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## St Aldhelm's bees (*De uirginitate prosa* cc. IV–VI): some observations on a literary tradition

AUGUSTINE CASIDAY

Although the classic comparison of monks to bees owes its enduring success chiefly to the *Vita S. Antonii*, one of the most interesting developments of that simile is found in the prose treatise *De uirginitate* by Aldhelm of Malmesbury. In his writings, Aldhelm demonstrates familiarity with most of the conventional similes – monks are like bees in their industry, their intelligence, their chastity, and so on – but he also insists that monks are like bees in their ‘voluntary solidarity’ and obedience to leadership. This is a novel claim, one that I will argue Aldhelm makes by introducing a theme known from other Christian (and pagan) literature into his advice to nuns. The present article will describe the traditions incorporated by Aldhelm into his claim that monks, like bees, are obedient to a fault. In this way, this article will offer a broad view of the literary heritage to which Aldhelm’s treatise belongs and in which it should be interpreted. This will entail an assessment of which sources Aldhelm likely knew. While this assessment is indebted to the excellent notes by Rudolf Ehwald (as indeed all scholarship subsequent to Ehwald must be), it will not be bound by Ehwald’s conclusions.<sup>1</sup> In some instances, I will posit sources not mentioned by, and perhaps not detected by, Ehwald; in others, I will with trepidation suggest refinements to Ehwald’s work. It is hoped that on these grounds the article will be useful to students both of late antique monasticism and of Anglo-Saxon England. Since this is the goal of the article, it will be convenient to begin each section with an excerpt from Aldhelm and follow it with the relevant antecedents; each section will then be concluded with a return to Aldhelm; this will allow us to appreciate the distinctiveness of Aldhelm’s contribution. The article itself will be concluded with an overview of the comparisons and of the relationship between the earlier writings and Aldhelm’s.

### INDUSTRY

Aldhelm’s *De uirginitate* is an *opus geminatum*, a ‘twinned’ work, so called because it consists of a prose version and a poetic version. That the versions are not

<sup>1</sup> *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. R. Ehwald, MGH Auct. antiq. 15 (Berlin, 1919).

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identical is evident, for example, from the fact that the simile about bees that concerns us here is lacking from the poetic version. The prose treatise is in the form of a letter addressed to Hildelith, abbess of a monastery in Barking, Essex, and the sisters with her (an establishment mentioned by Bede).<sup>2</sup> Aldhelm first brings his readers' attention to the bees in the elaborate – indeed, overly elaborate – compliment that he pays to the dedicatees of the treatise. He congratulates them on their devotion to study of scripture and their discipline. First, he likens them to athletes, with an eye to I Cor. IX.24 ('all run indeed, but one wins the prize') and to Vergil (quoting *Aeneid* XI.875). It is not unusual for Aldhelm, whose knowledge of Vergil was considerable,<sup>3</sup> to pair secular and sacred literature in this way. Then, with an extremely tenuous transition, Aldhelm adds to his convoluted salutation the figure of the bee.<sup>4</sup> Or, to be more precise, he adds the simile of the bee's industry: '... the richest experience of life clearly declares that the industry of the highly industrious bee might be adapted to the aforementioned schemes of examples'.<sup>5</sup> He adduces three examples. First, bees pour out across the fields to 'gather honeyed moisture drop by drop in their mouths and, as if with the treacly must of the sweet wine made for royal feasts, they struggle eagerly to fill the greedy receptacles of their stomachs'. Second, they take from the blossoms of the willow and the broom 'their fertile booty' from which 'they build waxen castles'. Third, from the ivy and lime tree, they derive the substances needed to build the honeycomb. Aldhelm amplifies the last point with two learned quotations (the first, he points out rather pedantically, in catalectic verse; the second, in a brachycatalectic) from Caelius Sedulius's *Carmen paschale*, praef. 13 and 14.

With this much said, it is high time for Aldhelm to explain himself. The nuns, he writes, are similar because they, too, roam 'widely through the flowering fields of scripture'. He mentions in particular the prophets who foretold the coming of the Saviour; the Mosaic laws; the gospels – together with the commentaries of the catholic Fathers, who used the methods of *historia*, *allegoria*, *tropologia* and *anagoge*; and finally the historians and the grammarians. This five-fold curriculum is predicated on the gospels. The gospels provide the

<sup>2</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* IV.6–10 (ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), pp. 354–64); see also the introduction to Lapidge's translation of *De uirginitate prosa*, in M. Lapidge and M. Herren, *Aldhelm: the Prose Works* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 51–8. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of *De uirginitate* will be taken from this translation (*ibid.* pp. 59–132). All other translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. T. J. Brown, 'An Historical Introduction to the Use of Classical Latin Authors in the British Isles from the Fifth to the Eleventh Centuries', *SettSpol* 23 (1975), 237–93, esp. 274–5.

<sup>4</sup> But for his reference to Vergil, Aldhelm's transition compares very closely to the one made by Gregory Nazianzen, *Oratio XV: In Macchabeorum laudem* (PG 35, col. 933).

<sup>5</sup> This quotation, and the others in the same paragraph, is from Aldhelm, *De uirginitate prosa*, c. iv (ed. Ehwald, pp. 231–2).

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norms for selecting and interpreting what is relevant in the prophets and the Law, and the commentaries (theological, historical and grammatical) provide the techniques needed for making sense of the gospels. The last two items, the historians and the grammarians, are included because (at least from the time of Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*) competence in these subjects had been expected of would-be biblical scholars.<sup>6</sup>

That bees are hardworking animals is platitudinous. In a declamation by ps.-Quintilian, we are told that the three chief natural characteristics of bees are thriftiness, loyalty and industry.<sup>7</sup> Roughly three centuries later, Ambrose draws the attention of nuns to bees, 'for worthy is that virginity which can be compared to bees – so industrious, so modest, so temperate'.<sup>8</sup> And, in the fifth century, Salvian upbraids his fellow Christians by appealing to the natural industry of the bees and contrasting this to the habitual shiftlessness of his peers.<sup>9</sup> The simile about industry recurs in the form of exhortations to one's reader to produce a meaningful compound out of what has been gleaned from experience (not least the experience of reading). Thus, Seneca exhorts Lucilius to separate out 'whatever we have collected from diverse readings' and 'to mix these juices together into a single delicacy' – just as bees do.<sup>10</sup> In arguably the most influential monastic *uita*, the *Life of St Antony*, Antony is portrayed as seeking out ever-more-advanced disciplines 'like a clever bee'.<sup>11</sup> In a treatise ascribed to Ephrem the Syrian which circulated in Greek, the author was similarly moved by consideration of the bee, hard at work, and invoked her example to spur on the monk to diligence: 'Have a care for yourself, lest you should lapse into carelessness: for the tyranny of carelessness is the source of destruction. Recall the bee and behold her wondrous mystery, how from the flowers scattered throughout the earth she accomplishes her work. Consider, then, her thriftiness . . .'<sup>12</sup> The impact of this conceit is evident in the considerably later Greek anthology of monastic lore, the *Pratum spirituale*, the very title of which depends upon that simile.<sup>13</sup> But it influenced Latin Christian

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* II.xxviii.42.105 (for history), III.xxix.40.87–8 (for grammar) (ed. R. Green, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford, 1995), pp. 104 and 170).

<sup>7</sup> Ps.-Quintilian, *Declamationes XIX maiores* XIII.iii, lines 16–17: 'Nam quid apibus inuenit natura praestantius? Parcae, fideles, laboriosae' (ed. L. Håkanson (Stuttgart, 1982), p. 267).

<sup>8</sup> Ambrose, *De uirginibus* I.viii.40 (ed. F. Gori, Biblioteca Ambrosiana 14.1 (Rome, 1989), p. 140).

<sup>9</sup> Salvian, *De gubernatione Dei* IV.ix.43 (ed. G. Lagarrigue, SChr 220 (Paris, 1975), p. 268).

<sup>10</sup> Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* LXXXIV.v: 'quaecumque ex diuersa lectione congressimus . . . in unum saporem uaria illa libamenta confundere' (ed. O. Hense (Leipzig, 1938), p. 332).

<sup>11</sup> Athanasius, *Vita S. Antonii* III.ii (ed. G. J. M. Bartelink, SChr 400 (Paris, 1994), p. 136).

<sup>12</sup> Ephrem graecus, *Sermo asceticus* ('Οσίου Ἐφραίμου τοῦ Σύρου ἔργα, ed. K. G. Phrantzoles (Thessalonica, 1988) I, 122–84, at 152). How much of the Greek corpus – if indeed any of it at all – should be attributed to Ephrem himself has not yet been established; but, for the sake of convenience, in what follows I will simply refer to this material by Ephrem's name.

<sup>13</sup> John Moschus, *Pratum spirituale*, prologue (PG 87, col. 2852).

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writers no less. This is particularly evident from the theme of ‘spiritual honey’ that we often meet and to which we shall soon turn.

Before turning to that topic, we would do well to note that Aldhelm has modified the traditional monastic simile that bees and monks are industrious, by introducing the topic of scriptural exposition. When Aldhelm mentions this topic, he does so by invoking terms and techniques that indicate his familiarity with traditional methods of exegesis. What makes this stand out is that the authors we have considered so far typically regarded mundane physical activities (for example, manual labour or pilgrimage) as evidence for monastic industry. By contrast, Aldhelm emphasizes reading and interpreting scripture and holy tradition as a form of industry; this hearkens back to Seneca’s advice to Lucilius when he encouraged him to cull worthwhile bits from his reading. It is certainly appropriate that Aldhelm should begin his florilegium on virginity by expressing his approval for hard work in the form of collecting, presenting and thereby interpreting monastic lore for the benefit of others. Even if he cannot echo John Moschus’s claim to have personally visited the people about whom he writes and witnessed the fruits of their extraordinary commitment to God, Aldhelm can nevertheless take some satisfaction in having culled choice passages about their lives to edify the nuns of Barking.<sup>14</sup> The distinctiveness of Aldhelm’s use of the industrious bee is also evident when we consider a subset of this simile – the ‘spiritual honey’ that the bees’ industry produces.

*‘Spiritual honey’*

Several late antique authors wrote about ‘spiritual honey’, though Aldhelm differs from all of them because he takes the bee to represent the religious who are extracting spiritual sense from scripture. By contrast, the bees in question are variously treated in the antecedent literature. In one instance, they are explicitly identified as bishops, distilling the sense of scripture for the benefit of the laity; in two others, it appears that the bees should be understood as the laity themselves; and in other cases, though it is clear that the bees stand for monks, it is not at all clear whether the monks are distilling scripture. Since this last type can be disposed of quickly, we will consider it first. It is found in Fortunatus’s *Carmen* IV.xi, his ‘Epitaph for Victorian’, and in the *Paraenesis ad ascetas* in the Greek corpus of Ephrem’s writings. In the latter, we read, ‘A monk should speak chiefly in sweet phrases: for honey has no bitterness. Let not the chief worker of righteousness be careless: for the bee works ceaselessly.’<sup>15</sup> As for Fortunatus’s epitaph, Victorian was the abbot of the monastery of St Martin in Asan, Spain and died in 558. With regard to the success of Victorian’s abbacy, Fortunatus says that he ‘established many examples for the

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Aldhelm, *De uirginitate prosa*, c. xix (ed. Ehwald, p. 249).

<sup>15</sup> Ephrem graecus, *Paraenesis ad ascetas* (ed. K. G. Phrantzoles, p. 350).

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monks; the bee made honey from eternal flowers'.<sup>16</sup> Fortunatus regrettably does not tell us more about this honey 'made from eternal flowers', leaving us to wonder from which flowers Victorian made it. Perhaps he was like Gregory of Nyssa, who writes that he extracted spiritual honey from the writings of Ephrem the Syrian;<sup>17</sup> but this is conjecture.

By contrast, the other cases are explicit: the spiritual honey is produced from scripture. The longest of them is from Maximus of Turin, even though it is almost certainly fragmentary.<sup>18</sup> What we have is basically an exordium but it is particularly interesting because in it Maximus reflects on how bishops are like bees:

I ought, brethren, to preach something richer after these several days, and refresh you with a sweet sermon now that I have returned from such a swarm of bishops. I said 'swarm of bishops' rightly, since like the bee they make sweet honey from the blossoms of Divine scriptures, and whatever pertains to the medicine of souls they compound by the skill of their mouth. Bishops are justly compared to bees since like the bee they display chastity of the body, they offer the food of heavenly life and they exercise the sting of the law. For they are pure in order to sanctify, sweet in order to refresh and severe in order to punish. They should obviously be compared to bees who are kept, as it were, in a sort of beehive by the grace of Mother Church, in which they produce many swarms of Christians from the one swarm of the Saviour and by their most sweet preaching make little cells of various merits.<sup>19</sup>

By contrast, the other sources attest that this form of bee-like industry is not the exclusive domain of bishops. About a century and a half earlier, Ambrose had written: 'The bee is fed by the dew, knows no intercourse, and compounds honey. The virgin's dew is likewise divine discourse, since the words of God fall like the dew. [. . .] The virgin's offspring is the fruit of her lips, which lacks any bitterness and is rich with sweetness.'<sup>20</sup> Although Ambrose adds the exceptional remark that the bees feed on dew, rather than blossoms,<sup>21</sup> he nevertheless affirms that they extract sweet spiritual honey from the words of God. In

<sup>16</sup> Fortunatus, 'Epitaphium Victoriani abbatis de monasterio Asane' (ed. M. Reydellet (Paris, 1994), I, 143–4). The biographical details for Victorian given above are taken from Reydellet's notes *ad loc.* <sup>17</sup> Gregory Nyssen, *In sanctum Ephraim* (PG 46, col. 825).

<sup>18</sup> This is almost certainly a fragment because it does not relate Maximus doing precisely what he has announced he would do: preach a sweet sermon, drawn from scripture.

<sup>19</sup> Maximus of Turin, *Collectio sermonum antiqua* LXXXIX (ed. A. Mutzenbecher, CCSL 23 (Turnhout, 1962), p. 364).

<sup>20</sup> Ambrose, *De uirginibus* I.viii.40 (ed. F. Gori, p. 140); cf. his *Expositio psalmi cxviii*, XIII.xxiii (ed. M. Petschenig, CSEL 62 (Vienna, 1913), p. 294).

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that at *De uirginibus* I.viii.41 and 43, Ambrose does say that the bee feeds on *flos* rather than on *ros*. In his edition of the text, E. Cazzaniga emended *flos* to *ros* at I.viii.41, but this is a questionable emendation because *flos* recurs at I.viii.43. Ambrose's description at I.viii.40 depends on *ros* and at I.viii.41–3 it depends on *flos*, so it would appear that he simply preferred a stylish transition to slavish consistency.

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his warning to monks against the dangers of nodding off during the reading of scripture or during the sermon, Ephrem appeals to a very similar image: ‘Pluck from them remedies for the soul, just like a wise bee collecting honey from the flowers.’<sup>22</sup> Here, the monk is intended to extract medicine for the soul from the readings he hears in church.

Likewise, in one of his sermons Caesarius says to his audience that, ‘like most prudent bees, [you] faithfully hasten to Christ’s beehive so that you can partake of the sweetness of spiritual honey from the holy readings’.<sup>23</sup> While it could be argued that Caesarius is calling the listeners to receive the honey he has derived from scripture, this seems implausible: he has, after all, just likened them to the bees and honey is made by bees. In other words, Caesarius is not suggesting that in his capacity as bishop he has extracted spiritual honey for the benefit of the faithful; instead, he is calling them to make spiritual honey from the holy readings that are provided for them. In a comparable passage, Caesarius upbraids all Christians, lay, clerical and monastic, for failing to produce spiritual honey.<sup>24</sup> Because Ambrose and Ephrem had made monastic Christians (and not necessarily only those in orders) out to be the bees who derive honey from spiritual reading, Aldhelm’s call for the nuns of Barking to emulate bees in just this way is not unprecedented. Even as he praises their intelligence and diligence for having ‘subtly investigated bit by bit and stage by stage’ such abstruse questions as the scriptural distinction of the ‘inner man’ and ‘outer man’,<sup>25</sup> he encourages them to continue in this good work.

WISDOM

The praise Aldhelm gave to his nuns’ intellectual vigour points up another salient aspect of the simile from bees: bees, and monks, are intelligent. We have already encountered this characteristic of the bees when we read, in the excerpt from Caesarius’s sermons, his description of bees as *prudentissimae*. That bees are ‘most prudent’ is evident from the skill they display in producing honey. Skill is one of the signal attributes of the prudent person. But *prudens* also designates intelligence. Although Aldhelm does not make a sharp or clear distinction between *prudentia* as intelligence and *prudentia* as skill, his description of how the nuns read scripture nevertheless makes it quite obvious that he has in

<sup>22</sup> Ephrem graecus, *De recta uiuendi ratione* 36 (ed. K. G. Phrantzoles).

<sup>23</sup> Caesarius, *Sermo* CCVII.ii (ed. D. Morin, CCSL 104 (Turnhout, 1953), pp. 829–30): ‘Magis enim de uestra deuotione confidens credo uos uelud apes prudentissimas ad aluearium Christi fideliter festinare, ut dulcedinem spiritalis mellis ex diuinis lectionibus possitis accipere, et cum propheta dicere: quam dulcia faucibus meis eloquia tua, Domine, super mel et fauum ori meo.’

<sup>24</sup> Caesarius, *Sermo* CLVI.v (ed. Morin, p. 638).

<sup>25</sup> Aldhelm, *De uirginitate prosa*, c. iii (ed. Ehwald, p. 231).

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mind both senses of the word. The interpretative gymnastics they are capable of undertaking attest to intellectual subtlety, and also intellectual skill.<sup>26</sup> He makes several statements about the interpretative process, all of which stress the high level of intellectual activity characteristic of interpretation, within his extended analogy of bees flying through a glade. Let us return to the passage just examined and note the several references to intelligence and understanding that it features. In the first instance, it is the nuns' 'remarkable mental disposition' that Aldhelm likens to bees. This disposition leads them to plumb 'the divine oracles of the ancient prophets foretelling long in advance the advent of the Saviour with certain affirmations' and to engage in the four-fold interpretation of scripture under the headings of literal, allegorical, topological and anagogic sense. Finally, he claims that the nuns have been motivated in their precocity to consult historians and grammarians so as to facilitate their understanding of scripture. Such extensive measures attest to a considerable theoretical foundation no less than to an impressive practical aptitude.<sup>27</sup>

Once more, in the matter of bees' intelligence, Aldhelm is treading well-worn ground. One might even call it battle-scarred ground, for the question of whether or not bees could be meaningfully considered intelligent was widely debated. Vergil initiated the discussion by referring to the 'divine intelligence' of bees.<sup>28</sup> This was well within his prerogatives as a poet; but it is somewhat surprising to find that the naturalist Hyginus entertained similar beliefs.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the rather more pragmatic Columella considered it a topic not worthy of serious discussion: with an all but audible scoff, Columella notes that farmers have more important things to do than propagate fairy tales and pore over literature.<sup>30</sup> But if the topic did not merit the attention of practical agronomists, it certainly detained the attention of philosophers. For instance, in rebutting Celsus, Origen stipulates that bees are not reasoning creatures and therefore they cannot be praised for their actions (or, more to the point, the significance of humans' rational actions cannot be minimized by comparing

<sup>26</sup> See Aldhelm, *De uirginitate prosa*, c. iii: '... ita interioris qualitatem, qui caelesti afflatus spiraculo iuxta Geneseos relatum creditur, a uestra prudentia membratim et particulatim subtiliter inuestigatam reor' (ed. Ehwald, p. 231). In this passage, he also praises the nuns' discipline and industry – which point to the skill involved in *prudentia* – and their sagacity and subtlety – which point to the intelligence involved in *prudentia*. Note that he does not mention *uirgines sapientes* until *De uirginitate prosa*, c. xlviii (*ibid.* p. 302).

<sup>27</sup> Aldhelm, *De uirginitate prosa*, c. iv: 'uestrum ... memoriale mentis ingenium'; 'diuina priscorum prophetarum oracula certis adstipulationibus iam dudum saluatoris aduentum uaticinantia enixius inuestigando'; etc. (*ibid.* p. 232).

<sup>28</sup> Vergil, *Georgics* IV.219–21 (ed. O. Ribbeck (Leipzig, 1894), p. 186).

<sup>29</sup> Hyginus *ap.* Columella, *Res rustica* IX.ii.2–3 (ed. V. Lundström, A. Josephson and S. Hedberg (Leipzig, 1897–1968), p. 640).

<sup>30</sup> Columella, *Res rustica* IX.ii.5 (ed. Lundström *et al.*, p. 640)

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them to what bees do).<sup>31</sup> According to Origen, bees act according to their providential design – a view also found in a homily by one of Basil’s disciples and indeed in one of Aldhelm’s letters.<sup>32</sup> On a comparable note, Seneca assigns the skills exhibited by bees and particularly their co-operation to a natural desire for self-preservation.<sup>33</sup>

Despite this dismissive treatment by philosophers and naturalists, the image of the ‘wise bee’ persists in the literature. The great poet and theologian, Gregory Nazianzen, concluded one of his homilies with a florid, quasi-architectural description of bees’ cells; then he added, ‘So it befits us, too – Christ’s apiary – and let us take this example of wisdom and industry.’<sup>34</sup> Wisdom is evident in the well-ordered proportions of the cell, but also in the forethought demonstrated by bees who store up honey for the future. (In Gregory’s hands, this becomes an occasion to exhort his audience to hospitality: like bees, good Christians ought to make provisions for entertaining guests!) Furthermore, Evagrius of Antioch’s Latin translation of the *Life of St Antony* tells us that the great hermit was ‘like a wise bee’ when he went from ascetic to ascetic, learning and perfecting his ascetic skills.<sup>35</sup> Even if for different reasons, Ambrose likewise thought virgins should emulate ‘that wise bee’.<sup>36</sup>

These cases have in common an extremely practical sensibility. In all of them, the primary evidence for wisdom and intelligence is moral know-how. As we have seen, Aldhelm emphasizes both the practical skill of the nuns and their intellectual acuity – both at the same time by referring to the example of a swarm of bees seeking out the right flowers and compounding honey from them. But, to reiterate a theme, Aldhelm’s decision to correlate the nuns’ exegetical acumen with the symbol of the bee is a new departure. The well-established (if, in some quarters, controversial) precedent for appealing to the wisdom and intelligence of the bees notwithstanding, Aldhelm reworks the tradition in a strikingly original way by appealing to the figure of speech in order to connote a very sophisticated level of intellectual culture.

<sup>31</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* IV.lxxxi (ed. M. Borret, SChr 136 (Paris, 1968), II, 384–8).

<sup>32</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* IV.lxxxi (ed. Borret II, 388); ps.-Basil, *Sermo in illud, Ne dederis somnum oculis tuis et c.* (PG 31, cols. 1502–4); Aldhelm, *Epistulae* XII, ‘Ad Wilfridi abbates’ (ed. Ehwald, p. 501). <sup>33</sup> Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* CXXI.xxii (ed. Hense, p. 593).

<sup>34</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *In nouam dominicam* (PG 36, col. 620); cf. Basil, *Homiliae in hexaemeron* VIII.iv.47–55 (ed. S. Giet, SChr 26, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1968), pp. 450–2).

<sup>35</sup> Evagrius of Antioch, *Vita Antonii latine* III.iv.18: ‘ut sapiens illa apis’ (ed. G. Bartelink, *Vite dei Santi* 1, 6th ed. (Milan, 1998), p. 12).

<sup>36</sup> Ambrose, *De uirginitate* XVII.cvii (ed. Gori, p. 84). Ambrose encourages his readers to emulate the dynamic stability of bees who are not blown off course ‘per inania . . . nubila’ (a phrase which he owes to Vergil, *Georgics* IV.191 (ed. Ribbeck, p. 184)); his readers similarly ought not be ‘in tantis mundi fluctibus iactantiae’.



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CHASTITY

By comparing the nuns to bees, Aldhelm has offered an elaborate compliment to their industry, practicality and intelligence. As we have seen, these associations are time-honoured and when he thus compliments the nuns, Aldhelm appeals to a literary tradition that he may well have expected the nuns to appreciate. However, it comes as a surprise that Aldhelm makes little of a far more obvious aspect of the metaphor – the chastity of bees. Because the ancients never observed sexual reproduction among bees, many assumed that bees must reproduce asexually. As Pliny notes, ‘How they produce offspring was a major and subtle question among the learned – for bees’ intercourse has never been seen. Previously, most believed they were produced from the mouth by blending reed and olive flowers; others, from the intercourse of that bee in the swarm who is called the king . . .’<sup>37</sup> The belief that bees reproduce asexually had been advanced by no less an authority than Vergil.<sup>38</sup> This was a thoroughly useful device for Christian polemicists, since it provided a ready example of virgin birth.<sup>39</sup> Sometimes, though, Christians simply mention the asexual reproduction of bees in passing, without imputing any obvious significance to it. In such a case, one suspects that the reason this claim is inserted into a discussion where it is completely irrelevant, is simply so the author can demonstrate a knowledge of Vergil.<sup>40</sup>

By contrast, St Ambrose integrated this belief into his presentation of consecrated virginity.<sup>41</sup> In a passage we have already met twice from his treatise *De uirginibus*, Ambrose praises the virtues of the anthropomorphic bee and encourages the Christian virgin to attain these virtues: ‘How I wish, O daughter, that you would imitate this little bee, whose food is the flower, whose offshoot is collected and composed by its mouth. Imitate this bee, O daughter!’<sup>42</sup> In this account, the figure of the bee attains almost mythic status, for Ambrose intricately relates every convention we have encountered so far and incorporates them under the claim that bees are virginal creatures.

Aldhelm’s rationale and approach appears to be more straightforwardly Pauline: those who are chaste have fewer cares for the world; in connection with the bees at least, Aldhelm shows little or no interest in chastity as such.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Pliny, *Historia naturalis* XI.xvi.46 (ed. L. Ian and C. Mayhoff (Leipzig, 1892–1909), p. 297).

<sup>38</sup> Vergil, *Georgics* IV.197 (ed. Ribbeck, p. 184).

<sup>39</sup> Thus, John Cassian, *De incarnatione Domini* VII.v.4 (ed. M. Petschenig, CSEL 17 (Vienna, 1888), p. 360); Augustine, *De bono conjugali* II.ii (ed. P. Walsh, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford, 2001), pp. 2–4).

<sup>40</sup> E.g., Salvian, *De gubernatione Dei* IV.ix.43 (ed. Lagarrigue, p. 268).

<sup>41</sup> See P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988): pp. 341–66. <sup>42</sup> Ambrose, *De uirginibus* I.viii.41 (ed. Gori, p. 140).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. I Cor. VII.29–38.

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### *Augustine Casiday*

For the nuns at Barking, being disentangled from the cares of the world means that they have more time to pursue Christian learning. And we know from Jerome and Augustine that there is a long and venerable tradition of retirement from the cares of the world for the sake of Christian learning.<sup>44</sup> In other words, Aldhelm shows surprisingly little interest in praising the nuns' chastity as such: he shows more interest in particular virgins than in abstract virginity. Aldhelm's relative lack of interest in virginity as such is perhaps attributable to the status of his addressees as married women who had retired into chastity – 'born-again virgins', so to speak.<sup>45</sup> Aldhelm's circumspection in praising virginity and his sensitivity in praising chastity are evidently related to their status.<sup>46</sup> There is no compelling reason to suppose that the aforementioned passages from Christian literature had any particular impact upon Aldhelm's thought; it is more economic to suppose that he got his belief in the asexual reproduction of bees immediately from Vergil, whose works he knew.

### *The virginal church*

But an interesting aside that Aldhelm makes when writing about bees' chastity deserves some further consideration. He writes, 'The bee, I say, by virtue of the special attribute of its peculiar chastity, is by the undoubted authority of the scriptures agreed to signify a type of virginity and the likeness of the church . . .'<sup>47</sup> It is curious, given how slight is Aldhelm's interest in the bee-like chastity of nuns, that he should incorporate this not particularly intuitive comparison of the 'chaste bee' to the church. One might suppose that the conjunction of 'virginal bees' and 'virginal church' – the latter a very widely attested

<sup>44</sup> E.g. Augustine, *Confessionum libri tredecim* VI.xii.21 and VI.xiv.24 (ed. L. Verheijen, CCSL 27 (Turnhout, 1981), pp. 87 and 89–90), regarding his plan and Alypius's to retire with friends into a community of learned men; Jerome, *Epistula* CVIII.xxvi (ed. J. Labourt (Paris, 1955) V, 194–6), regarding Paula's and Eustochium's asceticism and knowledge of Hebrew.

<sup>45</sup> See the analysis of Lapidge in Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: the Prose Works*, pp. 51–2.

<sup>46</sup> See Aldhelm, *De uirginitate prosa*, cc. ix–xi (ed. Ehwald, pp. 236–40). It would not be amiss in this context to note that the status of the nuns at Barking is not a uniquely Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. Examples of marriages set aside for the pursuit of consecrated 'virginity' are known in eastern ascetic literature (e.g. *Apophthegmata Carion* 2 (PG 65, cols. 249–51); Cassian, *Conlationes* XXI.ix *passim* (ed. Petschenig, pp. 581–4)). Ambiguous parallels are available in the west: e.g. the celebrated chaste marriages of Paulinus and Therasia (note his description of the common life that she and he share with eight others in Nola, and also his praise of a chaste marriage in the *epithalamium* for Julian of Aeclauum: *Carm.* XXI.272–93 and XXV (ed. W. Hartel, CSEL 30 (Vienna, 1894), pp. 167 and 238–45) and of Melania and Pinianus (see Anon., *Vita s. Melaniae* I–VI (ed. D. Gorce, SChr 90 (Paris, 1962), pp. 130–8); and Palladius, *Historia lausiaca* LXI.i–iii (ed. G. Bartelink, *Vite dei Santi* 2, 4th ed. (Milan, 1990), pp. 264–6)).

<sup>47</sup> Aldhelm, *De uirginitate prosa* c. v (ed. Ehwald, p. 233).