

BOOK REVIEWS



Virginia Blanton, *Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St. Æthelthryth in Medieval England, 695-1615*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007. Pp. xviii + 349; b/w ill. ISBN: 978-0-271-02984-9.

IN *Signs of Devotion* Virginia Blanton examines the use of St. Æthelthryth as a multivalent symbol by a variety of medieval groups. A seventh-century Anglo-Saxon princess, Æthelthryth maintained her virginity through two royal marriages before taking the veil and founding a monastery at Ely, which she ruled as abbess until her death. A translation demonstrated her corpse uncorrupted and, along with an admiring account from Bede, argued for her sanctity. Later medieval groups found Æthelthryth's identity as virgin, queen, married woman, nun, abbess, and saint malleable and molded her past to suit their own purposes and needs. This Blanton demonstrates effectively with a survey of Æthelthryth's semiotic meaning as manipulated by hagiographic, episcopal, monastic, aristocratic, and lay groups who harnessed the saint's symbolic power. Thus, Æthelthryth could symbolize chaste monasticism for Bishop Æthelwold during the tenth-century Benedictine Reform as well as maternal nourishment for lay devotees in the late Middle Ages.

Blanton's primary focus is on texts and literary exploitation of Æthelthryth's identity, and these texts are carefully situated in their historical contexts—an admirable feat for the 900 years *Signs of Devotion* surveys. While some may desire a deeper history of Æthelthryth's cult—details about the cult's dispersion, pilgrimage to shrines devoted to Æthelthryth, history of the larger world of these institutions—such is not necessary for Blanton's argument as it focuses not on an exhaustive narrative of devotion to the saint, but rather suggests that Æthelthryth herself was a useful device for making meaning among her devotees. Each chapter works as a case study in which devotees select the aspect of Æthelthryth's identity that most appealed to them.

Chapter one details Bede's efforts to portray Æthelthryth as a saint in the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in order to present the holiness of the Anglo-Saxon church. While Bede's history is not technically a *vita*, Blanton

demonstrates that Bede drew upon hagiographic forms to display Æthelthryth's incorruptible body as the perfect symbol of virginal holiness and to position her as one of the important symbols of the Anglo-Saxon Christian community. Æthelthryth becomes a symbol of chaste monasticism under the hands of Bishop Æthelwold of Winchester in chapter two. For Æthelwold it was the saint's rejection of worldly status, royal marriage, and "earthly lust" in favor of a monastic life that promoted Æthelthryth's holiness. Rather than virginal perfection, Æthelwold emphasized the saint's identity as a nun and abbess in order to encourage others to embrace clerical chastity during the Benedictine reform.

Chapter three examines a discourse of enclosure that the monks of Ely used to protect their monastery during the Norman invasion. In the *Liber Eliensis* the monks portrayed Æthelthryth as a queenly protector and linked her inviolable body with the monastic space of Ely. Thus the monastery itself became a "feminized space" (291) that William the Conqueror could "rape" metaphorically if he didn't respect Ely's boundaries. At the same moment, the *Liber Eliensis* also cast Æthelthryth as a masculine protector who wrought vengeance on any attackers who threatened to penetrate the monastic enclosure. Æthelthryth again embodies traditional images of sanctity—the inviolate virgin, the masculine avenger—in order to suit the needs of an Anglo-Saxon monastery during the Conquest. The gender play here is well documented; this is Blanton's most exciting chapter.

In chapter four Blanton turns to *La Vie Sainte Audrée*, a French poem adapted from the *Liber Eliensis* that promoted Æthelthryth's life to thirteenth-century aristocratic women. Marie, the poem's author, alters the depiction of Æthelthryth, Blanton suggests, to appeal to an aristocratic audience of perhaps widowed ladies and to encourage their religious patronage. This is accomplished through a closer description of the saint's two marriages than offered previously, greater treatment of the queen's secular life, and greater emphasis on the saint's patronage. So far Blanton's demonstration that thirteenth-century innovations led to a new understanding and yet another representation of Æthelthryth's symbolic importance is convincing.

In the second half of this chapter, Blanton examines the impact of the manuscript of *La Vie Sainte Audrée* at the female abbey of Campsey Ash—which served as a home for wealthy laywomen—through a case study of one aristocratic woman, Isabella Ufford, Countess of Suffolk. Blanton suggests that Isabella's patronage may have been inspired by Marie's life of Æthelthryth and the model of a wealthy widow as patron. While it is suggestive of the power

a manuscript might have for its audience, this section relies on a great deal of conjecture and is, perhaps, Blanton's least successful argument. It is not clear that Isabella read Marie's poem and, if she did, she left no direct evidence that she was influenced by the life. Moreover, patronage was a major facet of female aristocratic life in the fourteenth century and need not require an "ideology of patronage established by Marie's life of Æthelthryth" (200) in order to encourage Isabella Ufford to devote her resources toward religious patronage. Of course, Marie's poem surely appealed to the women at Campsey Ash, but the lines between the poem and their patronage may not have been drawn as neatly as Blanton suggests.

In chapter five Blanton examines the appeal of Æthelthryth to larger audiences in late medieval narratives and visual representations. This chapter focuses on lay ownership of the saint and lay interest in depicting the saint both in text and image. Blanton suggests that parishioners played with clerical images of Æthelthryth and modified them for lay purposes in parish churches and vernacular texts. Æthelthryth becomes the abbatial nurturer, depicted as abbess, virgin, and—uniquely—as mother. There was likely a good deal more interchange between clerical and lay interests in the creation of these texts. The exhaustive list of devotional objects Blanton has compiled in the appendix will greatly facilitate further study on the phenomenon she has outlined here.

It is Blanton's discussion of the multiple meanings attached to Æthelthryth's body throughout these chapters that will most appeal to scholars of gender. Æthelthryth's body was particularly suited to symbolic use. Her tumor, and its scar once lanced, produced a secondary site of corporal permeability, allowing metaphorical play with images of virginity, chastity, and violation, as well as incorruptibility once her body was found intact. Blanton demonstrates that Æthelthryth's body could be presented both as masculine protector for clerical audiences and feminine mother for lay female audiences. Indeed, even when representations of Æthelthryth ignored or downplayed her physical body, such as those created by Æthelwold, Blanton suggests that the saint became a textual symbol that could be represented by liturgical texts that "became the discursive body that speaks to the audience about chastity and monasticism" (128). The symbolic use of Æthelthryth's body to convert Christians, to encourage chastity, to defend Ely, to inspire patronage, or to nurture her spiritual children demonstrates how flexible metaphors of her holy body could be.

The merits of Blanton's work have already received recognition, winning the 2008 Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship Best First Book Prize. *Signs of Devotion* is an important book for scholars of saints, of medieval texts, and

of the church in England, as well as to feminist scholars in general. Indeed, the note that Æthelthryth was a national saint could receive greater attention in demonstrating the importance of women for building membership, patronage, and pride in the English church during the Middle Ages. As a female saint, widow, queen, abbess, and virgin, Æthelthryth provided a rich narrative from which various medieval groups could pluck out elements that suited their own needs. This book offers the same richness for modern scholars.

Jennifer C. Edwards
Manhattan College