

Saints Edith and Æthelthryth: Princesses, Miracle Workers, and their Late Medieval Audiences: The Wilton Chronicle and the Wilton Life of St. Æthelthryth. Edited and translated by Mary Dockray-Miller. *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts* 25. Brepols, 2009. Pp. ix+475. ISBN: 9782503528366.

The *Wilton Chronicle* and the lesser-known *Wilton Life of St. Æthelthryth* (along with lists of Wilton's founders and of the *Chronicle's* sources probably forming an originally stand-alone manuscript) now make up the final folios of London, British Library, MS Cotton Faustina B. III. Since earlier, nineteenth-century editions of both texts can be somewhat difficult to access, this new edition (and translation) of the two early fifteenth-century texts is nothing if not welcome. It is the more welcome, moreover, because it locates itself at the intersection of two currently highly productive approaches to studying medieval and early modern women and literary culture. A number of scholars have shown how useful it can be to focus on local histories of specific reading circles, patrons, and sites of production and reception. In this regard Dockray-Miller's book makes a nice companion especially to Stephanie Hollis's *Writing the Wilton Women* (published, as it happens, in the same series, *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts*).¹ Other scholars have looked rather at the shifting representations over time and the evolving reputations of specific female figures—and specifically here also later medieval interpretations of its Anglo-Saxon past. Here this book can be usefully read in conjunction not only with Hollis's edition of Goscelin's *Life of St Edith*, probably the *Wilton Chronicle's* primary source, but also with recent work on the cult of Saint Æthelthryth, especially Virginia Blanton's *Signs of Devotion*.²

Dockray-Miller's Introduction economically but effectively situates the two texts in both scholarly conversations. That introduction provides a solid political and economic contextualization of the texts' production and initial reception: the texts were written and first read in the wake of a somewhat critical episcopal visitation and consequent putting into order of Wilton Abbey's affairs. Contemporary renewal of veneration of Saint Æthelthryth and encouragement of pilgrimage to Ely perhaps also explains a Wilton life of a non-Wilton saint. Whether written by a Wilton chaplain or (conceivably) by one of the nuns—and Dockray-Miller first speculates about and then seems to assume a common author for the two texts—both the *Chronicle* and the *Life* were clearly read within the community. Both texts—but especially the *Chronicle*—allowed the Wilton female community “to shape and present its own history and identity” (13). The

fact that (as Dockray-Miller notes) other early fifteenth-century manuscripts reveal similar interests prevailing at other English convents raises a number of provocative questions about which this book may (one hopes) stimulate further exploration, questions about late medieval English historiography in general and the evident interest in historical writing in women's communities in particular.

Nor are these the only topics suggested to this volume's readers as worthy of attention. Dockray-Miller notes the extent to which "the poems' Anglo-Saxonism values what Wogan-Browne terms 'the authority of this ancient Wessex nunnery,' lending the weight of history and tradition to the current fifteenth-century abbey" (13). That "Anglo-Saxonism" might, however, benefit from further interrogation than her discussion allows. In discussing Æthelthryth's special place in Anglo-Saxon hagiography, Dockray-Miller follows the *Life's* own lead in citing Bede's account as a particular source. The problematic nature of this claim, however, could bear a little more scrutiny. Yes, Bede can be credited with much of the saint's *vita* as it came down to later ages. But Ælfric's later *vita* should merit some attention, especially given Ælfric's connection to the Benedictine reform movement that looms so large in Wilton's institutional history. It should be noted, too, that while the Wilton text itself cites Bede as its ultimate source, it does so through the filter of the *Liber Eliensis* and other later medieval historians and chroniclers, including Trevisa and Higden. These intermediary sources are recognized in the notes to the edition proper, but their influence is elided in the Introduction, perhaps in aid of a more straightforward, if not stronger, argument. Since the Introduction itself raises the issue of historical leveling and anachronism, the issue of Wilton's reception, reuse and revision of specifically Anglo-Saxon hagiographical and historiographical materials is an intriguingly complex one worthy of being treated with a little more finesse. In the *Wilton Life of Saint Æthelbryth* as in the *Wilton Chronicle*, it is always already 1420 in terms of cultural responses and norms, even when the events being retold occurred much earlier. Unfortunately the Introduction also seems to treat Æthelthryth as ever and essentially the later medieval national saint, rather than ever the specifically East Anglian royal saint she was before she became the heroine of the Benedictine Reform.

What the Introduction does very well, however, is "sell" the texts to readers (particularly, perhaps, students) whom it prompts to investigate a cluster of stylistic and thematic topics. How do the texts merge the saint's life genre with romance, on the one hand, and chronicle on the other? What is the place of humor in a "serious" genre like the saint's life? How does institutional history shape readers' identity—as well as the reverse? How do miracle stories—like that

of the Dancers of Colbek—circulate between and among monastic institutions regionally, nationally, and internationally? How do the texts use narratives of dreams and visions to validate succession or demonstrate rightful patronage?

All in all, *Saints Edith and Æthelbryth* may not perhaps satisfy all the needs and desires of all its readers. Students, for whom this volume (with its translation and glossary) seems primarily to have been designed, will find the price off-putting: this is clearly a book for the library rather than for classroom adoption. Specialists in Middle English, particularly those already conversant with the texts and in search of an updated and more accessible edition, may find the critical apparatus somewhat meager. But Dockray-Miller has made these fascinating and problematic texts available to a much larger audience of feminist scholars in medieval and early modern studies. And that is a very good thing.

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NOTES

1. Stephanie Hollis, with W. R. Barnes, Rebecca Hayward, Kathleen Loncar and Michael Wright, *Writing the Wilton Women*. Goscelin's *Legend of Edith* and *Liber confortatorius* *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts* 9 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004). See also the introduction and interpretive essay in Monika Otter, *Goscelin of St. Bertin. The Book of Encouragement and Consolation [Liber confortatorius]* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004).

2. Virginia Blanton, *Signs of Devotion. The Cult of St. Æthelbryth in Medieval England, 695-1615* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2007); see also Janet Fairweather, trans., *Liber Eliensis. A History of the Isle of Ely from the Seventh Century to the Twelfth, compiled by a Monk of Ely in the Twelfth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005); and the recent edition and translation of the Anglo-Norman saint's life, June Hall McCash and Judith Clark Barban, *The Life of Saint Audrey: A Text by Marie de France* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).