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Abstract: This article offers a theoretical biography of Anonymous 756, the wife of King Eardwulf of Northumbria. Historians working on women in the pre-Conquest period have noted their relative absence in sources, and evidence for queens can be scant or spurious. By carefully interrogating the political and ideological biases of the sources, as well as focusing on female relationships, this article looks to advance our understanding of the life of Anonymous 756. First, it situates her marriage to Eardwulf within an overview of pre-Conquest royal marriages to foreground a discussion of peaceweaving marriages, which is proposed as one plausible scenario to understand the match. Beowulf serves as a cultural illustration of some of the key ideas of aristocratic matches; another cultural icon, Charlemagne, has been associated with Eardwulf, but a further investigation of this connection rejects identifying Anonymous 756 as the emperor's daughter. Using the principles of contemporary naming practices, it then excavates patterns of relationships both simultaneously documented and obscured in the Northumbrian Liber Vitae to offer some possible "identities." The argument offered here must remain theoretical—an "authorized fiction" rather than a traditional biography. However, detailed consideration of her likely relationships serves as a fruitful line of inquiry to understand more about the life of Anonymous 756, as well as other women with similarly scantily documented backgrounds.

Keywords: queenship; Old English; biography; feminist history; Alcuin; Bede

Biography is conventionally considered an account of the intimate experiences of a person, a detailed description beyond the simple facts of birth, maioj events and death of the subject. Therefore, it creates a tension between the simple facts and the lived experiencies of the subject inherent in what constitutes biography. In this survey of biography, Nigel Hamilton questions:

> Where does fact end and interpretation begin? Is biography essentially the chronicle of a life's journey (and thus a branch of history, employing similar processes or research and scholarship), or is it an art of human portraiture that must, for social and psychologically constructive reasons, capture the essence and distinctiveness of a real

individual to be useful both in its time and for posterity?[1]

Both Hamilton and critic and biographer Ira Nadel note the artificiality of conventional biographies. Nadel observes:

> the completeness of biography, the achievement of its professionalization, is an ironic fiction, since no life is ever lived according to aesthetic proportions. The 'plot' of a biography is superficially based on the birth, life and death of the subject; 'character' is the vision of the author. Both are as much creations of the biographer as they are of a novelist. We must content ourselves with 'authorized fictions.'[2]

A conventional biography that delves into the character and distinctiveness of an individual risks obscuring and reducing the telling of a life story to the illusion of a positivist, objective rendering of what is inherently subjective, both on the part of the biographer and the subject of the biography. Furthermore, when tracing the roots of the genre in the modern era, Hamilton draws on the well-established canon of Western literature, works such as *Gilgamesh*, and the tradition of commemoration, encomium, eulogy and lives of great men, including the *Life of Alexander* and Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*. Far from being simple, factual recounting of the deeds of their subjects, these biographies are often character sketches that capture an emotional aspect of traditional biographies. The origins of the biographical genre, which espouses the individual and the detailed portraiture of character is largely a masculine genre ill-suited to the telling of women's lives. Whether in a secular biography or the construction of holiness involved in hagiography, when women's lives are told they are gendered in terms of subject, but also potentially in the way that their authors or audiences conceive of them. In her expansive work, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, Theresa Earenfight observes:

> from at least the late nineteenth century, most of what was known about queens in the Middle Ages came from biographies of famous heroic queens written by gentlewomen for gentle readers. Because women were not seen as suitable subjects for serious historical study, queens were portrayed as sentimental, passionate, and often ill-fated Great Women married to Great Men, or doing unexpected things. By paying attention to individuals, these works followed kingship studies but, instead of focusing on law, governance and war, the books on queens were romantic representations that emphasized the emotional life of a queen.[3]

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[1] Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 15.
[2] Ira B. Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 100.
[3] Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

This swing towards the character-centred narrative style of biography brought queens into the conventions of the field, but arguably at the expense of the strengths of a historical, research-based scholarly approach. It also privileged queens who left a documentary record, whose own voices and names were attached to public acts in charters, decrees and narrated in histories and chronicles, whether as virtuous queens or as meddlers and political monsters.

When it comes to early medieval queens it can be difficult to access sufficient material to be able to transcend the basic details, even more so to construct anything like a character. This becomes even more the case when attempting to write some sort of experimental biography for a woman like Anonymous 756, the "name" given to the queen of Eardwulf of Northumbria in the *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (PASE)*.[4] As such, in this article, I will be attempting an "authorized fiction," to borrow Nadel's term, rather than a traditional character-driven biography. It is very much contextual and speculative, rather than conventional. Many of the conventional features of life writing will be impossible to identify, but the authority derived from considering the source material within context and specifically with a view to constructing a life story for Anonymous 756 will approximate, though never fully be, a traditional biography. The impossibility of a traditional biography, as well as the possibilities offered by an "authorized fiction", becomes even more evident when considering pre-Conquest women. Gillian Lees and Clare Overing address this in their work *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo–Saxon England*, how "the female agent is a double agent: she moves in this 'real' world of Anglo-Saxon society, but we can only perceive her in that penumbral netherworld to which she is relegated by clerical culture."[5] Clerical sources—ecclesiastical histories, charters, letters, and annals, among other documents—are among the only sources for the lives of pre-Conquest people. These records retain a bias that often applies to how women are considered: the derivative nature of their identities. Simone de Beauvoir explores in her pivotal work, *The Second Sex*, how women have long existed in a world defined by, and in relation to, men.[6] An "authorized fiction" that accounts for the life of Anonymous 756 must also address this bias, and use it to understand more about the woman herself and the media in which her constructed identity endures. It proposes that we see her as a Northumbrian aristocrat, whose marriage was likely made as a political alliance, which may have also had a peaceweaving goal, but also invites further reconsideration of other shadowy figures from the documentary record whose lives might be better illuminated using similar methodologies.

Any form of biographical writing about Anonymous 756 poses a greater challenge than several other pre-Conquest women simply because we lack the name of our protagonist. The

[4] "Anonymous 756," *Prosopography of Anglo–Saxon England*, http://pase.ac.uk. In this database, the mistress is identified as Anonymous 757.

[5] Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), 2.

[6] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, with an introduction by Sheila Rowbotham (London: Vintage Digital, 2014).

absence of a contemporary name compounds the absence of evidence in the documentary record. She is mentioned only once, in a letter between Alcuin and Osbert, a Mercian nobleman, and only in relation to her husband. In order to access more biographical details, the documents in which Anonymous 756 and women like her appear must be examined in their cultural, historical, and textual contexts. These should in turn be considered especially for their biases and attitudes towards women. Evidence must be weighed against likelihood or competing sources for accuracy and bias, which often obscures, intentionally or not, female roles and relationships.

A theoretical biography may not satisfy the demands of traditional life writing, but represents a substantial advancement. It adds not only to the understanding of individual lives but also to an emerging picture of pre-Conquest queenship, which in turn enriches perspectives on the social and political dynamics of the period. Methodologically, it informs possible approaches for subjects who are ill suited to the procedures of conventional biography, opening new lines of enquiry and encouraging reconsideration of what information sources can—and cannot—support.

In writing "authorized fiction," this article therefore offers a form of theoretical biographical writing for the wife of an eighth- and ninth-century Northumbrian king—a wife who used to have a name and a character, but who is now known only as Anonymous 756. Exploring the circumstances in which Anonymous 756 likely found herself can provide a more detailed framework in which to interpret the scraps of what had been previously known about her, and open possibilities for understanding other individuals in similar circumstances. In the case of Anonymous 756, we can say more about her background: she was most likely a Northumbrian noblewoman who was matched with Eardwulf as part of a political pact that helped bolster his unstable position on the throne. Contrary to information available in a later chronicle, she was almost certainly not a daughter of Charlemagne. These are rather general observations. However, when one considers the cultural, historical, and textual contexts from which we might glean information about our subject, the perspective that emerges represents a significant advance on what can be said of Anonymous 756, as she is seen as one piece of a larger and more clearly defined puzzle.

The Wife of the King

The one fact known about Anonymous 756 is her marriage to Eardwulf of Northumbria. Though there is no date for this, it must antedate the letter from Alcuin to Osbert in 797. It is therefore also likely that their marriage predated Eardwulf's coronation in May 796.

In 797, Alcuin, distinguished Northumbrian scholar and cleric, wrote from his position at Charlemagne's court to advise a prominent nobleman back in England. Things had not been going well, either politically or morally, in Alcuin's view. A series of royal deaths had destabilised the thrones of both Mercia and Northumbria and in the absence of the moral leadership of a good, Christian king, all manner of maladies had broken out. Chief among

these was the sack of Lindisfarne by Vikings in 793. Alcuin's primary concern in his later letter to Osbert remains the lack of leadership because he fears the repercussions that it may have on the population, and on the leaders themselves. He writes:

> give earnest counsel to your king [Cenwulf] and also to ours [Eardwulf], that they keep close to divine goodness, avoiding adultery, not slighting the wives they already have by affairs with women of the nobility, but in the fear of God keeping their own wives or agreeing to live in abstinence. I fear our king Eardwulf must soon lose his throne for the affront to God involved in putting away his wife and openly living with his mistress, as is reported.[7]

This is the only information that exists about Anonymous 756. In Alcuin's communication, she occupies a secondary position, relative only to Eardwulf and his choices. Rather than the subject of Alcuin's concern, she is a detail for her husband's misdeeds. Who was she? What can be said of her lived experiences?

Because of her status as a queen, contemporary queens serve as the most relevant point of comparison to illustrate this aspect of the life of Anonymous 756. Alcuin's identification of her as "uxorem" of Eardwulf, and demarcation between her and the mistress for whom she is put aside, is a clear indication that theirs was a marriage rather than any other sort of relationship. As the wife of a king, she is best considered as a queen. Apart from a brief but well-known hiatus in eighth- and ninth-century Wessex, queenship was well recognised throughout pre-Conquest England, referenced in the works of Bede, Alcuin, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and numerous charters.[8] It is true that in comparison to later periods, early medieval queenship lacked much of the formality and theory of later queenship, but this does not detract from the wealth of evidence that supports contemporary recognition of the office itself. The earliest known coronation ritual for a queen in England, the tenth-century *Regularis Concordia*, made the queen the protector of nunneries, just as the king was protector of monasteries, and the anointing ceremony in this document made queenship a divinely ordained

[7] "Ideo diligentius admone regem vestrum vel etiam nostre patrie [potentiores] ut se apud divinam contineant pietatem, adulteria devitantes, nec despiciant uxores priores propter adulteria feminarum nobelium; sed sub timore Dei vel proprias habere vel etiam se cum consensus in castitate continents. Timeo, quod Ardwulfus rex noster cito regnum perdere habeat propter contumeliam, quam in Deum gerit, propriam dimittens uxorem, publice se socians concubinae, ut fertur." *Epistolae Merowingici et Karolini Aevi*, ed. Ernst Dümmler, 8.

[8] Further discussion below. See also: Pauline Stafford, "The King's Wife in Wessex 800-1066," *Past and Present* 91, no. 1 (1981): 3–27; a cursory overview of some key texts that clearly reference queens include, as in his account of the birth of Eanflæd, that the "regina" had borne the king a daughter. Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* ed. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) 9, 164–165; Alcuin addressed Offa of Mercia's queen, Cynethryth, directly as "domnan reginam." Alcuin, *Alcuin of York*, no. 36, 49; Dümmler, *Epistolae Karolini Aevi*, no. 62, 205–206. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tells of the murder of "Ostryðe, Æþelredes cwene" in 697. G.P. Cubbin, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Vol. 6 MS D (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), 9.

position.[9] Before then, the most widespread conception of what constituted a queen was that she was the wife of the king. As Pauline Stafford has explored, as the wife of the king, Anonymous 756 fits the definition of contemporary early medieval English queens.[10] Queenship developed in the early medieval period alongside notions of marriage influenced by Christianity, and the need to legitimize and support the claims of an individual and his family to rule a kingdom. A queen's own power stemmed from her male relations: her father, brothers, and kinsmen, as derived from what appear to be traditional familial and tribal bonds.[11] As such, queens possessed considerable power and influence in early medieval English society, though marginalising clerical attitudes towards women and secular power led to the unexpectedly low profile of queens in contemporary sources. More recently, Earenfight's expansive survey of medieval European queenship outlines the four major unifying factors of queenship: she was almost always the wife of the king; she could be considered a justified choice to rule or govern; she was subject to increasingly Christian theories of society and culture; and she was a key agent in in forging the relationship between throne and aristocracy.[12]

If the defining feature of a queen was her relationship with her husband, her role was largely defined by her ability to mediate. Stacey Klein's study of legendary and fictional queens in pre-Conquest England finds that the queen was often a "mediatory figure ... who offers the potential to bridge differences between groups of people, social structures and systems of belief."[13] As a mediator, a historical queen existed only in relation to two mutually exclusive categories. She bridged the link between her natal and her marital, royal family, but never existed fully in either of the two categories. As such, her identity was consistently predicated on her male relations. This could either raise the reputation and profile of the individual queen—and queenship as an office—or consign her to ignominy.

A famous example of the relegation of the office of queenship is Asser's account of Eadburh, the queen of Beorhtric of Wessex. Asser recounts how the West Saxon kings following Ecgberht did not follow the custom of nominating the king's wife as a queen as a response to Eadburh's wickedness. He remarks on "the (wrongful) custom of that people ...

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[9] Janet L. Nelson, "Early Medieval Rites of Queen-Making and the Shaping of Medieval Queenship," in *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe*, ed. Anne Duggan (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997), 301–316; Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 121–134, 145–147; Stacy S. Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006), 173–174.

[10] Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (London: University of Leicester Press, 1998).

[11] Stafford, Queens, 191–197; Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 78; Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992), 48–49, 62–65; Carol Braun Pasternack, "Negotiating Gender in Anglo-Saxon England," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 117.

[12] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 35–37.

[13] Klein, *Ruling Women*, 4.

[f]or the West Saxons did not allow the queen to sit beside the king, nor indeed did they allow her to be called 'queen', but rather 'king's wife'" (c.13).[14] In effacing the position of queen in Wessex, the dynasty of Ecgberht defined itself in opposition to that of the Mercians, who tended to embrace stronger queens. But Asser is careful to note that this was an unusual practice even in the ninth century, calling it a "perverse and detestable custom".[15] It is a fair assessment to say that before *Regularis Concordia*, consecrated or not, the wife of the king was generally understood to be the queen.

It can be difficult to say more about queens generally in this period because of the lack of sources. Queens often figure in the sources that do exist, such as charters, hagiographies, and histories. However, these texts were written with purposes other than the biographies of the women in them, and preserve the biases of their authors. For example, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* is one of the most indispensable sources for the study of earlier pre–Conquest England; as a cleric, however, his work also espouses certain biases. Stephanie Hollis has observed in her work, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, that in the early English sources there are "pervasive indications of conflict between women and churchmen and of clerical disesteem."[16] Bede's account of Penda's sister in the seventh century serves to illustrate much about the actions and relations of the great contemporary powers of Mercia and other kings in the heptarchy, but in so doing obscures the individuals beneath these major political events. He reports:

> Cenwealh ... refused to receive the faith and the mysteries of the heavenly kingdom and not long afterwards lost his earthly kingdom also. Now he had repudiated his wife who was sister of Penda, king of the Mercians, and had married another woman; for this he was attacked by Penda and deprived of his kingdom. [EH III.7][17]

Bede recounts the episode as part of the history of the evangelization of the West Saxons; in such a context, Cenwealh's apostasy is the major event, overshadowing the minor footnote of his repudiation of his wife. One gets the impression that the only reason that Bede even includes this minor fact is because this act serves as the efficient cause of Cenwealh's deposition and eventual conversion to Christianity in exile, rather than resulting from any

[14] "[P]erversam illius gentis consuetudinem ... [g]ens namque Occidentalium Saxonum reginam iuxta regem sedere non patitur, nec etiam reginam appellari, sed regis coniugem, permittit. Quam controversiam, immo infamiam, de quadam pertinaci et malevola eiusdem gentis regina ortam fuisse." William Henry Stevenson, ed., *Asser's Life of King Alfred* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 11; Keynes and Lapidge, trans., *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (London: Penguin, 1983), 71.

[15] "perversa et detestabilis consuetudo." Stevenson, Asser's Life of King Alfred, c. 13, 12; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 71.

[16] Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 2.

[17] "Coinualch ... fidem ac sacramenta reni caelestis suscipere rennuit, et non multo post etiam regni terrestris potentiam perdidit. Repudiata enim sorore Pendan regis Merciorum, quam duxerat, aliam accepit uxorem; ideoque bello petitus ac regno priuatus ab illo." Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 232–235.

concern over the woman and her plight, or the political disruption caused by a major foreign power deposing the ruler. Peter Baker has discussed how, chronologically, such a marriage must have been imposed as a means of exerting greater control over a client kingdom, thereby possibly making this nameless queen the agent or representation of hostile foreign power.[18] Yet whilst Bede's relation of this event serves to illustrate how Cenwealh repudiated his faithless ways and converted to become an ideal Christian king, it sublimates the identity of his repudiated wife to her male relations—her husband and her brother. What did become of Penda's sister? What did she think of all this? What were her experiences? Beyond her relationship with Cenwealh that made her a queen, we simply do not know.

The unknowability of the experiences, thoughts and motivations of Penda's sister are not unique to her. Technically, even Penda and Cenwealh suffer from the same lack of information. We read what Bede intended us to, adopting the character sketches he has written. This attribution of agency and relationship reads more like traditional biographical writing, and its constructed nature conceals what the absence of information for Penda's sister does not.

The experiences of Penda's sister as a queen serve to illustrate the basic principles of queenship in early medieval England. As a queen, she was one of the most powerful women in society. As a woman, her power largely derived from her male relations, as can be seen in Penda's interference with the West Saxon throne following her repudiation. Her identity mediated between her natal family and that of her husband. However, because queens' identities and views were not often considered relevant to the purposes of the texts in which they are recorded, essential details such as names are often not preserved, further relegating their life stories in the textual record. Given the paucity of biographical information in the sources for early medieval queens, it is incredibly difficult to distinguish between the actual person and the person as represented in the text. The texts were created with the intentions and needs of their (predominantly male) authors, in which the experiences of their subjects were secondary to the authors' purposes. Penda's sister, a queen and sister of a king, as discussed by Bede, occupies a position similar to that of Anonymous 756. Her identity as queen, the wife of a king, made her one of the most influential women in secular society, yet also relegated in status by the biases and concerns of the documents in which her reputation survives.

A Peaceweaving Marriage?

Thus far, we have considered the position of women as queens in circumstances textually similar to Anonymous 756. She, like other queens, was empowered by her relationship with her own family and by her proximity to the king, Eardwulf. The model of the peaceweaving marriage offers a further perspective for understanding Anonymous 756's position. One of the

[18] Peter S. Baker, *Honour, Exchange and Violence in Beowulf* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), 157–159.

critical concepts often applied to the marriages of high-status women, and especially queens, in pre-Conquest England is that of the peaceweaver, Old English *freoðuwebbe*. The term derives from three uses, two in heroic poetry (in *Beowulf* and *Widsith*) and one by the poet Cynewulf.[19] The *freoðuwebbe*, often translated as peaceweaver, is usually a person responsible for reconciling traditional enemies, most often a woman given in marriage.

The state of politics in late eighth-century Northumbria gives the distinct impression that a peaceweaving marriage was a genuine probability for Eardwulf. The succession to the Northumbrian throne was becoming increasingly unstable. The five kings prior to Eardwulf, whose collective reigns consist of a mere thirty years, were exiled; deposed, restored and later murdered; deposed and exiled; murdered; and deposed and exiled. A peaceweaving marriage to a rival aristocratic family, whether to bolster support or to heal the wounds of a feud, could have aided Eardwulf with his aspirations to the tumultuous and unstable Northumbrian throne.

The concept of the peaceweaver has occupied a productive position in critical literature: Larry Skulte has proposed that it is best interpreted as "political advisor", whereas Christopher Fee examines the term alongside other frequent descriptive phrases for women, including *beag, beaghroden* and *goldhroden*.[20] Debate over whether the peaceweaver should be regarded as a recognised cultural phenomenon beyond Old English literature continues, though examining two different sources may help illustrate the concept and its possible historicity more fully.[21]

Bede promulgates a discernibly and overtly ecclesiastical bias in his *Historia Ecclesiastica.* Stephanie Hollis has also articulated this when discussing peaceweavers. In her reading of the temporary resolution of the feud and strife between the royal families of Northumbria and Mercia, Hollis identifies how Bede has supplanted the traditional role of bridal peaceweaver in the form of a queen with a high ranking ecclesiastic, archbishop Theodore, who resolves the feud with payment, rather than a relationship.[22] The women in Bede's record are predominantly of secondary concern. Understanding Bede's preference for the "lasting success of ... the peace of Christ in the bonds of the spirit, wrought by the inspired wisdom of an archbishop" is perhaps crucial, then, for decoding the bias against the traditional role of

[19] For a more in-depth discussion of the concept of the peaceweaver, see: Megan Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies: The Poetics of Human Experience in Old English Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), esp. 280–296.

[20] Larry John Sklute, "Freoðuwebbe in Old English Poetry," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature,* ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 204–210; Christopher Fee, "Beag and Beaghroden: Women, Treasure and the Language of Social Structure in Beowulf," Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 97, no. 3 (1996): 285–294.

[21] See especially Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies.*

[22] Hollis, Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church, 154. For another perspective on Bede's view of such marriages, see: Máirín MacCaron, "Royal Marriage and Conversion in Bede's Historia Gentis Anglorum," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 68 (2017): 650–670.

peaceweaver in his history.[23] The text rarely references this role, and when women who can be identified contextually as peacemakers do appear in the course of his narrative, they tend to fail at this primary function: women like Ealhflæd, queen of Peada of Mercia, who was implicated in his murder just over a year after their marriage; or Osthyrth, queen of Æthelred of Mercia, who was murdered by, as Bede recounts, "her own" Mercian nobles.

Bede's account has a pronounced ecclesiastical bias against queens as peaceweavers, preferring clerical, male peace–brokers like bishops and abbots, downplaying and obscuring evidence of successful peaceweaving unions. Just as Hollis has also questioned, it is possible that this is due to the emphasis on "the influence of male comradeship bonds in society, rather than on the influence of the female agent of their formation."[24] However, less well-detailed matches in his text may be obscured successful peaceweaving marriages.[25]

One such possibility is the marriage of Osgyth to Sighere of Essex. It is difficult to construct many of the details of her life with any degree of certainty, as most of the information derives from later, fragmentary hagiographical sources that are intended to present Osgyth as a saint, rather than as a historical queen. In fact, it is virtually impossible to see many of the most elementary details of her life, obscured by the competing needs of historical sources and the demands of later hagiographical writers. The facts that we do know survive (or were constructed) to serve the needs of those writing about her, not to create a traditional biographical narrative. Osgyth was born to Frithuwold of Surrey, a client subking to Mercian overlords, and his queen, Wilburh, whose lineage is ascribed to Mercian royalty. Though these details derive from twelfth-century lives of Osgyth, they may preserve an authentic tradition. As shall be discussed below, alliterating names were one way aristocratic families could indicate their relationships: Wilburh's name alliterates with other known offspring of Penda, particularly Wulfhere. Bede noted Wulfhere was younger than Penda's other sons. Therefore, he and Wilburh may be the children of another, unrecorded wife.

The details regarding Osgyth's upbringing and even the dates of her life in hagiographical sources are to be regarded cautiously. Virginia Blanton and Jane Tibbets Schulenburg have noted how the lives of saints reflect more about the individual and community writing them, rather than about their nominal subjects.[26] This is also true of Osgyth. Nevertheless, looking to external sources may confirm how Osgyth, a princess noted

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[23] Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 162.

[24] Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 229.

[25] For an interesting counterpoint to the practice of peaceweavers on the continent, see: Janet T. Nelson, "Making a Difference in Eighth-Century Politics: The Daughters of Desiderus," in *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History. Essays Presented to Walter Goffart* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 171–190; Walter Pohl, "Why Not to Marry a Foreign Woman: Stephen III's Letter to Charlemagne," in *Rome and Religion in the Early Middle Ages: Studies in Honor of Thomas F.X. Noble*, ed. Valerie Garver and Owen Phelan (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 47–63.

[26] Virginia Blanton, *Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St Aethelthryth in Medieval England, 695-1615* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Jane T. Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 51–52

for her devotion to virginity in childhood, came to be a queen and mother. As the descendant of a Mercian king during the Mercian hegemony, Osgyth would have made a desirable partner for marriage. Almost all versions of her *Lives* agree that she was married to Sighere of Essex. Bede's *Historia*, which does not even mention Osgyth by name, provides more information as to why a royal princess would have been taken, seemingly against her own desires, for a marriage partner.

In Bede's *Historia*, Sighere, one of two East Saxon kings ruling under Wulfhere's overlordship, is known for his apostasy of the Christian faith during a plague in 665. Wulfhere sent his bishop, Jaruman, to the area to convince the king to abandon his restored temples, and to return to the churches. Bede's account depicts Jaruman as very successful, bringing "both the people and their King Sighere to the paths of righteousness" (III.30).[27] These conditions provide a political explanation for why Osgyth was promised to the East Saxon subking. In this betrothal, Osgyth is treated like many other royal women: she can be read as a political pawn, an object to be bartered and traded for political gain. From Wulfhere's perspective, such an alliance could only benefit his rule. A union with a member of his family could potentially draw Sighere into a more tightly–knit alliance with the Mercian royal family, especially following the birth of any potential offspring and heirs (in this case, Offa of Essex). Additionally, having a member of the Mercian royal family as a peaceweaving queen privileged Mercian political interests. The queen was one of the most powerful secular members of society, one whose role involved distributing patronage, forging bonds with noble families and advising the king. Osgyth's presence as queen would ensure that the interests of her natal kingdom and family were considered, if not prioritised, within the East Saxon court. But, as with the account presented by Bede, the female bonds that underpin these alliances remain in the shadows. In the case of Sighere and Osgyth, if the marriage had been undertaken as a peaceweaving attempt it must be regarded as an unusual success for all involved: Osgyth appears to have separated from Sighere amicably in 673 to enter monastic life, and the kingdom remained Christian.[28] Bede's account of the reconversion of Essex marginalises Osgyth's role to the extent of excluding her name, whether through lack of sources or by conscious omission.[29] However, unearthing the circumstances of Osgyth's marriage has required sifting through several sources and their biases to recognise its potential as a peaceweaving union.

It is possible to piece together the details of how Osgyth's marriage to Sighere of Essex may be seen as a peaceweaving marriage, combining hagiographical sources with historical narrative. Such a comparison is not possible for Anonymous 756. In the absence of her name,

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[27] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 322–323

[28] For an alternative view on Osgyth, see: Barbara Yorke, "The Kingdom of the East Saxons," *Anglo-Saxon England* 14 (1985): 20n107.

[29] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4–5; Nicholas J. Higham, *An English Empire: Bede and the Early Anglo-Saxon Kings* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 9–12; Stefany Wragg, "Vernacular Literature in Eighth- and Ninth-Century Mercia" (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2017), 183.

it is impossible to know if she was the object of a saint's cult with later hagiographical material. Statistically, this is unlikely. During the years of Anonymous 756's life, the frequency of female saints across the continent of Europe was decreasing, and Nijenhuis' survey of pre-Conquest female saints notes how the majority lived in the seventh and, first half of the eighth centuries.[30] The information available for the earlier part of Eardwulf's reign becomes more difficult to relate to Anonymous 756 because of the absence of other sources, hagiographical or historical. [31]

Where historical narrative and annalistic sources cannot supply further information, literature can provide a useful comparison to illustrate the kind of situations in which a woman such as Anonymous 756 likely found herself. *Beowulf* is perhaps the most useful of these sources, as it offers a cultural exploration of queenship that is relatively divorced from the political realities of historical writing. The culture depicted in *Beowulf* furnishes a further perspective on the general position of Anonymous 756 in an authorized fiction by further elucidating the social circumstances similarly positioned women may have faced in a narrative.

What's in an Identity: Freawaru in *Beowulf*

The trends observable in contemporary queenship offer the best comparisons for understanding Anonymous 756 because of her status as a king's wife. From a historical perspective, the model of the peaceweaving marriage adds to our understanding of the kinds of circumstances in which such marriages were contracted, as well as how they are often obscured in the historical record. Whereas many historical examples of peaceweaving marriage can be difficult to discern, except when they have been notable failures, Freawaru's marriage in *Beowulf* is a clear and explicit instance of a *freoðuwebbe*. When treated carefully, heroic poetry, and especially *Beowulf*, represents one of the richest potential sources for understanding aristocratic culture in this era.

There are limitations to the explanatory power of this text: its dating and authorship is greatly debated, and its setting is not eighth-century England, but rather sixth-century Denmark. John Blair has recently argued, following Wormald's dating of the poem to the later eighth century, that "we should remember how very little physical evidence there is [for the sort of activities in the poem], and how powerfully 'Beowulf' has encouraged us to generalise an image of Anglo-Saxon royal life that may have been quite specific."[32] Blair's observation is a

[30] Jane T. Schulenburg, "Female Sanctity: Public and Private Roles, 500-1100," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages,* ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 102–125; Wiesje Nijenhuis, "In a Class of Their Own, Anglo-Saxon Female Saints," *Mediaevistik* 14 (2001): 134.

[31] For an overview of the material regarding Eardwulf, see: Joanna Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c.750–860* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), esp. 145–167.

[32] John Blair, *Building Anglo-Saxon England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 138. See also: Patrick Wormald, "Bede, Beowulf and the Conversion of the Anglo–Saxon Aristocracy," in *The Times of Bede, 625–865: Studies in Early English Christian Society and its Historian* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 30–70; Leonard Neidorf, "Beowulf before Beowulf: Anglo-Saxon Anthroponymy and Heroic Legend," *Review of English Studies* 64, no. 266 (2013): 553–573.

salient reminder that as useful as literature may be, it is only a model. Nevertheless, the depictions of court culture in *Beowulf* can offer a critical model of the web of relations and politics of traditional early medieval English culture, and the text offers a narrative to depict the kinds of interpersonal relationships and situations that a woman like Anonymous 756 was likely to have had.

For a text at least nominally about a male hero, *Beowulf* has a number of female characters who offer tantalising parallels to consider alongside queens like Anonymous 756. Though there are several women in the poem, their positions in the text are often marginal or ancillary, featuring as asides, in digressions, or as shadowy contrasts to the more fully explored male characters. Gillian Overing views the "systematic exclusion of women" in *Beowulf* as a critique of the "death–centred, masculine economy" of its heroic setting.[33] Jane Chance and Stacey Klein read the women of *Beowulf* as in fact being central to the text.[34] Shari Horner uses the discourse of enclosure, informed by the increasingly restrictive conditions of early medieval monasticism, to read the women and structure of *Beowulf*.[35] Among these women is word-wise Wealtheow, a well–spoken and politically astute woman of a foreign background trying to secure her son's succession after Hrothgar's death; there is weeping Hildeburh, exposed to the worst aspects of revenge culture; and, arguably the closest parallel for Eardwulf's queen, Anonymous 756—the voiceless daughter of Hrothgar, Freawaru.[36]

Freawaru is a suitable comparison for Anonymous 756 on several levels. One is a connection via Alcuin, who authored the letter in which Anonymous 756 is uniquely documented. In another letter, Alcuin also mentions the name of Freawaru's husband, Ingeld, in a letter to complain about heroic customs overtaking monastic practice in Northumbria.[37] Though the contexts are very different, the names Ingeld, Beowulf, Hildeburh and other characters also appear in the Northumbrian *Liber Vitae*—but not Freawaru.

Most usefully, Freawaru's position in *Beowulf* is rather like that of Anonymous 756 in the textual record. She is an object, rather than a subject; she is spoken about, but does not speak. Like Anonymous 756, her story is imparted in male-to-male communication in which she figures as an object ancillary to the message. Unlike her husband and several of the other heroic characters in the *Beowulf* texts, she does not appear in any other text or analogue. There is no other source to work out the details of her existence. In addition, the family relationships of both women are not entirely clear. Freawaru is identified as the daughter of Hrothgar and

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33 Gillian Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), xxiii.
34 Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 95–108; Klein, *Ruling Women*, 87–123.
35 Shari Horner, *The Discourse of Enclosure: Representing Women in Old English Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).
36 Alaric Hall has also discussed the marriage of Hygelac's unnamed daughter in a similar context, though with a focus on the hapax *ofermaðmas*. See: Alaric Hall, "Hygelac's Only Daughter: A Present, a Potentate and a Peaceweaver in Beowulf," *Studia Neophilologica* 78, no. 1 (2006): 81–87.
37 For a discussion of the Beowulf legend in the context of early Northumbria, see: Neidorf, "Beowulf before Beowulf."

engaged to Ingeld; the identity of her mother, however, is never explicitly referenced. It is possible that Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen, is her mother, an assumption made by many scholars. However, where Wealtheow clearly asserts her relationship with Hrothgar's sons, Hrethric and Hrothmund as "uncran eaferan" ("both of our sons," l. 1185), there is no explicit mention of her relationship to Freawaru. And, like Anonymous 756, Freawaru is victimised by systems of power and violence that also obscure her relationships. The concern for her in Beowulf is secondary to the concern for her male relations.

We only learn of Hrothgar's daughter—and her plight—in Beowulf's advice and summary when he returns from Hrothgar's court (ll. 2020–31).[38] To summarise, he remarks that he saw her in Hrothgar's hall, then projects forward that her impending peaceweaving marriage to Ingeld, a Heathobard, will ultimately fail as the strife between the two warring factions will erupt again. He relates a gnomic projection to illustrate his concerns: "As a rule, the bone–spear will not rest for a long time in such circumstances, though the bride be good."[39] Though Beowulf speaks in general terms here, applying a maxim to the specific, Freawaru is reduced to her relation to men. She is only a bride. Nowhere does Freawaru speak; in fact, she is not even remarked upon or engaged with until her presence becomes absence, after Beowulf departs Heorot. She has no voice, nor any choice in her role. Hrothgar has brokered her as a peaceweaver, and she will leave the hall. None of these characters as presented in the poem represent "real" individuals in any historical sense, but remain the anonymous poet's narrative construction of them, perhaps inspired by legendary or historical figures. Given her constructed nature, Freawaru has been read in a number of different ways: Alaric Hall compares her to Hygelac's daughter, given as an excessive treasure or *ofermaðm* and suggests that the failure of peaceweaving marriages fundamentally rests with the men between whom these women are passed.[40] In comparison, Peter Baker considers Freawaru against the greater theoretical model of peaceweavers as well as systems of gift exchange, and suggests that because she is like a gift:

> [n]o matter how graciously a queen like Freawaru behaves ... she is unlikely ever to be *leof*. When she gives gifts, after all, can anyone be sure on whose behalf she is imposing obligation? And when she offers sage advice, can they be sure whose interests she is serving?[41]

More recently, Francis Leneghan has assessed the poem as being fundamentally concerned

[38] For a discussion of how Wealtheow and Freawaru figure into the politics of Beowulf, see: Francis Leneghan, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020).
[39] Friedrich Klaeber, *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). Translation is my own with reference to the notes in this volume: "Oft seldan hwæræfter leodhryre lytle hwile bongar bugeð, þeah seo bryd duge." (2029b–2030).
[40] Hall, "Hygelac's Only Daughter: A Present, a Potentate and a Peaceweaver in Beowulf."
[41] Baker, *Honour, Exchange and Violence*, 103–166, esp. 163–166.

with the politics of success and dynastic drama, comparing Freawaru to Offa's bride (Fremu/Thryth), highlighting the relative obstacles and possible successes involved in peaceweaving.[42] Each of these readings recognises Freawaru's lack of autonomy. She is represented as passive, rather than active, object, rather than subject, silent, rather than speaking: she is, in many ways, a queen as they often occur in the historical sources.[43]

Though one is a fictional character and one a historical woman, Freawaru and Anonymous 756 occupy a similar position. Both women exist only in texts constructed to serve the purposes of their authors. The marriage that Beowulf describes, as well as its fallout, appears to be an attempt to reconcile a feud with a marriage. The parallels between Freawaru and Anonymous 756 suggest that an authorized fiction of her should also consider the possibility that her marriage may have also had a peaceweaving function.

Reading the marriage of Anonymous 756 to Eardwulf against that of Freawaru draws into relief its probable function in promoting unity against a background of familial strife. Alcuin's letter mentioning Anonymous 756 implies that when Eardwulf succeeded to the throne, he was already married. Eardwulf succeeded Osbald, whom Alcuin seems fairly convinced was responsible for the murder of the previous king, Æthelbert, in 796. Osbald was deserted by the Northumbrian nobles and fled to Pictland, clearing the way for Eardwulf, though he mounted later challenges. As Joanna Story has pointed out, Eardwulf "had been born into a noble, but non-royal family" and "[w]ell before his creation as king in 796, Eardwulf had been a man of considerable political significance within Northumbria and possibly posed a second-generation threat to Æthelred's authority."[44] A political match to ally like-minded factions within Northumbria—or to help broker a peace in such an unstable environment—would fit logically with the background of late eighth-century Northumbria. An alliance or settled feud could have furnished Eardwulf with the support necessary to take the throne. Strong domestic backing from his nobles seems requisite given the known hostility of Coenwulf of Mercia: Eardwulf needed the support from within the Northumbrian nobility as well as key ecclesiastics to hold the throne. Eardwulf was consecrated in May 796 by Archbishop Eanbald of York; the latter was dead by the end of the summer and replaced by Eanbald II, who was noted for his hostility to Eardwulf and for harbouring enemies within the sanctuary of York Minster.[45]

While we will not be able to pass a decisive judgement on the precise situation that occasioned the marriage between Anonymous 756 and Eardwulf in Northumbria, what is clear is that, in 796, Eardwulf faced a number of significant changes. One was his consecration as

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[42] Leneghan, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf*, 80–81.

[43] For an alternative view of Wealtheow's active involvement in dynastic politics (as opposed to Freawaru's), see: Élise Louviot, *Direct Speech in Beowulf and Other Old English Narrative Poems* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2016).

[44] Story, Carolingian Connections, 159.

[45] Ernst Dümmler, ed., *Epistolae Merowingici et Karolini Aevi*, nos. 232–233, 114, 116, 125, 226; Alcuin, *Alcuin of York,* trans. Stephen Allott (York: William Sessions, 1974), 20–21, 6–7, 18–19; Story, *Carolingian Connections*, 132–133.

king in York Minster in May; another was his decision to abandon his wife in favour of a mistress; a third was the death of a friendly archbishop of York, who was replaced with an actively hostile one. While Eardwulf had been consecrated king, a distinction of especial importance following the Legatine Canons of 786, his security on the throne was not assured. Perhaps his marriage to Anonymous 756 was an attempt, if not to settle a blood-feud, then to promote a new alliance to take on the Northumbrian throne in the dynastic chaos, as the royal line of the Northumbrians diluted and died out and aristocrats were increasingly raised to the throne.[46] It is impossible to know precisely what motivated Eardwulf's abandonment of his wife. It is even more difficult to know how the women themselves thought of such peaceweaving marriages: the high incidence of princess saints fleeing rejected suitors in favour or monastic life or even martyrdom may hint that many of these women did not view the matches favourably. In the case of Anonymous 756, we do not know her thoughts, but the circumstances surrounding the union favour the likelihood of a peaceweaving marriage or political alliance.

An Impossible Identity: Charlemagne's Daughter

Thus far, I have advocated the theory that Anonymous 756, as the wife of king Eardwulf, was a queen who was married as part of a peaceweaving marriage. Another theory regarding the identity of Anonymous 756 is that she was one of Charlemagne's daughters. The draw of Charlemagne's reputation, as well as known interactions between Eardwulf and Charlemagne's court make this an interesting possibility to explore, and further elucidates the socio-political dynamics of the late eighth century.

There are precedents for marriages between Frankish wives and English kings in pre-Conquest England. For example, the Frankish princess Bertha, queen of Æthelberht of Kent in the sixth and seventh century, may have provided some impetus for her husband to convert to Christianity. Other unions are more speculative. The West Saxon king and grandfather of Alfred the Great, Ecgberht, also spent time in Francia: his wife, named "Rædburga" in a fifteenth-century chronicle, is attributed to be a relation of Charlemagne, though this has not been confirmed. Unions only documented in later sources tend to be regarded with some suspicion. The basis for the conjecture that Eardwulf's wife was a daughter of Charlemagne rests in the entry for 797 in the tenth-century *Annales Lindisfarensis et Dunelmenses*. Joanna Story notes with suspicion how this information is "the only unique piece of evidence found inthese annals" and that "the reference to Eardwulf's possible dynastic union with the Carolingians is usually considered spurious."[47] Although the dating of material can sometimes be out a year or two depending upon the earlier sources used to compile these later documents, already the date of this entry is concerning, a year after Anonymous 756 was put aside in favour of a

[46] Alcuin's letters to Eardwulf and his rival, Osbert in 796 specifically reference "the blood of nobles and rulers ... spilt" (Letter 16). See: Alcuin, *Alcuin of York*, nos. 16, 17, 24–26.
[47] Story, *Carolingian Connections*, 156.

mistress.

The suggestion and possibility of this union is striking for its implications in terms of Charlemagne's management of his domestic affairs, as well as for the politics of pre-Conquest England. Was Charlemagne aware of Eardwulf and the legitimacy of his claim to the Northumbrian throne early on, and did he marry a daughter to him to provide support and form a political alliance? The idea of a union between an English king and Charlemagne's offspring is not altogether implausible. In the 780s, Charlemagne was involved with several marriage negotiations regarding his offspring. In 781, Irene, the *basilissa* of the Byzantine Empire, and Charlemagne began negotiations for her son, Constantine VI, to marry one of his daughters, Rotrude. Theophanes even mentions the scandalous suggestion that the empress offered herself in marriage to Charlemagne. However, the agreement was later broken off for political reasons, as Charlemagne invaded a section of Italy traditionally viewed as Byzantine territory.[48] In the late 780s, Charlemagne sought a bride for one of his sons from among the daughters of Offa of Mercia. The negotiations failed, allegedly because Offa demanded that his heir, Ecgfrith, have one of Charlemagne's daughters for a wife.[49] These high-profile marriage negotiations reveal that Charlemagne at least considered marrying his children to the offspring of high-ranking kings in regions outside his control and across ethnic lines.

In addition, there are some suggestions of contact between Eardwulf and Charlemagne's court before his exile there in 808.[50] The language of Eardwulf's coronation in the *York Annals* and the Northern Recension of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* closely parallels language in Frankish passions and chronicles for the elevation and consecration of high-ranking men.[51] Eardwulf spent time in exile between a botched assassination attempt in 790 and his coronation in 796, but where he spent this exile is unknown. Eardwulf's later decision to visit Charlemagne in Nijmegen in 808 on his way to Rome, as chronicled in the *Royal Frankish Annals*, lends credence to the idea that there was some sort of early connection between him and the famous Frankish emperor.[52]

The weight of evidence, however, makes it almost impossible that Anonymous 756 herself was a daughter of Charlemagne. It may be that Eardwulf of Northumbria did have a later Frankish bride, but it is overwhelmingly unlikely that she is the same woman as Anonymous 756. Firstly, Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* records how he brought up his family. In particular, he notes how Charlemagne's daughters were:

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48 Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527– 1204* (London: Routledge, 1999), 76; Paul Hollingsworth, "Charlemagne," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. Alexander P. Kazhdan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); see also Pohl.

49 Story, *Carolingian Connections*, 135–136.

50 For a more detailed reconstruction of Eardwulf's exile and subsequent restoration, see: Story, *Carolingian Connections,* 145–167.

51 Story, *Carolingian Connections,* 129–130.

52 Fridericus Kurze, ed., *Annales Regni Francorum Inde Ab. a. 741 Usque Ad a. 829 Qui Dicuntur Annales Laurissenses Maiores et Einhardi* (Hannover: Culemann, 1895), 126

> most beautiful and were deeply loved by him, strange to say he never wanted to give any one of them in marriage to anybody, whether a Frank or a foreigner, but kept them all with him until his death, saying that he could not give up their companionship. [c. 19][53]

This testimony is consistent with what is known of how Charlemagne treated his daughters. Both sets of marriage negotiations in the 780s were ultimately unfruitful. Charlemagne kept his daughters under his own protection, or, like Merovingian kings, placed unmarried daughters in convents. Matthias Becher observes that "[t]he marriage of one of his daughters would have enhanced her husband's and his family's status too much, not to mention the future claims of a grandson."[54] Even at a distance, allying his family with that of a high-status noble in Northumbria was a political risk for Charlemagne and his dynasty. Finally, Charlemagne's response to the political turbulence in late eighth-century Northumbria again makes it highly unlikely that he would have married any of his daughters into such a climate. In what looks like an expression of political influence, Charlemagne sent some of the treasure from his campaign against the Avars to Mercia and Northumbria in 796.[55] It is uncertain what the relationship between Charlemagne and his corresponding kings in Britain precisely constituted, but what is clear is that Charlemagne indicated his outrage at the murder of Æthelred of Northumbria in letters of the same year.[56] Nor was regicide or the deposition of kings a new situation in Northumbria. The visit of the Papal Legates to Mercia and Northumbria in 786 is largely seen as a response to the deposition and murder of successive kings in Northumbria.[57] Almost as a rule, Charlemagne did not marry off any of his daughters, let alone in political alliances, and even less so to kingdoms known for political instability.

Alternative explanations can account for the closeness between Eardwulf and Charlemagne. Alcuin's presence at both courts serves to explain the parallels between the Frankish annals and the records of Eardwulf's coronation.[58] In addition, Eardwulf's position as a king from a new dynasty replacing an old one largely paralleled the position of the Carolingians. Eardwulf's visit to Charlemagne in 808 may have been prompted more for his reputation for aiding exiles and helping to restore rightful kings to their thrones in foreign lands.[59] It would be difficult to conceive of Charlemagne aiding Eardwulf as a son-in-law, had Anonymous 756 been permanently put aside in favour of a mistress. Rather, the tenth-century annal misidentifying Eardwulf's wife as a daughter of Charlemagne may be a retrospective

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[53] David Ganz, *Two Lives of Charlemagne* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2008), 33
[54] Matthias Becher, *Charlemagne* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
[55] Kurze, *Annales Regni Francorum*, 98.
[56] Alcuin, *Alcuin of York*, nos. 41, 53–55; Story, *Carolingian Connections*, 162–167.
[57] Catherine Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils, c. 650–c. 850* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995) 183–187.
[58] For a more detailed discussion, see: Story, *Carolingian Connections*, 126–133.
[59] Story, *Carolingian Connections*, 135–167.

attempt to explain his reinstatement on the throne in 808.

The women in Charlemagne's life are not always well documented. Many of his own concubines came from low-born families, and the name of one daughter is completely forgotten by sources. While it is impossible to say for certain, based on the evidence available it seems improbable that Anonymous 756 was one of Charlemagne's offspring. The (mis)attribution commands attention because of Charlemagne's reputation, rather than Eardwulf's, or that of Anonymous 756 herself. The interest that the possibility garners derives yet again from the men involved, relegating the women to a relative position in the history, sources, and discussion. In this consideration of the possibility of Anonymous 756 being a daughter of Charlemagne, it is not her we are directly interested in or discussing: it is her father, and her relationship to him. From a modern perspective, in seeking to access directly the identity of a historical woman directly, we are confronted once again with the fundamentally and impenetrably patriarchal nature of the sources and ongoing debate.

What's in a Name? Old English Names

Thus far, we have considered Anonymous 756 in the context of contemporary pre-Conquest queens. In addition, the political situation of late eighth-century Northumbria suggests that her match to Eardwulf had a peaceweaving function, but that she almost certainly was not a daughter of Charlemagne. In all this, the absence of a traditional name for Anonymous 756 has presented challenges. In traditional biographical and historical work, a name is easily and often taken for granted. It is the essential identifier, the key that pulls up relevant information and paves the way for identifying further relationships. With Anonymous 756, this information—and, in turn, the easiest path to fuller picture—is absent.

The value of knowing the actual name of Anonymous 756 cannot be overstated for the purposes of biography. Yet, while any theory here must remain "authorized fiction" rather than fact, there are some principles by which we might posit her name. This, in turn, enables us to identify some connections with possible family members, and offering further plausible contexts for her life.

Some general principles inform an educated guess as to her name. Generally speaking, Old English names after the seventh century tended to be dithematic, that is, consisting of two name-elements, usually words with their own meanings.[60] These are referred to as the prototheme, for the first part of a name, and deuterotheme, for the second part of the name. For example, in the name Eardwulf, the prototheme is "Eard," "native land or country, dwelling," and the deuterotheme "wulf," "wolf."[61] Over time, deuterothemes could develop a

[60] For a brief summary, see: James Chetwood, "Re-evaluating English Personal Naming on the Eve of the Conquest," *Early Medieval Europe* 26, no. 4 (2018): 518–547.

[61] "Eard," in *The Toronto Dictionary of Old English, A-I,* ed. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, and Antonette diPaolo Healey (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2018); "Wulf," in the *Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary,* ed. Joseph Bosworth, Thomas Toller, Sean Christ, and Ondřej Tichý,

gendered character, though as Okasha has articulated, grammatical gender did not necessarily agree with biological or social gender.[62] As a result, certain names tend to be considered male and others female, depending on their deuterothemes.

Another key principle to naming patterns was the desire to mark kinship. Familial names (at least in aristocratic records) often alliterate, or share a name element with the father's side of the family, or, less often, the mother's. Whilst surnames did not exist as such, these sound–patterns, alliteration, and the use of patronymic appendages such as "son of Eardwulf" served the function of modern–day surnames as a further means of specification. The general guiding principles for naming practice can be outlined thus: (1) dithematic names with an imperfect degree of correlation between grammatical gender and biological gender; (2) the re-use of sound patterns, including alliteration and themes, associated with families and, to an extent, social rank; and (3) the use of genealogical patronymics for further specification of identity.

These principles alone do not recover the name of Anonymous 756. They do, however, offer some guiding principles in identifying possible candidates—both for her name, and her natal family. It will remain impossible to positively identify the real name of Anonymous 756. Yet exploring identities brings into clearer focus the potential background and family relationships she had, as well as the kind of life experiences she faced. Such a shift in perspective elucidates more about her individual world, and in turn, more about the culture and society in which she lived and moved. It also draws into relief what advances in understanding such experimental methods offer on subjects (and objects) where sources are sparse in this period.

The Northumbrian *Liber Vitae*

Considering the context in which Anonymous 756 lived, politically, domestically, and internationally, as well as culturally, has yielded developments on the initial vague information yielded by the one sentence in Alcuin's letter. The narrative constructed in this exploration suggests that she was very probably a Northumbrian noblewoman married to Eardwulf as part of a peaceweaving relationship, and not a daughter of Charlemagne. We do not have any indication as to what her name may have been, though we do have an understanding of the general principles of personal names in this period. A sample of noble, female Northumbrian names offers further lines of enquiry. However, whilst these names offer possibilities to consider in terms of the identity of Anonymous 756, fundamentally it is impossible to resolve on any one possibility as significant or definitive. The individuals represented in these textual records are divorced of too much context or additional definitive information to move beyond the constructed nature of the lists in which they survive to the recognisable realities of their

http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/036812.

[62] Elisabeth Okasha, *Women's Names in Old English* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

own lived experiences. The process of attempting to excavate a name to fit the identity of Anonymous 756 draws into greater relief the necessity of a name for any attempt at a traditional form of biographical writing.

The Northumbrian *Liber Vitae* is a high-status liturgical book of commemoration which records and organises the names of many people. Its origins are complex, drawingnames material seems to be a record of the names of the community of St Cuthbert, most likely drawn on material from Lindisfarne and Wearmouth-Jarrow.[63] It includes a list of *Nomina Reginarum et Abatissarum* with the names of 198 Queens and Abbesses, of which approximately 116 are unidentifiable.[64] The relative "anonymity" of these women is in part due to the incomplete survival of records, especially from Northumbria, yet even in areas with better survival, the documentary record offers little more than a few sparse details about most women.

The core of the inscriptions is thought to date to *c.*800–840. These names in turn have been considered to be copied from earlier materials and lists, and consequently would preserve early forms of names that were themselves possibly copied from earlier diptychs.[65] Nor is it an impartial and complete record, like a modern census: some queens are entered but not their kings; some kings are entered, but not their queens, or at least, as we know them; there are Merovingian and Carolingian queens entered alongside queens from Britain.

In terms of identifying possible names for Anonymous 756, there is also the complicating factor that this list is of queens *and* abbesses. In one sense, this organisation reflects the organic values of its authors, rather than categories imposed by later historians, and therefore is not an issue. William Levison noted early on, and it has been observed by many historians since, that it was common practice for a queen dowager to enter monastic life, usually as an abbess.[66] Looking at the careers of Eormenhild of Mercia, Cynethryth of Mercia, Osgyth of Essex, Ealhflæd of Mercia and Osthryth of Mercia confirms this trend—all but one of these queens became abbesses, and the one who did not, Osthryth, was murdered before she had a chance to do so. On the other hand, not all abbesses were once queens: many were princesses, or members of extremely powerful aristocratic families, like Hild of Whitby. Elizabeth Briggs concludes "that queens and abbesses were recorded in the same list is an indication of the high status of abbesses."[67] It also solves the problem of names being recorded twice but privileges the ecclesiastical position of these powerful women over their

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63 Elizabeth Briggs, "Nothing but the Names: The Original Core of the Durham Liber Vitae," in *The Durham Liber Vitae and Its Context,* ed. D.W. Rollason (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004), 68. See also: David Dumville, "'The Northumbrian Liber Vitae': London, British Library, MS. Cotton Domitian A.Vii, Folios 15–24 & 25–45, the Original Text," in *Anglo–Saxon Essays, 2001–2007* (Aberdeen: The Centre for Anglo–Saxon Studies, 2007).

64 Elizabeth Briggs, "Religion, Society and Politics, and the Liber Vitae of Durham" (PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 1987), 89.

65 Briggs, "Nothing", 66–68.

66 William Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century: The Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford in the Hilary Term, 1943* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946).

67 Briggs, "Religion, Society and Politics," 15.

secular status as queen. Such categorization reflects the perspective of the monastic producers and users of this list. In looking further at the individuals whose identity can be confirmed or inferred from the Northumbrian Liber Vitae, it becomes more apparent that Anonymous 756's name could be among the names recorded, though it lies beyond the scope of the data available to offer a single positive identification.

Furthermore, where Anonymous 756 lacks a name to identify her, conversely, many of the names in the list of *Reginarum et Abatissarum* lack identities. It is thought that the list of names was meant to commemorate individuals who in some form had a connection with the community producing the book: this may have been a record of a pilgrimage to the community, or a record of a gift to it, or an agreement to offer prayers for each other. Yet in the majority of instances in the Northumbrian *Liber Vitae*, their association with the community is now the only discernible significance of these names. Their names survive, as well as the context of their memory: the confraternity book. But the individuals themselves have largely been effaced. In most instances, it is no more possible to write the biographies of these explicitly named individuals than it is an "anonymous" woman like Anonymous 756. Yet, as with Anonymous 756, that does not mean that there is no value to discussing these women with regard to their effaced identities. Such an examination draws forward potential, if not definitive, patterns of relation, by which more might be understood about them and the world that recorded their names for posterity.

The list of abbesses and queens starts with Rægenmelth / Rieienmelth and Eanflæd, two of Oswiu's queens, dating the origins of the list into the 640s. There are, however, some issues with positively identifying individuals on the list. There are fewer than 300 Old English names thought to be female, and there is no surviving text that explains Old English naming practices.[68] Most of the identifiably female names come from the Northumbrian *Liber Vitae*, whilst other sources, such as the Hyde *Liber Vitae*, the *Anglo–Saxon Chronicle*, hagiographies, documentary evidence such as wills and Domesday Books, and the works of historians such as Bede, Asser, and William of Malmesbury, provide the rest.[69] The evidence is also complicated by presence of Anglicised foreign names.[70] Yet some positive identifications of queens are possible. Briggs highlights Iurminburg (also known as Eormenburg, the second wife of Ecgfrith of Northumbria and third name on the list), and Cuthburg, the wife of King Aldfrith of Northumbria (sixth on the list). The latest name that Briggs concretely identifies as a queen or abbess is Ælfflæd, the wife of Æthelred I of Northumbria (r. 774–777/8; 790–796) and the daughter of King Offa and Queen Cynethryth of Mercia, on fol. 16v.[71] There are, however, a few more names on this list that probably belong to queens. The name "cyniðryð" appears seven times. It is possible that some of these are accidental duplicates, drawn together from

[68] Elisabeth Okasha, *Women's Names in Old English* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 1.
[69] Okasha, *Women's Names in Old English*, 7.
[70] Okasha, *Women's Names in Old English*, 11.
[71] Briggs, "Nothing," 75.

several previous sources or confraternity books, and divorced of the identity of the women named. However, the PASE database suggests, the name "Cyniðryð" was not uncommon; with seven instances of this name, though, it is unlikely that there is a one–to–one correlation between the list and the database's individuals.[72] Briggs identifies the Cynethryth at position 119 as the queen of Offa of Mercia, two above her daughter, Ælfflæd.[73] There are also possibly later queens recorded in the list, though these identifications become increasingly tenuous due to the lack of documentary evidence for these queens themselves: based on the dating of names nearby, the "cyniðryð" at position 174 could potentially be the queen of Wiglaf of Mercia (r. 831–6). Beyond that, it is difficult to say. The name, and its instances on the list, serve to illustrate how challenging the identification process can be.

Ælfflæd's name is a useful chronological placeholder in this list, though its function as temporal bookmark is also not without complications. It is one of the last names clearly entered by the first hand, probably around 800; the second hand possibly dates from around 840, and enters up to 60 names. While the list is roughly chronological, with earlier queens appearing earlier in the list and rough contemporaries often appearing near to each other, the list is not organised in a strict, chronological fashion; as Briggs notes, some of the names appear to be grouped by family connections, highlighted by alliteration, such as the cluster of "beorngyð, berctuaru, beorngyð" on f. 16v at positions 116 to 118, or by identifiable names, such as the cluster of Mercian royal women at positions 119 to 121. Similar groupings of families or political alliances occur in other sections of the list, such as the alliance cluster of kings including Æthelred of Northumbria, Charlemagne ("Karlus"), Megenfridus, and Constantine, king of the Picts (c. 789–820).[74] Eardwulf appears 55th in this same list of *Regum vel Ducum* (Kings or Dukes), but again, they are not in strict chronological order. Identifying potential candidates for the name of Anonymous 756, if she were to appear in the list of Queens and Abbesses, is not, then, as straightforward as working chronologically.

There are a few other principles that are fair enough assumptions to work from. The first is her rank before her marriage, and her family's status. Eardwulf was not on the throne long before Alcuin wrote his letter—he was crowned in May of 796, but by 797, he had set Anonymous 756 aside for a mistress. From this, it seems safe to infer that the marriage took place before Eardwulf's succession to the throne.

The fragmentary nature of the historical record makes it difficult to establish much more than this in terms of chronology. Furthermore, the sparse record means it would be perilous to make certain assumptions to provide a clearer framework. It is impossible to determine whether Eardwulf's son and successor, Eanred, was born to Anonymous 756 or to

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[72] PASE, "Cynethryth," http://pase.ac.uk/jsp/pdb?dosp=VIEW_RECORDS&st=PERSON_NAME&value=832&level=1&lbl=Cynethryth.
[73] Briggs, "Nothing," 75.
[74] Briggs, "Nothing," 71, 74-75.

another woman; furthermore, later historical sources conflict in the date of Eanred's succession, alternating between 810 (according to Roger of Wendover in the thirteenth century) and a date more likely in the 830s, suggested by numismatic evidence.[75] As such his birth date offers little useful information in terms of writing the biography of Anonymous 756.

Looking at potential family connections offers new avenues of exploration in understanding the aristocracy of pre-Conquest England. But who were Anonymous 756's natal family? Were they local or did they hail from a foreign kingdom? Renato Rodrigues da Silva has identified that the Northumbrian aristocracy and royalty of the eighth century, Eardwulf's predecessors, had "a custom of marrying a noble lady from a kingdom different from his own."[76] There are clear examples of this; Da Silva cites the two marriages of Ecgfrith (r. 664–685); Æthelred I (r. 774–779; 790–796) also married a Mercian princess bride following his restoration. However, each of these three matches were made in markedly different circumstances than that of Eardwulf to Anonymous 756. Ecgfrith was married as part of a series of dynastic alliances made by Oswiu, Ecgfrith's father, between his children and the children of nearby kingdoms in order to strengthen his position as the effective overlord. At his marriage at the age of 15 in 660, Ecgfrith was the son of a reigning king by his favoured wife, Eanflæd of Deira, whom Oswiu had married in an attempt to garner favour with the Deiran dynasty and people. At the time of his second marriage, Ecgfrith was perhaps the most powerful king in Britain. Respectively, Æthelred I was a king reasserting his authority over his turbulent nobility. Eardwulf occupied a significantly different position to that of these two kings at the time of his marriage. He was not the son of a reigning king, but rather the son of a prominent nobleman, also named Eardwulf. He may have been seen as an *ætheling*, a possible candidate for the throne, but certainly not a prince.

The marriage patterns of the sons of kings, and those of reigning kings, are therefore not necessarily a good model by which to understand Eardwulf's marriage to Anonymous 756. By the time of Eardwulf's marriage, the position of the Northumbrian monarchy had changed significantly from the early eighth century. Oswiu had been able to combine the subkingdoms of Bernicia and Deira into one kingdom of Northumbria and transmit the rule of these to his sons, Ecgfrith and Aldfrith in turn. Increasingly, succession was not father to son or brother, but rotated around different *æthelings* all descended from the royal stock in different degrees, such as Eadwulf (r. 704-5), who may have been Eardwulf's great-grandfather, or Coenred and Ceolwulf, who were both descendants of Ida of Bernicia. Increasingly, Northumbrian kings were murdered or deposed, such as Oswulf, who was murdered by his own servants in 759, Æthelwald Moll who was deposed in 765, or Alhred, who was deposed and exiled in 774. Arguably, few foreign kings would be willing to marry a daughter into such an unstable political situation. Offa of Mercia's offspring must be regarded as exceptions in the late eighth

[75] D.W. Rollason, "Eardwulf (fl. 796–c.830)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/8394.
[76] Renato Rodrigues Da Silva, "The Aristocracy of Northumbria in the Long Eighth-Century: Production, Circulation, Consumption" (PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 2016), 40.

century. He married his daughter, Ælfflæd, to Æthelred in 792, well after Æthelred had retaken his kingdom following deposition, and after the failed marriage negotiations between Offa and Charlemagne. In retrospect, one may question the wisdom of Offa's choices, as Æthelred was murdered in April 796, mere months before Offa's own death, and the untimely demise of his heir, Ecgfrith. After a relatively stable succession in the late seventh and early eighth century, the *æthelings* of Northumbria in the late eighth century would not have seemed secure political matches for foreign rulers. The increasing raids of the Danes, first noted as attacking Dorset in 789 and who raided Lindisfarne in 793, offered further political disruption.[77] Contracting a marriage to secure a foreign alliance to a high-ranking Northumbrian was increasingly less of a priority than alliances between local aristocratic families.

Furthermore, the collective landscape of royal families in England had changed during the eighth century. By the late 780s, the royal houses available for dynastic alliances were limited in comparison to earlier in the century, due to the rise of monogamous marriage practice as advocated by the Church and the amalgamation of several kingdoms into larger ones like Mercia and Wessex.[78] The dynasty ruling East Anglia at the time had been disrupted by the murder of Æthelbert II by Offa in 794; Kent's royal family apparently migrated to become the royal family of Wessex, and the region principally ruled by clients for Mercian overlords. Even Mercia and Northumbria's royal families had been disordered by dynastic strife: in the case of Mercia, Alcuin implies that Offa purged rivals for the throne to ensure Ecgfrith's succession, but that this backfired when his son died only months later than him; years of continued deposition and murder from rival branches in Northumbria similarly diluted the royal stock. Mercian kings such as Offa and his successor, Coenwulf, appear to have married brides from within their own kingdom; Wessex adopted a similar policy of choosing domestic brides from the aristocracy, but abandoned the title of queen after Eadburh.

The value of a foreign bride in the late eighth century, therefore, was not as high as that of a woman from a local aristocratic family in securing support to take the throne of Northumbria.[79] Janet Nelson's discussion of the careers of Merovingian queens Brunhild and Balthild notes how a queen could use her privileged aristocratic background to shore up support for her position and the succession of her children.[80] Similar principles may well have underwritten the exchange made between Eardwulf and the natal family of Anonymous 756.

Arguably, the most likely background of Anonymous 756 was aristocratic and Northumbrian. Using the principle of alliteration as marking kin-groups we may be able to further identify some of the familial relationships in the Northumbrian *Liber Vitae* obscured by the categorisation of their names into social ranks and roles. There are several identifiable

[77] Cubbin, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Vol. 6 MS D*.
[78] See: Pasternack, "Negotiating Gender in Anglo–Saxon England," 107–142.
[79] Pohl, "Why Not to Marry a Foreign Woman."
[80] Janet T. Nelson, "Queens as Jezebels: Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian History," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 31–77.

Northumbrian noblemen in its list of *Regum vel Ducum* who offer a starting point to identifying possible names for the identity of the father of Anonymous 756. If she was at least 14 at her time of marriage before 796, her father, if on the list, would have flourished in the period of around 760–800. There are some names in the Northumbrian Liber Vitae that correspond to several independently known Northumbrian *duces*, roughly contemporary with the generation around or before Eardwulf. One of these is Wada (fl. 798), who joined a rebellion against Eardwulf in 798, which the king was successful in repelling, though Wada was also involved with later plots against Eardwulf. Wada was noted as being new among the conspirators against Eardwulf in 798. Could his change in allegiance have arisen from the estrangement between the king and Anonymous 756, perhaps a daughter or kinswoman? Another potential option is Sigwulf ("siguulf" at position 87). This could be the same Sigewulf who had witnessed the capitulary presented by George of Ostia as the papal legate as a dux in 786. Another possible contemporary is Tondwini ("tonduini" at position 84). Its proximity to two other known, roughly contemporary Northumbrian noblemen recommend that he, too, flourished around the same time. The name Tondwini is also known from an eighth–century slab at Hexham, perhaps a burial place or memorial. The name element Tond was popular in the region—Æthelthryth's first husband, the princeps Tondberht of the Gearwe, seems to have been in this region, which was part of the Bernician kingdom; a contemporary Tondhere was an ally of Oswine before his murder in 651.

These three names also have similar name elements to three in the list of *Reginarum et Abatissarum*, which could be candidates for the name of Anonymous 756. These names are clustered in the area of transition between the performance of the first and second scribes on f. 17r, just after the record of Ælfflæd's name among her family. This suggests that these names could be chronologically proximate to the time when Anonymous 756 married Eardwulf. These are Sigewaru ("siguarau" at position 133), the otherwise–unattested Tondburg ("tondburg" at position 129), and Wulfhild ("uulfhild" at 124). The nearby Osthryth (at position 125) is also a traditional Northumbrian name, associated with other famous Northumbrians, such as Osthyrth, the Northumbrian princess who married Æthelred of Mercia in the early eighth century, or Osberht, Oswald—though again, this name element is not limited exclusively to Northumbria.

There are, of course, other possibilities, but these examples seem among the more plausible due to their similarity to identifiable names of Northumbrian aristocrats in the *Liber Vitae* and their rough chronological clustering around other late eighth–century queens and abbesses. It is impossible to identify her name exactly. There is too much unknown; the names on the lists have lost too much meaning.

Using the Northumbrian *Liber Vitae* does have limitations in its utility for writing an "authorized fiction" of Anonymous 756. Combined as they are as abbesses and queens, a co–identity signposted in the connective in this categorical title, it is difficult to match the identities of many of these women to the names as recorded. As Lees and Overing have

observed, the biases of clerical culture further relegate the status of women. Such bias is evident in the Northumbrian *Liber Vitae*, in which the names, but little more, of the most powerful women in contemporary early medieval England survive, divorced of much of the contextual meaning with which they were originally invested.[81] Naturally, the same can be said for many of the male names of the document. But the difference is in the documentation: there are more male names recorded elsewhere against which to construct a narrative and cross-reference information.

The process of searching for a name has raised some important further conclusions that offer new perspectives on the position of women and their family ties in this period. Firstly, it offers a methodology to investigate family ties in the Northumbrian *Liber Vitae*, by aligning independently verifiable information about the identities of its names along with chronology and naming practice. This offers a potential, if tenuous, reservoir of new perspectives on family and kinship, often obscured by the categories imposed by pre-Conquest sources. Recognising networks of female relations can further illuminate the socio–political tensions that underlie alliances and rivalries in the period. Secondly, it draws the discussion of queenship in late eighth–century Northumbria into closer comparison with what is known of the practice elsewhere in England and in Francia at the time. These liaisons and connections can often be obscured by geopolitical boundaries and modern categories, but remain crucial to the discussion of Anonymous 756 as an early medieval queen. Finally, the discussion of the family ties and record of names in the Northumbrian *Liber Vitae* offers a different perspective on the political background of Northumbria in the late eighth century. Looking at the throne alone gives some sense of the instability and chaos impacting Northumbria in the eighth century. Drawing the position of women into the discussion offers a more comprehensive view of the nature and causes of disruptions to the ideal political and dynastic process.

Conclusion

Alcuin's remark in his missive to a nobleman—a mere mention of the reason why a king may be due for divine punishment—is the only basis for knowing anything about the existence of Anonymous 756. Alcuin has no interest in her, her identity, or her plight. The only remarkable feature is her relation to another, more important, individual: the king. This does not seem to be the most auspicious or fertile source for the writing of a biography; yet, in exploring the range of sources and contexts that are relevant to tracing some sort of identity for Anonymous 756, it has shed light on much, much more.

Many queens in pre-Conquest England who can be named or identified have few other details known about them. Some of these women do not even have names recorded for posterity, such as the wife of Eardwulf of Northumbria. For others, there is so little source material available that it is difficult to say much about them, or the sources obscure

[81] Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 2.

relationships that become more apparent when approaching them from the perspective of the queens themselves. Similar approaches could be used to illuminate the lives of other queens: the mother of Æthelberht of East Anglia, whose name may have been Leofrun; Eormengyth, the queen of Centwine of Wessex; one of Penda's queens, known as Cynewise; or even the queen of Anna of East Anglia, whose name has also not survived in the textual record. The absence of a name does not need to be an insurmountable obstacle if we are prepared to work with the sources using less traditional methods.

This article has reviewed what one can learn from the ultimately impossible search for the "identity" of Anonymous 756, the only "name" to distinguish the wife of Eardwulf, king of Northumbria. In this, we are severely hindered by the lack of her name. We do not know if Eardwulf had only one wife, what her background was, or the identities any of her offspring. She is divorced from the personal relationships that would enable us to say more about her roles as mother, wife, daughter, or sister, because we do not know if she held most of those roles, or in relation to whom.

This is not, however, to abandon the prospect of biographical writing entirely. Where conventional biographical sources are absent, other material can be adapted to help sketch at least some of the broader shapes of a life as an "authorized fiction". Positioning Anonymous 756 within a carefully constructed, contextual and holistic account gives a fuller perspective of the key factors operational in her life. In a general sense, her identity as a queen—albeit, briefly—has been considered as part of the wider culture in which she operated; in addition, the paradigm of the peaceweaving marriage has been illustrated and applied to one possible peaceweaving marriage (Osgyth and Sighere of Essex), and then to Anonymous 756. Two main documents offer further detailed illustration to create an "authorized fiction" for modelling the life of Anonymous 756. The first, *Beowulf*, uses a similar character, Freawaru, and her position as a model for the situations in which Anonymous 756 may have found herself. Feud culture, political intrigue, shifting alliances and the fundamental relegation of women's positions in an overwhelmingly heroic and patriarchal culture are all illustrated most poignantly in *Beowulf*, but remain difficult to construct from the sources that survive from Anonymous 756's lifetime. Looking across to literature, then, offers an additional perspective that sheds more biographical light on her and her circumstances. The second, the Northumbrian *Liber Vitae*, offers several perspectives to further elucidate her life. These include an examination of some possible names, as well as some possible male relations or fathers from around a generation before Eardwulf's succession; it also discusses the problems posed by the absence of Anonymous 756's name, and the possible life paths following her expulsion from the throne.

Because of her fundamental anonymity, this is not and never could be a traditional biography of Anonymous 756. Rather, by adopting a feminist stance, this form of biographical writing seeks to reorient existing sources to serve a new purpose: to frame the scraps of information relating to one woman's life around the turn of the ninth century, in order to form

the outline of a piece of biographical writing with this thoroughly objectified woman as its subject. This may not appear to be a particularly significant achievement. However, in terms of the biography and history of women of this era, it stands as an advancement in women's studies, gender studies, and history as a whole; most work that engages with these topics tends to skirt around the problematic lack of material in the pre–Conquest period. The queens of this period are not easy to engage with, both due to the lack of sources and the nature of the sources themselves. As Lees and Overing find in their chapter on the rhetorical position of women in pre–Conquest texts:

> to impose a single, unified concept, such as that of the woman question, onto the Anglo–Saxon material, and chart its absence is to ignore the massively complex relation between representation and reality in this, and any other period ... To us, the denial, silencing and elision of women's agency in the Anglo–Saxon cultural record at this structural level is so pervasive as to seem utterly naturalized.[82]

It is impossible to construct a traditional, positivist biography of an anonymous, pre–Conquest queen: to do so is to force the sources to divulge information that is utterly foreign and other to them; to misfit what is object in sources and expect it to serve as a subject. That is not to conclude, however, that nothing biographical can be said of Anonymous 756. Rather, by engaging with the sources that do exist on their terms, and examining both these records and the subject of this biography holistically and contextually, a clearer picture of both emerge. It is not a full image; rather, it is, like the information from which it takes its form, a marginal sketch; a manicule pointing to some scrap of information, but lacking its body.

[82] Lees and Overing, "The Clerics and the Critics," 35.