The St. Edith Cycle in The Salisbury Breviary (c. 1460)

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The study of liturgical manuscripts has experienced a wealth of interdisciplinary activity in the last five years. Richard K. Emmerson has noted that examinations of illuminated manuscripts have shifted from exclusive concern with stylistic and iconographic analyses to more extensive attention to the semiotics of representation and seeing and to the contextualization of image reception within social (e.g., interpretive communities) and material (e.g., the whole book) contexts.

Interdisciplinary analyses of deluxe illuminated manuscripts can thus provide contextualizations that include cultural and political considerations; for example, a recent analysis of the ordre of St. Louis demonstrates that this manuscript was “ordered to serve the political and ideological plans of Saint Louis,” so that “both the visual and the textual content of this codex cooperate to fully realize a monument to the glory of the very Christian sovereign.”

The deluxe manuscript called the Salisbury Breviary also lends itself to such an analysis. This breviary is a good example of what John Lowden has recently termed a “nonworking, luxury” copy of a liturgical book not used in religious ceremonies. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS lat. 17294, did not fulfill the ostensible, practical purpose of a breviary owned by a layperson instead of a religious institution because the volume was not primarily a book of texts and images that would allow its owner to follow church services. Like a number of the illuminated manuscripts Lowden discusses, the Salisbury Breviary’s cultural function was glorification of its patron, John of Lancaster, Duke of Bedford (1389–1435). Our close examination of one small set of texts and images in the manuscript can illustrate its political and cultural function. The Salisbury Breviary’s fifteen miniatures accompanying the readings for the feast of St. Edith of Wilton (16 September) comprise the only extant illustrated cycle of the saint’s life. These images emphasize the connections among Edith’s holiness, royal genealogy, and obedience to her earthly and spiritual fathers. The cycle thus presents in microcosm the book’s objective to proclaim and glorify the rightfully inherited temporal and spiritual power of the Duke.

The Manuscript

The lavishly illustrated fifteenth-c. Salisbury Breviary has received surprisingly little scholarly notice, especially in English language publication. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS lat. 17294, was commissioned from a Paris workshop by John of Lancaster, Duke of Bedford and Regent of France, in the early 1420s; the work had not been completed when he died in 1435. The book’s liturgical texts follow the use of Sarum [Latin for Salisbury], the religious rites developed and regularized at Salisbury Cathedral in the High Middle Ages; for clarity throughout this essay, I refer to the standard breviary text as the Sarum Breviary and to BnF MS lat. 17294 as the Salisbury Breviary. The Paris workshop produced other manuscripts for the Duke, leading modern scholars to designate the breviary’s primary artist as the “Master of the Duke of Bedford” or the “Bedford Master.” Even unfinished, the 832-folio manuscript contains more than 4,200 completed pictorial items; the breviary includes the Calendar, Temporale, Sanctorale, and Communal; if the Psalter had ever been completed, that portion of the breviary is now missing.

The frequent use of the Bedford arms and badges, as well as the overall deluxe layout, mark the book as a testimony to Bedford’s political and religious authority as well as to his good taste. The Duke, a noted protector of the arts, could have intended the breviary as a guide for his own use during services, although its unwieldy size and two-volume layout would have made referring to it cumbersome during a service. The texts show that John of Lancaster expected the French churches he attended to conform to English conventions — thus, the use of Sarum — rather than to a breviary of Paris; the Salisbury Breviary, then, can be viewed as an adjunct of the Duke’s program of instituting English rule and custom throughout the French territories. Had the book been completed before John’s death, its presence during a church service — whether or not he actually referred to the breviary — would have attested to “the wealth and power of the regent.” While the Duke’s appreciation of fine books is not in dispute (as he owned a number of important volumes, including the well-known Bedford Hours), Jenny Stratford argues that the Duke “may have been primarily concerned to appear in the great state fitting to him as regent.” His motivations for commissioning the manuscript were thus aesthetic and political as well as religious; the Paris production of a service book in the English custom certainly indicated that court culture was to accord with the desires and practices of the occupying regent and not with previous French traditions.

In 1966 Eleanor Spencer argued that the Salisbury Breviary was originally meant to be completed in two volumes, the first for the Calendar, Psalter, and Temporale; the second for the Sanctorale and Communal. Catherine Reynolds and Judith Pearce, more recent students of the manuscript, agree with Spencer about the volume division, with Pearce noting that this order differs from the usual Parisian layout determined by the seasons. The text-copying was completed at the beginning of the commissioning period (while the Duke
was still alive) with the work of two scribes. Reynolds breaks the illustrations into three “campaigns” of work spanning a 35–40 year period. The third campaign was still incomplete when work on the book ceased in the 1460s.

Since the Salisbury Breviary follows the Sarum rather than the Paris liturgy, the Parisian artists who produced the illustrations were undoubtedly not familiar with the narratives of the English saints included in the Sacrorum. The latter shows extensive illustration cycles for numerous English as well as universal saints, mostly appearing as border miniatures on the pages containing the readings for the saints’ feast days. Each of these images includes a brief quotation from the text in a banner within the frame (see figures for examples; quotations are noted in the table below). Pearce suggests that members of the Duke’s personal staff — probably his chaplains — were responsible for guiding the artists in the Paris workshop during the execution of these English pictorial cycles. Reynolds postulates the existence of a list of “brief descriptions of the scenes to be shown,” which must have accompanied the book until it left the workshop. The guidance of the English chaplains probably disappeared with the Duke’s patronage, as errors mark a number of the English saints’ cycles.

The Cult of St. Edith

One of those English saints, Edith of Wilton, was a historical personage whose cult began to blossom after her death; born c.961, she was the daughter of King Edgar and Wulfrhryth, a woman who may have been married to the king. Edith grew up at Wilton Abbey in a state befitting a princess; she purchased numerous relics, built an elaborate chapel to St. Dennis, and engaged in numerous good works. The Wilton community promoted her cult after her death in 984; Edith performed numerous posthumous miracles of healing and protection; locally, her cult was very strong even after the Reformation.

Wilton Abbey was under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Salisbury, and the churchmen standardizing the liturgy at the cathedral included readings for the feast of St. Edith in the Sacrorum of the Sarum Breviary. These readings present Edith as an imitable saint so that congregants may learn about Edith’s adherence to family duty, Christian charity, and spiritual obedience. The lections are excerpted from the Vita Edithae written at Wilton in the eleventh century by Goscelin, a monk of St. Bertin; the selected passages focus on episodes from Edith’s active life rather than on her death, or posthumous miracles. Indeed, the readings conclude with Edith’s consecration as abbess in accordance with her father’s and her bishop’s will. The breviary text is drawn from the version of the Vita preserved in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson C.938, folios 1–29; none of the variants in Cardiff, Public Library MS I. 381, folios 81–120, is apparent. Each of the lessons provides instruction in Christian living suitable for a wide variety of congregants — male and female, aristocratic and common, professed and secular.

Rather than celebrate Edith’s miracles and posthumous intercessory power (which were substantial, according to the full Vita), the Sarum Breviary readings present life choices deemed as exemplary by Edith and her family members. A summary of the readings follows (personal names follow the usage and spelling employed in the text):

1. With Bishop Athelwold’s support, Edith’s mother Queen Wulfhryth leaves the child’s father King Edgar to become a nun; she retires to Wilton Abbey.
2. Two-year-old Edith is placed on a cloth with a variety of items arrayed on it: jewels, fine clothing, golden garlands, and a nun’s veil.
3. Installed at Wilton Abbey, Edith follows the examples of saints in books and in her family tree, especially those of her aunt Edith of Tamworth and her grandmother Queen Alfgyva.

4–6. These lessons are readings about martyrs unrelated to Edith’s life, depending on the day of the week.
7. Edith practices humility; she performs good works for the sick and the poor; she intercedes with her father the king for the condemned and for the church.
8. A fire breaks out at Wilton Abbey, but Edith’s clothes are miraculously not burned.
9. At the insistence of Edgar and Athelwold, Edith becomes consecrated abbess of three nunneries, but she appoints other nuns to attend to those houses so she can stay at Wilton.

Notably absent from the readings are some of the more sensational events from Edith’s life and afterlife, such as the bleeding of a fragment of the True Cross on the altar, when she tried to share the relic with Athelwold; or her posthumous calming of an ocean storm that threatened the life of King Cnut. The liturgical focus of the breviary lessons is thus very much on Edith’s imitable Christian goodness, on her obedience to her father and to her bishop, and on her good works performed on behalf of the poor.

The St. Edith Illustration Cycle

Even more than the standard Sarum text, the illustrations in the Salisbury Breviary Edith cycle emphasize that royalty is synonymous with duty. Genealogy, spiritual power, Christian duty, and generational continuity form thematic subtexts to the cycle, thus reinforcing the Duke of Bedford’s political and cultural purposes in commissioning the Salisbury Breviary. The images equate royal genealogy and holiness; the depictions relate throne to church, and thus to God.
Wealth and power, both temporal and spiritual, are apparent in all of the Edith miniatures: ten of the fifteen scenes, for example, include a royal crown. The readings and illustrations for the feast of St. Edith span two full page openings of the manuscript (folios 581v–583r), more than is accorded to any other English female saint. Even St. Aethelthryth/Audrey, whose cult was much more widespread than Edith’s, receives only seven illustrations across one full page opening. Only four male English saints receive more space: Cuthbert, Edward the Martyr, Augustine of Canterbury, and Dunstan. Edith’s visual and textual prominence may stem from the ready availability of aristocratic subjects in images of her life.

Readings 1–3, with instructions for 4–6, appear on 581v–582r with eight border miniatures (fig. 16); readings 7–9 appear on 582v–583r, also with eight border miniatures (fig. 17). Reynolds places these images in the third campaign, dating from the 1440s to c.1460, and argues that the later work on the breviary illustrations is “cursory” and “smudgy.”38 Pearce also notes that the Salisbury Breviary is generally considered to be an example of a temporary decline in Paris manuscript production.39 Despite this possibly low artistic value, the St. Edith cycle demonstrates how the cult was presented to accord with the needs both of the predetermined text and of the patron; in this sense, the cycle is exemplary of the political and cultural purposes of the manuscript as a whole.

Leroquais briefly describes the illustrations in his 1934 catalog; notes to the table indicate suggested revisions to Leroquais’s identifications.39

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Folio, placement on folio, fig. number</th>
<th>banner inscription</th>
<th>scene description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>581v, middle left margin, fig. 1</td>
<td>Interveniente</td>
<td>Queen Wilfrida consults with Bishop Aethelwold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>581v, lower left margin, fig. 2</td>
<td>Pro auro text</td>
<td>The queen lays aside her crown and takes the veil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>581v, lower right margin, fig. 3</td>
<td>Triumphat civitas</td>
<td>King Edgar arrives at Wilton.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>582r, lower left margin, fig. 4</td>
<td>Scitatur ergo</td>
<td>King Edgar and the former queen, now a nun, kneel in front of an altar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>582r, upper right margin, fig. 5</td>
<td>Solam velum</td>
<td>Edith takes the veil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>582r, center right margin, fig. 6</td>
<td>Uterque presents</td>
<td>King Edgar, Edith, and an attendant kneel before an altar.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>582r, lower right margin, fig. 7</td>
<td>Beatissima quaque</td>
<td>Alligiva stands between Wilfrida and Edith.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

Each of these images emphasizes the link between holiness and the royal family. Although they accompany the readings for the feast of St. Edith, the illustrations repeatedly feature Edith’s mother Wilfrida/Wulftrude (four times) and her father King Edgar (six times). The deluxe clothing, elaborate patterned backgrounds, and frequent depicition of the crown, indicate the status and wealth of the royal family. The royal nuns’ black robes are visually distinct against the rich backgrounds to remind the viewer that holiness can co-exist with sumptuous trappings. Two miniatures especially emphasize the mutually beneficial relationship between royal family and church: both use images of the feminine to underscore the continuity of holiness and genealogy. The first is the portrait of three generations of holy royal women (fig. 7); the second is the abbatial consecration of Edith between her father and the prevailing bishop (fig. 15).

The multi-generational portrait imagines a scene that never happened: Alligiva, Wilfrida, and Edith engaging in conversation. Edith’s grandmother Alligiva (Old English AEiligith) died in 944, while Edith was born c.961.43 In all likelihood, Edith’s mother Wilfrida (Old English Wulfthryth) was a baby when her future mother-in-law died; Wilfrida/Wulfthryth actually outlived her sainted daughter, maintaining Edith’s cult at Wilton until her own death c.1000. While the scene is thus imaginary, its cultural message remains very strong, as royalty and holiness are generationally connected: Alligiva stands in the center, wearing an elaborate pink dress and a golden crown. Royalty appears in pink throughout the cycle: Edgar does so in figs. 3, 4, and 14, while Wilfrida wears that color in figs. 1 and 2, and Edith’s discarded royal
robe in figure 5 is pink. All of the pink dresses seem more or less identical, with white collar and cuffs and long flowing skirt; this lack of attention to differentiation of detail can probably be traced to the somewhat hurried and mechanical production of all third-campaign illustrations. Alfiva turns toward St. Edith and gestures as if in conversation, while on the right of the frame, Wifridis opens her hands, perhaps presenting the other two women to the viewer; Wifridis's black robe provides a visual balance for Edith's apparel opposite. On the left, Edith gestures toward her paternal grandmother with her left hand; in her right, she holds a book, presumably containing hagiographical texts, sanctorum exempla quae libris legebat enhelia [examples of the saints which she read animatedly in books].

St. Edith has no readily identifiable iconographic attribute (equivalent to Katherine's wheel or Margaret's dragon), but the Saint does have a visual and textual association with books; Edith holds a volume in the extant seal of Wilton Abbey as well, and all of the existing texts describing her life emphasize her dedication to reading and the arts. The image of the book further suggests Marian associations, connecting Edith iconographically to the Virgin, who was the patron saint of Wilton Abbey during Edith's lifetime (the abbey had a joint dedication to St. Mary and St. Edith during the later Middle Ages). The Salisbury Breviary image of the three royal and holy women thus underscores the genealogy of their engagement with holy discourse; according to this image, holiness is available to members of the royal family who choose to stay in the world (hence the pink dress and the crown) as well as to those who retire to a life of books in the convent (the black-robed nun flanking Alfiva).

Edith's black dress in this image is yet another indication of the artists' unfamiliarity with narratives of her life; the Sarum text does not include the Vita episode wherein Edith rebukes Bishop Athelwold for his criticism of her elaborate royal clothing. Since she wears a hairshirt under her rich garments, Edith is confident that God would not judge her by her outer clothing. Goscelin's Vita implies that although Edith chose the veil, she did not wear the Benedictine habit during her short lifetime. For the purposes of fifteenth-century artists, however, she is portrayed in traditional nun's garb to make apparent the desirable balance and relationship between royal genealogy and spiritual rectitude.

Edith's robe fulfills similar functions as in the Parisian manuscript in the last miniature of the cycle, portraying her consecration as abbess (fig. 15). While this scene could have had an historical precedent (unlike fig. 7), the consecration may not have taken place, as Edith never assumed actual responsibility for the houses in question; she stayed at Wilton to continue learning from her mother and appointed spirituales matres for the other houses. Goscelin's text tells us that Edgar, Athelwold, and Dunstan urged Edith to become an abbess of three nunneries — Winchester, Barking, and an unnamed third house. The Sarum reading provides much the same information, in shortened form: at first, Edith's humility prevents her from accepting; after some struggle, her consecration as abbess is presented as an act non ad praebitionem sed ad obedientiam [not for preferment but for obedience]. Her consecration, then, is an act of obedience to her father, her king, and her bishop; its depiction emphasizes that virtue, showing that her holiness links the royal family to the church.

Here and throughout the cycle, a richly detailed background and sumptuous clothing are on display. Five figures crowd the scene; Edith's central position connects the secular figures on the left with the religious figures on the right; her father stands behind her, wearing a crown, an elaborate robe, and a jeweled belt; his attendant is partially hidden by the post of the arch on the left side. On the right, a monk attendant on Athelwold is similarly hidden by Athelwold's elaborately dressed figure; his mitre and crozier are laden with gold; broad gold trim decorates his white inner robe and blue outer garment. Both Athelwold and Edgar raise their right hands in gestures that visually equate the blessing of the king with that of the bishop; Edith's hands are clasped in prayer; she faces Athelwold in an act of obedience as he consecrates her. Her body provides the narrative and visual link between the royal family and the church; she connects the wealth and splendor of the church to the riches and magnificence of the king.

Conclusions

These brief remarks about a tiny fraction of the manuscript's images indicate the extent of the work that remains to be done on the illustration sequences of the Salisbury Breviary. Much further study is required of the artists' use of standard iconography and scene composition, their errors in the depictions of English saints' Lives, and the use of religious texts for secular display. Some of the folios, especially those with large miniatures, are available online in low-resolution images, but there is as yet no way to study the manuscript in facsimile, either digitally or in print. The Bibliothèque Nationale should accelerate its accessibility program, much as the British Library has in its "turning the pages" online feature, to facilitate study of this and its numerous other major manuscripts.

John, Duke of Bedford and Regent of France, had every reason to commission a book that would contribute to the legitimation of his own and his nephew's rule in France. While he did not oversee the design of the book himself, he certainly indicated to his agents that the Salisbury Breviary was intended to display the Duke's wealth, power, and good taste. Perhaps completed as much as twenty years after the Duke's death, and representing
only a minute fraction of the manuscript’s program of images, the Edith cycle of miniatures is an excellent example of how even the minor pictures serve the Duke’s cultural purposes of illustrating the integral relationship between royal genealogy, duty, obedience, and legitimately acquired secular and religious power.

Figure 1: Queen Wilfrida and Bishop Athelwold. Permission: BnF.

Figure 2: The queen lays aside her crown and takes the veil. Permission: BnF.

Figure 3: King Edgar arrives at Wilton. Permission: BnF.

Figure 4: King Edgar and the nun kneel in front of an altar. Permission: BnF.

Figure 5: Edith takes the veil. Permission: BnF.

Figure 6: King Edgar, Edith, and attendant kneel. Permission: BnF.

Figure 7: Alfgiva stands between Wilfrida and Edith. Permission: BnF.

Figure 8: St. Edith appears with her fellow nuns. Permission: BnF.
Figure 9: Edith serves the poor. Permission: BnF.

Figure 10: Edith asks her father (Edgar) to extend mercy to prisoners. Permission: BnF.

Figure 11: Fire is about to start. Permission: BnF.

Figure 12: The chapel is in flames. Permission: BnF.

Figure 13: Edith learns that her clothes were not burned. Permission: BnF.

Figure 14: Edith consults with Edgar. Permission: BnF.

Figure 15: St. Edith is consecrated abbess. Permission: BnF.
Notes

I would like to thank Susan Ashbrook of the Art Institute of Boston, Christine Evans of Lesley University, and Judith Pearce of the National Library of Australia for their generous assistance with this essay.


6 For a detailed description of the manuscript and its pictorial program, see Victor Leroquais, ed., Les bréviaires manuscrits des bibliothèques publiques de France (Paris: Protestant frères, 1934).


12 Reynolds (ibid.): Introduction.

13 Other (quasi-) historical English saints with at least one illustration in the Sacramale include: Wulfstan, Chad, Edward the Martyr, Cuthbert, Alphege, John of Beverley, Dunstan, Aldhelm, Augustine of Canterbury, Edmund (archbishop), Ethelfrith, Etheldreda, Swithun, Oswald, Edward the Confessor, and Edmund (king).


Leroquais explains this image as “the clothes retrieved intact,” but the apparel is nowhere to be seen — Edith is praying when the attendant brings the news of the miracle.


In *The Perambulation of Kent*, William Lambard conteuneously describes the annual blessing of the seed corn before an image of St. Edith in the village of Kemsing, her birthplace (London: Ralph Newberie, 1596).


For discussion of the relationship between these versions, see Michael Wright, “Note on the Translation of the Legend of Edith,” in Hollis (note 19 above): 17–19.

This sequence of events is somewhat sanitized from the information in other sources, wherein Wulfhryth (or Wulfrude) is the king’s concubine who goes to Wilton when King Edgar marries the future mother of Edward the Martyr. For full discussion, see Yorke (note 17 above).

This common trope appears as well in the Life of Edmund of Winchester, who was Edith’s great-aunt. See Susan J. Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 18 and appendix one.


See the *Breviariun* (note 4 above), 3: col. 833, for details.

These episodes are in chapter 12 of the *translatio* and chapter 14 of the *Vita*, respectively.


Pearce (note 7 above): 1.

The phrases in the “scene description” column are loose translations of Leroquais’s identifications (note 6 above), unless I argue for a change to that identification. All figures are reproduced by permission of the Bibliotheque nationale de France.

Leroquais identifies this image as “the arrival of the King and his daughter Edith into the village in celebration,” but Edith is two years old at this point in the narrative. The woman to the king’s left could be Edith, mistakenly portrayed by the artist as an adult, but she has no crown; she is more likely a member of his aristocratic retinue.

Leroquais explains this image as “the King and a nun,” but it makes sense to identify the two figures with Edgar as Edith, who has chosen the veil in the image directly above, and a male attendant, who appears in similar attire in three other images.

Leroquais calls the central figure “Elfrida,” but the Latin text identifies her as “Aligiva” (the printed edition of the Sarum Breviary uses “Aligina”).

Leroquais recognizes this image as “the fire started by a candle,” but the fire has not begun yet. The picture is another example of the artists’ unfamiliarity with the narrative — a monk holds the candle above the clothes chest, although the story states that the carelessness of a female attendant — *femina ministra* — started the fire and no monk is mentioned. The presence of the male attendant on the right also has no textual precedent.

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