

Exposing Virginal Bodies in Early Norman England

[note: this is adapted from a longer paper. For purposes of streamlining, footnotes have been eliminated; please contact me if you would like me to re-insert them]

A *hagiographer* is one who composes accounts of the lives and miracles of the saints. This is a very dangerous task, for in doing so, he finds that he is playing with fire. To the medieval mind, the saints were electric; they were exceptionally powerful, potent figures precisely because they bridged the human and the divine. He who controlled their memory through narrative and story was, therefore, a powerful man indeed. But although they reached toward the eternal, the saints and their biographers easily became entangled in worldly affairs, and in colonial contexts such as those of Norman England the saints could become pawns in monumental cultural, social, and political struggles.

Goscelin of Saint-Bertin emigrated from France to England some time around 1060, a few years before William of Normandy took the English throne in 1066. After about twenty years, during which he built his reputation as a hagiographer of skill, Goscelin visited the monastery at Ely around 1087 or 1088. It was probably around that time that he was commissioned to write the lives of Ely's saintly women, a veritable bouquet of consecrated female virgins from Ely's glorious past.

As a French emigrant to England before the Normans overtook the native secular and sacred hierarchies, Goscelin was in a unique position, perched between his new English countrymen and the colonizers from his French homeland. Thus, when he wrote or rewrote the lives of the native Anglo-Saxon saints, he often had two audiences in mind: the commissioning Anglo-Saxon community and the Norman ecclesiastical authorities. These authorities, who had a somewhat dubious view of the native English church, also held some ambivalence toward her saints. Goscelin's hagiographies were,

therefore, ultimately polemic. As he attempted to create texts of devotion and commemoration he also sought to prove to the new colonial authorities that the native saints were legitimate receptacles of divine favor on earth.

In fact, his works are treasure troves of information and insight into the culture contact that produced early Norman England. But Goscelin's explicit authorial purpose seems to contradict the implicit action of the texts themselves. Once one engages issues of sexuality and pornography in analyses of his work, new vistas are opened in which the colonial enterprise interacted with the virgin saints in ways that ultimately implicated female bodies in the narratives of conquest.

Indeed, in his hagiographies of the virgin saints from Ely, it is the female body and its visual presence that seem to have fascinated Goscelin most. To begin with, Goscelin's women are immaculately dressed: they are outfitted with the stunning fashions and glorious ornaments of virtue. With their physical beauty reflecting their inner beauty, they are seen to eschew the ostentatious opulence of worldly apparel, donning what Goscelin calls the "simple clothing consecrated to God, . . . [enjoying] the stole of inestimable nobility [and] crowned with the laurel wreath of beauty which never fades."

Goscelin even described the corpses—the relics—of these women as jewels, ornamenting the church with their radiance. Whereas the married woman relied on gold and jewels, the holy virgin was effortlessly and by nature radiant: glittering in her repose for all to admire, it was her untouched body itself that scintillated with light, making her desirable to the Christian faithful and Christ himself. Goscelin made it clear that this holy light needed to be held up and exposed before the eyes of all. Whereas the theologians of

the early church thought that the holy virgin should properly remain hidden and cloistered, Goscelin demanded exposure: such bright lights were created for the illumination of all—they were created to be looked at, displayed. This is seen most evidently in his accounts of the incorrupt virginal corpses.

Like many saints, when the holy virgins of Ely died, they were thought to be immune to decay. Holy virgins, uncorrupted in body while living, received the distinction of incorruption of body in death. For example, hear Goscelin's description of St. Wihtburh's body upon the opening of her tomb: "her face glowed for the Lord with rosy cheeks, animated with the breath of life; her breasts [were] firm and upright in their incorruption, her unwedded limbs blossom[ed] with the loveliness of paradise."

Wihtburh's body was a shining, paradisiacal body, straddling the boundaries between life, death, and *eternal life*. And yet, although it was radiance that marked the body as holy, it was also fleshiness. Wihtburh's breasts are firm, her face glows, her limbs blossom. As we have seen, it was the flesh itself that seemed to produce light—it was not a shimmering aura that illuminated the virgin but the incandescent heat of living flesh.

Goscelin tells us that those who encounter the miraculously uncorrupted virginal body are moved to test it by touching, prodding, or manipulating it. They cannot believe the stories, nor can they believe their eyes—they must test the bodies for themselves. Here, Goscelin struggled to draw a difference between what he called *pure* and *impure* testing. But what exactly was this difference? It must be borne in mind that the action of the pure testing and the impure testing—touching the virginal body—was the same. Even the intent to prove what could not be believed was the same, as was the reliance on

touch, not faith. Both testers were seen to possess audacity, brazenness, and daring. So what appears to be the difference was the *method* of testing. Whereas, for example, a presumptuous priest pokes and prods Æthelthryth's body with brusqueness, roughness, and even rudeness (and is subsequently struck blind and felled by plague), the priests who test Wihtburh do so with gentleness. They "reverently" and "tremulously" caress her flesh, fondle her limbs, and gaze upon her body. But, for all their touching and gazing, Goscelin tells us that "no irreverent eye lit upon her beautiful body, shielded by its snowy-white coverings."

Here is an interesting paradox: the virginal body is simultaneously veiled and exposed. Although Wihtburh is held up to examination by eyes and fingers, and many men step up to test her, the "snowy-white coverings" protect her from "irreverent" eyes. In order to investigate this paradox, questions of the pornographic must be brought into play.

There are as many definitions of "pornography" as there are people who choose to use the term. Feminist detractors find the pornographic firmly tied to narratives of exposure and rape: the policy statement of the Campaign against Pornography and Censorship holds that "pornography is a continuum of the representation of women as sex objects, sexually available, inviting sexual access and violation, and victims of sexual violence; women are frequently portrayed . . . being raped, tortured, or assaulted."

I do not deny that pornography often involves some sort of exposure or violation, but I would caution against an understanding of pornography that is wholly coercive, that assumes a monolithic "male gaze" that always seeks to rape. Some theorists have noticed other arenas of the pornographic—pleasure and fantasy—where the loci of response

become multiplicitous and embedded coercion fades away. Robert Mills reminds us of the fracturing, embodied responses engendered by the pornographic, where fantasy and multiplicity bridge distance and shatter subjectivity. I argue, inspired by Caroline Bynum's presidential address to the American Historical Association, that in Goscelin's hagiographies, this shattering of subjectivity was enacted not so much through fantasy as through *wonder*. Medieval *admiratio*, inspired by paradox and the confounding of perceived boundaries, was a stimulus toward the impulse to seek, to know, and to understand, but was also the understanding that one could never appropriate nor fully possess.

When Goscelin exposes a virgin's incorrupt body, therefore, the wonder it elicits is based upon the knowledge that human flesh, by nature, decays. When confronted by a reversal of this law, the observer steps back, startled, shocked into a moment of awe and the sudden desire to touch, to test, to know. Yet there is an element of mystery and hiddenness that remains in Goscelin's hagiographies despite their impulse to reveal, which is the paradox of the veiled yet exposed body. There is wonder in the response because of this paradox; this is, perhaps, why the hagiographies are pornographic: they tease, they reveal too much and then conceal.

Jonathan Stuart Boulter sees the pornographic as a metaphor for "total revelation;" it is "too much" knowledge, even "transgressive knowledge." Thus, if that which is pornographic is a narrative of transgressive revelation accompanied and initiated by the visceral response known as *wonder*, then Goscelin's exposure and display of the incorrupt virginal bodies can indeed be called pornographic.

Goscelin presented images of female nudity that conveyed a sacred story through the very narrative of exposure itself. The details of the look and feel of the virginal bodies uphold their miraculous, boundary-transgressing nature, but they also put these bodies on display. But before whom? Goscelin had two intended audiences, the monks at Ely and the Norman authorities. The Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of Ely, whose stories of inviolate virginal bodies that repel impure investigation may have spoken directly to the colonial authorities who doubted the legitimacy of the native saints. Those who doubt holy women, they seemed to say, are those who violate them. But Goscelin took these narratives of concealment and defense and added his own rhetorical flourishes that served to expose those very bodies before the authorities.

Malek Alloula, in investigating French representations of Algerian women, has argued that discursive seizure and exposure of erstwhile hidden female bodies is implicit in any colonial enterprise. The action of unveiling what was hidden—which is the main action of and in Goscelin’s pornographies—reflects the opening of a country to colonial forces. Goscelin tells us that the virgins had been able to repel the Viking invaders of the ninth century; even though a Viking had hacked a hole into Æthelthryth’s tomb, for example, he was unable to glimpse the virginal remains within—immediately struck blind, he perished on the spot. In more contemporary times, however, men had not only been able to glimpse the incorrupt bodies of the holy virgins but had been able to touch, prod, and test them. It is clear that a concern for the integrity of virginal bodies reflected a concern for the integrity of political or social boundaries. The Vikings, who had colonized England before the Normans, were unable to access the virgins. So, what was different about this new era, in which virgins could be touched?

The Normans knew that in order to control the Anglo-Saxon populace they had to control the holy relics of its saints. Goscelin saw himself in the middle of a frenzy in which relics changed hands as swiftly as new Norman abbots and Romanesque churches arose to receive them. What seems to have resulted was an Anglo-Saxon society that was unable to control and protect its relics just as it was no longer able to control and protect its holy women.

Goscelin was an Anglo-Saxon apologist, but he was nevertheless an immigrant, an outsider who ended up exposing the very bodies the natives wished to remain hidden. This is why there is the paradox of the veiled/revealed. Here, the pornography of transgressive knowledge and the wonder-fulness of radiant incorruptibility were implicated in a colonial enterprise marked by incursion, conquest, and control. Although Goscelin desired to uphold the sanctity of the native saints, he nevertheless participated in their violation by constructing narratives of exposure that opened these women to investigation and laid them bare. Yet such is the nature of pornographic wonder: the holy virgins of Ely could be viewed, touched, and tested, but never fully possessed. Goscelin's saints are wonderful because they are paradoxical, they are veiled yet ultimately examined, exposed. By reaching deep into a cloistered realm, grasping the female bodies found there, revealing what should have remained hidden, and yielding the miraculous and mysterious up to investigation, Goscelin participated in the penetrating thrust of the Norman conquest—even as he sought to allay it—by manipulating Anglo-Saxon society through its symbolic and powerful women.