“The Heavenly Light”:
Representing Female Virginity in Medieval Celtic Hagiography

Katherine DeCoste

Introduction

With both attributed and anonymous extant documents detailing the lives of touchstone figures like Saints Patrick, Columba, and Brigid, it is clear that hagiography was a vital element of medieval Celtic Christianity. Most simply meaning "saints' lives," hagiographies are useful to historians less because of the historical information they provide about Celtic Christian saints, and more because of how they reflect the values of their authors and the societies within which they were written. Hagiographies were not intended to be historical documents; they were not records of "the events of a life, but rather of a way of life."[1] These texts not only reinforced the moral virtues of the saints whose lives they purported to record, but verified the sanctity of a revered figure. Because saints were often founders of religious communities, such sanctity was inevitably connected to a particular site. The anonymous Lives of Brigid, for instance, helped to establish the validity of Brigid's community in Kildare despite the absence of traditional bodily relics from her corpse.[2] Hagiography was inexorably connected to the formation of Celtic saints' cults. The creation of written documents recording orally transmitted legends about a saint's birth, death, and miracles communicated the saint's legendary deeds and affirmed the presence of God's favour in their religious community.

Historians have not failed to note the discrepancy in numbers of extant hagiographies regarding male versus female saints. However, while the majority of hagiography details the lives of male saints, lives of female saints merit equally in-depth analysis. Female saints were dominant figures in the foundation of religious communities in the British Isles, such as Brigid's founding of Kildare or Non's maternal relationship to David, patron Saint of Wales.

---

[1] Noel Kissane, *Saint Brigid of Kildare: Life, Legend and Cult* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 69.
[2] Lisa M. Bitel, "Body of a saint, story of a goddess: Origins of the Brigidine Tradition," *Textual Practice* 16, no. 2 (2002): 210.

Furthermore, hagiography of female saints can provide historians with necessary insight into the cultural values surrounding femininity as it related to religion and sanctity in the Celtic medieval period, commonly defined as the long period between the 5th and 15th centuries. This paper will study the defining virtues of female "sainthood," and how hagiography used literary devices such as motif and symbolism to reinforce these ideals. Because, as medieval and literary scholar of Celtic theology Dorothy Ann Bray rightfully notes, hagiography was dominated by the recounting of miracles,[3] my study will make particular use of the types of miracles performed by female saints, and how these miracles reflected cultural feminine ideals.

Preservation of female virtue, equated with chastity (sexually pure behaviour) and virginity (physical purity), is a particularly dominant theme in Celtic hagiography, one to which the majority of this paper will be devoted. Both female saints and their followers were often defined by their virginity; female saints were praised as virgins in a way that rhetorically equated their virginity and their holiness in the eyes of God. The emphasis on female virginity is particularly notable because no comparable standard exists for male saints. Male clergy in the medieval Celtic church could marry, and those who remained celibate were not defined by that decision.[4] Conversely, the women who founded religious communities in extant hagiographies are almost exclusively virgins, as are their followers. Those who are not physical virgins are what I will call "spiritual virgins," who either did not consent to sexual activity, or who at one point participated in sexual activity before experiencing a conversion and "repenting" of their "sin." Ultimately, I argue that virginity was the defining aspect of female sanctity in Celtic hagiography, as evidenced by authors' literary hyper-fixation on female sexual activity. But

[3] Dorothy Ann Bray, "Miracles and wonders in the composition of the Lives of the early Irish saints," in *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults*, ed. Jane Cartwright (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 137.
[4] Christina Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 450-1150* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 45.

while this may seem at first glance to be the mere reflection of patriarchal desires to police female sexuality, my analysis will also tease out nuances in hagiography that interrogate such an assumption. While authors' focus on female virginity does underline a culture that valued women's chastity, particular stories suggest that the maintenance of their virginity also afforded medieval religious women a certain amount of agency in separating their lives from those of men, and allowed them to become prominent religious and community leaders.

"A way of life:" the significance of Celtic hagiography

The term "hagiography" comes from the Greek *hagios* ("holy" or "saint") and *graphy* ("writing").[5] A tradition not exclusive to Celtic Christianity but predominant across the early Christian world, it nevertheless held special importance to establishing the importance of key Celtic saints. The first hagiographical writings to reach the Celtic world did not concern the lives of indigenous saints, but those of the 'Desert Fathers' in the third century.[6] Subsequently, from the fifth century, the hagiography of continental European saints gained popularity in the Celtic world, particularly Ireland; Saint Martin of Tours was especially popular.[7] Imported hagiography eventually evolved into a thriving indigenous practice by Celtic religious writers, typically composing in Latin, who detailed the lives of saints connected to specific Celtic localities.[8] Among the most famous of these are Columba's Iona and Brigid's Kildare.

Although often entertaining and at times thrilling, hagiography did not gain traction in the Celtic world exclusively due to its narrative and aesthetic appeal. By recording religious ways of life through miraculous episodic structure, hagiography served several sociocultural and theological purposes in the communities where they were written and disseminated. Hagiography

[5] Kissane, 69
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

provided a model of living for religious communities, contributing to the education of both consecrated religious and laypeople. More importantly, however, hagiography "endeavoured to establish [its] subject as preeminent in virtue."[9] Hagiography deliberately elevated the stature of local saints, establishing them not only as models of ethical living, but as blessed with a special connection to the divine that enabled them to work miracles.[10] Miracles form the bulk of Celtic hagiographical tradition; the earliest extant Celtic hagiographies, the seventh-century *Lives* of Patrick, Brigid, and Columba, all devote the majority of their text to recounting miracles worked by the saints.[11] Miracles had practical purposes: they established the saint's connection to God, promoted the importance of saintly relics (where they existed) and holy sites,[12] paralleled Biblical stories to emphasize the saint's Christlike attributes,[13] and provided engaging narrative material. In a literary sense, they functioned to restore God's natural order and to punish the wicked while rewarding the holy saint and their followers.[14]

While some have used this focus on miracles to undermine the sanctity of Celtic saints—arguing that miracles paralleled druidic tradition and thus constituted "white magic" that excluded Christian virtue from the narrative—Bray suggests with much more nuance that this modern viewpoint oversimplifies the meaning of miracles in Celtic hagiography.[15] An analysis of miracle patterns, such as the nature miracle, Biblical miracles like miraculous food multiplication, and communication with the divine, establishes an Irish hagiography distinct from continental traditions, which focused more on demonic encounters and healings.[16]

---

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 70.
[11] Bray, 136.
[12] Bitel, 211.
[13] Elizabeth M. G. Krajewski, *Archetypal Narratives: Pattern and Parable in the Lives of Three Saints* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2018), 3.
[14] Bray, 141.
[15] Ibid., 137-139.
[16] Ibid., 139.

Although this typological analysis is useful in establishing what some have identified as the nationalist impulse of Celtic hagiography, it also allows historians to approach hagiography as literature.[17] Such an approach opens new avenues for scholars to understand not just the cultural importance of hagiographical writing, but also the significance of repeated motifs, symbols, and narrative tropes across hagiographical texts. Read thus, hagiography and its symbolically weighted miracles can be understood as cultural touchstones for the transmission of religious and social ideals. "Few things," writes scholar of Celtic literature Mary-Ann Constantine, "are more normative than the vita: the patterned life."[18] Consequently, typological literary reading of hagiography helps historians understand how such centrepiece texts were not merely propagandistic, rote repetitions of the ideal female life.[19]. Saints may explicitly defy authority, or, more often, their vitae may leave room for many nuanced readings that emphasize what Constantine calls "the larger question about the interaction between 'official' and 'popular' conceptions of religion."[20]

"She was abstinent, she was innocent:" conceptualizing virginity

Communities of consecrated religious virgins came into being in the Celtic Church sometime between Patrick's era (approximately between 432 and his recorded death in 492, although the actual dates of his life are unknown) and 600 CE, but the phenomena of consecrated

[17] Most historians agree that nationalism as we understand the phenomena today had its roots in the mid-to-late-nineteenth-century, and did not exist in the medieval period. However, I, like many scholars of Celtic Christianity, use the term nationalism here to understand how hagiography built connections between religious communities and their localities. By prioritizing the sanctity not only of a specific person, but of a specific site, hagiographers elevated the land itself as well as the people who lived on it. Perhaps a more accurate term for this phenomenon would be "regionalism."

[18] Mary-Ann Constantine, "Saints behaving badly: sanctity and transgression in Breton popular culture," *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults*, ed. Jane Cartwright (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 198.

[19] Dorothy Ann Bray offers a useful resource for such a reading in her *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1992).

[20] Constantine, 199.

virginity among Christians had existed since at least the second century.[21] By the third century, consecrated virgins were special members of the community, and "virginity was a permanent…state, not an ephemeral condition preceding marriage."[22] Virgins made "vows of chastity" that signified a symbolic "marriage to God."[23] In the seventh century, consecrated virgins still occasionally lived at home with their families, but during this period small women's "churches" appeared, particularly throughout Ireland; their founders were often revered as saints.[24] In the context of pre-Christian Irish society, young women were most commonly forced into arranged marriage by fathers or fosterers, and authority figures such as slave owners and political leaders were almost always male.[25] Despite the existence of several powerful Irish goddesses, like Morrigan and the three Brigids, it is safe to say that Christianity was built upon a historical foundation of patriarchy in the Celtic world.[26] When Patrick began to baptize female converts, he encouraged vows of chastity, writing in his *Confessio* of "a blessed lady of native Irish birth and high rank…the angel had encouraged her to become a virgin of Christ…thanks be to God, six days later she most commendably and enthusiastically took up that same course that all virgins of God also do."[27] Patrick and continental theologians like Jerome and Ambrose said that "in holy virgins we see on earth the life of the angels;" male leaders elevated female virginity.[28] However, despite their sanctity, virgins were still subordinate to male authority. When in conflict with fathers or male Church leaders, they should not disobey, but use

[21] Harrington, 33.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 35.
[25] Ibid., 27.
[26] Ibid, 25.
[27] Patrick, "Confessio," *Patrick: His Writings and Life*, trans. Newport J. D. White (London: S. P. C. K., 1920), 45.
[28] Ambrose, *De institutione virginis*, quoted in Harrington, 31.

persuasion to further their cause.[29] The idealization of female virginity is particularly evident in hagiographies of female saints.

One historian of women's history in the Celtic Church, Christina Harrington, identifies a central problem of reading hagiographies of women: most, if not all, hagiographers were men.[30] As such, our extant textual evidence of women saints has already been filtered through male gaze and interpretation. Harrington goes as far as to suggest that women in hagiography might represent the principles of their male authors, rather than real women: "A woman character in a Life could thus be intended as a metaphor."[31] While the male gaze and patriarchal Church structure that prioritized male education and literacy is certainly a concern when reading hagiography, a more accurate interpretation is that male hagiographers used real women to further their principles. Often, such principles were illustrated through the motif of female virginity. In the medieval Celtic Church, male priests could be married. Conversely, religious women were almost exclusively "consecrated virgins."[32] Indeed, religious women were referred to explicitly as virgins, not as nuns: "The sons and daughters of Irish kings are giving themselves to be monks and virgins of Christ."[33]The very term "virginity" was inapplicable to men (for largely anatomical reasons, as virginity was linked to an intact hymen, an anatomical feature notably absent on those bodies historically categorized as male). Female sanctity and sainthood were contingent upon "virginity." At first reading, it is easy to assume that the significance of female virginity was merely a continuation of patriarchal power structures that existed before the establishment of a Celtic Church. But I argue that the political implications of consecrated

[29] Harrington, 31.
[30] Ibid., 52.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 42.
[33] Ibid., 23.

virginity and female religious communities contravened social normativity for women and allowed religious women to gain influence and authority.

In seventh-century hagiographies, when women establish religious communities, they act similarly to male saints.[34] Just like Patrick, Brigid travels frequently over considerable distance, preaches to pagans, acquires followers, performs miracles, befriends male clerics, and even receives land from nobles. The female saint, contrary to medieval social norms, is not financially dependent upon her immediate family.[35] "A holy woman, a consecrated nun, could have developed a national following and built herself a large monastery for followers of both sexes," suggesting that the religious legitimacy afforded by consecrated virginity also provided political legitimacy.[36] By establishing religious communities, women created social spaces for themselves separate from the economic and social dependence on men to which they would otherwise have been bound. While men did occasionally aid in the foundation of female monasteries, and some saints, like Hilde, established monasteries for both men and women, abbesses held final authority over women's monasteries, excluding men in a way that was uncommon during the medieval era.[37] Consecrated virginity afforded women some protection from male violence as well, as the punishment for raping a consecrated virgin was much harsher than that for raping a laywoman.[38] Ultimately, virginity was a social state, not merely a sexual one. As such, it was difficult to undo a consecration to holy virginity. Nevertheless, sexual purity was central to the social role of the virgin.

[34] Ibid., 54.
[35] Ibid., 55.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., 36.
[38] Ibid., 34.

Because of virginity's connection to sexual purity, the "fallen virgin"—described in hagiography as the victim of "evil suggestion"—posed a significant social problem.[39] While the Church established public penances like abstention from wine and meat for the restoration of virginity, many hagiographers preferred simpler approaches.[40] Using literary devices like rape, they dealt with the problem of the "fertile virgin." Because women were socialized as wives and fertile mothers, childbearing and rearing (especially, as will be discussed later, the bearing of a saintly child) had to be reconciled with the sanctity of consecrated virginity; such "fallen virgins" occupied a liminal space in religious society and in hagiographical literature. As Harrington argues, "the builders of the new Irish Church adopted fewer foreign ideas about women and holiness than has hitherto been imagined, opting consistently for a more generous attitude towards the female sex."[41] While such a claim arguably discounts the promotion of normative sexual purity in both hagiographical literature and in the penance practices of the early Celtic Church, Harrington correctly identifies a fascinating trend in hagiography that, while not openly undermining the significance of virginity, allows for a more flexible interpretation of what it meant for a woman to be a virgin, and of the power and social significance that virgins held in their communities. I explore both the establishment of the virginal ideal and the ways that virgins in hagiography challenged patriarchal structures through close readings of three key female saints: Brigid, Samthann, and Non.

"I am overwhelmed with shame and sadness:" preserving virginity

[39] *Life of the Holy Virgin Samthann*, trans. Dorothy Africa, *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Head (London: Garland Publishing, 2000), 107.
[40] Harrington, 38.
[41] Ibid., 48.

Because "virginity is almost a prerequisite for female sanctity," hagiographers go to great lengths to preserve the virginity of their female subjects.[42] For women, the maintenance of holy virginity entailed avoiding the social norm of marriage. Although the anonymous *Life of the Holy Virgin Samthann* was written later than major seventh-century texts, the first death notice for Samthann, the abbess of Cloburney, appears in 739 CE, placing her chronologically in a similar religious tradition.[43] Translator Dorothy Africa notes that it is common in Irish hagiography for women to "escape" marriages arranged by fathers or male fosterers.[44] Africa claims that the difference in male and female religious experience is reflected in hagiography "not so much in its quality but its quantity," but a close reading of the opening passage to Samthann's vita suggests that saints' lives were key to establishing normative gendered behaviour, especially sexually.[45]

The hagiographer introduces Samthann as "the holy and venerable virgin," a rhetorical gesture also present in Cogitosus' descriptions of Brigid.[46] He further validates her sanctity by connecting her to a prominent male saint: "her mother, Columba."[47] Such a connection linked Samthann through female lineage to an already-famous Celtic evangelist. While Columba was a patriarch of the Celtic church, naming Samthann's mother for him feminized the saint, creating a stronger connection between the two. Samthann, "when she came of age," was betrothed to a noble man.[48] After the betrothal, the hagiographer confirms Samthann's virginal sanctity through the motif of light: "a shaft of light like a sunbeam descending through the roof down onto the bed

---

[42] Jane Cartwright, "The Cult of St. Non: Rape, Sanctity and Motherhood in Welsh and Breton Hagiography," *St. David of Wales: Cult, Church, and Nation*, ed. J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), 182.
[43] Africa, 97.
[44] Ibid., 99.
[45] Ibid., 101.
[46] Ibid., 103.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.

where Samthann…was sleeping."[49] Reminiscent of the Biblical Nativity star, the light leads the man to "rejoice that he merited a spouse so imbued with heavenly light."[50] The pair even marry, but the hagiographer makes it plain that Samthann is unwilling to surrender her virginity, as she puts off her new spouse by saying, "Please wait until the others in the house have fallen asleep."[51] Preserving virginity is associated with the favour of God when "she began to pray, beating at the gates of divine charity, that it might save her virginity."[52] Paralleling the earlier "shaft of heavenly light," God intervenes with "a prodigious flame [that] seemed to soar from her mouth to the roof of the house."[53] A holy but destructive form of "heavenly light" from the "holy virgin" herself, the flame prevents Samthann from consummating the marriage and allows her to beseech her fosterer Cridan to disallow the marriage. She characterizes herself as a "poor servant of almighty God" and claims she was betrothed "without her consent."[54] Cridan agrees to "let the judgement be yours," giving Samthann a freedom of choice not afforded to many medieval women concerning marriage. Conversely, however, her virginity is depicted as a "marriage to God," and her entry to the community at Urney takes place only with "the consent of her husband."[55] Although virginity here allows Samthann to make her own choices regarding sexuality, it also reaffirms the patriarchal society she lived in, and is underlined as the key component to a woman's holy life.

Virginity is equally important to Brigid. In the Middle Irish *Life*, a male hagiographer says that Brigid was free from sexual desire, for "she never looked at the head of a man…She

[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

was abstinent, she was innocent."[56] A well-documented patron of Ireland alongside Patrick, Brigid is compared by a bishop in the anonymous *Bethu Brigte* to Christianity's most important female virgin, the mother of Jesus: "today a girl, for whom it has been prepared by God, will come to us like Mary."[57] Brigid's virginity is "preserved" like Samthann's when she rejects a man who has come to "woo" her; although her father and brothers are pleased with the suitor, Brigid says, "I have offered my virginity up to God."[58] Brigid goes further than Samthann, relying on holy violence to preserve her virginity: "Bacene…said, 'That beautiful eye in your head will be betrothed to a man whether you like it or not.' Thereupon she immediately thrust her finger into her eye."[59] Brigid, unlike Samthann, is physically punished for "depriving [her father and brothers] of the bride-price" and resisting normative marriage.[60] Yet, as she curses Bacene, her virginity, associated with God, grants her greater power than laymen wield. Ultimately, the preservation of Brigid's physical virginity grants her religious power; at her consecration, the bishop declares, "This virgin alone in Ireland will hold the episcopal ordination."[61]

Non, unlike Brigid and Samthann, presented a literary problem for hagiographers documenting female virginity associated with sanctity. Documented only in hagiographies of her more famous son, David of Wales, Non became holy primarily through her reproductive capacity. Consequently, hagiographers were faced with the problem of reconciling virginal and maternal sanctity. Jane Cartwright, Celtic studies professor at the University of Wales, notes that

---

[56] Whitley Stokes, "The life of Brigid," *Lives of the saints in the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), 197
[57] *Bethu Brigte*, Corpus of Electronic Texts, 23.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., 24.

Non is a "rare example of a raped female saint."[62] Although the "menaced virgin" is a common hagiographical trope which involves the graphic depiction of verbal and physical abuse and torture, the violence stops short of violating women's virginity, their most sacred "possession."[63] Consistent across all medieval accounts of her life, the rape of Non poses a significant literary and historical problem for historians addressing virginity and hagiography.

I suggest that rape was a literary device used to reconcile the seemingly contradictory aspects of female sanctity: virginity and motherhood. Non is a "spiritual virgin;" while physically violated, her virginity is, ironically, "preserved" through rape. She conceives David without the "sin" of experiencing sexual pleasure. Multiple hagiographies depict the rape and Non's response to the violation, emphasizing, for example that she was, by all accounts, willingly physically inviolate: "Neither before nor after did she know a man, but continued steadfastly in mind and body."[64] Before being raped, Non claims that "I would prefer to die cruelly than submit myself to such an embrace."[65] Losing one's virginity is a fate worse than death for a "virgin bride of Christ;"[66] in fact, foundational Christian theologian Jerome suggests that the threatening of virginity is the only acceptable circumstance for contemplating suicide.[67] Furthermore, Non's despair after the rape centres around the loss of her virginal holiness: "I am now overwhelmed with shame and sadness. I was a virgin—pure and religious."[68] Her despair not only links her prior virginity to religious devotion, but identifies even the unwilling loss of physical purity with shamefulness. More importantly, Non's grief underlines that she was an unwilling participant in intercourse, preserving her sanctity. Non resolves to "Go to mass,"

---

[62] Cartwright, 182.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Rhygyfarch, *Vita S. David*, ed. Sharpe and Davis, quoted in Cartwright, 201.
[65] *Buez Santez Nonn*, ed. Le Ferre, quoted in Cartwright, 202.
[66] Cartwright, 202.
[67] Ibid.
[6868] *Buez Santez Nonn*, 201.

participating in the metaphorical eucharistic "marriage" to God.[69] She retains her connections to God, and it is thus that she may go on to be a holy mother and prominent saint. Despite the untoward circumstances of the conception, when Non gives birth in the *Vita S. David*, "the place where the labouring mother was groaning was lit with such serene light that it shone as if God were present."[70] The presence of heavenly light, similar to that in Samthann's life, affirms Non's "spiritual virginity" and continued holiness.

"Do not trouble my sisters:" virginity and patriarchy

The obsession with preserving female saints' virginity as a signifier of divine favour and sanctity may be disturbing to feminist historians, particularly as these women generally submit willingly to what may be perceived as restrictive sexual limitations. Read contextually, however, the virginal life permitted women to resist patriarchal structures by establishing largely independent communities and providing a pretext for the refusal of sexual advances by "sinful" men. This trend is evident as both Samthann and Brigid dedicate great effort to preserving not only their own virginities, but those of the other members of their communities. The leadership afforded by pious virginity also allowed saints to provide for the material and spiritual wellbeing their followers. Not only did Brigid foster children at her monasteries, but in the *Bethu Brigte*, other virgins seek out Brigid to consecrate their communities, sharing her sanctity with their nunneries.[71] She also has the spiritual power to protect other religious women from demonic influence. When Satan visits "a certain pious virgin in Thebae," Brigit's instruction to perform "the sign of the cross over your eyes first" protects the virgin from Satan's influence. The "maiden" is then healed of her sin, "excessive sloth."[72]

---

[69] Ibid.
[70] Rhygyfarch, 189.
[71] *Bethu Brigte*, 29.
[72] Ibid., 28-29.

More obviously, Samthann quite literally protects her community from men in the Chapter 11 story of the "lustful cleric." Presented as an intruder who "came into the community," the unnamed man developed a "fancy" for a "young girl."[73] Although "she in turn paid out love to the lover," Samthann's intervention is presented not as interference, but a necessary protection. She instructs the cleric, "Do not trouble my sisters with sweet talk or misdeeds,"[74] but her protection goes beyond saintly charisma to the performance of a nature miracle: "The water had risen as high as his belt when a huge eel encircled his loins and cinched tightly around him."[75] Samthann commands nature to preserve her sister's virginity and the sanctity of her community. The cleric "swore that he would never come again to a women's community," delineating the social boundaries between women's religious communities and men's, and the independence that women's communities were afforded.[76]

Conforming to the virginal norm further allowed Brigid and Samthann to, like Non, become "mothers" in their own right. When a religious woman living at Cainnech "yielded to evil suggestion and subsequently bore a son,"[77] Samthann "sympathized with them and undertook the child's rearing," allowing the women to "maintain public decency" and "avoid scandal and suspicion."[78] "The right hand of the Lord showed its power"[79] to protect the fallen woman and her baby, implying divine approval over what might seem at first reading to be a transgressive act. Less violent than Non's rape, Samthann's adoption reconciles virginity and motherhood as two pillars of female holiness. Indeed, Samthann's capacity to perform miracles extends to control over childbirth, as she blesses a sterile woman: "the shame of sterility had

---

[73] *Samthann*, 105.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 107.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.

been expunged through her prayer."[80] Notably, just as the loss of sexual purity is "shameful" in Non's story, the inability to conceive is equally "shameful," further paralleling motherhood and virginity, despite their apparent contradictions. The general trend of Brigid's miracles associates her with motherhood. Cogitosus' *Life* opens with the multiplication of churned butter; later, Brigid milks a single cow six times in one day to feed a guest. While some speculate that this association with cattle is a thematic carry-over from legends of the pagan goddess Brigid, a more relevant interpretation suggests a miraculous association with motherhood and fertility through the motif of cows. Miraculous power, bestowed by virginity, allows Brigid to provide for her community, multiplying food supplies and manipulating nature.

"What had been conceived in the womb disappeared:" transgressive sanctity

I have discussed representations of virginity in hagiography as implicitly transgressive of societal norms for female behaviour, but Cogitosus' *Life* of Brigid offers an explicit example of "saints behaving badly" when Brigid performs what can be called, for all intents and purposes, an abortion on a fallen woman. The woman Brigid "blesses" is a virgin who "had lapsed through weakness into youthful concupiscence."[81] If hagiographies present an idealized human transformed by God's grace, the episode becomes even more difficult to interpret. But as religious studies scholar Maeve B. Callan rightly argues, the difficulty of hagiographical episodes offers important insights into medieval society. She notes that, because consecrated virgins were "married" to God, sex constituted fornication, and, therefore, resulting offspring were "problematic."[82] The removal of this offspring through Brigid's "blessing" is thus

[80] Ibid.
[81] Sean Connolly and J. M. Picard, "Cogitosus's 'Life of Saint Brigid:' Content and Value," *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117 (1987): 16.
[82] Maeve B. Callan, "Of Vanishing Fetuses and Maids Made-Again: Abortion, Restored Virginity, and Similar Scenarios in Medieval Irish Hagiography and Penitentials," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, no. 2 (2012): 286.

acceptable. The blessing, a non-graphic depiction of early abortion, renders the act sanitary and acceptable. All evidence of conception is removed after the hagiographical abortion, and the procedure spares the woman from the "pangs" of childbirth. Further, abortion returns the woman to "health and penitence," becoming part of the required penance for her sinful act.[83] Although modern Christianity condemns abortion, early Celtic Christianity ranked it "comparatively low" in terms of sin.[84] Penances were further determined based on the point during the pregnancy at which the child was "miscarried."[85] Abortion returned pregnant women to their virginal state when, via blessing and penance, the evidence of their sin was removed.[86] Other literary traditions, including the Irish penitentials, detail many female abortionists, and several male saints also perform abortions in extant *Lives.*[87] Thus, abortion may be a less transgressive act than it first appears, as it worked to restore female virginity and sanctity, while simultaneously sparing the fallen woman from social and religious disgrace. The consequence was that female saintly power, bestowed by virginal holiness, could actively determine and restore virginity at will.

Conclusion

While it is tempting when reading Celtic hagiography from a feminist perspective to condemn its glorification of female virginity, these rich and diverse texts, which are remarkable in their geographical and temporal range, demand a more complex analysis. While virginity is certainly centred as the defining aspect of female sanctity, virginal status had more to do with women's relationships to the Church than to particular men. Episodes of "menaced" or "fallen"

[83] Connolly, 16.
[84] Callan, 292.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., 294.
[87] Ibid., 295.

virgins reflect the capacity for virginal restoration, penance, and forgiveness, and female saints are regularly compassionate to "fallen women." More importantly, women were afforded holiness on par or greater than men's through their virginal status. Church Fathers, importantly, elevated virginity as the holiest state of being below that of the asexual angelic host.[88] Because male clerical abstinence was less emphasized and, rhetorically, men could not be "virgins," women had exclusive access to this highest sanctity. The importance of virginity afforded consecrated religious women access to independent communities, political and religious power, and divine, miraculous influence. Consequently, while virginity itself was certainly a product of patriarchal rhetoric about women and the functions of their bodies, it was also a vehicle through which women could transgress the patriarchy, live apart from men and marriage, and exercise meaningful power in their communities and beyond.

[88] Cartwright, 202.

Bibliography

Bethu Brigte, Corpus of Electronic Texts.

Bitel, Lisa M. “Body of a saint, story of a goddess: Origins of the Brigidine Tradition.” *Textual Practice* 16, no. 2 (2002): 209-228.

Bray, Dorothy Ann. “Miracles and wonders in the composition of the Lives of the early Irish saints.” In *Celtic Hagiography and Saints’ Cults*, edited by Jane Cartwright, 136-148. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003.

Callan, Maeve B. “Of Vanishing Fetuses and Maids Made-Again: Abortion, Restored Virginity, and Similar Scenarios in Medieval Irish Hagiography and Penitentials.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, no. 2 (2012): 282-296.

Cartwright, Jane. “The Cult of St. Non: Rape, Sanctity and Motherhood in Welsh and Breton Hagiography.” In *St. David of Wales: Cult, Church, and Nation*, edited by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding, 182-206. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007.

Connolly, Sean and J. M. Picard, “Cogitosus’s ‘Life of Saint Brigid:’ Content and Value,” *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117 (1987): 5-27.

Constantine, Mary-Ann. “Saints behaving badly: sanctity and transgression in Breton popular culture” in *Celtic Hagiography and Saints’ Cults*, edited by Jane Cartwright, 198-212. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003.

Harrington, Christina, *Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 450-1150.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Kissane, Noel. *Saint Brigid of Kildare: Life, Legend and Cult.* Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017.

Krajewski, Elizabeth M. G. *Archetypal Narratives: Pattern and Parable in the Lives of Three Saints.* Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2018.

Life of the Holy Virgin Samthann, translated by Dorothy Africa in *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, edited by Thomas Head, 99-111. London: Garland Publishing, 2000.

Patrick, “Confessio,” in *Patrick: His Writings and Life*, edited and translated by Newport J. D. White, 31-52. London: S. P. C. K., 1920.

Stokes, Whitley. “The life of Brigid.” In *Lives of the saints in the Book of Lismore.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890.