

COLUMBIA COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

TURNING TOWARDS A LIFE OF SPIRIT:
THE DISRUPTION OF ECONOMIC LOGIC IN THE *VITAE* OF CHRISTINA OF
MARKYATE AND WULFRIC OF HASELBURY, ANCHORITES

A SENIOR THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY
MEGAN E. STATER

NEW YORK, NEW YORK
SPRING 2016

To my father, a storyteller who would have loved these stories

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	v
Acknowledgements	1
Introduction	4
Ch. I. A Penny for the Breath of Life	16
Ch. II. Divine Economy and Extravagance.	32
Conclusion	48
Bibliography	53

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1.1	Cell in Hartlip	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	5
1.2	Old anchorhold at Willingham	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	6
2.1	Detail from St. Alban's Psalter	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	17
2.2	Halfpenny from the reign of King Henry I	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	26
3.1	King Stephen meets with Wulfric	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	35
4.1	An anchorite's window	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	52

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Before beginning this project, I could not fathom creating a piece of writing longer than twenty-five pages. How glad I am that I have, and how indebted I am to those that helped it happen! First, many thanks to Professor Elizabeth Castelli, without whose weekly (!) meetings I could not have mustered as much as research and writing as I did. Your constant pressure for me to think more critically about my positions, your capacity to listen to my endless ramblings, and your seemingly infinite suggestions for further reading made this process immensely rewarding. This project would not have been the same without your insight. Second, thank you to Professor Gale Kenny, whose constant optimism and meticulous edits of my every draft allowed me to find hope in my project, even when I felt unsure about what I was doing. I also want to thank Professor Eleanor Johnson, who helped me brainstorm at the beginning of my project before I knew what I was writing about, and, finally, my wonderful cohort of thesis seminar buddies, Becca, Meghan, Jennifer, and Rosy, who always gave such a wonderfully fresh eye to my work.

Then there are the delightful people in my life who read over my writing, listened to me ramble about ascetics, and sat in the Butler Stacks with me. To Ferial Massoud, my steadfast roommate who always left the light on when she knew I was in the library late; Mariam Elnozahy, ever-generous with her time; the editors: Jack Gross, Adil Habib, Hallie Nell Swanson, Ian Trueger; Michael Chang-Frieden; and, of course, B.C.S, without whom I would never have put the pieces together. Special mention must also be given to my mother, who always reads over whatever I send her, no matter the time.

The ascetic priest is the incarnate desire to be different, to be in a different place, and indeed this desire at its greatest extreme, its distinctive fervor and passion; but precisely this power of his desire is the chain that holds him captive so that he becomes a tool for the creation of more favorable conditions for being here and being man—it is precisely this power that enables him to persuade to existence the whole herd of the ill-constituted, disgruntled, underprivileged, unfortunate, and all who suffer themselves, by instinctively going before them as their shepherd. You will see my point: this ascetic priest, this apparent enemy of life, this denier—precisely he is among the greatest conserving and yes-creating forces of life.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

Introduction

In the English liturgy for consecration, the anchorite-to-be would step over a line of ash laid down by the priest into a cell, which would be their lifelong resting place. The conjunction of “lifelong” and “resting place” is no accident: the ash laid down by the priest was meant to symbolize the transformation of the anchorite from living to living dead. The liturgy was marked by three aspects in general: the quasi-burial ceremony, the blocking of the reclusory door, and the constant presence of the anchorite’s own tomb in her cell.¹ Upon her consecration, the anchorite became an aporia at the heart of the community, someone dead and withdrawn from the world—anchorite comes, after all, from the Greek “anachōréō,” or “to withdraw”—and yet alive, conspicuously practicing a penitential form of asceticism. Anchoritism in its extremity uncovers the unstable fault lines that undercut asceticism as a whole. A dichotomy appears at the foundation of anchoritic existence that can be most clearly stated in this way: how can an individual simultaneously live at the center of a society and be dead to it?

The most common anchoritic life in medieval England adjoined the neighborhood parish church. The cell, or anchorhold, would be built against the church, often with a hole cut into the wall of the church itself so that the anchorite could look up at the altar. In the words of the *Ancrene Wisse*, a thirteenth-century rulebook for anchorites, the anchorite was “anchored under the church as an anchor under ship, to hold the ship so that neither waves nor storms may overwhelm it.”² The cell could vary from only a few square feet to the size of a small house with several apartments to accommodate servants and a private chapel for confession. It was a

¹ E.A. Jones, “Ceremonies of Enclosure: Rite, Rhetoric, and Reality,” in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body Within the Discourses of Enclosure*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008).

² Bella Millett, trans., *Ancrene Wisse: Guide for Anchoresses, A Translation, based on Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402.*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), 3.13.

startlingly popular practice: Ann Warren notes that there were over two hundred recorded anchorites dispersed throughout England in the thirteenth century alone.³

Lifelong anchoritic confinement clearly fit into a long tradition of Christian penitential asceticism. As Mary Rotha Clay writes, anchoritism could trace its genealogy to the practices of the Desert Fathers of fourth-century Egypt and Syria. The desert, the founding site of Christian asceticism, held symbolic import for English anchorites a thousand years later: “The desert, then, was a place of combat and conquest—not ‘a retreat for the feeble, but a training-place for the strong.’”⁴ Whereas the desert presented an open horizon for Egyptian and Syrian anchorites to re-form their lives and create wholly new communities, with new norms and practices, the English anchorite found herself surrounded by the daily lives of parishioners, isolated yet within reach of the ordinary world.⁵

The omnipresence of the English anchorite highlighted how dependent she was upon the whims of the external world. While rulebooks like the *Ancrene Wisse* instructed anchorites to avoid all contact with people outside of the cell, necessities like food and regular confession prevented total withdrawal from society. As Ann Warren notes in *Anchorites and Their Patrons*



Fig. 1.1 Cell adjoining church in Hartlip. Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites*, 78.

³ Mary Rotha Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 78-9.

⁴ Ibid., 115, quoting F.W. Farrar, *Saintly Workers: five Lenten lectures delivered in St. Andrew's Holborn, March and April, 1878* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1892), 51.

⁵ William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

in *Medieval England*, anchorites frequently needed alms to maintain their practice, not to mention servants to bring them their sustenance, as they were essentially stationary, unproductive members of the community. Figures like Julian of Norwich, the renowned thirteenth-century visionary and anchoress, received visits from numerous religious figures, including the controversial Margery Kempe. Some lay-people even left jewels and coins in anchorholds for safekeeping.⁶ The anchorite, then, held an unstable position in society: completely detached from the world and engaged in spiritual trials, yet requiring of the care and attention of society. The anchorite is, in the words of Nietzsche, “a discord that *wants* to be discordant.”⁷ The anchorite



Fig. 1.2. Anchorhold (now sacristy) at the Church of St. Mary and All Saints, Willingham, Cambridgeshire. Jeremy Lander, Freeland Rees Roberts Architects, March 2005.

yearns to be dead to the world, “to be different, to be in a different place...but precisely this power of his desire is the chain that holds him captive” in the world.⁸

Only two known hagiographies, or *Vitae*, from the twelfth century feature the dichotomous figure of the anchorite.

Wulfic of Haselbury, subject of both a lengthy *Vita* and medieval English cult, was renowned for his engagement in rigorous fasting, night watches, and cold baths, until “the bloom of youth...dried up in no time at all as the breath

⁶ Ann Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 111. Bella Millett also addresses the tension in the relationship between the anchoritic rulebook and the anchorite herself: Bella Millett, “Can there be such a thing as an ‘anchoritic rule’?” in *Anchoritism in the Middle Ages: Texts and Traditions*, ed. Catherine Innes-Parker and Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa (Cardiff: University of Wales Press), 19.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, RJ Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), III.11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, III.13.

of the Lord, breathing on him, blew it all away, until, with the skin barely clinging to his bones, the wasted flesh bodied forth no longer the carnal man, but the spiritual.”⁹ Yet Wulfric’s *Vita* is punctuated by the regular appearance of alms-givers—and those who fail to give him alms—which highlights his profound dependance on the surrounding community. Similarly, Christina of Markyate, another twelfth-century anchorite whose remarkable *Vita* ends without conclusion in the middle of a sentence and who was forgotten albeit for the preservation of her hagiography’s sole manuscript through the centuries, also engaged in intense ascetic practices. Her hagiographer exclaims at one point, “O what trials she had to bear of cold and heat, hunger and thirst, daily fasting!”¹⁰ Like Wulfric, her *Vita* is equally distinguished by the prominent role of her male patron, the abbot Geoffrey of St. Albans, and her complex role in the larger monastic and village community.

How could a community involved in the quotidian activities of “making a living” in all its senses relate to such figures? On the one hand, the anchorite was involved in a practice essential to the community’s spiritual well-being: the earliest texts surrounding the English anchoritic cell assumed that the anchorite sacrificed her own life for the spiritual benefit of the community, achieving her salvation through her penances and prayers. Yet, on the other, the anchorite consistently rejected and subverted worldly mores through her very existence. The hagiographers of Wulfric and Christina capture the anchoritic dichotomy by implicating the anchorites in the social, showing their abject need for support, and demonstrating the anchorite’s defiance of the social, by illustrating how the anchorite defied the worldly logic of exchange.

⁹ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric of Haselbury*, trans. Pauline Maud Matarasso (Collegeville, Minn.: Cisterican Publications, 2011), 102-5.

¹⁰ C.H. Talbot, ed. and trans., *The Life of Christina of Markyate, a twelfth century recluse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 103.

It was this rejection of the world—and, perhaps in particular, the commercial—which horrified the Protestant scholars of Christianity in the years following the Reformation and the so-called “Dissolution”—King Henry VIII’s suppression of the monastic orders in the sixteenth century. In the light of the increasingly functionalist logic of the Enlightenment, and the onset of modernity, anchoritism appeared to be a bizarre symptom of the medieval degradation of the Christian tradition. This prejudice is linked by some, like Tom Licence, to the work of Edward Gibbon and his characterization of anchorites in particular as “contemptible products of degenerate, irrational fanaticism.”¹¹ This prejudice can even be seen in the words of Immanuel Kant, the German Idealist:

From the time that Christianity itself became a learned public, or became part of the universal one, its history, so far as the beneficial effect which we rightly expect from a moral religion is concerned, has nothing in any way to recommend it. — How mystical enthusiasm in the life of hermits and monks and the exaltation of the holiness of the celibate state rendered a great number of individuals useless to the world; how the alleged miracles accompanying all this weighed down the people with the heavy chains of a blind superstition...¹²

It was the “useless” nature of these people, these hermits, anchorites, and recluses, which ran contrary to the common assumptions of commentators from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. How could Adam Smith, economist and Calvinist, who famously declared that “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest,” understand the motivations of the servant who ran back and forth, bringing the anchorite food and books each day, or even the motivations of the

¹¹ Tom Licence, *Hermits and Recluses in English Society, 950-1200* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2. Cf. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J.B. Bury, 7 vols (London: 1909), IV, esp. 78-9.

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. and ed. Allen Wood, George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6:130.

anchorite herself? Anchoritism fails to present any clear utility or function, both for the community or the anchorite herself. The anchorite was “a mere footnote to medieval religiosity.”¹³ This prejudice can be seen most clearly in the fact that hardly any academic work on anchorites was produced until Mary Rotha Clay published her comprehensive study of English anchorites in 1914.¹⁴

Indeed, it was the twentieth century which brought a renewed interest in anchoritism, and asceticism at large, within the Christian tradition. Perhaps in an attempt to combat the Protestant dismissal of asceticism as a useless, asocial branch of the Christian tradition, contemporary theorists of asceticism emphasize the functional, social role of the ascetic in Christian societies across Europe and the Mediterranean. In Peter Brown’s groundbreaking study, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” the “holy man,” or charismatic ascetic, had, as the title suggests, clear functionality in Levantine society. Outside of societal norms, the holy man could, in part, fill gaps in the Roman social system and act as a mediator for those within the society.¹⁵ Similarly, Richard Valantasis’ essay, “The Social Function of Asceticism,” builds a picture of modern (and postmodern) theories of asceticism by highlighting three major contributors to the field of religious studies in this regard: Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Geoffrey Harpham. All three theorists, as the title of Valantasis’ work suggests, attribute some

¹³ *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), 6.

¹⁴ Tom Licence develops this historiography in regards to the study of anchoritism in particular. As he writes, despite the robust historical-interpretive work of Henry Mayr-Hating and Peter Brown, “it still begs the question whether the social-historical imperative to explain a religious phenomenon in non-religious terms distracts from the fundamental issue. For, although it may be true that hermits and recluses freed themselves from social expectations or acted as authoritative arbiters, these were not their defining characteristics. Perhaps it is time to move, once more, towards a spiritual explanation, now that the historiography is turning full circle, with R.I. Moore, Susan Ridyard, and others reclaiming anchorites as religious figures who performed religious roles...” Licence, *Hermits and Recluses*, 8.

¹⁵ Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101.

kind of “social function” to asceticism. First, Max Weber argues that asceticism has “wider economic and political implications; that [these] behaviors are at the heart of ascetical activity; that [these] behaviors are strongly regulated and directed towards specific goals; and that ascetic behaviors set out ways of relating to other people.” In contrast, for Michel Foucault, asceticism is a “self-forming activity,” one integral to an individual’s ethical formation, rather than self-annihilating. Harpham, in *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*, thinks of asceticism as “ambidextrous”: just as it turns away from society, it nonetheless turns back. In Valantasis’ words, Harpham “emphasizes the ethical nature of culture itself, arguing that there is an inherent level of self-denial necessary for a person to live within a culture.” In this way, for Harpham, asceticism is “subideological.” In dialogue with these three thinkers, Valantasis puts forth his own theory of the social function of asceticism: asceticism relates “to the integration of an individual person, and of groups of people, into the culture itself.”¹⁶

One sees a thematic similarity throughout the work of these theorists of asceticism. Each is concerned in their own way with a functionalism of the self—that is, an asceticism that serves the function of self-formation. For Weber, asceticism creates individuals that perform behaviors and reproduce particular economies; for Foucault, asceticism forms ethical individuals; for Harpham, asceticism forms individuals as cultural participants; for Valantasis, asceticism

¹⁶ Richard Valantasis, “The Social Function of Asceticism,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 545-547. Cf. Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Flood’s position in *The Ascetic Self* is not far from that which Valantasis proposes. According to Flood, asceticism is always part of a pattern established by a particular tradition. It is in that fact that he sees a tension between subjectivity and asceticism’s demand that the subjective be subsumed under the weight of a particular pattern of renunciation within a tradition: “the eradication of subjectivity in ascetic pursuit entails the assertion of subjectivity in voluntary acts of will. Asceticism, then, is the performance of this ambiguity, an ambiguity that is absolutely central to subjectivity.” Flood not only sees ambiguity here, but paradox: the ascetic individual wills to annihilate his or her own will and instead replace it with the demands of a traditional pattern of behavior. Asceticism is an enactment of the tradition on the physical body, a performance through which “occurs the transformation of the self.” Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, 2-6.

integrates individuals into a culture and, in a Hegelian mood, reconciles (or, as Gavin Flood would say, reveals) the disjunction between particularity and universality. They each address the dichotomy of asceticism by appealing to the functionality of the ascetic individual, for if an individual is part of a social whole, his or her transformation similarly affects the social body. They respond to the ascetic's dichotomous position in society by falling back on the very functionalist conception of the individual's role in society that they seem to dialectically reject.

These modes of interpretation, regarding both asceticism in general and anchoritism in particular, fail to escape the standard of functionality, that is, the binary of functional and non-functional, that thinkers like Gibbon prescribed. To see the anchorite as fully functional and purposeful elides the true dichotomy, and radical separation, of the anchorite. Functionalism understands the social as a systematic and structural totality incapable of fragmentation or rupture. Contemporary theorists of asceticism and anchoritism, in falling back on functionalism, cannot, then, fully address the dichotomous nature of the anchorite. Even Foucault, whose discussion of the ascetical self does not include mention of integration or the function of the ethical subject in society as a whole, nonetheless maintains the ascetical self's membership in a society: after all, an "ethic" is only relevant to a subject who is part of a social whole. As we will see in Chapter Two's discussion, there is a sense in which the anchorite is beyond the ethical, or at least is herself a justification for seemingly unjust and disproportionate punishment.

This emphasis on the functionality of the medieval anchorite may obfuscate the understanding that contemporaries of the anchorite had themselves. The ascetic, and particularly the anchorite, is dichotomous because her role is double-sided: she has a connection to the community that must be accounted for (and is, by these thinkers), but she is also radically

separated from this community. Even as the hagiographers of Wulfric and Christina discuss the relationships these anchorites made with lay-people, the alms they gave to the poor, and the counsel they offered, they continually break down the worldly, commercial logic within which the anchorite seems to be implicated. They gloss the anchorites' encounters with beggars or pilgrims as brushes with angels or Christ Himself. The trope of exchange, which plays so prominent a role in Wulfric and Christina's *Vitae*, defies any functionalist logic by consistently demonstrating how any attempt to exchange with an anchorite, a sacred figure at the heart of the community, ultimately disrupts normal, human, societal and commercial expectations and demonstrates the socially fragmentary role of the anchorite. To state it in another way, if functionalist theorists of asceticism hope to emphasize how the anchorite was alive to society, their hagiographers are far more interested in how they were, in important respects, dead.

The work of the twentieth-century French philosopher, Georges Bataille, illustrates how one may think of asceticism without losing an emphasis of the social disruptiveness of the ascetic herself. For Bataille, non-functionality is the primary characteristic of the sacred in contrast to the functionalism of the profane. In the profane domain of work and utility, all things are subordinated as means to external ends. In contrast, the sacred or homogenous is a realm of luxurious loss and excess; it is the only domain in which anything can truly be valued as an end in itself. The realm of sacred is held in check by "the order of things," yet it "constantly threatens to break the dikes, to confront productive activity with the precipitate and contagious movement of a purely glorious consumption."¹⁷ Just as Durkheim's effervescence or Turner's *communitas* are collective experiences that reveal and integrate the individual into the collective, for Bataille

¹⁷ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 52.

it is only in “rituals involving unmotivated expenditure...that the subject reveals his or her innermost, intimate being to his or her fellow beings.”¹⁸ Sacrifice is Bataille’s primary example of this “purely glorious consumption”: “Sacrifice destroys an object’s real ties of subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice.”¹⁹ Religion detaches the world from “the poverty of *things*” and offers a divine order, restoring “interior freedom” to man.²⁰

Asceticism is just another form of ritual excess. From a Bataillean perspective, anchoritism reveals this excess on multiple levels: it is a sacrifice of both the individual and the community. The individual sacrifices their life for a living death punctuated by extreme ascetic practices. But the community also sacrifices—a whole person, who could have provided for others through exchange and reproduction. The anchorite defies the worldly logic of exchange and sits at the communal center, adjoining the parish church, as a perpetual sacrifice and useless expenditure. In turn, the community must face mortality itself with the face of a saint, performing a living death.

Both *Vitae* of Wulfic of Haselbury and Christina of Markyate exhibit a trope of exchange and payment, a strange theme for texts supposedly featuring individuals who have rejected worldly desires and withdrawn from the world. In my first chapter, I will discuss the symbol of the penny in the hagiographies of both anchorites. Both Christina and Wulfic use a penny to symbolize their rejection of the world and their vow to consecrate their lives as anchorites. The

¹⁸ Tiina Aarpe, “Sacred Violence: Girard, Bataille, and the Vicissitudes of Human Desire,” *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 10.2 (2009), “Sacred Violence,” 43; Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman and ed. Mark S. Cladis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1969).

¹⁹ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 43.

²⁰ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume I: Consumption* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 57-8.

offering of a penny to God (or an angel, in Wulfric's case) to vow oneself to an ascetic life is a clear example of the disjunctive position of the anchorite. On the one hand, the penny is itself pure value, a stand-in for the most worldly of functions, economic exchange. In attempting to reject the domain of the worldly, Christina and Wulfric cannot help but use its objects; the would-be ascetic is forced to be, as Harpham would say, "ambidextrous." But the offering of a penny to God is playing the part of a sacrifice; it is, in Bataille's language, a "useless expenditure." In this way, we can understand the penny as a symbol for the anchorite's own transformative exchange from worldly to godly life, marking the fault line between the domains of the sacred and profane, or the homogenous and the heterogenous.

In my second chapter, I highlight the anchorites' relationships with the larger communities within which they are situated. Specifically, both anchorites seem to participate in a kind of spiritual economy: Wulfric and Christina bestow blessings and perform miracles in what seems to be a form of payment, in return for food and alms. Astonishingly, too, community members' failure to participate in this seeming exchange precipitates extreme punishments, most often corporal; in the most extreme example, a monk's failure to supply Wulfric with food leads to his dramatic death in a flood. These examples demonstrate, however, that the analogy of these relationships to an economy defies any human logic of exchange: first, the blessings and healings (and punishments) bestowed are dramatically disproportionate to the gifts given (or not). Second, both *Vitae* distance the miracles from the actions of the anchorites themselves, instead attributing them to divine intervention. The anchorites do not, therefore, participate in any kind of economy. Rather, the anchorites channel God, who intervenes in a triadic, divine economy, disrupting

social and economic expectations. Even as the anchorite cannot help but be materially connected to society, she ultimately subverts and fragments the social rather than participates in it.

Chapter I

A Penny for the Breath of Life: Disrupting Worldly Logic Through Transformative Exchange

The moments that delineate both Christina of Markyate's and Wulfric of Haselbury's *Vitae*, marking their turn towards a new life of devotion to God as anchorites, depend upon a penny. Both Christina and Wulfric gift a penny, an object branded with the head of the sovereign but of petty value itself, to another. The giving of currency implies an exchange, something received in turn: but what, exactly, Christina and Wulfric receive is not directly indicated. These parallel moments in the two hagiographies, however, act as fulcrums in both texts. In each, the giving of a penny marks their turn from the world towards the anchoritic enclosure. Christina and Wulfric receive no tangible, worldly return for paying in a penny; instead, once in the anchorhold, both begin to receive visions. A penny for personal transformation and mystical access to the Divine: it is a radically uneven exchange, one that challenges the logic of exchange altogether. This asymmetry and the slippages and inconsistencies in contemporary scholars' and the hagiographers' own interpretations of these moments indicate the ambiguity of the pennies' significance. Just as the pennies seem to be part of an exchange—a penny for a new life—these moments' position in the texts, and the transformative power of the penny over both Christina and Wulfric, imply that the exchange may not be so straightforward. The gift of a penny defies the worldly logic of exchange and instead becomes a sacrifice. Insofar as the pennies are sacrificed, their sacrifice functions as a metaphor in these texts: The anchorites-to-be give a penny, just as they give their physical bodies, to God. The penny is a gift simultaneously reciprocal and sacrificial, symbolizing the radical transformation of Christina and Wulfric shedding their old selves and striving towards their new life with God.

As a young girl, her hagiographer writes, Christina vowed to God to devote herself to him and preserve her virginity. On her birthday, the feast day of St. Leonard,²¹ her parents brought her to the monastery of St. Alban's. St. Alban's was not only the institution to which Christina would later attach herself (more or less literally: her hermitage would be adjacent to the monastery), but was also, as the author writes, "our monastery," the monastery which produced the *Vita* itself.²² Christina explored the monastery; she "declared how fortunate the inmates were, and expressed a wish to share in their fellowship." Just as she left the monastery, "she made a sign of the cross with one of her fingernails on the door as a token that she had placed her affection there." That night, as the members of her party drunkenly amused themselves, she secluded herself in "holy meditation,"



Fig. 2.1. Detail from St. Alban's Psalter, believed to have belonged to Christina herself. The woman is thought to be Christina. *Hortulus: The Online Graduate Journal of Medieval Studies*.

culminating in a fervent prayer before God: "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides Thee. My flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever. For lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: Thou hast destroyed all them that go a-whoring from Thee." The next day, Christina attended Mass.

²¹ A Frankish saint, who converted to Christianity in 496 and who became a hermit in the forest of Noblac, near Limoges. His feast day is November 6.

²² Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 39. The events at this monastery foreshadow Christina's return to this institution and the development of her ascetic practice. The self-reflexivity of the anonymous hagiographer here, too, makes St. Alban's the center of Christina's narrative long before Christina's virginity has been formally consecrated by the Church or she enters under the patronage of St. Alban's.

Following the reading of the Gospel, Christina approached the priest. She offered a *denarius* [penny] to him, “saying in her heart, ‘O Lord God, merciful and all powerful, receive my oblation through the hands of Thy priest. Grant me, I beseech Thee, purity and inviolable virginity whereby Thou mayest renew in me the image of Thy son: who lives and reigns with Thee in the unity of the Holy Spirit God for ever and ever. Amen.’” This moment was her first formal recognition before God of the life she resolved to follow.²³

Why choose this way to consecrate herself to God? The priest to whom she hands the penny cannot know of what she utters only “in her heart.” Before this moment, Christina already turns away, both physically and mentally, from her familial household. The household, after all, represents utter worldliness. It demands indulgence of physical desire for the sake of marriage and reproduction, which disgusts Christina.²⁴ The extreme licentiousness into which her family falls only heightens an awareness of the household’s worldly prerogative. Similarly, the penny is a worldly symbol of commerce and sovereignty. Why use a penny to symbolize a vow to God of chastity, no less? As Neil Cartlidge writes, “the penny-donation might be seen as a kind of consideration — a basis for her contract with God. The agency of the priest, the celebration of the Mass, and her presence at the altar are all designed to make her gesture of personal commitment as solemn as possible.”²⁵ The penny gives a sense of contractual, legal, obligation. Christina gives this coin to the priest in order to give herself to God; she offers a kind of payment. But legality and payment are in the domain of the worldly, exactly what she paradoxically renounces through this exchange.

²³ Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 39-41.

²⁴ The priest Sueno tells her that despite his clerical position, “he was still so stimulated by lust that unless he were prevented by the greater power of God he would without any shame lie with any ugly and mis-shapen leper,” to which Christina responds with “deep disgust.” *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁵ Neil Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100-1300* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 108-9.

It is, in the context of hermetic hagiographies, an odd moment. In Athanasius' life of St. Antony, the paradigmatic anchorite of the Egyptian desert in the third century, Antony immediately gives his abundant possessions to the poor upon hearing the Gospel passage, "If thou woudest be perfect, go and sell that thou hast and give to the poor; and come follow Me and thou shalt have treasure in heaven."²⁶ In an example closer to Christina, Bede's *Life of St. Cuthbert*, a hagiography of the seventh-century English hermit, makes no mention of money at all. Rather, it frequently lauds the saint's natural disinclination towards "worldly things," most notably food and water, and his rigorous desire to uphold religious duties from an early age.²⁷ The eremitic tradition, then, seems especially attuned to the dangers of money. Currency is a charged symbol for those aspects of the world the ascetic is especially meant to avoid.

Thomas Head interprets the offering of a penny as two expressions of exchange, one a reflection of a feudal oath of fealty and the other of a traditional dowry gift. Christina's parents brought her to St. Alban's in order to view the relics of St. Alban himself and pray for his "patrocinium," or patronage.²⁸ As Head discusses in "The Marriages of Christina of Markyate," the relation of laity to saint was analogous to that of serf to overlord. Moreover, although no such ritual is explicitly recounted in the text, Head also notes that, "Frequently such donations [to a saint for protection] came to be ritualized, for the laity, as a donation of a token amount of money such as a *denarius* [penny], the same coin used when a serf swore fealty to an overlord."²⁹ Christina's gift of a penny to the priest mirrors the vows her parents, Autti and Beatrix, may have

²⁶ Mark 10:21 and Matt. 19:21; "Athanasius of Alexandria: Vita S. Antoni [Life of St. Antony]," in *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters, Vol. IV of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II*, ed. Philip Schaff, Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971).

²⁷ The Venerable St. Bede, *Life of Cuthbert* (Cambridge: Penguin Books, 2011).

²⁸ Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 38-9.

²⁹ Thomas Head, "The Marriages of Christina of Markyate," *Viator* 21 (1990), 80.

made only the day before to St. Alban. Just like her parents, Head argues, Christina used the penny to signal her direct vow of fealty not to any saint, but to Christ himself. In this way, Christina supersedes her parents' worldly request to St. Alban and exchanges her loyalty and prayer for Christ's protection over her chastity, an exchange symbolized by the gift of the penny.

Head's first analysis does not, however, preclude other interpretations. He also sees resonances in the penny episode of a solemn betrothal or marriage ritual of the time. Although he acknowledges that explicit marital language is absent from the episode, he nonetheless insists that the symbols of such ceremonies determine Christina's actions. To Head, Christina's marking of the church door's threshold evokes the marriage ceremony, which took place at the church door, rather than the altar, in this period. He adds that the betrothal, *desponsatio*, ceremonies of the time included a donation of a *denarius* [penny] to confirm the vow. Again, Head interprets the penny as a symbol for an exchange enacted between Christina and Christ, an exchange of vows not of fealty, but of betrothal.³⁰

However, Head's interpretation of the penny as a representation of a betrothal encounters several problems, which imply that although this resonance may be present, there may be other ways to understand the penny's significance here. Christina's hagiographer frequently refers to her as *sponsa Dei*, or spouse of God, throughout the text. Although Head's interpretation resonates with this motif, however, this language is conspicuously absent from the moment of Christina's vow itself. Moreover, Head cites Jean-Baptiste Molin and Protais Mutembe's *Le rituel du mariage en France du XIIe au XVIe siècle*,³¹ rather than a source focused on English

³⁰ Head, "Marriages," 81.

³¹ Jean-Baptiste Molin and Protais Mutembe, *Le rituel du mariage en France du XIIe au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1974).

marriage practices during this period. Indeed, the particulars of the English marriage ceremony of the time do not match Head's interpretation of the penny episode. In England, it was the groom, not the bride, who gave a gift during the ceremony: "the husband was expected to give his new wife her dower at the church door and might do so by handing over a symbolic object, such as a knife."³² The knife or similar symbolic object represented the granting of up to a third of the husband's estate to the bride. The bride gave no object, coin or otherwise, to symbolize a dowry, for English brides brought no dowry to the marriage. Rather, they contributed a "marriage portion," left unrepresented during the marriage ceremony itself. Unlike a dowry or entry gift, a marriage portion was merely "the property the woman brought with her to the marriage."³³ Although Head is right to acknowledge that marriage ceremonies took place at the church door at this time, it is tenuous to connect Christina's marking of a cross at the monastery's door—more likely intended to symbolize her future *return* to this monastery as a consecrated religious—to her spiritual marriage to Christ.

There is evidence, moreover, that Christina's use of a penny was hardly remarkable in the context of the medieval English liturgy. The hagiographer notes that Christina approaches the priest following the reading of the Gospel. In the medieval English liturgy, just as in the modern Roman Rite and many Protestant services, the Offertory, or the consecration of the Host in preparation for the Eucharist, followed the reading of the Gospel. In many modern services, both Protestant and Catholic, a passing of a collection plate amongst the laity accompanies the Offertory. This practice developed much later. But the passing of the collection plate had a

³² Robert Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 553.

³³ *Ibid.*, 555-556.

medieval English counterpart: the Mass-penny. Herbert Thurston, the nineteenth-century English Jesuit priest and scholar, writes in “The Mass in Medieval England” that a long tradition of lay offerings of bread and wine before the Eucharist extended back to the earliest Christian liturgies. Even over a thousand years later, this practice resonated in the medieval English liturgy, as Thurston points out in his analysis of contemporary literary sources like *The Canterbury Tales* and *Piers Plowman*:

the congregation, men and women alike, continued to bring a money offering to the priest within the chancel down to the time of the Reformation. This offering was known as the ‘Mass-penny,’ a familiar name to all students of medieval literature. It was not in any way obligatory. The *Mass Book* tells us: ‘Offer or leeve whether the lyst,’ *i.e.*, ‘Offer or stay in your place, whichever you please,’ and no doubt the laity generally understood this perfectly well.³⁴

This seems to explain Christina’s approach towards the priest, which the hagiographer finds unremarkable; the hagiographer is interested in the content of her prayer, not her action. This conclusion is made even clearer with Thurston’s observation that “as might be expected from the name, Mass-penny, it was usual to put into the priest’s hand a single piece of money.”³⁵ From this description, it does not seem as though this episode in Christina’s *Vita* is explicitly intended to invoke Christ as patron or mimic a betrothal ceremony. Rather, she is offering an “oblation,” as she herself says, simultaneous to the priestly offering of the bread and wine to be consecrated as the Host, itself a repetition of Christ’s own sacrifice.³⁶ It is this language of sacrifice, not of marriage or patronage, that appears most clearly in this moment.

³⁴ Herbert Thurston, “The Mass in Medieval England,” *The Month and Catholic Review* 39 (London: May-August 1880), 247-248.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 249.

³⁶ ““While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many...’” Mark 14:22-5.

Of course, perhaps the penny's symbolism is overdetermined; the resonances of patronage and marital rites could certainly be there. The latter interpretation in particular, however, overemphasizes Christina's gender, making marriage—and thus her female condition, sexuality, and potential for reproduction—the most central characteristic of her worldly renunciation. This is, to be sure, an important narrative aspect of Christina's renunciation—she spends half the text hiding from her betrothed, Burthred, for example. One would want to conclude that this vow of chastity she makes at a young age would be a formal vow in the mode of a betrothal or marriage ceremony of the time, thus neatly tying together the text. But although these themes are present through Christina's *Vita*, the prominent use of a penny in this episode may touch upon another more direct point her hagiographer highlights. That is, Christina's hagiographer seems eager to gloss Christina's break from her family and betrothed not only as a moment of liberation from maternal and spousal expectations, but from economic and profit-making concerns.

Throughout Christina's *Vita*, her parents express anxiety about how Christina's renunciation will impoverish the family. Her father, Autti, declares at one point: "Her life of poverty will bring the whole of the nobility into disrepute."³⁷ Her hagiographer is keen to point out that by becoming an ascetic, Christina not only renounces wealth for herself, but potential gains for her family: "if she had given her mind to worldly pursuits she could have enriched and ennobled not only herself and her family but also her relatives."³⁸ Once Autti learns of Christina's vow of chastity (performed by way of a penny), Autti attempts to bribe a bishop to bar Christina from becoming an anchoress, for as Robert the dean tells Autti, "If you had given

³⁷ Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 59.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

him money, you would certainly have won your case.”³⁹ Ultimately, however, Christina’s gift of a penny—her celestial payment to God—overcomes any earthly payment Autti could make. This contrast between earthly and celestial wealth comes to the forefront in Christina’s final encounter with her father, when he drives her out of his house:

...her father was violently incensed and stripped her of all her clothes, with the exception of her shift, and taking from the keys which he had placed in her keeping, decided to drive her naked from the house that night. Now Autti was very rich and always entrusted to Christina his silver and gold and whatever treasures he possessed. So, maddened with anger and holding the keys in his hands, he said to the maiden, stripped as she was of her bodily garments, but more blessedly clothed with the gems of virtue: “Get out, as fast as you can. If you want to have Christ, follow Him stripped of everything.”⁴⁰

Autti violently makes Christina doubly vulnerable. His gendered assault, stripping and exposing her, parallels his simultaneous robbing of the household keys, which would have been her access within the household to both wealth and authority. The hagiographer further contrasts Autti’s silver and gold and Christina’s “gems of virtue.” The incident is spun around, for Christina exchanges earthly wealth in order to move towards “a more wealthy” union than she could ever had made on earth, “For who is richer than Christ?”⁴¹ Her humiliation becomes the basis of her authority as a renunciant. The hagiographer interprets Christina’s renunciation as both marital and monetary and yet, as this explication illustrates, he interprets the renunciation as an exchange, for it leads to a greater marriage and greater wealth. Christina’s penny symbolizes this exchange she makes, from the worldly to the spiritual. Whether or not this penny purely signifies an exchange—precisely the kind of worldly logic Christina seems to renounce by enclosing herself—or a kind of sacrifice remains to be seen. It is to understand this apparent inconsistency

³⁹ Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 67.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

that leads us to reflect on a similar moment in the *Vita* of Wulfric of Haselbury, an anchorite and contemporary of Christina's.⁴²

Wulfric was born, like Christina, in the southeast of England to an Anglo-Saxon family. He entered the priesthood at an early age out of a "shallow immaturity." His hagiographer, John of Forde, does not hesitate to add that Wulfric preferred the amusements of hunting and hawking and the company of "people in thrall to worldly vanities" to the spiritual demands of his vocation.⁴³ But one day, a poor stranger approached Wulfric and begged him for "a new coin." As John of Forde digresses to explain, there had been a recent minting "in the days of King Henry I," but the new coins were still "uncommon." Wulfric replied that he did not know whether he had a new penny. The stranger insisted: "Look in your purse and you'll find tuppence halfpenny there." Wulfric found such a coin and offered it to the stranger. The stranger replied with these words:

He for whose love you did this will repay you. And I in his name foretell to you that soon you will leave this place for another, and thence you will move shortly after to a third; there at length you will find rest and in a narrower dwelling-place persevere with God to the end; and thus at the last you will be called to join the company of the saints.

At this moment, John of Forde writes, "the God who was calling him breathed into his nostrils the breath of life."⁴⁴

Once again, a penny symbolizes a future ascetic's movement from worldly to saintly. Again, the encounter seems to take the form of an exchange: just as Christina gives a coin to the

⁴² Wulfric was born around 1090 and died in 1154; Christina was born between 1096 and 1098, and died in 1155/66. Wulfric's hagiography was written around 1169-1184; Christina's *Vita* was written around 1156-1166.

⁴³ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 98.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.



Fig. 2.2 A halfpenny from the reign of King Henry I (1106-1135). Fitzwilliam Museum: Dept. of Coins and Medals.

priest in exchange for beginning a sacralized life (one in which she grows in virtue from day to day⁴⁵), Wulfric gives a coin in order to receive “the breath of life.” Of course, Wulfric does not immediately realize that an exchange has occurred—it is the stranger, who seemed to Wulfric to be “no

man, for all he seemed one,”⁴⁶ who tells him that God “will repay you.” Although both scenes may take the familiar form of a monetary exchange, however, the economy in consideration is wildly out of

proportion. Wulfric does not even give the stranger a whole penny. Rather, he gives a “tuppence halfpenny,” that is, a silver penny that had been cut or sliced in half.⁴⁷ This penny is nearly worthless. Its insignificance recalls the biblical story of the widow’s mite, a lesson found in the synoptic gospels:

He [Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’⁴⁸

Like the tuppence halfpenny of Wulfric, the widow can only give two small coins. By any worldly calculation, neither the widow, Christina, nor Wulfric have given anything of significant

⁴⁵ Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 41.

⁴⁶ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 99.

⁴⁷ A necessary innovation in an age when most ordinary purchases did not require the high exchange value of a full silver penny: “The workhorse of the medieval English coinage was the silver penny. It was introduced in the late eighth century by Offa, king of Mercia, with the first issues in south-east England coming in the 760s and 770s... Edgar made the silver penny the standard English coin from about 973 onward. It was a small coin, about the same size as a current five-pence piece and just over half its weight. The practical problem with it was that, given its high silver content, its purchasing power was surprisingly high... the common solution to the problem was to cut pennies into halves and quarters using a hammer and a cold chisel...” J.L. Bolton, *Money in the Medieval English Economy, 973-1489* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 50-1.

⁴⁸ Mark 12:21-44.

value. But in return, all receive the favor of God. For both Wulfric and Christina, the gift of a penny precedes the infinitely greater gift of spiritual perfection. This seeming “exchange” defies the logic of worldly economics in its disproportionality.

But if this is so, can it even be called an exchange? Wulfric does not even know whether he has a penny at all; he offers it “devoutly” to the beggar, but is shocked at the penny’s apparently miraculous appearance in his purse. Before the beggar responds, John of Forde writes that “this was the beginning of the grace which God dispensed to his beloved Wulfric as a foretaste of the blessings of his sweetness, having seen and singled him out like another Nathanael under the fig tree.”⁴⁹ The blessed appearance of the coin in Wulfric’s purse is a sign of his future “blessings.” These “blessings” are soon made clear, for the beggar announces that God’s asymmetrical repayment, to join “the company of the saints,” awaits Wulfric. In this way, his episode contrasts with the story of the widow, for whom her gift of two copper coins are manifestly a *sacrifice*; she gives “everything she had” to God. Just as there is no real “exchange” in this episode, the coin itself is no sacrifice for Wulfric.

Wulfric’s real sacrifice is only hinted at in the text, through his hagiographer’s fixation on the “newness” of the currency. By asking Wulfric for a “new coin,” John of Forde writes, “there is good reason to believe that this stranger was an angel of the Lord, pointing towards the new man he was asking for in terms of a new currency.”⁵⁰ Wulfric gives this new coin to a beggar, who John of Forde hypothesizes is really an “angel of the Lord.” But according to John of Forde, the “new coin” is only a symbol for the “new man” Wulfric will become. That is, Wulfric’s new life will be given to the Lord, just as that new life will have already been given to him by the

⁴⁹ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 98.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

Lord. Wulfric will become a “new man,” or *novum hominem*, John of Forde’s citation of Ephesians: “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self [*novum hominem*], created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”⁵¹ The penny moment has the form of some kind of exchange, but it is no exchange at all. Rather, it marks the moment in time when Wulfric’s old self, all that he has, is sacrificed for the sake of a new self, given by and devoted to God.

Christina used the language of sacrifice when she offered her penny, but the penny was not the “oblation” to which she refers; Wulfric’s episode reveals the true content of this sacrifice. Coins, in a way, are symbols of all worldly projects, power, and vice: these would have been emblazoned with the head of the King. But for these ascetics, the pennies themselves carry no value but as a metaphor. They are only part of a symbolic movement, separating old lives from new and marking the transfer of allegiance from one sovereign to another, truer One. This is signaled most obviously by the shift from the worldly and towards the renunciatory, their lives as a “new man,” that follows each figure’s gift of a penny.

Following the penny episode, Wulfric immediately began a harsh renunciatory process and a transition to the life of an anchorite. He began by abstaining from meat. But that was followed by a rapid escalation of his asceticism, from enclosing himself at Haselbury to

strict fasting, straining and striving to wring out all natural comeliness and restore to himself the beauty of holiness through extremes of abstinence and watching. And indeed the bloom of youth and, speaking in human terms, good looks that passed the ordinary, were dried up in no time at all as the breath of the Lord,

⁵¹ Eph. 4:22-24.

blowing on him, blew it all away, until, with the skin barely clinging to his bones, the wasted flesh bodied forth no longer the carnal man, but the spiritual.⁵²

He prayed rather than slept, taking short naps while remaining upright only when necessity forced him. His days were punctuated by his nightly cold bath, after which he would put on a hair shirt underneath armor. He practiced the self-discipline of silence.⁵³ Christina, similarly, bore extreme hardship while enclosed:

O what trials she had to bear of cold and heat, hunger and thirst, daily fasting! The confined space would not allow her to wear even the necessary clothing when she was cold. The airless little enclosure became stifling when she was hot. 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 from her nostril.⁵⁴

When she felt the creeping temptations of lust in her cell, Christina “violently resisted the desires of her flesh, lest her own members should become the agents of wickedness against her. Long fastings, little food, and that only of raw herbs, a measure of water to drink, nights spent without sleep, harsh scourgings.”⁵⁵

But this extreme asceticism was only the bodily symptom of their new lives, straining towards God. Both Wulfric and Christina’s gift of a new life from God is not marked only by asceticism, but by wonder-working: healing, visions, prophecies, and visitations from demons, angels, and even Christ himself. Wulfric was blessed with “the fragrance of the prophetic gift.”⁵⁶ In a way, of course, his visions could not be separate from the world upon which he depended on for food and sustenance while enclosed. He frequently envisioned the coming

⁵² John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 102.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 103-4, 107.

⁵⁴ Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 104-5.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁶ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 111.

deaths of prominent men and women in the community.⁵⁷ Likewise, visions sometimes occurred to those around him in order to serve Wulfric's own short-term ends of necessity: during one winter, when Wulfric was frozen inside his cell, a man not so far away received a vision bidding him to give Wulfric a coverlet of fox fur.⁵⁸ These visions, whose subjects inevitably dealt with the world in which he still lived, were seen undoubtedly as the workings of the Divine. This was made most clear by a holy visitation which came to Wulfric. Wulfric's servant boy had run out to find some necessary thing ("a staple"). During this time, a stranger came to Wulfric's window and told him that he had failed to tell his confessor of a sin. Wulfric, shocked at this stranger's mysterious knowledge, agreed to remember to confess of this sin in the future. The stranger replied: "Know that your dwelling-place is made ready in heaven and lacks only one staple to bring it to completion." After the visitation, he realized that it must have been "one of the angelic host, or...the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the king of glory." This episode simultaneously reveals the fallibility of this man who remained all too human and his in-between existence in the world, fallible but close to perfection and as removed as possible from the world already.

Christina's asceticism was a symptom of her desire to be with God. When she felt lust for a cleric living alongside her, she tried to expunge it through harsh ascetic practices. Her hagiographer notes, however, that little could abate the inward feeling which made her think that "the clothes which clung to her body might be set on fire."⁵⁹ Not even when the cleric, the object of her passion, renounced her, did this fire cool. But then one day, after she had prayed and wept and begged for freedom from earthly desire, Christ Himself appeared to her in the guise of a

⁵⁷ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 188, 190-1, 200, 202.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 130-1.

⁵⁹ Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 117.

child. He curled up to her breast and “with immeasurable delight she held Him.” At this delight, “the fire of lust was so completely extinguished that never afterwards could it be revived.”⁶⁰ Her asceticism alone could not fully transform her from lustful and worldly to pure and saintly. Rather, only through a vision of Christ’s presence in her new life, could she overcome her human desires and transform.

Both Wulfric and Christina offer up their lives as sacrifice to God. The penny which both give away at the beginning of their hagiographies symbolizes this oblation of themselves and signals the putting away of their old selves, to turn towards the clothing of the new. They enclose themselves, exclude themselves, and scourge themselves to reach towards the new life God has promised to them. Ultimately, however, the “new life” for which they sacrificed their old is not merely the anchoritic cell, with its prayers, confessions, fasting, and self-discipline. Rather, their “new life” is the future perfection that both received as a gift from God in the moment when both offered a penny to God: their sacrifice becomes a transformative exchange. Two insignificant pennies are offered in return for infinite divine grace, which disrupts the logic of worldly exchange. Of course, even as the penny symbolizes the radical transformation of Christina and Wulfric into ascetics, it also serves as a reminder of the inability of the ascetic to totally break away from the material, the commercial, and the social. Christina and Wulfric reside in between the earthly and spiritual, neither fully alive nor fully dead in their closed-off cells. They cannot help but be implicated in the world as long as they are alive, but they certainly turn away from it towards a new, transformed realm of life.

⁶⁰ Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 119.

Chapter II Divine Economy and Extravagance

The anchorite sat at the heart of the community, rooted to the parish church. As such, she was completely dependent upon the alms and patronage of the community that surrounded her. The *Ancrene Wisse*, the thirteenth-century anchoritic rulebook, captured the tension between the penitential ascetic imperative of the anchorhold and the anchorite's responsibility to care for her body: "Although the flesh is our enemy, we are told that we should support it. We can make it suffer, as it very often deserves, but not destroy it completely; because however weak it may be, it is still so coupled and so closely linked to our precious soul, God's own image, that we might easily kill the one along with the other..."⁶¹ Although the anchorite turned away from the world, she still required worldly support. As Ann Warren writes in *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*:

Clearly many anchorites must have received promises of support from friends and relatives in the first flowering of their decision to become recluses. But such support, if not well documented legally, could wane as time passed. What had begun as a spontaneous gift could become an irksome demand after years of enclosure, and payments might cease to be made.⁶²

The anchorite had no guarantee of an income if she did not enter into a contract with a patron. Otherwise, she was at the behest of alms-givers and the surrounding community. Her existence was a purposeful denial of the customary demands of the world; but in return, her continued existence was utterly contingent on the support of others. Yet this support became only one part of an exchange between the anchorite and the surrounding community: the anchorite became the nexus of a spiritual economy, an exchange of spiritual works for material support. Such spiritual

⁶¹ Bella Millett, trans., *Ancrene Wisse: Guide for Anchoresses, A Translation, based on Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402.* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), 3.12.

⁶² Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons*, 43.

works often took the form of healing. However, these healings had a dramatic counterpart. In the *Vitae* of both Wulfric and Christina, the failure of a layperson to discharge their duty in this spiritual economy—their disruption of this economy—inevitably leads to divine punishment, even death. This in turn complicates the status of the anchorite in this seemingly dyadic exchange. The powers of miracle, both good and ill, never emanate from the anchorite alone, but rather from the intervention of God. The spiritual economy presented in these hagiographies defies the worldly logic of exchange, for gifts are not repaid by the recipient, but by a third variable, God Himself.

The clerical discussion of the anchorite's relationship to the community emphasizes the community's dependence upon the anchorite, rather than the anchorite's vulnerability. Even though the anchorite appeared to be an unproductive burden at the center of the village, she had a communal function to play. The author of the *Ancrene Wisse* capitalizes upon the false homonyms 'ancre' (anchorite) and 'ancre' (anchor) to suggest such a function of the anchorite:

The night-bird in the eaves signifies recluses, who live under the eaves of the church so they may understand that they ought to lead such a holy life that all Holy Church—that is, Christian people—can lean on them and be supported by them, and that they should hold it up with their holiness of life and their blessed prayers. That is why the anchoress [*ancre*] is called an 'anchor' [*ancre*], and anchored under the church like an anchor under the side of a ship to hold the ship, so that waves and storms do not capsize it. Just so, all Holy Church (which is described as a ship) should anchor on the anchoress, for her to hold it so that the devil's blasts, which are temptations, do not blow it over.⁶³

Below the Holy Church hangs its anchor, the anchorite, who holds the holy Ship steadfast through her prayers. This imagery was not only the product of false homonyms; after all, the cell of the anchorite was frequently positioned adjacent to the nave of the Church—"nave" being

⁶³ Millett, *Ancrene Wisse*, 3.13.

derived from *navis*, medieval Latin for “ship.” The anchorite was the metaphorical anchor of the Church constituted by all Christian believers just as the anchorhold itself was physically anchored to the nave of the physical church in each community. This wealth of symbols clearly illustrates that even as the anchorite took the physical support of her surrounding community, she was seen by that community—or the community was instructed to see her— as supporting the community in turn.

John of Forde, Wulfric of Haselbury’s hagiographer, attempts to justify support of Wulfric by appealing to this spiritual economy. John acknowledges that “much was offered to the man of God, and of this the greater part was accepted.”⁶⁴ The personal wealth of Wulfric seems abundant. John recounts the story of Wulfric’s cunning servant, who stole from him, “sheep and cattle as well as gold and silver and precious vestments.”⁶⁵ This servant’s ability to take so much from Wulfric indicates that the anchorite possessed a great deal of wealth. In response, perhaps, to the questions this wealth—of an ascetic, no less—may raise, John quickly gives two justifications for Wulfric’s acceptance of such gifts. First, he claims, “for the rich to present themselves before him empty-handed with their petitions would not have been fitting.”⁶⁶ That is, the spiritual support—as an “anchor” of the community—that Wulfric offers in response to these petitions cannot go without compensation, or an exchange, of some kind. Second, John specifies that the wealth Wulfric receives is not for his own benefit (“for he himself kept within unvarying norms of simplicity and poverty”) but rather for the benefit of the poor and the parish church to

⁶⁴ John of Forde, *Life of Wulfric*, 151.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

which he was attached. The parish church received from Wulfric those “books and phylacteries⁶⁷ and precious vestments” he received from others; the remaining wealth he “poured out” on “Christ’s poor men of Forde.”⁶⁸

This reciprocity of the spiritual and the material is found throughout Wulfric’s *Vita*. At various times in the text, laypeople far and wide receive dreams instructing them to bring Wulfric



Fig. 3.1. King Stephen visits Wulfric.
Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites*, 149.

gifts. One of them is a man from Bristol, nearly fifty miles away from Haselbury. He receives a dream that bids him take “the new coverlet of fox-skin he had laid on his bed” to Wulfric in order to keep him warm.⁶⁹ The man immediately “jumped up to obey the divine command” as soon as he woke up and travels with his servants to bring Wulfric the coverlet. In return, “they bore home the fruit of a blessing for themselves

and the one who had sent them.” (131) The men exchange a fox coverlet for a blessing from the holy man. In a similar story, a sick woman dreams that she should take Wulfric some expensive cloth to cover a book, and in return she would be healed. She takes this cloth and Wulfric heals her. Wulfric needs the cloth, John of Forde reveals, because he spends his days, when not in prayer or contemplation, copying books for himself and for his parish church. Here, again, we see material support exchanged for spiritual fruits. Unlike

⁶⁷ From the note by the translator, Matarasso: “*phylacteriis* — a word with a wide range of reference, here probably objects connected with the saints. We know that Wulfric possessed a considerable collection of relics.” John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 232.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 130-1.

the man from Bristol, who took away only a blessing, this woman is healed miraculously of a mysterious ailment. Yet these accounts also seem to suggest two separate exchanges operating in parallel to one another: there is a spiritual exchange (the woman provides the cloth; the woman is healed) and a material exchange (the woman provides the cloth; Wulfric gives books to the community). The material support to Wulfric circulates back into the community. The spiritual payment, the blessing or the healing, is in excess.

Wulfric's healings frequently appear to be involuntary, a function of his physical body rather than an act of will. John of Forde records Wulfric's healing of a whole number of the afflicted, from demoniacs to the dumb. He frequently notes that this healing comes "at his hand."⁷⁰ For example, Wulfric cures a dumb man when, "as the saint was making the sign of the cross on the mute's face, the latter opened his mouth wide and the saint touched the back of his tongue, which he was sticking out as far as he could, and loosed it."⁷¹ Like the woman healed by touching Jesus' robe without his knowledge,⁷² some find healing powers in the Wulfric's touch, even without his knowledge. Wulfric's healing of the dumb man, for instance, was "all unknowing."⁷³ In another case, a bystander takes Wulfric's hand to place it on a sick man, forcibly healing the man.⁷⁴ These accounts of miracles appear to interpret Wulfric's physical body as the catalyst for healing. His physical, material form seems capable of conjuring spiritual effects.

⁷⁰ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 131.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷² Mark 5:28.

⁷³ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 115.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 150-1.

Although Wulfric's physical form seems to transmute healing and blessing to its recipients, however, his hagiographer attempts to distance Wulfric himself from such effects in other parts of his *Vita*. As seen above, the healing is frequently unknowing and involuntary. Sometimes Wulfric, unbeknownst to himself, appears in the dreams of the sick: on one occasion, Wulfric appears to a demoniac in his sleep who discovers himself healed the next morning.⁷⁵ In several instances, John of Forde seems to distance Wulfric from the miracles enacted. When a father comes to Wulfric to cure his son of insomnia, Wulfric instructs him to ask the monks at Forde Abbey to recite the Lord's Prayer three times and thus cure him. The father asks: "But why, sir, are you unwilling to pray for him yourself?" The reply came back magnificent in its simplicity: 'I could have obtained this from my Lord on my own; how much more all of you?'⁷⁶ This distancing of power from Wulfric is apparent in a scene in which John of Forde attributes some responsibility for the healing to the sick person herself. A virgin with severe abdominal pain woke up with her disorder totally vanished for she recalled that "the holy man of Haselbury" had come to her in a dream with holy water he held out to her. But John of Forde emphasizes that the responsibility for this miracle is not in Wulfric's hands alone; rather, "the virgin too had some share in the glory of this miracle, seeing that through the ancient privilege of virginity, healing now came to a virgin of itself, instead of her betaking herself to healing."⁷⁷

John of Forde distances Wulfric from these miracles because these miracles are not Wulfric's, but God's alone. At another time, Wulfric heals a demoniac not through his own appearance or touch, but by forcing him to stand in the back of the church as he performs mass,

⁷⁵ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 176-7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

“so that the unclean spirit might be blown away by the sight of the sacred elements and by hearing the words of power.”⁷⁸ It is not Wulfric, but the words of the mass, which John of Forde presents as the cure. Through some difficulty, the man is exorcised. In an echo of a theme in Jesus’ ministry,⁷⁹ Wulfric demands that the healed man and all witnesses do not tell others of the healing. That night, however, Wulfric dreams of a voice that warns him that he cannot allow others to remain quiet about his abilities. Rather, he must “speak confidently of the works of power the Lord will do through you, and bid others do the same.”⁸⁰ Wulfric may speak of, and allows others to testify to, these works, for they are not of his doing; it is “through” Wulfric that these works occur. Wulfric is merely a material channel for the miraculous power of God. It is not Wulfric, but the Lord, who is the true physician.⁸¹ As John of Forde notes, citing 1 Corinthians, “strong, too, are those who are prompted by the Holy Spirit in the midst of all this honor to glory not in it, nor in themselves, but in the Lord.”⁸² As a mere channel for the Divine, Wulfric becomes a nexus of the exchanges played out through him: the material gifts he receives recirculate into the community, just as the intervention of God manifests through him, unconsciously.

Christina of Markyate’s *Vita* focuses upon exchange through the relationship which emerges between Christina and her patron, the abbot Geoffrey. In the years after she escaped her parents and forced betrothal, Christina underwent a host of trials and temptations while enclosed as an anchoress, from physical austerities to the appearance of demons to torment her. Her

⁷⁸ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 112.

⁷⁹ E.g. Mark 7:36.

⁸⁰ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 112.

⁸¹ Mark 2:17.

⁸² John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 113. Cf. 1 Cor. 1:31: “...as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

hagiographer is keen to demonstrate that Christina learned to overcome these travails and became unaffected by such hardships. Just as the *Ancrene Wisse* instructs anchoresses to behave, Christina “would not receive what she needed from anyone unless it was prompted by spiritual love and holy compassion.”⁸³ Nevertheless, her hagiographer simultaneously argues for Christina’s need of support, bringing attention to the discordance between her alleged intentions and her physical necessities. He emphasizes that she is caught “in the crucible of poverty,” unable as an anchoress to provide for herself.⁸⁴ Only through the intervention of “He who knew her secrets”—that is, her true bridegroom, Christ—does Christina find material relief through the miraculous arrival of Geoffrey, the abbot of St. Alban’s, who soon becomes her patron. This patronage has a reciprocal element. It seems to be an exact exchange: “He supported her in worldly matters: she commended him to God more earnestly in her prayers.”⁸⁵ From its inception, their relationship explicitly centers on the exchange of his material wealth for her spiritual works: “it was through this man that God decided to provide for her needs and it was through His virgin that He decided to bring about this man’s full conversion.”⁸⁶ Christina prompts for Abbot Geoffrey’s “full conversion” into a new, saintly life in return for economic support. Like Wulfric, Christina is a mere catalyst for this conversion, a channel for the Divine. The spiritual economy between lay-person and anchorite is in fact a *divine* economy, one in which God plays an active role.

This divine economy is not dyadic, but triadic, for it simultaneously implicates God, anchorite, and lay-person. Wulfric receives material goods, which circulate back into the

⁸³ Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 133.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 139-41.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

community. The laypeople that give these material goods are repaid not by the anchorite, but by God. In an especially gruesome episode, when a man who had been traveling to see Wulfric stopped along the way to relieve himself, “he happened to push out his own rectum.” In response, he called out to Wulfric and “while faith, supplied with argument by need, was setting up this clamor, behold! a heaven-sent hand placed itself courteously on the extruded part and gently pushed it back into its place.”⁸⁷ It is Wulfric that is invoked, but evidently the hand that truly effects the miracle is “heaven-sent.” John of Forde distances Wulfric from his wonder-working. This distance opens up room for the community to see God’s active intervention in the world, particularly in this triadic spiritual economy. God uses Wulfric as healer and Christina as visionary to enact wonders in the world. John of Forde continually remarks upon God’s active presence in Wulfric’s anchorhold. He writes: “a certain divine power was seen as keeping vigil on the very threshold of the holy man, so that salvation dwelt in his halls and praise in his gateways.”⁸⁸ It is not only the physicality of the anchorite, but the physical dwelling of the anchorite, that is suffused with the presence of the Divine. The anchorite is like a lightning-rod of the Divine, channeling its power in one place: “The spirit of God rested on blessed Wulfric.”⁸⁹

This triadic economy of man, anchorite, and God, however, does not only involve miracles, visions, and prophecies. These miracles have dangerous counterparts, which manifest when the external community fails to participate in, or actively disrupts, this economy. There are a series of stories of such disruption throughout Wulfric’s *Vita*. The lady Joan, wife of “the powerful Durand de Mohun and sister of the lord of Haselbury,” sends two servants to Wulfric

⁸⁷Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 178-9.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

with bread, pasties, and wine. Along the way, the servants agree to take their own share of each and hide it before accompanying the rest to the anchorite. But before they arrive, a servant of Wulfric intercepts them, relaying a message from the holy man, to “forbid them on pain of death from eating any of what they have stolen and laid aside for themselves.” When the servants guiltily returned to the hidden share, they found the wine swarming with venomous tadpoles and the breads crawling with maggots, after which they begged for Wulfric’s pardon.⁹⁰ These stories take a particular form: Food is sent to Wulfric from a wealthy donor or loyal layperson, only to be intercepted. Wulfric prophetically knows of this wrongdoing from his cell and, soon, after, the wrongdoers face punishment. In most of these incidents, the punishments appear reformatory. A loaf of stolen bread bleeds when cut, or turns to rock: these act as signs to the thieves to beg for Wulfric’s pardon.

Yet some of these punishments far exceed any reformatory end. The stealing servant mentioned earlier, “seduced by money-making,” stole from Wulfric “to keep himself and the whore to whom he cleaved.” Within a year, however, “he was condemned to such poverty that he had nowhere to lay his head....he hardly found short breeches to cover his sinful flesh.”⁹¹ This narrative appears similar to the parable of the Prodigal Son—a wayward man takes money and wastes it, only to find himself in poverty. However, John of Forde does not interpret this anecdote in this mode at all. The servant did not receive, like the Prodigal Son, but stole. Therefore, his poverty is a punishment, a condemnation from God rather than a condition for his redemption. Even more striking is the tale John of Forde tells of the cellarer at Montacute, a nearby monastery. There was “an agreement” to furnish Wulfric with food, but over time, the

⁹⁰ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 195.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 194-5.

monastery's cellarer increasingly grumbled about giving food to Wulfric's servant and eventually began refusing to give altogether. One day, when, to the surprise of John of Forde, the cellarer visited Wulfric, he was received with a meal "as hospitality required." Yet at the end of the meal, Wulfric cried out: "'Up to now,' he exclaimed, 'you have crossed me and made my spirit bitter; let God now judge between you and me.'" But the cellarer, despite this hospitality and pronounced judgment, continued to refuse food and speak ill of Wulfric, until one day Wulfric cursed: "May God this day, take that man's food away who has taken mine from me!" As John of Forde writes, "And it happened that very day that the cellarer on his mortal journey, was swept away in a sudden flood and, meeting a fearful end, fell into the hand of God."⁹²

This is a shocking moment in the text. It seems as though Wulfric himself brought death upon the cellarer who defied him. Indeed, John of Forde feels anxious enough about this moment to clarify that the meaning of this horrific scene is not as clear as it may seem:

Now this is slippery ground where I personally watch my feet, and I would advise you to do the same for fear of stumbling, as it is still dark. I say this to forestall any rush to premature judgment—whether to predict this man's eternal death or the salvation of his soul when and if God should so decide—and arriving at an over-hasty verdict about a death which consists at present in the destruction of the body. It is, moreover, the height of blind presumption and a temptation passing human strength to seek rashly to determine matters which lie for now beyond our mortal day, and which, referred to the hearing of a higher court, are the preserve of God alone.⁹³

Although Wulfric may seem to be the cause of the cellarer's death, it is "the preserve of God alone" to know why he died. Wulfric himself is, in the end, only mortal; it is God who decides the fate of individuals. Although Wulfric is the one who curses, it is clearly not he who brings the flood to kill the cellarer. Indeed, following this anecdote John of Forde recalls Wulfric "battering

⁹² John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 147-8.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 148-9.

the ears of Gods and his friends alike with his lamentations” for the death, even if of an enemy.⁹⁴ The manifest reason for the cellarer’s death is his breaking of the “covenant” with Wulfric to provide food. Yet the significance of this death comes not from the withholding of food from Wulfric—after all, this is the ascetic who purposefully ate as little as possible, “who picked at rather than ate.”⁹⁵ It is not the food, but the “covenant” the monastery made to support Wulfric, which is of importance. Just as all exchanges with Wulfric implicate God, all covenants with him are symbols for that greater covenant that the people of God have with the Lord. And as it is in the words of Jeremiah, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Cursed be anyone who does not heed the words of this covenant.”⁹⁶

The death of the cellarer is mirrored in the similar death of a blasphemer. Two companions came to listen to Wulfric’s teachings. One listened “like a parched land thirsting for rain,” whereas the other recoiled, yelling and running out: “How long are you going to talk with that fool, that country bumpkin? I’m not waiting for you any longer.” With that, he ran outside, “suddenly and fearfully seized by the evil spirit to whom he had yielded himself, and went on his way to perdition with the fury of the Lord in his wake, which caught him in due turn.” But how the “fury of the Lord” had caught him is not evident until, much later, his companion left to find him and discovered him “lying slain in his own blood.”⁹⁷ The blasphemy was rooted in a dismissal of Wulfric’s teachings, his gift to the two visitors. Wulfric’s teachings were, of course, not his, but God’s. By rejecting Wulfric’s teachings, the blasphemer rejected participation in the divine economy and God Himself. Like the cellarer, then, the blasphemer disrupts the circle of

⁹⁴ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 149.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁹⁶ Jeremiah 11:3.

⁹⁷ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 201-2.

exchange between Wulfric and his community. Insofar as he disrupted this exchange, then, he was delivered into the “fury of the Lord.”

This God is not the God of love, but of the devouring fire.⁹⁸ He seems to be the smiting God of Sodom and Gomorrah, rather than a forgiving and salvific God. John of Forde’s interpretation of the cellarer’s death in particular, however, appeals to both Old and New Testaments. His citations do not reflect a coherent theology, but a positive conception of the layperson’s responsibility to the anchorite, and thus God. The story of the cellarer begins: “This mildness of temper [of Wulfric] was once brought to a fall; and woe to that man through whom the falling come!”⁹⁹ This seems to contradict John of Forde’s attempt to distance Wulfric from the death itself, attributing the death to Wulfric’s anger. Reference to the biblical passage he cites, however, uncovers why he links Wulfric to the cellarer’s death here: “Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!”¹⁰⁰ The cellarer’s withholding of food is a stumbling block. Without food, Wulfric cannot continue his practice. Yet he cannot also keep, John of Forde implies, his “mildness of temper,” his contemplative repose within the cell. The cellarer’s actions disrupts the anchorite’s saintly life. In order to justify the consequences of this disruption, the hagiographer appeals to two texts: the Book of Joshua, the sixth book of the Hebrew Bible, and the Epistle to the Hebrews, a text of the New Testament. By failing to hold to their promise of support, Montacute, and the cellarer, “broke their covenant” with Wulfric,¹⁰¹ just as the Israelites, in the words of God as recorded in the Book of Joshua, “transgressed my covenant that I

⁹⁸ Deut. 4:24 (cf. Heb. 12:29); 1 John 4:8.

⁹⁹ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 147.

¹⁰⁰ Matt. 18:7.

¹⁰¹ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 147.

imposed on them. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have acted deceitfully, and they have put them among their own belongings.”¹⁰² The withholding of the cellarer—and, implicitly, each anecdote of withheld support throughout Wulfric’s *Vita*—repeats the transgression of the Israelites. It also reinscribes the connection between the anchorite and God, for the covenant with Wulfric reflects the covenant with God. Finally, John of Forde writes that in the moment when the flood sweeps away the cellarer, he “fell into the hand of God.”¹⁰³ His gloss here directly cites Hebrews: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”¹⁰⁴ These scriptural citations reflect the connection John of Forde makes throughout: to act in relation to an anchorite is to act in relation to God, with all the ensuing rewards and punishments as a result.

Christina’s hagiography only alludes to this motif of punishment. Throughout her *Vita*, her hagiographer records the gossip and slander about her: “some of them called her a dreamer, others a seducer of souls, others, more moderately, just a worldly-wise business woman: that is, what was a gift of God they attributed to earthly prudence. Others who could think of nothing better to say spread the rumour that she was attracted to the abbot by earthly love.”¹⁰⁵ This slander, mentioned throughout the text,¹⁰⁶ and especially directed at Christina’s vulnerable position as an independent woman in this isolating practice, is briefly addressed by the hagiographer: “so jealously did Christ watch over His handmaid that if any molested her, they were visited with swift punishment or afflicted with some bodily ailment, so that we heard that

¹⁰² Joshua 7:11.

¹⁰³ John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 148.

¹⁰⁴ Heb. 10:31.

¹⁰⁵ Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 171-5.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 131, 149.

one was stricken with blindness, another had died without the sacraments, others were eaten up with envy and lost all the reputation for holiness which they had once enjoyed.”¹⁰⁷

Although there are no explicit anecdotes of punishment in Christina’s *Vita* as they are in Wulfric’s, the mechanism of punishment and exchange appears to be the same, along the lines of the *Ancrene Wisse*’s understanding of suffering as an anchorite. The *Ancrene Wisse* uses two metaphors, that of the file and of the rod, to illustrate the role that outside slanderers performed for the anchorite. Those who harm the anchorite, whether through words or action, are like a file, “filing away all your rust and your roughness of sin; because he wears himself away, I’m afraid, as the file does, but he makes your soul smooth and bright.”¹⁰⁸ Or, that person “is God’s rod; God beats and chastises you with them as a father beats the son he loves with a rod...But anyone who is God’s rod should not be at all proud of himself; because just as the father, when he has beaten his child enough and disciplined it properly, throws the rod into the fire, since it is of no further use, so the Father of heaven, when he has beaten his dear child with a bad man or a bad woman for its own good, throws the rod, that is, the bad person, into the fire of hell.”¹⁰⁹ In both *Vitae*, God “jealously” keeps watch over the anchorite, simultaneously ensuring that His people are caring for His representative and forming His representative through the trials experienced.¹¹⁰

The anchorite was a vulnerable and exceptional member of the community. Wulfric and Christina both exhibit ascetic and prophetic capabilities. Their spiritual gifts are not of them, but of God. Their own power cannot extend outside of the cells to which they have confined themselves. As good anchorites, they do not even “peep out” of their cell to uncover their body

¹⁰⁷ Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 171.

¹⁰⁸ Millett, *Ancrene Wisse*, 4.9.

¹⁰⁹ Millett, *Ancrene Wisse*, 4.10.

¹¹⁰ Talbot, *The Life of Christina*, 171; John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric*, 149.

from its walled-in enclosure.¹¹¹ Yet they must allow the gifts of laypeople penetrate the chastity of the cell, in order that they may maintain their own religious practice. The gifts of food and other necessary items that the villagers give the anchorites are not, therefore, really part of a direct exchange. They are, instead, materially unproductive investments in a person who will never leave their small dwelling, will never make much of consequence, and will never be a significant portion of the local economy; these items are, in short, a sacrifice. But all sacrifices are *to* something, and it is in this case that the triadic form of the exchange emerges. The actions of the anchorites that do penetrate the boundary of the walls of the cell are not enacted by the anchorites themselves, but by God: visions, healings, and punishments all come from a “heaven-sent hand.” Henry Mayr-Harting appeals to a sociological reason for these dramatic moments of punishment in Wulfric’s *Vita*: “The fact that Wulfric could not rely on any formal endowment for his food is doubtless what made him so ferocious and vindictive where his food supply was concerned.”¹¹² The hagiographers of Wulfric and Christina do not, however, see the anchorites’ relation to the community in this way. Rather, they show the anchorites as channels for God’s active intervention in the world. The relations between lay-person and anchorite are part of a triadic exchange with the Divine, of both spiritual and divine goods. The anchorite turns away from society, withdraws, in order to rip a hole in the worldly web of utilitarian and monetary calculation to open up a space where “a certain divine power” can reside, both in the hands of the anchorite and her own physical dwelling.

¹¹¹ Millett, *Ancrene Wisse*, 2.3.

¹¹² Henry Mayr-Harting, “Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse,” *History* 60, no. 200 (1975), 347.

Conclusion

What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary?

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

The anchorite strikes a note in contemporary readers—perhaps a discordant one, to ape Nietzsche. It sounds strange, giving up the view of the horizon and the liberty to roam it. The notion of such purposeful solitude, without even Walden Pond for consolation, is bizarre in a world in which the increasingly dominant form of recreational media is social. Nonetheless, the anxieties one faces when one looks at the anchorite are anxieties that even the medievals must have felt. It is this discordance of the anchorite which is precisely her significance to the hagiographers of Wulfric and Christina. To John of Forde and the anonymous hagiographer at St. Alban's, the anchorite is a dichotomy, both radically dependent upon and radically separate from society.

The theme of exchange throughout both *Vitae* appears concretized in the symbolic penny and illustrated through the language of relationality between anchorite, lay-person, and God. For both Christina's and Wulfric's hagiographers, the penny symbolizes the exchange they make, shedding the old life for the new. As this account demonstrates, however, this exchange is profoundly asymmetrical. Their old lives, by the account of the hagiographers, are practically worthless, just like the mediocre pennies Christina and Wulfric give. In contrast, their new lives offer the possibility of sainthood. The hagiographers' symbolic use of the pennies, therefore, defies the profane logic of exchange. Rather, the use of the pennies takes on the sacred and disruptive form of a sacrifice. Similarly, the triadic relations between the anchorite, the lay-person, and God defy the customarily dyadic worldly exchange. This divine economy disrupts

the worldly expectation that the anchorite would, nonetheless, carry on wholly as a member of the community. Instead, this divine economy demonstrates that the anchorite occupies a disruptive position in the society, one for which there is nonetheless both an expectation and promise to support.

To the German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel, exchange and sacrifice themselves bear a reciprocal relation. Exchange necessarily involves sacrifice, for it is a process of mutual sacrifice: “economic exchange—whether it is of objects of labour or labour power invested in objects—always signifies the sacrifice of an otherwise useful good, however much eudaemonistic gain is involved.”¹¹³ The worker sacrifices his time and labor-power to create an object, for which the consumer sacrifices labor or objects of their own. Even in an “isolated economy,” an economy of one, a singular person must sacrifice something of themselves in order to grasp an object of nature.¹¹⁴ Exchange underlies all human relationality, even when one is alone. For Simmel, money itself is only a metaphor for the economic value, the desire and willingness to sacrifice for an object, that two subjects see in an object.

The *Vitae* of Christina and Wulfric illustrate a crucial distinction in Simmel’s work that must be preserved. It is all too easy to assume the Simmel means to say that commercial, bipartite exchange underlies all human relationality. His emphasis that exchange exists even in an isolated economy of one, however, illustrates that human being does not necessitate *commercial* exchange. Rather, as the *Vitae* demonstrate, exchange is merely a form through which human relations are constituted, one which need not necessarily appear in a

¹¹³ Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (London: Routledge, 2011), 87. Cf. Susan Mizruchi, *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

straightforwardly dyadic shape. The themes in the *Vitae* of Wulfric and Christina reflect the ever-pervasive motif of exchange and sacrifice Simmel recognizes. Between the profane and the sacred, the anchorite's exchange relationships are necessarily complicated by what seems to be divine asymmetry and excess. In their new lives as anchorites, Wulfric and Christina receive disproportionately infinite grace and those that fail to support them suffer disproportionately. These hagiographers play with this theme of exchange because, as Simmel suggests, exchange and sacrifice undergird all human relations.

What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? Is it one in which the occupant physically separates themselves away from said fellows, and the world altogether? Likely not: Christina and Wulfric are hardly alone in their cells, by their hagiographer's account. Each night during their watches, the Devil, demons, angels, miraculous toads, visions of saints or their families or their parish priest, or even Christ Himself came to visit. During the day, they gave teachings to kings, courtiers, farmers, foreign visitors, and clerics alike. Of course, in accordance with the counsel of the *Ancrene Wisse* and according to their hagiographers, they did not speak much. Admittedly, too, one has no epistemic insight into the lived experience of Christina and Wulfric themselves. Loneliness may very well have been part of daily life for the anchorite. Our modern aversion to loneliness, however, should not preclude understanding that some truly desired such solitude. As Søren Kierkegaard, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, writes:

In general, the urge for solitude is a sign that there is after all spirit in a person and the measure of what spirit there is. So little do chattering nonentities and socializers feel the need for solitude that, like love-birds, if left alone for an instant they promptly die. As the little child must be lulled to sleep, so these need the soothing hushaby of social life to be able to eat, drink, sleep, pray, fall in love,

etc. It isn't only in the Middle Ages that people have been aware of this need for solitude, but also in antiquity there was respect for what it means; while in the never-ending sociality of our own day one shrinks from solitude to the point of not knowing to what use to put it except (oh! excellent epigram) the punishment of law-breakers. Yet it is true; in our own day it is indeed a crime to have spirit, so the fact that such people, the lovers of solitude, are put into the same category as criminals is just as it should be.¹¹⁵

Christina and Wulfic's hagiographers' emphasis on exchange demonstrates that there was no way for the anchorite to fully disengage from society. The anchorite was dichotomous precisely because she required the community to support her solitary condition. The significance of the anchorite is not merely, however, that communities supported individuals in this particular practice. In the face of a modern society which inflicts solitude as punishment, the anchorite demonstrates that there was a form of human being, in the not-so-distant past, that gives us an example of an attempt to escape society altogether in order to live a life of spirit outside of the economic.

¹¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 95.



Fig 4.1 An anchorite's window at St. Nicholas, Crompton.

Bibliography

PRIMARY SOURCES

“Athanasius of Alexandria: Vita S. Antoni [Life of St. Antony].” In *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters, Vol. IV of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II*, edited by Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971.

“The Life of St. Godric of Finchale by Reginald of Durham.” In *Medieval England, 1000-1500: A Reader*. Edited by Emilie Amt. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2001.

Bernard of Clairvaux. *The Life and Death of Saint Malachy, the Irishman*. Translated and annotated by Robert T. Meyer. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1978.

John of Forde, *The Life of Wulfric of Haselbury*. Translated by Pauline Matarasso. Collegeville, Minn.: Cisterican Publications, 2011.

Millett, Bella, trans. *Ancrene Wisse: Guide for Anchoresses, A Translation, based on Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009.

Talbot, C.H., trans. and ed. *The Life of Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth Century Recluse*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959.

The Venerable St. Bede, *Life of Cuthbert* (Cambridge: Penguin Books, 2011).

SECONDARY SOURCES

Albertson, Clinton, ed. *Anglo-Saxon Saints and Heroes*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1967.

Allen, Martin. *Mints and Money in Medieval England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Arppe, Tiina. "Sacred Violence: Girard, Bataille and the Vicissitudes of Human Desire." *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 10.2 (2009): 31-58.

Anchoritism in the Middle Ages: Texts and Traditions. Edited by Catherine Innes-Parker and Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013.

Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages. Edited by Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005.

- Bartlett, Robert. *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.
- Bataille, Georges. *Theory of Religion*. New York: Zone Books, 1989.
- — —. *The Accursed Share, Volume I: Consumption*. New York: Zone Books, 1988.
- — —. *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*. New York: Walker and Company, 1962.
- Baudrillard, Jean. "When Bataille Attacked the Metaphysical Principle of Economy." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 15 (1991): 135-138.
- Bolton, J.L. *Money in the Medieval English Economy, 973-1489*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012.
- Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. London: Faber and Faber, 1989.
- — —. "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity." *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 61 (1971): 80-101.
- Burton-Christie, Douglas. *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Jesus as Mother*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.
- — —. *Metamorphosis and Identity*. New York: Zone Books, 2001.
- Cartlidge, Neil. *Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100-1300*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997.
- Clay, Mary Rotha. *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*. London: Methuen, 1914.
- Darwin, Francis D.S. *The English Medieval Recluse*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1944.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Carol Cosman and edited by Mark S. Cladis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

- Elkins, Sharon K. *Holy Women of Twelfth Century England*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1988.
- Fanou, Samuel, and Henrietta Leyser, ed. *Christina of Markyate: A twelfth-century holy woman*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Farmer, David Hugh. *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Flood, Gavin. *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory, and Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Georgianna, Linda. *The Solitary Self: Individuality in the Ancrene Wisse*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Gunn, Cate. *Ancrene Wisse: From Pastoral Literature to Vernacular Spirituality*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008.
- Harmless, William. *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Harpham, Geoffrey. "Asceticism and the Compensations of Art," in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- — —. *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Head, Thomas. "The Marriages of Christina of Markyate," *Viator* 21 (1990) 75-101.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. New York: Penguin Books, 1989).
- Licence, Tom. *Hermits and Recluses in English Society, 950-1200*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Mayr-Harting, Henry. "Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse," *History* 60, no. 200 (1975), 337-352.
- McAvoy, Liz Herbert, ed. *Medieval Anchoritisms: Gender, Space, and the Solitary Life*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2011.
- — —, ed. *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place, and Body Within the Discourses of Enclosure*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008.

- Miller, Patricia Cox. *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.
- Mizruchi, Susan. *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Newman, John Henry, ed. *Lives of the English Saints, Volume III (The Hermit Saints)*. London: Toovey, 1844-5.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann, RJ Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Ridyard, Susan. "Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse Revisited: The Case of Godric of Finchale." In *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting*. Edited by Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Roberts, Ruth R. "Illuminating the Soul: Religious Enclosure and the Validation of Mystical Experience in *The Life of Christina of Markyate* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Marginalia* Vol. 3 (2006)
- Robertson, Elizabeth. "Savoring *Scientia*: the Medieval anchoress Reads *Ancrene Wisse*," 113-44 from *A Companion to the Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Yoko Wada. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003.
- Simmel, Georg. *The Philosophy of Money*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Tanner, Norman. *The Ages of Faith: Popular Religion in Late Medieval England and Western Europe*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009.
- Thurston, Herbert. "The Mass in Medieval England," *The Month and Catholic Review* 39 (London: May-August 1880), 243-260.
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1969.
- Valantasis, Richard. "The Social Function of Asceticism," from *Asceticism*. Edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Warren, Ann. *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.