

## Ælfric's Abjection of the Virgin Mary

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Ælfric composed not one, but two, homilies on the occasion of the Virgin Mary's Nativity. The first, *De sancta Maria*, appears in the second series of *Catholic Homilies* (Godden 1979), while he wrote his second, *Nativitas sanctae Mariae virginis* (Assmann 1889), ten years later, as an addition to the first series of *Catholic Homilies*. While one might reasonably expect a homily for this feast day to include information on the early life of Mary as well as a discussion of the day's prescribed gospel text, in both cases, Ælfric's approach to Mary's girlhood extends beyond even the most extreme caution. His writing suggests an unwillingness to consider the multifaceted aspects of her saintliness that emerge from this apocryphal story because of concern for the heretical implications that presenting this type of sanctity might cause. The texts that he writes to honour her Nativity therefore have only the most tenuous connection to her girlhood. However, instead of simply presenting the ideas with which he is comfortable, he interweaves rationalisations of his cautious approach into the actual texts themselves. From the information that Ælfric provides in his rationalisations, combined with the manner in which he mediates Mary's youth, we can view his writing choices as being profoundly influenced by what Julia Kristeva terms the abject.

Kristeva describes abjection as a revolt against something that is close to us, but cannot be assimilated into us, and causes worry because of the strange relational position that it therefore occupies with us (1982: 1). The thing that is abjected is not an object, but rather a border. However, as Kristeva says, "we may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it" (1982: 9). The abject also accompanies all religious traditions where it "persists as exclusion or taboo (dietary or other) in monotheistic religions" (Kristeva 1982: 17). From a more strictly psychoanalytical point of view, there are three main categories of abjects: food, waste, and signs of sexual difference (Grosz 1990: 89). With each of these categories, there is a "need to purify the abject," (Kristeva

1982: 17) but with the category of sexual difference, this need has rather drastic consequences. Not only is the archaic mother and her powers of generation feared (Kristeva 1982: 77) but the Mother herself (as well as death) must be abjected as a necessary stage in order for the speaking subject to enter into the Symbolic order of signification. When discussing forms of discourse, we can follow Grosz in saying that "abjection is the underside of the symbolic. It is what the symbolic must reject, cover over and contain" (1990: 89).

As a specific object of abjection, the paradoxical subjectivity that is at the heart of the Virgin Mary's sanctity causes major unrest. As a virgin who, despite her humanity, is elevated 'above all other women' because of her miraculous maternity, she is utterly unique, and it is precisely this extraordinary status that makes her an appropriate object of veneration for ordinary women (and men). The fact that she therefore participates in both the human and the divine (just as her Son does) is, after all, one of the reasons why the faithful sought her intercession with God. Without even contemplating the increased 'biographical' information that apocryphal traditions afford her, her status simply as a woman therefore cannot ultimately be assimilated into orthodox Christian ideologies concerning how regular, non-saintly men and women ought to be.<sup>1</sup> Although these ideologies obviously do not associate her with any of the antifeminist qualities that the Church Fathers so often ascribed to

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<sup>1</sup> The terms orthodox and apocryphal have evolved a great deal as applied to Christian practice and belief. While orthodox has a more consistent meaning of being that which is in accordance with an accepted or authoritatively established belief system, apocryphal first referred to writings that did not belong to Jewish and early Christian canonical literature. With regard to the Virgin Mary, we can thus define all extra-biblical details about her life as apocryphal. However, as the legends about her began to spread and take root in various literary traditions, they necessarily became an accepted part of the belief systems from which these traditions emerged. In places where these legends encountered no resistance, we can thus say that they gained an orthodoxy that they did not have initially. Details concerning the Virgin Mary that were originally apocryphal, for example, the idea of her perpetual virginity, can also be accepted by traditions that, in rejecting the veracity of the majority of her extra-biblical narratives, belong to a more orthodox point of view. It is therefore important to remember that these two terms do not necessarily have to be applied in a mutually exclusive manner. For the sake of clarity, however, in this article, the term orthodox refers to that which is accepted as the truth by the Church Fathers and later men of the Church such as Bede, and the term apocryphal refers to that which causes great ideological concern to these authorities. A narrative's biblical or extra-biblical origin is thus only one aspect, and not the defining principle, of its designation as orthodox or apocryphal.

women,<sup>2</sup> her sex nevertheless prevents them from representing her according to the same parameters as saintly men. Such a position of intra-categorical limbo, for a historical woman, is not innate, even for a minority of extraordinary women; it is only within a narrative that presents itself as biographical reportage that this type of woman can exist.

Mary, therefore, never crosses over into the realm of masculine privilege, but rather only exists as an alien presence in close proximity to it. At the same time, the orthodox tradition abjects, not rejects her, because her position, disturbing as it is, provides a necessary border between the feminine and the masculine. In this way, she protects masculine privilege from the taint of feminine Otherness, but the fact that she ultimately embodies neither of these positions makes her a troubling gatekeeper to say the least. From this point of view, apocryphal traditions and texts that describe Mary beyond the limits of her biblical origins are, in turn, potentially disruptive to the biblical Word as the definitive site of the monolithic, masculine universality. Thus, while Ælfric is extremely concerned with excluding apocryphal details of the Virgin Mary from his own 'proper' Nativity narratives, we find that he never excises their presence from his texts entirely.

It must first be stated that Ælfric assigns Mary a very high place indeed within the Heavenly Family, as he praises her and her powers of intercession with Christ at every opportunity, which we see more fully demonstrated in his second Nativity homily. In both of his Nativity homilies, however, Ælfric explains that the main reason behind his avoidance of apocryphal materials on the Nativity of Mary is his fear of error, or heresy. In the first homily, he simply states his concern about saying too much, "þy læs ðe we on ænigum gedwylde befeallon" (l. 6) (lest we fall into any error), while he is more explicit in the second: "Ac we nellað secgan be þære gesetnyse / of ðam gedwylde, þe gedwolmen setton / be hyre acennednyse..." (ll. 5-7a) (But we do not wish to recite the narrative of the heresy which heretics composed about her birth...). Clearly, Ælfric equates Mary's position as a type of frontier between the feminine and the masculine as a dangerous place that must be avoided. Not even crossing over, but simply approaching, this frontier leads him to an uncomfortable proximity to the heretical errors that would surely result

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<sup>2</sup> For example, women were said to possess apparently inherently lustful, deceitful, envious, garrulous, and deficient natures.

if aspects of the feminine were allowed to mingle with, and thereby infect, the ostensible centrality of the masculine.

In a discussion on heresy in the later medieval period, Swanson notes that, because Western Christianity developed and transformed greatly between 1100 and 1500, "heresy was almost a necessary concomitant" (1994: 280). Although he does not deal specifically with the Anglo-Saxon period, Swanson also states that "given the fragmentation within medieval Christianity, and the tensions and weaknesses of its doctrinal and ideological development, the frequent uncertainty about the boundaries between the orthodox and the unorthodox is unsurprising" (1994: 282). Given the fact that Ælfric was writing in the midst of the changes brought about by the Benedictine Reform, and was also a proponent of the Reform itself, his fear of 'error' is not surprising. Indeed, it is particularly relevant to his views on the Virgin Mary, as one of his chief reasons for writing his homilies is to disseminate what he believes to be proper Christian doctrine to those who are less learned than himself.<sup>3</sup>

However, as much as it might seem reasonable for Ælfric's concerns simply to be a product of his times, the circumstances that surround their origins are much more complex. On the one hand, critics such as Milton Gatch (1977: 102-3), Stanley Greenfield and Daniel Calder (1986: 71), and Malcolm Godden (1978: 102) describe Ælfric's work as specifically reacting to the unorthodoxies of what they believe to be the earlier anonymous Old English homilies that do not share his concerns about Mary. On the other hand, however, there are major discrepancies with such points of view. First, Clayton points out that it is not possible to date the anonymous homilies to the pre-Reform period (1990: 261-3). Second, she points to source studies as the key to deciphering the origins of Ælfric's attitudes towards Mary, suggesting that "Ælfric's acceptance or rejection of these texts seems... to have been guided more by his knowledge or ignorance of authorities which called a text into question than by individual discrimination" (1990: 262). O'Leary offers a similar argument when she points out that Ælfric did not condemn all apocryphal materials (1999: 15). On the contrary, O'Leary shows that Ælfric was familiar with and occasionally used the apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* as sources in his writings (1999: 16). She comments further that "Ælfric regarded apocryphal compositions about the closest followers of Jesus in a positive light and, for the most part, was by no means reluctant to utilise

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<sup>3</sup> We can also describe heresy as an abject, as it is necessary in order to define orthodoxy, but simultaneously repelled by orthodoxy as erroneous.

them,” and that Ælfric’s hesitations about Mary “should not be taken as a blanket-criticism of apocryphal material” (1999: 18 and 19). It seems, therefore, that the rationale that informs Ælfric’s creation of Mary in his Nativity homilies originates from previous authors’ definitions of what is acceptable and unacceptable source material.

It is also interesting to note that Ælfric’s ideas about acceptable source materials and proper Christian conduct were not, however, always followed by others, especially in the compilation of collections of his works. Contrary to his wishes, we find the unauthorised insertion of homilies in manuscripts that contain Ælfric’s work where he recommends three ‘silent days’ on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Sunday: days on which Ælfric maintained that Church custom prevented preaching (Hill 1985: 118). Evidence, for example, exists from MS Bodley 340 that the compiler ignored Ælfric’s desires and included anonymous homilies for the three silent days (Hill 1985: 120). Nor was this an isolated incident, given the fact that “at the end of the eleventh-century, marginal notes made in Worcester registered vigorous protests against Ælfric’s First Series pronouncement that church custom forbade the preaching of homilies on the three ‘silent days’” (Ibid). In light of Clayton and Hill’s observations, we can therefore suggest that Ælfric’s abjecting approach to the Virgin Mary is most likely more demonstrative of his own idiosyncratic, individual style of composition and use of source materials than of any compositional trends across Old English homilies as a genre during the time in which he wrote.

Despite his fears, however, Ælfric still incorporates apocryphal material concerning Mary into his homilies. Keeping in mind that the Bible includes no information whatsoever concerning Mary before the Annunciation, it is surprising that Ælfric says as much about her as he does in his first homily:

Hwæt wylle we secgan ymbe Marian gebyrtide. buton þæt  
heo wæs gestryned þurh fæder. and ðurh moder. swa swa oðre  
men. and wæs on ðam dæge acenned þe we cwedað Sexta Idus  
Septembris; Hire fæder hatte Ioachim. and hire moder Anna.  
eawfæste men on ðære ealdan æ. (ll. 1-5)

(What shall we say about Mary’s birthday, except that she was conceived by father and mother as other people, and was born on the day we call the eighth of September. Her father was called Joachim and her mother Anna, pious people according to the old law.)

In telling us that Mary was born like other people, Ælfric may be refuting, not only the Christologically apocryphal story of her birth, where God intervened with her aging parents to tell them that Anna would indeed become pregnant, but also the extrapolations from this story where some people therefore claimed that Anna (like Mary) was also subjected to a miraculously virginal conception and birth. However, the fact that Ælfric also recounts the date of Mary's birth, as well as her parents' names, and the fact that they were pious people, suggests that he himself is using heterodox information in his attempt to supply the minimal amount of information for this feast day. That he then quickly concludes this homily rather abruptly, claiming that he does not even want to risk a discussion of the day's gospel because it is too difficult to explain, demonstrates the great extent to which he can neither entirely include nor expunge Mary from his narrative. He abjects Mary's girlhood similarly in his second Nativity homily. Although he includes the details of Mary's parentage, he also states that he does not want to relate the stories of her birth or death, which "halgan boceras forbudon to secgenne" (l. 9) (holy scholars forbade [us] to relate). First simply dangerous, and then explicitly forbidden, this aspect of Mary is a problem of which he seemingly cannot rid himself.

Despite his difficulties with incorporating apocryphal material on Mary which should, logically, contribute to a Nativity homily in her honour, Ælfric does not banish it entirely. In fact, there is one apocryphal detail concerning her that he is happy to use over and over: her supposed girlhood vow of virginity.<sup>4</sup> Instead of engaging, therefore, with the possibility of emphasising multiple aspects of her saintly youth, his abjection of this leads him to use her virginity as an exegetical tool. Ælfric's highly selective employment of this particular apocryphal detail in his work thus characterises her paradoxical subjectivity according to a socio-sexual trait that the Church expected of all unmarried women, be they saints or laywomen. Such an emphasis on a trait that she shares with many other women, instead of one that, however extraordinary it may be,

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<sup>4</sup> In maintaining that the Virgin Mary vowed to remain a virgin when she was still only a girl, Ælfric expresses a view which, in light of the fact that it is extra-biblical, is technically heterodox. Also, although the idea of Mary's continual virginity even after Christ's birth was first developed by Church Fathers such as Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine, it first gained popular prominence in the thirteenth century, and was made official Church dogma only in the twentieth century. In maintaining that Mary made a vow always to remain a virgin, Ælfric was therefore clearly ahead of his time.

emphasises the speculative difference of her youth from that of other young women, provides him with the ideological safety that he requires.

We can see how Ælfric creates Mary not as an individual figure, but as a static tool, in the second section of his second Nativity homily, which is entitled *De sancta virginitate*.<sup>5</sup> As an in-depth comparison of Ælfric's text with Augustine's source text has already been carried out (Clayton 1986), it can suffice to add here that Ælfric's creation of Mary in this manner allows him to expound greatly upon the theme of virginity as it metaphorically relates to Christian faith and the Christian Church. Given the fact that speech is a factor of great importance in creating female sanctity in general, it is interesting to focus on how the speech that Ælfric ascribes to her participates in his exegesis. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there is only one example. When discussing Mary's surprise at the angel's announcement that she will conceive Christ and her reply to the angel of "Hu mæg ðis gewurðan, þonne ic weres ne bruce?" (l. 195) (How may this be, as I know not man?), Ælfric comments:

God mihte hi hatan,	þæt heo heolde hyre mægþhad
to swilcere acennednyse,	ac wæs swa þeah
hyre willa mærligor,	þæt heo wolde hyre sylf
hyre mægðhad behatan	þam heofonlican gode,
ærðan þe heo wiste,	hwæne heo acennan sceolde,
and wæs gode gehalgod	be hyre agenum cyre,
na swylce geneadod	mid nanre hæse,
eallum mædenum to bysne,	þe on mode geceosað,
þæt hi for Cristes lufon	on clænnysse þurhwunion.

(ll. 198-206)

(God could have commanded her that she should preserve her virginity for such a birth, but her desire, however, was more glorious, in that she herself wished to vow her virginity to the heavenly God, before she knew to whom she would have to give birth, and she was consecrated to God by her own choice, not compelled thus by any command, as an example to all virgins who choose in their minds that they will persevere in purity for love of Christ.)

Here we can see how Ælfric uses Mary's biblically sanctioned Annunciation speech for this exegesis of a portrayed girlhood decision which is in itself apocryphal. In this passage he presumes to fashion both

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<sup>5</sup> Ælfric's source for this is Augustine's own *De sancta virginitate*, which can be found in Migne 1844-80.

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her mind, as well as God's, as he speaks for both of them, inserting his own rationale in order to explain the circumstances that surround her supposed vow of virginity.<sup>6</sup> This type of contextual, positional abjection of Mary's Nativity therefore gives him total control to position her (and God!) as he wishes.

It seems, therefore, that abjection is the only means by which Ælfric can approach the Virgin Mary's girlhood, given his extremely conservative views on the appropriateness of presenting this aspect of her to the public. However, even this may be granting her too significant a role in Ælfric's process of homiletic composition. It has already been stated that much of what Ælfric accepted or rejected was based on the opinions of the Church men with whose works he was already familiar. His difficulties in mediating Mary's saintly girlhood may therefore have more to do with a desire that he himself remain within the well-defined, fixed ideological circumstances that the previous works create. Ælfric's concern with developing too many different aspects of Mary's character can thus be said to be only of secondary importance to him, as the primary importance revolves around staving off the threat that such potentially unsettling differences pose to his own positionality within the patristic economy of meaning.

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<sup>6</sup> This passage is a direct translation from *De sancta virginitate* (Clayton 1986: 304). So while the ideas expressed in it are not technically his own original work, the fact that he recreates them through translation into Old English still grants him authorship of and responsibility for them, especially as he is often quite free in his adaptation of Augustine's source text.



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