**THE EARLIEST WOMEN'S WRITING? ANGLO-SAXON LITERARY
CULTURES AND COMMUNITIES.**

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Abstract

Who were the first women writers in the English literary tradition? This question continues to preoccupy feminist scholars in the twenty-first century, but very few would look back to the centuries before the Norman invasions in order to find the answer. Focusing on the religious houses of Ely and Whitby in the seventh and early eighth centuries this article reviews some of the surviving evidence of the first monastic women's writing. Looking for traces of early texts by women, it re-examines the lives of the Abbesses Æthelthryth of Ely and Hild of Whitby found in the fourth book of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, alongside the account of Hild found in the *Old English Martyrology*, and, more speculatively, it reconsiders the case for women's involvement in the production of the anonymous first *Life of Gregory the Great*. This article argues that texts by women were 'overwritten' by the earliest male monastic writers, a process reinforced by later scholarship. By focusing on texts associated with religious houses ruled by women, and by seeing them as the productions not of individuals but of communities, it is possible to get a fuller and more balanced understanding of women's writing in this earliest period of English literary history.

Key words

Women; Medieval; Anglo-Saxon; Gender; Authorship; Saints' lives.

Biography

Diane Watt is Professor of English Literature and Head of the School of English and Languages at the University of Surrey. She works on medieval and early modern literature, women's writing, gender and sexuality. Her publications include

Secretaries of God (D.S. Brewer, 1997), *Amoral Gower* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), *Medieval Women's Writing* (Polity, 2007), *The Lesbian Premodern*, co-edited with Noreen Giffney and Michelle Sauer (Palgrave, 2011) and *The History of British Women's Writing, 700-1500*, co-edited with Liz Herbert McAvoy (Palgrave, 2012).

Introduction

Who were the first women writers in the English literary tradition? This is a question that continues to preoccupy feminist scholars in the twenty-first century, but very few would look back to the centuries before the Norman invasions in order to find an answer. As Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing have recently observed, ‘Literary History rarely associates women with writing and cultural production in the earliest period of English literature ... [and] the Anglo-Saxon period is ignored even by historians of women’s literature’.¹ Yet, as Lees and Overing suggest, there exists a considerable amount of evidence that from the seventh-century onwards women religious in England were actively engaged in literary culture. In this article I aim to review this evidence in order to explore in more detail the traces that remain in the surviving record of the earliest monastic women’s writing, focusing specifically on the religious houses of Ely and Whitby in the seventh and early eighth centuries. Further evidence of a tradition of women’s writing in Latin emerging from the important religious house at Barking has been analyzed in my companion article ‘Lost Books: Abbess Hildelith and the Literary Culture of Barking Abbey’.² My project here resonates with revisionist approaches being undertaken in relation to women’s writing in the later Middle Ages, and in particular with the hypotheses of Sarah McNamer in *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* concerning the appropriation of the textuality of holy women (whether as readers, patron, or as authors) by influential men who were often their close associates.³ Adopting such an approach in relation to the early medieval period presents us with specific problems, however, because of the greater impact of cultures of orality, because the manuscript record is so much more fragmented, because an even greater proportion of the written evidence was produced anonymously, and because so much

of the scholarship in the field remains resistant to speculative feminist readings and recovery work.

Book four of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (completed in 731), a work as a whole concerned with chronicling the establishment of the English church, includes the lives of three founding abbesses: Æthelburh (Ethelburga) of Barking (*fl.* 664); Æthelthryth (Etheldreda) of Ely (c.636-679); and Hild of Whitby (614-680).⁴ The lives of all three women, who wielded considerable political as well as religious power, suggest that Anglo-Saxon female sanctity fitted into a longstanding tradition of women's visions and prophecy that originated in the pre-Christian era and continued to the Reformation and beyond.⁵ Bede, like many of the influential churchmen who succeeded him, was divided in his motives: on the one hand, he wanted to honour and promote these early foundations by recording significant people and events associated with them; but on the other, he felt uncomfortable with, and therefore tried to contain textually, the degree of autonomy and power wielded by the early abbesses, autonomy and power which was subsequently circumscribed by monastic reform. Bede's accounts of these elite women elide their sources, which almost certainly included lives of the founding abbesses originally composed within their religious houses. I argue here that Bede 'overwrote' the women's lives in the sense that he wrote over, and thus partially obliterated accounts, whether written or oral, that had been produced in the abbesses' own monasteries.

Bede's accounts of Æthelthryth of Ely and Hild of Whitby stand in close proximity in the *Ecclesiastical History*, and Bede clearly intends them to be read together. Bede's life of Æthelthryth is given particular prominence in the *Ecclesiastical History*

because it is accompanied by a hymn to Æthelthryth which Bede himself composed. Æthelthryth is adopted by Bede as a representative of the ideal of female virginal piety, and Bede adapts her story to reinforce this point. I suggest that traces of a different version of the life of Æthelthryth can nevertheless still be detected; an underlying narrative with a greater focus on the community at Ely and on a wider network of female religious, including a more pronounced emphasis on the role of Æthelthryth's sister Seaxburh. In writing his life of Hild, Bede faced a greater challenge. Hild, a patron of an educated scholarly community of women and men, as well as a powerful political figure in her own right, does not conform to Bede's model of virginal piety. In this case, not only does it seem likely that a lost life of Hild, written by her own community, once existed, which Bede drew upon, but it is also possible to reconstruct elements of this hagiography from another early text, in this case a version of the *Old English Martyrology*. Reading the *Old English Martyrology* alongside Bede's life of Hild provides further supporting evidence of the visionary concerns of the Whitby community. Furthermore, although lives of Æthelthryth and Hild, produced by their own communities, have not come down to us, one crucially important early Whitby text has survived: the anonymous first *Life of Gregory the Great*. This hagiography was produced at Whitby under the rule of Hild's successor Ælfflaed. It is a key text in the history of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, and another possible unacknowledged source of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. Thus it provides us with an example of the sort of lost or unacknowledged source texts—or what I term 'underwriting'—on which Bede drew. I therefore go on to consider the claim that the Whitby *Life of Gregory* may have been female-authored.

Æthelthryth, Ely, and Bede's Hymn

At the heart of the fourth book of *Ecclesiastical History* lies Bede's life of Æthelthryth, the founding abbess of Ely. Bede describes Æthelthryth's pious life and death and the translation of her body (*EH* 4.19), and composes his Hymn about her (*EH* 4.20).⁶ Æthelthryth of Ely plays such a central role in the fourth book of the *Ecclesiastical History* because she represents Bede's ideal of female sanctity. Æthelthryth falls into a tradition of insular Anglo-Saxon female sanctity that is typified by the fact that the woman saint is married and has to struggle with her husband to protect her chastity.⁷ This royal saint, who succeeded in remaining chaste through two marriages, represents for Bede the perfect state of virginity. Indeed Bede overwrites Æthelthryth's life in order to make it fit his ideal of virginity. His retelling of her narrative passes relatively quickly over her life as a devout wife: 'She had previously been married to an ealdorman of the South Gyrwe, named Tondberht. But he died shortly after the marriage and on his death she was given to King Ecgfrith. Though she lived with him for twelve years she still preserved the glory of perfect virginity' (*EH* 4.19, p.391). In contrast, Bede pays far more attention to her life as a woman religious (her self-discipline, mortification of the flesh, and physical suffering), and especially to her death. As Virginia Blanton points out, Bede's treatment of Æthelthryth in *Ecclesiastical History* is exceptional: 'the story of Æthelthryth is fixated on her perfection'.⁸

Bede's Hymn to Æthelthryth is itself a remarkable document, celebrating as it does a form of heroic virginity that only partially fits Æthelthryth's own circumstances. Contrasting himself to Virgil ('Maro') Bede asserts that he writes of peace rather than war, and of chastity rather than rape. Unexceptionally, Bede figures Æthelthryth as

the bride of Christ, and likens her to the Virgin Mary. Yet Bede also lists as examples of chastity the legendary virgin martyrs Agatha, Eulalia, Thecla, Euphemia, Agnes and Cecilia, who variously endured attempted seductions, imprisonment in brothels, and violent and often sexualized torture. While Æthelthryth's dedication of her virginity to God resonates with the vows of Agnes, Cecilia and Thecla, there are few other direct similarities. Æthelthryth's husbands do not rape her; she is not tortured; and she is not martyred. Indeed she dies of natural causes: a victim of the plague, afflicted by 'a very large tumour beneath her jaw' (*EH* 4.19, p.395). Bede forces Æthelthryth into a mould that she does not fit. By composing a hymn in praise of Æthelthryth alone out of all the Anglo-Saxon abbesses, Bede bestows a unique status upon her, or rather (to use the evocative phrase of Lees and Overing), upon her 'clean, chaste and dead body'.⁹ It is her corpse, discovered to be incorrupt in the grave when it is dug up by her successor to be moved into the Church, that is the final proof of her enduring virginity:

Veiled in the tomb sixteen Novembers lay,

Nor rots her virgin flesh veiled in the tomb.

(*EH* 4.20, p.399)

There is a manifest tension between Bede's transcendental, panegyric poetic rendering of Æthelthryth and the more earth-bound, pragmatic prose.¹⁰ Yet both are part of the same prosimetrical text and neither takes precedence over, or overwrites the other. Rather the two aspects of the text counterbalance one another. Indeed, Bede's *Hymn* is the opposite of the fragment, as it is described by Allen Frantzen: if

the fragment is ‘a quotation taken out of context’, the *Hymn*, like Æthelthryth’s body, is safely enclosed within a larger whole, intact within its textual environment.¹¹

If Bede uses Æthelthryth’s life for his own ends, is it possible still to discern elements of the underwriting, is it possible to get a sense of the narratives, oral and written, that were his sources? Such writings and traditions would have originated in Ely itself, under the headship of Seaxburh (c.655-c.700), Æthelthryth’s own sister, and successor as abbess. Bede must certainly have had access to a life of the founding saint produced within her own monastery. One element that is common to Bede’s accounts of Æthelthryth and Hild of Whitby is a concern with visions and miracles of death that testify to the piety of the dead and of those who wish to honour them. It is Abbess Seaxburh herself who decides that Æthelthryth’s tomb should be moved, and who sends out the monks to look for a new coffin. In initiating the translation of Æthelthryth’s body, Seaxburh is fostering her sister’s cult by announcing publically through this ritual her claim to sanctity, and thus attributing divine legitimacy to the abbey itself. Even within Bede’s narrative women have key roles to play. While the whole community, monks as well as nuns, takes part in the exhumation of Æthelthryth’s corpse, it is the abbess and her sisters who open the old coffin with the intention of lifting the bones, and it is they who wash and re-clothe the body and carry it to its new resting place. Æthelthryth, who, we are told, in life did not wash herself but washed her fellow nuns, is here finally physically cleansed before being returned to the ground.

What is so remarkable about Bede’s account of Æthelthryth, however, is the extent to which, despite the centrality to it of Seaxburh and her community, it minimizes or

overwrites the authority of women. Blanton suggests that Æthelthryth's speech (in *EH* 4.19, p.397) may be derived from the lost life of Æthelthryth.¹² In this speech the abbess described the illness that killed her as punishment for former vanity: 'I know well enough that I deserve to bear the weight of this affliction in my neck, for I remember that when I was a young girl I used to wear an unnecessary weight of necklaces' (*EH* 4.19, p.397). Yet, in contrast to Bede's account of the death of Hild (discussed in the next section of this article), there are in this narrative no visions of the saint's ascension experienced by the nuns of her monastery. Furthermore, although it was Seaxburh who, as noted above, was responsible for ordering the exhumation, it is Bishop Wilfred, not Seaxburh, who testifies to Æthelthryth's virginity and who is named as a key witness to the preservation of Æthelthryth's corpse (*EH* 4.19, pp.391-3 and 395). What is more the physician Cynefrith, who attended the dying saint, is cited by Bede as the direct source of the story of the preservation of the corpse, and his words are taken as ultimate confirmation of the miracle (*EH* 4.19, p.395). From Bede's perspective, the verification offered by these male commentators has a divinely-endowed authority that far outweighs the evidence of women, which is implicitly viewed as partisan or unreliable. The incision that the physician had made in Æthelthryth's neck while she was still alive to drain a bubo on her neck has been replaced with an indistinct scar. This scar is the ultimate sign of her enduring purity.

Not only does Bede prefer male to female witnesses, he also distances Æthelthryth from other women. As Lees and Overing note 'the narrative process of isolating (in the cloister or the pedestal) the female saint obscures ... her relationships with other women'.¹³ Crucially, Bede makes no direct reference to Æthelthryth's familial ties to

Hild, even though, as Blanton suggests, ‘it is more than reasonable to believe that the women knew one another well and were in some way cognizant of their mutual work as leaders of monastic communities’.¹⁴ While Bede does record that Æthelthryth entered the monastery of her aunt Æbbe (in *EH* 4.19, p.393), this reference to Coldingham is somewhat troubling, and cannot be read straightforwardly as an implicit acknowledgement of female bonds of kinship. Later in the *Ecclesiastical History* (4.25), Bede describes how Coldingham was subsequently destroyed by fire as a result of the sinfulness of its residents. Æbbe herself is implicated in this corruption in that she fails to control her communities, and the Coldingham reference scars the narrative. Like the healed scar on the neck of Æthelthryth’s corpse that replaced the bubo that killed her, this narrative scar signifies the corruption that threatens Æthelthryth’s purity (comparable to her marriages, or the plague). In addition to isolating Æthelthryth from her wider female kin group, Bede also overlooks important information about Seaxburh. Rosalind C. Love points out that Bede makes no reference to Seaxburh’s own foundation at Minster-in-Sheppey, or to her daughter Eormenhild.¹⁵ Bede discusses the life, and death, of Seaxburh’s other daughter, Earcongota, but only in another context (in *EH* 3.8). While Bede may do his best to marginalize Seaxburh, her continued presence in his life of Æthelthryth indicates how important she actually is to the preservation of her sister’s history.

Bede presents a heavily overwritten account of the life of Æthelthryth, and this is seen most clearly in his hymn, which he states he had composed ‘many years’ before the prose life (*EH* 4.20, p.397). As Blanton points out, however much Bede may attempt to disguise it, even in the prose life, with its emphasis on eye-witness testimonies, Bede has made ‘deliberate choices about the presentation (shaping, editing,

deleting)'.¹⁶ Yet it is possible still to detect something of the underwriting: texts written to support the cult of Æthelthryth which her sister Seaxburh evidently fostered and which were produced by and in support of the Ely community as a community. It is important to note, however, that the elision of broader collaborations in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* is not limited to his accounts of holy women and their religious houses, but is a tendency demonstrated across his writing, including in relation to male figures. Despite the profession of the *Ecclesiastical History* to tell a shared, communal story of the English church and nation, Bede seems to work habitually by extracting characters as exemplars or key figures who embody ideals or transitions and changes, and in the process obscures wider processes and interactions. Nevertheless the effect on women's history and on their literary history of this overwriting of community is particularly marked, as is also illustrated by the case of Hild.

Hild and the Literary Culture of Whitby

As with the account of Æthelthryth in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* it is evident in his life of Hild (*EH* 4.23) that Bede was drawing on contemporary narratives about the abbess written by members of the religious community. In this case it is certainly reasonable to assume that Bede drew on a lost life of Hild from the double monastery at Streanaeshalch or Whitby. Certainly, Whitby was a site of literary production, and it may be that the sisters themselves played a central role: Hollis hypothesizes that the *Whitby Life of Gregory* could have been written by a nun, an idea that will be explored further below.¹⁷ One key factor that distinguishes Bede's life of Hild from his life of Æthelthryth is that, according to J.E. Cross, traces of a lost Whitby life can

be traced in *The Old English Martyrology*, which dates back to the ninth century and is one of the earliest Old English prose texts to have survived.¹⁸ Cross's article was published in 1979, but the evidence presented there has not hitherto been re-examined in the light of more recent scholarship. By looking closely at the places where the entry on Hild in *The Old English Martyrology* diverges from Bede's life of Hild, it is possible to discern something of the concerns of the Whitby community itself. First however, it is valuable once again to reflect upon the gaps and tensions within Bede's own narrative.

In, once more, failing to acknowledge his sources, Bede adapts Hild's life to fit his own agenda, part of which seems to be to remove surviving traces of Hild's own scholarly textual community.¹⁹ This is vividly illustrated by the writing out of Hild's crucial role as patron of the poet Caedmon (in *EH* 4.24), which has been analysed by Lees and Overing.²⁰ Bede also very deliberately excludes any mention of the Synod of Whitby, over which Hild herself presided (discussion of her role is limited to a couple of sentences in *EH* 3.25, where he mentions briefly that she took the Celtic side).²¹ In his account of Hild's life, Bede emphasises her personal devotion and her close association with Bishop Aidan and her role as spiritual mother of bishops, but without making it explicit that Hild was personally responsible for educating these men. The religious and political were profoundly imbricated in one another, as Hild's career illustrates. Yet Bede initiates a tendency to emphasise the religious over the political when discussing female saints and visionaries. Bede is also very selective in what he reveals about Hild's personal life. He certainly records her royal family connections and her conversion, but reveals little more about the first half of her life, choosing instead to dwell on the events that followed her profession. One argument

that has been put forward to explain this is that Hild was a widow when she became a nun and that she did not conform comfortably to Bede's expectations of female sanctity.²² Alternatively, Bede may have been unsettled by Hild's public and political life.

In his account of her life, Bede effectively depoliticizes and decontextualizes Hild's sanctity, remoulding it to fit his own model. What traces, if any, then remain of the underwriting, the life, or lives, that Bede drew on; the text, or texts, that more closely reflected the interests and concerns of Whitby itself, and that may have been authored by Hild's fellow nuns? One point to note is that Bede does mention, at least in passing, some important figures in the early history of women's monasticism: Hild's own sister Hereswith in the monastery of Chelles, whom Hild wished to join; and Heiu, the founding abbess of Heruteu or Hartlepool. Such women would surely have been celebrated in early writings by nuns. It also seems reasonable to assume that a version of Bede's narrative of the dream of a necklace experienced by Hild's mother Breguswith was found in the Whitby life. Indeed this dream does also appear in the *Old English Martyrology* although there are some significant differences.²³ Bede provides more background—explaining the absence of Hild's father Hereric as due to his exile—but locates the dream as having taken place after Hild's birth, and interprets the shining light of the necklace as representing the exemplary life Hild would go on to lead. The *Old English Martyrology* on the other hand renders this an annunciation vision. Hild is not yet born and the jewel signifies Hild's reputation:

To her mother it was revealed in her sleep when she was with child that a jewel was put in her bosom which began to shine all over Britain. This betokened the fame of the virgin's sanctity. St Hilda was for thirty-three years

in worldly life and for thirty-three in the cloister, and then she went to Christ.

(*Old English Martyrology*, p.207)

It is striking that unlike Bede, the *Old English Martyrology* does explicitly refer to Hild as a virgin. The splitting of Hild's life in two parts at the age of thirty-three, the age of Christ when He was crucified, signifies that at this perfect age Hild herself was reborn. While Bede includes this symbolic detail he does not link it to Breguswith's dream. Thus Bede avoids explicitly identifying Breguswith with the Virgin Mary and Hild with Christ.

With the exception of Breguswith's dream, Bede reveals very little about the first half of Hild's life beyond the fact that it was spent 'very nobly in the secular habit' (*EH* 4.23, p.407). But although men, whether as patrons (Bishop Aidan) or as sons of her religious house, are central to what Bede reveals of Hild's life as a nun, women dominate the narrative of her death. Hild's death is marked by miracles and visions that ripple through the community and bring unity and joy. Breguswith's prophetic vision is mirrored in visions surrounding Hild's death witnessed by nuns at Whitby and its neighbouring house at Hackness (*EH* 4.23, pp.413-14). Bede does in fact acknowledge the authority of the female visionaries, from Breguswith to Begu (a nun at Hackness), and an anonymous Whitby novice. Indeed Bede even names another female witness to validate Begu's dream: Frigyth, who presided over Hackness.

Begu, the nun at Hackness, sees in a dream the ascension of Hild's soul. Sleeping in the dormitory Begu is apparently awoken by a bell toll and watches in amazement as the roof opens and light pours into the room before seeing the Abbess's soul carried

upwards by angels. She rushes to share what she has seen with her prioress Frigyth, who summons her nuns to gather in the church to pray for Hild. The monks who later arrive with news of Hild's death find them thus. A nun at Whitby itself experiences a similar vision of the ascendance of Hild's soul. A single dream, which might correspond either to that of Begu or that of the anonymous Whitby nun, is also found in the *Old English Martyrology*:

One of her nuns perceived how angels brought her spirit to heaven, and it glittered in the midst of the angels like the shining sun or a glossy new gown. The same nun heard at the same time as she departed the sound of a wonderful bell in the air, and she also saw that angels raised against her spirit a very large and wonderful cross of Christ, and it shone like a star of heaven. With such joy was St. Hilda's spirit brought to the heavenly glory, where she now sees our Lord ever without end, whose will she did before as long as she was alive in the flesh (*Old English Martyrology*, pp.207-8)

There are a number of unique elements to the *Old English Martyrology* version. Cross draws our attention to the unusual simile of the 'glossy new gown', or, according to Cross's own translation, the 'newly-glossed garment'²⁴ which may well reflect the perspective of a female author, but the cross, shining like the jewel in Hild's mother's dream is also absent in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. Once again, the *Old English Martyrology* presents Hild as both Christ-like, and also in its final triumphant announcement of Hild's entry into heaven, Mary-like.

The Whitby *Earliest Life of Gregory*

Further evidence of the preoccupations and concerns of the Whitby community can be found in the eighth-century *Life of Gregory the Great*. In his account of the life of Hild in book four of his *History*, Bede makes no mention of her two powerful relatives and allies, who succeeded her as abbesses of Whitby, Ælfflæd (654-714) and her mother Eanflæd (626-after 685), despite discussing them elsewhere.²⁵ Yet one of these women very probably actually commissioned the writing of Hild's lost life. The earliest Latin *Life of Gregory the Great* was written under the patronage of Ælfflæd, and critics have speculated that it was composed by a nun or by a group of nuns of Whitby.²⁶ The *Life*, which was written between around 704 and 713, is preserved in St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 567.²⁷ As a biography of the so-called 'Apostle to the English' it is central to the early English tradition of religious writing, and would have been seen as such by contemporaries. Critics are divided over the question of whether or not Bede drew on the Whitby *Life* in writing his *Ecclesiastical History*.²⁸ The *Life* itself refers to both Ælfflæd and Eanflæd in a key passage describing the miracles that surrounded the translation of the relics of Edwin of Northumbria to Whitby, which took place 'while Eanflæd was still living and in the monastic life' (*Earliest Life*, p.103). That those responsible for writing the life are indeed members of the religious community at Whitby is apparent in the subsequent partisan description of the abbey as 'coenobium famosissimum', 'the *well-known monastery* of Ælfflæd, a most religious woman and the daughter of Queen Eanflæd, who was herself ... the daughter of Edwin' (*Earliest Life*, p.103; my italics). This crucial episode centres on a series of visions received by a priest called Trimma and is based in part on Trimma's own account (*Earliest Life*, p.105) and partly on that of 'our brother ... who was a kinsman of the priest' (*Earliest Life*, p.203). What is

particularly striking about this description of Whitby and of its abbesses is that the text insists upon the royal credentials of the abbey, and on its connection with the St Edwin, described elsewhere in the text as ‘our most Christian king’ (*Earliest Life*, p.99). The connection to Edwin, Hild’s great-uncle, is clearly crucial to establishing the legitimacy of the abbey community and its female leaders, and therefore would have been of vital importance to the community that produced the text. Significantly, the narrative concerning the transfer of Edwin’s bones is not found in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*.

The importance of Edwin to the narrative becomes apparent when the account of Gregory’s life is compared to that given of Edwin. While the *Life* begins the story of Gregory by describing with great confidence his parentage (even naming his mother, which Bede does not do), his early life, and the mission to convert the Anglo-Saxons, some doubt is cast over the authority of the final chapters, but this doubt is significant in considering the case for authorship of the text by the community of nuns at Whitby. Chapter 30 includes the instruction to those who find any mistakes in the *Life* that they must not ‘nibble with critical teeth at this work of ours which has been diligently twisted into shape by love rather than knowledge’ (*Earliest Life*, p.129). The text apologizes for any confusion in the relation of events, and for any potential mistakes and inaccuracies, and acknowledges that the work is based on third hand evidence: ‘remember, we did not learn about them [the events] directly from those who saw and heard them but only by common report’ (*Earliest Life*, pp.132-133). The use of the second person plural pronoun is a rhetorical convention, commonly found in homilies, for example, but in this context it is suggestive of the collaborative or communal authorship of the text. The *Life* tails out at its conclusion with that admission that the

community which produced it does not know ‘the form and fashion’ of Gregory’s death (*Earliest Life*, p.139). Yet even as the text appears to undermine its own authority it does so only ambivalently, echoing Matthew 13.17: ‘many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.’ Such apologies should not be misunderstood simply as examples of humility topoi, whereby an author disclaims her or his abilities in highly conventional terms. Rather the *Life* makes it clear that there is temporal and geographic distance between the Roman Pope and the Whitby community. This is not the case with Edwin, ‘a man of this race of ours which is called the Humbrians’ (*Life*, p.95) whose own conversion is described. Conversion is of course the key theme of the *Life of Gregory*: Gregory himself is responsible for the conversion of the English, but for the Whitby community it is Edwin who spreads the faith in the North. Indeed, according to John Edward Damon, in the Whitby *Life of Gregory*, ‘Before his death in battle, Edwin’s role in converting the Northumbrians represents his *only* claim to holiness’.²⁹ Furthermore, while we are told that the conversion of Edwin ‘happened long before the days of any of those who are still alive’ (*Earliest Life*, p.99), it was ‘related so sincerely by faithful witnesses’ (*Earliest Life*, p.99). In addition, the association of the translation of his body to Whitby with Eanflæd (*Earliest Life*, p.103) establishes the authority of the account by intimating that it *is* based on reports by eyewitnesses.

The most famous episode from the lives of Gregory is the story of Gregory’s Roman encounter with the Anglo-Saxon youths. This narrative has its first iteration in the Whitby *Life* and a comparison of the Whitby version to that in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* is extremely revealing, both about the relative perspectives of the Whitby

author or authors and of Bede, and about the linguistic competence demonstrated in the Whitby text. While Bertram Colgrave dismisses the Whitby author as ‘no Latinist’,³⁰ a revisionist analysis by Uppinder Mehan and David Townsend suggests that closer attention needs to be paid to the Whitby text.³¹ Bede’s version of the story is the one most widely known today: in this narrative Gregory encounters some beautiful slave boys for sale in the market place in Rome, and asks where they have come from; on discovering that they come from Britain, and following an elaborate play on words, Gregory resolves to convert the English (*EH* 2.1).³² Challenging Colgrave’s translation of the Whitby’s author’s Latin, Townsend offers the following version:

We should not pass over entirely silently how spiritually unto God and in what manner our conversion unto God he fostered by forethought in the incomparable mirror of his heart’s eyes. There is, then, a relation of the faithful that before his aforesaid pontificate some of our nation, shining of form and of white hair, to have come to Rome. When he had heard they had come he desired to behold and, then summoned to him with the gaze of his gracious mind, he was struck by their fresh unusual appearance, and most importantly, by God’s inner prompting asked from what people they had been. Some say that they were beautiful boys and yet some that they were curly-haired attractive youths. And when they responded, ‘They are called Angles of whom we are,’ he said, ‘Angels of God.’ Then he said, ‘How is the king of that people called?’ And they said ‘Aelli.’ And he said ‘Alleluia. For God’s praise should be there.’ He also asked the name of the tribe from which they

were. And they said ‘Of Deira.’ And he said, ‘Fleein’ from de ire of God to faith.’³³

This translation captures something of the difficulty, or ‘eccentricity’ or ‘peculiarity’ of the syntax of the text, as well as Gregory’s punning use of Old English and Latin.³⁴

Mehan and Townsend make the point that it is illogical to assume that the Whitby community would have passed the writing of the life of such an important figure as Gregory to an incompetent amateur writer: ‘Can we really imagine that Whitby’s most ambitious literary production to date could have proceeded without as scrupulous a level of attention to its form and grammar as the abbey could muster?’³⁵

As Clare A. Lees points out, given the fact that the Angles in the story are from Northumbria, it ‘should not surprise us’ that this earliest *Life* of Gregory comes from Northumbria.³⁶ Because both the story of the Deirans and the *Life* of the Apostle of the English were of central importance to the Whitby community, the writing of this text must have been entrusted to someone the community regarded in the highest possible terms.

Mehan and Townsend posit, then, that rather than being no Latinist, and a barely competent hagiographer, the Whitby author was an innovator, deliberately and self-consciously negotiating a distance from the metropolitan norms that reflects the distance of Northumbria from Rome.³⁷ It seems feasible to posit that such an innovative writer might have been a nun, working on her own, or alongside collaborators, who felt liberated enough from tradition to experiment stylistically and in terms of content. Read against Bede’s overwriting of the narrative it is possible to see the extent to which the writer identifies with the position of the young Deirans. In

contrast to Bede's version, in the *Whitby Life*, the Deirans are not slave boys being sold in the market, but travellers to Rome; it is the Deirans, not a third party, who reply to Gregory's question about where they are from; and, crucially, the narrative alludes to oral sources ('a relation of the faithful' and 'some say'), which may refer to narratives related by the Whitby community of nuns as well as monks.

Furthermore, the *Whitby Life* does not mention the paganism of the Deirans, which Bede chooses to emphasize, and whereas Bede has Gregory come upon the Deirans by chance, and articulates Gregory's gaze upon them in terms of erotic desire ('as well as other merchandise he saw some boys put up for sale, with fair complexions, handsome faces, and lovely hair'),³⁸ the *Whitby* text states that Gregory sought out the Deirans, having heard of their arrival in Rome, and that his gaze was thus from the outset directed by God. The *Whitby* text shares with Bede's account the aim of representing the English people as chosen by God, but gives the Deirans, and thus implicitly and by extension the Whitby community itself, greater agency and self-determinacy. As in Bede's text, the *Whitby* text acknowledges the distance of Northumbria from Rome, but the experimental use of Latin gives the narrative a unique immediacy, even urgency.

To reiterate, as is appropriate to a text produced at Whitby, the *Earliest Life of Gregory* pays considerable attention both to Gregory's English missions and to the role of Edwin of Northumbria, and it speaks directly to the Deirans. However, the argument that a nun or nuns of Whitby authored the *Life* is potentially undermined by one key element of its treatment of the English missions. We know from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* that the role royal women played in the conversions of their husbands was crucial.³⁹ Bede records that the catalyst for the conversion of Edwin

was the king's marriage to Æthelburg Tata (*EH* 2.9). Here—in another key episode in the history of the conversion of the English--marriage to the already converted woman resulted in Edwin himself accepting Christianity, and in the missionary Paulinus, Æthelburg Tata's spiritual confidant, being consecrated bishop. Bede also discusses Eanflæd's birth in his account of Edwin and the fact that Edwin dedicated his young daughter to Christ, and placed her under Paulinus's care (*EH* 2.9). The omission in the Whitby *Life of Gregory* of any account of Eanflæd's mother, or of Eanflæd's own consecration, is surprising, given the importance of Eanflæd in the episode in relation to the translation of Edwin's bones. It is all the more so, given that the *Life* was produced under the rule of her daughter Ælfflæd. Indeed Mechthild Gretsch argues convincingly that much of the material that forms the basis of the *Life* was circulated in oral form, and transmitted to Northumbria by Eanflæd's mother, and then Eanflæd herself (as she too moved from the South to the North).⁴⁰ We might then reasonably expect Eanflæd to feature much more prominently in a *Life* written by a Whitby nun or community of nuns; although equally it seems surprising that Eanflæd does not play a larger role in a *Life* authored by a Whitby religious, regardless of whether that religious was a man or a women. The text would certainly have been read by the community of nuns and monks who revered Eanflæd and held her memory dear. The relative absence of Eanflæd is an anomaly that is impossible to explain.

In fact the role of women in conversion is not completely overlooked within the *Life*. Following the extended digressions on the conversion of the English, and on the life of Edwin, and on the translation of his bones to Whitby, the *Life* returns its focus to Gregory: 'Having brought these stories to an end, we will follow them up with some

which rightly concern us' (*Earliest Life*, p.105). The first of these narratives of Gregory's miracles to be recounted is the famous story of the unbelieving woman, which was later incorporated into the *Golden Legend*:⁴¹

There is an ancient story that once a certain matron in Rome was making her oblations and had brought them to him; the saint received them and consecrated them into the most holy Body of Christ the Victim. When she came to receive it from the hands of the man of God and heard him say, 'The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ preserve thy soul,' she began to smile. When the man of God saw this, he closed his hand as it reached her mouth, not wishing to give her the holy Body of the Lord; then he placed it on the altar and decided to hide it with his vestment. When mass was finished, he called her up and asked why she laughed when she should have communicated. She answered, 'I made those loaves with my own hands and you said they were the Body of the Lord'. (*Earliest Life*, pp.105-107)

This episode can constructively be read as the counterpart of the masculinist story of Gregory's encounter with the Deiran youths. The figure of the Roman matron would especially resonate with aristocratic nuns of Whitby, many of who would have been married. The woman, who cynically laughs at seeing the bread that she herself has made administered in communion, has her lack of belief challenged by Gregory, and in response to his prayers and those of the congregation, the bread of the host visibly transforms into a bloody finger part. This visual confirmation of the miracle of transubstantiation successfully overcomes the woman's incredulity. The narrative of transformation and conversion is highly didactic, and particularly appropriate in the

context of the early English church, which needs to continually re-assert its new belief system. But it is also particularly appropriate to a community of royal and noble women, who themselves have come to an understanding that all aspects of their former lives, including the most domestic or mundane, have taken on a new meaning in the service of Christ.

Here then, in the Whitby *Life of Gregory the Great*, we have an example of the sort of unacknowledged underwriting that may lie behind Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*.

Whether or not this experimental Latin Life was composed by a woman religious or community of nuns, it was certainly written *for* the double community at Whitby, which included nuns as well as monks, and it was written under the rule of Abbess Ælfflaed.

Conclusion

Who then were the first women writers in the English literary tradition? The names of these women may not have come down to us, but we do know about the communities in which they lived and worked, and we do know the names of the Abbesses who commissioned their work, and the work of their monastic brethren. If, in most cases, the works by women have not survived, traces can nevertheless still be discerned, albeit overwritten or appropriated by male clerics. But in order to make sense of these traces, reading strategies have to be developed which take account of the full range of early women's engagement with literary culture. In the case of reading the lives of Æthelthryth and Hild, it is possible to read *through* the narratives written by Bede, with, in the case of Hild's life, the assistance of other another version found in the *Old*

English Martyrology, in order to reconstruct something of the nature and concerns of the lost sources. In reading the anonymous Whitby *Life of Gregory*, there is certainly evidence of female patronage and readership, and, albeit more ambiguously, of female authorship. Taken together, however, what can be learnt from a study of these lives is that by focusing on texts associated with religious houses ruled by women, and by considering these texts to be the productions not of individuals but of communities, it is possible to get a fuller and more balanced understanding of women's writing in this earliest period of English literary history. Equally importantly however, what can also be learnt from recuperating women's lost texts is the extent to which the earliest women's writing has been occluded from history and written out of literary history from the time of Bede to the end of the twentieth century and beyond.

¹ Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, 'Women and the Origins of English Literature' in *The History of British Women's Writing, 700-1500*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.31-40; p.31. See also my essay 'Literature in Pieces: Female Sanctity and the Relics of Early Women's Writing' in *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.357-380.

² 'Lost Books: Abbess Hildelith and the Literary Culture of Barking Abbey,' *Philological Quarterly* 91 (2012), pp.1-21. See also the volume, *Barking Abbey and Medieval Literary Culture: Authorship and Authority in a Female Community*, ed. Jennifer N. Brown and Donna Alfano Bussell (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2012); and Lisa M. C. Weston, "'Sanctimoniales cum sanctimoniale': Particular

Friendships and Female Community in Anglo-Saxon England' in *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Memory of Daniel Gillmore Calder*, ed. Carol Braun Pasternack and Lisa M.C. Weston (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), pp.35-62.

³ Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), esp. pp.67-73 and 86-115.

⁴ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). All in-text references to the *Ecclesiastical History* (hereafter *EH*) are to this text. In order to make this article accessible to a wider readership quotations are in translation only.

⁵ See Diane Watt, *Secretaries of God: Women Prophets in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 1997).

⁶ For a detailed discussion, see Virginia Blanton, *Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St. Æthelthryth in Medieval England, 695-1615* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2007), pp.19-63; for a wider context, see also Virginia Blanton, 'Presenting the Sister Saints of Ely, or Using Kinship to Increase a Monastery's Status as a Cult Center,' *Literature Compass* 5.4 (2008), pp.755-771.

⁷ Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.74.

⁸ Blanton, *Signs of Devotion*, p.63.

⁹ Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001; repr.

Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), p.171; see also Lees and Overing, 'Women and the Origins of English Literature,' pp. 32-35.

¹⁰ For an excellent analysis of the implications of prosimetrical writing in Anglo-Saxon texts, see Catherine A. M. Clarke, *Writing Power in Anglo-Saxon England: Texts, Hierarchies, Economies* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), pp.145-170.

¹¹ Allen J. Frantzen, 'The Fragmentation of Cultural Studies and the Fragments of Anglo-Saxon England,' *Anglia* 114 (1996), pp.310-339; p.323.

¹² Blanton, *Signs of Devotion*, p.49.

¹³ Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, p.43.

¹⁴ Blanton, *Signs of Devotion*, p.23.

¹⁵ Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, *The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely*, ed. and trans. Rosalind C. Love (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p.xiv.

¹⁶ Blanton, *Signs of Devotion*, p.62.

¹⁷ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, pp.125-126.

¹⁸ J.E. Cross, 'A Lost life of Hilda of Whitby: the Evidence of the *Old English Martyrology*', *The Early Middle Ages, Acta* 6 (1979), pp.21-43.

¹⁹ See Peter Hunter Blair, 'Whitby as a Centre of Learning in the Seventh Century' in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies Presented to Peter Clemoes on the Occasion of his Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed. Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.3-32; Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, pp.253-258 and 261-270.

²⁰ Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, pp.19-55.

²¹ Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, p.31.

²² Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992), p.248 and n.32. See also Christine E. Fell ‘Hild, Abbess of Streonæshalch’ in *Hagiography and Medieval Literature: a Symposium*, ed Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Peter Foote, Jørgen Højgaard Jørgensen, and Tore Nyberg (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), pp.76-99.

²³ *An Old English Martyrology*, ed. and trans. George Herzfeld, Early English Text Society 116, 114 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1900). All in-text references to the *Old English Martyrology* are to this text as it provides a full translation. It is however unreliable in places. The standard edition is *Das altenglische Martyrologium*, ed. G. Kotzor, (Munich: Abhandlungen der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Klass, ns 88.1-2, 1981), vol.II, pp.1-266.

²⁴ Cross ‘A Lost Life,’ p.24.

²⁵ Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, pp.31-2 and 68-71.

²⁶ For a recent reiteration of the claim that the *Life* might have been authored by a nun of Whitby, see Clare A. Lees, ‘In Ælfric’s Words: Conversion, Vigilance and the Nation in Ælfric’s *Life of Gregory the Great* in *A Companion to Ælfric*, ed. Hugh Magennis and Mary Swan (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), p. 276 and n.15; for the suggestion that it was commissioned by Abbess Ælfflæd, see Mechthild Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints in Late-Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.63.

²⁷ For the online facsimile of the manuscript, see <http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/csg/0567>. For an edition, see *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great by an Anonymous Monk of Whitby*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1968). All in-text references to the *Life* are to this edition unless otherwise stated.

²⁸ Walter Goffart's reading of the Whitby *Life* is highly critical, but Goffart makes a convincing case that Bede did use it as a source, albeit to a limited extent: Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D.550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 235-328; esp. 263-267; see also Gretsche, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints*, p.50.

²⁹ John Edward Damon, *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors: Warfare and Sanctity in the Literature of Early England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p.32.

³⁰ *Earliest Life of Gregory*, ed. and trans. Colgrave, p.146 n.48.

³¹ Uppinder Mehan and David Townsend, "'Nation" and the Gaze of the Other in Eighth-Century Northumbria,' *Comparative Literature* 53 (2001), pp.1-26.

³² For a recent analysis of Gregory's linguistic play, see Lees, 'In Ælfric's Words,' pp.271-296.

³³ Mehan and Townsend, "'Nation" and the Gaze,' p.19 n.16.

³⁴ Mehan and Townsend, "'Nation" and the Gaze,' p.14.

³⁵ Mehan and Townsend, "'Nation" and the Gaze,' p.15.

³⁶ Lees, 'In Ælfric's Words,' p.276.

³⁷ Mehan and Townsend, "'Nation" and the Gaze,' p.17.

³⁸ On the sexuality of this scene in various retellings, see Allen J. Frantzen, “Bede and Bawdy Bale: Gregory the Great, Angels, and the “Angli”” in *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), pp.17-39; Kathy Lavezzo, ‘Gregory’s Boys: The Homoerotic Production of English Whiteness’ in *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Memory of Daniel Gillmore Calder*, ed. Carol Braun Pasternack and Lisa M.C. Weston (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), pp.63-90; and Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000-1534* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp.27-45.

³⁹ On the gendering of conversion, see Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, pp.15-45.

⁴⁰ Gretsche, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints*, pp.25-26.

⁴¹ *Earliest Life of Gregory*, ed. and trans. Colgrave, p.154 n.77.