‘Certain Virgins’ and Hagiographical ‘Straightening Devices’ in the *Historia Divae Monacellae*

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This paper offers a literary analysis of the Latin Life of Saint Melangell, *Historia Divae Monacelae* (HDM), grounded in affect, gender, and queer theory. Melangell is a native Welsh saint described by the HDM as a ‘virgin’ who was granted land by the local prince. She then went on to ‘institute and establish certain virgins in the same region’ (Pryce 1994:39–40) and I posit that the HDM provides insight into what kinds of ‘less institutionalized’ communal expressions of women’s religious life may have existed in medieval Wales beyond the three documented nunneries – a topic for which there is scant extant evidence (Cartwright 2008:207–8). I begin with a brief background on the text, an introduction to theoretical lenses used, and an explanation of my use of the term ‘queer virgins’ to describe women who refused marriage on religious grounds in medieval Wales. I then develop a close reading of the text attentive to power, gender, sexuality, virginity, and ecology. Drawing on comparative textual examples from hagiography, law, and poetry, as well as scholarship on ecclesiastical discourse and women’s religious communities in medieval England, I attempt to situate aspects of the HDM in its wider social context. The paper concludes with a discussion about what insight the HDM might offer into medieval Welsh social attitudes to queer virgins.

Keywords: medieval Wales, hagiography, virginity, queer theory, literary analysis

> Why is it that people who consider you as in danger
> always want to control you as to make you safe?
>
> – Dorothy Allison, from her foreword
> to Amber Hollibaugh’s *My Dangerous Desires:*
> *a queer girl dreaming her way home* (2000:xiii)

> ‘I am a Welsh Prince. Safe you are.
> This land is mine by right.’
> He tells himself he loves the witch,
> But what he feels is fright.
>
> – Norman Schwenk, ‘Rime of St Melangell,’
> from *The Hare that Hides Within:*
> *Poems about St. Melangell* (2004:30)

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1. Introduction to the text and terminology

The Latin Life of Saint Melangell, *Historia Divae Monacellae* (HDM), is one of only two extant prose Lives for a native Welsh virgin saint, making it an important source for the study of gender and sexuality in medieval Welsh hagiography. Although the story of Melangell is 'one of the best known and most persistent legends' among those of Welsh saints (Henken 1987:217), the text of the HDM has to date not been studied as extensively as the Life of her counterpart Gwenfrewy. This paper will offer a brief background on the HDM, a substantial grounding in queer and feminist theoretical tools for textual interpretation, and a close reading of the text framed by hagiographical motifs and comparative examples from a broader literary corpus. To situate aspects of the HDM in its wider social context, I will draw on other medieval Welsh sources including law texts and poetry as well as scholarship on ecclesiastical discourse and women's religious communities in medieval England.

The physical places where women religious lived in medieval Europe – from convents to anchorite cells – have been studied extensively as sites of queer history for the ways that they offered unique spaces where men were mostly or wholly absent (Sauer 2004, Jankowski 2011, Weston 2011). Within the convent, women occupied neither the role of wife nor mother and their primary kinship bonds were with each other. However, it is not entirely accurate to call the people who lived in these religious communities 'women.' Rather they were understood distinctly as 'virgins,' which I would argue, after Theodora Jankowski, is a queer social position (2000). In the vein of Monique Wittig's assertion that 'a lesbian is not a woman,' Jankowski establishes early modern 'virgins' as 'those who confound the sex/gender system […] by *not being* "women"' where to be a woman is defined by crossing the threshold of penetrative sex with a man and becoming socially attached to him in the process (Jankowski 2000:12). I posit this same framework can be applied to the study of gender and sexuality in medieval Wales, where the legal texts demonstrate an obsession with paternity, surveillance of sexual couplings, and whether a woman is a *morwyn* 'virgin' on her wedding night (Roberts 2011, 2017; Stacey 2019, 2020).

To differentiate a virgin who intends to partner with a man and become a woman from a virgin who refuses partnership with men and intends to remain a virgin, I will refer to the latter in this paper as Jankowski does: queer virgins. While I do not intend the emphasis on 'physical virginity' centred in Jankowski's original use of the term (2000), and indeed I have argued previously that even the concept of 'physical virginity' is unstable and inaccurate both in modern and medieval contexts (Munro 2023), I do affirm her use of the term 'queer' (2011) after Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's assertion that 'one of the things that "queer" can refer to' is 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of

anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically (Sedgwick 1994:7). This is very much the case for the figure of Melangell in the HDM.

The text of the HDM survives in three complete versions and two incomplete, though the original version has been lost. Huw Pryce in his discussion of the text alongside his translation suggests 'that the text was originally composed at some point between the late fifteenth century and 1548' (1994:28). The location of its composition is not known, though it 'appears to be the work of someone with a reasonably sound grasp of Latin' if a bit 'cumbersome,' and could equally be a cleric or layman (Pryce 1994:29, 31). There are passages within the HDM dateable to the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, which may suggest that the existing HDM was based on an earlier text of that time (Pryce 1994:31). Pryce summarizes in his analysis of the HDM that the text provides 'a literary representation, by an educated author, of beliefs about the saint at the end of the medieval period' though the author may have drawn on earlier sources (Pryce 1994:36). On the primary motivation for the text of the HDM as preserved in the fifteenth- to sixteenth-century manuscripts, Pryce speculates that 'the answer probably lies in its preoccupation with St Melangell's rights of sanctuary,' which was a common theme among several late eleventh- and twelfth-century Latin Lives of Welsh Saints, such as St Cadog and St David (1994:31). Several Welsh churches sought to reassert their sanctuary rights as established by the princes of Powys prior to the Edwardian conquest of 1282–4, and it seems likely that the abbots of Pennant Melangell were among them (Pryce 1994:32).

The HDM recounts that Melangell was a 'virgin' who lived in the wilderness on the land of prince Brochwel in Powys, undetected by him for fifteen years. When the prince was out hunting one day, the hare his dogs were chasing sought refuge beneath Melangell's skirt while she was praying in a bramble bush. Brochwel, amazed by this and assured that she was 'a true handmaiden of God', granted her sanctuary on his lands, along with other law-abiding people, in perpetuity. Following this, Melangell went on to 'institute and establish certain virgins in the same region' (Pryce 1994:39–40). Thus, we are told, Melangell had important relationships with other virgins who lived locally to her. After her death, an intruding man (a prince of neighbouring principality) attempts to violate these virgins and is immediately struck down by divine intervention. This last piece of the narrative was probably intended to demonstrate the power of the sanctuary declared by Brochwel in Pennant Melangell.

However, the text contains contradictions about the nature of Melangell's life and relationships with the other virgins mentioned. At multiple points the narrator emphasises the solitary life Melangell lived yet also tells us towards the end that she 'took pains with all care and diligence' to 'institute and establish' these other virgins (Pryce 1994:39–40) – suggesting a meaningful bond of unknown duration. While the HDM can in no way be taken to prove the existence of an as-yet-unknown

nunnery in medieval Wales, it speaks to the possibility of a relational network of queer virgins that does not map on to our limited, existing knowledge about religious institutions or movements in medieval Wales for people who were not men.

In search of a history of queer virgins in medieval Wales, one discovers quickly that there is little extant evidence about their religious communities in any form. We know of the existence of only three nunneries in post-Norman Conquest Wales: two Cistercian abbeys in Llanllyr and Llanllugan and one Benedictine nunnery in Usk. All are poorly documented and what evidence does exist suggests they were relatively small scale (Burton and Stober 2015:13,123). There are no commentaries by theologians or directives from ecclesiastical authorities about the appropriate behaviour of nuns, as are extensively documented in England (Sauer). Neither do we have any first person records authored by a queer virgin from a convent in medieval Wales (Cartwright). The law texts address virginity but not women's celibacy in a religious context. However, ideas about nuns and queer virgins are documented in extant poetry and hagiography, and, I argue, the HDM in particular gestures toward some form of communal expression of women's religious life. While it is not possible to extrapolate from the HDM concrete information about the lives of medieval Welsh women who wished to avoid marriage and/or lead religious lives, in solitude or in the company of other women, a queer reading of the HDM reveals aspects of social commentary by the composer and/or the commissioning party about the culture of religious virgins in medieval Wales. It also leads to interesting questions such as: What kind of communal expressions of queer virgins' religious life could have been possible during the time period(s) in which the historic Melangell may have lived or when the text was first written? What were the dominant and/or varied cultural attitudes to such practices? To fully address these questions are beyond the scope of this paper and would require extensive study of archaeological and manuscript evidence, however I will make a start in that direction.

Interpreting the HDM through critical historiographical and queer theoretical lenses, I argue that the HDM can be read as a commentary on medieval Welsh attitudes around gender, sexuality, virginity, and religious women's social relationships with one another. I will demonstrate that the text participates in discourse around the the social position of queer virgins (women who refused marriage on religious grounds) and the medeival Welsh definition of virginity, and that reading it this way opens up interesting questions about the social and material forms that religious communities of queer virgins may have taken in medieval Wales.

2. Theoretical grounding

Before addressing the text more closely, I will introduce four theoretical tools which ground my literary analysis. These are medievalist scholar of English

anchoritism Michelle M. Sauer's deployment (2004) of Theodora Jankowski's 'lesbian void' (2000); medieval literary historian and lesbian scholar Lara Farina's concept of 'erotic reading' (2011); feminist historian Joan W. Scott's theory of gender as a culturally specific matrix of symbolic language (1986), particularly as applied by Robin Stacey Chapman to the 'social imagination' of medieval Wales (2019, 2020); and lesbian feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed's concept of queer phenomenology, the 'spatiality of orientation,' and readings which act as 'straightening devices' (2006). They each offer a way to make sense of gender and sexuality in the narrative of the HDM and the question more generally of how to write a history of lesbian and queer subjects.

Jankowski developed the concept of the 'lesbian void,' defined as a realm 'where erotic relationships between women could occur' in reference to the physical space of the early modern aristocratic home with increased privacy and also the relationship between mistress and servant, (2000:301). Following on from this, Sauer takes up the term 'lesbian void' to describe the physical space of a female anchorite's enclosure as well as the relationship between the anchorite and her servant (2004). The concept of the lesbian void refers both to the material – including architectural – conditions that might enable 'woman-woman erotic contact' (to use Sauer's phrasing) as well as forms of social organisation that would accommodate the same.

Farina's idea of 'erotic reading' invites the reader to focus their awareness on the 'affective pull' of a text. She articulates the value of 'erotic reading' as a methodology for writing lesbian premodern history, taking as the analytical starting point the 'literalist' approach to textual interpretation, which is defined by Mieke Bal as a stance that 'heeds the precise form of a text's language "for the nuances or shades it puts forward"' and produces new questions to address 'perceived textual enigmas' (Farina 2011:51). These new questions are essential for generating new knowledge. For Farina, erotic reading 'can expand our narration of lesbian experience, making many kinds of historical representations affectively available *to* lesbians' (2011:49–50).

Scott's two-part definition of gender as both 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes' and 'a primary way of signifying relationships of power (Scott 1986:1067). Judith Butler elaborates on Scott's work stating 'sexual difference is not only made or constructed, but is itself a *matrix* for articulating domains of life we may not immediately associate with sexual difference, such as culture, history, and power' (2011:14, emphasis mine). Miguel Cabrera expands on this concept as it relates to language specifically stating:

> language operates not as a transparent means of communication but as discourse, understood not as words or phrases but as entire forms of thought, as ways of understanding how the world works, and one's place in that world. (2011:33–34).

For Scott, gender is both a principle of social organisation and a symbolic language for articulating hierarchy which is unique to a historical moment. Stacey applies Scott's framework to the study of medieval Welsh law and develops the idea of the 'social imagination' to articulate the interplay between hierarchy and symbolic language (2019, 2020). Scott tells us this concept could be applied to any hierarchy which rests on perceived differences between humans to which society has ascribed meanings of inferiority and superiority.

The final – and titular – theoretical tool I wish to set out ahead of engaging more closely with the text of the HDM is that of Ahmed's discussion of queerness and 'orientation' through the lens of phenomenology. She remarks on the 'spatiality' of the term 'orientation,' using the image of a straight line to articulate compulsory heterosexuality, and asserts that queer desires can therefore be understood as 'not following the straight line' (Ahmed 2006:70). While 'compulsory heterosexuality' – like 'lesbian' and 'queer' – is of course anachronistic, there was a system of social norms in place around gender and sexuality in medieval Wales, and her theory is a useful one for thinking about deviation from these norms, and the methods for dealing with those deviations. Ahmed articulates that (sexual) orientation is not just about sexual desires but the way one makes one's life decisions and inhabits public space. Orientation is developed in relation to an expected and encouraged path which is set out for each person. To stay on that path requires conforming to societal expectations around desire and kinship, what she terms 'the straight line.' She writes:

> The discontinuity of queer desires can be explained in terms of objects that are not points on the straight line: the subject has to go "offline" to reach such objects. To go "offline" is to turn toward "one's own sex" and away from "the other sex." To turn away from "the other sex" is also to leave the straight line. […] So the question is not only how queer desire is read as offline, but also how queer desire has been read in order to bring such desire back into line, which is directed by desire for the "other sex," or for what we are "not." Such readings function as "*straightening devices*" that follow the straight line or even "can only see straight," given how they conflate this line with what is right, good, or normal. The straight reading, in other words, "corrects" the slantwise direction of queer desire. (2006:70–71, emphasis mine)

Here Ahmed is not talking only of reading 'texts' in the traditional sense but also social situations. Ahmed recounts an anecdote of moving to a new house with her lesbian partner and having a neighbour ask her if her partner is '[her] sister, or [her] husband,' to which she does not reply, but later reflects to herself, 'There are two women, living together, a couple of people alone in a house. So what do you see?' (2006:95). This sort of selective not-seeing – this deliberate (mis)categorisation of a lesbian union into a more socially acceptable explanation for such a pairing – is an act of erasure. The neighbour's language here acts as a 'straightening device,' which refuses to recognise the obvious queer desire, and

instead reassures the speaker and anyone who may be listening that the 'normal' social order is in place.

The authors of historical texts are also positioned to offer a 'straight reading' of their subjects, as are the scholars who interpret such texts. Indeed, medievalist Gail Ashton writes about hagiographers specifically:

> The female saint's life is appropriated by a male writer who operates a controlling textual tradition on behalf of a masculine world. He attempts to annihilate his subject in order to advance her sanctity and retain her transgressions within the reductive framework of his genre. (Ashton 2000:118)

What follows is an attempt to see 'slant' through the 'straightening' of the hagiographical account of Melangell by reading through the lenses built by these thinkers.

3. The landscape of sexual deviance in medieval Wales

In her work on the typical narrative patterns of Welsh saints' lives, Elissa Henken argues that hagiography only addresses the life stories of women saints from the point at which 'they are confronted with male sexuality,' whereas men saints' lives typically begin at the time of their birth (Henken 1982:13–14, as quoted in Cartwright 2008:86). The HDM fits this pattern, with the three main events recounted from Melangell's life being 1) her father's announcement that she must marry a suitor in Ireland, then a gap of fifteen years in which we learn nothing of how she passed the time aside from apparently not looking at men's faces, 2) encountering Brochwel and the hare in the bramble bush, followed again by a large stretch of time, twenty two years (if thirty seven includes the previous fifteen), with little detail given of her activity aside from the brief mention of 'establishing' other 'virgins' in the area and continuing to work miracles through the hares, and lastly 3) after Melangell's death when Elise comes to attack the remaining virgins in the community – a post-humous confrontation with male sexuality.

Of the Welsh saints who are identified as virgins, including Dunod, Tudful, Tybïe, Gwen, Enfail, Maches, Eluned and Gwenfrewy, Melangell is the only one who is not martyred in the popular narrative of her life (Cartwright 2008). Melangell's *vitae* then is noteworthy for the fact of her having survived her encounter in the bushes with the prince. In the lives of virgin saints, the relationship between the virgin and her suitor whom she rejects is the conflict on which the story of the virgin saint ultimately turns. Among the Welsh virgin saints, Saint Gwenfrewy was decapitated for refusing to have sex with a local prince called Caradog and Saint Eluned was also martyred for refusing a suitor (Cartwright 2008:71). In contrast, Brochwel does not, according to the text of the HDM, attempt to court or otherwise have a sexual relationship with Melangell. That said, Melangell's moment of contact with Brochwel is still the central scene of her *vitae:*

> *dictus princeps venatum transisset ad quendam locum […] et ubi odorisequi canes eiusdem principis leporem excitassent, canes leporem insequebantur et ille usque dum ad rubum quendam grandem et spinosum venissent. In quo quidem rubo invenit quandam virginem vultu speciosam quam devotissime orantem, et divinæ contemplationi deditam, una cum dicto lepore sub vestium extremitate aut ventrali cubante (facie canibus adversa) audacter et intrepide.*
>
> the said prince had gone hunting to a certain place […] and where the hunting dogs of the same prince had aroused a hare, he and the dogs pursued the hare until they came to a certain large and thorny bramble bush. In that bramble bush indeed he found a certain virgin beautiful in appearance praying as devoutly as possible, and given up to divine contemplation, together with the said hare lying down under the hem or girdle of her garment, with its face turned towards the dogs boldly and calmly.
>
> (Pryce 1994:37, 39)

The image of the bramble bush is pivotal in this narrative. It is the site of Melangell's contemplative practice, the place where the hare takes refuge, the moment that the the virgin is found effectively trespassing on the prince's land, and the setting in which her sanctity is confirmed. In a literalist interpretation of the text, one obvious starting point is: Why is Melangell praying in a bramble bush? Looking to Christian symbolism, this could be taken as an allusion to Christ's crown of thorns – the faithful virgin encircled within the thorny thicket, emulating his suffering in her own self-directed penance. This may be an aspect of the meanings at play, however if we consider the broader corpus of medieval Welsh texts, a variety of complex interpretive possibilities arise.

The bush, or grove, is well established as a setting for and symbol of sexual deviance in the social imagination of medieval Welsh law and poetry. Using Scott's theoretical framework for studying gender in history, Stacey examines the figure of the *gwraig llwyn a pherth* 'woman of bush and brake' in medieval Welsh law texts (2019, 2020). This term was used to describe a woman who 'engages in illicit sexual activity with a man to whom she is not married' and implies these sex acts are taking place 'in the bushes or marshy land (brake)' (2020:271–272, 284). Sara Elin Roberts in her study on 'secret sex' in medieval Welsh laws tells us that the phrase *llwyn a pherth* 'bush and brake' refers not only to the feature of the landscape where the 'furtive' sexual union takes place but also to (the woman's) participation in the act (2017:114). Stacey suggests the linkages between land and gender are metaphorical as well as literal, as 'she is ruined for another match' and has become 'herself "bush and brake", a field that can no longer be productively "ploughed"' by producing heirs in a legitimate marriage (2020:284-285). Thus the language of landscape – the hierarchy of 'productive' and 'unproductive' land – is used to communicate the bounds of sexual norms and transgressions.

Similar metaphors are found in medieval Welsh poetry, including that of Gwerful Mechain, Dafydd Llwyd, and Dafydd ap Gwilym. Translator and

historian of Gwerful Mechain's work Katie Grammich tells us that 'lovers' trysts' in medieval Welsh love poetry often take place in a 'fertile birch grove' (2018:139). Gwerful Mechain's poem *Llanc ym min y llwyn* 'A lad beside the bush' is in keeping with this theme, though not overtly erotic. A more sexually explicit example is Dafydd Llwyd's poem *Moliant i Werful Mechain* 'In praise of Gwerful Mechain' which suggests a sex act under cover of foliage:

Cydymddiddan dan y dail,
Cydgerdded coed ac irddail;
Ymwasgu, ymgaru i gyd
[...]
Yn ennaint a wnawn innau,
A gwely mewn y llwyn golas
Draw, rhag ein ceisiaw o'n cas

We will talk to each other under the leaves,
We will walk together through woods and fresh foliage;
We will embrace, and court and all,
[...]
An ointment I myself will make,
And a bed in a green bush
A long way off, to prevent them finding our cover

(Gramich 2018:138–9)

The setting of this sexual union, presumably outside of marriage, is off the beaten path where they will not be overlooked by members of their community. Gramich (2018:139) compares this poem by Dafydd Llwyd to one by Dafydd ap Gwilym called *Y deildy* 'The house of leaves' (37) which includes the phrase *mewn bedw a chyll* 'in birch and hazel' [fig. 'grove'] to describe the hidden place in the woods where the lovers are meeting.

In contrast to the spacious, pleasant, and airy grove of trees of love poetry, the plants of the HDM are decidedly thorny. The Latin *rubum* within the HDM refers specifically to a bramble bush or blackberry bush, whereas *frutex* would have been a more general choice for 'bush.' The *llwyn* of the law texts appears to be have multiple possible meanings, which GPC defines variously as 'bush, shrub, brake, thicket; copse, grove, arbour; woods, forest; (esp. in love-poetry) the traditional rendezvous of lovers, symbol of love or romance,' with the first usage being ninth century and several examples from the thirteenth. Similarly, according to GPC from the twelfth century the term *perth* can mean a (thorn-) bush, brake, thicket, copse, coppice, or (the) bush more generally. Thus it's possible that the bramble bush of the HDM might have been considered a *llwyn* or *perth* in Middle Welsh. It would be interesting to know whether the term *gwraig llwyn a perth* was anywhere translated into Latin in a medieval Welsh law text to identify the specific words used in that context.

The more specific Middle Welsh word for 'blackberry bushes, brambles, briers, or thorn bushes' from the thirteenth century is *mieri*, for which the Latin name *Rubus fruticosus* is given (GPC). The entry for *mieri* includes a line from a Dafydd ap Gwilym poem, *Er morwyn, o'r mieri* 'For a virgin, of the bramble bush' and the phrase *Mair a'n tyn o'r mieri* 'Mary and her house of brambles' from *Cywyddiau Iolo Goch ac Eraill*. Clearly there is a strong association between virgins and brambles specifically, as opposed to other types of 'bushes.' Thinking with Scott's concept summarised by Butler as a 'matrix' of symbols for articulating gender, we see that various aspects of the medieval Welsh landscape signify – at increasingly granular levels – a variety of sexual practices (or lack thereof) and convey in their phrasing social attitudes to each. As the *llwyn a pherth* of shameful sexual activity in the law texts refers to marshy undergrowth and the *llwyn golas* of romantic yearning in poetry is the pleasant birch grove, so does the 'bush' associated with virgins and virginity have its own particular characteristics – namely being very thorny and liable to injure would-be foragers looking to to pluck the plant's fruit. The virgin is hostile to men's sexual advances as the thorn bush is hostile to those who wish to harvest their valuable assets.

What Melangell and the 'woman of bush and brake' share is a failure to reproduce in socially acceptable ways, thus marking the end of the family line. As Ahmed states in *Queer Phenomenology,* 'The task is to trace the lines for a different genealogy, one that would embrace the failure to inherit the family line as the *condition of possibility* for another way of dwelling in the world' (2006: 178, emphasis mine). Indeed for Melangell it is precisely this 'failure' that made possible her independent existence in the wilderness for fifteen years and the network of other virgins with whom she apparently shared her life.

In addition to standing for the site of sexual practices which deviate from the norm, I would argue the symbol of the 'bush' could also allude to the vulva. This is supported by by Gwerful Mechain's famous poem variously named *Cywydd y cedor* or *Cywydd y gont* 'Poem to the vagina' or 'Poem of the cunt' which uses several woodland metaphors to stand in for the genitals:

Y llwyn sur, llawn yw o serch,
Fforest falch iawn, ddawn ddifreg,
Ffris ffraill, ffwrwr dwygaill deg,
Pant yw hwy no llwy yn llaw,
Clawdd i ddal cal ddwy ddwylaw.
Trwsglwyn merch, drud annerch dro,
Berth addwyn, Duw'n borth iddo.

The sour grove, it's full of passion,
Great proud forest, faultless gift,
Fragile frieze, fur for a good pair of balls,
It's a hollow longer than a spoon or a hand,
A bush to hold a penis two hands wide;

> A girl's thicket, precious ringlet of greeting,
> Noble bush, may God save it.
>
> (Gramich 2018:45)

Gramich translates *llwyn* in this poem as 'grove' while *clawdd* is translated as 'bush,' though elsewhere *llwyn* is also translated as 'bush.' The earlier (twelfth century) definition given for *clawdd* is 'soil thrown up in digging a pit or trench, mound, wall made of earth, dyke, earthwork, bulwark; boundary; hedge, fence' while the slightly later (fourteenth century) is 'ditch, gutter, trench; pit, quarry, mine; moat, fosse.' Here the language of devalued land stands in for the bodily site of women's sexual experience and pleasure. The image of the thorn bush also appears in Dafydd ap Gwilym's poem *Cyngor y Bioden* 'The Magpie's Counsel' (36), which narrates the scene of encountering a magpie *ym mhengrychedd perfedd perth* 'in the middle of a tangled thicket.' It is noteworthy that GPC suggests *pengrychedd* could also be translated as 'curliness (of hair),' in keeping with imagery which operates on both a bodily and ecological level.

Taken all together, these comparative examples demonstrate that the the setting of the bramble bush in the HDM may have signalled to contemporary audiences that this is a place where deviant sexualities dwell. Within the 'social imagination' as well as potentially in a very material sense, the 'lesbian void' in a medieval Welsh context was outdoors in the bushes. Within the HDM, the lesbian void is both the liminal space of the wilderness where the virgins potentially go unwatched by patriarchal authorities and also the relationships hinted at in Melangell's 'establishing' of other 'certain virgins in the region.'

4. Hares, hierarchies, and homoerotic anxiety

> *Demum princeps totus attonitus virginem postulavit quampridem in terris ipsius habitasset sola in huiusmodi deserto. Virgo respondens ait, 'Hos quindecim annos, nec vultum hominis interim usque modo contemplata sum.'*
>
> Finally the prince, totally astonished, asked the virgin for how long she had lived on his lands alone in such a wilderness. The virgin said in reply, 'For the past fifteen years, nor have I looked at the face of a man at all during that time.'
>
> (Pryce 1994:37–38, 39–40)

It is Brochwel who frames the question and thus presumes that Melangell is indeed 'alone in such a wilderness.' What does Brochwel mean when he asks Melangell this question? What qualifies as 'alone' in this instance? Is it the absence of any other humans? Or the absence of men specifically? He does not say and Melangell does not ask him to clarify. Melangell herself does not strictly confirm her having been 'alone,' but adds that she has not 'looked at the face of a man.' This is an odd thing to say if indeed she had not seen any other humans, as that would be implied.

Towards the end of the text, we learn that Melangell had relationships with other virgins in the area, though the timeline of this relative to the scene with Brochwel is ambiguous:

> *Eadem virgo Monacella virgines quasdam in eadem patria instituere et informare ut sacre et pudice in Dei amore perseverantes viverent omni cura et diligentia studuit quæ, divinis obsequiis intentæ, et dies et noctes nihil agentes aliud transigebant.*
>
> The same virgin Monacella took pains with all care and diligence to institute and establish certain virgins in the same region so that they might live holily and chastely, persevering in the love of God; intent upon divine services, they used to spend their days and nights doing nothing else.
>
> (Pryce 1994:38, 40)

This seems to be almost an afterthought, tacked on at the end of the piece in order to tell the tale of how Melangell post-humously defended them from the would-be attacker, Elise. The text does not explicitly state that Melangell's relationships with the other virgins only began after Brochwel granted her sanctuary, though perhaps this is suggested by the order in which the information is revealed – an authorial choice. This uncertainty – this 'textual enigma' (Farina 2011:51) – suggests further evidence for a 'lesbian void' in which Melangell and other virgins could have been living together 'in such a wilderness.' Indeed, again from a literalist perspective, is it not *more* plausible that Melangell would have been able to survive for fifteen years in a strange land with help from other virgins? If this was the case, why would the author of the HDM not say so? Hagiographical texts were often patterned on predecessors, and it's possible that the image of Melangell as 'solitary' for so many years was an important motif for emphasising her saintliness. Another possibility may be that a community of virgins living in the woods without ecclesiastical oversight could have interfered with the portrayal of the hagiographical subject as pure and chaste. Certainly the author of the HDM makes a point to assure the reader that the virgins did nothing but pray all day and night.

In her study of medieval English theological commentaries, Sauer has demonstrated that 'homoerotic anxiety' regarding the possibility of female anchorites having close personal and possibly sexual relationships with one another circulated extensively in anchoritic discourse in medieval England and Europe more broadly (2004; 2010). Roberta Gilchrist in her archaeological study of medieval women's religious communities notes that while separate abbot's quarters were standard in men's monasteries, women's monastic communities rarely had separate lodgings for the prioresses, as they were 'admonished to keep common dormitory with their nuns' (1994:125). This eliminated the possibility of a 'lesbian void' where women had sufficient physical privacy to enable bodily and sexual autonomy. However, Sauer argues that ultimately the question of whether

'woman-woman erotic acts' impacted the status of a virgin's virginity did not have a simple answer and depended on the specific type of sex act (penetrative or not) and the role of each lover in the act. 'Woman-woman erotic acts,' while potentially legible to medieval theologians as something that could happen, were not considered as 'troublesome' in many cases because they did not threaten the chastity of a virgin the same way that sex with a man would (2004:7). In other words, lesbian sex was not really sex, and erotic relationships between women could be dismissed, ignored, strategically not seen and unacknowledged – subject to a 'straight reading' to use Ahmed's term (2006).

While there is no outright mention of woman-woman erotic contact in the HDM, I argue that the text nonetheless participates in a discourse of homoerotic anxiety as it relates to the sexuality of queer virgins. This assertion hinges on a reading of the hare as a symbol of sexuality, sexual deviance, and gender non-conformity. John Andrew Boyle states that 'the hare as an erotic symbol and the hare-hunt as a metaphor for sexual pursuit are amply attested in both classical and medieval literature, the latter of course drawing on the former' (1973:324) citing Chaucer's Monk, 'whose fondness for coursing hares has recently been shown to admit of a double interpretation' referring to D. W. Robertson, Jr.'s *A Preface to Chaucer* (1963). David Scott-Macnab has since challenged Robertson's interpretation – echoed by others – that the Middle English word *prikyng* can be read as a double entendre for both hunting and sexual activity, arguing such a reading is not supported by the linguistic evidence (2005). Here I would point to Farina's assertion that the quality of eroticism is not inherent to a text but based on cultural frameworks, individual experiences, and associative memories (2011). For the sake of my present argument, I posit that a reading of the hare in the HDM as a symbol not just of sexuality but specifically queerness can be substantiated in other ways beyond a comparison to Chaucer.

Recalling Scott's theory which applies to social hierarchies beyond those of gender such as race and class, I would argue it is also a useful frame for considering the hierarchies of human and non-human animals and hierarchies relating to land and the valuing of some aspects of the landscape over others – and that, in the 'social imagination' of medieval Wales, these various hierarchies are part of the same ecosystem of symbolic language with which society is classified, organised, and governed. Within the structure of the story, the hare is paralleled with both Melangell herself and the other virgins mentioned. Melangell is living in the home of the hare, in the wilderness beyond the bounds of an established community. Brochwel was hunting a hare but has found a virgin living on his lands without permission, and in the moment where he is considering his next steps, her fate is in his hands in a manner not dissimilar to a prey animal awaiting the hunter's next move. They are both spared – Melangell not assaulted and the hare not killed. The hare at the start of the story is under Melangell's protection, as are the virgins at the end of the story. Both are imbued with divine power, with

the hares performing miracles and Melangell, after her death, striking dead the man who sought to attack the other virgins in her community.

For both the hare and Melangell, the text makes prominent mention of their gaze: while she has not 'looked at the face of a man' in fifteen years, the hare is found 'lying down under the hem or girdle of her garment, with its face turned towards the dogs boldly and calmly' (Pryce 1994:39). In the mirrored hierarchies of man-virgin and dogs-hare, the hare transgresses where Melangell, we are told, has been chaste with her eyes. Sauer's study of the *Ancrene Wisse* highlights the ways that anchorites were instructed to avoid looking at people outside their cells to avoid 'enticing glances,' and that more generally in medieval English theology and medical texts the act of looking was linked to the arousal of sexual desire (2004). To what extent this ideology was shared in Wales is not known, but the HDM itself seems to indicate that Melangell having abstained from looking at a man is a hallmark of her sexual purity. By extension, the hare who looks directly at the dogs is impure – a symbol of defiant lust and promiscuity. The language of animals, like the the language of landscape, is used to convey ideas about sexual norms and transgressions.

The animal Brochwel hunts is not a fox, roebuck, or wild goat – three other animals mentioned as examples of hunting prey in the medieval Welsh legal triads (Roberts 2011:335, 343) – but a hare. Dafydd Johnston notes in his discussion of Dafydd ap Gwilym's lexicon that his poem dedicated to the hare, *Serch fel Ysgyfarnog,* includes several alternative, compound names for the hare to avoid the apparent taboo of using its common name, *ysgyfarnog* (2015:65). According to Johnston, compounds in the lexicon of Dafydd ap Gwilym were 'a means of expressing hybridity,' and one such name for the hare is *gwrwraig* (75.9) 'literally "man-woman," another sole attestation outside dictionaries referring to the supposed androgynous nature of the hare' (Johnston 2015:65). Beliefs about the hare being able to change sex between female and male as well as the idea that there were no male hares, only female hares, date from the classical period and are present also in medieval European literature (Shemesh 2019). While it is clear that the idea of hares being intersex was present to some extent in the medieval Welsh social imagination, the existence of the notion that hares were only female is less certain. Thus the animal between Melangell's legs is both an emblem of sexual desire and also of an uncertain sex – or possibly part of a species of which there are no male creatures.

In stories of Welsh men saints who were given land grants, the animal seeking their protection is most often a stag, with one example of a goat (Henken 1991:87). In the example of Saint Oudoceus, the stag shelters beneath the saint's cloak – a decidedly less intimate encounter than Melangell's with the hare. Reading affectively, one can imagine Melangell's physical and emotional experience as the fleeing hare sheltered beneath her skirts. At first startled but then perhaps delighted or in awe as the soft warmth of the small animal registered against her

feet and calves – depending on the season, fur touching skin, a ticklish or pleasant sensation. The 'affective pull' of this scene, to quote Farina, is erotic, even as it is not overtly sexual. Taking this alongside all the ways that the hare mirrors the virgin Melangell within the narrative structure and other 'certain virgins' in their queer, ambiguous social position, I would argue the hare can be read allegorically *as* a virgin, if not in the moment of contact between the hare and Melangell that appears within the text then suggestive of 'woman-woman erotic contact' off-screen.

While the most obvious comparative studies of Melangell involve other virgin saints and/or other Welsh saints, there is noteworthy resonance between her story and that of Saint Anselm. There is within the *Vita Sancti Anselmi* (VSA) a story called 'How a hare was set free' in which the Saint protected a hare from some boys and dogs who were chasing it (Southern 1962:89). Unlike Melangell in the woods, Anselm is riding a horse on a road when the hare takes refuge beneath the horse, which Anselm stills, and the dogs are wary to interfere with the larger creature. He goes on to give a theological lecture comparing the hare whose 'enemies stand round about him' to the 'soul of man' after death confronted with 'the evil spirits which have haunted it' (Southern 1962:89). After Anselm's speech the hare was freed and 'leapt up unhurt, and swiftly returned to its fields and woods' (Southern 1962:90). In this story the hare is explicitly allegory for men's souls in a world filled with temptation, whereas in the HDM it is the sexual purity of the virgins which is at stake – the most evident risk being the would-be assault by prince Elise, but it is also perhaps endangered by their togetherness in the wilderness without men.

Although hares are not mentioned in the law texts with the same frequency as bushes, they are found within the Legal Triads in two places. In a middle Welsh manuscript it is said that a hare is one of 'three preys of a greyhound […] because the first one who raises it owns it, apart from one case, when the hounds of a king meet with an animal raised by the hounds of a nobleman' (Roberts 2011:335). Brochwel's hounds run away when the hare seeks refuge beneath Melangell's skirts, effectively causing Brochwel to surrender the hare to her. Considering the idea that this would usually only happen if Brochwel had been met with a king whose authority surpassed his own, we could read this scene as a momentary destabilization of hierarchy. What follows is Brochwel attempting to bring her back into line, not through physical or sexual violence but administrative oversight:

> *Tunc princeps in imo corde prosperitatem virginis considerans solitariam, in hæc verba prorupit: 'O virgo Monacella dignissima, compertum habeo quod es vera Dei ancilla et cultrix Christi verissima.'*
>
> Then the prince, considering from the depths of his heart the well-being of the virgin in her solitude, broke forth into these words: 'O most worthy virgin

> Monacella, I have discovered that you are a true handmaiden of God and the most truthful worshipper of Christ.'
>
> (Pryce 1994:38, 40)

Pryce has translated the Latin *cultrix* as 'worshipper,' but perhaps a more literal translation would be 'cultivator' (Crane). When we consider this alongside the previously discussed symbolic language of devalued land to describe women's deviant sexual activities and tainted social status, Brochwel's words can be understood as a declaration that Melangell is, in contrast, productive. Though not in the form of bearing children, she is instead fruitful through her religious devotion, and this is affirmed by Brochwel as a worthy 'use' of her virginity. Perhaps Brochwel does not kill Melangell because he (or the author) recognises / categorises / validates her virginity as a legitimate – even productive – mode of sexuality.

After escaping the patriarchal control of her family of origin, she has been living on his land freely (undetected?) and now she must answer to him and the abbots. Indeed, after Brochwel sets out exactly how the sanctuary of Pennant Melangell is to function – that *si quis sceleratus tuo sanctuario gaudens foras quippiam malefacturus exierit, tunc liberi tenentes dicti abbates tui sanctuarii et soli de ipsorum sceleribus cognoscentes, si reos desuper et culpabiles ipsos invenerint, officiariis de Powys tradere et deliberare puniendos procurent* 'if […] any guilty person enjoying your sanctuary shall go out to do any kind of wrong, then let the free tenants called abbots of your sanctuary (who alone have cognizance of the crimes of those persons), if they shall find them to be guilty and culpable in this regard, endeavour to hand over and deliver them for punishment to the officials of Powys' – Melangell utters no further words (Pryce 1994:38, 40). The Melangell of the HDM has silently fallen into line, once again enfolded in the patriarchal secular and ecclesiastic orders.

5. Conclusion

We can read the scene between Brochwel, Melangell, and the hare in the bramble bush as a site of negotiating sexual conformity and 'bringing back into line' or setting straight the record of Melangell's virginity. While Melangell has 'turned away from "the other sex"' and gone 'offline,' her *Historia* casts her virginity as a socially acceptable or even noble reason for her refusal to marry. Ahmed's theory that one's desire is brought 'back into line' by directing it toward 'the other sex' makes sense in a modern context, but in a medieval setting where perpetual virginity was considered – to varying degrees – a virtue, we might think of this instead as turning away from 'one's own sex' and toward God. As Lisa M. C. Weston writes, 'virginal bodies pose similar cultural challenges' to those posed by lesbians (2011:93).

The hagiographical tradition has typically dealt with the problem of virgins by killing them off. The HDM deals with the problem of virgins who are still alive by making them politically useful. Virginity can be productive when useful to the church – in this instance as propaganda to assert their sanctuary rights – but must be carefully monitored. Gilchrist has demonstrated that women's eremetic communities in England were not let to last long before being brought under ecclesiastical oversight, stating 'In the twelfth century, four groups of female hermits – unenclosed religious women – were recorded. In each case these small groups were regularised into nunneries by the heads of male houses. […] The leap from community of women hermits to nunnery was accelerated by ecclesiastical intervention' (1994:90–91). She posits this is because 'the lifestyle of the hermit' which necessitated physical labour and economic self-sufficiency 'was considered inappropriate for medieval English religious women' (Gilchrist 1994:91). Sauer's perspective on the reason there were far more male hermits than female in medieval England – whereas women tended to become anchorites – is that 'women could not be watched if they were allowed to wander free' (Sauer 2010:135). Notably similar terms used to describe Melangell in the HDM, *virgo* and *Dei ancilla,* were used in *The Life of Christina of Markyate* to describe the English anchorite at specific points in her life. According to Ann K. Warren, the terms *virgo* and *ancilla domini* were used to refer to Christina 'when living alone or with her "maidens" as an unregularized group of women,' as opposed to the term *inclusa* after enclosure in her cell (1984:198). Warren states the former two terms fall out of use in English historical records after the twelfth century, at which point 'one hears no more of the hermitess – by any name' (1994:201). She posits that, among other reasons, 'widespread female eremitism' was 'vulnerable to extinction' in 'the climate of the growing ecclesiastical control of all religious in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries' (1984:201).

In light of this, could the HDM encapsulate the hagiographer's support for bringing women eremetics under church supervision? Might we see in Brochwel's move to legitimise Melangell's previously wild life some echo of such an attitude in Wales? The ambiguity of Melangell's solitude in the wilderness raises questions for further study about what possible types of social organisation may have existed in medieval Wales among women who refused marriage on religious grounds. Stacey has suggested that the Welsh law texts' emphasis on women's social duty to preserve their virginity had 'little to do with ecclesiastical concerns,' but was motivated by a perceived need to refute 'the accusations of immorality levied against the Welsh by European reformers' (Stacey 2019:177–178). Perhaps similarly the author of the HDM was participating in discourse about the sexual practices or inappropriate kinship bonds of religious women in Wales by assuaging any allegations of sexual promiscuity among nuns and other queer virgins, through the mouthpiece of Brochwel who has declared her a 'true handmaiden of God.' Upon assessing the situation, he offers a 'straight reading'

of Melangell, confirming for the audience that she is indeed a pious virgin. Melangell is presented as an example of chastity and any curiosity about what she was doing in the woods all those years that she did not look 'at the face of a man' is foreclosed. In this way we can read the HDM as a rerouting by Brochwel of Melangell's life course to ensure her conformity and the preservation of her sexual purity – and reputation.

The HDM's discontinuity with regard to Melangell's solitude versus having a community of virgins could be the result of the author attempting to paint the most admirable portrait of Melangell possible, drawing on attitudes about 'appropriate' behaviour for religious women in Wales at the time of writing, while also preserving recognizable or narratively relevant pieces of her story. These authorial choices constitute efforts by power holders to keep sex, gender, and sexual orientation 'in line, often through force,' which Ahmed tells us causes 'any nonalignment [to produce] a queer effect'(2006:83). Indeed the HDM can be read as a text which expresses, through a matrix of hierarchies, a thread of homoerotic anxiety which is then resolved by Brochwel's confident assertion of Melangell's chastity, thus bringing her story 'back into line.' In the social imagination of medieval Welsh literary culture, the landscape of the thorn bush and Melangell's potent encounter with the hare suggest a queer virgin whose gender and sexuality are central to this story – perhaps even first despised (hunted) and then revered once neatly established as pure and holy. Despite the ways the narrative of the HDM 'straightens' Melangell's story into a portrait of virtuous virginity and appropriate behaviour for a female saint, these 'gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning' (Sedgwick 1994:7) within the text open a queer space in which marginalised expressions of gender and sexuality may be glimpsed.

Abbreviations

HDM	*Historia Divae Monacellae* 'The Life of Saint Melangell'
VSA	*Vita Sancti Anselmi* 'The Life of Saint Anselm'
GPC	*Geriadur Prifysgol Cymru* 'A Dictionary of the Welsh Language'

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