

The Third Gender and *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*

Rhonda L. McDaniel



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Conclusion: Metagender, Gender, and Ælfric

THE LATIN DOCTORS AND the Anglo-Saxon scholars who inherited their theologies reveal in their writings a complex nexus of ideas centered upon the nature of the soul and its relationship to God that also defines their understanding of gender. At the very heart of the soul lies the agency of the individual, the *uoluntas* or *willa*, working in and with memory and understanding to make deliberate choices about identity and self-formation. In the Christian context of the Latin Doctors and the Anglo-Saxon scholars, the soul had fallen through distraction into sin, fragmenting the metagendered *imago Dei* with which it had been created, and becoming lost and at odds even with itself. In this fallen state, the unbelieving men and women in the saints' lives defined themselves in relationship to each other rather than in relationship to God, vying with themselves and with each other in pursuit of wealth, power, social status, and physical gratification. Only a turn to salvation through belief in the Savior could begin the lifelong work of recovering the *imago Dei* that defined human beings as such within the soul. The saints-to-be frequently expressed this turn through a change of clothing, from one identifying form of garment to another.

The rational soul itself was believed to be present in every man and woman, and since it is not a part of the body it possesses no sex. This is why writers and compilers of hagiographies such as Ælfric could combine both male and female legends even if they were writing for a named audience of only one sex. The women and men who pledged their lives to restoring the prelapsarian perfection of their souls through the practice of virginity sought the development and maturity of the aspect of themselves that had no sex and so was of a common substance and nature and the basis of the third gender in both women and men. The souls of men and women alike begin to restore the *imago Dei* within through reading, studying, and memorizing Scripture, seeking to know God and themselves by purposefully situating themselves within a transcendent social context

defined by loving relationship with Christ and all the company of heaven, saints and angels alike. Rejecting the defining contexts of family, procreation, social exchange, and political power, monastic men and women practicing virginity chose a gender different from masculine and feminine because it enacted the profoundly different priorities of a spiritual society. No longer masculine nor feminine, monastic saints of both sexes chose the third-gendered activities intended to draw them closer in love to Christ, the source of virtue and metagendered perfection.

But Ælfric, when he decided to translate such legends for the encouragement of his patrons and a larger nonmonastic audience, faced a problem: how does one resituate Latin saints' lives formed around the subtle concept of a third gender into a new language and context for a non-Latinate audience that lives in a world defined by masculine and feminine genders? Ælfric found his solution to the problem in the fact that the saints, while already living the life of heaven, still had to live in the material world of men, women, blood, sweat, and flesh as did Ælfric's nonmonastic audience. Though the souls of the saints might have been beyond gendering in the transcendent society of heaven, their bodies still acted within their earthly social contexts as sites of gendered expectation and definition and this place of tension is precisely where Ælfric's saints succeed in enacting their sanctity. Ælfric's saints remain men and women and perform their acts of faith and holiness in their own female and male bodies (even when disguised) with the approval of God and the protection of his angels. By removing the gendered language of "becoming male" or "becoming a eunuch," of "acting manfully" or being "clothed in Christ" from his translations, Ælfric not only abridges the tedious length of some *passiones* but also removes the need to explain the performances of the properly ordered soul as a third gender for a less sophisticated audience. Instead of bogging himself down in the complexities of monastic theories of gender best not put before the laity, Ælfric presents metagendered saints in action without ever referring to them as such. Both the men and women among Ælfric's Roman martyrs and royal Anglo-Saxon saints perform variously and equally as learners, teachers, comforters, healers, encouragers, evangelists, rulers, builders, worshipers, prophets, lawyers, virgins, philosophers, and sometimes miracle-workers through their prayers. They memorize the scriptures, spend long times in prayer, generously give alms, preserve their chastity, desire for others to believe in Christ for salvation, defy earthly rulers and cultural expectations, resist tortures and blandishments, receive the service of angels and of wild

beasts, fearlessly approach martyrdom, obtain healing for their own bodies, perceive the truth beneath surface appearances, and without fail act with the motive of steadfast love for and belief in Christ. Since all of these activities are performed by both male and female saints, both masculinity and femininity become transformed in *Lives of Saints* not to the monastic third gender safely enclosed in the Latin texts, but into holy femininities and masculinities (some of which are rather surprising) whose shared defining characteristics are this same soul-shaping love and unwavering belief. Sometimes this love explicitly enacts a chaste lifestyle; at other times chastity is implied by omission of any mention of marriage or family even when history said otherwise. Ælfric always foregrounds the love itself, however, and the belief that accompanies it.

The main differences between Ælfric's female and male saints are that there are fewer female saints in the collection as we know it than male saints, and certain threats faced by some of the saints are clearly gendered in their intention (rape, seduction, or forced marriage) by the families or secular authorities within the legends. Ælfric also downplays Æthelthryth's secular life as noblewoman and queen in comparison with his treatment of Oswald and Edmund, but may do so to highlight a true monastic vocation, something he may have seen as paralleling the way several male saints gave up their kingdoms or perhaps as necessary to justify her long-term denial of the conjugal debt to the unwilling Ecgrith. Of the saints in this study, only Agnes embodies the idea of the soul as a bride of Christ, and only Alban receives spiritual armament as a soldier of Christ, though several other saints are earthly soldiers referred to as champions or athletes of God. This study, however, only makes a beginning in exploring a more nuanced understanding of gender and metagender in Ælfric's *Lives*. One area in which further work needs to be done lies in tracing the presence of specific patristic quotations and concepts in the Latin hagiographies known in Anglo-Saxon England, especially those contained in the Cotton-Corpus Legendary. Further work needs to be done as well on the lives not covered here and also in other ways of approaching Ælfric's work, such as a focused study of his narrative technique in his hagiographical works in relationship to each other as well as in relationship to their Latin sources, which may also reveal insights into his treatment of gender.

The rationale for Ælfric's selection of saints for his collection as we have it is beyond recovery at this point. The incidents of gendering in the *Lives of Saints* should not be surprising, however, for the evidence seems to indicate that Ælfric intended for his saints to be metagendered souls in

gendered bodies so that they could serve as examples for a nonmonastic audience. If the saints could enact the characteristics of the third gender while being nothing other than men and women, then the virtues and love for God illustrated by the saints could be imitated by Anglo-Saxon men and women outside the monastery in their own bodies as well, proving Gregory's observation that "quia ad amorem Dei et proximi plerumque corda audientium plus exempla quam uerba excitant" [examples often rouse the hearts of one's hearers to love of God and neighbor better than words].¹

NOTE

¹ Gregory, "Homilia 39," in *Homiliae in Euangelia*, ed. Étaix, 390.270–71; Gregory, "Homily 39," in *Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. Hurst 366.