

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Hugh Magennis, "'No Sex Please, We're Anglo-Saxons'? Attitudes to Sexuality in Old English Prose and Poetry', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 26 (1995), 1-27

Permanent URL:

https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=123710&silo_library=GEN01



Leeds Studies in English
School of English
University of Leeds
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

'No Sex Please, We're Anglo-Saxons'? Attitudes to Sexuality in Old English Prose and Poetry

Hugh Magennis

From time to time critics have commented on the clearly evident reticence of Anglo-Saxon poets and prose writers in dealing with matters of sex and love. Michael Swanton describes Old English poetry as 'largely asexual', and he identifies love as a theme 'alien to the Germanic mind'.¹ Stephen Morrison agrees, and therefore, rightly, finds it unsurprising that even purely spiritual erotic metaphors are not much taken up in Old English literature.² Morrison contrasts the unenthusiastic response of the Anglo-Saxons to the powerful traditional Christian theme of *Christus sponsus* [Christ the bridegroom] with their eager exploitation of other Christian image complexes. He notes that such image complexes as the presentation of life as journey and exile and as a spiritual battle against the powers of evil received considerable elaboration at the hands of Old English poets and homilists, 'partly', he adds, 'because of the existence of secular (and heroic) literary *topoi* to which the borrowed imagery largely corresponded'.³ The theme of *Christus sponsus*, on the other hand, for which there are no such corresponding literary *topoi* in secular tradition, is not widely exploited in Old English literature. The theme does appear in Anglo-Saxon texts but, as Morrison emphasizes, there is a reluctance on the part of Old English writers to explore the literal bases of the metaphor. In this reluctance, suggests Morrison, Old English writers 'demonstrate to what extent the theme of love, *per se*, was inimical to their literary sensibility'.⁴

Morton Donner speaks of the 'prudery' of the Old English translators of *Apollonius of Tyre* and the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*.⁵ Donner's comments concerning *Apollonius of Tyre* have recently been endorsed and developed by Anita Riedinger, who explains, in particular, how the leading female figure in this romance, Arcestrate, is presented as less passionate in the Old English version than in its Latin source: Riedinger sums up the Old English remodelling of Arcestrate's

personality in the comment, 'her whole demeanour grows more sedate'.⁶ Riedinger shows the Old English Arcestrate fitting submissively into a patriarchal world and displaying reassuringly the modest virtues which this world sees as appropriate to an ideal woman. Such virtues do not include the kind of subjection to the power of love evident in the Arcestrate of the Latin source. Another recent commentator on the Old English *Apollonius of Tyre*, noticing this version's de-emphasizing of the erotic, suggests that the love episodes 'may have been considered of little interest, or perhaps in bad taste'.⁷ The findings of Donner and Riedinger indicate instead that these episodes have been considered too prurient to be appropriate for inclusion in the Old English translation. A further illustration of the Old English translator's concern with propriety, not mentioned by Donner or Riedinger, can be seen in the transference of a meeting between Apollonius and Arcestrate from the privacy of Arcestrate's *cubiculum* 'bedroom' (translated elsewhere in the Old English version as *bur*) to the more public setting of the hall.⁸

Romance fiction, because of its subject matter, is a type of literature which we might expect to be especially revealing of attitudes to sex and love. Other types of literature produced in Anglo-Saxon England might be thought less likely to have much to tell us about such attitudes. Old English adaptations of other kinds of Latin sources, however, including hagiographical and biblical, reveal a broad uniformity of approach with that of the *Apollonius* translator, suggesting a shared interpretation of sexuality in the (usually monastic, or monastically influenced) section of society within which this literature was produced. The narrative perspective in this literature is generally a male one and, as in *Apollonius of Tyre*, attitudes to sex and love are most evident in the treatment of female characters and in the reaction of male characters to females. Particularly interesting in this respect are treatments of female saints in Old English versions of Latin *vitae*. Among the female saints most commonly celebrated in Anglo-Saxon England, as elsewhere in the medieval world, are the virgin martyrs. In Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*,⁹ of his female saints only Basilissa (of Julian and Basilissa) and Æthelthryth are not martyred, and even they are virgins; Ælfric's virgin martyrs are Eugenia, Agnes, Agatha, Lucy, Cecilia and Daria. The *Old English Martyrology*¹⁰ has a wider range of female saints, but includes some twenty virgin martyrs, and in many cases it devotes more space to the virgin martyrs than to other female saints. There is one surviving Old English poem on a virgin martyr, *Juliana*.¹¹

The classic picture of the virgin martyr, inherited from the early Christian centuries, is of a nobly-born and beautiful young girl, often lusted after by her

obdurate pagan persecutor. Impervious to blandishments and to tortures, she goes heroically to her death, achieving triumph and glorification in the process. The martyr may protest that she does not care what happens to her body, as long as her soul remains inviolate, but her virginity is divinely protected anyway, even when, as in the cases of SS Agnes, Agatha, Lucy and Daria (to give examples taken up by Ælfric in his *Lives of Saints*), she is consigned to a brothel. Preservation of the heroine's virginity in a brothel is a motif shared with the secular classical romance tradition, appearing, for example, in *Apollonius of Tyre* (though the incomplete text of the Old English *Apollonius of Tyre* lacks the relevant episode).¹²

Sexuality is an insistent underlying theme in these saints' lives. The *passio* of the virgin saint essentially dramatizes a struggle for power between a threatening world, which is destructive and sexual, and an embracing spirituality, which is asexual. Sexuality is equated with vice and must be rejected. It is associated with unsavoury characters, like the raging tyrant, the inhabitants of the brothel, and the licentious woman (for example, the predatory Melantia in the life of St Eugenia).¹³ The virgin overcomes this world through subjugation and repudiation of her sexuality. This may even involve living in disguise as a man. The latter recourse is not guaranteed to protect the woman against sexual threat, however, as SS Eugenia and Euphrosyne are alarmed to discover. Eugenia, living *incognita* as a monk, is pursued by the widow Melantia; and Euphrosyne, also ostensibly a monk, proves to be such a stunningly good-looking youth that the other brothers insist that this monk must live in solitary confinement, because of the temptation that his looks present to their human frailty.¹⁴ The theme of transvestitism, however, with its use of subterfuge, cannot be more than a sub-plot in the life of the virgin martyr, since her gaining of glory comes not in the avoidance of conflict, through disguise, but in her open declaration of defiance at her trial and execution.

Anglo-Saxon prose versions of this hagiographical material sometimes transmit its sexual themes with little modification, but often the explicit emphasis on such themes is diminished. It is notable that the Old English saints lives share with *Apollonius of Tyre* a tendency to be careful not to make too much of female physical beauty. Reference to the beauty of the virgin saint, particularly in introductory descriptions, is sometimes avoided, even though it may have been present in the source. The anonymous Old English *Life of St Euphrosyne* follows the detail of its source closely in most respects, including in its treatment of the saint's unwitting temptation of the other monks. Even the *Life of St Euphrosyne*, however, omits reference to Euphrosyne's beauty in its opening description of her. The Old English

tells of her fame, wisdom and learning spreading throughout her home town of Alexandria: 'þa asprang hire hlisa and wisdom and gelærednys . geond ealle þa ceastre' [Then her fame and wisdom and learning spread throughout the city] (ll. 29-30). This follows closely the Latin *vita*, but omits the source's accompanying reference to her beauty: 'Opinio ejus peragravit totam civitatem, et de sapientia ejus et de doctrina, et quia erat pulchra nimis, et composita vultu et anima' [Word of her pervaded the whole city, both concerning her wisdom and her learning and because she was exceedingly beautiful and lovely in face and mind] (cols 645D-646B). In the Old English, Euphrosyne's qualities of mind are stressed, not those of her appearance.

A similar omission of reference to physical beauty is notable in the Cotton Tiberius A.iii version of the life of St Margaret.¹⁵ In describing the fondness of Margaret's fostermother for the saint, the Latin source of the Old English had a reading similar to, 'ampliore desiderio tenebatur a suo nutrice, quia formosa erat' [she was held in greater affection by her fostermother (after the death of her mother), because she was beautiful] (ch. 3).¹⁶ The Old English reduces this to, 'seo fostormodor hi miccle swyðor lufode þonne heo ær dyde' [her fostermother loved her much more than she did before] (ch. 3). The same Old English version excludes two other references to Margaret's beauty present in the Latin analogues: in the Latin the persecutor Olibrius tells her that she will prosper in his house because of her beauty, and later, when she is being tortured, he urges her to have pity on her beauty and give in to him.¹⁷ The Old English version of the same legend in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 303¹⁸ is less reticent than the Cotton Tiberius, mentioning the beauty of Margaret when she is first seen by Olibrius, 'wlitig and fæger, onmang hire geferan' [beautiful and fair, among her companions] (ch. 5), and including Olibrius's plea for her to have pity on her beauty: 'Gemiltse þinum fægran lichaman' [Have pity on your fair body] (ch. 7). It does not have the detail of the fostermother's admiration for Margaret's beauty, but then the fostermother does not appear in this version at all.

Ælfric is among the Old English hagiographers who reduce the amount of reference to the beauty of the female saints found in their sources. Ælfric does transmit the reference to the beauty of St Agnes inherited from Ambrose: 'pulchra facie, sed pulchrior fide' [she was beautiful in her face, but more beautiful in her faith] (PL 17, col. 813C) is translated literally, 'Heo wæs wlitig on anyne, and wlitigre on geleafan' (l. 13).¹⁹ But he ignores a reference to the persecutor Quintianus being excited by the beauty of St Agatha: in the Latin, Quintianus looks

with lust 'as aspectum virginis pulcherrimae' [at the sight of the beautiful maiden] (p. 621D).²⁰

Ælfric's 'Life of St Eugenia' is interesting in that it omits the introductory description of the saint, which in the Latin *vita* takes the form of a variation of the formula also used by Ambrose of St Agnes: the *vita* has, 'Erat autem Eugenia pulchra facie et eleganti corpore, sed pulchrior mente et formosior castitate' [Eugenia was beautiful of face and of gracious body, but more beautiful in mind and lovely in chastity] (PL 73, col. 607A-B). The interesting point with respect to this is that the variant of the Latin text found in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 9 [CCCC 9], an English copy of the 'Cotton Corpus legendary', also omits the reference to Eugenia's beauty. The Cotton-Corpus legendary is recognized as being closely related to the exact sources of many of Ælfric's hagiographical writings.²¹ In the passage on Eugenia's qualities, CCCC 9 reads, 'Erat ergo Eugenia pulchra mente et formosior castitate' [Eugenia was beautiful in mind and more lovely in chastity] (p. 411, col. i, ll. 7-8). Ælfric's omission of mention of Eugenia's beauty may well therefore go back to his immediate source (though it is worth noting that Ælfric leaves out more of the account of Eugenia than CCCC 9 does, ignoring the passage on the saint's qualities altogether). CCCC 9 is itself an eleventh-century English manuscript and may reflect in its text the same tendency to excise references to beauty found in the vernacular Anglo-Saxon material.

Early medieval Latin prose hagiographers themselves mostly use a limited and formulaic vocabulary of physical beauty, and they usually confine what little attention they display, to the face of the saint, ignoring the rest of the body. Where such references to beauty are passed on by the vernacular prose writers – they are seldom *added* by vernacular prose writers²² – description goes no further than the employment of such stock adjectives as *whitig* and *fæger*. These writers, Latin and Old English, become interested in highlighting the beauty of the saint only when she has attained her glorified state and has transcended the earthly plane. Her beauty is now heavenly and spiritual. Admiring attention can now be paid to her radiant garments and to the adornments which surround her. In her earlier state, the saint had despised finery and ornament.

On the earthly plane, attention to bodily adornment is associated in homiletic and hagiographical tradition with vanity and often with harlots. Aldhelm particularly condemns the seductive allurements of female bodily adornment.²³ In Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, St Æthelthryth regards the tumour on her neck as deserved because of the necklaces she used to wear in her youth.²⁴ According to her *vita*, St

Pelagia, who lived a dissolute life as a young woman, used to adorn herself with gold and jewels and, says the *Old English Martyrology* writer, her whole dress smelt like perfume of every kind: 'eall hyre gyrela stanc swa ælces cynnes ricels'.²⁵ It is a mark of the extent of Pelagia's eventual renunciation of her sexuality that when in her repentance she goes to live alone on mount Olivet, no one knows whether she is a man or a woman – 'hwæðer hio wæs wer ðe wif'.²⁶ St Agnes refuses the costly robes offered her by Sempronius,²⁷ as does St Agatha those offered by Quintianus.²⁸ The *vita* of St Cecilia relates that this saint's high station in life required her to wear splendid clothes, but that she used to wear hair-cloth under them.²⁹ In translating this *vita*, however, Ælfric finds even this reference to rich clothing inappropriate. He decides to omit mention of her rich clothing altogether, saying simply that she clothed herself with hair-cloth:

Hwæt ða cecilia hi sylfe gescrydde
mid hæran to lice.³⁰ (13-14)
[Behold, then Cecilia clothed herself with hair-cloth on her
body.]

It is when the saint is in a glorified state that glowing attention can be paid, in both Latin and vernacular texts, to the splendour of her appearance. Here there is no danger of associating this beauty with sexual attractiveness, as the figure of the saint attains the appearance of supernatural radiance. In the brief references to the saint's physical beauty in the introductory descriptions mentioned above, care is often taken to link these references with mention of her chastity. In the images of the glorified saint, no such qualifications are necessary. Thus, in her *passio* St Lucy is addressed in an apparition by the figure of St Agatha, adorned with gems, 'gemmis ornatam'.³¹ Similarly, St Eugenia is seen in an apparition, 'auro textu cyclade induta' [attired in a formal bordered dress of gold fabric] (PL 73, col. 620C),³² as is St Agnes, likewise (with a group of other virgins) 'auro intextis cycladis indutae' [attired in formal bordered dresses of gold fabric] (PL 17, col. 819D).³³ The beauty of St Anastasia is emphasized as she goes to her death.³⁴ Males too are suffused with heavenly radiance in the glory of their martyrdom: the *passio* of the Seven Sleepers describes the countenances of these saints, in their transfigured state, as like roses blooming, and as shining like the sun.³⁵ Also described as shining like the sun is the body of St Mary of Egypt after her death; in life, after her repudiation of the immorality of her youth, it had been aged and weather-beaten by her years in

the desert.

This hagiographical treatment of beauty and adornment is closely paralleled in *Apollonius of Tyre*, particularly in its Old English version. Little interest is shown in the beauty of Arcestrate throughout the text. Only when she emerges at the very end as a figure of authority and power, as priestess of Diana, does the Old English writer make special mention of her 'micclan beorhtnesse and wlite' [great brightness and beauty] (p. 36, l. 12). The Old English follows the Latin in reporting, 'Heo wæs soðlice þearle wlitig, and for ðare micclan lufe þare clænnesse hi sædon ealle þæt þar nære nan Dianan swa gecweme swa heo' [She was very beautiful, and because of her great love for chastity they all said that there was no one so pleasing to Diana as she] (p. 36, ll. 7-9). The association of chastity and beauty goes back to the original, but, as Anita Riedinger points out,³⁶ the Old English adaptation of the portrait of Arcestrate the priestess enhances the emphasis on her beauty. It does so, however, in a way that suggests an asexual radiance emanating from her person, like that of the saint who has transcended all worldly desires. The Old English even increases Arcestrate's adornment, having her head 'mid golde and mid gimmon geglængde' [adorned with gold and gems] (p. 36, l. 5), whereas the Latin omits mention of the gold. In certain respects, then, this supernatural-looking figure (Apollonius thinks she *is* the goddess Diana),³⁷ transformed from the naive girl of earlier in the narrative, can be regarded as corresponding to the glorified saint of hagiographical tradition.

The only other reference to female beauty in the Old English *Apollonius of Tyre* also displays interests shared by hagiography: the narrative context is that of a beautiful young girl oppressed by a lustful tyrant. In *Apollonius*, however, the tyrant, Antiochus, is the girl's father and he succeeds in raping her. The incest theme is foreign to hagiography, but in Antiochus the cruel authority-figure of hagiographical tradition is recognizable, though in even more extreme form; and the girl, a 'swiðe wlitig dohter ungelifedlicre fægernesse' [very beautiful daughter of incredible fairness] (p. 2, l. 6) is, at least initially, not unlike the nobly-born heroines of hagiography.

So far in this article, the Old English texts on which we have concentrated have been prose translations or adaptations of Latin hagiographical and romance works. The de-emphasizing of sexual themes in these texts reveals an anxiety and discomfort on the part of the vernacular writers concerning the expression of such themes. The Latin works themselves, even *Apollonius of Tyre* in some respects,

take a negative view of sexuality, as something to be subjugated and denied. Old English translators reflect and extend this subjugation and denial in their own work, which is often blander than the material on which it is based. The approach of the Old English writers reflects what has been called the 'sexual pessimism' of the early medieval church³⁸ but carries this pessimism to even further extremes than those of the Latin sources. The vernacular writers, keenly conscious that they are writing for a less educated and more impressionable audience than that of Latin literature, and themselves products of a culture suspicious of sexuality, tread carefully indeed.

Where Anglo-Saxon writers might be thought likely to get into particular difficulties in attempting to render their sources less prurient, is in narratives which display a different or more complicated attitude towards sexuality than that evident in the sources so far discussed. The most intractable of such narratives are found in the Bible. In extant Old English literature, it is in the adaptations of the Books of Judith and Esther that we observe Anglo-Saxon authors proceeding especially gingerly in their treatment of sex. The Old English adaptations of these books struggle to accommodate the conflicting requirements of moral correctness and fidelity to the word of Scripture. *Ælfric* is troubled enough with the Book of Judith to feel impelled to begin his brief commentary on it by reminding his audience of the canonicity of this book:

Nis þis nan leas spel: hit stent on leden,

þus on ðære bibliothecan.³⁹ (404-05)

[This is no fictitious story: it is in the Vulgate, written thus in the Bible.]

Both in the Book of Judith and the Book of Esther show women calculatingly making use of their sexual attractiveness, though for a good purpose.

The Book of Esther begins with the disobedience of Vasthi, the wife of the great Persian king Assuerus (Xerxes), in refusing to allow herself to be shown off to his followers. For this she is rejected by her husband, and Esther, secretly a Jew, is chosen first as one of the king's concubines, but soon to be queen instead of Vasthi. Esther helps her persecuted people through her influence with the king, with whom in her beauty, which is 'past all belief' (Esther II. 15),⁴⁰ she finds great favour. Her co-operative approach with Assuerus enables her to prosper, unlike Vasthi, and to gain her patriotic ends through indirect means. The Old Testament text tells of Esther's elaborate preparations to please Assuerus with her beauty, when

she has been chosen as a royal concubine: 'First she must add art to beauty, anointing herself for six months with oil, and for six with paints and powders. Ever the bride was given what adornment she would, and so, in finery of her own choosing, passed out from the maiden's lodging to the royal bed-chamber' (Esther II. 12-13).

Ælfric refers to the beauty of Esther several times in his paraphrase of the biblical book.⁴¹ After all, it is because of her beauty that she has been chosen by king Assuerus. But he glosses over her position as concubine, by which, according to the Book of Esther, she wins the 'loving favour' (II. 17) of the king, and he draws the line completely at having to describe her bodily preparations for spending the night with Assuerus. Ælfric's ignoring of this passage is not simply due to his general tendency towards abbreviation: he does not shrink, for example, from providing a glowing description of the great banquet at the beginning of the narrative (II. 15-27), in which he emphasizes the decorum and splendour of the occasion. The use of sexual allurement is firmly played down in Ælfric's version. Esther emerges from the Old English adaptation as essentially a resolute and clear-thinking woman who engineers the downfall of the enemy of her people (Aman), and who acts with courage and assertiveness. The sexual dimension of her relationship with Assuerus is less in evidence. In producing an acceptable heroine for his Anglo-Saxon audience, Ælfric has to carry out a more radical modification of Esther than he customarily does in the case of his hagiographical characters.

Aspects of the Book of Judith, which tells of the calculated seduction and then killing of the Assyrian leader Holofernes by the Bethulian widow Judith, also alarm Ælfric and prompt some careful rewriting in his Old English paraphrase of the Vulgate text. In the biblical book, Judith tempts Holofernes to his death through her sexual blandishments. Ælfric minimizes the theme of seduction and presents Holofernes as responsible for his own downfall, a cruel tyrant lusting after a chaste young woman. He ignores Judith's bathing and anointing of herself before she goes to Holofernes (Judith X. 3). And, as she enters the scene of the banquet which leads to his death, it is the wickedness of Holofernes, not, as in the Book of Judith, his powerlessness to resist Judith, which Ælfric emphasizes. In the biblical version Holofernes is immediately captivated by Judith – 'No sooner did she stand before him than his eyes made him her prisoner' (Judith X. 17) – and in the banquet scene he is in the mentally subordinate position, having to react to Judith all the time, as she plays him along: 'fast beat his heart within him, such was his longing for her charms' (Judith XII. 16). He even accommodates her wish to eat only food

prepared by her serving-maid (XII. 19), a detail not mentioned by Ælfric.

In Ælfric's homily Holofernes has a much more dominant role in the scene, his actions being guided by his lust:

Heo com þa geglenged for nanre galnysse
and stod him ætforan swiðe fægres hiwes,
and his mod sona swiðe wearð ontend
on hire gewilnunge to his galnysse. (287-90)
[She came then adorned for no wantonness and stood before him
exceedingly fair in her appearance, and his mind at once became
enflamed in his desire for her for his lust.]

In Ælfric, Judith gives Holofernes the impression she is entering into the spirit of the banquet,⁴² whereas in the original she dictates its course. In the Old English she allows Holofernes to drink himself into a stupor – 'fordræncte hine sylfne' [he made himself drunk] (l. 294) – but in the Bible she is much more active in encouraging him to drink: 'And Holofernes, basking in her smiles, drank even deeper' (XII. 20).

Ælfric's response to the Book of Judith has recently been illuminatingly discussed by Mary Clayton, who shows how in his treatment of the figure of Judith Ælfric stuggles unsuccessfully to extract a 'safe' meaning from the book:

However much he tries to manipulate meaning, Ælfric cannot cancel the manipulateness and sexual autonomy of his heroine and, in the end he digs a hole for himself by his determination to play down these elements, to contain Judith within patterns dictated by his desire to make her into a model for virgins rather than following the biblical portrait of a forceful, resourceful woman who, though chaste, exploited her sexual attractiveness to kill an enemy of her people.⁴³

Clayton sees Ælfric's inability to deal with the figure of Judith as revealing 'a deep-seated anxiety with regard to women using their bodies in ways which had been firmly repressed by centuries of church prescriptions'.⁴⁴ The asexual virgin saint presents a type of femininity easier to handle for an Anglo-Saxon monastic writer like Ælfric than the threatening Old Testament figures of Esther and Judith, who are, in Clayton's phrase, 'sexually autonomous', and who achieve power over men

through exploitation of their own sexuality.

Before we turn to the other Old English version of the story of Judith, the poem *Judith*, and to other poetic biblical narratives in Old English, it is relevant to allude to the tradition of secular heroic poetry in Anglo-Saxon England. We have already seen Old English poetry characterized as 'largely asexual'. The characterization of the poetry as asexual demonstrably does not fit all Old English poems, but it applies recognizably enough to the secular heroic tradition, as represented by poems such as *Beowulf*, *Widsith* and *The Fight at Finnsburh*.

Secular heroic poetry in Old English is highly modest in content and has no overt interest in sexual themes. The role of women in the world of this poetry is an honoured but subordinate one, as *ides* 'lady' and as patriarchal family-member, mother, daughter or wife. Women are typically gracious and nobly-adorned, but presentations of them lack a sexual dimension. The heroic world is a public rather than a private world and its conflicts do not usually arise from matters of sex and love but from family and tribal enmities, from external threat and from treachery within society. In the solution of such conflicts women fulfil an important function as peace-weavers, and generally their sphere of activity in the poetry is at a public and social level. Women may suffer as victims of the principles of their society, but, if so, they typically do so with resignation. In *Beowulf* the unfortunate Hildeburh can only lament the decree of fate: 'meotodsceaft bemearn' (l. 1077). Poems like *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* portray women who are less acquiescent and more passionate than characters like Hildeburh. These disturbing figures cannot maintain a central role in heroic society and do not appear in heroic narrative itself. They do, however, point to the existence of other strands of Old English poetic tradition, which are not asexual in content. Some of these strands will be further explored in the closing part of the present article.

Christian narrative poetry mostly inherits the underlying 'asexuality' of the secular tradition. By and large, the adapted material accommodates itself perfectly satisfactorily to this asexuality. *Elene*, though it has a more authoritative central female character than any found in secular poetry, does not present severe problems of cultural translation for its Anglo-Saxon adaptor. *Juliana*, a version of a *passio* of a virgin martyr, is unusual among Old English poems in the extent to which it develops the theme of sexual conflict: the world of *Juliana* is, untypically for Old English poetry, not an asexual one, but the sexual dimension of this poem, though insistent, essentially is unthreatening to its heroine.

Biblical poetry also inherits the underlying 'asexuality' of the secular narrative

tradition, but it is nonetheless obliged to deal with awkward sexual themes. Vernacular biblical poets are doubly uncomfortable with such sexual themes, because of the limitations of the poetic tradition which they are adapting and because of the moral qualms about dealing with sexuality which we have seen as also present in Old English prose texts. A revealing example of this discomfort with sexual themes is found in a poem not itself Old English but closely related to the Old English biblical tradition, the Old Saxon paraphrase of the New Testament, the *Heliand*.⁴⁵ This poem's account of the dancing of the daughter of Herodias before Herod (ll. 2731-99) shows some recasting on the part of the Old Saxon poet. The poet finds it necessary in the first place to explain the nature of the girl's *gamen* [entertainment] (l. 2762): her act of dancing in the hall, unfamiliar in the world of Germanic heroic poetry, is said (ll. 2763-64) to reflect a custom practised at the time. The key change which the poet makes, however, defusing the sexual aspect of the dance, is that Herod makes his rash promise to the girl before he sees her perform her dance. He has not been metaphorically intoxicated by the dance itself but, as the poet makes clear, is already intoxicated from heavy drinking. The dance itself is not objectionable. Its excitation of Herod is pointedly ignored in this Germanic retelling, in a way that it is not, for example, in Ælfric's comments in his homily on the episode in *Catholic Homilies I*.⁴⁶

The poem *Judith* makes even less reference to the physical appearance of its heroine than does Ælfric's paraphrase of the Book of Judith. And in the poem the terms which are used of Judith's appearance mostly suggest the noble lady of Germanic tradition rather than specifying sexual attractiveness. Judith is *wundenlocc* [with braided locks] (ll. 77 and 103), *beahhroden* [ring-adorned] (138) (but then so is the attendant who accompanies her: the reference at line 138 applies to both women), *golde gefratwod* [adorned with gold] (l. 171) and *beorhte* [bright] (l. 254). The one unsettling adjective used of her is the much-discussed *ælfscinu* [of elfin beauty] (l. 14), which suggests a sense of the beguiling power of female beauty, but without implying culpability on the part of the heroine.⁴⁷ Mentions of Judith's appearance are also balanced, and outweighed, by insistent reference to her wisdom.⁴⁸

We have seen the attention to Judith's exploitation of her sexuality much reduced in Ælfric's version. In the poem *Judith* it is virtually excised altogether. Neither of the Old English adaptations of the biblical book presents Judith as leading Holofernes on, plying him at the banquet with more drink than he is used to. But, in a radical recasting of the inherited narrative, the *Judith* poet entirely removes the

heroine from this banquet. The banquet becomes a riotous feast of Holofernes and his warriors, in which Judith plays no part. Throughout, she remains in the *gystern* [guest-chamber] (l. 40). And, whereas in Ælfric's version, as in the original, Holofernes drinks 'ofer his gewunan' [more than his custom] (l. 295) on the night of his death, in the poem he is presented as a habitual and uncontrolled drunkard. He is described as *galmod* [licentious] (l. 256), but in *Judith* it is drunkenness rather than lust which destroys Holofernes. Like the Old Saxon poet of the *Heliand*, the *Judith* poet substitutes the more familiar Germanic theme of drunkenness for that of susceptibility to sexual allurements. This is due in part to the Anglo-Saxon discomfort with sexual themes evident too in Ælfric's version of the Judith story (as elsewhere), but it is also a feature of the poet's *Germanizierung* of the biblical material, as the story is transposed into a type of narrative poetry which traditionally lacks of a sexual dimension.

In *Genesis B* the beauty of Eve, which is not mentioned in the Book of Genesis, is described in formulaic terms – 'idesa scenost, wifa wlitegost' [brightest of ladies, most beautiful of women] (ll. 626-27)⁴⁹ – and is praised as the handiwork of the Lord (ll. 628 and 822). In *Genesis A* both Adam and Eve are described as *wlitebeorht* [brightly beautiful] (l. 189). In this poem the admiring epithet regularly applied to Eve is *freolic*,⁵⁰ which suggests her nobility and graciousness. Later, however, *Genesis A* shows interest in the theme of the alluring power of female beauty. It extends the passage in which the sons of God choose wives from the daughters of men (Genesis VI. 1-4), adopting the traditional association of the daughters of men with the women of the race of Cain (l. 1252) and adding a speech in which God expresses displeasure that the beauty of the women's faces has seized oppressively – 'onwod grome' (l. 1260) – the multitude of men. This theme also appears in the episode dealing with Abraham's time in Egypt. Abraham is worried that, because of her beauty, his wife Sarra – 'mæg ælfscieno' [a woman of elfin beauty] (l. 1827)⁵¹ – will innocently enflame the Egyptian noblemen so that some one of them will want her for himself.

In the Book of Genesis (XII. 11-20), however, Abraham's concern in this episode is not for Sarra's virtue but for his own safety. Fearing that the Egyptians will kill him because he is Sarra's husband, he asks Sarra to pretend to be his sister. Sarra agrees to do this and before long becomes, according to the Vulgate, the *uxor* 'wife' (XII. 19) of Pharaoh. The Old English version does not go as far as referring to Sarra as becoming the wife of Pharaoh, but it mentions the *wifmyne* [love for a woman] (l. 1861) that Pharaoh has for her. Is it notable that neither in the Sarra-

Pharao episode nor in the parallel episode of Sarra and Abimelech (ll. 2621-2721)⁵² does the *Genesis A* poet modify the sexual theme to the extent that we have seen in the Esther, Judith and Herod episodes discussed above. The less interventionist approach of the *Genesis A* poet in these episodes bears out the views of those commentators who see *Genesis A* as more of poetic paraphrase and less of a radical recreation of its scriptural material than other biblical narratives in Old English. Nonetheless, the *Genesis A* poet does introduce some changes which might lessen moral criticism of Sarra and Abraham. The mention of Sarra as becoming the wife of Pharao is avoided, as we have noticed, and in the Sarra-Abimelech episode, although it is stated that Abraham and Sarra pretend to be brother and sister, *Genesis A* gives the impression that Sarra is forcibly taken from Abraham, as though through rape:

þa wæs ellpeodig oðre siðe
wif Abrahames from were læded
on fremdes fæðm. (2630-32)

[Then for a second time in a foreign land was the wife of
Abraham taken from her man to the embrace of a stranger.]

In the Old English, Abimelech becomes a drunken reveller, and is evidently more forceful in removing Sarra from Abraham than he is in the Bible.⁵³ The phrase *on fremdes fæðm*, along with the passive *læded*, suggests sexual subjection, and removes attention from the complicity of Sarra and Abraham.⁵⁴ Sexual themes are not avoided in *Genesis A*: given the content of the biblical book, they hardly could be. But in this poem, as in the other vernacular biblical narratives referred to above, a tendency is revealed to absolve good characters from criticism with regard to questions of sexual behaviour and attitudes.

In their treatment of sexuality, most Old English literary texts reflect either of the attitudes identified above, the lack of concern with sexual themes, characteristic of the Germanic heroic tradition, or the 'sexual pessimism' inherited from patristic teaching, an attitude which receives expression in particularly acute form in Anglo-Saxon England. The two attitudes are different, but not, in practice, mutually contradictory. Indeed, Anglo-Saxon Christian writers appear more comfortable with the asexual Germanic heroic world than they do with aspects of the world of the Old Testament. Christian commentators might rail against the *carmina gentilium* [songs

of the pagans] but at least these *carmina* are usually sexually unproblematic and, though they do not repudiate sexuality, they have the decency to ignore it.

It is the attitude of 'sexual pessimism' which is the ideologically dominant one in Anglo-Saxon England, representing a powerful consensus within the text-producing community of the period. This attitude, springing from the church's unsympathetic position with regard to sexual pleasure and reinforced by the renunciatory ideals of early medieval monasticism, underpins the insistent concern with questions of sex evident in homiletic and, particularly, penitential writings. It also motivates the widespread remodelling of erotic narrative episodes, which we have seen in Old English works adapted from Latin.

But, though ideologically dominant, repudiation and denial are not the only responses to sexuality reflected in Anglo-Saxon literature. In life, religious leaders strove to regulate the sexual activity of their flocks and to enforce celibacy in the monastery and among priests and *nunnan*,⁵⁵ but in this they appear to have had no easy task. It is a measure of the gap between ideal and reality that even the much-lauded king Edgar is reported, among other amorous episodes in his youth, to have abducted a *nunne* for sexual purposes.⁵⁶ More generally, evidence of the stubborn persistence of patterns of behaviour quite different from those fostered by Christian moralists can perhaps be adduced from the insistence of the Anglo-Saxon penitentials on matters of sexual conduct. Anthony Davies has recently remarked that although penitentials cannot tell us how prevalent certain sexual acts were they indicate what forms of sexual behaviour a priest was likely to hear about at confession.⁵⁷ Though this view begs a number of questions, it is reasonable to assume that the penitentials must, as handbooks for priests, have had some practical reference to the real world. And even if the evidence they offer must be regarded as equivocal, these books certainly reveal the extent of the church's anxiety on matters of sex. For the penitentials are far more preoccupied by sins of sexual impurity than by other sins: as Allen J. Frantzen notes, such sins make up by far the most common category in the handbooks.⁵⁸

In his exegetical comments on the Book of Judith, Ælfric too reveals a key aspect of this anxiety concerning matters of sex. In the passage in question, Ælfric exhorts *nunnan* to live chastely, noting urgently that not all do so. It is likely that the word *nunne* has a looser significance for Ælfric than does the modern English word 'nun', being applicable to women in secular life.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, it is a matter of distress to Ælfric that some of these ostensibly pious women evidently do not regard sexual misbehaviour as seriously as they should:

Sume nunnan syndon, þe sceandlice libbað,
tellað to lytlum gylte, þæt hi hi forlicgon
and þæt hi leohtlice magon swa lytel gebetan.

(*Homily on Judith*, 429-31)

[There are some nuns who live disgracefully, counting it as a minor sin that they commit fornication, and thinking that they may easily atone for so small an offence.]

Ælfric here expresses his concern that people, even *nunnan*, do not appreciate the seriousness of sexual sin. She who commits fornication once, says Ælfric, loses her virginity for ever and can never have the reward of the hundredfold fruit – 'þæs hundfealdan wæstmes' (*Homily on Judith*, l. 433) – which is reserved for virgins alone. In referring to the loss of the hundredfold fruit,⁶⁰ Ælfric slides unconsciously from denouncing fornication to implicitly stigmatizing sexual activity itself: even legitimate sexual activity deprives one of this reward. And even within marriage, as we read elsewhere, Ælfric would severely curtail the times when intercourse is allowable.⁶¹

As a celibate himself, Ælfric appreciated the hardship of the celibate life. He himself was evidently not immune from the temptations of the flesh. Some verses in Latin appended to his 'Life of St Martin' in *Lives of Saints* provide what appears to be a rare glimpse of the personal struggles of Ælfric the celibate monk. In the verses Ælfric prays for St Martin to help him to live more purely, 'castius'.⁶² The personal tone of these lines presents a striking contrast with the public register that is normally associated with the writings of Ælfric.

The attitude of the erring *nunnan*, censured in the *Homily on Judith*, reflects for Ælfric the deplorable persistence, even among the devout, of an unregenerate view of sexuality, a view which does not properly appreciate the virtue of living *castius*. This unregenerate view, as we might expect, is not widely represented in the textual culture of Anglo-Saxon England. It does, however, invade the precincts of the monastery, at least in literature, occurring most notably in the sexual riddles of the Exeter Book.

The riddles of the Exeter Book express a playful and frank attitude to sexuality which someone like Ælfric could hardly have condoned. This attitude has its likely origin in popular and oral tradition rather than in the world of Christian learning, though it is expressed with considerable wit and intellectual sophistication. *Double-entendre* riddles teasingly introduce the indecorous into a decorous literary form, in

such a way as to implicate the audience in the indelicacy: the riddler can always claim that the correct answer to the riddle is an innocent one, despite the unseemly conclusion to which the audience is inclined to leap. Such riddles accept the principle that sex is not a proper subject for them to deal with – otherwise there would be no need for *double entendre* – but they deal with it anyway. Their attitude is one of good-humoured impudence rather than of hostility to sexuality; and they also proceed on the assumption that the audience accepts that sex is an interesting subject. The riddle is not prompted by disgust and does not succeed if it engenders disgust in the audience.

Several of the Exeter Book riddles are notable for their unabashed acceptance of female sexuality, a subject which we have seen to cause considerable disquiet among religious authorities. Such riddles as 25 (Onion), 45 (Dough) and 61 (Helmet) suggest women taking the initiative in sexual activity, while 54 (Churn) plays with the idea of women having more sexual stamina than men:⁶³

Þegn onnette, wæs þragum nyt
tillic esne, teorode hwæpre
æt stunda gehwam strong ær þon hio,
werig þæs weorces. (Riddle 54, 7-10)

[The thegn hastened, the servant was capable and of use at times,
but in his strength he tired on every occasion before she did,
weary from work.]

Nor, in the highly socially-discriminatory world of Old English poetry, can the sexually enthusiastic women of the riddles be dismissed as mere wenches who lack the continence of their 'betters'. Noblewomen too are shown as engaging confidently in sexual activity.⁶⁴ These riddles are not impelled by a need to construct an image of women as modest and lacking sexual autonomy, which might allay male anxieties. Instead, they treat women on a par with men and acknowledge frankly the reality of appetite and desire in both sexes.

The riddles are remarkable, in an Anglo-Saxon context, in that in their treatment of sexuality they lack an obvious moral dimension. They approach the subject of love-making between men and women both jokingly and with a sense of the mutuality of sexual pleasure. The sexual riddles have no obvious moral message, and their positive attitude to sexuality contrasts with the prevalent sexual pessimism found elsewhere in Old English literature. These riddles are not lacking

in morality, however, though their morality is not that of the early medieval Christian orthodoxy. They are underlain by a reassuring social morality which does not deny or repudiate sexuality but gives it a place in everyday life. The sexual riddles may be seen as representing a traditional type of literature with its background in folk culture. As such, they may be impudent but are not subversive. The sexual explicitness of the riddles might alarm many learned Anglo-Saxons but in its origin it is not socially threatening: the sexuality of the Exeter Book riddles is not presented as obsessive, or adulterous, or deviant, or violent. In acknowledging the interest of sexuality at all, however, the riddles identify themselves as representing a different literary strand from any of those discussed above.

More dangerous and socially threatening aspects of love and sex are also reflected in Old English literature, though, unsurprisingly, few works dealing with these aspects survive in the written records. The gnomic poems *Maxims I* and *Maxims II* are concerned with the theme of order in the world, and they have some incidental comments on sexuality. *Maxims I* expresses disapproval of the adulterous behaviour of some women when their husbands are away. These women are more adventurous – 'fyrwetgeornra' (l. 101) – than many others:

freoð hy fremde monnan, þonne se oþer feor gewiteþ. (102)
[They love strange men when the other man departs far away.]

Maxims I insists that a woman must remain faithful to her husband (l. 99), giving him what his love asks – 'þæs his lufu bædeð' (l. 98). *Maxims II*, in a passage difficult to interpret precisely, speaks of a young woman using secret means – 'dyrne cræft' (l. 43) – to gain her aims in matters of love. Such references suggest a world of more complicated sexuality than that presented in the riddles. They reveal an awareness that the demands of sexuality are independent of and can even be at odds with those of society. The term *ælfscinu*, mentioned above,⁶⁵ may also suggest such an awareness. This term, with its reference to a non-human realm, may be seen as reflecting a Germanic sense of the dangerous power of female beauty.⁶⁶

Apart from these brief references, the treatment of passionate love in Old English poetry is confined to a small number of poems, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wife's Lament* and *Deor* – and the reference in *Deor* (l. 16), to the *sorglufu* [sorrowful love] which deprives Mæthhild of all sleep, is cryptic in the extreme. Like the riddles, these poems are preserved in the Exeter Book, which is, with

regard to the treatment of sexuality, as in other respects, more heterogeneous in content than any other manuscript containing Old English. Indeed, without the Exeter Book there would be little to say about 'alternative' attitudes to sexuality in Old English literature.

The Wife's Lament recognizes the experience of the sorrow of separation in love as a familiar one: the poem's closing words generalize from the speaker's own experience:

Wa bið þam þe sceal
of langoþe leofes abidan. (53-54)
[Woe it is for the one who must in longing wait for a love one.]

The Wife's Lament expresses the intensity of feelings of a woman separated from her *fealaleofa* [much love one] (l. 26). It depicts an intimate relationship thwarted by external factors, which have left the speaker overwhelmed with longing. This speaker recalls the vows she and her loved one confidently once made:

Ful oft wit beotedan
þat unc ne gedælde nemne deað ana,
owiht elles. (21-23)
[Very often we two vowed that nothing but death alone would
part us.]

And she contrasts her own situation with that of lovers who can fulfil their relationships together:

Frynd sind on eorþan,
leofe lifgende leger weardiað,
þonne ic on uhtan ana gonge . . . (33-35)
[There are friends on earth, lovers living together occupy their
beds, while I in the period before dawn walk alone . . .]

Wulf and Eadwacer presents a love which is both passionate and against the wishes of society. It portrays a woman driven not by the obligations of her communal role or by a sense of morality but by an overpowering longing for her absent lover:

Wulf, min Wulf, wena me þine
seoce gedydon, þine seldcymas,
murnende mod, nales meteliste. (13-15)

[Wulf, my Wulf, my waiting for you has made me sick, your
seldom-comings, my sorrowing mind, not at all lack of food.]

In contrast to the speaker's longing for Wulf, and fears for his safety, is her alienation from her own position in the world, an alienation evident in the apparent bitterness of the poem's closing lines, with their reference to 'uncerne earne hwelp' [our wretched whelp] (l. 16) and to the paradoxical tearing apart – 'toslited' (l. 18) – of something that was never joined together. The two islands of the poem, the one on which the speaker lives, among her people, and the island where Wulf is, symbolize the sense of separation which dominates the speaker's mind.

The emotional agitation of the speaker of *Wulf and Eadwacer* expresses itself in an utterance which borders on the incoherent and in a preoccupation with unresolved opposites and paradox. Even the recollection of sexual intimacy with the *beaducafa* [one bold in battle] (l. 11) provokes startlingly antithetical feelings on the part of this woman:

Wæs me wyn to þon, wæs me hwæpre eac lað. (12)

[In one way it was a joy to me but it was also hateful to me.]

This line epitomizes the whole poem in reflecting a consciousness of the complex and contradictory emotions arising from sexuality. The fact that in her recollection of intimacy the speaker has no interest in putting a name to the *beaducafa* adds to the ambiguity of the relationships portrayed in the poem. It also, however, has the effect of emphasizing the sexual pleasure of this intimacy rather than its personal dimension.

The very fact that they are poems about sexual love, an area of experience which we have seen to be normally ignored in the secular heroic tradition and to be treated with distrust and extreme circumspection by religious writers, makes *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* unusual among surviving Old English poems. *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* also treat this subject in a way that does not attempt to make it 'safe' for an audience worried about sexual morality. It is not surprising that so few such poems survive in manuscripts which are themselves the product of a monastic culture which emphatically was worried about sexual

morality, a culture which insisted on the special virtue of celibacy⁶⁷ and stressed the importance of sexual continence and restraint even within marriage.⁶⁸

The inclusion of *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* in the Exeter Book raises questions which are outside the scope of the present article, about the principles at work in the compilation of this manuscript⁶⁹ and about the (perhaps non-literal) ways in which secular Old English verse might have been interpreted by a monastic audience.⁷⁰ Our discussion has shown the extent to which *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* represent interests different from those characteristic of Anglo-Saxon literate authority. The voices of these poems do not speak for the models of social behaviour reflected elsewhere in Old English literature, as surveyed in the first three-quarters of this article. A fairly narrow range of Old English literature, and largely self-selecting in nature, has been preserved from Anglo-Saxon England, however, and we can be confident that *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* were not the only Old English 'love' poems.

NOTES

- ¹ M. J. Swanton, 'The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message: A Reconsideration', *Anglia* 82 (1964), 269-90 (at 271).
- ² S. Morrison, 'The Figure of *Christus Sponsus* in Old English Prose', in *Liebe-Ehe-Ehebruch in der Literatur des Mittelalters*, ed. X. von Ertzdorff and M. Wynn, Beiträge zur deutschen Philologie 58 (Giessen, 1984), 5-15.
- ³ Morrison, 'The Figure of *Christus Sponsus*', p. 5.
- ⁴ Morrison, 'The Figure of *Christus Sponsus*', p. 11.
- ⁵ M. Donner, 'Prudery in Old English Fiction', *Comitatus* 3 (1973), 91-96.
- ⁶ A. R. Riedinger, 'The Englishing of Arcestrate: Woman in *Apollonius of Tyre*', in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. H. Damico and A. Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington, 1990), pp. 292-306 (at 298).
- ⁷ E. Archibald, *Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 184.
- ⁸ *The Old English Apollonius of Tyre*, ed. P. Goolden (Oxford, 1958), p. 30, ll. 28-29; cf. Latin version, ed. Goolden, *ibid.*, p. 31, ll. 28-29.
- ⁹ Ed. and trans. W. W. Skeat, *Ælfric's Live of Saints*, EETS os 76, 82, 94 and 114 (London, 1881-1900; repr. as 2 vols, 1966).
- ¹⁰ Ed. G. Kotzor, *Das altenglische Martyrologium*, Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philos.-hist. Klasse, Neue Forschung 88, 2 vols (Munich, 1981).
- ¹¹ In the present article, all references to Old English poems are to *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, ed. G. K. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, 6 vols (New York, 1931-53).
- ¹² See Archibald, *Apollonius of Tyre*, p. 34.
- ¹³ See Ælfric, *Lives of Saints*, ed. Skeat, I 24-51 (for Melantia episode, see ll. 133-63). For Latin *vita*, see PL 73, cols 605-20 (Melantia episode, chs 11-16). On Ælfric's treatment of Melantia and Eugenia, see G. Roy, 'A Virgin Acts Manfully: Ælfric's *Life of St Eugenia* and the Latin Versions', *Leeds Studies in English*, ns 23 (1992), 1-27. According to Roy, Ælfric presents Melantia and Eugenia as opposing kinds of women, 'the "prostitute" and the virgin: "beclypte seo myltestre þæt clæne mæden" (line 169) [the prostitute embraced the chaste maiden]. The force of this is . . . that she [Eugenia] has overcome the weakness of her sexuality with her virginity' (p. 17). See also P. E. Szarmach, 'Ælfric's Women Saints: Eugenia', in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Damico and Hennessey Olsen, pp. 146-57.
- ¹⁴ The anonymous Old English version is edited by Skeat, *Lives of Saints*, II 334-55 (for temptation caused by Euphrosyne's appearance, see ll. 159-72). For Latin *vita*, see PL 73, cols 645-52 (temptation caused by Euphrosyne's appearance, ch. 8).

¹⁵ Ed. and trans. M. Clayton and H. Magennis, *The Old English Lives of St Margaret*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 9 (Cambridge, 1994), 112-39.

¹⁶ *Passio S. Margaretae*, ed. and trans. Clayton and Magennis, *The Old English Lives of St Margaret*, pp. 194-219.

¹⁷ *Passio S. Margaretae*, chs 5 and 7, respectively; contrast chs 5 and 7 of the Tiberius version.

¹⁸ Ed. and trans. Clayton and Magennis, *The Old English Lives of St Margaret*, pp. 152-71.

¹⁹ 'Life of St Agnes', ed. Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, I 170-95.

²⁰ *Acta S. Agathae*, ed. J. Bollandus and G. Henschenius, *Acta Sanctorum Februarii*, I (Antwerp, 1658), 621-24.

²¹ See P. H. Zettel, 'Ælfric's Hagiographic Sources and the Latin Legendary Preserved in BL MS Cotton Nero E. i and CCCC MS 9 and Other Manuscripts', unpublished doctoral thesis (University of Oxford, 1979); and 'Saints' Lives in Old English: Latin Manuscripts and Vernacular Accounts: Ælfric', *Peritia* 1 (1982), 17-37. See also M. Brett, 'The Use of Universal Chronicle at Worcester', in *L'Historiographie médiévale en Europe: Actes du colloque organisé par la Fondation Européenne de la Science au Centre de Recherches Historiques et Juridiques de l'Université Paris I du 29 mars au 1er avril 1989*, ed. J.-P. Genet (Paris, 1991), pp. 277-85 (at 282-83); P. Jackson and M. Lapidge, 'The Contents of the Cotton-Corpus Legendary', in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and their Contexts*, ed. P. E. Szarmach (Albany, NY, forthcoming).

²² A rare example of such an addition is the description of the saint in ch. 5 of the CCCC 303 *Life of St Margaret*, referred to above, p. 4.

²³ Aldhelm writes disapprovingly and at length on the bodily adornments of women in his account of Judith in the prose *De virginitate*: ed. R. Ehwald, *Aldhelmi Opera Omnia*, MGH, Auctores Antiquissimi 15 (Berlin, 1919), 228-323 (at 316-18); trans. M. Lapidge, in *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, trans. M. Lapidge and M. Herren (Woodbridge and Totowa, NJ, 1979), pp. 59-132 (at 126-28).

²⁴ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 196), Book IV, ch. 19 (at 396).

²⁵ *Old English Martyrology*, ed. Kotzor, II 234, ll. 1-2.

²⁶ *Old English Martyrology*, ed. Kotzor, II 235, ll. 12-13.

²⁷ See PL 17, col. 813D; Ælfric, *Lives of Saints*, ed. Skeat, I 170 (ll. 17-19).

²⁸ See *Acta S. Agathae*, *Acta Sanctorum Februarii*, I, 621F; Ælfric, 'Life of St Agatha', ed. Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, I 194-209 (ll. 35-38).

²⁹ See *Passio S. Ceciliae*, ed. B. Mombricitus, *Sanctuarium seu Vitae Sanctorum*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (Paris, 1910), I 332-41 (at 332, l. 54-333, l. 1).

³⁰ 'Life of St Cecilia', ed. Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, II 356-77.

³¹ *Passio S. Luciae*, ed. Mombricitus, *Sanctuarium*, II 107-09 (at 107, ll. 32-33); cf. Ælfric,

'ænlice gefretewode', 'Life of St Lucy', ed. Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, I 210-19 (l. 24).

³² Cf. Ælfric, 'mid golde gefræteode', 'Life of St Eugenia', l. 417.

³³ Cf. Ælfric, 'Hi wæron ealle ge-glengede mid gyldenum gyrllum', 'Life of St Agnes', l. 252.

³⁴ See *Old English Martyrology*, ed. Kotzor, II 3, ll. 8-11.

³⁵ *Passio Septem Dormientium*, ed. and trans. H. Magennis, *The Anonymous Old English Legend of the Seven Sleepers*, Durham Medieval Texts 7 (Durham, 1994), 74-91; cf. Old English version, ed. Magennis (*ibid.*), ll. 717 and 753-54 (also ed. Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, I 488-541, ll. 780 and 820-21).

³⁶ Riedinger, 'The Englishing of Arcestrate', p. 300.

³⁷ See *Apollonius of Tyre*, ed. Goolden, p. 36, l. 11.

³⁸ See L. Osborne, *The Poisoned Embrace: A Brief History of Sexual Pessimism* (London, 1993).

³⁹ Ælfric, *Homily on Judith*, ed. B. Assmann, *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa 3 (Kassel, 1889), repr. with supplementary introduction by P. A. M. Clemoes (Darmstadt, 1964), 102-16. In line 405 Assmann reads *nis* instead of *þus*: on this, see E. G. Stanley, 'Ælfric and the Canonicity of the Book of Judith', *Notes and Queries*, New Series 32 (1985), 439.

⁴⁰ Biblical quotations in this article are from *The Holy Bible*, trans. R. A. Knox (London, 1955).

⁴¹ Ælfric, *Be Hester*, ed. Assmann, *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, pp. 92-101 (ll. 73, 82, 97 etc.).

⁴² See *Homily on Judith*, l. 292.

⁴³ M. Clayton, 'Ælfric's Judith: Manipulative or Manipulated?', *Anglo-Saxon England* 23 (1994), 215-27 (at 225).

⁴⁴ Clayton, 'Ælfric's Judith', p. 225.

⁴⁵ Ed. O. Behaghel, *Heliand und Genesis*, 9th ed., rev. B. Taeger, *Altdeutsche Textbibliothek* 4 (Tübingen, 1984).

⁴⁶ Ed. B. Thorpe, *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church. The First Part, Containing the Homilies of Ælfric*, 2 vols (London, 1844-46), I 476-91 (at 480-82). The Herod scene in the *Heliand* is discussed further in my article 'The Treatment of Feasting in the *Heliand*', *Neophilologus* 69 (1985), 126-33, with Erratum (for p. 127) printed at beginning of 70 (1986).

⁴⁷ B. F. Huppé writes that in the present passage *ælfscinu* is 'particularly effective in suggesting her [Judith's] deadly allure for Holofernes' (*The Web of Words* (Albany, NY, 1970), p. 159). As Huppé notes (*ibid.*), *ælfscinu* also occurs in *Genesis A*, lines 1827 and 2731, 'where it is used to designate Abraham's wife, Sarah, in the particular context of her dangerous attractiveness to a gentile prince'. Abraham's wife, of course, though *ælfscinu*, has no intention of seducing either

Pharao or Abimilech: the relevant episodes in *Genesis A* are discussed below pp. 13-14. Among discussions of *ælfscinu*, see especially H. Stuart, 'The Meaning of OE *ælfscinu*', *Parergon* 2 (1972), 22-26.

On the treatment of female beauty in Old English poetry, see P. B. Taylor, 'The Old English Poetic Vocabulary of Beauty', in *New Readings on Women*, ed. Damico and Hennessey Olsen, pp. 211-21.

⁴⁸ *Judith*, ll. 13, 41, 125 etc.

⁴⁹ Cf. also ll. 821-22.

⁵⁰ *Genesis*, ll. 184, 884 and 895; cf. also ll. 1722 and 2228.

⁵¹ Cf. l. 2731. On the epithet used here, see also n. 47, above.

⁵² Cf. *Genesis* XX. 2-14.

⁵³ At l. 2642, he is referred to in the manuscript as *synna brytta*, though this is emended to *sinces brytta* in *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* edition of *Genesis*. Cf. also ll. 2742-46.

⁵⁴ Cf. the context of sexual subjection in the other occurrence of the phrase *on fremdes fæðm* in Old English poetry, *Genesis*, l. 1971.

⁵⁵ On the status of *nunnan* and Ælfric's use of the term, see Clayton, 'Ælfric's Judith', pp. 225-27.

⁵⁶ See William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, ed. N. E. S. A. Hamilton, Rolls Series 52 (London, 1870), 190-91.

⁵⁷ A. Davies, 'Sexual Behaviour in Later Anglo-Saxon England', in *This Noble Craft . . . : Proceedings of the Tenth Research Symposium of the Dutch and Belgian University Teachers of Old and Middle English, Utrecht, 19-20 January, 1989*, ed. E. Kooper, Costerus, New Series 80 (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA, 1991), pp. 83-105 (at 84).

⁵⁸ A. J. Frantzen, *The Literature of Penance in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1983), p. 15. On attitudes to sexuality in the penitentials, see P. J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code 550-1150* (Toronto, 1984).

⁵⁹ See above, n. 55.

⁶⁰ Cf. Ælfric, *Catholic Homilies*, ed. Thorpe, I 148.

⁶¹ See *Catholic Homilies*, ed. Thorpe, II 608. For discussion of times of sexual abstinence, see Davies, 'Sexual Behaviour in Later Anglo-Saxon England', p. 89.

⁶² See 'Life of St Martin', ed. Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, II 218-313, after l. 1495. The verses are also edited by P. Grosjean, in 'Gloria postuma S. Martini Turonensis apud Scottos et Britannos', *Analecta Bollandiana* 55 (1937), 300-48 (at 347), and are listed in D. Schaller and E. Könsgen, *Initia carminum Latinorum saeculo undecimo antiquiorum* (Göttingen, 1977), no. 11,194 (thanks are due to Gordon Whatley for supplying these references).

It is relevant to include here the complete text of this short Latin passage, which occurs

(uniquely) in London, British Library, MS Cotton Julius E. vii, fol. 201r, ll. 1-5. The text, written continuously in the manuscript, is here divided into line units. I preserve manuscript capitalization and punctuation, and abbreviations are indicated by means of italics:

Olim haec transtuli . [MS *trastuli*]

sicuti ualui .

sed modo praecibus .

constrictus plenius .

O martine sanctae .

meritis praeclare .

iuuua me miserum .

meritis modicum.

Caream quo neuis.

mihimet nociuis . [MS *nocus*]

castiusque uiuam .

Nactus iam ueniam

[Once I translated this, according as I was able, but the more fully only because constrained by entreaties. O Martin, saint splendid in merits, help me, a wretch mediocre in merits. I will abstain from what you do not wish, things harmful to me, and I will live more purely, having already obtained pardon.]

⁶³ The probable solutions to the particular riddles referred to in this sentence, given here in brackets, are widely accepted: see notes in C. Williamson, ed., *The Old English Riddles of the 'Exeter Book'* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1977), and B. F. Muir, ed., *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501*, 2 vols (Exeter, 1994), (both of these editions have some discrepancy in numbering of riddles, as compared to *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* edition). On the 'sexual' riddles, see also R. Gleissner, *Die 'zweideutigen' altenglischen Rätsel des 'Exeter Book' in ihrem zeitgenössischen Kontext*, Regensburger Arbeiten zur Anglistik und Amerikanistik 23 (Frankfurt, 1984); E. W. Williams, 'What's So New About the Sexual Revolution?', *Texas Quarterly* 18 (1975), 51-54 (repr. in *New Readings on Women*, ed. Damico and Hennessey Olsen, pp. 137-45).

⁶⁴ See Riddle 45 and Riddle 61.

⁶⁵ See above, p. 12.

⁶⁶ Judith Jesch notes that in Old Norse tradition 'female figures could also be feared for their sexuality' (*Women in the Viking Age* [Woodbridge and Rochester, NY, 1991], p. 148).

⁶⁷ See above, p. 16. The celibacy of priests is a preoccupation of Ælfric in his pastoral letters: see *Letter to Wulfsgige*, paragraphs 13-27, ed. B. Fehr, *Die Hirtenbriefe Ælfrics*, Bibliothek der

angelsächsischen Prosa 9 (Hamburg, 1914), 1-34 (at 3-7); *First Old English Letter to Wulfstan*, paras. 15-18 and 77-93 (including, paras. 90-93, discussion of those who willingly become 'spiritually castrated' (*gastlice gehælede*), ed. Fehr, pp. 68-145 (at 76-79 and 100-07).

⁶⁸ The representation of marital love in Anglo-Saxon England as 'chaste and restrained' is discussed by Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest: A Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (London, 1989), p. 169.

⁶⁹ Contrasting views on this topic have recently been expressed by P. W. Conner and B. J. Muir. For Conner, the Exeter Book consists of three separate booklets, compiled over a considerable period of time, each with its own character and particular interests: see *Anglo-Saxon Exeter: A Tenth-Century Cultural History*, Studies in Anglo-Saxon History 4 (Woodbridge and Rochester, NY, 1993), pp. 148-64. Muir's view of the Exeter Book as a coherent anthology with thematic links and an overall structure is expressed in the very title of his recent edition, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*: see I 18-27.

⁷⁰ See, for example, the allegorical interpretation of *The Wife's Lament* proposed by Swanton in '*The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message: A Reconsideration*'.