“WHEN FEMALE WEAKNESS TRIUMPHS:” SHADOW FEMINISM IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

A Dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in English

By

Sarah A. Sutor, B.A.

Washington, DC
April 20, 2012
Copyright 2012 by Sarah A. Sutor
All Rights Reserved
“WHEN FEMALE WEAKNESS TRIUMPHS:’ SHADOW FEMINISM IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Sarah A. Sutor, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: Kelley Wickham-Crowley, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

In the early Middle Ages, women commonly faced violence in a myriad of forms, including rape, torture, and enclosure. In response to this violence, women, especially saints and martyrs, often passively accepted pain and/or committed self-violence. Past scholarship has tended to focus on either the religious nature of martyrdom or the gendered victimization of these women. Employing theory from Third Wave Feminism and Queer Theory, particularly Judith Halberstam’s theory of Shadow Feminism, this thesis suggests an alternate reading of Anglo-Saxon and Early Germanic works by Bede, Cynewulf, and Hrotsvit of Gandersheim. Particularly, early medieval women’s masochism and passivity are reinterpreted as a radical and desperate means of subverting religious and secular heteronormative power. Chapter one addresses how the re-victimization of early medieval women through theory and textual interpretation has led to my reexamination of these texts. Chapter two discusses the many ways Anglo-Saxon women were queered. Chapters three and four work as a pair by first introducing theory by Judith Halberstam, Leo Bersani, and Elaine Scarry and then applying it to literature.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to Kelley Wickham-Crowley for her guidance and to Tony and Diana Sutor for their untiring encouragement.

Many thanks,

**Sarah A. Sutor**
# Table Of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: Why Do We Have to Talk About This Again? ................................................................. 4

Chapter 2: Queering the Anglo-Saxon Woman ............................................................................. 16

Chapter 3: Shadow Feminism & The Suicidal Ecstasy of Womanhood .................................. 35

Chapter 4: When Female Weakness Triumphs, Or Theory in Action ...................................... 51

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................... 80

Works Cited ......................................................................................................................................... 82
INTRODUCTION

In 2010, in the music video “Telephone,” Lady Gaga dances her way down the hall of a prison wearing only crime scene tape, which barely covers her breasts and genitals. In the same year, appearing in Eminem’s video “Love the Way You Lie,” Rihanna stands in front of a house engulfed in flame singing, “just gonna stand there and watch me burn/ Well that’s alright because I like the way it hurts.” In just these two music videos, women are exposed, abused, burned, and murdered. These lyrics and images have all the earmarks of the gendered and sexualized oppression that feminists have been discussing for years. Yet, while it is not easy to pinpoint, this performance somehow unsettles our expectations and makes it difficult to label Lady Gaga and Rihanna as victims. Both Lady Gaga and Rihanna seem to flaunt their victimization by actively labeling themselves as a scene of a crime (Lady Gaga) and claiming to enjoy their suffering (Rihanna). While speaking of two contemporary singers seems to be an odd way to begin a paper on women and violence in the early Middle Ages, Lady Gaga and Rihanna share some surprising similarities with Anglo-Saxon and Early Germanic women. While none of Cynewulf or Hrotsvit of Gandersheim’s characters ever break into song, they do dance through flames, publicly denounce their torturer’s ability to harm them, and proclaim the ecstasy of agony. These hagiographies were also most certainly a performance and a form of entertainment as they were either read aloud or somehow enacted. So, while early medieval writers and contemporary performers come from very different worlds and employ very different medias they are both choosing to portray violence against women negatively in their art and then seemingly
embracing victimization and showing the desirability of suffering as a recognition of the
dual nature of oppression and feminism.

Besides the contradicting messages surrounding violence, it is “worth asking
why such works would be pleasurable for female religious readers, since in spite of
their ‘happy’ endings, the female characters are repeatedly tortured and threatened with
rape” (Horner 106). While the music videos mentioned have an unlimited audience, we
know that Hrotsvit of Gandersheim’s works were initially limited to the women in her
convent and only a few plays were circulated beyond her teachers and patrons. Further
hagiographic texts by Cynewulf and other early medieval authors may have been
intended for a female religious audience as well. Taking into account this female
audience, I must explain the procession of female virgins, penitents, martyrs, and saints
that undergoes a variety of trials including imprisonment, torture, sexual assault, and
murder. After all, why, unless they were profoundly oppressed, would women want to
hear about other women’s torture, especially women very similar to themselves?
According to Katharina Wilson, medievalist and translator, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim’s
writing is “entirely within the mainstream of the didactic hagiographic exemplum’s
tradition” (3). Of course, death and suffering were simply part of the “formal demands”
of this genre (Lees 61). Due to the routine nature of this violence, early medieval
women might be able to distance themselves and instead focus on the morality and
inspiration of the tales.

Yet, Wilson’s categorization of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim’s work as merely
hagiography and thus conservative is unsatisfactory to me. The contradiction between
moments of brutal torture, masochism, and passivity with alternate moments of victory and painlessness is unsettling. There is also that taunting quality, which I mentioned in regards to Lady Gaga and Rihanna, that seems to suggest a knowing and purposeful use of violence for a subversive end. As a religious hagiographic reading does not satisfy this textual sense of unease, I would like to suggest an alternate reading of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim arising out of Third Wave Feminism and Queer Theory. Specifically, I wish to employ queer theorist Judith/Jack Halberstam’s Shadow Feminism and literary theorist Leo Bersani’s masochistic jouissance to show how early medieval women may have employed masochism and radical passivity in order to dismantle their bodies, psyches, and ultimately oppression. Of course speaking of early medieval women as subjects even as I employ theory that destroys subjectivity will be tricky. However, I am confident that if the definition of “woman” is limited to a member of a group traditionally defined by gendered and sexualized oppression and some leeway is given for the difficulty of writing in a language dependent on gender and subjectivity that I will be able to navigate the difficult territory of woman/un-woman. And in the end, I believe that we can read Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, as well as the women in her tales, as Shadow Feminists, who in medieval playwright Hrosvit of Gandersheim’s words, use “female weakness” to “triumph” over violence and oppression (Hrotsvit, preface 41).
CHAPTER I: WHY DO WE HAVE TO TALK ABOUT THIS AGAIN?

When considering the potential application of feminism and queer theory to religious women’s violence and passivity in the early Middle Ages two initial questions emerge. First, why should post-modern theory be applied to pre-modern texts? Although theory often is applied to earlier literature, the reasoning for this methodology is not always clear. Logically, however, some explanation seems to be required, as two periods separated by over a thousand years do not naturally connect. Thus, as alterity between medieval writers and current theorists appears inevitable, some attempt must be made to explain why bridging the gap between two temporally different periods is both necessary and desirable. While I cannot presume to elucidate other theorists’ reasoning, my own motivation to “read across traditional period divisions” stems from a desire to enrich women’s history from a third wave feminist perspective (Horner 17). Nearly all early medieval texts were written by men and present women’s words and actions through a male perspective. Women, however, may have understood “their own behavior quite differently from how it is described” (Karras 112). At times, women’s roles either were greatly diminished or even erased. For example, while Hild of Whitby’s role as founding abbess of Whitby Abbey is commonly recognized, her participation in the Synod of Whitby and her spiritual motherhood, involving religious training, of five future bishops is obscured. And in the rare cases when a medieval text is specifically accredited to a female author, as with Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, the influence of an oppressive, patriarchal culture and language cannot be underestimated. Not only would women like Hrotsvit have had to write in a phallocentric language that
disadvantages them, but they would almost certainly encounter both direct and indirect 
censorship. While it is possible to continue discussing women’s literacy at length (as 
Lees and Overing do in Double Agents), the key aspect to take away from this brief 
introductory discussion is limitation. Due to power relations in Anglo-Saxon England 
and early medieval Germany, women’s abilities to represent themselves in literature 
were limited by patriarchal and heteronormative definitions. Meanwhile, due to this past 
limitation, as well as the loss of manuscripts over a millennium, contemporary scholars’ 
access to early medieval women is restricted. Although it cannot be denied that these 
women’s whole voices are in many ways lost to us forever, by making past and present 
touch, modern women may be able to use their own language to recover some of 
women’s history and literature (Dinshaw 12).

In Getting Medieval, Carolyn Dinshaw, professor of social and cultural analysis, 
describes this methodology or perhaps archeology of recovery as “a queer historical 
impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, 
lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on 
the other, those left out of current sexual categories now” (1). While Dinshaw is 
referring specifically to sexual identities when discussing the formation of “affective 
relations,” the connections created are not limited to any particular category (2). The 
point being conveyed is that although women may not have identified as feminists or 
lesbians in the Middle Ages and women now may not adhere to asceticism or chaste 
marrige, these different groups divided by time and culture can be connected and speak 
to each other: “The modern is not characterized as simply different from the medieval
but is touched by the medieval, and the medieval is touched by the modern; the absolute
opposition cannot hold” (Dinshaw 43). Dinshaw sees this queer historical impulse
being achieved by “explod[ing] the categories of sameness, otherness, present, past, loss
[and] pleasure” (2). Through breaking down traditional dichotomies of past and present
and even further by complicating the notion of teleological time, “continuities [and]
causalities” can no longer be assumed (Dinshaw 44). The temporal divide that initially
seemed so troubling to the compatibility of post-modern theory with pre-modern
literature crumbles with the realization that history does not merely have to be viewed
sequentially and that the past does not merely serve to ground the present. In the space
created by the newly recognized connection between medieval and present, scholars not
only have more room to employ theory, but modern medievalists who traditionally have
been barred due to the time period of their specialty can explore social action on
contemporary issues: “Past literature would be spoken from a contemporary language
and even from our contemporary language” (Dinshaw 44). Just as contemporary theory
changes our interpretation of earlier literature and history, writers from Anglo-Saxon
England and early medieval Germany can still have a significant impact on today’s
culture by introducing alternate ways of being and resisting.

Returning to the larger theme of applying feminism and queer theory to religious
women’s violence and passivity in the early Middle Ages, the second question we must
address is why this topic needs to be explored yet again. Numerous scholars, who argue
from a variety of positions, have already explored the combination of women, violence,
religion, and the Middle Ages. If the parameter of the Middle Ages is removed, the
number of works quickly multiplies beyond a practical level of consumption and comprehension; it would take more than a lifetime to read all the ink that has been spilled on the topic of violence and women. After all, much of feminism, especially Second Wave Feminism, has been dedicated to chronicling physical, emotional, sexual, textual, linguistic, and spatial violence committed against and carried out by women. So, given the amount already written, why do we need to talk about this combination again? The answer is two-fold. First, despite all that has been written, women historically have been actively using scholarship to comment on the inequalities of sex and gender for a relatively short amount of time. Although much has already been said, it appears that the feminist work of detailing women’s past and commenting on modern culture is not yet complete. Second, even while much feminist work has been meritorious, there have also been theoretical problems. Earlier feminists commented on the exclusionary practices of a feminism that was largely defined as white, western, heterosexual, and middle class. Through the work of black and lesbian feminists, as well as other feminists that did not fit the description of the “universal woman,” this default definition was challenged and changed. Yet, other theoretical issues like the acceptability of certain forms of resistance over others remain unresolved, which feminism and queer theory must eventually address.

For the purposes of my thesis, I am interested in three interrelated problems that all revolve around the re-victimization of women through theory and textual interpretation. The first form of re-victimization comes out of zealous feminist readings of oppression, past and present. As mentioned above, a significant part of the different
feminist movements has been about identifying the violence committed against women in order to end the cycle perpetrating it. Not only is this oppression theorized, but this theory is used to interpret literature. While this work is done with the best intention, most likely with the hope that the source of women’s oppression can be exposed and removed like a cancerous growth, unintended consequences come from reiterating the initial violence committed. Often, by highlighting the ways in which women are disempowered in a particular text or culture, the theorist unintentionally reinforces existing structures of power and ultimately denies women agency. Unfortunately, while trying to challenge oppression, scholars’ efforts can become problematized. When retelling the story of women’s oppression, are feminists exposing the dirty inner workings of a system or are they reinforcing the oppressive message by repeating it to a new readership? How are women supposed to feel when hearing arguments about their oppression? Are the implied meanings of “bitch” and “whore” or even the actual usage of the words any less painful because they come from the mouth/pen of a feminist professor instead of elsewhere? By both stressing the fact that women have often been victims and then reading texts to emphasize this fact, scholars in essence re-victimize women. Added to this re-victimization, at times, writers at times argue themselves into a corner. Either because they only meant to comment on existing oppression without considering a solution or because answers are not easy to come by in the complicated world of power relations, some writers leave off their work without challenging the oppression they just identified. The result of this action is that the text, characters
within, and readers are trapped in a textual world defined by oppression without an escape.

Unfortunately, the examination of how feminism can re-victimize women does not end with the question of challenging versus recreating the system of oppression. Another issue that poses a significant challenge for feminism is the dual question of “becoming woman” and “becoming feminist.” In terms of “becoming woman,” I am not speaking of a chemical or physical transformation, but rather of determining definitions. Despite how culture essentializes the separation of the biological sexes and then conflates it with gender and sexuality, what it means to be a woman is not a stable category. Despite the disadvantages attached to the label of “woman,” there is contention over who gets placed in this category and/or who gets to choose or label this identity. As mentioned earlier, feminism has struggled with issues of race, class, nationality, and sexuality when determining who belongs to the feminist movement. While the challenge dealt with feminism as an ideology and practice, the underlying question was who really counted as a woman and therefore had a right to speak. Far from being resolved, the definition of “woman” continues to become more complicated as time passes. Even if earlier feminists have addressed issues such as race and class, current thinkers are still left with some very old and very new categories of “women.” As we are now bringing post-modern theory to pre-modern literature, scholars are encountering some very old women, women from periods long ago. While we may be creating connections with them as Dinshaw suggests, we still cannot assume that being a woman meant the same thing in Anglo-Saxon England as it does today. As a
consequence of including medieval women, the definitions of woman must yet again be broadened. As for new categories of women, feminism has still not adequately addressed transgenderism. According to feminist theory, gender is commonly regarded as being separate from biological sex. Yet, femininity or the female gender appears only to get separated from physically female bodies and not from biologically male bodies. Instead, is it possible to imagine a definition of “woman” in which the female gender exists, but is attached to a biologically male body? Perhaps, then, early medieval men, especially monks and priests, who take on ministering, nurturing, and maternal roles, could be seen as transgender.

Directly tied to “becoming woman” is the topic of “becoming feminist.” Although being a feminist does not necessarily entail being a woman, these two groups frequently are connected. Furthermore, whether a person is considered a feminist often is based on whether he or she is considered enough of a woman. Besides limiting feminism to certain identities, the definition of feminism is also reserved for certain actions. The rhetoric “action and momentum” that emerged from Second Wave Feminism can largely be categorized as a choice between “freedom in liberal terms or death” (Halberstam 129). Freedom in this context entails several values, including the formation of female subjects (becoming women) and a devotion to women’s lineages, especially literary ones. Also crucial to this conceptualization of freedom are “theories of agency and power,” which almost always involved resistance to patriarchy and its products, such as silence (Halberstam 126). While these tenets are in many ways admirable and certainly helped to promote women’s expression and autonomy, some
scholars like Judith Halberstam argue that there are limitations to this form of feminism. Essentially, this rhetoric assumes the “universality” of the desire for freedom and the unquestionable correctness and positivity of resistance (Halberstam 127). Other “forms of agency” or feminisms that “do not take the form of resistance” are ignored or “rejected outright” by mainstream, traditional feminism (Halberstam 128, 126). By only recognizing certain actions and desires as properly feminist, the movement’s diversity is diminished. Just as certain women were denied the title of “woman,” an equally exclusive definition of the feminism bars some people from claiming to be feminists. In other words, many feminist movements disown women who do not fit this definition because they do not want the “right” things and/or they do not respond to oppression in the “right” way. Within the dichotomy of freedom and death, then, these non-feminists are associated with death. They are viewed not only as accepting and internalizing oppression, but also as needing to be rescued. According to this logic, these women can only ever be victims because they passively allow patriarchy to go unchallenged or even go so far as to commit masochism.

Judith Halberstam has recently responded to the re-victimization of women through prescriptive definitions of feminism, which will be important to my later argument. However, before addressing Halberstam’s response, one other form of re-victimization must be examined, which can roughly be described as “becoming man.” In both medieval texts and contemporary theory and interpretation, there are moments when women are framed as men by either culture expectations or textual readings. Of course, becoming “man” does not imply a physical, biological transformation or even
complete gender reversal. Rather in a world where femininity is associated with weakness and masculinity with strength, women are prompted to become “viragos” or “manly women” in order to “transcend the weakness of femininity” (Karras 42). In her book *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, Ruth Mazo Karras, professor of history and medieval studies, discusses medieval women and presents a complicated piece of gender logic. Directly Karras is discussing medieval, cultural values and how writers of the period “took women out of their gender-defined roles and made them honorary men” (34). Indirectly, however, Karras is describing the dichotomy of weak women/strong men to interpret medieval texts. The result of this combination of medieval ideology and contemporary reading (which is not free from gendered narratives of weakness and strength) is that it becomes difficult to distinguish the different strains of thought. Are medieval women becoming “sex-changed” because their culture shaped their identity this way, because we read them as more masculine, or both (Lees 156)?

Far from criticizing Karras, I raise this issue of “becoming man” because interpreting medieval women as masculine is such a common interpretive move. Shari Horner, professor of medieval literature, comments how in the narrative of enclosure, religious women’s bodies “assume masculine attributes” and become “defeminized” in order to be protected (Horner 107). The reason why masculinity grants security is related both to ideas of male power and sexual penetration: “Paradoxically, the female body can only be a site of power when it remains closed, impenetrable, when it is contained –when in other words, it is not feminine” (Horner 119). Horner is saying that
heteronormative sexual roles would traditionally place women in the position of the penetrated and to maintain “the monastic ideal of virginal incorruptibility,” the female body must be impregnable and thus masculinized (Horner 104). Added to Horner’s reflections on “masculine attributes” of both the body and clothing, Joyce Lionarons, professor of medieval literature, reflects on how, at times, medieval women were forced “to act in ways culturally coded as masculine” (Lionarons 55). In the battle against “pagan, demonic, or simply recalcitrantly secular forces,” hagiography frequently places women in “masculine performative categories” (Lionarons 58). Karma Lochrie, professor of gender studies, for example, discusses how Judith “deploy[s]” masculine systems of power to overcome an attempted assault (14). Meanwhile, Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, coauthors of Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England, bring up the character of the “miles Christi” and how this militant woman “figure[s] the female as male” (Lees 118).

Far from being comprehensive, the theorists that discuss medieval women somehow becoming men are merely examples of a larger pattern. Whether this gendered phenomenon was really occurring in the Middle Ages or it has been created by literary interpretation is difficult to determine. What are certain are the theoretical pitfalls that come with analyzing medieval women’s bodies and actions as masculine. First, as already suggested, reading women as becoming men and more specifically as adopting masculinity as a form of defense reinforces the cultural association of maleness with strength and femaleness with weakness. Beyond falling back into stereotypical gender descriptions, this division undoubtedly plays a role in feminist
concepts of resistance. Similar to strength and weakness is the dynamic of active male and passive female. In everything from literature to courtship, men are traditionally framed as subjects and doers while women are objects and recipients. In an interesting inversion, as we have seen in analysis of medieval texts, women must become “men” in order to be autonomous and resist power, especially in regards to political affairs. In many ways, in contemporary culture, becoming a feminist requires a similar transformation. Although supposedly all about discovering female identity and heritage, the definition of feminist that emerges from Second Wave Feminism demands resistance and action typically associated with masculinity. Unfortunately, the difficulty involved with becoming either “man” or “woman” is not the end of the discussion. Should we imagine that whether barred from being “woman” or forced into performing “man,” women are still forced into choosing between two genders? And can evolving feminist theory and literary interpretation discover other alternate versions of being or un-being?

Having viewed some of the ways that theory and literary interpretation have re-victimized women, a counter response is clearly necessary to confront the ways that people have been manipulated into different gender identities. “Aris[ing] out of queer, postcolonial, and black feminisms,” Judith Halberstam’s Shadow Feminism “offers a way out of the reproduction of woman as the other to man from one generation to the next . . . a theoretical and imaginative space that is ‘not woman’ or that can be occupied only by unbecoming women” (Halberstam 125). As the name implies, Shadow Feminism is not wholly separated from earlier forms of feminism, but rather connects as
a shadow does to the object it outlines. By standing behind other feminsts, Shadow Feminism is always close by and dependent on these feminsts. Yet, like a shadow, Shadow Feminism is also distorted, darker, and more threatening than the original object. As such, Shadow Feminism is mainly defined by being the opposite of canonical feminism: “A feminism grounded in negation, passivity, absence, and silence, offers spaces and modes of unknowing, failing, and forgetting as part of alternative feminist project, a Shadow Feminism which has nestled in more positivist accounts and unraveled their logics within” (Halberstam 124). In a post-feminist move, in order to break out of the trap of becoming man or woman and being limited to these gender identities, Shadow Feminism “advocate[s] a complete dismantling of [the] self” (Halberstam 124, 126). This “undoing” employs “patently antifeminist acts and activities,” such as masochism and radical passivity, to highlight the limits of traditional feminist theory and open up the possibility of other desires and forms of agency (Halberstam 124, 127). Ultimately, by employing Halberstam’s Shadow Feminism, I can address the theoretical problems associated with “becoming” and reinterpret textual readings that have re-victimized women.
Although the examination of gender’s tenuous stability is a contemporary preoccupation, the Middle Ages was far from “the period of harmonious Christian ideology” that is popularly represented in “the modern imaginary” (Pasternack 107). Gender was not constrained to stable categories of masculinity and femininity, but instead “was inflected by other systems of difference, including social status, religion, and sexuality” (Pasternack 107). In the early Middle Ages, men and women unquestionably performed gender and as a result came to occupy “distinctively different positions” in society (Pasternack 109). In a mutually constitutive cycle, these distinct cultural roles reinforced the concept of gender division. Nevertheless, the irony of gender is that even as it tries to form stable definitions and supposedly “normal” identities, it fails. Because gender is dependent upon on other, unstable social systems, such as class and sexuality, to fortify it and give the illusion of immutability, gender continues to shift. Beyond allowing us to interrogate gender as a category and attempt to break it down, the result of this constant realignment is that there is really no normative individual. Considering that queer does not always refer to “explicitly sexual” behavior, most individuals occupy a space that can be identified as simultaneously normative and queer (Dinshaw 6). In other words, depending upon the particular standard chosen, different aspects of a person, such as class or religion, could be alternately labeled as normative or queer. Yet, this individual remains a whole person and cannot easily be divided up between his or her constitutive parts. As such,
even if a person is only queered by one trait such as religion or gender, queerness cannot be contained and culturally comes to define entire individuals.

Remembering that Anglo-Saxon and Early Germanic definitions of normal and queer, or perhaps natural/unnatural and vice/virtue, are different than contemporary conceptualizations, it is still possible to see that women’s identities were conflicted during this time period due to competing hegemonic systems of Christianity and traditional secular society. The result of this instability of gender identity and women often being viewed as “imperfect” was that women were “in some sense always already perverse” from the early medieval male perspective (Dinshaw 13). In terms of women’s social and legal status, women’s queerness can be seen in the oscillation between socially recognized and rewarded positions and the denial of personhood and subjectivity. As wives, women often served in political roles as well as domestic ones. Both directly and indirectly, women often helped their male family members to expand and strengthen their “sphere of influence” and property (Pasternack 110). One of Anglo-Saxon women’s roles was the promotion of peace between different families. Upon marrying, a woman served as a friðuwebbe or “peace-weaver,” acting as a buffer and diplomat between different, often warring, factions. While the success of such efforts is questionable given the bloody history of Anglo-Saxon England, the peace-weaver was still a recognized, empowered role for noble women. Less directly, women also gained cultural capital through producing life’s necessities, such as food and textiles, and biologically producing children. Unquestionably, a significant aspect of women’s social and legal value, earned through their roles as peace-weavers, wives,
mothers, involves their commodification and exchange. Like Æthelthryth, who was forced to marry twice by her family before embarking on the religious life she desired, most women had very little choice in regards to marriage partners: “Æthelthryth, hearing she had to marry, was very horrified, resisted for a long time, said ‘no’ for a long time, as she wished with all her desire to live her whole life out in virginity” (Liber Eliensis, Book I, 17). Through these unions, property, wealth, and power were exchanged along with female bodies. Of course, as the stakes were particularly high in royal unions like Æthelthryth’s, the pressure to accede to familial duty and marry was even more intense and the idea of entering of convent was met with greater resistance.

While there were dehumanizing aspects to married women’s roles, it would be incorrect to label this sexual economy as purely oppressive. In everyday relations, women likely found numerous ways to subvert patriarchal power. While Anglo-Saxon law may have always valued women in relation to men and not the reverse, it is impossible to know how individual relationships were conducted (Pasternack 117). Literature suggests that there must have been some instances, such as when Wealhtheow reminds her husband of their sons’ right to inherit, that women asserted power over their male relatives: “I have been told you would have this warrior / for your son . . . use while you may / your gifts from so many, and leave to your kinsmen / the nation and folk when you must go forth” (Beowulf 1175-9). Educated and powerful women were always aware that they were “supposed to appear subordinate to men” (Karras 64). Yet, while still working in a constraining system, women still may have gained some authority in both the home and the greater community as well as
autonomy. Additionally, even though there were definite disadvantages to living in a patriarchal system of exchange, women did receive some material advantages from belonging to this system. Beyond needs such as food and shelter, grave goods and literature show us that some women possessed valuable jewelry and clothing. Even the most pecuniary aspect of the exchange of women was not without benefit. In early Germanic culture, among the various “marriage payments (brideprice, dowry, or dower) that were exchanged,” the bride received “a payment called the morning gift” on the day after her wedding (Karras 66). The literal significance of the “morning gift” is uncertain, but it was likely a confirmation of the bride’s virginity by her husband and a guarantee of the paternity of any future children (Karras 66). Paying a woman for her virginity and ensuring a lineage obviously serves the interests of a patriarchal culture. However, since the bride receives the payment and not male family members, as in the case of rape, she obviously is perceived to have some value, at least in terms of her sexuality and fertility. Furthermore, by receiving the morning-gift, the bride is financially gaining in the same system of exchange that commodifies her. Thus, the economic exchange of women present in Anglo-Saxon England is neither solely exploitative nor advantageous for women. Like other aspects of Anglo-Saxon women’s experience, their roles as wives, queens, peace-weavers, and mothers were complicated. The fact that women could be simultaneously valued as important for political and social relations and reduced to a form of currency reflects their conflicted position and ultimately their queerness.
Marriage, of course, was not the only existence available for Anglo-Saxon women nor was it the only category to be fundamentally unstable. Religious women occupied a variety of cultural positions ranging from devout, secular women who practiced chaste marriage to nuns largely confined to the monasteries where they lived. Levels of asceticism and strictness of enclosure varied geographically and temporally, especially in times of significant change, such as the Conversion Period (650-800 CE) and later the Benedictine Reform Period. Religious women’s experiences, therefore, differed significantly depending on a variety of factors, including date, location, class, and specific title (nun, abbess, canoness, anchoress, etc). While it would be difficult to find a unifying feature of these various women’s lives, one common theme could be conflict. As with marriage, living a religious life was not free of societal anxieties regarding normativity and queerness. Perhaps even more so than with matrimony, dominant culture was conflicted about the status of religious women. In particular, aspects of enclosure and celibacy were troubled. Some of this anxiety and the uncertainty it created in women’s lives can be seen as a result of religious change in England from paganism to Christianity. Yet, I would argue that while conversion is a contributing factor, the majority of unease present in Anglo-Saxon culture is a result of a definitional uncertainty regarding religious women. These women were simultaneously valued, even admired, and viewed as threats that must be destroyed; they alternated between occupying normative positions and queer ones.

According to Shari Horner’s book *The Discourse of Enclosure*, within the early medieval Church, “enclosure signified the legislated isolation and separation of both
male and female religious from society” (7). This segregation between religious and non-religious people both male and female was enforced by the boundaries of the cloister, which kept religious individuals inside the monastery while secular individuals were excluded. Though the need to be separated was commonly recognized, enclosure was enforced unequally between the sexes: “Although the rules of the cloister were theoretically intended for both male and female religious, these rules were applied much more rigorously to women” (Horner 7). As time passed, rules related to female enclosure became “increasingly rigid” and by the tenth century, the relative freedom and autonomy practiced by early Anglo-Saxon abbesses were “severely constrained” (Horner 9). Evidence for the steadily increasing difference between male and female enclosure is even “manifested in the physical layout of nuns’ cloisters,” which differed from men’s cloisters in ways “specifically related to their gender functions” (Horner 10).

The practice of enclosure, however, was not limited to the construction of cloisters to segregate religious communities from the general populace. Enclosure and the value of virginity “were profoundly interrelated throughout the Middle Ages” (Horner 6). According to Christian doctrine of the time, “to be truly pure was to be unpenetrated, impenetrable” (Karras 35). On both the level of the physical body and sexual penetration, as well as the spiritual level of protecting the soul, women’s wholeness was valued. As a result, “a discourse of enclosure” based on the “increasingly restrictive conditions” in the early medieval church appears in both Anglo-Saxon texts and monastic practice (Horner 6). Thus, women were “enclosed by
many layers – textual, material, discursive, spatial,” which all served to “regulate the female body” (Horner 6). In other words, religious women were successively enclosed by their souls, bodies, cloister, monastery, religious doctrine, literary representations, and even their graves.

Considering the great lengths taken by Anglo-Saxon culture and literature to enclose women, it is possible to argue that the practice of enclosure did not just have the effect of regulating the female body, but that enclosure was primarily meant to discipline women. The motivation behind specifically enclosing women is not difficult to discern. Some women, such as Æthelthryth, unquestionably wished to enter a monastic life and even “desired isolation and enclosure” (Horner 14). The ability to express their religious devotion, as well as the ability to avoid marriage with its attendant dangers of childbirth and marital violence could have influenced religious women’s choosing enclosure. Additionally, by remaining both physically and spiritually pure, religious women could hope to gain respect in this life and heavenly rewards after death. In essence, enclosure did provide women with some real, material benefits and allowed them to inhabit an increasingly normative position as defined by the Christian Church. Women’s interests, nevertheless, were not the only faction being served by the practice of enclosure. A common complaint of Anglo-Saxon religious leaders was that nuns, especially those with royal ties, “were too closely involved with their lay relatives” (Yorke 147). Even though this protest could be dismissed as the grumblings of overly restrictive clerics, this objection actually tells us about the close ties between nunneries and Anglo-Saxon royal houses. It was a fairly common practice
for Anglo-Saxon nobles and royalty to place daughters and sisters in convents. Women sometimes even would be placed in a monastery when they were still infants or young girls before they had the ability to choose, let alone protest (Yorke 111).

Families gained many advantages from committing their female relatives to religious institutions, including extended control over land. With the establishment of the Church as a separate sphere outside of secular politics and royal rule, powerful individuals and families required new strategies to maintain power in this new social structure. While religious authorities ruled the land and people associated with the Christian Church, Anglo-Saxon families could still influence the Church by having a relative serve in a monastery, especially as an abbot or abbess. Avoiding questions of succession was also a benefit gained from placing family members in monasteries. In a system that allowed men to claim succession rights through their mothers, fewer potential heirs meant a reduced chance of conflict. Of course, one way to ensure less competition among descendents was to keep daughters from marrying and bearing children. Finally, besides for the economic and political advantages Anglo-Saxon families obtained, giving a child to the Church could also be a spiritual advantage. Much like a tithe, the sacrifice involved in giving up something valuable for the benefit of the Church would be seen as a sign of devotion. As a tangible sign of piety, a daughter entering the religious life would reflect positively on her parents. Of course, as the Church was so closely allied to powerful Anglo-Saxon families, a woman being enclosed was advantageous for the Church as well. The addition of new female members “reinforced the powerful institutions of the Christian church” by giving
legitimacy to the institution (Horner 6). For both religious and secular institutions, then, women entering the Church, either voluntarily or involuntarily, and being subsequently enclosed was beneficial. As for women, their exchange between family and the Church emphasized their uncertain position as both valued family member and commodity and this uncertainty highlights the queer space they occupied.

Anglo-Saxon women’s continuing dance between normativity and queerness continues when the corresponding practices of virginity and chaste marriage are explored. The extent to which a person’s behavior or identity is viewed as normative or queer is determined by a culture’s hegemonic values. In any given society, these unstable categories can fluctuate over time and across geographic regions. In Conversion Period England, Anglo-Saxon women were placed in a particularly challenging position as a major epistemic shift was occurring. Traditional Germanic cultures “understood moral and legal responsibility in the corporate terms of family and tribe” where a “person’s legal relationships” encompassed both his paternal and maternal families (Pasternack 108). Marriage was the basis of this familial system that facilitated everything from political succession to the exchange of property and wealth. The “default state of marriage” was part of a larger “life-cycle” of virginity, marriage, and widowhood, where abstaining from sexuality only occurred due to extreme youth or choosing to remain a chaste widow (Karras 29, 34). Also, in terms of material necessity, marriage was considered imperative because “men could not readily live and function effectively without the services of women” and women “could rarely live at all without the support of men” (McGlynn 105).
In contrast to this established set of relations, Christianity “introduced an emphasis on the responsibility of the individual soul and a preference for the dissociation of the individual from familial entanglements” (Pasternack 108). In particular, “connections with natal and conjugal families” were to be rejected “in favor of monastic and heavenly families” (Pasternack 109). In addition to this increased individuality, “late antique and early medieval Christianity taught that spiritual and bodily purity, especially chastity, were among the highest virtues” (Pasternack 108).

While out of necessity “faithful, monogamous marriage” where marital sex as a duty was still tolerated, chaste marriage and virginity were seen as morally superior as they truly “signified Christian virtue” (Pasternack 108). Virginity, manifested as celibacy in monastic communities, involved life-long sexual abstinence, devotion to religion, and varying degrees of asceticism. Meanwhile, chaste marriage was a “relationship that is a normal marriage in every sense except that the participants abstain from sexual activity” (McGlynn 103). Chaste marriages originated early in Christian history when “there was no organized form of monastic life, and no clear place in society for the virgin” (McGlynn 107). Even after the growth of monasticism, the “scarcity of monastic sites” and general disapproval of communities made chaste marriage a viable option for many couples wishing to live a religious life who were unable to join a monastic community (McGlynn 107). Of course, regardless of whether women chose celibacy or chaste marriage, both conflicted with traditional, Germanic culture and its emphasis on marriage.
Thus, considering the divergent values Christianity represented, the introduction and growing influence of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England certainly was not an easy or benign transition: “So teachings that were central to this stage of Christianity were also destructive to Germanic family structure and the social structures based on family” (Pasternack 108). For women, the choice not to marry and reproduce “implicit in the decision to remain a virgin” signified a rejection of “traditional female identity” based upon family connections (Karras 35). Faced with religious women’s refusal to assume normative roles, Anglo-Saxon culture tended to deny nuns’ different sexual status and ultimately the legitimacy of her position. Evidence for this lack of respect and even attempts to bring religious women back into the realm of normativity (i.e. reproduction) can be seen in the fact that “pressures leading to sexual liaisons” often continued after entering the nunnery (Yorke 154). There is little evidence to suggest that sexual relations between nuns and priests or other voluntary expressions of religious women’s sexuality were a major concern. More commentary exists on the threats of abduction, sexual assault, and forced marriage for religious women. In fact, some Anglo-Saxon kings, such as King Æthelbald of Mercia, were recognized for their “predilection for sex with nuns” and were even reprimanded by Christian religious leaders (Yorke 155). The fact that kings continued to pursue religious women for purposes of marriage and sexual gratification suggests that women in nunneries were viewed as “any other group of royal kinswomen or noble women to whom they expected to have free access and whom they would try to pressure into a sexual relationship” (Yorke 155). The assumption of nuns’ sexual availability by Anglo-Saxon
kings suggests that hegemonic culture refused to recognize religious women’s choice to remain unmarried. Thus, the threats to religious women’s chastity were not just cases of individual sexual or romantic attraction, but a direct challenge to the alternate sexuality proposed by Christianity. Indeed, considering that “severe struggles of a celibate life” faced by religious women’s refusing to marry is a standard theme of hagiography in Anglo-Saxon England, it is easy to see that chastity was viewed as a “sexual deviance” during this period (Hrotsvit, Agnes 38, Van Elk 2). While Christianity may have been endeavoring to establish a new system of sexual values, virginity’s superiority to sexuality activity, especially marital relations, was not widely accepted.

Of course, the story of Anglo-Saxon religious women’s queerness does not end with the negative response of dominant culture. By focusing too much on how hegemonic Anglo-Saxon culture viewed virginity as non-normative, we overlook the existence of chastity as a deliberate choice and a sexual identity. While in contemporary culture we tend to think of sexualities as identities and as a declaration or “coming-out” of our desires which align us with others, according to Karras, sexuality in the early Middle Ages was defined instead by sexual actions towards others, most often involving penetration. Therefore, the choice between being sexually active or chaste, the sexual acts performed, and what person’s desires were directed towards was part of the “fundamental definition of what kind of person one was” (Karras 28). While celibacy might seem to be the definition of non-sexuality, the early medieval conceptualization of sexuality gave precedence to the act of choosing and therefore the
choice to forgo sexual activity was a type of sexuality. Actual participation in sex acts was not needed to qualify. Instead it was understood in the early Middle Ages that some women had an inclination or orientation toward chastity. While for some chastity was a choice (which is enough to be a sexuality by medieval standards), other religious women describe being “born with a calling” or “kn[owing] from a very young age” that they were meant to live a chaste life, an experience reminiscent of contemporary lesbian experience (Karras 47). Whether a woman with “an orientation to chastity” rarely desires sexual activity or instead simply craves chastity so much that she “is able to overcome the desire for sex” is uncertain (Karras 53). Either way, when Anglo-Saxon women chose virginity or chaste marriage, they clearly experienced desires that were non-normative and their choice to abstain can be considered queer.

Interestingly, Anglo-Saxon women’s chastity can not always be classified as “asexual” because abstaining from sex did not necessarily involve a lack or repression of desire, but a “deliberate orientation of desire towards matters of the spirit” (Karras 56). Besides for the aspects of choice and action necessary in the medieval conception of sexuality, virginity can perhaps be understood as a sexual identity, as “erotic chastity,” because of the “intense desire” some women experienced with spirituality (Karras 35, 56). As an expression of this erotic spirituality, women, such as Maria in Hrotsvit of Gandersheim’s “Abraham,” would be “betroth[ed]” and symbolically married to the Church and Christ: “If you will remain a virgin uncorrupt, you will become equal to an angel of the Lord” (Hrotsvit, Abraham 80, 82). Passionate language describing the adoration of Christ and the Virgin was commonly employed to express a
longing that often seems more sexual than spiritual. Besides the fact that this ardor was often directed toward a female superior (Virgin, saint, etc.), this same language was at times employed in human relationships within monastic environments. “Passionate same-sex friendships” or even “possibly homoerotic attraction” can be potentially indicated by these descriptions (Wiethaus 297). Of course, it is uncertain “to what degree the author’s homoerotic sensibility translated into sexual acts” or whether medieval women understood their passionate expressions and attachments as a form of homosexuality (Wiethaus 291). In fact, the irony is that homoeroticism and sexual activity between women may not have been recognized as sexual and the women involved “would still have been considered chaste or virgins” (Karras 53). As sex according to medieval understanding required penetration, a relationship that modern culture would label lesbianism most likely would be considered non-sexual due to the lack of a penis or dildo. Same-sex desire between women would also have been considered less threatening as it “did not involve reproduction or cast doubt on the paternity of children and therefore inheritance claims” (Karras 110). Instead, religious women may have actually viewed homoeroticism as an extension of erotic chastity and their sexual orientation toward virginity. This is not to say that the Church sanctioned sexual activity between women. Rather, women’s sexuality was understood differently and virginity, whether asexual or erotic, was part of the new sexual values being established by Christianity. Ultimately, with chastity being contrary to dominant, Anglo-Saxon culture and by potentially including homoeroticism, religious women’s sexuality can clearly be understood as queer.
Of course, for Anglo-Saxon and early-Germanic women, queerness is not confined to the related categories of sexuality and identity. Implicit in sexuality, especially early medieval definitions involving action and performance, is the existence of the body. The body is both the locus where a person physically enacts his or her sexuality and gender and where culture inscribes a multiplicity of meanings. Among the many ideologies and power struggles that are waged across the body’s surface is the conflicted and often conflated triad of sex, gender, and sexuality. While the early Middle Ages defined sexuality differently and included alternate sexualities, such as virginity and erotic chastity, this period also commonly blurred the lines between sex, gender, and sexuality. As already discussed, whether a wife, virgin, widow, or prostitute, normativity and queerness exist concurrently in early medieval women’s sexuality. Yet, within “the social roles [women] were required to play” in early medieval society, more than sexuality is being queered (Karras 33). From a patriarchal perspective, the female gender and female bodies were found to be non-normative, sinful, and threatening.

Christianity already had a “vexed relationship with the flesh” where all creation “including the human body” was good and yet “that flesh must be controlled and subdued for the sake of the salvation of the soul” (Karras 28). Meanwhile, traditional, Germanic culture is surprisingly similar to Christianity in its “profound ambivalence” toward “the material presence of the body coupled with an equal insistence on its devaluation” (Lewis 22). Not surprisingly, the introduction of Christianity into a culture where “silence and restraint” about the body already existed only served to
heighten regulation, repression, and a “displacement of the material body into the spiritual realm” (Lewis 22). Religious literature, especially hagiography, focused readers’ attention on “the horrors inflicted upon the saint’s physical body” and “simultaneously remind[ed] readers of the body’s insignificance, directing their readerly focus instead to the spirit of the saint and the narrative” (Horner 103). Of course within this literature, even as “an overt denial of the female body” existed, “an equally overt scrutiny of it” was occurring” (Lees 122). As women were understood to be particularly physical or “bound to the body,” early medieval culture’s conflicted relationship with the body had particular consequences for women (Karras 29). First, since “the feminine body is the locus of procreation” it was also commonly considered “a site of pollution” (Pasternack 127). The biological ability to give birth, however, does not entirely explain the queerness of early medieval women’s bodies. Due to “women’s innate weakness,” their “lust was also seen as harder to control” and thus more threatening (Karras 39). As a result, sex was considered “polluting” not just because of the nature of sex itself, but that coming into intimate contact with a woman was somehow unclean and sinful (Karras 28). While the source of feminine “weakness” that defines women’s sexuality can be found in the biblical story of Eve’s original sin, women’s purportedly closer ties to their bodies and physicality seem to be more involved in the label than any spiritual deficiency. However, regardless of definition, what this weakness tells us is that there was always already something wrong or non-normative about women’s bodies. Thus, through the abnormality of female sexuality and potential reproduction, essentially not being men, the bodies of early
medieval women were constructed as queer. Regardless of whether women chose queer or normative sexuality (chastity or sexual activity and reproduction), their bodies were already queer due to biology and there was the possibility that these queer women might “usurp gender privilege” (Karras 118).

Not only does the fundamentally queer nature of early medieval women’s bodies and the possibility that these bodies could either pollute men and/or subvert gender norms help explain how queerness goes beyond sexuality, the queerness of the body explains attempts “to regulate the body, to confine and restrict it” (Horner 14). Also, the logic behind the treatment of naked female bodies is revealed. Faced with the queer female body it had created, early medieval culture was left with “the ironic problem of what to do with the historical, sealed body that is still female and sexual, and will not go away” (Lees 122). Restricting sexuality to marriage and enclosure were two attempts to hide women’s dangerous, queer bodies. Clothing also played a critical role in containing women’s bodies. As seen in Bede’s reference to the nuns of Coldingham, who according to him are destroyed in a fire because they sinfully “adorn themselves as if they were brides,” it is clear that women were expected to wear certain clothing, especially when living in a religious community (Bede IV.25). The absence of clothing, however, was much more significant than the impropriety of certain garments. Although the existence of the female body was dangerous enough to justify a concerted cultural effort to control it, the exposure of the body or nakedness was worse as it was associated with “sin and shame” (Lewis 16). Furthermore, as nakedness was not considered “natural” but instead “as assumed state,” nudity adds another layer of
queerness to an already queer body (Lewis 15). Whether a woman was a harlot in the
desert like Mary of Egypt or shockingly and forcefully exposed like St. Agnes,
nakedness was abnormal and required correction. As a result, women’s bodies were
erased, disciplined, and “masked beneath layers of clothing” (Jochens 22).

Unquestionably part of the unnaturalness of nudity was related to morality,
specifically the ideal of chastity. However, part of nudity’s queerness “is the result of
neither modesty nor morality but, most likely, of meteorology” (Jochens 21). In the
cold climate of northern nations like Germany and Anglo-Saxon England, clothing
made of heavy cloth and fur was necessary to keep warm most of the year (Jochens 21).
As it was usual that a person’s body would be covered with bulky “layers of coarse
wool,” exposing the body would have seemed very strange (Jochens 21). Additionally,
being almost completely hidden under clothing meant a person’s body symbolically lost
its gender: “The process of sexual identification was removed from the body and
attached to clothing” (Jochens 21). In other words, as clothing concealed a person’s
shape (breasts, hips, etc.), traditional visual cues denoting sex, the body seemingly lost
the burden of gender and clothing choice took it on. The absence of gender implied by
clothing appropriate for cold weather may temporarily derail the presence of the body,
but ultimately does not eradicate it or its queerness. Considering how important
clothing is to gender coding, disrobing would not only be unusual and impractical, but it
could signify a stripping of gender signifiers. Somewhat ironically as nakedness
exposes secondary sex characteristics and thereby leaves little confusion between
identifying the sexes, nudity becomes queer partly because it destroys the system of
gender created by clothing; what it meant to be a man or woman changed without garment. In the end, this last aspect of the early medieval body’s queerness might be amusing, but it does highlight the complexity and diversity of queerness during this period. In terms of sexuality, gender, embodiment, clothing, and law, there were numerous ways to transgress hegemony. Despite the uniqueness implied by its name, queerness was surprisingly common in early medieval culture. And for the early medieval woman, queerness was nearly inescapable due to the impossible standards of normativity established by a male culture.
CHAPTER 3: SHADOW FEMINISM & THE SUICIDAL ECSTASY OF WOMANHOOD

In Anglo-Saxon literature and law, all bodies “figure as commodities of exchange within an economy of pain, loss, payment, and value” (Lewis 23). Within this economy of pain and loss, bodies and body parts were exchanged in numerous ways. Men exchanged their labor, including their aggression, for rings, treasure, and other rewards from their lord. Women were part of an exchange that either involved marriage and motherhood or entering a religious community. Even after death, a select few bodies remained “remarkably vital” due to their status as saints and the exchange of relics (Lees 167). Besides the inherent exploitation involved in the commodification of bodies, physical and sexual violence enters the economy when the exchange of bodies is enforced. Christianity and traditional, Germanic culture may have disagreed on how bodies, especially female bodies, should be employed, but there was a remarkable consensus on how to discipline these bodies within this economy and thus force bodies to assume normativity.

To understand the lengths women sometimes went to in order to free themselves from oppression, it is necessary to comprehend how torture actually functions. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry explores how torture is both a language in itself and “language destroying” (Scarry 35). While her observations are based wholly on modern examples of torture, many of her conclusions are applicable to earlier periods such as that of Anglo-Saxon England. Most of the time power is invisible as it masquerades as something else: religion, morality, economics, etc. In these cases, power relies upon people disciplining themselves, both consciously and unconsciously, as well as social
surveillance to keep members in line. There are, however, moments where power sheds its mask of politeness and harmlessness and displays its true strength and brutality; torture is one of those moments. As a language or “acting out,” torture seeks to create excruciating pain in the body and then translate this pain into power: “First, pain is inflicted on a person in ever-intensifying ways. Second, the pain, continually amplified within the person’s body, is also amplified in the sense that it is objectified, made visible to those outside the person’s body. Third, the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power, a translation made possible by the obsessive mediation of agency” (Scarry 27-8). Torturers succeed in translating pain into real power by repeatedly imposing their will or agency over others. Then, to counter the instability and “contestable” nature of a power structure, torture is used because “physical pain is so incontestably real that it seems to confer the quality of incontestable reality on the power that has brought it into being” (Scarry 27). In an already unstable culture divided between conflicting power structures (Christian and Germanic), certain women somehow further destabilized or threatened hegemony. Therefore, in an attempt to shore up their power, both secular and religious leaders tortured women. Framing torture as a language of pain and the violent response of an unstable system of power explains a significant part of the events relayed in hagiography.

This formula, however, is not comprehensive because it still suggests that actions and responses of the tortured are “crucial” when in reality “the motive for torture is a fiction” (Scarry 28-9). The truth is that power really needs no justification for torture except its own insatiable desire to dominate. Torture always “consists of a
primary physical act, the infliction of, and a primary verbal act, the interrogation” (Scarry 28). The verbal insults, threats, and interrogations early medieval women experience are not separate from their torture nor are their actions and responses a “motivation” or “justification” for later physical abuse; language is “internal to the structure of torture . . . because of its intimate connections to and interactions with the physical pain” (Scarry 29). Interrogation merely disguises the complete powerlessness of the tortured:

Torture systematically prevents the prisoner from being the agent of anything and simultaneously pretends that [s]he is the agent of some things. Despite the fact that in reality [s]he has been deprived of all control over, and therefore all responsibility for, [her] world, [her] words, and [her] body, [s]he is to understand [her] confession as it will be understood by others, as an act of betrayal (Scarry 47).

While none of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and Cynewulf’s characters ever give up critical information, they are certainly interrogated. When these women are faced with a male authority (priest, hermit, emperor, governor, etc.) they are not only questioned and threatened, but they are made to feel as if their responses will change their fates. Their interrogators suggest that if they renounce their religion, marry, or enter a convent that they will not have to suffer. Crediting these assertions, however, ignores the fact that the torture has already begun with the interrogation and gives more power to the tortured women than they are actually granted by their torturers. Instead, regardless of whether they comply with their torturer or they refuse all requests, each will somehow
be perceived as to blame for her torture. Considering how tortured women are simultaneously made to betray themselves and to reinforce the power of their oppressors, it is not surprising that torture is the moment where language comes the closest to being a “concrete agent of pain” (Scarry 46). Of course, torture might be empowering to the torturer, but to the object of torture it is “language destroying”: “He will, while being hurt, be made to speak, to sing, and, of course, to scream— and even those screams, the sound anterior to language that a human being reverts to when overwhelmed by pain, will in turn be broken off and made the property of the torturers” (Scarry 49). Through this violent conversion process, torturers appropriate any utterances made by their victims so that the tortured are silenced as effectively as if no sound had ever occurred. Even the public nature of early medieval martyrdom is not enough to counter this silencing. In fact, public torture would have actually granted language and solidified power more effectively than private torture. Rather than grant martyrs a chance to speak, the effect of public torture would be the general intimidation of the audience. Therefore, both tortured individuals and witnesses alike would be disciplined and silenced.

The severity of torture related in Scarry’s analysis is overwhelming and when applied to literary examples such as Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and Cynewulf’s female characters, the whole concept of women escaping oppression seems hopeless. Traditional feminist methods have sought to give women a voice and thereby empower them. Yet, as is evident in the instances of torture covered in early medieval literature, most female voices that exist are destroyed and attempting to give these women new
voices is implausible. The dilemma is, when language fails how are women supposed to fight oppression? According to Judith Halberstam, the answer comes through using the same medium and methodology that the torturers are employing: the body and violence. In place of language, a woman can communicate through her body and her own destruction by “unbecoming” (Halberstam 135). As discussed earlier in section one, Halberstam’s Shadow Feminisms stands in opposition to other feminisms by seeking to recognize other desires and forms of agency. Specifically, Halberstam reinterprets “radical forms of passivity and masochism” as examples of agency (131). Instead of seeing instances of women harming themselves or passively allowing others to injure them as being symptomatic of profound physical and psychological oppression, Halberstam recognizes that “some women may desire their own destruction for really good political reasons” (128). Speaking in post-colonial terms where women are colonized subjects within a patriarchal culture, instead of accepting the violence associated with her gender and sexuality, a woman may instead “refuse her role as colonized by refusing to be anything at all” (Halberstam 131). Based on this framework, female masochism and radical passivity can be understood as a “willingness of the subject to actually come undone” and ultimately a refusal to exist (Halberstam 140). As Elaine Scarry describes, pain and death “are the most intense forms of negation, the purest expressions of the anti-human, of annihilation, of total aversiveness” (Scarry 31). Therefore, the infliction of pain through torture and “drastic asceticism” serve as “mock execution[s]” prior to martyrdom, where all represent a
complete dismantling of the self and thus the oppression inscribed on the body (Karras 38, Scarry 31).

While masochism and radical passivity both imply a “willing giving over of the self to the other, to power,” these actions or inactions do not merely represent collaboration, but a means to achieve destruction and thus escape oppression (Halberstam 140). In fact, I would argue there are significant theoretical problems with understanding masochism and radical passivity solely as examples of victimization or in the case of early medieval women as performing the heroics of virginity. Initially, Halberstam’s Shadow Feminisms and oppressive, hegemonic institutions (secular or religious) seem to be promoting the same violence towards women. Medieval Christianity, in particular, “in its most extreme form entails the destruction of self” (Van Elk 7). Additionally, instances of self-mutilation, such as the Abbess Ebba and her nuns at Coldingham cutting off their noses and lips to prevent rape serve as examples of the heroics of virginity where “early medieval nuns in defense of their bodily integrity” committed “self-mutilation, suicide, or murder” (Horner 120, 106-7). While the actions of these nuns bear a remarkable resemblance to the masochism discussed by Halberstam, the key difference resides in the understanding of subjectivity. The purpose of the heroics of virginity and Christianity’s more general promotion of martyrdom towards women was to preserve the subject: “The loss of bodily integrity threatened to nullify the virgin’s primary identity. Thus for the early medieval religious woman, as for the virgin martyr, subjectivity was “wholly dependent on the intact female body” (Horner 106-7). Of course, the trade in relics would be a notable
exception to this rule, but this deviation occurs after death. Rape, meanwhile, would
destroy the wholeness of a living woman’s body and soul and consequently her identity,
masochistic acts were preferable to save the soul or subjectivity. For religious women,
dying for chastity not only preserved the identity of “virgin,” but allowed them to gain
an even more esteemed position: martyr. Halberstam, inversely, does not seek to
safeguard the undivided female subject for this world or an eternal one, but instead
leaves us with “subjects who unravel, who refuse to cohere; subjects who refuse being”
(Halberstam 126). And by focusing on the “negation of the subject rather than her
formation,” Halberstam is able to dismantle the oppressive discourses that are part of
women’s subject formation (Halberstam 127). Therefore, while both Halberstam and
the medieval discourse of martyrdom promote masochism and passivity, Halberstam
sees violence as a means to dismantle oppression while women, who die as martyrs,
leave the system of oppression intact.

As for other objections to Halberstam’s Shadow Feminisms, including the tragic
nature of the theory and the suggestion that the theory replicates oppression, there are
valid reasons to reject these claims. First, when I have shared Halberstam’s ideas, it has
been remarked upon that resorting to self-violence and death as a means to escape
oppression is tragic and should be avoided. In response, I would assert that Shadow
Feminism not only actively promotes women to self-destruct, but more importantly
recognizes already existent examples of masochism and passivity as locations of power
instead of victimization. As it is highly unlikely that women wish to pursue this path as
a first recourse to oppression, Shadow Feminism does not often come into play and the
number of women committing self-harm is limited. And as for the times when violent conditions make painlessness and perhaps even life an impossibility, then, tragedy is unavoidable. However, feminism, even Shadow Feminism, is not responsible for these tragic necessities: “Does the feminist kill other people’s joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy?” (Ahmed 65). Halberstam’s recognition of feminism within masochism and passivity did not create the “bad feelings” or tragedy that surround the topic; the violence and the pain were already there. Scholars do not get to decide whether a topic is painful or not, they only get to decide whether they will confront the violence or ignore it in favor of “happier” subjects. Halberstam’s Shadow Feminism is tragic and clearly makes some individuals uncomfortable, but it still tells us about an alternate form of resistance which needs to be explored.

In regards to Halberstam’s work, the second suggestion that women’s self-destruction is complicit with the intentions of the oppressor must be repudiated. To suggest that women’s actions, even ones as extreme as masochism and radical passivity, are evidence that women have been victimized on such a deep psychological level that they carry out the goals of patriarchal oppression by harming themselves is extremely problematic. Even the suggestion that female masochism and radical passivity is merely a preemptive move to prevent male violation leaves women only able to react in fear and therefore incapable of genuine action. Interestingly, similar accusations have been made about other supposedly self-destructive actions. In the wake of the AIDS epidemic, the allegation that engaging in unprotected sex signifies a homosexual
person’s self-hatred and desire for death emerged as an explanation for this supposedly irresponsible behavior. (Of course, no similar allegations were made about heterosexuals who refused to practice safe sex.) Responding to this accusation, Adam Phillips and Leo Bersani describe why reading potentially destructive behavior as self-hatred is a problematic interpretation: “Catastrophically shamed: we are in such deep if unconscious agreement with the original perpetrators of our shame that, ratifying their judgment of us, we move on to the sentencing stage and condemn ourselves and others to death” (Philips Bersani 34-5). In other words, if foregoing safe sex is viewed as a slow suicide, then it is the same as admitting to be so profoundly oppressed that a person agrees on a psychological level with his or her oppressor’s assessment and proceeds to deliver his or her own punishment. Besides the troubling depiction of individual psychology that this assessment of unprotected sex creates, validating the importance of oppression in shaping a person’s decisions “radically deprives [them] of agency in [their] behavior” (Phillips Bersani 34). And although Phillips and Bersani’s discussion of unprotected, homosexual sex is unrelated to my study of early medieval women, their understanding of agency coincides nicely with Halberstam’s Shadow Feminisms. Masochism and radical passivity may appear to enact the oppressive goals of patriarchy. Yet if when we view women’s self-destructive actions we grant supremacy to the oppressor’s intentions, then we are admitting their ability to hurt us on the most personal level and taking away all possibility of female agency. While it is certainly possible to read masochism and passivity in this way, doing so would be another example of the academic re-victimization of women. Therefore, scholars,
especially feminists, should avoid the temptation to see women’s self-destructive behavior as simply symptoms of patriarchal oppression and ask whether violence serves other purposes for the women themselves.

Having examined Halberstam’s Shadow Feminisms and the crucial need to see women’s masochistic and passive acts as more than victimization, the applicability of this theory to early medieval literature, particularly texts on religious women, can be explored. As discussed previously, Anglo-Saxon women and their Germanic sisters’ lives were a very precarious balance between normativity and queerness. Regardless of their role or identity (secular or religious), women were at times in agreement with dominant values and at other times in contention. Even more challenging is that heteronormativity altered across time and geography, subsequently causing some women to be redefined as alternately normal or queer. In particular, the conflict between traditional, Germanic culture and emerging Christianity in the Conversion Period created two opposing value systems and definitions of normativity. Regardless of which side a woman chose (or was chosen for), she would invariably be labeled as sinful, wrong, or queer by the other side. However, while traditional Germanic culture and Christianity might disagree about what constitutes a “good” woman, both were equally willing to manipulate and discipline women’s bodies in order to reinforce its ideology. Violence, then, in the overlapping forms of torture, rape, and enclosure, was a common methodology employed by both sides to enforce normativity. By taking violence and the ideological power struggles behind this violence into consideration, I believe it is possible to understand not only the uncertain and often brutal environment
early medieval women often found themselves in, but how these religious women’s lives could be seen as a response and perhaps a challenge to heteronormativity. Specifically, I argue that the literature of some early medieval writers, such as Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and Cynewulf, portray female characters that employ Shadow Feminism as a means to escape their persecutors and that the authors, themselves, might ultimately be categorized as Shadow Feminists.

Before moving on to textual analysis, one final aspect of early medieval women’s Shadow Feminism still needs to be discussed: the lack of pain experienced during torture. In select works of both Cynewulf and Hrotsvit of Gandersheim women repeatedly claim they “feel no touch of pain,” and then proceed to be untouched by flames and whips: “He will not hurt me at all, because lashes will not tear my small body apart, nor will the flames be able to darken my hair or my clothes” (Hrotsvit, *Sapientia* 167, 174). Not only is physical injury and pain not experienced, but emotional and psychological pain is also miraculously absent: “I am not disturbed, I am not distressed” (Hrotsvit, *Sapientia* 165). In fact, these dying women instead respond in a counterintuitive manner with “tears of happiness” and “great joy” (Hrotsvit, *Sapientia* 165, *Dulcitius* 54). Scholars of hagiography refer to this invulnerability to assault and pain coupled with euphoria as “the anesthesia of glory by which the impassibility promised to the body in the final resurrection is anticipated physically by the martyr undergoing affliction” (Newman 70). Essentially, as these women’s lives are ending and their souls are passing into heaven, their bodies begin to experience the painlessness and joy of heaven before their actual deaths. The martyrs are so ecstatically happy that
even their own burning flesh is described as “perfume” and “marvelous sweetness” (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 169). This odor of sanctity not only testifies to the pleasantness of these women’s torture, but the saintly nature of the newly deceased.

The anesthesia of glory certainly explains the lack of pain experienced by the women in Hrotsvit of Gandersheim’s literature. This explanation, however, relies upon a strictly religious reading of the texts and a limitation of the women’s actions to religious martyrdom. As discussed earlier, with the application of Judith Halberstam’s Shadow Feminisms, it is possible instead to view early medieval martyrs’ actions as evidence of a radical, even transgressive form of feminism. Employing masochism and radical passivity, heteronormative oppression is targeted alongside sin and ultimately dismantled with the breaking of bodies and the refusal to exist as a colonized subject. By reading early medieval religious women as Shadow Feminists instead of victims of patriarchal and/or religious violence, we gain the ability to recognize alternate versions of empowerment and freedom. With the application of Shadow Feminism, however, the existence of the anesthesia of glory presents a problem. Not only do religious women’s courage and endurance seem trivialized by the absence of pain, but painless torture undermines the definitions of masochism and radical passivity key to Shadow Feminism. To a large extent, Shadow Feminism relies upon the experience of pain, often self-inflicted, to mimic death and ultimately free women from the oppression inscribed upon their bodies. Yet, if these same women are not experiencing pain during torture, then what else besides their desire for death ties them to Shadow Feminism? In response to this dilemma, I would like to suggest that pairing Halberstam with Leo
Bersani’s understanding of *jouissance* can resolve the seeming disconnect between Shadow Feminism and the martyr’s lack of pain in what can be called “the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman” (Bersani 212).

Halberstam briefly discusses the “self-shattering mechanism of masochistic *jouissance*” as ultimately an “anarchic refusal of coherence and proscriptive forms of agency” (Halberstam 131, 136). While Halberstam only provides a cursory reference to Bersani, Bersani’s masochistic *jouissance* turns out to be critical to the conceptualization of Shadow Feminism and an alternate explanation of the anesthesia of glory. *Jouissance* in its most basic definition is sexual pleasure, both physical and psychological. Traditionally the pursuit of pleasure, orgasm, and *jouissance* is paired with the avoidance of pain and displeasure. However, since its early days of psychoanalysis, Feminists and Queer theorists, including Bersani, have appropriated *jouissance* and complicated the connection between pleasure and pain. Bersani begins with a “radically revised imagination of the body’s capacity for pleasure” (215). Rather than adhering to the “genitally centered desire” of Freud and Lacan, Bersani views “the body as a surface of multiple sources of pleasure” (Bersani 217, 219). *Jouissance* can thus be achieved through the stimulation of any bodily location, including those generally not recognized as sexual. Occurring across the body, in possibly non-normative regions, *jouissance* “occurs whenever a certain threshold of intensity is reached, when the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by affective processes somehow beyond those connected with psychic organization” (Bersani 217). Reaching this threshold, however, can be achieved by positive methods, such as love-
making, as well as violent actions meaning “the opposition of pleasure and pain becomes irrelevant, in which the sexual emerges as the jouissance of exploded limits, as the ecstatic suffering into which the human organism momentarily plunges when it is pressed beyond a certain threshold of endurance. Sexuality, at least in the mode in which it is constituted, may be a tautology for masochism” (Bersani 217). In other words, regarding jouissance, pleasure and pain become inextricable where both serve as means of stimulating the body in order to achieve a “radical disintegration and humiliation of the self” (Bersani 217).

This combination of pleasure and pain could be dismissed as merely a characteristic of alternate sexual practices like sadomasochism and bondage. Yet, feminists such as Halberstam identify jouissance as playing a more significant role in challenging heteronormative oppression. Experiencing jouissance leads a person to experience, even if only momentarily, a “shattering of psychic structures” leading to a dismantling of self identity (Bersani 217). This shattering of self, though, is not just an erasure of separateness or existence; these psychic structures are the “precondition[s]” for the establishment of all relationships, including cultural organization (Bersani 217). Breaking the connection between an individual and society on a psychic level may be drastic. However, in an oppressive society, queer individuals, including early medieval women, may “desire to kill” or destroy the societal violence incorporated into their own psyches (Halberstam 135). If the personal psychic structure must be sacrificed in order to free the individual and catalyze greater social change, then “the self [must be] exuberantly discarded” (Bersani 218). Meanwhile, the woman who discards her own
psychic connection to heteronormative culture does not only liberate herself, but also those who witness her shattering. Another woman who is “present merely as a witness” can also “experience the excitement without the sex” (Philips Bersani 40). In an act that sounds like it would be alienating and exclusionary, jouissance is surprisingly contagious and can be shared. Thus, one woman undergoing jouissance can lead to a domino effect where others experience similar self-abandonment and liberation. And beyond the political implications of breaking with heteronormative society, this process of disposing the self is not without its rewards. Just as pleasurable acts are involved in the build up toward jouissance, the actual climax involving the shattering of the self is supposed to be euphoric. At this moment, when finally free of the oppression that has shaped their bodies and even their psyches (consciously and unconsciously), women seem to undergo a transcendent experience and feel an unparalleled level of satisfaction. The blankness and nothingness created by jouissance is why women experience a suicidal ecstasy. In a sense, women die by ceasing to be women as defined by heteronormative culture, but in return, they are freed from oppression and experience an incomparable happiness associated with self-definition.

While jouissance sounds like an excellent means of disrupting hegemonic society on a psychic level and Bersani’s pairing of pain and pleasure conflates well with Halberstam’s Shadow Feminism, the question remains as to how these theories illuminate the female martyr’s lack of pain in early medieval texts. I would like to suggest that the women in Cynewulf and Hrotsvit of Gandersheim’s texts are not only practicing Shadow Feminism, but they are experiencing a masochistic form of
jouissance. Instead of feeling no pain because of anesthesia of glory, these scenes may be read as women experiencing the suicidal ecstasy of psychic shattering that occurs at the achievement of jouissance. In other words, a martyr undergoes torture to stimulate both pleasure and pain across diffuse, sexualized body until the threshold for jouissance is achieved. Thus, not only are the actual tortures experienced as pleasurable, but the psychic shattering that occurs towards the end renders death euphoric. In the end, the psychic absence and freedom achieved through jouissance/death leads to the completion of Shadow Feminism’s masochistic and passive unbecoming of women.
CHAPTER 4: WHEN FEMALE WEAKNESS TRIUMPHS, OR THEORY IN ACTION

Cynewulf, a ninth century Anglo-Saxon writer, provides our first literary example of secular authorities disciplining a non-normative woman by torture in order to force her compliance with dominant cultural values. In the poem “Juliana,” Juliana’s father promises her in marriage to a wealthy, aristocratic man. Juliana, however, is a Christian who “despis[e] the conjugal state” and wishes to live a chaste religious life (Cynewulf 303). In addition to denouncing her culture’s religion as “pagan idols,” Juliana also rejects her wealthy suitor: “You may neither have me nor coerce me into marriage” (Cynewulf 303). As a result of Juliana’s spurning her fiancé and the public humiliation that follows, her father “resign[s] her to destruction” and allows the governor, the scorned suitor, to “sentence her to death” (Cynewulf 304). No mercy or humanity is shown in the execution that follows, which involves stripping Juliana naked and flogging her with whips: “He ordered her to be hung and hauled up on a high gallows where she . . . suffered a beating and extremely savage treatment for six hours of the day” (Cynewulf 307). Only after Juliana is physically and sexually exposed, horribly tortured, and continually threatened with worse punishments is she finally killed by the “stroke of a sword” (Cynewulf 318). Unquestionably to a modern reader the “most evil tortures” inflicted upon Juliana seem extreme and unnecessary (Cynewulf 308). The logic behind killing a young woman for refusing to marry, especially in a manner that involves hours of torture, no longer makes sense. Yet to early Christian and early medieval audiences, Cynewulf’s retelling of Juliana’s
martyrdom, including the drastic measures taken to punish her, would culturally make sense. As discussed in section two, marriage and marital sexuality were not only normal, they were the foundations of early medieval culture. Additionally, the exchange of women by their male relatives was fundamental to the success of political and societal relations and the economy. By choosing Christianity and then refusing marriage, Juliana was not merely making a religious statement; she was disrupting the entire secular culture. Without marriage, the children needed to preserve and perpetuate traditional culture would likely never be born. Therefore, considering the significance of Juliana’s advocating chastity, a sexuality generally not recognized as acceptable and therefore made queer, her father and fiancé’s extremely violent actions are elucidated. Juliana’s challenge to dominant culture, her queerness, had to be destroyed and her death by torture had to be brutal enough to deter others.

Interestingly, just because Juliana was considered dangerous enough to warrant destruction and she is finally executed does not mean that Juliana is defeated or a victim: “They with their power could not withstand the will of a woman” (Cynewulf 316). Throughout her tortures, Juliana repeatedly asserts that she is unafraid, “Never shall I fear your ordeals, nor do the horrors of torture or the terrors of trial trouble me” (Cynewulf 305). While this statement may seem like bravado in the face of hours of torture, Juliana seems to be genuinely brave. Juliana is described as having an “indestructible strength” due to her “meek spirit” and faith in Christ (Cynewulf 308). A powerful demon even goes so far as to say, “I know for certain that neither early nor late have I met any woman like you in the worldly kingdom, more confident of purpose
or more stubborn among womankind” (Cynewulf 315). Yet, despite being so brave that even demons fear her, Juliana does not resist her captors or take actions to escape her violent fate; she passively allows herself to be tortured. Furthermore, in the end, Juliana’s passivity shifts to desiring death: “The virgin’s heart was greatly cheered when she heard . . . for it was to be the end of her days of strife, that her life was to be set free” (Cynewulf 317). Upon first inspection, Juliana’s refusal to fight for her life and liberty seems to be the epitome of victimization. Juliana was either not as “resolute and unafraid” as she first appeared or torture and imprisonment have broken her spirit (Cynewulf 316). Even a religious reading does not completely satisfy the contradiction between Juliana’s supposed bravery and her desire for death. When she hears of her impending execution, Juliana wishes to be “free,” but there is no mention of heaven; eternal salvation is apparently not the prime motivation for her death wish. However, if Halberstam’s concept of radical passivity is applied, Juliana’s actions suddenly become clear. Juliana’s “indestructible strength” is in her meekness because she allows herself to be destroyed and thus freed. Having refused to marry and thus submit to heteronormative values, Juliana is robbed of her voice and left with only one means to protest: her body. Juliana can communicate her refusal by allowing her body to be broken and ultimately rejecting life as has already defined by her oppressors. Yet, even though Juliana must die to end her oppression that does not mean she was defeated or victimized. By being passive, Juliana preserves her ability to choose and express herself while denying her oppressors’ power.
While Cynewulf gives us a powerful example of Shadow Feminism in the character of Juliana, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, a tenth century German canoness, excels at portraying female characters that triumph through weakness. In her version of The Passion of St. Agnes, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim presents another martyrdom of an unwilling bride. Agnes, the beautiful daughter of a Roman noble, catches the eye of the son of a powerful minister named Simphronius. Though the unnamed suitor wishes to marry Agnes, she only desires to be “the virtuous bride of Christ” and thus rejects his proposal (Hrotsvit, Agnes 52). In response to his son’s rejection, Simphronius decides to “compel” Agnes to accept his son’s love and to worship their “idols” (Hrotsvit, Agnes 140). Initially, Simphronius’ approach is seemingly benign (albeit manipulative and worldly) as he seeks “to coax her with kindly persuasions” (Hrotsvit, Agnes 146). Agnes, of course, is not tempted by Simphronius’ appeals and offers and utterly refuses both his son and his gods. Seeing that Agnes will not be moved and that the threat her disobedience represents will not resolved, Simphronius orders Agnes to undergo “severe tortures” and “speedily perish by cruel death” (Hrotsvit, Agnes 140, 348). As it is primarily Agnes’ chastity, her queer sexuality, that offends, it is not surprising that her initial punishment focuses on shaming her sexually: “He commanded the esteemed spouse of the Celestial King to be deprived of her garments and with body entirely exposed to be dragged in the midst of a great concourse of people that had gathered, and to be shut up in the dark den of a brothel” (Hrotsvit, Agnes 207-9). Agnes’ nakedness and enclosure in a brothel serves as a penalty not only because it is a violation of the modesty associated with chastity, but because it is an inversion and mockery of
religious enclosure. Instead of being separated from the secular world to live a religious life, according to Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, the women living in brothels are segregated from the rest of society for the purpose of serving its basest and most sinful desires. In addition to this shameful mockery, Agnes’ nakedness and association with sexually promiscuous women would also act as additional signifiers of queerness. For, just as chastity was queer in early medieval culture, “excessive” sexuality in women was equally transgressive in both Germanic and Christian cultures. Thus, as Agnes was already queer due to her religion and chastity, her nudity and temporary residence in a brothel only increase her queerness according to early medieval culture. Considering the multiple ways that Agnes disrupts normativity both by choice and through punishment, it is not surprising that the “pagan pontiffs” “command Agnes to be cast into fire” and then to have her throat cut “ravenously” (Hrotsvit, Agnes 344, 358, 406).

Despite Agnes’ savage ending, as with Juliana, it would not be correct to say that she was defeated and victimized. Agnes may not actively resist her captors and tormenters, but she is “in no wise terrified” (Hrotsvit, Agnes 145). Agnes is even said to have an “unwomanly wildness of heart” (Hrotsvit, Agnes, 275). Of course, although her courage may remain intact, Agnes’ body most certainly does not. Again, the seeming lack of resistance to overtly sexualized attacks makes a feminist reading difficult. Or rather, a traditional feminist reading is entirely possible, but it would consign Agnes to the category of victim. One quote surrounding Agnes’ fatalism, however, changes the entire perception of her character: “Desiring to suffer the sentence of death and speedily to be dissolved” (Hrotsvit, Agnes 386). Agnes’ passivity is not
just about letting her captors win. Her desire for dissolution, to be nothing, aligns her
with Halberstam’s Shadow Feminism. Not wanting to marry or forsake her religion,
only Agnes’ body and her death remain to refute normativity. Agnes’ choice to allow
others to torture and execute her, therefore, is an empowered decision and the reason
she “could not be overcome by suffering” (Hrotsvit, *Agnes* 150). Therefore, through
her use of Shadow Feminism, Agnes is not just a “happy martyr,” but a “victrix in a
double battle” as well (Hrotsvit, *Agnes* 424). A traditional reading of Agnes’ “double
battle” would include her physical battle with torture and her spiritual fight against the
devil. However, recognizing Shadow Feminism allows us to acknowledge that the
second battle may be characterized as an ideological triumph over patriarchy and
heteronormativity rather than any supernatural foe.

Lastly, considering both Juliana and Agnes’ absence of pain during torture, one
final aspect of dismantling of oppression remains to be discussed. In terms of
indestructibility and painlessness, the evidence for *jouissance* in Cynewulf’s *Juliana*
and Hrotsvit of Gandersheim’s *Agnes* is very similar. Juliana is placed in a cauldron
full of hot lead and “yet still the saint was standing with beauty unscarred. Not her hem
nor her robe, neither hair nor skin were blemished by fire, neither body nor limbs”
(Cynewulf 316). Similarly, as Agnes is supposed to be burnt alive, “the fire did not
molest” (Hrotsvit, *Agnes* 326). Furthermore, the complete absence of pain during
torture is highlighted by the fact that her death is described as simply “falling asleep”
(Hrotsvit, *Agnes* 412). For both Juliana and Agnes, the lack of physical harm and pain
they undergo might initially seem miraculous, however, the addition of masochistic
*jouissance* creates a more complicated picture. No pain or physical injury is reported because the stimulation of torture, albeit negative stimulation, is pushing Agnes and Juliana toward the threshold of *jouissance*. Then, once the psychic structures, which bind them to their torturers have shattered, both women unquestionably experience joy. Christianity traditionally understands the nature of this joy as the reward for endurance found in the afterlife. Yet, this religious motivation does not negate the ecstasy of torture that is simultaneously occurring. Ultimately, both religious components and *jouissance* are interwoven into Agnes and Juliana’s experience of torture.

In fact, the absolute destruction of their oppressors’ hold helps explain another aspect of their torture; both Agnes and Juliana manage to reverse the direction of torture leading to the death of some of their tormentors. As Agnes is being burned, “the flames raging with excessive heat broke forth and destroyed at once the executioners” (Hrotsvit, *Agnes* 363-7). Likewise, in Juliana’s case, “the fire was riven and scattered and the lead exploded wide, hot and deadly voracious” leading to “seventy-five in number of the heathen host” being “scorched up there by the blast of the fire” (Cynewulf 316). While both of these explosions could be the work of divine vengeance or human negligence, a third explanation exists. The flames’ wreaking havoc upon the torturers not only suggests their inability to harm Juliana and Agnes, but reveals the reason for the torturer’s subsequent destruction. It seems significant that at the moment when Juliana and Agnes are experiencing psychic shattering their physical surroundings are shattering as well. Symbolically, it almost as if the destruction wrought by *jouissance* is so powerful that it spreads outward. Thus, Juliana and Agnes are not only
psychically severed from oppression, but also physically divorced from heteronormative systems. At the same time, their torturers, who are firmly embedded in violent ideologies, are consumed by their own oppressive flames. Dead or alive, these men will never be free like Juliana and Agnes.

Of course, in early medieval hagiography, torture was not solely reserved for reluctant brides such as Juliana and Agnes. Hrotsvit of Gandersheim presents one of the most graphic descriptions of torture in her drama “Sapientia” or “wisdom” about the martyrdom of Sapientia’s daughters, the three “little women,” Fides, Spes, and Karitas (faith, hope, and charity), by the “tyrant” Hadrian (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 151, 159). In an unusual framework, Sapientia is not tortured, but stands by and witnesses her daughters’ martyrdoms and even encourages their sacrifice: “Yes, I am happy now. But later I will indeed rejoice, when I have seen your little sister off to heaven, ending her earthly life like you” (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 171). Although Sapientia’s evident happiness in the face of her daughters’ murders compared to expectations of maternal nurturing and protection seems to queer her as a mother, she also may be forcing herself to watch the girls’ suffereing as a means of self-torture in order to achieve masochistic jouissance and escape oppression. Of course, while the ability to experience jouissance second-hand is an established phenomena, it is still unsettling that she chooses her daugheters’ deaths to prompt her own shattering. Only Sapientia’s later grief and death can pardon her seeming lack of feeling and selfishness: “I do entrust to you once more, hard earth, these little flowers, born of my own body. Take them up and cherish them in your earthly, bodily bosom . . . and give rest and peace at last to their bones” (Hrotsvit,
Sapientia 177). Already captured by Hadrian, Sapientia encourages her daughters’ destruction and her own because it was the only remaining option to escape oppression.

Turning to Fides, Spes, and Karitas, while there is nothing particularly unique about these girls’ refusal to worship pagan gods (a fairly standard move in hagiography), what is different is their young age. As the term “little women” suggests, the three sisters are all prepubescent girls, where Fides is the oldest at twelve years and Karitas the youngest at eight (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 154). Furthermore, while there is recognition of these girls’ physical immaturity, torture and martyrdom proceed anyway: “Do not spare them because they are children, but have them killed” (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 161). Additionally, although Hadrian considers the “weak and delicate nature of the feminine sex,” the sisters’ youth and its potential influence on their minds or emotions ultimately do not change their fate (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 151). Therefore, while the girls’ chronological age was important enough to note several times, early medieval conceptions of childhood are clearly very different from modern ones. In fact, returning to the phrase “little women,” it is perhaps better if we broaden our definition of womanhood to include Fides, Spes, and Karitas and recognize that they were culturally expected to perform some of the same responsibilities as more mature women, such as obedience to secular authority and observance of traditional, non-Christian religion.

Consequently, when these girls refuse to comply with Emperor Hadrian’s demand to worship pagan gods, they are perceived as being as threatening as older Christian women. Actually rejecting marriage was not necessary as the girls’ Christianity and chastity were enough to position them as queer. In fact, rejecting
marriage in favor of a religious life at so early an age potentially would have seemed worse because this choice would indicate that chastity was now moving from a personal choice to a permanent cultural position. In other words, families were now intending their daughters for the Church and were creating a competing set of values, or as Sapientia says to her daughters, “So that I might marry you to someone better than a man –A divine bridegroom” (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 159). Altering marital practices, however, is not the only socio-political institution that Christianity threatens. Antiochus believes that Christians “threaten [Hadrian’s] rule” and therefore “want[s] whatever might disturb the state, whatever I believe might harm its peace of mind, to be uprooted and disappear completely from our land” (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 148). Within this governmental context, Sapientia and her daughters’ queer religion becomes more than a danger to traditional religion and society; refusing to worship idols is a direct challenge to the patriarchal authority of the state. Thus, in an attempt to impede these changes, Hadrian imprisons Sapientia and her daughters and then proceeds to torture the girls to death.

Confronting Fides first, Hadrian orders a dozen centurions to “lash her limbs off” with whips and to have her nipples cut from each breast (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 162-3). As these methods fail to break her, Hadrian moves on to attempting to kill her with the “torrid heat” of first “fiery glowing coals under a large grill” and then “a cauldron full of pitch and boiling wax” (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 164). Only after boiling and roasting prove to as ineffective as mutilation is Fides finally executed via beheading. Being without a head literally means no longer experiencing any physical sensation, including
pain, and therefore bringing torture to an end. There are, however, perhaps additional reasons why decapitation is effective when all other methods of torture have failed. In the western mind/body dichotomy, women are predominantly tied to the body and men to the mind. If the goal is to punish and destroy the female body, the head and its representative masculinity may have to be removed first. Additionally, a psychoanalytic reading of the mind’s correlation to maleness would highlight the connection between the male body’s two different heads: cranium and penis. Fides actions in the narrative may have made Hadrian feel emasculated. To counter the symbolic threat of castration, Hadrian would likely need to sever the heads of his enemy. In this reading, then, Fides is beheaded to remove her most masculine feature, her mind, so that Hadrian may protect his other head.

Repeating the cycle, Spes next faces beatings with the “heaviest whips” and dismemberment: “Have her strung up high above the ground, and torn to pieces by instruments of torture. When her very bowels have been plucked out and her bones are all laid bare she will weaken at last and die, breaking limb by limb” (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 167-8). Only after decapitation is Spes freed from her tortures and Hadrian shifts his focus to Karitas. Increasingly frustrated by his inability to cause these sisters excruciating pain and to deliver an inhumane death, Hadrian takes the most effort with Karitas. Not only does he attempt to repeat the tortures inflicted on Fides and Spes, but he orders “a furnace to be heated for three days and nights and have her thrown inside” (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 173). However, due to Karitas’ great faith and her devotion to chastity, the flames cause no pain and she can even be seen “running around playing in
the smoke as it glistened with tongues of fire” (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 175). With no other options left, Hadrian resorts to beheading and thus finally rids himself of the threat these “little women” represent. In the end, considering that Hadrian never manages to inflict the suffering he desires and the girls’ message is never completely silenced, Fides, Spes, and Karitas’ executions cannot really be called a victory for Hadrian. In fact, considering their willingness to die, which includes voluntarily jumping into burning cauldrons, Hadrian can really only be said to have provided the means and opportunity for these girls’ martyrdom. Their martyrdom, of course, is not merely about dying for religion, but is also about dying for their rights as “little women” and queer individuals. While the radical passivity of allowing Hadrian’s tortures and the masochism of willingly leaping into fire is extreme, these actions are consistent with Halberstam’s Shadow Feminism. Everything Fides, Spes, and Karitas undergo contributes to their physical destruction, which ultimately frees them from their oppressive environment.

Along with this physical shattering, Fides, Spes, and Karitas also exhibit evidence of psychic dismantling or jouissance. During their persecution, several events occur that testify to “torture becom[ing] a place of restful joy” to the girls because they feel no pain (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 164). Of the three sisters, Fides is the first to undergo torture and to render her captors impotent. After cutting the nipples off her breasts, Fides claims she is “wounded” but not “harmed” as “instead of a stream of blood, a stream of milk is flowing” (Hrotsvit, Sapientia 163). In place of blood, which signifies death, Fides is instead spilling milk, the essence femininity and maternity. Bedsides for
reversing the nature of her sexual mutilation, Fides also “swim[s] about happily unharmed in the boiling pitch” that feels like “the freshness of morning dew” (Hrotsvit, *Sapientia* 164). Instead of feeling utter agony, Fides speaks of being burned as if she were experiencing a refreshing treat. Fides, however, is not alone in claiming “joy” in the midst of horrific torture and death (Hrotsvit, *Sapientia* 171). Spes describes her tortures, which are nearly identical to her sister Fides’, as “kindness” and “mild lightness” (Hrotsvit, *Sapientia* 167). Then, Karitas, who is tried last, is savagely whipped, but “the lashes never so much as grazed the surface of that soft skin of her” (Hrotsvit, *Sapientia* 174). While Fides, Spes, and Karitas are three separate young women and all undergo individual torture, they are united by the absence of physical harm and lack of physical pain. And for all three, masochistic *jouissance* means that they are able to overcome oppression on a psychological level: “Whatever cruel threat, whatever deadly instrument you have invented! The crueler the punishment, the more you will be confounded when you are beaten” (Hrotsvit, *Sapientia* 168).

Intimately bound to torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence are a common feature of saint’s lives and presumably the religious women’s lives these stories reflect. As we saw when Agnes was stripped of her clothes and when Fides has the nipples cut from her breast, torture often involved sexual aspects as violating and shameful as any act of rape. Additionally, rape, as an act of extreme violence, can be torture. Despite the frequency with which rape and torture coincide, it is still useful to examine rape by itself in order to gain insight into the early medieval culture that influenced Hrotsvit of Gandersheim’s work. Despite knowing that rape did occur
during this period, it is surprisingly difficult to study. In the early Middle Ages, the term “raptus” could mean sexual assault, but it could also signify “acts which we would consider as abduction, elopement, and adultery” (Coleman 194). Not only could acts that are not understood as rape today be categorized as rape, but instances like marital rape that we would unquestionably label as rape due to the absence of consent would be “unperceived as rape” (Karras 114). What we do know about sexual assault during this period is that laws produced femininity “virtually without subjectivity” (Pasternack 123). In most cases, the family’s consent was more important than the woman’s. The importance of familial precedence was particularly important where marriage and its attendant, expected sexuality occurred. Often, little concern was given to a woman’s preference in marriage partners and there was certainly no conception of the need for a married woman to consent to sex; marital rape did not exist. Even in cases when a rape was perceived to have occurred, women’s consent was “irrelevant” and at times they were even held as “complicit” or responsible for their own assault (Karras 113). Instead of being viewed as a personal violation or an act of violence, rape was understood more as a loss of property or value. A woman’s sexuality, particularly her virginity, was something she (and her male relatives or guardians) possessed and thus rape was the stealing or damaging of this possession. Given this understanding of rape, King Æthelberht’s laws requiring compensation be paid to the king and the woman’s male relatives and the ability of a rapist to “buy the right to keep” a woman makes legal sense (Coleman 197). According to these laws, the amount of compensation required depended on the woman’s status both as a virgin/non-virgin and her socio-economic status.
standing, which was determined by her male guardian’s position. In other words, the remuneration required was not so much a punishment, as a form of recompense between men in the greater exchange of women. The cost paid had little to do with the actual sexual assault and everything to do with the monetary value placed on a woman according to her sexual activity and the power of the men that were responsible for her. In the end, the sad fact is that when an actual sexual assault occurred, it seems as if women were doubly victimized. The possibility that some of the financial settlement could have gone towards the continued care and support of the violated woman remains, but there is no definitive proof for this practice. Therefore, since women not only suffered the initial rape, but only their male relatives were compensated, it appears that they received little justice or recognition for their suffering.

While Hrotsvit of Gandersheim’s dramas never depict an actual rape, the threat of sexual violation remains vivid throughout her work. The close connection to torture is also repeatedly reemphasized. In “Dulcitius,” after refusing to renounce the “new Christian superstition” and enter proper Roman society, the sisters Agape, Chione, and Irena are labeled as “insane” and presented for questioning to Governor Dulcitius (Hrotsvit, Dulcitius 40). However, instead of beginning their interrogation, Dulcitius desires to have sex, imprisons them in a pantry, and attempts “to scare them with threats of dreadful punishment” (Hrotsvit, Dulcitius 42). Upon entering the kitchen at night to carry out his intended rape, Dulcitius begins hallucinating and instead begins “fondling” and kissing pots and pans as a result of the sisters’ prayers for protection (Hrotsvit, Dulcitius 44). Undoubtedly, this scene is meant to be humorous, especially considering
Hrotsvit wrote this play for a female audience. In an inversion of power, Dulcitius is being exposed to the female gaze as ridiculous and momentarily impotent. Yet, Hrotsvit’s humor is not without its dark moments. The groping that the cookware receives was clearly intended for the sisters, who would have been unwilling recipients. Additionally, Dulcitius’ intention to coerce the sisters into accepting his sexual advances with threats increases the violence of the scene. Taking into account these factors, Dulcitius’ kissing a frying pan becomes the opposite of comical and instead evidence for the ever-present threat of sexual violation. Surprisingly, even the ominous nature of Dulcitius’ amorous encounter with cookware does not completely stifle the hilarity of the scene. Rather, the humor of Hrotsvit’s portrayal relies on the audience realizing the social reality of rape and oppression and then seeing these reversed. Thus, a scene that initially seems entertaining, but unimportant becomes a satiric social commentary.

While Dulcitius never actually rapes Agape, Chione, and Irena, later, after he comes to his senses, he gets revenge for his unfulfilled desire and the humiliation he receives. Dulcitius hands the women over to Sisinnius to be “tortured on the rack” and then burnt alive in “raging flames” (Hrotsvit, Dulcitius 48-9). Not surprisingly, the sisters’ tortures also involve a sexual aspect. Soldiers attempt to strip all three women of their clothes and “publicly expose” them (Hrotsvit, Dulcitius 47). Although this attempted exposure fails because “their clothes cling to their young bodies,” the violent intent to demean the sisters remains intact (Hrotsvit, Dulcitius 47). Meanwhile, in a final attempt to force Irena to sacrifice to their gods and abandon a religious life,
Sisinnius has her “taken to a brothel, where [her] body will be shamefully disgraced” (Hrotsvit, Dulcitus 51). Of course, the threat of imprisonment in a brothel is more than just the shame Irena would receive as a fallen woman. As an unwilling inhabitant forced into prostitution, Irena’s experience would be more a series of rapes rather than a business transaction. The evidence for rape is even further supported by Irena’s defiant remarks to Sisinnius, which establish the distinction between forced defilement in a brothel and willful “dishonor” through idolatry (Hrotsvit, Dulcitus 51). Despite being a violation, forced prostitution has a limited potential for harm because consent is not given as it is with idolatry. Even if her body is harmed through torture, Irena’s will remains untouched.

Unfortunately, despite their strong wills, Agape, Chione, and Irena are still subject to sexual harassment and torture. Only death really frees these women from the threat posed by Dulcitius’ lust and Sisinnius’ determination to eradicate their Christian dedication to chastity. This death, however, is not as hopeless as it initially sounds. More than just passive recipients of torture, the sisters actively seek pain and death: “Punishment is the reward we seek! We yearn for the day we can embrace it” (Hrotsvit, Dulcitus 41). Although this masochistic desire supposedly stems from longing “to be torn asunder for the love of Christ,” the girls’ desire to die is not limited to a religious sacrifice (Hrotsvit, Dulcitus 41). Dulcitius and Sisinnius’ wish to force Agape, Chione, and Irena to give up their queer Christian religion and chaste sexuality so that they might gain sexual access to them. As a result, since the motivation behind the torture is not just about religion, but also sex, the sisters’ resistance cannot be solely limited to
religious martyrdom. Therefore, their desire to die for Christ is to some extent a desire to die for their non-normative versions of womanhood. And even though passivity and masochism seem weak, an incredible amount of strength is needed to persevere in the face of sexual violence and make the decision to refuse to exist in a world limited by gender and sexuality. In the end, even as their bodies are destroyed, the sisters “could not be broken by threats” because they have an excellent reason for desiring death: maintaining their ability to choose their faith and sexuality (Hrotsvit, Dulcitius 51).

The same sense of triumph despite death dominates another of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim’s dramas, “Callimachus.” In “Callimachus,” readers are introduced to Drusiana, a devout Christian practicing chaste marriage: “Wholly devoted to God and chastity. Even her husband Andronicus . . . has long missed her from his bed” (Hrotsvit, Callimachus 57). Despite her marital status and her vow of chastity, Drusiana has the misfortune of attracting the “lustful love” of Callimachus (Hrotsvit, Callimachus 59). As expected, Drusiana refuses Callimachus’ suit and remains true to her vow of chastity. Callimachus, however, quickly proves himself to be more than an ardent lover: “By God, I swear it, I shall have you, you’ll see! If you won’t give in to me, I’ll trap you. I’ll never rest. I’ll never stop. I’ll do anything to get you!” (Hrotsvit, Callimachus 59). At times the threat of sexual violence is not particularly overt in Hrotsvit’s work. However, in case of Callimachus’ statement, the threat of entrapment and rape are explicit. Callimachus is capable of all manner of “abominable acts” and he will do “anything” to achieve his purpose (Hrotsvit, Callimachus 66). Terrified of Callimachus and seeing no escape, Drusiana prays for death and receives it: “I am
afraid for my chastity. Lord, grant me, as the reward for my piety, swift death!” (Hrotsvit, Callimachus 60). Through death, Drusiana achieves ultimate physical dissolution allowing her to thwart oppression. Although, unlike most of her literary peers Drusiana does not have to go through excruciating torture to defend her queer chastity she still fits with Halberstam’s definition of Shadow Feminism. The purpose of Shadow Feminism is dismantling oppression through the destruction of the self. This breaking apart often includes violence by others (extreme passivity) and self-violence (masochism), but neither of these aspects is a prerequisite for Shadow Feminism. Drusiana’s lack of radical passivity and masochism is not important next to her extreme desire for death and her resultant physical and psychological dissolution.

Unfortunately, while Drusiana’s soul may be safe, death is apparently not enough to protect the body of a woman: “There’s the body – she looks asleep. Her face is not that of a corpse, nor are her limbs corrupt – use her as you will” (Hrotsvit, Callimachus 63). After bribing Fortunatus, a “wicked slave,” to bring him to Drusiana’s tomb, Callimachus discovers that she “lies fresh and lovely still” (Hrotsvit, Callimachus 66, 62). If suggestions of Drusiana’s remaining beauty is not unambiguous enough, Callimachus’ intent to commit necrophilia is confirmed with the phrases “defiling the chaste body of this dead woman” and “attack her lifeless flesh” (Hrotsvit, Callimachus 68). Callimachus’ planned postmortem rape of Drusiana is not, however, about personal predilection, but rather a continued need to dominate her: “Now it lies within my power to force you, to bruise you and injure you as much as I want” (Hrotsvit, Callimachus 63). In fact, considering how close violence and sexuality
seem to be for Callimachus, it is possible that he receives as much gratification from threatening and attacking as he does from intercourse. Continuing to consider this possibility, one cannot help wondering if Callimachus reveals something additional about the various male characters that torture women in early medieval saints’ lives and hagiography. Unquestionably these women’s refusal to worship pagan gods, marry, and enter into sexual relationships are seen as non-normative and threatening, but maybe the violence they receive in return is more than an attempt at discipline. Although frightening to consider, perhaps the reason that torture occurs, especially when it involves stripping the body and mutilating sexualized body parts like the breasts, is to gratify the sexual desires of the torturer and vicariously the reader. And if this motivation were the case, Drusiana and her literary sisters’ desire for death would not seem that surprising. Whether the primary motive in these texts is sexual desire or societal discipline, at least Callimachus’ intentions are clear. Also certain is Callimachus’ failure to carry out the defilement he had intended. A “dreadful snake,” supposedly the devil, rears up and kills both Callimachus and Fortunatus. And though a religious interpretation certainly suffices, since the devil is only ever mentioned in the stage notes written by Larissa Bonfante and not the actual text by Hrotsvit, an opposing phallic reading is equally as valid. After all, it would be ironic if Callimachus’ death were somehow linked to his penis considering all the harm he intended to do with that appendage.

Whether divine intervention or sexual dysfunction, the timely appearance of the snake prevents Drusiana’s post-mortem defilement. Interestingly, other women
apparently took more direct measures to protect their bodies from attack after death. St. Werburh, a seventh century Mercian nun, is said to have miraculously “made her own incorrupt body dissolve so that it would not fall into hands” of heathens (Yorke 58). The actual steps taken to achieve this disintegration are not described. However, the motive of the deceased Werburh appears to be the same as her living counterparts. Werburh clearly wishes to be free of her oppressors and the threat they pose to her continued chastity. Therefore, according to the legends arising from her cult and actively promoted by her brother Cenred, Werburh destroys her body even though she is already dead. The only difference between Werburh’s Shadow Feminism and that of the other characters mentioned is that she is already dead while other martyrs and saints are in the process of dying.

Swinging to the other end of the spectrum, the violence of enclosure sought to control women’s sexuality. Arising from Christian morality instead of traditional Germanic culture and the promotion of chastity over marriage, enclosure remained complicated as women sometimes entered convents voluntarily where they enthusiastically embraced violent asceticism and other times were forced into this environment and lifestyle. As already discussed in section two, enclosure and living a religious life were not always negative and for some women it was actually liberating and empowering: “Rather than cutting back on women’s choices, virginity offered them new options . . . rejection of sex meant the rejection of the control of a husband. Celibate women could avoid male domination, at least to some degree (the spiritual authority they amassed could help them gain their independence from fathers and
brothers as well)” (Karras 32). Nevertheless, when women did not elect to enter convents and were instead forcefully confined because of familial politics and economics or simply to suppress their “illicit passion[s],” then enclosure becomes an abusive practice (Hrotsvit, Abraham 83). Additionally, some of the practices associated with enclosure, whether related to asceticism or atonement, were particularly violent and could easily be classified as a form of torture. At times, the mortification of the body and the denial of sustenance were both voluntarily and involuntarily used as a part of the atonement and enclosure: “For she put on a hairshirt, and though worn down by relentless exercise of vigils and fasting, she still compels her sweet young body to follow the dictates of her soul in observing the strictest rule (Hrotsvit, Abraham 103). However, the most effective weapon involved in the practice of enclosure was the physical space of the room: “in normal contexts, the room, the simplest form of shelter, expresses the most benign potential of human life. It is, on the one hand, an enlargement of the body: it keeps warm and safe the individual it houses in the same way the body encloses and protects the individual within” (Scarry 39). Yet, when the room ceases to protect the individual and instead imprisons and causes suffering, then “the room, both in its structure and its content, is converted into a weapon” (Scarry 41). Therefore, enclosure can become a form of torture not only because of violent actions and abnegating lifestyle practiced within religious communities, but also due to being confined to the convent or even individual cells.

In her plays “Abraham” and “Paphnutius,” Hrotsvit of Gandersheim gives two excellent examples of how enclosure alters from a harmless religious practice to a form
of torture. In “Abraham,” Maria is made the ward of her uncle, Abraham, at a very young age. Abraham, a priest and hermit, determines that Maria should also live a religious enclosed life in “a little cell” with a “narrow entrance” (Hrotsvit, Abraham 82). This arrangement continues for twenty years until Maria achieves “total destruction” by losing her virginity to a man disguised as a monk (Hrotsvit 84). The fact that Maria’s unnamed seducer is disguised as a monk is significant because it indicates the failure of enclosure in this situation. Maria is supposed to be separated from men, especially non-religious men, by several levels of enclosure. Pretending to be a monk allowed the seducer to bypass the physical and institutional barriers to Maria and placed him in a position of social and spiritual authority. No longer enclosed, Maria is devastated by her loss of virtue, gives into grief, and proceeds to run away, which Abraham describes as: “But when she, poor woman, realized she was defiled, she beat upon her breast, she ripped her face with her hands, she tore at her clothes, pulled at her hair, screaming out her cries howling to the sky” (Hrotsvit, Abraham 84). Maria ends up working as a “whore” in “the house of certain pimp” bringing him “a good profit” (Hrotsvit Abraham 90). Despite wishing she “had been dead and gone three years ago,” Maria’s tenure as a prostitute continues until Abraham comes to retrieve her (Hrotsvit, Abraham 95). Although he gains admittance by disguising himself as a customer, Abraham reveals his true identity and reminds Maria of her “maidenly shame” and her former “marvelous chastity” (Hrotsvit, Abraham 97). Maria initially fears that she “will never be strong enough to do proper penance,” but ultimately returns with Abraham to her “small windowless cell” (Hrotsvit, Abraham 99, 102). Once again
enclosed, Maria not only lives primarily in dark and isolation, but she goes through an excruciating atonement for twenty years: “Whatever penances I have suggested she should suffer, no matter how painful, no matter how hard, she has not yet refused to undergo a single one of them” (Hrotsvit, *Abraham* 103). In the end, while Maria’s story revolves around repentance and likely was meant to serve as Christian inspiration, the journey she takes to be “purged by the bitterness of her penance” must also be recognized (Hrotsvit, *Abraham* 103). The question remains, though, whether Maria’s masochism should be interpreted as repentance and evidence of Abraham’s authority and by extension Christianity’s, or if instead Maria is attempting to end oppression by embracing enclosure and asceticism as a Shadow Feminist.

Whatever unpleasant aspects of enclosure are indirectly or vaguely mentioned in “Abraham” are portrayed with vivid and malodorous detail in “Paphnutius.” Thais, a courtesan “filthy in the foulness of her sordid life,” lives a wealthy, privileged life through trading sex (Hrotsvit, *Paphnutius* 114). After hearing of her reputation, though, the hermit Paphnutius determines to meet her “disguised as one of her lovers,” convince Thais of her sinfulness, and force her repentance (Hrotsvit, *Paphnutius* 116). Upon meeting, Paphnutius begins “threatening” Thais and frightening her with predictions of eternal damnation: “She was destroying herself, and damning herself willfully to everlasting Hell” (Hrotsvit, *Paphnutius* 121, 130). After only a relatively short conversation, Abraham convinces Thais to give us life as a prostitute and that enclosure is the best method to ensure repentance and forgiveness: “It is only proper for you. You have until now been wandering from man to man, without restraint of any kind at all.
You must be tamed at last, shut up in a place by yourself” (Hrosvit, *Paphnutius* 122, 133). A religious interpretation of this exchange would celebrate Thais’ newfound awareness of her sin and the steps taken towards redemption. Inversely, reading this scene from a feminist perspective produces a very different result. Regardless of individual stances on prostitution, Thais is clearly going from a position of power and wealth, where she is to some extent liberated in her ability to be sexually active and choose her partners, to a position of shame and confinement. When Abraham argues that Thais needs to be “restrained” and “tamed” because of her promiscuousness, it is clear that he is more concerned about her sexuality than her salvation. Thais’ soul might be endangered, but the greater danger is the threat her wantonness poses to hegemonic values (both Christian and Germanic), which confined sexuality to marriage. Even as Paphnutius teaches his disciples about the “harmonious order,” Thais disrupts both the lesson and the music of the cosmos (Hrosvit, *Paphnutius* 107). Thus, based on Paphnutius’ statement coupled with his desire for divine harmony, I believe it can be argued that the real motivation for enclosing Thais is to discipline her behavior and eliminate the threat of her non-normative life-style and sexuality.

Whether Paphnutius is sincere in his desire to save Thais or not, the result of her enclosure is the same. Paphnutius brings Thais to a convent where he begins to make arrangements for her enclosure. Not only is she to assigned “a narrow, solitary cell, in order to allow her to meditate, alone upon her crimes,” but she will be literally bricked into her room: “Tell them to leave neither entrance or exit, but only a narrow window through which she will be fed a small quantity of food” (Hrosvit, *Paphnutius* 131).
When Thais sees the tiny, dark room where she is supposed to live alone with the “nauseating smell” of her excrement, which is never removed, she naturally balks at her enclosure (Hrotsvit, *Paphnutius* 143). Yet, after Paphnutius renews his “harsh warnings,” she enters the “filthy shack” to live as a “prisoner” and “be broken” for five years (Hrotsvit, *Paphnutius* 139, 134, 141,135). Trapped in an inhumane situation (isolation, malnourishment, lack of sanitation), Thais “cries over her past deeds” and likely her current suffering, as well (Hrotsvit, *Paphnutius* 137). After five years of hell, Paphnutius finally returns to release Thais from her solitary confinement to find a woman completely mentally and physically destroyed: “Don’t take me away from this dirt, for I am a poor, wretched, dirty thing, too” (Hrotsvit, *Paphnutius* 143). Like many prisoners, Thais is frightened by the outside world and is reluctant to trust her captors. Referring to herself as “a poor, wretched, dirty thing” also suggests that her self-worth is nonexistent and that she may not even view herself as a person anymore. As for her physical health, years of malnourishment and living in filth have clearly taken a toll. Only two weeks after being released into the larger monastic community, still enclosed, but in better conditions, Thais dies. Since no other illness or injury is indicated, it can be assumed that Thais’ death is caused by the progressive deterioration she experiences in her cell. In fact, we can perhaps even surmise that she was only released from her cell because she was near death; her captors either felt guilty or were convinced due to the vision received by the disciple Paul that Thais’ death was imminent and therefore the threat she posed was already over.
As horrific as Maria and Thais’ enclosures are, it would be incorrect to label both women as victims of forced imprisonment. Both women desire to repent and are willing to go through an extreme penance to atone for their grave sins. Repentance, of course, does not necessarily signify submission to hegemonic values. While living and working as prostitutes was certainly non-normative, celibacy was also a contested sexuality during the early middle ages thought of as queer by secular society. So, by choosing to live enclosed, religious lives, Maria and Thais could be considered to be moving from one queer identity to another, rather than renouncing queerness in favor of normativity. Additionally, the extreme asceticism practiced by these women could not only be redemptive, but empowering. After all, some women “turned to monasticism as a substitute, a sort of martyrdom in this life” as an alternate expression of Shadow Feminism (Karras 37).

According to the Liber Eliensis, Æthelthryth, the daughter of a king and the wife of another, fought for years to live a monastic life “cut off from human social relations” (Liber Eliensis, Book I, 32). Despite being twice wed, Æthelthryth embraced a queer sexuality by remaining a virgin in chaste marriages and convincing her husbands to also live chastely. Immediately after entering the convent, she embarks on an extremely ascetic lifestyle including “vigils and abstinence from food” (Liber Eliensis, Book I, 24). Although Æthelthryth’s worst sin is her youthful, “needless vanity” of wearing necklaces, she still voluntarily undergoes intense penance (Bede IV.20). Therefore, though their sins differ significantly, Æthelthryth, Maria, and Thais are choosing the same living martyrdom:
If she had been permitted to fight her battle in those days, under Nero or Diocletian, it is unquestionable that she would have climbed up on the torturers’ rack of her own accord, would have thrown herself into the flame of her own accord, would never have been afraid to have her limbs severed by threshing wheels or saw blades . . . so that she would have laughed in the midst of any tortures whatsoever, happy in her sores, rejoicing in her agonies. As it was though she did not endure these things, she nonetheless achieved a bloodless martyrdom (Liber Eliensis, Book I, 37).

Of course, the bloodless or white martyrdom referred to here is an example of extreme asceticism. By denying her body food, rest, and comfort, Æthelthryth achieves a martyrdom equal to women like Agnes and Juliana, who actually were tortured and executed. The suffering that Æthelthryth, Maria, and Thais underwent is also equal to other more explicit tales of martyrdom in their relationship to Shadow Feminism. Not only did these women passively accept the restrictive lifestyle of monastic life, but they committed masochistic acts to their own bodies. While explicitly targeting their sins, masochism inevitably also sought to destroy the body on which oppression was inscribed. In other words, a dual dismantling of sin and patriarchy was occurring in these women’s extreme asceticism. In fact, considering that the body was one of the many layers women were enclosed in, purposeful mutilation might be a means to thwart the imposed ideology of wholeness to women’s bodies. As flagellation or other violent acts occurred to break the skin, a type of penetration was occurring. The difference is
that women were choosing to penetrate themselves in order to simultaneously deny men the ability to penetrate them and to contain them. Between this self-penetration and the other masochistic acts of extreme asceticism, women could gain control over their bodies, including the dismantling of these bodies, which would have been very empowering in a world dominated by violence against women.
CONCLUSION

I first encountered Judith/Jack Halberstam’s Shadow Feminism at her April 8, 2010 talk at Butler University. Hearing the suggestion that masochism and passivity could be a means of escaping oppression, I was incredibly disturbed and sought to challenge this point. I asked Halberstam how if something looked and felt like oppression, it could in fact be a form of agency. To paraphrase, Halberstam answered by saying that literary critics often find oppression and violence in moments that appear routine and non-violent. If we can find violence in peace and oppression in empowerment, then why can we not find the reverse: agency in violence. While I was initially uncertain, I came to be fascinated by the inseparability of feminism and oppression: “in a world engendered by sexual violence and its bastard offspring, a world where the enemy and the oppressor is also the lover, the victim is not choosing between action and passivity, freedom and death, but survival and desire” (Halberstam 137).

The concept that oppression and a solution to oppression are already present in each other has bolstered my belief that many early medieval women, including Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and her characters, were Shadow Feminists. Through masochism and radical passivity, these queer women found strength in their “female weakness” and thus “triumph” over heteronormative violence (Hrotsvit, preface, 41). The evidence for a reading involving Shadow Feminism and masochistic *jouissance* is abundant. The only question that remains is whether we are willing to accept this interpretation. Many scholars find the religious argument of early medieval women sacrificing themselves for their religion and chastity perfectly comprehensible. However, it is not yet known
how my queer feminist argument of early medieval women destroying themselves to end gendered and sexualized oppression will be received. Are we prepared to recognize that women previously defined only by their religion or victimization may have had an alternate form of agency?


Halberstam, Judith. “Shadow Feminisms: Queer Negativity and Radical Passivity.” *The Queer*


Lewis, Suzanne. “Medieval Bodies Then and Now: Negotiating Problems of Ambivalence and Paradox.” Naked Before God: Uncovering The Body in Anglo-


