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Gwenfrewy, or Winifride in the anglicised versions of her legend, is the most well-known and loved female saint in Wales. Following her death sometime in 650, over the next 500 years Gwenfrewy acquired a cult-like following within her native Wales that subsequently spread throughout the rest of Britain and continental Europe.¹ This level of fame led to multiple Lives in different languages, ‘a substantial hagiographical dossier’,² the most famous of which was written by Robert Pennant, prior of Shrewsbury: the *Vita Sancte Wenefrede* (Laud Mis. 114 version),³ published sometime between 1137-1142.⁴ Cartwright explains that Gwenfrewy is one of the only Welsh female saints that is fortunate enough to have ‘official prose Lives’; many others were lost over the centuries.⁵ Robert’s Life was written in Latin and was critical for the popularity of Gwenfrewy’s legend: according to Callander, his Life was used to translate Gwenfrewy’s story into Middle Welsh and Middle English.⁶ Robert makes great use of different hagiographical motifs, mostly specific to female saints at that time, but also utilises Welsh themes to great success. Robert also introduces political undertones and

¹ James Ryan Gregory, ‘*The Life of St. Winifred: The Vita S. Wenefrede from BL Lansdowne MS 436*’, *Medieval Feminist Forum*, vol. 4 (2016), p.1

² Jane Cartwright (2022), ‘*The Welsh versions of the life of Gwenfrewy*’, *Seintiau* (2022) <<https://repository.uwtsd.ac.uk/id/eprint/2038/1/Cartwright%2C%20Jane%20%282022%29%20The%20Welsh%20versions%20of%20the%20life%20of%20Gwenfrewy.pdf>>, p.237 [accessed 14th April 2024].

³ David Callander (2023), ‘*Vita Sancte Wenefrede (Robert of Shrewsbury; Laud³)*’, *Seintiau* (2023) < <https://saints.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Wenefreda-Laud.pdf>> [accessed 8th March 2024].

⁴ Cartwright, *Welsh versions*, p.239

⁵ Jane Cartwright (2002), ‘*Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales*’, *Medium Ævum*, vol. 71, no. 1, p.4

⁶ Callander, p.3

ties these in with said motifs. In combination, the *Vita Sancte Wenefrede* presents classic female hagiographical themes and ideas in a way that was, in a literary sense, thrilling and emotionally charged for the reader. These themes will be analysed individually, and then again in areas where they intertwine.

The primary theme is perhaps the commonest in female hagiography: the virgin martyr.⁷ Robert presents Gwenfrewy as a beautiful girl totally devout in her faith to God. Her intention was to become a nun, something she had expressed to her religious mentor and uncle, Beuno. Her parents left Gwenfrewy at home alone when visiting the nearby church, and Gwenfrewy was subsequently happened upon by Prince Caradog. The Prince outwardly expressed his sexual desire for Gwenfrewy, who refused his advances as politely as she could before fleeing towards the church, determined to protect her virginity and consecrate it. Prince Caradog became enraged, effectively telling Gwenfrewy that if he could not have her then nobody could and cut off her head on the threshold of the church. Gwenfrewy thus became the virgin martyr. Robert would not have written his Life without including this theme: a 'prerequisite' in female hagiography, the virgin martyr motif is effectively critical in introducing any female saint to her eventual holiness.⁸ It must be noted that Robert also had to tailor his *vita* for the new, Norman audience. According to Wogan-Browne, aside from Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalene, all twelfth century lives of female saints detail them as 'consecrated virgins, virgin spouses, or virgin martyrs', the most favoured of which was certainly the virgin martyr.⁹ Robert had

⁷ Katherine DeCoste (2020), 'The Heavenly Light: Representing Female Virginity in Medieval Celtic Hagiography', *Constellations*, vol. 11, no. 2, (p.2)

⁸ Jane Cartwright (2007), 'The Cult of St Non: Rape, Sanctity and Motherhood in Welsh and Breton Hagiography', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by J. Wyn Evans, Jonathan M. Wooding (Martlesham: Boydell Press, 2007), pp 182-206 (p. 182)

⁹ Jocelyn Wogan-Brown, 'Saints' Lives and the Female Reader', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 314-322 (p. 314-315)

to satisfy numerous audiences with this *vita*, though thankfully each one practically demanded the virgin martyr as the fundamental theme throughout the *vita*. It was essential that Robert satisfied Norman sensibilities on the subject, ensuring the acceptance of his *vita* whilst also furthering the ambitions of the newly established Shrewsbury Abbey.¹⁰ It was quite common for hagiographical prose to be used to expand upon a church's authority and power,¹¹ and Robert's *vita* is no different. Shrewsbury Abbey lacked power and prestige, and the possession of saintly relics would boost its authority as well as wealth via footfall from pilgrims on their way to Holywell and Gwytherin. Furthermore, Robert used Gwenfrewy and her various miracles to defend his quest for her relics. Robert openly revealed his religious intentions for journeying to Gwytherin in search of Gwenfrewy's bones, his more political purpose was hidden within the *vita*.¹²

Robert presents the virgin martyr motif in a highly emotional way, making use of religious and oftentimes frilly language,¹³ clearly intending to sow seeds of empathy within the reader. Delehaye's work would suggest that Robert's intentions in writing his *vita* was to educate and inspire Christian devotion by creating the saint's figure to be a model for virtue, as well as an object for religious devotion.¹⁴ It could be argued that, for the female reader, Robert intended to form a sort of admiring kinship between herself and Gwenfrewy's plight, that altogether-too-familiar encounter with uncontrollable male sexuality; for the male reader, Robert may have hoped to conjure a certain level of respect in regard to Gwenfrewy's determination to protect her virginity, her most precious and

¹⁰ Gregory, *The Life of St. Winefred*, p.11

¹¹ Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, 550 – 1307*, (London: Routledge, 1982), (p. 296)

¹² Henken, *Welsh saints*, p. 5

¹³ Fiona Winward (1999), "The Lives of St. Wenefred (*BHL* 8847-8851).", *Analecta Bollandiana* 117, pp 89-132 (p.129)

¹⁴ Hippolyte Delehaye, *The legends of the saints (Les legends hagiographiques)*, trans. D. Attwater (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1905; trans. London: G. Chapman, 1962), p. 3

prized possession. But there is also the argument that, since the Lives of female saints were largely produced by monks (Robert being one of these holy men), Gwenfrewy's legend was somewhat adapted to suit the tastes of the male reader. When considering the large emphasis placed on Gwenfrewy's teachings at Gwytherin, prayers and so on, Robert presents Gwenfrewy as someone that any reader could identify with.¹⁵ In fact, it has been suggested by Bynum that men may well have been more likely to identify with the chaste, praying virgin than women during that period; self-deprecation by male writers like Robert would have allowed him to profess his humility to God, and no person could do that better than a medieval woman.¹⁶ Robert's intention, irrespective of the reader's biological sex or gender, is to form a strong connection between the reader and Gwenfrewy, specifically in regard to her martyrdom as a virgin. Robert says that while Gwenfrewy's parents had not yet decided upon which earthly man she would eventually marry, that was certainly their intention for their daughter.¹⁷ Dorothy Africa explains that in Irish hagiography, it is the norm for women to effectively 'escape' arranged marriages,¹⁸ and this is certainly the case in Gwenfrewy's story. While a marriage has not yet been arranged, that is her parents' intended purpose and so Gwenfrewy seeks to preserve her virginity for a holy purpose; an escape from marriage as a 'social norm'.¹⁹ Gwenfrewy

¹⁵ Karen A. Winstead, "Martyrdom, Marriage, and Religious Communities, 1100-1250.", *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in late Medieval England*, Cornell University Press, 1997, pp. 19-63 (p. 34)

¹⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, "'...and Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages", *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone, 1992), pp.151-179 (p. 165)

¹⁷ Callander, p. 59-60

¹⁸ Dorothy Africa, Life of the Holy Virgin Samthann, *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Head (London: Garland Publishing, 2000), p.107

¹⁹ DeCoste, p.10

literally runs from Caradog, desperate to reach the safety of the church along with her Uncle Beuno and her parents; totally determined to avoid any interaction that would eventually lead to marriage.

The creation of a female saint and virginity are so heavily intertwined that sexual purity and female sanctity are rarely seen without the other.²⁰ Hagiographers like Robert would seemingly go to any lengths to protect and preserve the female's virginity. But Robert also uses the virgin martyr motif to champion two ideas within itself: first, that Gwenfrewy, as the virgin martyr, fights as celibacy's champion by rejecting any bodily sins, as well as an earthly marriage. By living and dying with her virginity intact, and following a perfectly chaste life, Gwenfrewy joins a multitude of other female saints in championing celibacy.²¹ The second idea is that the virgin martyr is also Christ's bride. As such, Robert's presentation of Gwenfrewy sets the finest example for the purest of earthly marriages amongst the readers of the *vita*.²² Concurrently, the virgin martyr motif also possesses feminist traits: the complete and utter rejection of traditional, and heavily gendered, medieval social norms; the bold refusal of the earthly marriage, and subsequent conjugal expectation; the dismissal of any male authority, save for male mentors.²³

Robert was able to utilise the virgin martyr motif for analytical purposes himself: medieval issues of theology are explored when Gwenfrewy's body is subjected to decapitation, and yet her body is miraculously brought back together by Beuno, which carries with it both the notion of resurrection and elements of the Eucharist.²⁴ By bringing Gwenfrewy back to life, Gwenfrewy gets a second

²⁰ Cartwright, *St. Non*, (p. 182)

²¹ Gregory, p. 6-7

²² Gregory, p. 6-7

²³ Gregory, p.6-7

²⁴ Gregory, p.6-7

chance to consecrate her virginity and serve as abbess at Gwytherin, and so Gwenfrewy's particular virgin martyr motif is also tied together with that of a 'foundress saint'.²⁵ As Gregory explains, Robert utilised Gwenfrewy's loyal cult following by introducing her second life as abbess of Gwytherin, thereby giving Gwenfrewy an opportunity to display those foundress traits of 'sanctity, generosity, and governance'.²⁶ Robert therefore expands the theme by connecting it with Gwenfrewy's eventual consecration, another motif which will be discussed later on in this paper.

Robert also uses the Welsh approach to the virgin martyr motif, which differs from its European counterparts; connected in nature but culturally separate. Henken explains that Welsh hagiography paints female Welsh saints as purely domestic in nature, with infinitely less development than their male counterparts,²⁷ and only become holy once faced with uncontrollable male sexual urges.²⁸ Furthermore, the physical beauty of Welsh female saints is often mentioned in their Lives, which is not the case for other Celtic saints;²⁹ as Cartwright posits, Welsh female saints are usually born into noble families but seek a simple, religious life, but their beauty rather gets in the way of this since they almost always find themselves as the unwanted subjects of unwarranted male sexuality.³⁰ It is not until they are faced with a man's sexuality that the lives of Welsh female saints take on meaning

²⁵ Gregory, p.7

²⁶ Gregory, p.7

²⁷ Elissa R. Henken, *'The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives'* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), p. 6-9

²⁸ Elissa R. Henken, 'The Saint as Folk Hero: Biographical Patterning in Welsh Hagiography', *Celtic Folklore and Christianity: Studies in Memory of William W. Heist*, ed. by Patrick K. Ford (Santa Barbara, California: McNally and Loftin, 1983), pp. 58-74 (p. 59)

²⁹ Sarah Fish, 'The Female Saints of Cornwall', unpublished Masters dissertation (University of Wales Trinity St. David, 2012), p.45

³⁰ Cartwright, *Dead Virgins*, p.13

of any kind. These women lived a purely domestic life until that point, in stark contrast to their male counterparts.³¹ Robert uses the theme of the Welsh virgin martyr to great success in *Gwenfrewy's Life*, mentioning her beauty on several occasions yet also affirming her eternal dedication to Christ and determination to avoid an earthly marriage; 'she was most beautiful in countenance... and fittingly built in her whole body'³², and 'a most beautiful virgin was standing near him'³³. As can be seen in the latter quote, Robert links *Gwenfrewy's* virginity with her beauty. It is possible to claim that Robert's frequent mentions of *Gwenfrewy's* beauty was done with specific purpose. By emphasising to the reader that *Gwenfrewy* was a beautiful maiden, Robert stirs up feelings of pity and regret within the male reader, as if it were a great shame that someone so beautiful should be so devoted to Christ rather than determined to find an earthly husband. The female reader, in contrast, would probably admire *Gwenfrewy* that much more, since she chooses to ignore her physical attributes that would certainly have assisted her in attracting a suitable man, and instead wishes to live a chaste life in service of God. Robert uses the Welsh virgin martyr motif cleverly here, developing *Gwenfrewy's* character in such a way that would likely offend the modern reader but for the medieval reader, adding depth to *Gwenfrewy's* literary personality. In so doing, Robert further strengthens the bond between *Gwenfrewy* and the reader, and so her eventual decapitation would have both shocked and horrified male and female readers alike, despite decapitation occurring frequently in *Lives* during that time.

While the virgin martyr is the fundamental theme in almost all female hagiography, and is certainly the primary theme in Robert's *Life*, it is important to analyse a motif interconnected with the virgin martyr: the threat of rape and subsequent decapitation. It is this encounter with violent male sexuality that defines *Gwenfrewy* as a martyr, rather than simply a beautiful virgin. As soon as *Gwenfrewy* is

³¹ Henken, p.13

³² Callander, p. 61

³³ Callander, p. 96

faced with Caradog's out-of-control sexual urges, and is beheaded for rejecting them, her body is reunified and she is able to consecrate her precious virginity to serve as abbess at Gwytherin. Decapitation, which is its own separate motif in female hagiography, is deeply connected with the threat of rape motif; both threads wrapped together so tightly they are almost never seen without the other. While the imagery of Gwenfrewy's beheading by Caradog is not included in Robert's *vita*, his descriptions of Gwenfrewy's decapitation are depicted in a seal from the church of the Holy Cross at the Priory of SS Peter and Paul, Shrewsbury.³⁴

Stark explains that the beheaded saint theme is directly connected to a theme that could be seen as a separate motif itself: the bursting forth of a spring. Stark refers to this motif as the 'decapitation of a saint instigating the creation of a holy well', and that this theme forms part of the primary element of Robert's *vita* of Gwenfrewy. The three acts within this motif are as follows: beheading, heavy emphasis on the liquids of milk, blood, and water, and the immediate 'transformation of the landscape'.³⁵ This is seen in Robert's *Life*, where Caradog beheads Gwenfrewy and, in the exact spot where her head fell to the ground, a miraculous well sprang forth where God could display an abundance of miracles.³⁶ The inclusion of Gwenfrewy's spring at Holywell was critical for Robert and occupied a great space in his *vita*. By emphasising her well, Robert also emphasises Gwenfrewy's sainthood, therefore furthering Shrewsbury Abbey's purpose in adding itself to the pilgrim's journey. But further to this is the fact that the 'beheaded saint's well'³⁷ motif also reflected Christian moral virtues and practices in Medieval Wales and England. Robert clearly wished to combine the Celtic

³⁴ Stark, p. 8

³⁵ Karen Stark, *Unde continuo exivit sanguis et aqua: Holy Wells and Beheaded Saints in Later Medieval England and Wales*, unpublished Masters thesis, University College London, 2012), p. 1

³⁶ Jacobus de Voragine, 'Life of Saint Winifred', *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Caxton (New York: AMS Press, 1973), p. 140

³⁷ Stark, p. 1

remnants of pagan worship sites with the Christian emphasis on holy wells and water.³⁸ The Bible contains numerous references to beheadings, water, and blood, but Robert was also influenced by the more contemporary theological ideas in order to utilise the element of transformation in Gwenfrewy's life before and after her decapitation.³⁹ Robert was able to channel the physical incarnation of this particular motif, and connect it to the landscape at all three pilgrimage points, the communities at those points, and Gwenfrewy herself; the unification of all religious, social, and cultural layers within Holywell, Gwytherin and Shrewsbury.⁴⁰

The next motif within Robert's *vita* is that of consecrated virginity. By establishing a religious community at Gwytherin, Gwenfrewy freed herself from relying on her father, or any man at all; the creation of a social, religious safe space that gave her and plenty of other women an alternative path. So, while virginity and the bride of Christ motif is critical to most female saints' Lives, it also gave the woman legitimacy in numerous ways. Firstly, by consecrating her virginity, Gwenfrewy legitimised herself in a religious sense. But since she was then able to travel and make her own way in medieval Wales, and subsequently establish a religious community of her own at Gwytherin, this also gave Gwenfrewy political legitimacy: her status as a holy woman, and after her second and final death, a saint, gave Gwenfrewy such a huge following spread across numerous countries.⁴¹

³⁸ Anne Ross, 'Severed Heads and Sacred Waters', *The Holy Wells Journal*, no. 5 (1998), pp. 4-11 (p. 4)

³⁹ Anne Ross, 'Severed Heads and Sacred Waters', *The Holy Wells Journal*, no. 5 (1998), pp. 4-11 (p. 4)

⁴⁰ Stark, p. 9

⁴¹ DeCoste, p. 8-9

Robert makes effective use of the consecrated virgin motif, using Gwenfrewy's shining example to effectively temper male sexuality, particularly against holy women (the punishment was far more severe) and gave women an alternative career path to that of the wife and mother. As abbess at Gwytherin, Gwenfrewy was the one with total authority over her female monastery. As such, men found themselves excluded; something highly unusual in the medieval period. It could actually be argued that by consecrating one's virginity, women like Gwenfrewy were able to live free from the medieval patriarchy via their religious authority; even further, women like Gwenfrewy were given such holy status that either challenged or surpassed that of a man simply because of their social and sexual status as a virgin.⁴² Since virginity was deemed to be the holiest of states, only below that of the 'asexual angelic host': God, and men were unable to be 'virgins', this form of sanctity was a province solely reserved for women.⁴³ It could certainly be argued that since virginity was effectively a 'prerequisite' for female sanctity, where there was no such standard for male saints, a woman's worth in religious society was solely defined by her sexual purity. These women who eventually reach sainthood are entirely defined by their decision to preserve their virginity, and to eventually consecrate it after an often mortal encounter with male sexual urges.⁴⁴ Men who joined the church were free to marry, and even if they did choose to remain celibate, such men were not 'defined by that decision'.⁴⁵ But there was clearly power to be found within the small, religiously defined sphere women found themselves in. Virginity, in and of itself, had two threads: one sexual, one social. The consecration of Gwenfrewy's virginity effectively changes it from being something purely sexual to a prerequisite for female sainthood. This would have been very important for women seeking Christ during the medieval era; their own virginity would belong to both themselves, and to God, something to be revered rather than desired. In this way, virginity becomes the cornerstone of the virgin's social

⁴² DeCoste, p. 8-10

⁴³ DeCoste, p. 7

⁴⁴ Gregory, doctoral thesis, p. 213-214

⁴⁵ DeCoste, p. 8-9

position in medieval society and eventual sainthood via consecration, and Robert makes great use of this throughout Gwenfrewy's journey in his *vita*.

The next theme to be analysed is the post-death miracles motif. Robert reveals Gwenfrewy's vengeful nature following her second death, something specifically attributed to Welsh saints, although it has occasionally appeared in the lives of English and Irish saints. Robert's Life shows how Gwenfrewy was frequently angered and unleashed her rage on sinners and thieves.⁴⁶ This vengeful side of Gwenfrewy is used to great success by Robert, who simultaneously paid homage to Gwenfrewy's Welsh cult whilst proving her incredible power to his own readers. It is highly likely that most of Robert's readers would not have come into contact with a vengeful saint, since they were likely not from Wales, and so were exposed to a new literary style and heroine. For male readers, such vengeful miracles may frighten them into behaving more in line with medieval Christian ideals, and for female readers, Gwenfrewy's incredible powers may well have empowered them in some small way. According to Stancliffe and Kleinberg, vengeance miracles as a hagiographical motif were often used to combine magical powers with moral virtues, the latter of which were almost definitely the same virtues the hagiographer wished to follow.⁴⁷

It was both respectful and calculated of Robert to utilise the vengeance sub-motif to pay homage to Gwenfrewy's Welsh, and inherently Celtic, roots. Respectful in the sense that those members of Gwenfrewy's national cult would be more likely to believe that Gwenfrewy actually wanted her relics

⁴⁶ Henken, *Welsh saints*, p. 42-43

⁴⁷ Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and his hagiographer: history and miracle in Sulpicius Severus*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 9, p. 98-99; Aviad M. Kleinberg, *Prophets in their own country: living saints and the making of sainthood in the later Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 8

to be moved to Shrewsbury Abbey and is therefore a political theme. But it was critical to Robert that the locals accepted the transfer of Gwenfrewy's relics, and he clearly relied upon oral accounts of her vengeance miracles in order to include them in his *vita*. This reliance is not only confirmed within Callander's translation of Robert's prose in its original Latin, but also by rigorous academic analysis. Robert uses phrases such as 'many people affirmed';⁴⁸ and 'everyone seeing this (Beuno's miracle) is struck by unspeakable fear';⁴⁹ and 'everyone who observed';⁵⁰ and 'everyone who was there saw it'.⁵¹ Robert evidently spent much time speaking with locals of Holywell and Gwytherin, gathering as much information as possible to add to his *vita*, ensuring that the Welsh tradition of passing down legends orally was included in his work⁵². Academics, like Gregory and Ong, confirm that Robert based much of his *vita* on oral accounts. Gregory states that the layout and general undertone of the *Vita Sancte Wenefrede* falls in line with the style of oral literature, although he also explains that Robert clearly relied on numerous written accounts as well; the *vita* is written in an orderly fashion, with a clear timeline, created meticulously over many years to ensure its intended purpose(s) were met.⁵³ Of course, Robert also demonstrates Gwenfrewy's less vengeful side in regard to the miracles regarding the brothers seeking her relics. These are some of the only miracles mentioned in the *vita* that are peaceful, which for Robert serve a means to an end: an opportunity to show how deeply Gwenfrewy desired for her relics to be moved to Shrewsbury Abbey. In this respect, these post-death miracles are more of a politically-charged hagiographical motif employed by Robert, who above all

⁴⁸ Callander, p. 37

⁴⁹ Callander, p. 65

⁵⁰ Callander, p. 91

⁵¹ Callander, p. 107

⁵² Henken, *Welsh saints*, p. 6-7

⁵³ Walter J. Ong, 'Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word' in James Ryan Gregory, '*A Welsh Saint in England: Translation, Orality, and National Identity in the Cult of St. Gwenfrewy, 1138-1512* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Georgia, 2012), p.139

sought to increase the importance and status of Shrewsbury Abbey. Within this gentler motif lies another: the washing of the saint's bones. According to Gregory, Robert's *vita* includes a scene where the Shrewsbury monks cannot continue on their journey back to their Abbey with Gwenfrewy's bones, because the bones apparently prevent them from moving. Their solution to this is to wash the bones in a fountain that appears at that very spot, yet another of Gwenfrewy's miracles that seems to permit the brothers to take her relics to Shrewsbury.⁵⁴

Secondary motifs employed by Robert include the departure of the mentor theme; the personal items untouched by the elements motif; and the foresight of the saint's own death. There are other lesser motifs used by Robert in his work, but these are not quite as critical within the *vita* as those already discussed. The above motifs will be analysed in less detail, not because they are any less significant but because they are not the primary hagiographical motifs seen across female saints' Lives, and specifically Robert's work; these secondary motifs are often seen in male saints' hagiographies as well. Firstly, Gwenfrewy's mentor leaves her. Beuno has been her religious instructor and guide throughout the story, but leaves after consecrating Gwenfrewy, stating that God requires him to be elsewhere. Beuno's final parting gift is that Gwenfrewy will, after seven years, journey with God's direction to find another place;⁵⁵ Gwytherin, although Beuno does not explicitly state the placename. Beuno has acted as a mentor to Gwenfrewy, helping her to find her own path in her journey to sainthood. They have enjoyed a close teacher-student relationship, indicative of the more relaxed approach to relationships between male religious mentors and female saints in Irish hagiography.⁵⁶ Robert describes Beuno as her uncle and, according to Gray, this is done to satiate the pressures

⁵⁴ Gregory, doctoral thesis, p.66

⁵⁵ Callander, p. 68-69

⁵⁶ Madeleine Gray, 'Saints on the Edge: Reconfiguring Sanctity in the Welsh March', *Rewriting Holiness: Reconfiguring Vitae, Re-signifying Cults*, Kings College London Medieval Studies, vol. 15, (pp. 89-108), p. 95

placed by the post-Gregorian church; a cleansing of the relationship.⁵⁷ When Beuno leaves Gwenfrewy, Robert presents them as equals: ‘post benedictionem mutuum’.⁵⁸ Directly connected to this theme is the personal items untouched by the elements motif. In Robert’s *vita*, Gwenfrewy sends Beuno a cloak annually, at midsummer. The cloak is apparently miraculous, ensuring Beuno stays dry and warm in the rain and the wind. Gwenfrewy places this cloak on the stone within the spring, and the spring carries it down towards the sea, and eventually to Beuno. According to Gray, such elemental control, particularly in regard to water (rain and sea) is a fundamental feature of Welsh saints, a remnant of Celtic water cults.⁵⁹ By demonstrating Gwenfrewy’s miraculous abilities even before her second death, and eventual sainthood, Robert gives the reader an opportunity to be awestruck by Gwenfrewy’s power, and therefore backs up the miracles that occur after her death.

In regard to the foresight of death motif, Gwenfrewy knew that she would die after Tenoï, St. Eleri’s mother who was also at Gwytherin. Gwenfrewy told Eleri that she would live and work alongside him, and that his mother would die a few years before her; Robert declared this to be a ‘true prophecy’.⁶⁰ This demonstration of prophetic power would have added literary support to Gwenfrewy’s legend, thereby increasing her influence on the reader, and is a strong application of this particular motif. Robert was able to solidify Gwytherin’s position within the pilgrimage triangle, and also gave further credence to the other motifs by using this one as another example of Gwenfrewy’s miraculous powers.

⁵⁷ Gray, p. 95-96

⁵⁸ Gray, p. 97

⁵⁹ Gray, p. 97-98

⁶⁰ Callander, p. 83-84

In conclusion, Robert Pennant included numerous hagiographical motifs within the *Vita Sancte Wenefrede*, some of which were specific to female saints during the medieval period, and others which were often seen throughout the hagiographies of male and female saints. The virgin martyr motif is certainly the major theme that Robert uses throughout the *vita* and is presented in a way that clearly conveyed his own religious and moral views at that time. In keeping with hagiographical tradition, Gwenfrewy's life purpose is not revealed or achieved until she is forced to defend her virginity with her life. As a motif, the virgin martyr was highly popular with the medieval lay reader, and conveniently fell in line with the Church's aims and purposes during that era. Connected to the virgin martyr motif is the threat of rape theme, which almost always leads to the virgin's decapitation. Stark identified the connection between these motifs, grouping them together under an umbrella theme: the 'beheaded saint's well'.⁶¹ Robert includes this combination of themes to great success in his *vita*, ensuring that the locals and Normans alike would be satisfied with the content of his work, but also paying his respects to the shadow of Celtic water cults and beliefs. By emphasising the spring, Robert gave authority to Holywell, while in so doing he furthered Shrewsbury Abbey's authority by the very nature of his *vita*. Robert ties these motifs together with another major hagiographical theme, the consecrated virgin. Beuno's consecration of Gwenfrewy's virginity confirms Gwytherin as the third destination in a pilgrimage triangle, whilst tempering the Norman and post-Gregorian Church's sensibilities. Once Gwenfrewy takes the veil in Robert's *vita*, his audience may be certain that their devotion and reverence of St. Gwenfrewy is not ill-directed. The miracles after her second death motif confirms the audience's belief, proving Gwenfrewy's powers to the reader whilst also demonstrating her more vengeful side as a saint; this would have provided ultimate shock value, as well as supporting the removal of her relics to Shrewsbury; the brothers could not move her bones until they were washed in the spring that miraculously erupted from the ground in front of them. Robert does use other motifs, and to great success, but these themes are not quite so monumental as the virgin martyr, the 'beheaded saint's well' or the consecrated virginity motifs. Robert includes the departure

⁶¹ Stark, p. 8

of the mentor theme, which he uses to further Gwenfrewy along on her journey towards her eventual position as abbess at Gwytherin. He ensures that Gwenfrewy's powers are demonstrated via the personal items untouched by the elements motif, giving the reader their first chance to feel awed by Gwenfrewy's God-given abilities. Robert also utilises the foresight of the saint's own death theme, again to provide the reader with yet another opportunity to revere Gwenfrewy's power. Robert was a shrewd hagiographer, and one with whom the popularity of the cult of St. Gwenfrewy owes a great deal. He was able to inspire thousands of pilgrims to visit Shrewsbury Abbey, cementing its status as a vital stop on a pilgrim's journey to Wales, whilst mitigating any Norman issues surrounding Gwenfrewy or her national cult following. Robert uses all the aforementioned motifs to great success, and numerous translations exist because of his *vita*'s influence and popularity.

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