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Reading Holiness: *Agnes Grey*, Ælfric, and the Augustinian Hermeneutic

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Reading Holiness: *Agnes Grey*, Ælfric, and the Augustinian Hermeneutic

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Master of Arts

Although Anne Brontë's first novel, *Agnes Grey*, presents itself as a didactic treatise, Brontë's work departs from many accepted Evangelical tropes in the portrayal of its moral protagonist. These departures create an exemplary figure whose flaws potentially subvert the novel's didactic purposes. The character of Agnes is not necessarily meant to be directly emulated, yet Brontë's governess is presented as a tool of moral instruction. The conflict between the novel's self-proclaimed didactic purpose and the form in which it presents that purpose raises a number of interpretive questions. I argue that many of these questions can be answered through the application of a hermeneutic presented in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*. Such a hermeneutic shifts the burden of interpretation away from the author and toward the reader in such a way that the moral figure becomes, not a standard to be emulated, but rather a test of the reader's personal spiritual maturity. This sign theory heavily influenced the works of medieval hagiographers such as Ælfric of Enysham, who depended on Augustine's sign theory to mediate some of the less-orthodox behaviors of saints such as Æthelthryth of Ely. I argue that by applying Augustine's hermeneutic and reading *Agnes Grey* in the context of these earlier didactic genres, the novel's potentially subversive qualities are not only neutralized, but become an important element of Evangelical instruction.

Keywords: *Agnes Grey*, Victorian, Anglo-Saxon, Old English, hermeneutic, Augustine, saints, Æthelthryth, Anne Brontë, religion, Ælfric, Catholic, Protestant

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Introduction

Although tenth-century England was separated from the nineteenth century by nearly a thousand years of linguistic, political, social, and religious development, authors in both periods faced similar dilemmas as they addressed the matters of instruction, literacy, and textual interpretation. These anxieties stemmed from a concern over the general populace's growing access to religious texts. While many Victorians worried over the moral implications of the proliferation of uncensored novels among the less-educated masses, Anglo-Saxon theologians faced similar dilemmas as vernacular hagiography was disseminated among the lay masses. Although the medieval period was not privileged with a highly literate public, hagiography was a widely accessible genre that would have been read aloud in church as well as transmitted through oral traditions. The general accessibility of the lives of the saints was potentially problematic since the saints were not always orthodox paragons of virtue—some were even subversive to the power structure of the Church. While hagiography was generally acknowledged as an important medium of religious instruction, many church fathers also expressed concern over how some less-orthodox hagiographies would be interpreted by the masses. Patrick Bratlinger's work describes a parallel situation in Victorian England where rising literacy made the public interpretation of novels difficult to predict or control. Although a broad treatment of Victorian interpretive anxieties is beyond the scope of this paper, Anne Brontë's first novel, *Agnes Grey*, demonstrates a number of these issues as the work presents an imperfect protagonist as a moral exemplar.

In the following analysis I argue that the threatening qualities of these didactic texts can be neutralized through the application of a hermeneutic set forth in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*. Although Brontë's first novel presents itself as a didactic treatise, the work departs

from the generic expectations of other Evangelical texts in its portrayal of a flawed moral protagonist. I argue that these departures create the demand for an Augustinian reading in which the text is not meant to be directly emulated, but rather interpreted through the lens of the reader's individual spiritual maturity. Those who are the most spiritual are the ones who read the text most correctly. In the argument that follows, I will show that both Brontë's novel and many tenth-century hagiographies justify their use of unorthodox protagonists on the basis of this hermeneutic. Because of the similarities in their didactic approaches, I will use the parallels between Ælfric's tenth-century *Life of St. Æthelthryth* and *Agnes Grey* to illuminate the structural moves that allow Brontë's unorthodox protagonist to appeal to her spiritual audience while barring the unenlightened from accessing the meaning behind the work. I claim that the process of reading *Agnes Grey* occurs on a spectrum of individual devotion which is mirrored by the secondary characters that surround the novel's moral governess. Those characters who are themselves moral read the virtue behind Agnes's behavior correctly while the immoral antagonists of the novel become an antithesis of a "pure" Christian reading of the work. The characters that either persecute or laud Agnes become surrogate readers in the text, and provide a model for both modern and Victorian interpretation.

Augustine's Hermeneutic

Brian Stock recently observed that "something new" occurred in late antiquity which dramatically affected the Western approach to reading a religious text. Rather than presenting ethics in the form of "purely philosophical discussions," there was a generic shift toward "writings that take up ethics within secular and sacred literature" (24). Although Stock acknowledges that moral stories were a constant staple of Classical and early Semitic writings, he points out that there "were no ancient prototypes for many of the literary types of ethical

discussion that appeared in late antiquity in the form of allegory, hagiography, or confession” (25). As Christians shifted their focus towards symbolic rather than direct portrayals of moral issues, the question of how to interpret these new genres became an important concern for ecclesiastical leaders. These new Christian genres allowed their readers more latitude to read or misread a message than straightforward philosophical treatises, and misreadings were potentially disastrous to the orthodox traditions of church.

Of these new Christian literatures, the interpretation of hagiography was a particularly complicated issue due to the genre’s accessibility and popular influence in medieval society. Katherine J. Lewis called it “one of the few literary forms [in late antiquity] to which we know that everyone would have been exposed,” including those illiterate laymen who had it read to them in church (qtd. in Salih 11). The widespread influence of hagiography made it an important center of social cohesion in the Christian community, yet the genre’s popularity made the perpetuation of heretical interpretations difficult to predict or control. As early as the late fifth century there is evidence that the Church discouraged the reading of hagiography among the laypeople (Jayatilaka).

The Church’s concerns were not unfounded. Saints were as readily canonized for rebellion as conformity, and hagiography often contained unorthodox elements that lent themselves to “misinterpretation” by the learned and unlearned alike. For example two Latin saints, Eugenia (d. AD 240) and Euphrosyne (d. AD 470), both dressed as men and entered monasteries. Eugenia even became an abbot before her gender was found out. Mary of Egypt (born c. AD 344) was also something of a reformed prostitute who wandered the desert naked as a sign of devotion. It goes without saying that the Church would have disapproved of such “devotions,” yet the cults of these saints were and continue to be important centers of religious

devotion. All three saints were influential enough that Ælfric, one of the first hagiographers to write in vernacular English, included them in his *Lives of the Saints* in the tenth century—several centuries after their deaths. The question of how to interpret the stories of such influential saints thus became an issue of great importance to the early church fathers.

This anxiety over the interpretation of hagiography paralleled the concerns espoused by later popular genres; the English novel in particular presented a number of interpretive complications. Patrick Bratlinger called this new literature a “genre with an inferiority complex: it wasn’t classical, it wasn’t poetry, and it wasn’t history” (3). Like hagiography, novels were something of a “new” literature with very little critical consensus on how they should be read or what role they were to play in eighteenth and nineteenth-century society. This lack of an interpretive precedent coupled with growing literacy rates made the genre a potentially dangerous force in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain. There was a general concern in this period that the less-educated masses might misinterpret or misapply the novel—a concern characterized by an 1849 parliamentary discussion where some expressed the fear that “public libraries would be filled with novels and the worst description of literature” (qtd. in Bratlinger 20). Edward Bulwer-Lytton (despite being a proponent of mass education) similarly argued that greater access to the written word led to the degradation of the nation’s cultural and literary identity:

if we look abroad in France, where the reading public is less numerous than in England, a more elevated and refining tone is more fashionable in literature; and in America, where it is infinitely larger, the tone of literature is infinitely more superficial. (qtd. in Bratlinger 18)

Like the concerns raised by the rising popularity of hagiography in late antiquity, the growth of a “reading public” created an interpretive anxiety: if the uneducated masses were permitted to

access, misinterpret, and misapply “the worst description” of literature, many feared that the cultural and moral identity of England would suffer for it.

Given these anxieties, it is not surprising that conduct books such as Isaac Watts’s *The Improvement of the Mind* tried to teach a “correct” approach to reading. Like early hagiography, novels (even self-consciously didactic novels) often featured protagonists who challenged the accepted social and moral order. For example, Anne Brontë’s *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* portrays a woman who abandons her husband because of his bad moral example to their son. Nancy Armstrong calls such protagonists “misfits” who became “moral protagonists” through the subversion of accepted cultural mores. Armstrong argues that such subversions shifted the power to define morality into the hands of the bourgeois masses (27-28).

This kind of power shift has a number of corollaries with a saint such as Euphrosyne, whose subversion of monastic gender-boundaries posed a potential threat to the orthodox teachings of the church. It is (of course) doubtful that hagiographers were trying to incite rebellion by recording Euphrosyne’s story, but her actions and the divine approval manifested by her miracles, suggest a shift away from the Church power structure towards a kind of individualism that was all but impossible to predict or control. For the laypeople, the saint was an important center of religious devotion, but church fathers would have considered a direct emulation of her actions to be a misapplication of the text. In order to counter the threat of misinterpretation, the hagiographies of such unorthodox saints had to be read through a hermeneutic that continued to influence writers throughout the Western tradition.

As one of the most influential writers of late antiquity, St. Augustine of Hippo’s hermeneutic theories had a profound effect on both Catholic and Protestant thought. He outlined his hermeneutic in *De Doctrina Christiana* in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, and various

English writers quoted it inside of their works. Notable among these early writers were Bede (AD 735) and Ælfric of Enysham, but authors and philosophers as diverse as More, Petrarch, Hugh of St. Victor, Decartes, Herder, Humboldt, and Coleridge were also directly or indirectly influenced by Augustinian thought (Stock 52, 59, 73, 101). A careful analysis of some Victorian novels, sermons, and essays also shows that this hermeneutic was adopted into certain Protestant interpretations of didactic literature in the nineteenth century. Although a broad analysis of Augustine's effects on these later traditions is beyond the scope of this paper, Anne Brontë's didactic approach in *Agnes Grey* provides a compelling example of how an Augustinian reading might be important to resolving the interpretive concerns inherent to a Protestant text. Like the hagiographies of late antiquity, Brontë's protagonist departs from the generic expectations of Evangelical writing in the nineteenth century, and thus complicates the didactic function of the narrative. I would suggest that these complications can be (to some degree) clarified through the application of Augustine's sign theory.

In *De Doctrina Christiana* Augustine argues that the act of reading the outward signs—words, miracles, shrines, etc.—of religious writing requires a kind of “literacy” that can only be obtained through study and an ascetic lifestyle. Augustine claims that in order for readers to properly connect meaning with symbols, they must first overcome the corruption of their own bodies. Human beings cannot understand an infinite God because they are bound by a finite world. The body thus becomes associated with the sign of the word while the soul becomes a corollary to the interpretation of that word. As the soul overcomes the body, the reader is able to interpret the spiritual truth in the text. Augustine suggests that the observer's depth of understanding—his or her ability to see past the sign of the text—is entirely dependent on overcoming the fallen nature of human existence (147-65).

In this hermeneutic, the sign become far less important than the meanings behind it. A truly spiritual man or woman would be able to read past the signs of the somewhat unorthodox behaviors of Eugenia, Euphrosyne, and Mary in order to interpret the “true” message behind their actions. Indeed, Richard Montgomery states the following in his analysis of Augustine’s semiotic theory:

[The] making of a fiction...may or may not accord with true doctrine but nevertheless is intellectually useful so long as it is not taken literally. We must not...‘allege as true’ that which is merely exemplary. (39)

Although saints were presented as historical rather than “fictional” figures, their function was essentially the same as the protagonists of moral fictions. They were exemplary, but not necessarily meant for direct emulation.

The practical function of hagiography depended, not on the text’s adherence to orthodox principles, but on the spiritual maturity of its readers. I would argue that *Agnes Grey*’s departures from the generic expectations of other Victorian Evangelical fictions creates the demand for an Augustinian interpretation of the text. By reading the work through Augustine’s sign theory, the moral protagonist comes to function as something of an unorthodox “saint” in the “canon” of Evangelical didactic writing. I would further argue that the application of Augustine’s sign theory is not anachronous to the Protestant thought that would have influenced Anne Brontë. Consider, for example, that Anne owned a copy of Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitatio Christi*: a text that was written by an Augustinian monk and translated by John Wesley (Thormählen 2-3). This book advocates the same kind of unflinching devotion to God that was dramatized by medieval hagiography, yet à Kempis’s work was also popular among the

Protestants of Victorian England. *Agnes Grey* certainly shows a tendency toward the same kind of asceticism that Augustine proscribed for the interpretation of religious texts.

This ascetic created a shared “language” of interpretation for communities of the faithful. In such communities, the ability to read does not equate to literacy; rather, the “literate” faithful are those who fully embrace a self-sacrificing life in pursuit of greater enlightenment. Brontë’s “saintly” protagonist exemplifies this ascetic, and in so doing proposes a different kind of literacy that would alleviate the Victorian anxiety towards the “reading public.” By analyzing *Agnes Grey* in the context of early English hagiography, I would argue that Brontë’s departures from the generic tropes of Evangelical fiction become logical, and even necessary to her didactic approach.

Agnes Grey and Evangelical Fiction

The crafting of saintliness in Anne Brontë’s work occurs on a number of levels—the first of which is on the level of the author, herself. Anne Brontë has long been seen as something of a “lesser saint” in the canons of literary scholarship. She was cast as the “gentle moralist” of the Brontë family—a sweet, tortured soul who lived a cloistered life and died young. One 1933 playwright characteristically wrote that “from [Anne] radiates a charm evanescent as a flower... We must love her as we love all delicate frail things” (qtd. in Miller 158). This view of Brontë has often extended to the critical reception of her work. Her novels have been pushed aside as simplistic renderings of Evangelical morals—an attitude that essentially sterilized some of the more subversive elements of Brontë’s fiction. Despite her reputation, the author who wrote the timid protagonist of *Agnes Grey* also portrayed scenes of domestic violence quite graphically in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Her two novels and much of her poetry were filled with astute criticisms of nineteenth-century society that hardly befitted a “delicate frail thing.”

In a phenomenon described in Tricia Lootens's work with Victorian literary canonization, Brontë's influence was nearly destroyed in the process of her own canonization.

In an attempt to revitalize the "true" identity of the youngest Brontë, much of the recent Anne Brontë scholarship emphasizes issues such as the "woman question," education, and religion in nineteenth-century England. In each of these areas, Anne's work provides unique insights into Victorian society. Lucasta Miller, Betty Jay, and Bettina L. Knapp in particular have shown Brontë's work to be a progressive and even radical commentary on women in Victorian culture. Anne's realistic portrayals of the life of a governess and upper-class education have likewise brought critical attention to her work.¹ The most prevailing interest in Anne Brontë scholarship, however, is the issue of religion. Anne's work was undeniably didactic, yet it was also far from simple. For Anne, the value of writing was deeply connected to its function as a teaching tool—a point that she illustrated quite clearly in her preface to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*:

If I have warned one rash youth from following in [the characters'] steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain....I love to give innocent pleasure. Yet, be it understood, I shall not limit my ambition to this—or even to producing 'a perfect work of art': time and talents so spent, I should consider wasted and misapplied....if I am able to amuse, I will try to benefit too; and when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I *will* speak it. (A. Brontë *TWFH* 4-5)

This need to "speak unpalatable truths" led Anne Brontë to both conformity and departure from the generic and (more rarely) doctrinal tropes of most Victorian Evangelicals. Although the

apparent simplicity and didactic nature of her work have contributed to Brontë's reputation as an inconsequential moralist, Anne's religious commentary is complex and often radical. For example, Christina Colon recognized that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* champions the heretical Unitarian doctrine of universal salvation. Likewise, Jennifer Stolpa reads *Agnes Grey* as a kind of sermon which subverts the system of male ecclesiastical figures by inserting Agnes's voice into the religious discussion. Marianne Thormählen has recognized that these departures from convention contributed to the longevity and critical importance of Brontë's work, and she commented that, more than a mere imitator of other Evangelical writers, "Anne's...explorations of vexed religious issues were every bit as daring as [Charlotte's]" (*Religion* 47, 148). Building on this point, I would further suggest that these departures from convention create the demand for an Augustinian reading in which the message of the text is dependent on the reader's spiritual maturity rather than on the naive emulation of moral characters in the texts.

Comparison with other Evangelical writers reveals the complexity of Brontë's didactic approach. The fictions of authors such as Agnes Giberne, Hannah More, Maria Louisa Charlesworth, Charlotte Tucker, and even Anne's father, Patrick Brontë, were largely simple allegories where evil was punished and good rewarded. Characters were presented as ideals of Evangelical virtue, and the texts functioned, not as artistic accomplishments, but rather as a kind of Evangelical "dramatization of conduct book advice" (Prior 44). The plots often followed the generic expectations of sermons and essays more than those constructions we associate with the novel. For example Mary Alden Hopkins called Hannah More's novel, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, "less a story than a series of essays modeled on those of *The Spectator* and *The Rambler* over which Hannah had poured in her youth" (qtd. in Prior 43). Similarly, the works of Charlesworth, Tucker, and Gilberne for children were given to stock characters and pontification.

Anne's father, Patrick Brontë also wrote an allegory entitled "The Cottage in the Wood" in which good behavior is easily rewarded and wickedness immediately punished. He justifies this simple Evangelical approach to didactic fictions in his introduction to the story. Censuring what he calls the "sensual novelist," he writes that "whatever be the drift of the narrative, the visionary writer mistakes his way, being utterly incapable of tracing good and evil to their proper sources" (102).

Patrick Brontë wrote "The Cottage in the Wood" when he was yet a young man, and he must have either changed his approach to "sensual novelists" or not been terribly militant in the upbringing of his daughters. Charlotte and Emily's were certainly "sensual" in their way. Anne's works, however, are more difficult to classify. Brontë made it clear that the purpose of her works was didactic, and *Agnes Grey* certainly has its moments of heavy-handed moralization. Yet the same time these moments are not so frequent nor so pronounced as in the works of other Evangelical writers. Her characters are far more complex and fallible, and her social commentary is more realistic. While Agnes is no Jane Eyre or Catherine Earnshaw, she is not as explicitly moral as the characters that usually populated Evangelical fiction. Indeed, on many levels, Brontë's protagonist is a flawed character—she is prudish, timid, and more than a little neurotic. She is a naive young governess who hopes to teach her pupils "how to make Virtue practicable, Instruction desirable, and Religion lovely and comprehensible" (AG 9). Reality, however, turns out to be quite a different matter for Brontë's governess, as Agnes meets with spoiled, selfish, and impossible pupils. The parents, who should be providing good examples for their children, impede Agnes's intentions at every turn and thereby perpetuate all of society's vices in the next generation. Brontë departs from the general Evangelical norm by allowing the sinners to go unpunished while a moral protagonist struggles with her own dashed expectations.

Agnes is presented as a *good* character, but an unhappy one, and unhappiness is something of a sin in the Evangelical world view. As Rev. Brontë points out,

Happiness and misery have their origin within, depending comparatively little on outward circumstance...The mind is its own place. Put a good man any where and he will not be miserable—put a bad man any where and he cannot be happy.
(AG 102)

Presuming that *Agnes Grey* accepts Patrick Brontë's theology, Agnes's unhappiness becomes a flaw that she struggles against throughout the novel. While she does not question God, Agnes does struggle to reconcile her understanding of a loving God with the life that he has given her. At one point Agnes states, "It was wrong to be so joyless, so desponding; I should have made God my friend, and to do His will the pleasure and the business of my life; but Faith was weak and Passion was too strong" (A. Brontë, AG 147-48). Although she attempts to repent of her own unhappiness, it is only when Mr. Weston arrives that she finds herself to be truly happy. At no point does Agnes completely rescue herself. She accepts the censure of her employers, the unruliness of her students, and the loneliness of her life with silence. Unlike the protagonists of her sisters' novels, Agnes never stands up to her employers. This is not to say that passive female protagonists are a consistent feature of Anne Brontë's novels. Helen Huntington of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is anything but submissive; however, in Agnes, Brontë gives us a conflicted, flawed martyr. Her triumph is partially in her submission to her own trials, yet many of those trials are brought on by her own shortcomings.

Marianne Thormählen suggests that it was the flaws and complexity of Brontë's protagonists that kept her work from going "the way of all Victorian tracts and works of didactic fiction" (*Religion* 148). *Agnes Grey* contains elements of Evangelical tracts, but Brontë's

portrayal of Agnes complicates the didactic purposes of the text. In contrast, Charlotte Tucker's *Good For Evil and other Stories* allows for a direct reading and for mimetic emulation of her exemplary characters. "Good for Evil" tells the story of a little boy named Phillip, who dutifully learns to forgive his enemies under his grandfather's wise council. Tucker ends the story by asking, "Reader, do you bear ill will towards any one? Has any one injured or insulted you? Oh forgive as you would be forgiven!" (15). This kind of straightforward moralizing is a staple in the works of other Evangelical writers including Moore, Gilberne, Charlesworth, and Patrick Brontë. Anne Brontë, on the other hand, avoids such straightforward statements and introduces her work as "useful to some, and entertaining to others, but the world may judge for itself" (*AG* 1). By avoiding sweeping didactic statements and stock characters, Brontë forces her readers to view *Agnes Grey's* Evangelical instruction with more complexity than in the works of her fellow authors.

Although these generic departures demand a more complex reading of *Agnes Grey*, they do not compromise the basic teachings of the Church of England (Thormählen, *Religion* 148). For example, the heroes of the text tend to align with Evangelical ideals while the Agnes's antagonists champion the opposing side. Although Agnes struggles with the ascetic demands of submission to God's will, the principle is never thrown aside or discounted. In the same vein, the humane treatment of animals was one of the key issues addressed by Wiberforce's Clapham sect (Melnyk 21). Patrick Brontë had close ties to this Evangelical group, and it is not surprising that the point where Agnes breaks from her first employer involves a debate over the humane treatment of sparrows (A. Brontë, *AG* 45-46). Similarly, Brontë's portrayal of the good Mr. Weston's view of God, his work with his parish, and his personal example all fall into an

orthodox understanding of basic Evangelical Anglicanism (Stolpa 229-30). Although Brontë was doing new things with her fiction, she remained a discernibly Evangelical author.

The matter of reconciling the failures of Brontë's protagonist with her aim of Evangelical instruction thus becomes a matter of hermeneutics. Agnes is not meant to be emulated, but read—and read correctly if she is to function as a moral character. This reading occurs on two levels: that of the characters and that of the reader. The characters that surround the governess “read” her actions, and their interpretations of Agnes's actions are measurements of each of their character's moral fiber. It is those characters with the clearest understanding of moral principles who correctly read the intentions behind the governess's actions. Mr. Weston and Agnes's mother, for example, each see her as a virtuous young woman while Agnes's employers consistently misinterpret her actions. These characters, however, act as surrogate readers in the text—they are a model for how Brontë's readers should or should not interpret *Agnes Grey*. As the audience interprets Brontë's novel, their interpretation and subsequent application of lessons learned becomes a gauge of individual virtue.

Despite its modern Protestant coloring, this hermeneutic approach was inherited from the Augustinian patristic tradition—a tradition that constantly had to reconcile unorthodox and even heretical stories of saints with church doctrine. The afore-mentioned model for this spiritual interpretation was set out by Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana* in the early fifth century. The act of interpretation functioned as a mirror into the reader's personal spirituality. Those who had overcome their own fallen nature were the most able to read the signs in a religious text correctly—even if that text was complicated by unorthodox elements. The interpretive problems presented by Brontë's Victorian novel paralleled with many of the problems presented by early

English hagiography, and both genres were dependent on an Augustinian hermeneutic to resolve these issues.

As a mix of folklore, history, and fiction hagiography was a particularly self-contradictory genre, and early theologians struggled to reconcile the orthodox practices of the church with this sort of didactic literature. The vastness of the hagiographic tradition over the course of history allowed for a great deal of complication and self-contradiction. Sarah Salih describes the saints as “locations of paradox” in which they acted as “both role models and intercessors, alien and distanced; their bodies stretched across the spaces between life and death, heaven and earth...bringing together various textual traditions and seamlessly mingling history and fiction” (1). Like *Agnes Grey*, the lives of the saints demanded a kind of reading that allowed flawed, unorthodox, or unsuccessful protagonists to become paragons of virtue. In both hagiography and Brontë’s narratives, signs of holiness did not necessarily develop from the progression of the plot. The virtue of the protagonist was proven through a system of signs that were meant to be interpreted spiritually.

Although it is unlikely that Anne would have been directly influenced by Augustine, Protestantism inherited many of its hermeneutic practices from Catholic traditions. Some of these appropriations were taken directly from Catholicism, and others were inherited indirectly. For example Brian Stock traces the Romantic idea that “the identity of a people is reflected in its language and literature” back to Wilhelm von Humboldt (1769-1859), who based his argument in some of the same principles that Augustine set forth in *De Trinitate* (Stock 101-02). Humboldt influenced Romantic thinkers such as Coleridge, the Schlegels, and Herder, who each had an enduring influence on Western literature (101). Although not all post-Reformation

writers were directly influenced by Augustine, his philosophies had a pervasive presence in the assumptions and general thought of Protestant England.

Anne Brontë was likely familiar with both Latin and Greek; however, it is unclear whether she read Augustine's work directly (Hurst 143-51). There are no copies of Augustine's work in the Brontë archives; however, she inherited a copy of *Imitatio Christi* from her mother (Thormählen 2-3). This work is attributed to the fifteenth-century Augustinian monk Thomas à Kempis. It was one of the few theological books widely read by Catholics and Protestants alike. Anne's copy was translated by John Wesley, the founder of Methodist thought. *Imitatio Christi* furthers a profoundly ascetic philosophy in which personal sacrifice leads to a greater understanding of Christ's sufferings for mankind. For those of a Calvinistic persuasion, the imitation of Christ was not emphasized since they believed that God had already chosen who he would save (Hudson 543). However, for Anglicans who were of the Arminian persuasion (as the Brontës were), salvation was attainable to anyone who was willing to accept the atonement of Christ. Arminianism among Evangelical Christians was largely adopted from Methodist theology (Melnik 36). It thus makes sense that the family of an Evangelical clergyman would own and read a copy of *Imitatio Christi* which was translated by John Wesley. The principles taught in this work have a number of corollaries with *Agnes Grey*.

For example, at one point in the novel when Agnes asks whether she should "shrink from the work that God had set before me, because it was not fitted to my taste?" she is calling on a kind of devotion similar to the one advocated by à Kempis's work (AG 172). Her answer also follows the Catholic asceticism proscribed in *Imitatio Christi*: "No....if happiness in this world is not for me, I will endeavour to promote the welfare of those around me, and my reward shall be hereafter" (A. Brontë, AG 172). This asceticism logically leads to a certain kind of interpretation

of exemplary figures. It allows martyrs, even those who doubt themselves, to be examples of self-sacrifice. Wesley's translation of *á Kempis* encourages this kind of reading when the book instructs its readers to consider the lives of the saints who "were strangers in the world; but friends to God. They seemed to themselves as nothing, and were despised by the world; but they were precious in the eyes of God" (30). Like Brontë's governess, who is internally virtuous, but externally criticized, the saints must be read spiritually and not physically. Furthermore, this kind of reading is specifically encouraged by Wesley in his preface to *Imitatio Christi*. He directs the reader:

Prepare yourself for reading by purity of intention, whereby you singly aim at your soul's benefit; and then, in a short ejaculation, beg God's grace to enlighten your understanding, and dispose your heart for receiving what you need: and that you may both know what he requires of you, and seriously resolve to execute his will when known. (iv)

The reader's ability to read the character of the governess correctly is thus essential to understanding Brontë's novel. Anne introduces her novel as "useful to some, and entertaining to others" (AG 1). The novel follows a long didactic treatise with the following statement

...my design, in writing the few last pages, was not to amuse, but to benefit those whom it might concern: he that has no interest in such matters will doubtless have skipped them over with a cursory glance, and perhaps, a malediction against the prolixity of the writer; but if a parent has, therefrom, gathered any useful hint, or an unfortunate governess received thereby the slightest benefit, I am well rewarded for my pains. (AG 33-34)

The ultimate concern in this passage is not the didactic intention of the author, but the needs and spiritual status of the reader. In fact, à Kempis proscribes this kind of hermeneutic for readers of scripture: “Let not the authority of the writer, whether he be of great or small learning, but the love of pure truth, draw thee to read. Search not who spake this, but mark what was spoken” (15). Both of these quotes suggest that judgment of the author is secondary to the reader’s ability to interpret the narrative correctly.

Anne Brontë’s work was clearly connected to the principles taught in *Imitatio Christi*, and her construction of *Agnes Grey* demands the kind of interpretation that was set forth by Augustine, rearticulated by à Kempis, and adopted by John Wesley. The application of such a hermeneutic made the didactic function of the text more personalized to Brontë’s readership. By moving away from the straightforward allegories and stock characters of other Evangelical writers, Agnes becomes a mirror to both her fellow characters and Brontë’s readership. By analyzing the ways which this sign theory plays out in both Victorian and medieval texts, the use of a flawed protagonist becomes logical and even necessary to Brontë’s didactic approach. Such a reading shifts the burden of learning away from the teacher/author and toward the individual. The story might be flawed, but if the message is interpreted “correctly,” the protagonist’s actions become secondary to their didactic function. This dichotomy between the meaning of the text and the behavior of its protagonists is important in the reading of *Agnes Grey*, but the need for such a hermeneutic is more readily apparent in the hagiographies of the medieval tradition.

Before analyzing *Agnes Grey*, I will turn to the beginning of the English literary tradition when Ælfric, abbot of Enysham, began writing saint’s lives in Old English vernacular for the lay audiences of the late tenth century. Ælfric was clearly influenced by Augustine; he quoted *De Doctrina Christiana* twice in the course of his writings, and his sign theory bears striking

resemblance to that of Augustine (Godden, Griffith). Sheri Horner shows that Ælfric was concerned with “two ways of reading sacred texts: readers may read *lichamlice*, (carnally in terms of the body), or *gastlice*, (spiritually, allegorically)” (133). The *gastlice* reading of the text was a learned behavior that was the result of ascetic living. This verbal dichotomy corresponds with Augustine’s sign theory which claimed that as the soul overcomes the body, the true meaning of the text overcomes the corporeal words which are its receptacles. A truly spiritual man or woman is able to read past the failings of the saints and see the spiritual value in their unorthodox actions. In the following analysis I will focus on the textual maneuvers that Ælfric makes in his *Life of St. Æthelthryth* in order to show how an unorthodox saint might be converted into an exemplary, virtuous figure through the application of Augustine’s hermeneutic. Furthermore, I would argue that this maneuvering leads to the same kind of interpretation that is required to understand Anne Brontë’s unconventional approach to didactic literature.

Reading Saintliness: *Agnes Grey* and St. Æthelthryth

When Patrick Brontë claimed that the “sensual” novelist “mistakes his way, being utterly incapable of tracing good and evil to their proper sources,” he was essentially expressing a concern over the question of interpretation (P. Brontë 102). If a novel is to function as a didactic text, there must be some kind of control that keeps its readers from misinterpretation. The early church fathers expressed similar concerns over the reading of hagiography. The shift in medieval literature from didactic treatises toward exemplary figures introduced a certain amount of ambiguity into the text which could be interpreted by an Augustinian hermeneutic; however, this mode of interpretation was not without complications. Although Augustine’s sign theory suggests that a spiritual reader will interpret the signs of the narrative correctly, the intended audience was not always spiritual. The composition of hagiography in vernacular languages

permitted the saints to be accessed by uneducated laymen, and several church fathers expressed fears over how the genre would be received by the masses. Notably, a decretal attributed to Pope Gelasius I in the late fifth century, banned the reading of hagiography during mass:

...gesta sanctorum martyrum ... Quis catholicorum dubitet maiora eos in agonibus fuisse perpessos nec suis viribus sed dei gratia et adiutorio universa tolerasse? Sed ideo secundum antiquam consuetudinem singulari cautela in sancta Romana ecclesia non leguntur, quia et eorum qui conscripsere nomina penitus ignorantur et ab infidelibus et idiotis superflua, aut minus apta quam rei ordo fuerit, esse putantur;...propter quod, ut dictum est, ne vel levis subsannandi oriretur, in sancta Romana ecclesia non leguntur.

[...concerning the acts of the holy martyrs....what Catholic should doubt that the martyrs fully endured greater things in agonies not by their strengths but by the grace of God and that they endured all things with aid? But thus according to ancient custom, by singular caution, they are not read in the Holy Roman Church, because both the names of those who wrote them are unknown and they are thought by the infidels and the unlearned to be superfluous and less proper than was the [actual] succession of the event....For this reason, as it was said, they are not to be read in the Holy Roman Church, lest even a slight occasion for showing contempt should arise.] (von Dobschütz 9)

Although Gelasius acknowledges the virtue of the saints, he is specifically concerned that the unorthodox or unhistorical qualities in the genre could lead to misinterpretation. Yet it is important to note that Gelasius is not denying the existence of the saints, or even criticizing the

unlikely stories that they transmitted. The issue at hand was how hagiography was to be received among “idiots” and the “unlearned.”

As a tenth-century vernacular hagiographer and a participant in the Benedictine reforms, Ælfric seems to have inherited some of Gelasius’s concerns over the general reception of the saints.² These concerns are apparent in his introduction to the *Lives of the Saints* in which Ælfric seems to be torn between the task of educating his audience and protecting the saints from the “contempt” of the world. He expresses the hope that his hagiographies might “magis fide torpentes recreare hortationibus, quia martyrum passiones nimium fidem erigant languentem” [refresh by their exhortations such as are slothful in the faith, since the passions of the ,artyrs greatly revive a failing faith]³ (Ælfric 1). At the same time he also explains the following regarding his Old English composition of the lives of the saints:

quia nec conuenit tamen plura promitto me cripturum hac lingua, quia necc
conuenit huic sermocinationi plura inseri; ne forte despectui habeantur margarite
christi

[I do not promise, however, to write very many in this tongue, because it is not
fitting that many should be translated into our language, lest peradventure the
pearls of Christ be had in disrespect] (Ælfric 1-2).

For early Catholics, the Augustinian hermeneutic presented for how Christian leaders might educate the public in religious matters without allowing the “pearls of Christ” to be “had in disrespect.”

Although Brontë’s audience was considerably more educated than Ælfric’s audience, Agnes expresses similar concerns about the interpretation of her novel. In the first chapter, the novel presents itself as an honest, unflinching portrayal of personal experience. Brontë’s

governess claims that “the world may judge” the usefulness of her narrative: “Shielded by my own obscurity, and by the lapse of years, and a few fictitious names, I do not fear to venture, and will candidly lay before the public what I would not disclose to the most intimate friend” (AG 1). Despite this promise of unmitigated candor, Agnes’s story shies away from a complete description at several points. In the chapter entitled “Confessions” Agnes states

Such were some of my reflections about this period. I might go on prosing more and more, I might dive much deeper, and disclose other thoughts, propose questions the reader might be puzzled to answer, and deduce arguments that might startle his prejudices, or perhaps provoke his ridicule, because he could not comprehend them; but I forbear. (A. Brontë, AG 139)

At another similar point in the novel, Agnes pauses in her explanation, and states that

I began this book with the intention of concealing nothing...but we have some thoughts that all the angels in heaven are welcome to behold—but not our brother-men—not even the best and kindest among them. (AG 110)

Although the nineteenth-century novelists were not so mistrustful of their lay readers as the monastic clergy of the tenth, Anne Brontë expresses concerns that are similar to those of both Gelasius and Ælfric. As a result of these concerns, both Ælfric and Brontë structure their texts in such a way as to demand both a spiritual and carnal reading. For the most part Brontë’s protagonist is candid, but she also deliberately hides certain thoughts and spiritual insights that the audience is likely to misread. Ælfric’s *Life of St. Æthelthryth* shows a similar kind of textual maneuvering in the face of Æthelthryth’s more unorthodox behaviors.

In order to understand and analyze how Ælfric mediates Æthelthryth’s unorthodox nature, it is important to read her in the political and social context of Anglo-Saxon England. In *Signs of*

Devotion, Virginia Blanton calls Æthelthryth “the most important native female saint in England and one of the most significant of all English saints” (Blanton 3). She was the only native Anglo-Saxon female saint to be included in Ælfric’s *Lives of the Saints* (completed in 996 or AD 997). Furthermore, she is also one of the four Anglo-Saxon saints that Ælfric cites in his *Life of St. Edmund* as proof that “Nis angel-cynn bedæled drihtnes halgena” [the English people is not deprived of the Lord’s holy ones] (332-33).

Ælfric’s tenth-century hagiography was itself a testimony of the continuing importance of Æthelthryth’s cult in Anglo-Saxon England. He wrote his *Life of St. Æthelthryth* nearly four hundred years after the saint’s death in AD 679. His work explains that Æthelthryth was an East-Anglian princess in the seventh century who reportedly married twice yet remained a virgin. Ælfric explains that, after many years of marital continence (against her husband’s will) Æthelthryth left the royal court of Northumbria in order to enter the monastic life. As a nun, Æthelthryth founded the double-monastery at Ely and remained there as an abbess until she died of a tumor on her neck in AD 679. Æthelthryth was succeeded as abbess by her sister, Sexburgh, who wished to have Æthelthryth’s remains moved inside of the church in AD 695. Ælfric’s hagiography claims that when the monks unearthed the body of the saint, they found it to be uncorrupted. There were a number of miracles reported at Æthelthryth’s body, and that body became the focal point of a vibrant cult.

Although Æthelthryth became an incredibly influential saint, the story of her progression towards sainthood is unconventional. The notion that a woman might be married twice and remain a virgin would have seemed as strange to Ælfric’s reader in the tenth century as it is in the twenty-first. Furthermore, Æthelthryth’s approach to marital continence was specifically prohibited by ecclesiastical leaders; Peter Jackson points out that vows of celibacy made against

a husband's wishes were specifically prohibited by the patristic authorities (249). Augustine's letter to Armentarius and Paulina specifically states:

uouenda talia non sunt a coniugatis nisi ex consensu et uoluntate
 communi...neque enim deus exigit, si quis ex alieno aliquid uouerit, sed potius
 usurpare uetat alienum

[such vows are not to be made by married people without a mutual will and
 agreement...God does not exact of us what is vowed at another's expense; rather,
 He forbids us to trespass on another's rights]. (qtd. in Jackson 249)

Given the unconventional nature of St. Æthelthryth's story, Ælfric's *Life of St. Æthelthryth* displays a great deal of textual maneuvering that attempts to make Æthelthryth a more orthodox saint for a tenth-century lay audience.

Ælfric addresses the saint's less-orthodox qualities on a number of levels which allows for both a spiritual and carnal reading of the text. The spiritual signs of Æthelthryth's virtue include the saint's ascetic lifestyle (she fasted regularly, wore a hair shirt, and only bathed on feast days). She also predicted her own death and greeted the tumor that killed her with gratitude (435-37). The healings that were reported at her shrine as well as her miraculously preserved body were also important spiritual evidences of her claim of perpetual virginity—the ideal state for medieval monastics. . At the same time, Ælfric couples these outward signs of devotion with more secular evidences. For example, Ælfric cites Bede's eighth-century conversation with Bishop Wilfrid in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. The bishop claimed that Æthelthryth's second husband offered him land and money if he could persuade Æthelthryth to consummate their marriage (Bede 391-3). Ælfric uses this testimony as evidence that “se ælmihtiga god mihte eaðe gedon nu on urum dagum þæt æðeldryð þurh-wunode unge-wemmed

mæden” [even in our days the almighty God might easily cause that Æthelthryth should remain an unblemished maiden] (432-34).

The spiritual proofs in the text are likewise constructed in such a way that they emphasize and valorize the less-believable qualities of Æthelthryth’s sainthood (namely her continence in marriage). For example, Ælfric introduces the life of the saint as follows:

We wyllað nu awitan þeah þe hit wundorlic sy be ðære halgan sancta æðeldryðe þam engliscan mædende. þe was mid twam werum and swa-ðeah wunode mæden. swa swa þa wundra geswuteljað þe heo wyrcoð gelome.

[Now we wish to write, though it be incredible, concerning that English maiden, the holy saint Æthelthryth, who was with two husbands and nonetheless remained a maiden, just as the miracles show which she works often.] (Ælfric 432).

The miracle of her virginity is revealed when her dead body is discovered intact: “hit is swutol þæt heo wæs ungewemmed mæden þonne hire licama ne mihte formolsnian on eorðan” [it is clear that she was an unspoiled maiden since her body could not decay in the earth] (Ælfric 438). Ælfric’s emphasis and re-emphasis of these signs of religious devotion are unusually pronounced in his *Life of St. Æthelthryth*. Other virgin saints such as Agnes, Catherine, and Agatha also manifested miracles that were considered to be evidences of their commitment to personal chastity; however, Ælfric’s versions of these virgin lives are not so self-conscious in their attempts to prove their own veracity.

The reasons for Ælfric’s approach are clear: the trials of these fourth and fifth-century virgin martyrs were far more public than Æthelthryth’s private struggle with her husband. All three of the virgin martyrs were subjected to some kind of sexual assault (usually in the form of an arranged marriage), but each saint also chose to be publicly martyred rather than lose her

virginity. Æthelthryth's virginity, however, was a far more private affair, so the signs of her miracles were essential to prove the legitimacy of her cult. These symbols were outward, physical manifestations of holiness that were clear to the clergy and laymen alike. They could be correctly read according to the Augustinian hermeneutic, which allowed spiritual people to look past the odd story of the saint and read her as one of the most holy women in Anglo-Saxon England; however, by emphasizing secular proofs of sainthood, Ælfric also avoids the censure of those whom he called "slothful" in the faith. The evidences in the text thus lend themselves to what Sheri Horner describes as both the *licmanlic* reading as well as the *gastlic* interpretation (133).

Another such instance in which Ælfric adjusts his text for a lay audience occurs when he departs from Bede's earlier account of St. Æthelthryth's history. Although Ælfric's *Life of St. Æthelthryth* is not a direct translation, Bede's eighth-century *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* contains the first known record of Æthelthryth's history. Bede was Ælfric's primary source for his *Life of St. Æthelthryth*, and the two representations of the saint's life were nearly identical despite the three-hundred year gap between the two accounts. There is, however a notable exception to this in which Ælfric deviates into a description of a man who

was þryttig geara mid his wife on clænnysse þry suns he gestrynde and hi siþþan buta þrittig geara wron wunigende butan hæmede"

[was with his wife for thirty years in cleanliness. He fathered three sons and afterwards they remained together for thirty years without cohabitation]. (Ælfric 441)

This modification from Bede's story has been the subject of much recent critical attention (Blanton 131-71); however, Peter Jackson suggests that this addendum is an indicator of Ælfric's

discomfort with Æthelthryth's behavior (249). In light of Æthelthryth's choice to remain a virgin without her husband's consent, Jackson argues that Ælfric was presenting a view of marriage that was in keeping with Augustine's instructions to Paulina and Armentarius (249).

From the perspective of Augustine's hermeneutic, however, I would argue that this addendum did not negate the saint's holiness, but rather provided an example of chastity that the married laity could emulate without taking monastic vows. Ælfric thus allows for both a spiritual and carnal reading of his text. By so doing he takes Æthelthryth—an unorthodox saint—and turns her into an exemplary figure who can be read and imitated by both the spiritual as well as the unspiritual. Nancy Armstrong called the heroines of nineteenth-century novels “misfit protagonists” whose flaws make them exemplary figures. I would argue that Æthelthryth's hagiography had a similar function. Æthelthryth's choices as a married woman went against the social and religious expectations of her time, yet Ælfric's work focuses on the signs of divine approval in such a way that these behaviors became virtues. Although Ælfric does not mean for his audience to emulate Æthelthryth directly, she becomes a symbol of religious unity in English history. Because he constructs his text in such a way that it appeals to both lay and clergy alike, Ælfric expands the didactic function of the saint's life. As the Christian community interprets the lives of the saints in unity, this Augustinian hermeneutic can create a shared language in the community of Anglo-Saxon Christians.⁴

This idea that shared interpretation can lead to a better community is fundamental to the didactic project of Protestant writers whose views of education, slavery, animal rights, prison reform, and any number of the other causes were deeply indebted to their interpretation of Christian values. Spiritual people could read, not only religious texts, but also the needs of their society. This idea underlies many of the messages conveyed by *Agnes Grey*. For Ælfric,

virginity was an ideal that came from an ascetic, devoted life. Those who lived Christian principles “correctly” were better able to interpret the actions of moral figures and were greater contributors to the community of Christ. Likewise, a self-disciplined approach to learning and living was essential to the social reforms that Victorian Protestants furthered in nineteenth-century England. This ascetic lifestyle thus becomes an important component of the interpretation of *Agnes Grey*.

Augustine and *Agnes Grey*

Although Augustine’s influence on the Protestant tradition was largely indirect, traces of his approach to Christian hermeneutics were perpetuated in the didactic works of the nineteenth-century. The suppression of worldly desires in order to elevate the soul towards God was as much a tenant of the reformed churches as the Catholic one. Indeed, Evangelicals were often portrayed as “pious killjoys” in mainstream literature (Melnyk 22). For example, Dickens portrays Mr. Stiggins of *The Pickwick Papers* as a hypocritical drunk and George Eliot wrote that “Evangelicalism had cast a certain suspicion as of plague-infection over the few amusements which survived in the provinces” (qtd. in Melnyk 22). Although such satires were likely exaggerated, the emphasis on self-sacrifice was definably part of the Evangelical mindset.

In *Agnes Grey* Brontë portrays a genuinely pious protagonist alongside her considerably less-pious employers. These employers read Agnes as something of the “plague-infection” that Eliot describes in *Middlemarch*. Her students see her as a killjoy, and her employers see her as a bad influence on their children. Like the laymen who might misread Æthelthryth’s stubborn adherence to chastity in marriage and even doubt whether she was able to maintain her virginity at all, Agnes’s fellow characters cannot correctly read the outward signs of her inward devotion to God. In many ways Agnes thus becomes a martyr to the society that cannot read her. Her

suffering comes to embody the sufferings of the faithful minority. Although the novel ends with a happy marriage, all of the problems of society continue, and herein lies the didactic power of Brontë's text. Like the martyrs whose suffering is done in the imitation of Christ's suffering, Agnes becomes a glorious failure. The fact that some of her failures come from internal faults is another reflection of the struggle that even the unpersecuted must constantly endure. It is true that Agnes's attempts to reform society fall short; however, I would argue that, by analyzing the novel with an Augustinian approach to interpretation, these failures seem more logical, and even necessary to *Agnes Grey's* didactic purposes.

Brontë began her novel with the statement that "all true histories contain instruction... Whether this be the case with my history, I am hardly competent to judge; I sometimes think it might prove useful to some, and entertaining to others, but the world may judge for itself" (AG 1). In this statement Brontë connects the principles of history and truth, with her didactic approach. Like Ælfric, her intent is to "instruct," yet the authority of that instruction depends on the reader's ability to extract truth from the text. The history is only true insofar as the reader reads truth into it. Agnes's hesitance to divulge every aspect of her life is largely based on a kind of distrust toward her reader's abilities to interpret her correctly. By moving away from Evangelical tropes, Brontë brings ambiguity and subjectivity into the text. The reader's individual spiritual standing defines his or her ability to access the meaning behind the governess's actions.

At least some portion of this spiritual standing was tied to whether or not the reader adhered to an ascetic lifestyle. An individual's ability to sacrifice passing pleasures for more enduring ones defined, not only the ability to read a text, but also his or her religious and social progression. This feeling that the suppression of worldly desires led to the elevation of souls was

not limited to religion; it was also one of the most fundamental and defining principles of nineteenth-century education. The development of the mind was inextricably connected to one's moral duties. Indeed, much of the instruction on hermeneutics in nineteenth-century conduct books seems to follow an Augustinian train of thought. For example, in Isaac Watts's *The Improvement of the Mind*—a popular eighteenth-century conduct book that was owned by Anne Brontë (Thormhalen, *Religion* 24)—he writes that books must be judged, not “merely by the subjects that they represent, but by the justness of their sentiments, the beauty of their manner...and the weight of just and proper argument which appears in them” (Watts 76).

Watts echoes the feeling that one must read past the outward trappings of the text in order to access the moral truth behind it. The construction of books like *The Improvement of the Mind* is geared toward Augustine's two levels of reading symbols. The first level included a kind of secular education that familiarized the reader with the tradition of Christian literature. This familiarity allowed the pupil to recognize whether or not a sign was divine. The second was the kind of ascetic lifestyle that would allow the reader to interpret the signs correctly. Watts's work includes instruction on how to, not only read books, but also how to develop the kind of Christian sentiments that would allow an individual to recognize the “justness” and “beauty” of the text's message. The development of the mind was inextricably connected to one's moral duties. The philosophies of education and religion thus mirrored one another, and this approach seems to inform Brontë's portrayal of education in *Agnes Grey*.

As Agnes attempts to instruct her pupils, both the parents and children impede Agnes's intentions at every turn. These impediments do not occur on the level of subject matter; the question at hand is how the children are to be disciplined. Both families prohibit Agnes from implementing any kind of punishment on the children. As Mrs. Murray states when Agnes

arrives, “if persuasion and gentle remonstrance will not do, let one of the others come and tell me; for *I* can speak to them more plainly than it would be proper for you to do” (A. Brontë, *AG* 61).

The families thus expect Agnes to teach information without teaching self-discipline, and the result is disastrous. Learning requires the kind of discipline which Augustine outlines as the model of textual interpretation. An the application of ascetic principles must precede spiritual or temporal progress.

Agnes’s employers fault her for her pupils’ moral failings, and the governess’s reaction (or lack thereof) only serves to highlight the kinds of vices which impede individual learning. Grey sets herself up as martyr by remaining silent in the face of persecution. Out of her impotence, however, the vices in society become more apparent to the reader. Each of Agnes’s students comes to represent some element of intemperance. Her first family of employers, the Bloomsfields, allows men to tyrannize the women in the family. Even seven-year old Tom explains that he is “obliged” to hit his sister “now and then to keep her in order” (A. Brontë, *AG* 17). Agnes’s charges in the Murray family, on the other hand, show women’s tyranny over men. Rosalie’s only pleasure is to play with her suitors’ affections, while her sister spends her time learning vulgar behavior from her father’s men.

Each of Agnes’s employers judge the governess based on their own moral state, and their interpretation seems to be, for the most part, inaccurate. In many ways, Agnes becomes a sort of saint whose actions are “read” by the surrounding characters—and most of them misread the governess’s actions. Rather than looking at Agnes’s intent, they read the children’s behavior as an outward manifestation of Agnes’s bad character. For example, when Mrs. Murray informs Agnes that her work as a governess has been less-than satisfactory, she makes the following statement:

When we wish to decide upon the merits of a governess, we naturally look at the young ladies she professes to have educated, and judge accordingly. The *judicious* governess knows this, she knows that, while she lives in obscurity herself, her pupil's virtues and defects will be open to every eye.... (AG 153).

Agnes's employers not only misread their governess, but—by extension— they also tend to misinterpret scripture. In a debate over the treatment of animals Agnes quotes scripture to defend her position; however, Mrs. Bloomsfield twists the meaning to counter her argument. For example, Mrs. Bloomsfield responds to the scripture “blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy” by saying “Oh, of course! but that refers to our conduct towards each other” (AG 46). In another instance, Agnes describes a speech by Tom's grandmother as including “several texts of scripture, misquoted or misapplied, and religious exclamations so redolent of the ludicrous in style of delivery....that I decline repeating them” (AG 37).

Agnes responds to the religious illiteracy of her employers with silence. After an argument with Mrs. Bloomsfield Agnes “thought it prudent to say no more” (AG 46). Similarly, her response to the accusation of meeting in secret with Mr. Weston is to say “Really, that is not worth contradicting!” (AG 111). Agnes calls herself “a close and resolute dissembler....My prayers, my tears, my wishes, fears, and lamentations were witnessed by myself and Heaven alone” (A. Brontë, AG 146). Agnes's reaction to this bad judgment only serves to highlight and perpetuate her employer's ignorance. Her actions are as much a commentary on the moral fiber of her fellow characters as her own virtue. Those who are immoral themselves are the ones who read immorality into Agnes's actions while those who are the most moral are also those who read Agnes most correctly. For instance, Mr. Weston correctly reads Agnes's intentions in direct contrast to Mrs. Murray's criticism. After Agnes tells Weston that Rosalie had always laughed

at her attempts to dissuade her from a bad marriage, and Mr. Weston responds: “You did attempt it? Then, at least, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that it was no fault of yours, if any harm should come of it” (AG 154). Mr. Weston’s ability to see Agnes’s value behind the criticisms of her employers leads to their marriage at the end of the novel and the perpetuation of good Christian values in their children.

The different perspectives that Brontë presents to judge Agnes create a kind of subjectivity—a subjectivity that seems to be quite self-consciously constructed. At one point the novel even changes abruptly from Agnes’s point of view to the Murray’s perspective. At this point in the text they describe their governess as having “very tiresome opinions....as she was always thinking of what was right and what was wrong, and had a strange reverence for matters connected with Religion, and an unaccountable liking to good people” (A. Brontë, AG 70). This subjectivity distances the audience from the governess’s story. Although the story is told from the first person, even this perspective creates distance between Agnes and thus would allow the “world to judge for itself” whether the “history” is true.

As I mentioned earlier, the protagonist herself admits that she “began this book with the intention of concealing nothing, that those who liked might have the benefit of perusing a fellow creature’s heart,” yet there are certain points that Agnes admits to omitting from the story (AG 110). Even a first-person perspective separates one individual from another. This separation—brought about by the Fall in Augustine’s mind—is only bridged by a correct reading of the text. It is not only her fellow characters that must correctly read the signs of Agnes’s virtue, but also the audience. The text acts as an outward sign of Agnes’s inner virtues; it functions the same way that the miracles and shrines in hagiography function—they act as outward manifestations

of behaviors, thoughts, and intentions that are not otherwise visible to the observer. At the same time, however, these signs must be interpreted correctly.

Conclusion

Brontë's construction of *Agnes Grey* creates two levels on which the governess is to be read. The characters that surround Agnes read (or misread) her actions while the book's audience reads the text as a whole. In many ways, the interpretation of Agnes follows a kind of hagiographic model in which the signs of divine approval do not necessarily conform to an idealized set of behaviors. Like the rather unorthodox saints of the tenth century, Brontë's protagonist does not fit with every social more of her society: she is unassertive, unhappy, and more than a little neurotic in her internal musings. Rather than presenting a paragon of virtue that is to be emulated, Agnes is flawed. At the same time, these very flaws allow the audience to make their own judgments and interpret the authority of the novel accordingly. Nancy Armstrong calls nineteenth-century female protagonists "misfits"—but it is the fact that they do not fit in with society that allows them to mediate between the reader and Victorian social problems (5). By modeling her text on a kind of Augustinian approach to learning, Brontë rests the authority of her work on the moral fiber of her readers, not in the perfection of her governess.

As Brontë's protagonist unsuccessfully struggles against the class and gender structures that impede her self-proclaimed project of instruction, Agnes's failures become a reflection of the moral state of Victorian England rather than a measure of the governess's individual commitment to ascetic living. The fact that Agnes is a "misfit" protagonist separates her from the general populace and places her in a position that is neither part of the social system nor wholly separated from it. She is a mirror more than an agent of social reform. When *Agnes*

Grey ends, the Bloomsfield children are just as ignorant, Rosalie is just as petty, and their parents are just as deluded as the moment when Agnes arrived in their homes.

This didactic approach creates a kind of shared religious literacy whose ambiguity allows people of different religious maturities to be instructed by the novel. As a departure from the simplistic characters and plot structures of other Evangelical authors, *Agnes Grey* presents a much more complex picture of Victorian society and demands a far more incisive reading of the of her moral protagonist. Agnes becomes something of a martyr, whose sufferings embody the sufferings of a devoted Christian populace. Those who recognize Agnes's moral virtue are, themselves, oppressed by Agnes's oppression while "religiously illiterate" readers become the equivalent of the Bloomsfields and the Murrays; they are unaffected by the governess's attempts to educate the immoral element of society, and are thereby excluded from the community of moral interpreters who empathize with Agnes's plight. The shrines of Anglo-Saxon England served as centers of social and religious cohesion, and the function of Brontë's novel in Victorian England was similar. Among an ever more diverse and disparate populace, didactic novels could function as a center of Victorian values for those whose lifestyle allowed them to read such novels correctly. Such a reading lends itself to the pluralistic readership of nineteenth century England and allows interpretation to occur on a spectrum of individual devotion.

¹ For Brontë's approaches to education see Simmons, Thormählen (*The Brontës and Education*), and Regaignon. Also Nash and Seuss's anthology provides a good survey of current Anne Brontë scholarship.

² Gelasius is a likely source for both Ælfric's *Life of St. George* and his *Homily for the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Jayatilaka).

³ All Latin translations were done by the translator referenced in the works cited page. All Old English translations are mine.

⁴ See R.A. Markus's work for further explanation of Augustine's sign theory and its attempts to create a Christian community.

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