Edited by Robin Norris, Rebecca Stephenson, and Renée R. Trilling

Feminist Approaches to Early Medieval English Studies

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Knowledge Communities

This series focuses on innovative scholarship in the areas of intellectual history and the history of ideas, particularly as they relate to the communication of knowledge within and among diverse scholarly, literary, religious, and social communities across Western Europe. Interdisciplinary in nature, the series especially encourages new methodological outlooks that draw on the disciplines of philosophy, theology, musicology, anthropology, paleography, and codicology.

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Introduction

In January 2016, the field of early medieval English studies was rocked by the revelation that one of its most prominent emeritus scholars had released a men's rights manifesto on his website, arguing that feminism had completely dominated academic discourse at the expense of men. In the ensuing weeks, further allegations of misogyny and sexual harassment among early medievalists multiplied, dovetailing with the cultural energy of the #MeToo movement to launch an ongoing conversation about women's place in the field, both as scholars and as subjects of study. For many, these developments seemed retrogressive after consistent progress throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. More women were earning PhDs and publishing scholarship in the field, building formidable international reputations and occupying prestigious positions in the highest reaches of academia. Even feminist criticism seemed more or less mainstream; it was no longer radical to suggest that a research project could incorporate or even focus exclusively on early medieval women, and many books and articles were informed by a feminist perspective, even if they weren't explicitly feminist in nature. Perhaps this is why the collective conversation caused such upheaval; it seemed to reveal an undercurrent of misogyny within our field that should have been impossible in the twenty-first century. How could a field in which women scholars are so visible, and where a great deal of feminist work has won critical acclaim, simultaneously harbor such retrograde thinking about feminism and the academy?

In the aftermath of 2016, conversations about the state of the field—who defines it, who it is for, who belongs, and who doesn't—have proliferated on social media, at conference panels and roundtables, and in blog posts and journal special issues. The result is a long-overdue and much-needed reconsideration of how early medievalists, and medieval studies more broadly, demarcate both their objects of study and their methods of inquiry. As these conversations have reminded us (again), our fields of study are not ideologically neutral. Like sand in mortar, the values and beliefs of those who defined the discipline are inherent in its very foundations; they underlie every aspect of our work. Some fear that the structure of the

field will disintegrate if its foundations are called into question, but those values and beliefs are not consistent with the ones that inform twenty-first-century scholarship because they emerge from a historical context that was explicit about its commitments to a narrow definition of the Middle Ages as coterminous—temporally, geographically, and ideologically—with Western Christendom. The field now known as early medieval English studies was born at the height of British imperialism, with the goal of bolstering British claims to cultural (understood as racial) superiority over its colonial subjects. During this period of European hegemonic expansion, continental scholars looked to Old English language and literature as evidence of the unity of a Germanic racial identity, and interest in Old English in the early United States was similarly due to an investment in the "Saxon myth."[1] The field grew in an environment where women, people of color, and openly LGBTQ+ voices were almost entirely absent and lent its historical authority to the restrictive definitions of "masculinity" and "femininity" that undergird heteronormative structures of gender and desire rooted in presumptive Whiteness. In both scholarship and curricula, early medieval English materials supported claims to White, male, European superiority.[2] Like all institutional structures, academic disciplines are designed to uphold the power of those who created them; as a result, the traditional scholarly paradigms of early medieval English studies embody the patriarchal and imperial values of their origins in White supremacy. The goal of this volume is to assist in the vital project of rewriting those paradigms.

In striving for this goal, we do not mean to suggest that feminism is the only, or even the best, remedy for what ails early medieval English and medieval studies. We see our theoretical and political commitments as one strand of a multivalent effort to rethink the parameters of our discipline and to create a scholarly community that is rigorous, inclusive, and diverse. To help effect this change, we seek a return to the originary promise of feminism as both a critical and a political practice. From its earliest days, feminist theory laid out the project of recovering the voices of people who had been silenced within the dominant paradigms of historical inquiry. By the later twentieth century, when feminist theory reached its ascendency

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1   Hans Sauer, "Anglo-Saxon Studies in the Nineteenth Century: Germany, Austria, Switzerland," in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Philip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 455–71; Stanley R. Hauer, "Anglo-Saxon Language," *PMLA* 98, no. 5 (October 1983): 879–898.
2   Mary Dockray-Miller, *Public Medievalists, Racism, and Suffrage in the American Women's College* (London: Palgrave, 2017).

in the academy, it revealed an even more radical notion: that the structures of inquiry themselves shaped the objects of our study, and that feminist questions could never really be answered within patriarchal paradigms. Feminist theory thus offered the promise of critiquing, pushing back, and even dismantling those paradigms in favor of new forms of inquiry that challenged the very foundations of most academic disciplines. As historian Joan Wallach Scott put it, "I do not think we should quit the archives or abandon the study of the past, but we do have to change some of the ways we have gone about working, some of the questions we have asked. We need to scrutinize our methods of analysis, clarify our operative assumptions, and explain how we think change occurs. Instead of a search for single origins, we have to conceive of processes so interconnected that they cannot be disentangled."[3] Placing women and gender at the center of a critical analysis fundamentally shifts its perspective and results in a literal refocusing of the material. Traditional understanding and conventional wisdom recede from view as new possibilities enter our frame of reference, changing what we are able to see, say, and know about the objects we study. This means, of course, that "our methods of analysis" and "our operative assumptions" will have to change as well, to accommodate different perspectives and the new forms of knowledge they reveal. Feminism, along with a variety of other critical methodologies, proposed a wholesale reconfiguration of epistemology, and the past forty years have witnessed dramatic shifts in the baseline assumptions that underlie academic work in the humanities, social sciences, and beyond.

The prospect of change has fueled no small amount of resistance to, and resentment of, feminist intersectional praxis. Medieval studies has been peculiarly resistant to the shifts that have taken place elsewhere in cultural studies, and such conservatism has been a constitutive influence on early medieval English studies over the past four decades. As a result, it is difficult to quantify the impact of feminist theory on the field. Inaugurated in the mid-1980s, early medieval English scholars' feminist analysis began (as it did in most fields of literary study) with the recovery of women's voices and women's perspectives. These early studies, now landmarks of literary criticism, worked to situate women in relation to the dominant modes of understanding early medieval English culture. Helen Damico, Jane Chance, and Helen Bennett placed women at the center of their analyses of traditional heroic discourse in Old English literature, establishing a key role for women

in the field's most prestigious texts.[4] Historian Christine Fell, meanwhile, sought for traces of women's lives and experiences in a historical record that largely excludes them, enabling scholars to see women's influence in early medieval history and assert their presence and agency in the early medieval English world.[5] In 1990, Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen edited a collection of *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, in the hope that "the presentation of an anthology might promote work in a much neglected area of Anglo-Saxon studies."[6] Publications like these, along with many others, went a long way toward legitimizing feminist criticism as a viable approach to early medieval materials—despite the fact that feminism in the academy was already on the decline within a decade of Damico and Olsen's watershed volume.[7]

The belatedness of feminist criticism in early medieval studies was keenly felt by scholars in the early 1990s who saw this late acceptance as a missed opportunity for a real critical overhaul of the field. At the same time that *New Readings* sought to celebrate and stimulate work on women in Old English, Bennett, along with Clare Lees and Gillian Overing, expressed frustration at the field's continued resistance to feminist criticism. They catalogue a certain amount of acceptance for the recovery of women's work and female voices within the texts, but they criticize scholars' reticence to embrace the possibility of a true epistemological shift. Especially in fields with a narrow focus and clearly defined critical approaches, such as language and literature, they pointed out, scholars were unlikely to undertake explicitly feminist work. In other words, work on women in early medieval English studies could find a place in the field as long as it adhered to conventional methodologies and did not threaten traditional scholarly paradigms. The impact of feminist theory on the workings of the field, then, was minimal at best, in distinct contrast to the state of other comparable fields of cultural studies.

Unfortunately, that is almost as true today as it was in 1990. In an effort to compile a data set that would allow for a diachronic comparison of feminist work in early medieval English studies since the early 1980s, we undertook

4   Helen Damico, Beowulf*'s Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986); and Helen Bennett, "The Female Mourner at Beowulf's Funeral: Filling in the Blanks/Hearing the Spaces," *Exemplaria* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 35–50.

5   Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

6   Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, eds., *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), vii.

7   Susan Gubar, "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (Summer 1998): 878–902.

to survey the proceedings of the biennial conference of the organization then known as the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists (ISAS)[8] since its inaugural meeting in 1983, using these papers as a bellwether of trends and currents in the field. Using the official reports of the meetings published in the journal *Anglo-Saxon England* (1983–2015) and the conference websites (2017–2019), we counted the number of speakers at each meeting, how many of those speakers were women, and how many addressed women or gender in their papers. We construed the critical category of "women or gender" quite broadly, including in our count papers on female-centered texts like *Juliana* or *Wulf and Eadwacer*, as well as texts associated with women, such as the Gospels of Judith of Flanders and the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, and papers on masculinity and sexuality.

The results of this survey reveal some interesting and, from our perspective, surprising trends. It was both surprising (to us) and heartening to note that women scholars have been central figures in early medieval English studies for quite some time. At the first ISAS meeting in 1983, for example, eight of the twenty-five speakers were women. By 1995, women accounted for half the speakers at the conference, a ratio that has remained the same or even grown since then. Over the last decade, more than half the conference presenters have been women, and in 2015, women accounted for fully two-thirds of the speakers. Keynote lectures, which became a regular part of these meetings in 1999, tell a similar story. At least one speaker, out of two or three keynotes at each conference, has been a woman. These data indicate that the field itself is not inimical to women scholars, whose work finds audiences at the flagship conference as often as, and sometimes even more often than, their male colleagues.

When we turn to analyze feminist work within the field, however, a very different picture emerges. In that inaugural ISAS conference in 1983, no papers dealt explicitly with women or gender. The first such paper was offered (by a man) in 1985, with single papers also offered in 1991 and 1993. The 1995 conference finally saw a paper on gender offered by a woman—the same year that women finally made up half of the slate of presenters. Still, only three of the thirty-five papers presented dealt with women or gender. And even that number was high; papers on women or gender account for between 3% and 5% of the conference program throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In 2017, when the ISAS conference expanded to include concurrent sessions for the first time and offered a record sixty-seven papers, 12% of

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8   The organization's membership voted in 2019 to rename itself the International Society for the Study of Early Medieval England.

them concerned women or gender. (In the program for the 2019 meeting, that number was back down to 8%.) The numbers for keynotes are equally dismal; only two keynotes in the last twenty years have dealt with gender. The data from the ISAS biannual conference, then, depict a field that is approximately 50% female, but where feminist criticism (very broadly construed) accounts for around 5% of the scholarship. While women are well represented among scholars of early medieval England, scholarship on women and gender is not.

The data of publications in the field's flagship journal, the annual *Anglo-Saxon England*, are even less encouraging. During the years 1983–2017, the journal published 380 research articles; 134 were authored or co-authored by women, for a ratio of approximately 35%. In that period, only sixteen articles (4%) dealt with women or gender—primarily articles about woman-focused or woman-owned texts. Only two, in thirty-five years, engage with gender as an explicit critical category. In the flagship journal, then, as at the flagship conference, women's participation in scholarship is clearly visible, but feminist scholarship is not. Even more distressing is the apparent fact that feminist work was actually more prevalent in articles of the 1980s and 1990s than it has been since 2000.

The proceedings of the biennial meetings of ISAS and the publication record of *Anglo-Saxon England* do not represent the entirety of the field, of course, but we would submit that they offer a useful snapshot of what could be considered the mainstream of early medieval English studies. It would be illuminating, though beyond the scope of this brief Introduction, to collect similar data for doctoral degrees and dissertations, as well as the wider publication of books and journal articles.[9] And it would be similarly productive, though we suspect even more damning, to undertake a survey of work by scholars of color and scholarship on race. Taken together, however, these examples allow us to make some general observations about the place of women and of feminist inquiry in early medieval English studies. First, it is impossible to assert that feminist analysis has ever been mainstream, let alone dominant, in in field. Despite the general acceptance of women

9   Christopher Abram has undertaken a comprehensive survey of women's scholarship on *Beowulf*, including dissertations, articles, monographs, edited collections, editions, and transla-tions. He finds that (1) women are greatly underrepresented as critics, editors, and translators of *Beowulf*, in comparison to their presence in the field and their work on other Old English texts, and (2) feminist work still accounts for only a fraction of the published criticism on the poem, as of 2018. Christopher Abram, "Does *Beowulf* Have a Gender Problem? (Spoiler: Yes)," Roundtable presentation, 53rd International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, May 2018.

as full participants in scholarship, their presence has not reshaped the fundamental paradigms, established centuries ago, that govern scholarly engagement with early medieval England. The mere presence of women does not guarantee a feminist revolution, of course. As recent work by Mary Dockray-Miller has shown, women's early involvement with early medieval English studies in the women's colleges of the nineteenth-century United States functioned as an explicit denial or subversion of their femininity; taking on the masculine discipline of the Old English language was a way to demonstrate academic rigor despite their gender.[10] It would be foolish to assume that all, or even most, women scholars would or should want to work on gender, but it seems equally foolish to assume that almost no one does. Something is keeping scholars from engaging with gender in early medieval English studies, despite relative gender parity in the field. Women are welcome, so long as they do not make gender explicit.

Outside the admittedly narrow scope of the ISAS conference and the flagship journal, feminism feels more prevalent in early medieval English studies. Dockray-Miller offered a comprehensive overview of this kind of work in 2008, while still noting (almost two decades after *New Readings*) that such work was "new" and that the influence of feminist work on Old English had yet to find its way into the scholarly mainstream or the undergraduate curriculum.[11] Readers will no doubt be able to rattle off a long litany of scholars, in addition to those listed above, who have contributed excellent work on women and gender to our collective knowledge of the period. Feminist scholarship of early medieval England runs the gamut from traditional philological analysis that just happens to be about women-centered texts to radical reshapings of the period when viewed through a feminist lens. The very fact that this work is not well-represented at the field's most prestigious conference or in its flagship journal indicates that feminist work has been running parallel, rather than central, to the discipline's primary concerns for the past four decades. The field has allowed it to exist on the margins and has occasionally acknowledged it as part of modern academia but has never accepted it as central to the prestige structures of the discipline.

Bennett, Lees, and Overing traced the source of this reticence to the overwhelmingly masculinist biases of the discipline, which cast themselves as standards of "rigor" and "clarity": "Much of what is not feminist about recent criticism on/of women in the literature is not, or not only, that it is

not consciously employing this or that variety of feminist critical theory, but that it does not more consciously acknowledge the masculinist (call them binary, traditional, patriarchal, patristic) premises upon which it operates, and that the potential for feminist hypotheses is closed down by the need for 'clarity', definition, and a concept of structure that relies on the principle of opposition."[12] Their words are just as applicable today as they were almost thirty years ago. The same traditional methods and scholarly standards continue to govern the production of knowledge—methods and standards derived from the explicitly imperialist, implicitly racist, and predominantly misogynist cultural paradigms of nineteenth-century Britain. In other words, the very standards by which scholarship on the early medieval English world—particularly its literature—was judged are predicated on a set of values and expectations inimical to a feminist project that embraces multiplicity, diversity, and ambiguity as positive epistemological and aesthetic values. Put yet another way, the scaffolding of early medieval English studies was built by men, for and about men; feminism had a hard time getting a foothold, and by the time it did, much of its most radical cultural force had already been spent. Feminism's revolutionary critical potential, we suggest, is precisely what has kept it sidelined within early medieval English studies for all these years.

Nearly three decades after Damico and Olsen's volume and Bennett, Lees, and Overing's call for a more methodologically open and inclusive field, then, early medieval English studies enjoys the fairly regular presence of women's voices, both in the source material and in the scholarship. Despite an exponential increase in scholarly work by and about women, however, the field has remained peculiarly resistant to the transformative potential of feminist critique. In the meantime, feminist theory itself has undergone some radical transformations. By the mid-2000s, critics seemed to reach a tentative consensus that the feminism of the late twentieth century had lost its revolutionary edge, overtaken by cultural changes that rendered it deradicalized and politically impotent.[13] In response, feminism reimagined itself, largely in response to long-standing critiques by scholars of color, as one of the many axes that intersect in projects of social justice and political change. In 2022, feminist criticism cannot consider gender in isolation from other categories of identity

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12   Helen T. Bennett, Clare A. Lees, and Gillian R. Overing, "Anglo-Saxon Studies: Gender and Power: Feminism and Old English Studies," *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 10, no. 1 (Fall 1990), 15–24, at 18.

13   For an overview, see "Theories and Methodologies: Feminist Criticism Today," *PMLA* 121, no. 5 (October 2006): 1678–1741, featuring Shanna Greene Benjamin, Julie Crawford, Marianne DeKoven, Jane Elliott, Susan Stanford Friedman, Susan Gubar, Astrid Henry, Sharon Marcus, Sinead McDermott, and Toril Moi.

or material existence; it is better conceptualized as one methodology among many, along with sexuality and critical race studies, studies of Indigeneity, decolonization, and social inequality, and environmental justice, that seek to reframe assumptions about the production of knowledge and the potential for political action. The recognition that gender intersects with other categories of identity in local and specific ways adds urgency to the long-standing call for forms of knowledge-making that recognize multiplicity and fluidity as fundamental to the process of analysis. In other words, feminism may no longer function as a self-contained field, but its commitment to its original project of challenging the unacknowledged assumptions that underlie scholarly discourse has gained a new and pressing impetus in the twenty-first century.

The transformation of feminist thought since 2000 does not render it impotent or irrelevant. While gender, as an analytical category, cannot and should not lay claim to the kind of universality it assumed in the 1970s and 1980s, it is still capable of providing some of the critical leverage necessary to dismantle the prevailing paradigms of academic discourse, especially in early medieval English studies. The events of 2016, in medieval studies and beyond, demonstrate that the foundations of academic fields and institutions remain steeped in colonial exploitation and show the continued need for this kind of radical, revisionist potential. Excellent work by scholars such as Dorothy Kim, Sierra Lomuto, Adam Miyashiro, Seeta Chaganti, Matthew X. Vernon, M. Rambaran-Olm, and the scholarly organization Medievalists of Color have helped us to see the layers of colonialism, White supremacy, and ethnic and linguistic nationalism that form the foundations of medieval studies and the extent to which every aspect of academic life, in scholarship and in teaching, is compromised by those foundations.[14] They have created

14   Dorothy Kim, "Teaching Medieval Studies in a Time of White Supremacy," *In the Middle* (28 August 2017), accessed April 19, 2019, http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2017/08/teaching-medieval-studies-in-time-of.html; Sierra Lomuto, "White Nationalism and the Ethics of Medieval Studies," *In the Middle* (5 December 2016), accessed April 29, 2019, http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2016/12/white-nationalism-and-ethics-of.html; Adam Miyashiro, "Decolonizing Anglo-Saxon Studies: A Response to ISAS in Honolulu," *In the Middle* (29 July 2017), accessed April 29, 2019, http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2017/07/decolonizing-anglo-saxon-studies.html; Seeta Chaganti, "Confederate Monuments and the *Cura pastoralis*," *In the Middle* (27 February 2018), accessed January 13, 2021, https://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2018/02/confederate-monuments-and-cura.html; Matthew X. Vernon, *The Black Middle Ages: Race and the Construction of the Middle Ages* (London: Palgrave, 2018); M. Rambaran-Olm, "Anglo-Saxon Studies, Academia and White Supremacy," *Medium* (27 June 2018), accessed April 29, 2019, https://medium.com/@mrambaranolm/anglo-saxon-studies-academia-and-white-supremacy-17c87b36obf3; "On Race and Medieval Studies," *Medievalists of Color* (1 August 2017), accessed April 29, 2019, http://medievalistsofcolor.com/statements/on-race-and-medieval-studies/.

an epistemic shift in how we can think, write, and talk about medieval materials—even how we define what counts as "medieval" to begin with. As a field, we now face the challenge of shifting our work to new foundations—an exciting opportunity to rethink what we do, how we do it, and why it matters. At the same time, we recognize that we do not all occupy a level playing field. We began this project with a diverse slate of contributors that gradually grew less so over the six years of its production. Too many of our valued colleagues are drastically under-resourced, and they faced challenges of ill health, family commitments, and competing work claims that forced them to withdraw. The volume is poorer for the loss of their contributions, and the situation highlights the urgency of restructuring our scholarly institutions to better support vulnerable scholars.

This is one reason why we see renewed urgency for feminist criticism— that is, criticism focused on women and gender, but also criticism that challenges received wisdom and destabilizes longstanding assumptions, celebrates multiplicity and fluidity as generators of meaning, and recognizes difference, in many forms, as productive. We seek to build coalitions with colleagues whose work in critical race studies, the politics of colonialism and Indigeneity, the histories of sexuality and gender identity, and environmental justice will allow us to reframe our field in terms that meet the needs of twenty-first-century scholars. Such work will change how we undertake scholarship of the early medieval period, but it also has the potential to radically alter the construction of the field itself, as vast new configurations of knowledge emerge from these changes in perspective. It is in this spirit that we offer the essays collected here: to center women and gender in our narrative of the early medieval English world, and to see how that recentering shifts the paradigms that govern our inquiry and reshapes the very foundations of our work. As Scott wrote more than thirty years ago, we do not seek to abandon the archives or to compromise the rigor of scholarly methodologies that are rooted in expert knowledge and historical specificity. We do recognize, however, that the tools of our trade—philology, historicism, paleography, codicology, archaeology, and even close reading—are not ideologically neutral, so we attempt to deploy them with deliberation, consciousness, and self-awareness. The work presented here is willing to engage with the discipline's most foundational assumptions about early medieval England not as a priori principles but as products of a particular time and place. By explicitly challenging earlier criticism and systematically showing how its investments and ideologies have limited the ways we think about our materials, the essays in this volume take up the dual enterprise of both dismantling the critical apparatuses of previous

generations of scholars and building new models informed by a broader and more inclusive perspective. Taken together, they represent an attempt to further the epistemological shift of medieval studies and to show what becomes possible when scholars approach the Middle Ages with a desire for diverse, inclusive, and potentially radical forms of knowledge.

Our volume opens with a metacritical consideration of how feminist analysis changes approaches to the study of the early Middle Ages by altering the lenses through it is viewed. The contributions of many women have been claimed by men, as Jane Toswell presents in "The Lost Victorian Women of Old English Studies." These women had their contributions published by male authors, such as W. W. Skeat and J. A. Giles, who claimed sole authorship. The contribution of medieval women is often ignored as well, since they tend to create textiles rather than large works of stone sculpture. Christina Lee in "Embroidered Narratives" argues that textiles offer evidence for women's literacy and their power in political exchanges, when such items were given as gifts. Even those medieval women who are vividly remembered, such as Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, find their true history becomes overwritten by the stories that each generation tells about them. In "Remembering the Lady of Mercia," Scott T. Smith catalogues the multifarious ways in which many eras grappled with the intractable parts of this virago's story. After considering what lenses we have historically used to write and rewrite our stories of the Middle Ages, our collection turns to four lenses of our own: affect theory, virginity, medical discourse, and women's literacy.

Displays of emotion are often connected to women's expression, yet this sequence of essays on affect asks readers to revise their connection of emotional performance to displays of masculinity and femininity. E. J. Christie turns his attention to masculinity in "Be a Man, Beowulf: Sentimental Masculinity and the Gentleness of Kings." Christie opens by exploring the influence of Victorian attitudes toward manliness on twentieth-century medievalists such as J. R. R. Tolkien. He then goes on to examine Beowulf's characterization as "manna mildust ond monðwærust" as a Christian formula "relaying gentleness, meekness, and obedience," vis-à-vis its treatment by Victorian scholars who treated Beowulf as a paragon of masculine energy, and later by Tolkien, for the poem is about not duty and loyalty but grief and regret. Masculinity is likewise the focus of Alice Jorgensen's essay "Shame, Disgust, and Ælfric's Masculine Performance." Jorgensen argues that whereas "[t]he ideal male body is contained, chaste, ordered in its passions, orthodox in its beliefs," Ælfric depicts the disgusting male bodies of Herod and Arius as "a convulsive rejection of all that is pagan, excessive, sinful, and mired in the body's appetites, especially sex."

The essay "explores the conjunction between disgust and gender in Ælfric's writings, arguing that it is an important aspect of how Ælfric constructs his masculine authority as a preacher."

In many literary texts virginity remained the ideal for religious women. Two essays interrogate how early, influential male authors tackle the problem of virginity. In "The Ornament of Virginity: Aldhelm's *De uirginitate* and the Virtuous Women of the Early English Church," Emily V. Thornbury argues that a text written for a female audience, albeit by a man, can reflect the intellectual lives of its addressees. Aldhelm diverged from his Mediterranean sources by representing virginity as acquired ornament, but the metaphor reflects both "the kind of martial imagery loved by Old English poets" and "early medieval conceptions of an aesthetic practice often associated with women: ornamentation." In Thornbury's analysis, "Aldhelm's striking conceptualization of virginity as an ornament suggests he thought of ornament itself in a way that was not derived from his literary sources, but instead likely reflects cultural presuppositions that his addressees, as fellow early medieval people, would have shared." Thus, she concludes, "Taken as a whole, Aldhelm's *De uirginitate* shows that women could be imagined—and perhaps imagined themselves—as warriors for virtue as well as discerning readers, and as artisans fully engaged in the construction of their moral selves." One of the most famous early medieval English virgins is Æthelthryth of Ely, but rather than turning to Ælfric of Eynsham's account, as many scholars do, Lisa M. C. Weston returns to his source in "Chaste Bodies and Untimely Virgins: Sexuality, Temporality, and Bede's Æthelthryth." In Weston's reading of Bede's prose narrative and hymn, the two texts "create a particularly telling epistemological and ontological connection between sexuality and temporality." By refusing reproduction and disrupting dynastic succession, and by occupying both sacred time and secular time, virgins entangle temporality, gender, and sexuality, and thus "reveal contradictions that inherently problematize monastic identity in early medieval England."

Medical texts are the subject of the fourth cluster of essays. In "*Monaðgecynd* and *flewsan*: Wanted and Unwanted Monthly Courses in Old English Medical Texts," Dana M. Oswald focuses on a phenomenon specific to the female body: "half of the adult population of early medieval England menstruated." "The treatments in the leechbooks specific to menstruation, either provoking or preventing it," she argues, "exhibit the male/textual desire to exert control over women's reproductive bodies, and, in the absence of their voices but the presence of their textual bodies, the desire of women to claim control of their actual bodies." In "Dangerous Voices, Erased Bodies:

Reassessing the Old English *Wifgemædla* and Witches in *Leechbook III*," Erin E. Sweany rereads one particular remedy traditionally interpreted as a defense against a female witch. After a thorough assessment of the evidence, Sweany argues that the remedy may actually serve a female patient struggling with her mental or emotional health. "Ultimately," she concludes, "the dominant reading and history of scholarly treatment of this entry, when context is considered, reveals more about our own emotions than those of the people who compiled and used *Leechbook III*." Finally, in "Women and 'Women's Medicine' in Early Medieval England, from Text to Practice," Christine Voth explores not just medical texts but charms, prayers, homilies, and penitentials, to identify and analyze the gender-specific corpus of early medieval women's medicine, specifically gynecological and obstetric care.

We finally see women's own writing in our final cluster of three essays on women's literacy. Aidan Conti discusses the career of an early medieval English nun who traveled to the continent in the late eighth century in "The Literate Memory of Hugeburc of Heidenheim." By writing the lives of her kinsmen Willibald and Wynnebald, Hugeburc became the only known female hagiographer of the period. Moreover, her work is one of the only accounts of interactions with Islam in the Holy Land between the early seventh century CE and the end of the eleventh century. Yet importantly, Conti concludes, "If making Hugeburc, who remained anonymous for so long, visible is a feminist act, so too is the unfurling of the concrete histories her cultural work inscribes, work that serves Western Christendom's imagined claims to foreign holdings and its vision of a regulated social order." Matthew T. Hussey, in his essay "A Road Nearly Taken: An Eight-Century Manuscript in a Woman's Hand and Franco-Saxon Nuns in Early Medieval English Intellectual History," reevaluates a cluster of understudied late seventh- and early eighth-century texts and manuscripts produced by female writers for female readers, suggesting a scriptorium of nuns in Bath under the influence of the Frankish church. Moreover, Hussey contests the pejorative assessment of this work by past scholars. Both Hussey and Conti offer evidence of female authors, scribes, and scholars working with and within the early medieval English church. In light of this evidence, and cross-referenced with how much we do not know about the scribe of Cotton Vitellius A.xv, Stephen M. Yeager opens "a conversation about three possibilities: first, that the *Beowulf* manuscript may have been intended for a readership of women; second, that it may have been copied by women scribes; and third, that the poem itself may be attributed to a woman poet." Yeager's essay "'Historical Accuracy', Anonymity, and Women's Authorship: The Case of the Case for *Beowulf*" offers an important reminder of how fundamental questions have

been foreclosed by the assumptions, constraints, and blind spots we have inherited from our scholarly predecessors.

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