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Influence of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon Christianity

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Influence of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon Christianity

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Abstract

Though it remains unclear when Christianity was first introduced to England, it is certain Christianity was established by the early third century. It was not until the beginning of the seventh century, however, that Christianity flourished in Anglo-Saxon England, bringing with it a new understanding of the feminine role. Once enthralled by the coming of Jesus Christ, worshippers of the Virgin Mary idealized the Mother of God as the realization of the ideals of purity, humility, and passivity. They defined Saint Mary by her sinlessness, valuing her unbreakable virginity as a symbol of unparalleled strength, responsibility, and holiness. Mary herself was viewed by Anglo-Saxon society as the perfect representation of womanhood and motherhood, despite the conviction that she was conceived without sexual intercourse,[1] and would give birth as a *virgin* mother.[2] This depiction of Mary valued the same characteristics among the women of Anglo-Saxon England. This positive representation of Mary, though strengthened by her relationship with Christ, held Anglo-Saxon women to a standard similar to Anglo-Saxon men.

In this paper, I will address the relationship between the Virgin Mary as a feminine ideal and the ways in which that ideal uplifted the perception of women's roles in Anglo-Saxon England. As a Humanities major with a concentration in communication within cultures, I find contributing to the discussion of the Virgin Mary critical to religious understanding, adding to the conversation the idea that, if it had not been for the depiction of Mary as sinless or *immaculata* in monasteries, Anglo-Saxon women would not have been viewed as favorably and,

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[1] Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4.

[2] In some early manuscripts of *Protoevangelium*, the narrative testified Mary was conceived despite Saint Anne's inability to bear children. It is inferred that, when an angel of the Lord granted Anne's prayer of bearing a child, her husband Joachim, who had fled in shame, was in the desert at the time of conception. In future manuscripts, however, this timescale is phrased in future tense, suggesting unease of the past.

therefore, would not have possessed the generous rights they were granted. I will defend this claim by investigating the femininity of the Virgin in relation to this perception within the Christian church, citing evidence from the Old English play *Advent* and Italian narrative poem *Divine Comedy*, which presents Mary as an exact counterpart to the heroic male figure—a unique characterization of the Marian cult that began flourishing in the sixth century.[3] Then, I will turn our lens upon the women of Anglo-Saxon England and an analysis of their legal and customary rights as these pertain to family law, occupation, and political leadership roles. Much emphasis will be placed on their distinction within the Christian church and Anglo-Saxon worship of the Virgin Mary, which contributes to the positive idealization of women in Anglo-Saxon England.

This paper emphasizes the representation of Mary as a woman in Old English texts and the value of liturgical analysis from a literary standpoint. It asks its audience to review a controversial ideology from the perspective of women with respect and thoughtfulness, and to reevaluate the role of Mary and her purpose in Christian culture. Perhaps, within these pages, you will redefine your purpose.

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[3] Jacqueline Pollard, "Mary's Advent in Anglo-Saxon England," Jacqueline A. Pollard (Wordpress, February 10, 2017), https://japollard.com/anglo-saxon-literature/marys-advent-in-anglo-saxon-england/.

Fig. 1, Giambattista Tiepolo, *L'Immacolata Concezione*, 1696-1770, Spain.

Introduction

The first references to Christianity, an Abrahamic monotheistic religion, date back to the first century CE, with the death of Jesus Christ. It began as a small religion, cherished by a small gathering of Jewish descendants from the Roman province of Judea, a mountainous terrain in the southern part of Israel. These worshippers gathered to discuss Jesus's teachings of love, miracles and healing, and the promise of salvation and eternal life. It is through these devotions that Christianity was able to spread quickly, to become the most widespread religion in the Greco-Roman world. After the Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as his personal religion before his death in 337 CE—the first Roman emperor to do so—Rome began to persecute pagans and, by the end of the fourth century, Christianity had become the state religion.[4]

It was not until the fifth century, however, that Christianity spread from mainland Europe and Asia Minor. When three Germanic tribes—the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes—invaded Britain, combined their identities, and became known as the Anglo-Saxons,[5] they brought their own pagan religious identity with them. Christianity, which first entered Britain in perhaps the early third century, responded with an effort to evangelize throughout Great Britain when Pope Gregory I sent a group of missionaries, led by Augustine of Canterbury, to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and converted King Aethelberht to Christianity in 597;[6] however, further progress against paganism was not easy. After King Aethelberht died in 616, he was replaced by a pagan ruler, who adopted certain Christian customs while retaining other, pagan practices.[7] This history of conversion was documented by the venerable Bede, arguably the first historian of

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[4] R. Malcolm Errington, "Constantine and the Pagans." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 29, no. 3 (1988): 309-318.
[5] Christine G. Clark, "Women's Rights in Early England," *BYU Law Review* no. 1 (1995): 207-236.
[6] Alison Hudson, "Religion in the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms." British Library. Accessed October 4, 2022. https://www.bl.uk/anglo-saxons/articles/religion-in-anglo-saxon-kingdoms.
[7] Ibid.

Christianized Britain, in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*,[8] a history of Christian Churches in England, completed in 731 CE. The purpose of this chronicle was to document the conflict between the pre-schism Roman Rite[9] and Celtic Christianity. However, Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* now remains the oldest surviving chronicle of Anglo-Saxon history and serves as a foundation for English national identity.

It is within the pages of *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* we find the only literary hymn to survive in its entirety from the Anglo-Saxon period. Residing at the bottom margin sits the earliest known version of *Caedmon's Hymn*, a non-Christian, spiritual poem attributed to a native Northumbrian peasant named Caedmon:[10]

> Nū scylun hergan hefaenrīcaes Uard,
> metudæs maecti end his mōdgidanc,
> uerc Uuldurfadur, suē hē uundra gihwaes,
> ēci dryctin ōr āstelidæ
> hē ǣrist scōp aelda barnum
> heben til hrōfe, hāleg scepen.
> Thā middungeard moncynnæs Uard,
> eci Dryctin, æfter tīadæ
> firum foldu, Frēa allmectig.
>
> Now [we] must honour the guardian of heaven,
> the might of the architect, and his purpose,
> the work of the father of glory
> as he, the eternal lord, established the beginning of wonders;
> he first created for the children of men
> heaven as a roof, the holy creator
> Then the guardian of mankind,

---

[8] Translated into English from Latin, the title reads: *Ecclesiastical History of the English People.*

[9] It is important to note that the Roman Rite is the primary liturgical rite of the Latin Church and was developed in the Latin language during the Roman empire. This usage of Latin was uncommon in the Anglo-Saxon context, which favored the vernacular as representation of the English national identity.

[10] Though this thesis focuses primarily on Christian ideology, noting the non-Christian hymn allows me to introduce the English national identity through the reference of Caedmon's firsthand perspective. Caedmon, who resided in Northumbia, an early medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdom, was a cow herdsman who fell asleep drunk and woke up with the gift of religious verse. Historians argue its religious intent, but they all agree the poem reflects the cosmology and spiritual world of Anglo-Saxon identity.

the eternal lord, afterwards appointed the middle earth,
the lands for men, the Lord almighty.

This hymn is important to the English national identity, because *Caedmon's Hymn* serves as a primary source for Anglo-Saxon identity *before* the expansion of Christianity. The hymn is considered religious but non-Christian, as it hints at spirituality through a ruler of the natural world but does not contain Christian particulars. Despite the absence of these details, this work is often referred to as a Christian hymn because of its inclusion within Bede's Latin *Historia ecclesiastica*, which only preserves the song in the interpretation of Bede, a monk at the monastery of Saint Peter.[11] I emphasize that, although Bede preserved *Caedmon's Hymn* in Latin, it is actually an Old English poem. His Latin translation of "frea allmectig," found in the last line, as *creavit omnipotens*, or "the Almighty who birthed," does not refer to a masculine lord.[12] Instead, that interpretation is thought to have originated from "Celtic, then Roman, missionaries needing to supplant, especially in the case of Freyja,[13] such unseemly competition for Mary."[14]

The inclusion of 'frea,' and its original meaning in *Caedmon's Hymn,* has sparked controversy amongst historians. Many believe Frēa allmectig refers to the Norse goddess Freyja, who, before the emergence of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England, represented sex and fertility. Because the word was written in the feminine gender within Norse, German, and Latin vernaculars, one may assume that Caedmon was referring to a feminine deity before translators

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[11] Ian N. Wood, "The Foundation of Bede's Wearmouth-Jarrow." *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (2010): 84-96.
St Peter's Church is one of three churches in the Parish of Monkwearmouth and was founded in 674 as one of the two churches of the Benedictine double monastery of Monkwearmouth–Jarrow Abbey.
[12] Throughout the years, new interpretations of *Caedmon's Hymn* emerge to cater to new vernaculars of the time; therefore, the adoption of *Caedmon's Hymn* as a Christian song derives from the interpretation of the translator only.
[13] Freyja, the Norse goddess of love, beauty, fate and fertility. Also known as Freya, Freija, Freja, Frea, Fröja, and Frøya, her name means "Lady."
[14] David Maurand, "Caedmon's Hymn," Caedmon's Hymn - Hwæt!, August 21, 2020, https://caedmonshymn.com/.

manipulated the meaning to fit Christian standards, which favored a singular masculine deity. Freyja's association with sex and beauty, which was also well-known in Norse mythology, was weaponized by Christian missionaries, who favored the pureness and virtue of the Virgin Mary, against the Norse gods:

> "Freyja's erotic qualities became an easy target for the new religion, in which an asexual virgin was the ideal woman [. . .] Freyja is called 'a whore' and 'a harlot' by the holy men and missionaries, whereas many of her functions in the everyday lives of men and women, such as protecting the vegetation and supplying assistance in childbirth were transferred to the Virgin Mary."[15]

Christianity brought new models of womanhood to England. Though the Virgin Mary and Freyja shared similar qualities, each woman was viewed quite separately from the other: Freyja, famous for her fertility and beauty, joined the Aesir tribe[16] to maintain spiritual peace and often achieved it through sex; Mary, patron saint of mankind, was beloved as the virgin mother of Jesus Christ. But for her purity, some theologians inferred, Jesus would not have been born without sin. Christianity favored Mary, whereas Freyja was viewed as an image of Eve, whose temptation in the Garden of Eden exposed humankind to sin and temptation. Mary was the vessel who carried the one to overcome sin.

The first reference to the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England comes from Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*. Traveling from Rome between 675 and 686, Benedict Biscop, Bede's teacher and the Anglo-Saxon abbot and founder of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow Priory, spread the Christian model of the Virgin.[17] This came as panel-paintings from the monastic church and Scripture: "imaginem . . . beatae Dei genetricis semperque uirginis Mariae, simul et duodecim

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[15] Britt-Mari Näsström, *Freyja: The Great Goddess of the North* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1995): 21.

[16] This word refers to the most prominent clan in the Norse religion, which Freyja joined after participating in the Aesir-Vanir War.

[17] Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England,* 146.

apostolorum."[18] Despite experiencing pregnancy and childbirth, Mary had been given the title of

ever-virgin, or *semper uirginis*, by Pope Siricus in 390.[19] As it is her body that bears, nurtures,

and protects the infant Christ, it is through her body that Mary accrues maternal power.[20] Her

embodiment of maternal power allowed Mary to be known as the mother of all mothers, and she

was worshipped as the ideal feminine[21] representation of mother, sister, daughter, and wife in

England. This perception of womanhood normalized Mary, invoking her as a familiar entity

similar to the women of Anglo-Saxon England.[22]

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[18] I will offer any and all necessary translations in the footnotes of this thesis. As most texts from the Anglo-Saxon period were written in Old English (though hardly any primary sources have survived in this language) and were converted into Latin by scholars and monks after this time, I will be providing translations in modern English for proper understanding. This text, originally written in Old English, then translated to Latin, translates into English as: "the image . . . Mary, the blessed mother of God and the ever-virgin, together with the twelve apostles."

[19] This was codified at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

[20] Mary Dockray-Miller, "The Maternal Performance of the Virgin Mary in the Old English 'Advent.'" *NWSA Journal*, no. 2 (2002): 38–55.

[21] For the purpose of this thesis, I refer to femininity as the embodiment of womanhood and the means of being a woman. This language is flexible to the reader's understanding, because I do not believe there is one "right" way to interpret femininity and I do not encourage one way of thinking. Femininity is what you identify it to be.

[22] Many things have changed since the process of this thesis began. Before, I wanted to focus on the adaptation of Freyja, Norse goddess, and how the ideals of both Pagan and Christian rulers of Anglo-Saxon England came to somewhat "combine" the roles of both Freyja and the Virgin Mary into a singular entity—which, then, would have been analyzed to pinpoint how this being, represented by the identification of the Virgin Mary alone, enhanced the experience of women in Anglo-Saxon England. Suitable evidence—some already presented in the introduction of this thesis—exists to back this case, but I now find the rejection of Freyja more compelling evidence than the combination of them. Freyja, in a sense, is everything the Christian Church does not want the Virgin Mary to be. Instead, I choose to identify the role of the Virgin alone and plan to return to the case of Freyja another time.

The Virgin Mary

Fig. 2, Diego Velazquez, *The Coronation of the Virgin*, oil on canvas,
1641-1644, Museo del Prado.

The figure of the Virgin Mary has meant many things in many cultures. Mary is honored in Muslim and New Age religions, but her presence receives the greatest significance within Christianity. Mary's identity within the Christian Church was built on the value of virginity; however, this identification has faced "multitudes of literary and artistic representation that have been manipulated by a myriad of ideologies, religious or political, to define the appropriate

positioning and agency of the feminine in culture and society."[23] Many cultures used virginity as

a sign of women's value, objectifying their pureness and sexuality through their anatomy. Mary

was perceived differently from the ordinary woman, conceiving without the pleasures of sexual

intercourse. Within the Christian faith Mary endures as both a virgin and a mother, and through

her Jesus Christ is born without sin. The role of women in religion—and, by extension, their

societal value—have often been measured by their biology: they cannot hold power in

themselves but they can grant it to someone else. Other ancient cultures privileged female

virginity and asserted examples of a virgin birth. Yet, although

> Different cultures have used virgin birth to assert man's natural distinction and closeness
> to the higher orders . . . It is characteristic of Christianity in particular, however, that the
> restraint of the lower 'animal' passions was a further necessary sign of man's superiority
> to beasts.[24]

To some extent, our need to distinguish ourselves from beasts demanded the suppression of the

passions and human sexuality. In the pre-Christian Roman empire, narratives of a virgin birth

were commonly used to symbolize a man's divinity.[25] However, the Christian concept of a virgin

birth arose from two traditions: "the Jewish belief that all is possible with God, and the Greek

view that some things are impossible in nature and that 'God does not even attempt such things

at all, but that he chooses the best out of the possibilities of becoming . . .'"[26] Through this

contradiction arose the Christian miracle of the virgin birth, signifying the power of God in

supernatural phenomena. Virginity enabled strength and purity, and possessed a magic inherited

from the classical world.[27] Therefore, the true power held by the Virgin Mary was envisioned

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[23] Mary Dockray-Miller, "The Maternal Performance of the Virgin Mary in the Old English 'Advent'," 38.
[24] Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2016): 34-50.
[25] Ibid, 34.
[26] Ibid, 39.
[27] Ibid, 48.

within her figure through the birth of Jesus, but her physical purity complimented the sinlessness bestowed upon her son at his birth. Christianity holds these two aspects separately, while also having them coexist to defend the Virgin's dual identity as mother and woman. Surely, one cannot be deemed a mother without first being called a woman.

In *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary*, Marina Warner stated she believed Christianity inherited a particular attitude toward virginity, but "Christian religion broadened the concept of virginity to embrace a fully developed ascetic philosophy."

Power in the Feminine

The iconography of the Virgin as a mother in Christianity influenced the roles of women in society, enabling them only within the boundaries of the familial household. Represented as the ideal mother, Mary was also an idealized depiction of femininity, virginity, and purity within the Church. Her identity as a virgin mother served the goals of Christianity, challenging prior pagan accounts of virgin births by implying the otherworldly or miraculous nature of Mary's parturition. Unlike Eve, Mary was meant to symbolize a sinless mother achieving power only through her son and the purity of her body.

Mary was a woman first, but this identification has been overshadowed by her maternity in the development of Christianity. Editors and critics of *Exeter Book*'s *The Advent Lyrics* often viewed the Virgin Mary "in traditional doctrinal terms, as the mother of God whose importance stems wholly from her relationship, both literal and metaphorical, with Christ."[28] Her body, in this context, only finds its power as a vessel for childbirth. It does not contribute to her power as a female and identifies her perpetual virginity as a responsibility instead of a miracle. Mary, in her role as a mother, is an enduring image in the Christian Church that challenges her embodiment:

> "Critical views of Mary's traditional femininity in *Advent*—a passivity shaped by its relation to men—tend to read Mary as an archetype idealized but never realized elsewhere in Old English literature. This critical tradition has consistently viewed Mary as a figure that must be interpreted metaphorically and thus disembodied. Such tradition has done so unconsciously, removing the material body from the text by interpreting it as a metaphor and discussing the Virgin, whose very epithet refers to her body, in terms that subordinate her to masculine desire and that relegate her existence to her relationships with masculine figures."[29]

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[28] Mary Dockray-Miller, "The Maternal Performance of the Virgin Mary in the Old English 'Advent'," 40.
[29] Ibid, 40-41. I do not use this text to reference Mary in a negative setting. In the context of this thesis, Mary does not represent a destructive or negative figure. Though I conclude she presents an unattainable ideal for ordinary women, I instead argue the iconography of Mary, provided by beliefs of the Church, gave Christian men these

The creator of Old English *Advent*'s unique perspective departs from its Anglo-Saxon contemporaries. The latter viewed traditional femininity as passive, a reproductive vessel that achieved its purpose only through sexual intercourse, whereas the *Advent* instead chose to celebrate Mary as a representation of womanhood, not motherhood. Celebrating Mary's femininity as a woman moved power from her womb to her entire being. Although her motherhood emphasized the importance of her womb's fertility, her womanhood expressed this divinity through Mary as one sacred entity. This sacredness derives from Mary's sinless conception, which identifies purity as more meaningful than fertility. In doing so, virginity becomes a sacred symbol of femininity and transforms the meaning of a woman's body. By de-sexualizing conception and questioning its Christian ideation, the *Advent* creator restored power to women and their ability to reproduce, releasing them from the goals of masculine desire. Lyric four, lines 71-103 of *Advent* acknowledges the contradiction of virginity, celebrates an unfathomable and miraculous conception, and amplifies an appropriate response by the Virgin:[30]

> Hail joy of women through the triumph of glory,
> the most noble of virgins across every corner of the earth
> that sea-dwelling men have ever heard spoken of—
> relate to us the mysteries which came to you from the heavens;
> how you ever took on your increasing, through the birthing of a child,
> never knowing any kind of coupling that the minds of men
> would understand. Truly we have never learned
> of anything like this happening in the days gone by,
> that you should take hold of this in your unique grace,
> nor need we look that event occurring any time ahead.

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unattainable standards, which they, then, applied to women of their time. Therefore, it is not the fault of the Virgin Mary for these expectations but man's.

[30] I use this sentence as a reasoning for Mary's conception without a human sexual partner, pushing emphasis through the Holy Spirit. It is interesting to find the speaker of *Advent* depicting "sea-dwelling men" as "never knowing any kind of coupling that the minds of men / would understand" while simultaneously acknowledging these same sea-dwelling men celebrate "the birthing of a child" and "your mighty maidenhead not [being] destroyed," though they "have never learned / of anything like this . . ." Because the author of *Advent* puts clear rebuttal in the hypocrisy of this specific Christian celebration, it seems important for me to highlight this hypocrisy in the name of the Virgin Mary, too.

Indeed that troth indwells within you worthily,
now that you have borne that glory majestic
within your breast, and your mighty maidenhead
was not destroyed. And as all children of men
have sown in their sorrows, so they will soon reap—
conception is a killing to them.

So spoke the Blessed Virgin, sainted Mary
filled always with her victory:

"What is this wonderment at which you all
stand amazed, and mourning lament your cares,
O son of Salem and his daughter too?
Curious, you inquire how I kept my virgin state
and its warding hand and also became the mother
of the famous Measurer's Son. However,
this is not a mystery knowable by men,
yet Christ revealed how in the kinswoman
dear to David that the sin of Eve is wholly turned aside,
her curse cast down, and the weaker kind glorified.[31]
A hope is taken up so that a blessing may abide
in both men and women together, now
and always for all time to come in the highest
delight of angels with the True Father." (71-103)[32]

In lyric four, Mary questions the prosaic understanding of maternity and virginity. She asks men

to explain their celebration of the virgin birth, to which they reply it was something

unfathomable and incomprehensible. If humanity were not meant to fully understand the glory of

a virgin birth, why would they celebrate Mary as if she were more than a mother? Why celebrate

all women as if they were as pure as she? Would it be more appropriate to call Mary divine or

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[31] The "weaker kind glorified" emphasizes that women are redeemed and given access to heaven because of Mary.

[32] It is important to note *The Advent Lyrics* had originally been written in its native Old English of the time. Therefore, the meaning of the English translations may have been skewed in order to transmit the interpretation and personal belief of the translator and does not perfectly express the original. This poem can be understood several ways, but I use it in this thesis as an identifier of the femininity and womanhood bestowed upon the Virgin Mary by a selective, unique audience of the Anglo-Saxon period.

one uniquely obedient to God—the New Eve? *Advent* reads: "Hail joy of women through the triumph of glory, / the most noble of virgins across every corner of the earth / . . . relate to us the mysteries which came to you from the heavens; . . ." This passage employs the plural noun *women* and identifies Mary as the *most noble of virgins*, but speaks as if it were only speaking to Mary. The passage implies that all women are capable of equality with the Virgin, and women are viewed in a positive light. This light serves as a metaphor for purity, which encourages women to be more like Mary. Indeed, "[i]n 325, the Council of Nicaea exhorted all women to follow [Mary's] example: 'The Lord looked upon the whole of creation, and he saw no-one to equal Mary. Therefore, he chose her for his mother. If therefore a girl wants to be called a virgin, she should resemble Mary.'"[33] The definition of a virgin entails wholeness, purity, and bodily integrity. The virgin body was not only pristine, but "the biblical images the Fathers applied to the birth of Christ reveal that they conceived of a virgin's body as seamless, unbroken, a literal epiphany of integrity."[34] This held true for Mary's *ante* and *postpartum* body, and emerged as an important aspect of orthodoxy in the early Church. It fortified the virgin body as natural and "the foremost image of purity."[35]

An emphasis upon the purity of the virgin body originated from biological beliefs in late antiquity. The hymen which, until modern times, was believed to seal off the womb and cause a girl to be 'infertile' until she experienced defloration,[36] encouraged virginity as the most important image.[37] However, these terms only applied to women. Men's bodies were not seen in

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[33] Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 68.

[34] Ibid, 73.

[35] Natural is used to describe the wholeness of the body at birth. In this context, virginity ought to be the natural state, as it references the untouched state of the hymen, which Mary keeps even after the birth of Christ. More on this topic in the following paragraph.

[36] At the time, cruel ceremonies of defloration were believed to have the ability to 'open' young girls, permitting fertility and menstruation. Normally, this would mark and complete the transition of 'girl' to 'woman.'

[37] It is important to note the hypocrisy of this statement under religious context. As Dr. Irven Resnick, my thesis director, said: "If virginity is equated with infertility, and infertility is incompatible with nature's goal or aim (the

the same way, as the absence of the hymen made men's bodies an incomplete and imperfect symbol of wholeness.[38]

In lyric four, *Advent* brings attention to this difference: "Curious, you inquire how I kept my virgin state / and its warding hand and also became the mother / of the famous Measurer's Son." The Virgin emphasizes the questioning nature of humankind, which celebrates a virgin birth without full knowledge of women's reproductive abilities. We witness firsthand how the shortcomings of ancient reproductive ideology confine women to household roles, highlighted by the hymen and the purpose of the Virgin herself. Mary Clayton, author of *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England*, acknowledges that the *Advent Lyrics* provides "'striking emphasis upon the virgin' even as '[the Virgin] Mary's importance, in the poet's view, is clearly the result of her role as *Dei genetrix*,[39] and she is viewed largely in Christological terms.'"[40] From Clayton's interpretation of the poem, it is clear that Clayton believes the cult of the Virgin Mary grew because the Virgin's cult emphasized her unique role as Mother of *God*, not her role as a mother in general.

Jane Chance's reading of the poem, however, "argues that the Virgin Mary of *Advent* presents an ideal Anglo-Saxon femininity that 'fulfills all of the roles normally available to women: young girl, virgin, bride, and mother.'"[41] Chance views Mary as a peaceweaver[42]

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preservation of the species), then why would pre-modern biology encourage virginity?" I answer with this: During the Anglo-Saxon period, science did not fully know or understand the function of women's bodies. Therefore, it was believed the hymen's purpose was to seal off the womb until it was forced open in religious ceremony. However, it is my own opinion when I say this ceremony had the intentions of "controlling" virginity and fertility. The root of this belief comes from the Church's definition of evil.

[38] Compared to Aristotle's biology, however, the male body is perfect and complete, and women's bodies are not. As noted by my thesis director: ". . . The female depends upon the male to reproduce. One must think, instead, that the loss of the hymen signifies the woman's incompleteness and imperfection."

[39] In English: "[the] Mother of God"

[40] Mary Dockray-Miller, "The Maternal Performance of the Virgin Mary in the Old English 'Advent'," 40.

[41] Ibid, 41.

[42] The term "peaceweaver" is used as a reference to someone who reconciles during disagreement.

between Jesus and humanity, and the peaceweaver is a traditional role for Anglo-Saxon women.

Women in Anglo-Saxon England were honored for their femininity, and for their nurturing and

protective nature. Perhaps, one may say the Virgin encouraged such behavior. Dockray-Miller

contends that,

> "For Chance, Mary's ideal femininity stems from her absolute success in a variety of roles, all of which entail that she subordinate herself to the desires of a masculine figure: the angel of annunciation, her son, her earthly husband, or a petitioning humanity."[43]

Chance's reference to subordinating herself to the desires of masculine figures invites a positive

comparison to Eve, who was exiled from the Garden of Eden for eating from the Tree of

Knowledge of Good and Evil. Unlike Mary, Eve asserts her independence and brings about a

dramatic and deleterious change in the human condition, which Mary will reverse.

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[43] Ibid, 41.

While undergoing research prior to the start of this thesis, I neglected to realize the Virgin specialized in more than being a mother. For Christianity, the recognition of Mary's femininity stems from her role as a mother, but I find it particularly important to mention she was also the servant for man, for she was born to serve the Church and her principal purpose was achieved in the birth of the Savior. Each role seems to coincide with the other, but they each hold drastically different importance in the larger story.

Mary v. Eve

In Christianity, virginity rarely preserved female independence.[44] Although Eve asserts her independence through the introduction of sin, Mary introduces the means of salvation. As Mary reverses Eve's impact on humanity, she becomes the inverse of Eve:

> "From virgin birth to virginity, from religious sign to moral doctrine, that transformed a mother goddess like the Virgin Mary into an effective instrument of asceticism and female subjection. Henry Adams wrote: 'The study of Our Lady . . . leads directly back to Eve, and lays bare the whole subject of sex.'"[45]

Because of the curse of Eve, Eve's twin roles as mother and temptress were linked to woman's subjection. In its early centuries, Christianity needs "to exempt the mother of Christ from tainted sexuality and to proclaim her virgin purity . . ."[46] That the Mother of God should be a virgin derived from the fathers of the early Church and their definition of evil.[47] Sexuality was viewed as the greatest human flaw and virginity was its opposite. Though this definition fails to recognize that renunciation does not overcome desire, it still endures in Christian symbolism: "The soul dies in lust as the body rots in death. Spiritual corruption mirrors bodily dissolution."[48] Because Mary gives birth to the redeemer, she conquers the post-Edenic natural law that man and woman must produce children through intercourse and the breaking of the hymen. Through the virgin birth, she escaped the debt of Adam and Eve[49] and introduced the fundamental idea "that the Incarnation of the godhead had overturned the Old Covenant of sin and death," finding its loveliest images in the concept of the Virgin: "She is the second Eve, mother of all the living in a new, spiritual sense."[50]

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[44] Maria Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 48.
[45] Ibid, 49.
[46] Ibid, 58.
[47] Ibid, 50: "Classical metaphysics contributed to the development of this belief, but the root of it was the Fathers' definition of evil."
[48] Ibid, 51. This association of sex, sin, and death is ancient.
[49] Ibid, 52.
[50] Ibid, 58.

Fig. 3, Titian (1490-1576), *The Fall of Man*, oil on canvas, 1550, Museo del Prado.

Women in Anglo-Saxon England

From Anglo-Saxon laws we may discover what women of various classes can and cannot do, especially in contrast with Anglo-Saxon men. An example derives from the ninth-century laws of King Alfred: "If a betrothed maiden commits fornication, if she is of ceorl[51] birth, sixty shillings compensation is to be paid to the surety . . . if she's a woman of six hundred wergild,[52] 100 shillings are to be given to the surety . . . if she's a woman of twelve hundred wergild, a 120 shillings are to be paid to the surety . . ."[53] The classification of sexual behavior is according to social rank, or "woman equals," which determine what woman can and cannot do.

However, it is from Anglo-Saxon penitential texts that "we learn how women, class, guilt, and penance are inextricably connected: 'If a mother slays her child, if she commits homicide, she shall do penance for fifteen years and never change except on Sunday .. . if a poor woman slays her child, she shall do penance for seven years . . .'"[54] Each case structures its prohibition to define a woman by class or sexual status. A 'woman' can often refer to a wife or a lower-class maiden, who is worth a certain amount, is measured materially or spiritually, but rarely is defined as 'woman.'[55] The Anglo-Saxon statements that a "woman should," a "woman does," a "woman cannot," and a "woman equals" symbolize misogyny in social action and classification more than they explain what "woman is":

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[51] Also spelled churl, a ceorl refers to a free peasant who formed the basis of society in Anglo-Saxon England. From Britannica: "[Their] free status was marked by [their] right to bear arms, [their] attendance at local courts, and [their] payment of dues directly to the king." Nineteenth century scholars often portrayed ceorls as peasant laborers in Anglo-Saxon democracy, but this was extinguished between the seventh and twelfth centuries.

[52] In Old English, wergild (also spelled wergild or weregild) meant "man payment." This typically refers to the amount of compensation paid by a person for an offense based on a man's value.

[53] Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, "The Clerics and the Critics: Misogyny and the Social Symbolic in Anglo-Saxon England," 24.

[54] Ibid, 24.

[55] Ibid, 24.

" . . . [T]he question of 'what is woman,' which would result in the answer: 'Woman is . . . ,' is not posed by the Anglo-Saxon vernacular literature (and, to the best of our knowledge, nor is it in the Latin)."[56]

In Anglo-Saxon culture, a woman is defined by her many roles in relation to a man: a wife, a relative of a man's family, a lover. However, rarely is a woman deemed a woman "in either the misogynist or existentialist senses of the term."[57] Evidenced in Christian clerical writings, the social subjectivity of the Anglo-Saxons relate historically and dialectically to the concept of gender. The concept of 'woman,' therefore, contains "components of self, psyche, and body [that] are most obviously at work in Christian didactic literature."[58] These contribute to the discussion of women in Anglo-Saxon England, because their representations of women change to adapt to religious context. To fully understand Anglo-Saxon women, we must first examine what "woman can" before approaching what "women cannot."

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[56] Ibid, 24-25.
[57] Ibid, 25.
[58] Ibid, 27.

Women's Rights in Anglo-Saxon England

Women in Anglo-Saxon England flourished more than their daughters and granddaughters did after the Norman Conquest in 1066. Anglo-Saxon women were treated as equals to their male counterparts, under law. They were allowed to hold legal and customary rights, had a say over family and land disputes, could intervene in public affairs, and participated in the legal system.[59] Noting these particular roles is important when describing Anglo-Saxon society, because these roles were commonly denied to women following this time period.

Legal and Customary Rights

In Anglo-Saxon England, women could hold, devise, inherit, and sell land under law. This included all three types of real property: bookland, folkland, and laenland. Bookland property referred to "hereditary tenure and the right of alienation, economic benefits based on demesne exploitation, and certain judicial rights and obligations."[60] This right gave Anglo-Saxon women power to alienate estates, making bookland the most valuable type of land to hold. In contrast, folkland and laenland offered less flexibility or autonomy. Folkland could not be alienated and was subject to vague reference to early Anglo-Saxon kingship. Laenland, on the other hand, was held by lease:

> "[T]he best-known form [of laenland] is the lease for a term of three lives, that is to say for the lifetime of the original lessee himself together with the lives of two [consecutive generations of] heirs."[61]

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[59] Prior to this thesis, I hypothesized that women of Anglo-Saxon England held fewer rights than their descendants of the Norman Conquest. I used women's rights from modern day as an appropriate scale, but I was gladly surprised to find I had been entirely wrong in my prediction. It is curious to follow how women's rights during the Anglo-Saxon period were diminished after 1066, but I will not be covering this within this thesis. However, I do encourage the reader to research this topic further. I highly recommend Christine G. Clark's "Women's Rights in Early England," which I reference below.

[60] Christine G. Clark, "Women's Rights in Early England," 209.

[61] Ibid, 209. This still applies to leaseholds in England today.

Women could receive and make grants for these types of lands. These grants could be held singly by women or jointly with their spouse; however, several historians question the extent to which women actually controlled their own land, stating, "[T]he real property she brought into the marriage remained in her possession, but its maintenance was vested in her husband; he held the land and could do with it whatever he wished except permanently alienate it from his wife's possession."[62] While this may have been true in many instances, Anglo-Saxon women also exercised property rights and met obligations for themselves:

> "F.M. Stenton argued that evidence of female ownership, control of, or connection with land can be found in the many still-existant feminine-based place names from the Anglo-Saxon period."[63]

This evidence comes from Anglo-Saxon women themselves, who used their land to procure religious merit for themselves and others. They also used land to gain political favor and to ensure their wills were upheld. These instances underscore women's rights in Anglo-Saxon England, because control over land provided them with economic, political, and societal advantages as well.

Family Law

In some situations, Anglo-Saxon women could choose whether or not to marry. Though marrying for political reasons was not uncommon, it was not forced. Usually, this type of marriage was made to reconcile two hostile tribes, and women in these marriages were called *peaceweavers*.[64]

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[62] Ibid, 209.
[63] Ibid, 212.
[64] Ibid, 211. This term also refers to the identity of the Virgin Mary, who serves as a peaceweaver between God and mankind.

While some Anglo-Saxon women could choose whether to marry, there is historical evidence that suggests they could also choose whether to reproduce. With reproductive rights comes the question of child custody:

> "With dissolution of the marriage, be it by divorce or death, comes the question of child custody. The Laws of Aethelberht state that if a woman 'wishes to depart with her children, she shall have half the goods.' However, they further state that '[i]f the husband wishes to keep [the children], [the wife] shall have a share of the goods equal to a child's.' It appears from this sequence of laws that the woman was presumptively the custodian of the children, losing them only if the man wanted them."[65]

It seems Anglo-Saxon women were valued as people, not just mothers. No records from Anglo-Saxon society reprimanding wives for barrenness have surfaced, and the laws of King Aethelberht do not reprimand women for barrenness—though they address who inherits her property, stating, "[I]f she does not bear a child . . ."

Family law also protected women and their children from being separated once the father died. Found in the Laws of Hlothhere and Eadric, "[i]f a man dies leaving a wife and child, it is right, that the child should accompany the mother."[66]A separate set of laws, called the Laws of Ine, also provided child support for children without a father: "If a husband has a child by his wife and the husband dies, the mother shall have her child and rear it, and [every year] 6 shillings shall be given for its maintenance."[67]

Political Leadership

Anglo-Saxon rulers performed many functions, and Anglo-Saxon women were allowed to do all of them. "Kings led their warriors into battle, distributed gifts, resolved disputes,

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[65] Ibid, 211.
[66] Ibid, 211.
[67] Ibid, 211.

granted land, and supported the ecclesia."[68] Women performed the same tasks as their male counterparts:

> "For example, Queen Aethelflaed led armies, built fortresses, and sent expeditions against the Welsh and the Danes in Leicester. Queen Welthow honored Beowulf with gifts just as the king did. A man and his wife, Brihtric and Aelfswith, asked for the queen to uphold their will. Women also granted land and supported ecclesiasti."[69]

Women in Anglo-Saxon England were granted more than private influence. They enjoyed the "widest liberty of intervention in public affairs,"[70] because they were viewed as capable leaders, ruling alongside their husbands in life and ruling after their husbands met death.

Legal System

Just like Anglo-Saxon men, women of Anglo-Saxon England were eligible to receive wergild payments if assaulted. The Laws of Alfred state that the amount of compensation must match the woman's social rank, and the Laws of Ine state "[i]f the person [under whose protection the victim has been] is an abbot or an abbess, he [or she] shall share [the wergeld] with the king."[71]

Not only does the legal system protect women, it also holds them accountable for their own crimes, not those committed by their spouses. For example, "Wihtred, a late seventh century king, issued a law stating that '[i]f a husband, without his wife's knowledge, makes offerings to devils, he shall forfeit all his goods.' Only if the wife participates are her goods forfeit."[72] This indicates women were viewed independently from their husbands, not as an extension of them.

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[68] Ibid, 212.
[69] Ibid, 220.
[70] Ibid, 212.
[71] Ibid, 221.
[72] Ibid, 221.

However, this perspective shifted drastically after Norman Conquest, which viewed women more as complements to men than as autonomous individuals.

Anglo-Saxon Women and the Christian Church

Anglo-Saxon women and the Christian Church shared a unique relationship prior to the Norman Conquest. Though marriage was likely the preferred path for Anglo-Saxon women, there were many occupations pursued outside of marital vows. Occupations within the Church were often sought after, as they provided personal freedom:

> "Lina Eckenstein noted that '[t]he right to self-development and social responsibility which the woman of to-day so persistently asks for, is in many ways analogous to the right which the convent secured to womankind a thousand years ago [during the Anglo-Saxon period].'"[73]

The Church was one place both men and women could receive an education. Though women were educated to teach Christianity across the continent, "Aldhelm . . . described the course of study of the nuns at the monastery of Barking as including scripture study, history, and grammar."[74] In fact, religious women were so educated, Aldhelm asked nuns at Barking to critique his book *De Virginitate*, which records the martyrology of female saints. Aldhelm, treating religious women, whether virgins, the formerly married, or the widowed, remarks, "[T]he nuns of Barking become the heirs and followers of a tradition of sainthood more fully and humanly varied."[75] He notes how the inclusion of male *and* female saints signify a communion of sainthood, representing "the union of all varieties of virginity into a mystic One, compounded of male and female but beyond the specificity of gender: 'there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ.'"[76] He concludes that, in the Christian Church, male and female saints are equal. This early recollection observes the significant influence of religious women, as "Talbot,

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[73] Ibid, 220.
[74] Ibid, 220.
[75] Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1992): 109.
[76] Ibid, 109.

for instance, observed: 'Never, perhaps, has there been such an age in which religious women exercised such great power.'"[77]

Another example comes from Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*, where he retells the life of Hilda, a powerful abbess of a double house in Whitby.[78] He recalls how "[h]er prudence was so great, that not only indifferent persons, but even kings and princes, as occasion offered, asked and received her advice."[79] Bede honors Hilda more than any other women in his *Historia ecclesiastica* and credits her influence: "Because of her outstanding piety and grace, she was not only an example of holy life to those who lived in her monastery, but provided an opportunity for repentance and salvation (*occasionem salutis et correctionis ministrauit*) to many who lived far away who heard the happy news of her diligence and virtue."[80] Her rule produced five bishops, three of them bishops of York, when less than fifteen bishops existed in all of England at the time.

Another example of Hilda's power and leadership comes from *Caedmon's Hymn*. After receiving the gift of verse in the vernacular, Caedmon was brought before Hilda:

> "After hearing him sing what he remembered from his dream, [Hilda] encouraged [Caedmon] to test his vocation as a monk, learning to develop his divinely-inspired creative gift within the resources of the monastic life in the Abbey, which included regular study of Scripture. Here he was 'instructed in the whole course of sacred history (*sacrae historiae*). He learned all he could . . . by listening (*quae audiendo*), and then memorizing it and ruminating over it.' He then transformed his insights into 'the most melodious verse' (*carmen dulcoissimum*)."[81]

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[77] Ibid, 4.
[78] Christine G Clark, "Women's Rights in Early England," 220.
It was common for early religious foundations to be double houses. Double houses held "monastery and nunnery side by side, always in Anglo-Saxon England ruled by an abbess."
[79] Ibid, 220.
[80] V. K. McCarty, "Abbess Hilda: Shining Light on the Northumbrian Renaissance," 9.
[81] Ibid, 9.

Caedmon's Hymn represents pivotal progress in historical literature, as it serves as an example of transition from Latin to English verse. Since Bede "'presented the story as one of the most dramatic results of Hild's[82] work at Whitby,' it also signals the significant shift in the work undertaken at the Whitby scriptorium from oral to written transmission of vernacular text."[83] Caedmon has been named the first Old English Christian poet[84] for this early literature, and:

> Caedmon's "memory has been honoured as the poet who gave early literature its Christian materials in place of the monsters, heroes, pagan gods, and mythology which were the stuff which the bards handled . . . [H]e was the first to provide people with the scriptural narratives in this popular form and his must have been a most exceptionally effective influence in the spread of Christianity."[85]

Despite the beginning of Viking invasions in 793 CE and the destruction of the double houses[86] by 870 CE,[87] female saints such as Hilda continued to flourish under the Christian Church. However, a tendency to view women as "threats to men's salvation" was spreading.[88] After Viking invasions destroyed the majority of the double houses and their reconstruction was banned, monasteries and nunneries were rebuilt separately. While these physical changes deprived women of much of their previous influence in the church, "there continued to be many abbesses whose lives were venerated by having sainthood bestowed upon them."[89] Women held their power while simultaneously diminishing their governing role in the Church. Despite the changing narrative, women exercised their unique relationship with the Christian Church and

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[82] Hild is the Latin version of the name Hilda. Bede refers to Hilda, as he does to the rest of his *Historia ecclesiastica*, in Latin. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be referring to the abbess in her English name.
[83] Ibid, 10.
[84] Though Caedmon is considered a Christian poet, whether *Caedmon's Hymn* should be considered a Christian poem is trivial. I argue *against* its Christian title in the introduction of this thesis. See page four.
[85] Ibid, 10.
[86] In Anglo-Saxon society, double houses, also called dual monasteries, were the conjunction of monasteries and nunneries into one institution. They shared one church and other facilities.
[87] Patricia Ranft, *Women and Spiritual Equality in Christian Tradition* (New York City, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998): 121.
[88] Christine G Clark, "Women's Rights in Early England," 220.
[89] Ibid, 220.

greatly influenced Anglo-Saxon England by taking up non-religious professions. Anglo-Saxon

women who did not choose to marry or enter religious life in the Church found lucrative

occupations as nurses, housemaids, and bakers. The most important, however, were embroiders

and weavers:

> "That women with these skills were sought after is evidenced by Wynflaed bequeathing to her granddaughter, Eadgifu, two female slaves who were skilled weavers and embroiders. Indeed, Leofgyo, an Anglo-Saxon noblewoman at the time of the Conquest, with the skill of her needle may have preserved her estate after her husband fell at Hastings in 1066. She was allowed to keep her estate and was granted revenue from other lands so she could teach the daughter of Godric the Sheriff to embroider."[90]

Though Anglo-Saxon women found themselves in various occupations, each occupation was

valued for its creativity and each woman was honored for her contribution to society.

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[90] Ibid, 220.

Fig. 4, *Caedmon and St. Hilda*, stained glass, Auckland Castle Chapel.

The Virgin Mary and Anglo-Saxon Women

Without the example of the Virgin Mary, it is unlikely that Anglo-Saxon women would have been viewed as favorably by the Church or seen as equals to their male counterparts. They would not have been allowed to receive an education in the Church, hold occupations outside the Church, and hold positions of power in their daily lives. They would not have had the right to own land, to keep their children following divorce, or to experience autonomy from their spouses. However, we must then ask how the Virgin can be applied to the lives of Anglo-Saxon women. By first identifying the importance of the Virgin to femininity, then applying this femininity to Anglo-Saxon women, one can observe its positive reinforcement within English society. The Virgin's positive representation within Anglo-Saxon culture is the key to the status of Anglo-Saxon women:

> "While Anglo-Saxon England can seem vastly foreign and distant, its culture provides an early example of a type of female spirituality and Marian devotion focused (somewhat precariously) on the female body and the maternity of the Virgin Mary. The culture of England before the Norman Conquest (1066), like most others, almost always presented or discussed Mary in positive terms, celebrating her for her humility and purity."[91]

Though these representations celebrate Mary positively, it also celebrates her as a passive and objectified maternal figure; however, "[i]ndeed, such passivity and objectification are integral parts of the overwhelming virtue of the Virgin Mary."[92] In fact, Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, an Italian narrative poem, provides a sublime history of devotion to Mary in the closing cantos of *Paradiso*, where Saint Bernard of Clairvaux praises the Virgin Mary for these attributes:

> Thou Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son,
>   Humble and high beyond all other creature,
>   The limit fixed of the eternal counsel,

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[91] Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England,* 38-39.
[92] Ibid, 39.

> Thou art the one who such nobility
>> To human nature gave, that its Creator
>> Did not disdain to make himself its creature.
>
> Within thy womb rekindled was the love,
>> By heat of which in the eternal peace
>> After such wise this flower has germinated.
>
> Here unto us thou art a noonday torch
>> Of charity, and below there among mortals
>> Thou art the living fountain-head of hope.
>
> Lady, thou art so great, and so prevailing,
>> That he who wishes grace, nor runs to thee,
>> His aspirations without wings would fly. (Canto 33, lines 1-15)[93]

Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, author of *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*, cites this "canto of apotheosis" as ". . . a summation and as a goal of the entire *Divine Comedy* . . ."[94] The glory given to Mary is special, because it is glory communicated to her and, by extension, to mankind by the grace of Jesus Christ. The beginning paradox, 'Virgin mother, daughter of thy Son, / Humble and high beyond all other creature,' positions Mary next to mankind—the same mankind to which Dante and his readers belonged. Mary serves as "the personal embodiment of the supreme virtues of which humanity was made capable through the gift of grace: in her, as Bernard said, 'is every goodness found in any creature.'"[95]

It is hard to depict Anglo-Saxon ideals from primary sources, because there are not many surviving texts from Anglo-Saxon England to begin with. Therefore, one must look to later literary works, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, to come to a conclusive resolution on Anglo-

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[93] Dante Alighieri. "The Divine Comedy, Canto XXXIII." Canto XXXIII. Accessed November 1, 2022. https://americanliterature.com/author/dante-alighieri/book/the-divine-comedy/paradiso-canto-xxxiii.
[94] Jaroslav Jan Pelikan. *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2011): 140.
[95] Ibid, 142.

Saxon ideation. Literature such as the *Divine Comedy* creates cultural tone, especially in the

interpretation of the Virgin, because the early gospels of Anglo-Saxon England do not offer the

story of Mary's early life and provenance. As the Anglo-Saxon Christian Church aimed only to

introduce Jesus in their gospels, Mary is introduced as a maiden about to receive the

Annunciation.[96] This focus upon Mary is not uncommon. Indeed, it carries pagan tradition and

was actually favored by Anglo-Saxon clergy:

> "Mary's role in the early Anglo-Saxon liturgy must have been intimately linked to the introduction in England of the four Roman feasts, as this naturally gave rise to a need for mass and Office texts for these days."[97]

The need for the mass and Office texts in Anglo-Saxon society contributed to the importance of

the four Roman feasts.[98] With this came calendars and liturgical manuscripts attesting to the

addition of vigils and octave celebrations, and "this liturgy was embellished with tropes and

sequences imported during the Benedictine reform."[99] Apart from these bodies of evidence, it is

difficult to determine how the Virgin Mary was celebrated in the liturgy of the early Anglo-

Saxon church: "Apart from *De laude Dei*,[100] . . . it seems that the masses and Offices for the four

feasts were the only liturgical manifestation of devotion to Mary in the early centuries."[101]

Anglo-Saxon manuscripts from the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries yield only fragments of

sacramentaries and even less material referencing the Divine Office:

> "Since the Purification, Annunciation, Assumption and Nativity of the Virgin were introduced from Rome, it is probable that texts from there also found their way to

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[96] Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2009): 4.

[97] Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England,* 52.

[98] This refers to the four Marian feasts: Mary's Purification, Annunciation, Assumption and Nativity, which celebrates the (traditional but unnecessary) purification of the virgin mother after childbirth, the taking of her body and soul to Heaven, the conception announcement given by angel Gabriel to the Virgin, and the birth of Mary.

[99] Ibid, 61.

[100] From Latin, "Of the praise of God"

[101] Ibid, 61.

England to supplement the liturgical material imported by the missionaries and by Anglo-Saxon book-collectors such as Benedict Biscop."[102]

Despite the lack of evidence from the Anglo-Saxon liturgy, the memory of the Virgin survives in later religious literature, such as *Advent Lyrics* and *Divine Comedy*, and historical documentations, such as Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* and Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*. From these, we find how Christianity influenced the life of women in the Anglo-Saxon period. However,

> "It is easy to overestimate the actual influence that the church exerted on the hearts and minds of the Anglo-Saxon populace at large because our sole contemporary chronicle of events is the sanguine account of its advance that Bede gives in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which works towards the conclusion that 'many of the Northumbrian race, both noble and simple, have laid aside their weapons and taken the tonsure, preferring that they and their children should take monastic vows rather than train themselves in the art of war.'"[103]

This statement demands that we recognize biases within religious histories and chronicles. As most documentation from the Anglo-Saxon era is also produced by men, one must navigate the male perspective in order to find a woman's reality. In other words, surviving literature, complete or partial, from Anglo-Saxon England must be read carefully, as it, as well as Christianity as a religion, is based on patriarchal concepts. To discover an Anglo-Saxon woman's reality, a *woman* must interpret the information and form their own conclusion. For instance, Stephanie Hollis, in her *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate*, concludes:

> ". . . [Jane] Chance assumes a society thoroughly penetrated by [patristic conceptions]: 'There were thus two archetypes of women that ordered the Anglo-Saxon social world,' she writes, 'two social roles of women, typified by the biblical contrast between

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[102] Ibid, 52.
[103] Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate*, 6.

Ave/Eva[104] . . . Anglo-Saxon woman modeled herself upon the ideal exemplar of the Virgin Mary, the epitome of both secular and ecclesiastical perfection.'"[105]

As Christianity became widely accepted by Anglo-Saxon society, biblical doctrines put great emphasis on virginity as a virtue. It makes sense that women would then model themselves after the exemplar of the Virgin, because Mary portrays a softness bestowed by Christianity. Not only is she the Mother of God, she is the ideal depiction of perfection. Anglo-Saxon women benefited from this Christian idea and from a similar perception of women in the Anglo-Saxon era. The positive representation of the Virgin Mary as nurturer, lover,[106] and mother was received by all and, as Anglo-Saxon women led godly lives, they came to be regarded as holy—by a comparison to the Virgin Mary. Anglo-Saxon women gained most of their freedom in English society from the powerful depiction of Mary in Christianity, because she embodied everything mankind could be. As described by Mary Dockray-Miller:

> "Such maternal power is based in nurtur-ance rather than domination, love rather than fear; maternal power is no less strong because of its origins . . . The power implicit in Mary's maternal per-formance is the power of the nurturer; caring or nurturance is not taken by the child but given by the mother."[107]

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[104] "Ave" is the first word the angel Gabriel said to Mary at the Annunciation. "Ave," which is "Eva" backwards, illustrates the reversal of Eve's sin. Therefore, Ave is Mary and Eva is Eve.

[105] Ibid, 6.

[106] I do not reference Mary as a lover because the Christian conception of the Virgin depicted her as such. Rather, I argue she shares love for Jesus in the way only a mother can. No one can replicate this love through devotion and prayer; instead, it is a type of love that can only be exchanged from parent to child, mother to son. This same concept of love is shared between Anglo-Saxon mothers and their own children, which is why I find this term favorable when describing the Virgin in comparison to them.

[107] Mary Dockray-Miller, "The Maternal Performance of the Virgin Mary in the Old English 'Advent'," 47.

Conclusion

When I first began my research on this thesis topic, I hypothesized what I believed the outcome would be. Indeed, I presumed that the Virgin Mary would be the sole source for the proper representation of women in Anglo-Saxon England, and that women, before the Virgin was widely accepted by the Anglo-Saxon Christian Church, did not profit from their traditional roles within Anglo-Saxon society. I am glad to discover that I had been wrong. In fact, it seems Anglo-Saxon women had flourished before the introduction of the Virgin Mary, and the presence of the Virgin only enhanced their already positive status.[108] Despite disproving my own hypothesis, one question kept appearing throughout this thesis: If Anglo-Saxon women did not need the representation of the Virgin Mary to improve their daily lives, why did the presence of the Virgin in the Christian Church flourish within Anglo-Saxon society?

The iconography of the Virgin Mary has been interpreted differently by many cultures for two thousand years. However, her salient image is as the sinless Mother of God. Though Christianity is unusual in its image of the Virgin, she is meant to be a classical representation of natural human generation:

> "The Christian religion was unusual in using the idea to set an enduring seal of approval on asceticism, but its use of the virgin birth as the key to the argument that Jesus was the son of God was classical in spirit, and dependent on long-lasting and erroneous ideas about human generation that were also inherited from classical philosophy."[109]

Theologians and Church Fathers began paying more attention to Mary during the second half of the fourth century. During this time, we see ecclesiological discourse on the Mary-Church

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[108] Since women already had a high status, an easier answer would be stating that the veneration of Mary was interpreted to fit this status. However, that is not the point I want to make and I do not want an easy answer. The answer I have provided in this thesis serves as the conclusion from my own hypothesis of the outcome. As this thesis covers controversial topics on religion, I want to clarify that everyone will interpret it differently. In fact, I highly encourage it—and I do not believe in one "right" answer. If this thesis did not create discussion, then the point of its creation would have been missed.

[109] Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 34.

parallel emerge: "After the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), there is a sharp increase in the level of Marian doctrine and devotion."[110] Mary's role as the Virgin Mother of the Savior began to influence the faith of the Church, and "Christians began using the texts of Scripture to reflect on the mystery of this woman, in whom the Lord's extraordinary intervention was interwoven with her own faith and openness."[111] Her conduct provided a model for Christian life. It was not until the fifth century, however, that Marian literature influenced the field of homiletics. These homilies were remarkably favorable, as "the development of panegyrics direct[ed] the attention of Christians toward the moral figure of the Mother of the Lord. She became, not only an object of admiration and exaltation, but also the model for imitation with regard to the Christian moral life and the practice of Gospel virtues."[112]

The Virgin represented everything humanity was not. Humankind could not compare to her purity because of the sins of Adam and Eve, so Christian followers sought salvation through the Church. They sought to imitate the Virgin as closely as possible, and within Anglo-Saxon society, women most nearly represented the Virgin. Anglo-Saxon women embodied the virtue of the Virgin and benefitted from it until the Norman Conquest.

This thesis discusses various topics concerning the Virgin Mary and Anglo-Saxon women. I do not believe there is one "correct" way to interpret the information I have provided in this work. Instead, I wished to contribute to the discussion of the Virgin Mary, adding to the conversation the idea that, if it had not been for the religious depiction of Mary as sinless or *immaculata*, Anglo-Saxon women would not have been viewed as positively and, therefore,

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[110] Luigi Gambero. *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought* (Ignatius Press, 1999), 19.
[111] Ibid, 19.
[112] Ibid, 20.

would not have possessed the generous rights they were granted. Instead, I found that

Christianity flourished because of the positive roles women performed in Anglo-Saxon England.
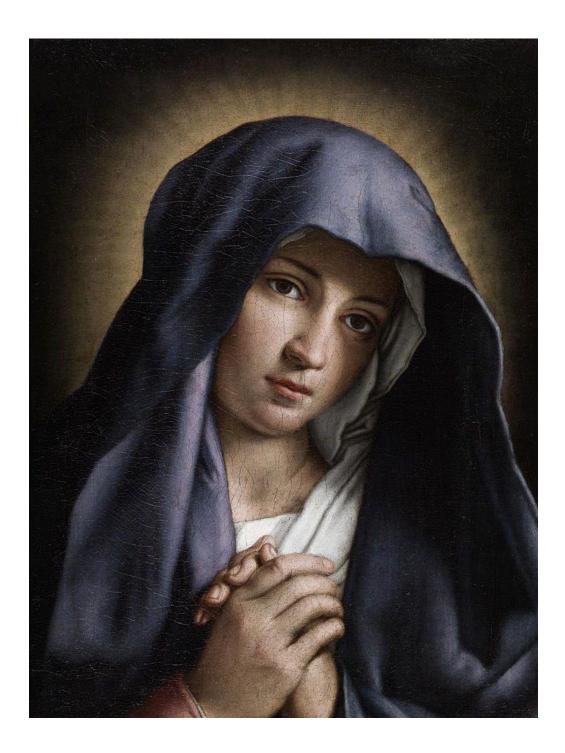
Fig. 5, Giovanni Battista Salvi da Sassoferrato (1609-1685), *Portrait of the Young Virgin Mary*, oil on canvas.

Men do not fear a powerful hostile army as the powers of hell fear the name and protection of Mary. —Saint Bonaventure

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