

**A SAINT MANQUÉE:  
THE LEGEND OF LADY GODIVA AS HAGIOGRAPHY**

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## Abstract

The story of Lady Godiva's naked ride through Coventry is well known. While scholars agree that it has no historical basis, no satisfactory explanation has been offered as to when and why it first appeared. This thesis explores the possibility that it may have been an original composition intended as hagiography.

Beginning with the historical Godiva, who died in 1067, it details the various categories of saint that were popular in Anglo-Saxon England, in particular the 'cartulary' or 'founder' saint – a category for which Godiva was eminently qualified. It examines the possibility of political objections to her canonization in the light of her grandsons' role in the rebellion against William the Conqueror, and considers the allegation that Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury, had a particular animosity towards the English saints.

The paper then turns to hagiography as a literary genre. It explores the purpose of writing about the saints, and how this correlates with the well-known flurry of such writing that occurred in England in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest. It discusses the influence of folklore, classical literature and twelfth-century courtly romance on hagiography in general, and examines the story of Godiva's Ride with specific reference to the Virgin Martyr tradition and to Chrétien de Troyes' courtly romance *Erec et Enide*. A brief overview of the political situation in Coventry when the story was first written in 1218 suggests that Godiva was intended to serve a role similar to that of the cartulary saint.

Finally, the thesis considers how Godiva became a local folk hero, and how this may have preserved her memory long after she would have been forgotten as a saint. It examines her changing role as a symbol of Coventry and of the East Midlands, and ends with the revelation that she may have become a saint after all – albeit of a uniquely secular variety.

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## List of Abbreviations

- ASC* *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Translated and edited by Michael Swanton. Routledge, 1998.
- DB* *Doomsday Book*. Translated and edited by Alecto Historical Editions. Penguin Classics, 2003.
- GL* *The Golden Legend*. Jacobus de Voragine, selected and translated by Christopher Stace. Penguin Group, 1998.
- HEP* *The History of the English People, 1000-1154*. Henry of Huntingdon, translated by Diana Greenway. Oxford University Press, 2002.
- LE* *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely from the Seventh Century to the Twelfth*. Translated by Janet Fairweather. The Boydell Press, 2005.
- LESP* *L'espurgatoire Seint Patriz*. Marie de France, edited by Thomas Atkinson Jenkins, 1894. Leopold Classic Library, POD.
- ODNB* *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

## Anglo-Saxon Pronunciation Guide

No pronunciation guide can be complete or exact, because Anglo-Saxon developed over several centuries and some regions were more subject to Danish (or Norwegian) influence than others. What is given here is not intended to be definitive but simply to make the names less intimidating to the general reader.

Emphasis is always on the first syllable.

Generally speaking, ‘e’ is pronounced as in ‘met’ and ‘o’ as in ‘dog,’ and all letters are sounded. Hence ‘Leofric’ should be a three-syllable name, but not with the same vowel sounds as Latin ‘Leo’ or with an intervening ‘y’ (Le-yo’). Although some favour a pronunciation closer to ‘Leaf,’ I have rendered the first element here as ‘Leff,’ as in the modern pronunciation of ‘Geoffrey.’

The combination ‘ea’ should be pronounced as in ‘pear,’ but later came to be a simple ‘e.’

‘Æ’ is given here as in ‘cat,’ though it was somewhere between ‘cat’ and ‘met’ and the modern rendition is inconsistent, e.g. Athelstan but Ethelred.

‘G,’ like its modern counterpart, has several possible pronunciations. In the list below, where it is not rendered as ‘y’ it should be pronounced as in ‘girl.’

Terminal ‘h’ is pronounced as in Scottish ‘loch.’

## List of Key Names

### Godiva's Family

Godgifu	GOD-yiva, GOD-yifa	Lady Godiva, founder of St Mary's, Coventry
Leofric	LEFF-rik	Earl of Mercia, Godiva's husband
Thorold	THOR-old	Sheriff of Lincolnshire, Godiva's brother
Leofwine	LEFF-wi-neh	Earl of Mercia, Leofric's father
Ælfgar	ALF-gar	Leofric and Godiva's historically attested son
Hereward	HEH-reh-ward	A leader of the resistance to Norman rule, known from his battle-cry as 'the Wake.' Popular lore makes him a son of Leofric and Godiva.
Edwin		Ælfgar's son
Morcar		Ælfgar's son
Ealdgyth Godwinson.	AIRLD-gith	Ælfgar's daughter, wife of King Harold  AKA Edith.
Lucia/ Leofgifu	LEFF-yiva, LEFF-yifa	Ælfgar's daughter; her birth name is uncertain

### Saints

Ælfheah	ALF-hairch	Archbishop of Canterbury, killed by the Danes in 1012. AKA Elphege or Alphege
Æthelthryth	ATH-el-thryth	Daughter of King Anna of Northumbria and founder of the monastery at Ely. AKA Etheldreda or Audrey/Audrée
Ecgwine	EDGE-wi-neh	Official founder of Evesham Abbey
Eormenilda	EH-or-men-IL-da	Nun at Ely; Æthelthryth's niece

Eoves	EV-es	Swineherd directed by the Virgin Mary to found Evesham (EVE-sham) Abbey
Seaxburh	SAIR-es-burch	Nun at Ely
Sigebert	SI-ye-bert	Anglo-Saxon king and martyr; Bede considered him unworthy of sainthood because he refused to defend his people against pagan invaders
Wereburga	WEH-reh-bur-GAH	Saint to whom Leofric and Godiva dedicated a convent in Leicester (LESS-ter)
Wihtburh	WICHT-burch	Nun at Ely

### Other People

Ælfric	ALF-rik	Tenth-century hagiographer
Byrhtferth	BURCHT-ferth	Monk of Ramsey, eleventh-century hagiographer
Eadmer	AIRD-mer, ED-mer	Monk of Canterbury, chronicler and hagiographer
Leofgar	LEFF-gar	Badly-behaved priest
Stigand	STIG-and	Archbishop of Canterbury excommunicated for pluralism

### Place Names

Leominster	LEM-ster	Town in Herefordshire; Leofric and Godiva endowed a church there
Lincoln	LINK-on	County town; Godiva was from Lincolnshire
Worcester	WUUS-ter	Diocese in which Coventry originally lay

## General Vocabulary

Æthelboren ATH-el-bor-en

‘Of noble birth’; an honour status frequently ascribed to saints regardless of actual parentage

Ætheling ATH-el-ing

A king’s son, eligible for the throne

Heregeld HEH-reh-yeld

Tax for the purpose of maintaining the king’s bodyguard

Witan WIT-an

Anglo-Saxon council of nobles

## Introduction

Growing up in England in the 1970s, I do not recall a time when I did not know about Lady Godiva. Like Robin Hood and King Arthur, she was an intrinsic part of my cultural heritage. When I was eight years old, we moved to Bourne, Lincolnshire, home of Godiva's alleged son Hereward 'the Wake,' leader of the English resistance to William the Conqueror. The ruins of his manor were still visible as grass-covered mounds in the park across the road from Bourne Abbey Church; ducks swam peacefully on what had once been his fishpond. The housing estate where we lived, the Hereward Estate, had streets named for people connected to him, including Godiva, and I began to wonder: Who were these people, really? What were their lives like, before and after the Norman Conquest of 1066?

Some twenty years ago, I began to research Lady Godiva and two of her contemporaries with a view to writing historical novels. I learned early on that the legend of Godiva's naked ride through Coventry, supposedly undertaken to persuade her husband, Earl Leofric, to cancel a tax he planned to impose upon its residents, could not be true for several reasons. For one thing, it is too dramatic an incident to have escaped notice, yet there is no mention of it in contemporary records such as the *ASC*. For another, the description of Coventry is anachronistic: no town existed when Godiva was the young wife depicted in the legend, and it was only a small farming village when Leofric died in 1057, at which point he and Godiva were probably in their fifties. Also, unlike their Norman successors, Anglo-Saxon women owned property in their own right, and the area where Coventry came to be belonged to Godiva herself. Leofric thus had no authority to impose taxes there, making any protest unnecessary.

As the one who donated the land along with much of the furnishings of the monastery,

Godiva was the primary founder of Coventry Abbey, and it was customary in Anglo-Saxon England for the founder of a monastery to be declared a saint. Why, then, is she not a saint? Given that she died almost exactly a year after the Conquest, was it because the new Norman overlords of England did not recognize a married woman as foundress independent of her husband? Was her exclusion politically inspired? Her granddaughter was the widow of the defeated English king, Harold Godwinson, and the mother of his heir. Her grandsons, Edwin and Morcar, were key figures in the resistance. Perhaps the Normans felt that allowing the matriarch to be declared a saint would encourage more Englishmen to support the young earls? Finally, the post-Conquest period saw a flurry of hagiographic writing in England, which was long interpreted as a desperate attempt by the English to preserve their saints from Norman antagonism.<sup>1</sup> If the Normans had no respect for the English saints anyway, it would follow that they would not permit new ones to be made.

Even if Norman antagonism might explain why Godiva never became a saint, however, it does nothing to explain the legend of the naked ride. We know it is not true, so where did it come from? Its earliest documented appearance comes from Coventry Priory around 1218, while the earliest extant copy comes from St Alban's Abbey in 1250, where it has been inserted after the record of Leofric's death in 1057. This might suggest an attempt at hagiography, but earlier accounts depicting Leofric and Godiva as the blessed recipients of divine visions have not been preserved in any major chronicle. At one point, it was popularly believed that Norman monks had attached Godiva's name to an ancient Celtic fertility cult in an attempt to Christianize it, but England had been largely Christian for centuries before the Normans came; any such cult would have been Christianized long before Godiva was born.

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<sup>1</sup> This was undisputed until 1986, when Susan Ridyard argued that the Norman archbishop of Canterbury, Lanfranc, was not as inimical towards the Anglo-Saxon saints as he was long believed to have been.

There are, however, some broader factors that may help to shed some light on why Lady Godiva became a folk hero rather than a saint. One is a churchwide change in the process of canonization. Up until the late eleventh century, saints were made largely by local acclamation; there was no particular process and the papacy was not involved. This is the system under which one might reasonably expect to find Lady Godiva, cofounder of Coventry Priory and seer of visions, declared a saint by the monks of the priory or their bishop. This changed with the Gregorian Reforms of c. 1050-1080, however, and a petition to have a person declared a saint by the pope became an expensive and often lengthy affair.

Another factor is the rise in the popularity of secular literature in the twelfth century, such as the *Lais* of Marie de France or the Arthurian romance of Chrétien de Troyes. In the thirteenth century, Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, a collection of short hagiographies, became popular. Certain common themes may be identified in hagiography and secular literature at this point, and several of these themes appear in the legend of Lady Godiva. As canonization became more difficult, the difference between religious and secular literature become increasingly blurred. Could this explain why she became a secular hero rather than a saint?

What has become clear is that Lady Godiva died on the cusp of a new era, not just for England but for Christendom as a whole. The subjugation of the English by the Normans in 1066, as momentous as it seems to the student of English history, was merely one aspect of a social, religious and political upheaval that affected the whole of Europe. On the one hand, the church tried to separate itself from, and assert its authority over, the secular powers; on the other, religious and secular literature became increasingly intertwined.

In my thesis, I aim to analyze some of the key threads that make up the rich tapestry of

the post-Conquest world and to see how these threads interacted to produce the image of Lady Godiva, folk hero and saint manquée, that we see today. I begin with some historical background, looking at what is known of Godiva herself, of the development of the legend and of its reenactment as a more or less annual procession. I then look at the history of the saint in the Christian era generally and more specifically in the Anglo-Saxon context, before turning to secular influences on hagiography and examining the ways in which legends may change and develop over time. Finally, I look at the social significance of the legend at various times in its history, with particular focus on its origins, its Victorian revival and its surprising role in modern culture.

My first chapter, “The Lady and the Legend,” discusses what is known of the historical Godiva and of the origins and development of the legend. What exactly do we know about her and her family? Were her connections likely to prejudice the Normans against her? What do we know about the city of Coventry and its development after 1066? Who held power there, and how closely were their interests aligned with the people or with the crown? Why might St. Alban’s Abbey have taken an interest in the story of Godiva’s naked ride? There were, after all, several other churches founded by Leofric and Godiva that might be expected to have had a vested interest, yet it is St. Alban’s, with no obvious connection, that made a point of preserving the story, and did so with the clear intention of honouring her.

Chapter 2, “What Is a Saint?” briefly considers the purpose and history of saints in Christianity as a whole before turning to more specifically Anglo-Saxon concepts, such as the unusually strong correlation between royal birth and sainthood. While royal saints are found throughout Europe, only in pre-Conquest England are they the rule rather than the exception. It

discusses the role of cartulary<sup>2</sup> saints (another English peculiarity) as protectors of legal rights; of legendary<sup>3</sup> saints as exemplars of good Christian behaviour; and of visionary saints who receive messages from God.

Chapter 3, “Church Reform,” looks at the global changes brought about by the Gregorian Reforms, which removed the responsibility of canonization from the local bishop and placed it in the hands of the pope. It investigates William the Conqueror’s claim that his invasion of England was necessary because the English Church was corrupt and veering into heresy, and addresses the allegations that Lanfranc, the Norman archbishop of Canterbury from 1070 to 1089, was disrespectful of the English saints.

Chapter 4, “Hagiography as Literary Genre,” looks at the development and changing role of hagiography from the first millennium to the thirteenth century. It considers the influence, particularly from the twelfth century onwards, of such secular genres as folklore and romance, identifying some key themes which, with variations, occur regularly in both hagiography and non-religious tales.

Having established the religious and historical background against which the legend of Lady Godiva came into being, Chapter 5, “The Significance of the Legend,” expands upon the brief history given in Chapter 1 to consider the *why* as well as the *what*. Why did the prior of Coventry Abbey write such an apparently scandalous story about the founder of his monastery? How did a local legend become a household name, known not only throughout the UK but in Europe and North America, too? It looks at Godiva’s recent association with industry and engineering, as evidenced by the giant puppet exhibited at the London Olympics in 2012 and by her ongoing role in North American engineering societies. Do the Godiva Week ceremonies held

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<sup>2</sup> The cartulary, or founder, saint is named after the monastery’s collection of charters (from the Latin *carta*).

<sup>3</sup> A legendary is a collection of readings for monks; the legendary saint is one whose story frequently appears in such collections (from the Latin *legere*, to read).

each year by the University of Toronto Engineering Society suggest that Godiva has finally moved from folk hero to a form of sainthood, albeit an oddly secular one?

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Lady and the Legend

For too long, mainstream academic history focused on the deeds of men, and in particular on the deeds of great men: of kings, generals and rebels who imposed change from above, often by violence. Women, with the exception of ruling queens and regents, were perceived as being relegated largely to the domestic sphere and thus as not contributing significantly to the changing political world. Yet they are not as invisible in the historical record as one might think, particularly in the early medieval period. “Plenty of women appeared in histories, poetry, sagas, chronicles, charters, legal codes, and all the other documents produced in early medieval Europe,” writes Lisa Bitel (276), “but not as the principal makers of politics and history.”

Lady Godiva is one such woman. Though what is best known of her today is the tale of her naked ride through Coventry, undertaken to persuade her husband to lower the city’s taxes, references to her can be found in contemporary chronicles and in histories written in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. She is mentioned in *Domesday Book*, the great inventory of English lands and holdings compiled in 1086 at the order of William the Conqueror, and in Henry of Huntingdon’s *History of the English People*, written around 1123 at the request of the (Norman) bishop of Lincoln. She appears in the *Gesta Herwardi* as the religious but cold mother of Hereward the Wake.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, she is conspicuous by her absence in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, produced in the monasteries of Winchester, Abingdon, Worcester, Peterborough and Canterbury between the late ninth and mid-twelfth centuries,<sup>5</sup> and is also not mentioned in

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<sup>4</sup> This appears to have been the origin of the myth that he was her son. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* indicates that he was actually a tenant of Peterborough Abbey (205), about 16 miles from Bourne, but epic poetry called for a hero of noble birth.

<sup>5</sup> Surviving manuscripts of the ASC were translated into modern English and published as a single volume by Norman Garmonsway in 1954, with a new edition by Michael Swanton published in 1996. The texts are arranged

Robert Mannyng of Brunne's fourteenth-century *Chronicle*.

### **Who Was Lady Godiva?**

History leaves us no record of Lady Godiva's background; the names and deeds of her ancestors and contemporary relatives are unknown to us. All we know for certain is that her name would originally have been spelled Godgifu,<sup>6</sup> meaning 'gift from God,' and that Coventry was built on land that belonged to her rather than to her husband (Donoghue 7, Ellis Davidson 107).

Writing in 1123, the Anglo-Norman cleric Henry of Huntingdon has little to say about women. Lady Godiva is one of the very few he mentions. He describes her as "worthy of perpetual renown" and "famous for her great goodness," but there is no hint of the one thing for which she would later become so famous. He tells us simply that she "built the abbey at Coventry, and incomparably endowed it with gold and silver. She also built the church of Stow, below the ridge on which Lincoln stands, and many other churches" (*HEP* 22).

William Dugdale, a seventeenth-century antiquarian, alleges that Godiva was the sister of Thorold, Sheriff of Lincolnshire (2). Dugdale's sources are lost to us, but *Domesday Book* shows that Godiva's grandson, Earl Morcar, held the manor of Bourne, in the Lincolnshire fens, in 1066, so a Lincolnshire origin is certainly possible. However, the fourteenth-century chronicler Robert Mannyng of Brunne (Bourne) makes no reference to her, which seems a little odd if she was, in fact, born to a local family. While the omission might be attributed to the fact that Mannyng's *Chronicle* is not an original work but largely a translation into English of two earlier works by Norman authors, Robert Wace and Pierre de Langtoft<sup>7</sup>, who may have chosen to omit

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so that entries for the same year are in parallel, thus highlighting any regional differences. All references to 'the ASC' in this paper are to the Swanton edition.

<sup>6</sup> Pronounced God'yifa or God'yiva, with the 'i' as in 'gift.'

<sup>7</sup> Pierre took his name from the village in Yorkshire, not the Langtoft that lies only six miles from Bourne.

reference to a family that rebelled against the Conqueror, it would by no means have been unusual for a chronicler to have inserted something of local interest into his work.

Whatever his reasons, Mannyng's omission is typical of historians who dismiss Godiva as irrelevant because she was not "a maker of politics" (Bitel 276). "As far as name recognition is concerned," writes Daniel Donoghue, Professor of English at Harvard University, Lady Godiva is "the most famous individual from ... Anglo-Saxon England" (1). More people have heard of her than have heard of Alfred the Great, he says, yet she has been ignored by historians. The Ride is viewed either as a domestic matter - a dispute between husband and wife - or as a silly story. Either way, the historical Godiva is dismissed as nothing more than a wife and mother to the 'real' protagonists of history. Indeed, the few academic articles about Godiva are by folklorists, and the only serious book-length treatment is Donoghue's own *Lady Godiva: A Literary History of the Legend*.

While our knowledge of Godiva herself is limited, we do know a great deal about her husband, her children and her grandchildren, all of whom were major players in the upheaval of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, and even a little about her great-grandchildren, though by then her line was fading into respectable insignificance.

She was the wife of Leofric of Mercia, one of the three Great Earls (the others being Godwin of Wessex and Eric of Northumbria) who ruled England under Cnut. The couple had one son, Aelfgar, who became Earl of East Anglia in 1053, after the previous holder of that title, Harold Godwinson, succeeded his father as Earl of Wessex (ASC 182). Aelfgar was the father of Edwin and Morcar, both of whom became earls and fought at Hastings, and of Edith, who was married first to Gruffydd ap Llewelyn, King of North Wales, and subsequently to Harold Godwinson, who was briefly King of England and died at Hastings in 1066. Edith and

Gruffydd's daughter, Nest, married Osbern fitz Richard (Barlow 62), the son of Richard Scrob, a Frenchman, possibly Norman, who had come to England during the reign of Edward the Confessor (Kingsford, *ODNB* 1896; Lewis, *ODNB* 2004). Edith's son with Harold, born after his father's death and also named Harold, found refuge in Norway and, in 1103, was involved in a skirmish against Hugh of Chester, Coventry's Norman overlord, in Anglesey. There is no suggestion, however, that Harold was attempting to claim anything from Hugh: it would appear that both parties happened to raid Anglesey at the same time (Barlow 122).

In the aftermath of Hastings, Edwin and Morcar saw their sister safely to the Welsh border, then joined the resistance movement based largely in the northeast of England. They fought, not for their infant nephew Harold Ætheling<sup>8</sup> (an infant king would be nothing but a liability, especially when his uncles of Wessex and his uncles of Mercia had long been at loggerheads), but for Edgar, the adult grandson of Edmund Ironside (ASC 199), who in turn was the son of Aethelred the Unready. Edwin was killed in 1071, and Morcar surrendered to the king later that same year (ASC 107-8). Dugdale also assigns a second daughter, "Lucia,"<sup>9</sup> to Aelfgar. This "Lucia" was married first to Ivo Taillebois (4), a Norman who owned large amounts of land in northern Lincolnshire by 1086 (*DB* 909-14), and later to Roger fitz Gerold of Romara (also variously given as Rolmara or Roumare), Her son Guglielmus (William) became Earl of Lincolnshire (Dugdale 4).

Godiva's grandsons thus seriously undermined Norman security in the immediate aftermath of the Conquest, while Harold's claim to the throne meant that he remained a potential

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<sup>8</sup> The surname 'Ætheling' was given to the sons of kings and indicated eligibility for the throne.

<sup>9</sup> It is very unlikely that she would have been given such an exotic name at birth, but it was not uncommon for a woman to change her name upon marriage to a foreigner. If she was named Leofgifu, after both grandparents, she may have adopted "Lucia" as the closest name to her own.

threat for the next forty or fifty years.<sup>10</sup> There was also some small risk that Nest might scheme to get her half-brother back on the throne, or that Lucia might act on behalf of her nephew. This was handled, in typical medieval fashion, through marriage: Nest's husband was reasonably wealthy but had no political influence; Lucia's marriage to Taillebois consolidated her family's Lincolnshire holdings with others given to one of the Conqueror's loyal men, which were then passed down to her son.

We can follow Leofric's activities as earl of Mercia in the pages of the *ASC*, which shows him to be a noble, brave and honourable man, not at all like the greedy and rather grumpy character we think of today. There is also evidence that it was originally Leofric, not Godiva, to whom miracles were attributed, and who may have been a borderline candidate for sainthood. The Old English *Visio Leofrici* is a collection of four visions which Leofric is supposed to have seen at various times. The author is unknown, but the one surviving manuscript<sup>11</sup> is believed to have been copied and used at Worcester under the aegis of Saint Wulfstan (Stokes 530). The first of the four visions is related as follows:

It seemed to him truly when he was half asleep, not entirely like in a dream but more certainly, that he had to cross a very long and narrow bridge, with terrifying water like a river very far beneath it. When he was concerned with this, a voice said to him, 'Do not be afraid, you will cross the bridge easily.' Then with that he was immediately across; he did not know how. When he was across, a guide came to him and led him to a very beautiful and very fair field filled with a very sweet smell. Then he saw a very large throng like on Rogation Day who were all clothed in snow-white garments, just as the deacon is when he reads the gospel. One of them was in the middle in mass-priest's clothing, standing very high up and well above the other people. Then the guide said, 'Do you know who this is?' 'No,' he said. 'It is St Paul who has now celebrated mass and blesses these people.' Then he led him further until they came to where six venerable men sat, very splendidly clothed. One of the men said, 'Why must this foul man be in our fellowship?'

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<sup>10</sup> There is no record of Harold's death, neither do we know whether he had any children.

<sup>11</sup> The final three leaves of Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS. 367.

Then another answered him, saying, ‘he can be with us, he is newly baptized through penitence, and he will come to us on his third [re]birth [into Paradise]’.

Anonymous, *Visio Leofrici*

Ed. and trans. Peter J. Stokes 548 (parentheses are in the original)

Ultimately, however, neither the man of visions and ‘virtuous memory’ nor his divinely shielded ‘pious and noble’ wife was ever canonized or even beatified. Had Godiva not become a folk hero, it is likely that both would long since have been forgotten. Yet by the standards of their time, both easily qualified for sainthood as founders of a major abbey, and Leofric’s visions are comparable to those of many other Anglo-Saxon noblemen who did become saints, so why are they excluded? Was it their connection to the rebellion that led to suppression of their cult, or were there other factors at play?

One possibility is that by the end of the eleventh century founding an abbey had ceased to be regarded as an act of exceptional piety. John Hunt notes that “the patronage of Leofric and Godiva is in keeping with what might be expected of an important regional family” (105) and that such patronage was commonly used to develop or maintain political influence in an area outside of the family’s primary holdings (114-115). As a monastery’s greatest benefactor, an earl could arrange for the appointment of a relative as abbot, and Hunt gives examples of cases in which it became unclear whether the lands from which the abbey derived income belonged to earl or church (107). Since the earl could use the abbey to provide for his supporters, however, it ultimately worked in his favour.

There was also the question of whether a new foundation was built for the greater glory of God or of its founder. Hunt describes Coventry as an *Eigenkloster*, or family mausoleum, intended to ensure that “the acts and reputation of Leofric and Godiva would never be forgotten” (115). By the eleventh century, he says, such institutions were ubiquitous and thus no particular

merit attached to their founding.

In either of the above cases, of course, Godiva and/or Leofric might still have become a local saint had there been no change in the political *status quo*, since the abbot of Coventry was a close relative. That neither of them did could be attributed to the simple fact that the abbey was no longer in their family's hands and so nobody thought of it. There is, however, another possibility: an apparent dispute between the earls of Mercia and St Wulfstan of Worcester, an English abbot who fully supported the Norman attempts to reform the English Church and became a confidant of the Conqueror. Referencing the complaints of Hemming, a monk of Worcester, Hunt says, "It would seem that Leofric or his kin had taken the opportunity to endow their foundation ... with land that they had seized from Worcester" (106). Thus it is possible that Leofric and Godiva's claim to sainthood might have been dismissed not because of their descendants' opposition to King William but because of their own dispute with Wulfstan.

Two factors mitigate against this hypothesis, however. One is Stokes' claim that the *Visio Leofrici* was read at Worcester in Wulfstan's time. The second is Leofric's eulogy, which appears in the Chronicle of St Alban's Abbey but was written by Florence of Worcester, who clearly bore him no grudge:

The same year, that man of virtuous memory, count Leofric, died on the last day of August, and was honourably buried at Coventry, in the monastery which he and his wife, a devout worshipper of God and lover of the blessed Virgin Mary, the pious and noble countess Godiva, had built from its foundations out of her own patrimony; and having established monks in it, they endowed it so abundantly with estates, and treasures of various kinds, that there was not found such a quantity of gold, and silver, and precious stones in any monastery in all England as there was in that monastery at that time. They also magnificently endowed with estates, and houses, and various ornamental gifts, the churches of Worcester, Evesham, Wenlock, and Leominster, and some other convents, especially that of Saint John the Baptist, and Saint Wereburga the Virgin, situated

in Leicester, and the church of Saint Mary of Stow, which Eadmot, bishop of Dorchester, had built.

Matthew of Westminster,<sup>12</sup> *The Flowers of History*  
Translated by C.D. Yonge, 543-544.

## Coventry and Its Priory

In the aftermath of the war that brought Cnut to the throne of England in 1016, Coventry was at best a hamlet, and perhaps just empty fields. Local tradition claims that a convent had once stood there, founded by Saint Osberga, and that this had been destroyed in the war. Leofric and Godiva are alleged to have founded Saint Mary's Priory on the site of the destroyed nunnery, thus preserving it as hallowed ground. Archaeologists have been unable to confirm this, however, as excavations in the 1960s revealed that "medieval builders had levelled the site down to bedrock, effectively removing any earlier archaeological strata" (Rylatt 68).

The foundation of the new priory is believed to have occurred in the 1020s, with the dedication taking place in 1043 (Demidowicz 1). It initially housed twenty-four monks, roughly on a par with Evesham and Worcester (Knowles 126), and even two centuries later, in 1256, it boasted no more than thirty (Swanson 140). The town grew up around it, starting with "small, irregular plots . . . indicative of market colonisation" (Lilley 76-77). This appears to have been in keeping with a general Benedictine policy of encouraging urban growth around monastic foundations: the letting of market plots provided the monks with income (91). *Domesday Book* gives the population of Coventry in 1086 as "7 serfs . . . 50 villeins and 12 bordars" (655);<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The identity of Matthew of Westminster is uncertain, as the name is not found on any roll of monks from the period (Widmore, cited in Wedlake Brayley, 70). However, he was thought to be a fourteenth-century monk of Westminster Abbey, who copied and extended the *Flowers of History* of Matthew Paris, whose work was in turn based upon that of Roger of Wendover (Yonge ii). Citations in this thesis are from Yonge's translation of the Westminster version.

<sup>13</sup> The distinctions between the various classes of agricultural worker were often blurred. Roughly speaking, serfs were the lord's tenants while villeins were freeholders who owed labour duties, but John Riddle cites cases where individual peasants disputed the status attributed to them by their neighbours (180), and it is known that the

Donoghue reminds us that these are adult males only, and says that the actual population was probably closer to 350, not including the monks (38).

Like many places in Norman England that were centred around Benedictine monasteries, Coventry grew rapidly in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. While its growth does not seem to have matched that of Worcester, which added ten new parish churches to the diocese in the last quarter of the eleventh century alone (Brooks 15), Ranulph II, earl of Chester 1129-1153, made Coventry his base of operations and actively encouraged settlement there (Donoghue 39). Thus by the time Matthew Paris completed the *Chronica Majora* in c. 1250, Coventry was a substantial stone-built town rather than the Anglo-Saxon village of Godiva's day.

Donoghue remarks that the first two centuries of Coventry's history were rife with disputes between the earls of Chester, the prior of Saint Mary's, and the bishop of Lichfield, who claimed authority over the priory (40). Towards the end of Earl Ranulph II's rulership, charters were forged which exempted the priory from the payment of all dues. Could the legend of Godiva winning freedom from taxation for Coventry have been linked to these forgeries? As Donoghue points out, forgeries were often just documents that put into writing what was already well known to be the case, in order to preserve existing rights going forward, rather than attempts to defraud (40). Saints, particularly founder saints, traditionally had a major role to play in the maintenance of their people's rights, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **The Development of the Legend**

A full examination of the story of Godiva's Ride will be undertaken in Chapter 5. The different versions will be discussed in detail there, along with what is known of the authors and the political and social circumstances that may have motivated them. The purpose of this section

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*Domesday* compilers did not entirely understand the English system and often recorded peasants' status incorrectly. A bordar, also called a cottar, fell between the other two, owning a cottage and a small amount of land (179).

is to give the reader an overview of the story's history and to introduce the key points arising from it.

The first written version of the legend is attributed to Geoffrey, prior of Coventry from 1216 to 1235, and is believed to have been written for the Trinity Sunday Fair in 1218 (Donoghue 40-41). Sadly no manuscript has survived, and we know of this version only from a "paraphrase," as Donoghue calls it (41), by Richard Grafton, a seventeenth-century antiquarian. In this version, Godiva rides unseen because the town's officials have ordered everybody to remain inside with their doors and windows closed. Godiva, watched by her husband and chaperoned by a gentlewoman, is never in any real danger (Peeping Tom is a later addition), and Leofric's acquiescence to her pleas has something of the air of a man losing a bet. It is an altogether peculiar story for a prior to write about his monastery's founders, so why did he do so? Did he know it was untrue, or was he misled by some local folktale? If it was an original creation, what were his influences? If he wrote it for the Trinity Sunday fair, was it intended to be performed as a play or merely read (or sung)?

The first extant version is found in a manuscript dated to 1250: it is Matthew of Paris's *Chronicon, or Flowers of History*, and the story appears as an insert immediately after Leofric's eulogy cited above. This version is more in keeping with hagiographic tradition: Leofric specifies that Godiva must ride through the marketplace when it is busy, and recognizes the divine approval of her cause when she does so unseen (an element which, as we shall see in Chapter 4, was popular in Virgin Martyr stories). Even so, it reads strangely, with the "man of virtuous memory" refusing to listen to pleas for justice until obliged to do so by a miracle. Donoghue (41-42) believes the significant differences between these two accounts, dated at most thirty years apart and possibly as few as ten, is indicative that the story had been in circulation

long before Geoffrey wrote it down. However, based upon more recent ideas about folklore and oral tradition (see Chapter 4), I shall argue that Geoffrey's story and the St Alban's adaptation were original compositions.

Both Matthew and Geoffrey refer to Godiva "freeing" Coventry from "slavery," but exactly what is meant by that is never made clear. By the fifteenth century, it had come to be understood as freedom from taxation, as is demonstrated by an image in a window of Holy Trinity Church, Coventry, with the caption, "I Luriche [Leofric], for love of thee / Doe make Coventrie toll-free," and by a note left on the door of Saint Michael's Church in 1495, in which angry citizens reminded their overlords that Godiva had freed them from taxation (Ellis Davidson 111). Although most taxes in Coventry would have been Godiva's responsibility, since the city was built on her patrimony, Hilda Ellis Davidson suggests that the taxation in question here might have been the *Heregeld*, which Leofric would collect on behalf of the king to support the king's bodyguard (111). I shall argue, however, that the taxes in question dated not from Godiva's day but from Geoffrey's, when the monks were reduced to poverty by heavy taxation under King John.

It is not known exactly when and how Peeping Tom, the voyeur who attempts to see Godiva naked and is struck down for it, became a part of the legend. One hypothesis is that it was a mistake. In Prior Geoffrey's version, Godiva is watched by her husband, and this is shown in Adam van Noort's 1585 painting of "Lady Goodiva" (top right-hand window). This painting hangs in the Herbert Art Museum and Gallery in Coventry, and the information plaque suggests that someone mistook Leofric for a townsman who wickedly disobeyed the order to keep his shutters closed, thus giving rise to the new element.



“Lady Goodiva” by Adam van Noort, 1585. Image is Public Domain.

Another possibility is that Tom arose from the Godiva processions. According to F. Bliss Burbidge (1952, cited in Donoghue 48):

When the Roman Catholic religion was prohibited, they [the Corpus Christi pageants] were continued, with many alterations, as a mockery; a naked woman on horseback was introduced to ridicule the Sacred Host – immediately after her came a Merry Andrew, to divert the populace with profane jests; he was drawn in a kind of house upon wheels, and from looking frequently out of the window, acquired the name of Peeping Tom.

Ellis Davidson (116) suggests a third possibility: in 1659, a visitor to Coventry was told, probably as a joke, that a statue he enquired about “represented the man who was struck blind for trying to see Godiva as she rode past.” Ellis Davidson thinks it was probably a statue of St George, either from a church or from a medieval clock (117). In 1765, the statue was dressed up and used for the first time in the Godiva procession. The fact that more than a century elapsed

between the two suggests that the people of Coventry knew, at least early on, that this was not the true nature of the statue, but it is possible that as the generations passed they came to believe in their own story.

The idea that he arose from the Godiva procession strikes me as the least likely explanation. The Merry Andrew had a name and was doing what Merry Andrews do, so why give him a new name based on those actions? The other two are not mutually exclusive: the idea could have arisen from a misunderstanding of the painting and been given broader currency by the joke about the statue. However, given that the painting probably had a limited audience, I think the most likely explanation is that people thought, “I bet there was one who peeped!”, and again the association with the statue reinforced the idea.

### **The Godiva Procession**

Prior Geoffrey, author of what is believed to be the earliest version of the Godiva legend, held office at Saint Mary’s from 1216 to 1235. Donoghue suggests that he may have been influenced by a fair established on Trinity Sunday by Ranulph III in 1218 and taken the opportunity to present the Godiva legend as a myth of origin (40-41), a suggestion I will consider more thoroughly in Chapter 5. Even if this was the case, however, there is no record of what form the performance may have taken.

The first properly documented Lady Godiva parade did not take place until 460 years later, in 1678, when the city decided to include a re-enactment of its foundress’s ride in the procession that opened the Great Show Fair (Donoghue 47). There is some suggestion that there may have been other, less official, performances in earlier years, particularly in the years after the Reformation, when it may have been intended to ridicule the Roman Catholic celebration of Corpus Christi (47-48), but this is not certain.

Ellis Davidson suggests that immediately post-Reformation, “the yearly procession which survived was a sober and restricted affair” which was “revived once more with elaborate ceremonial” after the accession of Charles II in 1660 (114). From her description of other elements involved from time to time, the revived procession would appear to have been simply a celebration of the city, its history, and whatever connections might make for a good show. The parade continued to take place, on a more or less annual basis, until the 1950s, when it was temporarily abandoned as Coventry tried to reinvent itself as a modern, industrial city.

In recent years, an interest in “roots” and all things medieval has led to a resurgence of interest in the Godiva legend. Once a figure of strictly local interest, she was adopted as a national symbol in 2012, when a giant Lady Godiva puppet processed from Coventry to London for the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Elements of Sainthood**

It is my contention that Lady Godiva met the Anglo-Saxon definition of a founder saint, even without her visions or the ‘miracle’ of the unseen ride through the marketplace, but what exactly is a saint, anyway? This chapter explores the origins in Late Antiquity of the Christian cult of saints, then addresses the development of saintly conventions in England, with particular focus on the Anglo-Saxon royal saint, the cartulary saint (the founder of a monastic institution), the legendary saint (‘legendary’ here being used in its original sense of ‘the subject of reading matter’), and the visionary. While I treat these as four distinct categories, it should be noted that there was, in fact, a great deal of overlap, and many saints fit easily into two, three, or even all four groups.

#### **What Is a Saint?**

In the ‘Christian West’ today, saints are commonly associated exclusively with the Roman Catholic tradition, although the term may often be used to refer to any deceased Christian thought to be in heaven, or figuratively to a certain kind of personality (Webster’s Canadian Dictionary and Thesaurus).

However, theologian Nicholas Sagovsky makes a case for the existence of saints within the Anglican tradition also, and further considers the differences between local and universal acceptance of a saint’s cult. To this end, he compares the official status of three people locally considered by some to be saints in Lincoln, England: a thirteenth-century bishop (St Hugh), a murdered child (Little St Hugh), also from the thirteenth century, and a nineteenth-century bishop, Edward King.

Today, there are four steps to canonization in the Roman Catholic church. The process begins with a diocesan investigation into the candidate's orthodoxy and character, during which time the candidate is a "Servant of God." Next comes an investigation by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome, after which the successful candidate is referred to as "Venerable." The third step is a search for evidence that the candidate was either martyred for the faith or has a miracle associated with them, after which they are styled "Blessed" and their home diocese is permitted to institute a feast day to commemorate them. Finally, if "a second miracle, directly attributable to their intercession" can be confirmed, they are declared a saint and may be venerated universally (Sagovsky 178-79).

This is very different from the Anglican tradition, which declares the invocation of saints to be "a fond thing vainly invented, and . . . repugnant to the Word of God" (Article XXII, cited in Sagovsky 180). The Church of England does recognize the value of role models, and since 1980 has allowed a handful of non-Scriptural role models to be commemorated on a fixed day in the "Lesser Festivals" (Sagovsky 178). The commemoration is standardized, however, allowing only for the insertion of a name, and miracles are not a factor in determining who should be thus honoured (180).

Of the three saints Sagovsky considers, only St Hugh the bishop is recognized by both Catholics and Anglicans, acknowledged by the former as a worker of miracles and commemorated by the latter as a good example of a caring and efficient bishop (176). Edward King, as an Anglican bishop, is commemorated within the Anglican tradition, on the same terms as St Hugh, but is not acknowledged a saint by the Catholic Church (178). Prior to the Gregorian Reforms, Little St Hugh would certainly have been considered a local saint, with a huge emotional response to his alleged ritual murder by Jews and a large number of miracles

attributed to him at the time of his death. He was ultimately rejected for canonization, however, as the investigative process revealed that there was no good evidence either that he had been murdered for being a Christian or that he had actually performed any miracles. Today, a commemorative plaque by his grave is tended by the Jewish community, in memory of the eighteen Jews who were hanged for his alleged murder (176-77).

### **Origin of the Cult of Saints**

The first use of the word “saints” in a Christian context, chronologically speaking, is found in First Thessalonians 3:13, written around 50-51 CE. St. Paul writes, “And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” However, the editor’s footnote states that while it might mean “Christians” in this context, it might also have been intended to mean “the angels,” a common Hebrew Bible usage. Similarly, in Second Thessalonians 1:10, “when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day amongst all who have believed,” it is unclear whether “saints” and “all who have believed” are synonymous or whether a distinction is being made. “God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit” (2:13) might point to the former, but this is by no means certain. The word “saints” is also used in Acts 9:41 (“Then calling the saints and widows, [Peter] showed [Tabitha] to be alive”), where it seems unlikely to refer to angels, but the use is unique in this book and the meaning is still unclear— the author usually uses either “disciples” or “brothers.”

The salutation in Paul’s letter to the Philippians is, however, unequivocal: the letter is addressed to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi” (1:1). This epistle is thought to date from 54-55 CE, and certainly from no later than 62 CE (NRSV 1908), thus confirming Robert Bartlett’s contention that Christians were referred to as “saints” from the earliest days of

Christianity because they were all “holy people” in the sense that they had chosen to serve God (15). Some individuals, however, were regarded as being worthy of exceptional reverence, as they had suffered and died for the faith (3), and it is not clear when the word was first used in this specific sense. All that can be said with certainty is that by the second or third century CE the martyrs were sometimes referred to in a way that made the word “saint” seem like a title—for example, “Saint Felicity” (16).

Peter Brown suggests that the “cult of the saints” may have begun, from an elite point of view, as an attempt to encourage Christians to follow the example of the martyrs (xxvii). It begins in the Acts of the Apostles (7:54-60) with an account of the death of the first martyr, St Stephen, and in the numerous letters of St Paul. The interests of the average Christian, however, were very different. While theologians disputed whether the dead martyrs could intervene in the affairs of the material world, and whether they would want to even if they could (xxv-xxvi), for many Christians saints were seen almost from the beginning as “deeply immanent presences” (xxx), and “enduring sources of supernatural power” (Bartlett 3). The martyrs, it seems, were often hero-worshipped, perhaps much as modern celebrities might be.

Worship at shrines – which initially were just the tombs of the martyrs – horrified Jews and pagans alike (Bartlett 4). In addition to concerns that the martyrs, who from a non-Christian point of view were criminals, were being worshipped as idols, they had concerns about hygiene and proper separation between the living and the dead (Brown 7). The dead had always been separated from the living, with cemeteries outside the city walls; the Christian obsession with handling body parts was anathema. From the Christian point of view, however, the martyr was both a “friend of God” (6) and present in his or her material remains, so the purpose of holding religious services in the presence of these remains was “to join Heaven and Earth” (1).

From the fourth century onwards, when Christians were no longer routinely persecuted, new paths to sainthood were created. Rather than dying for the faith, the “élite” Christian was now one who had “lived for it, in a heroic and resolute way” (Bartlett 16-17), either as a confessor, proclaiming the faith, or as a desert hermit.

### **The Anglo-Saxon Royal Saint**

The cult of saints in England began much as it had in the Mediterranean, with martyrs and confessors. The first of these were, of course, primarily priests and missionaries, but it was not long before kings – and occasionally queens – were added to the list. While many countries boast a handful of royal saints, mostly from the time of their conversion to Christianity, the tradition in England was notable for “the ubiquity and persistence of the royal cults” (Ridyard *Royal Saints* 3), which ended with the canonization of England’s last undisputed king before the Conquest, Edward the Confessor (1).

Both men and women of royal stock frequently became saints, and the qualities required were very different for kings than for women or young princes. This, says Susan Ridyard, was because “Hagiography tended to shade into monastic history; and monastic history was determined in large measure by the activities, benevolent and otherwise, of kings and royal ladies” (*Royal Saints* 79). Thus the royal saints, and particularly the women, who brought their dowries to the monastery, in time came to be regarded as the patron saint of the institution they had founded or joined (237), not only in life but also as powerful “friend[s] of God” (Brown 6) after death.

Generally speaking, a king was supposed to carry out the proper duties of kingship, including just rule and the protection of his people. If he was killed in the attempt, he might be considered a martyr and thus a saint. One of the best-known saints in this category is Saint

Oswald. The son of Æthelfrith of Bernicia, he became king of Northumberland in 634 and reigned for nine years, until his death in battle against Penda the Southumbrian in 641, according to the Peterborough manuscript of the *ASC*.<sup>14</sup>

Martyrdom on its own, however, was not an automatic path to sainthood for a ruler. Sigebert of East Anglia (629-634) was the first English king to enter a monastery; recalled to his kingly duties, he was killed by a pagan invader while refusing to raise a hand in his own defence. He thus clearly died for his Christian principles, but in doing so he abandoned his people to pagan rule. Although Sigebert is venerated as a saint today, Ridyard comments that Bede was very ambivalent about Sigebert's claim to sanctity, feeling that he had abandoned duty for a selfish goal (*Royal Saints* 92).

The other possible qualification for a royal male was the tradition of the “martyred innocent” – usually a very young prince killed by a political rival or even by a family member (Ridyard, *Royal Saints* 246). Ridyard suggests that these twin traditions were fostered by the church with a view to the promotion of a peaceful society in which kings performed their duties and regicides were condemned for wickedness (251).

While kings attained sainthood by the diligent performance of their duties, their daughters were honoured more for the rejection of earthly duty – “earthly duty” in this case generally consisting of dynastic marriage and the production of heirs (Ridyard *Royal Saints* 83). Æthelthryth, daughter of King Anna of Northumbria, remained a virgin through twelve years of marriage until finally, twice widowed, she was permitted to found a monastery on the Isle of Ely and retire there (82). Other royal virgins were not put to the test quite as strongly as was Æthelthryth, and their achievement centred not so much on their rejection of the flesh as on their

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<sup>14</sup> Not only do dates frequently vary from one monastic chronicle to another, but internal consistency is often lacking, too. Entries about even the most important events were often not made until much later, which might cause errors, and there were several different systems in use to determine when a new year began (*ASC* xiv-xv).

humility and rejection of the trappings of wealth (88).

The last category of royal saint is the devout widow, the woman who did her earthly duty, “lead[ing] her husband in the ways of virtue and . . . provid[ing] him with worthy heirs (Ridyard *Royal Saints* 90). Æthelthryth’s niece Eormenilda falls into this category. Ridyard stresses, however, that monasticism was an essential element of female sainthood: no matter how exemplary their public lives, queens were expected to retire to a monastery if they were to be considered saints (92). Throughout the Anglo-Saxon period widowed queens, even if considered worthy of veneration as saints, were considered to be less meritorious than those who had preserved their virginity for Christ (91).

There is thus a strong tradition of martyrdom within the Royal Saint tradition, but its expression is different for men than for women. With the exception of Edward the Confessor, who reigned over a united Christian country, a premature and violent death was a prerequisite for kings and princes. Women, on the other hand, followed more in the tradition of virgin martyrs such as St Anastasia or St Agnes, declaring themselves brides of Christ and rejecting earthly marriage. However, as the wives and daughters of Christian kings, torture and violent death were not required for them to be considered saints.<sup>15</sup>

### *Sacrality vs Sanctity*

While only a small percentage of society was of royal or near-royal status, a very high proportion of Anglo-Saxon saints are drawn from this group (Bartlett 211). One reason suggested for this imbalance is that royal sanctity was “the medieval version of sacral kingship” (Klaniczay, cited in Gaposchkin 7), and the royal saints the “lineal descendants” of the sacral

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<sup>15</sup> The story of Edward the Confessor is remarkably similar to that of St Alexis, whose story was very popular in the twelfth century. This and the original Virgin Martyr tradition are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

kings (Chaney, cited in Ridyard 74). The sacral king, in turn, has been described by James Frazer as “the lineal successor of the old magician or medicine-man,” a sacred being who “may [himself] attain to godhead, not merely after [his] death, but in [his] lifetime, through the temporary or permanent possession of [his] whole nature by a great and powerful spirit” (119). These kings were literally a special breed: a cross between humanity and the “supernatural agents” who “worked the world” (13). This “agent” might be a god or a mythical beast, and it was by virtue of descent from this being that the kings “possess[ed] magical or supernatural powers by virtue of which they [could] fertilise the earth and confer other benefits on their subjects” (117).

Frazer believes that this concept was “shared by the ancestors of all the Aryan races from India to Ireland” (117). J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, however, has traced its development in the Germanic tribes to Tacitus, who distinguished between the leader of a warrior band, whose powers were based purely on skill in war, and those who led a united tribe. This definition “will in turn have influenced the Germans’ outlook on their own leadership,” he says (7). Those who led a tribe were seen as “cult-kings” who “incapsulat[ed] good luck” (7-8). Among the Franks (a confederacy of West Germanic tribes), were *reges criniti* (long-haired kings), who were chosen for their *nobilitas* and were authorized to negotiate with the Romans on behalf of their people (17). In the early sixth century, the first Christian king among the Franks was Clovis, a long-haired Merovingian – that is, one who claimed descent from Merovech, alleged to be the son of a human woman and a sea-beast (18). Even after Clovis became a Christian, says Wallace-Hadrill, “the enduring roots of his kingship lay in something old and tribal” (19). In c. 590, the marriage of Æthelbert of Kent to Bertha, great-granddaughter of Clovis, united the Merovingian and Kentish royal families (24).

A little over a century later, Isidore of Seville was insisting that there was nothing magical about kingship; that it was, in fact, merely “the exercise of a Christian function, and that what the king holds is neither more nor less than a *ministerium*, an office, within the Church” (Wallace-Hadrill 53–54). The role of the king, as defined by the Church that gave it legitimacy, could be summed up as “protection of the Christian church and of Christian society” (Ridyard, *Royal Saints* 75), and offered sanctity as a reward for a job well done (76). Far from being a “lineal descendant” of sacrality, sanctity among the Anglo-Saxon kings was an entirely new concept arising from the idea of kingship as an office. Ridyard stresses the fundamental difference between the two, namely that sanctity is not an ascribed but an acquired status: Anglo-Saxon kings were not assumed to be inherently sacred by virtue of being of royal descent, but had to work to be recognized as such in a specifically Christian context (*Royal Saints* 77), and this recognition was awarded posthumously.

While the saint could intercede with God on special terms and some “agrarian saints” might be “associated with particular crops or stages in the growing cycle” (Wilson xix), the king, during his lifetime, had no such powers. The replacement of the ascribed status of sacrality by the acquired status of sanctity was, Ridyard says, very clear in principle, even if the “theoretical subtleties” may have been poorly understood by the laity (78).

Writing of a later change in accepted religious ideas, Peter Brown says, “Since the period of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, scholars had tended to treat the Catholic cult of the saints as no more than a peculiarly pervasive form of popular superstition” (xvi) – an attitude which hides the rich tapestry of social relations that may be expressed through popular belief (xvi–xix). Although Ridyard is undoubtedly correct in saying that sanctity was a fundamentally different concept from sacrality, rather than a mere variant or syncretism, and that “sanctity did

not flow in the veins of the early medieval English kings” (*Royal Saints* 78), she may be seeing an unrealistically exclusive replacement of one principle by another. As Stephen Wilson writes, “although there are valid distinctions to make between the established official ritual of the Churches and the informal rites of magic, there was in practice an enormous overlap between the two” (xviii). While Isidore of Seville wrote his treatise on the mundane nature of Christian kingship as early as the seventh century, there is evidence that what could only be described as an acceptance of sacrality continued at least into the thirteenth century, perhaps even the seventeenth, and reached as high as the Pope himself.

Bede, writing in the early part of the eighth century, was very much in the “overlap” zone. On the one hand, he believed with Isidore that “rule of any kind was a professional occupation” (Wallace-Hadrill 74). Yet he was also influenced by the biblical accounts of kings, and particularly that of Saul and David, which clearly depict sacrality in David’s refusal to harm Saul, “not because of unction but because he was king” (77). With such a powerful example of sacral kingship in Holy Writ itself, it would be surprising indeed if the concept of sacral kingship had died out under Christian rule. Cecilia Gaposchkin is clear that David, to whom many saint-kings were likened in their hagiographies, was seen as the archetype for both saintly and sacral kingship (112).

Even without any comparison to David, however, the same ideas that were fundamental to sacrality are present in the miracles attributed to numerous saint-kings. Bartlett reports that following the death of the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV, in 1106, many peasants came to take earth from his grave to improve the fertility of their land (213-4). Both Edward the Confessor (d. 1065) and Waldemar I of Denmark (d. 1182) were believed to cure illness by touch, and the idea that the king had special powers to cure scrofula reached its zenith under Charles II (d. 1685)

(Frazer 118). The French kings, too, were believed to have hereditary healing powers (118) – powers which had a history longer than sacral kingship itself, going all the way back to the medicine-man (119).

Yet there was some dispute as to the origin of these seemingly ancient powers. William of Malmesbury (d. 1143) fulminated against the idea “that Edward the Confessor’s healing powers ‘stemmed not from sanctity but hereditarily from royal stock’” (Bartlett 214), arguing that Edward’s healing powers were evidence of his personal relationship with God. The Merovingians, despite their myth of origin, had no “widespread cultus of holy kings” (Wallace-Hadrill 50–1), and in fact attributed their prosperity to the prayers of saints (59). If the king was chosen by God, as the Church taught, then surely he had a special relationship with God by virtue of being king; since kingship is hereditary, such an understanding is difficult to separate from true sacrality. The prosperity of the land might be interpreted as God’s reward for a Christian king who kept himself in good standing with the Church – in essence very similar to the notion of the king being assisted by supernatural agents who were in some way related to him, except that in this case the “agent” is cast more in the light of a satisfied employer.

Furthermore, given that sanctity and sacrality are so very different, it seems unnecessary to assume that the acceptance of the one automatically required rejection of the other. On the one hand, “The barbarian king might find his role in such a design [as defender of the Church] without losing too much of what was traditional to him” (Wallace-Hadrill 96–7). On the other, a Christian king might draw upon the notion of hereditary “sanctity” for the prestige it would give him (87): Philip the Fair of France sought the canonization of his grandfather, Louis IX (d. 1270), because of the “pre-eminent system of Capetian sacral authority” it would give to his dynasty (Gaposchkin 197). Gaposchkin sees Louis, like David, as fully meeting the criteria of

both sacral and saintly kingship:

In Louis, the *rex virtutis* took the form of a *rex sanctus*. By means of Louis' achieved status of saint, the logic of a king's heavenly merits could be pushed to its useful extreme since not only heaven but sanctity was the characteristic and reward of good governance and just rule. **This was where sacral royalty and saintly kingship met.** Royalty was sacral not only because, like the priesthood, the king was a mediator of God's rule, but also because the king was chosen by God to effect His reign on earth."

Gaposchkin, *The Making of Saint Louis*, pp. 110–11 (my emphasis)

Two further complications present themselves. The first is that the heavy emphasis on royal descent may in some cases have had political rather than religious significance. Adela of Blois, youngest daughter of William the Conqueror, is held by some to be a saint, and her history involves elements of both sacrality and sanctity. Her biographers Godfrey of Rheims and Ivo of Chartres stress that not only was she of Capetian royal blood on her mother's side, but she was born to a king. Ivo goes so far as to claim that she was not even conceived until after her father's coronation (LoPrete 23–24), on the principle that only if her father was anointed prior to her conception could she be held to have inherited royal blood from him (24). If Adela is viewed as a saint, then this emphasis strongly suggests that an element of sacrality was considered important in twelfth-century France. At the same time, the actual grounds for her sainthood follow the classic pattern of the royal widow: the dutiful wife and mother who "educated her boys in devotion to the Church" (LoPrete 406), endowed multiple monasteries and cathedrals (418), went some way towards reforming both monasteries and parish churches (247), and ultimately retired to a nunnery (352). However, Kimberly LoPrete, writing about Adela as "Countess and Lord" rather than as saint, while acknowledging that "belief in the transformative power of anointing" was a significant element here, also suggests a more prosaic reason for the emphasis on Adela's doubly-royal birth: legitimate temporal power comes from high birth status (26). While this does, in a sense, posit royalty as a breed apart, it points more to strictly controlled

social stratification than to any inherent magical quality.<sup>16</sup>

The second complication is that in medieval Italy, “where a city succeeded in avoiding despotic rule, the [patron] saint represented the monarchic principle in urban society, supreme, undying, transcending mere mortal and temporary officials” (Webb 20). This suggests that a mere official, even if supported by the Church and people, was not felt to be sufficient; an element of the divine was felt to be a prerequisite for a true ruler.

While sacrality and sanctity are clearly two different concepts, it seems that, far from the one becoming or replacing the other, sanctity was simply added to sacrality in the general worldview. Sacrality was a connection to the divine that a king enjoyed simply by virtue of his descent and rank, and ended when his death terminated his contact with the mortal world. Sanctity was a reward for good rulership which ensured that the good king’s connection to his people continued after his death when, like the early saints, he became an advocate for his people in the court of the *rex regum*.

## **Cartulary Saints**

### *The Cartulary*

The cartulary was a monastery’s, cathedral’s or family’s archive. It contained stories of key figures or events from the past, along with charters, deeds of ownership, and grants of rights that could be used to prove title if its neighbours attempted to encroach on its lands or prerogatives. Ancient cartularies generally have not survived, or may consist only of random scraps that give little information. We do, however, have cartulary-chronicles from the twelfth century, and these give us an idea of the kinds of documents that were considered to be of value.

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<sup>16</sup> Even today, the concept that being born royal is superior to becoming royal is evident in the fact that princesses of the blood do not have to curtsy to women who have married into the Royal Family unless the woman’s husband is also present. Thus little Princess Charlotte of Cambridge is held to outrank her own mother and step-grandmother by virtue of her royal birth.

Janet Fairweather, in her introduction to the *Liber Eliensis*, describes the cartulary-chronicle as being similar to “a modern source-book designed to present key primary texts . . . on some historical theme . . . It includes, alongside chapters which simply present charters or copy out some complete narrative text word for word, others in which the compiler combines data from several sources, working the material up in his own words” (xiv). These documents included not only items that would be considered to have legal standing today, such as wills, title deeds and records of land transactions, but also commemorations of benefactors and miracle stories (xv). Katharine Keats-Rohan, introducing the Cartulary of Mont-St-Michel, feels that piecemeal study of individual documents undermines the importance of the cartulary-chronicle as “a unique written work,” and believes it should be studied as a unit, with the positioning of each document being considered an essential property of that unit (95).

The compiler of the *LE* has divided his chronicle into three sections, each with its own introduction and a list of the documents it contains, and those documents have been carefully placed in chronological order, which does indeed give the impression of a sourcebook. The first book is an account of the refounding of the abbey by St Æthelthryth and her kinswomen, and of their posthumous miracles; the second deals with, in the compiler’s own words, “the people who restored the monastery, and their wills” (84); and the third “report[s] the times of the bishops and the things which befell them” (285). Thus the *LE* clearly indicates the importance to the abbey of good record-keeping and a careful study of the records, noting that Abbot Richard “rebutted the claims of challengers with righteous oratory . . . giving a clear account of his church” (285).

The compiler at Mont-St-Michel has taken a very different approach, first placing all the charters from the ducal family together, and following these with charters from lesser persons (Keats-Rohan 102). The narrative that links the charters expounds upon the theme of “lay

usurpation and the attempts by the abbots to recover such losses” (106) – the same theme that unites Book 3 of the *LE*. The first non-charter text is the *Revelatio*, “a hagiographical product of the mid-ninth century dealing with the abbey’s foundation by Bishop Aubert, c. 708–715, after the Archangel Michael had appeared to him in dreams” (102). An image of the vision forms the frontispiece, and the cartulary also contains two other images, one of which does not correlate with any of the written texts (Le Maho, no page).

The *Gesta Herwardi* was discovered in an early fourteenth-century cartulary of Peterborough Cathedral, “placed at the end . . . among lists of bishoprics, and other odds and ends” (*GH* xlvi). The positioning is unsurprising, given that Hereward was far from a friend of Peterborough (see below) and certainly made no contribution to the “*prima fundacione . . . restauratione . . . priuilegiis . . . et omnibus libertatibus . . . eiusdem ecclesiae*” (xlvi).<sup>17</sup> It is presumably included, however, because Hereward was granted a vision of St Peter, in which he was scolded for his actions: the miracle here is attributed to St Peter, rather than to Hereward in hagiographical fashion, and is evidently considered quite minor.

### *The Cartulary Saint*

As the cartulary contained documents relating to the foundation of the monastery or cathedral, the chief donor(s) became known as “cartulary saints.” By 1100, fully eighty-six per cent of all English saints were associated with a monastery in some way (Blair 143). Not all were founders, however: some were reformers or defenders, or had otherwise brought honour to the monastery through association – St Cuthbert, for example, was associated with both Lindisfarne and Melrose abbeys, though both were thriving establishments when he entered them. The founders from the period 670–700 are the best known, as this was a period in which monasteries

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<sup>17</sup> “The original foundation, restoration, privileges and liberties of that church.”

were primarily founded by members of royal families (84). Subsequently, the founding of small private minsters became widespread, to the great dismay of Bede, who saw these little minsters as nothing but a dissolute aristocracy “buy[ing] territories for themselves in which they can more easily indulge their lust” (*Epistola ad Ecgbertum Episcopum*, cited in Blair 101).

It was believed that those who had endowed or led a monastery retained an interest in their former property even after death, and they were regarded, says Blair, as a kind of “immortal landlord” (142). This is best exemplified at Ely, where St Æthelthryth played a very active role in defending the monastery’s land from the incursions of impious Normans such as Sheriff Picot or Gervase, the “administrator of a perverse taxation” (*LE* 252). Æthelthryth finally had enough of Gervase’s importunity and confronted him directly:

She lifted the staff which she was carrying and implanted its point heavily in the region of his heart, as if to pierce him through. Then her sisters, St Wihtburh and St Seaxburh, wounded him with the hard points of their staves. Gervase, to be sure, with his terrible groaning and horrible screaming, disturbed the whole of his household as they lay round about him: in the hearing of them all he said, ‘Lady, have mercy! Lady, have mercy!’ On hearing this, the servants came running and enquired the reason for his distress. There was a noise round about Gervase as he lay there and he said to them, ‘Do you not see St Æthelthryth going away? How she pierced my chest with the sharp end of her staff, while her saintly sisters did likewise? And look, a second time she is returning to impale me, and now I shall die, since finally she has impaled me.’ And with these words he breathed his last.

*LE* 252–53

The chronicler goes on to tell us that after this, “for a long time [nobody] dared to commit any outrage with respect to the property of Ely, because the holy virgin protected her possessions everywhere in manful fashion” (253).

Founder saints came, of necessity, from the upper classes, from those who either had land they could use for the purpose, or who had the necessary connections to obtain land. Æthelthryth, as we have seen, was a king’s daughter. Others, such as Oswald of Ramsey and Aiden of Lindisfarne, were monk-bishops. So too was Ecgwine of Evesham – but Ecgwine was not the

man whom the Virgin Mary first favoured with a vision instructing him to found an abbey in that place: that honour fell to an illiterate swineherd named Eoves (Lapidge lxxxv). Eoves, however, could neither provide land nor defend the abbey in a suitably noble fashion, so the Virgin was eventually obliged to ask Ecgwine, supposedly of royal stock,<sup>18</sup> instead!

### *The Cartulary Saint as Political Figurehead*

The cartulary saints not only defended their properties, but also became caught up in the political disputes of their people (Ridyard, “*Condigna Veneratio*” 182). St Æthelthryth did not merely punish importunate Norman tax collectors but also functioned as the liege lord of Hereward’s rebels. Just as a man would swear fealty by putting his hands between those of his lord, so anybody wishing to join Hereward’s army after 1069 was required to swear on the saint’s body (182). Oaths made to Hereward himself, by the Normans and by various malcontents who took refuge with him, had been broken too often in the past, so the saint was established as “lord” because she was better able to enforce the oaths she was given (LE 206–07). Such proactive involvement ensured that Ely remained a political target long after the rebellion was over (181).

St Cuthbert, too, intervened to protect his people following the murder of the new Norman earl, Robert de Comines, in 1069, when “both the church and the city of Durham were saved from the Conqueror’s first punitive expedition by a dense fog sent by St Cuthbert to confound the royal forces” (Ridyard, *Condigna Veneratio* 196).<sup>19</sup> St Peter, on the other hand, took the side of the Conqueror, who had come to England with the blessing of Peter’s successor,

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<sup>18</sup> Nothing is actually known of Ecgwine’s origins or early life. Byrhtferth filled in the gaps using common tropes, of which this was one (Lapidge lxxxv).

<sup>19</sup> St Cuthbert’s association with fog continued into WW2, when the Luftwaffe’s attempt to bomb Durham was reportedly foiled by “a mist, descending over the City like a ghostly shroud, hiding every building.” Because the weather conditions that night made a mist very unlikely, it became known as “Saint Cuthbert’s Mist” (Hails, web).

the pope. Peterborough Abbey offered no protection to Hereward and when he reciprocated, leading a plunder-hungry Danish army there so that they would not despoil Ely, St Peter – identified by the great key he held in his hand – appeared to him and told him to make restitution or face eternal punishment.

St Edmund, king and martyr, also proved himself an unlikely ally of the Normans. Bury St Edmund’s “entered the Norman era in a political position diametrically opposed to that of rebellious Ely” (Ridyard, “*Condigna Veneratio*” 187), thanks to its French (though not Norman) abbot, Baldwin, appointed by Edward the Confessor in 1065. Rather than supporting his own kinsman, Edward Ætheling, St Edmund conveniently agreed with Baldwin that William was the rightful heir of the Confessor. As a former king of the East Angles, he was presented “as patron not just of a religious house but also of the whole province of the East Angles” (Ridyard, “*Condigna Veneratio*” 188), thereby giving the area—except the rebellious Isle of Ely, of course—the political status of a royal ally (188).

### **Legendary Saints**

A legendary (from the Latin *legere*, to read) is a collection of saints’ Lives “arranged either hierarchically (e.g., apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins, in that order) or in calendar order, as in the *Golden Legend*” (Robertson 23). Where the Lives were arranged in calendar order, this would be for the purpose of reading them during church services on the appropriate day in order to “teach doctrine, inspire veneration of the saint, and prompt the reader to imitation” (17). The saints whose Lives appeared in these legends were already well-established (Hamer xi) and were largely universal saints, with the early martyrs being particularly common, though many churches added local saints as well (xxv). Biographical accuracy was less of a consideration than the more sublime truth a story could impart:

“hagiographers borrowed plots, characterizations and whole pages of wording from one another,” writes Robertson, because ultimately all saints imitate Christ, and what is true of one is thus, in a way, true of all (25).<sup>20</sup>

Legendaries were very much a product of their time and place, with the selected hagiographies reflecting fashionable interest, contemporary concerns, and local pride. Even within the selections, the stories were not static. “Normally a given saint’s life is a ‘version’ of the legend, a stage in a centuries-long tradition,” says Robertson (24).

#### *The Cotton-Corpus or Worcester Legendary*

One English legendary from the late eleventh century has survived reasonably intact: that compiled by Lady Godiva’s contemporary, St Wulfstan, for his Norman-style cathedral at Worcester. Also known as the Cotton-Corpus Legendary, because it was donated “for Publick use and Advantage” by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton in 1702 (British Library, web), the Worcester Legendary is preserved as Cotton MS Nero E I/1 and Cotton MS Nero E I/2 in the British Library and MS CCCC 9 at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. It is not known when or how the Corpus Christi section became separated from the rest.

This legendary was intended for use in the cathedral’s liturgy and is thus organized largely in calendar order. It includes the Lives of Andrew the Apostle, of many early martyrs such as Perpetua and Felicitas, of confessors such as Basil of Caesarea, and of virgins such as Agatha, and thus gives an insight into the wide range of saints who were formally recognized in England at that time. In addition, and placed at the beginning rather than according to their liturgical sequence, it contains Byrhtferth’s *Vita Sancti Oswaldi* and *Vita Sancti Ecgwini*, both previous bishops of Worcester. Whether these were placed here by Wulfstan to emphasize their

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<sup>20</sup> The development of hagiography as a literary genre with recognizable plot themes and devices forms the subject of the next chapter.

local importance, as we have seen done with the cartularies, or whether Cotton placed them here for his own convenience, is unknown. The idea that context might be as important as content was not understood in his day, and Cotton frequently “separated manuscripts which belonged together and directed his binder to put unrelated manuscripts between the same cover” (Ker lv).

The *Legendary* is in Latin and mostly in the same hand, which has been traced to a scribe known to have been active in 1058 (British Library, web). That the work could be done so quickly, and complete with illuminations and sections of gold lettering, suggests that the *Lives* were simply copied from Latin originals, perhaps even from an older *legendary* in use, and did not form part of the great flurry of translations of Old English hagiography into French or Latin. It is also likely that the copyist did not even know English, as some Old English glosses on *Byrhtferth's Vitae*, in the same hand, have been placed beside the wrong text or omitted completely (Lapidge 305). It can thus be assumed that other English saints included in this *legendary*, such as St Guthlac (eighth century abbot) and St Swithin (ninth century bishop of Winchester) were widely recognized, since their *Lives* were already circulating in Latin.

### *The Golden Legend*

While the Worcester *Legendary* primarily reflects local pride, Jacobus de Voragine's widely circulated *Legenda Aurea*, or Golden Legend, reflects fashionable interest. Completed around 1266, the *GL* is a collection of hagiographies used in the main liturgical feasts, and is again arranged in calendar order (Hamer x). It was not written for liturgical use, however, but instead “made available to everyone the stories that until then had scarcely ever been found outside liturgical books” (Mâle, cited in Hamer xvii). And ‘everyone,’ it seems, wanted to read or hear these stories, because the Legend's unprecedented popularity continued until the end of

the Middle Ages (Hamer ix).

The Golden Legend includes a much greater number of biblical characters than does the Worcester Legendary – no fewer than eleven apostles, plus St Mary Magdalene – suggesting that people liked to hear about familiar characters in more detail. The virgin martyrs are also well represented, perhaps because stories of “a virgin subjected to the lust of a powerful man” had popular appeal (Hamer xxviii). The Crusades “had increased awareness of a large and powerful non-Christian world” that might require martyrdom on the part of contemporary Christians, so stories of those who had died for the faith provided good role models (xxvii). The Golden Legend appears to include fewer confessors than the Worcester,<sup>21</sup> but nevertheless it represents “saints from all times and places, throughout the Roman empire and beyond” (Robertson 30).

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<sup>21</sup> This may, however, be due to the editor’s selection: the Penguin edition contains only 71 of the original 177 hagiographies (Hamer x).

## CHAPTER 3

### Church Reform

Standard school history lessons tend to focus exclusively on the secular changes introduced by the Normans, and particularly on feudalism. However, says Christopher Harper-Bill (165), “The Norman Conquest was no less dramatic in its impact on ecclesiastical life ... The church, like the land, was under new management, and the new French élite introduced important organisational changes based on continental models.” The new king at once began to appoint Normans to positions of importance within the church and to reorganize it along Norman lines (Knowles, *Saints*, 23), and in 1070 he was finally able to persuade Lanfranc, a monk from Bec, to accept the role of Archbishop of Canterbury. Described by Harper-Bill (174) as “the favourite son of the papacy, the triumphal defender of doctrinal orthodoxy,” Lanfranc found “the prospect of ruling a distracted church<sup>22</sup> in a foreign land . . . intensely distasteful” (Stenton 663). Eadmer, a monk and chronicler who knew Lanfranc personally, complained of his “unprecedented and humiliating treatment of local saints” (Rubenstein 308), and this, combined with the dramatic increase in the number of hagiographies being written about Anglo-Saxon saints, has led to Lanfranc being regarded as something of an iconoclast.

At first glance, then, it appears obvious why Lady Godiva never became a saint: not only was she a close relative of the Conqueror’s most significant enemies but, far from permitting the making of new saints, the drastically reformed Anglo-Norman church ‘decanonized’ large numbers of Anglo-Saxons whose holiness had long been recognized. In recent years, however,

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<sup>22</sup> It is not clear what Stenton means by ‘distracted’ in this context. It may be the long-term distraction of the ambivalent situation of Archbishop Stigand (discussed below) or the more immediate distraction of divided loyalties, with some bishops supporting the Normans and others supporting the rebels (e. g., Ely and Peterborough, discussed in the previous chapter).

numerous scholars have challenged the old assumptions about Norman church reforms and iconoclasm. This chapter considers the allegations against Lanfranc as “the Norman antagonist to the Anglo-Saxon saints” (Ridyard, *Condigna Veneratio*, 179) and his role as a reformer. It asks whether the English church was indeed “degenerate,” as the Conqueror claimed (Harper-Bill 167), and considers the suggestion that, a mere 12 years after the Great Schism, it was leaning politically towards Constantinople rather than Rome (Moss, Phillips). It looks at the changes that actually occurred: changes in personnel, in organization and in doctrine.

Finally, all of these changes must be viewed in the light of the larger picture, that of the Gregorian Reforms, which sought to bring the Western Church under the tight control of the papacy. To what extent was the “favourite son” influenced by Gregory, and in what ways did his policies diverge?

### **Global Changes**

While the Norman Conquest of 1066 looms large in British history, it is important to remember, when considering its possible effect on the English church, that it occurred just twelve years after the Great Schism and against the backdrop of the Gregorian Reforms. This suggests that at least some of the changes that occurred after 1066 would have occurred anyway, though in some cases, due to Britain’s insularity and distance from Rome, things may have taken a little longer.

### *The Great Schism*

In the sixth century CE, Christendom had been dominated by the Pentarchy - the great sees of Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem, each of which wielded great economic and administrative power (Charles River Editors, 22). By the end of the seventh century, however, most of the eastern sees had been overrun by the fast-growing Islamic

Caliphate, leaving just Latin-speaking Rome and Greek-speaking Constantinople. Several doctrinal differences were developing between the two, not helped by difficulties in translation.

The most significant doctrinal difference was the *filioque* clause: did the Holy Spirit proceed only from the Father, as Orthodoxy maintained, or from the Father and the Son, as Catholics believed? There was also disagreement as to whether the bread used in the Eucharist should be leavened (Orthodox) or unleavened (Catholic), and as to whether it was acceptable for priests to be married. Low levels of literacy in the West meant that rituals were extremely strict, designed to be memorized and performed by rote, and invalidated by the smallest mistake;<sup>23</sup> the East, on the other hand, permitted a degree of individuality of expression (Charles River Editors 23–24).

East and West also differed as to the extent and manner in which the Church should be involved in temporal affairs. Constantinople, which had achieved and maintained its supremacy largely because of its position on a major trade route, received much of its revenue from merchants, while Rome, which had lost its economic advantage after the barbarian invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries, developed what came to be known as the feudal system (Charles River Editors 25). Remembering her glory days, Rome claimed authority over Constantinople, and also claimed the right to settle disputes between claimants to a throne; this last was based upon the Donation of Constantine, a document now known to have been forged, but which at the time was widely believed to give imperial authority to the bishop of Rome. The situation was further complicated by the *Privilegium Ottonianum* of 963, which gave the Holy Roman Emperor the right to confirm papal elections – thus subordinating the spiritual to the temporal authority.

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<sup>23</sup> As recently as 2020, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith determined that the formula for baptism cannot be changed at all. Many thousands of Catholics are now considered unbaptized because of small errors such as the use of “we” instead of “I” (McDermott, web).

Relations between East and West allegedly<sup>24</sup> soured further in 1009, when the newly-elected Pope Sergius IV included the word *filioque* in the letter he sent to inform Constantinople of his election; this led Patriarch Sergius II to omit his name from the list of Catholic bishops endorsed by the Orthodox Church (Charles River Editors 38). Certainly they worsened significantly after 1017, when Norman mercenaries arrived in Bari, on the southern Adriatic coast of Italy, and treated Orthodox Christians as pagans, forcing them to convert to Catholicism (Charles River Editors 39). When Pope Leo IX sent a delegation to Constantinople in 1054 to discuss the situation, he did so not with a view to smoothing things over but rather to putting the Eastern Church in its place. His chosen legate, Humbert of Silva Candida, was a Benedictine abbot who believed that the pope should have supreme authority over the entire Church and saw the Greeks as heretics for using leavened bread during the Eucharist (Charles River Editors 40). When the pope died shortly after Humbert reached Constantinople, the legate took the opportunity to excommunicate Patriarch Michael Cerularius for heresy. The Patriarch considered his response carefully, ultimately condemning only Humbert and his fellow legates, but Humbert, who translated the Patriarch's letter, presented it as an attack on the entire Western Church. It was not the first schism between East and West, but it was to become permanent. This may be attributed in no small part to the Gregorian Reforms of the late eleventh century, which emphasized Rome's authority over all things, both spiritual and temporal.

### *The Gregorian Reforms*

Born Ildebrando Aldobrandeschi in Sovana, Tuscany, in 1015, Gregory VII was a Benedictine monk who became pope on 22 April 1073. Thus, like eight of the ten popes before

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<sup>24</sup> There is some suggestion that this story may have been a 12<sup>th</sup>-century fabrication (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, cited on Wikipedia).

him, he was born in the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>25</sup> The reforms that bear his name were not all initiated by him but were being steadily advanced by his predecessors, including Leo IX, and built upon the initial concept of the Empire. Gregory was, however, their most enthusiastic proponent, both before and after he became pope.

Refuting Voltaire's famous remark that the Holy Roman Empire was "ni saint, ni roman, ni empire,"<sup>26</sup> the Hapsburg Restoration Movement (web) summarizes it as "the one form of government with its very foundation in Catholicity with the Emperor being crowned by the Pope . . . preserving the Imperial Civilization of Rome . . . [and] encompassing all of Christendom under the leadership of the Emperor." It began in 962, with the coronation of Otto the Great as Emperor of the Franks by Pope John XII, and was accompanied by the *Privilegium Ottonianum*. In theory, reciprocal powers granted by the *Privilegium* and the Donation of Constantine created a relationship of "mystic dualism" between pope and emperor (Bryce, cited by Hapsburg Restoration Movement); in practice, it was to become a two-headed monster, leading to the Gregorian Reforms of the eleventh century and the Investiture Contest of the eleventh and twelfth.

The purpose of the Gregorian Reforms was to bring everything under the control of the church - that is, to give the spiritual absolute power over the temporal. While the pope should retain the right to crown the Holy Roman Emperor, papal elections should be independent of lay interference. Simony (the buying of clerical office) and nicolaism (the inheritance of clerical office) were forbidden, because they undermined the power of the pope or local bishop to appoint the most suitable candidate to a diocese or benefice. Clerical marriage was also forbidden, in part because it led to nicolaism, but also because a priest who had a wife and

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<sup>25</sup> The two exceptions, Benedict IX and Benedict X, were from Rome.

<sup>26</sup> "Neither holy, Roman, nor an empire"

family, and ties to the community, was not fully under the control of the church. Even lay marriage was to be considered valid only if blessed by a priest, thus giving the church control over who was or was not considered to be married. And if the Church was to have dominion over the temporal, then it must also, of course, have dominion over its own realm of the spiritual: admission to the ranks of the saints, those mediators between God and mortals, was to be brought under centralized control through a process of petition and enquiry.

### **The State of the English Church**

But why would England, on the western outskirts of Christendom, be suspected of leaning towards Constantinople in the east? How could the Gregorian Reforms be relevant seven years before their greatest proponent, Ildebrande Aldobrandeschi, became Pope Gregory VII? The short answer is “because William of Normandy said so.”

William believed he had several grounds on which to claim the English throne, none of them remotely convincing to anyone in England. The first was his blood relationship to Edward the Confessor: Edward’s mother, Emma, was the sister of William’s paternal grandfather. Under English law, however, this tenuous relationship on the mother’s side counted for nothing. The preferred heir, whenever possible, was a man descended in the male line from a previous king (Stenton 551). Such an heir did in fact exist, in the person of Edgar, grandson of the Confessor’s older half-brother, Edmund Ironside. The second basis of William’s claim was the oath Harold Godwinson had supposedly sworn to support him (Walker 91–97).<sup>27</sup> Even if Harold had sworn such an oath, however, there was no way he could guarantee William the throne, since he was just one member of the council (*witan*) that decided such things (551–52).

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<sup>27</sup> Walker doubts that any such oath was sworn, believing it to be an invention of Robert of Jumièges. William, however, insisted that it was and made it an essential element of his claim.

Probably William knew that his legal case was extremely weak, so, relying on the authority the pope claimed through the Donation of Constantine, he approached Alexander II with a more appealing argument: he presented his planned invasion as a battle against the degeneracy of the English Church (Stenton 586). But did this claim of Christian imperative have any more validity than the claims based on blood and oaths? Was Christianity in England really “moribund,” as the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman chronicler William of Malmesbury claimed?

### *Failings of the English Church*

The only near-contemporary accounts describing the English Church as degenerate come from Norman clerics seeking favour with the Conqueror, and writing a few years after the Conquest.<sup>28</sup> Set against that, it was the death of a king renowned for his saintliness that left the throne vacant in the first place. Leofric and Godiva dedicated Coventry Priory only twenty years before the Confessor died. The *ASC* records the deaths of old bishops and the appointment of new, mostly in quite matter-of-fact language. Only the behaviour of Leofgar of Hereford, a former mass-priest of Harold Godwinson who “wore his moustaches during his priesthood” and as soon as he was promoted “abandoned his chrism and his cross” to fight Harold’s enemy, King Gruffydd of North Wales, is accorded any significant attention (*ASC* 186–87), suggesting that such behaviour was abnormal and unacceptable. Still, there were things that were more or less acceptable in England that were at odds with the continental reform movement. Pluralism and married priests were common, and common law marriage was fully recognized. Intellectually, England lagged far behind Italy and France. And then there was the small matter of the archbishop of Canterbury.

The purpose of the Gregorian Reforms was to bring every aspect of Roman Catholic life

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<sup>28</sup> In particular, William of Jumièges in his *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, which was dedicated to the Conqueror.

under the control of the pope, and to this end lay investiture, simony, nicolaism and clerical marriage were to be abolished, and even non-clerical marriage was to be brought firmly within the auspices of Christian rather than common law. Knowles (*Monastic Order* 93) claims that simony “scarcely existed” in England, and indeed the one example we have of it post-dates the Conquest: Remigius of Lincoln was held by Alexander II to have effectively purchased his office through services rendered to William during the Conquest (Eadmer 11).

Clerical marriage and nicolaism may have been more significant issues, despite Knowles’ assertion that it “was not felt as a public evil owing to the monastic provenance of almost all the influential churchmen” (*Monastic Order* 93). By this he means that bishops were generally drawn from the ranks of the regular clergy<sup>29</sup> and thus were not married anyway. Nicolaism had certainly been an issue in the eighth century, however, as the aristocracy created minsters only to have them revert, after a generation or two, to convenient sources of income for married younger sons or retainers (Blair 100–02). Blair further records how a monastery founded at Cheddar, Somerset, at the beginning of the tenth century was, by 940, being referred to as a “villa”; by 1086, it was listed in Domesday “as a royal manor, without even mentioning the church” (326–27). The Church not only lost control of who ruled these monasteries; it lost all control over the alleged monks and over the income generated by the ‘monastic’ estate. The problem of the hereditary minster had already been recognized by Bede in the eighth century (*Epistola ad Ecgbertum Episcopum*, cited in Blair 101), and records show multiple attempts by the Anglo-Saxon *witan* to abolish clerical marriage in the eleventh (Stenton 668).

William’s strongest argument, however, was surely the behaviour of the notorious Archbishop of Canterbury, Stigand, to whom “many wicked and horrible crimes were ascribed”

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<sup>29</sup> That is, monks. Ordained priests who do not belong to a monastic order are known as “secular clergy.”

(Eadmer 9).<sup>30</sup> Stigand had been appointed archbishop in 1052, while his predecessor, Robert of Jumièges, was still very much alive and in good standing with Rome. This was done at the insistence of the Godwins, “a reflection,” says Harper-Bill (168), “of the way in which the leadership of the church had become enmeshed in factional conflict.” He was a prime example of the ills of lay investiture, and William no doubt stressed his connection to the Godwins as a reason why Harold should not be king.

Stigand was quite possibly the reason pluralism was declared uncanonical in 1061. Prior to that, it had been considered perfectly acceptable for the bishop of a poor see to also hold a rich one (Johnson 22), but Stigand had retained Winchester when he accepted Canterbury, thus amassing unprecedented wealth and power for himself.<sup>31</sup> Stigand had been summoned to Rome to explain himself shortly after his appointment, but failed to attend and was thus excommunicated (Stenton 465–66). Thereafter, English bishops went to the continent to ensure that their own consecration was canonically acceptable. A succession of short-lived popes all refused to recognize Stigand as the legitimate Archbishop of Canterbury, yet he steadfastly refused to relinquish either of his bishoprics.

### *The Orthodox Connection*

It has been suggested that the English Church maintained strong ties with Byzantium after the Schism, and that this might have been a factor in Alexander II’s support of William’s invasion. Vladimir Moss and Andrew Phillips each base their claims for such ties largely upon a fourteenth-century Life of Edward the Confessor, the *Jatvarðar Saga*, and upon the fact that Edward is considered a saint in the Orthodox Church despite the fact that he died several years after the Schism. According to the *Saga*, English refugees from the Conquest established a

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<sup>30</sup> Pauline Stafford (151) notes that no evidence was ever offered in support of such claims.

<sup>31</sup> Canterbury and Winchester were the two wealthiest sees in England.

settlement in Crimea, while many others joined the Varangian guard in Constantinople itself (Turner 203). Krijna Ciggaar (cited in Turner 200–02) recounts that there were strong political and diplomatic connections between England and Byzantium, which included the occasional exchange of ambassadors, and that English kings, including Edward the Confessor, used the Byzantine style *basileus* among their titles.

One thing that might have given some cause for concern was the presence in England of Edgar the Ætheling. Banished by Cnut, Edgar's father and uncle had found refuge with their maternal aunt at the court of Jaroslav the Wise in Kiev.<sup>32</sup> Jaroslav was well known for the “proselytizing zeal with which he tried to convert his people to the true Orthodox faith” (Ronay 65) and it seems likely that this would have extended to his nephews as well (66). Was there perhaps some concern that if Edgar were to take the throne he would steer England towards Kiev and Orthodoxy? The resistance of the English clergy to the abolition of clerical marriage might have been seen in some quarters as evidence, if not of existing Orthodox leanings, then at least of a possible ‘carrot’ the eastern-born Ætheling could offer to the lower clergy. Certainly William would have taken advantage of the slightest hint of such a possibility in order to discredit the last heir of the blood.

#### *Current Views*

Most of the arguments used to justify William's invasion as a crusade have been rejected by modern historians, who for the most part have concluded that Stigand was an anomaly and that “the late Anglo-Saxon church was fulfilling the function expected of a Christian Church in any age” and that “its work was well done” (Loyn 268). Johnson observes that “the Anglo-Saxon Church . . . was a part of English society that was in close contact with the continent” (116) and

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<sup>32</sup> Now Kyiv.

that English bishops routinely went to Rome to have their appointment confirmed and receive the pallium<sup>33</sup> (117). English missionaries were active in Scandinavia in the years leading up to the Conquest (Harper-Bill 169), which is hardly the sign of a ‘moribund’ church.

Turner rejects the claims of Eastern Orthodox leanings, noting that the *filioque* clause had been accepted as early as the Council of Hatfield in 680 (201) and that the use of leavened bread in the Eucharist had been phased out in England long before the eleventh century (201). He believes the increased number of Englishmen seeking to join the Varangian guard after 1070 were more likely seeking to replace their lost incomes and social positions than expressing a religious preference (203). Moreover, despite Jaroslav’s attempts to convert his nephews to Orthodoxy, they ultimately settled in Catholic Hungary after helping their fellow refugee, Prince Andrew of Hungary, to reclaim his throne. Edward’s bride, Agatha, was a niece of the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry III, and is known to have “brought up Margaret and Christina strictly . . . imbu[ing] them with strong, Catholic faith” (Ronay 118); it seems likely she would have brought up their brother the same way.

On balance, there is no real evidence that the Anglo-Saxon church was degenerate, much less moribund, neither is there anything to suggest that it was in danger of joining the Eastern rather than the Western rite. That is not to say, however, that William’s attempt to present his planned conquest as a crusade was a cynical disguise for more earthly ambitions. Robert of Jumièges had fled to William’s court after Edward deposed him, so William’s knowledge of the situation would have been extensive, if very one-sided. Harold Godwinson was, as William saw it, an oath-breaker. He had usurped a throne to which, even without his oath to William, he had no lawful claim. He was responsible for the appointment of the two disgraced clerics, Stigand of Canterbury and Leofgar of Hereford. Given the circumstances, it is easy to see how William may

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<sup>33</sup> A cloth worn around the neck to show the rank of a bishop or archbishop in the Catholic Church.

genuinely have believed the Anglo-Saxon church to be in a degenerate state and England in dire need of a good Christian king. Alexander II, frustrated by Harold's ongoing support of the excommunicate Stigand, may have been predisposed to believe any ill he heard of the new king and to conclude that the English Church needed to be protected from him.

### **Lanfranc as Reformer**

If the purpose of the Conquest was ostensibly to reform the Church, one would expect to see widespread changes in the organization of both the regular and secular clergy concomitant with the goals of the papacy. While historians agree that Lanfranc did indeed make sweeping changes, the extent to which those changes were in accordance with the Gregorian Reform movement is more problematic. On the one hand, he is described as a "favourite son of the papacy" (Harper-Bill 174), which suggests that his ideas were closely aligned with those of Rome. On the other, he had what appears to have been a close friendship with Duke William, and many of his reforms, as we shall see, seem to have been more in favour of William's secular power than the power of Rome.

In this section, I consider the major influences on Lanfranc's thinking and the nature of the reforms that he actually carried out. Were his goals primarily spiritual or secular? Knowles (*Saints* 30) notes that Lanfranc has been described as "father of monks." Ridyard opens her article "*Condigna Veneratio*" by saying that "The Norman antagonist to the Anglo-Saxon saints is a familiar figure" (179). What did he actually do in terms of monastic revival, reform of the secular Church, and the recognition (or otherwise) of English saints? Is it possible that Godiva's claim to sainthood was denied simply because Lanfranc despised the English?

*Who Was Lanfranc?*

Lanfranc was born in Pavia, around 35 km south of Milan, Italy, in c. 1005. Stenton (662) observes that little is known of his early life, except that he initially studied civil law before turning to theology, after which he taught for a few years at the cathedral school in Avranches, Normandy. His formative years were thus spent in an area where the ideas of the Gregorian Reforms were in wide circulation: not only was he within the Holy Roman Empire, but Pope Honorius II was born around five years later in nearby Verona and Alexander II in Milan itself. Lanfranc's successor at Canterbury, Anselm, was from Aosta, also in what is now northern Italy. Gregory VII himself was born around a decade later and a little further south, in Tuscany, but all five were from the area between the Italian Alps and Rome, much traveled by churchmen and secular envoys to the pope alike. Lanfranc was present at a council in Rome in April 1050, when Leo IX declared that the formal recognition of a saint was a papal prerogative (Rubenstein 297),<sup>34</sup> a legalistic approach which probably struck a chord with the former lawyer. Set against these connections with the reformers was his friendship with Berengar of Tours, who was subsequently condemned for heresy.<sup>35</sup> Lanfranc himself fell under suspicion of guilt by association (Bates 204), so he needed to be unimpeachable in his support of the pope.

Lanfranc was about forty years old when he “resolved to turn to solitude and obscurity” (Knowles, *Saints* 24) and sought for a suitable monastery. Finding no established monasteries to his liking, he joined Herluin's newly-founded abbey at Bec in Normandy, which he was to make famous by opening a very successful school. How he became acquainted with Duke William is not known, but the two men formed a working relationship that lasted for the rest of their lives

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<sup>34</sup> Rubenstein bases this on a twelfth-century *Vita Lanfranci*. However, Bates (200–01) disputes the accuracy of the source material and claims that Lanfranc did not, in fact, attend that council, though he was “in Leo IX's company for almost a year from the end of 1049” (201), so he would still have been subject to the same influence.

<sup>35</sup> He denied transubstantiation, arguing that Christ was spiritually but not physically present in the consecrated bread and wine.

(Stenton 663). The dukes of Normandy had, from the start, “treated the Church within their duchy as an aspect of government” (Bates 190). While this ran counter to the aims of the Gregorian Reforms, William in particular handled matters so well that even Gregory VII called him the “jewel of princes” (199), specifically with reference to his management of the Church. Perhaps because he saw how well William’s approach worked, Lanfranc himself formed the view that “the ideal condition of things appeared to be a strong hierarchy under a powerful primate and powerful king” (Knowles, *Saints* 27).

In terms of personality, “wisdom was the quality that seemed most to distinguish Lanfranc in the eyes of his contemporaries” (Knowles, *Saints* 24). Stenton sees him as a man of very practical intelligence, observing that “his decrees reflect the attitude of a statesman” (667), and Knowles likewise comments that “as a young man, his agility of thought and speech had won him many victories” (*Saints* 25). Knowledge was clearly very important to him, as is demonstrated by his opening a school at Bec that admitted all comers<sup>36</sup> (24) and by his reluctance to engage with an intellectually backward English Church. Within the Holy Roman Empire, he could at least have dealt with his fellow clerics in Latin regardless of the local vernacular; in England, he faced “the prospect of dealing with an alien people in an unknown tongue” (Knowles, *Monastic Order* 117). Yet Eadmer of Canterbury shows him to have been a very generous man, who made provision at Canterbury for the care, at the monastery’s cost, of the elderly and infirm and also of lepers (16), and who took a personal interest in the welfare of his monks and their families (14–15). Despite strong pressure from Rome to enforce clerical celibacy, he would have allowed it to “wither away” rather than “immediately depriv[e] priests already, and in accordance with age-old custom, married” (Harper-Bill 176). Here again we see

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<sup>36</sup> ‘All’ probably does not include ‘female’ in this context, though in the absence of any student rolls it is not possible to be absolutely certain.

his kindness as he attempted to avoid measures that “forced many bishops’ and priests’ wives into homelessness, prostitution and suicide” (Holland, back cover). It was rather the Englishman, Wulfstan of Worcester, who insisted upon immediate enforcement (Stenton 668).

### *The Monastic Revival*

According to Knowles, “William ... intended to renovate [the monasteries], and the Church in England through their agency, by pouring into them the new life which had sprung up so wonderfully in his native country” (*Monastic Order* 106). This “new life” was the intellectual life (82), which Lanfranc the schoolmaster was only too happy to seed. To this end, he rebuilt many monasteries along lines more conducive to learning, appointed Norman abbots whenever a post fell vacant, and introduced the *Consuetudines*, or Monastic Constitutions, described by Knowles (*Monastic Constitutions* xxix) as “a liturgical directory, a description of the functions of the leading officials of a monastery, and other fundamental regulations.”

The building of new monasteries properly suited to the purpose led to “a revolution in the art of building in England to which no parallel can be found at any other period of history” (Knowles, *Monastic Order* 120). The first monastery he had to rebuild was his own, Christ Church Canterbury, which had been destroyed by fire in 1067. Here, “besides a large church, he erected the main monastic buildings and surrounded the whole group with a wall, thus introducing into England the norm of the great monastic enceinte” (120). St Alban’s, too, was found to be almost derelict, “reduced both within and without to almost nothing” (Eadmer 15), and was thus one of the first to be restored, though “almost every parish and conventual church in England” would soon be rebuilt in the grand Romanesque style (Harper-Bill 171).

Harper-Bill claims that “the Normans used the Church as an agent of colonisation” (171) and that the wealthiest churches and abbeys were quickly in Norman hands. They were,

moreover, subject to feudal levies, with the abbots required to support knights (173) who, in turn, could be used by the king to put down subversive activity. Although English incumbents were not generally replaced until their death left a vacancy (Knowles, *Monastic Order* 111), widespread pluralism meant that many abbeys could be considered to be without an abbot and a Norman placed there immediately (Johnson 71). The majority of these abbots came from Bec, Caen or Fécamp, so were well versed in the king's way of doing things, and "the norm was that each abbot introduced, so far as possible, the customs and observances of the house from which he came" (Knowles, *Monastic Order* 122). In addition to this, Lanfranc drew up the *Consuetudines*, which were based largely on the customs of Bec but drew on other sources, too. These were very similar to the *Regularis Concordia*, a handbook issued by the Council of Winchester in 973 as part of St Dunstan's Benedictine Reform, and were intended as guidelines rather than as absolute law (122–24).

By the time of Lanfranc's death, the number of monks in England had at least doubled, and all were living in purpose-built monasteries under the direct control of an abbot chosen for his loyalty to king and archbishop (Knowles, *Saints* 29). Yet his greatest achievement lay not so much in the material and quantifiable, but in the less tangible spheres of the intellectual and spiritual. The introduction of Latin as the *lingua franca* of the Anglo-Norman monasteries encouraged "literary culture and an enthusiasm for at least a modest amount of learning" (Knowles, *Monastic Order* 98) and "made of England a province of the commonwealth of Latin Europe, which for a century and a half was to form a cultural unit more potent to unite than were racial differences to dissolve" (125). It ensured that any tendency England may have had towards Eastern Orthodoxy was extinguished and, as we will see in Chapter 4, was the reason for the great outpouring of hagiography, either translated from the vernacular or written anew (Ridyard,

*Condigna Veneratio* 205), that was such a major feature of twelfth century literature.

### *Reform of the Secular Church*

Knowles asserts that of all the Roman Catholic archbishops of Canterbury, only Theodore of Tarsus did more than Lanfranc to organize the English Church (*Saints* 30).<sup>37</sup> The specifics of his contribution are not easy to assess, however, as they occurred at a time when significant changes were already occurring (Blair 498). His primary goals appear to have been to establish a Norman-style hierarchy under the governance of king and primate (Knowles, *Saints* 27), to organize the Church in such a way that it served as a useful instrument of government (Harper-Bill 171), and to improve learning and decrease immoral practices. How well did he succeed?

Lanfranc believed that the best way to run the Church was to establish “a strong hierarchy under a powerful primate and a powerful king” (Knowles, *Saints* 27). To this end, one of the first reforms he hoped to carry out was to secure “the subjection of all sees in the British Isles to Canterbury” (Knowles, *Monastic Order* 143). Within weeks of his ordination, however, he encountered a problem in the form of Thomas, the elected archbishop of York. Thomas had come to Canterbury for his ordination, “according to ancient custom” (*ASC* 204). One might think—and clearly Lanfranc did think—that in accepting ordination from Canterbury, the archbishops of York had accepted that they were subject to Canterbury, but when he asked for Thomas’ oath of allegiance, Thomas “refused and said that he did not have to do it.” Lanfranc therefore refused to confirm his appointment (206).

The following year, 1071, the two archbishops traveled to Rome to receive the *pallium*

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<sup>37</sup> Theodore of Tarsus arrived in England in 669. He established a school at Canterbury and convened England’s first Church Council. He established diocesan structure and rules of episcopal succession which helped to unite the English Church as an entity (Orthodox Church in America, web).

and to put their case to the pope. Hubert, a cardinal deacon, was sent to preside over a council held at Winchester in April 1072, where Lanfranc demonstrated that same “agility of thought and speech” that had earned him victories in his youth (Knowles, *Saints* 25). He obtained a decree that York was subservient to Canterbury and that the southern dioceses of Lichfield, Worcester and Dorchester, which Thomas tried to claim for York, in fact belonged to the archdiocese of Canterbury (Stenton 664).

On his arrival in Canterbury, Lanfranc encountered a concept unknown in Normandy: the cathedral monastery. Here, as at Winchester, Worcester and Sherborne, the liturgical functions of the cathedral were performed by a monastery over which a monk-bishop presided as abbot (Knowles, *Monastic Order* 129). A monk by choice and archbishop at the command of the king, Lanfranc found the situation very much to his liking and, seeing the monasteries as a “principal agent of reform” (130), he encouraged the creation of additional cathedral monasteries. His hope was that the presence of regular monks living by the Rule of St Benedict would ensure higher moral standards than a college of secular canons, thus eliminating clerical marriage and nicolaism (R. Lancaster 284).

Among the first was Durham, where William of St Carilef, himself a former abbot, “established in his cathedral a community drawn from the group of new arrivals who had refounded Jarrow and Wearmouth” (Knowles, *Monastic Order* 131). Other cathedral monasteries were created as bishops moved from “small, decaying and unprotected places” to “centres of population which were capable of military defence” (131). Lichfield, where the bishop had formerly been provided by Coventry (132), was moved to Chester, the seat of a new Norman earldom, in 1075, at Lanfranc’s second synod (Stenton 666); the sees of Selsey and Sherborne were moved to Chichester and Salisbury at the same time. By 1087, says Stenton, “the rural

cathedral had become an anomaly in the English diocesan order” (667).

R. Lancaster argues that the restructuring of dioceses and diocesan offices, moving the cathedrals to more urban areas and establishing them in monasteries, led in time to the establishment of a more formal diocesan administration for the purpose of providing secular clergy with a more reliable income and ultimately to the development of a church bureaucracy (284). By the mid-twelfth century, he says, “dioceses began to use perpetual vicarages as a way of providing for clerks in the bishop’s household,” and qualifications for advancement within the Church, once based upon “personal asceticism,” came to be based rather upon “experience in administration and [the candidate’s] education” (286).

Lanfranc’s monastic reforms thus brought the secular church into the new world of learning and of continental, rather than merely English, culture. By encouraging regular rather than secular clergy in the cathedral cloister, he quietly enforced a higher standard of morality and encouraged bishops to find new ways of providing for their secular clerks, which ultimately led to an emphasis on literacy and administration skills among bishops. There was, however, one other area in which Lanfranc carried out a significant reform of the English Church, and one which for centuries left him with something of a bad reputation among his new countrymen: the cult of the saints.

#### *Lanfranc and the Anglo-Saxon Saints*

Eadmer of Canterbury, who knew Lanfranc personally and may himself have been the monk to whom he shows Lanfranc being so kind (14–15), nevertheless deplored what he saw as the animosity of the new archbishop towards the English saints. Apparently corroborated by similar complaints from other abbeys about their new Norman abbots, this testimony was universally accepted as incontrovertible evidence until Susan Ridyard questioned it in 1986 with

her seminal paper “*Condigna Veneratio: Post-Conquest Attitudes to the Saints of the Anglo-Saxons.*” Also appearing to support the claim of Norman animosity was the sudden glut of hagiographical writing in the decades after the Conquest, which was long interpreted as a desperate attempt by the English to preserve the memory of their beloved saints from Norman depredation. Today, however, greater weight is being given to Eadmer’s other, more positive, comments about Lanfranc. Eadmer himself has come under scrutiny, with scholars considering not only what he said but what elements of his background may have led him to make a less than accurate interpretation of Norman attitudes towards the English saints. Lanfranc’s attitudes are now being re-examined in the light of movements going on in the broader church, and particularly the Gregorian reforms. So what exactly did Eadmer say, and why did he say it? How should Lanfranc’s actions be interpreted? Was he opposed specifically to English saints, or did he demonstrate the same attitudes towards saints in general?

In the *Vita S. Anselmi*, Eadmer relates that Lanfranc discussed with his successor, Anselm, whether a former archbishop of Canterbury, Ælfheah (also known today as Elphege), should be considered a saint (cited in Rubenstein 284). According to the Peterborough manuscript of the *ASC*, in 1011 a Danish raiding-army had come to Canterbury and “seized all the ordained people, both men and women” (141), hoping for ransom money. The following year, when Ælfheah had not allowed himself to be ransomed, they “pelted him with bones and the heads of cattle; and one of them struck him on the head with the butt of an axe, so that with the blow he sank down and his holy blood fell on the earth, and sent forth his holy soul to God’s kingdom” (142). It was a gruesome death that he would not have suffered had he not been ordained, but Lanfranc’s concern was that he died “not for professing the name of Christ, but because he refused to buy himself with money” (Eadmer, cited in Rubenstein 284). Anselm

argued that Ælfheah had “died for justice, which is the equivalent of dying for Christ,” which Lanfranc soon accepted (Rubenstein 284).

Eadmer, however, remained concerned that Ælfheah was just one of those whom “These Englishmen” had “set up for themselves [as] saints whom they revere” and about whom Lanfranc had “doubts about the quality of their sanctity” (cited in Rubenstein 284). Furthermore, the archbishop did not limit himself to inquiries but, rather than displaying Christ Church’s relic collection as his predecessors had done (Rubenstein 290), he appears to have had most of them placed “in a room above the north transept, away from the main scenes of liturgical activity” (291). Whether this included the bodies of Dunstan and Ælfheah, whom Lanfranc did eventually acknowledge, is unclear, but Eadmer mentions in his *Epistola ad Glastonienses* that Dunstan’s body was “in a place to which [some potential relic thieves] had no access,” suggesting that they were not on display (Rubenstein 291). Furthermore, other Norman abbots had offended in a similar manner. Paul of St Alban’s, Lanfranc’s nephew, had tossed out the bones of his predecessors, calling those worthies “rudes et idiotas,”<sup>38</sup> while Warin of Malmesbury likewise turned out the bones of his predecessors “with a jest” (Knowles, *Monastic Order* 119). Thus it seemed to Eadmer that this was not an inquiry about one saint but “a sort of Continental snob[bery]” (Rubenstein 285).

Rubenstein suggests that Eadmer, who was a child of about six at the time of the Conquest, had an idealized view of the Anglo-Saxon world (299). He heard his elders’ nostalgic reminiscences untouched by the unspoken memories of the parts that were not so good. In his view, the Normans changed everything, and Lanfranc despised the ‘English saints’ not because their claim to sanctity was often dubious but because he was a newcomer, a *rudis Anglus*, who

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<sup>38</sup> Knowles renders this as “uneducated simpletons.”

did not understand or care to understand how Englishmen viewed their saints (Rubenstein 285).<sup>39</sup>

As we saw in Chapter 2, the cartulary saint, though common in England, was all but unheard of on the Continent, so it is likely that Lanfranc genuinely had no understanding of the importance to Englishmen of the founders, the benefactors and the fierce abbots who defended the monasteries in life and were believed to continue to do so after death. To Eadmer's mind, these individuals "ought to be present in the midst of [their] community" (Rubenstein 302), whereas Lanfranc followed Leo IX in requiring evidence of martyrdom or miracles as a basis for papal or archiepiscopal confirmation. In this context, it is clear that Lanfranc would not have considered Godiva a saint, since she was not a martyr and no miracles had been attributed to her.

Although Harper-Bill (169) claims that "the Christian religion did not become Christocentric until the twelfth century at the earliest," Lanfranc appears to have been ahead of his time here. Rubenstein (293–94) relates two miracle stories from Christ Church in which Christ himself, not a saint, is the miracle worker. He also recounts Lanfranc's *Decreta* recommendation that "on Palm Sunday the community was to lead a procession into the city, bearing a reliquary (*feretrum*) that contained, instead of saints' bones, the body of Christ, the Eucharist" (294). This is effectively a Corpus Christi procession, approximately 150 years before that feast was formally created in Liège in 1246 (Rubin 174) and two centuries before its presence can be established with certainty in England in 1318 (199).

While he encouraged the writing of hagiography to help determine the merits of a saint and to provide examples of good Christian behaviour to others, and was happy to include suitably sanctioned saints in the liturgical calendar (Harper-Bill, 171–72), Lanfranc seems to have had an almost Protestant attitude towards what he saw as the superstitious reverence of

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<sup>39</sup> Ridyard (*Condigna Veneratio* 189) points out that many of the former abbots whose bones were removed from around the altars of Christ Church, St Alban's and Malmesbury may never have been considered saints in the liturgical sense.

humans of doubtful sanctity. It is possible that Eadmer did recognize on some level that it was saints in general, not English saints in particular, that made his archbishop uncomfortable, as he wrote in the *History of Recent Events* (24) that Lanfranc was “a great and invincible defender of the Church of Christ, a devoted Father of the whole of England and, so far as he was allowed to be so, a good shepherd to all its inhabitants to his life’s end.”

Lanfranc’s reform of the English Church was thus far-reaching and of lasting importance. That he was a monk at heart is demonstrated by the importance he attached to rebuilding monasteries with grand, permanent structures designed to encourage prayer and study, and by the way he used the monasteries to provide a secure income and moral guidance for bishops. The number of monks in England doubled during his tenure (Knowles, *Saints* 29), and their newly-built stone abbeys dominated the landscape. He obtained a papal bull declaring that York was subject to Canterbury and exercised authority only over Durham and the churches in Scotland. Yet his reforms may not have been as ‘Gregorian’ as was once thought. He brought the secular church under the control of king and primate, Norman style, rather than subjecting it directly to the pope. It was Wulfstan, not Lanfranc, who insisted on dissolving existing clerical marriages. In his attitude to the saints, he was at the very least a Gregorian, in the sense that he believed potential saints should have to undergo a process of inquiry and await formal recognition by the metropolitan before being added to the liturgy. He went far beyond the Gregorian reforms, however, in his dislike of attention being paid to relics and in his Christocentric focus.

When Lanfranc came to England in 1070, he found a Church in disarray. Archbishop Stigand had been largely unrecognized by his own bishops, York was out of control, the *witan* had been unable to abolish clerical marriage, and standards of literacy were low. By the time of

his death in 1089, the supremacy of Canterbury was firmly established, monasteries and cathedrals dominated the landscape, and the Church was a flourishing centre of literacy and learning. Churches were no longer filled with the bones of the dead: hagiography, rather than ritual, had become the principal means of honouring the saints.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Hagiography as Literary Genre**

Hagiography, writing about the saints, is an essential element in the cult of saints. It began as the simple keeping of records, the notation of what Delehay (cited in Bartlett 96) called “the hagiographical coordinates” – the day of death and the place of burial – and was later expanded to include a more detailed literary commemoration (Bartlett 102). The purpose of such writing varied not only over time but also between social groups. Duncan Robertson says that “the announced program of a hagiographical text is to ‘edify,’ that is to say: to teach doctrine, inspire veneration of the saint, and prompt the reader to imitation” (17). Saints were also heroes, however (Elliott 6), and “Christians were eager for background stories, prequels and sequels to what they could read in the canonical books of scripture” (Bartlett 151).

This chapter looks at the development of Western European hagiography from the earliest times until the thirteenth century, when the legend of Lady Godiva appears in the *Chronica Majora*. The focus is on linguistic and literary influences, including the need to make stories of the saints better suited to a particular group; the incorporation of elements of folklore or popular secular literature, such as romance and epic; and key themes of hagiography, including power inversion and shame and honour. How do these elements play out in the story of Godiva’s Ride?

#### **History of the Genre**

The first hagiographies were Passions - stories of how the martyrs died (Bartlett 504). One of the earliest of these is the account of the stoning of St Stephen, which appears in Acts 7: 54–60, written between 80 and 90 CE (NRSV 1856). This version, however, is written primarily

to show the extent to which Saul, later St Paul, approved of the persecution of Christians prior to his vision on the road to Ephesus, and thus does not include Delehaye's "hagiographical coordinates" (Bartlett 96). Stephen claims to see "the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (56) but, unlike later passions, the witnesses see nothing out of the ordinary.

From the fourth century onwards, when Christians were no longer routinely persecuted, hagiography began to focus on the lives, rather than just the deaths, of a new type of saint known as Confessors – those who had been assiduous in proclaiming the faith. In some areas, all non-martyr bishops were considered to be saints of this type; a *Life of Martin*, bishop of Tours (d. 397), was written in 396 by Sulpicius Severus (Bartlett 188). Other forms of hagiography that began to appear around this time are Miracle Books, often produced locally with a view to encouraging the cult of the saint, and stories of how saints' bodies were miraculously discovered (505).

Hagiography was far from being a simple biographical account, however.<sup>40</sup> Ridyard says, "The historian seeks the objective reconstruction and interpretation of the past; the hagiographer writes with a moral and often propagandist purpose" (*Royal Saints* 9). Exactly what the hagiographer's purpose might be varied enormously, so that "a given saint's life is a 'version' of the legend, a stage in a centuries-long tradition" (Robertson 24). Elements of the saints' lives were considered to be interchangeable, on the grounds that "the things [they] had in common were more important than the things that gave them individual identity" (Bartlett 520). This can be seen, for example, in Byrhtferth of Ramsey's *Vita S. Ecgwini*, where he makes use of "an

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<sup>40</sup> In Western tradition, anyway. Riasanovsky (126) states that early Russian hagiography is "characterized by simplicity and biographical detail," and that the less realistic style was not introduced until the fifteenth century, by southern Slavs who thought of Moscow as the "Third Rome."

international popular tale, whereby, before leaving England, Ecgwine had himself shackled, threw the key to the shackles into the river Avon, and then miraculously recovered the key from the stomach of a salmon caught at Rome in the river Tiber” (Lapidge lxxxv).

One of the purposes of hagiography was to teach doctrine (Robertson 17). St Lucy embodies the Christian principle of charity, selling all that she has and giving the money to the poor (*GL* 22–23); St Margaret of Antioch refused to worship pagan gods (162); Bathildis, a widowed queen who entered a nunnery, exemplifies the virtue of humility as she “undertook lowly tasks gladly, even cleaning the toilets” (Bartlett 220).

A second purpose was to encourage veneration of the saint (Robertson 17). Saints’ cults did not spring up by themselves, says Ridyard (*Royal Saints* 5), “they were developed. And their development owed less to divine acknowledgement than to successful advertising.” This in turn had two purposes. One, from as early as the fourth century, was to encourage pilgrimage to the saint’s shrine; this served the religious needs of the pilgrims, who “searched for tangible proof of God’s presence by touching the physical site, looking at relics [and] collecting artifacts” (Kaufman 11). It could also be a lucrative business for the church or abbey that owned the shrine, since the pilgrims might make donations, buy souvenirs or otherwise bring money to the community as they paid for accommodation, food and other entertainment. From the eleventh century onwards, hagiographies were often written with a view to strengthening a candidate’s claim for papal canonization; the saint’s consequent inclusion in the liturgical calendar could then reach a broader audience (and encourage more pilgrims to visit and part with their money!). Thus, for example, Osbert of Clare wrote a *Life* of Edward the Confessor in the 1130s, hoping thereby to persuade the pope to canonize the late king; his attempt was not immediately successful, but Edward was eventually canonized in 1161 (Bartlett 546). Hagiographies

encouraging veneration of the saint might also be written as a means of obtaining the saint's gratitude for services rendered (515).

Hagiography was also aimed at encouraging imitation of the saint (Bartlett 17). St Augustine stressed the importance of human examples as being "more approachable for imitation," since imitating God or even Jesus is beyond us (511). This may be especially true of the legends of the virgin martyrs. With "the cruelties ... elaborated to an extraordinary degree," it is easy to interpret these as being intended "to give readers a sadomasochistic gratification" (535). Another interpretation, however, is that these highly exaggerated accounts were aimed at young nuns facing the ordinary temptations of the flesh or punishments inflicted by angry parents who wished them to marry. If the saints could endure so much, they were told, then surely you can withstand these lesser travails (538–40).

Saints were also heroes, both romantic and political, and hagiographies were written to answer public demand for news of them. By the time de Voragine put together his *Golden Legend* in the mid-thirteenth century, Mary Magdalene's hagiography had far outstripped the information given in the gospel. St George, once a common soldier who refused to sacrifice to pagan gods (Robertson 41), had been a martyr who came back from the dead several times (41–42), a "medieval *seigneur*" who defeated his enemy in courtly verbal duels (47–51), and had only very recently killed the dragon. Meanwhile, the hagiographies of the cartulary saints (discussed in chapter 2) served a political purpose, depicting founders or other abbots/bishops as having established or defended their institution by miraculous means, thus giving divine sanction to property rights and political freedoms (Blair 142).

### *Adaptations*

We have seen some of the primary purposes of hagiography, but in order for the desired

message to be adequately conveyed *Lives* frequently needed to be rewritten for a specific target audience. Very often, this was “a response to cultural change within the writer’s society” (Bartlett 544). This might include the movement of the writer from an area where Christianity was well established to one in which it was comparatively new, a change in the dominant language, or changes in popular taste.

Early hagiographies were written in Greek or Latin, depending upon where the martyr had lived or died, and Latin continued to be the primary language used in western Europe long after the fall of the Roman Empire. The Anglo-Saxons, living on the edge of the Roman world, were the first to use the vernacular (Bartlett 544); a ninth-century *Old English Martyrology* and Ælfric’s late-tenth century *Lives of Saints* have survived (580). This, unusually, was followed by a return to Latin, along with the Conqueror’s vernacular French, after 1066 (581), and then by a turn to Middle English in the fourteenth century (583). Hagiographies were written in Latin during the Anglo-Saxon period, witness Byrhtferth of Ramsey’s *Lives of Oswald and Ecgwine*, but Byrhtferth had been educated in France and was writing for one of the wealthier monasteries (Lapidge xv).

Whether in Latin or in the vernacular, hagiographies were generally written in prose form until the twelfth century, when the octosyllabic rhyming couplets of French secular literature became popular. One such translation is the *Vie Seinte Audree*, a version of the *Life of Æthelthryth of Ely*, written by a person identified only as ‘Marie’ – possibly, but by no means certainly, the same writer of secular literature known as Marie de France (Bliss 290). Like the latter’s *Lais*, the *Vie* is written for a listening audience: the collection in which it appears was intended for “mealttime readings in a nunnery,” uses the second person, and “makes chatty

explanations” (290). Simund de Freine<sup>41</sup> (fl. 1200), an Anglo-Norman cleric, wrote the *Vie de saint Georges* in the less common heptasyllabic verse,<sup>42</sup> eliminating the “rustic folklorism” of a previous Latin prose version (Robertson 47) and introducing “a discourse of urbanity, virtuosity, [and] sophistication” such that “the pathos of martyrdom has become transformed into an exercise of wit” (51). The thirteen-century English theologian Alexander of Ashby (cited in Bartlett 509) says he “employed the brevity of verse, so that the weakness of memory might be helped more powerfully by it.” Because it conformed to the same conventions as literature intended for oral performance, French verse hagiography was even taken up by minstrels, while Latin prose works continued to be used by monks and clerics for more serious study (584).

Cultural change influenced not only the writer’s choice of language or style but, as we have seen with the story of St George, the content itself changed over time, incorporating elements from other hagiographies or from local secular sources, such as folklore or romance. I shall now consider these influences in more detail.

## **Folklore**

“The interpenetration of hagiography and folklore” is “abundant in the eleventh- and twelfth-century texts,” says Blair (149). This interpenetration has been problematic for scholars attempting to reconstruct accurate histories of the saints, because on the one hand the basic biographical details are “fleshed out with routine *topoi* and fantastical digressions” (Powell 171), while at the same time the elements of folklore are not always easy to identify (176). The idea that ‘folklore’ was interchangeable with ‘oral tradition’ (176) has been replaced in recent years by a realization that there was constant interaction in the Middle Ages between literature and

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<sup>41</sup> Also known as Simon du Fresne.

<sup>42</sup> According to Bartlett (584), “of the twenty-five French verse hagiographies composed in England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, twenty-one were in octosyllables.”

popular culture (Schmitt 9). Themes and elements that entered a story via one route might be transmitted and altered via another; indeed, a single storyteller might tell the same tale in different ways according to the expectations of a specific audience, in a process described by Swedish folklore scholar Carl W. Von Sydow as *oikotypification* (Powell 180). Thus, says Schmitt, hagiography cannot be studied simply as history, but requires the use of both historical and anthropological approaches (19).

The anthropological approach is particularly important as we seek to understand the ways in which classical or folkloric elements were included and altered to suit the propagandist purpose of hagiography. Generally speaking, says Schmitt, “le mot *superstitio*, par opposition à *religio* ..., signifiait une forme dégradée et pervertie de la religion”<sup>43</sup> (29). Yet even Bede, who prided himself on historical accuracy, was willing to compromise and admit pagan superstition into his account “when great saints had to be glorified to inspire the laity” (Blair 148). For example, a dying horse rolls where St Oswald died and immediately recovers; the rider then has a paralyzed girl brought to the same place and laid down on the grass, where “she fell asleep for a short while; and, on waking, she found herself restored to health” and walked home (Bede 158). Though Bede presents this as a specific miracle performed by St Oswald, it is strongly reminiscent of spring fertility rites in which a girl would “lie on the ground as if dead” while others danced around her, until she sprang up, reinvigorated by the local deity of spring. Frazer describes rites of this sort taking place in Russia in the late nineteenth century (418), as well as similar rites in both Russia and France involving the revival of a male sleeper (176–77), so it seems reasonable to assume that such rites would have been widely practised in the seventh century. The traditional concept of new life arising in spring from the death-sleep of winter tied in well with the Church’s doctrine that Christ had risen from the dead at the same of year, so

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<sup>43</sup> “The word *superstitio*, as opposed to *religio* ..., indicated a debased and twisted form of religion.”

Bede was not straying from the path of spiritual truth when he assigned such a miracle to one of Christ's saints.

Bede's willingness to convert pagan mythology into a miracle attributed to a saint indicates that such transference was widely accepted, and attempts have been made to interpret the Godiva legend as a Christianization of some other form of pagan fertility rite, one that "exclude[s] men and involve[s] a ceremonial action by a naked woman" (Donoghue 35). No direct parallel has been identified, however, and even indirect links to known fertility rites are sketchy at best. Not only is there no rebirth, but there is nothing to suggest any kind of sacred marriage, such as was enacted in Alexandria in Classical times (Baring and Cashford 363). She is not dressed as a bride, as occurred in parts of Germany (Frazer 178). She is not in any way associated with corn, like the Greek Demeter (Baring and Cashford 364) or Christianized versions of Brigid (Frazer 177). Donoghue (35) notes attempts to cast her as a Christianized Epona, a Celtic goddess associated with both fertility and horses, but points out the extreme improbability of an Epona cult surviving in this non-Celtic area centuries after the Anglo-Saxons became Christian (36). It also seems unlikely that she would have failed to become a saint had she, in fact, been the 'reincarnation' of a pagan goddess: miracles attributed to the goddess would have been attributed to her, and the fact that there was already a cult to be transferred would have given a powerful impetus to the petition for canonical recognition.

Whether it involved the appropriation of pagan mythology or the eulogizing of genuine martyrs and confessors, propaganda needs a monster, a foil for the hero, and one folkloric monster that grew in popularity throughout the Middle Ages was the dragon. We have seen that St George was not definitively associated with his dragon until the twelfth or thirteenth century, but he was by no means the first saint to have one. St Marcel of Paris (d. 436) acquired his in the

mid-sixth century as the culmination of a series of miracles recounted by Fortunatus, and by the time Gregory of Tours wrote a new *Vita* only 50 years later, the banishing of the dragon had become Marcel's only miracle (Le Goff 236–38). Le Goff observes that Fortunatus ascribed no symbolic value to the dragon, seeing Marcel's victory as *de nature matérielle, psychologique, sociale, non religieuse*<sup>44</sup> (243): Marcel is a founder saint who removes Nature's threat to civilization (244). Gregory, on the other hand, follows a tradition in which dragons are associated with missionary bishops in a manner that suggests they represent a conquered pagan tradition: his dragon is the serpent from the Garden of Eden (245) – “c'est le vieil ennemi de l'homme, c'est le diable, c'est Satan,”<sup>45</sup> says Le Goff (246). This was the view that would eventually predominate in formal Church teaching.

Dragons, however, were ancient beasts associated with the wilderness, and had no place in eleventh-century Coventry. Yet at some point, there was perhaps a sense that Godiva needed a 'monster.' Leofric could be cast in this role, but her victory is obtained while she is separated from him, and the immediate threat during her ordeal is the risk that somebody will see her naked. In the St Alban's version of the legend, it is accounted a miracle that nobody sees her (Westminster 544), but this lacks the immediacy of an encounter with a monster. As with St George and his dragon, Godiva did not definitively acquire her Peeping Tom until centuries after the original story (Donoghue 31), though today the story of Godiva without the threat posed by Tom is unthinkable.

The entanglement of “*récit savant*” and “*tradition orale de la paysannerie*”<sup>46</sup> (Schmitt 66) may be seen again in the cult of St Guinefort the Holy Greyhound, recorded near Lyon, France, as a rural heretical practice by a Dominican friar, Etienne de Bourbon (d. 1261). Curious about

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<sup>44</sup> “Material, psychological and social in nature, but not religious.”

<sup>45</sup> “It's humanity's old enemy, it's the devil, it's Satan.”

<sup>46</sup> “Literary narrative” and the “oral tradition of the peasantry.”

the unknown saint to whom local mothers brought their sick children for healing, de Bourbon was horrified to find that the saint was a dog and that the cult involved practices so dangerous for the infant that he described the women who participated as “mères infanticides”<sup>47</sup> (16). Schmitt sees strong parallels between the story of Guinefort (a dog who saved his master’s baby from a serpent only to be killed when his master, returning home, saw the overturned cradle and the blood on the dog’s mouth and jumped to the wrong conclusion) and an ancient Sanskrit educational text, the *Pañcatantra*, in which it is a loyal pet mongoose who is killed after saving the baby (63). While the Sanskrit was recognized as a fable, the moral of which was that a good ruler should avoid “toute précipitation et . . . les conduites inconsidérées”<sup>48</sup> (63), Guinefort was taken literally as a saint of the “martyred innocent” type (see Chapter 2).

Schmitt traces a possible transmission route from Sanskrit via Persian, Arabic, Greek, Hebrew and Latin, but notes that the Latin version did not appear until 1263 at the very earliest, and thus cannot be the source of the Guinefort story (64). There is a similar but unrelated Greek foundation myth in which a serpent defends a baby from a wolf and is killed for its pains, which Schmitt surmises could possibly be the origin of Guinefort, though he admits there is no evidence for this (65).<sup>49</sup> Otherwise, he suggests that the story might simply belong to a “vieux fond indo-européen”<sup>50</sup> (66) and owe nothing to exterior influences. Certainly, jumping to the wrong conclusion about the blood around a pet’s mouth seems to be something that could actually occur, from time to time, anywhere that people keep pets and have babies, with some of the stories becoming immortalized for one reason or another – perhaps used by a local priest to

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<sup>47</sup> “Baby-killing mothers.”

<sup>48</sup> “Precipitate action and ill-considered behaviour.”

<sup>49</sup> It is noteworthy that in the Greek version it is the serpent/dragon who is cast in the role of protector – a role that must have been consciously switched at some point, to bad serpent and good wolf/dog, if this was indeed the basis of the Guinefort story.

<sup>50</sup> “Ancient Indo-European repository.”

tell a moral story or perhaps, in the case of Guinefort, because the heartbroken knight moved away and left his demesne to be reclaimed by the wilderness, thus giving a strong romantic overtone to the tragedy. The fact that de Bourbon did actually find the mortal remains of a dog at the alleged site of Guinefort's grave (17) suggests at least the possibility of a literal, rather than a literary, origin.

The similarity of the story of St Guinefort to a Sanskrit fable intended to teach young princes to exercise judgment cautiously, when the timeline of transmission indicates that it cannot be a direct descendant of that fable, warns us to be careful of inferring influence or relatedness from superficial similarity. The many attempts to present the story of Godiva as an attempt to Christianize a pagan fertility cult even when there is no similarity to known cults clearly demonstrates that not everything has an ancient antecedent: new cults may arise purely from the circumstances of their own time. Guinefort may have had a literal origin. Godiva may have been a late attempt at creating a founder saint, using concepts from the Virgin Martyr tales that were popular at the time and also, as we shall see in the next section, themes from the secular tales that had become hugely popular in the late twelfth century.

### **Influence of Secular Literature**

Christopher Booker famously claimed that every story follows just one of seven basic plots: overcoming the monster, rags to riches, quest, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy, and rebirth. It is hardly surprising, then, that "hagiographers . . . utilize pre-existing archetypes" (Elliott 180) to bring a saint's biography to life. The examples available to western hagiographers in the Middle Ages included classical and Scandinavian literature, French secular poetry, and even tales from India. This section will focus on classical and French literature, as it was these two that had by far the greatest influence on Anglo-Norman hagiography and on the

legend of Lady Godiva.

The written texts with which early hagiographers were most familiar were, of course, those of classical Greece and Rome. When St George finally acquired his dragon, the tale was almost identical to the story of Perseus and Andromeda.<sup>51</sup> A French Life of St Gregory (d. 604) appears to have been based on several Greek stories, and particularly on Sophocles' *Oedipus* (Robertson 239). In neither case was there any need to cover for a lack of knowledge of the saint's true history<sup>52</sup> but, as Robertson says of the Life of Gregory, "The familiar devices, and the conspicuous artificiality of the plot, identify this work as one designed for entertainment as well as edification" (241).

Also seemingly intended for both edification and entertainment was the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, written by Henry of Saltrey in 1188 (Jenkins 1–2). This bears great similarity to Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas is escorted through the Underworld and admonished to avoid such torments for himself by honouring the gods.<sup>53</sup> The *Purgatorio* was soon translated into French verse and embellished, supposedly by Marie de France,<sup>54</sup> as *L'espurgatoire seint Patriz*,<sup>55</sup> with the result that it reads very much as quest literature. After more than a fortnight of spiritual preparation, a knight, Owein, enters a cavern in Ireland which is believed to be Purgatory, seeking forgiveness for his sins (*LESP* lines 503–58). He is escorted by demons and is shown the many horrible punishments to which sinners may be sentenced after death. After a series of less threatening encounters, he finally reaches the river which contains

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<sup>51</sup> In Greek mythology, Perseus, a son of Zeus, saves Andromeda, a princess, from a sea monster (Whatley, Thompson and Upchurch).

<sup>52</sup> Saint Gregory was the first pope of that name, and details of his life are well documented.

<sup>53</sup> A tale which of course, found its ultimate secular expression in Dante's *Divina Commedia*.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Jenkins, in his annotated edition, attributes the work to Marie. She is not universally accepted as the author, however, and Jenkins himself admits that "The *Espurgatoire* shows a grade of literary skill distinctly inferior to that displayed in both the *Lays* and the *Fables*" (14).

<sup>55</sup> So called, explains Marie (lines 6–8), because God had chosen to show St Patrick where the entrance to Purgatory lay.

the entry to Hell. Marie takes a break from the action at this point to devote almost a hundred lines (1401–84) to a homily on the comparative ease of earthly suffering and the importance of praying for the dead in order to earn their speedy release from Purgatory, reminding us that this is no idle tale. Further, the reference to the many people who fail to return from St Patrick's Purgatory may perhaps allude to the many characters in Greek mythology who fail to follow instructions and thus never return from a visit to the Underworld.

Another classical work that had an extensive influence, first on secular literature and later on hagiography, was Ovid's *Ars amatoria*, "The Art of Love" (Parry 4). This circulated widely in twelfth-century Europe, and in Spain was combined with an Arabic spiritual tradition "which appears to be based upon the work of Plato" (8). The Spanish model then influenced the troubadours, and eventually developed into "courtly love" (6). The rules of courtly love were set out in great detail by Andreas Capellanus, chaplain to Eleanor of Aquitaine's daughter, Marie de Champagne (17), and greatly influenced the work of Chrétien de Troyes, who was attached to Marie's court. It was French writers such as Chrétien and Marie de France whose work would influence late twelfth- and thirteenth-century hagiography, perhaps including the legend of Lady Godiva.

One requirement of courtly love, at least according to Andreas, was that "whether the beloved was of high or low rank, the lover was always abject before her" (Parry 10). Another was that there could be no true love between husband and wife (6) – a tenet Chrétien de Troyes did not accept. It is Chrétien's tale of *Erec et Enide* (discussed below), which ends in a loving reconciliation between husband and wife, that strikes me as the most likely literary inspiration for Prior Geoffrey's story of Godiva's ride.

Robertson claims that "the French hagiographers looked to Bernard of Clairvaux on one

side and Chrétien de Troyes on the other” – that is, they “render[ed] spiritual experience into vernacular literary form” (14) – and draws attention to the similarities between the trials of the Arthurian heroes and those of the hermits (16–17). Elliott also sees similarities, particularly in structure, between passion and epic (36) and between vita and romance (45). Passion and epic both “narrate tales of unmediated opposition between good and evil, right and wrong” (85). As Saint Catherine refuses to sacrifice to idols (*GL* 333), so Roland fights the infidel at Roncevaux. The protagonist is pure; the enemy is external and irredeemable. Vita and romance, on the other hand, involve a quest or a journey, “often rich with symbols and motifs of descent” (Elliott 120). Owein humbly leaves his king’s service to cleanse his soul in St Patrick’s Purgatory, while Erec haughtily sets out with Enide in search of an adventure to restore his damaged reputation (which he blames on her). While one recognizes it and the other does not, both heroes are flawed and the real enemy is within. Rather than a single confrontation with evil, it takes a series of ever-increasing dangers to destroy the sin whilst sparing the man.

Elliott sees further similarities between hagiographical and secular heroes in both categories, in that both saint and hero are presented as liminars, leaving their familiar environment and “pass[ing] through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of either [their] past or future conditions” (171–72). Catherine, Roland, Owein and Erec all leave the safety of their wealthy origins to face dangers that ultimately lead to their greater glory. In the case of the epic heroes this glory is found in death, while for the romance heroes it involves a new standing at court. An important feature of liminars is that they are often naked and possess nothing (172), a sign of having left behind their past but not yet attained their goal. St Agnes is just one of the many virgin martyrs to be stripped and paraded through the streets on her way to martyrdom (*GL* 56); Bisclavret is trapped in his werewolf state because his unfaithful wife has

hidden his clothes, and he cannot become human again until the king accepts him as a werewolf and provides new clothing for him (Marie de France 49–57). Lady Godiva is similarly in a liminal state during her ride. Prior to it, Leofric sees her merely as “asking to no purpose for a thing which would be injurious to him” (Westminster 544), and sets a task which he thinks will silence her. Afterwards, when she has demonstrated at least her commitment and courage, and possibly also her sanctity – he “looked on [it] as a miracle” that she had not been seen (544) – he receives her back with honour and respect, elevated to a new level both in his eyes and those of the townspeople.

#### *Erec et Enide*

Zara Zaddy (14) describes *Erec et Enide* as “the story of a man taken to task by his wife, who sets out resentfully to vindicate himself in her eyes; but who comes in the process to recognise her love and worth. And is so disarmed by his discovery that he is left to look around for an occasion for reconciliation.”

Erec, a rather arrogant young prince, leaves King Arthur’s court in pursuit of an unknown knight who has insulted Guinevere and her lady-in-waiting. He catches up with him at the castle of Laluth, where he learns that a tournament is to take place the next day. He stays the night at the home of an impoverished “vavasor” (a gentleman, but not of the nobility), where he meets the beautiful Enide and immediately asks for her hand in marriage. He defeats the offending knight in the tournament and returns with Enide to Arthur’s court. To her embarrassment, he does not allow her wealthier cousin to give her a new dress, but insists on presenting her as he found her, which she later describes as “povre et nue,” (poor and naked) (de Troyes line 6259). The couple are so deeply in love that Erec stops participating in tournaments and quests in order to spend time with his bride, which leads to the other knights muttering and accusing him of

“recreantise” (cowardice). Enide, knowing that she is responsible, is crying about it one night and whispers “Amis, con mar fus!” (“My love, it’s such a shame!”) (2503). Erec overhears her and demands an explanation. Infuriated by this slur on his honour, he demands she dress and mount her palfrey, then orders her to ride in front of him and not say a word under any circumstances. There follows a series of adventures in which Enide always warns Erec of the danger, until he finally believes that she really does love him and the two are reconciled. By the end of the story, says Zaddy (22), “It is obvious that Enide is no longer a mere bed-fellow for Erec, but a consort whose worth he has come to recognise and whose counsels he will henceforth be prepared to listen to and accept.”

Both Erec and the Leofric of legend are arrogant noblemen who take a beautiful young bride whom they regard as inferior and purely decorative. Both behave in a way that makes them unpopular with those around them, and both are angered when their wives bring this to their attention. Both order their wives to ride out into danger: Enide, though fully clothed, is vulnerable as an apparently lone woman in a bandit-infested forest; Godiva, though in the normally safe environment of the town her husband rules, is alone (or accompanied only by her gentlewoman, in Prior Geoffrey’s version) and naked. Enide has previously had the experience of riding into Arthur’s court “povre et nue” – she was actually wearing frayed hand-me-downs, but her choice of words indicates that she felt naked and humiliated in front of the grandly dressed queen and her ladies. Both women endure their trials, earn the respect of their husbands, and are restored to favour.

### **Common Themes**

Liminality was not the only theme common to secular and hagiographic literature in the twelfth century. Both genres emphasize the wealth and nobility, youth and beauty of their

protagonists. Concepts of the preservation of virginity, shame and honour, good and evil, monstrous humans and noble monsters, and, of course, chivalry – though sometimes most conspicuous in its absence – abound.

### *Attributes of the Saint*

“The saintly hero of legend . . . is often a man or woman set apart, extraordinary,” writes Elliott (77). By the twelfth century, this had become something of a cliché in both hagiography and secular literature, but it had its origins in historical fact. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the pre-Christian sacral kings were considered to be, quite literally, a cross between humanity and the “supernatural agents” who “worked the world” (Frazer 13). Even when no divine ancestry was attributed to the individual, “the union of a royal title with priestly duties” was not uncommon (12). Le Goff observes that in the Middle Ages, “l’*épiscopat* . . . se recrutait essentiellement dans l’aristocratie, au point que la naissance illustre figurait parmi les lieux communs hagiographiques que les auteurs des *Vitae* répétaient, sans grand risque de se tromper” (236).<sup>56</sup>

King Arthur, originally a Welsh hero, entered the Anglo-Norman world via Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* shortly before 1140, and by the end of the century had become a staple of secular literature. The knights of the Round Table are all sons, or at least nephews, of kings; Arthur, however, takes precedence because of his supernatural conception<sup>57</sup> and (later) the gifting to him of Excalibur<sup>58</sup> via a miracle originally attributed to St Wulfstan. A similar need to go ‘higher than high,’ so to speak, is seen in the emphasis Ivo of Chartres places

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<sup>56</sup> “Bishops were primarily recruited from the aristocracy, to the point where noble birth became one of those hagiographic commonplaces that the writers of saints’ Lives repeated with little risk of being wrong.”

<sup>57</sup> His father Uther Pendragon, seduces his mother by a ruse, appearing to her in the likeness of her husband thanks to the ‘medicines’ of Merlin (Monmouth 143–44).

<sup>58</sup> The story of the Sword in the Stone does not appear in the original Welsh material or in Monmouth’s work, but is added by Robert de Boron around 1200 (Bryant 107).

on the timing of the conception of Adela of Blois – *after* her father became king (LoPrete 23–24). As we have seen in Chapter 2, the element of sacrality – a liminal quality – though formally denied, was frequently attributed to saints to enhance the lay recognition of their extraordinary status.

Wealth, though frequently associated with nobility, could also appear without it. Often, it is seen in conjunction with the extraordinary status of an only child born after long years of sterility, a concept that draws on such biblical examples as Israel, Samuel and John the Baptist. However, while the latter are devoted by their parents to God’s service, in hagiography the parents generally assume that the longed-for child will be heir to their material wealth, while the saint revolts against this. St Lucy, for example, gives away her entire inheritance to the poor, and is martyred after her furious fiancé turns her over to the authorities as a Christian (*GL* 22–24). St Alexis, in the original Syriac version of his Life, is a late-born heir who flees on his wedding night to live in poverty in far-off Edessa, thus eschewing both wealth and the marriage bed (Robertson 204–06). The Anglo-Norman Christina of Markyate may be seen as a “female version of Alexis” (227), rejecting an economically desirable marriage for a life of poverty and chastity. Anglo-Saxon royal widows such as Eormenilda are special because of their royal birth, but it is their rejection of wealth that makes them holy (Ridyard 92).

Youth and beauty are also key themes, particularly in the traditions of the Martyred Innocent and of the Virgin Martyr: “The figure of the virgin martyr is one of youth and beauty crowned by the virtue of chastity,” says Robertson (54). Two possible reasons may account for this, the first of which is quite simply pathos: Brandon D’mello (web), considering the 1943 *Kindchenschema* (‘baby schema,’ ‘childlikeness’ or ‘cuteness’) theories of Konrad Lorenz in the light of more recent studies, explains that ‘cuteness’ triggers both “an emotional ‘awwwwww’

[and] a physical urge to protect,” hardwired by evolution to ensure that helpless infants are cared for. While the virgin martyrs tend to be young adults, sufficient emphasis on their youth and beauty still triggers the ‘aww’ factor, as can be seen in the story of St Cecilia, when the men who arrested her “wept bitterly at the thought of such a lovely and well-born young girl going willingly to her death” (*GL* 321). The second is the association of beauty with goodness and ugliness with evil: Jeffrey Cohen, in his essay on monster theory, draws attention to the way in which Thomas More, describing Richard III as short, crooked and ugly, was thus able to convey the idea that he was also wicked (42).<sup>59</sup> At first glance, one might think this equation does not always hold: Bisclavret, though good, appears as a monster, while the devil appears to an abbot “in the form of a ravishing young girl” (*GL* 124) in an attempt to lure him into breaking his vow of chastity. The key, however, is that ‘true’ forms are always revealed: provided with clothing (a basic requirement of civilization), Bisclavret resumes his civilized human form; St Bartholomew comes to the rescue of his devotee and reveals the identity of the devil by asking ‘her’ a question no mortal could answer (125).<sup>60</sup>

### *Shame and Honour*

Shame and honour “play a prominent role . . . in Anglo-Saxon hagiography,” says Rolf Bremmer (97). In most cases, honour is an ascribed status such as the familiar *æðelboren*, ‘of noble birth.’ Sometimes, however, honour may be acquired: we have seen that St Marcel of Paris, not nobly born, acquired honour through valiance, by defeating the dragon. St George, too, though originally a common soldier, acquired a more romantic status as a dragon-slayer.<sup>61</sup> Other

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<sup>59</sup> According to Jo Appleby, who examined Richard’s skeleton in 2013, he had a quite severe thoracic scoliosis but, she says, “the physical disfigurement was probably slight ... [and] a good tailor and custom-made armour could have minimised the visual impact.”

<sup>60</sup> He asks the distance between heaven and hell, something only those who had fallen from heaven could know.

<sup>61</sup> As a martyr, George had already achieved the highest honour a Christian could, but the slaying of the dragon

saints acquired or heightened their earthly honour through learning (108–10). Learning is of particular importance in the ‘challenge and riposte’ style of honour contest (112), such as that between St Bartholomew and the devil, or the pre-dragon St George defeating his enemy in verbal duels (Robertson 47–51). Learning was accessible to only a few, and hence came to be synonymous with long years of service to the church and thus with honour as a Christian.

Bremmer also draws a distinction between shame and guilt, following anthropologist Ruth Benedict in defining shame as “a reaction to other people’s criticism” and guilt as something that comes from within (98). When the consul Paschasius threatens to have St Lucy “taken to a brothel and prostituted” – a common sentence for the virgin martyrs – so that she will “lose that Holy Spirit,” Lucy replies, “The body can only be defiled if the heart consents. If you have me used against my will, the reward for my chastity will be greater, and my martyr’s crown will be assured” (*GL* 23). In the case of martyrs, shame becomes honour because it is suffered for a noble cause (Bremmer 116). By contrast, the Roman officials and great scholars who contend with them are shamed and humiliated by publicly losing an argument with “one young girl” (St Catherine, in *GL* 335).

While the threat of rape is never realized in the Virgin Martyr accounts, the threat of being stripped naked in public frequently is. The goal is usually humiliation, as is clearly stated by Simeon Metaphrastes when he writes that St Anastasia was made to “stand totally naked, uncovered and unclothed, the more to shame the virgin, who was unaccustomed to crowds and the gaze of men” (cited in Bartlett 539). It is often the first stage of punishment, perhaps ordered in the hope that this alone will persuade the saint to recant. It would, after all, be counter-productive to ‘damage the goods’ if a well-born husband is still hoping to take his bride, and even if this is not the case, the official may want to avoid taking further, perhaps unpopular,

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gave him a more glamorous, and thus more ‘noble,’ appeal to the laity.

action against a ‘lovely and well-born young girl.’ St Agnes is stripped and paraded naked through the streets to the brothel, the order given by the father of her would-be suitor (*GL* 56). St Christina is stripped twice: once by her father, exposing her to the twelve men he has called upon to beat her, and then again by the judge, who forces her to walk naked to the temple of Apollo (Bartlett 536). Perpetua and Felicity are “exposed naked in a net in the arena at Carthage” (538) – though this backfired somewhat as the crowd were appalled at seeing two young mothers treated this way, and the ringmaster was forced to have them removed and dressed (Catholic Online). An exception to this occurs in the pre-Christian (third to first centuries BCE) story of Susanna and the Elders, which is presented as Daniel 13 in some versions of the Christian Bible. In this case, whether she is stripped completely naked, as in the Septuagint version, or merely unveiled, as in the version based on Theodotion (NSRV 1470–72), it is clear that this is done so that the elders who falsely accuse her of adultery “might feast their eyes on her beauty” (Daniel 13:32).

In some cases, however, the virgin is spared the humiliation. St Agnes is protected by a sudden growth of her hair, which “covered her better than any clothing could have” (*GL* 56), while St Barbara is “covered with a miraculous robe” (Bartlett 538). Hair, according to Ferguson (47), “is a symbol of penitence,” based upon the story of Mary Magdalene wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair. Long, loose hair was also the accepted style in antiquity and in the Middle Ages for an unmarried woman, and was thus a symbol of virginity (47). In Judges 13:5, Samson’s mother is told that “No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth,” while Hannah, mother of Samuel, is given the same instruction in 1 Samuel 1:11. A nazirite was one who had taken a vow of consecration (usually temporary), and their hair was not cut until they returned to normal life (*NRSV* 368–69); hence long hair may also be viewed as a

sign of devotion to God. The notion that a saintly woman's hair might cover her completely when she is forced to go naked in public against her will, and that it might miraculously grow to achieve this, perhaps comes from St Paul, who tells the Corinthians that "her hair is given to her for a covering" (1 Corinthians 11:15). Hair is also clearly equated with clothing in the story of St Catherine, where the sages she converts are killed but "neither their hair nor their clothing was so much as touched by the fire" (*GL* 336). While Paul is emphatic that a woman should also cover her head with a veil, his remarks could be interpreted to mean that a woman should keep her hair long as an emergency backup. Bisclavret evidently felt the same way, preferring the 'emergency backup' of his hairy covering as a wolf to being seen naked in public as a man, no matter how much he yearned to return to his human life.

Ferguson (49) details four distinct meanings of nudity in the religious art of the Renaissance: the natural state, poverty, purity/innocence and vice (particularly lust). The nudity of the young female martyrs is intended to humiliate them by the association with vice, and Leofric assumes that Godiva will not meet his terms for the same reason. However, the mere fact that they are expected to feel this way, being 'unaccustomed to ... the gaze of men,' is evidence of their purity. The long, thick hair that preserves their modesty without the need for artificial coverings indicates a natural state: they are "as God made them" and the sinful world is powerless against them. Even St Barbara's unspecified 'miraculous robe' may be interpreted in this way, since she is untouched by human fabrication. In the case of the early saints, however, it is only the virgins who are covered like this. Perpetua and Felicity, as young mothers, are removed from the arena and given normal clothing, while Mary of Egypt, a former prostitute, stands with her back to Zosimas and asks for his cloak before she can turn around to face him (*GL* 113). In Godiva's case, her nudity may also be associated with poverty, in that she is acting

on behalf of the poor; she empathizes with them and has thus, in a sense, consented to become one of them. As we saw in the previous section, nudity may also be a sign of transience or liminality, of having discarded the old existence but not yet attained the new.

A common theme in the *passiones* is that the saint is unharmed by fire or boiling liquids. SS Agnes (*GL* 57), Euphemia (234) and Daria (284) are all untouched by flames, while St Juliana's suitor keeps trying to kill her with molten lead (83–84), attempts are made to boil SS Cyprian and Justina in a cauldron of boiling wax (246), and St Cecilia remains cool in a tub of boiling water (322). St Lucy survives both, having flames lit around her and “pitch, resin and boiling oil poured over her” (24). Richard Hamer, in his introduction to *The Golden Legend*, suggests that this is intended to indicate “the failure of the persecutors to force the victims to abandon their faith . . . [which] ends when [they] order instead straightforward beheadings” (*GL* xxvii). This, however, overlooks the fact that even ‘straightforward beheadings’ do not always work: Cecilia survives for three days following three blows to the neck with an axe (322), while Lucy, stabbed in the neck with a knife, lives long enough for the priests to bring her communion (24). It is possible that the substances used represent the fire of lust, which does not touch them. Alternatively, since fire and brimstone<sup>62</sup> are staples in biblical references to Hell, there may also be an implication here that Hell cannot harm those who are willing to suffer and die for Christ. Baptism, which usually involves water, is also an essential element. The scholars who were brought in to refute St Catherine's arguments, but were instead converted by her, were thrown unbaptized into a pit of fire: they died but their hair and clothing were untouched. In this case, Catherine assures them, death itself counts as baptism and is therefore necessary (336), but the things associated with them are protected because they covered holy martyrs.

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<sup>62</sup> Sulphur, which is often found in hot springs.

### *Good and Evil*

As we have seen, Elliott identifies a parallel between Passion and epic, which both “narrate tales of unmediated opposition between good and evil, right and wrong” (85). The saintly hero is good and thus, succoured by God, must always win, as, for example, St Æthylthryth kills Sheriff Picot’s agent, Gervase, who refuses to recognize her monastery’s land rights (*LE* 252–53), or St Guinefort kills the serpent who would have harmed the baby. Those who attempt to violate the virgin often come to a sticky end. St Agnes’ suitor, who had attempted to send his friends in to rape her first, is throttled by the Devil (*GL* 56). Paschasius, who wanted St Lucy ravished to death and then attempted to kill her with multiple boiling liquids, is arrested on an unconnected charge of treason just as she lies dying of a dagger wound, and is executed (*GL* 24).

However, just as winning the fight against evil does not necessarily preserve the saint’s life and, as we see in *Roland*, the secular hero may sometimes fail, so the saint’s antagonist does not always die. When Priscus attempts to “have his way” with St Euphemia, “one of [his] hands was suddenly shrivelled” (*GL* 233), while another who attempts to grab her is “immediately paralysed from head to foot” (234). St Anastasia’s second husband is struck blind when he tries to embrace her (*GL* 32), though in this case de Voragine does not make it clear whether the unfortunate man was even aware that he was doing wrong. Alternatively, those in authority may be made to look weak and stupid when they are unable to control an adolescent girl or even, in the case of St Quiricus, a three-year-old boy (*GL* 141); it is, perhaps, a form of social death. Sometimes, as with St Marcel of Paris, the dragon is not slain but made to leave (Le Goff 237), thus losing its identity as the terror of the town. “The holiness of the saint is thrown into relief by the baseness of the monster that is encountered,” writes Samantha Riches of another saint, Sénan (Shannon) of Ireland, who defeats a dragon without killing it (201); one might similarly say that

the greatness of the powerless virgin is thrown into relief by the power of the official she defies.

*Noble Monsters, Monstrous Humans*

Some of the monsters and wild beasts in hagiography are undeniably a threat. Demons appear to St Theodora in the forms of “ferocious wild beasts” that threaten her life (*GL* 231). The Devil similarly appears to St Margaret of Antioch as a “monstrous dragon” (163). The “dragon” (possibly a lost walrus?) put into a trance by St Martha had “lurked in the river, killing everyone who tried to pass and sinking their boats” (183–84).<sup>63</sup> The wolf of Gubbio was more fortunate: St Francis recognized it as a hungry animal separated from its pack and solved its problem by arranging for it to be fed.<sup>64</sup>

Others – almost always lions – appeared fearsome but behaved nobly, helping and protecting the saint. A lion comes “meekly” to Zosimas in the desert, to help him dig a grave for Mary of Egypt (*GL* 115). Another lion is devoted to St Jerome after he pulls thorns from its paw, and even serves in place of the monastery’s ass after the animal it was supposed to be guarding is stolen (252–53). An almost identical story, this time involving “a savage woodland bear ... roaring and growling all around in a furious rage,” is attributed to Aventinus of Troyes (Bartlett 392), though in this case the bear returns to the forest after the saint has helped it. When St Euphemia is thrown into a pit with three beasts “so savage that they devoured anyone who came near them,” they “fawned on [her]” and one, specified as a lion, killed and ate her executioner

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<sup>63</sup> The description of this dragon as “an unbelievably savage aquatic serpent” with “sword-like teeth ... and flanks as impenetrable as twin shields” (*GL* 183) could perhaps describe a male walrus as seen by people unfamiliar with the animal. Also, the dragon’s behaviour, attacking boats and killing all aboard, is in keeping with recorded walrus incidents (Wild Focus Expeditions, web); a walrus named Freya was euthanized in Norway in August 2022 over fears that she would do this (Winsor, web). Finally, the beast “stood there as meek as a lamb while St Martha tied it up with her girdle” so it could be killed (*GL* 184). It may just have been asleep rather than in a miraculous trance, as walrus sleep for up to 19 hours straight when on land (Wild Focus Expeditions, web).

<sup>64</sup> This story does not appear in the *Golden Legend* but originated in the late fourteenth century, in *The Little Flowers of St Francis* (Franciscans, web). The skeleton of a wolf, “apparently several centuries old,” was allegedly discovered when the church at Gubbio was renovated in 1872 (House 181).

(*GL* 234–35).<sup>65</sup> A lion protects St Daria’s chastity, “post[ing] itself as a guard at the brothel door” (284), though again it is unable to save her life.

As is so often the case, the lion is multivalent. On the one hand, as a ferocious beast, it may represent the Devil (Ferguson 24); Pluskowski (161) notes that in the First Epistle of Peter, the Devil is described as “a roaring lion walk[ing] about, seeking whom he may devour,” and also that both lions and dragons are typically used as images of the mouth of Hell (160). Alternatively, it may be “emblematic of strength, majesty, courage, and fortitude” (Ferguson 23). It also represents watchfulness (24), which is certainly the role of Daria’s lion and perhaps also of Mary’s, since it appears to have been waiting for Zosimas to return. Jerome’s lion initially fails in its task of watchfulness, and as a result is reduced to the status of the ass; it is restored to honour when it finds the ass and brings those who stole it, with all their goods, to the monastery. In each case the power of the saint is revealed, this time by the majesty of the animal that serves them.

Humans, and particularly men in honourable positions, on the other hand, frequently show themselves to be more savage than any beast. The brutality shown by Paschasius, a Roman consul, towards St Lucy goes far beyond the bounds of law enforcement or even of sanity. He wants her “ravished to death” (*GL* 23); he calls first for a thousand men and then for a thousand oxen to move her to the brothel. When he realizes there is something supernatural happening, he calls for sorcerers, and when even the sorcerers fail he has three types of boiling liquid thrown over her while surrounding her with fire (24). De Voragine gives two versions of the death of St Quiricus. In one, Governor Alexander throws the three-year-old down a flight of steps, “dashing his young brains out all over them.” This could be interpreted as an accident: Quiricus had just

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<sup>65</sup> Euphemia’s story is very similar to the biblical story of Daniel in the lions’ den (Daniel 6:16–24). The lions do not harm the man of God but attack his accusers.

bitten him, so Alexander may have reacted instinctively and without thought for the smallness of his assailant. The other version, however, shows brutal intent as Alexander has the toddler – this time described as “not yet three years old” – flogged (141). Maxentius, the emperor, does initially try to reason with St Catherine, but loses his temper with the scholars who allow her to convert them. Unable to admit that he could be wrong, he orders their execution, and thereafter sinks into brutality towards both Catherine and his own wife, when she attempts to intervene on Catherine’s behalf (333–38).

In each case, the noble beast is secure in its own strength and reacts calmly to the calmness of the saint. The men, on the other hand, are conscious of the need to maintain an aura of power, and are enraged when their authority is publicly challenged.

### *Chivalry*

Closely linked to the concept of monstrous humans is the concept of chivalry. Richard Kaeuper describes medieval chivalry as “a wide and working set of ideals and ideas” that “framed not only war and peace, but status, acquisition and distribution of wealth, the practice of lay piety, the elevated and elevating nature of love, and ideal gender relationships, among much else” (5). In the secular literature of Chrétien de Troyes, ideals of gender relationships became infused with ideals of courtly love, so that romantic chivalry is presented with just two key aspects: the protection and respect a noble man should offer to those who are more vulnerable, particularly women, priests, and ‘noble beasts,’ and valiance in battle against the ignoble. The medieval St George does both: he protects a young princess by killing a dragon – an animal that, as we have seen, has many meanings in Christian theology, but none of them good. St Francis recognizes that the wolf is inherently noble but is behaving badly because it is desperate; he risks his life to speak to it while it is in this ignoble state, and protects both it and the people of Gubbio

by negotiating a settlement.

Other saints, however, are created when chivalry fails. Schmitt notes that the greyhound, in the Middle Ages, “est fortement valorisé ... il symbolise les vertus chevaleresques”<sup>66</sup> (87). Thus, when the knight kills Guinefort, “[il] tue l’animal qui incarne son propre système de valeurs”<sup>67</sup> (88). The tragedy comes about and the saint is created because the knight acts in a manner inconsistent with the chivalric values that should be synonymous with his social class. Similarly, the three knights who lured the priest Albert de Louvain (d. 1192) out of Rheims so that they could slay him without interference (Schmandt 649) behaved in a highly unchivalrous manner, which led to Albert being canonized as a martyr.<sup>68</sup> By contrast, St Jerome forbids his monks to kill the noble lion, and the lion ultimately justifies the saint’s faith by finding the ass he was wrongly thought to have killed. Jerome is to the lion what the knight should have been to Guinefort.

Leofric, too, behaves in an unchivalrous manner towards Godiva, subjecting her to potential danger and humiliation to accommodate his own greed – the very opposite of the behaviour expected of a nobleman towards any woman, and especially one of his own class. Whether the disappointment Prior Geoffrey relates (Donoghue 41–42) is due to her not being seen and humiliated, or to the fact that he has now lost a source of income because she fulfilled her side of the bargain, his actions are unchivalrous. The role reversal is complete in this case, because it is Godiva who acts in a chivalrous manner, risking her own well-being for the protection of others.

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<sup>66</sup> The greyhound “is highly significant ... it symbolizes the chivalric virtues.”

<sup>67</sup> “He kills the animal that embodies his own system of values.”

<sup>68</sup> Not only did three of them use trickery to beset a single unarmed man where nobody could come to his aid, but Schmandt concludes, with the contemporary author of the *Vita Alberti*, that they were acting on their own initiative (659), so they could not claim that they were honouring their vow of obedience to their liege lord.

## CHAPTER 5

### **The Significance of the Legend**

As we saw in Chapter 4, hagiographies are constantly changing, either to serve a new purpose or to appeal to a new audience. This chapter will consider key versions of the Godiva legend, putting them into their historical and social context. Why did Prior Geoffrey write such an obvious falsehood about the founder of his monastery? Why is the St Alban's version so different, when it is so close in time? What is the significance of Peeping Tom? What does Lady Godiva mean today?

#### **Prior Geoffrey**

The oldest known version of Lady Godiva's Ride is that written by Geoffrey, prior of St Mary's, Coventry, from 1216 to 1235, probably for the Trinity Sunday fair in 1218 (Donoghue 40–41). As noted in Chapter 1, we do not have Geoffrey's original story, only a 'paraphrase' written by Richard Grafton in the sixteenth century (Donoghue 41). But who was Geoffrey, and why might he have invented this story about the founder of his abbey?

The answer to the first part of that question is quite simply that we do not know, as not even a topographical surname has come down to us. Perhaps he was a foundling, or a youth of poor background who showed promise, rather than the son of a noble or wealthy household. It is likely that he had been a monk at Coventry for many years, perhaps decades (Franklin 136), before becoming prior, and British History Online gives his date of death as 1245, suggesting that he spent his last few years in retirement.

The second part of the question may be easier to answer. In 1185, a man named Hugh Nonant was appointed Bishop of Coventry. Iain Soden describes Nonant as "vile" and relates that "when he lay on his deathbed in 1198, the list of his sins was so long and heinous, no one

could be found who was willing to absolve him” (42). Certainly the monks of Coventry would agree with this, for no sooner had Nonant arrived to take up his bishopric than he threw them out, replacing them with secular canons. Entering the monastery with an armed force, he destroyed all their charters of rights and privileges (*Monasticon Anglicanum*, cited in Franklin 136), then tried to prosecute the monks for having “laid violent hands upon him” (Franklin 136)! Franklin believes Geoffrey was present at the monastery when this happened. Then, in 1208, King John and Pope Innocent III quarreled over the choice of archbishop of Canterbury, which resulted in Innocent excommunicating the whole of England for five years. Most bishops left the country and John seized their revenues, so that “monasteries were reduced to mere subsistence” (Soden 94). In the midst of all this, a tax was levied on the regular clergy, ostensibly to fund Ranulf of Chester’s campaign against the Welsh.

It is not surprising, then, if Geoffrey, having lived through all of this, should seek to recover the monastery’s rights and privileges when he became prior. First, there was the matter of refilling the cartulary. Joan Lancaster believes that all but one of the documents in that cartulary were forgeries (114) and were probably not fully accepted as genuine until around 1267 (118), although the famous division of Coventry into “prior’s half” and “earl’s half” was fully accepted by 1175 (128). It is not known whether Geoffrey was able to recover those stolen by Nonant<sup>69</sup> or whether he had new ‘copies’ written (129), but Soden makes no mention of Earl Ranulf contesting his claims – and very wide-reaching claims they were. In addition to giving the monks half of Coventry, it granted them “exemption from the payment of all dues to the king, to the king’s reeve, to the bishop or to any man” along with exemption from “castle duty”<sup>70</sup> and

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<sup>69</sup> He claimed they were copies, but had previously claimed the originals were destroyed. The most likely explanation is that they were rewritten, partly from memory but with convenient additions.

<sup>70</sup> I am not entirely certain what is meant by ‘castle duty’ here, but think it is probably castle guard duty — the responsibility of providing men to protect the earl’s castle in peace-time.

from “episcopal interference,” and secured “the right of the monks to elect their abbots or deans” (J. Lancaster 114).

As we saw in Chapter 2, those who had originally endowed a monastery were seen as a kind of “immortal landlord” (Blair 142) and as patron saints of their property, looking out for it from their seat in the presence of God (Brown 6). After the depredations it had suffered since Robert de Limesey first moved the seat of his bishopric from Lichfield to Coventry in 1102 (J. Lancaster 135) and claimed its revenues for himself as *de facto* abbot, and especially since the accession of Hugh Nonant in 1189, St Mary’s Priory must have felt the need of a divine protector. But why not cast Leofric in this role, given that there were already stories of him as a visionary and that, in keeping with Norman attitudes to women, it was his name on the forged documents and not Godiva’s? Why make Godiva a young woman, when she was almost certainly a grandmother when the abbey was consecrated in 1043? Perhaps it comes back to the ‘awww’ factor, to pathos: a young bride subjected to such potential humiliation by an ill-tempered husband triggers the urge to protect, whereas an older woman might be seen as more adversarial. It also fits with patterns of secular literature popular at the time, presenting Godiva as the heroine of a quest, coming into her power. Leofric, since he was already in a position of power, could not be presented in this light, unless he was depicted as opposing either Edward the Confessor or King John. Neither option was desirable. Edward was a national saint, so could not be presented as the villain. John had died only eighteen months earlier, leaving a nine-year-old heir; England was unstable enough without stirring up more hatred. At the very least, a young and naked Godiva posed no threat. Like the virgin martyrs whose first torment she shares, she is the epitome of self-sacrificing courage. Like theirs, her power lies precisely in her smallness and vulnerability.

Despite the similarities to cartulary saints and virgin martyrs, however, Prior Geoffrey's account of the ride does not include the miraculous. Rather, it reads as a story of cunning, of winning the bet by exploiting a loophole. Setting his story in the Coventry of his own time, an established episcopal city that had also, at one point, been the centre of Ranulf II's earldom, he describes how Godiva insisted that:

streight commaundement should be geuen throughout all the City, that euerie person should shut in their houses and Wyndowes, and none so hardy to looke out into the streetes, nor remayne in the stretes, vpon a great paine, so that when the tyme came of her out ryding none sawe her, but her husbände and such as were present with him, and she and her Gentlewoman to wayte vpon her galoped thorough the Towne, where the people might here the treading of their Horsse, but they saw her not.

Prior Geoffrey, paraphrased by Grafton and cited in Donoghue (41-42)

Note that Godiva rides through the whole town, both prior's half and earl's half. This appears somewhat odd if the sole purpose of the story was to secure divine protection for the monastery against the depredations of bishops. Geoffrey may have had a second purpose in mind, however. Emily Dolmans discusses the way local literature could be used to "forge an identity based on a shared regional mythology" (Introduction, Kindle), and this may well have been Geoffrey's intention. England had been rent asunder by the attempts of Prince John to seize power during the absence on crusade of Richard Lionheart. That rending had been replicated on a smaller scale in Coventry, as Earl Ranulf III sided with Richard while Hugh Nonant supported John. Not only did Nonant steal the resources of the monastery but, contrary to canon law, he also purchased three sheriffdoms, which he then used to squeeze everything he could out of Ranulf III in taxes (Soden 34). While the description of Coventry as divided into "prior's half" and "earl's half" suggests conflict between the two, the real conflict in Geoffrey's day was between Nonant on the one hand and his victims, the earl and the monks, on the other. Earl and

prior thus had a mutual interest in freeing Coventry from ‘slavery’ to avaricious bishops. Earl Ranulf was a pious man who donated to the monastery and to multiple other foundations throughout his earldom (267–68), so it is reasonable to assume that he was on good terms with Prior Geoffrey. By having Godiva ride through the whole town with the citizens collaborating to preserve her modesty, Geoffrey made her the protectress of all Coventry, not just of the abbey. One might even interpret Lady Godiva as representing the monastery she founded, while the assistance given by the town’s rulers represents the cooperation of the secular powers, the earl’s half.

Even if Leofric could not be the saint, why make him the villain? For one thing, it was necessary. His was the name on the forged charters, and since he could not be the saint, he had to be the sinner who was persuaded to change his ways. As we saw in Chapter 4, this would also be in keeping with the secular fashion for courtly love: the noble but imperfect man improved by a good woman. Neither is Leofric particularly villainous. Geoffrey may describe him as having his “imagination vtterly disappointed”<sup>71</sup> when Godiva completes her ride (Donoghue 42), but he nonetheless keeps his word. The other obvious choice of villain would have been Hugh Nonant, with an apparition of Godiva reproaching him, as Æthelthryth of Ely did Gervase, for his mistreatment of the monastery, thereby causing him to flee. However, while Nonant had become a Benedictine monk at Bec after fleeing Coventry, the fact that he died unshriven suggests that he had failed to convince those around him that he was truly repentant. This would be entirely inconsistent with the idea that he had been persuaded of the error of his ways by an angry apparition.

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<sup>71</sup> In Virgin Martyr tradition, the tyrant lasciviously anticipates seeing the young woman naked and humiliated. There is doubt as to whether this is what is intended here, however, as Godiva is his wife and he does see her riding through the town as agreed. It may be that he had imagined she would not do it, and was disappointed at the loss of income when she did.

## **The St Alban's Chronicle**

Donoghue (41–42) believes that the significant differences between the Coventry and St Alban's versions, perhaps separated by as little as ten years, suggest that the story was already in circulation and that the monks of St Alban's heard a different version than did Geoffrey.

However, as we saw in Chapter 4, hagiography was frequently rewritten to appeal to a specific target audience, and particularly as “a response to cultural change within the writer's society” (Bartlett 544). Simund de Freine completely rewrote the *Vie de Saint Georges* so that it would appeal to a more sophisticated audience, transforming “the pathos of martyrdom ... into an exercise of wit” (Roberts 51). The French *Vie de Saint Grégoire*, based as it is on Sophocles' *Oedipus* (Robertson 239), was clearly constructed to serve a purpose rather than evolving amongst an illiterate populace.

It does not seem unreasonable then, that a monk of St Alban's could have heard Geoffrey's story, or perhaps read it, and decided to adapt it for a monastic audience. The two cities are only 75 miles apart, with most of the journey along the great Roman highway of Watling Street, which also links to London and Canterbury. Any Coventry monk going to and from these cities would thus have spent at least one night at St Alban's in each direction. All the key elements remain: Leofric as the curmudgeonly ruler, Godiva as his young and empathetic wife, the naked ride through town as Leofric's condition for freeing the people from ‘slavery.’ However, it is much closer to a hagiographic account than Prior Geoffrey's version. Godiva's piety is emphasized: she wishes “in a most pious spirit, to deliver the city of Coventry from a burdensome and shameful slavery”; she is “beloved by God” and “under the favour of the Holy Trinity and the Holy Mother of God” (Westminster 544). There is no arrangement for the

townspeople to shut themselves in their houses; on the contrary, Leofric specifies that the ride must take place “at the time when you see all the people are assembled,” so that her public humiliation seems inevitable. As with St Agnes, her modesty is preserved by her hair, though in Godiva’s case there is no suggestion of miraculous growth. Finally, like SS Catherine and Daria with their first interlocutors, Godiva converts Leofric to her cause. He deems it a miracle that she passed unseen and takes this as a sign from God that her request is righteous and should be granted.

It should be noted that Ellis Davidson (109) offers a different timeline than that suggested by Donoghue, attributing the first written version of the legend to Roger of Wendover at St Alban’s in the twelfth century. She finds examples in folklore rather than hagiography for the constituent elements: the very popular theme of “the dutiful wife who performs some humiliating task at the bidding of a tyrant husband in order to benefit the common people”; the use of hair as a covering in the Scandinavian tale of Ragnar Lothbrok; or a line of trees springing up to hide a naked princess in a story from India (112). She does, however, reject as ‘nonsense’ the idea that the legend is the Christianization of a pagan cult (113).

There are several issues with her argument, however. Firstly, Ellis Davidson is a folklore specialist, so it is not surprising that she draws on that knowledge to explain the various elements of the Godiva legend, but it seems unlikely that a monastic original would be based on folktales when hagiography offers so many established examples of the same themes. Secondly, while a St Alban’s original including the miracle of Godiva passing unseen would strengthen my argument that the story was first intended as hagiography, the attribution of the original to Roger is dubious. Roger died in 1236. Since the earliest extant manuscript dates from 1250, we cannot be sure that the Godiva story was included in his lifetime; it may have been added later. All we can

say with certainty is that it was written later than 1057 (since it does not form part of Leofric's original eulogy but was inserted later) but was there in 1250. Also, it seems unlikely that Prior Geoffrey would intentionally remove the miraculous element from his version of the story, since it would surely have strengthened the reputation of Coventry's founder and protector. Finally, Donoghue (33) tells us that Roger of Wendover was not known as a writer of original works: rather, "most of his writings were derived from pre-existing chronicles, and so it is likely some version found its way to him" – an argument which, of course, brings us back to the 'oral tradition' dilemma.

On the whole, pending the discovery of a manuscript pre-dating 1218 that proves the contrary, I am inclined to believe that Prior Geoffrey was the originator of the story, which was subsequently brought more clearly within the hagiographic tradition at St Alban's. Certainly Geoffrey was the one with the greatest motivation to create a foundation myth for Coventry, and had a logical reason for presenting Leofric as a villain – an element which otherwise appears incongruous with what is known of his character and with his appearance elsewhere as a visionary.

### **Peeping Tom**

Regardless of where and how the Godiva legend began, it would go on to become an intrinsic part of Coventry's identity, and would acquire folk elements even if these were not part of the original inspiration. The most significant of these was Peeping Tom. As we saw in Chapter 1, he entered the narrative at some point during the sixteenth or seventeenth century. While his origins are unclear, what is certain is that once there, he stayed. But why?

For one thing, it is simply good storytelling. Since the version of the legend that remained in circulation was the one in which everybody remained indoors with their windows closed, there

is no dramatic moment: Godiva is never in any danger of being seen. After the argument with her husband, the ride itself is somewhat anticlimactic. If, however, there is one knave who disobeys the order and tries to see her naked, there is a moment of heightened tension. His lascivious searching for a good place to peep from, and even his horror as his eyes shrivel and fall from his head, as occurs in some versions, can also be used for comedic effect in reenactments.

Tom also serves a similar role to the Doubting Thomas (perhaps why he is named Tom) of John 20:24–29. Thomas, suspecting some kind of trick or hallucination, insisted on examining Jesus' wounds before he would believe in the Resurrection; he finally believed because he had confirmed for himself that Jesus was physically present. Similarly, if all the citizens were aware of was the sound of horses galloping through town, there is no 'proof' that a naked Godiva really did carry out her promise; she could have been fully clothed or have sent someone else in her place. If, however, somebody tried to see her and was struck blind or dead for his temerity, it suggests there really was something to see – especially if he was only struck blind, since he would then remain as a witness to his own crime and punishment.

### **The Victorians**

In the second half of the eighteenth century, England saw a surge of interest in the Middle Ages, which Michael Ferber (17) attributes to the social ills caused by the Industrial Revolution. Nostalgia for a more natural lifestyle led, he says, to people collecting folktales, perhaps as reminders of 'the good old days.' With the loss of America in 1783, and the further upheaval of the Napoleonic Wars in 1803–15, England sought escape in Romanticism (Alexander 33). Sir Walter Scott's edition of *Sir Tristrem* appeared in 1804, his *Lay of the Last Minstrel* in 1805, *Lady of the Lake* in 1810, and *Ivanhoe*, again based on medieval romances, in 1819.

But what exactly is Romanticism? Ferber observes that it has been described in many ways, none of which does justice to the entirety of the movement. Some of the descriptions he prefers include “[a celebration of] genius and individuality” (xiv) and “a transformation of the heroic quests from medieval romances into interior spiritual journeys” (10). This connection between the heroic quest and the spiritual journey was already evident in medieval hagiography, as we saw in Chapter 4, but Romanticism “replaced theological doctrine with metaphor and feeling” (10). Feeling, and especially “fellow-feeling or sympathy,” was highly valued as “the basis of our moral or social life” (16).

Early Romanticism was followed in the 1830s and ‘40s by a pushback against High Church Anglicanism, which was seen as too similar to Catholicism (Matthews 53) and thus ‘not British.’ The renewed fervour for all things ‘English’ affected many aspects of Victorian culture, including a revival of Gothic architecture and of jousting as a gentleman’s entertainment (49). Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote several poems based upon medieval stories during these years; most were from Arthurian romances but one, published in 1840, was *Godiva*.

Tennyson’s *Godiva* is based largely on Geoffrey’s version. Godiva did not speak to the magistrates, however, but instead:

Sent a herald forth,  
And bade him cry, with sound of trumpet, all  
The hard condition; but that she would loose  
The people: therefore, as they loved her well,  
From then till noon no foot should pace the street,  
No eye look down, she passing; but that all  
Should keep within, door shut, and window barr’d.

Godiva’s message is thus directly to the people she is trying to help. Rather than commanding them, she begs their understanding, appealing to their fellow-feeling to direct their moral action, just as it directs hers:

The passions of her mind,  
As winds from all the compass shift and blow,  
Made war upon each other for an hour,  
Till pity won.

Where Geoffrey's Godiva makes a deal with her husband and the authorities, and the St Alban's Godiva accepts Leofric's condition with an air of calling his bluff, Tennyson's Godiva is presented as doing the right thing despite her terror of being seen:

The deep air listen'd round her as she rode,  
And all the low wind hardly breathed for fear.  
The little wide-mouth'd heads upon the spout  
Had cunning eyes to see: the barking cur  
Made her cheek flame; her palfrey's footfall shot  
Light horrors thro' her pulses; the blind walls  
Were full of chinks and holes; and overhead  
Fantastic gables, crowding, stared: but she  
Not less thro' all bore up

This Godiva is not safely hidden behind a curtain of hair; neither does she have even the meagre protection of a gentlewoman beside her. She is alone and vulnerable, utterly at the mercy of the people, and the focus is on her feelings. One can imagine sheltered Victorian women, like the 'low wind,' hardly breathing for fear as they imagine themselves in her place, seeing eyes everywhere.

Neither is Godiva's fear of the 'chinks and holes' in the walls baseless, for there is a transgressor. Tennyson includes Peeping Tom, though not by name – it is clear that at this point his fame is such that no name is needed:

And one low churl, compact of thankless earth,  
The fatal byword of all years to come,  
Boring a little auger-hole in fear,  
Peeped

As we saw in Chapter 2, miracles are largely associated with the Roman Catholic tradition, while Anglican and Protestant traditions generally regard them as superfluous at best, if not as outright superstition. Tennyson's *Godiva*, however, despite being based upon Prior Geoffrey's version, does include the punishment of Tom, an event that might be considered a miracle:

But his eyes, before they had their will,  
Were shrivel'd into darkness in his head,  
And dropt before him. So the Powers, who wait  
On noble deeds, cancell'd a sense misused;  
And she, that knew not, pass'd;

In the St Alban's version, Leofric accounts it a miracle that Godiva passed unseen, and here we see the active intervention of 'the Powers' to ensure that she is not seen. But can this rightly be called a miracle? I would say not. Godiva's ride is presented here as a 'noble deed' arising from 'pity,' rather than as the action of one 'beloved of God' who acts 'in a most pious spirit' (Westminster 544). Where the St Alban's Godiva 'often entreated her husband ... under the favour of the Holy Trinity and the Holy Mother of God,' Tennyson's Godiva appears to approach him only once, appealing not to his righteousness but to his sentimentality — "she told him of their tears" and the emotionally charged "If they pay this tax, they starve!" She is not saintly but sentimental. Similarly, Tennyson makes no reference to God or Christ protecting her, but only to unspecified 'Powers,' which, in the strictly monotheistic culture of Victorian England, cannot refer to saints and must thus be taken as an entirely secular concept. What happens to Tom is poetic justice, not divine intervention.

### **The Modern Era**

Tennyson's poem helped to make Lady Godiva a household name throughout Britain and beyond. Today, however, knowledge of her seems to be waning. Donoghue (1) notes that while

she is the one Anglo-Saxon most of his students can name, and that they remember she rode naked to protest her husband's taxes, memory of any additional details tends to be sketchy. Many, it seems, would not understand 'the fatal byword of all years to come' as synonymous with 'Peeping Tom.' Two movies were made about her in the 1950s, one of which changed the plot to one of antagonism between Leofric and Godiva, as staunch Anglo-Saxons, on the one hand, and Edward the Confessor's Norman advisers on the other. In this version, the Norman Tom is blinded not by 'Powers' but by an Anglo-Saxon yeoman (121). There is nothing more recent, however. Whereas the memory of England's other legendary champion of the poor, Robin Hood, is kept alive by Hollywood in movies such as *Prince of Thieves* and its comic remake, *Men in Tights* (from 1991 and 1993, respectively), Lady Godiva's story is both too short and too lacking in fight scenes for any chance of box-office success.

Donoghue (1) also comments on how little Lady Godiva, either as a historical figure or as the legendary tax protester, is studied by historians. Any reference to her tends to be made "with a raised eyebrow or a passing witticism before returning to the more serious matter at hand." The real Lady Godiva has gone the same way as the real St George and so many other saints, rejected by those who seek "the objective reconstruction and interpretation of the past" (Ridyard, *Royal Saints* 9) as being too "fleshed out with routine *topoi* and fantastical digressions" (Powell 171).

Ironically, Lady Godiva is best remembered today as representing two things quite antithetical to her earlier incarnations, and to each other: industry and sensuality. In preparation for the 2012 London Olympics, Godiva was chosen to represent the West Midlands and its industrial heritage at the Opening Ceremony, "in the hope of reviving the engineering and manufacturing of the Midlands" (Kennedy, web). The brainchild of the Coventry division of NP

Aerospace, this Godiva was no naked lady but a 60-foot-tall moving puppet dressed in “a flowing golden silk coat embroidered with symbols of the region.” Rather than riding a horse, she was towed from Coventry to London by a team of 100 cyclists, dubbed the ‘Cyclopedia’.

The connection to engineering is not immediately obvious, but does actually make sense if we see Godiva as Coventry’s ‘immortal landlord’ who retains an interest in her property from beyond the grave (Blair 142). While the people of Coventry do not recognize her as a saint in the way their Anglo-Saxon predecessors might have done, the city continues to honour the mythologized Lady Godiva as its founder and folk hero. A statue of her on horseback stands outside a mall in the city centre, and the city’s logo is a stylized profile of the heads of a long-haired woman and a horse. And Coventry is a city built on industry and engineering. Thanks to the monasteries founded by Godiva, Ranulf III and others, it first grew powerful through the wool trade. When that failed, the city turned to watchmaking, then to bicycles – hence the appropriateness of the Cyclopedia – and in 1896 it became the first place in England to manufacture cars (Coventry City Council, web). Coventry continued to be “England’s Motor City” until the 1970s, when the industry went into decline (Humphries, web). One might say, then, that in being chosen to represent East Midlands engineering and industry, Lady Godiva was effectively being called upon to perform again the deed which made her famous – to ride out in an attempt to restore prosperity to the people of Coventry and the surrounding region.<sup>72</sup>

The woman who agreed to risk public humiliation to help others and who, like the virgin martyrs, passed unseen because of her purity of heart, is associated today with the decadence of a premium brand of Belgian chocolates. She is also the subject, with considerably less refinement, of the *Engineer’s Hymn*. Beginning, “Godiva was a lady who through Coventry did ride/To show

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<sup>72</sup> It may have worked, too, because since 2018 Coventry’s economy has been revived by the manufacture of the electric car (Humphries, web).

to all the villagers her fine and lily-white hide,” and sung by the US Army Corps of Engineers and in student engineering societies in the US and Canada (Skulepedia,<sup>73</sup> “Godiva’s Hymn,” web), the *Hymn* is a rambunctious celebration of drinking, sex, and the superiority of engineers at both pursuits – most definitely not what either Prior Geoffrey or the monk of St Alban’s had in mind!

Yet even in these contexts, there is a deep respect for Godiva’s virtues. The chocolate company claims that it was named, not with an eye to sensuality, but for “the values associated with [her], such as boldness, standing up for what is right, and a pioneering spirit” (GODIVA, web). North American engineering students may sing bawdy songs about her, but they also revere her for “her willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the public good, and for her humility and dedication to society” (Skulepedia, “Lady Godiva,” web). The University of Toronto School of Engineering’s annual Godiva Week begins with the ‘Resurrection,’ in which “the coffin holding the spirit of Lady Godiva is brought in [to the Atrium] ... All in attendance remain silent for this” (Skulepedia, “Godiva’s Resurrection,” web). Including a reading on the foundations of calculus, the ‘Resurrection’ is a pseudo-religious service held to remind future engineers of the twin pillars of their profession: good mathematics and devotion to public service.

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<sup>73</sup> Skulepedia is the website of the University of Toronto School of Engineering, the ‘Skule.’

## Conclusion

I began my investigation of the legend of Lady Godiva with the working hypothesis that the historical Godiva would have been an obscure Anglo-Saxon cartulary saint had it not been for the interruption of the Norman Conquest, and that the entirely fictional story of the Ride was intended as hagiography. While I still believe these statements to be broadly true, my understanding of why she was never canonized and of her role in the world today has changed significantly.

When Lady Godiva died in October 1067, just one year after William of Normandy invaded England and killed her grandson-in-law, King Harold Godwinson, it was indeed the end of an era. Her great-grandson, once heir to the throne, had been taken overseas with his mother for safety; neither would ever return. Her grandsons, once powerful earls and brothers-in-law to the king, had become outlaws, leaders of a resistance movement doomed to failure. Less than three years after her death, Lanfranc of Bec took over from the English Stigand as archbishop of Canterbury, and Norman bishops and abbots began to clear the mortal remains of their predecessors from their places of honour around the altar. A flurry of new hagiographies of Anglo-Saxon saints gave the impression, right up until Ridyard's 1986 article, "*Condigna Veneratio*," that the English were desperate to preserve the memories of their saints in the face of a Norman campaign to eradicate them.

Yet Anglo-Norman relations were both more complex and less antagonistic than they first appear. Certainly William replaced the English earls, rewarding his own followers with their estates, but there is no evidence of animosity towards those who accepted that England was conquered. Although many of the dispossessed left to recover their fortunes in Crimea or Constantinople (Turner 203), noblewomen, such as Godiva's granddaughter "Lucia" and great-

granddaughter Nest, married the newcomers, thereby giving them a claim to legitimacy. Godiva herself appears to have been left in peace with sufficient income to sustain her; certainly no mention is made in either the *LE* or the *ASC* of any reprisals taken against her as a result of her grandsons' resistance movement.

Although Lanfranc was long seen as the enemy of the Anglo-Saxon saint, more recent research (Ridyard, Harper-Bill, Rubenstein) has indicated that he was very much a Gregorian reformist, believing that saints should be recognized only at metropolitan or papal level, and only after a thorough inquiry into the individual's character and alleged miracles. The vast majority of the Anglo-Saxon saints were cartulary saints, a category little known outside England, and their hagiographies were written in a language Lanfranc could not read. While he and other Norman clerics did indeed remove the tombs of former bishops and abbots that were cluttering their churches, preferring the focus to be on God and not on relics, he did not dismiss the Anglo-Saxon saints out of hand; he simply insisted on seeing their credentials before granting them admission to the national liturgy.

Had Lady Godiva died before the Conquest, it is entirely possible that Abbot Leofwine, her husband's nephew, would have declared his uncle and aunt to be saints. The *Visio Leofrici* was ample support for Leofric's claim, while stories that it was Godiva's influence that made him a good Christian provided supporting evidence for her claims. Leofwine was a pluralist, however, and Coventry was not his first abbacy. The Normans thus considered Coventry to be without an abbot and replaced him. From the moment Coventry was in the hands of the Normans, it would literally have taken a miracle for Godiva to be recognized as a saint – not because she was Anglo-Saxon or related to the rebels, but because the definition of a saint had changed.

While folklorists have sought to trace the story of Godiva's Ride to pre-Christian fertility cults, no convincing argument has ever been made for this. Ellis Davidson, herself a prominent folklorist, has even dismissed such attempts as 'nonsense' (113). The timeline that identifies Roger of Wendover as the original author thus fails to explain *why* it was written, or why Leofric is presented as a villain immediately after being eulogized. Since Godiva had no direct link to St Alban's, there is no reason for the story to originate there if we reject the 'Christianization of a fertility cult' hypothesis, and similarly no basis for the story to have arisen in the oral tradition.

By contrast, Franklin's account of the misuse of the monastery by the bishops of Lichfield – particularly Nonant – and Soden's biography of Ranulf III, which sets it in the broader context, indicate that Prior Geoffrey would have had good reason to write a story that would make Lady Godiva, if not exactly a cartulary saint – a concept with which he is unlikely to have been familiar – then at least a local heroine. Dolmans' concept of using literature to create a regional identity adds further support to the argument that the legend of Godiva's Ride was a piece of fiction written with political intent, and drawing on contemporary themes in secular literature.

We must therefore conclude that the story originated with Prior Geoffrey and was written in 1218 for presentation at the Trinity Sunday fair. It would appear that it was subsequently rewritten by a monk of St Alban's to better fit with hagiographic tradition, though we cannot be sure of this. It is possible that Geoffrey's original was closer to the St Alban's version but had changed over the centuries, and that Grafton, writing four hundred years after Geoffrey, 'updated' his translation to include popular elements not found in the original.

Ironically, it is precisely because of the popularity of the more secular version that Lady

Godiva has finally achieved a kind of sainthood. It lent itself to performance and, because there was no risk of blasphemy, to the ribaldry of Peeping Tom, which further improved the popularity of the Godiva procession – and as Ridyard (*Royal Saints*) says, development of a saint's cult is due largely to advertising. The procession preserved Geoffrey's creation for centuries, ensuring that it survived the Reformation and the Enlightenment in a way that true hagiography would not have done. As Coventry's folk hero, Godiva became inextricably linked to the industries that supported her people, and with the engineering involved in the manufacture of watches, bicycles and motor vehicles. As with the legendary saints, biographical accuracy was less of a consideration than the ability to inspire imitation of her selfless commitment to justice and to the common good.

In conclusion, then, Prior Geoffrey created a story about his city's founder which both explained the unique exemption from tolls included in the monastery's forged charters and brought the prior's half and earl's half together through the shared legend. A monk of St Alban's recorded the story shortly afterwards, though whether the Virgin Martyr *topoi* were added there, or whether they were present in the original but lost over time, we may never know. In either case, despite the clear attempt at hagiography seen in the *Flowers of History*, it was a more secular and performative version that lived on in popular memory.

Though the Gregorian reforms had effectively abolished the cartulary saint, Geoffrey's heroine filled this role in all but name, overseeing the fortunes of her city from beyond the grave, even riding out again at the 2012 Olympics in an attempt to revitalize the engineering industries on which her people have long depended. She was able to do this because her 'cult,' the Godiva procession, was secular enough to survive the changes that all but destroyed the veneration of

saints in England. In her selfless commitment to the protection of her people from exploitation, Geoffrey's Godiva may also be said to meet the Anglican definition of a saint as role model, though the modern requirement for historical accuracy prevents her from being recognized as such.

Thus the Norman Conquest did indeed prevent the historical Lady Godiva from becoming a local saint, but ultimately it led to the creation of a legend that transformed her into an internationally recognized heroine and the uniquely interfaith 'patron saint' of North American engineers.

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