

The problem of Cross-dressing in *Ælfric's Life of St Eugenia*

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Abstract: *Ælfric of Eynsham's Life of St Eugenia* is an account of a holy cross-dresser's life who infiltrates and eventually heads a patriarchal community of monks in the vicinity of Alexandria and, following the exposure of her real sex, establishes a community of virgins and chaste widows in Rome. The present article attempts to reveal the narratorial masculine authority that contests Eugenia's attempts at her own self-representation as a woman as well as counters the Latin source's representation of Eugenia as a *miles Christi*.

Keywords: *Ælfric of Eynsham, life of Saint Eugenia, hagiography, Old English literature, transvestite saints*

Ælfric of Eynsham, an Anglo-Saxon monk, homilist and scholar, composed his adaption of the *Life of Saint Eugenia*¹ around 998 A.D., drawing upon one of Latin recensions of the legend. The legend falls into a category of transvestite saints' lives (Szarmach 1990, 146). Eugenia not only is a transvestite, but also, in disguise of a man, presides over a monastic community. Thus apart from conventions of sexuality she also flouts conventions of patriarchy in that she changes the appearance of her sex with a view to empowering to such an extent as only men are entitled to. As Valerie R. Hotchkiss observes, in the numerous lives of holy cross-dressers of the early Middle Ages,² "the transvestite saint, by inverting signs of gender, illustrates problematic views on the inferiority of women as well as anxiety about female

¹ Henceforth indicated as *Life of Eugenia* followed by verse number. All quotations are taken from Walter Skeat (ed.). (1881–1890). *Ælfric's Life of Saints*. London: Early English Texts Society. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. I use here throughout the parallel Modern English translation that accompanies the Old English text taken from this edition.

² Hotchkiss offers an overview of transvestite saints' lives in *Clothes make the man* (2012, 13).

sexuality” (Hotchkiss 2012, 13). She also aptly points out that early Christianity was unlike the Late Middle Ages “when Mary was venerated and women were developing their own relationship with the mystical divine” (Hotchkiss 2012, 16); in times when the legend of St Eugenia was textualized “masculine religious imagery predominated” (Hotchkiss 2012, 16).

Indeed, in the Latin Life, Eugenia grows up as a Christian in a predominantly masculine world and is idealised as a *miles Christi*. The fullness of being that she attains as *miles Christi* by denying her femininity conforms to the idea of gender discussed by Thomas Walter Laqueur in *Making Sex* (1990), where he argues that in antiquity there was one gender and it was male; women were quite literally considered inverted males by Galen, who “demonstrated at length that women were essentially men in whom a lack of vital heat – of perfection – had resulted in the retention, inside, of structures that in the male are visible without” (Laqueur 1990: 4). Laqueur maintains that in antiquity and later periods “men and women were arrayed according to their degree of metaphysical perfection, their vital heat, along an axis, whose telos was male gave by the late eighteenth century to a new model of radical dimorphism, of biological divergence” (Laqueur 1990: 6). Evidence gleaned from early Christian sources by Valerie R. Hotchkiss, from the author of the *Gospel of Thomas*, to Augustine (354–430) and Ambrose (333–397), supports a view that holiness is achieved by suppressing femininity and gaining spiritual manliness.³

The anonymous author of the Latin Life of St Eugenia is pervasively influenced by such a view on femininity, praising Eugenia for acting “viriliter” [manly] (*Vita*, Chapter VII) as well as depicting Eugenia as a *miles Christi*.⁴ Ælfric, however, limits the number of verbal echoes to Eugenia’s spiritual virility prominent in the source, while laying greater emphasis on Eugenia’s femininity. Contrary to the model advanced by Thomas Walter Laqueur, spiritual masculinity is not, in fact, the *telos* towards which the female saints must direct their spiritual growth. In Anglo-Saxon England, famous

³ *The Gospel of Thomas* (ca. 140) quotes Christ as saying, “Every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven”. Later, Augustine (354–430) praises Perpetua’s dream of sex inversion as a sign of her “manly spirit” and describes his mother as one who wore the clothes of a woman but had a “virile faith”. Ambrose (333–397) emphatically claims that the woman who serves Christ above all becomes like a man (“vir”) (Hotchkiss 2012, 16).

⁴ Henceforth indicated as *Vita* followed by chapter number. All quotations are taken from *Patrologia Latina* 73, 605–620. Unless otherwise stated, translations are mine.

for its monastic double houses,⁵ such religious women as Lady Hilda (c. 614–680), the founding abbess of Whitby Abbey, and *Æþelþryþ* of Ely (d. 679), the founder of the double monastery at Ely, had achieved positions of authority and leadership; hence, *Ælfric*, living at the close of the Anglo-Saxon period, was keen to formulating the parameters of female power, authority and autonomy in his *Saints' Lives*. In Anglo-Saxon England, there had been a time-honoured and well-established tradition of female leaders that presided over significant monastic communities, especially in early Anglo-Saxon church, so *Ælfric* may well have found redundant the insistence, so emphatically voiced in the source, on Eugenia's spiritual virility as a sanction to recognize her ability and permissibility to be a leader. Although both the Latin source and *Ælfric's* adaptation testify to an equally limited view of female agency and autonomy in religious communities, *Ælfric's* idea of femininity stands out as positive in the sense that in the Old English Life the contours of female piety are more sharply defined and women are far less dependent on the masculine terms of representing religious experience.

The present article turns to Thomas Walter Laqueur's one-sex model to elucidate the shift of emphasis on Eugenia's sexuality between the Latin source and *Ælfric's* adaptation. The major change that *Ælfric* made to the legend results from his manipulation of the notion of Eugenia's spiritual manhood that is operative in the source; *Ælfric* excises the notion of Eugenia's potential to become man spiritually to show that ideals of monasticism are not identical for men and women. A comparative method sensitive to the alterations brought by *Ælfric* to the Latin source makes it possible to explore Eugenia's body as a site of possibility where the culturally determined notion of femininity is materialised. *Ælfric* depicts Eugenia's cross-dressing as a contradiction in terms. Instead of being a vehicle for preserving chastity and gaining holiness, her cross-dressing causes Eugenia's body to materialise desires of those who perpetuate secular values; Eugenia is not only threatened by her masculine sexuality but also by other people's avarice. In the legend, this threat is thematised by the introduction of the variation on the suitor theme, as Eugenia, in disguise, is threatened by an old widow tempting her with her riches. As the overvaluation

⁵ As Cassandra Rhodes reminds, "the tenth-century Benedictine reform brought rules about contact between the male and female religious and in accordance with the RSB [Regula Sancti Benedicti], double monasteries were divided into single-sex institutions" (Rhodes 2012, 69).

of material values infects the world which Eugenia inhabits, Eugenia's masculine body perpetuates the secular terms of representing physical body even though she suppressed her sexuality by cross-dressing. Only when she performs her virginity as a woman does Eugenia's body accrue the correct social meaning as well as materialises the values of Christianity along the parameters of Ælfric's patriarchal authority.

This paper complements earlier important readings of the Life which also focus on Ælfric's attitude to the cross-dresser's sexuality and femininity. First of all, Paul Szarmach insists that "Eugenia is repudiating her own sexuality, which is *de rigueur* for those who join 'sex-negative' Christianity, and she is presumably changing her social status" (Szarmach 1990, 148). Szarmach presents Eugenia as inverting the established idea of sexuality, which aligns his reading with that of Allen Frantzen. Allen Frantzen argues that the cross-dressing on Eugenia's part reflects a spiritual process of transcendence, whereby a female saint becomes a man. He compares the Lives of Agatha and Eugenia to show that in these Lives a female saint "has transcended the female body and become, however briefly, like a man" (Frantzen 1993, 462). Allen Frantzen makes frequent references to the one-sex model outlined by Thomas Laqueur in *Making Sex* (1993, 452). Frantzen argues that, providing the Old English life of Euphrosine as another example, transvestite saints' lives

detail the temporary obliteration of female identity in the male for the purposes of conversion and the holy life. They show that the one-sex mode, in which the female is assumed to be included with the male, is doubly hierarchical. The model subordinates women to men and then conflates male and female in another hierarchy under God, the force above "the manly" (Frantzen 1993, 464).

Both Frantzen's and Szarmach's view is undermined by Shari Horner, who claims that both "establish a gendered polarity in which the saint must be gendered either male or female, but not both" (Horner 2001, 160). The present article takes up a trail from her challenge to Szarmach and Frantzen's position that Eugenia cross-dresses to suppress her sexuality, which she articulates in her proposition that "the saint does not change her essential sexual identity, grounded in her female body, even if that body

undergoes a material transformation" (Horner 2001, 160). The following reading is inspired by Horner's rejection of the view that Eugenia denounces her femininity to convert herself. Eugenia does not transcend her female body and, *pace* Shari Horner, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate her that femininity is essential to Eugenia's holiness, because, for Ælfric, monastic women and men follow separate paths in performing their religious vocation. In contrast to the Latin source, Eugenia's cross-dressing appears to be, in fact, misplaced and transgressive, if the cultural context behind Ælfric's adaptation is taken into account.

Since *Ælfric's Life of Eugenia* is seldom anthologised, a summary of it would be in order before other points are advanced. Eugenia, daughter of Phillipus, prefect of Alexandria and of Claudia, is well educated in philosophy and rhetoric. Once she becomes attracted to teachings of Saint Paul, and since the practice of Christianity is forbidden in Alexandria, she escapes, accompanied by her two eunuch servants, Protus and Jacinthus. She calls them her brothers, asks them to cut her hair short, and, in male apparel, she joins with them a community of monks in Alexandria, presided by Abbot Helenus. Although Eugenia's stratagem is revealed to him in a dream, he nevertheless admits Eugenia to the monastery. When he dies, she is elected abbot on the grounds of her accomplishments. As she becomes a healer and an exorcist, she is approached by an ill widow Melanthia. Melanthia attempts to seduce Eugenia, offering her wealth. Rejected, she turns the tables by accusing her of rape. Eugenia is imprisoned and brought in the presence of the prefect of Alexandria, her father Phillipus. Defying Melanthia's false vilifications, she asks the prefect to let the widow free once she manages to prove her innocence. Eugenia clears herself of the false charge, baring her breast and revealing her name. The family is reunited and Melanthia let free, her house burnt down with fire from heaven, an evident of sign of divine wrath. Eugenia converts her family. When her father is elected bishop of Alexandria, conspiracy is raised against him, resulting in his death. Attacked when praying at church, he dies after three days. Eugenia, her eunuch servants, her mother Claudia as well as her brothers Avitus and Sergius move to Rome. Sergius becomes bishop of Africa, while Avitus is elected bishop of Carthage. Eugenia and her mother stay at home, the former devoted to converting virgins like herself. Her actions are paralleled by Claudia, who converts widows, and Protus and Jacinthus, who convert Roman youths. Eugenia has converted Basilla, who emanates from a Roman senatorial family. Basilla has recently

turned down advances of Pompeius, a young aristocrat. Once he learns of her conversion, he orders Basilla, Eugenia, her mother Claudia as well as her Christian friends captured. Tortured and martyred by sword, Eugenia dies on the day of Nativity, 25 December. Crowned with martyrdom, she is soon joined by her mother, Protus and Jacinthus.

Misguided as Eugenia might be regarding her role in the Christian world following her conversion, she converts and disguises herself as a man to maintain her chastity. Both in the Latin source and in Ælfric's adaptation, Eugenia's decision to cross-dress as a monk springs from her desire to remain a virgin. Shari Horner lists three reasons why early Christian female saints cross-dressed.

Initially, the family of the virgin may have refused to allow her to practice Christianity, and thus the disguise offers freedom from these familial constraints. Second, the male disguise theoretically offers protection from sexual assault... Third, the assumption of masculine attributes may have permitted the saint to approximate male spirituality, and thus to achieve a higher level of spiritual life than a female body would permit (Horner 2001, 156-157).

The first motivation is manifest in Ælfric's *Life*. Eugenia is a cross-dresser who escapes from her pagan family and dresses as a man to dissolve her female sexuality.⁶

As for the second motivation, while her male disguise may well protect Eugenia from rape, it does not shelter the male saint's body from worldly temptations. Melanthis's advances involve temptations that may have induced

⁶ In his study of the cult of St Thecla in Eastern Christianity, Stephen J. Davis argues that female transvestism "serves as a final marker of her status as a wandering, charismatic teacher" (Davis 2001, 31). He argues that "in the context of an ancient society that held fast to the misogynistic assumptions about women's weakness, the act of dressing 'like a man' would have signalled a radical break from customary assumptions about women's identity in society" (Davis 2001, 31-32). But he also points to a number of examples from ancient hagiography, where "transvestism seems to fulfil the similar social function of enabling women to travel freely (i.e. incognito) in public" (Davis 2001, 32). In *Acts of Andrew* "the transvestism of Maximilia and Iphidama has the purpose of enabling the women to travel safely in public... In fact, women who travelled, especially those who travelled alone, faced the ever-present danger of physical or sexual violence" (Davis 2001, 33). Eugenia's transvestism encapsulates the transgressive nature of Christianity; Christianity encroaches upon the basic family structure of secular society, as it reconfigures the roles that individuals play in society regarding their gender.

a monk living in Ælfric's times to break the vow of celibacy. Virginity is not only threatened by the sin of fornication. In fact, greed and avarice are far more threatening. Body in the legend operates on multiple symbolic levels. Having both biological and social body, the subject is not only prone to sexual temptation, but also to avarice. Ælfric demonstrates that Eugenia attempts to make her body free from the secular world.

The third motivation to cross-dress is non-existent in Ælfric's adaptation, although it is evident in the source. A number of scholars show this third factor to be predominant in antiquity. Vern L. Bullough, in "Transvestites in Middle Ages" (1974), refers to Philo of Alexandria, for whom "progress meant giving up female gender, the material, passive, corporeal, and sense-perceptive world, and taking the active rational male world of mind and thought" (1974, 1383). According to this logic, as Bullough observes, "female who wore male clothes and adopted the role of the male would be trying to imitate the superior sex" (Bullough 1974, 1383). He quotes Saint Jerome's idea that when a woman "wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man" (Bullough 1974, 1383).⁷ This view is supported in Valerie R. Hotchkiss's comprehensive study of medieval transvestite saints lives, *Clothes make the man* (2012), where "recognition of holiness is earned primarily through the denial of womanhood" (Hotchkiss 2012, 13). The third motivation fits the one-sex model of sexuality that Allen Frantzen proposes in his reading of *Life of Eugenia*, quoting from Ælfric's mid-Lent homily: "if a woman is manly by nature and strong to God's will, she will be counted

⁷ Other scholars indicate that the same attitude was often articulated in Christian Antiquity. Elizabeth A. Castelli observes in *Martyrdom and Memory* (2004) that "[g]ender contingency and capacity to be overridden by spiritual prowess appear in numerous early martyr stories and in narratives about the ascetic specialists whose singular achievements are marked by the successful abandonment of femininity" (Castelli 2004, 63). Her claim is that "[t]hese ideas represent a double-edged ideological and theological realization on the part of Christianity: the gender binary need not always be binding though its intrinsic values system (the masculine is always necessarily more positively charged than the feminine) remains relentlessly intact" (Castelli 2004, 63). Castelli calls up Clement's argument from *Stromateis* that "[t]he Stoic virtue of manliness is ... prerequisite for both good courage and patient endurance" (2004: 64). In *This Female Man of God* (1995), Gillian Cloke astutely observes that "the paradigm of patristic thought on women was that women were not holy; they were creatures of error, of superstition, of carnal disposition - the Devil's gateway. This being so, anyone holy enough to an exemplar of faith could not be a woman: every one of the many who achieved fame through piety was held to 'surpass her sex' - never, be it noted, to elevate the expectations that might be held of their sex" (Cloke 1995, 135). The only way for a woman to become an exemplar was to desex herself: "they could only disguise the sex they had, either actively, in assuming the outward habit and guise of man, or by assuming inward 'male' habits of determination and courage in piety, to be written up as having disguised outwardly the real masculinity of their souls" (Cloke 1995, 135).

among the men who sit at the table of God” (Frantzen 1993, 464). For Frantzen, Eugenia, among other female saints from Ælfric’s corpus, “first acquires *the appearance of a man’s nature*; when the natural transformation is accomplished, the way for the supernatural transformation is prepared” (Frantzen 1993, 465).⁸

In the source, cross-dressing and assumed masculinity are symbolic of spiritual growth and renunciation. Allen Frantzen quotes from Ælfric’s mid-Lent homily to demonstrate that the notion that “the woman finds salvation by acquiring a man’s nature” finds an echo in his *Catholic Homilies* (Frantzen 1993, 464).⁹ Judging from his adaptation, Ælfric, however, must have found it questionable that women should seek masculine spirituality by rejecting the outer trappings of their femininity. It is evident that he carefully reworked the Life, cutting out most references to Eugenia’s profile as a *miles Christi*. Ælfric sets aside the source’s insistence on Eugenia’s manly conduct. In the Latin version, for instance, Helenus extols Eugenia’s conduct as manly: “Recte te Eugenium vocas; viriliter enim agis et confortetur cor tuum pro fide Christe” [Rightly you call yourself Eugenius, because you act manly and your heart grows in strength on account of your faith in Christ] (*Vita*, Chapter VII). Ælfric’s redaction changes the content of this speech. In the Old English version, Helenus extols Eugenia’s virginity and anticipates her martyrdom.

He genam hi þa onsundron and sæde hyre gewislice
 hwæt heo man ne wæs, and hwylcere mægþe,
 and þæt heo þurh mægðhad mycclum gelicode
 þam heofonlican cyninge þe heo gecoren hæfde;
 and cwæð þæt heo sceolde swiðlice æhtnyssa
 for mægðhade ðrowian, and þeah beon gescyld
 þurh þone soðan drihten þe gescyldt his gecorenan.
 (77–83)

⁸ Similarly, for Paul Szarmach, Eugenia’s major motivation is elevating her status. Quoting from Vern L. Bullough, Szarmach insists that “Eugenia is repudiating her own sexuality, which is *de rigueur* for those who join “sex-negative” Christianity, and she is presumably changing her social status” (Szarmach 1990, 148).

⁹ “[I]f a woman is manly by nature and strong to God’s will, she will be counted among the men who sit at the table of God” (Benjamin Thorpe (ed.) 1844-1946. *The Sermones Catholici or Homilies of Ælfric*, 2 vol. London).

Then he took her asunder, and said to her assuredly how she was no man, and of what kindred she was, and how she, by the virginity which she had chosen, greatly pleased the heavenly King; and said, that she should yet be preserved by help of the true Lord, who shields his chosen ones.

The speech is reworked so as to reflect the conventional view of feminine holiness; cross-dressing serves the instrumental purpose of preserving Eugenia's spiritual and carnal integrity. Following the Latin version, Ælfric turns Eugenia's manly disguise into a metaphoric representation of conversion from the secular world and sexuality. The main contrast between the source and the Old English adaptation is that Ælfric makes it manifest that the monk's status of a *miles Christi* is unavailable to Eugenia on account of her essential femininity. The source underlines Eugenia's promotion to a spiritual warrior. For example, as Eugenia continues her monastic career, she is lauded in her Latin sources for remaining "virilu habitu et animo" [of masculine apparel and soul] (*Vita*, Chapter IX). "Quis enim deprehenderat quod esset femina, quam virtus Christi et virginitas immaculata protegebat, ut mirabilis esset et viris?" [Who could find out that she was a woman, since the virtue of Christ and unravished virginity protected her miraculously among men] (*Vita*, Chapter IX). In contrast, Ælfric excises virtually all references to spiritual warfare from his adaptation. Accordingly, Eugenia's manly conduct praised in the Latin source as symbolic of her carnal purity and spiritual progress is played down in the Old English version merely as a clandestine stratagem instrumental for Eugenia's separation from her family. What is more, Ælfric stresses Eugenia's modesty, which constitutes one of the foremost attributes of a virgin. Although Eugenia lives "with a man's mind" [mid wærlicum mode, l. 93], she maintains "great humility" [mycelre eadmodnesse, l. 96].

Eugenia's desire to become like a man, so manifest in the sources as well as in the Old English life, might reflect Eugenia's desire to construct a syneisactic community in which gender difference is levelled, "a union of women and men free of sex and gender roles that generally accompany sex" (McNamara 1994, 6). As McNamara points out, some of the early Christian authorities held celibate women spiritually and intellectually equal to celibate men (McNamara 1994, 6). Around the time of Eugenia's martyrdom, Clement of Alexandria claimed the difference to be grounded solely in the biological body, to which a genderless soul was temporarily tied (McNamara 1994, 23).

In the Latin source, Eugenia motivates her cross-dressing as a way to infiltrate the Christian community of the learned men who object to admitting women in their fellowship: “sane ad diversorium hujus congregationis, in quo Deo canitur, nullam patitur venire feminarum” (*Vita*, Chapter III). Eugenia desires to partake of spirituality which is also exclusively masculine. Ælfric’s adaption, however, makes no mention of such a prohibition. In the Old English source, Eugenia asks her companions to cut her hair short so that she remains unrecognized.

Ða nam Eugenia hi on sundorspræce,
 het hi gebroðra, and bæd þæt hi
 hyre fæx forcurfon on wæpmonna wysan,
 and mid wædum gehiwodon swylce heo cniht wære –
 wolde ðam Cristenan genealecan
 on wærlicum hiwe þæt heo ne wurde ameldod.
 (48–53)

Then Eugenia took them apart in conversation, called them brethren, and besought that they
 Would shear her hair after the fashion of men, and disguise her with garments as if she were a boy. she desired to approach the Christians in the garb of a man, that she might not be betrayed.

Although they are servants, the eunuchs share Eugenia’s nobility of mind, nobility that according to Helenus surpasses the nobility of birth. Hence, Eugenia’s cross-dressing is motivated by a desire for existence within a community, where gender difference is obliterated by spiritual perfection.

Eugenia seems to possess a sense of empowerment that accompanies levelling gender difference in a syneisactic community. The company of Eugenia, Protus and Jacinthus clearly approximates such a community.¹⁰ Eugenia’s

¹⁰ Ælfric’s version can be related to two historical and cultural specificities that applied to the position of religious women in Anglo-Saxon England, the first being the abundance of double monastic house before the Benedictine reform of the tenth century, the second being women leaders in Anglo-Saxon monasticism. In Anglo-Saxon England, there had been a time-honoured and well-established tradition of female leaders that presided over significant monastic communities, especially in early Anglo-Saxon church, so Ælfric may well have found redundant the insistence so emphatically voiced in the source on Eugenia’s spiritual virility as a sanction to recognize her ability and permissibility to be a leader.

attempt to level gender and economic difference is impeded by her elevation to the position of abbot, following Helenus' death. The irony that resurfaces from *Ælfric's* adaptation is that Eugenia's conversion cannot be made complete with the change of sex, since by repudiating female sexuality Eugenia becomes implicated in masculine sexuality. This is strongly at odds with Paul Szarmach's observation that "Eugenia's conversion of heart to Christianity requires a transformation of sex, or at least the appearance of sex. And her transformation is dual: she wishes to appear as a man and she wishes to be brother to her eunuch" (Szarmach 1990, 148). Such a view disregards the social milieu that *Ælfric* reflects in his adaptation. The ways of masculine spirituality, which Eugenia desires, do not free the individual from sexuality. As the legend shows, a change of gender necessitates a different set of temptations that are associated with the opposite sex.

Nu is min mod awend mycclum to ðe,
þæt þu hlaford beo þæra æhta and min.
Ic wene þæt hit ne sy unrihtwisnysse ætforan Gode
þeah ðe þu wifes bruce and blysse on life.
(157-161)

Now is my mind much inclined towards thee, that thou mayst
be lord of my goods and of me. I ween it is not unrighteousness
before God though thou shouldst enjoy a wife and happiness
in this life.

Melanthia's temptation strikes a chord counterpointing Eugenia's father's reification of her body; she tempts Eugenius to return to the economy of the secular world. As a story-teller, *Ælfric* takes advantage in his adaptation that Eugenia's masculine gender entails an assumption of male sexuality to build up an exciting peripeteia. Although *Ælfric* excises the suitor theme from the source, he maintains a juxtaposition between Eugenia's female body desired by her father and male body desired by Melanthia. Phillipus has a golden sculpture made to make up for his daughter's absence, while Melanthia plans to attract Eugenius with her dowry.

Ða andwyrde Eugenia þyssere olecunge,
 and cwæð to þam wife mid þisum ingehyde,
 þæt ða gewylnunga þissere andweardan worulde
 synt swiðe swicole, þeah þe hi geswæse beon,
 and þæs lichoman lustas gelome bepæced
 and to sarnissum gelædað þa þe hi swiðost lufiað.
 (162-167)

Then Eugenia replied to this flattery, and spake to the woman to this intent, that the desires of this present world are extremely deceitful, though they be pleasant, and the lusts of the body oftentimes seduce and bring them to sorrow who love them most.

Engaging in a hectoring censure of the world and the flesh, Ælfric's Eugenia voices a warning that those who indulge in pleasure will earn punishment for being swept away by superficial benefits achieved by satisfaction of fickle desire. Ironically, renunciation which she desires is beyond her reach. Allen Frantzen argues, analyzing Ælfric's Lives of Agatha and Eugenia, that "when the natural transformation is accomplished, the way for the supernatural transformation is prepared" (Frantzen 1993, 465). It is contended here, however, that this is not the case in the Life of Eugenia. Eugenia cannot continue as a cross-dresser, because "the appearance of masculinity" (Frantzen 1993, 465) cannot authenticate her renunciation. Only as a woman can she convert from the world. The episode helps Ælfric advance a notion that monastic men and women should embrace separate sets of ideals that make their renunciation complete. In the episode, in order to convert, Eugenia must reject her female sexuality not so much by embracing masculinity as by incorporating her female body into monasticism. Ælfric insists, arguably, that her full incorporation into Christianity results from the conversion of her entire family.

Pauline Stafford astutely remarks that "'Woman's sexual body, land and non-communal possessions were combined as the opposite of the monastic ideal which Eugenia had sought" (Stafford 1999, 9). Resolving to live a monastic life of chastity may not be enough to repudiate an individual from his or her gender. The Life illustrates the ecclesiastical concern that secular values claim monastic chaste bodies, which are never fully dissolved from secular values. While the gender difference that constructed secular

society in Anglo-Saxon England may well have encroached on the values of the monastic community, this difference remained essential to maintain hierarchies in Anglo-Saxon monastic communities, of which the sexually piquant episode featuring Melanthis is not only a reminder, but also an ingenious structural device that resolves the potentially tragic tension resulting from the conflicting secular and ecclesiastical values.

What cannot be missed from *Ælfric's* adaptation is the emphasis he places on the irony that while Eugenia's constructed masculinity does little to separate her from the secular world and its values, her restored femininity in the latter half of the *vita* reintegrates her with her family and Christian community. While masculinity is instrumental for Eugenia in persevering in chastity in the community of men, freedom from her father's paternal authority that she achieves as a result from converting her whole family makes it possible, and necessary, for her new identity as a female virgin and martyr to emerge. Eugenia discards her holy transvestism to establish a community of virgins in Rome. In the second half of the *Life*, *Ælfric*, arguably, manipulates the source to establish Eugenia as a role model for monastic females, mainly by excising from the source her heroism and resistance to her pagan enemies.

The Latin source, which *Ælfric* abridges, by way of the rhetorical strategy of *abbreviatio*, allows Eugenia and Basilla, who appears as Eugenia's foil in the second half of the *vita*, to counterbalance the androcentric misrepresentation of their bodies.¹¹ Eugenia addresses the community of virgins and widows that gathers around her with a language couched in the terms of Roman imperialism: "Absque eorum sanguine nulla potestas imperii, nulla illustris dignitas decorator" [Without shedding one's blood no one gains imperial power, no one is decorated with highest honours] (*Vita* Ch XXIII).

The life of virginity and martyrdom is depicted in the source as a threat to the patriarchal and masculinist values of the Roman Empire.¹² The revulsion

¹¹ Virginia Burrus, in "Word Made Flesh" (1994), argues that "[t]he culturally dominant androcentric construction of virginal sexuality, which crystallises out of the distinctive needs of the post-Constantinian church, functions to create and defend new communal boundaries and to reassert and strengthen the gender hierarchy" (Burrus 1994, 51).

¹² In *Dying for God* (1999), Daniel Boyarin observes that in early Christianity "the virgin girl is a topos in both Judaism and Christianity for thinking about male bodies and their spiritual states" (Boyarin 1999, 67). In "Reading Agnes" (1995), analyzing fourth century Christian discourse of power, Virginia Burrus argues that "[t]he assertiveness of this masculinised speech [in the *Life of Agnes*, JO] illumines the competitive rhetorical economy within which it seeks to usurp the privileged maleness of the classical discourse. Its ambiguity constitutes both its vulnerability and its peculiar power - on the one hand allowing a 'bending' of gender identity through which the strategies of both feminized resistance and a masculinised hegemony can be mobilized

expressed by male antagonists more than compounds the rhetorical force of the military imagery in which Eugenia and Basilla's speeches are couched. In the source, Christians are accused of downright disregard of the republic, their customs being misrepresented not only as the flouting of the Roman worship but also as the undermining of patriarchy. Basilla's refusal to marry Pompeius causes him to deliver before the emperor of Rome a vociferous rant against Christianity, which casts Eugenia's practices as a potential threat to social order.

Diu est enim quod hi qui Christiani dicuntur reipublice nocent: qui irrident legum nostrarum sacrosancta caeremonia, et omnipotens deos nostros, ac si vana simulacra, despiciunt. Jura quoque ipsius naturae perverunt, separant conjugium, gratiam sponsorum sibi associant: et dicunt iniquum esse, si sponsum sibi associant.

It is long since the Christians do harm to the republic. They ridicule the sacred ceremonies of our laws and our mighty gods as empty idols. They are undermining the very laws of nature; they break marriages up and decide about marriages themselves, considering it iniquitous for a bride to accept the bridegroom assigned to her. O most pious Emperor, what shall we do? (*Vita*, Chapter XXV)

Particularly emphasized in Pompeius's repudiation of Christians is their downright disregard of marriage arrangements, which would have been outrageous for Romans citizens of the day of persecutions. The image that structures the speech, one of marriage as cure against death, was in fact a cliché in Roman literature and rhetoric, as Peter Brown notes in *The Body and Society*

simultaneously" (Boyarin 1995, 29). Following Burrus's observations, Boyarin hypothesizes that in early Christianity around the fourth century A.D. "[i]dentification with the female virgin was a mode for both Rabbis and Fathers of disidentification with a "Rome" whose power was stereotyped as a highly sexualized male. Both groups were engaged in complex, tangled, and ambivalent negotiations of self-fashioning in response to their attraction and repulsion from that Rome. Each, however, occupied a different space within the economies of power and ethnic emplacement in the Empire. Christian writers, even as late as in the fourth or fifth centuries, frequently were former Roman "pagans," sons of power and prestige in imperial society who were highly educated and who identified with classical culture" (Boyarin 1999, 79–80).

(Brown 2008).¹³ It is vital to bear in mind that students of late antique martyrs and saints' lives draw attention to the apologetic rhetorical strategies by male authors, who defend virgins' and female ascetics' right to function outside the jurisdiction of masculine authority.¹⁴

It is notable that while some of the early recensions of the *vita* feature strongly wilful and recalcitrant heroines, Ælfric outstrips Eugenia, as well as Basilla, of agency, authority and autonomy. In the Syriac and Armenian recensions, which are the earliest, Eugenia's transgressive cross-dressing is fomented by a perusal of the *Life of Thecla* (*Select Narratives of Holy Women*, 2).¹⁵ The Latin *Vita Eugeniae*, which comes second, replicates his source's language that is strongly resonant of allegory of war and *miles Christi* metaphor that couches many speeches delivered by Eugenia and Basilla. However, this Latin version does not record the intertextual link to the *Life of Thecla*; instead, it merely reports Eugenia to read some male authors including Aristotle and Saint Paul. The two Anglo-Saxon adaptations of the *Life* further diminish Eugenia's grandeur. Aldhelm's *De Virginate* reproduces the legend's strong military language, intimating that she has abandoned her kindred to

receive the sacrament of baptism and take service in the monastic army – not like a woman, but, against the laws of nature, with her curling locks shaved off, in the short crop of the masculine sex – and she was joined with the assembly of saints and was recruited to the troops of Christ's army with the seal of purity unbroken, and with no blemish on her chastity (Aldhelm, *On Virginité*, chapter 44, 110).

Ælfric's version, however, is consistent not only in excising all references to Thecla, but also in reducing a significant number of allusions to *miles Christi* metaphor. What might be reconstructed from the discourses reviewing

¹³ Peter Brown observes that in Roman literature co-terminent with early Christian writings, marriage was presented as means of continuing the civilization endangered by low expectancy and exposure to death at early childhood (Brown 2008, 8).

¹⁴ Virginia Burrus shows that in *On Virgins* "Ambrose explicitly defends the church's right to remove the sexual bodies of elite Roman daughters from one sphere of social interchange by inscribing virginity with seductively heroic drama of martyrdom, on the one hand, and the reassuringly patriarchal vow of marriage, on the other" (Burrus 1995, 30).

¹⁵ A reference to an English translation of the Coptic *Life of Eugenia* included in Agnes Smith Lewis (ed.). 1900. *Select Narratives of Holy Women*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Eugenia's profile as a cross-dressing saint in these versions of the Life is, for one thing, the extent to which early Christianity offered women opportunities for power and independence reserved for men and, for another, their inability to determine forms of representing their agency, as these were only entertained by the masculine authority of male authors who textualised their lives.

The excision of Basilla's speech from the source is by far the most significant one that Ælfric conducts, as it reflects the politics of representing feminine agency. In the Latin source, the military language that underlies much of Basilla's speech empowers women as transgressive insofar as their resolves to remain virgins thwart their father and suitors' arrangements and, accordingly, pose a direct threat to their fathers' interests and obligations. Representing such a conflict between youth and old age, however, may have not been of any value in late Anglo-Saxon England, where not infrequently fathers willingly presented monasteries with their daughters as oblates and where the opposition between Christianity and secular paganism had long been a thing of the past. It is not that Ælfric curbs the agency that empowers Eugenia and Basilla in the source. Rather, Eugenia and Basilla are presented by him as more significant to society. By assuaging the clash between the secular and the religious world, Ælfric sustains a vision of holiness as essential to integrating the secular and religious communities.

In conclusion, contrary to Paul Szarmach and Allen Frantzen's idea that Eugenia has to suppress her femininity to become a saint, in Ælfric's adaptation the saint's perfection results from her body accruing the correct social meanings. His adaptation is complicit with the immanence of Eugenia's body. More to that point, Ælfric's representation of Eugenia as a female saint is still complicit with a model of gender that Thomas Walter Laqueur advances for antique and early medieval writers.

... in these pre-Enlightenment texts, and some later ones, *sex*, or the body, must be understood as the epiphenomenon, while *gender*, what we would take to be a cultural category, was primary or 'real.' Gender – man and woman – mattered a great deal and was part of the order of things; sex was conventional (Laqueur 1990, 8).

A Christian's body must be shaped in accordance with acceptable norms; the body of a saint inculcates the parameters for bearing one's bodily frame in men and women, whose performance of holiness is determined by sexual difference. The bodies of monastic women and men lay at the intersection of the secular and religious communities. While in many saints lives, the resolve to remain a virgin on the part of a young Christian woman destabilizes the hierarchies within a household, a case made in Ælfric's *Eugenia* is that her untarnished reputation as a virgin reconfigures patriarchal hierarchies, bringing about their Christianization. The *Life of Eugenia* was conducive to perpetuating Anglo-Saxon ideals of honour held in aristocratic families, whose daughters were dedicated to monastic houses as oblates to continue in their virginity throughout lifetime. The *Life* does not as much idealise renunciation as reconfigures secular and monastic values resurfacing from tensions between religious and secular communities of late Anglo-Saxon England. Eugenia's body represents a palimpsest that records the process of identity construction not just through a conversion of a female individual to faith but also through a conversion, from one patriarchal community to another, of a female individual who remains inextricably entangled in the conflicted secular and religious forms of representing women and their religious experience. Eugenia developed two cultural bodies: the first one was gendered according to the values of secular society, the other is gendered through the incorporation into Christian patriarchy, in which the body of a saint is conventionally masculine regardless of his or her biological sex. Ælfric's treatment of Eugenia resolves this tension, not only defining space for Eugenia's femininity, but also integrating the secular and monastic values in the *Life*.

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