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A Canterbury School of Literary Theory:
Aldhelm's *De virginitate*, the *Liber monstrorum*, and (Un)Reliable Fictions

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[This is the author's final version of an essay that appears in *The Practice and Politics of Reading, 650-1500*, ed. Daniel Donoghue, James Simpson, Nicholas Watson, and Anna Wilson (D.S. Brewer, 2022), 63–83].

From the seventh century to the twelfth, one of the most widely read works in England was the "treatise on sexual practice" by Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury and later bishop of Sherborne (d. 709).[1] An *opus geminatum* or 'twinned work' of matched verse and prose, the *De virginitate* offers an encomium of exemplary male and female virgins and was produced at the behest of a group of women known for their wit and learning: Abbess Hildelith and the famously well-read nuns of Barking Abbey. As Diane Watt, Clare A. Lees, and Gillian R. Overing have noted,[2] this fact alone helpfully overturns assumptions about the typical readership for Anglo-Latin literature, but Aldhelm's text also merits attention as an influential guide to early medieval English reading practices, precisely because it proved one of the most widely read—and obsessively annotated—works of the period. As a result of its preeminence as a schoolroom text, I argue that it transmitted not only Aldhelm's thinking on the sexual rewards of chastity but also his conflicting approaches to reading and interpretation.

Furthermore, the *De virginitate*'s broader usefulness as a guide to early medieval English reading practices comes into focus when the text is read through the slightly unusual interpretive lens of a contemporary philosophical project: the *Liber monstrorum* or 'book of monsters', which survives in five full or partial copies as well as two inclusions (now lost) in a putatively

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[1] This characterization is borrowed from Carol Braun Pasternack, "The Sexual Practices of Virginity and Chastity in Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*," in *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Memory of Daniel Gillmore Calder*, ed. Carol Braun Pasternack and Lisa M. C. Weston (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), 93.

[2] See Diane Watt, "Lost Books: Abbess Hildelith and the Literary Culture of Barking Abbey," *Philological Quarterly* 91, no. 1 (2012): 1–21; and Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 111–24.

ninth-century book-list that further attests to its popularity.[3] Sometimes attributed to Aldhelm himself, the *Liber* likely stems from another, now unknown, scholar close to him at Malmesbury or the famous Canterbury school established ca. 670 by Theodore (archbishop of Canterbury from 668 to 690) and Hadrian (abbot of Saints Peter and Paul [later St Augustine's Canterbury]).[4] Among others, Michael Lapidge and Andy Orchard have traced several intriguing correspondences between the two texts, triangulating between their points of overlap with each other and with *Beowulf* to ask whether we might locate an ancestor to our own *Beowulf* in Aldhelm's Malmesbury and, by extension, whether the nature of monstrosity and vice in *De virginitate* and the *Liber* can shed any light on the *Beowulf* manuscript.[5] By putting *Beowulf* aside, however, we can ask what these two seemingly very different Anglo-Latin works offer us in themselves—particularly for the art of reading well (or badly) in early medieval England. That is, when read as a strange eighth-century dyad without *Beowulf* shifting their centers of gravity, what reading methods do they calibrate? Moreover, what might their hermeneutic modes suggest about the schools at Theodore and Hadrian's Canterbury or Aldhelm's Malmesbury or all of the later schoolrooms in England and on the Continent, where Aldhelm reigned supreme as a curriculum author? Together, this odd couple usefully illuminates some of the central tensions of early medieval exegesis—and of reading broadly conceived. Indeed, the *De virginitate* and the *Liber monstrorum* undertake parallel projects even if their virgins and monsters at first seem to have very little in common.

In this essay, I will tease out the literary-theoretical modes inculcated by Aldhelm's work and the work of his now-anonymous contemporary as well as the hermeneutic rubrics embedded

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[3] For fuller discussion of the dating, authorship, and circulation of the *Liber monstrorum*, see Patrizia Lendinara, *Anglo-Saxon Glosses and Glossaries* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1999), 114–17.

[4] Scholars have long speculated that Aldhelm may have written the *Liber monstrorum*, because the authors had similar libraries at their disposal and shared a proclivity for recherché diction and dense prose. Based on a comparison of their uses of *cursus*, however, Michael Lapidge determines, "these two Anglo-Saxon authors were writing rhythmical prose in what might be described as a 'house style'" but were not one and the same; in ""*Beowulf*, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum*, and Wessex," in *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899*, by Michael Lapidge (London: Hambledon, 1996), 295. For the classic overview of the Canterbury school, see Michael Lapidge, "The School of Theodore and Hadrian," *Anglo-Saxon England* 15 (1986): 45–72.

[5] Lapidge, "*Beowulf*"; Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), 94–115.

in the influential interpretive guides that survive from Theodore and Hadrian's Canterbury school, where Aldhelm spent two years studying rhetoric and exegesis.[6] These include the biblical commentaries identified by Lapidge and Bernard Bischoff as well as the *Laterculus Malalianus*, a late seventh-century exegetical work, which Jane Stevenson has persuasively ascribed to Theodore himself.[7] While I devote the bulk of this essay to Aldhelm and to the *Liber*, each of these texts helps to constellate what I have playfully termed a Canterbury school of literary theory.[8] As a set, they underscore that in early medieval England, reading well relied on the ability to parse what is reliable and what is doubtful—and to thereby separate zeal from virtue, history from fable, and scripture from apocrypha.

I begin with an account of the centrality of Aldhelm's *De virginitate* because its ubiquity enabled his—and, by extension, the Canterbury school's—meditations on reading to reach a wide audience, shaping the mechanics of literary interpretation in the process. Indeed, Aldhelm quickly became a schoolroom author,[9] introducing into the curriculum the hermeneutic theory that is woven into his theological works, whether implicitly transmitted by means of his playful *Enigmata* ('mysteries' or riddles—themselves originally embedded in his metrical guides, *De metris* and *De pedum regulis*) or directly stated in the prefaces and conclusions to the two halves of his *De virginitate*. As a result, Aldhelm's hermeneutic theories were widely, even

[6] Aldhelm likely spent 670–2 studying with Theodore and Hadrian and refers to the Canterbury school in several letters, including one addressed to Hadrian himself. For further discussion, see Michael Herren's commentary on Letter 1: To Leuthere, presumably written from Canterbury; Letter 2: To Hadrian; and Letter 5: To Heahfrith, wherein Aldhelm discourages his addressee from going to Ireland when he could stay in England and study with Theodore and Hadrian; in Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979), 137–46.

[7] Bernhard Bischoff and Michael Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Jane Stevenson, *The 'Laterculus Malalianus' and the School of Archbishop Theodore* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Emma Vosper has also just completed a fresh study, *A Reassessment of the Biblical Glosses of Theodore and Hadrian's Canterbury School*, PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 2019.

[8] Here, I have in mind the kind of "reading as constellation" that Renée R. Trilling proposes as a means of "thinking through non- or anti- teleological connections to suggest a meaning both specific to [a particular] poem and greater than the sum of its parts," in "Ruins in the Realm of Thoughts: Reading as Constellation in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," *JEGP, Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108, no. 2 (2009): 144.

[9] See Patrizia Lendinara, "The World of Anglo-Saxon Learning," in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 295–312; and Michael Lapidge, "The Study of Latin Texts in Late Anglo-Saxon England: The Evidence of Latin Glosses," in *Latin and the Vernacular Languages in Early Medieval Britain*, ed. Nicholas Brooks (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982), 99–140.

painstakingly read into the twelfth century, with his works heavily annotated throughout the period. A single copy of the prose treatise (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 146) now contains more than 14,000 Latin and English glosses,[10] while Mechthild Gretsch has argued that mid-tenth-century Glastonbury housed a dedicated "Aldhelm seminar."[11] Altogether, as Fred C. Robinson notes, "the elaborately styled writings of Aldhelm elicited from the Anglo-Saxons more vernacular glossing than any other Latin text save the Vulgate,"[12] and this enormous body of *scholia* ensured that his own interpretive predilections would shape early medieval English reading practices at a fundamental level.

In short, much early medieval English reading consisted of reading Aldhelm, especially in the most asymptotic relationship of reading praxis to pure literary theory. In Orchard's appraisal, "no other figure was influential for so long,"[13] while Lapidge proclaims that "to the Anglo-Saxon reading public Aldhelm was the pre-eminent author, not Bede."[14] After Aldhelm's dispatch to Barking, the *De virginitate* circulated widely in both England and on the Continent, finding favor first among Boniface's circle and then, in the tenth century, with almost every Anglo-Latin author whose work survives.[15] Unsurprisingly then, the prose comes down to us today in twenty-one copies, and the verse in twenty—almost all with lexical, syntactic, and philosophical glosses throughout.[16]

But how did this central schoolroom text cultivate a sophisticated hermeneutic sensibility? And what are we to make of the fact that Aldhelm's *De virginitate* actually begins and ends with two very different models of reading and interpretation? Across the *Carmen* and

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[10] Scott Gwara, "The Transmission of the 'Digby' Corpus of Bilingual Glosses to Aldhelm's 'Prosa De Virginitate,'" *Anglo-Saxon England* 27 (1998): 139–168.

[11] Mechthild Gretsch, *The Intellectual Foundations of the English Benedictine Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 382.

[12] Fred C. Robinson, "Review of Louis Goossens, *The Old English Glosses of MS Brussels, Royal Library, 1650 (Adelhelm's 'De Laudibus Viginitatis')*" *Speculum* 52, no. 3 (1977): 680–81.

[13] Andy Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 281.

[14] Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm*, 3. It is perhaps worth noting here, too, that in Bede's own estimation, the *De virginitate* was "a most excellent book" ("librum eximium"). Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, eds. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 514.

[15] See Michael Lapidge, "The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature," *Anglo-Saxon England* 4 (1975): 67–111.

[16] For a list of manuscripts, see Rudolf Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi, xv (Berlin: Weidmann, 1919), 225 and 349.

Prosa, Aldhelm produced a unified *opus geminatum*: an Anglo-Latin genre, consisting of a pair of twinned works—one in verse, and one in prose—ostensibly addressing the same subject matter. Yet, rather than directly versifying the earlier prose half of his project, Aldhelm alters, expands, and cuts throughout, so that the conjoined *De virginitate* ultimately puts forth two models of approaching texts. These hybrid reading methods fit within what would become the conventions of the genre, in which the prose and poetry ostensibly treat identical topics but nonetheless cater to different readerships. As I argue here, however, the divergent expectations of the *Prosa* and the *Carmen de virginitate* correspond to the multi-directional exegetical habits fostered by Theodore and Hadrian's Canterbury school and belabored by the *Liber monstrorum*, which I will turn to in the second half of this essay. Together, these texts calibrate an adventurous readerly sensibility, capable of moving across verse and prose, martyrs and monsters.

In the preface to the prose treatise, Aldhelm memorably depicts reading as a vigorous form of exercise that unlocks textual meaning only after a triathlon of interpretive efforts. An elaborate metaphor spanning eighteen lines in Rudolf Ehwald's edition vaults readers through "a series of gymnastic exercises Olympian athletes might undertake. In panting prose he imagines sweaty, oil-smeared wrestlers writhing, javelin-throwers guiding their projectiles, runners glorying in their victorious laps, riders urging forward their bloodied steeds, and rowers pressing through the sea," as Irina Dumitrescu helpfully summarizes.[17] "Then comes the twist," because as she and the preface underscore, "these are all metaphors for … the discipline of reading Scripture."[18] Indeed, Aldhelm is quick to clarify: the bodily motions of these athletic endeavors stand in for the mental gymnastics of those "who, sprinting through the wide racetracks of the scriptures, are revealed to train, by means of constant application to reading, the most perceptive activity of [their] intellects and the essence of spirited wit" ("qui per ampla scripturarum stadia decurrentes sagacissimam animorum industriam et vivacis ingenii qualitatem assidua lectionis

[17] Irina Dumitrescu, "Reading Lessons," in *How We Read: Tales, Fury, Nothing, Sound*, ed. Kaitlin Heller and Suzanne Conklin Akbari (Santa Barbara: Punctum Books, 2019), 3.

[18] Dumitrescu, "Reading Lessons," 3.

instantia exercere noscuntur")[19] So, reading requires dutiful exercise as well as regimented dedication, and interpretation had better work up a sweat.

This extended metaphor certainly describes the energetic process many early medieval (and modern) readers would bring to Aldhelm's own text, in obsessively annotating words and phrases and even adding sequencing codes to help cut a path through his convoluted word order. In both Aldhelm's estimation and the layered reading notes of dozens of later hands, the art of reading is therefore inherently iterative, and it requires multiple approaches: hand-to-hand grappling as well as javelins and a willingness to embrace different modalities in running, riding, or rowing into a text. What's more, it must look effortless, so that Aldhelm next envisions these agile readers not only as sprinters hurtling down the track but also as lackadaisical gatherers of flowers, roaming like the proverbial bee "through scripture's blossoming fields" ("per florulenta scripturarum arva")[20] He thus emphasizes the playfulness—albeit highly skilled and cultivated playfulness, more akin to somersaults than to forward rolls—inherent in the art of reading, whether as putative gymnasts or bees in flight. Reading requires both perception and pep.

In the *Carmen*, Aldhelm takes a decidedly negative view of these reading exercises, however. Indeed, in an intriguing concluding boast to Abbess Hildelith and her nuns, he reframes these energetic pursuits as charlatanic over-reading rather than careful study, insisting, "By no means am I afraid of the witticisms of disreputable readers, who prefer to crumple the sheets of singing prophets, while they search in the light for the dark corners of a word and rummage about for twisting uneven passages through flat fields" (lines 2835–38, "haud metuam scurrarum dicta legentum, / Qui malunt vatum scedas lacerare canentum, / Dum furvas verbi quaerunt in luce tenebras / Planaque rimantur tortas per rura salebras")[21] Rather than the athletic fields of the prose treatise, he now sees only "flat"—and presumably empty—planes. As he explains, he longs for virgin wreaths, not poetic laurels, and he enjoins his audience to practice chaste hermeneutics rather than imitating the joking, idle, and altogether unsavory readers, who

[19] Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, 231.

[20] Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, 232.

[21] Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, 468.

"search" and "rummage about" rather than taking poets at their word. Seemingly, there is a time and place for readerly cartwheels and interpretive repartee; sometimes, reading should not merely *look* but actually be easy.

In addition to denying the vigorous exercises of the prose, which he now deems "disreputable," he thereby also proleptically razes the "dense forest of Latinity" ("densa Latinitatis silva") of his *Enigmata*.[22] *Enigma* 59 ('pen'), for example, valorizes precisely the "twisting uneven passages through flat fields" that Aldhelm disparages in the *Carmen*. In this riddle, he concedes that, when reading, "one rough track is not enough to spread out through the fields, / for the pathway stretches into a thousand trails" (lines 6–7, Nec satis est unum per campos pandere callem, / Semita quin potius milleno tramite tendit).[23] Similarly, in *enigma* 32 ('writing tablets'), Aldhelm's textual field "bears bountiful bushels with thousandfold fruit" (line 7, "largos generat millena fruge maniplos").[24] And yet, this abundance is decidedly ephemeral, for, as the riddle itself enacts, the text can easily be erased and overwritten by subsequent writers as much as by readers. And just as the writing tablet is vulnerable to erasure, so does Aldhelm's book cupboard (*enigma* 89) similarly undo the usual meditative imagery of chewing cud to show that filled entrails—or shelves—do not necessarily produce knowledge, which can prove elusive and reading unachievable. Aldhelm's final riddle even unmakes his collection altogether by invoking a "denying reader" of "trivia" (line 82, "infitians … frivola lector") and issuing the last solving challenge of the hundred *Enigmata* to "windbag philosophers" (line 83, "inflatos … sofos").[25] Across the *De virginitate* and the *Enigmata*, Aldhelm thus oscillates from delighting in elaborate theoretical gamesmanship and the spirited pursuit of multiple trails, to hoping to inspire obedient surface reading along a singular path, and finally to worrying that even that may become a mockery.

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[22] Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, 78.

[23] Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, 124.

[24] Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, 111.

[25] Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, 149. For the delightfully fitting "windbag," I am indebted to A. M. Juster, *Saint Aldhelm's Riddles* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 67.

The concluding tone of the *Carmen* similarly maligns suspicious practices, keeping any interpretation firmly in the light and on the level and rejecting any peeking beneath the words or drifting away from a linear reading experience—or, in short the activities of the same sort of pedants and critics his prose preface lauds as Olympic athletes. Instead, Aldhelm here hopes readers will stay on track with his poem, trusting its literal message rather than letting inflated curiosity lead them out of line. And if they cannot resist, then bad readers, he hopes, will nonetheless vanish like phantoms, with Aldhelm dismissing their criticisms as "the farce of the saber-rattling tongue, for it is an enchantment, which frightens the trembling in hidden spaces by night and which has a habit of jabbering on always in the dark shadows" (lines 2855–57, "terrentis ludicra linguae! / Nam tremulos terret nocturnis larba latebris, / Quae solet in furvis semper garrire tenebris").[26] Similarly, in the beguiling ending to his *Letter to Heahfrith*, Aldhelm rearranges four lines from the end of the *Carmen* in order to scoff at the "follies" (line 2, "ludicra") of critics, who "in this way always hope to consume the pages of writers, just as a shaggy goat gnaws on bunches of grapes with his tooth, and yet they don't improve a letter of the staggering poet" (lines 3–5, "Sic semper cupiunt scriptorum carpere cartas, / Ut caper hirsutus rodet cum dente racemos; / Nec tamen emedant titubantis gramma poetae").[27] In other words, rather than reading seriously, careless critics *perform* reading by fretting over meaningless trivia and consequently partaking only of unfermented grapes rather than the poet's intoxicating wine.

This is why Aldhelm advocates returning to "the level countryside" to retrace well-trodden paths without wandering off into the brush. Such stewardship is essential for the transmission of literature. Inept readers do not only misconstrue; they also mar, shredding a useful text purely to have food for critique. At the end of the *Carmen*, Aldhelm's goatlike critics even munch off his poetic flowers altogether, leaving a barren vine. As he complains, bad readers are thieves and charlatans, who pluck out the best parts of a text and pawn off the remainder like

[26] Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, 469.

[27] These are lines 2855, 2834, 2845, and 2843 of the *Carmen*. On the letter's interpretive difficulties, see Gwara 1995.

dishonest merchants, who water down their wine even while "touting it was just how the grapes clustered on the vine, from which the grapes in the wine-press were stomped by feet" (lines 2799–800, "Taliter adstipulans antos de vite racemos, / E quibus in praelo plantis contunditur uva").[28] Bad readers similarly misrepresent, overlook, and interpolate. And, by selectively quoting or aggressively overwriting, they water down the text. Even as he seeks to inspire invested, rigorous reading at Olympic levels and jokes about charting his own course through the Scylla and Charybdis of grammatical faults and stylistic slip-ups, Aldhelm consequently cautions against the inherent risks of letting such capering readers out to pasture.

This anxiety about improper over-reading thus presents several troubling paradoxes at the heart of medieval reading and interpretation: namely, how could readers allow themselves enough textual investment to keep turning the pages but not so much that they risked mangling them, not from neglect but from irrepressible critical zeal? Moreover, how did early medieval readers read attentively without allowing the very attentiveness of their reading to become time-wasting or idle? When did curiosity become overweening, tipping from a useful readerly orientation to a self-defeating one? Or, where should readers draw the line between a functional exegesis that fully illuminates textual meaning and a misguided effort that chews the flowers from the vine, crumpling pages rather than flattening them? As I have already indicated, Aldhelm's own texts call for and resist competing methods of reading, which are imaginatively assigned to Olympic grounds, flat fields, and winding paths depending on context. And while at first this may seem like a generic difference between the *Prosa* and *Carmen de virginitate*—for, as Aldhelm puts it, poetry and prose "are as unlike each other as sweet new wine differs from potent mead" ("tantum altrinsecus discrepent, quantum distat dulcis sapa a merulento temeto")—his poetic works are also at odds, with the *Carmen* and the *Enigmata* vacillating between radically different hermeneutic stances.[29]

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[29] Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, 321.

Aldhelm's interpretive vacillation also operates on another level, however. From the perspective of intentionality, this equivocation both piques and denies his readers' curiosity in order to propel would-be interpreters through his text by mobilizing ambiguity and maximizing suggestive language. In this way, his work becomes a sort of mirage, always beckoning without ever fully materializing. Indeed, Carol Braun Pasternack has observed that the *De virginitate* is so full of double entendre that it actually eroticizes virginity, "especially in his syntactic convolutions and alliterative emphases."[30] Double meanings are both there and not, and Aldhelm thereby elicits a reading practice that maintains similarly plausible deniability between over- and merely reading, on the one hand, and between chaste and promiscuous hermeneutics, on the other. As Lees and Overing remind us, one of the biggest challenges of his project is that Aldhelm must transmute living bodies into metaphors, and "Such translation … repeatedly poses the ironic problem of what to do with the historical, sealed body that is still female and sexual, and will not go away."[31] As he crafts this precarious catalogue, Aldhelm thus foregrounds reading as an exercise in both curiosity and skepticism, chastity and dalliance.

Moreover, the treatise belabors the nuns' exegetical prowess in order to reimagine "the Church's functioning as a reproductive body that produces scholarship," as Pasternack contends.[32] This leveraging of virginity as a textual project as well as a sexual one makes the treatise into a hermeneutic handbook both on the sentence level of Aldhelm's famously difficult literary style and on the abstract level of Aldhelm's reflections on reading both his own work and his sources. As another index of this, several of Aldhelm's *enigmata* are likewise full of innuendo and thus invite a layered solving process, particularly since, compared to the Exeter Book riddles, "the intensity of the double-entendre technique employed by Aldhelm is significantly lower ... and results in a much more diluted set of clues," as Mercedes Salvador-

[30] Pasternack, "Sexual Practices," 95.
[31] Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 122.
[32] Pasternack, "Sexual Practices," 103.

Bello has observed.[33] Whether in the *De virginitate* or the *Enigmata*, reading thus requires knowing how to strike the proper balance between literal signification and suggestion.

These alternatively suspicious and trusting hermeneutics find a revealing backdrop in the biblical commentaries, which Lapidge and Bischoff have ascribed to the Canterbury school. These glosses are thought to preserve Theodore and Hadrian's own teachings, and together with the *Laterculus Malalianus*, they offer a guide to the hyper-attentive mode of reading central to biblical exegesis, which they cultivated at Canterbury. After all, they are "the product of multiple glossators recording close readings of the text in a didactic or source-critical context" and, in Brian Christopher Hardison's estimation, should be thought of as "students' reading notes," which testify to careful literary study.[34] One particularly revealing note maintains that "there are eight steps in all writing" ("Octo gradus … esse … in omni scriptura"), which begin with a text's "prearranged goal, because each [author] has a prearranged goal in mind for every book before he writes" ("praedestinatio, quod unusquisque habet praedestinationem in mente cuiuslibet libri antequam scribat").[35] In this suggestive aside about Jerome's Preface to Genesis, the commentator thus highlights authorial intent as the primary consideration for textual production.

While this "prearranged goal" is nominally about writing rather than reading, the distinction is more muddled than it initially seems, because the gloss appears on a heading about translators' preeminence among men of learning. So, while the "eight steps in all writing" pertain most directly to authorial production, they are also fundamentally about reading and the art of translation, which combines the two. In addition, the commentary prescribes seven further steps, so that, even if anyone approaching a text should begin by considering authorial intent (*praedestinatio*), texts also demand considerations of usefulness, genuineness, layout, motivation, chapter divisions, didactic purpose, and points of reference. Of particular interest here, the commentator emphasizes that texts fundamentally rely on "determination of those

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[33] Mercedes Salvador-Bello, "The Sexual Riddle Type in Aldhelm's *Enigmata*, the Exeter Book, and Early Medieval Latin," *Philological Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (2012): 376.

[34] Brian Christopher Hardison, "Words, Meanings, and Readings: Reconstructing the Use of Gildas's *De excidio Britanniae* at the Canterbury School," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 47, no 1 (2016): 17.

[35] Bischoff and Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*, 302.

things that seem similar and nevertheless are not alike, as ambiguous things are, … or

determination of fact from fictions" ("distinctio horum quae similia uidentur et tamen similia non

fiunt, ut sunt aequiuoca … et ueri a falsis distinctio").[36] These tensions are certainly at play in

Aldhelm's *De virginitate* and *Enigmata*, but they come even more sharply into focus when

virginity is answered by monstrosity in another text from the broader network of the Canterbury

school, as I will argue shortly.

Indeed, the Canterbury commentaries themselves suggest that this wavering between

accepting authorial intent (or reading literally) and discerning hidden subtexts (or reading

allegorically) reflects an exegetical division in late seventh- and early eighth-century England.

Looking to Theodore and Hadrian's own Mediterranean origins, Lapidge, Bischoff, and

Stevenson demonstrate that their scriptural proclivities reflect their thorough grounding in

Byzantine sources. Both men were native Greek speakers, and they introduced to England

interpretive stances drawn from their own schooldays in North Africa, Syria, and Rome.

Theodore himself had likely studied in the Greek-Syriac milieu of Antioch. As a result, their

habits were predominantly Antiochene and therefore literal or historical rather than Alexandrine

and allegorical—a decided shift from the exegetical habits favored by someone like Bede, who

preferred an allegorical reading practice heavily influenced by Irish exegesis.[37] Indeed, according

to Stevenson, "Canterbury was almost the only western school in the seventh century to teach the

exegetical methods of the school of Antioch."[38]

These competing interpretive frameworks underpin Aldhelm's own theological

investigation, and they map neatly onto his seemingly divergent remarks. Lapidge and Bischoff

helpfully summarize: "For the Antiochenes, contemplation or investigation of scripture was

aimed at discovering the literal sense intended by the biblical author, no more, no less."[39] In

practice, this often entailed a rigorous philological investigation into etymologies, with would-be

[36] Bischoff and Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*, 302.
[37] Bischoff and Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*, 243–49.
[38] Stevenson, *Laterculus Malalianus*, 4.
[39] Bischoff and Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*, 245.

exegetes reading across variants to determine the best reading for each word of scripture. This is precisely the athletic reading Aldhelm envisions in his treatise as well as the trusting readerly orientation he hopes for in verse—possibly taking on different tones because in the former, he is talking about reading scripture, and in the latter, he is imagining well-trained philological readers bringing their chiseled intellects to bear on his own work.

Even Theodore and Hadrian's hermeneutic methods were likely calibrated for both scriptural exegesis and wider reading. Bede, for instance, makes a point of noting that Theodore and Hadrian "were both rigorously instructed in sacred and secular literature simultaneously" ("litteris sacris simul et saecularibus ... abundanter ambo erant instructi").[40] While it is undeniably true that devout readers would approach scripture with extra care, Aldhelm's repeated allusions to his own bad readers as poor exegetes further belie any rigid distinction in practice. Indeed, as his dense literary style spread, the same glossing practices developed in the Leiden family of glossaries—and traced to the Canterbury school of biblical exegesis—would soon be applied to Aldhelm's own works, so that, in Robert Stanton's terms, these "glossaries lead to a dense, lexically rich style [i.e. Aldhelm's], which in turn leads to more glossing, as the text becomes a pretext for further interpretation."[41]

Moreover, as the *De virginitate* unfolds, Aldhelm cultivates attuned exegetes precisely by foregrounding the importance of skepticism about critical method—and even about the reliability, or unreliability, of his own text. At the conclusion of his catalogue of exemplary virgins, he consequently makes a point of noting that "it's a wide gap between the ambiguous accounts of the Pharisees and the around-the-clock explanation of sacred scripture, which is to say that the catholic church does not at all admit the idle rumors of apocryphal [matter] and the uncertain stories of fripperies" ("plurimum differt inter ambiguas fariseorum traditiones et elucubratam sacrae scripturae diffinitionem; apocriforum enim naenias et incertas fribulorum

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[40] Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 332.

[41] Robert Staunton, *The Culture of Translation in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 29.

fabulas nequaquam catholica receptat ecclesia").[42] In the *De virginitate*, Aldhelm is thus at pains to distinguish between scripture and apocrypha, honest explication and dubious invention.

And yet, he also embellishes throughout, reveling in his highly ornamented style and introducing dragons where his sources have only barren crags. As Lapidge explains, "For Aldhelm, virginity was not (as it often is for us) the mere residue of avoidance of the opposite sex. In his writings *virginitas* is a vigorously aggressive virtue... And in order for the virtuous aggression to be seen to best advantage, it requires adversaries of threatening ferocity."[43] For this reason, Aldhelm populates the desert retreats of early anchorites with fearsome lions. But these monstrous apparitions also serve another purpose, fashioning an unreliable narrative that must be both trusted and scrutinized. Even in his catalogue of illustrious and exemplary virgins, we can thus see a revealing tension between truth and fiction, history and literature as well as the close relationship between reading and parsing: of likelihood, of textual reliability, end even of curiosity as a sensation both disturbing and productive. After all, as Brandon Hawk has argued, "Biblical apocrypha thrive in epistemic liminal spaces between perceptions of truth and fiction," and even a touted avoidance of apocrypha requires a careful inventory of invention.[44] From this perspective, Aldhelm's consideration of virginity takes shape as a kind of early medieval source study, by which I mean an investigation of the orientation of medieval readers (and writers) to their sources. And here, we can tease out what it meant to read in early medieval England at a fundamental level, because the line between over- and mis-reading is thereby revealed to be very thin indeed.

As an index of this, I turn now to the *Liber monstrorum*, which helpfully answers readerly trust with its obverse: doubt. From this perspective, I argue that the *De virginitate* and *Liber monstrorum* are analogous projects: one credible, the other doubtful—one to emulate, the other to spurn. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, they offer very different insights into best practices in early medieval English reading but are also mutually illuminating. Purportedly a "book of

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[42] Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, 313.

[43] Lapidge, "'Beowulf,'" 279.

[44] Brandon W. Hawk, "Apocrypha and Fictionality," *New Literary History* 51, no. 1 (2020): 254.

monsters of different sorts" ("liber monstrorum de diversis generibus"),[45] the *Liber* is fundamentally about reading and its limits, and it develops a sophisticated hermeneutic framework around the collection of some 120 monstrous men, beasts, and serpents—much as Aldhelm calibrates an interpretive sensibility around the consideration of exemplary virgins. The anonymous author narrates his own interpretive doubts and skepticism directly, however, in decided contrast to Aldhelm, who subtly tweaks his sources, chastises over-zealous readers, and elevates scripture over apocyrpha. Conceding that similar discussions of monstrous bodies once proliferated "through the authority of many texts" ("per multarum scripturarum auctoritatem"),[46] the besieged author nonetheless maintains:

> "I should have believed that those lies were repeatable to nobody, except the blast of your solicitation hurled me (terrified!) headlong from the high ship down among the sea monsters. For I liken this work to the dark water, because there is no entry point for uncovering if the rumor that has spread across the circuit of the globe with the glitzy chatter of outlandish gossip is real or tricked-out with fraud… Only certain elements in the wonders themselves are believed to be true, and there are innumerable aspects that, if one had the power to fly on wings to explore, he would observe that, despite being fashioned out of rumor and talk, where now a golden city and coasts sprinkled with jewels are said to be, in that same spot one would discern nothing or maybe a gravelly city and rocks."

> "Mendacia ea nemini iteranda putassem nisi me uentus tuae postulationis a puppi praecelsa pauidum inter marina praecipitasset monstra. Ponto namque tenebroso hoc opus aequipero, quod probandi si sint uera an instructa mendacio, nullus patet accessus eaque per orbem terrarum aurato sermone miri rumoris fama dispergebat … Quadam tantum in ipsis mirabilibus uera esse creduntur, et sunt innumerabilia quae si quis ad exploranda pennis uolare potuisset et ita rumoroso sermone tamen

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[45] Andy Orchard, ed., *Liber monstrorum*, in *Pride and Prodigies*, 254.

[46] Orchard, ed., *Liber monstrorum*, 254.

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ficta probaret, ubi nunc urbs aurea et gemmis aspersa litora dicuntur, ibi lapideam

aut nullam urbem et scopulosa cerneret."[47]

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Before producing such a catalogue, the author thereby sounds a warning for his readers,

underscoring that he and they have no means of testing his reports, except by reading. For this

reason, his warning is addressed forward his own readers, who must each undertake their own

active investigations rather than passively accepting his words. Tellingly, Aldhelm adopts a

similarly swashbuckling metaphor for his literary process in the prose *De virginitate*, noting that

intruding sounds have a way of "roughly pushing those discovered without the rudder of

grammarians onto the shipwrecks of error" ("quousque sine grammaticorum gubernaculo

repertos ad erroris naufragia truciter trudentes").[48] One word resembles another, and science

edges into fable. The only path "to fly[ing] on wings" and gaining any chance of exploration,

verification, or debunking is that most magical of all arts: *grammatica*, or the art of reading

broadly conceived.[49]

 Across almost 120 men, beasts, and serpents, even the most grammatically-inclined

reader of the *Liber* must confront "matters which are not simply arcane, but positively hostile

and dreadful"[50] —much as Aldhelm's virginal readers must confront virginity through a web of

sexual innuendo. Mary Kate Hurley has convincingly argued that the similar catalogue of

marvels found in the later Old English *Wonders of the East* is "fundamentally concerned with

knowledge rather than solely with monsters" and may be best understood as "a consideration of

learning, its uses, and its dangers."[51] In Hurley's reading, these monstrous catalogues thereby

warn readers about the risks of forbidden knowledge and of the reading that exposes them.

Indeed, Michelle Karnes has demonstrated that, for later medieval thinkers, "marvels," or

monsters, "might be questions, but they resist easy answers. Often, they claim a space just shy of

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[47] Orchard, ed., *Liber monstrorum*, 254–6.

[48] Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, 321.

[49] On the interpretive potential of *grammatica*, see Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: "Grammatica" and Literary Theory, 350–1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[50] Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 89.

[51] Mary Kate Hurley, "Distant Knowledge in the British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.v Wonders of the East," *The Review of English Studies* 67, no. 682 (2016): 828 and 829.

logical impossibility, and that is what makes them fascinating"—their very indeterminacy calibrating readers capable of relishing irresolution.[52]

The *Liber monstrorum* dramatizes precisely this, but it also goes a step further to become not a catalogue of monstrous beings so much as an ongoing investigation of their varying ontological statuses and the nature of literary reliability. By repeatedly questioning the fictionality of the "monsters" and highlighting that the only evidence for the vast majority of them is textual, the *Liber* dramatizes the stakes of literature itself, so that the most unsettling figure in the entire catalogue is ultimately that of the reader, who must separate fact from fiction. Indeed, by taking flight, the reader develops a monstrous power of his own. Moreover, the preface's contrast between glittering fiction and stony fact "effectively foreshadows a second major tension which runs implicitly throughout the work, namely that between Christian and pagan lore."[53] As a result, Augustine and Isidore are hyped as trustworthy sources, while Vergil and Lucan are disparaged as lying poets. Instead of compiling the requested list of monsters, the author thereby assembles a far more interesting book of *books* of monsters—and, consequently, a self-conscious inventory of sources meant to cultivate a barometer for readerly doubt. In the book of monsters, reading thereby becomes an art of navigation as well as a zoological project and sometimes even both at once.

For this reason, the author pointedly announces his organizational conceit, which lets readers in on the game: "first I will address those [marvels], which are in some manner to be believed, and let every [reader] parse the subsequent story for himself, since through these caves of monsters I will sketch the figure of some mermaid or siren, so that if there is a head of reason, nevertheless, it's followed by all sorts of hairy and scaly tales" ("Et de his primum eloquar quae sunt aliquot modo credenda et sequentem historiam sibi quisque discernat, quod per haec antra monstrorum marinae puellae quandam formulam sirenae depingam, ut sit capite rationis quod tamen diuersorum generum hispidae squamosaeque sequuntur fabulae").[54] He will thus begin

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[52] Michelle Karnes, "The Possibilities of Medieval Fiction," *New Literary History* 51, no. 1 (2020): 215.

[53] Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 90.

[54] Orchard, ed., *Liber monstrorum*, 256.

with the human and nearly-human in Book I before turning to beasts and then to serpents in Books II and III, respectively.

Along the way, credibility is questioned, and sources are parsed, prompting the reader to probe the governing logic of the catalogue itself along with particular entries. As Orchard concludes, "the *Liber monstrorum*, far from being a casual compendium of the bizarre and outlandish, is in fact the rather subtle and sophisticated work of a learned author who drew on and cunningly manipulated a number of disparate texts."[55] What is on offer is ultimately a guide to reading and its dangers. The author thus "carefully interweaves accounts from Christian and pagan sources" throughout,[56] while the epilogue to the first book reaffirms the shifting (un)reliability of the preceding catalogue along with its incompleteness. Noting that countless other creatures are said to exist but have nonetheless been left out, this epilogue plays with what is and is not recorded and where. A final epilogue to the third book further proclaims, "In these serpents, which we have depicted just now, some real ones are discoverable and some devoid of all truth" ("In his namque serpentibus quos superius descripsimus, quadam uera, quadam namque omni ueritate carentia reperiuntur").[57] The *Liber* thereby reminds readers again and again that it only comprises a partial inventory, constantly subject to skepticism, for there are not only omissions but also outright shams.

By pointedly refusing to valorize his own inclusions, the author craftily assembles "116 micronarratives" that require the reader to act as an interpretive authority.[58] The *Liber*'s monsters thus operate similarly to medieval miracle stories, which, in Stephen Justice's account, "bare the devices of faith," so that "what polemic and scholarship have posed as questions about or criticisms of miracle stories prove to be criticisms and questions in and of them."[59] By foregrounding his own readerly ambivalence, the *Liber*-author both highlights the multiplicity of early medieval English reading methods and passes the interpretive decision on to his own

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[55] Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 87.

[56] Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 94.

[57] Orchard, ed., *Liber monstrorum*, 316.

[58] Brian McFadden, "Authority and Discourse in the *Liber Monstrorum*," *Neophilologus* 89 (2005): 473.

[59] Stephen Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?" *Representations* 103, no. 1 (2008): 15.

reader, who must step forward to arbitrate. While Brian McFadden ascribes this insistence on textual ambiguity and interpretive agency to late-seventh- and early-eighth-century English anxieties about heresy in an ecclesiastical landscape still intent on conversion, I argue that these monstrous conundrums therefore manifest a broader investment in reading itself as an art of determination.

Such an insistence is directly rooted in the Old English verb *rædan*, which comprises not only our sense of reading but also an active process of thinking and making out meaning.[60] As Nicholas Howe reminds us, *ræd*, *rædan*, "and their cognate forms in other Indo-European languages first denoted the act of giving counsel through speech," especially in explicating what was obscure, and this oral backdrop "led speakers of Old English to conceive of comprehending a written text in ways that had not to do with gathering"—as in Latin *legere* or modern German *lesen*—"but rather with offering counsel or solving a riddle."[61] In devotional reading, Howe argues, it is possible to trace "the coalescence of the important earlier meanings of *rædan* as they concern spoken discourse, the giving of counsel, and the interpreting of obscurity, for all three are contained within the reading aloud of a work of scriptural or didactic value written in a code [i.e. Latin] accessible only to the initiated," and they were further cemented as such in Latin grammars designed for English speakers.[62] These tensions underpin the *Liber*, which plays on ideas of reading as the evaluation of rumor and hearsay.

This determination becomes increasingly necessary as the catalogue unfolds, and it becomes apparent that the monsters are culled from a mixture of Greek fables, Roman mythology, and early Christian sources, with particular figures singled out for increased dubiousness or trustworthiness, accordingly. Sometimes these indications have a biting faux-neutrality, as for the Harpies, for whom the author adds, "it is read that some monsters have

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[60] *Bosworth Toller's Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, ed. Tichý, Ondřej, et al., s.v. "*Rædan*," https://bosworthtoller.com/.

[61] Nicholas Howe, "The Cultural Construction of Reading in Anglo-Saxon England," in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. R. M. Liuzza (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 4 and 6.

[62] Howe, "Cultural Construction," 10.

existed" ("legitur quod … quaedam monstra … fuissent")[63]—not openly doubting his reading and yet distancing himself by pointing to it. When it comes to the next entry, he is much more cutting, announcing that, with the Eumenides, his catalogue moves into the realm of "empty narrative" ("uana historia") and "incredible fables" ("incredibilibus … fabulis") lifted from Vergil.[64] While some entries are verifiable or legitimate, others are thus decidedly dubious, and some are altogether inadmissible. Yet, they all form a part of the catalogue, so that the full *Liber* educates any readers bold enough to proceed in skepticism and evaluation rather than in the supposedly monstrous beings themselves.

The penultimate entry brings this central conceit full circle, noting, "For, in the fictions of poets, it is written that twinned snakes with monsters and barking clouds out of the atmosphere routed a terrified Cleopatra to the Nile… And just like that lie has invented monsters and snakes of hot air on this queen's back, just so the spurious stories of poets willingly invent for themselves a huge number of things that do not happen" ("In enim poetarum fictionibus describitur quod angues gemini cum monstris et nubes ex aere latrantes Cleopatram ad Nilum fugassent exterritam… Et sicut huic mendacium a tergo reginae monstra et angues finxit aethereos, ita et fallaces poetarum fabulae sibi plurima quae non fiunt uoluntarie fingunt").[65] With this entry rounding out the preceding catalogue, the *Liber* is cemented as a work of fiction that is fundamentally *about* fictionality and therefore reading. To add another layer to the interpretive game, the author gets in on the fun even while disdaining poetic license, replacing Vergil's reference to the dog-headed Egyptian god Anubis[66] with the nonsensical barking *nubes* ('clouds'), so that the entry comprises a "mischevious witticism directed at readers who knew their Vergil."[67] Such moments manifest the author's calculated ploy to foster close and careful reading—not only of sources but also of their manipulation. By calling attention to the wordplay, the *Liber monstrorum* inaugurates readers into the game.

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[63] Orchard, ed., *Liber monstrorum*, 282.

[64] Orchard, ed., *Liber monstrorum*, 282.

[65] Orchard, ed., *Liber monstrorum*, 314.

[66] *Aeneid* VIII, l. 698.

[67] Lapidge, "'Beowulf,'" 288.

In doing so, the *Liber* also highlights the frequency of willful misreading or rereading of the sort that the fourth-century poet Faltonia Betitia Proba likewise does to Vergil—or, for that matter, that Aldhelm does to his own work in repurposing and recycling the four hexameters mentioned above. By rearranging and manipulating Vergil's lines, Proba insists, "I will relate how Vergil sang of Christ's sacred gifts" (line 23, "Vergilium cecinisse loquar pia munera Christi").[68] In dismantling and repurposing Vergil to write a Christian epic, she raises important questions about what it means to deconstruct a text—and to read, especially works of literature that blend truth and lies. Although relatively hard to come by in early medieval England, Proba's cento was known to Aldhelm and to the Canterbury school, where its interpretive audacity was likely both admired and feared.

Indeed, the *Liber* author delves into a similarly surprising archive, so that, in addition to combing the *Æneid* for monstrous progeny, the author was also "able to find monsters in the most improbable of sources: dragon-footed giants in the pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones*, hippocentaurs in Jerome's *Vita S. Pauli*, or battle-elephants in Orosius's *Historia adversus paganos*."[69] The *Liber*'s cautious unsnarling of monsters from holy sources thus reverses the Aldhelmian tendency to introduce dragons to his own monster-less martyrs. And it likewise highlights the importance of separating scripture from apocrypha and fact from fiction. While a book of monsters seemingly has little to do with proper exegetical behavior or with the praise of virginity with which this essay began, it thus sounds a cautionary note for would-be exegetes.

Interpretive flexibility may seem trivial for parsing real and imaginary monsters, but a similar suppleness was necessary for more serious matter, such as scripture or confessional guides, as exemplified by the proliferating commentaries, glosses, and penitentials produced by the Canterbury school. Forming a counterpart to these religious projects, the *Liber* valorizes skepticism over naïve curiosity, lest readers wreck themselves on hidden shoals. The *Liber monstrorum* thereby offers a lesson in the virtues of doubt. The successful reader must know

[68] Elizabeth Ann Clark and Diane F. Hatch, *The Golden Bough, the Oaken Cross: The Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba*, ed. James A. Massey (Chico: Scholars Press, 1981), 16.
[69] Lapidge, "'Beowulf,'" 288.

when to skim along and when to pull back, when to gnaw the grapes and when to drink the wine. Above all, the *Liber* insists that, when done correctly, reading should never resemble gossip or hearsay, and, like talk, it should never grow idle. By shaping this lesson around the careful manipulation of literary scuttlebutt, the author calibrates a reading method born from the art of *not* reading, selectively.

Furthermore, by attuning readers to the "unearnest reference" of the texts they read, the *Liber* prepares them to encounter less marked fictions, and it thereby constructs a theory of early medieval fictionality.[70] Readers must be trusting when their sources are virgin martyrs, and suspicious when they are not, but they must also remember that even devils can gird themselves with heavenly disguises. Together with Aldhelm's *De virginitate* and *Enigmata* as well as the interpretive predilections of the Canterbury school, the *Liber* thus highlights the importance of adaptable reading methods, for the same marvel, or the same passage of text, can always elicit multiple interpretations—sometimes posing a transcendent riddle and sometimes sweeping readers overboard into a monstrous deep.

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[70] Julie Orlemanski, "Who Has Fiction? Modernity, Fictionality and the Middle Ages," *New Literary History* 50, no. 2 (2019): 147 and 166.

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