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Saint Brigit and Her Habits: Exploring Queerness in Early Medieval Ireland

Abstract

Saint Brigit's behavior and reception by society highlight an avenue by which women in the early medieval period could escape societal strictures, exercising agency over their bodies and their romantic choices, and carve out a distinct and unexpected place for themselves in a Christian patriarchal society. In Saint Brigit's case, this is especially demonstrated by the breadth of her portrayed power as not just a nun but a saint, her extreme resistance to marriage, and her frequent comparisons to men. Indeed, her hagiography, written by Cogitosus in the seventh century, positioned her as one of the three principal and earliest Irish saints, and the only one who is female. Given this, Saint Brigit's position, actions, and depiction by Cogitosus can be interpreted through the lens of queer theory to ask key questions regarding attitudes towards queerness in early medieval Ireland. In order to render the queerness of female sanctity acceptable in a patriarchal system, there were significant elements of compensation for the deviance from these societal norms in the depictions of female saints, such as hyperfemininity contrasting with contemporary masculine traits. This balance of deviance and compensation is most clear in hagiographies, texts where the saints and their actions were recorded and mediated for the explicit purpose of demonstrating sanctity. As Cogitosus's *Life of Saint Brigit* depicted a woman who not only stepped out of one social structure, that being secular, but also monastic ones, his portrayal of Saint Brigit demonstrates that within female sainthood, queerness was not only accepted, but a prerequisite and inherent feature worthy of veneration. By examining how scholars have used a lens of queerness and mediation to analyze key hagiographies first of saints more broadly, and then of female saints, and using these approaches to examine the inherently queer actions, positions, and roles found in Saint Brigit's *First Life*, we can gain a clearer view of societal views towards queerness during the early medieval period, and in early medieval Ireland in particular. In doing so, this thesis will help chip away at the monolithic view of the period, as well as the queer erasure within, demonstrating that queerness has always been a fundamental part of human society.

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Saint Brigit and Her Habits:
Exploring Queerness in Early Medieval Ireland

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Introduction

Shortly afterwards, when her parents wanted to betroth her to a man according to the custom of the world, Brigit, inspired from above and wanting to devote herself as a chaste virgin to God, went to the most holy bishop Mac Caille of blessed memory. Seeing her heavenly desire and modesty and seeing so great a love of chastity in this remarkable maiden, he placed the white veil and white garment over her venerable head.

Cogitosus's Life of Saint Brigit Chapter Two¹

In the opening chapters of Cogitosus's *Life of Saint Brigit*, Saint Brigit immediately bucks the norms of gender, sexuality, and romance, with both her refusal of marriage, as well as with her dedication to being a chaste virgin. We might expect condemnation for the deviance from these norms, yet rather, she is praised for them. Her behavior and reception by society highlight an avenue by which women in the early medieval period could escape societal strictures, exercising agency over their bodies and their romantic choices, and carve out a distinct and unexpected place for themselves in a Christian patriarchal society. In Saint Brigit's case, this is especially demonstrated by the breadth of her portrayed power as not just a nun but a saint, her extreme resistance to marriage, and her frequent comparisons to men. Indeed, her hagiography, written by Cogitosus in the seventh century, positioned her as one of the three principal and earliest Irish saints, and the only one who is female.²

Given this, Saint Brigit's position, actions, and depiction by Cogitosus can be interpreted through the lens of queer theory in order to ask key questions regarding attitudes towards queerness in early medieval Ireland. In order to render the queerness of female sanctity acceptable in a patriarchal system, there were significant elements of compensation for the deviance from these societal norms in the depictions of female saints, such as hyperfemininity

¹ Cogitosus, *Life of Saint Brigit*. Translated by Sean Connolly and J. M. Picard in "Cogitosus's 'Life of St. Brigit' Content and Value," *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117 (1987): 5–27, 14.

² Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 33-35, 580. The three principal Irish saints are Saint Brigit, Saint Patrick, and Saint Columba.

contrasting with contemporary masculine traits. This balance of deviance and compensation is most clear in hagiographies, texts where the saints and their actions were recorded and mediated for the explicit purpose of demonstrating sanctity. As Cogitosus's *Life of Saint Brigit* depicted a woman who not only stepped out of one social structure, that being secular, but also monastic ones, his portrayal of Saint Brigit demonstrates that within female sainthood, queerness was not only accepted, but a prerequisite and inherent feature worthy of veneration.

By examining how scholars have used a lens of queerness and mediation to analyze key hagiographies first of saints more broadly, and then of female saints, and using these approaches to examine the inherently queer actions, positions, and roles found in Saint Brigit's *First Life*, we can gain a clearer view of societal views towards queerness during the early medieval period, and in early medieval Ireland in particular. In doing so, this thesis will help chip away at the monolithic view of the period, as well as the queer erasure within, demonstrating that queerness has always been a fundamental part of human society.

Queering Saints

As scholars such as Paul Antony Hayward detail, sainthood in the early medieval period was particularly associated with the rise of the cult of saints.³ This practice entailed posthumous veneration of particular saints, especially martyrs, through physical associations with their dead body or the alleged place of the specific saint's remains. While by the end of the medieval period, the definition of sainthood became more standardized, with the pope being the only one with the power to declare sainthood, in the early medieval period we cannot define saints by

³ Paul Antony Hayward, "The Cult of Saints in Western Christendom: Demystifying the Role of Sanctity in Western Christendom," in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 115-119.

these more modern bureaucratic definitions, but rather by their behavior and norms which lead to popular acclaim rather than condemnation.⁴

A key tool for the development of a saint's cult was the production of hagiographic works depicting the miraculous and unique nature of each saint, making the genre of hagiography, or holy biography, the primary lens through which this saintly queerness is visible. As Robert Bartlett details, hagiographies were meant to make a saint look as good as possible, as they were written by those who might benefit from the association.⁵ These works, as Bartlett shows, highlight the various patterns of behavior seen across saints in the period which set them apart from both mainstream and monastic social structures. Saints tend to perform miracles, where God has used them as a conduit for divine action in the world. Some saints had visions, such as Saint Teresa of Ávila and Saint Faustina.⁶ Others demonstrated moments of reformation/transformation, like Saint Augustine and Saint Monica.⁷ Many partook in intense prayer to the point of physical detriment, such as religious anorexia in the case of Saint Catherine of Siena.⁸ Still others participated in extensive charity with the idea of giving up worldly goods in the name of God, such as Saint Raymond Nonnatus, who spent all of his money freeing enslaved Christians and then, when there was no money left, exchanged himself.⁹ These were not mutually exclusive categories as well, with many saints embodying a mixture. As shown, even

⁴ Michael Lipka, "Papal Saints: Once a given, Now Extremely Rare." Pew Research Center, April 24, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2014/04/24/papal-saints-once-a-given-now-extremely-rare/#:~:text=By%20the%2012th%20century%2C%20the,to%20declare%20someone%20a%20saint.>

⁵ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 512, 525, 541.

⁶ National Catholic Register, "These saints had visions of heaven and hell and revealed what they saw." Accessed February 09, 2024. <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/saints-who-saw-heaven-and-hell>.

⁷ St. Margaret Mary Catholic Church, "St. Monica and St. Augustine," <https://stmargaretmary.org/st-monica-and-st-augustine/>.

⁸ F.M. Galassi et al., "St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380 AD): One of the Earliest Historic Cases of Altered Gustatory Perception in Anorexia Mirabilis," *Neurological Sciences*. 2018 May; 39(5): 939-940.

⁹ Oxford Reference, "Raymund Nonnatus." in *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

within sainthood there is diversity in normative behaviors, with each in its own right inherently placing saints outside of key structures and hierarchies.

Despite the presence and veneration of these unusual actors, there is an often monolithic and assumed understanding of medieval norms, wherein there was no way to break social hierarchies without major social condemnation; ironically, saints are frequently understood within this framework, as those who most greatly ascribe to hierarchies and norms. William Manchester, in his popular book *A World Lit Only By Fire: The Medieval Mind and the Renaissance, Portrait of an Age*, demonstrates common ideas about the medieval period as uniform and inhospitable to any who deviated from that uniformity, saying, “[a]ny innovation was inconceivable; to suggest the possibility of one would have invited suspicion” and to be suspect was to be doomed.¹⁰ But Manchester’s view of the Middle Ages is not a universally held one. Over the last thirty years, medievalists like Richard Cleaver and others have begun to push back, aiming to demonstrate that the medieval period was anything but monolithic or uniform.¹¹

In particular, because of the way they inherently break these norms and defy contemporary standards and modern expectations about the medieval world, saints act as an especially good lens for queering this period and emphasizing that these assumed norms need reevaluation and queering. Drawing from the literature of Judith Butler and other queer theorists, queerness broadly occurs when one breaks mainstream social norms, especially in relation to gender, sexuality, and romance.¹² The field of queer theory arose in the 1990s, with its development largely attributed to Gloria Anzaldúa, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and

¹⁰ William Manchester, *A World Lit Only By Fire: The Medieval Mind and the Renaissance, Portrait of an Age*. (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1992), 23.

¹¹ Richard Cleaver, *Know My Name: A Gay Liberation Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

¹² Forrest C. Helvie, “Queer Studies” in *Handbook of Medieval Studies: Terms - Methods - Trends* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 1142-1154.

Teresa de Laurentis, in response to not only changing societal attitudes to queerness, but also to scholarship which asserted the socially constructed nature of sexuality and questioned the value systems associated with it, such as Michel Foucault's 1976 *The History of Sexuality* and Gayle Rubin's 1984 "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality"; it was Teresa de Laurentis who organized the first queer theory conference in 1990.¹³ Within the field of queer theory, even more recent is that of medieval queer theory; some of the key figures in this discourse are Robert Sturges, Susan Crane, and Dorsey Armstrong, whose work questions the queer erasure in these monolithic norms and assumptions.¹⁴ As these scholars demonstrate, the period showcases both queerness and the tools by which it was mediated, with the constant push and pull of deviation and compensation becoming the standard for sanctity, particularly as seen through hagiographies, even in the less standardized and bureaucratic monastic life of early medieval Ireland.

Throughout the early medieval period, hagiography as a genre grew and developed, further becoming the core lens for understanding saints' lives, in which one can see a set of accepted practices and characteristics that are, again, typically associated with saints, which highlight their otherness and queerness.¹⁵ Consequently, hagiographies not only render queerness not just acceptable, but something godly and powerful. Within this conceptual framework, saints are inherently and uniquely queer in the sense that they stepped outside of societal norms in ways we might expect to be considered unacceptable, yet resulted in veneration. They stepped out of secular social structures of the day, in many cases denying marriage and abandoning life in

¹³ Indiana University Bloomington, "Philosophy: Introduction to Queer Theory," <https://guides.libraries.indiana.edu/c.php?g=995240&p=8361766>; Helvie, "Queer Studies," 1142-1154.

¹⁴ Helvie, "Queer Studies," 1149-1153.

¹⁵ For a more detailed explanation of the creation and types of historiographies, see Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 19-26, 504-586.

secular society, and this queerness, rather than a flaw, was seen as a godly quality. Of course not everyone who avoided marriage was a saint. Ecclesiastical and especially monastic life could theoretically offer an ‘acceptable’ path to escape certain social norms in the secular context, but saints went even further; God was their leader, not any other authority, and thus they transcend hierarchies, particularly in an early medieval context, to the greatest extent possible.

Saints operate on a fine line between veneration and condemnation with how unusual their behavior is, with a pivotal aspect being the acceptance that they are acting as a conduit of God. A key example is Saint Willibald, famous for his pilgrimages to the Holy Land between 722 and 729.¹⁶ Indeed, it was Saint Willibald’s wandering that made him worthy of sainthood, with his hagiography even called the *Hodoeporicon of Saint Willibald*, ‘hodoeporicon’ meaning ‘relation of a voyage.’¹⁷ And yet, by the very rules that Saint Willibald lived by as a Benedictine monk, this wandering should have earned him condemnation. In chapter one of the *Rule of St. Benedict*, there are numerous categorizations of monks. Saint Benedict described the gyrary monks, which Saint Willibald would fall under, as follows: “[a]ll their lives they wander in different countries.... They are restless, servants to the seduction of their own will and appetites... It is better to be silent as to their wretched life style than to speak.”¹⁸ This excerpt highlights the deeds of Saint Willibald as something expressly condemned in the monastic rule and yet in this specific case Saint Willibald’s sanctity makes them not just acceptable but praiseworthy. Saint Willibald can thus be understood through the lens of queerness as defined by Butler: a person who breaks social norms. Interestingly, his hagiographer, Hunneberc, is the only

¹⁶ Hunneberc of Heidenheim, *The Hodoeporicon of Saint Willibald*, translated by C. H. Talbot, in *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints’ Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, edited by Thomas F.X. Noble and Thomas Head (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 141-64.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Anthony C. Meisel and M.L. del Mastro. *The Rule of St. Benedict*. (New York: Doubleday, 1975),43-47.

known female author of a hagiography in the Early Middle Ages, thus additionally pushing boundaries and defying norms, potentially adding another layer of implicit queerness to the *Hodoeporicon of Saint Willibald*.¹⁹

Just as Saint Willibald transcended the rules of Saint Benedict, and demonstrates the utility of this broader definition of queerness, there are additionally a litany of saints whose behavior we might associate with more modern definitions, for which we might expect condemnation. The queer theorist Cleaver details this in his book *Know My Name: A Gay Liberation Theology*, where he examines queer relationships within the Church, particularly sanctity such as that between Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and Saint Malachy of Armagh. Cleaver's work, while still largely focused on male love in the Church, came about in the 1990s, when queer theory was still in its infancy, and thus is a foundational text in the queering of not only the Church, but also the medieval period. His work shows that Saint Bernard and Saint Malachy were not an exception, but rather represented another form of queerness accessible through sanctity. Cleaver looks at these traditions of queerness through analysis of letters, writing, "shortly before Malachy died in Bernard's arms. Bernard's account makes deeply romantic reading for a modern gay man. 'Oscula rui,' Bernard says of their reunion: 'I showered him with kisses'," though Cleaver asserts that it was highly unlikely they would have broken their vow of celibacy through sex.²⁰ Furthermore, in his queering of the two, Cleaver employs the accounts of Saint Bernard holding Saint Malachy as he died, wearing Saint Malachy's habits the remainder of his life, and eventually being buried next to him. These examples of more modern conceptions of queer romance demonstrate a context in which queerness was considered acceptable and even, apparently, documented without reproach.

¹⁹ Huneberc of Heidenheim, *The Hodoeporicon of Saint Willibald*, 141-164.

²⁰ Cleaver, *Know My Name: A Gay Liberation Theology*, 14-15, 123.

Yet, while these might appear to us in the modern context as explicit examples of queerness which were ignored and accepted, this does not mean that expressions of queerness were off the Church's radar, but rather that their main concern was related to sexual acts, seen in the English "Penitential of Theodore."²¹ Produced in Canterbury in 670 by Theodore the Archbishop of Canterbury, the penitential included numerous descriptions of sexual acts between men, such as in section *II: Of Fornication* "4. He who after his twentieth year defiles himself with a male shall do penance for ten years. 5. A man who commits fornication with a male shall do penance for ten years. 6. Sodomites shall do penance for seven years, and the effeminate man as an adultress," before continuing to detail four more descriptions of sexual activities between men.²² Concerns over homosexuality amongst the clergy demonstrate that the Church and society knew of it and was common enough that rules against it had to be written. Despite this, the veneration of saints compensated for and allowed for relationships which we might conceptualize as queer, recontextualizing them into an acceptable framework, such as that of Saint Bernard and Saint Malachy.

Historians have used sanctity as a key tool for queering the period, due to the inherent queerness of saints, with their breaking of social norms in both secular and monastic contexts and the veneration of them for it. By this broad definition, all saints are queer in some way, otherwise they would not be worshiped. Beyond this broad definition, it is noteworthy that many saints intersected with more traditional definitions of queerness centered on sexuality and gender. And within both of these frameworks no saint is more queer than a female saint.

²¹ Theodore of Canterbury. "The Penitential of Theodore" In *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal "Libri Poenitentiales" and Selections From Related Documents*. Translated and edited by John T. McNeill, 179-215. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 185.

²² Ibid.

Queering Female Saints

While the field of queer theory has expanded into the medieval period, much of the scholarship, such as that of Cleaver, focuses primarily on male figures. Yet, as scholars have demonstrated, and as this thesis aims to further demonstrate, queerness is not only likely when speaking on female saints, but rather a defining feature. The definition of queerness applied to all saints above is deliberately broad, designed to highlight the overarching nature of queerness in the period, but when looking at female saints a more specialized definition comes into focus. Drawing again on Judith Butler and medieval queer theorists, such as Maeve Callan, I define female queerness as the act of defying the romantic/sexual, and gender norms of the time for those perceived as women (this includes the potential for what we may now consider asexuality).²³ Following this definition, female sainthood is inherently and particularly queer, due to the rejection of norms such as marriage and motherhood, as well as of male companionship overall. And while female monastic communities might offer a new set of norms that rendered this somewhat acceptable, female saints pushed the boundaries of even these communities, using the authority granted by their relationship to God in order to further transcend norms and hierarchies.

While queerness was implicit to female sanctity, as with male saints, sexual expressions of female queerness were also a concern of the Church. Once again, this can be seen in the English “Penitential of Theodore.”²⁴ The penitential counts masturbation and sexual acts between women as deserving of the same penance, “12. If a woman practices vice with a woman, she shall do penance for three years. 13. If she practices solitary vice, she shall do penance for the same period.” Yet adultery was placed as needing a higher penalty, “[s]he who

²³ Helvie, “Queer Studies,” 1142-1154.

²⁴ Theodore of Canterbury, “The Penitential of Theodore: Of Fornication,” 185.

has a husband deserves a greater penalty if she commits fornication,” and oral sex as needing the highest penalty.²⁵ This gives the idea of the perception of women engaging in sexual acts with each other as less condemned than those who were adulterers. Yet, they were still condemned, with the main focus and concern being on the idea of maximizing reproduction, as demonstrated potentially by its equivalent penalization to female masturbation. The use of “vice” to describe it as well as the use of “penance,” demonstrates a pejorative view of sexual acts between women. The existence of related consequences contributes to the idea that this society, or at least those practicing Christianity and those enforcing related social norms, believed that these acts deserved punishment and were fundamentally wrong, although to a lesser degree than we might expect. The mere existence of codes penalizing female queer behaviors, like male ones, demonstrated the knowledge and practice of them. However, while sexual acts between women were condemned, hagiographies show us where and how queerness was accepted and mediated into something venerable.

While every saint appears to use the loophole of acting as a conduit of God, as a tool to mitigate their queerness, female saints particularly do so. As with all saints, the lives of female saints are depicted most clearly in hagiographies, and the vast majority of hagiographers were men. Because of this fact, it is impossible to access the actual lived experiences of these women due to the inherent mediation by male writers; this is further exacerbated by the reality that women were largely illiterate in the period and very scarcely left behind their own writing, as male saints may have.²⁶ As Amy Hollywood argues, in her chapter of the book *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, “contemporary accounts of medieval women’s ascetic practice may tell us more about how medieval men understood women’s sanctity than about

²⁵ Ibid., 185-186.

²⁶ Shirley Kersey, “Medieval Education of Girls and Women,” *Educational Horizons* 58, no. 4 (1980): 188–92.

medieval women themselves.”²⁷ Nevertheless, as demonstrated, it is the way that these saints are depicted by those who dictate the norms that offers the best way to look at how society viewed queerness at the time.

Just as with male saints, female saints fell into specific roles, in their veneration and hagiographical presentation, the most important of which were martyrs and virgins.²⁸ Examples of these roles are evident across Christendom, particularly through the cult of female saints, such as with an altar of relics, “in honor of the holy virgins,” in St. Maximin, Trier. This includes Saint Brigit, an interesting example as the only one who was not a martyr.²⁹ “And yet even these specific roles cannot fully hide the potential queerness of female saints. As demonstrated by Margaret Cotter-Lynch’s in her article, “Rereading Leoba, or Hagiography as Compromise,” Saint Leoba of the *Life of Leoba*, is an example of a virgin saint, as well as of the often paradoxical theme of maiden and wife/mother.³⁰ Cotter-Lynch highlights how the *Life of Leoba* exemplifies the queer compensation/deviation balancing act particularly embodied by both female saints and their hagiographers, writing that “any given hagiography represents a compromise between competing claims of historical fact, generic convention, ecclesiastical practice, theology, and the personal ideas and biases of the author. All of these constraints, in addition, are historically contingent, in that what counts as relevant fact, generic expectation, etc. will be to a certain degree particular to the time and place of textual production.”³¹

In the mid to late-eighth century, Saint Leoba was raised for monastic life, and particularly well educated and literate, and while this was not necessarily as unusual in the

²⁷ Amy Hollywood, “Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographer.” *In Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, edited by Catherine M. Mooney, 78–98 (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 83.

²⁸ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 150.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 448.

³⁰ Margaret Cotter-Lynch, “Rereading Leoba, or Hagiography as Compromise,” *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 46, No. 1. 2010, 14-37.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

context of elite and religious women such as Saint Leoba, it did set her apart from the vast amount of women in the period.³² Not only is she expressly detailed as a holy virgin, but also as the spouse of Christ, a role which men, no matter how holy, could not fill. As her hagiographer Rudolf of Fulda wrote, “[b]efore I begin to write of the life of the blessed and venerable virgin Leoba, I invoke her spouse, Christ, our Lord and Saviour, who gave her the courage to overcome the powers of evil, to inspire me with eloquence sufficient to describe her outstanding merits.”³³ Saint Leoba was depicted as a conduit of God, something which has appeared to adequately compensate for the queerness of male sainthood, yet this excerpt demonstrates the idea that women needed even more compensation to transcend these hierarchies.

This adds to the multilayered mitigation of gender deviance in female sanctity; these women were depicted as imitating Christ, a man, yet were then depicted as his bride. As scholars such as Cotter-Lynch and Hollywood examine, this effort to depict saints like Saint Leoba as the spouse of Christ worked to place them in some normative context of social hierarchy, embodying the gender norm of a wife.³⁴ Consequently this helped compensate for the queerness female saints embody. Yet even within this imposed hierarchy, there is built in queerness, as this marriage is a sexless one with a non-present entity. This tool of mitigation itself has various components and implications, as Callan notes in her book *Sisters: Gender, Sanctity, and Power in Medieval Ireland*, asserting that men highlight the “bodily and mystical” achievements of women and placed them as the brides of Christ, such as seen with Saint Leoba, “whereas woman themselves downplayed their bodies and sought to imitate Christ rather than simply wed him,

³² Rudolf of Fulda, *The Life of Saint Leoba*, translated by C. H. Talbot, *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, accessed January 2024, 188-92; Kersey, “Medieval Education of Girls and Women,” 188–92.

³³ Rudolf of Fulda, *Life of Leoba*, 188-92.

³⁴ Hollywood, “Inside Out,” 79, 98; Cotter-Lynch, “Rereading Leoba, or Hagiography as Compromise,” 14-36.

encouraging others to strive to do the same.”³⁵ This dissonance seen with the portrayals of female monastic figures as ‘brides of Christ’ is not unique to Saint Leoba, adding additional complexity in unpacking the experiences of these women.

The love of God and Christ was an important tool of mitigation which often compensated for the deviance found in abandoning social structures, or rather what we might consider social expectations of women; this is not only the case with the “brides of Christ” rhetoric, something also demonstrated in the *Life of Leoba*, “[s]he took no pleasure in aimless jests and wasted no time on girlish romances, but, fired by the love of Christ, fixed her mind always on reading or hearing the word of God.”³⁶ While here she rejected the idea of “girlish romances” it was made acceptable by her “love of Christ.” Her humility and love of God in conjunction were also used to offset her deviance in being a female leader, “[s]he presented the virtue of humility with such care that, though she had been appointed to govern others because of her holiness and wisdom, she believed that she was the least of all.”³⁷

Humility acted not only as a counterweight to power, but also resistance, a core aspect of female sanctity. Scholars such as Hollywood, detail that the surviving medieval writings of female saints, like Saint Beatrice of Nazareth, emphasize resistance in many ways to these devaluations and monolithic descriptions, such as through emphasis of their strength in religiosity and religious study over bodily achievements, furthering the idea of compensation in the broader early medieval Christian hagiographical tradition; Hollywood highlights that “[t]heir resistance, paradoxically, generated an early version of that interiorized, disembodied subject often identified today with masculinity,” explicitly demonstrating yet another manifestation of

³⁵ Maeve Callan, *Sacred Sisters: Gender, Sanctity, and Power in Medieval Ireland (Hagiography Beyond Tradition)*, 1st ed, (Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 19.

³⁶ Rudolf of Fulda, *Life of Leoba*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

the gender queerness of many female saints.³⁸ This resistance is supported in the story of Saint Canir the Pious, in the Irish *Life of Senán* from the Book of Lismore, which gives another example of an Irish female saint mediated within the hagiography of a man.³⁹ The story goes that when a man attempted to deny Saint Canir entry to an island due to her gender, she dug her heels in, saying “[y]ou’re not better than Christ. Christ came to redeem women just as much as men. No less did Christ suffer for the sake of women than for the sake of men. Women served with and ministered unto Christ and his apostles. No less than man do women enter the heavenly kingdom. Why, then, should you not admit women to this island?”⁴⁰ She did die almost immediately following her arrival at her resurrection site after receiving the eucharist, a usual arc in Irish medieval tales, and her argument was softened in adaptations of the tale, such as in the *Codex Salmanticensis*, which took away her name and power.⁴¹ In this depiction, her deviance, in the form of disobedience, was compensated by her calling upon the word of God, as well as by her death.

Returning again to the deviance of Saint Leoba, she additionally demonstrated the disobedience noted amongst saints when, despite being ordered by the archbishop to never leave her monastery, a standard set for any woman “who wishes to renounce the world and enter the cloister,” she travels to the Carolingian court and various monasteries.⁴² Her dedication as a conduit for God was continually emphasized, “[t]he blessed virgin, however, persevered unwaveringly in the work of God. She had no desire to gain earthly possessions but only those of heaven, and she spent all her energies on fulfilling her vows.”⁴³ Saint Leoba is only one of a

³⁸ Hollywood, “Inside Out,” 79, 98.

³⁹ Callan, *Sacred Sisters*, 15.

⁴⁰ Callan, *Sacred Sisters*, 15-16. This is meant to have occurred in the sixth century, although the earliest mention found is in the fifteenth century.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴² Rudolf of Fulda, *Life of Leoba*; Cotter-Lynch, “Rereading Leoba, or Hagiography as Compromise,” 14-36.

⁴³ Rudolf of Fulda, *Life of Leoba*.

multitude of early medieval female saints whose life and hagiography exemplified this subversion, with others such as Saint Liutberga, whose hagiographer detailed that, “she asserted that this happened by divine will because she had vowed to be a pilgrim and God, to whom she had given herself in her mind, had made it possible.”⁴⁴ Saint Leoba and Saint Liutberga are representative of a larger trend seen in Continental and Irish accounts of female saints. But the conflict between female sanctity and the norms and expectations of the Church goes back even further than the early medieval period, to the first hagiography of a woman, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*.⁴⁵

In Saint Perpetua, we see a new type of saint, a female martyr. Martyred in 203 CE in Carthage (in present-day Tunisia), for refusing to renounce her faith, Brent D. Shaw has argued that the life and death of Perpetua’s served as the blueprint for later female saints and their hagiographies.⁴⁶ Her hagiography is not only the first of a woman, it is also a rare first person account, written during her imprisonment though finished and edited by a male scribe at some point after her death, thus continuing the mediation by men which is unavoidable in these sources.

Her queerness is evident in her deviation from norms of motherhood, matrimony, and parental respect, when she left behind both her husband and newborn, while rebelling against her father’s orders that she renounce her faith; however, her death in the name of God compensated for this deviance and allowed her to be venerated rather than condemned for her breaking of social norms. As Shaw demonstrates, there were also explicit depictions of gender queerness, in

⁴⁴ *The Life of Saint Liutberga*. Translated by Jo Ann McNamara. *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, accessed January 2024, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/liutberga.asp>

⁴⁵ Saint Perpetua, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, translated and edited by Thomas J. Heffernan, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴⁶ Brent D. Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” *Past & Present*, May, 1993, no. 139, (1993): 3-45.

both the definition established here as well as more traditional conceptions of queerness. In chapter ten, there is a particularly relevant section where Saint Perpetua had a vision in which she dreamt of transforming into a man, “And I was stripped naked, and I became a man. And my supporters began to rub me with oil, as they are accustomed to do for a match... This Egyptian, if he defeats this woman, will kill her with the sword, but if she defeats him, she shall receive this branch.”⁴⁷ This demonstrates deviation from her gender, especially with the use of female pronouns despite the assertion that she was a man in this vision. This has interesting implications on ideas of gender, with the potential possibility of one being both a man and woman or overall a different conception of gender than a binary. As it is the earliest hagiography of a woman, it set the precedent and standard for all future female hagiographies, and this standard is implicitly queer, consequently making it almost a built in requirement and facet of female sanctity from its inception.

As shown, from the first hagiography of a woman in third century Africa to those across the medieval period, there is a greater inherent queerness of female sanctity, and as hagiographies make it acceptable and venerable, female queerness is most clear in hagiographies. When further applying this to an Irish context, it is noteworthy that, as scholars such as Kim McCone and Callan detail, Ireland has distinct cultural elements in their hagiographical traditions compared to other Christian cultures, especially rooted in its pre-Cristian Celtic culture and deities.⁴⁸ Thus, to examine attitudes towards female queerness in early medieval Ireland, it is

⁴⁷ Saint Perpetua, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 130.

⁴⁸ Kim McCone, *An Introduction to Early Irish Saints' Lives. The Maynooth review* 11 (1984): 26–59; Callan, *Sacred Sisters*, 27; T.M. Charles-Edwards, "Early Irish Saints' Cults and Their Constituencies," *Ériu* 54, no. 1 (2004), 82-92.

most effective to look at the first Irish female saint, whose hagiography was written in the period, that being Saint Brigit in Cogitosus's *Life of Saint Brigit*.⁴⁹

Cogitosus's *Life of Saint Brigit* demonstrates that queerness was not only present in his depictions of Saint Brigit, but female sainthood and sanctity overall, as a requirement and inherent factor. While this queerness was present through deviance from both secular and monastic norms and hierarchies, hagiographies acted as a tool of mediation, using a counter-weight of compensation, to both defuse this deviance and even make it revered. The presence of this queerness and its veneration go against common conceptions of the period and attitudes towards queerness, demonstrating a need for the application of a queer lens to the medieval world on a much larger scale. This is not to say that facets of queerness were not condemned, as sexual acts between same-sex participants were expressly so; yet, this does change our understandings of not only Saint Brigit, but queer women in early medieval Ireland and queerness within Christianity, as well as how that queerness was made acceptable.

Queering Cogitosus & Saint Brigit

As scholars including Bartlett and McCone detail, Saint Brigit has various origin stories, but the standard one is that in Cogitosus's *Life of Saint Brigit*, where she was born to dairy farmers in Ireland.⁵⁰ Despite her parents wanting to marry her off, she pursued a religious life, known for her chastity, generosity, and piety from childhood.⁵¹ Her female sanctity, hagiography, and Irish origin all come together to create a type of queerness formed within a specific period and society. While Cogitosus lived in the early to late 600s and Saint Brigit allegedly from ~451-525, that is a relatively close period of time in the context of the

⁴⁹ Cogitosus, "Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit'"; Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 33-35, 580.

⁵⁰ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 33-35; Cogitosus, "Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit'"; McCone, *An Introduction to Early Irish Saints' Lives*, 26-59.

⁵¹ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 33; Cogitosus, "Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit'."

scholarship, particularly as both existed in the earlier end of the early medieval period.⁵² While there are later surviving hagiographies on Saint Brigit, Cogitosus account of her life is the earliest surviving Irish hagiography on a female saint, and one of three of the principal Irish saints lives, consequently making it an excellent example of not only a female saint, but one who was particularly unique among Irish saints and, as we shall see by examining the text, also one who was particularly queer.⁵³ Thus, it provides a prime place to start the queering of women in early medieval Ireland.

Cogitosus was an Irish monk, arguably most known for his *Vitae Sanctae Bridae* (Life of Saint Brigit), written in ~650.⁵⁴ Bartlett details that Cogitosus's connections to Kildare, where Saint Brigit is alleged to have been abbess, gave him greater motivation to boast of the connection and the idea that she lay in rest at Kildare, with her relics.⁵⁵ While there are other places Saint Brigit is rumored to be more accurately associated with than Kildare, that is where she is typically worshiped, seen through the fire which is kept alive there, tended exclusively by women.⁵⁶ Cogitosus attributed her as having been the Abbess of Kildare and for founding two monasteries, one for men and one for women, emphasizing her uniqueness in that regard as well.⁵⁷ This hagiographical association of a saint and their power over a place follows suit with the other two principal Irish saints, Saint Patrick with Armagh and Saint Columba with Iona.⁵⁸

⁵² "Saint Brigid of Ireland | Biography, Kildare, Patron Saint, Cross, & Facts | Britannica,"

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Brigit-of-Ireland>; Sean Connolly and J.-M. Picard, "Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit' Content and Value," *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117 (1987), 5-10.

⁵³ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 33-35; for a greater analysis of the lives of Saint Brigit, see McCone, *An Introduction to Early Irish Saints' Lives*, 26-59.

⁵⁴ Cogitosus, "Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit'."

⁵⁵ Charles-Edwards, "Early Irish Saints' Cults and Their Constituencies," 82-92; Hayward, "The Cult of Saints in Western Christendom," 115-119; Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 32-35, 512; McCone, *An Introduction to Early Irish Saints' Lives*. 29-30.

⁵⁶ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 33-35, 613-614.

⁵⁷ Cogitosus, "Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit'."

⁵⁸ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 29-35, 512.

Saint Brigit's hagiography and the motivations behind its creation came with various distinctly Irish cultural influences. As Bartlett details, Cogitosus wrote this work at a time when Christianity had been in Ireland for only two hundred years and the old deities were not completely forgotten, giving motivation to have a saint whose miracles and associations have significant overlap with the pre-Christian goddess Brigid, with some scholars arguing that Saint Brigit never existed and was rather a christianized version of the goddess.⁵⁹ T.M. Charles-Edward asserts that this is part of the broader Irish tradition of pre-Christian influence seen in early medieval Irish hagiographies and highlights another aspect of complexity which Cogitosus's *Life of Saint Brigit* presents, in addition to her queerness.⁶⁰

While Cogitosus's *Life of Saint Brigit* may have avoided overt sexual depictions of queerness in early medieval Ireland, there are other texts which help contextualize and fill in those gaps. When looking at the broader Irish tradition of and approach to queerness comparatively, an overt sexual example may be in "Niall Frossach's True Judgement" in the Book of Leinster; the story is of the eighth century Irish King Niall, in which a woman came to him after falling pregnant despite not having sexual relations with a man, only a married woman.⁶¹ There are undeniable and unmasked depictions of female sexual relations as seen with terms and phrases such as: "playful mating with a woman," "she put it into your womb in the tumbling..." where the woman in question, rather than denying it says she has "not known guilt with a man for many years now." The king did not penalize the women involved, challenging ideas of a monolithic attitude to queerness in the medieval period, as this was transcribed by an Irish ecclesiastic figure in the 1100s, four centuries later than the "Penitentials of Theodore."

⁵⁹ Ibid., 32-35, 613-614; Callan, *Sacred Sisters*, 85.

⁶⁰ Charles-Edwards, "Early Irish Saints' Cults and Their Constituencies," 82-92; Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 613-614.

⁶¹ Dan M. Wiley, "Niall Frossach's True Judgement (in the Book of Leinster)," *Ériu* 55 (2005): 19-36.

While tales like “Niall Frossach’s True Judgement” provide valuable context on attitudes towards queerness in medieval Ireland, the best way to access attitudes towards female queerness in the early medieval period remains hagiography.

The Analysis of Cogitosus’s *Life of Saint Brigit*

This established queerness as embedded in sanctity, Irish culture, and the period makes examining female queerness through the earliest texts of an Irish female saint, Cogitosus’s *Life of Saint Brigit*, particularly valuable. As Cogitosus was part of the population dictating and sharing social norms, the way he used compensation to make the deviance of queerness acceptable helps demonstrate potential social attitudes towards it, consequently helping to address questions of queerness in early medieval Ireland. These depictions of queerness will be categorized into deviation from sexual/romantic and gender norms of the period. This categorization helps examine the ways in which these depictions manifested and were mediated in Cogitosus’s *Life of Saint Brigit* through compensation for deviance. This analysis will explore how this mediation was necessary to make queerness acceptable and venerated in the period and context.

Sexual acts between women were the aspect of queerness most clearly condemned by the Church. However, there are still depictions of queerness which defy the norms of sexuality one might expect condemnation for in this society, such as deviance from the norms of romantic and sexual involvement with men. These moments in the *Life of Saint Brigit* help to give a sense both of how queerness might have manifested for women in early medieval Ireland and the tools and tactics used by men like Cogitosus to make them appear less ‘frightening’ or ‘unnatural’ and instead celebrated. While Cogitosus’s *Life of Saint Brigit* lacks one type of queerness (explicit

depictions of sexual acts), that does not diminish its value for queering and exposing tensions surrounding female queerness in early medieval Ireland.

It is important to note that the romance and sexuality are not mutually exclusive, however, as romance and sexuality are particularly interrelated in the *Life of Saint Brigit*, they are examined here in tandem. Examples of the expected norms in these areas are particularly detailed in the *Early Irish Penitentials*, such as in the section “Of the will of the maiden or of the father in marriage,” which states, “[w]hat the father wishes, the maiden shall do, since the head of the woman is the man. But the will of the maiden is to be inquired after by the father, since ‘God left man in the hand of his own counsel’”; Saint Brigit demonstrates direct deviance from that cultural and religious norm by disobeying her father’s plan to marry her off.⁶² This is not to say that Saint Brigit could not have had attraction to men or that she had attraction to women, she may not have been attracted to anyone, but the depictions of her extreme desire to stay chaste and unmarried deviated from the established norms of sexuality and romance, thus demonstrating queerness.

Her sexual and romantic deviance is particularly evident in her eternal chastity, which she insisted on maintaining, even in the face of her father; nevertheless we can also see how Cogitosus goes about defusing and compensating for these characteristics. She will never fulfill the norms of being with a man sexually or romantically but according to Cogitosus her love of God makes this acceptable. This is evident from the second chapter, when the bishop veiled her after “[s]eeing her heavenly desire and modesty and seeing so great a love of chastity in this

⁶² “Early Irish Penitential Documents.” In *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents*, translated and edited by John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, 75-168 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 85.

remarkable maiden”;⁶³ here a “love of chastity” counters the idea of not wanting to have sex with a man, in the name of God. Cogitosus even went as far as saying “chosen by God, the girl was by character totally self-restrained and chaste....” so not only was she chaste, but even chosen by God to be so, thus circumventing her obligation to the norms of romance and sexuality. Cogitosus did not stop here, extensively mentioning Saint Brigit’s chastity, virginity, and maidenhood; her exaltation as “the most holy maiden” is a common theme, continually helping to offset these moments of deviance as something holy. Romantic deviance also comes in chapter two, in which she ran to a bishop when her parents wanted to marry her off to a man “inspired from above and wanting to devote herself as a chaste virgin to God.”⁶⁴ With this, she deviated from the expected norm of wanting male companionship, compensated instead by the idea that God rather is her male companion and authority. While Cogitosus’s depictions of Saint Brigit demonstrate queerness, scholars such as McKenzie Stephenson have done further romantic queering of Saint Brigit, specifically concerning her relationship with another woman, Saint Darlughdach.⁶⁵

The compensation of this deviance is omnipresent, with Cogitosus detailing her “[k]neeling humbly before God and the bishop as well as before the altar and offering her virginal crown to almighty God, she touched with her hand the wooden base on which the alter rested. And to commemorate her unsullied virtue, this wood flourishes fresh and green to the present day as if it had not been cut down and stripped of its bark but was attached to its root. And to this day it rids all the faithful of afflictions and diseases.”⁶⁶ Not only was her virginity

⁶³ Cogitosus, “Cogitosus’s ‘Life of St Brigit,’” 14.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ For more on Saint Brigid and Saint Darlughdach, see McKenzie Stephenson, “Those Things that are Divine: A Brief History of Lesbian-Like Relationships in the Middle Ages.” PhD diss. (Austin Peay State University, 2023).

⁶⁶ Cogitosus, “Cogitosus’s ‘Life of St Brigit,’” 14.

and rejection of men celebrated, but it was so special that it commanded nature to make the wood a healing object, and consequently outweighed the deviation from sexual norms.

Beyond the refusal to engage in standard sexual and romantic norms, Cogitosus's *Life of Saint Brigit* both depicted and defused acts of deviance from standard gender norms, painting a picture of queerness mediated via sanctity and hagiographic veneration. A core element of this gender queerness visible in Saint Brigit is the co-opting of male gender norms. As Saint Perpetua demonstrated, the blueprint of a female hagiography has gender queer aspects, and Cogitosus's depictions of Saint Brigit are gender nonconforming in multiple ways: foundationally with her female sanctity; the power she is depicted as having in a patriarchal society; and comparisons to men. While the queerness in the categories of romance and sexuality are evident, that in the category of gender is even clearer.

As with her sexual and romantic deviance, a key theme of gender deviance is her disobedience to male authority.⁶⁷ As noted above, Cogitosus started her story with this deviance, with her refusal to marry, despite the fact that “her parents wanted to betroth her to a man according to the custom of the world.”⁶⁸ While this demonstrates disobedience as well as the acknowledgement that she was deviating from the accepted norms of being a wife and mother, it was compensated by the approval of her actions by the bishop; the bishop was a man working within a hierarchy which transcends that of her parents, as well as God, the ultimate authority. In the first chapter of Cogitosus's *Life of Saint Brigit*, he detailed that, “[s]he too was meant to carry out this work, in the same way as other women were accustomed to do, and to deliver for use the complete yield of the cows and the customary weight and measure of butter at the appointed time with the others. However, this maiden with her most beautiful and generous disposition,

⁶⁷ Cogitosus, “Cogitosus's ‘Life of St Brigit’,” 13-23.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

preferring to obey God rather than men, distributed the milk and butter liberally to the poor and the guests.”⁶⁹ While she was unabashed in her refusal to listen to men and her parents, and detailed as breaking the norms of “other women,” her charity and belief in God both allowed her to transcend hierarchies and social norms of disobedience, while continuing to be under the authority of a male figure.

Furthermore, she was not just disobedient, she was commanding. Her power is seen in every chapter of Cogitosus’s *Life of Saint Brigit*, where he detailed her power in the church, even in the preface, “[t]he anointed head and primate of all the bishops and the most blessed chief abbess of the virgins governed their primatial Church...”⁷⁰ This demonstrates both deviance and compensation, with her power as the primate, a title reserved for men, and head “of all the bishops” and the “chief abbess” highlighting significant gender deviance, yet the emphasis of virginity and being “blessed” by God helped compensate. Another example is as follows, where Saint Brigit had given three “lepers” a silver chalice and asked one who knew how to weigh silver, to break it equally, “[w]hen he began to make excuses, saying he could not weigh it equally, Brigit, the most cheerful of women, seizing the silver vessel, dashed it against a stone and broke it in three equal and exactly similar parts as she had wished.”⁷¹ Here, Saint Brigit used her power to shame a man, demonstrating deviance from the norms of a gentile, subservient, women, by taking the silver vessel from him and breaking it when he did not do it himself; however, the emphasis of her as “the most cheerful of women,” helped to compensate for that deviance.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 13-14.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁷¹ Ibid., 16-17.

Of course, Saint Brigit was not always cheerful, there are also militaristic depictions of her, such as in other lives, “promising ‘victory in every battle’ to an Irish king... ‘the king saw St. Brigit going before him with a staff in her right hand and a column of fire burned from her head up to heaven. Then the enemy turned in flight’.”⁷² Her power even extended past her interactions with other people, as seen in chapter 18, “[e]ven brute animals and beasts were unable to resist her words and her will, but became tame and submissive and served her.”⁷³ Not only was she depicted as powerful enough to control “brute animals and beasts,” but as able to dominate them into submission and subservience. Consequently, she commanded others to be in the role and demonstrate the norms she was expected to fill, that being a tame and submissive woman.

This power deviance is also influenced by the aforementioned early medieval Irish context, such as with the influence of the pre-Christian celtic goddess Brigit.⁷⁴ As scholars such as Bartlett have noted, this power deviance concerning both Saint Brigit’s more militaristic depictions and the use of fire has some grounding in overlap with the tales of Saint Brigit and those of the goddess Brigit, who was particularly associated with fire; this further demonstrates an additional element of compensation with paganism as a whole, but also in the queer sense with the gender deviance these overlapping characteristics demonstrate.⁷⁵ Cogitosus mitigated this overlap in chapter 31, wherein Saint Brigit’s actions expressly condemned paganism, following her blessing of a millstone.

“[a] heathen and pagan man, whose home was near the mill, deviously sent his grain to this mill ... And, when it was thrown and poured between its millstones, nothing could set

⁷² Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 380-381, 613-614.

⁷³ Cogitosus, “Cogitosus’s ‘Life of St Brigit’,” 18.

⁷⁴ Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?* 32-35, 613-614; Callan. *Sacred Sisters*. 85.

⁷⁵ Additional points of overlap are her connections with cows, doorways/liminal spaces, maternity, and poetry, to name a few. While the focus of this thesis is not on the overlap with the goddess Brigit, it adds to the unique nature of queering her in an early medieval Irish context, for more on this see Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 613-614.

the mill in motion and thrust it into its revolving orbit and customary round, neither the propulsion and driving power of the strong rivers, nor the violent forces of the waters, not the efforts of the tradesmen ... they happened to find out that it was the druid's grain.

And so they were in no doubt that the millstone on which saint Brigit performed a divine miracle had refused to grind the heathen's grain into flour."⁷⁶

This worked to compensate for the deviance which this overlap with a pagan goddess presented, consequently allowing Saint Brigit to both appeal to pre-Christian traditions while being explicitly anti-pagan and an embodiment of female sanctity.

A result of her upheaval of norms was another form of compensation Cogitosus employed to render her power and disobedience acceptable and less threatening, something even more gender queer: similes comparing her to God and other religious male figures, such as by saying "... as if she were Christ" or descriptions of her changing water to ale.⁷⁷ This is significant as, not only does it demonstrate gender queerness in the coopting of roles performed by male figures, but also the direct compensation for it, with her placed as a conduit of God and these holy figures, which is itself further compensated for with the emphasis of hyper-feminine/maternalistic characteristics detailed in nearly all of the same chapters.⁷⁸ When describing her miracle 'Of the Garment thrown over a Sunbeam' in chapter six, Cogitosus said, "[h]ere I think I ought to slip in for your Reverences this other miracle in which the pure mind of the virgin and God's co-operating hand clearly appear to combine."⁷⁹ In this, the previously established veneration of her virginity and the reassertion of her place as a conduit of God helped to offset the power she wielded, and thus render her queerness acceptable. This is particularly

⁷⁶ Cogitosus, "Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit'," 24-25.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 13-17, 22.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 13-27.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 14.

important as, not only is Cogitosus's *Life of Saint Brigit* the earliest of her various lives, but also the earliest Irish female hagiography and one of the three earliest Irish hagiographies and principal saints lives (likely the first of the three as well), making her the presumptive foundation of female sanctity in the period and culture.

Conclusion

There are common misconceptions of norms in the middle ages as very monolithic, especially concerning gender roles and Christianity, yet this paper demonstrates that it was anything but. As detailed, queerness is an inherent feature of every religious figure as they abandon secular norms and hierarchies in the name of God. But saints take this further, breaking out of and transcending both standard norms and hierarchies, whether secular or monastic, becoming unique enough to stand out as a saint; thus making them queer even among the queer. Yet, instead of being condemned for this queerness, they were venerated for it. This is even more pronounced by female saints, who were already placed lower in social hierarchies than men in both secular and monastic life.

Cogitosus's *Life of Saint Brigit* showcases a positive correlation between depictions of deviance from norms of sexuality, romance, and gender and ones of compensation. Cogitosus made a point to say that Saint Brigit was cheerful, obedient to certain men, anti-pagan, an abbess, and a saint, all of which acted as a direct counterweight to the deviance particularly evident in her acts of disobedience and commanding power. His balancing of this queerness is part of a broader hagiographical tradition of making strong and disobedient (and even pagan) women palatable and non-threatening. Hagiography as a tool is valuable not only for examining attitudes towards female queerness in early medieval Ireland, but across cultures and periods, not just early medieval Ireland. Ultimately, this thesis gives more insight into queerness in early

medieval Ireland, but also demonstrates that queerness has always been a fundamental part of society, even in a society and time where one might least expect it.

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