Economies of Salvation in English Anchoritic Texts, 1100-1400

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Economies of Salvation in English Anchoritic Texts, 1100-1400

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Dedication

To my parents, Bruce and Linda; and my in-laws, Kathy, Ken, and Judy. Without your support, this project would not have been possible. To my children, Ella, Claire, and Griffin. You shared your dad with this seemingly endless work.

Most of all, this is dedicated to my wife, Kimberly. Your sacrifices and patient, steadfast love truly made this project possible, and any honors for its completion belong as much to you (if not more) as to me.
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Abstract

This dissertation explores the different ways medieval authors conceived of anchoritism and solitary life by focusing on three important phases of the movement which are represented by Wulfric of Haselbury, Christina of Markyate, and fourteenth-century mystics. It is grounded in the medieval English anchoritic literature that was produced by religious scholars between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. Initially, lacking a tradition of their own and a language to articulate the anchoritic experience, medieval hagiographers borrowed the desert imagery from the story of the early fathers who lived in the Syrian and Egyptian deserts, which they viewed as a place of solitude and physical suffering and in which they sought perfection and salvation. While acts of penitence and the sacrament of penance would never be removed from the economy of salvation, by the eleventh century, the desert was no longer a viable analogue for salvation. I argue that in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, new ideas of what constituted salvation and how it was fulfilled were elaborated. The cell became the place in which devotion to the sacraments was fulfilled, and it was this sacramental devotion, particularly the Eucharist but also marriage and holy orders, not physical isolation that imbued anchorites with exceptional holiness and led them to salvation. A century later a new understanding of the economy of salvation emerged, which deemphasized the physical body and was grounded in
mysticism or the inward migration of the spiritual center. This was the final transformation in medieval English anchoritism and the narratives of the reclusive changed to reflect that turn.
Chapter One

Introduction

This dissertation analyzes medieval English anchoritic literature that was produced by scholars and hagiographers between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. In particular, I trace the different ways medieval authors conceived of anchoritism and solitary life through representatives of three important phases of the movement: Wulfric of Haselbury, Christina of Markyate, and fourteenth-century mystics. Lacking a tradition of their own and a language to articulate the anchoritic experience, early medieval hagiographers borrowed the desert imagery from the story of the early fathers who lived in the Syrian and Egyptian deserts as an act of living martyrdom. The desert imagery used by contemporary authors to describe the dwellings of hermits and anchorites stretches back to the third and fourth centuries even if English anchorites lived in forests, island, and swamps. The desert was a place typically cast as a site of struggle rather than contemplation, a crucial metaphor that explained a religious vocation that sought perfection in a life of solitude and physical suffering. The desert operated as an ecosystem of salvation whose arid environs provided the means for bodily penance and the solitude necessary for contemplation and illumination, and finally, salvation. While acts of penitence and the sacrament of penance would never be removed from the economy of salvation, by the eleventh century, the desert, with its long literary and religious tradition of suffering and pain, was no longer a viable analogue for Christian salvation and the cell of the recluse ceased to be described
as desert. I argue that in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, new ideas of what constituted salvation and how it was fulfilled were elaborated. The cell became the place in which devotion to the sacraments was fulfilled, and it was this sacramental devotion, not asceticism and physical isolation that imbued the anchorite with exceptional holiness. In the twelfth century, the sacramental turn shifted the primary mode of salvation toward the observance of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist but also marriage and holy orders. A century later a new understanding of the economy of salvation emerged, which deemphasized the physical body and was grounded in mysticism or the inward migration of the spiritual center. This was the final transformation in medieval English anchoritism and the narratives of the reclusive changed to reflect that turn.

Anchorites have occupied an ambiguous place in modern scholarship.1 Although the vocation was ubiquitous in medieval society, as evidenced by its inclusion in several medieval literary genres such as hagiographies, guidance texts, pontificals, missals, and personal correspondence, the meaning of the anchoritic vocation within the context of medieval communities has been difficult to pin down. This is perhaps because the vocation of the anchorite has been hard to define. Anchorites were men and women who chose to live as

1 The terminology used to refer to solitaries throughout the Middle Ages is complicated. The simplest explanation is that hermits and anchorites, the two most common terms for solitaries, were differentiated by their mobility. Hermits were permitted to move from one location to another, work the land, and often, perform public works service such as repairing roads and bridges, etc. Anchorites were usually enclosed in a cell connected to a parish church or cathedral and were not allowed to leave, for the remainder of their lives. Tom Licence uses the term recluse to refer to refer specifically to what are traditionally considered anchorites, and he applies anchorite as an umbrella term to identify both hermits and recluses. In England, during the Anglo-Saxon period, the terms anchorite and hermit were still interchangeable. In this chapter, I will use the term hermit to refer to those holy men who live in the eastern deserts and the countryside of western Europe, and anchorite to refer to Eustochium, Eve, and the three enclosed sisters to whom Ancrene Wisse was written as their conditions are more congruent with anchoritism. For more on terminology see Tom Licence, Hermits and Recluses in English Society, 950-1200 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10-21.
solitaries enclosed in cells attached to churches or cathedrals. Because there was not a
universally accepted rule for anchorites, like the Rule of St. Benedict was for monks and nuns,
anchorites enjoyed a unique kind of freedom to spend their days as they wished within the
 confines of their cells (or anchorholds). Many anchorites, however, desired to live according to a
rule, and, often, requested one to be written by a trusted spiritual advisor. These guidance texts,
usually written by male priests for female anchorites (anchoresses), account for much of what is
known today about the anchoritic life, such as the motivations for someone taking on such an
austere lifestyle, how they were expected to live, and what their function might have been in
medieval society. Additionally, anchorites became the subjects of vitae (lives), which were
biographies of holy men and women who either already were, or were thought eligible to
become, saints. The number and proliferation of these text attest to the intrigue with which the
vocation was viewed by medieval society.

Anchoritism and monasticism both have their roots in the deserts of fourth-century Syria
and Egypt. The solitary life of the desert drew men and women who sought piety through a life
of ascetic withdrawal from the luxuries found in towns and villages. While some of these
ascetics went on to found the first Christian monasteries, others remained solitary hermits (from
the Latin word eremus, often spelled heremus in medieval latin, which means desert or
abandoned, solitary place). By the fifth century, the monastic lifestyle had migrated to Western
Europe, and with it the solitary life of the hermit. In England, hermits found their deserts on
rocky coastal islands and in swampy marshes. Often, although they lived apart, hermits were
members of local monasteries, and they were supplied with food and other necessities by their
monastic brothers.
In England, during the Anglo-Saxon period, the terms *hermit* and *anchorite* were used synonymously, and it was not until the twelfth century that the terms took on different meanings. According to these later linguistic distinctions, hermits were solitaries who were mobile and free to relocate when they wished; anchorites were fixed in a single location and were not supposed to leave for the rest of their lives. Both types of religious lives, that of the hermit and that of the anchorite, were common in medieval England from the Anglo-Saxon period through the end of the Middle Ages. Anchoritism, however, played a particularly vital role in the religious landscape, largely because more so than their hermitic counterparts, anchorites were deeply integrated into their communities, which fed, supported, and communicated with them regularly. Anchoritism also provided a religious path that proved particularly attractive to female and to lay practitioners. Although anchoritism drew both men and women, anchoresses remained more common throughout the Middle Ages. And, while the male anchorites were often priests or came from a monastic background, anchoresses were typically laywomen. Because of this lack of standardized personnel, anchorites occupied a middle ground between clergy and laity and, while called recluses, they did not live in a literal wilderness, but were rather spiritual figures who, by the twelfth century, usually lived in the very center of towns and villages and were valued as important intermediaries between God and the community.

Anchoritism could be found throughout the European continent as well as the British Isles. Most of the existing anchoritic literature, however, comes from England, and its relative wealth of extant anchorholds (though many in ruins), have made it a natural hotbed for anchoritic studies. Because of the lack of any standardization, these anchorholds appeared in many shapes and sizes, from lean-tos constructed under the eaves of churches to multi-roomed and multi-storied apartments, and their remains have provided considerable knowledge about these
recluses. For example, we know that in many cases, anchorites were attended by servants who often lived in the cell with them or in adjacent buildings. At the very least, the anchorite was supported financially through complex networks of patronage that ranged from monarchs to bishops, to common villagers.

Prior to the last three decades, scholars took for granted that the role of anchorites in their communities was marginal, and most scholars considered them to be unimportant figures in medieval communities. Indeed, they appeared as ghosts on the margins of medieval history, not quite absent, but also, not quite present. More recently, however, scholars, mostly from England, have begun to move the anchorite out of the peripheries and into the center of town life, delving deeper into the influence that anchorites had on their host communities. Gender scholars, such as Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards, have deftly used the anchoritic corpus to explain the opaque rhetoric that often appears in guidance texts and *vitae*. Literary scholars and historians, like Eddie Jones and Tom Licence have also used these texts to shed light on the development of the anchoritic vocation and how it functioned within medieval English society.

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2 Michelle M. Sauer, “Architecture of Desire: Mediating the Female Gaze in the Medieval English Anchorhold” *Gender and History* 25 (2013): 545-64; Roberta Gilchrist, *Contemplation and Action: The Other Monasticism* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1995). Gilchrist, an archaeologist, has shown that recluses (both hermits and anchorites) occupied physically liminal spaces by situating themselves directly on or very near the boundaries of counties and towns. They also occupied spiritually liminal spaces between the living and the dead, being surrounded often enough by cemeteries on the north end of the church. This liminality of course has frustrated the efforts of modern historians to categorize these recluses geographically.


4 Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards, eds., *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005); Liz Herbert McAvoy, ed. *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourses of Enclosure* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008); *Speculum inclusorum/a*
Anchoritic studies, however, still suffer from broad generalizations and an overly simplistic depiction of the anchoritic experience.

For much of the twentieth century, the anchoritic tradition was an understudied field within the scholarship of medieval England. In 1914 the antiquarian Rotha Mary Clay published *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*, the first book-length study on anchorites and hermits, which still informs nearly every study on the subject. Clay’s lasting contribution to the field was her meticulous collection of names and places of anchorites and hermits that lived in England during the Middle Ages. Though mostly descriptive, her tables of data and collections of literary evidence on the presence of religious solitaries are still invaluable sources for scholars. During the following decades, however, anchorites continued to be viewed as marginal to society. In spite of their admiration for these hermits’ solitary existence, scholars consigned them further to a history of silence and neglect. They viewed anchorites as socially isolated, confined to their anchorholds and unable to participate in community functions. Economically, their life was

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5 Rotha Mary Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1968). It could be said that the field is still awaiting the third monograph that will synthesize the few decades of Anchorite studies.

6 Clay had planned for years to write an updated edition of *Hermits and Anchorites*. She began revisions in the 1950s but died before seeing the project to completion. The project was then passed on to Professor Basil Cottle from the University of Bristol, but was halted once again upon his death in 1994. This eclectic collection of typed papers and handwritten notes (some on train ticket stubs and other scraps) are now called the Clay-Cottle Papers. They have never been published, leaving their potential untapped and inaccessible, except by in-person examination at the University of Exeter, where they are currently under the care of Eddie Jones.
believed to be one of precarious subsistence and for the most part based on alms. Religiously, it was argued that they existed outside of the Church hierarchy with no official order, or any standard rule by which to live.\(^7\)

By mid-century, as more information was collected, scholars began exploring the reasons for the increased popularity of the anchoritic vocation between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. In his 1975 article, “Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse,” Henry Maria Mayr-Harting focused on the anchorite Wulfric of Haselbury (d. 1154) as a case study to understand anchorites’ influence in the towns where they lived. He argued that Wulfric played an important role as arbiter during a time of crisis precipitated by the Norman Conquest, negotiating between old and new social forces.\(^8\) Mayr-Harting’s conclusions, which associated the perceived proliferation of hermits in English towns after 1066 with the economic and social upheaval following the Conquest, then became a springboard for later anchoritic studies.\(^9\)

In the 1980s, Ann K. Warren produced another much-needed monograph written on this subject. In *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England*, Warren used the data that Clay had collected and, building on Mayr-Harting’s interpretation of anchorites as arbiters during


adverse circumstances, added archival evidence that showed how these recluses both maintained the lifestyle of solitude that defined their vocation and were deeply integrated into the social and religious landscapes of English towns. Her study of English anchorites from the twelfth to the early fifteenth centuries was a breakthrough in that it presented a systematic exploration of the social groups that followed and supported anchorites, which included humble village laborers and merchants, as well as kings and the aristocracy. Warren’s study on anchoritic patronage led to a novel interpretation that viewed the solitaries as highly valued members of both the religious and secular life in English towns. By demystifying the isolation of medieval English anchorites, Warren opened the gate for later scholars to reflect more deeply on the social meanings of living a life of solitude.

In the decades since Anchorites and their Patrons, scholars have published a small number of insightful works on anchoritic life and the roles of solitaries in their towns, as well as on their mystical experiences and the symbolic interpretations of the anchorhold itself. In the early 2000s, after research showed that the Norman presence had not been as traumatic or disruptive as previously thought, scholars began questioning Mayr-Harting’s explanation for the increased popularity of anchorites and his interpretation of their role as one of arbitration following the Conquest. At the same time, new evidence showed that anchorites in England had enjoyed extraordinary influence in the centuries leading up to and after 1066.


In 2011, when Tom Licence published his monograph *Hermits and Recluses*, not much was known about who the English anchorites were, where they came from, what they did, and the reasons for their popularity as expressed in the sources. Focusing on the period between 950 and 1200, Licence did not completely dismiss Mayr-Harting’s explanation that the anchorites’ increased presence in contemporary documents was a consequence of the Norman Conquest. Finding evidence of a strong anchoritic presence prior to the Conquest, Licence cites an increase in records in post-conquest England that gives the impression of an increase in the anchoritic population. He also debunked previous interpretations that the flourishing of anchoritism in the twelfth century was a sudden and uniquely English phenomenon, linking it, instead, to a Europe-wide trend.\(^\text{13}\)

Licence reached these conclusions by drawing from the work of scholars of anchoritism on the continent who had long noticed an increase in the number of those pursuing the vocation beginning in the eleventh century. In 1946, the French historian Jean Leclercq had suggested that men and women were flocking to the eremitical life in response to the dislocations caused by demographic increase, urbanization, the emergence of a commercial economy, and the accumulation of great wealth in most parts of Europe.\(^\text{14}\) According to Leclercq, these social and economic changes led to increased anxiety among the religious and the lay communities alike.


\(^{13}\) Licence, *Hermits and Recluses*, 6.

Rejecting a society that was becoming progressively more materialistic, many retreated to the hermitage and anchorhold. In light of Leclercq’s study, Licence began exploring the spiritual motivations that led to the growth of the anchoritic vocation and that accounted for the respect and admiration afforded those who chose to seek the guidance of anchorites.\textsuperscript{15} He concluded that it was religious “millenarian anxiety” over salvation that motivated individuals’ flight to the hermitage and anchorhold and that accounted for the popularity of the solitary vocation.\textsuperscript{16} He argued that anchorites were seen and saw themselves as having a unique and superior relationship with God and as filling the role of brokers who channeled the power and wisdom of God to the rest of the community.

Licence’s research has influenced the works of literary and gender scholars who have recently produced important work on the role of anchorites in the communities that supported them and on the religious belief system that both shaped and was produced by them as well as on the gendered nature of anchoritism.\textsuperscript{17} Recently, Eddie Jones has opened new lines of inquiries focusing on medieval liturgy to understand how recluses fit within the complicated hierarchy of

\textsuperscript{15} Licence, \textit{Hermits and Recluses}, 8-9.

\textsuperscript{16} For more on millenarian anxiety, see Rachel Fulton Brown, \textit{From Judgement to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 89, 90, 142.

\textsuperscript{17} Literary and gender scholars have inquired further into the issue of anchorites’ patronage, first explored by Warren, and have raised questions about contemporary perceptions of gender and anchoritic life. Some of the most substantial recent contributions by literary scholars include, McAvoy and Hughes-Edwards, eds., \textit{Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs}; McAvoy, ed. \textit{Rhetoric of the Anchorhold}; Cate Gunn and Liz Herbert McAvoy, eds. \textit{Medieval Anchorites in Their Communities}, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017). In addition to editing two volumes together, McAvoy and Edwards have also independently published widely on the topic of anchorites. They have also made efforts through the organizing of conferences to bridge the gap between anchorite studies in the U.K and those of the continent, a long acknowledged deficiency in the field.
the Catholic Church and on the liminal place held by anchorites in the royal court. According to Jones, anchorites did not just inhabit religious spaces, such as churches and cathedrals. They also lived in castles and the defensive walls of towns. They were a stark reminder of the boundaries between wilderness and civilization, making them a constant presence in medieval life. There has also been a recent, increased interest in anchoritism in pre-conquest England. Historians Jane Roberts, Sarah Foot, Mary Clayton, and John Blair are all publishing research on the place of anchorite saints and their cults in Anglo-Saxon society.

The recent body of work on anchorites has acknowledged the importance of religion in understanding the motivation and popularity of anchoritism. However, by focusing on the period between the tenth and the beginning of the twelve centuries, scholars have neglected to identify the impact of the twelve-century Gregorian reforms on anchoritism. In particular, scholars have failed to recognize that the changing economy of salvation and developments in sacramental, and later mystical theory and praxis had profoundly affected anchoritic identities and the ways in which anchoritic writers positioned this singular lifestyle in their texts. These developments are revealed in the changes of imagery and language used by such writers over the course of the high and later Middle Ages, but these shifts have gone unnoticed by modern scholars who have

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largely assumed that the metaphor of the desert remained the touchstone motif for the anchoritic vocation throughout its history. My argument departs from this interpretation.

The Desert in Modern Scholarship

The experience of the desert has offered modern authors the clearest way to initiate their readers into the anchoritic life. The anchoritic and eremitic life has become nearly synonymous with the desert in modern scholarship for several reasons. It is true that the early medieval authors such as Jerome and John Cassian who brought the solitary practice to the non-desert west where themselves anchorites from Syrian and Egyptian deserts. Desert imagery was built into their descriptions of such lifestyles. Furthermore, some of the most scrutinized anchoritic texts, such as Jerome’s letter and the early thirteenth century Ancrene Wisse relied heavily on desert imagery, leading scholars to understand the vocation of the medieval recluse as a call to the desert.

Finding meaning in this foundational metaphor, modern works on hermits and anchorites often begin with a discussion of early desert Christianity. For instance, Warren did not separate medieval English anchoritism from the earlier solitaries on the assumption that they both used the desert motif. She argued that the desert was the “primary symbol of the cell,” and that the cell was, “a new version of the desert cave.” Even more recently, Liz Herbert McAvoy began the introduction of her Medieval Anchoritisms with Gertrude Bell’s autobiographical account of her


experience in the desert at Kureifeh in 1900. McAvoy, whose focus is primarily on the
gendered anchoritic experience, viewed the desert as a feminine space that needed to “be
penetrated” and turned into a “fertile garden” when it was inhabited by male anchorites, and a
masculine space when it was inhabited by female anchorites, who were expected to divest
themselves of their female identity in order to survive. For example, in her discussion of the
Regula solitariorum, a tenth-century rule for male monastic recluses by a German monk named
Grimlaicus, she argued that the author used water imagery by comparing the anchorite to an
anchor, and his life as a recluse like a walking on a narrow bridge above a deep, watery
expanse. Yet, even as the desert analogy seems to have been replaced by water, McAvoy
invokes the desert through a gendered reading, arguing that the male anchorite must engage in
“watery penetration” as earlier anchorites penetrated the desert. McAvoy discussed the desert
imagery also in her analysis of Ancrene Wisse, an early thirteenth-century guidance text written
for three anchorite sisters, in which the author cast the anchoresses as wilderness creatures, who
should shy away from the distractions of daily life and people. McAvoy claimed that the desert
mentioned in Ancrene Wisse was not the quiet place where God could be encountered and
instead was “wild and unpredictable borderland region, a place of prowling beasts with voracious
appetites.” According to McAvoy, the sisters could thrive in such a dangerous and ultimately

22 Liz Herbert McAvoy, Medieval Anchoritisms: Gender, Space, and the Solitary Life, (New
York: Boydell and Brewer, 2011), Introduction.

23 McAvoy, Medieval Anchoritisms, 20.

24 Grimlaici prespyteri regula solitariorum, PL 103, cols. 573-644.

25 McAvoy, Medieval Anchoritisms, 33.

26 Ibid, 103.
male-gendered space only if they stripped themselves of their female form and became monstrous forces.  

Eddie Jones, has recently used medieval liturgy as a productive source for understanding how recluses fit within the complicated hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Jones’ studies on the Vespasian Manuscript, a twelfth-century pontifical that includes the rite of enclosure, make clear that by the twelfth century there was an expectation, at least in theory, that the bishop would preside over an elaborate ceremony at the official enclosure of an anchorite, complete with a procession that started in the church, moved through the cemetery, and terminated at the anchorhold. After this, the bishop would then bless the cell, perform what were basically funeral rites, and then close up the entrance. In short, what had been a relatively simple ceremony performed by the abbot and witnessed by the postulant’s monastic brothers, had become by the last quarter of the twelfth century a regional spectacle, witnessed by the town and requiring the presence of the bishop. The degree to which this was carried out in its entirety, or at all, through the twelfth century is hard to say for certain, but it is clear that the only prerequisites that the aspiring anchorite (postulate) was proof of financial support and that they had gone through a year of solitary living, to be sure they had the mettle for such a life; and the latter became increasingly less important.

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The Economy of Salvation

To date, little attention has been given to the role of anchorites in the changing religious landscape of the Middle Ages. By focusing on the period from the late eleventh to the early fourteenth centuries, my research uncovers important changes in anchoritic vocation. It shows that by the twelfth century, with few exceptions, medieval authors eschewed the metaphor of the desert and associated anchoritic vocation with sacramental observance. Through a close reading of anchoritic texts, I show how the changing economy of salvation both affected the anchoritic vocation, and the way authors of anchoritic literature chose to understand and write about the spaces inhabited by anchorites and the hardships that they experienced in their search for salvation. In particular I examine how the changing economy of salvation, which was induced by the Gregorian reforms, was reflected in the anchoritic vitae of Wulfric of Haselbury and Christina of Markyate and in the experience of fourteenth-century mystics.

The idea of salvation was an important tenant not only of the experience of anchorites but also in many religious texts associated with anchoritism. Generally speaking, salvation meant the redemption of the fallen human person, and most particularly, the entrance to Heaven after death. It was the goal of every Christian, but it was a particular focus for those who adopted a consecrated religious life devoted to prayer and devotional practices that aided both the individual's redemption and that of the Christian community more broadly. Discussions of salvation and the paths towards eternal life were constantly evolving, especially as doctrines related to the sacraments were debated and codified and as lay devotional practices expanded and blossomed in the High and Later Middle Ages. I argue that the medieval redefinition of salvation was closely linked to anchoritic praxis. Understanding this relation illuminates both those who

28 In *Hermits and Anchorites* Clay refers to the Desert Fathers, and the first chapter of Warren’s 1985 *Anchorites and their Patrons* is titled “The Desert.”
chose the life of a recluse and those who supported and venerated them. In the process, my dissertation positions anchorites as crucial agents in the elaboration of new notions about salvation.

I have chosen to use the phrase “economy of salvation” because it best articulates the process by which humanity is redeemed from its sinful nature and allowed to dwell with God in heaven after physical death. My usage of the expression differs in emphasis from some theologians. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202) was the first to articulate a sophisticated understanding of an “economy of salvation.” Writing in response to Gnostic rejections of the Old Testament God, his aim was to affirm the identity and role of the Holy Spirit as a distinct, and equal, member of a triune godhead, which had put into place a particular plan, or order, for the salvation of humanity.\(^{29}\) Paul Ricoeur described the Christian salvation economy in terms of “buying back” the invitation from God to enter heaven.\(^{30}\) More recently, Emily Francomano has used the economy of salvation to discuss the medieval economics of prostitution and Margaret Gibson has addressed the gendered notions of the father-son relationship (God the Father and Jesus, his son) as the gender structure within the Christian moral economy.\(^{31}\)

For this study, I am most concerned with the transactional aspect of this economy, and focus on actions thought to be required of individuals to achieve salvation. In other words, by


“economy of salvation,” I simply mean what people had to do in order to go to heaven.

Furthermore, I have delineated the development of this economy into three stages, penitential, sacramental, and contemplative, each of which corresponds roughly to the Early, High, and Late Middle Ages, respectively. Beginning with the first desert-dwelling monks in the deserts of Syria and Egypt in the fourth century and until the Gregorian Reform movement gained its momentum in the early to mid-twelfth century, the economy of salvation was closely related to the physical body and was born out of radical asceticism. When Christianity was first legalized under Constantine, and then made the official state religion of the Roman Empire under Theodosius I in 380, the opportunities to die a martyr’s death virtually disappeared. Because martyrdom was the best proof of faith and sacrifice, and offered a clear path toward heaven, when Christians stopped being persecuted, and were allowed to live comfortable lives, it created a crisis in the economy of salvation, that is the transactional sequence leading to heaven. \(^{(32)}\) Christian ascetics, however, sought a living martyrdom in the harsh and lonely environs of the desert. The proliferation of these first-generation solitaries, as well as the later founding of monastic communities, attest to the need for a new kind of living martyrdom. \(^{(33)}\) St. Benedict in the first chapter of his *Rule*, delineates the different kinds of religious lives and explicitly regards the anchoritic life as the hardest and best, but only for those who are spiritually prepared. \(^{(34)}\)

Contemporary literature associated with early western recluses reflects the penitential economy of salvation through the motif of the desert analogy. Hermits such as St. Martin of  

\(^{(32)}\) Warren, Anchorites and their Patrons, 9; Leyser, Hermits and the New Monasticism, 7.  

\(^{(33)}\) These ideas were spread most famously through the collections of sayings called, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* and the writings of Jerome and John Cassian in the fourth and fifth centuries, and the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*. See discussion on all three in Chapter 3.  

Tours, St. Cuthbert at Lindisfarne, and St. Guthlac at Crowland were all described by their hagiographers as living in the desert, when it was apparent they were actually nowhere near a physical desert. Yet, the narratives focus on the extremities of their bodily discomfort. Their sanctity and assured salvation was predicated on their exceptional feats of self-denial. In other words, their salvation, and presumably the salvation of anybody else, was understood primarily within the context of the desert and all of the suffering that that entailed. By the twelfth century, however, the economy of salvation had shifted in emphasis and reflected what I call the “sacramental turn.” Although the sacraments had been important in maintaining orthodoxy for centuries, with the Gregorian Reforms, the Church began to promote the sacraments as essential elements in salvation. Effectively, the Church was tightening its control over who could and could not achieve salvation. Two sacraments in particular received the most attention: marriage and the Eucharist. I argue that these changes were represented in the literature written about anchorites, and that those who chose to live the solitary life, as presented by medieval authors, were most qualified to satisfy the call to holiness under all three economies of salvation.

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Sources and Chapters

For my sources, I have selected texts that represent, for the most part, generally accepted beliefs regarding the successful anchoritic life. The texts are organized chronologically into three groups. The first starts with Jerome and John Cassian in the fourth century and ends with the vitae of Celtic hermits in the tenth century. These texts serve as an introduction to the eremitical lifestyle as it emerged in the deserts of the East. This brand of spiritual solitude was then transplanted into the West, where the desert experience initially remained intact through metaphor, even though the physical environment was lush and green (as for example in the British Isles).

The second group covers the long twelfth century and includes Aelred’s De institutione inclusarum, Goscelin of St. Bertin’s Liber confortatorius, and the vitae of Wulfric of Haselbury and Christina of Markyate. These texts show how metaphor remained a favorite tool among authors of anchoritic texts for expressing elements of the successful reclusive life, even as they gradually abandoned the metaphor of the desert-dweller and replaced it with other, more pertinent images of the recluse, such as lover, prisoner, and even as embodiment of the sacrament.

The last group covers the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and includes the well-known texts of late medieval English mysticism, such as Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*, Richard Rolle’s *Form of Living*, the anonymous text, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich. All of the texts in this group are guidance texts, written to encourage and advise postulants aspiring to the solitary life, and they are part of the group of texts commonly called “mystical” by modern scholars. I chose the mystical works of the fourteenth century as a terminus because it is with these texts that any association between the anchorite and the desert was lost. Throughout the discussions of these texts, I raise possible interpretations for understanding why the desert motif was no longer more compelling than other symbolic identities in their literary contributions to the age’s seminal religious changes.

My creative approach recasts anchoritic hagiography as a way to access religious change as it worked its way into popular practice from institutional conception. For instance, my reading of John of Forde’s *Life of Wulfric* through a lens of the then-developing Eucharistic theology has revealed a threshold of change in anchoritic praxis over the course of the twelfth century that was far reaching and included sources of patronage, church oversight, and roles in the community. Furthermore, I posit that this changing face of anchorite practice created problems for John, the biographer, as he envisioned Wulfric’s enclosure sixty years later through the lens of his contemporary enclosure praxis. I concluded that John resolved these issues by imbuing Wulfric with a heightened spirituality by employing Eucharistic language in his description of Wulfric, the Eucharist being the most exciting theological topic amongst John’s Cistercian peers and assumed target audience for the biography.

In much the same way, I recast the *Vita* of Christina of Markyate as a vehicle by which the anonymous author comments on the changing notions of marriage in the wake of the
Gregorian reform movement. I do this by calling attention to an element of Christina’s *Vita* that has begged for comment but received very little by way of scholarly interest; that is, the significance of St. Leonard in the *Vita*’s construction of Christina’s exceptional spirituality. Through a close reading of the *Vita* and citing evidence from the St. Albans Psalter, I argued that St. Leonard is an important member of the cast of characters in Christina’s life. And, if we ignore the author’s cue to consider St. Leonard’s patronage as a foundational element in Christina’s development as a holy woman and in her journey toward enclosure, we get an incomplete picture of both the historical Christina and the hagiographic Christina. It is my assertion that the hagiographer was aware of a personal connection between Christina and St. Leonard, and used her story, with its many instances of captivity and escape, to comment on a particular ideal of virginity, sanctity, and enclosure through the analogy of imprisonment.

This study begins with an overview chapter on the importance of the desert to understand the origins of the anchoritic vocation and its establishment in England. This chapter provides the setting for chapters three, four, and five. In chapters three and four I present case studies of two twelfth-century *vitae*, those of Wulfric of Haselbury and Christina of Markyate. I show that by the time these texts were written the desert motif had disappeared as an anchoritic analogue. I argue that the authors found more traction in themes related to the sacraments than in the earlier ones centered on bodily penance. While the body was still important, and the physical discomfort and struggle of Wulfric and Christina was emphasized, their sanctity was found in their proximity to the sacraments, either physically or metaphorically. Chapter five focuses on the fourteenth century mystical texts of Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Julian of Norwich. Warren recognized that there was process of change from the earlier penitential path of salvation to a more contemplative path that reached its
apex in the fourteenth century. While I accept Warren’s argument, I add a nuance to the process by adding the sacramental turn in between these two shifts.
Chapter Two

The Desert

Introduction

The desert, as both a physical space and an imaginative space, had significant influence on the ways early medieval hermits approached the solitary life. In this chapter I discuss this influence. I begin with a brief survey of desert imagery in the Bible before moving on to show how the application of desert imagery persisted in the non-desert climates of western Europe in anchoritic texts from the seventh century through the early twelfth century. I argue that the desert was central to the early medieval economy of salvation. Prior to the twelfth century, emphasis on penance linked to the desert motivated many extreme ascetics in England. In their vitae, hagiographers used this idea of penance to confirm these ascetics as holy people. I believe, however, that by the first half of the twelfth century, as shown in the anchoritic literature of this period, the desert motif ceased to be a crucial factor in the economy of salvation.

38 The Latin terms heremum, desertum, and solitudine, can all be translated as desert or wilderness, although most typically, desertum and heremum are translated as desert, while solitudine as wilderness or just solitude. In this study, I consider the terms to be mostly interchangeable, but I will rely on context to determine which is most appropriate for any particular passage. I will usually rely on the published translation unless otherwise noted.
Biblical Desert

The desert was important to both Hebrew and Christian spiritual life. It was a fascinating place that was capable of destroying and rejuvenating. As Dee Dyas points out, the desert was a place in which God could just as easily court or punish his people. It was a dangerous place and yet a place of blessing. It symbolized life, death, and rebirth, as well as a place where one was able to find God.39 It began with the Hebrew Scriptures and continued into the New Testament, both of which include accounts of the desert that reveal its paradoxical character. The Old Testament prophet, Elijah, was forced into the desert to escape persecution.40 There, he experienced hardship, but was miraculously fed by ravens daily. Also, while in the desert, Elijah was taught how to hear God’s voice when God showed him earthquakes, raging fires, and rainstorms. After this show of power, Elijah was led to hear God’s still small voice in the quiet of solitude. It was only then that he received the answers he was looking for, which were basically that God had a formidable force of prophets who would help Elijah defeat Ahab and Jezebel. Additionally, the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness for forty years as punishment for their lack of trust in God, but in that same wilderness they experienced the grace and providence of God through the gift of manna and miraculous streams of water.41


41 The book of Exodus includes numerous episodes of God’s miraculous provision for the Hebrew people while in the desert, including the splitting of the Red Sea (Ch. 14), manna from heaven (Ch. 16), and water from a rock (Ch. 17). Of course, the desert is also where Moses received the law, which was miraculously inscribed on stone tablets (Ch. 20).
Desert imagery was important in the New Testament as an agent of change. John the Baptist, a transitional character linking the Old and New Testaments, is described as emerging from the desert.\(^{42}\) In fact, Jerome (d. 420) called John the Baptist the forerunner of Jesus, and the first hermit.\(^{43}\) And, it was John’s voice, the voice crying in the wilderness that heralded the advent of Jesus’ ministry and called for repentance. Jesus, himself, spent forty days and nights fasting in the wilderness and emerged fundamentally transformed. In the gospel of Mark, after Jesus was baptized, “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.”\(^{44}\) The desert, according to Scripture, is thus a place of fasting and hunger, physical danger, and spiritual temptation. The Gospel of Luke further explains that after his wilderness experience, “Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit … And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.”\(^{45}\) The desert, then, is crucial to understanding the development of Jesus’ earthly ministry and character. Indeed, each of the gospel accounts, except John, makes a direct connection between Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness and the launching of his teaching and healing ministry immediately after.\(^{46}\) In other words, Jesus’ claim to spiritual authority crystalized while he was fasting in the wilderness. With the desert playing such an important role in the life of Jesus, it is no wonder, then, that his followers would also seek to have their own experiences in the desert.

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\(^{42}\) Matt. 3:1; Mk. 1:1-4; Lk. 3:2; Jn. 1:19-23 (NKJV).


\(^{44}\) Mk 1:12-13.

\(^{45}\) Lk. 4:14.

\(^{46}\) Matt. 4:1-11; Mk. 1:12-13.
The vocation of the recluse held a special place in Christian society and spirituality since the earliest centuries of Christianity. Many of the Church Fathers were in some way connected with or endorsed the solitary life, and even St. Benedict, one of the founders of western monasticism, acknowledged that the eremitic life was more difficult and arguably more noble than cenobitic (communal) monasticism. While many could live in a monastery, under a rule and abbot, only those who had long trained in a religious life could hope to maintain an anchoritic lifestyle.

They have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, they are ready with God's help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind.

The vocation of the recluse, able to be followed by only the most heroic and committed followers of Christ, was thus the preeminent vocation of the Christian faith, considered throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages as the spiritual ideal. Evidence of the exalted position of the anchoritic or eremitic vocation appears in a preponderance of sources from the church fathers, including St. Augustine (d. 430), through prominent leaders in the medieval


\[48\] Ibid. The Latin text reads: et bene exstructi fraterna ex acie ad singularem pugnam heremi, securi iam sine consolatione alterius, sola manu vel rachio contra vitia carnis vel cogitationum, Deo auxiliante, pugnare sufficiunt. (http://www.lluisvives.com/servlet/SirveObras/jlv/02580516454693584321157/p0000001.htm#1_2)
church like Peter Damian (d.1072), St. Anselm of Canterbury (d.1109), and Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). For instance, the author of the late fourth century Historia monachorum in Aegypto, while discussing the hermits’ role in Egyptian society states that, “…it is clear to all who dwell there that through them [hermits and monks] the world is kept in being, and that through them too human life is preserved and honoured by God.” The author thus sees hermits as the spiritual glue of the world, working not only for their own salvation, but also, through their penance and prayer, helping redeem other Christians. And, although, the author was ostensibly talking about Egyptian cities, his scope clearly reaches beyond Egypt to all society. In other words, the single anchorite’s contribution to salvation played into a larger societal spiritual reckoning. For example, it was only after reading Athanasius’ Life of St. Antony that St. Augustine finally converted, and afterward emphasized the eremitical life as one most worthy of the serious Christian. The perception that eremitic living was the hardest form of religious life, and one to which only the most devout and committed were called, persisted throughout the Middle Ages. Even the thirteenth-century Dominican friar, Thomas Aquinas, writing after decades of monastic reforms that had complicated the vocational landscape, understood that among the various


religious professions, the solitary life was the most severe, and that those drawn to more severe orders did so out of devotion in order to become more righteous.⁵²

At its inception, the eremitic life was associated with the desert, but even prior to the fourth century, Christianity had had a long and enduring relationship with the desert, both ontologically and existentially. Not only was the desert literally the place in which Jesus and the first several generations of his followers established the foundational tenets of Christianity, but the idea of the desert became a way for Christians to think about living a life that mirrored the lives of Jesus and his apostles. In the first century, the Christian religion emerged amid the arid terrain of the Middle East as a sect of Judaism, which had used the desert as a metaphorical touchstone throughout the Hebrew scriptures. In the following three centuries, despite periodic waves of intense Roman persecutions, Christianity flourished, not least in the deserts of Syria and Egypt.⁵³ During these persecutions, the Christian church gained a host of new martyr saints, as well as a deep-rooted fascination with martyrdom itself. For many, however, the mission to be martyred was thwarted when Christianity was first legalized and then elevated to the status of the state religion of the Roman Empire in 380. In response, some pious men and women adopted a kind of living martyrdom and chose to forsake earthly possessions and forge out a life in the

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⁵² Aquinas here is discussing the possibility of moving from one order to another, and while his comment appears in the context of a man who left his heretical life for a less strict communal (monastic) life because of laxity and decline he had found in the heretical life, the example and Aquinas' subsequent replies, clearly assumes that heretical life, when properly, followed was the most severe form of a religious life. (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q189, A8.)

harsh Syrian and Egyptian deserts. This pursuit of life in the desert, or “eremitical” life produced
the first Christian monks and hermits.54

This feeling of need to live in the desert was closely related to the early church’s
understanding of penance. While early notions of penance can be traced back to Tertullian (d.
220), there was no systematic or authoritative teaching on how penance should be administered,
or even how confession should proceed.55 It was generally understood, however, that confession
and penance should be made publicly. And so, when Christian ascetics made their way to the
desert, they were operating within a previously established penitential economy, making a public
profession of penance. Everything from the location where they chose to live, to the clothes they
chose to wear identified these ascetics as perpetual penitents. In the West, there was a general
decline in the practice of penance until traveling Celtic monks brought their penitentials
(manuals for priests that explained how to proceed with confessing and the administration of
penance) to England and the continent in the sixth century. I argue in this chapter that the new
emphasis on penance, or what I call the penitential economy of salvation, motivated much of the
extreme ascetics in England, and the hagiographers who wrote about them prior to the twelfth
century.

54 Philip Rousseau, Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian,

55 John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the
Prinicipal Libri poenitentiales and Selection from Related Documents (New York: Columbia
University Press, 1990), 6. In the introduction McNeill provides a comprehensive survey of the
development of the sacrament of penance in the Catholic church.
Ascetic Desert

The writings of the fourth-century church father, Jerome (340-420) provide insight into how the desert was used by early ascetics. The desert for Jerome was a crucial element in the solitary life. Upon his return to Rome following his own two-year sojourn as a desert solitary, he wrote an instructive letter to Eustochium, the daughter of one of his pupils and good friend, Paula. The occasion for this letter was that the teenaged Eustochium had decided to take a vow of perpetual virginity, and Jerome was providing her a guide for how to maintain her virginal purity. In this letter, Letter XXII, he makes reference to the desert seven times. Notably, in every case, Jerome’s reference to the desert is a literal one. Beginning with the story of his own attempts to live alone in the desert, he then reminds his reader about the desert experiences of other spiritual powerhouses like Paul the Hermit and Jesus. Jerome also discusses what he thought was the proper path of a solitary, starting out in a monastic community before moving alone into the desert as an anchorite. Jerome only spent two years in his own cave in the Syrian desert. Fortified by his personal library of sacred and secular books, he communicated through letters, finding it difficult to remain completely cut off from life at home. By 382, he was living in Rome and teaching about the attributes of the eremitical life. While leading a group of pious women in Rome, he met Paula, a wealthy widow with whom he would later travel to Palestine, tour Egyptian monastic houses, and eventually settle in Bethlehem to establish male and female monasteries. Jerome had one foot firmly planted in the deserts of the East and the eremitical and monastic lifestyle that flourished there, but his other foot was planted in the urban and

57 Rousseau, Ascetics, Authority, and the Church, 135.
58 Rousseau, Ascetics, Authority, and the Church, 98.
metropolitan culture of the West, to which his time in Rome attests, making him a bridge by which the desert life crossed to the West.

Jerome, however, does more than just transmit the eremitical life to the West. In his letter to Paula’s daughter, Eustochium, Letter XXII, he sets two precedents that will continue until the twelfth century.  

First, he reassigns the spiritual capital earned in a desert cell to a non-desert space. Second, he blurs the lines between that new non-desert space and the physical body of the anchorite. In essence, Jerome takes the Christian concept of ascetic living out of the deserts and into the private cells of the West while, at the same time, casting the anchoritic body as analogous to the cell in which it is contained. Although Jerome did not seem to be able to maintain his own life of solitude, he still extolled the benefits of the solitary life and considered that life more favorable than the communal life of the monastery.

Letter XXII represents the fourth and fifth-century church’s view of what a good solitary life should include and gives us a glimpse of Jerome’s own misgivings about his own abandonment of the desert cave. He focuses on the virtue of virginity and maintaining one’s maidenhood, and claims the solitary life is the best way for Eustochium to achieve this. In the course of his instruction, Jerome identifies what he considered the ideal anchoritic life and, in the process, provides a striking contrast between the way he remembers his own cell and the way he envisions Eustochium’s cell. In his accounts of his own desert experiences, Jerome describes his own cell as a place of torments and temptations, which, if conquered, would save him from hell:

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60 Leyser, Hermits and the New Monasticism, 7-12.
“But though in my fear of hell I had condemned myself to this prison-house, where my only companions were scorpions and wild beasts, I often found myself surrounded by bands of dancing girls.”\textsuperscript{61} Later, he writes that, “I used to dread my poor cell as if it knew my secret thoughts. Filled with stiff anger against myself, I would make my way alone into the desert.” Jerome’s cell was extremely uncomfortable and filled with physical danger. It was, in nearly every sense, penitential. When his body could no longer take the torture of enclosure, he fled to the harsh solitude of the open desert, where he says, “I would set up my oratory, and make that spot a place of torture for my unhappy flesh.”\textsuperscript{62}

In contrast, his exhortations to Eustochium picture a cell presumably not in a desert, perse, and more or less comfortable. He describes it as no less than a bridal chamber. Jerome goes on to speculate that she will be visited by Christ as she sleeps and when she awakes, she will cry, “I am sick with love.” Christ, as her bridegroom will reply, “A garden inclosed [sic] is my sister, my spouse: a garden shut up, a fountain sealed.”\textsuperscript{63} To Jerome, the dangers of the solitary life do not come from the cell itself, but are found in the influences from without. Eustochium’s body and her cell, each analogous to each other, seem to be an oasis in the desert, as opposed to Jerome’s cell, which worked in tandem with the desert as a penitential device, pushing him further toward spiritual perfection. Although their paths were different, within the penitential economy of salvation, both Jerome and Eustochium were required to endure the solitary life and bring their bodies into submission to gain heaven. While Jerome cast himself as a wretched man whose only path to salvation was through asceticism, his female pupil was cast as already

\textsuperscript{61} Jerome, \textit{Letter XXII}, 67.

\textsuperscript{62} Jerome, \textit{Letter XXII}, 69.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
possessing salvation through her virginity, but requiring the solitary life to maintain that purity. Indeed, Jerome explains his own frustration at this perpetual need for this brand of penance and how quickly he could return to his old ways when he says, “I do not blush to confess my misery; nay, rather, I lament that I am not now what once I was.”

We can almost see Jerome reminiscing over his pen about his days in the desert and what a formidable spiritual warrior he imagined himself to be.

Another aspect of the cell addressed by Jerome, even if only briefly, is the windows. Windows would remain a point of interest for anchoritic authors through the fourteenth century. Jerome reminds Eustochium only to open her window to the light and to leave the windows closed to gossip, when he says, “Daniel when he could no longer remain below withdrew to an upper room, but he kept its windows open towards Jerusalem. Do you too keep your windows open on the side where light may enter and you may see the city of God. Open not those other windows of which it is said: ‘By our windows death came in.’”

We are left wondering whether Jerome was commenting on physical windows in the anchorite’s cell, or merely referring to the ways in which the anchorite might allow sin into her body, either through the eyes or the ears, conflating the literal cell with the physical body. This ambiguity is absent from Jerome’s account of his own cell.

The desert monk who was most influential in bringing the desert ideal to the West was John Cassian (d. 445). Unlike Jerome, who traveled back and forth between East and West, first living in the desert, then bringing the ideal of the desert to Rome, and finally bringing westerners back with him to the East, Cassian’s migration simply moved from the East to the West, finally

64 Ibid, 69.

65 Ibid, 113.
settling in Provence in Southern Gaul. In 385, he and his companion, Germanus, left their monastery in Bethlehem to be discipled by desert monks (the “Desert Fathers,”) in Egypt. In his *Conferences*, Cassian transcribed from memory these meetings that he and Germanus had with these venerable desert hermits.\(^{66}\)

The *Conferences* is essentially a collection of questions and answers that were volleyed back and forth between the younger men, Cassian and Germanus, and the older desert hermits. These included questions about the nature of spiritual solitude, how to achieve spiritual perfection, and specific elements of the solitary life. The elder monks drew from their years of experience to provide lengthy answers and impart wisdom to the younger monks. This book, along with Cassian’s previous work, the *Institutes*, extolled the eremitical life and eventually formed the nucleus of nearly every monastic library in western Europe.\(^{67}\) According to C.H. Lawrence, Cassian supplied, “…the western ascetical movement with a theology.”\(^{68}\) Cassian’s student, Benedict of Nursia, even lived as a solitary before becoming abbot of the monastery in Subiaco in Italy and authoring the eponymous rule that would become the gold standard for Western monasticism.\(^{69}\) As noted above, he ultimately saw the communal, monastic life as the more practical for most people desirous of living a consecrated religious life, but his own rule acknowledged the solitary life as the more demanding vocation. In addition to the writings of Jerome and Cassian and the influence of the growing monastic movement, the general dissemination of literature about the desert monks, and bishops like Athanasius who had fled

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\(^{68}\) Lawrence, Medieval Monasticism, 16.

\(^{69}\) McAvoy, Medieval Anchoritisms, 23.
persecution in Alexandria, contributed to the spread of the eremitic life to the West. By the sixth century the ascetic life had been successfully planted as far west as the British Isles.

**Wet Deserts**

In the early medieval West, local anchorites and hermits inherited the tradition of ascetic withdrawal from the desert hermits of the early centuries of Christianity. They also inherited what Liz McAvoy and Dee Dyas have called “wilderness theology,” or the enduring and influential teachings about the desert and wilderness geography on early Christian thought, in relation to living the Christian life and salvation. By the late fourth and fifth centuries, the desert ideal was being projected onto the non-desert geographies of France and England by authors of *vitae* of western hermit saints. For example, St. Martin’s mid fifth-century biographer, Sulpicius Severus, wrote that Martin built his cell outside of the city in an area, “so secluded and remote that it had all the solitude of the desert.” And, while Martin found his "desert" in the lush countryside of southern France, Anglo-Saxon hermits like Ss. Cuthbert and Guthlac found theirs on the harsh island of Farne and the swampy fens of East Anglia, respectively.

These wet deserts had considerable purchase for medieval writers of anchoritic guides and *vitae*. By connecting their subjects to the desert, authors could legitimatize their saintly

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71 Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 12-16.


status and imbue them with a particular degree of holiness that was readily recognized by their monastic audiences. Consequently, wet deserts and references to the desert fathers and mothers, either as prescribed reading for recluses or as standards of holiness, appear repeatedly in medieval enclosure literature. Felix, in his Vita of the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon hermit, Guthlac (d.715), used the word heremum (desert) fourteen times to describe Crowland, in the East Midlands of England, where Guthlac built his hermitage. 74 Felix also, however, described Crowland as “a very long tract consisting of marshes, now of bogs, sometimes of black waters overhung by fog, sometimes studded with wooded islands and traversed by the windings of tortuous streams.”75 Although this region was so wet and swampy that it required Guthlac’s visitors to come by boat, Felix, still chose to call it a heremus or desert.76 Even more starkly, Felix described Guthlac’s home as both an island and a desert. We are told by Felix that when Guthlac was searching for a suitable location for his hermitage, he inquired of a local named Tatwine who, “declared that he knew a certain island in the more remote and hidden parts of that desert; many had attempted to live there, but had rejected it on account of the unknown portents of the desert and its terrors of various shapes.”77 By the time Felix was writing the vita, it had become second nature to refer to the places in which a holy person lived, or could become a saint, as a desert. The austerity and danger of the island as described by Tatwine, qualified it as a saint-making place, and according to Felix, Guthlac immediately made his way there.

75 Ibid, 87.
76 Ibid, 67.
77 Ibid, 89. Emphasis is mine.
The desert also played a critical role in the *vitae* written about the most revered Anglo-Saxon saint, St. Cuthbert (d. 687). In the popular *Vita* of Saint Cuthbert by the Benedictine monk Bede (d.735), for instance, the monk recounted a conversation between the abbess Aelfflaed and Cuthbert about his hesitation to accept a possible appointment to the episcopal see of Lindisfarne. “Although you might attain to a bishopric --Aelfflaed told Cuthbert -- you would prefer the fastness of your desert (*deserti*) place to that rank…” As in the case of Guthlac, the “desert” place to which Bede refered, through the voice of Aelfflaed, was not what one might consider a desert at all, but, was a cold, wet, and dismal island off the eastern coast of England. It was a desert, then, by virtue of the holy man who resided in it; as the physical home of a person pursuing a spiritual path in the footsteps of Jesus and the desert Fathers, the wilderness he inhabited became "the desert."

Additionally, because Guthlac was venerated as saint, and thus believed to be in heaven, his eremitic, penitential life was directly linked to his salvation. According to Felix, Guthlac was promised in advance that his adoption of the ascetic life would bring him salvation. His acceptance into heaven was confirmed by Felix by relating several events. First, upon Guthlac’s death, the house was “filled with the splendor of heavenly light and a tower as of fire stretching...”

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79 Two Lives of *Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede’s Prose Life*, texts, translation, and notes, Bertram Colgrave (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1969), 141-307. Bede’s prose *Life of St. Cuthbert* was based on the anonymous *Metric Life of St. Cuthbert*. While much of the information is the same, Bede’s prose version includes some new information, according to Colgrave. For a full account of the extant manuscripts of the *Life*, see Colgrave’s *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 17-55.
from earth to heaven, in comparison with whose splendour the sun, though it was in med heaven seemed to grow pale like a lamp in daylight.” The whole air was heard to thunder with angelic song, while one would have thought the island was filled with the sweet scents of many kinds of spices.” This odour of sanctity, a lingering, sweet, floral aroma, was a standard sign of sainthood, particularly of the saints who went directly to heaven. By assigning these smells to Guthlac, Felix was claiming Guthlac’s sainthood. Felix also wrote that a full year after Guthlac’s death, when the abbess Prega decided to move his body to a new sepulcher, they discovered that his body was uncorrupted. Incorruptibility, too, was a sure sign of sainthood. Finally, Guthlac appears, postmortem, to the exile and future king, Aethelbald, who, “As he lay terrified by this same vision, he suddenly saw the blessed Guthlac standing before him robed in angelic splendor” to assure him that he would become ruler of the kingdom. If the other signs were not enough, a vision of a holy person in heaven was a guarantee of their status as saint.

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80 Life of Guthlac, 159.
81 Ibid, 159.
83 Life of Guthlac, 161-63.
85 Life of Guthlac, 165-66.
In 699 when Guthlac entered his hermitage, his primary motivation was to find solitude and an ascetic lifestyle as recompense for his past sins. His life in the proverbial desert, however, held more than just solitude. The desert provided a realm in which the struggle with Satan occurred. This journey brought him into physical combat with devils who not only taunted him with accusations against his legitimacy as a religious, but literally dragged him through the wooded fens.\(^{86}\) They nearly cast him into the mouth of hell, but for the superhero-esque intervention of St. Bartholomew. Appearing in radiant light, Bartholomew commanded the devils to return Guthlac gently to his hermitage, which they grudgingly did.\(^{87}\) His home was the desert. But, it was also the marsh, the bog, and the forest. In short, Felix left no question that his subject has made it to heaven and was interceding on behalf of his supplicants on earth, and the desert, in all that it promised, made that possible.

The role of the desert in helping a penitential person achieve salvation was even more starkly articulated in the seventh century by Pope Gregory the Great in his *Vita* of St. Benedict, which formed the second book of his wildly popular *Dialogues*. Gregory wrote about Benedict of Nursia’s “desert” experience.

But Benedict, desiring rather the miseries of the world than the praises of men, rather to be wearied with labor for God’s sake than to be exalted with transitory commendation,

\(^{86}\) Ibid, 103.

\(^{87}\) Ibid, 107.
fled secretly from his nurse, and went into a desert place, called Subiaco, distant almost forty miles from Rome. 88

And then, Gregory links Benedict’s salvation to his ability to maintain his desert asceticism:

A certain woman there was, which some time he had seen, the memory of which the wicked spirit put into his mind, and by the representation of her did so mightily inflame with concupiscence the soul of God’s servant, which did so increase, that almost overcome with pleasure he was of mind to have forsaken the wilderness. 89

From these two passages it is clear that Gregory placed Benedict in the desert, even though he was only forty miles from Rome, in order to increase Benedict’s merit. And, that if Benedict had succumbed to sexual temptation, then the wilderness (i.e. his holiness) would be lost. These passages can (and should) be taken literally: that Benedict nearly left his desert to find this woman. If he had succumbed, though, it was a move that would have disqualified him as a holy man, as Gregory knew he would later become. Like Christina of Markyate (discussed in Chapter Four), six centuries later, Benedict’s life as a hermit was not a lifelong endeavor, but an essential step in his process of holiness. The desert for Benedict represented a penitential moment in his life that was only profitable if he remained in it until God led him to leave. As we know, Benedict did eventually leave the desert and establish his monastery. In other words, it was not

89 Ibid, 31.
the length of time spent in the desert, per se, but having the spiritual acuity to know when it was
time to leave, that imbued Benedict with his superior holiness.

Farther west, Celtic monks sought the desert ideal differently than did their Anglo-Saxon
neighbors. These monks had a tendency to wander to far away places, a tradition known as Irish
_peregrinatio_. Adomnan, in his seventh-century Life of St. Columba, described the propensity to
wander as a quest for, “deserts on the ocean.”\textsuperscript{90} The _peregrinatio_ of Irish monks was a way to
engage with the desert ideal of solitude and alienation in not only a non-desert place, but literally
on the water. As they sailed from port to port and wandered from place to place, they remained
forever strangers everywhere they went. Celtic monks, like St. Columba and St. Brendan, found
the desert in their voluntary exile on the continent and on the sea.\textsuperscript{91} The desert was thus so
fundamental to saintly identities and to the literary traditions surrounding early eremitic figures
that it was superimposed on every kind of landscape, forming spiritual and salvific deserts in
reclusive spaces across Western Europe.

By the late eleventh century, however, the ways in which the idea of the desert was used
by religious communities began to change. While new monastic orders like the Cistercians,

\textsuperscript{90} Adomnan, *Life of St. Columba*, Medieval Sourcebook ed. and trans. Seth Seyfried,
http://www.seil.org.uk/Life%20of%20St%20Columba%20Adamnan.pdf, Chs. VI, IX, XLIII;

\textsuperscript{91} Licence, *Hermits and Recluses*, 115-122. Licence categorizes the chronological development
of the salvific attributes of reclusion into three models, all centering on exile as the _modus
operandi_ of the solitary. Exile, in Anglo-Saxon literature was often portrayed as an act of
penance that was efficacious for salvation. Exile as the preliminary phase of purgation, and
anachoressis as the _imitatio Christi_, give a clear picture of how the act of seclusion was perceived
in the minds of those engaging in the vocation and those who wrote about it through the Early
and High Middle Ages in England. Licence claims that by the seventh century, exile, “was a
recognized way of eradicating sin” because the act of voluntary exile was the ultimate
renunciation of sin, and the renunciation of sin was absolutely necessary for salvation. For a
detailed discussion on hermits as a form of exile, see M. Clayton, “Hermits and the
Contemplative Life in Anglo-Saxon England,” 147-75.
Carthusians, and Premonstratensians still claimed to seek the desert in their foundation narratives, anchoritic texts like *vitae* and guidance texts began to drop the desert motif. I propose that this can be explained at least in part by how monastic orders and vocation of anchoritism were affected differently by the Gregorian Reforms. By the end of the eleventh century in England, in the wake of the Norman Conquest, there had been nearly a complete episcopal turnover. With the new personnel came a tightly organized program for reform, and while it may be impossible to determine how reform was initiated by the Normans and how much was already underway in 1066, it is certain that the Norman presence expediated the process.\(^{92}\) While it has been recognized that these reforms helped launch and then nurture new monastic orders, I propose that the focus of the reforms on the eradication of clerical marriage and the separation of religious and secular power, led to an emphasis on the sacraments that superseded the desert motif in anchoritic texts.\(^{93}\)

The “new hermits,” a term first coined by Henrietta Leyser to describe this emergent generation of solitaries and the subsequent monastic orders that they founded, proliferated in

\(^{92}\) The Reforms were a top-down movement, beginning with Pope Gregory VII (1073-85). As the power of the pope increased with the reign of Innocent III (1198-1216), the power of archbishops and bishops also increased within their dioceses. While the extent to which the papacy influenced Lanfranc, the Archbishop of Canterbury appointed by William, is thought to have been small (and there is no way to tell exactly how much reform was happening already and how much was imported with the Normans), there is no doubt that there was active and enthusiastic reform occurring in England immediately following the arrival of the Normans. See the following for further study. H.E.J. Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory VII, 1073-1085* (Oxford, 1998); H.R. Loyon, “William’s Bishops: Some Further Thoughts,” *Anglo-Norman Studies* X (1987): 223-35; Constance Hoffman Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution: The Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

England in the early twelfth century. While the new hermits still sought solitude, it was a means to an end rather than an end in itself. They were usually accompanied by other religious and would often ultimately establish monasteries that brought together the eremitical and communal modes of living. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of the new hermits was their amalgamation of the desert and community. Personal solitude was not essential for these new hermits, but what mattered most was that the monastic communities that they founded in ‘forests and deserts’ “should be cut off and isolated from the world.”

Some examples include Robert of Arbrissel, St. Norbert, and the Canons at Oigny in Autun, all of which were considered hermits, but all of whom founded, or lived in communities. Robert and Norbert founded the monastery at Fontrevault and the order of the Premonstratensians, respectively, while the hermit canons at Oigny claimed to have followed the rule of Augustine and the eremitical life, so that they will, “eat, sleep, work, and perform service of God together…we will live as hermits in all that concerns rigorous abstinence and the total renunciation of secular concerns.”

This coexistence of desert and community life thus redefined what it meant to be a hermit in the twelfth century. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in England, these eremitic orders flourished, and they maintained the desert motif in their foundation narratives. The Cistercians, for example, nearly always began their foundation texts with a description of how they built the monastic house out in the wilderness, although we know now that in most cases they were

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96 Leyser, *Hermits and the New Monasticism*, 21. The Premonstratensians were a branch of canons regular that sought a more austere lifestyle as a community of hermits, and, under the direction of St. Norbert adopted the Rule of St. Augustine in Prémontré in 1121. For more detailed information, see Lawrence, 166-8.
simply absorbing an existing monastery. The use of the desert motif, however, helped these new foundations establish their legitimacy and their claim to the kind of strict lifestyle from which earlier monastic houses had strayed. As almost hybrid foundations, they laid claim to the spiritual superiority of the eremitic life by portraying their "hermit communities" as occupying the severe and salvific space of the "desert."

At the same time that the Cistercians were purportedly founding houses in the desert, however, the desert motif in anchoritic texts had begun to wane. In the 1060s, Goscelin of St. Bertin wrote a letter, *Liber confortatorius*, to his protégé and confidant, Eve. Eve had been under the tutelage of Goscelin since she was a child, but she had decided to leave the monastery and travel to France, where she would be enclosed as an anchorite. According the letter, Eve left during the night without telling Goscelin. Upset by the loss of his friend and spiritual partner, Goscelin composed this letter both to voice his sense of betrayal, and to offer her guidance on how to live a proper anchoritic life. While Goscelin alluded to the desert, he stopped short of directly labeling Eve’s cell as a desert, like earlier authors had for their subjects. For example, he alluded to the Israelites in the wilderness and says, “If we renounce present joys but do not reach the eternal reward because we are too sluggish, we shall be the most wretched of humans. What good is it to have left Egypt and, dying in the desert, not to inherit the promised land?” In this instance, Goscelin is meditating on the frivolities of denouncing the world, yet not progressing to the next plane of spirituality. Just being in the cell was not enough. The anchorhold provided the

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97 Elizabeth Freeman (“Male and Female Cistercians and their Gendered Experiences of the Margins, the Wilderness and the Periphery” in *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs*, 65-76) discusses the absence of the desert narrative in texts associated with female houses seeking Cistercian status, and claims that a marginal, desert narrative that was so advantageous for male Cistercians was actually not necessary for female houses whose gender already marginalized them.

opportunity to achieve everlasting life, and what a pity it would be, if Eve had shunned the world for the anchorhold, but squandered her time there by falling prey to sin and losing her salvation. According to Goscelin, this was a very real and present danger. In a later passage, Goscelin offered spiritual encouragement by connecting her with John the Baptist, the first hermit: “John, the precursor of the Lord, was a burning and glowing lamp, crying in the wilderness as the voice that preceded the Word of God: ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’ In becoming an anchoress, you have joined his family, whom the Church celebrates …” He also called Eve’s cell a hut, a single room. In it is Eve’s sanctuary, oratory, dining hall, dormitory, hall, bedroom, vestibule, cellar, and office; “A stone is your armchair, the ground your bed.” Where Eve did not live, by the end of the eleventh century was a desert, at least not in the same direct sense that Guthlac and Cuthbert had. Indeed, for Goscelin, the desert as an analogue for the solitary life was beginning to fade; the desert as a place is not enough to guarantee salvation, and a focus on the desert, rather than on the true means of spiritual growth, could lead to the unfruitful wanderings of the Israelites. Goscelin's early impulse to turn away from the desert towards more useful spiritual metaphors would be even more fully embraced by the next generation of anchoritic authors. For, as I argue, by the first half of the twelfth century, the desert motif virtually disappears from anchoritic literature.

In prominent vitae of the twelfth century, such as the Vita wulfrici and the life of Christina of Markyate, the desert is nowhere to be found. The authors of both texts chose not to describe the cells of their recluses as deserts, and even not to use words that might be translated as “desert” anywhere in the texts. That is not to say that spatial concerns and descriptions of

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100 Ibid, 92.
anchorholds were absent from the narratives. Indeed, they were described in stark detail, and made out to be, at best, extremely uncomfortable, and at worst, torturous. But, the anchorholds themselves (whether described as deserts or not) did not carry the lead role in these twelfth-century narratives as they had in earlier centuries. Instead, the anchoritic and eremitic cell became the place in which devotion to the sacraments took place. The desert motif, then, was replaced by analogues that more accurately reflected the heady religious discourses of the day, namely, as discussed in subsequent chapters, the change in Eucharistic praxis and new attitudes toward marriage and virginity.  

I propose that the emphasis of the Gregorian Reforms on clerical marriage and ritual purity when performing the Mass translated into an emphasis on marriage as sacrament and newly developing notions of Eucharistic praxis in anchoritic vitae. Therefore, these twelfth-century lives served to promote the centrality of sacramental devotion and the salvific qualities of such devotion, which had supplanted the earlier emphasis on bodily penance and deprivation. The desert, with its long literary and religious tradition of suffering and pain, was no longer a viable analogue for Christian salvation. With the sacramental turn in the twelfth century that shifted the primary mode of salvation to the proper observance of the sacraments, the narratives of the reclusive, changed to reflect that turn. As I show in later chapters, the desert was eschewed and replaced with analogies related to the sacraments, which were more salient in the wake of the Gregorian Reforms.

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102 My ideas of the sacramental turn in the economy of salvation is discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

103 Further evidence of this abandonment of the desert can be found in the Guthlac Roll, a series of illustrations depicting the major events in the life of St. Guthlac and created in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. While the evidence of the Guthlac Roll is dubious at best, it is...
One notable exception to the disappearance of the desert from the anchoritic corpus occurs in the *Ancrene Wisse*, a thirteenth-century guidance text addressed to two groups of female religious in the West Midlands, near the Welsh border between 1190 and 1230.\textsuperscript{104} *Ancrene Wisse* is one of the most studied anchoritic texts, and the desert motif in *Ancrene Wisse* is prominent.\textsuperscript{105} The author, who most scholars agree was a secular Augustinian canon of the house at Wigmore named John Lingen, continuously compares the female anchorites to ones living in the wilderness.\textsuperscript{106} Lingen uses the desert motif in ways similar to previous authors of

interesting that, as a manuscript created in that depicts, it does not mention the desert either. This is interesting because Felix used *heremum* to describe Guthlac’s choice of location for his hermitage numerous times, but the creator of the roll chose not to include that descriptor when narrating events centered on Guthlac’s journey to Crowland and the building of his oratory. While we cannot prove that the Roll was based on the *vita* authored by Felix, it is curious that the author chose not to include *heremum*.

\textsuperscript{104} The other exception that I discuss (in Chapter Five) is Julian of Norwich’s *Showings*, in her parable of the Lord and Servant.

\textsuperscript{105} *Ancrene Wisse* has been viewed as a text that sits on a literary threshold that separates the anchoritic guidance texts of the High Middle Ages, which are seen as penitential in focus, from the guidance texts in the Later Middle Ages, that have been understood by scholars to be defined mostly by their mystical influences.\textsuperscript{105} This bifurcation was made popular by Warren in *Anchorites and their Patrons*, but Hughes-Edwards seeks to bring continuity across this threshold by showing that the notion of mystical transcendence is present in Aelred’s twelfth-century *Institutione Inclusarum* and *Ancrene Wisse*, as well as in fourteenth-century texts like Richard Rolle’s *Form of Living* and Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection* by identifying mysticism in the twelfth century. While Hughes-Edwards has succeeded in showing the importance of understanding anchoritic guidance texts in light of their similarities rather than their differences across the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, I seek to fracture the trajectory of anchoritic guidance texts along the lines of salvation economy. Guidance texts helped to define the identities of the anchorite and, while there is much to be gained through a narrative of continuity, it is important also to locate the moments of rupture, when certain identities (in this case, the desert hermit) that had been consistent from the time of the desert fathers, suddenly disappear, as the focus of the writers drift toward the inward, mystical experience and away from the outward penitent ascetic of the broken body and harsh cell.

anchoritic literature of the fourth through eleventh centuries. In the same breath he presents the wilderness paradoxically as a place to be desired and a place of mortal danger, first quoting Lamentations 4:19, “These enemies [Satan and temptations] follow us on the hills and wait in the wilderness for a way to harm us.”107 And then, commenting on that verse says, “The hill is the sublime life, where the devil’s attacks are often the strongest; the wilderness is the solitary life of the anchoress’ dwelling.”108 The author has made two points in these statements. First, the cell of the anchorite is the wilderness. No matter where the cell was physically located, it became the wilderness for the anchoress. The author located the wilderness in the mind, not the physical space, a crystallization of the merging of the eremitic and anchoritic that, according to McAvoy, began with the life of Guthlac, in the eighth century.109

Furthermore, he compares his pupils not just to wanderers in the wilderness, but to wild animals that are found in the wilderness. He tells them that, “For just as there are all kinds of wild beasts in the wilderness who will not endure the approach of people, but flee when they hear them, in the same way anchoresses, more than all other women, ought to be wild in this way. And then they will be dear to our Lord more than others, and will seem sweetest to him. For of all meat, the meat of wild game is dearest and sweetest.”110 Beyond the seemingly bizarre


108 Savage and Watson, Anchoritic Spirituality, 119.


110 Savage and Watson, Anchoritic Spirituality, 119.
predatory image of God savoring the flesh of anchorites, it represents the author’s conflation of the bodies of the anchoresses with wilderness animals. They belong in the wilderness just as wild animals also belong there in such a way that they become part of the wilderness landscape. In this way, the author draws on much starker desert imagery than did earlier writers.

But there were other creatures in the wilderness described by the author. The anchoresses were warned to

… go very warily, for in this wilderness are many harmful beasts: the lion of pride; the serpent of poisonous envy; the unicorn of anger; the bear of deadly sloth; the fox of covetousness; the sow of gluttony; the scorpion with the tail of stinging lechery, that is, lust.\textsuperscript{111}

The author identified the seven deadly sins with their corresponding wilderness creature as a device to warn his pupils against the dangers of the solitary life of anchoritic enclosure, a life in the desert.

While the heavy use of the desert motif in this early thirteenth-century text might at first seem to be incongruent with my argument that the desert is abandoned by the early twelfth century, I argue that it should be seen as an outlier, an can be explained by the identity of the author, an Augustinian canon.\textsuperscript{112} The Augustinian orders were particularly influenced by the

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid, 120.

\textsuperscript{112} I think that it is also worth considering the location of the monastery where his readers’ cells were located, and by the assumed identity of the author. If indeed the provenance of \textit{Ancrene Wisse} is near the Welsh border, then linking the wilderness metaphors to neighboring Wales, might make sense. Henry had subdued it only half a century before, and it was still feared as a dark, wild, and uncivilized country. Seeing as this text is an outlier, we could perhaps attribute
eremitic ideal, and it would make sense that the author was particularly inclined to use the metaphorical desert to drive home salient points about the solitary life. If indeed the provenance of *Ancrene Wisse* is near the Welsh border, I propose that he thinks that the stark imagery is one that is more easily remembered, and thus a better teaching tool for his female (i.e. less learned) readers. Indeed, it would make little sense for the author to engage in serious sacramental reflection and instruction, if his text is not meant for an audience who could appreciate it. He is revisiting the older, simpler metaphors that everyone knows and accepts.

**Conclusion**

During the early Middle Ages, the desert motif, which already had a rich history in the geographies and literature of Christianity, was brought to western Europe. Despite the fact that there were no literal deserts, the motif flourished in an economy of salvation that valued bodily penance as the primary means of salvation. The vocations of anchorites and hermits, as the apex of Christian spirituality, were connected to the desert and the desert fathers by writers of anchoritic literature in order to validate and affirm their sanctity. As the economy of salvation developed over the next several centuries, however, so too did the preferred image of the anchorite cast by writers of enclosure literature. By the twelfth century, these authors chose the author’s use of the desert as a comment on physical location and not necessarily a return to the desert motif of earlier *vitae*. For more on Wales as an uncivilized territory, see Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950-1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 298, 76-7.

instead to connect their would-be saints to a kind of sanctity congruent with the new economy of salvation: sacramental piety.
Chapter Three

John of Forde’s Life of Wulric of Haselbury

Introduction

By the late eleventh century, the desert motif had already begun to wane; in the twelfth century it is scarcely to be found. In its place, we find new dynamic imagery that better served the goals of anchoritic authors and connected the anchoritic vocation to more current religious themes than the age-old association with the desert. In this chapter, I analyze the *Vita Beati Wulrici anachoretae Haselberiae (The Life of Blessed Wulfric Anchorite of Haselbury)* written by John of Forde, the Cistercian abbot of Forde Abbey between 1175 and 1184.\(^{114}\) Through a close reading of the text, I argue that this *Vita* exemplifies a new approach by medieval authors of anchoritic literature to the solitary life that did not necessarily include the desert. I show that John of Forde, Wulfric’s biographer, eschewed the desert, and instead connected his holy man to the Eucharist, a sacrament that was still under scrutiny in the wake of the Gregorian reforms. Through this connection, John was able to imbue Wulfric with a heightened sanctity, comparable to the holiness previously achieved by evoking the desert, that was now attained through

\(^{114}\) Latin passages from the *Vita Wulfrici* come from Dom Maurice Bell, *Wulfric of Haselbury* (Somerset Record Society, 1933). The English translations by Matarasso, *The Life.*
association with the sacraments. This change was the result of the influence of the late eleventh-century Gregorian Reforms on the economy of salvation.

The church of St. Michael and All Angels stands in the small village of Haselbury-Plucknett in Somerset, England. Although the twelfth-century structure, what is left of it, now stands obscured by nineteenth-century additions and facades (a familiar fate for many medieval English parish churches), one can still find the high medieval character of the church in a couple of arches and the church’s foundations. To the north of the chancel, what is now the chancery, stood the cell of Wulfric, the twelfth-century anchorite of Haselbury. According to Jerry Sampson, County Archaeologist for Somerset, there is still twelfth-century material in the overall structure, but the room that now sits on the foundation of Wulfric’s cell is of later construction.\footnote{Jerry Sampson, “Haselbury-Plucknett: St. Michael and All Angels,” \textit{Buildings Archaeology}, (2013): 1-3. Some of this data was gleaned from Mr. Sampson when we met at St. Michael and All Angels to examine the structure (May, 2017).} One can still easily imagine the dimensions of what was Wulfric’s home for nearly thirty years. Just outside the cell, between its door and the altar was Wulfric’s second burial place. Fearing the body would be stolen, Osbern, the priest and longtime friend of Wulfric, moved Wulfric’s remains twice, finally hiding them, “in the western end of the church in a spot known only to God and himself.”\footnote{Matarasso, \textit{The Life}, 213; “et in occidental parte ecclesiae Deo et sibi secretum suum abscondit,” Bell, \textit{Wulfric}, 130.} Outside, where there must have been a stable and other outbuildings necessary to maintain the recluse in his solitude, only a cemetery has been found.\footnote{Gilchrist, \textit{Contemplation and Action}, 192-5, asserts that there must have been stables and other support facilities in order for Wulfric’s servant to house a horse.} Recently, Stephen Batty in the blog named “Benedict’s Ark” described the church at Haselbury as, “not just architecturally hidden, but possessing a quality, a history that has a ‘kept back’
feel.” But, solitude is not exactly what comes to mind when standing in and around the church at Haselbury. It is (and was in the twelfth century) in the middle of the village. And, indeed, Wulfric’s life was anything but solitary. He gave audience to a constant stream of pilgrims, villagers, and kings at a time when England was enduring the social and political challenges of a civil war (1135-1153). At the same time, he offered a focus for religious devotion, presenting a clear template for a spiritual life during a period of religious reform while the Catholic Church wrestled with institutional change and doctrinal debates. One of those debates, perhaps the most central, focused on varying interpretations of Eucharistic theology and questions regarding the nature of the sacrament that were particularly unsettled during the period between the Berengar-Lanfranc controversy (c. 1050-1080) and the Fourth Lateran Council (1215).

This was the context during Wulfric’s tenure as anchorite of Haselbury, and during the period in which John, later, wrote his *Vita*, a work that can be seen to take into consideration the impact that these events had on English anchoritism and the economy of salvation. In addition, during the twelfth century, the anchoritic movement underwent two substantial changes in the gender ratio of its followers and in the ritual of enclosure. This threshold of change made John’s task of writing the *Vita* a precarious labor. Therefore, in the process of dealing with a context full of turmoil and transformation, and with the particular need to portray Wulfric as a powerful (male) anchoritic figure who was more authoritative than other female anchorites/anochoresses,

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119 Politically, the country was in the throes of civil war as Matilda and Stephen fought for the throne, and the subsequent reign of Stephen left the people of England in a despicable state. Christopher Daniell, *From Norman Conquest to Magna Carta: England 1066-1215*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 38-44.
John moved away from the desert imagery of the earlier centuries and from its interpretation as a penitential experience. Instead, John embraced the metaphor of the Eucharist and chose to describe Wulfric in Eucharistic language that centered on “bread,” an item that was coded with multiple meanings, and that typified Cistercian spirituality. One might also draw on other eleventh and twelfth-century sources associated with both the Berengar controversy and the Cistercian order’s interpretation of the Eucharist in order to place John of Forde and Wulfric’s Vita within the context of the changing nature of Eucharistic praxis. This narrative of anchoritic spirituality was not just a means of promoting Wulfric’s life and legitimizing his relics as a pilgrimage site, but was also a way to emphasize changing notions of the economy of salvation. While acts of penitence and the sacrament of penance would never be removed from this economy, a new focus on other sacraments (particularly the Eucharist but also as the next chapter explores, the sacraments of marriage and holy orders) and the role of those sacraments in conferring salvific grace upon participants diversified this economy. John's Vita of Wulfric participated in this diversification, bringing new imagery into this conservative genre that shows a deep interest in Eucharistic power, and, in particular, the Cistercian emphasis to elevate and gaze at the host upon blessing.

John’s Vita wulfrici thus captures a moment when the practice of anchoritism and the Eucharistic praxis underwent fundamental changes and reveals how an anxious abbot negotiated these changes. I argue that by linking Wulfric with “bread,” John of Forde elaborated a language

120 For example, in his commentary on the Song of Song, the Cistercian monk Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1174) often used the metaphor of eating and drinking, and Baldwin of Ford, a Cistercian abbot and later archbishop of Canterbury (1185 and 1190), wrote one of the longest treatises on the sacrament, De sacramento altaris. Baldwin was one of the patrons to whom the vita was dedicated. David N. Bell, “Baldwin of Ford and the Sacrament of the Altar,” in Erudition at God's Service CS 98, ed. John R. Sommerfeldt, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987).
that allowed him to associate the solitary vocation of anchorites with the Eucharist and transform Wulfric penitential experience into a sacramental experience. In the Vita and through Wulfric’s life, John presented the ideal anchoritic life as he envisioned it at the end of the twelfth century. By using the controversial and yet, still flexible Eucharistic language of the twelfth century, John hoped to reinvigorate interest in Wulfric’s cult, which he claimed had been all but forgotten.

Little is known about John, the Cistercian abbot of Forde Abbey (d.1214). He joined the Cistercian order ca. 1165, seventy-six years after its founding, and came to hold significant influence in religious, literary, and political spheres. In the late 1180s John became the abbot of Bindon and then, in 1191 served as abbot at Forde.¹²¹ It is likely that he received most of his education at Forde Abbey, which, as a renowned center of learning, gave John the opportunity to become acquainted with powerful intellectual figures with high positions in the church, like Bartholomew Iscanus, the bishop of Exeter, and Baldwin of Ford, archbishop of Canterbury. John dedicated his Vita wulfrici to both Bartholomew and Baldwin as testament to his close relationship with both men and their patronage of the younger monk.

Throughout his life, John displayed leadership skills even during troubling times. During his tenure as abbot, Ford Abbey flourished and was one of Cistercian houses to remain in operation even under the financial stress during the reign of King John (r. 1199-1216). John’s reputation as expert of legal matters secured him a number of important positions as a papal judge and as a conciliatory judge in the General Council of the Cistercian order.¹²² In addition, John of Forde was an influential political figure. He was King John’s confessor from 1204-7 and


¹²² Matarasso, The Life, 4-5.
was later a supporter of the king's position regarding the taxation of ecclesiastical houses, despite his own pleas to the King to rescind the royal taxes levied on Cistercian houses.\textsuperscript{123} Finally, John was one of the most respected contemporary Cistercian writers. His surviving two main bodies of work are the \textit{Vita wulfrici} and his commentaries on the last chapters of the Song of Songs, a task begun by Bernard of Clairvaux, resumed by Gilbert of Hoyland and Geoffrey of Auxerre after Bernard’s death, and then finally carried on by John.\textsuperscript{124} While Aelred of Rievaulx (d.1167) is widely lauded as the most significant English Cistercian writer in the first generation of the Order, John emerges as one of the key leading Cistercian intellectuals in the second generation of English Cistercians. Indeed, Christopher Holdsworth claims that among his contemporaries, “… no single writer comes up to him in both quality and breadth of achievement.”\textsuperscript{125}

John’s one attempt at hagiography began prior to his promotion to abbot, and even before his promotion to prior of Forde Abbey in 1184. Begun around 1175 and finished in 1184 (the year he became prior), the \textit{Vita}, survives in four manuscripts. Three of these date to around 1200, and the fourth was created sometime before John’s death in 1214. Having four such early copies

\textsuperscript{123} Bell, \textit{Wulfric}, xiii. In 1210, the papal interdict and heavy taxation brought John before the King again, only this time as a supplicant asking for a rescinding of the royal taxes levied on Cistercian houses to pay for the King’s campaigns in Ireland. In this, he was unsuccessful. During this period John disagreed with the Cistercian General Chapter. While the chapter held fast to its claims of immunity from taxation, John, by citing the story of the coin in the fish’s mouth in the Gospel of Matthew 17:24-27, argued that they should just pay the tax and get back to the business of monastic life and poverty, a lifestyle he felt that the order was drifting from anyway. Christopher J. Holdsworth, “John of Ford and the Interdict,” \textit{The English Historical Review} 309 (1963): 705-14.

\textsuperscript{124} Holdsworth, “John of Ford and English Cistercian Writing,” 120-24.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, 130.
of the text suggests that it was popular and widely read by twelfth-century standards. Its popularity, particularly among Cistercians, is not difficult to explain. In addition to the author's own importance, and to the general popularity of hagiographies in England throughout the Middle Ages, the *Vita wulfrici* is the work of a man who had an intimate knowledge of Cistercian spirituality and who participated in the most salient religious discourse of the day. According to Marsha Dutton, the *Vita wulfrici* was a contemplative work in which John attempted to demonstrate through the life of Wulfric the ideal Cistercian life and how to combine both the active and contemplative life. This “blending of contemplation and service” may be one reason why the *Vita* was circulated amongst many Cistercian houses.

It is, in many ways, a typical hagiography. Written after Wulfric's death by a member of his community in order to promote Wulfric's cult, the *Vita* contains a wealth of miraculous events, biographical details of private devotion, and promotions for the spiritual heroism of the holy man's (here, anchoritic) behavior. The progression of the *Vita* is similarly conventional. John starts with Wulfric’s life before his enclosure, which is prophesied by an angel in the form of a beggar, and then offers a clear narrative arc for the holy man through the three books of the


127 The scholarship on English saints, their *vitae*, and their cults is vast. For an introduction to the popularity of saints and hagiographies in medieval England, however, see Loredana Lazzari, et al., eds., *Hagiography in Anglo-Saxon England: Adoption and Adapting Saints’ Lives into Old English Prose* (c. 950-1150) (Barcelona and Madrid: Fédération Internationale des Instituts d’Études Médiévales, (2014); and, though focused on a slightly later period, see also Sarah Salih, ed., *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography* (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2006).


129 Matarasso, *The Life*. 
Vita. Each book focuses on a stage of Wulfric’s knowledge and power, from a young, wayward priest, to a novice solitary who was learning to negotiate the twofold demands of contemplation and service, until finally, he is presented as a venerable sage, who filled the world with “the glory of his signs if anyone can and will, out of pious curiosity, take the trouble to hunt them down and dig them out of the places where they lurk.”  

In the course of this narrative, moreover, John not only wrote about the practice of anchoritism and the identity of the anchorite in the twelfth century, he also discussed how anchorites were viewed by the villages and monasteries that supported them.

There are, however, some elements in Wulfric’s life that I argue were problematic for John, if he was to pen a captivating hagiography. First, there is nothing remarkable about Wulfric’s early years that would have pointed toward the spiritual powerhouse he later became. He was born in the village of Compton-Martin to parents of “modest English stock” (mediocri anglorum gente), and no early signs from childhood suggested a latent spiritual vocation. Even his early years as a priest were mediocre at best. As John acknowledges, the young Wulfric was too preoccupied with worldly pursuits and spending too much time with the wrong crowd: "As priest he certainly did not abstain from hunting and hawking, and prior to his calling spent his time among people in thrall to worldly vanities.”  

Neither deeply sinful, and thus well-poised for a redemptive spiritual conversion, nor deeply pious from birth, Wulfric's ordinariness actually presented a kind of obstacle to a compelling hagiographic narrative. The other problems facing John were related to the tenets of the anchoritic vocation, itself, or more appropriately, the

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changing tenets of the vocation between Wulfric’s tenure and the years in which John wrote the 
Vita.

The vocation of anchoritism underwent substantial changes during the twelfth century. As mentioned earlier, the most striking change was a shift in the gender ratio among English anchorites. When Wulfric entered his anchorhold, the vocation attracted mainly male monastics desirous of an even stricter or a more contemplative life. Still attached to their monasteries, their needs were provided for by their respective religious orders. By the time of Wulfric’s death, however, the call to reclusion was predominately answered by laywomen, whose sustenance depended on either personal wealth or the patronage of lay benefactors. The anchoritic life had long held appeal for some medieval women as an alternative to marriage or to the restrictive life of a convent. By the late twelfth century, however, the number of laywomen supported by lay benefactors increased.\textsuperscript{132} The fact that Wulfric was male and an ordained priest made him exceptional by late twelfth-century standards. In the attempt to validate the life and spiritual authority of the male vocation, John included a lengthy episode in the Vita that portrayed an exemplary female anchorite, Matilda of Wareham, in relation to his main protagonist. In fact, John dedicated two chapters of Book Two to describing Matilda’s conversion and subsequent entrance into the anchorhold. John creates a level of parity between the two by describing Matilda’s vocation using the same analogy of bread and consuming he had earlier used for Wulfric (discussed below):

If the dough offered as first fruits is holy, so is the whole lump. So if you want to know what Matilda was like, taste and see, for she was like that all through: sweet, tranquil, exuding peace and patience.\(^{133}\)

John portrays Matilda as a visitor seeking to live a solitary life of devotion. Wulfric not only lauded her for her devotion but also, according to John, accurately foretold the events that would then lead to her enclosure, including the number of years she had left to live. By not only relating Matilda's journey to the anchorhold, but also describing some of her feats of devotion during her tenure as anchoress, John makes it clear that Matilda is a worthy anchoress. Her spiritual excellence then reverberates back on Wulfric, for her presence casts Wulfric as an advisor and grants the occasion of his miraculous predictions. John thus relates their actions and interactions in order to establish, and mutually-reinforce, their legitimacies and authorities in their different iterations of the anchoritic life. Matilda's story ultimately places Wulfric within, and even casts him as a participant in, the process of change that John saw in the vocation. By telling the story of Matilda, John both acknowledged the growing presence of female anchorites, while also crafting Wulfric as a mentor (and thus as spiritually superior) to younger anchoritic women.

Another way in which the anchoritic vocation changed during the twelfth century was in its ritual of enclosure. The anchorite effectively belonged to the community, for the community had to agree to sustain the anchorite. (In Wulfric’s case, for example, he was Haselbury’s anchorite.) Early agreements between anchorites and their communities were somewhat informal, and there was no standardized method by which a person "became" an anchorite. By

the end of the century, however, there were certain procedural expectations (notably the participation of the bishop) for how a person committed to the anchoritic life. There had even developed a complex liturgy that celebrated and solemnified the process by which a person was physically placed in an anchorhold. This ceremony was performed at the enclosure, the literal "sealing in," of a postulate committing to the anchoritic life. Eddie Jones has written illuminating essays on the twelfth-century pontifical manuscript, the Vespasian Manuscript, that includes the earliest recorded version of the rite (*ordo*) of enclosure that was performed to mark the consecration and enclosure of an anchorite in his or her cell.  

The most intriguing aspect of the enclosure *ordo* is that it included parts of the Office of the Dead, the rite performed for the repose of the soul of the deceased, complete with identical antiphons, prayers, and bodily performance such as the sprinkling of dust on the grave (or in this case the anchorhold). This created an analogous relationship between the enclosed and the dead, with the clear implication that the new anchorite was truly dead to the world, and had crossed into a space where his/her role in the community was purely spiritual.

The ceremony and procession to the anchorhold, as it traversed the sacred spaces of the church and cemetery, was a community event. The aspiring anchorite was publicly identified and

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134 Eddie A. Jones, “Ceremonies of Enclosure: Rite, Rhetoric, and Reality,” in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold*, 158-59. Jones has found fourteen extant pontificals that include the rite of enclosure. While the Vespasian MS was written in the mid-to-late twelfth century (around the time John was writing the *Vita*), none of the others predate the fifteenth century. Jones concludes, however, that there would have been significant developments in the expectations for ceremony between Wulfric’s enclosure and John’s recording it.

135 Jones, “Rites of Enclosure,” 145-234. For more information on the anchorhold as tomb, McAvoy has also written about the symbolic interpretations of the anchorhold as “womb and tomb.” She also sees a semiotic relationship between the anchorite and anchorhold and Christ in Mary’s womb, a safe, nourishing place. Aelred in his *Rule* likens the anchorhold to the wound in Jesus’s side and incites the reader to creep into the wound.
connected to his or her community, but it is clear that in England, the enclosure ordo codified the process of vetting and selecting any person who desired to commit to the anchoritic life. Furthermore, it was customary for the bishop to shoulder the burden for investigating the life and resources of the suppliant.136 This typically involved interviewing community members, procuring a statement of possessions, such as land holdings and income, and often requiring the aspiring recluse to live as a solitary during a probationary year to test their mettle against long-term isolation. It was only after suppliants had secured enough resources to sustain them, and had passed the probation period, that the bishop performed the rite of enclosure, which ended with the anchorite entering the anchorhold and the locking of the door.137

These grandiose displays, however, would have been unknown to Wulfric of Haselbury, whose enclosure occurred before the development of such ceremonial extravagance as prescribed in the Vespasian Manuscript. His was a frugal event overseen by the abbot, “without the usual induction by the bishop and no solemn blessing, but only with the inward authority of the Holy Spirit.”138 This (by John's day) unconventional, and arguably illegitimate, start to Wulfric's life as an anchorite was not ideal for his erstwhile hagiographer. John thus takes pains to make clear

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136 Clay, The Hermits and Anchorites, 193-8. The entire “Office for the Enclosing of Anchorites (according to the use of Sarum)” is included in Appendix A of Hermits and Anchorites.

137 While the Vespasian manuscript provides the earliest liturgical evidence of an enclosure ordo in England, manuscript evidence the bishop’s personal responsibility for the recluse only emerges in the early fifteenth century. However, such expectations of the bishop must have already been developing when John wrote the Vita, as he states, “nulla ut assolet episcopi introductione.” Bell, Wulfric, 15.

138 Matarasso, The Life, 100; “nulla ut assolet episcopi introductione, nulla benedictionis solemnitate, sed familiari Spiritus Sancti auctoritate.” Bell, Wulfric, 15. Bell, commenting on the account of Wulfric’s enclosure, concluded that “St. Wulfric must have been one of the last to escape from the tightening net of episcopal control.” (Ibid, 142). Eddie Jones also supports this notion in “Rites of Enclosure,” 159, fn. 43.
that while not subjected to the enclosure rites, Wulfric was fully endorsed by the bishop, as well as by the Lord, William FitzWalter. But if John was to depict Wulfric as an exemplar within the anchoritic tradition, a task implicit in the request by Baldwin, the Archbishop of Canterbury and former abbot of Forde, that he, John, write the *Vita*, he needed to emphasize, not to say fabricate, certain legitimatizing elements of Wulfric’s ministry and persona. He did this by creatively imbuing Wulfric with a spiritual meaning that surpassed that of most anchorites. In fact, John’s depiction of Wulfric’s exemplary status did not simply rely on examples of a spiritual life well-lived, he also elevated Wulfric’s position within the greater Christian community by connecting the holy man to the holy host. Made analogous to the host, the incarnation of the resurrected (ie both living and dead) Christ, Wulfric was able to claim the same ambiguous state between living and dead that the anchorites of John’s day did through their rites of enclosure. But this association with the host did more than elicit thoughts of death and dying; it also cast Wulfric as a present and living body, a body that was worthy to be gazed upon and able to bring salvation. John effectively downplayed Wulfric’s unofficial entry into the cell by linking him to Jesus-as-Host and thus by positioning him in the contemporary debate surrounding the Eucharist.139

The twelfth century witnessed a sea change in the way in which Christians related to God and ushered in a more sacramental understanding of the economy of salvation.140 Rather than just looking at the lives of holy men and women as exempla, Christians began to view their relationship to God and all the things that came with it, such as grace, mercy, and salvation, through the lens of the seven sacraments. Miri Rubin has described this turn: “Whereas early...


Christianity looked to holy men and early medieval society turned to saints to effect the connection between God and humankind through prayers of intercession, a different order was now emerging. It was embedded in procedures and mediating practices, in a neatly defined mystery, rather than in the inspiration of charismatic and exemplary figures.”

This shift was produced, in part, by the increased attention by, and prolific output of, twelfth-century theologians who brought scholastic discipline to their understandings of faith, Church reform, and canon law.

The twelfth century was a particularly vibrant period for sacramental theology, as the most skilled, and often legal-minded, religious writers of the age, including Gratian, Hugh of St. Victor, and Peter Lombard, wrote treatises and synthesized collections of theology in which the sacraments played a critical role. Over the course of the century, the very number of sacraments was settled at seven; earlier lists had included as many as twelve. Twelfth-century theologians and reformers also clearly positioned the sacraments, particularly the five common sacraments of baptism, confirmation, penance, Eucharist, and extreme unction, as spiritually therapeutic, or cures for the soul, ministered to the faithful by priests. The common sacraments, moreover, were considered necessary for salvation; they cleansed, strengthened and prepared the soul for the good fight on earth and for its final reward, the vision of God. The two special sacraments, marriage and holy orders, were reserved for the laity and the religious, respectively. As elective, and mutually-exclusive, vocations they were not necessary for salvation, and are discussed more


143 Ibid, 24.

144 Ibid, 409.
fully in the next chapter. The focus on the sacraments was intimately bound up with the new
attention to and elevation of clerical authority, an outgrowth of the Gregorian reforms.\textsuperscript{145} While
each of the sacraments garnered new attention in this rich religious discourse, the sacrament of
the Eucharist was the site of the most sustained theological controversy and the site of the
greatest devotion.

Between the mid eleventh century and the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, ecclesiastical
authorities promoted an increased reverence for and devotion to the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{146} The Church's
urgency to promote the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and to increase the role of the
sacrament of the Eucharist in the Mass (and thus in the lives of the laity) was the result of both
internal and external pressures: the Benengar-Lanfranc controversy, the reinvigoration of
devotional practices, particularly related to relics, by the new reform-minded orders, such as the
Cistercians and Carthusians, and the threat of the Cathar heresy. Although separate events, all
three shared points of intersection, and ultimately led to the adoption of the dogma of
transubstantiation and to the focus of attention on the moment of the major elevation of the Host
immediately after the consecration.\textsuperscript{147}

\textsuperscript{145} While all the sacraments in some way helped to distinguish between lay and cleric, the priest's
ability to perform the miraculous act of consecration first instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper
formed the touchstone of his authority and power, particularly in the eyes of the laity. For the
development of the theology around ordination and the power of the priest (only) to consecrate
the host see Macy, "Theology of the Eucharist," 367-8.

\textsuperscript{146} For more on the ways in which the laity participated in the Mass, see Martin R. Dudley,
"Liturgies in the Middle Ages" in The Liturgy of the Medieval Church, eds. Thomas J. Heffernan
and E. Ann Matter (Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 204.

\textsuperscript{147} Gary Macy, Treasures from the Storeroom: Medieval Religion and the Eucharist (Minnesota:
Prior to the codification of doctrine at Latern IV, the church lacked a clearly defined doctrine on the nature of the Eucharist. It had, however, been working on one for some time, articulating clear steps in the direction of what would become the doctrine of transubstantiation. A formative moment on this path came with the Berengarian oath of 1059. In that year, upon the condemnation of his anti-transubstantiation teachings on the Eucharist, Berengar of Tours was forced to sign the following confession affirming the real corporeal presence of Christ in the sacrament:

I agree with the holy Roman Church and the Apostolic See, and I profess with mouth and heart to hold as the faith concerning the sacrament of the Lord’s supper what the Lord and venerable Pope Nicholas and this holy synod by the authority of the gospels and the apostles have given to be held and have ratified to me: Namely, that the bread and wine which are placed on the altar after the consecration are not only signs, but also the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that sensually, not only in sign, but in truth they are handled and broken by the hands of the priest and crushed by the teeth of the faithful, swearing by the holy and on-in-substance Trinity and by the most holy gospel of Christ.148

Berengar’s “confession” captured a clear iteration of what the Church considered an orthodox understanding of the Eucharist during the eleventh century.149 As Gary Macy pointed

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148 This text is recorded by Lanfranc, *Liber de corpore et sanguine domini*, c. 2, *PL* 150: 410D.

149 Interestingly, in spite of the three decades of controversy that surrounded his teachings, he died in good standing with the Catholic Church in 1088, which leads one to speculate about the church authorities’ ambivalent attitude toward the doctrine of the Eucharist.
out, however, throughout the remainder of the twelfth century, scholars, including Guibert of Nogent (d. 1124), Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141), and Peter Lombard (d. 1160) not only disputed the meaning of the oath and eventually repudiated it altogether, but also did so with impunity.\textsuperscript{150} A general consensus regarding the Eucharist was not attained, thanks in part, to the problematic theological ramifications of the language of the oath as well as to the inclination of certain scholastic thinkers to accommodate competing theologies that allowed the clergy to apply Eucharistic language in a variety of ways. Only with the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, and then with Thomas Aquinas’s later doctrine of transubstantiation, was the nature of the true physical presence in the bread and wine finally defined.\textsuperscript{151}

As theologians were still debating the nature of Eucharistic doctrine, the affective piety of the new Cistercian order contributed to the rise of a widespread devotion to the Eucharist among monastic communities, and eventually among the laity. Early Cistercian writers had a special connection Jesus-as-Eucharist. Bernard of Clairvaux (St. Bernard), for instance, sought to identify with Christ in his writings and was known for using metaphors of eating and drinking in his writing on the relationship between God and humankind.\textsuperscript{152} Although Bernard did not write specifically on the Eucharist, other Cistercians predating John of Forde did. William of St.

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\textsuperscript{150} Macy, Treasures from the Storeroom, 20-30.
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\textsuperscript{151} I recognize, and agree with Gary Macy’s contention that most scholarship on the eleventh century’s contribution to Eucharistic theology has been dismissive and sees the works of eleventh-century authors as only a precursor to Lateran IV. Although I agree that the eleventh century should be analyzed as an important period in the development of Eucharistic theology, I refer to it here and its relationship to Lateran IV, simply in chronological terms.
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Thierry, Baldwin of Forde, Gurerric of Igny, and Isaac of Stella all wrote treatises on the Eucharist. Cistercians were also among the early proponents of the act of elevation in the celebration of the Eucharist, though it was then taken up by Parisian clergy and eventually too by the Franciscans.

Furthermore, as Catharism (and all of its manifestations under other names) and its rejection of the real presence in the Eucharist grew in the twelfth century, the Catholic Church came to see partaking of, and devotion to, the Eucharist as one litmus test that separated the faithful from heretics. It thus placed ever more importance on the sacrament of the Eucharist and on the need for all members of the Church, religious and lay, to receive the sacrament regularly. It also emphasized the moment of consecration, by promoting the major elevation, in which the priest (whose back was to the congregation) lifted the wafer over his head as he recited the words, *hoc est corpus meum*, hence activating the miracle of transubstantiation. While the exact date for official regulations regarding elevation are debated, it is generally assumed that the practice of elevating the host either at the time of the sacring or just after, was widespread in the later twelfth century.

In the early thirteenth century the practice was then affirmed and approved by powerful clerics. In 1210, Odo of Sully, bishop of Paris, required that priests raise the host, but only as high as the breast until after the consecration, when they could fully elevate it for viewing by the congregation. This was to ensure that the visible host was not worshiped.

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153 Ibid, 2.


before it was consecrated to avoid any accidental idol worship. In 1219, the practice was officially approved by Pope Honorius III, who also directed priests to tell the laity to reverence the elevated host by bowing their heads. But bowing was not the only response on the part of the laity. The church also encouraged the laity to “gaze” upon the wafer, an act which, in itself, became efficacious for salvation. According to Eamon Duffy, “grace came by gazing on the Host: to see it was to be blessed.” Since the laity attended Mass far more often than they received the Eucharist, seeing the Eucharist became a central devotional moment in the lives of medieval Christians.

The ambiguity over the true meaning of the Eucharist, coupled with the increased devotion to the Eucharist and to the body of Christ, gave Eucharistic imagery both a currency and a flexibility that was not lost on John of Forde. At the same time, the shift in the economy of salvation away from a penitential, ascetic model to one focused on the sacraments, meant that older forms of anchoritic imagery, like the desert, were less effective. I believe it clear that this Cistercian abbot thus appropriated Eucharistic language and applied it to his descriptions of Wulfric, in order to legitimatize Wulfric’s ministry. In this way, John portrayed Wulfric as more

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157 Izbicki, *Medieval Canon Law*, 107


159 Izbicki, *Medieval Canon Law*, 105. One of the canons of Lateran IV had to insist that everyone had to receive the Eucharist at least once a year, after which most people only received the Eucharist once a year, at Easter.
than just an ascetic holy man, and more than just the ideal Cistercian. Situating John’s work within the context of sacramental and liturgical praxis prior to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 is essential to interpreting his appropriation of Eucharistic language and how he did so with impunity. I suggest that the accommodations in Eucharistic theology allowed by the church between the Berengarian oath in 1059 and Lateran IV, created a space for John of Forde to use Eucharistic language to depict Wulfric as a sacramental body.

At several points in the *Vita*, John likens Wulfric, and in one case even Matilda, Anchoress at Wareham, to bread or food to be consumed. The first instance of this particular analogy is in John’s prefatory letter to Baldwin, Archbishop of Canterbury, to whom John had dedicated his *Vita*. In the letter John asked for the archbishop’s examination and approval of the text. In his justification for writing the *Vita*, John explained that the church had forgotten all the marvelous works of Wulfric and he was

confident that I have taken my principal purpose – devout most surely and sincere – from blessed Wulfric’s own devotion: namely to glorify God and build up the church; also to offer her saint, well-nigh forgotten like one who is dead, to her lips and teeth for rumination.

The word “rumination,” in English has two clear meanings: both thinking and chewing; however, the Latin word *ruminare*, used by John, while it still possessed both senses, emphasizes the physical act of chewing and consuming. John thus depicted Wulfric as food to nourish the

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160 Although Wulfric was not of the Cistercian order, John makes clear that Wulfric was an admirer of the order and often guided others to it. Matarasso, *The Life*, 45-6.
church, and foreshadowed the likeness he would later make between Wulfric’s body and the holy bread of the Eucharist.

In a later passage John underscored this analogous relationship between Wulfric and the Eucharist when he wrote that,

Drawing as it were on a well-stocked pantry… His precepts, like loaves fresh from the oven, were potent with his grace and virtue, and to those who heard them they gave off a delicious smell, redolent of heavenly purity and delightful simplicity of heart.\footnote{Matarasso, \textit{The Life}, 106. “et velut de pleni cellari copiis…sermons ejus velut panes de furno recenter extracti cum sua essent gratia et virtute potentes, caelestem quondam puritatem et simplicitatem jocundissimam redolebant in odorem suavitatis audentibus eos.” Bell, \textit{Wulfric}, 20.}

Wulfric’s teachings, and by association, Wulfric himself, are not only bread, but bread \textit{filled with grace}. According to medieval (and modern) theology, grace was God's alone, conferred to the faithful through word, deed, and, most importantly, the sacraments. In fact, Peter Lombard had defined a sacrament as "a sign of God's grace and a form of invisible grace...not instituted only for the sake of signifying, but also to sanctify."\footnote{Quoted in Bryan Spinks, \textit{Do This In Remembrance of Me: The Eucharist from the Early Church to the Present Day} (Norwich, SCM Press, 2013), 225.} While subsequent theologians would debate the relationship between the ritual and grace, they all agreed that the sacrament itself was in some way a source of grace. By linking Wulfric to grace-imbued bread, which might then confer grace (for what else was that potency to do?) as did the consecrated host, John offers Wulfric as something more than just a wise hermit.

Finally, the use of bread then reappeared for a third time when John introduced Matilda (discussed above), likening her to dough and offering her as something to be tasted and seen.
John framed these anchorites as consumable bread that exuded grace in the context of their engagement with visitors. They were, in essence, analogous to the sacrament of the Eucharist. Although scholars have established that anchorites were expected by church leaders and the community to provide spiritual services for visitors, and therefore play an important role in the spirituality of the community, to see anchorites as sacramental raises their role to a new level of spiritual influence. John assigned attributes to Wulfric that were usually reserved for the consecrated host. This choice could have violated the host, or at least have been considered suspiciously heterodox. But, because John wrote his account in the decades preceding the Fourth Lateran Council, at a time of flexible iterations of official doctrine on the Eucharist, his liberal use of Eucharistic language was in line with the theological thought of his day.

Moreover, John of Forde’s use of the bread metaphor resonated with his audience on multiple levels. Not only was John writing in the midst of changing ideologies concerning the Eucharist, his anchorite lived during the succession crisis of the Anarchy, when Matilda, the daughter of Henry I, was fighting against Stephen, Henry’s nephew, for the throne of England. Contemporary sources cite the devastating impact of the war on the countryside, with Wessex hit especially hard.163 It is no wonder, then, that so many of the stories about Wulfric gathered by John, had to do with food, and bread in particular. The general masses who came to see the holy man would have come to address physical as well as spiritual hunger.

John not only likens Wulfric to bread, he also makes Wulfric the salvific object of an uplifted gaze. John tells the story of a man who had sold his soul to the devil in exchange for power and wealth. He wrote,

Long since seduced by the devil, as he later confessed, through greed for money and power, he [the man] had placed himself of his own accord under the yoke of a malign bondage and, speaking face to face with his slave-master, had made a covenant with death and a pact with hell.164

After a “spirit of repentence” (*spiritu paenitentiae*) convicted the man of his sin, the man was delivered from demonic bondage, but, John continued,

it would take someone strong to do this, since his enemies were exceedingly strong and he himself was in their hands. At long last he lifted his gaze to blessed Wulfric, said to have healing in his hand, and resolving to go to him he lost no time in organizing his journey.165

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By John’s day, lifting one’s gaze toward the consecrated host without consuming it was considered a sufficient act for salvation. John’s application of the phrase, “lifted his gaze” would have immediately invoked thoughts of the Eucharist, even as they were grafted onto Wulfric. In the case of this demonic, lifting his gaze to Wulfric (as stand-in for the Eucharist) inspired hope of deliverance, as he prepared to travel to see the anchorite. But, John tells us that the devil was not through with the man yet, and attacked him while crossing a stream to see Wulfric who, becoming aware of the man’s situation, dispatched the parish priest, Brihtric, to retrieve him.

Continuing with the Eucharistic theme of this story, John describes the priest as wearing the vestments for administering the sacrament:

Blessed Wulfric meanwhile, who had seen his son [the demoniac] fleeing to him for refuge when the young man was still a long way off … sent his angel of mercy in the venerable person of Brihtric. … Nor was the priest to proceed in modest style, but with the triumphal sign of Christ’s cross going before and vested for celebrating the great sacrament in which a captive of sin was to pass over into the body of Christ, in which a man would once again be ransomed from the devil’s hand, as happened long ago, and the mystery of human redemption celebrated, as it were visibly, in one individual. … So the minister went to this great work … and rescued the prey and put the robber to flight.167

166 See Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 95-102 and Rubin, Corpus Christi, 54-63.

167 Matarasso, The Life, 119; At beatus vir filium ad se confugientem cum adhuc longe esset videns…misit misericordiam suam per angelum suum venerabilem scilicet virum Bricricum…Direxit autem non simpliciter sed praececedente triumphali signo crucis Christi armatum velut in solemnitatem tanti sacrament i in quo captivus peccati transiturus erat in Corpus Christi; in quo denuo sicut in diebus antiquis redimendus erat homo de manu diabolic et
Then, after Brihtric brought the man back to Wulfric, Wulfric served the Eucharist. When the man looked at it, however, it appeared to him as real flesh and blood, and John writes this in such a way that the reader almost wonders if the man is looking at Wulfric:

Finally, since the penitent absolutely refused to leave the holy man’s side until he had received the life-giving sacrament which would no longer allow him to doubt that he was one body with Christ, he drew near for holy communion. Asked whether he believed, he replied: ‘I do truly believe that I, a sinner, see here the body and blood of Christ under the appearance of flesh and blood.’ The holy man said in reply: ‘Thanks be to God. But now let us pray together that in its former likeness you may deserve to receive it.’ Thus did he send him away in peace, communicated and filled with faith and the consolation of the Holy Spirit.\(^\text{168}\)

Throughout this account, John chose to incorporate the Eucharist as an agent of healing and deliverance, and at times, he skillfully blurred the distinctions between Wulfric and the redemptionis humanae mysterium in uno homine visibiliter quodam modo celebrandum…Procedit ergo tanti operis minister…exussit praedam, praedonem fugavit.” Bell, \textit{Wulfric}, 33.

\(^{168}\) Matarasso, \textit{The Life}, 121; “Denique cum a later viri sancti ante perceptionem vivifici sacrament nullatenus recedere acquiesceret, quo se Christo incorporatum jam dubitare non posset, accendens ad communionem sacram et interrogates si crederet; ‘Vere credo,’ inquit, ‘quia ecce Corpus Christi et Sanguinem in specie carnis et sanguinis peccator aspicio.’ Cui vir sanctus: ‘Deo,’ inquit, ‘gratias; sed jam simul oremus ut priori specie illud percipere merearis.’ Sicque communicatum et fide atque consolation Spiritus Sancti repletum demisit in pace.” Bell, \textit{Wulfric}, 35.
sacramental bread, endorsing Wulfric with a preeminent level of holiness through language that would have been well understood by John’s contemporaries.

As already discussed, there is a wide range of scholarship concerning the practice of elevating the Host immediately after consecration and by the end of twelfth century, the Host was most usually something to be seen rather than something to be tasted. Reverence for the Eucharist was popularized by the new Cistercian order as status of the Host transitioned from relic to the central sacrament of the church.\textsuperscript{169} Michal Kobialka has shown how the Catholic Church focused the energies of the Eucharist debate into a clear iteration of, if not obsession with, the substantive change of the Host from bread and wine to flesh and blood at the Fourth Lateran Council.\textsuperscript{170} According to Kobialka, before the Council, the miracle was only available to lay participants irregularly, and then only at a distance, because viewing the sacrament at the moment of elevation was considered enough, which led to a privatization of the sacrament.\textsuperscript{171} This privatization is what I suggest allowed the anchorite to be viewed physically and spiritually as a sacramental body.\textsuperscript{172}

In conclusion, anchoritism in medieval England underwent changes on multiple levels as it developed during the twelfth century. In this chapter, I have demonstrated that connecting these nuances with the \textit{Life of Wulfric} presents a more dynamic and historically grounded interpretation of the text. By examining certain passages from Wulfric’s \textit{Vita}, I have brought

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{169} Kobialka, \textit{This is my body}, 147-59. Also see Gerard G. Grant, “The Elevation: A Reaction to Twelfth-Century Heresy,” \textit{Theological Studies I} (1940): 228-50; Kennedy, “The Moment of Consecration;” Kennedy, “The Date of the Parisian Decree.”
\item \textsuperscript{170} Kobialka, \textit{This is my body}, 165.
\item \textsuperscript{171} Ibid, 157.
\item \textsuperscript{172} Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 95.
\end{itemize}
literary evidence to bear on one instance where these changes in the vocation were problematic. Faced with the insurmountable problem of change over time, John of Forde employed the imagery of the most recognizable sacrament of the church to legitimatize Wulfric’s anchoritic career and confirm Wulfric’s salvation, while assuaging his anxiety over Wulfric’s lackluster enclosure. John’s intent to elevate Wulfric to a level of spirituality bathed in Eucharistic splendor and, therefore, beyond reproach, an effort that would have been unnecessary if the role and perception of anchorite had remained unchanged throughout the twelfth century.
Chapter Four

The *Vita* of Christina of Markyate

Introduction

Christina of Markyate spent much of her young adult life as a captive in hiding. On the lam from the authorities, she lived in constant fear of being forced to consummate a coerced marriage as she fought, ironically, for her freedom to choose enclosure. By now, most medieval scholars are familiar with Christina’s story. She was a twelfth-century holy woman whose *Vita* was penned by an anonymous monk at the monastery of St. Albans, sometime between the 1150s and 1180s.\(^{173}\) Her *Vita* reads more like an action-adventure movie script than a medieval hagiography. With sexual avarice, conspiracies, narrow escapes, and unrequited love abounding, the reader becomes privy to the young woman’s action-packed struggle to defend her vow of chastity and live a life of enclosure against opposition posed not only by her family but also by the very churchmen whose job was to ostensibly affirm that vow.

Although, like in all hagiographies, Christina’s *Vita* was intended to call attention to her holiness and piety, the author proved to be a master craftsman of religious imagery and a savvy

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negotiator of the theological issues of the day. The anonymous hagiographer chose not to cast the young solitary who struggled to defend her chastity as a desert dweller, despite the obvious parallels he could have drawn to the desert fathers and mothers who fought their own sexual demons in the wilderness. Instead, the author presented Christina as a prisoner, a far less typical exemplar for hagiographies, but one that allowed the author to explore more fruitfully questions of confinement, gender, and the nature of the two sacraments in conflict in Christina’s story. For, her imprisonment, both spiritual and physical, was at the hands of unscrupulous church leaders and her own parents, and was the result of what the author represents as an improper approach to the sacramental nature of marriage. In Christina’s case, it was the institutional church and social protocol’s rejection of her private vow of virginity, which she and the author viewed as legitimate and sacramental in nature. Like the *Vita wulfrici*, the *Vita* of Christina is a social and religious commentary on the somewhat ambiguous state of marriage as well as on the state of the church in twelfth-century England. Christina’s *Vita* reveals changing social norms in the matter of marriage that seem unrelated to anchoritism, and yet were vital in the shifting understanding of anchoritic life. As marriage became a topic of debate among churchmen, it gained greater currency as a foil against which anchoritism could be understood and experienced. And so, the salvific qualities of her story that ultimately contributed to her salvation, was her own understanding of the sacrament of true marriage.

In order to understand what was involved, we must first consider four main issues. The first is the state of marriage in twelfth-century England because it shows how Christina’s life reflects the sacramental turn in the economy of salvation following the Gregorian Reform movement. Together with their efforts to promote the doctrine of transubstantiation and eradicate the practice of simony, reforming clergy worked to delineate an official position on the
sacramentality of marriage vows. The fact that notions about what constituted a sacramentally valid marriage were still being formed is extremely important, as it allows one to contextualize the *Vita* within this discourse. The anonymous twelfth-century monk behind Christina’s *Vita* can therefore be seen to promote a reform agenda through his literary depictions of Christina.

The second issue involves the specific case of Christina herself and the characters involved in her *Vita* who actually debate the issues involved with sacramental marriage. Christina stands at the center of this debate. Unequivocally the author casts the consensual approach to marriage as the correct one, and does this by celebrating Christina’s triumph, in the end. The third issue encompasses the significance of St. Leonard in the author’s construction of Christina’s exceptional spirituality, an issue that has received very little attention by scholars. I believe that the author’s inclusion of St. Leonard was not incidental and shows that Leonard’s role, together with the virgin Mary, was to sustain and protect Christina in becoming a *sponsa Christi*, or bride of Christ, a status for which, according to the author, she had been chosen. The final issue centers on the *St. Albans Psalter*, a manuscript created or adapted specifically for Christina by Abbot Geoffery. Evidence from the *Psalter* will clarify further St. Leonard’s crucial role in Christina’s life.

Christina was born into a wealthy Anglo-Saxon merchant family. Her parents, Autti and Beatrix, were, according to the *Vita*, pious and respected members of their community, in and around Huntingdon, and were part of a social network that included other wealthy merchants and high-ranking church officials. The *Vita* begins with Christina’s (or Theodora, which was her birth name) auspicious birth on the feast day of St. Leonard. As a teenager, she and her parents travelled on the anniversary of Christina’s birth and the saint's feast, to the nearby monastery of St. Albans so that her parents could acquire the saint’s blessing and patronage for themselves and
their daughter. Christina, who was deeply affected by the monastic life she saw at St. Albans, made a decision at that moment to take a vow of virginity by inscribing a cross on the wooden doorway of the monastery with her fingernail. While attending mass on their way home, she gave the priest a denarius as an oblation to Christ, a token of her vow that would secure her promise to become Christ’s bride. Her parents, however, were not supportive of her decision and betrothed her, with the support of the local clergy, to a wealthy local man. To avoid the demands of her parents and the advances of her fiancé, Christina went into hiding to fulfill her vow to Christ. The anonymous author of the Vita cast Christina as a holy heroine, an anchorite who in order to escape the enclosure of earthy marriage chose the physical enclosure of the cell as the anchorite’s vow. At the end, through the authorial voice of the anonymous monk, Christina’s view of marriage prevails over that of her parents and Christina was finally recognized as a vowed virgin and allowed to live, as she wished, enclosed as a bride of Christ. Just as John of Forde presented the anchorite at Haselbury as sacramental through Eucharistic language, the author of Christina’s Vita also viewed his subject as an agent who communicated emerging notions about a twelfth-century highly contested sacrament.

Scholarship has questioned Christina’s status as an anchorite. In 2005, Eddie Jones claimed that the Vita depicted her final status as a nun under Benedictine authority as a “happy ending” for the Benedictine author, casting suspicion on her identity as an anchorite.\(^\text{174}\) Dyan Elliot, however, has suggested a more complex reading of the Vita, which she defined as “a text

that is divided against itself." According to Elliot there is a discrepancy between the first and second halves of the *Vita*. In the first half, Christina is fully engaged in the anchoritic life, living contentedly under the influence of the hermits Alfwen and Roger, but in the second half, Christina trades her reclusive status for the more regulated and safe life of a Benedictine nun, under the influence of Geoffrey de Gorran, Christina’s confidant and abbot of St. Albans (1119-1146). There is no doubt, however, that regardless of Christina’s religious vocation at the end of her life, the years she spent as an anchorite are depicted vividly by her hagiographer as spiritually trying, and that they ultimately contributed to a life worthy of saintly veneration.

Like most hagiographies, Christina’s *Vita* was an attempt to promote the holy life and deeds of a potential saint. But, it also exemplifies the changes in anchoritic literature and in the cultural understanding of what anchorites were that took place over the course of the twelfth century. Anchoritism in effect developed past its desert roots, so that by the twelfth century, holy men and women were no longer presented as desert dwellers. Instead, they were cast as exemplary adherents to, and even embodiments of, the sacraments. While the desert had been a fruitful image for earlier creators of the anchoritic ideal, by the twelfth century in England, that imagery was no longer the most powerful way to show the premier status now claimed by anchorites on the hierarchical scale of religious vocations. It was, perhaps too old or too conservative a parallel to draw, despite modern scholars’ assumptions that it maintained a consistent level of religious currency thanks to its Biblical precedence. Instead, anchoritism, in

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176 Christina’s life, although certainly not traditionally anchoritic, is usually included in the anchoritic corpus by modern scholarship due to her tenure in various cells throughout her early religious career, even if it was only semi-voluntary.
the eyes of those who lived it or promoted it, was the vocation par excellence. It surpassed other forms of religious life and its defenders needed energetic ways to convey the anchorite’s ability to tap more directly into the economy of salvation than the rest of living Christendom. In the twelfth century, that narrative energy was conveyed by connecting anchorites to the sacraments. While Wulfric’s Vita mined the imagery of the Eucharist and hence conferred on the hermits a Christ-like role, Christina’s Vita drew attention to what constituted an exemplary female solitary by using debates over marriage to invigorate the narrative.

The Marriage Debate

It is no radical revelation that Christina’s Vita centers on marriage. Indeed, many of the contributions to the 2005 collection of essays, Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman, focus on issues that are, to some degree, associated with marriage, virginity, or the sexually charged politics of female enclosure.\(^{177}\) Furthermore, scholarship has also given much attention to Christina’s relationship to the Virgin Mary and St. Cecilia (whom Christina invoked in an attempt to talk betrothed husband into a chaste marriage), as a way to explore the Vita as part of the virgin-martyr genre.\(^{178}\) In other words, historians and literary scholars alike have considered it a vivid, if rare, view into the social and religious complexities of twelfth-century English life, particularly in the realm of medieval marriage.

Two schools of thought that comprised the marriage debate are represented in the Vita: consensual and copulative. Thomas Head has cited the period beginning with the writings of Ivo,


Bishop of Chartes (1090-1116) and ending with Pope Alexander III (1159-81) as a time of significant transition in the interpretation of the sacrament of marriage. ¹⁷⁹ In these times, which included Christina’s lifetime, there was no general consensus amongst ecclesiastical authorities about what constituted a valid, sacramental marriage and likely, most leading churchmen were privy to the ongoing discussions involving the debate. ¹⁸⁰ Those who upheld the consensual interpretation, like Ivo, believed that a marriage was valid and indissoluble from the date of the betrothal, or desponsatio, when the man and woman in question verbally agreed to be married at a specific date. The copulative view believed that the marriage was valid only when it was consummated through sexual intercourse. Sometime around the middle of the twelfth century, with Pope Alexander III and under the influence of Peter Lombard, the consensual camp won. During his tenure as pope, Alexander had issued around eighty decretals that dealt with marriage. ¹⁸¹ In most cases, he considered promises of marriage in the present tense (“I marry you”) or in the future tense (“I will marry you”) to be sacramental and indissoluble as long as it was followed by intercourse, even if the promises were made in secret and without the blessing of a priest. The church’s emphasis on the consent of the two marrying individuals lessened the role of the families in the act of the marriage, and helped solidify the church as the arbiter of what was essentially a social contract. Yet, conversely, its emphasis on consent also removed the church from needing to be present at the moment the sacrament took place. If the two people had


only to agree to be married in order to validate the marriage, then they could enter into a sacramental bond without the mediation of the church.

All of the details of this marriage debate created a powerful context for Christina’s life and the message that the St. Albans monk conveyed. The nucleus of her story centers on the question of whether or not her initial vow to be Christ’s bride was a legitimate impediment to her arranged marriage. Most likely, the readership of Christina’s Vita was limited to the monks at St. Albans and the nuns at the priory of Markyate, of which Christina was the founding abbess. Therefore, most of those who read the text would have been familiar with the embattled status of sacramental marriage in the church over the previous half century. Here it is worth looking at some of the issues within this debate, in order to better understand the gravity it held for the Vita, as it was received by readers.

Although the church had always been somewhat involved in nuptial unions, in the early middle ages, marriage was not listed among the sacraments. During this period, while the medieval church was still developing its administrative scaffolding, controlling marriage was not a top priority. Even clerical marriage was somewhat commonplace. Moreover, while it was desirable to have the blessing of a priest, it was not required. For the laity, marriage unions were mostly political and social agreements established to further the fortune and status of both parties. In the early twelfth century and with the Gregorian reforms, church officials began to turn their gaze toward the institution of marriage as a whole.182 Amidst efforts for general reform within the clergy, influential leaders such as Peter Damian and Peter Lombard began to

182 Brundage, Sex, Law and Marriage in the Middle Ages, 69-73.
specifically target clerical marriage, with the mandate to eradicate it altogether.\textsuperscript{183} This, however, had a dramatic effect on the laity. As clerical reforms were consciously trying to elevate the clergy from the laity, clerical celibacy became a rallying cry for the superiority of the religious vocation. This in turn provoked a desire among the laity to make similar vows and required lay marriage to fall within the scope of ecclesiastical censure. The result was that marriage became one of the sacraments of the Catholic Church and, as such was held to very specific criteria.

This begs the question then, what constituted a legitimate marriage? The answer lay at the heart of the debate over sacramental marriage discussed earlier. In the \textit{Vita}, we see this debate acted out in vibrant detail, as Christina, who embodied the consensual theory, fought against her parents, her betrothed husband, and local bishops who backed the copulative theory. Much like Wulfric’s \textit{Vita}, Christina’s \textit{Vita} consciously straddles a significant period of change, in Christina’s case, it was a change in nuptial praxis, as well as a more general shift in lay piety.

\textbf{Characters in the \textit{Vita}}

The characters in her story were carefully selected by the author to represent both sides of the divide and set the tone for the \textit{Vita}. Including wealthy townspeople, high-ranking secular churchmen, as well as monastic figures and hermits, these characters all contributed to Christina’s spiritual path, some by obstructing it, and others clearing it. For example, her parents, Autti and Beatrix were members of the old Anglo-Saxon community (we should remember that the Norman conquest had only occurred approximately forty years before Christina’s birth), and more than any other characters, are cast as pre-Gregorian in their views on marriage. It was they who insisted that Christina marry Burthred, invited him to rape her when she refused to

\textsuperscript{183} Peter Lombard, \textit{Sententiae in IV libris distinctae} (Grottaferrata and Rome, 1981), 4.27.3, 422-3.
consummate the marriage, and even would have settled for anyone to deflower their daughter in order for her to give up her claim to perpetual virginity.\textsuperscript{184}

Autti and Beatrix’s relationship to the saints is also cast as somewhat self-serving. When they travel with Christina to the tomb of St. Alban, they were going to pay a tribute in order to gain favor from the saint for themselves and their daughter. This was strictly a business deal, in which the saint accepted payment and in return offered them his patronage and protection. It was based on gift exchange, not necessarily any affection for the saint or the monastery that housed his tomb. Christina, however, was deeply moved by the life lived by the monks at St. Albans and made a decision to become a \textit{sponsa Christi}. When she marked the doorframe with the cross, she was making a legitimate vow. Her devotion was markedly not for the saint, but for Christ himself, and his mother, Mary. The monetary transaction that took place later, when Christina gave a denarius to the priest was not payment, per se, but simply an oblation. It was the customary fulfillment of a marriage as well as vows more generally.\textsuperscript{185} The third and final step in her vow took place when she told Sueno about her decision, and he blessed it.\textsuperscript{186} The significance of this step is that when the priest, Sueno, heard and blessed the vow, it transitioned from a private to a solemn vow, one that was supposed to be unbreakable. From this point forward, Christina was convinced that she had a very real and legally binding marriage to Christ. Her parents, although most certainly aware of her vow, did not see it as an impediment to an arranged marriage to Burthred, a union that would have been perfectly acceptable in England at

\textsuperscript{184} Talbot, The Life of Christina, 53.

\textsuperscript{185} This was also the case \textit{ex votos}. It was customary to leave something for the saint in fulfillment of a vow.

\textsuperscript{186} For more on the various types of medieval vows, see James Brundage, \textit{Medieval Canon Law and the Crusader} (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).
that time. The two parties in the early conflict between Christina’s parents and Christina and the Sueno, represent two sides of the marriage debate, based on differing understandings of sacramental marriage and solemn vows. Autti and Beatrix firmly supported the marriage, even after Christina emphatically cited her previous vow in protest.

Ralph, the bishop of Durham, also was not deterred by the previous vow. When the bishop made sexual advances toward Christina, he was cunningly rebuffed. After a second, later failed attempt to seduce the young girl, Ralph arranged for Christina to marry Burthred. Her parents agreed to the union and Christina, after initially refusing, was eventually coerced into accepting the marriage. The hagiographer states that Ralph was “eaten up with resentment” and sought revenge by “depriving Christina of her virginity…for the preservation of which she did not hesitate to repulse even a bishop.”\(^{187}\) And, although the author presented the situation as a sinister scheme born out of Ralph’s ire that Christina would not sleep with him, there is reason to believe that Ralph was operating in a standard system of patronage for Autti and Beatrix. A previous relationship with Beatrix’s sister (Christina’s aunt) had produced progeny, whom he appointed to lucrative positions. It is very possible, as proposed by R.I Moore, that Ralph’s attempt to sleep with Christina, although it assaults our modern understanding of consent and coercion, was another gesture of patronage.\(^{188}\) This is upheld by his second attempt to court Christina with lavish gifts, which she refused. In response, Ralph takes it upon himself to arrange Christina’s marriage to Burthred, who was a lucrative match and would have increased the social status of Christina and her family. I propose, however, that the reason why Ralph was depicted in

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\(^{187}\) Talbot, The Life of Christina, 43.

such a negative light by the reform-minded St. Albans monk, is because Ralph had broken two of
the Gregorian Reforms, clerical celibacy and simony.

A utti’s network of social ties reached far beyond just the Bishop of Durham. This
becomes evident when Autti brings Christina before Fredebert, the prior of St. Mary’s in
Huntingdon, in order for the prior to convince her to change her mind. Fredebert, initially after
hearing both sides, aligned himself with Autti. Citing first the passage in I Corinthians that
marriage bonds cannot be broken, and second, the commandment that children ought to obey
their parents, Fredebert ruled that Christina was doubly at fault, having broken both of those
precepts.\textsuperscript{189} He was going to overrule her previous vow of virginity for the sake of a well-
established social norm. During a private consultation with the prior, however, Christina
responded, successfully refuting his rationale.\textsuperscript{190} During this episode it becomes apparent to
Fredebert and to the reader that Christina viewed her vow to Christ as legally binding and
indissoluble. It was, indeed, a “real” marriage. It was not until Fredebert asked Christina to take
an oath that she was betrothed to Christ before Burthred and would not seek an earthly marriage
at any point afterward, to which she responded that she would submit to a trial by ordeal, that he
finally tells Autti that he cannot “bend” Christina to Autti’s will. And so, it appears from the text
that Fredebert, did not give a judgement in the case. He simple concluded that he was not able to
change Christina’s mind. The tone of the author does not give the impression that this was what
Fredebert wanted to side with Christina, but that he simply could not refute her claim that her
vow to Christ superseded her coerced vow to Burthred. At that point Fredebert sent Autti and

\textsuperscript{189} Talbot, The Life of Christina, 61.

\textsuperscript{190} Elliot astutely compares this discourse between judge and defendant with the lives of earlier
Christina to Robert, bishop of Lincoln, in order to secure a final decision. The author lumps Autti, Fredebert, and the leading townsmen together when he states that Fredebert, Autti, and “the most noble citizens of the town” brought the matter before Robert for a final decision. This bishop initially sided with Christina, saying, “I declare to you, and I swear before God and his blessed mother that there is no bishop under heaven who could force her into marriage, if according to her vow she wishes to keep herself for God to serve him freely and for no man besides.” Then Autti, at the suggestion of Fredebert and the “noble citizens,” bribed Robert and secured a reversal that condemned Christina to a life of marriage to Burthred. From the perspective of the Anglo-Saxon elite, Christina was not just refusing a marriage, but she was potentially wrecking the family name. By using social and religious networks, Autti mobilized both the church and the local lay community to make sure that did not happen. After Robert’s decision, Christiana was subjected to imprisonment in her parents’ house and suffered physical and verbal abuse at the hands of Autti and Beatrix, who, representing an older familial understanding view of marriage, mostly wanted a sexual consummation with Burthred, since such consummation would make the marriage indissoluble in the eyes of society and would preclude her from any hope of pursuing the path of religious enclosure, as sexual activity would invalidate her vow. However, in the midst of this dark period, Christina found support from another contingent of professed religious, the hermits.

It is perhaps no wonder that hermits play somewhat of a heroic role in a text written by a monk of St. Albans. It is well known that that monastery regularly supported local recluses, and Geoffrey, Christina’s later protégé, confidant, and abbot of St. Albans, was deeply invested in

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There are three hermits mentioned in the text, all of whom support Christina in her plight to pursue a life of reclusion. These three characters, I argue, represent what the author viewed as an appropriate definition of marriage, which was sacramental and legally binding based only on a vow, or the consensual theory. I argue that in an effort to show the supremacy of the solitary life over the vocations of the secular church, the author explicitly show that the three hermits, Edwin, Alfwen, and Roger, all risk their reputations in order to help Christina escape from her parents’ house, and then work together as a network to hide her for several years from church authorities and Christina’s family.

After she escaped her parents’ house, Christina was not free to publicly profess as a religious. As far as society, and even much of the church (unaware of the circumstances of her earlier vow) was concerned, she was still married to Burthred and, as a consequence, she was forced to live in hiding. Thus began her odyssey of imprisonment. She moved secretly between various locations, all of which brought their own brand of trials, temptations, and despair. First, following her escape from her parents’ house, she hid at the hermitage of Alfwen, in nearby Flamstead. The Vita describes her hiding place in this way: “Hidden out of sight in a very dark chamber hardly large enough, on account of its size, to house her, she remained carefully concealed there for a long time …” Furthermore, the chamber was, “… closed and locked on all sides …” Beyond just the physical limitations of the space, she was subjected to a horrific

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192 Talbot, The Life of Christina, 151. There is also evidence, however, that Geoffrey was instrumental in redirecting Christina’s path, convincing her to leave her life as an anchorite, which she lived for at least fourteen years (1131-1145), to become the founding prioress at Markyate, a priory Geoffrey built specifically for Christina.

193 Talbot, The Life of Christina, 93.

episode of demonic interference when “… toads invaded her cell to distract her attention …” and with “big and terrible eyes … squatted here and there, arrogating the middle of the psalter …”\textsuperscript{195}

After enduring at Alfwen’s for two years, Christina was given shelter at the hermitage of Roger, a monk of St. Albans who lived as a hermit. In Roger, Christina found more than just a refuge and friend, but also a kindred spirit and source strength. Roger was a mentor that she sought to emulate, as he, “trained her, first by word, then by example.”\textsuperscript{196} And so they lived together for four years as mentor and protégé, praying together and serving God through ascetic discipline. The benefits of this friendship, however, were little compensation for Christina’s continued lack of freedom. The hagiographer is careful to show that Christina was still a captive, a hidden prisoner, once again hiding in a small space in fear of getting caught and dragged back to her husband. The \textit{Vita} describes her new cell at Roger’s hermitage as a “prison” (\textit{carcer}), and explains that it was an “airless little enclosure,” “not bigger than a span and a half,” that “became stifling when it was hot.”\textsuperscript{197} Christina’s body also suffered from this confinement. She was allowed only enough space to sit on a large stone to read and pray, and she could only go outside at night to relieve herself. Furthermore, “Through long fasting, her bowels became contracted and dried up. There was a time when her burning thirst caused little clots of blood to bubble up

\textsuperscript{195} Ibid, 99. In these passages, the author uses the imagery of space much like earlier hagiographers did: to paint a picture of the lurid agonies Christina suffered in her little cells. But, unlike earlier writers, the pains are not cast as penitential, and the imagery of space is not that of the desert, but that of the prison, reflecting the turn in the economy of salvation from penitential to sacramental. The author carefully crafts the spaces Christina inhabited as both negative, in that she was hiding from men who wanted to divest her of her life of solitude, and positive, in that in any case, she was living that solitary life.

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid, 105.

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid, 103.
from her nostrils.” Finally, lest we see this “chosen” prison as one that Christina was truly free to leave, the Vita explains that she was also not able to open the entrance on her own. It was locked from the outside. So, even if she had wanted to abandon her hiding place, she was not able. Thus, her newfound relationship with Roger notwithstanding, her physical situation had not improved since her arrival at Alfwen’s. In fact, it had become far worse; her space was smaller, her body was more deprived, and her status was still that of a prisoner, for she did not enter the cell as an anchorite, one who chooses solitary enclosure, but as a prisoner.

After Roger’s death, Christina was relocated to the home of a cleric, but remained a captive. In this case not just physically but spiritually as she was harassed by demonic interference as well as the cleric, himself, who the author of the Vita refused to name due to his unconscionable behavior toward Christina. Much like with Roger, Christina and the cleric developed a mutual affection for each other, but this time the man of God crossed the moral line. Standing naked before her while she prayed, the cleric preyed upon his charge. Even though, as the Vita states, she was so aroused with sexual desire that “she thought that the clothes that clung to her body might be set on fire,” Christina remained steadfast. Her chastity was preserved, if only just barely. The sexual desire awakened by that cleric in Christina was a major spiritual struggle, and one that often occurred in desert narratives, as well. Here, however, the author make the sexual temptation even more powerful for Christina’s confinement, and even a source of anxiety for her when she was preparing to profess as a nun years later. After her departure from that place, she “day and night knelt in prayer, weeping, and lamenting, and begging to be

198 Ibid, 103-105.

199 Ibid, 117.
freed from temptation.” Thus, throughout the narrative, Christina’s identity as a prisoner persisted, as it was manifested in her bondage to sexual temptation, and not just as physical enclosure.

Clearly Alfwen and Roger were not against the sacrament of marriage. They were simply convinced that Christina had already entered into a sacramental relationship with Christ. When Burthred went to Alfwen’s hermitage thinking that Christina might be hiding there, Alfwen responded with, “Stop, my son, stop imagining that she is here with us. It is not our custom to give shelter to wives who are running away from their husbands.” When Burthred went to Roger’s hermitage looking for Christina, Roger’s disciple indignantly said, “Who do you think you are, expecting to find a woman here at this hour? It is with the greatest difficulty that a woman is allowed here even in broad daylight and accompanied. And you look for a girl here before daybreak?” Certainly, in any other case, neither hermit would not have harbored a runaway wife. Christina, however, was not a wife who had run away, but was running toward Christ, whom she had selected as her husband. Roger expressed this same sentiment when he was originally approached about Christina’s case by his cousin, Edwin, who was also a hermit. Edwin had spoken with Christina and together they devised a plan for her escape. When he asked Roger to let her stay at his hermitage, Roger listened agreeably until he had heard that she had already been betrothed, when he angrily responded with, “Have you come here to show me how to dissolve marriages? Get out of here quickly and think yourself lucky if you get away safe and

200 Ibid, 117.

201 Ibid, 95.

202 Ibid, 95.
sound: you deserve a whipping.\textsuperscript{203} Indeed once it became clear that Christina had taken a vow of virginity, Roger changed his position as did the hermit population who mobilized to protect and secure the future of this sponsa Christi. Also, Sueno a canon and not a hermit, upon hearing of Christina’s marriage, assumed that she had violated her original vow to Christ, choosing instead to marry Burthred. After learning that the marriage was not consensual, he sought her forgiveness and remained her dedicated advocate afterward. In fact, all of the ecclesiastical authorities, as well as the hermits featured in the Vita, voice strong opinions about the sacrament of marriage, though not all on the same side.

The point that the author makes in the Vita is not that arranged marriages were wrong, or even that Autti and Beatrix’s actions would have been inappropriate in some other scenario. In fact, the author, along with all of the hermits and Christina would have agreed that, if not for her previous oath, and with her consent, the marriage to Burthred would have been considered a valid, sacramental marriage. It was the collective rejection of Christina’s vow of virginity that put the ecclesiastical authorities at fault. It was vital, then, for the author to prove the legitimacy of Christina’s marriage to Christ. To do so, he signified Christina’s marriage by the three acts mentioned above: the cruciform inscription at the monastery, the oblation, and the priestly blessing by Sueno. All of these were representative of traditional marriage protocol, and also satisfied the requirements for an official vow of virginity. If not for Ralph’s interference, it is likely that Christina would have at some point entered into life as an anchorite. But, I believe that the author goes even farther to validate Christina’s claim by appropriating the practice of arranged marriages, patronage, and even gift exchange, and applies them to the relationship between Christina and the Virgin Mary (Christina’s heavenly mother-in-law). Still caught

\textsuperscript{203} Ibid, 83.
between an older model of marriage in which parental negotiations were paramount, and a newer Church-advocated model that said the consent of the marrying individuals was all that mattered, the author of Christina's *Vita* offers key interactions with Mary as a way to transition a reluctant readership into accepting Christina's position, for she does, in fact, have "parental" permission for her vow. Mary, in essence, becomes a supportive parental negotiator, one who models how parents ought to react to their children's solemn vows, in contrast to Christina's earthy parents who try to force a non-valid marriage on a non-consenting soul.

There are three instances in which the Virgin Mary came to Christina in a vision. The first vision occurred when Christina was still held captive by her parents. When she was in deep despair the author said that, "Christ, wishing to comfort his spouse (*sponsam confortare*), gave her consolation through his holy mother."

204 In this vision, Christina sees a priest saying mass. He gives her a “branch of most beautiful leaves and flowers” and tells her to, “Receive this, my dear, and offer it to the lady.”

205 When she sees Mary, Christina gives her the branch and in return, Mary gives Christina a twig with the instructions, “Take care of it for me.”

206 This gift exchange, coupled with the spousal title, is clearly meant to mirror a marriage ceremony, and serves in the narrative to affirm Christina’s place in Christ’s family. Indeed, after this exchange, Mary promises to deliver Christina from her parents’ house, a promise that operates on one level as a rescue but on another as the expected next step in which a bride moves out of her parents' house and into that of her new husband. This then happens in the narrative with the help of Edwin. After the first vision, Christina told Sueno what Mary had said. Sueno, then told it to his...

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204 Ibid, 75.

205 Ibid, 75.

206 Ibid, 75.
prior, Fredebert (the same Fredebert who had worked with Autti to bribe Robert), who warned Autti not to get in the way of Christina, because Mary was protecting her. In response, Autti and Beatrix simply abused Christina more. The author then tells us that, seeing this, Mary came again to Christina in the second vision and says, “Be assured that I have chosen you from your father’s house…” This reaffirms the narrative's careful implication that, both like (and unlike) the actions of Autti, Beatrix, and Ralph, Mary, too, has arranged a marriage for Christina that was mystical yet very real. The third vision of Mary comes later, after Christina had been released by Burthred and she was no longer held accountable to that marriage. In this vision, Christina sees Mary talking to a group of angels when Mary tells one of them, “Ask Christina what she wants, because I will give her whatever she asks.” Christina, not sure yet where she will live or how she will be able to live out her desired life of seclusion now that she no longer has to hide from her husband, asks for a hermitage. In many cases, endowments were given to certain hermitages to support whoever was living there at the time. In other cases, endowments were given to the hermit, to sustain them wherever they chose to live. For Christina, she was given the hermitage occupied by Roger, who was under the authority of the abbot of St. Albans and whose hermitage was sustained by the monastery. Christina inherited the patronage of the monastery through the supernatural intervention and truly parental patronage of Mary. The first two visions explain how Mary removed Christina from her parental house, and the third vision complete the move into her husband’s (Christ’s) house.

207 Ibid, 79.

208 Or, as Head describes it, ”concrete.” Head, “The Marriages of Christina,” 119.

209 Ibid, 111.
To further make his point, the author relates a story of Mary appearing to Burthred in a “terrifying” vision in which she “harshly reproached him” for persecuting Christina. Two days after the vision, Burthred came to Roger and declared that he would release Christina. For extra assurance, Roger requires Burthred to return with three key players in his failed attempt to force marriage on Christina: Ralph, the bishop of Durham; Robert, dean of Huntingdon, who had colluded with Autti to bribe the Bishop Robert; and the original priest who had married Burthred and Christina. Together with five hermits who lived with Roger, the men who worked so hard to invalidate Christina’s claim to virginity, now stood witness to Burthred’s official surrender of any claim, however invalid in the eyes of the Vita’s author, he had to her. Again, Mary saw to it that Christina was well taken care of. Through the three-step process of Christina’s vow, and then through the ceremonial gift exchange, personal selection, and declaration of patronage of Jesus’ mother, the author makes it very clear that Christina’s vow to Christ was not merely spiritual but, in every sense, real and sacramental.

The author is interested in Christina as a prisoner beyond the actual episodes of her physical confinements in houses and hermit cells. Indeed, he not only foreshadows Christina’s identity as a captive through his repeated reference to St. Leonard, but he also casts her as a kind of prisoner when he writes about her in her mother’s womb. Twice, the author refers to Christina in utero. In the first instance, one for which the focus was centered on Beatrix, Christina’s mother, he uses the common and more biological Latin phrase, gestaret in utero, which means to

210 Ibid, 109. This is not the only time that a saint visited one of Christina’s antagonists. Later, when she was being harassed by the unnamed cleric, the cleric was threatened in his sleep by Mary Magdalen, John the Evangelist, and St. Benadict (Talbot, The Life, 117). The visitation worked. Afterwards, he pleaded for Christina’s forgiveness.
bear in the womb.\textsuperscript{211} In the second reference, which focuses on a prophetic sign that implied Christina would be filled with the Holy Spirit, however, the author uses an unusual Latin phrase, \textit{quod intus latebat}.\textsuperscript{212} The Latin verb, \textit{late}, means "to hide" and the phrase "she hid inside" is an usual way to describe an unborn saint. The author thus wants to make clear that even in utero Christina was a kind of refugee. Beatrix was not just bearing Christina; she was hiding her.

The meaning of this early pre-birth description of Christina is reinforced by the author's subsequent use of the same term, \textit{lateo}, when he expounds on Christina’s various hiding places. For example, when Burthred and his cronies come to the hermitage of Alfwen, searching for Christina, Alfwen upbraids him for even implying that her home might be used as a “hiding place,” or \textit{latibulum} for runaway wives. Three more uses of \textit{lateo} are also associated with Christina’s time at Alfwen’s hermitage. The \textit{Vita} explains that Christina’s “concealment and her peaceful existence irritated the devil…” and that “although in her hiding place she was hidden from men, she could never escape the notice of the demons.”\textsuperscript{213} When Christina was transferred to Roger’s hermitage, the hagiographer used \textit{lateo} two times to describe her cell as a hiding place (\textit{latebras})\textsuperscript{214} and the fact that she was concealed (\textit{latens}).\textsuperscript{215} Indeed, the words translated into English by the modern translator as \textit{concealment, hidden, and escape notice} are, in fact, all variations of \textit{lateo}.

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid, 35
\textsuperscript{212} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid, 99 for all three references.
\textsuperscript{214} Ibid, 104
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid, 102
Lateo as a verb was commonly used to express hiding or being hidden. As the monastic author of the *Vita* likely knew, it was used in this context in the Vulgate. In the Book of Joshua (2:8), the men sent to spy on Jericho were hidden (*latebant*) by Rahab; and in I Samuel (24:4) David and his men, on the run from King Saul, lie hiding (*latebant*) in the cave.\(^{216}\) This word was not, however used in the context of pregnancy, either in the Vulgate or in other hagiographies that I have yet found. It is an unusual linguistic choice – and not a casual one. Rather, by casting the unborn Christina as one who was hiding, the author of the *Vita* was making a statement about Christina’s identity as a captive. Her mother’s womb was a temporary refuge, but one that need to be escaped, much as her later cells would also serve both as places of safety and places of difficult confinement.

**St. Leonard**

Besides Mary, Christina was served by another patron in the *Vita*, the lesser-known St. Leonard of Noblac, the patron saint of prisoners. Although previously overlooked by scholars, I believe that St. Leonard plays an integral part in the life of Christina. From the very beginning of the *Vita*, when the author describes Christina’s auspicious birth and her vow of virginity as occurring on Leonard’s feast day, he leads the reader to the inescapable conclusion that Christina will be associated with imprisonment. In doing this, the author creates a new imagery of place, the prison, that replaces the desert, the older, more traditional imagery of place associated with anchorites. The question, then, is why the author saw the need to present Christina specifically in this way. Throughout the *Vita*, the author describes Christina’s various cells as *carcer*, or prison,
and depicts her as a refugee in hiding, yet at the same time, living the life desired, the life of an anchorite. Moreover, her imprisonment can be seen as the physical manifestation of a non-consensual and, therefore, non-sacramental marriage. As I showed above, the author used accepted social protocol and the patronage of Mary to firmly establish the legitimacy of Christina’s marriage to Christ, while simultaneously setting her on the personal consent (and not familial) side of the marriage debate. With Leonard, the author casts Christina as a saint wrongly imprisoned by those church officials who held to a misrepresentation of the sacrament of marriage.

By making St. Leonard an important member of the cast of characters in Christina’s life, the author portrays her on the one hand as a prisoner of those who either do not understand the full import of the sacrament, as is the case for her parents and her husband, or abuse the power of administering the sacrament, as is the case for Ralph, the bishop of Durham. On the other hand, he highlights the help she received from local hermits who recognize her piety and choose to risk their own peril to conceal her, in a semi-voluntary imprisonment, from the authorities. This interpretation shows that, once again, solitaries were seen as the embodiment of the highest form of religious vocations in the current economy of salvation. The hermits that rescued Christina from parental and pseudo-spousal imprisonment were the earthly agents of Leonard. By allowing her to embrace spiritual freedom through the somewhat paradoxical confinement (particularly in its initial iterations during Christina's life in hiding) of an anchoritic life, the hermits fulfilled the heavenly commission of her patron saint.

And so, the inclusion of Leonard in Christina’s Vita, although overlooked by most scholars, is of primary importance. If we ignore the author’s cue to consider St. Leonard’s patronage as a foundational element in Christina’s development as a holy woman and in her
journey toward enclosure, we get an incomplete picture of how the author understood Christina's vocation and how he used the complicated metaphor of imprisonment (rather than that of the desert) to explain the anchoritic life to his audience. Based on the intimate details described in the *Vita*, most scholars agree that the hagiographer probably knew Christina and received many of the details directly from her.\(^\text{217}\) While it is impossible to say whether Christina had any personal connection with St. Leonard, it is clear that her hagiographer was aware of the implications of connecting the saint to her story. In fact, the many instances of captivity and escape, and the comment on a particular ideal of virginity, sanctity, and enclosure through the analogy of imprisonment indicate the important role of the saint in Christina’s life.

In the introduction to *Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman*, Henrietta Leyser makes two observations about Leonard’s appearance in the *Vita*. First, she acknowledges that it would be natural for a pregnant Beatrix, Christina’s mother, to invoke St. Leonard, for he was known for aiding women in childbirth. This is particularly true in Beatrix’s case because she went into labor on St. Leonard’s feast day, November 6. Her second observation was that since young Christina made her initial vow of virginity also on St. Leonard’s feast day, it symbolized a kind of “rebirth.”\(^\text{218}\) While these are both plausible readings of the text, I suggest that St. Leonard’s importance stems from Christina’s continual need for escape and her complicated relationship with "imprisonments" of several kinds. Indeed, the author was counting on the reader to be familiar with Leonard’s other, and far more famous saintly attribute as a breaker of chains and a liberator of prisoners. I argue, however, that his identity as a saint who releases


\(^{218}\) Ibid, 2.
wrongfully-imprisoned supplicants from bondage, is key to interpreting both passages, and for that matter, the rest of the *Vita*.

St. Leonard of Noblac was a sixth-century saint whose popularity began to grow in the first few decades of the eleventh century in France. His first *Vita* was written around the same time his cult was established in France, between 1028 and 1031. Leonard’s cult was brought to England by the Normans, and his miracle stories were circulating in England by the end of the eleventh century. Most of the monks at St Albans in the late twelfth century, however, were most likely of Norman descent, and thus familiar with, and perhaps even more disposed than the average Anglo-saxon layman to venerate, the saint.\(^{219}\) While it is possible that Christina may have actually possessed some connection to the saint, it thus seems more likely that the saint's appearance in the *Vita* is largely a projection of the author. At the very least, the anonymous author was well familiar with the saint and skillfully invoked him early in his narrative in order to establish a particular valence for Christina's subsequent life path and ultimate identity as an anchorite.

In the miracle stories of St. Leonard, supplicants who had been unjustly imprisoned were liberated after praying to Leonard. They then brought their broken chains to his shrine at Noblac as votive gifts.\(^{220}\) By the mid to late twelfth century he was known well enough in England for

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\(^{219}\) Head, “The Marriages of Christina,” 122; Peter Newcome, *The history of the ancient and royal foundation, called the Abbey of St. Alban, in the county of Hertford, from the founding thereof, in 793, to its dissolution, in 1539. Exhibiting the life of each Abbot, and the principal events relating to the monastery, during his rule and Government. Extracted from the most faithful authorities and records, both printed and manuscript. With plates; and a new map of the county*. By the Reverend Peter Newcome, Rector of Shenley, Herts, London, MDCCXCV [1795], Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, University of South Florida, 21 Mar. 2019.

the author of Christina’s *Vita* to assume that his audience would understand the importance of invoking the saint. Megan Cassidy-Welch’s 2011 study on medieval imprisonment shows that to invoke St. Leonard, or to put him into a story was to make a statement about the circumstances of the story itself. To include Leonard not only necessitated a prisoner in the story, but it also promises deliverance for that prisoner.\(^{221}\) Christina’s auspicious birthday thus ought to be read as a comment on, or a foreshadowing of, the unhappy circumstances that would surround her in the following years. Furthermore, where Leyser interprets Christina’s initial vow as a rebirth, I interpret it as yet one more sign of the inclement times to come. Christina was not seeking “Leonard the patron saint of childbirth” as she made her vow of virginity; had she done so, she would have been following her mother’s example – an action that would have been remarkably out of character for Christina and exceptionally difficult to explain for her hagiographer. Rather, she was making sure that the saint witnessing her virginal contract was a saint who knew how to get the oppressed and pursued out of tight spots.

Thanks to a well-connected network of solitaries around Huntington and some miraculous interventions, Christina was able to secure help in escaping her parents’ home. While the account of this daring escape, as shown above, is noteworthy for its evidence of a substantial population of solitary religious, I assert that the author presented Christina’s miraculous liberation and subsequent string of escapes as evidence of her earlier, contractual relationship with Leonard, when she made her initial vow with him as a witness.\(^{222}\) The author is careful, however, to keep Christina as both agent and object in her escapes, not allowing for an actual

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\(^{222}\) Licence, *Hermits and Recluses*, 1-2. Licence comments on this network of hermits in his introduction.
miraculous intervention on the part of Leonard. Invoking Leonard connected Christina to a powerful narrative of liberation, but Leonard becomes a kind of metaphor, rather than a real character in the narrative, for the focus of the *Vita* is Christina and her extraordinary spirituality, not Leonard and his power to deliver. This miracle story was not intended to increase devotion to an established saint, Leonard, but to initiate a devotion to the author’s hoped for saint, Christina.

**The St. Alban’s Psalter**

We have the rare opportunity to compare the *Vita*’s apparent interest in Leonard with a second source that has proven to be revealing about Christina’s life and relations: the St. Albans Psalter. Scholars believe that this text was prepared specifically for and presented to Christina during her lifetime by Geoffrey, abbot of St. Albans, or else dedicated to her memory shortly after her death. 223 This psalter has justly gained recognition for its many exceptionalities, but for our purposes, the psalter’s calendar and litany of saints prove to be the most pertinent. Because the psalter was most likely designed for either Christina’s personal use, or at least to commemorate her, the feast days on the calendar and the saints invoked in the litany hint at which saints were particularly important to the life or legacy of Christina. St. Leonard appears in both: he is named towards the end of the list of confessors in the litany, and his feast day (November 6) is included in the calendar. The presence of Leonard in this psalter is notable. Significantly, while St. Leonard’s cult in England has not been widely studied, it does not seem to have had the same appeal in twelfth-century England as it had in twelfth-century France, or as it would later enjoy once Leonard was included in the Fourteen Holy Helpers. In fact, two other

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St. Albans calendars from the same period as Christina’s do not include Leonard’s feast day. This might lead us to believe that the inclusion of Leonard in the Vita was entirely the author’s doing, considering he was most likely of Norman background and would have been more familiar with Leonard’s cult. However, if Leonard were known to be especially meaningful to Christina, as I suggest, it would explain Leonard’s appearance in both the Vita and in the calendar and litany of the St. Albans Psalter. In other words, it seems that it was fairly well known to the creators of the psalter and to the author of the Vita that Christina’s association with St. Leonard was more meaningful than just her being born on his feast day.\textsuperscript{224} Starting with her birth, but particularly from the moment she made her initial vow of virginity until the death of Ralph Flambard nearly twenty years later, Christina lived as a captive, fighting for her right to be voluntarily enclosed in need of a miraculous liberation.

There is, however, more to the Psalter than just the calendar and litany that pertain to this study. Included in the Psalter is the Chanson de Saint Alexis, the story of St. Alexis written in Old French. Originally written in Latin, this particular manuscript is thought to be the earliest vernacular copy of the poem. Alexis was a fourth-century saint who was the only son of a wealthy Roman nobleman named Eufamian. Alexis was betrothed to the daughter of another noble family through an arranged marriage. On their wedding day, however, Alexis decided to leave his wife, family, and possessions behind and travel to the East to live a life of poverty for Christ. While in Syria, his saintly identity is revealed miraculously by a statue of Mary, and he flees again, fearing the negative consequences of fame. While at sea, a storm blows his ship back to Rome where he begs his father to give him shelter. His father, not recognizing Alexis after

seventeen brutal years of ascetic living, agrees to let him sleep under the stairs. After another seventeen years of living this small compartment, Alexis’ family discovers his true identity, but only moments after his death.

Alexis’ story came to symbolize the virtue found in poverty and rejection of earthly pleasures for the sake of following Christ. And, while it has some obvious similarities to Christina’s story, it is still very different, not least because of the gendered nature of their stories. As a man, Alexis was more able to renounce his wife and to travel. Alexis’ spouse seems to be a willing participant in his radical piety. Though not happy with the turn of events, she was powerless to stop him, and so lets him go.²²⁵ Christina’s spouse, by contrast, fought physically and through the courts to keep her. This has more to do with the power differentials at work, than any question of devotion. Alexis was free to take off to the East at a moment’s notice, where, if the tables were turned, his spouse could hardly have done so. And, the case was much the same with Christina. As her hagiographer knew, under the circumstances, confinement, or imprisonment, were the only narrative paths available to Christina, given the limits of social agency afforded by her gender.²²⁶ To make this point, and to imbue Christina with more saintly authenticity, the author chose to introduce St. Cecilia into the Vita as a parallel model.

St. Cecilia appears in Christina’s Vita when Autti and Beatrix first send Burthred into Christina’s bedroom to force her into consummating the marriage.²²⁷ Christina relates the story


²²⁷ Talbot, The Life of Christina, 51. This happened three times. On the second, he brought friends with him in order to restrain Christina and ensure the consummation took place, by rape
of how Cecilia and her husband, Valerian, lived in a chaste marriage and, upon their martyrdom, were crowned with both the crowns of virgins and martyrs. The story of St. Cecilia offered a message more apropos at the moment, for Cecilia, like Christina, was a woman who was married and yet still sought a life of virginity. In crafting his narrative, the author shrewdly chose Cecilia as Christina’s model of choice. By imbedding the story of his saint with the story of another saint who had chosen a holy path that was less noble than Christina’s, because it actually involved an earthly marriage, the author placed Christina on higher tier of holiness than the already venerated Cecilia.

Neil Cartlidge, in questioning why the principle of marriage fidelity is so strongly emphasized in the psalter and the *Vita*, proposes that Christina's influence in the community as a holy woman was a legitimate replacement for the influence she lost when she rejected her marriage to Burthred.\(^{228}\) While I agree with Cartlidge, I would add that marital fidelity is not the marital concept most emphasized in the *Vita*. Rather, the emphasis is on marriage sacramentality and vows. Christina is cast as a faithful spouse to one husband, Christ. Her marriage to Burthred is never cast by the author as sacramental, even if it is presented as problematic. Of course, as with any hagiography, the subject is made to conform to the spiritual sensibilities of the author.

Christina's liberation finally occurred when her marriage was annulled and she was publically professed as a religious. This event is marked by a drastic change of tone in the narrative of her *Vita*. Much like the captives released by Leonard’s intervention, Christina too sheds her chains. Hers, though, were not iron shackles, but abusive parents, a forced marriage, if necessary. She hid behind a curtain by hanging on a wall peg. The third time, she was able to miraculously escape by running out of the house and leaping, unaided, over a fence.

\(^{228}\) Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, 112.
sexual harassment, and psychologically taxing solitary confinement. The evidence of these broken chains is her relationship with Geoffrey, the abbot of St. Albans and a general reversal of fortune for Christina. While most of her previous relationships with men resulted in a certain degree of sexual impropriety, she later nurtured what Dyan Elliott calls a “heteroascetic” relationship with Geoffrey. This kind of relationship existed between male and female religious and bore all of the trappings of the conjugal relationship barring sexual activity. In other words, the relationship with Geoffrey was a healthy partnership of mutual respect and trust, which had a different dynamic than any other relationship she had experienced thus far. Even with Roger, Christina was a protégé. If there was a power differential in this new relationship, she was the mentor and Geoffrey, the protégé. Something else that signals Christina’s release is when she serves Christ, himself, at her own table.

By this time Christina had been given permission to occupy Roger’s old hermitage as the prioress of the priory of Markyate, which had been built around it. Christ, in the guise of a traveler arrived at the door of her cell twice. The first time he stayed only for conversation, but the second time he accepted her invitation to stay and eat with her. She, therefore, hosted the Lord, her spouse, in her own priory twice. As a captive in her parents’ house, she was forced to serve wine at the merchant guild as her mother tried to get her drunk and trick her into losing her virginity. But now, those chains had disappeared. She was no longer serving men as a prisoner, but hosting Christ as his bride. Her relationship with Leonard had persevered; he had come through on her behalf. This story is a clear statement by the hagiographer that Christina had moved beyond her identity as a captive. She had been endorsed by none other than Christ,

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229 Elliott, The Bride of Christ, 150.

230 Talbot, The Life of Christina, 49.
himself, a harkening back to the prophetic sign before her birth. Her story had come full circle. The author, by including St. Leonard, had promised a captive and her miraculous liberation; he made good on both counts.

While the author was successful at casting Christina as a prisoner, the writer did not see fit to connect either Christina, her suffering, or any other solitary in the narrative, to the older desert tradition. This was not for lack of opportunity. Hermits played an integral role in Christina’s spiritual journey and the way that the author presented her story. He never mentioned the desert or wilderness in relation to those who would have been the most closely aligned with it historically. Only once did he refer to one of Christina’s cells with a term (solitudine) that Talbot translated as “wilderness,” and that was when she initially returned to Roger’s hermitage after the sexually charged episode with the unnamed cleric: “Even in the wilderness she unwillingly felt its [the sexual temptations] stings.”

In the Latin, the word used is solitudine, which can be translated as wilderness, but can also be translated as “loneliness” or simply solitude. And, it is different from desertum, which is always translated as desert. Overall, given that this is the only instance when the word is used, it is safe to assume that the author was not attempting to connect Christina with an earlier desert tradition of anchoritism, but rather to amplify the intensity of the sexual temptation and guilt associated with it. “Even when she was alone, Christina felt the stings of that temptation” might be a more appropriate translation. And so, these hermits were used to exemplify the voices of orthodoxy and virtue as they related to the sacrament of marriage, not to connect Christina to the older and seemingly obsolete tradition of the hermit as desert dweller.

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231 Ibid, 118-19.
Like Wulfric, even though the penitential mode of salvation was deemphasized, Christina was not without ascetic longings and experiences. Far from it. As we have seen, she was subjected to excruciating circumstances that taxed her physically and spiritually. Christina’s body and physical surroundings were treated by the author as representative of the changing economy of salvation. The physical elements of Christina’s life, the form of her body and the cells in which she was confined were still extremely important to the author. And, although the close attention given to her physical body and surroundings connects Christina to an earlier tradition of penance, it was a means to a different end than in earlier centuries. Christina’s bodily discomfort served not to remind the reader of the desert, connecting her to earlier generations of recluses, because her ability to survive in the “desert” was not what made her holy and worthy of veneration. Rather, her trials testified to the evil of defiling a sacrament, in this case in the form of nonconsensual marriage. Her position within the marriage debate and the question of sacramentality of marriage, places her firmly in a forward moving religious current that also informs her mystical visions of Mary and Christ.232

By restoring the influence of St. Leonard to the Vita of Christina of Markyate, hopefully, I have offered a perspective on her life that resonates a little closer to how the hagiographer intended to portray Christina, and establishes, along with the Vita wulfrici, a precedent for a move away from the desert motif and toward a sacramental emphasis in anchoritic literature. While recent scholarship has worked diligently to classify her Vita within certain genres, or to contextualize her relationships within contemporary notions of marriage and virginity, I am suggesting that we ask who Christina becomes when we view her through the patronage of St.

232 Christina’s vision of the Christ child has fairly explicit sexual overtones, and can be seen as a forerunner to the later “erotic” themes of visions experienced by female mystics in the next two centuries.
Leonard *as well as* St. Mary. She was a young woman called to defend her chastity against the abusive onslights, of husband, family, and church, enduring most of her trials as she fought toward that enclosure, and not as a result of it. As a child, she chose to remain a virgin and, one day, be enclosed in a convent. Ironically, she endured enclosure that she did not choose, multiple times, in order to live an enclosed life that she did choose. I have suggested in this chapter that the author of her *Vita* chose to depict this struggle through the contemporary debate over sacramental marriage and by affiliating Christina with St. Leonard, the liberator of captives, and strategically using the verb *lateo* to cast Christina as one who is hidden, held captive by her circumstances. If we listen closely, we can hear in Christina’s *Vita* the din of breaking chains, as St. Leonard frees yet another captive from bondage.
Chapter Five

Fourteenth-Century Mysticism

Introduction

In the two centuries since Wulfric and Christina’s Vitae were written, England had become a much different place. Like the rest of Europe, the English people had experienced dramatic increases in population and urbanization, followed by the ravages of famine and plague. By the end of the fourteenth century, there had developed significant reinterpretations of how the believers experienced the divine, which coalesced into five vernacular religious texts that modern scholars have grouped into one body of literature called Middle English mysticism. These works include Richard Rolle’s Form of Perfect Living (1348), the anonymous Cloud of Unknowing (c. 1370), Showings, by Julian of Norwich (1373), Walter Hilton’s Scale of Perfection (c. 1380), and the autobiographical Book of Margery Kempe (c. 1431). 233 While the

accuracy of labeling these texts as “mystical” has come under scrutiny in recent years, they do represent a sea change not just in the economy of salvation, but also in the interpretation of the anchoritic vocation in the years since Wulfric and Christina had sought their lives of solitude, and as such will be used as the main sources in this Chapter.  

A close reading of these texts reveals the final transformation in medieval English anchoritism: an increasing influence of mysticism on the economy of salvation, and the feminization and urbanization of the anchoritic vocation. These changes must be understood in light of the events taking place during the first half of the fourteenth century. I argue that, at a time when the fervor of reform was overshadowed by catastrophes like famine, plague and social unrest, mysticism became the form of piety that informed the economy of salvation, with its inward migration of the spiritual center, and a deemphasizing of the physical body. Neither the desert (a place typically cast as a site of struggle rather than contemplation) or the sacraments remained viable analogues. Instead, together with the feminization and urbanization of anchoritism, the obsolescence of the physical body, and the elevation of the emotional, affective planes of anchoritic piety were affirmed. In other words, as the economy of salvation increasingly emphasized contemplative and affective approaches to experiencing the divine, it


moved further away from the traditional understanding and use of the desert motif and the
physicality represented by that motif.

There is no doubt, however, that the reclusive life had lost its place as the highest form of
Christian religious expression. By the time the foundational texts of English mysticism were
written, contemplation (for the guidance authors) and the mysterious union with God through
visions and somatic experiences (for Julian) were considered to be the most reliable test by
which one could know they were going to heaven. For example, Rolle stated that, “The condition
of life in which you live, in other words, solitude, is the most suitable of all for the revelation of
the Holy Spirit.” And the Augustinian monk Walter Hilton claimed that, “You shall be saved
from this original sin and every other that you have done: yes, and as an enclosed anchoress you
shall be safe.” For these writers, to be enclosed as a recluse was the most assured way to
achieve salvation. Such faith in the eternal reward of the solitary life was reiterated in later texts,
including the fourteenth-century *The Cloud of Unknowing*, whose author exhorts his anchoritic
reader to, “look most attentively to the way and the method of your vocation. And give God
heartfelt thanks, so that you … may win through to the crown of everlasting life.” The
reclusive life was the best way to access the grace of God, and the best way to practice that life
was to perfect the act of contemplation.

On May 13, 1373 Julian, a recluse in Norwich, England, received sixteen visions during
an illness that she and those who surrounded her bed thought was fatal. Her visions, titled *The
Revelations of Divine Love*, or the *Showings*, were recorded in two versions, the short text and

235 Form of Living, 158.

236 Scale, 115.

237 Cloud, 58.
The former was written immediately after the visions, and the latter, which is an expanded version of the short text, was produced nearly twenty years later, and seems to reflect two decades of Julian’s commitment to contemplation and theological development. Julian’s visions have become one of the most studied texts by modern scholars interested in medieval spirituality. With her clear articulation of the function of sin and God’s relationship to man, as well as the conspicuously deliberate alignment of her own teachings with orthodox church teaching, her visions offer an excellent lens into how mysticism in the fourteenth century affected and was affected by the anchoritic vocation in England.

I begin with Julian because her life as an anchoress, what little we know about it, seems to have conformed to the leading guidance texts of the day, making it the exemplar of the fourteenth-century anchoritic and mystical life.239 As such, she provides a reference point to which we can compare and contrast the lives of earlier anchorites and hermits and identify changes that had occurred over time, both in how they approached the austere life of solitude and in how the vocation was presented idealistically in guidance texts. In many ways, Julian had much in common with Martin of Tours and Guthlac, and even more with Wulfric of Haselbury and Christina of Markyate. The enduring belief in the salvific qualities of the solitary life formed a strong common thread woven into the experience of all practitioners of reclusive vocations from the early Middle Ages through the fourteenth century. Indeed, anchoritism continued to be the pinnacle of religious life and the most esteemed way to express worldly renunciation, spiritual devotion, and personal humility, in the fourteenth century. In addition to its exalted


239 Authors have suggested that Julian most likely had read, or at least been exposed to Ancrene Wisse or De institutione inclusarum. See Denis M. Baker, “Julian of Norwich and Anchoritic Literature,” Mystics Quarterly 4 (1993): 148-160.
position in the spiritual hierarchy of religious vocations, the minutiae of the solitary life also remained the same throughout the Middle Ages. Every solitary lived a regimented life of prayer, fasting, and some sort of intellectual labor, like reading or reciting the psalter, or copying books, or sewing garments for the poor. Their cells also remained more or less the same throughout the centuries: small, spare, and attached to a church, chapel or monastic enclosure. The everyday things that Julian did, therefore, from prayer and reflection to the interactions with the community around her, were much the same as what her predecessors had done.

The theological underpinnings that gave Julian's daily routines meaning, however, were quite different from that of her predecessors', for the economy of salvation that informed anchoritic praxis had changed significantly over the years. With the advent of mystical literature and affective piety, salvation was thought to be found in union with Christ, and not primarily through the prescribed adherence to the sacraments, or practice of bodily penance, as in the previous centuries. In light of the shift in piety from physical to affective, from exterior to interior, and from penitential to mystical, the desert as analogue became obsolete for the fourteenth-century anchorite.

Modern scholars have assumed that the desert was a useful metaphor to understand anchoritic life in the fourteenth century. But, as I claim, by the fourteenth century the desert had entirely disappeared, despite its potential suitability for engaging with the new contemplative focus of the vocation. In her 2011 study of late medieval English anchoritism, in fact, McAvoy persists in assuming that the desert was a structuring or at least inspiring image for the anchorites she studies. Yet, a close look at the anchoritic literature of the age reveals that the desert was of little interest to anchoritic writers in the fourteenth century. 240 This disconnect between the

240 McAvoy, Medieval Anchoritisms, 1-3.
assumptions of modern scholars that yes, of course medieval solitaries understood their lives in terms of desert or wilderness, and the actual writings of late medieval anchoritic authors, who found the desert motif to be of little use, or perhaps even outdated, reveals a complex development in how medieval anchorites and those who wrote guidance texts understood their profession and the concept of place within that rarified environment.

**Anchoritism is Feminized and Urbanized**

By the late thirteenth century, the feminization and urbanization of the vocation as well as dramatic catastrophes helped to deemphasize the physical cell and body that had been so important in the twelfth century. Although the number of male anchorites had never exceeded that of women, during the long thirteenth century female anchorites came to greatly outnumber men, eventually reaching a ratio of 5:1.\(^{241}\) Scholars have surmised that this was because the newer religious opportunities for lay women on the continent, such as the Beguines, were not readily accepted in England.\(^{242}\) As lay piety became increasingly popular, both women and men sought new avenues to express their devotion, but as men were offered a variety of approved paths, English women had only the convent and the anchorhold. Most men were closely aligned with the expectations of St. Benedict in his rule, they were regular clerics who sought to increase their level of devotion through solitude, and were often ordained priests. Only occasionally did this hold true for female anchorites. Of course, women were never priests, but neither were they

\(^{241}\) Warren, Anchorites and their Patrons, 20, 291.

regular religious. Therefore, English women who sought a religious vocation, but were not
drawn to life in a convent, often found their calling as anchorites.\footnote{243}

It is clear that many religious writers understood that women inhabited the desert, both
physically and metaphorically.\footnote{244} The desert, however, was a gendered space. Women who were
cast as desert dwellers had to be masculinized in order for their desert experience to be valid. For
example, Mary of Egypt, possibly the most well-known of the desert mothers, was asked by
Zosima the priest to bless him, even after she insisted that he blessed her, since he was a priest
and outranked her spiritually. Additionally, her body had to be transformed by the sun and desert
environment until she no longer resembled a woman. Only then could she partake of the salvific
qualities of the desert.\footnote{245} When the author of Christina’s \textit{Vita} related the story of Christina’s
harassment by a lustful cleric, he praised her for her commitment to chastity by calling her
discipline “manful” and saying that, “she was more like a man than a woman, though she, with

\footnote{243} Warren, \textit{Anchorites and their Patrons}, 21; Brenda Bolton, “Mulieres Sanctae,” in \textit{Sanctity
and Secularity: The Church and the World}, ed. Derek Baker, Studies in Church History 10

\footnote{244} For over a century, scholars have recognized that women, too, lived as recluses in the deserts
of Egypt and Syria, and then participated in the western migration of the eremitic ideal. As early
as the ninth century in Syria, there was a monastery of women who, it is believed that as Stylites
lived on top of pillars. Margot H. King, “The Desert Mothers: From Judith to Julian of
Norwich” \textit{14th Century English Newsletter} 9 (1983): 12. Indeed, women had been integral to the
development of the reclusive life. For Instance, Jerome wrote of Asella who, at twelve years of
age, lived, “shut up in a narrow cell and so roamed through paradise.” Sara and Syncletica, both
fourth and fifth-century desert ascetics, are named by the author of the \textit{Ancrene Wisse} in the
same group as Paul and Antony and as patron saints of recluses. Also, the Virgin Mary told
Christina of Markyate in a vision that both Christina and Judith would be taken into her (Mary’s)
chamber as a reward for their chaste and solitary lives. \textit{Ancrene Wisse}, 50, 108, 134. Talbot, \textit{Life
of Christina}, 77.

\footnote{245} McAvoy, \textit{Medieval Anchoritisms}, 103.
her more masculine qualities, might more justifiably have called him [the cleric] a woman.”

In order for Christina’s experience in the anchorhold, which as I argued earlier was not cast by the author as a metaphorical desert, to be valid, she was given masculine qualities. Finally, it was commonplace for female recluses to take on the attire of men. Perhaps this was because it was safer, as King asserts, because a woman in the desert may have been mistaken for a demon and killed. The desert, like so many other medieval spaces, was a masculine space in which women were allowed to dwell, but only after they had been conformed to the masculine criteria prescribed by male authors. By the fourteenth century, the rural, masculine nature of the desert was no longer congruent with the increasingly feminine nature of the vocation.

With a swell of lay, female anchorites, there was also an increased need for spiritual guidance and instruction in how to live the anchoritic life. This need for instruction, as has been shown in previous chapters, was nothing new. But, the type of instruction and the expectations given in these texts took on new characteristics that emphasized the care of the soul rather than the punishment of the body, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The urbanization of the vocation is linked to its feminization. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Europe as a whole had experienced population increase, urbanization, and commercial growth as well as the emergence of cultural and political edifices like the university and merchant-led urban governments. Starting in the thirteenth century, anchorite cells were

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248 This expansive growth provided the means for aggressive colonization of peripheral territories. In the British Isles, this is represented by the establishment of English presence in Ireland and Wales. Bartlett, *The Making of Europe*, 308.
also increasingly found in English towns.\textsuperscript{249} Because of the stigma attached to women who were independent, as well as the vulnerability of a woman living on her own in a secluded hermitage, it was less common for women to take on the life of a hermit. Hermits, as a rule of thumb, were not bound to a single location and, although technically under the authority of the bishop, enjoyed much more freedom and less oversight. Hence, as the number of female solitaries increased, there was also an increase of anchorholds in more populated areas, where there would have been more control and accountability. Whether or not this was the primary causation behind the urbanization of anchoritic cells is unclear, but it was certainly a major factor. Another reason for the move toward urban centers was the closer proximity to friends, family, and most importantly, funds, which were indispensable for the livelihood of anchorites, despite the criticism raised by the fourteenth-century guidance text \textit{Speculum inclusarum}, which warns against anchorites who set up in cities for just that reason.\textsuperscript{250}

For all the optimism of the three previous centuries, however, by the fourteenth century, a series of cataclysms helped to deemphasize the physical cell and the body that had been so important in the twelfth century. Accordingly, the authors of anchoritic literature turned their gaze inward, abandoning the exterior, physical world of the desert imagery. In light of the literary and linguistic contributions of the vernacular texts produced during this period, one might compare the age of English mysticism to a diamond, created under the duress of external adversities. Indeed English collective spirituality was forged \textit{in extremis}.

\textsuperscript{249} Warren, \textit{Anchorites and their Patrons}, 38.

\textsuperscript{250} \textit{Speculum inclusorum}, 10. “Ista patent in quibusdam nostril temporis inclusis, mon in heremo, sed in urbe, ut ibibdem largas elemosinas recipient vnde magnam familiam retineant; consanguineous & amicos – amplius quam in alio statu poterant.”
By 1300, the economic and cultural vitality of the High Middle Ages had reached its zenith. This was also a time of heightened spiritual optimism that produced works such as Anselm’s *Proslogion* and Abelard’s *Logica*, works that were both imbued with confidence in man’s ability to know and understand God through reason and logic. In the more affective sense, one could also cite St. Bernard’s commentary on the first chapters of the Song of Songs as evidence of a giddy optimism that brought Christ and believer together in a very literal nuptial relationship. This particular kind of intimacy (although the metaphor of bridegroom and bride was, of course, very old), with its emphasis on affective piety, would become the seed that flowered into the hyper-affective mysticism of the fourteenth century, as it was subjected to the catastrophes of the first half of the century. In fact, within the first two decades of that century, the calamity of famine followed by the more ravaging blight of Bubonic Plague, social unrest and war brought that expansion to a dramatic halt.\(^2\) It is hard to pinpoint any one, or even a few, of the catastrophic events that contributed most to the shift in spiritual thought of the fourteenth century, but these calamities stand out as the major contributors.

The anchoritic vocation was significantly affected by these events, as the anchoritic body and cell that had been the focus of writers of previous centuries, no longer carried as much importance. Indeed, in the mystical texts of fourteenth-century England, the bodies and cells of recluses had virtually vanished. The authors usher us past these physical trappings, and lead us straight toward the place in which the anchorite can truly find that mysterious union with Christ, the soul. This reached full maturity in the late fourteenth-century understanding that the ultimate expression of God’s love to an individual was through an ecstatic, mystical experience. Although this certainly did not guarantee the salvation of the person who had the experience, it was

undoubtedly a good sign. Furthermore, a mystical experience could not be conjured or in any way predicted through acts of piety or ritual. God could decide who he would bless with such knowledge, and, theoretically, he could choose anyone, keeping in mind that a life of contemplation was the best way to prepare for, and get the most out of, an ecstatic vision. Therefore, most of the people who were granted such visions, were those who lived lives of contemplative piety.

In the twelfth century, the cells of Wulfric and Christina, as well as other solitaries from that century, like Grodic of Finchale, Bartholomew of Farne, Godric of Throckenholt, and Robert of Knaresborow, were precarious, uncomfortable, and often dangerous. The authors of their vitae were careful to include descriptions of the wretched conditions of their cells, from Christina’s frog infestation and prison-like confines, to Wulfric’s cold baths and harsh bed, and Bartholomew of Farne’s drafty hermitage and sod chair, in which he slept sitting up. In many cases their very means of sustenance was uncertain, as they relied on the charity of the communities in which they lived. Their stories are rife with meager food supplies and dodgy abbots, who refused to send promised rations. Of course, their affliction was manifested in different ways than the earlier generations discussed in chapter one. Their afflictions can mostly be described as environmental and less so as acts of self-flagellation. The contrast between outside and inside, active and retired, public and private, continued into the fourteenth-century idea of the solitary life, but with a much different emphasis.

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Introduction to Mysticism

The feminization and urbanization of anchoritism, as well as the catastrophic disruptions of the fourteenth century account for the departure from the physical. Religiously, the turn toward contemplation and the soul as the primary interface with the divine left not just the desert, but the physicality of the cell and the body absent in anchoritic texts. The mysticism that defined much of the spiritual energy of the fourteenth century was a unique brand of spirituality that began to emerge in the thirteenth century and should not be conflated with the practice of contemplation. Whereas both had existed in the Christian context since Christianity’s inception, they were distinctly different, yet equally integral to the development of fourteenth-century English spirituality. Contemplation, the practice of concentrating on a particular thing or concept – and in the Christian context, on a biblical truth, saint, or scripture passage – required long, uninterrupted periods of inactivity, and had been viewed since the ancient Greeks as the vocation of the wealthy, who had time for such leisure. It was subject to the discipline of the mind and body. In other words, any person who had the time could engage in contemplation. And, with enough time, a person could improve their ability to engage in contemplation and, ideally, perfect it. Mysticism, however, was a more ephemeral concept. The term “mysticism” as we understand it in modern scholarship, was not used in medieval texts, although mysticus was used to refer to mysterious spiritual things. Defined simply, it was the experience, or pursuit of the


experience, of having a tangible encounter with God. In the fourteenth century, a mystical experience nearly always involved a vision, usually of the suffering or crucified Christ. Unlike contemplation, a mystical experience was not something that could be practiced and, theoretically, could happen to anyone at any time. However, it was believed that engaging in intense devotion through contemplation would prepare one for, and increase the likelihood of, a mystical vision. This concept of contemplation leading to a mystical encounter, I argue, is what sustained the esteemed status of solitaries in the church hierarchy in the fourteenth century. If a mystical experience was proof that a person was heaven bound, and if contemplation was the path to receiving a vision, then those who had the most time to contemplate would be the ones who would achieve salvation, the anchorites.

Of course, neither mystical experiences nor contemplation were new to Christianity in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Many of the core beliefs of the Christian religion were, and are, fundamentally, mystical. One only has to consider basic tenets such as the miracles attributed to Jesus, his bodily resurrection, and his physical presence in the Eucharist to get the point. As a consequence, mysticism had played an important part in Christian spirituality from very early on, and as it developed through the Middle Ages, it became an expression of piety that sought above all else the mysterious union of Christ and the human soul. The turn toward affective piety that reached maturity in the fourteenth century, can be traced back as far as Anslem’s Prayers and Meditations (c. 1033-1109) and St. Bernard’s commentary on the Song of

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255 While the fourteenth century is commonly considered to be the golden age of mysticism, the term mysticism itself has been a widely contested term amongst scholars, who have been arguing that mysticism has been defined too narrowly, both chronologically and textually. See “Introduction,” in The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism, eds. Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2011).
Songs (1090-1153). This initial spiritual migration from exterior to interior was hastened by the calamitous events of the fourteenth century, and manifested in mystical literature as a full-on retreat into the inner person. Spatial reference in mystical literature took place simultaneously in the soul and in a divine realm but outside of the human body and locals. It is the ethereal space where God resides. One has only to think about the very title of *The Cloud of Unknowing* to get the picture. When the spiritual migration from exterior to interior occur, like with Julian’s desert in the parable of the Lord and servant, it is very much internalized. It is not a space in which she resides, but it has become the place where God resides: “The place that the lord sat on was unadorned, on the ground, barren and waste, alone in the wilderness.”

One is hard pressed to find any hint of a description of the space that the anchorite was supposed to occupy. It was individual more than corporate, emotional more than intellectual, and experiential more than theoretical. What is troubling, is that there does not seem to be a direct replacement for the cell, except, perhaps, the soul itself. As the spiritual domus for the recluse was located further inward, the experiences of the outer world, or the physical world, began to fade, until the anchorite’s entire existence was wrapped up in her internal, affective experience; ideally, this experience would lead to a mystical experience with Christ, often in the form of visions.

In previous centuries, anchoritic visions were typically pragmatic in nature: the boy servant who appeared to Christina and other visions that gave her supernatural knowledge about

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257 Colledge and Walsh, 271; “The place that the lorde satt on was symply on the erth, bareyn and deserte, aloone in wyldernesse,” *Showings*, 73.
Abbot Geoffrey; St. Bartholomew appearing to Guthlac and providing guidance. Late medieval mystical visions, however, tended to focus primarily on the suffering Christ, particularly on the cross. Furthermore, nobody could guarantee a mystical vision experience, because it was not a formulaic process, by which one could bring on such grace. Rolle, in reference to the mystical experience, stated that, “…no one in the world knows whether they are in a state of charity unless through some privilege or special grace that God may have given to any man or woman, which no one else could take as a pattern.”\(^{258}\) Yet, if one was going to receive this gift of illumination, they should be prepared to make the most of it through the practice of contemplation. It is widely believed that Julian did not become an anchorite until after she received the visions contained in Showings.\(^{259}\) Only after years of solitary living did she write the second text, which provided more insight and interpretation of the visions. In Julian’s case the visions were not the product of an anchoritic life, but were validated by the contemplation that was afforded by the anchoritic life she took up after.

Scholars have associated visions with Eucharistic devotion in fourteenth-century mysticism.\(^{260}\) This new devotion developed on the heels of the spiritual fervor created by the Gregorian reforms of the twelfth century and the popularization of the new doctrine of transubstantiation. Until Lateran IV in 1215, the lay reception of the Eucharist was often limited to gazing, which was considered salvific. Reform-minded clergy, attempting to create distinctions between themselves and the laity, emphasized the miracle of transubstantiation as well as priestly ritual purity, and heightened reverence for the Eucharistic liturgy. This in turn

\(^{258}\) *Form of Living*, 178.

\(^{259}\) *Showings*, ix-xxi.

increased lay interest in the Eucharist and churches became swollen with attendees attempting to gaze at the wafer upon its elevation. After 1215, yearly reception of the Eucharist (actually consuming the elements) was required by all. Physical consumption of the Eucharist was no longer the exclusive right of priests, but was now introduced to the laity. As devotion to the Eucharist grew, laypeople of means would often receive the elements once a day or more. In the case of Margery Kempe, special permission was granted by the Archbishop for her to receive the Eucharist weekly, which was a special privilege.  

The devotion to the Eucharist coincided with (and was at the same time, a product of) an emergent emphasis on the humanity of Christ. Prior to this turn there had begun a general emphasis on the crucified Christ, which can be seen in the devotion to the sacred heart and the wounds of Christ, as well as the *arma Christi*, a devotion to the weapons used in the passion of Jesus. It was also in the mid-thirteenth century that the feast of Corpus Christi was recognized, venerating the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament. In the twelfth century, the Church had begun to promote the doctrine of transubstantiation and the feast of Corpus Christi (established in 1264), which formally recognized that the cult of Eucharist was a direct result of the popular desire to venerate the consecrated host (technically now a relic). By 1317, the cult of the Eucharist had spread throughout Europe and developed into “showing” the host in procession. As the theology of mysticism spread throughout Europe, many holy women, particularly on the continent, were able to participate in the mystical union with Christ through their devotion to the sacrament, often limiting their diets to only the Eucharist, which

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261 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 103.

was then followed by ecstatic visions and revelations. Although many of these women were anchorites, their experiences seem incongruent with anchoritic guidance texts in England. The authors of these texts departed from the corporeal, and centered their attention on the spiritual, or the inner man. As A.C. Spearing observes, the Cloud author never discussed or even mentioned the Eucharist, which was the ultimate representation of the corporeal and real presence of God, even though he wrote decades after the institution of the feast of Corpus Christi. Hilton, Rolle, and the Cloud author all emphasize moderation, and none seem very concerned about the Eucharist; nor does there seem to be a significant number of instances in England where this type of mystical experience was associated with such a radically ascetic and almost desperate approach to the Eucharist, despite clear evidence that there was an increase in Eucharistic devotion generally. By the late thirteenth century, the increase in Eucharistic devotion became an important factor in the development of mystical experiences among the laity who wished to express their spiritual devotion without joining an order. The newly established Franciscan Order founded by Francis of Assisi and supported by the pope, for example, played an important role in spreading the mystical experience into the ranks of the laity. In fact St Francis’s emphasis on preaching to the urban laity and to the poor, and his own visions and stigmata experiences helped popularize new forms of lay piety. In addition to the Eucharist, mystical experiences came to

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263 These cases are mostly on the continent. For examples, see Caroline Walker Bynum, Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women (University of California Press, 1987), 113-49; André Vauchez, The Laity in the Middle Ages, 237-42; Rubin describes the Eucharist as a “trigger” for contemplation, which then allowed for the visions. Rubin, Corpus Christi, 316. For more on mysticism as theology, see Renevey, “Richard Rolle,” 66.


265 Rubin, Corpus Christi, 316-319.
define one’s own salvation while on earth. As shown in anchoritic texts, those among the laity who sought the most extreme mode of piety chose to be anchorites.

The primary goal of the anchoritic vocation might seem at first glance to be the exact opposite of that of the Franciscans. Rather than preaching in the streets, anchorites prayed in their cells; while friars were meant to be seen, anchorites were meant to be hidden. These two vocations, however, also shared much in common. Perhaps most notable was their reliance on others for their subsistence. Friars begged and anchorites had prearranged agreements to receive the necessities for their survival in their cells. Both the Franciscan order and the anchoritic vocation also contributed elements to what would become the phenomenon of mysticism, particularly in England: The Franciscans brought the concept of visions and affective piety into the mainstream culture. In other words, the laity now considered these manifestations of God’s grace to be available to them, outside of joining a religious order. Richard Rolle’s *Expositio*, his most popular work, dealt mostly with the liturgy of the office of the dead and was owned by many secular clergy. Denis Renevey suggests that in the hands of parish priests it could have acted as a pastoral manual and disseminated anchoritic culture to a wider lay audience by imbuing that liturgy with anchoritic meaning.266 Through this, the anchoritic vocation brought to the mainstream the idea of contemplation as a primary means of communicating with God. This was a concept that was gaining traction in the fourteenth century and reclusion was the best guarantee of achieving a contemplative life.267


Julian’s Desert

Although the desert and any sort of physicality of space is conspicuously absent in fourteenth-century mystical texts, it does emerge in Julian’s Showings as an exception that proves the rule. The desert is depicted in her parable of the Lord and the servant as, “mannes soule.” Not only is it a singular use of desert imagery in the corpus of English mystical literature, but it also provides us with some idea as to where the desert “went” in the minds and practices of anchorites and hermits in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Julian explains that in this vision she understands the soul of man to be the place that God has chosen to dwell. Thanks to the fall of Adam, however, the soul has become, “wyldernesse,” yet God, out of love, remains there, “… syttyng on the erth, bareyn and desert …” It is not until man enters heaven through the sacrifice of Christ that Julian realizes, “Now the lord does not sit on the ground in the wilderness, but in his rich and noblest seat, which he made in heaven most to his liking.”268 Only when man gets to heaven, is the soul reformed into the paradise that it was prelapsarian. Congruent with other mystical texts, Julian eschewed any emphasis on physical space, and instead centered on the internal (and eternal) inner space of man’s soul. Not only does this metaphor situate Julian firmly in the corpus of fourteenth-century mystical literature, but it also represents the process of change over time within the anchoritic vocation since the twelfth century.

The authors of Wulfric and Christina’s vitae used enclosures to communicate the sanctity of their saints, although not connecting them to the desert. For Wulfric, the enclosure of his body was described in Eucharistic language and the ascetic conditions of his cell proved his sanctity, while Christina’s various cells were prisons. For these two, it was important that they entered

268 Colledge and Walsh, 278; “Now sittyth nott the lorde on erth in wyldernesse, but he syttyth on hys rycye and nobyll seyt, whych he made in hevyn most to his lykyng,” Showings, 79.
these places in order to encounter God. In other words, God was waiting in these external spaces. Julian, however, looked past both the enclosures of cell and body when she chose to identify God as the desert-dweller and mankind as the desert itself. And by doing so, Julian reintroduced the desert to anchoritic discourse, but with a significant twist. Rather than a place to which the solitary must go to meet God, the desert was now man’s soul, an internal, non-physical local. And, this desert was also where God made his home. The desert was no longer a place where one went to meet God, but place that existed inside every person and in which God already was, a radical departure from previous forms of the desert motif. Even considering its use in Ancrene Wisse, a rule that Julian may have read and followed, it is still a radical departure, as the desert moved inward and the anchorite cell itself disappeared. If Ancrene Wisse was the rule followed by Julian, then the imagery of the anchorite as a desert dweller clearly did not come through. Julian used the desert as a metaphor for the soul itself, in order to highlight God's own journey to man, rather than man's journey to God. The desert is not a place for man, for in Julian's mind, all of fallen mankind, that is, all souls not yet in Heaven, are themselves a kind of desert, but a desert far removed from the actual physical spaces of the medieval world. Besides Julian, other mystical authors, most of whom were writing guidance texts to recluses, completely neglected the desert as an analogue.

**Inward Turn and the Body**

One of the most distinctive characteristics of fourteenth-century anchoritism, as it appeared in guidance texts, is its inward turn. By inward, I mean that the interface between God

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and the anchorite migrated from the outward physicality of the cell and the body, to the inward spirituality of the soul. Dee Dyas has addressed this turn in *Ancrene Wisse*, stating, “Just as the representation of Christ has moved from that of young hero to lover-knight, so the anchorite moves from heroic warrior to beloved spouse.”

Continuing the migration of the location of focus from the exterior to the interior, the practices of devotional and contemplative prayer culminated in visions of Christ, oftentimes on the cross and bearing wounds. Love was the motivation for seeking Christ, and then when Christ is found, it is love that he exudes to the supplicant. To be sure, pain and bodily deprivation played a part in the mystical experience. Indeed, contemplating the bloodied, crucified Christ was a common devotional practice. For solitaries like Julian of Norwich mystical encounters with Christ did not completely mitigate the overall loneliness of a life enclosed, but these concerns were overshadowed by the ecstatic experience of the spiritual union of their souls and Christ.

This had a significant effect on the anchoritic approach to the body, penance, and even pain, all traditionally elemental characteristics of the anchoritic life. As established earlier, in the High Middle Ages, a period of relative productivity and prosperity, the body, through the rejection of material possessions and its ultimate discomfort, was an appropriate interface between God and the anchorite. To underscore this, we can look to both Christina and Wulfric

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271 Bhattacharji, “Medieval Contemplation and Mystical Experience” in *Approaching Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, 55. This emphasis on love as the anchorite’s most reliable path to identifying with Christ made impacts on the literature, ultimately shifting the metaphorical language from desert or sacramental to the affective roles of Christ. These became the two motifs that are characteristic of the writings associated with mystical literature of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries that were not as clearly developed in the early Middle Ages, Jesus as mother and Jesus as spouse.
and the very explicit physicality of the descriptions of their cells and bodily suffering. For both, their biographers gave detailed descriptions of their cells and their bodies: Christina had blood bubbling from her nostrils and Wulfric suffered a poisonous snake bite to the thigh. In the fourteenth century, however, the body and cell faded away in anchoritic literature as the spiritual interface gradually changed, turning inward from the cell and body, to the soul.

This inward turn had been in development for more than a century. Already by the early thirteenth century, the emphasis on the inner man of the anchorite had begun to supersede that of the outer man. This is evident in the early thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse*, when the author explained to his disciples that he will give them two rules: one concerned with inward things, and one concerned with outward things. He wrote: “in all ways with all your might and strength guard well the inner, and the outer for her sake.”

The author of *Ancrene Wisse* exhorted his disciples to privilege the inner condition over the outer. For the *Ancrene Wisse* author, the outer rule was kept only for the service of keeping the inner rule. By the late fourteenth century this migration toward the inner man had become a prominent feature of anchoritic texts, as their authors divulge very little or nothing at all about the outward man. Walter Hilton affirmed the shift in emphasis in the economy of salvation to contemplation. He preferred his reader to attend to the inner qualities like humility and charity instead of focusing on the outward discipline of the flesh. He was an author who was firmly grounded in the early mystical writings, being influenced primarily by Augustine, Gregory the Great, and St. Bernard, as well as Anselm and

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272 *Ancrene Wisse*, 48.


274 *Scale*, 41.
Hugh of St. Victor. For Hilton, salvation is achieved by either the active or the contemplative life, but the contemplative life, if possible, is the best. He defines this life thus: “Contemplative life lies in perfect love and charity, felt inwardly through spiritual virtues and by a true knowledge and sight of God in spiritual things.”\textsuperscript{275} Clearly, the body of the anchorite is of little consequence for Hilton.

Rolle almost completely sidesteps the physical body, dismissing it in favor of the inner man when he tells his disciple that if others could see the hearts of anchorites instead of just their bodies, “… many of them would abandon all they have in order to follow us.”\textsuperscript{276} When explaining where love (the path to Christ) is, Rolle says that, “Love is in a person’s heart and will, not in his hand nor in his mouth; which means: not in his actions but in his soul.”\textsuperscript{277} Furthermore, intelligence for Rolle is not defined by worldly knowledge, but by “being poor, without any yearning for the things of this world.”\textsuperscript{278} This further removes the locus of salvation from the exterior experience and places it in the interior realm of the heart. And then, when discussing how to be on “good terms with God,” Rolle advises his disciple that, “There is no need for you to be very eager for a lot of books: Hold on to love in heart and deed and you’ve got everything which we can talk or write about.”\textsuperscript{279} When referring to the ways in which the devil deceives Christians, Rolle says, “But recognize clearly that if he [the devil] does not deceive you

\textsuperscript{275} Scale, 78-9.
\textsuperscript{276} Form of Living, 158. On pp. 179-80, Rolle talks more at length about the contemplative life being the most appropriate situation in which people can most love God.
\textsuperscript{277} Form of Living, 175.
\textsuperscript{278} Ibid, 177.
\textsuperscript{279} Ibid, 173.
inwardly, you need not be afraid of what he can do outwardly, because he can do no more than God gives him permission to do.”  

This echoes the sentiment of one of Rolle’s contemporaries, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, who rejects the physical, outward body entirely when he advises that, “Why, when you are ‘nowhere’ physically, you are ‘everywhere’ spiritually.”  

He even goes further than Rolle in recasting the body as something non-corporeal when, in chapter thirty-five he deals with the three helps of Reading, Thinking, and Praying, saying, “Spiritually, the ‘eye’ of your soul is your reason: your conscience is your spiritual ‘face.’”  

This trend to treat the body almost with indifference is, I argue, a way to keep the body from being a distraction.  

The intellect also fell under the category of the physical body, and was therefore also rejected as a way to achieve unity with Christ. The author of the *Cloud* insisted on the inability of the human intellect to know God, and instead believed that God could be known only through love:  

The soul, when it is restored by grace, is made wholly sufficient to comprehend him fully by love. He cannot be comprehended by our intellect or any man’s – or any angel’s for that matter. For both we and they are created beings. But only to our intellect is he incomprehensible: not to our love.  

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281 *Cloud*, 142; “For whi noghwhere bodily is everywhere goostly,” TEAMS, 94.  

282 *Cloud*, 102.  

283 *Cloud*, 63; “And oure soule, bi vertewe of this reformyng grace, is mad sufficient at the fulle to comprehende al him by love, the whiche is incomprehensible to alle create knowable might, as
He then went on to warn that any man who believed that the vocation of contemplation was an intellectual enterprise was “dangerously misled.”\textsuperscript{284} In his distinctions between spiritual, intellectual, and physical, the intellectual is precluded from knowing God. As he continued to discuss this point he became more poignant:

So for the love of God be careful, and do not attempt to achieve this experience intellectually. I tell you truly it cannot come this way. So leave it alone.\textsuperscript{285}

He then affirmed that the inner man, or the soul, was the safe place:

You need have no fear, for now the devil cannot come near you. He may only stir a man’s will occasionally, and then only from afar, however subtle a devil he may be. Without sufficient cause, not even a good angel can directly influence your will. In short, it is only God who can.\textsuperscript{286}

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\textsuperscript{284} Cloud, 65.

\textsuperscript{285} Cloud, 66; “And therefore, for Goddes love, beware in this werk, and travayle not in thi wittes ne in thin ymagination on no wise. For I telle thee trewly, it may not be comen to by travaile in theim; and therfore leve theim and worche not with theim,” TEAMS 34.

\textsuperscript{286} Cloud, 102; “And be not feerd for the devisel, for he may not com so neer. He may never come to styrrre a mans wil, bot occasyoneely, and by a fer mene, be he never so sotyl a devil. For sufficiently and withouten mene may no good aungel stire thi wil; ne, schortly to sey, no thin bot only God,” TEAMS, 63.
For him, the body should even be treated with indifference:

Therefore, if I am able to give a vital and wholehearted attention to this spiritual activity within my soul, I can then view my eating and drinking, my sleep and conversation and so on with comparative indifference. I would rather acquire a right discretion in these matters by such indifference, than by giving them my close attention, and weighing carefully all their pros and cons.\textsuperscript{287}

He exhorted his disciple to hide his strongest desires from God and to express what he wants from God in the same way he would ask a friend. But then, in chapter forty-eight, he wrote,

I am not writing this because I want you to stop praying vocally whenever you are so moved … God forbid that I should part what he has joined, the body and spirit. For God wants to be served with body and soul, both together … \textsuperscript{288}

In his continued rejection of the physical, he went as far as to claim:

\textsuperscript{287} \textit{Cloud}, 110; “And therefore and I might gete a wakyng and a besi beholdyng to this goostly werk withinne my soule, I wolde than have a rechelesnes in etyng and in drynyng, in sleping and in spekyng, and in alle myn outward doynges. For sekirly I trowe I schuld rather com to discrecion in hem by soche a rechelesnes than by any besy beholding to the same thinges, as I wolde bi that beholdyng set a merke and a mesure in hem,” TEAMS, 69-70.

\textsuperscript{288} \textit{Cloud}, 117; “I sey not this for I will thou leve any tyme, yif thou be stirid for to preie with thi mouth, or to brest oute … And God forbade that I schuld departe that God hath couplid, the body and the spirit; for God wil be served with body and soue, bothe togeders,” TEAMS, 75.
Why, when you are ‘nowhere’ physically, you are ‘everywhere’ spiritually. Make it your business then to see that your spirit is tied to nothing physical. … Therefore, leave all outer knowledge gained through the senses; do not work with the senses at all, either objectively or subjectively.²⁸⁹

Indeed, the anonymous author of the Cloud cast the soul as the last stronghold after the cell. The body had disappeared amidst the calamities of the century.

Although the influence of mysticism on anchoritism was mostly reflected in rendering the body nearly non-existent, the recluse was not instructed to treat the physical body and the material world to which it belonged in an overly permissive way. The flesh and its carnal desires were still an impediment to the contemplative life. They were still to be censored and repressed. But, the method employed to overcome it was different for the authors of mystical texts. The advice of the Cloud author was to ignore it all together, to look past it so that it would lose all influence over the spirit.²⁹⁰ Rather than engaging the flesh directly with cold baths, whips, and starvation, the solitary was instructed to nourish the body to the point that it would remain healthy and, therefore, cooperative. A sick body was a distraction and did not promote the proper environment for contemplation. Indeed, this was the crux of the difference between the earlier solitaries and the later mystics. The seclusion was not an end in itself, but a means to the ultimate union of the soul and Christ through contemplation. Anything that hindered the solitary’s ability to contemplate was to be eradicated. This sometimes meant (as in the case of sexual desire)

²⁸⁹ Cloud, 142; “For whi noghwhere bodily is everywhere goostly. Loke than besily that thi goostly werk be noghwhere bodely … And thof al thi bodely wittes kon fynde ther nothing to fede hem on,” TEAMS, 94.

²⁹⁰ Cloud, 97-8.
complete abstinence, but in other cases, as in fasting, it meant satisfying the flesh to the degree that it was healthy and not a distraction. This concept of “looking past” the physical was born out in the literature. Hilton exhorted his anchorite reader not to take on more physical duress than was reasonable,

Therefore do fairly what concerns you, look after your bodily nature according to reason, and then suffer God to send what he will, whether it be health or sickness; take it gladly, and do not willfully complain against him.291

In other words, Hilton saw the body a passive element in the solitary life. Treat it well and it will not become a distraction, and if God chooses to afflict it, the solitary just has to endure.

Along with the physical body, descriptions of the solitary’s cell, so vivid in Aelred and the Ancrene Wisse, had faded away entirely by the time Scale, Form, and Cloud were written. Instead, the soul became the cell. For example, Hilton said that after a solitary had escaped a trying time or temptation, that she should, “…enter into [her] own soul by meditation in order to know what it is, and by the knowledge of it to come the spiritual knowledge of God.”292 The world in the late fourteenth century was filled with anxiety over war, disease, famine, and changing notions of orthodoxy, and the guidance literature from this period responded to that anxiety, as it characteristically bid the recluse to retreat not into her cell, but into her soul.

Why were Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, and the author of the Cloud of Unknowing (all writing to aspiring recluses) content to leave any description of the anchoritic cell of their

291 Scale, 148.

292 Scale, 111.
disciples to the imagination? Perhaps because they assumed that their readers would have a clear understanding of what would pass as acceptable. As mentioned before, nearly every medieval village, town, and city had at least one anchorite. So, the familiarity of such places and the likelihood of the readers having visited them in person are quite high, and are most likely one reason why the authors did not go to the trouble to address them. I suggest another reason.

Besides the fact that anchorite cells had been a ubiquitous part of the general English landscape for centuries, the physical enclosure, although necessary, was not a primary concern for the authors precisely because of the adverse conditions in the England at the time. The connection here is that through the harsh realities of famine, plague, and war the physical body had proven to be an unreliable vehicle through which to identify with Christ. By this I mean that during the prosperity of the High Middle Ages, the body had to be chastised and trained to reject the worldly temptations from without the cell. And, the cell itself was an important mechanism in accomplishing this.

In the context of a world in distress, I propose that the cell as an agent of reform was no longer viable. The solitary was not so much rejecting the world (although we know that the vocation still precluded her from worldly pleasures such as marriage, sex, freedom of movement, etc.) as she was being drawn toward Christ. So, there was more of a positive force pulling her into unity with Christ, rather than a negative force beating the world out of her. What little we read about the body in mystical literature instructs that it should be maintained in such a way as to not let it be a distraction; it should not be deprived to excess, nor indulged. The body should fade into the deep background. This is not to say that to take on the life of an anchorite in the fourteenth century was to live in ease and leisure. In that case, there would be no spiritual value

293 Licence, Hermits and Recluses, 1.
to the vocation. The sacrifice paid by solitaries, then, was still everything. They were still dead to
the world. Most of the physical evidence we have for anchorite cells are from this period, and the
picture is bleak. Many of the cells were not more than lean-tos constructed under the eaves of
parish churches, usually on the colder north side. There were still instances of anchorites freezing
to death or dying of malnutrition, or at least coming very close to starving. So, even though the
image of the desert had virtually disappeared by the fourteenth century, the life of an anchorite,
regardless of the rhetoric in mystical texts, was still often harsh and dangerous.

And so, penance was not absent in the devotional writings of the fourteenth century.
After all, penance was still a sacrament and the need for penance for the absolution of sin, was
still very real. This was still evident in the mystics, but it had a different tenor than it did before.
Julian of Norwich acknowledged the importance of penance in the process of salvation, but she
left it for God to determine:

As to the penance which one takes upon oneself, that was to revealed to me; that is to say,
it was not revealed to me specifically. But what was revealed, specially and greatly and in
a most loving manner, is that we ought meekly and patiently to bear and suffer the
penance which God himself gives us, with recollection of his blessed Passion.

294 Jones, “Hermits and Anchorites in Historical Context,” in Approaching Medieval English
Anchoritic, 11.

295 Colledge and Walsh, 330; “For that penance that man takyth upon hym self, it was nott
shewde me; that is to sey, it was not shewde me specyfyed. But this was shewde specially and
highly and with fulle lovely chere, that we shulde mekely and pacently bere and suffer that
pennawnce that God hym self geveth us with mynde of hys blessyd passion,” Showings, 116.
The penance described by Julian was markedly passive and came in the form of affliction. It consisted of simply accepting the hardships that God allowed, not actively punishing oneself through strict ascetic living. Like the experience of mystical visions, the act of penance was relegated to the realm of God’s discretion. In other words, in the hands of Julian, the act of penance was a service to God, directed by God. The image of the hairshirt-wearing anchorite chanting psalms in an icy bath is foreign to Showings (and for that matter, to all of the mystical texts). Antony, Guthlac, Cuthbert, and even Wulfric and Christina would be strangers in Julian’s world. For these early recluses, bodily penance was an act of warfare against the flesh, waged by their own will and can be seen as a service to themselves, as they worked to subdue the flesh. This was not the case for the mystical anchorites of the fourteenth century. Indeed, Rolle puts the wearing of hairshirts in the mouth of the devil, as a way of warning his reader about the dangers of the excessive self-mortification practiced and encouraged a century before.296 Where these solitaries of early generations actively embarked on ascetic lifestyles, Julian’s suffering was brought about passively through illness; an illness that she had no doubt asked for, but one for which she waited patiently until God allowed it. Rather than fixating on rejecting sin, she focused on accepting Christ. Where Guthlac and Wulfric defiantly beat their bodies in response to carnal desires, Julian patiently endured pain in the form of illness.

Grace Jantzen, citing Julian’s sickness, asserts that in Ancrene Wisse and in Aelred’s De institutione inclusarum, pain was necessary for spiritual growth.297 I argue that although it might

296 *Form of Living*, 159. The warnings against these extreme ascetic acts were a reaction to the flagellants during the Plague, mid-century, but had much impact on the anchoritic approach to pain.

be necessary for growth, the source of pain is different in these illustrations. Julian’s pain was through illness brought on by God. It was not self-inflicted, per se. She prayed for God to grant her the weakness of an illness, and then let him decide whether she was to receive it. The pain described by the author of *Ancrene Wisse* and Aelred was a penance in the style of the desert fathers, even if not in the same degree of excess. In Julian’s case, there was a relinquishing of agency in the suffering of the anchorhold. The mystical tradition relegated the discomfort of solitude to the divine imperative. Elaine Scarry identifies physical pain as a dehumanizing agent and one that dissolves the reality of an individual. In the context of medieval Christianity, pain is understood through the agonizing pain of Christ on the cross, and is therefore both penitential and substitutionary. This can certainly be applied to both the early anchorites and the fourteenth-century mystics, with the former viewing pain as penitential, seeking to working out their sins here on earth, and the latter used pain to lose one’s human identity and experience the divine in spirit.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored the final development of English anchoritism though the texts that are considered by modern scholars to be the core texts of Middle English mysticism. I have shown that by the close of the fourteenth century, the anchoritic vocation was cast by those who wrote about it as an expression of piety that sought God primarily through contemplation at the expense of the physicality of the body and the cell. I have argued that as anchoritism

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continued to be esteemed as the apex of Christian spirituality, it also conformed to the changing economy of salvation, which can be described as increasingly inward-looking in focus. Whereas the sacraments provided a useful analogue for writers of anchoritic texts during the Gregorian Reforms in the twelfth century, fourteenth-century writers, in the wake of plague, urbanization, and the influence of mysticism, abandoned the body and the cell. Instead, they chose the soul as the most appropriate interface by which anchorites could experience the divine.
By the late fourteenth century, anchoritism in England had been developing for well over seven centuries. What began in the seventh century as a movement of mostly male religious hermits, who found their proverbial deserts on the coastal islands and bogs of northeast England, had become an urban vocation of mostly women, who occupied cells in nearly every town and village in the country. This dissertation has shown that while anchorites and the vocation of anchoritism were thus constant presence in the religious landscape of medieval England, the practice and meaning of the anchoritic life underwent profound changes, which corresponded to changes in the economy of salvation. Early medieval anchoritic texts reflect these changes. Indeed, throughout the Middle Ages, leading churchmen regularly took up their pens to record the stories of anchorites and to provide spiritual guidance. In their texts, these authors show admiration for the struggles that anchorites endured to earn salvation and viewed anchoritic life as the purest expression of Christian spirituality, and, if lived properly, the surest way to gain heaven.

Until the eleventh century, the desert operated as an ecosystem of salvation whose arid environs provided the means for bodily penance and the solitude necessary for contemplation
and finally, salvation. Early medieval anchoritic texts reflect the desert heritage of the vocation, leading many modern scholars to associate anchorites of every century with the desert. Later medieval texts, however, do not support this interpretation. As shown by this dissertation, by the twelfth century, medieval authors had abandoned the desert experience as an analogue for their anchorite subjects. But by the twelfth century, the desert, with its long literary and religious tradition of suffering and pain, was no longer a viable analogue for Christian salvation. Anchorites elaborated new ideas of what constituted salvation and how it was fulfilled. The cell became the place in which devotion to the sacraments was achieved. This sacramental turn shifted the primary mode of salvation to the observance of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist but also marriage and holy orders. A century later a new understanding of the economy of salvation emerged which deemphasized the physical body and was grounded, instead, in mysticism or the inward migration of the spiritual center. All three forms of piety – penitential, sacramental, and mystical-- however, always remained present in the anchoritic life, and for this reason, anchoritism was able to remain at the apex of Christian spirituality during the three centuries under study.

Over the centuries, the economy of salvation had changed. By the twelfth century, the very physical, penitential economy that had developed during the Christian persecutions and had motivated ascetics to live first in the real deserts of Egypt and Syria, and later in the metaphorical deserts of Western Europe, had been supplanted by an emphasis on sacramental observance and on salvation through contemplation. These changes were the result of the Gregorian Reforms, the emergence of a novel mystical theology, and the social dislocation caused by the fourteenth-century calamities.
During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, reform-minded clergy sought, among other things, to elevate the clergy from the ranks of the laity through efforts to eradicate clerical marriage and to elevate the status of the priest by championing the doctrine of transubstantiation, thus underscoring the priest’s God-given ability to perform the miracle of the Mass. This sacramental turn in the economy of salvation was not lost on the writers of anchoritic literature. These authors, who were often influential church leaders and ordained priests, eschewed the older, more established metaphor of the anchorite as desert-dweller for more salient motifs that centered on the sacraments.

Two examples of this development are the twelfth-century Vitae of Wulfric of Haselbury and Christina of Markyate. The author of Wulfric’s Vita, John of Forde, was faced with writing the biography of an anchorite who had begun his tenure over sixty years before. In the wake of changes within the anchoritic vocation and a waning interest in his saint, he had to choose his imagery wisely. Rather than relying on the desert motif, John used Eucharistic language to describe Wulfric, imbuing the anchorite with a heightened level of holiness and enhancing his appeal in a religious environment that was already fixated on Eucharistic reform.

The anonymous author of Christina’s Vita chose to use the debate surrounding the issue of sacramental marriage, more specifically, what constituted a sacramental marriage, to communicate her sanctity. In the twelfth century, reformers were divided over what kind of vows was considered sacramentally binding. Her biographer, rejecting the desert motif and the analogy of the desert dweller, chose to cast Christina as a holy heroine. Through his strategic incorporation of Ss. Leonard and Mary, and his use of the terms carcer (prison) and latere (hide), Christina’s biographer cast her as one who was imprisoned, yet liberated, thanks to her proper understanding of the sacrament of marriage. Caught between an older model of marriage
in which parental negotiations were paramount, and a newer Church-advocated model that said the consent of the marrying individuals was all that mattered, the author of Christina's *Vita* offers key interactions with Mary as a way to transition a reluctant readership into accepting Christina's position, for she does, in fact, have "parental" permission for her vow. Mary, in essence, becomes a supportive parental negotiator, one who models how parents ought to react to their children's solemn vows, in contrast to Christina's earthly parents who had tried to force a non-valid marriage on a non-consenting soul. In Christina’s case it was her fidelity to the marriage vow made to Christ that guaranteed her salvation. It is clear that by the time Wulfric and Christina’s *Vitae* were written, the desert had lost its influence on authors of anchoritic literature.

By the end of the fourteenth century, the economy of salvation had changed yet again. In the aftermath of famine, plague, and general disruption in England, there was an inward migration of spiritual focus. Informed by mystical theology, Christian thinkers like Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton and the anonymous author of the *Cloud* encouraged their readers to find salvation through contemplation. In the guidance texts they wrote for their anchoritic audiences, these authors emphasized neither penance, nor the sacraments, but the soul. Indeed, none of their guidance texts mentioned the desert, and if the sacraments were addressed, it was only in passing. Instead, the anchorite was to turn her focus away from all physicality. So much is this the case that descriptions of the anchorhold, so vivid in previous centuries, had vanished in the mystical texts. Furthermore, the body was not to be scourged or beat into submission, but it was to be sufficiently nourished so that it was forgotten altogether. When the desert did appear in a fourteenth mystical text, it was through the vision of Julian of Norwich. The roles had changed, however. Instead of Julian, an anchoress, dwelling in the desert to find God (salvation), God was the desert-dweller, and the desert was her soul. Julian, who was deeply influenced by mystical
theology, internalized all aspects of her spiritual struggles to the point that even the desert, the place that had once been nearly synonymous with the very physical, outward struggle of the anchorite, had been relegated to, and even become analogous to, her soul.

Throughout the Middle Ages, English anchorites were viewed by those who wrote about them, and most of society around them, as champions of the spiritual struggle to gain heaven. By analyzing anchoritic narratives alongside the historical changes that affected their authors reveals the transformations in the practice and meaning of the anchoritic life in its long history. Between the eleventh and twelve centuries, demographic increase, urbanization, the emergence of a commercial economy, and the accumulation of great wealth unsettled the early medieval socio-economic balance. During the late thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth century, famine, increased mortality, and widespread diseases fostered profound reinterpretations of how the believers experienced the divine. It was amidst this broader historical context that anchoritic narratives ceased to compare anchorites to their desert-dwelling ancestors and began accommodating the anchoritic experience to the demands of new economies of salvation.
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