Vice & Virtue As Woman?:
The Iconography of Gender Identity in the Late Anglo-Saxon Psychomachia Illustrations

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The Psychomachia is a violent text: it vividly renders battles between vice and virtue. The audience watches the maiming and dismemberment of the vice’s body in the course of virtue’s ultimate victory over vice. The body is rarely revealed; it is hidden beneath the clothing and attributes that identify vice and virtue as either male or female, masculine or feminine. Gender is not straightforward: it is constructed in abstract ways that allow the artists to firmly identify vice and virtue as a particular gender in one scene, while shifting that identification in the next in order to imbue the narrative with greater meaning for the manuscripts’ audiences. In creating a game of shifting genders, the Anglo-Saxon artists encourage viewers to try to identify the figures as a particular gender, and, in the moment of surety, the artists change details to destabilize gender representation. Male transforms into female. Feminine becomes masculine. Ultimately the audience is left questioning what is male and what is female and whether such categories are appropriate in understanding these illustrations.

In describing the ways in which transgendered bodies are formulated in contemporary society, Susan Stryker has noted that “their multiple and contradictory statuses of visibility and erasure, of presence and absence, are intimately related to the operations of social power that create norms, impart consequence to difference, and construct the space of a dominant culture.”¹ Stryker’s comments, and transgender theory more generally...

¹ Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges,” in The Transgender Studies

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broadly, are instructive when analyzing the ways that Anglo-Saxon conceptions of gender are represented visually in the Psychomachia cycles by establishing frameworks that allow exceptions and outliers to dominant culture to be analyzed. Transgender theory, moreover, with its focus on the living body and the realities that transgender and transsexual persons face, also grounds representations in lived experience, demanding that the scholar look beyond the image and look for the persons behind it. Cycles, furthermore, like the Psychomachia reinforce dominant narratives of Anglo-Saxon culture in ways that make precise gender representation challenging for the artists. A breast-bearing Avaritia (Greed) is constructed as mother but is rendered in masculine terms in other scenes. Avaritia’s representation not only reminds the audience to starve vice rather than nurture it, but also calls into question the gender of the audience and their role in society as well as how gender may change the understanding of the vice. Images of Pudicitia (Chastity) and Libido (Lust) battling further challenge the viewer’s ability to identify their genders while also constructing gender through attributes and the images’ settings. Unsurprisingly, Pudicitia wins, but only when her femininity is masculinized and her enemy’s femininity highlighted. Where vices seek to challenge, or abuse, dominant gender roles, they are overwritten by figures that reinforce early medieval societal expectations; those that uphold gender roles are rewarded.

Drawing on transgender theory, this paper focuses on specific moments of destabilized gender to show how gender could be utilized in late Anglo-Saxon manuscripts to question the roles of men and women with the ultimate aim of stressing the importance of righteous behaviors. It first examines how gender is constructed in late Anglo-Saxon society generally, and within the Psychomachia manuscripts in particular, by outlining how gender is consistently presented as unstable. From there, the paper analyzes the illustrations of Pudicitia and Libido battling as well as Avaritia’s gender representation in light of her motherhood.

Prudentius’s late fourth-century or early fifth-century poem, Psychomachia, describes the internal battle that Christians believe all souls

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face on a daily basis: that between Vice and Virtue. While Richard Stettiner has proposed that the text was likely first illustrated within a century after Prudentius’s death in 413, the earliest extant illustrated manuscript is ninth century. The text was introduced into England between the seventh and ninth centuries. The earliest extant (unillustrated) edition of the text known in England is Rawlinson MS C. 697. While the text may have arrived in England earlier, it is not difficult to imagine a ninth-century context for the initial introduction of the text in an unillustrated format as part of Alfred’s reforms. The tenth-century monastic reforms under Edgar and Æthelwold, furthermore, present themselves as a possible context for the illustration of the manuscripts given the relative explosion of manuscript decoration undertaken in the period, including that of texts previously unillustrated in an Anglo-Saxon context, such as the Old English Hexateuch. The narrative,


3. For the early manuscripts, see Helen Woodruff, The Illustrated Manuscripts of Prudentius (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), and Richard Stettiner, Die Illustrierten Prudentiushandschriften (Druck von JS Press, 1895). Woodruff, following Stettiner, divides the extant manuscripts into two groups. Group One includes the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and two continental examples that are roughly contemporaneous. In this group, the depiction of gender is more abstract despite the manuscripts’ tendency to illustrate both the vices and virtues as feminine. Group Two, comprised entirely of continental cycles, illustrates the virtues as male warriors and the vices as dangerous women who must be defeated. Woodruff, Illustrated Manuscripts, 10.


6. For the dating, style, and context of the Old English Illustrated Hexateuch, see Peter Clemoes and C. R. Dodwell, The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch: British Museum Cotton Claudius B.IV (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1974).

The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch is digitized and available here: http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Claudius_B_IV.

moreover, of the *Psychomachia* reflects key themes that were developed in writings of the monastic reformers and their students; namely, the importance of every Christian living righteously and adhering to key virtues while rejecting deadly sins. This ideology was promoted among monks and laymen alike, with late Anglo-Saxon writings addressing different groups within their own spheres. Many popular writings witness a duality in their audience and seem to be appropriate to both those in religious orders and to the laity because of their focus on the importance of universal behaviors. Unusually for a non-liturgical text, three complete or nearly complete illustrated cycles are known from Anglo-Saxon England, with a fourth conserved in a single folio. They all date from the late tenth century and are connected to important reform centers such as Canterbury and Malmesbury.

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7. The manuscripts are British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra C. viii, British Library Additional MS 24199, Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 23. The single folio is Munich Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Cleomes 29013b. In addition to the illustrated manuscripts, six unillustrated texts survive: Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 223, Cambridge University Library Gg 5.35, Cambridge Trinity College o.2.51, Durham Cathedral Library B.IV.9, Oxford Bodleian Library Auct. F. 36, and Rawlinson C. 697.

8. Elźbieta Temple, * Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts, 900-1066* (London: Harvey Miller, 1976), 69–71. Temple gives the dating and provenance of each manuscript as follows: Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 23, late tenth century from Christ Church Canterbury, in Malmesbury by the eleventh century; British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra C. viii, late tenth century from Christ Church, Canterbury; British Library Additional MS 24199, late tenth century from an unknown center and known to be at Bury by the fourteenth century; Munich Staatsbibliothek Cleomes 29031b, late tenth century from an unknown center. Note that Temple’s assertions should be treated with caution given critiques against her stylistic analyses, treatment of illustrations as separate from text, and her desire to assign manuscripts to Canterbury in order to bolster its reputation as a center of manuscript production. See, for example, Thomas Ohlgren, “Review: Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts, 900-1066 by Elźbieta Temple,” *Speculum* 56, no. 1 (1980), 178–80. Furthermore, Peter Lucas has suggested that rather than Canterbury, the Cambridge manuscript should be assigned to Malmesbury. Peter Lucas, “MS Junius 11 and Malmesbury,” *Scripotorum* 34, nos. 1–2 (1980): 197–220, and “MS Junius 11 and Malmesbury II,” *Scripotorum* 35, nos. 1–2 (1981): 3–22.
The Anglo-Saxon illuminators were the first to conceive both the vices and virtues of the *Psychomachia* as (nearly) entirely female. Yet, their depictions as such are not always stable within the individual manuscripts or across them. This is evident in each manuscript with regards to many of the vices and virtues, including Pudicitia, Libido, and Avaritia. Each manuscript follows a general pattern with regards to these scenes: Pudicitia is associated with nature and feminized in death; Avaritia’s gender representation is unstable across the series of scenes that illustrate the battle with the vice. This article places British Library Additional MS 24199 in dialogue with the other Anglo-Saxon *Psychomachia* cycles where appropriate and describes the differences in the scenes. While Additional 24199 is not the most complete of the extant cycles, it demonstrates all of the trends discussed here, and, in the case of the battle between Pudicitia and Libido, exaggerates them. The images provided are largely from British Library Additional MS 24199, except where the cycle is incomplete; the folio numbers of the scenes in the other manuscripts are noted.

Before considering individual scenes, it is important first to understand how gender is defined within these images and in Anglo-Saxon society more broadly. Judith Butler’s definition of performativity as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” provides a useful theoretical underpinning to

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understanding how gender is constructed in the manuscripts. Rather than through a daily performance *per se*, the stylization of the body occurs through the repeated representations of it across the illustrations. The burden of proof of gender, then, is on the audience’s understanding of the clothing and attributes of a given figure. The regulatory frame is the expected representation, which the viewer has been educated to understand through familiarity with Anglo-Saxon society, other Anglo-Saxon art, and the other figures within the *Psychomachia*. The outliers, when recognized, destabilize the expected presentations of gender, encouraging the viewer to interrogate their place in the text as well as the viewer’s location in relation to the message of both the image and the text.

Furthermore, in discussing women in Old English literature, Clare Lees and Gillian Overing note that the literature does not pose the exact question of what woman is, but describes them through their actions as wives, queens, nuns, daughters, sisters, and lovers. The female should be like Mary (chaste, obedient, humble) and not like Eve (disobedient, vain, curious). In other words, it is their performance that dictates what woman is. Yet, the Anglo-Saxon *Psychomachia* female figures, while demonstrating feminine characteristics, especially with regards to dress, also blur the traditional interpretation of female action: they, whether vice or virtue, are all militant, co-opting the masculine role of the warrior, which creates tensions throughout the illustration cycles. Throughout the *Psychomachia* cycles produced in Anglo-Saxon England, the female virtue becomes more masculine through her attributes as her victory draws nearer, while the ambiguous or female vice is increasingly feminized as her defeat and death approach.

The manuscripts create the sense of two separate genders, male and female; yet, while gender is defined, it is often subject to caveats in the illustrations. Identification of a figure as male or female relies on the

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dress of the figure. Following established traditions, male figures are shown in long tunics, usually associated with Germanic or ecclesiastical dress, or in short tunics with leggings. 13 In either instance, they may have outer layers, such as a cloak. Female figures are always shown in long gowns, with their hair either long and uncovered, or in a veil. In a few instances, the long dress and hairstyle is inconclusive as to gender identification. If there is a cloak, it can be used to supplement interpretations: a cloak clasped on one shoulder is traditionally associated with the male, while a cloak clasped on both shoulders or in the centre is associated with the female. 14

In discussing how people decide the gender of the person(s) they are communicating with, Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna, social psychologists working on contemporary understandings of gender, reach the conclusion that people define gender along the schema “see someone as female only when you cannot see them as male.” 15 In the case of identifying figures in the Psychomachia as female, the schema is a reflection of the process that the viewer undertakes when attempting to identify a figure’s gender. A short tunic or veil are conclusive indicators of gender in these instances; however, the long dress asks if there are any male indicators: no facial hair or hair pulled back invite a female interpretation, but the existence of ecclesiastical figures and male figures with their hair pulled back known from contemporary late Anglo-Saxon manuscripts undermine the possibility that the figure

14. See Owen-Crocker, Dress in Anglo-Saxon England, 71, 163, and 212–13 for female dress and 232–38 for male dress. In the manuscripts, examples of typical female dress are evident on British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra C. viii, fol. 7r; British Library Additional MS 24199, fol. 5v; Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 23, fol. 16r. Examples of typical male dress with the long tunic are evident on British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra C. viii, fol. 31r; British Library Additional MS 24199, fol. 4r; Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 23, fol. 4r. Examples of typical male dress with the short tunic are evident on British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra C. viii, fol. 12r; British Library Additional MS 24199, fol. 12r; Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 23, fol. 12r.
is a female. The desire to see ambiguously rendered virtues as female requires more of the viewer in defending their gendering than seeing the (to-be) defeated vice as feminine. Yet, while the viewer may be content to make a gender assignment in one scene, the next scene or scenes likely present something to challenge that assignation. Unlike Kessler and McKenna’s assertion that modern audiences tend to adhere to their original gender interpretation so that the person does not need to “keep ‘doing male’ or ‘doing female,’” in the Psychomachia, the figures insist that the viewer (modern or Anglo-Saxon) constantly reevaluate their original assumptions.16

Despite the consistent instability evident throughout the cycles, one series of scenes found towards the end of the cycle demonstrates a stringently defined representation of gender, which the patterns elsewhere in the manuscripts manipulate. The scenes illustrate Pax (Peace) and her troops’ victory against a series of vices, described as Metus (Fear), Labor (Toil), Vis (Violence), and Scelus (Crime or Wickedness), and the moment when Pax orders her troops to return to their camp. In the scenes that follow, gender is constructed on the basis of what the figures are shown doing: they perform their gender. When they are shown as warriors, Pax’s troops appear male; yet, when the same figures are shown rejoicing, they appear female (figs. 1-2).17

The text describes the scene as follows:

Concord gives the signal to take the victorious standards back to camp and return to their tents. Never did [an] army look so fine, so glorious, as she led her troops in double column with ranks in long array, the regiment of foot soldiers singing as they marched, while on the other side rang out the horsemen’s hymns.18

17. The scenes are illustrated on fol. 29v and fol. 30r of British Library Additional MS 24199, and are incomplete. The image appears on fol. 31v and fol. 32r of Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 23.
Figure 1. Virtues Rejoice. *Psychomachia*, © British Library Board, Cleopatra C. viii, fol. 30v.

Figure 2. Virtues Return to Camp. *Psychomachia*, © British Library Board, Cotton Cleopatra C. viii, fol. 31r.
Despite illustrating the majority of the cycle with female warriors, the artists are uncomfortable with the idea of the female warrior. After all, physical warfare was viewed as the masculine activity during the Middle Ages.\(^\text{19}\) The female figures rejoice—not fight. The absence of the inverse, male figures who rejoice, is harder to explain. This could, perhaps, be indicative of a female religious audience. In arguing for a female audience for Ælfric’s homily on Judith, Mary Clayton has noted that Judith was a figure who could be interpreted for a variety of audiences.\(^\text{20}\) She further argues that the text’s conclusion is “more apt for a female religious audience” as Ælfric, late tenth- and early-eleventh-century writer, abbot of Eynsham, and proponent of monastic reform, would have wanted the women reading (or listening) to steer away from a literal interpretation of fighting.\(^\text{21}\) The Psychomachia cycles witness a similar relationship to the female fighter. While the vices and virtues throughout the cycle could speak to both male and female, encouraging large groups of religious women to fight would be problematic. Thus, the artists carefully construct the groups of virtues with respect to understood gender roles. The Psychomachia’s text implies that individual female combatants, and not groups of females, are an exception to the warrior as male stereotype. Groups of women, however, are better off praying and rejoicing. As in Anglo-Saxon history, it appears that individual women can be plural. A more accurate translation would be riders, which does not assume the gender of said riders.


McLaughlin also argues for greater recognition of the female warrior in the Middle Ages, especially the Central Middle Ages. In her examples of the female warrior across the period, she acknowledges the importance of Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, the likelihood that nuns were equipped to some degree to defend their homes, whether religious or domestic, and the appointment of female sheriffs in England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. See “Woman Warrior,” 197–99.


exceptions, following in the footsteps of Mary as a symbol of the Church Militant.\footnote{22}

Textually, Latin grammar is the only indicator of why the groups might alternate in this way. The *cornicinum* (trumpeters) of line 636 are grammatically male, but the *agmina casta* (literally pure/virtuous/pious army) and the *bifida agmina* (double column) are grammatically neuter, which opens the possibility for depicting the virtues as feminine, as they have been throughout the cycle.\footnote{23} The neuter words also allowed the artists to appeal to the universal themes of the poem and its illustrations: vice and virtue are things with which every human, male and female, must contend. Thus, by showing the virtues as both male and female in these scenes, the artists create a way for the audiences to see themselves reflected in the imagery regardless of gender.

The audience for the manuscripts as a group, then, should be conceived of in the broadest possible terms. While, as noted, there are certain moments within the cycle that seem to speak directly to a female religious audience, the alternation and ambiguity of the personifications’ genders allow for individuals to identify themselves in a particular virtue (or vice) and opens the possibility of a multiplicity of gendered audiences. Moreover, the manuscripts themselves imply such a multiplicity. In terms of audience, the text would likely be familiar to a larger group than the images; texts can be read aloud to large groups, while images can only be viewed by a small number at once. While Cambridge Corpus Christi College (CCCC) MS 23 is a larger volume, which could have been used by a small group, the comparatively tiny size of Cotton Cleopatra C. viii suggests fewer simultaneous viewers. Cotton Cleopatra C. viii could, therefore, have been designed for personal study, something that

\footnote{22} The ivory plaque now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 17.190.49, shows Mary dressed in what has been shown to be Roman military garb and is a rare early image of the Virgin as a warrior. For the identification of Mary’s dress as Roman and the original context of the plaque, see Suzanne Lewis, “A Byzantine ‘Virgo Militans’ at Charlemagne’s Court,” *Viator* 11 (1980), 71-94, doi:10.1484/J.VIATOR.2.301500.

\footnote{23} Lines 640 and 647. Thomson translates *agmina casta* as “the squadrons,” choosing not to emphasise the adjective *casta*, which highlights the character of the army.
both monks and nuns were encouraged to undertake. The manuscript inscriptions, further, are worn, which may suggest considerable use. Additional MS 24199 falls between the other two manuscripts in size.\textsuperscript{24}

Whether dealing with an individual monk, a single lay person, or a group of either, and possibly including mixed groups, the *Psychomachia* contains something that would appeal to everyone who could be part of an intended or actual audience. Further, the ambiguity of the figures allows for both male and female to visualize themselves as vice and virtue. Whether male or female, viewers are able to see themselves reflected in vice and virtue throughout the cycles and to relate to the text’s stress on the importance of righteous behaviour. Catherine Karkov, in discussing CCC MS 23, has argued that the lack of evidence for female use or production of the Anglo-Saxon *Psychomachia* manuscripts, the gendered nature of the imagery, and their appearance in the tenth-century all “suggests that we might relate the production of the manuscripts to the curtailing of female power within in the church.”\textsuperscript{25} In the absence of evidence, we can hypothesize either way: that women did or did not use, or make, the manuscripts. Despite the violence repeatedly enacted on the female body, the virtues remain feminized. Given the ambiguity of the illustrations and the innovations in the Anglo-Saxon rendering of the virtues as female warriors rather than clearly male warriors (as seen in the continental manuscripts), as well as the universally applicable themes of vice and virtue, it is possible to see a mixed audience for the manuscripts.

The Old English captions, moreover, in the manuscripts also witness an attempt to expand the appeal of the text. Its key points are therefore transmitted in three languages: Latin, Old English, and the visual. Lay and monastic audiences would be capable of understanding any combination of these three languages. And, as texts, a fourth language—the aural—is also evidenced, which further opens the text and its themes to other, possibly illiterate, audiences. Horizons of understanding or interpretation, then, may change depending on the gender of the audience,

\textsuperscript{24} CCCC 23 measures 14 × 11 inches; Additional MS 24199 measures 12 × 8 inches; Cotton Cleopatra C. measures 8 × 5 inches.

\textsuperscript{25} Karkov, “Broken Bodies and Singing Tongues,” 136.
further queering the text and its images for the modern scholar seeking to establish a particular audience for the group of manuscripts. The evidence for audience, much like the representations of gender, is inherently ambiguous.

With regards to individual scenes, ambiguity becomes more evident. In depicting the battle between Libido and Pudicitia, the cycles all show a level of ambiguity in both figures. However, the illustrations equate Libido with small plants. This effect is most noticeable in Additional MS 24199, where the plant is equated with the vice, growing and dying as the vice’s position in the battle changes. When Libido attacks Pudicitia the foliage is abundant, seeming to grow as Libido reaches towards the virtue. Apart from the weapons each hold, the only difference in appearance is the hairstyle: Pudicitia’s hair is either short or pinned up underneath her helmet, while Libido’s hair trails down her back. When Pudicitia attacks Libido, the vice falls backwards, and the foliage is barely evident. Yet, the foliage in the next image is almost equal to Libido. Despite visually overwhelming the virtue, both vice and foliage droop, echoing their declining position in the battle. In the final scene of the series, the foliage is transformed into a small, barren hillock that supports the defeated Libido as Pudicitia rebukes the vice (figs. 3-6). Throughout the images, lust has been rendered twice: symbolically in terms of both the foliage and the feminine personification.

A variety of floral decoration and attributes are evident throughout Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, notably with regards to the Virgin Mary and saints who emulate her, such as Æthelthryth in the Benedictional of St Æthelwold. There, the foliage can be related to early medieval writings

26. The sequence illustrates lines 40 to 108. This is illustrated in Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 23 on folios 6r to 8v and British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra C. viii on folios 7v to 10r.

Figure 3. Libido Attacks Pudicitia. *Psychomachia*, © British Library Board, Additional MS 24199, fol. 5v.

Figure 4. Pudicitia Strikes Libido. *Psychomachia*, © British Library Board, Additional MS 24199, fol. 6r.

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Figure 5. Pudicitia Stabs Libido. *Psychomachia*, © British Library Board, Additional MS 24199, fol. 6r.

Figure 6. Pudicitia Rebukes (Deceased) Libido. *Psychomachia*, © British Library Board, Additional MS 24199, fol. 6v.
comparing Mary to a lily and the Rod of Aaron, which blossoms without seed. Here, however, the use of the foliage represents unrighteousness and vice and is rendered differently. Rather than being a recognizable plant, the foliage around Lust is more abstract and difficult to identify. It is an unruly vine-bush-foliate thing that grows unrestrained and becomes an attribute of the vice. Vice and foliage together threaten Pudicitia’s position in the battle. The equation of lust and the feminine with nature can be seen as part of the ongoing trend of associating women with nature. In her summary of ecofeminism, Victoria Davion demonstrates that nature has historically been associated with two distinct aspects of womanhood: motherhood and the “uncontrollable” female. Unlike the righteous, flowering motherhood of Mary, Libido is presented as the uncontrollable female who is closely identified with unrestrained nature which threatens virtue, especially chastity. Moreover, lust was the vice most threatening to tenth-century writers associated with monastic reform.

In Ælfric’s *De duodecim abusivis* (On the ten abuses), Ælfric, lists the fifth abuse as an immodest woman. The passage reads:

The fifth abuse is that a woman be immodest. Immodesty is a disgrace in the eyes of the world and the immodest woman is worthless in her lifetime and then after her lifetime she will have no reward from God. Wisdom is fitting for men and modesty for women, because modesty protects them against vices. Where there is modesty, there is purity also; and the modest woman rejects avarice with abhorrence and does not stir up strife, but calms anger and scorns lust and restrains greed. She guards herself against

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28. See, for example, Ælfric, “The Nativity of the Lord,” in *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Benjamin Thorpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). The passage describes the rod of Aaron as “betoken[ing] the blessed Mary, who had no society of man, and yet bore the Living Fruit, who is the true Bishop and the Redeemer of our souls” (in hæfde getæcnume þære eadigan Marían, þe næfde weres gemánan, and swa-ðæah þone liflican wæstm abær, seðe is søð Biscop and ure sawla Alysend).

drunkenness and does not love idle talk. Truly modesty has power over all abuses and preserves good habits, which please God and men.\textsuperscript{30}

Clare Lees has argued that Late Anglo-Saxon writings witness an “attitude toward sexuality that has a precise cultural logic.”\textsuperscript{31} Here, Ælfric’s writings help highlight Anglo-Saxon conceptions of virtue and vice as gendered. The Anglo-Saxon \textit{Psychomachia} illustrations further highlight this. While the feminine virtue is shown as victorious throughout the cycle, when striking the fatal blow, Pudicitia must become more masculine to achieve victory against the vice, who takes on a more feminine appearance as she dies—and her foliage lessens.

Furthermore, while Libido is rendered as ambiguous in appearance, the loose and unbound hairstyles, combined with the equation of Libido with nature, imply that despite any ambiguity, the vice should be understood in feminine terms. Further, only in battle is this ambiguity of gender evident, again showing an unease with female warriors; this unease is also evidenced with Pudicitia’s helmet, seen elsewhere on male figures, which masculinizes her in battle.\textsuperscript{32} This masculinization of the feminine virtue, especially while she is fighting, is no accident. It serves to further distinguish between triumphant virtue and feminized, defeated vice. The


“Se fifta unþeaw is þæt wif beo unsideful. Unsidefulyns byð sceamu for worulde, and þæt unsidefulle wif byð unswurð on life and eft æfter life nan edlean næfð æt Gode. Wisdom gerist werum and wifum sidefulnyss, for þan de seo sydefulyns gescylt hi wið unþeawas. Der ðæt seo sydefulyns byð, ðæt byð eac seo clænnys; and þæt sidefulle wif onscurað gitsunge and ceaste ne astyrð, æc gestilð graman and forsyð galnysse and grædignysse gemetegað. Heo hi warnað wið druncennysse and word-lunga ne lufað. Witoslice seo sidefulnyss gewilt ealle unþeawas and gode þeawas heo hylt, þe Gode liciðæ and mannum.”


\textsuperscript{32} In Cotton Cleopatra C. viii, Libido’s hair is long and unbound, while Pudicitia is veiled and wearing a helmet. Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 23 follows the pattern established in Additional 24199.
feminization of the defeated enemy is found in Anglo-Saxon historical writing. In Gildas’s *De excidio Britanniae*, for example, Gildas describes the defeated Britons as “like women as they stretch their arms out to be bound by the victorious Romans.” As they were led by a woman (Boadicea), it is, perhaps, in the eyes of a masculine warrior society, only appropriate that the warriors are led away as women in defeat. As with the defeated Libido, the enemy is feminized in order to heighten the military prowess and, by extension, the masculinity, of the victor. Such language is still used by military personnel today. While it may, at least in a medieval world view, be less impressive for a man to defeat a woman, rather than another man, a woman who defeats a man calls that man’s masculinity, and his control of the signifiers of masculinity, into question. In discussing the “blurry” gender of Grendel’s Mother in *Beowulf*, Gillian Overing has argued that “Beowulf, the poet, and the watching warriors all want to diminish the femininity of the hero’s adversary, whose femininity might thence diminish him.” When an individual woman challenged that masculine persona either by adopting it or fighting it, their gender could be represented as unstable in order to maintain, or attempt to maintain, constructed societal gender normalities.

Libido is not the only vice to be feminized as the narrative progresses. Avaritia is perhaps the most ambiguous of the vices in terms of appearance. The Avaritia narrative begins with the vice gathering spoils from the previous battle. In the first image, the vice is shown with flowing hair and a long gown, seemingly female. The next image, however, shows her with spoils in a cloak, which is fastened on the shoulder in a style, as noted earlier, traditionally associated with male dress. The third


The text describes the scene as:

Care, Hunger, Fear, Anguish, Perjuries, Pallor, Corruption, Treachery, Falsehood, Sleeplessness, Meanness, diverse fiends, go in attendance on the monster; and all the while Crimes, the brood of their mother Greed’s black milk, like ravening wolves go prowling and leaping over the field.  

While Avaritia’s black milk is certainly a rhetorical device denoting her evil and that of her children, given that blood and milk were conflated throughout the Middle Ages, other layers of symbolism are likely at play here. Avaritia’s milk, her blood, could be seen as an inversion of the

“Cura, Famis, Metus, Anxietas, Periura, Pallor, Corruptela, Dolus, Commenta, Insomnia, Sordes, Eumenides variae monstri comitatus aguntur. nec minus interea rabidorum more luporum Crimina persultant toto grassantia campo, matris Avaritiae nigro de lacte creat.”
life-giving, life-saving blood of Christ, or the milk of Ecclesia/Mary.\textsuperscript{39} Rather than offering intercession and salvation to mankind, Avaritia offers a sacrament of damnation. Given Mary’s and Christ’s association with sacrifice and lack of desire for this world, the inversion of Avaritia’s milk as damning sacrament is hardly surprising.\textsuperscript{40}

Images of breastfeeding are rare in Anglo-Saxon art. Apart from the \textit{Psychomachia} manuscripts, only British Library MS Harley 603 illustrates breastfeeding.\textsuperscript{41} While there is a parallel between Eve and Avaritia as the breast-baring female, ultimately the two women are different in their deployment of their motherhood. Eve’s motherhood is a result of her Fall; it has been argued, based on Anglo-Saxon poetic representations, that Eve’s Fall was not born out of the desire to sin for sin’s sake, but rather in an effort to remain loyal to Adam.\textsuperscript{42} Avaritia’s motherhood, by comparison, while also evidence of her sin, enhances it through nurturing further sin. Anglo-Saxon Christians believed that the introduction of sin into the world by Eve will be redeemed by Mary; the sins nurtured by Avaritia are not redeemed, but destroyed by the virtues that take on Avaritia and her sin-children. In an eighth-century English mass, Mary is referred to as the one who overturned Eve’s curse

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} My thanks to Catherine Karkov for her observation regarding Mary’s and Christ’s lack of desire for the world as opposite to Avaritia’s desire for the worldly.
\item \textsuperscript{41} A group of women are seen breastfeeding on folio 12r in British Library MS Harley 603, the Anglo-Saxon copy of the Utrecht Psalter, Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek, MS Bibl. Rhenotraiectinae I Nr 32.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Laura M. Reinert, “Heo spraec p̡icce’: The Privileges and Proprieties of Female Speech in Anglo-Saxon Poetry” (PhD diss., Saint Louis University, 2008), 211.
\end{itemize}
because of her virginal motherhood. This is echoed on a smaller scale by Operatio’s caregiving and distribution of Avaritia’s spoils.

In the following images, Avaritia is shown in a long gown with bound, long hair before the cycle reverts to presenting the figure in masculine dress types. While vices and virtues such as Puditicia and Libido are rendered more masculine or feminine in the sequences illustrating their battle, it is only Avaritia whose gender is in a constant state of flux, not only in dress but in action. This has caused Mildred Budny, in her discussion of the Cambridge *Psychomachia*, to argue that when breastfeeding, Avaritia is “either an unveiled female or a male perversely suckling a brood,” building on her observations that Avaritia is shown as male elsewhere in the Cambridge cycle. The same is true for both British Library cycles. However, rendering Avaritia’s gender as unstable allows the artists to illustrate the virtue in monstrous terms: Prudentius’s *monstri* is rendered by the Anglo-Saxon artists in gendered terms.

The monster in medieval texts and images, according to Asa Mittman and Susan Kim, not only signified ideas but could also represent a real entity. Oswald has argued that monsters are designed to simultaneously challenge and confirm societal boundaries, including reaffirming the boundaries of human gender when the gender of the monstrous is permeable. The permeable gender of Avaritia is one of the key signifiers


“Per quam malediction matris Aeuae solute est”
(Through whom the curse of the mother Eve is dissolved).

44. British Library Cotton Cleopatra C. viii, fol. 25r; British Library Additional MS 24199, fol. 24r and 24v; Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 23, fol. 25v.


47. Dana Oswald, “Monstrous Gender: Geographies of Ambiguity,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Mittman and
of her monstrosity in addition to her sinful nurturing, which is allowed because of her permeable gender representation. Rather than strictly collapsing the male and female, the portrayal of Avaritia in the manuscript cycles is intentionally fluid. The artists destabilize the vice’s representation intentionally to show its danger. While the virtues may alternate gender in the representation of them in groups, their gender changes are not portrayed as a threat to the soul’s salvation. Rather than act as a further destabilizing moment, the group changes represent perceived societal roles for women and men—one group fights; one group does not fight—and thus reinforce contemporary understandings of gender. By contrast, Avaritia’s changing gender subverts the viewer’s expectations for the representation of the vice, destabilizes wider constructs around motherhood known from the period and introduces damnation as something that can be nurtured.

In conclusion and returning to the theoretical framework outlined at the start of this paper, Stryker’s dichotomies are evident in the Psychomachia illustrations. A vice’s visibility is erased by a virtue’s adoption of a role outside the normal bounds of their gender. A virtue’s presence as a female warrior is undermined by the alternating gender portrayals of virtues in a group. The consequence for difference can be the damnation of the soul when that difference allows a vice to nurtured. The dominant modes of gender are upheld and highlighted. This leads to a consideration of who made up the intended audiences, and whether audience composition could explain why such gender-bending is undertaken by the artists. Ultimately, while aspects of the scenes discussed here lend themselves to interpretations in favor of an audience of female religious, the universality of the poem’s themes and ambiguity of its figures allow for both genders to identify with the meanings encapsulated within the manuscripts, and thus carry the images’ ambiguity to the Anglo-Saxon users of the manuscripts. Male, female, masculine, and feminine clash to create a blurred representation of Anglo-Saxon gender categories while seeking to uphold their divisions.

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Peter Dendale (London: Routledge, 2012), 343 and 347.