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## Jeopardized Virginity an Analysis of Rape and Spiritual Virginity in Medieval Europe

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JEOPARDIZED VIRGINITY  
AN ANALYSIS OF RAPE AND SPIRITUAL VIRGINITY IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

BY  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses whether or not, according to theologians, virgins could maintain their virginity even after instances of physical loss, such as rape. I will use post-structuralism method and a socio-cultural analysis by viewing virginity's relationship with the norms of society. It will examine virginity and its place within texts and the Christian tradition. Most importantly, it will view how virginity has changed over time, and from one thinker to the next in response to the tension between the body and spirit. Beginning with Augustine, and into the medieval era, there are theological ideas that allow virginity to remain even after physical losses like rape. This was not true for most thinkers before Augustine. Physical virginity was rendered absolute in order to claim virginity.

The aim of this thesis is to assess raped virginity's place within medieval society. Virginity offered an escape to women who did not wish to marry and bear children, and also offered the highest honor of heavenly reward alongside martyrdom. However, maintaining physical virginity could not always be guaranteed. Rape was a threat to many Holy Virgins in medieval Europe, especially during invasions. This paper will assess how women of the convents were able to maintain their virginity even when threatened with violation. The change in the theology of virginity provided a way for these virgins to challenge rape. Spiritual virginity, which was in constant tension with bodily virginity, was an idea developed in response to rape, allowing a woman's access to virginity regardless of physical intactness.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*No woman can be deprived of her virginity through any deed men do to her body, unless her heart consents. For the more my body is defiled here against my will, the purer will be my virginity, and the greater, indeed, my reward.<sup>1</sup>*

-Lucy of Syracuse

Virginity was a common ideology within the ancient world, and early Christian women grasped hold of it. Paul was the first to write about virginity in early Christian writings. He endorsed it as the freedom to focus on God without the need to focus on worldly endeavors. Early Christian writers and theologians also endorse virginity, proclaiming that physicality and spiritual virginity were both crucial. Throughout late antiquity into the Middle Ages, virginity grew rapidly within the Christian tradition. It became the ideal state for Christians to obtain. However, while viewing texts such as the Virgin Martyrs, one can see that there was a common threat to virgins: rape. The defiling of virginity was the ultimate devastation to the virgin, one much greater than death. Virginity, in turn required reassessment by theologians. Was virginity solely a physical state? Or could virginity be maintained after an occurrence of rape? Throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages, the flexible status of virginity continued. Violence and invasions led to instances where rape became a probable threat.

For women of the veil [nuns], maintaining physical virginity could not always be guaranteed. Rape was a threat to many Holy Virgins, especially in times of violence. This paper will assess how women of the convents were able to maintain their status of virginity even if threatened with violation. The change in theology of virginity provided a way for these virgins to

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<sup>1</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c. 1150-1300: Virginity and its Authorization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 104.

challenge rape. Spiritual virginity, which was in constant tension with bodily virginity, was an idea developed in response to rape, allowing access to virginity regardless of physical intactness.

The goal of this thesis is to view not only how the thoughts on virginity had drastically changed, but also how theologians dealt with the friction of the body/spirit entity. Scholars have generally looked at rape in medieval society outside of the convents, but few have looked at the issue of rape in the theology of the body/spirit tension within the realm of feminist religious studies. The construct of virginity changes drastically from late antiquity, through the middle ages, and into the reformation. This thesis will relate to the wider field of religious studies by offering an analysis of theological views and instances of rape of consecrated virgins. The question being addressed and analyzed in this thesis is whether or not virgins could maintain their virginity even after instances of physical loss, such as rape.

The virgin martyr texts are a group of legends that were quite popular, especially in early Medieval era. They were stories of saintly women who endured martyrdom and maintained their virginity. The genre expresses a certain paradigm of sainthood.<sup>2</sup> Rape and sexuality were common theme within these texts, and some argue that is exactly why they became so popular. Scholars have looked at the Virgin Martyrs genre in depth and analyzed the attempted rape. The current consensus is that within the narratives, rape never actually occurs to the virgin martyrs. Scholar Dr. Maud Burnett McInerney provides a theory that the virgin martyr must be threatened with rape in the Saint's Lives because she is defined by her virginity. Being defined by this though, the virgin cannot be raped in the end. Dr. McInerney states:

The threat of rape is a way of reconfiguring the virgin rather than virginity; it is imagined as peculiar to women, just as virginity was once a condition peculiar to women; the threat of rape, in fact, becomes a way of making female virginity more fragile than the male equivalent, even

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<sup>2</sup> Karen A. Windstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 4.

though the experience of the desert fathers had suggested that nothing in this world was more tenuous than male chastity, which could be undone by the involuntary movement of a single, rebellious organ.<sup>3</sup>

Others scholars believe that the attempted rape of the virgin martyr is a literary allegory for the seizure of Rome or a threat to the Church. Although these theories are well founded, this thesis will not address these literary issues and theories. Instead, for purposes of this thesis, the virgin martyr as a construct will be examined, to question virginity's state in instances of rape, and to questions whether virginity can be maintained if rape occurs.

There are several disclaimers that must be made before analysis. I recognize that rape is a global phenomenon, not limited to Western Europe. It is also not limited to the Middle Ages. Rape touches on a whole array of areas of medieval society. I am conscious of this global and social phenomenon but have elected to treat it in such a way only with Medieval Western Europe and mostly consecrated virgins. Sin and crime are both repressed in rape in the medieval times. However, crime is defined by society, scandal, and submersion of social order. What modern day views as a more defined category of rape is actually not present in medieval society. It is defined by the society itself. Yes, rape is a sexual question, but from the judicial point of view, rape is essentially a social question. For example, if a noble man rapes a peasant, this is not considered rape. It is socially reproachable. However, if a peasant rapes a noble woman, it is absolutely not reproachable. This tampers with the social order. It is important to note that this is not only true of the medieval period. I am aware of all of these abstaining issues before delving into the thesis.

In order to better understand the concepts of the body in medieval society, this paper will use Caroline Walker Bynum's methodology. Her work on the body as a psychosomatic union between the soul and self will be the ideal model for this thesis. In her work, *Fragmentation and*

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<sup>3</sup> Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2003), 75.



*Redemption*, Bynum looks in depth at the body's relationship to the soul in medieval society and how tension between the two can create issues. "Compared to other periods of Christian history and other world religions, medieval spirituality- especially female spirituality- was particularly bodily; this was not only because medieval assumptions associated female with flesh but also because theology and natural philosophy saw persons as, in some real sense, body as well as soul."<sup>4</sup> This new concept of viewing the self as both body and soul was a Christian and Jewish notion and also a profound development of the Middle Ages. The unity can be viewed directly with the female, since her spirituality was more bodily than her male counterparts. In medieval society, thinkers associated the body to women, and therefore claimed that women's manifestations of spirituality would be more physical and physiological than men's.<sup>5</sup> This thought comes from early Christian interpretations of the book of Genesis. The interpretations portray women as relying on the bodily senses. "Although both men and women manipulated their bodies from the outside, so to speak, by flagellation and other forms of self-inflicted suffering, cases of psychosomatic manipulation (or manipulation from within) are almost exclusively female."<sup>6</sup> The boundaries between spirituality and physicality appear to be breached during this time, not only between male and female, but also between the soul and the body.<sup>7</sup> It is important to remember the ways in which treatments of the body and soul resulted in a mix, rather than separation of the two components of person, particularly in the period after 1200.<sup>8</sup> And by the thirteenth century, the prevalent concept of the self and personhood was strictly a psychosomatic unity.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 183.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 201-202.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 186.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 182.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 205.

<sup>9</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 183.

Caroline Walker Bynum's theory paves the way for scholars to view the change between the soul and the self as two opposing entities prior to medieval theology, and the drastic changes throughout the Middle Ages. She states:

It seems reasonable to suppose that the extraordinary importance given to body, especially female body, in thirteenth- to fifteenth- century religion, and what appear to be the historical beginnings of certain somatic events (such as stigmata or miraculous lactation), owe something to the fact that theorists in the high Middle Ages did not see body primarily as the enemy of soul, the container of soul, or the servant of soul; rather they saw the person as a psychosomatic unity, as body and soul together.<sup>10</sup>

This is due to the fact that medieval thinkers intended to “tie body and soul together, to bridge the gap between them while allowing body to retain a reality and significance of its own, that their writings in these areas are so extraordinarily difficult to understand.”<sup>11</sup> This concept is quite different than modern views of the body, as well as views prior to Medieval theology. Bynum's main point is important to this thesis is: “the line between soul and body, form and matter, disappears in a complex apparatus that obscures the transition point from one to the other.”<sup>12</sup>

While using Bynum's theory as a premise, we can view in depth the constant tension between the body's physicality and spirituality. Not only are the lines blurred between the two parts of the self, but also problems arise when the two become one entity. Rape provides one of the most prominent tensions between the physicality of the body and the purity that can be maintained spiritually through virginity.

The first part of this thesis will look directly at Virginity within the Medieval Era. Chapter 1 will introduce the construct of virginity during the Middle Ages: how it had become a major part of the Christian Church as well as its social and economic opportunities. “Virginity is one of the greatest inventions of medieval Christian culture, theorized and practiced from early

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 222.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 223.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 227.

Christianity. Virginity in this discourse is the image and practice of perfection, the highest form of life, and imitation of the angels.”<sup>13</sup> One of the main points that will be discussed by this thesis is the status of virginity. This status was not only available to physical virgins, but to other women as well. Therefore, virginity was not solely based on the physical intactness, but a sliding scale. “The status of virginity was thereby available for non-virgin women, while the powers of maternity and household, acquired for virginity, were incorporated into models of holiness which still proclaimed virginity as the superior form.”<sup>14</sup> Although the purest form was maintained in virginity, widows and married women could renounce their past lives and take up the status of virginity; however not as holy as consecrated virgins. Within this chapter, the topic of virginity cults and ascetic practices will also be analyzed briefly.

Chapter 2 will examine the early church theologians and their stances on virginity. This section and the time frame will be from the early church theologians up to John Chrysostom. Many early theologians took stances on virginity. These early church theologians formed views on proper virginity and how women should conduct themselves, as well as the actual state of virginity. Chapter 3 will further the analysis of virginity theology by viewing Medieval theologians as they look specifically at rape in regards to virginity. Medieval theologians used the early church father’s teachings in order to support their views on the state of virginity. Although some of these theologians show sharp contrasts within the interworking of virginity, the overall focus on the beauty and perfection of virginity is consistent. Many theologians were faced with this issue throughout Late Antiquity and well into the middle ages. Virginity was considered a purely physical state in the earliest forms of Christianity. However, in instances of rape, virginity took a new form. Augustine’s theology allowed for this change. Many church

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<sup>13</sup> Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih, *Medieval Virginites* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture*, 150.

theologians proclaimed that if a consecrated virgin was raped against her will, her virginity would remain intact. Theology of virginity created a solution to this problem in the Middle Ages. Rape victims would still maintain their virginity, and therefore maintain their heavenly state. This idea brings about a ‘spiritualized virginity’ and not just the bodily state. However, there were some theologians who disagree that virginity remains after rape. Some believed that the defiled virgin would remain completely pure, and others argued that the defiled virgin would remain pure in God’s eyes, however, these virgins could not compare themselves to undefiled virgins. Both of these viewpoints will be discussed in detail during this chapter.

From here, the thesis will lead into the second major section with chapter 4 transitioning between the discussions of virginity as an entity itself into threatened virginity through a detailed look at the virgin martyrs genre. Many of the virgin martyrs were threatened with rape or sexual exploitation within the last moments of their life. This brings about the interesting question if their virginity remaining intact even after rape. Although none of the Virgin Martyrs were actually raped, the threat was there and theological ideologies were formed in regards to threatened virginity. By viewing examples of nearly raped virgin martyrs, it will become apparent how many valued their virginity more than their lives.

After discussing theological views of rape in medieval society, and the literature genre of the Virgin Martyrs, it will be important to look at the secular laws of medieval society. The next two chapters will look strictly at medieval Anglo-Saxon/English territories. The scope is smaller in order to get a better understanding of laws and rape examples in one particular country, although the theme was also present in other countries as well, such as France. England is the best example due to the many invasions and violence that took place on Anglo Saxon and English soil, as well as violence in general. These next two sections will aim to show that there

were reasons for the church to be concerned about rape of their virgins. Chapter 5 will examine rape and the law in medieval English territories in order to analyze what society deemed a heinous crime of rape. Many of the laws portray the rape of a virgin or one 'married to God' to be an act requiring harsher punishment than the rape of other women. Virginitude also held a socio-economic value that can be found through these laws.

Chapter 6 will assess rape in regards to Holy Virgins. The medieval times were a violent period for many within Europe, especially within Anglo Saxon/English territories. Women of God were not immune to the violence of foreign conquests, nor the violence of their own community members. Although few examples of rape remain, those that do exist require attention. Some sources speak of consecrated virgins being afraid for their lives, but more so they fear for their virginitude. Rape was a commonality in invasions and convents were rarely neutral ground. The Norman Conquest was one of the most brutal in regards to violence, as well as the Viking raiders, Gauls, and other invaders. Virgins were also at risk of rape outside of invasions. The examples given in this chapter will show that rape was considered a threat to consecrated virgins.

The last chapter will conclude the assessment of the Middle Ages by looking at how the construct of virginitude was transformed in the Reformation. With a detailed look at Martin Luther and the humanist, theologian, and teacher Erasmus, we get a clearer idea of the changing thoughts on virginitude. Virginitude no longer remained the highest form of dedication to God. The Reformation took a very different outlook on virginitude and in many cases, condemned it altogether. Therefore, it is important to conclude not only with medieval society's views of virginitude, but also to briefly assess how this construct moved into the Reformation and changed in drastic ways.

This thesis will have discussed the drastic changes of virginity from late antiquity, through the middle ages, and ending within the reformation. Virginity was not a constant state, and in many cases, virginity had been altered throughout time to fit the social norms and issues. When rape was a common threat, theologians were forced to alter their stance on virginity to maintain a “perfect state.” They were able to complete this task by offering spiritual virginity.

## CHAPTER 2

### MEDIEVAL VIRGINITY

Virginity grew to be a major construct within Christianity during Late Antiquity. Moving into the early Middle Ages, it began to take on an even more powerful role. It quickly became the most ideal state for one, especially for women, to obtain. For a majority of the Middle Ages, the highest state for women, and the church's view of the perfect life, was "*integritas*, total virginity, that is, uncorrupted sexual and spiritual purity. In the view of churchmen, there was only one way in which women could transcend their unfortunate sexuality and free themselves from their corporeal shackles, and this was through a life of sexless perfection."<sup>15</sup> The only way to obtain this sexless perfection was to remain totally pure from the world. Through virginity, and by renouncing sexuality, women would now be saved from their inferior nature only by becoming like *vir*, a man.<sup>16</sup> The practice of virginity grew even further into the Middle Ages by gaining the status of cardinal virtue. This was a main innovation of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>17</sup> As Peter Brown stated: "The virgin body was an exquisitely appropriate mirror, in which human beings could catch a glimpse of the immense purity of the image of God. The woman's untouched flesh was both a mirror of the purity of her soul and a physical image of the virgin earth of the garden of Eden."<sup>17</sup> Through the virgin, people were able to gaze on the purity of their God. The virgin thus became the perfect state as well as an icon.

When studying virginity, it is important to note the social and economic benefits the institution offered women. One of the greatest social benefits that virginity offered was a

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Beth Rose, *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 31.

<sup>16</sup> Katherine Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 22.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Brown, *Body and Society*, pg 299 in Katherine J. Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England*, (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer Inc., 2000), 83.

freedom from marriage. First, we must understand how virginity shifted from a ‘pagan’ practice into Christianized virginity. Dr. Maud Burnett McInerney argues:

This paradox must be understood in the context of the development of the ideal of sexual renunciation delineated by Brown, according to which virginity changed from an essentially social or even economic quality that enhanced the worth of pagan girls on the marriage market to a spiritual value that was, on a contrary, antisocial.<sup>18</sup>

The possibility of choosing virginity to evade the social expectations of marriage was celebrated as one of the greatest attractions of virginity.<sup>19</sup> The concept shifted from pagan girls sustaining their worth in society, to a spiritualized construct that defied social norms. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne argues: “Reclusion offers a kind of personal liberty to women of socioeconomic privilege or achievement, but does not necessarily entail political transformation of the institutions by which it is supported.”<sup>20</sup> She is correct to assume that the freedoms of virginity were only found within socioeconomic structures. The politics of the institutions were not threatened enough for concern.

The second major benefit that virginity offered women was the renunciation of their inferior sex. Women within the human kinship structures were viewed as a form of property, in contrast to her male counterparts. The female virgin maintains this material value that requires a more specific definition of her worth to God.<sup>21</sup> This therefore heightened her value compared to her male counterparts whose value remains the same. The quality of physical integrity within the female body alone, as “hollow and therefore capable both of containing the divine and being sealed to exclude all other influences, is the aspect of female virginity in which it was impossible

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<sup>18</sup> Maud Burnett McInerney, “Rhetoric, Power, and Integrity in the Passion of the Virgin Martyr,” in Kelly, *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 58.

<sup>19</sup> Kelly, *Menacing Virgins*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture c. 1150-1300*, 32.

<sup>21</sup> Emma Campbell, *Medieval Saints’ Lives: The Gift, Kinship and Community in Old French Hagiography*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 60.



for males, no matter how chaste, to share fully.”<sup>22</sup> Virgins were able to bypass their sexual limitations and to reach perfect manhood by rejecting their female sex. St. Jerome wrote, “as long as women is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, she will cease to be woman and will be called man.”<sup>23</sup> Virgins had found an avenue to rise above their sex to obtain a higher intimacy with Christ than their male counterparts.

Virginité also allowed a desexualized femininity. Virgins were able to reject the very act that defines their sexuality as other or different: sex. For the female sex, only virgins, and sometimes widows, were able to occupy this third space that was usually only available to males (i.e. Eunuchs). They were free from the chains of marriage that all other women suffered and endured.<sup>24</sup> However, by the high Middle Ages this idea had transformed. Still, the idea of the virgin as a ‘*vir-ago*, a woman acting like a man,’ continues, “virginité is (re)-sexualized and feminized [...] virginité is rewritten as marriage, just as marriage can be rewritten as chastity.”<sup>25</sup> *Virago* (female) is a Latin word that Jerome uses in the Vulgate, similar to *vir* (man). The virgin’s marriage to Christ takes the place of earthly marriage, but the institution of marriage is still present. No longer is the virgin free from marriage entirely. The femininity of virginité, which is only available to women, is reinstated. The occupation of a third sex, or a new space, is reverted.

One of the distinct characteristics of chastity is the different forms or levels. Early Christian theologians, continuing into the Middle Ages agreed that there were various forms and

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<sup>22</sup> McInerney, “Rhetoric, Power, and Integrity in the Passion of the Virgin Martyr,” in Kelly, *Menacing Virgins*, 57.

<sup>23</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Ephesios*. III V (685) in PL 26: 533, in Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, Ca. 500-1100*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 128.

<sup>24</sup> Carlson, *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginité in the Middle Ages*, 52.

<sup>25</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, ‘The Virgin’s Tale’, p.166 in Campbell, *Medieval Saints’ Lives*, 98.

degrees of chastity. The lowest level was a chaste marriage, then widowhood, and finally, the highest form, virginity.<sup>26</sup> Kathleen Kelly argues that the terms related to virginity were interchangeable:

Depending on the context, the patristic authors and their later commentators who use the terms *castitas* and *virginitas* may be referring either to one's never having experience coitus, that is a 'virgin' in one, purely physical sense; *or* to an individual's commitment to the celibate religious life (regardless of whether that individual was single, married, or widowed), or to sexual faithfulness in a monogamous marriage.<sup>27</sup>

These terms were interchangeable, and allowed for the view of virginity to be complex and unclear. Women would enter and many times re-enter convents and communities at different levels of virginity. Some enter as virgins, wives, and widows, and later would reenter at a different stage in their life.<sup>28</sup> Women had many different reasons for entering and reentering the convent. What is incredibly fascinating however is the interchangeable level of chastity available to these women. It is important to point out that chastity was not identical to virginity. Although the terms were interchangeable, the levels of virginity were clearly separated. Only virgins were able to occupy the highest level. Also interesting to note is the definitions and formulation of virginity are listed only in heterosexual terms. This leaves homosexual relationships open to questions.<sup>29</sup> These were problems that theologians were required to address.

Women relationships were open to interpretation based on the exclusively heterosexual terms of virginity and chastity. This issue was not exclusive to the Middle Ages. "Early monastic rules governing female communities betray similar concerns- concerns haunting the textualized lives of female monastics as well- while tending to transfer prohibitions of explicitly sexual

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<sup>26</sup> Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 122

<sup>27</sup> Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c. 1150-1300*, 48.

<sup>29</sup> McInerney, "Rhetoric, Power, and Integrity in the Passion of the Virgin Martyr," in Kelly, *Menacing Virgins*, 58.

liaisons to prohibitions against all close and exclusive female relationships, creating a rhetorically criminalized category which will come to be called ‘particular friendships.’<sup>30</sup> Early on, close ‘particular friendships’ between women began to upset the construct of virginity. Although this may have only been a small issue compared to other more pressing subjects, theologians and monastic rules required a rethinking of sexuality. Augustine was one of the first theologians to speak out about women relationships. He states in his *Letter to the Consecrated Virgin* that: ‘the love between you ought not to be earthly but spiritual.’ This statement would “seem to recognize, indeed to sanction, the existence of relationships, even exclusive relationships, between and among women.”<sup>31</sup> Another entry regarding this subject comes from the *Penitential of Bede*, written by an anonymous *Discipulus Umbrensius*. It states:

If a woman fornicates with a woman, then she shall do penance for three years. If she practices solitary vice, she shall do the same penance. This one penance pertains to widows and [unmarried] girls; she who has a husband merits a greater penance if she commits fornication.<sup>32</sup>

Here again, it is clear that there was a need for these rules to be enforced. Fornication between women was a subject that theologians needed to address in order to maintain the spiritual construct and integrity of virginity.

One of the main questions of virginity, one that will be useful to this thesis, is if virginity was physical, spiritual, or both. Most theologians argued to some extent that virginity is both spiritual and physical, which we will analyze in the next two chapters. Virginity, regardless of being an actual physical state or a mental one, continued as the primary goal for holy women

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<sup>30</sup> Lisa M.C. Weston, “Sanctimoniales Cum Sanctimoniales: Particular Friendships and Female Community in Anglo-Saxon England” in Carol Braun Pasternack and Lisa M.C. Weston (ed.), *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Memory in Memory of Daniel Gillmore Calder*, (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), 45.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

throughout the medieval period.<sup>33</sup> Although there was a shift from a heightened importance in the physicality of virginity, spiritualized virginity, or a pure mind, was also crucial. Kathleen Kelly argues:

By defining virginity/chastity primarily as a spiritual quality, patristic and scholastic writers reconfigured the limits of the physical body. However, the fact that virginity may exceed bodily boundaries and actually reside in a given discourse did not prevent various writers from attempting to locate virginity in the flesh- female flesh, that is, for it is invariably women who are praised for their chastity or condemned for their lack thereof.<sup>34</sup>

Virginity proved difficult for theologians due to its location. It continued to be theorized as fleshly, even when spiritual virginity became the dominant thought. The actual sexual state of virginity, defined by the physical female body, continued even if only briefly. However, into the Middle Ages, the spiritual nature of virginity begins to become a main concern for the institution. This was a very difficult task for medieval theologians. There are two extremes: virginity as a physical state (as never experiencing sexual intercourse; a hymen intact) and virginity as a moral or spiritual state (a quality of the spiritual relationship with God).<sup>35</sup>

The problem of possible loss of virginity haunted the institution throughout the entirety of antiquity and the Middle Ages. The Katherine Group of Prose is a 13th century group of texts written in Middle English. These five texts focus on virginity. The *Hali Meidhad*, one of the texts located in the Katherine Group, states: “Virginity is the treasure which, if once lost, will never be found again.”<sup>36</sup> Virginity was viewed as a particular treasure to women. It was a physical entity that could be lost forever.<sup>37</sup> There are many examples of virgins and widows who

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<sup>33</sup> Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England*, 84.

<sup>34</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Clarissa Atkinson, “Precious balsam in a fragile glass: the ideology of virginity in the later Middle Ages,” *Journal of Family History* 8 (1983), 133.

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Salih, “Performing Virginity: Sex and Violence in the Katherine Group,” in Carlson, *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, 100.

<sup>37</sup> Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England*, 83.

failed in their attempts at virginity. “Virgins and widows who failed in their chastity were chastised; if the Church Fathers told stories of fallen virgins- usually deflowered through the agency of evil clerics- to warn virgins of what lay in wait for them in the world outside.”<sup>38</sup> One example of a scandalous failure in virginity, although it was most likely a rumored scandal, is the case of Christina Markyate. Christina was a twelfth century hermit, holy woman, and hagiographer who fought tirelessly in court against suitors. She claimed to be united in marriage to Christ. She and her spiritual mentor Roger, offer a good example of how quickly virginity can be tarnished: “Before they had come to love each other in Christ, the abbot’s well-known integrity and the virgin’s holy chastity had been praised in many parts of England. But when their mutual affection in Christ inspired them to greater good, then the abbot was slandered as a seducer and the maiden as a whore.”<sup>39</sup> Her relationship with her spiritual mentor quickly became gossip. Instantaneously, Christina was deemed a whore regardless of any proof of a sexual relationship. The scandal-like nature of the event insists that physical virginity was still considered greatly important, even if spiritualized virginity was the main focus in the Middle Ages.

Virginity was also a common value within cultic and ascetic practices. One of the ancient views of celibacy was regarded as ‘unfit for marriage,’ while some praised virginity, such as the Vestal Virgins. As we have seen, it develops from these pagan thought into a love for the *basileia*.<sup>40</sup> With this, virginity expands into self-denial, renunciation, and sacrifice.<sup>41</sup> Martyrdom was the ultimate sacrifice that Christians could obtain. After Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in Antiquity, the state discontinued outright persecution of Christians. Therefore,

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<sup>38</sup> Carlson, *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, 5.

<sup>39</sup> *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, Talbot, C.H. Trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 79.

<sup>40</sup> Greek for ‘kingdom’ therefore referring to the kingdom of God.

<sup>41</sup> Leonhard M. Weber, *On Marriage, Sex and Virginity*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 87.

opportunities of martyrdom were scarce. Ascetic virginity, especially fasting, became a substitute for martyrdom and “rather than asking [for more delicate food] she should die as a martyr in her discomfort... one should die rather than commit any deadly sin.”<sup>42</sup> A renunciation of food became a common practice among virgins attempting to obtain martyrdom. One classic example is again Christine of Markyate: “Through long fasting her insides contracted and dried up. There was a time when her burning thirst caused little clots of blood to bubble up from her nostrils. Most unbearable of all was the fact that she was not allowed to go out until evening to satisfy the demands of nature.”<sup>43</sup> The suffering involved in this form of asceticism acted as a comparable substitute for acts of martyrdom.

The yearning to suffer was also a yearning for Christ. He was used as a model of infinite and immeasurable suffering, as well as control and desire.<sup>44</sup> “Since Christ’s sinless virgin flesh was more sensitive to pain than any other human’s, his suffering always relativizes anything of which an enclosed woman might wish to complain.”<sup>45</sup> Striving to suffer as Christ had suffered became a common practice and goal for virgins. Caroline Walker Bynum argues: “Medieval images of the body have less to do with sexuality than with fertility and decay. Control, discipline, even torture of the flesh is, in medieval devotion, not so much the rejection of physicality as the elevation of it- a horrible yet delicious elevation- into a means of access to the divine.”<sup>46</sup> The intended goal of medieval ascetics was to obtain a closer access with the divine Christ. Only through this access could one elevate the sinful body from its physical components.

One of the most fascinating aspects of virginity is the mystical marriage to Christ. Consecrated virgins were considered brides of Christ and yearned to unite with their groom in

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<sup>42</sup> Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture c. 1150-1300*, 40.

<sup>43</sup> *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, Talbot (Trans.), 40.

<sup>44</sup> Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture c. 1150-1300*, 124-25.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 124-25.

<sup>46</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 182.

the afterlife. One of the many challenges that the virgins faced was denying earthly marriage. Many virgin's families had arranged a marriage for their daughters. Therefore, these virgins had to fight to maintain their virginal state. One example is St. Ulphia, "an eighth century virgin/recluse. According to her saint's life, Ulphia's strategy for virginal maintenance and avoiding a forced marriage was feigned insanity."<sup>47</sup> There are many examples of virgins refusing to marry their betrothed. St. Ulphia is only one example of a virgin who uses drastic means to deter her suitor's attention. Marriage itself begins to be questioned. It was within the twelfth century that the theology of marriage entered into a state of flux. Theologians began to question what it was that made a marriage.<sup>48</sup> There are many different important parts to a marriage, and claiming to be a bride of Christ maintained these same necessities that were crucial "For the bride of Christ, spiritual dower from her Christ bridegroom is one part of her donation, but she also needs dowry from her earthly father."<sup>49</sup> The earthly father still plays a role in the dowry system in many monastic groups.

There are several examples of consecrated mystic virgins who describe in detail their marriage to Christ. In some cases, such as Catherine of Sienna, virgins imagined Christ's foreskin as a wedding band. However, Saint Katherine is the only consecrated virgin whose writings detail an experience of an actual wedding with Christ.<sup>50</sup> "In the Insular tradition this is described as an event which takes place, not in a dream or a vision, but as an actual event, and which leaves tangible proof in the form of a wedding ring."<sup>51</sup> This mystical religious union between consecrated virgins and their Christ has a surprisingly erotic nature. However, Emma Campbell gives a good argument as to the yearning for marriage with Christ. She states: "Yet it

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<sup>47</sup> Rose, *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 52.

<sup>48</sup> *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, trans. Talbot, xi.

<sup>49</sup> Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c. 1150-1300*, 84.

<sup>50</sup> Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England*, 107.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 107.

should be underlined that in the case of virgin saints, marriage connotes an access to the divine that is potentially universal because it is evacuated of its human content. Spiritual marriage at once inscribes desire for God and desire for a place in heavenly kinship and community.”<sup>52</sup> This spiritual marriage allows an escape from a worldly marriage and a replacement with Christ himself as the holy Bridegroom.

The concept of virginity within the Middle Ages was a broad and intensely complex construct. Virginity allowed socio-economic freedoms, as well as freedom from the female sexual limitations. Virginity was complex in its definition as physical or spiritual, its different levels, and its threatened loss. If one thing remains clear, however, it is that virginity was a major construct throughout late antiquity into the Middle Ages. It offered many benefits to women that could not be compared to the social-norms of a marriageable life. When paired with other practices, especially ascetic and mystical practices, virginity could be used to rise from the physical body into a more spiritual state. Some were even able to obtain the greatest honor of martyrdom, although this became harder to obtain as Christianity became more popular. Only when martyrdom accompanied virginity, had one reached the highest level possible within Christianity.

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<sup>52</sup> Campbell, Emma, *Medieval Saints' Lives*, 115.



## CHAPTER 3

### VIRGINITY: FROM PAUL TO CHRYSOSTOM

Early church theologians, such as Paul, Tertullian, Origin of Alexandria, St. Methodius, Ambrose, Jerome, and John Chrysostom all discuss the state of virginity. Though they may have different views on the subject, they all agree that virginity is a high form of existence. These men's theology helped to lead the popularity of virginity in Antiquity and into the Middle Ages. In order to see how the ideas of virginity have changed over time, we will look at the church theologians in chronological order. This chapter will give us a foundation of theological beliefs prior to the theological shift on virginity with Augustine.

St. Paul who lived c. 5-67 C.E is the first of the church theologians to endorse virginity within a Christian context. Although, he is not solely a theologian like those who follow, Paul's writings formed the beginning of Christian theology. Having his works included in New Testament canon makes Paul unique. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, he forms a basis for the discussion of marriage and virginity.

Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. <sup>26</sup> Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. <sup>27</sup> Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. <sup>28</sup> But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. (1 Corinthians 7:25-28)

Paul is making the claim that there is an absence of sin within both marriage and virginity. However, there is a 'freedom' from marriage offered to virgins. Paul encourages one to remain free if they are able. Not only is the unmarried person free from many of the troubles in life, but also they are therefore free to focus on the will of the Lord. He goes on to say:

I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord. If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing. So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better. (1 Corinthians 7:32-38)

Therefore, Paul is stating that it is more pleasing to God to remain a virgin than to marry, however, one who marries is not sinning. Here, Paul has established what would later become the normative view of virginity in the medieval ages. If one can resist the sexual desire to marry, they will have the freedom to focus on their Lord. This avenue is more pleasing to Paul. Paul also makes the claim that it is necessary to have both bodily and spiritual integrity within the will in order to claim virginity.<sup>53</sup> This is a theme we will see repeating throughout the Christian theology of virginity.

Tertullian (c.160-220) is the next theologian to take up the construct of virginity. Unlike the theologians who follow, Tertullian is a bit suspicious of virginity. This is mostly due to the fact that virginity cannot be separated from the sexual female body. In his treatises, *Virgins 11*, he states:

A virgin ceases to be a virgin from the time when it becomes possible for her not to be one. And accordingly, among the Jews, it is unlawful to deliver a girl to her husband except after the proof by blood of her maturity... already her voice is changed, her limbs are fully shaped, her shame clothes itself, the months pay their tributes.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Kelly, *Menacing Virgins*, 16.

<sup>54</sup> Tertullian, *Virgins 11*, in McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc*.

Here, Tertullian is reaffirming that virginity is a suspicious concept because it is not a rejection of femininity, but virginity actually acts as an affirmation of femininity.<sup>55</sup> He claims that virginity ceases to be relevant once the girl has reached her maturity with menstruation. In another treatise, *On Veiling the Virgin*, Tertullian continues developing his theology on virginity.

I beg you, whether you are mother or sister or virgin daughter- permit me to address you by the names appropriate to your various ages- veil your head! If you are a mother, do it for the sake of your sons, if you are a sister, for the sake of your brothers, if you are a daughter, for the sake of your father! Every age is imperiled by your person. Wear the armor of modesty, barricade yourself with the stockade of timidity, build up a rampart for your sex which will not allow your own gaze out or the gaze of others in. Wear the full dress of a woman, to preserve your virginity.<sup>56</sup>

Tertullian urges virgins to take precautions against losing their virginity. It now becomes not only the virgin's duty, but for all women to veil themselves to prevent the male gaze. For him, the only way to guarantee virginity is total modesty, and this responsibility is placed on the woman alone. Tertullian then continues on by taking a new stance on virginity. He offers that chastity is actually above virginity within the hierarchy:

Indeed, is not chastity superior to virginity, both that of widows and that of those who have been mutually agreed to renounce the shared injury? Virginity is maintained by grace, after all, chastity by virtue. It is a great struggle for anyone who has had sex to give it up. On the other hand, if you have never known the pleasures which result from desire, it is easy not to feel desire at all...<sup>57</sup>

Tertullian is implying that it is easier for a virgin to give up sex because she has never experienced it, whereas, chastity is a much more difficult task to overcome. Therefore, Tertullian insists that although virginity is an honorable status, it is not the most superior form. Chastity should be revered as the highest spiritual form.

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<sup>55</sup> McNerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc*, 17.

<sup>56</sup> Tertullian, *On Veiling the Virgins* 2.18 in McNerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc*, 28.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 33.

Origen of Alexandria (185-254) lived in the same era as Tertullian. These two men, however, hold different views about the hierarchy and where virginity is placed. In his *In Num. Hom.* 11, Origen titles the virgins of the Church as ‘the first fruit.’ This view of virginity is indeed contrasted with Tertullian’s view. Tertullian believed that widowhood and celibacy were more superior to virginity.<sup>58</sup> Origen however notes the many things that virgins must avoid. According to Origen, one such avoidable pleasure is food. “Basil had noted that draining the body’s fat dries out the pipes around the private parts. It is food that engenders this moisture according to Origen.”<sup>59</sup> The avoidance of food is what will allow the virgin to fight the temptation of her sexual organs. Origen believes that the virgin’s bodily integrity is not the only area of virginity that should be maintained. For him, a virtuous life is also of great importance. Without a virtuous life, virginity is useless.<sup>60</sup> This idea is of great importance. From here on, virginity is considered in the mind and spirit as well as in the body. For example, in *Commentary of the Epistle to the Romans Book 1*, Origen writes: “And there is also the virgin who is called but is not chosen a virgin, namely the one who will not be holy in body and spirit.”<sup>61</sup> Origen is suggesting here that there is a difference between bodily and spiritual virginity. Having one without the other renders virginity useless. For Origen, both spiritual and physical virginity must be kept in order to maintain the high status.

As for St. Methodius (c. 311), there is virtually no information left about his life. However, some writers, including Jerome, reference him in their works. He discusses virginity at great lengths in his *Symposium and Treatise on Chastity*. Methodius offers a dialogue between

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<sup>58</sup> J. Massingberd Ford, *A Trilogy on Wisdom and Celibacy*, Vol. 4, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 154-55.

<sup>59</sup> Neil Adkin, *Jerome on Virginity: A Commentary on the Libellus De Virginitate Servanda (Letter 22)*, (Cambridge: Francis Cairns Publications, 2003), 144-45.

<sup>60</sup> Ford, *A Trilogy on Wisdom and Celibacy*, 156.

<sup>61</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, Book 1, Ch. 2, (Catholic University of America Press, 2001) 63.

himself and several women: Thalia, Theopatra, Thallusa, Procilla, and Domnia. The material itself can be dense, however, there are key points to mention in regards to the monastic life in the early church. According to this Treatise, virginity itself is the perfect state. Thalia and Domnia both offer arguments to this point:

Those who are more perfect and have embraced the truth with more perception, and thus, by their perfect faith and purification, have detached themselves from the absurdities of the flesh-these become the Church and the helpmate of the Christ; they are the virgins, as the Apostles tell us, espoused and wedded to Him that by receiving from Him the pure and fertile seed of doctrine they might collaborate with him in the preaching of the Gospel for the salvation of all the rest.<sup>62</sup> –Thalia

They also practice it who live chastely with their wives: they bring forth as it were little shoots around the trunk of the tree of chastity, blossoming with self-control, not coming high enough, as we do, to touch its mighty branches, but they too, nonetheless, produce shoots of chastity however small.<sup>63</sup> -Domnina

Although virginity is the most perfect state, Domnia also argues that other states are still honorable, such as chastity. Those offering some form of chastity are reaching closer to God than those who are not. Therefore, a chaste marriage is a state that pleases God, even if it is not as pure and perfect as virginity. The passions continue as a main concern within this Treatise. Thalia and Theopatra both discuss the dangerous nature of the passions to virginity. Thalia argues that virginity is the most pure state due to Paul's recommendations. Theopatra discusses the pureness of virginity when successfully combating the passions.

...Consider too how he recommends the practice of virginity as a gift of God. Hence if any have embraced it from a motive of vanity without being continent, Paul would reject them, suggesting that they get married; otherwise, when the body's vigor rouses them to the heat of passion, they may be provoked into defiling their souls.<sup>64</sup> –Thalia

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<sup>62</sup> *St. Methodius: The Symposium and Treatise on Chastity*, trans. Herbert Musurillo, (New York: Newman Press, 1958), 66-67.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 138.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 73.

But those who have put on and shone in the immaculate and bright and pure and reverent and precious beauty that is chastity, these are found to be sterile and unproductive of seething and painful passions; these do not sing the song in a strange land. For they are not borne thither by their expectations, nor do they cleave to the lusts of their mortal bodies, or basely despised the meaning of the commandments.<sup>65</sup> –Theopatra

Both women agree that the passions, including lust, are detrimental to virginity. If the virgin has a chance of remaining pure, she must completely detach herself from the passions of lust. They continue the argument presented by earlier theologians that virginity cannot be kept in body alone. It must be kept in the mind, and according to Thallusa, from childhood:

whosoever strives to keep his flesh undefiled from childhood by the practice of virginity is the one who offers himself perfectly to God. For virginity, to those who practice it, quickly brings a great and most desirable realization of their hopes, in that it causes the soul-destroying lusts and passions to wither away.<sup>66</sup> –Thallusa

Only if virginity is maintained from childhood will the virgin be able to fight off the lusts of the body entirely. The virgin must also remain undefiled if she wishes to enter the bridal chamber of Christ. Both Procilla and Theopatra discuss the importance of avoiding earthly passions.

For the spouse must be betrothed to the bridegroom and call herself by his name, and till then she must remain pure and undefiled, like a *sealed garden*, in which all the spices of heaven's fragrance grow, that Christ alone may come and pluck them as they blossom and grow with incorporeal seed.<sup>67</sup> –Procilla

Avoid temptation in order to teach you, my fair virgins, to imitate your Mother as best you can, and not to be disturbed by the pains, afflictions, and reverses of life, that thus you may enter joyously with her into the bridal chamber, holding your lamps lighted.<sup>68</sup> -Theopatra

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<sup>65</sup> *St. Methodius: The Symposium and Treatise on Chastity*, 79.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 118.

The bridal chamber imagery here offers the conclusion that virgins are only worthy as Christ's bride if they are entirely undefiled. There is no room for either a physical mishap, or an impure thought.

Ambrose lived from 337 to 397 and included the topic of virginity in many of his writings. A majority of patristic writers and later commentators agree that the bodily integrity of virginity is worthless if the soul or spirit is not also chaste. In *De Virginitate*, "Ambrose declares that 'mere physical virginity does not gain merit, but rather, the integrity of the mind.'"<sup>69</sup>. Although Ambrose argues that virginity's moral criteria holds a great deal of weight, physical virginity is still of great importance to Ambrose. In one of his Letters, he expresses anxiety that a gynecological examination may 'damage the seal of intact virginity.'<sup>70</sup> So, although Ambrose argues that spiritual virginity is what gains merit along with physical virginity, the physicality still cannot be ruptured in order to gain the status of virginity. Even if accidentally ruptured, the virgin should fear the loss of her virginity entirely. Ambrose also takes caution about the modesty of virgins. He states in a letter to a mother who has promised her daughter into virginity: "Never let her go out, or those who roam the city may find her and strike and wound her and tearing away the garment of her modesty and leave her naked in her blood."<sup>71</sup> These dangers are very real for the virgin according to Ambrose. It is important to note that like Tertullian, Ambrose puts the maintenance of virginity on the woman alone. It is her duty to preserve her chastity against those who would want to steal it from her. Again, even though Ambrose argues that virginity is a condition placed partially within the moral soul, the physicality of virginity is also crucial.

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<sup>69</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Ambrose, Letter 5.9 in McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc*, 77.

<sup>71</sup> Ambrose, Letter 107.7 in McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc*.

Jerome (347-420) wrote a detailed work, *On Virginity: A Commentary on the Libellus De Virginitate Servanda* (Letter 22), focused on the state of virginity. He is one of the first writers to look closely at the subject and to complete such a large work devoted to virginity alone. It appears that Jerome has taken some cues from Ambrose's *De Virginitate*.<sup>72</sup> They both agree that pregnancy is "among many of the woes of marriage."<sup>73</sup> Virginity offered an escape from marriage and childbirth for both Ambrose and Jerome. Jerome believes that there are many vices that the virgin in particular should avoid. Pride and wine were two of the most cautious vices Jerome points at several times:

Pride was a vice against which virgins had frequently to be cautioned...<sup>74</sup> the virgin must accordingly avoid wine, which is uniquely dangerous as an inciter of the passions....<sup>75</sup> wine sets the passions burning as oil to a flame...<sup>76</sup> Avoidance of wine and an austere diet are necessary in order to combat sexual temptation...<sup>77</sup> Finally the virgin should avoid eloquence, poetry and affectations of speech.<sup>78</sup>

These dangerous vices should be avoided if a virgin intends to maintain her virginity. Jerome valued the status of virginity and at several instances references it as a pearl and something of great value and beauty.<sup>79</sup> A virgin's model should be the Virgin Mary, "whose purity enabled her to be the Lord's mother: she was so unused to male company that Gabriel's appearance in the shape of a man alarmed her."<sup>80</sup> With the Virgin Mary as a model, virgins should strive to maintain her level of perfect virginity. A virgin should be as removed from her fellow man as possible, only in this way will she be able to withstand temptation. Jerome even goes on to claim an androgynous sexual state of a virgin: "As long as woman is for birth and children, she is

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<sup>72</sup> Adkin, *Jerome on Virginity*, 38.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 68.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 72.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 266.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 359.



different from man as body is from soul. But if she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man.”<sup>81</sup> This sexual state is no longer a feminine one, but more androgynous. The idea of the androgynous sex goes back to Aristotle’s physiology. Aristotle believed that the human body was androgynous; the female organs were essentially male organs in reverse. Aristotle states, “For it is just because the semen is secreted from the two sexes, the secretion taking place in them and from them, that they are first principles of generation.”<sup>82</sup> For Aristotle, semen is found in both sexes, rendering each sex similar to the other, and therefore androgynous. Jerome does not go this far; however he does suggest that virgins are to be like man in order to obtain the closeness to God in which women are one step removed. Virgins were able to overcome the limitations of their sex through Jerome’s understanding of virginity.

One of the most interesting of Jerome’s stances on virginity is the fact that virginity can be destroyed in several circumstances. He states “virginity once lost is irrecoverable. Even thought can destroy it.”<sup>83</sup> Similar to earlier patristic writers, he believed that virginity of the body is only one part of maintaining virginity. Both spiritual and physical virginity must be maintained in order to claim the status of Virgin. One thought can undo the whole state, regardless of physical integrity. To those who are reckless with their thoughts, Jerome labels as “foolish virgins with no oil for their lamps.”<sup>84</sup> Loss of chastity within the mind can be particularly damaging and can restrict a woman from gaining heavenly status.<sup>85</sup> Like many before him, Jerome placed lust of a woman within her navel,<sup>86</sup> and instructs that young virgins

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<sup>81</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Letter to Ephesians*, in Pasternack, *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*, 99.

<sup>82</sup> Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*, Book 1, Ch. 2,  
<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/generation/book1.html>

<sup>83</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Letter to Ephesians*, in Pasternack, *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*, 46.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 48.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 48.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* 98.

should be cautious of the world. “He stipulates that the virgin should go out only if accompanied by her mother.”<sup>87</sup> A virgin should avoid leaving the safe walls of her convent or home, due to the dangers that lay outside. Once again, the responsibility is on the virgin to protect herself from outside forces. Lastly, Jerome talks of the threat of rape in the sense that virginity can be robbed. He states: “I do not wish pride to come upon you by reason of your decision [to espouse virginity], but fear. If you walk laden with gold you must beware of a robber. This mortal life is a race. Here we struggle, that elsewhere we may be crowned. No one walks without anxiety amid serpents and scorpions.”<sup>88</sup> His concerns for the safety of virgins imply that virginity can be stolen. Most importantly, Jerome is implying that it is the virgin’s responsibility to keep her virginity safe. If someone steals the virgin’s virginity, it will leave her entirely, regardless of her mental integrity.

John Chrysostom (349-407) also wrote several commentaries dealing with virginity. He “composed more treatises on asceticism and marriage than any other Greek-writing church father.”<sup>89</sup> His most detailed work was *On Virginity- Against Marriage*. The first section of his work deals with virginity only, offering a critical view of those virgins who claim to be superior to others. He states: “Just as we will not think ourselves worthy of a crown for not committing adultery, so neither could they for not marrying. On the judgment day the judge will say to them: ‘I have not fixed honors for those who have merely refrained from evil...’”<sup>90</sup> Chrysostom holds a very different view than earlier patristic writers by claiming that virgins will not be rewarded for refraining from sex only. He goes on to state that “For fasting and virginity are neither good nor

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<sup>87</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Letter to Ephesians*, in Pasternack, *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*, 135.

<sup>88</sup> Charles Christopher Mierow trans., *The Letters of St. Jerome: Ancient Christian Writers*, (Westminster, Md., 1963) Vol. I, Letter 22, p. 135.

<sup>89</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Virginity- Against Marriage*, trans. Sally Rieger Shore, (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), vii.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

evil in themselves but from the purpose of those who practice them comes each of these qualities.”<sup>91</sup> These qualities are not valuable standing alone, but only when a person applies a virtuous life alongside fasting and virginity. In Chrysostom’s work *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, he attempts to discourage virgins from thinking they are equal with men. “When a virgin learns to discuss things frankly with a man, to sit by him, to look at him, to laugh in his presence, to disgrace herself in many other ways... the veil of virginity is destroyed, the flower trampled underfoot.”<sup>92</sup> He threatens the loss of virginity and states that the virgin is disgracing herself by acting an equal to men. By doing this, he is able to keep virgins within the patriarchal hierarchy, in an attempt to undo past patristic writers who proposed virgins rose above the female sex. Unlike Ambrose, who thought virgins were androgynous compared to the female sex, Chrysostom disagrees and finds their existence quite feminine.

Chrysostom also holds the view that physical virginity is not enough to maintain the status of virginity:

For the virgin must be pure not only in body but also in soul if she is going to receive the holy bridegroom.<sup>93</sup> It is not enough to be unmarried to be a virgin. There must be spiritual chastity, and I mean by chastity not only the absence of wicked and shameful desire, the absence of ornaments and superfluous cares, but also being unsoiled by life’s cares.<sup>94</sup>

There is a spiritual virginity that must also be maintained, one linked to the soul. This view is consistent with past patristic writers. Chrysostom spends some time in his work arguing that virgins should avoid life’s worries and cares. She should gain freedom from these worries by choosing virginity over the life of marriage. One great worry the virgin is free from is her bridegroom’s faithfulness:

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<sup>91</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Virginity- Against Marriage*, trans. Shore, 6.

<sup>92</sup> Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, in Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, 4.

<sup>93</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Virginity- Against Marriage*, trans. Shore, 7.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 115-16.

The virgin need not make inquiries about her bridegroom, not fear any deception. For he is God not man, a master not a fellow-slave. The difference between the bridegroom is vast; but observe too the condition of their marriage bond. The wedding gifts of this bride are not bondage, parcels of land and just so many talents of gold, but the heavens and its advantages. In addition, the married woman shudders at the thought of death, among other reasons because it separates her from her companion. The virgin, however, both yearns for death and is oppressed by life, anxious as she is to see her groom face to face and to enjoy that glory.<sup>95</sup>

For Chrysostom, the marriage itself is free of worries and bondage. Death is no longer a fear for the virgin. Instead she yearns to be united with her groom face to face. Another horrible pain that the virgin remains free from is childbirth. Married women are plagued with this pain several times throughout their lives and Chrysostom argues:

Tell me, what does the virgin suffer during her whole life that approaches what the married woman, who is torn apart by birth-pains and loud wailing, endures almost every year?<sup>96</sup> What does the unmarried woman worry about? Is it money, servants, stewards, property, and other things? Is she in charge of cooks, seamstresses and the rest of the staff? Of course not! None of these enter her thoughts. She reflects on one thing alone: edifying her soul and decking that holy temple not with wreaths or gold or pearls, not with cosmetics or eyeliner, not using other disgraceful and debased methods, but with sanctity in body and soul.<sup>97</sup>

The virgin has no worries that distract her from her spiritual life. She has no earthly husband or children to worry for and devote her time to. However, women should not become virgins only to avoid the institution of marriage. Chrysostom states: “Women who avoid marriage as an accursed institution by this very act become more accursed than everyone and find that virginity is more abominable than fornication.”<sup>98</sup> Therefore, only maintaining the physicality of virginity is worthless without the right mindset.

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<sup>95</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Virginity- Against Marriage*, trans. Shore, 96.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 101.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 113-14.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 10.

John Chrysostom focuses greatly on the pros of virginity versus the cons of marriage. His main argument is that virginity is indeed superior to marriage, although marriage can still be praised as well. “I believe virginity is much more honorable than marriage. I do not of course count marriage among evil things, rather I praise it exceedingly. It is the harbor of chastity for those who desire to use it well, and it does not allow one’s nature to become wild.”<sup>99</sup> As long as chastity is being practiced within the marriage, marriage is a positive institution. Those virgins who demean marriage also reduce the glory of virginity according to Chrysostom; however, praising marriage increases the admiration and magnificent aspects of the institution.<sup>100</sup> Although marriage is an acceptable state and is praise-worthy, according to Chrysostom, virginity continues to maintain superiority. He claims: “virginity is as much superior to marriage as heaven is to earth, as the angels are to men, and, to use far stronger language, it is more superior still.”<sup>101</sup> His views on the hierarchy of virgins versus other women are clear. Virgins are consistently held as the superior state. Scholar Kathleen Coyne Kelly argues that Chrysostom was attempting to gain control and give definitions to the state of virginity. She argues: “by enumerating- if not inventing- the characteristics of virginity, Chrysostom establishes it as an orthodox state, arguing that consecrated virginity has value only within the boundaries created by the institutionalized Church.”<sup>102</sup> By creating this system of rules and boundaries, Chrysostom was able to systematically take control of the institution of virginity. The church became the authority of consecrated virginity. They provided the basis for what actually constitutes virginity and who can claim the status.

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<sup>99</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Virginity- Against Marriage*, trans. Shore, 12.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>102</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, 4.

This chapter has presented several different views and opinions of virginity from the early church theologians prior to Augustine. Although the thoughts varied, virginity continued to remain an important institution to the Church of Late Antiquity. When it comes to lost virginity, all had argued that virginity could not be regained. It is also the responsibility of the virgin to maintain her virginity. If it was stolen from her, she could not regain her status. Up until this point in time, virginity was viewed in this way. However, within the next chapter we will see a major shift to the spiritualized state of virginity. In some cases, the spiritual virginity alone could consecrate a virgin's status.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE MAJOR SHIFT: AUGUSTINE AND MEDIEVAL THINKERS

This chapter will continue to analyze church theology as it experienced a major shift with Augustine. Augustine was the first theologian to deal with the problem of rape and virginity. This called for him to alter his theology on virginity as a whole. It is important to see the major shift that Augustine is forced to complete. The threat of rape created a problem that theologians needed to address. Augustine took the first step, and medieval theologians followed in his footsteps. Augustine heard stories of the invasions on Rome and of women who had been raped. Due to this, Augustine's theology allowed a space for raped consecrated virgins. It is important to note that rape cannot be considered just as itself. It is not a continuum and the authors are not pure theoreticians. We must recognize this before delving further into the analysis. This chapter will continue looking at medieval theological views on rape through theologians, church canon laws, and the change within the Lateran Council.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) is most famously known for his numerous works including *City of God Against the Pagans* and *Confessions*. Many of his works touch on virginity; however, *On Holy Virginity* focuses a great deal on the state of virgins. Augustine's views are based off of his own sexual state, and patristic fathers before him. He insisted in his *Confessions* that sex was pleasureless for him due to it being compulsive, and compulsive acts do not bring about pleasure.<sup>103</sup> Due to this, he avoided sex although the struggle of temptation is clear within his *Confessions*. He states: "how thou didst deliver me from the chain of sexual desire by which I

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<sup>103</sup> Margaret R. Miles, "Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine's Confessions," in Maureen A. Tilley and Susan A. Ross (ed.), *Broken and Whole: Essays on Religion and the Body*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), 7.

was so tightly held, and from the slavery of worldly business.”<sup>104</sup> In regards to virginity, Augustine most commonly spoke of the Virgin Mary; however, in some places, he discusses virginity itself. He developed theological ideas on the occurrence of sin. Augustine states: “for, even as no one makes an immodest use of the body, unless the sin have been before conceived in the spirit, so no one keeps modesty in the body, unless chastity have been before implanted in the spirit.”<sup>105</sup> According to Augustine, sin occurs in the mind before it occurs in the physical realm. Therefore, sin is not only physical actions of the body, but also of the mind.

Do not claim to have chaste minds if you have unchaste eyes, because the unchaste eye is the messenger of the unchaste heart; and when unchaste hearts reveal themselves to each other by a mutual glance, even though the tongue is silent, and when they take pleasure in each other’s passion according to the lust of the flesh, chastity flees from the character through the body remain untouched by impure violation.<sup>106</sup>

Augustine is confirming the views of his predecessors by claiming that virginity must be kept both in the mind and in the body, and it may flee altogether if virginity of the mind is compromised. Virginity of the body alone is worthless. He also claims in *On Holy Virginity* that once virginity is lost, it cannot be regained: “Go when you can, that the good of virginity perish not from you, unto which you can do nothing, in order that it may return.”<sup>107</sup> Therefore, Augustine is firm in his stance that virginity cannot return after it has perished from the virgin. He also makes the claim that virginity was superior to others forms of chastity. His hierarchy places virginity as the highest form, then widowhood, chastity, and finally those who practice marital celibacy.<sup>108</sup> Marital celibacy is the theological concept that allows for sex in a marriage while still remaining chaste. There were very strict rules for when spouses could engage in sexual intercourse. Marital celibacy

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<sup>104</sup> Augustine, Confessions Book 8, Chapter 6.

<sup>105</sup> Augustine, *On Holy Virginity*, trans. C.L. Cornish, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1310.htm>, Ch. 8

<sup>106</sup> Augustine, Letters, in Weston, “Sanctimoniales Cum Sanctimoniales: Particular Friendships and Female Community in Anglo-Saxon England” in Pasternack, *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*, 49.

<sup>107</sup> Augustine, *On Holy Virginity*, trans. Cornish, Ch. 29.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. Ch. 19.



allowed the marital group a chance to raise their status a bit higher than regular marriages without chastity.

Although it appears that Augustine is following along with the theology of his predecessors, one important instance changes his views on virginity. Augustine is faced with the dilemma of rape within the story of Lucrecia. In an attempt to prove her innocence, Lucrecia committed suicide after being raped. This caused a great problem within the patristic thought of maintaining both bodily and spiritual virginity in order to be considered a consecrated virgin. Although Lucrecia was not a consecrated virgin, the story used suicide as a means to respond to rape. It is after the horrific instances of invasions of the Goths on Rome that Augustine begins to argue that there needs to be an exception with physical virginity. Rape became a real threat and this problem directly influenced Augustine's theology as well as theologians after him.

In regards to the siege of Rome, Augustine discusses in detail the attacks against women. He states: "but they fancy they bring a conclusive charge against Christianity, when they aggravate the horror of captivity by adding that not only wives and unmarried maidens, but even consecrated virgins, were violated."<sup>109</sup> At this horrific thought, Augustine is forced to reconstruct the theological boundaries of virginity. Rape completely upset the institution of virginity where the physicality is of such importance. Augustine is required to offer up a theology that allows rape to be an exception:

For if purity can be thus destroyed, then assuredly purity is no virtue of the soul...since purity is a virtue of the soul, and has for its companion virtue, the fortitude which will rather endure all ills than consent to evil... If, on the other hand, it belongs to the soul, then not even when the body is violated is it lost...that while the sanctity of the soul remains even when the body is violated, the sanctity of the body is not lost; and that, in like manner, the sanctity of the body is lost when the sanctity of the soul is

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<sup>109</sup> Augustine, *City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. R.W. Dyson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 16

violated, though the body itself remains intact. And therefore a woman who has been violated by the sin of another, and without any consent of her own, has no cause to put herself to death.<sup>110</sup>

Augustine, here, is reworking the theology of virginity. According to him, purity is a part of the soul and not directly attached to the body. Purity is only in danger when the soul is violated.

Therefore, as long as the virgin's "will remains firm and unshaken, nothing that another person does with the body, or upon the body, is any fault of the person who suffers it, so long as he cannot escape it without sin"<sup>111</sup> The mind and the soul are now responsible for the purity of virginity. The body and the integrity of the organ are less crucial. Augustine goes on to say:

I suppose no one is so foolish as to believe that, by this destruction of the integrity of one organ, the virgin has lost anything even of her bodily sanctity. And thus, so long as the soul keeps this firmness of purpose which sanctifies even the body, the violence done by another's lust makes no impression on this bodily sanctity.<sup>112</sup>

Augustine had reversed the thoughts on virginity at the time, although only in regards to rape. Virginity, for Augustine, was solely held within the soul and the mind. As long as these two remained pure, a loss of physical virginity would not alter the virgin's state.

However, there is one exception for Augustine: shame. The raped virgin must not feel "shame, lest that act which could not be suffered without some sensual pleasure, should be believed to have been committed also with some assent of the will."<sup>113</sup> Shame, for Augustine, implies that the soul or mind gained some pleasure or gave some consent during the act.

However, if shame is not present and "if that was not impurity by which she was unwillingly ravished, then this is not justice by which she, being chaste, is punished."<sup>114</sup> Losing her physical virginity in the instances of rape does not punish the virgin theologically. She is still considered a

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<sup>110</sup> Augustine, *City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Dyson, Ch. 18.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. Ch. 16

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. Ch. 18

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. Ch. 16

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. Ch. 19

consecrated virgin, regardless of her physical state since she had maintained her virginity in spirit and mind. Augustine successfully reworked the theology of virginity to allow a space for the victims of rape. It was the problem of rape alone that altered the theology of virginity. This shift in theology continues into the Middle Ages, where rape continues to be a great threat to consecrated virgins.

Pope Leo, however, objected to these thoughts held by Augustine. “Of special interest is the position taken by Pope Leo I (440-61) in a letter to the bishops of Africa. Here he maintains that the servants of God who lost the purity of chastity through the violence of the barbarians will be praiseworthy in their modesty and feeling of shame, *so long as they dare not compare themselves to unpolluted virgins.*”<sup>115</sup> The idea is that raped virgins did indeed lose some part of their virginity when they were raped. Although Pope Leo I held this view at the time, those that followed tended to agree with Augustine in their theology on raped virgins.

Peter Lombard (1095-1160) was a theological writer and the bishop of Paris in the twelfth century. His well known work, *Sentences*, goes into detail concerning the importance of consent within marriage:

For the efficient cause of marriage is consent, not any consent, but expressed in words; not concerning the future, but the present tense. For if by consent in the future tense, saying: I will accept you as my husband, and I you as my wife, this consent does not effect marriage. Likewise, if they consent mentally, and they do not express consent through words or other clear signs, neither does such consent effect marriage. But if it is expressed in words, which nonetheless are not heartfelt, provided there is no duress or deceit present, that pledge of words through which they consent, saying, ‘I accept you as my husband and I you as my wife,’ makes marriage.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Rose, *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 36.

<sup>116</sup> Peter Lombard, *Sentences*, in Conor McCarthy, *Love, Sex, and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 63.

For Peter Lombard, consent is the most important piece of a marriage. It is what renders a marriage as legitimate and consecrated. If one forces marriage on another, then the supposed marriage in they eyes of God is dissolved. For Lombard, consent is critical and determines if the Church acknowledges the marriage.

The *Capitula Judiciorum* was a ninth century Christian text outlining the punishments for sins. Within the Volume VIII, *Synodus romana XXVIII*, the text describes the crime of abducting a nun: “Therefore we detest *raptors* of widows or virgins, by reason of the monstrosity of such a crime, and those who have attempted to unite holy virgins in marriage with themselves, either with or without their consent, are to be more fiercely perused; we recommend that these men be suspended from communion by reason of the atrocity of such an evil crime.”<sup>117</sup> The church harshly viewed abducting a nun during the times of the raids. The text goes on to state that women who had been raped in warfare were free from penance.<sup>118</sup> This texts agrees that women were free from blame if they were forcefully raped, especially during invasions.

We must be conscious that laws themselves changed during the thirteenth century. With the Gregorian Reform, canon law became a counterpart to civil law. This stressed the papal supremacy. The most important reason is due to the fourth Lateran council, which took place in 1215. It was with this council that marriage was instituted as sacrament. The decisions within the council shaped Christianity’s role in marriage from the high to late medieval era. The First Statutes of Salisbury (between 1217 and 1219) was a group of formal rules put into place for local churches. Within Chapter 82 there is a discussion of marriage as a first of the sacraments of the church:

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<sup>117</sup> *Capitula Judiciorum VIII, Synodus romana XXVIII* in Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 103.

<sup>118</sup> Hans-Henning Kortum, *Transcultural Wars: From the Middle Ages to the 21st Century*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 155.

Priests should try to commend marriage as vigorously and in as many ways as is possible through the dignity and goods of marriage itself, by making fornicators' embraces repulsive by contrast, confidently asserting that marriage was first among the sacraments in origin and was instituted first by the Lord himself in Paradise. And since the goods of marriage are security, offspring, and the sacrament, security of the bed, offspring for the worship of God, and the sacrament of Christ and his Church, it appears that in this life the most desirable, good and privileged thing is marriage.<sup>119</sup>

This text clearly shows how the laws at the time had changed to consider marriage as a high sacrament that the church had control over. The statute of Salisbury was in agreement with the Lateran council. Therefore, the changing of laws during this time was due largely to the change in Christian canon law.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) is a theologian who lived during the Middle Ages. He is best known for his work *Summa Theologica*. In this text, Aquinas attempted to compile all the main points of Christian theology into one text for theological students. One of the crucial theological points is on the passions. He holds that the passions are present within all humans, and there is a need to coach them. For him, the nature of passions is consistent with appetite.<sup>120</sup>

He states:

The movements of the sensitive appetite, are properly called passions, as stated above. Now every emotion arising from a sensitive apprehension, is a movement of the sensitive appetite: and this must need be said of delight, since, according to the Philosopher 'delight is a certain movement of the soul and a sensible establishing thereof all at once, in keeping with the nature of the thing.'<sup>121</sup>

Not only are passions linked with appetite, but they also are linked to animalistic pleasures.

Human beings, according to Thomas Aquinas are common to animals in their pleasure of the

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<sup>119</sup> First Statutes of Salisbury, Chapter 82 in McCarthy, *Love, Sex, and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, 74.

<sup>120</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Kevin Knight, 2nd and Revised Edition, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1022.htm>, Question 22, Article 2.

<sup>121</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 31, Article 1.

senses.<sup>122</sup> He claims that spiritual good is greater and more beloved than bodily good. A man should abstain from physical pleasures of the body rather than suffer a loss of intellectual good.<sup>123</sup> Although he does not condemn the passions, Aquinas describes passions and bodily pleasure as animalistic in nature.

With Thomas Aquinas, we can continue to analyze the medieval shift of thought from early Christian writers on the state of virginity. Early Christian writers continuously argued that virginity required both a pure body and spirit. The physicality was crucial. Medieval theologians, like Aquinas, continue the argument that Augustine proposes. Thomas Aquinas agrees that unwanted corruption is only a physical occurrence:

First, therefore corruption, which is only physical, is not a matter of virtue or vice, unless by chance some emotion of the spirit intervenes; whence if through some incision of fastness of maidenhood is ruptured, there will be no more damage done to virginity than if a foot or hand is cut by a sword.<sup>124</sup>

What Aquinas is arguing is quite drastic from earlier theologians. If ‘maidenhood is ruptured’ the virgin will not be faulted as long as her spirit remained pure. For Thomas Aquinas, bodily integrity is not the focus of virginity; it is only an accidental relation. It is moral integrity that Aquinas views as virginity’s substantial element.<sup>125</sup> Here, Aquinas is altering the state of virginity once again. He claims that a spiritual virginity alone is the main importance.

Alexander of Hales was a theologian who lived between 1185-1245. He was the first to teach theology at the University of Paris and studied the complex nature of virginity. When he discusses the nature of Lucy, the virgin martyr who was threatened with rape, he states:

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<sup>122</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 31, Article 6.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.* Question 31, Article 5.

<sup>124</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *In Quattuor Libros Sententiarum*, in *Opera Omnia* I, ed. Roberto Busa SI (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980), IV, xxxiii.3.I.ra7, 602, in Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*.

<sup>125</sup> Weber, *On Marriage, Sex and Virginity*, 89.

For nothing of virtue is destroyed, even if the constraint of the flesh is ruptured through violence. Whence Lucy said, 'If you cause me to be violated against my will, my chastity will be doubled for the crown.' Therefore if suffering increases for such virgins, the virtue of virginity increases, although the integrity of the flesh does not remain.<sup>126</sup>

Alexander of Hales agreed with Augustine that during instances of rape, a virgin does not lose her virginity. He continues that Lucy was correct in asserting that her crown will be doubled if she is raped by force. The integrity of the flesh, for Alexander, is not a concern. Virginity held within the mind and soul is what mattered the most.

Osbert of Clare, a monk and prior of Westminster Abbey, wrote a letter to his nieces at Barking Abbey regarding their virginity. Barking Abbey was one of the frequently attacked monasteries from the Danish raids in the eighth century. Osbert of Clare wrote to his nieces Margaret and Cecilia: "See that the precious gem is not dashed to pieces by your enemy nor brought into the open to be broken up by your adversary. Your enemy is the spirit of fornication: your foe is the corrupter of chastity. 'If any man,' says the apostle, 'defile the temple of God, God will destroy him.'"<sup>127</sup> Osbert is warning his nieces of the possibility of rape against their virginity. They are encouraged to take action against anyone who threatens their purity. Goscelin of St Bertin, within the *Lives of the Abbesses at Barking*, explained the fate of the virgins at Barking Abbey:

But we have passed over many things of value for succeeding generations: for on one occasion the whole assembly of sacred virgins with their mother abbess were burned together by the heathen in this holy church; that was at the very time when the blessed King Edmund was sacrificed by the heathen as an offering to God. Oh, how we ought to consider and bear in mind that, as the lead of the burning monastery was pouring down, the mother of that holy family spread out both her tunic sleeves, like wings of supporting promises, and, wounded by love and strengthening all who were joyful in

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<sup>126</sup> Alexander of Hales, IV.xxxiii.3 Ig, 523. Prayer, *The Bridling of Desire*, in Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 93.

<sup>127</sup> *Heavenly rewards for Virgins in Barking*. Letter 21 to Margaret, trans. Vera Morton, *Guidance for Women in 12th Century Convents*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), 112.

their tears, she said, 'Endure, my dearest daughters, O endure this passing bird of fire as long as we run for the everlasting reward. Now heaven lies open for you, now the martyr's palms and everlasting glory are exchanged for momentary pain.'<sup>128</sup>

Goscelin of Saint Bertin praises the nuns for their bravery and maintenance of their chastity.

They were able to die with both their virginity and as martyrs, receiving both heavenly crowns.

This chapter has presented the major shift in regards to virginity from Late Antiquity into medieval theology. Throughout the Middle Ages, and even into the Reformation, (as we shall see later) virginity was constantly changing. However, virginity continued to remain a treasured institution to the church up until the Reformation. Rape created a problem that theologians were required to address. Augustine took the first step, and medieval thought followed. As the threat of rape was a common occurrence throughout the Middle Ages, the church's theology needed to change in order to allow a space for raped consecrated virgins. This chapter has laid out how church theologians in the Middle Ages were able to accomplish this task.

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<sup>128</sup> *Guidance for Women in 12th Century Convents*, trans. Vera Morton, 148.



## CHAPTER 5

### VIRGIN MARTYRS

The virgin martyrs were women who died in martyrdom while maintaining their virginity. These stories sprouted up throughout the Middle Ages and formed an entire genre. It is important to note that hagiographers, those who wrote the virgin martyr stories, were not necessarily historians or biographers. “Their works were panegyrics, conscious programs of persuasion or propaganda, meant to prove the particular sanctity of their protagonists... hagiographers attempted to demonstrate the efficacy of their saints and their exceptional worth as special friends of God.”<sup>129</sup> Due to this, we cannot take the virgin martyr accounts at face value as complete historical fact. However, the genre does give an interesting look at female-role identity in the Middle Ages, as well as what medieval persons were thinking and reading about. We will also see how this genre looks at more serious issues, such as rape.

Female saints began to flourish during the mid-seventh through the mid-eighth century in France, Belgium, and Britain. They gained momentum once again in tenth-century Britain and Germany. These saints arose with the new opportunities for women in the Church. The most popular were the female monastic movement and the elite establishment of convents.<sup>130</sup> “Jocelyn Wogan-Browne points out that most collections of saints’ lives in medieval England were produced for women in religious houses (whose reading pleasure may have been as much vicarious as instructive), and notes that the figure of the virgin martyr was especially popular in the vernaculars of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.”<sup>131</sup> This popular genre gained momentum and continued into the high Middle Ages. One of the most popular female saints was St.

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<sup>129</sup> Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 17.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

<sup>131</sup> Kathleen Coyne Kelly, “Useful in Medieval Hagiography,” in Carlson, *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, 139.

Katherine. Her popularity was due to her status as virgin martyr. These were the most popular types of female saints throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>132</sup> Their popularity was partially due to the fact that the audience could identify with the saint's humanity. They were closer to regular individuals because they had physical human bodies, unlike the holy body of Christ. "To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, the saint's life is a story that Christians of late antiquity and the Middle Ages told themselves about themselves."<sup>133</sup> The virgin martyrs show feminine weakness as strength, and the virgin is put beyond the rules and limitations of female social norms as child bearers, both passive and silent.<sup>134</sup>

When discussing the virgin martyrs, it is important to first discuss the role of the martyr in early Christianity. There needed to be a victim within these stories. The victim is almost always the Christian martyr.<sup>135</sup> Maud Burnett McNerney writes about the importance of modesty for these women: "The female body, especially the maternal female body, required or perhaps deserved the veil of modesty, even when it was destined to be torn apart by wild beasts."<sup>136</sup> From the very beginning of early Christian martyrdom, modesty was important. Although virginity was not required for martyrs to gain status in early Christianity, in the Middle Ages, virginity is transformed as the most important aspect of a martyr. The *Acts of Thecla* is one of the earliest and most popular martyr texts from early Christianity. However, her *Saint Lives* was drastically different. "While the *Acts of Thecla* represents the saint's choice of virginity as both socially and politically radical in its challenge both to the heterosocial norms of marriage and family and to the spiritual and temporal authority of men, the *Life* makes its heroine a much more

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<sup>132</sup> Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England*, 82.

<sup>133</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, 62.

<sup>134</sup> Maud Burnett McNerney, "Rhetoric, Power, and Integrity in the Passion of the Virgin Martyr," in Kelly, *Menacing Virgins*, 63.

<sup>135</sup> Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c. 1150-1300*, 120.

<sup>136</sup> McNerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc*, 27.

conventionally feminine figure, modest, silent, and submissive.”<sup>137</sup> This example begins to show how the virgin martyrs will change from early Christianity into the Middle Ages.

There are several themes that are prominent in the Virgin Martyr tales. One common theme is describing the women as intensely beautiful. “Indeed, by the sixth century, the Christian heroine was almost invariably a virgin; what is more, she was almost always a pretty, young virgin with a distinguished pedigree.”<sup>138</sup> Her physical attributes were important within the story. This aspect leads to another commonality due to her beauty: the virgins as the object of men’s desires. “Virgin martyr legends also subvert fantasies of women as sexual objects. On the one hand, hagiographers explicitly portray the saints as the objects of men’s desire.”<sup>139</sup> She is often a heroine who is very beautiful, young, and endangered by sexual violence.<sup>140</sup> The appeal of the legends for medieval readers was the emphasis on sex, violence, and sexual violence.<sup>141</sup> There is one fascinating difference, however, between virgin martyrs and male martyrs: the sexual nature of the tortures and the hatred that the persecutors express toward her Christianity and womanhood alike.<sup>142</sup> The emphasis remains on the attempted sexual violence towards the martyrs as women.

Rape is a common theme in the virgin martyr legends as well. Almost all of the virgin martyrs include some threat to the saint’s virginity.<sup>143</sup> Many of the *Saint’s Lives* that were written during the Middle Ages dramatize this violence. “Anxieties about chastity certainly played an important role in Anglo-Saxon England. Hagiographic literature focuses on virginal saints

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid. 44-45.

<sup>138</sup> Karen A. Windstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. 108.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 12

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. 107.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. 6.

preserving their chastity from would-be rapists.”<sup>144</sup> In many of OE saints’ lives, rape is contemplated, plotted, and attempted. The Lives of Saints Daria, Agatha, Agnes, Lucy, and Eugenia, all deal with the attempted rape, while associating “illicit female sexual behavior with the male desire to force sex on the virgin.”<sup>145</sup> The *Legends* written by Osbern Bokenham appear to be more directed to a female audience. The women in this selection who deal with threats of rape include Lucy, Agnes, Agatha, Ursula, and Elizabeth of Hungry.<sup>146</sup> In the *Golden Legends*, there are thirteen virgins who experience some attempt at sexual violence: “Lucy, Agnes, Agatha and Daria are forced into brothels; attempts are made to compel Anastasia, Luliana, Margaret and Ursula to marry; Justina, the Virgin of Antioch, and Theodora undergo sexual harassment in once form or another; finally, actual attempts of rape are carried out on Margaret, Lucy, Justina, Anastasia’s maids, and Agnes.”<sup>147</sup> In these examples, hagiographical works focused greatly on sexual violence and the attempted pollution of the body through rape.<sup>148</sup> The saint lives offer a unique perspective into the central theological question in medieval society dealing with virginity. Is it purely a physical or spiritual virtue? Does the raped virgin retain the crown of virginity?<sup>149</sup> The narratives, although fictitious to some degree, offer a unique reason for the theological questions.

As mentioned above, there are many examples of saints experiencing attempted rape. Saint Lucy of Syracuse (283-304) was a profound advocate for spiritualized virginity. She is quoted in *Saint Lives* as speaking out for those who have lost their virginity, and also on the power of God to restore lost virginity. In *Ancrene Riwe*, a monastic rule for anchoresses written

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<sup>144</sup> Caroline Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction, and Adultery, 1100-1500*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 25.

<sup>145</sup> Shari Horner, “The Language of Rape in Old English Literature and Law: Views from the Anglo-Saxon(ist)” in Pasternack, *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*, 171.

<sup>146</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 127.

<sup>147</sup> Robert Mills, “Can the Virgin Martyr Speak?,” in Bernau, *Medieval Virginites*, 190.

<sup>148</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 21.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* 125.

in the thirteenth century, Lucy states: “In however many mortal sins His beloved may have prostituted herself, as soon as she comes back to Him, He makes her a maiden again, for as St. Augustine says, the difference between God’s approaching and that of a man to woman is so great that that of a man turns a maiden into a wife, but that of God, wife into maiden.”<sup>150</sup> Here, the text has Lucy speaking of the mercy of God in restoring lost virginity, which had been voluntarily lost. Lucy does not stop at only the voluntary loss of virginity but she also speaks about attempted rape within her *Saints Lives*. After she refuses her pagan suitor, he demands that she be sent to a brothel and repeatedly raped until she dies. She boldly states: “No woman can be deprived of her virginity through any deed men do to her body, unless her heart consents. For the more my body is defiled here against my will, the purer will be my virginity, and the greater, indeed, my reward.”<sup>151</sup> Lucy is speaking of the spiritual virginity that will only grow in reward if she is raped. Lucy’s statement is quite clear that rape does not tarnish virginity. Although the theological standpoint and other saint’s lives can be ambiguous about the status of raped virginity, Lucy makes a clear and precise statement. The raped virgin will not be tarnished.

Agnes of Sicily (c. 3rd century) was a member of the nobility who also devoted herself as a bride of Christ. When she refused a suitor, he condemned her to be sent to the brothel, similar to St. Lucy. Agnes’ *Saints Lives* describes the suitor condemning her: “I shall straightaway bid men lead thee to the house of harlots, that thou mayst lose thy maidenhood, that the Holy Ghost may flee from thee, when thou art foully dishonoured.”<sup>152</sup> Agnes is drug to the brothel and although rape is attempted, God does not allow the virgin to be raped. Religious scholar, Shari

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<sup>150</sup> St. Lucy, *Ancrene Riwe* in Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 130.

<sup>151</sup> Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture c. 1150-1300* 104.

<sup>152</sup> Skeat, *Lives*, 214-15 in Shari Horner, “The Violence of Exegesis: Reading the Bodies of Aelfric’s Female Saints,” in Anna Roberts, *Violence against Women in Medieval Texts*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 34.

Horner, in her article “The Violence of Exegesis: Reading the Bodies of Aelfric’s Female Saints,” notes:

Miraculously, if not unexpectedly, God subverts this attempted literal reading in three ways: first, as soon as her clothing is torn off, Agnes’ body is instantly covered by her hair; second, God sends a bright light, which blinds anyone who tries to look at her nakedness; third, he clothes her in a beautiful, perfectly fitting garment. Thus Agnes’ body is simultaneously sexualized and desexualized at once the public spectacle of male gaze and the spiritual mystery that is hidden from view.<sup>153</sup>

The hand of God protected Agnes’ virginity, and even the man who attempted to rape Agnes was struck blind instantly. Agnes healed the man and was saved from defilement.

Christina of Markyate (c. 1096-1156) was a young Anglo-Saxon woman who was a devoted bride of Christ. Her parents attempted to force Christina into a marriage, which in itself could be considered rape if they succeeded. Forced marriages did not take into account the consent of both parties; and in many cases, ravished women in medieval society were forced to marry their abductor. When Christina refused to marry, on many accounts her parents tried to arrange her rape/abduction by her suitor. For four years, she even sought confinement in a closet-sized cell in order to avoid the attacks on her virginity.<sup>154</sup> *The Life of Christina of Markyate* describes her terror:

And while she feared that, since a man is stronger than a woman, he would in one way or another be able to extricate himself, she saw Jesus, the helper of the saved, clasping her hand with his own holy hand, not by intertwining his fingers with hers but by joining them one over the other so that, by joining her hands as well as by the power of her arms, she would feel strength in holding back her beloved.<sup>155</sup>

Christina was willing to take great lengths in order to combat her fear of threatened virginity. She also dealt with temptations. In one example a demon in disguise as an attractive robber

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<sup>153</sup> Horner, “The Violence of Exegesis: Reading the Bodies of Aelfric’s Female Saints,” in Roberts, *Violence against Women in Medieval Texts*, 36.

<sup>154</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, 52.

<sup>155</sup> *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, Trans. C.H. Talbot, 76.

enters her house. The robber first tried to seduce Christina, and then attempted to rape her. The demon created a dream-like illusion in which he killed Christina's father for her refusal to submit to his desires. Christina was forced to wound herself with a knife to distract herself from the pain in the event of rape.<sup>156</sup> Although this was a dream-like state and the events did not occur in reality, Christina did experience intense fear of lost virginity.

Saint Eulalia plays the hero character of a Middle English text. When faced with rape in *Peristephanon* II.91-95, she states: "Go ahead, tormentor, scorch, chop, cut up these limbs formed out of clay. It is easy to ruin such a fragile thing. You shall not penetrate the soul within with any burning pain."<sup>157</sup> Eulalia is reaffirming this idea that the soul cannot be raped, and that the virginity of the soul matters more than the virginity of the body. Her argument suggests that virginity is actually located in the soul and not within the body itself. Similar to Saint Lucy, she claims that rape will not tarnish her virginity. The *Book of Mary Kempe*, which is believed to be a Middle English autobiographical work, mentions the threatened rape of Saint Margery Kempe (c. 14th century). God responds to Kempe's laments for her virginity: 'For as mech as þu art a mayden in þi sowle... so xalt þu dawnsyn in Hevyn wyth oþer holy maydens & virgynes.'<sup>158</sup> In this scene, God reassures Margery that her virginity is maintained in her soul and that physical rupture against her will does not devalue her virginity in God's eyes.

Saint Oda's *Saint Lives* discuss other virgins whose had been threatened with rape. They killed themselves with swords, drowned themselves, perished by fire, or fell headlong from a precipice. Since these women chose to lose their life rather than suffer the loss of their virginity,

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<sup>156</sup> John Coakley, "A Marriage and Its Observer: Christine of Stommeln, the Heavenly Bridegroom, and Friar Peter of Dacia," in Catherin M. Mooney (ed.), *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 114.

<sup>157</sup> *Peristephanon* II.91-95 in McInerney, "Rhetoric, Power, and Integrity in the Passion of the Virgin Martyr," in Kelly, *Menacing Virgins*, 63.

<sup>158</sup> *Book of Mary Kempe*, 30, in Karen A. Windstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*, 178.

they were venerated as martyrs.<sup>159</sup> Maintaining virginity by committing suicide is the main reason that St. Augustine felt compelled to alter the theology of virginity. Although he states that virginity is maintained even after rape, some virgins still believed that death was a better fate than lost virginity. Rape, therefore, is no longer only an act against the body, but a spiritual offence as well. Hence, sometimes the saint chooses death over the possibility of lost virginity.<sup>160</sup> This is interesting due to the fact that many virgin martyrs claimed their virginity would be safe from rape's harm. It is apparent that in some instances, virgins still feared that rape might tarnish virginity within these medieval legends.

The most important lesson to take away from these saint lives of virgin martyrs is that they always succeed in maintaining their chastity. Especially in hagiography, no rape is ever completed. Even when the saint dies, she remains sexually pure.<sup>161</sup> "In the legends in which circumvented rape surfaces as a trope, the consecrated virgin may lose her limbs or her life, but never her virginity."<sup>162</sup> The loss of virginity is the one torture that every saint is able to resist throughout the stories.<sup>163</sup> It appears that rape can be threatened in the saint's lives but can never be enacted.<sup>164</sup> Shari Horner in "The Violence of Exegesis: Reading the Bodies of Aelfric's Female Saints," offers this argument:

Aelfric's Lives of virgin martyrs conform to hagiographic conventions: they present stories of young Christian women whose virginity is violently threatened but who maintain their bodily integrity in the face of grave danger. The inevitable emphasis on the saint's body and her potential sexuality points to a key paradox in medieval hagiography: the bodies of

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<sup>159</sup> Rose, *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 49.

<sup>160</sup> Horner, "The Language of Rape in Old English Literature and Law: Views from the Anglo-Saxon(ist)s" in Pasternack, *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*, 172.

<sup>161</sup> Gravidal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 24.

<sup>162</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, 42.

<sup>163</sup> Horner, "The Language of Rape in Old English Literature and Law: Views from the Anglo-Saxon(ist)s" in Pasternack, *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*, 173.

<sup>164</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 134.



female virgin martyrs are of primary importance in texts that purport not to be about the body at all.<sup>165</sup>

Kathleen Coyne Kelly, author of *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, maintains another argument:

The raped virgin is a paradox, an oxymoron that would cause the whole system of stable, fixed signs to collapse. It is important to note that, in the hagiographical paradigm, in which the details of a particular virgin's martyrdom drive the narrative, the virgin may be tortured- the Syriac hagiographies are particularly graphic in this regard, but she *must* remain intact, sexually inviolate. To imagine her otherwise is too much of a threat to the system.<sup>166</sup>

The Saint's Lives maintain that the loss of virginity will remain intact in the eyes of God.

However, the inevitable miraculous escape from rape "contains a powerful implication: although begin raped would not, in theory, tarnish a virtuous woman, in practice virtuous women are not raped."<sup>167</sup> The oxymoron is ever present within these hagiographical works. A true virgin is not raped. It is obvious that the practice of theology is still not entirely consistent on whether virginity will remain after instances of rape. Regardless, at the moment of inevitable death, the saint becomes a bride of Christ receiving her crown of both virginity and martyrdom.<sup>168</sup>

Receiving both crowns after death was not the only reward for the virgin. During their lives, the state of virginity also gave these women a voice. They are authorized to speak publically and to explain the miraculous maintenance of virginity that will remain after any torture, including rape.<sup>169</sup> However, the hagiographical works are in need of threatened rape within their stories. Maud Burnett McNerney, author of *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc*, writes:

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<sup>165</sup> Horner, "The Violence of Exegesis: Reading the Bodies of Aelfric's Female Saints," in Roberts, *Violence against Women in Medieval Texts*, 22.

<sup>166</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, 60.

<sup>167</sup> Windstead, Karen A., *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*, 13.

<sup>168</sup> Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England*, 95.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.* 82.

Irresistibly desirable, the virgin martyr must be raped; defined by her virginity, she cannot be raped. Instead of penetration by a penis, she will inevitably suffer penetration by a sword. The threat of rape is a way of reconfiguring the virgin rather than virginity; it is imagined as peculiar to women, just as virginity was once a condition peculiar to women; the threat of rape, in fact, becomes a way of making female virginity more fragile than the male equivalent, even though the experience of the desert fathers had suggested that nothing in this world was more tenuous than male chastity, which could be undone by the involuntary movement of a single, rebellious organ.<sup>170</sup>

Therefore, in order to make female virginity appear fragile, hagiographers wrote virginity with the threat of rape. Indeed, without the threat of rape, the virgin would be irrelevant, as well as invisible.<sup>171</sup> The lives of the female saints depend on both virginity and holiness, and this is why threatened rape takes on such a dramatic role.<sup>172</sup>

Many scholars who study virgin martyr texts have argued that the virgin threatened with rape is a stand-in for another entity, or is a symbolic narrative. “Virginity always stands for something other or more than itself- it is a metaphor par excellence. This is partly because it can be defined only through other terms.”<sup>173</sup> Mary Douglas’ arguments on taboo and rituals relating to the body can be quite useful here. In *Purity and Danger* she states: “the body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious... the powers and dangers credited to social structure [are] reproduced in small on the human body.”<sup>174</sup> This representation is at play within the virgin martyr texts as well. One of the most common arguments is that the virgin martyr is standing in for the threatened Christian church. Kathleen Coyne Kelley argues that the saint’s virgin body “represent the ‘body’ of the church metonymically, serving as the first line of defense, the

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<sup>170</sup> McNerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc*, 75.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. 162.

<sup>172</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 120.

<sup>173</sup> Bernau, “Saint, Witch, Man, Maid, or Whore: Joan of Arc and Writing History,” in Bernau, *Medieval Virginites*, 220.

<sup>174</sup> Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger*, 124.

lightening rod, the decoy, as it were, for the institution behind it.”<sup>175</sup> She believes that the threaten rape in the narratives is a metonym. The unpolluted body stands in for the church more so than an actual historical person.<sup>176</sup> These arguments view the body of the virgin as a stand-in only. However, it is important that note that although these stories may be fictitious, the threat of rape as a literary device does point to the possibility of rape in society. At the very least, it proves to be in the minds of medieval readers and writers. Due to the frequency of violence against women and instances of invasions, rape became a probable threat to all women, even those of the veil. So, although their historical accuracy may be questioned, their use as a literary device is still valid.

It is important to remember that literacy was not common within the Middle Ages among laypersons. It was not until the fifteenth century that a wide range of literature, once written for the use of the elite and religious, was translated into the vernacular for the lay audience.<sup>177</sup> “The emergence of exemplary saints’ lives is not solely attributable, however, to a greater rapport between religious writers and their lay public. These legends grew out of a climate that was also marked by a suspicious of lay literacy.”<sup>178</sup> So although the saint’s lives were quite popular within the Middle Ages, they were written more for the elite and the religious aristocracy than for the everyday man or woman.

There are many other social ideologies at play in the virgin martyr legends. Surprisingly, the appeal for these texts was very high, as many previous religious scholars have established. André Vauchez, Caroline Walker Bynum, and Richard Kieckhefer note that the “changing social conditions [in later medieval piety] engendered definitions of saintliness that differed profoundly

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<sup>175</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, 41.

<sup>176</sup> Kathleen Coyne Kelly, “Useful in Medieval Hagiography,” in Carlson, *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, 139.

<sup>177</sup> Windstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*, 128.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.* 121.

from those that had prevailed when the virgin martyr legend took shape as a hagiographical genre.”<sup>179</sup> The medieval readings of the virgin martyrs found an outlet to the many changes and fluxes in society.

Because hierarchies were commonly related to one another in this fashion, the virgin martyr’s disruption of the gender hierarchy could stand for a spectrum of activities that threatened traditional relations of dominion and subordination, particularly in the years following the Black Death- activities ranging from worker’s defiance of labor statutes to the social strivings of civil servants and bureaucrats...<sup>180</sup>

The power virgin martyr texts gave to women was one of the main threats to society. These women spoke freely and countered men’s wishes. “Because their rebellious heroines were also saints, virgin martyr legends could easily be interpreted as sanctioning social disruptiveness. Hence, they may have been especially likely to ‘prompt new ways of thinking about the system and reacting to it.’”<sup>181</sup> Saint Cecilia, like many other virgin martyrs, consistently refused to acknowledge the authority of the institution of marriage. Therefore, marriage is providing a context for virginity.<sup>182</sup> And it is this context that challenges the system. However, the church was using these texts to their own advantage as well. Karen Windstead notes:

Of course, the clergy retained a professional interest in propagating legends of holy virgins, for those legends reinforced the barrier between the laity and the celibate elite of saints and clerics. Though a fifteenth-century mother might see herself in the image of a well-dressed St. Barbara reading in her parlor, Barbara’s virginity would subtly remind her of the distance that separated her from God’s aristocracy.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Windstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*, 10.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. 109-110.

<sup>181</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women on Top,” in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 131, in Windstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*, 110.

<sup>182</sup> Windstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*, 83.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid. 11.

These stories, although offering some form of social change, also reinforced a main goal of the church: power and social elitism. As long as the church could maintain its status along with the elite, they could set themselves apart and control the laity through this power.

While looking briefly at the Virgin Martyr Legends and texts, we have found that rape was a common trope of hagiography. The reasons for using rape as a literary device are quite diverse, and each argument holds value. The virgin martyrs were a popular group of texts, especially among religious women in convents. These women could look to the texts for inspiration, and theological questions, such as the nature of virginity. During a time when rape was a true threat to all women, including virgins, the virgin martyr texts were available to offer encouragement.

## CHAPTER 6

### RAPE AND THE LAW IN MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

Like many scholars who have studied rape in medieval society, I acknowledge that the interpretations of laws cannot be viewed as complete factual evidence for problems of rape in society. Just because there are laws against rape does not directly mean that rape was rampant. However, to give weight to the argument of the thesis, this chapter will present evidence from Anglo-Saxon and English legal literature “to demonstrate the level of anxiety felt by Anglo-Saxon societies regarding sexual offenses, the apparent frequency of such offenses, and the likelihood that the victims themselves may have been publicly shamed.”<sup>184</sup> Also in agreement with other scholars, I assume that rape and sexual assault was more common than reported in courts. This will explain why the references to rape in the court records are less common than crimes of abduction.<sup>185</sup> There are many forms of literature that can shine light on the history of the time, while not being solely historical accounts. Law, like romances can “yield insights into the history and politics of their age as well as into the deep structures of the psyche.”<sup>186</sup> Like the virgin martyrs discussed above, what was written down, even if it was fiction, can shine light onto anxieties of the time. Laws also have this ability, even more so due to their historical nature. It is enough to assume that there had to be an issue in order for a law to be constructed. At least until the Statute of Rapes in 1382, rape was one of the few crimes that a woman could prosecute independently. Even married women had this right.<sup>187</sup> By looking into Anglo-Saxon and English

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<sup>184</sup> Horner, “The Language of Rape in Old English Literature and Law: Views from the Anglo-Saxon(ist)s” in Pasternack, *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*, 150.

<sup>185</sup> Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 2-3.

<sup>186</sup> Corinne Saunders, “A Matter of Consent: Middle English Romance and the Law of Raptus,” in Noel James Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000), 105

<sup>187</sup> Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 52.

laws, this chapter will analyze the need for the laws, the heinous nature of the crime, as well as punishments against offenders.

Before looking more deeply into rape in the law, it is important to discuss the complex nature of the translation of the Latin word *raptus*. Corinne Saunders explains in detail the meaning: “The Etymological root of the word is the Latin *raptus*, literally meaning ‘theft’ or ‘seizure,’ used in Roman law to denote abduction; in English law, both *raptus* and *rap* (Old French) were used to denote sexual violence, but never exclusively, while *raptus* in canon law signified rape and abduction of a virgin.”<sup>188</sup> This impactful information of the complexity of the word complicates the study of medieval rape. Many twentieth century scholars have translated *raptus* as rape only. However, the term actually can mean three modern-day offences: abduction, sexual assault/rape, and/or theft.<sup>189</sup> The Latin vocabulary, ‘to seize,’ was used to depict the ravishment of many medieval women, but throughout time began to include rape and sexual offences along with seizure.<sup>190</sup> Only around the sixth century, with the law code of Justinian, was the definition of *raptus* enlarged to include rape. And even then, the law only included rape of virgins, nuns, and widows.<sup>191</sup> By the time of the ninth century, with the laws of Alfred, a distinction is made “between rape, indicated, for examples, by the term *niedhæmed* (literally meaning ‘forcible coition’), and abduction, signified by phrases such as *ut alædan* (to lead out); rape is treated in Alfred’s law code alongside lesser sexual crimes like illicitly touching the woman, whereas abduction is addressed in a different part of the code.”<sup>192</sup> Later even, some ravishment cases use the phrase [*vi concubuit contra voluntatem*) that a man slept with a women

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<sup>188</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 20.

<sup>189</sup> Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 19.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>191</sup> Saunders, “A Matter of Consent: Middle English Romance and the Law of Raptus,” in Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*, 107.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

violently against her will.<sup>193</sup> With the introduction of this phrase, along with other clearer references to sexual violence, it becomes easier for the historian to distinguish between rape and abduction in the Middle Ages.

The laws prior to English/Anglo-Saxon era were less concerned with rape as an inclusive category. The Byzantine medieval legislation only considered rape when it concerned a nun or unmarried girl.<sup>194</sup> Roman law stressed abduction and Canon law was more concerned about the violation of consecrated virgins. Pre-conquest English laws had little interest in virginal status, although they did emphasize sexual assault.<sup>195</sup> However, after this time period, English and Anglo-Saxon laws pay the most attention to rape and *raptus* in medieval society. The chapter will focus on this period due to its frequency of invasions and the amount of historical sources and laws that has survived.

After the Norman Conquest of Anglo-Saxon territories, Latin became the common language for legal documents. The Anglo-Saxon laws were based off of the rigorously controlled rape crimes after the time of the Conquest.<sup>196</sup> Similar to Roman law, rape during the Anglo-Saxon period was more concerned with virginity: “Loss of virginity must occur as well as abduction, to render the crime one of *raptus*, but if the element of abduction is not present, the crime is simply that of *stuprum*, illicit intercourse.”<sup>197</sup> However, by the year 1282, a woman no longer needed to claim loss of virginity in order to be a victim of rape in the eyes of the law.<sup>198</sup> Henry Rothwell, in his *English Historical Documents, III: 1189-1327*, discusses the law against rape during this time:

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<sup>193</sup> Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 21.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>195</sup> Kim M. Phillips, “Four Virgins’ Tales: Sex and Power in Medieval Law,” in Bernau, *Medieval Virginites*, 85.

<sup>196</sup> Saunders, “A Matter of Consent: Middle English Romance and the Law of Raptus,” in Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*, 113.

<sup>197</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 82.

<sup>198</sup> Kim M. Phillips, “Four Virgins’ Tales: Sex and Power in Medieval Law,” in Bernau, *Medieval Virginites*, 83.



[c. 13] And the king forbids anyone to rape, or take by force a damsel under age, either with her consent or without it, or a married woman or a damsel of age or any other woman against her will; and if anyone does so the king will, at the suit of him who will sue within forty days, do common justice therein; and if no one begins his suit within forty days the king will sue in the matter; and those whom he finds guilty shall have two years' imprisonment and then shall make fine at the will of the king, and if they have not the means from which to be fined at the king's pleasure, they are to be punished by longer imprisonment, according to what the offence demands.<sup>199</sup>

It is important to note that very few appeals of rape were made to the courts. Of those that were brought before the court, a majority was withdrawn. Those that were heard, a majority were not found guilty. And of those few who were found guilty, the maximum punishment was rarely carried out.<sup>200</sup> Crimes of rape within the courtroom were hardly even heard. Although this is true, it is still worth analyzing due to the fact that the laws were made. Rape must have been an intense issue to create the need for a law. The laws commonly referred to as *Glanvill*, were written in the twelfth century. They describes the laws against rape as:

Rape [*raptus*] is a crime in which a woman charges a man with overpowering her by force [*ui oppressam*] in the peace of the lord king. A woman who suffers in this way must go, soon after the deed is done, to the nearest vill, and there show to trustworthy men the injury done to her, and any effusion of blood there may be and torn clothing.<sup>201</sup>

The woman was required to turn herself over to 'trustworthy men' and allow herself to be 'analyzed' in order to claim that the crime of rape had actually occurred. If the woman was ashamed or waited too long, the lack of evidence would not hold weight legally. Therefore, the blood offers tangible proof of the crime.

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<sup>199</sup> Henry Rothwell, *English Historical Documents, III: 1189-1327*, (London: 1975), p. 400.

<sup>200</sup> Phillips, "Written on the Body: Reading Rape from the Twelfth to Fifteenth Centuries," in Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*, 128.

<sup>201</sup> *The Treatise on the Laws and Customs of the Realm of England Commonly Called Glanvill*, ed. G.D.G. Hall, 2nd Edition with additional material by M.T. Clanchy (Oxford, 1993), XIV.6, p. 175.

The main theme within the laws is the crime physically placed on the body itself. Although consent was included in many definitions of rape, whether explicitly or implied, rape was almost always a crime on the body from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries.<sup>202</sup> In the English laws, the will is less a concern. It is the body that is subjected to the laws.<sup>203</sup> Again, *Glanvill's* laws described rape as a physical act and violence done only to the body of a woman. "This emphasis on violent assault and/or the bleeding body is also prominent in appeals of rape made before the royal courts in the early years of the thirteenth century."<sup>204</sup> It is with the violent assault and the physical proof of blood that the laws held their basis.

A major theme in analyzing in these laws is the reference to theft. There is something being stolen in regards to crimes of rape: the theft of virginity. Scholar Kim Phillips notes that:

Common law was not much interested in female virginity, except in some cases of its forceful theft. Then it allowed the women the right to bring an appeal of felony against her attacker, through the strict procedure of first raising a hue and cry, procuring a writ by which she alleged the occurrence of the crime in formal legal terms and appearing before the king's justices at Westminster or during their progress through the provinces.<sup>205</sup>

The theme of stolen virginity continues in *The English Historical Documents*: "The law first address abduction and sexual assault on nuns; the use of the term 'ut alædan' for abduction makes the distinction between these clear: if anyone brings a nun out of a nunnery without the permission of the king or the bishop, he is to pay 120 shillings, half to the king and half to the bishop and the lord of the church which had the nun."<sup>206</sup> The nun is viewed as the property of the church as well as the king. Compensation must be paid to both as a punishment for the theft. The

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<sup>202</sup> Phillips, "Written on the Body: Reading Rape from the Twelfth to Fifteenth Centuries," in Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*, 125.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>205</sup> Phillips, "Four Virgins' Tales: Sex and Power in Medieval Law," in Bernau, *Medieval Virginites*, 82.

<sup>206</sup> Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 375. in Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 39.

Attenborough Laws call for compensation as well: “If anyone seizes by the breast a young woman belonging to the commons, he shall pay her 5 shillings compensation. If he throws her down but does not lie with her, he shall pay her 10 shillings compensation. If he lies with her, he shall pay compensation. If another man has previously lain with her, then the compensation shall be half this amount.”<sup>207</sup> The fiscal compensation increases as the crime increases. However, the Attenborough Law is different in that the woman receives that payment for the crime. What is interesting to note is the monetary value that the female possessed in English medieval society. Sexual crimes against a woman were righted if the proper fine was paid to her owner. This is also a common feature found in barbarian laws, which viewed the female as property worth compensation. John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, continues this theme and “classifies rape not as an examples of the sin of Lechery, but of Robbery; the rape of a shepherdess by a knight is depicted as theft of another man’s property.”<sup>208</sup> It is clear within these laws that the virgin is considered man’s property and holds monetary value. This monetary value is what was stolen from the owner when the woman was raped.

A woman was the property of a man and the woman’s virginity was a treasured financial asset. Medieval marriage was based on the female’s virginity. Rape of a virgin deprived the man from this treasured financial payment he would receive for the marriage of his daughter.<sup>209</sup> Justices were sympathetic to fathers who had lost this right of compensation. In a case from 1315, Justice Beresford states: “if a man come with force and arms into my close and carries away my daughter an marries her against my will he does me wrong.”<sup>210</sup> Justice Beresford is

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<sup>207</sup> Attenborough Laws, 70-71, in Shari Horner, “The Language of Rape in Old English Literature and Law: Views from the Anglo-Saxon(ist)s” in Pasternack, *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*, 159.

<sup>208</sup> Saunders, “A Matter of Consent: Middle English Romance and the Law of Raptus,” in Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*, 106.

<sup>209</sup> Phillips, “Written on the Body: Reading Rape from the Twelfth to Fifteenth Centuries,” in Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*, 141.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.* 142.

sympathetic with the father of the case. The sympathy is not for the woman who was raped, but with the father only since something of monetary value had been stolen from him. Scholar Kim Phillips argues: “For the lawmakers and practitioners of this era, their daughters’ and wives’ chastity was their property, and their raped body was the body absent from male familial control.”<sup>211</sup> Therefore, while only very few cases were brought before the courts regarding rape, these cases were commonly more concerned for the father’s financial loss than for the crime against the woman. The ‘King’s Peace’ is commonly referenced in many laws as well. This was strongly linked to rape because the king attempted to constrict physical violent acts. “*Glanvill* listed as felonies of the crown crimes which directly affected the king, including regicide, treason, falsifying, and concealment of treasure trove, and crimes of violence which were perceived to be indirectly injurious to the king through bringing disorder to the realm: homicide, arson, robbery, and rape.”<sup>212</sup> Rape was considered among these treacherous crimes and was restricted due to its violent nature as well as the possibility of disorder against the king.

Although theft was the main assault in cases of rape, some laws do require harsher punishments for the crime, especially dealing with women of the veil. The Anglo-Saxon laws usually fined the rapist, and “the law of Edward I declared him liable to three years imprisonment, besides satisfactions made to the convent.”<sup>213</sup> Although this law did exist, today there is no surviving evidence that the punishment was ever enforced. The *1285 Second Statute of Westminster* states: “He that carrieth a nun from her house, although she consent, shall be punished by three years’ imprisonment, and shall make suitable satisfaction to the house from

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<sup>211</sup> Phillips, “Written on the Body: Reading Rape from the Twelfth to Fifteenth Centuries,” in Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*, 142.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. 140.

<sup>213</sup> Eileen Powers, *Medieval English Nunneries C. 1275-1535*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1922, 462.

whence she was taken, and nevertheless shall make fine at the king's will."<sup>214</sup> In this law, rape is not a concern since the woman gives consent. Regardless of consent, the heavy fine to the house and to the king, as well as the imprisonment is harsher than laws prior. Bracton's outline for punishment for the rape of a virgin during the end of the thirteenth century was harsher than the laws in the past: "There must be member for member, for which a virgin is defiled she loses her member and therefore let her defiler be punished in the parts in which he offended. Let him lose his eyes, which gave him sight of the maiden's beauty for which he coveted her. And let him lose as well the testicles which excited his hot lust."<sup>215</sup> Castration is one of the harshest punishments for the crime of rape within medieval England. Once again, there are no cases that describe this punishment being enforced, but the intensity of the punishment conveys a sense that the crime was heinous.

For the purposes of this thesis, it will be valuable to analyze the rape of virgins and nuns specifically. It was during the thirteenth century that the laws began to shift from the image of the bleeding, violently inflicted body to the loss of virginity.<sup>216</sup> The laws and resolution rates imply that the loss of virginity is a more punishable crime than the rape of a non-virgin.<sup>217</sup> "Rape by the later Middle Ages in England is still a crime written on the body; but a true victim is no longer the violated woman but the deprived maiden."<sup>218</sup> As we have seen earlier, the depravity of virginity was a major loss for the father figure. However, in some laws, after the thirteenth century, the loss of virginity for the maiden was also disastrous. A rape case of *mægbbot*, which was during the time of the laws of Æthelberht, requires "the compensation to be paid for the rape

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<sup>214</sup> Edward I, *1285 Second Statute of Westminster, Chapters 34 and 35*, Ch. 34, pg. 3 in Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 31.

<sup>215</sup> Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 78-79.

<sup>216</sup> Phillips, "Written on the Body: Reading Rape from the Twelfth to Fifteenth Centuries," in Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*, 130.

<sup>217</sup> Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 56.

<sup>218</sup> Phillips, "Written on the Body: Reading Rape from the Twelfth to Fifteenth Centuries," in Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*, 138.

of a virgin is equivalent to that required for the killing of a young man; the implication is that loss of virginity was equated with death, a theme that will resurface repeatedly in the history of rape.”<sup>219</sup> The economic and social uselessness of the woman after the loss of her virginity is implied greatly here. The value of a young woman was located in her virginity. Robertson’s *Laws* stated: “And if anyone injures a nun or does violence to a widow, he shall make amends to the utmost of his ability both towards the church and state.”<sup>220</sup> Here, the church is included in the punishment’s beneficiaries. A nun’s keeper is the church and in the place of the father, the church should receive the compensation from the offender. Eileen Powers suggests that “all abductions [of nuns] were in reality elopements’ and Donald Logan largely confirmed her view, writing that most, if not all, cases of nun abduction in medieval England involved willing females.”<sup>221</sup> These scholars are right to suggest that of those cases brought to the court, rape was not involved. These cases were brought before the court due to the church dealing strictly with abduction charges. However, these scholars are not referring to instances of rape against nuns. It cannot be assumed that rape of nuns never occurred only due to the fact that no evidence of court records has survived. Although there is need for caution here and it is difficult to prove, the rape of consecrated virgins is quite plausible outside of court cases. Eileen Powers offers examples of raped nuns herself in her work *Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275 to 1535* which will be useful in the next chapter. It is only important to note that laws do not offer evidence of court cases for the rape of consecrated virgins. However, they do offer the anxieties of society at the time.

There are a few examples of rape crimes against virgins (although we cannot confirm if these women were consecrated) in medieval England. Three cases in particular were brought

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<sup>219</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 41.

<sup>220</sup> Robertson *Laws*, 102.3, in Horner, “The Language of Rape in Old English Literature and Law: Views from the Anglo-Saxon(ist)s” in Pasternack, *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*, 161.

<sup>221</sup> Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 123.

before the courts dealing strictly with the rape of virgins. *The Roll and Writ File of the Berkshire Eyre of 1248*, describes the rape of Margery and Christina:

Margery daughter of Emma de la Hulle appeals Nicholas son of Geoffrey of Whatcomb that he came to her between Bagnor and Boxford in a certain place which is known as Bagnor wood in the vigil [21 July 1244] of St. Mary Magdalen at the hour of vespers in the 28th year and raped her virginity [*rapuit ei virginitatem suam*] against the [king's] peace.<sup>222</sup>

Christian daughter [named Christina] of John of Woodstock appeals brother Simon, lay brother of Stanley, that he came to her in a certain park which is known as Dedemore in Wicklesham on the Friday [25 May 1246] before Whitsun before the hour of vespers in the 30th years and there raped her virginity [*rapuit ei virginitatem suam*].<sup>223</sup>

The *Roll and Writ File of the Berkshire Eyre of 1248* goes on to say that Simon of Stanley, with three other men, then “took Christiana to the abbot of Stanley’s grange, where they continued the assault.”<sup>224</sup> The horrifying accounts of rape signify that the rape of virgins was a crime that needed law and punishment. *The Roll of the Shropshire Eyre of 1256* describes the assault on Agnes of Wrockwardine:

Agnes daughter of Adam Mason of Wrockwardine appealed Adam Turner in the shire court, [alleging] that when she was in the peace of the lord king in Newport... Adam came there and seized her and dragged her outside that township to a place called the Weald Moors, and there he threw her down and maltreated her and raped her of her virginity by force [*et vi ei rapuit virginitatem suam*]<sup>225</sup>

The language here leaves no ambiguity of whether rape occurred or not. The specific statement ‘rapuit of her virginity’ indicates that this is not simply an abduction, but that rape indeed took place. Aelred of Rievaulx in the twelfth century wrote, “a group of Gilbertine nuns castrated a

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<sup>222</sup> *The Roll and Writ File of the Berkshire Eyre of 1248*, M.T. Clanchy, ed, Selden Society, 90 (London, 1972-3), no. 787, p. 317 in Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 63.

<sup>223</sup> Clanchy, ed. *Berkshire Eyre*, no. 888, pp. 350-51 in Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*.

<sup>224</sup> *The Roll and Writ File of the Berkshire Eyre of 1248*, ed. M.T. Clanchy p. 351, in Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 63.

<sup>225</sup> *The Roll of the Shropshire Eyre of 1256*, no. 739, Alan Harding, ed., (London, 1980), p. 258, in Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*.

man accused of fornicating with a member of the order, and Gile Constable suggests the connection between this castration and the prescribed punishment for rape.”<sup>226</sup> Although the text seems to say that fornication was the only crime here, the nuns enacted the same punishment as for rape.

The church had a large role in laws and punishments against rape in Medieval England. When a nun took her vows to join the convent, she bound herself to the church.<sup>227</sup> The Church had a strict policy of what constitutes rape. “Theological writings classify ‘simple’ rape- rape without abduction- under one of two other branches of the sin of Lechery: *stuprum*, defloration of virgins, and *fornication*, illicit sex with married women or prostitutes.”<sup>228</sup> Therefore, the rape of a married woman was under the same punishment as consensual sex with a prostitute or married woman. *Stuprum* was a much greater offence. Those who offended the church’s consecrated virgins, either consensually or not, were almost always found undergoing punishment from the Church and not the State. The punishment of abducting or seducing a nun required a man to purge himself before the Bishop or Archdeacon.<sup>229</sup> These laws within the church indicate that there was a need for them in the first place. Although speculative, the argument still holds.

The gender discrepancies within the laws are quite obvious. There are no male victims of rape mentioned. Male victims were seized for their property, whereas women were victims of sexual assault.<sup>230</sup> “Thus although the issue of rape is associated with wider notions of abductions, the crime of *raptus* was understood as one against women, and related to other gendered issues

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<sup>226</sup> Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 79.

<sup>227</sup> Elizabeth Makowski, *English Nuns and the Law in the Middle Ages: Cloistered Nuns and their Lawyers, 1293-1540*, (Rochester: The Boydell Press, 2012), 18.

<sup>228</sup> Saunders, “A Matter of Consent: Middle English Romance and the Law of Raptus,” in Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*, 107.

<sup>229</sup> Powers, *Medieval English Nunneries C. 1275-1535*, 462.

<sup>230</sup> Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 9.



of marriage, virginity and consent.”<sup>231</sup> Rape and abduction was not a crime against men within medieval England. A maiden’s loss of virginity required financial reparation.<sup>232</sup> There is not a concern for the loss of male virginity. Virginity and the loss thereof was only a female concern, especially within the laws of the time.

In conclusion, there was a need for laws against rape in Medieval England. Even if an abundant amount of evidence does not exist today, it is still worth questioning the need for the law in the first place. There was a hierarchy of sexual crimes and this has been present above. “The abduction, with or without her consent, of a virgin, widow or nun represents the gravest crime of *raptus*; the defloration of virgins or widows outside the context of abductions and respective of consent is ranked next; the rape of wives is placed lowest on the scale as fornication, since, in this case, sex, even if non-consensual, does not decrease the woman’s value.”<sup>233</sup> The property value of women in medieval England was also of great importance. It is important to note that when there are rape cases brought to the court, it is most commonly dealing with theft from the father of the raped girl. The father is the figure who is wronged, not the girl herself. And punishments are usually paid to the man who suffered this theft. Throughout this chapter, we have analyzed the laws and cases dealing with rape in order to move into the next chapter dealing with the rape of consecrated virgins. By analyzing these laws, and the need for these laws, we can now look at rape occurrences outside of the law within Medieval England.

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<sup>231</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 20.

<sup>232</sup> Phillips, “Four Virgins’ Tales: Sex and Power in Medieval Law,” in Bernau, *Medieval Virginites*, 87.

<sup>233</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 86.

## CHAPTER 7

### VIOLENCE AND RAPE OF HOLY VIRGINS

When looking at rape specifically of holy virgins in the medieval era, many historical issues can arise. The two most common reports of rape are either chronicles, which hold no responsibility to retain historical accuracy, and secondhand reports from theologians. Augustine and others, as analyzed earlier, report that many virgins were subjected to rape, often in times of violence. However, these theologians do not provide direct narratives, but only reports of the accounts.<sup>234</sup> This makes it difficult to provide an accurate historical analysis of what may have happened. However, the consistent remarks of rape against holy virgins provide enough evidence to speculate. I am aware of the lack of solid proof and look at these accounts only as partial and sometimes fictional narratives that can give us the room to speculate as to what may have been in the minds of these writers, if not what actually happened in reality. Other religious scholars, such as Kathleen Coyne Kelly, Eileen Power, and Corinne Saunders have analyzed examples much like those that will be described below. I agree with their arguments that although these accounts cannot be proven as historical fact, they should not be discarded. In combination with the Virgin Martyr tales, rape laws, theologian's accounts, and the altering of virginity in theology into the medieval era, rape can be viewed as a probable threat to medieval virgins.

There have been many studies in the past several decades on rape. Some scholars have questioned why rape occurs and others, what is rape a response to? Carolyn Dinshaw argues that: “[Rape] is a violent act that intends to demonstrate man's power, an act that rearticulates, each time, the superiority of masculine over feminine.”<sup>235</sup> This tends to be the common consensus.

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<sup>234</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, 43.

<sup>235</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, “Rivalry, Rape, and Manhood: Gower and Chaucer,” in Roberts, *Violence against Women in Medieval Texts*, 142.

Rape becomes less about passion and desire and more about aggression and power. The sexual act is not about fornication, but about domination.<sup>236</sup> There are also many gender stereotypes when looking at rape that tend to adhere to forms of victim blaming. One of the most typical stereotypes is that women tease men and invite seduction. Men are the victims of women's teasing and when a woman says no, what she really means is yes.<sup>237</sup> These rationalizations and stereotypical responses can explain why rape has been, although not acceptable in most societies, still largely present. Medieval writers recognized that "rape is one of the most painful and destructive expressions of violence that can be used against women."<sup>238</sup> Throughout many accounts, rape is considered a 'fate worse than death.' The virgin martyr accounts are perfect examples of this, as well as theological writings. The result is a violation of chastity and loss of spirituality, not only a loss of the flesh.<sup>239</sup>

Shari Horner provides a great argument as to why rape narratives should hold some weight in scholarly research:

Anglo-Saxon hagiographic and homiletic literature, in particular, disguises its rape narratives with spiritual or metaphoric meanings, but we need to recognize that the basic plot structures of literal, sexual violence enable those spiritual meanings. Rereading rape narratives more literally, by linking them to the material and social conditions and consequences of rape set out in the law codes, reveals that a rhetoric of sexual violence circulates throughout much of Old English literature.<sup>240</sup>

It is clear through the accounts of chronicles, laws, charters, letters and saint's lives that monasteries were quite often targets of plunder, rape, and attack.<sup>241</sup> These accounts cannot be

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<sup>236</sup> Isabelle Mast, "Rape in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and other Related works," in Lewis, *Young Medieval Women*, 108.

<sup>237</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 27.

<sup>238</sup> Mast, "Rape in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and other Related works," in Lewis, *Young Medieval Women*, 101.

<sup>239</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 150.

<sup>240</sup> Shari Horner, "The Language of Rape in Old English Literature and Law: Views from the Anglo-Saxon(ist)s" in Pasternack, *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*, 181.

<sup>241</sup> Rose, *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 42.

ignored. Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl both argue that “virgins were threatened by temptation in stories that cast them as guilty temptresses; their enticing female bodies- which they strove to reject- became sites of danger; merely being seen by men, regardless of the virgin’s desire or intent, could lead to rape and defilement, a loss of status and total abjection.”<sup>242</sup> These stories sometimes portrayed virgins at fault in situations of rape. But one thing is certain; it was the virgin who suffered the loss of status. In religious literature, sex and sexual desire are almost always linked to violence. These negative views of sex reinforced the church’s strict disapproval of sex (except for the use of procreation).<sup>243</sup> However, what is interesting for this study is the use of violence against women that is linked with sexual acts.

Although violence in general is more often when rape takes place, invasions can also lead to rape. One of the most frequent byproducts of war and invasions was rape. Unrest between Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and surrounding lands must have provided ample opportunities for soldiers to rape. The ability of a nation to protect its women from rape during these times was a sign of strength.<sup>244</sup> However, no matter the attempts to provide protection for women, especially holy virgins, they continued to experience acts of war, violence, and rape.<sup>245</sup> One of the first invasions that brought about rape narratives of holy women was the Goth’s siege of Rome. The Goths were Arian Christians, and they tended to spare many churches. However, they did not always spare the holy Christian women. Many were raped or threatened with Rape.<sup>246</sup> Augustine

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<sup>242</sup> Carlson, *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginitly in the Middle Ages*, 5.

<sup>243</sup> Horner, “The Language of Rape in Old English Literature and Law: Views from the Anglo-Saxon(ist)s” in Pasternack, *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*, 164.

<sup>244</sup> Guy Halsall, *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998), 195.

<sup>245</sup> Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 142.

<sup>246</sup> McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc*, 78.

gave accounts of these horrific acts against Holy Virgins in *City of God against the Pagans*, Chapter 16, which have been discussed in Chapter 3.<sup>247</sup>

The next invasion to hit Anglo-Saxon England was by the Franks. Gregory of Tours wrote a *History of the Franks* in which he reports the devastation in the Limousin area by Theudebert, son of Chilperic in the sixth century: “He burned the churches, stole their holy vessels, killed the clergy, emptied the monasteries of monks, raped the nuns in their convents and caused devastation everywhere.”<sup>248</sup> Thus started the violence to come where consecrated virgins were at risk of sexual violation. Beginning in 793 with the sack of Lindisfarne, Scandinavian invaders destroyed the countryside of England, including religious houses and persons.<sup>249</sup> According to Knowles and Hadcock’s *Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales*, “at least forty-one monasteries for women (including double houses), were destroyed by the Viking invaders. Thus by the time of the Norman Conquest, there were only nine houses for women still in existence in Britain.”<sup>250</sup> In fact, due to invasions and raids, in 1080 there were only about as many convents as three centuries before in France and England. The Vikings were the first raiders that began the continuous attacks on convents.<sup>251</sup>

Other invaders, like the Normans, Hungarians, and Saracens in the ninth and tenth centuries were widespread and devastating. Monasteries, due to their wealth and riches, were often targets of violence. Religious communities were in a constant state of fear.<sup>252</sup> The nuns from Whitby fled several times from the invasions and devastation of the Danes. First they fled

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<sup>247</sup> ‘but they fancy they bring a conclusive charge against Christianity, when they aggravate the horror of captivity by adding that not only wives and unmarried maidens, but even consecrated virgins, were violated.’

<sup>248</sup> Rose, *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 43.

<sup>249</sup> Bruce L. Venarde, *Women’s Monasticism and Medieval Society*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 20.

<sup>250</sup> Rose, *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 45.

<sup>251</sup> Venarde, *Women’s Monasticism and Medieval Society* 34, 37

<sup>252</sup> Ibid. 28.

to Hartlepool and then to Tynemouth.<sup>253</sup> In order to remain safe, these women of God needed to flee for their lives at every opportunity. There are some accounts listing women as becoming hermits who disguised themselves as men to protect their virginity against rape.<sup>254</sup> The “Danish invasions, mass burnings, and rapes were remembered in English nunneries, and violent raiding even from, perhaps specially from, local landowners was a perennial possibility.”<sup>255</sup> The Danish raids provided a terrifying time for all persons, but especially for women attempting to guard their virginity. However, the Danes were not the last to use rape as a by-product of invasions. The 1296 Chronicles of Lanercost describes the first great raid of the Scots: “They burnt consecrated churches; both in the sanctuary and elsewhere they violated women dedicated to God [i.e. Nuns] as well as married women and girls, either murdering them or robbing them, after gratifying their lust.”<sup>256</sup> The numerous invasions shed light into the probable threat of rape and devastation to monasteries and consecrated virgins.

There are a couple instances in which rape was explicitly discussed. In the *Chronica sive Flores Historiarum*, Roger of Wendover wrote of the devastation of the Viking raids, “Desiring to make an utter desolation of the entire territory of England, they cut the throats of both young and old who came in their way, and shamefully entreated holy matrons and virgins. (I, 191)”<sup>257</sup> The shameful treatment of holy virgins implies that the Viking raiders did indeed rape consecrated virgins. This account, although from a Chronicle, can allow one to wonder about the position of virgins within invasions, or at least understand the normality of fearing rape during

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<sup>253</sup> Rose, *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 45.

<sup>254</sup> E. Patlagean, "L'histoire de la femme deguisee en moine et l'evolution de la saintete feminine a Byzance," *Studi Medievali*, ser. 3, 17 (1976), 597-623 in Alice-Mary Talbot, "An Introduction to Byzantine Monasticism," in *Illinois Classical Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Fall 1987) pp. 229-241, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23064039>, accessed 03/09/2014.

<sup>255</sup> Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c. 1150-1300*, 116.

<sup>256</sup> Powers, *Medieval English Nunneries C. 1275-1535*, 426.

<sup>257</sup> Roger of Wendover, *Chronica, sive Flores Historiarum*, I, 191, in Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 140.

the time. Another Chronicle tells of Abbess and Convent of Tarrant Keynes in 1343: “The Normayns Pycardes and Spanyerdes entred into the toune (of the Southampton) and robbed and pilld the toune, and slewe dyvers and defowled maydens, and enforced wyves, and charged their vessels with the pyllage and so entred agayne into their shyppes.”<sup>258</sup> This account discusses the Norman and Spaniards invasions into Anglo-Saxon territory and the rape that occurs against virgins.

Bishop Dalderby, who took note of the religious houses and their devastation in Northampton from 1300-1320, described another disturbance. This account is an example of violence against women during peacetime. It took place in Rothwell in 1421-22 when a gang broke into the cloister and seized a boarder, Joan. They carried her away to a secluded house where the leader of the gang violated her by brutal force.<sup>259</sup> After Joan had escaped, Dalderby describes the men:

Entering the same priory a second time, like a tyrant and pirate with a far greater multitude of like henchmen and people untamed and savage in his company, with naked swords and other sorts of divers weapons of offence, fell.. upon the same woman, who was then in the presence of the prioress and the nuns in the hall of the said priory and... daringly laid wicked, sacrilegious and violent hands, notwithstanding the worship both of their persons and of the place, upon the prioress and nuns of the said place, honorable members of the church and persons hallowed to God accordingly- who endeavored gently to appease their baseness and savagery, so far as their sex as women allowed- and cudgeled them with cruel strokes, threw them down on the ground and, trampling on them with their feet, mercilessly kicked them and violently dragged off their garments of their habits over their heads, and even as robbers, having caught their prey, carried off the said women, dragging her with them out of the priory.<sup>260</sup>

The violent treatment of women as sexual objects continues within these stories. One of the most detailed and well-preserved accounts of violence against virgins takes place in the St. Albans

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<sup>258</sup> Froissart, tr. Berners, I, Ch. xxxviii. in Powers, *Medieval English Nunneries C. 1275-1535*, 425.

<sup>259</sup> *Linc. Epis. Reg. Dalderby*, f. 16, in Powers, *Medieval English Nunneries C. 1275-1535*, 424.

<sup>260</sup> *Link. Visit. I*, pp. 108-9, in Powers, *Medieval English Nunneries C. 1275-1535*, 424.

Chronicles. The story begins with Sir John Arundel needing a place to rest with his soldiers.

They entered the convent to find refuge:

But the nun, considering in her mind that danger might arise from such guests and that his request was absolutely contrary to religion, pointed out to him with due reverence and humility that many of his followers were young and might easily be moved to commit an inexpressible crime... These, scorning reverence for the place casting aside the fear of God, the men oppressed and violated by force. Nor did their lust rage against these alone, for they feared not to pollute the widow's continence and the conjugal tie. For many widows had gathered there to receive hospitality, as is customary in such abbeys, either for lack of property or in order the more perfectly and safely to preserve their chastity. They forced into public adultery and married women who had gathered there for the same reasons, and did not content (it is said) with these misdeeds they subjected the nuns themselves to their lust.<sup>261</sup>

The women and virgins of this convent were not safe from sexual harm, even when there was no outright attack on the convent. When Sir John Arundel and his army were leaving the convent, St. Albans chronicle continues: "His men carried off with them the stolen bride and a number of wives, widows and virgins from the abbey, forced the wretched women on board and put to sea."<sup>262</sup> St. Alban's Chronicle gives a unique account of the violence against women in times of invasions. Once again we must acknowledge that these accounts cannot be considered as purely historical by any means. However, they do give a unique view of how people contemplated and understood invasion violence.

There are also several accounts in which nuns react to threats of rape. Many examples describe mutilation in order to disfigure their faces. The nuns believed if they looked disfigured, the invaders would not rape them. One of the most famous accounts comes from the *Lessons of the Office of Saint Eusebia*:

The virgin Eusebia, of distinguished piety, governed the monastery of nuns that the blessed Cassian founded in the past, in the territory of Marseilles, not

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<sup>261</sup> From St. Albans Chronicle, in Powers, *Medieval English Nunneries C. 1275-1535*, 429-30.

<sup>262</sup> Powers, *Medieval English Nunneries C. 1275-1535*, 431.



far from the Church of St. Victor. The infidels burst into the monastery, and Eusebia urged the holy virgins, caring more for preserving their purity than their life, to cut off their noses in order to irritate by this bloody spectacle the rage of the barbarians and to extinguish their passions. With incredible zeal, she [Eusebia] and all of her companions accomplished this act; the barbarians massacred them in the number of forty, while they confessed Christ with an admirable constancy.<sup>263</sup>

After this account, all forty of the virgins along with Eusebia were revered as virgin martyrs. The virgins embraced their death joyfully, knowing that they avoided the repulsive sexual attacks from these men.<sup>264</sup> Cutting off one's nose appears to be a symbol of severing sexual desire and desirability. Corrine Saunders argued that the nose might be equated with the sexual organ. The nun's act of severing the nose was a total rejection of their sexuality.<sup>265</sup> Another example is present in Roger of Wendover's *Chronica, sive Flores Historiarum*. He discusses the Ebba and the monastery of Collingham:

...The abbess, with an heroic spirit, affording to all the holy sisters an example of chastity profitable only to themselves, but to be embraced by all succeeding virgins for ever, took a razor, and with it cut off her nose, together with her upper lip up unto the teeth, presenting herself a horrible spectacle to those who stood by. Filled with admiration at this admirable deed, the whole assembly followed her maternal example, and severally did the like to themselves. (I, 191-92)<sup>266</sup>

When the men came to rape the virgins, they were repulsed by their spectacle. The men burned the monastery to the ground with the virgin martyrs inside. Similarly to St. Eusebia, Ebba encourages her maidens to disfigure their faces to leave the men in horror. These actions worked, and the women gained both preserved virginity and martyrdom. Gouging out/losing one's eyes

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<sup>263</sup> Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 145.

<sup>264</sup> Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 23.

<sup>265</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 145.

<sup>266</sup> Roger of Wendover, *Chronica, sive Flores Historiarum*, I, 191-192, in Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, 140.

or cutting off one's nose is common in the Chronicle stories of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It appears that this is how good, holy women are able to evade rape.<sup>267</sup>

In this chapter we have analyzed several different examples in which rape is threatened directly to holy virgins. Usually within the walls of the convent, a virgin was threatened and sometimes raped forcefully. Chronicles more often, but also other accounts have given us a look into what medieval minds thought of violence against virgins. Invasions most definitely were not the only reasons for rape, and violence against women outside of invasions was just as likely. However, war did bring about a heightened frequency of rape victims in medieval Anglo-Saxon territories. Some nuns were able to resist the sexual urges of soldiers by mutilating their appearance. Others, however, were not able to avoid rape. Rape was a threat to these holy women, as shown in these accounts, whether a real threat or an imagined threat. And this aids to the argument that the theology of virginity was forced to change during the medieval era. Due to rape occurrences, women of the veil were threatened with a loss of their virginity against their will. This will explain why the theology needed to include rape as not interfering with virginity's loss.

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<sup>267</sup> Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c. 1150-1300*, 204.

## CHAPTER 8

### VIRGINITY INTO THE REFORMATION

The Protestant Reformation brought with it many new theological arguments that attempted to reform the Catholic Church. Protestant leaders attacked the Catholic Church harshly for celibacy in particular, but also greed and scandal.<sup>268</sup> Virginity, which was once a high honor that separated nuns from laywomen, no longer offered independent power. Convents began to be monitored by male, protestant officials.<sup>269</sup> Martin Luther and the reformation as a whole criticized the state of virginity. Sometimes even, the nunneries were compared to brothels, like in Hamlet's advice to Ophelia.<sup>270</sup> A majority of reformers began to view virginity as only a temporary stage for a young girl, until she can enter into a chaste marriage. Virginity did not lose its value in society; however, it was only meant to be temporary.<sup>271</sup>

Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) was an influential scholar and theologian who considered the monastic life as worldly and a waste of resources. Although Erasmus never joined the Reformation movement, his views on virginity are similar. He believed that virginity retained superstitious ideals and that the bishops should more directly control the convents.<sup>272</sup> Erasmus expresses his negative view of convents in *Colloquies*. In this work, he has a conversation with a dear friend, who is contemplating taking up the veil. Erasmus states:

I do not disapprove of a chaste society: Yet I would not have you delude yourself with false imaginations. When once you come to be thoroughly acquainted there, and see Things nearer Hand, perhaps Things won't look with so good a Face as they did once. They are not all Virgins that wear

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<sup>268</sup> Kelly, *Menacing Virgins*, 20.

<sup>269</sup> Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice*, (London: Routledge, 2010), 134.

<sup>270</sup> Kelly, *Menacing Virgins*, 20.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>272</sup> G. W. Bernard, "The Dissolution of the Monasteries," *History* (Oxford: The Historical Association and Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 393.

Veils; believe me...<sup>273</sup> So I would most undoubtedly caution all young Women; especially those of generous Tempers, not to precipitate themselves unadvisedly into that State from whence there is no getting out afterwards: And the rather, because their Chastity is more in Danger in a Cloyster than out of it; and besides that, you may do whatever is done there as well as Home.<sup>274</sup>

Erasmus, although he claims not to disapprove of the chaste society, displays his concerns and distaste for the life of consecrated virgins. He shows his distrust of the actual virginity of the proclaimed virgins, and his fears that virginity is more at risk within the convent than out.

Erasmus' distaste for the virgin life is slightly ironic due to his chaste lifestyle. Although never married, he had a great enthusiasm for marriage. This may have been due to his desire to condemn celibacy. In his essay, *Encomium Matrimonii*, he not only disgraces celibacy but also commends marriage.<sup>275</sup>

Erasmus' views of virginity are more similar to Reformation theology, in which virginity is no longer the highest state. In another work, *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus discusses the continuous threat of rape:

So much for these miseries; even more serious are those mortal evils too which God himself would find it difficult to repair, when adultery becomes widespread, women forget chastity, virgins are raped everywhere, young men (who are disposed to vices by nature), once order is destroyed and impunity is open to them, learn to think that nothing matters and are carried headlong into crimes of all kinds.<sup>276</sup>

Here, Erasmus is discussing rape in the instances of invasions. He believes that the soldiers felt that they are able to take whatever they liked during their plunder. Often, this included the bodies of women. Erasmus holds a different and more negative opinion about virginity than those before him. His views are a good example of the transformation into the Reformation, where

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<sup>273</sup> The Colloquies of Erasmus 1466-1536, Trans. N. Bailey, Vol. 1, (London: Reeves & Turner, 1878), 231.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid. 236.

<sup>275</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 625.

<sup>276</sup> The Colloquies of Erasmus 1466-1536, Trans. N. Bailey, Vol. 1.

virginity is critiqued and no longer the highest heavenly crown. One side of the Reformation movement, due to his new thoughts and doctrines, revered Erasmus. However, others saw his deep regard for tradition and authority as an advantage for the Catholic Church.<sup>277</sup> Regardless, the teachings and doctrines of Erasmus greatly aligned with the side of the Reformation movement.

Richard Sherry, who was writer and follower of Erasmus, discusses one of our main previous subjects: the rape of nuns. In his work, *A Treatise of Schemes and Tropes* (1550), he gives an account of the destructive ‘Barbarian’ raids:

The treasure spent vpon the Barbariens, the youthe broken wyth laboures, the corne troden downe, the catel driuen awaye, stretes and vyllages euery where set on fyre, fieldes lefte desolate, walles ouerthrowen, houses robbed, temples spoyled, so many olde men chylderles, so manye orphanes, so manye wyddowes, so many virgins shamefully defiled, y<sup>e</sup> maners of so many yong mē made worse by leude liberty, so many mē slayne, so great mourning, so many good artes loste, lawes oppressed, religion blotted, al thynges of god and man confounded, all good order of the citie corrupted: I say all this heape of myschiefs that riseth of war, we mai thāke the only of it, which wast y<sup>e</sup> beginner of this war. (E.i. 65)<sup>278</sup>

Sherry’s mention of the disasters and rape within war allows the reader to speculate that rape was still considered a real issue, even into the later middle ages. Although Sherry mentions this account in detail, he does not go on to theorize the actual state of raped virginity.

The most important theological character during the Reformation is most definitely Martin Luther. He was the face of the movement. However, before the Reformation began, Luther was just a young man attempting to save his own soul. He search for the best avenues and chose to enter a cloister. Luther had heard that the monastic life could save men and transform his heart. In order to secure eternal life for his soul, young Martin Luther entered into the

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<sup>277</sup> James Pounder Whitney, *The History of the Reformation*, (London: S.P.C.K., 1958), 29.

<sup>278</sup> Richard Sherry, *A Treatise of Schemes and Tropes* (1550), (Gainesville: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1961), E.i. 65.

monastic life.<sup>279</sup> He set out alone in the middle of the night with only two books in hand. He asked admittance into the convent of the hermits of St. Augustine. As a twenty-one year old man in 1505, the gates of the cloister closed behind him for what he imagined would be for the rest of his life.<sup>280</sup> Luther, however, did not remain in the monastic life. After a few years he left the hermits and began constructing his a new theology.

Due to his past life in the cloister, Luther had many thoughts on celibacy. He definitely saw the link between original sin and sexual desire, just like St. Augustine. However, Luther thought that this desire was too powerful for man to conquer. He believed that only a few would be able to accomplish this task. He argued that the best Christian life was when the desire of sexuality was only expressed in marriage. He argued that the vows of celibacy for monastic members should be null and void and that the institutions should be closed.<sup>281</sup> This is an intense change from the younger man who wanted to join the monastic communities. It is important to note though that Luther did not encourage women to leave the convents only to fulfill sexual urges; they should leave for the right reasons.<sup>282</sup> Since Martin Luther had argued that the vows of celibacy should be void, and that marriage was the best way for a Christian to live, he decided to marry an ex nun in 1525, Katherine von Bora.<sup>283</sup>

Luther deals with celibacy in two of his works, *To Several Nuns* and *On Celibacy and Marriage*. In his Letter *To Several Nuns*, Luther discusses the two reasons that a nun should leave her convent. He states: “You are correct that there are two reasons for which life at the convent and vows may be forsaken: The one is where men's laws and life within the order are

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<sup>279</sup> D’Aubigne, J.H. Merle, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther: Selections from D’Aubigne’s famed History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, trans. H. White, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1950), 24.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>281</sup> Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World*, 77.

<sup>282</sup> Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer, *From Priest’s Whore to Pastor’s Wife: Clerical Marriage and the Process of Reform in the Early German Reformation*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 137.

<sup>283</sup> Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World*, 75.

being forced, where there is no free choice, where it is put upon the conscience as a burden. In such cases it is time to run away, leaving the convent and all it entails behind.”<sup>284</sup> For Luther, the chaste life should be entirely voluntary. If chastity is in any way being forced onto the individual, he believes that renders one able to abandon their vows. The second reason that Luther gives for leaving the convent is due to mankind’s sexual desire. He states: “Though womenfolk are ashamed to admit to this, nevertheless Scripture and experience show that among many thousands there is not a one to whom God has given to remain in pure chastity. A woman has no control over herself. God has made her body to be with man, to bear children and to raise them.”<sup>285</sup> Although Luther is only talking of women’s sexual desire here and not of man’s, he is claiming that mankind is naturally sexual and should not be forced into virginity. He himself does not believe that a woman can control these urges entirely. This view is based off of the Genesis story in which Eve was weaker than Adam. Luther argues that the sanctity of marriage was created prior to the Fall in the Garden of Eden.

In another work, *On Celibacy and Marriage*, Luther looks at both lifestyles: celibacy and marriage. He offers two reasons why a man may need a woman: “First, not every priest can do without a woman, not only on account of the weakness of the flesh but much more because of the needs of the household.”<sup>286</sup> For Luther, domestic help, and sexual desire are both convincing reasons why a priest should marry. Sexual desire, according to Luther is deeply engrained in human nature. He states: “If a girl is not sustained by great and exceptional grace, she can live without a man as little as she can without eating, drinking, sleeping, and other natural necessities. Nor on the other hand, can a man dispense with a wife. The reason for this is that procreating

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<sup>284</sup> Martin Luther, *To Several Nuns*, From Wittenberg 6 August 1524, Translated from Briefe aus dem Jahre 1524 No. 733 -756 (Letters of the Year 1524 Nos. 733 - 756) Weimarer Ausgabe, translated by Erika Bullmann Flores.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Martin Luther, *On Celibacy and Marriage*.

children is an urge planted as deeply in human nature as eating and drinking.”<sup>287</sup> Luther believed that this urge could not be entirely suppressed by most, and that they should not attempt to suppress these natural human conditions. This is what leads to the Reformation movement encouraging the marriage of the clergy.

The people of the Reformation held fast to Luther’s positive view and championing of marriage. Since he denied the value of celibacy (what created a hierarchy between the holy virgins/monks and layperson) Luther had raised the status of marriage. Now, the vast majority of the population was no longer lower class Christians.<sup>288</sup> Luther’s complex theological view on the exemption of monastic vows led to an encouragement of marriage among priests. Luther himself began to support this movement, however, he was weary and did not outright advise monks and nuns to marry.<sup>289</sup> Ex-monks and nuns though, did decide to marry and this forced the social norms to consider a radical new definition, not just of marriage, but also of religious practice and the church’s organization as an institution.<sup>290</sup> Ex-monastic who entered marriage not only crossed the boundary of celibate vows but also the boundary of the cloister wall.

Marriage of the clergy also broke with social norms and returned to its original institution prior to 1215. Some accepted this adjustment, where others found it a disgrace. Both secular and regular clergy began to marry during the early years of the Reformation.<sup>291</sup> Some members of the community criticized the broken celibacy vows. Others, however, began to embrace this new figure. Religious scholar, Majorie Elizabeth Plummer argues that the clergy wife went “from being abused and despised by conservatives in the parish, [and] came to provide a new model for all the wives of Protestant Europe: She was now without any female rival for iconic status, since

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<sup>287</sup> Martin Luther, *On Celibacy and Marriage*.

<sup>288</sup> Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World*, 77.

<sup>289</sup> Plummer, *From Priest’s Whore to Pastor’s Wife*, 134-5.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.* 133.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.* 132.



nuns and anchoresses had been banished from Protestant society.”<sup>292</sup> From once being despise, the clergy wife became a holy role model for other Protestant Christian women. The clergy, now released from their sexual renunciation, also became new fathers. They attempted to take ahold of their patriarchal masculinity. In order to separate themselves from their previous vows of chastity, the clergy attempted to emphasize their sexuality as no different than laymen’s.<sup>293</sup> This was intended to make the case that the clergy were not separated from the laity, at least in regards to sexual purity.

Since this thesis has mostly looked at the lands of Anglo-Saxon England, it will prove useful to briefly analyze the movement into the Reformation in this area for monastic life. During the last several years of the medieval era prior to the Reformation, monastic life began to dwindle. Foundations and endowments were no longer given to monastic communities by patrons. Hospitals and chantries became the preferred endowments. “Thus from Henry IV to Henry VIII only eight monasteries were founded, but about sixty colleges or hospitals.”<sup>294</sup> This had a major effect on the monastic institutions. Without endowments and financial support, the communities suffered. It was in 1534 that Henry VIII passed the Act of Supremacy claiming that he was the head of the English church.<sup>295</sup> As a supporter of the Reformation’s views of monastic communities, Henry VIII accused the houses of evil conditions. He ordered the smaller houses to be dissolved in 1536, and they were transferred to larger monastic houses. However, these larger institutions also were dissolved shortly after.<sup>296</sup> “Altogether some 350 smaller and 200 larger houses were dissolved, some 5000 and 3000 persons respectively affected.”<sup>297</sup> The Reformation

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<sup>292</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 631.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid. 627.

<sup>294</sup> Whitney, *The History of the Reformation*, 411.

<sup>295</sup> Mary C. Erler, *Reading and Writing During the Dissolution: Monks, Friars, and Nuns 1530-1558*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>296</sup> Whitney, *The History of the Reformation*, 428.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

proved disastrous for monastic communities in Protestant England. Some were dissolved and forced into the world against their will.

Now, to go into more detail, this chapter will analyze the town of Strasbourg in Germany. Germany was the home front of the Reformation and also where the majority of research has been completed on the subject. Strasbourg will give us a deeper analysis of monastic changes during the beginnings of the Reformation. In Strasbourg, the community's wishes are what led to strict actions taken against the monastic community. They complained of abuse and the monastic life in general. The community called for a more radical reform of these communities.<sup>298</sup> The city's council therefore began think about actions to take against the monasteries. By 1525, Strasbourg began the secularization of all monastic houses. The council took over looking after the poor community, which was once a monastic duty, and they also removed all items they deemed as 'idols' from the churches.<sup>299</sup> It was during the Peasants' War of 1525 when the council found a perfect opportunity to begin reforming the monastic orders. "Before the peasants were beaten at Saverne in May 1525, they succeeded in sacking and looting a number of convents and monasteries near Strasbourg. Many of the convents were outside the city walls, making them particularly vulnerable to attacks, something the council used as a means to close them."<sup>300</sup> This proved to be the perfect time for the council to step in and take charge of the religious communities. Providing their 'safety' was a political move aimed to secularize the communities.

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<sup>298</sup> Amy Leonard, *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 59.

<sup>299</sup> Leonard, *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany*, 60.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

However, even before the council began their work, many local families wanted to take their daughters out of the nunneries. Many times, these women were taken against their will.<sup>301</sup> One notable example is Anna, a nun, and her brothers, Matthias and Wolfgang. Matthias had attempted many times to take Anna from the nunnery. “He expressed his hope that she would accept the Protestant preaching and leave that ‘godless prison’ and come home to him. In a clear attempt at bribery, the brothers offered to return her inheritance to her if she left.”<sup>302</sup> Anna stood firm for many years against her brother’s attempts to take her from the monastery. Although, Anna did eventually leave the monastic life and was never heard from again. It is unclear if she left by her own will or if she was eventually forced. Another example is the case of Margarethe and her father Claus. Claus came to the convent to take his daughter back home. The prioress of the nunnery states:

My dear child, there stands your father. He brought you into this convent, hoping thereby to promote God’s honor and your soul’s salvation. For the same reasons we accepted you, in God’s name, and have for five years reared and taught you, which has been no small task. It is now your father’s will that you live with him, for he wants you out of the convent. And he has assured us that if we do not surrender you voluntarily, he will see that we are forced to do so. And if we do not want him to make good on his threat of force, we should give you up to him. I would nonetheless rather see you lying in your grave than to see you go out into the world.<sup>303</sup>

Although it pained the prioress to surrender Margarethe to her father, the nunnery had no choice due to her young age. These examples are only a quick glance into many families who had been influenced by the Reformation’s view of monastic life. Hearing the alleged crimes and rumors of the Church, many rushed to the monastic houses to seize their loved ones.

Then came the more intense secularization strategies against the convents and monasteries in Strasbourg. The council wanted a united religious intuition. They began to

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<sup>301</sup> Leonard, *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany*, 61.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.* 63.

<sup>303</sup> Strasbourg, Archives Municipales de Strasbourg VI 699/3, in Leonard, *Nails in the Wall*, 66-67.

secularize the monastic houses by forcing them to pay taxes and the inhabitants to wear lay clothing.<sup>304</sup> No longer could nuns be distinguished from layperson by law. Another drastic measure was when the “magistrates passed a resolution on 27 April 1524 forbidding any monks or friars to enter the convents. Instead the nuns should be provided with a pious, learned (Protestant) pastor as father confessor to take the place of their order’s priests.”<sup>305</sup> The council’s replacement was received bitterly by most nuns and was viewed as sacrilege.<sup>306</sup>

Another major attempt to secularize the communities was the ruling that nun’s vows were void. They agreed with the Protestant view that humans cannot take vows “such as the vow of chastity ‘because humans have no power to pledge their bodies, which are God’s.’”<sup>307</sup> Since their vows were rendered void, nuns were then free to leave the walls of their cloister. The council attempted to bribe nuns to leave with promises of retaining their dowries and extra pension.<sup>308</sup> This proved to be the most affective route at dissolution of monastic communities. Many nuns took their pensions and returned to their families where they quickly married. The numbers prove the effectiveness of the council’s pressure. “Ten of the sixteen religious foundations in Strasbourg succumbed to the Reformation by 1538, and their members accepted the pensions and left their houses.”<sup>309</sup> However, some houses did remain and were used as education centers. Martin Luther claimed that had been the monastic’s original purpose all along.<sup>310</sup> Nunneries took in young girls throughout their entire childhood. They taught them housework and kept their virginity safe until they turned eighteen and were returned to their parent’s care.<sup>311</sup> The young girls virginity was still protected, however, this was only temporary in the convents. These girls

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<sup>304</sup> Leonard, *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany*, 68.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid. 71.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid. 92.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid. 74.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid. 89.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid. 91.

were never intended to remain chaste for their entire lives. Once they became of age, their families came to return the girls home and marry them off to proper suitors.

In conclusion, the protestant reformation drastically changed monastic life from the previous centuries. Not only this, but it changed Christian history and views of sexuality as well.<sup>312</sup> The Protestant Reformation reaffirmed the value of marriage, and raised the marital class from its previous social tier below virginity and chastity. This was a major feature of the Counter Reformation as well. The Reformation also proclaimed that celibacy was not a natural human existence. Propaganda and rumors about the monastic life led to despise. And in return, led to the extinction of many monastic houses. Virginity took a sharp turn from being the most perfect state of human existence in the medieval era, to the Protestant notion of virginity as unnatural and a corrupted system of a corrupted Catholic church.

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<sup>312</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 588.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

This thesis has analyzed how the concept of virginity shifted and changed from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages. It has also briefly looked at the shift into the Reformation. Virginity was not a static state of being. It was fluid and ever changing based on the needs of the times. In Late Antiquity, virginity was highly focused on the physical state of the body but also took into consideration the spiritual state as well. A virgin could not maintain her status with physical or spiritual virginity alone. Both were needed in order to claim virginity. However, with the shift of Augustine's ideology, the consensus within the medieval era is that the spiritual virginity outweighs physical, bodily virginity. Although the physicality of virginity remains desirable, it is not always required. As long as the virgin has maintained her spiritual state she can maintain her status.

From using Caroline Walker Bynum's method of the psychosomatic unity of the soul and the self, this thesis has been able to find one of the tensions within this unity. The medieval concept of virginity attempted to combine these two entities beginning with Augustine's theology, and the combination created tension between the two entities. In the ancient world, the body and the soul were two separated entities. This is no longer the case in the medieval era. The line between the two is blurred and inconsistent. We can see tension between the two in regards to medieval virginity, and rape provides the most prominent example. Being physically raped created tension with virginity between the body and the soul. The lines are blurred as to what is considered virginity. Medieval thinkers needed to find a way to allow for raped virgins to maintain their status. This is when spiritualized virginity as the prominent form became popular thought.

This thesis looked at the idea of virginity within medieval society. It became the purest and most respected form within the church. Virginity was the separation of holy women from laywomen. Prior to medieval concepts of virginity, early theologians and church fathers viewed virginity as a wonderful quality and highly regarded. However, most viewed virginity as a physical state of being. Once Augustine shifts this view, medieval theologians regard virginity as more spiritualized than bodily. The virgin martyr tales gave an in-depth look at a particular form of literature dealing with rape. Rape was a common theme within these texts and maintaining virginity was always the first priority. Virgin martyr texts do imply that rape was a fear in the minds of medieval persons.

While looking closer at Anglo-Saxon territory, this thesis delved into the laws of the land dealing with Rape. Rape obviously had some place within society in order to create a need for the laws. What was most interesting about this is how often rape of nuns is brought up in different laws. Virginity was at stake for holy women. We then looked closely at rape accounts in chapter six dealing with holy women. The chronicles and secondhand accounts are not enough to undoubtedly prove that rape occurred, but it is enough to know that the fear of rape was ever present in the minds of medieval persons. Lastly, this thesis analyzed the major shift of virginity into the period of the Reformation. Protestantism did not deem virginity with the high regard of the Catholic Church. Monasticism was viewed with suspicion and distrust. The only place for virginity within Protestant Europe was in young girls before they were married. This negative view of monastic life was a drastic change from the medieval era. This goes to show that virginity was a fluid concept that had changed with the times.

This thesis has aimed to prove that the shift was largely due to more frequent occurrences of rape during the medieval era. Violence and invasions took hold of inhabitant's lives within

Anglo-Saxon territory. The constant tension between Lords and outside clans led to violent times in the land. And with the physical violence of invasions came sexual violence. Whether or not rape was a real threat to Anglo-Saxon women, we may never be sure. However, we can tell that the fear of rape was quite common in medieval Anglo-Saxon minds. Themes and stories of rape appear in virgin martyr texts, laws, court records, theologian's accounts, and chronicles. Rape comes up so often, it is a surprise that more studies have not looked into this shift before. It would be useful for academia to further this research in order to delve deeper into available primary sources. It would also be useful to look deeper at primarily the theological shift of virginity. This thesis only briefly touched the surface of how virginity changed into a more spiritualized state. Regardless, this thesis has attempted to show that the theological shift of virginity was largely due to occurrences of rape in the medieval era.



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