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The Invisible Woman: Ælfric and his Subject Female

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In recent work on the *Catholic Homilies*, scholars have been keen to embrace Ælfric as the populist didact who wrote his prolific corpus of vernacular texts for a 'mixed and all-compassing audience'.¹ This audience of lay men and women, secular clerics and regular religious men and women is hypothesised from comments embedded within the Old English texts themselves, particularly Ælfric's own declarations. In the second series homily written for Wednesday in Rogationtide, for example, Ælfric directly addresses his audience:

Mine gebroðra [. . .] Nu behófige ge læwede men micelre lare on ðisne timan. for ðan ðe þeos world is micclum geswenct ðurh menigfealdum gedrefednyssum.²

[My brethren [. . .] Now you unlearned men [laymen] have need of great learning at this time, because this world is greatly disturbed by various troubles.]

With his typical homiletic rhetoric Ælfric identifies his hearers or readers as, *prima facie*, a united, and specifically masculinised gathering – 'gebroðra' – and also as 'læwede', *laici*. Such statements, found throughout the *Catholic Homilies*, have led to the subsequent definition of Anglo-Saxon and post-Conquest audiences of Ælfric's English sermons as a 'lay', 'uneducated' group of people.³ If it is accepted that terms such as 'broðer' and 'man' are non-gender specific, then this confirms the sense that we know for whom Ælfric wrote: a homogenous congregation of (mostly) *illiterati* comprised both of women and men.⁴ But this is to suppose that all manuscript compilers using the *Catholic Homilies* had this audience in mind; moreover, such a conclusion would insist on some form of public performance by a priest, bishop, canon or other religious preacher.⁵ It is

likely that the exploitation of the *Catholic Homilies* is much more nuanced than this theoretical stasis throughout the two hundred years of its varied appearance in English manuscripts. A notional audience, then, is as much a construct of the modern scholarly imagination as is Ælfric's own attempt to imagine his addressees, about whom he might actually have known as little as we do.

This short paper will look briefly at Ælfric's addressees, and his female subjects, to demonstrate the problematic nature of understanding Ælfric's 'mixed' audience. It is a knotty issue because of the invisibility of women in the texts, made more invidious once Ælfric's deliberate camouflage of rhetorical generality has been discarded.⁶ The forms of address in the quotation above to 'brothers' and 'men' are typical of Ælfric's extensive homiletic corpus, which most frequently employs gender-marked terms to denote his perceived audience. In the vast majority of homilies, when discussing in the abstract the preferred behaviour of the good Christian, the norm is always a masculine subject: in his homily for the feast of St Peter, Ælfric advises 'Eow læwedum mannum mæg ðeos anfealde racu to trymninge';⁷ and in a Pentecost homily, he warns that 'Ne forseo nan man godes stemne. and his gearcunge. þy læs ðe he hine nu beladige'.⁸ One might persist in believing that Ælfric's use of 'man', 'his', 'he', and 'hine' can be translated as 'person', 'their', 'they', and 'them',⁹ but that 'man' is often (usually?) intended as exclusive is evident many times within the *Catholic Homilies*.¹⁰

Such an indication that Ælfric addressed his male audience alone is illustrated in the sermon for the ninth Sunday after Pentecost:

Þu mann wilt habban gód. ðu wilt habban hælu þines lichaman [. . .] Soðlice nelt ðu nan ðing yfeles habban. on ðinum æhtum; Nelt ðu habban yfel wíf. ne yfele cild. ne yfele ðeowe men. ne yfel scrud. ne furðon yfele sceos. and wilt swa ðeah habban yfel lif[.]¹¹

Not only is it immediately apparent in this example that 'mann' refers only to the male holder of a wife, but that also his wife and child are equated with disposable items owned by the man, 'ðinum æhtum', possessions such as clothing and shoes. Ælfric bases this part of his text on an Augustinian sermon, but makes small alterations to his source changing the nature of the text in a significant way. Augustine comments:

Vis enim habere sanitatem corporis [. . .] Quid enim est quod velis habere malum? Dic mihi. Nihil omnino; non uxorem, non filium, non filiam, non servum, non ancillam, non villam, non tunicam, postremo non caligam: et tamen vis habere malam vitam.¹²

Besides altering the rhetoric of his source such that Augustine's co-operative mode of question and answer is transformed into an authoritative declaration, Ælfric also abbreviates the list of possessions through an excision of two of the specifically female referents (*filia*, *ancilla*). To enhance the emphasis of an evil life, even as the subject sinner is seen not to have cause for his immoral actions, Ælfric repeats the qualifier 'yfel' for maximum impact. The equation of an evil wife with an evil servant or 'evil' shoes, though, is to create this list as the expectation of a man's lot;¹³ moreover, Ælfric's omission of the daughter and serving-girl writes out the role of women, while accentuating the 'yfel wif', part of the moveable goods of the man.

Such male-specific use of language, interchangeably masquerading as non-gendered, is pervasive. In his general homily, *In natale sanctorum martirum*, the discourse makes explicit only masculine referents and stereotypical male fields of occupation when, for example, the congregation is told: 'Máre sige bið þæt se man hine sylfne ðurh geðyld gewylde. ðonne hé wiðutan him burga oferfeohste',¹⁴ where the military prowess of a male warrior is used as the sole point of reference. In his First Series homily on the Circumcision of the Lord,¹⁵ Ælfric provides a unique, and quite lengthy, metaphorical reading equating chastity with spiritual circumcision.¹⁶ In his idiosyncratic reading,¹⁷ Ælfric explains that:

nan mann ne bið. soðlice cristen buton he þa ymsnidenysse
on gastlicum þeawum gehealde; Hwæt getacnað þæs
felmenes ofcyrf on þam gesceape. buton galnysse wanunge;
Eaðe mihte ðæs cwede beon læwedum mannum bediglod.
nære seo gastlice getacnung[.]¹⁸

And Ælfric expands in a reinforcement of this interpretation that 'Ne scolde we for þi synderlice on anum lime beo ymsnidene; ac we sceolon ða fulan galnysse symle wanian'.¹⁹ The 'we' here notionally indicates that spiritual circumcision is meant to apply to all members of the gathered faithful,²⁰ but the particular focus and physical analogy of the text here is distinctly male, and the maleness of the

explication is stressed by Ælfric's references to the foreskin and the penis. The 'we' of Ælfric's position in relation to his audience can thus only be read as referring specifically to men.

This suppression of female subjectivity and experience manifests itself in different ways throughout the *Catholic Homilies*. In *letania maiore*, for instance, contains a lengthy discussion on the worthlessness of earthly prosperity, and the need for charity.²¹ Ælfric admonishes his audience:

Se ðe god beon wyle. clypige to ðam þe æfre is gód. þæt he hine godne gewyrce; Se man hæfð gold. þæt is gód be his mæðe. he hæfð land and welan þa sind góde; Ac ne bið se man gód þurh þas þing.²²

This and the succeeding exposition seems to apply to all Christian people, in spite of the use of 'he' and 'man', and in spite of a common association of land and wealth with men in this period.²³ Ælfric subsequently, however, introduces another exemplum: 'Gif rice wif. and earm acennað togædere. gangon hi aweig. nast ðu hwæðer bið. þæs rican wifes cild. hwæðer þæs earman'.²⁴ The use of this example, based on an Augustinian sermon,²⁵ indicates Ælfric's recognition of the role of women in child-bearing on the one hand, but his separation of them here indicates that they may not be explicitly included in the previous discussion of 'se man'.

Such potential exclusion within seemingly gender-neutral language occurs among Ælfric's catalogues of the Christian faith's greatest exponents too, and this despite his own sporadic depiction of holy women. Ælfric depicts pious women when they appear in his scriptural sources. For example, in his homily on St Peter, Ælfric provides a slightly abbreviated account of Acts 12. 12-16, in which Peter is miraculously released from prison, returns to his companions, and is greeted by Rhode, 'sum mæden þæs geleaffullan weredes'.²⁶ Similarly, in the same homily, narrating the role of the faithful and devoted woman in scriptural accounts, Ælfric relates the miracle of Christ when he healed a woman with a long-term haemorrhage. As Godden comments, Ælfric adds a line here to his scriptural source to emphasise that 'þæt wif hine hrepode synderlice mid geleafan'.²⁷ Yet, in comparison with the two scriptural sources (Mark 5. 25-34 and Luke 8. 43-48), Ælfric silences the woman with his use of reported speech ('Heo [. . .] feol bifigende to ðæs hælendes foton. and sæde ætforan eallum ðam folce hwi heo hine hrepode'),²⁸ when in the two gospel accounts she speaks directly to

Christ. The direct speech in this narrative belongs to Christ and Peter alone enhancing the male performance here.

The subtle silencing of women is apparent, then, from the way in which Ælfric manipulates his sources, and from the use of inclusive terms, either masculine but supposedly generic, such as 'he' or 'se man', or gender-neutral, like 'Cristes gelapung', Christ's church. In relation to the former, Ælfric's occasional indexes of those who represent the epitome of Christian behaviour demonstrate a gender imbalance, arguably typical of all institutionalised religions. In his homily on St Peter, in which scriptural women are accorded a presence, Ælfric lists those who will join Christ:

Witodlice cristes ðenas þæt sind Apostolas. and martyras.
andeteras. and halige fæmnan becomon to heofenan rice.
swa swa he sylf cwæð. and ealle ða þe ðurh clænre
drohtnunge and góðum geearnungum Criste ðeniað.
becumað untwylice to his rice.²⁹

In this hierarchical categorisation, the ostensibly non-gender marked language of 'martyrs' and confessors cannot be said to apply to women, who instead form a separate group at the end of the list.³⁰ This list occurs again in the *Excusatio dictantis* in the context of Ælfric's plan for completing the *Catholic Homilies*:

Ne durre we ðas bóc na miccle swiðor gelengan. ði læs ðe
heo úngemetegod sy. and mannum æðryt þurh hire
micelnysse astyrige; We willað swa ðeah gýt. ane feawe
cwydas on ðissere bec geendebyrdian. gemænelice be
apostolum. and martirum. andeterum. and halgum fæmnum
þam hælende to lofe.³¹

Within this ranked list, despite their identical status with men within God's congregation, women are clearly not included within the first three groups of venerated figures; they form a specifically and explicitly gender-marked group of lesser stature in the order, and it is this appropriate order that Ælfric states is his guiding principle. In fact, the four major texts that follow *Excusatio Dictantis* are *In natale unius apostoli*, *In natale plurimorum apostolorum*, *In natale Sanctorum martirum*, *In natale unius confessoris*, and *In natale sanctarum virginum*.³² Ælfric thus follows his established hierarchy as he completes the second series of

Catholic Homilies, and very clearly intends the 'holy women' of his brief catalogue to equate with 'the holy virgins' of the penultimate homily in the collection, rather narrowing the definition of what 'holy woman' actually denotes in Ælfric's eyes.

In turning to the only text that appears from Ælfric's own categorisation to be concerned with holy women, *In natale sanctarum virginum*,³³ it is perhaps no surprise to find that Ælfric's rubric and gospel reading, the parable of the ten virgins from Matthew 25. 1-13, are somewhat misleading, as Godden points out.³⁴ The homily is not actually about virgins, but about the church comprised of 'werhádes and wifhádes' ('men and women'), and who can be metaphorically understood as the ten virgins:³⁵

Deos andwerde gelaðung þe underfehð yfele and góde. is
wiðmeten ðam tyn mædenum. ðæra wæron fif stunte. and fif
snotere³⁶

In this extended explication:

Ælc ðæra manna ðe hine forhæfð fram unalyfedlicere
gesihðe. fram unalyfedlicere heorcunge. fram
unalyfedlicum swæcce. fram unalyfedlicum stence. fram
unalyfedlicere hrepunge. se hæfð mædenes naman. for ðære
anwalhnyse.³⁷

Here, there can be little doubt that Ælfric intends 'man' to be all-encompassing, both in terms of obedient Christians' abilities to deny illicit sensual activities, and in terms of their ability to be known as virgins. Here, then, in contradistinction to the exclusion of women, Ælfric overtly includes them, but also shows that men are equal participants in the purity that seemed to be the only attribute assignable to a woman. Countering the narrow definition that he gave of 'holy women' as 'holy virgin', Ælfric demonstrates man's place in the virginal grade; whereas women can be denied a part in the hierarchy of apostles, martyrs and confessors, men cannot be denied a share in any means of salvation.

The difference between the sexes' endeavours for salvation is evinced in another of the general homilies, *In natale Sanctorum martirum*. Although Ælfric attended to some of the early Christian martyrs individually in his *Lives of Saints* collection, this homily focuses instead on the virtue of exhibiting patience through

suffering; that is, principally on 'digela martyrdom' (secret martyrdom).³⁸ Ælfric first mentions briefly the apostle John as the exemplar of secret suffering. He then dwells on two Gregorian exempla: the first about a certain Stephen, who bore life's hardships with patience while dwelling in contemplation within a monastery; and the second, about a religious woman, Romula, whose story is told in the homily's closing paragraphs. Romula is described as 'swiðe geðyldig and þearle gehyrsum, singal on gebedum, and swigan lufode',³⁹ while her textual predecessor, Stephen, 'forlét ealle woruldðing. and forfleah manna gehlýd. beeode his gebedu on sumum mynstre drohtniende'.⁴⁰ In addition to the contemplatives' usual patience and devotion to prayer, it is Romula's obedience that marks her out here: characteristics Ælfric presumably wanted all those wishing to embark on secret martyrdom to emulate, and particularly, one might argue, religious women.⁴¹ Romula's patient endurance of her pain and incapacity caused by palsy is rewarded by her soul's journey to heaven in the company of angels, alluding to the virgin's ascent to her bridegroom, guarded by the angelic host.⁴²

The key aspects of this exemplum, unlike the Gregorian source, are the holy woman's silence, obedience, physical suffering and patience,⁴³ and are, indeed, the traits that Ælfric, in his *Catholic Homilies*, seems to find praiseworthy in women. This may suggest his adherence to, and deliberate perpetuation of, age-old stereotypes and myths about women's licentiousness, garrulousness, and inconstancy. In his account of St Benedict derived from Gregory's *Dialogues*, Book II,⁴⁴ for example, Ælfric tells the story of two religious women who are threatened with excommunication by the saint because of their refusal to cease using slanderous words.⁴⁵ While for the most part, Ælfric remains close to his source, he stresses the women's verbal waywardness. In Gregory's account, Benedict threatens the women with the possibility of excommunication, narrated through indirect speech and reported to the women by their maligned servant; Ælfric has Benedict send a harsher, more direct, warning, saying 'Gerihltæcað eowere tungan. gif ge ne dóð. Ic eow amánsumige'.⁴⁶ The women die suddenly after this warning, and are buried in their parish church. However, during Mass, the bodies of the women rise up and leave the church when the deacon asks those who are non-communicant to retire. Benedict subsequently restores the communicative status of the deceased women by sending a eucharistic wafer for the celebration of a mass for the women. This results, in Gregory's account, in their posthumous readmission into Christ's communion, a consequence that seems to imply acceptance into heaven for the women. In Ælfric's account, the religious women are never again seen to emerge from their graves (with no comment on

their salvation or otherwise), and the cause of this incident 'for heora stuntum wordum' is repeated and reinforced.⁴⁷

While these two religious women clearly behave in aberrant ways, as in his account of Romula, Ælfric also provides positive models of holy behaviour. In his homily on the Purification of Mary, for instance, Ælfric describes how Anna did not love luxuries, did not indulge in idle discourse, and did not wander about the land:

Deos áнна þe we embe sprecað. ne lufode heo na estmettas.
ac lufode fæstenu; Ne lufode heo idele spellunge. Ac beeode
hyre gebedu. Ne ferde heo worigende geond land. Ac wæs
wuniende gepýldelice binnan godes temple. Gif wife
getimie. þæt heo hyre wer forleose þonne nime heo bisne be
þisre wudewan;⁴⁸

The antitheses of the pairs of behaviour makes the comparison between Anna and other hypothetical widows very insistent, the negative coming first in the pair suggesting that there may be other widows who participate precisely in the condemned activities of over-indulgence at mealtimes, gossiping or chattering, and wandering by the way.⁴⁹ In almost all cases, then, from widows to holy women, virgins to married women, Ælfric either implicitly condemns his imagined audience of contemporary Anglo-Saxon women, or effectively disinvests his texts of explicit relevance for them. From the *Catholic Homilies* alone, however, it is perhaps too easy to overstate the potential negativity of Ælfric's depiction of women. One can note that women barely register as individuals worthy of direct address in the formal context of this author's homiletic framework, and that Ælfric often has in mind stereotypical characteristics as if his first-hand knowledge of women were limited.⁵⁰ Thus it is that for more sustained depictions of women and positive models of pious female behaviour, one must attend to Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, written, as is well documented, for aristocratic male patrons.⁵¹

While the female virgin martyrs, such as Agnes, Lucy, and Cecilia, and the lone female confessor, Æthelthryth, are obvious candidates for scholarly scrutiny, other female characters in the *Lives of Saints* are only now beginning to receive detailed attention.⁵² Among those worth mentioning is the sole female recipient of a miracle in the Old English Life of St Swithun.⁵³ This woman, a servant, due to be flogged for a minor offence, prays arduously through the night for help from Swithun. As lauds is being sung in Winchester New Minster, her feet are freed

from their fetters, and she runs to the minster to thank the saint. Her lord subsequently frees her in honour of Swithun's mediation.⁵⁴ This particular episode seems designed not to demonstrate the intercessory powers of the saint *per se*, but his meaningful intervention in this miscarriage of justice. That the recipient of the miracle is female appears to be of little significance, at least, until the sources available to Ælfric are examined, and the fuller story revealed. As Lapidge outlines, there are two major Latin texts from which Ælfric drew his *Life*: the *Translatio et miracula S. Swithuni*, c. 975, composed by the monk Lantfred, who had been assisting Æthelwold in implementing the reforms in Winchester, and who thus might be considered both an architect and product of the Benedictine Reform itself;⁵⁵ and the *Epitome Translationis et miraculorum S. Swithuni*, an abbreviated version of Lantfred.⁵⁶ In his meticulous analysis, Lapidge has made a very strong case for regarding the author of the *Epitome* as Ælfric himself.⁵⁷

It is, however, the Old English version that is of greatest relevance here. In this subsequent, expanded vernacular account, written for Æthelweard and Æthelmær, Ælfric emphasises those miracles and events that seem directly relevant to his envisaged audience. He omits all of Lantfred's events that take place outside the local area of Winchester and Hampshire, for example; and, remarkably, expunges all of the miracles involving women recipients or participants, with the exception of the 'token' one involving the freed female servant, which is a shorter account even so, deliberately refocused to emphasise Swithun's power.⁵⁸ Ten chapters of Lantfred's forty concern women,⁵⁹ and others concern both men and women.⁶⁰ Blind women are healed because they are deemed 'worthy',⁶¹ and an unwell woman, who does not give sufficient thanks (or gifts to Swithun's shrine) for her healing, sickens again and is cured a second time.⁶² In Lantfred, a woman recipient of a vision of Swithun is told by him to report to Æthelwold the negligence of the New Minster monks who have not been assiduous in their praise of the saint on his performance of a miracle. In Ælfric, this female visionary becomes a man – an interesting refusal by Ælfric, perhaps, to countenance the propriety of a visit by a woman to bishop Æthelwold.⁶³

Ælfric also excises miracles performed by the saint on two French women, and ignores the miracle of the fettered slave-woman miraculously transported into the shrine of the saint.⁶⁴ Such omissions might be attributed to Ælfric's preference to emphasise for his patrons only local events that are relevant and uncontentious or non-sensational, as with the case of the cutting of the 'invisibly transported' woman. This cannot, however, explain the virtual writing out of women, both as subjects of the saint's miraculous powers, and as actors in remarkable events that

allegedly take place within the actual lifetimes of the writers, Lantfred and Ælfric. While Ælfric always seems so determined to be true to his authoritative sources in his homilies,⁶⁵ he makes very profound alterations to this particular saint's life, suggesting he is quite capable of treating his sources, if they are not revered patristic authors, with considerable freedom. Unlike Lantfred or Wulfstan the Cantor, Ælfric thus seems quite unable to envisage a role for women in Reform-era Winchester, in a manner that clearly marks him out as untypical of his milieu, and certainly in comparison with these other, contemporary writers influenced by Æthelwold and working at Winchester. The consequence of Ælfric's re-shaping of Lantfred's text is a sealed work, closed off to women, and precluding them from any real share in the merits of Swithun and any genuine sense of equal participation in the text. Ælfric's concerns to reinforce a specifically male setting for a specifically male audience are foregrounded above all else in this particular Life.⁶⁶

This masculine perspective provided for a declared audience of male patrons problematises any construction of Ælfric's 'mixed' audience, real or imagined. Women seem to have had little place in Ælfric's scheme of salvation or revelation of divine favour through miraculous events. This certainly appears to be the case for contemporary women,⁶⁷ upon whom Ælfric gazed unfavourably from a very long (and very safe?) distance. If women had access to the *Lives of Saints* or the *Catholic Homilies* much of the discourse will have been alienating or even irrelevant, and one can but wonder, then, if women were genuinely intended by Ælfric to hear his message at all, or if lip service was the only courtesy he was willing to pay them.

By a number of different methods, therefore, Ælfric assembles audiences for his *Catholic Homilies* and *Lives of Saints* that he can only conceive of as male; female subjects are not within his purview, and are not meant to be within ours, subsumed as they are beneath the gazed-upon male of this exegetical and spiritual discourse.⁶⁸ Moreover, no matter how easy it is to dismiss stylistic aspects of Ælfric's writing as 'non-gender specific' or to contextualize him sympathetically within his Christian and patriarchal milieu, there can be little doubt that, for much of the time, he silently wrote women out of the shared Christian experience. Even in the post-Benedictine Reform period, exceptional as Ælfric was in every aspect of his thought and work, his agenda was not one that engaged fully or convincingly with the broad lay audience envisaged by so many modern critics. Only close analysis of his writing can provide a more nuanced

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account of his intentions, and prevent modern scholarship from constructing Ælfric's audience as imaginatively as he himself did.

NOTES

¹ *Ælfric's Prefaces*, ed. by Jonathan Wilcox, Durham Medieval Texts, 9 (Durham: Durham University Press, 1994), pp. 20-21 (p. 21). See his similar description, with references to others' research too, in the more recent 'Ælfric in Dorset and the Landscape of Pastoral Care', in *Pastoral Care in the Late Anglo-Saxon Landscape*, ed. by Francesca Tinti (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005), pp. 52-62. It is a pleasure to dedicate this piece to Joyce Hill with love and thanks. She is an exceptionally important role model for British women in the field of Anglo-Saxon Studies, and is, moreover, a stalwart ally and friend.

² *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series: Text*, ed. by Malcolm Godden, EETS, s.s. 5 (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 206-12, *In letania maiore, feria iiii*, p. 211, l. 180 and p. 212, ll. 191-94. For a brief discussion and sources, see Malcolm Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*, EETS, s.s. 18 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 545-48. All translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

³ See, for example, E. Gordon Whatley's perceptive discussion of Ælfric's concerns for his audience, in his "'Pearls before Swine": Ælfric, Vernacular Hagiography, and the Lay Reader', in *Via Crucis: Essays on Early Medieval Sources and Ideas in Memory of J. E. Cross*, ed. by Thomas N. Hall, Thomas D. Hill, and Charles D. Wright, Medieval European Studies, 1 (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2002), pp. 158-84, where, at p. 173, he states 'The two series of *Catholic Homilies*, which were sent to Canterbury for redistribution, were intended for preaching on major feast days to mixed congregations of lay people around the country'.

⁴ 'Man(n)' and its variants are ubiquitous in the *Catholic Homilies*. Many homilies begin with 'Men ða leofostan' (*CH* II, 15, 18 and 20, for example; and as do some of the Vercelli Homilies and Blickling Homilies too) and contain repeated references to 'man', 'he', 'his', 'him'. Mary Swan shows in numerous papers (such as 'Performing Gender and Identity in Ælfric's Preaching Texts', and 'Performing Christian Identity in Old English Preaching') and in her forthcoming book, *Making Ælfric's Audience*, that Ælfric is quite deliberate in his 'rhetorical positioning' *vis-à-vis* his perceived audience and that he constructs through these apparent non-gender specific addressees a more masculinist and monastic agenda than one might at first think. I am deeply grateful to Dr Swan for the allowing me to see her work in progress, and for our frequent discussions on this and other topics.

⁵ Neither supposition can be wholly supported by the extant evidence: manuscripts produced between c. 1000 and c. 1200 that incorporate Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* often differ significantly from one another in their overall contents and contexts of production, though all that can be localised belong to a monastic or secular cathedral, with the exception of Ælfric's

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own manuscripts; furthermore, a 'mixed' or 'lay' audience will have varied considerably over a period of two hundred years depending on regional pastoral provision and the actual consequences of two conquests, if nothing else.

⁶ Mary Swan discusses this briefly in her paper, 'Performing Gender and Identity in Ælfric's Preaching Texts', given at the 2003 International Society of Anglo-Saxonists conference in Scottsdale, Arizona.

⁷ CH II, 24, p. 222, ll. 48-49: 'To you unlearned men this simple account may be edification'.

⁸ CH II, 23, p. 217, ll. 117-18: 'No man should ignore God's voice and his preparation unless he excuse himself now'.

⁹ On the early modern history of the non-gender marked 'he', see Ann Bodine, 'Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: singular "they", sex-indefinite "he", and "he or she"', *Language and Society*, 4 (1975), 129-46 (repr. in *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, ed. by Deborah Cameron (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 166-86). One should also note the frequent use of 'brother(s)', 'brotherhood', and 'brotherly' in the *Catholic Homilies*. This too, it can be supposed, is meant as gender-neutral, as in 'brethren', but 'sisterly' or 'sisters' would clearly not be equipollent.

¹⁰ To corroborate this, all anyone need do is substitute 'person' or 'people' every time 'man' and its variants appear. It becomes evident on numerous occasions that gender-neutral language is not implied in the Old English.

¹¹ CH II, 26, pp. 238-39, ll. 110-11; 120-23: 'Man, you will have good, you will have the health of your body [. . .] Truly, you will not have evil things among your possessions: you will not have an evil wife, or an evil child, or an evil servant, or horrible clothing, or, moreover, horrible shoes, and will even then have an evil life'.

¹² Godden, *Commentary*, p. 574. This passage is derived from Augustine's Sermon 72, § 5, *Patrologia Latina*, 38, 468-69. 'You will certainly have the health of your body. Indeed, what will you have that is bad among your possessions? Tell me. Nothing at all; not a wife, nor a son, nor a daughter, nor a servant, nor a serving girl, nor a house, nor a tunic, nor finally a shoe: and nevertheless you will have an evil life'.

¹³ As if Ælfric were saying, 'Look, you don't even have an evil wife, or an evil child, etc. and yet you're still leading an evil life'.

¹⁴ CH II, 37, pp. 314, ll. 128-29: 'It is a greater victory that a man control himself within through patience than conquer towns without'.

¹⁵ *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series: Text*, ed. by P. Clemoes, EETS, s.s. 17 (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 224-31, homily 6.

¹⁶ In CH II, 4, pp. 38-39, ll. 281-93, Christ's circumcision is interpreted as pointing to 'gemænelicum æriste on ðissere worulde geendunge. on ðære bið seo galnys forðwyr. and on ðære ablinð ælc hæmed', 'the general resurrection at the ending of this world, where lust will be

destroyed and all sexual activity will cease.' As Godden, *Commentary*, p. 379, proposes, Ælfric's reference to lust and sexual acts here 'presumably expands Bede's *mortalis propago cessabit*', but the implicit link made between circumcision and the cessation of lust here echoes the direct symbolism of spiritual circumcision and chastity in *CH I*, 6. In other words, for Ælfric, any reference to the body, but particularly to the sexual members, is cause for admonitory comment.

¹⁷ See Godden, *Commentary*, pp. 49-50 for the free handling of this part of the homily, which takes scriptural and patristic commentary on circumcision in a different, more gender-marked, direction. Compare, for example, Philippians 3. 3: 'For we are the circumcision, who in spirit serve God and glory in Christ Jesus, not having confidence in the flesh.' But one might compare also Ambrose's Letter 72 to Constantius, § 20 on the Christian's spiritual circumcision: *The Letters of Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan*, rev. by H. Walford (Oxford: 1881), pp. 423-32, available online at http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/ambrose_letters_08_letters71_80.htm#Letter72.

¹⁸ *CH I*, 6, p. 226, ll. 81-84: 'no man is truly Christian unless he maintain circumcision in his spiritual way of life. What does the cutting-off of the foreskin from the penis signify unless it is the diminishing of lust? This discourse might easily be hidden from the uneducated man were it not for its spiritual symbolism'.

¹⁹ *CH I*, 6, p. 227, ll. 102-03: 'We should not, therefore, be circumcised in one member separately, but should always repress that disgusting lust'. Ælfric is following Haymo here. See Godden, *Commentary*, p. 50.

²⁰ As is the case in Colossians 2. 11-12, for example.

²¹ *CH I*, 18, pp. 317-24 (p. 323).

²² *CH I*, 18, p. 323, ll. 165-66: 'He who wishes to be good should call to him who is forever good, so that he will make him good. A man has gold which is good of its kind; he has land and wealth which are good; but no man can be good through these things'.

²³ It does seem, however, that women could bequeath land in this period. See, for example, Ann Williams, 'Land Tenure', in Michael Lapidge and others, eds, *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 277-78.

²⁴ *CH I*, 18, p. 324, ll. 190-91: 'If a rich woman and a poor one give birth together and then go away, you will not know which is the rich woman's child and which the poor one's'.

²⁵ See Godden, *Commentary*, p. 153.

²⁶ 'a certain maiden of that faithful company'. See *CH II*, 24, p. 222, ll. 26-30.

²⁷ 'That woman alone touched him [Jesus] with faith.' See *CH II* 24, p. 228, l. 243; and Godden, *Commentary*, pp. 558 and 564.

²⁸ *CH II*, 24, pp. 228-29, ll. 244-46: 'She fell trembling to the Saviour's feet, and said in front of all the people why she had touched him'.

The Invisible Woman: Ælfric and his Subject Female

²⁹ CH II, 24, p. 225, ll. 119-23: 'Truly Christ's servants, that is the apostles and martyrs, confessors and holy women, will come to the heavenly kingdom just as he himself said, and all those who serve Christ by chaste living and good merits will certainly come to his kingdom'.

³⁰ While 'apostolas' itself is non-gender specific, this group obviously pertains to the male disciples of Christ.

³¹ CH II, 34, pp. 297-98, ll. 2-7: 'We do not dare to lengthen this book more in case it becomes excessive and cause tedium to men through its great size. Even so, we will yet arrange in order a few narratives in this book about the apostles and martyrs, confessors and holy women generally, to praise the saviour'. On the distinctions made between women and men, chiefly by male authors in the twelfth century, see Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 19-28. She notes at p. 28 that men are described by their profession (of apostle, confessor, martyr, monk, bishop, etc.) while 'holy women formed a class unto themselves'.

³² CH II, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39 respectively. These are followed by the final homily for the dedication of a church.

³³ CH II, 39, pp. 327-34.

³⁴ Godden, *Commentary*, pp. 654-66. Notably, as Godden comments at p. 655, 'Although the rubric, and indeed the earlier note headed *Excusatio Dictantis*, assign the homily to the feast-day of holy virgins, Ælfric follows the patristic tradition in applying the text to all the faithful, not just women in religious orders, and the avowed subject of the homily is not mentioned again after the rubric'.

³⁵ CH II, 39, 40. One might note that Godden seems to anticipate an expectation that a homily on virgins would be for 'just women in religious orders' (*Commentary*, p. 655).

³⁶ CH II, 39, p. 328, ll. 32-34: 'This present church which takes in the evil and the good is compared with the ten virgins, of whom five were foolish and five were wise'.

³⁷ CH II, 39, p. 328, ll. 40-44: 'Each one of those men who refrain from forbidden sight, from forbidden listening, from forbidden taste, from forbidden smell, from forbidden touch, has the name of virgin for that purity'. This is based on Augustine, *Sermon* 93. See Godden, *Commentary*, p. 656.

³⁸ Ælfric makes a clear distinction between types of martyrdom: 'Twa cynn sind martirdomes. An dearnunge. oðer earwunge' [There are two kinds of martyrdom: one is secretly, the other openly], CH II, 37, pp. 314, l. 132.

³⁹ CH II, 37, p. 316, ll. 177-78: 'very patient and very obedient, constant in prayer, and she loved silence'.

⁴⁰ CH II, 37, p. 315, ll. 165-66: 'abandoned all worldly things, fled from men's noise, devoted himself to his prayers, living in a certain monastery'.

⁴¹ CH II, 37, pp. 316. Godden, *Commentary*, p. 646, gives Gregory's Homily 40 as the source for this abridged narrative of Romula, but it seems equally possible to me that Gregory's *Dialogues*, Book 4, chapter 16 influenced Ælfric here. Either way, Gregory's account, which emphasises the joyful and painless death of the sainted, followed by their musical journey to heaven, is somewhat decontextualised by Ælfric here, with its emphasis on patience and suffering in this life rather than the glories that usher in the next.

⁴² Thus, even though there is no actual reference to virginity as an essential component of Romula's life and salvation, it seems to form a crucial sub-text in this narrative.

⁴³ This is made clear by Ælfric's final paragraph following immediately upon the reception of Romula's soul into heaven. In his conclusion (CH II, 37, pp. 316-17, ll. 202-04), Ælfric states that 'Se ælmihtiga god beswingð and ðreað þa ðe he lufað. þæt hí ðurh ða hwilendlican geswencednyse wuldorfulle becumon to ðam ecan life', 'The almighty God chastises and corrects those whom he loves so that they will come gloriously to eternal life through temporary affliction'.

⁴⁴ Godden, *Commentary*, p. 429.

⁴⁵ CH II, 11, page 102, ll. 334-61. On these two women, see also Mary Swan's forthcoming book, *Making Ælfric's Audience*.

⁴⁶ CH II, 11, p. 102, ll. 341-42: 'Correct your tongues. If you do not, I will excommunicate you'. In Gregory's account, the fact that Benedict only threatened the women with excommunication is repeated.

⁴⁷ CH II, 11, p. 102, l. 360: 'because of their foolish words'. One might also note that in Gregory's account the women's 'old nurse who regularly made an offering for them' is the eyewitness of the dead women's self-removal from the Mass. In Ælfric's version, the nurse is excised; instead, the women emerge from their graves 'on manna gesihðum' [in the sight of the men/people].

⁴⁸ CH I, 9, p. 255, ll. 193-97: 'This Anna about whom we speak did not love rich food, but loved fasts. She did not love idle chatter, but she devoted herself to her prayers. She did not go wandering through the land, but was living patiently inside God's temple. If it should happen to a woman that she lose her husband, then she should take her example from this widow'. See Godden, *Commentary*, pp. 75-76 for the source – Haymo's Homily 13 – where the list of negative actions precedes the list of positive attributes. On Ælfric's depiction of widows, see Catherine Cubitt, 'Virginity and Misogyny in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England', *Gender and History*, 12 (2000), 1-32, who, in an extensive survey, concludes that Ælfric wrote chiefly for a male audience, demonstrating a suspicion of women throughout his homiletic and hagiographic works. See also Clare Lees, *Tradition and Belief: Religious Writing in Late Anglo-Saxon England*, Medieval Cultures, 19 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), esp. Chapter 5; and Mary Swan's work cited above in note 4.

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⁴⁹ The wandering by the way and gossiping, of course, foreshadows the epitome of a secular widow – the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

⁵⁰ As one might expect, indeed, from a man who had been within a monastic environment since a child.

⁵¹ *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. by W. W. Skeat, EETS, o.s. 76, 82, 94, 114 (London: Oxford University Press, 1889-1900; repr. as 2 vols, 1966). For recent discussions of female saints' lives, see Leslie A. Donovan, *Women Saints' Lives in Old English Prose*, Library of Medieval Women (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999); and Paul E. Szarmach's intriguing 'Ælfric and the Problem of Women', in *Essays on Anglo-Saxon and Related Themes in Memory of Lynne Grundy*, ed. by Jane Roberts and Janet Nelson, King's College London Medieval Studies, 17 (London: King's College London Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 2000), pp. 571-90. It is worth noting that Claire Watson, in her recent PhD, 'The Authority of Saints and their Makers in Old English Hagiography' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2004), pp. 100-61, demonstrates very convincingly that 'the virgins Ælfric selects for his writing are all relatively vulnerable figures, and generally inferior to male saints in their performance of miracles' (pp. 160-61).

⁵² In the forthcoming work of Robert Upchurch, for example: *Ælfric of Eynsham's Lives of the Virgin Spouses* (Exeter: Exeter University Press), and 'The Legend of Chrysanthus and Daria in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*', *Studies in Philology*, 101 (2004), 250-69.

⁵³ Ed. by Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, as number xxi; also edited by G. I. Needham, *Ælfric: Lives of Three English Saints* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1966; rev. edn 1976), pp. 60-81. Most recently edited and discussed together with other major Latin and English versions in Michael Lapidge's immense *The Cult of St Swithun*, Winchester Studies, The Anglo-Saxon Minsters of Winchester, 4.2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003). It is this latter edition to which I shall refer. I have recently written more extensively on St Swithun in 'Ælfric's Account of St Swithun: Literature of Reform and Reward', in *History and Narrative in Early Medieval Literature*, ed. by Ross Balzaretti and Elizabeth Tyler (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), pp. 167-88.

⁵⁴ Lapidge, *Cult of St Swithun*, ch. 12, pp. 596-97, based on Lantfred, ch. 6.

⁵⁵ Edited by Lapidge, in *Cult of St Swithun* at pp. 217-334.

⁵⁶ See *Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 217-610.

⁵⁷ *Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 553-57.

⁵⁸ Compare Ælfric's account with Lantfred's in *Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 596-97 and 288-91 respectively.

⁵⁹ *Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 217-334, chapters 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 20, 21, 32, 33, 38.

⁶⁰ *Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 217-334, chapters 12, 14, 19, 22, 23, for example.

⁶¹ *Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 289, 291

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⁶² *Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 293

⁶³ *Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 293-97 and pp. 599-601.

⁶⁴ *Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 320-23 and 302-05, respectively.

⁶⁵ So extensively analysed by Joyce Hill, of course. See for example, 'Ælfric and Smaragdus', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 21 (1992), pp. 203-47; 'Monastic Reform and the Secular Church: Ælfric's Pastoral Letters in Context', in *England in the Eleventh Century: Proceedings of the 1990 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. by Carola Hicks (Stamford: Watkins, 1992), pp. 103-17; and 'Translating the Tradition: Manuscripts, Models and Methodologies in the Composition of Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies*', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 79 (1997), pp. 43-65.

⁶⁶ This is similar to the conclusion at which Cubitt arrives in her 'Virginity and Misogyny'.

⁶⁷ With the exception of Æthelthryth, Ælfric dwells upon few obvious contemporary or recent female figures.

⁶⁸ That is, Ælfric directs his gaze to the male, not to a 'mixed' congregation.