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# I, a saint; I, a sinner: Rereading female sanctity in Chaucer's "Lyfe of Seinte Cecile" and Kate Horsley's *Confessions of a Pagan Nun*

Lillian Constance  
*James Madison University*

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I, a Saint; I, a Sinner: Rereading Female Sanctity in Chaucer's "Lyfe of Seinte Cecile" and Kate  
Horsley's *Confessions of a Pagan Nun*

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by Lillian Leigh Constance

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of English, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

HONORS COLLEGE APPROVAL:

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Project Advisor: Dabney A. Bankert

---

Bradley R. Newcomer, Ph.D.,  
Dean, Honors College

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Reader: Bruce Johnson

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Reader: Mary Thompson

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

The presentation requirement for this work has been waived due to the applicant spending her senior year abroad.

This paper is dedicated to my mother, my sisters, my grandmothers, my aunts, my friends, and my teachers: the women who have encouraged me to celebrate femininity and to question institutions that encourage us to do otherwise.

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## Introduction

Women's identities are impacted by the adherence to or denial of a religion. This makes the question of whether religion is empowering or oppressive to women a significant feminist concern. A religion's ability to empower can be understood by the agency it allows women and if it encourages a model of femininity that does justice to their actual experience. Christianity, for example, has an on-going history of misogyny yet plenty of modern women still identify as Christians. We can better understand the complex nature of agency and women's spirituality in Christianity by studying what medieval and modern authors write about women and their experience of faith. Kate Horsley's *Confessions of a Pagan Nun* and Geoffrey Chaucer's "Lyfe of Seinte Cecile", included in the *Canterbury Tales*, are examples of a respectively modern and a medieval literary text that provides definitions of women's spirituality which are revealing of Christianity's ability both to empower and oppress. A comparison of Horsley's twenty-first century rendition of the life of a medieval woman with Chaucer's fourteenth-century version exposes the problems with feminist readings of female saints' lives as well as the ways in which faith intersects with other aspects of identity. Horsley's novel imagines what is omitted or obscured from a medieval narrative that reflects as much the patriarchal institution of the church as woman's experience.

St. Cecilia is recognized today chiefly as the Patron Saint of Music but her life was also one of the best known medieval virgin martyr legends written in English (Winstead 49). The legend describes the noble and chaste maiden Cecilia who, on the night of her wedding to a man named Valerian, seeks to convert him to Christianity. She claims to have "an aungel" ("Lyf"

264, l. 152) who protects her purity<sup>1</sup>. She tells Valerian that if “he may feelen, out of drede, / That ye me touche, or love in vileynye, / He right anon wol sle yow with the dede, / And in youre yowthe thus ye shullen dye.” (ll. 155-58) She sends Valerian to the priest “Seint” Urban where he is visited by another angel, submits himself to the Christian God, and is baptized.

Valerian returns to Cecilia and an angel who has “of roses and of lilie/ Corones two” (ll. 220-221); the angel gives one to Cecile and the other to Valerian. Shortly after, Valerian’s brother Tiburce arrives, smells the “corones,” which give off a heavenly fragrance, and is convinced by Cecilia and Valerian also to convert. Eventually, the brothers are tracked down by the Roman authorities for Christian proselytizing and brought to the prefect Almachius. But they convert their captors and Cecilia brings priests to baptize all of them. Refusing to sacrifice to heathen gods, Valerian and Tiburce are beheaded and Almachius kills his officer Maximus for claiming that he had seen the brother’s souls being guided by an angel into heaven. Next, Cecilia is seized and ordered to publicly renounce her faith. This leads to a lively debate between Cecilia and Almachius. He asserts his power and she challenges it, impugning the efficacy of pagan gods. Almachius orders her burned to death in a “bath of flambes rede” (l. 515); when this doesn’t work—“she sat al coold and feeleded no wo” (l. 521)—he orders her beheaded, after which she survives three days, her “nekke ycorven there,” (l. 533) and continues preaching to the people.

The oldest version of St. Cecilia’s story, and what is thought to be the source for all others, is the *Passio S. Caeciliae*, a historical romance dating from the early Middle Ages (Reames 38). There are several notable English translations, one being Jacobus de Voragine’s

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<sup>1</sup> This and all quotations from the “Lyf of Seinte Cecile” are taken from the *Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 264-69, cited by line number hereafter.

*Legenda aurea*, which is “the most widely circulated and influential legend of the Middle Ages.” (Winstead 53) The legend is also found in two anthologies of religious writings that date from the fifteenth-century (Winstead 49). But the vita’s chief claim to fame is that it is the only canonical saint’s life written by Chaucer, as “The Second Nun’s Tale,” from the *Canterbury Tales*.

To understand Chaucer’s translation and adaptation of Cecilia’s life, we must consider the manuscripts and versions he used. (*Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, 494-96) Sherry Reames traces the progression of the content and quality of the translation from the original *Passio*, to the *Legenda*, to Chaucer’s version. Chaucer begins by translating Jacobus’ version, then transitions to using the *Passio* manuscript directly after Tiburce’s baptism, ending with an abridgement of the tale rather than with the longer version. Considering the *Legenda* already breaks away from the narrative of the *Passio* “by emphasizing supernatural power at the expense of human understanding and choice,” Reames argues that Chaucer’s further omissions and abridgements project an increasing theological pessimism that distances the narrative from the more balanced Augustinian perspective of faith in the *Passio* (39, 40). According to St. Augustine, a balanced faith is one centered in understanding. The *Passio* demonstrates this ideal by providing detailed instructions to converts. In this case, there is a greater potential for intimacy in a relationship with Christ that stems from the convert’s awareness and appreciation of the tenets of the faith they are adopting. In Chaucer’s version, there is less emphasis on a personal relationship with Christ and more on the all-powerfulness of the divine. An authoritarian power is prescribed to the divine that’s nonexistent in the *Passio*. Tracking the changes made in both translations reveals a shift in the presentation of one’s relationship with Christ; the idea of a “betrothal” to Christ vanishes (Reames 42). Valerian’s conversion in the



*Passio* is preceded by questions which he eagerly poses to Cecilia but these questions are absent in the *Legenda* and “Second Nun’s Tale.” There is no longer a focus on the inner growth of one’s faith. In Chaucer’s version, for example, Valerian demands to see proof of Cecilia’s angel, “Lat me that aungel se and hym biholde,” then before he is even baptized, “An oold man, clad in white clothes cleere” appears to him (ll. 164, 201). The Augustinian concept of conversion as an ongoing process and faith as a relationship that grows steadily deeper is cheapened by allowing an unbaptized man to experience such proximity to the divine.

We can try to make sense of Chaucer’s motivation for radically altering Cecilia’s story by analyzing the elements of his translation that are entirely unique; namely, the Second Nun’s prologue. She opens with four stanzas that reflect on the nature of idleness, followed by an eight-stanza invocation to the Virgin Mary, and finishes with five stanzas contemplating the etymology of Cecilia’s name. “Ydelnesse,” (l. 2) which is “roten slogardye,” (l. 17) makes us more susceptible to the devil. The Second Nun establishes herself as a morally conscious narrator by suggesting it is our responsibility to be wary of the influence of sin. It is “to putte us fro swich ydelnesse,/ That cause is of so greet confusioun,” (ll. 22-23) that the second nun takes on the “faithful busyness” (l. 24) of relating Cecilia’s life to her audience. In other words, she has a duty not only to educate her audience, but to herself avoid sin by telling Cecilia’s story. Her invocation to Mary immediately establishes an ideal of femininity: “mercy, goodnesse”, “pitee” (l. 51), “meeke and blissful,” (l. 57) are listed as qualities that Mary embodies and exhibits. If the combination of these traits is the prerequisite to the perfect female, the Second Nun sets a standard for women that is not easily reached. Mary’s virginity and that she “synful soules cure” (l. 37) is another focus of the prologue and are qualities that we also see in Cecilia. These qualities connect Cecilia to Mary and to her traits. The Second Nun’s interpretation of the

meaning of Cecilia's name suggests that Cecelia will be virtuous, authoritative, and intelligent. For example, the English meaning of her name, "heaven's lily," (Winstead 53) refers to her "pure chaastnesse of virginitee." (l. 88) The English definition entwines Cecilia's purity with a physical beauty that is white, dainty, and prized by heaven, for she is "heaven's lily." Her authority comes from the translation of her name as "way of the blind" which indicates how she leads others through her good teaching. (ll. 92-93) She is not only a leader, she is "the way", the door through which others can reach enlightenment. Without her guidance, people will live in ignorance. Lastly, if Cecilia is a conjunction of "heaven" and "lia" then her intelligence is suggested through her "holy thoughts and constant industriousness." (Winstead 53) Not only does she have an intelligence that is deemed "holy," but also she has the dedication and drive to exercise it "industriously." From the meaning of her name to her similarities to the Virgin Mary, it is clear that Cecilia is to be admired and revered.

The Second Nun's prologue reflects an adherence to Augustine's ideal of a perfection centered in virginity and the virgin's relationship to the Church. Augustine, however, stresses that perfection comes from a "corporate" (Reames 41) Christianity where the virgin is fostered in her faith by the Church and returns that same support to her community. Chaucer's translation stresses the perfection of the individual which decreases the notion of faith as interdependent and fruitful. In the "Second Nun's Tale" conversion is practically instantaneous and the convert's ensuing career is short-lived. The sole purpose of the characters becomes perfect adherence to and promotion of faith; there is little room for "human nature and its achievements." (Reames 52) Chaucer's omission of the narrative of inner growth, speeding up the process of conversion, and streamlined living out of the faith communicates that divine will occurs with the sacrifice

rather than celebration of human nature. Reames comments on the dangerous implications of what is lost in Chaucer's version of the *Passio*:

Whereas the saints of the *Passio* were called only to renounce worldly loves, those of the tale act out, in effect, a total renunciation of themselves - laying down at God's call not only their worship of idols but their belief that there are things worth doing in this life, not only their sexual potential but their potential for understanding and choosing, not only their lives but their very identities. (54)

Reames sets the tone for the extremity of faith we can expect from Cecilia and the other converts of the tale. Prescribing the Augustinian ideal of perfection on to the individual rather than the community sets a much higher standard of faith that must be met. Normal human connection, emotion, and experience are cast aside to make room for the duties of servitude to Christ and his word. We see this full renunciation of human identity in Cecilia's isolation from others. The fruitfulness of faith is gone, since Chaucer gives her no mission "except to goad the persecutor into executing her." (Reames 57) Although we cannot equate the tale with Chaucer's personal beliefs since it is reflective of its speaker, the Second Nun, Reames suggests that we cannot ignore the implications of Chaucer's portrayal of Cecilia, as it is indicative of his personal conception of sanctity. And so Chaucer's motivation appears to be in part to have the Second Nun articulate a desire to avoid the sinful idleness, and in part to promote her personal conception of female sanctity.

Notwithstanding this idealistic portrayal of her spirituality, it seems to be the rebelliousness of Cecilia's character which made her a popular figure in Chaucer's day. Winstead, for example, argues that Cecilia provided an example for married women who wished

to abstain from sex and that “many holy women of the later Middle Ages imitated her (with varying success) in discouraging their bridegrooms from exacting the ‘conjugal debt’.” (50) The previously held notion that a “debt” was due to one’s husband could be done away with when more importance was laid on one’s duty to God. Technically, following the will of Christ rather than the will of a husband meant a woman was still bound in the patriarchal hierarchy, but the ability to deny one form of male authority still suggests, no matter how idealistic, a sense of agency.

Cecilia’s was not, of course, the only story that shaped medieval women’s faith; The virgin martyr sub-genre of hagiography was a thriving body of literature in medieval England, Scotland, and Ireland. Such legends depicted women much like Cecilia: young, and often educated noblewomen, who were persecuted for upholding their Christian faith. Despite threats from Pagan authority, family, and persistent suitors, the woman would refuse to abandon Christian doctrine and was often brutally tortured and killed for doing so. In Cecilia’s case, she had “hir nekke ycorven,” (l. 533) “her neck hacked,” (Winstead 60) and took three days to bleed to death. Cecilia’s story surprisingly demonstrates a more muted violence in comparison to the typical virgin martyr legend. This scene from the legend of Saint Barbara, found in one 15th-century manuscript of the South English *Legendary*, offers a more typical example of this genre:

He ordered her stripped and her flesh ripped to pieces with a hideous instrument. When she was so torn and bloodied that she no longer looked like a living creature, she was cast into a dark prison until he could think of something worse to do with her... the judge had her brought forth again and had both her sides cruelly seared with burning lamps. Then he had her tender head beat with various instruments. Even in this pain, she fell down and prayed to almighty God with all her heart... Her father beheaded her right there.

(Winstead 42, 43)

Although hagiography was one of the most popular literary genres in medieval Europe (Donovan 5), modern readers are largely unfamiliar with it. How does a twenty-first century reader relate to this description Saint Barbara's torture? Horrified aversion? Testament that violence against women has been exercised throughout history? When I've read this passage to contemporaries, many mistake it for a current event from the Middle East. The account of St. Barbara is, in fact, exemplary of a type of narrative that served as a model of ideal Christian behavior for lay women (Heffernan 258). This model showed young Christian women renouncing everything worldly—relationships, possessions, emotions—in exchange for a relationship with Christ and unfailing servitude to him. Their stories emerged out of the late Classical world, chiefly in the third and fourth centuries, becoming popular throughout the Middle Ages in translated versions that were disseminated widely in Europe.

The vitae promoted specific ideals of the female body and behavior, notably rejection of female sexuality and social bonds with the family and community and pursuit of a divine relationship with Christ. The period from the 13th through the mid-15th century saw a large increase in appreciation for lives about “heroic saintly women, those who achieved their sanctity either through virginity or martyrdom or both.” (Heffernan 256) The “heroic” women of these stories often experienced four elements of female spirituality: “the redefinition of ideas of kinship; freedom from the Pauline notion of sexual ‘indebtedness’; the importance of prophetic visions; and the change from virgin, wife, or widow to sponsa Christi.” (Heffernan 185) These elements of female spirituality probably influenced the medieval woman's experience of faith since, in the later medieval period, many of them personally identified with the vitae and turned to them for “religious authorization of their own experiences.” (Donovan 12) The significance of

this influence is alarming considering that female spirituality seemed to be characterized by a complete social upheaval in the life of the woman: a rejection of the traditional role of mother or wife for a divine role as spouse of Christ. This reflects the Church's desire to control not only a woman's social sphere, but to control how she expresses and acts out her sexuality.

Through the *vitae*, the church offered medieval women a redefinition of what it meant to be a good Christian female. Part of this redefinition was due to the new emphasis on virginity over motherhood. Remaining a virgin gave women "an opportunity to advance to positions of importance within the church; celibacy freed them from the difficult and sometimes dangerous demands of the roles of wife and mother." (Heffernan 242) In addition, the *vitae* portrayed intelligent women who used their knowledge of Christian doctrine to educate and serve as a role model for the less faithful. Saint's lives presented the opportunity to medieval women to exercise intellectual authority when it came to matters of faith, albeit at least within a circumscribed behavioral norm. It is important to remember though, that this was a power allowed to women by men. Men crafted these examples of authority in their writing of saint's lives, and in the lives it is also the men who have the power to silence that authority, often through death. Her authority always came at a cost. The nature of this authority must also be questioned, considering that women had to denounce their sexuality and female traits, essentially becoming "like" a man, to exercise it.

Although some of the *vitae* are loosely based on the lives of real women, most are fictional stories told, written, and edited by men. Considering these were stories about women and supposedly for women, it's notable that there are relatively few instances of women—Julian of Norwich is one—who told their own stories. The perspective of the female experience of faith and suffering is rarely recorded. Such lives, especially in their earliest versions, were intended to

inspire and instruct those in religious vocations (Winstead 4). But this changed around the thirteenth century, when England and Europe were Christianized and church authorities turned their efforts toward a contemporary already-Christian audience (Winstead 4). The result was a proliferation of vernacular versions of the lives translated and adapted for that audience:

“virtually everyone in the Middle Ages was exposed to the lives of the saints in one form or another.” (Heffernan 14) Chaucer’s translation is an example of one of these lives, a male author espousing through a female narrator ideals of sanctity. From the start, these lives have been screens onto which men modeled female sanctity and generations of readers have projected their own ideals. The medieval church generally imparted through such lives an ideal of virginity and complete renunciation. There is a repeated message from their male writers that female spirituality is entwined with sacrifice and, more often than not, considerable suffering. Modern feminist scholars have sometimes been idealistic about the sacrifices these women made, seeing virgin martyrs as cultural rebels and exemplars of early feminism.

The vitae gradually declined in popularity after the Enlightenment. However, the emergence of feminist scholarship in the twentieth century gave them new popularity as windows into feminine ideals as understood by medieval male writers, providing an alternative reading of the vitae that saw these women as early examples of female empowerment, despite the attempts of their authors. For example, in her analysis of over 2200 saints’ lives, Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg shows early medieval women as autonomous and intelligent. Oliva Espin believes “Their rebellion was a way to get what they wanted rather than what others dictated” (136); she sees the saints as exhibiting distinct agency. She even encourages modern readers to look for guidance in the lives: “Their gritty resistance to authority and sometimes stubborn conformity, their personal limitations and successes, can illuminate our own lives’ struggles.” (161) This

body of historical, cultural, and literary criticism<sup>2</sup> turned women of the vitae into icons of a different kind: heroines who defied traditional sexuality and gained authority through their faith. Leslie Donovan, for example, argues that “By denying their female sexuality, which would normally have been reserved for their husbands, women saints also become cultural rebels.” She also maintains that “Women saints were exceptional, not only in their faith, but also in their rejection of the circumscribed options for female fulfillment” (14). What does Donovan have to say, though, for those women who struggled to maintain the standard of “exceptional” faith modeled by the saints? And what are the options for fulfillment made available through faith? For whom are they fulfilling?

In different ways, then, both the medieval religious and modern feminist readings of the vitae emphasized ideas of freedom and authority for women. For readers in the 21st century, however, these readings raise more questions than they answer. First, how can we celebrate brutal torture and murder as positive examples of the female experience of faith? More importantly, how can we relate to the women of the vitae who embody idealized notions written chiefly by men? We know so little about the inner lives of these women or how real women responded. The lives tend to offer stereotypical characters, one-dimensional, and mono-focused. Such portraits tell us little of women’s doubts or misgivings about their decisions, of how their

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<sup>2</sup> Other scholars who tend to read the saints lives as empowering and feminist include John Kitchen. *Saints Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998); Corinne J. Saunders, “Classical Paradigms of Rape in the Middle Ages: Chaucer’s Lucretia and Philomela.” *Rape in Antiquity*. Ed. Susan Deacy and Karen F. Pierce. (Swansea: Classical Press/Duckworth, 1997), 243-266; Rudiger Schnell, “The Discourse on Marriage in the Middle Ages.” *Speculum* 73 (1998): 771-786; Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, “The Virgin’s Tale.” *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All her Sect*. Ed. Ruth Evans and Leslie Johnson. (Rutledge, 1994), 165-194; Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints’ Lives in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).



actions affected their relationships with family and friends, of how they experienced their sexuality.

In fact, a modern novelist has considered these questions in a retelling of a female saint's life. Kate Horsley's novel *Confession of a Pagan Nun*, (2001), tells the story of Gwynneve, a once Pagan woman who has converted to Christianity and becomes a nun in sixth century Ireland. Raised chiefly by her mother in the unforgiving Pagan society of rural Ireland, Gwynneve finds consolation in stories and words. She falls in love with the Druid Giannon, who "was a master of words and histories," (24) and eventually becomes his apprentice and lover. Increasing conflict with the Christian authority leads to Giannon's capture, and Gwynneve is forced to forge her own way, making a living by travelling from *túath* to *túath* and offering her services. The nomadic lifestyle becomes unsustainable in her old age and her only option for stability is the monastery. She lies about her faith and retires there, resigning herself to practice Christianity and offer her writing skills in exchange for a home.

The novel focuses on conventions of the traditional genre such as the conversion from Paganism to Christianity, the relationships with male authority figures, and female virtue and its role. Horsley's novel mimics the style of the fifth century *Confession of Saint Patrick*. "I am Patrick, yes a sinner and indeed untaught" (Succant 1) reads Patrick's introduction. Horsley's begins: "I, Gwynneve, a sinner quite uncultivated and the least of all the faithful and utterly despicable to many." (1) While Patrick characterizes himself as unlearned, Gwynneve does not. Both are sinners, but Patrick is self-deprecating in a manner we would expect because Christians, by nature, identify as sinners. It is a title for him—for Gwynneve, it is a state of being. Her assertion seems harsher and more internalized than Patrick's. She sets herself apart from a community who apparently condemn her as "utterly despicable." There is a clear uncertainty in

Gwynneve's beliefs that are not present in St. Patrick's. By mimicking the style of this renowned Irish religious text, Horsley not only inverts the genre but inverts the gender of the authorship, allowing a shift in the focus on traditional ideals of female spirituality to the question of how spirituality is actually experienced by the protagonist.

As the opening forecasts, *Confessions of a Pagan Nun* diverges from the conventions of traditional vitae in several crucial ways. In the medieval vitae, the main character is usually a young girl or woman, often beautiful, who comes from an upper-class family. This depiction of the maiden as "well bred, sometimes aristocratic, comely, forceful, intelligent, and eminently desirable... informs virtually all these vernacular lives." (Heffernan 268) She exhibits an arrogance in her interactions with others, especially non-believers and persecutors, that is strongly informed by her spiritual authority. By contrast, Gwynneve's story begins towards the end of her life: she is old, worn out, and poor; there will be no dramatic martyrdom of a beautiful youth. While many of the medieval stories depict champions of the Christian community pitted against Pagan authority, *Confessions* provides an example of what conflict within the Christian community might have looked like. Significantly, a female author writes Gwynneve's story, in contrast to the almost entirely male authorship of medieval saint's lives. The first-person narration of Gwynneve's story portrays a Christian woman who is ravaged by doubt and grief, an entirely different picture than the one we get in a medieval virgin martyr characterized by unwavering conviction in her faith. St. Patrick's words of conviction in his faith and role contrast with Gwynneve's, enhancing the singularity of her narrative.

*Confessions* offers a means of rereading a tale such as St. Cecelia's by illuminating the elements of the female experience of faith which are left out, simplified, or distorted. Her novel calls into question the portraits of early Christian women's lives as juxtaposed against the more

complex, dimensional character of Gwynneve. Horsley adopts Saint Patrick's, an early revered Christian man's, simplistic and direct style of confession, but inserts a woman protagonist within the narrative. This complicates our understanding of Christian education, conversion, and experience of faith and creates a much richer portrayal of medieval female spirituality which questions the freedom, spiritual power, and authority these legends supposedly ascribed to women. There is no mollifying of Gwynneve's experience with faith; Horsley explores human nature as it intersects with the Christian faith, not as a clear-cut submission but as a process of questioning and reflecting. In what follows I will contrast Gwynneve's story in *Confessions* with Chaucer's fourteenth-century version of the legend of St. Cecilia. There are obvious differences between the stories: Cecilia's life is set at a time of great change—the Christianization of Europe and the Roman world—and is written in the third person perspective. *Confessions* is written in the twenty-first century from a first-person perspective and is set in the beginning of the Dark Ages in sixth century Ireland. This paper is not a direct comparison of like things but rather seeks to understand how Horsley's novel can inform our understanding of medieval female spirituality and imaginatively expose the elements of the female experience of faith, emotion, and human nature that are lost or obscured in the narratives of the vitae. Specifically, I will explore how the idea of female sanctity and faith is worked out in the "Lyfe of Seinte Cecile" and *Confessions of a Pagan Nun* in the areas of education and knowledge, human relationships, and sexuality. Finally, I will argue that by persuasively expanding our understanding of female saint's lives beyond their roles as icons of Christian virtue or of feminist courage, Horsley shows the way toward a reassessment of these ancient tales that can continue to inform modern readers.

## Chapter 1: The Power of Knowledge in the Hands of Female Saints

Cecilia “from hir cradel up fostred in the feith/ Of Crist, and bar his gospel in hir mynde.” (ll. 122-123) The beginning of the “Second Nun’s Tale” makes clear that, from birth, Cecilia has been raised on Christian teachings and has never wavered from them. While this is typical of some lives, many of the *vitae* feature a conversion from Paganism to Christianity. These conversions are often intellectual in nature and occur as a result of teaching and study of the Christian doctrine. Saint Anastasia of the North English Legendary, for example, converts to Christianity because Saint Chrysogonus “taught her the tenets of the faith.” (Winstead 45) For The Scottish Legendary’s Saint Eugenia, “her heart was drawn to Christ’s law, both spiritually and intellectually, for her learning inclined her to think that law best.” (Winstead 72) When Cecilia’s brother-in-law Tiburce is brought to the priest Urban, “He cristned hym and made hym in that place/ Parfit in his lernynge.” (ll. 352-353) His baptism signifies a completion of his education, “his lernynge.” In *Confessions*, Gwynneve agrees that “Teaching is a sacred art.” (104) The pattern of studying or teaching followed by conversion suggests that there is an intellectual superiority and credibility to the Christian doctrine since its truths must be self-evident to any who study it and compare it to other belief systems. They haven’t necessarily received the components of a formal education, such as being taught Latin, but those who understand Christian teachings are bestowed with an intellectual authority and wisdom which is affirmed by the community. While Cecilia is an already Christian-educated heroine, it is still clear that knowledge of Christian doctrine is crucial no matter when one receives it.

From the beginning, Cecilia shows the utmost resolve in her faith. Her tale begins on her wedding night where she convinces her new husband, Valerian, that she must remain a virgin and he must convert to Christianity. Valerian’s baptism is followed by the baptism of his brother,

Tiburce, and they set out to educate others in the Christian doctrine. The brothers eventually are sentenced to death by Pagan authorities which leads to a confrontation between Cecilia and the prefect Almachius. She angers Almachius by taunting his beliefs and belittling Paganism, but really seems to infuriate him by arrogantly refusing to recognize his power and is then executed for upholding her Christian faith.

Whether it was his intention or not, Chaucer's adaptation of Cecilia's story has the effect of making Christianity appear less of an intellectually superior doctrine in comparison to the *Passio* and *Legenda*. The latter provide lengthy explanations of doctrine in response to the various characters' questioning of Christian faith. These moments are obvious opportunities for the Church to promote Christian doctrine and to convince those who are unsure of its intellectual superiority. In addition, the level of detail in these responses reiterates that Christianity is a faith that can be learned and taught by its followers; blind faith is not a requirement. The responses in the "Second Nun's Tale" are cut to a couple of lines. This editing is evident in Tiburces' first scene with Cecilia and Valerian. He responds to his brother's declaration of the Christian truth with curiosity but understandable skepticism, asking "How woostow this?" and "in what wyse?" (ll. 264, 265) Valerian responds "That shal I thee devyse," (l. 266) but in fact he provides no explanation, insisting that Tiburce must "reneye/ The ydoles and be clene." (ll. 268, 269) Cecilia elaborates, claiming idols are "a thing in veyn" (l. 285) and "dombe" (l. 286) but never explains why. That apparently isn't a problem for Tiburce because he immediately accepts what Cecilia tells him as truth.

Chaucer's version may fail to emphasize the intellectual superiority of Christian doctrine, but since he was writing for an entirely Christian audience, explanation was perhaps less important than, as the Second Nun argues in the prologue, preventing idleness. The focus of the

tale becomes more about adventure, Christian heroics, persistent faith, and female spirituality. And it is still ultimately Cecilia's knowledge of these teachings that make her credible to the community. Cecilia's role as a teacher, despite being unique for a female in the Middle Ages, shapes her image of authority. Valerian and Tiburce convert to Christianity thanks to her instruction. She convinces Valerian to get baptized, instructing him to go to the "Via Apia" (l. 172) where Pope Urban will "purge[d] yow fro synne," (l. 181) and to let it be known that "I, Cecile, yow to hem sente." (l. 176) Tiburce is more skeptical than his brother and Cecilia must explain the doctrine in slightly more depth before he is convinced. She explains that "alle ydoles nys but a thyng in veyn," (l. 285) and there is "better lif in oother place," (l. 323) "Which Goddes Sone us tolde thurgh his grace." (l. 324) When Tiburce is convinced, "Whoso that troweth nat this, a beest he is," (l. 288) she proclaims, "I take thee for myn allye." (l. 300) Winstead translates "allye" as "colleague" (56), supporting the notion of the Christian community as an intellectual one, where members are colleagues learning together. Cecilia uses her knowledge of the doctrine and conviction in her faith to convince her husband to be baptized instead of consummating their marriage. That isn't to say, though, that Cecilia doesn't also appeal to Valerian's human nature; she threatens his life with her angel and also gives him the chance to satisfy his curiosity about this angel by sending him to Urban. Tiburce has no reason to pay attention to Cecilia either, but she again appeals to a fear of death as well as curiosity by tempting him with the knowledge that "ther is better lif in oother place,/ That nevere shal be lost, ne drede thee noht." (ll. 323, 324) Cecilia's teaching and persuasive skills extend to the community in her tale as well. The previously Pagan public are "converted at hir wise loore" (l. 414) so much so that they're willing to speak out against the prefect Almachius.

Cecilia's debating skills are put to the test during her confrontation with Almachius.

While there are instances in the story of visits from angels and other supernatural occurrences, in this scene it is only Cecilia's word against the male Pagan authority, there is no direct "divine" interference on her behalf. Despite her gender and age, she speaks to Almachius with a confidence and conviction that makes him appear uncertain and brash by comparison. There is an underlying irony to their confrontation because Cecilia and Almachius are upset for completely different reasons. She is focused on exposing the faultiness of his belief-system but he cannot get past the behavioral norms which are being violated by a "gentil womman" (l. 425) who chooses to speak to him with so little respect. He even implores her, "Ne takestow noon heede/ Of my power?" (ll. 435, 436) She retorts, "Thou seyst thy princes han thee yeven mygh/ Bothe for to sleen and for to quyken a wigh/ Thou, that ne mayst but oonly lyf bireve/... thy power is ful naked." (ll. 480-486) She challenges his claim to "sleen and for to quyken a wigh", to power over life and death, by pointing out that he can only take life, "ne mayst but oonly lyf bireve" unlike her Christian God. Her claim is that because his god can only kill, his power is limited; hers can do both—take and give. She uses her knowledge of the Christian faith to systematically break down Almachius' argument and persuasively paint Paganism as a foolish "faith." Cecilia demonstrates this by taunting the stone the Pagans supposedly worship:

Thou were in every manner wise/ A lewed officer and a veyn justice./ Ther lakketh no thyng to thyne outter yen/ That thou n'art blynd; for thyng that we seen alle/ That it is stoon—that men may wel espyen—/ That ilke stoon a god thou wolt it calle./ I rede thee lat thyn hand upon it falle/ And taste it wel, and stoon thou shalt it fynde./ Syn that thou seest nat with thyne eyen blynde.

(ll. 496-504)

Cecilia harshly criticizes Almachius, telling him he is in every way a “lewed” official and a “veyn” judge. “Lewed” means “unlearned” in Middle English which is in direct contrast to her learnedness. She does not entreat, she commands that he “lat thyn hand upon it falle/ And taste it wel.” She belittles Almachius’ faith, saying it is ridiculous to call a stone God, even with blind eyes like his. Reducing his idol to a “dumb” stone, and then taunting him for worshiping it makes Paganism seem absurd compared to Cecilia’s eloquent defense of Christianity. She also employs rhetorical devices like metaphor to strengthen her argument: “For every mortal mannes power nys/ But lyk a bladdre ful of wynd, ywys./ For with a nedles poynt, whan it is blowe,/ May al the boost of it be leyd ful lowe.” (ll. 438-441)

Her comparative skill is impressive throughout the confrontation: she pits death against life and stone against Christ. In this moment, there is no hint of the meekness the Second Nun mentions in her prologue. In this crucial scene, it is her rhetorical skills, her powers of persuasion, that come in use against the Pagans. Heffernan suggests it is typical of saint’s lives to “exemplify the maid’s intelligence (she defeats all comers in offering a rationale for her newfound religion).” (269) She is certainly exhibiting the “holy thoughts and constant industriousness” (Winstead 52) we were told to expect in the prologue, but in no instance is Cecilia “meeke and blissful.” (l. 57) And while she shows mercy to those seeking conversion as well as converts, she has no “pitee” (l. 51) for Pagans like Almachius. The prologue seems to promote the feminine traits ascribed to the biblical model of Mary. But Mary is a relatively passive figure compared to Cecilia. The contrast between the values mentioned in the prologue and those that Cecilia actually exhibit suggests that her defiant behavior and challenge of masculine authority could not have been acted out if she were truly “meeke and blissful” and full of “goodness”. Curiously, Cecilia must become more like a man—or at least assume she is equal



to Almachius— if she's to stand up against him. So it is Cecilia's failure to demonstrate the Marian qualities mentioned in the prologue that allow for the impressive display of rhetoric that convinces the community to support her and convert to Christianity. It is still the intellectual display of power, though, and not supernatural power that is important in this moment. This raises some questions about the Second Nun's reliability as a storyteller. She is not described in the General Prologue as are most of the other pilgrims, so we can only make assumptions about her character by comparing her prologue to the tale she tells. It seems that the feminine virtues she promotes in the prologue, those that we are supposed to value, are not what she actually values.

Unlike Cecilia, Gwynneve is first educated as a Pagan and only later as a Christian, so she herself compares the two "doctrines" in her auto-biography, which she is writing toward the end of her life. The story is told in flashback. At the beginning Gwynneve resides in the monastery of Saint Brigit along with a small group of other elderly nuns. She lives a humble life, praying along with her sisters, occasionally providing services to the local townspeople, and completing various translations for the monastery. The narrative is made up of her spiritual musings and personal memoir. She is occasionally interrupted by events in the monastery and the outside world. For example, the arrival of the beautiful Sister Aileen marks the beginning of upheaval in Gwynneve's life. Gwynneve learns of Aileen's romantic past with the abbot of the monastery and becomes inextricably involved in their affairs, leading to the destruction of everyone involved. Her narrative begins as she works late into the night transcribing scripture since she's "one of a few nuns who are literate." (1) This suggests her knowledge is valuable to the community and establishes her, like Cecilia, as respected and influential. But it quickly becomes clear that Gwynneve's literacy makes others in the community more wary and

suspicious than reverent. Upon seeing that Gwynneve is writing a journal rather than transcribing Christian doctrine, the elder Sister Luirren chides her, “you are blasphemous and waste parchment.” (16) The lives only show the dynamic of Pagan verses Christian but in *Confessions* we learn that Christian can also be pitted against Christian. Utilizing her education for personal means constitutes “blasphemy”: impious behavior that can be considered a religious crime. Cecilia’s Christian education and the way she uses it against the Pagan authorities is impressive considering she is living during a period where women rarely exercised such assertive power, but her intellectual authority never tests or reaches beyond Christian doctrine. Gwynneve’s does. It suggests that a woman’s education can only be exercised within the circumscribed field of Christianity: any other intellectual expression is condemned. Gwynneve’s intellect is confined; Cecilia’s is only allowed to expand because she exercises it solely for the purpose of Christian teaching.

The treatment of Gwynneve’s intellectual work by her fellow nuns appears even more striking in comparison to her intellectual freedom as a Pagan. Gwynneve explains that her knowledge is due to her teacher “Giannon the Druid, [who] was an expert at the magic of words.” (1) Indeed, the teaching that Gwynneve receives is rare and atypical for the average Pagan woman, but as she explains in her opening, many Christian women are uneducated—a challenge to the intellectual model Cecilia offers. At least in her Irish Pagan community, education was regarded as a power not a weakness and respected rather than feared.

In Cecilia’s story, the Christian doctrine is undeniably superior to Paganism. Gwynneve, on the other hand, approaches scripture with an educated but skeptical curiosity. When questions arise, she looks for answers in scripture as a Christian is supposed to do: “As a scholar I am searching the words of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” (31) Gwynneve’s intellectualism contrasts with

Cecilia's because the latter represents certainty. Gwynneve rarely assumes to know the truth which, at moments, translates more honestly than Cecilia's dogmatic certainty. Gwynneve is marked by humility, Cecilia is not. Gwynneve is also not easily satisfied with the answers that scripture provides. For example, reading Saint Augustine's complaints against Pelagius, whose followers she once knew, she asks "Is it not possible that all that we see around us, being created by God, should be considered holy? Is it not possible that instead of original sin there is original grace?" (32) Gwynneve's dissatisfaction with certain core Christian tenants contrasts starkly with Cecilia's resolute faith.

Gwynneve recognizes the power of knowledge from an early age, understanding words to be "immortal things one could see and touch." (9) Her childhood is a world dominated by fear and uncertainty: death and hunger are ever-present and affection and kindness are rare. For her, knowledge is an escape from a violent world. Her education is Pagan and comes directly from her mother. She explains that, as a child, "I felt that I would starve if my mother did not feed me with her words." (11) The stories Gwynneve's mother tells are sustenance for her daughter; they are a way of making sense of the capricious natural world but also a distraction from discomfort and unhappiness. Since her mother is the sole provider of the words which are so sacred to Gwynneve, she also becomes sacred. But as Gwynneve grows older, she learns that Druids hold even greater knowledge, that the druid's knowledge is "power", and she begins to "lust" (12) for that power. Gwynneve admits that others insisted she "loved words too much," but she explains that "what I loved was the freedom of words." (9) She understands that knowledge has the potential to liberate: it allows one to question and to challenge. But Gwynneve also realizes that the education she receives from Giannon guarantees respect from other *túaths*, or tribes. Gwynneve gains power from her knowledge as a Pagan druid but loses that power when she

becomes Christian. Cecilia's education is in the service of dogmatism which gives an artificial quality to the power and respect it gives her, and Gwynneve's education is similarly constrained as a Christian since it can only be used for Christian proselytizing.

Their knowledge condemns both of them in the end; Cecelia is executed by the Pagan authorities for exercising her knowledge and Gwynneve is sentenced to death by her community and told by the abbot that "I was not humble but aggressive with my talents." (172) Cecilia's aggressive and defiant exercise of her knowledge seems empowering but Gwynneve's story sheds light on the inconsistent nature of this power; Cecilia is only allowed intellectual authority on matters of Christian doctrine, nothing else. The goal of Cecilia's story is a glorification of the Christian doctrine whereas the goal of *Confessions* seems to be to question how this doctrine actually impacts a woman's life. This variability in how female education is treated is further exposed in Gwynneve's commentary on the different interpretations of Christian doctrine. While she views her personal writing as a way to better understand Christianity, the abbot believes it to be blasphemous. His interpretation of the Bible leads him to view educated females as dangerous and Gwynneve explains that if he "wants me dead because I am capable of ruining his influence with my knowledge and my ability to speak and write it, then he can use his version of Christ to kill me." (179) The idea that the abbot can have "his own version of Christ" different from Gwynneve's, suggests that there is no ultimate "sacred" truth that can be gained from Christian doctrine: it, like all knowledge, is interpreted differently by those who are learning it. Granted, Gwynneve knows about the abbot's love affair with Sister Aileen, but she never gives any indication that she'd want to expose their secret. Gwynneve's innocence is so obvious to the reader, her question "Could I not be left alone, a barren woman, to scratch marks on parchment with innocent devotion to wisdom?" (153), poignantly reiterates the unfairness of her situation.

Her comparison of Paganism and Christianity reflects a genuine desire to better understand truth. While Valerian and Tiburce are able to question Cecilia in hope of understanding why they should choose Christianity over Paganism, curiosity is destructive for Gwynneve. Curiosity is permissible in men but dangerous in women.

Despite the fact that Gwynneve's writing ultimately provides the excuse for her execution, she reminds us that education has the ability to empower and give purpose to life: "I still love the power of words. They dispel my loneliness. They sooth my fear of uselessness." (165) Cecilia uses her learning for the benefit of Christianity and is championed for it. Questions are not part of her narrative: we are supposed to accept her knowledge as absolute. Gwynneve opens our eyes to a different definition of power when she says, "For if one does not have knowledge of what to do or think, he will be told by another what to do or think." (12) She suggests that the intellectual superiority of Christianity could be used as a form of oppression and domination over less educated groups of people and particularly over women, if those women don't fit the model that lives such as Cecelia's projected.

In both stories knowledge means power. Cecilia's impressive understanding of doctrine, her desire to share her education with others, and her fearless commitment to that doctrine is inspirational. It's possible that her story positively influenced medieval women readers and allowed for growth of what was a restricted view of female spirituality, allowing women to reject the traditional roles of wife and mother. That does not mean the intention of her tale was liberation. The Second Nun admits her purpose in translating the tale is to combat idleness; Cecelia is busy educating others; the Second Nun is busy telling her story. Gwynneve's story forces us to question how admired Cecilia would have been if she chose to defy her husband on her wedding night or challenge male authority figures even for Christian advocacy, and if a

medieval woman would have been celebrated for acting similarly. Is a woman only worthy of attention if she's a perfect emblem of her faith? Gwynneve's story shows that a woman who questions, who doubts, who gains personal use and satisfaction from her education, is rejected by her community. It cannot be argued that the *vitae* encouraged education and intellectual freedom for women if that education was limited to Christian doctrine. Cecilia could only appear to have more authority than Almachius because he is Pagan. Gwynneve concludes that Christian doctrine has the potential to be "fertile ground for harmful shame and fear." (164) Her tale reminds us that all knowledge has the potential to be destructive, even knowledge of sacred material.

Cecilia's goal, and presumably the goal of the Church, was to spread knowledge of the Christian doctrine with the intention of convincing others to convert. One can imagine that the successful product of this goal would be a fully Christian society. Since a woman, Cecilia, contributed to creating this society, it is only logical to assume that it would be filled with women like Cecilia: women who are educated, autonomous, defy traditional standards of female sexuality, exercise authority over men, challenge male figures of authority, and are respected by men and women alike. *Confessions* challenges the illusion of this imagined society by describing the reality for an educated woman in an already Christian community. Gwynneve is also educated in both Pagan and Christian worldviews which allows her to make comparisons that are available to Cecilia but which she sees in stark terms of good and evil. The authority that Cecilia exercises over men like her husband and Almachius is nonexistent in Gwynneve's world. Christian society is not exempt from a traditional gender hierarchy when nuns are forced to accommodate an abbot and his men in their own home. Gwynneve, who found hope and purpose in writing is condemned for knowing too much: not of scripture but of human failings. Too much knowledge in a woman is so dangerous that the Christian society's response is to execute her.

There is an alarmingly fine line between a knowledge that constitutes execution and a knowledge that constitutes celebration. To this day, the Church still exhibits a distrust of the power of knowledge in the hands of women; despite taking on every other role performed by a man, women are still considered unqualified to preach by the Church.

## Chapter 2: The Saint in Family and Society

A central theme of sacred biography is “the image of the physically embattled woman who struggles against secular authority, whether political, familial, moral, or sexual.” (Heffernan 261) Conflict is inherent in the relationships of the female saint: she literally battles against the people with whom she shares her world. It is only her relationship with God that is free of conflict, and it is for his sake that she struggles against the complexities and constraints of these worldly relationships. For the female saint of the *vitae*, familial relationships can exist along with a relationship with God, but God is prioritized and duties or responsibilities that don’t glorify Him interfere with that relationship. A demanding requirement presented by the lives for the medieval reader is the need to cast aside worldly relationships.

This does not appear to be difficult for Cecilia because her family isn’t mentioned at all. We are only told that she’s descended from “Romayns and of noble kynde.” (l. 121) We can also assume that her family were Christian, since she was “from hir cradle up fostred in the faith/ Of Crist,” (ll. 122, 123) but their faith did not keep them from marrying their daughter to a Pagan man. After this brief introduction to Cecilia’s background, the tale skips to her wedding day. At this point in a saint’s life the maiden’s father often plays a role, as he would be responsible for the arranging of the marriage. For example, in the legend of Saint Anastasia, her “powerful and strong-willed guardians married her with a large dowry to a man called Pupillus.” (Winstead 45) Saint Juliana’s father marries her to the nobleman Eleusius, “knowing that such a wellborn man was a worthy match for a wellborn lady.” (Winstead 12) Often such a marriage sets up a conflict between the father’s desires for the marriage and the daughter’s desire to remain a virgin. Yet Cecilia’s wedding day passes without a mention of family, which remains an invisible presence throughout her tale. There is more of an emphasis on family created through shared faith: Cecilia



denies her husband Valerian on their wedding night and does not accept him until he's baptized and they're visited by an angel who crowns them in two "Corones" (l. 221) of "roses" and "lilie." (l. 220) The absence of her father in orchestrating her marriage reiterates the theme that it is not familial approval of a husband which matters to Cecilia, but the approval of God signified by her crowning at the hands of an angel. In addition, though she is Tiburces' sister by marriage, she does not acknowledge their relationship until he declares his faith in Christianity. She tells Tiburce, "Lo, right so as the love of Crist," quod she/ "Made me thy brotheres wyf, right in that wise/ Anon for myn allye heer take I thee,/ Syn that thou wolt thyne ydoles despise." (ll. 295-298) It is "the love of Crist" acting in Valerian that made him Cecilia's husband, not a marriage ceremony or consummation, and it is through the same love that Tiburce becomes her brother. This new relationship is recognized from that point onwards, Cecilia calling Tiburtius "myn owene deere brother," (l. 321) and Tiburtius referring to her as "suster deere." (l. 333) In the absence of a nuclear family, Cecilia's relationship with Pope Urban and his deacons becomes the connection that most resembles a familial relationship. They share mutual trust: Cecilia sends people to Urban to be baptized and Urban praises her servitude to God, proclaiming she is "lyk a bisy bee, withouten gile." (l. 195) This trust is reaffirmed at the end of Cecilia's life when she entrusts Urban with the souls of the Christians she has been teaching-- "And to the Pope Urban betook them tho" (l. 541)—and she later leaves instructions for him to make her "hous perpetuelly a cherche." (l. 546) Cecilia entrusts everything to Pope Urban, not her biological family, and it is Pope Urban, after she dies, who "with his deknes prively/ The body fette and buried it by nyghte" (ll. 547, 548) and "halwed" (l. 551) her house, calling it "the chirche of Sainte Cecilie." (l. 550) Even her physical home, the place which is supposed to be reserved for family, becomes a space dedicated to God. Urban acts on behalf of the needs of the Church

family, the needs of Cecilia's biological family are secondary. The conversion of Cecilia's house into a Church represents the fulfilment of the Church's idealistic goal to envelop all aspects of public and private life.

Familial relationships in Cecilia's tale are voluntary, chosen relationships. Perhaps this is because relationships stemming from Christ were believed to be more sacred and superior to worldly relationships. But a relationship with Christ does not mean the absence of a relationship with biological family: they can coexist and it is in part due to the institution of family that the Church is sustained through generations. Why, then, are Cecilia's family absent from her narrative? Perhaps it comes down to what the Second Nun wants to emphasize, given that her prologue demonstrates very little interest in the biological family. An understanding of the role of the daughter in medieval families can also help to answer this question.

According to Heffernan, documentary sources from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries show that the daughters of wealthier peasants generally married younger, sometime before the age of eighteen. Since "the prospect for land inheritance and dowry determined the appropriate marriageable age", it was normal to consider girls around the age of fourteen "potential future liabilities on the family." (274) Daughters were the property of their fathers, property whose value came from being married off. Susan Mosher Stuard comments on the increasing adherence to primogeniture which hindered the independence even of "aristocratic women in landowning families." (148) Even nobles were struggling to provide large dowries for their daughters, exerting even more pressure on finding a successful match. N.M. Heckel explains that the issue of dowries was further complicated by competing religious and secular desires: the connections and potential profit that a father could make in providing a dowry for his daughter was threatened by the Church's encouragement of young woman to give that dowry to

ecclesiastical treasuries. Heckel suggests it is “easy to see why all but the most devout or the very well off would be unhappy” with the unprofitable transaction of paying for a divine husband instead of one in the flesh.

Such dehumanization—reducing women to property, to chattel—suggests one possible reason for the sexual violence which women endured at the hands of fathers and suitors in the saints lives; giving a pubescent child the status of property makes them screens on which sexual violence could be projected. If young women were truly understood to be the property of their husbands and fathers, then those male figures had the right to inflict the punishment they saw fit in reaction to that “property’s” rebellion against their desires. This theme is evident in the previously mentioned life of Saint Barbara, who orders three windows to be inserted in a building of her fathers to represent the Holy Trinity. Her Pagan father’s response is to have her brutally tortured and killed. There are examples in the lives of loving relationships between fathers and daughters, typically when the father is amenable to conversion, but generally, “If there was any member of the household who was dispensable, whose contribution to the success of the household were problematic, it was the unmarried daughter.” (Heffernan 247) Fathers were the ultimate authority in their daughters’ lives until they were married off and placed under the authority of their husbands. Cecilia’s family are responsible for the opening conflict of her tale, since they assumedly would have pushed Cecilia into the arranged marriage with Valerian, but Cecilia doesn’t have a hard time resolving it. There is an idealistic quality to the narrative; it is hard to imagine that a real bridegroom would have as readily respected their wife’s desire to remain celibate as Valerian does. Again, this could be evidence of the Second Nun’s intention for the story; to focus on the character of the female protagonist—her industrious faith—not the details of her relationships with others.

The Church was faced with the predicament of familial and social dynamics that were at odds with the Christine doctrine. If fathers could act as the ultimate authority in their daughter's lives, and marrying these daughters off continued to be a source of profit for the family, how did the Church convince those daughters to deny their fathers and families for the sake of a divine father? The virgin-martyr lives provided an alternative, potentially more appealing image of femininity for the young woman who was only valued for material means. The *vitae* allowed women who rebelled against Pagan and male authority titles that were more exciting than the title of property: "saint", "martyr", and "bride of Christ." Granted, the freedom exercised by the women of the *vitae* was contingent upon their ability to uphold the qualities which the Church wished them to exhibit, and it came at the cost of essentially giving up their biological gender, taking on traits traditional to a father or spouse—determination, authority, and certainty. This swapping of gendered behavior stems in part from the Church's fear of the power of sexuality and its potential to jeopardize a commitment to chastity. This fear was further complicated by the Church's reliance on sexuality for the purpose of procreation, for the continuation of the Church. Stuard suggests that the phenomenon of male hostility for women rooted in fear, though a modern-sounding concept, is anticipated as early as the fourteenth century. (6)

It is understandable that some scholars, like Espin and Schulenburg, view the saints lives as early examples of feminist activism since they often feature determined and remarkably courageous women and exemplify alternatives for women who might have been dissatisfied with their status as powerless bodies. After all, there were religious communities in the early 1200's, like the Poor Clares and the Beguines (Stuard 146), who "deliberately chose to deny their noble or rich background and turned instead to a way of life scorned by those they had known." (Stuard 147) But the idealistic reality of these communities is checked by the fact that women were never

allowed agency over their religious lives since the Church believed the only possible role for women “was one of attachment to existing male orders.” (Stuard 143) Since the Christian Church has not traditionally been sympathetic to feminist advocacy, what motive might they have had in their production and circulation of virgin martyr lives? Lives like Cecilia’s suggest that the Church desired a model of perfect Christianity for females which came at the expense of most social and personal elements in their lives. There are noticeable ways the Church goes about encouraging this model, one strategy being an attack on the Pagan family, fixation on the often violent and oppressive relationship between pagan father and Christian daughter. To triumph the daughter needed to completely reject her family. But if the female body is really being passed from one form of male authority, that of her father’s, to the male authority of God, she quickly falls into a trap of masculine domination. Heffernan elaborates on the lengths which these young women would have to go:

Only after having achieved a modicum of independence, having thrown off the yoke of male sexual dominance, having freed themselves from the ideal of Pauline indebtedness, having resolved the actual struggle with a recognizable individual and achieved self-control is the holy woman able to free herself from the thrall of family. (188)

Yet, the freedom Heffernan claims is questionable. Family bonds were intricately entwined with social responsibilities: the casting aside of the Pagan family was really a denial of a spectrum of social expectations and norms for the Pagan female. By being a bride of Christ, the young woman is freed of the sexual debt she owed her husband and can abandon the responsibility of providing heirs. She frees herself from the tyrannical power of her father, but gains the dubious “freedom” of God’s “miraculous” protection, which theoretically but does not actually preserve her against assailants. The vitae, then, create a false sense of security and hope by promoting a

faulty freedom: the unsustainable and fatal freedom to rebel. Encouraging a rejection of familial relationships also encouraged a rejection of worldly necessities. For example, the life of Christiana describes a woman who spurns a relationship with her Pagan parents and her “rejection of her parents represents a radical denial of all the merit of pagan society in both its public and familial domains.” (Heffernan 291) The necessity to cast aside Pagan family members is a call from the Church to denounce Paganism, a behavior made impressive in the lives when perpetuated and modeled by brave young women. In general, marriage and the duties it imposed could occupy time and demand responsibility that was centered in the material world, not the spiritual. Therefore, the *vitae* generally encouraged a distancing and rejection of traditional familial relationships.

Since Cecilia’s family are apparently already Christian, there is no dramatic familial conflict in her tale. We are instead left with the impression that Cecilia has no need for her biological family; Marriage takes her out of her father’s sphere of influence. She is completely fulfilled by a relationship with Christ so she doesn’t desire any meaningful worldly relationships. There is virtually no mention of her relationship with her family, the only information we are given is that they “comen of Romayns and of noble kynde,” (121) and that they have fostered Cecilia in the ways of the Christian faith (122). We are to believe she has found an alternative: her relationship with Christ satisfies all her needs and informs all her ways of knowing. The potential conflict that her marriage would have caused between herself and her family is avoided when she decides she’s capable of preventing conflict by threatening then converting her husband. Cecilia still must rebel against the sexual debt her husband believes he is owed. This rebellion is possible thanks to her “aungel” (l. 152) who “Is redy ay my body for to kepe.” (l.

155) The sexual transaction which is the consummation of marriage is so inherently expected from a wife, she must threaten her husband's life to avoid it.

Familial relationships are much more formative in Gwynneve's narrative. Her close bond with her mother, Murrynn, challenges the idea of patriarchy in Pagan Irish society. Mother and daughter move freely, foraging in the forest on their own to find food or travelling to the "Fair of Tailltenn" (35) where Murrynn takes part in a "council of women." (41) Gwynneve rarely mentions her father, only that she "did not admire him" (19); she is raised entirely by her mother. Gwynneve even claims that her father, Clebd, was "weaker in character" (20) than her mother. In the "Second Nun's Tale" Cecelia exercises authority because of her Christianity, but that authority and its freedom are overt in the Pagan community sketched in *Confessions*. Gwynneve's relationship with her mother does justice to the power of human love and human connection. Gwynneve writes of her mother that "In all the writings I have transcribed, there is no account of such a woman. I do not call her a saint or a hero, but a good mother who died at the beginning of the great changes, leaving me with an unredeemable loneliness" (4). No "unredeemable loneliness" is expressed in Cecelia's life; it is silent on the matter of biological familial affection, unless the family converts. In *Confessions*, Horsley offers an example of women positively relating to and supporting one another within a loosely patriarchal society. Cecilia, on the other hand, is isolated. She delegates and imparts wisdom in her relationships with others but does not receive it in return. In the lives, the value of relationships like Gwynneve's and Murrynn's would be irrelevant. One must consider what Gwynneve ever received from her mother for her loss to make such an impression on the rest of her life.

Murrynn is Gwynneve's healer, teacher, and care-taker. She teaches Gwynneve about the world around her and what it means to be a woman in that world. She helps Gwynneve make

sense of the harsh Nature they inhabit, explaining that perhaps the spirit of dark pools was “an ancient one who regretted the loss of its human form and sought to grab a child to inhabit” and that there were also spirits who “listened to wishes and tried to fulfill them by saying certain words in their dark waters.” (7) She teaches Gwynneve about femininity, its powers and its downfalls. Unlike the other women in her *túath*, Gwynneve reflects that her mother “was not ashamed of her beauty or to rub her hands with perfumed oil or to leave a feast when men’s war tales went on too long.” (6) Gwynneve’s mother teaches her what it looks like to embrace not the values that the Second Nun imparts in her prologue, but the expression of her sexuality and understanding of its uses. Cecilia shows a similar lack of adherence to the values of the prologue, but her deviation stems from the way she exercises authority, not expresses sexuality. Murrynn also warns Gwynneve to use her cleverness “to be free from the obligations of a woman married to a man who raises pigs.” (8) Her marriage is an unhappy one but it is not atypical. In fact, she marries Clebd because she was unhappy with her previous husband who “trembled when she went wild and who had not given her children.” (19) Even with this new husband, Murrynn is unsatisfied. Her dissatisfaction with the opportunities available to her in life represents a common and relatable sentiment which is again nonexistent for the women of the vitae who, we are to believe, find perfect fulfilment in their relationship with Christ.

Most importantly, Murrynn teaches Gwynneve what it feels like to be cared for and loved. Gwynneve explains “I was small and frail; but she treated me as though I were strong”. (7) Gwynneve’s mother teaches her to have a strength which is not rooted in faith. The vitae provide countless examples of women who are inspired by and gain strength from the divine, but Gwynneve’s tale is inspired by her Pagan mother and later by the Druid Giannon. Finally, the lessons and gifts Gwynneve has received from a relationship with her mother are made so much



more valuable to Gwynneve after she loses her. She learns an important reality about life, that “no one, not even the most beloved of a chieftain, is free from worms, treacherous falls, vicious animals, or sorrow.” (11) This grief is at odds with Cecilia and the converts because their joy is in their deaths; Gwynneve’s is in life. The Pagan world of Gwynneve’s childhood that is shaped by deep female relationships allows for a contrast between that world and Gwynneve’s later life as a Christian nun. The freedom and depth of relationship that Gwynneve experiences as a Pagan is not mirrored in her life as a Christian. In this way, the novel compares what cannot be compared in Cecilia’s life—Pagan and Christian, human and divine relationships.

Cecilia’s life simplifies the complexity of human relationships that we get in *Confessions*. But the Second Nun would have us believe that simplicity is conducive to conversion. If Valerian and Tiburce are baptized, they are saved. Thus, the lives function on simplified interactions that bear little resemblance to how people really interact with others. We are to believe Cecilia is truly sustained and motivated by her relationship with Christ, but the relationship is hierarchical. Cecilia’s life is exposed as Christian propaganda when we realize that she portrays almost no human emotion except anger at Paganism and passion in spreading Christian doctrine. Her relationships with other people are formal and exist to promote the growth of Christianity. The *vitae*, and specifically the Second Nun, do not include or allow for a comparison of viewpoints. Horsley’s novel describes Gwynneve’s life as a Christian and as a Pagan, capturing the complexity of human relationships within each belief system.

### **Chapter 3: “This sin that is original in our flesh”: Sex, Sanctity, and the Female Body**

There is a remarkable emphasis on sexuality in the virgin martyr stories, a reflection of women’s inextricable association with sexuality in the Middle Ages. According to Heckel, this was “Because of their manifestly ‘other’ nature, (not male, and therefore not, when specifically called ‘women,’ able to participate in the ‘default’ category that would allow them to exist outside of gender).” The Church faced a conundrum in its advocacy for chastity and its need for procreation through lawful marriage. Stuard believes that it is through the sacrament of marriage that the Church was able to exercise “the most profound effect” upon women. (7) Marriage was one of the most significant moments in a women’s life, and the Church was able to dictate exactly what that marriage should look like. So, what happens when female spirituality comes up against a cultural expectation of conjugal debt rooted in scripture? Scripture, or at least monastic reading of it, reinforced the legal status of women as property, and so a female’s body belonged to her father and then to her husband. In a way, she was “sexually indebted” to them both—to her father and husband as a means of providing heirs. The Church’s tactic for dealing with female sexual indebtedness was to claim that relationships with family and spouses distract from the potential of being a good Christian so those ties should, in fact, be severed. Heffernan supports the notion that medieval female sanctity “requires a deliberate rejection of social and sexual mores rooted in the family, even if such bonds were sanctioned by a beneficent authority.” (188) Women were then faced with the substantial choice to prescribe to an identity rooted in what was biologically expected from them, motherhood, or to deny that biological imperative in order to identify as a good Christian. Dr. Alixe Bovey explains that one factor which might have encouraged the rejection of motherhood was the risky nature of pregnancy and childbirth in the Middle Ages: “complications that would today be considered relatively minor,

such as the breech presentation of the baby, could be fatal for mother and child.” The possibility to not only avoid a painful and potentially fatal responsibility, but to be celebrated for it, is understandably appealing.

It is clear that Cecilia is expected by her invisible family to fulfil her duty of marriage, she marries without complaint, but she finds a way to meet this duty and defy it at the same time: she maintains both her marriage and chastity. She not only refuses to consummate her marriage with Valerian, she threatens that her angel “wol sle yow” (157) if he tries to force her, then sends her new Pagan husband away to become a Christian. Cecilia is unique in her ability to convince a man to give up the sex he believed owed to him and embrace abstinence without a marital relationship. The medieval Church’s attitude towards female sexuality comes from centuries of writings by the church fathers and was complicated, but giving birth was an undeniable product of female sexuality that would benefit the Church by adding to its growth. And so, with Mary as the ideal model, child-bearing was separated from sexual desires. Sexual desire carried with it the potential for sinful behavior. Although medical authorities in the Middle Ages “considered sex to be an essential part of bodily health... this was an era in which the medical and moral definitely clashed.” (Heckel) The message to medieval women was clear: the only sure way to avoid sin was to give up sex.

The model the Church held up was procreation without sex—Mary. But for medieval women this model was unattainable. Preserving virginity, that is purity of body, meant no procreation. Mary is an impossible role model: she is the only woman within the biblical narrative who is able to attain the dual role of mother and virgin. The next model of female spirituality that women could turn to after Mary were the saint’s lives: proof that if women could not be virgin mothers, they must be virgin martyrs. The vitae suggest that remaining celibate is

the only sure way to avoid sexual sin. Virgin martyrs were often pubescent, giving them a unique status as innocent and pure. Cecilia is so resolute in her desire to remain a virgin that she wears a hair shirt to her wedding underneath her clothing and prays to the Lord “my soule and eek my body gye/ Unwemmed, lest that I confounded be,” which suggests resistance required some fortitude on her part as well (136-137). The Middle English Dictionary defines “wemmen” as meaning “to disfigure, mar, stain, or spoil.” At this moment, Cecilia’s body has not been tarnished in any of the latter ways. “Confounded” implies being put to shame; she beseeches God to protect her undefiled body, or else she will be ruined. Preserving her virtue is the key to sanctity and efficacy as a Christian proselytizer. The risk Valerian poses to her is a loss of her virginity which would mean a loss of her sanctity. This is why she tells her husband of her “aungel” (l. 152) that will vehemently protect her “body” (l. 154) if he sees “That ye me touche, or love in vileynye.” (l. 156) On the other hand, if Valerian “in clene” (l. 159) loves her, the angel will love Valerian for his “clennesse” (l. 160) the same way he loves Cecilia. The choice of purity is a matter of life or death for Valerian and Cecelia. The interesting implication, though, of Cecilia’s need for a divine guardian is that if her angel turned out to actually be another man, as Valerian initially accuses, Cecilia should expect to be punished by her husband.

The Church was going against biological nature in promoting virginity over motherhood, but they claimed certain advantages would be given to women who were willing to make the sacrifice. Heffernan explains the logic of female opportunity created through celibacy:

Because the vocation of Christian celibacy was a radical disavowal of one’s sexuality, the role of the celibate within the young church minimized the importance of gender. In doing so, it allowed women, in theory, an opportunity to advance to positions of

importance within the church; celibacy freed them from the demands of the roles of wife and mother. (242)

Cecilia may be freed from familial responsibilities, but Heffernan admits this is only possible through a “radical disavow[al]”, a forced denial of her sexuality. This renunciation makes room for the adoption of a male role with its demands and consequences: educating and converting, much like a priest. From that point onward we are able to forget her sexuality but these new responsibilities seem to more ensnare than set free, and they lead to Cecilia’s untimely execution. It is a paradoxical world where the rejection of her sexuality makes her qualified to guide men but guarantees she will be killed by them. The rejection of biological sex comes at a high cost, as the ending of most saint’s lives can testify. They suggest that the only alternative to the expression of human sexuality is one that leads to torture and death.

The often sexually explicit brutality that many virgin martyrs experience at the hands of male oppressors is muted in Cecelia’s life. For instance, Saint Barbara’s father orders her to be “stripped and her flesh ripped to pieces.” (Winstead 42) Saint Lucy’s “tender, naked body” (Winstead 34) is boiled. The Duke orders Saint Agatha to have “hooks and willow twists bound to her breasts and torturers twisted them off.” (Winstead 30) Cecilia avoids the melodramatic and erotic end experienced by other young women of the vitae. She is boiled in a hot bath (but it causes her no pain), then has her “nekke ycorven” (l. 533); she avoids the humiliating sexual degradation. The rather undramatic and idealistic protection of the angel removes the sexual threat. The lives tend to normalize this sexual violence and suggest readers found prurient interest in the violent eroticism of the deaths of young girls at the hands of men. In his introduction to *Women Defamed and Women Defended*, Alcuin Blamires speculates that, for the male audience of Chaucer’s time, “feminine speaking is never wholly divested of the titillating

ambivalences of eroticism.” (5) The expression of sexual fantasy “could only obtain a public hearing by denigrating the young woman’s sexuality and in so doing could install a religiosity of shame concerning human sexuality in the congregation.” (Heffernan 282) Cecilia’s life implies that the only way to avoid this shame is to deny female sexuality entirely. The tale projects an image of the woman who gains authority because she exhibits qualities we would expect from a man in the Middle Ages. So though Cecilia’s life does not perpetuate the erotic violence of the other saints lives, it reiterates that female sexuality is, indeed, destructive, hindering, and better avoided. The implications of this condemnation of an essential part of women’s identity serves to remind us that in many ways the medieval Church was a patriarchal institution that valued the experience of men no matter how virgin martyrs dominated the narrative.

This “religiosity of shame” is explored in *Confessions*. While Cecilia’s tale begins by repelling anything that is unchaste and impure, Gwynneve reflects on her Pagan youth with a very different attitude: “I loved how the women at these feasts tore their robes and revealed their breasts in celebration of sacrifice and lust.” (4) The focus on breasts here is in “celebration of lust,” unlike the violent dismembering of them in Saint Agatha’s and other lives. Gwynneve’s stories from her childhood represent a more balanced understanding of biological imperatives. For example, Gwynneve realizes that she’ll get no praise from her father, so she begins “the practice of showing my breasts to the boys who came to use my father’s boat.” (20) Though an overtly sexual act, and one that the Christian church would call sinful, it is presented as an innocent attempt by a young girl to gain attention using her body. In the Pagan world of Gwynneve’s youth, sexual desire is acknowledged and explored with particular focus on the relationship between lust and love. “Nature” is accepted, not denied. But when Gwynneve becomes a Christian, the conception of a sexuality that is “natural” is banished.

Nevertheless, Gwynneve continues to be honest about how she has expressed her sexuality throughout her life. The first man, Thyall, that asks to be her husband she accepts and is fond of, but doesn't love. What he chiefly teaches her is "how a man and women can give each other pleasure and tangle their limbs together," (50) but the person she truly desires is the druid Giannon:

I recognized the nature of my own emotion concerning Giannon the Druid. The fertility of the woods seemed related to my own body's texture. I had the notion that if Giannon and I had our bodies opened by a warrior's blade, sweet black earth and deep red petals would fall out instead of blood and organs. (50)

Gwynn's desire for Giannon suggests sexuality is rooted in nature because it is a force that mirrors phenomenon in nature, but which is also bound up in her desire for knowledge and learning. The all-encompassing, self-renouncing love Cecilia and other saints have for God is stripped of human connection and meaning. *Confessions* interrogates the difference between expression of sexuality as central to identity and the Christian church's formulation of it as destructive to identity. In addition, Gwynn's description of "sweet black earth and deep red petals" that she imagines being contained within their bodies hints at a more liberal understanding of sexual desire as something with creative potential, a mechanism of giving and receiving love aligned with nature. What the saint's lives seem to disregard is the ability for sex to be an expression of love and for male and female sexuality to heighten the act of that love.

Even as a Christian nun looking back, Gwynneve doesn't view her sexual past with Giannon with regret; rather, she's reflective about what the relationship helped her to learn (85). Gwynn talks of her sexuality as synonymous with her sense of self: it isn't something which

magically vanishes when she converts to Christianity. It is not until Gwynneve arrives at Saint Brigit's Monastery that she is exposed to the "religiosity of shame" inherent in Christianity. The potential for this shame to be harmful is explored in the failed relationship between Sister Aileen and the abbot, a relationship which embodies the ideas that war within Gwynneve as a Christian.

Aileen is a beautiful young woman who turns up mysteriously on the steps of the monastery one day. Gwynneve eventually learns of her past as the daughter of a noble chief: when her father killed her favorite horse to teach her a lesson, Aileen nearly went mad. Around that time, the abbot currently residing at Saint Brigit's came to Aileen's home and it was only his care that allowed her to recover her health again. At Saint Brigit's, Gwynneve accidentally catches them having sex, and Sister Aileen confesses that she fell in love with the abbot when he visited her father's *túath*. She explains to Gwynneve that the abbot taught her that preserving their purity through celibacy was of the utmost importance and she willingly let him bind her in a chastity belt. But the abbot's desire eventually drove him mad and he condemned Aileen for having demons that aimed to tempt him. She fled to the monastery in anguish, but coincidentally, the same abbot turned up at Saint Brigit's monastery and they eventually succumbed to their renewed passion, breaking their vow of chastity. Resisting biological identity and desire has dramatic consequences in *Confessions*. The abbot and Aileen are examples of how the church's advocacy for chastity created an emotional and behavioral paradox. The mutual goal of chastity the abbot and Aileen seek, symbolized by the chastity belt, mirrors the agreement that Valerian and Cecilia make. For them this decision is a seamless process in their relationship once Valerian agrees to be baptized. Neither the abbot nor Aileen, in the "real" world, has as easy of a time upholding chastity and it is Aileen who is blamed for making it so difficult for the abbot. He spurns Aileen for seducing him with her lust and believes he's being punished for making "a



woman into an object of worship.” (128) Because of his shame, he is unable to reciprocate the concept of sexual love as a form of human connection.

The torture that Aileen and the abbot submit themselves to as punishment for their sexuality is barbarous. The abbot has himself castrated, physically ridding himself of the organs that make him a biological male. In Cecilia’s story Valerian’s path is much less painful, he even receives a crown after his baptism. Sister Aileen self mutilates, cutting her skin repeatedly and starving herself. Cecelia easily embraces chastity. Aileen is driven mad with anger and shame and is responsible, along with the abbot, for having Gwynneve sentenced to death. The exact reasoning for Gwynneve’s condemnation is murky. Motivated by the knowledge that Gwynneve is aware of their sexual affair, they try to paint her as a Pagan witch-figure who defiles infant’s graves and has an unnatural intelligence that allows her to write whatever she pleases; Gwynneve says they claim “I have hidden things in my body in unclean orifices and that I entice children and daemons to extract them and engage in foul orgies.” (170) The fear of a woman who does not fit the narrowly prescribed characteristics of the ideal Christian female motivates and normalizes these accusations. The fear stems from sexual perversion but is rooted in the paradox that the church creates with their requirement for denial of sexual identity in exchange for sanctity. Suppressing their sexuality and sexual desires leads to the destruction of them all and to the death of an innocent women. Sister Aileen and the Abbot are a reminder that even the devout struggle with their sexuality. Gwynneve concludes by questioning “What is this shame concerning the pleasure-loving bodies God gave us? What is this sin that is original in our flesh?” (154) In the face of death, Gwynneve challenges the very heart of the church’s position on sex and sanctity. By condemning female sexuality, the vitae condemn an inherent element of human nature that in *Confessions* and the saint’s lives leads to death.

## Conclusion

Virgin Martyr tales appear to offer insight into female experience in the early church. Women are the main characters making influential decisions, being leaders of men and women alike, bravely standing up to persecutors, and flaunting their knowledge. Yet, as Stuard reminds us, the ecclesiastical attitude towards women “was at best negative if not actively hostile.” (143) *Confessions* imagines the cost of being shown only one potential reading of female spirituality – that is, the idea that chastity equals sanctity. The Church voice, in the form of virgin martyr tales, was a male voice that privileged a masculine experience of faith, which had the effect of simplifying the plots of the lives. This simplification seems far more problematic in light of the ways in which faith, relationships, and sexuality are complicated in *Confessions*. Gwynneve’s relationship with Giannon and Aileen’s with the abbot highlight the problem the Church had to deal with by aligning holiness with chastity when faced with real, rather than ideal, human desires and behaviors. They set a standard of sanctity which could only be achieved by renouncing a part of identity engrained in human nature: sexuality. The Church then gave this standard the false appearance of being easy to achieve and maintain in the vitae.

The virgin martyr genre was undeniably Christian propaganda that manipulated the female experience of faith with the intention of promoting their own ideals. *Confessions* fully articulates the paradox of a chastity that is characterized and promoted by men and that is also the door into the male world where women can briefly act out, before death silences them. That those unasked-for deaths are figured as heroic victories, makes it all the more troubling to read the lives as feminist in any form. The male authors of the lives faced a dilemma in their admiration of the woman’s ability to adopt a level of authority and intelligence which was thought only available to men, and corresponding fear of the potential sexual threat that woman

could pose. The reading of these lives as empowering is highly questionable considering how the lives glorified the brutal destruction and sexual torture of the female body. As far as the perception of these women as cultural rebels by some feminist scholars, it is the motivation for a deeper relationship with Christ that causes women to rebel in the saint's lives. In this sense, even rebellious behavior is executed out of obedience, rather than from a desire for autonomy. In fact, "The pertinent historical records, manorial court records, provide virtually no evidence of young female acting independently." (Heffernan 274) The severing of familial ties, the elevation of the divine spouse over the earthly one, the exercising of the courage to speak out against male authority are evidentially fictional choices.

Perhaps the decline in popularity of the saints' lives is due in part to how unsatisfactory they are for the modern woman of faith. Stories of young women who are punished or executed for speaking out about their faith is neither entertaining nor encouraging to a modern reader. Female spirituality is far more complex than the saint's lives would suggest. Horsley's novel gets at the heart of this misrepresentation of the female identity rooted in faith. Female spirituality is nuanced, multi-faceted, and variable, as is female sexuality. As Gwynneve puts it, "I wonder if Eve's seduction of Adam was the result not of evil moral frailty but of her restlessness. Perhaps Adam was more easily amused and satisfied than Eve, who wanted more than the life of a child in a pretty garden." (23) Her comment transforms the church's founding concept of original sin as lust and as perpetrated by a woman on an innocent man. Gwynneve imagines a woman of faith as engaged in dynamic relationships, who is curious about the world around her, and embraces her sexuality as contributing to an identity apart from the desires of men.

The Second Nun's prologue establishes a Christian ideal of femininity modeled on the Virgin Mary. We see this model reflected in Cecilia along with the added masculine qualities

which give her power. Gwynneve has little in common with Cecelia and her complicated experience challenges Mary's status as model for women. In the tragedy that plays out in *Confessions*, Horsley asks us to reconsider the ways in which sexuality is intertwined with love and affection, two fundamental elements of human experience, and to consider the effect of denying one part of our human nature. *Confessions* allows us to consider the martyrdom in the lives as reflective of inherent cultural shame about sexuality instead of an act of heroism. Conversion is a complicated turning point in both stories that is centered in gender. Cecilia has always been a Christian, and her tale suggests a simple gendered world, where men voluntarily give up their sexuality. In Gwynneve's world there is no smooth transition from Pagan to Christian. We see that for both her and Aileen, the abandonment of sexuality is not easily done. Gwynneve is not the resolute, beautiful, confident, and powerful woman that Cecilia is. But it is Gwynneve's soul that is revealed to us, it is her story which we can relate to and which justifies the complicated reality of human faith and relationships. The absolute, unwavering adherence to the Christian world-view that we observe in the vitae makes it easier to rebel. *Confessions* makes us consider if faith can really be characterized and adhered to in this absolutist way, considering how unsuccessful the model of these lives were for real women. It exposes the vitae as representative of a dangerously simplistic version of women's spirituality that does not account for her nuanced identity.

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