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NUNS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE:
AELRED OF RIEVAULX'S *DE SANCTIMONIALI DE*
WATTUN AND THE GENDERING OF AUTHORITY

Elizabeth Freeman

For there is only one house [Watton] in the diocese of York where canons and lay brethren dwell alongside nuns within the same enclosures, which are particularly spacious; but, as is public knowledge, they live apart with propriety.¹

The preceding passage appears in a letter from Roger archbishop of York and Hugh bishop of Durham to Pope Alexander III, composed in 1166 or 1167. The letter is part of a defense of the Gilbertine order against allegations from some of the order's lay brethren. Roger and Hugh assert the order's propriety and deny that the proximity of nuns, lay sisters, canons, and lay brethren within the single monastic establishment at Watton had ever resulted in unbefitting behavior or sexual relations.

When they defended the reputation of the mixed religious house, the two correspondents defended the very *raison d'être* of the Gilbertines. For more than anything else, the Gilbertine order was characterized by its adoption of the double monastery, in which men and women were members of the same religious community.² Founded by Gilbert of Sempringham in the 1130s, the Gilbertines were one of

¹ "Unica quippe domus est in Eboracensi diocesi in qua canonici et conversi cum monialibus, infra eadem septa, que quidem ampla sunt, sed seorsum, ut fama publica est, honeste habitant." Letter from Roger archbishop of York and Hugh bishop of Durham to Pope Alexander. *The Book of St Gilbert*, ed. R. Foreville and G. Keir (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 150–51.

² The term "double monastery" is infamously problematic, especially for English and Irish monasteries; S. K. Elkins, *Holy Women of Twelfth-Century England* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), xvii–xviii. For want of a better description, however, it remains in use; S. Thompson, *Women Religious: The Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 54–73.

the many monastic orders that developed during the great eleventh- and twelfth-century revisionings of religious life.³ Never expanding beyond England, they were nevertheless firmly entrenched in their local communities of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire and seem quickly to have provided the spiritual services that lay benefactors demanded, thus ensuring the resources for further growth.

The order's institutional features progressed through various stages, with a general trend towards increased regulation of the female community. The surviving legislation includes elements from many different periods, and so precise dating of new practices is famously difficult.⁴ Scholars do agree, however, that Gilbertine houses were designed originally as eremitical communities for females. They then gained lay sisters who performed menial and practical duties, while from here it was a short step to the introduction of lay brothers who could perform the more laborious physical work. Finally, canons were introduced to serve the spiritual needs of the nuns. Many Gilbertine customs were taken from other orders.⁵ The nuns, for example, followed a version of the Benedictine Rule while the canons adhered to a mixture of Cistercian and Augustinian practices. The lay brothers followed even more closely in the Cistercians' footsteps

³ The authoritative survey is B. Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine Order c.1130-c.1300* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). R. Graham's *S. Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertines* (London: Elliot Stock, 1901) remains useful for its later portions on the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries.

⁴ The two Gilbertine collections are the *Institutes*, which includes the rule of the order, and the *Book of St Gilbert*. The *Institutes* is "an amalgam of regulations from many decades." It exists in a single early thirteenth-century manuscript and combines primitive directives from Gilbert with later legislation. Unfortunately "the different chronological strata in the *Institutes* are impossible to separate" (Elkins, 134). Golding makes the same assessment (*Gilbert of Sempringham*, 81-82 and 455). For the text, see "The Institutes of the Gilbertine Order," in W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, ed. J. Caley, H. Ellis, and B. Bandinel, 6/ii (London: Joseph Harding et al., 1830), insert after 945, v-xxcix (hereafter, *Institutes*). The *Book of St Gilbert* (see n. 1 above) is a compilation, the main component of which is the *Life of St Gilbert*. The anonymous *Life* was written prior to 1202 in order to ensure Gilbert's canonization and then revised in 1205. Although naturally replete with hagiographical topoi, it is still a useful source for Gilbert's life and the early history of his order, as Golding's reconstructed narrative demonstrates (*Gilbert of Sempringham*, 7-70). For an edition of the *Life*, see *Book of St Gilbert*, 2-133.

⁵ Indeed, Gilbert saw such similarities between his religious foundations and the Cistercians that he tried (unsuccessfully) in 1147 to have his autonomous houses incorporated within the Cistercian order. Other influences on the developing Gilbertine customs came from Fontevrault, Arrouaise, and Prémontré (Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 26-28, 91-96, 112-19).

while the lay sisters, although not allocated much attention in the documents, seem also to have fulfilled similar duties to their Cistercian counterparts.⁶ There were three areas, however, in which the Gilbertines were more original. First was their belief that the cenobitic religious life could include a certain degree of male/female interaction; second was the peculiar legislative, architectural, and liturgical practices that they developed in order to facilitate this coexistence between the sexes; and third was the fact that the authority the Gilbertines granted to women was extremely short-lived. For the rules that defined these double communities demonstrate that there was an institutionalized retreat from the original ideals, almost from the outset of the order's existence. Thus, the Gilbertine order is today often praised yet simultaneously lamented as a worthy experiment that enjoyed an all-too-brief period of success.⁷

But from their confident words, it would seem that Roger and Hugh were part of the first generation of Gilbertine advocates who as yet harbored no such concerns about the Gilbertine enterprise. Evidently then they were unaware of an incident that had occurred at Watton some few years before their letter was written. Recorded by Aelred of Rievaulx prior to his final illness in 1166, this was an event in which a nun of Watton had embarked on an ill-fated love affair with a male religious of the same house. The master of the Gilbertine order, Gilbert of Sempringham, had summoned Aelred to arbitrate in the incident, and Aelred subsequently recorded the event for the benefit of posterity. The resultant treatise is known as *De sanctimoniali de Wattun*, in keeping with the title on the sole extant manuscript.⁸

Unfortunately, we know little about the work's distribution and popularity. But the lack of manuscripts suggests that the treatise was not well known. Moreover, it does not appear in the thirteenth-century Rievaulx library catalogue, nor does Walter Daniel mention

⁶ On the tasks of the four groups, see Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 108–27.

⁷ On the decreasing fortunes of Gilbertine women as indicative of wider regulation of female religious practice at this time, see Elkins. More optimistically, for the successes as well as the failures of the “Gilbertine experiment,” see Golding’s *Gilbert of Sempringham*.

⁸ CCCC MS 139, fols. 149r–151v. This important and problematic manuscript was probably written at both Durham and Fountains in the late 1160s and subsequently moved to Sawley. See B. Meehan, “Durham Twelfth-Century Manuscripts in Cistercian Houses,” in *Anglo-Norman Durham: 1093–1193*, ed. D. Rollason et al. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1994), 440–42 and references therein.

it among Aelred's compositions. It appears then that *De sanctimoniali de Wattun* was not one of Aelred's major "memorable works"⁹ which Walter Daniel considered worthy of attention. It is perhaps best defined as an edificatory treatise composed by Aelred in his domestic and pedagogic role as abbot. The work may well have been intended to circulate only within a small monastic milieu. Aelred tells his audience that he wrote simply because "to know of the Lord's miracles and of his proofs of divine love and to be silent about them were sacrilege."¹⁰

But despite its small popularity in the Middle Ages, *De sanctimoniali de Wattun* is a useful source to modern historians. Contained within a mere eight columns of the *Patrologia Latina* are a range of themes and issues representative of wider medieval mentalities. Because no official Gilbertine documents were produced until the early thirteenth century, Aelred's work is an integral source for our understanding of how the early Gilbertine houses operated.¹¹ The treatise has received excellent analysis in this regard.¹² The affair has also been studied as the first in a series of events heralding crisis and disunity in the Gilbertine order. Many scholars investigate it in tandem with the more well known lay brothers' revolt. Although the relationship between the two events is unclear, both incidents betray contemporary misgivings over accommodating religious men and women together.¹³ Thus, Aelred's treatise provides valuable evidence

⁹ Walter Daniel, *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx and the Letter to Maurice*, trans. F. M. Powicke (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1994), 120.

¹⁰ "Miracula Domini et manifesta divinae pietatis indicia scire et tegere, portio sacrilegii est." Aelred of Rievaulx, "De sanctimoniali de Wattun" in *Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1844-64), vol. 195: col. 789C (hereafter cited by column number). There is no complete translation of the treatise. Partial translations appear in M. L. Dutton, "Aelred of Rievaulx on Friendship, Chastity and Sex: The Sources," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 29 (1994): 140, 160; Elkins, 100, 108-10; and G. Constable, "Aelred of Rievaulx and the Nun of Watton: An Episode in the Early History of the Gilbertine Order," in *Medieval Women*, ed. D. Baker, Studies in Church History, Subsidia 1 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 205-26. My own translations have been improved by reference to these works.

¹¹ Or, at least, nothing survives prior to the first decade of the thirteenth century (when the *Institutes* and the *Book of St Gilbert* were compiled).

¹² Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 33-38; Constable, "Aelred of Rievaulx and the Nun of Watton."

¹³ On the revolt, see *Book of St Gilbert*, xxiv, lv-lxii, 77-85, 135-67. While scholars agree that the revolt prompted greater segregation in Gilbertine priories, the influence of the affair at Watton is less clear. Most commentators suspect some influence but defer to the lack of evidence. See Graham, 40; Elkins, 111.

for medieval conceptions of the types of religious lives women were expected or required to pursue. And, indeed, the work has long profited from attention by scholars interested in the experiences of medieval women.¹⁴ This article will continue that theme. In particular, this article investigates Aelred of Rievaulx's *De sanctimoniali de Watun* in relation to modern debates concerning the usefulness of the categories "public" and "private" as conceptual frameworks for the study of women's lives.

An informal definition might posit the "public" as the world of political and economic action, institutions, and culture contrasted with the "private" as the realm of domesticity. Certainly, this working definition has served as a profitable starting point in many previous investigations.¹⁵ However, as Augustine reminds us in his discussion of time, it is precisely such mundane properties that most demand yet simultaneously resist more specific definitions. Scholars of feminist anthropology have persisted longest in the difficult task of definition, convinced that an awareness of this bipartite social structure permits us new understandings of the interactions between and within men's and women's lives.¹⁶ Significantly, while they do

¹⁴ L. Eckenstein, *Woman under Monasticism: Chapters on Saint-Lore and Convent Life between A.D. 500 and A.D. 1500* (1896; repr. New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), 218-9. More recent treatments appear in S. Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. C. Galai (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), 100-1; Elkins, 99-101, 106-11; and P. L'Hermite-Leclercq, "The Feudal Order," in *Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. C. Klapisch-Zuber, *A History of Women in the West*, no. 2 (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 225.

¹⁵ See the contributions to *Beyond the Public/Domestic Dichotomy*, ed. J. Sharistanian (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987). Proceeding from similar starting points, however, the authors ultimately suggest very different conclusions and reassessments of the "public/private" terminology. This is a result of their pursuing similar interests in public and private settings but investigating them in vastly different contexts.

¹⁶ A good introduction to the problems of definition can be found in M. Z. Rosaldo's survey article, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5 (1980): 389-417. This is a reformulation of the approaches in *Women, Culture, and Society*, ed. M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), whence the debate first attracted wider scholarly attention. Current studies engage in yet further reformulation, always stressing the need to ground any theoretical pronouncements in specific contexts. See, for example, the essays in *Gender, Ideology, and Action: Historical Perspectives on Women's Public Lives*, ed. J. Sharistanian (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986) and *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History*, ed. D. O. Helly and S. M. Reverby (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1992).

not disagree with the preceding working definition, they focus more on the model's causes and effects than on its form. Here, public and private are defined in terms of social endorsement and power. Thus, the private realm may be well equated with the domestic and local, but it need not necessarily be so. What is more important is that the private zone lacks formal authority while the public zone possesses it. Further, the private world is actively denied such legitimacy while the public world succeeds in claiming it for itself.

By envisaging "private" and "public" in terms of the legitimacy with which each is accorded in a given culture's social hierarchy, I am also arguing for the fluidity and historicity of these terms.¹⁷ Because both zones are constituted by broader societal forces, they are also inexplicable apart from these forces. In other words, the meanings and effects of this bipartite division vary according to time and place and so are particularly receptive to historicized readings. This paper will provide one such reading.

It will be argued that *De sanctimoniali de Wattun* records moments of conflict between Gilbertine men and women concerning women's roles in the public world. Further, it will be suggested that this conflict was articulated predominantly in terms of space. Although it is certainly simplistic to argue that privacy is necessarily synonymous with (or a corollary of) physical seclusion, nonetheless there are sufficient similarities to provide a starting point for this discussion. Indeed, it has been suggested that in order to contrast private life with public life "the first point to note is that this opposition hinges on place. The zone of private life is apparently that of domestic space, circumscribed by walls,"¹⁸ while public life assumes a very different and more expansive participation in space. Significantly, however, the two zones can exist and carry meaning only in contrast to each other; each zone requires its opposite as a necessary other, and so must be investigated in a comparative rather than restrictive sense. Further, this inherently relational factor means that the two categories (and the attendant experiences of the individuals within these categories) are never fixed or rigidly defined. As the preceding quotation continues: "Note, however, that there are degrees of seclu-

¹⁷ Here I reaffirm Rosaldo's argument that the "domestic/public [framework] constitutes an ideological rather than an objective and necessary set of terms" (402 n. 20).

¹⁸ G. Duby, "Introduction: Private Power, Public Power," in *Revelations of the Medieval World*, ed. P. Ariès and G. Duby, A History of Private Life, no. 2 (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988), 6-7.

sion and that the notion of private life is relative, since one moves gradually from the most external to the most internal." It is precisely this practice of movement, intrusion, and relativism that is apparent in *De sanctimoniali de Wattun*.

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that many medieval nuns passed their lives in negotiation between public and private experiences. Nuns in France, for example, seem to have "treated their enclosures as permeable membranes, crossing over the private/public ecclesiastic barrier in search of their own and society's well-being."¹⁹ *De sanctimoniali de Wattun* is another example of the monastery as a site of interaction and, more precisely, of contestation. It reminds us that medieval examples are particularly pertinent for our understanding of how public and private realms function. It will be seen that, in keeping with recent reformulations of the public/private framework, these realms are not separate but, rather, fluid. Further, the nuns of Watton will be presented as "participants in two realms which overlap but which, precisely because they overlap, as often create new conflicts as resolve old ones."²⁰ Detailed investigation of Aelred's *De sanctimoniali de Wattun* will reveal that certain medieval spaces, and their attendant authorities, were considered appropriate for women and others for men. Thus, this investigation will conclude as a commentary on the medieval gendering of religious space.

Watton Priory: From Order to Disorder

Aelred's treatise opens with a depiction of the order and harmony that existed at Watton priory. Watton was a double house in Yorkshire which had been founded in 1150 as part of the Gilbertines' expansion from their Lincolnshire heartland. Although a church and buildings were constructed immediately after its foundation, the original church was destroyed by fire in 1167. Hence, the buildings for which modern scholars possess most information were not constructed until after the affair at Watton.²¹ Watton was the order's largest house and, according to the *Institutes*, was able to accommodate 140 women and 70 men by the late twelfth or early thirteenth

¹⁹ P. D. Johnson, "The Cloistering of Medieval Nuns: Release or Repression, Reality or Fantasy?" in *Gendered Domains*, 39.

²⁰ J. Sharistanian, "Conclusion: The Public/Domestic Model and the Study of Contemporary Women's Lives," in *Beyond the Public/Domestic Dichotomy*, 180.

²¹ On Watton, see Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 214-17. The classic study of the buildings is W. H. St. J. Hope, "The Gilbertine Priory of Watton, in the East Riding of Yorkshire," *Archaeological Journal* 58 (1901): 1-34.

century. Unfortunately, we do not know the figures for the early 1160s, the period during which the affair probably occurred.²²

What we do know, however, is that Aelred considered the house to be extremely devout. This was a place of "ancient miracles."²³ Significantly, Aelred reserved his praise for the female community. He does not mention the canons but specifies that the nuns performed all their spiritual tasks in exemplary fashion. They performed the required daily labor and chanting of the psalms and were blessed with heavenly contemplations. Aelred's highest praise was to state that the women were almost "bidding farewell to the world and the things of this world."²⁴

Significantly, this spiritual success was not an individualistic one; rather, the nuns were characterized by their willingness to intercede for one another. When one nun died, the others continued praying for her until the nun had been assured of either punishment or glory. Thus, the nuns assumed the right and the capacity to facilitate their dead sister's salvation. This activity locates the nuns within a devotional milieu which was rapidly embracing both the reality of purgatory and, more importantly, the concomitant belief that one's actions on earth could directly influence the fate of another's soul. Not only did the nuns at Watton demonstrate independent spiritual agency but they also created a sense of community which extended beyond the living and included all members of their house, alive or dead, in an embrace of mutual dependency.

Following this description Aelred includes a second anecdote concerning a nun who received a vision of one of her dead monastic sisters: "Everyone loved her [the deceased nun] but one nun cherished her in particular."²⁵ Here Aelred refers to the virtue of friendship which had been his preoccupation since the start of his writing career. As a reward for her love and for the actions which this love inspired, the nun was blessed with an illuminated vision of the dead virgin: "At once the sun's ray rose from where it lay and came nearer. Lying before the virgin's face, it offered to her friend (*amanti*) the countenance she had longed for, so that she could contemplate it

²² The event probably took place between 1160 and 1165 (Elkins, 200-1 n. 2).

²³ 790C.

²⁴ "quasi valedicentes mundo et omnibus quae mundi sunt" (790C).

²⁵ "Diligebatur ab omnibus, sed ab una specialius colebatur" (790D).

close at hand."²⁶ Friendship brought rewards; it allowed two people to share their experiences of God and to profit from the virtues of each other.

The preceding anecdotes are not idle items of praise; rather, they represent two of Aelred's greatest interests. The individual sister praying for her dead friend illustrates the virtues of spiritual friendship, while the collective devotions of the nuns manifest the strengths of charitable monastic communities. At the time of composing this treatise, Aelred had either just completed or was still in the process of composing his *De spirituali amicitia*. In this work Aelred endorsed friendship as a means of facilitating the love of Christ, since "quickly and imperceptibly the one love passes over into the other."²⁷ Indeed, Aelred introduced *De spirituali amicitia* by stating that whenever friendship was present, so too was Christ. Friendship, then, possessed the highest legitimacy within monastic life. Many of Aelred's contemporaries favored examples of male friends, but he saw no inherent distinction between male and female friendship.²⁸ In keeping with his belief in the spiritual equality of men and women,²⁹ Aelred presented the friendship of two nuns at Watton as a perfectly edificatory tale to convey to posterity.

The preceding example reminds us, however, that it was never possible to be friends with everyone: "Everyone loved her, but [only] one nun cherished her in particular." Yet while only one nun offered the gift of spiritual friendship, nonetheless the whole community displayed the requirement of charity. As Aelred argued elsewhere, friendship may have been possible only between those of similar

²⁶ "Mox radius solis a loco quo substiterat elevatus, accessit propius, et ante faciem virginis stans vultum quem concupierat amanti praebeuit cominus contemplandum" (791B).

²⁷ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. M. E. Laker (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 3.133 (p. 131). Likewise, 2.20–21 (pp. 74–5); 3.87 (pp. 113–4). This is a common Aelredian and Cistercian theme; that is, the love of others opens the heart for love of God. As Aelred wrote in the *Speculum caritatis*, the three loves (self, others, God) were all bound together, so that: "None of them can be possessed without all." Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror of Charity*, trans. E. Connor (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 3.2.3 (p. 223).

²⁸ Dutton, 184.

²⁹ "How beautiful it is that the second human being was taken from the side of the first, so that nature might teach that human beings are equal and, as it were, collateral, and that there is in human affairs neither a superior nor an inferior, a characteristic of true friendship." Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.57 (p. 63).

wills, yet charity was to be extended to all people.³⁰ Further, the monastery was an excellent site for employing charity and attempting to restore the image of God in humankind. One must remember then that Aelred's conception of charity is an intrinsically communal and monastic one. Aelred's understanding of life in community included more than simply living together or avoiding the hermit's life.³¹ In addition, cenobitic life demanded a willingness to share and to put all gifts of Christ's love at the disposal of one's fellow religious. Thus, its greatest potential was realized only with the introduction of charity. When charity was present, the community provided the individual with the opportunity to recognize God in others. The nuns of Watton had embraced this opportunity, and so Watton is introduced to the audience as a house of the highest propriety and love.

Aelred was of course aware that cenobitic life could be threatened. As he wrote in his *Oratio pastoralis*, the role of abbot brought with it the responsibility to "restrain the restless, comfort the discouraged, and support the weak."³² Various anecdotes in Walter Daniel's *Life* suggest that such restlessness and discouragement were not unknown at Rievaulx. Violent and runaway monks tested Aelred's ability to supply his community's needs,³³ while Aelred's appeal to God to "teach me to suit myself to everyone according to his nature, character and disposition" indicates how seriously he cared for his community. Aelred continued: "I do not want to rule over them harshly or self-assertively, but to help them in charity, rather than command."³⁴

While Aelred recognized a range of threats to monastic life, he was particularly concerned about the potential for spiritual closeness to transform itself into sexual desire. This concern was evident in Aelred's first work, the *Speculum caritatis*, and it is a theme which

³⁰ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.59 (pp. 63-4).

³¹ Aelred's treatment of the individual within the monastic community has prompted much study. A. Squire, "Aelred of Rievaulx and the Monastic Tradition concerning Action and Contemplation," *Downside Review* 72 (1954): 289-303 and C. Dumont, "Seeking God in Community According to St Aelred," *Cistercian Studies* 6 (1971): 289-317 are good introductions.

³² Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Pastoral Prayer*, in *Treatises, Pastoral Prayer*, vol. 1 of *The Works of Aelred of Rievaulx*, trans. R. P. Lawson (Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 114-5.

³³ Walter Daniel, *Life of Aelred of Rievaulx*, 107-8, 112-3, 157.

³⁴ Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Pastoral Prayer*, 115.

persists throughout his subsequent writings. The *Speculum caritatis* warns monks that excessive contact with nuns will turn their devotion to carnal love.³⁵ *De institutione inclusarum* argues similarly, attributing the capacity for sin to men and women alike. On this occasion, it is the anchoress who is advised to avoid seeing the same man too frequently, since the memory of him will linger and tempt her to sin.³⁶ Aelred acknowledged that relationships with one's peers in religious life provided potential for spiritual growth but, on the other hand, they were always accompanied by the possibility of sin in the form of sexual temptation.

Having invoked Aelred's praise of successful monastic communities and his concern that the affirming potentials of personal relationships should not be abandoned to sexual improprieties, it is easier to appreciate the organization of *De sanctimoniali de Watton*. Aelred referred to his opening description of the devout community as an excursus. But, in keeping with rhetorical tradition, such an apology was disingenuous. Aelred's reference to the initial devotion at Watton is essential to his story since it brings the subsequent failings into sharper focus and, further, defines those failings as failings of community spirit.

Aelred now proceeds to introduce the young girl, the main character of the narrative. He tells us that the Cistercian archbishop Henry Murdac had placed the four-year-old girl in the care of the Gilbertines at Watton. The girl grew up among the community and, presumably, was expected to take religious vows. Unfortunately, however, she was not suited to community life. Aelred provides a list of her failings, the first of which was the girl's penchant for lewdness. Her other shortcomings derived from this quality. The girl affected a petulant look, indecent speech, and a lewd gait as well as a general failure to fear God. The contrast with the other nuns could not have been greater. The nuns demonstrated the loving qualities of communal charity, while the girl's lewdness challenged the basis of that community.

There were other ways in which the girl undermined the nuns' sense of community. Gilbertine nuns followed a modified version of the Benedictine Rule. The young girl, however, indulged in two vices

³⁵ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Mirror of Charity*, 3.28.66, 67 (p. 266).

³⁶ Aelred of Rievaulx, *A Rule of Life for a Recluse*, in *Treatises, Pastoral Prayer*, vol. 1 of *The Works of Aelred of Rievaulx*, trans. M. P. Macpherson (Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 7 (p. 52).

which the Rule prohibited—wasteful leisure and idle talk or gossip.³⁷ As the Rule made clear, these two activities were related. Chapter 48 directs that senior monks should keep duty over the brethren while they are reading, in order that “no brother is so apathetic as to waste time or engage in idle talk to the neglect of his reading.” Chapter 43 also refers to gossip, and makes the point that such talk is likely to occur when brothers are left unsupervised outside the oratory. As Benedict had envisaged, and as the nun of Watton would confirm, idle talk and other indiscretions were encouraged by the improper use of monastic space.

Aelred stresses that the nun’s disobedience was facilitated by physical solitude. It was by “withdrawing” from the eyes of the mistresses that the nun was able to indulge in leisure and wallow in disorder. Significantly, her entrance into other spaces was considered problematic only once the girl had reached puberty. Aelred drew a causal link between the girl having been “made marriageable” and the unfortunate fact that she preferred exterior things to interior things, unproductive leisure to monastic rest and games to serious matters.³⁸ Now that the girl had reached a marriageable age, the lewdness which she had already demonstrated would prove an even greater problem, particularly when it was accompanied by such exterior distractions. Having reached puberty, the girl moved away from the virtuous space inhabited by the diligent nun into the other unnamed space that would permit sin.

Somehow, the curious nun managed to approach a group of “brothers of the monastery to whom the care of the exterior was entrusted.”³⁹ Aelred states, “There was among them an adolescent who was more attractive in appearance and more blooming in youth than the others.”⁴⁰ Aelred does not specify whether the man was a canon or lay brother but, since the group had “entered the monastery

³⁷ “Furabatur magistrarum oculis horas, ut vel indulgeret otio, vel signis inordinatis diffuaret, aut vacaret fabulis, aut inutile aliquid aliis suaderet” (791C). On the negative combination of *vacare* and *fabulis*, see *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. T. Fry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 43.8, 48.18 (hereafter RB).

³⁸ “Et jam nubilis facta, interioribus exteriora, otiosa quietis, seriis ludicra praeponerat” (791C).

³⁹ “Accidit autem ut fratres monasterii quibus exteriorum commissa est cura” (791C-D).

⁴⁰ “Erat inter eos adolescens caeteris formosior facie et aetate nitidior [sic]” (791D). Migne’s *nitidior* is incorrect; the manuscript reads *viridior*.

of the women to do some kind of job," it has been suggested that he was one of the lay brethren who performed manual work.⁴¹ On the other hand, however, the man clearly wore a religious habit, thus suggesting canonical status. Ultimately, then, the man's position cannot be determined. What is significant though is that the man had such easy contact with the nun, despite monastic proscriptions to the contrary. These proscriptions would have applied to both canons and lay brethren alike. But Aelred suggests that the couple encountered little difficulty in arranging occasions for their mutual nods. Following the conventional order of the "steps of love" (*gradus amoris*), these nods were soon followed by signs and then by speech.⁴²

The topos of *gradus amoris* was brought to its inevitable and unfortunate conclusion when the couple engaged in sexual intercourse. Significantly, however, Aelred seems to have considered that the eventual sin was made possible only after "they came to agree on a place and time. Rejecting the armor of light, they were pleased by the darkness of night. Fleeing public places, they favoured more secret ones."⁴³ Paradoxically, however, the nun succeeded in exchanging one public identity for another. There was no sharp and rigid division between the public and private spheres. Nor did the nun inhabit one sphere at the expense of the other; rather, the two realms were related in a complex web of mutual dependency. Although the couple's sins took place in secret and private places, these actions would have ramifications of a communal and public nature. In fleeing the

⁴¹ "quidpiam operis facturi ingrederentur monasterium feminarum" (791D). The lay brethren were instituted specifically to take care of "the nuns' external and more arduous tasks." *Book of St Gilbert*, 37.

⁴² Later Aelred will repeat that the corruption occurred by stages: "her mind already corrupted, her flesh is corrupted" ("et prius mente corrupta carne corrumpitur," 792C). There were traditionally five stages of love—sight, speech, touch, kissing, and consummation. These were popular in Latin theology and vernacular romances, ultimately traceable to Horace and known to medieval writers through studies in rhetoric (L. J. Friedman, "Gradus Amoris," *Romance Philology* 19 [1965]: 167–77). Aelred frequently refers to the combined influence of the senses in prompting carnal love. See Aelred of Rievaulx, *A Rule of Life for a Recluse*, 7 (p. 52), where a woman's modesty and "peace of mind" can be undermined by the sight, voice, or conversation of a man. Likewise: "Then by gesture, nod, words, compliance, spirit is captivated by spirit, and one is inflamed by the other, and they are kindled to form a sinful bond." Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.40 (p. 59).

⁴³ "de loco vel tempore in unam coiere sententiam. Abjicientibus itaque arma lucis, nox placebat obscurior. Publicum fugitantibus locus secretior gratus habetur" (792A).

public places of the monastic community the nun arrived unavoidably in the public places of the world.

Aelred considered evil to be an invader of good monastic space: "Where is there a watch so careful around all doors, windows, out of the way places that evil spirits seem not to be able to enter?"⁴⁴ Aelred conceived of evil in a tangible sense, as something that could move and acquire territory. His gravest concern was that evil should not cross the boundary from outer to inner. At the same time, however, he included an excursus which seems to concede that evil will, after all, succeed. Here Aelred speaks rhetorically to Gilbert of Sempringham, asking: "Where were those many well-thought out mechanisms for keeping out the opportunity for failings?"⁴⁵ Once again, sin has a specific locus; it should be restricted to certain exterior sites. The crime of the couple was that they met sin halfway. The girl moved outside her conventional and religiously sanctioned boundaries, while sin itself moved in.

But Aelred does not blame Gilbert for his charge's misdemeanours: "unless the Lord watches over the city, he who watches it keeps alert in vain'....You did, blessed man, you did whatever a man could do."⁴⁶ Instead, Aelred considered it inherent in the structure of the order that such events should occur. While his first excursus had emphasized the positive features of community living, this second excursus isolates inbuilt organizational problems. Even the "well-thought out mechanisms for keeping out the opportunity for failings" were insufficient to prevent the entrance of evil spirits.⁴⁷ Thus, the misdemeanor was explained in spatial terms; it was unavoidably connected with the girl's physical wandering and hence departure from the spiritual guardianship of the monastic community: "A virgin of Christ goes out; after a while an adulteress returns."⁴⁸ Physical egression was symbolically and literally connected with spiritual egression.

⁴⁴ "Ubi tunc illa tam prudens, tam cauta, tam perspicax cura, et circa singula ostia, fenestras, angulos tam fida custodia ut sinistris etiam spiritibus negari videretur accessus?" (792A-B).

⁴⁵ "Ubi tot tam exquisita ad excludendam vitiorum materiam machinamenta?" (792A).

⁴⁶ "nisi Dominus custodierit civitatem, frustra vigilat qui custodit eam'....Fecisti, vir beate, fecisti quidquid potuit homo" (792B).

⁴⁷ See n. 46.

⁴⁸ "Egreditur Christi virgo, adultera post modicum reditura" (792C).

The Regulation of Space as the Regulation of Public and Private Roles

A. Gilbertine Practices

Gilbert of Sempringham's initial intention may well have been to establish religious foundations for women alone.⁴⁹ But religious women were always dependent on men to varying degrees. The provision of sacraments was the most pressing need but it was also common for female religious to defer to men for physical labor and the business administration of their houses. Gilbert's biographer follows this traditional argument when explaining why men eventually entered the order.⁵⁰ Yet although most of the early houses were double establishments, the precise relationships between Gilbertine men and women in the 1150s and 1160s remain unclear. This problem is of course aggravated by the late dates of the *Institutes* and the *Book of St Gilbert*. As previous scholars have pointed out: "It is not easy to ascertain the degree of separation and the degree of common living in the early Gilbertine houses."⁵¹

We do know, however, that the Gilbertines were preoccupied with the regulation of space. Gilbert of Sempringham's original preference seems to have been for the eremitical life,⁵² and he ensured that his original community of handmaidens of Christ lived "a solitary life" under the wall of the village church at Sempringham: "Only a window was preserved which could be opened so that the necessities could be passed through it."⁵³ The *Institutes* continued this emphasis on physical separation. Although Gilbertine nuns were to follow the Benedictine Rule in most respects, their requirements for seclusion were much stricter than anything specified by Benedict.

⁴⁹ Certainly, Gilbert himself claimed this, and medieval and modern writers agree. See *Book of St Gilbert*, p. li; and B. Golding, "Hermits, Monks and Women in Twelfth-Century France and England: The Experience of Obazine and Sempringham," in *Monastic Studies. The Continuity of Tradition*, ed. J. Loades (Bangor: Headstart History, 1990), 132. On the other hand, however, the Gilbertine documents also contain suggestions that Gilbert would have supported a male community, if only he could have found one. Golding argues that this is due to the apologetic nature of the texts; composed after various crises in the order, they deemphasised Gilbert's role in what had since become a controversial area—the encouragement of female religious life. See Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 16–18.

⁵⁰ *Book of St Gilbert*, 46.

⁵¹ Thompson, 74.

⁵² Golding, "Hermits, Monks and Women," 136–37.

⁵³ *Book of St Gilbert*, 33.

Separation was to last from their entrance into the community until the point of death. Only when the women were dying and in need of extreme unction could they come into contact with canons.⁵⁴ And, even then, canons were able to perform unction only provided witnesses were present.

The Gilbertines articulated their commitment to separation in their architecture as well as in their writings and rituals. The buildings at Watton would be constructed in such a fashion as to deter any contact, physical or visual, between the canons and the nuns.⁵⁵ The method of ensuring this was to build two versions of every monastic building, one for men and one for women. Separate cloisters were provided for each, and these were divided by a wall and a ditch. Even the church would be effectively divided into two. Although we have no information concerning the original church of Aelred's day, the replacement building would have a dividing wall running down its length preventing contact between men and women.⁵⁶

The one area where sexual segregation was relaxed was the window-house.⁵⁷ Located in the middle of the covered walkway joining the male and female cloisters, this area physically and symbolically traversed boundaries. It was the place of authorized and regulated interaction between men and women. Here some of the nuns' endorsed public roles could be conducted. Nuns were in charge of cooking and sewing for both male and female communities, and it

⁵⁴ *Institutes*, lxxxix.

⁵⁵ R. Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 93–4. Unfortunately, we do not know the architectural details for Watton at the time of the affair. But “although what we have at Watton is a mature Gilbertine plan, it is likely that the buildings always reflected the needs of a strictly secluded nunnery.” J. Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000–1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 149. Golding argues similarly but suggests that the very fact that the affair at Watton could have taken place at all means that the physical barriers must have been surmountable (*Gilbert of Sempringham*, 129–30).

⁵⁶ The original church survives only in a few foundations, and we do not know if it had the dividing wall. But such features were common at the time, in accordance with the Second Lateran Council (1139) decree that nuns should not sing in the same choirs as men. Stephen of Obazine's community had a wall in the 1140s (Golding, “Hermits, Monks and Women,” 132).

⁵⁷ On the *domus fenestrae*, see *Institutes*, lxxiv; Hope, 19. A small window was also built into the church's dividing wall, but its use was restricted to the passing through of the chalice (*Institutes*, l). The complex relationship between the public nature of holy communion and the private nature of the nuns' seclusion in the church building is beyond the scope of this paper.

was at the window-house that they passed the food and clothing through to the men. Their public role was not supposed to extend, however, to talking to the men any more than necessary.⁵⁸

Significantly, the window-house was located in the area of deepest space within the monastery.⁵⁹ That is, it was the least accessible of all buildings from the starting point of the monastic precinct. Recent study has demonstrated that the areas of deepest space within monasteries were the ones which, for a variety of reasons, were considered most necessary to control. In men's houses, it was frequently the chapter-house (with its functions of important daily business) that was the most impermeable or difficult to access. For women, the dormitory was usually the most protected space, reflecting concerns that nuns' virginity and physical safety were worth protecting and governing. For the Gilbertines, however, it was the activity of male-female contact, and the public nature of this, which was the most regulated by restriction to deep space. Ironically, then, it is by investigating the single area where male-female contact was permitted that one appreciates just how much such contact was controlled.

There were a variety of reasons for the Gilbertines' preoccupation with space and their concomitant enforcement of separation. Enclosure was a common practice, by no means unique to the Gilbertines, which was justified by the Benedictine Rule:

The monastery should, if possible, be so constructed that within it all necessities, such as water, mill and garden are contained, and the various crafts are practiced. Then there will be no need for the monks to roam outside, because this is not at all good for their souls.⁶⁰

Theoretically, men and women were bound equally by this requirement but in practice the prescription fell more strongly on women.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Speech was to occur only "when necessary." Even then, men and women were to discuss only "suitable" matters, always with witnesses present (*Institutes*, lxxiv).

⁵⁹ On deep space, see Gilchrist, 163-6.

⁶⁰ "Monasterium autem, si possit fieri, ita debet constitui, ut omnia necessaria, id est aqua, molendinum, hortus, vel artes diversae intra monasterium exerceantur, ut non sit necessitas monachis vagandi foris, quia omnino non expedit animabus eorum." RB 66.6-7.

⁶¹ For medieval theory and practice concerning female enclaustration, see Johnson, 27-29; J. T. Schulenburg, "Strict Active Enclosure and its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience (ca. 500-1100)," in *Medieval Religious Women*, vol. 1 of *Distant Echoes*, ed. J. A. Nichols and L. T. Shank (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 51-86.

Enclosure worked on different mutually enhancing levels.⁶² Firstly, and in a literal sense, the nun or monk remained physically separate from the world. Secondly, and in a spiritual sense, he or she remained an impermeable fortress to temptation and sin. A consequence of this conflation, as the nun of Watton would discover, was that the failure to maintain spatial separation was considered a corollary of, and indeed an inevitable precursor of, failure to maintain spiritual separation.

One of the most commonly mentioned spiritual imperatives for separation was the preservation of virginity. As the *Life of St Gilbert* states,

tender virginity is frequently and easily tempted by the serpent's cunning; therefore he [Gilbert] shut them [the seven virgins who became the first Gilbertine nuns] away from the world's clamour and the sight of men, so that having entered the king's chamber they might be free in solitude for the embrace of the bridegroom alone.⁶³

Aelred was particularly sympathetic to this argument. As he wrote in *De institutione inclusarum*, virginity is "the flower and adornment of all the virtues."⁶⁴ But Aelred saw virginity not so much as an end in itself as a manifestation of a greater good—a rejection of the world.⁶⁵ He raised the topic of virginity in order to demonstrate how enclosed women could "be hidden and unseen . . . dead as it were to the world."⁶⁶ In keeping with monastic tradition, rejecting the world brought great benefits: "With how glad a face Christ comes to meet one who renounces the world."⁶⁷ What is significant is Aelred's insistence that virginity was the best manifestation of this rejection. He continues his argument by drawing an explicit connection between the two ideals: "Let the world become of no value to you, let all carnal love seem defiled."⁶⁸ Thus, Aelred's praise of virginity was more precisely a plea for a wider monastic vision of renunciation in which

⁶² On these two levels, see J. Leclercq, "Le cloître est-il une prison?" *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 47 (1971): 415.

⁶³ *Book of St Gilbert*, 33.

⁶⁴ Aelred of Rievaulx, *A Rule of Life for a Recluse*, 23 (p. 70).

⁶⁵ T. Renna, "Virginity in the *Life* of Christina of Markyate and Aelred of Rievaulx's *Rule*," *American Benedictine Review* 36 (1985): 88–90.

⁶⁶ Aelred of Rievaulx, *A Rule of Life for a Recluse*, 14 (p. 62).

⁶⁷ Aelred of Rievaulx, *A Rule of Life for a Recluse*, 32 (p. 96).

⁶⁸ Aelred of Rievaulx, *A Rule of Life for a Recluse*, 32 (p. 96).

self-conquest was a stage on the contemplative's path to perfection. For Aelred, solitude and virginity went hand in hand.

As formulated by Aelred and the Gilbertines, separation and solitude were gendered activities. That is, they were intended to serve different ends for men and women. The *Life of St Gilbert* states that retaining walls were necessary in churches, "so that the men cannot be seen or the women heard."⁶⁹ This prescription suggests both that separation was intended to prevent temptation and, further, that temptation had different guises for male and female religious. Employing the common stereotype of the garrulous woman, the prescription suggests that it was women's voices that furnished risks to men.⁷⁰ And, as the nun of Watton would discover, the very sight of men was allegedly a risk to women: "The wretched one cast her eyes on him, and he fastened his attention on her."⁷¹ Begun by a look: "The thing was done first by nods, but nods were followed by signs."⁷² Thus, from a single look, perhaps at the window-house, sight was followed by talk and then by action. The later Gilbertine *Institutes* may well command strict separation of the sexes but *De sanctimoniali de Wattun* suggests that, in the early years of the order, contact was by no means difficult.

B. Modern theories

The gendering of religious space can be studied by invoking the concepts of public and private realms. The relevance of these concepts for investigations of monastic communities has been successfully demonstrated.⁷³ Additionally, many scholars identify an inherently gendered component within the public/private division. Not only have women traditionally been assigned to the private sphere but, further, "public" and "private" have often had very different implications for the lives of women from those they have for the lives

⁶⁹ *Book of St Gilbert*, 46–7.

⁷⁰ This equation of women's voices with sexual temptation was confirmed by the *Institutes'* prohibition of females singing in church. Nuns should "psalm indirectly [silently] with that blessed Virgin, the perpetual mother of God, in the spirit of humility rather than with that wanton daughter of Herodias [Salome] to corrupt the minds of the weak with music." *Institutes*, lxxx. On the negative power of female voices, see S. A. Farmer, "Softening the Hearts of Men: Women, Embodiment, and Persuasion in the Thirteenth Century," in *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values*, ed. P. M. Cooley et al. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 115–6.

⁷¹ "Injecit in illum oculos misera, ipse vero intendebat in eam" (791D).

⁷² "Res primum nutibus agitur, sed nutus signa sequuntur" (791D).

⁷³ Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*; Johnson, 27–39.

of men."⁷⁴ Thus, the investigation of the public/private dichotomy has provided a useful means of validating the private lives of women while still asserting that the privacy of women's lives is culturally constructed rather than natural.

But prior to invoking this theory, a word of warning must be raised. The public/private framework should not be defined in a rigid fashion. Indeed, the exclusiveness of the public and private fields was questioned almost as soon as the two categories were formulated.⁷⁵ These queries have carried particular urgency in the areas of women's histories, since it has been argued that maintenance of strict categorical dichotomies limits the interpretative possibilities for women's experiences and indeed excuses the tendency to leave women in a domain apart.⁷⁶ Notwithstanding the usefulness of the two oppositional categories, they are never the sole influences at work in people's lives, as historians of race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality remind us; rather, the framework is a useful basis for investigation only insofar as one acknowledges the complex relationships between these spheres and other features of individual and community life. The characters in *De sanctimonialibus de Wiltun*, for example, provide evidence of constant interaction and shifting boundaries concerning the loci of the public and private realms. Thus, Aelred's treatise furnishes modern readers with a salutary reminder that real-life situations are never reducible to unqualified and unhistoricized oppositions between the exclusive realms of the public and the private.

Authority in the Public Realm: Claim and Counter-Claim

The nun's crossing of physical boundaries challenged the community's boundaries of authority. Although the *Institutes* tell us that Gilbertine nuns were later required to defer to the ultimate authority of men, Aelred's treatise presents a more delicately shaded situation. Here the women were prepared to claim certain authorities as their

⁷⁴ N. O. Keohane, "Preface," in *Gendered Domains*, x.

⁷⁵ For a history of academic approaches to public and private (domestic) realms, see n. 16 above and J. Sharistanian, "Bibliographical Essay," in *Beyond the Public/Domestic Dichotomy*, 185-97. The realms were defined by cultural anthropologists in the 1970s but, as S. M. Reverby and D. O. Helly point out, "however dazzling the [public/private] model appeared, scholars almost immediately began to query its power and universality," not least its relevance beyond the modern western contexts for which it was developed ("Introduction: Converging on history," in *Gendered Domains*, 6).

⁷⁶ Rosaldo, "Use and Abuse of Anthropology," 389-417.

own. Although the sisters were suspicious of the unusual noises they heard at night, they did not take any action until after the man had left the nun and joined the secular world. He had left her on discovering that she was pregnant, and it was due to her obvious state of pregnancy that the nun confessed to the *matronae sapientiores* who had summoned her. We see then that authority to act is claimed by this ill-defined group of "wiser mothers."⁷⁷ But although they are never described in anything other than vague terms, the rights of these women to summon the nun on behalf of the community are never challenged.

The sisters initially disagreed as to the best course of action. While some favored physical violence towards the girl, a group of *matronae* (who may or may not have been the same as the "wiser mothers") made the final decision. Although Aelred's terminology is once again imprecise, it appears that the authority of these older nuns was accepted by the others.⁷⁸ The *matronae* succeeded in checking the younger nuns' enthusiasm for physical punishment and instead recommended imprisonment. As would become characteristic of the affair at Watton, this punishment contained both public and private symbolism. Although the cell was a place of physical privacy, it linked one symbolically with the public glories of early Christian martyrs who had been (literally) incarcerated. Since imprisonment and monastic enclosure had grammatical and philosophical links,⁷⁹ imprisonment returned the penitent monk or nun to the orthodoxy of enclosed communal life. Thus, in a complex relationship between private and public, private penance facilitated an eventual reincorporation into the group.

But, as it turned out, imprisonment did not satisfy the women in this instance. They acted from the premise that the nun's sin was the sin of the entire community and that it was necessary for the whole

⁷⁷ "Tunc matronae sapientiores puellam conveniunt" (792D). The Gilbertine *Institutes* would later refer to "scrutinisers of the cloister" (*scrutatrices claustris*). Each house was to appoint three sisters, or as many as necessary, who were to report monastic matters to their superiors (the master general and the female general scrutinizers) in order to "correct errors of the house and improve good things." *Institutes*, xxxv; and Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 106. The "wiser women" may well have filled the same scrutinizing function at this earlier period.

⁷⁸ "Fervorem adolescentium compescebant matronae" (792D-793A).

⁷⁹ On monastic life as voluntary imprisonment, see Leclercq, "Le cloître est-il une prison?" 407-20.

community to be avenged of the crime.⁸⁰ Likewise, whatever remedy the nuns elected would also reflect on the state of the house as a whole. They were concerned that if they expelled their monastic sister then this would risk infamy for them all.⁸¹ Significantly, however, the sense of community created by the nuns does not seem to have included the canons. All the debate and decision was initiated by women; men were remarkably absent.

Finally, however, a transferral of authority was effected. We do not know by what means the events were eventually brought to wider attention. Aelred writes simply that: "Then the master of the congregation [Gilbert], certain things having been admitted from the brothers, uncovered the matter."⁸² It is not stated how the brothers found out and how they then reported to Gilbert. Nonetheless, once Gilbert gained this information, activity moved irrevocably into the public realm. A plan for capture was enacted by the canons. One of the brothers dressed as a woman in order to impersonate the nun. Significantly, Aelred did not feel compelled to justify the necessity of this ruse. While it is likely that the canons did not wish to expose the nun to the dangerous embraces of the returning man, it is also helpful to investigate the episode in relation to modern theories concerning medieval transvestitism. Here it is suggested that men might adopt the clothing of women in order to usurp the legitimate roles of women and to prevent the conventional wearers of such clothing from performing public tasks.⁸³ This interpretation permits us to view the incident of female impersonation as yet another occasion in which legitimate authority at Watton was asserted and indeed appropriated by one group at the expense of another. According to this interpretation, the canons were not prepared to permit nuns to act in the public realm. As the canons had planned, the man was duly captured.

The agency of the nuns was not, however, diminished. Claims to authority continued to sway back and forth, and the nuns soon re-

⁸⁰ For Aelred's frequent use of the term "ulcisor" in a communal sense, see Constable, 217.

⁸¹ 793B.

⁸² "Tunc magister congregationis, ascitis quibusdam e fratribus, rem aperit" (793C).

⁸³ Medieval "cross dressing was, if not officially permitted, at least tolerated under two conditions: when the person was clearly recognized as being a man or when the man performed a social function that, because of other prohibitions, women were not allowed to do," V. L. Bullough and B. Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 61-2.

gained the initiative. Indeed, Aelred reports that the matter was given over to the nuns seemingly without question.⁸⁴ The nuns held the man down and forced the girl to castrate him. Then one of the nuns "snatched the parts of which he had been relieved and thrust them into the mouth of the sinful woman just as they were befouled with blood."⁸⁵ As a result of this action, the nuns believed that their communal revenge had been exacted.⁸⁶

Aelred's response to the incident was equivocal. He clearly did not believe the violence to be justified yet, at the same time, he acknowledged the nuns' virtuous intention: "I praise not the deed but the zeal, and I approve not the shedding of blood but so great a striving of the nuns against evil."⁸⁷ Such a statement bespeaks a curious attitude towards women's public roles. Aelred clearly allowed women the right to participate in the public realm and to determine how they were represented, but he nonetheless imposed limits. Aelred credited the nuns with the right to resist evil but only in an intangible fashion which was at the cost of their action.

Even so, Aelred did recognize a particular type of agency. The nuns could participate in the public realm provided their actions worked towards a communal rather than an individualistic end. Just as *De sanctimoniali de Wattun* had commenced with images of harmonious community life, so also it concludes. Aelred argues that the nuns were vindicating the reputation of the entire community and that they were protecting their collective reputations and virginities. Aelred employs the second person form of address ("You see how by mutilating him and by censuring her with shame and insult they avenged the injury of Christ"⁸⁸) in order to present the nuns as examples for his audience to follow.

Aelred proceeds to depict a return to the strengths of community life, reminiscent of the treatise's opening excursus. He describes the nun's return to prison and Christ's forgiveness of her sins. Significantly, forgiveness was precipitated by the actions of all the community working together: "They cry and pray that he might

⁸⁴ "Res defertur ad virgines" (793D).

⁸⁵ "Tunc una de astantibus, arreptis quibus ille fuerat relevatus, sicut erant foeda sanguine in ora peccatricis projecit" (793D-794A).

⁸⁶ "exacta ultione" (794B).

⁸⁷ "Non laudo factum sed zelum; nec probo sanguinis effusionem, sed tantam contra turpitudinem sanctarum virginum aemulationem extollo" (794A-B).

⁸⁸ "Vides quo modo istum mutilando, illam opprobriis et contumeliis insectando Christi ulciscuntur injuriam" (794A).

spare the place, that he be mindful of their virginal shame, to counteract the infamy, and to ward off danger."⁸⁹ This statement contains two important features. First, it ascribes virginal shame to the nuns, thus returning the community to a state of virginal piety which, as we know from *De institutione inclusarum*, was one of Aelred's major concerns. Secondly, the nuns' sense of community seems to have been defined in spatial terms. The nuns prayed not only that God be mindful of their persons but also that he be mindful of their monastic place (*loco*). This association between piety and place was in keeping with a solid tradition of conceiving of religious establishments in terms of location.⁹⁰ For the nuns of Watton, the orthodoxy of persons seems to have been dependent on the orthodox use of space.

The preceding section illustrates the inherent tensions in Aelred's preparedness to grant public voices to the Gilbertine nuns. Despite undeniable ambiguities in Aelred's argument, the nuns were clearly presented as legitimate agents. There were other areas, however, in which monastic conventions were less accommodating to women. For example, not even the nuns themselves believed that women should have been judges of miraculous events. Soon the young nun had a vision of the deceased Henry Murdac, the man responsible for her placement within the Gilbertine community. During this vision the nun confessed her sins, and Murdac arranged with two beautiful women to spirit the baby away. The other sisters suspected that the nun must have hidden the newborn baby. They were reluctant to believe in the miraculous disappearance or in the nun's unexplained freedom from her chains and one of her fetters. They believed only after the events had been endorsed by "the authority of the father [Gilbert]."⁹¹

And so it was only at the end of the incident that the sisters felt compelled to seek male advice. Although they were prepared to follow their own judgment on matters of internal monastic discipline and punishment, the identification of miracles was evidently the preserve of male religious. More specifically, while the nuns at Watton seem to have had no sole bearer of authority (rather, power was invested in the hands of an unspecified number of "wiser women"),

⁸⁹ "Plorant et orant, ut loco parceret, verecundiae virginali consuleret, infamiae occurreret, periculum propulsaret" (794B).

⁹⁰ M.-A. Dimier, "Le mot *locus* employé dans le sens de *monastère*," *Revue Mabillon* 58 (1972): 133-54.

⁹¹ "nihil sine patris auctoritate iudicare praesumunt" (795D).

when they appealed for male advice they invested authority in a single male—in Gilbert, their founder. But even Gilbert felt unqualified to preside over this issue of the miraculously disappearing child. And so he turned to Aelred, hence precipitating Aelred's knowledge of the affair which would result in his composition of *De sanctimoniali de Wattun*.

This article has investigated several occasions at Watton during which conceptions of legitimate authority were in conflict. It is suggested that we can understand these opposing views of authority if we invoke modern theories of the public and private realms. Following such an approach, these disagreements can be seen as evidence of tension between the expected public and private roles of Gilbertine men and women. Modifications to the original formulations of public and private suggest that the spheres were not separate and exclusive but, rather, permeable. And, certainly, the nuns of Watton were prepared to move backwards and forwards across these boundaries, asserting their legitimate places in both. We have been reminded, then, that often when public and private spheres appear the most sharply defined and separate they are in fact the most inextricably linked. For example, the ease with which the "wiser mothers" enacted public disciplinary authority within what modern scholars might consider the private space of the enclosed monastery is an excellent example of how medieval texts can further our appreciation of the ways in which the two spheres interrelated.

But the nature and degree of interaction and permeability did not go undisputed. As we have seen, the heart of Aelred's treatise contains an unresolved ambivalence. While Aelred praised the nuns' initial sense of community and charity, he nonetheless continued to question the wisdom of housing men and women together. This doubt was articulated in terms that were particularly detrimental to women. Women could be invoked as exemplary models for friendship but not as models for monastic authority. Aelred's complaint was that nuns might start to claim unconventional authorities for themselves, authorities that were facilitated by their physical movement. Further, the nuns' spatial movement was equated with the movement and indeed enlargement of their spheres of authority. This enlargement of authority was something that Aelred and other male religious did not always endorse. And the nuns' preparedness to defer to Gilbert's final authority on the identification of miracles suggests that they held no illusions about the limited extent to which their crossing of boundaries could be taken. While they were confident in

their ability to administer justice and discipline within the monastery, they recognized that not all forms of public authority could be theirs.

Aelred's treatise suggests that movement into the public realm was granted and withheld on the basis of gender. Modern scholars argue that the Gilbertines provided medieval women with legitimate and publicly recognized religious vocations. *De sanctimoniali de Watum* reminds us, however, that there were always disputes between male and female religious over what such vocations should entail. In particular, it reminds us that religious authority was a deeply gendered authority.

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