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# The Sexual Shame of the Chaste: 'Abortion Miracles' in Early Medieval Saints' Lives

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In the early Middle Ages, gender distinctions commonly expressed ideas of polarity and hierarchy. In one widely circulated Latin etymology, man (*vir*) derived from strength (*virtus*) and woman (*mulier*) from softness (*mollities*). *Virtus* and *mollities* denoted moral as much as physical difference; as one notable source for the commonplace emphasised, this difference justified the subjection of woman to man.<sup>1</sup> But the history of medieval gender is not straightforwardly the story of a stable system of polarity, hierarchy and subjugation. Gender was amenable to varying ends and interacted with different political, social and religious impulses.

Some medieval historians have drawn attention to the complexity of medieval gender by identifying distinct groups which did not conform to conventional roles, from late Roman and Byzantine court eunuchs to thirteenth-century dowagers, as third genders.<sup>2</sup> Like recent work on medieval masculinities, the interest in putative medieval third genders is a gauge of medieval historians' evolving study and use of gender in ways which increasingly sharpen the distinction between the history of gender and women's history.<sup>3</sup> The interaction between gender and religion in medieval thought and practice has also been a rich, if still developing, forum and here, too, historians have identified third genders. For the early Middle Ages, Jo Ann McNamara has argued that 'monastic theorists tended to conceptualize a third gender, apart from the two sexually active genders'. This third gender enacted a 'spiritual parity' which did not endure beyond the earlier centuries of monasticism.<sup>4</sup> If not all historians have found it germane to see the clergy or religious in this way, this is not because of a lack of critical interest in the interaction between gender and religion. Ruth Mazo Karras has seen fit to apply Ockham's razor, arguing that 'genders should not be multiplied beyond necessity' in her own analysis of the distinctiveness of post-Gregorian clerical masculinity.<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not early medieval monks, nuns and, more complicatedly, clerics constituted a third gender, the ideologies and practicalities governing religious and clerical life distinguished them from the laity. Their lives were defined, in part, by the mundane and celestial possibilities opened up by religious profession, and also by the different routes which men and women took towards this goal. The memory of what these men and women relinquished was not entirely forgotten in the delineation of their new roles and the gender permutations of religious life found varied expression. In

the thought of the Anglo-Saxon monastic theorist Aldhelm (c.639–709), for example, religious men and women partook, in Emma Pettit's words, of a 'shared invisible spiritual identity heavily indebted to masculinity'. Monks and nuns alike were enjoined to contend 'manfully' (*viriliter*) in the battle against vices. The visible dimensions of religious life, however, from dress to demeanour, retained clear gender distinctions, and for Aldhelm the transition to religious life entailed a more dramatic break for men than for women.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, hagiographers drew on different models of sanctity in characterising the transition to female religious life, from the transcending of gender through virile asceticism to the transformation of gender through spiritualised motherhood. Often, as Simon Coates has shown in his study of the *vitae* of the sixth-century abbess Radegund of Poitiers, hagiographers blended elements from these models.<sup>7</sup>

Across the diversity of early medieval models of sanctity (and their modern interpretations), chastity was a crucial sign of religious distinction. But chastity was also fragile, an 'unstable condition and easily lost among the pitfalls of the world'.<sup>8</sup> From early Christianity onwards, sexual lapses were rude reminders to individuals and communities of the gender roles which religious orientation sought to reconfigure. When, in the early third century, Tertullian critiqued an emergent custom in Carthage for virgins who had renounced marriage to stand unveiled in church, he noted acerbically that after uncovering their heads many ended up covering their bellies in shame or resorting to abortion to prevent public disclosure of sexual sin.<sup>9</sup> From punitive retribution to the remedy of penance, responses to such lapses endeavoured to recover the communal experience of chastity and to contain the turbulence of sexual sin in communities of the chaste.

This article focuses on questions of chastity and sexual sin in examining an unusual 'abortion miracle' motif in the Latin hagiography of early medieval Ireland. It is found in the *vitae* of Brigit of Kildare and two male saints, Áed mac Bricc and Cainnech of Aghaboe: the saint encounters a nun who has breached her vow to chastity and become pregnant but, through the saint's intervention, the pregnancy miraculously disappears. The motif has not been as thoroughly scrutinised as other episodes in Irish hagiography. David Herlihy situated the miracle in the interplay between native paganism and nascent Christianisation. For Herlihy, such stories glistened with the 'aura of archaism' from a 'strange, occasionally savage world, still largely influenced by traditional heathen customs, still only slightly touched by a crude Christianity'.<sup>10</sup> Other readings have focused on attitudes to abortion and the lives of early medieval women. Noting that 'abortion took place, if not commonly, then at least often enough to appear without comment in both secular and ecclesiastical sources', Lisa Bitel has suggested that such miracles reflect a 'blasé attitude toward abortion'.<sup>11</sup> Most recently, Maeve Callan has argued that hagiographic depictions of 'abortionist saints', virginal restoration and the birth of Irish saints from incestuous or illegitimate unions 'reflect a remarkably permissive attitude toward . . . traditionally taboo acts', an attitude shared by some prescriptive texts. Callan has also provided a gendered reading of the motif and the hagiographic handling of reproduction: male incursions into reproductive matters, like those of Áed and Cainnech, were failed attempts to appropriate control of a female zone of reproductive labour, in which women turned to other women for their needs, and prescriptive texts, which explicitly refer only to female abortionists, 'represent the morality of "ordinary" Irish Christians'.<sup>12</sup> While these readings, especially Callan's, are of much interest, the question of how the erasure of a nun's pregnancy could be

represented as a mark of saintly sanctity has not been fully explored. This paper will approach the miracle lying at the heart of the motif in light of a critical juncture between early medieval gender and religion, namely the promotion and protection of chastity.

### Early Irish hagiography

Irish saints' lives emerged in the seventh and eighth centuries, to which the *vitae* of three famous saints from the fourth to sixth centuries can be placed: two of Patrick, one of Columba and two of Brigit. The Brigidine *vitae* were one by Cogitosus (Cog.), a monk of Kildare, and the so-called *Vita Prima* (VP), which earns its name from the order in the Bollandists' early modern edition in the *Acta Sanctorum*. The Bollandists believed that it was the oldest Brigidine *vita*, a matter still debated among scholars. These early works each drew distinctively on some continental hagiography, scripture, apocrypha and secular stories to create narratives of Christian sanctity designed to resonate in Irish milieus.<sup>13</sup>

Hereafter, the picture becomes more complicated and the following summary leans towards simplification. In subsequent centuries, *vitae* of new saintly subjects, together with redactions of older *vitae*, were produced in Latin and, from around the ninth century, Old Irish. Beyond the earliest works, these Latin *vitae* have only survived in three later medieval compilations produced after the thirteenth century, which Richard Sharpe has called the Dublin, Salamanca and Oxford manuscripts in his fundamental study of early Irish hagiography. The two principal modern editions of these *vitae* draw differently on these compilations: Charles Plummer has edited the Dublin *vitae* (and unique Oxford ones) while William W. Heist has edited the Salamanca *vitae*.<sup>14</sup> These editions contain different redactions of the *vitae* of Áed and Cainnech, including intriguing differences in the 'abortion miracle' motif.

Sharpe's study has established that, whereas the compiler of the Dublin manuscript often edited and amended material, the Salamanca codex was the work of a more conservative compiler. Thus the Salamanca codex (and Heist's edition) appears to contain some redactions of *vitae* which are older than their Dublin counterparts (and Plummer's edition). Further, Sharpe has argued that within the former, nine or ten *vitae* including those of Áed and Cainnech, the so-called O'Donohue group, named after a scribal annotation, represent an original collection which pre-dates the later compilation of the codex. The *vitae* in this group as preserved in the more conservative Salamanca codex, he argues, can plausibly be dated to c.800.<sup>15</sup> This summary yields a tentative working chronology for the 'abortion miracle' motif from emergence and recycling to later dissipation. It probably originated in the earliest Brigidine *vitae* (or in a lost exemplar) in the seventh century; it was adapted in the *vitae* of Áed and Cainnech perhaps in the late eighth or ninth century; and it was subsequently amended or excised in some later redactions of all of these lives.

### The Brigidine *vitae*

Brigit (c.452/6–524/6/8), abbess and founder of the influential monastery at Kildare, was one of the pre-eminent Irish saints.<sup>16</sup> From the late nineteenth century, Brigit the saint became entwined with Brigit the goddess through a confluence of scholarly trends and their popular receptions. Brigit appealed to those interested in excavating the native

mythologies of a putatively matriarchal prehistory and in exhuming personas around whom the energies of nationalist identity could coalesce.<sup>17</sup> She endures as an icon in feminist spirituality and neo-paganism, epitomised by works such as Mary Condren's engaging but methodologically problematic study of Irish religious history.<sup>18</sup>

Brigit's enduring popularity demonstrates the possibilities for both convergence and divergence between scholarly and popular thought. As Christina Harrington has put it, 'in very few areas of modern life is scholarship so influential on so many people's daily religious life – but it is Victorian scholarship, not contemporary work'.<sup>19</sup> Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, scholars have relocated almost all of the sources previously understood to contain layers of pre-Christian traditions within the distinct cultural dynamics of a Christianising early Ireland.<sup>20</sup> Scholars sometimes still use the goddess-saint connection to illuminate the Brigidine *vitae*; but their focus has shifted, if not entirely, to the forms, purposes and contexts of that distinctly Christian genre, the hagiographical *vita*, and away from the history of Brigit the saint in the fifth and sixth centuries or the prehistory of Brigit the goddess.

The 'abortion miracle' motif emerged, then, in texts with a vested interest in shaping the past for the present. The earliest texts to include the motif were Cogitosus's *vita* and the *Vita Prima*. The precise origin is unclear and no comparable motif survives in earlier Christian literature.<sup>21</sup> Whether it originated with Cogitosus's *vita*, which can be reasonably dated to c.680, the *Vita Prima*, which could pre-date Cogitosus or have been composed as late as c.800, or a now-lost *vita*, is uncertain.<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, Cogitosus's *vita* is a useful starting point. Aside from a prologue outlining her career and extensive accounts of posthumous miracles, the bulk of this *vita* is comprised of short nature miracles: the diverting of rivers, relocation of trees and mastery over animals. A few miracles, however, touched on the promotion or protection of religious chastity. In one, Brigit cured a young girl born mute by asking her whether she wanted to become a veiled virgin or be given away in marriage. The girl's first utterance resonated with religious obedience: 'I do not want to do anything except what you want'.<sup>23</sup> In another, Brigit came to the aid of a 'chaste woman who was her follower'. After entrusting a silver brooch to this woman for safekeeping, a deceitful man secretly took it back and flung it into the sea. He insisted, 'for the guilty gratification of his lustful whims', that because she had lost it the woman should become his slave. Brigit was deliberating over how to help her when a man delivered a fish he had caught and the brooch was found within it. The inadvertence of the miracle conveyed rather than compromised Brigit's sanctity: she had saved the woman from sexual slavery and the episode culminated in the man's confession and reorientation towards a life committed to God.<sup>24</sup> Like these miracles, the 'abortion miracle' motif touched on religious life:

With a strength of faith most powerful and ineffable, she faithfully blessed a woman who, after a vow of integrity, had fallen into youthful concupiscence, whose womb was now swelling with pregnancy: and, after the conception disappeared, without childbirth or pain she restored her healthy to penitence.<sup>25</sup>

The same motif also appeared in the *Vita Prima*:

On another occasion, through the most powerful strength of God, Saint Brigit blessed the swelling womb of a woman: when the conception disappeared, without childbirth or pain she restored her healthy to penitence. She was healed and gave thanks to God.<sup>26</sup>

These two *vitae* were very different, first, in terms of politico-religious subtext. Whereas Cogitosus was staking a claim for Kildare's pre-eminence as a pilgrimage site, the *Vita Prima* was written in the absence of Brigit's relics and located her activity more widely across the religious landscape of Ireland, possibly in the context of a changing political situation and increased tension with Patrician Armagh to the north.<sup>27</sup>

Second, the Brigit of these *vitae* differed in detail and emphasis. Like so many saints, Cogitosus's Brigit, 'whom God foreknew and predestined according to his own image', was marked for sanctity from her conception and through her precocious childhood.<sup>28</sup> When her parents desired to marry her off 'according to the custom of the world', Brigit approached the bishop Mac Caille, 'inspired from above and wanting to devote herself as a chaste virgin to God'. Struck by her 'love of chastity', he placed the white veil over her head. The wood of the altar which she touched at her consecration, Cogitosus noted, was still visited by pilgrims seeking relief from afflictions.<sup>29</sup> Though the number of 'folkloric' miracles wrought was unusual by continental standards, she was nonetheless, in Lisa Bitel's words, a 'holy woman of such stereotypical virtues that her vita might have been written in Gaul or Rome . . . virtuous, tireless and humble to the point of seeming passivity'.<sup>30</sup>

The Brigit of the *Vita Prima* was also devoted to chastity. When her father and brothers began pressurising her into marrying, she prayed for a deformity to stave off suitors, whereupon one of her eyes burst.<sup>31</sup> But, more unusually, the Brigit of the *Vita Prima* was peripatetic and evocative of Irish heroic traditions, and the depiction of her commitment to chastity was coloured with these distinctive traits. Her birth story marked her sanctity from the womb when a druid prophesied her future eminence upon encountering her pregnant mother, the slave-girl Broicsech, and father, Broicsech's master Dubthach.<sup>32</sup> She attracted fellow virgins to the religious life on her wanderings north to territories in the orbit of Patrick and his disciples.<sup>33</sup> On one such visit, Brigit resolved a paternity dispute. A council of bishops was adjudicating the matter of a professed virgin who alleged that she had given birth to the child of a bishop from among Patrick's followers. Patrick entrusted an initially reluctant Brigit with ascertaining the truth. Disbelieving the woman's account, Brigit marked a cross on the woman's mouth, causing her head and tongue to swell up, and blessed the infant's tongue before asking him who his father was. The infant disclosed the accused bishop's innocence and revealed that his father was a 'certain fellow who is sitting furthest away at the very end of the council-hall'; the woman repented.<sup>34</sup> Like Cogitosus's Brigit, however, she was not a virile ascetic who transcended her gender but a chaste woman who, as a holy man visionary recognised in one encounter, was a 'type of Mary', a physical virgin and symbolic mother.<sup>35</sup>

### The *vitae* of Áed and Cainnech

The motif is one of several shared between the Brigidine *vitae* and the *vitae* of the sixth-century male saints Áed and Cainnech, which were composed, following Sharpe's arguments, around the turn of the ninth century. The *vita Aidi* presented a peripatetic national saint not associated with any particular ecclesiastical centre or political dynasty.<sup>36</sup> Several miracles showcased Áed's friendships with female religious communities which received him with hospitality. In a miracle directly preceding the motif, three female religious were ambushed and decapitated by robbers, who stole

off with their heads. Seeing this in a vision, Áed arrived at the women's mourning community and pursued the robbers, whose flight was stalled by divine intervention. Reproached by the saint, the robbers underwent penance. Returning with the women's heads, Áed revived them.<sup>37</sup> In other stories he miraculously replenished a meal served by an impoverished female community and contended with a king reluctant to free his slave-girl to take the veil.<sup>38</sup> In the context of the *vita*, the motif reemphasised Áed's affiliations with female religious life:

On another day, making a journey, Áed came to a place of other holy virgins called Druimard and was received with great joy in hospitality. But gazing upon the virgin who was serving him, holy Áed saw that her womb was swelling and carrying a child. Immediately he stood up without [eating] food to take flight from that place. Then she confessed before all that she had secretly sinned and did penance. And holy Áed blessed her womb, and immediately the infant in her womb disappeared as if it did not exist.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, the motif appears in a slightly different guise in the *vita Cainnechi*:

A certain virgin living in a place close to him secretly fornicated, and her womb swelled up with a child. She asked holy Cainnech to bless her womb as if it were swelling from some illness. When he had blessed her, immediately the infant in her womb disappeared without showing.<sup>40</sup>

Where the authors of the *vitae* obtained the motif from is not entirely certain. The *vita Aidi* contains elements derived from both Brigidine *vitae*: the foretelling of his sanctity at birth bears comparisons to Brigit's birth story in the *Vita Prima*, while the story of the recovered brooch in Cogitosus finds a parallel when Áed came to the aid of a religious woman entrusted with a king's gold and silver ornament.<sup>41</sup> It seems likely that the motif was adapted from a Brigidine source. The author of Cainnech's *vita*, however, may have adapted the motif from the *vita Aidi*. Máire Herbert has argued that it drew on the *vita Aidi* as a source on the basis of paralleled motifs and an episode in which Cainnech comes to the aid of Áed in rescuing a sister abducted by a king.<sup>42</sup> It is plausible, then, that the author of the *vita Aidi* adapted the motif conscious of a gender switch from female to male saint, while the *vita Cainnechi* adapted the motif as the miracle of a male saint.

### The *vita* of Ciarán of Saigir

The motif of male saints performing such a miracle can be compared to a lengthier episode in the *vita* of Ciarán of Saigir, which, like its subject, cannot be dated securely.<sup>43</sup> Ciarán's mother had established a female religious community next to his monastery at which a group of women 'imitated the life of the saints', among them a 'noble and very beautiful girl' called Bruinech, whom a local king, Dimma, abducted. 'Loathing the immensity of so great a crime', Ciarán set off on a rescue mission. Dimma laid down a challenge: he would return Ciarán's 'disciple' if the saint could awaken him the next morning through the cooing of a cuckoo (unlikely in the middle of winter). Nonetheless, a cuckoo awoke a startled Dimma at dawn and, having broken his resolve, Ciarán recovered Bruinech. But not without a disturbing revelation:

After the man of God returned to the monastery with the girl, she confessed that she had conceived in her womb. Then the man of God, stirred by a zeal for justice, not wanting the serpent's seed to come alive, by making the sign of the cross on her belly made it empty.<sup>44</sup>



The story did not quite end there. Dimma returned to the monastery to abduct Bruinech once again and she dropped dead at the sight of him. Through his prayers, Ciarán revived her and the feud with Dimma ended when Ciarán miraculously saved his son from a fire. Dimma finally repented and consecrated both of his sons to Ciarán.

Ciarán's miracle puts the gender permutations of the motif in the *vitae* of Áed and Cainnech into sharper relief. In Ciarán's miracle, Bruinech's body became, in Callan's words, the 'battlefield for a war waged between religious and secular male authority ... [and] little more than the site of one man's effacement of another's virility'.<sup>45</sup> The miracles of Áed and Cainnech were not coloured with the same concern to underline religious male authority. Ideas condensed in three words recur across them and the Brigidine versions: the swelling (*tumescere*) by which the nun's pregnancy was beginning to show and the disappearance or evanescence (*evanescere*) brought about by the saint's blessing (*benedicere*). But certain differences are visible too. Unlike Brigit, the male saints are distanced from reproductive matters. In Áed's case, his enigmatic response upon realising that the nun was pregnant, dramatically leaving the table, hints perhaps at a sense of pollution and his blessing only came after the nun's confession to her community. In Cainnech's case, the penitential theme is almost absent. Like the story of Brigit and the brooch, this was something of an inadvertent miracle and there is even a whisper of deception: it is not altogether clear that Cainnech knew what he was doing.<sup>46</sup> These differences condense how the social experience of reproduction interacted with both gender and religious status, and typify attempts by the male clerical hierarchy to wrest greater ideological control over reproduction.<sup>47</sup> But, understanding the significance of the motif, what made it miraculous, gravitates around gender in a different sense.

### Complications: making the text disappear

This understanding must first navigate the potentially distorting effect of the motif's fate in the hands of later medieval redactors and early modern editors. It evidently scandalised nineteenth-century Catholics. In Migne's edition of Cogitosus's *vita* in the *Patrologia Latina*, one can read of the preceding miracle, the transformation of water into ale for lepers, an allusion to Christ's miracle at Cana, and the subsequent one, the turning of stone into salt at a poor man's request. But the motif is nowhere to be seen: Brigit's miraculous undoing of the nun's sexual lapse was sufficiently unsettling for it to have disappeared leaving only an elliptical trace.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, John O'Hanlon's influential ten-volume *Lives of the Irish Saints* published in 1875 synthesised the multiple *vitae* of saints into single narratives. As he made explicit in his preface, his syntheses excluded 'no statement of importance, judged consistent with sound morals and doctrine, or Christian edification'. Less explicitly, elements not consonant with this aim were excised, including the motif.<sup>49</sup>

The story of the motif in the hands of later medieval compilers is more complicated, though here too one can detect editorial adjustments. In the Dublin redaction of the *vita Aidi*, the story became about the spiritual, but not physical, consequences of sexual sin: the saint 'realised that one of them had fallen into sin. Then aware that the holy bishop had learned of her sin, she confessed her guilt in front of all, and did penance'.<sup>50</sup> The story was completely excised from the *vita Cainnechi* as represented in Plummer.<sup>51</sup> Curiously, in the case of Ciarán, the redaction in Plummer's edition

brought the moment when Bruinech was disburdened of her pregnancy closer to the more candid versions of Áed's and Cainnech's miracles: 'The man of God, seeing that [Bruinech's] womb was swelling with a child, blessed her womb with the sign of the holy cross, and her stomach immediately shrank, and the child in her womb disappeared'.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, in a later life of Brigit, based on the *Vita Prima* and edited by Sharpe, the story of the pregnant nun was omitted by an editor sensitive to 'passages of a remotely scandalous nature'. Perhaps the scenario of a pregnant nun caused as much offence as the hint of abortion: the story of Brigit's involvement in the paternity dispute referred simply to a woman (*mulier*) rather than a female religious (*virgo*). Additionally, some manuscript copies of Cogitosus's *vita* also omitted the story.<sup>53</sup>

If these editorial adjustments and the impulses which appear to underlie them make it tempting to read modern dynamics into the motif – they, like us, seem to detect a tolerant attitude to sexual sin and abortion – it ought to be remembered that the motif was retained in at least some manuscript copies of the Brigidine *vitae*, the Salamanca *vitae* and the Bollandists' early modern edition. Not all subsequent readers of the miracle necessarily saw in the motif what, we presume, certain anxious editors did. The adjustments suggest that the motif needs to be historicised and understood in early medieval terms.

### The miraculous in the motif: gender and chastity

Sean Connolly has implied that the authors of the motif, writing with 'delightful naïveté', did not quite realise what they were representing.<sup>54</sup> But, in fact, the motif was included in *vitae* with diverse political and ecclesiastical subtexts, suggesting that hagiographers saw something edifying in it which transcended these other impulses. As Dorothy Bray has noted, the 'possibility that [early Irish] miracle stories might have a moral or spiritual lesson to offer is frequently overlooked or dismissed'.<sup>55</sup> Hagiographers crafted their works for an 'ecclesiastical public' frequently, but not exclusively, monastic and receptive to their layered meanings.<sup>56</sup> Saints' lives were, in Lisa Bitel's words, 'liturgical drama[s]', often read out with accompanying ritual on feast days, which invited audiences to 'learn from the example of a life led piously, meditate on the life journey of the saint, catch certain thematic links, conceive of a deeper meaning to the order in which events occurred . . . and receive other encoded messages'.<sup>57</sup>

The 'moral or spiritual lesson' lying at the heart of the motif concerned the reconciliation and healing of individuals and, by implication, their communities, following the disruption of sexual sin. In a monastic context, pregnancy through fornication was both a spiritual and physical affliction from which the lapsed virgin emerged 'healthy', in part, through the medicine of penance. To an audience which encountered other miracles concerning chastity within the *vitae*, the motif enacted expiation and reintegration within communities.<sup>58</sup> Maeve Callan has rightly drawn attention to the possibility for restored virginity in prescriptive ecclesiastical texts. Here, the importance of Ireland in the broader history of penance is significant.<sup>59</sup> The mid-to late sixth-century *Penitential of Finnian*, one of the oldest surviving penitentials or handbooks for confession, held out the possibility for reconciliation after sexual lapses by vowed virgins and clerics alike. After a canon on abortion or infanticide,



which gave a half-year penance to any 'woman who has destroyed someone's child by her *maleficium*' (a term which connects magic and poisoning), the author immediately turned to any professed virgin whose 'sin becomes manifest'. After six years of penance, she would be 'joined to the altar, and then we can say that she can restore her crown and put on the white robe and be declared a virgin'. Likewise, a cleric who had fathered a child would regain his office in the seventh year. Produced in a monastic setting, this penitential viewed sexual sin through the lens of communal visibility. It treated nuns and clerics whose sexual sin had become publicly disclosed through the birth of a child more stringently than those whose sin remained hidden.<sup>60</sup>

The miracle motif perhaps played on the intelligibility of recourse by the religious to conceal sexual sin, though it should also be stressed that the penitential dimension publicised the sin. Moreover, its audiences might well have been familiar with stricter ecclesiastical rulings against abortion. The *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*, an important Irish collection of canon law composed in the late seventh or early eighth century and which later proliferated on the continent, addressed abortion in a section on religious, rather than lay, women. It reiterated patristic and conciliar rulings against abortion which left the possibility of remedial penance open but which broached abortion in terms less mitigated by consideration of communal visibility. For instance, a quotation from Jerome's famous letter on asceticism to Eustochium rebuked professed virgins who conceived in sin, drank potions to have abortion and often died in the process: such women would be triply damned as 'suicides, adulterers against Christ and parricides of their unborn children'.<sup>61</sup> The possibility of such familiarity is given further, albeit later, support when we bear in mind that the Brigidine *vitae* circulated and, indeed, survived on the continent. In the ninth century, a Carolingian reader who consulted the oldest surviving manuscript containing the whole of Cogitosus's *vita* would also have been able to read Halitgar of Cambrai's penitential, which incorporated condemnations of abortion from earlier penitentials and canon law with an original canon singling out abortionists, namely the 'apothecary, male or female, [that is] killers of children'.<sup>62</sup>

Hagiographic authors may have been more disciplined by awareness of what abortion was understood to entail, physically and morally, than historians have recognised. Ciarán's miracle, for example, wrought because the saint did not want the 'serpent's seed to come alive', was rhetorically crafted in manipulation, rather than disregard, of emerging ecclesiastical strictures on abortion which calibrated penances according to varying defined stages of fetal development.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, the authors of the motif very deliberately described something which was not, in fact, quite an abortion. This is not to deny that they were conveying the intelligibility of recourse to abortion by those with a stake in keeping sexual sin secret. But it is to recognise that, on early medieval understandings, abortion did not avoid parturition but rendered parturition premature in the bloody flux of miscarriage. One penitential composed on the continent in c.800, but drawing heavily on Irish material, described abortion in an earlier stage of pregnancy as 'destruction of the liquid matter of the infant'.<sup>64</sup> A more graphic visualisation comes from seventh-century Spain. In replying to a priest troubled by the problem of whether Christ's blood splattered at his scourging had been restored to him at his resurrection, Braulio of Saragossa turned to the unpleasant superfluities of menstrual blood, semen and miscarriage to defuse these concerns. 'Why

should it not be believed', he asked, 'that human blood is drawn off and perishes when the humour of generation and blood, as well as the miscarriage (*aborsus*), are not restored in the resurrection to either parent, if indeed one can speak of a parent, whose disgusting fluid or inanimate foetus is poured forth?'<sup>65</sup> By speaking of uterine evanescence, the previously swelling womb emptied of a child which vanished as if it had never been, hagiographers were not elaborating a euphemism for abortion, but were carefully describing the ends of abortion without quite describing the means. What was truly miraculous about the motif was that the pregnant nun has her fornication erased, enters into reconciliation and avoids the bloody, premature parturition of abortion.

The impetus behind this, more than 'pagan' custom fossilised in a Christian text or a broader permissive attitude encoded in the miracle, lay in the symbolism of chastity. While no *regulae* or rules for early Irish nuns have survived, the symbolic connotations of what chastity allowed women to avoid within the delineation of female religious identity can hardly be overstated. Many monastic theorists used the uglier toils of marriage, sexuality and childbearing to illuminate the beauty of consecrated virginity. In the seventh century, Leander of Seville counted the 'weight of the pregnant womb' and mortality in childbirth in which the very 'function and fruit of marriage perish' among the 'primary dangers' of marriage in his *regula* for nuns addressed to his sister Florentina.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, in a poem on virginity, Venantius Fortunatus wrote that, for virgins, the 'stiffening womb does not press down with a fetus shut within' in a kind of prenatal depression.<sup>67</sup> A comparable symbolic dimension is implicit in other episodes within the *vitae* and in the different versions of the motif. It is also explicitly inscribed upon the Brigidine versions in which the nun's pregnancy disappeared 'without childbirth or pain'. This may have been a subtle hint at a kind of female collaboration absent in the miracles wrought by Áed and Cainnech; significantly, as Callan notes, it is Brigit who spares the nun from the pain of childbirth and the *VP*'s version, in which the nun 'gave thanks to God', yields the only evocation of the nun's own perspective.<sup>68</sup> But the allusion to 'childbirth or pain' also bears a crucial symbolic weight, referring to the curse in Genesis 3: 16 by which God committed Eve and her female descendants to the pain of childbirth as a symbol of original sin.<sup>69</sup> It was not simply that the miracle averted the painful birth of an unwanted child – it averted the unwanted symbolism of having that child.

## Conclusion

If religious life did not allow early medieval women to transcend conventional gender roles altogether, chastity and the avoidance of marriage, sexuality and childbearing certainly represented a crucial dimension of how religious life transformed gender. Sexual sin, however, threatened a reversion back from this transformation: the nun who had fallen into fornication risked lapsing into the ways of the world she had left behind. The miracle wrought by Brigit, Áed and Cainnech, however, allowed the sinning nun to remain distinct from her unprofessed counterpart even in the aftermath of her sin. These saints remedied such sin for individuals and their communities by allowing the nun to avoid the physical and symbolic degradation of both childbirth and abortion. Paradoxically, then, in early medieval religion, chastity could transform gender – sometimes even when it was breached.

## Notes

I am grateful to the participants of the colloquium for their responses and discussion; to the anonymous reviewer for comments; and to Katherine Cross for reading the article.

1. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* XI.ii.17–19, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford Classical Texts, 1911), unpaginated.
2. Re eunuchs, see Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); also Shaun Tougher, 'Social Transformation, Gender Transformation? The Court Eunuch, 300–900', in Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith (eds), *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 70–82. For dowagers, see Linda E. Mitchell, *Portraits of Medieval Women: Family, Marriage, and Politics in England, 1225–1350* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
3. See Dyan Elliott, 'The Three Ages of Joan Scott', *American Historical Review* 113 (2008), pp. 1390–1403.
4. Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 120–229, quotations on pp. 144, 148. For comparable later medieval arguments, see R. N. Swanson, 'Angels Incarnate: Clergy and Masculinity from Gregorian Reform to Reformation', in Dawn M. Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 160–77; Jacqueline Murray, 'One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?', in Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (eds), *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 34–51.
5. Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Thomas Aquinas's Chastity Belt: Masculinity in Medieval Europe', in Bitel and Lifshitz (eds) *Gender and Christianity*, pp. 52–67, here p. 53.
6. Emma Pettit, 'Holiness and Masculinity in Aldhelm's *Opus Geminatum de Virginitate*', in Patricia H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (eds), *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), pp. 8–23, quotation on p. 18.
7. Simon Coates, 'Regendering Radegund? Fortunatus, Baudonivia and the Problem of Female Sanctity in Merovingian Gaul', in R. N. Swanson (ed.), *Gender and Religion*, Studies in Church History 34 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), pp. 37–50. See also Giselle de Nie, "'Consciousness Fecund Through God": From Male Fighter to Spiritual Bridegroom in Late Antique Female Sanctity', in Anneke Mulder-Bakker (ed.), *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Garland, 1995), pp. 101–61.
8. Jo Ann McNamara, 'Chastity as a Third Gender in the History and Hagiography of Gregory of Tours', in Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (eds), *The World of Gregory of Tours* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 209.
9. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, 14.2–9, ed. E. Dekkers, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (CCSL) 2 (1954), pp. 1224–5.
10. David Herlihy, 'Households in the Early Middle Ages: Symmetry and Sainthood', in Robert McC. Netting, Richard R. Wilk and Eric J. Arnould (eds), *Households: Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 389–90.
11. Lisa Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 77.
12. Maeve B. Callan, 'Of Vanishing Fetuses and Maidens Made-Again: Abortion, Restored Virginity, and Similar Scenarios in Medieval Irish Hagiography and Penitentials', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21 (2012), pp. 282–96.
13. Kim McCone, 'An Introduction to Early Irish Saints' Lives', *Maynooth Review* 11 (1984), pp. 26–59; Clare Stancliffe, 'The Miracle Stories in Seventh-Century Irish Saints' Lives', in J. Fontaine and J. N. Hillgarth (eds), *The Seventh Century: Change and Continuity* (London: Warburg Institute, 1992), pp. 87–111.
14. *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Charles Plummer, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), hereafter Plummer; *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi*, ed. W. W. Heist (Brussels: Société de Bollandistes, 1965), hereafter Heist.
15. Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
16. On Brigit's dates, see Lisa Bitel, 'Body of a Saint, Story of a Goddess: Origins of the Brigidine Tradition', *Textual Practice* 16 (2002), pp. 209–28, here p. 210.
17. Catherine McKenna, 'Apotheosis and Evanescence: The Fortunes of Saint Brigit in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in Joseph F. Nagy (ed.), *The Individual in Celtic Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp. 74–108.

18. Mary Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).
19. Christina Harrington, *Women in the Celtic Church: Ireland, 450–1150* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 6–16, quotation on p. 11, including pp. 7–8 on Condren’s methodology.
20. Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990); Joseph F. Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Motifs of Medieval Ireland* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), pp. 68–80, counters ‘exaggerated claims . . . made about the degree of power and freedom enjoyed by women in early Irish society’ (p. 68).
21. See Giles Constable, ‘Aelred of Rievaulx and the Nun of Watton: An Episode in the Early History of the Gilbertine Order’, in Derek Baker (ed.), *Medieval Women*, Studies in Church History, subsidia 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), pp. 205–26, for a comparable but more elaborate twelfth-century episode.
22. The debate is ongoing: two important contributions with contrasting arguments are Richard Sharpe, ‘*Vitae S. Brigidae: The Oldest Texts*’ and Kim McCone, ‘Brigit in the Seventh Century: A Saint with Three Lives?’ *Peritia* 1 (1982), pp. 81–106, 107–45 respectively. Nathalie Stalmans, *Saints d’Irlande: Analyse critique des sources hagiographiques (VII<sup>e</sup>–X<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2003), pp. 59–67, 269–87, provides a more recent overview.
23. Cog.12, tr. Sean Connolly and J.-M. Picard, ‘Cogitosus’s *Life of St Brigit: Content and Value*’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117 (1987), p. 16. In what follows, I quote from this translation and Connolly’s translation of the *VP* (see note 26 below) except where the Latin, taken from the *Acta Sanctorum* (*AS*), is of interest.
24. Cog.25, tr. Connolly and Picard, pp. 21–2. For secular parallels, see Ludwig Bieler, ‘Hagiography and Romance in Medieval Ireland’, *Medievalia et Humanistica* new series 6 (1975), p. 16.
25. ‘Potentissima enim et ineffabili fidei fortitudine, quamdam feminam, post votum integritatis, fragilitate humana in juvenili voluptatis desiderio lapsam, et habentem jam praegnantem ac tumescentem uterum, fideliter benedixit: et evanescente in vulva conceptu, sine partu et sine dolore eam sanam ad penitentiam restituit’, II.13, *AS* Feb I. col.136F; translation adapted from Cog. 9, tr. Connolly and Picard, p. 16.
26. ‘Alio autem tempore S. Brigida, per potentissimam Dei virtutem, cujusdam mulieris tumescentem vulvam benedixit: et evanescente conceptu, sine partu et dolore eam sanam ad pœnitentiam restituit. Illa vero sanata est, et Deo gratias egit’, 16.100, *AS* Feb I. col.133C. In the *AS*’s Latin, the woman is not explicitly a nun. Connolly’s translation from an unpublished critical edition based on 26 full manuscripts, however, refers to a ‘woman who had fallen after a vow of integrity’: *VP* 103, tr. Sean Connolly, ‘Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae: Background and Historical Value’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 119 (1989), p. 45.
27. Bitel, ‘Body of a Saint’. See also Stalmans, *Saints d’Irlande*, pp. 100–08.
28. Cog.1.1, tr. Connolly and Picard, p. 13. The scriptural allusion is to Jeremiah 1: 5.
29. Cog.2, tr. Connolly and Picard, p. 14.
30. Bitel, ‘Body of a Saint’, p. 214.
31. *VP* 19, tr. Connolly, p. 18. On female self-mutilation or psychosomatic illness to avoid marriage in early medieval hagiography, see Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, c.a. 500–1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 144–55.
32. *VP* 2, tr. Connolly, p. 14; Bitel, ‘Body of a Saint’, pp. 216–22.
33. *VP* 20, tr. Connolly, p. 18.
34. *VP* 39, tr. Connolly, p. 23.
35. *VP* 17, tr. Connolly, p. 17. On Brigit’s Marian associations, see Diane Peters Auslander, ‘Gendering the “Vita Prima”: An Examination of St. Brigid’s Role as “Mary of the Gael”’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 20/21 (2000/1), pp. 187–202.
36. Stalmans, *Saints d’Irlande*, pp. 206–9, 235–6.
37. *Vita Aidi* 16, Heist, pp. 172–3. See also Lisa Bitel, ‘Saints and Angry Neighbours: The Politics of Cursing in Irish Hagiography’, in Sharon Farmer and Barbara H. Rosenwein (eds), *Monks and Nuns, Saints and Outcasts: Religion in Medieval Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 123–50, here p. 131.
38. *Vita Aidi* 20, 37, Heist, pp. 173–4, 178.
39. ‘Quadam autem die, Aidus, iter agens, venit ad aliarum sanctarum virginum locum, qui dicitur Druimm Ard, et cum magno gaudio in hospicium receptus est. Intuens autem sanctus Aidus virginem que sibi ministrabat, vidit quod uterus illius, partum gestans, intumescerebat. Et cito surrexit ille sine cibo, ut ab isto

- loco fugeret. Tunc illa coram omnibus confessa est quod occulte peccasset et penitentiam egit. Sanctus autem Aidus benedixit uterum eius, et statim infans in utero eius evanuit quasi non esset', *Vita Aidi* 15, Heist, p. 172.
40. 'Quedam virgo in vicino sibi loco habitans occulte fornicavit, et uterus eius partu intumuit. Que a sancto Kannecho postulavit ut uterum suum, quasi aliquo dolore tumescentem, benediceret. Cumque ille benedixisset eam, statim infans in utero eius non apparens evanuit', *Vita Cainnechi* 56, Heist, p. 197.
  41. *Vita Aidi* 1, 33, Heist, pp. 167–8, 177.
  42. *Vita Cainnechi* 32, Heist, p. 190; Máire Herbert, 'The *Vita Columbae* and Irish Hagiography: A Study of the *Vita Cainnechi*', in John Carey, Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Riain (eds), *Studies in Irish Hagiography: Saints and Scholars* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp. 31–40.
  43. The Salamanca codex may not represent an older text: Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*, pp. 293–6.
  44. 'Revertente vero vir Dei cum puella ad monasterium, confessa est puella se conceptum habere in utero. Tunc vir Dei, zelo iustitiae ductus, viperium semen animari nolens, impresso ventri eius signo crucis, fecit illud exinaniri', *Vita s. Ciarani* 5, Heist, p. 348.
  45. Callan, 'Vanishing Fetuses', p. 290.
  46. A miracle attributed to Radegund, in which she healed a nun swollen (*tumefacta*) with dropsy by immersing her in chrisom so that the 'illness left no trace in the womb (*utero*)' and 'no damage to the stomach (*ventris*)', suggests that the prevarication was not wholly implausible: Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita Radegundis* 80–1, MGH Auct. ant. 4.2, p. 93.
  47. Bitel, *Land of Women*, pp. 80–83, Callan, 'Vanishing Fetuses', p. 295.
  48. PL 72, col.780c. See also Danuta Shanzer, 'Voices and Bodies: The Afterlife of the Unborn', *Numen* 56 (2009), p. 352 n.103.
  49. Quoted in McKenna, 'Apotheosis and Evanescence', pp. 91–2.
  50. 'vir Dei cognovit unam earum tunc cecidisse in peccatum. Tunc illa sciens quod noverat peccatum eius sanctus episcopus, confessa est culpam suam coram omnibus, et egit penitentiam', *Vita Aedi*, Plummer, I, p. 38. See also Dorothy Africa, review of Dorothy Ann Bray, *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints*, *Speculum* 71 (1996) p. 131.
  51. See the note in Heist, p. 197.
  52. 'Videns autem vir Dei quod uterus illius femine partu intumescerat, signo sancte crucis benedixit vulvam illius, et venter eius exinde decrevit, et partus in utero evanuit', *Vita Ciarani de Saigir* 9, Plummer, I, p. 221. See also David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 32; Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 77; Callan, 'Vanishing Fetuses', p. 290 n. 30.
  53. Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*, pp. 153 n. 73, 200 n. 187, quotation at p. 213. The version in the AS without explicit allusion to religious profession (see n. 28) may reflect a similar sensitivity.
  54. Connolly, 'Cogitosus's *Life of St Brigit*', p. 7. This is quoted from Connolly's introduction to the translation by Connolly and Picard.
  55. Dorothy Ann Bray, 'Miracles and Wonders in the Composition of the Lives of the Early Irish Saints', in Jane Cartwright (ed.), *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 136.
  56. Herbert, 'Vita Columbae', p. 39.
  57. Bitel, 'Body of a Saint', p. 213.
  58. See Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church*, pp. 88, 150–54. On penance as medicinal, see John T. McNeill, 'Medicine for Sin as Prescribed in the Penitentials', *Church History* 1 (1932), pp. 14–26.
  59. Allen J. Frantzen, *The Literature of Penance in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), pp. 19–59.
  60. *P. Vinniani* cc. 20–21, ed. and tr. Ludwig Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963), pp. 78–81 (my translation). For a more detailed reading, see Zubin Mistry, "'Alienated from the Womb": Abortion in the Early Medieval West, c.500–900' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2011), pp. 104–10.
  61. *Collectio canonum Hibernensis* 45.3–5, ed. F. W. H. Wasserschleben, *Die irische Kanonensammlung* (Giessen: J. Ricker'sche Buchhandlung, 1874), p. 210; Jerome, *Ep.* 22.13, PL 22, cols. 401–2.
  62. *P. pseudo-Romanum* 2.16, 5.1–2, 11.22, ed. F. W. H. Wasserschleben, *Die Bussordnungen der abendländischen Kirche* (Halle: C. Graeger, 1851), pp. 366–7, 369, 375. This manuscript (Paris, BN, MS lat. 2999) was written in the first third of the ninth century in northeastern France. The manuscript has been mutilated and most of the *vita* is lost. An index survives, however, including the heading, 'About a pregnant [woman] blessed without pain'; see Mario Esposito, 'On the Earliest Latin Life of St. Brigit of Kildare', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History,*

- Linguistics, Literature* 30 (1912–13), pp. 313–4, with Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*, p. 18 on dating and provenance.
63. See Mistry, 'Alienated from the Womb', pp. 125–6 on Irish conciliar material and the *Old Irish Penitential*.
  64. *P. Bigotianum*, IV.2.2, Bieler, *Irish Penitentials*, p. 228.
  65. *Ep.* 42, PL 80, cols. 687d–688d.
  66. *Regula* 1, PL 72, col. 879c.
  67. *Carmina* 8.3, MGH Auct. ant. 4.1, p. 189.
  68. Callan, 'Vanishing Fetuses', pp. 291–2. I am also grateful to Michelle Sauer for underlining this aspect during discussion at the colloquium.
  69. A rare scriptural allusion, as Stalmans, *Saints d'Irlande*, pp. 171–2 notes.