

REDEMPTION THROUGH SEXUAL RENUNCIATION: A STUDY OF MALE  
PURITY IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council  
of Texas State University-San Marcos  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

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San Marcos, Texas  
May 2006

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2006

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work in loving memory of my grandmother, Sue Ann “Slim” Shiver, who passed away during my final year of graduate school. I only wish she were still here to relish in this moment with me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, and foremost, I want to begin by thanking my immediate “family” because without them, I probably would not have made it this far. I would like to thank my mother, Tonyaa Shiver, who always encouraged me to meet my fullest potential when it came to education. Mom, you have been like a rock for me to lean on, and for that, I will always be grateful. I would also like to thank Mick Eskew, also known as Dad II, for treating me like a “real” daughter—much obliged. My sister, Melissa Leiva, like my mother’s presence in my life, has seen me through thick and thin. Mel, thank you for showing me the light during my darkest moments. Next, Cole Rogers also deserves a spot in this list of acknowledgements. Thanks, Cole, for all your love, ceaseless patience, and encouraging words. Lastly, I would like to thank my father and stepmother, Tony and Isabel Leiva. Although we do not get to spend much time together, I know I can always expect your support and encouragement.

The second group I would like to acknowledge consists of several members of the English Department. Susan Morrison, my lovely thesis director, deserves all the praise in the world because she is an utterly amazing woman. Susan, I cannot begin to comprehend all the millions of things you juggle in life, yet still manage to smile the way you do—thanks for *all* the advice and encouragement. Sue Beebe, my supervisor and savior, thanks for always leaving your door open, but more importantly, thanks for never kicking me out. Steve and Nancy Wilson, thanks for your thought-provoking courses;

the satisfaction of earning a grade would not be worth it otherwise. Also, thanks for making the Ireland trip one of my most cherished memories thus far. Susie Tilka, you have been in my life since I was an undergraduate, and if it were not for you, I would not be in this position. I doubt that you know this, but you were the person that made all this happen when you suggested to me that I should apply here for graduate school and an assistantship—thank you. I would also like to thank Edgar Laird and Dan Lochman for agreeing to join my thesis committee—both of you are ceaseless sources of knowledge. Also, I would like to extend my gratitude to Jessie Herrada and Abby Nance, fellow graduate students and teaching assistants in the English department. I cannot begin to express my gratitude for our friendships, even though I know that we have kept each other sane during our roughest moments.

Please forgive me if I have left anyone off this list of acknowledgments. Seeing that this list is getting lengthy, I cannot name every person who has helped me to make it to this moment. Nevertheless, to my closest friends, and you know who you are, thanks for sticking by me and understanding my hectic schedule. And last, but certainly not least, my “editor-in-chief,” Clyde Rogers, deserves a truly heartfelt thank you. Thanks, Mr. Rogers.

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## CHAPTER 1

### JESUS CHRIST: A CONSTRUCT OF SEXUAL PURITY

Virginity is a holy state and way of life, an imitation of Christ and / or the Virgin Mary, the life of angels lived on earth. It is the new martyrdom, to be rewarded one hundred-fold in heaven, available to men and women alike. Through virginity, the mortal flesh is transformed into the vessel of the divine. Virginity has a strange magic.<sup>7</sup>

Whether men rely on Christ as a model of sexual purity or women on the Virgin Mary, both figures serve as the foundation of constructs concerning sexual purity. Thus, despite one's sex, men and women alike view both figures, Christ and Mary, in terms of sexual renunciation. For the means of this discussion, it is not important to speculate whether the virgin birth actually happened, or whether Christ remained a virgin.<sup>8</sup> What is of concern is the fact that the conception of Christ as a sexually pure being inadvertently placed idealized constraints on the people of the medieval period. There seems to have

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001) 21.

<sup>8</sup> In *Was Jesus Married? The Distortion of Sexuality in the Christian Tradition*, writer William Phipps considers the probability that Jesus did marry at some point in life; Phipps states, "Likewise there is abundant internal evidence that Jesus endorsed marriage. This attitude, coupled with the knowledge that the marital obligation was enjoined by Hebrew Scriptures and observed by Jesus' fellow Jews, makes it highly probable that Jesus married" (37).

been a frenzy to uphold Christ's exalted nature not only among the hierarchies of the church, but also among the laity.

The virginal conception of Jesus often centers on the doctrine of Immaculate Conception. Although Immaculate Conception refers to a "Roman Catholic dogma about the conception, not of Jesus, but of Mary," such doctrine is responsible for creating constructs of sexual purity in reference to both figures.<sup>9</sup> Since Christ does not have a human father, the Virgin Mary is considered an example of a "sinless humanity."<sup>10</sup> As a result of her "sinless humanity," Mary passed down her "clean" flesh to Christ; thus, Christ has pure flesh—flesh not tainted by Original Sin, caused by the fall of Adam and Eve in Paradise. The doctrine of Original Sin is most commonly associated with Saint Augustine, who will be discussed more in depth in a later chapter, but here it is important to recognize his doctrine as one of the first to connect sexual desire to Original Sin.<sup>11</sup>

The doctrine suggests that

[f]rom Adam onward, as Augustine interpreted the Bible, lust (*concupiscentia*) has been a 'disease' congenitally transmitted in the semen, so infants are sinful 'by contagion and not by decision.' The evil sexual impulse inherent in parents is passed to offspring in the same physiological way children inherit the skin pigmentation of their parents.<sup>12</sup>

However, both Mary and her son Christ are deemed, as already suggested, to stand in a category of their own because Mary became pregnant through the will of God; she was

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<sup>9</sup> N.T. Wright, "Born of a Virgin?" *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright (New York: Harper, 1999) 172.

<sup>10</sup> Bynum, *Body* 422.

<sup>11</sup> Phipps 110.

<sup>12</sup> Phipps 110.

not exposed to “contaminated” semen. Yet, the fact that biblical stories attribute Mary’s pregnancy to the will of God inevitably implicates sexual intercourse as an act unworthy of God’s grace. Since God did not physically impregnate Mary, it is logical that early Christians sometimes assumed God condemned sex as a sin. This common conception of sex eventually began to act as a catalyst by which persons became internally divided against their own fleshly bodies. The medieval person not only had to struggle to control often unexplainable sexual urges, but they also had to accept a guilt-like consciousness that required the body to remain as “pure” as possible. By abstaining from sex, the “pure” body of a male would naturally mirror the bodily purity of Christ, God’s only son.

One must also discuss the teachings of Saint Paul when discussing Christ as a construct of sexual purity. Paul, one of Christ’s twelve apostles, is infamously known for shaping the thoughts and general attitudes of the early Church Fathers including, but not limited to, Saint Jerome and Tertullian.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Paul’s teachings influenced the views of early Christians and contributed to a general consensus regarding sexuality among early Christians:

The notion of an antithesis between *the spirit* and *the flesh* was a peculiarly fateful ‘theological abbreviation.’ Paul crammed into the notion of the flesh a superabundance of overlapping notions. The charged opacity of his language faced all later ages like a Rohrschach test: it is possible to measure in the repeated exegesis of a mere hundred words of

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<sup>13</sup> Katharina M. Wilson and Elizabeth M. Makowski, *Wykked Wyves and the Woes of Marriage* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1990) 36.

Paul's letters, the future course of Christian thought on the human person.<sup>14</sup>

Because Paul believed the second coming would take place during his lifetime, his writings, quite fervently, express a misogynist attitude that recognized the supremacy of virginity over the married state.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, his misogynist attitude eventually began to appear in secular literature:

[I]n the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the young Thecla rejects worldly marriage and faces the threat of execution after being converted by Paul, who preached 'Blessed are the bodies of virgins, for they shall be pleasing to God, and shall not lose the reward of their purity.' Paul's opponents criticize him for teaching that there is no resurrection unless one remains chaste and keeps the flesh pure.<sup>16</sup>

However, while affirming his beliefs that virginity is an idealized state of grace, he also managed to send mixed signals to his followers as

Paul seems to agree with his correspondents in Corinth that 'it is good for a man not to touch a woman', but he cautions that because of *porneia*, that is, because of temptations to sexual immorality, it is better to marry. [ . . . ] In the same way, Paul observes, it is good for those who are unmarried to

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) 47-8.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson and Makowski 36.

<sup>16</sup> Teresa M. Shaw, "Sex and sexual renunciation," Ed. Philip F. Esler, *The Early Christian World*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2000) 415.

remain so. Yet if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for ‘it is better to marry than to burn [i.e. with desire]’ (I Cor. 7:8-9).<sup>17</sup>

His notion that it is better to marry to fornicate than to be single and fornicate reflects his own concerns about the body. Paul considered the body itself inherently weak, unable to fight the temptations of sexual urges. Thus,

Whatever its cause, the painful conflict of body and soul was a fact of life: many of the sins most distasteful to [Paul]—notably lust and drunkenness—obviously arose from surrender to the promptings of the body. Such sins did not exhaust his notion of the flesh. [ . . . ] A weak thing in itself, the body was presented as lying in the shadow of a mighty force, the power of *the flesh*: the body’s physical frailty, its liability to death and the undeniable penchant of its instincts toward sin served Paul as a synecdoche for the state of humankind pitted against the spirit of God.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of his distrust of the flesh, Paul inevitably shaped the prevailing thoughts concerning sexuality among the early Christians. Moreover, early Christians often formed groups that fostered mores of sexual renunciation. The “encratites,” for example, is a term used to identify Christian groups that “distinguished themselves by their dedication to abstinence or *eukrateia*.”<sup>19</sup> In general, the encratites “link[ed] procreation and meat-eating with the fall from paradise and with death, and thus link[ed] abstinence

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<sup>17</sup> Shaw 411.

<sup>18</sup> Brown 48.

<sup>19</sup> Shaw 414.

with a return to paradise and a regaining of the angelic condition of original creation”<sup>20</sup>  
 In short, Paul’s teachings generated far-reaching if not devastating effects that have influenced Christian thought throughout the centuries that followed him—thoughts that still seem to resonate in rather recent times.

Besides the teachings of Paul, the Gospels also establish Christ as a model of sexual purity. Several passages indicate Christ’s preference for sexual abstinence. However, in this case, my point is not to refute the meaning of the passages; rather, my point is to view the passages in their literal sense. Literal interpretation of Christ’s words linked sexuality to sinfulness as early as one hundred years after the death of Christ when “his followers claimed to base their own celibacy on his example.”<sup>21</sup> The following is a list of the three passages that mostly influenced early Christian thought concerning sexuality:

1. *If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)*<sup>22</sup>
2. *You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that every one who look at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her. (Matthew 5:27-28)*<sup>23</sup>
3. *There are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made*

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<sup>20</sup> Shaw 414.

<sup>21</sup> Brown 41.

<sup>22</sup> William Phipps, *Was Jesus Married? The Distortion of Sexuality in the Christian Tradition* (New York: Harper, 1970) 75.

<sup>23</sup> Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?* 72.

*themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it. (Matthew 19:12)*<sup>24</sup>

As already indicated, there is no need to discern Christ's intentions concerning the passages because early Christians (and modern Christians as well) took these passages literally; among all three passages a tone of anti-sexuality resonates as each passage suggests man should sacrifice his greatest temptation: woman. Evidence from the lives of pious men and saints recognizes the long-standing tradition by which these Biblical scriptures began to acquire a widespread influence.

The life of Origen, a third-century theologian, is notable because his popularity in the East rivaled that of Augustinian thought in the West.<sup>25</sup> The third passage above, Matthew 19:12, surfaces when discussing Origen for it has long been suggested that he willingly castrated himself to become a eunuch; “[Origen’s] story indicates how hallowed hagiography attributed to his feats of overachieving, perhaps overreaching, holiness.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, while scholarship does not recognize Christ as a eunuch, self-castration, as evident in Origen’s example, came to symbolize an idealized state by which men could achieve a life reflecting the stringent example of Christ. After all, Matthew 19:12 readily places self-castrated eunuchs in a “higher” category, like that of virgins, since they “made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>27</sup>

Another religious figure who preached on the importance of sexual renunciation is Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory, a Greek Christian of the fourth-century, “appropriated

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<sup>24</sup> Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?* 79.

<sup>25</sup> Fred Norris, “Origen,” Ed. Philip F. Esler, *The Early Christian World*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 2000) 1005.

<sup>26</sup> Norris 1008.

<sup>27</sup> Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?* 79.

Plato's charioteer myth for describing the soul's descent and ascent. It is soiled by sexual desire when it falls into [a] material realm, so the first stage in return to perfection is achieved by a renunciation of marriage."<sup>28</sup> In *On Virginit*y, Gregory writes,

‘[Virginity] should be preferred by those who have intelligence, because it is stronger than the power of death. Bodily procreation – let no one be disgusted by this argument – is the origin not of life but of death for humans. For corruption has its beginning in birth, and those who have made an end of it (birth) have established in themselves through virginity the end point of death, by preventing it from advancing further through them. And, by setting themselves up as a boundary stone between death and life, they hinder its movement forward. If, then, death is unable to get past virginity, but reaches its end and dissolves in it, then it is clearly shown that virginity is stronger than death.’<sup>29</sup>

As evident in the above passage, the pivotal word is *virginit*y. Although the term itself is usually assigned to females who have never had sexual intercourse, virginity as a concept is important to men as well. In general, virginity refers to a form of sexual renunciation, whether intentional or unintentional; one's sex in this case does not matter since both males and females are virgins until they become sexually active. Gregory's passage makes it become obvious that he has not singled out one specific sex; instead, he refers to virgins in general: “For corruption has its beginning in birth, and *those* who have made an end of it (birth) have established in *themselves* through virginity the end point of

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<sup>28</sup> Phipps, *The Sexuality of Jesus* 85.

<sup>29</sup> Translation provided by Shaw 416.

death, by preventing it from advancing further through *them*.”<sup>30</sup> By using such words as *those*, *themselves* and *them*, Gregory’s audience remains ambiguous. For Gregory, the concept of virginity conquers the corporeal being because he readily asserts that *virginity is stronger than death*.

Perhaps the most influential literature that circulated throughout the medieval period is the saints’ life. Saints were popularly known as the soldiers of Christ because they “were those persons who had been judged by God to be worthy of entrance to the kingdom of heaven immediately after death.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the written lives of saints, known as hagiography, came to represent an idealized state by which the medieval people upheld the sacredness of saints’ lives, much like that of Christ’s life:

The most common works of hagiography were the lives of saints that recorded the ways in which these residents of heaven had developed and demonstrated their holiness. [ . . . ] [But] [a]bove all else, such works instructed the faithful in the virtues of the Christian life. Authors stressed that the lives of the saints were intended to provide their audience with exemplars of conduct.<sup>32</sup>

Although most saints are generally known for maintaining a “pure” body—that is, a body untainted by sexual acts—it should not be surprising that male and female saints alike had to take the proper precautionary measures to protect themselves. For example,

In olden times the kings of that nation [Wimbourne] had built two monasteries in the place, one for men, the other for women, both

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<sup>30</sup> Translation provided by Shaw 416. Emphasis mine.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas F.X. Noble and Thomas Head, eds., *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints’ Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* xiv.

<sup>32</sup> Noble and Head xvii.

surrounded by strong and lofty walls and provided with all the necessities that prudence could devise. From the beginning of the foundation the rule firmly laid down for both was that no entrance should be allowed to a person of the other sex. No woman was permitted to go into the men's community, nor was any man allowed into the women's, except in the case of priests who had to celebrate Mass in their churches; even so, immediately after the function was ended the priest had to withdraw.<sup>33</sup>

The fact that separate monasteries had to be built in order to safeguard pious men and women from engaging in sexual deeds demonstrates the pervasive attitudes against sexuality.

The theme of sexual renunciation resonates in the *vitae* of saint's lives. Take, for instance, the life of Saint Gerald of Aurillac (c. 855 – c. 909) whose ascetic life was heavily influenced by the life his father led.<sup>34</sup> According to Gerald's *vita*,

His father was so careful to conduct himself chastely in his marriage, that he frequently slept alone far from the marriage bed, as though for a time giving himself to prayer according to the apostle. He is said to have been warned in sleep on a certain night that he should know his wife, because he was to beget a son, and they say it was announced to him that he should call his name Gerald, and that he would be a man of great virtue.<sup>35</sup>

As an adult, Gerald's life followed his father's vision. When Duke William of Aquitaine offered his sister to Gerald, Gerald turned down the marriage proposal because, “[ . . . ]

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<sup>33</sup> *Soldiers of Christ* 259.

<sup>34</sup> *Soldiers of Christ* 294.

<sup>35</sup> *Soldiers of Christ* 294, 298.

Christ, the Son of the Virgin, had ever imbued him with the love of chastity, which he so embraced from his earliest years that he would not allow himself to be diverted from it[.]”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the *vita* of Saint Gerald readily exalts his chaste state:

Only consider how great this man is to be held who, placed amidst worldly riches and at the height of earthly position, preserved chastity. What could he have done more splendid? One could be nothing more, or more excellent, for as Saint Martin asserts, nothing is to be compared with virginity.”<sup>37</sup>

Besides Saint Gerald, many more saints including Saint Germanus of Auxerre (c. 375- c. 446), Saint Boniface (c. 680- c. 754), and Saint Willibald (c. 700- c. 786) typified the life of Christ through their chaste lifestyles.<sup>38</sup>

Oftentimes, women prayed for physical deformities to avoid marriage and to safeguard their virginity. Take, for instance, the life of the female saint, Wilgefortis. Her *vita* tells the dilemma she faced when her father tried to arrange a marriage for her. Upon realizing her father’s intention,

[s]he prayed for some sort of miraculous intervention that would make her so disfigured that no one would want to marry her. Her prayers were answered with the sudden growth of a beard and mustache. Undeterred by this turn of events, her father continued to push forward his plans for marriage. However, during the ceremony, according to the story, Wilgefortis moved her veil so that her betrothed, the king of Sicily, could

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<sup>36</sup> *Soldiers of Christ* 318, 320.

<sup>37</sup> *Soldiers of Christ* 320.

<sup>38</sup> *Soldiers of Christ* 76, 107, and 142.

have a better look at his new bride. Thus, apparently on closer inspection, he immediately withdrew his marriage offer.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, men felt the need to avoid the confinements of wedlock to pursue an ascetic life. Although rare, there are recorded cases of *virginitas deformitate defensa*—deformities, whether self-inflicted or caused by the will of God, used to protect one’s virginity—occurring in women and men alike.<sup>40</sup> Such cases include brief bouts of “leprosy, strumas, temporary or hysterical blindness, insanity, and others” that only last until the threat of marriage dissolves.<sup>41</sup> One such incident of *virginitas deformitate defensa* occurring in a male saint is recorded in the *vita* of the abbot of Brittany, Saint Maudez of the seventh century.<sup>42</sup> Saint Maudez prayed for divine intervention as a youth in order to avoid wedlock. As a result of his prayers, Maudez began to emit “a personal odor so intense that no one dared to approach him [ . . . ] [which] did in fact ‘save’ him from any further marriage negotiations! Also, he too was fortuitously freed of this ‘disability’ when the threat of marriage was removed.”<sup>43</sup> In terms of sexual renunciation, men and women alike avoided marriage in order to maintain pure bodies, like those of the Virgin Mary and Christ, acceptable in the eyes of God.

The universality of Christ’s body symbolizes two forms of purity: bodily and spiritual. Because Christ was born of a virgin and because he presumably maintained his own virginity, his sexual purity and his bodily purity are one because His body is not tainted by the sins of the flesh. Moreover, the body of Christ represents a spiritually pure

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<sup>39</sup> Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society 500-1150* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 152.

<sup>40</sup> Schulenburg 149.

<sup>41</sup> Schulenburg 153.

<sup>42</sup> Schulenburg 153.

<sup>43</sup> Schulenburg 153.

figure in that his crucifixion represents the ultimate sacrifice to God. When Christ died on the cross, he did so for all of humankind—his unselfish sacrifice to save humankind represents spirituality in the purest form. The bodily and the spiritual purity of Christ's body co-exist together, creating a construct of male purity. Furthermore, his body was a construct of male purity that saints, theologians, and clergymen of the medieval period glorified. This glorification of Christ and the purity associated with his body inadvertently began to influence the rituals and customs of the medieval church.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE DEMISE OF THE MARRIED CLERGY

*The unmarried man cares for the Lord's business; his aim is to please the Lord. But the married man cares for worldly things; his aim is to please his wife, and he has a divided mind. – I Corinthians 7:32-3<sup>43</sup>*

Christ imagery created the quintessential representation of male purity, and the medieval church sought to preserve such imagery by all measures possible. The preservation of such imagery produced an ever-pervasive demand to renounce sex as a means to lead a sexually “pure” life, as Christ did. However, if the medieval church wished to advocate sexual renunciation, it needed to change its infrastructure. Beginning with the demise of the married clergy, the Roman Catholic church began an evolution that led to the celibate church that survives today.

Although it has long been established that ordained members of the church, including priests, must not marry, this was not always the case. Many outside of academia do not know that priests, bishops, deacons, and subdeacons were once granted the right to marry and procreate; however, such marriages were prohibited during the later medieval period.<sup>44</sup> While opposition to clerical marriages began to resonate during

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<sup>43</sup> Charles A. Frazee, “The Origins of Clerical Celibacy in the Western Church,” *Church History* 57 (1988): 108, 8 Oct. 2005 <<http://www.jstor.org/search>>.

<sup>44</sup> Barstow 3.

the fourth century, the subject remained relatively untouched until the eleventh century when church officials, such as Pope Nicholas II, revitalized the movement to end clerical marriages. The church's efforts led to an interesting question: If clerical marriages were once accepted by the church, why would the same church later prohibit such a practice? While sole answer does not exist as to why the destruction of the married clergy occurred, several factors, ranging from the theological to economical, may have contributed to the church's radical decision.

If we are going to ask why clerical marriages were prohibited in the first place, we must ask another equally appropriate question: Why allow clerical marriages? Quite simply, these marriages were encouraged because the early church based its marital views on both the Old and the New Testaments, "which judged the married state as the normal way of life for all Christians, clergy as well as laity."<sup>45</sup> Neither source discouraged marriage or sex because, after all, it was recognized that men and women needed to procreate to sustain life on earth; however, both sources readily recognize that sex within a marriage is the only acceptable means of procreation.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the early church openly encouraged marriages within and outside of the church because they to Biblical scripture; yet, attitudes concerning sex and marriage were becoming increasingly pervasive "as the first century of the Christian period came to a close, a marked change was apparent in the teachings of the church regarding sex and marriage."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Frazee 109.

<sup>46</sup> Oscar E. Feucht, ed., *Sex and the Church: A Sociological, Historical, and Theological Investigation of Sex Attitudes*, Marriage and Family Research Series. vol. 5 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961) 25 and 39.

<sup>47</sup> Feucht, *Sex and the Church* 57.

As is evident in any Christian Bible, the Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus, and this event was one of several contributing factors to the demise of the married clergy, because the handling of the sacrament is called in to question. One argument for clerical celibacy is that anyone ordained to perform the sacrament must be a celibate: “since Christ was born of a virgin he wished to be served by virgin hands. That is, Christ himself, present in the elements of the eucharist, must be touched by unstained hands.”<sup>48</sup> Clearly, “unstained hands” alludes to a priest’s sexual status, but why would one’s sexual status affect the handling of the sacrament?

The church of the medieval period became increasingly apprehensive because of the implications surrounding the married clergy. By demanding the dissolution of clerical marriages in the eleventh century, the church placed devastating consequences on sexual intercourse.<sup>49</sup> The church tainted sex by implying that “unstained hands,” hands that have abstained from sex and other pollution, are the only ones that should be allowed to touch the eucharist. Peter Damian, one of the legates who worked for Pope Leo IX, vehemently supported the abolition of clerical marriage because, as he stated, “the hands that touch the body and blood of Christ must not have touched the genitals of a whore.”<sup>50</sup> For this reason, sexual intercourse, in the eyes of the medieval church, became equivalent to filth. Since sex equated to filth, it would appear that, on a symbolic level, the purity of the eucharist could not be contaminated by the impure hands of sexually active priests.

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<sup>48</sup> Barstow 58.

<sup>49</sup> Barstow 3.

<sup>50</sup> Barstow 58.

Although such reasoning makes sense theologically, it does not explain why the medieval church, or the laity for that matter, associated sex with impurity. Charles Frazee, a scholar of church history, recognizes that “[t]he association between sexual intercourse and uncleanness is so ancient that its origins can no longer be traced in history.”<sup>51</sup> However, Frazee does recognize the Old Testament as one source for the common link between sex and impurity:

Within the Old Testament there was usually a matter of fact acceptance of nature and material things, but there was a significant exception regarding certain categories of objects or activities that were looked upon as unclean. These were four in number: certain foods, leprosy, contact with corpses and sexual activities of any kind. Regarding the latter, uncleanness resulted from any discharge from sexual organs, menstruation, childbirth, and even normal sexual intercourse. Such activity rendered a person unclean for the rest of the day, and then a bath was required. Priests who had intercourse were not only unclean for the whole day but were not permitted to eat any of the food offered for sacrifice. The principal effect of any uncleanness was to prohibit the person from performing any act of worship [.]<sup>52</sup>

Such connections link the ideas about marriage and sex to the Old Testament, which seems to have placed both positive and negative connotations on the subject.

Interestingly, Frazee’s scholarship also brings up a vexing issue concerning medieval society: voluntary and involuntary bodily impurity.

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<sup>51</sup> 113.

<sup>52</sup> 112.

In Book I of *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede tells that Augustine, bishop of the Church of Canterbury, has sought to acquire Pope Gregory's responses to several questions on topics that included theft, incest, menstruation, and church customs. In his ninth question, Augustine asked, "May a man receive communion after a sexual illusion in a dream; or, if a priest, may he celebrate the holy mysteries?"<sup>53</sup> In response, Gregory insinuates that nocturnal emissions leave a man unclean; therefore, when this occurs, a man of the church may not enter a church "until evening and after purification."<sup>54</sup> Gregory's response illustrates ever-pervasive attitudes concerning the body—a seemingly uncontrollable, impure body—during the medieval period. In this sense, an "impure" body not only referred to being sexually active, but it also referred to many, even uncontrollable, bodily excretions. During the medieval period, the obsession over a "pure" body became widespread as the idea of maintaining a pure body spread from the hierarchies of the church to the laity. As a result, the people of the medieval period began to view their bodies as involved in a constant struggle between "good" and "evil." Church leaders such as Pope Gregory and John Cassian influenced both the clergy and the laity as they publicly voiced their thoughts and attitudes concerning bodily purity, and, specifically, nocturnal emissions.

Relative to other early Christian writers, Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540 - c. 604) may be considered among the most liberal.<sup>55</sup> Unlike others, Gregory demonstrated an understanding for the complexities of the flesh as he "showed surprisingly little sympathy

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<sup>53</sup> Bede the Venerable, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Sherley Price (London: Penguin, 1990) 87.

<sup>54</sup> Bede 87.

<sup>55</sup> Murray 3.

for [ . . . ] concern with ritual prohibitions that had to do with blood and semen.”<sup>56</sup> While Gregory believed that man must cleanse himself with a bath and tears after experiencing a nocturnal emission, he did not necessarily associate such dreams with sinfulness.<sup>57</sup> Gregory readily entertained reasonable explanations to justify the presence of nocturnal emissions:

‘[ . . . ] we should carefully examine the origin of such illusions in the mind of a sleeper; for sometimes they arise from over-eating, sometimes from excess or lack of bodily vigour, and sometimes from impure thoughts. When such illusion occurs through excess or lack of bodily vigour, it need not be feared, because it is to be deplored rather as something the mind has unwittingly suffered than as something it has done.’<sup>58</sup>

Gregory’s postulation reflects a common thought of the medieval period regarding the humours. It was once thought the healthy body needed to maintain an equal balance among the four humours because sickness was blamed on an “imbalance” of the humours. Thus, people of the medieval period linked nocturnal emissions to an imbalance of the humours. Jacqueline Murray suggests that “[m]edical theory taught that for good health the body’s humours needed to be balanced. Should a superfluity of humours develop, they needed to be emitted by such diverse means as sweating, urination, menstruation, or the emission of semen.”<sup>59</sup> Under involuntary circumstances,

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<sup>56</sup> Brown 433.

<sup>57</sup> Bede 87.

<sup>58</sup> Bede 87.

<sup>59</sup> Jacqueline Murray, “Men’s bodies, men’s minds: Seminal emissions and sexual anxiety in the Middle Ages,” *Annual Review of Sex Research* 8 (1997): 2.

Gregory did not believe men should receive punishment, such as not being able to participate in communion.

Gregory did, however, warrant punishment for any nocturnal emission caused by voluntary circumstances. In most cases, Gregory did not attribute nocturnal emissions to sinfulness unless a man initiated the sinful act himself. Gregory suggested three ways by which a person engaged in sin: suggestion, pleasure, and consent. Gregory explains,

Suggestion comes through the devil, pleasure through the flesh, and consent through the will. The Serpent suggests the first sin, and Eve, as flesh, took physical pleasure in it, while Adam, as spirit, consented; and great discernment is needed if the mind, in judging itself, is to distinguish between suggestion and pleasure, and between pleasure and consent. For when the Evil Spirit suggests a sin, no sin is committed unless the flesh takes pleasure in it; but when the flesh begins to take pleasure, then sin is born; and if deliberate consent is given, sin is complete.<sup>60</sup>

If a man does not engage in sexual thoughts prior to falling asleep and still has a nocturnal emission, then he does not commit a sin; however, if he does engage in sexual thought prior to falling asleep, he is guilty of committing sin, which should result in penance.<sup>61</sup> For Gregory, intention was key to deciding whether a man should be guilty of having a nocturnal emission.

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<sup>60</sup> Bede 88.

<sup>61</sup> C. Leyser, "Masculinity in Flux: Nocturnal Emission and the Limits of Celibacy in the Early Middle Ages," Ed. D.M. Hadley, *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (New York: Longman, 1999) 116.

John Cassian, a monk during the fourth and fifth centuries, intended his writings and lectures to influence fellow monks including the renowned Desert Fathers.<sup>62</sup> Similar to Saint Augustine of Hippo's, Cassian's doctrine is often described by scholars as an "obsessive regime of sexual self-denial."<sup>63</sup> Quite often, Cassian specifically directed the subject of nocturnal emissions, as opposed to other "sexual deviances," to his fellow monks. He offered

[ . . . ] scarcely any discussion of sexual intercourse or masturbation, because the monk is presumed long ago to have surmounted these physical temptations: all eyes are focused instead on cleansing the innermost desires of the monk's heart, as revealed in his ability to reduce, ideally to zero, the incidence of nocturnal emission."<sup>64</sup>

However, as already indicated, Cassian would disagree on the point of view of nocturnal emissions as an involuntary action. Like Pope Gregory, Cassian believed that external factors including "excess food or drink, a wandering mind, or a trick of the devil, [ . . . ] the touch of a woman, or the fantasies or daydreams of a careless and imprudent mind" were responsible for nocturnal emissions.<sup>65</sup> As a means to help man eliminate nocturnal emissions, Cassian preferred the ascetic route, as suggested in his *Institutiones*:

It takes a man six months to bring the nocturnal emission of his semen under control: he must eat two loaves a day, drink as much water as he needs, take three or four hours sleep. He must avoid any idle conversation, and curb feelings of anger. In the final stages, he should cut

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<sup>62</sup> Brown 231.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted by Leyser 103.

<sup>64</sup> Leyser 109.

<sup>65</sup> Murray 3.

down on water, and take up strapping lead plates onto his genitals at night [ . . . ].<sup>66</sup>

While the ideas of Pope Gregory and Cassian helped to develop the general attitudes concerning the body during the medieval period, modern scholarship fosters a more complete understanding of nocturnal emissions as an “impurity.” Because people of the medieval period often associated “uncleanness” with sinfulness, occurrences of nocturnal emissions resulted in punishment against members of the church and, eventually as sexuality became more taboo, a punishment against the laity. Mary Douglas, an eminent anthropologist and scholar of bodily purity and pollution, postulated two important models of “pollution” in her book, *Purity and Danger*: 1) pollution as dirt to matter out of place and 2) pollution that lacks categorization. The two models demonstrate a common thread: “[t]he fundamental premise of both models is that what societies call ‘unclean’ depends not upon hygienic considerations, but upon social and cultural norms and anomalies.”<sup>67</sup> Both models of “pollution” bring clarity to the medieval idea of social/cultural norms outweighing “hygienic consideration.”

One model of “pollution” equates dirt to matter out of place.<sup>68</sup> C. Leyser cites Mary Douglas on the issue:

A society names ‘dirty’ that which affronts its sense of cosmic order; it very likely invokes images of bodily uncleanness to discuss such challenges to its basic structuring principles. Douglas warns cultural critics to expect that the margins of the body, and the matter that crosses

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<sup>66</sup> Leyser 103.

<sup>67</sup> Leyser 106.

<sup>68</sup> Leyser 106.

them, will be especially resonant with cultural meaning: ‘Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces, or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body.’<sup>69</sup>

To further this explanation, take, for example, the significance of tears during the medieval period. Pope Gregory instructs the man, who has experienced a nocturnal emission: “‘Then he must cleanse himself with water, thus washing away his sinful thoughts with tears.’”<sup>70</sup> Clearly, tears and water were symbolic of purity; by washing, man could cleanse himself of the “uncleanness” brought on by having a wet dream. In this instance, it becomes clear that medieval society placed a taboo on seminal excretion not because it was seen as hygienically unsanitary but because society attributed sexuality with sinfulness—something that went against acceptable “norms.”

Leyser also identifies Douglas’ second model of pollution, which “[. . .] suggests not dirt as a ‘category error’, but the more dangerous pollution represented by matter that refuses all categorization.”<sup>71</sup> This model can best be explained in terms of bodily cycles. For instance, a woman’s menstrual cycle is not sinful since woman cannot control or force the cycle to come to an end.<sup>72</sup> Enough information existed during the fourth or fifth century to understand the general pattern of menstruation.<sup>73</sup> Another form of bodily

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<sup>69</sup> Leyser 106.

<sup>70</sup> Bede 87.

<sup>71</sup> Leyser 107.

<sup>72</sup> Murray 3.

<sup>73</sup> Murray 3.

excretion that runs on a cyclical pattern is breast milk. The *basic* cycle of breast milk begins during a woman's pregnancy and continues until she decides to stop breastfeeding, at which point the breast milk slowly depletes. Both examples show that the functions of a woman's body follow an obvious pattern. However, the same cannot be said for a man, who has no way of predicting the spontaneous occurrences of nocturnal emissions. In short, the second model of pollution confirms why seminal excretion was seen as "dirty" during the medieval period—nocturnal emissions lacked a predictable explanation; therefore, it defied "all categorization."

As Pope Gregory ends his somewhat lengthy response to Augustine's inquiry concerning nocturnal emissions, he concludes, "'So one may say that a man is both captive and free; free through the law of right which he loves, and captive through the law of bodily pleasure, of which he is an unwilling victim.'" <sup>74</sup> Amazingly, in that one statement, Gregory was able to expose the vulnerability that festered within the heart of medieval society—a society that feared sexuality to the extent of loathing the body itself.

The lack of medical knowledge and the relatively little information available about the body during the medieval period is the prevalent mentality of society. At most, those few who did receive an education during the period acquired their knowledge from sources that cited ancient medical practitioners including Aristotle and Galen. For example:

Aristotle's formulations [equate] the male principle as 'soul' or 'form' and the female principle as 'body' or matter'. Since form is what 'shapes', it followed that man appropriated another divine faculty too, the faculty of

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<sup>74</sup> Bede 89.

‘movement’: his was the ‘active’, formative role, woman’s the ‘passive’, receptive role (supplying, in procreation, just inert substance for the superior male semen to ‘move’ into shape like a carpenter). And all this was summed up in the ultimate derogation of woman, as ‘deformed’ or ‘defective’ male, one who could not reach the male standard of perfection because her menstruation signaled that her body was physiologically inferior.<sup>75</sup>

While there is no scientific basis for Aristotle’s assertion, we must admit that “the people of any age are never completely divorced from the past.”<sup>76</sup> Considering that the ideas of Socrates are still debated in the twenty-first century, the people of the medieval period are not guilty of exploiting the only means of education available. However, Aristotle’s scholarship leads the discussion back to a possible reason for the church to rid itself of a married clergy: misogyny.

Misogyny, or the hatred of women, is evident since one of the very few ways by which women were allowed to actively participate in the church was if they became nuns. With limited accessibility to women, the medieval church fostered an almost exclusive male “club.”<sup>77</sup> Frazee provides a possible explanation for the uncleanness of sex during the medieval period, his explanation also hints at another underlying motivation: “[ . . . ] uncleanness resulted from any discharge from sexual organs, menstruation, childbirth, and even normal sexual intercourse.”<sup>78</sup> Notice how the items on this list of bodily

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<sup>75</sup> Alcuin Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) 2.

<sup>76</sup> Feucht, *Sex and the Church* 59.

<sup>77</sup> Barstow 181.

<sup>78</sup> 112.

functions is, for the most part, attributed to a woman's body. Aristotle's assertion of the "active" versus the "passive," with the latter directed at the female reproductive system, seems to suggest that a woman's body is nothing more than a receptacle used to incubate man's semen for procreation. Such thinking demonstrates the ignorance of man's reasoning in relation to the idiosyncrasies of woman's body; for man, the unknown—woman's body—fostered a prejudice against all women which eventually influenced misogynistic attitudes both in and outside of the church.

Clearly, the "foreignness" of woman's body hints at the church's underlying motive to enforce a vow of celibacy amongst the clergy. However, as celibate vows became the norm, men entered the church for two reasons. First, men became celibate in order to "protect" themselves from acting on their own sexual impulses:

Many of the *vitae*, while expressing a basic contempt for the human condition in general, also demonstrated a hatred of the body, and a concern for, or obsession with, celibacy. In part motivated by fear of their own weakness and susceptibility to female seduction, these holy men are shown fleeing to the 'desert'—the wilderness of the hermit or the cloister of the monk—to shield themselves from their struggles with women and sexuality.<sup>79</sup>

As a result of their impulses, many men feared women for they believed women possessed the ability to seduce men. For reasons unknown, "the mere sight, touch, or sound of a woman was thought to be potent enough to provoke concupiscent thoughts or,

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<sup>79</sup> Schulenburg 311.

worse, instant fornication.”<sup>80</sup> Ironically, such statements imply that men used celibacy not to lead a life reflecting the ways of Christ but as a means of safeguarding themselves from their own weaknesses—sexual desires.

The second reason, perhaps more influential in explaining why men became celibate during the medieval period, reflects the demands of the church. An authoritative figure in the church, Pope Siricius of the fourth century, believed “service at the altar was only for those who were prepared henceforth to be perpetually free from at least one of the many stains of worldly life: the stain of intercourse. Those who stood before God to offer up the Eucharist must practice continence.”<sup>81</sup> As previously discussed, authoritative figures, such as this pope, wanted to enforce vows of celibacy in order to conduct and maintain the “pure,” ritualistic traditions of the church; however, the church’s motive for enforcing vows of celibacy is not as clear-cut as one might hope. One of the church’s underlying motives, as is recognized by Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, dealt more with misogynistic attitudes than with the “pure” state in which the church wanted their pious men: “A definite preference for male leadership made itself felt within the church. The various reform movements, with their emphasis on clerical hierarchies, celibacy, ritual purity, and sacramental formalism, fostered an exaggerated fear of women and in some cases a blatant misogyny.”<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Schulenburg recognizes the misogynistic attitudes of the medieval church:

[ . . . ] [I]t is interesting to stress the new bishop’s direct connections with the early misogynist St. Calais, who, as we have noted, maintained a well-

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<sup>80</sup> Schulenburg 311.

<sup>81</sup> Brown 358.

<sup>82</sup> Schulenburg 7.

known policy of prohibiting women from entering his hermitage and monastery. No doubt conditioned by this traditional fear of women and the strict policy of female avoidance at the monastery of St. Calais, it seems highly probable that Bishop William was personally involved in introducing this new precedent into his reform program at Durham—i.e., an intense misogyny with the requisite need to control and severely limit women's access to the church. Thus it appears that with this shift brought about by the new reform policy, the famous seventh-century St. Cuthbert, the patron saint of Durham, was conveniently 'remade' to share in the long-lived misogynistic tradition of St. Calais. [ . . . ] And this was then used to provide 'historical' justification for the reform policy of celibacy and the exclusion of women from his churches.<sup>83</sup>

Such attitudes, found throughout the hierarchies of the church, are rather ironic considering the Christian doctrine of human creation. Although there are various interpretations of the story, the basic idea is that God created both Adam *and* Eve. Genesis 1:26-27 states, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."<sup>84</sup> This passage recognizes both Adam and Eve as equals; Eve is not the lesser because she is a woman. Furthermore, Christian doctrine recognizes that all of God's creations are, as originally created, "good." Genesis 1:31 states, "God saw *all* that he had made, and it

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<sup>83</sup> Schulenburg 346.

<sup>84</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version* (Nashville: Holman, 1995).

was very good.”<sup>85</sup> Therefore, woman is inherently good since God created her.

Although the Fall changes the status of humans, Adam and Eve remain as equals because they both committed sin against God and fell from paradise together. By fostering misogyny, the medieval church unconsciously became the antithesis of the same Christian doctrine it was trying to preach.

Although the church wanted a celibate clergy, the authoritative figures knew they could not enforce celibacy on their clergy overnight. To integrate the practice of sexual renunciation slowly, the church first emphasized sexual abstinence among the married clerics. During the fourth century, in an attempt to create “chaste” marriages, the church created Canon 33, which states, “We declare that all bishops, priests, deacons and all clerics active in the ministry are to entirely keep themselves from their wives and not have children. Whoever shall do so will be dismissed from the clergy.”<sup>86</sup> However, the married clergy was not the only group that began to accept the church’s urging of sexual purity as a result of the new reform policy.

As the popularity of chaste marriages spread among the clergy inside the church, the practice of chaste marriages began to influence some of the laity. The church probably had not intended to affect the laity in this manner, yet one such lay person whose acts imitated the sexual mores of the clergy is the infamous Margery Kempe. Her life, chronicled in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, demonstrates the extent to which a lay person was willing to go to lead a “pious” life. Margery pleads to her husband,

‘Sere, yf it lyke 3ow, 3e schal grawnt me my desyr, & 3e schal haue 3owr.

Grawntyth me þat 3schal not komyn in my bed, & I grawnt 3ow to qwyte

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<sup>85</sup> *Holy Bible*. Emphasis mine.

<sup>86</sup> Frazee 114.

3owr dettys er I go to Ierusalem. & makyth my body fre to God so þat 3e  
 neuyr make no chalengyng in me to askyn no dett of matrimony aftyr þis  
 day whyl 3e leuyn, & I schal etyn & drynkyn on þe Fryday at 3owr  
 byddyng.’<sup>87</sup>

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‘Sir, if you please, you shall grant me my desire, and you shall have your  
 desire. Grant me that you will not come into my bed, and I grant you that  
 I will pay your debts before I go to Jerusalem. And make my body free to  
 God, so that you never make any claim on me requesting any conjugal  
 debt after this day as long as you live – and I shall eat and drink on  
 Fridays at your bidding.’<sup>88</sup>

Interestingly, the practice of chaste marriages appealed just as much to women as to men, because, despite having children, women were still able to become saints as evident in the written *vitae* of St. Bilhild and St. Eustadiola, both of whom had children.<sup>89</sup> The popularity of chaste marriages, and therefore, sexual “purity” among the clergy began to act as a centrifugal force asserting what the church considered “right” and “wrong.” The church’s views inadvertently shaped the views of the congregations and led to the widespread belief that sex was “evil.” After all, Saint Jerome himself believed that virginity took precedence over marriage, considering the fact that he ranked marriage

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<sup>87</sup> Kempe, Margery, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen (New York: Oxford UP, 1940) 25. All Middle English quotations are taken from Meech and Allen.

<sup>88</sup> Kempe, Margery, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. B.A. Windeatt (London: Penguin, 1985) 60. All modern English quotations are from the Windeatt translation.

<sup>89</sup> Schulenburg 220.

third following virginity and widowhood.<sup>90</sup> Jerome emphasized the superiority of sexual renunciation in his writings: “Christ loves virgins more than others, because they willingly give what was not commanded them. And it indicated greater grace to offer what you are not bound to give, than to render what is exacted of you.”<sup>91</sup> One could lead a pious life free from sin, which would be rewarded by God’s grace in the afterlife by renouncing sex, even within the bonds of marriage.

Similarly, the determination among the medieval people to lead a pious life as a means of acceptance into Heaven led to another practice that influenced the demise of the married clergy: asceticism. Men and women alike practiced various forms of asceticism in order to achieve the grace of God. Such practices included practicing extreme fasting, providing charity, and nourishing the sick; however, the most rigorous discipline involved leading a life free from sex. The history of the word *ascetic* reveals that the Greek root “is *askēsis*, which first meant the training an athlete receives.”<sup>92</sup> However, the word eventually began to evolve:

Socrates used *askēsis* to refer to the self-discipline necessary for anyone desiring to become an educated citizen. It later came to connote a life abstaining from the natural enjoyments of life as much as survival permitted. Sensual pleasures, especially those received from sexual relations and from some food, were denied. They were deemed inherently

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<sup>90</sup> Blamires 64.

<sup>91</sup> Blamires 66.

<sup>92</sup> Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?* 53.

evil because they are stimulated by the flesh-craving part of man's psyche.<sup>93</sup>

As the word began to take on new meaning, the practice of asceticism increased among members of the church because “[o]n one matter the clerics agreed: their asceticism marked their separation from the average believer. The man who sacrifices, the cleric who lives so much more ‘purely’ than the layman, feels he has the right to demand the privileges of leadership.”<sup>94</sup> Thus, clergymen needed to practice sexual renunciation as a means to lead a “pure,” ascetic lifestyle.

As suggested earlier, the medieval church fought vigorously, by all means possible, to rid itself of a married clergy; yet, the contributing factors that led to the demise of the married clergy were often controversial issues as opposed to theological concerns. The insidious offenses of the medieval church, including misogyny, clearly signify the church's desire to rule as an omnipotent force. And, the more the church tolerated a married clergy, the more the church jeopardized its own future. For the church, the immediate family of any married cleric produced economic liabilities which were ultimately causing the church to slowly lose its wealth.<sup>95</sup> Take, for instance, the life of a married priest; if, by chance, a priest produced a son, that child would be entitled to inherit his father's position in the church including a take in the church's diminishing landholdings.<sup>96</sup> For this reason, the church concluded that single clerics cost less money to maintain than married clerics whose “excess baggage” compromised the church's

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<sup>93</sup> Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?* 53.

<sup>94</sup> Samuel Laeuchli, *Power and Sexuality: The Emergence of Canon Law at the Synod of Elvira* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1972) 96.

<sup>95</sup> Phipps, *Clerical Celibacy* 137.

<sup>96</sup> Phipps, *Clerical Celibacy* 129.

assets; but more to the point, the church's motive for dissolving clerical marriages revealed issues concerning frugality. Frugality, in this case, amounts to greed—one of the seven “deadly” sins—, which, ironically, is found within the various hierarchies of the medieval church, a church that was supposed to represent a place of sacredness designated for worship. With this underlying greed festering within the confinements of the church, is it safe to assume that this corruption went unnoticed among the medieval people?

According to Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the answer is no. Chaucer, who popularized the fabliau in English, created satiric tongue-in-cheek tales about the medieval church and its clergy, such as *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*.<sup>97</sup> While some of characters are positively portrayed, including the humble parson and the honest plowman, a handful of Chaucer's characters, specifically those who work for the church, are not portrayed in such a positive light. Such characters include the Monk who is materialistic; the Friar, a professional beggar, who steals a bit of the church's earnings for himself; and the Summoner who is described as “lecherous as a sparwe”<sup>98</sup> The Pardoner, who sells relics to absolve sin, is perhaps the most hated of all the pilgrim goes concerning Geoffrey Chaucer, the character. A brief look at *The Reeve's Tale* will help to foster an understanding of the church's decision to enforce a celibate clergy.

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<sup>97</sup> Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004) 93.

<sup>98</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales: The General Prologue*, eds. M.H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume I*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Norton, 2000) Fragment I, line 628, page 230.

The character who is of main concern to us in *The Reeve's Tale* is the Reeve's wife. Accordingly, the tale states, "A wyf [Symkyn] hadde, ycomen of noble kyn; / the person of the toun hir fader was."<sup>99</sup> Interestingly, the Middle English word "person" translates to "parson" or "priest" in Modern English.<sup>100</sup> The fact that Chaucer would write about a priest having a child is rather curious, if not deliberate, considering that by the time Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* in the fourteenth century the canons forbidding priests to marry and procreate children had already been established. Thus, the church observed sexual intercourse as an inconvenience to the daily proceedings of the sacrament. As stated earlier, priests who engaged in sexual intercourse were considered "unclean" for the rest of the day and were not allowed to perform their ordained duties as a consequence.<sup>101</sup> The church relied on Biblical scripture, particularly passages taken from Corinthians, to justify their condemnation of the married clergy. I Corinthians 7:32-33 states, "The unmarried man cares for the Lord's business; his aim is to please the Lord. But the married man cares for worldly things; his aim is to please his wife, and he has a divided mind."<sup>102</sup> The church interpreted this passage to apply indirectly to any married cleric with a family. The church felt that the stresses accumulated from marriage and a family life would complicate church proceedings, not to mention generate controversy surrounding the issue of sex among members of the church. Rather than deal with the fine line between church life and married life, the

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<sup>99</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Reeve's Tale*, eds. Larry D. Benson and F.N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton, 1987) Fragment I (A), lines 3942-3, page 79.

<sup>100</sup> *The Riverside Chaucer* 79 (footnote).

<sup>101</sup> Frazee 112.

<sup>102</sup> Frazee 108.

church presumed to rid itself of a complicated situation by abolishing the married clergy altogether.

In the end, the issues that surrounded the abolishment of the married clergy ran deeper than the medieval church was willing to admit. From issues concerning the church's blatant misogynistic attitudes to the church's financial standing, the church's underlying motivation had less to do with the theological concerns of maintaining the ritualistic purity of the Eucharist and more to do with several co-existing issues, as previously mentioned. Oftentimes, religious figures, such as Ambrose, Jerome, Tertullian, Pope Siricius, and Pope Innocent III, would add fuel to the fire by supporting the demise of the married clergy because they reinforced the "sinfulness" of sexuality. Moreover, the idea that sexuality was sinful began to affect the conceptions of sexuality during the medieval period. One of the Fathers who played a prominent role in shaping such conceptions is Saint Augustine. As the next chapter will discuss, the doctrine of Augustine not only shaped the medieval person's thoughts concerning sexuality, but he also inadvertently shaped the prevailing thoughts of future generations.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE DOCTRINE OF SAINT AUGUSTINE AND ITS AFFECTS ON SEXUALITY

Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, is known for single-handedly shaping the thoughts and attitudes of Western civilization. Not only did he drastically affect the people of this own generation, but, as is evident in religious and secular literature, Augustine's scholarship shaped the prevailing thoughts of generations yet to come. As suggested in Chapter One, Augustine is often recognized as one of the first to posit a direct correlation between sexual desire and Original Sin.<sup>98</sup>

For Augustine, every human being inherited Original Sin as a consequence of Adam and Eve's fall from Paradise. Augustine, like his predecessor Saint Paul, distrusted and was contemptuous of the body, but more specifically, the body unable to control sexual impulses. As a result, Augustine's own preoccupation with sexuality eventually became a driving force that dictated how others should view their own bodies. But why, and more importantly, to what extent, did Augustine damn the corporeal being? A brief look into his past, prior to his years as a bishop, as revealed in his *Confessions* will help to decipher Augustinian thought.

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<sup>98</sup> Phipps, *Clerical Celibacy* 110.

Living from 354 to 430, Augustine spent the majority of his life studying both “humanity and God.”<sup>99</sup> Augustine was desperate to understand the human condition, and, beginning around his nineteenth year, he became interested in the Manichees, a group founded on the philosophy of Mani (c. 216-76).<sup>100</sup> For Mani, who is said to have received a vision that eventually led him to his calling, light equated to goodness while darkness equated to evil:

Darkness has pulverized light into a myriad tiny fragments, which are scattered throughout the world as the ‘divine spark’ of life in all living things [ . . . ] But through Mani’s teaching, these particles of divine light could be released and make their way back to reunion with the source of all Good.<sup>101</sup>

Mani’s “vision” consisted of helping human beings to become one with the light in order to be united with God; however, it’s important to note that Mani’s “God” differed from the “typical” concept of God: “[Mani’s] God was not the same as the ‘god’ of the Old Testament, who had made the world and declared it to be ‘very good’. Mani taught that ‘matter’ (the material world of creation) was actually very bad, forming an evil prison from which human must seek to escape.”<sup>102</sup> Although his own Persian government eventually executed him in 276, Mani’s teachings continued full force past his death, as evident by Augustine’s eventual membership in the fourth century.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Andrew Knowles and Pachomios Penkett, *Augustine and His World*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 160.

<sup>100</sup> Knowles and Penkett 55.

<sup>101</sup> Knowles and Penkett 55.

<sup>102</sup> Knowles and Penkett 55.

<sup>103</sup> Knowles and Penkett 51.

The Manichees consisted of two main groups: the “elect” and the “hearers.” In order to follow in the footsteps of Mani himself, members of the “elect” were mainly known for leading the more ascetic life including sexual renunciation.<sup>104</sup> The latter group, the “hearers,” consisted of members who approved of the Manichaeian dogma, but who faced external circumstances, such as a spouse or child that restricted their status in the group. Augustine fell into the latter because of his relationship with his anonymous mistress—a mistress whose relationship with Augustine lasted about fifteen years and who eventually gave birth to his only child, Adeodatus.<sup>105</sup> For Augustine, the Manichees provided the answers that he needed to hear to various concerns; however, his affiliation with the Manichees eventually came to an end when he began to re-examine his own life. Although Manichaeian dogma provided a quick solution to his questions, this solution was superficial. Augustine believed in an omnipotent God, but the Manichees thought otherwise as they believed that “‘good’ was helpless under the onslaught of evil.”<sup>106</sup>

As Augustine withdrew from his association with the Manichees, he felt more confused about the world as he knew it, yet a Christian conversion was looming over his distant future. Accordingly, Augustine’s profession as a teacher of rhetoric eventually led him to Milan, Italy, in 384.<sup>107</sup> In Milan, Augustine met Ambrose, the man who would soon baptize Augustine. During this time, Ambrose resided in Milan where he held the bishop office. Augustine admired Ambrose in many respects, especially when Ambrose

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<sup>104</sup> Knowles and Penkett 55.

<sup>105</sup> Knowles and Penkett 46, 55.

<sup>106</sup> Knowles and Penkett 53.

<sup>107</sup> Knowles and Penkett 65.

used his interpretation of the Old Testament to refute Manichaean dogma.<sup>108</sup> When this occurred, Augustine turned to Ambrose for answers, realizing that there was hope for himself after all.

Although Augustine never considered himself a “true” Neoplatonist, he did gain exposure to the doctrine through Ambrose, a Neoplatonist himself. Since Augustine wanted to identify the nature of evil, a study of Neoplatonism helped him to pave the road to his discovery. Plotinus, the father of Neoplatonism, posited two suggestions as to where the origins of “moral evil” in human beings came from:

The first was that it originated as a consequence of misused freedom, arising from the potential for weakness in human beings, resulting from their inferior place in the ladder of Being. The second was that it originated from the weakness of the human soul, which tended to lead it to become preoccupied with material things. Because of their imperfection, arising from lessened Being, this human preoccupation with material things becomes the root of moral evil in the soul of a person, causing its fall.<sup>109</sup>

Notice how the explanations blame the *weakness in human beings* and *the weakness of the human soul* for the moral evil of humanity. The links in Plotinus’ explanations together seemingly suggests an innate *weakness* in all human beings. Both explanations reverberate in Augustine’s doctrine of Original Sin.

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<sup>108</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A New Biography* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987) 74.

<sup>109</sup> Knowles and Penkett 70-1.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Augustine does not blame the fall of humankind solely on Eve. Instead, he reasons “that Eve, who was the first to be seduced by the serpent, was not yet as advanced in knowledge as Adam; that Adam, in ‘friendly benevolence’, went along with Eve, rather than abandon her; that he did not think God would deal with him so harshly[ . ]”<sup>110</sup> Augustine deems Original Sin as a never-ending consequence—*poena reciproca*—imposed on all the descendants of Adam and Eve by God.<sup>111</sup> The “consequence,” in turn has affected the functionality of the body:

[Adam and Eve’s] bodies were touched with a disturbing new sense of the alien, in the form of sexual sensations that escaped their control. The body could no longer be embraced entirely by the will. A tiny but ominous symptom—in Adam’s case, the stirring of an erection over which he had no control—warned them both of the final slipping of the body as a whole from the soul’s familiar embrace at death.<sup>112</sup>

For Augustine, the consequence of the fall resulted in the body’s inability to control sexual impulses. For this reason, Augustine adopted a vigorous attitude against sexuality, much like that of the apostle Paul, which only made sexual intercourse permissible in marital union. Writing on the subject of sexual intercourse in marriages, Augustine states, “[ . . . ] married people owe each other not only the fidelity of sexual intercourse for the purpose of procreating children [ . . . ] but also the mutual service in a certain measure, of sustaining each other’s weakness, for the avoidance of illicit

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<sup>110</sup> Carol Harrison, “Augustine,” Ed. Philip F. Esler, *The Early Christian World*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 2000) 1210.

<sup>111</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society* 416.

<sup>112</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society* 416-7.

intercourse [ . . . ].”<sup>113</sup> Like Paul, Augustine agreed that it was better for a man and a woman to have sex as a married couple than to have sex outside of wedlock.

In many ways, Augustine is considered to be the pioneer of thoughts concerning God and sexuality.<sup>114</sup> Through his doctrine of Original Sin, Augustine placed negative connotations on sexuality; however, his ideas begin to make sense when one analyzes his reasoning. Augustine not only wanted to understand the human condition, but also, as already discussed, he wanted to understand the basis and the nature of evil. This led him to believe that a “higher” being controlled such factors, leaving human beings incapable of ever controlling this force. As evident in the history of his life, Augustine appealed to various sources relating to theology and doctrine to try to pinpoint the source that seemed to direct human behavior, which eventually led him to his conversion to Christianity. Upon his conversion around 387, he gave up his life with his mistress and renounced sex to lead his “new” life as a celibate.<sup>115</sup> Augustine’s actions are perplexing considering that celibacy was not a requirement needed to solidify a pious life, excluding monks. Thanks to Ambrose’s influence, Augustine came to recognize the Old Testament as his most favored ally; from the Old Testament, he would use its scripture to supplement many of his ideas and writings.<sup>116</sup> Although Augustine wrote numerous treatises on various subjects, none was more influential than his *Confessions*.

When Augustine began writing his *Confessions* around the year 397, he was approximately 43-years-old.<sup>117</sup> Accordingly, the *Confessions* mainly concentrates on

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<sup>113</sup> Wilson and Makowski 114.

<sup>114</sup> Knowles and Penkett 160.

<sup>115</sup> Harrison 1211.

<sup>116</sup> Pine-Coffin 14.

<sup>117</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society* 388.

Augustine's conversion to Christianity. Since the book was written about ten years after Augustine's initial conversion, Augustine wrote the majority of his work thinking retrospectively. At this point in his life, Augustine was not only entering middle age, but he was also moving up through the hierarchies of the church: after serving as a priest, he became the Bishop of Hippo, a post he held for the last thirty-four years of his life<sup>118</sup>

The fact that Augustine wrote the *Confessions* at this point is significant considering that the work itself is autobiographical. It re-examines his life as a youth, an adolescent, and an adult. Augustine needed this re-examination of his own life for three reasons: "In the first place it is a confession of the writer's sin and error, in the second a recognition of God's goodness and truth. [ . . . ] In the third place, because he has been saved from error and the truth has been made clear to him [ . . . ]."<sup>119</sup> In his own life, Augustine remained in a sexual relationship with his common-law wife of fifteen years—a relationship that resulted in the pregnancy and birth of his only son. Only when Augustine converted to Christianity did he relinquish the relationship in order to pursue a celibate life. As a result of his trying to come to terms with his past, including acts of petty theft, and his active sexual life, Augustine not only adopted a rather guilt-like tone in his writing, but he also began to exhibit a contemptuous attitude against sexuality all together. Peter Brown recognizes this dilemma as he states,

In the *Confessions*, sexuality was presented as a facet of human social relations quite as frequently as it was analyzed as a problem of the human will. This book enables us to glimpse a little of the idiosyncrasy of Augustine's experiences of sex as a young man. At the same time, it

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<sup>118</sup> Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* 156; Knowles and Penkett 158.

<sup>119</sup> Pine-Coffin 16.

communicated the views on the relationship between sexuality and society which Augustine had come to adopt in his middle age.<sup>120</sup>

While Augustine may not have intended to come across to his audience in this manner, nonetheless, the *Confessions* does distort the perception of sexuality.

Augustine's *Confessions* is an extensive work in twelve books. As already indicated, by the end of his twelfth book, Augustine, quite successfully, mapped out the course of his own life—before and after his Christian conversion. In Book II, Augustine details his troubled adolescent years, especially his overly active sexual drive:

Recordari volo transactas foeditates meas, et carnales corruptiones animae meae, non quod eas amem, sed ut amem te, domine meus. amore amoris tui facio istuc, recolens vias meas nequissimas in amaritudine recogitationis meae [ . . . ]<sup>121</sup>

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I must carry my thoughts back to the abominable things I did in those days, the sins of the flesh which defiled my soul. I do this, my God, not because I love those sins, but so that I may love you. For love of your love I shall retrace my wicked ways.<sup>122</sup>

In these opening lines Augustine specifically addresses his *sins of the flesh* in order to mend his relationship with God: *For love of thy love I do it*. More importantly, however, this “confession” is not only needed for his own personal satisfaction but is also needed “to persuade his admirers that any good qualities he had were his by the grace of God,

<sup>120</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society* 388.

<sup>121</sup> Watts 64. All Latin quotations are taken from Watts.

<sup>122</sup> Pine-Coffin 43. All modern English quotations are taken from the Pine-Coffin translation.

who saved him so often from himself.”<sup>123</sup> For this reason, Augustine does not hold back as he discloses his past to his readers. Surprisingly, Augustine also shares the infamous story of his father’s witnessing his son’s erection:

quin immo ubi me ille pater in balneis vidit pubescentem et inquieta  
indutum adulescentia, quasi iam ex hoc in nepotes gestiret, gaudens matri  
indicavit, gaudens vinulencia, in qua te iste mundus oblitus est creatorem  
suum et creaturam tuam [ . . . ]<sup>124</sup>

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One day at the public baths he saw the signs of active virility coming to  
life in me and this was enough to make him relish the thought of having  
grandchildren. He (his father) was so happy to tell my mother about it, for  
his happiness was due to the intoxication which causes the world to forget  
you, its Creator [ . . . ]<sup>125</sup>

Although Augustine was still a young adolescent, around the age of sixteen-years-old, when this occurred, the incident haunted him for the rest of his life.<sup>126</sup> In retrospect, Augustine was ashamed of his inability to control his own body. As a man of the church, Augustine did not understand why he could not exhibit more self-control over his own flesh. The only answer that made sense to him was, as previously discussed, *poena reciproca*, the permanent consequence of humankind’s fall from grace. *Poena reciproca* in Augustine’s case, and men in general, includes the inability to control the penis.

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<sup>123</sup> Pine-Coffin 12.

<sup>124</sup> Watts 72.

<sup>125</sup> Pine-Coffin 45.

<sup>126</sup> Pine-Coffin 45.

Moreover, Augustine recognizes his problem with the flesh as he recalls a point in his youth when his mother, Monica, becomes worried about her son's behavior:

[ . . . ] mater carnis meae, sicut monuit me pudicitiam, ita curavit quod de me a viro suo audierat, iamque pestilentiosum et in posterum periculosum sentiebat cohercere termino coniugalis affectus, si resecari ad vivum non poterat. non curavit hoc, quia metus erat, ne inpediretur spes mea conpede uxorial, non spes illa, quam in te futuri saeculi habebat mater, sed spes litterarum, quas ut nossem nimis volebat parens uterque, ille [ . . . ]<sup>127</sup>

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[ . . . ] she had advised me about chastity. She saw that I was already infected with a disease that would become dangerous later on but if the growth of my passions could not be cut back to the quick, she did not think it right to restrict them to the bonds of marriage that might be a hindrance to my hopes for the future – not of course the hope of the life to come, which she reposed in you, but hopes of success at my studies. Both my parents were unduly eager for me to learn [ . . . ]<sup>128</sup>

The “disease” that Augustine refers to is his sexual passion, as evident when he says, “the growth of *my passions* could not be cut back to the quick[.]” Augustine wanted to take heed to his mother's advice because she had been a powerful force in his life, especially since she was a devout Christian, unlike Augustine's pagan father. Monica feared for her son's life as he seemed to be spiraling out of control; this is why she advised him on the “goodness” of chastity. Monica disagreed with St. Paul's notion, that it is better to

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<sup>127</sup> Watts 74, 76.

<sup>128</sup> Pine-Coffin 46-7.

fornicate in the bonds of marriage than fornicate outside of wedlock, because she feared that marriage might distract Augustine from his education. Although Monica herself was a married woman, she did not want the same for the son; thus, her attitude reflects a philosophical misogyny like that expressed in I Corinthians 7:32-3. However, Augustine failed to yield to Monica's cautionary advice.

Augustine accredited his worsening behavior to his reluctance to accept his Lord's grace:

relaxabantur etiam mihi ad ludendum habenae ultra temperamentum  
severitatis in dissolutionem afflictionum variarum, et in omnibus erat  
caligo intercludens mihi, deus meus, serenitatem veritatis tuae [ . . . ]<sup>129</sup>

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Furthermore, I was given a free rein to amuse myself beyond the strict limits of discipline, so that I lost myself in many kinds of evil ways, in all of which a pall of darkness hung between me and the bright light of your truth, my God.<sup>130</sup>

From this point, Augustine immediately discusses the incident involving his participation in the theft from a pear-tree. Augustine writes,

arbor erat pirus in vicinia nostrae vineae, pomis onusta, nec forma nec  
sapore inlecebrosis. ad hanc excutiendam atque asportandam nequissimi  
adulescentuli perreximus nocte intempesta, quousque ludum de  
pestilentiae more in areis produxeramus, et abstulimus inde onera ingentia

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<sup>129</sup> Watts 76.

<sup>130</sup> Pine-Coffin 47.

non ad nostras epulas, sed vel procienda porcis, etiamsi aliquid inde comedimus, dum tamen fieret a nobis quod eo liberet, quo non liceret.<sup>131</sup>

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There was a pear-tree near our vineyard, loaded with fruit that was attractive neither to look at nor to taste. Late one night a band of ruffians, myself included, went off to shake down the fruit and carry it away, for we had continued our games out of doors until well after dark, as was our pernicious habit. We took away an enormous quantity of pears, not to eat them ourselves, but simply to throw them to the pigs. Perhaps we ate some of them, but our real pleasure consisted in doing something that was forbidden.<sup>132</sup>

The key phrase Augustine utters is “our *real pleasure* consisted in doing something that *was forbidden*.” The whole scenario provides his readers with a profound insight into his thoughts. Notice how the scene has direct parallels to the biblical story of Adam and Eve:

When the woman saw that the *fruit of the tree* was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were open, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made covering for themselves.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Watts 78.

<sup>132</sup> Pine-Coffin 47.

<sup>133</sup> Genesis 3:6-7. Emphasis mine.

For some unknown reason, people have often named the apple as the fruit tree of the biblical story; nevertheless, as is evident in the above passage, the biblical story does not readily identify the fruit of the tree. Augustine intentionally draws on specific parallelism between his theft of the pear-tree and the biblical story of Adam and Eve in order to demonstrate how he had fallen into sinful behavior; after all, the fruit tree in Paradise very well could have been a pear-tree since the story never explicitly indicates otherwise.<sup>134</sup> However, Augustine's medieval audience may not have read his passage in the same light because Augustine often uses abstract language throughout the *Confessions*. As already discussed, he uses the word "disease" to allude to his sexual passions. Later in the book, he uses the "pear-tree" incident to allude to his sexual tendencies. According to James O'Donnell,

A good biographer might worry about whether Augustine's adolescent sex life was much to speak of, and whether he and his friends really did steal those pears, but he would miss the point of the narrative. Augustine's strategy needs him to cave in to the hankering of the flesh here, to lose the divine spirit and start down a bad slope. So the story tells us in the abstract that he was awash in sexual temptation [ . . . ] then settles on the story of the pear theft as an image of primordial sin with sexual overtones—quite in the same spirit as Augustine's interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Wendy L. Maldonado, "Pears Galore: A Semiotic Approach to the Pear in Late Medieval England," honors thesis, Southwest Texas State U, n.d, 2.

<sup>135</sup> James J. O' Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: Harper, 2005) 67.

O'Donnell's mention of the "hankerings of the flesh" refers to Augustine's struggle to overcome the sexual impulses, evident in his telling of the "pear-tree" incident. Moreover, the fact that O'Donnell suggests that Augustine purposely wrote about the incident to coincide with his sinful behavior, inevitably supports the notion that Augustine wrote his *Confessions* to persuade his reader, perhaps his reader who has experienced sinful behavior like himself, to witness the will of God (at least the will of God according to Augustine). It may never be known whether the "pear-tree" incident actually occurred or occurred in the manner Augustine tells it, because Augustine writes the *Confessions* from the view of a reformed sinner—a reformed sinner who only discussed the negativity of his past sex life. Augustine, in many ways, inadvertently fostered the "taboo" nature of sex, affecting his own generation and future generations as well.

As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, Augustinian thought created a cause-and-effect ripple throughout Western civilization. Topics ranging from sex to the sacred have been influenced, in one way or another, by Augustine's writing. He influenced sacred writing and even secular literature—literature for the laity. A brief analysis of *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* and the dialogue, *Dives and Pauper*, demonstrates the influence of Augustinian thought on secular literature.

*The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* represent the collected letters written between Peter Abelard and Heloise during the twelfth century.<sup>136</sup> Abelard was well known in his time for mastering the subjects of classical literature, rhetoric, and logic; his mastery of such subjects led him to his career as a distinguished teacher, which is how he eventually

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<sup>136</sup> My point here is not to discuss whether the letters are truly authentic, as some scholars have debated; instead, as stated, my point is to discuss the subject matter of the letters.

came to meet Heloise.<sup>137</sup> Soon after Fulbert, Heloise's uncle and guardian, established Abelard as Heloise's tutor, a love affair quickly blossomed between the tutor and his pupil. The two began a sexual relationship that quickly resulted in the pregnancy of Heloise. Although marriage might seem like the appropriate action to take, both Abelard and Heloise were hesitant to make such a move. Unlike Heloise, Abelard was more willing to marry her as a matter of making amends with her uncle; however, Abelard had only one condition for the marriage: it had to be done in secrecy and remain in secrecy so as to not jeopardize his career.<sup>138</sup> From the beginning Heloise knew if she and Abelard were to get married, Abelard's career would be harmed because "[ . . . ] there was no career open to an educated man at this time except in the Church, [however,] Abelard was prepared to sacrifice his ambitions for high office in order to secure Heloise for himself."<sup>139</sup> Thus, Heloise tries whole-heartedly to dissuade Abelard from the idea of marriage by appealing to the epistles of Saint Paul, which Augustine had also used. In *Letter I, Historia Calamitatum* Abelard, in referring to Heloise, states,

She absolutely rejected this marriage; it would be nothing but a disgrace and a burden to me. Along with the loss to my reputation she put before me the difficulties of marriage, which the apostle Paul exhorts us to avoid when he says: 'Has your marriage been dissolved? Do not seek a wife. [ . . . ] [T]hose who marry will have pain and grief in this bodily life, and my aim is to spare you.'<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Radice xiv, xix.

<sup>138</sup> Radice xix.

<sup>139</sup> Radice xx.

<sup>140</sup> *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* 13.

Although Heloise readily justifies her reasoning for them to remain unmarried, in the end Abelard declares that they will be married,

But at last she saw that her attempts to persuade or dissuade me were making no impression on my foolish obstinacy, and she could not bear to offend me; so amidst deep sighs and tears she ended in these words: ‘We shall both be destroyed. All that is left us is suffering as great as our love has been.’ In this, as the whole world knows, she showed herself a true prophet.<sup>141</sup>

And, as indicated by Abelard’s last line, Heloise, the “prophet,” was correct when she asserted that *we shall both be destroyed*.

As *Letter I, Historia Calamitatum* progresses, Abelard reveals the abusive tendencies of Heloise’s uncle as he states, “[ . . . ] Fulbert heaped abuse on her on several occasions. [However,] [a]s soon as I discovered this I removed her to a convent of nuns [ . . . ] and I also had made for her a religious habit of the type worn by novices, with the exception of the veil, and made her put it on.”<sup>142</sup> Although Abelard removed Heloise from her uncle’s home with good intention, Fulbert thought Abelard was trying to get rid of Heloise by taking her to a convent; as a result, Fulbert has Abelard castrated: “[T]hey cut off the parts of my body whereby I had committed the wrong of which they complained.”<sup>143</sup> By being made into a eunuch, not only has his passionate relationship with Heloise come to an end, much to the dismay of Heloise, but Abelard has paid the

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<sup>141</sup> *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* 16.

<sup>142</sup> *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* 17.

<sup>143</sup> *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* 17.

price for his relationship with her, as proclaimed in Heloise's words, *we shall both be destroyed*.

Soon after his castration, Abelard and Heloise part ways by entering into separate monastic communities. And it is at this point that Abelard begins to re-examine his life, as Augustine does in his *Confessions*. Hence, Augustine's *Confessions* and the life of Abelard and Heloise, as told in *Letter 1, Historia Calamitatum*, focuses on the same dilemma: sex. Like Augustine before his Christian conversion, Abelard succumbs, repeatedly, to his sexual impulses. At times, Abelard's sexual drive seems out of control as he readily admits to having sex with Heloise "in a corner of the refectory" of her convent.<sup>144</sup> Augustinian thought intervenes as Abelard is unable to control his flesh--a *poena reciproca* of man's fallen state. Abelard even goes so far as to compare Heloise to Eve: "I protested that I had done nothing unusual in the eyes of anyone who had known the power of love, and recalled how since the beginning of the human race women had brought the noblest men to ruin."<sup>145</sup> Similar to the way in which Augustine rebukes his past sex life, Abelard recognizes his castrated self as a merciful punishment handed down by God himself:

It is well known that the philosophers, and still more the Fathers, by which is meant those who have devoted themselves to the teachings of Holy Scripture, were especially glorified by their chastity. Since therefore I was wholly enslaved to pride and lechery, God's grace provided a remedy

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<sup>144</sup> *Letters of Abelard and Heloise* 80.

<sup>145</sup> *Letters of Abelard and Heloise* 13.

[ . . . ] for my lechery by depriving me of those organs with which I practiced it.<sup>146</sup>

In retrospect, Abelard realizes that it was *concupiscentia carnis*—the soul’s flawed state after the Fall, a term denoted in Augustinian tradition—that led him to his uncontrollable desires for Heloise.<sup>147</sup> Therefore, Abelard, now the reformed sinner, “confesses” his erroneous ways to Heloise in order to show her his explanation of God’s grace:

It was [God] who truly loved you, not I. My love, which brought us both to sin, should be called lust, not love. I took my fill of my wretched pleasures in you, and this was the sum total of my love. You say I suffered for you, and perhaps that is true, but it was really through you, and even this, unwillingly; not for love of you but under compulsion, and to bring you not salvation but sorrow. But [God] suffered truly for your salvation, on your behalf of his own free will, and by his suffering he cures all sickness and removes all suffering. To him, I beseech you, not to me, should be directed all your devotion, all your compassion, all your remorse.

Although Abelard and Heloise never rekindle their past relationship, the two remain, as presented in the letters, as colleagues settled in their monastic lives: in one of his letters, Abelard makes a prayer request for Heloise, and conversely, in a later letter, Heloise asks Abelard to specify the rules of the convent.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> *Letters of Abelard and Heloise* 9.

<sup>147</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society* 418.

<sup>148</sup> *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* 64, 91.

Whether or not Abelard would have entered the monastic life if he had not been castrated will forever remain a mystery, but his story offers an uncanny parallel to Augustine in his *Confessions*. Abelard remained in his fallen state, constantly yielding to his sexual impulses, until he becomes a “victim” of a premeditated castration, which, consequently, causes his abrupt impotency. Abelard argues it was God’s grace that saved him by bringing him from his sinful life to a “saved” state. In this sense, the very foundation of *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, especially Abelard’s *Letter I, Historia Calamitatum*, reflects the way in which Augustine wrote his *Confessions*: both men reflect on their past to illustrate how they came, through God’s mercy, to their present state in life.

Another work influenced by Augustinian scholarship is the anonymously written dialogue, *Dives and Pauper*, which is thought to have been written sometime between 1405 and 1410.<sup>149</sup> According to Alcuin Blamires’ treatment of the text, Dives and Pauper discuss various issues concerning the Ten Commandments; while Dives’ character is “a rich person who seems to represent a conventionally minded, worldly layperson [ . . . ], Pauper is a clerical voice whose affiliations are hard to pin down, for he propounds orthodox doctrine with a tinge of radicalism [ . . . ].<sup>150</sup> Accordingly, Pauper often relies on Augustinian thought as he defends his ideas to Dives. For instance, when discussing adultery, Dives asks Pauper, ““Is adultery a greater sin in man than in woman?””<sup>151</sup> Pauper responds,

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<sup>149</sup> Blamires 260.

<sup>150</sup> Blamires 260.

<sup>151</sup> Blamires 262.

Generally it is more sinful in man than in woman because the higher one's position, the worse the fall and the more serious the sin. By nature, man has greater strength and greater intelligence and reason with which to withstand and be on the guard against the devil's guile. And because he is made woman's master and guardian, to direct her in virtue and protect her from vices, if *he* lapses into vices and adultery, he is much more to blame [ . . . ]. Hence St Augustine in his work *The Ten Strings* reproves husbands who lapse into adultery, addressing each of them thus: 'God bids you not to commit lechery, that is, not to have sex with any woman except your wife [ . . . ].'<sup>152</sup>

It should be of no surprise that Pauper alludes to Augustine to justify his reasoning. Pauper, like his contemporaries, supplements his argument with that of a well-respected and highly influential scholar; he uses his resources to the best of his ability while demonstrating an unrelenting view, much like Augustine himself. Pauper asserts,

As St Augustine says, 'you are not ashamed of your sin because so many men commit it. Man's wickedness is now such that men are more ashamed of chastity than of lechery. Murderers, thieves, perjurers, false witnesses [ . . . ] are detested and hated by people generally, but whoever will sleep with his servant girl in brazen lechery is liked and admired for it, and people make light of the damage to his soul.'<sup>153</sup>

Although written anonymously, the dialogue of *Dives and Pauper* demonstrates the extent to which Augustinian thought affected secular literature. For parts of this

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<sup>152</sup> Blamires 262.

<sup>153</sup> Blamires 263.

dialogue, specifically those dealing with adultery and chastity, the writer inserts passages taken directly from the works of Augustine to support the principles of Pauper's persona.

From his doctrine of Original Sin to *The Confessions*, Augustine managed to shape the prevailing thoughts of his generation and those of future generations. As this chapter has shown, there are several ways to study Augustine: one can study the man himself; one can study his work as a theologian; and one can study the works of literature that he inadvertently influenced after his death. The possibilities of study are limitless. But more importantly, for this study, Augustinian thought drastically affected conceptions of sexuality. For the medieval person, fleshly desires and sex equated sinfulness. Therefore, to remain pure, one needed to renounce the desires of the flesh, which translates to bodily purity. And, as the next chapter will discuss, the conception of bodily purity eventually formed a prevalent theme in medieval fictional literature.

## CHAPTER 4

### MALE PURITY: A THEME IN MEDIEVAL FICTIONAL LITERATURE

Leading up to this chapter, I have discussed three major topics: Christ as a construct of male purity; the demise of the medieval church's married clergy; and the doctrine of Saint Augustine and the effects his doctrine had on the conceptualization of sexuality during the medieval period. Furthermore, each chapter has explored the theme of male purity in religious literature and, tangentially, in secular literature. Now the attention will be drawn to this theme solely in fictional literature. Themes are important when studying literature because they not only shed light on the work itself, but they also allow scholars to conceive a better understanding of the period in which a work was written. However, any piece of literature, be it a play, poem, or epic, is not necessarily limited to one theme, for many themes can arise in one work. In the following works of literature—*Beowulf*, Gottfried Von Strassburg's *Tristan*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—the theme of male purity co-exists with the texts' other themes.

In the introduction to his translation of *Beowulf*, Seamus Heaney recognizes that “[the manuscript of *Beowulf* has] barely survived a fire in the eighteenth century and was then transcribed and titled, retranscribed and edited, translated and adapted, interpreted and reinterpreted, until it has become canonical. For decades it has been a set book on

English syllabuses at university level all over the world.”<sup>152</sup> As recognized by Heaney, the popularity of *Beowulf* has soared to great heights over the past couple of centuries. Perhaps, one reason that accounts for its popularity is due to the mystery that is associated with the story. While the writer of *Beowulf* remains anonymous, scholars have postulated that the story “[. . . ] was composed sometime between the middle of the seventh and the end of the tenth century of the first millennium [ . . . ]”<sup>153</sup> The dialect of the story has helped scholars to determine the origin of authorship, considering how long ago the story was written. In studying the dialect, scholars have tried to accomplish one of two goals:

More generally, [ . . . ] to establish the history and genealogy of the dynasties of Swedes and Geats and Danes to which the poet makes constant allusion; and they devoted themselves to a consideration of the world-view behind the poem, asking to what extent (if at all) the newly Christian understanding of the world which operates in the poet’s designating mind displaces him from his imaginative at-homeness in the world of his poem—a pagan Germanic society governed by a heroic code of honour, one where the attainment of a name for warrior-prowess among the living overwhelms any concern about the soul’s destiny in the afterlife.<sup>154</sup>

Heaney indicates that Christianity had only recently emerged into the world prior to the creation of *Beowulf*. Thus, the story itself involves a constant struggle between

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<sup>152</sup> *Beowulf*, trans Seamus Heaney (New York: Norton, 2000) x.

<sup>153</sup> Heaney ix.

<sup>154</sup> Heaney x-xi.

Christianity and paganism, and, as a result, the dichotomy of the two makes it difficult for scholars and readers alike to distinguish where the loyalties of the author and characters stand. For this discussion, I do not want to argue which “faith” dominated the story; rather, I will discuss the Christian imagery of the story in order to identify the Christ-like bodily purity of Beowulf, and to argue that such imagery is needed because the story is a representation of Beowulf’s spiritual journey to redemption.

As is established towards the beginning of the story, Beowulf, under allegiance to Hygelac, sails to the Danes to extend a helping hand to King Hrothgar and his kingdom because for the past twelve years, the monster, Grendel has been terrorizing the countryside.<sup>155</sup> Grendel, in particular, seems to have a vendetta for Hrothgar’s renowned hall, Heorot, as he constantly plunders the hall and kills occupants at random. Grendel’s character is particularly important as he is one of the first to establish a significant Christian element in the story. Accordingly, the narrator describes,

Grendel haten,  
 mære mearc-stapa, se þe moras heold,  
 fen ond fæsten; fifel-cynnes eard  
 won-sæli wer weardode hwile,  
 siþðan him Scyppend forscifen hæfde  
 in Caines cynne— þone cwealm gewræc  
 ece Drihten, þæs þe he Abel slog.  
 Ne gefeah he þære fæhðe, ac he hine feor forwræc,  
 Metod for þy mane, man-cynne fram.

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<sup>155</sup> Heaney 7.

Ðanon untydras ealle onwocon,  
 eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas,  
 swylce gigantas, þa wið Gode wunnon  
 lange þrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald.<sup>156</sup>

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 Grendel was the name of this grim demon  
 haunting the marches, marauding round the heath  
 and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time  
 in misery among the banished monsters,  
 Cain's clan whom the Creator had outlawed  
 and condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel  
 the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:  
 Cain got no good from committing that murder  
 because the Almighty had made him anathema  
 and out of the curse of his exile there sprang  
 ogres and elves and evil phantoms  
 and the giants too who strove with God  
 time and again until He gave them their reward.<sup>157</sup>

From the evil that resulted in Cain's killing Abel sprang the monstrous Grendel who represents the pure evil act of that *first* murder. In this respect, Grendel's monstrous body is associated with sin, but more specifically the evil that arises from sin.

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<sup>156</sup> Heaney 8, lines 102-14. All Old English quotations are taken from Heaney.

<sup>157</sup> Heaney 9, lines 102-14. All Modern English quotation are also taken from Heaney.

Like any spiritual journey, Beowulf not only must follow several steps to reach his redemption, but he must also endure hardships along the way. In this respect, Beowulf himself has three hardships in particular that he must face, all of which increase in difficulty as he moves from one hardship to the next: Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. Following this order, Beowulf defeats Grendel rather easily, at least in comparison to his other battles, as Grendel, the infamous, ravaging beast is described as a feeble fighter during the battle:

Hyge wæs him hin-fus, wolde on heolster fleon,  
 secan deofla gedræg; ne wæs his drothoð þær,  
 swylce he on ealder-dagum ær gemette.<sup>158</sup>

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He was desperate to flee to his den and hide  
 with the devil's litter, for all his days  
 he had never been clamped or cornered like this.<sup>159</sup>

Upon re-telling Beowulf's heroic deed of killing Grendel, the narrator is quick to recognize God as the being who made Beowulf's victory possible:

[ . . . ] þone ðe Grendel ær  
 mane acwealde, swa he hyra ma wolde,  
 nefne him witig God wyrd forstode  
 ond ðæs mannes mod.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Heaney 50, lines 755-7.

<sup>159</sup> Heaney 51, lines 754-6.

<sup>160</sup> Heaney 70, lines 1054-7.

[ . . . ] Grendel had cruelly killed earlier—  
 as he would have killed more,  
 had not mindful God and one man's daring prevented that doom.  
 Past and present, God's will prevails.<sup>161</sup>

The fact that the narrator recognizes Beowulf's victory as a result of God's will, suggests that God is protecting Beowulf from harm; moreover, "[t]he passage just quoted can reasonably [suggest] that Beowulf's faith in God enabled him to defeat God's enemies, and to imply perhaps that Beowulf may be an instrument of divine warfare."<sup>162</sup> After all, Grendel is God's enemy because his monster-like presence is a result of the first murder.<sup>163</sup> The idea that Beowulf's victory is accomplished through God's grace is reiterated as the battle of Beowulf and Grendel is mentioned yet again:

þær him aglæca ætgræpe wearð;  
 hwæpre he gemunde mægenes strenge,  
 gim-fæste gife, ðe him God sealed,  
 ond him to An-waldan are gelyfde,  
 frofre ond fultum; ðy he þone feond ofercwom,  
 gehnægde helle-gast.<sup>164</sup>

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 The monster wrenched and wrestled with him  
 but Beowulf was mindful of his mighty strength,

<sup>161</sup> Heaney 71, lines 1054-7.

<sup>162</sup> Robert D. Stevick, "Christian Elements and the Genesis of 'Beowulf,'" *Modern Philology* 61 (1963): 84.

<sup>163</sup> Stevick 85.

<sup>164</sup> Heaney 88, lines 1269-74.

the wondrous gifts God had showered on him:  
 He relied for help on the Lord of All,  
 on His care and favour. / So he overcame the foe,  
 brought down the hell-brute.<sup>165</sup>

As is indicated in the above excerpts, the author has established a symbiotic relationship by which God provides Beowulf with the means to overcome his enemy. Therefore, both are deemed as the victors since “good” has defeated “evil.”

As the story unfolds, the reader becomes keenly aware that the misfortune of Heorot has not come to an end despite the death of Grendel, for there is still a hellish fiend roaming free among Hrothgar’s kingdom: Grendel’s mother. Like Grendel, his mother sprang from the evil that resulted from Cain’s killing Abel:

Grendles modor,  
 ides, aglæc-wīf yrmþe gemunde,  
 se þe wæter-egesan wunian scolde,  
 cealde streamas, siþðan Cain wearð  
 to ecg-banan angan breþer,  
 fæderen-mæge; [ . . . ]<sup>166</sup>

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Grendel’s mother,  
 monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.  
 She had been forced down into fearful waters,  
 the cold depths, after Cain had killed

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<sup>165</sup> Heaney 89, lines 1269-74.

<sup>166</sup> Heaney 88, lines 1258-63.

his father's son, felled his own  
brother with a sword.<sup>167</sup>

To avenge her son's death, Grendel's mother attacks the hall the night after Grendel's attack; in doing so, she not only kills Hrothgar's cherished friend, Aeschere, but she also steals his body and the trophy of Beowulf's fight: Grendel's arm. Now Beowulf must prolong his stay in order to win back his battle "trophy" and he must kill Grendel's mother in the process to avenge Aeschere's death. However, unlike his battle with Grendel, which seemed rather effortless on Beowulf's part, the battle with Grendel's mother will be tougher and more dangerous. After all, the audience knows that both Grendel and his mother sprang from the sin that resulted from the murder of Abel.

In analyzing the Christ-like bodily purity of Beowulf's character, the battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother represents the second hardship he must endure during his spiritual journey to redemption. From the onset of the underwater battle with the she-monster, Beowulf, although in combat with a "woman," has seemingly met his match physically, for his sword—known as Hrunting—proves useless during their battle for it refuses to physically penetrate the she-monster. The narrator describes this dilemma as Beowulf swings his "war-sword" at his foe:

Ða se gist onfand,  
þæt se beado-leoma bitan nolde,  
aldre sceþðan, ac seo ecg geswac  
ðeodne æt þearfe; ðolode ær fela  
hond-gemota, helm oft gescær,

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<sup>167</sup> Heaney 89, lines 1258-63.

fæges fyrd-hrægl; ða wæs forma sið  
deorum madme, þæt his dom alæg.<sup>168</sup>

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But he soon found  
his battle-torch extinguished: the shining blade  
refused to bite. It spared her and failed  
the man in his need. It had gone through many  
hand-to-hand fights, had hewed the armour  
and helmets of the doomed, but here at last  
the fabulous powers of that heirloom failed.<sup>169</sup>

The sexual overtones of the scene become apparent as Beowulf finds that his sword cannot bite (the Middle English word “bitan” translates to “bite” in Modern English)<sup>170</sup> the she-monster. This initially results in his “fabulous powers” failing to perform during the physical match. However, the battle is not yet lost. Instead, after a long-fought battle, Beowulf overcomes the she-monster with her own weapon:

Geseah ða on searwum sige-eadig bil,  
eald-sweord eotenisc ecgum þyhtig,  
wigena weorð-mynd; þæt wæs wæpna cyst [ . . . ].<sup>171</sup>

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Then he saw a blade that boded well,

<sup>168</sup> Heaney 104, lines 1522-28.

<sup>169</sup> Heaney 105, lines 1522-28.

<sup>170</sup> Hans Kurath and Sherman M. Kuhn, eds, *Middle English Dictionary*, vol. 1 (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1956) 914.

<sup>171</sup> Heaney 106, lines 1557-9.

a sword in her armoury, an ancient heirloom  
 from the days of the giants [ . . . ].<sup>172</sup>

Beowulf's initial inability to penetrate the she-monster readily glorifies his bodily purity as he remains sexually pure because, in this sense, his sword represents phallic imagery: his "penis" does not penetrate the she-monster. Despite the fact that he finally penetrates the she-monster with a fatal wound, Beowulf's bodily purity remains intact because he did so with her weapon, not his. The Christian elements of the story seem to suggest, once again, that Beowulf's victory was a matter of destiny as determined by God. Right before Beowulf takes notice of the she-monster's weapon, the narrator explains:

[ . . . ] ond halig God  
 geweold wig-sigor, witig Drihten,  
 rodera Rædend, hit on ryht gesced  
 yðelice, syþðan he eft astod.<sup>173</sup>

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 [and] holy God  
 decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord,  
 the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance  
 once Beowulf got back up on his feet.<sup>174</sup>

As indicated earlier, God seems to readily grant victory for Beowulf when he fights His enemies.

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<sup>172</sup> Heaney 107, lines 1557-9.

<sup>173</sup> Heaney 106, lines 1553-6.

<sup>174</sup> Heaney 107, lines 1553-6.

Beowulf's third and final hardship is his battle with the dragon, a battle that turns out to be Beowulf's final battle in life. Leading up the eventful finale of Beowulf's life, the story has progressed fifty years into the future, during which time Beowulf has served as the ruler of his kingdom. As king, Beowulf is a well-respected, cherished leader throughout his country, but the peace of his country is soon disturbed by a dragon who begins plundering the countryside as a result of being robbed of the treasure it guarded. Upon receiving the news about the dragon's destructive tirade, Beowulf contemplates his course of action; in doing so, he has a brief epiphany about his own future:

wisse he gearwe,  
 þæt him holt-wudu helþan ne meahte,  
 lind wið lige. Sceolde læn-daga  
 æþeling ær-god ende gebidan,  
 worulde lifes, ond se wurm somod,  
 þeah ðe hord-welan heolde lange.<sup>175</sup>

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He well knew  
 that linden boards would let him down  
 and timber burn. After many trials,  
 he was destined to face the end of his days  
 in this mortal world; as was the dragon,  
 for all his long leasehold on the treasure.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Heaney 158, lines 2339-44.

<sup>176</sup> Heaney 159, lines 2339-44.

Despite the foreshadowing of events to come, Beowulf does not yield to such warning, as the narrator states,

Oferhogode ða hringa fengel,  
 þæt he þone wid-flogan weorode gesohte,  
 sidan herge; no he him þa sæcce ondred,  
 ne him þæs wyrmes wig for wiht dyde,  
 eafoð ond ellen, forðon he ær fela  
 nearo neðende niða gedigde,  
 hilde-hlemma, syððan he Hroðgares,  
 sigor-eadig secg, sele fælsode  
 ond æt guðe forgrap Grendeles mægum  
 laðan cynnes.<sup>177</sup>

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Yet the prince of rings was too proud  
 to line up with a large army  
 against the sky-plague. He had scant regard  
 for the dragon as a threat, no dread at all  
 of its courage or strength, for he had kept going  
 often in the past, through perils and ordeals  
 of every sort, after he had purged Hrothgar's hall, triumphed in Heorot  
 and beaten Grendel. He outgrappled the monster and his evil kin.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Heaney 158, lines 2345-54.

<sup>178</sup> Heaney 159, lines 2345-54.

Although an aged man, Beowulf lets his pride get the better of him, which results in his decision to battle the dragon. Moreover, this moment ultimately triggers his own *fall*; after all, pride is one of the seven “deadly” sins.<sup>179</sup> But Beowulf must experience his fall in order to truly experience his spiritual journey to redemption.

As the battle commences, Beowulf proceeds to fight the dragon with his sword, although not the same sword from his previous battle with the she-monster, it fails him yet again. Despite seeing their king in jeopardy,

ymbe gestodon  
 hilde-cystum, ac hy on holt bugon,  
 ealdre burgan.<sup>180</sup>

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 that hand-picked troop  
 broke ranks and ran for their lives  
 to the safety of the wood.<sup>181</sup>

When Beowulf’s troops abandon him in crisis, this episode has parallels to scripture. In Matthew 26:69-75, Peter, one of Christ’s twelve disciples, blatantly denies Christ. As a servant girl replies to Peter, ““You also were with Jesus of Galilee,”” Peter responds with, ““I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ [ . . . ].”<sup>182</sup> While it may seem that Peter denied Christ on purpose, perhaps to avoid the deadly persecution of being a Christian, this is not the case because after Peter rejects Christ three times, he acknowledges his

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<sup>179</sup> Margaret E. Goldsmith, “The Christian Perspective in *Beowulf*,” *Comparative Literature* 14 (1962): 74.

<sup>180</sup> Heaney 174, lines 2597-99.

<sup>181</sup> Heaney 175, lines 2597-99.

<sup>182</sup> Matthew 26:69-70.

shame for doing so: “Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: ‘Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly.”<sup>183</sup> Like Christ, Beowulf is denied by his own troops as they succumb to their cowardice; however, this part of the story’s uncanny resemblance to the scripture ends when Wiglaf decides to keep his ground in order to render aid to his king, Beowulf.

When Wiglaf enters the battle, the story exposes a profound insight into Beowulf’s character that ultimately glorifies his purity. As Wiglaf and Beowulf desperately fight the dragon with all their might, the dragon deals a fatal, poisonous wound to Beowulf, but soon after he receives his own death-wound Beowulf fatally stabs the dragon. Upon realizing that his fateful death is near, Beowulf expresses a heartfelt sentiment to Wiglaf:

‘Nū ic suna minum   syllan wolde  
 guð-gewædu,   þær me gifeðe swa  
 ænig yrfe-weard   æfter wurde,  
 lice gelenge.’<sup>184</sup>

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‘Now is the time when I would have wanted  
 to bestow this armour on my own son,  
 had it been my fortune to have fathered an heir  
 and live on in his flesh.’<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Matthew 26:75.

<sup>184</sup> Heaney 184, lines 2729-32

<sup>185</sup> Heaney 185, lines 2729-32.

Beowulf cannot pass on his legacy because he does not have any children to do so. Historically speaking, this is rather peculiar considering that kings would often impregnate their wives in hopes of producing a male who would eventually inherit his father's position. Moreover, not only is Beowulf without child, but he is also presumably without a wife—not once does the story mention Beowulf as having a wife, or a mistress for that matter. Therefore, Beowulf's bodily purity is representative of the bodily purity of Christ who, as we have discussed, was understood to have led a celibate life. In the end, once Beowulf has been fatally wounded, he “desires to see the gold he has bought with his life. His arrogance is now gone, his thought is for those to whom he will leave this wealth.”<sup>186</sup> Only when Beowulf finally purges himself from his “arrogance,” is he able to gain his redemption:

The man who leaves the world willingly is the man who puts his hope in ‘ece rædas,’ not in earthly possessions. He is the man, of the sons of Abel, who knows that this world is not his true home; he is on a journey elsewhere, and this world to him is an inn where he sojourns for a while.<sup>187</sup>

Because Beowulf has presumably remained chaste like Christ, his final unselfish act in life ultimately redeems his sinful behavior that initiated his fall in the first place.

The next story that conveys the theme of male purity is Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*, composed around the year 1210.<sup>188</sup> On the surface, *Tristan* does not seem to exalt the male purity theme as readily as Beowulf because the two main characters,

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<sup>186</sup> Goldsmith 88.

<sup>187</sup> Goldsmith 86.

<sup>188</sup> Strassburg, Gottfried von, *Tristan*, trans. A. T. Hatto (London: Penguin, 1960) 19.

Tristan and Isolde, not only have a sexual relationship, but they also commit adultery in the process. However, despite the obvious, we cannot yet condemn Tristan. The male purity theme is present because of Tristan's sexuality. Through his sexual mischief, Tristan experiences his *fall* when he continuously gives into his sexual desires with a married woman, and he eventually suffers a fatal wound and dies for his sins. Within Gottfried's sanctification of bodily love, the wound imagery functions as a symbolic representation of a Christ-like wound, in that the wound represents the suffering Tristan must experience before he can gain redemption through his death.

Tristan and Isolde's love affair does not begin until about halfway through the story. Once Isolde discovers that Tristan killed her uncle Morold during a quarrel, she forgets about her latent attraction to Tristan and despises him for committing the murderous act. Now we have to ask the main question: how is that Isolde and Tristan fall in love with each other if Isolde is first overcome with hatred for Tristan? A love-potion drunken by both Tristan and Isolde initiates their love for each other. I use the word "love" loosely because one has to consider whether or not the two would have begun their relationship had they not drunken the love-potion.<sup>189</sup> Furthermore, the love-potion conveys religious overtones as the drink itself may be considered as an allusion to the chalice.<sup>190</sup> Through transubstantiation, when one drinks from the chalice, he/she, in theory, literally drinks the blood of Christ, thus becoming one with him. In the same sense, when Tristan and Isolde drink the love-potion that they think is wine, they too

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<sup>189</sup> Hatto 27.

<sup>190</sup> Nigel Harris, "God, Religion, and Ambiguity in *Tristan*," ed. Will Hasty (Rochester: Camden House, 2003) 128.

become one and ultimately “share one death and life, one sorrow and one joy.”<sup>191</sup>

Gottfried purposely incorporates eucharistic imagery into his writing, as is evident in the Prologue:

*This is bread to all noble hearts. With this their death lives on We read  
their life, we read their death, and to us it is sweet as bread*

*Their life, their death are our bread Thus lives their life, thus lives their  
death. Thus they live still and yet are dead, and their death is the bread of  
the living.*

*And whoever now desires to be told of their life, their death, their joy,  
their sorrow, let him lend me his heart and ears – he shall find all that he  
desires!*<sup>192</sup>

According to Alois Wolf, Gottfried includes eucharistic imagery in order to set his work apart from others’: “In this artistic conception, the metaphor of nourishment has been transformed in a bold way. The death of the protagonists has not been entrusted to fame as something merely of the past, but rather becomes life-sustaining bread, now and in the future.”<sup>193</sup> In other words, Gottfried is asserting that, like the eucharist, his telling of the love story will nourish the reader’s soul and will live on forever.

The love-potion enters the story when Isolde’s mother, Queen Isolde, concocts the potion for her daughter to drink on the night of her wedding to King Mark, Tristan’s uncle. Queen Isolde, who is said to be “versed in herbs of many kinds, in the virtues of all plants, and in the art of medicine,” specifically concocts the potion with “[ . . . ] such

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<sup>191</sup> *Tristan* 192.

<sup>192</sup> *Tristan* 44.

<sup>193</sup> “Humanism in the High Middle Ages: The Case of Gottfried’s *Tristan*,” ed. Will Hasty (Rochester: Camden House, 2003) 34.

powers, that with whomever any man drank it he had to love her above all things, whether he wished it or no, and she love him alone. They would share one death and one life, and sorrow and one joy.”<sup>194</sup> Knowing the potency of her love-potion, Queen Isolde entrusts Brangane, Isolde’s servant, with the potion, and, in doing so, Queen Isolde delivers strict instructions for the safekeeping of the potion as she states,

Take this flask with its draught, have it in your keeping, and guard it above all your possessions. See to it that absolutely no one gets to hear of it. Take care that nobody drinks any! When Isolde and Mark have been united in love, make it your strict concern to pour out this liquor as wine for them, and see that they drink it all between them. [. . .] This brew is a love-philtre! Bear it well in mind! I most dearly and urgently commend Isolde to your care. [. . .] Remember that she and I are in your hands, by all your hopes of Paradise!<sup>195</sup>

Notice how the love-potion draws on parallels to the story of Adam and Eve, in Genesis 2:8:

[ . . . ] the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. [ . . . ] The Lord God took man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but

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<sup>194</sup> *Tristan* 134, 192.

<sup>195</sup> *Tristan* 192.

you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.’<sup>196</sup>

Similar to the way in which Queen Isolde instructs Brangane, God too instructs Adam to obey by his rules as to not disturb the tree of knowledge for, if he does disobey, he will die. In this sense, both the love-potion and the tree of knowledge are symbolic of each other since the consumption of either ultimately causes destruction. But this reference is not the only clue that the story has connections to Adam and Eve. Take Isolde for example. During the love-potion episode, Isolde’s actions have an uncanny resemblance to Eve’s actions in the garden of Eden. Like Eve, Isolde is the first who initiates the *fall* as she is the first to drink the potion.<sup>197</sup> Unsuspecting of the consequences, “[Isolde] drank after long reluctance, then returned [the love-potion] to Tristan, and he drank [ . . . ]”<sup>198</sup> Immediately after the two drink the love-potion, the effects of doing so become obvious, as the narrator explains:

Now when the maid and the man, Isolde and Tristan, had drunk the draught, in an instant that arch-disturber of tranquility was there, Love, waylayer of all hearts, and she had stolen in! Before they were aware of it she had planted her victorious standard in their two hearts and bowed them beneath her yoke. They who were two and divided now became one and united. No longer were they at variance: Isolde’s hatred was gone. [ . . . ] They shared a single heart. Her anguish was his pain:

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<sup>196</sup> Genesis 2:8-9 and 15-17.

<sup>197</sup> Sidney M. Johnson, “*This Drink Will be the Death of You: Interpreting the Love Potion in Gottfried’s Tristan,*” ed. Will Hasty (Rochester: Camden House, 2003) 97.

<sup>198</sup> *Tristan* 195.

his pain her anguish. [ . . . ] However blindly the craving in their hearts was centered on one desire [ . . . ]<sup>199</sup>

Again, the parallelism between Gottfried's story and the biblical story becomes clear because once Eve ate from the tree of knowledge, "[s]he also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened [ . . . ]"<sup>200</sup> Once they ate from the tree, their fallen state is immediately made known as God passes down his judgment and forever banishes them from Paradise. Thus, by drinking the love-potion, Tristan and Isolde have fallen from their state of innocence only to be consumed with desire for each other. The disastrous consequences of the love-potion become clear as the narrator's words re-echo the destiny of Tristan and Isolde: "They would share one death and one life, and sorrow and one joy."<sup>201</sup>

The second Christian element of story, the one that ultimately grants redemption to Tristan, is the Christ-like wound that he suffers during battle. While there are disparities between the actual wounds of both men, the circumstances that surround those wounds unite Christ and Tristan together. As Tristan and Tristan the Dwarf battle with Estult l' Orgillus, the man who has stolen the lover of Tristan the Dwarf, Tristan "[ . . . ] was wounded through the loins by a lance bated with venom."<sup>202</sup> The standard dictionary definition of "loins" states, "the hips and the lower abdomen regarded as a part of the body to be clothed or as the region of strength and procreative power."<sup>203</sup> By this definition, the "procreative power" of Tristan's body is none other than a region located

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<sup>199</sup> *Tristan* 195.

<sup>200</sup> Genesis 3:6-7.

<sup>201</sup> *Tristan* 192.

<sup>202</sup> *Tristan* 341.

<sup>203</sup> "Loin," *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 2nd ed.

close to his genitals. Is this a mere coincidence that Tristan receives a fatal wound in the vicinity of his penis? After all, the locality of the wound reminds the reader of Tristan's sexual relationship with Isolde and "mirrors his transgressions in life."<sup>204</sup> Leading up to his fatal wound, Tristan has incurred two other wounds, which makes his final wound, wound number three.<sup>205</sup> By no means does Tristan experience a painless death, for this third wound proves to be the one that punishes him for his past sins:

The venom spreads all over his body and makes it swell up, both inside and out. He grows black and discolored, he loses strength, his bones now show through the skin. He now knows that he will lose his life unless he is succoured at once, and he sees that none can cure him and therefore he must die.<sup>206</sup>

Similarly, Christ suffered a most horrific death as he suffered a wound in his side and was forcefully nailed to a cross, where he later died. Although the wounds of Christ and Tristan are in different locations on their bodies, nonetheless, each wound signifies the suffering of sins:

Christian wound imagery was supplemented by concepts of guilt and atonement. The sinning and suffering Christian soul becomes linked with Christ's sufferings on the Cross. In the New Testament, Christ acts as intermediary between man and God. His sufferings redeem the world and demonstrate the atoning love of God: 'By his wounds you have been healed' (Peter I, 2:24). [ . . . ] Christ's wounded side becomes

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<sup>204</sup> Margit M. Sinka, "Wound Imagery in Gottfried von Strassburg's 'Tristan.'" *South Atlantic Bulletin* 42 (1977): 8, 12 Feb. 2006 <<http://www.jstor.org/search>>.

<sup>205</sup> *Tristan* 133, 161.

<sup>206</sup> *Tristan* 341.

associated with the visibly wounded heart expressing God's invisible love. Longing for redemption, man's soul turns to Christ's wounded heart as the source for God's flowing grace and its own purification process.<sup>207</sup>

Similarly, Tristan's fatal wound is a symbolic manifestation of Christ's suffering. Unlike Christ, Tristan does not die for the sins of humankind; instead, he dies for his own sins. Had Tristan not suffered and died for his sins in a similar manner to that of Christ, he would not have been able to seek redemption. In the end, Tristan's wound not only cleansed him of his sins, but in the process, the cleansing of his sins allowed for the redemption of his bodily purity.

However, it is important to call attention to the fact that this analysis is a reading according to Gottfried's perspective, for his *Tristan* is a "tale of martyred love."<sup>208</sup> In other words, Gottfried compares love to religion. He establishes this "martyrdom" in his Prologue as he states the following in reference to Tristan and Isolde: "And although they are long dead, their death will endure for ever [ . . . ]."<sup>209</sup> In making such a statement, Gottfried implies that Tristan and Isolde's love story will ultimately elevate their status as if they are worthy enough to be in equal standing with a martyr who has died for the sake of his/her faith. Gottfried's fellow contemporary, Wolfram von Eschenbach, known for writing *Parzival*, whole-heartedly disagrees with Gottfried's conception of Christianity. In short, Wolfram felt that Gottfried's text relies on a "purely relative conception of truth and loyalty [ . . . ]"<sup>210</sup> Unlike Gottfried, Wolfram would prefer to uphold the chivalric aspects of knighthood in the story since he was a knight

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<sup>207</sup> Sinka 4.

<sup>208</sup> Hatto 15.

<sup>209</sup> *Tristan*, Prologue 44.

<sup>210</sup> Hatto 368, Appendix 4.

himself.<sup>211</sup> In the end, Gottfried's writing of *Tristan* is loosely based on *his*, not others', conception of Christianity and elevated love.

Much like *Beowulf* and *Tristan*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* conveys the theme of male purity. While the authorship of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* remains anonymous like *Beowulf*, the story is believed to have been composed between the years 1375 to 1400.<sup>212</sup> Unlike other Arthurian legends, such as Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, the story does not center on the infamous Sir Lancelot; rather, the poem focuses on the nephew of Arthur, Sir Gawain.<sup>213</sup> As the story begins, Arthur and the knights of the Round Table are celebrating the Christmas season in Camelot. But shortly after the festivities commence, a most peculiar man enters the dining hall: the Green Knight. Not only is this knight literally green, but he is also described as having the most exquisite physique. When the Green Knight finally addresses King Arthur's hall, he seemingly flatters both King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table as he says,

Bot for þe los of þe, lede, is lyft vp so hyze,  
 And py burz and þy burnes best ar holden,  
 Stifest vnder stel-gere on steeds to ryde,  
 þe wyztest and þe worþyest of þe worldes kynde,  
 Preue for to play wyth in oþer pure laykez,

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<sup>211</sup> Hatto 12.

<sup>212</sup> *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. Marie Borroff, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 7th Edition*, eds. M.H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2000) 156.

<sup>213</sup> *Sir Gawain* 156.

And here is kydde cortaysye, as I haf herd carp [ . . . ]<sup>214</sup>

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But as the praise of you, prince, is puffed up so high,  
 And your court and your company are counted the best,  
 Stoutest under steel-gear on steeds to ride,  
 Worthiest of their works the wide world over,  
 And peerless to prove in passages of arms,  
 And courtesy here is carried to its height [ . . . ]<sup>215</sup>

The Green Knight condescends to use flattery with Arthur and his knights to prove a point when he proposes a challenge to the men: a beheading game. The Green Knight announces that he will allow one of the knights to take a swing at his neck with an axe, but, in return, the Green Knight must also get the same chance to behead the challenger if he withstands the beheading himself. However, once the Green Knight proposes his challenge, the hall remains in silence—not one knight of the Round Table agrees to the challenge. As a result, the Green Knight is quick to mock Arthur and his knights since they are proving not to be the highly esteemed group that everyone supposes them to be. Just when it looks as though King Arthur himself might have to accept the challenge, despite his own reluctance, Sir Gawain intercedes and accepts on the king's behalf. And this is when Gawain's adventure begins, seeing that although he successfully beheads the Green Knight, the Green Knight himself defies death; thus, Gawain must meet his challenger in one year and a day at the Green Chapel.

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<sup>214</sup> *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, eds. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) 8, lines 258-63. The Middle English text is taken from Tolkien and Gordon.

<sup>215</sup> Borroff 164, lines 258-63. All Modern English translations are taken from Borroff.

Through his challenge, the Green Knight has purposely questioned the chivalric code of the Round Table, so it is up to Gawain to disprove the Green Knight in order to salvage the livelihood of King Arthur and his Round Table.<sup>216</sup> On the surface, Gawain honors the code as his shield bears the symbol of a pentangle—the symbol for truth.<sup>217</sup> The pentangle is an important symbol to the knight because

Hit is a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle  
 In bytonknyng of trawþe, bi tyle þat hit habbez,  
 For hit is a figure þat haldez fyue poyntez,  
 And vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in oþer,  
 And ayquere hit is endelez; and Englych hit callen  
 Oueral, as I here, þe endeles knot.  
 Forþy hit acordez to þis knyzt and to his cler armez,  
 For ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue syþez  
 Gawan watz for gode knawen, and as golde pured,  
 Voyded of vche vylany, with vertuez ennoured  
 in mote.<sup>218</sup>

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[i]t is a sign by Soloman sagely devised  
 To be a token of *truth*, by its title of old,  
 For it is a figure formed of five points,  
 And each line is linked and locked with the next

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<sup>216</sup> Norton 156.

<sup>217</sup> Norton 157.

<sup>218</sup> Tolkien and Gordon 18, lines 625-35.

Fore ever and ever, and hence it is called  
 In all England, as I hear, the endless knot.  
 And well may he wear it on his worthy arms,  
 For ever faithful five-fold in five-fold fashion  
 Was Gawain in Good works, as good unalloyed,  
 Devoid of all villainy, with virtues adorned  
 in sight.<sup>219</sup>

Through his shield of “truth,” Gawain becomes the “[. . .] epitome of a moral ideal of chivalry, courtesy, and Christian knighthood.”<sup>220</sup> In other words, the shield suggests that Gawain is none other than a manifestation of perfection.<sup>221</sup> But is it safe to assume that Gawain represents the epitome of truth as conveyed through his shield? Only Gawain’s journey to the Green Chapel will prove or disprove his worthiness, for the journey itself will ultimately test both his honor as a knight and his bodily purity.

Gawain’s true test lies in the journey because that is, after all, its purpose—to test his worthiness as a knight. Morgan le Faye, the half-sister of King Arthur, is the culprit behind the plot; the apparent sibling rivalry between the two often causes Morgan, who is an enchantress, to use her supernatural abilities to stir up trouble for Arthur.<sup>222</sup> The “beheading game” is no different because Morgan has used her powers to disguise Sir Bertilak, the man who purposely befriends Gawain, as the Green Knight. In doing this, Morgan wanted to accomplish at least two goals as attested by Sir Bertilak when he finally confronts Gawain with the truth:

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<sup>219</sup> Borroff 171, lines 625-35.

<sup>220</sup> Freeman and Thormann 391.

<sup>221</sup> Friedman and Osberg 301.

<sup>222</sup> Norton 208 (the eighth footnote).

Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle  
 For to assay þe surquidré, 3if hit soth were  
 þeat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Round Table;  
 Ho wayned me þis wonder your wyttez to reue,  
 For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyze  
 With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked  
 With his hede in his honde bifore þe hyze table.<sup>223</sup>

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She guided me in this guise to your glorious hall.  
 To assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride  
 That is rumored of the retinue of the Round Table.  
 She put this shape upon me to puzzle your wits,  
 To afflict the fair queen, and frighten her to death  
 With awe of that elfish man that eerily spoke  
 With his head in his hand before the high table.<sup>224</sup>

Being that this is a test of Gawain's knighthood, Bertilak carries out his "mission" by posing a seemingly innocent game to Gawain during his stay at Bertilak's castle.

Accordingly, Bertilak suggests,

'3e schal lenge in your lofte, and lyze in your ese  
 To-morn quyle þe messequyle, and to mete wende  
 When 3e wyl, wyth my wyf, þat with yow shcal sitte  
 And comfort yow with compayny, til I to cort torne;

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<sup>223</sup> Tolkien and Gordon 67-8, lines 2456-62.

<sup>224</sup> Borroff 208, lines 2456-62.

3e lende,  
 And I schal erly ryse,  
 On huntyng wyl I wende. [ . . . ]  
 3et firre, [ . . . ] a forwarde we make:  
 Quat-so-euer I wynne in þe wod hit worþez to yourez,  
 And quat chek so 3e acheue chaunge me þerforne.  
 Swete, swap we so, sware with trawþe,  
 Queþer, leude, so lymþ, lere oþer better.<sup>225</sup>

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‘You shall lie abed in your lofty chamber  
 Tomorrow until mass, and meet then to dine  
 When you will, with my wife, who will sit by your side  
 And talk with you at table, the better to cheer  
     our guest.  
 A-hunting I will go  
 While you lie late and rest. [ . . . ]  
 And Gawain, [ . . . ] agree now to this:  
 Whatever I win in the woods I will give you at eve,  
 And all you have earned you must offer to me;  
 Swear now, sweet friend, to swap as I say,  
 Whether hands, in the end, be empty or better.’<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Tolkien and Gordon 31, lines 1096-2 and 5-9.

<sup>226</sup> Borroff 181, lines 1096-2 and 5-9.

Unsuspecting of Bertilak's true intention, Gawain readily accepts to participate in this "hunt and chase" game.

The "game," involves Gawain being tested on three separate occasions, on three separate days. Each test challenges Gawain's chivalry, but more specifically, the tests challenge more than this, for the greater issue is Gawain's chaste state.

Bertilak's wife, Lady Bertilak, plays a major role in this aspect of the "game" because the conspirators are hoping that her beauty will dupe Gawain in trying to proposition her to have an adulterous affair. In this respect, courtly love becomes an issue of the story since "[c]ourtly love itself is a unique resolution of desire [ . . . ]"<sup>227</sup> More specifically,

Lacan describes courtly love as 'an altogether refined way of making up for the absence of sexual relation by pretending that it is we who put an obstacle to it [ . . . ] it is rooted in the discourse of fealty, of fidelity to the person [ . . . ] It is the only way of coming off elegantly from the absence of sexual relation.' [ . . . ] That is to say that the promise of the bliss we had before the Fall is kept alive in a chaste relationship by avoiding the complications and frustrations which are unavoidable in adult sexuality.<sup>228</sup>

Similarly, with the first two tests of the "hunt and chase" game, Gawain is pushing both his chivalric code and chastity right up to the point where he does not overstep the point of no return. On the first day Gawain receives one kiss from Lady Bertilak and two kisses on the second day; Gawain accordingly fulfills his end of the bargain as he offers the same number of kisses to Bertilak on each day. While a kiss may seem like an innocent gesture on the part of Lady Bertilak and Gawain, the reader is well aware that

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<sup>227</sup> Freeman and Thormann 392.

<sup>228</sup> Freeman and Thormann 392.

Gawain is very much attracted to the lady starting when the lady enters Gawain's sleeping quarters for the first time. The narrator describes this scene:

And as in slomeryng he slode, slezly he herde  
 A little dyn at his dor, and dernly vpon;  
 And he heuez vp his hed out of þe cloþes,  
 A corner of þe cortyn he cazt vp a lyttel,  
 And waytez warly þiderwarde quat hit be myzt.  
 Hit watz þe ladi, loflyest to beholde,  
 þat dro3 þe dor after hir ful dernly and style,  
 And bozed towarde þe bed [ . . . ]<sup>229</sup>

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And as he slips into slumber, slyly there comes  
 A little din at his door, and the latch is lifted,  
 And he holds up his heavy head out of the clothes;  
 A corner of the curtain he caught back a little  
 and waited there warily, to see what befell.  
 Lo! it was the lady, loveliest to behold,  
 That drew the door behind her deftly and still  
 And was bound for his bed [ . . . ]<sup>230</sup>

Gawain seemingly conceals his attraction for the lady as he condescends to use his knighthood as a valid excuse to accept the kisses: “Iwysse, worpe as yow lykez; / I schal kysse at your comaundement, as a knyzt fallez, / And fire, lest he displese yow, so plede

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<sup>229</sup> Tolkien and Gordon 33, lines 1182-89.

<sup>230</sup> Borroff 183, lines 1182-89.

hit no more. (Good lady, I grant it at once! / I shall kiss at your command, as becomes a knight, / And more, lest you mislike, so let be, I pray.’”)<sup>231</sup> Gawain’s actions fall into Lacan’s definition of courtly love in that Gawain uses the kisses to compensate for not having sex with Lady Bertilak. Through the kisses, Gawain is able to express his sensuality for the lady while honoring the chaste state of his bodily purity. On the surface, it would appear that Gawain has readily maintained his bodily purity, but we must analyze Gawain’s final test to know whether he has truly succeeded.

With each test, the stakes become higher. As already indicated, the first two tests only involved kisses, which Gawain gladly surrendered to Bertilak when asked to. However, the third test is different because Gawain fails to fulfill his end of the agreement that he made, as he lies to Bertilak about the “gifts” he receives on the third day. But with every passing day Gawain stays at Bertilak’s castle is another day in which he gets closer to having to meet the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. Without a doubt, Gawain is fearful of the encounter because he is quite certain that he will not be able to escape death at the hands of the Green Knight. Therefore, when Lady Bertilak offers him her green girdle, Gawain cannot resist accepting the gift when she explains,

‘Bot who-so knew þe costes þat knit ar þerinne,  
 He wolde hit prayse at more prys, paraenture;  
 For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,  
 While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,  
 Þer is no hapel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myzt,

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<sup>231</sup> Tolkien and Gordon 36, lines 1302-4 and Borroff 185, lines 1302-4.

For ye myzt not be slayn for slyzt vpon erþe.<sup>232</sup>

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‘But if the virtue that invests it were verily known,  
It would be held, I hope, in higher esteem.  
For the man that possesses this piece of silk,  
If he bore it on his body, belted about,  
There is no hand under heaven that could hew him down,  
For he could not be killed by any craft on earth.’<sup>233</sup>

Out of cowardice Gawain accepts the green girdle under false pretenses thinking that it will save his life when he must meet the Green Knight to finish the beheading game. For this reason, Gawain fails to hand over the girdle to Bertilak and only offers to give him three kisses instead. Thus, when Gawain finally meets the Green Knight, there is a decisive turn of events because, despite possessing the “power” of the girdle that he thinks will help him, Gawain flinches the first time the Green Knight swings his axe. In response, the Green Knight immediately calls out Gawain’s cowardice by exclaiming,

‘Pou art not Gawayn, [ . . . ] þat is so goud halden,  
þat neuer arzed for no here by hylle ne be vale,  
And now þou fles for ferde er þou fele harmez!  
Such cowardise of þat knyzt cowþe I neuer here.’<sup>234</sup>

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‘You are not Gawain the glorious, [ . . . ]

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<sup>232</sup> Tolkien and Gordon 51, lines 1849-54.

<sup>233</sup> Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, lines 1849-54. Ed. Norton 196.

<sup>234</sup> Tolkien and Gordon 62, lines 2270-3.

That never fell back on field in the face of the foe,  
 And now you flee for fear, and have felt no harm:  
 Such news of that knight I never heard yet!’<sup>235</sup>

The second swing, the Green Knight only gives Gawain a nick on his neck and confesses the truth about the test Gawain has undergone, for it was never in the plan to kill Gawain—they just wanted to teach him a lesson. Therefore, the Green Knight only dispenses a superficial cut on Gawain’s neck to remind him that he failed to honor his knighthood. Because of this, Gawain decides to publicly display the girdle to serve as a reminder of his faults. Upon returning to Camelot, Gawain explains the presence of the girdle to all who greet him:

‘Pis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek,  
 Pis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I last haue  
 Of couardise and couetyse þat I haf cast þare;  
 Pis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne,  
 And I mot nedeþ hit were wyle I may last;  
 For mon may hyden his harme, bot vnhap ne may hit,  
 For þer ht onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer.’<sup>236</sup>

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 ‘This is the blazon of the blemish that I bear on my neck;  
 This is the sign of sore loss that I have suffered there  
 For cowardice and coveting that I came to there;  
 This is the badge of false faith that I was found in there,

<sup>235</sup> Borroff 204, lines 2270-3.

<sup>236</sup> Tolkien and Gordon 69, lines 2506-12.

And I must bear it on my body till I breathe my last.

For one may keep a deed dark, but undo it no whit,

For where a fault is made fast, it is fixed evermore.<sup>237</sup>

While it would appear that Gawain has confessed his sins, we must ask an important question: Has Gawain truly redeemed himself?

The answer is yes because Gawain's bodily purity remains intact in his chaste state. Despite the fact that the nick on his neck heals and despite the replication of the green girdle among the knights of the Round Table, we must keep in mind that Gawain, at the hands of Morgan le Faye and Bertilak, suffers humility during his trial of the beheading game. Because Gawain failed to live up the expectations of a chivalric knighthood, he needed to seek redemption in a way other than through his bodily purity. The humility that he suffers is his redeeming quality because he lives out the rest of his days remembering his failure as a knight.

Works including *Beowulf*, *Tristan*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, convey the theme of male purity in medieval fictional literature. However, when analyzing this theme, one must take two factors into consideration. First, when I use the word "convey," I am implying that the work has, in one way or another, called special attention to a male character's sexuality—be it active or inactive. Therefore, it is important to understand that the character(s) in question may not readily embody the traditional sense of male purity and, more specifically, sexual purity. Second, it is also important to realize, as was the case with all three works studied, that each male character needed some sort of spiritual redemption in order to embody male purity. In the end, both factors

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<sup>237</sup> Borroff 209, lines 2506-12.

must be taken into consideration to demonstrate the tendency of the medieval period to stress one's bodily purity, especially in terms of sexuality.

## CONCLUSION

Christ as a construct of male purity sets up the foundation of the argument of this thesis. Medieval people viewed both the Virgin Mary and Christ in terms of bodily purity and sexual purity. Thus, Christ's body functions as an exemplar for men. However, such a conception inadvertently creates an idealized state of purity because, after all, Christ is the son of God and his immaculate conception places him in a category of his own. The people of the medieval period, by viewing Christ as an exemplar of male purity, construed their own conceptions of sexuality based on a figure whose ideal status was often achieved by members of pious communities, including saints and monks.

This perception of Christ placed constraints on the medieval church and its married clergy. On one hand, by being married, the clergy was jeopardizing the ritualistic traditions of the sacrament, but, on the other, by prohibiting clerical marriages in the church, the church risked sending the wrong message to the laity. While several reasons exist as to why the church eventually banned clerical marriages, doing so created a negative perception of marriage that influenced the laity to harbor similar beliefs about marriage and sexuality. Religious figures play a major role in shaping the views of the laity through sermons and religious literature. This idea becomes particularly evident in the writings of the church figures including, but not limited to, Saint Paul, Saint Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, and Saint Augustine. In many respects, the writings of Paul and Augustine shaped prevailing views of the body and sexuality in Western culture.

Augustine, in particular, influenced both medieval secular literature and religious literature because many of the writers based their ideas on Augustinian thought.

Medieval people began to develop a general consensus which viewed sexuality as sinful.

The theme of male purity in medieval literature spread throughout society because conceptions concerning sexuality and the body were considered to be prevalent and highly volatile issues.

Sex as a subject encompasses many different topics of scholarship. But for the purpose of this thesis, I have chosen to concentrate on the bodily purity of males in order to take a different approach on sexual renunciation. In terms of sexual renunciation, females have often been the focus of the discussion, not men. Therefore, the medieval man who maintained his bodily purity also deserves the recognition that is often only granted to the medieval woman.

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