

HOLY WOMEN IN THE BRITISH ISLES: A SURVEY

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Representations of holy women appear in a wide variety of textual, dramatic, and iconographic forms across medieval Europe during the central and late Middle Ages (c. 1100–1530). This survey provides an introduction to the *mulieres sanctae* whose Lives circulated in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and in the numerous island regions and inland territories that have come to be categorized as the British Isles.¹ Traditional scholarship on British hagiography during the period under consideration here has focused primarily on the representation of the virgin martyrs of late antiquity.² The best-

¹ Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at the University of Connecticut's Medieval Studies Colloquium and at the 40th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University. I am grateful for the commentary of many colleagues on successive drafts, and also for the help of my research assistant, Darren Trongeau.

The 'British Isles' has long been a highly problematic term, which I use here with caution. From the eleventh century onward, 'British' was increasingly used as a synonym for 'English'. For the medieval implications of the appropriation of 'Britishness' by the English, or perhaps more accurately, by the Anglo-Normans, see R. R. Davies, *The First English Empire*, pp. 11–17, and Frame, *The Political Development*. Norman Davies prefers to designate the area only as 'The Isles'; see his *The Isles: A History*. Modern literary scholars are likewise increasingly acknowledging the political implications of conflating 'British' and 'English'. See Stanbury, 'Vernacular Nostalgia'.

² The standard bibliography of manuscripts, editions, translations, and critical studies on English hagiography (to 1984) is D'Evelyn and Foster's 'Saints' Legends'. Görlach has provided outstanding textual studies of the *South English Legendary* and related texts. On John of Tynemouth and the *Nova legenda Angliae*, see Horstmann's edition. On Anglo-Norman hagiography, see Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives*. On early Irish female saints, see Callan, 'St Darerca and Her Sister Scholars', esp. pp. 32–34. For Welsh female saints, see Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins', esp. pp. 1–5. The most influential recent treatments of the virgin martyr saints' Lives in English

known of these were Katherine of Alexandria and Margaret of Antioch,³ whose biographies survive in Latin, Anglo-Norman, English, Irish, and Welsh versions, as well as in such widely circulated collections as the *Legenda aurea* (c. 1255–70) and *The South English Legendary* (c. 1270–90).

The *vitae* of the female virgin martyrs feature highly formulaic, quasi-allegorical conventions of characterization and conflict. The typical protagonist is young, well educated, noble, beautiful, and pious. Her parents (sometimes well-intentioned) urge her to worship their (false) gods, bow down to their pagan emperor, or to marry an unbeliever. Rejecting parental authority and social tradition, the saint-in-the-making refuses. She fixes all of her affection on the Christian God and offers eloquent testimony about her faith. Family and civic authorities attempt to persuade her with pleas, bribery, and imprisonment. When these measures fail, they initiate graphic, brutal, often sexualized, torture. In many stories, the young virgin is publicly stripped, taunted, and sent to dwell in a brothel; her breasts are cut off; or she is tied naked to a bed and set on fire. Her steadfastness and eloquence in the face of such treatment initiate mass conversions, and she is eventually martyred. Miracles accompany her death, and her hair, fingers, clothing, teeth, and blood inspire pilgrimages and further miracles. Despite their heroines' flamboyant eloquence and power, the Lives of the virgin martyrs focus with particular intensity on their heroines' virginity, patience, and humility. Their stories are exemplary though not imitable, as their authors regularly insist.⁴ Medieval clerics advised female readers and viewers to admire the virtues of the saints, but not to emulate their rebellious activities.⁵

The representation of native Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, and Germanic holy women after the Norman Conquest of 1066 invites much further attention. It has been argued that the 'early saints of England were largely forgotten after the Norman Conquest, and many of their legends have been lost entirely'.⁶ There is some truth

are by Winstead (*Virgin Martyrs*), Delany (*Impolitic Bodies*), and Heffernan (*Sacred Biography*).

³ See *St Katherine of Alexandria*, ed. by Jenkins and Lewis; Cartwright 'Bucedd Catrin', pp. 53–86; Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine*, pp. 45–110; Fitch, 'Power Through Purity', pp. 17–20; *Virgin Lives and Holy Deaths*, trans. by Wogan-Browne and Burgess, pp. xi–lxiii.

⁴ Kieckhefer distinguishes between material to be admired (*admiranda*) and to be imitated (*imitanda*): *Unquiet Souls*, p. 13.

⁵ See Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives*, pp. 1–56; Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, pp. 275–99; Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, pp. 5–18; Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, pp. 17–56; Delany, *Impolitic Bodies*, pp. 160–84; Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*, pp. 1–33.

⁶ *Middle English Legends*, ed. by Reames, p. 5.

in this assessment. As this volume amply demonstrates, most geographical regions in medieval Europe enjoyed active native traditions of institutionally recognized female sanctity. This does not seem to have been the case in the British Isles, where Margaret of Scotland (d. 1093) and Margaret of England (d. 1192) were the last female saints to achieve canonization until after the Protestant Reformation.⁷ This dearth of late medieval insular holy women becomes particularly vexing when viewed from the perspective of earlier hagiography. Jane Schulenburg calculates that nearly forty percent of the British saints canonized in the period around 650–750 were female.⁸

Why the British Isles should lack a canon of native late medieval female saints has attracted surprisingly little speculation. The effects of the Norman Conquest clearly played an important role in creating this absence, as Continental churchmen sought to replace the potentially subversive native British saints of the early Middle Ages or to appropriate them to serve their own interests.⁹ In the decades after 1066, the chronologically and geographically remote stories of the virgin martyrs must have offered relatively safe alternatives to the biographies of the persuasive queens, princesses, abbesses, and missionaries who assisted in the early transmission of Christianity in northern Europe. These distant exemplars of female virtue offered relatively remote counter-narratives of cultural origins for the ongoing and unevenly successful Norman expansion into England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.¹⁰

The extent to which representations of the pre-Conquest saints continued to circulate in the post-Conquest Isles has not yet been satisfactorily determined, but

⁷ An official record of Queen Margaret of Scotland's canonization does not survive. However, an indulgence of forty days for visiting Dunfermline, the convent she founded, survives from 1249, and her body was translated in 1250. Little is known at present about Margaret of England. Reportedly a Cistercian nun, she made pilgrimages and lived a life of penitence with her mother. See Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, pp. 345–46.

⁸ See Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, p. 65.

⁹ On the history and complexities of these issues, see Cownie, *Religious Patronage*, and Ridyard, 'Condigna veneratio'. The representation of Ætheldreda of Ely offers a compelling case study. See Blanton-Whetsell, 'Tota integra', pp. 248–60. One might well ask, to paraphrase Joan Kelly, 'Did Women Have a Norman Conquest?'; see 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?'. For a relevant analysis of feminist historiography, see Bennett, 'Confronting Continuity', esp. pp. 74–75. On the use of 'Celtic' as an historiographical category, see Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church*, pp. 3–19.

¹⁰ See *Medieval Frontier Societies*, ed. by Bartlett and Mackay, and Morrissey, 'Cultural Geographies'.

recent studies suggest that their stories were more widely circulated than has been previously understood. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne has shown that successive redactions and editions of the *South English Legendary* and the *Legenda aurea* included increasing numbers of British holy women, featuring: Brigid of Kildare (d. c. 525), Ebba of Coldingham (d. 683), Edburga and Mildred of Minster-in-Thamet (d. 751 and 700 respectively), Æthelthryth of Ely (d. 679), Frideswide of Oxford (d. 727), and Winefrede of Wales (d. c. 655).¹¹ Still, by 1516, printer Richard Pynson felt compelled to preface an edition of John of Tynemouth's fourteenth-century *Nova legenda Angliae* with the admission that 'very few people in this realm of England, especially commoners, have ever heard of these saints', which therefore makes 'even the hearing of their names a worthwhile education'.¹² This campaign to reacquaint English readers with the holy people of their British past has distinct nationalistic implications, making the saints exemplars of political as well as religious submission. The preface concludes:

it should be said that most of the saints in this book were either born in this Realm or were living there, and that these other countries — Ireland, Scotland, and Wales — truly and lawfully ought to be obedient subjects of this Realm of England. And it seems to me that this little treatise may appropriately be called The Calendar of the New Legend of England.¹³

Future examinations of the post-Conquest circulation of pre-Conquest female saints will no doubt expand on the survey offered here. At present, I offer the following propositions about the holy women of the British Isles during 1100–1500: that 'sainthood' offers a lens of limited relevance for assessing women's holiness in an era and a region apparently reluctant to extend institutionalized legitimacy through canonization; that modern scholars have been too quick to link sanctity with the degree of a holy person's isolation from the world; that medieval religious vocations were far more fluid than has commonly been supposed; that holy people of both sexes maintained productive working relationships, despite the prohibitions and polemic in much ecclesiastical discourse; and finally, that the production of post-Conquest hagiography in England was part of a broad colonializing agenda of 'Englishing' that informed the production of religious and secular literature in the British Isles long after 1066.

Exploring these propositions requires us to acknowledge that, to adapt the common phrase, all hagiography is local. Very different representations of an

¹¹ Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives*, p. 65.
¹² *Nova legenda Angliae*, ed. by Horstmann, p. xxii (my translation).
¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. xxiii–xxiv.

individual saint could circulate independently, having been shaped to fit particular doctrinal, political, or liturgical needs. Gifts and bequests to monastic communities, guilds, and parishes link individual donors and their communities to the veneration of particular saints and even to idiosyncratic versions of their stories. As Jane Cartwright points out, 'the vast majority of the native saints' cults (and in particular the female saints) were confined to a particular locality'.¹⁴ Material objects, such as relics and rood screens, testify to the veneration of saints with greater precision than do the narratives that are more readily accessible to modern readers.¹⁵ Sparse and sporadic references in administrative documents to women such as Christine Carpenter suggest that there may be numerous holy women whose existence is known but for whom little documentation survives.¹⁶

As deceptive as the notion that British saints existed only to the extent that they appear in written collections, is the idea that holy women can be effectively classified by the degree of their enclosure. In theory, to be a holy woman (*sancta*) meant to withdraw from society: to exist apart from, even in opposition to, everyday communities, and to be dedicated to religious purposes and activities. Didactic and prescriptive literature urged aspirants to sanctity (both male and female) to withdraw physically from the world, to restrain their speech and their appetites, and to avoid the moral risks of communicating and associating with others, no matter how well intentioned this may have been.¹⁷ However, the lifetime arc of a woman's holiness cannot be determined by the degree, form, and location of her enclosure at any given time, especially given the paucity of surviving documentation on female sanctity. Classifying holy women in mutually

¹⁴ Cartwright, 'Dead Virgins', p. 6.
¹⁵ See Graham Jones, 'A Transnational Database and Atlas of Saints' Cults', <<http://www.le.ac.uk/elh/grj1/tasc.html>> [accessed 24 May 2005].
¹⁶ See Rubin, 'An English Anchorite', pp. 204–23. Notations in surviving books and records of bequests and patronage also indicate the contours of female holiness for whom no documentation survives. See Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under Suspicion*.
¹⁷ The *Ancrene Wisse* urges readers against letting anyone see them under any circumstances, warning that anchoresses bear responsibility for any sin committed as a result of an onlooker's desire for them. See Salu's translation, pp. 24–25. The post-Conquest Life of Aebbe of Coldingham concludes its description of a scandal at the convent by reiterating St Cuthbert's injunction against mixed-sex contact: 'the famous decree (as we believe, even though it is not recorded in writing), to be observed as a perpetual law by his servants, according to which not only was the company of women forbidden to them wherever his holy body was present, but even the entry, access, and sight of women were prohibited': *The Miracles of St Aebbe*, ed. and trans. by Bartlett, p. 21.

exclusive vocational categories obscures the complexity and flexibility of their commitments and activities. The lives of medieval British holy women were far more fluid than previously has been imagined.

Modern scholars regard anchoresses (also known as recluses and solitaires) as the pious elite of medieval holy women. According to the surviving rules that provided guidelines for the anchoritic life, anchoresses were to embody literally the idealized isolation of the holy life.¹⁸ Walled up in small enclosures, they were to pursue solitary lives of prayer, penance, and study. This rigorous vocation emulated the example of the desert fathers and mothers of early Christianity who withdrew to caves, pillars, and deserts, shunning the world with its comforts and temptations. Before being permitted to embark on this path, an aspiring anchoress was to be diligently examined by family, friends, and clergy. A prospective solitary had to secure pledges of material support — food, clothing, and care — from secular or ecclesiastical benefactors. After being approved by local and diocesan authorities, an anchoress received the sacrament of marriage to Christ, was given the last rites, and processed into her cell in a ritual enclosure. Finally, she was immured in her anchorhold and declared 'dead to the world' (*mortuum mundi*).

If in theory medieval anchoresses were dead to the world, in practice they were rarely so isolated. The most celebrated English anchoress is Julian of Norwich (the subject of the following chapter). Though little can be argued with certainty about her life, Julian seems to have withdrawn to a cell near the church of Saint Julian in Norwich during the 1390s,¹⁹ well after the visions she experienced in 1373. A longer and a shorter version of her astonishing revelations survive, in which Julian develops an innovative and imaginative vernacular theology. She offers vivid and subtle interpretations of the motherhood of Jesus, the redemptive nature of shared suffering, and ultimate centrality of love in the religious life.

As well as authors and counsellors, anchoresses are known to modern readers as the audiences for some of the most celebrated and widely circulated texts written for women in this era. These include Goscelin of Saint-Bertin's Latin *Liber confortatorius* (c. 1080), written for Eve of Wilton, an Anglo-Saxon nun who took up the anchoritic life; Aelred of Rievaulx's *De Institutione inclusarum* (c. 1162), which survives in Latin and in Middle English versions; the anonymous

¹⁸ Ann Warren's *Anchorites and Their Patrons* remains an indispensable resource for studying medieval solitaires. The work of Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites*, is also still extremely valuable. For outstanding recent treatments, see *Christina of Markyate*, ed. by Fanous and Leyser, and Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the Anchoresses*.

¹⁹ McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 69.

Ancrene Wisse (c. 1220), which circulated widely in Latin, French, and English; Richard Rolle's *The Form of Living* (c. 1348); and the first book of Walter Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection* (mid-fourteenth century).

Such texts can tell us more about the ideals of the anchoritic life than they can about the realities of this vocation. E. A. Jones reminds us that 'the traces left by medieval solitaires are as slight archivally as they are architecturally'.²⁰ The sparse records that do survive represent the lives of the anchoresses with surprising diversity. Endowed hermitages seem to have provided relatively spacious accommodation, comprising two storeys, rooms for servants, and sometimes multiple cells.²¹ Others, documented in passing in chronicles and romances as well as in saints' Lives, seem to have been little more than roadside huts or lean-tos. Many were not consistently gendered in the sense we have come to recognize.²² Administrative records indicate that an anchoress might be succeeded by an anchorite, followed by an anchoress, and so on.²³

The only extant *vita* of Christina of Markyate (c. 1096–c. 1155) appears near the end of *Sanctilogium Angliae, Walliae, Scotiae, et Hiberniae*, a mid- to late-fourteenth-century compendium in Latin collected by John of Tynemouth. Christina's *vita* illustrates the insufficiency of a single model of holiness for understanding the varieties of piety practised by British women.²⁴ Christina's sanctity becomes apparent even before her birth when her mother beholds, during pregnancy, a miraculous white dove landing on a nearby monastery roof. This sign indicates that Christina will possess 'uncommon holiness' and will remain 'ever a virgin ... holy both in mind and body; detaching herself from the things of the world and finding peace in the contemplation of the things that are above'.²⁵ When her family makes a visit to the celebrated monastery at St Albans, Christina expresses a desire to become a nun. She communicates this intention by

²⁰ Jones, 'Christina of Markyate', p. 240.

²¹ See Ann Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons*, pp. 15–52.

²² On the gendering of space, see Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture* and Blanton-Whetsell, 'Tota Integra', pp. 228–33.

²³ 'Alien Houses: Hermits and Anchorites of London', *A History of the County of London, Volume 1: London within the Bars, Westminster and Southwark*, ed. by William Page (London: Constable, 1909), pp. 585–88 <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=35398>> [accessed 18 October 2009].

²⁴ *The Life of Christina*, ed. and trans. by Talbot. See also *Christina of Markyate*, ed. by Fanous and Leyser.

²⁵ *The Life of Christina*, ed. and trans. by Talbot, p. 35.

performing the sign of the cross on the door as she leaves the foundation. The next day, she confirms her pledge at her own parish church, laying a penny on the altar to seal the offering. Fulfilling their part in the conventional ideological dynamics of hagiographical narrative, Christina's parents insist that she marry Burhred, a young Anglo-Saxon nobleman.²⁶ The first half of her story details a sensationalistic, even lurid, series of pursuits and pleadings, threats and trickery, which rival the torments found in the passions of the virgin martyr saints or in the adventures of persecuted romance heroines.²⁷ However, Christina is not martyred; a network of hermits help her to escape her confinement, and she runs away to join what is clearly a loosely organized community of male and female anchorites.

Rather than strict and consistent isolation, then, Christina's *vita* documents a highly sociable solitariness. She takes up residence in a cell adjoining the hermitage of her friend Roger, lives under the direction of an unnamed cleric after Roger's death, travels to Canterbury, and visits convents and hermitages in England and France. Christina eventually becomes the spiritual mentor of Geoffrey, abbot of St Albans, where 'her warnings and exhortations were implicitly obeyed'.²⁸ Nevertheless, her friendships with men and women cause controversy, as her opponents attack her as a 'worldly wise business woman' (*secularium agendorum prudentem procuratricem*),²⁹ a dreamer, and a seducer of souls. Similar tensions characterized the relationships of other anchoresses with their male friends, partly because of pervasive clerical suspicion about friendship in general, and partly because of the relative independence that the solitary life allowed.³⁰ Anchoresses both resisted involvement in everyday life and contributed powerfully to it through counsel, leadership, and prayer. Though enjoined to set themselves apart, holy enclosed women played active and prominent roles as writers, readers, mentors, and patrons, as well as being central figures in social institutions and movements.

²⁶ It is useful to recall that Christina's family was Anglo-Saxon; she was known by her parents as Theodora.

²⁷ On parallels between medieval romances and Christina's *vita*, see Cartlidge, 'The Unknown Pilgrim', pp. 89–95.

²⁸ *The Life of Christina*, ed. and trans. by Talbot, p. 139.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁰ On spiritual friendship among women and men, see Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*, pp. 86–114; Coakley, 'Friars as Confidants'; Sargent, *James Grenehalgh as Textual Critic; Gendered Voices*, ed. by Mooney; and Watson, *Richard Rolle*.

Usually positioned in contrast to the solitary ethos of the anchoress, the life of a medieval nun unfolded in a communal setting.³¹ Nuns pledged poverty, chastity, and obedience, and embraced a range of spiritual and physical labour: performing the divine offices, undertaking communal and solitary prayer, reading and writing, and helping tend to the convent's grounds and facilities. The communal life for women varied greatly according to the location, size and wealth of the foundation and the variety of its monastic observance. Some of the wealthiest and most prominent foundations were Shaftesbury, Barking, Wilton, and Romsey Abbeys, all founded before the Norman Conquest. Thriving post-Conquest houses include Campsey, Elstow, Godstow, Denny, Dartford, and the most celebrated example, Syon Abbey. The period between 1080 and 1170 saw tremendous growth and development in women's monasticism.³² By the twelfth century, Bruce Venarde argues, virtually no resident of England or France was 'more than a day's journey from a female monastic community, and most were closer than that'.³³ In addition to this general expansion, this era saw important innovations in traditional coenobitic practice. The new 'double' religious orders, the Gilbertines and the Order of Fontevraud, founded in England by Gilbert of Sempringham (d. 1189) and Robert of Arbrissel (d. c. 1117) adapted the ancient practice of syneisacticism, or chaste heterosexual cohabitation, allowing men and women to inhabit a single house, though under strict guidelines for separation.³⁴ Governing the English priories of Nuneaton, Westwood, and Amesbury and their holdings, the statutes of Fontevraud even required an abbess to govern both the male and female members of the order.³⁵ Not surprisingly, some clerics expressed concern over these new disciplines. For example, Geoffrey of Vendôme (d. 1132) wrote sternly to Robert of Arbrissel to express his anxiety over the Fontevault founder's alleged 'solicitude for the female sex, which you have undertaken to guide' and reports that 'rumour has it ... [that] by lying in bed with them you are

³¹ Power's *Medieval English Nunneries* is still an extraordinarily rich resource. More recent valuable studies include Nancy Warren, *Spiritual Economies*, and Oliva, *The Convent and the Community*.

³² Elkins, *Holy Women*, p. 17; Venarde, *Women's Monasticism*, p. 176.

³³ Venarde, *Women's Monasticism*, p. 16.

³⁴ McNamara (*Sisters in Arms*, p. 145) argues that the 'double house' is an invention of modern scholars. She maintains that the double monastery 'was not a system, but a convenient arrangement haphazardly adapted to the needs of frontier missions'. Indeed, many women's houses and men's houses were founded proximally, whether they were located at a frontier or not.

³⁵ Kerr, *Religious Life for Women*, pp. 64–100.

tortured in a new kind of martyrdom'.³⁶ Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1166) betrays similar concern over a reported incident at the Gilbertine convent at Watton, in which a nun's dalliance with a laybrother results in her pregnancy, the mutilation of the brother, and a miraculously disappearing foetus that resolves the resulting conflict in the convent.³⁷ Perhaps not surprisingly, following this era of expansion and innovation was an increased emphasis on strict enclosure and sexual segregation. In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII incorporated the infamous *Periculoso* statute into canon law, which ordered all nuns to be confined within their foundations.³⁸ There is no way of knowing how closely this prescriptive measure was enforced, though the fact that canonists and theologians had to reiterate it and elaborate its terms repeatedly suggests that enclosure was not strictly observed.

The Lives of the abbess/queen/saints of Ely circulated particularly widely throughout the later Middle Ages. These holy women are usually taken to include sisters Æthelthryth (d. 679, also called Etheldreda and Audrey), Seaxburh (d. c. 700) and Wihtburh (d. c. 743), Seaxburh's daughters Earcongota (d. c. 660) and Eormenhild (d. c. 700), and Eormenhild's daughter Waerburh (d. c. 700). Post-Conquest versions of their stories survive in several twelfth-century Latin collections, thanks to the efforts of the prolific hagiographer Goscelin of Saint-Bertin (d. c. 1099). Goscelin adapted, wrote, and compiled numerous accounts of holy women in England and France during the late eleventh century. He also wrote the lengthy and passionate *Liber confortatorius*, a letter of spiritual guidance addressed to 'Eva', a nun at Wilton and then a member of a community of anchoresses at the church of St Laurent at Angers.

The post-Conquest Lives of the Ely saints characterize them as 'English' queens and saints, rather than British or Anglo-Saxon holy women. However, their connection to pre-Conquest royal houses remains clear. Æthelthryth, the daughter of King Anna of East Anglia, was married twice, first to Tondberht, an ealdorman, and then to Ecgrith, King of Northumbria. According to tradition, Æthelthryth preserved her virginity even after marrying twice, though when her second husband insisted that they consummate their marriage, she fled to join family members at the monastery at Coldingham.³⁹ There, she received protection

³⁶ Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, pp. 104–05.

³⁷ 'The Nun of Watton', trans. by McNamara, pp. 122–37.

³⁸ See Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women*, pp. 1–8. Makowski includes an edition and a translation of *Liber Sextus*, at pp. 131–36.

³⁹ On the historicity of Bede's account of Æthelthryth, see Fell, 'Saint Æðelþryð'.

and gathered the resources to found her own convent at Ely. The Latin version of her Life rewards this devotion to chastity with the title, 'ever virgin, most noble and powerful queen of the English'.⁴⁰ Æthelthryth's sister Seaxburh married, bore children, and outlived her royal husband. She ruled as regent for her son and, when he reached adulthood, she withdrew to Ely. Her *vita* explains that she 'sought solitude, embraced heavenly seclusion' and therefore 'entered a monastery, submitted to the triumph of holy discipline, was clothed with the garb of holy religion'.⁴¹ Her daughter Eormenhild likewise followed the family tradition. A pious princess, she aspired to live as a consecrated virgin, but she obeyed the wishes of her parents and married Wulfhere, King of Mercia. After his death, she too joined her mother and aunt at Ely. Eventually, Eormenhild's daughter Waerburh was able to fulfil the Ely women's long-thwarted desire for lifelong virginity. The success of her pursuit of celibacy may account for the wide circulation of her *vita* as compared to those of her Ely relatives. Six Latin copies of Waerburh's Life survive, attesting that its heroine is 'renowned in the whole of England both for her sanctity and for her holy rank, and by the testimony of miracles, and by a host of English histories'.⁴²

This brief sketch of the female saints of Ely indicates that, while the historical evidence for the activities of pre-Conquest holy women is slight, their impact on later hagiography was profound. Virginia Blanton-Whetsell has located more than ninety-nine artifacts associated with Æthelthryth that survive to this day, extending Ælfric's claim (c. 1000) that she was one of the 'the three most important intercessor saints'⁴³ in twelfth-century England. Moreover, Æthelthryth's enduring popularity is documented by the particular abundance of the items associated with her veneration that date from the early fourteenth century to the mid-sixteenth century.⁴⁴

The post-Conquest *vita* of the Irish saint Modwenna (also known as Darerca and Moninne; d. 517/519) likewise illustrates the prominence of native holy women in England after the Norman Conquest. Modwenna's biography was translated from Latin into English c. 1114–35 by Geoffrey of Burton, abbot of the

⁴⁰ Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, ed. and trans. by Love, p. 99.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 151.

⁴² Ibid., p. 29.

⁴³ Blanton-Whetsell, 'Imagines Ætheldredae', p. 57. Ælfric's *Passio Sancti Eadmund Regis* (c. 1000) refers explicitly to Edmund, Æthelthryth, and Cuthbert as the best known saints in his national pantheon (quoted in Fell, 'Saint Æðelþryð', p. 18).

⁴⁴ Blanton-Whetsell, 'Imagines Ætheldredae', p. 65.

Benedictine monastery at Burton upon Trent. This version, which quickly became the authoritative account of her life, explains that, upon learning that Modwenna's bones were buried under his monastery, the abbot sent to Ireland for her *vita*.⁴⁵ The revisions in the twelfth-century account cast Modwenna as the teacher of St Brigid of Kildare (instead of the other way around, as the Irish tradition maintains), embellishing her travels through Ireland, Scotland, and Rome, where she lodges in a house of English pilgrims and, in the English tradition, becomes foundress of hospitals.⁴⁶ The post-Conquest *vita* combines the distinctively Irish hagiographical tropes of the saintly voyage and the serial foundation of houses thereafter associated with their patron saint with the fluid continuum of communal and solitary identities that many British holy women pursued.⁴⁷ For example, after Modwenna is orphaned, she travels to a deserted island to visit the devout bishop Ibar, who had been living there 'as a steadfast hermit and proven athlete of God ... with his disciples who lived likewise, on three small islands lying in the western ocean beyond Ireland'.⁴⁸ Inspired by his solitary example, Modwenna relocates to a 'suitably remote spot' atop a mountain, where she builds her first monastery and establishes a community of holy women.⁴⁹ Not long afterwards, as her reputation for sanctity grows, and tales of her piety and power circulate throughout Ireland, one hundred and fifty holy women gather around her. Her *vita* blurs the traditional boundaries among women's religious vocations by noting that the members of her convent called no possession their own; rather, 'they all lived *in common* and earned their food and clothing by the work of their own hands following the example of their abbess, they lived *an eremitical life*'.⁵⁰ This story is organized around the pattern found in the *vita* of Christina of Markyate: a trajectory of attempted isolation; enjoyment of monastic life; encroachment by followers, and renewed isolation. In pursuit of a communal solitariness, these holy women blur the conceptual boundaries between cloister and anchorhold.

⁴⁵ Robert Bartlett (*The Life and Miracles*, p. 17) notes that the appropriation of early British saints by Anglo-Norman monastic foundations were common 'during the monastic boom of 1050–1200'.

⁴⁶ *The Life and Miracles*, ed. and trans. by Bartlett, pp. xiii–iv. See also Wogan-Browne, 'La Vie de sainte modwenne'.

⁴⁷ On the tropes of Irish hagiography, see Bitel, 'Body of a Saint'.

⁴⁸ *The Life and Miracles*, ed. and trans. by Bartlett, pp. 15–17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25 (emphasis added).

Their communities also challenge the ideal of strict sexual segregation promoted by the religious authorities and accepted by many modern scholars. Modwenna's story records visitors of 'every rank, kings and princes, dukes and great lords, rich and poor, queens too, married women, widows, and holy virgins'.⁵¹ Her *vita* maintains that even King Alfred came to Ireland to seek her prayers to cure a disease. Despite the pervasive concern that medieval nuns should maintain their sanctity by setting themselves apart, their actions — documented in cartularies, wills, letters, and other administrative documents — show how they maintained close working relationships with their monastic colleagues, as well as with laypeople, the monarchy, the papacy, and other civic and ecclesiastical entities.

Just as medieval theologians judged the contemplative life superior to the active life, they valued virginity above widowhood and widowhood above marriage. However, by the thirteenth century, the practice of the mixed life began to circulate as an alternative for women whose commitments and circumstances prevented them from entering the convent or the anchorhold. The title 'vowess', which occurs in English administrative documents, referred to women who took formal vows of celibacy, but not poverty, obedience, or enclosure.⁵² Even before the circulation of Walter Hilton's treatise *On the Mixed Life* in the late fourteenth century, medieval laywomen stretched the boundaries of the holy life in ways that allowed them to dedicate their hearts to God while remaining active in worldly affairs. *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost* addresses this desire, attributing it to women as well as to men:

My dear brother and sister, I see that many people would prefer to take religious vows but are unable to do so, on account of their poverty, or their family and marital responsibilities. As a result, I offer here a book of the religion of the heart, that is, of the abbey of the holy ghost, which allows all who desire to live a holy life to do so, even if they cannot live within the monastery walls.⁵³

Margery Kempe, the subject of Goodman's chapter in this volume, provides the most celebrated performance of the mixed life to have survived from medieval England. Marriage and motherhood prevented Kempe from pursuing a full religious vocation. However, despite her family obligations, she undertook several pilgrimages and insisted on wearing the white garments that would ordinarily

⁵¹ *The Life and Miracles*, ed. and trans. by Bartlett, pp. 61–63 (emphasis added).

⁵² See Erler, 'Three Fifteenth-Century Vowesses', and Erler, *Women, Reading and Piety*, pp. 48–67.

⁵³ *Yorkshire Writers*, ed. by Horstmann, i, p. 321. My translation.

have signified virginity. She engaged in what is carefully termed 'only conversation and good words',⁵⁴ visited monasteries, courts, cathedrals, and anchorholds, travelled with a confessor, and refused to eat meat. Her companions repeatedly accused her of madness and heresy. Clearly, Kempe provides a singular example of female piety, but her activities offer some suggestive parallels with those of other medieval women, in Britain and beyond.

Numerous laywomen sought to adopt and adapt the disciplines of the anchoress and the nun while remaining active in the world. One of the best-documented examples is Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare (d. 1360).⁵⁵ After being married three times, Elizabeth enjoyed nearly forty years of prosperous and pious widowhood. She managed her properties, entertained guests whose ranks and estates ranged from dukes and countesses and professed religious to rural gentry and urban tradespeople, gave alms generously, and supported the work of numerous book copyists, goldsmiths, illuminators, enamel workers, embroiderers, and jewellers. She sought and was granted ecclesiastical permission to blend monastic and lay life in a variety of ways. She was allowed to lodge at convents with friends and members of her staff and to allow visiting religious to eat at her table. She founded Clare College at the University of Cambridge, c. 1346, and the records of her ongoing patronage indicate that she maintained an active role in supervising the college's curriculum and personnel.⁵⁶ Elizabeth maintained a deep attachment to the Franciscan Order. She took a vow of chastity in 1343 and later built a house — perhaps intended as an unofficial anchorhold — in London in the vicinity of the Minorites outside Aldgate.

Elizabeth's close friend, Mary of St Pol, Countess of Pembroke (d. 1377), likewise sought to integrate the concerns of the anchorhold, the cloister, and the polity. She founded a chantry at Westminster Abbey, a house of Franciscan nuns (Denney Abbey), and Pembroke College, Cambridge. Under Mary's efficient management, Denney expanded its lands and privileges, and the house comprised forty-one nuns within four decades of its foundation. Mary petitioned the pope successfully for permission to enter convents with female attendants in 1333, with both female and male attendants in 1334, and to receive room and board at both male and female houses in 1364.⁵⁷ In 1377, she built a private household, arguably

⁵⁴ See *The Book of Margery*, trans. by Windeatt, p. 164.

⁵⁵ See Underhill, *For Her Good Estate*, and Ward, 'Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare'.

⁵⁶ Underhill, *For Her Good Estate*, pp. 140–44.

⁵⁷ Such guests were termed 'corrodians' and sometimes dangerously overtaxed the financial resources of monastic houses.

also intended as a self-styled anchorhold, on the Denney grounds. When she died later that year, she was buried in the habit of a Minoress.

Dame Eleanor Hull (d. 1460) offers another instructive example of this variety of hybrid holy life.⁵⁸ As a wife and mother, she entered the service of Queen Joan of Navarre and was admitted to the confraternity of St Albans. When her husband died, she took lodgings at Sopwell Priory, a Benedictine convent. She received papal permission in 1413 to have a portable altar, and in 1415, to choose her own confessor. Near the end of her life she completed an English translation of a French commentary on the seven penitential psalms. Her intellectual activities are further documented by her donation of a copy of Nicholas of Lyra's *Postillae* (now Cambridge, University Library, MS Dd. 7.7–10) to St Albans, where she maintained a close association with the community and its clergy. Her will leaves 'my mantle, my cloak, all of my gowns and furs to the poor religious that have need' and 'the alms of my little purses by continued as long as is left any good ... in the worship of Saint Katherine'.⁵⁹ She bequeathed her service books and a 'blue Bible of Latin' to her lifelong friend, Roger Huswyf. Other celebrated laywomen who likewise blurred the conventional boundaries of piety include Lady Margaret Beaufort (d. 1509); Cecily, Duchess of York (d. 1495); Margaret, Duchess of Clarence (d. 1439); Elizabeth Berkeley (d. 1478), and Anne Neville (d. 1485).⁶⁰ These women represent only a few of the best documented examples.

Surprisingly, it is the anchoress Christina of Markyate who provides a vision of enclosure that any of the holy women in this chapter might have recognized as consonant with their own practices. When Geoffrey of St Albans tells Christina that a papal mandate calls him to Rome, she disapproves. Nevertheless, she permits him to leave, saying:

Go forth in the Lord. For I am certain that whether you go or whether you stay, the divine will in you will be fulfilled. For when I was at prayer I saw a kind of enclosure surrounded by high fences which were transparent; it resembled a cloister without doors or windows ... Overjoyed at this, I saw you, the cause of my anxiety, within this enclosure, standing happily enough with an enviable degree of pleasure. And when I was still anxious about how you would get out, whether by digging or by any other way, it was said to me: 'the enclosure which you see has but one doorkeeper: God, and that man cannot come out except by divine intervention. On this account, strengthened by the mercy of Jesus Christ,

⁵⁸ *The Seven Psalms*, ed. by Barratt, pp. xxiii–xxxiii.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁶⁰ On Lady Margaret Beaufort, see Jones and Underwood, *The King's Mother*, and Krug, *Reading Families*, pp. 65–113.

I am confident that you are kept within that enclosure and prevented from setting out on your journey'. He, on his part, hastened to Rome.⁶¹

Though Geoffrey was not enclosed in the literal sense (as Christina herself evidently was not, or not consistently), Christina finds comfort in his containment in the love and mercy of God. Their borders are not physical; they constitute, in Christina's words, a 'cloister without doors or windows', much like the intangible monastery walls described in *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost*.

When rigidly applied, the terms 'saint', ' anchoress', 'nun', and 'laywoman' obscure more than they clarify about the medieval holy women of the British Isles, and perhaps the holy women of every place and time. As theological and geographical abstractions, saints, anchoresses, nuns, and laywomen represent distinct identities, opposing points in such categorical binaries as sacred and secular, solitary and community, active and contemplative, centre and periphery. In practice, a particular woman might move among the roles of solitary, nun, wife, and widow (and others) as childbearing, marriage, and work responsibilities required. As her circumstances changed, the ratio of her active and contemplative practices varied. Widows or married women with families took up temporary residence at religious houses for periods of study and spiritual renewal. Correspondingly, nuns and anchoresses maintained important roles in the outside world, despite the official ideology of pious isolation. All holy women led mixed lives. They withdrew, worshipped, prayed, fasted, had visions, and remained silent. However, they also taught, wrote, provided counsel, adjudicated disputes, and served as public exemplars of piety. Their physical settings — the household, the convent, the anchorhold, all three, or none of these — illustrate their multiple commitments to this world as well as to the next, and to human need as well as to spiritual perfection. Their stories contain elements of insularity and community, as their allegiances, alliances, and alternatives shifted, strengthened, and evolved.

⁶¹ *The Life of Christina*, ed. and trans. by Talbot, p. 165.

British Holy Women: A Reference Chart

Holy Woman	Date	Social Status	Religious Affiliation
Margaret of Scotland	d. 1093	Anglo-Saxon royalty	founded Dunfermline (Benedictine)
Christina of Markyate	1096–1155	Anglo-Saxon nobility	anchoress, became Prioress of Markyate (Benedictine)
Margaret of England	d. 1192	English nobility	Cistercian nun
Christine Carpenter of Schire	unknown	English, status unknown	petition to become an anchoress approved in 1329
Elizabeth de Burgh	d. 1360	English nobility	lay, affiliated with Franciscans
Mary of St Pol	d. 1377	English nobility	lay, affiliated with Franciscans
Julian of Norwich	1332–after 1416	English, status unknown	anchoress
Margery Kempe	c. 1373–c. 1438	English bourgeois	lay, took a vow of celibacy while married
Margaret, Duchess of Clarence	d. 1439	English nobility	lay, no affiliation
Eleanor Hull	d. 1460	English nobility	lay, affiliated with Benedictines
Elizabeth Berkeley	d. 1478	English nobility	lay, no affiliation
Anne Neville	d. 1485	English nobility	lay, no affiliation

Cecily, Duchess of York	d. 1495	English nobility	lay, no affiliation
Lady Margaret Beaufort	d. 1509	English nobility	lay, no affiliation. Married three times; took a vow of celibacy in 1499 while married to her third husband

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