

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARY'S ROLE IN THE *EXETER BOOK* ADVENT LYRICS<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

Considered the most important compilation of Old English poetry that is extant, the Exeter Book opens with twelve poems known as the Advent Lyrics or *Christ I*. Although little attention has been drawn to this group of poems, its study may however offer us a valuable insight into the manuscript and its context. As Clayton and Dushman have already noted, the significance of the Marian topic in the *Exeter Book* Advent sequence seems to agree with the ideological concerns of the monastic reform of the late tenth century, an idea that prompts a possible contemporary dating of the Lyrics. In the line of these scholars' arguments, this paper aims to provide an analysis of Lyrics 4, 7 and 9 of the *Exeter Book* Advent sequence, focusing on the imagery employed to depict the Virgin Mary. I will then consider the antiphonal sources of the Lyrics as well as the scribe's departure from them to highlight Mary's outstanding role in the Advent Lyrics. In addition to this, I will examine the significance of the five manuscript sections, paying special attention to punctuation and capitalization. The paper intends to add further evidence to the hypothesis held by some scholars that the first part of the Exeter manuscript was compiled during the heyday of the Benedictine revival, when the prominence of the Virgin Mary reached the utmost peak of popularity in the Anglo-Saxon period.

**Keywords:** Virgin Mary, Exeter Book, Advent Lyrics, Benedictine revival, Marian imagery, liturgy, Anglo-Saxon queens.

### *Resumen*

Considerada la colección existente más importante de poesía anglosajona, el Códice de Exeter comienza con doce poemas conocidos como los poemas de Adviento o *Christ I*. Aunque ha recibido poca atención, estos poemas pueden ofrecernos un entendimiento valioso del manuscrito y su contexto. Como Clayton y Dushman ya han observado, la importancia del tema mariano en los poemas de Adviento del Códice de Exeter puede coincidir con los intereses ideológicos de la reforma monástica de finales del siglo décimo; una idea que, o suscita una posible datación contemporánea de los poemas, o a lo sumo una probable influencia benedictina. En la línea de los argumentos sostenidos por estos académicos, este artículo tiene como objetivo presentar un análisis de los poemas 4, 7 y 9 de los poemas de Adviento del Códice de Exeter, centrándose en las imágenes empleadas para describir a la Virgen María. Tendré en cuenta las fuentes antifonales de los poemas, así como la intención del escriba de alejarse de las mismas para resaltar el papel sobresaliente de la Virgen María en los poemas de Adviento. Además, se examina la trascendencia de las cinco secciones del manuscrito, prestando especial atención a la puntuación y mayúsculas. El artículo pretende aportar evidencias a la hipótesis respaldada por varios académicos de que la primera parte del manuscrito de Exeter se recopiló durante

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el apogeo del renacimiento benedictino, cuando la importancia de la Virgen María alcanzó la cota más alta de popularidad en el período anglosajón.

**Palabras clave:** Virgen María, poemas de Adviento, Códice de Exeter, renacimiento benedictino, imágenes marianas, liturgia, reinas anglosajonas.

Introducing the *Exeter Book*, the Advent Lyrics<sup>2</sup> (fols. 8r–14r) constitute a collection of twelve poems which are based on the antiphons for Advent found in the Divine Office.<sup>3</sup> In their current state (with a fragmentary beginning),<sup>4</sup> three of the twelve extant poems are substantially devoted to the Virgin Mary—namely, Lyrics 4, 7 and 9. In Burlin’s opinion, “this Marian sequence, with its evident chronology and progression, functions as a backbone to the structure” (1968: 177). The Marian topic is therefore an essential component of the whole poetic sequence.

But the prominence of the Marian motif is not only found in the Exeter Advent Lyrics, since it is also regularly observed in the liturgy of the period. The Anglo-Saxon devotion to the Virgin is made evident in the rapid development of liturgical literature dedicated to Mary. In addition to the four main Marian feasts (Purification, Annunciation,

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<sup>2</sup> The title *Christ* stems from the former scholarly view that the three opening Exeter works, all of them traditionally attributed to Cynewulf, constituted a single poetic piece. Just as the Cynewulfian authorship of the whole triad was eventually dismissed, the unity of *Christ* was also contested by various critics and the three resulting poetic pieces started to be called *Christ I (Advent)*, *Christ II (Ascension)*, and *Christ III (Judgement Day)*.

<sup>3</sup> Cook first noted that the majority of the Lyrics of the Advent sequence derived from the so-called “Antiphonae majores” or “O’ antiphons,” which are regularly used in the liturgy of Advent or Christmas. See Albert S. Cook ed. (1900: specially pp. xxv–xliii). For a reprinted version of Cook’s work with a preface by John C. Pope, see Ed. Albert S. Cook. (1964). A further comparative study of the Advent Lyrics and their liturgical sources is found in Edward Burgert (1921). Also, see Robert B. Burlin (1968: 40–43).

<sup>4</sup> It has been generally assumed by critics that several manuscript leaves have been lost. An initial lacuna precisely affects the beginning of the Advent Lyrics which start on fol. 8r. As pointed out by Conner, “The resulting loss amounts to as much as forty-six manuscript lines of text, assuming that another gathering containing part of ‘Christ I’ did not precede this one; the poem’s Latin sources do not indicate a loss so great as to require our positing another quire before this one. In any case, fol. 8r is sufficiently stained and darkened to allow the suggestion that it has existed for quite some time as the first leaf of the manuscript while the book was in an unbound state.” (Conner 1993: 98).

Assumption and Nativity), new liturgical texts and prayers were composed and new celebrations such as vigils and octaves were created in the period of the Benedictine Reform (Clayton 1990: 61). Late-tenth century texts—such as the *Regularis Concordia*, probably composed by Bishop Æthelwold (c. 970)—established that all refounded monasteries should observe a Saturday mass for Mary or the recitation of a votive antiphon or daily memorial after Lauds and Vespers.

Critics such as Clayton (1990: 181) and Deshman have also noted the great relevance of the Marian topic in the literature and pictorial art of this period. As Deshman demonstrates (1976: 376–405; 1995: 137), Æthelwold's *Benedictional* (c. 973)<sup>5</sup> offers a new iconographic element that is recorded for the first time in the history of western pictorial art: the Virgin's Coronation as queen of heaven.<sup>6</sup> According to him, the occurrence of this motif in the *Benedictional*, a book that was most likely designed under Æthelwold's supervision, seems to be related to the contemporary concern with Ælfthryth's legitimate condition as queen consort of Edgar (957–75) after the king's repudiation of his former wife Æthelflæd.<sup>7</sup> Given that the compilation of the Exeter Book is roughly coeval with the *Benedictional*,<sup>8</sup> the imagery used in the Advent Lyrics for the Virgin Mary might be equally meaningful, since the manuscript probably appeared at

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Deshman proposed 973 as the possible date of compilation of the *Benedictional*, since he assumed that the iconographic elements found in this book seem to be related to the propaganda employed for Edgar's coronation that year. See Deshman (1995: 212–14; 260–61).

<sup>6</sup> For this miniature (fol. 102v of the manuscript), see Deshman (1995: fig. 34). For further comments on this illustration and its political implications, see Deshman (1995: 204–07).

<sup>7</sup> Ælfthryth was actually Edgar's third wife. For more information on this, see Barbara Yorke (2008: 143–57).

<sup>8</sup> The exact date of the Exeter Book has been frequently an object of scholarly debate and is however far from being settled. From a palaeographical point of view, Flower (R. W. Chambers. 1933: 90) notes that the script of the Exeter Book resembles that of London, Lambeth Palace, MS.149, stating that both manuscripts were written some time between 970 and 990. For Krapp and Dobbie (1936: xiii) “the date of the handwriting of the Exeter Book is evidently to be placed in the second half of the tenth century”. More recently, Patrick W. Conner (1993: 76) claims that the script suggests a date between 950 and 970. For his part, Muir (1994: vol. 1: 1), the latest editor of the Exeter Book, suggests a time period between 965–75.

a time when the legitimacy of Ælfthryth, a well-known patroness of the monastic reform, was at stake. Not surprisingly, both Deshman (1995: 137) and Clayton (1990: 61–68) have associated the great importance of the Marian motif in the Exeter Advent Lyrics with the ideological concerns of the Benedictine revival of the late tenth century.<sup>9</sup>

In this train of thought, the aim of this paper is threefold: first, by means of a detailed analysis of Advent Lyrics 4, 7 and 9 I intend to study the significance of the imagery employed to depict the Virgin as Christ's counterpart in the mystery of Advent; second, to examine the author's deliberate departure from the antiphonal sources in these Lyrics as to stress Mary's relevance in the Advent sequence; and third, I will provide paleographical evidence, which seems to have passed unnoticed, in order to support the assumption that the Virgin Mary plays an essential part in the Advent Lyrics. A combined study of these three aspects may throw light on the possible ascription of the Advent sequence to the heyday of the monastic reform when the prominence of the Virgin Mary reached the utmost peak of the Anglo-Saxon period.

Lyric 4 of the Advent sequence is based on the Marian antiphon *O Virgo virginum*. Dealing with the mystery of Mary's virginal impregnation, the Lyric appears in the form of a dialogue as Mary is questioned by the first-person speaker who functions as a representative of the Christians of Jerusalem. By means of a forceful discourse, Mary faces the people of Jerusalem who want to learn about the mystery (*geryne*, 74) of her virginal state. Before she gives her response, in a typically heroic style, she is described as *symle sigores full, sancta Maria* (88) or "ever full of victory, Sancta Maria,"<sup>10</sup> which heralds "a spiritual victory for Mary as emblem of woman," as stated by Chance (1986: 23). Also, it is Mary's knowledge of the *geryne* that stresses her authority as shown in her reply. By means of a rhetorical question and later a categorical statement (89–91), Mary thus makes clear that this knowledge is not to be shared by mankind and that she will not fulfill the citizens' curiosity as no answer to the mystery is provided: *Hwæt is þeos wundrung þe ge wafiað, lond geomrende gehþum*

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<sup>9</sup> For a recent assessment of the Advent Lyrics in a late-tenth century context, see Mercedes Salvador (2006: 169–211).

<sup>10</sup> The edition and translation of the passages from the Advent Lyrics is from Robert B. Burlin (1968).

*mænað, / sunu Solimæ somod his dohtor?* (89–91) [“What is this spectacle that you wonder at / and lamenting moan with grief, / Sons of Salem and her daughters together?”]. By dismissing the people’s *wundrung* (“curiosity,” 89a), Mary is clearly undermining the authority of the people of Jerusalem and her superiority is thus highlighted.

Further in the poem, we find another instance in which Mary is significantly elevated to a higher position above ordinary people. In line 96, the Virgin refers to herself as *Dauides dyrre mægan* (“David’s dear kinswoman”). This allusion to David’s stock acknowledges Mary’s royal ascendancy from Jesse, King David’s father. This motif, which has traditionally been known as “Jesse’s Tree,” was often employed to represent Christ’s descent from David and was usually portrayed as a tree stemming from Jesse, with his descendants representing the different branches and ending either with Jesus or the Virgin and the Holy Child. In Advent Lyric 4, the allusion to Mary’s royal background therefore contributes to characterize her as Christ’s counterpart by stressing her superior condition.

As Mary responds to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the poem then centers on the notion of Eve’s curse<sup>11</sup> in a passage that evidently triggers the typological relationship between the Virgin and Eve:

ac Crist onwrah ...	["But Christ has revealed ...
þæt is Euan scyld eal forþyndeð,	That the guilt of Eve is all absolved,
wærgða aworpen, ond gewuldrad is	The curse cast off, and glorified
se heanra had. (95–99a)	Is the lowlier sex."]

Thus, Mary is celebrated as a figure participating in the redemption episode as she is finally freeing mankind from the three curses set upon Eve after the Fall: pain, sorrow and servitude. The emphasis here is on the redemption of Eve’s sin and on the promises of eternal life for both men and women through the womanhood of Mary. The poet is therefore stressing Mary’s active involvement in Salvation History, as she decisively participates in Christ’s mission to redeem mankind.

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<sup>11</sup> This idea derives from Gen. 3:16: “To the woman He said, ‘I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, In pain you will bring forth children; Yet your desire will be for your husband, And he will rule over you.’” All citations from the Bible are from *New American Standard Bible*. 1995. The Lockman Foundation. LaHabra, California.

The Virgin's characterization as a prominent figure in the Advent sequence is also observed in the poet's skillful handling of the liturgical source that served as the basis of Lyric 4, the "O Virgo virginum" antiphon, one of the "Monastic O's":

O Virgo virginum, quomodo fiet istud? Quia nec primam similem  
visa es nec habere sequentem? Filiae Jerusalem, quid me admiramini?  
Divinum est mysterium hoc quod cernitis.

[“O Virgin of virgins, how shall this be? For never was there one like you, nor will there ever be. - Daughters of Jerusalem, why do you look wondering at me? What you behold is a divine mystery.”]<sup>12</sup>

Lyric 4 similarly opens with an allusion to Mary by means of superlatives and basically follows the question-answer format of the antiphon. But the Old English text goes a step further and describes her as *fæmne freolicast ofer ealne foldan sceat* (72), that is, “noblest woman over all the earth's regions.” The powerful role of the Virgin as consort queen of Christ is thus emphasized. As observed in the antiphon, the reference is only to the daughters of Jerusalem (*filiae Jerusalem*). By contrast, in the Old English text, Mary interestingly addresses both the sons of Jerusalem and their daughters, *sunu Solimæ / somod his dohtor* (91). By alluding to both men and women, the author is highlighting Mary's dominion over the whole of mankind, not just women as presented in the antiphon. Also, towards the end of this Lyric, the poet insists on this idea when the blessing is addressed to *werum ond wifum* (101a), that is, both men and women. In this light, Mary's participation in Christ's Salvation task is again meaningfully stressed, as she is presented as the bond that connects God to all humankind.

As the analysis of Lyric 4 shows, the Advent poet was concerned with characterizing Mary as a figure of supreme power and authority. She is thus described as the legitimate queen consort of the king of Heaven, a right deriving from her own royal lineage, and as the lawful mother of the Son God. Her superior rank over men and women is also enhanced by the poet's deliberate alterations of the original antiphonal source. The characterization provided by the Advent poet therefore seems to be consonant with the actual requirements established for a contemporary

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<sup>12</sup> Text and translation of the antiphons is from Robert B. Burlin (1968).

queen, as they put the emphasis on royal stock and legitimate authority. When Ælfthryth married Edgar (c. 964–65), she theoretically fulfilled all these requirements since she was the daughter of Ealdorman Ordgar of Devon. Also, it is generally assumed that she was of royal descent through her mother although the identity of the latter is unknown.<sup>13</sup> Her political connections were also important due to her first marriage (c. 956), as she was the widow of Ealdorman of East Anglia Æthelwold, and eldest son of Æthelstan Half-King.

As regards the Advent poet's insistence on Mary's function as queen consort, playing an active role in Salvation History alongside with Christ, this recalls the reference to Ælfthryth's cooperation with Edgar as the official patroness of nunneries in the preface to the *Regularis Concordia*:<sup>14</sup>

Coniugique suae Ælfthritae sanctimonialium mandras ut impaudi  
more custodies defenderet cautissime praecepit; ut uidelicet mas  
maribus, femina feminis, sine ullo suspicionis scrupulo subueniret.

[“And he (Edgar) saw to it wisely that his Queen, Aelfthrith, should be the protectress and fearless guardian of the communities of nuns; so that he himself helping the men and his consort helping the women there should be no cause for any breath of scandal.”]<sup>15</sup>

In light of the different features ascribed to the Virgin Mary in Lyric 4, it is therefore not surprising, that the Old English poet's interest in highlighting her legitimacy as queen consort of Christ appears to be in consonance with political and religious realities of the period.

Based on the traditional motif known as “The Doubting of Mary,” Lyric 7 is structured as a dialogue between Mary and Joseph, in which the Virgin, first characterized in the role of Joseph's spouse, is questioned

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<sup>13</sup> For further information on Ælfthryth's family ties, see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (s.v. Ælfthryth).

<sup>14</sup> See Catherine E. Karkov (2004: 93).

<sup>15</sup> Text and translation from Symons (1953: 2). A similar reference to Ælfthryth's collaboration with Edgar in the supervising of convents is found in the so-called *Edgar's Establishment of the Monasteries* (Whitelock et al. 1981: 150).

about the legitimacy of her pregnancy.<sup>16</sup> In this section of the Advent sequence, the figure of Mary seems to undergo a significant evolution that is worth analyzing here. The Lyric opens with a speech which clearly puts the emphasis on Mary's humanity: *ic lungre eam / deope gedrefed, dome bereafod* (167b–168a), "I am all at once deeply grieved, bereft of reputation." Further in this part, the poet insists on Mary's deep sorrow: *Ic tearas sceal geotan geomormod* (172–173), "I cannot keep from weeping, saddened in spirit." This first passage therefore describes Mary's suffering for the loss of her reputation in a way that clearly enhances her human dimension, setting her at the level of any other earthly woman.

Mary's response, however, eventually initiates her transformation from a mortal woman into "the temple of the Lord": *Nu ic his temple eam / gefremed butan facne* (206b–207a), "Now I am His temple, built without sin." With this metaphor, the poet is thus adding prominence to Mary, as she is here presented as a "founding mother" of the Church: it is through her that Christ is incarnated. After having doubted Mary's honesty, Joseph's attitude similarly helps underline this transformation that takes place in Mary. He then acknowledges Mary's impeccable reputation by alluding to her as *fæmnan clene, / womma lease* (187b–188a), "a pure woman without stain." Finally, Joseph refers to Mary as *Dauides dohtor* (191), "the daughter of David," an expression that recalls the reference to Mary's royal ancestry found in Lyric 4.

The poet's particular employment of the imagery alluding to Mary similarly supports this gradual transformation. Early in the poem she is described by Joseph as *fæmne geong* (young girl or virgin, 175b) and *mægð* (virgin, maiden, 176a). As with Lyric 4, the emphasis is first placed on Mary's humble acceptance of the gift of God and on her virginal condition. However, as Lyric 7 develops, the figure of the Virgin is transformed when she explains the mystery (*ryhtgeryno*, 196a) of her virginal impregnation to Joseph, as the archangel Gabriel revealed to her that she had been chosen to be the mother of the "Power of life" (*lifes þrym*, 204b), the "bright Son" (*beorhtne sunu*, 205a), and the "Child great of God" (*bearn eacen godes*, 205b). Thus, it is in Mary's second speech that the poet fully acknowledges

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<sup>16</sup> Here Burlin follows the speech division suggested by Cosijn (1898: 109–10). Thus, Mary's first speech runs from l. 164 to l. 174a, followed by Joseph's speech from l. 174b to l. 195a, and Mary's final speech from l. 195a to the end.

her new status as Christ's mother, developing the temple analogy that was introduced by Joseph. As explained by Burlin, by placing the emphasis on the Virgin as "the earthly vessel chosen to accomplish His [God's] Incarnation" (1968: 124), Mary's body, as she herself declares, becomes the metaphorical sanctuary where Christ rests: *Nu ic his temple eam / gefremed butan facne* (206b–207a). It is her maternal role that provides her with authority as she is the "temple" that will lodge the heavenly king on earth. By revealing the mystery of her impregnation and the divine origin of her son to Joseph, the role of the Virgin is therefore clearly stressed, as the Lyric centers on her as the chief character and concludes with her own declaration that she is the legitimate mother of the *meotodes sunu* (210a). Unlike the preceding poem, Lyric 7 is not based on either the "Greater O's" or the "Monastic O's" (Campbell 1959: 6–9). Nonetheless, as suggested by Burlin, the liturgical conventions are present particularly in the way the figure of the Virgin undergoes a transformation from "the grieving and bewildered wife into the radiant and illumined Mother of God" (1968: 120). Since this Lyric offers no liturgical parallel, it might be inferred that it is a further example of the idiosyncratic character of the Advent sequence, in which the poet could have decided to present the motif of the Doubting of Mary in the form of a dramatic dialogue, highlighting thus the originality of the poet's reflection on the mystery of Advent.

In a contextualized reading, Lyric 7 is also particularly insightful. The continuous emphasis made by the poet on the legitimacy of Mary as Joseph's wife and mother of Christ finds an echo in contemporary politics. The New Minster Refoundation charter (966), for example, reveals a notable concern with the legitimate status of both Ælfthryth and her son Edmund who signed as witnesses. In the charter the queen is interestingly styled as *legitima prefati regis coniuncx* ("The legitimate wife of the aforementioned King" [Edgar]) and Edmund appears as *clito legitimus prefati regis filius* ("The legitimate son of the aforementioned King").<sup>17</sup> Edmund's signature appears before that of his older half-brother Edward, who is designated by contrast as *eodem rege clito procreatus* ("son

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<sup>17</sup> As Rumble (2003: 93, fn. 130) points out, "This may have been her [Ælfthryth's] first subscription as queen... If so, it could have been seen as an opportunity to make her status clear to the whole court."

begotten by the same King”) [Rumble 2003: 93]. As pointed out by Yorke, there is also a visual indication of the different status of both the queen and Edmund, whose corresponding crosses in their signatures are adorned with gold leaf, whereas a simple black cross represents Edward’s subscription. As she observes, “the implication seems to be that Ælfhryth and her son Edmund were ‘legitimate’ in a way that Edward and his mother were not, probably on the grounds that Ælfhryth had been a consecrated queen when she conceived and gave birth to her son, but Æthelfæd had not” (2008: 148). Under this light, Lyric 7 with its blatant acknowledgement of Mary’s legitimacy after her reputation has been at stake might have had interesting resonances for a contemporary readership.

Lyric 9 is the rhetorical result of what was anticipated in the pieces that have already been discussed. Mary is thus directly presented as the mother of Christ and as the Queen and lawful bride of *þæs selestan swegles bryttan* (281) [“the most noble Prince of the sky”]. As Mary’s condition as illegitimate mother has been categorically dismissed in Lyric 7, from the beginning of Lyric 9 the Virgin is overtly portrayed as Christ’s rightful counterpart in the kingdom of heaven. The Lyric then introduces her as *seo clæneste cwen ofer eorþan* (276) [“throughout the world the purest queen”], which offers the readers a powerful portrayal of the Mother of God as an authoritative queen. Lyric 9 is therefore a celebration of Mary’s acknowledged status as queen of heaven.

Later on, the motif of Mary’s pure impregnation and eternal virginity is further developed in the poem. Her chastity is thus the object of the poet’s admiration as it was Mary herself who offered her pure maternal body to God. It is then in this context that the poet introduces a series of images, all of them deriving from the traditional *porta coeli* motif, to refer to Mary’s virginity. Thus, she is metaphorically compared to *ðas gylðnan gatu*, “the golden gates” (318), *æþelic ingong*, “the noble gate” (308), and *gebunden deoran since duru ormæte*, “the huge door bound with precious treasure” (308b–309a). By means of these images, Mary’s body is depicted as a bright and dignified entrance through which only God can pass, since He is the only one who can unlock it.<sup>18</sup> Also importantly, these passages

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<sup>18</sup> The poet is alluding to the Old Testament vision of Ezekiel describing the excellences of the temple which has been traditionally interpreted “as a prophecy referring to Mary and the virgin birth...” For this, see Jackson J. Campbell (1959: 28).

describe valuable impressive doors in such a way as to enhance the Virgin's noble ascendancy in the same way it was done in Lyric 7. Finally, Mary is said to be *þæt wealldor*, "the wall-door," (328a), which interestingly echoes the opening lines of Lyric 1 in which Christ was alluded to as *se weallstan* (2a), the cornerstone of the Church.<sup>19</sup> By using *wealldor*, the poet is thus consciously leveling Mary's status to that of Christ, who is said to be *se cræftiga* (12a)—the builder—who will reconstruct the Church. In sum, the various images employed to depict the figure of the virgin queen provide cohesion to the entire poem and can be interpreted as a clear example of the Old English poet's intention to underline Mary's predominant character in Salvation History (Chance 1986: 28). Thus, the Anglo-Saxon poet elevates the figure of Mary to a higher position that is only reserved to Christ.

Interestingly, in Lyric 9, the Old English poet chooses to depart from the antiphonal source once more. As pointed out by Campbell, the scribe's decision to diverge from the Latin source, the monastic antiphon "O mundi domina," is so clear that "we can only believe that the poet used the antiphon for little more than an opportunity to write another poem on the Virgin" (1959: 27). Mary is then presented not only as *mundi domina*, but as queen (*blæfdige*, 284), as she is alluded to as the celestial empress of the three worlds: heaven, earth and hell (284–86).<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the reference to the Virgin as *blæfdige* in this Lyric might have been particularly meaningful in a contemporary context, since, as Stafford explains, this term was commonly used to refer to Queen Ælfthryth after her anointing in 973.<sup>21</sup>

The poem's depiction of Mary as Queen of Heaven in all her splendor and the emphasis on her queenship is further developed in this Lyric:

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<sup>19</sup> For a thorough study of this image in the reform context, see Robert Deshman (1986: 261–82, especially at pp. 262–72; 1995: 19–23). For the significance of the cornerstone image in the Advent Lyrics, see Salvador (2006: 174–81).

<sup>20</sup> Also importantly, as stated by Clayton (1990: 199), "Mary's title as *domina* of heaven, earth and hell is a transference of Christ's designation as Lord of all three regions."

<sup>21</sup> Ælfthryth regularly subscribed charters either as *regina* or *seo blæfdige*. For this see Pauline Stafford (1990: 62–63). Also, for *seo blæfdige* being employed as Ælfthryth's title in Anglo-Saxon charters, see Stafford (1990: 75, fn. 44).

Nan swylc ne cwom  
ænig oþer ofer ealle men,  
bryd beaga hroden, þe þa beorhtan lac  
to heofonhame hlutre mode  
siþþan sende. (290b–94a)

[“None like you has come,  
none other from among all mankind thereafter,  
no bride with rings adorned, who has sent  
to the heavenly home with clear spirit  
such a bright gift.”]

As pointed out by Dushman (1995: 136), the description offered in this passage suggests the Coronation of the Virgin. Indeed, in this passage Mary is described as a virginal bride, whose authoritative image is further enhanced as her behavior resembles that of a “heroic-minded warrior” in her courageous and firm determination (*bisthycgende*, 288b) to serve God, as observed by Chance (1986: 26). But the characterization of Mary as a figure of power is also supported by the choice of terms employed by the poet to describe her. Thus, Mary is styled as *bryd beaga hroden* (292a), that is, “bride with rings adorned.” This image could certainly accord with the description of an earthly queen. Interestingly, in a rubric preceding the queen’s *Ordo* (version B) in the Sherborne Pontifical (fol. 74), there are some directions for the consecration ceremony of a queen which are worth considering here:

The king’s consecration ends. The queen’s consecration follows. To do her honour, she is anointed on the crown of her head by the bishop with the oil of sacred unction. . . . We further decree that she be adorned with a ring for the integrity of the faith, and a crown for the glory of eternity.

These lines allude to the consecration of a nameless queen although, as pointed out by Nelson (1986: 372), this queen could be no other but Ælfthryth, who was anointed together with her husband Edgar in the same ceremony in 973. The crown and ring mentioned in this passage equate those bestowed earlier on the king, thus visually contributing to endow the queen with the symbols of regal authority.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> However, as pointed out by Nelson (1986: 372), this queen must have been Ælfthryth, who was consecrated together with her husband Edgar in the same ceremony in 973.

A further text that seems to be in line with the characterization of the Virgin Mary in the Advent Lyrics as an earthly queen, wearing the jewels appropriate to her status, may be found in Byrhtferth of Ramsey's *Vita sancti Oswaldi*, a text containing a description of the double coronation of Edgar and Ælfhryth:

Regina uero cum abbatibus et abbatissis conuiuium habuit. Que uestita carbasa ueste erat, splendide circumamicta, uarietate lapillorum et margaritarum suffulta, elatius precellens ceteris matronis.

[“The queen, together with the abbots and abbesses, had a separate feast. Being dressed in linen garments and robed splendidly, adorned with a variety of precious stones and pearls, she loftily surpassed the other ladies present.”]<sup>23</sup>

This passage provides an interesting insight into the description of a late-tenth century queen. The reference to Ælfhryth's being accompanied by abbots and abbesses is probably meant to highlight her role as patroness of the reform. As pointed out by Hollis (1992: 208–09), “the queen, cast as a kind of paramount abbess, was endowed with a role parallel to the quasi-sacerdotal position that the king had been accorded from the outset.” As with the preceding text and Advent Lyric 9, in this passage the reference to the queen bearing jewels is again indicative of her authority and regal status.

As the analysis of Lyrics 4, 7 and 9 has showed, the Advent poet was clearly interested in endowing Mary with an outstanding role as queen consort of Christ and as His chief collaborator in Salvation History. The poet's employment of Marian imagery and epithets such as *Dauides dyrre mægan*, *blæfdige* and *bryd beaga broden* to describe Mary as Christ's equal in the mystery of Advent seems to support this idea. Furthermore, paleographical evidence may help corroborate this assumption. In its current state in the manuscript, end-punctuation, capitalization and spacing seem to have been used by the Exeter scribe to mark four sections in the Advent sequence. As seen on fol. 9r of the manuscript,<sup>24</sup> at the close of Lyric 3 a double end-punctuation mark (:-:) occurs. Besides, a blank space has been left by the scribe to mark the end of Lyric 3.

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<sup>23</sup> Edition and translation by Lapidge (2008: 58–59).

<sup>24</sup> For this discussion see *The Exeter DVD*, ed. Muir (2006); Raw (1991: 233).

Furthermore, a large capital *E* (in *Eala*), which is slightly adorned, opens Lyric 4. The *A* of *Eala* is also capitalized but looks significantly smaller than the preceding *E*. The scribe marked three further sections for Lyrics 7, 9 and 11 by using a similar system of capitalization, spacing and end-punctuation. In the case of Lyrics 7 and 9, the two poems are preceded by a single end-punctuation mark (:). As regards Lyric 9, on fol. 11v there is no blank space separating this poem from the preceding Lyric and the two capitalized letters (*E* and *A* from *Eala*) are smaller than the ones found in the other Lyrics. But the other three sections of the Advent sequence are consistently marked by large capitals and blank space.<sup>25</sup>

In the light of this discussion, the use of end-punctuation, capitalization, and spacing seems to point to the scribe's attempt to define four sections in the Advent sequence, three of which precisely start at Lyrics 4, 7, 9—the Marian Lyrics that have just been discussed—and one more marking the beginning of Lyric 11, which deals with the trinity. This section layout suggests the scribe's intent to grant the Marian Lyrics of the Advent sequence special visual emphasis (Clayton 1990: 182).

This paper has analyzed Lyrics 4, 7 and 9 of the Exeter Book Advent sequence with the objective to offer evidence of the Old English poet's interest in presenting Mary as a figure of outstanding importance. The use of various images and metaphors to depict the Virgin, together with the deliberate departure from the antiphonal sources and the evidence provided by the study of manuscript sections support my assumption that the scribe's intention was to direct the reader's attention to Mary. This character is thus described as legitimate mother of Christ, queen of heaven, and Christ's rightful counterpart. The significance of the Marian topic in the Advent Lyrics is therefore highlighted and may be linked, as noted earlier, with the great prominence granted to the Virgin in the Benedictine reform of the second half of the tenth century.

In this light, the emphasis placed on the figure of Mary in her role as queen of heaven and consort of Christ reveals an interesting insight into contemporary queenship with a heightened focus on Ælfthryth as King Edgar's legitimate queen. Also importantly, the stress on Mary's lawful

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<sup>25</sup> Only Lyric 9 on fol. 11v lacks the typical blank space serving as border-marker. Conversely, capitalization and punctuation are present in this section. For the beginning of Lyrics 4, 7 and 9, see fols. 9r, 10r and 11v in *The Exeter DVD*, ed. Muir (2006).

condition as the mother of Christ similarly finds echo in the political and religious context of the period. It is precisely her position as queen mother that made Ælfthryth a key figure during the reign of her son Æthelred II.<sup>26</sup> As noted by Stafford (1990: 71), the second-half of the tenth century was a period in which succession struggles were intensified and monarchs sought the help of their queen-consorts and queen-mothers to secure the throne and retain power.

In sum, this set of poems celebrating Christ's Advent, based on Latin antiphons and included at the beginning of the Exeter Book, is probably the work of a dexterous monk from one of the reformed monasteries with a strong Marian devotion. This idea either prompts a possible contemporary dating of the sequence or at best a probable Benedictine coloring carried out parallel to the manuscript compilation, when the prominence of the Virgin Mary reached the utmost peak of the Anglo-Saxon period.

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<sup>26</sup> See Yorke (1988: 82–83).

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