

The Lost Book of Barkynge

SAMPLER

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*The Lost Book
of Barkynge*

SAMPLE

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Part of the terror is to take back our own listening, to use our own voice, to see our own light

—Hildegard von Bingen

We've had enough exhortations to be silent. Cry out with a thousand tongues – I see the world is rotten because of silence

—Catherine of Siena

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Foreword

In his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede refers to a 'libellus' (or *little book*) compiled at Barking Abbey in the early 8th century, but which is now lost. When I first encountered the ruins of the abbey on the banks of the River Roding, I was overwhelmed by a sense of those lost voices. And slowly what had begun as a handful of poems about a favourite river became *The Lost Book of Barkynge* as first one nun and then the next demanded to be heard. The book traces the history of the abbey from its foundation in 666 to its dissolution in 1539. It includes extensive notes that I recommend to the reader as integral to the text. Barking was a royal abbey and was a centre of learning for women at a time when few other opportunities existed beyond marriage. The poems are an attempt to recover the voices of the nuns, abbesses and local women of the period. They offer a conjectural history but one grounded in thorough research, and though not an exhaustive list, all the abbesses are mentioned in the historical record. Each section begins with a 'hic' (*here* or *this*, in Latin) to set the scene of the period. These lyric captions offer a different slant on the usual bullet points of British history. Barking itself is in what we would now call East London but was historically an ancient parish on the Roding, north of the Thames. There is a marginal note (c.1000) saying '*hic is seo boc to Beorcingon*' / 'this is the book for Barking Abbey'. In the words of Lisa M.C. Weston in her essay 'The Saintly Female Body and the Landscape of Foundation in Anglo-Saxon Barking' this 'book' marked 'the transformation of secular, dynastic *folcland* into monastic *bacland* and it is the inviolable space of that book-land, and the potential it offered the centuries of women that lived there, that this collection endeavours to explore.

Ruth Wiggins

And so begins nine hundred winters

— 7th century —

- i A rose of shimmering (Æthelburh – abbess)
- ii Shucked and cast away (Tortgyth – novice mistress)
- iii Seigneur en jupe (Hildelith – abbess)
- iv Letters (Hildelith – abbess)

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A rose of shimmering – Æthelburh

And so begins in England, a hundred winters of raising holy villas
Æthelburh's brother, soon to hold the bishopric, founds two – one at
Chertsey for himself, one at Barking for his sister – Days of Cædmon
and Hild, mother of snakestones at Streoneshalh – Æthelthryth at Ely, her
sister Wendreda the healer – The daughters of Eafe – Mildrith, Mildgyth,
Mildburh – Miraculous escapes across a river – protectors of springs and
of barley, birds

At Lundenwic the Thamesis cannot move for ice
cold on her bed and

drifting towards release
Æthelburh remembers

Miracles

The translation of unexpected bones
at the raising of Beracingchirche
Earconwald baptising a gosse-lyfe
releasing him to dust
with just
the holy water of his pity

This abbey raised
for her and for her daughters
and for the daughters after
From Francia dear Hildelith to guide them

But since they first broke ground
bright lights in the sky – sickness – inundation
a great palsy among the geese
men labouring in a storm of clay
at Berecingum and Certesi
The sun hiding its face
signs and portents – but how to read them

reading in itself an answer a mistlethrush
tru-truing in the holly

She hums the old liturgy remembers the sky fires
that brought the yellow plague
how they seemed to chase upon the heels of glaziers
here from Gaul
to teach the art of windows
Apertures into crystal crysoprase and sard
How bloody rain fell
milk and butter turned to blood

Earconwald's letters urging
gather your daughters seclude them
Instead
they opened their doors to the flood
In all charity
how could they not

Pestilence

Even the boy Æsica on whom the sisters doted
and none more so than sweet Eadgyth his teacher
little Æsica taken
With his last earthly breath he called to Eadgyth
Eadgyth! three times he called
once for each of his too few years
and wondrous! at prayer that-very-moment Eadgyth
did also call out
and then did follow him
that he would not have to step
into the light alone

Green the child in the earth no more to
hurry into lessons
Green in the earth and sweet

o puzzle
soon to join him

We intercede for the dead

Now Earconwald here you come again
come to die at Berecingum

Dear brother conveyed
in a horse-drawn crib
Old Hæsl steady mare she too
outlives you

The brothers at Certesi and from the Bishopric
all noisy for your body
cloak staff your everything all carried off
No quiet felix left to honour
a sister's loss
How we sunk our hopes
into that sudden rising
of the river
remarkable flood apparent interceding
but then a miracle
with which we virgins
could not argue
a weary trunk perhaps fallen upriver
into the flood and
staunching
Easy passage then
for them to carry you off
your body to London
and there to rest

Bright glade of grass
a rose of shimmering

This kingdom of the yellow death its estate pricked out in decades
O world in turmoil and people
losing faith

A bold comet standing
and standing in the autumn dawn
for months standing
Old Ofwyth gone
and Thecla
your complaint in the night at the vigil torch
moving towards a brighter
light and gone by dawn

Æthelburh asks the last of her daughters where
they will have her lay
their bodies down
lay down the daughters after
they say
they cannot answer
Then oracular night! when praying
the still unsettled graves
tilth freshly leavened by gravel
spade
Of a sudden a great sheet of light
sky like wool combed
by a great weft beater
billow lifting from the loom
then dipping
south and west of the chapel
where it does hang in plain view
of each astonished handmaiden

And Æthelburh has her answer

Shucked and cast away – Tortgyth

And Tortgyth who knew Æthelburh as a child at court came south
with her Barking not so different from the wetlands of Lindsey both
bounded by marsh and river, birch trees A cloister of birdsong and
midges unceasing choir their bellies full of garnets But as when an
oyster has been shucked and cast away the shell goes brittle and one
half finds itself worked free of the other

We were as sisters embroidery
scripture
plaiting each other's hair always together
Æ's good father
knew from the start
offered her crown of psalter
but like her brother
she had no use for gold
He had us learn together
and when the time came we left as one
we took the dyke and then
the long stræt south
until
as pilgrims working our soft way
through fen
we found the tracks of brushwood
pocked with flint

The look on her face bittersweet and shy
that first day when she raised as Abbess
the sacramental shears
my hair coming away in her hands no need of cutting
body so eager to be humble
just the ritual of her fingers