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MÆGB, WIF, CWÉN, AND HÁLGA:

THE MANY LIVES OF SAINT ÆTHELTHRYTH.

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## ABSTRACT

Saint Æthelthryth of Ely (c. 630-679) was one of the most popular saints in Anglo-Saxon England. She experienced a wide range of vital circumstances as a woman, thus providing us with an extraordinary opportunity to study the different roles reserved for Anglo-Saxon women such as those of virgin, wife, queen and abbess. This dissertation provides, in the first place, a general overview of several of the most relevant Anglo-Saxon female roles. Secondly, this dissertation explores how her figure is portrayed in several representative medieval texts, and whether Saint Æthelthryth submitted or challenged social expectations in terms of the aforementioned roles. Afterwards, a comparative analysis of Saint Æthelthryth's portrayals in all those texts is provided. This comparison allows us to conclude whether there were any changes in the depiction of the saint's figure throughout the centuries and to see the causes underlying that shift.

**Keywords:** Saint Æthelthryth, women roles, virgin, abbess, hagiographies, Anglo-Saxon Literature

## RESUMEN

Santa Edeldreda (c. 630-679) fue una de las santas más populares de la Inglaterra Anglo-Sajona. Experimentó una amplia gama de circunstancias vitales como mujer, proporcionándonos así una extraordinaria oportunidad de estudiar diferentes roles reservados a las mujeres anglosajonas, como virgen, esposa, reina y abadesa. Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado ofrece en primer lugar, una visión general sobre varios de los papeles más relevantes reservados a las mujeres anglosajonas. En segundo lugar, se analiza cómo se retrata la figura de Santa Edeldreda en varios textos medievales representativos y si se sometió o desafió las expectativas sociales en relación con los mencionados roles. A continuación se desarrolla un análisis comparativo de las distintas representaciones de la santa que se realizan en los textos estudiados. Esta comparación nos permitirá determinar si hubo algún cambio en la descripción de Santa Edeldreda a lo largo de los siglos y las causas subyacentes a dicho cambio.

**Palabras claves:** Santa Edeldreda, papeles femeninos, virgen, abadesa, hagiografías, Literatura Anglosajona



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The study of significant historical figures from the Anglo-Saxon period (c. 440-1066) faces the problem of the scarcity of written documents from which relevant information may be drawn out. When focusing the study on relevant characters of women in this period the problem worsens, as the deeds and achievements of medieval women have not been portrayed as much as those of men. However, the extant historiographical sources and the female narratives of saints' lives contain very interesting historical and legendary elements from which interesting information about relevant female characters of that period may be obtained.

The objective of this dissertation is the study of the life of one of the most popular medieval female saints of England, Saint Æthelthryth of Ely (c. 630-679). Having as a background the social and legal situation of Anglo-Saxon women and the roles they could perform, this paper analyzes how the figure of Saint Æthelthryth and her different roles as a woman are portrayed in several medieval texts that were devoted to her or contained significant references about her. The life of Saint Æthelthryth provides an enlightening opportunity for this study because due to the variety of her life circumstances, she experienced a range of legal and vital situations. This paper is focusing in particular in her roles as virgin, wife, queen, abbess and foundress of the Monastery of Ely.

The literary works under analysis are the following: Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (732), Aelfric's *Lives of Saints* (996-997), the anonymous *Liber Eliensis* (end of twelfth century), Marie de France's *The Life of Saint Audrey* (end of the twelfth century) and the *South English Legendary* (mid-thirteenth century).

These texts have been selected because they are representative literary works that belong to different periods of history, different places and they were elaborated with different purposes. They were written in different languages, some of them by men and one by a woman.

It could be expected that these wide range of different personal, social, historical and religious contexts, will offer an enriching variety and nuances in the approaches to the figure of Saint Æthelthryth.

This dissertation provides also an analysis about how the projection of the figure of the saint evolves over the middle ages in the selected medieval texts.

This dissertation has been divided into two different parts. The first part studies the general position of women within Anglo-Saxon society. This position is controversial as the degree of independence of Anglo-Saxon women has been the object of discussion among researchers for a long time. Therefore, in this part a survey about the main trends of scholar research on the matter is presented. Afterwards, a depiction of the main relevant roles of Anglo-Saxon women is provided. These roles are relevant for being the most common roles or because of the social influence they could imply. The roles under analysis are these of maiden, wife, widow, queen and abbess and their depiction will consider both social and legal aspects to help the understanding of the society's expectations towards women under these different situations. For this analysis both scholar opinion and the early English laws of the period have been taking into account.

The second part of this paper analyzes on one hand, how some medieval texts address the different roles of the life of Saint Æthelthryth, and on the other hand, very much related, if there is a shift in the way these roles are considered throughout the centuries. I will examine whether more relevance is given to one role or to another and the possible intentions and causes underlying. Finally, a conjoint comparison among all of the medieval texts regarding the topic under analysis will be carried out as well.

This investigation is carried through the close analysis of each of the primary sources, searching in particular for the way Saint Æthelthryth is portrayed in each of them and above all which ones of her female roles are highlighted, focusing on the reasons that authors might have for underlining some aspects of her life and not others. An in-depth analysis of relevant extracts and quotations that illustrate the arguments is provided.



The consequent comparison among the texts attempts to comprehend how the figure of the saint evolves over the Middle Ages and how the different authors manipulated the typical roles of Anglo-Saxon Women.

Relevant topics this research focuses on are how a relevant woman of Anglo-Saxon period, Saint Æthelthryth, embodied many of the roles assigned to women of her time and in what extent she confirmed or challenged social expectations. Besides, considering her roles as queen and abbess, whether she could dispose of a higher degree of freedom and agency than common Anglo-Saxon women will be analyzed. Moreover, it will be examined whether devoting to religious life could be a medium for some Anglo-Saxon women to achieve a social influence and power unattainable for the majority of them, thus being the life in Anglo-Saxon abbeys a realm for the exercise of power for Anglo-Saxon women.

## 2. WOMEN IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

When we delve into the topic of the social position of women in Anglo-Saxon period (c. 440-1066), several questions arise from the outset, what role did women play at that time? What significance or influence had women in Anglo-Saxon society? What was their scope of action?

The position of women in Anglo-Saxon society has been object of some controversy. On the one hand, some authors defend the idea that women have enjoyed at this period a freedom that was unknown in previous stages of history and that they could lead their lives on an equal footing than men. On the other hand, other scholars remark that Anglo-Saxon women did not enjoy the same liberty and equality than men.

Stephanie Hollis remarks that Anglo-Saxon society had a conception of women and men that emphasizes the similarities between sexes rather than remarking the differences or trying to attribute women specific gender characteristics.

This conception derived from the Germanic background of Anglo-Saxon society; in Germanic societies, women occupied positions of power. The reason could be that an essential feature of this society is the importance given to “kinship and comradeship” (10) and cultural references of warriors and heroes were common for women and men.

Following this train of thought, Doris Stenton in her work *The English women in History* remarks that:

The evidence which has survived from Anglo-Saxon England indicates that women were then more nearly the equal companions of their husbands and brothers than at any time before the modern age. In the higher ranges of society this rough and ready partnership was ended by the Norman Conquest, which introduced into England a military society relegating women to a position honorable but essentially unimportant. (28).

In the first centuries of the medieval ages, Anglo-Saxon women enjoyed a degree of freedom, had a political and social influence and enjoyed more rights than in a later time after the Norman Conquest (Clark 1). Fulk and Cain point out several examples following this trend of opinion when they say that for instance, Anglo-Saxon women had the right to the “morning-gift” to be used freely at disposal. They even alleged that women could retain half of the property of the marriage if a wife left her husband but took their children with her<sup>1</sup>. However, Fulk and Cain observed that women position and opportunities seemed to decrease as the power of the Church increases in England (9).

However, other scholars argue that Anglo-Saxon women were not in the same position than men in any way. Mavis E. Mate points out that women always had less opportunities and rights regarding education, occupations, property, etc., than men of their own social class.

According to Mate, social class and stage in life are factors that determine the scope of liberty and rights that Anglo-Saxon women enjoyed. Hence, women belonging to the upper classes were going to enjoy more rights, and have more influence and opportunities of all types than women from lower classes were (2). Besides, the different stages of women life - maiden, wife, widow and, if it was the case, religious life - were also a very important factor that determined both the rights and the greater or lesser degree of freedom they enjoyed. In general, Anglo-Saxon women were under the subjection of a man’s authority, either the father or the husband throughout her life (17).

Mate states that “only widows had any measure of legal autonomy” (3) and that women enjoyed the greatest freedom in the stage of widowhood, although again, this fact could be hindered if they had very low incomes (Mate 2- 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Clause 79 of the Laws of king Ethelbert of Kent (r. c. 580–616), Thorpe 1840; Britain and Attenborough 1922 .These laws were based on the Roman legal code and were “the first Germanic laws that were written in a Germanic tongue” (Pollock and Maitland 14). They consist of ninety clauses being the ones devoted to women clauses 73 to 85. *Early English Laws*. <<http://www.earlyenglishlaws.ac.uk/laws/texts>>

Mate concludes that women did not enjoy full equality to men in any aspect in any time throughout the middle ages and that the Norman Conquest did not imply any immediate change in the legal position of women (20).

Women did not have the same degree of influence as men neither in the economic sphere nor in the political power. For Mate, the few women that had more liberty to dispose of their goods were women from higher classes (17). Eventually, Mate remarks that ordinary women had only two options in life: to marry or to become a nun, “equality was impossible” (26).

## **2.1 THE ROLES OF ANGLO-SAXON WOMEN**

In order to delve into the analysis of the position of Anglo-Saxon women we will focus on some of the roles that Anglo-Saxon women could have within the Anglo-Saxon society, being the more common and relevant ones, both in religious and not religious sphere the following: Maiden-virgin, wife, widow, queen, and nun or abbess. It must be clarified that not all these roles were accessible to every woman regardless her social class; some of them were common to all women whereas others were only for women belonging to high social classes.

The analysis of these roles is important because they determine the scope of freedom that women had and the greater or lesser options they had to decide about their lives, in a given general framework of not complete equality to men.

### **2.1.1 MAIDEN-VIRGIN, WIFE AND WIDOW**

The most common social situation for Anglo-Saxon women, as we shall analyze in more detail below, was to be married.

As Carole Hough states, what defined women was their “marital status” (2015). Before being married women were under the protection or control of the male relatives of her family (2015).

In the Laws of king Ethelbert of Kent there are some references although very scarce to women before married, as in clause 74 “compensation [for injury] to be paid to an unmarried woman, shall be on the same scale as that paid to a freeman”

Virginité was a quality very much praised and that many authors, in particular religious ones, laud it in a high degree. As Melissa Hoffman states, this praising of virginité came from the tradition of the Church Fathers (1). In this sense, it could be cited the work of Aldhelm’s work “*De Virginitate*”, where he stated that virginité was the highest state of women comparing it with gold, whereas the states of widowhood and marriage would be regarded as silver and bronze respectively (3).<sup>2</sup>

Being a wife was the most common social role for Anglo-Saxon women. Women of the sixth century did not have many alternatives to marriage (Mate 17), although there was the possibility of devoting themselves to religious life. Considering the degree of liberty that a wife could enjoy it is necessary to focus on the issue of the control over property. According to Christine Fell, women had control over their dowry, even asserting that “Women moved in the world of landed property with much assurance and as full rights as the men of their family” (qtd. in Mate: 17). However, Mate claims that women have no right to alienate land and that married women did not managed their dowry (17). According to Mare A. Meyer, the dowry was managed by the husband with the only limit that he could not alienate it (qtd. in Mate: 18). Husbands also managed all resources of the households and family, therefore, it was only in widowhood were women could recover some control over her goods (Mate: 34).

In the Anglo-Saxon society, a widow could enjoy a greater degree of freedom to conduct her life than the married woman could, given that they possessed sufficient incomes to maintain themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Aldhelm (c. 639-709) was an Anglo-Saxon cleric (Hoffman 1).

Once a woman widowed, she could administer her goods on her behalf. However, sometimes she had to pay fines to the king “for their dowry” and in order not to being forced into a new marriage (Mate 23).

Regarding the essential question of the legal right to administer her own properties, Mate said that widows enjoyed only a “life interest” over any land that they could receive and that in case of dying childless, these lands reverted to the king or to the church (18). In contrast to Mate’s opinion, Christine Clark states that “only upon widowhood did a woman obtain the right to (...) control her land” (233). Mate states that only women who belonged in the social elite could have some control over property (Mate 19).

### **2.1.2 ABBESS**

According to Hollis, prior to the ninth century abbesses enjoyed a great power, they ruled over both men and women’s double-house monasteries and exerted a great influence over the areas where monasteries were located.

In a society based on kinship and comradeship, women in monasteries were considered as “sisters in Christ”. Consequently, it was socially accepted that abbesses held a power that was on equal footing than bishops (10). Nonetheless, Mate upholds the thesis that if these religious women could hold some administrative powers, was because they had been somehow “degendered” (6) and they had abandoned their traditional feminine reproductive role. Although Mate admits that, the abbesses coming from the nobility or a royal lineage did have the opportunity to have an education in a time of generalized illiteracy (7). Nuns and abbesses led studies of the scriptures and even got to copy manuscripts (Hollis 75, 11).

After the Danish invasions, in the tenth century, the influence of abbesses declined, as the number of female houses, now cloistered and separated from the male houses, was significantly reduced (Mate 8, 9). This situation reverted on the twelfth century when the number of female houses multiplied.

This fact gave women, regardless their social classes, more opportunities to lead a religious life, but they never enjoyed again their liberty of learning and the capacity of influencing in their society that female monasteries had in the seventh century. From the ninth to the twelfth centuries, female convents were no longer centres for culture (25)

### **2.1.3 QUEEN**

Mate remarks that the position of queens in the seventh and eighth centuries was much different from that of the abbesses. They did not play a significant role and it was only in the tenth century onwards when they improved their power. Some of them could enjoy enormous riches, being these in many cases the lands that were given to them as a dowry.

However, despite their limitations as they operated inside a “patriarchal society” (6), there were some important roles that they could play as queens, especially as “peace weavers” and as the kings’ mothers and wives (Stafford 1989; 1997a; 1997b qtd. in Mate 10, 11).

Saint Æthelthryth, the object of this dissertation, represented during her lifetime all these roles. I am not including her role as a saint as it cannot be consider a role in itself but rather a quality that is attributed to her after her death. In the next part of this paper, we will analyse how these roles are portrayed in the following medieval texts concerning the saint.

### **3. SAINT ÆTHELTHRYTH'S PORTRAIT IN MEDIEVAL HAGIOGRAPHIES**

From now on, the figure of Saint Æthelthryth will be analyzed considering in depth how different literary sources portrayed her in the middle ages and the different approaches to her figure that take place along the centuries. Before this analysis, it is necessary to provide a brief summary about her life.

Saint Æthelthryth (c. 630-679) was the daughter of Anna, king of East Anglia. She was raised in a very devout Christian family praised for their devotion. Since she was very young, she stood out for her pious and devout conduct. Around 652, she was given against her will to be the wife of an ealdorman, Tondberht, and when he died, she married King Ecgrith of Northumbria, becoming Queen of Northumbria in 670. During her two marriages, she preserved her virginity as a vow to God. In 672, after many pledges she obtained permission to leave her second husband and become a nun in the monastery of Coldingham. One year later, she founded the double monastery of Ely, in the Island of Ely that had been given to her as a marriage-gift by her first husband. She was abbess for six years and died in 679. After her death, her sister Saint Seaxburh became abbess of the monastery and sixteen years later, in 695, she decided to place Saint Æthelthryth's body in a more suitable place in the church of the convent. They found her body miraculously uncorrupted. After this miracle, a cult for Saint Æthelthryth was developed in Anglo-Saxon England and later on (Schaus 10). As Schaus states, she was the most popular native female saint in the middle ages (11).

As it was mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation, we can resort to the narratives of saints' lives as valuable sources from which to derive facts and data about relevant Anglo-Saxon women.



Although its origin can be traced back to the first years of the Christian era (Donovan 5), the genre of hagiographies reached its peak of popularity in the middle ages, when Christianity was well established in Europe these lives of saints served more as examples to explain the Christian doctrine. In Anglo-Saxon literature the first written stories about lives in general, the “first biographies” it might be said, are mostly about saints, following the classical hagiographic tradition (Fulk and Cain 89).

In the Anglo-Saxon society of the last years of the sixth century, members of the Anglo-Saxon nobility began to enter religious life as abbots, abbesses and bishops, practicing a religious life that was characterized by an extreme ascetism. This combination of nobility and ascetism was distinctive of the saints’ lives recorded from that period. Other characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon society, with a marked emphasis upon heroism and bravery, influenced as well the way in which medieval literature addressed saints’ lives. Thus, saints are going to be presented sometimes as heroes of God (Fulk and Cain 5). The saints depicted in medieval hagiographies were idealized persons, who never showed dismay or doubts in the living of their faith. They were “heroes in the epic of salvation” (Donovan 10). Besides, the lives of saints were used as a means to reinforce the idea of the power of the Christian God against the pagan idols that were worshipped by Anglo-Saxon society in former times. (Donovan 16)

The hagiographies of Anglo-Saxon women saints highlight, until the eleventh century, the aforementioned distinctive features of noble origins and a severe ascetism. These hagiographies were considered as a model of pious behavior for women belonging to the nobility of that time.

According to Donovan, there are some common elements in the narrations concerning Anglo-Saxon female saints. For instance, they provide us with cultural and historical information about the period in which these women were born. Besides, it is important to highlight that these narrations offer us information about a variety of female roles that help us to comprehend the variety of roles that Anglo-Saxon women could experience and the worries, concerns and possibilities that women had at that time to lead a

fruitful life. Perhaps more significantly, the hagiographies of Anglo-Saxon female saints show “how these women used their faith as a tool for empowerment” (2), and they break some of the traditional limits imposed upon Anglo-Saxon women (1-2). For instance, female saints did not follow expected behaviors regarding marriage, reproductive role and political influence, and they showed a remarkable capacity to impose their own will. The fact that these women insisted in doing their will as the only means to live their faith is a revolutionary feature for women of that age (15). This can be clearly applied in the case of Saint Æthelthryth who, as will be shown, led her life without being constrained by the limits and obligations derived from her rank and marriages.

Around twenty-five hagiographies dealt with the life of Saint Æthelthryth. Some of them were written in Latin and others in Old English, Anglo Norman and Middle English (Blanton 2010:8). In these hagiographies it can be seen how Saint Æthelthryth is an exceptional figure that occupied many different female social positions of Anglo-Saxon period. Some of these roles were common to many women, as the fact of being married to a man, although some others were destined only for women from the highest social class – queen, abbess -. The most relevant female roles we are focusing on are the following: princess, maiden-virgin, queen, abbess and saint. We will consider how the different female roles that Saint Æthelthryth experienced throughout her life are portrayed in several middle ages texts .

### **3.1 HISTORIA ECCLESIASTICA GENTIS ANGLORUM. BEDE<sup>3</sup>**

Bede (c. 672-735) finished his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* in 732 when he was around 59 years old. This remarkable work is considered the first historical narration of the facts and events taking place in the Anglo-Saxons kingdoms from the fifth

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<sup>3</sup> I have used Oxford University Press edition translated into Modern English. 2008

to the eighth centuries. Its author has been considered the “founding father of a national historiography” (McClure and Collins ix, xviii).

Little is known about Bede’s life. It appears that he did not travel much and spent his entire life in the monasteries of Wearmouth and probably also in Jarrow (kingdom of Northumbria) where he was ordained as a priest and devoted to the study of ecclesiastical issues and the relevant events in the history of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. A decade after his death, his remains were found well preserved and a cult of Bede developed from that moment on (xv).

The *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* is composed of five books where Bede recounts important episodes related to the general history of England and narrates relevant historical facts of the Church of Anglo-Saxon England.

The *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* is the first written work that addresses the figure of Saint Æthelthryth. Bede remarks several aspects of the saint’s life in the fourth book, Chapters 19 (17) and 20 (18). In these two chapters, Bede follows the tradition of writing the life of a person both in verse and in prose (Blanton 56). In Chapter 19 (17) Bede writes in prose several aspects of Saint Æthelthryth’s life whereas in Chapter 20 (18) he inserts a hymn in praise of Saint Æthelthryth, stating in the preface that “It seems fitting to insert in this story a hymn on the subject of virginity which I compose many years ago in elegiac metre in honor of this queen” (205). Bede explains that he is imitating “the method of holy scripture in which many songs are inserted into the history and, as is well known, these are composed in metre and verse” (205).

In Chapter 19 (17), Bede begins by giving a brief account of some biographical data of Saint Æthelthryth’s. It is striking that he does not provide any detail about her childhood, or youth; instead, Bede starts his account with Saint Æthelthryth’s marriage to King Ecgrith, her second espouse. This fact may be explained partly because King Ecgrith was the patron of the monastery of Wearmouth and Jarrow (Blanton 19). Bede mentions only

two more facts related to Saint Æthelthryth's background: first, that she was the daughter of King Anna, a very pious king, and second, that she was married once before and widowed.

Immediately after, Bede refers to the virginity of Saint Æthelthryth, the aspect of her life he is most interested in, remarking that "Though she lived with him for twelve years she still preserved the glory of perfect virginity" (202). The importance that Bede gives to this aspect is demonstrated by the relationship he establishes between the miraculous fact that Saint Æthelthryth remained virgin during her two marriages, and the miraculous preservation of her body after her death: "And the divine miracle whereby her flesh would not corrupt after she was buried was token and proof that she has remained uncorrupted by contact with any man" (202). Therefore, it might be said that Bede is establishing the virginity of Saint Æthelthryth as the base of her sanctity.

Another aspect about Saint Æthelthryth's life that Bede points out, although in a perfunctory manner, is that she became abbess in Ely after having permission to leave her husband. Bede does not refer to her influence or power as abbess but simply states the following: "She was herself appointed abbess in the district called Ely, where she built a monastery and became, by the example of her heavenly life and teaching, the virgin mother of many virgins" (203). By using this epithet "virgin mother of many virgins", Bede is emphasizing her role as a virgin, and placing in a second level her role as an abbess. At the same time, by using this expression Bede attributes Saint Æthelthryth a female role as a mother that should not be applied to her as she did not have any children. Bede attributes her a symbolic role that she could be mother even if virgin.

In this sense, in the hymn contained in Chapter 20 (18) we find a parallelism between the Virgin as the mother of God and Saint Æthelthryth as mother as well: "Royal Mother of Heaven's King your leader now; / you too, maybe a mother of Heaven's King" (206).

In relation to her life and actions as an abbess, Bede merely explains that she made many sacrifices in the monastery and led a virtuous and self-denying life. He mentions that

“she was taken to the lord in the midst of her people, after holding the rank of abbess for seven years” (203), but no further explanation about these years is given. Similarly, in the hymn contained in Chapter 20 (18), he suggests that Saint Æthelthryth acquired notoriety in the monastery but he does not go deeper into the matter: “When in the cloister was she pledged to God. / To heaven devoted there she won a new fame” (206).

Finally, Bede gave great importance to several miracles concerning Saint Æthelthryth. In first place, the miracle that her body was uncorrupted sixteen years after her death: “When the tomb of the sacred virgin and bride of Christ was opened and the body brought to light, it was found to be as uncorrupt as if she had died and been buried that very day”(204). Furthermore, Bede relates several miracles that took place when people touched the saint’s clothes or her coffin: “It happened also that, by the touch of the linen clothes, devils were expelled from the bodies of those who were possessed by them, and other diseases were healed from time to time” (205)

Again, he refers to her as “sacred virgin and bride of Christ”, that is to say her figure as a woman is considered only in relation to her virginity and her great faith. In Chapter 20 (18), the title of the hymn, “On the subject of virginity”, shows the importance Bede is giving to this aspect of Saint Æthelthryth’s person. The main theme of the hymn is set clear from the beginning “Chaste is my song” (206). Bede commences by praising several figures of virgins in the story of the Church beginning by the Virgin Mary, and other virgins-martyrs<sup>4</sup> and finally he praises Saint Æthelthryth as the virgin of “our age” (206).

When introducing his hymn Bede mentions for the first time Saint Æthelthryth’s role as queen, but always subordinated to her role within the Church “truly a queen because the bride of Christ” (205). Therefore, the aspect of Saint Æthelthryth as a queen itself is of no interest for Bede, he does not refer to her as a queen because she was married to a king, or noticing her possible political or social influence, but he remarks that she was a queen because she was the bride of Christ. The only one time that Bede addresses Saint

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<sup>4</sup> The praising of the life of these virgin-martyrs: Agatha, Agnes, Cecily, among others, have a long-standing tradition in the western hagiographies (Head 1999).

Æthelthryth as a queen is in a spiritual sense “Queen, wherefore seek a mate, with Christ thy groom?” (206)

When he refers to her royal origins, it is only to remark that she was prouder to serve God:

Of royal blood she sprang, but noble far

God’s service found than pride of royal blood.

Proud is she, queening it on earthly throne;

In heaven established far more proud is she. (206).

As shown here, Bede is not interested in these roles of bride, wife or queen as a physical woman, but only because they are invested with a clear spiritual significance.

In the last part of his hymn, Bede expresses with a metaphor that when Saint Æthelthryth died and went to heaven then she has a bridegroom and she was wife of Christ: “Many thy wedding gifts while torches blaze. / The bridegroom comes; many thy wedding gifts” (207). It could be inferred that Bede regards her two previous marriages as “non-existent” and that it is this spiritual marriage the only certain and important: “

Overall, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* Bede portrays the figure of Saint Æthelthryth by highlighting her relevance as an example of faith and piety for the believers because of her virtue and the preservation of her virginity. However, Bede is not interested in other aspects of her life as wife, abbess, or queen who could have exerted, to some extent, economic, social and political influence. On the contrary, Bede attributes quite a passive role to Saint Æthelthryth as he refers that “she was given to King Ecgrith” (202), “she was herself appointed abbess” (203), not considering her strong will or determination.

### 3.2 AELFRIC'S LIVES OF SAINTS<sup>5</sup>

According to Joyce Hill, Aelfric (c. 955- c. 1010) was a monk in the Old Minster Winchester (35). He is considered “the most important writer of Old English religious prose” (Magennis and Swan 5). Aelfric wrote his *Lives of Saints* around 996-997 in the period when the Benedictine reform was taking place and when the Monastery of Ely itself was being re-founded.<sup>6</sup> Aelfric’s audience was composed of religious and lay men and women and his interest when he wrote his lives of saints was to give instruction on Christian principles to the people of that time (Donovan 18, 22).

Aelfric devotes Chapter XX to the figure of Saint Æthelthryth and already in the first lines of the chapter we can see that Aelfric gives great importance to her virginity. It is important to remark that the importance given to chastity and virginity extends in the case of Aelfric to not only religious figures or saints, but also to lay men and women.

Thus, at the end of Saint Æthelthryth’s story, Aelfric concludes by saying that likewise, Æthelthryth preserves her virginity, some laymen have preserved “their chastity in the marriage-state” (441). Aelfric’s intention with these remarks might have been to encourage men and women to keep chastity inside their marriages. It could be said that Aelfric’s emphasis upon Saint Æthelthryth’s virginity and her desire to live in the monastery symbolize the values of the Benedictine reformation, because one of the main aspects on which the Benedictine reform focused on, among others, was monastic celibacy (Maude 41).

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<sup>5</sup> I have used edition published by London Pub. for the Early English text society, by N. Trübner 1881-1900; translated into Modern English.

<sup>6</sup> The monastery of Ely was destroyed as a consequence of the Danish invasions (c. 870). In the tenth century the monastery underwent a reformation as a Benedictine monastery only for monks and it was restored and provided with endowments (Fairweather 2005 : xiii).

In Chapter 20 we observe that the importance given to Saint Æthelthryth' virginity is focused on the fact that she kept her virginity through her two marriages, thus sharing Bede's approach to the figure of Saint Æthelthryth:

We will now write, wonderful though it be,  
concerning the holy Æthelthryth, the English maiden,  
who had two husbands and nevertheless remained a virgin,  
as the miracles show which she often worketh (433).

However, Aelfric approaches this marvelous fact giving no recognition to Saint Æthelthryth's own merit in preserving her virginity by herself, but rather attributing her quite a passive role, again echoing Bede:

But Almighty God would not that her virginity should be  
destroyed through cohabitation, but preserved her in continence  
because he is God Almighty and can do all that He will,  
and in divers ways showeth His might (433)

.....  
She loved the Saviour who kept her unspotted (433)

Aelfric even quotes Bede in this respect:

Now the holy Bede who wrote this book  
Said that Almighty God might easily cause,  
Even now in our days, that Æthelthryth should remain  
A pure maiden though she had a husband (433- 435)

There are other instances of this passive role with which Saint Æthelthryth is depicted, for instance in relation to her role as a wife: "Æthelthryth was given to a certain



alderman [Tondbyrht] to wife” (433); “and she was given to marriage to king Ecgfrith” (433).

This passive perspective when depicting Saint Æthelthryth’s roles can be seen again in Aelfric’s treatment to her role as abbess. In this aspect, Aelfric echoes Bede and ignores the fact that the Isle of Ely was hers by marriage, pointing out that Æthelthryth was made abbess of the monastery but forgetting that she founded it:

she was then again instituted  
as abbess in the monastery of Ely,  
and [set] over many nuns, whom she trained as a mother  
by her good example in the religious life. (435).

Even though Ely was a double monastery, Aelfric described it as composed of women only, with Æthelthryth ruling as a mother. It is worth highlighting that in middle ages abbesses were women that uphold quite an important power. In the words of Schaus:

[they held] legal, ecclesiastical and spiritual functions of leadership not usually granted to women. Therefore the office of abbess does not merely exemplify as mother of the community but as a kind of female father with paternal rights. Attempting to indicate the independence of the leader from her bishop. (Schaus 2006: 1)

Thus, Bede and Aelfric, by attributing Saint Æthelthryth a passive role as an abbess and referring her with the epithet “mother” of nuns, are diminishing her influence, forgetting her management tasks as a ruler of the monastery of Ely.

Another aspect that strikes the reader’s attention is that Aelfric remarks that she was an English maiden. This might be an attempt to reinforce the sense of “Englishness” through the figure of the native saints, showing thus a similar approach in this aspect to the work *The South English Legendary* that will be analyzed below:

The English Nation is not deprived of the Lords' saints,

Since in England land lie such saints

As this holy king, and the blessed Cuthbert,

And Saint Æthelthryth in Ely (333)

.....

There are also many other saints among the English (333).

Aelfric does not refer to her or addresses her as a queen even once, in spite of the fact that she was married to a king and was herself a queen; he only mentions that “she lived in wedlock with the king” (433).

To conclude, Aelfric provides an approach to the figure of Saint Æthelthryth in a narrow and restrictive way, less focused on praising the virtues and roles of Saint Æthelthryth as an influential woman of her time and more focused on the spiritual aspects of chastity and self-denial.

### **3.3. LIBER ELIENSIS<sup>7</sup>**

*Liber Eliensis* (composed around the end of twelfth century) is the narration, written in Latin and compiled by an anonymous monk of the Monastery of Ely, of the history of the Monastery of Ely from its origins, when Saint Æthelthryth founded it in the seventh century, until the twelfth century. What is more interesting about the *Liber Eliensis* is that at the same time that it provides the historical account of the ups and downs of the monastery, it also provides information about the life in England from the seventh to the eleventh century (Fairweather xiii, xiv). The book is divided into three different parts that deal with Saint Æthelthryth's life and the history of the Monastery until the time when it became the seat of a bishop in the twelfth century (xiii).

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<sup>7</sup> For the analysis of the *Liber Eliensis* I have used the translation into Modern English of Janet Fairweather, 2005.

According to Fairweather, the main sources used by the compiler of the *Liber Eliensis* were Latin and Old English documents kept in the monastery and local hagiographies about Saint Æthelthryth's sisters. (xvi). The compiler said he tried not to contradict Bede although he states that he needed to gather information about the saint from other authors (7).

The main theme of this work is to exalt the figure of Saint Æthelthryth and to remark her importance as the foundress of the monastery because the perspectives of continuity, wealth and relevance of the monastery rested in the reputation of the saint (xxi).

In addition, the recollection of the miracles made by Saint Æthelthryth could mean that the *Liber Eliensis* was also an attempt to claim properties during the Norman Conquest (Blanton 8). Some other motivations underlying the writing of the *Liber Eliensis* were the interest for the past, and for the relevant national figures that were a pride in the history of England. (Fairweather xviii). The narration of saints' lives was a means as well for monks in the monasteries to attract new believers to the Christian faith and to the monasteries themselves. In this last sense, Donovan remarks that they were "intentionally propagandistic" (Donovan 8, 9). Certainly, it seems reasonable to think that having a renowned saint as a foundress of a monastery could have attracted wealth, importance and influence to the monastery.

Analyzing the different roles of Saint Æthelthryth that are portrayed in the *Liber Eliensis*, it must be said that compared to Bede, who only approached Æthelthryth from the point of view of her virginity and downplayed her importance as the abbess of Ely, the compiler of the *Liber Eliensis* tried to provide more information about her life, presenting her as a powerful woman in a more "earthly" way.

He begins by giving a detailed description of Saint Æthelthryth's familiar background and childhood, emphasizing from the beginning both her royal origins and her piety and devotion since she was very young:

Æthelthryth, pre-elected by God was growing up, having passed her adolescence in a home of good breeding, in the manner customary for a girl of that age with her parents' wealth.

She was the daughter of Anna king of the East Angles, born of a mother called Hereswith ... Well then being nobly exalted by her lineage, she adorned the nobility of her mind by the glory of sanctity (Fairweather 2005:14, 16)

Therefore, since the beginning of the work there is a twofold presentation of her figure: as a member of a royal lineage and as a very virtuous woman, the roles of her as queen and saint are already suggested from the beginning.

As the compiler narrates her first marriage, he begins by pointing out that Saint Æthelthryth intended to remain virgin her whole life, and to live in purity and chastity as an offering to God: "she was sighing for the bridal-chamber of God alone ... as she wished with all her desire to live her whole life out in virginity ... She remained a virgin for evermore. See!" (16-17).

The evidence of the compiler's interest in the virginity of Saint Æthelthryth is shown when he expresses his concern for giving an account of the sources from which he knew this miraculous fact: "Also, what the sainted Bede wrote was in accordance with what he had learnt from the spoken evidence of Wilfrid, the most holy Archbishop of York<sup>8</sup>, the physician Cynefrith<sup>9</sup> and other truthful people, and the testimony of the general public as well" (36). From this account of sources can be inferred that there were other testimonies about Saint Æthelthryth that have been lost, showing how popular this saint was in medieval England:

Regarding her first marriage, the compiler reminds the reader that it was Saint Æthelthryth's first husband, Tondberht, who gave her the Isle of Ely as a marriage-gift: "her own estate (...) which she had received from her first husband predestined for her, and to be held by her in perpetuity, by virtue of their legal settlement on her of a marriage-gift"

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<sup>8</sup> Wilfrid, Archbishop of York was Saint Æthelthryth's spiritual counsellor.

<sup>9</sup> Physician Cynefrith was the medical practitioner who came to heal Saint Æthelthryth from the tumour of her neck before she died (Fairweather 2005:51).

(41). The laws of Æthelberht of Kent<sup>10</sup> conferred a certain degree of liberty and rights to women; for instance, they established that when a woman married she received lands or goods that were called “morgen-gife or “morning gift” to be used freely by her. This fact has important connotations, because it implies that a woman of that time could be given properties; as the owner of the Isle of Ely, Saint Æthelthryth was allowed to found the monastery afterwards. This capacity of disposing of their property is increased in the case of the saints to whom the hagiographies attributed quite an important capacity of resolution and decisiveness.

Saint Æthelthryth is portrayed as queen when the compiler narrates her marriage to King Ecgfrith of Northumbria. He refers to Saint Æthelthryth very often as “Queen Æthelthryth” (26) and depicts her from a more earthly point of view than Bede. When referring to her virginity throughout her second marriage, the author described it in more sensual or physical terms, evading “she evaded the perilous desires of her second [husband]” (29).

The compiler presents Saint Æthelthryth as a very influential woman: “she had come to that place, this being of assistance to many people ... innumerable people longed for the opportunity to make her acquaintance and at the same time to talk with her” (30-31).

Besides, she is presented as a woman disposing of goods and wealth, which she distributes according to her will. This was the case with Cuthbert;<sup>11</sup> to whom Æthelthryth supplied “with much assistance from out of the abundance of her private resources” (30). This conveys a message of economic independence and autonomy that according to Clark could be common to any Anglo-Saxon woman.

It is also worth noting that, being the *Liber Eliensis* an account of the history of the monastery, the compiler gives great importance to everything related to the legal status of the land where the monastery was placed: “The liberty of the place should not be

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<sup>10</sup> In Clause 81 there is a reference to the “morning gift”, that was a gift that was given to the wife by her husband the morning after the consummation of their marriage Thorpe 1840; Britain and Attenborough 1922.

<sup>11</sup> Saint and hermit who was friend and spiritual assistant of Saint Æthelthryth.

diminished or destroyed in future by either king or bishop”(43). This reinforces Æthelthryth’s political and economic power, something that is not mentioned in detail by either Bede or Aelfric.

Her role as an abbess acquires a prominent place in the *Liber Eliensis*. Saint Æthelthryth began to build the monastery around the year 673 and she was made abbess by Saint Wilfrid. The compiler presents Saint Æthelthryth as a powerful woman that led the community of women and men under her ruling: “in a short while [she] collected a community of God-fearing people of both sexes living subject to the direction of a rule ...

Æthelthryth herself received from [Saint Wilfrid] a great deal of advice about rulership”(44-45). Besides, more instances of her work as a ruler of the monastery can be found when she asked the Pope for privileges and also when it is mentioned that she had a steward for the administration of her farmlands (55), which speaks about the economic importance of the monastery and her powerful position. In addition, in Book III there is an epigraph recounting the goods that Saint Æthelthryth contributed to the Monastery of Ely, emphasizing, once more, the idea of her as a proprietor of goods. Therefore, the *Liber Eliensis* focuses on her role as a manager and as a leader of a society of women and men. This outlook implies quite a modern representation of the figure of the saint. However, a note of misogynist thinking can be found when the compiler writes that Bishop Wilfrid helps her to keep her vow of virginity in order that “the virgin would not deviate from her intention through any inconstancy of the feminine mind” (29).

Another important issue regarding women’s rights at that period was the right to get divorce. The Kentish laws seem to contemplate the possibility for Anglo-Saxon women to get divorce from their husbands “If a woman wishes to depart with her children, she shall have half the goods”<sup>12</sup>. However, when Queen Æthelthryth wanted to divorce King Ecgrith and become a nun, she had to pledge divorce to her husband, she could not get divorce unless he granted it. This fact is presented in the *Liber Eliensis* as something very hard to

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<sup>12</sup> Clause 79 of the Laws of king Ethelbert of Kent (r. c. 580–616), Thorpe 1840; Britain and Attenborough 1922

obtain and something obtained due to pressure “difficult and slow though it had been to obtain”, “she kept pressing her case all the more importunately the more difficulty she believed there would be (...)”, but she obtained it against her husband will “invincible as she was”, (31, 32). This nuance of “invincibility” is an instance of the heroic qualities attributed to Anglo-Saxon saints’ lives.

To conclude, the *Liber Eliensis* presents the life of Saint Æthelthryth from many different perspectives. She is depicted as a powerful and influential woman in several ways: first, by emphasizing her role as an abbess, something coherent taking into account that this is the history of the Monastery of Ely and there was an intention to praise her figure as a reflection of the relevance of the monastery itself; second, highlighting her role as a queen. Thus, the *Liber Eliensis* offers us a very different point of view than Bede or Aelfric do.

Virginity is no longer the main aspect of the life of the saint, and instead there is an obvious interest in emphasizing other aspects of her biography.

### **3.4 VIE SEINTE AUDREE. THE LIFE OF ST. AUDREY. MARIE DE FRANCE<sup>13</sup>**

This work is a hagiography written at the end of the twelfth century or at the beginning of the thirteenth century. It is composed of 4625 lines written in Anglo-Norman that narrate the life of Saint Æthelthryth. The text is divided into three different parts: the first one is a brief introduction in which the author draws attention to the importance that everyone devotes one’s time to a good purpose; in the second one, the author provides a superficial account of Saint Æthelthryth’s genealogy; finally, in the third part the author recounts the facts of the life of Saint Æthelthryth.

According to McCash and Barban, only some elements about the identity of the author of *The Life of Saint Audrey* are quite certain. It is clear that the author was a woman named Marie, as she identifies herself as the writer of the book. The most probable identity of this woman seems to be Marie de Meulan, daughter of Galeran de Meulan and wife of

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<sup>13</sup> I have used edition by McCash and Barban translated into Modern English, 2006.

Hugh Talbot, and who is better known as Marie de France (6). This work offers the readers further information about Marie de France's concerns about the situation of women and their "empowerment and disempowerment" (12).

Marie de France begins the story of Saint Æthelthryth by pointing out her royal origins; that she is descended from a king, that her brothers and sisters were kings or were married to kings and that she was herself a queen: "I have undertaken to write this book, in honor of Saint Audrey the queen "(27). Therefore, she is giving importance to her role as a queen from the first moment.

As opposed to Bede, Marie de France gives us a more detailed description of the childhood and youth of the saint, "During her childhood she behaved very well and properly" (37), "Saint Audrey went in the company of her father and mother to pray in church and hear the mass" (37).

Marie stresses that even though Saint Æthelthryth belonged to the highest nobility, she renounced riches and wealth to be a servant of God "She disdained and despised this world" (39); "She disdained earthly joy and honor" (83). In this sense, taking into account that deprivation and insecurity were common circumstances for the majority of Anglo-Saxon population belonging to the underprivileged social classes, the fact that a member of the nobility was capable of rejecting riches, earthly commodities and wealth for the sake of God should have constituted a powerful example of piety and devotion.

It is important to highlight that, even though Marie de France gives importance to the role of Saint Æthelthryth as queen, she remarks that Saint Æthelthryth sees herself truly as a queen only when she becomes a nun and lives for Christ. Therefore, Marie de France is downplaying Saint Æthelthryth's earthly role as queen in favor of her spiritual role as nun and abbess: "Now for the first time it seemed to her / That she was a queen, and so she reigned (83)



It is very remarkable that Marie de France provides an enriching nuance to Saint Æthelthryth's role as queen when she points out that being a queen from the Anglo-Saxon nobility helped her to become foundress and abbess of the Monastery of Ely, thus establishing a link between these two roles:

Here on the island Saint Audrey  
Founded a magnificent church.  
Because she was an East Angle  
In the line of English nobility,  
And because of her spiritual nature,  
And her admirable holy lifestyle,  
Many (people)  
Placed their daughters in her care  
To learn from her the divine law,  
Wisdom and discipline (103)

Thus, Marie de France remarks that people from the nobility joined her at the monastery she founded:

Many people came to Ely  
To join her community:  
Noble barons of high lineage  
And fine ladies from great families; (113)

In this sense, it is interesting to draw a comparison between this text and the *Liber Eliensis*. On the one hand, unlike Marie de France the *Liber Eliensis* shows a more comprehensive point of view when it refers to people of “varying dignity and age” (46) that went to join the saint. On the other hand, both of them coincide in mentioning that the

monastery of Ely was inhabited by men and women. Both Bede and Aelfric omit this last aspect.

It is worth noting that Marie de France offers the reader a closer and more detailed account of the life of Saint Æthelthryth within her marriages and in the household: “the king and she, coexisting chastely within her bed chamber” (75); “night and day she begged her husband”( 81). These scenes about intimate life provide the reader with a much more defined image of the figure of the saint as a woman.

Finally, the fact that Saint Æthelthryth sisters and the daughters of her sisters succeeded her in the ruling of the monastery of Ely when she died allows to draw a parallelism between the “hereditary” succession of abbesses and the hereditary succession of kings; being in Anglo-Saxon society kingdoms were the realm of power for men, and monasteries the more likely sphere of power and influence of women.

Another female role of Saint Æthelthryth that Marie de France highlights throughout the whole work is her role as a virgin. Along the poem, the writer remarks several times that Saint Æthelthryth kept her virginity through two marriages. About the first marriage, she states:

She and her husband agreed  
That to live that way  
Would be holier  
Than to give in to any other desire (43)

It is very interesting that both Marie de France and the *Liber Eliensis* refer to Saint Æthelthryth’s first husband in positive terms, placing husband and wife on an equal footing. Conversely, the other three works analyzed here do not mention him in this light. However, despite the fact that Saint Æthelthryth loved her husband - “her dear friend” (43), when he died, Marie de France remarks that she was “rejoiced to be free from the servitude she had endured under the yoke of marriage” (43). The author reiterates the image of

marriage as a yoke, imposing and limiting the saint's will to live only for God. In this way, the author is portraying the figure of the saint with a remarkably "feminist" approach, considering the marriage a limitation for the possibilities of a woman to pursue her dreams and fulfill herself. It is very interesting to see how the image of the marriage as a yoke appears also in the *Liber Eliensis* "She was constant in her song and full of ardour for the sacrifice of her marriage-yoke as a whole –offering before God" (16)

In addition, regarding the second marriage Marie de France writes the following:

She wished to keep the virginity  
That she had promised to God.  
That is the way she preferred to live  
Rather than to have intimacy with a man.  
She was indeed united in marriage with her husband,  
But not by carnal relations. (71)

It is important to draw attention to the fact that the saint's virginity is considered both a miraculous fact - she was married twice and yet kept her virginity – and a proof of Saint Æthelthryth's high virtue, a quality inherent to her holiness:

Those who knew the virgin  
Marveled at her,  
For though she was a married woman, she kept  
Her virginity and maidenhood. (41)

.....

Let no one doubt  
that the virgin truly had  
enough virtue and control

to guard her virginity.(73)

It is very interesting to highlight the opposite perspectives we find between Aelfric and Marie de France about the issue of how Saint Æthelthryth kept her virtue. Whereas Aelfric attributes everything to the power of God, Marie de France gives Saint Æthelthryth the merit of keeping her virtue herself by means of her pious and self-determined personality.

Another aspect of Saint Æthelthryth's life that Marie de France reinforces is her role as an abbess. As we have mentioned before, Marie de France links this to the fact that Æthelthryth was a queen and had wealth. The fact that she was given the Isle of Ely as dowry for her first marriage eased that she could found the monastery: "She returned to the Isle of Ely, / Her sovereign possession / Which she received from her husband Tonbert" (101).

Marie de France remarks that Saint Æthelthryth possessed many reaches and that she endowed with them the monastery:

brought with her rich garments  
and her royal adornments with her-  
her gold and silver  
and all that belonged to her-  
to be used to improve the monastery  
where she had entered religious life. (83)

Therefore, despite Marie stated that Saint Æthelthryth disdained earthly honors she still kept goods and riches. As an abbess, Marie de France describes Saint Æthelthryth as a clever and resolute woman. She provides us with many instances that show certain autonomy in the management of the economic issues of the monastery. For instance, she is presented as a foundress of a magnificent church, (153), capable of building a chapter

house and outbuildings (105) and managing money and organizing her monastery. Saint Æthelthryth is capable, for instance, of obtaining important tax exemptions approved by Rome for Saint Wilfrid (105).

Regarding the important issue of property in order to analyze the autonomy of a woman of that period, it must be said that she is presented as an owner determined to keep and organize her property “because the island had been given to her and confirmed as her dower ... she never wanted to lose it or to have anyone to take it away from her” (105).

In conclusion, Marie de France focuses on Saint Æthelthryth’s roles as queen and abbess. She offers a closer approach to the saint as a woman, providing several details about her daily life and altogether presenting her as a resolute woman. It is very interesting to highlight the surprisingly modern approach that Marie de France shows to the institution of marriage expressing the idea that for some women, as was the case of Saint Æthelthryth, who have a very defined objective in life, marriage can be an obstacle to the fulfillment of their destinies and happiness. Marie de France also provides a modern conception regarding the importance for women to have their own possessions in order to be able to attain their objectives in life. She states that in the case of Saint Æthelthryth, her objective of devoting herself to religious life was eased due to the lands that were of her own property that allowed her to institute the monastery.

### **3.5 THE SOUTH ENGLISH LEGENDARY<sup>14</sup>**

After the Norman Conquest, the lives of saints played an important role in helping to build the idea of England and “the Englishness”. Anglo-Saxon female saints played also an important role in this sense, because despite of the fact that they belong to the nobility or royal lineages they were accessible to common people as well. Their lives were read and reached by English men and women belonging to different classes. (Olsen 2013).

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<sup>14</sup> I have used edition by Tristan Major in original Middle English, 2010. Major edited a part of *SEL* dealing with Saint Æthelthryth.

In this context the *South English Legendary* (*SEL*) appeared, it was a collection of versified lives of saints from the middle ages that was written in English by an anonymous author in the mid-thirteenth century. This collection of epitomes about lives of saints was written by religious men and was addressed to nuns (Blanton 233), and it was aimed to be read in the feast days (Major 83). The part dedicated to Saint Æthelthryth is composed of fifty lines, where the main facts of her life are explained; therefore, taking into account the shortness of this work, it offers less information than the other works under study. The first lines place Saint Æthelthryth geographically and historically within an English background: “Seint Aeldri of Eli · god [maide] was hende/ Hire fader was king of Engelond · of al þat est ende.”(98).<sup>15</sup> In this sense, when referring to her second husband his English origins are highlighted as well: “To anoþer king of Engelonde · þat me clepede Egfray” (98). The author does not focus much on the two marriages of the saint, but the narration goes on to tell that Saint Æthelthryth desired to be a nun and that afterwards she became abbess: “Into þe ordre of nonnerie · <þat> he grantede hire to wende”( 98); “Abbesse heo was hireself · imad after þe furste zere” ( 98).

However, the text highlights Æthelthryth’s condition as a virgin: “god maide” (98), “holi maide” (98), “clene maide” (98). The word “maide” is accompanied by several adjectives referring and reinforcing the same notion of pureness. In relation to the importance given to the virginity of Saint Æthelthryth, the *SEL* shows more similarities to the works of Bede and Aelfric than to the *Liber Eliensis* or the *Life of St. Audrey*. However, due to its short length the *SEL* does not provide further analysis on the topic

Regarding the rest of facts of her life, some more attention is paid to her death and the miracle of her uncorrupted body (98) but no more elements are provided. As a conclusion, it may be pointed out that in the *SEL* the more relevant aspects about Saint Æthelthryth’s life are her virginity and her “Englishness”. As a novelty, in this work there

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<sup>15</sup> Quotations of *SEL* taken from Major, pp.98-99. There are around 60 extant copies of *SEL*, not all of them containing the same lives of saints; due to the fact that the concrete manuscript containing the story of Saint Æthelthryth could not be found, Major’s work is used as a basis for the analysis of the content of the *South English Legendary*.

is a reference to the celebration of her fest at Ely “Of hire me makeþ in Eli · gret feste azer iwis” (99).

### 3.6 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

After analyzing the texts one by one, now it is the time to offer a conjoint overview of all the works that have been analyzed thus offering a combination of perspectives that will provide enriching conclusions about how the figure of the saint was regarded along the centuries.

Overall it must be said that the *Liber Eliensis* and Marie de France offered a major number of similarities in the way they portraited the different roles of the saint than the other three works. The fact that the Latin text that Marie de France used in her work was preserved in a similar form in the *Liber Eliensis* could explain the similarities in both works with regard to some aspects (McCash and Barban 8). However, these author could have selected the material that suited better to their respective interests when writing their works, and that explains that they also present some dissimilarities in respect to different points. On the other hand, Bede’s and Aelfric’s work offer similar perspectives.

All of the five works highlight the role of Saint Æthelthryth as a virgin in a high degree; no doubt, virginity through her two marriages was a striking fact, a miracle for all the people of that age that needed to be emphasized. However, a different degree of emphasis and different perspectives are given to this feature. Whereas Bede, Aelfric and the *SEL* focus mainly on this aspect over other roles, Marie de France and the *Liber Eliensis*, although admitting its importance, give more prominence to other aspects of her life. The *Liber Eliensis* and Marie de France, emphasize the willpower and strength of Saint Æthelthryth in keeping her virtue, honoring her with that merit. By contrast, in Bede, Aelfric and the *SEL* the power of God is the will that worked over the passive figure of the saint. Some distinctions can be drawn however, between Bede and Aelfric; whereas virginity is linked in Bede’s work to the miracle of the preservation of Saint Æthelthryth’s

body after her death, in Aelfric's poem virginity is probably linked to an intention to encourage chastity also among lay men and women. Aelfric seems to be fostering the idea of virginity as an ideal state or characteristic.

Concerning Æthelthryth's role as a wife, it is overshadowed by the significance of her virginity, the feature that is more commonly emphasized as it was aforementioned. Being a wife was a common role for Anglo-Saxon women that was shared by Saint Æthelthryth, however, the fact that she kept her virginity throughout her two marriages was something that obviously made her stand out from the rest, which could imply that she was not under the subjection of her husbands. However, as Fell stated, Saint Æthelthryth shares with the rest of married women some common advantages such as holding complete control over her dowry (qtd. in Mate 17).

Marie de France and the author of the *Liber Eliensis* clearly placed in the foreground and emphasized the two positions of power that women of that time could hold, abbess and queen. It is very interesting to remark that even though these two texts were written after the Norman Conquest, when the rights of Anglo-Saxon women have been very much restricted in relation to the previous centuries (Clark 207), they are vindicating the agency of Saint Æthelthryth as a woman and portraying her as an influential and powerful woman.

It is interesting to notice that the authors that give more relevance to her role as queen and abbess provide also more details about her royal origins, even linking both aspects. This is explained by the fact that at that time the social position of abbesses was mostly reserved to noble women. The majority of abbesses came from the more wealthy families and they were elected from well-known and influential members of the noble families in order to secure wealth and influence for the religious community of the Monastery (Schaus 2, 3). In this sense, Saint Æthelthryth was different from the common women of her time and had more opportunities.



Regarding Æthelthryth's role as abbess, despite the fact that the five hagiographies I have analyzed mention this fact, Bede, Aelfric and the *SEL* consider it a mere biographical datum and, moreover they give it a very distinct passive touch: it was something "that happened" to Saint Æthelthryth, not something that she won, or fought for. Aelfric did not even mention that she was the foundress of the Monastery. The reason why these three authors did not regard her condition as an abbess as important as her other roles others may be that they were focusing more on the spiritual aspects of the saint; they were trying to encourage the faith of the believers, presenting her as a figure to be imitated in her piety. They did not have other "intentions" related to for instance, encouraging the importance of the monastery as the *Liber Eliensis* had. On the contrary, Marie de France and above all the *Liber Eliensis*, give great prominence to this role, although some shades may be pointed out between both perspectives.

Marie de France portrays Saint Æthelthryth as a powerful woman who enjoyed a position of power at the monastery of Ely; her position as abbess was a tool for empowerment that allowed her to lead her community from a spiritual, economic and administrative point of view. Marie de France emphasizes the dowry as a means to attain Saint Æthelthryth's goal of founding the monastery. The *Liber Eliensis*, in addition to the consideration of Saint Æthelthryth as a powerful figure emphasizing her importance as a ruler over men and women, it emphasizes as well the rights she held over the property of the Isle of Ely, where the monastery was located, which were not to be diminished in the future by any circumstance. This concern is reflecting the difficulties that the monastery underwent throughout its history, being almost destroyed after the Danish invasions. There is a clear intention in this point to defend the legal status of the properties that the monastery had possessed along the centuries by using its famous foundress as a means of propaganda.

Analyzing the consideration of the second position of power for a woman of that time, the role as a queen, it is once again remarked by Marie de France and the *Liber Eliensis*. From the beginning these two works address her as a queen, they give importance

to the period of her life when she was a queen and provide details about how Saint Æthelthryth's life was and how she exerted her influence upon the group of people that visited her. On the contrary, Bede points to her as a queen only from the spiritual point of view, in contrast again to *Liber Eliensis* that depicted her more as a queen from an "earthly" point of view.

In this regard, Marie de France and Bede show a similar point of view when both state that for Saint Æthelthryth it was more important to become abbess than reigning as a queen. However, Marie de France reinforces the importance of the fact that Saint Æthelthryth came from a royal origin and was herself a queen as a precondition of her becoming an abbess. It is striking that Aelfric does not mention the role of queen of Saint Æthelthryth while the *SEL* mentioned it and linked it to her Anglo-Saxon royal origins, remarking thus the "Englishness" of the saint.

The portrait of the figure of the saint clearly evolves over the centuries. There is a shift from the passive attitude that was ascribed to her in the works by Bede and Aelfric to the active and assertive position that the *Liber Eliensis* and Marie de France underscore. Bede and Aelfric depict her with a submissive role in stark contrast with the way some saint's women were portrayed in hagiographies, as was the case of saints Agnes, Cecilia, Agatha, among others, that were depicted as women with a high capacity of self-determination (Donovan 2). On the contrary, the *Liber Eliensis* and Marie de France focused in her ability and agency as a ruler of a community of men and women without omitting Saint Æthelthryth's spiritual and pious qualities. In this sense, it is worth noting once more that in a time when women had lost many rights, after the Norman Conquest, these two texts seem to follow a contrary trend and vindicate her figure as an autonomous leader.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we have observed a shift in the portraits of Saint Æthelthryth as the different point of views and interests evolved over the centuries; from the first works that focused mainly on her virginity to the last ones that highlight other aspects of the saint. Overall, Saint Æthelthryth is portrayed in all the works breaking social expectations in different aspects. Firstly, by the fact of maintaining her virginity and not having children despite being married twice, something very uncommon for women of her time. Secondly, by achieving her purpose of keeping her virginity and devoting entirely her life to the service of God imposing her will over her two husbands and after overcoming considerable difficulties.

Besides, her position as abbes conferred upon her a capacity of managing and ruling over a community of men and women that was unattainable for common women. Our research has shown that abbeys were the place where Anglo-Saxon women could exert the highest degree of power and influence.

The many lives that Saint Æthelthryth embodied in her own life and the changing many lives portrayed in these antiques texts, reach the contemporary reader as a portrait of a modern women who managed to impose her will overcoming many difficulties. Thereby being Saint Æthelthryth not only an example of piety for the women of her time, but also an inspiring image of self-realization for modern women of our age.

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