Calling All Corpses: An Examination of the Treatment of the Dead in Old English Literature

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CALLING ALL CORPSES: AN EXAMINATION OF THE TREATMENT OF THE DEAD IN OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The care and disposal of the dead bodies, an unavoidable reminder of one’s mortality, rarely receives in-depth literary attention. In early medieval England, the Anglo-Saxons dealt with corpses but seldom discussed the undertaking in written documents. Instead they focused on the grandiose deeds of heroes like Beowulf and the holy lives of revered saints.

This dissertation examines various genres of Old English literature to identify times when authors discuss corpses and to what end these discussions led. Hagiographers, for example, describe the corpses of certain saints such as Æthelthryth and Edmund at length while the bodies of other saints are virtually ignored post-mortem. Their burials, such as that of Cecilia, may be only one half-line in length while the description of Æthelthryth’s corpse includes burial, exhumation, discovery of incorruption, and reburial. Her dead body receives almost as much attention as does her living body. Both women uphold their chastity and virginity throughout their lives, but it is only Æthelthryth’s corpse which receives attention. Edmund’s dead body is also given great attention, but
his purity is not of primary concern. In my dissertation, I examine the discussion of corpses by various authors within hagiography as well as non-hagiographical texts, identify discrepancies in gender and social standing which may contribute to the length of the authors’ discussion, and use the Anglo-Saxon culture as a basis to explain why corpses such as those of Beowulf, Grendel, Æthelthryth, and Edmund take center stage but a battlefield full of fallen soldiers, Grendel’s mother, and Cecilia receive less than two lines of text.
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Introduction

Bodies of the Dead: Post-Mortem Significance in Anglo-Saxon Literature

The living, breathing body of an individual is typically of primary importance when it comes to storytelling, historical retrospection, and theoretical dissection of a text or situation. However, when that body loses its animation and becomes a corpse—the molded combination of flesh, bones, muscles, and tissues—it loses, in many ways, its appeal. Authors ignore the corpse because normally it no longer has a story to tell, and scholars lose focus on the body because it does not provide words or actions which are able to be interpreted or analyzed. Because death is an inevitable part of life and decomposition is the final function a body can perform, it should not be avoided but rather embraced, inspected, and discussed.

This dissertation project examines the management of corpses in the hagiography and non-hagiographical poetry and prose of Anglo-Saxon England. My analysis illustrates how various authors view the importance of the corpse in relation to its social standing (peasant, noble, military officer, saint, royal) by scrutinizing the detail of the account of the individual’s death as well as the treatment of the person’s remains following his demise. This includes the location and method of the person’s death, the body’s final resting place, burial or burning ritual, exhumations and translations, and any subsequent mention of the corpse following its death and burial.
The Anglo-Saxons definitely “were aware of the ways the body decayed after death”\(^1\) and saw bodily decomposition as a normal part of life and death. They even felt dead bodies continued to exert influence within and over their personal communities, especially for extreme characters such as saints. This influence is clear in some hagiographical texts which detail the exhumation and translation of a saint’s non-living body, though the focus of these pieces is certainly not exclusive to the corpse itself. Rather, the corpse is used as another illustration of the sanctity of the individual. In secular texts such as heroic poetry, the detailed discussions of corpses are generally saved for the bodies of those with power—good or evil—in the story, though the bodies of less important characters sometimes receive a brief but significant mention. The amount of description for the powerful characters, however, is not always equal and clearly reflects the culture’s interests of the time concerning gender and social status.

This dissertation incorporates literary (close-reading), archaeological, and anthropological approaches to examine the corpses of Old English literature. The opening chapter is a review of the work of major scholars in literature, archaeology, and anthropology to provide a foundation on which I build my literary analysis. Throughout the literature review, it becomes clear that, although the scholarship presented is well-researched and thorough, the scope is limited to either literature or the sciences. It informs later research such as mine from multiple angles, but these angles need to be merged for a more complete picture of the time period. The subject matter is inherently intertwined, so any further research should also be a combination of those areas. The

literature was informed by various aspects of society, so it is difficult to discuss the Old English texts without also referring to life in Anglo-Saxon England. Attempting to analyze the value and significance of literary corpses would be futile without also discussing actual burials, cemeteries, and skeletons from the Anglo-Saxon period to figure out why the corpses in the literature and the ways in which they are presented are important to the texts and medieval society.

Following this review of the scholarship, the next chapter focuses on the corpses of three characters in the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*. Through a close reading of my own translation of the sections in which the dead bodies of Scyld, Grendel, and Æschere are highlighted, a distinct and intriguing conclusion can be drawn. Corpses, even those which do not play a significant part in the poem, should not be overlooked simply because the individual has died. Their bodies are important demonstrations of life in the Middle Ages that could not easily be illustrated by anything other than a corpse (or portion of the corpse). Scyld’s body is honored because he was a valuable leader and deserved a proper burial and memorial. However, the elements of the ship burial such as the heaping of armor, weapons, and other precious items on top of the dead body remove the essential personhood from Scyld to the point that he becomes part of the grave goods in the belly of the ship. And without the visible dead body his memory slowly fades just as his identity as a person dissipates amongst the cargo.

The next corpse is that of the first monster Beowulf encounters, Grendel, and the audience quickly realizes that this creature will hold great significance both alive and dead. However, the parts of his corpse which are highlighted following his death (arm and head) illustrate how important his dead body is to both humankind and Grendel-kin.
The arm elicits awe and wonder from the Danes and Geats in Hrothgar’s court and is then retrieved by his mother to make him whole for a monstrous burial. This burial is disturbed by the Geat hero following his defeat of Grendel’s mother when he decapitates his first opponent and triumphantly carries the head back to Heorot. Because of this disturbance of the monster’s burial, he can be considered one of two deviant burials presented in this section of the poem.

Finally, Æschere’s corpse demonstrates how important the head of an individual (even, or especially, when they are deceased) can be. When Grendel’s mother claims him from among the host of retainers in Heorot, she separates his head from his body and leaves the head at the boundary of her mere. This, along with Grendel’s head at its place in Heorot, marks the boundary zone between human and Grendel-kin. Likewise, Æschere’s head also elicits awe and fear not only because Beowulf and his men were not expecting to find it in all of its gory glory but also because it presents another deviant burial. This time the audience and characters all know what type of burial Æschere should have been given (as opposed to what type a monster would have), but the beloved retainer was denied what he was due. Instead, the head is forever separated from the body, and the body itself is never found or discussed. Æschere further demonstrates that space in the text and in the manuscript is not solely reserved for the bodies of kings, heroes, and monsters; the common man can be a significant addition to the discussion of corpses.

In the first of two hagiographical chapters, the vitae of three intriguing women and the passiones of three significant chaste couples written by Ælfric of Eynsham are discussed in chapter 3. This chapter argues that virginity and chastity are the most
important qualities for the women and couples for whom the hagiographers have written these texts, and these qualities are a clear signal that the corpses of saints are significant for a variety of reasons and demonstrated in various ways. The frequency with which the writers mention virginity and chastity does not indicate something unique about the saintly dead bodies; rather, the discussion of purity shows that certain corpses deserve special attention because of the effects they have on their communities. There is also a stark difference between the texts which only focus on one female body and those which split their time between two saints, one being female. The couples are examined through their chastity in marriage until the woman dies; after this, as long as the man survives her, the text alters its focus to the example the male saint sets for his larger community. The concept of a marriage is far different than what may be expected, especially since sex is not involved, so it is far more accurate to consider the two saints as members of a Christian partnership. Some bodies such as that of Æthelthryth are exhumed following their burials and are found to be incorrupt while others are simply buried and the hagiography moves on to explain the impact that person had on her community. The texts follow a similar pattern, but each illustrates the power of the woman’s life and death in reinforcing the faith of those who might hear or read their vitae.

For male saints there is a definite difference in the focus for their hagiographies because their virginity and chastity are not of the greatest significance. Rather, it is their concentration on demonstrating the actions of Christ (imitatio Christi) as well as their strength of faith and devotion to Christianity. Their holiness is then demonstrated through their corpses in one way or another; this chapter focuses on three significant saints’ bodies (Edmund, Cuthbert, and Alban) and how each illustrates strength in Christ.
Edmund’s head was able to speak to his people even after he was decapitated; Cuthbert’s body was exhumed years after his burial and found to be incorrupt; and Alban’s head and blood were able to sanctify a pagan after the saint’s death. These three saints’ ability to illustrate their piety and devotion to following Christ’s example indicated how much focus (if any) male corpses would receive post-mortem.

Finally, after having covered the secular epic and religious hagiography of the Middle Ages, the last chapter discusses other religious texts which are not saints’ lives. The selections included are Judith, “The Dream of the Rood,” the “Soul and Body” poems, and a brief anecdote concerning the trial of a dead pope’s body. Each of these texts demonstrates that corpses in medieval literature have myriad uses and stand out from other pieces because they are unique to the larger corpus. Through the reinterpretation of the biblical story, Judith illustrates how the head of a tyrant can stand as a banner for the Christian faithful and the rest of the remains are a visual representation of abandonment and damnation to heathens. “The Dream of the Rood” reinterprets the definition of corpse and illustrates the quintessential demonstration of imitatio Christi. In the “Soul and Body” poems, the dead bodies play important roles as metaphorical platforms on which the souls may stand and speak as examples of salvation or condemnation based on the bodies’ actions in life. They reiterate why the tenets of the faith must be followed to the letter and how audiences should learn from them as models of pious or impious living. Without the corpses, the souls would only be able to express the abstract concepts of their afterlives in glory or hell; the corpses provide tangible evidence that cannot be denied.
Although it can be tempting to overlook or ignore a corpse because it seems useless or disgusting, this project aims to demonstrate just how important corpses are in the literature of the Anglo-Saxons, especially when intertwined with the actual archaeological evidence upon which the literature expounds. Corpses may not always be used in the same manner across texts or even within the same genre, but it is critical to include them in a study of the literature and society of the Middle Ages. They were ubiquitous in the culture, decomposition was a known, understood, and expected process, and the incorporation of corpses into the literature was deliberate by the texts’ authors. While corpses are often considered fodder for the macabre, the various genres of literature from the medieval period clearly show that one does not have to be ghoulish to learn from and explore the significance of dead bodies in both society and literature. It is true that living bodies are able to exert an active presence within their communities and most texts focus primarily on the actions and words of the living person, but death does not necessarily remove the voice of those individuals. One must simply know how to listen and understand the lessons, morals, and experience the corpses are trying to impart to their audiences.
Chapter 1
A Review of the Literary, Historical, and Archaeological
Scholarship of Anglo-Saxon Corpses

Medieval literary scholars task themselves with interpreting a text and examining the particular element of interest while also incorporating an interdisciplinary understanding of the language, history, culture, etc. which may have informed the author while creating the piece. Although the author may have been informed by these contexts, he likely did not fully integrate them into the work. A religious text may have components of Christian dogma and ideology of the time but exclude the contemporary political climate or any recent social happenings. In the same way, common rituals and practices—especially those concerning death, burial, and the corpses themselves—which would have been well-known and observed by the audience of a text may not have been given an elaborate description by an author simply because it would have seemed like a waste of time and parchment space. If the text was not a handbook or manual, detailed descriptions or illustrations would likely not have been worth the time and effort. It is sound logic; why write something out in excruciating detail when the individuals reading or hearing the text are already well-versed in the subject matter?

The thought of future generations—a thousand years or more after the text’s composition—needing to know these details (such as those involved in specific burial rituals for the dead, especially in the context of the deceased’s social status) may not have crossed authors’ minds. If a method of completing a task works, there is no reason to revise it (if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it). Since everyone who needs to have the instruction
receives it firsthand, authors may have felt no incentive to dedicate time, energy, parchment, and ink to the laborious, tedious undertaking of transcribing procedural notes and directions. They had more important work to complete—the preservation of oral stories, translation of saints’ lives for the purpose of continued veneration, documentation of homilies, instruction to devout followers and newly converted, among other critical responsibilities. Although modern generations can learn a great deal about a culture’s values and morals as well as important figures such as royalty, saints, and heroes from their literature, the daily activities and important ritualistic practices may be more difficult to discern from only the literature they left behind. The literature is only one aspect of medieval culture which survives, but it is an incomplete perspective “just as the afterlife of a human person usually is imagined as only a partial survival, involving some form of loss—the soul without a body, the body without an intellect, the spirit without a social persona.”\(^2\) It is impossible to form the clearest and most comprehensive picture of life in the Middle Ages, especially in reference to death, burial of the dead, and corpses, using only the literature of the time as our guide.

For this reason, it is important that there is interdisciplinary cooperation, evaluation, and research. When it comes to medieval studies, the humanities must work with the social sciences, especially archaeology, to create a fully informed understanding of the ancient cultures under inspection. This cooperation, however, is a two-way street because the scientists are limited—as literary scholars are as well—by what the culture has left behind. In the study of literature, scholars work to create a picture of the lives of characters’ creators through clues placed throughout the texts as well as the knowledge

gleaned through historical texts. Essentially, we have a document of medieval existence which is brought back to life every time we read the tale, dissect its parts, and evaluate its content. The authors, their characters, and the audience breathe new life when their pieces are read in modern times because the situation, environment, and language is reignited again and again. Even texts which concern themselves, even partially, with the death and burial of a person or persons are reanimated when read and relived through the authors’ words.\(^3\)

The interest in death and burial for many may stem from a larger preoccupation with the more general theme of the body as the focus of much literary investigation as well as that of most other disciplines. The body itself has become at the same time the easiest and most difficult topic to discuss because of the myriad ways it can be dissected and interpreted. Caroline Bynum explains that there is so much confusion, especially for students looking into discussions of the body within their chosen field, because “‘the body’ is the wrong topic. It is no topic or, perhaps, almost all topics. As many contemporary theorists point out, we no longer think there is such a thing as the body—a kind of ‘flesh dress’ we take up, or put off, or refurbish according to the latest style … no one in the humanities seems really to feel comfortable any longer with the idea of an

essential ‘bodiliness.’”⁴ After providing a thorough description extending widely over various disciplines of current trends in conversations about the body,⁵ Bynum chooses to use “three aspects of a widespread medieval concern about a particular kind of body—the body that dies”⁶ to help illustrate that the current view of the body as a multi-valent mechanism of discussion is not new. Her primary concern is to “correct certain prevalent generalizations about the medieval past and thus, by bringing forward a more nuanced understanding of that past, to suggest that we in the present would do well to focus on a wider range of topics in our study of body or bodies.”⁷ Throughout her description of the medieval conception of body, spirit, and soul, Bynum makes several important conclusions which bring to the foreground the significance of the body in the Middle Ages and why the dead body, in particular, should not be ignored in modern scholarship.

Bynum relates that “the understanding of ‘medieval attitudes’ as ‘dualistic’ in the sense of ‘despising’ or ‘recommending flight from’ the body is wrong.”⁸ Medieval people did not run from corpses or what they represented as far as death was concerned—decay and decomposition directly interpreted as the soul’s descent into hell—especially when considering orthodox Christian discourses. Bynum explains that in even “the most (to our tastes) macabre of late medieval poems and images—the Dances of Death or the transi tombs that depict their occupants as putrefying corpses—one can hardly with accuracy speak of ‘rejections of the body.’”⁹ She continues to elaborate: “Many historians of funerary practices point out that the injunction of memento mori was embedded in

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⁵ See Bynum, “Why All the Fuss,” 2-6.
imagery that promised resurrection to the same corpse that moldered in the grave … the extravagant attention to flesh and decay characteristic of the period is not ‘flight from’ so much as ‘submersion in.’”

Her primary point throughout this article is that there are many reasons why the body is such an important tool of discussion from the medieval up through the modern era because “a place for encounter with meaning, a locus of redemption, is not ‘flight from’ the body” and couldn’t have been a place of fear or avoidance in a time when the basic tenet of the faith was redemption through sacrifice of the human body.

In Bynum’s *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, she also discusses certain aspects of the medieval conception of the body’s importance, especially following its death. She “chronicle[s] both technical discussions of what it means for the body to return at the end of time and the spread of burial practices that treat the corpse, whether its parts are carefully united or deliberately divided, as an object of great cultural significance.”

What becomes clear from this book, especially her chapter on resurrection, burial, and heresy, is that the post-mortem body itself continued to be of particular import to the medieval community in which it once lived. Bynum discusses how saints’ bodies were “eviscerated, then boiled to remove the flesh, so that bones were more quickly available for distribution” and gives a brief description of the changing appearance of reliquaries from the early Middle Ages (gold and jeweled caskets which divert attention from the decay) to the period following 1150 when reliquaries

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“indicated by their forms the nature of the fragment”\textsuperscript{14} and into the thirteenth century when windows fashioned from crystal made it possible to view parts of the body. Bynum also explains that the long-dead corpses of ordinary people (non-saints or ecclesiastics) were also disturbed to make room for the newly deceased.\textsuperscript{15} She provides sources from Germany and specifically Cologne which discuss charnel houses or ossuaries as early as the 1160s and chapels which were decorated with bones from the bonehouse.\textsuperscript{16} Though the specifics vary from place to place, time to time, and person to person, it is clear that the medieval period was one which focused very heavily on the non-living body within its culture. People did not fear the corpse (though there was rampant fear concerning the returned dead as wraiths and revenants) but rather understood the processes which the body would inevitably go through once buried, expected to see the results of those processes, and continued to theorize as to how the body, soul, and spirit were interconnected. In this age, “theorists who dealt with eschatology tended to talk of the person not as soul but as soul and body … [and] theologians and philosophers knew the corpse was in the grave; they buried corpses, and they revered as relics bits of holy corpses that remained above ground.”\textsuperscript{17} Because of the fact that “[m]edieval Christianity was built upon the memory of a violent death and fueled by a promise of eternal transcendence of death for the faithful,”\textsuperscript{18} it was necessary, as Bynum describes, for theologians to also “respond to philosophical doubts about the resurrection of the flesh” knowing what they did about the decomposition process. Knowledge of the biology had

\textsuperscript{15} Paul Binski, \textit{Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), which I discuss later, also briefly discusses the exhumation of long-dead corpses that have already decomposed to the bones to make room for newly deceased bodies.
\textsuperscript{17} Bynum, “Why All the Fuss,” 19.
\textsuperscript{18} Caciola, \textit{Afterlives}, 19.
to be combined with Christian doctrine in order to provide a solid explanation for resurrection. As Nancy Caciola relates, the “notion that the human person had a double nature, being comprised of both a spiritual and a material self in intimate union with one another, was central to Christian anthropology. For theologians, then, the chief concern in analyzing life and death was to understand how the soul inhabited the body and how the bond between the two ruptured at death.”

Therefore, the corpse (whether or not in conjunction with the soul) was often in the minds of theologians, professionals, commoners, and new converts throughout the Middle Ages. Corpses were and are not simply the bodies of the dead; they are conduits for exploration and examination of deep philosophical, theological, and cultural meaning, and medieval communities understood this and communicated it through their literature as well as their rites, rituals, and commemorations for the corpses in their lives.

Though it would be easy to say they were infatuated with the corpse, it would also be inaccurate. The medieval mind was as preoccupied with the corpse as the modern mind could be considered obsessed. There was and will continue to be inherent interest in the corpse because it has had cultural, social, religious, and political significance throughout the ages. While the details are unimportant at this point, the larger significance of Bynum’s explanation of the disruption, division, and distribution of body parts in the twelfth century is that it “was an indication—not a denial—that body is

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20 Caciola’s second chapter elaborates how medical professionals of the Middle Ages believed that the presence of the soul within the body provides substance to the body and without the soul the body will perish. Unlike the theologians she discusses in chapter 1, physicians sought to understand the connection between life and death by focusing on the body and “human selfhood” (20) rather than the soul. That was the domain of the Christian theologian in the medieval period though the medical practitioner was well-versed in Christian theology and turned to the Bible in times of crisis and for instruction.
The corpse of the Middle Ages was definitely important on multiple levels and for every person of the era; the literature of the time demonstrates this significance through the various genres that discuss the corpses of individuals at all social levels. As Nancy Caciola explains, the memory of the dead lingered, hovering at the social periphery yet central to the symbolic systems of medieval culture … perhaps more than any other cultural arena, attitudes toward death and the dead reveal how societies think distinctively about what it means to be human. Death is the ultimate translation of self: seemingly in an instant, it transmutes a person into a thing [Caciola’s emphasis]. Yet at the same time that mortality confronts us with a radical materialist change in the body, so, too, does it involve purely idealist constructions of a perduring self in the afterlife.

It is not just death that holds significance to the population of the Middle Ages, but also the bodies of the dead as well. They are the catalysts for discussing the larger themes associated with death such as the spiritual presence of an afterlife, the experience of death itself, and a plethora of others; the dead “are at the intersection of fundamental ideas about identity and society, fertility and decay, temporal limitations and eternal transcendence.” Caciola writes that the “dead were freighted with significance for the ultimate questions: mortality, eternity, and bloodline; fertility and decay; where one came from and where one ultimately must go.” With so much meaning associated with a simple corpse, it becomes clear that an in-depth analysis of corpses presented in medieval literature is necessary to more fully understand the cultural impact that one person’s dead body can have within a given society, even those of peasants or criminals. If Caciola’s assertion that the deceased continued to exert influence over the living is correct and

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21 Bynum, The Resurrection of the Body, 204-5.
22 Caciola, Afterlives, 2.
23 Caciola, Afterlives, 6.
24 Caciola, Afterlives, 2.
25 A point that Zoë L. Devlin also makes her in article discussed later in this chapter.
that “[p]reoccupation with the continuing vitality and power of the dead was a characteristic feature of medieval society,” then the literature’s reflection of this influence and power is critical to analyze so that we may continue to learn more about medieval culture since, as Caciola claims, “the overall importance of the dead across medieval culture has been either overlooked or underemphasized by medievalists.” The literature scholar’s goal is to understand the importance of these corpses to society using the literature as presented by its authors but also information from interdisciplinary sources, especially those which come directly from the society such as the corpses and graves discovered by archaeologists.

If literary works may be interpreted and examined through the lens of societal reconstruction, as is the goal of many scholars who seek to further understand the culture being studied, why turn to the social sciences at all? The answer can be found in the way society conducts itself when it comes to the “proper” handling of its dead. In his book *Ritualizing the Disposal of the Deceased: From Corpse to Concept*, William W. McCorkle, Jr., makes a bold statement concerning people (from any era): “Humans dispose of dead bodies and this cultural behavior appears to be widespread spanning time and space.” Although it seems like an obvious declaration of human behavior, the principle of corpse disposal and the ritualization that governs it provides a firm foundation for further investigation of the topic of corpse burial and the inclusion of archaeology into that exploration. His discussion, in fact, of the ritualized mortuary behaviors of ancient civilizations provides the starting point for the excavation of burial

grounds and a reasonable explanation for the progression into the literary world. He writes, “prior to ‘full blown’ ritual behavior by religious guilds and participants, individuals and groups were engaging in ritualized compulsive behavior in the material record prior to literacy and writing.”

Because the people were already carrying out the actions, it made logical sense for these rituals to be written down or otherwise interpreted in literary form once literacy was embraced by a particular culture. As McCorkle continues to explain, the “unconnected compulsions may have perfectly suited the new literate and religious guilds in the historical era to kick-start organized doctrinal religions … by using oral, written, and performative ritual scripts in various forms to generate meaning (and thus ideological power) over individuals and groups and their naturally occurring ritualized behavior.”

Likewise, from a much earlier literary perspective, Velma Bourgeois Richmond explained that the written medieval narrative, because of its popular appeal, “contain[s] insights about human behavior” and death is a particularly pivotal theme within which much could be written to explore behavior, conscious awareness, and emotional reactions. She explains that writers “recognize the value of using the occasion of death for exploiting resources of emotion, for revealing something of the complexity of individuals and their relations to other persons and the world in which they live.” In addition to the physical evidence left in the graves from the medieval culture, the literature allows modern scholars to bear witness to medieval people’s fundamental life.

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activities and many of their feelings. Richmond is specifically focused on laments for the dead in medieval literature; in her terms, a “lament is simply what is said when someone is dead, or is believed to be dead, and consequently the ideas expressed are not the result of elaborate mental deliberation. Laments for the dead in medieval narrative differ in only one important way from those which anyone would make in life. They are artistic.”

By examining these moments of lamentations within the narratives, Richmond shows that the writers are “going beyond the telling of stories to investigate a fundamental and universal experience which allows, indeed necessitates, a consideration of some complexities of the motives and behavior of the human personality.”

Although her study’s primary purpose was “to discover whether there existed in the centuries before Elizabethan tragedy began, a tradition of laments for the dead as a quasi-dramatic device” as well as identifying and categorizing characteristics of laments throughout the drama genre, her conclusions concerning the elements of human behavior which can be gleaned from such an inquiry and examination of the laments themselves is no less valuable for an investigation of the literature focused on societal treatment of corpses in conjunction with archaeological findings. The words of the laments and the emotions behind them allow us to continue piecing together more of the puzzle that is medieval life.

In her study of the funerals in Beowulf, for example, Gale R. Owen-Crocker explains that features such as the mourning woman may have been “a traditional feature of Germanic funerals” and “the suggestion that the lamentations were often repeated conveys a sense of time passing, time in which the funeral fire completes its destruction

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33 Richmond, Laments for the Dead, 29.
34 Richmond, Laments for the Dead, 14.
35 Richmond, Laments for the Dead, 27.
of the king’s body.”\textsuperscript{36} Death has given us the opportunity to peek inside the past and discover the significance of the dead in the medieval past. It is because death is a universal truth that transcends time and place that exploring the literature of a specific time—the Middle Ages, for instance—and focusing on the moments in which death and the dead are the stars can be legitimized. The corpse being lamented clearly has inherent value to the society in which it once lived; this makes laments, and the study (literarily and scientifically) of the corpses themselves, valuable to the larger comprehension of the time period. Richmond explains that in the laments

we find various moralizations on particular deaths; accusations of treason in the slaying, assertions that the death is justly deserved, cries against Fortune, religious questioning, prayer, consolation, and considerations of the future of the public weal, such as how the kingdom will continue, either collapsing without those who are dead or going on with some kind of substitute, the loss of the king’s honor when his knights are slain, and rather futile wishes to give up riches, relinquish kingdom and kingship, to have the dead person alive again.\textsuperscript{37}

Many of these aspects are seen in the eulogies and mourning cries of modern peoples across the world, so it is intriguing at the very least that these themes were present in texts from the Middle Ages and continue throughout time and place. As Richmond elaborates, “Death is one of the most fundamental parts of human experience, so that there has always been an attempt to understand and assimilate the event. It is not surprising to find in the Middle Ages many comments about death.”\textsuperscript{38} In a combination of both the discussion of the proper handling of the dead and lamentations for the dead,  

\textsuperscript{37} Richmond, \textit{Laments for the Dead}, 29.  
\textsuperscript{38} Richmond, \textit{Laments for the Dead}, 16.
*Beowulf* provides a prime example for scholars to examine on the literary and social levels.

In her article, “The Fourth Funeral: Beowulf’s Complex Obsequies,” Gale R. Owen-Crocker elaborates on the fourth of four funerals in *Beowulf* and why it is so much more intriguing than the other three funerals of the poem. She relates that it “is the only funeral of the four to include mention of the labour involved, and it does so twice.”

Owen-Crocker explains how the text provides some detail about how the construction of Beowulf’s funeral pyre was to be completed and who should bring the wood: “all Beowulf’s subordinate chiefs are expected to supply fuel for his pyre [which] makes the practical collection of wood seem like the delivering of tribute.” The poem also indicates how long it took to build Beowulf’s barrow and some instruction for its construction as well. She notes that the poet’s differentiation between Beowulf’s funeral and those of characters from the past included in the poem is indicative of the importance for his audience of Beowulf’s funeral. She explains that the “details give the final funeral of the poem an immediacy which is not present in the others; the time scale is quite feasible. The fact that the *Beowulf*-poet chose to include such details here while omitting them from the other funerals makes a contrast between the treatment of characters and events of the remote past and that of Beowulf, in a more tangible past.” In addition to Beowulf’s body, there is also the disposal of the dragon’s corpse—over the edge of a cliff into the sea below—which helps to demonstrate the fact that the poem goes to great lengths to articulate the “unpleasant practicalities which ordinary men can deal with:

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feet of dead reptile (line 3042) to be disposed of in the enormity of the sea and a funeral fire to be made.”

Though the disposal of a fifty-foot reptile was likely not a real concern during the Middle Ages, the poet’s description of the tasks to be completed after a person’s or thing’s death provides more insight into the everyday working world of the medieval period. We must, as Owen-Crocker has, interpret the details as presented through a work of poetry, but the analysis of the literary work provides a basis within which the archaeological facts can be incorporated. The discovery of a real barrow in the countryside provides concrete evidence of the labors which literary characters claim to have undertaken and demonstrates the activities in which actual medieval people engaged.

Owen-Crocker furthers her examination of the fourth funeral by discussing the reality of the fire which consumes the body of Beowulf—the finality of the hero’s life—but also intertwines, much like the tapestries and illuminated manuscript artwork of the time, with the mourning of his people: “the burning and the lamentation were evidently seen as taking place simultaneously, since weeping is interwoven with the noise of the fire.”

She continues,

The last action of the retainers is their kindling of the fire … after which the elements themselves take over, ascending, roaring, storming and finally breaking the ‘bone-house’, the body that was Beowulf. The action of the fire and the human grief become inseparable. Darkness (here the colour of the smoke) is an obvious metaphor for misery and the sound of the flame and weeping are linked with a grammatical complexity which is lost in translation.

Through the complex poetic structure, the poet allows his audience to understand just how important it was that the hero’s body was consumed by the flames, but Owen-

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Crocker also notes that the description of Beowulf’s corpse in the fire lacks the true reality demonstrated with the Finnsburg corpses:

[This] funeral allows the corpse of Beowulf … a dignity that the Finnsburg corpses were denied. There is no melting head or spurting wounds or even a more realistic oozing fat and escaping body fluids. The practical problems of dealing with unburnt bone are ignored as Beowulf’s corpse rapidly subsides into hot ash. It is a mere *banhus* now … a ‘bone-house’ that was once the repository of the spirit but is so no longer … In the poet’s choice of the word *hreðre* (line 3148) it is as if body and fire become one. It echoes the *hreðre* of line 2819, when it signified Beowulf’s breast from which the spirit departed, but it may also refer to the hot core of the fire. There is a finality about the destruction of Beowulf’s body which was absent from Scyld’s ship funeral.45

Once Owen-Crocker has fully discussed the account of the funeral pyre, she then moves on to the barrow in which Beowulf was buried. Her description of the relationship between the poetic text and archaeological findings showcases the reason why using both literary and scientific sources is necessary to fully understand the rituals of life and death in the Middle Ages. Both she and other scholars, most notably Fred C. Robinson, have pointed out that the “peculiarity of Beowulf’s last rites is that ten days after the very formal closure of the scene we have just examined [the funeral pyre], Beowulf’s subjects initiate a whole new series of ceremonies.”46 Robinson suggests that the doubling of the burial rituals was not, as many scholars such as Knut Stjerna,47 R. W. Chambers,48 and Paula Loikala49 have argued, a conflation of two sources for the poet concerning Scandinavian practices (Stjerna), the poet’s ignorance of pagan practice (Chambers), or a confusion of tradition (Loikala). Instead, he argues that “at least some in the poet’s

audience would have seen in the final ceremony of the poem suggestions of an apotheosis."\textsuperscript{50} Based on his examination of the cultural background of the Anglo-Saxons for dealing with the loss of loved ones as well as the appearance of apotheosis in society, Robinson is able to argue that because Beowulf’s people were so overwhelmed by their loss “and so unwilling to accept the finality of his death … they turn desperately to the pagan resources available to them to accord him ultimate veneration and, perhaps, recruit his protective force beyond the grave.”\textsuperscript{51} Regardless of the argument, it is significant that this deviation in typical burial activity has caused a good deal of scholarly confusion and theorizing.

Likewise, it was noteworthy for Owen-Crocker to relate that within Beowulf’s tomb was placed jewelry and other treasures (but no weapons, as she specifically mentions) from the dragon’s hoard, seemingly unburnt on the pyre and to explain that this too was not common in Anglo-Saxon England or Scandinavia. She explains that in “the ‘folk-cemeteries’ unburnt grave-goods are found with inhumations; but in cremations any remains of metal, usually from clothing fasteners, are normally burnt and melted.”\textsuperscript{52} There may have been an exception for personal items such as combs or utilitarian objects which may not have been burned, but no obvious reason stands out to explain the anomaly. Other objects of high value have also been found unburned, “such as bone gaming pieces, vessels and bone or ivory boxes” in burial pits of royalty (Owen-Crocker names Sutton Hoo as reference), and this may be an explanation for the text’s

\textsuperscript{50} Robinson, \textit{The Tomb of Beowulf}, 6.
\textsuperscript{51} Robinson, \textit{The Tomb of Beowulf}, 6. His essay ultimately suggests that the second funeral was not simple redundancy, but the poet was able to subtly hint simultaneously at two possible explanations for the second funeral so that neither his pagan nor his Christian audiences would take offense. The historical Germanic notion of apotheosis allows for this ambiguous conclusion and still aligns with the cultural and religious atmosphere of the time.
\textsuperscript{52} Owen-Crocker, “The Fourth Funeral,” 219.
inclusion of the dragon’s treasure in Beowulf’s barrow. It may have been precious to him. Another example of the inclusion of confusing items within an Anglo-Saxon burial site is the 2003 discovery of the lavish seventh-century burial in Prittlewell, near Southend in Essex. As the tomb was unearthed, archaeologists found a variety of grave goods including bowls, Coptic flagons, gold-foil Latin crosses (believed to have been placed on the eyes), a tablet-woven brocade, a small gold coin from Merovingian France, a gold belt buckle, an iron folding stool, a copper-alloy cauldron, wooden and horn drinking vessels, 57 bone gaming pieces, two large antler dice, and many other valuable items. The most intriguing aspect of this burial is the combination of Christian and pagan beliefs. As Ian Blair relates, “Although the manner of the burial—a chamber grave beneath a barrow mound with many grave goods—is that of a very high-status pagan, some of the grave goods suggest contact with Christianity.”53 The speculation as to who may have been buried within the tomb results in the possibility that it was the East Saxon king Sabert (d. 616) whose sons, as reported by Bede, claimed to have only pretended to convert to Christianity and later encouraged their people to return to paganism. This burial may perhaps have been Sabert’s sons’ defiance toward Christianity. Without the combination of physical evidence excavated from Sutton Hoo, Prittlewell, and other burial sites and literary references such as the Beowulf-poet’s barrow and pyre explanations, we would not have a fairly complete picture of the obsequies of the Middle Ages or understand why or if those of Beowulf stand out so peculiarly.

With so much conscious effort expended on various aspects of death, burial, and dead bodies by the authors of the works included in my examination of Old English

literature, it is crucial for modern scholars to understand the fundamental part these themes played in medieval society and culture. Though the body has become inactive, it has not yet finished speaking to its then-contemporary audience nor to its future audience of modernity. Though the philosophical question becomes “How does a living person become an inanimate object?,” the dead continue to intrigue and speak to us (as well as their medieval counterparts) in their inanimate state. It is clear that historical cultures and their mortuary behaviors set the stage for a combination of literary analyses and archaeological studies so that a fully formed picture of the past may begin to develop, especially concerning the bodies of the deceased.

Social scientists must work with the graves and their content, especially the bodies which, once uncovered, no longer hold a mystery. When a barrow is excavated or a cemetery plot exhumed, that body is no longer hidden; it is now placed under scrutiny for identification—age, sex, race, status, physical capacity, disability, deformity. Likewise, the condition of the body—how it was buried—becomes the critical piece of the puzzle in understanding what kind of graveyard was discovered and how it informs the modern scientist concerning the location’s importance in the particular society. Generally, there will be no description of the corpse which may help with identification or further insight into its life as a whole. For this reason, it is important that the humanities and science work together in order to develop a more complete picture of life and, in particular, death in the Middle Ages.

The seminal volume of collected papers presented at the Oxford Anglo-Saxon Symposium in November 1979 edited by Philip Rahtz, Tania Dickinson, and Lorna Watts

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provides a thorough, though quite outdated, overview of the state of archaeological
survey and interpretation of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. The “intention was … to
concentrate on broader theoretical issues [rather than presenting then-current excavation
progress]—on interpretation of mortuary evidence in general and on the early medieval
period as a whole.”\textsuperscript{55} Within the collection, the various contributors begin with a survey
of Anglo-Saxon cemetery studies followed by a comparison to Merovingian cemetery
studies to provide further implications for the Anglo-Saxons. They then move on to
discussing theoretical approaches and applications (death and culture, wealth and
material culture displayed through burials, and scholarly appraisal of society through
cemeteries), methodology and techniques for excavation and synthesis (cremation versus
exhumation cemeteries, grave goods), and a plethora of dig sites, including Sutton Hoo.
The combination of papers provides for a well-balanced impression of Anglo-Saxon
cemeteries and their value to the field of archaeology as well as the scholarly
understanding of the social structure and belief systems of the Middle Ages in England.

Sam Lucy’s \textit{The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death} provides a thorough breakdown of
the most important aspects of burial practices, cemeteries, grave goods, and the
interpretations we as scholars can make from what has been uncovered in Anglo-Saxon
cemeteries. The study begins by defining what exactly an Anglo-Saxon cemetery is (and
the difficulty in that definition) and the evolutions to the cemetery throughout the
centuries or across the island of England itself. It then works its way through the dating
of burials and grave goods and into both inhumation and cremation burial practices. The

Rahtz, Tania Dickinson, and Lorna Watts, British Archaeological Reports 82 (Oxford: British
Archaeological Reports, 1980), 3.
work concludes with an overview of cemetery composition and changes to them through settlements followed by the impacts of archaeological digs and methods of re-examining the findings of previous scholars. Through all of the evidence provided and the thorough explanations of various grave goods, burial practices, and cemetery layouts, what becomes extremely clear from the text is that even after almost 250 years of archaeological investigations, “archaeologists are still refining their knowledge of the nature and extent of furnished burials of the fifth to eighth centuries AD. Discoveries of new sites are still being made, challenging long-held beliefs, and new interpretations are continually being put forward.”

The more scholars in the humanities and sciences investigate the Anglo-Saxon period the clearer the picture of life and death in medieval England will become.

In the introduction to the edited volume *Death Embodied: Archaeological Approaches to the Treatment of the Corpse*, Emma-Jayne Graham discusses a prominent issue which both archaeologists and literary scholars encounter when researching and writing about past cultures: inherent limits of a particular field; in her case, Graham is concerned with late Anglo-Saxon burial sites. She describes the discoveries and excavations of two Roman women (each in different states of preservation) and ends the anecdote with a list of questions which modern archaeologists would love to have answered, including the manner in which their bodies had been treated in life and death, embalming practices, perfumes and other unguents used during burial, and many other

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57 Graham makes reference to *Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries 1979* to demonstrate the issue she regularly finds concerning late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. In the 25-paper volume, only 3 discuss the later part of the period.
inquiries. Graham goes on to elaborate on two important factors which the Roman
women’s bodies make abundantly clear:

[corpses] remind us of the power of the dead body to evoke in the minds of living
people, be they contemporary (survivors or mourners) or distanced from the
remains by time (archaeologists or non-specialists), a range of emotions and
physical responses, ranging from fascination to fear, and from curiosity to disgust.
This need not be restricted to the fleshed body, still recognisable as a once
animate individual, but might extend also to skeletal remains which emphasise,
and thereby remind us of the inanimate biological reality of death … the different
nature of the preserved remains of the two Roman women highlights for us the
variety of forms that a human body might take over the course of its life and
death, and provides a glimpse into the range of responses that might affect the
way in which these bodies are understood, experienced or treated.58

Continuing, she relates that

Archaeological interpretations are sometimes written in such a way as to suggest
that the skeletons which we uncover, and therefore usually associate with past
funerary practices, were what was deposited in graves, rather than articulated
corpses. In these instances ‘body’ essentially means ‘skeleton’ and we have
developed a collective tendency to think of the dead body in terms of bones and
the living in terms of flesh and fluids.59

Graham is acknowledging here that the science of the corpse and all the activities which
revolve around that body seem to forget or ignore the fact that the skeleton which lay
before them in a grave was once a living, breathing human who had a story to tell and
experienced the culture which the archaeologists are attempting to study. While the body
itself can reveal many secrets to life in the past, Graham concedes that it “would be much
easier to identify and decipher the decisions that were made at the moment of burial, and
in the process which led up to it, if we could see, smell or feel for ourselves the
materiality of the body with which past mourners or disposal practitioners were

58 Emma-Jayne Graham, “Introduction: Embodying Death in Archaeology,” in Death Embodied:
Archaeological Approaches to the Treatment of the Corpse, ed. Zoë L. Devlin and Emma-Jayne Graham
confronted." The bodies discovered are in their final moment—interment—because what is not found “are bodies that were abandoned part way through the ritual process” which may provide an opportunity for inspection and a glimpse into the actual funeral rite or preparation. The single moment at which scientists find the body—fleshly or skeletal—is useful in its own right, but the story leading up to that final resting place is where the literature may be able to play a part. By combining the details of the excavation and scientific experimentation on the corpse and its resting place with the literary interpretation of life and death during the Middle Ages, scholars are able to develop a clearer picture of the time and place. Graham advocates for widening the scope of inquiry: “what we excavate reflects only part of the story and in order to comprehend the role that the corpse itself played in determining funerary behaviour it is necessary to explore ways of ‘re-embodying’ burial activities or, in other words, re-introducing bodily perspectives.” The volume for which Graham writes this introduction does just that, but the scope should not be limited to just archaeological inquiry. Incorporating methods of “re-embodying” must also include the texts which the living bodies of those who we study now wrote during the time. Deciphering these clues along with the physical grave evidence will lead to a more in-depth understanding of funerary practices as well as the importance of the corpse itself, fleshed or skeletal.

In the same volume as Graham’s introduction, the co-editor contributes a chapter of her own which focuses on the Anglo-Saxon experience with various types of dead human remains. Graham cites many historical examples of integrating the body back into its role in religion, memory, mortuary ritual, and identity (see p. 6). She also identifies numerous texts which bring together archaeology and history in discussing the human body (see p. 7) as well as studies and research conducted highlighting the importance of the corpse in social, religious, and political contexts (see p. 7).
bodies. Zoë L. Devlin’s “‘(Un)touched by Decay’: Anglo-Saxon Encounters with Dead Bodies” examines the ways in which corpses “continued to have a social life after death, with varying degrees of power and agency to affect the communities around them” and argues that this social life “had an impact on the ways in which ordinary communities perceived and interacted with their dead.” While this chapter certainly applies to the theme of the volume as a whole, as described by Graham in the introduction, to re-embODY the corpses from the Middle Ages, Devlin situates her chapter by incorporating relevant literature from the time to provide a foundation on which she may base her argument and description of the Anglo-Saxons’ understanding of decay, decomposition, and corpses, in general. She makes it clear that the Anglo-Saxons were not unfamiliar with the processes which corpses underwent—probably they were more aware than most of us living in the modern world—and their literary works reflected that awareness. She quotes from an anonymous homily (Assmann XIV), Bede’s version of Æthelthryth’s *vita*, the Exeter’s Book’s *Phoenix*, and *Soul and Body II*, among many others. In addition to the obvious deduction that the Anglo-Saxons used the state of the corpses as described within the literary works as revelations of the consequences of good and evil, Devlin also claims that the “texts … reveal a structure within which corpses might act, or be used as a tool to act upon the living,” noting that bodily control during life and after death was a major concern for them. Devlin makes compelling suggestions that saints’ bodies appeared passive to their communities because of their unique state of preservation but those of criminals continued to appear active due to biological processes the body

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64 Zoë L. Devlin, “‘(Un)touched by Decay’: Anglo-Saxon Encounters with Dead Bodies,” in Devlin and Graham, *Death Embodied*, 64.
65 Devlin, “‘(Un)touched by Decay,’” 65.
underwent as well as insect activity. In either circumstance, those within the community of the saint or criminal would be affected by the ways in which the corpse affected their senses.66 Likewise, the ways in which individuals “engaged with particular corpses renegotiated and transformed the ways in which they perceived death and the dead as well as their own relationship with society.”67 Corpses took on various meanings for different communities and impacted those societies by exerting an influence over the people. It is important to note that in Devlin’s chapter she has sewn together brief snippets from the literature with sociological interpretations as well as archaeological findings from various early and late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. By doing so, she begins to construct a clearer picture of early medieval English society and its comprehension of death, decay, and corpses.

Because society at any time and in any place is never stagnant, social and cultural changes bring with them alterations in the landscape and community. One of the most important developments in the Anglo-Saxon period was the conversion to Christianity; when the people converted, their rites, rituals, and belief systems were also altered to fit

66 Many scholars discuss the likelihood of a scent associated with a decaying corpse. For saints or other holy men and women, this smell is either undetected (or simply not mentioned by the writer of the saint’s life) or has a sweet odor to it. Devlin mentions that strong stench which, in addition to the rot and decay accompanying exposure to the elements, would have affected those who may have been witness to the decomposing corpse of a criminal. In his text Ritualizing the Disposal of the Deceased: From Corpse to Concept, William W. McCorkle, Jr. also elaborates on the possible dangers a corpse may be associated with, including the smell of death in conjunction with the Rozin facial/disgust experiment (humans unconsciously are stimulated by noxious odors and tastes to have a reaction involving nose wrinkling, gape and tongue extension, and upper lip retraction). See Paul Rozin, Laura Lowery, and Rhonda Ebert, “Varieties of Disgust Faces and the Structure of Disgust,” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 66, no. 5 (1994): 870-81. McCorkle finds a correlation between humans’ reaction to the smell of a dead body and the ways in which people dispose of human remains (he also makes a point that, although animal bodies exude the same two odors (ammonia and sulfur), people dispose of human bodies ritualistically while most animals’ bodies are simply discarded—the obvious exception being domesticated pets in modern times wherein the pets are treated like members of the family and are given ritualized burials). See McCorkle, Ritualizing the Disposal of the Deceased, 97-100.
67 Devlin, “(Un)touched by Decay,” 68.
the requirements of their new religion. In *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation*, Paul Binski thoroughly explains the death culture of the Middle Ages, especially as it relates to the emergence of Christianity in England. He does so in a way which is accessible to both students and scholars of the Middle Ages since his monograph emerged from his own students’ enthusiasm in the classroom when he lectured on the topic. As would seem appropriate, he begins with the roots of medieval death culture which is heavily based on Christianity and the religion’s dogma because, as he relates, the “facts of medieval death were largely, if not entirely, Christian facts.”

He explains how Christianity changed the attitudes of the people toward corpses—it was able “to demarginalize the dead”—as well as the locations of their burials, the importance of relics for the holy, and the influence of the afterlife in determining how the living could still help or interact with their deceased loved ones. Binski then moves on to ways of dying—*ars moriendi* and bad death—and rituals concerned with death such as performing mass, blessings, and purification. Toward the end of this chapter, he reaches a fuller discussion of the body’s part in death, especially what to do with corpses depending on their social status. The concept of what to do with the bodies of the dead is especially important when it comes to the corpses—even the dismembered and amputated limbs—of saints. As Julia M. H. Smith explains, there existed a normative theology of relics—that of *pars pro toto*: a tiny fraction of a fragmented body was as holy and as potent as the complete, undivided body. This was combined with an affirmation that saints remained whole and entire in their corporeal identities, however fragmented their physical remains might become. Also, by a process of ‘holy contagion’, the sanctity of saints’ bodies could be

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transferred to associated objects—items of clothing, dust from the grave, and the like.\textsuperscript{70}

Dead bodies themselves have no inherent material value until some kind of significance is assigned to them through spiritual, political, or cultural means, and “Christian relics were paltry remains endowed with an abundance of values and meanings.”\textsuperscript{71} Monetary worth may be lacking, but the value of the corpse within a society or culture cannot be assessed on the basis of worldly wealth. This is especially true of saints’ relics because they “were eternal treasures that transcended the earthly treasures within which they were encased, and we should not lose sight of the contents, whether sword, lance and banner, pinches of dust, or splinters of wood and bone.”\textsuperscript{72} Spiritual significance or cultural importance provide the reasons why actual corpses or those discussed in literature need to be examined and discussed within their contexts rather than forgotten about simply because the people no longer exert an active presence in the lives of those around them.

In a description of the procession to the graveyard for burial, Binski incorporates an explanation of illustrations in the Office of the Dead to provide context and foundation for his explication of burial, coffining, exhumation, and graveyard practices. This incorporation of drawings within a text is a simple yet important point; we can gain a good understanding of medieval life from the burials, but the literature (or illustrations within the manuscripts) elaborate and fill in any blank spots that may not have explanations based solely on the excavated burial mounds. The literature and the


\textsuperscript{71} Smith, “Rulers and Relics,” 76. She explains in this article that it is because of kings and emperors of the medieval period that spiritual significance can be transformed and enhanced by a political or commemorative charge. The containers, reliquaries, housing these newly transformed relics would then also be enhanced and increase in value. She uses Æthelstan’s collection of relics as an example to demonstrate her point.

\textsuperscript{72} Smith, “Rulers and Relics,” 95.
archaeological findings are inextricable. When a character in a text dies and is buried, that is generally the end of their particular story. However, the reality of the medieval cemetery was not so final, especially for the common medieval man or woman:

The graveyard events amounted to a final laying-out. Corpses were manipulable and divisible for essentially practical reasons: graveyards were sites of recycling, and their earth and worms participated in a sacred ecology … Once a body had been buried and had decomposed to the point of defleshing, it was normal to exhume it and to store the bones in a charnel … house … The existence of a specific grave was less at issue than burial in consecrated ground: and this in turn reveals general culture issues about territory and social exclusiveness.73

When it came to body parts, specifically, Binski then notes that the head is at the top of the legal hierarchy of the body in the Middle Ages. This brings his discussion to the corpses of royalty, specifically the various parts amputated as part of a common practice involving division of the individual’s body. He focuses on the issues of decomposition encountered by those charged with the body’s transportation to its burial site. He also makes mention of relics for saintly bodies, transitioning nicely into his chapter concerning the physical representation and display of corpses in their tombs or reliquaries. Access to saints’ relics (whether corporeal or non-corporeal) displayed in a variety of differently sized and shaped reliquaries was extremely important to the faithful and their continued devotion to Christianity.

In his discussion of the Latin and Old English terminology for saints’ relics and reliquaries, Christopher Jones examines the relationship between the Latin vocabulary for “corpse,” “relic,” and other words associated with bodies of saints. He also notes that the differentiation between the physical body of the saint and the contact relics sometimes placed in the reliquaries (such as those strips of cloth placed in the crypts Bishop Wilfrid

had dug beneath the altars of Ripon and Hexham\(^{74}\) is not always obvious from the words used to describe those objects. Jones likewise examines the importance of the visualization of a saint’s actual body and the frequency with which a saint’s corpse was made available to the public. He relates:

Reliquaries of any sort might be opened by their keepers, but public showings (\textit{ostensiones}) of their contents were infrequent unless a translation was to follow. Otherwise, when showings occurred, it is seldom clear from the language of the sources whether the container was opened and the object taken out, or whether displaying the \textit{closed} reliquary constituted an \textit{ostensio}. Routine showings and the rise of transparent reliquaries are associated with a piety of the gaze (\textit{Schaufrömmigkeit}) ascendant only from the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Prior to that turn, the typical western reliquary was less concerned with making a saint’s absent, glorified body seem present. Instead, concealment may have often had the opposite effect—of \textit{disassociating} relics from bodies and perhaps, as a consequence, from a sense of the saint’s personhood. The reliquary as experienced did not so much speak for the relic but rather fused with it into a sacred but potentially impersonal object of power.\(^{75}\)

The importance of the corpse itself, which hagiography and its conventions appears to encourage, showed that “early medieval people inevitably wanted to put human faces on the relics they revered.”\(^{76}\) However, Jones explains, using the historical scholarship on reliquaries published by authors such as Hahn and Diedrichs, that “most early medieval people experienced relics not as anything suggestive of a person or a body, but as a closed box or stone slab”\(^{77}\) wherein, Julia M. H. Smith relates, “they remained an invisible presence. Even when relics were enshrined within a reliquary, only on very rare occasions prior to c.1200 could they be seen directly by the viewer, who saw generally only the valuable trappings, not the modest objects themselves.”\(^{78}\) The cultural and

\(^{75}\) Jones, “Old English Words,” 89.
\(^{76}\) Jones, “Old English Words,” 90.
\(^{77}\) Jones, “Old English Words,” 90.
\(^{78}\) Smith, “Rulers and Relics,” 76.
literary significance of the corpse, especially the holy corpse, becomes clear in the
language of hagiography and the nomenclature found in Latin and Old English secular
texts which refer to reliquaries, relics, corpses, bodies, and body parts.

Although there is an undeniable significance to a corpse (especially that of a
saint), Cynthia Hahn discusses the inherent power of a reliquary—even if the relic housed
within is not as described since “many body-part reliquaries do not hold the body part
implied”79—because “it participates in complexly metaphorical systems of meaning”80
and is not limited to simply demonstrating the shape of the object inside.81 As she
explains in her article “Metaphor and Meaning in Early Medieval Reliquaries,”

there is no tightly bound relationship between relic and artistic presentation like
that of signifier to signified; no conventionally fixed correlation of meaning as in
a sign or symbol. Neither, typically, is there an allegorical program in which
accepted and established theological meaning is reiterated or presented. Rather,
the nature of representations in the reliquaries … is closer to the ambiguity and
suggestiveness of what Augustine called the ‘figurative sign’ or what we
generally today characterize as the operation of metaphor,82

a point reinforced here from the previously cited article, “The Voices of the Saints:
Speaking Reliquaries.” In that same essay, Hahn focuses on arm reliquaries specifically
because they were the most common of the shaped reliquaries to survive into the present
but also because they were used and had “a particularly active history”83 in the medieval
ecclesiastical world. Her discussion of the arm reliquary, though very specific to the

80 Hahn, “The Voices of the Saints,” 20.
81 Hahn’s argument, as she notes, is in direct contrast to Josef Braun’s argument in Die Reliquiare des
cristlichen Kultes und ihre Entwicklung that reliquaries literally spoke their contents and the exterior
shape revealed what was contained in the reliquary itself. Braun’s discussion was specific to the small
Carolingian or Ottonian reliquary of the nail from Trier. It conformed to the proper shape and had no other
implied meaning or function. For more, see Hahn, “The Voices of the Saints,” and Hahn, “Metaphor and
Meaning in Early Medieval Reliquaries,” in Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle
Ages: Papers from ‘Verbal and Pictorial Imaging: Representing and Accessing Experience of the Invisible,
400-1000,’ ed. Giselle de Nie, Karl F. Morrison, and Marco Mostert (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 240.
82 Hahn, “Metaphor and Meaning,” 240.
scholarship of reliquaries themselves rather than the exploration of the corpse’s body part within, provides valuable information concerning how the body part could have continued to have presence in the world of the living during the Middle Ages. She relates that the “fragments [of the saints’ bodies contained in the reliquaries] are especially valuable to the medieval Church because they are not the buried body of the saint, the corpus irretrievably immured in a tomb. Instead, relic fragments are a more active and portable form of saintly body.”84 Although the saintly body could not be seen, the power of that holy individual continues to exist within the reliquary and can be used to reinforce the devotion of the faithful. If the full body could not be viewed and venerated, there was continued impact of the relic which was present; “the compelling interest of the hand or arm of the saint is its status as an active ‘limb’ of the saintly body and its potential for touch and gesture in the form of the arm reliquary.”85 Hahn makes it clear in both her 1997 and 2005 articles that reliquaries represented far more than the content within them and, in fact, “obscure rather than clarify the presence of the relic and relentlessly point elsewhere to indicate primary loci of meaning.”86 The physical shape of the reliquary as well as its contents are far less important than what may be interpreted metaphorically by ecclesiastical authorities for the benefit of the faithful. Having been placed on display within their containers, relics “would have enhanced liturgical splendour, reminded monks of their obligations to pray for deceased benefactors and urged living rulers to make equally generous donations.”87 It is the body part and the holiness it represents which inspire people of every social status; the importance of the corpse cannot be denied

84 Hahn, “The Voices of the Saints,” 22.
85 Hahn, “The Voices of the Saints,” 22.
86 Hahn, “Metaphor and Meaning,” 250.
87 Smith, “Rulers and Relics,” 95.
or diminished. Reliquaries and the relics they enclose powerfully affected the Christian communities of which they were a part by acting as conduits of God’s power. They “deny their physicality and insistently point beyond themselves and this world. They promise but also frustrate expectations associated with their apparent shape … later medieval arm reliquaries point not to their purported saintly and enclosed body but to heaven; and heads are not the locus of meaning or identity but only a transmitter that passes on the prayer.”

It seems that Hahn may be denying the importance of the corpse (or portion of the corpse) contained within the reliquary, but it is undeniable that without the presence of the body itself the reliquary would have no place or ability to transmit the meaning that she has been discussing. Her examination of reliquaries would not be possible without the inherent importance placed on the deceased body of the saint. Hahn concludes that “The reliquary, however, must be viewed as expressing an essentially different view of body: a body enclosed, shrunken and radically dismembered but thereby set apart. By its disassociation from things of this world, this body is supplemented with power in life through the liturgy and granted power in death through a very real connection with Paradise.”

Though reliquaries are tangentially related to an exploration of the corpses presented in medieval literature, the significance placed on containers used to enclose saintly body parts illustrates the fact that medieval culture held saints’ bodies, even after their deaths, in high esteem.

In a later article, Hahn continues her discussion of reliquaries by turning to the aesthetics of them as an art form. She is sure to note, though, that the inherent beauty of the reliquary is not its only significance for the Middle Ages. There is a reinforcement of

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88 Hahn, “Metaphor and Meaning,” 255.
89 Hahn, “The Voices of the Saints,” 29.
her previous article’s statements concerning the function of the reliquary in medieval society which comments directly on the importance of the relic. Hahn explains that the “beauty of the reliquary does not, therefore, only function to honor the saint, and mediate the ‘ugliness’ of the relic; it also takes part, along with the beauty of the liturgy, the shrine, hymns, poems, and prayers, in creating or constructing the saint and his or her spiritual meaning for (and by) the viewer.”  

Hahn elaborates that even as works of art reliquaries function to serve the faithful and display the continuing presence of the saint long after their deaths. Throughout the article, Hahn provides examples of how “relics are ‘lively’ and give ‘gifts’ to those who pray to them, gifts of miracles, healing and even conversion”; she also relates that there was a medieval “claim that relics (and reliquaries) had the ability to speak and some reliquaries even elicit speech from their devotees, in a process that seeks to teach the faithful Christian truths.” The culmination of this intriguing understanding of the functionality of reliquaries is that they, along with the relics themselves, are not “passive object[s] of the gaze” but rather active parts of the medieval Christian reality. The deceased body of the saint contained within the reliquary remains significant not simply because of the living saint’s hagiography but rather because the corpse and its container retain an active presence in the lives of the faithful. This aspect of medieval culture makes it all the more important that the corpses of the saints (or any significant individual of the time) as presented in the literature or histories should be examined with the same emphasis and vigor as that of texts concerning the living person.

Binski makes an important point for the overall study of corpses in the Middle Ages, keeping the medieval attitudes and influences of Christianity in mind concerning the relationship of the body and soul: the “issue was basically a dialectical one, since the dead body stood in an important relationship both to the living – and so was inextricably bound up with cultural attitudes to social and political coherence and its reaffirmation – and to the afterlife, wherein the issue of how a person survived, and so what a person actually was, was critical.”94 Binski’s book displays the importance of considering and integrating archaeological information into an analysis of Old English literature; without aspects presented in the literary works, much of the findings in the excavations would lack a firm explanation, but likewise the literature fails to depict the full extent of medieval life so the excavated tombs and burial mounds are integral for supplementation.

Along this same line of scholarly discussion of Christian emergence in the Middle Ages and its impact on medieval society, Annia Cherryson and Jo Buckberry explore religion and the role it played in burial rites and the state of graves. They relate, “the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to Christianity during the seventh century led to the rapid abandonment of furnished burial and ushered in an era of homogenous churchyard burial.”95 With the transition to Christianity, the makeup of cemeteries and the contents of the burials themselves changed to suit the requirements of the faith. However, these changes were neither rapid nor uniform, so scholarly interest in the burials of the later Anglo-Saxon period began to increase in medieval archaeology circles. Cherryson and Buckberry’s edited collection demonstrates that, though there was

94 Binski, Medieval Death, 71.
a major adjustment in later Anglo-Saxon cemeteries from their earlier traditions, studies of the burials during this later period have been growing in the last decade. They explain that “the decline in the use of grave goods did not lead to a uniformity of burial practices but instead the expression of individuality through other aspects of the burial rite, such as the use of funerary furnishing and above-ground markers.”96 In their edited volume, the papers explore later medieval burials through the lens of personal and group identity, the placement of the dead within the landscape, the development of the churchyard burial as well as the impact of the church on mortuary practice, social structure, social status, political developments, and religion. Most of the ten scholars published in the collection explore their specific interest by focusing on one particular cemetery or area of later Anglo-Saxon England, including Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, Hampshire, Saxon Southampton, Worcester Cathedral, Northumberland, and Raunds Furnells. Each of the papers shows the significance of studying these later Anglo-Saxon burials and “the importance of examining old questions and assumptions using new methods and approaches.”97 While these authors and editors demonstrate the vitality of deeper archaeological investigation into the remains of later Anglo-Saxon burials and cemeteries, their published findings also illustrate the necessity for combining the conclusions drawn by archaeological evidence with my analysis of data gathered through medieval literary sources to formulate a stronger understanding of mortuary practices of the time as well as the overall importance of the corpse itself within the larger Anglo-Saxon society and the individual community to which the corpse belonged.

96 Cherryson and Buckberry, “Introduction,” ix.
97 Cherryson and Buckberry, “Introduction,” x.
As an example, Jo Buckberry’s article concludes that social status—in addition to the growing prominence of the Church—was likely a determining factor for where an individual was buried, especially in a time of such disparity and variation in cemetery types and burial forms (she mentions church and non-churchyard cemeteries as well as execution cemeteries that often had evidence of deviant burials\textsuperscript{98}). She explains that some people, and not just those who were interred in so-called execution cemeteries, continued to be buried away from churches into the tenth century and beyond—although to what extent this was taking place outside the parochial system by this time is unclear. The nobility no doubt also played a role, by choosing to be buried in high-status locations within important churches or in ‘princely’ barrows in the seventh century. To founding their own churches in later centuries, to reorganising settlements, landscapes and funerary landscapes throughout the period.\textsuperscript{99}

However, if not deviant or belonging to the elite of society, Buckberry continues to relate that there is difficulty in ascertaining the “extent [to which] the common people were able to influence the manner of their burial, but it is likely that there was far more choice available than we have previously realised.”\textsuperscript{100} When considering the locations of burial and manner by which the dead were interred as presented in the literature, it is critical to have studies such as Buckberry’s to further inform the cultural reality within which authors were writing and how they may have been influenced by the social and religious backdrop. Cuthbert’s burial was considered deviant, though not in a similar way to some of those described by Buckberry (many of the ones she examined and refers to showed evidence of decapitation, amputation, binding, and other unusual deformities of the body); still, Cuthbert’s insistence to be buried on Farne Island directly contradicted the

\textsuperscript{98} On the subject of deviant burials, see also Andrew Reynolds, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).


\textsuperscript{100} Buckerry, “Cemetery Diversity,” 20.
mandates of the church and its burial practices. Likewise, Edmund’s decapitation was devastating to his people because the thought of burying him separately from his head was disturbing since he was a political as well as religious leader with great power in his community. The archaeological studies supplement the emotions described by medieval authors throughout literary works; the authors could not explain traditional burial practices if they intended to create a narrative rather than a handbook, so the scientific conclusions from real world cemeteries provides the cultural context lacking in the texts.

Another such real-world cemetery that has provided a plethora of information concerning burials, deviancy, and a glimpse into the Anglo-Saxon methodology for execution and interment is Sutton Hoo. While the ship burial of Mound One is well known and often discussed, there are many other burials in various other mounds around the ship. Martin Carver’s *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* includes a chapter concerning the burials around Mound Five which contain the bodies of those who had been executed or mutilated. Carver relates the various positions in which the bodies had been placed in the graves following their deaths, often by execution. These positions include: head detached and placed below the knee, head removed and placed askew at the neck, male decapitated body which two women lying face down on top, body with a collar of dark soil (remnants of the gallows rope), head detached and placed (rotated 180°) at the neck end and lower left leg broken, and body folded backwards and possibly had been quartered. Carver continues to describe more burials on the eastern periphery of the cemetery, and these positions continued to demonstrate a great variety of deviancy. After these descriptions, Carver explains that interpreting the cemetery’s contents is tricky because the various interpretations leave many questions over which to puzzle. As
a possible answer to why have executions here, Carver relates that “execution was a necessary instrument for the removal of ideological or political deviants, in which case we are looking for a time when there was a new law and authority to challenge. We are led to the conclusion that the ritual killing at Sutton Hoo represents a concomitant of kingship.”

As these studies have made clear, it is essential that within an examination of Old English literature one must always undertake an interdisciplinary line of inquiry. My study of the corpses as presented within the literature of the Anglo-Saxons needs to be informed by the excavated findings of archaeologists in medieval cemeteries so that points at which an author only hints at a ritual or particular activity concerning the burial or preparation of a corpse can be fully understood and incorporated into the analysis. Any peculiarities in the obsequies, such as those found in Beowulf mentioned earlier, need to be identified and one can only do so with the knowledge of actual mortuary procedure of the Middle Ages. Likewise, discussions of holy or royal corpses should be interpreted only after having been informed of medieval idiosyncrasies concerning these social rankings such as the legal hierarchy of body parts, veneration of saints’ bodies, types of above and below ground burials, and religious ceremonies. The foundation for a solid literary analysis of the Old English texts stems from a combination of historical facts and interpretations of archaeological excavations, since the texts themselves do not overtly state the background necessary for the clear picture to form while reading. Having presented these archaeological findings, the following chapters do not necessitate a

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regurgitation of this same information, so the focus can remain solely on the literature
and my interpretation of the authors’ words.
Chapter 2

Hero, Monster, and Man: The Critical Corpses of the Old English Epic Poem *Beowulf*

As one might expect from such a text, the lines of the Old English epic *Beowulf* are littered with the dead, their final moments, and, for some, their funeral rites. The anonymous author of the poem varies in his concentration and focus when it pertains to corpses, seemingly dependent on who the corpse once was in life or how that corpse affected the plot. Several different corpses and groups of bodies of varying importance are mentioned throughout *Beowulf*, including that of Beowulf himself. Their inclusion in the text demonstrates that bodies, both living and dead, have value in Anglo-Saxon society, but the level of discussion various corpses receive differentiates the importance of the corpses themselves. This chapter will examine the descriptions of the corpses of Scyld, Grendel, and Æschere in the poem to determine how the treatment of those corpses illustrates the societal value of the living bodies prior to their deaths as well as how the dead bodies continue to exert influence over the society in which they exist and the people who live amongst them.

Scyld’s Corpse and Ship Burial

At the beginning of *Beowulf*, in what scholars consider a preface, the audience is introduced to an important ruling figure, Scyld Scefing. After detailing his exploits as

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102 Gale Owen-Crocker explains that the beginning of *Beowulf* is considered a preface because of the location of the numbers which mark the fitts. See Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *The Four Funerals in “Beowulf”* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 11. R. D. Fulk also discusses the fitt numbering and argues that the divisions in the poem were made by scribes rather than the author. Divisions made by the second scribe make little narrative sense while those made by the first scribe are rational. See R. D. Fulk, “The Origin of the Numbered Sections in *Beowulf* and Other Old English Poems,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 35 (2006): 91–109.
ruler of the Danes and “the birth and early promise of his son and successor,” the text proceeds to inform readers:

Him ða Scyld gewat to gescæphwile
felahror feran on frean wære. (ll. 26-27)

Then Scyld, very strong, departed at the appointed time
to go in the protection of the lord.

Following this vague statement of his death, Scyld’s corpse is given the literal royal treatment as he, in compliance with his direct orders, is carried to the seashore (l. 29), laid in a ship—“the vessel of a nobleman” (“æþelinges fær,” l. 33)—and enveloped by treasures, ornaments, armor, and weapons in the bosom of the boat. The author even relates,

Ne hyrde ic cymlicor ceol gegyrwan
hildewæpnum and heaðowædum,
billum ond byrnum him on bearne læg
madma mænigo, þa him mid scoldon
on flodes æht feor gewitan. (ll. 38-42)

I have not heard of a ship more splendidly adorned with battle-weapons and battle-garments, with swords and corselets; a multitude of treasures lay in his bosom, which ought to have departed far with him in the possession of the sea.

As would be expected, the concept of a ship burial is definitely not original to the Beowulf-poet since the practice of using a ship to contain the dead body of a high-ranking person is well attested in both the archaeology and the literature of north-west Europe. Archaeological discoveries demonstrate that boat burial was already old-established when the Germanic peoples entered their Migration Age, going as far back as the Late Neolithic, the Bronze and the Roman Iron Ages.105

103 Owen-Crocker, Four Funerals, 11.
104 All Old English translations are my own unless otherwise stated. I use Klaeber’s Beowulf, 4th ed. (ed. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles) for the Old English text itself.
105 Owen-Crocker, Four Funerals, 27. Throughout her chapter concerning Scyld’s ship burial at sea, Owen-Crocker elaborates on archaeological findings from the Vendel period (c. 600-c. 750) in Sweden, the popularity of boat burials during the Viking Age, grave goods found in boat burials, the Sutton Hoo
The practice of boat burials seems to have been not only widely used but also various in execution. In one form or another, boat burial was popular and expected, especially for high-ranking members of society including the king. In the case of Scyld’s burial, the form was unusual since his ship was sent out to sea.

Within the boat, though, Scyld seems to disappear, buried under all of the riches and wealth that his people placed upon and around him in the ship; in fact, while the text does refer to his body’s presence, it is not actually referenced after line 35 (the placing of the body in the bosom of the boat). Aside from using the term “him” to remind the audience that there is a corpse in the boat, Scyld is not named, nor is his physical body mentioned. The emphasis is on the items placed around Scyld’s body, the people who are mourning him (their “sad spirit” (“geomor sefa,” l. 49) and “mourning heart” (“murnende mod,” l. 50)), and the ocean which will take the ship away from the Danes.

Just as Scyld’s body metaphorically disappears in the belly of the ship surrounded by goods, weaponry, and armor, the empty burial chamber of the ship discovered in 1939 on the Sutton Hoo property in East Anglia on an estuary of the River Deben poses an archaeological conundrum and provides a literary parallel to Beowulf. The 89-foot long ship, uncovered in Mound One, contained 263 pieces which have been reconstructed into discovery and its similarities to Beowulf (particularly to Scyld’s funeral activity and the treasures described in Beowulf), and Christian, pagan, and Old Norse comparisons to the Scyld burial scene.

Müller-Wille discusses boat-graves in northern Europe and the various forms of boat-graves that have been discovered. He elaborates that unburned boats were buried in trenches, placed on the surface with supports, covered with wood to make a flat surface, and covered with a barrow while the corpse was placed in the middle of the chamber. In the case of cremated boats, there have been both flat and barrow graves; the location of the burial may be under the pyre or interred elsewhere. See Michael Müller-Wille, “Boat-graves in Northern Europe,” The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology and Underwater Exploration 3, no. 2 (1974): 187-204.

Owen-Crocker explains that the Sutton Hoo discovery’s parallel to the poem is so strong that it “has become standard practice to teach Beowulf to students with illustrations from the material culture of the Anglo-Saxons” (30), including many of the items found in Mound One. Owen-Crocker likewise continues to elaborate that she has found parallels between Sutton Hoo and all of the burials in Beowulf.
fifty-nine complete objects. Some of them were crafted by the Anglo-Saxons and others were imported from locations such as Gaul, Celtic lands, and the Eastern Mediterranean area including Constantinople and Africa. These objects include a mail shirt, helmet, iron sword, six long spears, three short spears, ax, wooden shield, belt buckle, purse, leather baldric, drinking horns, bottles, eight walnut cups, lyre, objects associated with the preparation and serving of food, Merovingian coins, aurochs horns, and possibly the body of King Redwald of East Anglia (died ca. 626), a bretwalda who converted to Christianity but later reconverted to paganism at his wife’s request. \(^{108}\) Ralph Arnold explains that the objects found in the Sutton Hoo burial mound were “every bit as fine as Scyld’s treasure in the poem and the manner of his funeral similar, except that Scyld’s funeral ship was launched off on to the bosom of the ocean whereas the Sutton Hoo ship was buried on dry land—burial, according to archaeologists, being in fact a more usual practice than random launching.” \(^{109}\) It is unclear to scholars and archaeologists whether or not anyone was buried within Mound One because the body, if one actually existed, left no evidence of its presence. Arnold provides a plausible explanation that the reason for the vacant burial chamber may be that “the king whose body should have been there had been lost at sea. Or again if the king in question had been a convert to Christianity, it


is possible that he had been given a Christian burial elsewhere which had failed to satisfy
his still pagan subjects.”

Gale Owen-Crocker, in making comparisons between the burial and Scyld Scefing and Sutton Hoo, explains that, for some scholars, the lack of a skeleton serves as evidence that “the burial was a cenotaph, with no body” while some “thought there was a cremated body; and others, probably in the majority today, who believe there was once a body in the vacant space, but that the combination of acid soil and damp conditions had destroyed it completely before excavation.” The question of who the Sutton Hoo burial may have honored may never be answered (though the arguments which identify Redwald as the honored corpse are fairly compelling), but it does provide an interesting parallel to Beowulf since Scyld’s body was laid in the ship unburned and sent out into the sea. His body would never be seen again by his people just as the presence of a body in the Sutton Hoo ship cannot be confirmed by the archaeological evidence. It is as if nature—the sea in the case of Scyld and the acidic earth for Sutton Hoo—work against the inherent desire of historians, archaeologists, and literary scholars to find clear, substantiated evidence of these figures. Within the poem itself, it seems that Scyld’s people have already begun to forget about the physical Scyld and care only to commemorate his deeds, honor, and prowess in this memorial vessel as it drifts into the past.

At the conclusion of this twenty-six line passage, Scyld himself as a person has been completely eliminated from the description. His disappearance is remarkably evident in the last two and a half lines when the text states,

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men ne cunnon
seegan to soðe selerædende,
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\[110\] Arnold, “Royal Halls,” 93.

\[111\] Owen-Crocker, *Four Funerals*, 32.
hæleð under heofenum, hwa þæm hlæste onfeng. (ll. 50-2)

Men, hall-counsellors,
warriors under the heavens are not able to say with certainty
who received that freight.

Not only are Scyld’s people unaware of the location at which the boat (and obviously his body) comes to rest, but also they have ceased their consideration of Scyld as a person at all. Depending on the translation of the word *hleste*, the items on the ship may be simply considered its cargo or, a less desirable description especially for the human corpse now residing there, its burden. No longer is Scyld the great warrior, beloved leader, or proud hero he once was in life; now Scyld has become equivalent to objects. Although these objects are considered precious, valuable, and important to those who have placed them on the ship, the treasure, war-garments, and weapons remain simply *things*. Following his death, the well-respected leader of the Danes, praised by all who knew of his grand deeds, now has his prowess expunged from his lifeless corpse. His body has been lumped in with the rest of the inanimate objects in the belly of the ship.

While those objects are culturally significant and meaningful, especially having been placed within the nautical tomb of the leader, they are still lifeless objects which must have meaning assigned to them. Scyld will be remembered and have meaning in the society based on those memories, but he is no longer able to influence his own significance in the culture through acts of valor.

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112 Gale Owen-Crocker briefly mentions that the implication of this statement is that only the Lord, in a Christianized reading of this scene, knows where the boat and Scyld’s body finally land. See Owen-Crocker, *Four Funerals*, 13. Additionally, Judy King suggests that Scyld’s ultimate destiny on the boat is not known because this opening section explains that “no-one can know the fate of a pagan who lives according to the old heroic ethos. However, the poem as a whole is designed to demonstrate the fate of a pagan who follows quite different principles, and in this case the poet does not declare his ignorance” (Judy King, “Launching the Hero: The Case of Scyld and Beowulf,” *Neophilologus* 87, no. 3 (2003): 465).

113 *The Dictionary of Old English: A to H* indicates “freight, load, burden, cargo,” noting this particular line in *Beowulf* as its example.
31, Owen-Crocker relates that the syntax “reflects the ebbing of Scyld’s power as he becomes the grammatical object of the clauses, and the hands of others take over the action.”\textsuperscript{114} He has unknowingly lost his humanity by becoming a member of the inanimate world, a world which now physically and textually surrounds his corpse.

A second point of interest in these last two and a half lines stems from the verb onfeng and its range of translational possibilities. It is the third person, singular, past tense active indicative form of onfon with definitions, according to Bosworth-Toller, of “take,” “grant,” “give,” “to take what another offers,” “receive favourably,” and “accept.”\textsuperscript{115} For the context of this term in the epic, these definitions work fairly well.

The Danes are unaware of who might receive or take (in) the ship holding their king and a great deal of their wealth once it has left their shores and sailed far beyond their line of sight on the ocean. The waves, which may also be a possible receptor of the ship\textsuperscript{116} depending on the weather and tumultuousness of the sea at any given moment or location, will lead or strand the boat and its occupants wherever they desire. The reception of Scyld’s body into the belly of the ship would be most appropriate for this term since it is his “coffin, his shelter and his monument,”\textsuperscript{117} yet such is not the case. The use of the term onfeng lends itself well to the idea that Scyld, as a corpse, is no longer human because each definition seems to refer to material objects;\textsuperscript{118} his death has caused

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{114} Owen-Crocker, \textit{Four Funerals}, 15.
\textsuperscript{116} Old English poetry often personifies inanimate objects such as the sea, so it could easily be perceived as receiving Scyld and his well-stocked ship as a guest.
\textsuperscript{117} Owen-Crocker, \textit{Four Funerals}, 27.
\textsuperscript{118} The Bosworth-Toller \textit{Anglo-Saxon Dictionary} also provides “to receive a person” as a fourth definition with the understanding that this would be “for entertainment, assistance or protection,” but I conclude that this option is for the living, breathing human being welcomed as a guest in a hall or home such as Beowulf.
\end{footnotesize}
Scyld to lose his humanity and he now is equivalent to the objects which surround and honor his memory. The ship’s belly may be considered a coffin since it is able to hold the corpse, but it is certainly not shelter for him since the body would be exposed to the elements. Likewise, considering the ship to be a monument is a stretch since no one would be able to visit the site. Scyld has been removed from the physical space inhabited by the Danes so could easily be forgotten. Monuments are meant to memorialize, but that is very difficult when the monument moves and never returns to its original location. For all intents and purposes, Scyld’s body is no longer human and the man himself could easily be forgotten over time without a physical reminder. Everything about his funerary ship consistently refers back to the past, Scyld’s heroism, and his prowess as a leader. As Owen-Crocker relates, the “standard towers ‘high,’ and so, by implication, does the mast, in a visible manifestation of Scyld’s earthly magnificence; Hrothgar’s hall and Beowulf’s barrow will also tower splendidly high. The ship and its contents are emblematic of Scyld’s reign. They establish military victory.”\footnote{Owen-Crocker, \textit{Four Funerals}, 27.} From these comparisons, it is important that Scyld be among the treasures as he has now become a precious object. The corpse can be stripped of any valuables and possibly sold just as much as any of the objects on his ship. Once Scyld and his boat have passed out of memory in the text, they are also pushed aside in the minds of the audience as a new character is discussed and the fate of Scyld’s body remains a mystery.

Grendel was in Hrothgar’s hall. Bosworth-Toller does not cite \textit{Beowulf} at this point, so the reception of Scyld’s body for any purpose does not seem likely.\footnote{Bosworth-Toller does not cite \textit{Beowulf} at this point, so the reception of Scyld’s body for any purpose does not seem likely.}
From the first appearance of Beowulf in the eponymous poem, the audience is
told that his primary purpose is to save Hrothgar’s people from the wretch called
Grendel. The text refers to Grendel as

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Đa se ellengæst earfoðlice} \\
\text{þræge gehólode, se þe in þystrum bad,} \\
\text{þæt he dogora gehwæm dream gehyrde} \\
\text{hludne in healle. (ll. 86-9)}
\end{align*}\]

the powerful creature,\(^{120}\)

he who waited in darkness,
suffered for a time impatiently
because every day he heard loud
rejoicing in the hall.

and this description immediately places Grendel in a position outside of the Danes’
society. After elaborating on the festivities commonplace in Hrothgar’s hall, the poem
continues to discuss the extremity of Grendel as a character compared to the members of

\[^{120}\text{The term ellengæst, “powerful creature,” is an incredibly complicated word with myriad definitions which construe various meanings and connotations. As a modern audience with no positive identification of author and no described authorial intent, we may become biased toward Grendel before he is able to demonstrate what type of character he is and what values or morals he embodies based solely on the chosen definition a translator uses in his edition of the poem. As Jana K. Schulman relates, due to the “definitions provided in various dictionaries for the words ellengæst and aglæcwif, the majority of editors and translators depict Grendel and his mother as ‘other,’ as non-human, and as evil” (Jana K. Schulman, “Monstrous Introductions: Ellengæst and Aglæcwif,” in Beowulf at Kalamazoo: Essays on Translation and Performance, ed. Jana K. Schulman and Paul E. Szarmach (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2012), 69). There is a good deal of ambiguity present in the meaning of the word as a compound as well as the possibility of wordplay, but traditional readings of ellengæst privilege the negative over the neutral or ambiguous which continue into modern translations. Schulman’s article outlines editions dating back to 1833 and demonstrates how the term had been pigeonholed into the negative definitions going so far as to use “demon,” though a few stand apart by using “spirit” along with an adjective describing Grendel’s strength or by interpreting the second element as a form of giest for “guest” or “visitor.” Generally, however, “demon” is a commonality among most translators. The words of the compound itself, as Schulman explains, become problematic once put together because the term only appears once in Old English even though the two words separately occur often. The first, ellen, can simply mean “courage, strength,” but gast is the difficult term, especially when considering vowel length markings. Determining whether the term should be gast or gæst can make the difference between Grendel being construed as a “visitor” or a “demon,” even though the vowel length is rarely marked. This still leaves interpretation up to the translator. For the purposes of this analysis, I will refer to Grendel as ambiguously as possible while acknowledging that he is still considered an outsider to the Danes and an enemy to Hrothgar, his people, and Beowulf. His monstrous actions rather than the misconstrued meaning of one term will be the significant factor I focus on concerning the treatment of his corpse throughout the text.}\]
the meadhall. The “enemy from hell began to perpetrate savageries” (“ongan / fyrene fremman feond on helle,” ll. 100-101), “the savage spirit” (“se grimma gæst,” l. 102), the

mære mearestapa, se þe moras heold,
fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard
wonsæli wer weardode hwile. (ll. 103-5)

famous border wanderer, he who held
the moors, fen and stronghold, the unfortunate man
occupied the land of the race of monsters for a time.

To an even more extreme extent beyond simply being ostracized by the community, the next several lines indicate that the Christian God has played a part in the creation and condemnation of this vile being. Of Grendel, the text states,

siþðan him scyppen forscrifen hæfde
in Caines cynne – þone cwealm gewræc
ece drihten, þæs þe he Abel slog;
ne gefeah he þære fæhðe, ac he hine feor forwræc,
metod for þy mane mancynne fram.
Þanon untydras ealle onwocon,
eotenas ons ylfè ond orcneas,
swylce gi(ga)ntas, þa wið Gode wunnon
lange þrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald. (ll. 106-14)

afterward the Creator had him condemned into
the kin of Cain – the eternal lord avenged the killing
because he slew Abel;
he did not rejoice about the enmity, but he, the Maker, exiled
him far from mankind because of the crime.
Thence all evil offspring – giants and elves and
evil spirits also giants, were born,
who contended against God for
a long time; he paid to him their reward for this.

At this point, it seems that even God can do nothing but outcast Grendel because he is such an evil individual; however, God’s condemnation provides a loophole to Grendel’s characterization and a reasoning for his actions. This loophole becomes increasingly more important following Grendel’s fight with Beowulf as it allows audiences to see
Grendel as a sympathetic character but also provides an interesting background to the notion that Grendel’s arm is simultaneously a trophy and a revered relic, or perhaps an anti-relic.

Grendel’s actions following the first hall-feast that the audience is made privy to clearly set him on a malicious path. The music and joy-making infuriated Grendel because, as the text states concerning the retainers and their lives up to that point,

sorge ne cuðon,
wonsceafþ wera. (ll. 119-20)

they [the hall thanes] did not know sorrow, misery of men,

so Grendel, an expert in sadness and desolation, was immediately prepared to demonstrate pain and mourning to them. The narrator continues to influence the audience’s vision of Grendel through the unpleasant description of not only the character’s actions but also the depiction of his mental state. Grendel,

Wiht umhælo,
grim ond grædig, gearo sona wæs,
reoc ond reþe, ond on ræste genam
þritig þegna; þanon eft gewat
huðe hremig to ham faran,
mid þære wælfylle wica neosan.
Da wæs on uhtan mid ærdæge
Grendles guðcræft gumum undyre. (ll. 120-27)

the creature of misfortune,
grim and greedy, was immediately ready,
savage and cruel, and seized thirty thanes from rest; afterwards he departed thence exalting in plunder proceeding to [his] home, with the abundance of the slain to seek his dwelling. Then in the dawn at day-break the war-strength of Grendel was manifest to the men.
Within this set of lines, the poem illustrates a truly gruesome and gory scene designed to demonstrate Grendel’s hatred toward mankind and his destructive nature. However, the text also makes brief mention of a group of corpses which do not receive the type of care, comfort, and attention that Scyld’s body (prior to its objectification in the belly of his burial ship) is given. This group consists of the thirty slain warriors which Grendel plunders during his rampage; other than knowing where their final resting place will likely be—Grendel’s mere unless he drops one along the way or consumes them before reaching his final destination—their corpses are given no more than three lines of description. They are Hrothgar’s men since Beowulf and his fellow Geats have not yet arrived, but their identities are left unspoken. Although it could be argued that the thanes are discussed a bit further on when Hrothgar is demonstrably heart-broken and joyless in the following several lines, that small portion actually focuses more explicitly on Hrothgar’s emotions than on the thanes and their untimely demise. No mention is made of an attempted reacquisition of the corpses nor of a desire for proper burials; it is as if the men and their bodies have become a symbol for hatred and aggression for the Danes, but the actual, physical presence of the corpses is not necessary for Hrothgar’s (and his men’s) emotions to manifest. These disregarded corpses are joined by soldier counterparts who briefly enter the story about 1100 lines later in a short description accompanying the bestowal of a golden torque to the victorious Beowulf.

During the celebratory feast for Beowulf and his fellow Geats following the gripping battle with and gruesome defeat of the first combatant, Grendel, the scop diverts the main story into one of its digressions, the Finnsburg episode.\textsuperscript{121} Among other reasons

\textsuperscript{121} In the middle of the Finnsburg digression, Hildeburh commits her son to the pyre on which her brother Hnæf has already been placed, and she watches and wails as the fire consumes the two bodies. The \textit{scop}
for its inclusion, Ludvig Schrøder argued that the episode emphasized Hrothgar’s weakness and the fragility of the nation over which he ruled. It also demonstrates how, through emigration, the Danes created their own vulnerability to invaders such as Grendel who they would be unable to conquer without foreign assistance. Following this, Beowulf is given gifts in a passage which transitions into a brief prolepsis concerning the torque Beowulf receives. He would later give that neck-ring to his king, Hygelac, who would wear it into battle with the Frisians. Hygelac is killed, and the Frisians steal the torque. The final lines of that section, 1212-1214b, depict a macabre scene of corpse-plundering on the battlefield. The first line and a half raise the specter of a group of dishonorable warriors pillaging the bodies of fallen warriors after the slaughter had concluded:

Wyrsan wigfrecan wæl rēafeden
æfter gūðsceare. (ll. 1212-1213a)

provides a rather detailed description of the flame’s effects on the body as it burns; more detail, in fact, than the effect of the pyre flames which consumed Beowulf’s body at the end of the poem. Gale Owen-Crocker notes that the Finnsburg episode provides a more realistic description of the effects of fire on a human body with the inclusion of spurting wounds and melting heads while Beowulf’s funeral focuses on the dignity of the man and the spirit within (Gale Owen-Crocker, “The Fourth Funeral: Beowulf’s Complex Obsequies,” in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: Beowulf*, ed. Harold Bloom, Updated Edition (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2007), 215). The text states, “The heads melted, / the gashes burst then blood sprang out, / hostile bites of the body; the flame, the most ravenous of creatures, / swallowed all, from both people, / those who battle destroyed there” (“Hafelan multan, / bengeato burston ðonne blod ætspranc, / laðbite lices; lig ealle forswealg / gæste gifrost, þara ðe þær guð fornam / bega folces,” ll. 1120-1124). This depiction of the funeral pyre certainly stands out within the digression itself since further elaboration on or detailed descriptions of corpses (like that of Hildeburh or Finn) are not provided but also hints at how knowledgeable medieval people were concerning corpses and how various environments or situations affect the decomposition process. The scop was not timid about sharing these gruesome details (nor is the narrator of the poem squeamish about specific gore-filled moments in the lives of the characters), and the people hearing his tale in Heorot did not seem to be offended or disgusted by those particulars. The text relates that “the bench noise sounded loudly” (“beorhtode bencsweg,” l. 1160) as the festivities continued. Clearly, the audience (both in and outside of the text) was aware of and undisturbed by bodily reactions during funeral pyres, which gives us an indication of societal awareness concerning death and decomposition during the Middle Ages.

Less worthy warriors might have robbed the corpses after the slaughter.

The rest relate that,

Gēata lēode
hrēawīc hēoldon. (ll. 1213b-1214b)

the people of the Geats
guarded the place of the corpses.

These two and a half lines follow a description of how King Hygelac’s body was treated by the Frisians after his fall on the battlefield. His body, mailshirt, and necklace were all in Frankish possession. Just as the fate of the murdered Danish compatriots was never revealed, so too is the final resting place of the king left in mystery. The other fallen Geats who joined Hygelac in death are also not given further attention aside from the brief note that other warriors may have participated in plundering post-battle.

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123 This translation of rēafeden as “might rob” has not been recorded by any of the prominent Old English scholars who have published editions and translations of Beowulf. Additionally, the transcription of the verb in these editions is often changed from the subjunctive mood to the indicative, most likely for the sake of ease of translation. This includes works published by Klaeber, Ettmüller, Chambers, Schücking, Sedgefield, Holthausen, Dobbie, Wrenn, and Jack. Klaeber’s first edition transcribes the term as “rēafedon” and Wrenn’s first and second editions use “rēafodon” (Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, Klaeber’s Beowulf, 42). Fulk, Bjork, and Niles note the substitution of –en for the expected –on in “rēafeden” of line 1212 in their introductory section discussing questionable ending markers for various tenses and moods found in the poem; however, there is no further explanation for this specific anomaly except for a reference to Hogg’s A Grammar of Old English § 6.62, which describes the beginning of a back vowel being “interchangeable in spelling with the unstressed front vowel /e/” (Richard Hogg, A Grammar of Old English, Vol. 1: Phonology (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992)), also termed leveling. Additionally, as Kiernan relates, “it is possible to argue that three, slightly different, mixed, spoken dialects of the poet and his scribes came together with the mixed dialect in the early 11th century when Beowulf was composed” (Kevin Kiernan, Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 42). While these are plausible explanations for the indicative, I contend that the substitution of –en where an expected –on would be placed is purposefully meant to be subjunctive rather than indicative. If the dishonorable warriors—in this case, one warrior—wanted to plunder the corpses, why would the Geats simply stand by watching over them? Changing the translation of “rēafeden” from indicative to subjunctive would easily create a rational explanation for the Geatish warriors’ presence during a grave robbery: prevention. With a subjunctive interpretation, the Geats are continually praised for their heroism and acts of valor. Translating “rēafeden” subjunctively eliminates confusion grammatically and contextually while proclaiming the bravery of the Geats both in the present (Beowulf’s victory over Grendel) as well as the future (Hygelac’s death and the Geats’ defense of fallen warriors).
Within the context of the poem itself, the narrator’s brief aside about Hygelac’s impending doom during a jubilant occasion seems like a stark contrast since Beowulf has just attained victory over Grendel. However, it is a clear demonstration that no matter the outcome of a battle, the Geats remain steadfast in their defense of their home as well as each other. They are superior warriors to Hrothgar’s men, and this is where the grammatical use of the subjunctive mood for the verb *rēafeden* is critically important (see fn. 119 above). Because the less worthy Frisian warriors were not able to rob the fallen Geats being guarded on the bloody field of battle, the audience is able to make a clear comparison given similar situations. Upon Grendel’s first attack, thirty men were taken from Heorot never to be seen again; their corpses were not recovered, sought after, or even discussed further. There was great mourning in the hall, but that does very little for those corpses as a memorial. The dead bodies were not guarded, nor was the field of battle—Hrothgar’s hall—protected following the attack from Grendel. Hrothgar’s men were essentially helpless, unable to defend the hall, and, by extension, their king, themselves, or their slain fellow thanes. Grendel was given free reign while in the hall to rampage, pillage, and plunder however, and whomever, he desired. The Geats from the prolepsis were not quite so helpless; although they lost the battle to the Frisians and were unsuccessful in retaining the body or possessions of Hygelac, they were staunch in preventing the fallen warriors from being robbed after an already miserable defeat. They were able to take pride in knowing that these men’s bodies would be kept from dishonor, a point on which Hrothgar’s men compromised. While the anecdote ultimately culminates in Hygelac’s defeat, we see that Beowulf is able to defend Hrothgar’s people since they could not do so themselves. Line 1214b, “The hall resounded in music,”
(“Heal swege onfeng”) transitions from the prolepsis back to the main text. Just like the men whose bodies were never recovered from Grendel’s lair, the corpses on the battlefield are forgotten as quickly as the prolepsis itself.

Beowulf’s fight with Grendel, the first of three battles Beowulf chooses to endure, demonstrates many things concerning Beowulf’s strength and courage, Grendel’s physical similarities to the hero, and the importance of the hero successfully destroying the monster to a Christian reading of the poem as a whole. The two characters are evenly matched, and Grendel quickly realizes that he has met his equal when he enters Hrothgar’s hall for another late-night feast. Within Grendel,

him alumpen wæs
wistfylle wen. Ne wæs þæt wyrd þa gen
þæt he ma moste manna cynnes
ðiegean ofer þa niht. (ll. 733-36)

the expectation of the fill of feasting
was arisen in him;
that was not yet fate that he might consume
more of the kin of men over the night.

This scene clearly depicts Grendel as a ravager of men, but it also illustrates that Beowulf is cunning and willing to make the decision to allow one of his men to be devoured for the sake of expert battle strategy. In the next lines, Beowulf watches Grendel creep into Heorot, snatch a man from his slumber, and slowly consume that warrior in the most gruesome and elaborate way:

Þryðswyð beheold
mæg Higelaces hu se manscæða
under færgripum gefaran wolde.
Ne þæt se aglæca yldan þohte,
ac he gefeng hraðe forman siðe
slæpendne rinc, slat unwearnnum,
bat banlocan, blod edrum dranc,
synsnædum swealh; sona hæfde
unlyfigendes eal gefeormod,  
fet ond folma. (ll. 736-45)

The powerful kinsman of Hygelac watched  
how the guilty ravager wished  
to proceed with sudden attacks.  
The adversary did not think to delay that,  
but he quickly seized at the first occasion  
a sleeping warrior, tore greedily,  
bite the joints, drank blood from the veins,  
swallowed huge morsels; soon he  
had consumed all of the dead one,  
feet and hands.

Aside from the fact that Beowulf seals the fate of one of his loyal Geat kinsmen by  
remaining silent while he watches the cursed creature approach and realizes its intention  
to consume the soldier, this Grendel-snack receives, thus far, more attention, as far as  
poetic space is concerned, from the poet than any other non-player character. Although  
the man’s name is not mentioned at this point, the audience is told, in gloriously  
gruesome detail, what becomes of the warrior’s body. Beowulf will provide the soldier’s  
ame, Hondscio, while in Hygelac’s court after returning from Heorot.\(^{124}\) Seth Lerer,  
however, reduces the importance of the identification of this warrior by explaining that  
Beowulf’s use of the name *Hondscio* “is a joke, a contribution to the tame and reassuring  
retelling of Beowulf’s story” which “transforms the terror of his experience into a form of  
social entertainment. The play on name and glove effectively dramatizes the horror of the  
Geat’s death and the monster’s appetite. It makes the story an acceptable social

\(^{124}\) Beowulf describes the scene to Hygelac and his wife thusly: “When the gem of heaven glided over the  
ground, the angry spirit, horrible, angry in the evening, came to seek us out, where we, sound, guarded the  
hall. There the battle was fatal for Hondscio, deadly attack for the fated one; he lay dead first, the girded  
champion; Grendel became for him, the famous young thane, a devourer, he swallowed up the whole body  
of the dear man.” (“Syððan heofones gim / glad ofer grundas, gæst yrre cwom, / eotol æfengrom user  
neosan, / ðær we gesunde sæl weardodon. / ðær wæs Hondscio hild onsæge, / feorhbealu fægum; he  
fyrmest læg, / gyrded cempa; him Grendel wearð, / mærum magulpegne to muðbonan, / leofes mannes lic  
eall forswealg,” ll. 2072-2080).
performance, one that will not—as Grendel’s own disembodied head did—frighten men and queen.”125 We do not have to wonder if Grendel simply kidnapped him, outright murdered him, or went so far as to actually consume his flesh and bones. The poet provides us with these details. The man is literally torn limb from limb between the monster’s teeth, and his blood is used to wash down the meat swallowed in large chunks. And just so there is no question in his audience’s mind, the poet reiterates that Grendel enjoyed all of this man, feet and hands included. As far as one may tell, this character is no different than the previously murdered thirty thanes which Grendel likely consumed save for the fact that he is one of Beowulf’s men. He seems to be a regular warrior sleeping among the rest of his companions and simply happens to be the unfortunate victim at this point in the poem. Why, then, does he receive such a gory description for his demise and is then later referenced by name in Beowulf’s recitation to Hygelac of his exploits in Hrothgar’s kingdom?

Just as Grendel enters the hall, the poem relates that the monster is infuriated to the point that

him of eagum stod
ligge gelicost leoht unfæger. (ll. 726-27)

an eerie light most like a flame emanated from his eyes

as he looked about at the sleeping warriors.126 Their peaceful slumber in Hrothgar’s hall infuriated Grendel, and it seems that the sadness with which he originally entered the hall

126 Scholars often make parallels between Grendel, his characteristics, and his actions and Norse literature, most specifically to the draugr Glámr in the Icelandic *Grettis Saga* among others. Michael Lapidge identifies these similarities when he explains that “the Beowulf-poet must in the first instance have conceived Grendel in terms of an Old Norse draugr, an ‘undead man’ or ‘ghost’ or ‘zombi,’ a dead man who had not been properly buried and therefore became an animated corpse able to haunt the living by walking about, usually at night and in the mist” (Michael Lapidge, “Beowulf and the Psychology of
completely dissipated into total rage. It was then that, as the poet relates, Grendel’s intentions turned to

\[ \text{gedælde ... anra gehwylces} \\
\text{lif wið lice. (ll. 732-33)} \]

part[ing] life from body
from each of them [the sleeping warriors in the hall].

Because the poet used the verb *gedælde*, from *gedælan* meaning “to divide, part, separate, share…,”\(^{127}\) it is not only logical but also cleverly poetic that he follows this statement of intention with a description of Grendel’s literal division, parting, and separating of the sleeping warrior’s body. Additionally, and on a larger, more wide-ranging literary scope, the dismemberment of Hondscio’s body falls in line with ancient sacrificial ritual as well as traditional poetic device. Referencing Walter Burkert’s *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, Seth Lerer explains that “blood, flesh, viscera, bone, and skin all played a role in the propitiation of the gods and the feeding of their human subjects.”\(^ {128}\) He also relates that

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\(^{128}\) Lerer, “Grendel’s Glove,” 723.
The “general narrative” of creation, in which “a primordial being is killed and dismembered,” comes to share in the accounts of social organization, as the body bears a broad relationship to both the structure of the universe and that of human society. Analogies between, for example, the head and the heavens, the flesh and the earth, blood and water, are embedded in the myths of Indic, Iranian, Germanic, and the Greek and Latin peoples. Such stories as the killing, dismemberment, and burial of Romulus constitute veiled retellings of the story of creation while at the same time they domesticate, by rendering in literary form, the old brute practices of cultic sacrifice or social hunt.129

And, ultimately, through the literary tradition, “The human body—marked and dismembered, reduced to its constituent elements or its disassembled limbs—is often taken as the site of allegory in the ancient traditions of literary speculation.”130 It is important for the context of the epic as well as the literary tradition in which the poem participates that the destruction, dismemberment, and consumption of the body of Hondscio were detailed. The audience lives as the Geats lived during that event through Hondscio, though we are unaware of his name and that is not particularly important at this point because “[m]etonymically or synechdochically [sic], the body locates and explains phenomena of social life.”131 He is sacrificed so that Hrothgar’s court and the Geat visitors may continue to live free of the Grendel curse.

While the particular soldier himself is seemingly unimportant to the poem or series of events even though Beowulf would later refer to him as the “famous young thane” (“mærum maguþegne,” l. 2079) and the “dear man,” (“leofes mannes,” l. 2080) his body becomes the perfect canvas on which the gruesome picture of Grendel’s path of destruction might be painted. The poem only hinted at the destructive possibilities Grendel may have harbored when he took the previous thirty thanes—no obvious gore.

no corpse evidence, no blood-covered perpetrator—so it is therefore able to be far more descriptive in this instance. The scene of this man’s demise is also the perfect juxtaposition for Grendel’s attempted assault on Beowulf as he finishes the last morsel of the now-deceased thane and goes back to the warrior smorgasbord for seconds only to meet Beowulf.

The hero’s victory over Grendel culminates after quite an intense struggle, especially for Grendel who had expected to have the upper hand from the beginning. The text makes it clear, though, that Beowulf would obtain and maintain a firm grip on his opponent and the fight itself, and Grendel quickly realizes this. The monster discovers that Beowulf is far more of a contender than he had previously assumed. From the first instance that Grendel reaches out for Beowulf with the clear intention to consume him as he had the previous sleeping warrior, the poem states blatantly that Grendel fears Beowulf when he observes the Geat’s strength, especially in his handgrip (*mundgripe*).

The creature

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He on mode wearð
forht on ferhôe; no þy ær from meahte.
Hyge wæs him hinfus, wolde on heolster fleon,
secan deofla gedræg. (ll. 753-56)
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became afraid in his mind
for his life; none the sooner he might away.
His intention was to get away eagerly, he wished to flee to the hiding place,
to seek the company of demons.

Even with all of Grendel’s hostile intentions, about which the text continually reminds us, Grendel almost immediately fears for his life and seeks to escape the mighty

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132 At line 740, Grendel picks up the sleeping warrior in the meadhall. Prior to this, the audience is made aware of Grendel’s mindset concerning Beowulf, the Geats, and the celebratory Danes who were all overjoyed at Beowulf’s arrival at line 703. Starting at line 710, Grendel begins his stalking toward Heorot,
handgrip of the Geat hero. It also demonstrates Beowulf’s lack of consideration for his adversary as an individual with feelings or emotions:

and we are told of his intentions. The poem constantly uses extremely negative adjectives to describe Grendel—"walker in darkness" (703), "hostile demon" (706), "guilty ravager" (712), "horrible combatant" (732), "adversary" (739). Interestingly, in Beowulf’s boasting speech recited just before the men of Heorot and the Geats fall to sleep on the eve of Grendel’s return, the hero simply uses the masculine pronoun “he” or calls him “Grendel”. The poem clearly wants its audience to see Grendel as an unholy creature while the hero himself only understands Grendel as another adversary. In a discussion of the name “Grendel,” Michael Lapidge relates that etymological explanations of the name from previous scholars “are derived more from a sense of how Grendel behaves in Beowulf than from any conviction about what the elements of the name might be. It is at least possible that the poet consciously chose for his monster a name that defined explanation and lacked precise denotation or connotation” (Lapidge, “Beowulf and Psychology,” 379). Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe explains that Beowulf’s interactions with Grendel and his definition of his opponent in line 274 (“sceaðona ic nat hwyle”) creates “a being who exists in two different modes, who appears as spirit and mist in the fens, but who is manifestly corporeal in his contact with men” (Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, “Beowulf, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human,” Texas Studies in Literature and Language 23, no. 4 (1981): 486-7). Likewise, in the context of the Beowulf-Grendel fight, O’Brien O’Keeffe explains that Beowulf seems to reject himself as a human in order to more properly approach Grendel just as the actual leaves his monstrous arena to fight with the humans. She notes that the "struggle in Heorot shows us the limits of the human approached from either side as each adversary separates himself from those signs which help define him" (O’Brien O’Keeffe, “Beowulf, Lines 702b-836,” 487). Now, having already convinced the audience of Grendel’s maliciousness, the poem elaborates on the creature’s intentions. At line 723, Grendel is depicted throwing open the doors of Heorot, intending harm. Just before reaching out for the sleeping warrior, the text once again emphasizes in lines 731-733 that “he [Grendel] intended, ere the day might come, that he, the horrible combatant, might part life from body from each one of them” (“mynte þæt he gedælde, ær þon dæg cwome, / atoll aglaea anra gehwylces / lif wið wīðlice”). It is not simply the case that Grendel, a monster, was hungry for human flesh and trudged to Heorot from his lair in order to scrape up his warrior feast; rather, it seems that Grendel’s intentions were to wreak havoc in Heorot, and he knew exactly what he was doing. Grendel appears to be motivated by revenge for his exclusion from the joy of the meadhall as well as his exile in the marshes and fens lying “outside perceived cultural or scientific categories” (Lapidge, “Beowulf and Psychology,” 393). From the audience’s point of view and the fear Grendel created, Lapidge relates that the horror of Grendel’s actions in ravaging Heorot stems from unfamiliarity and the “mechanism of fear” (Lapidge, “Beowulf and Psychology,” 394) created by the unknown.

133 Based on Beowulf’s description of his encounter with Grendel to King Hygelac, some scholars have argued that Beowulf actually feared his opponent and purposefully downplayed Grendel’s ferocity. His recitation is not as elaborate as the actual account 1300 lines earlier, and Seth Lerer sees the description as a performance which “shows the hero in his courtly mode, a hero serving as his own best poet, one acutely conscious of the expectations of his audience to be both challenged and amused. The pun on Hondsio’s name and the account of Grendel’s glove thus function less as added details designed to enhance the realism of the monster’s threat than as allusions calibrated to enhance the mythic quality of this self-presentation” (Lerer, “Grendel’s Glove,” 737-8). Essentially, according to Lerer, the recounting of the story to his king allows Beowulf to “transform the stuff of ritual into the logic of comedy and the narrative of literary making” (Lerer, “Grendel’s Glove,” 738). However, it is also important to consider that Beowulf’s transformation of the gruesome tale into something palpable for his current audience also includes the elaborate description of the glove as having demonic roots and draconic properties. Asa Mittman and Susan M. Kim also briefly note that Beowulf speaks of “the magical dragon-skin glove that he fears Grendel will put him in” (Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim, “Monsters and the Exotic in Early Medieval England,” Literature Compass 6/2 (2009): 342) though, of course, “Beowulf does not find himself in Grendel’s glove. His escape is what makes him heroic; his actions take on a power and significance … Beowulf presents a comic scene in order to define his heroism as a social performance” (Lerer, “Grendel’s Glove,” 736). The struggle, for Beowulf, was real as he was obviously well-matched, and the scene was
Nolde eorla hleo ænige þinga
þone cwealmcuman cwicne forlætan,
ne his lifdagas leoda ængum
nytte tealde. (ll. 791-94)

The protector of heroes did not wish by any means
to let the murderous visitor go alive,
nor considered his life-days beneficial to
any people.

Though not easily dispatched (the text explains that no blade on earth could harm
Grendel), Beowulf provides no mercy nor does he allow Grendel to live once the Geat
leader has the advantage. The battle shakes the very foundation of Hrothgar’s meadhall,
but it stays standing; Grendel’s strength, though, does not remain, especially as the pain
from Beowulf’s grasp on his body increases and the fatal wound appears. In a similar
description to that of the Geat warrior who was eaten by Grendel, the poem gruesomely
depicts the removal of Grendel’s arm. The text relates,

him on eaxle wearð
syndolh sweotol, seonowe onsprungon,
burston banlocan. (ll. 816-18)

an unmistakable tremendous wound
was on his shoulder; sinews sprang asunder,
the bone-locker burst.

Following the amputation, Grendel escapes and his arm is presented as a trophy.

Interestingly, the description of the amputation is more detailed than Grendel’s actual
death and the location of the corpse’s resting place. We are simply told that the water of
the mere swallows him as he dies and hell claims his soul. It is not until later after
Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother that any further elaboration is given concerning
Grendel’s dead body when the Geat hero desecrates the monstrous, one-armed corpse.

gruesome. However, Beowulf is aware of his strength and is confident that he could overpower Grendel
even after witnessing what the monster could do to a human body.
Additionally, the poem plays with the audience’s perception of the two fighters at various points within the struggle by using ambiguous, undefined masculine pronouns as well as unclear nouns such as se aglæca whose meanings could refer to either Beowulf or Grendel at any given point. As Mittman and Kim explain,

Grendel, the first of the monsters, is described in terms strikingly equivalent to those which describe Beowulf: Grendel kills thirty men in a single stroke; Beowulf has the strength of thirty men in his handgrip; both Beowulf and Grendel are larger than other men; Grendel has no known father; Beowulf is anomalous among Germanic heroes in the fact that his name does not alliterate with his father’s. As several critics have noted, in Beowulf’s physical fight with Grendel, the bodies of hero and monster, joined by their handgrips, become indistinguishable to the readers: during the climactic struggle, the text renders it impossible to tell who is doing what to whom.\(^\text{134}\)

Mittman and Kim continue to elaborate on the similarities between Beowulf and Grendel, which extend far past physical attributes, stating,

when Beowulf departs to Grendel’s mere to kill Grendel’s mother, he travels to a place ‘not far in miles’ from Hrothgar’s court. As we have noted elsewhere, the possibility of litotes in that description suggests that Grendel’s mere may be understood in some senses as a version of Hrothgar’s court, at no literal distance from the hall … Certainly, both Grendel and his mother are creatures of the mearc, the borderlands, contiguous to but just outside the world of Heorot. Beowulf’s struggle with these monsters is thus also a struggle against the ductility of those borders. Hence the final triumph of the poem, after the slaying of the dragon, is the posthumous erection of the tomb of Beowulf at the headland, the border, a final stand in which Beowulf, as hero, marks off, and reinforces with his body a difference from the monstrous which the poem itself has demonstrated to be an impossibility.\(^\text{135}\)

Beowulf’s fight with Grendel is clearly well-matched in a multitude of ways, and the poem’s emphasis of their similarities shows this in both obvious and covert ways. Their equality may be a reason why the actual battle, the effects of which rock Heorot, is not given the blow-by-blow treatment we see with Grendel’s mother.

\(^\text{134}\) Mittman and Kim, “Monsters and the Exotic,” 341.
In the end, Grendel, the monster, is not able to return to his marshy home whole and sound. Although the Geats and Danes celebrate the hero’s remarkable victory, they could not have been absolutely certain that the threat had been extinguished from Heorot. The men and women of Heorot enjoyed the victory but did not know if they were absolutely safe from the vengeance of Grendel. It is not until the appearance of Grendel’s mother that the characters realize Grendel was indeed defeated by Beowulf and is now deceased. Even when Grendel’s mother attacks Heorot and Beowulf is forced to battle another member of the Grendel-kin, there is no dialogue from the mother concerning her son and the poem does not comment on the final resting place of Grendel’s physical corpse until Beowulf enters the underwater lair. Before the extermination of the mother, Grendel’s body (other than the arm which Beowulf ripped off) is set aside. Where other great warriors such as Scyld are given a proper funeral immediately following their demise, Grendel, a clearly significant and special corpse within the epic, is left in a state of suspended animation.

From line 841 through 852, the poem does provide what could be considered a type of funeral scene for Grendel. He is alone, but the corpse is not mentioned specifically; rather, the text discusses the reactions of the men who witness the destruction post-battle as well as what happens to the environment around Grendel as he makes his way into and through the underwater lair in the fens. Following Beowulf’s defeat of the creature, Grendel retreats and it is clear that no one will miss or mourn him. Witnesses, or would-be mourners, to the gore and death scene observe Grendel’s tracks but

No his lifegedal
sarlic þuhte seega ænegum
His death did not seem sad to any of the men
those who saw the tracks of the vanquished one,
how he, weary-minded, overcome from the hostility,
fated and put to flight, bore away from there
bloody tracks into the pool of water monsters.
There the bloody water was seething;
the terrible swirl of waves all mingled
surged with the hot gore, battle blood.
The one doomed to death concealed in the fen-refuge
afterward devoid of gladness gave up life,
the heathen soul; there Hell received him.

Just as Scyld becomes a part of his funeral ship—and is quickly dehumanized—so too
does Grendel become absorbed by his surroundings. His body affects the environment,
and this is the audience’s cue that something has changed with Grendel’s life. The battle
and its effects have now altered the environment in which Grendel lived and where his
mother still resided. The only ones who are present for Grendel’s death as he finds a
place for himself to rest eternally are the barely mentioned water monsters which reside
in the mere. These monsters and the effects that Grendel’s retreat have on the
environment echo an actual funeral seen later in Beowulf after the hero, as the aged king
of the Geats, confronts, kills, and is killed by the dragon. Once his people realize he has
died, the mourning and ritual commence:

Ongunnon þa on beorge bælfyra mæst
wigend weccan; wud(u)rec astah
Then the warriors began to kindle the greatest of funeral fires on the headland; the black wood-smoke arose over the fire, the roaring fire [was] encircled by lamentation—the agitation of winds subsided—until it had broken the bone-house. hot in the heart. The depressed ones spoke of the sorrow of the soul in [their] hearts, the death of the lord; likewise a sorrowful Geatish woman with bound hair sang a song of mourning about Beowulf, told earnestly that she dreaded for herself hard invasions, large number of slaughters, horror of the band, harm and captivity. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

There are several interesting parallels in this set of lines with the last scene of Grendel’s activity in the poem, though they are not precise or exact. Beowulf’s body affects his surroundings by way of his people; they wish to honor him with appropriate funeral accommodations so the environment is directly impacted by their actions. A funeral fire is constructed, and black smoke consumes the air above and around it. All work, we must assume, ceases unless it is connected to Beowulf’s funeral because the Geats are raising their voices in lamentation; the death of their lord, especially a king of Beowulf’s valor, might, and prestige, drastically changes their lives. They feel their sorrow deeply enough that it resonates within their hearts because their love for Beowulf is so intense. Grendel also directly affects his environment because his body physically changes the makeup of
the water. It seethes with his blood and the waves begin to swirl in a terrible mingling with the gore streaming from Grendel’s battle wounds. The water has been affected by Grendel’s body, specifically the fact that Grendel has been injured and is in the process of dying. Allowing the blood to intermingle with the water causes an unnatural interruption to the water’s natural flow or stillness. It is clear that there is something unique about Grendel’s body and the way that his death would be commemorated by the environment. The preparation for Beowulf’s body on the pyre affects the air above and around it while Grendel’s body directly affects his watery grave.

Another parallel with these two sections is the presence of mourners at each character’s funeral scenes. Beowulf, though mourned by his entire kingdom, is especially mourned by one very sorrowful woman who realizes that this loss will spell disaster for herself as well as the Geatish people. She awaits invasions, a host of vicious slaughterers, and captivity. By also indicating very clearly that she is a sorgcearig meowle who is singing a giomorgyd, the poet is keeping with traditional expectations for gender roles, as the commentary of Klaeber’s Beowulf indicates: “That the song of lamentation should be uttered by a woman is what we expect.”\(^\text{136}\) The editors also refer to Tacitus’s Germania in discussing the conventional role for women during funeral rites. Chapter 27 of the Germania states, “It is proper for women to lament, for men to remember.”\(^\text{137}\) When it comes to Grendel’s “funeral,” a cursory glance at the text would reveal a lack of mourners at Grendel’s side. By comparison, Beowulf wins that contest as well. However, we must consider the fact that Grendel is not a typical humanoid character, so the

\(^{136}\) Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, Klaeber’s Beowulf, 270.

\(^{137}\) Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, Klaeber’s Beowulf, 309. The Latin text reads “feminis lugere honestum est, viris meminisse.”
conventions of his funerary activity may be different than those of the Geats or Danes. Upon closer inspection, two possibilities for comparative mourners are revealed. The first is the presence of the water monsters *nicera* mentioned in line 845 as he enters the water. Though they are not given a specific role or any further description or activity besides simply existing, it is possible that they were present for Grendel’s death. With the water surging and welling as it did, the water monsters may have been drawn to the place of death within Grendel’s home and have been witness to his demise. While they may not have mourned him, it is at least possible that they could have been present.

A second, and highly probable, comparison to the mourning woman present at Beowulf’s funeral pyre is the previously unmentioned mother of Grendel. She does not make an actual appearance until line 1251, but we can assume, given the further elaboration at this point, that she was present in the mere\(^{138}\) to provide a type of funeral for Grendel which the audience is not made privy to, likely because they are the kin of Cain so it would not matter to the Danes, Geats, or medieval audience. When Grendel’s mother debuts in the poem, she is depicted as

\[
\text{widcup werum, } \text{þætte wrecend } \text{þa gyt} \\
\text{lifde } \text{æfter } \text{læpum, } \text{lange } \text{þrage,} \\
\text{æfter guðceare; } \text{Grendles modor. (ll. 1256-8)}
\]

an avenger widely known to men who still lived\(^{139}\)

\(^{138}\) Bill Schipper, “All Talk: Robert Zemeckis’s *Beowulf*, Wealtheow, and Grendel’s Mother,” *Literature Compass* 8/7 (2011): 424, shows in his discussion of Zemeckis’s 2008 *Beowulf* that one of the main differences in character interpretation from the medieval poem to the film is that Grendel’s mother is given an active role in the mere and speaks with her son about his activities with Hrothgar and his kingdom in Heorot. He states concerning the reinterpretation of the creature’s mother in Zemeckis’s film, “Grendel’s mother is also a mother … warm and loving to her visually repulsive son.” She speaks to Grendel as any concerned parent would and soothes her son by holding him and singing a lullaby. He argues that this humanizing and sexualizing of Grendel’s mother makes her “more believable to a modern audience” (425), but Zemeckis’s changes also show what is only implied in the text itself. That is, Grendel’s mother’s sadness, despair, and desperation for vengeance after her son’s death; she has all the characteristics of a mourning woman, but *Beowulf* simply does not overtly make her one following Grendel’s demise.

\(^{139}\) Paul Acker, “Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*,” *PMLA* 121.3 (2006): 704, discusses the appearance of Grendel’s mother as a surprise in the text. He relates that her arrival in the poem “is the more marked for
after the hostile one [Grendel], a long time, after the war-care; the mother of Grendel.

We are also told that she,

ides aglæcwif yrmþe gemunde,  
se þe waëtergesan wunian scolde,  
cealde streamas. (ll. 1259-61)

the lady adversary remembered the misery, she who had to inhabit the dreadful waters, cold streams.

Following a short diatribe about Cain and his actions against his brother as well as a brief rehashing of Grendel’s loss to Beowulf, the text relates,

Þa he hean gewat,  
dreame bedæled deaþwic seon,  
mancynnes feond, ond his modor þa gyt  
gifre ond galgmod gegan wolde  
sorhfulne sið, sunu deoð wrecan. (ll. 1274-78)

Then he [Grendel], wretched, deprived of gladness, departed to see the death place, the enemy of mankind, and his mother then still greedy and gloomy wished to enter upon a grief-filled venture, to avenge the death of [her] son.

From these three passages, the picture of what may have occurred in the underwater mere during and following Grendel’s death becomes clearer. Though she was not given an active role in the section where Grendel is the primary adversary, the elaboration given in her dedicated portion of the poem clarifies the scene significantly.

If she was not there when Grendel died (a point which we will never know), she was certainly there afterwards and mourned his passing. Because she actively takes vengeance for her son’s death, it is easy to make the comparison to the mourning woman

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the fact that she is introduced in the narrative action only after she already intruded upon it; that is, only after she has attacked Heorot does Hrothgar happen to mention that, oh yes, by the way, we have heard tell that there were two monsters from the mere, not just one.”
at Beowulf’s funeral. Her mission at Heorot is described as “grief-filled,” so it is clear that she had and continued to mourn her son. She begins by lamenting privately, away from the view of the audience, and ends her mourning by seeking vengeance from those she holds responsible. Through her intrusion into the story, audiences are presented with a mourning woman and the method by which the poem projects the anxieties it cannot otherwise adequately voice concerning the inherent weaknesses in the system of feuding and revenge. Killing off one opponent will only trigger the appearance of another as long as the system of revenge by kin is in place…That a female creature and more particularly a maternal one takes this revenge may have highlighted its monstrousness.140

The maternal aspect of her character enhances the chance of Grendel’s mother being the parallel mourning woman because of the deep feelings she harbors for her son; she avenges him but also walks his path and continues the destruction he began. Her method of overt mourning for the loss of her son is repeatedly demonstrated and the “similarity of her actions to that of her son, the fact that she is following in her son’s (bloody) footsteps, is emphasized.”141 Though she does not embody the typical characteristics of the Germanic mourning woman, this should not be surprising since Grendel is not the common figure for which a funeral is given. M. Wendy Hennequin even notes that Grendel’s mother “mirrors the situation of Hildeburh,”142 another mourning female character to whom the audience had just recently been introduced. Bill Schipper also notes that the “poet seems to have a certain amount of sympathy for Grendel’s mother’s dilemma – she is a ‘woman’ (whether the word be ides or wif), determined to avenge her

son’s death although her strength, according to the poet ‘was less/by as much as a
maiden’s strength,/a woman’s warfare, is less than an armed man’s’ … a judgment that
severely underestimates her terrible power.”143 This continues to show that Grendel’s
mother takes her maternal duties seriously as well as the obligation of vengeance against
her son’s murderers. Schipper’s comment that the poet has sympathy for Grendel’s
mother144 demonstrates that there is a reason Grendel’s mother deserves sympathy and
that she is in mourning.

The mourning woman parallel in Grendel’s section of Beowulf, as with the other
parallels to Beowulf’s funeral, should not carry the expectation of normalcy for a human,
and, specifically, a gender-normative female human. In this epic, though, as Schipper
notes, the Beowulf-poet “hints at some sort of humanity”145 for Grendel’s mother within
the epic and gives her “some rudimentary human characteristics, most strikingly her
desire to avenge her son’s death.”146 M. Wendy Hennequin also notes that Grendel’s
mother, typically described as demonic, evil, and villainous because of her connection to
the monstrous nature of her son, “is presented [in the poem] as a noble and brave
opponent and even as a somewhat sympathetic character,” and the text

143 Schipper, “All Talk,” 424.
144 On the following page, Schipper notes in parentheses that the poet only occasionally implied sympathy
for Grendel’s mother, but it is still important that the poet’s sympathy as well as her despair have been
identified and discussed. Several other scholars have discussed the poem’s sympathy for Grendel’s mother
including George Clark, Beowulf, Twayne’s English Author Series 477 (Boston: Twayne, 1990), 92;
Kiernan, “Grendel’s Heroic Mother,” 26; Elizabeth Liggins, “Revenge and Reward as Recurrent Motives in
Beowulf,” Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 74 (1973): 201; Hugh Magennis, Images of Community in Old
in Beowulf;” in Approaches to Teaching Beowulf, ed. Jess B. Bessinger and Robert F. Yeager (New York:
Modern Language Association, 1984), 152; Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, 30; Keith P. Taylor, “Beowulf
1259a: The Inherent Nobility of Grendel’s Mother,” English Language Notes 31, no. 3 (1994): 21-2; and
Eric Wilson, “The Blood-Wrought Peace: A Girardian Reading of Beowulf,” English Language Notes 34,
146 Schipper, “All Talk,” 425.
calls her normal Old English words used for women, such as *wif* and *ides*. But translators and critics of the poem have consistently interpreted Grendel’s mother as demonic, monstrous, and horrible, a reading which the Old English text does not support … because Grendel’s mother does not behave like Wealtheow, Hygd, or Hildeburh, whom scholars consider to be proper models of womanhood, Grendel’s mother must be monstrous.\textsuperscript{147}

It is, perhaps, a modern bias that Grendel’s mother has never been nor may ever be considered Grendel’s mourning woman due to her implied malevolent nature. This is an implication that, as Hennequin points out, is not explicitly addressed in the poem because the text “expresses both sympathy and admiration in its construction of Grendel’s mother.”\textsuperscript{148} Regardless of how she is interpreted, her grief over the loss of her son is obvious in her clear acts of vicious vengeance. As a “monstrous” mourning woman, Grendel’s mother strikes out violently in sorrow rather than loudly weeping and singing distressed dirges next to the funeral pyre.

The final comparison to Beowulf’s funeral is the final half-line of each quoted section. When Grendel finally accepts his fate in the fen-refuge, presumably alone and suffering, the text relates that he gives up his life, his heathen soul. Following this acknowledgement that a character reported to be so evil is a descendant of Cain, actually has a soul within him, it then states simply that Hell received him. At the opposite end of the poem, following the dirge of the mourning woman, Heaven swallowed the smoke from Beowulf’s funeral pyre. This is a blatant dichotomy of good versus evil, human versus monster. Grendel’s eternal resting place will be in Hell, while Beowulf, by way of the smoke emanating from his burning corpse, is accepted into Heaven because he has done his duty of defeating three monstrous creatures, reigning as king for fifty years

\textsuperscript{147} Hennequin, “We’ve Created a Monster,” 504.
\textsuperscript{148} Hennequin, “We’ve Created a Monster,” 517.
beloved by his people, and dying in defense of his kingdom (though a more reasonable
king would have taken Wiglaf’s advice to allow younger, stronger thanes to fight the
dragon for him). Grendel died because of his greed, envy, and gluttony.

Following his battle with Grendel and the monster’s hasty retreat back to the
marshlands, Beowulf placed the hand and arm which had been wrenched away from
Grendel under the vaulted roof of Heorot for all to view and to wonder at:

Hæfde East-Denum
Geatmeega leod gilp gebette,
inwidsorge þe hie ær drugon
ond for þreanydum þolian scoldon,
torn unlytel. Þæt wæs taken sweotol
syþðan hildedeor hond alegde,
earm ond eaxle – þær wæs eal geador
Grendles grape – under geapne hr(of). (ll. 828-36)

The man of the Geats had
fulfilled the boast to the East Danes,
likewise [he] settled all grief which
they previously endured
and had to suffer not a little distress on account of
sore afflictions. That was a clear sign
after the battle-brave one lay down the hand,
arm and shoulder – there was the grasp of Grendel
all together – under the vaulted roof.

Beowulf’s fight with Grendel “leaves Beowulf and Hroðgar’s court in possession of
Grendel’s arm as a trophy, which in turn leads to his mother’s visit to collect it and to
Beowulf’s subsequent battle with her at the mere. Thus everything in this account hangs
together, and everything comes down to the fate of Grendel’s hand or arm as an
instrument of fighting and an instrument of his own fate and the fate of Hroðgar’s
court.”149 Not only the removal of the arm but also the placement and position in the hall

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of the dismembered appendage is extremely significant for the text and characters.

Thomas Miller has explained that Hrothgar’s “hall would have at least two gables one of which might be turned to the road forming a façade and containing the entrance … If then the gable formed an end of the hall turned towards the advancing spectator, its height and width would strike the eye”;¹⁵⁰ he concludes that “Grendel’s arm was placed not within but outside Heorot.”¹⁵¹ To be specific, Miller explains that Beowulf having placed the arm under a wide gable would have been the “most suitable for a public exhibition of the trophy, namely by the door at the top of the flight of steps leading up to the entrance.”¹⁵²

The placement and position of Grendel’s arm would be extremely important for it to be gawked at as a trophy in remembrance of Beowulf’s grand accomplishment. Opposed to Miller’s description of the placement of Grendel’s arm just outside of Heorot’s walls, Kate Koppelman explains that Beowulf “remove[s] the flesh of the demon in order to incorporate it into the ‘body’ of Heorot—Grendel’s arm is left behind, inne the mead-hall, and it becomes a physical memorial to the fight itself. The fight that Beowulf has with Grendel is marked by its placement in the intimate space of Heorot.”¹⁵³ Though the text is not explicit about the placement of the arm, the fact that it was displayed for all to see presents its significance to the poem and the characters as a memorial of Beowulf’s impressive achievement. Additionally, it would be revered as an unholy anti-relic.

For his great deed, Beowulf was praised and given tokens of appreciation by Hrothgar and Wealhtheow. Although Beowulf completed the great deed of single-

¹⁵¹ Miller, “Position of Grendel’s Arm,” 400. Author’s emphasis.
¹⁵² Miller, “Position of Grendel’s Arm,” 398.
handedly eliminating the evil from Heorot, it is not Beowulf himself that is always the focus of the admiration, fear, and awe of the warriors and royalty present in Hrothgar’s meadhall. It is the arm of the monster that receives a prominent place in the hall and great attention.

Immediately after the poem discusses the placement of Grendel’s arm in Hrothgar’s meadhall, it moves directly to the following day. In fact, it is on the very next morning that the arm begins to attract the attention of a variety of people:

Đa wæs on morgen mine gefræge
ymb þa gifhealle guðrinc monig;
ferdon folctogan feorran ond nean
geond widwegas wundor sceawian,
læpes lastas. (ll. 837-41)

Then in the morning as I have heard say many
a warrior was around the gift-hall;
chiefs from far and near throughout distant regions
went to see the astonishing thing,
the tracks of the hated one.

From these few lines, it appears as if the poem is attempting to describe a type of pilgrimage that these chiefs are embarking upon just to see the battle’s remnant. Just as faithful Christians would embark on pilgrimages to Rome and other important religious sites to bear witness to relics of saints, gain access to the locations in which something significant had occurred, and feel closer to God, so too do these great chiefs make their way to the hall to see this gruesome spectacle. In a similar fashion to some odd, unusual, or gaudy reliquaries and the relics they contain, Grendel’s arm attracted attention for its hideousness and ghastliness. In Cynthia Hahn’s discussion of the Reliquary of the Staff of Peter, she describes its odd shape, “a curiously phallic-shaped, hyper-attenuated
object"\textsuperscript{154} which stands six feet tall and is heavily ornamented, as well as its unusual (purported) ability to raise the dead. In as much as the most pious would desire to venerate this reliquary for its holiness, there also seems to be the possibility that pilgrims—like the chiefs in \textit{Beowulf}—would travel from near and far to simply gawk at its flashy sacredness. The arm of Grendel, not housed in any type of container, provides a similar parallel in its horrible display.

Following a good amount of praise from Hrothgar, the hero himself begins a thorough round of post-battle boasting in the form of the Christianized humble brag to reaffirm that the deed he accomplished was done only through the help and favor of God.

Beowulf recalls,

\begin{quote}
We þæt ellenweorc estum miclum, feohtan fremedon, frecne geneðdon eafod uncuþes. Upe ic swiþor þæt ðu hine selfne geseon moste, feond on frætewum fylwerigne. Ic hine hraedlice heardan clammum on wælbedde wriþan þohte, þæt he for mundgripe minum scolde liegean lifbysig, butan his lic swice; ic hine ne mihte, þa metod nolde, ganges getwæman, no ic him þæs georne ætfealh, feorhgeniðlan; wæs to foremihtig feond on feþe. Hwæpere he his folme forlet to lifwraþe last weardian, earm ond eaxle. (ll. 957-72)
\end{quote}

We performed the courageous deed, the fight, with great favor, braved daringly the strength of an uncanny enemy. I rather wish that you might see him, the enemy killed in decorated armor. I intended to twist him quickly with strong grips in the bed of death, so that he shall lie in torment of death from

my hand-grip, unless his body might escape; 
I may not, when the Measurer did not wish [it], hinder
him from going, nor did I hold him, that deadly foe,
firmly enough; the enemy was too powerful in going.
However he left his hand, arm and
shoulder remaining behind to save his life.

Beowulf continues this speech with mudslinging, calling Grendel such things as
“wretched man” (feasceaf guma), “loathly spoiler” (laðgeteona), and “guilty man” (fah maga). Finally, he falls silent, and the poem relates how

eorlas cræfte
ofer heanne hrof hand sceawedon,
feondas fingras; foran æghwylc wæs,
steda nægla gehwylc style gelicost,
hæþenes handsporu, hilderinces,
egl unheoru. Æghwylc gecwæð
þæt him heardra nan hrinan wolde
iren ærgod þæt ðæs ahleæcan
blodge beadufolme onberan wolde. (ll. 982-90)

the nobles looked toward the high roof,
saw the hand, the fingers of the enemy, by means of the power of
the man; in front on each one [finger] was
a hideous, monstrous [talon], each one most like steel,
in the places of nails, the claws of the heathen,
of the warrior. Each one of the brave ones said that no tried
and true iron would touch him
that would weaken this bloody
battle-hand of the adversary.

The way in which the people assembled in the hall, gazed at Grendel’s arm, and were in
awe of its monstrousness—as well as Beowulf’s might and power at having dispatched
the creature—seem to put the arm on an equal playing field as the Staff of Peter described
above. It is a sight to behold and has been placed in a location where everyone might be
able to view it either in reverence or in horror.

Though he is constantly degraded and condemned throughout the poem, Grendel,
as a corpse, is given the most attention from characters in the epic. Placing the arm in the
meadhall at a height at which everyone could view it clearly makes the corpse-piece the medieval equivalent of the coffee table book, until, of course, Grendel’s mother, during her quest for vengeance, removes the arm and returns it to their underwater mere. This is later replaced by Grendel’s severed head which, due to its size and grotesqueness, “moves the Danes to wonder and awe.” Following the battle with Grendel’s mother,

\[
\text{(Þa wæs be feaxe on flet boren)} \\
\text{Grendles heafod, þær guman druncon,} \\
\text{egeslic for eorlum ond þære idese mid,} \\
\text{wliteseon wrætlic; weras on sawon. (ll. 1647-50)}
\]

the head of Grendel was then borne by the hair into the hall, where the men drank, terrible for the warriors and among them the woman, a wonder-inspiring spectacle; the men looked on.

Everyone who walks into Hrothgar’s hall is sure to see the arm—until it decomposes—and will likely ask about its origins, its history, and the players involved in its amputation. Much like a saint’s \textit{vita}, the epic adventure of Beowulf’s fight with the monster, his victory, and the placement of the arm can be retold—and eventually transcribed onto parchment—for the wider public. Rather than learning positive lessons from the \textit{vita}, a common feature in saints’ lives, those hearing of the ferocious fight with Grendel will understand what it means to be equivocated with the kin of Cain. They will listen with fear in their hearts and view the arm awestruck just as they would thinking of the trials and tribulations endured by certain saints and being in the presence of a true relic.

Amputation of certain body parts was common in many saints’ lives; Lucy’s eyes were gouged out, St. Agnes of Sicily’s breasts were forcefully removed, St. Edmund’s

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155 Christopher Pipkin, “Monster Relics in Medieval English Literature” (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2016), 50.
head was decapitated, and various others. Additionally, St. Lucy’s eyes were not the only body parts to be removed from her; like Grendel, Lucy’s arm was taken during a translation of her body. In the *Sermo de Sancta Lucia* by Sigebert of Gembloux (1030-1112), the author discusses the burial and removal of the corpse of St. Lucy. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* summarizes Sigebert’s Latin sermon, stating that the “body lay undisturbed in Sicily for 400 years, before Faroald, Duke of Spoleto, captured the island and transferred the saint’s body to Corfinium in Italy. Thence it was removed by the Emperor Otho I, 972, to Metz and deposited in the church of St. Vincent. And it was from this shrine that an arm of the saint was taken to the monastery of Luitburg in the Diocese of Spires.”

Daniel Thelen’s *Saints in Rome and Beyond* provides a brief history of various saints who can be found in and around Rome; one of the saints discussed is Lucy. He explains that the “Sicilian city of Syracuse lost most of its relics of St. Lucy through the transfers carried out by Faroald II and Giorgio Maniace during the 8th and the 11th centuries.” When discussing the Cathedral of Syracuse (Duomo di Siracusa), he briefly notes that in “1988 Syracuse received the left humerus bone of St. Lucy from the Patriarch of Venice, Marco Cè.” Like many other relics of saints, Lucy’s left arm is prominently on display for all to see within the Cathedral of Syracuse. Although her arm’s location is not high overhead within the great meadhall of a Danish king, Lucy’s relic still holds a place of prestige and is a major attraction to all those who

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159 Thelen, *Saints in Rome*, 126.
make the journey to Syracuse and visit the cathedral. If the humerus of a saintly woman—presumably not hideous or grotesque in any way, simply a human bone—can be revered and leave its viewers awestruck, the same adoration or induction of awe can definitely be applied to the violently amputated arm of a creature known throughout Heorot and the Danish realm as a monster. His deeds make him appear to be evil, and he has been vilified, but the arm continues to elicit the same emotions from its viewers that such relics as Lucy’s arm have for centuries.

As Christopher Pipkin relates in his dissertation, “it is Grendel’s arm and head, as well as the sword-hilt from the Grendel-kin’s hoard, which provoke the greatest degree of wonder.” With the consistent and persistent religious overtones and blatant injections of Christian doctrine (such as Grendel being equated with the kin of Cain in the first place) present throughout Beowulf, it is no wonder that the creature’s arm could be seen as an anti-relic to which chiefs would travel from great distances so they might catch a glimpse of the grotesque awe-inspiring sight that Beowulf, Hrothgar, and all assembled are able to be witness to regularly. As Seth Lerer explains, “Whereas Beowulf can swim through Grendel’s mere or Hrothgar can tell legends of its origin, these men see the monstrous only as an object or a relic.”

Æschere’s Head

Beowulf’s final battle in Hrothgar’s land is in the deadly mere of Grendel’s mother. Following the hero’s defeat of her son, Grendel, the mother sought revenge on the people she had never previously bothered. She apparently left that to her spawn. The

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160 Pipkin, “Monster Relics,” 49.
night Grendel’s mother appeared in Hrothgar’s kingdom was truly only fatal to one unfortunate individual. As M. Wendy Hennequin explains, Grendel’s mother “has murdered only one man, in the context of a legitimate feud clearly recognized by narration, Hrothgar, and Beowulf … We have no evidence that she has killed in the past, and the poem does not indicate that she plans or wishes to return to Heorot after achieving her vengeance.”\textsuperscript{162} Beowulf himself even acknowledges that she has acted justly and within her rights to avenge her son’s death\textsuperscript{163} because she “adhered to the heroic ethic of the blood feud.”\textsuperscript{164} She seized the thane from his sleep and dragged him to her mere, but unlike the thirty thanes that Grendel consumed, this man was given a name, Æschere, and a brief description. We are told that

\begin{verbatim}
it was the most dear of the nobles to Hrothgar in the position of retainer, a mighty shield warrior, between the two seas, he whom she killed in rest, the glorious man.
\end{verbatim}

The poem also illustrates a close relationship between the king and Æschere.

\begin{verbatim}
the grief was renewed,
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{162} Hennequin, “We’ve Created a Monster,” 515.
\textsuperscript{163} Hennequin, “We’ve Created a Monster,” 517.
\textsuperscript{164} James Paz, \textit{Nonhuman Voices in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Material Culture} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 37.
arose in the home. That exchange was not good, so that they on both sides ought to pay with the lives of friends.

He continues that the king

\begin{verbatim}
har hilderinc on hreon mode
syðþan he aldorþegn unlyfigendne,
þone deorstan deaden wise. (ll. 1307-09)
\end{verbatim}

the hoary warrior, was in a troubled mind after he knew the unliving chief-thane, the most beloved [was] dead.

Æschere, though not mentioned prior to his demise, is shown to be extremely important to the king as an advisor, counselor, and battle compatriot. Hrothgar, in speaking to Beowulf about the horror of the previous night’s events, essentially eulogizes Æschere without his corpse in their presence. Other than Scyld and Beowulf, no other human corpse is given anything even remotely close to this kind of treatment. No comment, eulogy, or acknowledgement was made concerning the lives and accomplishments of the thirty thanes taken from Hrothgar’s court by Grendel, and nothing was said of those killed in battle against the Frisians. More than any other non-royal or non-hero, Æschere holds a special place in Hrothgar’s court but also in the poem itself. Likewise, he is one of the few humans whose fate (at least the fate of his head) is specifically mentioned, rather than assumed, following his demise. At the edge of the mere where the water was

\begin{footnote}{165 As mentioned earlier, Hondscio was (for all intents and purposes) sacrificed by Beowulf to Grendel during his first attack on Heorot, and the audience is told in gory detail what happens to the body as Grendel consumes the thane completely. We are also given his name 1330 lines later as Beowulf recounts the story to Hygelac upon his return to Geatland. Yet, Beowulf is not delivering a eulogy as much as he is simply reciting the tale of his harrowing adventure and being certain to include all the gory details. Hondscio has been reduced to a bloody detail within Beowulf’s glorious battle rather than an actual human to be remembered and honored. Hondscio does not hold the same value to Beowulf as Æschere does to Hrothgar, even based solely on the amount of textual space each character received.} \end{footnote}
bloody and serpents and water monsters waited for fresh meat, Beowulf, his men, and the Danes found part of the missing man:

syðþan Æscheres
on þam holmclife hafelan metton. (ll. 1420-21)

they found the head
of Æschere by the sea-cliff.

Æschere is mentioned once more in the poem, and we are given as definitive of an answer as possible concerning the final resting place of his corpse. Beowulf recounts his adventure to King Hygelac and relates that

Þa wæs eft hraðe
gearo gyranwraece Grendeles modor,
siðode sorhfull; sunu deað fornam,
wighete Wedra. Wif unhyre
hyre bearn gewræc, beorn acwealde
ellenlice; þær wæs Æschere,
froðan fyrmwitan feorh uðgenge.
 Nóðer hy hine ne moston, syððan mergen cwom,
deaðwerigne Denia leode
bronde forbærnan, ne on bel hladan
leofne mannan; hio þæt lic ðetbær
feondes fæð(mum un)der firgenstream.
Þæt wæs Hroðgar(e) hreowa tornost. (ll. 2117-23)

Then the mother of Grendel was quickly read
y for revenge for injury again,
she went sorrowful; death, the war-hate of the Weders, took away [her] son. The monstrous woman avenged her child, killed a warrior boldly; there the life from Æschere, the wise counselor from old times, departed. Nor were they, the people of the Danes, able, when the morning came, to burn him, the death-weary one, up in the fire, nor to lay the beloved man on the funeral pyre; she bore that body into the embrace of the enemy under the mountain stream. That was the cruelest of sorrows for Hrothgar.

With this information, it is clear that Æschere’s body was taken into the mere. Unlike most other corpses within the poem, this character gets a final acknowledgement without
prompting from another character and with little vagueness. Although we are unsure if Grendel’s mother consumed him or simply left the headless corpse to rot somewhere out of sight, Hennequin points out that she “does leave Æschere’s head for the Geats and Danes to find … a gesture reminiscent of the exhibition of Grendel’s arm in Heorot’s rafters: a sign of triumph in the feud.”\(^\text{166}\) The choice of Æschere as her victim also illustrates that “she is making a clear statement that she will be neither explained nor controlled by the community of Heorot.”\(^\text{167}\) The chosen victim, the deliberate display of Æschere’s head, and her theft of Grendel’s arm are all representative of Grendel’s mother’s demonstration of strength and emotion in this situation. Helen Appleton also relates that “only his head remains to appear as a sign: the display of the head is significant in a way that the moment of death is not.”\(^\text{168}\) Everyone within the narrative has been witness to the monstrous death scenes, so the actual deaths do not seem to have a great impact on the characters. However, the surprise of finding Æschere’s head was distressing for Beowulf’s men. Grendel’s mother is clearly making a point to Hrothgar, Beowulf, and all those who might see her trophy displayed. She is letting the Danes and Geats know that the blood feud has ended, her mere should not be disturbed, and more decapitated heads will join Æschere’s if anyone chooses to trespass in her land. Even though she leaves behind tracks for Beowulf and his men to follow, “what these tracks lead to is a warning against the very act of reading” those trails.\(^\text{169}\) As Appleton explains, the

\(^{166}\) Hennequin, “We’ve Created a Monster,” 515.
\(^{167}\) Paz, *Nonhuman Voices*, 35.
\(^{169}\) Paz, *Nonhuman Voices*, 43.
Beowulf poet depicts Grendel’s mother using Æschere’s head to assert the boundary of her space and warn against transgression, actively marking the mere as outside human control. The role of Æschere’s head within the narrative of Beowulf is to contribute to the sense of unheimlich around Grendel’s mother by having her echo Anglo-Saxon practice, amplifying the episode’s horror and highlighting man’s vulnerability in the landscape.170

In addition to this point, there is more to the prominence of Æschere’s head than simply signifying borderlands. If that were the head’s only worth, it would seem that Grendel’s mother could have chosen any of Hrothgar’s men or Beowulf’s retinue to undertake that role. James Paz notes, though, that the text indicates Æschere was “marked out for death beforehand, at least by the narrator.”171 Æschere seemed to have been taken specifically, and because of this, the “Beowulf poet handles the death of Hrothgar’s retainer differently from the other deaths inflicted by the poem’s monsters.”172 As opposed to the other dead bodies in the poem, Æschere’s corpse (or what is left of it) receives three separate points of recognition, and the significance of this attention stems from the fact that Grendel’s mother—not Grendel—is his killer.

Throughout the poem, Beowulf’s battles with monstrous creatures are continuously more difficult and dangerous for various reasons. His defeat of the sea monsters while swimming against Breca in his youth was heroic but not horribly difficult, or so he would make it seem, since he continued the contest. The battle with Grendel was definitely a trying fight, but Beowulf never seemed to doubt that he could defeat the kin of Cain having home field advantage in Heorot; he illustrated this by brandishing no weapons and wearing no armor. Grendel’s mother presented more difficulty for him as evidenced by the amount of armor he wore, the number and types of weapons he used,

170 Appleton, “The Role of Æschere’s Head,” 429.
171 Paz, Nonhuman Voices, 36.
172 Appleton, “The Role of Æschere’s Head,” 429.
and the fact that it was in her underwater mere. Finally, the battle with the dragon was his most difficult because the creature was not humanoid and Beowulf lacked the youthful advantage he had in previous bouts. While the dragon ultimately died, so too did the hero. Of significant importance here, though, is the difference between the Grendel-kin fights. Grendel himself was a less arduous foe for Beowulf than was Grendel’s mother. Those individuals killed by Grendel are unnamed (save for Hondscio at the end) and seem to lack substantial purpose within the court, Beowulf’s retinue, or the poem itself. Grendel’s mother, on the other hand, presents considerably more of a challenge for the hero. The armor, weapons, length of battle, and struggle for victory all contribute to the magnitude of this fight, so the thane Grendel’s mother murders must also carry weight for at least one of the aforementioned areas (court, retinue, poem). In this case, it is Hrothgar and his court. The result of this importance/challenge/significance equation is that Æschere is named, described, and mourned following his death, and he continues to be discussed at various points throughout the second half of the poem. Everything hinges on the fact that Beowulf’s battle with Grendel’s mother is the more difficult of the two challenges he faces in Heorot.

While Grendel’s mother creates significance for Æschere and his corpse, she does not receive the kind of attention following her death that her son did. After a long, intense battle, Beowulf finally gains the upper hand and is able to overpower Grendel’s mother. We are told that

hringmael gebrœgd
aldres orwena, yrringa sloh
þæt hire wið halse heard grapode,
bahringas bræc; bil eal ðūrhwod
faegne flaeschoman, heo on flet gecrong. (ll. 1564-68)
he drew the ring-sword despairing
of life, angrily struck, so that it, strong, groped against her neck,
broke bone-rings; the blade penetrated entirely through the
fated body, she fell onto the floor.

Even though defeating Grendel’s mother was a far more arduous and painstaking task for
Beowulf, his victory over her seems short-lived and barely registers for him. The text
notes that Beowulf “rejoiced in the deed” (“Secg weorce gefeh,” l. 1569), but he is
clearly more concerned about the remains of Grendel lying near him. It is not until
Beowulf recounts his adventures in Hrothgar’s land to King Hygelac that we are finally
told, in a straightforward, non-descript line

ic heafde becearf
in ðam [guð]sele Grendeles modor
eacnum ecgum. (ll. 2138-40)

I cut off the head
of Grendel’s mother in the battle hall
with immense swords,

that the Geat hero had decapitated Grendel’s mother following their battle. With this in
mind, it is even more significant that Beowulf also removes Grendel’s head and returns
only with it instead of the mother’s or both heads. The misdeeds that Grendel perpetrated
against him and Hrothgar outweighed the atrocities committed by Grendel’s mother,
including the death of Æschere. Because of this, the audience discovers what happens to
Grendel’s body:

ac he hraþe wolde
Grendle forgylidan guðræsa fela
ðara þe he geworhte to West-Denum
oftor micle ðonne on ænne síð
þonne he Hroðgares heorðgeneatas
sloh on sweofote slæpende fræt
folces Denigea fyftyne men
ond oðer swycle ut offerede
laðlicu lac. Êe him þæs lean forgeald,
but he [Beowulf] quickly wished to requite Grendel for the many battle-storms those which he carried out on the West-Danes much more often than on one occasion, when he slew Hrothgar’s hearth-companions in their slumber, devoured fifteen sleeping men of the nation of the Danes, and carried out other such loathly gifts. He, the fierce champion, repaid to him this recompense, after he saw the dead body of Grendel in its resting place, lifeless, since he had injured him previously in the fight at Heorot—the corpse sprang far when suffered a blow after death, a strong sword-stroke—and then he cut off his head.

After this, Beowulf returns to the surface and Heorot with Grendel’s head and the sword hilt after Grendel’s mother’s blood had melted the sword itself. While Grendel’s mother was the more difficult foe to defeat for Beowulf, the head of Grendel was borne into Heorot rather than that of the hero’s female opponent, seemingly as a replacement for the arm which Grendel’s mother had retrieved earlier. Even when Beowulf described his victory over Grendel’s mother as he presented the giant sword hilt to Hrothgar, the poem relates,

ond þa þas worold ofgeaf
gromheort guuma Godes andsaca,
morðres scyldig, ond his modor eac. (ll. 1681-83)

and then the hostile-hearted man, the adversary of God left this world guilty of murder, and his mother also.
The corpse of Grendel continues to be more important than that of his mother regardless of her prowess in battle, the difficulty she presented Beowulf, or the fact that her head was also removed post-mortem.

The two decapitated heads of this section of the poem hinge around Grendel’s mother as an adversary, an avenger, and a defeated foe of Beowulf. Without Grendel’s mother taking revenge on Hrothgar’s kingdom for the death of her son, Æschere would never have been killed. Likewise, without Beowulf’s fight with her, he would never have brought back the head of Grendel as further proof of the monster’s death. Because Æschere was taken as payment in the blood feud, his corpse as well as the corpse of Grendel were each denied proper burials following the customs that their people followed. Each body may be considered deviant in its burial because of the decapitations; Æschere’s body was not found alongside the head at the edge of the fenland, and Grendel’s body was further mutilated in its resting place by Beowulf when the hero removed the head and carried it back to Heorot. The poem tells us that Hrothgar and his people were unable to properly bury Æschere because the remains were never found and his head “remains as a horrifying object whose role is to signal the limits of worldly human power.”\(^{173}\) Further, Grendel’s burial (if his placement in his mother’s mere was considered his final resting place) was disturbed by Beowulf’s actions. These two characters’ heads become the driving force behind both shock and triumph at different points in the text. The separation of the head and body would prohibit them from having any type of typical or proper burial, especially in Anglo-Saxon society. Decapitation was a clear signal that the person in the grave was a criminal or should at least be distanced.

\(^{173}\) Appleton, “The Role of Æschere’s Head,” 447.
from the more righteous community; most of the time, these burials were in a dedicated execution cemetery on the outskirts of town. In Icelandic sagas, the texts describe draugar, “walking corpses which attack humans and livestock” which “have to be wrestled with, decapitated, and burnt.” Decapitation of bodies, whether Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian, may have been used as a “symbolic way of dishonouring the corpse, or that it was a ritual to prevent the dead from ‘walking’” as reanimated revenants. In the case of Beowulf, the locations of the heads of each of the beheaded characters are technically on the fringes of their homes, and the exhibition of the transgressor’s head marks the boundary and threatens anyone who would breach it. Archaeological evidence of post-mortem decapitation suggests that those killed by other methods would be beheaded to show their deviant status, and to serve as a boundary marker … For the Anglo-Saxons, severed heads effectively assert a border without the need for an impenetrable physical barrier. Heads on stakes, placed at prominent locations, served as a powerful warning against transgression of both law and territory in the landscape.

As mentioned earlier, Grendel’s mother uses Æschere’s head as a boundary marker to her lands for the Danes as well as Beowulf and his men. The head “marks the boundary, echoing the location and presentation of an Anglo-Saxon execution cemetery,” and it “would have been clearly recognizable to the Anglo-Saxon audience as a warning against transgression of a boundary and those who control it, beyond the londmearc lies a disturbing space in which human society is the ‘other’: it is the social space of Æschere’s killer, coloured by his gore.” Likewise, Grendel’s head, because it is so far removed from his home and body, can be considered a marker for the human boundary against

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176 Appleton, “The Role of Æschere’s Head,” 435.
177 Appleton, “The Role of Æschere’s Head,” 446.
other possible Grendel-kin or kin of Cain, since the description of the land itself leading to the underwater mere from Heorot is “creating a boundary zone between the two in which Æschere’s head is found.” While Grendel’s arm displayed in the rafters of Heorot presented a memory of triumph to Hrothgar, his people, and Beowulf, the head replaces that triumph with a recollection of loss and the difficulty Beowulf encountered during his battle with Grendel’s mother. However, its placement within Heorot closes the open end of the boundary zone created by Grendel’s mother and Æschere’s head.

As a non-royal, non-heroic human character, Æschere is the only individual to receive such attention from the poem following his demise. Grendel’s mother is the catalyst for this attention, and through her actions the corpse of the fallen retainer garners great focus and significance from within the poem as well as from the audience. His decapitation and the improper disposal of his body by Grendel’s mother place him in the deviant burial category, and his head’s placement on the fringe of society and humanity creates half of a boundary. Grendel’s head is likewise separated from his body even after it had been put to rest (a further act of mutilation by the hero), so he too is a deviant corpse. Without Grendel’s mother acting upon the blood feud, neither of these beings would have this deviant status as far as burial is concerned and there would not have been considerable attention paid to a retainer within the poem. Because of her significance as a catalyst, it makes sense that her corpse does not receive much attention following her defeat; her role has concluded but the effects of her actions continue on long after she is deceased. Her dead body is inconsequential since her living body set so much in motion having to do with the corpses of others.

178 Appleton, “The Role of Æschere’s Head,” 441.
In a text as complex and nuanced as *Beowulf*, it is easy to become entranced by the descriptions of the battles, the complicated histories, and the emotional turmoil created by characters and their activities. It is also common to overlook something which seems insignificant to the larger work but, if examined more closely, truly holds substantial value in the microcosm of its place in the poem as well as the whole text. Corpses are regularly passed over by readers and audiences because they appear to have lost agency, importance, and presence within the poem. However, further inspection of just a few of the dead bodies presented in *Beowulf* demonstrates that they should be given as much attention as any living character regardless of the individual’s station in life or place in society. Opening the poem with Scyld’s funeral provides ample evidence for this since the leader is dead, yet his people dedicate their time, focus, and energy to his memory. The elaborate ship burial demonstrates from the beginning that corpses will exert influence over the living throughout the poem and should not be overlooked just because a new monster has emerged or another feast is taking place. Not only is memorializing the living person important but also the dead body itself. Scyld’s body illustrates how quickly a memorial can fade when the body is out of sight; his body began to diminish when all of the grave goods were piled on top of and around him, essentially transforming him into cargo. Without the body, the memory dissipates.

As a character, Grendel becomes our typical villain of the story since he is a blood-thirsty, murderous monster whose only obvious desire is to wreak havoc on humanity, specifically Hrothgar and the Danes. His battle with Beowulf is intense and almost destroys Heorot, but that is not uncharacteristic for an epic poem. His death is
“off-screen,” thereby signaling that the death is not as important as what is left behind. As a corpse, Grendel becomes much more complicated. Rather than completing the Grendel episode with a firm conclusion as to the fate of the creature, his dead body is not discussed until well into Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s monstrous mother. His arm, removed during battle, evokes wonder and awe from the humans who view it (as does his head once Beowulf returns with it victorious in battle against Grendel’s mother) in much the same way that a saint’s relic is venerated, and the appendage then becomes a mobile relic when his mother retrieves it along with the soon-to-be-decapitated Æschere. His various body parts, removed and translated, hold more significance than the living creature ever truly did. Alive, Grendel is a ferocious creature needing to be dispatched; dead, his body is worth so much more to both humankind and Grendel-kin.

Finally, Æschere rounds out this chapter’s discussion of the corpses in Beowulf. He is neither royal nor heroic, and he is not one of the villainous creatures everyone wants to see defeated; yet, his common retainer-corpse (much beloved by King Hrothgar) holds interest and import for the poem. It is his head, and only his head, which strikes fear and disgust in Beowulf and the rest of the Geats on their way into Grendel’s mother’s mere. The head also serves as an illustration of clear boundary lines for humans and Grendel-kin, as will Grendel’s head once Beowulf decapitates the creature and presents it to Hrothgar. And the head of the retainer carefully placed at the edge of the marshland is able to demonstrate Anglo-Saxon society’s execution cemeteries and the concept of deviant burials, since decapitation was a clear signal that the person in the grave was a criminal deserving of a deviant, non-righteous interment. Grendel’s mother denies Æschere a proper burial, and the Danes (especially Hrothgar) must come to terms
with that fact. Grendel’s head demonstrates a similar deviance for his kind since we can assume his mother had laid him to rest as a type of burial in her mere, but Beowulf disturbed it so Grendel’s body will never be whole or able to rest in peace. While Æschere’s body is nowhere to be found, the head illustrates how profoundly important a corpse (or piece of one) can be for the society in which the individual once lived.

Although the monster and dragon battles are exciting and the various digressions are illuminating, audiences should not overlook the seemingly small but significant details of *Beowulf*. Once an individual—king, hero, monster, retainer—dies, it may be a logical step to move on since that person seems to no longer affect the larger text. However, as I have shown in the examples of Scyld, Grendel, and Æschere, the body’s work is not necessarily complete after its death. Corpses continue to exert influence over their societies and can demonstrate any number of complex concepts if one is simply willing to examine the dead and the ways in which they are treated.
Chapter 3

Purity and Chastity: The Virtues of Holy Corpses in Ælfric’s Hagiographies of Women and Chaste Couples

Written accounts of the lives of medieval saints generally tend to include several important characteristics which indicate that a particular person’s life was worthy of setting quill and ink to parchment. These include the person’s familial history, economic status, and religious affiliation; any adversity the individual had to overcome such as anti-Christian authorities, persecution from the government, or marriage arrangement; miracles performed by or ascribed to the saint-to-be; torture or persecution because of their religious beliefs; their eventual deaths; and any posthumous miracle attribution, bodily incorruption, or other significant post-mortem occurrences. These figures were certainly special and stood out from among the rest of society in every stage of their lives. As Leslie Donovan explains,

the saintly subjects of the early holy biographies were idealized figures, superior in every way to the average Christian in the Middle Ages … the personal history of the saints embodies the noblest ideals of the culture … these stories describe them as nobly born, exceedingly wise, extremely beautiful in appearance, steadfastly courageous, securely confident, and unswerving in devotion to their faith. As typified by the lives translated here, women saints never doubt their God and never exhibit any fear, even when facing the most horrible tortures. Perfect in faith, wisdom, heritage, and the force of their individual wills, they are heroes in the epic of salvation. Although human by birth and in form, they are presented as superhuman in virtue and faith. In this way, the saints themselves mediate between the human and the divine.179

Even after death, the exceptional nature of saints continued with their holy dead bodies.

The notion of a corpse resisting decay due to the individual’s faith during his or her life is

certainly not unfamiliar territory for the Middle Ages, including in saints’ lives written or translated by Anglo-Saxon authors. What is particularly intriguing, however, about the corpses of saints is the fact that not all written accounts of saints’ lives include a description or even exhumation of the body following its death and burial. The aim of this chapter is to identify Anglo-Saxon hagiographical texts which do include the indication of incorruption or some type of significance concerning the corpse and to illustrate why the vitae of certain women and couples include these details while others divert attention away from the corpse and focus on post-mortem miracles, describe the person’s impact on other Christians, or simply end with a prayer. It is especially interesting in the cases of non-royal saints, as Gerald Dyson relates, because “even if they died a martyr’s death, [they] were venerated for their holiness in life” rather than for their sanctity reflected in their dead bodies. Royal saints like St. Edmund, for instance, were almost guaranteed to have cultic veneration, but this is not always true for commoners. Special focus on the body or the inclusion of post-mortem bodily descriptions were not likely unless significant circumstances arose concerning the saint’s death or occurrences following his or her demise.

Throughout the medieval period, people were not sheltered from the horrors of death and decomposition, and they were quite aware of the natural processes which the body would undergo once life had been extinguished. As Kristin Michelle Keating explains, Europeans of the Middle Ages were confronted with death daily “whether in the putrefying flesh hanging from the gibbets, the blackened limbs of plague victims carted through the streets, or other bodies [which had] succumbed to any number of diseases,”

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illnesses, malnourishments, or violence,” and the medieval period itself had an “obsession with memento mori images.” By the time of King John of England’s death in 1216, bodies of the deceased underwent fairly extreme treatment for the purposes of preservation and burial. Katharine Park provides the description given by chronicler Ralph of Coggeshall of the process by which King John’s body was prepared for his burial: “After the said abbot [of Crokestone] had made an anatomy [anathomia] of [the king’s] physical body, his entrails were reserved, sprinkled with salt, taken to Crokestone at the order of the abbot, where they were buried. His body, dressed in royal fashion, was carried to Worcester, and he was reverently buried in the cathedral by the bishop.” Park elaborates on the various practices employed during the Middle Ages, specifically the high and later time periods, and among them are the dissection and dissemination of a corpse, embalming, evisceration, and removal of certain body parts (eyes, brain, and viscera) for burial separate from the rest of the body.

Because of these processes, people became very familiar with the sights and, especially, the smells of decomposition and post-mortem bodily fluids and functions. Park describes Henry of Huntingdon’s anecdote concerning Henry I of England’s body after his death in 1135, and this story illustrates just how familiar those dealing with corpses throughout the medieval period became with decomposition. She explains,

The rest of his body was cut into pieces, heavily salted, and packed in oxhides against the smell, which, according to the chronicler, had already killed the man responsible for extracting the brain. By the time the funeral procession reached Caen, the corpse was exuding a liquid so foul that its attendants could not drain it without … ‘horror and faintings.’ Largely to avoid this kind of unpleasantness,

German nobles, increasingly followed by their French and English counterparts, often asked to have their bodies dismembered and their bones boiled in water or wine; in this way, their flesh and entrails could be buried locally and their dry bones neatly and cleanly transported to their chosen resting place.\textsuperscript{184}

Though this took place shortly after the end of the Anglo-Saxon period and not exclusively in England, Park is sure to also note that these practices had, for centuries, fallen out of the realm of taboo and that “[d]ismemberment had long since been domesticated by the Christian cult of relics (often severed body parts), while the stories of dismembered martyrs had surrounded the practice with a charismatic if somewhat anxious glow”\textsuperscript{185} by the time embalming, dissection, and division became familiar practices. The Christians “believed that their bodies would be resurrected at the Last Judgment,” so “the bodies of those who had lived holy existences were ardently searched after their deaths for corporeal signs that they had entered God’s kingdom and performative rituals were enacted regularly to remind the faithful of the still-living power of these dead bodies.”\textsuperscript{186} The preservation of the bodies of those considered saintly throughout the Middle Ages was so important that sometimes extreme measures were taken to ensure that the cult of a saint could be justified; Keating explains that “the bodies of Christian leaders were often covertly embalmed or otherwise deceptively presented, with gilded casings and wax coverings masking their ‘flaws’ of decay.”\textsuperscript{187}

In her chapter on Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, Victoria Thompson discusses Bishop Werferth’s understanding of funereal rituals and practices, as explained by Pope Gregory the Great’s \textit{Dialogues}. Werferth condoned the washing, clothing, and shrouding

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{184} Park, “Life of the Corpse,” 112.
  \item \textsuperscript{185} Park, “Life of the Corpse,” 115.
  \item \textsuperscript{186} Keating, “Performative Corpse,” 21.
  \item \textsuperscript{187} Keating, “Performative Corpse,” 23.
\end{itemize}
of the corpse in Mercia around 900AD, but did not believe in the idea of embalming. It was “foreign, perhaps even specifically Byzantine” and “implies that even the use of externally applied substances such as myrrh and balsam to disguise rather than delay the onset of decay was unfamiliar.” What makes this information even more intriguing is the fact that Æthelflæd’s corpse had to be carried approximately 100 kilometers to the church she and Æthelred had built in honor of St. Peter in Gloucester following her death. The lack of embalming “makes it that much more likely that Æthelflæd’s own funeral cortège moved speedily from Tamworth to Gloucester in June 918. It also shows us a cultural world in which the decay of the human body was perceived as rapid and inevitable.” Regardless of the body preparation practices, it is clear that the Anglo-Saxons were well aware of how a corpse would break down.

As far as early medieval knowledge of the body’s decomposition process is concerned, Zoe L. Devlin explicitly notes that the Anglo-Saxons “were aware of the ways the body decayed after death” and saw bodily decomposition as a normal part of life and death. They even felt dead bodies continued to exert influence within and over their personal communities, especially in extreme circumstances such as saints or executed criminals. It is with this point in mind that we now turn to the vitae and passiones of the female saints and chaste couples found in Ælfric of Eynsham’s Lives of Saints.

Female Saints

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189 Thompson, *Dying and Death*, 21.
190 Devlin, “(Un)touched by Decay,” 64.
No other singular concept defines and separates men from women, sacred from secular, or corrupt from incorrupt than virginity. So much so that Aldhelm of Malmesbury (c. 639-709), “writing in a venerable patristic tradition” by following in the footsteps of such great Church Fathers as Tertullian, Cyprian, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine, among others, became most well-known for his *opus geminatum* (“twinned work”) focused on the subject of virginity, *De Virginitate*. He addresses the work to the nuns of the double monastery at Barking. In the text he relates the *vitae* of select male and female saints who epitomize the importance of virginity in seventh-century Christian society and reconfigures the traditional tripartite distinction of female chastity first set by patristic authors. Rather than virginity, widowhood, and marriage/conjugality, Aldhelm substitutes chastity for widowhood. While a man’s virginity is recognized in medieval society, generally as a way of life chosen through vows of chastity and celibacy because “virginity/maidenhood is only a chosen identity” for men, a woman’s virginity holds far more significance and meaning. As Sarah Salih relates, “Virginity is a condition relevant to all women at some point in their lives, whether they are then required to lose it in marriage or use it in religious profession.” Because of this major sexual distinction, saints’ lives follow typical patterns in which a male saint’s sexual background is not overtly emphasized; rather, it is discussed through his status as a monk or other ecclesiastic. It seems that virginity is a side-effect of a man’s life choices rather than an

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191 Donovan notes that “Collections of saints’ lives from the Middle Ages almost always present the holy biographies of both men and women, suggesting that their compilers saw no reason to distinguish certain texts for specific audiences … Yet, while it is evident that early and medieval Christians considered both men and women as deserving honor for their sanctity, women saints’ lives held a different appeal for medieval male and female audiences.” Donovan, *Women Saints’ Lives*, 13.


194 Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 16.
indication of religious devotion, and the “male saint generally achieves his spiritual
heroism either by resisting sexual temptation or by refusing to abandon his faith.”¹⁹⁵ Still
further, Salih relates that

clerical status includes and trumps virginity, making virginity in itself relatively
insignificant: patristic virginity theory rarely discusses the male virgin. Several
male saints are approvingly referred to as chaste or virginal, but their sexual status
is rarely the locus of their sanctity, as is often the case for women. A saint like
John the Evangelist may be celebrated for his virginity, but virginity is only one
of his many holy achievements. There are other things men can do to demonstrate
their sanctity; women’s choices are fewer. Conversely, holy women tend to get
cooperted whenever possible into the category of virgin, whatever their personal
priorities or other achievements.¹⁹⁶

Based on this contention, it is clear that female virginity was of the highest priority within
medieval society. Aldhelm provides a definite hierarchy for virginity, chastity, and
marriage in chapter XIX of his De Virginitate, in which virginity receives the greatest
praise and highest esteem:

Moreover the catholic Church accepts a three-fold distinction of the human race,
which increases orthodox faith, as it is described by an angelic narrative in a
certain volume, how ‘virginity’, ‘chastity’ and ‘conjugality’ differ the one from
the other in three ranks; which, as they are each in turn isolated by the triple
quality of different lifestyles, so they are separated on three levels by the different
order of the merits—with the angel distinguishing (them) in turn in this manner:
so that virginity is gold, chastity silver, conjugality bronze; that virginity is riches,
chastity an average income, conjugality poverty; that virginity is freedom, chastity
ransom, conjugality captivity; that virginity is the sun, chastity a lamp, conjugality
darkness; that virginity is day, chastity the dawn, conjugality night; that virginity
is a queen, chastity a lady, conjugality a servant; that virginity is the homeland,
chastity the harbour, conjugality the sea; that virginity is the royal purple,
chastity the re-dyed fabric, conjugality the (undyed) wool.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Salih, Versions of Virginity, 17.
¹⁹⁷ Lapidge and Herren, Aldhelm: The Prose Works, 75.
These ideas translated well to hagiographical writing of the time, wherein virginity is always placed on the highest pedestal and becomes a primary focus for the vitae of female saints.

For many female saints, their sexuality (or lack thereof) seems to be made into quite the spectacle for outside observers. The lengths to which these women went in order to avoid sexual corruption was, at times, Beowulfian, although, as Salih notes, the “telos of virginity is always significant” but also, “St. Augustine argued that virginity is constituted in the intention to remain virgin.” Both the intent to remain virgin as well as the steadfast chaste ending—the saints’ deaths, in this case—are essential to the overall holiness of the woman in question and their preservation of their status as brides of Christ. As Donovan explains concerning the primary goal of hagiography for women, these “holy biographies not only highlight the woman saint's fidelity to her divine bridegroom, but also foreground the resolution with which she maintains that fidelity. For the woman saint, her role as the spouse of Christ was not only her confirmed duty within the design of the sacred biography, but more important, her divine betrothal was a privilege to be zealously defended.” This intention to remain pure defines, for Aldhelm, what virginity is; for virgins, especially saints, they are “unharmed by any carnal defilement” and their spiritual focus “continues pure out of the spontaneous desire for celibacy.” Æthelthryth was married but remained chaste; Eugenia fled the safety of her father’s home to a men’s monastery disguised as a monk so that she would not be

198 Donovan notes that female saints heroically preserve their virginity against men who would like nothing more than to rip it from them. See Donovan, Women Saints’ Lives, 14.
199 Salih, Versions of Virginity, 19.
201 Lapidge and Herren, Aldhelm: The Prose Works, 75.
forced to marry a suitor who would likely not be willing to remain chaste with his wife;
Daria was married to Chrysanthus (a chaste man), taken to a brothel to be raped by its
patrons, and protected by a lioness; and many other female saints took it upon themselves
to preserve their virginity as a sign of devotion to God and their faith. Virginity for
women seemed to be the true test of sanctity, devoutness, and purity, and this applied
only to holy women since “‘Virgin’ is a category only for women saints … ‘virgin’ [is] a
life-stage only for women.”

It is now clear why hagiographers such as Ælfric would emphasize the virginity issue so thoroughly when writing or translating a female saint’s
life, but another issue is raised based solely on the endings of those hagiographies.
Incorruption of the post-mortem body appears in some saints’ lives, both male and
female, but not others. This is not wholly surprising since saints’ lives follow a pattern
but are not taken from the same template. Even when the corpse is not exhumed or found
to be incorrupt, there is still sometimes a focus on the dead body post-mortem that should
be further examined. This may be the method of burial, explication of burial place, or
depiction of a vision in which the saint returns fully embodied. The combination of
emphasis on holiness as illustrated through virginity and a lack of decomposition of the
body following the saint’s death or further interest in the corpse deserves exploration.

“Virginity is a holy state and way of life, an imitation of Christ and/or the Virgin Mary,
the life of the angels lived on earth. It is the new martyrdom, to be rewarded one
hundred-fold in heaven, available to men and women alike. Through virginity, the mortal
human flesh is transformed into the vessel of the divine.”

For some, becoming the vessel of the divine ultimately results in an exhumation of a perfectly pristine corpse

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202 Salih, Versions of Virginity, 17.
203 Salih, Versions of Virginity, 21.
whose clothing has not been soiled, wounds have been healed, and outward appearance more closely resembles a sleeping individual rather than a dead body. The most direct and explicit example of this is Ælfric’s “Life of St. Æthelthryth,” derived from Bede’s Anglo-Latin version from 731.

St. Æthelthryth, Virgin Saint and Incorrupt Corpse

Æthelthryth (c. 630-679) was the earliest English female saint as well as the only native English female saint included in my examination (and in Ælfric’s collection). She was an English maiden, daughter of King Anna of East Anglia, and wife to two men (Tondbyrht and Ecfrid). Throughout both of her marriages, she fought successfully to remain a virgin, as was her wish, and even lived in and became abbess of the monastery at Ely. She taught her fellow nuns the proper way to live the Christian lifestyle through her example; she wore woolen garments, loved solitary prayer, seldom bathed but bathed everyone else, and fasted regularly. Eight years after becoming abbess, she was afflicted with a large tumor on her neck, which she thanked God for delivering to her as a punishment for adorning herself with neck-chains in her youth. The physician Cynefrith attempted to lance the tumor, but Æthelthryth still succumbed to the malady.

When St. Æthelthryth died, the nuns living at the double monastery under Æthelthryth as abbess acquiesced to her request of a simple burial. She wanted her body in death to continue the simplicity in which she lived. A basic wooden coffin was obtained, Æthelthryth’s body was placed inside, and she was laid among her sisters in a simple tomb. For many saints’ lives stories, this would have been the ending point of the vita or the transitional juncture to the saint’s influence in her community. In the case of St. Æthelthryth, the biography continued because she had not finished her life’s work in
showing the world how to live piously and devoutly. After Æthelthryth’s sister Sexburh was appointed abbess, she simply could not allow her sister to rot and decay alongside the other corpses in the cemetery, though it took her sixteen years to make this decision. Disregarding her sister’s wishes for a plain burial, Sexburh decided to exhume Æthelthryth’s corpse and have it translated to a more appropriate coffin in a more fitting—in her estimation—location, the church.

Sexburh sent several brethren to find appropriate stones out of which a coffin could be created. In Grantchester, the brothers found a beautiful white marble coffin and lid which fit exactly to Æthelthryth’s measurements. Sexburh erected a tent over her sister’s grave, and the tomb was revealed. When the coffin was opened, those in attendance remained on either side, singing while Sexburh and a few select individuals entered the tent. As the body was revealed, the abbess cried out because the corpse lying in the grave looked as if she were simply sleeping or had been laid to rest that same day. The same description applied to her clothing, which was as fresh and clean as the day she had been wrapped in it. Additionally, the wound resulting from the lancing of the tumor on her jawbone had completely healed. Bede notes in *Ecclesiastical History*, Book IV, chapter 19, through the words of the physician Cynefrith, that “the incision which I [Cynefrith] had made had healed. This astounded me; for in place of the open gaping wound with which she was buried, there remained only the faint mark of a scar.”

Sexburh and her few helpers raised Æthelthryth out of the grave and washed her corpse.

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204 In her translation, Donovan notes that the brothers found the coffin in Grantchester, near Cambridge, which was originally a Roman settlement, so there is a suggestion that the marble coffin could have Roman origins. See Donovan, *Women Saints’ Lives*, 34.

Once the body was cleansed from its earthly repose, it was taken into the church and laid into its new coffin for permanent interment. While the washing of the corpse is a typical task for the burial of a fresh body, Æthelthryth’s sisters did so without showing any fear.

Exhumation and translation of a medieval saint’s corpse is certainly not unique to Æthelthryth, nor is the revelation that the body is incorrupt though it had been buried and exposed to the underground elements for many years. However, the discussion of Æthelthryth’s exhumation and incorruption provides interesting insight into what makes a particular corpse important enough to write the vita and continue the biography after the individual’s death—a logical stopping point. Ælfric of Eynsham’s translation of the “Life of St. Æthelthryth” from its Latin source has a distinct feature in that he emphasizes the woman’s virginity as the primary cause for her lack of decomposition following her death, whereas Bede makes no mention of it. However, though Ælfric places emphasis on her virginity as the deciding factor as to why her body did not decompose as was expected, the concepts of virginity, purity, holiness, and chastity are only mentioned eleven times throughout the entire vita.

As Andrew Rabin notes, “In S779 [the Old English translation of the Ely foundation charter], the drafter interrupts his account of the monastery’s lands and privileges with a brief excursus on the virginity of St. Æthelthryth, a passage that the Old English translator significantly expands and revises.”\textsuperscript{206} Rabin argues that the vitae of both Æthelthryth and Eugenia—another saint whose life I will be discussing later—have scope beyond royal law and focus instead on “problems of female sexuality and erotic

Specifically, Æthelthryth’s virginity and her body become a primary concern in the narrative *because* of the body’s virginal status as evidenced by Ælfric’s first three lines of the saint’s *vita*, in which he refers to her as an English maiden and a virgin. Rabin illustrates that the “legal problems concerning Ely’s property rights come to be bound up with questions of how Æthelthryth’s virginal body may be best observed, her sexual purity verified, and her inviolate tomb safeguarded.”

The text itself makes it evidently clear more than once that Æthelthryth’s virginity and sexual purity are of the highest priority even though the saint’s virginity is brought to the forefront of the conversation far fewer times than for any of the other female saints, especially those who were not living in chaste marriages. Early in the text, Ælfric emphasizes that Æthelthryth has stayed virginal even through marriage not just by her own will but through God’s influence. Ælfric writes,

\[
\text{Nu cwæð se halga beda þe þas boc gesette.} \\
\text{þæt se ælmihtiga god mihte eaðe gedon} \\
\text{nu on urum dagum þæt ædeldryð þurh-wunode} \\
\text{unge-wemmed mæden. þeah þe heo wer hæfde.} \\
\text{swa swa on ealdum dagum hwilon ær getimode} \\
\text{þurh þone ylcan god þe æfre þurh-wunað} \\
\text{mid his gecorenum halgum swa swa he syf behet. (ll. 24-30)}
\]

“Now the holy Bede who wrote this book said that Almighty God might easily cause, even now in our days, that Æthelthryth should remain a pure maiden, though she had a husband, as it seemed to me now through the grace of the same God, who continued ever with His chosen saints, even as He himself had promised.”

Another instance occurs following her death, when her corpse is the primary concern; her sister exhumed her body

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and sexburh seo abbudisse het slean an geteld
bufan ða byrgene wolde þa ban gaderian. (ll. 86-7)

“and Sexburh the abbess bade pitch a tent above the burial-place, wishing to collect the bones.”

A final occurrence comes after Æthelthryth’s body had been translated into the new resting place where

þæt seo ðruh wæs geworht
ðurh godes foresceawunge hire swa gemæte.
swylce heo hyre sylfre swa ge-sceapen ware. (ll. 102-4)

“by God’s providence the coffin was wrought so exactly fitting her, even as she was herself shaped.”

Once the wonder of the miracle of Æthelthryth’s incorruption had settled, the text again turns to God’s grace and power which, Ælfric illustrates, was the reason Æthelthryth was able to remain pure throughout her life. He writes,

Hit is swutol þæt heo wæs ungewemmed mæden.
þonne hire lichama ne mihte formolsnian on eorðan.
and godes miht is geswutelod soðlice þurh hi.
þæt he mæg aræran ða for-molsnodon (sic) lichaman.
seðe hire lic heold hal on ðære byrgene
-git oð þisne dæg. Sy him ðæs a wuldor. (ll. 107-12)

“It is evident that she was an unspotted virgin, since her body was not suffered to moulder in the earth, and in her, God’s power is verily manifested, namely, to raise up corruptible bodies, in that He had kept her body uncorrupt in her grave even unto this day; wherefore to Him be everlasting glory.”

Though Rabin discusses the secular legal authority of the time, his focus on the significance and problematization of Æthelthryth’s virginal body enhances the point that Ælfric needed to feature her purity as the main reason her body did not decompose, all her wounds were healed, and her clothes were purified. The additional emphasis on

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God’s role in Æthelthryth’s ability to resist the typical duties of a wife during her marriage, her determination to remain pure, and her decision to forsake all earthly things so as to be spiritually rich allows Ælfric to praise Æthelthryth’s efforts without deifying her. Æthelthryth’s vita and the corpse itself are both remarkable because the woman alone is not held as solely responsible for her righteous actions, but her life’s story should be upheld as an example of virtue and purity for both ecclesiastical and secular audiences. The prominence placed on her virginity as a link to her corpse’s incorrupt state is a definite line of demarcation to which other female saints’ lives may have been subjected when it comes to the ending point of the vita. If the woman was a virgin and held to the highest esteem because of this, the corpse might be highlighted after the woman’s death; if her virginity is not a primary focus or only briefly mentioned, there is great doubt whether an author, Ælfric or otherwise, would allow the corpse to live past its death or burial. However, this is not always the case, as will be evidenced by other female saints whose virginity was a high priority—and mentioned in their vitae more than eleven times—such as Eugenia. These women were pure and chaste throughout all of the hardships and tribulations of their lives, yet their corpses are given no further examination past the acknowledgement of who buried them and a vague location of the tomb. It is interesting, then, that Æthelthryth’s corpse gets so much attention.

When Æthelthryth’s tomb was opened and her corpse was exposed, Sexburh’s demand for a tent provides the clear concern that everyone—both characters and author—has for the preservation of Æthelthryth’s body as pure and virginal. It also presents an interesting parallel to texts which feature the memento mori theme; most works in this genre deal with rotting corpses or spirits of departed loved ones returning to
deliver a warning, but Æthelthryth’s *vita* is a distinct reversal because of the incorrupt state of her body and clothing. Yet, the idea remains the same. In the Middle English moralizing story “The Three Living and the Three Dead” (often depicted pictorially and textually), three young men returning from a hunt are confronted by three corpses. The concept of the tale is simple: everyone dies and the pictorial juxtaposition of the living and the dead on the same page “would have served as a potent reminder of the importance of being always prepared for death.” The moral of the story encourages those who are not following the laws of God and the righteous path to change their ways or risk an eternity of torment. In Æthelthryth’s *vita* Sexburh, the other nuns and monks of Ely, and Cynefrith are presented with a corpse and are shown vividly the importance of following the proper ways of living as Æthelthryth illustrated throughout her life. Æthelthryth’s body speaks through its purity and cleanliness to those present at the exhumation as well as the audience of the *vita*, just as the “earliest images of the story of the Three Living and the Three Dead to be found in manuscripts show the living and dead in two groups presented as though in conversation with each other.” The decaying corpses in the Middle English story strike fear in the living characters as well as the audience, but Æthelthryth’s incorrupt corpse elicits awe and sacred wonder. Æthelthryth, just like the three corpses, continues to interact with and affect those who see her, regardless of the barrier that Sexburh sets into place. Even those who cannot see her body

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213 Christine Kralik, “Death Is Not the End: The Encounter of the Three Living and the Three Dead in the Berlin Hours of Mary of Burgundy and Maximilian I,” in *The Ends of the Body: Identity and Community in Medieval Culture*, ed. Jill Ross and Suzanne Conklin Akbari (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 63. Kralik, at this point, is referring to images found in the Berlin Hours of Mary of Burgundy and Maximilian I. The juxtaposition would have been with the corpses and the manuscript’s owner and user, but the effect would still be the same for any person viewing the manuscript images.

because of the tent are affected by the holiness they feel coming from the grave, so much so that they begin to sing hymns:

Hi sungon ða ealle sealmas. and lic-sang. þa hwile þe man ða byrgene bufan geopenode. (ll. 88-9)

“Then all the community sang psalms and hymns for the dead while the grave was being opened at the top.”

Likewise, in the images of the Three Living and the Three Dead, part of the image crosses its frame “suggesting a rupture between two realms. This element of the composition underscores the interaction that occurs between two different worlds.”

While Æthelthryth never spoke, opened her eyes, or had any actual interaction by her own volition with the nuns and monks of Ely, her corpse affected them. Her body delivers the message of the necessity for righteousness and moral excellence if one wished for eternal happiness. Æthelthryth, like the corpses in the Middle English work, also became “an image that confronted the viewer directly with the inevitability of death,” but the saint’s bodily purity portrayed this positively rather than through fear.

St. Eugenia

Eugenia was born to a third century noble family (though historically authentic records are unclear concerning the events in her life), and her father was appointed the ruler over Alexandria and Egypt by emperor Commodus. She was educated in Latin and Greek teachings but found Christianity and knew that a Christian life was meant for her. She and her two eunuch servants, Protus and Jacinctus, convinced a bishop to allow them to live in the local monastery even though the bishop knew that she was a woman under

her cross-dressing disguise.\textsuperscript{218} He understood that she so wished to preserve her virginity that living as a man among other men in a monastery would be the only successful path to achieve her goal of purity. She sets the best possible example of life as a Christian for her fellow monks and even became their abbot. Eugenia continued in her pure Christian lifestyle even when confronted with a woman named Melantia who tried to sexually tempt the saint from her faith. Throughout her life, Eugenia always followed the teachings of Christ and held steadfast to her virginity, a point which would have been appreciated in Anglo-Saxon England since “Eugenia’s legend was widely known from early in the region’s Christian history.”\textsuperscript{219}

From the first three lines of Eugenia’s \textit{vita}, Ælfric introduces us to the saint by calling her a “holy maiden” and “the daughter of Philip” but also noting that

\begin{quote}
Mæg ge-.hyran se ðe wyle be ðam halgan mædene.
eugenian philyppus dæhter.

hu heo ðurh mægðhad mærlice þeah. (ll. 1-3)
\end{quote}

“by her virginity [she] gloriously flourished.”\textsuperscript{220}

If this seems familiar, it is because Æthelthryth’s \textit{Life} began in a very similar manner; it may appear that there is a pattern emerging concerning Ælfric and his need to accentuate the virginity and purity of the female saints for whom he translated a \textit{vita} or \textit{passio}. Ælfric continuously calls Eugenia a holy maiden throughout the work, even during the moments of her life when she cross-dressed as a man and shaved her hair in order to enter a monastery with Protus and Jacinctus. Though she presented herself as a man and called

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{218} As Donovan explains, there is an entire subgroup of hagiography for transvestite saints, and prior to 1050 there were twenty-three cross-dressing saints’ lives stories circulating medieval Europe. Eugenia and another female saint known as Euphrosyne are the only two which survive in Old English, and Eugenia is Ælfric’s only holy biography of a transvestite saint. See Donovan, \textit{Women Saints’ Lives}, 67-8.
\textsuperscript{219} Donovan, \textit{Women Saints’ Lives}, 68.
\end{footnotes}
herself one of three brethren when talking with the mass-priest Eutropius, Ælfric referred to her by the maid/maiden title. Likewise, Bishop Helenus knew of her false identity thanks to a vision revealed to him by God. Within the same set of lines concerning her life in the minster, Ælfric praises her virtues and reminds us, yet again, that she is a maiden. He also integrates an intriguing metaphor which invites an inquiry as to his true feelings about her sanctity. He states,

Eugenia þa wunode on þam mynstre
mid wærlicum mode. þeah þe heo mæden wære.
mid hyre twam cnihhtum. uncuð gehwam.
And heolð on hyre þeawum halige drohtnume,
ðurh modes lîþnesse. and mycelre eadmodnesse.
and þurh halige mægnu. þam hælende ge-cwæmde.
Heo þeah on lare. þæs rihtan geleafan.
and on godcundlicum gewrytum mid godum wyllan.
and wearð awend of wulfe to sceape. (ll. 92-100)

“Eugenia then dwelt in the minster with a man’s mind, though she were a maid, with her two servants, unknown to everyone, and observed in her conduct the holy service with gentleness of mind and great humility, and by her holy virtues pleased the Savior. She increased in the doctrine of the true faith, and in divine writ, with a good will, and was changed from a wolf to a sheep.”

Regardless of the number of times Ælfric reiterates Eugenia’s maidenhood and holy virtues, this phrase describing her as a transformed or, perhaps, rehabilitated wolf stands out and seems to place her in an unfavorable light, intentionally or not. The more likely reason for this insertion is the notion that Eugenia began as a heathen, and it wasn’t until Christianity was introduced to her that she reformed her life. Her heathen past could be seen as lupine because wolves prey on sheep, the Christian flock of God in this case, and seduce them with unholy or unsanctified temptations. After her conversion to the true faith, Eugenia became part of the flock and, therefore, a sheep. While that could be the

explanation for the unflattering metaphor, a secondary explanation could be that Ælfric is commenting on the saint’s deceit and trickery; maybe her heathen habits had not been completely overcome. Although all of her actions and intentions are meant to demonstrate her virtue and piety, it cannot be overlooked that she and her two eunuch servants are intentionally deceiving the monks of the monastery and the mass-priest and attempting to trick the bishop. It is arguable that Ælfric felt the need to chastise the saint in metaphor but hoped to make up for the criticism. He is, however, using “one of the most popular genres of the Middle Ages, that of the transvestite saint, as evidenced by the fact that between the fourth and seventh centuries, at least eleven vitae of female transvestite saints were written,” so perhaps even the idea of chastisement would be too harsh. Ælfric later shows his true condemnation of a character’s actions when he describes Melantia following her deceit and false accusations lobbed at Eugenia. The saint relates that her accuser is essentially in league with the devil or, at least, controlled by a devilish entity, so, by comparison, Eugenia’s description as a transformed wolf is not terrible or damning but simply a statement of her previous life.

Regardless of how this apparent criticism may be received, Ælfric certainly accentuated Eugenia’s virginal state throughout the piece. Over the course of 428 lines of Old English text, Ælfric mentions Eugenia’s virginity/status as a virgin, maidenhood (or some variation: maiden, maid), virtue, and nobility more than thirty times. He also comments on the status of Protus and Jacinctus upon their decapitations by stating that

\[\text{Das martyras næron næfre on life} \]
\[\text{þurh wif besmytene. ac hi wunedon on clænnysse.} \]
\[\text{oð heora lifes ænde. mid mycclum geleafan. (ll. 380-82)} \]

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“these martyrs were never throughout their lives, defiled with women, but continued in purity unto their lives’ end, with much faith.”

Likewise, he commented on the state of one of Eugenia’s followers, Basilla, as a “royal maid” (“kyneborene mæden”) in line 351 and notes that she “was martyred for her virginity” (“wearð þa gemartyrod for hyre mægðhade”) at line 367. The concepts of purity and virginity as they relate to faith in Christ and the spread of Christianity contrast sharply with the introduction of Melantia.

From Melantia’s first appearance, the tone of the story changes to fit her forthcoming and developing characterization. Like Eugenia, the audience is made to believe that Melantia is a poor soul afflicted by some form of evil, but her true personality, hinted at in this section’s first line as Ælfric describes her as “a certain woman, wealthy in possessions” (“sum wif wælig on æhtum,” l. 133), quickly emerges. Eugenia performs an act of healing which results in Melantia vomiting out “evil venom” (“reðe attor”) in line 138; when Eugenia refuses Melantia’s offer of treasures as payment for her cure, Melantia is intrigued and becomes obsessed with Eugenia. The audience, at this point, must remember that Eugenia bears the resemblance of a man, and Melantia, like almost every other character in this story, is unaware of Eugenia’s cross-dressing. Her attraction to Eugenia turns malevolent when she realizes that Eugenia lacks any interest in her “gifts”—monetary or otherwise—and decides to reveal her true antagonistic intentions. Through failed seductions and false accusations leveled at the saint, who, Ælfric constantly reminds us, is a virgin, pure, and always a maiden, Melantia proves herself to be the ultimate foil of Eugenia. Ælfric, likewise, changes the tone of the

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Ælfric, “Natale Sancte Eugenie,” 46.
Ælfric, “Natale Sancte Eugenie,” 32.
piece following the initial spurned attempt at seduction. He begins to remark more consistently on the remnants of evil which remain in Melantia and how that malevolence continues to permeate her interactions with Eugenia. Ælfric notes that Melantia was “wholly filled with evil” (“mid yfele eall afylled,” l. 150), had “deceitful intent” (“bysmor-fullum geþance,” l. 151), spoke “dark thoughts” (“sweartan gepohtas,” l. 153) to Eugenia, and was a “wanton woman/harlot”225 (“myltestre,” l. 169) who wanted Eugenia to commit “shameful adultery” (“bismorlicum hæmede,” l. 170). Eugenia herself then spurns the widow and directly condemns her:

Hwæt ða eugenia. hi gebletsode.
and cwæð to ðære sceande. þæt heo soðlice wære
galnyssse ontendnyss. and gramena mæge.
þeostra gefæra. and mid sweartnysse afylled.
Deaðes dohtor and deofles fætels.
Habban þine æhta þine gelican.
we habbað ealle ðing mid þam ælmihtigan drihtne. (ll. 171-77)

“Lo! then Eugenia blessed herself, and said, to her shame, that she verily was a kindler of lust, a child of wrath, a companion of darkness, and filled with blackness, a daughter of death, and the devil’s vessel. ‘Let them that are like thee possess thy goods, we possess all things together with Almighty God.’”226

Melantia helps to demonstrate more clearly how dedicated Eugenia was to God and her faith. She also provides a stark contrast to Eugenia, emphasizing the saint’s purity and virginity in such a way that its importance cannot be denied or cast off as a byproduct of her decision to live a monastic life. The entire ordeal with Melantia “complicates the relationship of womanhood to virginity and virginity to sanctity. As a dramatic device the scene simply allows Eugenia an escape from her disguise; as a thematic device, however, the episode provides conflicting images of women which advance the legend’s moral

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225 Bosworth-Toller simply uses “harlot” for miltestre while Skeat defines Melantia as a “wanton woman.”
226 Ælfric, “Natale Sancte Eugenie,” 34.
purpose through the traditional virgin/whore, Mary/Eve dichotomy," though “Ælfric … avoids a pointed comparison.” Melantia demonstrates the extremity of non-virginal, non-sanctified female activity while Eugenia is her opposite, illustrating the epitome of virginal sanctity. Alison Gulley does argue, however, that Ælfric’s version of Eugenia’s life demonstrates “that virginity and/or its preservation is merely an outward manifestation of purity and in and of itself not of the utmost importance for Eugenia or for Ælfric.” She goes on to explain that, even though Ælfric’s Latin source shows how the saint actively rejected marriage and positions of power in exchange for living an ascetic life, in Ælfric’s translation, “chastity in body and spirit are necessary for an ascetic life, but, just as her secular education need not be manifestly cast off, neither do we as an audience need to witness overt rejection of sex and marriage to learn our lesson.” I must disagree with Gulley here because of the lengths to which Ælfric goes to emphasize Eugenia’s purity in the words of the text itself. Ælfric regularly took liberties in paraphrase and adaptation with his source material for all of the vitae he translated, so it stands to reason that the points he focused on most were done deliberately. Eugenia was truly committed to her virginity, and Melantia’s actions and words illustrate the extreme opposite of Eugenia’s lifestyle. Eugenia is holy, pure, and virtuous while Melantia is completely evil, devilish, and deceitful. With such a

227 Gulley, The Displacement of the Body, 78.
228 Gulley, The Displacement of the Body, 81.
229 Gulley, The Displacement of the Body, 71. Author’s emphasis.
231 In the case of Eugenia’s vita, it is unclear from which Latin source Ælfric drew, but Skeat has suggested the Vitae Patrum while Zettel argues for a source which would pre-date the Cotton-Corpus Legendary. Michael Lapidge concurs with that proposition and points to the dating of Eugenia’s feast day as evidence (Ælfric follows theLegendary dating of December 25 rather than March 16 or May 16). See Michael Lapidge, “Ælfric’s Sanctorale,” in Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints’ Lives and Their Contexts, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 115-30.
contrasting figure playing a significant role in Eugenia’s life—Melantia’s eventual accusations of impropriety on the part of Eugenia are a major factor in the revelation of her true identity and gender—the lack of commentary on Eugenia’s corpse (though her body was kept in purity throughout life) is intriguing, especially since it is Eugenia’s “choice of virginity, not her assumption of male dress and by extension malehood, [which] will lead to her sanctity.”

As the *vita* continues, Eugenia reveals her true identity to her father so that the accusations Melantia made against her might be dropped, her father converts to Christianity along with her mother and brothers, and she moves to Rome following the death of her father at the hands of the governor by order of the emperor. She also develops a following which includes another devout bride of Christ called Basilla, and they successfully convert many heathens. Because Basilla has been promised to a suitor and she failed to fulfill that promise, her would-be suitor begged the emperor to make her lie with him. At her refusal, a series of martyrdoms occurred within Eugenia’s group, beginning with Basilla’s death by sword (Ælfric notes that her body was “cut in two with a hard sword” (“toheowe mid heardum swurde on twa,” l. 360)), continuing with Protus’s and Jacinctus’s beheading, and culminating with Eugenia’s torture and death. After refusing to worship at the temple of Diana and destroying it through prayer to God, she was tortured: thrown into a river with a hewn stone which broke while she sat on the water, cast into a burning oven whose fires were quenched, and tossed into a dark prison with no food for twenty days where the Lord provided her a white loaf of bread and light. He finally allowed the torture to end on the day of the Nativity, when an executioner sent

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from the emperor killed her (Ælfric does not elaborate nor does his Latin source). She was buried by Christian men, and her mother wept at her grave. There is no mention of her corpse directly following her death, nor is her body exhumed. Though her purity and virginity are continually emphasized during her life—more so than Æthelthryth’s—the dead body seems to no longer be of consequence. However, one final moment of existence shows that her efforts in life were rewarded in heaven. This is when she appears to her mother in a vision and relates that she has become the bride of Christ and that her father Philip has been given a high seat in heaven as well, since his conversion had made such an impact on the community that the Christians had appointed him as bishop. Philip’s martyrdom foreshadowed his heavenly appointment because he survived the wounds of his assassins for the space of three days (a clear reference to Christ) before departing his earthly body. Without Eugenia’s revelation of her Christian lifestyle in the monastery, her father would never have converted or been exalted in heaven.

Ælfric and his Latin source seem to not be able to completely abandon Eugenia after her martyrdom. Her ghost appears to her mother to comfort the grieving woman and also to tell her mother that she would soon die. The ghost’s appearance and Ælfric’s description may not have been one of her earthly body in the grave, but he is sure to include a bodily depiction of her spirit as being adorned in gold and accompanied by the heavenly host. She could have appeared as a ball of light or just a voice, but Eugenia made a final manifestation in a human form. Scholars such as Paul Szarmach have argued over the reasons Eugenia donned a male disguise,233 and Gulley makes the assertion that

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the abandonment of earthly possessions was of primary importance in the vita, rather than the saint’s virginity. Regardless of appearance or wealth, it is clear that the interlacing of purity and sanctity is reflected in Ælfric’s choice to bring Eugenia back in a humanoid form in her mother’s ghostly vision and describe it in detail when other depictions are glossed over or paraphrased from the Latin source. Displaying her body post-mortem remains important, and Ælfric’s insistence in emphasizing her purity and devotion to her status as a bride of Christ demonstrates the significance of her body in life and death.

St. Agnes

In the city of Rome during the late third and early fourth centuries, Agnes lived in purity and faith in Christ throughout her youth. A young man named Sempronius, the prefect of the city, attempted to woo her with gifts of precious gems and worldly ornaments. She refused him and said her only bridegroom would be Christ, with whom Sempronius could not compete. Even under threat of severe punishment, Sempronius’s father could not convince Agnes to forsake Christ and take his son to be her bridegroom, nor would she sacrifice to their false idols. When Sempronius’s father ordered that Agnes be stripped naked and taken to the house of harlots, her hair covered her as she walked and a beacon of light prohibited anyone from looking upon her. Agnes also could not be harmed by fire, but she finally did succumb to the sword after the Deputy-Prefect Aspasius ordered her to be killed. Her death signaled the beginning of her afterlife as one of the typical Anglo-Saxon religious tropes, a bride of Christ.

234 Reliable historical records for a Christian martyr named Agnes is virtually non-existent, but there is a Christian martyr with the same name buried in a Roman cemetery called Via Nomentana from the late third or very early fourth century. The legend, however, held great interest, and no alternative feast day exists, so some credibility is lent to the early version of the legend. See Donovan, Women Saints’ Lives, 45.
St. Agnes discusses her relationship with Christ in much the same way that a newlywed would describe her life with her husband. Agnes explains that her bridegroom gives her adornments, precious stones, shining gems, and other incomparable treasures.

In return for these treasures, she has decided to follow him. She states,

Ne mæg ic him to teonan oðerne geceosan. and hine forlætan. þe me mid lufe beweddode …
his bryd-bedd me is gearo. nu iu iu mid dreamum.
His mædenu me singað. mid geswegum stemnum.
Of his muðe ic under-feng meoluc. and hunig. nu iu ic eom beclypt. mid his clænum earmum.
his fægera lichama is minum geferlæht. and his blod ge-glende mine eah-hringas. (ll. 40-1, 43-8)

“I may not to His dishonour choose another and forsake Him who has espoused me by His love … His bridal-bed has now been prepared for me with joys for a long time, His maidens sing to me with melodious voices. From his mouth I have received milk and honey; now already I am embraced with His pure arms. His fair body is united to mine, and His blood has adorned my eyebrows.” 235

Technically, Agnes is not considered a member of the chaste marriage category (discussed later in this chapter) since her bridegroom was not human, but this speech certainly demonstrates her faithfulness to one being in whose bridal bed she has consented to lie. Her description is consistent with that of a married woman and carries a clear allusion to a relationship which would be sexual in nature if the male member of the pair was corporeal. Carolyn Diskant Muir discusses Agnes as a bride of Christ figure who, arguably, could overshadow St. Catherine of Alexandria “as the quintessential bride of Christ in late medieval and Renaissance culture” by examining various versions of her vita, including the fifth-century Gesta sanctae Agnes authored by Pseudo-Ambrosius as well as Voragine’s Legenda aurea. What becomes extremely clear is that Ælfric, following in the literary footsteps of earlier authors (including St. Ambrose’s mention of

Agnes in “De virginibus” from 377 and Aldhelm’s discussion of her in *De Virginitate*, wants to emphasize Agnes’s virginity and devotion to that virginity because her only lover is Christ.

As Muir relates, “Agnes’ reference to her divine lover who is revealed to be Christ is the element of her story that led to her identification as Christ’s bride, even though no actual marriage between the two is described”; she adds that, according to Ambrose, Agnes “is prepared to die rather than sacrifice her religion and her virginity.”

Ælfric’s version of her story continues with Agnes discussing for many lines how amazing Christ is:

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\begin{align*}
\text{þa wynsumun tunglan.} \\
\text{sunne. and mona. þe middan-eard onlihtað.} \\
\text{þurh his spæc geedcuciað eac ða deadan.} \\
\text{and þurh his hrepunge beoð gestrangode þa unstrangan seocan.} \\
\text{His speda ne ateoriað. ne his welan ne waniað. (ll. 51-5)}
\end{align*}
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“The winsome stars glorify His beauty, and the sun and moon also, which enlighten the earth. By His word even the dead are quickened, and by His touch the infirm are strengthened.”

Her words are a remarkable foreshadowing because God will, through the course of the *vita*, raise a dead boy from the grave and heal an infirm woman in order to demonstrate his great power but also continue to illustrate that Agnes’s firm resolve is not misplaced. The Prefect’s son has died, and he asks Agnes to pray that God’s power will be manifested before them by raising his dead son and returning him to life. She does just that, and the boy is revived: “Then they all went out, and she prayed alone, beseeching her Lord that He would raise the dead. Then Christ’s Angel appeared there, and raised the youth, and he immediately ran out, when he was requickened” (lines 199-202). Following Agnes’ death, Constantia, Emperor Constantine’s daughter, came to her tomb, prayed for healing, and saw Agnes in a sleeping vision. Agnes told her that God could heal her wounds, and he did just that upon her waking.

ðonne ic hine under-fo. ic beo mæden forð. (ll. 56-60)

“To Him alone I ever keep my troth, to whom I commit myself with all devotion. When I love Him, I am wholly pure when I touch Him, I am unstained, when I receive Him, I am still a virgin.”

With Agnes’s determination to remain virginal and dedicated to Christ as her bridegroom in mind, Agnes would definitely qualify as one half of a married couple as well as the ideal female image for the Middle Ages. Yet, just like the end of Eugenia’s story—and her life—Agnes’s corpse receives limited recognition and only the briefest mention from Ælfric. He writes,

Dé ne mihte Aspasius þa micclan ceaste acumen.
ac het hi acwellan. mid cwealm-bærum swurde.
and críst hi þa undorðung. for his naman gemartyrode.
Se fæder. and seo modor. mid mycelre blysse.
gelæhton hyre lic. and gelæddon to heora agenum.
and hi ðæer bebyrigden. buton sarnysse.
and þær gelome wacodon. wurðigende þa stowe. (ll. 243-49)

“Then Aspasius could not withstand the great tumult, but bade kill her with death-bearing sword, and Christ then received her, martyred for His Name. Her father and her mother, with great joy, took her body, and brought it to their own house, and buried her there without sorrowing, and there often watched, venerating the place.”

Once again, the female saint is martyred without details of her death, and the dead body is simply taken away and buried. There is a vague description of the final resting place at her parents’ home and an indication that her parents joyfully buried her corpse without mourning their familial loss.

Additionally, like Eugenia, Agnes appears to her loved ones, her parents in this case, accompanied by a host of virgins. Given the importance placed upon virginity

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throughout Ælfric’s work, one must assume that these virgins were also female. She tells her parents,

Warniað þæt ge ne wepon me swa swa deade.  
ac blyssiað mid me. Ic eom þysum mædenum geferlæht.  
and ic mid him under-feng. swiðe fægere wununga.  
and þam ic eom on heofonum geþeodd. þe ic her on eorðan lufode. (ll. 255-8)

“Beware that you weep not for me as if dead, but rejoice with me, I am a companion of these virgins, and I have received with them very fair habitations, and I am associated to Him in Heaven, whom I loved here on earth.”

In addition to their joyful, but vague, burial, Agnes’s parents are joined in seeing a vision of their daughter by the heathen daughter of Emperor Constantine. Constantia visits Agnes’s tomb to pray for the healing of her “wounds in all her limbs” (“on eallum limum egeslice wunda hæfde,” l. 266) after being told by some of the emperor’s men about Agnes’s parents’ vision—knowledge of this vision, as Ælfric notes, spread throughout the world—and again no information regarding the location of her tomb, any description of Agnes’s corpse, or how Constantia finds out where Agnes’s body was interred is given in this scene. Even though Agnes was the quintessential bride of Christ figure throughout all of the iterations of her vita and the concepts of virginity, purity, and chastity are mentioned in Ælfric’s “Natale Sancte Agnetis, Uirginis” more than thirty times—some in

241 In his translation, Skeat uses “beware” for warniað, but Bosworth-Toller also includes a possible option for the translation to be “to take heed that something is not done” (http://www.bosworthtoller.com/034697), which I would argue fits the context more accurately in this instance than “beware.” Agnes acts less like Dickens’s Ghost of Christmas Past and more like a comforting voice from the grave to her parents, asking, rather than demanding or scaring, them to simply continue their joyfulness and avoid mourning because she is rejoicing since she is finally able to be in the presence of her long-awaited bridegroom in heaven after enduring the struggles and hardships of life on earth without her partner in faith by her side as she so desperately wanted.
elongated passages which elucidate her role as bride of Christ but still only count as one instance—her corpse is not given any special privilege in the vita.

Chaste Couples

As Robert K. Upchurch notes in his “The Legend of Chrysanthus and Daria in Ælfric’s Lives of Saints,” Ælfric decides “to give prominence to the legends of the virgin spouses Julian and Basilissa, Chrysanthus and Daria, and Cecilia and Valerian. Only eight female saints are included in the Lives: four unmarried virgin martyrs (Eugenia, Agnes, Agatha, and Lucy) and four sets of married virgin spouses, three of whom (Basilissa, Cecilia, and Daria) have husbands who are also saints,” but that decision can be difficult for a modern audience to understand given the patron of the Lives of Saints. In a similar fashion to the female saints’ lives discussed earlier, Ælfric relates the lives of these couples with a clear emphasis on their chastity and purity (known as the intactam sponsa topos), especially when both partners are still alive. Though in Aldhelm’s description of the hierarchy of the state of virginity, chastity, and conjugality, chaste couples would rank lower than unmarried virgins, chastity in marriage is critical for these saints’ lives because they have “scorned the commerce of matrimony for the sake of the heavenly kingdom.” These vitae are quite complicated because of the dual nature of the marriage. There is a partnership involved since the two holy individuals are

244 Robert K. Upchurch, “The Legend of Chrysanthus and Daria in Ælfric’s Lives of Saints,” Studies in Philology 101, no. 3 (June 2004): 251. Upchurch notes in a footnote that St. Æthelthryth is included in the list of virgin couples but is not overtly discussed because her husbands were not saints, nor were they intending to be in a chaste marriage.

245 Upchurch argues that the reason Ælfric included the chaste couples in his work and that they were relevant to his patron Æthelweard and his son Æthelmar, as well as “a wider circle of like-minded laymen … [was] as a vehicle to spur them to greater asceticism and steadfast belief” (“Legend of Chrysanthus and Daria,” 251).

246 Lapidge and Herren, Aldhelm: The Prose Works, 75.
married; calling it a marriage, however, is deceptive. For all intents and purposes, the couples are invested in a platonic partnership and share the same goal of spreading Christianity wherever they go. They deny their biological urges as men and women because sex is not a factor in their relationships, even though they seem to truly love each other. They share caritas love rather than cupiditas since they have an emotional connection and support one another but do not desire each other carnally. The marriage connects them, especially in the eyes of the lay person, but they are able to use it as a tool to demonstrate how to love and live in the Christian manner. Through purity and chastity, they are illustrating the ideal Christian lifestyle, and each member of the partnership has a specific role to play. The female partner remains virginal and must fight the physical forces which may be tempting her to turn away from her devotion to her true bridegroom (Christ) as well as those authorities who may be attempting to defile her against her will. These chaste couples’ passiones, especially the depiction of the female partner, “offered medieval women a more practical possibility for achieving sanctity than the violence and refusal to marry presented in many other virgin martyrs' lives.”247 On the other hand, the male partner seeks to use his chastity in the relationship to follow the example of Christ and spread the faith to all who will listen. His imitatio Christi is especially prevalent during the times when he is separated from his wife or she has already been martyred. As a unit, the two implement their largely gender-based strategy to convert pagans and reinforce the beliefs of the faithful.

In Ælfric’s translations of the passiones of the three chaste couples, they generally follow a basic pattern of conversion, confrontation with heathen leaders, torture, and

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death. Because there are two people involved in the texts, this pattern may change depending on whether or not the couples are captured by the heathen authorities together or separately. Additionally, the focus given to the dead bodies of the saints following their deaths is quite minimal because there always seems to be another individual or group which needs to be discussed, so the corpse does not receive the kind of comprehensive attention one might expect for individuals involved in a chaste relationship. In almost every situation, other converts, family members, or the other half of the couple fills out the rest of the *passio*. Rather than focus on the dead bodies, Ælfric prioritizes the impact the saint had on the community and how the living partner would continue without his or her other half. In the case of Julian and Basilissa, Basilissa dies and Julian buries her without further comment about her body because there is much more to the text remaining concerning Julian’s missionary work. His body following his death is then buried by his brethren without more commentary about the physical corpse; his impact is more important. For Daria and Chrysanthus, the two are buried alive in a sand pit together so their deaths and burial are simultaneous. Again, their impact becomes the primary concern. Finally, Valerian departs long before Cecilia, and she buries her beheaded husband along with his brother with little more pomp and circumstance than anyone else of any consequence. Cecilia dies about 100 lines later following a series of tortures (which fail to harm her) and is buried by Pope Urban. Although she is the last saint standing in her *passio*, attention falls on the fact that she was buried by the pope, one of the most important earthly figures in Christianity. The lack of attention paid to these holy corpses is stunning; one would imagine that out of six people at least one dead body would be described in detail. However, it is the impact they had on their
communities as missionaries and chaste partners which becomes the primary source of importance. While Ælfric does not examine their corpses directly, he does include a few intriguing moments that deserve further attention and are directly related to either the corpses of the saints or the members of their communities.

Sts. Julian and Basilissa

The story of Julian and Basilissa follows a typical plot, though the details create a unique complexity for one of Ælfric’s passio narratives. The couple is forced into marriage but decide to remain chaste due to their faith, a heathen leader begins to persecute Christians, the couple resists the leader’s demand for conversion to heathenism, the leader quickly turns to torture, and the saints are eventually killed for their faith. However, there are several oddities within Julian and Basilissa’s story which allow it to stand apart from the many other saints’ lives of the Middle Ages and involve a discussion of corpses. To begin with, as most hagiographies do, the couple’s faith and dedication to chastity is revered above all else. As Anne P. Alwis explains, the vita of Julian and Basilissa “expresses an unequivocal conflict between marriage and celibacy and initially appears to declare that celibacy wins. The author borrows the template of the reluctant spouses and promotes an unambiguous message: such a union is divinely sanctioned.”

In their marriage bed, the couple prays for God to preserve their chastity:

Þa wurdon gegenarcde þa gyftu æfter gewunan.
and hi butu coman on anum bedde to-somne.
Hwæt ða iulianus hine georne ge-bæd.
to ðam hælende criste. þæt he hine geheolde.
wìð ealla ontendynsse and yfele costnunga.
Þa wearð þæt bryd-bed mid bræðe afylded.
swylce þær lægon. lilie and rose.

Then was prepared the marriage, according to custom and they two came into one bed together. Well, then! Julian eagerly prayed to Jesus Christ, that He would preserve him against all desire and evil temptation. Then was the bride-bed filled with fragrance just as though a lily and a rose were lying there. Then said Basilissa to the pure bridegroom, “It is now winter-time, and I greatly wonder whence this fragrance of flowers thus wonderfully rises; and now I have no desire for any sinfulness, but feel only desire for the Saviour, with preserved chastity.” Julian answered the noble maiden, “This winsome fragrance, at which thou greatly wonders, hath no beginning, nor also any end. This fragrance is from Christ who is lover of purity; if we two continue in unbroken chastity and purely love Him, then shall we come to His kingdom, and we two shall never be severed, but shall rejoice forever.” Basilissa said that she desired to continue in pure maidenhood, because of that winsome promise, so as to have the life eternal, and the Saviour for her bride-groom.”

Following these prayers, God blessed their union and their devout faith. In a scene reminiscent of a horror movie, Christ made his presence known by shaking the marriage bed, shining a bright light on the couple, and appearing before them with his virgin mother Mary in tow. They are promised eternal salvation and a place among the saints because of their devotion to Christianity and chastity. Nothing within this scene is truly unique to the story of Julian and Basilissa, but Ælfric takes his writing a bit further by incorporating a common Anglo-Saxon poetic device into the passio. He creates a clear

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parallelism, or envelope pattern, for a later scene involving Julian and his followers—by this time in the tale, Basilissa will have already died.

After the rise of Diocletian as the “bloodthirsty” (“wel-hreowan,” l. 89) Roman emperor, Christians were persecuted throughout Egypt. As the story relates, Julian and Basilissa knew that they would have to undergo torture and other miseries in defense of their faith. While both saints were confident in their abilities to remain devout and were willing to face the persecutions, they both prayed to Christ for guidance in their time of need and worry. God answers them, specifically Basilissa, instructing her not to worry and

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\text{þæt ealle þine mædenu of middan-earde gewitað}
\]
\[
ær ðan þe seo arlease ehtnys. ofer eow be-cume.
\]
\[
\text{þæt ge ne beon ge-wem-mede. þurh ða wodan ehteras. (ll. 93-5)}
\]

“that all thy maidens shall depart from the world before the cruel persecution shall come upon you, that you be not polluted by the mad persecutors.”

250 In his parallel-text edition, Ælfric’s Lives of the Virgin Spouses with Modern English Parallel-text Translations, Robert K. Upchurch’s translation of one of the Latin sources for the passio of Julian and Basilissa demonstrates that God has much more than a brief interaction with Basilissa, as Ælfric’s Old English translation would convey. God speaks to her in a dream where he informs her that she has done a magnificent job preserving the virginity of her charges whom he placed in her care and that she would “have half the time” that Julian, her husband, does on earth. At the appointed time of her death, she “will follow me [God] to accept the keys of a storehouse full of an abundance of souls, from which a pleasant fragrance ascends daily to heaven into the presence of the holy angels” (Upchurch, Ælfric’s Lives of the Virgin Spouses, 125). Following this interaction and in Basilissa’s waking hours, God speaks to her again while her cohort of virginal women stand around her. He shakes the ground, a column of light appears with a golden inscription above it, and God’s voice rings out with the appearance of the sign of the cross. God tells her that he has found no fault in her charges and they are welcome in heaven. Afterward, the maidens all depart from the world to bliss. Ælfric takes this great elaboration—paragraphs within the Latin—and condenses it into approximately one paragraph. This trend continues throughout much of Ælfric’s work. Ælfric himself writes within the text of Julian and Basilissa’s passio that “This story is very tedious, to tell it all, but we tell it to you in the briefest way” (“Þeos race is swiðe lăng-sum fullice to gereccenne. ac we hit sæcgað eow on þa scortostan wisan,” ll. 139-140). He freely admits to not wanting to translate the whole story as it is written in the Latin but give us the Old English equivalent of Cliff’s Notes. Upchurch explains that the text on which he based his Latin translation and translation is not the one from which Ælfric worked. He also elaborates on the Biblioteca Hagiographica Latina (BHL), the importance of the “Cotton-Corpus Legendary,” and the conclusion that Ælfric likely “worked from a hybrid of BHL 4529 [the most common version of the legend] and 4532 [an abridgement of 4529] that has yet to be identified” (Upchurch, Ælfric’s Lives of the Virgin Spouses (Exeter University Press, 2007), 29).

251 Ælfric, “Passio Sancti Ivliani,” 96.
Not long after her prayer was answered, Basilissa and her fellow maidens departed from the world as chaste and virginal as they had lived. Julian, after Basilissa dies, buries her “with joy, with his monks” (“mid blisse … mid his munecum,” l. 101). It isn’t until the very end of the piece that we read any more about Basilissa—a brief mention—and nothing else is discussed concerning Basilissa’s body, regardless of her ongoing chastity.

In the Latin source that Upchurch translates for his edition, there is not much difference with Ælfric’s rendition of the death and burial scene. Her death follows the departures of her maidens to the Lord, for which both Julian and Basilissa are joyful. Though the two saints have no actual children of their own because their marriage is chaste, some scholars like Alwis consider the men and women that Julian and Basilissa respectively convert, preach to, and guide akin to being their children in Christ. Alwis explains, “the couple even have children. Physically barren they may choose to be, but by their commitment to God and their teaching of young men and women, these people are regarded as their progeny.” Theirs is certainly a prime example of the creation of the “spiritual family,” a point which Alwis emphasizes concerning the Latin vita versus the Greek passio. She explains that “the Latin vita’s author embraces a substitute mode of living, viable in the face of social and biological renunciation, and already fêted in the [Greek] passio.” In every aspect, this story continues to promote its “extreme preference for virginity.” Following the death of Basilissa’s virginal ‘daughters,’ the holy maiden simply passes away as well. One major point, though it may not seem incredibly important to the casual reader, that Ælfric glosses over is the fact that, in the

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252 Ælfric, “Passio Sancti Ivliani,” 96.
253 Alwis, Celibate Marriages, 55.
254 Alwis, Celibate Marriages, 56.
255 Alwis, Celibate Marriages, 56.
Latin, Julian has “a most fitting burial ceremony and remembered her day and night by carrying out spiritual vigils.” Ålfric would have us believe that Julian forgets his virginal wife with no reminiscence or indication that he misses her. Clearly, the Latin text places more of an emotional emphasis on both the burial and Julian’s feelings for Basílissa. Still, it is critical to note that in both Latin and Old English, the corpse of the saintly woman is essentially forgotten once she dies. It seems to be nothing but boiler plate action at this point to have her interred appropriately, whatever that might mean. Her virginity and purity as well as her impact on the lives of other women around her to maintain their own chastity are not enough to warrant further elaboration concerning any incorruption of the corpse, miracles at the tomb, or significance of the interment. Following her burial, Julian and his fellow monks are imprisoned by the emperor.

The way in which the setting is described completes the envelope pattern mentioned earlier:

Þa halgan wurdon gebrohte on blindum cwearterne syððan be martianes hæse þær manna lic lagon. ðe wæran ær acwealde on ðam cwearterne gefyrn. þa weollon eall maðon and egeslice stuncon. Þa före-sceawode godes gifu. þæt þær seean mycel leoht. and se stenc wearð awend. to wynsumum bræðe. and eall se unwynsumnyss him wearð to blysse. (ll. 209-15)

“The saints were then cast into a blind prison, by Martianus’s command, where men’s bodies lay, that were long before this killed in the prison, which swarmed all with worms, and stank horribly. Then God’s grace provided that there shone a great light, and the stench was turned into a pleasant fragrance, and all the unpleasantness turned, for them, into happiness.”

The light and sweet smell are clear parallels to the previous bridal bedroom, but the mention of corpses becomes vague and a bit confusing. The phrasing starts very

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256 Upchurch, Ålfric’s Lives of the Virgin Spouses, 127.
257 Ålfric, “Passio Sancti Ivliani,” 102.
specifically with extremely explicit visual and olfactory descriptions, but this depiction quickly unravels into an indistinct expression of visual ambiguity.\textsuperscript{258} The stench portion is covered by stating that it changed into a pleasant fragrance—not as specific as the flowers from the bedroom scene but having adjectival equivalence. Aldhelm’s description of the stench resulting from the “fetid corpses … bubbling over with horrid swarms of worms” having been replaced by God’s intervention provides a bit more specificity where the dungeon was filled with the “sweet smell of ambrosia and the fragrance of nectar.”\textsuperscript{259} The presence of an olfactory description would come as no surprise to an Anglo-Saxon audience, and its prevalence in Old English literature, specifically Christian literature, is well-documented scholastically. Brian McFadden’s “Sweet Odors and Interpretative Authority in the Exeter Book \textit{Physiologus} and \textit{Phoenix}” explains that a passage from a Pauline text “illustrates the importance of the image of the sweet odor in Anglo-Saxon Christianity” and that the motif of a sweet odor is linked to a set of images about successful sin offerings and sacrifices, not only in Paul but in many places throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and as the ‘odor of sanctity,’ it is also a repeated motif in many hagiographies and ecclesiastical texts to indicate that a saint’s life, an exemplary \textit{imitatio Christi}, has been pleasing to God. Only someone familiar with Scripture, however, would know the importance of the image of the sweet odor.\textsuperscript{260}

\textsuperscript{258} At this point, Ælfric cannot be blamed for the Old English text’s ambiguity concerning the corpses. In Upchurch’s Latin source and modern English translation, the text is just as ambiguous as Ælfric’s presentation:

he [Martianus] ordered them to be confined in the depths of the jail where swarms of horrible maggots boiled out from the bodies of the condemned that had been wasting away day after day, and where there was the foulest stench. When they were being led in, the Lord’s grace went before them and rendered the dreadful place a delightful one. His grace changed darkness into light, furnishing candlelight and sending forth the fragrance of nectar: in fact the punishment bubbling up vanished. (Upchurch, \textit{Ælfric’s Lives of the Virgin Spouses}, 145.)

Obviously, there are a few choice word changes, embellishments, and deletions, but overall the ambiguity remains in both versions. With this in mind, it is still unclear as to what exactly happened to the bodies of the condemned men (presumably) who had previously been assisting in the creation of an extremely unpleasant situation.

\textsuperscript{259} Lapidge and Herren, \textit{Aldhelm: The Prose Works}, 101.

Using the example of *The Panther* found in the Exeter Book, McFadden explains that sweet smells are connected to wonder, specifically awe for God, but also deception as described in another Exeter poem, *The Whale*. Although there is ambiguity in the Exeter Book for sweet odors, McFadden’s interpretation is that the pleasant smell in *The Panther* “attracts humans to the beneficence of the panther and Christ (a pleasant odor being one of the signs of divine presence in hagiography).” And he later continues to explain, using the example of *The Phoenix*, that “in hagiographical texts, a sweet odor is a sign of sanctity.” Rosemary Cramp’s *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture: Southwest England* also notes the sweet smell emanating from the panther. She explains that after the panther “has eaten it rests in a secret place in a hill cave and then after three days it rises up and a most delightful sound issues from its mouth, and after the voice a sweet smell, a delightful breath comes out … The poet explicitly then compares the panther with Christ.” Cramp mentions the panther because its likeness may be represented on part of a stone columnar cross or font at Melbury Bubb (St. Mary) in the nave of the church, and in the carving a differentiation is made, Cramp argues, between the panther and a lion because “it is shown with its mouth open and something issuing from it which could signify its sweet breath.” Clearly, the notion of sweet odors is important in Anglo-Saxon culture, so it is a foreseeable expectation that smell may factor into some of Ælfric’s hagiographies.

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262 McFadden, “Sweet Odors,” 198.
264 Cramp, *Corpus*, 105.
In Julian and Basilissa’s *passio*, sweet fragrances are described twice, and in each instance, the saints are engaged in a situation where their faith would be tested. First, the temptations of the marriage bed attempt to seduce the newlywed couple, but they vehemently resist and call upon God for aid. Second, Julian is thrown into a prison in which the stench is overwhelming due to the presence of rotting corpses, and God provides, as a symbol of his divine manifestation, relief from the stench by means of a pleasant odor. Ælfric is using the common Anglo-Saxon theme of sweet smells to represent God’s presence and power, to place wonder and awe within the characters of Julian and Basilissa as well as the audience, and to create a double parallelism within the story, marriage bed to prison and the remark concerning the stench and its relief.

However, the visual scene—and the third part of the envelope pattern trifecta—changes from specificity (the corpses of former male prisoners) to the imprecise concept of unpleasantness turned to happiness. This ambiguity is never explained by Ælfric because, like most discussions of corpses throughout medieval literature, dead bodies are rarely given more than a passing reference; in these brief lines, that short note is even more difficult to understand because the explicit visual devolves into nonspecific literary filler. Like the corpses of the saints in this *passio*, the fate of the corpses of these men is left unknown and the author, generally, appears indifferent to the bodies, their fates, or their apparent disappearance.

In a similar fashion to other female saints, such as Eugenia and Agnes, whose hagiographies do not include any information concerning the whereabouts of their corpses or exhumations of their bodies post-burial but do feature a brief cameo in the form of a spiritual apparition to their loved ones, Basilissa briefly appears to Julian just
after he is beheaded to accompany him and his fellow martyrs into the kingdom of heaven. Julian is greeted by

basilissa mid hyre beorhtum mædenum.
and se halga heap. þe on ðam huse for-barn.
and þa twentig weard-menn. þe se wælhreowa be-heafdode. (ll. 417-19)

“Basilissa, with her bright maidens, and the holy company that were burnt in the house, and the twenty warders, whom the cruel one beheaded, and the seven brethren, whom he commanded to be burnt.”

Ælfric chooses not to divulge any information about her corpse’s final resting place or any miracles occurring at her tomb. Even Julian seems rather nonplussed by her death; in fact, Ælfric accentuates Julian’s joy at the end of her life and their partnership. It is evident in Eugenia’s story as well as Basilissa’s tale of chastity through marriage that Ælfric places great value on a female saint’s corporeal purity throughout her life. However, these two women are given barely a half-line for their deaths and their burials—and both hagiographies make note that a Christian man or men buries the body after she has died. Æthelthyrth, though admired and congratulated for the maintenance of her virginity through two marriages, seems to be an outlier as far as Ælfric’s treatment of female bodies post-mortem since his audience is provided with great detail concerning her corpse, its final resting places, and the condition of the body following exhumation. It is an interesting feature to note that being in the company of women, either fellow spirits or the physical presence of a living woman, plays a part as well. Basilissa appears to her husband and his compatriots before their deaths in the company of women, Eugenia reveals herself to her mother at her grave with no one else in the vicinity, and the revelation of Æthelthyrth’s incorruption is made possible only because of her sister’s

265 Ælfric, “Passio Sancti Iuliani,” 114.
insistence that the saint have a more proper burial place. Though the presence of women plays no part in the qualification of the female saint as a holy woman, it does seem to have a correlation with the saint playing a part in her own story following her eventual death.

The *passio* of Julian and Basilissa is intriguing on multiple levels, but of the utmost concern at this point is the fact that neither of the saints’ non-living bodies received the type of attention that their living bodies did (much like Agnes and Eugenia). Both saints, we are told, simply departed from the physical world and entered the kingdom of heaven; Julian is greeted upon his passing by Basilissa and her bright maidens, and the only further description given concerning Julian’s corpse follows the fairly gruesome and graphic death scene of Julian’s own torturer, Martianus. Ælfric writes:

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Hit gelamp þa sona. swa hi ofslagene wæron.
þæt mycel liget com. ofer þa manfullan hæðenan.
and swiðlic eorð-styrung. and egeslic þunor.
swa þæt þæra manfulra mycel dæl. for-wearð.
and nan stow ne æt-stod. mid þam stænenum godum.
ne nan hæðen-gyld se hagol ne belæfde.
Þa fleah martianus for nean adyd.
and he wearð fornumen. æfter feawum dagum.
swa þæt wurmas crupon cuce of his lice.
and se arleasa ge-wat mid wite to helle.
Þæra halgan lic. þurh geleaf-fulle men.
wurdon gebyrigde sona mid blisse. binnan godes cyrcan. (ll. 422-33)
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“*It happened then, as soon as they were slain, that a great lightning-flash fell upon the wicked heathen, and a mighty earthquake, and terrible thunder, so that of the wicked ones a great many perished, and no place remained standing with the gods of stone, nor did the hail leave any heathen place of worship. Then fled Martianus, very nearly slain, and he was consumed (with disease) after a few days, so that worms crept alive out of his body, and the impious one departed, with torture to hell. The saints’ bodies by believing men were soon buried with gladness within God’s church.*”

Ælfric, “Passio Sancti Ivliani,” 114.
Julian departs and is buried, but the evil torturer of Christians has a thoroughly
descriptive death scene, complete with another notation of worms and more light from
the heavens—this time in the form of a lightning strike—to add more parallelism to this
already cyclical storyline, and an indication of his final resting place (whether it is of his
soul or his corporeal being is not specified) in hell. Even with Ælfric’s insistence on
reaffirming their chastity and purity throughout the story, most especially prior to
Basilissa’s death in which the couple’s virginity and their nobility resulting from it are
mentioned nineteen times, their corpses receive one line each. It is interesting to note that
after Basilissa’s death, Julian’s virginity is only stated once (line 280) out of the fifteen
descriptors used in reference to Julian. Others include “holy Julianus,” “noble Julianus,”
“saint,” and “illustrious Julianus.” It seems that Basilissa’s presence makes a difference
in how Julian’s virginity is received as a sign of holiness and sanctity, especially since the
rest of the passio after his wife’s departure from the world consists of conversion,
persecution, miracles, torture, and death. Virginity plays very little part in Julian’s
characterization as a saint or holy figure unless his female counterpart is present. Julian
and Basilissa’s marriage, their celibacy within the marriage, and the lack of any
biological children resulting from that marriage is of the utmost importance when the
couple is together and, especially, prior to Basilissa’s death. As Anne P. Alwis relates,
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ultimate denial of the worldly family unit is a continent marriage and Julian and
Basilissa have exactly that. The connection between Julian and Basilissa’s
marriage and their virginity is emphasized when two angels crown them and unite
their hands, mirroring the marriage ceremony . . . It is their virginity within
marriage that is highlighted and praised. It is for this that they are deemed worthy
to join the rank of the angels.267

267 Alwis, Celibate Marriages in Late Antique and Byzantine Hagiography, 55.
Even in Aldhelm’s version of these saints’ hagiography, he emphasizes their virginity as a couple but also pays special attention to Julian’s chastity by choosing Basilissa as his wife. Aldhelm relates that God told Julian through a vision that Basilissa would retain his virginity; Aldhelm’s description of Basilissa focuses on her beauty, both outward and inward. She was “beautiful in the features of her face, yet more beautiful in the chastity of her heart.”\(^{268}\) His depiction of their deaths is quite different than Ælfric’s, especially in the case of Basilissa. He is not explicit in stating that she had been executed and certainly pays no attention to her corpse: “Basilissa, (equally) dedicated to God, reaping one thousand sheaves of the holy harvest with the scythe of gospel preaching, took them to be threshed on the threshing-floor of the executioner and to be stored in the celestial granaries.”\(^{269}\) Basilissa is not mentioned again, but Julian’s persecution, torture, and execution are quite lengthy. When he is finally executed, Julian is struck down with companions and dies, but Aldhelm includes the detail that “a ruby river of blood” comes pouring from his body. The burial is not described, and Basilissa’s return to Julian as a vision from heaven is also missing. Aldhelm does include a miracle concerning the healing of ten lepers at Julian’s tomb, but the dead body of the saint is not discussed. Likewise, more attention is paid (prior to Julian’s death) to the corpse which the saint resuscitates, “a dead man which was wrapped up in the lengthy windings of bandages but not yet buried in the enclosure of the tomb.”\(^{270}\) This is far more explication of the dead body than either saint receives, yet the primary emphasis is not on the corpse but rather on the fact that Julian was able to resurrect the dead man through his faith in God. The

\(^{268}\) Lapidge and Herren, \textit{Aldhelm: The Prose Works}, 100.

\(^{269}\) Lapidge and Herren, \textit{Aldhelm: The Prose Works}, 100.

\(^{270}\) Lapidge and Herren, \textit{Aldhelm: The Prose Works}, 101.
chastity of the couple is always the main focus in their hagiography, regardless of the writer, yet, having died for their faith and lived always in purity, their holy corpses are mostly ignored beyond a measly line or two of text. Martyrdom is critical to the vita, yet the discussion of the corpse is inconsistent and incomplete.

Julian and Basilissa are only one of the three chaste couples to be discussed here, so it is important to turn to another duo who did not allow the temptations of their marital status to interfere with their dedication to and faithfulness in God in order to further analyze and attempt to explain how virginity and chastity play a role—or don’t—in Ælfric’s discussion of holy corpses.

Sts. Daria and Chrysanthus

The second chaste couple for whom Ælfric translates a passio in his Lives of Saints is Chrysanthus and Daria. Each person in the couple begins his/her life as a heathen, is converted to Christianity, and enters into a chaste marriage as a starting point for their quest to spread the word of God and convert others. Though Chrysanthus was well-educated in worldly intelligence from, what Æfric calls, heathen books, he realized that his learning was all for naught with the wisdom he discovered in the holy gospels. Because he lived in Alexandria, Chrysanthus was a heathen, as was his family and all those around him. His father was greatly disappointed that his son had discovered Christianity in Rome (during the reign of Emperor Numerianus) and attempted to return his son to heathenism. One of the ways he intended to do this was, among other methods, to entice him with beautiful maidens. While he abhorred and renounced them all “as one does adders” (“swa swa man deþ næddran,” l. 58),\(^{271}\) the sixth one to be sent to

Chrysanthus was special. Daria was intelligent, skilled, noble, and fair in stature, and she approached Chrysanthus,

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geglenged mid golde …
and scinendum gymstanum swilce sun-beam færlice.
and hine frefrode mid hire fægerum wordum. (ll. 89-91)
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“adorned with gold and shining gem-stones, suddenly, like a sunbeam, and comforted him with her fair words.”

There was clearly something special and intriguing about this particular maiden which the other five maidens lacked.

Ælfric’s use of the term “maiden” in this text seems to contradict his usage of the word and Skeat’s translation of it in other saints’ lives discussed above. In *vitae* such as those of Eugenia or Æthelthryth, Ælfric appears to only refer to virginal women, specifically the female saints, as maidens. However, in the *passio* of Chrysanthus and Daria, the word is used seemingly interchangeably with “woman,” more specifically a young woman. Though he does not comment on the virginal status of the five women who originally approach Chrysanthus following his initial imprisonment, it cannot be assumed that they are virgins. Their willingness—Ælfric also does not comment on whether or not these five women were forced into the activity or went willingly—to distract Chrysanthus with sins of the flesh and entice him with lustful desires would definitely provide evidence for the argument that they have engaged in fornication prior to their entanglement with Chrysanthus. However, in Upchurch’s bilingual-text edition of the *vita*, he explicitly uses “virgins” as a translation for *mædene* in each instance that the five women are mentioned—as well as in the introduction of Daria shortly thereafter—

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272 Ælfric, “Passio Chrisanti et Dariae,” 382.
during their attempted enticement of Chrysanthus away from Christianity.²⁷³

Chrysanthus, in his prayers to God for strength to resist the temptation these beautiful
women present, used the Old English *næddran* (modern English “snakes, vipers,
adders”²⁷⁴) which would seem to contradict, or at least argue against, Upchurch’s bold
assertion that these women were virginal. Several lines later, the five women were
referred to by one of Chrysanthus’s father’s advisors once again after having been ejected
from Chrysanthus’s quarters as virgins but with an ambiguous adjective: *bylewitan*.

Bosworth-Toller gives multiple meanings for this term, including “merciful, mild, gentle,
simple, honest.”²⁷⁵ Skeat opts for the generous translation “innocent” (line 77), while
Upchurch chooses the more denigrating “simple-minded”²⁷⁶ in his edition. The apparent
sympathy Upchurch displayed for the five women several lines earlier has disappeared
with this declaration of the women’s stupidity. There is no further comment on the state
of their virginity, as Skeat’s translation may imply, but the “simple-minded” definition
brings forth more parallel comparisons with Daria since she is well-educated and
eloquent, hardly simple. Daria, additionally, has her virginal status confirmed twice in the
space of approximately thirty lines.

After Chrysanthus first sees her, he speaks to her “with pure mind” (“*mid clænum
mode*,” l. 92),²⁷⁷ stating that she and her beauty were sent to confound him and dissolve
his resolution to remain faithful to God, but she has the choice to pledge herself to Christ

²⁷³ Upchurch, *Ælfric’s Lives of the Virgin Spouses*, 89.
²⁷⁷ *Ælfric*, “Passio Chrisanti et Dariae,” 382.
as a bridegroom—another Bride of Christ image, as is quite popular in medieval religious
texts. The way to do this would be to

hine lufodest. and heolde þe clænlice.
on ungewemmaedum mægðhade. (ll. 95-7)

“love Him, and keep yourself chaste in unspotted virginity.”\textsuperscript{278}

The crucial word in that instruction, other than “virginity,” is “keep.” \textit{Heolde} has a
variety of meanings, including “keep,” and using this term ensures that the audience
knows there is a clear difference between the women Chrysanthus rebuked earlier and
Daria—her virginity has been verified. The second instance in which her virginity is
confirmed comes directly within the narrative rather than out of the mouth of one of the
characters. It follows her conversation with Chrysanthus wherein he finds fault with three
of the heathen gods she and the rest of Alexandria praise—Saturn, Jove, and Hercules.
Ælfric states,

Ælfric states,

\begin{quote}
Hi wurdon þa anræde. and wunodon ætgædere
gehiwodum synscipe. and gehealdenre clænnysse.
ofþæt daria under-feng fulluht on gode.
and godes bec leornode æt þam gelæredun enhte.
and hire mod gestrangode on mægðhade wunigende. (122-26)
\end{quote}

“That they were steadfast, and lived together in the appearance of marriage, their chastity
being preserved, until Daria received baptism in God, and learnt God’s books from the
well-taught youth, and strengthened her mind, continuing in virginity.”\textsuperscript{279}

Daria is clearly a special maiden, but Ælfric’s generalization of the term in this \textit{passio}
becomes problematic when compared to other saint’s life stories where he apparently
limits the scope of “maiden” to women of a virginal status. At this point, all that can be
confirmed is that Ælfric describes Daria and other women throughout this text twelve

\textsuperscript{278} Ælfric, “Passio Chrisanti et Dariæ,” 382.
\textsuperscript{279} Ælfric, “Passio Chrisanti et Dariæ,” 384.
times, and eight of the twelve times are in reference to Daria as a pure woman or those other chaste women she has converted in the course of her preaching. The other four instances, which all appear within the beginning eighty lines of the piece, have a clear indication toward young women but whose virtue has not been established or given credibility.

Regardless of Daria’s virginity and continued chastity throughout her marriage to Chrysanthus, her corpse receives no more special treatment than that of Basilissa or, as we will see, Cecilia. The same can also be said for Chrysanthus’s post-mortem body, especially since he and his virgin wife were killed and buried together simultaneously. Chrysanthus underwent several types of tortures under the orders of the Roman prefect, but the tortures were foiled each time; some of the methods included binding (bonds fell off), being placed into stocks with leg fetters (fetters turned to rottenness), being covered in old urine (liquid transformed into sweet smell),\textsuperscript{280} sewing the saint into the hide of a skinned ox and left to bake in the sun (no harm came to him), binding in chains and placed in dark prison (chains fell off and light shone in the prison), and scourging with rods (rods softened). Following their release by and conversion of Claudius, the chaste couple was imprisoned again but kept apart—Chrysanthus was thrown into an actual prison while Daria was dragged to a brothel. As witnessed in Julian and Basilissa’s \textit{vita}, Chrysanthus’s prison

\begin{quote}
wearð æfyllæ mid fælum ædelæn.
and butan ælæcum ælohte ætelæce stincende. (ll. 244-5)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{280} In Aldhelm’s description of this scene, he repeats phrasing used in Julian and Basilissa’s \textit{passio} where the rotting smell of the corpses in the prison was overpowered by ambrosia and nectar. The ghastly urine smell Chrysanthus is covered with is also changed to “fragrant ambrosia and into the rosy aroma of nectar.” Lapidge and Herren, \textit{Aldhelm: The Prose Works}, 98.
“was filled with foul filth, and without any light, stinking horribly,”\textsuperscript{281}

and also in a similar fashion to Julian’s predicament, Chrysanthus’s prison situation was made tolerable through God. As Ælfric describes, the

\begin{verbatim}
þæt an-þræce cweartern þe crisantus on wæs.
wearð onliht sona wundorlice þurh god.
and þær wynsum bræð werodlice s	stemde. (ll. 250-2)
\end{verbatim}

“fearful prison wherein Chrysanthus was immediately became wondrously lighted by God; and there a winsome breath sweetly steamed.”\textsuperscript{282}

Although there are no rotting corpses in this cell, Chrysanthus’s circumstances were certainly not ideal.

Daria, however, was not as fortunate as Basilissa in being able to escape (attempted) tortures. While her husband remained in a ghastly prison, she was sent to a brothel “for the sport of the wicked” (“þam manfullan to gamene,” l. 248).\textsuperscript{283} When one reads depictions of the lives, tortures, and deaths of medieval saints, one may expect drama; this tale, however, has quite the flair for the dramatic, especially when it comes to God’s preservation of Daria’s virginity. In order to protect her from the foul intentions of the patrons of the brothel, God allows a lioness to escape its enclosure, bound into Daria’s harlot cell, and pledge its allegiance to her by bowing to the earth where Daria lay. Any man who entered the room with the unwholesome objective of besmirching the virginity of the maiden would be overpowered by the lioness and potentially disposed of if Daria would request such action. Even after the brothel is set ablaze by order of the prefect, the lioness, though fearful, would have stayed by Daria’s side to prevent any

\textsuperscript{281} Ælfric, “Passio Chrisanti et Dariae,” 392.
\textsuperscript{282} Ælfric, “Passio Chrisanti et Dariae,” 392.
\textsuperscript{283} Ælfric, “Passio Chrisanti et Dariae,” 392.
harm from befalling her. Thankfully, the animal was permitted to leave the fiery home unscathed.

Again, the prefect ordered another round of tortures for both saints, but neither was harmed. Finally, after much frustration for the Roman prefect, Daria and Chrysanthus are buried alive in a sandpit with earth and stone cast upon them. Though the final lines concerning the saints and their bodies are that

\[
\text{and hi mid clænnysse ferdon} \\
of worulde to wuldre to wunigenne mid criste. (ll. 328-9)
\]

“they with chastity departed from the world to glory, to dwell with Christ,”

nothing is said of their actual corpses. We are told that many converts came “to the great cave where the martyrs lay” (“to þam micclan screfe. þær þa martyras lagon,” l. 334) as, what can be assumed, a pilgrimage, and the emperor commanded his men

\[
ahebban ænne wah \\
to þæs sceæfes ingange. ðæt hi ut ne mihton. \\
and het afyllan ðæt clyf færlice him on-uppan. \\
þæt hi ealle to-gæedere heora gastas ageafon. \\
mid eorðan of-hroene. (ll. 335-9)
\]

“to build a wall at the cave’s entrance, that they might not come out, and bade men cast down the rock suddenly upon them, so that they all together gave up the ghost, crushed by the earth.”

Essentially, Ælfric is telling us that ordinary Christian people were buried alongside two of, what may be called, the elite of Christianity, and their bodies were permitted to decompose just as the corpses of Daria and Chrysanthus may or may not have been doing. For this ending, the burial location, state of the corpses, or intermingling with

\[284\] Ælfric, “Passio Chrisanti et Dariae,” 396.  
\[285\] Ælfric, “Passio Chrisanti et Dariae,” 396.  
\[286\] Ælfric, “Passio Chrisanti et Dariae,” 396.
those of lesser devout caliber are not important because, as a moral finality to the passio, Ælfric explains that

\[
\text{We wurþiað godes halgan. ac wite ge swa-þeah}
\]
\[
\text{þæt þam halgum nis nan neod ure herunge on þam life.}
\]
\[
\text{ac us sylfum fremað þæt þæt we seegað be him. (ll. 341-3)}
\]

“We venerate God’s saints, but know, nevertheless, that the saints have no need of our praise in this life, but that which we say concerning them profits ourselves.”

At the culmination of a 361-line passio where Daria and Chrysanthus’s virginity and chastity or their resulting holiness are mentioned twenty-three times, their dead bodies are not affected by—or at least we are not told about the effects—their firm beliefs in remaining pure for the entirety of their lives. In this case, as with many of the saints’ lives described here, only the spirit’s place in everlasting joy in Heaven with God is of the utmost importance, but at least Ælfric gives us a bit of reasoning why commenting on or giving credence to the corpses may not be a necessary tool in the hagiographer’s belt.

Aldhelm’s depiction of Daria and Chrysanthus’s martyrdom and final resting place is quite different than Ælfric’s. In De Virginitate, he relates all of the tortures each saint endured in detail but quickly concludes their passio, stating “they died as martyrs, put to rest together in the one crypt in the company of saints, ready to receive together the rewards for their merits, just as they had shared together their torments.”

Although this seems and is probably meant as a comment on their spiritual rewards in the afterlife for having lived chaste lives and spread Christianity through their devout partnership, there may also be a subtle hint at the state of their dead bodies in the grave. Aldhelm acknowledges that the couple shared physical tortures while they were alive and would

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287 Ælfric, “Passio Chrisanti et Daria;” 396.
have endured the results of those torments had God not interfered on their behalf. The “reward for their merits” could also be related to their physical dead bodies just as the tortures related to their living bodies. Though not exhumed or described, their corpses may be reaping the rewards of the chaste Christian lifestyle by resisting decomposition, decay, and consumption by worms. While Aldhelm was likely emphasizing the aspect of the couple sharing experiences rather than identifying which part of the person (body or soul) would be affected, the parallel structure of the logic in his statement certainly leaves the option open. Ælfric makes it clear that the saints were buried alive and their souls went to heaven, but Aldhelm’s description is not quite as specific and unambiguous. Prior to the saints’ deaths, he also depicts the group decimation of the tribune Claudius, his soldiers, family, slaves, and guests who all converted at once, having witnessed the inefficacy of the tortures Chrysanthus endured. They are all baptized, but then Aldhelm explains that they “achieve the glowing crowns of paradise by the blessed spilling of their blood; and their holy bodies, buried together, lie in a subterranean crypt, ready to arise to glory at the final judgment.”

It seems that for saints the outcome of their physical bodies is difficult to illustrate for hagiographers, but the same is not true for new converts or individuals less holy and pure than the saints. Perhaps they cannot give the explanation without seeming to pass judgment on the saints, who would be venerated for their devotion to Christianity. Other individuals are not held in as high esteem so their bodies are open for commentary or description. Providing the description may end up demystifying the saint’s legacy, so the lack of commentary leaves the option for holy incorruption or other significance open, but the common Christian can easily relate to the

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other non-saint characters so there need not be any illusion. These bodies are buried and
will decompose just as medieval society would expect.

St. Cecilia, Virgin, and Her Husband Valerian

Though the title of this saint’s life in the manuscript of Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints*
only indicates one individual will be discussed, Saint Cecilia and her husband Valerian
are the final chaste couple to be analyzed here. This story, unlike those of the two other
virginal pairs described above, is quite different in that they do not spend much time
together and split rather uneven time within the *vita*. Valerian, though his name does not
appear in the title, is given the lion’s share of the attention. They lived in second century
Rome during the time when Christianity was still being persecuted, and the pope (who is
available to them for baptism) was Urban. Cecilia vehemently does not want to marry
anyone and cries out to God and the angels to be saved from any chance of defilement.
Unfortunately, she is still forced to marry Valerian and quickly becomes combative and,
simultaneously, an agent of conversion in their marriage bed. She tells her new groom
that she is a bride of Christ and relates that God’s angel protects her, preventing any
possibility of pollution. Much like Daria’s lioness, Cecilia’s angel is ready and willing to
slay Valerian should he try to break her virginity. Valerian’s act of conversion is certainly
under duress and seems to be coerced by the fact that Cecilia threatens him with the
power of God’s retribution and anger. Following Valerian’s conversion, the two are able
to convert his brother Tiburtius, and it seems that the tone of the text changes, as if the
prologue has concluded and the actual plot may begin as the antagonist—the pagan
prefect Almachius—enters.
Cecilia seems to disappear from her own *vita* while the narrative focuses on Almachius, Valerian, and Tiburtius. To demonstrate his true colors, Almachius instructs his men to torture and kill Christians. Ælfric also includes the detail that after the Christians’ deaths, “no man might bury them” (“man ne moste hi bebyrigan,” l. 199). As if simply to spite Almachius, Valerian and Tiburtius do in fact bury the martyrs as a symbol of respect and honor in the Christian world. The prefect then asks the brothers why they buried these men, but when they provide Almachius no satisfactory reply he orders them to be executed as well. Although there is no clear mention of the bodies Almachius slew, it is important to note that the prefect cared about the burial rituals of the Christians. Tangentially, this is a commentary on the corpses because it would seem that if they are not buried (but are still clearly accessible), then the bodies would simply be left out in the elements to begin decomposing in plain sight of all who may pass by. These men were martyred for their faith en masse, so no individual is singled out for further discussion. However, it would seem likely that as holy corpses there may have been something religiously important occurring with the physical dead bodies. Since they were buried, though, we will never know. Likewise, Almachius is using corpses to make a point and further his hatred of Christians. Allowing the corpses to decompose publicly and preventing others from burying them would demonstrate the power he believes that his pagan gods and, by extension, he has over the Christian God. Regardless of the outcome, the fact that the brief statement appears in the text illustrates the potential impact a corpse may have on its community and surroundings.

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Aside from these nameless martyrs, more executions take place throughout the rest of the *passio*, including those of Valerian and Tiburtius. They are beheaded for refusing to make sacrifices to the heathen gods and are able to convert their would-be executioner, Maximus, the night before their deaths. Maximus makes a grand conversionary comment by relating what he saw (angels receiving the men’s souls) to the larger crowd and converts many of them. Almachius is obviously upset by this and demands Maximus’s death as well by means of a beating with leaden whips. Finally, Cecilia reenters the text in order to bury Maximus, her husband, and his brother. There is an interesting distinction in these burials which would seem counterintuitive. Ælfric relates that Cecilia

\[
\text{sona ľone sanct bebyrigde  \\
on stænenre ľryh on ľam stede ľe lagon  \\
ľa twegen gebroľra bebyridge on ær. (ll. 282-4)}
\]

“soon buried the saint in a stone coffin in the place where the two brothers lay buried previously.”

At this point, Cecilia plays the role of undertaker, but the primary concern here is the description of the method by which each person is buried and the details included in this very short burial scene. The newly converted Maximus receives the “Æthelthryth treatment” (stone coffin) while the established missionaries are seemingly used as landmarks to describe where Maximus would be interred. Valerian and Tiburtius fight for their faith, defend themselves against the heathen prefect, and are martyred for Christianity, but they receive barely a full line of vague description post-mortem. One plausible interpretation of this situation can be extracted from the “Æthelthryth treatment” itself. As Gwen Griffiths explains, the

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291 Ælfric, “Passio Sancte Cecilie,” 372.
exhumation, treatment, and translation of Æthelthryth’s body are detailed, and the finding and physical characteristics of the well-wrought coffin which is to house the body occupy what might seem a disproportionate amount of textual space (75-87). God’s miraculous and perfect provision and the community’s subsequent joy are duly noted and interpreted as a further sign that God has accepted Æthelthryth’s offering of virginity and service.292

Because Maximus has had the most recent conversion, it may be necessary that the audience understands how serious he is about his change of faith. Dying for his newfound belief in Christianity, especially when confronted by a former employer and companion, would certainly seem like concrete enough evidence for devotion, so the stone coffin in which Cecilia places Maximus’s corpse may be the final solidifying piece of evidence from God himself that he has accepted the conversion of the former pagan and Christian persecutor. The very fact that Maximus was a persecutor of Christians might mean that extensive proof of his true conversion to the faith and God’s approval of the new convert was required. Valerian and Tiburtius certainly deserve the “Æthelthryth treatment” because of their devotion, but it is because Maximus was the new convert that the stone coffin (whose origins are not described in the same way as Æthelthryth’s coffin) was allocated to his corpse rather than his brethren.

Another possible explanation for the vagueness concerning these burials may be the fact that the location of the triple interment could be considered an impromptu Christian cemetery for those who had been executed in the name of the faith. In Anglo-Saxon England, the conversion of the various kingdoms to Christianity influenced the location where non-Christians were to be buried. As J. L. Buckberry and D. M. Hadley explain, the conversion and the emergence of a network of ecclesiastical provision led to distinctions between

burial in consecrated ground for Christians and burial in unconsecrated ground for non-Christians and excommunicates, among them felons … Documentary sources do not refer to the exclusion of certain offenders from burial in consecrated ground until the early tenth century, but archaeological evidence indicates that certain individuals, particularly those who had been executed, were excluded from burial in churchyards from the seventh or eighth century … there is little doubt that the trying, execution and disposal of felons was intimately bound up with Christianity.293

While this is applied to the Anglo-Saxon Christians in England, the concept governing the burial specifications can still be appropriated for these Christians in Rome. Valerian, Tiburtius, and Maximus were considered felons to the prefect of Rome for their Christian beliefs, so their bodies would be buried outside of society, away from law-abiding pagan citizens. Cecilia understands the necessity of burying Christian corpses rather than burning them (or obviously just leaving them exposed to the elements to decompose), so she took it upon herself to find appropriate accommodations for the bodies of the men with whom she had bonded in faith. Earlier in the vita, as mentioned above, Valerian and Tiburtius purposefully buried the men Almachius had executed because they were martyred for their faith, so it seems appropriate that Cecilia provides the same treatment for the brothers and their convert. The Christians were treated as the felons in this situation, so their “disposal” was bound up by the rules of Christian burial which required interment in the ground. Cecilia is essentially creating consecrated ground by placing the bodies of her fellow Christians, martyred saints, there. During the Anglo-Saxon period, burials which include those who have been decapitated most typically occur in community cemeteries, where the only segregated inhumations were those of high-status individuals, not unlike late Roman decapitation burials. In fact, more often than not, early Anglo-Saxon community cemeteries contain at least a few deviant burials. This trend seems to have continued until the eighth century, at which point a gradual shift may be noted.

Burials dating from after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, excluding deviant burials, can be found in close proximity to ecclesiastical centers. Decapitation and other deviant burials then moved from community cemeteries to what are known as execution cemeteries, in which nearly every burial is nonstandard in terms of the cause of death, orientation, treatment of the remains, or a combination thereof.294

In a sense, Cecilia has founded a community execution cemetery in a location where the Christians need to be segregated from the Roman population due to their faith. Though the decapitations of Valerian and Tiburtius would be considered deviant, their sacrifices for their faith would enable them to be buried in a normal cemetery without the deviant status. It is Maximus who is buried in a segregated way by being placed in a stone coffin (because we are unaware how the brothers were buried and must assume that they were not provided with stone coffins since that would seem to be a detail which Ælfric would not exclude). Yet, he is still interred in the newly formed Christian community cemetery.

While these lines are brief and lack thorough description, the implications are meaningful; the corpses did not need to be detailed in order for their usefulness to be illustrated to the faithful. Because Valerian, Tiburtius, and Maximus died for the faith, they were given the honor of consecrating what could (in other saints’ lives, for example) become the site of a church. Many times the location of the saint’s interment becomes the foundation for a new church, so it seems that they have been given an honor by means of Cecilia’s burial practices. It is especially so for the brothers because they were buried first. Because of their devotion to the faith, following in Christ’s example, and Valerian’s continued chastity throughout his partnership with Cecilia, their bodies may have been deemed holy enough to sanctify the ground so that Maximus’s body could be buried in a place of holiness.

The final corpse in this *vita* is that of the eponymous saint herself, Cecilia. Following the burial of the brethren, Cecilia and Almachius have a conversation about his ability to kill people and bring them back to life. Because she knows this is untrue and disagrees with Almachius about his claim, Cecilia is ordered to be tortured. This is typical of hagiography; the saints will almost always endure some kind of torture from their oppressors. Like many other female saints, Cecilia is unharmed by the burning fire bath in which she is lain. An executioner is ordered to behead her, but after three strikes

\[
\text{hire swura næs forod.}
\]

\[
\text{and he forlet hi sona swa samcuce licgan.}
\]

\[
\text{forþam-þe witan cwædon þæt nan cwellere ne sceolde}
\]

\[
\text{feower siðan slean to. þonne man sloge scylldigne. (ll. 354-7)}
\]

“her neck was not pierced; and immediately he left her lying half-dead, because the senate decreed that no executioner should strike four times when he slew a criminal.”

Cecilia lives for three days following this incomplete execution before she finally departs this world and is buried by Pope Urban. Here we are presented with an allusion to Christ’s resurrection three days after his death as well as the biblically important repetition of the number three. Nicola Masciandaro also discusses the number three as it relates to the concept of decapitation. He explains,

Beheading unlocks the invisible head-body holism, the conjunction of each being within the other, into the negative conjunction of severed head and body. Decapitation’s count is three, and in three distinct ways: 1) serially, decapitation is the weird third thing that follows the separation of head (one) from body (two), a neither-head-nor-body that includes and emerges from both; 2) additively, decapitation is the sum of its parts: head plus body (head + trunk) equals three, where head must be counted twice, as head and as part of body; 3) synthetically, decapitation is three as the union of its dualities, its two-in-one and one-in-two. The three-ness of beheading may also be sought within its twisted temporality, its being a specular folding of past, present, and future.

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295 Ælfric, “Passio Sancte Cecilie,” 376.
The three blows of the executioner’s ax clearly have far more meaning than simply an attempt to behead the saint, especially since the number three is repeated in such close proximity (execution attempt and number of days before Cecilia dies). Although sentenced to death by beheading, the state of Cecilia’s body following the failure is unclear from the text. Ælfric relates that her neck was not pierced by the executioner’s blade, yet she was left half-dead following three strikes. This seems logically contradictory, especially since she lives for three additional days before dying from an unknown cause (presumably, though, something stemming from the attempted decapitation). Alison Gulley notes that the Latin text leaves Cecilia lying in a pool of her own blood which would indicate that the neck was definitely pierced, but Ælfric is clear that her neck was not affected by the executioner’s blade. Her instruction to the faithful is done for three days “with body intact as simultaneous symbol of both the purity of faith and also the ultimate irrelevance of earthly, physical life.” For Ælfric to include the detail of her neck at all is definitely significant and demonstrates, contradictory to Gulley’s argument, that the earthly body is quite important. Even taking at face value that the neck was not pierced by the blade, anyone who can withstand the execution attempt and return to the care of her handmaidens demonstrates the strength of the earthly body resulting from devotion to faith. It is a miracle in itself that Cecilia was not decapitated, and the audience of the vita would have been in awe of this fact. The body matters, especially when it should be, at this point, a corpse.

Cecilia’s botched execution can be considered an incomplete decapitation, which Valentina Nikolić et al. describe thus: “the head and neck are partially interconnected by

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297 Gulley, The Displacement of the Body, 110.
a smaller or larger amount of the skin and soft tissue”; in the complete decapitation, by contrast, “there is no connection between the head and neck.”

Depending on the size of the connected skin and tissue, it would seem possible that the intended victim could continue living for a time since death “occurs due to separation of the brain and spinal cord, after the transection (cutting through) of the surrounding tissues, together with massive haemorrhage.”

The text relates that Cecilia’s neck was not pierced, which may seem to indicate that this was exactly the case; there was some amount of tissue (left to the audience’s imagination by Ælfric) which remained intact long enough for Cecilia to conclude her business before her death. Additionally, the fact that the saint’s head remained attached to her body may be a commentary on the competence (or lack thereof) of the executioner in charge of her decapitation. Execution by beheading required much more skill than has been depicted in anachronistic popular culture. If done correctly, decapitation can be humane; however, it was infrequent that one blow was sufficient to completely remove the head. Often a complete beheading required two or more strokes of the ax or sword, as was the case, for example, for Mary, Queen of Scots’ execution in 1587 which required two full swings of the ax and another small cut to completely sever the sinew. Certain skilled headsmen were able to complete their task with only one blow so that the victim was dispatched quickly and painlessly. Most others, however, required two or more strikes leading to a bloody, gory mess. In his well-organized journal, Master Franz Schmidt, the public executioner of Nuremberg from 1573 to 1617, explained how

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crucial it was that he completed the task of executing criminals efficiently and without great suffering to the victim. During his career and 187 recorded executions by the sword, he was unsuccessful at delivering a fatal blow on the first strike only four times and was sure to note it in his journal. It is clear that he took great pride in his impressive track record. He also wanted to avoid the possibility of becoming the victim instead of the executioner as the law in some German towns dictated that if the executioner was not successful within three strokes of his ax he was required to take the place of the condemned.  

In St. Cecilia’s case, the executioner did not have the expertise displayed by Schmidt since he used the three strokes allocated by Roman law and still could not complete the task. This puts Cecilia’s body in an odd position halfway between living and dead where she is neither and both simultaneously: “[b]eing half dead, Cecilia is ultimately alive. Being half alive, Cecilia is ultimately dead.” Already her (almost) dead body has great significance to the text, its audience, and the Christian faith. As Masciandaro relates,

[p]inched between the cruelty of the headsman’s impotence, the idiotic inflexibility of the law, and her own sacred durability, Cecilia embodies the paradoxical idea of an unending, asymptotically inconclusive decapitation, an infinite series of beheading blows that never severs the head. Her hacked neck fuses into one form the two principles it figurally evokes: the unbeheadability of the body of God … and the semi-living nature of fallen humanity.

Cecilia cannot yet be called a corpse because she is still able to instruct the faithful and commit her handmaidens to the pope, yet she also cannot truly be considered a living


301 In his article, Masciandaro suggests that there may be other reasons for the executioner’s botched decapitation other than simple incompetence at his job. He includes the desire to torture Cecilia and deny her the relief of death, his desire to not hurt Cecilia while being forced to, a lack of care for his job, and a mid-execution change of heart. See Masciandaro, “Half Dead: Parsing Cecilia,” 79.


being because of the probable state of her neck following the ax blows. It is in this state of limbo that her body is described by Ælfric rather than after she has completely died, and the emphasis on the half-dead body is significant. We only know that Pope Urban buried her corpse without any pomp, circumstance, or miraculous revelation upon burial or exhumation, but the brief depiction of the saint lying in a state of half-life with either a tenuous sinew-based attachment of her head and neck or a broken neck/spinal column reveals the importance of her soon-to-be corpse.

One final point to be made concerning Cecilia’s half-dead body relates directly back to the concept of her purity and dedication to her status as a bride of Christ even though she and Valerian were technically a married couple. Prior to his death, Valerian was able to convert his would-be executioner, Maximus, and had always followed the example of Christ. However, Ælfric does not emphasize Valerian in this saint’s life as much as he does Cecilia, even though Valerian is certainly worthy of the attention. Though his missionary work is successful and he sacrifices himself in the name of the faith, very little is discussed of his death and next to nothing of his corpse or any half-life status. He dies alongside his brother, and Cecilia buries him. Cecilia, on the other hand, is pure and devout from the beginning of the vita to the very end and is rewarded for it by this intriguing half-life situation. Although the corpse itself is overlooked beyond a simple designation that the pope himself buried her, it seems that there is great power and strength in Cecilia’s denial of carnal urges and dedication to her Christian lifestyle (it

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304 If the ax blade was too dull to truly pierce the skin (as the text describes), then her neck would likely have been crushed by the force of the blunt object striking her three times with great effort. Most texts which depict botched decapitations blame the need for additional strokes on the executioner’s poor aim, whereby their blows land in the cranium or the shoulder blades before they are able to strike the neck itself. A wooden chopping block intended to raise the neck above the head was helpful in assisting the executioner, but there was no guarantee that he would hit his mark.
may have also been one of the reasons that she “became one of the most venerated saints of the Middle Ages” beginning in the fifth century." Her devotion to remaining steadfast as a bride of Christ may even have influenced the headsman to change his ways or have prevented him from fully carrying out his task. Her devotion to God “fulfills the characteristically Christian renunciatory logic of strength-through-weakness … There is a real dialectical relation between Cecilia’s self-exposure and her material power to withstand the tormentor’s blows.” However, unlike Masciandaro’s claim, I argue that she cannot actually claim to have withstood the executioner’s ax-strokes; rather, her strength of faith allowed her to have a prolonged death so that she could communicate the final thoughts and instructions she had for her following, but her body had actually entered the process of death. Her dedication to Christianity kept her brain alive long enough to fulfill her last wishes, but the body had, for all intents and purposes, stopped functioning. Regardless of the state of the neck (hanging on by sinews or crushed), there was no chance of survival short of a legitimate miracle. Cecilia’s sanctity kept her consciousness in the living world while the body had already left; this is why Ælfric could write about the half-dead body so thoroughly but leave the corpse untouched. Technically, he had already described her corpse, and there was no need for further elaboration except for the identification of her noteworthy grave digger.

As has been demonstrated in this examination of the vitae of Æthelthryth, Eugenia, and Agnes as well as the passiones of the three chaste couples, discussion of the saints’ corpses is inconsistent and unpredictable, even when virginity and chastity are

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305 Donovan, Women Saints’ Lives, 57.
predominantly emphasized. What is clear, though, from these hagiographies is that the
dead body, in whatever form it is discussed, is significant. Even when compared to
another, less prominent corpse such as unnamed martyrs or newly converted ones, the
saints’ corpses provide important details concerning the effects of the martyrs on their
larger communities versus the impact of new converts or unnamed martyrs. While
incorruption is exciting and significant, it is quite rare; the variety of circumstances
within which the corpses are placed creates intriguing ambiguity that simply reinforces
the power of faith for those members of the hagiographers’ audiences who may need it.
For hagiographers of female saints’ lives and those of chaste couples, virginity and
chastity are of the utmost importance. The frequency with which hagiographers note a
particular woman’s or couple’s chastity does not necessarily dictate the prominence of or
focus on the corpse at the end of the vita. However, it is an indication that this person
deserves attention both during her life and after she has departed the world. Though the
corpse is not always discussed in detail, there is quite often a significant and special
occurrence taking place in or around the tomb, burial site, or corpse. The overt focus on
the virginity and chastity is the clear signal that the body of the saint is important not only
in life but also in death.
Chapter 4

Leading by Example: The Importance of *Imitatio Christi*

and Devotion in Three Male Saints’ Lives

In the medieval world of sainthood (much like most aspects of medieval life in general), the genders are not on equal ground and do not always encounter the same troubles, trials, and tribulations, though most undergo some type of physical suffering. After all, the “body of the saint was considered to be wonderful proof of the divine presence: tormented in life and incorruptible after death, it carried the sign of God’s glory … The bleeding bodies of the saints became a means of both submission and redemption, through which they could contemplate the Saviour in both his humanity and his godliness.”

Female saints, and the *vita*e written about them, focus almost exclusively on their purity, chastity, and virginity in the face of defilement. The *Lives* of women such as St. Æthelthryth make it clear that the most prominent and important feature of the female saint is her incorruptible devotion to God as her true and only love to whom she has dedicated her life, body and soul. They resist powerful men in their lives who may try to break their vow of purity, either through violent coercion or forced marriage, and remain steadfast.

Old English male saints’ lives, on the other hand, are given a different focus: the strength they have in their faith and their ability to imitate the deeds of Christ in whatever situation they are placed. Peter Hunter Blair explains that

Following the pattern set by Athanasius, Jerome, Sulpicius Severus and others, many western churchmen, some known by name and others anonymous, rapidly

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turned hagiography into the most popular form of literary composition in the
west, and not least in Brittany, Wales and Ireland. Since these areas were remote
from the scenes of conflict with Aryanism and were but little affected by the
struggle between Christianity and neopagan teaching descended ultimately from
classical antiquity, there was no need for the western saints to be represented as
the champions of orthodoxy against heresy. Instead they could devote their time
to fighting against evil in more elementary, and elemental forms. Inevitably the
saint’s Life tended to conform to a pattern, with his childhood, or even the very
circumstances of his birth, foretelling his future sanctity, his maturity marked by
varying degrees of ascetical practices and by triumphant struggles against devils
in various guises, and his death by edifying scenes followed at his tomb by a
continuation of the miracles of his life.  

It could be difficult for the hagiographer to distinguish one saint’s vita from another, but
some writers such as Bede focused less on creativity or uniqueness of content and more
on widespread readability. He “was not an innovator in this field of composition and one
suspects that he may have found the more extravagant claims of the hagiographers
distasteful,” so his main concern in works such as his versions of the Lives of Felix and
Anastasius was “to ensure that they should be presented in a simple and readily
intelligible form.” For writers like Bede, the “essence of hagiography was that it
should be popular and easily understood by the unlettered,” so elaborate language and
outlandish feats or unbelievable content may not have been the best route to take,
compositionally. What was imperative to impart to the masses was the message of living
a proper Christian life and following the ways of Christ. Hunter Blair’s description of the
typical structure of hagiography explains, “At their worst the hagiographers produced no
more than a tedious repetition of standard miracle stories, such as were the common stock
of any saint of good standing.” This seems a bit bleak, but he also relates that some of

308 Peter Hunter Blair, The World of Bede, Corrected Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1993), 275-6.
309 Hunter Blair, World of Bede, 277.
310 Hunter Blair, World of Bede, 279.
311 Hunter Blair, World of Bede, 276.
the best content of these *Lives* “could draw sympathetic and lively portraits of men who had a profound effect upon their contemporaries while they were alive, and an even more profound effect upon posterity after their death.” It is these extraordinary moments, especially those post-mortem, which showcase one of the primary goals for practicing Christians—that is, imitating Christ’s standard in actions and words—that make certain *vitae* stand out among the rest and differentiate the standard boiler plate material from the truly miraculous and literarily significant.

Saints such as Edmund and Cuthbert led the way as *exempla* for monks and other religious men. For men who were one half of a married but chaste couple (on which see chapter 3), the hagiography tends to make a drastic change of focus once the wife departs to God and leaves her male counterpart behind. Husbands such as Julian, married to Basilissa, seem to forget that they were ever in a partnership following the deaths of their wives. Julian buries Basilissa and continues the work that the couple had begun, but the focus is no longer on the purity of the couple or the chastity of the living man. Now that the female body is out of the picture it seems as if the hagiography of the male saint can finally begin, regardless of the length of the rest of the story. It is the strength of the male saint against persecution, hardship, and torture, usually in the form of pagan adversaries of varying social status—emperors, kings, raiders, etc.—and degrees of hatred toward Christians, that allows the male saint to stand out and possibly earn a place among the incorrupt.

As will be demonstrated through an examination of the *vitae* of Sts. Edmund, Cuthbert, and Alban, the men’s piety, devotion to Christianity, and their ability to

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practice the *imitatio Christi* has a connection to the authors’ inclusion and discussion of their lifeless corpses. While every hagiography tends to follow a particular pattern of events and moments of interest to the reader, there are many which simply end after the saints’ deaths. The corpses receive no attention or even the briefest mention of a burial location; these saints, though obviously holy and devout in their beliefs, did not meet the same standard of piety and dedication to imitating Christ’s example that other saints were able to achieve. Those saints who went above and beyond throughout their lives were given special attention following their deaths so that their holy corpses could continue to illustrate the message of piety and Christian devotion. In extreme cases incorruption and miracle working give the author a clear reason to focus on the corpse; however, in some less sensational hagiographies, simply providing the fate of the body itself or the location for the corpse’s interment is enough to demonstrate that this saint was still a step above the others. By continuing the *vita* beyond the death or martyrdom of the saint, the authors of the hagiography communicate to their audience that these men demonstrated the Christian ideal to such a degree that even their lifeless corpse could not be ignored as a continuing example of faith.

St. Edmund

Ælfric of Eynsham, “by far the most prolific, and by far the most popular, of the Anglo-Saxon homilists,”313 translated Abbo of Fleury’s Latin hagiography of St. Edmund into English so that the king’s life, battle against pagan enemies, death, post-mortem animation, and burial would be chronicled in the vernacular Old English.314 Most of the

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314 The actual path of transmission from the event to Ælfric’s version of Edmund’s *vita* is as follows: “Ælfric’s source was Abbo of Fleury, who got his account from Archbishop Dunstan, who heard it from
events which take place in the *vita* are fairly typical of the hagiography genre until, that is, Edmund is martyred at the hands of Viking invaders led by Hinguar who, because of Edmund’s staunch devotion to Christianity, briefly torture the martyr-king, behead him, and vindictively conceal his head so that it may not be buried with the rest of his body, as is decreed by Christian doctrine. While much of this may still seem fairly typical of the genre, Edmund’s story takes an unusual and significant turn when the decapitated head is taken under the protection of a wolf and calls out to Edmund’s men while they search for it. Though the head only speaks the word “here” three times, it is certainly a remarkable and biologically impossible occasion for the body part, having previously been severed from the body, to do *anything* (let alone speak). To more fully understand the reasons why Edmund’s head could remain temporarily animate following the body’s demise, specific moments of the hagiography must be more closely examined.

Unlike the female saints whose bodies were found incorrupt—a definite miracle and biological impossibility—or given a focus post-mortem, which can be directly linked to their extreme devotion not only to God and Christianity but also their steadfastness to their virginity and purity in the face of temptation, torture, and death, the male saints must be scrutinized under a different lens. While most also remain virginal, that is generally not the key to their sanctity.315 While Ælfric of Eynsham’s *Lives of Saints*
“teach[es] the godlessness of lust and the rewards of virginity” and that “rape is chaos and virginity is order and that rape is lust and virginity is steadfastness,”\textsuperscript{316} Ælfric truly strives to show that the “virgin martyrs … were powerful emblems of the monastic life.”\textsuperscript{317} Overpowering this emphasis on controlling sexuality is the fact that male saints occupy a more particular space within Christianity than women do in that they may more closely mimic the words and deeds of Jesus Christ. Erich Auerbach’s \textit{Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur}, “one of the few genuine classics of literary scholarship from the second half of” the twentieth century,\textsuperscript{318} explains how medieval literature breaks with classical theory of levels of style when it comes to the imitation of life (such as male saints imitating Christ’s actions) in literary texts. He relates that, according to a previously established classical rule, “everyday practical reality could find a place in literature only within the frame of a low or intermediate kind of style, that is to say, as either grotesquely comic or pleasant, light, colorful, and elegant entertainment.”\textsuperscript{319} During the Middle Ages, however, this rule was abandoned and replaced by the ability “to represent the most everyday phenomena of reality in a serious and significant context”\textsuperscript{320} which likely came about, in Auerbach’s estimation, because of the importance he places on virginity but not that of male saints; it could also be that the hagiographer was simply trying to include every aspect of Basil’s life that he felt was important to the faith as well as the many moments that create the overall hagiography. The same unexpected discussion of virginity occurs in the \textit{vita} of St. Edmund when Ælfric tells his audience that Edmund had retained his chastity for his entire life. This was an important point in Abbo of Fleury’s \textit{passio} of Edmund and takes up a good amount of space in the work. Because Abbo was Ælfric’s source, it makes sense that Ælfric includes it as well. However, that he does not integrate it in the same way that Abbo does is startling.


\textsuperscript{320} Auerbach, \textit{Mimesis}, 555.
“the story of Christ, with its ruthless mixture of everyday reality and the highest and most sublime tragedy, which had conquered the classical rules of styles.”321 It is then the interpretation of Scripture and integration of it into the larger historical context, specifically in reference to figures from Scripture and history, that provides a clear association of the actions of Christ himself and the imitatio Christi as displayed by male saints. Auerbach argues that this interpretation of Scriptural figures establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being real events or persons, are within temporality. They are both contained in the flowing stream which is historical life, and only the comprehension, the intellectus spiritualis, of their interdependence is a spiritual act.322

For Auerbach, “figural” is used to identify the conception of reality during the Middle Ages and explains that “an occurrence on earth signifies not only itself but at the same time another, which it predicts or confirms, without prejudice to the power of its concrete reality here and now,” and these occurrences should be regarded “as a oneness with the divine plan”323 so that their earthly significance is of secondary importance. Auerbach’s interpretation of medieval literature demonstrates why the occurrence of Christ-like actions by an ordinary man—the subject of the hagiography—directly correlates to a representation of Christ on earth. The men are connected figurally and signify one another which is inevitably visible to those who see the imitatio Christi in action.

Additionally, because the “figure of Christ is a complex one” to the point that he “can be both man and boy, mother and father, brother and lover, and he may exhibit all

321 Auerbach, Mimesis, 555.
322 Auerbach, Mimesis, 73.
323 Auerbach, Mimesis, 555.
these features in a single work,” it allows the male imitation of Christ’s actions to be wide-ranging and multi-faceted. Catherine M. Mooney’s discussion of the later medieval hagiographies of Clare and Francis of Assisi demonstrates that even if the female saint did identify with Christ and mimic his actions, their biographers tended not to associate the female saint and Christ directly. She explains that the “tendency of some medieval authors to model Clare after Mary rather than Jesus is a subtle and perhaps unconscious effort to reserve Jesus, who is after all God, as the model par excellence for men, leaving women in their appropriately subordinate position.” In the case of Ælfric of Eynsham and his Lives of Saints, Mary Louise Fellows explains that “he [Ælfric] chose the collection from the hagiographies used to teach virgin monks how to attain imitatio Christi and everlasting life.”

Women could consider themselves brides of Christ and take Jesus as their husband, but the imitatio Christi is difficult for female saints to accomplish simply because of the limitations imposed upon them based solely on their gender. As Thomas J. Heffernan explains, “there are four types of experience taken together (they almost constitute an ideology of convention) within which female spirituality is exemplified” in the vitae of female saints and these “appear to be gender-specific and diachronically constant. They are: the redefinition of ideas of kinship; freedom from the Pauline notion of sexual ‘indebtedness’; the importance of prophetic visions; and the change from

virgin, wife, or widow to sponsa Christi.”327 It is thanks to the Latin text of the *Passio
Sanctorum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (ca. 203) that these categories exist and developed
conventions “which were to shape female sacred biography for a millennium.”328

Although some scholars such as Catherine M. Mooney, Caroline Bynum, and Paul
Szarmach have argued for the existence of female *imitatio Christi*, it is not the trend;
Mooney also discusses an intriguing parallel imitation for women in the *imitatio
Mariae*.329 Male saints’ hagiographies generally do not include these elements because
they do not reflect the *imitatio Christi* which becomes so important in building the level
of sanctity reflected in the *vita* and, I argue, helps determine whether or not the saints’
corpses will be discussed at any length.

Because male saints are not glorified beyond normal laymen for their purity as a
representation of their devotion to God,330 it would be unusual for the hagiography of a
man to begin as many female saints’ lives do: an explanation of the hardship the saint
was forced to undergo to maintain her virginity.331 Instead it is typical for a male saint’s

329 See Catherine M. Mooney, “*Imitatio Christi* or *Imitatio Mariae?* Clare of Assisi and Her Interpreters”
quoted above.
330 Ælfric does include three brief lines acknowledging the fact that he remained virginal throughout his life
(“His body, which lay undecayed, shows us that he lived without fornication here in this world, and by a
pure life to Christ,” ll. 186-88), but this seems to only be to remain accurate to his source, Abbo of Fleury.
Abbo’s version of the *passio* elaborates through an entire final section the connection between sanctity,
virginity, and martyrdom. Ælfric’s version is succinct and, because of the lack of a connective thread, fails
to seem relevant in his *vita* of St. Edmund.
331 There are many examples throughout the hagiographies of female saints who vehemently defended their
virginity having consecrated it to God, but I will provide only a small selection here as examples. St.
Æthelthryth was married twice but managed to remain a virgin even though her second husband, Egfrith
of Northumbria, did wish to consummate the marriage. Egfrith attempted to bribe Bishop Wilfrid to use
his influence on Æthelthryth to acquiesce to her husband’s request. Instead, she fled to the monastery at Ely
and evaded capture. St. Daria lived contentedly in a chaste marriage but was separated from her husband by
the Roman emperor. She was taken to a brothel where the men in attendance lined up to defile her, but her
chastity was saved by a lioness. Finally, St. Lucy had dedicated her virginity to God, but her mother had
previously arranged a marriage for her to secure a solid future for her daughter. Because Lucy would not
heed the demands of the governor of Syracuse, Paschadius, and make a sacrifice to the emperor, he ordered
hagiography to begin with an explanation of his prowess as a leader, religiously,
politically, militarily, socially, etc. As the beginning of his *passio* relates, Edmund’s
people had been devastated by foreign invaders, and he was the only survivor of the
military force. He met the pagan leader Hinguar after having been told by a certain
bishop that all hope of victory is lost, and the only way the king could possibly survive
would be to run or to bow to Hinguar. Edmund replies,

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Þæs ic gewilnige and gewisce mid mode.} \\
\text{þæt ic ana ne belife æfter minum leofum þegnum} \\
\text{þe on heora bedde wurdon mid bearnum. and wifum.} \\
\text{færlice ofslægene fram þysum flotmanum.} \\
\text{Næs me næfre gewunelic þæt ic worhte flæmes.} \\
\text{ac ic wolde swiðor sweltan gif ic þorfte} \\
\text{for minum agenum eared. and se ælmihtiga god wat} \\
\text{þæt ic nelle abugan fram his biggengum æfre.} \\
\text{ne fram his soþan lufe. swelte ic. lybbe ic. (ll. 74-82)}
\end{align*}\]

“I desire and wish this heartily, that I alone not be left [alive] after my dear thanes, who
were suddenly slain in their beds, with children and women by these pirates. It was never
customary to me that I took to flight, but I rather wished to die if I must for my own land;
and the almighty God knows that I will not ever turn aside from his worship, nor from his
true love, whether I die or live.”

Rather than turn away from his Christian beliefs, Edmund faces Hinguar unarmed
following his bloodless discussion with the Viking messenger who relates Hinguar’s
demand that the king submit to the pagan leader because, as Ælfric states,

\[\begin{align*}
\text{wolde geæfenlæcan} \\
\text{cristes gebynungum. þe for-bead petre} \\
\text{mid wæpnum to winnenne wið þa wælhreowan iudeiscan. (ll. 103-5)}
\end{align*}\]

“He wished to imitate the example of Christ, who forbade Peter to fight against the cruel
Jews with weapons,”

her to be taken to a brothel and be defiled. However, her claim to her virginity allowed her to withstand
guards’ attempts at moving her (even by a team of oxen) as well as the flames of a fire built around her.
332 This will be shown in the following pages, especially with St. Edmund, whose *passio* begins with his
strength as king and warrior, and St. Cuthbert, who shows himself to be a model monk.
a very clear and overt illustration of *imitatio Christi*. Carl Phelpstead explains that “early medieval hagiographers of St. Edmund represented his life and especially his death in ways designed to demonstrate to the faithful that he was holy, that is to say Christ-like.”

He also notes that this is done explicitly by Ælfric in *Lives of Saints*. As a military commander, it would follow logically that Edmund would be ready, willing, and able to shed the lifeblood of his enemies, but the king’s religious devotion prevents him from acting on this royal and military duty. It would also have made sense, at least in a warrior culture, for Christ to fight back against his enemies, especially when being physically persecuted and tortured, but he simply accepted his fate, turned the other cheek, and knew that there was a higher cause to which he was devoting his life.

Royal saints “became much more prominent in Anglo-Saxon England” than elsewhere in medieval Europe because of the “continuity between Christian royal sainthood and pagan Germanic ideas of sacral kingship.” Therefore, it is not unique or surprising that Ælfric would repeatedly tell his audience that Edmund was following the example of Christ, especially since “sanctity is something that has to be achieved. One does not become a saint just by being a king: there is no automatic qualification for it, and it has to be ‘recognized’ by others.” Edmund’s imitation of Christ as well as his complete faith are well-emphasized throughout the hagiography. Gábor Klaniczay also relates that Abbo of Fleury is making a specific distinction in writing Edmund’s *passio*.

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336 Though Jesus did ask God for the predestined course of action to pass him by, he realized that his suffering was for the greater good of mankind, which enabled him to accept his fate. His faith in the Almighty Father showed him the way for humankind’s salvation.

337 Phelpstead, “King, Martyr and Virgin,” 33.

338 Phelpstead, “King, Martyr and Virgin,” 33.

because the story is especially useful “to illustrate a new model of sanctity. The legend of St. Edmund is one of the first to reconcile royal authority with the qualities of a saint.”

Though Edmund is a king with a military force at his disposal, he is also a devout Christian who wishes to follow Christ’s teachings and examples. The best way to do so is to use his place as an authority figure to set the model of Christian teachings. He is a king just as Christ is considered the king of kings, and Edmund would be martyred just as Jesus was sacrificed on the cross for the sake of all humankind.

Edmund, as Abbo and then Ælfric skillfully demonstrate, comprehends his royal Christian duty. Ælfric continues to emphasize the saint-king’s obligations through his characterization of Edmund which “makes it clear … that he [Edmund] understands his office as involving the imitation of Christ: he explains that he will not shed the blood of the Viking messenger who has offered him an ultimatum.” At times, it seems that Edmund’s kingly qualities and his Christ-like characteristics are at odds with each other because the king says he is ready to die in battle to avenge his people, yet he approaches Hinguar and throws his weapons to the floor. This is “the characteristic which represents the martyr-king’s triumph … not the imposition of his will upon others, but the surrender of his will and the deliberate disavowal of his martial power.” Unless the Viking leader has an unexpected change of heart, Edmund must know that he will die as a victim to become the martyred king. Nevertheless, where the Vikings may see weakness, the Christians and Ælfric as author see a powerful king whose “masculinity is wondrously

341 Phelpstead, “King, Martyr and Virgin,” 34.
Edmund would not be the Vikings’ next victim; rather he would be the model of sanctity and a shining example of how to fully enact the goal of imitating Christ throughout one’s life.

Following their verbal showdown, Edmund is bound, degraded, and beaten with cudgels before being bound once again to a tree and scourged with whips. Throughout the entire ordeal, Edmund, like all other saints whose lives have been chronicled, remained steadfast in his belief. Because his faith angered Hinguar and his men, they shot him with javelins which Ælfric describes as looking “like the bristles of a hedgehog, just as Sebastian was” (“swilce igles byrsta. swa swa Sebastianus wæs,” l. 118). This reference to Sebastian, the late-Roman saint, is again following the typical tropes of the ideal hagiography “in order to promote Edmund’s sanctity: Edmund must be a saint because his torture is like that of another saint.” This further emphasizes the desire to recognize King Edmund as a saint by illustrating how he followed the example of Christ and was tortured in a similar fashion to an already well-established saint. Edmund endures the tortures of his enemy but remains benevolent toward them just as Christ did when faced with his impending death on the cross. The king shows his stature as a leader and military warrior by facing his adversaries, not considering backing away from the battle even though all of his men had been slaughtered; as Ælfric states in the beginning of the hagiography:

[gif] þu eart to heafod-men ge-set.
ne ahefè þu ðe. ac beo betwux mannum swa swa an man of him. (ll. 20-1)

344 Ælfric, “Passio Sancti Eadmundi,” 322.
“If you are made a chieftain, do not raise yourself, but be among the men as if one of them.”

Since his men were willing to give their lives in defense of their country and king, Edmund was obliged to do the same, albeit sans weapons. It also shows the compassion and devoutness that is required of the saint, especially since, as Ælfric describes, the Vikings definitely deserve any punishment Edmund could dole out before he would be overtaken. Ælfric sets the scene shortly after the Vikings’ arrival in East Anglia, recounting that Hinguar, acting as a wolf stalking prey, and his men tortured and slaughtered everyone, including women and children.

However, while Ælfric and Abbo both show how “Edmund undergoes a passion like Christ’s, and the Vikings fulfill the role of the Jews,” the Vikings’ account (written later than Ælfric’s and Abbo’s versions) deviates at the point of the king’s execution. James Earl relates, “According to Viking tradition, in 870 Ivar [the Boneless] killed the East Anglian king Edmund in the same way he killed the Northumbrian king Ælla two years earlier, in the Viking ritual known as the blóðorn, or “blood-eagle.” One of the most logical reasons for this difference (if the Viking version is accurate) in the Latin and Old English renditions is that it clearly “does not fit the typological conventions of hagiographic violence, like the scourging of Christ or Sebastian’s hedgehog.” At all

346 Ælfric, “Passio Sancti Eadmundi,” 314.
347 Comparing Hinguar to a wolf at this point proleptically references the fact that Edmund’s head following his decapitation would later be protected by a wolf. As a beast of battle, it would make sense that a wolf is present after the Vikings slaughtered Edmund’s men, but the actions of the real wolf in the story provide a stark juxtaposition to the connotations of a wolf when Hinguar is compared to the animal. At this point, the wolf is used to show Hinguar’s true depravity even though the actual wolf will later act so devoutly.
350 Earl, “Violence and Non-Violence,” 130. Pages 130-131 list several reasons why Earl believes that the violence of the Vikings was purposefully reduced in Ælfric’s edition, but Ælfric’s desire to illustrate Edmund’s saintly qualities makes the most sense in this context.
times, it seems that Ælfric and Abbo wanted to preserve the saintliness of Edmund throughout the hagiography and so softened the violence of the Vikings in order to create a very particular tone for their work. Gerald Dyson and Anthony Bale note that the particular details and emphases in certain royal saints’ lives are often different than the historical facts or greatly embellish them. For St. Edmund, there is general agreement that he was killed in battle against the Danes, but his martyrdom and method of death are not included in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* or *Asser’s Life of Alfred*. It is not until Abbo’s hagiography that the tale emerges.\(^{351}\) Ælfric and Abbo had different objectives for their texts than the historians, so including the blood-eagle as the method of execution would place too much emphasis on the Vikings in a work that is supposed to center particularly on the saint-king and his strength as a leader as well as on his imitation of Christ’s sacrifice. Using a typical execution method—beheading—places less prominence on the actual death itself and far more on the sacrifice the saint-king made in order to defend his Christian values and beliefs. Edmund has already demonstrated the depth of his sanctity through the elaborate and elongated tortures he was made to suffer, so the emphasis need not be on the execution style; rather, the focus can be Edmund’s sacrifice and connection to Christ. While a beheading is not pleasant or non-violent, it is far more common than the Viking-specific execution style of the blood-eagle. This change takes the emphasis away from the Vikings and places it squarely on the devout king. Just as Christ’s execution was fairly typical of the Roman culture of the time—he was crucified with two criminals, making his execution method rather ordinary—the focus was not on the Romans and their method of execution. Instead it centered on Christ’s sacrifice for the

salvation of humankind. By eliminating the blood eagle from the Old English vita, Ælfric follows his source and helps Edmund more accurately match Christ’s sacrifice: ordinary execution, clear significance in defense of the faith. That should definitely qualify as an imitatio Christi.

Prior to their departure from East Anglia, Hinguar and his men decide to conceal Edmund’s head following the beheading in thick brambles so that his men could not bury it alongside the body, “the culmination of the Vikings’ attempts to disfigure and dismember Edmund’s corpse, a final attempt to prevent Edmund from eventually enjoying the bodily resurrection universally promised to every Christian.”352 The remaining inhabitants in East Anglia searched the woods for the head after the Vikings had left, but it seemed to be lost. This loss would have been particularly detrimental for Edmund’s people because the head, especially of royalty, held significant meaning. The head, “Abbo says, is ‘inestimabilis pretii margaritam’ [the pearl of inestimable price] … The head is so valuable because it was once anointed … and once bore the ‘regali diademate’ [royal diadem] … and is thus a metonym for Edmund’s royalty and virtue. For Ælfric, recovering the head is a priority because Edmund’s body simply must be reassembled.”353 Additionally, “the head was invariably aligned with the governing elite; to hold status was to be or have a head. Members of the lower orders were identified with lower body parts: the hands, the feet, or the stomach. Non-aristocrats essentially lacked symbolic heads. Thus, they did not qualify for beheading should they be condemned to

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353 Faulkner, “Like a Virgin,” 43-44.
judicial execution.” Within this one brief passage of Edmund’s decapitation and the people’s hunt for his head, Ælfric is able to emphasize once again Edmund’s royal and saintly duality. More practically from the standpoint of the hagiographer attempting conversion of pagans and reinforcing Christian dogma to the faithful, decapitation, as Larissa Tracy and Jeff Massey relate in their introduction, “is a marker of sanctity and theological propaganda.” The insistence on finding the head also provides literary foreshadowing to the eventual revelation of Edmund’s incorruption following his burial, exhumation, and translation into a newly built church.

Unbeknownst to Edmund’s followers, a wolf was guarding the king’s head against other wild animals. Finally, the searchers made a desperate call to their leader. There’s no explanation as to why exactly the inhabitants would cry out to Edmund, having already seen the headless corpse. Perhaps if they were aware of St. Denis’s hagiography and his decapitated head calling out to God, they may have been hopeful that Edmund would be able to follow suit and speak, but this seems to be a stretch. Edmund’s head mysteriously answers them: “Here! Here! Here!” (“Her. her. her,” l. 151) and his people are not fearful of this reanimation. Edmund’s decapitated head speaks these words and leads his people to the wolf’s hiding place even though Ælfric has already narrated the ascension of Edmund’s soul into heaven. Ælfric relates “and his soul departed with joy to Christ” (“and his sawl sipode gesælig to criste,” l. 126) directly following the deathblow to Edmund’s head. Faulkner argues that the beheading

355 Tracy and Massey, Heads Will Roll, 2.
356 Ælfric, “Passio Sancti Eadmundi,” 324.
357 Ælfric, “Passio Sancti Eadmundi,” 322.
is the beginning of his rise “towards his spiritual zenith, an ascent figured through the reheading of Edmund’s physical body” and that “[h]is ability to talk even when his head is severed from his body makes it clear that the previous Viking assault has been in vain and anticipates his future incorruption.”

It is as if Edmund, having already separated his soul from his body, knew that the head needed to be returned to the rest of his body in order for the ultimate miracle of incorruption to occur.

Nicola Masciandaro argues that Edmund was the Schrodinger’s cat of the male saints in the Middle Ages because Edmund would have been both present and absent within his earthly self. In Christianity, “Beheading is impossible” because “the impossibility of beheading is the visibility of faith itself … the reverse projection of the understanding that faith gives…the spectacular production of the invisible by the visible.” He uses the example of St. Paul’s head speaking the name of Christ following its severing and the body’s gathering of its own blood rushing from the head’s open wound into Plantilla’s veil as an example of true faith defeating death, even temporarily.

A decapitated head is, essentially,

a supreme subjectless accident that opens into two radically opposite ways of recognizing the decapitated person: 1) as immanent transcendent substance, as person in the saintly sense, the universally individuated being who is at once there, in the highest divine beyond, and here with their body; and 2) as radical, omnipresent absence, as a substance that is precisely both nowhere and entirely there, wholly reduced to its objective material remnant.

In Masciandaro’s perspective, a decapitated corpse immediately develops a duality which may be used to explain, in theoretical terms, why Edmund’s head continues to speak until

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358 Faulkner, “Like a Virgin,” 43-44.
it is found and reunited with his body. It is clearly crucial that the head and body are
buried together because the saint must be found to be incorrupt upon exhumation.

Edmund’s effort to imitate Christ will be rewarded in heaven and demonstrated through
the incorruption of his earthly remains.

Following Edmund’s hasty burial, a church was built atop his grave, but this
church does not suffice in the minds of the people as a proper burial ground for the saint.

Ælfric relates that

[Æ]fter fela gearum.
þa seo hergung geswac and sibb wearð forgifen
þam geswenecan folce. Þa fengon hi togæedere
and worhton ane cyrcan wurðlice þam halgan.
forhæde gelome wundra wurdon æt his byrgene
æt þam gebædhuse þær he bebyrged wæs.
Hi woldon þa ferian mid follicum wurðmynte
þone halgan lichaman. and læcgan innan þære cyrcan.
þa wæs micel wundor þæt he wæs eall swa gehal
swylce he cucu warfare mid clænum lichaman.
and his swura wæs gehalod þe ær wæs forslagen.
and wæs swylce an seolcen þraed embe his swuran ræd
mannum to sweotelunge hu he ofslagen wæs.
Eac swilce þa wunda þe þa vælþreowan hæþenan
mid gelomum scotungum on his lice macodon.
wæron gehæleded þurh þone heofonlican god.
and he lip swa an sund onþ þisne and-wardan dæg.
and-bidigende æristes, and þæs ecان wuldres. (ll. 168-85)

“after many years, when the invasion had ceased, and peace was restored to the oppressed
people, then they came together, and built a church worthily to the saint, because
frequently miracles were done at his burial-place, at the prayer-house where he was
buried. Then they desired to carry the holy body with public honor and to lay it within the
church. Then there was a great wonder that he was all as whole as if he were alive, with
clean body, and his neck was healed which before was cut through, and there was also a
silken thread about his neck, to show men how he was slain. Also the wounds which the
bloodthirsty heathens had made in his body by their repeated shots were healed by the
heavenly God; and so he lay uncorrupt until this present day awaiting the resurrection and
the eternal glory.”362

While the revelation of Edmund’s incorrupt body is certainly a wonder, Ælfric does not include any reaction from the crowd who may have been gathered to witness Edmund’s translation. Because Edmund ensured that his life emulated that of Christ, it is no wonder that his body should continue to imitate Jesus even after Edmund’s soul had departed to heaven. In Ælfric’s “Cathedra Sancti Petri,” he describes a small part of Jesus’s life while preaching to a group of heathens in the city of Caesarea. Within that discussion, he is sure to mention the fact that Jesus performed many miracles, suffered a death which would be the salvation for humankind, and “on the third day arose from the dead uncorrupt” (“on þam þryddan dæge aras of þam deaðe gesund,” l. 158). Although Christ actually rose from the dead and had no sign of decay, there is still a similarity to Edmund’s exhumation. Edmund sacrificed himself for his people to show the Vikings that they could not break his faith and strength as a Christian king. Though Jesus’s sacrifice was far more important because of its impact on all of humanity, Edmund saw this was a way for his life to end in an emulation of Christ and have long-lasting effects on those around him. Additionally, it is important to note that his continuing animation following the beheading is another, albeit small, comparison to the reanimation of Christ’s body on Easter Sunday three days after the crucifixion. Jesus’s death and bodily incorruption post-mortem would be difficult to emulate, and Edmund could not have purposefully and actively attempted to imitate the resurrection; however, the closest he was able to get was the incorruption of his corpse found only because his people wanted to build a church.


Though theologically clear that Christ was returned to life as if he had not been dead, it cannot be confirmed biologically whether Christ was brought back to full life, was the reanimated dead, or was able to rise as an animate corpse who still had functioning speaking skills without the need of full bodily function.
worthy of the king and place him within it. Ælfric makes it clear that Edmund’s body awaits the resurrection predicted for the end of days, and when it is finally resurrected and brought into glory, the *imitatio Christi* will continue at that point because he will have been resurrected with an undecayed body just as Christ rose post-mortem. Ælfric briefly notes this toward the end of the *vita*, stating that

> On þyssum halgan is swutel. and on swilcum oþrum. þæt god ælmihtig mæg þone man aræran eft on domes dæg andsundne of eorþan. (ll. 250-2)

“By this saint is it manifest and by others like him, that Almighty God can raise man again, on the day of judgement, incorruptible from the earth.”

Those who follow Christ’s example as Edmund did will have a similar fate when the resurrection occurs. There is simply a different time frame for St. Edmund’s resurrection compared to Christ’s. From his life to his death to his exhumation and translation, Edmund earned his incorruption thanks to his strength as a righteous king, devout faith, and dedication to the imitation of Christ’s life in every aspect of his own existence.

To make a comparison for Edmund with another man, which could solidify the importance of how pious and devout Edmund was throughout his life, Ælfric briefly discusses Leofstan toward the end of the *vita*. Leofstan desired to look upon Edmund’s body to ensure that the incorruption which had been reported to him was true. Not only does Leofstan want to see the corpse for himself, but he also rides into town insolently and carries himself arrogantly. Ælfric is setting him up very early to be a direct foil to the devout Edmund. The text relates,

> On þam lande wæs sum man. leofstan gehaten. rice for worulde. and unwittig for gode. se rad to þam halgan mid riccetere swiðe. and het him æt-eowian orhlice swiðe.

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365 Ælfric, “Passio Sancti Eadmundi,” 332.
In that land was a certain man called Leofstan, rich in worldly things, and ignorant towards God, who rode with great insolence to the saint’s shrine, and very arrogantly commanded them to show him the holy saint, to see whether he was incorrupt; but as soon as he saw the saint’s body, then he immediately raved and roared horribly, and miserably ended by an evil death.  

Human curiosity is reasonable; however, Ælfric illustrates why Leofstan’s motivations are more than simple curiosity. The hagiographer describes Leofstan and demonstrates very clearly that he has not led the type of life Edmund did and was unworthy of looking upon the saint’s pure, uncorrupted body because he cared more for earthly wealth. Once Leofstan actually gazes upon the body, he goes mad before meeting a bitter, unpleasant end—Ælfric actually describes his death as “evil.” In other saints’ lives, individuals who view the corpses of the saints generally have some kind of positive outcome. Sometimes they are healed of an affliction, other times they are converted, and some are simply able to confirm their faith. This is not the case for Leofstan. He has a non-normative reaction to the sight of Edmund’s lifeless body; he is no longer proud or insolent and has been reduced to a raving madman until his death. Leofstan wishes to indulge his voyeuristic curiosity and thereby reduce Edmund’s corpse to a “corporeal spectacle … an object for consumption,” but when the body looks back “countering his

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367 Abbo does not qualify Leofstan’s death as Ælfric does, but he is sure to note that Leofstan, smitten with madness by God when he looked at Edmund’s body, is reduced to utter poverty, and was eventually eaten by worms at the end of his life. See Abbo of Fleury, “Passio Sancti Eadmundi,” in Three Lives of English Saints, ed. Michael Winterbottom (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1972), 65-88.
gaze and overpowering it in a defiant message of virginal faith,”369 Leofstan cannot handle the pressure. Edmund’s corpse demonstrates a type of agency that Howard Williams explains in that “the deceased has the potential for social action after their biological death” and the ability to “affect the actions of mourners.”370 Williams notes that the decomposing body can have obvious negative side effects on those who view the corpse, but he also relates that the “experience of the cadaver creates such a unique and powerful impact on the senses that it can form the very basis of the way the dead person is remembered.”371 In either sense, the corpse has a type of active influence on the world of the living, and Edmund’s deceased body, especially because it is incorrupt, certainly demonstrates its agency when Leofstan views it. Even as a corpse, Edmund exudes strength as a devout Christian to the point that non-believers who, as Leofstan seems to display, are unwilling to accept Christianity no longer exert influence in the community and bring no further doubt to the truly devout. Decay of the mind and body seems to be the only outcome for the doubters as represented by Leofstan.

This brief account of Leofstan further cements the audience’s understanding of just how great Edmund’s life is as an example of proper Christian living at all levels of existence (physical, spiritual, and mental) since his body does not decompose and is, in fact, healed from the wounds and decapitation incurred from the Vikings. Ælfric emphasizes Edmund’s leadership as a king and devotion to imitating the example of Christ throughout his vita so that his great attention to Edmund’s corpse (finding the

369 Rhodes, “‘What, After All, Is a Male Virgin,’” 23. In her discussion of Edmund’s corpse’s interaction with Leofstan, Rhodes is using Slavoj Žižek’s interpretation of the Lacanian gaze as a force which disturbs the viewer and does not provide a division between subject and object. This is not to say that Edmund’s eyes were open or his sense of sight functioned after his death and exhumation.
head, burying the body and head together, the Leofstan episode) and its incorruption was beneficial and valuable to his audience as inspiration for living the proper Christian life.

St. Cuthbert

Throughout his life, the Venerable Bede wore many hats. As a monk at Wearmouth-Jarrow, he had access to an extensive library and developed masterful skills as an historian, computist, exegete, and hagiographer. Although his most well-known and, arguably, valuable work for the modern audience is the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede’s “other works provide a more complete presentation of the Christian intellectual and spiritual heritage he sought to preserve.” Bede’s hagiography of St. Cuthbert, a “man of prayer and peace who lived close to nature and had the reputation of being a miracle worker,” is equally as valuable. Bede’s *Life of Cuthbert*, an *opus geminatum* or “twinned work,” describes in detail the life of the saint from his childhood through his death, burial, exhumation, translation, and post-mortem miracles.

Around the year 700, an anonymous *Life of Cuthbert* was composed by a monk in Lindisfarne, but this version was clearly not adequate for his fellow brethren as evidenced by their commission of Bede to write his own hagiography of the saint. As D. H. Farmer relates, this “invitation revealed not only their confidence in his ability and skill, but also a real need for some additional account of Cuthbert for posterity.” John P. Bequette, however, questions Bishop Eadfrid’s motives for Bede’s commission, stating that the

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372 In addition to Bede’s “Life of Cuthbert” discussed here, he also wrote the hagiographies of Felix and Anastasius.


anonymous *Life* “is elegantly written, masterfully weaving significant Biblical allusions into the episodes of Cuthbert’s life, and is comprehensive in scope, covering the entirety of his life and ending with a detailed account of posthumous miracles.”\(^{376}\) He indicates that Eadfrid may have heard of miracles not included within the anonymous version and wanted to add them into Bede’s revision. The bishop, according to Bequette, also may have wanted to promote the cult of Cuthbert throughout the wider Anglo-Saxon world, and Bede’s renown as a scholar, Eadfrid believed, was the way to do so. In 716, Bede wrote his verse version of the *Life* followed by the prose version by 721. As Peter Hunter Blair relates concerning Bede’s composition of these versions, Bede “does not say in this *Prologue*, though he does elsewhere, that his chief source of information had been the earlier Lindisfarne *Life* of the saint” and that he “followed his source closely,”\(^{377}\) though Bede’s version is double the length of his source, adding “a dozen chapters’ worth of material.”\(^{378}\) In his *A Companion to Bede*, George Hardin Brown states that “to improve the style of his source, he completely rewrote the life in his own lucid fashion, rearranging the sequence of events, smoothing transitions, adding quotations and augmenting plot to form a continuous narrative.”\(^{379}\) Bede’s admiration for Cuthbert is clear throughout the work, and his hagiography “exemplifies the nature and purpose of this particular literary form … to stress that the saint was a man of God and shared in divine qualities and even in the power of miracles.”\(^{380}\) Also, by “drawing out the spiritual and moral lessons to be derived from hagiographic reading, he observed the requirements

\(^{376}\) Bequette, “Monasticism,” 326.

\(^{377}\) Hunter Blair, *The World of Bede*, 279.


\(^{379}\) Brown, *Companion to Bede*, 81.

of the genre.” Bede chronicles Cuthbert’s life, describes his religious devotion, and praises both his monastic and hermetic lifestyles throughout the work in order not only to provide his audience with a rich understanding of the life of one very significant individual but also to explicate the proper ways of living. He adds some new information not mentioned in the anonymous *Life* but also omits “many details of local interest” from his source which “give a more faithful reflection of Cuthbert’s age than the more elaborate prose of Bede.”

It is clear from Cuthbert’s religious devotion and monastic asceticism that he was a true man of God, but there were also certain miracles which occurred during his life which further confirmed that fact. In chapter 10 of the *Life*, Bede describes a scene in which Cuthbert enters the sea until the water covers his entire body save for his head and he prays in the water all night until dawn. When he comes out of the water and kneels to pray on the sand, two otters meet him on the shore, breathe on his feet, and wipe him down with their fur. One of Cuthbert’s fellow monks witnesses this scene, but Cuthbert tells him that he should not relate the tale to anyone until Cuthbert had died. Bede explains that, in doing this, Cuthbert “followed the example of our Lord, who, when He showed his glory to his disciples on the mountain, said, ‘Tell no man until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.’” Cuthbert clearly understands how to follow the example of Christ in all ways and chooses to be humble when others may desire to brag or boast of the miracle. He is also further able to illustrate the advantages of the monastic lifestyle to his fellow monk even when his initial plan was to be unobserved and carry out

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381 Brown, *Companion to Bede*, 81.
382 Hunter Blair, *World of Bede*, 279.
his actions privately. Chapters 19 and 20 of the *Life* describe two more animal-related miracles. Cuthbert had encounters with birds—one in which the birds attempted to steal his laboriously grown barley and another in which crows tried to steal thatch from his hut to build their nests—which he resolved with reason and forgiveness. During the first encounter, he emulated St. Antony in reasoning with the birds, and in the second he used his faith in the name of Christ to stop the crows. The crows even came back to apologize and bring him restitution for the thatch they had stolen and the trouble they had caused. Finally, in chapter 21 of Bede’s work, Cuthbert demonstrates that through his faith and piety, not only animals but also the sea itself will obey his instruction. Bede explains:

> it is hardly strange that the rest of creation should obey the wishes and commands of a man who so dedicated himself with complete sincerity to the Lord’s service. We, on the other hand, often lose that dominion over creation which is ours by right through neglecting to serve its Creator. The very sea, I say, was quick to lend him aid when he needed it.\(^{384}\)

When Cuthbert’s fellow monks failed to bring him a length of wood he had requested in order to build a little room on his monastery, the sea provided one for him over the course of the night which was found the next morning. Because he so readily forgave the monks their forgetfulness and provided them lodging for the night, he was rewarded with the essential wood he needed, and all of this was done in full sight of his brethren. Throughout his living days, Cuthbert was a consistent exemplum of the monastic lifestyle, faith and devotion to Christ, and piety. It is no wonder that in death his body was saved from corruption.

While the events which occurred during St. Cuthbert’s life were certainly important and provide a great deal of information about the monastic lifestyle, Bede’s

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account of Cuthbert’s death and, most especially, the treatment of his corpse is particularly significant. Because Christianity was “a religion of the body as much as of the soul,” the significance of Bede’s account is not just his discussion of the corpse since most, if not all, hagiographies include some mention of the saint’s corpse. Rather, it is his extended discussion of its treatment within the *Life*. In chapter 37 of the prose *Life*, Cuthbert returns to his hermitage on Farne Island following the Christmas festivities. When his fellow monks gather around him before he begins his journey back to the island, an older monk asks when they might see their brother again. His response, articulated unemotionally, is the first mention of Cuthbert as a non-living entity. He simply replies, “When you bring back my corpse.” Bede does not provide any indication of the other monks’ reactions to this bombshell revelation; he instead moves on to Cuthbert’s death “as I [Bede] had [heard] it from Herefrith.” Because Bede “presents Cuthbert’s death *verbatim* as given to him by one Herefrith,” we must assume that Herefrith did not indicate any emotional or physical reaction experienced by himself or his fellow monks. The details of Cuthbert’s last days—sending his fellow monks away so he may be alone, surviving for five days on nothing but the juice and flesh of half an onion, and not being able to move his legs from his position outside of the monastery for those same five days—are painful, especially for the modern reader, and certainly in opposition to the typical caretaking of terminally ill monks.

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386 Bede’s account of Cuthbert’s death in the prose *Life* greatly expanded upon the account given in the anonymous *Life* thanks to the information he received from Herefrith. Therefore, we have much more knowledge about Cuthbert’s last days on Farne, his request concerning his interment, and how Cuthbert’s body was eventually transported to Lindisfarne for interment.
If a monk was fatally ill or enfeebled, he “received care for the rest of his days, and even had a lay brother assigned as his full-time attendant during his final decline.”\(^{390}\) Cuthbert purposefully sent his brothers away because he believed that “It was God’s will that I [Cuthbert] should be left to suffer awhile without help or company”\(^{391}\) even though his sickness grew steadily worse and more debilitating. Cuthbert’s “life of extreme asceticism”\(^{392}\) caused the rapidity of his deteriorating health, but Cuthbert remained staunch in his piety and devotion to monastic ideals. In all ways and throughout all circumstances, Cuthbert wanted to adhere to the way of life he had chosen and continue to demonstrate that lifestyle for his fellow monks. Herefrith basically forced Cuthbert to allow himself and a few other brothers to stay at his side so he could be cared for; when death was imminent, it was standard monastic practice for the community to be “summoned to the infirmary … to observe the traditional ceremony for a monk’s passing, in which the dying monk was placed on a goatskin strewn with ashes, while the community chanted psalms to aid his passage to heaven.”\(^{393}\) In chapter 38 of the \textit{Life}, Bede relates that Cuthbert instructed the brothers to carry him back into his oratory and house but only permitted one monk, Wahlstod, to accompany him inside. It seems that throughout the narrative Cuthbert continually tried to be as little a burden as possible, including at the time of his death, to everyone he encountered. Bede places special emphasis on the fact that Cuthbert related to Herefrith precise directions for the interment of his body, in a similar manner as Æthelthryth (see chapter 3); the prominence Bede gives to these instructions is the first indication within the \textit{Life} that Cuthbert’s burial will

\(^{392}\) Bequette, “Monasticism,” 350.
\(^{393}\) Forgeng, \textit{Daily Life}, 159.
be non-normative in comparison to other hagiographies. Cuthbert insists that the burial of his corpse be unproblematic, yet the outcome of his request is controversial.

Cuthbert’s clear, coherent command for the treatment of his corpse is unusual and intriguing. Cuthbert told Herefrith,

“When God takes my soul, bury me here close to the oratory, on the south side and to the east of that holy cross I myself put up. To the north of the oratory you will find a stone coffin hidden under the turf, a present from the holy Abbot Cudda. Put my body in it, wrapped in the cloth you will find there. Abbess Verca gave it me as a present but I was loath to wear it. Out of affection for her I carefully put it aside to use as a winding-sheet.”

After hearing these directions, Herefrith appropriately seemed less concerned about Cuthbert’s request once he realized that his monastery’s leader was not simply sick but actually dying. When Cuthbert convinced Herefrith to leave him until the proper time arrived, Herefrith returned to his brethren and related Cuthbert’s orders. However, Herefrith and the other monks did not find this request suitable. While Cuthbert preferred to have his corpse rest in the same way that he spent his final living days, Herefrith consulted with his fellow monks and they decided “to ask him to let us bring his body back here to be given a more decent burial with proper honours in the church.”

Upon bringing their request to Cuthbert, he repeated his command and gave a very particular reason as to why they should do as he had previously bade:

“It would be less trouble for you if I did stay here, because of the influx of fugitives and every other kind of malefactor which will otherwise result. They will flee for refuge to my body, for, whatever I might be, my fame as a servant of God has been noised abroad. You will be constrained to intercede very often with the powers of this world on behalf of such men. The presence of my remains will prove extremely irksome.”

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396 Farmer, *Age of Bede*, 93.
Even in his death, Cuthbert only cared about the community in which he lived and prayed; his concern for their well-being shows the compassion he developed as a monk following the righteous path and the example Christ set. Before Christ’s execution, his primary concern was for the safety of his apostles; Cuthbert too wanted to ensure his fellow monks would not be hassled by those hoping to glimpse his corpse—perhaps he had foresight knowing that his body would be found incorrupt following exhumation and translation—and witness or be a part of a miracle. Cuthbert eventually relents; it seems that his initial statement to the old man mentioned previously proved eerily accurate.

Cuthbert apparently seemed to know that his brethren would not allow Farne Island to be his final resting place as he asked. Bede does not specifically elaborate on what entails the “more decent burial” his brethren had requested to provide for him or the reasons the monks refused to acquiesce to Cuthbert’s request, but archaeological evidence and discussion of normative and deviant burials may shed light on this aspect of the text. Andrew Reynolds relates that in Anglo-Saxon England during the Conversion period and “into Christian England, the principal mode of interment was … supine inhumation, with the head to the west and, from the eighth century, the body was prepared for burial by the removal of ‘everyday’ clothing and the provision of a shroud, perhaps fastened with a pin.” From Bede’s narrative, it is clear that the monks followed this typical custom when burying Cuthbert. So far, Cuthbert’s burial appears to be normative. However, distinguishing between normative and deviant burials relies on two

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aspects, \footnote{398 I will only be discussing the geographical distance between the individual burial and the communal burial ground. Reynolds also includes features of non-normative burials such as prone (face-down) burials, decapitations, amputations, and stoning (where the grave is literally covered with stones as an indication of deviance). See Reynolds, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs}, 34-60.} “individual burial rites and burial location.” \footnote{399 Reynolds, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial}, 37.} It is Cuthbert’s denial of the typical burial rites and his refusal to be buried amongst his brethren which helps to classify his burial as deviant.

While Reynolds is specifically discussing non-normative burials caused by factors such as battles, executions, massacres, and murders, he also elaborates on the “exclusion of individuals from communal cemetery space, but lacking other indications of deviant status … where … inhumations lay physically separated from the main burial ground by boundary features.” \footnote{400 Reynolds, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial}, 201.} Burial within a liminal space, away from the community, was a method to help distinguish “sinister or ‘other’ dead,” \footnote{401 Reynolds, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial}, 201.} and it seems that Cuthbert was attempting to create his own deviant burial by separating himself, as he did in life, from the Lindisfarne monastery as well as the world at large. While not a deviant in the typical sense, Cuthbert’s desire to use the physical, geographical boundary (Farne is an island so water places distance between it and the mainland by several miles) separating the monastery from his hermitage/desired burial ground creates a deviance which Reynolds describes as the “funerary vocabulary of ‘otherness’” \footnote{402 Reynolds, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial}, 202.} and would add to a well-established pattern of isolated deviant burials in early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. \footnote{403 Reynolds, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial}, 203.} Although Cuthbert tells his brethren that he doesn’t want his living body, corpse, or burial to be a burden to them, the monks themselves, especially Herefrith, were concerned that Cuthbert’s burial on Farne Island would seem to others as a deviance and
that their seemingly intentional separation from Cuthbert would indicate he was an outcast from the monastery because “[n]otions of boundaries as appropriate places to inter outcasts is a feature found across northern Europe in the middle ages, as are common modes for the laying of malevolent corpses safely with regard to the living.”

This notion of the body’s separation from the living community as deviant was not a Christian concept in the early days of the Latin church. In his discussion of the roots of the medieval church, Paul Binski notes that corpses, including Christian corpses, were originally buried in necropoli, away from the living. It wasn’t until later that burials began to take place within the city’s walls. Binski states, “with the growing importance of the Christian profession of faith through confession and martyrdom, the sainted dead, what Peter Brown called the ‘very special dead,’ were admitted within; especially into the churches of the newly Christianized Latin empire.”

Robert Bartlett also notes that

While the ancient Greeks and Romans (and subsequently the Muslims) sought to separate the living and the dead, to differentiate cemeteries and areas of residence, Christians intermingled them. Moving the remains of the dead into city churches broke the ancient taboo demarcating the places of the living and the dead, and disregarded deeply felt legal and moral prohibitions both on the disturbance of human remains and on the presence of the dead in the city. It was a development that marked off Christianity sharply from pagan and Jewish religions, which knew the difference between a place of worship and a cemetery, and regarded the cult of corporeal relics as ghoulish.

Also, “some sinners’ bodies were considered so polluting that they could not be buried with the rest of the community.” The Lindisfarne monks obviously revered Cuthbert and wanted to give him all the honors due to him within the church; David Rollason also

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404 Reynolds, Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial, 247.
405 Binski, Medieval Death, 12.
407 Devlin, “‘(Un) touched by Decay,’” 67.
notes that burial within the church, not necessarily the translation and elevation of the relics, “evidently was a prerequisite” for “designating a person as a saint.”\footnote{David Rollason, \textit{Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England} (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 42.} In addition to the desire to provide Cuthbert with these honors, the notion of allowing him to be perceived as an outcast, deviant, sinner, or malevolent corpse was simply unacceptable to his brethren.

Cuthbert then made—or perhaps had previously formulated—another provision as to the specific treatment of his corpse: “I think it would be best to make a tomb in the interior of the basilica - then you will be able to visit it yourselves whenever you wish and also to decide who else from outside may do so.”\footnote{Bede, “Life of Cuthbert,” 93.} Rather than purposefully ostracizing himself, though Cuthbert would obviously not have seen himself as an outcast even in death, Cuthbert relented to a traditional burial practice\footnote{Though traditional, Binski also notes that St. John Chrysostom objected to the practice, stating that the saints’ corpses were now held “upon the very limbs of Christ.” See Binski, \textit{Medieval Death}, 13.} dating to the construction of basilican churches in Rome. Binski relates, “from the fourth century, the dead saints were admitted to the great basilicas of Rome” and “the culture of the exterior garden tomb was replaced by an interiorized and hierarchal model of burial within.”\footnote{Binski, \textit{Medieval Death}, 13.} Cuthbert also specifically mentions that his brethren will be able to control who has access to his tomb\footnote{In addition to controlling access to the saint’s tomb, burying Cuthbert in the church would ensure that the monks of Lindisfarne could “control the saint’s cult or, looked at another way … gain undisputed possession of the relics and their miraculous power.” See Rollason, \textit{Saints and Relics}, 42.} because, as Binski acknowledges, the basilican burials “attracted those of a more humble but spiritually ambitious inclination, and around the shrines grew up burial sites within the churches as lavish and various as coral.”\footnote{Binski, \textit{Medieval Death}, 13.} Between Cuthbert’s request, the intercession of his brethren, and the final compromise and provision for his
burial, it is clear that the saint’s corpse held a special place in the minds and hearts of the monks at Lindisfarne, as the “sense of the reverence for holy bodies penetrated deep into the medieval mind.” This intense focus on the non-living body of Cuthbert and the detailed description of his conversation with his brethren is stylistically common for Bede’s work, but the corpse discussion itself is uncommon in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature.

Typically, dead bodies may receive a brief mention—lying on a battlefield being plundered as described by the hall scop during a banquet scene in Beowulf, being chastised by its disembodied soul as illustrated in Soul and Body II, being eaten by cannibals as witnessed by Andrew in Andreas, etc.—but no concentrated account. Bede provides his audience with a clear and systematic, if unusual, breakdown of how the lifeless body of an individual, specifically one of a religious leader, should be treated following the withdrawal of his life force. From archaeological evidence, scholars have discovered that corpses were

washed, wrapped in cloth, and carried to the church for burial. Most people were buried in the churchyard, without a coffin or gravemarker. Traditionally, only priests were buried in the church itself … The churchyard that served for burial was often an important public space in the community, serving not just as a repository for the dead, but as a place of public assembly, a marketplace, and even as a playing field.

Cuthbert did not want any kind of ceremony or special marker commemorating his life or death but rather concerned himself with the well-being of his fellow monks while they dealt with the preparation of his body and the burial. It was typical, especially for men, to

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414 Binski, Medieval Death, 15.
have burials which “accorded the most elaborate funerary provision,” including such items as a lead-lined coffin. Burial patterns and exceptions to those patterns were based on an individual’s occupation and social status, so burials for men of monastic communities may have had prominent locations in churchyards or contain special items. After his death, Cuthbert’s body was placed in a boat and ferried to Lindisfarne “where it was received by choirs of singers and a great crowd that had turned out to meet it. It was buried in a stone coffin on the right-hand side of the altar in the church of the Blessed Apostle Peter.” Although Bede describes miracles that occurred at his burial place, very little mention of Cuthbert’s actual corpse is made until it is exhumed eleven years later. Bede says that God put the idea in the monks’ minds to see what had become of Cuthbert’s body; he writes, “Almighty God in His Providence now chose to give further proof of Cuthbert’s glory in Heaven by putting it into the minds of the brethren to dig up his bones … They were going to put them in a light casket in some fitting place above ground in order to give them their due veneration.

From his description, Bede makes it clear that throughout the medieval period, people (monks included) were well aware of what happens to a corpse in the years following its death: “They expected to find the bones quite bare (as is usual with the dead), the rest of the body having dwindled away to dust.” Medieval society was definitely interested and well-informed (to an extent) of the process of decomposition and also formulated its own ideas as to the relationship between the decay of a person’s

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corpse and their actions in life as a sinner or saint. Zoë L. Devlin explains, “[c]orpses were … seen as reflecting the consequences of an individual’s behaviour in life; they held up a mirror to the state of a person’s soul”\textsuperscript{421} and the “preservation of the saintly body is therefore seen as a reward for its control and self-denial during life and as a reminder to the faithful of the reconstitution of all bodies on the Day of Judgement.”\textsuperscript{422} Hence, when the Lindisfarne monks opened the tomb with the expectation of seeing, at most, a skeleton with ragged vestments and instead saw a body which resembled a man sleeping rather than dead, with flexible joints wearing crisp, fresh clothing, they “were filled with great fear and trembling; they could not speak, did not dare to look at the miracle, and hardly knew where to turn.”\textsuperscript{423} Out of fear, they took only garments which had not touched Cuthbert’s body to the bishop Eadberht, the individual who, after his death, “was buried in Cuthbert’s grave, presumably to associate him with his predecessor’s sainthood, and the latter’s new wooden coffin was placed over the top.”\textsuperscript{424} The bishop, on the other hand, realized what the incorrupted vestments meant, received them happily, and instructed the monks to translate the corpse to “the chest you have made ready for it” and assured them that “the spot that has been consecrated by so great a proof of heavenly virtue will not be empty for long.”\textsuperscript{425} They did as the bishop had directed; they dressed Cuthbert’s corpse—now regularly referred to as simply “the body”—in new garments and placed it on the floor of the sanctuary in a light coffin on the anniversary of Cuthbert’s death, March 20. C. F. Battiscombe notes that the “carrying out of the

\textsuperscript{421} Devlin, “(Un)touched by Decay,” 65.
\textsuperscript{422} Devlin, “(Un)touched by Decay,” 65.
\textsuperscript{423} Bede, “Life of Cuthbert,” 98.
\textsuperscript{424} Rollason, Saints and Relics, 35.
bishop’s instructions therefore marks the elevation of St. Cuthbert’s body from its original tomb of stone, his ‘canonization’ by general consent and with the approval of the bishop, and the beginning of his cult.”

In the Middle Ages, the corpses of those who led a particularly blessed or damned life continued to exhibit an influence within their communities. The bodies of executed criminals were left open and unprotected in the natural world; this meant that exposure, with the effects of the weather and animal activity, would have meant the corpse was continuously changing perhaps on an almost daily basis. There would have been movement, as the body bloated and then deflated, expelling gases and liquids, and as parts dropped off or collapsed inwards … The activity of insects could also create the illusion of movement. All this is in contrast to the preserved saints who remained stationary and passive, unless threatened, even allowing themselves to be posed like dolls. The corpses of sinners could therefore appear threatening, alive yet not, and active in death, and able to alarm passers-by with movement and sounds.

Decay and preservation were not unknown for the early medieval world, and the “decay of sin would have been a relatively common sight.” The incorrupt corpse of Cuthbert, while surprising to the Lindisfarne monks since “the preservation of sanctity [was] nothing but a story for all but a privileged few,” should be considered a passive body since it was preserved and exhibited no active movement as would normally be seen through decomposition. However, Bede makes a particular note of the fact that upon exhumation Cuthbert looked alive with “the joints of the limbs still flexible.” As Robert Bartlett relates, the “‘gift of flexibility’ made him [Cuthbert] a leader even among the incorrupt.” This flexibility compensates for the monks’ denial of Cuthbert’s non-

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428 Devlin, “(Un)touched by Decay,” 68.
429 Devlin, “(Un)touched by Decay,” 68.
normative burial on Farne Island by exchanging the would-be deviant burial for a non-

normative incorruption. Because of the flexibility of his limbs, Cuthbert’s corpse
unintentionally exhibits the same type of active presence within his community that an
executed criminal’s body would demonstrate. After witnessing his exhumation and the
life-like flexibility, interacting with Cuthbert became “a tactile experience as well as a
visual one”\textsuperscript{432} for the monks of Lindisfarne. While the seemingly active bodies of sinners
and criminals had a severe effect on all those who saw them due to the “continuously
changing nature of exposed corpses, coupled with the sensory experience of smell and the
illusion of movement caused by insect activity and decay,”\textsuperscript{433} the Lindisfarne brethren
who were present for the exhumation of Cuthbert’s body invited both the visual and
tactile experience Devlin discusses. As they bent and manipulated his corpse, implying
“that they not only touched the body but spent some time lifting the limbs and
rearranging them to see what would happen,”\textsuperscript{434} the monks helped to create a deviant
activeness\textsuperscript{435} for Cuthbert that most other incorrupt saints\textsuperscript{436} did not possess.

Bede’s textual treatment of Cuthbert is remarkable because his emphasis on
Cuthbert’s extreme piety and devotion give clear indications as to why Cuthbert’s corpse
would eventually be found uncorrupted by the elements. While his living actions are

\textsuperscript{432} Devlin, “‘(Un)touched by Decay,’” 68.
\textsuperscript{433} Devlin, “‘(Un)touched by Decay,’” 68.
\textsuperscript{434} Devlin, “‘(Un)touched by Decay,’” 68.
\textsuperscript{435} Although there are miracles associated with touching Cuthbert’s corpse, tomb, and clothing, I do not
believe that they provide evidence for the activeness of Cuthbert’s body following his death. The body
itself has no control over the healing of the people being through the tactile experience; rather, Cuthbert’s
blessed soul/spirit provides the healing in conjunction with the grace of God. As Bartlett relates, the “saints
are with God, God is everywhere, therefore the saints are everywhere” (624-5). Because this discussion
solely focuses on the physical corpse, I will not be discussing these miracles associated with Cuthbert or
Bede’s explanation of them in his Life.
\textsuperscript{436} Devlin (68) notes that in Goscelin of Saint-Bertin’s \textit{Vita Sancte WiburghVirginis}, St. Wiburgh’s
uncorrupted body was touched and the limbs were lifted to ensure the validity of the miraculous
incorruption. Preserved saints, upon discovery of the incorruption, are often washed and reclothed.
simply considered saintly, as are all events within a saint’s vita, the active presence of his corpse within the community, highlighted by the flexibility, and his request for a non-normative burial allow readers to conclude that Bede’s description of Cuthbert’s death, burial, and exhumation are extraordinary by comparison within the Anglo-Saxon culture and monastic community at Lindisfarne.

In his description of Cuthbert, Bede makes it clear that the monks who witnessed the exhumations of their former leader and mentor were quite shocked at the miraculous preservation of the corpse and that the incorruption of the corpse held significant religious meaning. As Cynthia Turner Camp relates, the “incorrupt corpse does not just resemble the resurrection body, but acts as a token of promised corporeal immortality.”

Additionally, Camp explains that Bede concludes the poem he includes in the prose Life “with the image of the resurrection and the power of God to reshape bodies and limbs from the ashes to which they have decayed, interpreting the incorrupt body as a prefiguring of the resurrection body and a token of God’s ability to raise one’s dust to heavenly glory and immortality.” Cuthbert’s corpse was placed, against the living wishes of the saint, in a new coffin in a location to be venerated following his exhumation.

In Bede’s hagiography of Cuthbert, the corpse is used as an illustration of the sanctity of the individual. As Rollason relates, aspects of the Life such as Cuthbert’s elevation onto the floor of the sanctuary on the anniversary of his death are “affirmation[s] of Cuthbert’s sainthood, since the implication is that its purpose was to

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heighten awareness of the anniversary of Cuthbert’s death, the traditional day for commemorating a saint from early Christian times.” During his life, many miracles occurred which marked him as significant and special even in a community of pious and devout monks; this importance stood out further once he departed from his earthly life and his incorrupt corpse continued to demonstrate the saint’s importance post-mortem. He may not have battled for the cause of righteousness or been martyred for the sake of Christianity, but Cuthbert’s life on Farne Island demonstrated how continual faith and devotion to the calling of the Christian lifestyle—in whatever manner that is illustrated—provides one of the faithful with a place in Heaven.

St. Alban

In book 1, chapter 7 of the Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum, Bede details the life and martyrdom of St. Alban, “Britain’s protomartyr from Romano-British days,” as he found it written by “the priest Fortunatus in his Praise of Virgins, in which he mentions all the blessed martyrs who came to God from every part of the world.” Though Alban is a pagan at the beginning of the vita, this fact quickly changes following the arrival of a certain clergyman at his home. After witnessing the man in continual

439 Rollason, Saints and Relics, 36.
440 Using Bede’s work as a primary source, Ælfric of Eynsham also produced and published his version of Alban’s passio approximately two centuries later. Throughout my discussion of Bede’s hagiography, I will be referencing points where Ælfric modifies Bede’s information by adding details which make the story more complete or providing answers to questions stemming from Bede’s discussion. Bede omits certain details from his chapter such as dates and individuals’ names, and Ælfric provides further clarity by including such details and historical facts. Bede’s work was not designed to be read as an individual saint’s life but rather as a book whose chapters flow into one another. Ælfric, writing the Life as a standalone within his collection, must incorporate all of the facts cohesively.
441 Hunter Blair, The World of Bede, 277.
443 Bede is regularly known for his explicit details in the construction of his Ecclesiastical History and for citing his sources. While he does indeed cite his source for the St. Alban story within the vita’s content, the specifics of time and place are absent here if one reads chapter 7 in isolation without context from the
prayer during his flight from persecution, Alban desired to imitate this example. He became one of the faithful and pious when “he was suddenly touched by the grace of God” and he “renounced the darkness of idolatry, and sincerely accepted Christ.” His devotion was almost immediately tested when soldiers were sent by the non-Christian ruler to search Alban’s residence for the priest. When they arrived, Alban stood in the priest’s place wearing his long cloak and willingly surrendered himself to be taken before the judge. As is the case with most saints’ lives, the pagan judge demands that Alban abandon his newfound Christianity and join him in sacrifice to the pagan gods, which Bede continually refers to as “devils, who cannot help their suppliants, nor answer their prayers and vows. On the contrary, whosoever offers sacrifice to idols is doomed to the pains of hell.” In likewise typical order for Christian stories of martyrdom, Alban’s refusal and insult to the judge’s religion result in threats of torture followed closely by the actual tortures; Bede does not elaborate on these tortures but simply states that Alban endured the “most horrible tortures patiently and even gladly” before the judge finally gave up and ordered the saint’s decapitation. In an effort to make the passio as complete

surrounding chapters. Chapter 6 provides names, dates, and historical context, but the connective thread to Alban’s story relies on having read the previous chapter; he writes: “Diocletian in the East and Herculius in the West ordered all churches to be destroyed and all Christians to be hunted out and killed. This was the tenth persecution since Nero, and was more protracted and horrible than all that had preceded it. It was carried out without any respite for ten years, with the burning of churches, the outlawing of innocent people, and the slaughter of martyrs” (Bede, Ecclesiastical History, 51). However, it should be remembered that Bede was not writing for the sake of history alone. There was a religious purpose underlying his work, so the focus need not be on dates but rather the spiritual benefit of retelling Alban’s vita. Ælfric’s version of the vita itself combines the details from both of Bede’s chapters; he includes information such as the ruling emperor’s name (Diocletian), the approximate date of his rule (286 AD), the length of his reign (twenty years), what activities the persecution included (killing Christians, burning churches, and robbing the innocent), and how long the persecution persisted (ten years). Clearly, the hagiographer obtained all of this information from reading more of the Ecclesiastical History than just chapter seven, but Ælfric is able to synthesize two chapters’ worth of Bede’s writing into one cohesive description suitable for telling Alban’s Life.

444 Bede, Ecclesiastical History, 51.
445 Bede, Ecclesiastical History, 52.
446 Bede, Ecclesiastical History, 52.
447 Bede, Ecclesiastical History, 53.
as possible, Ælfric does include specifics on the type of torture that Alban was forced to endure after refusing to obey the commands of the judge and return to paganism. Before discussing these details, though, Ælfric notes that Alban did not fear the judge’s threats

forðan þe he wæs ymb-gyrd mid godes wæpnum
to þam gastlicum gecampe. (ll. 50-1)

“because he was girded about with God’s weapons unto the ghostly fight.” 448

There is no indication as to what exactly Ælfric means by this, but we may assume that he is foreshadowing the coming miracle at the river prior to his execution. Clearly, he feels that the strength of God (in whatever form that may take) will protect and fortify him against the judge’s threats, during these imminent tortures, and in the face of the executioner’s blade. Thirty lines later, Ælfric relates that the judge

het beswingan þone halgan martyr.
wende þæt he mihte his modes anrædnysse.
mid þam swingelum gebigan to his biggengum.
ac se eadiga wer wearð þurh god gestrangod.
and ða swingle forbær swyðe geþyldiglice.
and mid glædum mode gode ðæs þancode. (ll. 74-9)

“commanded men to scourge the holy martyr, believing that he might bend the steadfastness of his mind to his (own) forms of worship by means of whips; but the blessed man was strengthened by God, and bore the scourging exceeding patiently, and with glad mind thanked God for it.”449

It is at this point that Ælfric returns to Bede’s storyline with the judge’s realization that he could not make Alban relinquish his newfound Christian devotion.

Many gathered at the site of the execution to witness Alban’s sacrifice, and Alban himself actually hastened his death, wishing to leave this earthly place so that he might assemble among the saints in heaven. His desire for a hurried execution is a rarity in the

449 Ælfric, “Passio Sancti Albani,” 418.
saints’ lives’ text; while all willingly give their bodies in sacrifice for the faith, none seem to be in a rush about it. Because so many people of all ages and both genders attended the execution, the bridge across the river which flowed between the wall of the town and his execution site was overwhelmed and impassable. Alban was so fervent in his desire to sacrifice himself for the sake of Christianity (just as Christ did for the salvation of all humankind) that he performed his first miracle: drying up the riverbed so that he might cross it uninhibited. At the execution site, the crowd gathered, and the executioner arrived but threw down his sword and refused to complete his duty, having been so moved by Alban’s miracle. In fact, the executioner “fell at his [Alban’s] feet, begging that he might be thought worthy to die with the martyr if he could not die in his place” and is later decapitated at the same time as Alban but, Bede relates, is rewarded for his sacrifice and given a place in the kingdom of heaven even though he had not previously converted to Christianity and was pagan up until his death. Ælfric goes one step further in his description of the recently converted executioner’s death and explains that following his beheading

he læg mid albane gelyfed on god.
mid his blode gefullod and ferde to heofonum. (ll. 125-6)

“He lay beside Alban, believing in God, baptized with his blood, and departed to Heaven.”

Bede does not explain what happens to the executioner’s body past the beheading but concentrates on his soul’s entrance into heaven. Ælfric, who clearly has an interest in both the body and soul of a saint, provides a fairly thorough and detailed picture of the

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451 Ælfric, “Passio Sancti Albani,” 422.
execution scene. This pagan executioner was found worthy enough to join Alban on the hallowed ground on his execution site as well as in God’s kingdom.

Returning to Bede’s hagiography, much to Alban’s dismay no other executioner present would take the former’s place. Alban then moves to the top of a hill, a location whose beauty, Bede relates, provided “a worthy place to be hallowed by a martyr’s blood.” This is the second time between the two versions of the hagiography that the blood of Alban is used as a purifying element—once to baptize the executioner who was beheaded beside Alban and once to cleanse the ground on which Alban was martyred.

Blood was important in medieval religious culture, as exemplified by the many references to Christ’s bloodshed on the cross to save humanity. As Bettina Bildhauer relates in “Blood in Medieval Cultures,” the Church, with its ambition to encompass all humankind, was perceived as one body united by a common blood, insofar as it was believed to be born from the water and blood flowing from Christ’s side.

It is not only the blood of kinship that draws together social groups into one body, but also the idea of Christ’s body and blood being the exact quantifiable equivalent of humankind when he buys humankind with his body and blood and frees it of sin. Christ’s sacrifice is always paradigmatically imagined in this way as one blood paying for the other.

It is significant that Alban’s blood is able to hallow the ground on which it falls as well as baptize a pagan who never officially converted to Christianity or renounced his pagan beliefs. Christian blood, especially that which has been spilt for the cause of faith, holds great power, more so than what the medieval world already believed it to hold. As Francesca Matteoni relates, “blood was a symbol of continuity between life and death,

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452 Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 53.
desired as a source of power by the living but also by decaying and decayed bodies.”

Within “the Christian world, due to its link with Jesus’s sacrifice, blood was considered to enliven, liberate and cleanse the soul. Drinking, embodying, and shedding it, the saint succeeded in the sublimation of self beyond the corporeal existence.” Through the spilling of Alban’s blood and then mixing with the pagan executioner’s following his beheading, the executioner receives the promise of everlasting life just as any Christian who follows the teachings of Christ and the examples set by the saints who embody those teachings. Matteoni continues to explain that the “‘spirit’ or ‘spirits’ … subtle vapours formed by the purest part of the blood, [were seen] as the connecting agent(s) between the soul and the body. The ‘spirit’ had the precise task of transfusing life from the soul to the body, determining the quality of both blood and the humours.” Therefore, Alban’s dead body (but mostly his head for the purposes of this hagiography) and his blood are both crucial in understanding the depth of his devoutness and faith in following Christ’s example. Significantly, neither the blood of the saint nor his body are mentioned prior to the execution—specifically, both should seemingly have been discussed when the tortures were carried out, but that information is missing from Bede’s and Ælfric’s versions—but are considered critical points following the execution. This means that it is not only the living body and blood of the saint which impact the hagiography but also the dead body and blood. The ground could not have been purified and the executioner

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baptized with Alban’s living blood; the sacrifice of life deepens the religious devotion
and therefore further empowers the life force draining from Alban’s decapitated corpse.

After reaching the top of the hill, the saint prays to God for a spring and is granted
the boon. The spring bubbled at Alban’s feet for all on-lookers to witness. So far, as we
have seen from Bede’s description, Alban was thoroughly able to show his saintliness in
the vein of the *imitatio Christi*, much like Edmund. Miracles, self-sacrifice, and
conversion certainly fit the mold for a saint in the making. His actual death continues to
serve as evidence of his worthiness to be treated as a saint.

In many saints’ lives, the death scenes are not given a great amount of focus or
detail since the end of the bodily life is not the primary concern when focusing on the
conversion of non-Christians or the continued teaching of the faithful. Alban’s death is no
different; a new executioner takes up the sword and decapitates the saint. The scene is
brief but compelling in the details that Bede takes care to provide:

Here, then, the gallant martyr met his death, and received the crown of life which
God has promised to those who love him. But the man whose impious hands
struck off that pious head was not permitted to boast of his deed, for as the
martyr’s head fell, the executioner’s eyes dropped out on the ground.\(^{457}\)

Bede provides no further information about Alban’s body or what becomes of it, but
Ælfric does give his audience closure concerning the martyr’s corpse and how his actions
on that hilltop affected the larger Christian community. Following the secession of the
persecution of the Christians after Alban’s death, the newly liberated Christians came out
of hiding and

\[
\text{Hi worhton eac ŧa wurōlīce cyrcan}
\text{þam halgan albane ðær he bebyrged wæs.}
\text{and þær wurgon gelome wundra gefremode.}
\text{þam hælende to lofe. (ll. 143-6)}
\]

“built likewise a worthy church to the holy Alban, where he was buried, and there frequently were miracles performed to the praise of the Saviour.”

While there aren’t any intricate details such as the corruption (or not) of the body or if the saint’s head and body were placed in the church’s tomb together, the significance of these brief lines shows that the non-living body of the saint is still vital for both the hagiographer and his medieval audience when it comes to conversion to Christianity and reaffirming the faithful.

Although the scene in Bede’s version certainly provides a bit of gratification for the audience because the executioner who chose to complete the actions the former had refused is given almost instantaneous repercussions for the deed, the focus on the eyes, hands, and speech is most interesting. The particular details of the saint’s head and the executioner’s eyes given by Bede are important and certainly allow Alban’s vita to stand apart from most other hagiographies written by Bede or Ælfric. Alban, as we are told, had already left his physical body and received the crown of life in heaven, so there is no possibility that Bede might be relating another Edmund-type situation. The decapitated head is not going to speak; it is as lifeless and inanimate as the rest of Alban’s body. The lifelessness of the body is, in fact, the reason why the head becomes even more

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Ælfric, “Passio Sancti Albani,” 422.

459 In the vita of St. Kenelm, an eleventh-century text written about a ninth-century atheling, Kenelm is decapitated by a hunting companion in the forest at the behest of his own sister. He catches his own head, a white dove flies away from his body, and the pope is notified via letter brought by the dove of Kenelm’s death and whereabouts. The news is brought to England, his body is found (the legend says that his executioner buried his body following the decapitation), and a procession brings him back from the forest. During the procession, his sister attempts to thwart it via witchcraft and her eyes fall from their sockets. While it does not seem that the saint’s body causes her eyes to become dislodged from her body, it is clear that the two events (his procession and her eyes spontaneously falling from her head) are at least linked. See Rosalind Love, ed. and trans., Three Eleventh-Century Anglo-Latin Saints’ Lives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 61-73. Gerald Dyson claims that the writers of Kenelm’s vita were aware of Bede’s account of Alban’s hagiography which demonstrates some similarities in the texts of Anglo-Saxon hagiographers. See Dyson, “Kings, Peasants, and the Restless Dead,” 35.
important, especially considering its connection to the eyes of the executioner. As Jeffrey J. Cohen explains,

> Because beheading nullifies personal identity (the acephalic body is a corpse without history, personhood, individuality), decapitation seems the most violent blow against subjectivity, against one’s individualized being. And yet the head without body entrances. With its eyes that do not blink, or through empty sockets darkening a skinless skull, the severed head gives the impression of gazing back, of staring at its observers to pose relentlessly a question that we cannot seem to answer, cannot even understand, but a query that troubles and compels all the same.\textsuperscript{460}

This concept that Cohen describes resonates with Alban’s \textit{vita} at this point since it may be inferred that Alban’s head and the executioner’s eyes fall to the ground in relatively close proximity, and it is possible that the eyes of both the saint and the sinner may meet. Though the decapitated body definitely can leave the audience feeling as though the person has become dangerous and frightening (Cohen relates that having been beheaded “is surely a kind of monstrosity, the becoming-monstrous of the human through fragmentation, through the reduction of embodied identity from five limbs and torso to a liminal object, an uncanny thing”\textsuperscript{461}), Alban’s head continues to elicit something unspoken in the text. The uncanniness that Cohen identifies may be the very reason that many \textit{vitae} fail to provide details about the corpses—decapitated or otherwise—and simply focus on the living and their continued interaction with the miracles performed at the saints’ tombs or in their dedicated churches. However, Alban’s head and the eyes of the executioner seem to have more to tell in this story though Bede does not provide further elaboration concerning the corpses of anyone who died that day, whether or not the executioner lived without his eyes, and the state of both the head and eyes. All of this

\textsuperscript{461} Cohen, “Preface,” ix.
considered, there is clear focus on the head and eyes that must have held some interest for any who may read about or hear of St. Alban’s *Life*. As Cohen stated, the head continues to entrance even without the body. Even without further elaboration, the head and eyes at the conclusion of Alban’s *vita* hold significance for Bede’s Anglo-Saxon audience as well as the modern one.

As has been discussed previously, the head was given priority and held with special regard. Asa Simon Mittman explains that because the head was so important, there is “no such thing as ‘the role’ of the severed head in medieval and early modern culture. Rather, there is a great diversity of roles (speaking and non-speaking parts, alike) played by severed heads”\(^{462}\) and “that there is no singular ‘medieval view’ of decapitation or of the resulting severed head. Such variation is the result of the great importance of the head itself, too central to medieval understandings of humanity to be reduced, even in its severance, to a single meaning or essentialized trope.”\(^{463}\) The head is critically important literally, symbolically, and logically. However, Bede also includes two other body parts—I count all of the elements on Alban’s head as a collective of the head so they are not individuated here—mentioned following the saint’s decapitation: eyes and hands. Human senses, as represented through their respective body parts, held a particular value for the Anglo-Saxons. As Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe relates,

> When St. Augustine called on Paul’s words to argue the interdependence of the members of the body, he nonetheless underscored the different values of those parts in an explanation that depends for its force precisely on an understanding that each organ has only one function, that the functions are differentially valued, and that sight is the highest of them. Touch, by contrast, though proper to the largest organ in the body, trails the others in statements of value or is overlooked


entirely. As sight is related to air, touch, the lowest of the senses, is closest to the earth.\textsuperscript{464}

Within the same scene of Alban’s \textit{vita}, we are given both the highest and lowest of the body parts named in O’Brien O’Keeffe’s explanation, and they are from the same individual. O’Brien O’Keeffe also relates that Exeter Riddle 43 (“Soul and Body”), as an example of the importance of and often juxtaposition of the eyes and hands in relation to sight and touch,

illustrates cunningly the frames within which we may access the appraisal of eyes and hands, sight and touch in Anglo-Saxon England. It shows the senses as capacities that are unique functions of their respective organs; they are apprehended as actions rather than things; their embodiment suits them as servants to the soul; organ and function work in metonymic relation; their standard order of presentation … is a statement of relative value.\textsuperscript{465}

The most intriguing aspect, though, is that the “highest” of the organs (the eyes) fall to the ground and would seemingly become unclean just as the executioner’s actions were unclean. The hands, likewise, are given an adjectival description rather than simply stating that he swung the sword; Bede depicts the executioner’s hands as impious, which would seem to distance the executioner from his actions. The hands were impious rather than the man, and his eyes watched everything happen rather than turn away. It appears that Bede is removing blame from the whole man and simply placing it on the organs which he felt were most responsible for the vile act of decapitation. Because there is no further explanation of the hands, one can assume that they have done their task and have become stained, literally or metaphorically, with the blood of the saint which, because the hands are impious and the executioner had no remorse for his actions, did not have the


purifying quality that it had previously (in Ælfric’s version) for the executioner. He spilled the saint’s blood out of malice and, therefore, could not be sanctified by it since there was no appearance of conversion or sympathy for his victim. The eyes, on the other hand, fall to the ground just as Alban’s head also lands on the ground.

In her discussion of Augustine’s medical mapping of the senses as they relate to the organs which enable the senses to exist, O’Brien O’Keeffe explains that Augustine was interested in the relation of sensory function to organ as part of how information is conveyed through the nerves to the brain and the soul. While corporeal, and thus distinct from the incorporeal soul, the senses are ianuae (openings) and quasi nuntii (kinds of messengers) whose functions can be closely described but whose modes of operation are elusive.466

She later discusses the value placed on each sensory organ and its functionality as described in various Anglo-Saxon kings’ law codes and, through this examination, provides an intriguing concept for the modern reader. O’Brien O’Keeffe writes,

appraisals of these organs and functions are sensitive to the effect of such damage on an individual’s appearance, but for eye/sight and ear/hearing, damage to the sense is a critical determinant of the amount of the compensation … The differential for loss of sight without loss of the eye is 33%, producing a compensation (presumably) of 44 scillings, 2 pence for an eye blinded but not removed from the socket … It is (for us) a counterintuitive amount for the loss of a sense, reduced because the damaged organ remains in the body. This difference indicates that although sight is valued higher than hearing (both absolutely and relatively), the law assumes that loss of an ear may be covered by hair, but an empty eye socket cannot as easily be hidden.467

It may not seem relevant to this discussion of Alban’s head and the executioner’s eyeballs to be discussing valuation of the organs, but the information presented above makes two clear points. First, there is a significance to the organs being distinct from the soul

because they are corporeal but also directly involved in the ways in which the brain and soul are given information concerning the world in which the body lives. Second, the value and discussion of compensation illustrate that the eyeballs are worth more than their function if they remain within the head. When it comes to the executioner’s fate, many questions still remain, especially concerning his eyes, sight, and status of life. Both of these points should be examined in turn for a better, more well-rounded understanding of the reasons why Bede may have made such a point of including these brief details without expanding upon them.

Because this is a religious tale whose content is meant to help convert non-Christians and reaffirm the faithful, it is reasonable to assume that the executioner likely died from the loss of his eyeballs. Bede tells us as much when he relates that the executioner would not be able to spread the word of his unrighteous deed. However, because this is also a saint’s life, it is not completely unreasonable to believe that the eyeballs, having fallen out of the head of the executioner and landing somewhere near Alban’s decapitated head, are still able to convey messages to the brain and, especially, soul of the executioner. If the eyes, which were whole, sound, and functioning prior to their departure from the executioner’s head, were still able to perform their duties as organs of sight normally since nothing would have blinded the eyeballs themselves, the audience—faithful Christians—might perceive that the executioner’s soul is able to “see” the action of its corporeal counterpart and realize that its fate had been sealed by the stroke of a sword. This executioner was the only person present who refused to believe in the miracles of Alban or exalt him for his actions; other executioners denied their duties, converted, and risked their lives so that Alban might live. The impious executioner
carried out the task at hand and, apparently, would have unrighteously boasted of the achievement. His rejection of the Christian faith and completion of the beheading sentence led to his eternal damnation. The executioner’s conversion at this point in the vita could be construed as anything from peer pressure to mass hysteria; it certainly would not be genuine. Because of his role in the execution, his eyes were popped out, by what must be assumed is divine intervention, and landed on the ground. Such a grisly detail as that of the eyes falling from his head shows “strong cultural reinforcement of the idea that the opponents of churches and monasteries are bound for damnation for their actions.”

Because the executioner would be required to stand near his victim in order to adequately carry out the death sentence, logic provides the assumption that Alban’s head and the executioner’s eyeballs must be in close proximity to one another. These eyes, messengers to the soul and highest valued of the sensory organs, having not been blinded previously and/or found defective, may have been forced to “look” at Alban’s head to forever have the grotesque image burned in the incorporeal soul. While this may seem a bit far-fetched, Howard Williams, in discussing cremations during the Anglo-Saxon period, explains that “each distinctive interaction between fire and the corpse might encourage the belief that the personality of the deceased still inhabited the bones.” If the Anglo-Saxons could believe that the fire’s movements (jumping, crackling, etc.) could be interpreted as a person’s personality remaining in their bones long after the life had been extinguished, the literary juxtaposition of the eyes and Alban’s head could warrant a theoretical interpretation that the eyes may have still been able to see without

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468 Dyson, “Kings, Peasants, and the Restless Dead,” 42.
469 Williams, “Death Warmed Up,” 274.
attachment to the head. Likewise, Sheila Harper, drawing on and referencing Alfred Gell’s theory of agency abduction from objects, discusses how dead bodies continue to have agency, are attributed with “intentional psychology,” and impact their mourners. She explains that this “is significant, not only because the attribution of a ‘mental state’ to a dead body affects the relationship between the dead body and the mourner, but because it implies that the dead body ‘has something inside it ‘which thinks’ or ‘with which it thinks’ … it [the body] has something like a spirit, a soul, and ego, lodged within it.”

This concept of intentional psychology which allows the corpse to continue to have agency in the living world is evidenced by mourners who place items into coffins “such as tobacco, coins, newspapers, eyeglasses, walking sticks and food … [which] suggest the attribution of agency, particularly if they are included as functional items (i.e. to accompany the deceased into inhumation or cremation) rather than as decorative items.” The inclusion of eyeglasses is especially intriguing with regard to the possibility of the executioner’s eyeballs being able to see and communicate with the soul. The agency of the corpse, which may allow it to think or interact with its soul or spirit, and the inclusion of the glasses in this discussion complements the theory that the executioner’s eyeballs were removed for a reason and their placement near the decapitated head of Alban is not random or sheer luck. It is intentional, as is Ælfric’s focus on these deceased body parts.


Ælfric’s interpretation of this event also seems to confirm the possibility that the impious executioner’s eyes may have been forced to bear witness to his crime long after the body’s life is extinguished; he writes,

\[\text{ac his slaga ne moste gesundful lybban. forðam þe him burston ut butu his eagan. and to eorðan feollon mid albanes heafde. þæt he mihte oncnawan hwæne he acwealde. (ll. 119-22)}\]

“but his [Alban’s] slayer might not live in full health, because both his eyes burst out of him, and fell to the earth with Alban’s head so that he might acknowledge whom he had killed.”

The five senses, as O’Brien O’Keeffe explains concerning classical and late antique understanding, “because corporeal could not by themselves complete the task of communicating sensory objects to the mind or soul. The bodily senses were complemented by an inner sense (or senses), which exceeds the ‘outer’ ones,” and they “deliver their sensory data to the inner sense, for it is the soul that perceives through the body.” The eyes work in conjunction with the soul, and this was a particularly detrimental image conveyed to the incorporeal side of the executioner. Beyond damnation, being forced to stare at that constant image may have been an even worse fate. Although Ælfric states a few lines later that information regarding the executioner’s blinding was conveyed to his, and the other executioners’, lord, this brief description refers only to the removal of eyes as a blinding technique. The relay of information to this leader is far more pragmatic than philosophical or theological in nature.

\[\text{472 Ælfric, “Passio Sancti Albani,” 422.}\]
\[\text{473 O’Brien O’Keeffe, “Hands and Eyes,” 117.}\]
\[\text{474 It is unclear whether this is the judge who had ordered Alban’s execution or the emperor Diocletian who had previously commanded that all Christians be sought out and murdered for their faith. The most likely identification is that of the judge.}\]
The concept of functionality directly relates to the point of valuation as well; since the eyeballs were removed from the head, there is a clear loss of value but possibly not of functionality. The body has been corrupted and deformed by the loss, which correlates to a “loss of honour caused by damaged appearance against loss of sensory function.” For the case of the executioner, the functionality of his eyes is not clear, but they are definitely removed from the head. Decapitating the saint, as ordered by the unrighteous ruler, may not be seen as a crime by the pagans but certainly is by the faithful Christians as well as by God, who is assumedly the perpetrator of the popping out of the eyeballs. Does this mean that, in terms of the wergild of Anglo-Saxon law codes, the taken life of a saint requires repayment by death and the loss of the most important organ? Or does the value of his organs no longer matter because he is a pagan and the life he took was that of a holy Christian whose only “crime” was following the example of Jesus Christ? It would seem, since this piece was written by a Christian hand, that the latter of the two explanations would be the logical one. Although Bede does not elaborate on what happened to Alban’s corpse or the body of the impious executioner, the significance of this vita in the larger scope of this discussion of corpses is that the body

476 O’Brien O’Keeffe discusses Æthelberht’s and Alfred’s respective law codes in the article cited above.
477 I do not use the term “corpse” to refer to the executioner who beheads Alban because there is no definite determination that he is dead. While Bede does acknowledge that he would not be able to spread the news of his unrighteous act, this does not immediately and unquestionably confirm that the removal of his eyeballs was a cause of death for him. It could have been that he simply wouldn’t have been welcome around anyone given his newfound disability—both physiologically and functionally—and disfigurement, or, likewise, since what Bede does elaborate on is the fact that the judge who initially condemned Alban halted all persecution of Christians following the “many strange miracles” that occurred at the execution site that day and vowed to begin honoring the deaths of the Christian saints. Given this information, the executioner who beheaded Alban may then have been seen as traitorous or, at the very least, shunned for his barbaric actions against the now-beloved martyr so his indecent and sacrilegious “bragging” may have been rejected, spurned, and unwelcome. In either case, the executioner would have been able to boast of his deed as much in this new life—disabled and a pagan—as he would have had his death been confirmed in the vita.
parts, separated from their bodies, are given a brief but important moment in the hagiographical limelight. This intense focus provides insight into what is truly important concerning the bodies. While they land in the same vicinity on the ground, the head will always outrank the eyes, but the eyes are now subject to staring at their deficiency—no head—as well as the unrighteous activity perpetrated by the entire body, most especially the hands, from which they are likewise separated. It is not the whole corpse or body that is necessary for the death to be important; the head and eyes illustrate the difference between the fate of a pious, devout individual who followed the teachings of Christ following his conversion until his death, and an impious, wicked one who denied the Christian faith.

Though this is not a comprehensive study of male saints’ corpses from the Middle Ages, these three examples clearly demonstrate a significant trend in the hagiographical treatment of non-living bodies. While purity and chastity were of the utmost importance for hagiographies of female saints, the male saints were held to a different standard when it came to their worthiness for sainthood (though virginity was a valued trait as well). Their ability to illustrate devotion to Christianity, piety, and the *imitatio Christi* defines whether or not the man was truly holy enough to be counted among the heavenly body. The confirmation of their holiness is then demonstrated by the lack of corruption of the corpse in one form or another. For Edmund, it was his head’s ability to speak post-mortem; Cuthbert’s body was exhumed years after his burial and found incorrupt; and Alban’s head and blood sanctify a pagan even after the saint was executed. Other saints—and, of course, most non-saints—were not allotted even that much manuscript
time following their deaths. From these examples, the overarching theme present in each vita is the constant and persistent emphasis of the man’s piety, devotion, and ability to follow Christ’s teaching and examples for his community and the larger world. It is that set of qualities which seems to determine whether or not the corpse of the saint is described beyond the simple fact of his death.
Chapter 5

What’s a Corpse Anyway? The Unlikely Dead of

“The Dream of the Rood,” Judith, and the “Soul and Body” Poems

When considering the texts in which one may find corpses strewn about the manuscript folios, it is logical to jump to an epic poem such as Beowulf where battles between good and evil will result in the death of at least one character as well as saints’ lives whose stories must ultimately end with the deaths—many times martyrdoms—of main characters. The eponymous hero and the monsters of Anglo-Saxon epic control the plot, and audiences are as ravenous as Grendel to find out how the monster will be defeated and if the hero survives. Saints may be executed for their faith or simply die after having lived a pious and devout life. There is a natural curiosity to search for corpses of many of these characters within the pages of their tales because their actions in life must have repercussions on the ways in which their bodies are dealt with following their deaths. However, the Anglo-Saxon authors did not limit their inclusion of corpses to epics and hagiographies. Non-hagiographical religious texts of the early Middle Ages incorporated corpses in unique and remarkable ways which differ significantly from epics and hagiographies.

In the pieces discussed in this chapter, each one creates a unique situation in which a corpse is incorporated to illustrate a particular, usually religious, point to its audience. The dead bodies in these texts are not always the ones we would automatically expect, sometimes defy the very definition of what a corpse can be, and other times undergo interesting penalties or chastisements for wrongdoings committed during life.
While these distinctive integrations of corpses may seem to be just the innovations of certain creative authors, medieval history has demonstrated that there is a basis for the unusual treatment of corpses and illustrated just how familiar the medieval world truly was with their dead. Even if Anglo-Saxon authors themselves were not aware of how people in other parts of the world dealt with dead bodies, the texts certainly show that abnormal or out of the ordinary interactions with corpses were not limited to imagination or geography.

In January 897 one of the most curious, outlandish, and grotesque events occurred in Rome. While accusing a person of high authority within the church or political state of a serious religious crime may not have been done often, accusations of crimes committed by a dead man, specifically a deceased pope, were unheard of prior to 897. At a trial known as the Cadaver Synod, the current pope, Stephen VII, claimed that Formosus broke canon law by becoming the bishop of Rome while still acting as the bishop for another diocese. However, his true offense was crowning as emperor one of many illegitimate descendants of Charlemagne and a member of the party opposed to Pope Stephen when he had already crowned the candidate Pope Stephen’s party supported. For the bizarre trial, Pope Stephen had the body of Pope Formosus (891-896)

478 It was chronicled in several annals including Annales Fuldenses, Annales Alamannici, and Annales Laubacensium.
exhumed from the tomb where it had lain for less than a year. His corpse, still dressed in papal regalia, was propped up on the papal throne, and placed on trial, with a deacon answering the charges on behalf of the dead pontiff. Formosus was convicted, and all his ordinations declared invalid. The three fingers used to form the sign of blessing were cut from his right hand, and the corpse stripped of its papal garments and put into layman’s clothing. It is possible that the body was first consigned to an unmarked grave, but again disinterred, and thrown into the Tiber.481

During this bizarre escapade, Stephen screamed at the corpse of the pope, and the deacon appointed to speak for the deceased pope remained quiet. Formosus’s corpse was desecrated following its conviction because “early medieval law, including canon law was something done to the body – early medieval law pertained to the body more than the soul or mind.” 482 The body, alive or dead, was of the utmost importance, so Stephen strove to disgrace the corpse and demonstrate his power in the Roman Christian world by reviving “the ancient Roman practice of damnatio memoriae,”483 in order to erase Formosus from the minds of the people.

After spending a bit of time in the Tiber River, Formosus’s body was discovered by a monk and reburied. A later successor to the papacy, Theodore II (897),484 found Formosus’s body, invalidated the Cadaver Synod, reinstated Formosus’s ordinations,  

483 Moore, “The Body of Pope Formosus,” 288. Moore discusses the practice of damnatio memoriae in great detail, and some aspects of the practice pertain directly to the treatment of the corpse of the individual who is being erased from public memory. Though much of the ritual involved destruction of statues and erasure of names from inscriptions, mutilation of the corpses was often part of it as well even into Christian times. Actions taken include decapitation (Pertinax); decapitation with the head displayed (Pescenius Niger); decapitation, body trampled by a horse, left for carrion, and thrown in the Tiber (Clodius Albinus); and body drowned in the Tiber, dragged from it, mutilated, decapitated, and head displayed in Rome (Maxentius). The emphasis on the inhuman treatment of the corpses in the situation of the damnatio further illustrates why the literary texts, which also depict unusual treatment of corpses, are important and critical for understanding the culture of the Anglo-Saxons and the culture which influenced them. See pp. 288-90 for more concerning the damnatio.
484 After Stephen was stripped of his title, made to dress as a monk, jailed, and possibly strangled in August 897, Romanus took the papacy. Romanus annulled Stephen’s orders but was deposed within the year. Theodore II then followed Romanus but spent only twenty days in the office. See Moore, “The Body of Pope Formosus,” and Bilal and Tubbs, “Popes Convict Dead Pope,” for more.
brought the corpse before the Confession of St. Peter, had a mass dedicated to the pope’s soul, and reinterred the corpse in its original tomb fully garbed in pontifical robes. Also, a “consecrated host was placed in his mouth, restoring Formosus to communion with the Church.”485 However, Pope Sergius III (904-11) negated all of this by reconfirming Formosus’s convictions. At a second Cadaver Synod, he had the corpse of Formosus exhumed, tried, and found guilty again. This time Formosus was beheaded for his crimes.486 Though this second synod may be apocryphal, the overall handling of the pope’s corpse clearly demonstrates that corpses, both historical and literary, were treated in a variety of ways for myriad reasons, including political gain. This example illustrates the extent to which corpses may have been (mis)handled by the living to make a point, confirm a belief, and defy norms to reach a particular goal. Although the treatment of Formosus’s corpse is clearly extreme and highly unusual, especially since Formosus was a pope, the larger point remains. Corpses were handled in unique and intriguing ways throughout the Middle Ages for theological, cultural, social, or political reasons, and the living seemed to have no qualms about interacting with the bodies of those they knew in life.

The Anglo-Saxon texts throughout this chapter also demonstrate the ways in which authors may have felt compelled to include corpses within their stories to challenge the concept of typical corpse treatment as well as the very definition and categorization of a corpse. While the Anglo-Saxon authors whose texts will be examined here may not have been aware of the incident with Pope Formosus, their incorporation of unexpected corpses and the treatment of those dead bodies illustrates that the deceased

486 Bilal and Tubbs, “Popes Convict Dead Pope,” 143.
remained viable elements within their community to be used, exploited, or manipulated to achieve a goal or make a point.

“The Dream of the Rood”

In the Old English dream vision poem “The Dream of the Rood,” the anonymous author provides two intriguing corpses, if one is willing to stretch one’s imagination about the definition of the term “corpse.” The poem is most commonly divided into three distinct sections in which the narrator changes as does the perspective from which the story is told. In the first twenty-seven lines, the dreamer (a man) is the narrator, and he is setting up the scene as he bears witness to a rood, or cross, upon which he sees shining gems but also glistening with blood. He is in awe at the sight but becomes even more interested when the tree actually begins to tell its tale of woe. Throughout this second section (lines 28-121), a dream vision, the tree takes over narratorial duties, and we are presented with the two corpses: the body of Christ during his crucifixion as well as the speaking, non-living body upon which Christ was executed, the cross. The rood states that it was

wæs aheawan holtes on ende,
astyræd of stefne minum. Genaman me ðær strange feondas,
geworhton him þær to wæfersyne, heton me heora wergas hebban. (ll. 29-31)

hewn down at the holt’s end,
stirred from my stock. Strong foes seized me there,
worked for themselves an awful spectacle, ordered me to heave up their criminals.487

It is clear that the tree has been separated from the roots which give it life, so the remains now have no life force coursing through them. Even without this life force, the tree is still animate and speaks as a type of parallel to Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. As the rood continues recalling the events of that day, the two corpses are given fairly equal treatment by the poet.

The second section of the poem, told from the point of view of the cross, details the events of Christ’s crucifixion once he has reached the hilltop upon which the cross will be raised and Christ’s body hung from it. The rood explains, as any good narrator should, how it plays its part and what exactly happens to the body of Christ. Once the man has been nailed to the cross and further injured by a spear, the tree relates that it

\[ wæs \text{ mid } \text{blode bestemed,} \]
\[ \text{begoten of } \text{þæs guman sidan, siððan he } \text{hæfde his gast onsended. (ll. 48-9)} \]

was wet with blood,
shed from the man’s side, after he had sent forth his soul.\textsuperscript{488}

From this point on, Christ’s body would seem to have become a corpse, as is discussed in the next few lines:

\[ ðystro hæfdon \]
\[ bewrigen mid wolcnum wealdendes hræw. (ll. 52-3) \]
\[ \text{darkness had} \]
\[ \text{covered the corpse of the Lord with clouds.} \textsuperscript{489} \]

The phrasing is a bit ambiguous because \textit{hræw} is defined as “The body of a man living or dead, a corpse, carcase, trunk, carrion,”\textsuperscript{490} a “living body: corpse, carcase, carrion,”\textsuperscript{491}

\textsuperscript{488} Krapp, “Dream of the Rood,” 62.
\textsuperscript{489} Krapp, “Dream of the Rood,” 62.
and “corpse, (dead) body” by various translators. The Bosworth-Toller *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* provides myriad examples from other Anglo-Saxon texts for translations of the term as a living body and a corpse, so this alone is not conclusive of the body’s animate or inanimate status. The rood continues then to recount the mood and environment following Christ’s death, and the anonymous author is sure to provide as much detail as possible while remaining poetic and respectful of the religious icon.

Unlike many hagiographies written in the Middle Ages, the rood’s account of what becomes of Christ’s body is quite detailed and provides a clear understanding of where the corpse is taken and how the people react to his death. As Christ is removed from the cross, his body was treated with the utmost care while the rood was left beaten and bloody. The cross recounts:

> Hwæðere þær fuse feorran cwoman
to þam ædelinge. Ic þæt eall beheold.
>Sare ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed, hnag ic hwæðre þam secgum to handa,
eaðmod elne mycle. Genamon hie þær ælmihtigne god,
ahofon hine of þam hefian wite. Forleton me þa hilderincas standan steame bedrifenne; eall ic wæs mid strælum forwundod.
>Aledon hie ðær limwerigne, gestodon him æt his lices heaufðum,
>beheoldon hie ðær heofenes dryhten, ond he hine ðær hwile reste,
>meðe æfter þam mielan gewinne. (ll. 57-65)

However they came quick from afar to the Lord; I beheld all of that. I was greatly troubled with sorrow, but nevertheless I bowed into the hands of those men humble with great courage. They took from there Almighty God, lifted him from the grievous torment; the warriors then left me to stand enveloped in blood; I was completely wounded with arrows. They laid down the limb-weary one, they stood by him at the head of his corpse, they beheld there the lord of heaven; and he rested there for a while,

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exhausted after the great strife.\textsuperscript{493}

From the rood’s description, one may be able to conclude that Christ may have not actually died from the torments and crucifixion. Though the cross is completely covered in blood from the wounds in Christ’s body, one may choose to interpret that Christ could still be alive. Furthermore, the last few lines of this section provide details about Christ’s state and well-being that may be understood in various ways. A corpse would not usually be considered limb-weary, nor would a corpse need to rest or feel exhausted after enduring strife. This is representative of the paradox inherent in the gospels concerning Christ’s death and resurrection. As Thomas D. Hill points out, the “Passion narratives in the gospels thus reflect a deeply paradoxical event. The suffering and death of Jesus is an apparent defeat, and yet His passion is the ultimate goal of His incarnation and ministry and it culminates in His triumph over Satan and death.”\textsuperscript{494} Hill’s analysis of the passion narratives as well as the poet’s chosen terminology to describe Christ’s post-crucifixion body brings to the foreground the concept of Christ as hero in a similar fashion to Germanic heroes of secular poetry.

Catherine Woeber explains that early Christian poetry used Germanic diction and metaphor to intrigue its audience, and “Christian subject matter usually comprised exciting adventures and martial exploits since formulas already existed for them. Germanic words and compounds used to express the idea of ‘ruler’ were adapted to serve as synonyms for God, like *waldend* and *dryhten*.”\textsuperscript{495} As a Christian hero, Jesus “trusts

solely in God for his strength” as he, according to Stanley Greenfield, “ventur[es] into battle against spiritual evil and the forces of Satan even as the secular lord and his comitatus engaged the armed forces of predatory enemies.” Woeber argues effectively that the poet is able to demonstrate how Christ is a “victor on the Cross” comparable to Germanic heroes, so the focus on his body following the crucifixion flows logically given the importance placed on the bodies of heroes such as Beowulf. Having fought for his faith and coming out as the victor because of his sacrifice (which seems paradoxical to the typical definition of victory), the allusion to the resurrection is all the more justified since the people would desire for their ruler to return triumphantly.

The linchpin term in deciding Christ’s state of life is *lices* because it is not definitively a corpse or living body. The Bosworth-Toller *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* defines it as “A body [living or dead] generally the latter,” so the possibility of ambiguity continues to foreshadow Christ’s resurrection. Likewise, we have already been told that the cross witnessed Christ sending forth his soul before his body was removed. In the hagiography of St. Edmund by Ælfric of Eynsham, we are told that the saint cast his soul upward to heaven following the Vikings’ tortures even though the head was able to remain animate following decapitation. This did not mean that Edmund was still alive.

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when he called out to his men in order to reveal his head’s location, but rather that he was a temporarily animate corpse (see chapter 4). Following this same logic, Christ’s body on the cross is no longer a living body after his soul is sent to heaven. It is the corpse, then, which is exhausted and resting after having been tortured for so long, even though the cross refers to Christ’s body in mostly living terms. As a Christian hero, Jesus continues an active presence in the community even after the crucifixion and will confirm his triumph over his enemies when he returns from the grave. The rood seems to know that Christ is the hero regardless of the physical well-being of his corpse.

The next section of the poem focuses on exactly what has happened, how the people around Christ feel concerning his death, and where Christ’s body is placed. It is reminiscent of a saint’s life such as St. Æthelthryth’s because of the attention given to the grave and the body within that grave. Æthelthryth’s tomb is opened and her body exhumed, and Ælfric is sure to mention who is permitted to gaze upon the body (see chapter 3). Christ’s sepulcher also receives great attention in the poem as well as those in attendance. It also calls to mind the mourning scene in Beowulf as the people mourn the loss of their leader, a warrior. As a Christian warrior, Jesus is also mourned by his people because they now wonder who will lead the charge against the enemy forces who oppose Christianity. The audience of the poem knows, of course, that the resurrection is imminent and will have a profound impact on Christianity. The rood explains,

Ongunnon him þa moldern wyrcan
beornas on banan gesyhðe; curfon hie ðæt of beorhtan stane,
gesetton hie ðæron sigora wealdend. Ongunnon him þa sorhleoð galan
earme on þa æfentide, þa hie woldon eft síðian,
meðe fram þam mæran þeodne. Reste he ðær mæte weorode. (ll. 65-9)

Then they, the men, began to make for him a tomb in sight of the slayers; they hewed it out of bright stone,
they set him, the Wielder of victories, therein. Then they, wretched in the evening, began to sing a dirge. Then afterward they, weary, wished to depart from the glorious Lord; he rested there with a small company.501

Even after his death, Christ’s body is the central focus and is representative of all that he and his followers believed in. They made the tomb in a location where his slayers could see it, so the fight against Christ’s enemies did not end simply because his body had died. The corpse, its burial place, and the mourners are not hidden; his body continues to be used to embolden the faithful and, as the audience knows, will be resurrected for the ultimate victory. Just as a saint’s body may be displayed as a symbol of devout faith and a leader’s corpse is publicly burned or placed in a barrow to remain in the memory of his people, so too is Christ’s corpse purposefully laid in its resting place, the moldern, and thoroughly explained in the poem. The poet could have provided only a line or two of description for the corpse and tomb, but it was critical that more attention be given to it due to its manifold importance.

Unlike most Christian texts which focus on the crucifixion as salvation for all mankind and the resurrection of the Lord to demonstrate Christ’s victory over death, “The Dream of the Rood” dedicates ample space to Christ’s dead, lifeless body. Because this section of the poem is from the perspective of the cross, it is logical that it describes the scene through its own experience. However, the poet chooses to continue writing about a corpse long after the crucifixion has ended and well before the resurrection occurs. He hints at and foreshadows the resurrection throughout the poem but never falters in reminding the audience that Christ has died just as all of humankind will die. In keeping with Christian dogma, the poem emphasizes the fact that Christ was fully human

and fully divine by dedicating so much of this section to the corpse. He will rise and have victory over death, but the reality of his lifeless corpse could not be denied or overlooked. Christ is placed in the moldern, the “grave”\(^{502}\) the “sepulcher, tomb,”\(^{503}\) where he grew cold as normal bodily function ceased. The cross even interrupts its own transition to the aftermath of the crucifixion with a seemingly scientific description of Christ in his tomb, stating,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hræw colode,} \\
\text{fæger feorgbold. (ll. 72-3)}
\end{align*}
\]

The corpse grew cold, the beautiful soul-dwelling.\(^{504}\)

The Anglo-Saxons would have understood basic pathology and post-mortem bodily functioning to the point that they would have expected Christ’s body to grow cold. The normal bodily functioning humanizes Christ as the hero by demonstrating that he could and did die, but the audience of the poem knew that the resurrection was imminent, thereby confirming the divinity of their Savior/hero.

“The Dream of the Rood” is able to demonstrate the importance of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross as redemption of humankind while also hinting at the eventuality of the resurrection through a few moments of ambiguity concerning Christ’s lifeless corpse. The metaphor of Christ as a battle-weary hero taking a moment to rest is present in the piece so that the resurrection is kept in view—he will be back and return to the battle for the salvation of humanity—but the focus remains on Christ’s dead body. This piece emphasizes the mysterious and otherworldly aspect of the nature of Christ and the dogma

\(^{503}\) Cook, *Dream of the Rood*, 62.
\(^{504}\) Krapp, “Dream of the Rood,” 63.
surrounding his life, death, and eventual resurrection. As Rosemary Woolf relates concerning the complexity of the poet’s approach to Christianity, the

most remarkable achievement of the poem is its balance between the effects of triumph and suffering, and their paradoxical fusion in the Crucifixion is suggested first by the alternation between the jewelled radiant cross and the plain and blood-covered cross in the prelude, and secondly and much more subtly and powerfully by the two figures of the heroic victorious warrior and the passive enduring cross. At the time when the poet wrote, the Church insisted on the co-existence of these two elements in Christ, divine supremacy and human suffering, with a vehemence and rigidity deriving from more than two centuries of heretical Christological dispute, and which abated only when the orthodox view was no longer questioned.505

Given Woolf’s explanation, it makes clearer sense as to why the poet used terms for a body which could be in reference to the living or the dead. In order to see Christ as a triumphant heroic warrior, the emphasis could not be on the suffering and death as a defeat of the human but rather as the victory over persecution seen from the view of the cross upon which he suffered. Woolf elaborates that the “stress that will be laid on the Crucifixion as a scene of triumph or a scene of suffering depends upon the stress that is laid on Christ as God or Christ as man.”506 The cross, then, bears the gems as the victor’s spoils but also the blood so that the body of the Lord need not be seen as weak or lacking. The poet knew and understood “that the greatest theological care and precision was required in any statements about Christ’s life, and in particular about His Crucifixion, and that an equal stress must be laid on Christ’s divinity … and Christ’s humanity.”507 Using the perspective of the rood allows the poet to intertwine these two ideals concerning Christ’s nature because the cross is bonded with Christ and witnesses all that the man

endures as well as Christ’s own actions (i.e. ascending the cross, sending forth his soul, dying, resting after having been removed from the cross). The poem was written at a time when both Christology and soteriology laid this double stress on the Crucifixion as a scene of both triumph and suffering, and the author has succeeded in fulfilling what might seem to be an artistically impossible demand. Without such a brilliant conception as that of the poet’s, the two aspects would inevitably have become separated, as they were usually in the Middle Ages. The Crucifixion in both mediæval art and mediæval literature is usually a scene of utmost agony: in accordance with the doctrine of ‘satisfaction’, Christ as man offers His suffering to its farthest limit, until the body hangs painfully from the Cross without blood or life. The note of triumph is necessarily reserved until the Harrowing of Hell, when Christ, approaching as the King of Glory, conquers the devil, often using His Resurrection cross as a weapon of war.\footnote{Woolf, “Doctrinal Influences,” 143.}

It seems that because the paradox of the dogma exists, the poet must use terms that create ambiguity for the body of Christ as corpse or resting, living figure so that Christ is able to remain a triumphant hero and suffering human simultaneously.

While Christ’s body is the obvious choice for the corpse of the poem since his mortal existence is as a human, there is another one which should be examined. Because the cross itself is speaking and becomes personified, I consider it to be deserving of the role of second corpse. In the beginning of the poem, the dreamer does not refer to the rood as something that may be considered a corpse. It is more of an object to behold rather than a body to be dealt with and given proper funereal rites. However, even the dreamer notes that there is something unique, intriguing, and deserving of respect concerning this tree. He relates,

\footnote{Woolf, “Doctrinal Influences,” 143.}

\begin{quote}
Þuhte me þæt ic gesawe syllicre treow 
on lyft lædan, leohte bewunden, 
beama beorhtost. Eall þæt beacen wæs 
begoten mid golde. Gimmas stodon 
fægere æt foldan sceatum, swylce þær fife wæron 
uppe on þam eaxlegespann. Beheoldon þær engel dryhtnes ealle, 
fægere þurh forðgesceaf. Ne wæs ðær huru fracodes géalga. (ll. 4-10)
\end{quote}
It seemed to me that I saw a very marvelous tree, 
the brightest of beams, wrapped in light 
brought on high. The beacon was 
all covered in gold; the beautiful gems stood 
on the surface of the ground, just as there were five up on the crossbeam. 
The angels of God, beautiful by means of creation, all beheld [it] there: 
verily, that was not a wicked gallows.\(^509\)

At this point, the rood is simply an object, and the dreamer is attempting to 
demonstrate how it should not be deemed an instrument of torture and death. He uses 
terms which are similar to those employed in the depiction of Christ himself as well as 
those which provide the cross with the type of respect that Christ also receives: “cross of 
victory,” (“sigebeam,” l. 13)\(^510\)

\begin{verbatim}
  wuldres treow, 
  wædum geweorðode, wynnum scinan, 
  gegyred mid golde, (ll. 14-16)
\end{verbatim}

tree of wonders 
decorated in garments, shining with joys, 
adorned with gold,\(^511\)

and

\begin{verbatim}
  gimmas hæfdon 
  bewrigene weordlice wealdendes treow. (ll. 16-17)
\end{verbatim}

gems had 
worthily wrapped the tree of the Lord.\(^512\)

There are also additional elements of the description which can be considered 
personifications that force the audience to question whether or not this beam is a living 
being or simply an object of destruction. As Matthew Scribner writes in his ecocritical

analysis of the role of the tree in “Dream of the Rood,” the “Cross eventually comes to
relish the fact that it has been made into an instrument that assists Christians in their
worship,” but there are “issues of the autonomy of ‘nature’”\textsuperscript{513} that arise from this
instrumentation. He argues that the Cross is a medieval version of Donna Haraway’s
cyborg\textsuperscript{514} (used in the description of humanity’s relationship with machines), wherein

the poem and the Ruthwell Cross encourage identification of the cross with
human beings, animals, and even the divine Christ, rather than any purity
recognizable in nature. It also encourages the human readers of the poem to
identify with it, in a reciprocal sympathy … the Cross maintains its radical
ecological perspective even after it has entered the realm of human dominance.\textsuperscript{515}

Essentially, Scribner believes that even though the tree was put to use by people as a
“symbolic technology used to propagate human ideas,” it retains its basic natural state
and “remains a powerful proponent of nature.”\textsuperscript{516} It cannot simply be a lifeless beam
upon which Christ was made to suffer because “the Cross encourages a sympathetic
reaction. It is concerned to make its case as a noble and suffering tree and draws attention
to its tree biology as it recounts the violence that it has suffered.”\textsuperscript{517} Though obviously
not a human figure, the rood still has its identity as a tree, not just the denatured piece of
technology that it may appear to be. Likewise, there is the “striking appeal for the
participation of the nonhuman world in Christianity”\textsuperscript{518} in that the Cross is the method by
which humanity is saved.

In the poem, the dreamer relates,

\textsuperscript{515} Scribner, “Tree and Technology.” 242.
\textsuperscript{516} Scribner, “Tree and Technology.” 246.
\textsuperscript{517} Scribner, “Tree and Technology.” 246.
\textsuperscript{518} Scribner, “Tree and Technology,” 252.
ic þurh þæt gold ongytan meahte
earmra ærgewin, þæt hit ærest ongan
swætan on þa swiðran healfe. Eall ic wæs mid sorgum
gedrefed,
forht ic wæs for þære fægran gesyhðe. Geseah ic þæt fuse beacen
wendan wædum and bleom: hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed,
beswynled mid swates gange, hwilum mid since gegyrwed. (ll. 18-23)

I was able to perceive through that gold
a wretched ancient strife, when it at first began
to sweat on the right half. I was all distressed with sorrow;
I was fearful for the beautiful sight. I saw that beacon readily change
its garments and hue: sometimes it was wet with moisture,
defiled by the flow of blood, other times adorned with treasure.  

Though not conclusive that the cross is considered a living creature in the mind of the
poet or the dreamer, it has certainly been given qualities that can also be attributed to a
human. The cross is dressed in garments which it can change, adorned with treasures, can
be defiled, and sweats on one of its sides. Much of this obviously refers to Christ and
his place on the rood, but there is no specific mention of the man. All of these descriptors
are ascribed to the cross. Within only the first twenty-five lines, we are beginning to
observe the idea that there is definitely something significant about the status of this
particular piece of wood.

While the dreamer’s description of the cross allows the audience to perceive a
certain undeniable importance about this tree, it is not until the poet utilizes the rhetorical

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520 Scribner explains that the similarities between the Cross and Christ cannot be ignored, including the
fluids released from both bodies. He concentrates on the term “steame” as it can mean “moisture” or
“blood,” but others have argued for “steam” and even “horse sweat” (see Richard North, Heathen Gods in
Old English Literature, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 22 (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 1997, 295)). His main focus on this point is the fact that John 19:34 relates how blood and water
come from Christ’s side (he references Peter Orton, “The Technique of Object-Personification in The
Dream of the Rood and a Comparison with the Old English Riddles,” Leeds Studies in English 11 (1980):
4), so the medieval audience’s awareness of this biblical source could lead them to believe that the Cross
and Christ are bleeding the same liquid and sharing the same essence. See Scribner, “Tree and
Technology,” 254.
technique of prosopopoeia, which affords the cross the opportunity to narrate its story,\(^{521}\) that we may begin to believe that the cross is also a second corpse which has been torn asunder and offered as a sacrifice. The opening statement of the rood in section two is able to be read as its martyrdom since the description it gives is definitely a death scene.

It remembers:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Þæt wæs geara iu, (ic ðæt gyta geman),} \\
\text{ðæt ic wæs aheaven holtes on ende,} \\
\text{astyrəd of stefne minum. Genaman me ðær strange feondas,} \\
\text{geworhton him þær to wæfersyne, heton me heora wergas hebban.} \\
\text{Bæron me ðær beornas on eaxlum, oððæt hie me on beorg asetton,} \\
\text{gefæstnodon me þær feonda s genoge. Geseah ic þa frean mancynnes} \\
\text{efstan elne mycle ðæt he me wolde on gestigan. (ll. 28-34)}
\end{align*}
\]

It was long ago—I remember still—that I was cut down at the end of the forest, removed from my trunk. The strange enemies took me there, fashioned for themselves a spectacle there, commanded me to bear aloft their criminals; the men bore me on their shoulders, until they placed me on the hill, numerous enemies fastened me there. I saw the Lord of mankind hasten with much courage so that he wished to ascend onto me.\(^{522}\)

Just as in any hagiography of the Middle Ages, the story of the rood’s extraction from its home shows that it suffers and dies but still stands firm for the sake of its lord. The tree’s enemies take it from the forest and place it in a compromising position; they want it to


bear their criminals, but it quickly realizes that one of the people who they considered to be a criminal was Christ. The tree is being used as a tool of execution but is also bearing the pain of the punishment, as much the recipient as is Christ. Given the fact “that from antiquity, animals were punished for crimes, and lifeless objects associated with a crime could be considered offensive and might be punished,” the cross’s role in the crucifixion at this point in the poem begins to illustrate how it may be interpreted as a personified, non-living object rather than an inanimate object. The rood understands that it is no longer the focus of the enemies’ concern, and it must do whatever it can to support the choices and righteousness of the lord.

The rood’s next words show that it is now absolutely dedicated to Christ in the same way that Christian saints dedicate themselves, in life or death, to spreading the faith and demonstrating their strength and commitment to Christianity. The rood now offers itself as a symbol of the courage that Christ himself illustrates by climbing onto his execution tree. The “speaking Cross dramatically represents the human, suffering body of the incarnate Christ.” Following Christ’s ascension onto the cross, it imitates the lord’s example as best as it could, given the fact that it is a tree rather than a human. The rood explains,

\[ \text{þær ic űa ne dorste ofer dryhtnes word bugan oððe berstan, űa ic þifian geseah eorðan sceatas. Ealle ic mihte feondas gefyllan, hwæorc fæste stod.} \]  

(ll. 35-8)

Then I dared not [be] contrary to the word of the lord there, [dared not] to bend or burst asunder, when I saw the surface of the earth tremble; I had the power to slay all the enemies, yet I stood firm.

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It understands what its role is in the salvation of humanity: “the high gallows” (“gealgan heanne,” l. 40)\(^{526}\) upon which Christ “wished to redeem mankind” (“wolde mancyn lysan,” l. 41).\(^{527}\) The rood seems to have a connection with Christ, and the two characters will become martyrs so that the sins of mankind will not damn them. As Hill relates, the “character ‘Christ’ in the poem thus represents the divine aspect of the incarnate Deus-Homo, whereas the Cross represents the human, particularly the corporeal aspect of His being. The ‘reordberend,’ ‘speaking’ Cross in this poem thus represents the ‘body’ of Christ.”\(^{528}\)

As the story of the rood’s martyrdom continues, it becomes clear that it is suffering as much as Christ himself does. Each element of the crucifixion is experienced by the cross in vivid, gory detail, but, just as Christ does not balk at his fate or fight back against his persecutors, the rood refuses to give in to the same temptation. It recollects,

\[\text{þurhdifan hi me mid deorcan næglum. On me syndon þa dolg gesiene,}
\text{opene inwidthlemmas. Ne dorste ic hira nænigum sceðdan.}
\text{Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere. Eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed,}
\text{begoten of þæs guman sidan, siððan he hæfde his gast onsended. (ll. 46-9)}\]

They pierced me with dark nails; then on me were visible wounds. They mocked both of us together. I was all wet with blood shed from the side of the man, after he had sent forth his soul.\(^{529}\)

The poet personifies the rood by allowing it not only to speak in the dreamer’s vision but also to articulate what happened, how it felt while the crucifixion was occurring, and in its co-suffering with Christ. This shows a significant explanation for the problematic enigma within Christianity (the dual natures of Christ as fully human and fully divine)

\(^{528}\) Hill, “Cross as Symbolic Body,” 297.
which Hill discusses in both “Dream of the Rood” and the *Regularis Concordia*, “a well-known Anglo-Latin text … [which] describes a liturgical ceremony in which the Cross on the altar is ‘deposited’ for the three days from Good Friday to the dawn of Easter Sunday in a receptacle which represents the tomb of Christ.”⁵³⁰ Hill emphasizes that the author of the *Regularis Concordia* “specifically identifies the Cross in this ceremony as a symbol of the body of Jesus,”⁵³¹ so it is logical that within a poem focused on the rood used in the actual crucifixion of Christ the cross itself would also become the symbol of Christ’s body. The “Dream” poet simply takes it a step even further and animates the tree; the fact that it is in a dream vision is less important than the animation—and, therefore, death—of the cross. To more easily explain and grasp the fundamental issue of Christ’s dual natures which “raised a variety of problems for theologians and exegetes, and is, indeed, difficult to conceptualise as anything other than a profound Christian mystery,”⁵³² Hill explains that

In both the poem and the proto-dramatic rite [the *Regularis Concordia*] it was necessary to find a symbol to represent the human body of the incarnate Christ. During the passion, Christ as man suffered and died. The divine Son, however, could neither suffer nor die, and after Christ’s death on the Cross, while Christ’s body rested in the tomb, His human soul and divine person harrowed Hell, and freed Adam, Eve, and the patriarchs.⁵³³

The cross is a symbol of the body of Christ, but it is also a physical body in and of itself which suffers, dies, and deservedly can be treated as a second corpse within the poem.

Intermixed with the rood’s depiction of the people’s treatment of the corpse of Christ is the constant reminder that the cross suffers, even though it has already been felled and taken from its life source. It relates,

Sare ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed, hnaeg ic hwædre þam secgum to handa, eaðmod eæne mycle. Genamon hie þær ælmihtege god, ahofon hine of ðam hefian wite. Forleton me þa hilderincas standan steame bedrifenne; eall ic wæs mid strælum forwundod. (ll. 59-62)

I was greatly troubled with sorrow, I bowed into the hands of those men humble with great zeal. They took from there Almighty God, lifted him from the grievous torment; the warriors then left me to stand enveloped in blood; I was completely wounded with arrows.534

When Christ is removed from the cross, the rood is handled as a corpse as well, left covered in blood and arrow wounds. While Christ’s body was still alive, the cross was active in its ability to stay firmly in place without wavering. After Christ is removed, the cross becomes much more passive just as Christ’s body had. It tells the dreamer,

þa us man fyllan ongan
ealle to eorðan. þæt wæs egeslic wyrd!
Bedealf us man on deopan seafe. Hwædre me þær dryhtnes þegnas, freondas gefrunon,
don geredon me golde and seolfre. (ll. 73-7)

Then a certain one set about cutting us all to the earth—that was a fearful fate! The one buried us in a deep pit. Nevertheless the thanes of the lord, friends, found me there; they then raised me from the earth, they decorated me with gold and silver.535

The rood is taken care of in much the same way that a human corpse would be in preparation for burial or special honors. It was taken from its home and persecuted by its enemies, forced to endure brutality on two fronts (for itself and for Christ), then buried,

exhumed, and wrapped with exceptional treatments. The cross has certainly been given the same kind of considerations as one might expect to see for a saint or other significant individual in the community.

Finally, the cross relates that it has survived the persecution that its enemies have forced it to withstand—

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ic bealuwara weorc gebiden hæbbe,} \\
\text{sarra sorga. (ll. 79-80)} \\
\text{“I have endured the pain, the grievous sorrows,} \\
\text{of the evil ones}^{536}
\end{align*}
\]

—and come out remaining a steadfast symbol of the faith so

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þæt me weorðiað wide ond side} \\
\text{menn ofer moldan, ond eall þeos mære gesceaf,} \\
\text{gebiddaþ him to þyssum beacne. (ll. 81-3)} \\
\text{that men over the earth honor me [the rood] far and wide,} \\
\text{and all this glorious creation address themselves} \\
\text{in prayer to this beacon.}^{537}
\end{align*}
\]

It seems that the cross is very much a symbolic representation of Christ himself—the human side of Christ, of course, since it is, in my estimation, considered a corpse and has died both as a tree and as the corporeal form of Christ—and the tree has begun to not only imitate the lord but also observe the repercussions that its similarities have on the larger community. It relates,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{On me bearn godes} \\
\text{þrowode hwile. Forþan ic þrymfæst nu} \\
\text{hlifige under heofenum, ond ic hælan mæg} \\
\text{æghwylene anra, þara þe him bið egesa to me.} \\
\text{Iu ic wæs geworden wita heardost,} \\
\text{leodum laðost, æþan ic him lifes weg} \\
\text{rihtne gerymde, reordberendum. Hwæt, me þa geweorðode wuldres ealdor} \\
\text{ofor holmwudu, heofonrices weard! (ll. 83-91)}
\end{align*}
\]

\[^{536}\text{Krapp, “Dream of the Rood,” 63.}\]

\[^{537}\text{Krapp, “Dream of the Rood,” 63.}\]
On me the Son of God
suffered for a while; therefore I, glorious, now
tower under the heavens, and I am able to save
everyone, those who are in fear of me.
Long ago I became the most severe of torments,
most hateful to men, before I prepared the true way of life for them,
the speech-gifted ones. Lo, then the Lord of glory,
the Ward of Heaven, honored me over the forest.538

The rood’s connection to Christ through the crucifixion enables it to receive honors and
glory of which other members of the forest would never conceive.539 It ends up
comparing itself directly to Christ’s mother, Mary, and how she was exalted over all
other women because of the role she played in Christ’s life. As Scribner relates, this
statement is important “because it suggests that just as there is an ideal image of
womanhood, so there is an ideal form of treeness. Any theologian would place Mary high
above any tree, and while the Cross and Mary are by no means equal here … they are
parallel. Both have their own place, and their own honors due.”540 The tree has become
sanctified, and the poet uses this work as a means to share the cross’s life and death for
the greater good of the Christian world. Though it does not at first realize that it is being
torn asunder for a higher purpose than an executioner’s tool, the rood is martyred for the
cause of Christianity and stands—literally and figuratively—as a symbol of faith and

539 Gillian Rudd, Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), discusses the marginalization of trees and forests in later medieval
works, especially Chaucer. She notes that in Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale” the forest “is a backdrop to
human affairs, the woods and trees are cultivated and dispensable” (50). The trees serve a purpose for
humans and are essentially denatured so that they can be utilized in the anthropocentric vision of life of
earth. Lisa Kiser, “Chaucer and the Politics of Nature,” in Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the
Boundaries of Ecocriticism, ed. Karla Ambruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville: University of
Virginia Press, 2001), 41-56, also discusses Chaucer’s use of trees in his Parliament of Fowles as
symbolism for the purposes of humanity.
devoutness which could and should have been commemorated and imitated by all those who were made aware of its story.

When the dreamer finally regains control as narrator of the poem, he is clearly struck by the story he was just told and finds inspiration in it. He wants to seek out the rood itself in order to honor it as well as find redemption and salvation in its presence. He says,

ond ic wene me
daga gehwylce hwænne me dryhtnes rod,
þe ic her on eorðan ær sceawode,
on þysson lænan life gefetige,
ond me þonne gebringe þær is blis micel,
dream on heofonum, þær is dryhtnes folc
geseted to symle, þær is singal blis,
ond me þonne asette þær ic syððan mot
wunian on wuldre, well mid þam halgum
dreames brucan. (ll. 135-44)

and I expect for myself
every day when the rood of the Lord,
which I previously saw on the earth,
will fetch me from this transitory life,
and then bring me where there is much bliss,
the joy of the heavens, where the people of the Lord established a banquet, where there is perpetual bliss;
and then place me where I afterward may dwell in glory,
fully partake of the heavenly joy with the holy ones.  

The dreamer wishes to find the cross so that it may perform a miracle and enable him to join others who have passed before him into the kingdom of heaven. He hopes that the rood will act as an intercessor on his behalf, so his dream has inspired him to bear witness to the lifeless body of the tree. There is almost as much significance to the rood as there is for the actual body of Christ; since that body is unattainable, the symbolic representative of that body in a corporeal form—the cross—is a suitable substitute for the

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dreamer which reminds the audience “that the poet had read (or listened) widely and thought deeply about the central themes of Christian history.” This poem presents its audience with two significant corpses—philosophically and literarily—which are intertwined and difficult to separate without removing some importance from one or the other. Both the literal body of Christ which died upon the cross and the rood itself are discussed in the poem and given equal respect as holy bodies. While the cross may not be considered a typical corpse as seen in many other texts, the poem reveals the events of its life, death, and post-mortem activity all combine to form a substantial resemblance to a saint’s *vita*. This, combined with its interconnectedness with the life and death of Christ, demonstrates its qualifications as a corpse and why the poem’s author may have treated it as such.

*Judith*

While “Dream of the Rood” glorified and sanctified the corpses of Christ and the Cross presented throughout the course of the poem, other Old English texts do not carry that same theme when it comes to the treatment or descriptions of dead bodies. In the Old English biblical poem *Judith*, two genres—epic and hagiography—blend to create a story of female heroism quite unlike most other works of the time. *Judith* tells the story of a strong woman called Judith fighting in defense of her people against the heathenistic Assyrians, “Satan’s debauched, beastly army,” led by Holofernes, “a lustful, animalistic heathen who thoroughly displays all types of spiritual vice.” As is easily observable, the poem is allegorical, and that allegory “supports … the literal meaning of

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military conflict and presents it as a holy warfare against an enemy that is at once historical and eternal, political and religious, Danish and demonic.”

Ann W. Astell examines *Judith* through the lens of allegory used as a method of encouraging the real world audience “to follow her [Judith’s] example and confront, with comparable courage, the invading Danes.” In order to inspire the audience, according to Astell, the poet must juxtapose the two main characters, Judith

\[
\text{gleaw on geðonce,} \\
\text{ides ælfscinu. (ll. 13-14)}
\]

\[
\text{cunning in thought,} \\
\text{the elf-bright woman}
\]

and Holofernes “hateful to the Savior” (“nergende lað,” l. 45), in an extreme manner. She relates that the *Judith*-poet

\[
\text{obviates the need to discover the demonic, allegorical significance of the character, while using allegory in a direct way to heighten the emotional response of his audience. In its tropological dimension, then, the poem exerts upon its audience in an immediate way both the logical and ethical appeal included in the allegory (which assimilates Judith to God, Holofernes to the devil) and the pathetic appeal found in the *prima facie* meaning, the sound and sequence of the heroic tale – rhetorical appeals fused by the poet in the body of the text and directed toward a single final cause: the arousal of resistance in his auditors against a real and pressing foe.}
\]

All of the action and events which take place in the poem continue to reaffirm this interpretation, and this allegorical understanding of the characters also allows for a more in-depth analysis of Holofernes’s corpse.

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546 Astell, “Holofernes’s Head,” 119.
548 Dobbie, “Judith,” 100.
549 Astell, “Holofernes’s Head,” 121.
Holofernes is consistently described in deleterious, demonizing terms; in the poem, “he is rhetorically reduced to bestiality. The epithets for Holofernes become increasingly negative. When Judith finally kills him, she kills a monster (“þone atolan”), a heathen hound (“þone hæðenan hund”), a malignant-minded and hostile enemy (“þone feondsceādan,” “heteþoncolne”). Though these descriptions could have been part and parcel of a saint’s life, Judith’s persecution ends once she enters Holofernes’s tent and is successful in her pursuit. Her success, the assassination of Holofernes, is why the corpse of the malignant leader is featured in the poem rather than the death and/or body of Judith. She defends the Christian faith and fights for it. Judith has been given the Lord’s divine blessing, encouragement, and support because her endeavor is righteous in the Christian mindset. She is the Lord’s servant but also the embodiment of salvation for all people since God has blessed her. However, she is not martyred, so there is no Christian corpse to discuss. It is important, though, to emphasize Holofernes’s corpse because of how important it was for the audience to recognize and remember that “Holofernes plans to defile Judith” and “God himself opposes Holofernes, but he does so through Judith whom he inspires with valour.” Similar to the corpses of the monsters in Beowulf, the body of the enemy becomes a highlight and receives incredible attention from the poet because of how much the living man must be despised and his corpse reviled post-mortem.

Once Judith feels the strength of God following her prayer, she turns her attention to the task at hand. The assassination of Holofernes is thoroughly detailed, and the “poet stresses the coordination between Judith and her divine Dryhten in the next two narrative
units which recount Judith’s actual beheading of Holofernes … and the subsequent
torments of his soul in hell.” The scene itself is dramatic but has a clear tone of
Christian righteousness coursing through each line of text as the heroine takes the life of
another human being:

She seized then the heathen man
firmly by his hair, drew him toward her contemptuously by her hands,
and cunningly laid the wicked one, the hateful man,
down just as she might most easily well manage
the miserable one. Then the curly-haired one slew
the dire enemy, the hostile-minded one,
with the stained sword, so that she cut through half his neck,
so that he lay in a swoon,
drunken and wounded. He was not yet dead,
etirely lifeless: then the woman of undaunted courage
slew sharply for another time
the heathen hound, so that his head
rolled forth on the floor; the corrupt trunk
lay behind dead.

Knowing that she was supported by God in her enterprise gave Judith the strength she
needed to enact her plan without hesitation, but it is also significant that she decides to
remove the head of her enemy. There were certainly easier, more efficient execution

\footnotesize
\[552\] Astell, “Holofernes’s Head,” 128.
\[553\] Dobbie, “Judith,” 102.
methods, but decapitating him illustrates just how noteworthy of an adversary the Assyrian leader was for Judith, her people, and the Christian world. She was forced to strike Holofernes twice before his head was completely dislodged from his body. His earthbound body underwent a torturous end, but his soul is then led to an even more disastrous eternity where it will be condemned, debased, wound with serpents, tormented, and besieged by demonic entities in eternal darkness all because of his terrible deeds in life, including the kidnapping and persecution of Judith and her people. The Judith-poet reveals Holofernes’s soul’s ultimate fate just after describing his head and body following Judith’s assassination and uses a specific, intriguing adjective attached to the body or “trunk.” The poet calls his body “fula,” which has myriad translations. The Dictionary of Old English defines it as “foul, loathsome” as its most basic meaning. However, it also provides definitions including “(grossly) offensive to the senses, physically loathsome; especially of odour, often indicating putrefaction; foul-smelling, stinking” (Oliphant’s Latin-Old English Glossaries (F291), “referring to putrefaction or corruption: foul-smelling; putrid, corrupt; of a corpse: rotten, decayed, putrefied” (Oliphant’s Latin-Old English Glossaries (C799)), and many others which refer to physical decay or a rotten smell. One of the many cited examples which falls under this definition is the post-decapitation scene I have discussed here. Of particular interest, though, is the use of the word in Wulfstan’s Canons of Edgar, where the term can be interpreted as “morally or spiritually polluted, defiled, sinful, wicked, base.”554 Likewise, the Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary defines “ful” as “foul, dirty, impure, corrupt, rotten, stinking,

guilty, convicted of a crime.” From our understanding of Holofernes’s actions in life, it is clear that he is morally debased; using the term “fula” to describe his body at this point demonstrates that he is now a corpse, but the multitude of meanings leaves open the possible construal that perhaps his body had begun to metaphorically decay from his inner corruption of the soul and that the decay is now leaking out into the physical world. The corrupted, putrefying external now reflects what the poet overtly states will be happening to his soul in the afterlife. The corpse could not possibly have begun to decompose biologically so soon after the assassination, but utilizing “fula” at this point certainly conveys that Holofernes’s corruption affected both his body and soul. Perhaps, the poet wanted his audience to believe that Holofernes was so spiritually unclean that the death of the body enabled the corruption to manifest much more quickly than the typical decomposition process. Just as a saint’s incorrupt corpse displays the purity of the body and everlasting joy of the soul in heaven, so too does Holofernes’s foul corpse illustrate the fate which awaits those who deny God and persecute Christians. If Æthelthryth’s wounds could be healed (though we are unaware of the time frame) and the body appear to be simply sleeping in her grave, the processes in Holofernes’s body might certainly have been sped up to increase the severity of his appearance.

All of this, both the execution and the damnation, were sanctioned by God himself and enacted through his maidservant:

Judith’s violent physical action against Holofernes anticipates his eternal torment in hell and thus becomes an imitatio Dei, an act of holy devotion. In opposing her enemy Judith fights against God’s foe, and she does so in his power. In a summary statement at the end of these two passages the narrator explicitly unites

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divine action with human cooperation, noting that ‘Iudith æt guðe’ attained outstanding success ‘swa hyre God uðe.’

In the hagiographies of male saints, it is their ability to imitate Christ’s deeds and words throughout their lives which inevitably led to a discussion of their corpse, usually concerning its incorruption following an exhumation and translation. For Judith, her imitation of God’s actions—or, in the case, ability to enact God’s desire through human actions—leads to a gruesome description of Holofernes’s corpse which continues even past the initial death scene. The importance for the Judith-poet is not the sanctity of the heroine but rather the demonstration of her cooperation and connection with God through the enemy’s body. She has attained salvation through the execution and damnation of another human being at the behest of her deity.

Though the decapitation scene itself is gruesome and memorable, the poem is certainly not finished discussing Holofernes’s corpse. Judith seizes the head of her enemy and carries it out of the tent, leaving the rest of the corpse behind as the Assyrian leader’s inner corruption seeps into the outer reality. The poem relates,

\[
\text{Þa seo snotere mægð snude gebrohte}
\text{þæs herewæðan heafod swa blodig}
\text{on ðam fætelse. (ll. 125-7)}
\]

Then the wise maiden quickly carried the head of the warrior, so bloody, into a sack.\

Just like the description of Holofernes himself, the depiction of his decapitated head is equally as repugnant, though it is simplistic. The image of a strong, prudent woman grabbing an inanimate, bloody head is gore-filled but thoroughly memorable. It is the

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556 Astell, “Holofernes’s Head,” 128.
image of the Christian battle-cry against persecution. A few lines later Judith passes the
gory head to her maidservant who accepts it without question or disgust before they
embark on their journey home to Bethulia. Once the two women return home and
thousands of people surround them to hear their story of conquest, Judith asks her
maidservant to reveal her trophy, the symbol of her victory over a heathen tyrant, the
head of their enemy. Just as the preserved, incorrupt corpse of a saint is a clear
representation of his or her worthiness for sanctity—purity and chastity for women,
imitatio Christi for men—the decapitated head of Holofernes represents Judith’s religious
victory as well as her devotion to the faith. The Assyrian leader, now deceased, is still
presented in a demonized fashion, and Judith re-emphasizes, through the exhibition of his
decapitated head, the fact that Holofernes was the reason for her people’s persecution.
During the presentation of the head scene, Judith is definitely proud of her achievement
through her collaboration with God:

Þa seo gleawe het, golde gefrætewod,
hyre ðinenne þancolmode
þæs herewæðan heafod onwriðan
ond hyt to behōe blodig ðætywan
þam burhleodum, hu hyre æt beaduwe gespeow.
Spræc ða seo æðele to eallum þam fólce:
‘Her ge magon sweotole, sigerofe hæleð,
leoda ræswan, on ðæs laðestan
hæðenes headorinces heafod starian,
Holofernum unlyfigendes,
þe us monna mæst morðra gefremede,
sarra sorga, ond þæt swyðor gyt
ycan wolde, ac him ne uðe god
lengran lifes, þæt he mid læððum us
eglan moste; ic him ealdor oðhrong
þurh godes fultum. (ll. 171-86)

Then the wise one adorned with gold called
to her attentive maidservant
to uncover the head of the warrior,
and to display it, bloody, as a sign
to the people, how she succeeded at her battle.
Then the noble one spoke to all of the people:
“Here you may clearly gaze, valorous men, leaders of people,
upon the head of the unliving
Holofernes, the most hateful heathen warrior,
who effected great torments,
grievous sorrows, on us, and wished to increase
the sorrow much more; but God did not grant to him
long life, so that he might plague us with afflictions;
I took life away from him
through the aid of God.”\(^{558}\)

Judith is consistently emphasizing the fact that God has given her the approval,
encouragement, and added strength needed to overcome Holofernes, but she also makes
sure that the people to whom she is orating understand that the head of Holofernes is just
as important. Without the proof of the decapitation, she could not illustrate that God was
assisting her because of his disapproval of Holofernes’s actions; “the heafod in Judith is a
sign inspiring belief in a victory still to be won.”\(^{559}\) As Astell explains, “Unlike the
biblical Judith, who displays the head herself and then praises the Lord for preserving her
chastity and enabling her to kill the Assyrian general, the poet’s Judith emphasizes
Holofernes’s past crimes against the nation and his intent to inflict more injuries.”\(^{560}\) This
is why the corpse, and, more specifically, the head, of the Assyrian leader is so critical to
not only mention but also to discuss in great, gory detail throughout the poem. He is the
essential element of the revolt against the Assyrian army and his head becomes linked to
“the cross as a symbol of Christian victory over the forces of darkness.”\(^{561}\) The corpse is
still used for furthering Christianity by inspiring fury against enemies, just as the corpses

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\(^{558}\) Dobbie, “Judith,” 104.
\(^{559}\) Astell, “Holofernes’s Head,” 130.
\(^{560}\) Astell, “Holofernes’s Head,” 130.
\(^{561}\) Astell, “Holofernes’s Head,” 130.
of saints are used as symbols of sanctity and purity for the purpose of conversion and reaffirmation of the faithful.

Judith now rouses her people for battle against the Assyrians, and the skirmish begins. However, before the poem has a chance to provide the conclusion to the battle, it jumps back to Holofernes’s camp so that both audience and Assyrians can witness the aftermath of Judith’s execution of the heathen leader. Once one brave man entered the tent,

Funde ða on bedde blacne liegan
his goldgifan gæstes gesne,
lifes belidenne. (ll. 278-80)

then he found lying on the bed
his gold-giver, pale, lacking a soul,
deprived of life.⁵⁶²

The warrior leaves his chieftain’s body in the tent, alerts his comrades of his findings, and prepares to flee with the rest of the men knowing that their fate has been predicted through Holofernes’s body, “a sign of destruction for the Assyrians,”⁵⁶³ a symbol of their damnation. He tells his fellow Assyrians,

Her ys geswutelod ure sylfra forwyrd,
toward getacnod þæt þære tide ys
mid niðum neah geðrungen,
þe we sculon nyde losian,
somod æt sæcce forweorðan. Her lið sweorde geheawen,
beheafdod healdend ure. (ll. 285-90)

Here is made manifest our own destruction,
signified to be imminent, that there is now the time pressing forward with tribulations, when we shall lose life together, perish in the strife:
here lies our beheaded leader,
hewn down by the sword.⁵⁶⁴

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⁵⁶³ Astell, “Holofernes’s Head,” 132.
The corpse receives minor attention here, and the body remains in the tent and no funeral arrangements are made. His men, knowing that they would surely perish, abandoned him in hopes of avoiding the Christian army reinforced by the will of God. There is no further mention or discussion of Holofernes’s corpse or head since its powerful message has been received on both sides. Judith and her people use Holofernes’s head to inspire fury against their enemies while the Assyrians acknowledge the corpse as a symbol of their eternal damnation.

Finally, the blood-soaked battlefield and the bodies found in it following the fight receive minimal but visible attention. Rather than Beowulf’s hall-bard’s depiction of the bloodied bodies of defeated warriors being robbed by their enemies following the battle, the Judith-poet describes the slaughter of the Assyrians by the Israelites in the least detail possible:

```
slogan eornoste
Assiria oretnæcgas,
iðhygcende, nanne ne sparedon
þæs herefolces, heanne ne ricne,
cwicera manna þe hie ofercuman mihton. (ll. 231-5)
```

they vehemently slew
the Assyrian warriors,
the evil-scheming ones, they spared no one of the army,
lowly or powerful, the living men
who they might overcome.565

Based on this depiction, one can imagine the extreme slaughter across the battlefield, but the poet leaves it to the imagination of the audience to visualize what the scene may have looked like. However, concerning the return of the valiant Israelites after the Assyrians had been defeated, the poet relates,

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Cirdon cynerofe,
wiggend on wiđertrod, vælscel on innan,
reocende hæw. Rum wæs to nimanne
londbuendum on ðam laðestan,
hyra ealdfeondum unlyfigendum
heolfrig herereaf, hyrsta scyne,
bord ond bradswyrd, brune helmas,
dyre madmas. (ll. 311-18)

The royally brave warriors
turned back in retreat among the carnage,
the reeking corpses; there was the opportunity to take
from the most hostile land-dwellers,
their ancient foes, the unliving ones,
gory plunder, beautiful ornaments,
shields and broad swords, brown helms,
precious treasures.\(^566\)

This depiction mentions the grisly corpses as well as battlefield robbery in an intriguing
juxtaposition of horrible gore and beautiful treasure, but there is no examination of what
happens to the bodies.\(^567\) We assume that they are left to rot, unneeded and unwanted,
unless the few surviving Assyrians returned to the scene once the field had cooled.
Because the mass of Assyrian bodies is not used for any specific, philosophical or
religious purpose as was the body of Holofernes, they did not deserve to be given more
attention than a brief mention. The triumph of the Israelites and destruction of the
Assyrian army are highlighted, so the aftermath of the victory need only be touched upon.
Following the defeat of the heathen army, Judith’s people return home and praise God for
allowing their conquest.

Throughout the text of \textit{Judith}, it quickly becomes clear that corpses are
incorporated for a very specific and distinct purpose, especially when compared to other

\(^{566}\) Dobbie, “Judith,” 108.
\(^{567}\) Lines 205-212 describe the beasts of battle (wolf, raven, eagle) waiting in the wings for the battle to conclude so they may partake in the spoils of war.
similar texts. Many scholars refer to *Judith* as a semi-hagiography, but the use of dead bodies in this text is markedly different than Anglo-Saxon hagiographies like those of St. Æthelthryth, St. Eugenia, St. Cuthbert, St. Edmund, and many others. The bodies of deceased saints are described and incorporated into the *vita* in order to demonstrate to new converts as well as the established faithful the proper ways of living and the advantages of that lifestyle. Women who are pure, chaste, and take Christ as their bridegroom will reap the benefits in the afterlife in heaven; men who imitate Christ as closely as possible through sacrifice, forgiveness, and leadership will also enjoy God’s kingdom. In their *vitae*, the saints’ bodies illustrate these concepts, sometimes including incorruption following death. *Judith*, however, presents the bodies of heathens and sinners to also demonstrate a particular lifestyle. The corpse of Holofernes, especially his head, clearly shows that God will not condone gluttonous, licentious, dastardly behavior but will always encourage and support those who oppose tyrannical enemies to the faith. The decapitated head stands as a symbolic trophy to Judith and her people, reminding them that God has delivered them from great hardship and torment. In many ways, *Judith* acts as an anti-hagiography of Holofernes since it is his life which is ended and it is his corpse about which we are given the most information. The head also spurs Judith’s people to victory by inspiring fury against their enemies and encourages their battle spirit. Likewise, the bodies of Holofernes’s men are left, presumably, waiting for wolves and carrion birds to tear them to pieces and then the remains to decompose on the battlefield rather than receiving any type of proper burial because they defended Holofernes and his immoral lifestyle. The survivors do not care enough about their fallen comrades to return and collect their bodies, and, because Holofernes is dead, they lack any type of
leadership. Though the description of the corpses is at a bare minimum, it is still clear that the bodies are used to demonstrate how and why Judith, her people, and their fight against the heathens are much more righteous than the Assyrians. *Judith*, like “The Dream of the Rood,” truly exhibits how varied the use of corpses throughout Anglo-Saxon literature can be by showing that not all corpses discussed by authors must be those of saints or heroes.

“Soul and Body I” and “Soul and Body II”

When conjuring the image of a corpse, thoughts of rotting flesh, noxious fumes, worm infestation, limp limbs, and gaping maws may come to mind. In the two texts discussed above, none of this imagery has appeared, yet the presence of corpses is still central to the plot as well as the dispensation of morality as it pertains to the Christian faith. All of the dead bodies considered so far in this chapter have been bloodied, fresh, and unburied. The Christian message demonstrated through the corpses has also been primarily delivered through another living human (the dreamer controls his dream though he is not the main narrator or subject throughout most of “The Dream of the Rood” and Judith is the epic heroine whose actions—the killing of Holofernes and the displaying of his gory head—speak volumes to her fellow Israelites). However, these two pieces do not encompass the wide breadth of authors’ uses of corpses to illustrate a tenet of the faith or to confirm the necessity of Christianity in the lives of those who read or hear the stories. In “Soul and Body I,” located in the *Vercelli Book*, the anonymous poet uses a soul which is saved and a soul which is damned to explain the importance of the physical body’s refusal to entertain temptation during its temporary, transitory life in order to provide eternal salvation for its soul in heaven. “Soul and Body II,” essentially a remake of “Soul
and Body I” found in the *Exeter Book*, only incorporates the damned soul/corpse dynamic, which removes approximately forty lines of text but also eliminates any note of positivity from the text, “thus leaving its audience feeling much less optimistic.” When discussing “Soul and Body II,” Glenn Davis explains, the “eschatological message of the poem is clear: don’t be like the owner of this body. Instead, live a devout, religiously productive life, and, most importantly, always consider the future consequences of your actions.” Just as the titles, placed on the poems by modern scholars, as well as the content of the pieces demonstrate, “while there was a clear separation of soul and body, both interacted in the living body as it functioned and was treated,” so it is important that the poem stresses the significance of the body’s actions as it pertains to the soul’s ultimate fate.

The corpse belonging to the damned soul is unable to defend itself or speak on its own behalf when confronted about its life of feasting and fulfillment. In fact, as Jenny Boyar points out, “almost all of *Soul and Body II*, aside from the brief introductory ‘non-address’ passage by the ‘poet,’ occurs as the soul’s monologue which renders the body voiceless.” The soul chastises the now-rotting corpse for the corruptions of the flesh during its life; however, as Allen Frantzen points out, “normative Christian thought holds that the soul is the body’s master and that it shares responsibility for their eternal welfare. This view is not stated in *Soul and Body I*; in fact, three voices – the poet, the good soul, the evil soul – contradict it … The souls also assume that the body determines the soul’s

568 Davis, “Corporeal Anxiety in *Soul and Body II*,” 33.
fate. The damned soul charges its body with a failure to attend to spiritual needs.”572 The poet incorporates graphic detail of the condition of the damned soul’s corpse to illustrate his point concerning proper and improper ways of living though, of course, the corpse is left unaffected by the soul’s chastisement and gains no advantage being the poet’s example and is unable to even acknowledge the point which both souls make clear: “what the body does in this life … ordains the soul’s future.”573

From the beginning of “Soul and Body I,” it is clear that the damned soul will be garnering most of the attention throughout the poem (the saved soul and its corpse only receive approximately forty lines of text), and it is the only voice heard throughout the entirety of “Soul and Body II.” The saved soul imparts a bit of praise to its physical counterpart for living a righteous life, and “thanks the body for those things which ‘ðu me geafe,’ and ‘ðu me sealdest’ when they dwelled together, since these gifts will bring glory rather than shame on the Last Day. The body’s discipline has freed the soul.”574 However, the poet only dedicates a minor section of his work to this point. The benefits for the soul of a dutifully Christian life and rejecting earthly temptations and pleasures

(“Fæstest ðu on foldan ond gefyldest me godes lichoman, gastes drynces.” (ll. 142-3))

(“You fasted on earth and filled me with the body of God, the drink of the spirit”)575

so that the soul could be nourished in preparation for the afterlife are made clear—entrance into the kingdom of heaven—but there is also a significant issue that the poet

attempts to gloss over with an extremely brief explication by the saved soul concerning the fate of its corpse left on earth. This stands in stark juxtaposition to the damned soul’s explication of its body’s fate following death and burial. As Frantzen explains, the poem does not treat physical corruption merely as a natural process: the evil soul exploits it … The evil soul repeatedly refers to decay because physical corruption serves as an image of moral corruption and a prefiguration of the soul at Judgment; decay is not simply the inevitable consequence of original sin. Throughout its address, the evil soul dwells on the body’s misery as worms devour it. This suffering is linked both to the Last Judgment and, by implication, to the pains of hell … the evil soul declares that the body will pay for its sins with every joint and sinew.\(^{576}\)

It is clear that, even though the saved soul’s body was pious throughout its living days, this person was not a saint because the corpse is, as the soul’s speech makes clear, subject to the natural process of corruption in the grave and decomposition. As Frantzen relates and I have discussed at length concerning both male and female saints, “In hagiography, the preservation of the corpse from decay traditionally signifies sanctity.”\(^{577}\) Likewise, Davis notes that the saintly bodies “avoid dissolution in death or, through fragmentation into relics, serve as a powerful focal points [sic] for the creation and development of spiritual communities.”\(^{578}\) Unfortunately for this particular corpse, its owner in life was a member of the typical community of Anglo-Saxons whose bodies, unlike saintly bodies, “were vulnerable to a host of physical and spiritual threats both on earth and in the grave, and yet never assured of their place in heaven,”\(^{579}\) so decomposition had definitely begun.


\(^{577}\) Frantzen, “The Body in ‘Soul and Body I,’” 83.

\(^{578}\) Davis, “Corporeal Anxiety in Soul and Body II,” 45.

\(^{579}\) Davis, “Corporeal Anxiety in Soul and Body II,” 46.
Because of the corpse’s ill-suited fate as well as the clear “duality and dependence between soul and body – articulated … as a kind of ruptured brotherhood,” the soul shows great sympathy and remorse for its physical counterpart and attempts to display that sympathy in much the same way that an individual on vacation demonstrates regret in a postcard to another person who was unable to join in the fun. The soul states,

> “Wine leofesta, þeah ðe wyrmas gyt
gifre gretaþ, nu is ðin gast cumen,
fægere gefrætewod, of mines fæder rice,
arum bewunden. Eala, min dryhten,
þær ic þe moste mid me lædan,
þæt wyt englas ealle gesawon,
heofona wuldor, swyle swa ōu me ær her scrif!” (ll. 135-41)

> “Dearest protector, though covetous worms yet attack [you], now is your spirit, pleasantly adorned, wound in honor, come, from my father’s kingdom. Alas, my lord, if [only] I were able to lead you with me so that we two [might] see all the angels, the wonder of heaven, just as you previously allotted here for me!”

581 Wine can also be translated as “friend” but, in this circumstance, it makes more sense that the soul may consider its body as its protector. Because of the body’s actions in life, the soul gained salvation and entrance into heaven. Though the soul seems to have a touch of survivor’s remorse since the corpse has now become a feast for worms, it still seems to respect the body for completing its duties of protecting the future of the soul in its everlasting fate. Although “friend” gives the relationship a sense of camaraderie, the term “protector” also provides respect and, I argue, is more well-suited to the situation, especially in comparison to the damned soul and its unfortunate fate caused by the improper actions of its body.
582 Gifre can also be translated as “voracious” and “greedy,” which is the option most scholars choose when translating the poem, but “covetous” seems more appropriate here. It conveys a sense of irony in the saved soul’s speech given the fact that being covetous is one of the many sins that the body avoided during its life yet it must endure the constant covetousness of the worms chewing on its flesh as it rots in the ground. It also seems that the soul may believe that the body certainly envies, if not covets, the soul’s fate since its own fate is so dreadful after having lived a proper Christian life. However, as protector of the soul, the body knows that it must continue to tolerate pain and desecration by these vile worms in order for the soul to continue its happiness in heaven. Finally, the worms and their contribution to the natural process of decomposition as well as their prominence in this speech provides another juxtaposition to the damned soul’s corpse which is also being eaten by worms, but their presence is almost always associated with corruption and damnation, as Frantzen discusses above. Both corpses withstand the same fate, but only the bad corpse’s worm-invaders are linked to eternal damnation and torment for the soul—and the damned soul certainly will not allow the corpse to forget that.
This soul may have had the best of intentions in its speech, but its words certainly do not seem to convey the type of message the rotting corpse, if sentient, would have wanted to hear. The soul continues its speech, and does not seem to make matters any better, relating:

“Bygdest ðu þe for hæleðum ond ahofe me on ecne dream. Forðan me a langaþ, leofost manna, on minum hige hearde, þæs þe ic þe on ḷyssum hynðum wat wyrmum to wiste, ac þæt wolde god, þæt þu æfre þus laðlic legerbed cure.” (ll. 151-5)

“You humbled yourself before men, and lifted me up into great joy. Therefore [there is] always a longing greatly in my heart, most loved of men, since I know that you [are] nourishment for worms in this abasement, but God desires it, that you ever choose this loathsome bed of death.”

A difficulty of this speech and its potential repercussions on its intended audience as well as Christianity as a whole is whether or not we are expected to believe that the corpse cares about its fate.

While decomposing in the ground and being eaten by worms is not an ideal ending, the corpse is, of course, not sentient. There is no indication from the poem that it hears the soul’s speech or recognizes that it has gotten the proverbial short end of the stick. It sacrificed throughout its life and acted as a proper, pious Christian, yet it receives the same treatment as the damned soul’s corpse. The soul’s remorse over the body’s death-bed does seem genuine, and the use of the corpse description is simply a method the poet employs to demonstrate how important it is for the soul’s eternity that the body

585 The remorse may be genuine, but the soul certainly does not act on it as the good soul in homily IV of the Vercelli Book does by asking for God to spare the body from physical corruption in the grave as a reward for a life well-lived. See Frantzen, “The Body in ‘Soul and Body I,’” 83, for more on the Vercelli homily and a comparison to “Soul and Body I.”
suffers in both life and death. The corpse is a vehicle to drive a message to the audience concerning the proper manner of living because “the salvation of the soul depends on the mortification of the body; unless the body suffers in repentance, the soul will be damned.” For the poet, it seems, the corpse of the saved soul is a representative symbol rather than a character, and the soul’s speech is directed less at the corpse itself and more toward the audience attempting to illustrate the eternal advantages of fasting during life.

The damned soul, on the other hand, is most certainly treating its corpse as if it were sentient, though again it is not, and berating it for having condemned the soul to eternal damnation. The description of the bodily decay increased exponentially from that of the saved soul’s corpse to the point that it appears to be “one massive wound” because “physical decay is more than a memento mori: it anticipates both the body’s treatment in hell, and the appearance of the damned soul before God.” Frantzen explains that the Vercelli homily “attests to the close association of the body’s corruption with the state of the soul. The body becomes an emblem of the soul when Christ pronounces judgment. The good soul’s body shines like precious stones, while the evil body turns dark … The transformation of the damned had only one analogue in the natural world – the destruction of the body in the grave.” In “Soul and Body I,” this certainly holds true when it comes to the damned soul and its speech as well as the extremely gory portrayal of the corpse in its grave following the soul’s departure to hell.

From the very beginning of the damned soul’s speech, it is clear that there is extreme animosity toward its corpse. Unlike the saved soul, who attempted to mitigate

588 Frantzen, “The Body in ‘Soul and Body I,’” 83.
589 Frantzen, “The Body in ‘Soul and Body I,’” 83.
the corpse’s decomposition by demonstrating how important it was that the corpse fasted
during life and ensured the soul’s happiness in heaven, the damned soul immediately
exploits the fact that the corpse’s decay is directly related to its actions during life. It
reminds the corpse that “you indeed [are] food for worms” (“ðu huru wyrma gyfl,” l.
22),\(^{590}\) and

\[
\begin{align*}
“ðu on eorðan scealt \\
wyrmum to wiste.” (ll. 24-5)
\end{align*}
\]

“you shall be as a feast for
worms in the earth.”

\(^{591}\)

The hostility shown to the corpse through the soul’s speech did not begin simply because
the soul now finds itself damned to the fires of hell; rather, it has been cultivated for
many years which is perhaps why “the damned soul … when addressing its body,
studiously avoids referring to it as whole, and instead employs a series of appellations
that suggest the physical process of dissolution has already begun.”\(^{592}\) The soul relates,

\[
\begin{align*}
&Eardode ic þe on innan. Ne meahte ic ðe of cuman, \\
&flæsc befangen, ond me fyrenlustas \\
&þine geþrungon. þæt me þuhte ful oft \\
&þæt hit wære XXX þusend wintra to þinum deaðdæge. A ic uncres gedales \\
onbad \\
earfoðlices. Nis nu huru se ende to god!” (ll. 33-8)
\end{align*}
\]

“I dwelled within you. I might not come [away] from you,
encased in flesh, and your wantonness oppressed me.
It seemed to me quite often that
it was thirty thousand winters to your death-day.
I waited ever painfully for our separation. The end now indeed is not too
good!”

\(^{593}\)

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\(^{590}\) Krapp, “Soul and Body,” 55.
\(^{591}\) Krapp, “Soul and Body,” 55.
\(^{592}\) Davis, “Corporeal Anxiety in Soul and Body II,” 41.
\(^{593}\) Krapp, “Soul and Body,” 55.
The soul seems to liken itself to a prisoner held inside the flesh of the corpse with no hope of reprieve. Not only is there enmity but also resentment for the body throughout its life because of the choices it made to enjoy the lustful luxuries with no thought of future consequences or the soul’s desires. The body controls the soul’s fate, and its indulgences combined with the soul’s obvious anger demonstrate “that both sin and the forgiveness of sin are the body’s responsibilities.”594 Rather than being master over the body, this soul, imprisoned in an impious body, was forced to wait for its imminent damnation. In opposition to the saved soul, the damned soul was not provided with any sustenance, and its speech—both the words and the contemptuous tone behind them—continuously reminds the corpse of this fact. It relates,

“Wære þu þe wiste wlanc ond wines sæd, þrymful þunedest, ond ic ofþyrsted wæs godes lichoman, gastes drynces. Forðan þu ne hogodest her on life, syððan ic ðe on worulde wunian sceolde, þæt þu wære þurh flæsc ond þurh fyrenlustas strange gestryned ond gestaðolod þurh me, ond ic wæs gast on ðe fram gode sended.” (ll. 39-46)

“You were proud in your feasting and sated with wine, prominent, magnificent and I was very thirsty for the body of God, the drink of the soul.595 Therefore you did not consider here in life, since I should dwell with you in the world, that you strongly gained through flesh and through wantonness and strengthened through me, and I was the spirit sent to you from God.”596

Throughout the rest of its speech, the damned soul continues to revile its corpse for having given in to the lusts of the flesh and never considering how these actions may

595 This phrasing is repeated by the saved soul later in the poem. See above.
eventually affect the soul. It continually criticizes the corpse, rebukes it, and finally acknowledges that they both will now suffer in perpetuity for the physical sins.

When the speech ends, the poem describes the soul’s descent into hell—

Thus it [the soul] reviled the flesh-hoard, when it must travel away, to seek the depth of hell, not at all the joys of heaven, vexed by [the body’s] deeds

—followed by a graphic account of the corpse in its grave. After the soul descends, the audience then discovers what becomes of the corpse after having led an impious life of indulgence: a description “in which the body is violently exposed, deconstructed”, though, technically, these biological changes to the body occur post-mortem regardless of the lifestyle one leads:

men to gemynede, modsnotra gehwam! (ll. 105-26)

The dust lay where it was,
it may not command any answer to him,
the miserable spirit, nor comfort or consolation.
The head is split asunder, the hand dismembered,
jaws gape open, the palate is torn to pieces,
sinews are sucked, neck gnawed,
fingers decayed. The cruel worms ravage the ribs,
their tongues will be pulled into ten parts,
comfort for the hungry ones; therefore they are not able to exchange
shameful words with the miserable spirit.
The worm is called Glutton, the one whose jaws
are sharper than a needle. He is compelled,
first of all in the grave, so that he tears
the tongue to pieces and then creeps through the teeth
and then eats through the eyes down from inside the head
and to make room for the other worms as a feast,
then the miserable body is cooled which he formerly long
clothed with garments. It is then morsels for worms,
food in the earth. That may be as memory for all men,
each one of the wise ones!

Compared to the saved soul’s reserved description of the body’s decay, this is much more
gruesome and certainly paints a clear image of what the damned soul’s body is
undergoing while the soul travels to hell. Davis notes that

While later medieval treatments of the body and soul theme are often this specific,
if not more so, in their depiction of the horrible things that happen to the body
after death, in an Anglo-Saxon context, this invocation of the fragmented,
mortified body is all but unique among treatments of the body and soul theme,
and within the corpus of Old English literature more generally.

It would seem as though the corpse should definitely be experiencing the excruciating
pain associated with everything the worms, led by the commanding “Gifer” (“Glutton”),
are doing to it given the detail included in the poem since “the evil soul declares that the

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599 Boyar argues that within the quoted passage, especially once *Gifer* is introduced, the “imagery is not of
decay but of the body being infiltrated by hungry, anthropomorphized worms” and continues to explain
how this relates to medical, physiological changes as well as bodily afflictions. See Boyar, “Body Break-
Ups and Poetic Make-Ups.”


601 Davis, “Corporeal Anxiety in Soul and Body II,” 33.
body will pay for its sins with every joint and sinew … as if the corpse suffered in the grave as it would before Christ at Judgment.  

From sinews being sucked dry to fingers rotting away, the head being split open to the jaws gaping, each vivid depiction elicits a reaction from the audience. This reaction is what makes the poem and the poet’s inclusion of the two corpses so important: the lesson taught to each corpse by its soul—and, by extension, the audience of the text—is the advantages for living a good life. Although each corpse underwent similar types of decomposition, the relief to the soul—the aspect of a human which will continue to exist forever in the afterlife—which experiences salvation is far greater than the anguish the damned soul portrays and then must endure in hell. While the saved soul attempts to avoid drawing images to worms and their inevitable consumption of the body in the ground, the damned soul continually refers to the cruel and savage worms because they “inevitably suggested the even fiercer worms of hell,” even to the point of actually naming what one may consider to be the leader of the worm-invaders, “Gifer.” Obviously, the saved soul did not desire to conjure images of hell when considering how its body would spend the rest of eternity, nor would the poet if, as I believe, he was trying to illustrate the benefits of living a devout Christian life and providing your soul with the heavenly sustenance it needs while also denying yourself the indulgences and pleasures of earthly life.

As with “Dream of the Rood” and *Judith*, the corpses in “Soul and Body I” serve an extremely valuable purpose when it comes to confirming the significance of Christianity and following the tenets of the faith throughout one’s life. Though both corpses essentially end up in the same situation as far as decomposition is concerned, the

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602 Frantzen, “The Body in ‘Soul and Body I,’” 83.
603 Frantzen, “The Body in ‘Soul and Body I,’” 83.
damned soul’s corpse is meant to suffer right alongside its soul whether or not it recognizes its torment. Additionally, the corpses provide a stage upon which the souls may stand metaphorically to deliver their speeches of salvation or condemnation; rather than being the true audiences of the souls, the corpses are far more useful as a platform for the souls and primary content point for their speeches to the actual audience of the poem.

Throughout each of the texts examined here, it is clear that the corpses incorporated within them are used in quite different ways than is typical for Old English literature. Though unique in the larger corpus of the literature, history provides a real-world example for unusual exploits of a corpse. The double trial and condemnation of the deceased Pope Formosus by his successors in the Cadaver Synod was outlandish and extreme but supports the fact that corpses, historical or literary, can perform interesting and exceptional roles in service of a greater purpose or to demonstrate a particular point for a leader or author. “The Dream of the Rood” redefines what qualifies as a dead body by providing a comparison and contrast with the executed body of Christ on the cross and the rood itself. Judith appears as an epic heroine defending her people against a cruel tyrant, Holofernes, and the poem demonstrates that the power of Christian faith and the support of God will provide emancipation from hatred and persecution. The head of Holofernes is the emblematic trophy representing this freedom while the rest of the body remains abandoned without hope of salvation. Finally, the souls in “Soul and Body I” and “Soul and Body II” illustrate why it is so critical that the body in its earthly life is dedicated to fasting and pious living in order for the everlasting soul to prosper and
experience the joys and blessings of heaven. These texts show that just because one is not an epic hero or devout saint does not mean that one’s body and soul are damned or unimportant. They provide hope for the common Anglo-Saxon as well as confirmation of the benefits of having converted to and remaining steadfast in the Christian faith.
Conclusion

The End? Death Is Only the Beginning for Anglo-Saxon Corpses

The scope of the literature of the Anglo-Saxons is wide and varied across themes, subject matter, and representations of the human condition. Writers expressed society’s views on many topics as well as life experiences through their works; this most certainly included death and the afterlife. In the texts discussed in the previous pages, it is clear that Old English literature does not overlook an aspect of life simply because it appears to have ceased to be useful. As modern readers of these texts, it is our duty to recognize this, to resist the urge to look past inactivity, and to combat the fear of missing out on some heroic deed the protagonist may have accomplished. The corpses of literary characters demonstrate exactly how important and significant “useless” things can be in the context of the works in which they appear as well as the larger society. In the reading of these texts, it is quite easy to simply gloss past the corpses unless the bodies actually continue to participate in the plot. St. Edmund’s head would be difficult to overlook since it actually speaks to his compatriots and continues to play an active role until it is reunited with the rest of the body. However, bodies such as that of Scyld and Æschere in Beowulf or Sts. Basilissa and Eugenia in Ælfric’s Lives of Saints are not actively contributing to the progression of the texts; because of their inactivity, audiences as well as other characters are prone to moving past the corpses to other living bodies who are visibly exerting a presence in their communities. This tendency should be controlled because, upon further analysis, it becomes clear that the dead body can be just as interesting and valuable as the living body.
Because much of the literature is informed by real life events, it is important to begin an examination of literary corpses by first discussing society’s real corpses. In Anglo-Saxon England, people were no strangers to the presence of dead bodies in their midst as well as witnessing the process of decomposition and decay. This familiarity infiltrated the literary works of the time but can also be identified in the remnants of society left behind and discovered by archaeologists. In the literature review, I discussed the intertwining of society and literature and illustrated why the literary texts should be examined through a lens informed by the discoveries and interpretations of archaeological research. Even if the authors of the medieval texts do not blatantly point out the fact that their work was inspired by true events, the background knowledge provided by archaeological studies allows the literary scholar to pay closer attention to the corpses and the multitude of possible meanings for their presence in a text. As a modern audience, we need to be just as informed about the significance of corpses as medieval people were in order to fully understand and appreciate their contributions to texts in all genres.

The first genre whose corpses were examined through the lens of literary analysis informed by archaeological evidence was Old English epic poetry. In *Beowulf* I discussed three important corpses which appear in the text and was able to demonstrate that the bodies of the dead play vital roles in society regardless of class and social ranking. Scyld, Grendel, and Æschere embodied different social strata, and each individual demonstrated how a corpse can be utilized and hold significance even though it has stopped actively participating in the larger society. Grendel and Æschere also showed that one does not need to be a king or valiant hero to garner importance after death. Their connection with
other characters provides increased meaning to their dead bodies so that their memories will not fade and their participation in society has not completely ceased just because they died. Their bodies take on significance without needing to be active; this is why the removal of body parts or the placement of decapitated heads in particular locations becomes even more critical than one would normally assume. The corpses play a part, in fact, that a living body simply could not because the living bodies are participatory rather than passive.

Hagiography, as another genre of Old English literature, details the lives and deaths of female and male saints; this sometimes includes any post-mortem activity. For female saints and chaste couples, the primary concern for sanctity hinges upon their virginity and chastity throughout their lives. Hagiography for men focuses far less on their choice to remain pure and instead illustrates how piety and devotion to the *imitatio Christi* will indicate how the corpse will be presented after the male saint’s death. For both men and women, the holy corpse cannot simply be dismissed as inactive or useless; the corpses continue to be present in the lives of their family, friends, and followers so that the faithful will not lose their Christian devotion and new converts will not be tempted to abandon the faith and return to their lives as heathens.

Lastly, religious texts which are non-hagiographical in nature such as “The Dream of the Rood,” *Judith*, or the “Soul and Body” poems present a complication concerning the definition of a corpse and whose corpse may garner spotlight. In each of these pieces, the corpses simply cannot be overlooked because they are critical to their narratives. Without them, the primary lesson or overall moral would be lost. The head of a monstrous enemy (Holofernes) became the symbol of freedom and devotion to the
Christian faith for Judith and her people; a tree was able to redefine what “corpse” means as well as to illustrate the importance of following the example of Christ (imitatio Christi) as it became a corpse and suffered the same torment that Christ himself suffered; and the bodies of the speaking souls provided a platform on which the souls could present their arguments for living a life of piety and faithfulness rather than exuberance and decadence. Although these texts are not connected contextually, they are thematically similar and also share the commonality of validating corpses as useful and purposeful. It is clear from these works that corpses are deserving of respect and greater attention beyond a cursory notation that a living person had died.

Corpses are not simply the result of the expiration of a living being; though that is biologically true, the incorporation of a dead body into a piece of literature is almost always done deliberately. Corpses continue to exert influence in their communities, and the depth of that influence is decided by the author as well as the society in which the body finds an audience. Bodies may be used to impart morals and life lessons, to symbolize the rising or waning of power for a particular leader or group, to redefine who or what can be considered holy and sanctified (or even identifiable as a corpse), to simply frighten those who may see it, or any number of other utilizations reserved specifically for a corpse. The use of corpses in literary works is not limited to the early Middle Ages which is why this project can easily be reconfigured for the literature of almost any time or place. Where there are living bodies, there will surely (eventually) be dead ones. And in each time and place there are likely to be different burial rituals, funereal rites, and beliefs in the afterlife.
As a continuation of this analytical framework, I have already begun to apply the same mechanics of identifying the archaeological evidence, investigating the culture, and closely reading the literature of the Middle English period. Examples such as the works of the Gawain-poet including “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” and “Saint Erkenwald” provide excellent fodder for a lucrative analysis. The corpses which appear throughout the Gawain-poet poems connect the works to one another. In “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” and “St. Erkenwald,” the poet makes the bodies obvious and their use overtly purposeful. Pearl incorporates the gruesome body of Christ post-crucifixion to demonstrate the value in holding steadfast in the Christian faith. “Cleanness” and “Patience” interpret biblical stories but incorporate corpses and disfigured bodies in unique ways to make manifest the importance of the eponymous virtues of each poem. Morality, for the Gawain-poet, is easily exemplified through corpses and bodies because, though the body has ceased to function or has been punished to the point of malfunction, they are visible and relatable to anyone and everyone who may hear the tales.

Although this text has not definitively been identified as the work of the Gawain-poet, I argue that aspects of the Gawain-poet’s other works found in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript (“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” “Pearl,” “Patience,” and “Cleanness”) are likewise distinguishable in the “Saint Erkenwald” poem. These characteristics are found at both the content and grammatical levels, which has led some other scholars to likewise agree that “Saint Erkenwald” could have been written by the same anonymous author as the other texts. For more on the authorship of the Gawain-poet texts, see Malcolm Andrew, “Theories of Authorship,” in A Companion to the Gawain-Poet, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 23-33; Anthony Bale, “From Translator to Laureate: Imagining the Medieval Author,” Literature Compass 5/5 (2008): 918-34; Richard Newhauser, “Sources II: Scriptural and Devotional Sources,” in Brewer and Gibson, A Companion to the Gawain-Poet, 257-76; Derek Pearsall, “Setting and Context in the Works of the Gawain-poet,” in New Perspectives on Middle English Texts: A Festschrift for R.A. Waldron, ed. Susan Powell and Jeremy J. Smith (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 3-16; Kenneth Rooney, Mortality and Imagination: The Life of the Dead in Medieval English Literature (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011); Sarah Stanbury, Seeing the Gawain-Poet: Description and the Act of Perception (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); and William Vantuono, “Patience, Cleanness, Pearl, and Gawain: The Case for Common Authorship,” Annuale Mediaevale 12 (1971): 37-69.
No matter the time period or the place, corpses appear in the literature reminding the living of their fate, teaching lessons, and hoping to make it clear that death is not the end for a character’s story. While most corpses are not quite as active as those mentioned from the Middle English works or even Old English ones like St. Edmund, their very presence—pure or putrid, beautiful or rotten—prevents us from ignoring them just because it appears as if their participation in the text has concluded. The dead truly can speak volumes if one is simply willing to listen.
References


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