



Token and Promise: The Saintly Role of Royal Bodies in Ælfric's Lives of Oswald, Æthelthryth and Edmund

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Token and Promise: The Saintly Role of Royal Bodies in Ælfric's Lives of Oswald,
Æthelthryth, and Edmund

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role and depiction of the body in the *vitae* of three Anglo-Saxon royal saints (Oswald of Northumbria, Æthelthryth of Ely, and Edmund of East Anglia); these hagiographical narratives are contained in a collection of Old English religious writings known as *Lives of Saints*, which was produced at the end of the tenth century by Ælfric, a Benedictine monk known for his distinctive alliterative, or rhythmical, prose style. Oswald, Æthelthryth, and Edmund are united not only by royal status, but also by the posthumous condition of each of their bodies, which were found to be partially or wholly undecayed after death. How might the fact that the bodies were distinguished in life by royal birth and in death by their incorrupt condition have affected Ælfric's depiction of these three saints? This thesis locates each saint's life in his or her historical context before closely analyzing Ælfric's narrative to consider the role that the body plays in the *vitae* and in sanctity. The study concludes that, using a variety of stylistic techniques, Ælfric carefully focused the reader's attention on the body in order to offer examples of the proper performance of Christianity, of the way to be a righteous and faithful leader, and of the saint as a figure of Christ in deed as well as spirit.

Dedication

To Robert

symble and æfre

Acknowledgements

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Matt Garufi, Steven Roth, and Michael Schroeder: thank you for being the most stalwart of friends. My brilliant, articulate, and strong daughters, Nicole and Campbell: you listened, questioned, cheered, and read; you offered counsel and laughter. You encouraged me to push on, and on more than one occasion, you reminded me to take a break. Thank you always.

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Table of Contents

Dedication	iv
Acknowledgements	v
I. Ælfric and His Saints' Lives in Context	1
II. Body of Sanctity: Oswald of Northumbria, King and Martyr	13
III. Body of Purity: Æthelthryth of Ely	33
IV. Body of Sacrifice: Edmund of East Anglia, King and Martyr	59
V. The Body as Token and as Promise	82
Epilogue: What Remains	89
Bibliography	92

Chapter I

Ælfric and His Saints' Lives in Context

In the last years of tenth-century England, a Benedictine monk named Ælfric compiled the third volume of his collected religious writings. Known as *Lives of Saints*, it contains a mixture of homilies, Old Testament narratives, and saints' lives written in Old English. While the vast majority of Ælfric's lives tell the stories of the saints of the early church whose cults of veneration extended throughout Christian Europe, five are the *vitae* of English saints.¹ Three of them—Oswald, Æthelthryth, and Edmund—form an even more select group: they were all born into Anglo-Saxon royal families, and after death the body of each was found to be either wholly or partially untouched by decay. This raises a question: what special role does the body—marked in birth by royal status and in death by incorruption—play in Ælfric's depictions of Oswald, Æthelthryth, and Edmund within their *vitae*?

Surprisingly, this question has not been explored about Oswald, Æthelthryth, and Edmund as a group. When they are considered jointly, it is usually as royal saints who had active cults. More often they are considered separately or in pairs, and their bodies become part of a discussion concerning gender, virginity, military role, and metonymic representation. All of these lenses provide insights, but they neglect what might be learned by expanding the focus to look at all three as holy people whose bodies are integral to their performance of faith and manifestation of holiness. The fact that all three

¹ See below, page 4-5, for discussion of *vita* and *passio*.

were born royal adds another layer to the consideration of their bodies, which have special significance by dint of their birth and position. During their lifetimes, all three saints were expected to lead their people, and that leadership was not strictly intellectual or spiritual. It was also acted out through their physical presence.

While the question I propose may seem straightforward, it is complicated by the vast cultural shifts that have occurred in the thousand years since Ælfric wrote these *vitae*. Simply put, a modern reader misses a lot without some awareness of the world in which Ælfric lived and thought and wrote. This point is made very clearly by scholars such as Clare Lees and Ruth Waterhouse who emphasize the need to understand the full context of a work in order to evaluate the meaning it had for both writer and audience. That is not to say that as modern readers we cannot appreciate Ælfric's style and skill by reading attentively: the sound effects and elegance of his writing can be recognized without knowledge of tenth-century religious beliefs; the clarity of his thought can be grasped without understanding historical setting. Lees's argument is instructive, however: "Aesthetic pleasure can be divorced from religious content and historical moment, but that divorce hardly makes for coherent critical analysis" (*Tradition* 18). Waterhouse also demonstrates that the differences between a modern reader's and a tenth-century reader's assumptions, expectations, and experiences can affect the way each understands a text: themes and issues acquire different weights depending on the reader's experiential framework ("Hypersignification" *passim*). In some cases, a modern reader might not recognize the significance of a detail or comment that a tenth-century reader would find revealing; in other cases, a modern reader might infer something from a text that would be utterly alien to a tenth-century reader or that might be completely

outside the scope of hagiographical writing to begin with. This has frequently been the case with the *vita* of Æthelthryth, whose adamant virginity has been examined from decidedly modern perspectives that yield tenuous conclusions. I intend to approach these narratives with awareness of the beliefs and history that shaped them and to see what careful analysis of language reveals about the role of the body in the lives of the three saints.

A tenth-century reader might be surprised by the process that canonization now requires. Not until the thirteenth century did the current protocol of canonization, which demands extensive investigation prior to papal pronouncement, become fully established (Bartlett 56-64). During the lifetimes of these three saints, and even during Ælfric's own lifetime, cults of sainthood began on a local level by popular acclamation and veneration. Generally, upon the death of a person of great piety, the people in the community would begin to visit and to pray at the grave. In time, there would be reports of miracles, which would affirm the power of the saint, at which point local clergy might begin to acknowledge the sanctity of the dead person.² Royal saints, however, are a special group, whose higher profiles gave their actions greater import. Æthelthryth's decision to forsake secular life and enter the convent was more noteworthy (and more of a sacrifice, perhaps) because she gave up her life as a queen. Oswald's and Edmund's deaths were positioned as martyrdoms in part because they were Christian kings who died at the hands of pagans. Scholars such as William Chaney and Catherine Cubitt identify elements of pagan or folk religion in the cults surrounding the royal saints—and as can be seen in the *vita* of

² See Thomas Hill, "*Imago Dei*: Genre, Symbolism, and Anglo-Saxon Hagiography" 36. Also see Michael Lapidge, "The Saintly Life in Anglo-Saxon England" 253. For a historical overview of the development of the cult of saints in Christianity, see Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*, especially chapters 1-3.

Oswald, those elements very likely existed and may have contributed to his popularity as a saint.³ Susan Ridyard argues strenuously against the idea of sacral kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: “Sanctity did not flow in the veins of early medieval English kings” (78).⁴ She contends that it was actually in the interests of both ecclesiastical and secular leaders to promote the cults of royal saints as sources of wealth and as reinforcement of current leaders’ claims to power (234-240).⁵ In the cases of Oswald, Æthelthryth, and Edmund, of course, the incorrupt state of their bodies was seen as clear and unequivocal sign of their sanctity, but it is worth noting that the success of their cults had great significance to both church and crown.

The story of a saint’s life was an integral part of the cult of sainthood. Hagiographical writing presents the saint as an epitome of Christian living and attests to the saint’s similarity to the examples set by other, earlier saints. Its purpose is to teach and to inspire, not to present absolute accuracy or the potentially confusing complications and contradictions of most human lives. Traditionally, the story of saint’s life was distinguished as being either a *passio* or *vita*. *Passiones* (“passions”, from the Latin word for suffering) were the stories of martyrs who, forced to choose between apostasy and their faith, choose faith, knowing and accepting that it will result in torture (usually) and death. *Vitae* (“lives”) were the stories of those who exemplified the faith and showed perfect devotion to God in their behavior: these saints will choose the religious life (at

³ For an overview of the argument that pagan or folk beliefs—specifically regarding the inherent sacrality of kings and royalty—coexisted with Christianity, see Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity*. Also, see Cubitt, “Sites and Sanctity: Revisiting the Cult of Murdered and Martyred Anglo-Saxon Royal Saints,” for argument that the popularity of murdered and martyred royal saints may have sprung from folk beliefs of the non-elite classes.

⁴ Ridyard makes a very useful distinction between “sacrality, an ascribed status” and “sanctity, an achieved status” and observes that since sanctity was the result of behavior, and not inherent to birth, it could be made to fit with a definition of being a good monarch by religious standards (234-235).

⁵ See also Rollason 105-126.

which they will excel); they will perform miracles during their lives and even more miracles after their deaths (Lapidge 260-261). Lapidge refers to the saints whose lives are depicted in the *vitae* as those “whose impeccable service to God constituted a metaphorical, not a real, martyrdom” (260). Because *vitae* and *passiones* are, in many ways, formulaic, readers may dismiss them as boring or lacking in artistry. That characterization is as unfair to the genre as is the expectation that these narratives be verifiably accurate and completely dispassionate historical sources. Hagiographers aspired to demonstrate that the saint under discussion was just like other saints (Lapidge 262). Lees observes that what might be seen as a lack of originality or as repetitiveness is actually a deliberate choice to reinforce tradition and the continuation of the past into the present: “[T]raditions selectively reproduce the past in order to evoke an impression of sameness” (*Tradition* 28). This sameness across time and across cultures ensures that the Christian message is consistent and that a unifying Christian identity is emphasized.

Hagiographical writings present similarities not just to one another but also to both Old and New Testament narratives. This, too, is deliberate. Erich Auerbach’s essay, “*Figura*,” discusses the way that figural interpretation sought to find identifications between Old and New Testament events and people as a way of understanding history: “Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first” (53). Thomas Hill builds upon Auerbach’s work to consider the ways that a saint’s life might be considered a figural narrative:

It is possible for medieval historians and hagiographers to perceive such events as the conversion of England, or the Crusades, or the life of a specific local saint in terms of figural patterns. This perception is not merely arbitrary or absurd; it is simply one way, and I would submit a

legitimate way, of understanding the sequence of history. At any rate, a given *vita* may thus be “figural” in that its narrative echoes certain specific biblical types and itself prefigures their fulfillment in the lives of the reader and (perhaps) in the drama of the last times. (44-45)

This sort of figural patterning will be seen in the *vitae* of all three saints under discussion and offers a way to see the saint as embodying Christ and also as a model for, and promise to, the reader.

Ælfric’s *vitae* of Oswald, Æthelthryth, and Edmund were based on narratives written by Bede (in the cases of Oswald and Æthelthryth) and Abbo of Fleury (in the case of Edmund). They are translations from the Latin, but Ælfric’s work goes well beyond simple translation. In the oft-quoted Latin preface to *Lives of Saints*, Ælfric explains that he does not translate “word for word” but “sense for sense” (Skeat 1:5).⁶ These works, therefore, are creative and individual products shaped by Ælfric’s sense of language and structure and affected by Ælfric’s own concerns and history. Once again, context is needed in order to better understand and interpret the *vitae*.

Ælfric is perhaps best known for his unique rhythmical (or alliterative) prose style. Walter W. Skeat, the editor and translator of the most complete edition of *Lives of Saints* to date, chose to organize the text as if it were verse. Subsequent scholars have argued about whether Ælfric was inspired by vernacular verse or by Latin rhythmical prose, but the overwhelming consensus is that Ælfric wrote prose that contained many of the characteristics of poetry.⁷ Gabriella Corona comments:

⁶ *Nec potuimus in ista translatione semper uerbum ex uerbo transferre, sed tamen sensum ex sensu* (Ælfric, *LS* Preface.22-23). The original text is drawn from Walter J. Skeat’s edition of *Lives of Saints* (*LS*), including all punctuation. Quotations from *Lives of Saints* will give the item number—or title, in the case of the preface—associated with the individual homily, *vita*, or narrative followed by line numbers.

⁷ For discussion of this topic see, among others, John C. Pope, “Introduction”; Peter Clemoes, “Ælfric”; Anne Middleton, “Ælfric’s Answerable Style: The Rhetoric of Alliterative Prose”; Haruko

Lexical variation is a dominant characteristic of Ælfric's work. . . . Most of Ælfric's works also contain an array of figures of speech such as alliteration, repetition, and paronomasia, yielding a rhetorically effective structure, tightly bound together by such ornamental devices as were common in native poetry. (170)

John C. Pope characterizes Ælfric's rhythmical prose as "a loosely metrical form resembling in basic structural principles the alliterative verse of the Old English poets, but differing markedly in the character and range of its rhythms as in strictness of alliterative practice, and altogether distinct in diction, rhetoric, and tone" (105).⁸

Central to Ælfric's style is the clarity of his writing. The three *vitae* under discussion required the reorganization and consolidation of the source material: Ælfric accomplishes that while retaining elegance of expression and an absolute commitment to restraint, clarity, and orthodoxy of teaching. He is a thoughtful, deliberate, and controlled writer. Pope observes that Ælfric's homilies reflect his ability to not only master his source material but also to distill it to its essence (99). Peter Clemoes points to Ælfric's "sense of pattern" ("Ælfric" 189), which we as readers see in his ability to convey figural and thematic connections within the works. Clemoes characterizes Ælfric's rhythmical prose as "an attempt—and not an unsuccessful one—to create formal harmony between rhythm and thought" ("Ælfric" 205). In his discussion of Ælfric's homily on St. Cuthbert, Clemoes concludes by saying ". . . the rhythmical style is the language of the spirit. It is

Momma, "Rhythm and Alliteration: Styles of Ælfric's Prose up to the *Lives of Saints*"; Gabriella Corona, "Ælfric's (Un)Changing Style: Continuity of Patterns from the *Catholic Homilies* to the *Lives of Saints*." For argument that Ælfric was writing rhythmical verse, see Thomas Bredehoft, *Early English Meter*. For the possible influence of Latin rhythmical prose, see Gordon Hall Gerould, "Abbot Ælfric's Rhyming Prose."

⁸ Pope notes that Ælfric uses alliteration with a much greater freedom than would be found in poetry: "Everywhere we find Ælfric admitting weakly-stressed syllables into the alliterative scheme often enough to make the practice seem intentional. . . . I am disposed to include . . . not only pronouns, demonstratives, conjunctions (except, perhaps, *and* and *ac*), and prepositions, but unstressed prefixes, sometimes *ge-*, *a-*, *on-*, *ymb-*, as well as *be-*, *for-*, *to-*, and *purh-*, with their easily heard initial consonants" (127).

transcendental. The unity of its interrelated, regular sound is the artistic counterpart of the unity of an interrelated, regular universe. Whatever subjects Ælfric wrote about, they were all parts of the same, patterned whole” (“Ælfric” 206).

Ælfric’s authorial voice may be one of Anglo-Saxon England’s best known and most recognizable, but limited facts are known about Ælfric himself. Joyce Hill has examined much of the biographical scholarship related to Ælfric and concludes that he seems to have been born in Wessex in the mid-950s; he began his religious life as a monk in Winchester under Bishop Æthelwold, who was a central figure in the tenth-century English Benedictine Reform that emphasized education, monastic discipline, and the relationship of church and crown. Eventually, Ælfric went to the Cerne Abbas monastery where he serves as a priest and a monk, and around 1005, he moved to Eynsham where he became abbot. Hill, following Clemoes’s reasoning, agrees that Ælfric probably died sometime around 1010 (“Ælfric: His Life” 35-37). The years at Winchester and the exposure to Æthelwold appear to have been formative for Ælfric, and Hill comments that Ælfric always identified himself as having an association with both, perhaps because of the authority that such a connection implied (“Ælfric: His Life” 47). At some point, Ælfric became known to the powerful and pious Anglo-Saxon nobleman Æthelweard and his son Æthelmær.⁹ Æthelweard was the ealdorman of the Western Provinces, a position of great power and authority that was bestowed by the king, not inherited, and which was maintained at the king’s will (Cubitt, “Lay Patrons” 167-168). Æthelweard was not simply a military leader and politician, though. He was also a scholar and writer in his own right, and both he and his son Æthelmær were devout, generous toward religious

⁹ Cubitt proposes the possibility that Ælfric came to Æthelweard’s attention as a young man, possibly even as a child, who lived on Æthelweard’s lands and who showed great intellectual promise (“Lay Patrons” 177).

institutions, and appear to have been drawn to forms of religious observance modeled on monastic practices. This may explain their desire for the collection of saints' lives that they requested of Ælfric (Cubitt, "Lay Patrons" 182-183). That request resulted in *Lives of Saints*.

Ælfric's relationship to Bishop Æthelwold exposed him to the concerns and successes that had been central to the Benedictine Reform movement. Clemons identifies Ælfric as being a product of the "intellectual and artistic standards" of the Reform as well as being influenced by King Alfred's program of promoting vernacular writing ("Ælfric" 179). One of the achievements of the movement was the close relationship and unified purpose that reforming bishops (namely Æthelwold, Dunstan, and Oswald) had forged with the king, Edgar. In those years, the country was generally safe and peaceful, an inheritance from Alfred's reign that was maintained by his successors, including Edgar. The England in which Ælfric, Æthelweard, and Æthelmær lived, however, was not as safe or as tranquil. After years of relative peace and security, Viking attacks and pillaging began again. The current king, Æthelred, seemed uncertain and unequal to the challenge this presented, and his policy of paying ransoms to the Danes was controversial and of questionable efficacy in that the raids continued. There were grave concerns about Æthelred's ability to rule and, more fundamentally, about his courage since he did not even lead his people in battle—a major failing in a king (Brooks 12-13). The warrior culture of England's past had idealized certain archetypes of leadership that persisted in memory and were evoked by poems like *The Battle of Maldon*. Paying off the enemy and avoiding battle while one's people were terrorized and killed would have been dissonant with those nostalgic ideals. More simply, even if Æthelred's policies were prudent, they

did not inspire. Æthelred had other problems, though, in addition to the questions about his military and political decisions. In particular, Æthelred's relationship with the church was in no way as strong as Edgar's had been. Cubitt explains that while Edgar had been very generous to the monasteries and to the church in general by granting vast tracts of land to them, there were those who felt that such open-handedness at the expense of his nobles had been wrong. When Æthelred was persuaded to allow some of these land grants to be reversed, and then the Vikings began to raid once more, it seemed logical to conclude that the raids were punishment and signified God's displeasure. Eventually, Æthelred had to make a penitential shift toward renewing the favored status of the monasteries; Æthelweard and Æthelmær were closely connected to that new policy (Cubitt, "Lay Patrons" 172-175).

Ælfric, therefore, was writing his saints' lives in an atmosphere of anxiety and questioning about the role of the leader (and his advisors), about the relationship of royalty and church, and about the gap between reality and those behavioral ideals associated with the past. For the faithful, these questions went beyond politics and right to the heart of how Christianity was lived. There were other, more specific, religious issues to consider as well. Malcolm Godden suggests that the Viking raids would have reignited worries about paganism and apostasy (302-305). As someone deeply influenced by the Benedictine Reform, Ælfric was also greatly concerned with the issue of proper clerical behavior, including chastity, and how those concerns extended to the proper behavior of the faithful. Within this atmosphere of uncertainty, the lives of saints—particularly English saints born into the leadership class—offered examples of how to carry out God's will and how to be a model for one's people. For Oswald,

Æthelthryth, and Edmund, their position within their communities came with the obligation to act on behalf of their royal families and their people, and to do so publicly. Whether fighting, praying, negotiating, or even dying, they (and their bodies) were on display in a way that a person of the non-elite classes might not have been. In deed and in perception, therefore, leadership was physical. As a result, Ælfric's depictions of the three royal saints' bodies—as the means of action and as vehicles of the spirit—invite special attention.

In the next three chapters, we will do just that by paying attention to how Ælfric treats each saint's body. We will begin with Oswald, the seventh-century Northumbrian king who died in battle against a pagan enemy. Oswald's *vita* describes an active king who was constantly engaged in the business of his kingdom, but, more precisely, Oswald is shown as always balancing his responsibilities to defend and build his kingdom with his obligations to uphold and spread his faith. In this *vita*, more persistently than in the other two, Ælfric demonstrates how important it is for a strong connection to exist between monarch and church and how that is an attribute of good leadership. Close analysis of the episodes related to Oswald's body and to Oswald's actions will also focus on the ways that his body manifests the values and ideals of Christianity and also the way these Christian virtues can be seen as reconfigurations of the values of the pagan heroic era. This chapter will also discuss Ælfric's description of Oswald's death, dismemberment, and the disposition of his corpse (including his undecayed right arm) as part of our consideration of the metonymic and figural implications of the body in the *vita*, before concluding with an examination of the miracles associated with Oswald.

Æthelthryth of Ely may be most famous for the having maintained her virginity through two marriages before becoming a nun, but her *vita* tells a much more nuanced story of self-abnegation and humility in which her body is the vehicle through which Æthelthryth earns and manifests her sanctity. Born in the seventh century a generation after Oswald, Æthelthryth came from the devoutly Christian royal family of East Anglia, south of Oswald's Northumbria. She was first queen and then abbess, and her life story encourages readers to consider the differences in the two paths open to her and to try to reconcile the tension that proceeds from her rejection of the role of queen and wife. Our discussion of the *vita* will examine the interrelationship between Æthelthryth's physical virginity and her spiritual purity, the ways that her treatment and perception of her own body relates to her sanctity, and the role attributed to God in maintaining Æthelthryth's physical state of virginity as well as her incorrupt state after death. In addition to analyzing the ways that Æthelthryth is portrayed as a figure of Christ, this chapter will also consider Ælfric's contrasting treatments of Æthelthryth and another queen whose story can be found in *Lives of Saints: Jezebel* from the Book of Kings.

Edmund of East Anglia was king during the great Viking army invasions and raids of the ninth-century; he was tortured and died when he refused Viking demands for hegemony and treasure. Although Edmund is often considered in conjunction with other wartime saints, he diverges from the warrior-king model of the past. The battle that Edmund wages does not occur on a field: it occurs on and within his own body after he chooses, and then endures, being the physical focus of the invaders' anger and frustration. We will consider the ways in which Ælfric explores the themes of sacrifice and humility in this *vita*, and how he sets those values, occasionally uneasily, against the traditional

attributes of a king. Ælfric presents Edmund as embodying a reimagined, redirected kind of heroism in which the rewards of sanctity and faith balance the pain and loss associated with Edmund's torture, humiliation, and sacrifice. Finally, Edmund's undecayed body, like Æthelthryth's, offers an opportunity to reflect on healing and wholeness as part of the promise of Christian salvation.

At the end of his preface to *Lives of Saints*, Ælfric promises: *We awritað fela wundra on þissere bec . forþan þe god is wundorlic / on his halgum swa swa we ær sædon . and his halgena wundra / wurðiað hine . forþan þe he worhte þa wundra þurh hi* (“We describe many wonders in this book because God is wonderful in his saints, as we have said before, and the miracles of his saints exalt him because he works those miracles through them”; *LS Preface.56-58*).¹⁰ Wonders, miracles—the repetition in these lines demands that the reader acknowledge them—are made manifest through work, through effort, and through creation, and the saints are integral to God's ability to bring his power and grace into this physical world. As we look at the *vitae*, we will evaluate how the saints' very physicality acts as example and inspiration, and helps assure Ælfric's readers that God was present and active in England. After all, the miraculous signs of his power were among them: most wondrous and undeniable of those signs was the incorrupt bodies of his saints.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Old English are my own.

Chapter II

Body of Faith: Oswald of Northumbria, King and Martyr

Oswald of Northumbria, the first of the three saints under discussion, came to the throne after a rapid succession of kings' deaths: he might well be considered an accidental king. Oswald's eight-year reign began and ended with battle, and in the intervening years, according to the extant sources, he devoted himself in great part to the promotion of Christianity in his kingdom. Oswald was born at the beginning of the seventh century, during the early years of the conversion of England, and his *vita* depicts a king striving to enact Christian virtues and to be an obedient son of the church while still maintaining his hold on temporal power. It is also a story of transformation. As we will do in the cases of each of the three saints, however, we will look first to the story as it is presented in the historical record before we turn to hagiography. For Oswald, much of that story can be found in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written within the century after Oswald's death.¹

Oswald was the nephew of the powerful King Edwin of Northumbria, but like other young noblemen who might be potential threats to the crown, Oswald had left Northumbria to live in exile among the Irish, where he was educated and baptized as a Christian (*EH* 3.1).² By the year 633, however, Northumbria had suddenly become a

¹ For a discussion of what Bede chose to include (and not to include) of Oswald's life and actions, see Clare Stancliffe, "Oswald, 'Most Holy and Most Victorious King of the Northumbrians.'"

² References to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (*EH*) come from the Oxford Medieval Texts edition, translated by Bertram Colgrave; references will be designated, as customary, by book and chapter. Quotations in the original Latin will be found in footnotes. Translated quotations will also give page numbers from this edition. Oswald's exile among the Irish requires some elaboration: the Irish-held

kingdom in which political and religious stability were rapidly disintegrating. In October of 633, King Edwin died in battle against Cædwalla of Gwynned and his ally, Penda of Mercia (*EH* 2.20).³ Upon Edwin's death, many of the young exiles returned, and soon the kingdom of Northumbria, which had been united under Edwin, broke apart once again into the separate kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia; Edwin's nephew Osric became king of the Deirans and another nephew, Eanfrith, became king of the Bernicians.⁴ Bede informs us that their reigns were inglorious and brief. Both kings promptly abandoned Christianity "and reverted to the filth of their former idolatry" (*EH* 3.1; Colgrave 213), and then, equally promptly, Cædwalla killed both.⁵ Bede adds:

To this day that year is still held to have been ill-omened and hateful to all good men, not only on account of the apostasy of the English kings who cast aside the mysteries of their faith, but also because of the outrageous tyranny of the British king. So all those who compute the dates of kings have decided to abolish the memory of those perfidious kings and to assign this year to their successor Oswald, a man beloved of God. (*EH* 3.1; Colgrave 215)⁶

Indeed, Bede credits God with helping the pious Oswald win the battle of Heavenfield that secured the throne for him, and the site of the battle became associated with miracles

kingdom of Dál Riada and the Irish-run island monastery of Iona were located in Scotland. See Stancliffe 33-34.

³ At this time, England is far from unified. It is comprised of multiple kingdoms, often warring with one another or jockeying for power and alliance. Northumbria (encompassing the kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia) describes the land north of the Humber River. The kingdom of Mercia abuts Northumbria but is more centrally located slightly to the south. Cædwalla, the king of the Britons, comes from one of the Welsh kingdoms. See Nicholas Brooks, "The Social and Political Background," for an overview of the evolution of the political landscape in Anglo-Saxon England.

⁴ The names of many of these individuals and places can be spelled in different ways. For the sake of consistency, I have selected one spelling of any individual's name and use it throughout. Direct quotations, however, use the version of the name chosen by that particular author or translator.

⁵ *ac se priscis idolatriae sordibus polluentum perdendumque restituit* (*EH* 3.1).

⁶ *Infaustus ille annus et omnibus bonis exosus usque hodie permanet, tam propter apostasiam regum Anglorum, qua se fidei sacramentis exuerant, quam propter uaesanam Bretonici regis tyrannidem. Vnde cunctis placuit regum tempora computantibus ut, ablata de medio regum perfidorum memoria, idem annus sequentis regis, id est Osualdi uiri Deo dilecti, regno adsignaretur* (*EH* 3.1).

afterward. Bede claims that the name “Heavenfield” preceded the battle and was a promise that something wondrous would happen there (*EH* 3.2).

Once peace had been achieved, Oswald turned his attention to the growth of Christianity in his kingdom. In response to Oswald’s request for a missionary-bishop, Aidan—later Saint Aidan—came to Northumbria from the monastery on Iona, and with Oswald’s support (including his services as translator), Aidan began the work of preaching and spreading the faith. Churches were built; more monks and priests arrived; baptism and Christian education became even more widespread (*EH* 3.3). For his part, Oswald continued to be an example of a virtuous Christian king, which Bede demonstrates with stories of Oswald’s prayerfulness and, above all, his charity, including an example from an Easter banquet at which Oswald’s openhanded generosity inspired Bishop Aidan to bless Oswald’s right hand and pray that it never decay (*EH* 3.6). The *vita* develops this episode.

Oswald’s kingdom flourished and grew, a fact that Bede attributes to God’s favor (*EH* 3.6) but—perhaps inevitably, given this expansion—in the eighth year of Oswald’s reign, the Northumbrians and the Mercians led by Penda were at war once again. Oswald died on the battlefield, and the Mercians, seeking to humiliate the corpse, and, likely, to terrify and demoralize his warriors, cut off Oswald’s head as well as his hands and arms and displayed them on stakes (*EH* 3.12).⁷ David Rollason finds it noteworthy that Bede

⁷ This is somewhat unclear. In book 3, chapter 6, Bede states that Oswald’s arm and hand (*manus cum brachio*) was severed, but twice in chapter 12 does he refer to both arms and hands (*manus cum brachiis*) having been severed. Colgrave does not comment. Similarly, reference in chapter 12 to burial of the arm(s) at Bamburgh seems at odds with Bede’s previous assertion in chapter 6 that the relics were “preserved in a silver shrine” and “venerated with fitting respect” at Bamburgh (Colgrave 231). Marianne Malo Chenard discusses this topic at length and in comparison to other sources, noting that they suggest that the entire arm, rather than just the hand, was undecayed (40-46). She observes, “In effect, the Latin and Old English versions of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* render Aidan’s blessing greater in its realization than

is determined to stress that it was Penda who dismembered Oswald's body. Rollason explains that the purposeful fragmentation of a saint's body in order to create multiple primary relics had been highly discouraged by church leaders in Rome, so the eventual presence of so many relics of Oswald in so many places needed to be explained (26-28).⁸ The fragmented corpse remained on the battlefield for a year, until finally Oswald's brother and successor Oswiu was able to reclaim the displayed body parts; the head was buried at Lindisfarne, the seat of Aidan's bishopric. The hands and arms went to a church in Bamburgh, the royal city near Lindisfarne (*EH* 3.12).⁹ Later, what were determined to be the bones from Oswald's corpse were "found" and then transported by Oswiu's daughter, Osthryth, to the monastery of Bardney (*EH* 3.11).¹⁰ Bede does not explain how the remains were identified when they were found: perhaps the mutilation the body had suffered was sufficient to identify it. Whatever questions might linger about how the Northumbrians could be certain they had found the right body, the insulting treatment of the head, hands, and arms guaranteed that they at least could be definitively identified and laid to rest with honor. Significantly, for the purposes of establishing Oswald's sanctity, Bede says that the right hand and arm "have remained incorrupt until this present time" (*EH* 3.6; Colgrave 231).¹¹ Bede reports that afterward

in its utterance; Aidan blesses only *haec manus*, "this hand," not both hands or arms. Bede thus casts Oswald's sanctity as in excess of Aidan's approval and benediction" (45).

⁸ See also Alan Thacker 100-101. Primary relics are the saint's body, whether whole or in part. They could include things like hair or nails, as we will see in the *vita* of Edmund. Secondary relics are items that have come in contact with the saint's body, such as clothes or burial wrappings or even the water used to wash a saint's body. See Rollason, especially 10-11.

⁹ Thacker cites Alcuin's comment that Oswiu built the church of St. Peter's at Bamburgh in order to house the relics (99).

¹⁰ By the time Ælfric is writing the *vita*, Oswald's bones had been moved from Bardney to Gloucester. For a discussion of the probable political rationale for their transfer see Rollason, 153-154.

¹¹ *ut hactenus incorruptae perdurent* (*EH* 3.6).

many miracles began to occur in association with the spot where Oswald died, with the dirt into which his blood flowed, and with the stake upon which his head was displayed, just as miracles had happened at the site of the cross at Heavenfield (*EH* 3.9-12). Within a very short time, the pious warrior-king Oswald was being venerated as a saint.

Ælfric based his *vita* of Oswald on Bede's account, assembling information that appears in multiple chapters and in chronological disorder and reworking it into a coherent, organized narrative. Ælfric smoothly elides Bede's description of the events around Edwin's death and the ignominious reigns of Osric and Eanfrith; he simply identifies Edwin as a Christian king killed by Cædwalla, who then killed *twegen his æftergengan binnan twam gearum* ("two of his successors within two years"; *LS* 26.10). Ælfric's streamlined approach eliminates distraction and distills the beginning of the narrative to a fundamental message: Cædwalla is the evil that swept through Northumbria bringing with him death and chaos. Then, like Christ with his disciples, Oswald arrives with a small band of followers, faith-filled and ready to save his people—with God's help—from an evil oppressor:

<i>Oswold þa arærde ane rode sona</i>	17
<i>gode to wurðmynte ær þan þe he to ðam gewinne come .</i>	
<i>and clypode to his geferum . Uton feallan to ðære rode .</i>	
<i>and þone ælmihtigan biddan þæt he us ahredde</i>	20
<i>wið þone modigan feond þe us afyllan wile .</i>	
<i>god sylf wat geara þæt we winnað rihtlice</i>	
<i>wið þysne reðan cyning . to ahredenne ure leode .</i>	23

Then, right away, before he went to battle, Oswald raised up a cross to honor God and called to his companions, "Let us fall before the cross and ask the almighty that he save us from the prideful enemy who wants to cut us down. God himself certainly knows that we fight justly against this cruel king in order to save our people." (*LS* 26.17-23)¹²

¹² Skeat chose to present Ælfric's rhythmical prose in verse form. As Pope notes, this decision ensures that the reader will grasp the rhythm more easily and understand the way Ælfric structures his writing (134-135). My translation, however, will be in prose form.

In the preceding lines, Ælfric had jumped ahead to inform the reader that Oswald defeated Cædwalla with the help of Christ; this passage doubles back again to explain in detail exactly how it happened. The proleptic technique emphasizes the episode's importance by, in effect, telling it twice, and it also ensures that readers will focus on what Ælfric wants them to understand: though by necessity he is a warrior-king, Oswald thinks of God and exerts himself for God before anything else. Christ rewards that faith by helping him defeat his enemies.

In her analysis of Bede's Oswald, Chenard remarks that we are meant to notice that Oswald raises a cross before lifting a sword, and the same is true in Ælfric's *vita*. Chenard argues that Bede emphasizes the activities of Oswald's hands to "metonymically represent the relationship between *ecclesia* and *regnum*" and "depict the monarch as both warrior and holy man, as much a fighter as a 'saint'" (33, 34). Certainly, Ælfric, too, emphasizes the partnership of church and crown throughout the *vita*, but I would argue that Ælfric's Oswald is far more a saint than a fighter, more a virtuous king than a warrior. In fact, while many of the elements of a heroic tale are present (the king, his companions, the cruel enemy, the looming battle), these elements do not come together in the expected way. There are no bold challenges exchanged with the enemy as we see in *The Battle of Maldon*, or, arguably, in the *vita* of Edmund. Oswald is humble, and when he gathers his men before battle, he does not deliver a rallying speech that praises their courage and skills and promises them treasure. He tells them instead that they should pray for help, and they should trust that God will aid them because they are fighting for their people. This is a battle in which the most powerful weapon is not held in a warrior's hand: Ælfric tells us that God granted the Northumbrians victory because of

Oswald's faith (*gewunnon þær sige swa swa se wealdend heom uðe . / for oswoldes geleafan; LS 26.26-27*). His faith is demonstrated physically, and the activities of faith—raising the cross and falling in prayer—stand in unspoken contrast to the activities of war: raising the sword and falling in battle. Simultaneously, though, the presence of the cross and all of its associations with Christ's suffering, sacrifice, and death, foreshadow Oswald's eventual fate.

One of the ways in which Ælfric demands his readers' attention to this passage is with a variety of sound effects that combine to create a rolling musicality. If we read it aloud, we can hear the echo of the repeated *o*, which, in frequent combination with the unstressed *e*, creates a series of internal rhymes: *rode sona / gode . . . come* (lines 17-18). The compact near-rhyme of *arærde ane rode* in the first line introduces the *r* (and later *hr*) that, along with the internal *d* sounds, weaves throughout. The effect is hypnotic. The tempo of the passage is interrupted by the monosyllabic three-word phrase *god sylf wat* ("God himself knows"); it draws attention to the climactic assertion *we winnað rihtlice* ("we fight justly") that is further emphasized by the alliteration of *we winnað*. Alliteration, rhyme, and repetition link *arærde*, *rode*, *gode*, and *ahredde* ("raise," "cross," "God," "save"), and the combination of words presents an abbreviated reminder that Christians were and are saved because of Christ's death on the cross and God's mercy. Ælfric also uses the related words *feallan* and *afyllan* in this passage: the first, falling in prayer, is offered as a potential remedy against the second, being felled in battle. This, too, continues the theme of salvation present in the passage. Finally, if we turn from a strict examination of sound effects, we can see that Ælfric connects the possibility of salvation from Oswald and his men to Oswald's entire people by positioning variations of

the word *ahreddan* (“to save”) in a chiasmic relationship with the phrases that describe the enemy: “that he save us [*us ahredde*] from this proud enemy” (lines 20 and 21) and “against this cruel king in order to save [*ahredenne*] our people” (line 23). The structure establishes a sort of transitive equation by which, ultimately, God will be the one to save the people through Oswald and his followers. In that sense, Oswald attains Christ-like qualities that are reiterated throughout the *vita*.

The second episode in the *vita* that we will examine in detail is the Easter Sunday banquet scene during which Bishop Aidan, seated at Oswald’s side, blesses Oswald’s hand as metonymic embodiment of Oswald’s act of charity. In this vividly descriptive passage, Ælfric highlights Oswald’s generosity and his close relationship with Bishop Aidan, but it is worth noting that, once again, Oswald is seen leading the people around him in the performance of Christian values. Just as he urged (or perhaps commanded) his men to pray on the battlefield, he now orders his men to distribute food and silver to the poor:

<i>Hit gelamp on sumne sæl þæt hi sæton ætgædere .</i>	87
<i>oswald . and aidan . on þam halgan easterdæge ,</i>	
<i>þa bær man þam cyninge cynelice þenunga</i>	
<i>on anum sylfrenan disce and sona þa inn eode</i>	
<i>an þæs cyninges þegna þe his ælmyssan bewiste .</i>	
<i>and sæde þæt fela þearfan sætan geond þa stræt .</i>	92
<i>gehwanon cumene to þæs cyninges ælmyssan .</i>	
<i>Þa sende se cyning sona þam þearfum</i>	
<i>þone sylfrenan disc mid sande mid ealle .</i>	
<i>and het toceorfan þone disc . and syllan þam þearfum</i>	
<i>heora ælcum his dæl . and man dyde ða swa .</i>	97
<i>Þa genam aidanus se æðela bisceop</i>	
<i>þæs cyninges swyþran hand mid swiðlicre blysse .</i>	
<i>and clypode mid geleafan þus cwæðende him to .</i>	
<i>Ne forrotige on brosnunge þeos gebletsode swyðre hand</i>	
<i>and him eac swa geeode . swa swa aidanus him bæd .</i>	102
<i>þæt his swiðre hand is gesundful oð þis .</i>	

On a certain occasion, it happened that they sat together, Oswald and Aidan, on holy Easter day. Then a kingly meal on a silver dish was carried in to the king, and immediately after that, one of the king's retainers, who administered his alms, came in and said that many needy people remained in the streets, [who had] come in from all over for the king's alms. Then, immediately, the king sent the silver dish to the poor with food and all, and commanded that the dish be cut up and given to the poor, to each a share, and so it was done. Then Aidan, the noble bishop, seized the king's right hand with very great joy and called out with faith, saying thus to him: "May this blessed right hand never rot away in decay!" and just as Aidan asked, it happened like that for him, that his right hand is sound to this day. (*LS* 26.87-103)

As we read this, we hear the sibilant sounds repeating throughout this passage linking words and terms such as the echoing *sylfrenum* and *syllan*, the various forms of *swiðre*, *ælmýssan*, *swyðra*, and the beautiful phrase, *swiðlicre blysse* ("silver," "give," "great," "alms," "right [hand]" and "very great joy"). Alliteration connects the concepts of charity with Oswald's right hand and with happiness. Thematically, the pairing of the silver [dish] and right [hand] also serves to foreshadow the eventual encasing of Oswald's dismembered hand in silver after his death. The two repetitions of *sona* ("immediately" or "right away") drive the pace of the episode along and add to a sense that Oswald is a king who expects discipline and behaves decisively; more emotionally, his reflexive generosity is part of who he is. The alliteration on *b* unites *bisceop*, *blysse*, and *gebletsode* ("bishop," "joy," and "blessed"), but it also creates a disturbing contrast with *brosnunge* ("corruption" or "decay"). Aidan's words in line 101 resolve this tension: he prays that the hand *ne forrotige on brosnunge* ("may [it] not rot in decay") and thus we are reassured that charity and faith can work miracles.

Close attention to the language reveals something else: although Ælfric refers to Aidan several times by name in this passage, in five out of six references, he calls Oswald simply "the king." Aidan, however, is referred to by name even when his title is included.

Alliteration might explain two instances, but since Ælfric lacked neither vocabulary nor imagination, it appears to be a deliberate choice to use Oswald's title rather than name. As a result, Oswald, the individual, drops away for a moment; we are left with "the king" and all of the appurtenances of his rank. In part, this subtly enhances the idea of the ideal institutional relationship represented by the personal relationship of the two men seated at the banquet, Aidan and Oswald / bishop and king. On a less theoretical level, though, by only referring to him as "the king," Ælfric reminds us of the vast gulf between Oswald's position and that of the poor: he sits beside the bishop, and the poor sit on the street. His generosity is all the more remarkable because it bridges this societal stratification, and because of his willingness to sacrifice to his people not only his own food but also an emblem of his wealth and status. We might even hear the faintest echoes of the story of the wedding at Cana (John 2.1-11) at which, informed of need, Jesus produces something of even greater quality than what initially had been hoped for. Thus, Oswald's identification, simply and repeatedly, as "the king" accomplishes at least two things: it reminds the reader of the connection between the institutions of church and crown, and it also emphasizes the exceptional nature of his charity. It offers another lesson, too, for a modern reader tempted to dismiss Oswald's action with the question of what one platter of food, or even one silver platter, matters to a king. Rather than heading too far down this republican path, it is useful to recall Waterhouse's admonition: this is a situation in which a tenth-century audience would have had vastly different expectations, assumptions, and cultural frameworks than twenty-first century readers do. For a tenth-century reader, Oswald's command that each receive their share of the silver tray might have been reminiscent of the actions of the Germanic hero of tradition, distributing rings

and treasure to his warriors. Like the speech before battle in the beginning of the *vita*, this moment echoes the past but then deviates from the model to reaffirm Christian values.

It is Oswald's body, however, that remains as physical evidence of his charity. Aidan's action and cry focus the readers' attention on Oswald's hand: whether Aidan is praying, prophesying, or merely exclaiming in delight is not really the point. Aidan points to this moment so that it will be remembered later when Oswald's hand does not decay.¹³ Aidan forces us to foreground the deeds Oswald performs literally and figuratively with his hands. We will remember that he himself raised the battlefield cross and that he has similarly caused churches to be raised throughout his kingdom (*man arærde cyrcan on his rice geond eall; LS 26.85*). He has been charitable. He has been prayerful—always—even adopting the habit of praying “with his palms upturned toward heaven” (*up-awendum handbredum wiþ þæs heofones weard; LS 26.118*). The miraculous transformation that will happen to Oswald's hand will not only keep it from decaying into nothingness, but will also turn that hand into a record of his deeds and his virtues, much as we will see Æthelthryth's and Edmund's bodies record events in their lives.

As told in the *vita*, Oswald's reign would seem to be one of remarkable growth and symmetry: religious and political expansion bracketed on either side by a battle.

Common sense—and historical record—tells us that reality was far more complicated

¹³ John Edward Damon reads Bede's version of this episode as Aidan's experience of a prophetic moment (*Soldier Saints* 51); Thacker shares this viewpoint (100). I do not believe that the language of Ælfric's narrative supports a similar reading. While *aidanus . . . clypode mid geleafan* (“Aidan . . . called with faith” or “Aidan . . . cried out with faith”) might conceivably be read as inspired speech, Ælfric concludes by saying that the hand remained decayed *swa swa aidanus him bæd* (“just as Aidan prayed” or “just as Aidan asked”). If this were a prophecy, surely Ælfric would have used a word such as *witegode* (“knew”).

and bloody. As a genre, however, hagiography does not seek to be a mirror of history nor does it aim to present a complete biography.¹⁴ As a hagiographer, therefore, Ælfric deliberately hones his narrative. He presents us with two battles that have similar elements, not only in character and plot, but also in language and device. He begins, as he did with the first battle, by jumping forward to reveal the ending. John Halbrooks points to Ælfric “circumscribing the reader’s response” in his treatment of the battle scenes in his narrative translation of the Books of Maccabees (280). Once again, the proleptic narrative technique acts as a ‘spoiler’ to remove the emotional suspense that might derail the moral lesson Ælfric is attempting to convey; as readers, we will not be distracted by our conjecture about the way the story will unfold. Ælfric then returns to the beginning, confident that the reader will share his focus:

Hi comon þa to gefeohte to maserfelda begen . 153
and fengon to gædere oð þæt þær feollon þa cristenan .
and þa hæðenan genealæhton to þam halgan oswolde .
Þa geseah he genealecan his lifes geendunge .
and gebæd for his folc þe þær feallende sweolt . 157
and betæhte heora sawla and hine sylfne gode .
and þus clypode on his fylle . God gemiltsa urum sawlum .
Þa het se hæþena cynincg his heafod of-aslean .
and his swiðran earm . and settan hi to myrcelse . 161

Then they both came to Maserfeld to fight, and battled together until the Christians were slain. And when the heathens neared holy Oswald, he saw his life’s ending nearing and he prayed for his people who died violently there, falling, and he committed their souls and himself to God, and cried out as he fell, “God have mercy on our souls.” Then the heathen king commanded that his head and right arm be cut off and they be placed as a trophy. (LS 26.153-161)

¹⁴ For example, Ælfric, unlike Bede, does not mention that Oswald was married or that he had a son. Leaving aside Ælfric’s complex attitudes toward marriage, chastity, and sexuality in general, I suspect that he did not want to complicate his narrative or distract from his message. It is harder for Oswald to be Christ-like if he is father and husband.

In this moment the army of Oswald faces the army of Penda again, and, although history might offer many reasons for this battle, Ælfric offers none: he frames it as a battle of heathen versus Christian, an opposition made more stark by the alliterative pairing of *hæðenan* and *halgan* (“heathen” and “holy”). *Feollon, fallende, fylle*: the relentless toll of these words, reinforced by all of the other *f* sounds in the passage, cruelly contrasts with the first battle when Oswald also fell—but in prayer—and where the idea of “being felled” was merely the enemy’s wish. For the second time in the *vita*, Oswald speaks directly and for the second time he prays as much for his people as for himself, and as he commends himself and his people to God, he is both king and priest. With all of these points of comparison, we, as readers, look for the cross—and we find the stakes upon which Oswald’s head and arm are displayed: his sacrifice and humiliation are Christ’s.

There is an identical battlefield trophy described in *Lives of Saints*. It is in Ælfric’s narrative from the Books of Maccabees, the item immediately preceding Oswald’s *vita*.¹⁵ In Maccabees, however, the head and the arm belong to Nicanor, the duplicitous Syrian general who aimed to destroy the Jewish people and their temple. His head and arm are left as a *tacne for his teon-rædene* (“a sign of his wrongdoing”; *LS* 25.640) by the victorious army led by Judas Maccabeus. Because we have no doubt that Nicanor is evil or that Judas Maccabeus and his followers are brave, faithful, and righteous, we are inclined to be persuaded that the treatment of Nicanor was appropriate. It was, as Ælfric reminded us earlier in the narrative, a different time.¹⁶ Of course, both

¹⁵ Peter Clemons concluded that Ælfric did indeed intend the compilation to have the mixture of materials that is presented in Cotton Julius E.vii (“Chronology” 10). It seems reasonable to look across the collection to see themes, connections, and repeated images.

¹⁶ *Fela wæron forbodene godes folce on ðære . æ / þe nu syndon clæne æfter cristes to-cyme* (“Many things were forbidden to God’s people under the law that are now clean after Christ’s coming” *LS*)

the Mercians and the army of Israel would have had many different reasons for mutilating and displaying their enemy's body: the display is a trophy; it is metonymic representation of elimination of leadership and strength; it is an act of psychological warfare.¹⁷ Chaney suggests that Oswald's body was left as an offering to the god Woden (117). In any case, the pagan Mercians are not the virtuous Maccabees and Oswald is not Nicanor. The proximity of the two episodes within *Lives of Saints* and the stark differences between the actors encourage readers to try to tease out what message can be learned from comparing the two. Certainly, pious Oswald is so undeserving of this violation that it makes him all the more a martyr, but perhaps, by identifying mutilation and display with something shameful, something that happens to criminals, something intended to humiliate, Oswald's story more closely aligns with Christ's.¹⁸

Ælfric tells us that Oswald's brother and successor Oswiu recovers the head and arm from the battlefield:

Da æfter oswoldes slege feng oswig his broðor 164
to norðhymbra rice . and ráð mid werode
to þær his broðor heafod stod on stacan gefæstnod .
and genam þæt heafod . and his swiðran hand .
and mid arwurðnysse ferode to lindisfarnea cyrcan . 168

Then after the killing of Oswald, his brother Oswiu took the kingdom of Northumbria, and rode with an army to where his brother's head remained

25.74-75). While Ælfric's remark relates specifically to Jewish dietary law, his differentiation between "then" and "now" extends far beyond food.

¹⁷ Damon, who has also examined this passage in conjunction with the *vita* of Oswald, notes that removing the head and the hand symbolically destroys a king and warrior; Damon proposes that because Nicanor is not a king, his body parts are displayed as just retribution for his arrogant attempts to act like one by conquering and destroying ("*Desecto*" 419-420).

¹⁸ For Ælfric's tenth-century reader this sort of mutilation and display would not have been merely a custom of the distant past: it would be identified with criminal punishment. Mutilation (severing the hand of a thief, for example) had been sanctioned under the criminal code for over one hundred years by this point, and by the early tenth century, display of severed body parts had also been mandated for certain crimes (O'Gorman 149).

fastened on a stake and took the head and his right arm and with reverence brought them to Lindisfarne church. (*LS* 26.164-168)

As in the very beginning of the *vita*, a new king accompanied by his men goes to a battlefield. This time the king does not raise up a cross to glorify or revere God, but, with reverence, he takes down the relics of his brother from the stake upon which they were displayed. The echoes are very quiet, but they are present in the events described and in the words—*werode* (line 165) and (*lytlum*) *werode* (line 15); *arwurðnysse* (line 168) and *wurðmynte* (line 18)—and they provide both a last bit of symmetry and, in the reverential removal of the body from the stakes, another reminder of Christ.

The head relic remained in Lindisfarne. The arm, which *wunað hal mid þam flæsce . / butan ælcere brosnunge* (“remains whole with the flesh without any decay”; *LS* 26.170-171), is encased in silver and brought to Bamburgh. As so often happened, a dynastic alliance is made between enemies, and Oswald’s niece Ostryth becomes queen of Mercia. She brings her uncle’s bones to Mercia with her, where, initially, the monks refuse to admit the bones into the monastery in Bardney. Diplomatically, Ælfric excuses this as *menniscum gedwylde* (“human error”; *LS* 26.179), although historians point to residual feelings of enmity on the part of the Mercian monks (Rollason 121). God, however, reveals to the monks that Oswald is a saint by shining a bright light all night upon the tent shielding the bones. The bones are brought inside the monastery, washed, and enshrined (*LS* 26.176-191).

Ælfric is careful to assure his readers that Oswald’s body was treated with great honor and reverence (*arwurðnysse*, also *arwurðlice*) from the time it was removed from the battlefield: Oswiu brings the body parts to Lindisfarne with reverence; the arm in enshrined at Bamburgh reverently (line 172); the frightened Bardney monks pray that they

may reverently receive the bones (line 189); the bones are enshrined at Bardney with reverence (line 191). The repetitions serve to reinforce the assertion that Oswald and his body are sanctified. Damon, who has written extensively about Oswald in his work on warrior saints, suggests that the church may have felt some anxiety over the initial treatment of Oswald's body, fearing or suspecting that its dismemberment and display were in some way related to pagan practice. He argues that by venerating the body parts as saintly relics, the church reclaims Oswald and removes any perception of pagan contamination ("*Desecto*" 403-404).¹⁹ Whether or not this is true, Oswald's incorrupt arm, now encased in silver, remains just as much a trophy as it was on the battlefield, but it has been reclaimed and serves as a warning for those who would doubt the truth and power of Christianity. Damon has also suggested that a Christian king who died—and whose body was violated as Oswald's (and Edmund's) was—while fighting an enemy who happened to be pagan would initially have been cause for great distress, not merely from a military point of view, but also because it would call into question the true power, the absolute rightness, of Christianity (*Soldier Saints* 53-54). As Damon notes, by portraying the king as a martyr, the pagan victory becomes, in effect, a dangerous defeat: they have killed one of God's chosen. Thus, locating and moving the Christian warrior-king's body parts (as Oswiu and Osthryth did) would be an act similar to the locating and moving of a martyr's body parts. In both cases, the attention, ceremony, and reverence would assert the virtues and sacrifice of the victim and would proclaim ultimate victory

¹⁹ Thacker points out that while the arms were displayed and associated with miracles—though this tradition is not included in Ælfric's *vita*—at the church in Bamburgh, the head seems to have been simply buried at Lindisfarne. He suggests that the head may have provoked anxiety because of associations with pre-Christian Celtic traditions of worshipping severed heads as well as Germanic cults of king worship (100-104).

over the actions of the pagan enemy or oppressor (*Soldier Saints* 55). There are, it would seem, many uses for the body of a saint.

The *vita* of Oswald contains many more miracles than that of either Æthelthryth or Edmund; there are two clusters of miracle stories included in the narrative, with the first group inserted after the battle of Heavenfield. These miracles relate to the cross that Oswald erected on the battlefield. Ælfric tells us that Bede wrote that *wurdon fela gehæled untrumnra manna and eac swilce nytena* (“there were many sickly people healed and also animals”; *LS* 26.31-32). Ælfric includes a story about a bedridden man with a badly broken arm: someone thinks to bring some of the moss that has grown on the battlefield cross and the man is healed as he sleeps (*LS* 26.34-39). This version differs slightly from Bede’s far more detailed account, in which the injured man is identified as a badly injured, but not bedridden, monk. He asks a fellow monk to bring back a bit of the Heavenfield cross but the monk instead brings the moss from the cross. The injured man, who was sitting at the communal table at the time, puts it inside his robe, forgets it is there, and wakes to find he has been healed while he slept (*EH* 3.2). By omitting the details, Ælfric keeps the narrative moving along, but it is interesting to consider this a little more deeply. The victim, because he is not identified in any way, becomes more universal; if he is bedridden, the injury seems more significant; most importantly though, in Ælfric’s version, the relic is treated with greater respect. It is not the second choice and it is not forgotten. In addition, whereas Bede’s monk asks for the relic so that the Lord will grant him healing, Ælfric specifically links this miracle to Oswald: *and se adliga sona on slæpe wearð gehæled / on ðære ylcan nihte þurh oswoldes gearnungum* (“and

the sick one was healed right away in his sleep on the same night, through Oswald's merits"; *LS* 26.38-39).

The second group of miracles can be found at the end of Ælfric's *vita* after the description of the arrival of the bones at Bardney monastery. These miracles are also drawn from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, but Ælfric reorganizes and edits them, removing anecdotal details that might shift the focus away from the saint, the miracle, or the message that Ælfric considers primary.²⁰ Although most of the miracles relate to healings, there is one that is not: a fire destroys an entire home except for the post upon which hung a pouch of dirt from Oswald's death site (*LS* 26.221-236).²¹ Those who witness the miracle interpret it as demonstrating the merits of the man who died upon—whose blood soaked—that earth, a holiness so great that fire either could not (or would not) destroy the dirt: *þæt þæt fyr ne mihte þa moldan forbæran* (*LS* 26.236). Bede also relates this story but merely states that the witnesses were so surprised that the one post did not burn that they investigated where the dirt in the pouch had come from and discovered its relationship to Oswald (*EH* 3.10). Ælfric's version, once again, ensures that Oswald's merits (*geearnunga*) are immediately linked to the miracle.

In a similar way, many of the healing miracles are associated with physical contact with or ingestion of items—relics—that have touched or absorbed part of Oswald's innermost body: dirt infused with the water that washed his bones; the dirt and

²⁰ For example, Bede includes a lengthy episode in which a monastery guest is possessed by an evil spirit during the night. The demon is eventually driven away by the proximity of a casket of dirt that had absorbed water that washed Oswald's bones. The account is quite dramatic, describing the violent thrashing of the afflicted man, the futile attempts at exorcism, and the multiple people involved. Ælfric includes none of that. This sentence seems to be the only reference: *Mid þam duste wurdon aflugde deofla fram mannum . / þa þe on wodnysse ær wæron gedrehte* ("Through that dust, devils were driven away from people who had been afflicted with madness"; *LS* 26.198-199).

²¹ I exclude the miraculous beam of light that alerts the Bardney monks to Oswald's sanctity. It does not manifest God's power *through* Oswald the way these other miracles do.

grass that absorbed his blood; the stake upon which his head was impaled. A sick horse rolls on the grass where Oswald died and is healed; a paralyzed young woman is placed on that same grass, falls asleep, wakes, and walks away (*LS* 26.204-220). A sick man is healed when he drinks water containing a shaving of the stake that impaled Oswald's head. The miracles that involve consumption of the body—generally in tinctures—are unsettlingly reminiscent of the sacrament of the Eucharist. They adamantly argue, however, for the belief that a saint's physical body is transformed by his sanctity: these miracles can only happen because the body itself is the vehicle of God's grace.

Unlike Æthelthryth and Edmund, Oswald's body is not made whole or wholly incorrupt. At the end of the *vita*, it remains broken; only the one arm is undecayed. Yet, as we have seen, by paying close attention to the literal and metonymic actions of that arm, we can find Ælfric carefully narrating the story of a saint whose life presents a model for active Christian kingship that occasionally alludes to the archetypes of the heroic past, and whose deeds show a figure of Christ in action. Ælfric's *vita* assures his readers that Oswald's fragmented body does not mark his defeat. Instead his body allows us to see the power of God to transform even the smallest particle into something miraculous that can strengthen faith, protect, and heal.

Chapter III

Body of Purity: Æthelthryth of Ely

South of Oswald's Northumbria lies the coastal kingdom of East Anglia, birthplace of Æthelthryth of Ely. Oswald had been king for a few years when Æthelthryth was born to East Anglia's King Anna; like many royal daughters, her duty was to marry and, with her marriage, to forge a connection that would create an alliance with an enemy or tie an ally even closer. Æthelthryth's life diverged rather remarkably from this model: although she married twice, she remained nonetheless a virgin, and eventually became the abbess of a double monastery at Ely.¹ Her story is one of wonder, which uses the language of virginity to explore the physical and spiritual states of purity and wholeness and in which the denial and suffering of Christ are a model for sanctity.

The historic record of Æthelthryth's story, like Oswald's, can be found in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. Bede begins by establishing Æthelthryth within the nexus of seventh-century Anglo-Saxon familial and marital connections: she was the daughter of pious King Anna; she was married first to Tondberht, "an ealdorman of the South Gyrwe" (*EH* 4.19; Colgrave 391).² Upon Tondberht's death, Æthelthryth was then married to Ecgfrith, who was the current king of Northumbria.³ She maintained her

¹ A double monastery refers to a religious house with both monks and nuns in (separate) residence.

² *princeps uidelicet Australium Gyruiorum* (*EH* 4.19). While the land of the South Gyrwe can be identified, generally, as the fenland region where Ely is located, there is some uncertainty as to its exact boundaries and whether it was independent or a part of the East Anglian kingdom as Bede implies (Ridyard 178n14). There was a tradition that Tondberht gave Æthelthryth the land upon which she founded Ely monastery as her dower gift (Blanton 143).

³ Ecgfrith was Oswald's nephew. His father was Oswiu.

virginity throughout the twelve years of this marriage as she had maintained it through her previous marriage. The skepticism with which modern readers meet this claim seems to have been shared by contemporary audiences. Writing a few decades after Æthelthryth's death, Bede comments that some were doubtful of her virginity, and as he hastens to provide a witness's corroboration, he also offers an insight into Ecgfrith's desperation:

When I asked Bishop Wilfrid of blessed memory whether this was true, because certain people doubted it, he told me that he had the most perfect proof of her virginity; in fact Ecgfrith had promised to give him estates and money if he could persuade the queen to consummate their marriage, because he knew that there was none that she loved more than Wilfrid himself. (*EH* 4.19; Colgrave 391, 393)⁴

Bede seems to realize that he has a difficult case to prove, even with Wilfrid's testimony; first he argues that God has made such things happen in the past and can do so again, and then he adduces Æthelthryth's incorrupt body as clear proof of her pure and untouched state. Although Æthelthryth's virginity may have seemed wondrous to churchmen, it sorely complicated Ecgfrith's rule. There would be no sons to succeed him and no daughters to create alliances: an obdurately celibate queen would have been a political crisis. As Ridyard points out, perpetual virginity simply was not something that could be accommodated in a royal wife (82-83).

Finally, after persistent appeals, Æthelthryth persuaded Ecgfrith to allow her to leave the marriage; she becomes a nun and then abbess of a monastery at Ely (*EH* 4.19).

⁴ *sicut mihimet sciscitanti, cum hoc an ita esset quibuscum uenisset in dubium, beatae memoriae Wilfrid episcopus referebat, dicens se testem integritatis eius esse certissimum, adeo ut Ecgfridus promiserit se ei terras ac pecunias multas esse donaturum, si reginae posset persuadere eius uti connubio, quia sciebat illam nullum uirorum plus illo diligere* (*EH* 4.19). Bishop Wilfrid, Æthelthryth's much-loved spiritual advisor, was himself born into Northumbrian nobility and spent time at Lindisfarne during Bishop Aidan's tenure. At first Wilfrid was on very good terms with Ecgfrith (and Ecgfrith was quite generous to Wilfrid), but eventually the relationship fell apart, partly, we might assume, because of Wilfrid's support for Æthelthryth's vocation but also because of the animosity of Ecgfrith's second wife, which will be discussed later in this chapter (Wormald 82, 93).

Bede takes great care to emphasize Æthelthryth's stoical humility and to foreshadow her eventual sainthood. He provides several examples of her ascetic habits of dress, diet, hygiene, and prayer (which Ælfric's *vita* will develop), and adds that there were even those who said that Æthelthryth had prophetic knowledge of how many members of the monastic community would die in the plague that would also kill her (*EH* 4.19). Bede's anecdotes are, of course, evidence of Æthelthryth's holiness, but they also argue for the sincerity of her vocation. She was not running away from marriage or her dynastic responsibility: she truly was one of God's holy ones, called to his service.

Seven years after becoming abbess, Æthelthryth died and was buried in a wooden coffin "in the ranks of the other nuns" (*EH* 4.19; Colgrave 393).⁵ The simplicity of her coffin and grave, Bede tells us, were her command and, we might say, the final assertion of her choice to be identified as one of God's servants, not as a princess or queen. Sixteen years later, however, Æthelthryth's sister Seaxburh, who had succeeded her as abbess of Ely, decided that Æthelthryth should be given a more elaborate resting place.⁶ She ordered members of the community to travel beyond the marshy fens to locate stone for a new coffin. What they found instead was a perfectly wrought marble coffin and lid, which they immediately brought back to Ely. Here Bede's narrative abandons

⁵ *non alibi quam medio eorum* (*EH* 4.19).

⁶ Seaxburh entered religious life after her marriage to King Earconbert of Kent. Like Æthelthryth, Seaxburh—along with a third sister Æthelburh—became venerated as a saint; Æthelburh's body, again like Æthelthryth's, was found to be incorrupt after her death (Ridyard 50-61). See also Mechthild Gretsch 196-197. More debatable is the claim that Æthelthryth had another saintly (and incorrupt) sister Wihtburh. Ælfric may allude to her in his life of Edmund: *sancte æpeldryð on elig . / and eac hire swustor ansunde on lichaman* ("Saint Æthelthryth in Ely and also her sister incorrupt in body"; *LS* 32.262-263). The confusion arises because Ælfric was referring to saints whose bodies are in England and Æthelburh's body was in France. For arguments against Wihtburh's existence, see Christine Fell 32n29. See also Gretsch 204. While Ridyard tacitly acknowledges the issue, she does not take a stance (50, 58-59).

chronological order and begins to leapfrog back and forth. He takes us to the grave as Æthelthryth's coffin is opened and her incorrupt corpse is exposed:

When the tomb of the sacred virgin and bride of Christ was opened and the body brought to light, it was found to be as uncorrupt as if she had died and been buried that very day. Bishop Wilfrid and many others who knew about it testify to this (*EH* 4.19; Colgrave 395)⁷

The image presented in this passage—the intact and incorrupt body emerging into light from the darkness of the grave, looking as though no time had passed—could be an image of the resurrection of the body at the second coming of Christ. Once again, Bede preemptively substantiates his narrative by asserting that Wilfrid, among others, was witness to the perfect condition of the body; having established that there was no decay, Bede then wants his readers to look more closely and see that the body is also healed. For that, he introduces the physician Cynefrith, who attended Æthelthryth in her final illness, and who was also on hand at the gravesite when the coffin was opened. We follow his gaze, and in order to interpret what he has seen, we need to analeptically experience his memory of Æthelthryth's last days:

He [Cynefrith] used to relate how, during her illness, she had a very large tumour beneath her jaw. “I was ordered,” he said, “to cut this tumour so as to drain out the poisonous matter within it. After I had done this she seemed to be easier for about two days and many thought that she would recover from her sickness. But on the third day she was attacked by her former pains and was soon taken from the world, exchanging pain and death for everlasting health and life.” (*EH* 4.19; Colgrave 395)⁸

⁷ *Cumque corpus sacrae uirginis ac sponsae Christi aperto sepulchro esset prolatum in lucem, ita incorruptum inuentum est, ac si eodem die fuisset defuncta siue humo condita, sicut et praefatus antistes Uilfrid et multi alii qui nouere testantur* (*EH* 4.19).

⁸ . . . *qui referre erat solitus quod illa infirmata habuerit tumorem maximum sub maxilla. 'Iusseruntque me' inquit 'incidere tumerum illum, ut efflueret noxius umor qui inerat. Quod dum facerem, uidebatur illa per biduum aliquanto leuius habere, ita ut multi putarent quia sanari posset a languore. Tercia autem die prioribus adgrauata doloribus et rapta confestim de mundo, dolorem omnem ac mortem perpetua salute ac uita mutauit.'* (*EH* 4.19)

Cynefrith's words invite us to see Æthelthryth's death as a parallel to Christ's resurrection, but in doing so, we have to reverse our preconceptions. Her three days of continued life after surgery are implicitly compared to Christ's three days in the tomb before his resurrection. We are to understand her passage as one from mortality immediately into eternal bliss; we are not to focus on her death as anything but a transitional moment. In fact, perhaps all of earthly life is compared to the darkness of the tomb beyond which everlasting life awaits.

Cynefrith's account then moves sixteen years forward and gives a detailed statement about the day of the translation of her body; it provides a vivid picture of how events unfolded.⁹ The description of what was supposed to happen is reminiscent of what took place when Oswald's bones were brought to Bardney. Seaxburh had a tent set over the gravesite; members of the community stood nearby singing while Seaxburh and several others went inside the tent with the intention of removing and washing the bones before moving them to the newly acquired coffin. The physician suddenly heard Seaxburh cry out in wonder; immediately those inside called for him to come inside and join them:

“ . . . then I saw the body of God's holy virgin raised from the tomb and laid on a bed like one asleep. They drew back the cloth which covered her face and showed me the wound I had made by my incision, now healed, so that instead of the open gaping wound which she had when she was

⁹ Translation is a ceremony in which a saint's body or relics are moved from one place to another. Translations could occur within the precinct of a church or could involve much greater distances (Bartlett 282-283). For example, the translation of Æthelthryth's body was from a grave outside to a shrine inside the Ely church, whereas Oswald's body was translated many miles from the monastery at Bardney in eastern England to Gloucester in the west. Translations occurred for many reasons: to honor a saint; to make it easier for the faithful to visit the saint; to control access to the relics; to establish a church or increase its prestige; or even to protect the body or relics in time of unrest. For a complete explanation with examples, see Bartlett 282-296.

buried, there now appeared, marvelous to relate, only the slightest traces of a scar.” (*EH* 4.19; Colgrave 395)¹⁰

As Virginia Blanton observes, Cynefrith serves as both witness to and interpreter of the body because it was he who made the incision, saw the scar, and was able to give the detailed report of his interactions with Æthelthryth in life and in death. In effect, he guarantees that the body that was removed from the grave was Æthelthryth’s and that the healing of the incision can be explained only as a miracle (42-45).¹¹

After Cynefrith’s testimony, Bede steps back to narrate the remainder of the *vita* in what might be described as a stream-of-consciousness fashion. It is difficult to discern what his organizational purpose might have been as he weaves details about Æthelthryth, living and dead, among descriptions of the items associated with her: the linen body wrappings, the wooden coffin, the marble coffin, all of them in some way associated with miracles. For us the most fascinating part is when Bede shares Æthelthryth’s own words, explaining that she had reacted to her illness with gratitude; she interpreted the swelling on her neck as a reminder of the necklaces she once wore, and she interpreted the pain as an opportunity to atone for the vanity she once felt. Bede’s language leads us to believe that she expressed this sentiment frequently: he says Æthelthryth “used to say” (*EH* 4.19; Colgrave 397).¹² It is a small thing, but the notion that this was a repeated utterance

¹⁰ . . . uidiq̄ue eleuatum de tumulo et positum in lectulo corpus sacrae Deo uirginis quasi dormientis simile. Sed et discooperto uultus indumento monstrauerunt mihi etiam uulnus incisurae, quod feceram, curatum, ita ut mirum in modum pro aperto et hiantē uulnere, cum quo sepulta est, tenuissima tunc cicatricis uestigia parerent (*EH* 4.19)

¹¹ Rollason, more skeptically, suggests that the physician may have been invited to the translation specifically to act as an expert witness because Seaxburh and members of the community had treated the corpse in such a way that they hoped or already knew it would be undecayed.

¹² *solita dicere* (*EH* 4.19).

invites us to speculate that we are hearing a woman try to make sense of something that was happening to her as much as we are hearing a saint offer a didactic pronouncement.

Bede concludes by widening the narrative focus once again: he gives us a brief geography lesson about Ely and comments that Æthelthryth chose to establish her monastery there because she was East Anglian (*EH* 4.19). In this way, he situates Æthelthryth and the Ely monastery in the region and within England; he reminds his English reader that she is an English saint. At the same time, by emphasizing her heritage as East Anglian, Bede returns us to the first lines of this chapter where Æthelthryth was identified as the daughter of the king of the East Anglians. I would suggest that, despite Æthelthryth's desire to live as an ascetic and abandon the accessories of her rank, Bede wished to subtly emphasize the earthly status of this saint as a way of indicating the successful spread of Christianity.

Ælfric reworks and distills Bede's narrative to produce a *vita* of Æthelthryth that is short—135 lines—and deceptively simple. Within this narrative, however, Ælfric selects words and images, often related to the body, which will allow a simultaneous telling of Æthelthryth's spiritual experiences as well as the events of her life. Æthelthryth's virgin body is central to her story and to her sanctity, and in a typically forthright manner, Ælfric begins his *vita* by immediately addressing the issue of her unlikely virginity and by placing her body squarely in the spotlight:

We wyllað nv [sic] awritan þeah ðe hit wundorlic sy 1
be ðære halgan sancte æðeldryðe þam engliscan mædene .
þe wæs mid twam werum and swa-ðeah wunode mæden .
swa swa þa wundra geswuteliað þe heo wyrcoð gelome . 4

Now we wish to write, although it may be strange, about holy Saint Æthelthryth, the English virgin, who was with two husbands and

nevertheless remained a virgin, as the miracles that she often works prove.
(*LS* 20.1-4)

This very compact and highly alliterative introduction foregrounds the idea of “wonder” in all its complexity: we will hear about things that seem strange, wonderful, miraculous; we will have to accept the special logic of miracles and saints’ lives. *Wundor* is an Old English word that comes close to the Modern English “wonder” but is in some ways more comprehensive. It can mean miracle, but it can also mean something that evokes astonishment or even causes a person to think that they are seeing something that might be associated with divine power or presence. Often, it seems to mean all of these things at once.

As persistent as the concept of “wonder” is the idea of virginity. Æthelthryth’s identity and sanctity are equated to virginity (she is “holy Saint Æthelthryth, the English virgin”). From the beginning, therefore, faith and the body are inextricably linked by these two themes of wonder and virginity, which Ælfric makes sure we notice by using forms of each word twice in just four lines. Ruth Waterhouse sees the chiasmic organization of these lines as a rhetorical strategy to refute doubt about Æthelthryth’s unusual virginity; she observes that Ælfric locates his two references to Æthelthryth as *mæden(e)* (“virgin” or “maiden”) between words that relate to the miraculous or astonishing: *wundorlic* and *wundra* (“Hypersignification” 343-344).¹³ We can also see *wundorlic* and *wundra* forming an aural triplet with *wunode*; these echoes remind us that it was wonderfully strange—a miracle—that Æthelthryth remained a virgin.

¹³ Waterhouse comments that Ælfric “spends about a quarter of the lines in the life . . . in stressing the sheer unlikeliness and also the proofs that Æthelthryth remains a virgin”; she also reminds us that a contemporary audience was likely more accepting of the possibility of the miraculous than modern audiences may be (“Hypersignification” 344).

After this introductory passage, Ælfric moves into the biographical elements of the *vita*, explaining that Æthelthryth's father was Anna, the king of the East Anglians, a *swyðe cristen man swa swa he cydde mid weorcum* (“a very Christian person as he showed with deeds”; *LS* 20.6) and that Æthelthryth's entire family was exalted by God (*LS* 20.7). Ælfric's emphasis on “showing” one's Christianity is something that comes up in each of the *vitae*. Real faith is actively performed: this authentication of the faith, in a way, is part of Ælfric's concern for authority that he can point to. Under Oswald's rule, churches were built in Northumbria and the poor were given food and silver. These actions proved that his devotion was genuine. Early in the *vita* of Edmund, we will see a similar focus on what exactly Edmund as a Christian king does for his subjects that shows his faith. Here, Anna's deeds prove his Christianity; possibly that this statement offers an implicit contrast to other early royal converts, whose commitment to their new religion was insincere or indifferent.¹⁴ The phrase *cydde mid weorcum* (“showed with deeds”) also brings us back to the assertion in lines 3 and 4: *and swa ðeah wunode mæden . / swa swa þa wundra geswutelid þe heo wyrcoð gelome* (“and nevertheless [she] remained a virgin, as the miracles that she often works prove”). Æthelthryth, like Anna, Oswald, and Edmund, shows her sanctity and commitment to her faith with deeds.

As Ælfric begins to describe Æthelthryth's marriages, we see him building a web of themes associated with the idea of virginity as both a physical and spiritual state. He also makes a significant departure from Bede at this point in the narrative by insistently depicting Æthelthryth's continued virginity as God's will:

Æðeldryð wearð þa for-gifen anum ealdor-menn to wife . 8
ac hit nolde se ælmihtiga god þæt hire mægð-had wurde

¹⁴ We need look no further than Oswald's cousins, who were apostates.

mid hæmede adylegod . ac heold hi on clænnysse 10
forðan þe he is ælmihtig god and mæg don eall þæt he wile .

Then Æthelthryth was given as a wife to a certain ealdorman, but almighty God did not wish it that her virginity be destroyed by intercourse, but instead he kept her in purity, because he is almighty God and can do all that he wishes. (LS 20.8-11)

In these lines, the idea of virginity expands from the purely physical (*mægð-had*) to the spiritual (*clænnysse*), but it is also very much a state of vulnerability, which requires protection (*heold hi* can also be translated as “protected her”). Ælfric presents the two options facing Æthelthryth: she can be made impure, her virginity destroyed, by accepting her role as wife, or she can be held by God, intact and chaste. It is a choice vividly represented by two words, *mægð-had* and *hæmede*, which not only represent antithetical states but which also present a phonemic chiasmus (and near-rhyme) that demands our attention.

With the promise—or warning—that God can do whatever he wishes, Ælfric then explains that Tondberht (here, the unnamed ealdorman) died *þa ða hit wolde god* (“when God willed it”; LS 20.13), and Æthelthryth was consequently married to Ecgfrith. Again, her virginity is asserted in both physical and spiritual terms:

and twelf gear wunode unge-wemmed mæden 15
on þæs cynincges synscype . swa swa swutele wundra
hyre mærdða cyðað . and hire mægð-had gelome .
Heo lufode þone hælend þe hi heold unwemme . 18

and for twelve years she remained an uncorrupted virgin while married to the king, as clear miracles often make known her glories and and her virginity. She loved the Savior, who held her undefiled. (LS 20.15-18)

Ælfric’s choice of *ungewemmed* and *unwemme* merits additional consideration. The prefix *un-* allows us to define something by invoking its opposite: Æthelthryth is *not* corrupted, *not* defiled. In this case, we must contemplate what it is to be stained, defiled,

or corrupted in order to understand that Æthelthryth is none of these things, and that is because Christ kept her safe. Moreover, these words foreshadow the fact that Æthelthryth's body will never become corrupt. There is a hint of the heroic here, of a siege withstood, in which the alliterative, punning pair *hyre mærdða* ("her glories") and *hire mægð-had* ("her virginity") are the spiritual and physical treasures retained.

Like Bede, Ælfric repeats Bishop Wilfrid's assertion that Ecgfrith offered land and treasure if Wilfrid would persuade Æthelthryth to assume her marital responsibilities, and as it does in Bede's narrative, this anecdote hints at the real-life anxieties and frustrations that Æthelthryth's adamant chastity would have caused Ecgfrith and his court.¹⁵ Philip Pulsiano remarks that Ælfric avoids the complications that Æthelthryth's chastity presents; Pulsiano characterizes the issue as "suppressed in the narrative" in favor of attention to virginity (38). It is quite accurate to say that Ælfric does not offer us a sense of what he may have thought about a queen refusing to sleep with her husband: his concern, after all, is with the saint. Other scholars, like Renee Trilling and Gwen Griffiths, offer interpretations framed by feminist and gender-studies perspectives. Trilling, in her study of Ælfric's martyred female saints, would have us consider the refusal of marriage and marital relations as a rejection of a society built upon the commodification of the female body (268-270). Griffiths, who argues for reading Ælfric's *vita* in a near-adversarial manner to "recuperate" the real Æthelthryth, sees Ælfric neatly sidestepping the issue of Æthelthryth's rejection of the marriage bed by depicting a woman who is—at all other times—passively obedient. To Griffiths, Ælfric's

¹⁵ Whereas Bede presents this story as unequivocal testimony to Æthelthryth's virginity ("he [Wilfrid] had the most perfect proof of her virginity"; *EH* 4.19; Colgrave 393), Ælfric does not. He simply says *he sæde bedan / þæt se cyning . . .* ("he said to Bede that the king . . ."; *LS* 20.20-21). Ælfric may have merely considered Wilfrid's claim to be an extraneous remark, but by omitting it, Wilfrid does retain a little more dignity than he does in Bede's version.

Æthelthryth is someone who “can be perceived as fitting neatly a stereotype acceptable to a patriarchal hegemony. Her sexuality is sublimated; potential subversiveness is apparently nullified, and tension between sex and power muted” (42-43).

Trilling’s and Griffiths’s readings are not without merit or interest, but their perspectives simply do not approach the narrative the way that Ælfric would have seen it. Modern readers may focus on the temporal issues of how her chastity affected the marriage, king, and kingdom, but equally important are the religious beliefs that frame this *vita*. To Ælfric, Æthelthryth’s virginity was sustained—however improbably or problematically—because it was God’s will. That belief shapes his language, his objectives, and his treatment of the narrative details. As we have seen, hagiographic material persistently presents a duality: its historical and biographical elements do not mean it is either history or biography, but rather a genre that uses the language of time, events, and people to express the spiritual, much in the way that the saint’s physical body becomes the vehicle for the performance of religious belief.

Ælfric, like Bede, tells us that Æthelthryth repeatedly petitioned Ecgrith to be able to leave the marriage in order to serve Christ in the religious life. Ælfric explains that *Æðeldryð wolde ða ealle woruld-þincg forlætan* (“Æthelthryth desired to leave behind all worldly things”; *LS* 20.28). Finally, Ecgrith concedes, and Æthelthryth is consecrated first as a nun, and twelve months later, as abbess of a double monastery at Ely. Æthelthryth’s position at the monastery is, in effect, the religious equivalent of her role as queen. Monks as well as nuns are subordinate to her authority. She may have given up earthly concerns, but she would still have had responsibilities to the community she had charge of, and yet there are few details about Æthelthryth’s eight-year abbacy in

the *vita*. What we do see, much as we saw in Oswald's *vita* is an emphasis on Christian leadership by example, as well as a quiet redirecting of the usual responsibilities and behaviors of a royal woman. Æthelthryth would have married to create an alliance; she would have been expected to bear and raise children; she would have known and performed the proper customs as the highest-ranking woman. When we look at the *vita*, we see a woman who has, in effect, successfully done all of these things. She has allied her family with another powerful force: the church. Ælfric tells us that she leads her community as a mother might (*hi modorlice heold*; LS 20.39), by showing them by her actions the proper way to live the spiritual life (*gastlican life*; LS 20.40). As he elaborates on those examples, Ælfric returns us squarely to consideration of Æthelthryth's body:

<i>Be hire is awrytan þæt heo wel drohtnode</i>	41
<i>to anum mæle fæstende . butan hit freols-dæg wære .</i>	
<i>and heo syndrige gebedu swyðe lufode</i>	
<i>and wyllen weorode . and wolde seld-hwænne</i>	
<i>hire lic baðian butan to heahtidum .</i>	45
<i>and ðonne heo wolde ærest ealle ða baðian</i>	
<i>þe on ðam mynstre wæron . and wolde him ðenian</i>	
<i>mid hire þinenum . and þonne hi sylfe baðian .</i>	48

It is written about her that she lived the [religious] way of life well, having only one meal except if it were a feast day, and she greatly loved solitary prayer, and she wore woolen, and she seldom would bathe her body except on holidays, and then she would first bathe all who were in the monastery and she would attend upon them with her servants and then bathe herself. (LS 20.41-48)

The passage begins at a steady pace, with each of the first three examples of Æthelthryth's behavior tidily, clearly, and briefly presented; the simplicity and discipline of each phrase befits the practices described. While not excessive, assonance and alliteration also help distinguish one description from the next: *æ* sounds dominate in line 42 (*mæle, fæstende, freols-dæg, wære*), but in line 43, we hear the higher vowels *y* and *u*

(*syndrige, gebedu, swyðe, lufode*). The alliterative phrase *wyllen weorode* in line 44 economically conveys layers of significance with two words. Wearing wool is the outward manifestation of Æthelthryth's choice to be humble and penitent and would have had instantly recognizable meaning to a contemporary audience (Waterhouse, "Hypersignification" 340-341). Other nuns apparently wore at least some linen, which can be inferred from Bede's remark: "[Æthelthryth] would never wear linen but only woolen garments" (*EH* 4.19; Colgrave 393).¹⁶ Similarly, the alliterative pairing of "fasting" (*fæstende*) and "feast day" (*freols-dæg*) in line 42 unites two opposing concepts but also suggests the contrast between denial and enjoyment. The first three examples of Æthelthryth's behavior as a nun (fasting, praying alone, and wearing wool), in short, remind the reader of the life that she has forsaken—a life of banquets, secular entertainments in a king's crowded court, and items of luxury and comfort. These are the customs that she is modeling for those who look up to her.

After the compactness of the preceding images, Ælfric changes approach and offers an extended (four and one-half line) description of Æthelthryth's bathing practices; as many scholars have noted, Ælfric reorganizes Bede's material by moving this section from the middle to the end of the list of Æthelthryth's practices. The new position, the comparably much greater length, and the multiple repetitions of *baðian* (lines 45, 46, and 48), alert us to pay close attention to this passage. It can be difficult, especially from a modern perspective, to understand Æthelthryth's choice to eschew bathing and Ælfric's

¹⁶ *nunquam lineis sed solum laneis uestinetis uti uoluerit* (*EH* 4.19). In fact, Æthelthryth was free to wear whatever she chose: "Monks and nuns did not wear distinctive habits, though they were expected to dress plainly" (Owens-Crocker 108). See also Carol Neuman de Vegvar, "Saints and Companions to Saints" 58-61. Neuman de Vegvar directs attention to the *Ecclesiastical History* 4.25, in which Bede repeats a story about the nuns' attire at Coldingham monastery. The Coldingham nuns clad themselves with very fashionable, inappropriately ornate clothing. This is especially pertinent since Æthelthryth took the veil and was a nun at Coldingham for a year before moving to Ely.

evident acceptance of this as an admirable Christian practice. Waterhouse, who has written in great detail about this episode, comments that modern readers find “alien” the idea that wearing wool or not bathing is somehow a virtue, given that wool is something many like to wear and that it is easy to bathe now (“Hypersignification” 340-341). What resolves this confusion (and it is true that contemporary readers may not have shared that confusion) is the realization that Æthelthryth is not ignoring hygiene because she is focused on spiritual matters: she is choosing discomfort; she is purposefully abstaining from something pleasurable that would have been part of the life she has left behind, and possibly, she is acting to avoid or expiate vanity about her body. In other words, being physically unclean is additional proof of Æthelthryth’s spiritual cleanliness. Waterhouse sees this episode also as foreshadowing what will happen to Æthelthryth’s body at her translation: she will be bathed; she will be clothed; most significantly, her community will serve her (“Hypersignification” 340-341). Waterhouse also observes that bathing is the literal enactment of ‘cleansing’ and of becoming ‘clean,’ themes and concepts that pervade the *vita* (“Hypersignification” 342).

It is striking, when we consider the entire eight-line passage, to realize how much of Æthelthryth’s behavior seems solitary, or, at least, to distance her from those around her. As a rule, she is only eating one meal: either she is sitting but not eating or she is not going to the communal meals. Her choice to wear wool set her apart the rest. She is praying alone. Her relationship, it seems, is primarily with God. The only time we see Æthelthryth interacting with the members of her community is when she and her servants help the others to bathe prior to bathing herself. The echoing rhyme of the phrase *wolde him ðenian / mid hire þinenum* (“[she] would serve them, with her servants”; *LS* 20.47-

48) highlights this action. For many readers, this might immediately evoke the story found in John 13.1-17 in which Jesus washes the feet of his disciples in an example of loving humility. In this moment, we see Æthelthryth as a Christ-like figure whose selflessness, humility, and compassion are characteristic of a leadership that emphasizes the overall equality of the community.¹⁷ She is, like Christ, a leader without prideful assertions of rank. In this action, Æthelthryth can be seen transcending her role as simply the *englisc mæden*: she is motherly; she is Christ-like; she stands in a space of blurred gender for a moment.

In her book *Fragmentation and Redemption*, Caroline Walker Bynum presents many examples of the way gender is mixed and reversed in religious writing, imagery, and iconography in the medieval period. She identifies depictions and descriptions of Christ with female attributes as well as citing the experiences of female saints who find that they identify with the body and actions of Christ. The evidence that Bynum presents comes from the period after Ælfric's work (and certainly well beyond the source material Ælfric is translating), and the emotional, mystical, sensational, and occasionally sexual content markedly contrasts with Ælfric's style and approach. Still, I would argue that the identification of Æthelthryth with Christ is present in not just this episode, but also in her deathbed and translation scenes.

In his retelling of Æthelthryth's illness and death, Ælfric again asks his readers to consider the spiritual dimensions of the body's experience:

heo wearð geuntrumod swa swa heo ær witegode . 50
swa þæt an geswel weox on hire swuran
mycel under þam cynn-bane . and heo swiðe þancode gode

¹⁷ According to Waterhouse, a connection can also be made to the Benedictine Rule, which designates that one brother each week will wash the feet of the others ("Hypersignification" 342).

þæt heo on þam swuran sum geswinc þolode .
Heo cwæð ic wat geara þæt ic wel wyrðe eom . 54
þæt min swura beo geswenct mid swylcere untrum-nysse .
forðan þe ic on iugode frætwode minne swuran
mid mænig-fealdum swur-beagum . and me is nu gepuht
þæt godes arfæstnyss þone gylt aclænsige . 58
þone me nu þis geswel scynð for golde .
and þæs hata bryne for healicum gymstanum .

She became sick just as she had prophesized, such that a great swelling grew on her neck under the chin bone. And she thanked God very much that she suffered such a swelling on the neck. She said, “I know very well that I am well deserving that I be afflicted on my throat with such sickness, because, in my youth, I adorned my neck with many necklaces, and now I think that God’s mercy cleanses the guilt, when now, for me, this tumor shines in place of gold and this heat burns in place of proud gemstones. (LS 20.50-60)

The importance of this passage is highlighted by Ælfric’s extensive use of sound effects.

We hear the heavy repetition of *sw* sounds—*geswel* (twice), *swuran* (five times, in different forms), *geswinc*, and *geswenct*, plus *swyðe*, *swylcere*, and *swa*—making audible the connection between tumor, throat, swelling, and afflicted. There is lesser, but still significant alliteration on *w* throughout: *witegode*, *weox*, *wat*, *wel wyrðe*. Ælfric also employs rhyme to provide emphasis and connect unexpected concepts. If we consider *witegode*, *þancode gode*, and *þolode*, we find more than an aural effect. These words associate prophecy and wisdom, gratitude to God, and suffering. In many ways, they are the essence of the Christian experience.

The passage also allows us to see how Ælfric presents Æthelthryth’s specific experience of and response to her illness. If we begin with the language he uses, we see that both *geuntrumod* and *untrumnyss* relate to sickness or weakness, but literally they refer to the state of being ‘un-strong.’¹⁸ Ælfric contrasts Æthelthryth’s physical condition

¹⁸ I do not argue that these are uncommon words, either in Old English or in Ælfric’s body of work, but rather that Ælfric chose his words very carefully. That said, it does seem to be a word he liked:

of weakness with two things that are very strong: the tumor, which grows (*weox*), and above all, with Æthelthryth's faith. In the only direct discourse in the *vita*, Æthelthryth remarks that she is grateful to God for the illness and for his mercy in allowing her to be cleansed of her guilt. As Waterhouse notes, the choice of the word *aclænsige* associates the illness with the ideas of purity and bathing seen elsewhere in the *vita* ("Hypersignification" 342). This illness, therefore, is an opportunity to make the spirit as pure as the virginal body. Understandably, much has been made of Æthelthryth's words, which specifically identify the tumor with the necklaces she once wore. Griffiths proposes that, for Æthelthryth, the necklaces were symbolic of everything associated with wealth, rank, privilege, and even desirability and sexuality, some of which may have been harder to give up than others (46-47). I do not think it is necessary to project motivations on Æthelthryth's psyche in order to argue that, whatever meaning the necklaces once had, Æthelthryth gladly sees the tumor as a place of sacrifice where all sins burn away (a connection Ælfric emphasizes by the alliterative trio *gylt*, *golde*, and *gymstanum*). Her pain and illness, therefore, are as much of an offering as her abandoned jewelry and royal rank were, and affirm her embrace of spiritual treasures rather than earthly. For Ælfric the hagiographer, her words offer proof of her saintly status and an example of how a Christian can understand and interpret suffering.

After Æthelthryth's speech, the narrative focus pulls back once again as Ælfric presents, briskly and chronologically, the Ely community's response to her sickness. Although Cynefrith's testimony is included, Ælfric relates his words as indirect speech; Waterhouse suggests that this was a deliberate choice to ensure that the dramatic effect of

a search of the online Old English Corpus returned over 900 instances of words containing *untrum-*, of which 360 were in Ælfric's works.

Æthelthryth's remarks would not be overshadowed by a later speech from Cynefrith ("Discourse" 90). Ælfric's remodeling and editing of Bede's version also makes more explicit what I see as a focus on Æthelthryth as a figure of Christ in his suffering. Ælfric crafts an impersonal narrative, without the intrusion of the speaker, which is pared down enough to allow readers to recognize the elements that would speak of Christ's experience: anonymous voices that call for the body to be treated in a certain way, the opening of the wound and outflow of fluid, and the unexpected events of the third day:¹⁹

. . . *hi cwædon þa sume* 62
þæt se læce sceolde asceotan þæt geswell .
þa dyde he sona swa . and þær sað ut wyrms .
Wearð him þa gepuht swilce heo gewurpan mihte 65
ac heo gewat of worulde mid wuldre to gode .
on þam ðriddan dæge syððan se dolh wæs geopenod .

. . . then some of them said that the physician ought to lance the swelling. Then he did so right away, and corrupt matter issued out. Then it seemed to him that she would recover but she departed the world with glory to God on the third day after the wound was opened. (*LS* 20.62-67)

Her experience, of course, is in no way an exact analogue of Christ's. She is not being condemned and executed for the redemption of others, although the eventual condition of her body will be seen as a promise for all the faithful. She is, however, a figure whose physical pain is endured and transcended because of her sanctity, and in that way, a model worth emulation. These points of similarity function as cues to encourage the reader to look at Æthelthryth as a figure sharing Christ's physical suffering, and thus they promise that she will share his glory.

In a *vita* as concerned with cleanliness and purity as this one is, the image of the infected matter issuing from the wound seems additionally shocking and horrible.

¹⁹ See Matthew 27.22-23 for "the crowd" calling for Christ's death. See John 19.34 for the lancing of Christ's side. For explicit reference to the "third day," see Matthew 16.21. For the reaction of Christ's followers on the third day, see John 20.1-20.

Æthelthryth's statement that the tumor was a way of cleansing guilt would argue for reading this description as a visual image of sin draining from her body, leaving behind purity. I think that the similarity of the words for "infected or corrupt matter" (*worms*, here in the variant *wyrms*) and the word for "worm" (*wyrm*) would not have escaped Ælfric's notice.²⁰ Worms were, after all, associated with the destruction of the body after death (Thompson 137-143). In Æthelthryth's case, the worms will never attack her body: so, in effect, the normal process of decay is being rejected by her body. She will be free from corruption in every sense, physical as well as spiritual.

Ælfric tells us that Æthelthryth's body was placed in a wooden coffin and she was buried "amid her sisters" (*betwux hire geswustrum*; *LS* 20.69). Previously, Æthelthryth's leadership would be best characterized as passive (she leads mainly by her own ascetic example), but Ælfric states that her burial was *swa swa heo bæd sylf and hét* ("just as she herself asked and commanded"; *LS* 20.68). Both Ælfric's choice of words ("asked" and "commanded") and Æthelthryth's command describe the simultaneous expression of humility and authority. Æthelthryth deliberately uses her status to ensure that her status will be ignored when she is buried. By comparison, Æthelthryth's sister and successor, Seaxburh—whom Ælfric identifies as *cwen*, a term he never uses for Æthelthryth—leads quite actively. She gives orders, countermanding the wishes of her sister by directing the translation of Æthelthryth's body sixteen years after her death (*LS* 20.70-75).

²⁰ Victoria Thompson suggests that the Anglo-Saxons may have thought of infection or pus as associated with worms: "There is a group of cognate words (nouns *worms*, *wyrms*, adjective *gewyrms*, *wyrmsig*, verb *wyrmsan*), found in the leechbooks and glossing Latin words such as *lues*, *purulentus*, and *putredo*, which suggests that these morbid substances and processes were thought of as having an intrinsically vermicular nature, and very few descriptions of the decaying corpse separate catabolic decay from the presence of *wyrmas*" (136).

As Bede reported in the *Ecclesiastical History*, Æthelthryth's body is discovered to be incorrupt during the translation ceremony:

þa læg heo on ðære cyste . swylce heo læge on slæpe 90
hal eallum limum . and se læce wæs ðær
ðe þæt ge-swell geopenode . and hi sceawode georne .
þa wæs seo wund gehæled . þe se læce worhte ær .
eac swilce þa ge-wæda . þe heo bewunden wæs mid .
wæron swa ansunde . swylce hi eall niwe wæron . 95

Then she lay in the coffin, as if she lay in sleep, with all limbs whole. And the physician was there who opened the tumor, and he looked eagerly. The wound that the physician had made was healed then; likewise also the garments that she was wrapped in were likewise entire as if they all were new. (*LS* 20.90-95)

This passage celebrates the promise of healing and restoration, themes that we will see again, and even more dramatically, in the *vita* of Edmund. Underlying the words *hal*, *gehæled*, and *ansunde* (“whole,” “healed,” and “entire” or “undamaged”) is the concept of wholeness or integrity; these words share connotations seen in earlier lines celebrating Æthelthryth's virginity. These words also can be associated with *Hælend* (“Savior”: literally, “the healing one”), which refers us back to line 18 (*Heo lufode þone hælend þe hi heold unwemme*; “She loved the Savior who held her undefiled”).

The pristine condition of Æthelthryth's body stands in stark contrast to the body of another queen whom Ælfric included in this text: Jezebel, from the Book of Kings. The *Lives of Saints* manuscript includes narrative material from the Book of Kings (Item 18 in Skeat), which is found in close proximity to the *vita* of Æthelthryth (Item 20).²¹ The Book of Kings focuses on the influence that a king's behavior has on his kingdom:

²¹ *Lives of Saints* organizes the saints' *vitae* according to their feast day. Æthelthryth's is June 23. Stacy Klein notes that the Book of Kings does not have a specific day associated with it during the liturgical year, but that it might have been considered appropriate for summertime reading (129-130). It is hard to know whether the positioning of the Kings material in such close proximity to her *vita* was intentional, but the proximity makes it easier to quickly pick up on the points of contrast and comparison.

good kings, simply put, are those who honor God and do his will, earning God's blessing for their kingdoms; bad kings bring down God's judgment upon their kingdoms. As we have seen in the *vita* of Oswald, and as we will see in the *vita* of Edmund, Ælfric was also concerned about kingship and about what makes a good Christian king. I would argue that the stories of Æthelthryth and Jezebel provided Ælfric with an opportunity to productively contrast the behaviors of royal women. This is not necessarily unusual. We see a similar comparison in *Beowulf*, in the conjunction of Hygd, Hygelac's gracious young queen, with Fremu/Modthryth, the young princess who has men executed simply for looking at her (*Beow.* 1925-1940). Hygd, like Hrothgar's queen Wealhtheow, is a force for social harmony, whereas Fremu obviously is not. Ælfric may have found the juxtaposition of Æthelthryth and Jezebel meaningful for an even more specific reason. Klein argues that writing about Jezebel offered Ælfric a chance to address the issue of advice, advisors, and the authority of queens, fraught issues during the reign of king Æthelred (128). I would also point out, as Klein does, that in his *vita* of Bishop Wilfrid, Eddius Stephanus refers to Ecgfrith's second wife, Iurminburg, as 'Jezebel' because of her envy of Wilfrid's great wealth. Her greed led to the breakdown of the relationship between Ecgfrith and Wilfrid, crown and church (Klein 133-134). The chance to contrast, even by proxy, a queen who fostered ties to the church with one who disrupted them, may have seemed fortuitous to Ælfric. Whatever the reason or reasons, Ælfric's extended focus on Jezebel and the latitude that he gave himself in reworking her depiction in comparison to the Biblical model reveals that he had given a great deal of thought and attention to her role in "Kings" (Klein 126). Æthelthryth's and Jezebel's

lives offer very interesting points of comparison as we look at both their behavior and their bodies.

In much of our discussion of the *vita* of Æthelthryth, we have noted that the words that Ælfric uses to describe her emphasize her pureness and chastity. A sampling of the words used to describe Jezebel is instructive: she is “most wicked,” “evil,” and “malevolent” (*forcupost, yfelan, and awyrigendan*; *LS* 18.49, 182, 324); she is “a witch” (*hætse*; *LS* 18.350) who lives in “foul fornication” (*manfullum forligr*; *LS* 18.332). Perhaps worst of all, she is pagan, relentlessly contemptuous of the Hebrew God and his servants, killing all of the prophets (*Gezebel acwealde ealle godes witegan*; *LS* 18.83) and plotting to kill Elijah when God sends him to the kingdom. In comparison, Æthelthryth’s devotion to God and his servants, and particularly to Bishop Wilfrid, is an explicit theme in her *vita*. We see both queens’ influence on king and people: Æthelthryth showed Ecgfrith and later her Ely community the way to follow God’s will; Jezebel spurred her husband to cruelty, taught their son by evil example, and out of greed, incited the people to kill an innocent man (*LS* 18.51, 229-230, 189-199).²²

As we have seen, Æthelthryth’s life of purity and faith, her self-denial, and her conscious rejection of vanity earned her God’s blessing. Her incorrupt, healed, whole corpse was physical witness to her virtue. Jezebel dies in proud royal splendor, face painted. She is pushed, falls, and is trampled to death by horses (*LS* 18.340-347). After her death, there is an attempt at a sort of translation of her body from the streets to a more appropriate grave when Jehu, the new king, decides that out of respect for her birth (*for hire gebyrdum*; *LS* 18.351), she should have a burial. When his servants go out to move

²² For the death of the innocent man Naboth, God curses Ahab, Jezebel, and their family, promising that the dogs will lick Ahab’s blood off the ground and that they will eat Jezebel (*LS* 18.208-213).

her body, they discover that it has been eaten by dogs and all that is left are pieces: her hands and the top of her head, trophies unworthy of display (*LS* 18.352-254). Neither intact nor healed, her body, too, is witness to her life and fulfillment of God's promise. It is a token of a life lived without attention to God and without humility or sacrifice.

Æthelthryth's body, washed and rewrapped, is transferred to the marble sarcophagus that the Ely monks had found for her and which fitted her body as if it were made for it. It is then carried into the church, *þær ðær heo lið oð þis* ("where there she lies until this day"; *LS* 20.100). Ælfric reassures his reader that her incorrupt body is both proof of her virginity and pledge of God's power:

<i>Hit is swutol þæt heo wæs ungewemmed mæden .</i>	107
<i>þonne hire lichama ne mihte formolsian on eorðan .</i>	
<i>and godes miht is geswutelod soðlice þurh hi</i>	
<i>þæt he mæg aræran þa for-molsnodon lichaman</i>	110
<i>seðe hire lice heold hál on ðære byrgene</i>	
<i>git oð þisne dæg . Sy him ðæs á wuldor .</i>	

It is evident that she was an uncorrupted virgin when her body could not decay in the ground, and God's power is truly shown through her, that he, who kept her body whole in the tomb still to this day, is able to raise up decayed bodies. Glory be to him always. (*LS* 20.107-112)

Æthelthryth's body, in other words, is testament to her physical state and to her spiritual purity, to the events of her life, and to God's promise to her in the past and to God's people in the future.

Almost as if it were incidental, Ælfric mentions that there have been healings through Æthelthryth, however, unlike in the *vitae* of Oswald and Edmund, there are no specific stories nor does Ælfric dwell for long on those miracles. Other than the information that contact with the original burial clothes and the original wooden coffin has led to healings, Ælfric leaves the reader with little more information than was had in

vague comment to *þa wundra . . . þe heo wyrcoð gelome* (“the wonders . . . that she often works”; *LS* 20.4) with which he opened the *vita*. Ælfric’s concern about accuracy and about the reliability of the source may have dictated which miracles he included in his saints’ *vitae* (Godden 291-293). It could be that little or no material outside Bede’s account of Æthelthryth’s life seemed trustworthy or authoritative enough to be included, and therefore Ælfric’s *vita* simply summarizes what Bede—a highly respected authority—has written, omitting nothing very significant. Godden also notes that Ælfric distinguished between miracle stories that contained a deeper meaning and those that simply elicited wonder without that deeper meaning. While Ælfric acknowledged that the latter had a place in encouraging those of simpler, less intellectual belief, his preference was for the former, and especially for miracles that revealed or resulted in a spiritual transformation (Godden 300-301, 287-288).

In Æthelthryth’s *vita*, we do see a miracle of spiritual transformation, and it is one that is often overlooked. Æthelthryth is a saint whose sanctity is overwhelmingly associated with the simple state of her physical body: she was a virgin, and therefore her body did not decay—that is the story that elicits wonder and nothing more. If we seek to find the meaning, we realize that her virginity was an expression of something greater: her devotion to God and his love for her, a love that held and protected her even as her choices brought her into conflict with her royal husband. It was also the physical manifestation of a spiritual purity attained through self-denial; through the renunciation of her royal rank and privilege in favor of religious life and leadership; and ultimately, through a willing emulation of the humility and suffering of Christ. As Ælfric tells us, her

incorrupt corpse does more than attest to her virginity, it speaks to the immaculate state of her spirit and to the real hope of resurrection promised to all the faithful.

Chapter IV

Body of Sacrifice: Edmund of East Anglia, King and Martyr

Our third saint, Edmund, was the king of East Anglia in the latter half of the ninth century during the period of the Viking army invasions. By this time, Anglo-Saxon England had been Christian for a long time, and while there may have been lingering pockets and traces of folk religion in England, the Vikings presented a more immediate threat of paganism coming from abroad. Little is known about Edmund, and in fact, it would be fair to say that his sainthood stems from the story of the events of one day. Edmund's *vita* presents a king who chooses to live, not as a warrior, but according to the sacrificial example of Christ, and like Christ, all that Edmund sacrifices will eventually be restored. His story offers the promise of wholeness and healing.

Edmund's designation as martyr—and for that matter, Oswald's—merits some consideration. Both died at the hands of non-Christians, but neither seems to have been targeted specifically because of his Christianity. From the point of view of their enemies, who are intent upon power and territory, their faith seems incidental (or even irritating, in Edmund's case), and unlike what we might expect in a traditional martyr's story, the central conflict was not whether or not the saint would deny his faith to avoid death. Their stories are an evolution in the definition of martyrdom, one that might look at whether a person's religious beliefs left no option open: in order to defend the faith, the person had to hold to a certain behavior regardless of consequence. Under this scenario, both Oswald and Edmund may well be considered martyrs without actually having been

killed specifically for their faith. For Oswald, his faith might have directed that he defend his kingdom against the Mercians, who were pagan. For Edmund, it might have meant not acquiescing to becoming an under-king to the Viking pagans.

Unlike Oswald and Æthelthryth, there is virtually no surviving contemporary written mention of Edmund other than one reference to his death in the Parker manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and another in Asser's *Life of King Alfred* (Ridyard 61-62). The primary sources tell a similar, straightforward story: after years of periodic incursions and raids, an army of Danes poured into East Anglia from Mercia to the west. Edmund fought, lost, and was killed, after which the Danes occupied his kingdom (Ridyard 61-62).¹ There is also some scant material evidence in the form of coins, which indicate that Edmund succeeded a king named Æthelweard (Whitelock 218). None of this would seem a promising basis for the establishment, much less the spread, of a cult of sainthood: Edmund is merely one more king who died in battle and, truth be told, it is an utterly unremarkable story for the time. Unexpectedly, however, another source of information arose a few decades later when an eyewitness to the events surrounding Edmund's last hours appeared at King Æthelstan's court; the story the eyewitness recounted (and the audience to whom he recounted it) transformed Edmund's narrative from that of royal casualty of war to that of a martyr and saint.² This story, which Abbo of Fleury preserved in his *Passio Sancti Eadmundi*, became the basis for Ælfric's work.³

¹ Asser embellishes the narrative slightly and specifies that Edmund died in battle. Dorothy Whitelock argues that we need not follow Asser in assuming that death happened in battle (217-218). Similarly, Ridyard concludes on the basis of details that are unique to Abbo but supported by other historical information that Abbo's version of events may be more accurate than the *Chronicle* or Asser (67). See below, page 63, for discussion.

² The eyewitness's story is supported by the fact that there were "St. Edmund" coins minted in the 890s. Whitelock remarks that it indicates that Edmund "was honored as a saint already in the lifetime of some of the men who could have witnessed his martyrdom" (218). Whitelock presupposes martyrdom. In

To better understand Ælfric's *vita*, we must begin with Abbo and his *Passio*.⁴

Abbo was part of the intellectual vanguard of the Benedictine Reform and as such had great influence on Ælfric (John, "World" 304-306). A Benedictine monk, teacher, and scholar associated with the abbey at Fleury, Abbo came to teach at England's Ramsey Abbey in 985 at the invitation of Oswald, bishop of Worcester and archbishop of York (Phelpstead 30). While at Ramsey, Abbo heard Archbishop Dunstan repeat an account of Edmund's torture and death and the search for his remains: it was a story Dunstan had heard an extremely old man tell many years before in King Æthelstan's court.⁵ The old man had sworn he was an eyewitness to the tragedy: "[he] declared on his oath that, on the very day that the martyr laid down his life for Christ's sake, he had been armour-bearer to the saintly hero" (*Incipit*; Hervey 9).⁶ Abbo is quite careful to establish the story's provenance and validity by repeatedly emphasizing that his immediate source is Dunstan, whose reputation would lend the *Passio* instant authority; the fact that

fact, murdered royals were known to become the focus of cults of veneration. See Cubitt, "Sites and Sanctity" *passim*, and also Rollason 118-129.

³ When referring to Abbo's work, I will call it the *Passio*. Edmund's story is technically a *passio* (see page 4), but to distinguish it from Abbo's and to be consistent with the other *vitae*, I will refer to Ælfric's work by the more general term 'vita' in its most basic sense: a narrative of a saint's life.

⁴ In 1907, Lord Frances Hervey assembled and edited an exhaustive collection of materials related to Edmund entitled *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi: The Garland of Saint Edmund, King and Martyr*. The materials include the references to Edmund in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in Asser's *Life of Alfred*, and most importantly for our purposes, Abbo's *Passio Sancti Eadmundi (Passio)*, as well as later sources. Hervey reprinted the Rolls Series edition of Abbo's Latin *Passio* but with a facing page English translation. References to the *Passio* come from this edition and are cited by chapter number. Original Latin will be in footnotes; translated quotations will be cited by chapter and also by the page on which they are found in this edition.

⁵ Dunstan, archbishop of Canterbury, was one of the three abbot-bishops, along with Oswald and Æthelwold (bishop of Winchester), most strongly associated with the tenth-century Benedictine Reform movement in England. In addition to focusing on promoting stricter monastic rules and education mentioned before, the three vigorously encouraged the establishment and growth of a number of saints' cults (Bartlett 4, 50). All three bishops were later venerated as saints. Rollason calls our attention to the fact that Dunstan heard the story in the court of Æthelstan; Rollason believes that indicates that there was interest in Edmund outside East Anglia, in the West Saxon court (157).

⁶ *sene decrepito . . . jure-jurando asserens quod eadem die fuisset armiger beati viri qua pro Christo martyr occubuit (Passio Incipit).*

Dunstan's source had sworn an oath before the king would also have had great weight as well.⁷ Whitelock, who notes that Dunstan was in his seventies when he told the story and that, similarly, the armor-bearer was very elderly when he told Æthelstan's court, is satisfied that the chain of transmission is plausible; she concludes that the story, and therefore the *Passio*, must be treated with respect (219).

Whitelock's analysis of the timing is persuasive, yet we still know that memory is imperfect, even in a culture more accustomed than ours to oral transmission of history, and regardless of Abbo's remark that Dunstan "stored away" the armor-bearer's words (*Passio Incipit*; Hervey 9).⁸ Ridyard offers another reason for caution, reminding us that whatever the original testimony, the story has been interpreted and presented anew by both Dunstan and Abbo, and they may have their own goals in ensuring that it is told in a certain way (62-65). Indeed those goals are what make the *Passio* hagiographical rather than historical: it may repeat an eyewitness account and it may contain historical facts, but it is very much a hagiographical work, which, inspired by the story of Edmund's faith and courage, interprets his experiences and actions through the prism of Christ's life and with reference to Old Testament figures. With that in mind, however, we will glean what we can about Edmund and his story.

After a sweeping summary of East Anglian history and geography, Abbo gives an enthusiastic description of Edmund's ancestry and disposition that offers little in the way of persuasive detail; instead it presents a generic encomium that assures the reader that

⁷ See Paul Cavill, "Analogy and Genre in the Legend of Saint Edmund," for argument that the *Passio* follows the pattern of narratives of early church martyrs and that the assurances of authenticity and the witness accounts are merely *topoi*. I concur that the *Passio* needs to be read with caution as a historical source but I would not go so far as Cavill and assume it is wholly made up simply to create a good story to promote a cult of sainthood.

⁸ *ut promptuario memoriae verba ex integro reconderes (Passio Incipit)*.

Edmund was noble in both ancestry and spirit and was true in faith. Once he has expounded on Edmund's perfection, grace, and modesty, Abbo concludes that because Edmund was so much the model of a Christian king, the devil chose to torment him as Job was tormented in order to tempt him away from his faith.⁹ This comment reveals how Edmund's lack of biographical detail, the lack of a sense of him as anything other than an epitome of a Christian king, assists Abbo's narrative and hagiographical goals: Edmund can be an allegorical representation of 'good' in this battle with evil and a figural representation of not only Job, but also Christ who suffered his own temptation by the devil (Matthew 4.1-11). At this point, having identified 'good,' Abbo introduces the agents of evil—Hinguar and Hubba, two Danish chiefs—and finally tells the story of the events of 870 (*Passio* ch. 5). Abbo describes the Vikings' raids, slaughter, and destruction as they moved through Northumbria and into East Anglia, whereupon Hinguar decided that the best strategy was to ensure that Edmund could not raise an army (*Passio* ch. 6). Ridyard argues that these details ring true: she identifies Hinguar with a Viking leader named Ivarr (Ivarr inn beinlausi, better known in English as Ivar the Boneless) who was active in England at the time. She concludes that the decision to isolate Edmund from possible supporters aligns with the way the Vikings planned and fought (67-69).

Events unfolded swiftly. Hinguar sent a messenger to Edmund demanding, on pain of death, that Edmund submit to Hinguar and convey to him the treasures and treasury of his kingdom. Edmund turned to an unnamed bishop for advice; the bishop urged him to save his life by whatever means he might. Edmund decided to surrender but

⁹ *Cumque tam conspicuus in Christo et Ecclesia emerit bonorum actuum ornamentis, ejus patientiam, sicut et sancti Job, aggressus est experiri inimicus humani generis: qui eo bonis invidet, quo appetitu bonae voluntatis caret* (*Passio* ch. 4)

refused to submit to Hinguar as an over-king unless Hinguar were to convert to Christianity (*Passio* ch. 7-9). Abbo's narrative builds upon this fairly believable sequence of events and creates a drama of lengthy, florid speeches packed with emotional and religious overtones. The messenger's speech, riddled with references to the natural world and to violence, is juxtaposed against Edmund's extended description of his sacramental experience of faith and relationship with God. It is this overlay that moves us into the realm of hagiography.

Hinguar, who was already on the move, arrived at Hæglisdun where Edmund and his closest attendants were, and as soon as he was informed of Edmund's defiant message, Hinguar immediately ordered his warriors to encircle the stronghold to prevent Edmund's escape; he entered and had the king restrained. Edmund was beaten, lashed, shot at with arrows, and finally, beheaded, which Abbo describes in relentless detail (*Passio* ch. 10).¹⁰ As Abbo summarizes what happened to Edmund, he explicitly points to the ways in which Edmund's suffering echoed Christ's throughout this ordeal and asserts that Edmund's faith never faltered. Edmund's death is depicted as a triumph of faith over despair and, therefore, of good over evil. In Abbo's account, the Vikings have no motivation for their actions other than to humiliate Edmund, to treat him cruelly, and to show contempt for the Christian faith. They left the arrow-pierced and decapitated corpse where it lay, but took Edmund's head with them (*Passio* ch. 11).

Until this point in the narrative, everything that has happened is the result of human agency—regardless of the hagiographical slant Abbo may have applied. Again

¹⁰ Ridyard finds it most likely that Hæglisdun can be identified in an area of Bradfield St. Clare about five miles from Edmund's eventual shrine at Bury St. Edmunds. She notes the presence of place names containing the word 'Kingshall' in close proximity to a field known as Hellesden (218-219). See also Whitelock, who argues for Hellesden in Norfolk (220). Since Whitelock's Hellesden is about forty miles from Bury St. Edmunds, Ridyard's suggestion seems more plausible.

concerned to stress his veracity, Abbo steps back from the narrative in order to tell us that there was a Christian witness to the Vikings' actions (*Passio* ch. 12).¹¹ He then resumes the story and explains that once the Vikings had withdrawn, the local people went to recover the body but could not find the head. The witness recalled seeing the Vikings throw the head into the woods and, with that information, the people formed a search party to find it, using a system in which each searcher brought with them a means of making noise so that each would be able to advertise his location and they could avoid searching the same area multiple times (*Passio* ch. 12). The detailed explanation of the search process grounds Abbo's narrative in the everyday world and makes the events that follow seem somehow more credible.

Abbo tells us that after a while, the searchers—drawn by cries of “Here! Here! Here!”—converged upon a single spot (*Passio* ch. 13; Hervey 41).¹² They find the head, but they also discover that the head is being protected from predation by an enormous wolf. Abbo remarks upon the similarity of the scene to Daniel's experience among the lions (Daniel 6.16-23). Accompanied by the strangely protective wolf, they returned with the head, reunited it with the body, and buried it, erecting a small chapel over the burial site (*Passio* ch. 13-14).¹³ Soon, however, miracles began to occur and the decision was

¹¹ Carl Phelpstead identifies the witness as the armor-bearer (32). It makes sense, but we have to wonder why Abbo did not simply say that. Possibly he wished to imply a second witness.

¹² *Quippe caput sancti regis, longius remotum a suo corpore . . . respondebat, designando locum, patria lingua dicens, Her, her, her, Quod interpretatum Latinus sermo exprimit, Hic, hic, hic* (*Passio* ch. 13).

¹³ Abbo's description certainly implies that something more than just laying the head back in position occurred. He refers to people “with skill” being involved in the process of fitting or connecting head to body (*cum summa diligencia et omni sagacitatis studio aptantes quibus creditum est caput corpori sancto pro tempore; Passio* ch. 14). In “The Body of St. Edmund: An Essay in Necrobiography,” Norman Scarfe recounts the story of an eleventh-century abbot pulling at the head in order to be certain that it was really attached. Scarfe suggests that if the body in the tomb was indeed Edmund's, the head may have been wired to the vertebrae (308n27).

made to translate the body to a larger, more suitable new church in Beodricesgueord (the town that eventually became known as Bury St. Edmunds). When they opened the original coffin, Edmund's body was found to be completely undecayed and unmarked, and the only evidence of his beheading was a thin red line around his neck. Abbo adds that it was even necessary for Edmund's nails and hair to be trimmed annually (*Passio* ch, 15). In the final section of the *Passio*, Abbo relates the stories of several post-translation miracles; he then concludes by reflecting on the continuing relationship of a saint's spirit and his body and by praising Edmund for his purity of spirit and—above all—virginity of body, which is proven by the body's incorrupt condition after death.

After the ornate prolixity of Abbo, Ælfric's clear, spare, and elegant *vita* of Edmund comes as a relief.¹⁴ Ælfric condenses Abbo's work greatly. The preface shrinks to twelve lines, which still include the story's provenance and additionally reassures Ælfric's readers that Abbo was a worthy authority. Ælfric tells us that Abbo is not only a *swyðe gelæred munuc* ("a very learned monk"; *LS* 32.1) but that after his time at Ramsey [*s*]e munuc þa abbo . . . gewende ham to his mynstre and wearð sona to abbode geset on þam ylcan mynstre ("then the monk, Abbo, returned home to his monastery and immediately was made abbot of that same monastery"; *LS* 32.10-12). Notably, the prefatory remarks are written in ordinary, not rhythmical, prose, although Ælfric's innate fondness for alliteration can still be heard in the repeated *s* sound of the first sentence.

The first lines of the *vita* provide a brief testament to Edmund's worthiness.¹⁵

With Abbo's generic paeon to Edmund as his source, Ælfric did not have unique or even

¹⁴ For a particularly dramatic sample of Abbo's writing, see footnote 23, the description of Edmund's tortured body.

¹⁵ Pope refers to this section as "pompous," and comments that it "may remind us of royal panegyric" (118n2). While I agree with the latter comment, I think 'pompous' is harsh, and it may miss the

substantive detail to incorporate. He abbreviates this section to fifteen lines, and it is only upon closer examination that we see that Ælfric has subtly introduced themes, words, and concepts that he will return to throughout the *vita*:

<i>Eadmund se eadiga eastengla cynincg</i>	13
<i>wæs snotor and wurðfull . and wurðode symble</i>	
<i>mid æþelum þeawum þone ælmihtigan god .</i>	
<i>He wæs ead-mod . and gepungen . and swa an-ræde þurh-wunode</i>	
<i>þæt he nolde abugan to bysmorfullum leahtrum .</i>	
<i>ne on naþre healfe he ne ahylde his þeawas .</i>	18
<i>ac wæs symble gemyndig þære soþan lare .</i>	
<i>[gif] þu eart to heafod-men ge-set . ne ahefe þu ðe .</i>	
<i>ac beo betwux mannum swa swa an man of him .</i>	
<i>He wæs cystig wædlum and wydewum swa swa fæder .</i>	
<i>and mid wel-willendnysse gewissode his folc</i>	23
<i>symle to riht-wisnysse . and þam reþum styrde .</i>	
<i>and gesæliglice leofode on soþan geleafan .</i>	

Edmund, the blessed king of the East Angles, was wise and honorable and always honored almighty God with [his] excellent conduct. He was humble and pious and thusly perservered resolute that he would not bow to shameful vices nor would he turn away to any side from his way of conduct, but was always mindful of the true teaching, “If you are made the leader, do not exalt yourself but rather be among men one person from among them.” He was generous just like a father to the poor and to widows, and with benevolence governed his people always toward righteousness and restrained the cruel and lived happily in the true faith. (LS 32.13-25)

We notice immediately that Ælfric has repeated the first element of *Eadmund*/Edmund’s name in the two adjectives *eadiga* (“blessed”) and *ead-mod* (“humble”); the second occurrence—*He wæs ead-mod*—creates a type of pun because of the similar sounds in *mund* and *mod*. There is also a play on words with *wurðfull* and *wurðode* (“honorable” and “honored”) that implies that Edmund too is worthy of being honored. Although Edmund’s holiness and his humility seemingly are central to identity (as virginity and

point: the stateliness and the panegyric quality also evoke a sense of the heroic, but we will see it put in service of Christian values.

sanctity were to Æthelthryth's), Ælfric ensures that we do not equate humility with weakness. He describes Edmund as resolute and unyielding, as a generous father-figure, and as a good leader who guides his people well while controlling those who would hurt others. Phelpstead observes the absence of any mention of military prowess (36).

Jocelyn Wogan-Browne looks at the narrative events of the *vita*, as opposed to this descriptive passage, and remarks, "The social relations and values of the Germanic heroic ethos (vengeance, treasure-giving, loyalty for example) are not present" (218). While strictly speaking both Phelpstead and Wogan-Browne are correct, I would argue that the qualities attributed to Edmund *could* be characteristics of what one expects of a warrior-king, but that Ælfric—much as he did in the *vitae* of both Oswald and Æthelthryth—casts them instead as Christian virtues rather than the archetypal heroic models. Here, specifically, Edmund does show the resolve expected of a king and warrior, yet he is resolved to live rightly. Edmund is unbending—about avoiding sin. He is generous, and we should note the great emphasis that Ælfric puts on generosity in the *vitae* of both kings, but Edmund, like Oswald, gives to the poor of his kingdom rather than making distributions to his warriors. He is fatherly, just as Æthelthryth is motherly, however, their parental instincts focus not on biological children (which is the expectation of a king and queen), but rather toward those who look to them for guidance and protection. All three saints do perform the acts that they are 'supposed to' according to the old models, but they perform them the way that service to a different *hlaford*—God—demands and which attests to a different priority than war and the accumulation of wealth. In some ways, the description of Edmund brings to mind the final description of Beowulf, in

which Beowulf is praised, not for his military prowess, but for his kindness, goodness, and generosity for his people (*Beow.* 3180-82).

With such great focus on Edmund's humility, it appears fairly evident why Ælfric retained Abbo's choice of the gnomic quotation from Ecclesiasticus (32.1) found in lines 20 and 21.¹⁶ This verse stands out, not only because the switch to the second-person pronoun captures our attention, but also because Ælfric's translation of the verse catches our ear with two pairs of echoing stressed words, *heafod-men* ("leader") / *ahefe* ("exalt") and *mannum* ("people") / *an man* ("one person"). It is, however, the word *heafod-men*—literally, "head person", that gives pause as we consider the added significance of this word choice: Edmund is the head person whose head will be removed. Ælfric was a writer who was exceptionally attuned to the words he selected and this was deliberate. Additionally, if we think of the verse as not simply an adage but also as a figural promise of Christ's incarnation, it becomes clear that Edmund is being identified with Christ, and therefore Edmund's sacrifice for his people is inevitable. Through that sacrifice, Edmund, like Christ, will be exalted.¹⁷

Like *heafod-men* the word *abugan* ("to bow" or "to submit") deserves additional attention. *Abugan* and a variety of related words (*gebuge* in lines 61 and 93, *abihð* in line 91; *buge* in line 72) appear several times in the *vita* as part of an ongoing argument about whether it is better to submit or not to submit to the Vikings. As the *vita* progresses, we

¹⁶ It is tempting to imagine that Ælfric's remark in the preface about Abbo's promotion upon returning to Fleury (*wearð sona geset to abbode*) was crafted so that this adage might have significance for Abbo, too.

¹⁷ Eric John, who remarks that Ælfric's sermons exhibit an affinity for devotion to the suffering Christ, believes that the *vitae* of Oswald and Edmund support the argument that Ælfric felt that kings should model their behavior on the Christ who suffered and died for mankind ("World" 311-313). That may not be a wide enough argument: perhaps Ælfric felt that anyone could make the choice to accept suffering and endure it and that those who witnessed would be bettered.

recall this opening passage and realize that at every moment when Edmund is urged or commanded to bow down, he is defiant and instead pulls himself up with a demonstration of courage and faith. In fact, *abugan* is part of a series of words and phrases in the *vita* that use language related to physical performance that embodies spiritual activity. In this excerpt, we find *ahylde* (“turn aside or away”), *styrde* (“steered or directed”), and even, perhaps, *gewissode* (“directed”). Control of thought, behavior, and action is central to religious behavior.

Finally, Ælfric repeats the word *symble/symle* (“ever” or “always”) three times in fifteen lines. I would argue that this is significant, particularly because two of those occurrences are part of a chiasmic alliterative structure. *Symble* appears the first time in line 14, where we find *snotor and wurðfull . and wurðode symble*. The second occurrence is in line 19, in the phrase *symble gemyndig*; the two words share the *m* and *y* sounds, which creates an interrelationship. The third use of *symble*, like the first, is in a chiasmic structure: *symle to riht-wisnysse and þam reþum styrde* (line 24). It is hard to know what to make of this. On the most elementary level, Edmund’s constancy is being reiterated; it is more evidence of his strength. Aurally, the repetition captures our attention in a section of the *vita* that a reader might be tempted to skim because he or she anticipates nothing more than a stock list of virtues.

The mood of the *vita* shifts abruptly as Ælfric begins to describe the Viking invasion. The contrast between the control and righteousness of Edmund’s rule and the disorder of the Viking raids could not be starker. The Vikings pour over the land, bringing chaos, terror, and disorder: *hergiende and sleande / wide geond land* (“plundering and killing widely throughout the land”; *LS*. 32.28-29). Borrowing Abbo’s

simile, Ælfric tells us that Hinguar moves through East Anglia like a wolf, killing indiscriminately as he draws closer and close to Edmund, and then sending the message *þæt he abugan sceolde / to his man-rædene gif he rohste his feores* (“that he must submit to being his vassal if he cared about his life”; *LS*. 32.44-45). Ælfric’s narration of the events that followed does not deviate significantly in content from Abbo’s but it is, once again, far more condensed and much less sensational. The bishop is called, consulted, and his advice (to submit) rejected. Edmund mourns what happened to his people, and then, after a heroic yet somewhat perfunctory claim that he wishes he could have died in battle, he decided that he would rather die than flee and live on without his people. He sends the messenger back to Hinguar, rejecting the demand that he submit to Hinguar—unless Hinguar should bow to Christ. It is Edmund, not Hinguar, who introduces religion into the conflict.

In this section, we see Edmund wrestling with a crisis that demands all of the qualities for which he was praised in the earlier passage and reiterates language we have seen. He restrained the cruel (*reþum*) in his kingdom, but now he must find a way to respond to *þam reþan hingware* (“cruel / savage Hinguar” *LS* 32.58). The generosity and fatherly concern he showed to his people now demands that he react to their slaughter. Edmund never bowed to *bysmorfullum leahtrum* (“shameful vices” *LS* 32.17), but Hinguar has brought Edmund’s people *to bysmore* (“to shame” *LS* 32.64), and therefore, he who never submitted or turned away now faces the choice of fleeing, dying, or bowing down to Hinguar. In short, Ælfric has completely reframed a political crisis as a religious crisis, which enables us to make sense of Edmund’s concluding remarks before he sends his reply off to Hinguar:

Næs me næfre gewunelic þæt ic worhte fleames . 78
ac ic wolde swiðor sweltan gif ic þorfte
for minum agenum earde . and se ælmihtiga god wat
þæt ic nelle abugan fram his biggengum æfre .
ne fram his soþan lufe . swelte ic . lybbe ic . 82

It was never my habit to retreat, but I would rather die for my own land if I need to, and almighty God knows that live or die, I will never turn from his observances or from his true love. (*LS 32.78-82*)

Edmund's decision is framed as born of both heroism and faith, presenting yet another moment in which the expectations inherited from the heroic model (a warrior does not retreat) are given a religious twist (no matter what happens to Edmund he will keep his faith.) He refuses to retreat; he will not abandon his land to whatever the Vikings might do merely to save himself. It is a choice similar to the one another East Anglian, Byrhtnoth, will make at Maldon and speaks to an enduring concept of heroism, courage, and self-sacrifice.¹⁸ Moreover, in accepting that his choice will likely result in his death, Edmund moves the battlefield from the land itself to his own body. Arguably, this moment is one where the king's body becomes identified with something greater than just his identity as Edmund. He is offering himself in place of East Anglia and is willing to suffer for the land and its people. John Edward Damon writes, "Edmund will fulfill his destiny, doing as he perceives God wills, even if he must die. This is the central concept of the trope of spiritual fulfillment, the importance of following the path God has set out for you" (*Soldier Saints* 215). Edmund's decision to remain and accept whatever will happen is, therefore, a religious act chosen to prove to God that he is faithful. It is a continuation of who he has always been. He will not bow; he will stand.

¹⁸ Although it is not known exactly when the *vita* was written, it was sometime after Dunstan's death in 988. It is quite possible that it was contemporaneous with the Battle of Maldon (991 A.D.) and that the death of Ealdorman Byrhtnoth in battle against the Vikings was very much on the national mind. For context of the Battle of Maldon within the greater issue of the Viking raids and Æthelred's reign, see John, "The Return of the Vikings" 194-195, 198.

Edmund's decision may be saintly, and it may be heroic, but it is a troubling one for a king to make. Even Phelpstead, who argues that Edmund's choice reflects a new model of the sacrificial—rather than warrior—king, concedes that this might have been a difficult model for all to accept (36-37).¹⁹ We might ask how Edmund's sacrifice could have helped his people at all, who are left with no king and no immediate successors since Edmund is childless. There is no one to protect them and, with Edmund dead, the Vikings were free to do whatever they wished.²⁰ While we have to be careful not to ask more of the *vita* than it offers, it seems reasonable to assume that Ælfric would have known all of these things, at least as well as we. If the answer is to read Edmund's life as an imitation of Christ's, then we might even ask what is the sin from which Edmund is redeeming his people.

When Hinguar enters Edmund's hall, Edmund stands there and purposefully discards his weapons, *wolde geæfen-læcan / cristes gebysnungum* ("he wished to imitate Christ's examples" *LS* 32.103-104). He is beaten, tied to a tree, whipped, and shot with so many arrows that his body bristles with them, and all the while he cries out for Christ's help, a fact that Ælfric will mention three times. Ælfric does not go into the detail that Abbo does in his description of the torture; with the exception of the reference to Edmund having so many arrows in him that he resembled a hedgehog, Ælfric avoids the

¹⁹ Damon suggests that if this *vita* was one of Ælfric's earlier ones, it may represent an early phase in his thinking about saints and warfare. Damon proposes that perhaps Ælfric moved from believing in strict non-violence to allowing that one could be a saint and a warrior, like Oswald (*Soldier Saints* 216-218).

²⁰ Brooks characterizes East Anglia, as well as Mercia and Northumbria, as "destroyed" after the Viking incursions and says that after the raiding phase stopped, the Vikings parceled out the land—at least in Mercia and Northumbria—and began to settle (8-9). According to Ridyard, the Vikings seem to have moved on in order to attack other areas with great success until Alfred was finally able to defeat the Viking army in 878 and force their leaders to convert. One of them, Guthrum, took the Anglo-Saxon name Æthelstan and became ruler of East Anglia (211-212).

sorts of details that would inappropriately excite a reader.²¹ We are meant to understand that Edmund's torment is like Christ's but equally importantly, we are meant to understand that his faith is as steadfast as Christ's.²² Finally, Hinguar becomes enraged and orders his men to decapitate Edmund:

<i>þa geseah hingwar se arlease flot-man</i>	119
<i>þæt se æþela cyning nolde criste wið-sacan .</i>	
<i>ac mid anrædum geleafan hine æfre clypode .</i>	
<i>het hine þa beheafdian and þa hæðenan swa dydon .</i>	122
<i>Betwux þam pe he clypode to criste þagit</i>	
<i>þa tugon þa hæþenan þone hælgan to slæge .</i>	
<i>and mid anum swencge slogon him of þæt heafod .</i>	
<i>and his sawl sipode gesælig to criste .</i>	126

When Hinguar, the wicked seaman, saw that the noble king would not deny Christ, but with single-minded faith called continually to him, then he commanded him to be beheaded and the heathen did so. While he was still calling out to Christ, the heathen dragged the saint away to slay him and with one stroke struck off his head, and his soul went, happy, to Christ. (LS 32.119-126)

Ælfric deviates from Abbo in this passage: he breaks away from the scene of the torture to describe Hinguar's reaction, and then picks up by very simply relating the beheading. In doing so, Ælfric tempers and controls the reader's reaction. Abbo, however, inserts Hinguar's command into an ongoing, mounting scene of torment. While we are still processing the image of Edmund, barely able to breathe, bristling with arrows, Abbo says that Hinguar decided to order the beheading, and then resumes the description of Edmund's condition in even more terrible detail.²³ James W. Earl sees Ælfric's restraint

²¹ Ælfric's reticence about looking too long at Edmund's body as it is tortured is consistent with what Lees and Overing find in Ælfric's treatment of female martyrs. See "Before History, Before Difference: Bodies, Metaphor, and the Church in Anglo-Saxon England" for full discussion.

²² And perhaps, we are to consider that, when we hear three times that Edmund cries out, he—unlike Peter—is affirming Christ, not denying him (Matthew 26.69-75).

²³ *Ille seminecem, cui adhuc vitalis calor palpitabat in tepido pectore, ut vix posset subsistere, avellit cruento stipiti festinus, avulsumque, relectis costarum latebris præ punctiōibus crebis, ac si raptum e culeo aut sævis tortum unguis, jubet caput extendere quod semper fuerat insigne regali diademate;* "The

as evidence of his antipathy toward all violence, whether inflicted by the Vikings or as a response to them (141).²⁴ Not only does Ælfric’s technique ensure that the reader’s reaction is managed, it also refocuses out attention from the body to the head; strong alliteration on *h* aids in maintaining that focus. The alliterating words tell the story in brief: *Hingwar*, *beheafdian*, *hæðenan* and *hæþenan*, *halgan*, and *heafod*—“Hinguar,” “behead,” “heathen,” “saint,” “head”. Another miniature narrative appears when we look at the cluster of words that alliterate on ‘s’ in lines 125 and 126: *swencge*, *slogon*, *sawl*, *sipode*, and *gesælig*—“blow,” “struck off,” “soul,” “went,” “happy”. The word *gesælig* ties back to the early description of Edmund: he lived happily in the true faith. Now, dead, he is happy with Christ.

Whether or not this is martyrdom is a question that is not easy to answer, especially if we insist on historical evidence. As hagiographers, Ælfric and Abbo insist that it was Edmund’s calls for Christ that incited Hinguar to have him killed, and in the world and for the purposes of this *vita*, this motive is critical. It is certainly a death met with courage and faith by a pious man who knew that the minute he did not fight or flee, he was likely to be killed. Does it matter that he suffered and died in a purposefully Christ-like way? Perhaps not to those who killed him, but to those who witnessed or read about it, it offers a model for behavior in any terrible, hopeless situation: the option

king was by this time almost lifeless, though the warm lifestream still throbbed in his breast, and he was scarcely able to stand erect. In this plight he was hastily wrenched from the blood-stained stem [the tree to which Edmund had been tied], his ribs laid bare by numerous gashes, as if he had been put to the torture of the rack, or had been torn by savage claws, and was bidden to stretch out the head which had ever been adorned by the royal diadem” (*Passio* ch.10; Hervey 35). After all of this, Edmund is finally beheaded while he prays.

²⁴ Earl also makes the interesting observation that when Ælfric was writing, many Danes had also settled and built lives in England. Ælfric may have been reluctant to feed anti-Danish sentiment (a risk, given the resurgent Viking raids) by recounting the atrocities of Edmund’s torture (141-142).

always exists to offer up the suffering in prayer rather than become subsumed in anger or despair.

With Edmund dead, the Vikings leave, but they take the head with them and throw it into a “thick brambles so that it could not be buried” (*biccum bremulum þæt hit bebyrged ne wurde*; *LS* 32.132). As in Abbo’s account, an eyewitness was able to report this information to the distressed local people when they came forth to bury the body and discovered its condition. Nicole Marafioti reminds us that in this period, seeing a corpse would not have been shocking in and of itself. People saw dead and decomposing bodies; families prepared their dead for burial; executed criminals would be left on display; saints’ remains were taken from coffins, washed, and moved. A king’s body, however, was not ordinarily seen in such a state: it would have been deeply disturbing (*King’s Body* 147-148). Edmund’s broken and mutilated body, while not displayed in the same way that Oswald’s was, also would have been intended as humiliation and as proof of the Vikings’ superiority. Marafioti comments, “For Abbo’s English contemporaries, the treatment of Edmund’s head and body would have recalled the punishments prescribed for criminals and excommunicants: offenders might be mutilated and left for carrion, and sometimes their heads were buried, displayed, or discarded some distance from the rest of their body” (185).²⁵ Since Ælfric was writing very soon after Abbo, this statement would apply to Ælfric’s audience as well.

²⁵ Marafioti’s comment certainly applies to criminals. Excommunicants could not be buried in consecrated ground, and Marafioti elaborates: “Medieval anathema formulas instructed that excommunicated bodies be deposited on dung heaps or left as food for birds and beasts” (137-138). She cites an Old English homiletic (she refers her readers to Donald Scragg’s edition of the *Vercelli* homilies) that similarly instructed that excommunicants could not be buried in consecrated ground nor even be buried with pagans (138, 138n41). Whether this was something that actually happened or whether this is charged rhetoric is another question.

With all of these traumatic associations, recovery of Edmund's head (and the burial of the complete body) can be seen as having meaning far beyond the comfort of providing the king with a proper Christian burial. It is, as Marafioti observes, symbolic of the restoration of social order (188). We have seen the same impulse at work in Oswiu's efforts to reclaim Oswald's body from the battlefield. The restoration of order begins, in fact, with Edmund's subjects themselves as they methodically organize and conduct their search:

Hi eodon þa secende . and symle clypigende . 148
swa swa hit gewunelic is þam ðe on wuda gað oft .
Hwær eart þu nu gefera ? and him andwyrde þæt heafod .
Hér . hér . hér . and swa gelome clypode
andswarigende him eallum . swa oft swa heora ænig clypode .
oþþæt hi ealle becomen þurh ða clypunga him to . 153
Þa læg se græga wulf þe bewiste þæt heafod .
And mid his twam fotum hæfde þæt heafod beclypped .
grædig . and hungrig . and for gode ne dorste
þæs heafdes abyrian . [ac] heold hit wið deor . 157

Then they went looking and always crying out, as it is customary for those who often go into the woods, "Where are you now, friend?" And the head answered them, "Here. Here. Here." And thus it cried out repeatedly, answering them all, as often as any of them cried out, until they all came to it because of the cries. There lay the grey wolf, who guarded the head, and between his two feet he had clasped the head, greedy and hungry, and because of God he did not dare eat it but kept it from wild animals. (*LS* 32.148-157)

As in Abbo's *Passio*, the process of searching the woods is a deliberate one that requires cooperation and calm. It is a return to order and control after a period of disorder and chaos. The wolf that the searchers encounter, as scholars such as Michael Benskin, Daniel Donoghue, and James W. Earl have noted before me, brings us back to that description of Hinguar, prowling the countryside like a wolf, unlike Hinguar, is submissive to God and to Edmund. The wolf's protectiveness of Edmund's head can be

seen as remedy, as a counteraction to the violence caused by Hinguar. Similarly, if we think about the wolf's normal 'role' as predator of a flock, its protective posture toward Edmund, the sacrificial lamb, could be seen as a counterbalance to the ineffectiveness and insufficiency of the bishop as 'shepherd.'

A third remedy that we see in the passage is the restoration of Edmund's power of speech. An event as extraordinary as this will capture any reader's attention particularly when Ælfric imitates the conversation by punctuating multiple repetitions of *clypode* and related words (*clypidende*, *clypunga*) with their counterparts *andwyrde/andswarigende*. As we recall, Edmund cried out for Christ throughout the torture, up until the moment of his decapitation: it was his relentless faith, voiced over and over again, that finally provoked Hinguar to stop the torture and order his death. Now the voice is just as insistent, answering the cries of the searchers, summoning them, not only so it might be found, but also to gather the group, this recuperating community, together. We might argue that the head (it is never "Edmund"—it is simply *heafod*) can be transcending its identity as Edmund the king and instead demonstrating its identity as saint, answering the cries of the faithful here on earth. It is the ability of Edmund's head to cry out again that demonstrates that Christian faith cannot be defeated or silenced.

Ælfric tells us that after a few years, when life had become peaceful again, the people resolved to honor Edmund with a more suitable church than the little shrine set over his grave. It was during the translation that his body was discovered to be incorrupt:

þa wæs micel wundor þæt he wæs eall swa gehal 176
swylce he cucu wære mid clænum lichaman .
and his swura was gehalod þe ær wæs forslægen .
and wæs swylce an seolcen þræd embe his swuran ræd
mannum to sweotelunge hu he ofslagen wæs . 180
Eac swylce þa wunda þe þa wælhreowan hæþenan

mid gelomum scotungum on his lice macodon .
wæron gehælede þurh þone heofonlican god .
and he liþ swa ansund oþ þisne and-werdan dæg . 184
and-bidigende æristes . and þæs ecan wuldres .
His lichama us cyð þe lið un-formolsnod
þæt he butan forligre her on worulde leofode .
and mid clænum life to criste sibode . 188

Then there was great wonder that he was all as whole, with a clean body, as if he were alive, and his neck, which had been cut through, was healed, and how it was like a red silken thread around his neck that might show people how he was killed. Also, similarly, the wounds on his body, which the bloodthirsty heathen made with repeated shots, were healed by the heavenly God. And he lies like so, uncorrupt, until this present day waiting for resurrection and eternal glory. His body, which lies undecayed, shows us that he lived in the world without fornication and by means of a pure life went to Christ. (*LS* 32.176-188)

Edmund's body has been restored to perfection, the only evidence of his death being a discreet red line around his throat, which Ælfric celebrates with the irresistible phrase *seolcen þræde embe his swuran ræd* (179); rhyme can also be heard in *eall swa gehal* (176) and the near-rhyme of *wælhreowan hæþenan / mid gelomum scotungum* (183). These phrases function like little sound-bites, to use an anachronistic description, grabbing a reader's attention and then lodging in the reader's memory. In lines 176-178, Ælfric assembles the words describing the body in chiasmic alliteration: *gehal, cucu, clænum, gehalod* ("whole," "alive," "clean," "healed"). These words distill the promise of the resurrected body. We notice, too, in this passage an emphasis on the body as testimony, much in the way the Æthelthryth's was (Lees, "Engendering" 24-25); in both cases, we are invited to reflect on their wounds as emblems of their humanity and their saintliness and we are told to see their lack of corruption and know that they were pure and virginal.

Ælfric offers two miracle stories toward the end of the *vita*. Curiously, both are what I would consider ‘negative miracles’: no one is saved, healed, brought back to life, or freed from prison, but instead, someone is hurt. In the first story, thieves attempt to break into the church containing Edmund’s shrine; they seek to steal the treasures that people brought as offerings and gifts to the saint. They are unsuccessful because Edmund *hi wundorlice geband / ælcne swa he stod* (“[he] miraculously bound them, each as he stood” *LS* 32.207-208). The next morning, the thieves are found and the bishop rashly sentences them to death, realizing too late that he was forbidden to do so as a churchman. Benskin, who proposes that the *vita* may be symmetrically structured in a very deliberate way, argues that the behavior of the bishop in this episode parallels that of the bishop earlier in the *vita*. In both cases, the bishop does not act with wisdom (21).²⁶ We can also look at this miracle with relation to Edmund’s behavior and as a way of ‘healing’ or ‘restoring’ the past: Edmund’s tomb, like his kingdom, is invaded by those who seek its treasures; he rejects violence in both cases, but this time, his non-violent response (freezing the thieves) stops the attack and saves the treasures. Similarly, the second miracle story involves a threat to Edmund. A wealthy man named Leofstan comes to the shrine and insists on seeing the incorrupt body for himself. Leofstan’s arrogant skepticism and his bullying demand are, in effect, an attack on Edmund, and when he does see the body, he immediately becomes insane and—we are promised—died miserably. Both this miracle and the first reassert Edmund’s power as God’s saint to protect his territory and himself, which he was unable to do when he was alive.

²⁶ In his article, “The Literary Structure of *Ælfric’s Life of King Edmund*,” Benskin demonstrates that there are several motifs in the *vita*, like the behavior of the bishop, which can be seen recurring a second time and are often reversed in the second appearance. One example of that would be the wolf, which appears as a description of Hinguar, who orders Edmund’s decapitation, and then appears a second time as the protector of Edmund’s head.

Ælfric concludes the *vita* by promising that Edmund's incorrupt body, like the body of Æthelthryth and two other saints, is proof that one day the restored and undecayed bodies of the faithful can and will be raised up.²⁷ That is the ultimate imitation of Christ, the resurrection to which all Christians aspire. Edmund's *vita* demonstrates that to live a life according to Christ's example will be hard—spiritually, yes, but sometimes physically, too. When we look at Edmund's body in the *vita* we see his faith in practice, in challenge, and ultimately, in triumph.

²⁷ The two other saints are Cuthbert and Æthelthryth's sister, who was discussed above, page 35n6.

Chapter V

The Body as Token and as Promise

The *vitae* of Oswald, Æthelthryth, and Edmund speak of events, practices, and anxieties that, at first glance, seem quite distant from our lives. Warrior kings and celibate queens, powerful missionary-bishops, Viking attacks, torture, miraculous healings, incorrupt corpses, veneration of bodies, and holy relics all give glimpses of a violent, mystical, and faith-filled time populated by nameless masses ruled by a powerful few. In addition, the language and the conventions of hagiography can erect a barrier between the work and the reader, leading readers to be skeptical about the relevance of these lives to their own. It is easy to look at, or even dismiss, the *vitae* as relics themselves rather than as meticulously crafted exemplars of Christian teaching. Paradoxically, the fact that they seem so alien may be part of their appeal and may encourage the repeated readings through which the elegance and subtlety of their construction gradually emerges.

Some scholars find value in the *vitae* by imposing modern critical frameworks on them or in analyzing them for their biographical or historical insight.¹ Although these approaches can be interesting and valuable, they do a disservice to the meaning that can be found in the *vitae* when they are approached with respect for their cultural context; moreover, such approaches can risk ignoring the rhetorical skill and intellectual rigor that

¹ Earl, for example, interprets Edmund's life using, among other things, the tools of psychological analysis. Griffiths, as we have mentioned, applies a feminist framework to her analysis of Æthelthryth's *vita*. Trilling looks at the *vitae* of Ælfric's female saints with an eye toward economics. Cavill examines Edmund's *vita*, among others, to look for historical "truths" about martyrs' deaths.

Ælfric brought to his work. In these deceptively simple narratives, Ælfric weaves together themes that have relevance for readers of this century as much as they did for those of his time, and he does so with artistry that by itself invites the reader to a deeper contemplation of their meaning. Applying the insights gained from closely readings of the *vitae* allows us to first answer the question asked in the first chapter: what special role does the body—marked in birth by royal status and in death by incorruption—play in Ælfric’s depictions of Oswald, Æthelthryth, and Edmund? In the course of answering that question, we will ask what importance this has to readers and to scholarship.

As we have seen in all three saints’ *vitae*, Ælfric employs a variety of techniques to draw attention to the bodies and to the physical actions of the living saints. Alliteration, repetition, paronomasia, rhyme, chiasmus: again and again, Ælfric uses these devices to juxtapose words and ideas in ways that emphasize and enhance the reader’s understanding of the *vita*. In the *vita* of Oswald, for example, Ælfric plays with the concepts of raising up, of felling, of saving and of falling, in both physical and spiritual senses through his manipulation of forms of *aræran*, *afyllan*, *ahreddan*, and *feallan*. Similarly, in the *vita* of Æthelthryth, we saw Ælfric’s repeated use of words with the *un-*prefix (*untrummysse* and *ungewemmed*, for example) to subtly define a state by invoking its opposite. Rhyme was used to great effect in Edmund’s *vita*, creating memorable phrases that leave vivid pictures in the reader’s mind (*seolcen þræd embe his swuran ræd*). The physical state of these bodies is undeniably important and Ælfric’s language—in technique and in word choice—demands that we pay attention. Beyond that, though, many of these devices can be seen as stylistic and rhetorical representations of Ælfric’s view of the world. Building upon Clemoes’s assertion that Ælfric’s rhythmical style and

his patterning of his language was a mirror of how he saw the world, we might say that Ælfric used chiasmus to evoke the interconnectedness of the world; he used echo to remind us of those figural motifs that he saw repeated across history; he used paronomasia to demonstrate that seemingly dissimilar things can have remarkable similarities.

If Ælfric focuses the reader's attention on the body, then we should ask why. On the most fundamental level, the activities of these bodies demonstrate how Christian faith can be performed on the physical plane. These saints are seen praying, performing charitable works, tending to others, fasting, and above all, enduring suffering, pain, and death. By focusing on the body, we see these saints as like us, physical beings who make their way through life and eventually die: whether famous or nameless, this does not change, and so we can identify and sympathize with these royal saints because we share a human body. On another level, the fact that they are all leaders who were born into royalty magnifies the results of their actions: their choices and deeds affect an entire people whether they are defeating a pagan army or choosing celibacy over marriage. Their lives act as a reminder to all rulers of their responsibility to live rightly and to guide a people to be a better nation and better Christians. Ælfric emphasizes this fact in the *vitae* of Oswald and Æthelthryth by alluding to the cautionary examples of Nicanor and Jezebel found the Maccabees and Book of Kings narratives and whose bodies testify to the consequences of arrogant, unrighteous leadership.

For Ælfric's audience, the fact that Oswald, Æthelthryth, and Edmund are all Anglo-Saxons like themselves would add to the personal interest of their stories and would also encourage reflection about whether the current Anglo-Saxon ruler was

exhibiting the kind of moral leadership and righteous activity of the past: was he building churches, distributing alms to the poor, defending the faith? It is also worth considering how the saints' context within the Anglo-Saxon historical past would have evoked the memory of the bygone but still influential warrior-hero ideal. We see Oswald and Edmund accept their duties as kings, but not without certain deviations from the archetypes of heroic literature. Oswald may go to battle on behalf of his people, but this activity is both literally and figuratively second to his activities as a Christian. He prays before fighting and he prays for the souls of his people in the moment that the enemy, and his death, approach. Even as a ruler, it seems that he devotes as much time to his partnership with Aidan in bringing his people to Christianity as he does to the unspecified business of running a kingdom. Edmund, on the other hand, makes the conscious—and disconcerting—decision to sacrifice himself when faced with an armed enemy even though his people will be left without a leader. His courage comes in his determination that his death have meaning from a Christian perspective. Rather than running away or making a pointless attack on his armed enemy, he chooses sacrifice. This is entirely consistent with the application of traditional heroic behaviors and values (generosity, valor, honor) to Christian activity (almsgiving, defending his people, steadfastness in faith) that had characterized his reign. Æthelthryth's path seems to diverge most markedly from the traditional duties of female royalty. She will not sacrifice her virginity in order to ensure the continuance of her husband's line. As we have seen, though, her life too presents a new variation on the traditional behaviors associated with the queens of heroic epic. She is an exemplary spouse to Christ, king of heaven, and raises his family well and with all duty and custom. All three saints, therefore, present a

new type of leadership, which is visible in the physical acts of leadership that point to the spiritual. They are leaders who are first followers of Christ and whose actions indicate that. Ælfric may not be advocating that all kings and queens follow the exact template of these three, but he is demonstrating that there are ways to be both a worthy ruler and a good Christian.

On a still deeper level, however, Ælfric also makes sure that the readers see these saints as figures of Christ, man and king, in action and suffering. When a thirty-year-old Oswald returns to Northumbria with his followers and his determination, we are reminded of Christ, at the same age, beginning his ministry with his disciples.² The cross stands in the background to unite the two and to hint at both kings' eventual deaths and humiliation. Edmund's rejection of weapons when surrounded by the Vikings obeys Christ's admonition to Peter when soldiers came to arrest him (John 18.11); his torture and even the derisive way that his head is treated is similar to what Christ endured when he was lashed and then crowned with thorns. Æthelthryth emulates Christ in his humility not only as she bathes the members of her community, but also in her choice to identify as God's servant rather than as an earthly queen. Her body becomes a vehicle for her transformation of sin into salvation by means of suffering. These figures of Christ reiterate the essential mystery and message of Christianity: Christ became incarnate in human flesh. This is a truth that Ælfric urges his readers to reflect upon. Following in Christ's footsteps, therefore, means embracing the physical aspect of existence as well as the spiritual. In his sermon, "Memory of the Saints," which is also included in the *Lives of Saints* manuscript, Ælfric writes:

² Both Bede and Ælfric mention that Oswald died at thirty-eight in the ninth year of his reign. If we take Bede at his word, Oswald's reign was inflated by a year in order to erase the memory of his apostate cousins. Either way, he would have been around thirty when he came to power.

hwæt þa ure hælend þæs heofonlican godes sunu 106
cydde his mycclan lufe þe he to us mannum hæfde .
swa þæt he wearð acenned of anum clænan mædene
butan weres gemanan . and mann wearð gesewen
on sawle . and on lichaman . soð god . and soð man . 110

Hear this, then. Our savior, the son of heavenly God, showed the great love that he had for us people such tht he was born of a chaste virgin, without man's touch, and became seen as man, in soul and in body, true God and true man. (*LS* 16.106-110)

The perfect balance of Ælfric's phrases emphasizes the perfectibility of body and spirit, a truth that Christ embraced by becoming human and which these saints embrace as figures of Christ. For the attentive reader, whether contemporary or modern, these saints exemplify the ways that the trials of human life, physical as well as spiritual, can be endured and made to serve the goal of salvation.

These three *vitae* take an unusual turn with the discovery that the saints' remains were either wholly or partly incorrupt. This phenomenon was considered remarkable, even in a time of miracles, and it invited explanation. Oswald's incorrupt arm commemorates the generosity of his actions and stands as a reminder of the way that the hand that can hold a sword can also support the church and feed the poor. Æthelthryth's and Edmund's undecayed bodies are proof of their purity and of God's limitless ability to heal and restore. This goes beyond metonymy: the Christian faith teaches that God has promised that the bodies of the faithful will be resurrected, whole and perfect at the end of time. For people who saw dead bodies and were very aware of the normal processes of decay, this doctrine must have been difficult but wondrous to imagine: it would almost be easier to believe that Christ could be raised after three days and eventually assumed bodily into heaven than that a long-dead and utterly decomposed body could be restored to wholeness. The bodies of these saints, therefore, functioned as earthbound figures of

the resurrected Christ, human and yet perfected in death, tokens of what was promised to all the faithful. In the *vita* of Edmund, Ælfric comments:

Nis angel cynn bedæled drihtnes halgena . 259
ponne on engla landa licgaþ swilce halgan
swylce þæs halga cyning is and cupberht se eadiga .
and sancte æþeldryð on elig . and eac hire swustor
ansunde on lichaman geleafan to trymminge . 263

The English nation is not deprived of the Lord's saints when in England lie such saints as this holy king is, and Cuthbert the blessed, and St. Æthelthryth in Ely and also her sister, sound in body, to strengthen the faith. (*LS* 32.259-263)

Ælfric describes an England in which sanctity is a real and physical presence as well as a promise to the faithful and where the saints' bodies are the nexus of earthly existence and the immortal life of the spirit.

Oswald, Æthelthryth, and Edmund form a natural grouping within the *Lives of Saints* simply by virtue of their nationality, birth, and the eventual condition of their bodies. Those common characteristics allowed Ælfric to engage in a nuanced and complex evaluation of the role of the physical presence in leadership, in faith and in sanctity with each *vita* individually developing those themes in slightly different ways. Their connections, and the recurrence of these same themes in other items in *Lives of Saints* argue for the possibility that Ælfric conceived of his work as more than a simple compilation, but rather as a unified whole whose individual elements reflect and intensify, distinguish and define one another. It is a work whose simplicity is the result of relentless discipline and subtle art. Its concerns are the concerns that have not changed despite the gap of over one thousand years: they are the challenges of understanding our responsibilities to those around us, of learning how to face danger, terror, suffering, and death, and of believing that this physical existence holds the promise of something more.

Epilogue

What Remains

The continuing relevance of these *vitae* extends, rather appropriately, into the physical world today. In the course of researching and discussing this topic, I became curious to know whether anything still remained of the three saints. Remarkably, relics of Oswald and Æthelthryth can still be found in England and are objects of veneration for the faithful, even after fourteen hundred years, and, more unexpectedly, after the willful destruction of shrines that occurred during the sixteenth-century Reformation.¹

Oswald's incorrupt arm was in Bamburgh at St. Peter's Church until it was stolen by the monks at Peterborough (Thacker 119); the arm disappeared during the dissolution of the monasteries ("Peterborough Cathedral"). Oswald's bones were moved from Bardney to Gloucester, where they were enshrined at a new church that became known as St. Oswald's (Thacker 120). That church was dissolved in the sixteenth century and demolished in the seventeenth century ("St. Oswald's Priory"). I have not been able to determine what happened to the relics. As mentioned in the *vita*, Oswald's head was kept initially at Lindisfarne monastery, but fears of destruction by raiding Vikings led the monks to remove their most precious relics to safer places, and eventually, Oswald's head, along with the body of St. Cuthbert, was brought to Durham. Today, a fragment of

¹ The history of many of the great cathedrals and shrines is punctuated by the dissolution of the monasteries. When Henry VIII broke with the Roman Catholic Church, he determined to seize the wealth and properties of the church throughout England for reasons religious, political, and fiscal. The lavishly decorated shrines of the saints were stripped of their valuables and, frequently, the relics of the saints were destroyed or lost in the process.

Oswald's skull rests in the shrine of St. Cuthbert at Durham Cathedral. The skull relic is housed in a feretory containing St. Cuthbert's remains and relics (Pepper).²

Æthelthryth's shrine did not survive the raids of Henry VIII's agents, and it was assumed that her body had been destroyed or lost. In 1811, however, a hand relic, believed to be Æthelthryth's was discovered ("The Story of Ely Cathedral"). The relic was hidden inside "a priest's hiding hole" in a building on the estates of the Duke of Norfolk; it was "mounted over a silver plate inscribed 'Manus Scae Etheldredae 679'" (Bright A2).³ The relic eventually was separated into two: one part has made its way back to Ely where it can be found in the Roman Catholic Church of St. Etheldreda, and the other is in a locked reliquary case near the altar of St. Etheldreda's in Ely Place, London (Bright A2; Deidun).⁴

Edmund's body rested at Bury St. Edmunds until the sixteenth century. Scholars such as Norman Scarfe, an expert in the history of Suffolk, believe it most likely that when the monks were informed that royal agents were en route to assess and claim the

² The presence of this relic was confirmed in personal correspondence with Durham Cathedral assistant librarian Suzanne Pepper, who conferred with Cathedral archeologist Norman Emery. Ms. Pepper added that St. Cuthbert's tomb was last opened in 1899.

³ The Duke of Norfolk gave the relic to his estate manager, who then made a gift of it when a member of his family entered the Convent of Saint Dominic in Stone (Deidun; Bright A2). The description of the relic varies. Fr. Tom Deidun refers to William Lockhart's *St. Etheldreda's and Old London*, 2nd edition, 1890, and describes the relic as "a model of a female hand carved in ivory and containing a portion of an uncorrupted hand. On the silver-gilt cuff attached to the hand were the words written in 9th-century Latin script: 'The relics of St Etheldreda Queen and Virgin'" (Deidun). Alexander Wood describes the relic as affixed to a silver plate and spike that "may possibly be as old as the tenth century" (16). If the relic was indeed mounted to a plate or embellished with a cuff in the ninth or tenth centuries that raises questions because of the often-repeated assertion that Æthelthryth's body was never touched or disrupted. Patrick Bright writes, "It is believed that the relic was once kept [at St. Etheldreda's Chapel, London, a property of the Bishops of Ely] and was only saved from the Tudor destruction by the prompt action of some priest who secreted it elsewhere" (A2). If this, too, is true, the implication is that the body was interfered with at some point in order to create other relics.

⁴ The relic was partitioned by Bishop Ullathorne in the 1870s so that a portion might be given to the newly restored St. Etheldreda's, London (Deidun). The remainder of the relic was kept at the convent at Stone until 1953 when it was given on permanent loan to the Ely St. Etheldreda's in honor of the church's fiftieth anniversary (Burling; Bright 9).

treasures of the shrine, they removed the body, perhaps hastily burying it in the graveyard (Scarfe 316-317). Francis Young, who specializes in the history of East Anglia, also believes that the body was moved before it could be destroyed. He argues that the monks may have hidden the body, in an iron chest, somewhere inside the Abbey precincts (Young 6-8).⁵

While Edmund's body has never been found, the continuing fascination it exerts, like the continuing veneration of the relics of Oswald and Æthelthryth, suggest that, for some, the presence of these bodies provides hope and continues, in the words of Ælfric, to strengthen the faith.

⁵ Young bases his theory on a document he found in the archives of the Abbey of St. Edmund near Reading (also known as Douai Abbey). The document contains the third-hand account of a witness—the (great) grandfather of a prior of the abbey—who had claimed to see the body being put in the chest when monks recognized the impending threat to the shrine (4-5). Young suggests that it would have been easier to hide the chest than to try to bury it outside the priory grounds and proposes that two possible locations would be the charnel house or the crypt (6).

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