



*The Character of the Treacherous  
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## The Character of the Treacherous Woman in the *Passiones* of Early Medieval English Royal Martyrs

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**Abstract:** Early medieval England is well-known for its assortment of royal saints; figures who, though drawn from nearly five centuries of pre-Conquest Christianity, are often best known from eleventh-century hagiography. Common among these narratives is the figure of the “wicked queen”—a woman whose exercise of political power provides the impetus for the martyrdom of the royal saint. Flatly drawn and lacking in complex motivation, the treacherous woman of English hagiography is a trope, a didactic exemplar tailored to eleventh-century English audiences, and a caution of the dangers of female agency. Here biblical archetypes, clerical scholarship, and an inherent social misogyny unite in a common literary framework. Yet it is also true that each of these “wicked queens” has a unique transmission history that displays a complicated progression of the motif within a living narrative. This article examines the role of the treacherous woman as a narrative device in three royal hagiographies: *Passio S. Æthelberhti*, *Vita et miracula S. Kenelmi*, and *Passio S. Eadwardi regis et martyris*. In so doing, it explores the authorial motives and social influences that informed the composition of these figures, arguing that each is formed of a convergence of the historical and regional contexts of the saints’ cults with the political concerns and ecclesiastical anxieties of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

**Keywords:** kingship; queenship; hagiography; England; Æthelred II; Ælfthryth

English literary production in the eleventh century was characterised by a flowering of hagiographical writing, frequently taking inspiration from the cults of pre-Conquest royal martyrs.<sup>1</sup> Royal saints were prevalent within the early English church and subjects of contemporary devotion, yet their lives and deeds are often only attested in these later hagiographies. That their subjects were obscured by the passage of time allowed authors to construct narratives that were not intended as accurate histories, but as instructional stories for the varied Christian audiences of eleventh-century England. While this makes hagiographies difficult historical sources for the lives of the saints, the underlying didactic intent of recurring motifs—*topoi* that would have been recognisable to their audience—provides evidence of contemporary social mores at the time of authorship. Yet the intent of these analogies is not always clear to modern readers, and such is the trope of the treacherous

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<sup>1</sup> This article has grown from research undertaken during my master’s degree at the University of New England, and thanks are due to Professor Thomas Fudge for his advice and insights on its earliest drafts. I am also extremely grateful to my anonymous peers whose meticulous, detailed reviews enabled me to develop this article to its full potential.

woman exercising political power in the *passiones* of Æthelberht of East Anglia (779–794), Kenelm of Mercia (819–disputed) and Edward the Martyr (975–978), all kings who were alleged to have died as a result of intrigues driven by royal women.<sup>2</sup> It is on this motif and these exempla that this article focuses, seeking to identify the authorial motives and social influences that informed the construction of these figures. The characterisation of these women is not subtle, and the deliberate and obvious contradistinction between these anti-saints, presented without redeeming features, and the saint who is presented without blemish, often leads to the creation of a shallow antagonist. The hagiographers rarely invite readers to sympathise with the female characters so cast as a foil to the saint. Yet to read them as mere ciphers adapted to the needs of the author, or products of narrative causality, is overly simple (though not wholly incorrect). The figure of the treacherous woman at the royal court was a complex construct of biblical exemplar, political commentary, and regional tradition; moreover, at an elemental level, hers was a character born of a societal mistrust for female power.

Given the influence of social concerns upon the creation of saints' lives narratives, it is natural that these stories evolved as those social concerns evolved. As such, it is important to avoid being limited by conventional temporal or literary classifications, as they rarely correspond to the transmission of living narrative. By way of example, it is illustrative to briefly consider the literary transmission of the treacherous woman in the martyrdom of Æthelberht of East Anglia. The event purportedly occurred in 794, and the earliest written account, in the ninth-century *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, indicates that Offa of Mercia beheaded Æthelberht, with no mention of Offa's queen, Cynethryth.<sup>3</sup> There is then literary silence until the late eleventh century, when the anonymous *Passio S. Æthelberhti* (1080 x 1100) established a narrative portraying Cynethryth as complicit in the murder. *Passio* declares Æthelberht's entry into Mercia to have been a mission of peace in which he sought marriage with Offa's daughter; yet Cynethryth poisoned Offa's mind against the East Anglian king, setting in train a series of events leading to the beheading.<sup>4</sup> From this point Cynethryth is always implicated in the murder, with two twelfth-century *vitae* following the narrative of *Passio*, and the Anglo-Norman historian John of Worcester declaring the crime to have been perpetrated at "the most wicked urging of ... Queen Cynethryth."<sup>5</sup> In the early thirteenth century, attitudes to Cynethryth continued to harden, and the chronicler Roger of Wendover produced a narrative that absolved Offa of all guilt, with the queen personally overseeing arrangements for a trap to end

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<sup>2</sup> The key *vitae* of Æthelberht, Kenelm, and Edward examined herein are: *Passio S. Æthelberhti*, in "Two Lives of St. Ethelbert, King and Martyr," ed. M.R. James, *English Historical Review* 32, no. 126 (1917): 236–244; *Vita et miracula S. Kenelmi*, in *Three Eleventh-Century Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives*, ed. and trans. Rosalind C. Love (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 50–89 (hereafter cited by chapter); *Passio S. Eadwardi regis et martyris*, in *Edward, King and Martyr*, ed., Christine Fell (Leeds: University of Leeds, School of English, 1971), 1–16.

<sup>3</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* A–F 794 (*recte*), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, A Collaborative Edition*, general editors David Dumville and Simon Keynes (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983–2004), vols 3–8 (hereafter cited as *ASC* with manuscript and year).

<sup>4</sup> *Passio Æthelberhti*, 236–241.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald of Wales, *Vita Regis et martiris Æthelberhti*, in "Two Lives of St. Ethelbert, King and Martyr," ed. M.R. James, *English Historical Review* 32, no. 126 (1917): 222–236 (hereafter *Vita S. Æthelberhti*); Osbert of Clare, *Vita S. Æthelberhti*, Gotha, Forschungsbibliothek Memb. I 81, fols. 30–39; R.R. Darlington and P. McGurk, eds., *The Chronicle of John of Worcester: The Annals from 450–1066* 793, trans. Jennifer Bray and P. McGurk (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 2:225 (hereafter *John of Worcester*).

Æthelberht's life.<sup>6</sup> As can be seen, though Æthelberht was an early English saint, the evolution of his *passio* narrative extended far beyond the range of either the saint's life genre or a cultural milieu that might be classified as "Anglo-Saxon." This study straddles the Norman Conquest, and to enforce an interpretation of an "Anglo-Saxon" period or people that implies an immutable pre-Conquest culture or suggests the post-Conquest English as entirely distinct from their forbears obscures the complexity, continuity, and adaptability of English societies. Moreover, in this context, to limit "hagiography" to religious biography would be to surrender the richer understanding of the character of the treacherous woman that post-Conquest histories and chronicles provide.

This study focuses on the intersection of two hagiographical tropes—that of the treacherous woman and that of the so-called "boy-king martyr." My intent is to examine the specific manifestations of the treacherous woman in the eleventh-century *passiones* of these early medieval English kings, reputedly martyred in their youths. Cynethryth of *Passio S. Æthelberhti*, Cwoenthryth of *Vita et miracula S. Kenelmi*, and Ælfthryth of *Passio S. Eadwardi regis et martyris* are all characters of a specific type—politically engaged royal women who betray the trust of an innocent king and bring about his death: "wicked queens." Historically, there are considerable differences between these women. Cynethryth was a Mercian queen-consort with significant political agency. Ælfthryth served as queen-consort of England and regent in a queen-mother capacity, exercising remarkable political power. In turn, Cwoenthryth, though a historical figure, was not in fact a queen but the daughter of a king and an abbess. Nonetheless, she is clearly intended to fulfil the "wicked queen" topos in her hagiographical representation; her agency is no less than that of Cynethryth and Ælfthryth—successfully arranging her brother's death and immediately appropriating queenly power.<sup>7</sup> Hagiography is not intended as historical record, but as didactic exemplar, and the "wicked queen" is a trope to serve that purpose. The conventions of Christian didactic literature define the frameworks of such motifs, participating in the shaping and transmission of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> As a homiletic archetype, the figure of the treacherous woman is found throughout Latin hagiography, and even within eleventh-century English texts, Cynethryth, Cwoenthryth, and Ælfthryth are not the only "wicked queens." *Vita S. Dunstani*, for example, famously recounts the young King Eadwig's lust for Ælfgifu and her mother Æthelgifu, the satiation of which led to condemnation by, and the subsequent exile of, St Dunstan.<sup>9</sup> However, such an example does not fall within the genre of royal hagiography—in this narrative the young king is one of the antagonists, and the cleric Dunstan the persecuted (though not martyred) saintly figure. Moreover, purity of body and mind is central to the *passiones* of the boy-kings, and depictions of lust and sex as found in the *Vita* (no less a king's participation or saint's intrusion on such a scene) do not form a part of the narrative tradition.<sup>10</sup> The female antagonists are not

<sup>6</sup> J.A. Giles, ed. and trans., *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History* 792 (London, 1849), 1:158–159 (hereafter Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum*).

<sup>7</sup> *Vita et miracula Kenelmi* 10.

<sup>8</sup> Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, "The Clerics and the Critics: Misogyny and the Social Symbolic in Anglo-Saxon England," in *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 26–28.

<sup>9</sup> B, *Vita S. Dunstani* 21–22, in *The Early Lives of St Dunstan*, ed. and trans. Michael Lapidge and Michael Winterbottom (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), 66–71.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Hayward, "The Idea of Innocent Martyrdom in Late Tenth- and Eleventh-century English Hagiology,"

temptresses exerting influence by means of sexual artifice, but ruthless and proactive participants in traditionally male power-structures, driven by the acquisition and exercise of royal authority. The figure of the “wicked queen” as antagonist to a martyred boy-king within eleventh-century English *passiones* is a unique manifestation of the treacherous woman trope, which naturally gives rise to the question as to why this may be the case. The answer, I propose, lies in the juncture of the historical and regional contexts of the saints’ cults with the political concerns and ecclesiastical anxieties of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

### Three “Wicked Queens” and Three Royal Martyrs

There is little scholarship analysing the trope of the treacherous woman across eleventh-century English royal hagiography. This is not to say that the female antagonists of the *vitae* of Æthelberht, Kenelm, and Edward have gone unnoticed, but rather that scholarship has focused on the role of each woman within her own evolving narrative. As observed in the varied portrayals of Cynethryth in Æthelberht’s *passio*, the woman’s role and character alter between retellings. Resistant to personal encapsulation, and lacking in nuanced characterisation or accessible motivation, the “wicked queen” within these narratives is historically suspect and thus problematic within studies where the intent is to establish historicity. Indeed, this protean element of her characterisation indicates that the “wicked queen” of English hagiography is, at least in part, a trope that evolves to meet the narrative requirements of a saint’s life as it develops. When thus understood as a literary device, common features in the construction of the treacherous woman motif across the *passiones* come into focus—a narrative pattern unidentifiable where focus is only on a single saint.

Æthelberht of East Anglia remains an elusive character in eighth-century English history. The scant references to Æthelberht’s murder in the four centuries between the event and the authorship of *Passio Æthelberhti* are marked by the absence of a treacherous woman. Cynethryth’s unheralded appearance in the *Passio* does not provide it with a veneer of historicity. Rather, *Passio*’s record of the East Anglian king’s death seems a clear analogue to that of John the Baptist, reflecting the function of *Passio* as didactic literature rather than historical record.<sup>11</sup> The development of the “wicked queen” trope within the Æthelberht *passio* provides an insight into eleventh-century cultural values and narrative traditions. Here C.E. Wright’s analysis of the historiographical transmission of early English hagiography in his 1939 book, *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England*, retains a surprising theoretical currency. Wright seeks to identify the existence of local vernacular traditions that facilitated narrative evolution and pays particular attention to the development of the *passiones* of Æthelberht and of Edward the Martyr, placing the treacherous woman at the forefront of events. Wright takes his interest in the character so far as to establish Cynethryth’s involvement in Æthelberht’s murder as the key element differentiating hagiographical traditions; it is a preoccupation he also brings to the Edward *passio* to varying success, as will be seen in due course.<sup>12</sup> Wright’s exposition of the Æthelberht narrative sits alongside M.R. James’s 1917 analysis accompanying

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*Studies in Church History* 30 (1993): 83–85.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 14.1–10; Mark 6.21–29; cf. *Vita S. Æthelberhti*, 227–228; *John of Worcester* 793.

<sup>12</sup> C.E. Wright, *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1939), 95–107, 157–170.

his transcription of two Æthelberht *vitae*, as the most comprehensive reviews of the hagiography of Æthelberht.<sup>13</sup> James's main purpose is to transcribe *Vita S. Æthelberhti* by Gerald of Wales, and his prefatory material focuses on extant manuscripts of the Æthelberht *vitae* and the traditions they reflect.<sup>14</sup> Unlike Wright, James shows no interest in the person of the "wicked queen," yet he provides access to invaluable primary materials and contextualises the traditions from which they arose.

*Vita et miracula S. Kenelmi* (1066 x 1075) is built around Kenelm's alleged reign in the early ninth century and his martyrdom via the machinations of his sister, Cwoenthryth.<sup>15</sup> Kenelm is portrayed as a child, and as such, the narrative lacks the political prologue the author of *Passio Æthelberhti* provided the somewhat older king, launching straight into the plot on Kenelm's life. Nonetheless, the murders are analogous: both kings were beheaded at the behest of a female rival for power by agents simultaneously trusted by the protagonist and operating on behalf of the antagonist.<sup>16</sup> The *vitae* may frame the *passio* elements of their narratives within different political contexts, yet the lack of differentiation within the *passiones* themselves points to an archetype of English royal saints. Situated within the wider tradition of murdered royal saints, *Vita* evinces authorial invention motivated by local eleventh-century social concerns more so than it does any earlier native tradition of which Kenelm's wicked sister formed a part.<sup>17</sup> Like *Passio Æthelberhti*, *Vita et miracula Kenelmi* finds much of its historical value to this discussion in the provision of insights into the cultural values and narrative traditions in which the treacherous woman of Anglo-Latin hagiography evolved. Kenelm's execution does not appear in the *Chronicles*, which, further, make no record of an *atheling* named Kenelm ascending the throne of Mercia in 819, nor are there extant contemporary attestations elsewhere that he may have done so. Indeed, in his study of Mercian royal saints, Alan Thacker asserts that there is no definitive evidence for Kenelm's kingship of Mercia, nor for Cwoenthryth's involvement in a plot to murder her brother, nor even for a vernacular cult prior to 970.<sup>18</sup>

Critically, in her examination of English royal saints' cults, Catherine Cubitt suggests that the literary transmission of *Vita*, so distant from the event it purports to describe, was inspired by the murder of King Edward the Martyr and a subsequent vogue for hagiographical biography.<sup>19</sup> It is not a leap to then suggest that the narrative similarities between the two hagiographies, as exemplified by the presence of the treacherous woman, similarly stem from popular interest in Edward's death and to then extend this argument to the thematically analogous *Passio Æthelberhti*. Therefore, while Edward is chronologically the latest of the three

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<sup>13</sup> M.R. James, "Two Lives of St. Ethelbert, King and Martyr," *English Historical Review* 32, no. 126 (1917): 214–244.

<sup>14</sup> James, "Two Lives," 214–216, though James was unaware of an extant text of Osbert of Clare's *Vita S. Æthelberhti* (Gotha, Forschungsbibliothek Memb. I 81, fols. 30r–39v).

<sup>15</sup> *Vita et miracula Kenelmi* 2–7.

<sup>16</sup> *Passio Æthelberhti*, 239–240; *Vita et miracula Kenelmi* 1–7.

<sup>17</sup> D.W. Rollason, "The Cults of Murdered Royal Anglo-Saxon Saints," *Anglo-Saxon England* 11 (1982): 10; Wright, *Cultivation of Saga*, 104; Alan Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries in Pre-Viking Mercia," *Midlands History* 10 (1985): 8–10.

<sup>18</sup> Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries," 8, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Cubitt, "Sites and Sanctity: Revisiting the Cult of Murdered and Martyred Anglo-Saxon Royal Saints," *Early Medieval Europe* 9, no. 1 (2000): 67.

royal saints, his martyrdom served to some degree as the inspiration for the written biographies of both Kenelm and Æthelberht, providing them a certain taint of late tenth-/early eleventh-century political commentary.<sup>20</sup> With Edward's martyrdom serving as a progenitor for later redactions of the "wicked queen," it will be valuable to dwell for some time on the historiography of the young king as it relates to his stepmother, Ælfthryth.

Edward is perhaps the most widely studied of England's pre-Conquest royal martyrs, and the best attested in contemporary sources. In part, this represents the proximity of Edward's martyrdom to the literary endeavours of eleventh-century England. Within twenty years of his death in 978, his martyrdom had passed into hagiographical narrative in *Vita S. Oswaldi* (995 x 1005). Here, Edward's death resulted from political intrigues in which Ælfthryth took no explicit part.<sup>21</sup> Her involvement as a "wicked queen" is first attested in *Passio S. Eadwardi regis et martyris* (1070 x 1080), the first extant independent hagiography of the young king; this account informs the transmission of Edward's martyrdom into Anglo-Norman histories.<sup>22</sup> In this narrative, while visiting his stepmother, Ælfthryth, and her son Æthelred (Edward's half-brother), Edward was killed on Ælfthryth's orders to enable Æthelred's ascension to the throne.<sup>23</sup> As Pauline Stafford argues, early English queen-mothers were often "identified with the fortunes of [their] male descendants," and Ælfthryth's demonisation in post-Æthelredian texts is likely linked to the perceived failures of her son's reign.<sup>24</sup> As the inheritors of a hagiographical tradition in which Ælfthryth's role as conspirator to the murder of the king was fact, the Anglo-Norman historians must have understood the judgement of the *Chronicles* that the "English had not done a worse deed than this" to ring true.<sup>25</sup> It was a truth confirmed by the manifestation of God's retributive hand in the trials England faced in the century leading to the Norman Conquest.

Modern scholarship takes a somewhat subtler, politically oriented view, in which such literary tropes of treachery and retribution form only a passing ideological interest. The reign of Æthelred II (978–1016) was marked by political infighting, a resurgence of Viking aggression, and a governmental apparatus ill-equipped to effectively deal with these threats. Æthelred's accession to the throne as a minor, amidst the political intrigue surrounding his half-brother's murder, no doubt contributed to this. As Simon Keynes highlights, the assassination had its roots in a succession dispute between factions representing the half-brothers—the political culture of late tenth-century England was divided before the boy Æthelred ever took the throne.<sup>26</sup> Coming to power in this political milieu, Levi Roach argues, Æthelred's minority regime was characterised by hesitancy, by apprehension: a government

<sup>20</sup> Christine Fell, "Edward King and Martyr and the English Hagiographical Tradition," in *Ethelred the Unready: Papers from the Millenary Conference*, ed. David Hill (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1978), 8–10.

<sup>21</sup> Byrhtferth of Ramsey, *Vita S. Oswaldi* iv.18, in *The Lives of St Oswald and St Egwine*, ed. and trans., Michael Lapidge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), 137–141.

<sup>22</sup> See for example: *John of Worcester* 978; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum* ii.162, ed. and trans., R.A.B. Mynors, R.M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 1:265–267.

<sup>23</sup> *Passio Eadwardi*, 3–5.

<sup>24</sup> Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 200.

<sup>25</sup> *ASC* E 979.

<sup>26</sup> Simon Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred 'the Unready', 978–1016* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 163–166.

unsure of its authority, and whose authority was undermined as the “beneficiaries of such a nefarious act.”<sup>27</sup> Both scholars note Ælfthryth’s involvement in governance as queen-mother in something of a regent role; however, as Roach goes on to say of the murder, “not a single contemporary source implicates Ælfthryth ... or Æthelred.”<sup>28</sup> Here Ælfthryth is a historical figure, the murder a historical event; this is scholarship directed to the examination of Ælfthryth’s political agency as queen-consort and queen-mother and her potential involvement in bringing her son to the throne. The approbation directed at the treacherous woman of later hagiographies is considered in the light of historical sources and (quite rightly) dismissed as ahistorical. This does not mean that the literary figure of the treacherous woman as antagonist to a martyred king lacks historical value in a broader sense, just that the historical narrative within hagiography must be treated with scepticism.

However, scholarship has not entirely ignored the “wicked queen” trope in *Passio Eadwardi* and its derivatives, though the prevalent attitude has been to minimise it. In his survey of English royal saints, D.W. Rollason acknowledges Edward as foremost among martyred English kings, yet treats his story with extreme brevity, summarising the king’s murder in a sentence. Rollason devotes his initial discussion of Edward’s *passio* to a typological analysis of early sources in which Ælfthryth’s treachery is absent. While this is valuable in tracing the origins and development of Edward’s cult and hagiography, it does follow that when Rollason attempts deeper analysis of the martyrdom, no mention is made of Ælfthryth’s rumoured involvement, with examination restricted to political investigation.<sup>29</sup> In her study of England’s royal saints, Susan Ridyard references Ælfthryth at various points, yet it is telling that in her analysis of the sources for Edward’s martyrdom, she scarcely notes the entry of the treacherous woman motif into the narrative.<sup>30</sup> In her turn, Cubitt does acknowledge the trope of the “wicked queen” and goes so far as to note the parallels between *Passio Æthelberhti*, *Vita et miracula Kenelmi*, and *Passio Eadwardi*, but she does not undertake to provide detailed analysis.<sup>31</sup> Fortunately, given the critical juncture in English political history that Edward’s martyrdom occupies, studies of his cult and attendant hagiographies are not limited to compilatory surveys, having been subjected to comprehensive independent evaluation. Unlike many saints’ lives, Edward’s assassination can be grounded historically and explained within the contemporary political milieu, making it of abiding interest.

C.E. Wright’s analysis of chronicle sources for Edward’s martyrdom remains the most comprehensive exposé of Ælfthryth’s role in the event yet undertaken.<sup>32</sup> Yet Wright’s focus on chronicles and preoccupation with the person of the treacherous woman contribute to a fundamental weakness in the analysis. While he may seek to establish the oral development of the Edward *passio*, Wright never makes reference to the text of *Passio Eadwardi*, a frequently criticised oversight.<sup>33</sup> In fact, he avoids all hagiographical sources, with the exception of *Vita*

<sup>27</sup> Levi Roach, *Æthelred the Unready* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 76–78.

<sup>28</sup> Roach, *Æthelred the Unready*, 76.

<sup>29</sup> Rollason, “Royal Anglo-Saxon Saints,” 2, 18–19.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Janet Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 44–50, 158–159.

<sup>31</sup> Cubitt, “Sites and Sanctity,” 72–74, 76, 82.

<sup>32</sup> Wright, *Cultivation of Saga*, 157–163.

<sup>33</sup> See for example: Christine Fell, *Edward, King and Martyr* (Leeds: University of Leeds, School of English, 1971), iii; Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, 50n.167.

*Oswaldi*, which he treats with scepticism, preferring to focus on those texts traditionally classed as histories. In Wright's analysis, a derisory attitude to *Vita Oswaldi* is warranted in the light of its silence on the involvement of the queen in the crime, declaring the text to be: "appallingly obscure and in the worst and most involved ecclesiastical style ... it leaves the queen's part in the incident ambiguous."<sup>34</sup> This hyperbolic statement sets the tone for Wright's discussion of the "wicked queen," universally present in the redactions of twelfth-century historians and ergo, in his assessment, the truth of events. This contrasts sharply with his willingness to excuse the characterisation of the "wicked queen" of *Passio Æthelberhti*.<sup>35</sup> Wright makes no room for the view presented by Ridyard that the traitorous woman is a later addition to the corpus inspired by *Passio Eadwardi* or that, subtly present in Rollason's summary, that this is a political murder and the queen's involvement or otherwise is extraneous detail.<sup>36</sup>

However, *Passio Eadwardi* cannot be ignored simply because it complicates the historical narrative. *Passio* is an important link in the transmission history of Edward's martyrdom, with the introduction of Ælfthryth in the role of the treacherous woman its most notable contribution to that tale. In her 1971 study of the *passio* narratives, Christine Fell expresses some confusion as to why earlier historians like Wright ignored (or were ignorant of) *Passio* in their studies of Edward's cult.<sup>37</sup> In the introduction to her transcription of *Passio Eadwardi*, Fell seeks to fill that gap, providing an overview of the extant manuscripts of *Passio*, their interrelation, and their derivatives. While the trope of the treacherous woman forms only a small part of that analysis, Fell's survey of chronicle sources is of note. By using *Passio* as the central text relating the martyrdom, she establishes groups of texts based upon the presence of the "wicked queen" within the tradition: those that predate *Passio*; subsequent texts dependent upon *Passio*; and subsequent texts with genuine variants.<sup>38</sup> This grouping facilitates an analysis of the stages of hagiographical transmission in which an entrenchment of Ælfthryth's role in the murder of Edward is clearly evident. The pivotal role of *Passio* in the evolving narrative of the queen-mother's guilt is also emphasised by Keynes in his analysis of Edward's martyrdom. Contrasting with Wright's presumption of the queen's guilt, Keynes assesses potential motivations for Ælfthryth's collaboration in the conspiracy while simultaneously exposing the retrospective nature of the political commentary that led hagiographers to expand on her character.<sup>39</sup> Roach similarly identifies the late arrival of the treacherous woman to the historical record, and both assert that, considered in the tenth-century political context, Ælfthryth was an unlikely participant in the assassination.<sup>40</sup> Fell, Keynes, and Roach bring a refreshing scepticism to the discussion of the "wicked queen" as a historical figure. That Ælfthryth *was* a historical figure is unquestioned—it is her role as a treacherous woman that they seek to prove or disprove within the political context of events. Yet in removing Ælfthryth from the hagiographical tradition to analyse her genuine political role, it is also true that little space is given to the possibility that her purpose in *Passio* is as a literary device to facilitate political or social commentary.

<sup>34</sup> Wright, *Cultivation of Saga*, 162.

<sup>35</sup> Wright, *Cultivation of Saga*, 104.

<sup>36</sup> Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, 49; Rollason, "Royal Anglo-Saxon Saints," 2.

<sup>37</sup> Fell, *Edward, King and Martyr*, iii.

<sup>38</sup> Fell, *Edward, King and Martyr*, ii–xxiv.

<sup>39</sup> Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred*, 167–174.

<sup>40</sup> Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred*, 171–174; Roach, *Æthelred the Unready*, 74–76.

Of the three *passiones* under examination, the presence of political commentary in the person of the treacherous woman is most evident in Edward's hagiographies. While this historiographical analysis has addressed each saint chronologically according to their narrative setting, as observed above, the hagiographies do not follow this pattern—all can be dated to between 1066 and 1100. However, the hagiographical precedent for Edward's martyrdom was established in *Vita Oswaldi* as early as 995, royal support for his cult demonstrated through both charter (1001) and law-code (1008), while the *Passio* author states his work to be a re-writing of an earlier *vita*.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, there is some suggestion that rumours of Ælfthryth's involvement had become widespread by the time the *Passio* author was writing; Adam of Bremen blames both Æthelred and Ælfthryth in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, composed in the 1070s, while in his 1080s recension of *Vita S. Dunstani*, Osbern make casual note of Ælfthryth's guilt.<sup>42</sup> In this milieu, it is not difficult to see that political commentary born of Edward's assassination and inherent in his subsequent cult bled into the characterisation of the treacherous women in the biographies of his predecessors, Æthelberht and Kenelm.<sup>43</sup> However, the "wicked queen" of English royal hagiography is not defined by politics alone: the biblical parallels of *Passio Æthelberhti* and the provincial character of *Vita et Miracula Kenelmi* have already been noted. The religious nature of hagiography and the regional nature of saints' cults ensure that biblical allusion and local tradition manifest themselves through all three *passiones*. It to these individual elements of English royal hagiography—biblical exemplar, political commentary, and regional tradition—to which we now turn.

### **A Biblical Trope: Jezebel, Delilah, and John the Baptist**

The treacherous woman is a familiar character within biblical narrative, with two women—Jezebel and Delilah—providing notable exempla of female apostasy and treachery for medieval hagiographers. The former, the queen of King Ahab of Israel, and the latter, the lover of Samson, are both depicted as political schemers motivated by the attainment of personal power and wealth.<sup>44</sup> Delilah's appearance in the book of Judges is brief, if pivotal. She enters the narrative as Samson's lover and turns that position to her advantage: promised a significant financial reward, she conspires with his political enemies and delivers him into the hands of the Philistines.<sup>45</sup> In her own turn, Jezebel's appearance in 1 Kings is neither so brief nor so simple. Reputed to have turned her husband from the worship of Yahweh, Jezebel further fomented slaughter upon God's prophets and vindictively pursued Elijah.<sup>46</sup> The apex of the Jezebel passages, where her portrayal as a treacherous woman is most evident, revolves around her promulgation of a plot to affect the death of an innocent man and appropriate his

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<sup>41</sup> S 899 in *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography*, ed. P.H. Sawyer, rev. S.E. Kelly, R. Rushforth et al. (<http://www.esawyer.org.uk/> [Accessed 11 September 2019]) (text: S.E. Kelly, ed. *The Charters of Shaftesbury Abbey*, no. 29 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 114–122); *V Æthelred* 16, in *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. Felix Liebermann (Halle, 1903), 1:240–241.

<sup>42</sup> Fell, *Edward, King and Martyr*, xvi–xvii.

<sup>43</sup> Cubitt, "Sites and Sanctity," 67. See also: Fell, *Edward, King and Martyr*, xix–xx.

<sup>44</sup> For Jezebel see 1 Kings 16.31, 21.7–10; for Delilah see Judges 16.4–5.

<sup>45</sup> Judges 16.4–21.

<sup>46</sup> 1 Kings 16.31, 18.13–20, 19.1–5.

lands through allegations of blasphemy.<sup>47</sup> Hers is a remarkable political agency, providing a didactic model of female power, her name invoked metaphorically by hagiographers to identify the wicked queens of their narratives.<sup>48</sup>

Yet Jezebel's development as a character is not matched by the flat portrayals of her English heirs, characters who are motivated by narrative causality and purposed to provide the nexus of the saint's transition from life to martyrdom. Indeed, in her study of early English queenship, Stacy Klein suggests that, in his adaptation of *Kings*, the tenth-century homilist Ælfric had need to reduce Jezebel to a generic hagiographical figure to make her accessible to his audience.<sup>49</sup> This is part of a wider trend identified by Jan Ziolkowski of early medieval Latin hagiography, whereby the Jezebel topos devolved from a precise hagiographical-biblical parallel, to a label for a noblewoman who persecuted a saint, to its ninth- and tenth-century manifestation as a queen who incited others to wicked deeds.<sup>50</sup> Thus, in a seventh-century example highlighted by both Ziolkowski and Janet Nelson, Jonas of Bobbio's characterisation of the Merovingian queen Brunhild (567–575) as “a second Jezebel” in his *Vita Columbani* contains tangible similarities with the life of the biblical queen.<sup>51</sup> Yet, by the tenth century, as exemplified by Liudprand of Cremona's depiction of the Italian queen-consort Willa (950–963), and into the eleventh, as in Adelard's portrayal of the aforementioned Æthelgifu, King Eadwig's mother-in-law—both termed “a second Jezebel”—the use of the name has become more generic.<sup>52</sup> Here, the agency of the royal women is reduced to persecution and robbery, to consort with devils and witchcraft. Locating *Vita et miracula Kenelmi* within this same narrative convention, the text declares that Cwoenthryth “lay in wait for [Kenelm] ... as Jezebel did for Elijah”—she too is accused of witchcraft of sorts.<sup>53</sup> The character-type of the “Jezebel” was one firmly entrenched in late eleventh-century hagiography, and one which informed the construct of the “wicked queen” in the *vitae* of the English boy-kings.

Such scriptural allusion is a standard technique employed by hagiographers in establishing a saint's godliness and worthiness of veneration. It does, however, presume an audience familiar with the scriptural progenitors. As late eleventh-century texts, the *vitae* were filtered through the English Benedictine and Norman reforms, and the anxieties of those movements are evident, suggestive of both clerical authorship and audience. Klein notes that the Benedictine reform, for example, introduced a hostility toward female agency, which surely underlies the construct of the “wicked queen,” while Paul Hayward suggests that the innocent boy-king was a figure intended as a paradigm of virtue for young monastics in Norman institutions.<sup>54</sup> Thus Edward is described as “just in all ways,” “of greatest humility,” “his piety

<sup>47</sup> 1 Kings 21.5–15.

<sup>48</sup> See for example: *Vita et miracula Kenelmi* 2; B, *Vita Dunstani* 22.2.

<sup>49</sup> Stacy S. Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 135.

<sup>50</sup> Jan Ziolkowski, *Jezebel: A Norman Latin Poem of the Early Eleventh Century* (New York: P. Lang, 1989), 15–16.

<sup>51</sup> Janet L. Nelson, “Queens as Jezebels: The Careers of Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian History,” in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 58; Ziolkowski, *Jezebel*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Simon Maclean, *Ottoman Queenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 133; Adelard, *Lectiones in depositione S. Dunstani* vi, in *The Early Lives of St Dunstan*, ed. and trans. Michael Lapidge and Michael Winterbottom (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), 126–127.

<sup>53</sup> *Vita et miracula Kenelmi* 2, 16.

<sup>54</sup> Hayward, “The Idea of Innocent Martyrdom,” 83–85; Klein, *Ruling Women*, 145–146

evident to all the world”; Kenelm as “illuminated by heavenly grace,” “eminent in mind and holiness”; and Æthelberht as “innocent and peaceful,” “a living sacrifice, a holy sacrifice, a sacrifice pleasing to God.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the implication of an ecclesiastical audience finds support in appeals to the authority of the architects of the Benedictine reform, the bishops Dunstan and Æthelwold, in the prologues of both *Passio Eadwardi* and *Vita et miracula Kenelmi*.<sup>56</sup> However, taking a different approach, the prologue to *Passio Æthelberhti* makes no mention of ecclesiastical authority, rather establishing Æthelberht’s legitimacy by locating him within the lineage of Kings of East Anglia, perhaps pointing to secular patronage for that work (though the text is connected to Winchcombe Abbey, as discussed below). In either instance, we can presume a primary audience of literate elites and should understand a degree of overlap between ecclesiastical and secular hierarchies. However, hagiography was also a tool of pastoral instruction and, while it cannot be understood that such Latin texts served a direct instructional purpose for congregations, they shaped the rhetoric and models of instruction.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, as such cults were often regionally grounded, we can suppose a broader communal familiarity with the narratives that allowed the hagiographies a pedagogic application when parsed or interpreted in the vernacular.

In this context, where direct access to the texts was largely clerical, and wider access disseminated via clerical mediation, it made little difference whether, in detail, biblical analogies such as the Jezebel passages held true. To bring forth familiar didactic motifs, it was sufficient for biblical allusion to be present and recognisable without the need for the author to engage in a pedantic exactitude.<sup>58</sup> It is an effect similarly on display in the ubiquitous references to the treachery of Judas Iscariot in the *passiones*.<sup>59</sup> Where authors deliberately announce the introduction of biblical exemplar, they are guiding their audience toward conceptualising a fictive apostasy. The treacherous woman in English hagiography is rarely explicitly portrayed as an apostate. Yet, granting an audience familiarity with biblical narrative, a name like Jezebel was not only a symbol of treachery, but apostasy. The hagiographer is engaging a technique that guides the implicit narrative by casting the treacherous woman as a foil to the saint, subtly enhancing her wickedness in contrast to the blameless saint.

Thus, the treacherous woman of English royal hagiography, like her scriptural progenitors, is a political figure intriguing to further her own interests, contravening religious mores in her quest for power and influence. In this characterisation, Delilah would perhaps seem to provide a more direct biblical analogy than Jezebel, in part due to the brevity and simplicity of her story. Like Cynethryth, Cwoenthryth, and Ælfthryth, she enters an established narrative in the role of the treacherous woman and proves the motivator for the protagonist’s decline and death. Yet the clearly sexual nature of the Delilah-Samson relationship is not an element of the English “wicked queen” topos, nor is it characteristic of “Jezebels” in the wider hagiographical tradition.<sup>60</sup> The English tradition of boy-king martyrs requires the inviolate sanctity of the protagonist. Indeed, as Hayward notes, their celibacy, their purity of body and

<sup>55</sup> *Passio Eadwardi*, 3; *Vita et miracula Kenelmi* 1–2; *Passio Æthelberhti*, 239.

<sup>56</sup> *Passio Eadwardi*, 1; *Vita et miracula Kenelmi*, preface.

<sup>57</sup> Lees and Overing, “The Clerics and the Critics,” 26–28.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5–6; Ziolkowski, *Jezebel*, 15.

<sup>59</sup> *Passio Æthelberhti*, 240; *Passio Eadwardi*, 5; *Vita et miracula Kenelmi* 5.

<sup>60</sup> Judges 16.4; Ziolkowski, *Jezebel*, 25–26.

mind is central to the texts, their martyrdoms portrayed as evidence of, and even reward for, their innocence.<sup>61</sup> This is, perhaps, most evident in *Passio Æthelberhti*. Edward may be described as just and pious, Kenelm as filled with grace and holiness, neither as tempted by lust, yet there is also no sexual dimension to their *passiones*. In contrast, central to Æthelberht's journey to Mercia is the need for him to marry in order sire an heir. It is not a need he himself identifies, but rather is convinced of by his advisors, and the hagiographer is sure to inform us that "Æthelberht long resisted, his a heart marked by chastity and honour."<sup>62</sup> It is, of course, integral to the narrative that Æthelberht never realises the proposed marriage, maintaining his innocence and chastity into death, thereby "ascending to the joys of the heavenly kingdom."<sup>63</sup> Such interpretations of the martyrdoms were not a part of the cults in their genesis. Rather, they represent the emphasis of eleventh-century English reformed monasticism on the recruitment of children, and a perceived need to provide instructional models of the virtues of innocence and purity.<sup>64</sup> Thus, though it may serve to augment the "wickedness" of the treacherous woman, as seen in *Vita Dunstani*, sexual desire falls outside the remit of this sub-genre of hagiography. Eadwig's lust for both Ælgifu and Æthelgifu led him to spiritual and political error, as did Samson's desire for Delilah. In contrast, Æthelberht, Kenelm, and Edward are not depicted with intimate companions, no less betrayed by them; the treacherous women are sisters, stepmothers, and antagonists' wives. The very proximity and trusted nature of these relationships serves to heighten the sense of treachery.

*Passio Æthelberhti* takes a subtle approach to biblical narrative, displaying the treacherous woman archetype without naming a biblical model for the figure. Cynethryth fulfils a role analogous with that of Jezebel: the wife of the narrative's dominant male political figure, she is guileful in bringing about the death of an innocent man who threatened her power.<sup>65</sup> Yet it is more likely that the author's intent was to create a narrative reminiscent of the betrayal of John the Baptist.<sup>66</sup> Extant homilies and liturgical calendars of the eleventh-century English church show that the decollation of John the Baptist was a celebrated and familiar narrative.<sup>67</sup> Any echoes of Jezebel in the characterisation of Cynethryth can be traced through the biblical reports of John's death, and are indicative of an archetypal treacherous women across scriptural narrative. Indeed, Ælfric's homily on John's martyrdom preserves one of the few early English characterisations of Jezebel (who is portrayed as a corrupting influence over kingly power).<sup>68</sup> Both John and Æthelberht were purported to have been executed on the order of a seemingly reluctant king, as a result of the machinations of his wife. Even the supporting

<sup>61</sup> Hayward, "The Idea of Innocent Martyrdom," 83–85. See also Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), 165.

<sup>62</sup> *Passio Æthelberhti*, 237.

<sup>63</sup> *Passio Æthelberhti*, 240

<sup>64</sup> Cubitt, "Sites and Sanctity," 67; Hayward, "The Idea of Innocent Martyrdom," 89–90.

<sup>65</sup> 1 Kings 21.6–15, cf. *Passio Æthelberhti*, 239–40; Wright, *Cultivation of Saga*, 97–100.

<sup>66</sup> Matthew 14.3–11; Mark 6.17–21.

<sup>67</sup> See for example: Ælfric of Eynsham, "August XXIX: The Decollation of John the Baptist," in *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, ed. Benjamin Thorpe (London, 1844), 1:477–90. In their manuscript catalogue Helmut Gneuss and Michael Lapidge note five extant copies containing Ælfric's homilies for both the nativity and decollation of John the Baptist, indicating a reasonable circulation; Helmut Gneuss and Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A Bibliographical Handlist of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 22, 70, 81, 328–329, 448.

<sup>68</sup> Klein, *Ruling Women*, 131, 139–140.

characters of the daughter who acts as the medium for her mother's plotting and the executioner who beheads the saint, have migrated from the gospel narrative into *Passio*.<sup>69</sup>

Such an analysis is necessarily based on intertextual correlation, as the direct evidence of the text does not allow definitive parallels to be drawn. Yet parallels are present and substantive—it cannot be supposed that Cynethryth is an independent manifestation of a universal trope of the treacherous woman. In her study of the “wicked stepmother” trope, Patricia Watson highlights that the motif is, to some degree, a pervasive cultural inheritance of literary representations of misogyny in the classical world.<sup>70</sup> However, the immense influence of Christian scripture and its exegesis in patristic texts on the literature of a Christian Europe must be taken into account. The nature of clerical education was such that biblical narrative was an omnipresent component of the authorial scholarship comprising hagiography, resulting in both its subconscious as well as conscious application.<sup>71</sup> As Rosalind Love notes in the introduction of her edition of *Vita et miracula Kenelmi*, “relatively few non-biblical sources seem to have been used,” and where those few other sources are identified, they represent borrowings from post-classical Christian writers and biographers.<sup>72</sup>

These sources had their own inherent intolerance of female agency, which was only augmented by the misogynist anxieties of the Benedictine reforms. Indeed, Hayward argues—of Cwoenthryth and Ælfthryth in particular—that the treacherous woman of English royal hagiography “appears to be a misogynist reading arising out of a monastic propensity for attributing evil deeds to uncooperative and usurping queens.”<sup>73</sup> It was milieu of religious rhetoric deeply uncomfortable with all forms of female power—spiritual and temporal. As Stafford notes, queenship and sanctity were potentially degendering within the language of the pre-Conquest church: a good queen destined for sainthood was rendered a virgin; a good queen exercising power in the absence of a king is described as a king.<sup>74</sup> There is a nuanced element of this anti-feminist rhetoric in the hagiographical portrayal of “wicked queens.” These women are at once degendered as active participants in male power-structures, and defined by gender in ascribing a transgressive nature to actions that may not have been censured if undertaken by a male character.

Returning then to John and Æthelberht, neither were killed by their female antagonists. Yet, by neglecting the executioner and deploying the motif of the “wicked queen,” both narratives seek to enhance the abominable nature of the event, highlighting a fundamental attitude to female power. The framework within which the treacherous woman of eleventh-century Anglo-Latin hagiography is constructed owes much to the treacherous women of the Bible. For Æthelberht's hagiographer to equate the East Anglian king with Christianity's first saint was a bold statement of the royal saint's godliness and served to enhance the debasement of those who effected his martyrdom, foremost amongst these Cynethryth, the treacherous woman. The hagiographer may be recording local tradition relating the juridical murder of the East-Anglian King; however, it is also a highly structured narrative intended for an audience

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<sup>69</sup> Matthew 14.3–11, cf. *Passio Æthelberhti*, 239–40.

<sup>70</sup> Patricia Watson, *Ancient Step-mothers: Myth, Misogyny and Reality* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1–3.

<sup>71</sup> Heffernen, *Sacred Biography*, 14–15.

<sup>72</sup> Rosalind Love, *Three Eleventh Century Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), xciii.

<sup>73</sup> Hayward, “The Idea of Innocent Martyrdom,” 87.

<sup>74</sup> Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith*, 180.

removed from those origins. Saints' lives were intended for an audience familiar with biblical exegesis, and, within such a milieu, the parallels between Æthelberht's death and that of John the Baptist would have been evident, the author's analogy clear.

### A Political Trope: *Passio Eadwardi*

Perhaps even clearer to readers of *Passio Eadwardi* than its biblical allegories would have been the political context of its setting, well attested throughout the eleventh century. The earliest hagiographical narratives relating Edward's death are near contemporary, composed within the lifetimes of its antagonists. These early accounts of the martyrdom are politically cautious for, as Keynes notes in reference to *Vita Oswaldi* (presuming it enjoyed a wide dissemination), it is reasonable to assume "that the author's indiscretions would be punished."<sup>75</sup> It is an understandable circumspection granted that the murder occurred in Corfe on lands controlled by Edward's stepmother, and that her son succeeded to the throne.<sup>76</sup> As Stafford highlights of *Vita S. Dunstani*—silent on Edward's murder, but vociferous in condemning Ælfgifu and Æthelgifu—political commentary was safer when made of the dead.<sup>77</sup> Thus, while Edward's assassination is described as a political event from its earliest recounting, the motif of the treacherous woman does not enter the narrative until relatively late in its transmission. The entry for 979 in the D-text of the *Chronicles* rages that the murder was the worst deed the English had committed "since first they came to Britain," while refraining from any direct accusations.<sup>78</sup> Likewise, *Vita Oswaldi* is vociferous in its condemnations, but vague in its denunciations, the author Byrhtferth laying the blame on unidentified rebellious thegns who murdered Edward in order to place his more compliant brother, Æthelred, on the throne.<sup>79</sup> Even Wulfstan of York, in his famously hyperbolic homily *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* does not implicate Ælfthryth, simply stating that "Edward was betrayed and then killed."<sup>80</sup>

Preaching in 1014 at the height of England's political unrest, Wulfstan's intent was to decry the moral depravities of the English that had led to divinely administered depredations by Danish forces. Particularly reprehensible to Wulfstan was "that a man should betray his lord to death, or drive him in his lifetime from this land," both acts which he declares "have happened in this country."<sup>81</sup> Interestingly, as Wulfstan goes on to describe these betrayals, the manuscript traditions diverge. Three manuscripts refer only to Edward's assassination, while the remaining two also reference Æthelred's exile during the brief reign of Sweyn Forkbeard (1013–1014). The omission of Æthelred's exile by scribes is understandable in a political milieu governed by an ascendant Danish dynasty, yet the inclusion of both events is the logical conclusion to Wulfstan's rhetoric and seems genuine to the composition.<sup>82</sup> That Wulfstan

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<sup>75</sup> Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred*, 167.

<sup>76</sup> *ASC* D 979.

<sup>77</sup> Pauline Stafford, "The Portrayal of Royal Women in England, Mid-Tenth to Mid-Twelfth Centuries," in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi Parsons (New York: St Martin's, 1998), 149–150.

<sup>78</sup> *ASC* D 979.

<sup>79</sup> Byrhtferth of Ramsey, *Vita S. Oswaldi* iv.18.

<sup>80</sup> Wulfstan, *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, in *English Historical Documents, c. 500–1042*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Dorothy Whitelock (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), 1:931.

<sup>81</sup> Wulfstan, *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, 931.

<sup>82</sup> Whitelock discusses the provenance of the passage relating to Æthelred across manuscript traditions, Wulfstan,

mentions Æthelred's exile alongside Edward's death as crimes committed by the English people indicates that Wulfstan did not believe Æthelred to be culpable in the king's murder. While Wulfstan's silence on the person of Ælfthryth means that this argument cannot be extended to her involvement, to undermine the now dead queen would have been to undermine the legitimacy of Æthelred's reign at a time when the English needed a united political class. That Wulfstan, unlike the hagiographers, does not seek to enhance this retributive narrative through a condemnation of feminine power reflects the political milieu in which he was preaching. Irrespective of any truth that may underlie Ælfthryth's potential involvement in Edward's murder, there was no political benefit to be derived in the early eleventh century by accusing the queen-mother of complicity.

Clearly the political environment of England had changed by the time of the authorship of *Passio Eadwardi* (1070 x 1080), which does cast Ælfthryth as the treacherous woman, conspiring against her political rival and effecting his death through murderous agents. As used by the *Passio* author, the trope is precisely parallel to the structure underlying the characterisations of Cynethryth and Cwoenthryth and, as with these other 'wicked queens,' once the motif entered the hagiographical tradition it became the dominant narrative transmitted in subsequent accounts. Henceforth Ælfthryth is portrayed as the archetypal treacherous woman, the text explicit in describing her motivation to be "that her son, the child Æthelred, may rule in [Edward's] place."<sup>83</sup> However, it cannot pass without comment that *Passio* may indeed preserve a memory of a genuine betrayal; suspicion of Ælfthryth's involvement is a logical conclusion drawn from the location of the murder and the political benefit she derived from it. The contemporary accounts of Edward's martyrdom may reflect a deliberate political amnesia that did not need to be maintained after 1016 with the protagonists dead, a new dynasty on the throne, and the political danger removed. Yet it must be reiterated that, though a plausible theory, no contemporary source supports a murder accusation levelled at Ælfthryth.

Nonetheless, the *Passio* narrative of the murder was the most prominent version transmitted into the twelfth century, and the trope of the treacherous woman came to dominate portrayals of Ælfthryth. John of Worcester, for example, stated that Edward was murdered "at the command of his step-mother," while his contemporary, William of Malmesbury declared that Ælfthryth, "with a step-mother's hatred and a viper's guile ... laid plots against her stepson's life."<sup>84</sup> Geffrei Gaimar, writing a mere decade after William and John, pushed the motif of the "wicked queen" further with a salacious narrative of treachery and betrayal, while Henry of Huntingdon, writing in the 1130s, went so far as to place the murder weapon in Ælfthryth's hands.<sup>85</sup> Continuing that theme, in the late twelfth century Walter Map described a scene in which Ælfthryth offered a poisoned cup of wine, while Roger of Wendover in the early thirteenth century added a sexualised dimension to the "wicked queen," Edward stabbed as Ælfthryth beguiled him with caresses, kisses, and wine.<sup>86</sup> There is

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*Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, 931n.4.

<sup>83</sup> *Passio Eadwardi*, 4.

<sup>84</sup> *John of Worcester* 978; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum* ii.162.

<sup>85</sup> Geffrei Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis* 4009–4094, ed. and trans. Ian Short (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 218–223; Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum* v.27–28, ed. and trans. Diana E. Greenaway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 324–327.

<sup>86</sup> Fell, *Edward, King and Martyr*, xvi–xvii; Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum* 978.

little doubt these characterisations of the queen-mother were intrinsically linked with the perceived failures of her son's reign. All the aforementioned chroniclers, with the exception of John of Worcester, associate Æthelred's coronation the following year with ill-omens, with Roger of Wendover explicitly linking the misfortunes to come with Edward's murder.<sup>87</sup> Yet it is also true that Ælfthryth was a powerful woman: an anointed queen-consort, queen-mother and regent in Æthelred's minority, a noble woman whose diplomas attest as politically active in the reigns of her husband and son. She was, in short, antithetical to good queenship as perceived by clerical authors of the late eleventh century.<sup>88</sup> Thus, as the narrative became removed from the historical event, Ælfthryth lost any personal differentiation or political nuance, primarily serving the needs of hagiographical narrative as the antitype to the royal saint. Once isolated from the immediate political events following Edward's death, the transmission and development of the treacherous woman in *Passio Eadwardi* becomes stereotypical, evolving in the same manner as Cynethryth in *Passio Æthelberhti*. Perhaps the most salient political comment being made through the person of the treacherous woman of Edward's *passio* is that noted by Klein, and also present Jezebel topoi—a warning of the dangers of queenly power.<sup>89</sup>

### **A Regional Trope: *Passio Æthelberhti* and *Vita et Miracula Kenelmi***

Beyond biblical archetype and political commentary, there is, finally, the effect of local tradition to consider in the developing character of the “wicked queen” in the *vitae* of the English boy-kings. Regional interests must be understood as a key link between the deaths of these English royals, the perpetuation of their cults, and the production of their biographies. Both *Passio Æthelberhti* and *Vita et Miracula Kenelmi* show the distinct mark of local influence, the former in the transmission of the narrative, the latter in the inspiration for its composition. *Passio* is notable for its specificity in naming even minor participants and providing details of local interest that are indicative of preexisting tradition in Hereford where the martyr's cult was based.<sup>90</sup> *Vita* is far less rich in compelling detail that points to the preservation of a vernacular tradition. Yet it does display elements that strongly suggest an authorial interest in Winchcombe, where Kenelm's cult was based, with the suggestion being that *Vita* was written to accompany the rededication of that city's abbey.<sup>91</sup>

Though *Passio Æthelberhti* is the latest of the three *vitae* (1080 x 1100), the manuscript only represents the earliest written account that has survived, and there is evidence that the cult of Æthelberht had existed at Hereford from a significantly earlier period. *Passio* records a *translatio* narrative in which the murdered king appeared in visions giving instructions as to the recovery of his body, in order that it be translated to Hereford.<sup>92</sup> This passage displays detailed personal knowledge of Hereford and also preserves older name forms than those present in the twelfth-century *Vita Æthelberhti* of Gerald of Wales, which suggest that *Passio* has its genesis

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<sup>87</sup> Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum* 978.

<sup>88</sup> Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 106–107.

<sup>89</sup> Klein, *Ruling Women*, 143.

<sup>90</sup> Cubitt, “Sites and Sanctity,” 75–76; James, “Two Lives,” 218–219; Thacker, “Kings, Saints, and Monasteries,” 16–17.

<sup>91</sup> Love, *Three Eleventh Century Saints*, cx–cxii; Thacker, “Kings, Saints, and Monasteries,” 8.

<sup>92</sup> *Passio Æthelberhti*, 242–244.

in the native traditions of Hereford.<sup>93</sup> James highlights that the place names in *Passio* show a familiarity with the Hereford region and that, in form, alongside personal names, display a linguistic authenticity that preserves a tradition predating the written text.<sup>94</sup> Most compelling, however, are a ninth-century entry on a list of saints' burial places and a will of c. 1000, both attesting to the cathedral's dedication to Æthelberht.<sup>95</sup> It is plausible that the saint's long residence at Hereford encouraged an active vernacular tradition. Of our treacherous woman, Thacker has highlighted that the name Cynethryth in *Passio* is late eighth-century in form, whereas in later traditions her name is the same as that of Kenelm's traitorous sister, Cwoenthryth.<sup>96</sup> When considered alongside the established cult in Hereford and the narrative's local flavour, it seems that *Passio* retains a believable cultural memory of Offa's wife.

However, Hereford was not the only ecclesiastical centre to preserve the story of Æthelberht's martyrdom. Indeed, the treacherous woman as fabricated motif is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the comparison between the Cynethryth of *Passio Æthelberhti* and that of *Vitae duorum Offarum*. *Vitae duorum Offarum* is an early thirteenth-century document that eulogises Offa for his foundation of the abbey at St Albans. Though the Mercian King was never canonised, the portion of *Vitae* that focuses on Offa is written in the tradition of hagiography, and ergo the protagonist cannot be a part of a plot to murder a saint. To resolve this conflict, the *Vitae* author strengthens the role of the treacherous queen, and it is from this same tradition that Roger of Wendover received the narrative that has been previously noted. Offa is absolved of any evil intent, with Cynethryth overseeing and personally partaking in the plot that ends Æthelberht's life.<sup>97</sup> Here Cynethryth is constructed as a mere foil to both kings, motivated only by narrative necessity. Any truth there may be in the characterisation of the "wicked queen" in *Passio Æthelberhti* is subordinated to local interest in the St Albans tradition.

Regional influences are similarly displayed in *Vita et miracula Kenelmi*. The author locates events firmly within geographical bounds with which he seems personally familiar.<sup>98</sup> Yet this only establishes where the hagiography was written for, unlike *Passio Æthelberhti*, there is no onomastic evidence within *Vita* pointing to an earlier vernacular tradition. In his discussion of the lost saints' lives of medieval England, R.M. Wilson argues "that vernacular tales of Kenelm must have been widespread" based on the appearance of the fully formed narrative in post-Conquest chronicles. However, Wilson was seemingly unaware of *Vita*, attributing the redactions of Kenelm's martyrdom by John of Worcester and Gerald of Wales to local tradition, rather than the obvious influence of that earlier document.<sup>99</sup> In fact, there is no substantial early evidence for the Mercian prince's cult. The local concerns within *Vita* are

<sup>93</sup> James, "Two Lives," 218–219; Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries," 16–17; Wright, *Cultivation of Saga*, 95–97.

<sup>94</sup> James, "Two Lives," 218–219.

<sup>95</sup> "Segan be þam Godes sanctum," in *Die Heiligen Englands: Angelsächsisch und Lateinisch*, ed. Felix Liebermann (Hanover, 1889), 11; "The Will of Wulfgeat," in *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. and trans. Dorothy Whitelock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 54–55, 165.

<sup>96</sup> Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries," 17.

<sup>97</sup> Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum* 792; *Vitae duorum Offarum*, extract in Wright, *Cultivation of Saga*, 100–103, 261–264.

<sup>98</sup> See for example: *Vita et miracula Kenelmi* 14–16, for the description of Kenelm's translation including provinces, landmarks and a description of the approach to Winchcombe Abbey; Cubitt, "Sites and Sanctity," 68.

<sup>99</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales and the Description of Wales*, ed. and trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 85–86; *John of Worcester* 819.

contemporary with its authorship. The lack of evidence for Kenelm's kingship has been noted, and this is equally true of his martyrdom and veneration, with the earliest documentary evidence of his cult at Winchcombe a sacramentary of the late tenth century. This first official promulgation of Kenelm's cult is datable to the 970s when the community of Winchcombe adopted the Benedictine reform under the guidance of Oswald of Worcester.<sup>100</sup> In the preface to *Vita*, the author exhibits the official sanction of Kenelm's cult by the leaders of that movement as the key evidence of the authenticity of the narrative:

The holy fathers Dunstan and Æthelwold and the venerable Oswald himself, and the other holy fathers would never have celebrated [Kenelm] nor consented to his cult, unless they had recognised he was worthy of it.<sup>101</sup>

It is unlikely that Kenelm's name was abruptly added to the Mass by the agents of reform without his cult having some period of earlier vernacular evolution. Yet, while Oswald and the Abbot of Winchcombe may have built on local narrative to establish Kenelm's cult in the city, *Vita*, as the earliest narrative evidence of his martyrdom and translation, was the product of a second revival accompanying the abbey's first Norman abbot.<sup>102</sup> Specifically, it was written to accompany the refoundation of the abbey under the Norman church and created as a deliberate narrative to promote Winchcombe's resident saint. Cubitt argues that *Vita* does display elements characteristic of earlier oral transmission, identifying folkloric topoi correlative with tropes found in Stith Thomson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*.<sup>103</sup> Certainly the motif of the "wicked queen" appears as prevalent in folklore as in biblical and hagiographical narrative; however, it is questionable to what degree folklore can be perceived as distinct within the intertextual frameworks of eleventh-century hagiography. Whether *Vita* preserves some residual memory of events, or the author invented Cwoenthryth's character as a literary foil for her brother, the queen forms an integral part of the resultant story. Yet she is a flatly drawn antagonist. Though there is evidence for her person, much like her brother she is devoid of evidential historical motivation and action.<sup>104</sup> In her characterisation she is merely intended to contrast the prince's innocence with feminine avarice and the desire for power, at best prompted to action by narrative requirement.

One of the main differentiating factors between *Passio Æthelberhti* and *Vita et miracula Kenelmi* is that, while the former seems to have been the culmination of local tradition, the latter seems to represent the birth of a local tradition. King Æthelberht can be historically grounded, and the presence of a vernacular tradition prior to *Passio* is demonstrable; King Kenelm seems to have been a fabrication, and a vernacular tradition predating *Vita* can only be hypothesised. Yet the narrative of Kenelm's martyrdom has a long literary life, unrivalled by that of Æthelberht, apparently familiar to audiences and authors for centuries after the composition of *Vita*. Gerald of Wales notes the martyrdom in his twelfth-century *Journey*

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<sup>100</sup> Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries," 8, 22n57.

<sup>101</sup> *Vita et miracula Kenelmi*, preface.

<sup>102</sup> Love, *Three Eleventh Century Saints*, xci, cx.

<sup>103</sup> Cubitt, "Sites and Sanctity," 70–71.

<sup>104</sup> See for example: S165, S1434, S1436. All three charters are from the reign of Cwoenthryth's father Coenwulf; Cwoenthryth appears as a witness in S165 and is involved in land disputes with ecclesiastical institutions in S1434 and S1436.

*through Wales*. It is recorded more fully in the thirteenth-century *South English Legendary*, and can even be found (in a severely abbreviated form) narrated by a cockerel in Chaucer's fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>105</sup> We will not, however, be distracted by the transmission of the Kenelm *passio* into the fourteenth century and beyond, no matter how interesting; for the purposes of this discussion, it is the summary of Cwoenthryth's treachery provided by Gerald of Wales that is of particular note. *Vita* describes the divine punishment meted out on the traitorous woman, administered as she was in throes of cursing the very memory of her royal brother. During her brother's translation from his ignominious grave to Winchcombe abbey, Cwoenthryth, witnessing the celebratory scene, began to chant the imprecatory Psalm 108 backward as a form of curse:

Straightway, both her eyes, rooted out from their sockets, dropped upon the very page she was reading. That same psalter, adorned with silver, still shows the proof of this chastisement, stained on the same sentence with the blood of the fallen eye-balls.<sup>106</sup>

In *Journey Through Wales*, written over a century after *Vita*, Gerald relates a miracle in which a fornicating monk of Winchcombe, carrying a psalter in the abbey's procession for the feast of Kenelm, finds the psalter stuck to his hands until he repents his sin. Gerald identifies this psalter as that which bore the stains of Cwoenthryth's divine blinding and provides a summation of that event.<sup>107</sup> While that passage is a clear borrowing from *Vita*, that Gerald would seek to revive the narrative with a contemporary attribution of divine intervention suggests the story retained some importance in Winchcombe three centuries after the alleged event and a century after its documentation. This tale of the impure monk is unique to Gerald, as is the identification of the relic of the stained psalter that forever proclaimed Cwoenthryth's guilt. In contrast, his synopsis of the *Vita* narrative is not; the borrowing of *Vita* into most early Anglo-Norman histories is notable in the narrative transmission of the Kenelm *passio*. John of Worcester and William of Malmesbury, writing within decades of *Vita*, accepted the hagiographical narrative as it extended to the murder itself as a historical event.<sup>108</sup> Their entries for the innocent Kenelm's death at the behest of his wicked sister are precisely parallel to the *Vita* account. This can be extended to Gerald's contemporary Roger of Wendover, whose record of Kenelm's death is obviously built on the *Vita* tradition.<sup>109</sup> However, it is of note that Roger represents a culture that was becoming removed from that in which these hagiographies were authored. His portrayals of Cynethryth, Cwoenthryth, and Ælfthryth are such that it appears Roger understood their treachery, the dangers of female agency they exemplified, as matters of historical record.<sup>110</sup> Nonetheless, it remains that all these subsequent traditions are born of *Vita* and, as noted, substantial early evidence for Kenelm's cult is lacking.

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<sup>105</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Nun's Priest's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer* VII 3110-3121, ed. F.N. Robinson, 3rd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 257; Gerald of Wales, *Journey Through Wales*, 85; "St Kenelm," in *The South English Legendary*, eds. Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 1:279-290; Robert Boenig, "Chaucer and St. Kenelm," *Neophilologus* 84 (2000): 157-159.

<sup>106</sup> *Vita et miracula Kenelmi* 16.

<sup>107</sup> Gerald of Wales, *Journey Through Wales*, 85-86.

<sup>108</sup> *John of Worcester* 819; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum* i.95, ii.211.

<sup>109</sup> Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum* 819.

<sup>110</sup> Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum* 792, 819, 978.

However, Cwoenthryth's blinding does not stand without narrative precedent. In relating the decollation of S. Alban in his eighth-century *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede declares that, "as the martyr's head fell, the executioner's eyes fell out."<sup>111</sup> The striking imagery common to both narratives indicates that the hagiographers did not look to biblical narrative alone for exemplars.<sup>112</sup> It is of further note that *Vita* seems to have a preoccupation with the trope retributive blinding. Shortly after Cwoenthryth's punishment, the author relays the story of a thrifty merchant-woman who advised her town to continue trading on Kenelm's feast-day, upon which declaration her eyes likewise fell from her head.<sup>113</sup> In Cwoenthryth's punishment and that of the merchant-woman, we see the combination of two culturally familiar hagiographical motifs with literary precedents. The effect of tying God's retributive blinding to the figure of female treachery, or the exercise of female power, was to create a narrative powerful in its symbolism for an audience who subsequently carried it into regional folklore. The longevity of the Kenelm *passio* and its transmission into histories, chronicles, and vernacular traditions displays the author's ability to identify the conventions of a pre-existing hagiographical tradition and produce a narrative within a socially accessible framework.

## Conclusion

There can be little doubt that parallels in the portrayals of treacherous women in the lives of early medieval English royal martyrs are attributable to the commonalities of biblical motifs and social misogyny that have been under examination. However, the proximity of the event of Edward's murder to the zenith of eleventh-century English hagiography must not be underestimated. Edward was almost immediately eulogised and the tales of Ælfthryth's betrayal emerged within a generation of the events of the narrative. The "wicked queen" of *Passio* need not be a faithful representation of Ælfthryth to enter social consciousness and communal imagination. Identified with the failures of Æthelred's kingship, her characterisation became one of avarice and treachery that facilitated her son's rise to power through murder. It is likely that Ælfthryth's suspected crimes as exemplified by her characterisation within *Passio Eadwardi* provided a key inspiration for the depictions of the treacherous women in *Passio Æthelberhti* and *Vita et miracula Kenelmi*.<sup>114</sup> At the time of their authorship, Ælfthryth remained a historical figure within generational memory, as did the martyrdom of her stepson, and the troubled reign of her son Æthelred. For the hagiographers, as inheritors of both the Benedictine and Norman reforms, the exemplar of the traitorous Ælfthryth decried the wickedness of female power and the exemplar of Edward extolled the virtues of innocence. As her infidelity permeated the trope of the treacherous woman in English hagiography, so too did tenth- and eleventh-century political concerns and ecclesiastical anxieties enter the biographies of earlier saints.

Whatever her historical basis, the treacherous woman becomes little more than a cipher in the hands of the hagiographer. The characterisation is not subtle. Shallowly drawn

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<sup>111</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* 1.7, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 32–35.

<sup>112</sup> For an overview of cultural attitudes toward blinding in pre-Conquest England, and its literary manifestations, see Matthew Firth, "Allegories of sight: Blinding and power in late Anglo-Saxon England," *Cerae* 3 (2016): 1–33.

<sup>113</sup> *Vita et miracula Kenelmi* 20.

<sup>114</sup> Cubitt, "Sites and Sanctity," 67.

and without redeeming features, the very fact that the antagonist of the saints' life is a woman is intended to enhance their wickedness in contrast to the saint. In this way the "wicked queen" becomes little more than a narrative device. Yet this is but one aspect of the treacherous woman as a literary construct, and to read the characters as empty vessels informed only by narrative causality and authorial whim is overly simple. As antagonist to the boy-kings of English hagiography, hers was a character built around a framework of biblical exemplar, political commentary, and regional tradition. It may not be a character rich in complex motivation, but as a didactic exemplar within a religious biography, the treacherous woman is a rich metaphor tailored to an eleventh-century English audience. Biblical archetypes, clerical scholarship, and an inherent social misogyny unite in an expression of mistrust for female power, while in turn, local tradition and high politics combine in the specific character of the "wicked queen" of England. The unique character of the treacherous woman of English royal hagiography is an evident product of the social and religious milieu of eleventh-century England.