired ascetic lifestyle of the individual Christian woman.⁸⁶ Ambrose continues by creating a grandiose status for the virginal brides of Christ; he claims that the

⁸³ Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church," 292-3.

⁸⁴ Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church," 285 & 288.

⁸⁵ Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church," 286.

⁸⁶ Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church," 286.

“Holy Spirit, speaking through the divine Scriptures, has assigned to the virgin three special gifts: royalty, gold, and beauty.”⁸⁷ The royalty is her status as a bride of the king, the gold refers to her body appearing even more splendid as it is consecrated by the divine Spirit, and of her beauty, which is unimaginable since she is the beloved of God.⁸⁸

To be a “virginal bride,” Ambrose specifically means that the woman was a consecrated virgin, not just someone who embraces a celibate lifestyle. This is a key difference between Jerome and Ambrose. For Jerome, any woman living the ascetically chaste lifestyle could be a bride of Christ, but for Ambrose, they must be a consecrated virgin. To be a consecrated virgin, the woman went through a special ritual ceremony which was presided over by their bishop and is called the taking of the veil or *flammeum*.⁸⁹ This ritual became a formal practice in the Western church in the fourth-century, and Ambrose was a primary source for its development and instatement. The taking of the veil was modeled after a Roman wedding ceremony. The veiling ceremony created a new formal relationship between the virgin to Christ, to the community, and to the bishop who now undertook ecclesiastical supervision over the newly veiled virgin.⁹⁰ For Ambrose, being a part of a veiling ceremony puts him in a position of power. By forming a formal relationship with the nun through a veiling ceremony, Ambrose, as a bishop puts into effect

⁸⁷ Hunter, “The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church,” 287.

⁸⁸ Hunter, “The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church,” 287.

⁸⁹ Hunter, “The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church,” 288.

⁹⁰ Hunter, “The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church,” 288-9.

paterfamilias: "Ambrose himself alludes to the 'fatherly' status of the bishop at several places in his ascetic writings."⁹¹ By Ambrose putting himself in the role of a "father figure," it gives him control over the virgins and allows him to be a spiritual gatekeeper for virgins who intend to be Brides of Christ.

Both Ambrose and Jerome agreed that sex within marriage⁹² was natural; however, they also both agreed that virginity was the best state in which a person exist. Their main concerns were that sex was associated with heat⁹³ and therefore, lust and desire: "If sex were hot, then anything else that is hot leads to sexuality."⁹⁴ Jerome was especially concerned with the effects of heat produced by food and wine. He believed that the heat of food and wine within the body would bring forth the heat of lust and therefore temptation for the person: "...not that the Creator and Lord of all takes pleasure in a rumbling and empty stomach, or in fevered lungs; but that these are indispensable as a means to the preservation of chastity."⁹⁵ While eating was necessary, an overindulgence of food and wine was a threat to chastity and is the sin of gluttony. Overindulgence was especially dangerous for women as "they were carnal and sexual within themselves by

⁹¹ Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church," 289.

⁹² Salisbury, "The Latin Doctors," 282. "...I acquiesce in marriage, lest I should seem to condemn nature" (*Against Jovinianus 1:8*)

⁹³ Salisbury, "The Latin Doctors," 282.

⁹⁴ Salisbury, "The Latin Doctors," 282.

⁹⁵ Jerome, "To Eustochium."

nature."⁹⁶ An overindulgence of any kind could lead to the heat of desire enflaming them, and then they would tempt men to be sexual beings instead of spiritual ones.

Augustine of Hippo's views on sex and sexuality greatly differed from Jerome and Ambrose. Where they believed that virginity was a representation of purity and sex (even within a marriage despite it being natural) was unclean, Augustine argued that the "spirit is a good and the flesh is a good."⁹⁷ Augustine stated that God created people with needs such as "the urge for wisdom, health and friendship. To satisfy these needs, God provided good things: learning for wisdom, food, drink, and sleep for health, and marriage and intercourse for friendship."⁹⁸ This foundation took away from Jerome and Ambrose's belief that original sin started with sex. Augustine created a new understanding of original sin; for Jerome and Ambrose, it started with sex within the Garden of Eden, but for Augustine, sin began with disobeying God. Augustine argued that there was supposed to be sex within the Garden, but it was sex without pleasure and was solely for reproductive purposes.⁹⁹ Augustine argued that once Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, their emotions and bodies were no longer subservient to their will,¹⁰⁰ and this brought on the passions of lust. Augustine states, "For in its disobedience, which subjected the sexual organs solely to its own impulses and snatched them from the will's authority, we

⁹⁶ Salisbury, "The Latin Doctors," 208.

⁹⁷ Salisbury, "The Latin Doctors," 285. Originally from: Augustine, *Continence* 7.18

⁹⁸ Salisbury, "The Latin Doctors," 285. Originally from: Augustine, *The Good of Marriage* 9 in Deferrari 1955:22.

⁹⁹ Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 49.

¹⁰⁰ Salisbury, "The Latin Doctors," 285.

see a proof of the retribution imposed on man for that first disobedience."¹⁰¹

Consequently, the rest of humanity would be unable to control their sexual organs.

Augustine believed that since disobedience led to the being out of control of one's sexual organs and passions, the way to remedy the situation was to focus on one's rational side and focus on God's gifts. Additionally, he believed in practicing humility with rationality. With this belief, he rejected Jerome and Ambrose's requirement of fasting. Augustine felt that it was prideful to think that by simply fasting, a person could conquer lust. By this reasoning, fasting to prevent lust is counterintuitive; having pride in believing that lust could be conquered by fasting only leads to more passions and therefore more lust. Augustine argued that humility was the true central virtue, not virginity.¹⁰² This completely separated Augustine's thinking from Jerome and Ambrose's. Where Jerome and Ambrose were with sins of the flesh, Augustine was most concerned with sins towards the spirit. Although Augustine was more concerned about humility, obedience, and a rational focus on God compared to Jerome and Ambrose whose focus was on chastity and virginity, all of their concepts go into the ideals that surround virginity. To be considered a virgin, it is for a person to be in "the ideal state of perfection for human existence."¹⁰³ To be in this state would mean a woman must be physically, socially, and spiritually pure. To be physically pure did not necessarily mean to have

¹⁰¹ Salisbury, "The Latin Doctors," 286. Originally from: Augustine, *The City of God* 14.21

¹⁰² Salisbury, "The Latin Doctors," 286.

¹⁰³ Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 48.

an intact hymen or to have 'virginal blood' after having penetrative sex for the first time (ideally on a woman's wedding day). As Kelly argues, "it was the condition of the uterus, not the presence or absence of the hymen, that was believed to be the most reliable sign of female virginity."¹⁰⁴ Kelly's argument is congruent with Augustine's statement that "the holiness of the body lies not in the integrity of its parts."¹⁰⁵ Theologians came to this conclusion because there could be circumstances where a woman would not bleed on her wedding night. For example, a woman could have a past injury that damaged the hymen, or she could have been malnourished when she was married. Under either of these circumstances, she possibly would not bleed, or bleed enough to be noticeable. Therefore, the belief that an intact hymen was a sign of virginity was set aside and the focal points of virginity were dictated by the integrity of the uterus and whether or not the woman's behavior was chaste.

Many scholars address physical, spiritual, and social virginal purity separately. I argue that these ideals can be addressed together as each one affects the other. I also argue that social virginal purity is most important for a woman to maintain. Each ideal of virginity overlaps with the others. For example, if a woman eats too much food or drinks too much wine, she would be taking their mind off God due to overindulging; this would be considered being spiritually impure because she is focusing on her own gratification and not God's. Additionally,

¹⁰⁴ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 18.

¹⁰⁵ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 33.

overindulging will enflame the woman and cause her lustful passions to arise. This would be considered being physically and spiritually impure because she lost control of her sexual organs, and she is then focused on herself and not God. Especially dangerous for several reasons. A woman who has lustful desires might tempt a man into sexual intercourse, or (and perhaps worse) she might masturbate and defile herself. As Jerome states "virginity can be lost even by a thought"¹⁰⁶ meaning that the woman does not need to physically masturbate to lose her virginity. Instead, she can mentally masturbate by thinking impure thoughts. Lastly, the production of lust and desire affects the space that the woman inhabits and therefore affects those who are around her. Her lust will become like a disease, infect everyone else around her with lustful sin as well, and she will become socially known as an overindulging lustful person. Thus, one action can cause her to lose physical, spiritual, and social virginity. Furthermore, a woman did not actually have to have penetrative sex with a man in order to lose her virginity. Jerome gives specific examples to virgins on how not to dress or walk stating:

Their robes have but a narrow purple stripe, it is true; and their head-dress is somewhat loose, so as to leave the hair free. From their shoulders flutters the lilac mantle which they call "*ma-forte*;" they have their feet in cheap slippers and their arms tucked up tight-fitting sleeves. Add to these marks of their profession an easy gait, and you have all the virginity that they possess.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 52.

¹⁰⁷ Jerome, "Letter 22: To Eustochium."

Jerome essentially states that that the virgins might as well be prostitutes if they were going to dress loosely with their hair free and walk with an easy gait. The looseness of their dress and legs advertise an openness of their body and therefore the “marks of their profession”. Kelly argues that Jerome is referring to physical body performances, and those performances would affect a person’s physical virginity. However, she also argues that “virginity is produced and maintained in a *discursive* space that takes precedence over the actual *physical* space that is may be said to occupy.”¹⁰⁸ This statement takes away from her argument of physical actions solely affecting physical virginity. Per this line of argument, the actions that occur within the discursive space produce virginity. When virginity is produced within the space it affects everyone in the space, because the person producing the ideals of virginity are evoking that space to work in a manner where the rules of virginity and chastity are adhered to. If the space is viewed as a discursive space, a space of knowledge and interpretation, the people within the evoked virginal space will not only be affected by the work that is happening in the space, but also will “carry” it with them when they are physically out of that space. They will learn from the chastity being produced by the virgin and potentially enact the knowledge they gained from being within the virginal space. Therefore, the physical actions (physical virginity) of a person also affects others within and outside of their space, making the physical actions part of social virginity.

¹⁰⁸ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 33.

Social virginity is the most important of the different aspects of virginity. A woman can be spiritually and physically pure, but if society does not view them that way, then they are not treated with the reverence and respect a virgin would normally get. The loss of social virginity can have serious effects on a woman and her community, if a woman was considered socially impure, she would lose her social connections within the society because it was believed that her sinfulness would affect others around her. Furthermore, being socially impure would make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the woman to be able to make a favorable marriage match.

Since social virginity was so important for a woman and her community virginal testing pre- and post-marriage became a social practice, which started pre-Christianity with the Talmudic Jewish people. There were a variety of ways to perform virginal testing pre- and post-marriage. For example, "according to Deuteronomy 22:13, if a man believes that his wife was not a virgin at the time of marriage, he may declare publicly that he did not find, as the Hebrew has it, *betulim*, 'evidence of virginity.'"¹⁰⁹ It was then up to the bride's parents to provide evidence of her virginity and were called to "spread the garment before the elders of the city."¹¹⁰ Kelly warns that this might lead readers to believe that the spreading

¹⁰⁹ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 19

¹¹⁰ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 33

of a garment is to show blood evidence of consummation; however, because of the ambiguous phrasing, it is difficult to say for sure what the text exactly means.¹¹¹ While it can be conclusively said that the Talmudic Jews did believe in blood evidence as a sign of virginity, there is no evidence to say that they believed it came from the hymen as medieval Christians believe. However, there are cases that show that the Talmudic Jews knew that blood evidence was not always reliable. Such cases included women having “neither blood of menstruation nor the blood of a virgin,”¹¹² a bride suffering from malnutrition and therefore not being able to bleed, and of women injuring themselves in which virginal blood flowed without them having sexual intercourse.¹¹³

Other methods of testing began to emerge such as sitting on a wine cask, as suggested by Rabbi Gamliel (d. 52 CE). His theory was that if a non-virgin sat on the cask, he would be able to smell the fumes of the wine through her mouth, whereas with a virgin he could not.¹¹⁴ This theory was supported and coincides with Giulia Sissa’s research in *Greek Virginity* (1990) that the female’s body is open at both ends¹¹⁵, and viewed the uterus as a mouth that could open and close.¹¹⁶ The open and close theory was supported by many, and continued to influence

¹¹¹ Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 51.

¹¹² Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 51.

¹¹³ Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 51.

¹¹⁴ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 33.

¹¹⁵ “Both ends” referring to the top opening of the female body, the mouth, and the bottom end of the female body, (the vagina).

¹¹⁶ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 22. For further reading: Sissa, Giulia. *Greek Virginity*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Harvard University Press, 1990.

alternative virginity testing into the Middle Ages. For instance, Guiliemus de Saliceto (1210-1277 CE) believed that a tight vagina was an indication of a virgin,¹¹⁷ with the reasoning that a tight vagina indicates that it was closed versus a loose vagina indicates that it had already been opened. de Saliceto also believed that the shape and size of the vagina and cervix were indicators of virginity. To examine the size and shape would require a physician or an experienced midwife.¹¹⁸ Niccolo Falcucci (d. c. 1412 CE), an Italian physician, also suggested fumigation falling in line with Rabbi Gamaliel. Falucucci suggested women be fumigated with coal in order to test for virginity. If the woman could smell the odor, then she was not a virgin, and if she was given a drink and urinated immediately after the fumigation, she was found not to be a virgin.¹¹⁹ Urinalysis also became a popular method for determining virginity. The text *De secretis mulierum* (Of the Secrets of Women) (ca. late thirteenth CE) states that if a man wants to find out if a particular woman is a virgin, he only need to examine her urine for it should be "clear and lucid, sometimes white, sometimes sparkling."¹²⁰ If the woman's urine was muddy in color, it was an indication of the blood from her first intercourse and male sperm mixing together.¹²¹ de Saliceto also indicates that the urinalysis method of testing

¹¹⁷ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 29.

¹¹⁸ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 29.

¹¹⁹ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 29.

¹²⁰ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 29.

¹²¹ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 29.

reveals that a virgin “urinates with a subtle hiss, and indeed takes longer than a small boy”¹²² to urinate.

However, these tests and analysis seem to be more social and pseudo-science based as the patristic writers who invented the ideals of virginity and chastity did not agree with the concept of virginity testing. Ambrose rejected the idea of needing physical proof to validate virginity stating it, “will it be allowable to demand an inspection of the private parts, and will holy virgins always be handed over to sport of this sort, which is horribly shocking to the eye and ear?”¹²³ He further states that even inspection by a midwife cannot be trusted as anyone is susceptible to error and bribery.¹²⁴ John Chrysostom (d. 402 CE), archbishop of Constantinople and a patristic writer, also disagreed with virginity testing stating that demanding an examination to validate virginity is a desire to establish authority over virginity. Formally placing Church authority over virginity implies that the Church has a stronger claim to declaring the virginal status than God does. He also agrees with Ambrose in that mistakes can happen during an examination, citing an incident when a midwife accidentally destroyed a young virgin’s maidenhead.¹²⁵ Augustine also agrees with Ambrose and Chrysostom stating the same reasons for his objections. Despite the patristic writers’ objections to virginity testing, there was still many of apprehensions surrounding virginity and women

¹²² Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 29.

¹²³ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 34.

¹²⁴ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 34.

¹²⁵ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing*, 35.

maintaining it. Within the monastic setting, nuns took vows of chastity which helped guard them from sexual transgressions. The vow of chastity allowed them to focus only on God and not on their bodily desires. Nun communities were enclosed communities, and they had no contact with the outside world. The nuns generally relied on partnerships their canon counterparts, who lived in a monastery nearby, to bring supplies as needed, as well as to provide religious needs such as saying mass and hearing confession. Double monasteries, although controversial, aimed to make the partnerships between convents and monasteries easier by having the nuns' and canons' houses in the same location connected by a common, shared church.

The Gilbertine Order was the only monastic order to have double houses in England. Gilbert of Sempringham, founder of the order, established double houses as his order grew. Gilbert's first communities were in Sempringham (1131 CE) and Haverholme (1139 CE),¹²⁶ located in Northern England. Gilbert had originally intended his first communities to be for men, but he could not find any to join him. Brian Golding states that "[Gilbert] writes that he could not find men, and so 'I found girls, who had been frequently taught by us, and who wished, having put aside earthly cares, to devote themselves to divine service without hindrance.'"¹²⁷ Like Jerome, Gilbert makes a kind of apology or excuse as to why he is working with women. Gilbert created a challenging situation when he created his

¹²⁶ Golding, Brian. *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine Order, c. 1130-C.1300*. Clarendon Press, 1995.

¹²⁷ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 17.

communities. With Gilbert having no male monasteries, and no other male monasteries of other orders nearby, all the responsibility for these first communities fell on him. Gilbert intended for the convents to function as a community of anchoresses instead of a traditional community of nuns; he refers to the nuns as *inclusae Christi* (enclosed in Christ) and *ancillae Christi* (handmaid of Christ), terms typically applied to anchoresses.¹²⁸ Gilbert created similar conditions for the nuns as anchorites¹²⁹ had, such as: being segregated from the world, pledging eternal virginity for their bridegroom, Christ, and exiling themselves from their family homes, and being a solitary, stationary religious people.¹³⁰ As the Order grew, the nuns began to live in traditional convent communities and not as solitary beings. These convent communities eventually evolved into double monasteries and were controversial at the time and considered to be experimental in England during the twelfth century. The Gilbertine double monasteries potentially would have had more success and the scandals that occurred¹³¹ would have been avoided if Gilbert had been more attentive and responsible for his order.

In 1147, Gilbert tried to abandon his communities and attempted to cede them to the Cistercian Order.¹³² Gilbert traveled to Cîteaux to petition for the

¹²⁸ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 20.

¹²⁹ In the Middle Ages, an anchorite is a solitary religious person, who is enclosed in a cell that is attached to the church building.

¹³⁰ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 20.

¹³¹ To be discussed more later.

¹³² Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 21.

Cistercian Order to take over administrative responsibility of the communities.¹³³

Marsha L. Dutton states, "Gilbert thus aimed to relieve himself from administrative responsibility while allowing his two priories to retain their autonomy and distinctive nature..."¹³⁴ Gilbert's petition was not well thought out. It would have required the Cistercians to take on, and his request was denied. Katherine Sykes hypothesizes that one of the reasons his request was denied was due to the development to two new Cistercian houses of Savigny and Obazine.¹³⁵ Additionally, *The Book of Gilbert* states:

Dominus autem papa et abbates Cistercie dixerunt sui ordinis monachos aliorum religioni, et presertim monialium, non licere preesse: et sic quode optuit non optinuit, sed ad imperium apostolici et consilium sanctorum iussus est quod inchoauerat prosequi in gratia Christi.

[However, the lord Pope and the Cistercian abbots said that monks of their own Order were not permitted authority over the religious life of others, least of all that of nuns; and so he did not achieve what he desired but, by the Pope's command and the advice of the holy brethren, he was ordered to continue what he had begun in the grace of Christ.]¹³⁶

Sykes exposes the flaw within the *Book of Gilbert*, stating that both Savigny and Obazine housed women. However, Savigny and Obazine are houses in France and are both Benedictine houses that made partnerships with French Cistercian houses.

¹³³ Dutton, "Where Ælred of Rievaulx and Gilbert of Sempringham Friends?" 280.

¹³⁴ Dutton, "Where Ælred of Rievaulx and Gilbert of Sempringham Friends?" 280.

¹³⁵ Sykes, *Inventing Sempringham*, 8-9.

¹³⁶ *The Book of St. Gilbert*, 42-43.

It seems that English Cistercians were stricter than their French counterparts about affiliating with female monastic houses. Sykes further suggests that the difference in roles between the Gilbertine nuns, who have a quasi Benedictine/Cistercian Rule, and the Benedictine nuns who have a partnership with the Cistercian houses in France, could have played a role in the Cistercians denying Gilbert's request. Additionally, Sykes argues that the distance between the Cistercian houses and the Gilbertine priories could be an additional factor.

However, more was happening within the Cistercian Order that could have contributed to the denial of Gilbert's request. In 1140, candidates were being brought forth to be the Archbishop of York. William Fitzherbert (d. 1154 CE) was a candidate, but he was not the first pick, and he was a highly contested.¹³⁷ Due to other candidates not willing to step down from their current positions, William Fitzherbert was elected as the Archbishop of York in January 1141.¹³⁸ Archbishop William's election was not viewed favorably, and a group of Cistercians moved against William to have him removed from office. Some of the Cistercians involved in opposing William were Bernard of Clairvaux, Archdeacon Walter of London (d. 1151 CE), an unnamed monk of Rievaulx, and Ælred of Rievaulx as representative for Abbot William of Rievaulx (d. 1145 CE).¹³⁹ The Cistercians' efforts failed, and

¹³⁷ Jamroziak, Emilia. "The Cistercians, Eugenius III, and the Disputed York Election." In *Pope Eugenius III (1145-1153): The First Cistercian Pope*, 101-23: Amsterdam University Press, 2018.

¹³⁸ Jamroziak, "The Cistercians," 106-7.

¹³⁹ Jamroziak, "The Cistercians," 108.

Fitzherbert was consecrated as the archbishop of York on September 26, 1143.¹⁴⁰ However with the election of Pope Eugenius III (1088-1153 CE), who was a Cistercian, Fitzherbert was suspended from office and Henry Murdac was put forth as a candidate to be archbishop. Unfortunately for William, some of his supporters attacked the Fountains Abbey, where Henry Murdac was abbot. This attack led to Eugenius III declaring that Fitzherbert should be removed from office. In 1147, Henry Murdac was elected and consecrated as the archbishop of York.¹⁴¹ The Cistercian Order was not only growing at the time of Gilbert's request, but also they were making large, influential political moves. The Cistercians needed to show that they were a strong, influential order if they were going to maintain keeping Cistercians in high positions of power. Gilbert's priories were not maintained or disciplined like the Cistercians would have preferred. Furthermore, the priories were made up of women, who were viewed as the weaker sex and would have been more of a liability than an asset for the Cistercians.

It was not the first time Gilbert tried to avoid responsibility. When Gilbert was in school as a boy, he was considered by his superiors to be lazy and slow in his progress. Ashamed, Gilbert fled to France. His *vita* is unclear on what Gilbert did during his stay in France, but there is some evidence that he continued his education there.¹⁴² When Gilbert returned to England, he started up a boy's school,

¹⁴⁰ Jamroziak, "The Cistercians," 108.

¹⁴¹ Jamroziak, "The Cistercians," 109.

¹⁴² Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 12.

and preached at the two churches that his father had gifted to him.¹⁴³ Gilbert was in a precarious position with his preaching as he did not have a license to preach. Gilbert ended up joining the household of Robert Bloet (d. 1123 CE), bishop of Lincoln to avoid persecution. Gilbert never gave a clear reason why he refused to become a priest and obtain a license. It could be that he felt unworthy because he was born with a physical deformity.¹⁴⁴ The other possibility, and the most likely, as Dutton and Sykes both suggest, is that Gilbert wanted to avoid the responsibility of his duties.

Gilbert continued to avoid responsibilities throughout his life. When Gilbert established the Gilbertine Order, he did not officially take vows and join his own order, and there was little originality in the writing of the Gilbertine Rule. In the Gilbertine Rule, women lived under the Benedictine Rule and men the Augustinian Rule. There were Cistercian Rule influences throughout the Rule, as Gilbert had a very close connection with them and familiar with their rule.¹⁴⁵ The Benedictine Rule was originally designed to be followed by men but was adapted for women to utilize as well. However, the Augustinian Rule was solely written for men and a version for women was not adapted until the thirteenth century.¹⁴⁶ It seems odd as to why Gilbert would choose an Augustinian Rule instead of building a more Cistercian-like

¹⁴³ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 13-14. The gifting of the churches was debated within canon law, but after some failed lawsuits Gilbert retained the churches.

¹⁴⁴ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 11.

¹⁴⁵ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 30-1.

¹⁴⁶ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 87-88.

rule, but with the Cistercians rejected Gilbert's communities and the "Augustinians were increasing in numbers locally and could fulfill both a teaching and an active role in within a nunnery" it made more sense for Gilbert to choose an Augustinian Rule. There are no records of Gilbert requesting other monastic orders to absorb his communities after his failed request with the Cistercians, but by establishing an Augustinian Rule within his communities, when the Augustinian community is growing, gives Gilbert a hypothetical safety net. If Gilbert once again decided that his communities were too much for him to handle, he could request that the Augustinians absorb his communities. It would be simple for them to do so, since half of the double house already practiced the Augustinian Rule. While the Gilbertine nuns officially followed the Benedictine Rule, they practiced a more Cistercian-like lifestyle.¹⁴⁷ The Cistercian Rule was designed for men to follow, and it was believed that women could not follow it because it was too rigorous in its practices.

Even though having a religious community of women was not what Gilbert originally wanted, he found purpose and benefit in building his first community: "Because the fruit of virgins is one hundredfold, when he abandoned his own possessions in order to preserve their virgin status he received a hundredfold and possesses eternal life."¹⁴⁸ Gilbert realized that preserving the virginal status of the

¹⁴⁷ Foreville and Keir, *The Book of St. Gilbert*, xlv.

¹⁴⁸ *The Book of St. Gilbert*, 31. *Virginum uero fructus est centesimus, ideo propter earum statum conseruandum sua relinquens contuplum receipt et uitan eternam possidet.*

women he would be keeping them in the most ideal state for God, and that God would in turn reward him for upholding and preserving the ideal virginal status. Gilbert sets up the enclosed lifestyle for the nuns: "he [Gilbert] shut them away from the world's clamour and the sight of men, so that having entered the king's chamber they might be free in solitude for the embrace of the bridegroom alone."¹⁴⁹ Gilbert intended the nuns to live a life of solitude, even though they were in a communal setting. Gilbert had not established an official Gilbertine Rule when he established his first communities. While the *Book* does not specifically state how Gilbert instructed the nuns, it can be assumed that it was in the fashion of a Cistercian-lifestyle as it was similar to what he practiced and was affiliated with. The lifestyle that Gilbert created for the nuns, was centered on the preservation of their virginity and chastity and the fear of the "serpent's cunning"¹⁵⁰ their chastity.

¹⁴⁹ *The Book of St. Gilbert*, 33.

¹⁵⁰ *The Book of St. Gilbert*, 33.

ARGUMENT

It is unknown when the event at Watton occurred as "Ælred seems to have written his account shortly before the beginning of his last illness in December 1166."¹⁵¹ The event occurred sometime after 1150, when Gilbertine dual monasteries started to be created, and at least ten years after Henry Murdac brought the Nun to the priory at the age of four. Based off of these dates, the event can be roughly estimated to have occurred between 1160-1165. Ælred describes Gilbert of Sempringham as a venerable man beloved by God, and how Gilbert created various monasteries in England.¹⁵² Ælred gives the impression that Gilbert is a good God-fearing priest, but he does not over-emphasize Gilbert's 'goodness' or role within the monasteries. However, Ælred does go into detail about the virgin nuns that reside in the monastery at Watton, in the province of York. Ælred states that the nuns "showed so much love and concern for one another."¹⁵³ Ælred recalls a miraculous event of a nun receiving a vision of her fellow nun who had passed and whom she had been very close with. The nun wished to see her friend's virginal reward that she earned in life. After a year of praying to see her friend in virginal glory, her wish was granted, and she was able to be close to her friend with the

¹⁵¹ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 34.

¹⁵² Ælred of Rievaulx. "A Certain Wonderful Miracle." Translated by Jane Patricia Freeland. In *Ælred of Rievaulx: Lives of the Northern Saints* 2006.

¹⁵³ Ælred, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 110.

knowledge that she received her heavenly virginal reward.¹⁵⁴ However, the miraculous vision of the deceased nun is not the main purpose for Ælred's letter. Ælred uses the vision of the deceased nun as a buffer to the scandal, which will become known as *The Nun of Watton*. Ælred recounts the sins and sexual transgressions of the Nun with a lay brother, but he does not wish to implicate the rest of the community of nuns and imply that they are also impure. Ælred takes steps throughout the text to separate the Nun and her impurity from the rest of the community.

Ælred states that the Nun is a "virgin of Christ"¹⁵⁵ before her sexual transgression. However, I argue that the Nun was not in a fully virginal state before and when the transgression occurred. To be in a fully virginal state a woman must be physically, spiritually, and socially pure. Generally, scholars agree that to be physically pure is to not have a physical sexual encounter. Physical acts affect the body, such as eating and fasting. A physical sexual encounter can be any sexual experience the body (not the mind) experiences. This can range from being penetrated by a penis or fingers, to physical stimulation from themselves or others, and nocturnal emissions. Additionally, a physical penetration goes beyond the breaking of a woman's hymen. If a man and woman look upon each other with lust,

¹⁵⁴ Ælred, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 110-111.

¹⁵⁵ Ælred, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 114.

they have penetrated each other with their gaze and had a physical sexual encounter (to be discussed more later).¹⁵⁶

To be physically pure is highly tied to being spiritually pure. Being spiritually pure requires the person to be pure of mind, heart, and soul. Losing one's spiritual virginity could be as simple as having a stray impure thought according to Jerome. "Virginity, therefore, may be lost even by thinking...because of other faults [virgins] are not saved by bodily virginity, what will become of those who have prostituted the members of Christ and have turned the temple of the Holy Spirit into a brothel?"¹⁵⁷ Spiritual virginity also involved attending mass, performing daily prayers, fasting, and abstaining from too much food or wine, and in general keeping the mind always on God. Therefore, the loss of spiritual virginity, the loss of focusing on God, leads to the loss of physical virginity. When a person loses their focus on God, their focus can stray to their bodily desires, which can then lead to them acting on pleasing their bodily desires and not pleasing God.

However, physical and spiritual virginity are measured by social virginity. Social virginity is based on social standards of opinion, for example how a woman should "behave, speak, walk, dress, pray, and even tell the vowed virgin what to eat."¹⁵⁸ Kathleen Coyne Kelly argues that walking, speaking, dressing, etc. are physical aspects of virginity. I argue that these physical actions affect both physical

¹⁵⁶ Sauer, Michelle M. "Architecture of Desire: Mediating the Female Gaze in the Medieval English Anchorhold." *Gender and History* 25, no. 3 (November 2013): 545-64.

¹⁵⁷ Jerome, "To Eustochium."

¹⁵⁸ Kelly, *Performng Virginity and testing Chastity*, 29.

and social virginity. Furthermore, I argue that the different aspects of virginity are intertwined and should not be viewed as three separate categories, as one aspect will always affect the others, meaning that the loss of one aspect is the loss of all. Social virginity is the hardest to obtain and maintain as it is solely based on social opinion. For example, a woman can fast and abstain from food to show her love for God. Fasting and abstinence would positively influence a woman's social virginity because it is an act that can be seen by the community. Being socially viewed as spiritually and physically pure is essential for a virgin as they are intended to be a role model of chastity and purity for their community.

Generally, fasting is not overindulging in food or wine, and not eating meat on Fridays. Jerome and John Cassian (c. 360-435 CE) warn that "meat and wine excited sexual lust and that gluttony was the basic source from which flowed other sins."¹⁵⁹ Fasting was a common practice in the Middle Ages, with some varying practices. Ascetic fasting, extreme fasting, and eucharistic devotion "were expected of saints, especially hermit saints and women."¹⁶⁰ Ascetic fasting is a spiritual practice that is paired with intense eucharistic piety. The purpose of ascetic fasting and eucharistic piety was to show complete devotion to God and to be sustained only on the body of Christ, the eucharist. However, not all theologians believed that ascetic fasting was a good practice. For instance, Fulgentius of Ruspe (d. 533 CE), a

¹⁵⁹ Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. University of California Press, 1988.

¹⁶⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 82.

disciple of Augustine of Hippo, wrote about the fine balance between abstinence and moderation:

We must practice such moderation in fasting that our body is not excited by the full satisfaction of the appetite or enfeebled by too much privation. It is necessary then that the fast of virgins be followed by eating such that the body is not drawn by the pleasures of eating nor excited by its fulfillment.¹⁶¹

Carolyn Walker Bynum also notes the different social views on fasting, stating that a number of the Desert Fathers “were said to have practiced extreme food asceticism, combined with intense eucharistic piety.”¹⁶² Bynum explains further that “many hagiographers and saints from the eleventh to the fifteenth century bore this model in mind.”¹⁶³ Therefore, depending on the general views of the community a woman practicing ascetic fasting could be viewed in a positive manner, because it showed how dedicated she is to God and that she only needs to be sustained on the body of Christ. Or ascetic fasting could be viewed in a negative manner because it is not practicing moderation and is viewed as harmful to the person.

Nuns have been recorded performing various forms of asceticism for fasting, to wearing hair shirts, self-flagellation, and being enclosed. Sarah Macmillan argues that asceticism “arguably underpins devotional culture as an affirmative marker of piety and identity.”¹⁶⁴ By a nun choosing the monastic lifestyle, to be fully enclosed, they are performing the greatest ascetic practice by becoming a Bride of Christ. The

¹⁶¹ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* 79.

¹⁶² Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 82.

¹⁶³ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* 82.

¹⁶⁴ MacMillan, Sarah. "Imitation, Interpretation, and Ascetic Impulse in Medieval English Devotional Culture." *Medium Aevum* 86, no. 1 (2017): 38-59.

others in the monasterial community describe the Nun to Ælred as going “about clothed in the sacred veil, but in her actions, she exhibited nothing worthy of the habit.”¹⁶⁵ The nuns’ description of the Nun indicates that she never did any ascetic practices and “wasted hours indulging in idleness or frittering them away in disorder,”¹⁶⁶ instead of purposefully using her time in prayer or doing the work of God. The Nun not obeying the rules of her society impacts her social virginity, because she is not only damaging her own virginity but the virginity of the other nuns, who she influenced to also waste time.¹⁶⁷ While nuns might be physically enclosed within their monastery, the Nun never embraced the ascetic spirit of being enclosed and focusing on God. This lack of embrace and focus caused the Nun’s community to not view her as socially, spiritually, or physically pure and non-virginal despite not being physically penetrated at the time. To the community at Watton, the Nun is not presenting as a virgin. This presentation continues to be exacerbated by the Nun having “no sense of the fear of God.”¹⁶⁸ Ælred continues to describe the Nun as wasting time, persuading others in the community to also waste time, and “she preferred external things to inner, laziness to quiet, and play to industry.”¹⁶⁹ The disorder and idleness she produces takes away from her prayers and focus on God and it hinders the other nuns in the community from

¹⁶⁵ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 112.

¹⁶⁶ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 112.

¹⁶⁷ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 112.

¹⁶⁸ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 112.

¹⁶⁹ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 112.

focusing on God as well. She focuses on herself, and through her self-centeredness, she loses the spiritual aspect of her virginity.

While the Nun might not have been physically penetrated at the beginning of Ælred's letter, she was still not a virgin. Salih implies that the Nun is not a virgin by stating that "the vvil and the whole process of monastic discipline which it represents have formed neither an obedient disposition or nor a virginal body."¹⁷⁰ Arguing that the Nun does not have a 'virginal body' gives the portrayal that the Nun has lost her physical virginity and arguably her social virginity, seeing that the other nuns in the community judged her body and its actions (pre-sex). While Salih is correct in her argument that the Nun does not have a virginal body, pre-sex, she also does not have a virginal spirit and is not socially viewed as a virgin by her community. Through her actions and speech, she lost all three aspects of virginity. "The nun is now that which monastic theory fears and would deny: a figure whose performance of monastic duties produces only a superficial effect of virginity."¹⁷¹ This superficial effect and non-virginal status that the Nun has is detrimental to her community and the monastic space.

The purpose of the monastic space, in the *Nun of Watton*, is to be pure, chaste, and enclosed. A monastery is a space that works and produces monastic virginity. Henri Lefevre (1901-1991 CE) states the "status of space is that of a

¹⁷⁰ Salih, "Monstrous Virginity," 55.

¹⁷¹ Salih, "Monstrous Virginity," 56.

'mental thing' or 'mental place.'"¹⁷² Meaning that the people within the space set the intention and parameters of the space. For instance, generally speaking a monastery is a space created by religious peoples who intend for it to work within the confines of the of the Rule of the religious order. This work could produce a variety of different things such as being a role model for the surrounding community, providing teaching for children, providing religious needs, and perpetuates monastic virginity, by being the ideal pure community physically, socially, and spiritually. Lefevre also states that the production of something, such as monastic virginity, is a sequence of actions with a certain objective that imposes a temporal and spatial order upon related operations.¹⁷³ The actions of production are made up of materials and *matériel*.¹⁷⁴ Materials are raw and tangible that are "indispensable and durable"¹⁷⁵, such as stone, wood, leather, etc.¹⁷⁶ Whereas *matériel* are conceptual concepts such as language, instructions, and agendas.¹⁷⁷ Lefebvre states that *matériel* is used up quickly and must be replaced often as new needs arise.¹⁷⁸ The monastic space is made up of materials, such as stone and wood, that physically build up the monastery and produces an enclosed space for the nuns, which will create a physical barrier between their purity and the outside

¹⁷² Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Blackwell Publishing, 1991.

¹⁷³ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 71.

¹⁷⁴ Not my emphases

¹⁷⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 71.

¹⁷⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 71.

¹⁷⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 71.

¹⁷⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 105.

world. Additionally, the space is made up of *matériel* in the form of instructions for how the nuns are to adhere to the ideals of monastic virginity and to keep a pure, chaste, and enclosed space. Both physical materials and the corporeal *matériel* made for the space go hand in hand and are of equal importance. When the Nun does not adhere to the ideals of monastic virginity and keep a pure, enclosed space, she not only sullies the space with her sinfulness, but also she breaks the enclosed space, all of which could infect to her fellow nuns with impurity, and thus creates a liminal space within the monastery, but only if the monastery was truly enclosed to begin with. Therefore, I argue that the monastery was not fully enclosed, as Ælred and Gilbert claim, but had always been a liminal space.

Freeman argues that Gilbert's original preference was for the women in his order to live a solitary, enclosed life.¹⁷⁹ However, seeing that most of the early Gilbertine houses were double houses (housing both men and women), it is unclear on the level of separation and seclusion Gilbert had intended for his houses.¹⁸⁰ The double house at Watton was founded in 1150, but "the original church was destroyed by fire in 1167. Hence, the buildings for which modern scholars possess most information were not constructed until after the affair at Watton"¹⁸¹ Gilbert had no clear idea of what he truly wanted for the Gilbertine Rule or for his monasteries. He never showed true commitment or passion for them, and at one

¹⁷⁹ Freeman, "Nuns in the Public Sphere", 69.

¹⁸⁰ Freeman, "Nuns in the Public Sphere," 69.

¹⁸¹ Freeman, "Nuns in the Public Sphere," 31.

point in time he tried to abandon them. Gilbert used aspects from the Benedictine Rule with Cistercian influences for the nuns and the Augustinian Rule for the canons, but he never truly added something original with a specific intent. I believe that Gilbert intended to be original in some way with his order. But he never gave clear parameters of how the Gilbertine monastic spaces were to function and how Gilbertine monasteries are different from Augustinian, Benedictine, and Cistercian monasteries. The uncertainty in parameters and function within the Gilbertine order and spaces means that Gilbert had a lack of specific intent when he created the monastic spaces. Without a specific intention, the space, and the people within the space, will not function properly. For a space to function properly Gilbert would need to evoke energy into the space with a specific intent on how it was to function. Lefebvre states "when we evoke 'energy', we must immediately note that the energy has to be deployed within a space. When we evoke 'space', we must immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so."¹⁸² Gilbert attempts to evoke energy by creating his Rule. The people who occupy the space should be directed by the Rule of how to correctly occupy the space. Because Gilbert never sets his intentions with his Rule correctly and has no clear direction or purpose for the nuns or canons under him.

It was acceptable to use other rules as a template for creating a new rule, but each is unique in some way. The Benedictine Rule was the first rule created by

¹⁸² Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 12.

Benedict of Nursia (d. 547), and it served as the foundation for western monasticism. The Cistercian Rule is based on the Benedictine Rule, but it is more strict and did not make accommodations for religious women within the Rule.¹⁸³ When Gilbert created the Gilbertine Rule he did not change the Benedictine or Augustinian Rule; there is nothing specifically Gilbertine about the Gilbertine Rule. The two rules within the same space creates conflict. Gilbert wanted to create a “Gilbertine space” with the Gilbertine Rule, but he ended up creating a quasi “Benedictine and Augustinian space with unofficial Cistercian influences.”¹⁸⁴ Therefore, the Gilbertine monasteries try to appear as if they are functioning properly, but the attempted façade adds to the liminality of the space, as it is not truly Cistercian, Benedictine, or Augustinian.

Even though the space is liminal and has a convoluted purpose, the monastery should have been built to deter any contact between the nuns and canons. While it is not known what the monastery looked like at the time of the incident, per the Second Lateran Council (1139) the monastery should have separate cloisters for men and women, with a dividing wall and ditch. Additionally, the church would be split in two with a dividing wall. The only point of contact would be the window-house which would be essentially a room with a window that

¹⁸³ English Cistercians did not affiliate with religious women at all. French Cistercians did make partnerships with religious women monasteries, but they followed the Benedictine Rule and not the Cistercian.

¹⁸⁴ None of the Cistercian Rule was written into the Gilbertine Rule, but because the communities had already been practicing the Cistercian Rule, the influence remained despite the implementation of the Benedictine and Augustinian Rule.

connected the two sides of the monastery. Here is where food or clothing to be mended would be passed through.¹⁸⁵ Brian Golding, like Freeman, points out that the “description of conditions that [were] obtained when the author [of Gilbert’s *Vita*] was writing rather than those operative in the 1150s and 1160s. Indeed, the degree of separation may have been deliberately emphasized in order to reduce criticism of the order.”¹⁸⁶ Again, while it is not known if the Gilbertine house at Watton had all of the features for separation, there is still a level of separation and gendered spaces within the monastery.

Molly Martin cites Roberta Gilchrist who argues that the gendering of female spaces indicates that there are specific and intentional architectural mechanisms of segregation and enclosure, which works to regulate the women within the space.¹⁸⁷ Freeman agrees by arguing that the domestic space, circumscribed by walls¹⁸⁸, is a female place, an enclosed space that is private, versus an outside place which is a public space or a male space, a place to be seen and interacted with. Per Ælred’s text it is known that the lay brothers oversaw “the care of the exterior”¹⁸⁹ which follows the ideas of gendered spaces. Ælred continues by stating that the lay brothers “entered the woman’s monastery to do some kind of work.”¹⁹⁰ However,

¹⁸⁵ Freeman, “Nuns in the Public Sphere,” 70-1.

¹⁸⁶ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 31.

¹⁸⁷ Martin, Molly. “Castles and the Architecture of Gender in Malory’s ‘the Knight of the Cart’.” *Arthuriana* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 37-51.

¹⁸⁸ Freeman, “Nuns in the Public Sphere,” 60.

¹⁸⁹ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 112.

¹⁹⁰ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 112.

Ælred gives no specific reason as to why the lay brothers were *inside* an enclosed nun monastery. Furthermore, Ælred's vague statement of 'some kind of work' implies that he did not know why the lay brothers were in the monastery. The lay brothers shouldn't have access to the nuns' monastery because Gilbert held the key to open the locked monastery door. *The Book of Gilbert* states:

He [Gilbert] had left a single opening [to the women's monastery] to be used only at a suitable time; in fact he would have fastened it permanently if humans could have ever lived without human things. There was a door, but it was never unlocked except by his command, and it was not for the women to go out through but for him to go in to them when necessary. He himself was the keeper of this door and its key. For wherever he went and wherever he stayed, like an ardent and jealous lover he carried with him the key to that door as the seal of their purity.¹⁹¹

Gilbert was supposed to keep the key to the monastery, and it should never be unlocked without him present; the lay brothers inside the monastery without Gilbert there implies that he either left the door unlocked or never locked it to begin with. Ælred chastises Gilbert for this lack of discipline saying, "where then, Father Gilbert, was your vigilant concern for the keeping of discipline?"¹⁹² It seems that after Gilbert tried to abandon his duties in 1147, he became lackadaisical in his duties and did not enforce the Rule or appoint a canon to be prior and enforce the Rule for the lay brothers in his stead. Gilbert leaving the nuns monastery unlocked and not assigning a prior to govern the lay brothers makes the monastery a liminal space because the rules of enclosure are not being adhered to.

¹⁹¹ *The Book of Gilbert*, 35.

¹⁹² Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 113.

Virginia Chieffo and Sarah Stanbury argue that to have “visual access to a space is...a way of laying claim to the space.”¹⁹³ An enclosed space is an extension of the nuns’ body and to see the private enclosed space that the nuns reside in is to visually penetrate them. The gaze and the eyes were tied to medieval morality and social codes. Bartholomaeus Anglicus (d. 1272 CE), in his text *On the Order of Things*¹⁹⁴ (c. 1240 CE), “suggest that the eyes were crucial in moral development because they occupy the space in the body closest to the soul.”¹⁹⁵ Additionally, Roger Bacon (1220-1292 CE), a Franciscan scientist, regarded active vision as a force that was an extension of the embodied soul stating: “As an organ of the eye ‘passes over the separate points of a visible object’, ‘grasp[s] its surface and contain[s] its extremities.”¹⁹⁶ Michelle M. Sauer argues that the active visual force eroticized the eye as “both an organ of penetration as well as a penetrated orifice.”¹⁹⁷ But a person does not need to gaze upon another person to visually penetrate them. Therefore, even though the lay brothers might not have had the intention of physically seeing the nuns upon entering their monastery, the nuns were still visually penetrated by the lay brothers seeing their space.

Sauer explains that men even “looking at a women invited sin as much as it was a sin,”¹⁹⁸ and that the very nature of women was “thought to incite desire in

¹⁹³ Get citation and include it in Bib.

¹⁹⁴ *De proprietatibus rerum*

¹⁹⁵ Sauer, “Architecture,” 548.

¹⁹⁶ Sauer, “Architecture,” 548.

¹⁹⁷ Sauer, “Architecture,” 548.

¹⁹⁸ Sauer, “Architecture,” 550.

men."¹⁹⁹ Therefore, the lay brothers in turn are visually penetrated by seeing the nuns' space, which is akin to seeing her body. The lay brothers were further penetrated by the gaze of the Nun. Ælred states that the Nun noticed "their [the lay brothers] arrival, the girl approached; curiously she watched their work and their faces."²⁰⁰ Even though Ælred did not state what work the lay brothers were doing within the monastery, it is safe to argue that they were doing some kind of manual labor that the nuns could not do. The work itself is not a bad thing. The male community of the double monastery is supposed to do exterior manual labor for the monastery. However, how and when the lay brothers were in the monastery is troubling. Gilbert or an appointed prior should have been present to supervise the lay brothers with the consent of the prioresses of the nuns monastery, so they could ensure that the nuns were properly enclosed away from male sight while the work was being done. The Nun watching the lay brothers faces is a severe issue and creates two levels of visual penetration. The dual penetrating gazes exposes the nuns and the lay brothers to lustful thoughts and feelings. The Nun was exposed to lust when the lay brothers penetrated the nuns' space with their gaze and the lay brothers were exposed to lust and penetrated through her gaze. There is only Ælred's record of the one lay brother fell to lustful thoughts and feelings.

The monastic enclosed space is a way for men to control women's bodies.

Sauer states:

¹⁹⁹ Sauer, "Architecture," 549.

²⁰⁰ Ælred, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 112.

women could not be watched if they were allowed to wander free. Both secular and ecclesiastical authorities agreed on this point, and by 1298 enclosure was mandated for religious women in the papal bull *Periculoso*, issued by Boniface VIII [d. 1303] ...Clearly, the fear regarding unenclosed women concerned sexual temptation, and unless these women were protected from themselves by being removed from the world, they would fall into sin.²⁰¹

Enclosure was practiced before *Periculoso* was issued; the papal bull just made the practice officially mandated for religious women. Monastic enclosure was a means of male control over women's bodies and spaces. The Nun leaving her enclosed space and viewing the lay brothers removes the male control over her body. By removing male control, she fell into sin by penetrating the lay brother with her gaze and her gaze induced him to sin in return. The dual penetrative gaze further demotes the Nun's virginity. The Nun was not fully virginal before the dual penetrative gaze. The Nun's social and spiritual virginity was in jeopardy because of her idleness. Medieval writers often associated idleness with sexual sin, as did Jerome and Benedict.²⁰² While idleness itself is not a sexual sin, it takes away a woman's focus from God and because women are sexual beings, they will then focus on themselves and their sexual desires. Therefore, the Nun's idleness led to her sexual sin of dual penetrative gaze. Ælred states:

The wretch cast her eyes on him, and he fixed his attention on her. They regarded each other caressingly, and soon the devious serpent, entering the breast of each, insinuated his pleasant poison throughout their vital parts.²⁰³

²⁰¹ Sauer, Michelle M, "Uncovering Difference Encoded Homoerotic Anxiety within the Christian Eremic Tradition in Medieval England," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19 no. 1, (2010), 133-152.

²⁰² Sauer, "Uncovering differences," 149.

²⁰³ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 112.

Ælred gives physicality sexual transgression in their dual penetrative gaze by saying that the gaze was caressing and signals the reciprocation of the penetrative gaze of the lay brother to the Nun herself and not just the space of the monastery. Ælred further gives physicality to the dual penetrative gaze by giving it the imagery of a 'devious serpent.' Serpents were also used as imagery for sin. Ælred describes the lustful feelings that arise in the Nun and the lay brother as a poison, again giving a negative connotation towards feeling aroused. The poison of lust spreads throughout the Nun's and lay brother's vital parts, their genital area. Ælred equating lust as a poison implies that lust is deadly, and lust is especially deadly because it causes a person to take their focus off of God and puts it physically onto themselves.

Although the Nun's hymen is still intact, she has still broken her vows of chastity as a Bride of Christ because she has committed a sexual transgression through the dual penetrative gaze with the lay brother. As a Bride of Christ, the Nun is a spouse to God, and the Nun broke her vows of chastity to God by participating in ocular penetration with the lay brother. This makes the Nun an "adulteress."²⁰⁴ The Nun continues to commit adultery as she continues to be exposed to the lay brother. Ælred continues, "the thing [adultery] was first done by nods but nods were followed by signs. Eventually the silence was broken, and they spoke of the sweetness of love. They inflamed one another; they sowed in one

²⁰⁴ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 114.

another the seeds of delight, the kindling of desire."²⁰⁵ At this point in the narrative, Ælred implies that the Nun and the lay brother are equally participating in the affair. Ælred further implies that the Nun and lay brother were having physical penetrative sex, and not just speaking sweetly to each other. In the Middle Ages, seed was another word for semen, and it was believed that both men and women had semen, this was known as the two-seed theory. The two-seed theory is a "theory of conception wherein both male and female sperm were required for an embryo."²⁰⁶ The sowing of seeds is not just an indication that the Nun and lay brother were having sex, but that the kindling (heat) of their desire produced the seed (male and female semen), resulting in the production of an embryo. Sauer explains that women were thought of as "cold, wet, and composed of inferior biological matter."²⁰⁷ For female semen to be produced and released her body must be heated up with passion. Sauer states that "the two-seed model made women responsible for rape and conception, it similarly made them responsible for infertility, since they were clearly incapable of producing enough passion (heat) to properly release their seed."²⁰⁸ Per the two-seed model, the Nun was knowingly and willingly committing adultery because she was heated with passion and producing seed.

²⁰⁵ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 113.

²⁰⁶ Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 18.

²⁰⁷ Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 18.

²⁰⁸ Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 18.

Adultery was a very serious crime in the Middle Ages and “was normally uncovered, prosecuted, and punished in the ecclesiastical realm where theologians, religious authors, and the Church court officials usually targeted male and female adultery with equal zeal.”²⁰⁹ There is a distinct difference between a woman voluntarily committing adultery and being abducted and raped. Adultery, abduction, and rape laws go somewhat hand in hand. It begins with the Roman law of *raptus* or “carrying off by force”²¹⁰ however, that did not always mean or acknowledge that rape had occurred. *Raptus* also did not solely mean the abduction of a woman, it could be used in any sense of property theft. In regards to abducted women, under Roman law *raptus* was “punishable by death rather than marriage; if the woman consented to the *raptus*, she too was subject to the death penalty.”²¹¹ Even without rape, being abducted devalues the woman and the husband or father of said woman has property (the woman) who is damaged and tainted. The woman accrues damage through abduction because she was taken without consent from her husband or father. This implies that some sexual damage was done to her. She could have been looked upon by another man and through his gaze she was visually penetrated (eye rape), which enflamed her desire. Through the implication that damage was done to the woman by abduction it taints the social view of her

²⁰⁹ Dunn, Caroline. *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction, and Adultery, 1100-1500*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

²¹⁰ Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 19.

²¹¹ Saunders, Corinne. "Secular Law: Rape and Raptus." In *Rape and Ravishment in Literature of Medieval England*, 33-75: Boydell & Brewer; D.S. Brewer, 2001.

and her chastity. She would potentially be looked down upon and even avoided by others. If she was not married yet, it would be exceedingly difficult for her to get married because the future husband would be gambling on whether or not he was getting a pure virgin out of the arrangement.

Justinian law expands on Roman law by addressing sexual violence against women within *raptus* by stating that "sexual violence against women, although only against unmarried women, widows or nuns: they are devalued by rape as they are by abduction: 'castitas corrupta restitui non potest' ('chastity once polluted cannot be restored', AD 533)."²¹² While the law surrounding *raptus* evolved as ruling bodies and monarchs came and went, the Church maintained the prescription to Roman and Justinian law in regards to *raptus*.²¹³ Which means that the Nun and the lay brother could be put to death if brought before a Church official, such as the Archbishop. Since the Nun and lay brother are under Church authority, they would not be brought before the court of English secular law. In English legal practice was not clear cut and largely depended on the whim of the judge, the Nun and the lay brother's punishment could be varied between castration, public beatings, loss of hand or foot, blinding, and death.²¹⁴ In most instances "men and women received identical sentences, but some Church courts used discretion and commuted the

²¹² Saunders, "Secular Rape and Raptus", 34. Jerome also holds the same view that chastity cannot be restored. He states that even God cannot revirginize a woman.

²¹³ Saunders, "Secular Rape and Raptus", 51.

²¹⁴ Saunders, "Secular Rape and Raptus", 49.

sentence of either party.”²¹⁵ Ælred is the advising church member in the case of the Nun and the lay brother. Within Ælred’s text, he does not prosecute the Nun and lay brother as the law would demand. Ælred names the Nun as an “adulteress,”²¹⁶ and addresses the lay brother for his actions in the scandal by also calling him an “adulterer,”²¹⁷ like the Nun, as well as an “unhappy man,”²¹⁸ a “hawk,”²¹⁹ and “a horse or mule without understanding.”²²⁰ While Ælred’s main focus in the text is the Nun, Ælred still gives harsh criticism to the lay brother. By equating the lay brother to an animal, Ælred is stating that the lay brother is not fit to be a part of the monastic society, and he is unfit as a man. In the Middle Ages, men were supposed to represent the mind, and logic, and be closer to the spiritual realm, and be above physical desires such as lust and gluttony. By the lay brother succumbing to his lustful desires and turning away from God and logic, he is no better than an animal.²²¹

Ælred is careful not to harshly criticize the other nuns or lay brothers in the community. Ælred does not want to implicate the rest of the community for the Nun’s and lay brother’s sins. But Ælred is not wholly pleased with anyone in the

²¹⁵ Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 121.

²¹⁶ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 114.

²¹⁷ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” “For when she had revealed to the adulterer that she had conceived a child, he, fearing that he too would be revealed, left the monastery and returned to the world.

²¹⁸ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 113.

²¹⁹ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 114.

²²⁰ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 116.

²²¹ Hostetter, Aaron. “Sir Gowther: Table Manners and Aristocratic Identity.” In *Political Appetites for Food in Medieval English Romance*, 133-166. Ohio State University Press (2017).

community. Ælred states that “for her [the Nun] everything depended on fear, nothing on love.”²²² Ælred often preached the value of love and friendship within religious communities, and Ælred implies that if the nuns had treated the Nun with kindness, love, and helped foster a love for God, it is possible that the unfortunate event could have been avoided. Again, Ælred does not want to harshly criticize the other nuns, and he goes out of his way to praise the other nuns’ religious zeal for their virginity and love of God.²²³

Ælred makes clear criticism of Gilbert stating “where then, Father Gilbert, was your vigilant concern for the keeping of discipline? Where were your many delicate devices for excluding occasions of sin?”²²⁴ Gilbert’s lack of concern is a common theme for him. In his early years, Gilbert was a devout lay brother, but he refused to obtain a license for preaching for many years. He was unsuccessful at monastery school and was known for being lazy. His *vita* suggests that he joined the household of Robert Bloet, Bishop of Lincoln, so that he would be exonerated from the charges.²²⁵ Gilbert’s laziness and lack of concern affected the monastic spaces that he constructed, and laziness was often associated with sexual sin by medieval writers.²²⁶ By not establishing the Rule of his monasteries properly

²²² Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 112.

²²³ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 117.

²²⁴ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 113.

²²⁵ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 13.

²²⁶ Sauer, Michelle M. “Uncovering Difference Encoded Homoerotic Anxiety within the Christian Eremitic Tradition in Medieval England.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 1 (January 2010): 133-52.

because he was lazy, he left the monasteries in a liminal space of not being fully enclosed and vulnerable to sexual sin.

The monastic space is intended to produce a pure, chaste, enclosed space, but Gilbert produces a lazy and idle energy when he constructs monastic spaces which result in permeable spaces. The 'idle energy' from Gilbert immediately seeps into the space that he constructs, and that energy will produce more idleness within the monastic space instead of chastity. The Nun was affected by Gilbert's idle energy, and she produced idleness instead of chastity. Idleness is considered a sin that leads to sexual sin.²²⁷ Through the production of idleness and the space being permeable made the Nun extremely susceptible to sexual sin. Ælred describes how the Nun's and lay brother's sexual transgression continued to progress. Ælred describes how the two adulterers sneaked around with each other. The man would throw rocks at her window so she would come down and meet him. The monastery being a liminal space instead of a properly enclosed space gave room for sin to occur. The space, however, was still attempting to act as an enclosed space giving some shelter to the occupants within. While the lay brothers being in the nun's monastery is a break in enclosure, the Nun broke the enclosure herself when she left with the lay brother: "They agreed with one mind on a place and time to speak

²²⁷ Sauer, "Uncovering Difference," 149.

more freely with each other and take more pleasure together."²²⁸ While Ælred does not specify whether or not the two left the monastery or not, it is heavily implied.

The Nun and lay brother continued to break the enclosure of the space with the man coming into the women's monastery, and by the Nun going out of the monastery to be with him.

A virgin of Christ goes out; in a little while an adulteress will return. She goes out, and soon *like a deluded dove, heartless*, she is seized by the talons of a hawk. She is thrown down, her mouth is stopped lest she cry out, and having been already debauched in the mind, she is debauched in body.²²⁹

Ælred's narrative about the Nun and the lay brother shifts from being a torrid affair that the Nun was a willing participant into a violent rape. Previously, Ælred described a mutual, passion filled affair that started with the Nun penetrating the lay brother with her gaze, and her removing herself from the male control over the monastic space and her body. However, in this passage the sexual transgression is one sided and the lay brother is exerting his male control over the Nun through rape. Additionally, specific passage is important to part of Ælred's purpose for this text. While Ælred prefaces this passage with "close your ears, virgins of Christ; shut your eyes"²³⁰ implying he does not wish other nuns or virgins to hear of this terrible event. He has additional motives for the purpose of the passage. While I do believe

²²⁸ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 113.

²²⁹ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 114.

²³⁰ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 114.

that Ælred did not want other nuns or virgins to be tainted by this tale of adultery, his words also show his desire to protect virgins. While Ælred does rebuke the Nun in his text, he never condemns her. By using the imagery of the dove, Ælred keeps her aligned with God as the dove is also used as imagery of the Holy Spirit, showing that while this Nun is sinful there is always forgiveness and redemption through God. Additionally, I argue that Ælred writes this passage in this manner to help preserve the chastity of the space and the other nuns. By emphasizing that the Nun was raped, she could not call out for help or run away helps protect the chastity of the space because it shows that she did not willingly go out of the monastery to have sex. The passage allows the Nun to be painted as naïve and not purposefully seeking sexual transgression.

Unfortunately, through the repeated encounters with the Nun and the lay brother, the Nun became pregnant. When the Nun told the lay brother of her pregnancy, he fled the monastery. The Nun was already under suspicion and the lay brother's flight increased it. The matron nuns summoned the Nun, and she confessed the transgressions that occurred.²³¹ There are records of adulterous nuns at different monasteries prior to the incident at Watton. Church policy on fornicating nuns would follow Justinian law which states that any person committing adultery against God would be brought before a Church official, such as an Archbishop and

²³¹ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 114.

would be sentenced to death.²³² Not all fornicating nuns were brought before the justice of the Church and the nuns bore children. But there are no Church laws as to what to do with children from nuns. Based on the evidence, there were likely four ways that this particular situation was dealt with. There is always the threat of expelling the Nun from the monastery or putting her to death, as Church law dictates. While this option is always brought to the table, it is rarely followed through because of the negative implications it could have for the rest of the community. The next option is for the nun to carry the child to term. The child is fostered in a different monastery than the mother, or fostered with another religious person, like a hermit. Records of these children often show that they grow up into high ranking and esteemed church members. For example, St. Samthann (d. c. 738 CE) fostered a boy whose mother was a nun, who sought her out with a small group of fellow nuns. "Samthann took pity on them and their child and accepted the boy as her foster son. Through the care and education, she provided for him, the boy later became an abbot of the very monastery from which the nuns had fled in shame."²³³ In this situation, the nuns shared the shame of the one nun who was pregnant and bore a child, compared to the nuns at Watton who rejected and tried to expel the adulteress Nun. The nuns who fled in shame together did so

²³² Saunders, "Secular Rape and Raptus", 51.

²³³ Callan, Maeve B. "Of Vanishing Fetuses and Maidens Made-Again: Abortion, Restored Virginity, and Similar Scenarios in Medieval Irish Hagiography and Penitentials." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, no. 2 (May 2012): 282-96.

because they remained as one bodily unit, therefore the one nun's sexual transgression is viewed socially as the sexual transgression of them all. They contracted her sin through close proximity (like a disease) and because she remained a part of the bodily unit, versus removing the infected 'limb' of the unit (the nun who physically had a sexual transgression).

The last way to handle the situation of a pregnant adulterous nun, is for the nun to receive a miraculous abortion, which seems to occur with the adulteress Nun. While this situation is rare, it has been recorded to have happened multiple times with various saints throughout the Middle Ages. A miraculous abortion is an event where a holy person, someone who became a saint (mostly men), intercedes with God on behalf of a defiled woman, and cured her of her unwanted pregnancy. A majority of the abortions took place specifically with nuns. In some cases, the nun would approach the saint and ask for help by interceding with God, but in other cases the saint just acted with God's intercession and "took care of the situation". For example, St. Áed of Ireland, "noticed that the womb of one of the consecrated virgins serving him 'grew quickly without food, as if it might flee from that place [*cito surrexit ille sine cibo, ut ab isto figeret*] ...Then [the virign] confessed before all that she had sinned secretly and she did penance. St. Áed blessed her womb, and at once the baby [*infans*] in her womb disappeared as if it did not exist."²³⁴

²³⁴ Callan, "Of Vanishing Fetuses," 290-1, and footnote 32: "Vita sancti Aidi episcopi Killiariensis, in Heist, *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae*, 172: "Intuens autem sanctus Aidus virguinem que sibi ministrabat, vidit quod uterus illius,

This situation is similar to that of the adulteress Nun it is never explicitly stated within Áed's *vita* or within Ælred's text that the nuns asked for the miraculous abortion to occur. Often times, the blessing of the womb would be accompanied by the sign of the cross over it enacting God's will that the fetus suddenly disappears as if it were never there, and the nun would be returned to a virginal state.²³⁵

Recordings of these miraculous abortions within saints' *vitas* never expand on what happens after the abortion occurs. Callan argues that a miraculous abortion suggests "that any physical and/or social effects of sex and pregnancy were wholly removed by the abortion or that to be a *virgo* (virgin) referred not to a person in a particular physical state but to one consecrated to God."²³⁶ I partially agree with Callan. I would argue that the abortion would return the woman to a virgin-like state instead of being revirginized as Callan suggests. While the ideals of virginity do not demand an intact hymen, they do require a virgin to not be penetrated. As Jerome would say "although God is able to do anything, he cannot raise a virgin after she has been defiled."²³⁷ And if God cannot restore a virgin, a saint cannot either. Therefore, a defiled woman can only be repaired into a virgin-like state, meaning that she would socially act, spiritually practice, and physically present

partum gestans, intumescebat. et cito surrexit ille sine cibo, ut ab isto fugeret. Tunc illa coram omnibus confessa est quod occulte peccasset et penitentiam egit. Sanctus autem Aidus benedixit uterum eius, et statim infans in utero eius evanuit quasi non esset." See also *Vita sancti Aedi*, in Plummer, *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae*, 1:38."

²³⁵ Callan, "Of Vanishing Fetuses," 291.

²³⁶ Callan, "Of Vanishing Fetuses," 293.

²³⁷ Jerome, "To Eustochium."

herself as society would dictate a virgin would, but she would not be fully virginal. Furthermore, I argue against the abortion being able to remove 'physical and/or social effects of sex and pregnancy'. I argue that only the ritual blessing of a miraculous churching would purify a woman of the physical and sinful effects of pregnancy, and it would allow a woman to socially be presented as virgin-like because of the purification. I also argue that a miraculous abortion and a miraculous churching, a miraculous form of purification for a woman of blood and sexual impurities,²³⁸ happens simultaneously in the *Nun of Watton* tale, making the event a miraculous abortive churching.

According to Paula M. Rieder in, *On the Purification of Women: Churching of Women in Northern France, 1100-1500*, "studies of churching... are rare. Until quite recently, the practice has been virtually ignored by scholars."²³⁹ While there no treatise or sermons specifically written on the ritual of churching, there are penitentials that give advice on different kinds of purification that gives scholars a glimpse of what churching ceremonies looked like. While each penitential differed in its instruction on cleansing, they all agreed that for churching, women should not reenter the church for a certain amount of time, generally forty to sixty days so the

²³⁸ A woman was required to be purified before resuming sexual relations with her husband and reentering her community. In the Middle Ages, it was believed that when a woman was pregnant, she retained all the menstrual blood that she didn't expel during pregnancy. The retained menstrual blood was considered a blood impurity. Furthermore, it was believed that the sperm produced during sex to conceive the child remained in the body, was not absorbed, and was considered a sexual sin.

²³⁹ Rieder, Paula M. *On the Purification of Women: Churching in Northern France, 1100-1500*. Palgrave MacMillian, 2006.

woman is no longer producing birth/menstrual blood.²⁴⁰ Intercourse is forbidden before she is churched²⁴¹, and after the woman's abstinence period, she will go to the church for a blessing at the church door followed by a mass.²⁴² The priest would lead the new mother into the church through the use of his stole. This allowed the priest to avoid touching the still impure woman, while finishing the churching ritual, and enacts how the priest is in an elevated position within the hierarchy above the woman.²⁴³ The stole itself was more than just a physical barrier to protect the priest but also a spiritual one, it shielded him from the woman's burning sexual desires.²⁴⁴ The mass continues as a part of the churching ceremony. At the end of the mass, the woman brings forward her candle and bread offering, which is sprinkled with holy water, and then a small piece of the bread was given to her to eat. The priest concludes with a final reading, placing his stole on the woman's head, and then he offers for her to kiss the stole at the conclusion of the reading and the churching ceremony.²⁴⁵

The overall purpose of churching was not for the benefit of the woman; the ceremony was to cleanse the impurities *of* her, not *for* her.²⁴⁶ The purification was to rid the woman of blood, semen, and lust,²⁴⁷ so that the woman would not

²⁴⁰ Rieder, *On the Purification of Women*, 23.

²⁴¹ Rieder, *On the Purification of Women*, 24.

²⁴² Rieder, *On the Purification of Women*, 2.

²⁴³ Rieder, *On the Purification of Women*, 89.

²⁴⁴ Rieder, *On the Purification of Women*, 90.

²⁴⁵ Rieder, *On the Purification of Women*, 90.

²⁴⁶ Emphasis is my own.

²⁴⁷ Rieder, *On the Purification of Women*, 3.

contaminate the sacred place of the altar, the priests, the husbands, and the community as a whole.²⁴⁸ Rieder argues that churching is required after every pregnancy whether said pregnancy ended in abortion, miscarriage, birth in wedlock, or birth out of wedlock. Eventually, churching became a privilege only for the properly married mothers: "Unwed mothers, marginalized by these developments, continued to find illegal means of obtaining the rite."²⁴⁹ There are no records of what the illegal churching ritual looked like, but based on the evidence from the penitentials from official churching, it can be assumed that the illegal churching was a pared down version of the official. In plain terms, a churching is a purification blessing and offering for women who have had a pregnancy. It could be as elaborate as having a procession and full mass, or it could be as simple as making the sign of the cross over the woman there was no one correct way to perform a churching. Therefore, it was not the miraculous abortion that purified the defiled nuns previously discussed and Nun; rather, it was the miraculous churching in tandem with the abortion, making it a miraculous abortive churching.

While a miraculous abortive churching will purify the Nun and allow her to socially present as virgin-like, it doesn't necessarily mean that her community will accept or view her that way. Her sin was so detrimental to the community that when they heard what had happened "zeal immediately flamed up in their bones,

²⁴⁸ Rieder, *On the Purification of Women*, 3.

²⁴⁹ Rieder, *On the Purification of Women*, 2.

and, looking at each other and striking their hands together, they rushed upon her, tearing her veil from her head."²⁵⁰ The tearing of the veil from her head is a vital act for the community because it removes the Nun from being enclosed. The veil of a nun is both highly symbolic and functional. Symbolically, it represents "the relationship of individual to community, linking them in the practice of virginity."²⁵¹ It is a "symbol of submissive and feminine virginity and...is a mark of a modest and obedient bride of Christ."²⁵² The matron nuns ripping off the Nun's veil symbolizes that she is no longer part of their community and is no longer considered a bride of Christ. There have been other cases of the forceful removal of veils. According to the Lincoln records, at the "priory of Catesby, Angnes Alewey complained 'quod priorissa in choro et extra extrahit vela de capitibus monialium, vocando eas mendicas et meretrices."²⁵³ "[that the prioress in choir and without pulls the veils from the nuns' heads, calling them beggars and whores.]"²⁵⁴ The de-veiling is not just a violent or extreme act, but a necessary one. Since the veil represents unification within monastic virginity, any sexual transgression of one of the nuns would implicate the rest of the nuns in the community. As Ælred notes, "great especially were the laments of the holy virgins who, fearing for their own honor, dreaded that the offense of one would be held against all."²⁵⁵ Therefore, removing

²⁵⁰ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 115.

²⁵¹ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 127.

²⁵² Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 127.

²⁵³ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 136. Originally from: *Visitations II*, p. 49.

²⁵⁴ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 136.

²⁵⁵ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 115.

the veil is an act of self-preservation for the community who fear for their reputations.

The nuns of Watton considered banishing the Nun from the monastery, but “if she were to be expelled, it would redound to the infamy of them all, and if a mother, denied help should die with her offspring, no little danger would threaten all their souls.”²⁵⁶ This leaves the Nun in a liminal state. Although veil has been removed, symbolizing rejection, she cannot leave the physical space. By not being able to leave, she is not fully removed from the community and still is partly enclosed. The other nuns were grieving and had no guidance on what to do with the Nun, especially because Gilbert was not there at the time: “They wept together, they wept separately, and enflamed by their great sorrow.”²⁵⁷ Since they could not expel her from the monastery, they re-enclosed her within a cell and chained her to the walls. The Nun being re-enclosed is actually a fortuitous situation. Not only does it keep her from infecting the rest of the community with her sin, but also is a deterrent for committing more sexual transgressions. Through the Nun’s re-enclosure, her sin is contained, but because she is in a state of liminality by being an adulteress, and a pregnant Bride of Christ, the enclosed space she resides in also becomes a liminal space because of the liminal energy she evokes.

²⁵⁶ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 115.

²⁵⁷ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 115.

The Nun's cell, in which she is imprisoned in is a liminal space because of her own production of liminality. However, the space is doubly liminal because the nuns created the space. When the nuns created the space, they evoked the energy of containment because they needed protection from the Nun. This creation of space and energy coincides with Lefebvre's spatial theory that states: "when we evoke 'energy', we must immediately note that energy has to be deployed within a space. When we evoke 'space', we must immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so."²⁵⁸ The nuns deployed the energy of containment into the space, and the Nun occupies the space for the containment energy to work upon. However, the nuns did not evoke time correctly. Lefebvre states that "energy, space, time—can be neither conflated nor separated from one another."²⁵⁹ Furthermore, Lefebvre states "when we evoke 'time' we must immediately say what it is that moves or changes therein."²⁶⁰ The nuns construct the containment space out of a serious need, but they saw no feasible way in resolving the issue of the adulteress Nun: "They [the nuns] considered what was to be done. If she [the Nun] were to be expelled, it would redound to the infamy of them all, and if a mother, denied help, should die with her offspring, no little danger would threaten all their souls."²⁶¹ The nuns also considered giving the Nun back to the lay brother that she had the affair with, but when they found out that he had raped her, that option was

²⁵⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 12.

²⁵⁹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 12.

²⁶⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 12.

²⁶¹ Ælfred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 115.

also no longer feasible.²⁶² With no way to move or change the Nun within the space, time was not evoked correctly making the space doubly liminal and suspending the Nun in time. "Time is thus solidified and fixed within the rationality immanent to space."²⁶³ As long as the space the Nun occupies is liminal, time will be a fixed point and not function properly.

Ælred declares that the nuns acted appropriately by containing the Nun and they acted with proper fervor. Ælred giving his approval for nuns' passion for Christ:

Do you see with what zeal these woman, champions of decency, burned these persecutors of impurity, these women who loved Christ more than anything else? Do you see how they avenged the injury to Christ by mutilating the man and perusing the woman with opprobrium and abuse?²⁶⁴

While Ælred does not condone the shedding of blood, he advocates the zeal with which they defended their communal virginity. Even though Ælred does not take an active role in what occurred at Watton, his words and his written text are also a defense of virginity and chastity and are akin to the "support" the abortion saints gave to defiled women. The miraculous abortion was an act of defense and support of virginity. Also, like the so-called abortion saints, Ælred's and Gilbert's reputation for holiness was not affected by their support of the abortion.²⁶⁵

²⁶² Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 116.

²⁶³ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 21.

²⁶⁴ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 117.

²⁶⁵ Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 38.

The other nuns created the containment space for the adulterous Nun to keep her sin from infecting the community and to keep her in a solitary location while they figure out the best course of action on how to handle the situation with her. But the nuns begin to panic and become distraught. The nuns “wept together, they wept separately,”²⁶⁶ and they prayed that “he [God] would spare their place, that he would have regard for their virginal shame, that he would put down the infamy and drive away the danger.”²⁶⁷ The nuns’ prayers work within the space of the monastery and produce a solution from God. Lefebvre states that the “product of a process of production which is animated by knowledge (the concept) and oriented by consciousness (language, the Logos)—this is necessary product—asserts its own self-sufficiency.”²⁶⁸ The monastery produces a virginal chaste space, however because of various factors the nuns’ monastery is liminal, but the space will still attempt to function as it is supposed to. Therefore, the nuns’ prayers are a production based off the knowledge that their space is supposed to be virginal and chaste. Furthermore, the nuns’ prayers are a form of language or “*matériel*,”²⁶⁹ which evokes the ideals of virginity. The nuns’ prayers begin to override some of the liminality within the monastery because the nuns are being self-sufficient by evoking the ideals of virginity through prayer and not relying on the monastic space to produce it. The nuns’ production of virginity within the space allowed for the

²⁶⁶ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 115.

²⁶⁷ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 117-8.

²⁶⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 21.

²⁶⁹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 71.

miraculous abortive churching to occur for the Nun, and therefore the space was able to be restored to a virgin-like status. The miraculous abortive churching would remove the sexual sin from the space but because the space was still not enclosed properly it cannot be a fully virginal space.

Even though the Nun is suspended in time due to her own liminality, the liminality of her cell, and the liminality of the monastery, Ælred describes the Nun as if she is still moving within time and her pregnancy is progressing. Ælred never saw the Nun pregnant, and merely received descriptions of her from her fellow nuns who were present. I believe that Ælred uses the nuns' description of the Nun to construct a narrative strategy in order to impart a moral message within the text. Elizabeth Freeman argues that Ælred wanted to convey the moral that

Lust was a danger to the charity of friendship of communities... Ælred takes advantage of the narrative strategies of juxtaposition and disingenuous 'excursus' to emphasize still further this desired moral [of the text.] Each of his anecdotes was enhanced by its juxtapositions and close narrative relationship to its opposite, lesson of friendship and charity versus lessons of disobedience and physical and spiritual wanderings, lessons which are always presented through the actions of women.²⁷⁰

Ælred had previously implied that if the Nun had been brought up in love instead of fear, this scandal could have been avoided.²⁷¹

Previously, Ælred warned other virgins, who might read this text, to close their ears and shut their eyes. Ælred tells other virgins to do this as a warning to

²⁷⁰ Freeman, "Medieval Nuns," 7.

²⁷¹ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 112.

the upcoming violence he is about to describe. Later on in the text, Ælred uses narrative strategies to make the Nun appear grotesque during her pregnancy as a warning to other virgins of the horrors that would await them by discarding their virginity. Ælred states “milk flowed freely from her [the Nun’s] breasts. Moreover, her womb seemed to swell so much that he thought she would bear twins. A leaden color spread around her eyes, and pallor came over her face; now her breast were empty of fluid, and after a little while they were filled up with the usual liquid.”²⁷² Ælred description is based on the recalled events the nuns recounted to him, which he wrote into a narrative. The nuns viewed the Nun as a sinful, grotesque being that could contaminate them all with her sinfulness. Ælred used this sinful grotesque view as an opposing view of how a proper nun should look: fresh, clean, a nice complexion, no bodily signs of pregnancy, such as leaking breasts or an extremely swollen womb. Ælred needed to make her pregnancy look terrifying so that if any other nun, outside of the Watton community read his text, they would be potentially frightened and that would hopefully help solidify their resolve to remain a chaste Bride of Christ.

While the Nun was in her cell, Henry Murdac, former Archbishop of York—the man who delivered her to the monastery came to her in a dream. He said to her

I blame you rather for this, that you have not yet acknowledged your sin to your spiritual father, as is necessary. But see to it that you confess as quickly

²⁷² Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 118.

as you can, and take this from me as a command, that you chant these psalms to Christ every day.²⁷³

Murdac's statement is a bit odd because he blames her for not confessing her sin to her spiritual father, Gilbert. Previously in the text, Ælred had heavily implied that Gilbert was not there at the time of the event. This discrepancy as to whether or not Gilbert was there also carries into scholarship about Gilbert and the Nun. Some scholars argue that Gilbert was there and gave the order for the lay brothers to help the nuns capture the errant lay brother. Whereas other scholars argue that Gilbert was not at Watton at all during the scandal, I agree that Gilbert was not there. Although Ælred does not clearly state that Gilbert was not there, I believe it is implied through his criticism of Gilbert saying, "where then, Father Gilbert, was your vigilant concern for the keeping of discipline?"²⁷⁴ Additionally, I believe that the nuns dictating the scandal to Ælred and making decisions without any male authority is a strong indication that Gilbert was not present.

Confession was a part of the churching process because it was also a form of purification. Even if they only had sexual relations for the purpose of procreation, it was still considered a sin, albeit a necessary one. Murdac initiates the miraculous abortive churching process by commanding her to confess her sins and to recite certain psalms. Churching also incorporated psalms, for example,

²⁷³ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 119.

²⁷⁴ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 113.

The rite *Ad introducendam* in the Boulogne manuscript begins at the church door with the recitation of Psalm 23. The words of the psalm set the tone of the ritual: those who desire entrance into the sanctuary of the Lord must be innocent and pure of heart, eager to receive the blessing and mercy of God.²⁷⁵

However, the psalms that Murdac would have required would not be in the tone of intent to receive purification so that the person may enter into the sanctuary of the Lord with a pure heart. Freland suggests that Psalm 6 might have been a psalm that Murdac required the Nun to recite, as it has the inflection of atonement and a wish for forgiveness.²⁷⁶ Ælred states that the Nun awoke from her dream and “she

²⁷⁵ Reider, *Purification of Women*, 85.

“Psalmi-Chapter 23.” Vulgate.org, https://vulgate.org/ot/psalms_23.htm.

David canticum Domini est terra et plenitudo eius orbis et habitatores eius
quia ipse super maria fundavit eum et super flumina stabilivit illum
quis ascendet in montem Domini et quis stabit in loco sancto eius
innocens manibus et mundo corde qui non exaltavit frustra animam suam et non iuravit dolose
accipiet benedictionem a Domino et iustitiam a Deo salutari suo
haec generatio quaerentium eum quaerentium faciem tuam Iacob semper
levate portae capita vestra et elevamini ianuae sempiternae et ingrediatur rex gloriae
quis est iste rex gloriae Dominus fortis et potens Dominus fortis in proelio
levate portae capita vestra et erigite ianuae sempiternae et ingrediatur rex gloriae
quis est iste rex gloriae Dominus exercituum ipse est rex gloriae semper

²⁷⁶“Psalmi-Chapter 6.” Vulgate.Org, https://vulgate.org/ot/psalms_6.htm.

Victori in psalmis super octava canticum David

*Domine ne in furore tuo arguas me neque in ira tua corripas me
miserere mei Domine quoniam infirmus sum sana me Domine quoniam conturbata sunt ossa mea
et anima mea turbata est valde et tu Domine usquequo
revertere Domine erue animam meam salva me propter misericordiam tuam
quoniam non est in morte recordatio tui in inferno quis confitebitur tibi
laboravi in gemitu meo natare faciam tota nocte lectulum meum lacrimis meis stratum meum rigabo
caligavit prae amaritudine oculus meus consumptus sum ab universis hostibus meis
recedite a me omnes qui operamini iniquitatem quia audivit Dominus vocem fletus mei
audivit Dominus deprecationem meam Dominus orationem meam suscipiet
confundantur et conturbentur vehementer omnes inimici mei revertantur et confundantur subito*

committed the vision and the psalms to memory."²⁷⁷ While he does not specifically state that the Nun actually recited the psalms, he implies it.

Ælred continues the narrative by stating that the next night after Murdac's visit, the Nun thought that she was about to give birth. Murdac again appeared to the Nun and came with two beautiful, angelic women. Murdac

covered her face with the pallium in which he was clothed, chiding her and saying: "If you had been cleansed by a true confession you would clearly see what is being done. Now indeed you feel the benefit, but you cannot know the means and nature of the action."²⁷⁸

In other miraculous abortive churching records, the nuns confessed their sins to the saint before the abortion and churching occurred. Since the Nun was unable to confess her sins properly, Murdac decides that she cannot witness the miraculous event that is about to occur. Murdac covers her face with his pallium, which a garment similar to a stole but is for an archbishop, not a priest. The use of the pallium coincides with the use of the stole in the churching ritual. The stole is used as a barrier between the priest and new mother (not yet purified) so that he would not be tainted by her sin and it as used as a lead to bring the woman back into the church.²⁷⁹ Through these actions, using a barrier and leading the woman by a role, a priest demonstrated gate keeping power. They controlled who was able to reenter

²⁷⁷ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 119.

²⁷⁸ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 119.

²⁷⁹ Rieder, *Purification of Women*, 89.

the church. Murdac is using his pallium in a similar fashion. He uses it as a barrier between himself and the Nun. Although she could not infect him in his current state, she is still impure and is not allowed to physically interact with an untainted person/being—especially a saintly body. While Murdac does not physically lead her anywhere, his act of miraculous abortive churching spiritually leads her into a better state of being.

Murdac gives no explanation as to what happened or why. This lack of explanation is in correlation with other abortion miracles: “The recipient of Cainnech’s abortion services had ‘fornicated secretly,’ become pregnant, and asked Cainnech to bless her womb. When he did so “at once the baby [*infans*] in her womb vanished without a trace.’ Whether or not this was the sort of blessing the woman had in mind is not mentioned.”²⁸⁰ Callan further argues that “each woman is portrayed as little more than a vessel of a child unwanted by the saint, if not the mother, and, having undergone such a ‘miracle,’ the women are discarded from the Lives much like the fetus from their wombs.”²⁸¹ I partly disagree with this argument because a saint does not have the power or authority to simply decide who must or must not have a miraculous abortive churching. It is only through God’s intercession that the saint has these miraculous abilities, in those specific moments.

²⁸⁰ Callan, “Of Vanishing Fetuses”, 291.

²⁸¹ Callan, “Of Vanishing Fetuses”, 290.

Ælred reports that the Nun, after some time of having her face covered, “raised herself, saw the women bearing in their arms an infant wrapped in white linen, as it seemed to her, and following after the departing bishop. Startled awake, she felt no weight in her belly.”²⁸² Again, Ælred’s wording is vague and there is a lack of clarity to whether she is unsure of what she saw, or if Ælred doubts her statement. The lack of clarity makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make a definitive argument. The unique difference between the Nun’s miraculous abortive churching compared to the other nun’s miraculous abortive churching is that she did not see the fetus disappear from her womb, and she did not see the actual purification blessing of the churching. After all, the miraculous event occurred within a dream. With these differences in mind, I would suggest that the Nun was allowed to see what seemed like an infant leaving with the two angelic women within her dream because it gave her a reasonable idea about what occurred so that she could report it to the other nuns. Without this information, the community, Gilbert, and Ælred might not have believed her, and instead may have accuse her of infanticide.

In fact the community did think that she had killed her child: “They saw that her womb had shrunk, that her girlish— I will not say virginal— face had put on comeliness, and that her clear eyes had lost their leaden color.”²⁸³ Ælred is careful

²⁸² Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 119.

²⁸³ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 119.

not to outright call her virginal; this, too, is different than other abortion miracles which call the women virgins even while pregnant.²⁸⁴ However, he implies that the Nun has been repaired in ways that can be physically seen, which gives an indication that she is returning to a virgin-like state, and that she will have the opportunity to reintegrate into her community: "They [the nuns] did not believe her, being terrified by the novelty of the thing...They ran their fingers over each of her members, they explored everywhere, but they discovered no sign of a birth, no indication of a conception."²⁸⁵ Ælred calling her account a "novelty" is true. There is no other account like the Nun's. While the other abortion miracles are akin to her experience, there are marked differences that set them apart. The largest and key difference is that there was no one, not even the Nun, to fully witness the event. Without any kind of witness, it is difficult for Ælred and others to definitively state what occurred. Although there is this ambiguity within Ælred's record, the similarities between the abortion miracles and Nun's are abundant. Other scholars have argued that the Nun experienced a miraculous birth, but most scholars seem to avoid giving an argument about what the entire event is.

Miraculous births vary in what occurs. For example, St. Brigid of Kildare was known to help mothers with "an array of miracles for every stage of the pregnancy process, from conception to soothing sore nipples to ensuring the safety of a

²⁸⁴ Callan, "Of Vanishing Fetuses," 293.

²⁸⁵ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 120.

disabled child...sparing [a woman] `childbirth or its pangs."²⁸⁶ What is classified as a miraculous birth? God's intersection assisting with conception of a child? The removal from labor pains? The child miraculously popping out of the womb and the mother being returned to a virgin like state? In many cases of miraculous births, they are well documented and follow said child through adulthood. A majority of the children are male, and grow up to be saints and/or become high ranking members within the Church. The key factor as to why I argue that it is a miraculous abortive churching instead of a miraculous birth is that there is no evidence or continued record of the child.

Ælred ends his text rather abruptly. He discusses how the Nun was miraculously freed from her fetters, save one that remained on her foot. He went to Watton and saw the fetters that had been miraculously removed, saying the fetters were "whole, in the form in which it had come from."²⁴² Ælred reported, "I began to handle the fetter with my own hands, and I understood that without God's power she could not have been looked from this one."²⁴³ It is through Ælred's declaration, not Gilbert's, that the Nun has been released and therefore forgiven by God. Ælred, keeping in accord with the miraculous abortion tales, does not specifically state what happens to the Nun after he leaves. He does state that he received a letter "from that venerable man [Gilbert]"²⁸⁷ saying that the last fetter had miraculously

²⁸⁶ Callan, "Of Vanishing Fetuses," 291.

²⁸⁷ Ælred of Rievaulx, "A Certain Wonderful Miracle," 122.

fallen from her foot and asking what he should do. Ælred replies “*What God has cleansed you cannot call common*, and her whom he has loosed you must not bind.”²⁸⁸ Ælred references Matthew 16:19 at the end of his text:

et tibi dabo claves regni caelorum et quodcumque ligaveris super terram erit ligatum in caelis et quodcumque solveris super terram erit solutum in caelis

And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven²⁸⁹

Ælred is reiterating through the biblical reference that God has forgiven the Nun, she is once again a Bride of Christ and should be treated the respect due to her status.

While the Nun’s situation has concluded, the liminality of the monastery has not. Gilbert is still predisposed to be in a liminal state with his three Rules and two houses. He continues to shirk off responsibility and leadership roles by asking other monks, such as Ælred, for direction. Since Gilbert is the leader and creator of the monastic space, he creates and sets the intention for the space, but his continued laziness and indecisiveness allows for sin, especially sexual sin, to leach into the space that should be fully enclosed. Gilbert perpetuates a state of liminality which doesn’t allow his monasteries and his followers to function properly or to produce a pure, chaste environment. The space and followers are both unable to function

²⁸⁸ Ælred of Rievaulx, “A Certain Wonderful Miracle,” 122.

²⁸⁹ “Evangelium Secundum Matthaeum- Chapter 16.” Vulgate. Org. https://vulgate.org/nt/gospel/matthew_16.htm

properly due to Gilbert's laziness, so virginal apprehensions will continue to manifest.

CONCLUSION

Ælred's historical text shows the implications and reaction of when the monastic setting is a permeable (liminal) space and not enclosed as it should be. The text also reflects how the enclosed space is a means of male control over female spaces and bodies. When the monastic space is permeable instead of enclosed male control is challenged or taken away by the women in the space. The monastic space at Watton was already a permeable space because Gilbert did not construct the space or his Rule for his Order correctly. Furthermore, Gilbert did not ensure the nuns' monastic space was properly enclosed at Watton and lay brothers were able to enter the space. Gilbert's permeable construction of the space allowed sin to be in the space. The Nun became susceptible to the sin and committed sexual transgressions with a lay brother that had entered into the nuns' monastery. Ælred originally describes the sexual transgression as a torrid affair, but as the narrative continues the sexual transgression shifts from affair to violent rape. By the Nun breaking her vow of chastity she removes herself from under male control, but the lay brother violently reinstates male control over her body through rape.

The Nuns sexual transgression jeopardizes the virginal status of the entire nun community at Watton. When the other nuns discover that she broke her vow of chastity which resulted in her becoming pregnant the other nuns rip her veil off, symbolizing her being rejected by her community, and they re-enclose her within a cell to help preserve the community's virginal status. This puts the Nun in a virginal

state within a newly constructed liminal space. Through this layered liminality the Nun becomes suspended in time, essentially pausing her pregnancy. Henry Murdac, Archbishop of York, comes to the Nun in a dream and exhorts male control over her body by performing a miraculous abortive churching. The miraculous abortive churching not only puts the Nun back under male monastic control, but it purifies her so that she may reintegrate into her community without causing the other nuns harm.

The Gilbertine Order survived, despite Gilbert's lack of leadership abilities.²⁹⁰ The Order flourished after Gilbert's death and the Rule was refined and solidified with official documents. The Gilbertines never expanded outside of England, and they were active until disillusionment of the monasteries²⁹¹ by King Henry VIII (1491-1547 CE). The Gilbertines never truly flourished under Gilbert because he liked to have power but not the responsibility that goes with it. Gilbert continued to build communities to give himself more power over others, but he took responsibility or care of his people. Gilbert held onto power so much, that it was a

²⁹⁰ The event with the Nun was not the only scandal that the Gilbertines endured with Gilbert. A few years after the incident at Watton there was the Lay Brothers Revolt (c. 1170-1175 CE) and Gilbert briefly had to take refuge in France because he fell out of royal favor for assisting in the escape of Thomas Becket (d. 1170 CE), Archbishop of Canterbury.

²⁹¹ A small revival of the Gilbertine Order occurred in the early 2000's in honor of Gilbert's 900th birthday. The group was in Northeast England (same area the Gilbertines were active) and were unofficial. The group is not a formal organization with canons and nuns, just parish parishioners following the Gilbertine Rule's Liturgy of the Hours. It is unknown if this group is still active.

struggle for Roger, the next master of the Order, to succeed him because Gilbert would not let his position go.

Gilbert's influence throughout Ælred's text is of negligence and a lack of control. Gilbert's lack of control is a medieval man's nightmare, because that leaves space for women to take control and gain authority. For women to have authority and control over their own bodies and spaces is unacceptable; they must remain under male control. Despite Gilbert's negligence, he was canonized by Pope Innocent III in 1202, not long after his death. Gilbert was nominated for canonization by Hubert Walter (d. 1205 CE), the Archbishop of Canterbury. Walter nominated Gilbert because he was a native Englishman and created the first (and only) native English monastic order. Three miraculous events were recorded of Gilbert healing various members of his Order,²⁹² and several letters of recommendation were written from high-ranking members of society, including King John (1166-1216 CE). Innocent rejected Gilbert's first nomination but granted the second nomination after having a dream about Gilbert.²⁹³

At the time of Gilbert's canonization, Innocent had revised the requirements for canonization. Gilbert's nomination seems to be a political power move by the Walter to gain more saints for England, and for Innocent to test out his new reforms for canonization. Innocent also gained political power through canonizing

²⁹² All recorded miracles were posthumous

²⁹³ Innocent received help interpreting his dream by his advisor and confessor Reiner of Ponza, a Cistercian.

Gilbert. The Gilbertines agreed “in return for papal assent to the canonization, the Gilbertines pledged to place Innocent’s name in their martyrology [history of the order] and include him as a confrater [associate member] of the order.”²⁹⁴ By agreeing to these terms the Gilbertines give Innocent political power within the Order, and the Order gained notoriety for having their founder become a saint.

Political power is a driving force within the medieval Church and that greatly influences male control over female bodies and spaces. The debate surrounding the Virgin Mary’s immaculate conception was settled as a political move of power. The abortion saints exhorted male control over the defiled nuns’ pregnant bodies, often times without their consent.²⁹⁵ Like the abortion saints, Henry Murdac forced male control over the Nun’s body by performing a miraculous abortive churching without her knowledge or consent. Ælred’s text is an exemplary example of the violent reactions to women challenging and taking control over their own spaces and bodies. When the Nun took control of her own body and space she was violently raped, was subjected to violence and hate from her community out of fear that male control perpetuates, and had a miraculous abortive churching imposed upon her body to reinstate male control over her.

²⁹⁴ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 63.

²⁹⁵ Callan names Brigid of Kildare as an abortion saint, but Callan states that Brigid’s abortion miracle involves sparing the woman childbirth/childbirth pangs. Callan’s statement is vague and sparing a woman childbirth can be argued that Brigid granted the woman a miraculous birth. Callan does imply that the abortion miracle Brigid performed was with the woman’s consent, which makes this miracle vastly different than the other abortion miracle. The woman has control over her own body and space by accepting Brigid’s help through her abortion miracle.

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