
“Performing their Holy Duties”

Female Community and Same-Sex Desire in Anglo-Saxon Monasteries

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BA Thesis

Engelse Taal en Cultuur: History, Genre, Identity

12555 words

Supervisor: Dr. M.P.J. Cole

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18 January 2016



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Abstract

This dissertation discusses female-female relationships in an Anglo-Saxon monastic context, focussing on the opportunities and limitations for such relationships, and on how they might have been perceived and described. While evidence for same-sex relationships in the Anglo-Saxon period is virtually non-existent, it is important to uncover what can be said about marginalised experiences in spite of limitations and difficulties. This dissertation firstly explains in more detail the evidentiary and conceptual difficulties of researching medieval same-sex relationships. However, it also demonstrates that, by examining the possibilities for same-sex relationships in monastic life, and by reading the silence in the Anglo-Saxon source material, especially the hagiographical texts, a discussion of same-sex desire becomes possible. Bede's narrative of the life of Ethelburg of Barking in the *Ecclesiastical History*, Aelfric's "Life of Eugenia", and Rudolf's "Life of Leoba" contain descriptions of friendships between women that, although not explicitly sexual or erotic, may be indicative of same-sex desire. By altering our assumptions about what eroticism would look like in Anglo-Saxon texts, and by being aware of the inherent limitations of this type of research, it is possible to come to new readings of female-female relationships without creating anachronisms or imposing inaccurate identity categories on Anglo-Saxon women.

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Introduction

Research into same-sex relationships in premodern times is inherently difficult, conceptually as well as evidentiary, and this is especially true for relationships between women. Central to modern debates of defining 'lesbianism' are questions of sexual behaviour and identity (Coleman 305), which is problematic in researching medieval culture because "[i]n premodern times, people didn't speak of 'identity' and 'recognition,' not because people didn't have (what we call) identities or because these didn't depend on recognition, but rather because these were then too unproblematic to be thematized as such" (Taylor 48).

Researching medieval sexuality can therefore be a difficult process, even more so with regards to the Anglo-Saxon period.

Even if the notion of sexual *identity* is disregarded, female-female relationships are difficult to discuss because there is little evidence of their existence. This may be why they have been largely neglected in previous research: John Boswell, for instance, has written on premodern same-sex unions between men, but excludes women from his discussion because, as he explains, their relationships do not feature prominently in most premodern historical sources (xxvii-x). Several other medievalists, such as Diane Watt and Jacqueline Murray, have conducted research into same-sex relationships between women, but their research only considers the later medieval period throughout Western Europe. Murray's work focusses primarily on the historical evidence for the existence of female-female relationships, such as love poems between women. Watt has analysed relationships between women in the works of authors such as John Gower and Marie de France, using Judith Bennett's term 'lesbian-like,' which includes a broad category of behaviours to make same-sex desire more legible.

However, Anglo-Saxons are not included in any of these discussions. Ruth Mazo Karras discusses medieval views on sexuality and sexual identity, and especially the way sexuality was talked about, but like Watt and Murray, she writes primarily about the later medieval

period. This does not mean that Anglo-Saxon women are not written about at all: there are many studies on their lives, for instance by Christine Fell, Stephanie Hollis, and Sarah Foot, but this research tends to neglect sexuality as an aspect of female existence. Research into same-sex relationships between Anglo-Saxon women is, thus, virtually non-existent, and has largely been dismissed as impossible or impractical, due to the lack of evidence or adequate terminology.

Luisa Passerini argues that, when discussing the lives of marginalised groups “we should turn our attention and our discussions in two main directions: one is the effort to build a new history [...] that takes into account the dialectics of memory, silence and oblivion; the other is the search for the limits of our disciplines in these fields” (250). Passerini’s views might be particularly relevant for approaching the present topic: in order to discuss premodern same-sex relationships, research must sometimes be confined to reading the silence in the textual material, and there are limits to what knowledge can be inferred with such an approach.

This thesis will focus on female-female relationships in an Anglo-Saxon monastic context, mostly because the lives of monastic women are better-documented than those of the laity. While there are several historical texts outlining monastic standards and regulations, the best sources to gain an insight into the lives of monastic women are perhaps the hagiographical texts – not because they are always reliable in conveying historical events, but because, as Mazo Karras explains, these texts represent “a set of attitudes and assumptions” even if they are “notoriously inaccurate about who did what” (*Doing unto Others* 11). Monastic women were highly literate, and as Lisa Weston argues, “[t]he act of reading [...] polices behaviour through its imposition of correct models for emulation” (“Particular Friendships” 56). Hagiographers would therefore probably have selected material they deemed useful and appropriate as models for emulation by female monastics, and for this

reason, the authors' adaptations of their source materials can lead to an insight into the lives of Anglo-Saxon monastic women and the moral standards that guided their behaviour – even in cases where these biographies describe non-Anglo-Saxon saints.

It is emphatically not the intention of this thesis to describe monastic women in terms of sexual identities; to label their relationships with other women as necessarily sexual; or to imply that their choice to lead a monastic life in itself indicated female-oriented desire. It cannot be assumed that women joined the monastery because they had same-sex romantic tendencies, nor that monastic life actually drove women to same-sex sexual acts because men were not present in the monasteries, and to argue for the validity of either statement would require radical leaps of interpretation. However, it is important to uncover what *can* be said about marginalised lives and experiences, in spite of limited evidence. Therefore, the present research will focus on explaining to what extent female-female relationships *could have* happened in Anglo-Saxon monastic life; in what ways these relationships were limited or facilitated; and how they may have been perceived or described by hagiographers.

The first chapter of this thesis provides an outline of the context in which Anglo-Saxon texts should be read and analysed. It consists of a broad overview of existing literature on women, sex, sexual orientation, and female-female relationships in the medieval period and particularly in Anglo-Saxon England. This chapter also addresses the evidentiary and terminological issues of this research in more detail. The second chapter discusses the ways in which monastic life may have facilitated erotic relationships or desire between women, explaining the limits imposed by monastic standards and regulations, as well as the opportunities created by the emphasis on community and by the conflation between spiritual and erotic desire in religious experience. The third chapter consists of an analysis of Bede's account of the life of Ethelburg of Barking, Rudolf's "Life of Leoba," and Ælfric's "Life of

Eugenia.”¹ These three texts are particularly significant in how they address relationships between women: in the lives of many female saints, men feature more prominently than other women, as fathers or advisors, but for the abovementioned women, relationships with other women are arguably the most significant aspect in the narratives of their lives. The findings of these chapters are summarised in a concluding chapter, which also discusses the implications and limitations of the study.

¹ The present paper relies on the following editions and translations: ed. Miller (1890) and the translation found in Sellar (1907) for Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*; ed. Heinrich (2010) and Talbot’s (1954) translation for Rudolf’s “Life of Leoba”; and ed. and trans. Skeat (1881) for “Life of Eugenia”.

Theoretical Framework

A common assumption in medieval studies is that it is difficult to analyse aspects of female lives in the Middle Ages, because women in the time period were marginalised, invisible, or repressed (Hollis 8), and because they are underrepresented in most European medieval sources (Foot, *Veiled Women* ix). While this belief is true for most of the European Middle Ages, women in the Anglo-Saxon period were considerably less marginalised than they were in the later medieval period, which is why the era is commonly referred to as the “golden age” of women (Lees and Overing, “Before History” 319). This term neglects class difference, but it is true that at least some women had relatively favourable positions, and the Church had difficulty regulating women from families more powerful than the male ecclesiastics (Hollis 8). Although the position of Anglo-Saxon women was favourable compared to women across the medieval period as a whole, they were mostly regarded as inferior. However, the Old English double entendre riddles “treat women on a par with men” (Magennis 18), and do not marginalise their existence or sexual experience. These inconsistencies explain why Clara Lees and Gillian Overing assert that views of women were multifaceted in the Anglo-Saxon period (“Clerics and Critics” 34), and that the period is “constructed by means of an ongoing, largely unexamined, and often unconscious critical process of differentiation” (“Clerics and Critics” 26). The fact that it is difficult to find a coherent perspective on what it meant to be a female in the Anglo-Saxon period pre-empt the complexity of investigating views of female sexuality in this time period.

Among medievalists, it is common knowledge that “Anglo-Saxon England is not a promising place to think about sex” (Lees 17). Firstly, there are few Anglo-Saxon literary texts that provide any representations of sex or sexual desire (Pasternack and Weston xxxiii). “The monastic archive of Anglo-Saxon England has been repeatedly judged barren of any erotic language [...], especially when viewed against the spectacularly sensual, affective

productions of the later Middle Ages” (Farina 11). Monastic writers, such as Ælfric, show a “discomfort with sexual themes” (Magennis 12), and even if their source texts refer to aspects of female sexuality, their adaptations typically neglect it. This does not mean that sex is regarded as unimportant, since hagiographers almost invariably insist on the virginity of their subjects: “Sexuality is what matters in the female saint’s life, but as a source of temptation it must be seen to be understood and therefore denied” (Lees 31).

While many Christian authors were suspicious of any sexual activity, even within marriage (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 30), it is commonly believed that “[s]ex in the Middle Ages could be talked about” (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 19). Mazo Karras points to the sexual riddles as evidence for this. Although they are limited in number, they were not banned or spread in secret, and they would not have been seen as subversive (*Doing unto Others* 2). Hugh Magennis provides a different perspective: he suggests that the riddles, although they have a sexual connotation, seem to “accept the principle that sex is not a proper subject for them to deal with — otherwise there would be no need for *double entendre*” (17). The reason they were not seen as subversive, according to Magennis, is because the type of sexuality they represent is not socially threatening (18). This theory might be confirmed by Mazo Karras when she asserts that, although medieval people discussed sex both in legal texts and in everyday conversation, sodomy was probably an exception to this rule. The topic may have been avoided as “it would give people ideas” (*Doing unto Others* 19).

Regardless of *why* they were deemed acceptable, the riddles “are remarkable, in an Anglo-Saxon context, in that in their treatment of sexuality they lack an obvious moral dimension [...] and their positive attitude to sexuality contrasts with the prevalent sexual pessimism found elsewhere in Old English literature” (Magennis 17). This pessimism is visible primarily in the penitentials. Importantly, the penitentials classified primarily kinds of sins, and did not attempt to map these onto individuals (Davidson 45). The practical utility of

the penitentials is hard to determine, but it can be assumed that they reflected the reality of human behaviour at least to an extent, because otherwise they would have been entirely without function (Payer 7-12). However, the penitentials “do not tell us how prevalent certain sexual acts were [...] [n]or does the relative severity of the penances always indicate the popularity of certain forms of sexual behaviour” (Davies 84). The hierarchy of sexual sin as represented by the penitentials is “somewhat alien to modern thinking” (Phillips and Reay 19), because this hierarchy systematically ranks relations without reproductive potential as the most sinful. Because of this attitude, sins such as masturbation and sodomy were regularly seen as more sinful than male-female incest and rape. Of course, the penitentials were composed by theologians, so there is no saying to what extent people in medieval society would have taken them seriously. In any case, “[t]he fact that chastity is so remarkable in saints’ lives would seem to indicate that it was not expected in normal people’s behaviour” (Mazo Karras *Doing unto Others* 26), even though sex acts are condemned by many medieval theologians.

It appears, then, that strongly contradictory viewpoints on sex and sexuality were held in medieval society. According to Mazo Karras, societal views on sex and sexuality differed between individuals, but also *for* individuals, depending on circumstances (*Doing unto Others* 2). This may be especially true for the Anglo-Saxon period, where “attitudes toward sexuality are profoundly ambivalent” (Lees 39). Overall, however, “Anglo-Saxon art does not take as its subject the human body, let alone sexuality” (Lees 22), and there is a “clearly evident reticence of Anglo-Saxon poets and prose writers in dealing with matters of sex and love” (Magennis 1). Therefore “those looking for representations of sex simply will not find many” (Farina 16). However, perhaps “[t]he very difficulty of discerning erotic elements in Old English literature can be informative, since it can suggest alterations we may need to

make to our assumptions about what constitutes eroticism and where its practices can happen” (Farina 16).

If it is not promising to think about sex in Anglo-Saxon England, it is less promising to think about sexual orientation. According to the *American Psychology Association*, sexuality or sexual orientation “refers to an *enduring pattern* of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person’s *sense of identity* based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions” (my emphasis). This is a fairly recent definition, and the concept of sexual identity did not exist as such until the nineteenth century. Therefore, “[w]e will find neither heterosexuals nor homosexuals in the contemporary sense in the premodern world” (Traub 27). Michel Foucault, in discussing the shift from sexual acts to identities, identifies sexuality as a discursive fact that is historically determined. Historical specificity cannot, therefore, be disregarded when discussing sexuality (Phillips and Reay 9), and speaking of the Middle Ages in terms of sexual identities, such as heterosexuality and lesbianism, “risks restricting interpretation before it begins” (Phillips and Reay 89).

Just because the modern concept of sexuality did not exist in the Middle Ages does not mean that sexual identities were simply non-existent. Sexuality “may not be a concept medieval people had [...] but nor is there any word that translates precisely to ‘political culture’ or ‘affective piety’ or ‘patriarchal family’ or a host of other terms that we have no problem using to describe the Middle Ages” (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 5). While it is believed by some scholars that people in the Middle Ages had “no notion of sexual identity” (Schultz, *Courtly Love* 57), this is not necessarily the case. Mazo Karras describes sexuality as “the universe of meanings that people place on sex acts, rather than the acts themselves” (*Doing unto Others* 5), and finds that “[t]he identities of medieval people were fundamentally

shaped by their sexual status” (*Doing unto Others* 9). According to Mazo Karras, it is possible to see “all societies as having both universalizing and minoritizing discourses” (“Prostitution” 159). She uses as an example the medieval prostitute, who was defined in medieval society as “a type of person and not just one who committed certain acts” (“Prostitution” 171), to argue the falsity of the assumption that sexual identities did not exist. The two most common sexual identities, however, were probably the chaste and the virginal. “A woman’s whole being [...] was defined by her sexual activity or lack thereof” (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 35), making virginity and chastity identity categories. Chastity was part of how medieval people defined themselves, and how they were defined by others (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 53), and Robert Mills explains that chastity and virginity are often described as inborn orientations, using directional language, similarly to modern descriptions of sexual identity categories (00:11:10-13:11).

Several medieval scholars, such as Sahar Amer, Diane Watt, Jacqueline Murray, and John Boswell, seem to have no problem identifying various premodern people as homosexuals. Watt justifies her usage of the term ‘lesbian’ by referring to Amer’s arguments in favour of it, but although Amer argues convincingly for the relevance of the word in the medieval Arabic world, her arguments cannot simply be transposed onto medieval western culture. In fact, Amer acknowledges that Arabian stories and descriptions explicitly describing lesbian sexual practices “have few equivalents in medieval European literature” (221). Watt states that “the rejection of the word *lesbian* in a medieval context is not overcautious but orientalist” (Watt, “Why” 461), but this would only apply to the rejection of the word in a non-western context. For medieval women in western Europe, the usage of the term is inaccurate. Amer feels that avoidance of the word lesbian means “maintaining medieval lesbians in othered categories of time and culture” (9), and Judith Bennett argues that the instabilities of the meaning of the word ‘lesbian,’ even nowadays, can be taken into

consideration without using them as an excuse to deny relationships between time periods (13). She feels that the consistent avoidance of the term will only serve to create “a fetish instead of a history” (14). However, the medieval perspective was truly different from modern western views of sexuality, and to “perpetually look for precursors to our categories in essentially different domains” creates “anachronism at best and unintelligibility at worst” (Davidson qtd. in Schultz, “Heterosexuality” 19).

Bennett has developed the term ‘lesbian-like’ as a category of behaviours that might be indicative of same-sex interest and desire, to create a new way of reading and analysing medieval texts that could lead to different insights. However, both Watt and Amer appropriate Bennett’s term to describe individual women (Watt, “Why” 457, 461; Amer 215, 226), which is emphatically not how Bennett intended it: she seeks to describe practices, not people. The approach by Watt and Amer might be problematic because sexual cultures in the premodern world differed significantly from our own, and are easily misrepresented by attempts to emphasise historical continuities. While it is understandable that scholars look for enduring patterns, “[s]urface likenesses [...] should not be read as sameness” (Phillips and Reay 10). Usage of the word ‘lesbian,’ or even ‘lesbian-like,’ creates interpretative issues. While these terms are ostensibly convenient, and while Bennett has attempted to avoid imposing identity categories on same-sex relationships, they cannot be used free from their modern connotations. This issue is highlighted by the fact that both Amer and Watt have managed to take the term out of its original context and have misapplied it to describe individual medieval women. Experts in communication theory, influenced by semioticians such as Mikhail Bakhtin, often feel that “the word does not forget where it has been” (Díaz-Diocaretz 167). Therefore, to use the word ‘lesbian-like’ is to create the implicit assumption that women were deviating from some kind of heterosexual norm, while heterosexuality did not exist in the Middle Ages – much like lesbianism.

While most medieval scholars nowadays know to avoid the term ‘homosexuals’ in discussing the Middle Ages, the same does not appear to be true for ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘heterosexuals’ (Schultz, “Heterosexuality” 14). It has been suggested that “perhaps there was no heteronormativity, much less heterosexuality, in medieval theological and penitential discourse” (Lochrie 201), and that the unchallenged use of the concept ‘heterosexuality’ in medieval studies is problematic because the term “consistently thwarts history” (Schultz, “Heterosexuality” 29). Heterosexuality, nowadays, is an unmarked category and thus not recognised as a social construct. Because of this, it is “especially important to keep in mind the question of whether behaviours and attitudes add up to an identity” (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 7) when discussing heterosexuality in the Middle Ages.

According to Eve Sedgwick, it is difficult to make heterosexuality historically visible “because, under its institutional pseudonyms such as Inheritance, Marriage, Dynasty, Domesticity, and Population, heterosexuality has been permitted to masquerade so fully as History itself – when it has not been busy impersonating romance” (qtd. in Schultz, “Heterosexuality” 25). A preoccupation with romantic love is taken for granted by many people in contemporary society but is not necessarily commonplace in other times and places. The “almost universal expectation that romantic love and marriage are inextricable, causally interrelated, and largely coterminous” (Boswell xx) in modern western Europe is almost unheard of in other cultures, as well as in premodern Europe, and “it is a serious misprision that [premodern societies] would have even *accepted* a correlation” between marriage and romantic love (idem). Marriage, in the Middle Ages, was a sacrament, often entered into for economic reasons, and did not have “the same emotional importance it has for many people today” (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 22).

If there is no correlation between love and marriage, there is certainly no correlation between marriage and heterosexuality. Nevertheless, marriage is commonly conflated with

heterosexuality by medievalists. Clare Lees, for example, refers to “cohabitation, marriage, concubinage, polygamy, and spiritual marriage” as “heterosexual examples” (20), and Mary Anne Campbell suggests that “in as much as virginity was considered the only alternative to marriage (...) it was considered from the male perspective to be the only alternative to active heterosexuality” (14-5). Both authors seem to rely on the inaccurate assumption that there was a necessary connection between marriage and sexuality in the medieval period.

Additionally, Campbell’s idea that resistance to male-female unions indicates a necessary preference for same-sex relationship is only acceptable if one accepts “that everyone has a sexual orientation, that there are only two, that they are mutually exclusive, and that therefore resistance to heterosexuality must indicate a homosexual orientation” (Schultz, “Heterosexuality” 22). Clearly, the fact that some women do not pursue marriage or sexual relationships with men “does not presume [...] that [they seek] to pursue intimate relationships with women” (Coleman 313-4).

Campbell, furthermore, believes that monasticism and chastity “provided for medieval women not only a rejection of physical heterosexuality but also a rejection of spiritual heterosexuality” (15). While it is true that *virginity* – but not chastity – was, in a way, the opposite of marriage, because marriage contained the only acceptable sexual activity for women (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 32), this does not mean women rejected ‘heterosexuality.’ The choice for virginity was often “made on the basis of faith rather than sexual inclination: it could be based on intense desire, but desire for salvation rather than human love” (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 35). This might be especially true for Anglo-Saxon culture, where “desire is most often represented as heroic or saintly” (Lees 21).

The medieval attitude towards female-female relationships further complicates research into the subject for medievalists. In the Middle Ages, law courts were generally comparatively indifferent towards women’s same-sex activity, and there was a “persistent

refusal to acknowledge the variety and intensity of women's emotional and erotic experience" (Cook 60). In the legal handbooks issued by Leo III and Constantine V, penalties for same-sex activities between women were rare and aimed entirely at nuns (Boswell 244), but it is unclear to what extent these laws would have been influential in England because, while the Byzantine Law essentially continued Roman law codes, England showed a preference for independent common law over Roman civil law (Phillips and Reay 91). The Anglo-Saxon laws seem to offer reliable evidence of penitential standards because English law was customary, and the law codes "record decisions actually arrived at by judges," rather than "mere theoretical constructs with little relevance to existing conditions" (Frantzen 78). Within the penitential literature, same-sex sexual activity between women is only sporadically mentioned, and it is given the same three-year penance as masturbation, whereas male-male sexual relationships were treated as "much more severe by all penitentials" (Davies 95). This shows the "primacy of phallogentric understanding of human sexuality in contemporary thought. It is the absence of the male partner that unites conceptually masturbation and lesbian sexual activity" (Murray 197). Female sexuality, on the whole, "was not taken seriously except insofar as it threatened male privilege or the natural hierarchy of the genders" (Murray 199). Although women in the "pre-heterosexual erotic regime [...] allegedly felt lust more powerfully than men" (Phillips and Reay 4; cf. Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 4), they were merely listed as the "occasions of temptation or sin to men" (Frantzen 66) in the Irish penitentials. They were rarely mentioned as being capable of committing sins themselves until Theodore's penitentials, which lists more offences involving women.

It was theoretically possible for women to be charged with sodomy. Described by Foucault as an 'utterly confused category,' it has, at some point, been used to describe almost every act outside of reproductive marital sex. Therefore, it could be applied to sex between

women, especially when a phallic device was used. However, even when legal codes and vocabulary were available, women were rarely charged with sodomy (Phillips and Reay 91). The infrequency of prosecutions is, however, “unlikely to have been because extremely few women were sexually involved with each other” (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 109). Rather, it was probably difficult for courts to figure out what women were up to together if they were not imitating traditional male-female intercourse. Linguistic evidence shows that “medieval people did not see what the two partners did in sexual intercourse as the same act at all. Medieval people, for the most part, understood sex acts as something that someone did to something else” (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 3). The verbs used to describe sexual acts were, in medieval European languages, transitive rather than intransitive. These linguistic forms reflect a general way of thinking about sex in medieval society. A distinction is thus made between the active and the passive partner in any sexual interaction, and this distinction comes down to one between a receptive partner and a penetrator. Because of this, there was “a good deal of confusion about the moral status of erotic acts between women, which often were not considered sex unless one of the women penetrated the other with a dildo” (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 4; cf. Sauer par.22; Boswell xxvii-xxix). Behaviour including the use of an artificial phallus, male performances, or cross-dressing helped make female-female sex visible (Phillips and Reay 11), whereas it was otherwise difficult to distinguish for medieval theologians. Erotic depictions of two women did not generally raise eyebrows because women were not thought to be capable of having sex with other women without presuming a male role (Mills 00:22:30-23:05). Therefore, the lack of prosecutions in the medieval period is perhaps unsurprising, especially considering that “most documentation of openly acknowledged woman-woman eroticism has uncovered non-penetrative forms of sexual intercourse” (Sauer par.22) in premodern sources. Studies indicate that even nowadays, few women who have sex with women engage in penetrative sex using artificial

devices (Bailey et al. 148-9; Masters and Johnson qtd. in Greenberg et al. 429; Carroll 251), and that the use of a dildo is “by no means a universal sexual activity” (Zenilman and Shahmanesh 330), which might further explain the lack of evidence in the medieval period.

It is, of course, problematic to find proof of sexual activity in the Middle Ages, but even in the modern period, conclusive proof of sexual acts would be impractical to come by. Therefore, Bennett’s concept ‘lesbian-like’ embodies a broad variety of behaviours. Similar attempts to make premodern same-sex desire legible, such as Adrienne Rich’s ‘lesbian continuum,’ have been criticised for desexualising a sexual identity (Danuta Walters 863), but Bennett states that she is “not eager to wash sexuality out of lesbian-like” (15). However, she also feels that “same-sex relations are not a sine qua non of lesbianism” (15).

Nevertheless, her application of the term ‘lesbian-like’ might be excessively broad, and it comes with several complications. She applies it, for example, to female cross-dressers. While male cross-dressing was seen as unacceptable in the Middle Ages, this was not the case for female cross-dressing (Watt, *Amoral Gower* 75), which was not necessarily a subversive activity. Female cross-dressing in the Middle Ages happened for a variety of reasons and is often found in contexts other than sexual or romantic relationships with other women (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 111), and empirical studies by researchers such as Rob Joy indicate that cross-dressing cannot be conflated with same-sex desire.

Another problem is that, “though monastic women [...] bound in homosocial community, may seem ‘lesbian-like’ to modern readers [...] monastic rejection of physical acts of desire surely problematizes the legibility of lesbian(-like) sexualities” (Weston, “Virgin Desires” 93). Of course, “*all* relationships were expected to be chaste in the sense of subordinate desire to responsibility” (Boswell 24), and, as pointed out by Mazo Karras, “[w]omen who chose to live in a household with other women rather than marrying, and who did not engage in sexual activity involving penetration, would still have been considered

chaste or virgins, and may not have recognized their desire for another woman as sexual” (*Doing unto Others* 53). As Boswell points out, “little is known of the feelings of ordinary people in any premodern society” (110) due to lack of documentation. Therefore, for modern approaches to medieval same-sex relationships, it might be necessary to assume that “the standard of visibility is not a universal prerequisite for knowledge” (Hamer 23).

For the present research, it is important to acknowledge the limits and possibilities in discussing same-sex relationships in the Anglo-Saxon period. Because the manuscript culture is so fragmented, and because so many different viewpoints can be found in the textual evidence, it is difficult to draw any coherent conclusions about the time period. Perspectives on women and sexual behaviour are often contradictory, and notions about sexual orientations were widely different from those in modern western society. These differences lead to terminological difficulties that need to be taken into account in the present study. Therefore, relationships and behaviour will primarily be discussed in terms of opportunities and limitations in the following chapters, and terms such as ‘heterosexual,’ ‘homosexual,’ ‘lesbian,’ and ‘lesbian-like,’ although useful for stylistic purposes, will be avoided whenever possible throughout the rest of this research.

Monastic Life: Limits, Opportunities, and Confusion of Community

The monastery is probably the most promising place to look for female-female relationships in the Anglo-Saxon period – monastic women, especially those in authoritative positions, were highly autonomous compared to lay women; the primary social interactions of these women existed outside of male-female unions; and finally, the lives of monastic women are better-documented than those of secular women. The monastic environment could be described, using Theodora Jankowski's term, as a "lesbian void" – "a kind of 'female realm,' where erotic relationships between women could occur" (qtd. in Sauer par.2). While she uses the term in a different context, with regard to Shakespeare's plays, and while the term 'lesbian' is inappropriate for reasons previously discussed, it is possible to discuss the Anglo-Saxon monasteries in terms of opportunities and limitations.

Female monasticism started to emerge in England around 630 (Foot, "*Flores Ecclesiae*" 176), and was associated primarily with royal and noble families. Anglo-Saxon religious women did not necessarily have to leave their homes, but monasticism was the "predominant form of religious expression" (Foot, *Monastic Life* 4) until the tenth century. Nevertheless, because of the way religious life was organised, it is possible to assume that the desire for religious salvation was not the only reason for the choice of monastic life. According to Helen Jewell, the pre-Viking convents were "all double houses [...] with separate living quarters but not total segregation" (46). Sarah Foot confirms that all-female monasteries were uncommon in pre-Viking Anglo-Saxon England, and that it cannot be safely assumed that all monasteries with nuns were all-female congregations (Foot, *Veiled Women* 200). It is known that some later Anglo-Saxon religious houses were jointly occupied by men and women, possibly in part for the physical protection of the women against external attacks from Vikings (Foot, *Veiled Women* 49), but it is unclear if there were *any* all-female monasteries at the time, because there was no vocabulary to clearly distinguish

congregations on the basis of the gender of their occupants (Foot, *Monastic Life* 4). A map of the Old English monasteries from 400-1066, composed by Alice Ryan, suggests that there were at most five exclusively female monasteries throughout the time period. However, even in the double monasteries, male and female houses were “parallel but physically separate” (Mitchell 33, cf. Foot, “*Flores Ecclesiae*” 175). Friendships between monastic men and women were not uncommon, and men often took on the roles of confessors and spiritual mentors, but contact with the male monastics was often regulated. Therefore, for the most part of daily life, monastic women resided in an all-female environment, even if their monastery was not all-female.

Foot explains that, while some women were given to nunneries as infants, a girl past the age of sixteen was no longer officially in the power of her parents. Legally, she could no longer be forced to marry against her will, and she could choose to join a monastery. Therefore, some women would take their vows to escape an unwanted marriage (*Veiled Women* 40). Some early medieval women went to extreme lengths to avoid marriage, sometimes going so far as to purposely contract illnesses to be allowed to enter a monastery. (Schulenberg 50-3) This behaviour was most likely motivated by a “heavily disproportioned admiration for female virginity” (Schulenberg 31). According to several penitentials, such as Theodore’s, marriage could be dissolved by mutual consent. However, married women were generally in the power of their husbands (Hollis 60), and marriage was regarded as an indissoluble union by many authors. Physical severance from a spouse was not usually permitted by the Church, even if a marriage was never consummated. Legally, however, voluntary separation was permissible under the laws of Aethelberht in the seventh century, and the laws of Cnut specified that marriage had to be entered into with the consent of both parties: women could not be forced or sold into marriage (Jewell 27-8). Nevertheless, for

some women, entry into a monastery was probably the easiest (if not the only) way to escape unwanted marriages (Hollis 66-7; Hamburger 14).

The escape of marriage was not the only advantage offered by the monastery. It also offered women protection and relative autonomy; Campbell states that “medieval women did live truly different lives when not bound to husbands” (15). Unlike most lay women, women in Anglo-Saxon monasteries sometimes had very influential roles. Women were usually in control of the double monasteries (Foot, *Monastic Life* 167), and “[m]onastic superiors were often important spiritual leaders outside the monastery, while monitoring and commenting on the activities and morals of the nearby secular population” (Wilfong 305). The monasteries formed “interconnected spheres of influence” (idem) with the world outside them. The abbesses, for example, could host church synods and act as advisors to kings. There is evidence for a Synod of Whitby that was summoned in 664, under the rule of Hild. This synod is also referred to in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* (3.25.195). In the seventh century, nothing but monastic life could give women a similar position of influence (Jewell 47). Additionally, women in monasteries were typically literate, as indicated by texts like Aldhelm’s *De Virginitate* (Lees and Overing, “Before History” 318; Fell 110-1). Hild is perhaps the best example of this: she was a patron of the poet Cadmon, was personally responsible for the education of men, and presided over the Synod. Although Bede does not mention any of this (Watt, “Women’s Writing” 544), and “adapts Hild’s life to fit his own agenda, part of which seems to be to remove surviving traces of Hild’s own scholarly textual community” (Watt, “Women’s Writing” 543), there is still evidence that shows female patronage and readership within a monastic context. This degree of female literacy and involvement in literary culture would have been uncommon outside of the monasteries.

From ca. 650 onwards, the ruling monastic code was the Rule of St Benedict (Knowles 3). The Rule, although relatively short, covers every department of monastic life, a

life that consisted of “absolute regularity, of strict discipline, of unvarying routine” (Knowles 4). Within the monastery, daily life consisted of prayer, reading, and domestic or otherwise manual chores, and every hour was rigorously planned. The Benedictine rule was, of course, written for monks, and there is little evidence indicating what daily life for monastic *women* looked like in Anglo-Saxon England. The existing evidence is usually indirect. However, hagiographic writings suggest an emphasis on regularity (Jewell 48; Foot, *Monastic Life* 194), and indicate that women, like men, kept monastic hours. It is likely that life of monastic women was very similar to that of men, especially during the time of the double monasteries, which lasted up until the collapse of monasticism by the end of the ninth century (Knowles 33). After the monastic revival and reform of the next century, monasteries became more strictly regulated and joint establishments were generally prohibited.

Before the monastic reform of the tenth century, monastic standards in Anglo-Saxon England were not actual rules (Foot, *Veiled Women* 55), and they painted an “idealised picture” (Foot, *Monastic Life* 7) that monastic life often did not live up to. The *Regularis Concordia*, probably composed around 970, was the first instance of a clear prescription of a monastic regime for both male and female houses, and by this time, most double monasteries had disappeared (Jewell 47). The monastic reform brought female houses under tighter control. Double-houses had become prohibited, nuns were no longer allowed to educate boys, contact with monks or bishops became regulated and abbesses and nuns were not allowed to leave their enclosures without permission. These rules were set up to prevent any and all contact with men that could provide an opportunity for sexual relationships (Foot, *Veiled Women* 67). While most monastic standards regarding various aspects of life were similar for men and women, females were more strictly prohibited from forming friendships with members of both sexes (Phillips and Reay 127). Of course, the prevailing idea in medieval society was that women were more sexually rampant than men (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto*

Others 28; Hollis 9; Phillips and Reay 4), which probably explains why they were subject to stricter regulations.

While many aspects of monasticism changed with the reform, monasteries both before and after the monastic revival were environments where women were enclosed together. This might be part of the reason why it is commonly assumed by modern scholars that monastic life provided women with the opportunity to form close personal bonds. Phillips and Reay, for instance, write that women in the Middle Ages sometimes formed “intensely affective relations, *especially in convents*” (11, my emphasis). For the most part, these relations were encouraged, and the rules of Augustine and Donatus “introduce a sort of homoerotics of community” (Weston, “Particular Friendships” 48). Nevertheless, the rules laid out by Saint Augustine in one of his letters, presumably written around 423, were, it seems, aimed at restricting friendships between women. He wrote, for example, that “the love between you [...] ought not to be earthly but spiritual, for the things which shameless women do even to other women in low jokes and games are to be avoided”² (50). This advice serves as an example of the concerns male monastics had about the behaviour of female nuns. Monastic order could be threatened by close exclusive friendships between women because it relied on communal relationships, so women were encouraged to give preference to spiritual love, which is, according to Weston, “a love general rather than particular or exclusive” (“Particular Friendships” 48). Augustine’s letter therefore indicates that he perceives female friendships as possibly threatening, whether or not because of their possible erotic potential.

Weston has analysed the place that female friendships occupied in the construction of Anglo-Saxon monastic communities by looking at medieval depictions of female homosocial relationships and considering what “anxieties” these betray (“Particular Friendships” 37).

² This was before female monasticism emerged in Anglo-Saxon England, but is nevertheless indicative of continuing male attitudes towards the relationships between women in religious enclosures.

According to Weston, contemporary authors seemed to feel that “[i]nvolving a pure, sanctified, and distinctly non-sexual union of *sanctimoniales cum sanctimoniales*, the play of similarity and difference [...] instantiates a practical and improving desire, one in which love draws the lover on toward ever greater spiritual perfection, one in which competition between lovers binds the community” (Weston, “Particular Friendships” 56). However, amongst male authors, there appeared to be a “particular suspicion about relationships between young girls and older women” (Murray 196-7) even though they were regarded as potentially spiritually uplifting. As addressed in the previous chapter, sex was seen as a transitive act in medieval discourse. There was a strong link between sexuality and dominance in medieval thought (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 24), and sexual relations were seen as hierarchical. The idea that older women in authoritative positions would seduce younger women is not altogether surprising from this point of view. It also makes sense in terms of opportunity, because monastic leaders had relative freedom in their movements, whereas younger women were under their supervision.

According to Weston, there is an “anxiety about the paradoxical necessity and impossibility of male policing and knowledge of female (homo)eroticism” in the penitentials, and “[e]arly monastic rules governing female communities betray similar concerns” (“Particular Friendships” 45). As discussed in the first chapter, the subject of sodomy was sometimes avoided in medieval debate about sex, because it could give people ideas. Monastic rules, therefore, tended to “transfer prohibitions of explicitly sexual liaisons to prohibitions against all close and exclusive female relationships” (idem). Saint Augustine, for instance, wrote that women in the monasteries may not be alone together: “if they go to the baths or wherever they have to go, let there be not less than three. The one who is under the necessity of going somewhere shall not go with the companions of her choice, but with those whom the Superior shall ordain” (48). These types of rules were aimed at preventing women

from forming close and exclusive personal bonds, thereby removing any opportunities for these friendships to develop into erotic relationships – but without mentioning the possibility for this to happen. It is important, however, that the prescriptive rules mentioned above were not necessarily adhered to. Nevertheless, the rules clearly suggest that the attitude towards monastic female friendships was dubious during the time period: homosociality was actively encouraged, but it was also anxiously policed.

According to Ruth Mazo Karras, most medieval erotic poetry between women occurs within a monastic context (*Doing unto Others* 109). It is important to keep in mind that women in monasteries were generally able to read and write, unlike many other women in medieval society, so whether erotic *relationships* were, in fact, more prevalent within a monastic context is up for debate. At the very least, however, the surviving poetry indicates that erotic relationships between monastic women existed, so monastic life must have presented women with opportunities for such relationships. Furthermore, much of the penitential literature referring to female-female sexual³ acts is specifically aimed at activity between nuns. The penitentials attributed to Bede⁴, for example, refer to same-sex sexual relations between nuns using some sort of instrument. As discussed in the first chapter, it can be assumed that sins described by the penitentials reflected people's behaviour, even if their prevalence cannot be determined. Therefore, in order for there to be guidelines about the penance for sexual acts between nuns, such acts would likely have happened. In spite of the regulations and supervision, erotic relationships between women must, thus, have been *possible* within the context of monastic life.

³ “Sexual” from a modern perspective: they would not have been regarded as such in the time period.

⁴ As explained by M.L.W. Laistner, the attribution of any handbooks of penance to Bede is virtually unsupported by evidence, so it is questionable whether Bede actually wrote these penitentials.

Additionally, relationships can be seen as erotic even if they were not sexual. Lack of evidence of sexual relationships does not necessarily indicate a lack of sexual desire (Coleman 305), especially since “the erotic was not equated with the carnal” (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 17). In medieval culture, the erotic is “inexorably bound up with shared, communal experience” (Farina 21). Reading and writing were often communal activities, and “erotic fantasy was acknowledged to be both a tool for refining religious disposition and a condition, an *episteme*, fundamental for acquiring knowledge of God” (Farina 3). Because of this connection to religion and religious desire, eroticism played a role in the monastic environment, if only to gain a better understanding of God. It may be difficult for modern readers to understand the erotic “in a culture where its motions are apparently neither internal nor private” (Farina 20), but within the context of monastic life, it is especially this communal erotic experience that may have facilitated female-female relationships. After all, the vocabulary of the spiritual and the carnal is easily confused in some religious texts, such as *Christ I*.⁵ As mentioned in the previous chapter, Mazo Karras believes that women may simply not have recognised their desire for other women as sexual (*Doing unto Others* 53), which could be a result of the constant confusion of the erotic and the spiritual. The complex intermingling of feelings, the active encouragement of homosociality, and the dubious attitudes towards female friendships put forward by contemporary authors such as Augustine arguably create an environment of opportunity for women within the monasteries. Because of all the blurred lines and uncertainty, women may have been able to get away with many kinds of behaviour.

In conclusion, because of the organisation of Anglo-Saxon religious life, entry into a monastery was not necessarily required, so the choice for enclosure in a female community

⁵ Lara Farina argues that *Christ I* focusses explicitly on the bodies of Mary and Christ, unlike most Anglo-Saxon texts, and that the text illustrates an “inseparability of eroticism from the pursuit of spiritual truth” (30).

was perhaps consciously made. Furthermore, the prevalence of double monasteries, as opposed to exclusively female monasteries, did not mean that the daily environment of monastic women was not one of all-female community. Contemporary male authors often presented fears of female friendships in the monasteries becoming overly exclusive, thereby threatening the community. Their writings may also be indicative of some anxiety over their erotic potential. Penitential literature and medieval monastic erotic poetry indicate that sexual relationships between monastic women existed, so they must have been possible within the monastic context, in spite of rules aimed to prevent them. The main opportunities for these relationships offered by monasticism seem to be the promotion of monastic homosociality and the confusion between the erotic and the spiritual. Women were closely bound together, and the lines between eroticism and spiritual love and friendship were often blurred in medieval writing, which perhaps allowed for female friendships to develop into bonds of romantic or sexual desire.

(Un)holy Friendships: Reading the Silence in the Lives of Saints

Terry Wilfong discusses how the “discourse of female homoeroticism [was] shaped by the attitudes and concerns of the (male) heads of the monastic communities in which women lived” (304).⁶ While the heads of monastic communities were not necessarily male, the surviving texts about these communities and the female monastics were written by male clerics, as were most contemporary written rules and standards for monastic life. The previous chapter discussed the ambiguous attitude of male monastic authors towards female-female friendships: friendships were seen as necessary and spiritually uplifting, but their narrative reconstructions often indicate a concern for their transgressive and possibly erotic potential.

In many hagiographical texts, “the narrative process of isolating (in the cloister or the pedestal) the female saint obscures [...] her relationships with other women” (Lees and Overing, *Double Agents* 43). Relationships between women are not prominently described in all hagiographies, but Bede’s story about Ethelburg of Barking, Ælfric’s “Life of Eugenia,” and Rudolf of Fulda’s “Life of Leoba”⁷ are three narratives containing significant female-female friendships. Weston finds that the discourse of female monastic friendship often contains elements of secrecy, sin, and community (“Particular Friendships” 39). The male rhetoric of female friendships is one of anxiety, and relationships between women can only be analysed in texts that are “dismissive or even hostile” (Weston, “Particular Friendships” 37) about their erotic possibilities. The anxiety in narratives of female friendships may be an

⁶ Although Wilfong writes about fifth century Egypt, this is equally true for the Anglo-Saxon period.

⁷ For Bede’s text, the Old English comes from a manuscript edited by Thomas Miller and digitised by *The Internet Archive*. Translations are by A.M. Sellar and are based on the original Latin. Rudolf’s Latin text is from the digitised *Monumenta Germaniae Historicae*; translations are by C.H. Talbot and were taken from the *Medieval Sourcebook*. For Ælfric’s work, the Old English text was taken from the Early English Text Society’s *Lives of Saints*, based on the edition contained in the Cotton MS Julius A VII; translations are by Walter William Skeat and are contained in the same volume on the following page.

“attempt to transfer and inculcate those anxieties within a female audience so as to stifle same-sex relationships” (Weston, “Particular Friendships” 37).

The first chapter of this study mentioned how the monastic standards of virginity and chastity impede the legibility of female-female desire, but what is most significant in these hagiographical texts may be what is *not* said. Jenny Coleman addresses the interpretative issues of secrets and silence, and asks whether we should “assume either a lack of such relationships or a lack of sexual desire” (Coleman 305) when evidence of sexual relationships is lacking. Mazo Karras emphatically states that “[w]e do not need an eyewitness report of genital contact to state that a given man and woman’s attraction to each other was sexual, and we should not require it for two women either” (*Doing unto Others* 109). In other words, the erotic potential of the friendships in the abovementioned hagiographies can be analysed, even if there is no explicit evidence of erotic relationships in the texts.

In Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* (*EH*), the story of Ethelburg does not receive particular attention. Aetheltryth and Hilda, for instance, have chapters dedicated specifically to them, as do many male kings and bishops. The story of Ethelburg, on the other hand, is part of the larger chronicles of Barking, and does not stand on its own (cf. Weston, “Particular Friendships” 36). Because of this textual enclosure, the narrative of the friendship between Ethelburg and Tortgyth is easily overlooked.

According to the *EH*, Ethelburg was the head of the monastery of Berecingum⁸ around 675 A.D. (4.6.232). Tortgyth’s life in this same monastery is described as follows:

[s]eo monig ger in þæm ilcan mynstre wuniende wæs, and heo symle in ealre eaðmodnesse and in hluttornisse and in clænisse geornlice Gode þeodde; ond wæs fultumend regollices þeodscipes þære ilcan moder and abbudissan, and þa geongran lærde and clænsade ge mid láre ge mid lifes bysene

⁸ Barking

‘[she] always endeavoured, in all humility and sincerity, to serve God herself, and to help the mother to maintain regular discipline, by instructing and reproofing the younger ones’ (4.9.235).

This indicates that the two women worked together in ruling the monastery, and in their mutual positions of authority, they would have had more freedom than many of the younger women. Bede does not explicitly refer to a close friendship between the two women, but as Ethelburg is about to die, Tortgyth has a vision prophesising her death:

ƿa þohte heo bi þære gesyliðe; 7 hire nænig tweo wæs, þætte hwylchugu hraðe of þære gesomnunge sweltende wære, þære sawl þurh þa godan weorc 7 þa scinendan, þe heo dyde, swa swa þurh gylde rapas to heofonum ahefen beon sceolde

‘Reflecting on this vision, she made no doubt that some one of the community would soon die, and her soul be lifted up to heaven by the good works which she had wrought, as it were by golden cords’ (4.9.235-6).

Weston notes that this vision, beyond the sight of other members of her community, “hints at an intimate, almost secret communication” (“Particular Friendships” 39). Hollis explains that such prophetic visions often indicate “relationships of particular spiritual affinity which in some way transcend death and/or absence” (185), and that relations between monastic women sometimes have elements of “soul friendship.”

Of course, such a friendship is not inherently erotic, and it would not appear as such to a modern reader. However, as previously explained, we may need to alter our assumptions about what eroticism would look like in Anglo-Saxon texts (Farina 16). It might be significant that Tortgyth’s vision emphatically focusses on the *body* of Ethelburg: she sees a *wulderlecan lichoman* ‘glorious body’, dressed in linen (4.9.235). This is certainly not the case for all visions and prophecies in the *EH*: Herebert and Cuthbert have a strong spiritual

friendship much like Ethelburg and Torthgyth, but the prophecy of Cuthbert's death is shared verbally, and their spirits unite after death (4.24.294-5). There is no focus on a vision of the body of either man. This is also true for Ethelhun's vision of his brother Egbert (3.27.205), and a monastic woman's vision of an unnamed man (4.8.235). The human body is thus not necessarily important in all visions in the *EH*, but it is emphasised in Torthgyth's vision of Ethelburg.

It might also be significant that Torthgyth's vision is immediately juxtaposed with the concept of sin. Bede writes that Torthgyth fell ill so that *swa hwæt swa in hire unclænes betweoh þa mægen þurh unwisnesse oððo þurh ungemænne gelumpe, þætte eal þæt se ofn þære singalan costunge asude* 'whatever stain of evil remained amidst her virtues, either through ignorance or neglect, might all be purified in the furnace of long tribulation' (4.9.235), right before he mentions her vision prophesizing the death of Ethelburg. Bede does not describe what sin he is referring to here, but not because he consistently fails to address the sins of his (female) monastics: he addresses the *yfelnesse* 'wickedness' (4.25.281) of the inhabitants of the monastery of Coludi⁹ (4.25.281), because they converted prayer cells into places for feasting (4.25.284), and women in this monastery would *ðæm hio oððo hio siolfre frætwað in bryda onlicnesse* 'adorn themselves like brides' and *utwæpnedmonna friondscepes him ceapiað* 'gain the friendship of strange men' (idem). Aetheltryth had to endure pain in her neck from a tumour because she wore necklaces when she was young (4.19.263). Her sin is thus specified as former vanity. Weston writes that while "the trope of illness as a kind of martyrdom is a monastic commonplace, the mention of unknown or secret sin is extravagant" ("Particular Friendships" 39). An unnamed sin is not necessarily sexual, but it is possible that Bede is referring to some form of erotic desire here, especially since such a sin would not have been specified by the author, for several reasons: firstly, desire for another woman, or

⁹ Coldingham

even an erotic relationship between two women, may have been seen as a negligible sin because it was not seen as sexual, and secondly, Anglo-Saxon authors would probably be ambiguous about the nature of such a sin to avoid giving other women ideas.

Tortgyth has another vision of Ethelburg before her own death. After a long period of illness, Tortgyth longs for death and religious salvation (4.9.236); and she is finally released from her body and her illness and “entered into the joys of eternal salvation.” (4.9.237). As previously discussed, this longing for salvation is perhaps the most intense form of desire expressed in Anglo-Saxon texts, and for Tortgyth, it is connected to Ethelburg. While this desire is not described as erotic, as explained in the first chapter of the present study, women might simply not have recognised their desire for other women as sexual or erotic, and the constant conflation between the spiritual and erotic might have increased this confusion of feelings.

In the description of Tortgyth’s vision, the reader is only informed of part of the conversation between Tortgyth and Ethelburg. The text contains Tortgyth’s responses to Ethelburg, but it is unclear what Ethelburg says. This further emphasises the ambiguous nature of the relationship between the two women, and Weston feels that the previously mentioned discursive elements of secrecy, sin, and community are indicative of male anxiety towards female friendships – friendships beyond their control, supervision, or understanding. Weston also argues that the close and exclusive friendship between Tortgyth and Ethelburg “may well invoke some discussion of same-sex desire among medieval women, and not just as [an example] of deep and exclusive, if not sexual, bonds” (“Particular Friendships” 38).

Female friendships also play a significant role in Rudolf’s biography of Leoba, which he based on the writings of others informed by tales of four of her disciples (par.1). Rudolf explicitly states that one author’s notes left room for doubt because of his attempts to render events briefly (par. 1), but he tries to argue for the truthfulness of his account in spite of these

limitations. His unreliability becomes apparent, however, when Rudolf writes that monks and nuns were not allowed to enter each other's residences (par. 4) and that even the abbess gave her orders through a window (idem). According to Rudolf, Leoba insisted that the nuns should be separated from men, and even denied bishops entry into the community (par. 5). Considering Leoba's own close friendship with the bishop Boniface, it seems peculiar for her to have been overly concerned about friendships between monastic men and women. Furthermore, "such rigid enclosure was not the norm in England, and Rudolf's description may be biased by his knowledge of the more strictly regulated communities of the ninth century¹⁰" (Neuman de Vegvar 58); by the time Rudolf wrote Leoba's biography, friendships between monks and abbesses were under closer scrutiny and double monasteries were starting to become outlawed.

As previously mentioned, friendship in the monastery was supposed to instantiate a "practical and improving desire" (Weston, "Particular Friendships" 56), and this is clearly true in the "Life of Leoba." He writes that Leoba

ab universis sororibus puro diligebatur affectu, et ab omnibus discens omnibusque oboediens, proprias singularum gratias imitando captabat, huius continentiam
 'was loved by all the sisters. She learned from all and obeyed them all, and by imitating the good qualities of each one she modelled herself on the continence of one' (par.10).

According to Rudolf, the monastery of Bischofsheim observed the Rule of St Benedict, which is mentioned in the second chapter. However, Rudolf writes that Leoba had the younger nuns read the Scriptures to her at her bedside (par.13), indicating that he does not

¹⁰ As explained in the second chapter of this study, English monastic communities became more strictly separated and rigidly monitored with the tenth century monastic reform, but for most of the Anglo-Saxon period men and women were not subject to strict rules of separation.

seem to share the previously mentioned suspicion towards relationships between younger and older women, identified by Murray in the writings of some male authors. Nevertheless, Rudolf's narrative is still inscribed with a possibility for sin. He writes that the devil, frustrated with the virtue of the monastic women, *sordidis eas cogitationibus et carnalis concupiscentiae inlecebris incessabiliter inpugnabat* 'attacked them constantly with evil thoughts and temptations of the flesh,' and tried to break down their integrity by his *perversa suggerendo* 'foul suggestions' (par.12). Weston notes that what these suggestions might be, and how they are connected to the "cycle of emulative desire within the community, and especially with Leoba as the sanctioned focus of that desire, can only be conjectured" ("Particular Friendships" 58). According to Weston, the anxious male rhetoric of female friendship might refer to a possibility of social desire slipping into erotic or sexual desire, although the "communal desire of which Leoba is the object is desexualized" in the narrative (idem).

While communal desire plays an important role, the "Life of Leoba" also contains an exclusive friendship between Leoba and Queen Hildegard. According to Rudolf,

regina Hiltigardis puro eam venerabatur affectu atque ita ut animam suam diligebat; voluitque, ut assidue secum maneret, quatenus ad viam vitae verbis eius proficeret et exemplis,

'queen Hildegard also revered her with a chaste affection and loved her as her own soul. She would have liked her to remain continually at her side so that she might progress in the spiritual life and profit by her words and example' (par.18).

Apparently, "for Hildegard, Leoba is the Beloved object of a pure, deep, and abiding love, reciprocated, as it seems, by the abbess" (Weston, "Particular Friendships" 60). The fact that this love is referred to as "chaste affection" does not necessarily negate its erotic potential – as mentioned in the first chapter, "all relationships were expected to be chaste in the sense of

subordinate desire to responsibility” (Boswell 24), and women who experienced sexual desire for another woman would still have been considered chaste by medieval authors. The friendship between the two women serves a rhetorical purpose, according to Hollis: Rudolf seems to be promoting the importance of fostering a closer relationship between throne and church, and of stricter gender divisions and monastic segregation (298). Additionally, Leoba and Boniface probably shared a deep spiritual friendship that Rudolf might have perceived as threatening. In this biography, he seems to strategically transfer Leoba’s feelings towards a member of the same sex: the queen (Hollis 297). Of course, if the relationship between Boniface and Leoba was potentially sexual, this could logically be true for her relationship with Hildegard, but this possibility may not have occurred to Rudolf, or it may simply have been less threatening.

The erotic potential of the friendship between these two women is recognised by several medievalists. Hollis, for instance, finds that “[t]he warmth of Leoba’s farewell to the queen is in striking contrast with the high degree of rarefication postulated by Rudolf’s spiritual union in absence, and exceeds the requirements of the rhetorical and polemical purposes that this friendship serves” (299). When Leoba decides to leave the queen to return home, Rudolf writes the following:

ac solito affectuosius in amicam irruit, os, frontem, oculos deosculans et inherens amplexibus, huiusmodi verbis salutatam reliquit: ‘Vale in aeternum, domina et soror dilectissima! vale, animae meae portio pretiosa!’

‘embracing her friend rather more affectionately than usual, she kissed her on the mouth, the forehead and the eyes and took leave of her with these words:

“Farewell for evermore, my dearly beloved lady and sister; farewell most precious half of my soul” (par.20).

Weston refers to this as an “explicitly physicalized (not to say eroticized) example of

female friendship” (Weston, “Particular Friendships” 61). Of course, the farewell is not necessarily or inherently erotic because it is physicalized: anthropologists sometimes classify societies as either contact or non-contact types, and Medieval England was certainly a contact society (Burrow 49). Kissing, embracing, and hand-holding were very common and did not necessarily carry erotic connotations. However, Burrow emphasises the importance of distinguishing between public and private kisses. Public kisses were often exchanged out of politeness, whereas private kisses carry more personal significance (50-1), but Burrow also finds that “[p]ublic kisses between men and women always carry at least the possibility of erotic implication” (55). This viewpoint appears to be informed by modern heteronormative standards: if kisses between men and women *always* carry a possible erotic implication, it can be assumed that similar erotic implications may be carried by same-sex kisses at least in some instances, which is something Burrow fails to recognise. While the relationship between Leoba and Hildegard is not explicitly sexualised, the narrative construction of their friendship opens up the possibility, at least, for a discussion of same-sex desire between the two women.

Ælfric’s “Life of Saint Eugenia” is also interesting in terms of female relationships. While Eugenia is not an Anglo-Saxon but an Egyptian, Ælfric’s biography of her can still provide an insight into attitudes towards female friendship in Anglo-Saxon monastic life, because he would probably have selected and adapted his material based on what he deemed to be appropriate models of emulation for Anglo-Saxon women.

To enter a monastery, Eugenia disguises herself as a boy by changing her hair and her attire. This is not in itself significant, because as the first chapter explains, cross-dressing does not constitute same-sex desire. Furthermore, Eugenia is not the only cross-dressing

saint, because Euphrosyne¹¹ also disguises herself as a man to join a monastery in secret without her father's knowledge. However, the situation for the two women is very different. Throughout her biography, Euphrosyne does not come into contact with other women. She is seen as a threat to the ideal of chastity only because the men *wurdon þearle gecostnode þurh his fægernysse* 'were exceedingly tempted by his fairness' (344), and she is separated from them and placed in her own cell. Eugenia, on the other hand, is a counsellor to both the men in the monastery and the people outside of it, and she has relative freedom in her position as an 'abbot' (32). Additionally, while Euphrosyne's disguise causes *men* to become attracted to her, Eugenia attracts the attention of a widow, who *wende þæt heo cniht wære and mænigfealde sceattas hyre unmæðlice bead* 'thought she was a youth, and wickedly offered her manifold treasures' (32). The widow, Melantia, tells Eugenia of her *swertan gepohtas* 'dark thoughts' (34), and tries to convince her to leave the monastery and to take her as a wife. Eugenia replies that *þæt ða gewylnunga þissere andweardan worulde synt swiðe swicole þeah þe hi geswæse beon and þæs lichoman lustas gelóme be-pæceð and tó sarnissum gelædað þa þe hi swiðost lufiað* 'the desires of this present world are extremely deceitful, though they be pleasant, and the lusts of the body oftentimes seduce and bring them to sorrow who love them most' (34). This response could be interpreted as an indication of Eugenia's choice to resist desire, thus implying that this desire might exist. It is possible that Ælfric recognises the ability of women to desire other women, and as long as this desire is not acted upon, it seems to be regarded as relatively unproblematic. In fact, as previously explained, sexuality must be seen as a temptation before virginity can be regarded as heroic resistance (Lees 31), so it is possible that Ælfric means to suggest that Eugenia is tempted by Melantia's

¹¹ While the biography of Euphrosyne is contained in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, scholars nowadays agree that it is a non-Ælfrician hagiography (Hill 236-7; Szarmach 353). It is unclear who composed the text, and if it was ever circulated outside of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, but because it was likely read alongside Ælfric's other hagiographies it might still be valid to compare her biography to Eugenia's.

suggestion. However, Melantia, upset at Eugenia's rejection, *begann hi tó wrægenne and wolde forsæcgan cwæð þæt heo eode to hyre licgendre [...] and hi wolde for-lycgan* 'began to accuse her, and wished to speak falsely, saying that she [Eugenia] came to her as she lay in bed [...] and desired to lie with her' (36), and Eugenia reveals her identity to prove her innocence (38-40). Clearly, the accusation of seduction is no longer regarded as plausible when Eugenia is revealed to be a woman, which implies that female-female desire or sexual acts were presumed either impossible or extremely unlikely.

Another significant relationship is the one between Eugenia and Basilla. According to Ælfric, *[þ]a wurdon geloma þa leofan mædenu Eugenia and basilla and eac se biscop on sunder-spræce swiðe gebysgode and digel-lice on nihtum hi symble geneosodon and hæfdon heora gerihtu mid þam halgen biscope* '[t]hen were frequently the dear maidens, Eugenia and Basilla, and likewise the bishop, much employed in private conversation, and secretly by night they often visited him, and performed their duties with the holy bishop' (44). As previously discussed, secrecy permeates medieval discourse of female-female friendship, and this secrecy tends to indicate a possibility for sin. The fact that two monastic women had privacy and freedom of movement to an extent where they could sneak off in the middle of the night implies that it would have been possible for them to form an erotic relationship, but Ælfric does not appear to be concerned about this possibility, which might mean that he does not take the erotic and sexual potential of female-female relationships seriously.

Ælfric's hagiographies are often characterised by a "curtailment of violent and/or sexualized episodes" (Lees and Overing, "Before History" 328), while such episodes are often described in explicit detail in his source material. However, although sexuality and violence are not emphasised by Ælfric, his writing seems to contain sexual connotations that indicate their existence. For example, he writes that Basilla *gemartyrod for hyre mægðhade æt hám on hire huse mid heardum sweorde* 'was martyred for her virginity at home in her

house, with a hard sword' (46). Although this does not overtly describe sexual violence, it is at least implied here, especially since similar uses of connotation are not unheard of in Anglo-Saxon literature: in *Beowulf*, the fight between Beowulf and Grendel's mother is often read as having erotic implications (Oswald 94; Chance 102; Davis 49-50). The sword is significant for this interpretation of the text: for example, Beowulf's own sword does not succeed in penetrating Grendel's mother, so he has to rely on the *meahte, god ond geatolic* 'mighty, good and richly equipped' (l.1561-2)¹² sword of a giant. The sword-as-phallus analogy can also be found in Riddle 20: while most scholars have read this riddle as being about a sword, it has strong sexual connotations. Donald Kay has notably argued that the riddle could also be about a phallus, and Patrick Murphy, although convinced that the riddle describes a sword, concludes that "the riddling point [...] is simply that one kind of *wæpen* causes pleasure, another causes pain," and that the sword "is described in terms that echo the pleasures of the riddle's phallic focus" (214).

Ælfric's use of connotation, instead of overt description, might be indicative of the author's discomfort with describing sexualised scenes, and this means that he probably would not have been inclined to explicitly refer to erotic acts between women, even though these would not have been regarded as fully sexual. Interpreted in this context of silence, it is possible that secret conversations and visits to the bishop have erotic implications, especially since Ælfric does not specify exactly what the women were doing – something that appears to be true for almost every sexualised episode in the narrative.

Reading the silences in these hagiographies, written by men who were possibly anxious about the erotic potential of female friendships, can open up interesting and possibly significant perspectives on life in Anglo-Saxon monasteries. The importance of monastic friendships, and the way in which these friendships are discursively constructed by male

¹² Old English text from *The Beowulf Manuscript*, edited by R.D. Fulk; translation mine.

authors, reveals an ambiguity towards female-female desire and eroticism. Possible indications of such desire certainly exist in hagiographical writings. While the friendships of the women described in this chapter are not necessarily sexual, their narrative reconstructions are inscribed with secrecy and sin, which leaves room for reinterpreting them within the context of monastic opportunities and limitations for same-sex desire. It becomes clear from a reconsideration of hagiographical texts that same-sex erotic relationships were probably possible in a monastic context, and that attitudes towards these possibilities varied both between authors and within texts.

Conclusion

Glenn Burgess has asserted that “[t]he study of history was not so much to seek the truth about the past as the need to seek truths that would be valid in the present” (qtd. in Driver and Ray 10) – which might explain why some feminist theorists discussed in this thesis seem to have jumped to conclusions in their attempts to emphasise historical continuity, hoping that such continuity can help our present day understanding of sexuality or help legitimise non-normative sexual orientations. However, while it might be ideologically convenient to impose modern notions of sexual orientation on premodern women, this approach leads to anachronisms and unintelligibility. It therefore remains important to recognise “the limits of our disciplines” (250), as argued by Passerini, and to figure out what *can* be said in spite of these limits and in spite of evidentiary and terminological difficulties, as this research has attempted to do. The problem with such an approach is, of course, that very little can be *conclusively* determined; the main arguments of this study can be summarised, but they cannot lead to an unequivocal statement of truth.

Firstly, female-female relationships were presumably possible in monastic life: the penitentials indicate that sexual relationships between monastic women existed, and the fact that there is surviving erotic poetry between women in a monastic context (Mazo Karras, *Doing unto Others* 109) seems to show that the rules of Benedict and Augustine did not limit female contact to an extent where it became inconceivable for women to form erotic bonds. Furthermore, as explained by Foot, women did not necessarily live up to monastic standards (*Veiled Women* 55; *Monastic Life* 7), so there would have been opportunities for sexual relationships in spite of regulations.

Secondly, it was possible for women to form strongly affectionate relationships that were not sexual – the ideals of friendship permeate medieval discourse, indicating that such relationships were not only permitted but required: community and friendship were, in a way,

“holy duties” of monastic life. The conflation of spiritual and erotic desire in religious texts and monastic life may have facilitated same-sex relationships, but even without sexual contact, there may have been same-sex desire. The uncertainty about the moral status of such desire, same-sex sexual acts, and female friendships may have further enabled same-sex relationships in the monasteries. Of course, female-female relationships were probably also limited by aspects of monastic life: authors exhibited an anxious attitude towards female friendships, and some women may have internalised their concerns. Additionally, regulations controlling exclusive female friendships — even if these were not always adhered to — may have complicated female-female contact, and may have resulted in closer supervision of female friendships within the monastery.

Thirdly, within the hagiographical texts, narratives of female friendships are often imbued with secrecy and sin. In these texts, there are clear examples of close, particular friendships, and although these friendships were not necessarily sexual or based on same-sex desire, the ambiguity of the texts makes a reading of female-female relationships possible. That any of these friendships were erotic in nature cannot be confirmed by the texts — but neither can it be denied, and it is perhaps telling that narratives of female friendships present these relationships so inconclusively.

Interestingly, some of the relationships discussed in these hagiographies are between a monastic woman and a woman *outside* of the monastery: Eugenia’s relationship with Melantia, although not one of friendship, is significant in her biography, and Leoba’s primary bond of friendship is with the queen. Because the monasteries were “interconnected spheres of influence” (Wilfong 305), hagiographical writing can provide an insight into the lives of the laity as well as those of monastic women. For future research, it might be interesting to consider how hagiographical writing represents lay women in terms of morality and

sexuality. These women, unlike the saints, were not meant to be models for emulation, so hagiographers had a different agenda in depicting them.

This study has focussed specifically on Anglo-Saxon women: further research could investigate how they compare to early medieval women across western Europe, or consider if post Norman Conquest attitudes influenced views of same-sex relationships – especially since more research has been carried out into these relationships in the Late Medieval period and since this time period had produced more “spectacularly sensual” writing (Farina 11). Further research along these lines could hopefully provide a broader overview of the way in which the issues discussed in this thesis vary across regions, time periods, and social groups.

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