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Canada

Gender, Texts and Context in the Old English *Exeter Book*

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November, 1995

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts.

Canada

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M.A. Thesis - Abstract
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Thesis Title: Gender, Texts and Context in the Old English Exeter Book.

Abstract: An examination of historical and textual evidence supporting the thesis that the tenth-century Old English Exeter Book (Exeter Dean and Chapter MS. 3501) may have been compiled for, or even in, an Anglo-Saxon female monastic foundation or mixed-sex double house. The Exeter Book poems, many with female subjects, have been studied extensively, but rarely treated as components that unite to form a deliberately compiled, cohesive anthology. This study examines four main subjects: women's participation in both Latin and vernacular textual culture in the early Middle Ages in past and present scholarship; the history and structure of the codex; a summary of evidence indicating the possibility of the Exeter Book's production in or for a woman's monastic foundation or a double-house; a survey of the female figures in the Book and the effect of a "gendered" reading on the study of the codex as a unified document.

Teresa Nordoff-Perusse
These de Maîtrise-Résumé
Département d'Anglais
Université McGill
Novembre, 1995

Titre de la Thèse: Genre, textes et contextes dans le Livre Anglo-Saxonne

Exeter

Résumé: Un examen de l'évidence historique et textuelle supportant la thèse

que le Livre Exeter du dixième siècle (Exeter Dean et Chapître MS. 3501)

puisse avoir été compilé pour, ou même au sein d'une fondation monastique

féminine Anglo-Saxonne ou d'une maison-double mixte. Les poèmes du

Livre Exeter, plusiers ayant des sujets féminins, ont été étudiés

extensivement mais rarement ont-ils été traités comme des composantes qui

s'unissent pour former une anthologie cohésive délibérément compilée. Cette

étude examine quatre sujets principaux: la participation des femmes autant

dans la culture textuelle du Latin, et des dialectes au Moyen Âge dans les

apprentissages présents et passés; l'histoire et la structure du manuscrit; un

sommaire de ;l'évidence indiquant la possibilité de la production du Livre

Exeter au sein de ou pour une fondation monastique pour femmes ou une

maison-double; un survol des figures feminines dans le Livre et les effets

d'une lecture "sexuée" sur l'étude du manuscrit en tant que document unifié.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This study began with what appeared to be a simple question. The question derived from a general observation made while researching the myriad of scholarly interpretations of what are called the Old English elegies. If the individual texts of the tenth-century, Old English *Exeter Book*, the codex which includes the bulk of Old English lyric poetry, provide such rich subject matter to scholars, why is the manuscript as a unit so neglected? To my surprise Bernard Muir (the editor of the first new edition in sixty years) reached precisely the same conclusion. While the texts contained within the *Exeter Book* may be the most studied of all Old English poetry outside of *Beowulf*, few scholars examine the codex *in toto* for anything more than codicological or palaeographical information of a technical nature.

As my exploration of that question progressed, a second query began to form. Why is it generally assumed that the *Exeter Book*, or almost any other medieval manuscript without a clear provenance, was intended for an exclusively male readership when women were active participants, as readers, writers, and commissioners of books, in literary activities? In a sense, both questions illustrate the same problem: the effect of habit, custom and even routine on scholarship. The first question addresses the tendency of scholars over the years to regard the *Exeter Book* as an arbitrary gathering of relatively random texts. The second speaks to the convention of regarding women as only occasional or even negligible contributors to the history of European medieval textual culture.

These two questions eventually began to merge and form a single stream of enquiry. If, as Muir suggests, the *Exeter Book* is not a random collection but a deliberately compiled anthology, then what is the effect of that determination on how the codex can be read as a cultural document? Further, if it is possible to posit a female or mixed audience as a component of the text's originary function, does that possibility change our ability to comprehend the *Exeter Book* as a cultural document? The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the possibility of women as part of the original intended audience for the *Exeter Book*, and to investigate the *Exeter Book* itself for the structural patterns that may be found if it can be determined to be a deliberately compiled anthology which had women as part of its original audience.

This study will examine three threads that should become sufficiently intertwined by the end to prove the possibility and effect of a female readership for the Old English *Exeter Book*. The first thread of argument will examine women's place as participants in early medieval textual culture. As part of that discussion, Anglo-Saxon women in textual culture, in the church and in vernacular literature will be briefly examined. The second thread will explore the codicological history of and recent scholarly theories about the *Exeter Book*, including the possibility, based on historical data, that St. Peter's and St. Mary's at Exeter[1] may have been a double

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[1] St. Mary's and St. Peter's was the foundation taken over by Bishop Leofric in 1054. It is the site of the manuscript's first appearance, and where Patrick Conner theorizes the codex was made.

house before its reform in 968 CE (about the time of the *Book's* compilation) and perhaps again before the foundation's purgation and reformation by Leofric in 1050. In this section the possibility that the *Exeter Book* was created as a vernacular *ars grammatica* will also be discussed. The third thread will survey the content of the texts and structure of the codex in a more theoretical manner to determine the effect of both examining the codex as a cohesive structure and proposing a female or mixed-gender readership. It should be made clear at the outset that I do not intend to try and make an indisputable case for a historically provable female readership for the *Exeter Book*. In fact, I do not believe that even with more extensive research such a case could ever be made with absolute surety. Given the passage of a millennium since the codex's creation and the dearth of extant evidence about Anglo-Saxon vernacular literature, it is highly unlikely that the purpose and origin of the *Exeter Book* will ever be settled to the satisfaction of all those who ponder its inherent mysteries and apparent contradictions. It may only be possible to prove that there is nothing mitigating against the dual conclusions that the codex was a grammatical anthology made for a male and female audience, even if there is not overwhelming evidence for such a case. This is not to suggest that a lack of evidence, or negative evidence, should be used as proof for any claim of this kind. But the presence of some positive evidence, combined with newer patterns in scholarly thinking, such as feminism and cultural studies, may allow literary archaeologists new tools with which to dig up answers and reach at least tentative conclusions. This study is an attempt to combine "old" methods of scholarship, such as codicology, with new, such as feminist theory and literary analysis. This experiment may not produce absolute surety in its first attempt, but I

can only hope that it will be a tentative first step leading to a different, if not

necessarily better, understanding of a book of great beauty and profundity.

I wish to emphasise that this study will not direct its attention exclusively to

the traditional "women-voiced" texts such as *The Wife's Lament* or *Wulf and*

Eadwacer. These are the works which have attracted the bulk of attention by

Anglo-Saxonists working with the models offered by feminism and cultural studies.

In fact, individual works such as these will not be analysed in detail for their content

or characterisation. Instead I will discuss the codex as a whole to determine what

the full complement of works reveals as an entity. Interpretations of the *Wife's*

Lament will only be used as examples of the widely varying methodologies which

have been applied to the individual poems in the manuscript. I will pay detailed

attention to the introductory texts of the codex (*Christ I - Juliana*). I believe that these

first eight poems hold the key to reading the codex as a unit, and assist in the

understanding of the effect of a gendered audience on that unit. This proposal is

rooted in Bernard Muir's determination that the anthologist knew precisely what the

effect of each text's placement would be when he or she commissioned and/or

produced the anthology. The texts which follow the opening section will be

discussed generally and in their codicological context. As my argument develops

from historical material, through codicology and into theoretically-based literary

analysis, I believe that the importance of gender in the *Exeter Book's* texts and their

context will become clear.

SECTION I

Returning the Gaze: Women and Medieval Textual Culture

An important aspect of medieval literature and literacy that had been largely

neglected until recently was the participation of women in both vernacular and Latin

textual cultures [2]. Many generations of scholars presumed that the existence of

women as readers, writers, scribes or commissioners of books in the medieval

period was problematic, or negligible at best. This assumption seems to continue

into some current scholarship, which tends to segregate the study of medieval

women's activities into a sidebar of specialised "feminist scholarship."

However, a multitude of new studies has made it clear that women played a

vital role in both Latin and vernacular textual culture. Unfortunately, even with

increasing historical evidence to support the assertion that medieval women were

part of textual culture, there appears to be a continuing underestimation of women's

roles as readers of medieval texts. In a sense, medieval women and their

proponents remain in the literary kitchen while the banquet of a nearly exclusive

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[2] In an example of contemporary single-gender thinking, Martin Irvine's detailed study of early medieval textual culture notes that the formal study of Latin, through the *ars grammatica*, created a "special kind of literate subjectivity, an identity and social position for literati which was *consistently gendered as masculine* and socially empowered" (2) [emphasis mine]. Gernot Wieland's review of Irvine's work for the electronic *Bryn Mawr Reviews* (BMMR 95.2.10) is highly critical of a number of Irvine's statements, including his assertion that *grammatici* were "socially empowered", as not being provable given Irvine's citation of historical evidence. But Wieland does not argue with Irvine's statement that the *grammatici* were "consistently gendered as masculine", nor does he mention Irvine's neglect of women as part of textual culture. It seems that Wieland does not consider the absence of female participation in textual culture to be as notable as an assertion of class-based participation.

masculine readership goes on in the main hall [3]. To cite one example of scholarly preconceptions consider the following: unless a particular text can be demonstrated unequivocally to have been written for women or a mixed audience (such as Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*) [4] the possibility of a female or mixed-sex readership is largely neglected, or actively denied, by mainstream scholarship. The burden of proof for female authorship or readership has historically been greater than that required for an automatic claim of male readership. Further, unless that proof is irrefutable, the possible existence of a female writer or reader is presumed to be a theoretical fantasy. Such fantasies, it is implied, are fine for "playing" with texts, but are not acceptable as anything resembling fact. The male author is always presumed to exist unless proven otherwise, as is readily apparent by the inevitable masculine pronouns found in virtually all standard codicological and palaeographical studies.

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[3] This phenomenon in medieval studies generally was discussed by Judith Bennett in her article "Medievalism and Feminism." in the *Speculum* volume devoted to women and medieval studies (68:2 - referred to in the bibliography in its reprinted form, also edited by Nancy Partner, and entitled *Studying Medieval Women*). While Bennett surveys the history of women in medieval studies, the current work of both feminist and non-feminist scholars and the ongoing debate within feminist scholarship itself, she does not question the assumption of an exclusively male readership for medieval texts as a widespread phenomenon.

[4] Aldhelm wrote the work for the double house at Barking, which was headed by Abbess Hildelith. Lapidge and Herren state that the "doctrine and structure of the *De Virginitate* is determined by this audience of ladies-turned-nuns" (51-2). It could be suggested that the pairing of male and female exemplars of virginity and Christian life together in the same text might have influenced the inclusion of a similar single pair in the *Exeter Book*, Guthlac and Juliana.

It remains a given that the need to follow logical, scholarly methods of determining historical access to texts is unassailable [5], but it seems that more flexibility in the analysis of evidence for women's participation in textual culture could and should be allowed [6]. In other words, scholarship addressing the topic of medieval women as readers and writers should not feel obliged to prove its case more forcefully than that which suggests a male readership.

However, it would be both specious and facile to fall back on something resembling Virginia Woolf's famous maxim "anonymous was a woman" as a theoretical justification for ignoring evidence to the contrary. But to propose at least the *possibility* of a female readership or authorship where there is reasonable evidence to do so is logical and rational. The result of extending the readership of medieval texts to include women would be the opening up of entirely new areas for textual scholarship. The result of denying the existence of female participation in textual culture is the continued ghettoisation of women's history as a sideline. Allen Frantzen made an important point when he wrote that feminist scholarship had to move beyond the "women in" tendency in research in order to avoid the construction

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[5] As Allen Frantzen notes "Feminists who work in medieval subject need to account for the dates and material details of manuscripts, and traditionalists need to account for the social logic of sex that gender ideologies express in the Middle Ages" ("Women Aren't Enough" 446).

[6] I am thankful to Fiona Deller, M.A. student in the History of Medicine Department of McGill University for the following example. In her research on medieval women healers she has come across what is accepted by many scholars as a truism: because there is no evidence that medical codices were owned by women, it follows that no woman owned a medical text. Yet, as she observes, women worked as doctors and healers, were quoted in and wrote their own medical texts. It is unlikely that the latter occurred without the former also occurring. In other words, negative evidence is not evidence at all, and circumstantial evidence, when abundant, should allow one to reach at least preliminary conclusions.

of new forms of gender bias which are equally isolating and logically unbalanced ("Women Aren't Enough" 145-8). What seem now necessary are re-examinations of some of the historical "truisms" that have been accepted by medieval scholars. Where the historical material can be found to warrant such a proposition, the retrieval of the female reader should be accepted as a rational possibility. Indeed, it seems possible to argue that, unless proven otherwise, all anonymous texts could be read as possibly aimed at both a male and female audience.

Women and Christian Textual Culture

From the earliest years of Christianity women, especially women of means,
were teachers of religious values and promoters of textual study. The first Church
Fathers were dependent on the beneficence of wealthy women to support their
cause. Even those male authors viewed by modern scholars as misogynistic in their
writings relied on female followers and students for general financial support. They
studied and corresponded with women, (Brown *Body*, 148-49, 265, 345) and
depended on women as patrons for their studies (345). Women such as Melania,
impressively literate in her mastery of five-and-a-half million lines of Greek writing
(369), were among those who "copied and distributed commentaries and
translations" (369) of the early writers. Women also wrote original texts, one
example being the account of the Christian martyr Perpetua's ordeal, which is a
touching and important original record of a woman's life in the earliest years of the
religion.[7]

At the same time that the Church Fathers relied on the support of these
women, their writings sometimes revealed genuine gynephobia, a horror of women.
Many patristic writers asserted that women embodied a sexual threat that was

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[7] Perpetua's account of her ordeal, the writings of Melania and Paula, and the second-
century *Acts of Thecla* are some of the documents that could be included in the study
of *matristics*, or the writings of the "mothers" of the church. Barbara Newman has
suggested that the works attributed to Perpetua and Thecla demonstrate early
examples of what appears to be an orientation towards purgatorial subject matter on
the part of a number of female religious. She maintains that this may show a particular
role for women as "caretakers" of the dead (*Virile* 108-9). This phenomenon will be
discussed further in relation to the texts of the *Exeter Book*.

equated with the temptation into sin and the death of the soul. Women as a group

were felt to bear the burden of the sin of Eve and be in need of both bodily and

spiritual redemption. While the majority of early Christians, including a number of

apostles, were originally married, the emphasis on bodily continence fell most

heavily on women, whose virginity from birth to death brought them closest to the

patristic ideal [8]. As the first centuries of Christianity passed, male teachers and

scholars were increasingly encouraged to live like Augustine of Hippo in a

"monochrome, all-male world...(with) strict codes of sexual avoidance" (Brown *Body*

396). Women also gathered together to create early forms of convents (groups of

women studying Christian texts and living the celibate life), in order to preserve their

access to the highest form of Christian life for women. The demonisation of women

by patristic writers was not Bible-based, but seemed to emerge in part from what

Rosemary Reuther calls an "excessive pre-occupation" with sexuality on the part of

male writers. The resulting sexual repression saw its sufferers construct elaborate

and contradictory fantasies of sexual activity as both demonic (temptation) and

spiritually renewing (Christ as lover) (167). Powerful and central writers such as

Augustine, Origen and Jerome began to define women as bodily "others" and avoid

their company. Consequently, women's roles as writers, preachers and teachers,

began to diminish in importance. Some of the roots of the presumption of the eternal

---

[8] While it is clear that the patristic bodily ideal contained a strong anti-female bias, I would disagree with scholars who assert that medieval Christian writers saw the virgin female only as a sort of honorary male. The cult of, and effect of, virginity was far more complex than this, and must include notions of both asexuality and bisexuality as well as transsexuality. The particular gift of virginity was not merely the result of nonactivity in the sexual sphere. The powers of female virgins are more than merely male virtues, as the powers of male virgins can include both feminine and masculine ideals

male spiritual and intellectual subject and the female bodily object in Christian

culture can be seen here.

One of the consequences of the large-scale assumption of masculine

scholarly subjectivity, which may have reached its height in Victorian-era

scholarship [9] , was a near elimination of women from mainstream historic and

literary studies of medieval Christian culture. Hence it is apparent to anyone seeking

information on women's role in the history of early medieval literature and textual

culture that, according to many respected earlier scholars, women's contribution was

negligible or non-existent. Oft-cited "classic" modern studies of medieval thought

mention few women except for those that Germaine Greer might call "magnificent

exceptions", such as Hildegard, Heloise or Hrotswitha [10].

At the same time that women were being pilloried by writers such as Jerome

and Augustine [11], and many secular women were being denied access to

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[9] It is ironic that at the same time Victorian scholars, including Anglo-Saxonists, were in what Frantzen describes as a near panic over gender confusion in medieval texts, gifted women such as Eckenstein and Powers were writing major studies of women in in religious history. It is telling that until recently, there was virtually no follow-up on either of their broad-based studies. It is still standard practise to refer to them (Eckenstein's will be a century old in a few years) since they have yet to be surpassed.

[10] Dom David Knowles' standard study of the history of monasticism in England seems to be a perfect example of this kind of myopic scholarship. Knowles' erudite and detailed text barely mentions any women at all, and then only in passing. As Judith Bennett notes ("Medievalism" 325), Knowles' claim that there were no records on which to base a study of female monastics was blatantly untrue, especially since Eileen Powers' work on English nunneries was several decades old at the time of Knowles' writing (325). Germaine Greer used the term "magnificent exception" to describe Artemesia Genteleschi, the Baroque painter, who she felt was the only true "genius" of all the female artists she discussed in her book The Obstacle Race.

[11] The level of misogyny in much patristic writing varies enormously, and Brown's account of the history of sexual ideals in the early church emphasizes the apparently irreconcilable attitudes held by individual thinkers. Augustine, for example, once he

intellectual trends and textual activities in religious life, Benedict of Nursia and

Caesarius of Arles (two founders of the western monastic tradition) insisted on

literacy as an essential component of monastic life for both male and female

religious [12] (Putnam 51). The celibate religious life, which offered many women an

alternative to the bonds of enforced marriage and maternity [13], also gave them

access to textual culture. Women embraced the new opportunities with fervour, as

Peter Brown notes:

> For such women, the ideal "fecundity" associated with the virgin
>
> state was no high-flown metaphor: it was a perfectly real matter, as
>
> demonstrable as that of any male spiritual leader, for whom images
>
> of asexual procreation, and of virginal fertility, through spiritual
>
> guidance and scholarship, had long carried a very heavy charge of
>
> meaning. For such women, virginal fertility implied a high level of
>
> actual creativity, in the mind, by word of mouth, and through the
>
> pen...The culture that Jerome offered assumed that an upper-class

embarked on a religious life, gave greater credit to the benefits of Christian marriage than many, and had admiration for Christian women as equal in faith. Yet he also regarded women as the source of evil through sexual sin, and avoided them himself at all costs once he was ordained.

[12] Martin Irvine states that the centrality of the *ars grammatica* to Benedictine life cannot be overstated, and that the call to a life of "simplicity" made by Benedict is a simplicity possible only for powerful, cultured, literate elite, not simply that of an equal band of brothers and sisters in Christ (191).

[13] The question of the effect of Christianity on sex roles and women's lives is a vexed one. On the one hand women played prominent leadership roles in Early Christianity and the mission movement, but on the other the fixing of laws under Christian rule led to women's losing much of the secular power they had attained in Late Antiquity. Certainly, as Stephanie Hollis maintains, the effect of Christian notions of female alterity contributed to women's elimination from the power structure (8-9).

woman, as much as any man, carried within her "a heart in which a

library of books is stored" (*Body* 369-70).

And women were mentally fertile within early medieval textual culture – in

spite of the barriers placed in their way – functioning as writers, readers, copyists

and commissioners of books [14]. Some of the most personal extant records of

women's lives and work in religious settings are in the form of letters, such as that

from Abbess Caesaria II of Arles to Queen Radegund (McNamara, *Sainted* 112-13)

which displays eloquence in Latin, theological knowledge and an awareness of

worldly politics. Women also functioned as what would now be termed

"professional" writers, carrying forth the tradition exemplified by Melania. For

example, the plays of Hrotswitha of Gandersheim (b. 932) are more than mere

Christianised versions of the Roman playwright Terence (Eckenstein 160-1), and

her contemporary metrical histories follow in the tradition of writings on logic and

rhetoric by her predecessor, the first Hrotswitha (d. 927). It is only in recent years

that a number of early medieval texts, especially the lives of female saints, have

been reattributed from a masculine "anonymous" authorial collectivity to specific

female authors (Wemple 181). The reattributions seem to occur only when the

evidence becomes overwhelming, as Suzannne Wemple observed in her

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[14]That there are few extant records of identified women's writings is not surprising, in that there are few records of any writers outside the traditional canon of literature that was continually copied and recopied. In many cases, we must rely on records of their writing being described or mentioned, or on wills attesting to their ownership of books. The records of secular female writers are even rarer, outside of a few well-known works such as Dhuoda's instructions to her son, but so are those of noncanonical male secular writers. The question of the politics of textual transmission is an important one when seeking to retrieve evidence of female readership and authorship, but is beyond the scope of this study.

discussion of the reattribution of the *Life of Saint Wynnebald* to a female scribe. The

cryptographic author's name in the text might, she notes, "have been deciphered

earlier if scholars had paid attention to Saint Boniface's testimony that the Anglo-

Saxon nuns who came with him to the continent were avid readers and talented

writers" (181-2). Wemple has also determined that the contribution of women to

writing in the Merovingian period has also been sadly neglected to date (182). As

recently as 1990 Marilynn Desmond stated that "feminist scholars have yet to

reclaim the corpus of anonymous poetry -- medieval or modern -- for the history of

female culture" (573). I would add to Desmond's statement the rider "when

reasonable historical and textual research warrants the possibility".

Anglo-Saxon Women

Women in Anglo-Saxon England were somewhat less subject to

institutionalised misogyny than their Continental counterparts (Hollis 9) [15]. Powerful

aristocratic women made important contributions to monastic life as patrons,

founders, teachers and leaders. The original mission of Augustine to England, like

other mission efforts before and since, was greatly assisted by women who took on

---

[15] Hollis refutes some scholars who view pre-Conquest England as a form of prelapsarian paradise for women (2-3), and suggests that while a Greco-Roman form of virulent misogyny did not come naturally to Germanic culture there was from the earliest manifestation of Christianity an increasing tendency to see women as "other" as the mission effort became successful (11). Women lose their place as fellow warriors of Christ, she states, and become powerless and even dangerous sisters of mercy (96-7). This is seen in the apparent rewriting of hagiographies (such as Bede) that diminish women's roles, reducing them to onlookers and glorified support staff. Bede, she notes, in his famed *History* does not even mention double houses, except to condemn the alleged scandals at Coldingham (245).

the task of converting their husbands and families. It was in this early mission period

that women had the greatest equality in the Anglo-Saxon church, reflected in the

establishment of double monasteries and in the literary depiction of women as fellow

warriors for Christ. As participants in the tradition of the *milites Christi,* Anglo-Saxon

women, like the self-mutilating nuns of Coldingham, lived and died as martyrs for

their faith (Schulenburg, "Communities" 222-23). Like their Roman predecessors in

the church, wealthy women founded both male and female religious institutions, as

well as churches, and contributed to the dispersal of Christian textual culture by

commissioning, creating and buying books (Fell 119-20; Schulenburg,

"Communities" 218) [16].

The first English *ex libris* from c. 700 CE was that of a women, stating:

"Cuthsuuithae boec thaere abbitisson" (Bischoff 199). Women were the patrons of

writers, the oft-cited example being the patronage of Caedmon by the teacher and

founder, Hild of Whitby [17]. A number of pre-eminent Anglo-Saxon churchmen

studied at double houses, as did St. Guthlac, a prominent character in the *Exeter*

Book, who studied at Repton under Abbess Aelthrith (Eckenstein 108). In a story

that seems typical of early Anglo-Saxon Christianity, Guthlac's Latin *Vita* features

the figure of his sister Pega, also a hermit, as essential to his story particularly in her

assistance with the deposition of his body and relics after his death (110). One of

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[16] Jane Schulenburg notes that of 356 houses founded in Britain between 500-1000 C.E., seventy-six were women's houses ("Communities" 213).

[17] The life of Hild offers another example of Bede's prejudice, according to Hollis. In his depiction of Hild, he seems to "gloss over" (126-7) her role in favour of male bishops, especially when compared to other texts describing the same period, such as the anonymous *Life of Gregory* (135).

the most important commissions by women was that of Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*,

written for Abbess Hildelith and the double-house of Barking (Fell 109). This work on

the lives of male and female virgins became a standard text in Anglo-Saxon and

continental monasteries. Aldhelm pulled no textual punches, and did not

condescend to his commissioners, but presumed a high level of Latin literacy and

theological knowledge on the part of both the male and female readers [18]. Several

centuries later, nuns of the same convent asked King Edgar and his wife to supply

them with the *Rule of Benedict* and the *Regularis Concordia* in English (Kelly 52;

Meyer 54), suggesting that Latin literacy at Barking, as elsewhere in England, had

seriously declined. In the double houses that characterised English monasticism in

the first centuries of Anglo-Saxon Christianity (houses ruled for the most part by

abbesses) the production of texts to help spread the Gospel was an important

function. It is a surety that "the inmates of English nunneries were versed in writing

and were active too as scribes" (Bischoff 199). Boniface, to cite one example, sent

Abbess Eadburg a silver stylus, and thanked her for the "books and vestments you

have sent me" (Eckenstein 122) [19]. There is also solid evidence that secular women

commissioned books, such as the *Encomium Emmae* made for Queen Emma, and

that others, like Queen Edith, were renowned for their learning (Fell 104). Women

left books to the church or their children in wills, and influenced bookmaking in other

---

[18] Hildelith travelled to Canterbury to hear Boniface speak and to speak with him (79), returning to the school established at Barking (78).

[19] Schulenburg sees the nuns of the Boniface circle as evidence both for and against the imposition of strict claustration. Women did travel as part of Boniface's mission movement to the Continent, established schools in Germany and, in the case of Lioba, corresponded with temporal rulers ("Enclosure" 66). In the early years of his career, Boniface responded with cautious neutrality about a pilgrimage request by Eangyth and Bugga. But a few years later he forbade women to travel (67), citing the ease with which they fell into harlotry.

countries by carrying books among part of their marriage goods (Bell 156).[20] In fact,

it may be possible to suggest that the advocacy of English as a literary language by

Alfred the Great could be traced back to his mother's influence. She was the one

who encouraged him to memorise an English book, and perhaps stimulated his

desire to study his own language (Asser 75) [21].

It may be that the best record of women writers in Anglo-Saxon England

comes from the women of the so-called Boniface circle, who not only supplied his

mission with books by both acquiring and copying them, but wrote original works

themselves [22]. It is certain they wrote poetry in Latin (Wemple 182), and the letter in

which Boniface expresses his thanks for the quality of their work (Fell 114) and cites

several lines of poetry is still extant [23]. A number of the letters depict what could be

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[20] There is evidence in one medieval German customary law, the *Sachenspiegel*, that women were to inherit the *gerade*, or domestic goods, and that these goods did not need to be specified in wills. Bell suggests that this may explain why married women and mothers, regarded as the primary source of Christian education for their families, are not mentioned as inheriting books more often in wills (142).

[21] According to Asser it was "by the shameful negligence of his parents and tutors" that Alfred was illiterate until the age of twelve. Yet it was also his mother who (apparently) hired a bilingual (Latin/Anglo-Saxon) tutor for him, for he memorised the "book of English poetry" given to him by his mother with his teacher's help (75). It is also noted that even during times of war Alfred read "aloud from books in English and above all ...(learnt) English poems by heart" (91).

[22] Stephanie Hollis is currently working on a project which she says uncovers "quite a bit of indirect evidence of historical and hagiographical writing at double monastaries and women's houses" . This evidence is attested to by a number of manuscript fragments such as Lambeth 427, Caligual A.xiv and Tha Halgan. Professor Hollis is planning on publishing this evidence as part of her larger ongoing project on Minster-in-Thanet (Personal correspondence, November 3, 1995).

[23] It seems ironic that these few scraps of women's writing are not commonly known under the name of their (female) authors but by the name of the (male) recipient and responder. Doubtless, it is only because the letters could be affiliated with Boniface that they survived at all.

described as a passionate friendship [24] between Boniface and the nuns, in particular

Eangyth, whose letter to the saint seems to function as a "living embodiment of the

last survivor of lyric lament" (Hollis 139). Boniface seems typical of his era in the

apparent change he undergoes from friend and co-warrior with women in the

mission effort to "chief enforcement officer for Roman canonical law" by the mid-

eighth century (31; 131-32), condemning women as sexual temptresses and

advocating their strict enclosure in convents.

English monasticism is believed by historians such as Knowles to have

achieved its pre-Conquest height in the eighth century, when it was influential

enough to be the model taken by Carolingian Europe (Knowles 23) [25]. From the late

eighth century, Viking raids wreaked havoc on monastic communities. Religious

houses were destroyed, inhabitants, including a number of women religious such as

those at Barking, were slaughtered, libraries were burnt or burglarised, and the

system of education and training that had been set up under the church collapsed.

The raids had been commonly thought to mark the end of the double house era.

The few remaining were believed to have been finished off by a combination of

monastic reform and general neglect in the tenth century [26]. The reforms saw the

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[24] The passionate letters written by nuns, often in the form of *wineleodas* or lovesongs seems to have become such a problem in the late eighth century that they were banned by the *Capitulary of Charlemagne* (Hollis 142).

[25] Knowles also acknowledges, however, that within a century the import of English learning to Carolingian Europe was reversed, and the Carolingian model of monasticism and its emphasis on more central authority and adherence to a single Rule began to overtake the English.

[26] Although double houses were effectively and officially allowed to perish by neglect, scholars are discovering that mixed-sex houses (before, during and after this reform) were far more widespread than previously suspected.

imposition of a more traditional and strict Continental Benedictine order, which included sex segregation and stricter claustration for women. But there is evidence that forms of the double house, often unofficial in nature, continued through the Conquest, and well into the later Middle Ages.

Many histories of Anglo-Saxon monasticism in the reform period tend to regard it as the end of women's near-equal power in the English church. At the meeting that produced the *Regularis Concordia* in 972, both male and female church leaders came together to produce a stricter, and less localised, set of rules rooted in Continental Benedictinism. An essential element of the new rule was the creation of a sex-segregated hierarchy of authority for monastics. In the *Regularis*, the ultimate national authority came from the king for male religious orders and from the queen for female. In this renewal of a more regimented Continental Benedictinism, abbesses lost much of their power to act on their local communities, and even on their own houses. Instead they were required to answer more and more to the politically appointed bishops [27], requesting the bishops' permission for all activities, especially leave to exit the cloister and travel. The rebuilding campaign that occurred saw the refurbishment and creation of a multitude of male houses, a number of which were put in place in previously female institutions, and the logical consequence of a significant reduction in the number of female houses. Ironically,

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[27] Schulenburg quotes Jean LeClerc's statement that "it is the abbot who gives the monks permission to leave, while it is the bishop who authorizes the abbesses to leave and who is able to decide in which cases the nuns can be sent to the outside" (Enclosure 59). The first sweeping, Carolingian reforms did not "take" in all of Anglo-Saxon England, but nonetheless the impact of an increased emphasis on female enclosure did affect the English church.

the very movement that produced such a marked drop in women's houses was, like the mission movements before it, largely dependent on women for its funding and political support (Meyer 36). The effect of some of the reforms on women will be discussed in the context of the years of the *Exeter Book*'s production.

The Book and Medieval Textual Culture

Any attempt to understand the literary history of a culture as deeply rooted in the written word as that of Christian medieval Europe, first demands a definition of just what writing and reading meant. To Christianised Europe, and specifically to monastic culture, reading and writing were part of the process of devotion to God, and a tribute to the emergence of pure *logos*, the Word, in Christ. Christianity's roots in Judaism were reflected in the production of the "new", or Christian, Testament, and in the continual study of the entire text of the Bible as the true word of God [28]. The methodology of reading the Bible was carried over into nearly all monastic reading. The functions of exegesis, allegorical interpretation and the correct (*recto*) understanding of all written materials were defined by the earliest Church Fathers. Furthermore, the writing of any religious text was done by an author who, as *compilator*, effectively plundered previous texts and then added to the canon through his own knowledge (Irvine 147). In other words, notions of authorial "originality" were not considered appropriate, all texts had to be derived from a source with *auctoritas.*, such as a mystic's connection to God. The production of Christian literature was not only an act of religious devotion, however, but reflected

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[28] Irvine suggests that the formal and regulated study of texts through the *ars grammatica* is in fact a "pre-condition for Christian culture", reflecting the Christian and Judaic belief that God Himself wrote the Ten Commandments (14). One can suggest that the Bible was the word of God made textual just as Christ was the word of God made flesh. Geoffrey Galt Harpham finds that the trope of "God as author/author as God" still pervades contemporary scholarship. Modern "critical theory", he says, "typically defines itself in opposition to various aspects of a discredited hermeneutics exemplified by Scriptural exegesis" (124), and the obsession with the elimination of the authorial presence is part of the ongoing refutation of the notion of the author as God, creator of the world (125).

what Irvine terms the ideology of an elite textual culture which he sees as rooted in the foundational practice [29] of grammatical study (1). The early Christian writers saw a need to prove themselves, their beliefs and their writings as equal in purely literary value and superior in *auctoritas*[30] to the established Roman literary hierarchy, dominated by the heroic poetry of Vergil. The Roman literary hierarchy was itself, Irvine believes, a production of the Roman need to assert a national Latin "scripture" against the previously dominant Hellenistic tradition (50). A book was more than just a group of symbols on a page, or a collection of entertaining stories. To Christians, books were able to serve as part of a *summa* in which all things could be mirrored "just as the Book of God's word (the Bible) was a speculum of the Book of His work (nature)" (Gellrich 18).

In an age where literacy[31] was relatively rare, and books expensive to manufacture, these mirrors of God's work took on an iconic status. Their production

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[29] As Irvine puts it: "All interpretation indicates the signature of the text: a text is a system of signs requiring interpretation, since by its nature it signifies more than it says, and therefore is not self-interpreting, self-sufficient, or self-disclosing. The interpretation of a text will always take the form of another text" (252). This establishes an endless chain of texts which can never achieve closure. There is no end, because every act of interpretation requires another act of interpretation to render the first act "legible".

[30] As defined by Irvine, a text had *auctoritas* or authority, if and only if it could be placed in a relationship to the primary texts (i.e. the Bible for Christian culture, Vergil for Roman, Homer for Greek) of the culture through the work of the textual community (15) using a "metalanguage" (23). All Christian texts, therefore, took their authority from the Bible, and later from the authority of those with *auctoritas* (such as Augustine and Jerome) who were seen to have direct access to God's wisdom as interpreters of the Bible.

[31] Clanchy makes the point that modern definitions of "literacy" are not particularly useful when applied to the Middle Ages. Different forms of literacy existed, and merely being able, or unable, to read and write did not mean what it does today. He reminds scholars of the need to distinguish between classes and types of literacy, and that vernacular and Latin literacy could have very different functions and implications.

was frequently, but not exclusively, relegated to the monastic scriptoria where

scribes, usually trained by rote to reproduce precise styles, copied sacred and

secular texts with varying degrees of textual accuracy (Bischoff 39-40) [32]. The

largest portion of textual production, aside from legal documents, was intended for

ecclesiastical use: homilies and prayer-books for ritual; commentaries and Biblical

texts for study of the Scriptures; *ars grammatica* to produce the skills of "right"

(*recto*) reading, writing and speaking, and a wide range of other works, secular and

Christian, to fulfil the Benedictine rule which regarded reading as an essential

component of Christian life (Irvine 191)[33]. The vast majority of those were in Latin,

the language of the Roman church. The established hierarchy of Latin texts was

clear: first, the Bible; second, the Church Fathers (Augustine, Origen and Jerome,

for example); third, the lives of the saints and the writings of the great thinkers (such

as Boethius); and finally, by the works of the grammatical arts including literature.

Many of these grammatical writings were Christian in origin, but also included were

Christianised "pagan" texts, such as those of Vergil, Cicero and Ovid [34], which were

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(224-240). Some could read and not write, others - like scribes - could "write" as an art form, but not read or comprehend their writings.

[32] McKitterick suggests that in Carolingian territory specialized scriptoria existed which produced particular genres of texts, such as legal scriptoria, biblical scriptoria, and so on (*Word* 57). She also reminds the reader that while the study of palaeography "can tell one where the scribe was trained, it cannot settle the question of his lay or clerical status or whether he was working within or without a monastic scriptorium" (257). I would add that in a monastic system such as that of Anglo-Saxon England, where double houses are frequent, it cannot determine gender, either.

[33] Both Lapidge's article on booklists and Irvine's study of the *ars grammatica* explore the question of a literary hierarchy in Anglo-Saxon England in some detail.

[34] The creation of a Christian literary "canon" did not mean that secular works were excluded from monastic libraries. The *Ars grammatica* of the fourth-century *grammaticus* Donatus was used until the fifteenth-century (Irvine 58), albeit often altered through the addition of "Christianized" examples. The Christian appropriation of the Classical model of literary study is seen clearly in Augustine's *De Doctrina*

used as *exempla* of correct orthography, Latinity or as a means of establishing

auctoritas.

A vital component of a complete monastic library was the collection or

anthology, which became the standard form of grammatical textbook in monastic

schoolrooms (344)[35]. Aside from a few authors at the top of the hierarchical canon,

such as Augustine, Boethius or Origen, sources of grammatical *auctoritas* were

compiled and commented upon by their anthologists. Collections of classical

exemplary literature, such as *florilegia* [36], abounded. These non-Christian texts were

usually glossed, commented upon, or even altered, to adapt their meaning and

content to a Christian ethos (178). One of the uses of these books was in teaching

the art of *lectio*, or reading aloud. The variation in tone and style in each text gave

the student of *ars grammatica* the opportunity to prove their ability in proper reading

aloud (69-70), which was an essential component in achieving correct meaning. The

text did not merely exist on the page, but was given its reality by its use as an

element of a larger process of grammatical study. One aspect of *lectio* was the

requirement that the reader give each poetic "speaker" their own appropriate voice

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Christiana, which uses the models of Classical *grammatica* but "neutralizes" their
content, placing the Bible at the centre of textual studies of all kinds (178-79)

[35] Irvine discusses 3 types of anthologies used as ars grammatica: the school text
(grammar, etc), the *regulae* and the encyclopedia. The latter was the most advanced
of the three and the most literary in nature (56-7)

[36] McKitterick states that ninth-century Carolingian *florilegia* were addressed "almost
without exception, to laymen or laywomen and provided their addressees with
definitions and expositions of the Christian ethic and the social behaviours expected in
accordance with it" (*Word* 266). Similar evidence does not seem to have been
uncovered yet in Anglo-Saxon culture. In fact, Michael Lapidge is firm in his conviction
that no real evidence exists for secular noble libraries outside that, perhaps, of the king
("Booklist" 35).

and intonation. As Irvine puts it, "every reading was...a performance" (70). In other words, elements of texts such as gender variation -- as seen in the characters of the *Exeter Book* -- were required by the rules of grammatical study.

Martin Irvine states in a footnote in his monograph on textual culture that he plans to propose in later research that the *Exeter Book* may be such a *grammatica*, an anthology of texts intended as part of an entire system of vernacular *ars grammatica*. Anglo-Saxon vernacular literature, he states "appropriated the textual values and some of the genres of Latin grammatical culture, which it paralleled and often interpreted in English form" (405). He goes on to propose that it is impossible to understand Anglo-Saxon vernacular textual culture unless one understands its roots deep in the soil of Latin textual culture. Like Latin compilations, the *Exeter Book* contains a wide variety of texts including heroic epics, laments, grammatical riddles (a favourite of the Anglo-Saxons) and catalogue poems. While Irvine's theory is not fully outlined as yet, it seems important to note that the one textual fact arguing against the *Exeter Book* as *grammatica* is Irvine's own evidence that *grammatica* were almost always glossed, either marginally or interlinearly (384). While there is no gloss in the codex as such, it could be argued that the extensive textual emendations indicate a deep concern on the part of the scribe or users for textual accuracy. The layout of a manuscript, Irvine argues, "carries a load of ideological and cultural significance inseparable from the experience of reading a text in that form" (371). Since the form of the *Exeter Book* is stark, with little

decoration and no obvious commentary, it is the content of each text which is the focus of the reader's attention.

In fact, the layout of the *Book* is, I am convinced, the key to understanding what the *Book* was intended to be. I will propose that the very content of the first texts in the *Exeter Book* that contain the instructions to the reader on how to use the remainder of the codex. Those poems, *Christ I-Juliana* (Folios 8r-76r), are described by Muir as models of Christian life (*Exeter Book* 25). But it seems just as likely that they are intended to be models for an Anglo-Saxon Christian *grammaticus*, studying the vernacular forms of reading, writing and speaking. To be more specific, I believe that the *grammaticus* or ideal reader [37] presumed by those first eight texts could be either male or female. The introductory materials in any grammatical text functioned as the explicit or implicit rules for the reader. Not infrequently, the textual hierarchy inside a *grammatica* was that of a graded curriculum – from the easiest to the most difficult texts (355). The voices of *auctoritas* who guide the reader into the puzzling territory of the later sections of the book are the women who begin (the Virgin) and end (Juliana) this introductory group. The male saint whose story is one of the longest texts in these first texts was notable for the perfect Christian monastic brother-sister relationship he had with his own natural sister, Pega. The theory of how this acts upon the manuscript will be

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[37] I do not wish to imply that the only type of reader in Christian culture was the *grammaticus*, or master of the grammatical arts. But I agree with Martin Irvine's assertions that the acts of reading and comprehension within Christian textual culture were rooted in the foundational practises made explicit in the *ars grammatica*. To obtain membership in the textual elite, Irvine says, was to participate in a cultural activity that was bound by and subject to a set of rules comprehensible only to those trained within the grammatical arts (1-2).

discussed extensively in the last section of this thesis. Once again, I must emphasise that the mere existence of female characters does not, in and of itself, imply a mixed or even exclusively female audience. But there appears to exist a combination of factors which point to the possibility of women as members of the *Exeter Book's* primary audience.

Anglo-Saxon Textual Culture

Christian Anglo-Saxon England was notable for its production of a "bilingual"
(Old English/Latin) culture, which put forth a vernacular, national language as
comparable to Latin. Old English was promulgated, most notably by King Alfred the
Great [38] but also by his intellectual predecessors and successors, as worthy of
literary study and experimentation. In consequence, the period 700-1000 CE saw
an upsurge in the production of vernacular texts, which ranged in subject matter
from bawdy riddles to translations of the Holy Scriptures [39]. Unfortunately,
comparatively little remains of that first blossoming of English national literary
culture, but what there is attests to a vernacular textual culture that was far ahead of
many of its Continental peers. Large quantities of vernacular literature are presumed
to have been lost during the Anglo-Saxon period itself (the Viking raids), and when
monastic houses, libraries and other ecclesiastical properties were devastated five
hundred years later by Henry VIII's destruction of the monasteries. The loss of
vernacular texts is made even more understandable by the decline, and eventual

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[38] Irvine notes that the depiction of Alfred the Great by Asser as the literate king
resembles Alcuin's portrait of Charlemagne as promoter of learning (416). But there
are broader national implications in Alfred's activities since he is advocating not just
traditional literacy in Latin but an entire program of vernacular literacy in which he, as
a writer, is an active participant (Stenton 267).

[39] Susan Kelly has found that Anglo-Saxon lay society functioned with a "casual
bilingualism" (36), as can be seen in both legal documents literature. She finds that
Old English functioned as a genuine "alternative literary or documentary language" to
Latin (51), not a lesser or secondary language. It is possible that Kelly's observation
could effectively "depoliticize" the study of Anglo-Saxon literature. To be more
specific, if the use of Old English was indeed "casual" and not motivated by a form of
cultural nationalism, then the interpretation of that literature may have to depend less
on political interpretations of Anglo-Saxon England as an early form of cultural nation-
state than literary or literacy issues.

disappearance, of Old English as a literary and spoken language after the Norman

Conquest. Latin texts, written in a language that was to be continually used, valued,

and studied up to the present, survived in part due to their comprehensibility. As

Helmut Gneuss and Christine Fell have both noted, one difficulty in making coherent

the vernacular texts that remain is that much of it seems to have survived at

random. There may be no way of telling just how representative these works are of

the literary production of the Anglo-Saxon period. Further, there is no way of

knowing if what was saved and recorded (much of it in monastic settings) is in any

way indicative of the literature available in the secular community (Gneuss,

"Libraries" 645; Fell 15). What remains is likely not only to have been "filtered" by the

religious scribe, but also been distilled into a form of essence. While we believe the

remainder captures some of the flavour of Anglo-Saxon poetry, it must be presumed

to have lost much by the process. On the other hand, as Fell and Gneuss also

acknowledge, we should not be surprised that so little has survived but, given the

ravages of time, history and linguistic change, we should be amazed that anything in

Old English survived at all (Fell 15; Gneuss 645). That a collection as apparently

noncanonical as the *Exeter Book* survived (albeit burnt, stained and tattered) is

something approaching miraculous. Who it was made for, what purpose .. served,

and how it may provide a key to recognising the role of the female reader in Anglo-

Saxon literature are issues that will be examined in the next chapters.

I wish to make it clear that I am not the first person to suggest that an Anglo-

Saxon manuscript was created for or even by a female or mixed house. Another

advocate for women as readers and commissioners of books is Celia Sisam, who

states in her 1976 edition of the *Vercelli Book* (one of the two other surviving poetic

codices) was written for a women's house. The *Vercelli Book*, like the *Exeter Book*,

 contains signed poetry by Cynewulf, was recorded in the tenth century (20), and

has scribal variations suggesting that it was not all written at one sitting (37). She

believes that the codicological and palaeographical evidence point to a manuscript

that was "not the product of a great monastery, with flourishing scriptorium, trained

scribes, and large library. Rather we should look to some small house, perhaps a

nunnery, where an English book was needed for private reading" (44). She also

believes that vernacular collections such as this one may not have been written

exclusively for a religious audience (44). Further, she feels that the plundered

libraries of many women's houses may have been reduced to only vernacular

reading material by the mid-tenth century (44 note 2). I am aware that the advocacy

of a female-house source for one manuscript has no direct bearing on an argument

advocating the same kind of audience for another manuscript. However Sisam's

assertions make it clear that such a position is not beyond the bounds of rational

possibility.

SECTION II

The Exeter Book: History and Provenance

Women and the Old English *Exeter Book*: A Preliminary Statement

The *Exeter Book* features the most varied roles for the largest number of women extant in Old English literature, outside of collections of hagiography. Although Rosemary Woolf posited an original female readership for one of the *Book*'s longest poems, *Juliana* (*Art* 226) [40], the possibility that the *Exeter Book* itself could have been intended for, or even commissioned by, a female or double house has not been seriously considered [41]. The *Exeter Book* has offered feminist literary scholars in particular a rich source of study in recent years. But the sheer number of women as characters, or as what could be called "settings", in the codex as a whole has not been analysed in detail.

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[40] Unfortunately, Woolf merely states her belief that *Juliana*, like the later *Katherine Group*, was "intended for a convent of nuns" (226). She bases this conclusion in part on the poem's construction of Christ as the more appealing lover than Helesius, and on the fact that its sensational content reflects "a plot with popular appeal" (226). She goes on to state that in the Anglo-Saxon period, there was less distinction between literature intended for a female audience and that intended for a male than there would be in the later Middle Ages. Her argument, while somewhat reductive, is important since it is rooted in an idea of female heroism as intrinsically appealing for women in the religious life.

[41] Desmond states that "when feminists exclude anonymous poetry from the history of women's writing, they implicitly capitulate to masculinist assumptions about literature, authority and history. Standard literary history, moreover, explicitly appropriates anonymous literature to a masculine point of view" (574). While the caveat regarding reasoned, historical scholarship remains, her point is well taken. I believe the same conclusion could be reached of the vast majority of scholars in the fields of codicology and palaeography, who presume that all anonymous-source book producers were male unless explicitly stated otherwise.

Taking the texts from the beginning, it is possible to argue that women

appear in at least half the poems, if not more. Given the widest range of

interpretation, and temporarily acceding to what Frantzen has called the "women in"

phenomenon, the female subjects, objects and themes in the *Exeter Book*, may be

minimally described as follows: the Virgin Mary as subject in *Christ I* and as object in

Christ II; Guthlac's sister Pega in *Guthlac B* (Pope, "Palaeography" 39) [42]; the

Marian and feminine imagery of *The Phoenix* (Heffernan 14), the beautiful *miles*

Christi , *Juliana*; the "pleasure of a woman" desired by the *Seafarer* (Bradley 333);

the opposing figures of the beloved mother and temptress of the *Precepts*; the

"beloved peace-weaver" Ealhhild of *Widsith* (337); the mother, given equal care of

her son in the *Fortunes of Men*; the mother, "roving woman" (348), procured and

liberal queen, Frisian wife, unfaithful wife, and bejewelled woman of the *Maxims*; the

"vile body" of *Soul and Body*, which implicitly addresses the gendered body (as

tempter or tempted) succumbing to sexual sin; the grieving Beadohild and tragic

Maethild of *Deor*; the abandoned woman speakers of *Wulf and Eadwacer* and the

Wife's Lament; the innumerable women (sexual, domestic, vengeful and pure) of

the *Riddles* [43]; the paired men and women of *Judgement Day*; the "desolate

women" (392) mourning Christ and the "throng of women" in the *Descent into Hell*;

the Virgin of the *Homiletic Fragment II*, and the beloved "prince's daughter" of the

Husband's Message (400). An even more liberal interpretation could suggest that

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[43] Even a conservative reading would produce at least thirty female images or
subjects in the *Riddles*. Remarkably, the possibility of female speakers in the *Riddles*
is not usually included in discussions of the "usual" suspects: the two female speakers
of *Wulf and Eadwacer* and the *Wife's Lament*.

any or all of the figures who are literal or allegorical "exiles" could be read as not specifically gendered masculine or feminine. Rather they could be seen to represent a universal "men" = "souls" that includes women in the Augustinian notion of all personᶜ as souls wandering and seeking redemption in Christ and the City of Heaven.

This listing of female characters and possibly "feminine" subjects cannot, in ·d of itself, suggest a female readership for the codex. Even minimal research makes it clear that texts with both male and female subjects, such as Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*, were read in both male and female houses even if they were written for one gender or the other. Further, even if Christian misogyny led to a denigration of the female as intellectual subject, the admirable female (such as Mary, the saints, virgins, martyrs) and the loathsome female (Eve, the temptress, the fallen or corrupt woman) as literary or religious subjects remained constant features of male monastic writing. It is only when the subject matter of the *Exeter Book* can be combined with other evidence that a mixed male and female readership may be suggested as at least worthy of consideration. I believe it is possible to argue, through an investigation into the history of the text, women's and double houses in the period, the history of Exeter as a religious site, and a detailed discussion of the structure of the codex itself, that the inclusion of a possible female readership, alongside the presumed certainty of a male readership, is likely, if by no means certain.

However, the search for a female readership entails a discussion of the effect of a gendered readership on modern interpretations of the *Exeter Book*. Indeed, is there any effect at all? Some earlier studies which have offered "gendered" readings of texts seem to have fallen apart under the weight of the constructivist versus essentialist debate. Earlier examples of this would be Kemp Malone's "Two English Frauenlieder" and Clifford Davidson's "Erotic 'Women's Songs' in Anglo-Saxon England". The two articles take the stance that *Wulf and Eadwacer* and the *Wife's Lament* are *frauenlieder* or women's songs because they fit the established category, broadly described as a text with a female speaker along with explicit emotional and/or sexual content. Even recent articles such as Shari Horner's work on *Juliana* seem based on some interesting preconceived notions of medieval gender ideologies. She quotes Woolf's notion that women liked to read about heroic virgins, and adds her own analysis:

> Why would women readers "like" to read about heroic virgins --
> about the brutal torture of Juliana or Holofernes' lecherous
> designs on Judith? As we shall see, medieval literary theory
> correlates "good" reading, that is, spiritual reading of an
> allegorical text, with masculinity. Texts themselves are figured
> female; the masculine reader must penetrate the literal text to
> access its spiritual truth....Reading spiritually allowed female
> readers to assume a masculine perspective, a gender position
> outside of the one that placed them in both physical and spiritual

danger. Reading is thus a spiritually empowering act for an

otherwise threatened group of readers. ("*Juliana*" 661-2)

What Homer's reading of *Juliana* seems to presume is a fixed, trans-historical and

trans-cultural vision of female monasticism. While it is certain that the newly rigid

rules imposed by the reformers in the tenth-century were damaging to the double-

house system, and resulted in a significant drop in female houses, the work that she

is discussing (*Juliana*) is likely from the previous century. It was not necessary, at

least in some aspects of Anglo-Saxon Christian culture in the ninth-century and

earlier, for all monastic women to "become male" in order to be praiseworthy. While

I am cheered by the agreement of a more experienced scholar that some of the

Exeter Book texts were intended for a female audience, and I have great admiration

for Homer's application of contemporary theory to ancient texts, I am not sure that

the generalised approach used here is helpful to my argument.[44]

While the retrieval of the female voice, either as speaker or writer, is

something to be noted, these particular retrievals seem based on stereotypical

views of what women would, could or did write or read about in the Middle Ages. By

asserting the existence of a category called women's songs which is concerned only

with emotional or sexual subject matter, the articles mentioned create, by

implication, a somewhat limited medieval female or male mentality. By using

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[44] Homer's article also says that "most scholars believe that the Old English version of
the legend of Juliana was written to inspire an Anglo-Saxon female religious audience"
(659). In fact, as far as I know, Woolf is the only previous scholar to have stated this
unequivocally. Further, she writes that "In pre-Conquest England, levels of literacy
were high among noble and/or religious women" (659 note 5), a statement that I have
not seen validated in my research.

arguments that seem based in a broad generalisation about female virginity and textual activity, one runs the risk of defeating one's own argument through the plethora of "exceptions" to such a rule. In other words, the very theoretical stance which attempts to retrieve what are ostensibly women's voices from the distant past may also recreate an artificial notion of gender as it relates to literary activity. Did women write about philosophy? Yes. Did men write about emotions or sexuality as expressed by female characters? Of course. Is it possible to even begin to assess the effect of a text on a female audience, or even the existence of a female audience on the production of a text? Only in a perfect world which included time travel, I imagine. Absolute certainty is an impossibility, given the age of the *Exeter Book* and the paucity of documentation as to its origin or intended use. What may be possible is an analysis of the function of gender in the text. That is, how gender may function as one of the codex's organising principles, and the different meanings that may have had on an audience that has hitherto barely been suggested.

The *Exeter Book*: Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501

Of the four surviving vernacular poetic codices, the *Exeter Book* (Exeter

Dean and Chapter MS 3501) [45], is the most varied in content and has provided the

richest source of material for scholars of Anglo-Saxon poetry outside of *Beowulf*

itself. The literary potential of the individual texts, or groups of texts, is such that, as

Bernard Muir (the editor of the 1994 edition) recognises, few scholars have ventured

beyond their appeal as selected poems to take substantial note of the codex as a

whole ("Preliminary" 274). For example, most studies of *The Wife's Lament* [46]

acknowledge that poem's place in categories of *Exeter Book* texts referred to as

planctus, elegies or laments, or in the overall minor theme of abandonment that

preoccupies many of the poems. Some even try to ally the *Lament* with the *Riddles*

in order to explain its enigmatic nature. But few try to interpret the *Wife's Lament* as

a component in a larger codex which also contains *Azarias, Juliana,* the *Christ*

poems, *Guthlac, Widsith,* the *Maxims,* and so forth. One of the reasons for this lack

of contextual study may stem from a surprising assumption about extant studies of

the codex made by Anglo-Saxonists over the years.

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[45] All citations in Old English from the *Exeter Book* will be taken from Muir's 1994 edition. However, Muir has retitled a number of works in keeping with his reanalysis of the codex. Since the new edition is not yet widely available, the standard titles from Krapp and Dobbie will be used with Muir's line and page numbers. Muir's titles will be discussed where they are relevant to his interpretation of the poems.

[46] Perhaps no other Old English text has been as widely studied by feminist scholars as *The Wife's Lament.* In a sense, it holds pride of place at the centre of theoretical debate: Is it a "proto-feminist" work reflecting a powerful female cultural voice, not just as speaker but writer? Is it purely religious or allegorical in theme, and its speaker's gender irrelevant? Is it incomplete, a form of riddle, or part of a lost epic? Is the speaker a wife, widow, concubine, or mother? Indeed, is she dead or alive? Critics' positions on the nature of this one text can be seen as representative of their stance on Anglo-Saxon cultural studies generally.

A photographic facsimile of the codex was edited by Chambers, Forster and

Flowers and published in 1933. The photographs were taken while the *Exeter Book*

was stripped of its cover and stitching as part of the process of rebinding, done

under the auspices of the Dean of Exeter in 1930. This edition has been regarded

for decades as an exemplary project which produced an accurate representation of

the *Exeter Book*'s stained and tattered folios. According to the editors' notes

examined by Bernard Muir, the photographic facsimile, one ultraviolet photograph of

folio 8r, and some comments by previous editors – *not the original manuscript* –

were the sources used by George Krapp and Elliott V. K. Dobbie for their edition of

the codex for the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, Volume III*. It seems, then, that the

Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records edition, which remains the standard for Anglo-Saxon

literary studies, was not based on direct examination of the manuscript, nor have

most editions of the *Exeter Book* poems since the facsimile's publication (273). It

was not until Muir undertook a new edition that he, and Anglo-Saxonists at large

through his *Scriptorium* article, realised that the facsimile edition was seriously

flawed. Muir noted that "there are over four hundred scribal alterations in the

manuscript that are not discussed by Krapp and Dobbie (or by any other editor so

far as I am aware) because *they are not visible* in the facsimile" [47] [emphasis Muir's]

(273). It appears that many literary studies of the *Exeter Book* texts seem to have

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[47] The Rare Book Room of McGill University contains one of the facsimiles.
According to a note on the book's inside cover, only 250 copies of the facsimile were
published. The photographs are in sepia tone, giving the manuscript a brown on brown
(ink on parchment) appearance. This lack of contrast could explain why the numerous
emendations discovered by Muir are not visible. It may also be that the whole (the
codex *in toto*) was simply not as interesting as the sum of its parts (the individual
poems), so most scholars left it alone.

been based on somewhat flawed evidence which has led to a number of "false

conclusions about such matters as the way in which the scribe worked, the condition

of the manuscript, its readers and reception, and the spellings of the manuscript"

(*Exeter Book* xi). Muir goes on to acknowledge that many classic studies of the

Exeter Book or its poetry, and other editions of the poems themselves are not

necessarily rendered invalid in light of this new evidence (x). However, I agree with

his thesis that the codex as an entity needs to be discussed and the texts related to

each other in the context of the book as a whole in order to draw new conclusions.

After extensive examination of the original manuscript, Muir prepared the

new edition with the supposition that the *Exeter Book* was a deliberately

constructed, single text, put together by an "anthologist" who may or may not have

also been the scribe. In this respect, he is directly opposed to Patrick Conner, the

other scholar currently working almost exclusively on the *Exeter Book* as a codex.

Conner has repeatedly asserted that the *Exeter Book* is constructed of three

separate and distinct booklets ("Structure" 233-4), each with its own literary

character and theological message. He believes that the booklets were put together

after the texts' were recorded in the tenth century, and in their current state in the

codex are not in the order in which the scribe wrote them (233). In support of his

theory, Conner cites the rules for determining the existence of booklets as set out by

Pamela Robinson. Of Robinson's ten rules for determining the existence of

booklets within a codex, Conner admits that only four could be applied to the *Exeter*

Book (234; 237; 240). The four primary features he finds in the *Exeter Book* are:

soiled first pages of his three sections, three varying grades of parchment for each section, consistent changes in scribal hand within each booklet, and differences among the types of drypoints found. He describes the texts in the *Exeter Book* as "primarily works of art without any discernible utilitarian functions to unify them, such as homilies and charters have" (240).

Bernard Muir refutes three of Conner's arguments in his later *Scriptorium* article and in the introduction to the 1994 edition of the book. First he states that the variations between the grades of parchment used are not extreme, nor are they consistent within each purported section, but that there are numerous examples of defective parchments throughout the codex ("Preliminary" 274). Muir also argues that the soiling is not consistent or substantial enough on the alleged first pages of Conner's booklets to warrant the determination that the "booklets" were ever separate entities. Further, Muir presents evidence that the apparent variation in drypoints does not exist, but can be explained by Conner's overlooking several drypoints in the margins of the codex (274). This refutation leaves Conner with only his assertion of a variation in the scribe's hand, indicating to him the elapsing of an extended period of time, to support his three booklet theory [48].

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[48] In his book-length study Conner also asserts, among other things, that Cynewulf was a tenth-century poet (153 note 21), although he offers no substantial proof of this. He also states that Bishop Leofric was a purposeful forger, using the booklist and property list of his donations to the house at Exeter as a means of self-aggrandizement (15, 27-8, 31-2), even though the forging of property documents was so common in this period that it was seen as a standard practise for monastic archivists (Clanchy 158). He also finds that the *Exeter Book* itself is purely Carolingian in literary and philosophical derivation (148), but again offers no real analysis of the texts to support that conclusion. Although Conner's palaeographical analysis of the codex has definite value, some of his other assertions are troubling, and difficult to accept given the weight of scholarship still going against them.

The variations in the hand of the *Exeter Book* scribe are indeed notable, even to an inexperienced viewer looking only at the facsimile. Robin Flowers, one of the editors of the facsimile edition, believed that the variation was so pronounced that it indicated the work of multiple scribes (85). Flowers' observation was not generally accepted, and it is now recognised that the work was performed by a single scribe (Muir, *Exeter Book* 27). Although Muir accepts some of Conner's arguments as to scribal variances in certain sections of the book, he states that they are neither as convincing nor as frequent as Conner suggests. Certainly, there is not enough evidence, he believes, to justify the three-booklet theory on the basis of these points alone.

It is accepted by palaeographers that the variation of letter-forms in a scribe's hand within a single document or codex is common in what Clanchy refers to as "manuscript culture". The reasons for these variations are many, particularly in monastic manuscripts. First, Clanchy explains, there is evidence that writing in monasteries was a seasonal activity (116), so the passage of as long as a year between the writing of one section and the next may only indicate a normal interval between monastic scribal stints in a monastery without a large, year-round scriptorium. Second, and more importantly, Clanchy agrees with most other palaeographers in acknowledging that "just as medieval writers did not usually aim at absolute uniformity in the spelling of proper names and the use of capital letters and punctuation, they likewise varied their scripts" (128). The sheer number of scribal emendations in the *Exeter Book* (over four hundred) may suggest that the scribe had a limited amount of time time to copy his or her original texts, or that the

source texts were themselves error-ridden. The fact that either the scribe or another hand made such extensive corrections does suggest a profound concern for textual correctness and authority. This kind of concern was an integral part of the process of grammatical training and education in Christian textual culture [49]. One of the few features of the scribe's activities that Conner and Muir agree on is the likelihood that he or she was not a native writer of Old English, which would explain some of the deviations in Anglo-Saxon letter forms (e.g. ð, Ð, Æ, and þ) as well as errors in grammar, spelling and syntax (Muir *Exeter Book* 39). While Muir observes extensive revisions made to the manuscript, he is reasonably sure that not all of the emendations were made to correct errors by the original scribe (33). A number of changes were made by other hands to normalise orthography, but left behind some egregious errors of grammar and syntax. This may indicate that the manuscript was carefully read but, as Muir notes, many errors remain uncorrected, perhaps indicating that the source materials from which the scribe worked were themselves several generations removed from the original (38-39).

The final, and strongest, argument against Conner's theory comes from the Pamela Robinson herself, who states that in order for her rules about booklets to apply, there must first and foremost be proof that each booklet forms a self-sufficient unit based on its content (233). If this cannot be proven, she says clearly, then the

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[49] Although extensive study has been done on the oral tradition of Anglo-Saxon poetry, I have not found any evidence to suggest that the texts of the *Exeter Book* may have been taken from oral sources. While the writing used by the scribe is not cursive, it may be that the errors resulted from texts copied from memory and not manuscripts, and were corrected after dictation. It is likely that with Muir's discovery of the extensive scribal emendations that such a possibility will be investigated further.

booklet theory cannot be confirmed. Patrick Conner does offer a limited literary analysis of the *Exeter Book*, but it is not specific enough to support his entire argument. He states that the first booklet in the codex is unified by a "biographical chronology", the second by "dual themes of exile and gleomanry" and the third by the dominance of riddles. ("Structure" 241)[50]. While these three indefinite categories could be admitted to be true in general terms, the contents of each "booklet" are not so distinct from one another as to justify Conner's theory without other evidence. Conner's proof for the three-booklet theory is difficult to accept precisely because he cites Robinson's rules as his methodological source but then does not follow her major caveat [51]. Further, Conner makes it clear that he believes that the first section in the codex (*Christ I-Guthlac B*) was the last written. Given that medieval scribal activity was deeply concerned with textual hierarchy (the Bible ranked above patristics which ranked above grammatica, and so on) it seems illogical that the most important and holy of the texts (*Christ I* and the hagiographies) would have been at the bottom of a monastic scribe's agenda. In order for Conner's theory to stand up in his monograph, it would have been necessary for him to restate the theory from his article (which he does not) and to offer logical rebuttals to Muir's criticisms of the theory.

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[50] Conner's three booklets are, in his chronological order, Folios 53r-97v (Azarias-Partridge), Folios 98r-130v (Homiletic Fragment-Riddle 95) and 8r-52v (Christ-Guthlac B) (Structure 233-4).

[51] In fact, I agree with Conner that Folios 8r-52v are part of a unit. However, I will argue that they are a unit within an anthology, and that their content is neither simply biographical nor exclusively Carolingian in content.

Bernard Muir's carefully annotated edition of the *Exeter Book* (1994) offers

a more convincing argument on the *Exeter Book* as a deliberately compiled

anthology. He finds similarities in ornamentation and lettering throughout the work

(16; 29-32) as well as grammatical, thematic and syntactical practises that indicate a

unity of form (32-43). He is backed in his opinion by the distinguished manuscript

scholar John C. Pope, who described the *Exeter Book* as a "unique poetical

anthology" in the corpus of Old English literature ("Palaeography" 25). Muir also

sees coherence in the fitts of text which represent logical scribal stints. These fitts

are, in some cases, natural divisions of thought or sheer common sense on the part

of the scribe and/or anthologist, and in other cases just stops without rhyme or

reason to a modern reader (18-23). Muir has also determined that the first eight

poems (*Christ I-Juliana*) offer textual unity as models for Christian living (24-25), and

that the second group of riddles was not an afterthought, but was deliberately

added to complete a classically-influenced century of texts, many of which derived

from extant Latin *exempla* (25). Further, he theorises that the texts from *Judgement*

Day to *Homiletic Fragment II* were specifically selected to reflect the theme of Easter

(26-27). Muir gives further evidence of thematic unities within the codex, arguing

convincingly that there was intent and careful thought behind the selection of

poems. Indeed, as Clanchy has written, monastic scribes and anthologists were

very aware of the value and importance of making any kind of written record, literary

or legal, and selected their texts with care and an eye to posterity (77). The fact that

modern readers cannot come to an agreement over the meaning or type of a

medieval book is less a fault of the book itself than it is the consequence of our lack

of understanding of the very different meaning the book held in a manuscript culture

(83).

Clearly, I am not a professional codicologist, nor have I had access to the

original manuscript, and cannot render final judgement on the truth of either

Conner's or Muir's theory. Both scholars have devoted extensive study to the codex,

and both have made significant contributions to its "rediscovery" as an entity. But it

is necessary, in order for my argument to be put forth, to come down on one side of

the case or the other. Given the rationality and persuasiveness of Muir's argument,

and in particular his role as editor of the first truly complete edition of the manuscript,

it is his view of the text that will be accepted for the purposes of this study. However

Conner's detailed palaeographic study is not without value, in that he does make a

convincing case for the *Book's* production in a scriptorium at Exeter in the tenth

century. Although Conner is not completely convincing when he argues that the

Book and other manuscripts remained at the foundation in Exeter after the city's

devastation in 1003 (26-27; 29), it seems conceivable that precious books, along

with King Aethelstan's collection of relics which appear on relic lists from before and

after the destruction, could have been preserved by fleeing inhabitants. In this case,

the possibility of the *Book's* production in Exeter is a valid consideration.

The Manuscript: Codicology and Provenance

The manuscript as it exists today contains 124 folios comprising seventeen

gatherings [52]. The folios are of varying, and frequently mediocre, grades of

parchment. Minor differences in script have been noted, but there is a consensus

among modern scholars that the codex was written by one scribe who also

produced the Latin manuscripts Lambeth Palace MS 149 (Muir *Exeter Book* 27) and

Oxford Bodleian MS 319 (28). It is the attribution of these two manuscripts to the

Exeter Book scribe that forms part of my argument that the *Exeter Book* could have

been commissioned for either a female audience, or a double house.

Lambeth Palace MS 149 contains the Latin texts of Bede's *Explanatio*

Apocalypsis and Augustine's *De coniugiis adulterinis*, the latter of which deals with

the problem of marriage and religious life[53]. One of Augustine's main arguments

deals with the married man, newly made a priest, who could find that "God would

give him the grace needed to give up sleeping with his wife" (Brown, *Body* 397). It is

one of a number of Augustine's pronouncements on the possibility of redemption

and holiness after sexual experience that contrasts sharply with the more rigid

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[52] Full descriptions of the manuscript can be found in Muir's, Chambers' et al, and Krapp and Dobbie's editions of the full codex; further analysis can be found in Conner *Tenth Century* and "Structure", Muir "Preliminary", Ker *Catalogue* and Barlow *Leofric*. Conner argues that nearly thirty percent of the manuscript is missing, a far more radical analysis than that suggested by Pope ("Palaeography") or Muir.

[53] Conner's suggestion that the works in these two manuscripts represent simply a post-reform, strict Benedictine morality seems a bit simplistic given the content of Augustine's text. Much more severe works by Church Fathers existed that would have more accurately represented the reform attitude towards permanent and perpetual virginity.

stance of Jerome, Ambrose and Gregory of Nyssa (399). For many Anglo-Saxon

religious, especially older aristocratic women, of whom it is believed a goodly

percentage were previously married, this work would have had immediate

resonance.

Augustine's work bears similarities in tone to Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*, written

for the Abbess Hildelith and her double monastic house at Barking (Lapidge and

Herren 51), Aldhelm's text demonstrates an awareness of it's intended audience's

social standing, which included both widows and the "divorced" (those who had

possibly ended their marriage according to Germanic marital traditions) (52). He

mentions three categories of purity: the virgin, the chaste, and the conjugal; chaste

replacing earlier writers' "widow" (55). More importantly, and most uniquely, Aldhelm

includes in his list of famous virgins a number of men along with women. Lapidge

believes that the content of Aldhelm's text was adjusted to fit more carefully the

milieu, that is a mixed-sex house, for which it was intended (55). Aldhelm's text sets

up a hierarchy of chastity: the woman of "gold" is the virgin, of "silver" the chaste,

and of "bronze" the conjugal (65). The paragon of women, he makes clear, is the

Virgin Mary, whose perpetual chastity and motherhood of Christ redeemed both

women and men from the sin of Eve. As will be discussed later, the *Exeter Book*

displays a similar paradigm, a model of Christian life, and gives the examples of

both male and female behaviour. Opening with the ultimate models in the Virgin and

Christ, the book follows with the paired human models of perfectibility in *Guthlac* and

Juliana.

The other work in Lambeth 149 (Bede's text on the Apocalypse) was a standard monastic work but it may add to my argument, in that it may indicate a particular leaning of the commissioner of these texts, given the apocalyptic themes of the *Christ II* and *III*, *Judgement Day II*, and other *Exeter Book* texts [54]. As will be discussed later, the dual themes of apocalypse and purgatory are primary concerns of the poet Cynewulf (the apparent writer of *Juliana* and *Christ II*). Barbara Newman has found that purgatorial subject matter is a common thread throghout the literature by and about female religious. Since the other major manuscript containing Cynewulfian poems (*The Vercelli Book*) has been posited as possibly having been made for a female house, the similarity in theme might indicate a limited pattern of female commissions.

The content of the third extant work by the *Exeter Book* scribe, Oxford Bodleian Library MS. 319, seems to add material to the theory that the scribe's commissions may have been for a mixed or female audience. The Bodleian manuscript contains Isidore's *De fide catholica*, a text which includes a series of letters written by Isidore to his sister Florentina, in which he expounds on Christ's life as a model that she must endeavour to copy (Conner *Exeter* 84).

Like Isidore's sister, Anglo-Saxon religious women corresponded with their religious brethren to seek, receive and give instruction and support, as is evident

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[54] This theme may reflect Newman's suggestion of female religious as "caretakers" for the dead and the common theme of purgatory in visions, hagiographical literature and attitudes towards marriage by female religious (*Virile Woman* 108-136). She has found that many works on this theme came into existence well before 1170 CE, the date given by Jacques LeGoff for the first use of *purgatorium* as a noun (109).

from the correspondence of the Boniface circle. While women such as Lioba

travelled with Boniface on his missions, others stayed behind to provide support

through prayer and more material interventions. Given the extant evidence from that

group, a work rooted in the male-female Christian epistolary tradition would likely

have had a particular appeal for women religious. It would have been of specific

interest to the members of a double house, who sought to model their own

behaviour on the exemplary fraternal/sororal relations of their chaste monastic

predecessors. Dialogue between the sexes is an important feature in the *Exeter*

Book, as it is in extant texts from actual Anglo-Saxon female monastics (Homer

"En/Closed" 53-4). To Shari Homer, the *Wife's Lament* is expressed in the same

"'discourse of enclosure', a system of signifying which inscribes the increasingly

strict conditions of monasticism imposed on Anglo-Saxon female religious" as is

found in the letters from Boniface's female correspondents (46-47) [55] The

reinforcement of a system of female enclosure after the tenth-century reforms

"prohibits action, but not speech" (52), a characteristic of both the Virgin and Juliana,

who receive their physical fates willingly, some might even say passively, from God.

The Virgin uses words, not actions, to sway Joseph in *Christ I*, convincing him of her

purity. Juliana not only outperforms both her father and Helesius as a rhetorician,

but she speaks more eloquently than the demon (grammatically male) sent to tempt

her. Most importantly she is, unlike the physically and spiritually impure Eve, able to

correctly judge the falsity of persuasive demonic rhetoric. The message of these

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[55] Homer's analysis of *The Wife's Lament* is less rooted in broad stereotypes
than her article on *Juliana*. Certainly there is historic evidence, such as letters
from the women of the Boniface circle, to demonstrate the type of writing
performed by enclosed women.

two texts in the *Exeter Book* seems to be that virginity, or bodily enclosure, conveys to women an extraordinary gift -- the power of holy rhetoric as found through connection with the pure *logos* of Christ. These women are able to speak, hear, read, write and comprehend, in both literal and allegorical terms, the true word. In other words, they function as good Christian *grammatici* are meant to function. In fact, as I will argue later, these acts of the Christian *grammatici*, in particular the female *grammaticus*, are central to understanding the *Exeter Book* as an anthology. The fact that the *Exeter Book* scribe also produced a work explicitly intended to guide a woman to a model Christian life through reading (Isidore's *De fide*) could indicate that his or her patron(s) had specific concerns about or for women readers. Once again, this is not to assert that the mere existence of female characters in any single work implies a female audience, but these two other texts by the *Exeter Book* scribe may indicate a pattern of commissions that reflect the needs of a female or mixed house, rather than an exclusively male monastic foundation.

The arguments over the dating of the codex are summarised by Muir (*Exeter Book* 1-2), and current thought seems in agreement that the codex was written approximately 965-75 CE (1). It was, therefore, produced in the midst of the tenth-century monastic reforms in Anglo-Saxon England, a period of intense scribal activity[56]. Bishops bought books from abroad and commissioned texts locally in order to replace and refurbish monastic libraries and religious resources destroyed

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[56] The vast majority of English mss. before 1000 date from the post-Reform period. Three-quarters of mss. are from seven major centres and half of those are from four major cathedral cities (Canterbury, Exeter, Salisbury, Worcester) (Gneuss "Libraries" 646).

by the Viking invasions. The first historic citation which has been accepted as

attesting to the *Exeter Book* is the booklist (c. 1070) recording the donations of the

eleventh-century Bishop Leofric to the recently created see at Exeter[57]. The Exeter

codex appears on a list of (apparently) randomly[58] recorded titles from the see's

restored library[59]. The description of the twenty-third book of sixty-six works on the

booklist has been accepted as the *Exeter Book*: ".i. mycel[60] englisc boc be

gehwilcum þingum on leoðwisan geworht" (Lapidge Booklist 65) or "the great

English book of many things written in verse". The question of where the *Exeter*

Book was produced is somewhat more obscure, although Conner's attempt to place

the scribe in Exeter itself through detailed palaeographical and codicological

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[57] Bishop Leofric moved the see from Crediton to Exeter before his installation in 1054. A further discussion of this move, and the possibility that Leofric evicted nuns at Exeter will occur later.

[58] Lapidge notes that many of the booklists in this period were frequently "simple inventories" ("Booklists" 36), not necessarily structured hierarchically. Leofric's booklist seems to fall in this group, making Irvine's statement about the *Exeter Book's* place on the booklist being indicative of its status as equal to Latin literature open to some criticism (421-2). It seems unlikely that no matter how valuable the text was felt to be as a vernacular collection that it would be placed ahead of the traditionally canonical Biblical texts, Gregory, or Isidore, which follow it on the list (Lapidge Booklist 65-6). Further, Conner's statement that Leofric somehow manipulated the donations list for the purpose of self-aggrandizement is not convincing when, as Barlow and Clanchy say, the forging of charters and documents in the 10-11th century was commonplace. McKitterick also believes that some booklists could be a mix of inventories of existing books and *desiderata*, or a wishlist of books (*Carolingians* 193). It is nearly impossible, she says, to firmly establish if the contents of surviving booklists and inventories were real or idealized (199).

[59] The story of Leofric's move to Exeter has him arriving and finding that the see had been stripped of its properties, vestments and books, leaving behind only a few battered service books. There is no mention that the "mycel Englisc boc" was on site when Leofric arrived.

[60] The description of the book as "mycel" or "great" is not necessarily, not even likely, to have been an aesthetic judgement, but one describing the size of the text (folio, not quarto) or the quantity of work it contained. The quality of the parchment and the lack of decoration indicate that this was not necessarily a valuable book, in monetary terms.

analysis may be the most convincing aspect of his argument [61]. With the exception

of the two Cynewulf works (*Juliana, Christ II*), Muir believes that many of the texts

display "a considerable concentration of northern features", and that few if any date

from before the Alfredian period (*Exeter Book* 44). This may indicate that the poems

themselves are a result of the Alfredian-influenced national commitment to Anglo-

Saxon literary activities as equal to those of Latin. This would, logically, result in the

production of works such as anthologies and other grammatical texts. Once again,

Anglo-Saxon literary activities did not exist in isolation, but were deeply influenced

by and were to a large extent a result of the Latin tradition.

It is under Bishop Leofric's auspices that the *Exeter Book* makes its first

recorded appearance in the eleventh-century. Leofric was, as far as can be

determined, a Lotharingian-trained cleric who worked for Edward the Confessor

during the French exile and travelled with the king back to England in 1041 (Barlow,

Leofric 2). While there has been some speculation that Leofric functioned as one of

the king's chancellors, this theory is mitigated by what Barlow describes as Leofric's

poor knowledge of Latin as evidenced by "the diplomatic productions of Leofric's

own household when bishop (which) are characterised by Continental formulae and

rather uncertain Latinity" (4). In fact, some of it is so uncertain that Barlow describes

it as containing "spelling mistakes, garbled expressions and *howlers of all sorts*" (12)

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[61] Aside from Muir's reservations about Conner's work, it seems important to accede to Brownrigg's note that "in the 12th century the provenance of a manuscript is a fairly reliable indication of where it was written, but this is less true in the tenth. When houses were founded or reformed by Aethelwold, Dunstan or Oswald, the new libraries were partly supplied by books from older and established scriptoria" (261). Therefore the existence at Exeter of tenth-century manuscripts in Leofric's time should not, as Drage has also noted, be taken as firm evidence that they were made at Exeter (46).

[emphasis mine]. Whatever his position, it is fairly sure that he was closely allied to King Edward, since bishoprics were not simply religious appointments in the period (4) but reflected both the political needs of the appointer and loyalties of the appointee. Leofric's request to move the see from Crediton to Exeter in 1054 needed, and received, papal approval, but this move onto the heart of Godwine territory would have also needed royal assent and support. According to the booklist and the *Leofric Missal*, It was under Leofric that Exeter began to reclaim much of its' inherited property and, according to his Booklist, to restore its ravaged library [62]. It is the nature of this move to Exeter that is of interest, since the noted twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury states that Leofric expelled a small number of nuns, or possibly monks, from Exeter (Flowers 7) in order to replace them with secular canons under *the Rule of Chrodegang* (Drage vi). The *Rule* emphasised teaching over homiletic activities, and it is likely that Leofric's intent in restocking the see's library was due to the renewal of that *Rule*. In fact, this may also add to the argument that the *Exeter Book* was considered a grammatical text at that time. It would certainly explain the inclusion of a book that seems anomalous on Leofric's otherwise practical-minded booklist.

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[62] Elaine Drage's study of Leofric's scriptorium is acknowledged by Conner and Muir to be a long-needed analysis of what texts were produced and where they ended up. She gives a detailed analysis which concludes that little, if anything, on Leofric's Booklist was actually made at Exeter (62). It is entirely likely that the booklist was less than accurate. Clanchy states that Norman bishops were appalled at the state of Anglo-Saxon libraries when they examined them after the Conquest, and that they "restocked them on an unprecedented scale" (106). It is entirely possible that Leofric's booklist is less an inventory than a wish-list of what should be at Exeter, not what actually was at Exeter in 1070. However, several of the books on the list have been succesfully identified, indicating that there was a library of sorts, even if not as large as Leofric claimed.

But to return to the expulsion of nuns from Exeter, could these nuns have been the remains of a double house, or was Leofric the target of a smear campaign by Norman historians as has been asserted? Or is it possible that Leofric did indeed expel monks in 1054 CE, and that the reputation Exeter had for being a women's house was from the period before the first reformation in 968 CE? Could the "guilty" Leofric be Abbot, not Bishop, Leofric of the previous century? An examination of the possibility of a female or double-house at Exeter follows.

St. Mary's and St. Peter's at Exeter: A History

The foundation originally known as St. Mary's and St. Peter's in the former

Roman settlement of Exeter was founded circa 680 CE (Rose-Troup 179), and was

well enough established to have been the first training ground of Boniface six years

later (180). According to Rose-Troup it was Boniface who "urged the adoption" of

the double house system for Exeter based on his admiration for Wimbourne (181)[63].

There is little evidence about the house's activities or indeed existence after 700 CE,

but it seems certain that the area of Exeter, not necessarily the foundation alone,

was turned over to Alfred's biographer Asser in 893 (Rose-Troup 186). It is clearly

documented that Aethelstan held a *Witanagemot* in Exeter in 928 (189) and that he

turned over approximately one-third of his extensive collection of relics to the house.

During the reforms, Exeter was handed over to the care of Sidemann circa 968, who

was said to have expelled secular "monks" and replaced them with Benedictines

(198), but Rose-Troup states firmly that this reform was not the end of the Exeter

double house (207). While a number of historians tend to treat the reform as a

sweeping, all-encompassing event that left little of the old in its wake, Meyer has

determined that the specific regulations enacted by the reform, and stated in its

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[63] Rose-Troup states that a clue to the existence of a double-house is the double name given the foundation. Interestingly, Bishop Leofric changed the name from St. Marys' and St. Peter's to just St. Peter's after his accession. This could suggest the sort of occurrence that Sally Thompson postulates in her article on the lack of historical sources for English nunneries. Any number of houses were inhabited by both sexes when first established, she states, and in later, more rigid, times their "dual" origins were not infrequently altered or expunged from official records altogether ("Nunneries" 142). It is possible that Leofric was doing this in his elimination of the dual name of Exeter, but many other sites that were never inhabited by women had dual names. The mixture of the name of Mary with almost every saint in the canon is particularly common.

manifesto the *Regularis Concordia*, were not accepted either universally or speedily by Anglo-Saxon religious foundations. The ostensible double-house at Exeter, like all institutions containing women, would have been placed under the aegis of the queen by the *Regularis*. The queen mentioned in that document, Æthelthryth[64], had a particular connection to Exeter. Her father was buried there, and her stepson, Edward, was taught there by Sidemann (203). It seems unlikely that the queen would allow the house to be destroyed, given its familial connections, and especially since Exeter itself had been a *morgengifu* to the previous queen, Emma (205).

Frank Barlow states that "there was a monastery at Exeter by the end of the seventh century and, despite ups and downs, it seems to have had a fairly continuous history and, in any case, never to have been changed into a nunnery" (*Leofric* 9). But Barlow is arguing here against William of Malmesbury's claim that in the eleventh century Bishop Leofric expelled nuns from the foundation during his reformation. The source for the story, William of Malmesbury, is considered suspect by both Barlow and Knowles for what they see as his excessive monastic leanings (*Leofric* 9), and his role as an apparent Norman apologist. Historian James Campbell, on the other hand, defends William as having a strong sense for historic evidence, and for not being quite as "credulous" (Campbell's term) as some of his contemporaries (222). If, as Knowles and Barlow suggest, William merely wished to slander Bishop Leofric, who outside his refurbishment of Exeter's library seems to

[64] Æthelthryth was not without a conspiratorial side, as she showed in her expulsion of Wulfhilda from Barking, replacing her with an abbess more loyal to her (Meyer 55). But she also supported women's religious activities by founding nunneries (Ramsbury, Winchester, Wherwell and Amesbury) in a period when historians tend to suggest that nunneries are on the wane (55)

have had an unremarkable career, surely the charge of expelling monks would have been a more potent one. As will be seen shortly the replacement of nuns with male religious was considered the norm, not the exception after the eighth century especially when, as in the case of Exeter, only a few inhabitants remained (Flowers 7). There seems no logical reason to presume that William of Malmesbury would have concocted a charge that had no serious implications in his own time.

It seems clear, according to Drage, that Bishop Leofric expelled some persons from the foundation, and if he expelled reformed monks then this action "makes him unique in eleventh-century England and shows an attitude strikingly at variance with the prevalent one" (281). Barlow agrees, stating that it is "unlikely that even a Lotharingian would have destroyed a truly monastic community" (*English* 213), such as one would have expected after Sidemann's reputed reformation in the late 960's. But Edwards finds that at least Leofric's installation of secular clerks instead of monks at Exeter was identical to the actions carried out by Giso at Wells and Walter at Hereford (10). Nonetheless, while exchanging monks for clerks was possible, this was not done by expelling a reformed and legitimate monastic order.

Let us say for the moment that Knowles and Barlow are correct. Bishop Leofric did not expel nuns from Exeter, and William of Malmesbury did get his facts confused. Could William have been basing his assertion on some sort of hard evidence about the removal of women from Exeter at an earlier period by another Leofric, as Rose-Troup suggests? In an extant document from the period one hundred years before Bishop Leofric there exists a record involving an Abbot

Leofric, in Exeter, taking charge of property from Abbess Eadgifu, possibly as late as 1018 CE (Rose-Troup 207). This transaction is recorded in the *Leofric Missal*, and may represent Eadgifu's property settlement on her retirement as Abbess from Exeter. She is stated as departing for a property at Stoke, which after her death would be returned to the abbot of the house at Exeter (Rose-Troup 208). If the abbess was leaving Exeter without appointing a successor, and she retains only a life interest in the property, this may depict the end of the line for women religious at. Mary's and St. Peter's (209). The women at Exeter, like those at many women's houses in England once the reforms became widely accepted, could have been displaced in favour of a male order with little or no notice taken by either religious or secular authorities.

Jane Schulenburg has found that the diminishment in the number of female houses in the period after 750 has several causes [65]. First, the increasing emphasis on what she terms "strict active enclosure" which finds its source in representations of women as weak and dangerous even in the previously less misogynistic Anglo-Saxon church ("Enclosure" 51). Enclosure, while welcomed by some women religious as an enhancement of their lives, saw women as a group denied access to the social, intellectual and economic resources of their culture (76). This loss of access rendered women's houses increasingly vulnerable to invasion, loss of financial support and eviction by bishops or secular authorities (72; 75). Many small

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[65] Schulenburg's research in not exclusively focused on Anglo-Saxon England, but many of her conclusions are applicable to women's houses in general in the areas of England, France and Germany.

women's houses were proprietary in nature, relying on the goodwill of the founder

and her family for support. Often led by a single, charismatic woman of means, a

large percentage did not outlive their founders' deaths (Schulenburg, "Communities"

221-2). A third element in the decline of women's houses was due to the change in

attitude during the earlier Carolingian and later Anglo-Saxon monastic reforms. Most

of the women's or double-houses [66] destroyed in England by the Viking invasions

were rebuilt during the reforms as male houses. After all, a donor to a male house

could be guaranteed masses for life by its members, a service that could not be

offered by women. In fact, Schulenburg says, it became "nearly a formula for the

destroyed and abandoned women's foundations to be re-established by the

reformers as houses for monks and canons" (227). It is yet another irony of Christian

history that this new set of reformers, who can be seen to be directly responsible for

much of women's loss of access to ecclesiastical power, were, like Jerome and

Augustine before them, indebted to wealthy and powerful women for the support of

their activities (Meyer 35).

Among those foundations apparently lost to women were some of the "stars"

of women's monasticism from the earlier period, including Whitby, Coventry,

Gloucester, Folkestone, Leominster, Minster-in-Thanet, Oxford, Bath, Carlisle,

Berkeley and, Schulenburg says, Exeter ("Communities" 228) [67]. The houses that

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[66] In Knowles' and Hadcock's *Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales*, double houses do not exist as a category. Indeed they barely exist at all, most being subsumed by the generic category of Benedictine Monks.

[67] Unfortunately, Jane Schulenburg does not cite a source for her assertion that Exeter was a women's institution before the reforms. While it is encouraging to my argument to have such an assertion made by a prominent historian, it does not seem to be acceptable as a certainty. Like Rosemary Woolf, Schulenburg merely states Exeter's

were removed from women's purview were not all voluntarily abandoned by their

inhabitants. Some of these institutions were sold out from under them by newly

powerful bishops. It is a telling sign of monastic women's anxiety over their

community's safety that in post-Conquest Anglo-Norman hagiographies of Anglo-

Saxon foundresses "the nuns' dread of losing their property is revealed by the

saints' miracles as well as their caution about charity. Help in maintaining property

was very important to these communities: such protection receives as much, if not

more, attention than healing the sick" (Millinger 124). It becomes increasingly clear

that neither Abbot nor Bishop Leofric would have had to justify removing women

from what may have been merely a small and battered religious foundation after

either the reforms or the Viking raid in 1002 CE.

The tide of politics, economics and theology was turning against female

religious, and mixed-sex houses in particular, throughout the century in question

(970-1070 CE), but there is increasing evidence that some survived the combined

onslaught of invasions and reformation [68]. It may be that with the gradual

reattribution, or at least reconsideration, of textual evidence previously attributed to

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status as a women's house as a given, and does not refute the arguments (like
Barlow's) against the assertion. Even more unfortunately, Shari Horner simply accepts
Schulenburg's assertion for the purposes of her own research, without noting the lack
of source material.

[68] Sally Thompson notes that the study of women's institutions in England after the
Conquest has been relatively sparse (1-2). But she also acknowledges that a number
of those foundations were double houses, in contrast to previous historians who
believed that these houses disappeared after the tenth-century reforms (3). Although
she is dealing with post-Conquest foundations in her monograph, the presence of
double-houses after the Conquest may indicate a lingering tradition from before the
conquest.

"anonymous" sources, that the history of women's role in English monasticism will become more clear.

To summarise, there are three sources for the tradition of women at Exeter. The first is the name of the house before it was changed by the eleventh-century Leofric. The house's double name of St. Mary's and St. Peter's, Rose-Troup says, suggests – although ever so slightly – there may have been two under one leadership. The original foundation date of circa 680 does put Exeter in the centre of a period when double houses were the norm, and not the exception. The second is the historical record contained in the *Leofric Missal* which documents an exchange of property from the woman who may have been the la st abbess of Exeter to the tenth-century Abbott Leofric. The third is the evidence of William of Malmesbury who, as I have stated, would have had little incentive to state that Bishop Leofric removed nuns when a more effective slander would have been the removal of monks. If there were women at Exeter at its foundation, and there are sources suggesting that they were there after a first reformation, only to be removed for good during the second, then the possibility exists that at least a portion of the texts created at Exeter were intended for a double house.

I would suggest that a fourth piece of evidence pointing to the existence of women at Exeter is, as previously stated, the data provided by the surviving manuscripts of the Exeter scribe, which seem to point to a female or mixed audience. If all this evidence can be ceded as possible, then the likelihood of an audience of both women and men for the *Exeter Book* itself is made stronger. In the

next section, an analysis of the codex as a unified document will, I believe, add

further evidence to support this theory.

SECTION III

The Exeter Book: Texts and Context

The Anthology Theory

Bernard Muir believes so firmly that the *Exeter Book* is a deliberately

compiled anthology that he has titled his new edition of the codex *The Exeter*

Anthology of Old English Poetry [emphasis mine]. Anthologies were, as has

previously been discussed, an essential component in the grammatical education of

the Middle Ages. Although anthologies, or compilations as Irvine terms them (344),

can seem random to a modern reader, they were carefully constructed as aids to

the process of grammatical instruction. In fact, the compilation became the standard

form for presenting most authors, with only a few such as Vergil or Boethius felt to

be deserving of their own, individual texts. The author and even the historical

context of each work in these compilations became less meaningful as each text

derived its *auctoritas* from its existence within the compiled form itself. As Irvine

says, "No text is read in isolation but as part of a library, a larger textual system,

through which, and because of which, a text becomes intelligible" (82). All texts in

this system of knowledge were part of the grammatical tradition, in that they were

required to participate, either explicitly or implicitly, in the dialogue of *ars*

grammatica. In the Carolingian renaissance, the *ars grammatica* becomes a central

focus or monastic education once again. This focus was brought by the Anglo-

Saxon churchman Alcuin to the Continent, and then returned to England through

the Carolingian-influenced monastic reforms of the tenth-century.

The standard ingredients that made up the mix of the average compilation are virtually identical to the contents of the *Exeter Book*: elementary texts, epic poetry, a collection of *enigmata* or riddles, and classical authors (357-58). The element that appears to be missing from the *Exeter Book* is that of classical authors, but it can be argued that the presence of the *Phoenix*, riddles rooted in Latin sources and works with Anglo-Saxon *auctoritas* such as Cynewulf's poetry, could be the vernacular response to literary *Latinitas*. This phenomenon could be seen as part of an overall appropriation of Latin literary cultural traits to the English national literary language (405; 417). By creating vernacular versions of Latin texts and by establishing an Anglo-Saxon system of literary *auctoritas*, the national culture of England was placed on a par, politically, religiously and intellectually, with the Latin tradition. In fact, Irvine suggests that the surviving manuscript of the *Cambridge Songs* (CUL Ms. Gg.5.35) may be a later example of a standardised literary program in Anglo-Saxon England which was the "model for Old English compilations like the *Exeter Book*" (360) [69].

While the compilation, used as a tool of *ars grammatica*, was a staple of monastic life in both Carolingian Europe and Anglo-Saxon England, there is

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[69] While Irvine's proposal that the *Exeter Book* may be part of an Anglo-Saxon chain of grammatical texts is an exciting one, it is somewhat problematic for the purposes of this study. Irvine accepts, without question, Conner's three-booklet theory as a basis for his comparison of the two manuscripts. He does not question the manner in which Conner's conclusion was reached, nor does he allude to Muir's criticism of the theory. In fact, Conner's three-booklet theory -- and particularly his assertion that the codex had no apparent practical purpose -- would seem to directly contradict a conclusion that the *Exeter Book* was a cohesive, carefully structured grammatical anthology.

evidence that *florilegia*, or collections of the finest Christianised classical works were

of particular interest to lay readers in ninth-century Carolingian culture. The majority,

McKitterick finds, were addressed to laymen or women, and offered to them models

of Christian life and behaviour (*Carolingians* 266). In particular, McKitterick finds that

the genre of *planctus*, sometimes identified as elegy, was particularly well-suited to

an educated lay audience (229). The tropes used to describe the selector of these

texts included those of a bee gathering honey, a selection of the most beautiful

flowers, or gathering of trees from the *silva* or forest of texts available (Irvine 428).

The *florilegia* could be seen as a tribute to the grammatical skill of an educated

reader or patron. Whether compilation or *florilegia*, the texts produced contained

instructions, implicit or explicit, on the correct manner to read the works contained.

These instructions could take several forms, the most obvious being glossing,

explanations of the texts written interlinearly or on the sides of the manuscript

pages, or an introduction consisting of the rules of comprehension. But the

instructions could also take the form of the contents of the manuscript itself, set up

from first to last in a manner that would ensure the correct understanding of all the

texts contained. I believe that this is the premise on which the *Exeter Book* is

constructed.

In the *Exeter Book*, I believe that the reader is instructed on how to

understand the entire book by the first group of texts, from *Christ I* to *Juliana*. The

reader who is intended to be instructed by these works seems to be both an ideal

male and female Christian *grammaticus*. This first section functions as the textual

representation of the reader his or herself, creating perfect models of a Christian

monastic's behaviour in all aspects of life, but particularly in the skills of language.

More than anything, the figures of Mary and Juliana, the literal beginning and end of

the section, become icons of not only physical and spiritual perfectibility, but textual

purity as well. They are the embodiments of the reader's ability to achieve *recto*

reading through the physical, intellectual and spiritual perfection achieved by women

(or men) through virginity, asceticism and martyrdom. Adding to the two

distinguished women who envelope the text is the story of St. Guthlac, hermit and

ascetic, who is the only figure of the three who may be emulated by monastics

voluntarily. All three of these figures are tested by God for the purity of their faith, as

are the children of *Azarias*. In the cases of Guthlac and Juliana, they are tempted by

demons as a direct confrontation with the forces of evil. Each and every figure

provides the monastic reader with a literal model of impeccable Christian behaviour.

But they also provide the readers with allegorical models of Christian textual activity,

in that they all demonstrate an ability to read the world and write their lives in a

perfect imitation of the supreme exegete, Christ. Without their presence, the

remainder of the *Book* loses its meaning as an anthology which will test that ability.

Patrick Conner has suggested that his first booklet (*Christ I-Guthlac B*) was

the last written, due in part to its length and complexity ("Structure" 233-34). I agree

with Bernard Muir that the reverse is demonstrably true. In the reading I have made,

the first section may contain the longest texts, but they are the simplest on a

theological and allegorical level. The *Christ* poems are the pure, undistorted truth of

Christ's life, requiring the least amount of readerly filtering. The opening sequence is

rooted in the Latin antiphons of the mass, and therefore utterly familiar to the reader.

The same can be said for the simple allegorical contents of both the *Phoenix* and

Azarias, which are standard Christianised versions of Classical and Old Testament

sources. The two hagiographies, *Guthlac* and *Juliana*, are also clear in both content

and intent; they do not contain elaborate or hidden messages. When the theological

clarity of these texts is compared to the purposeful obscurity, layers of imagery and

allegory, and utter subjectivity of such later texts as *the Wife's Lament*, the *Seafarer*

and the *Riddles*, this seems clear. Conner seems to suggest that greater length and

grammatical complexity (the wide variety of words and syntax used) equates with

reading difficulty as it would have been understood by the medieval *grammaticus*.

As Martin Irvine and many other scholars have made eminently clear, medieval

readers had entirely different sets of rules for and expectations of reading. Brevity

did not mean simplicity, nor length complexity. To the medieval reader, the message

of the *Christ* poems would probably have been far more obvious and easily

understood than the vagaries of the shorter texts such as the cryptic *Riddles*. The

readers of *ars grammatica* expected to be instructed on how to read a text, based

on the glosser, commentator or *compilator's* references to *auctoritas*, and this is the

case in the *Exeter Book*. In the *Exeter Book*, however, at least one model of

behaviour constructed for the reader has not previously been suggested, in part

because the gender of the intended audience for the codex as a whole was not

taken into consideration. That the *Exeter Book* is a form of *grammatica* or *florilegium*

seems likely, and that its intended audience could have included women seems

entirely possible. I will discuss the evidence suggesting the existence of both an ideal male and female reader or writer in more detail in the next section.

But how could a relatively powerless female house obtain the money or influence necessary to pull together such expensive texts? McKitterick has noted that *florilegium* were particularly popular with lay audiences and that certain genres, such as *planctus*, were important literary elements of lay textual culture. Given that, and extending that similar ideals of textual culture were imported to Carolingian-influenced Anglo-Saxon England after the reforms, it may be that the *Exeter Book* was compiled by or for the women religious of Exeter in honour of their new patron, the queen, or vice versa. The responsibility for female houses was awarded to the queen in the *Regularis Concordia*, and the queen in power at the time of the *Regularis* had familial ties to Exeter. It would not be surprising under the circumstances if she participated in the restoration of or addition to the library of a female or double house in Exeter. Further, it is becoming increasingly clear that the double-house was not completely wiped out by the combined forces of Viking invasions and Carolingian-influenced reforms. It seems possible that Exeter could have been among those that survived, perhaps in a reduced or unofficial form, until at least the late tenth century.

It seems possible that the *Exeter Book* was intended to function as an Anglo-Saxon *florilegia*, or compilation, which may have had the same appeal to a lay audience as its equivalent in Carolingian Europe. It is entirely usual in

manuscript culture for a work dedicated to a powerful patron to remain at the place

of its commission. The scarcity and value of books gave them power as items of

trade on a political level, and to compile a book for, or dedicate a book to, an

important patron was a means of currying favour. That such a large book appears to

be set up for the benefit of an ideal male and female reader, not solely for a male

community, makes it very likely that such readers would have had great influence

on the fate of the house itself. Unfortunately, theories about the origin of the text

must remain entirely speculative, but it is a possibility which may explain the number

of manuscripts that seem oriented to a female, or at least mixed, audience at

Exeter.

The Model of Christian Life: *Christ I-Juliana*

The *Exeter Book* opens with the poems identified as *Christ I, II* and *III*, also known as *Advent, Ascension* and *Judgement. Christ I* has long been known to be based on "particular Advent antiphons, which were either chanted or recited at Vespers, usually before and after the *Magnificat*", demonstrating its homiletic, as well as literary origins. (Muir, "Preliminary" 386) [70]. The figure of the Virgin appears as speaking subject in two, and as a major character in six out of twelve lyrics. The *Christ* poems, while separate in authorship, function as a single theological and literary unit, and can be presumed to be the most important works in the codex for the medieval reader. As Pope has stated, in spite of the missing leaf at the beginning of *Christ I*, it is unlikely that any other text could have been placed in front of the Christ poems according to the hierarchy of medieval literature ("Palaeography" 31).

Muir believes that "the first eight poems were placed together because they are "related thematically in their concern with different models for Christian living" (*Exeter Book* 25). However, he does not describe their interrelatedness in extensive detail. I believe that the poems' thematic and literary correspondences are deliberate, and that their organisation as a group argues against Conner's booklet theory which has the first booklet ending at the final extant lines of *Guthlac B*, folio 52v (114), thereby disconnecting the eight poems. The second

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[70] Muir is, as far as I am aware, the first editor to provide the Latin (with English translation) antiphons before each of the Old English lyrics.

booklet would extend from *Azarias* to the *Partridge* (53r-97v) and the third from

Homiletic Fragment III to the end (98r-130v). Again, the subject matter of these

purported booklets does not correspond to Robinson's rule. Following Muir's

analysis, the first section forms a coherent unit which, from the inviolable body and

powerful rhetoric of the "divine" Virgin Mary in *Advent (Christ I)* to the equally

inviolable and linguistically gifted "human" figure of Juliana, covers the full spectrum

of life for both Christian men and women. But I believe that the significance of the

section's opening and closing with female figures has not been analysed sufficiently

in terms of its implications for a gendered audience. Why is the presence of female

characters so strong in this codex? Is it merely a coincidence that the same scribe

wrote at least two other manuscripts which would have been of particular interest to

a female or mixed audience? I feel confident that the following literary analysis will

add some weight to the argument that a mixed audience was a strong possibility, if

not probability.

R.T. Farrell's study of *Azarias*, the sixth poem in the codex, divided the texts

in this first section into two pleasing medieval mathematical sections (three-three).

He proposed that *Azarias*, or *The Canticle of the Three Youths*, was not a separate

literary entity but the completion of *Guthlac B*, and that *Guthlac A* and *B* were

intended to function as a unit. If Farrell had been correct, an argument could be

made for a tidy duplicate "trilogy" of texts that precisely paralleled the *Christ* poems.

Guthlac could be read as an English advent, the *Phoenix* as an allegory of the

ascension, and *Juliana* as both judge (of the devil) and rewarded believer in a

second *Judgement.* Although Farrell's theory has been refuted by Pope ("Palaeography" 37) and Muir on palaeographical and codicological grounds, there is still an argument to be made that the poems immediately following *Christ I, II and III (Guthlac A and B, Azarias, The Phoenix* and *Juliana)* are indeed analogous to the first group in literary and theological function.

Guthlac, the English noble-turned-hermit, is born into a time of doubt, when the children of God are wandering from the path of true believers:

	Woruld is onhrered,
colaþ Cris†es lufu,	sindan costinga
geond middangeard	monge arisene,
swa þæt geara iu	godes spelbodan
wordum sægdon	ond þurh witedom
eal anemdon,	swa hit nu gongeð. (37b-42)

Guthlac is appointed by God to function as a means of redemption not only for himself as a single believer, but for his people, by means of the voluntary sacrifice of his body through ascesis. Like Christ, he overcomes a temptation in the wilderness to triumph rhetorically, physically and spiritually over evil. Guthlac represents the male eremite modelled across gender lines on both Christ and the Blessed Virgin. Like the other male virgins outlined by Aldhelm in *De Virginitate*, Guthlac defies base nature and inherited sin to give birth to a spiritual perfection. As a Christian saint, he also acts as an allegorical new redeemer, offering a model for Christian re-birth in his metaphorical (as eremite) and literal (physical) death.

Azarias and *The Phoenix* offer parallels to both *Christ II and III*, first and

foremost through their use as allegorical accounts of resurrection. An essential

element of medieval exegesis was the interpretation of the texts of the Old

Testament as predictive of those in the New Testament. In *Azarias*, or *The Canticle*

of the Three Youths, as Muir retitles the work, the children's resurrection from the

flames was seen as an allegory for the true resurrection of the crucified Christ.

Likewise, classical texts were reworked in Christian literature to give both explicit

and implicit references to religious values. In this case, the frequently Christianised

figure of the Phoenix, rising from its own ashes, signifies both the re-birth of the

Christian and the resurrected Saviour. In *Christ II*, the Saviour raises himself aloft,

accompanied by angels, in triumph, just as the children in *Azarias* are saved from

the fiery furnace and carried by angels to their victory over evil and death.

An apparent purposeful opposition is set up when the scene in which Christ

chains Satan in fiery fetters to suffer endless torment (*Christ II* 291b-297a) is

contrasted with the unharmed children fettered in an equally fiery place. The

children in *Azarias*, who are representative of all true believers, are prevented from

suffering in the fiery furnace by their faith and God's intervention. In yet another

parallel in the texts, Christ is depicted in his ascension as a bird (II 194-224) which,

like the phoenix, is revealed to all of the earth's inhabitants. The phoenix, like the

children and like Juliana in her martyrdom, is not destroyed by the flames but

redeemed by them.

If these eight poems do represent a group connected by their function outlining models for Christian living, how does the possibility of a joint male and female audience affect their interpretation? The poems are enveloped by the figures of heroic women who are powerful rhetoricians, the Virgin at the beginning and Juliana at the end. They are both, using Jane Chance's model, anti-Eves, the complete inversion of the temptable and tempting woman. The Virgin uses speech to persuade Joseph of the truth of her purity and divine motherhood, and she provides the source of humanity's redemption from the sin of Eve through her maternity. The obedient and chaste Juliana is, unlike the sinful Eve, able to judge the devil's rhetoric for what it is, and to defeat the human and non-human demons through her own powerful use of language. They are models for all Christians, but particularly for Christian women, representing both the unattainable (Mary) and, theoretically, attainable (Juliana) perfection and glory of virginity and faith. Further, I believe that this section is arranged to prepare both the male and female reader for the rest of the *Book*. The opening contains representations of perfected men and women as models for the Christian reader as exegete or *grammaticus*. Each of the figures who dominate this opening section offers to the medieval reader the literal and metaphorical techniques for the command of the skills of *grammatica* as a vital attribute of Christian monastic life. They are *rectae* writers of divine truth in the acts of their lives. They are *rectae* readers of holy interpretation in their understanding of the signs which surround them. Finally, they are *recto* speakers of pure and sacred truth. They are themselves the *auctoritas* for the words they speak and the texts which describe them, participating in textual culture by being rendered legible

through their purity and faith. In the grammatical tradition handed down from Isidore of Seville, poetry was the first form of Christian literature after the Bible, and heroic epic the first form of poetry (Irvine 236). By beginning the *Exeter Book* with the literal emergence of the logos in *Advent*, and closing this section with the heroic epic in the form of *Juliana*, the *compilator* of the codex follows the well-established pattern of textual authority. The theological clarity of these texts is in stark contrast with the apparent obscurity of the texts that follow. This opening section functions as the key which unlocks the entire text of the *Exeter Book* as a *grammatica* containing all that was necessary for Anglo-Saxon religious men and women to participate in a national textual culture.

Carol Heffernan's monograph demonstrated that the *Phoenix* also contains extensive female imagery, rooted in both archetypal and Marian allusions. Needless to say, it would be specious to assert that the figures of admirable Christian women, particularly the omnipresent image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, were exclusively of interest or importance to women. But *Christ I* and *Juliana* function as the apparent prologue and epilogue to the group, drawing attention to themselves as models of specifically female Christian lives. This stress on the importance of women as models for Christian life seems likely to be oriented towards the needs of an audience that is not removed from women, as would be the case in the strict post-reform, single-sex, monastic setting envisioned by Conner.

If indeed the two works are the frames for this group of models, then the section appears to make a clear statement about women and textual culture. The

Virgin is one of the few holy women in the early Middle Ages who is portrayed in art

and texts as a writer. She is, through her physical perfection, removed from the

weakness of body, mind and spirit that plagues all other human beings -- not solely

women. She is also, to medieval writers, the literal instrument of God's writing upon

the world as the means through which Christ, the Word, becomes flesh. She is the

female quivalent of the Word, Christ as *logos*, in the unmitigated truth of her life as

the vessel for God's will. Homer finds that the literary language of enclosure used to

describe the both the enclosure of women in religious foundations and to speak of

Mary's body and the bodies of all of all virginal women, is precisely the same as

that used by the female speaker iof the *Wife's Lament* to describe her condition (47;

50). However I would argue that while special emphasis was placed on female

virginity, the monastic culture that commissioned Aldhelm's text about virgins of

both sexes did not ignore either male virginity or claustration entirely.

While Mary is the ideal and unreachable goal of all Christian women, the

achievements of Guthlac and his sister Pega are closer to home. The figure of

Guthlac's sister and fellow hermit Pega, is an essential element in the saint's story

(34). John C. Pope's comparison of both Felix's *Vita* and the Old English *Guthlac*

concluded that the figure of Pega would have been contained in the missing

quire between *Guthlac B* and *Azarias* (37). He concludes that he "cannot

believe that the poet would have failed to elaborate either the sister's response

or the burial over which she presides with such devotion" in Felix's Latin version

of the saint's life (39). While that section of the story is missing in the *Exeter Book*

in its current condition, her participation in the Anglo-Saxon saint's life would have

been familiar to the tenth-century reader. It may seem illogical to dicuss a character

who does not exist in the text, but she is so important to the story that either her

presence or absence in the original is notable. For the purposes of this study, I will

accept Pope's assurance that she would have been part of the original.

Pega is the modest handmaiden to the saint, conducting his burial, speaking

his praises and disposing of his relics in Felix's Latin *Vita*. Pega acts as the model

for Christian women, particularly women religious, as aides to their brothers in

Christ. If the Virgin is impeccable in her alliance of perfect thought and deed, then

Pega is also flawless in her asceticism and her selflessness. She is the emissary for

God's intermediary, and is the earthly conduit through whom Guthlac's physical

remnants of holiness (his relics) are distributed. She is the one in closest contact

with Guthlac's "holy radioactivity", and without Pega's handling of the body and

dispersal of the relics after Guthlac's death, his saintliness would remain localised

and his well-deserved fame would not have spread as widely. But Pega is also a

model for the female exegete, "reading" Guthlac's life and saintliness accurately,

and "writing" his sanctity on the actual body of the saint with burial. In other words,

the figure of Pega is also the reader, who learns by her example how to

comprehend holiness near at hand. In Geoffrey Harpham's model, she is both

eremite and cenobite. She duplicates Guthlac's achievements through her own

asceticism, but gives up her opportunity for similar fame by exiting her hermitage to

attend to his worldly remains. Most importantly, Pega and Guthlac serve as

matchless models for the inmates of double-house monasticism. They are

impeccable in their behaviour as brother and sister in Christ, and are perhaps not

coincidentally comparable to Isidore and his sister in another manuscript by the *Exeter Book* scribe.

Juliana is the human counterpart of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as a virginal martyr for the love of Christ. If Mary is the mother without sin, then Juliana is the bride awaiting her immaculate bridegroom, radiant in her pure beauty and unmarked by the words of the demon or by the human lust surrounding her. If Mary is the exemplar of the supreme female exegete, and Pega is the physical means of textual transmission in her handling of the relics and body, as reader, then Juliana combines the two in perfect harmony. Her body is the literal instrument of textual inscription, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham's theory of asceticism will show next. Juliana is, unlike the "desexed holy women" of Aelfric's hagiographies (Frantzen "Women Aren't Enough" 159-65), female to the end, radiant in her beauty and shining in her virginal purity. She does not become "manly" even in her wrestling match with the demon, but remains the perfect bride for her flawless bridegroom, Christ. Her physical body will be inscribed by the instruments of torture, and her soul will become the perfect text of holiness. She reads between the demon's lines of rhetoric and finds their faults, and she speaks to the end of true faith and belief. She shows Helesius and her father to be inadequate readers, in that they are only able to read literally. I agree with Homer's point that "Juliana's body functions as a text that contains a spiritual message of truth but that is read by her torturers only for its literal – that is, physical – value" (662) [71]. In her own behaviour she is a perfect

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[71] It is important to acknowledge that I reached a number of the same conclusions as Shari Homer (albeit through different methodologies) before I became aware of the existence of her work. Any information or conclusions garnered from Homer's work are

model for of the monastic *grammaticus* at his or her best, and her tale also functions as a warning against "wrong" reading..

After all, the role of the ideal Christian *grammaticus* was a difficult one. The ultimate aim was to achieve a perfect understanding of the perfect book, the Bible, without falling into temptation (wrong reading) on the way. The physical and mental demands of grammatical education were intense, and each and every text was a trial by fire, of sorts, for the reader. Like each of the perfect models set out in the opening section of the *Exeter Book*, the Christian reader was expected to overcome all the difficulties sent his or her way on the road to achieving a Christian comprehension of textual culture. Every text could be misunderstood, every word held in itself both correct and incorrect meaning, and the reader would have to stand fast, like their models, in their faith and right reading. The medieval Christian reader firmly believed in the potential for words and texts to wreak havoc. The result of the subsequent chaos would be a diminishment in faith and in God's reason in each reader. By including Cynewulf's request for the reader's prayers at the end of this section, the anthologist is demonstrating his or her confidence that the reader had understood and is able to emulate the models of grammatical understanding that have come before. The reader who comes to the end of *Juliana* has been purified by the reading of the texts, and is able to both act for Cynewulf (by praying for him) and continue on to the slippery road represented by the later, more ambiguous texts.

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acknowledged correctly, but any conclusions I reached through my own approach –
even if identical to Homer's – has been left in my own words.

Guthlac and Juliana: Gender and Saintliness

There are easy comparisons drawn between Juliana and Guthlac as female and male saints, martyr and hermit, paired archetypes of human holiness. As reasonably standard hagiographies, Juliana and Guthlac have generic similarities, but also significant variances. In his study *The Ascetic Imperative in Art and Culture*, Geoffrey Galt Harpham sets up a number of paradigms for the type of hagiographies he terms "ascetic texts" (4), the archetype for which is Athanasius' *Life of St. Anthony*. These texts, he states, serve the causes of both narrative and ethics by acting to erase "the distinction between inner and outer by serving simultaneously as an external record of inner thoughts and as an internalised eye of social judgement" (14). The texts he worked with for his monograph act as the record of the branch of monastic life called the eremitic, a term he broadens to cover many of the hagiographic subjects whose stories are rooted in fleshly denial, and which I extend to include the virgin martyr. The ascetic life of the eremite, Harpham says, functions as both a super-historical form of world renunciation and as the signifier, for which the cenobite (the community based monastic) is the signified (29). The *Exeter Book*'s likely origin in, and apparently certain collection by, a cenobitic monastic house makes Harpham's theories about the function of hagiography important to a reading of the saints' lives in the codex. Neither of the saints are based in a Christian community, but live and die alone with their faith. They are both removed from the community-based reader's existence in the strangeness of their circumstances. In particular, Harpham's definition of the supreme achievement of hagiography -- that the saint is subsumed by the text -- is relevant to my theory of

the opening section as modelling the grammatical life. In this codex, both Juliana
and Guthlac are utterly subsumed by their texts.

Harpham sees the central Christian linguistic metaphor of Christ as *logos* as
fraught with difficulty in the recorded lives of the ascetics. In these hagiographic
works, the demons who inevitably appear call into question the logocentric notion of
speech through their ability to mimic Scripture (9). In *Juliana* the demon mimics the
voice of the Christian, asking for the saint's mercy and implying that she could act to
redeem his suffering. The dual voices of Heliseus and Affricanus, the other
"demons" of the text, alternately seductive and threatening, function as weak and
human inversions of Christ the Bridegroom and God the Father. Juliana's ability to
judge the true *logos* from the false, and her own ability to reproduce the power of
the "text" of Christian faith through her rhetoric and action makes her an explicit
participant in Christian textual culture. The purpose of training the believer in the
methodologies of Christian reading through the *ars grammatica* was to ensure that
they could judge truth and read past the surface of any text to uncover its ultimate
meaning. Juliana embodies the potential for a Christian female class of monastic
grammatici, as desired by Benedict, in her perfect exegesis of all the male speakers
in the text, evil and divine.

In *Guthlac A and B*, the eremitic saint faces a similar demonic presence, one
that comes to both tempt through the manipulation of *logos*, and overpower through
physical intimidation. But the physically exiled Guthlac, unlike the spiritually solitary

Juliana, is given a guardian angel to assist him. Guthlac is the true eremite, removed from the world by choice, dead to his previous life, and eagerly awaiting heavenly rewards:

> Sume þa wuniað on westennum,
>
> secað ond gesittað   sylfra willum
>
> hamas on heolstrum   hy ðæs heofondcundan
>
> boldes bidað. (*Guthlac A* 81-84a)

Juliana, on the other hand, is seen from the poem's opening in blood and destruction to be in the thick of an earthly conflict, which she must face to gain her final reward. The poem opens with a heroic flourish, more reminiscent of battle than holy contemplation:

> Hwæt. We ðæt hyrdon   hæleð eahtian,
>
> deman dædhwate,   þætte in dagum gelamp
>
> Maximianes,   se geond middangeard,
>
> arleas cyning,   eahtnysse ahof --
>
> cwealde Cristne men,   circan fylde,
>
> geat on græswong   godhergendra,
>
> hæþen hildfruma,   haligra blod
>
> ryhtfremmendra. (*Juliana* 1-8a)

Guthlac, while physically alone in his worldly renunciation, is constantly supervised and aided by armed guardian angels: "Fore him englas stondað/gearwe mid gæsta wæpnum" (87b-88a). Guthlac's first temptation comes not by demons

alone, but when the competing voices of angel and devil vie for his soul. The conflict

is settled not by Guthlac's action, but by the Lord's intervention:

> Swa hy hine trymendon   on twa healfa
>
> oþþæt þæs gewinnes   weoroda dryhten
>
> on þæs engles dom   ende gereahte. (133–135)

Henceforth Guthlac receives guidance from his "comforter spirit" (Bradley, 253),

never again wandering alone in his wildemess. He appears to be passive, but is

active in his choice of the ascetic hermit's life, while Juliana's more active tale can

be read as rooted in non-action. Juliana may face her tormentors alone, inviolable in

her purity and steadfast in her faith, but she does not actively choose her path. Like

Mary, her role is thrust upon her, and she is reactive in her faith.

Harpham points out that "hagiography documents a class of people trying to

achieve complete narratability, trying to become dead to the world, and recuperable

only through textuality" (73) and both saints are fully imbedded in a purely textual

world. Juliana is inimitable both in her historical and geographic distance and in her

martyrdom, while Guthlac is the eremitic signifier to the reader's signified. At the end

of *Juliana*, it is the author Cynewulf, not the saint, who moves the reader to action

by requesting their prayers for himself. But it is the very textuality of Juliana's

existence that makes her a model for the female exegete. She confirms the power

of the true *logos* of Christian exegesis to defeat evil by right reading and right

speaking. The request for prayers at the end of *Juliana* further enhances the virtue

of "right" textual activity by drawing the reader into the speech-act of worship and prayerful intervention.

Juliana is, through her perfection, able to outthink, outread, outspeak and even outwrestle her foes in repeated displays of complete spiritual and physical attainment. She tells her father early on:

>   Ic þe to soðe   secgan wille,
>
>   bi me lifgendre   nelle ic lyge fremman.
>
>   Næfre ic me ondræde   domas þine,
>
>   ne me weorce sind,   witbrogan,
>
>   hildewoman,   þe þu hæstlice
>
>   manfemmende   to me beotast,
>
>   ne þu næfre gedest   þurh gedwolan þinne
>
>   þæt þu mec acyrre   from Cristes lofe. (132-139)

The life of the ascetic is, Harpham believes, a form of self-fashioning; an *mitatio Christi* in suffering as well as in the taking on and then rejecting of fleshly form (24). The ultimate achievement of the ascetic life, he concludes, is the eventual escape from autobiography through philosophy and finally to exegesis. This is exemplified, Harpham states, by Augustine's *Confessions* (91) where the author achieves the utter subjection of his physical body to the pure *logos* of Scripture. He describes Augustine's act thus: "Mortifying and deadening an unstable and temptable subjectivity by submitting it to a code, textual self-representation performs

a function analogous to ascetic discipline, analogous to martyrdom" (120).

Exegesis, then, could be regarded as "pure" reading, utterly removed from self-reference (121) and self-interest. The reader becomes one with the *auctoritas* of Christian readerly tradition by achieving the same prowess, as *recta* reader, as the model exegetes. The character of the ascetic/martyr as "athlete of Christ", a term coined by Origen and repeated in Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* (60), is determined by Harpham to be the perfect exemplar of the "calling" of asceticism, a calling that, as Weber would later describe it, was driven by profit. The profit to the ascetic was fame, which was given to the ascetic by the cenobite. As Harpham says: "Fame is so integral to the very idea of a saint's life that we must recognise a profound congruence between the practises of asceticism and the texts that documented those practises" (27). Both Guthlac and Juliana are, in one sense, the makers of their own "fame" through self-denial and sacrifice, but they do not exist without the perfect comprehension of the readers of their lives. They are both perfect *grammatici* and saviours, in that they sacrifice themselves to redeem others, especially the reader. Guthlac, who has given up the world to find God, believes he will be saved by God from the torments of demons and a premature demise. Juliana, on the other hand, awaits her death calmly. Cynewulf acts as the mere intermediary between the pure text which is Juliana which he has "heard" and the letters on the page. Similarly, the reader is the intermediary between the truth of Christian understanding and the danger of wrong reading.

Juliana's internal beauty is clearly manifest externally, for she is as radiant as the sun, gleaming, and dazzling in her loveliness. Here, the body of the virgin is

the text, as Harpham has suggested, since as an ascetic the "exemplary self is observable...it is narratable" in a way entirely different from the mystical (27). One of the strikingly original elements of the opening and closing of Cynewulf's *Juliana* is the absence of the standard apology for the author's shortcomings, for his inability to represent truly such a divine subject. The trope is usual, Harpham suggests, because of the nature of "textual ascetics" (5), that of the referential (perfect, unattainable, objective representation) versus the poetic function (that of the message and of language itself). The absence of that standard apology may indicate an authorial or scribal awareness that the readers would have the skills needed to read the text correctly. If the Blessed Virgin can be regarded as the first model for the readers, then no artifice of *humilitas* is required. Instead, the anthologist can be sure that his or her readers will be able to read each text as skilled *grammatici*. By the time the reader reaches the end of *Juliana*, they have moved beyond the act of reading as a skill into the action of reading as worship. The skilled *grammatici* who were created by reading the opening section of the *Exeter Book* were now capable of the speech-act required of them.

That Juliana should be the subject chosen – the virgin martyr – when the male saint of the *Exeter Book* is instead a hermit and founder of an abbey who has escaped from the militarism of aristocratic life, is interesting. Certainly they are dissimilar hagiographic "types", and both equally valid in their inclusion in an anthology. But if, as Muir suggests, this is a deliberately compiled anthology, then the choice must be commented upon. What seems to occur here is that it is the

Juliana who is the true *miles Christi*, dying as a soldier in the army of Christ, while Guthlac, in spite of his facing the standard demon, seems the more "passive" of the two. Cynewulf's "fighting saints", as Olsen terms them, Juliana and Elene, may have been selected for their Germanic, heroic qualities and narrative appeal, but why is this active woman selected along with an apparently more passive man for this tenth-century text? This may say something significant about the Anglo-Saxon view of Christianity, that Juliana embraces the heroic tradition to become holy while Guthlac rejects it, and may explain the changes made to the original text of Juliana's Latin *passio* [72]. On the other hand, Guthlac's very rejection of the cultural values of militarism makes him more Christ-like in the end. He becomes the redeemer of his people, and those who seek his intervention, precisely because he is utterly dead to the world through self-mortification and passivity. Guthlac is just as perfect a *grammaticus* as Juliana in that he has read Christ's message accurately, and lives it through his own subjugation to the word. Each saint seems to reject their cultural and religious gender roles, the male becomes passive and "female" and the female active and "male", as they must to be equal in Christ. Yet at the same time, Juliana is passive in her acceptance of martyrdom, and Guthlac active in seeking out the hermit's way. Guthlac's apparent passivity is equal, in monastic terms, to any act of warrior-like martyrdom. While Guthlac inscribes his life, or text, upon the world by refuting the world, Juliana is inscribed upon by that same refutation. There is, in fact, no simple explanation for the apparent inversion and simultaneous confirmation of

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[72] The *passio* includes one scene in which Juliana converts the audience at her martyrdom, and another in which she demands that Helesius get a promotion before she will consider his proposal. The *passio* figure is less committed virgin than committed Christian who would have married Helesius if he had only agreed to convert to Christianity.

monastic gender expectations in these two texts. It may be this, as much as any form of historical documentation, which allows for the possibility that the audience intended for these texts was not itself simple. The political, religious and theological complexities of the double-house system ultimately led to its undoing by a Continental church hierarchy. That Juliana and Guthlac both meet and resist expectations of gendered behaviour is precisely what the inmates of the double-houses of Anglo-Saxon England did themselves.

If, as I quoted Harpham stating earlier, the practise of exegesis, of utter subjection to the text, is the equivalent of martyrdom and of ascetic practises in general, then the texts of *Juliana* and *Guthlac* provide perfectibility for all readers of the text. The *Exeter Book*'s possible compilation for a double-house, during or after the conservative reform period could suggest that the active Juliana, a remnant from an earlier era, functioned as a reminder to the women religious of the potential of female spiritual militarism. However, she appears to be placed at risk due to her inciting desire in others. In this sense, I agree with part of Homer's thesis, that *Juliana* could also be seen as a literary representation of the potential fate of women "out there" beyond the walls of the peaceful and, according to the post-reform rules, sex-segregated cloister ("*Juliana*" 671). But if the temptations represented by Juliana are placed in a purely grammatical context, then it becomes possible that they represent not a simple sexual threat, or a knee-jerk reaction to women's sexual dangers, but the threat of poor grammatical skills. The evil that

could be found in misinterpretation, according to many Christian writers, was not in the texts themselves, but in the reader's poor understanding of them.

The *Exeter Book* Texts -- Testing Knowledge

Bernard Muir has included an extensive bibliography at the end of Volume 2

of his edition of the *Exeter Book* (II 696-814). Within this bibliography are hundreds

of studies which could be described as "microscopic" in their view of the works of the

codex. This description is not intended to suggest that the studies are lacking in

worth, indeed they are invaluable resources for an in-depth understanding of the

poetry in the codex. The description of "microscopic" means merely that they are

limited by their intention to examine the poems contained within the *Exeter Book* as

independant entities or parts of small, discrete groups. What the majority of

scholars in this area have not seemed to do is to try and examine the texts as part

of the larger entity which is the entire codex, a view which could be described as

"macroscopic". What becomes apparent when research is undertaken on the nearly

infinite variety of views held, is that collectively the studies form a larger picture.

Scholars have found myriad connections between and among all of the various

texts contained within the *Exeter Book*. Muir cites a number of such interpretive

studies in his introductions to each poem. One example would be Howe's work on

Widsið, which is described as part of the Old English catalogue poems, including

the *Gifts of Men*, the *Precepts, Deor, Widsið* and the *Fortunes of Men*. But Muir also

cites another study which sees *Widsið* as a vernacular *ars poetica* (Rollman 431), a

determination which is in keeping with its placement in a grammatical anthology.

Jane Chance connects *Widsið* with the *Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*,

viewing the two female speakers as inversions of the male poet's skill (86). These

interpretations may seem contradictory and prove the point made bey Bernard Muir

that the individual texts of the codex have proved so seductive and fascinating that

few scholars have seen the need to venture beyond them as individual works to

examine the codex *in toto*.

The most obvious example of a poem which has received a multitude of

differing readings is the *Wife's Lament*. It has been interpreted (to cite only a few

studies) as: a riddle; part of a group of "female-voiced" poems with *Wulf and*

Eadwacer, an example of *frauenlieder*, a prominent part of a category of Old

English elegies with *Wulf, The Seafarer, The Ruin* and *The Wanderer*, paired with

the *Husband's Message* as a "diptych of elegy and consolation" (Howlett 7); one of

the female heroes alongside *Juliana*, the Virgin of *Christ II* and the speaker of *Wulf*

(Chance 92); an inverted "mock scop" who could be thematically connected to the

speakers of *Deor* and *Widsið* (Chance 86); as linguistically similar to the Gnomic

poems such as the *Maxims* (Henry 22); one of a group including *The Descent Into*

Hell, Judgement Day I and *Resignation* which features "plural speakers or apparent

disunity of thought (Anderson 636-7), and so on, practically *ad infinitum*. The list

could go on a very long time, and indicates that the poem does indeed hold

enormous intrinsic value in and of itself. But it also holds value as part of a larger

whole.

As just one example, by using an even broader canvas than that offered by

Anglo-Saxon studies, it is possible to make a thematic reading of the *Wife's Lament*

and a number of other *Exeter Book* poems as components in one type of literature preferred by and written about some women religious. Barbara Newman has recently published a study which includes a section on women religious and the theme of purgatory, a theme which she is confident predates the twelfth-century inception of the term, as stated by LeGoff (109). The speaker of the *Wife's Lament* could easily be described as trapped in the cruel nothingness which is purgatorial space. In literary terms, she may be joined there by the speakers of the *Wanderer*, the *Seafarer*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and *Widsið*, and in subject matter by *Vainglory*, *Soul and Body II*, *Judgement Day I*, the *Descent into Hell* and *Contrition*. In fact, the two poems which are inevitably linked together by scholars as "woman-voiced", the *Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, seem to be perfect examples of women suffering in "purgatorial marriage" (Newman 115-6). As Newman puts it "if happy marriages deserved punishment, unhappy ones deserved a reward, at least for the abused and long-suffering spouse" (115). These two women are clearly suffering, and may be following the route to heaven by means of their purgatory here on earth. The theme of purgatorial marriage is important in the literature of female saints, and could even be found in the perversion of love and physical relations found in *Juliana*.

Celia Sisam's theory that the *Vercelli Book* could have been made either for or even in a female house becomes relevant at this point again. In this case, Newman's theory is applicible to both codices, if the premise that the *Exeter Book* could have been made for a female or double house is accepted. Using Newman's

hypothesis about the importance of the themes of purgatory for women religious, the two codices are found to have a considerable interrelationship. The *Exeter* and *Vercelli* Books contain the four "signed" Cynewulf poems, *Juliana* and *Christ II* in the *Exeter Book* and *The Fates of the Apostles* and *Elene* in the *Vercelli Book*. Roberta Bosse and Norman Hinton have determined that Cynewulf's signed texts are a "departure from normal Anglo-Saxon poetic practise (containing) a commonality of thematic interest which may suggest that, throughout his career, Cynewulf was possessed of an evolving interest in apocalyptic materials, particularly the Second Coming" (279). The theme of apocalypse is joined by a concern for the dead and those in purgatory, which is also found in all four of the Cynewulf texts. Bosse and Hinton find that purgatory "had been mentioned in England prior to Cynewulf by Bede, who also stressed the efficacy of prayers for the dead as a means of alleviating their sufferings" (281). The theme of purgatory, and especially of women as intercessors for the dead, is one that Newman finds in the earliest texts by women, such as Perpetua and Thecla, and which continues through her study into the fourteenth century. In another link between the two manuscripts, they each contain versions of the poem *Soul and Body II*, the shorter version of which is in the *Exeter Book* between *Homiletic Fragment III* and *Deor*. It seems possible that the inclusion of the unusual Cynewulf poems, as Bosse and Hinton describe them, and the duplication of *Soul and Body II* was not unintentional.

It may be that further study of both codices as units which could have been made in or for a female or double house could result in a significant enlarging of women's roles in Anglo-Saxon textual culture. What becomes apparent in Bosse

and Hinton's study is that Cynewulf was unusual in Anglo-Saxon culture, and it seems possible that his unusual interests led to a particular popularity for his poetry among Anglo-Saxon mixed-sex houses, which were themselves unusual in the larger Western Christian monastic scheme. It would indeed be remarkable if two of the three surviving Old English poetic codices originally had female or mixed audiences. While the interrelationships described may have been only coincidences, it may also say something about the nature of women's textual activities in that particular time and place.

Karma Lochrie's reading of the *Exeter Book* sees a number of connections between texts in the manuscript. As she says "As well as an anthology of individual poems, the *Exeter Book* is a collection of poetical arrangements, configurations, and sequences, such as the *Riddles*, the *Christ* sequence, and the bestiaries. In other words, the Exeter codex is a composite of miniature compositions of which the individual poems can be seen as parts" ("*Wyrd* " 323). To Lochrie, three texts in the *Exeter Book* (*Resignation A* and *B*, *Judgement Day*) form a group of texts comparable to those of Corpus Christi College MS. 201. These works are a "series of instructions for devotional exercises" (323) involved in penitence. I agree with Lochrie that these texts could be related to devotional exercises, but I believe that the exercise they are requiring of the reader is that of reading and right comprehension as a form of devotion.

Even in a brief survey of the hundreds of articles and monographs written about the contents of the *Exeter Book* it is, as seen above, possible to find variant

readings which result in an almost infinite number of textual and thematic

interconnections. In their sheer number and diversity, it is possible to say that there

exist studies which make connections *from* any single text in the codex *to* every

other poem in the manuscript. On first glance the multiple and apparently

irreconcilable readings seem to indicate only that Anglo-Saxonists are possessed of

fertile imaginations. But the range of readings can also be read macroscopically as

affirming the idea that the *Exeter Book* is indeed a unified text. Returning to one of

the themes outlined at the beginning of this study, it becomes apparent that the lack

of attention to the codex as an entity spreads to become a lack of interest in the

critical literature which writes about the codex as an entity. Bernard Muir's gathering

of both in his new edition is an invaluable resource which makes taking the larger

view possible. If both the texts of the codex and their scholarly interpretations are

viewed broadly and macroscopically, instead of narrowly and microscopically,

unifying themes become readily apparent in both.

The links that have been established are not simply codicological in nature,

but go beyond the texts placement in the codex to find similarities throughout

different physical parts of the manuscript. In other words, the thematic unities are

not tied to the physical connections of the texts on conjoined folios or in theoretical

sections. For example, it seems clear that even if only two or three of the above

theories about the *Wife's Lament* are true, then that poem can be related to at least,

say, five or six other works in the codex. If that can be done, then it becomes

impossible to argue that the codex is an arbitrary gathering of poems, without any

relationship or meaning. What occurs then is that poems that seem "anomalous"

become simply part of a larger whole, and are supported by that whole as essential

components in a larger strategy of textual context.

Conclusion

At this point in thmy study, I must presume that the reader is able to

consider, if not to accept two specific premises. The first is that the *Exeter Book*

seems to have created as a carefully structured and deliberately compiled

anthology, likely for the study of *ars grammatica*. The second premise is that the

anthology may have been intended to be read by both male and female readers,

both groups participating in a vernacular study of language. It appears to me that

the original readers of the codex were presumed by the scribe/anthologist to have

the skills necessary to interpret complex literary texts. It seems very likely that they

would have been expected to study the remainder of the texts in the book just as

their introductory models of perfect textual understanding (Juliana, Guthlac and the

Virgin) would have done. The texts that the *Exeter Book* contains are indeed a

mirror of all things in God's world, both good and bad. The works are placed by the

anthologist in a logical and conscientious order to provide contrast, literary impact

and the greatest challenge to the women who were intended to be the audience. To

cite one example, *The Wanderer* assures the reader of the rewards of a life such

as Juliana's, in spite of the tests of faith and trials of the heart that cause the reader

pain. While it is overly simplistic to suggest that all the poems within the *Exeter Book*

were to be read as basic Christian allegories or axioms, it seems apparent that the

anthologist would have expected his or her readers to perform the functions

required of a Christian exegete or *grammaticus*. This would mean that each text

would be analysed on all four levels of Christian exegesis: the literal, tropological, typological and anagogocal.

In this case, tho textual culture in which the *Exeter Book* participated was the vernacular, but the anthologist was likely, and the scribe was certainly, aware of the competing Latin textual culture. The origins of any of the poems in the Latin, Germanic or Celtic traditions have been discussed in Calder's two studies on the sources of Anglo-Saxon poetry (*Sources and Analogues*), and is external to the purposes of this discussion. But this vernacular grammatical anthology serves the purpose outlined by Irvine, in that it sees its role, and the role of vernacular *ars grammatica* generally as "the guardian of historia – textual tradition – and therefore...embraces all writings worthy of memory" (241). The anthologist functions as the literary *auctor* as *compilator*, a "plunderer of the whole library of accumulated texts" (243). The apparently anomalous nature of any number of the *Exeter Book* texts becomes fully comprehensible if the purposes of the *ars grammatica* and the collections which serve those purposes are kept in mind.

But more importantly, if it is possible to apply a gender to the grammaticus – either male or female – then the works take on new meanings. An essential function of grammatical study was *lectio*, or reading aloud. With a female reader speaking the voice of the Virgin, of Pega and of Juliana, and going on to become the *recta* reader/speaker of the *Maxims*, *Soul and Body* or the *Wife's Lament*, the Christianisation of all the poems would have been complete. The perfect female *grammaticus*, purified in mind, body and spirit, could have found in each and every

work another key to God's wonders. The sheer number of female voices in the codex is made unremarkable if it can be accepted that its readership might have been either, or both, sexes. The sometimes earthy subject matter of the *Riddles*, for example, is elevated by the textual sophistication possessed by these men and women. In the end, it is not that the *Exeter Book* as an entiry is incomprehensible to modern readers, but that the audience of that book disappeared from view. The retrieval of a female readership makes the *Book 's* structure apparent, and its content less puzzling.

At the outset, I indicated that it would not be possible for this study to create a certainty. There is simply not enough evidence to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that the *Exeter Book* was manufactured for a double or female house. It might appear that I have lost sight of that in the section of the text which argues for a literary "fact" — the ideal female reader — based on subjective interpretation of poetic texts. I wish to emphasise that this is not the case. I am fully aware of the limitations of the evidence I have presented, and of the numerous interpretations that could be reached by different scholars using the same evidence. The aim of this study was not so much to prove facts as to raise possibilities, and to question accepted practises. What, I asked at the beginning, are the results of positing a female readership for the *Exeter Book?* I hope that I have proven that the results of viewing the text as intended for women renders the codex less opaque, and in particular explains how it may have been intended to be read by its male, female or mixed audience. The endless discussions of the content of the many anomalous texts seem to continue because there is an attempt to explain away the variations

in gender , theological, pollitical and sexual dynamics that inhabit the *Book*. If the female reader is given credit as being essential to the foundational structure of the codex, then those variances are rendered comprehensible.

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Abbreviations

ANQ   *American Notes and Queries*

ASE   *Anglo-Saxon England*

EETS   *Early English Text Society*

GRM   *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*

JEGP   *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*

MÆ   *Medium Ævum*

MLQ   *Modern Language Quarterly*

Neophil.   *Neophilologus*

N & Q   *Notes and Queries*

NM   *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*

PMLA   *Modern Language Association of America: Publications*

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