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Chaste Marriage, Sexual Desire, and Christian Martyrdom in *La vie seinte Andrée*

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VIOLENCE AND DESIRE ARE CENTRAL components in hagiographical accounts about women, for the early Christian tradition marked as holy those who maintained their faith in the face of sexual assault, painful torture, and violent death.¹ Generally, the most highly celebrated women were virgins who chose their faith over secular obligations such as marriage. Their stories take two basic forms. Some, like the story of Saint Agnes, recount a virgin's ability to thwart a pagan suitor's sexual desire and, despite a barrage of bodily tortures and the threat of violent death, retain her purity and her faith.² Others, such as the story of Saint Cecilia, focus on a forced alliance whereby a devout virgin is compelled to marry but is able to persuade her husband to live in chastity before she is killed by a pagan tyrant for her Christian beliefs.³ The former might usefully be termed the faithful resistance model, while the latter, the chaste marriage model. The two basic narratives, which were repetitively reproduced, largely defined how holy women were codified in medieval Christian Europe. The pervasiveness of these two hagiographical types compelled later authors to use them when rewriting local or regional narratives. As a result, when *vitae* about early English female saints who may or may not have been virgins were rewritten during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the accounts conformed to one of these narratives.⁴ At least one hagiographical life, however, draws

¹ Karen A. Winstead provides a useful overview of the types of narratives written about virgin martyrs in *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 5–10.

² Marc Glasser offers a brief discussion of this type in "Marriage in Medieval Hagiography," in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 4, ed. J. A. S. Evans and R. W. Unger (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, Committee for Medieval Studies, 1981), 1–34.

³ The principal authority on chaste marriage is Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993). I use the term *chaste marriage* here in the same way Elliott uses *spiritual marriage*, that is, a legally binding marriage in which the couple mutually agree to live without sexual contact.

⁴ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture, c. 1150–1300: Virginity and Its Authorizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 40–43, 123–50.

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on both traditions and, in so doing, produces a story about female desire and sanctity that is at odds with both narrative types.

The structure of *La vie sainte Audrée* (The Life of Saint Audrey), an Anglo-Norman poem that describes the life and two marriages of the royal abbess Æthelthryth (d. 679), includes elements from both types of virgin martyr narratives, casting the Anglo-Saxon queen and founder of the English monastery at Ely as a woman who successfully negotiated the social demands of marriage even as she steadfastly preserved her virginity for God.⁵ Recently, scholars have investigated the thematic, linguistic, and cultural aspects of this late-twelfth or early-thirteenth-century poem, but little attention has been paid to its narrative structure.⁶ This is a significant omission, for *La vie sainte Audrée* describes the saint's two arranged marriages in terms that accord with both the model narratives described above: the first is portrayed much like the account of Cecilia and Valerian, in which they resolved on their wedding night to live in perfect chastity; the second marriage is recast as a variation of the faithful resistance model when the husband, thinking to consummate the union through force, assaulted his wife. Æthelthryth, or here Audrée, wrestled the aggressive husband to the ground, physically overcoming him, and then persuaded him to allow her to leave their marriage for a religious career. In crafting a scenario about the second husband's zealous determination and Audrée's resistance, the author—a woman who identified herself only as “Marie”—positioned the saint, who was not tortured or killed for her beliefs, as an “honorary virgin

Examples of Anglo-Saxon saints whose lives were rewritten include Sidwell, Winifred, Osith, and Modwenna.

⁵ *La vie sainte Audrée: Poème anglo-normand du XIIIe siècle*, ed. Östen Södergard (Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1955). Translations in this article are my own, although I have been assisted in my work by three unpublished translations: that of Jane Zatta, who generously shared her version before her death and which is to be published in *The Lives of Three Anglo-Norman Women Saints*, ed. Jane Chance (New York: Boydell & Brewer, forthcoming); that of June Hall McCash and Judith L. Barban, who made a draft of their edition and translation available to me, recently published as *The Life of St. Audrey* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006); and that of Christine Wille Garrison, included as an appendix to her doctoral dissertation, “The Lives of St. Ætheldreda: Representation of Female Sanctity from 700 to 1300” (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 1990), 316–434. I also acknowledge here the assistance of Kathy Krause, who generously reviewed my translations for accuracy and whose suggestions helped to provide more exact renderings. I am truly grateful for the generosity of these colleagues and note that any residual errors are my own.

⁶ Wogan-Browne (*Saints' Lives*, 189–222) has written at length on the representation of Æthelthryth as a royal abbess; June Hall McCash has investigated the linguistic parallels of the writer with Marie de France in “*La vie sainte Audrée: A Fourth Text by Marie de France?*” *Speculum* 77 (2002): 744–77; and I have discussed the aristocratic female audience among whom this saint's life circulated in *Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St. Æthelthryth in Medieval England, 695–1615* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 189–201.

martyr,” a term coined by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne to describe women whose lives conform to this hagiographical type.⁷ Like Agnes, Audrée resisted the social demand that she submit to this marriage, endured an attempted rape, and retained her purity in the face of male aggression. By representing Audrée’s marital life as one that threatened her resolve, Marie used *La vie sainte Audrée* to situate a local saint among the most elite group of holy women, the virgin martyrs. To be sure, this type of embellishment was common in hagiographical writing about women, for the attempted rape narrative loomed large in the tradition. Marie took great liberties with her source, however, when presenting Audrée’s first marriage, which was aligned with the chaste marriage model epitomized by the life of Cecilia.

Marie described Audrée’s first union as one of steadfast chastity, one mutually agreed upon, but the author adjusted the generic formula by adding a unique element: she presented the saint as a martyr figure who endured the torment of her own physical desires and who controlled these impulses through self-mortification. Instead of presenting the husband’s desire as a threat to the saint’s purity (the common trope that Marie used when describing the second marriage), the author elected to focus on the saint’s interior struggle with her own physicality during this first marriage, for it was Audrée who experienced sexual desire for her spouse, it was she who had to resist the carnality of her own body, and it was she who suffered great torment and, as a result, was able to experience a kind of martyrdom.⁸

The presentation of a female saint having sexual desire was not copied from any source text or borrowed from another saint’s life; in truth, it appears as a strange aberration on the hagiographical landscape.⁹ The reasons for this portrayal remain elusive, but Marie hinted at her motives. Throughout the first half of the poem the narrator offered a series

⁷ Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives*, 123–50. Glasser (“Marriage,” 23) notes that married saints became much more popular in the late Middle Ages, in part because the establishment of Christianity throughout Europe made martyrdom rare.

⁸ This presentation might be drawn from 1 Corinthians 7:28.

⁹ Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg notes that accounts of eremitic and monastic male saints often include sexual temptation and desire as well as mortification of the flesh, but generally accounts of female saints do not identify sexual desire as a cause for women’s self-mortification (“Saints and Sex, ca. 500–1100: Striding down the Nettle Path of Life,” in *Sex in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Joyce E. Salisbury [New York: Garland, 1991], 203–31). An exception might be Mary of Egypt, who, in recounting her sins to Zosimas, indicated that she lay face down upon the ground and prayed that the Virgin Mary would punish her for her lustful thoughts; see “Life of St. Mary of Egypt,” trans. Maria Kouli, in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints’ Lives in English Translation*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996), available online at <http://www.doaks.org/HolyWomen/talbch2.pdf> (accessed 9 July 2007). The life of Matrona of Perge (d. ca. 510) offers a closer analogue to the life of Audrée than that of Mary of Egypt, though there is no indication that Matrona castigated her flesh: she refused her husband’s sexual advances, enacted ascetic practices, and asked God to help her eradicate inner desire. One version of her life, written by Symeon Metaphrastes and called the *Vita altera*, only alludes to

of comments on the nature of marriage. These asides demonstrate that Marie specifically addressed women's experience, and they suggest that she imagined an audience of aristocratic widows (quite possibly ones who later adopted religious vocations) who could well understand the terms of Audrée's choices.¹⁰ Specifically, the ongoing commentary serves as a guide to understanding this *vie*, since these interruptions demonstrate how the audience could compare its experiences in marriage with those of this twice-married queen and abbess. As the following demonstrates, Marie clarified how women could negotiate their own lives by presenting Audrée as a woman who had real-life experiences, including carnal desire. Furthermore, the author illustrated how Audrée, who was not tortured or killed for her beliefs, could participate in Christ's martyrdom by resisting those desires. Marie's presentation, therefore, illustrates how virgin martyr narratives were adapted to meet the demands of aristocratic female readers whose circumstances prevented them from emulating Agnes or Cecilia but who might have appreciated the real problems Audrée endured as a wife and religious devotee. The following, then, examines the unique presentation of marriage offered in *La vie sainte Audrée*, focusing first on Audrée's sexual desire and her self-inflicted punishment and, second, on Marie's commentary on marriage and the audience to whom she was speaking.

La vie sainte Audrée is an Anglo-Norman poem of 4,620 lines written in octosyllabic couplets.¹¹ Based on the style of this vernacular text, scholars

the saint's sexual desire, but the anonymous *Vita prima* was more pointed in its description of Matrona's carnal desires, which she controlled herself, though the writer does not explain how. See Symeon Metaphrastes, "The Life of Matrona of Perge," in *The Medieval Sourcebook*, available online at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/matrona.html#prima> (accessed 9 July 2007); and "Life of St. Matrona of Perge," trans. Jeffrey Featherstone, in Talbot, *Holy Women of Byzantium*. These accounts are complemented by two general discussions of sanctity and chastity: Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 28–58; and Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000–1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 73–99. Weinstein and Bell's statistical analysis shows that, although female saints were tested sexually far more often than men, none struggled with innate desires of the flesh. Their analysis indicates, moreover, that only about a third of the female saints studied ever participated in flagellation or other extreme forms of asceticism (234).

¹⁰ McCash ("La vie sainte Audrée: A Fourth Text," 758–61) also argues for a female audience but believes the author and the audience were lay and not religious women. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne holds that Marie was a nun writing for a community of religious women whose text would also have resonance among lay women ("Re-routing the Dower: The Anglo-Norman Life of St. Audrey by Marie (of Chatteris?)," in *Power of the Weak: Studies on Medieval Women* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995], 27–56). William MacBain has also argued that Marie was a nun writing for her community ("Anglo-Norman Women Hagiographers," in *Anglo-Norman Anniversary Essays*, ed. Ian Short [London: ANTS, 1993], 235–50, at 237).

¹¹ McCash ("La vie sainte Audrée: A Fourth Text," 755–56) notes that the text was originally written in Continental French but that the scribe knew Anglo-Norman. For an additional bibliography of scholarship on this text see Ruth Dean and Maureen B. M. Boulton, *Anglo-Norman Literature: A Guide to Texts and Manuscripts* (London: ANTS, 1999), 312–13.

place its composition in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.¹² The author identified herself in the final lines, asking that she be remembered for her devotion to Audrée, and June Hall McCash contends that she may well have been the author known as Marie de France.¹³ Marie's source was a lengthy Latin account included in the *Liber Eliensis* (Book of Ely), the twelfth-century chronicle of Audrée's monastic foundation. A prose *vita* opens the monastic history and details Audrée's childhood, the genealogy of her East Anglian royal family, her alliances through marriage, and her position as abbess of Ely.¹⁴ As might be expected, the chronicle focused primarily on Audrée's asceticism and her role as Ely's founder.

Particularly important to understanding Marie's choices as an author was the literary history behind her text. The Latin *vita*, like earlier hagiographical texts about Audrée, did not account for the chastity of the first marriage, but it did offer an amplification of Bede's original text, which included the claim that her second marriage had never been consummated. In the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* (Ecclesiastical History of the English People, finished in 731), Bede asserted that Audrée's second marriage lasted for twelve years and that her husband attempted to bribe a bishop to pressure his wife into consummating their union. Audrée refused and was allowed to join a nunnery, after which she founded the monastery at Ely.¹⁵ This narrative was repeated in the *Liber Eliensis*, but the chronicler went further by inventing an episode in which Audrée's second husband, Egfrid, attempted to reclaim his wife by force after she became a nun.¹⁶ Thus, the hagiographical tradition had explained the social and political hurdles Audrée negotiated to retain her chastity while extracting herself from the second marriage, but these accounts had largely ignored Audrée's first husband or her life with him.¹⁷ Seeking to bridge this narrative gap, Marie embroidered her source significantly. In addition to providing more

¹² Wogan-Browne ("Re-routing the Dower," 27–56) has addressed the date of the poem and the possible authorship, as has McCash ("La vie sainte Audrée: A Fourth Text," 744–77).

¹³ McCash ("La vie sainte Audrée: A Fourth Text," 744–77) discusses the textual parallels between *La vie sainte Audrée* and writings by Marie de France. Significantly, Marie de France was known to have translated another hagiographical text from Latin into Anglo-Norman called *L'espurgatoire seint Patriz*, which has been edited by Michael J. Curley, *Saint Patrick's Purgatory: A Poem by Marie de France* (Binghamton, N.Y.: MRTS, 1993).

¹⁴ *Liber Eliensis*, ed. E. O. Blake (London: Royal Historical Society, 1962). Södergård (*La vie sainte Audrée: Poème anglo-normand*, 33–37) provides a detailed account of the differences between *La vie sainte Audrée* and Marie's source text in his edition.

¹⁵ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (1969; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 390–401.

¹⁶ See the *Liber Eliensis*, 27–28. Another Latin *vita* produced at Ely, for example, employed the imagery of Judith's decapitation of Holofernes to suggest how the saint evaded her husband's touch. For this account see Pauline A. Thompson and Elizabeth Stevens, "Gregory of Ely's Verse Life and Miracles of St. Æthelthryth," *Analecta Bollandiana* 106 (1988): 333–90.

¹⁷ Glasser ("Marriage," 10) suggests that Bede represented Tonbert as elderly and that he died in battle before the marriage could be consummated. Yet this detail is not in Bede's text or in the *Liber Eliensis* and completely misrepresents the hagiographical tradition about Audrée.

details about the second marriage, she invented a completely new narrative, one that allowed the reader to imagine the practical realities of a life of marital chastity. These additions drew upon hagiographical conventions, but they included a decidedly unorthodox representation of desire within conjugal chastity.

When describing the events of Audrée's life just prior to the first marriage, Marie indicated that Audrée had promised her virginity to Jesus and, because she wished to live in his chamber, "she spent all her days in prayers / And disciplined and mortified her body."¹⁸ Marie utilized a common hagiographical trope when she explained that Audrée's parents arranged the marriage despite their daughter's protestations. In keeping with twelfth-century canon law, which required consent of both parties, Marie contended that the virgin's objections were overcome "by divine providence [*Par la divine purveiance*]," and she acquiesced.¹⁹ Once the wedding took place, the author then described Audrée and her first husband, Tonbert, as mutually content with their relationship:

One body, one heart, and one desire
These two had spiritually.
Between them, there was not any discord
Nor strife but only a sweet and holy life.²⁰

In this description of their contentment Marie suggested that the wife and husband adopted the Pauline lesson that the two cleave together and become one flesh, for the two have "one body, one heart, and one will."²¹ The writer carefully distinguished, however, the "one body" as a spiritual state, not a representation of the physical aspects of the marriage.²² The

¹⁸ *La vie sainte Audrée*, lines 279–80: "En oreisons toz jurs manoit, / Sa char dantoit et destreignoit." Garrison ("The Lives of St. Ætheldreda," 259–68) also addresses these scenes briefly but frames them within her larger discussion of Audrée's goodness and her renunciation of secular life.

¹⁹ *La vie sainte Audrée*, line 297. A similar phrase at line 284 is used to explain that the parents initiated the marriage "par le devin porveiemment." On the necessity of consent to marriage see Irvén M. Resnick, "Marriage in Medieval Culture: Consent Theory and the Case of Joseph and Mary," *Church History* 69, no. 2 (2000): 350–71. See also James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 348–64, 436–37.

²⁰ *La vie sainte Audrée*, lines 361–64: "Un cors, un cuer et un talent / Heurent cist espritelement. / N'out entr' eus nule departie / Ne estrif mes douce et sainte vie."

²¹ Ephesians 5:25–31. The whole passage is focused on how husbands should love their wives, but Paul's emphasis on the body recurs throughout the lesson, culminating in the admonition that in marriage the two become one flesh.

²² Brundage (*Law, Sex and Christian Society*, 351–55) demonstrates that in the twelfth century canonists disagreed about what constituted a marriage. Consummation could not be the only requirement, since Mary and Joseph had been "married," but their union was not consummated. Two other useful discussions are Penny S. Gold, "The Marriage of Mary and Joseph in the Twelfth-Century Ideology of Marriage," in *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1982), 102–17;

couple's association, the author contended, was sweet and peaceful, cooperative and holy, but not corporeal or sexual. This assertion might suggest a lack of emotional attachment between the two, but Marie emphasized Audrée's regard for her husband when she described the saint as weeping at the untimely death of *son amy*, her "friend" or "loved one," after only a few years of marriage.²³

Ostensibly, Marie's presentation of this first marriage accorded well with the elements of the chaste marriage model, but her account of Audrée's daily life with Tonbert altered the narrative formula. In most accounts of conjugal chastity the (usually male) spouse must be persuaded to become a Christian, and only then does he understand the necessity of sexual renunciation. Marie did not place Tonbert in this role, for no conversion scene occurred on their wedding night, and the lack thereof suggested his previous status as a Christian and his acceptance of Audrée's demand for a chaste marriage.²⁴ What is more, Tonbert did not express desire for his wife, nor did he pressure his wife to consummate their union. As a result, no divine intervention separated the couple, and Audrée did not articulate the value of a spiritual reward over a sexual one, as in the life of Cecilia. Significantly, Marie did not even remark on Tonbert's sexual desire; he, like Audrée, appeared committed to chastity from the outset, and upon his death "God gave him the kingdom of heaven / As a reward for his chastity."²⁵

Marie diverged further from the chaste marriage model by making Audrée's desire the focus of this part of her poem rather than Tonbert's. Specifically, the writer demonstrated the practical realities of conjugal life and showed that the close proximity of Tonbert caused Audrée physical distress:

This blessed virgin
Was tormented from day to day.
In order to overcome and control her body
She had to live as a martyr.
And in alms-giving and in chastity
She conducted herself throughout her life.
Her husband and she believed

and Margaret McGlynn and Richard J. Moll, "Chaste Marriage in the Middle Ages: 'It Were to Hire a Greet Merite,'" in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996), 103–22.

²³ *La vie sainte Audrée*, line 367. I note here the multiple connotations of *amy* as "friend," "lover," or "companion." The nuances of this phrase are important, for in the absence of consummation, evidence of affection could render a marriage valid. See James A. Brundage, "Carnal Delight: Canonistic Theories of Sexuality," in *Sex, Law and Marriage in the Middle Ages* (Brookfield, Vt.: Variorum, 1993), 361–85.

²⁴ Bede did not comment on Tonbert's religious status, nor did the compiler of the *Liber Eliensis*. Marie made Tonbert's Christianity explicit, moreover, by indicating that he chose this life and because of it he attained heaven for his chastity.

²⁵ *La vie sainte Audrée*, lines 355–56: "Par deserte de chasteté / Ly a Deu son regne doné."

That living their life this way
 Would be much greater holiness
 Than to fulfill the other's desire.²⁶

This passage illustrates the complicated generic requirements that Marie negotiated as a writer. She underscored Audrée's purity, even as she presented the difficulties inherent in chaste marriage. Those difficulties included being physically attracted to one's spouse, enduring the pain of unfulfilled sexual desire, and disciplining the body to control the lust caused by the couple's close proximity. Knowing that they have chosen well (and with mutual accord) did not erase the real pain of sexual desire, Marie contended. Indeed, the author pitted the practical against the ideal by showing Audrée's struggle between her conflicting desires, the desire for sexual contact, and the desire for a spiritual reward. Marie further emphasized this tension by situating Audrée's blessedness directly against the physical torment she endured by rhyming *bonuree* (blessed) with *tormenté* (tormented) in the first couplet. It seems as if Marie wanted her audience to be fully aware of Audrée's choice and the remarkable situation in which she lived. Marie went further by infusing the text with charged language, electing the word *volunté*, which can be rendered either as "passion," "desire," or "will," to describe the couple's carnal feelings. Indeed, *La vie seinte Audrée* is striking for the deliberate repetition of words related to concupiscence (*désir*, *volunté*, *charnel*, *talent*, *coveitise*) and its effects (*anguisa*, *tormenté*), repeated throughout the poem. These words demonstrate the importance of physical desire as a theme in Marie's narrative, and they provide a constant reminder of the tension she presented between secular marriage and one's spiritual life.²⁷ For example, Marie explained how Audrée replaced sexual desire with a spiritual desire:

The desire which was put in her heart
 Was overtaken by the Holy Spirit.
 By the torments that she endured
 She vanquished all carnal desires.²⁸

This passage, because of its ambiguity, is significant. If *surpris* is rendered as "inflamed," as Jane Zatta has suggested, "Le desir k'en son quer" could be understood to mean that "the desire for God" was inflamed by the Holy

²⁶ Ibid., lines 341–50: "Ceste virge bonuree / De jur en jur fu tormenté. / Pour danter sa char et destreindre / La covint en martire maindre. / E en amone et en chasteté / Mena sa vie en son heé. / Son mari et ele entendi / Ke demener lur vie issi / Estoit mut greindre sainteté / Ke acompleir autres volunté."

²⁷ McCash ("La vie seinte Audrée: A Fourth Text," 754–55) notes that repetition is a characteristic of the poem.

²⁸ *La vie seinte Audrée*, lines 770–73: "Del saint Espirit ert suspris / Le desir k'en son quer out mis. / Par les travaus ke ele suffri / Tut charneus desirs venqui." See also lines 937–40, which explain that the Holy Spirit governs Audrée during her second marriage.

Spirit. If “overtaken” is used, as I have here, the desire referred to in the first line could be understood as either “the desire for God” or “a fleshly desire,” which parallels the final line. In this case, the meaning might be that the Holy Spirit has overtaken the carnal desire in her heart and redirected it. If so, the first and second lines indicate that the Holy Spirit was working in Audrée, but the third and fourth lines stress Audrée’s agency in handling her sexual desires. Despite the ambiguity of the referent, Marie asserted that it was Audrée who vanquished carnality; she suggested that regardless of divine intervention, Audrée herself had to mitigate her own desires. Marie acknowledged the importance of agency, therefore, even as she assured her audience that this wife had the ability to guard her virginity.²⁹

In pointing to the practicalities of marriage, Marie framed Audrée’s humanity by articulating her physical desires and by showing that a married woman, even a holy one, could feel conflicted by her choices. In stressing Audrée’s torment, Marie positioned the virgin as being aware of her body and its sexual demands. Here, the female saint’s body was not sexless or dispassionate, a trope common in many narratives about virgins; instead, Audrée’s body was fully responsive, and her corporeal impulses caused her much pain. In contrast to the Augustinian model of the woman transformed into an “honorary male spirit” when she attained salvation, Marie insisted that, at least on earth, Audrée remained a woman affected by the same concerns as other women, including those who might have read her narrative or heard it read.³⁰ In sexualizing Audrée’s body, Marie acknowledged the physical realities of a woman’s lived experience—the body’s desires, its pleasures, and its punishments—and she demonstrated how a female saint experienced these realities. The author indicated, moreover, the body’s natural sexuality, for when she described Audrée’s desire “to live in Jesus’s chamber,” the author indicated that even before Audrée married it was necessary for the saint to punish and discipline her flesh.³¹

As noted above, mortification was a standard *topos* when writing the lives of the desert fathers but not one included in narratives about virginal women. In the description of these early male saints, all too often the men struggled with their sexual desire, eventually retreating from the world to avoid the temptation offered by women’s bodies. A gendered formula, therefore, frames early hagiography: men, whether lay or religious, have desire and handle it either appropriately or inappropriately; and women, if lay, are Jezebels who tempt men or, if religious, are virgins who deflect male desire. Marie’s narrative changed this binary, presenting a virgin who has already professed a spiritual desire to be a bride of Christ experiencing innate sexual desire not for Christ, as is the case with many women mystics, but for her secular husband. Like

²⁹ Ibid., lines 981–84.

³⁰ See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 80.

³¹ *La vie sainte Audrée*, lines 279–80.

the hagiographical accounts about men who face sexual temptation, *La vie sainte Audrée* focused on Audrée's agency, on the saint's ability to manage her own physicality and the realities of her marriage.

The description of Audrée's desire is striking for its bald acceptance of a devoted Christian virgin who experienced carnal desire both as a single woman and as a newly married one. While a typical virgin martyr expressed a desire to remain chaste for God, *La vie sainte Audrée* indicated that sexual desire was an interior threat, one that needed to be exorcized to illustrate the saint's true devotion. In her narrative Marie portrayed both Audrée's spiritual focus and her body's carnality as combatant desires so that the choice of God became one that required self-abnegation, and thus, the author crafted a unique situation in hagiographical writing about female saints.³²

Indeed, this element appears to be particular to *La vie sainte Audrée*, for I have located only two other lives in which a female saint explicitly experienced carnal desire, that of Christina of Markyate (d. ca. 1155) and that of Justina of Antioch (d. ca. 300). Both narratives are similar in that a devil instigates the desire; desire in these lives is not innate to the female saint. For example, Christina lived for a time with a hermit in his narrow cell, and while she was there a "devil [*diabolus*]" or "something opposed to chastity [*castitatis inimicus*]" took advantage of the saint and the cleric with whom she was living. The cleric was moved to lust, and while Christina "struggled with this wretched passion," she "violently resisted the desires of her flesh" through "long fastings, little food, and that only of raw herbs, a measure of water to drink, nights spent without sleep, harsh scourgings."³³

³² Just as this element of Marie's text did not conform to hagiographical models, it did not reiterate the earliest narratives about Audrée. All *vitae* produced to honor Audrée prior to *La vie sainte Audrée* insisted that she always remained devoted to chastity, and not one registered any sexual desire on her part. The source of this presentation might well lie in hagiographical romance, where desire and chastity were often illustrated in conflict. See, for example, Amy Ogden's discussion of the conflation of spiritual and earthly desire in *Hagiography, Romance, and the Vie de sainte Eufrosine* (Princeton, N.J.: Edward C. Armstrong Monographs, 2003). McCash ("La vie sainte Audrée: A Fourth Text," 761–63) has also discussed the elements of hagiographical romance.

³³ Unfortunately, the most effective method to control sexual desire, according to Christina's hagiographer, is lost through a textual *lacuna*. See *The Life of Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Recluse*, ed. and trans. C. H. Talbot (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), 113–19. Annabelle Parker notes that the life of Synkletike offers a specific description of how women could rid themselves of thoughts of fornication by desecrating an image of the tempter's body ("Nothing but Blood Mixed with Phlegm": Desert Mothers' Teachings on the Object of Desire," *Gouden Hoorn* 5, no. 2 [1997–98]: 4–10). Shari Horner deserves my thanks for bringing Christina of Markyate to my attention; see her *The Discourse of Enclosure: Representing Women in Old English Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 178–83. For an account of Justina, which was based on an earlier tradition but circulated after Marie wrote her *La vie sainte Audrée*, see William Caxton's 1483 translation of Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints*, ed. F. S. Ellis (London: J. M. Dent, 1900), also available online at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/GoldenLegend-Volume5.htm#Justina> (accessed 27 December 2007).

There is some similarity here with Marie's *vie*, for, like Christina's desire for the hermit, Audrée's desire for Tonbert emerged when she cohabited with him, and she only resisted her impulses by mortifying her flesh. The cause, however, differed. Christina's biographer attributed the desire to a diabolical force; Marie indicated that desire is intrinsic to Audrée's body and not caused by an exterior agent.³⁴

By contrast, Marie did not explain how Audrée handled her sexual desires. Castigating the flesh was a well-known trope in narratives about saintly male monks and hermits, but all too often the model narratives about virgins simply repeated the sexual tortures that these women endured, and they were never described as experiencing sexual desire themselves.³⁵ Rarely did these women punish their own bodies as men did, and when they did, it was an act designed to discourage men from raping them.³⁶ Corporal violence was a requisite of the martyr narrative, and all too often the narrators of the virgin martyrs describe the tortures inflicted in excruciating detail, inviting the reader to participate in the event. Even while Marie used this trope, however, she chose not to position her audience as voyeurs of Audrée's self-inflicted torments. She never discussed how Audrée controlled her own body; she only repeated that Audrée vanquished all desire through self-mortification.³⁷ Marie's refusal to offer specific detail is intriguing, a decision perhaps made because of her position as a female author writing about a female saint. She opted to present Audrée's choice without focusing on the pain inflicted on the body. Indeed, attention is drawn to the pain

³⁴ As will be discussed briefly later in this article, the issue of desire changed in Marie's description of Audrée's second marriage. There, Audrée had no carnal desire (line 863) and despised it (line 1428); instead, it was her husband who was "desirous [*curius*]" of her (line 1005). Marie suggested that in this second marriage Audrée experienced temptation that came from the devil (lines 1313–14): "Si out ele temptation / De l'enemi et agoillon [Still she had temptation / From the enemy and his barbs]." Thus, the demands of the second marriage were represented much like Christina's desire, that is, as an outward temptation. Glasser notes ("Marriage," 12) that attributing desire to the influence of the devil was a common *topos* in medieval hagiography. On the theology regarding sexual desire see Mary B. Cunningham, "'Shutting the Gates of the Soul': Spiritual Treatises on Resisting the Passions," in *Desire and Denial in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 1999), 23–32. Cunningham indicates that all of the writers in her study experienced desire because of a tempter, which makes Marie's story of Audrée's innate desire even more compelling. For a general overview of early Christian sexual asceticism see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

³⁵ Schulenburg ("Saints and Sex," 211–13) discusses several ways in which male saints mortified their flesh in order to resist sexual temptation. See also Megan McLaughlin, "The Bishop in the Bedroom: Witnessing Episcopal Sexuality in an Age of Reform," in this issue for examples of the male control of sexual desire.

³⁶ The exception, as Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg notes, were those virgins who disfigured their bodies to prevent rape; see her "The Heroics of Virginité: Brides of Christ and Sacrificial Mutilation," in *Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 29–72. Glasser ("Marriage," 8) also describes the legend of Rodena, who mutilated herself to prevent a marriage.

³⁷ *La vie seinte Audrée*, lines 280, 343, 772, 1470, 1474, 1928, 2788, 2812.

she experienced from sexual desire, not the pain she felt by exorcizing it. Marie's narrative, then, altered the cultural poetics of desire as it has been presented in medieval hagiography and constructed a new formula in which desire was acknowledged and yet still managed.³⁸

The crowning point of the embellishments in *La vie sainte Audrée* comes when Marie insisted that because of these carnal desires it was necessary for Audrée "to live as a martyr," apparently because she willingly endured pain and suffering for her faith. Certainly, Marie's amplifications illustrate how the saint enacted the behavior of the virgin martyrs: Audrée was forced into marriage, she resisted sexual assault, she forwent the conjugal demands of marriage, and she experienced physical torment, but, unlike Cecilia, she was not asked to renounce her faith, nor was she killed because she chose God over her husbands. The martyrdom, according to Marie, came from castigating the flesh and denying the body's needs. By shifting the terms of martyrdom, Marie brought to the fore what other narratives about holy Christian women denied: that women, even holy virgins, had sexual desire and that all women, regardless of their circumstances, could participate in Christian martyrdom by managing these desires.

Audrée's daily torments as a wife were so strong, Marie contended, that Audrée extinguished them with the pain of self-torture, and in so doing Audrée emulated the suffering and pain of the martyrs, who endured physical pain for their spiritual conviction. Yet, unlike the faithful resistance model in which the virgin was tortured to renounce her belief, Audrée was tormented by unfulfilled sexual desire and by her refusal to act upon her sexual impulses. And, as Marie indicated, Audrée punished herself in order to subdue these impulses. In effect, she was both the tormented and the tormentor.

In a strange approximation of the physical attack enacted upon the virgin martyr Agnes, tortured so that she would renounce Christianity, the torment imposed on Audrée demonstrated how sexual desire was an indirect threat to her faith; physical desire could easily have affected her chaste resolve and, by extension, have rendered her less holy. Yet this did not seem to be Marie's point. In describing Audrée as both the subject who desired and the object that received the torment because of those desires, Marie staged a martyrdom for a saint who was not pressured to renounce her Christian beliefs, one more appropriate to Marie's audience, who needed never to fear martyrdom in their time. Still, the terms were exactly those that constituted the basic elements of the virgin martyr narrative: sexual desire, bodily torture, and resistance to carnality. As Clare Lees asserts in her discussion of sexuality and desire in Anglo-Saxon literature, "sexuality is what matters in the female saint's life, but as a source of temptation it must

³⁸ The phrase "cultural poetics of desire" is from David M. Halperin, "Is There a History of Sexuality?" in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 426.

be seen to be understood and therefore denied.”³⁹ Marie’s text is exceptional in that the author made Audrée’s sexuality explicit by demonstrating that Audrée experienced sexual desire and by illustrating that the saint herself participated in Christian martyrdom by successfully denying the demands of her physicality.

By presenting the saint as both subject and object of torture, Marie afforded Audrée agency in the choice of a chaste marriage and in the continued preservation of her chastity in the face of temptation. Although Bede and other sources had explained Audrée’s virginity within marriage as owing to God’s grace, in *La vie sainte Audrée* Marie demonstrated how Audrée managed her desires and negotiated the conflicting loyalties of marriage and religious devotion.⁴⁰ All too easily, then, Marie’s audience could understand the very real sacrifice Audrée made for her faith. The seventh-century saint became less removed from the experience of those living in the early thirteenth century and a more familiar person because of the negotiations of her marriage. Marie’s articulation of Audrée’s conflict made the saint’s life, which might otherwise have been seen as improbable, miraculously unique, and too difficult to accomplish, more understandable to her audience. Marie’s emphasis on conjugal chastity implied that even married people might enjoy a kind of holiness, lesser to be sure, but holiness just the same. Thus, her point seems to be fourfold: (1) that holiness and marriage were not mutually exclusive; (2) that women, even holy ones, had physical desires; (3) that despite their social obligations, women had the ability to control their own lives and could choose to live in greater holiness; and (4) that women could emulate the lives of the martyrs through self-abnegation.⁴¹

This anomalous presentation thus transformed a rather incredible narrative about Audrée’s evasion of her conjugal duties into a more plausible story about the saint’s marital and spiritual choices. Marie, in fact, seemed concerned to shape this story in a way that presented Audrée’s behavior not only as credible but also as completely intelligible. As she stressed,

Many demand to know on what page
One might find such a marriage recorded
As the one Saint Bede describes here
Of the virgin and of her husband,
[Bede] who investigated the true story

³⁹ Clare A. Lees, “Engendering Religious Desire: Sex, Knowledge, and Christian Identity in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27, no. 1 (1997): 17–46.

⁴⁰ As Rudolph M. Bell has found, depicting Audrée’s agency through sacrifice and a strong will is not unusual (*Holy Anorexia* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985], 150).

⁴¹ Many of Marie’s themes on marriage, sex, and obligation recall the teachings of Paul, who established why one should marry, how one should maintain a marriage, how one should manage carnal desire, and how married people could also live in holiness. See Ephesians 5:22–33 and 1 Corinthians 7:1–40.

In order to record her life for posterity,
 As if no one could negotiate her life
 In marriage without sullyng herself.⁴²

Marie anticipated the incredulity with which her audience might respond to the narrative of a twice-married virgin. Speaking directly to this concern, she reminded her audience of Bede's authority before mentioning the marriage of Mary and Joseph, Jesus's parents, who lived in similar true purity. Describing Audrée and Tonbert's marriage specifically, Marie drew on her source, the *Liber Eliensis*, in her assertion that Audrée intentionally emulated the Virgin Mary.⁴³ The account of Mary and Joseph authorized Audrée's choice, for Marie's audience would have been all too familiar with the requirements of the conjugal debt, which according to Pauline tradition required husband and wife to render their bodies to the other.⁴⁴ So that "one might not doubt or not believe / That their way of life was not true," Marie coupled the reference to Mary and Joseph with another extraordinary account of chaste marriage, that of Eucaliste, a humble shepherd, and his wife, Marie.⁴⁵ In listing others who emulated Mary and Joseph, Marie intimated that even the most humble could live in chastity and be honored for their sacrifice, just as Tonbert was honored by God for his chaste marriage with Audrée. In presenting her portrait of the saint's first marriage, Marie, then, made a direct link to the past and allowed her audience to consider how a local English woman emulated the lives of those who lived so long before. In making Audrée's situation familiar, Marie also rendered the story of Mary and Joseph's chastity more accessible to her audience, even as she demonstrated the consequences of this choice. The result: *La vie seinte Audrée* suggested that all married women, whether princesses or humble shepherds' wives, had the ability to administer successfully the terms of marriage and physical desire.

Wogan-Browne eloquently argues that Marie's vernacular poem demonstrates the various roles available to aristocratic women among whom this text may have circulated; she adds that the saint's ownership and disposal of her dower lands was akin to those of thirteenth-century dower rituals and that the saint's story would seem relevant to an audience of Marie's contemporaries who were actively negotiating the economic exigencies of

⁴² *La vie seinte Audrée*, lines 395–402: "Plusurs demandent en quel page / Hom trueve escrist tel mariage / Com saint Bede dist ici / De la virge et de son mari, / Ky encercha la veire estoire / Pur mestre la vie en memoire, / Com put nul sa vie treiter / En mariage sanz suillier."

⁴³ Ibid., lines 335–40.

⁴⁴ 1 Corinthians 7:4–5. That Marie was aware of this mutual obligation is made clear in her description of Audrée's second marriage (*La vie seinte Audrée*, lines 1015–18).

⁴⁵ *La vie seinte Audrée*, lines 461–62: "homme ne doit doter ne decreire / Que la lur vie ne soit veire." The source text, *Liber Eliensis*, offers an abbreviated discussion of Eucalistus and Maria that Marie amplified considerably, adding a dialogue in which Eucalistus explained that he and Maria slept apart and that he never touched her.

their own lives.⁴⁶ Elsewhere I have demonstrated that Marie's *La vie sainte Audrée* had a second audience at least a century after she wrote, including nuns and lay women of the highest social rank who lived in monasteries as boarders, women whose life experiences differed considerably. Virgins, married women, widows, and vowesses all gathered at Campsey Ash, a priory for women, and would have been privy to the saints' lives in the fourteenth-century manuscript in which *La vie sainte Audrée* was preserved and which, according to an inscription on the last folio, was read during mealtimes at the priory.⁴⁷ That *La vie sainte Audrée* would have appealed to a variety of aristocratic women is unquestionable: Audrée was a virgin, a wife, a widow, and a divorcée; she was a princess, a queen, a nun, and an abbess.⁴⁸ Based on its content and its reception (not to mention its composition in the language of the Anglo-Norman court), we can be reasonably certain that Marie's primary audience was a group of contemporaries, aristocratic women who may well have been married and later in life became nuns. Her reasons for choosing Audrée were, most likely, the flexibility offered by the saint's multiple roles and by the narrative gaps left by previous hagiographers.

As we have seen, Marie adapted a story that heretofore had only briefly dealt with the saint's marriages and embellished it with details about chaste marriage and the difficulties a woman might experience in such a situation. Not content simply to present the narrative as one of superior holiness, however, Marie demonstrated how a female audience should understand Audrée's choices and the difficulties she faced. A series of statements that addressed the realities of women's marital experiences, moreover, provide some indication of Marie's motives. These asides offered a commentary on Audrée's life even as they established a direct correlation between the women who heard the poem read aloud and the woman about whom it was written.

⁴⁶ Wogan-Browne, "Re-routing the Dower," 37.

⁴⁷ Blanton, *Signs of Devotion*, 189–201. See also significant discussions of Campsey Ash provided by Marilyn Oliva, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England: Female Monasteries in the Diocese of Norwich, 1350–1540* (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell, 1998); and of the Campsey manuscript provided by Delbert Russell, "The Campsey Collection of Old French Saints' Lives: A Re-examination of Its Structure and Provenance," *Scriptorium* 57 (2003): 51–83. The inscription denoting Campsey's ownership is quoted by Bell (*Holy Anorexia*, 123–26): "Ce liure <est> deviseie a la priorie de Kampseie de lire a mengier [This book is intended for the priory of Campsey Ash to read at meals]." Russell notes that *deviseie* is ambiguous and might also mean here "to plan, devise, arrange; to assign, designate; to bequeath" ("The Campsey Collection," 63). We can take this statement, therefore, only to mean that it was available at Campsey for reading and not that it was made or commissioned by the house.

⁴⁸ Marie's description of Audrée's ascetic life as a widow placed her at Ely, which she claimed had been a dower gift from Tonbert. Symbolically, Marie suggested that the marriage gift reflected the vow of chastity made by the couple (lines 768–69). For a persuasive discussion of women's literacy and the intersections between religious and lay audiences see Felicity Riddy, "Women Talking about the Things of God: A Late Medieval Sub-culture," in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150–1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 104–27.

In effect, these insertions were the means by which Marie spoke directly to her audience and made the story of Audrée culturally intelligible.⁴⁹

In presenting the details of the two marriages, Marie often interrupted the narrative to comment on specific points. When discussing Audrée's carnal desire for Tonbert, for example, Marie showed great regard for the saint's resistance and self-determination while she indicated the ordinariness of women's sexual desire:

It would be difficult to ever find
A girl who was married
Who was not vanquished and overcome
By this carnal desire.⁵⁰

The comment, which seems intended to draw the reader's attention by its change of tone and mood, was carefully positioned to help an audience understand that Audrée's desire was all too common. It illustrated the saint's exceptional capacity for managing her physical impulses, even as it allowed Marie to remind her audience that Audrée was a woman who suffered because of her choices. This passage itself referred directly to Marie's previous discussion of Audrée's desire, and the phrase "carnal desire [*charnel covetise*]" and the demonstrative pronoun "this [*icel*]" make Marie's referent explicit to "this carnal desire of which I have been speaking."

By referring directly to her subject matter, Marie demonstrated how the audience is to draw on their own experiences to understand Audrée's life. They should be impressed, as she was, by the difficulty of Audrée's situation as well as awed by the saint's self-control. To encourage this response, Marie stressed the difficulty of marital chastity by using verbs that referred to the power struggle inherent in dealing with one's sexual desire. Marie selected verbs that suggested conquest and submission, defeat and surprise.⁵¹ The many nuances of *vaincre*, for example, include "to defeat," "to conquer," "to get the better of," "to subdue," "to master," and "to overcome." The verb *surprendre* has similar connotations, including "to overtake," "to catch," and "to entrap," but it might also be rendered as "to take by surprise," "to astonish," or "to amaze." These words allowed

⁴⁹ McCash ("La vie sainte Audrée: A Fourth Text," 770) notes several instances where Marie addressed the audience directly, but she does not examine the comments Marie offered about marriage. Russell ("The Campsey Collection," 61, 68) indicates that several of the saints' lives in the Campsey manuscript end with prayers or injunctions to the audience to pray for the author; he adds that the Modwenna legend also ends with an expectation of a communal response. He also explains that in three lives, those of Saints Osith, Faith, and Modwenna, the narrator addressed the audience as *seignurs*, which should be understood as an address both to ladies and to monks.

⁵⁰ *La vie sainte Audrée*, lines 381–84: "Envis seroit onkes trovee / Pucele que fust mariee / Ke ne fust venue et surprise / Par icel charnel covetise."

⁵¹ See, for example, *ibid.*, lines 1039–44, where forms of *vaincre* are used three times to illustrate how Audrée overcame the will of both husbands.

Marie to demonstrate how difficult it would be to live in a chaste marriage, even as she showed an understanding of the sexual demands of the female body and how these impulses could overwhelm. Where she had first offered a concrete illustration about how Audrée managed to overcome her own desires, Marie used this comment to speak more generally about women's sexuality. In broadening her discussion to include all women, Marie asked her audience to consider women they might have known who, after marriage, had been overcome by sexual desire and perhaps also to ask themselves if they knew of anyone not moved by sexual feelings. Implied here is Marie's directive that her audience examine their own experiences regarding sexual desire and compare them to Audrée's.

Marie's conclusion about women's sexual desire within marriage could easily be read as a common misogynist trope about the excessiveness of female desire. In another writer's hands it might well have been intended as such, but Marie seemed not to be invoking the antifeminist tradition so much as demonstrating the real conditions of marriage for her audience. Marie's commentary indicated her awareness of the realities of a secular life compared with a religious one, for she insisted that desire was a consequence of living in the world rather than living a cloistered life: "It is rarely seen that those who are in / And who dwell in this world / Despise carnal desire."⁵² That Audrée would feel desire while married to Tonbert was, as Marie claimed, a predictable circumstance. This statement, however, provides a direct clue about the author's purpose: to demonstrate the difficulties inherent in choosing to live a religious life within a secular world or, perhaps more pointedly, the difficulties of choosing to live a religious life *after* marriage.

Marie acknowledged that choosing marriage also meant that it was less likely for a woman to control her sexual impulses. This led her to address not only the physical realities of sexual pleasure but also, if obliquely, the social obligations required by marriage—cohabitation, sex, and procreation—and how these obligations centered the couple in the secular realm, where sexual desire was omnipresent. Marie made it explicit that she was addressing women who had experienced the sexual joys of marriage when she asserted:

One is able to remember in her heart
The fun she had in marriage,
And of the carnal temptation
When she was with her husband.⁵³

⁵² Ibid., lines 1139–41: "Relement voit l'em ke cil ke sont / Et ky conversent en ce mond / Despisent charnel covetise."

⁵³ Ibid., lines 1129–32: "Ky poet remembrier en corage / Le jeu k'ele out en mariage / Et de charnel temptation, / Kant ele fu ou son baron."

Her comment pressed the point and, at the same time, provides some insight into Marie's own life experiences. She seemed to be remembering her own past, the joys of secular marriage, and the desires that arose within it. Still, this passage need not be read as only an autobiographical reference. We might also consider that Marie used it as a narrative device to provoke further reflection. In this way the asides helped the audience to think through the issues of Audrée's life in a very personal way. In effect, the narrator used her commentary to prick remembrance, that is, to force women to consider Audrée's experiences in marriage alongside their own life experiences.

These narrative interruptions, which speak about marriage, desire, and religious vocation, suggest that Marie was writing specifically to an audience of women who had been married before taking religious vows, perhaps women who had become nuns later in life, as well as vowesses who had chosen a commitment to chastity in their widowhood or even widows who had taken up temporary residence in a nunnery like Campsey Ash.⁵⁴ If she had been married herself, Marie might have used these asides to remind her audience about the meaning of marriage and to help them recall their own marital experiences as they consider the life that Audrée has led, even as she compliments them for choosing a religious life after their marriages have ended. Since only the one copy of the poem survives, produced much later than when Marie composed it, the original audience for *La vie sainte Audrée* remains uncertain. Given the sole survival of this account within a codex held by an important nunnery in Suffolk peopled by aristocratic women, however, we might reasonably assume that the text circulated within communities that housed the most privileged women whose wealth stemmed in large part from advantageous marriages before they adopted the life of the cloister. If so, it might well explain why the elements of carnal desire and personal agency were added to *La vie sainte Audrée*, even as it may explain why Marie opted to present Audrée as a martyr to sexual desire.

While the presentation of a married woman who elected to maintain her religious devotion in the secular realm of marriage was in keeping with the narrative of the chaste marriage, *La vie sainte Audrée* did not advocate the complete renunciation of marriage in favor of a religious life. Instead, the poem suggested that, despite the necessity of marriage and of social obligations, a woman could imagine a life lived according to her own will.⁵⁵ A woman might have to "live like a martyr" in order to maintain her desires, but she could do it. The description of Audrée's willingness to love her

⁵⁴ Blanton (*Signs of Devotion*, 201–28) provides an extensive account of Isabella Ufford, Countess of Suffolk, who took a vow of chastity at Campsey Ash and likely lived there during part of her widowhood. Isabella serves as an important example of an aristocrat who fits the secondary audience for *La vie sainte Audrée*, for as a vowess and patron of Campsey she most likely would have heard it read aloud during meals there.

⁵⁵ Wogan-Browne makes this point in "Re-routing the Dower," 37.

first spouse even as she restrained her own physical responses to that love in favor of a greater spiritual desire is a concrete example.

Indeed, *La vie sainte Audrée* also offered a description of Audrée's forceful resistance to the threat posed by her second husband, which illustrates how successful the saint had become at resisting any desire (whether her own or others') that might lead her away from God. When the narrative shifts and describes the second husband as a potential rapist who threatens the virgin's purity, Marie ascertained that Audrée "set all her desire / On the husband who will never die."⁵⁶ The narrative, then, demonstrates how Audrée became a full-fledged martyr in the face of external attacks on her chastity, and, at this point, Marie skillfully redirected her narrative to suggest that the saint's desire has been appropriately focused on God all along. Describing Audrée as one "Without any carnal desire / By which she should lose her chastity"⁵⁷ and as one "seized by the love of God,"⁵⁸ Marie proceeded to remind her audience how Audrée controlled her desires through self-mortification and, in so doing, suffered in the ways that martyrs suffered, indeed in the way that Christ suffered:

This one was never killed,
 Still her body was put on
 The cross where Jesus Christ suffered
 Death, when Longinus struck him.
 In fasting, in keeping vigils, and in crying
 She tormented her body night and day.
 For this behavior, this virgin was embraced
 In that holy company

 Enduring the torments as she had,
 She caused herself to be joyous and happy.
 Without spilling blood, she was a martyr
 In keeping vigils, in tears, and in desire,
 In hunger, in thirst, and in nakedness.
 For the sick ones, she was in anguish
 For the dangers of the sea
 And to make amends for all the people.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ *La vie sainte Audrée*, lines 1165–66: "avoit tot son desir / A l'espous ky ne peust morir."

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, lines 863–64: "Sanz nule charnel covetise / Par quei ele perdist sa franchise."

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, line 1467: "de l'amur Deu enprise." Again, "overcome" might be a better rendering of *enpris*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, lines 1469–94: "Ja soit iceo ke ele ne fust occise, / Si out ele sur sa char mise / La croize ou Jhesu Crist sueffri / La mort, quant Longis le feri. / En jonne, en veillie et en plur / Tormentoito son cors nuit et jur. / Pur ceo ert ceste virge acollie / En cele sainte compaignie / . . . / Denz tormenz com ele avoit / Joieuse et lee se fesoit. / Senz sanc espandre fu martir / En veillie, en plur et en desir, / En feim, en soif et en nuesce. / Pur malades fu en destresce, / Pur les perils de la mer / Et pur le pople tut amender."

Here, Marie indicated the possibility of martyrdom through suffering. Like Christ, Audrée was scourged, chastened, and, in some way, crucified. The various forms of ascetic behavior—fasting, keeping vigils, and weeping—indicate finally how Audrée punished her body, and Marie stressed that these behaviors earned her a place in heaven. Taking this idea further, Marie indicated that suffering brought Audrée joy, for in so doing, she made amends for others. In the second part of this passage, moreover, Marie added two elements to the list of ascetic behaviors: desire and nakedness. Where nakedness (either exposure to the elements or the choosing of coarse cloth) had long been a *topos* of the hagiographical tradition, indeed, one of the behaviors associated with Audrée, the specific use of “desire [*desir*]” to rhyme with “martyr [*martir*]” in the next line is telling. Without bloodshed and without death, Audrée was a martyr because she suffered the torments of desire. Here, other desires were made manifest (the desire for food, for drink, for sleep, for comfort), but so was the desire for sex. Having made it her theme in this first section of the *vie*, the inclusion here of “desire” served to illustrate the possibility of martyrdom for aristocratic women.

As Marie described the second marriage, she more closely adhered to the traditional virgin martyr narrative to show how Audrée successfully eluded Egfrid’s advances. Still, the subversion of hagiographical *topoi* explicit in the “chaste spouse who desires her husband” and of the “virgin who tortures her own body” destabilized the categories of virgin martyr and chaste spouse, conflating them in a way that gave complete agency to Audrée. This reordering was deliberately executed, for Marie’s wording continued to emphasize issues of desire and negation, as in her description of the first marriage, but the terms were shifted appropriately when the author recounted the details of the second marriage: Egfrid desired Audrée, and Audrée, who desired only God, successfully evaded his advances. Suffering in this way, as Marie demonstrated again, leads to martyrdom, a martyrdom far different from the one the queen endured before.⁶⁰

Typically, the virgin martyr narrative ended with the saint’s death, but Marie, who had yet to recount the saint’s life as abbess of Ely, was obliged to return to her source text, the *Liber Eliensis*, to continue the story of the saint’s religious career. While it might seem the virgin martyr sequence remained unfinished, the conclusion of *La vie sainte Audrée* illustrates

In private communication McCash indicated she and Barban believe that “Pur les perils de la mer” contains a scribal error, for the Latin source text reads “pro periclitantibus” and the line in *La vie sainte Audrée* is hypometric. They suggest that “those in danger on the sea” may have been intended. This line might also be a reference to a miracle story in which Audrée saved some sailors, as Rupert Pickens suggests in his unfinished work on the *Liber miraculorum* as the source for Marie’s *La vie sainte Audrée*. I am grateful to these colleagues for their advice on this point.

⁶⁰ This presentation of martyrdom through the vanquishing of desire is repeated in the later Anglo-Norman life of Edward the Confessor, written by Matthew Paris. See *La Estoire de sainte Ædward le rei*, ed. Kathryn Young Wallace (London: ANTS, 1993), II, 1255–56.

how successfully the story of Audrée could be adapted to this framework: positioning Audrée as queen, abbess, and patron of religious institutions, Marie transformed her source significantly, recounting various churches and monasteries founded by the royal saint; in fact, Marie stressed Audrée's patronage as a widow who used the dower properties from her two marriages to support religious houses.⁶¹

The conflation of narrative models in Marie's *vie* produces an alternative narrative type, one that might seem disjunctive but, in reality, conformed to the various hagiographical traditions about female saints even while it transformed them. While biographies about holy women routinely centered on bodily experiences, the stories of virgin martyrs were almost always focused on physical torture or self-deprivation. Marie invoked this motif of physical discomfort to demonstrate the social realities of aristocratic women's experiences and their negotiations about marriage, desire, wealth, patronage, volition, and faith. In diverging significantly from her sources and models, Marie offered, therefore, a presentation in which desire was equivalent to volition and expressed through self-abnegation. The resonances that this text may have had for an aristocratic female audience are suggestive.⁶² When we consider the placement of *La vie seinte Audrée* in a codex belonging to such a prominent aristocratic nunnery as Campsey Ash, we must recognize the significant contribution of Marie's work, which so successfully commingled elements from two related hagiographical traditions. At the same time, it provided an unconventional position regarding sexual desire, even as its focus on the realities of women's lived experience offered a direct link between the textual matter about Audrée and the aristocratic women who received it. In essence, then, Marie used the life of Audrée to illustrate how aristocratic women could have agency in their own lives, even when their life circumstances were prescribed by the institutional and spiritual strictures others placed upon them.

⁶¹ See Wogan-Browne, "Re-routing the Dower," 27–56; and Blanton, *Signs of Devotion*, 173–95, on this issue.

⁶² McCash ("La vie seinte Audrée: A Fourth Text," 776) demonstrates that there are close textual parallels between *La vie seinte Audrée* and the other writings of Marie de France. She also suggests that there are particular parallels between *La vie seinte Audrée* and the *lai* by Marie de France entitled *Eliduc* in which a spiritual marriage resolves the narrative.