Adolescence And Sanctity: The Life And Passion Of Saint William Of Norwich

Denise L. Despres
University of Puget Sound, ddespres@pugetsound.edu

Citation

Follow this and additional works at: http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/faculty_pubs
Adolescence and Sanctity: The Life and Passion of Saint William of Norwich

Denise L. Despres / University of Puget Sound

One of the few extant documents providing evidence of Jewish life in the Norman settlements after the conquest, Thomas of Monmouth’s *Vita et passio Sancti Willemi martyris Norwicensis* is a literary prototype for the narrative of Jewish ritual murder that burgeoned in late twelfth- and thirteenth-century England. Fanning out from Norwich, a fictional web linked important commercial and spiritual communities in a shared myth of Christian identity and Jewish depravity: Gloucester (1168), Bury St. Edmunds (1181), Lincoln (1255), Winchester (1225, 1232), and London (1244). The impact these tales of Jewish ritual murder had on local communities differed, but the literary topoi were so similar as to constitute a genre with recognizable elements, all of which appear in Thomas’s text: the ritual crucifixion of a child bought by Jews as part of a wider anti-Christian conspiracy; the miraculous discovery of the defiled body and the community witness of the translation to sacred space; the reportage of a Christian convert from Judaism as verifying malicious intent; the pathos of a grieving mother in imitation of Mary; the immutability of the body and its signs of sanctification through miraculous healing, the odor of sanctity, and thaumaturgical power; and the ritual entombment of the precious relics and the creation of new sacred space to purge sacrilege and sanctify the ritual map of the community.1

1 See Anthony Bale’s definitive “Fictions of Judaism in England before 1290,” in *Jews in Medieval Britain*, ed. Patricia Skinner (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2003), 129–44. Given this evidence of inclusiveness, Gavin Langmuir concluded that Thomas had indeed invented this genre after joining the monastic community at Norwich five years after the murder in 1144; see “Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder,” in his *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 209–36; also see Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 1995), 139: “In Norwich, for example, there were no anti-Jewish protests in response to Thomas of Monmouth’s ramblings. At the time, Christian townsfolk did not really think their Jewish neighbors were a threat to their children. Although intellectual developments, ecclesiastical and governmental legisla-
Entering the cathedral priory of Norwich sometime before Lent of 1150, Thomas of Monmouth claimed to have had successive visions that inspired him to champion the neglected cause of William, a twelve-year-old boy presumed to have been ritually murdered by the Jews of Norwich on the Saturday before Easter in 1144. When Thomas arrived in Norwich, William’s body lay in the monastic cemetery, where it was buried after its discovery in Thorpe Wood on April 24, 1144. Thomas’s undertaking of the role of “sacrist,” caring for William’s relics and recording the miracles that occurred at his tomb, is in keeping with the communal nature of monastic hagiography in the central Middle Ages, when the cult of relics and their translations were foundational to a monastic community’s origins and identity. Although Thomas was not present when the murder occurred, he does vividly witness the symbolic translations of William’s body into the sacred center of the cathedral and thus offers compelling description of William’s (and his own) struggle for credibility and authority within the monastic community.

To this end, he performs his role like a detective, gathering the testimony of eyewitnesses, visiting the “crime scene” himself to reason from material evidence, and both observing and interviewing the faithful who visit William’s tomb and claim miraculous healing. His first six books, composed in 1154–55, describe in exhaustive detail the events of the murder and William’s translations from the monastic cemetery, to the chapter house, to his final resting place in the cathedral at the Chapel of the Holy Martyrs. Book 7, resumed and concluded between 1172 and 1174 after a lengthy hiatus, chronicles a revival of interest in William brought about by a resurgence of miracles at his tomb.

---

2 John M. McCulloh, “Jewish Ritual Murder,” *Speculum* 72, no. 3 (July 1997): 701–17. McCulloh’s article is indispensable in providing a concise summary of the events Thomas of Monmouth weaves into his seven-volume *Vita*, a convincing redating of the dates of composition of each book, and evidence that the Jewish ritual murder libel did not originate with Thomas. Continental evidence suggests that knowledge of William’s murder “spread independently of Thomas’s text” (717).


4 Geary (“Relics and Saints,” 12–13) notes that “many translations from the ninth through the twelfth centuries are extremely individualistic and, particularly when they are reported by persons who actually participated in the translation, rank among some of the most vivid and fascinating glimpses of medieval society,” but even more often the accounts “were written years or even centuries after the acquisition of the relic.”

The Life and Passion of Saint William of Norwich

More than one baffled historian has wondered why, despite the exhaustiveness and sensational detail of its account of ritual murder in its local landscape, Thomas’s narrative was received ambivalently by his monastic community and failed equally to impress upon the wider Christian community of Norwich the potential of the local Jews to commit ritual murder. In his recent reconfiguration of the dating of Thomas’s narrative, John McCulloh has debunked the long-held view that the Jewish ritual murder charge originated in Norwich, concluding, “Thomas did not invent the myth, and his literary expression of it remained without influence.”6 In exploring versions of the charge that did convince and endure, Anthony Bale has argued that “the myth of ritual murder was transmitted and kept alive through books rather than worship or devotion,” constituting a specific subgenre of “Christian historiography” in a “narrative plot, a set of events that could be organized, interpreted, moralized and interpolated according to their resonance to the present day author” in the “construction of Identity—be it personal, local, corporate or religious.”7 In this light, the lukewarm reception of Thomas’s arguments for both William’s sanctity and Jewish depravity seems peculiar, for Thomas undoubtedly included all of these elements in his story. Thomas even forthrightly acknowledges his own difficulty in persuading an important segment of his community to accept William’s holy identity. Thomas’s disbelieving superior refused to grant William sacramentals like a carpet and candles, visible signs of cultic devotion. An irritable Thomas complains of this incredulity even as he concludes the final book in 1172 in the wake of numerous miraculous healings:

If, however, some things introduced in this little book should seem improbable to any, let him not therefore charge me guilty of falsehood, since I have been careful to set down nothing which I have not seen or which I have not come to the knowledge of by common report. . . . For there are some who, led away by the spirit of perversity, as they refuse to believe those things that are written, also reject those things which have been testified by very many . . . and even censure those things which have been actually seen as if they were inventions.8

6 Ibid., 740. In his postcolonial interpretation of the Vita, Jerome Jeffrey Cohen (“The Flow of Blood in Medieval Norwich,” Speculum 79, no. 1 [January 2003]: 65) reflects, “The murder of the child William in Norwich in 1144 was brutal, but in a way it arrived too early. The events surrounding his death did not inspire the contagious awe and national fascination to be awakened by the boy martyr Hugh of Lincoln in the next century. Few in number and never in fact capable of posing much of an actual threat to local communities, let alone national communitas, the Jews were perhaps of greatest ideological use once they had been expelled from the island and transformed, in the wake of 1290, into specters or virtual bodies.”


8 “Si quis uero aliquam in libello presenti non uerisimilia interserta reppererit, non tamen mendacii reatum nobis imputet . . . sunt enim nonnulli qui peruerso ducti spiritu sicut
Thomas’s authorial woes, although typical of hagiographers whose saintly subjects are deemed problematic in some fashion, have in the past been interpreted as primarily resultant of his failure to persuade others that the Jews were responsible for the ritual murder of the twelve-year-old boy. I want to revisit this issue in the broader religious context of cultural shifts that were occurring coexistent to this first recorded charge against the Jews, suggesting causal connections among new models of sanctity and thus fully realized Christian “identity” in the wake of Gregorian reforms, the changing role of boy oblates within the monastery, and the problem of intentionality that plagues Thomas’s defense of his William. In many ways, there is nothing unusual in the ephemeral nature of William’s fame. The vast majority of saints prior to papal intervention in the canonization process remained local, never incorporated into the liturgy, inevitably fading in the dynamic and changing devotional celebrations of local communities; yet Thomas’s reportage reveals that William’s feeble sanctity and his own failure to argue successfully for it from the cult’s inception is located in an evolving model of human interiority and intentionality essential both to the persuasive construction of Christian sanctity and Jewish criminality. If this is so, we should be less surprised that shortly after Thomas concluded the *Vita* in 1172, Norwich experienced an influx of Jews from Bungay and Thetford, left defenseless in the wake of Henry’s destruction of Hugh Bigod’s castles.9 Indeed, Norwich became a distinguished center of Jewish learning, as is evidenced by the recently studied writings of Meir b. Elijah of Norwich.10 Clearly, Norwich afforded economic and cultural opportunities to the Jewish population undiminished by a renewed devotion to William in 1155: “For suddenly, when we were least expecting it, in the year of the Lord’s incarnation 1155, the power of the holy martyr seemed to renew itself, and flashed forth with a greater multitude of signs than before.”11

11 “Subito etenim, inopinantibus nobis, anno ab incarnatione domini M.C.LV. quasi renouata uritus sancti martiris amplior quam prius signorum effulsit frequenta” (Thomas of Monmouth, *Life*, 262).
The Life and Passion of Saint William of Norwich

If the “signs” revived sufficient interest in the local cult to draw Thomas away from his numerous monastic duties to resume his role as William’s secretary (as he often calls himself), he made no effort in his last book (7) to underscore for his audience the Jewish crime upon which the boy’s sanctity was founded. Whereas books 1 and 2 dramatically reconstruct the part the Jews play in the “Passion” of William, references to the Jews in the following books are sparse; even the saint himself, when describing the location of his healing spring in the woods to a supplicant in book 4, speaks of the Jews as in a distant past, never intimating outrage that their community was thriving in the present time: “Approach the tree where I was once thrown by the Jews and lay long in the open air: dig a little near its roots and drink the water which you will find there.”

It is precisely the absence of an omnipresent threat of Jews that distinguishes Thomas’s Vita from the self-referential and perpetuating exempla that successfully narrated Jewish perfidy through story and image in later renditions of Jewish ritual murder. Although twelfth-century writers such as Peter the Venerable and Odo of Cambrai established a hermeneutic of “Jew” as sensual, carnal, appetitive, and bestial, there is no trope in Thomas’s narrative to link Jewish uncleanness with the symbolic nature of the bodily healings that occur in William’s progressive journey to sanctity and a resting place in the Chapel of the Holy Martyrs within the cathedral. There is no Christian interiority or psychological revelation in Thomas’s Vita that gives Jewish carnality meaning in respect to William’s evolving Christian identity. Instead, the Jews disappear from the narrative as William’s character grows from adolescence to maturity in the three decades after his martyrdom, ultimately assuming the characteristics of conventional twelfth-century English sanctity.

THE LIFE AND PASSION OF ST. WILLIAM THE MARTYR OF NORWICH

Written in a monastic community and informed by monastic memory, spiritual geography, and literary conventions, Thomas’s Vita reveals a clever and ambitious auctor at work. The very order in which he sets forth the events he aims to reconstruct reveals his awareness of the

"Accedentes uero ad arborem ubi quondam a iudeis proiectus aliquandiu sub dio iacui circa radices eius modicum cauate et inuentam ibi aquam haurientes bibite" (ibid., 179).


See Abulafia, Christians and Jews, 77–93.

I am currently exploring authorship and monastic inventiones in Thomas's Vita.
The Journal of Religion

challenges he faces in persuading his readers of Jewish culpability for the murder and William’s sufficiency as a martyr. As if to provide material evidence of William’s growing legitimacy, Thomas punctuates the books of his narrative with the body’s translations, from its uncere-
monious dumping in Thorpe Wood, to the monastic cemetery, to the chapter house, to its final resting place in the Chapel of the Holy Martyrs in Norwich Cathedral. Thomas thereby maps his narrative onto the landscape of Norwich, the spiritual, temporal, and geographical truths converging. Similarly, he changes his rhetorical strategies, from description of the murder and first month’s events in book 1, to anti-
Jewish polemic and chastising of materialistic “Judaizers” (Christians who cannot believe in William’s martyrdom) in book 2, to conventional reportage of miracles occurring at first within monastic precincts then spreading more widely throughout East Anglia. For the purposes of this essay’s focus on intentionality and interiority, however, I will simply set forth the basic events of books 1 and 2 to establish the centrality of adolescence to Thomas’s development of William’s saintly character.

Book 1 opens with a traditional authorial apology, as well as Thomas’s affirmation that his reportage is the result of scrupulous detective work and eyewitness accounts rather than invention. Although Thomas briefly pays tribute to the expected hagiographic conventions of maternal vi-
sions and holy infancy, by his third chapter he moves to the facts lead-
ing up to the murder. William is a country boy, at twelve years of age a village skinner’s apprentice, quick at his craft and able to seek work independently in the nearby city of Norwich by virtue of his skill and, apparently, competitive prices. In Norwich, the Jews seek him out to repair their cloaks and robes, but when William’s family reprimands him for mixing too freely with Jews, he avoids their custom. His with-
drawal results in their conspiracy during the Passover season to lure him to his death under the pretense of a lucrative position in the kitchen of the Archdeacon of Norwich. Innocently accompanying a stranger to the Jewish quarter, William witnesses the Jews celebrate the Passover meal, himself eating and communing with the Jews before he is ritually mocked and crucified to death. The Jews dispose of his body in Thorpe Wood, where he is—after a series of miraculous signs and visions—found in the Easter season and entombed in the monastic cemetery. His uncle Godwin Sturt, a priest, accuses the Jews of the murder before the ecclesiastical synod, presided over by Bishop Eborard.

16 See Bettina Bildhauer’s essay on the configurations of the Ebstorf map for a visual par-
However, through bribes and ridicule of the charge, the Jews convince the sheriff of its spuriousness. Indeed, they are protected throughout the episode by royal edicts and the king’s sheriff, finding safety in the castle’s defenses when they fear retribution.17

Book 2 is largely a defense of William’s sanctity in response to his early detractors, who not only doubt the validity of the claim of martyrdom but find equally perturbing and presumptuous the idea of a local saint’s cult unrecognized by the universal church. Book 2 sets forth a handful of early miracles, but Thomas’s central concern is to address the reluctance of his own monastic community to accept William as a genuine martyr, a view rooted in the boy’s lack of spiritual intention as well as his unsuitability as a poor and neglected child to merit this distinction. Like other twelfth-century writers interested in human psychology in the growth of holiness, Thomas turns to Christ’s own boyhood and the celebrated martyrdom of boys revered in the litany to establish William’s plausibility: “Now then, since we have said enough to the first, let us pass on to the others, they who saw that poor little ragged boy, and as they saw him held him of little value, and so say that it was not acceptable that he should rise to such a degree of veneration, when no previous merits had distinguished him. To these I reply; If his boyhood is reason enough for rejecting his holiness, we remind them of those boys Pancratius, Pantaleon, and Celsus, whom Christ exalted to the martyr’s crown in their boyhood.”18 Nonetheless, the analogy is a stretch, for these boys were not ritually murdered by Jews; in contrast, the particular claim for ritual crucifixion that Thomas has initiated in book 1 of William’s Vita creates expectations of a complex drama that delineates the Christian and Jewish body, Christian and Jewish reason, and—finally—Christian and Jewish will. Without these elements, we have a fairly typical twelfth-century miracle story that only anticipates the waning of Augustinian toleration and its attendant anti-Jewish thirteenth-century devotional culture. Benedicta Ward is thus correct in her assessment of William of Norwich as a “traditional” or early model of sanctity, whose cult could perform some of the functions for its devotees that the Eucharist later would in ha-

18 “Nunc igitur, quoniam primus sat dixisse uidemur, ad alios transeamus qui puerulum eum uilem, pannosum, atque pauperulum uiderunt, uidentes uilipenderunt, uilipendentes ad tante illum uenerationis excelluntiam pertingere non debuisse aiunt ubi nulla merita precesserunt. Hic respondemus; Si ad sanctificationis repudiium puericia in causa est, et nos illis pueros proponimus Pancratium, Pantaleonem, et Celsum, quos in etate puerili Christus ad coronam sullimaut martirii” (Thomas of Monmouth, Life, 87).
The Journal of Religion

giographic narrative: protect, favor, punish, cure illness, and proph-
ey. Thomas looks back to Cuthbert and Edmund for hagiographic
models in his composition and coheres with a traditional emphasis on
the saint’s incorruptible body as the source of miraculous cures. Like
all hagiographers, Thomas celebrates the unique person, but William’s
sanctity is largely a twelfth-century issue of “triumph over biological
process.” Despite the fact that Thomas includes reference to a re-
cently converted Jew (the spurious Theobald) in his narrative, his story
lacks entirely the pathos produced by twelfth-century interiority, the
consciousness of difference in the Jewish-Christian psychological dy-
namic that we might expect given the emphasis on self, intellectual
faculties, and the interior person that dominates contemporary dis-
course on identity in Jewish-Christian debate. Nonetheless, if Thomas’s
*Vita* fails to exploit Jewish corruption as integral to the construction
of Christian spiritual self and community, he reveals his awareness of
significant trends in thinking about adolescence, the interior life, and
new constructions of sanctity that are emerging in his lifetime and that
have implications, at least in other English texts, for the role of Juda-
ism in the evolution of Christian identity.

**ADOLESCENCE IN TWELFTH-CENTURY CONVERSION NARRATIVES**

Anxiety about Jewish-Christian coexistence imprinted itself upon every
significant genre produced in the cultural awakening identified as the

19 Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record, and Event, 1000–1215*

20 Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press,
1995), 221–23. Bynum notes that “the twelfth century was the high point of literalism and
materialism in treatments of resurrection,” a description that seems appropriate to Thomas’s
*Vita*.

21 See Jonathan M. Elukin, “The Discovery of the Self: Jews and Conversion in the Twelfth-
Century” in *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. Michael A. Signer and John Van
Engen (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 63–76. I share the general
thesis of Jonathan Elukin’s recent study *Living Together, Living Apart: Rethinking Jewish-Christian
violence against Jews looks very different when seen in the context of larger polemical trends
in medieval culture.”

22 See John Tolan, *Petrus Alfonsi and His Medieval Readers* (Gainesville: University Press of
Florida, 1993). An intriguing connection, although one that cannot be explored here, is the
presence of Petrus Alfonsi, converted Jew and author of the influential *Dialogi contra Judaeos*,
in England sometime after 1106; Tolan notes that Alfonsi “certainly taught astronomy in
England, for in 1120 Walcher, prior of Malvern, composed . . . a treatise on the prediction
of eclipses, in which he refers to Alfonsi as ‘our teacher’” (10–11). Alfonsi’s *Dialogi* was “the
preeminent anti-Jewish text of the Latin Middle Ages,” its twelfth-century manuscript distri-
bution including important intellectual centers in northern France and England, including
Hereford Cathedral. See Tolan, “Manuscript Distribution: Mapping the Spread of the *Dialogi*,”
in *Petrus Alfonsi and His Medieval Readers*, 98–103.
“twelfth-century Renaissance.” Whereas at one time the “Renaissance” featured writings exclusively by Christians, scholars such as Ivan Marcus and Susan Einbinder have explored the cross-influences of Jewish and Christian intellectual and literary culture. Both twelfth-century Jews and Christians acknowledge the dangers of apostasy, the traversing of spatial and religious boundaries, and cultic pollution. Christian narratives that have exemplified for readers a new attempt to diagram the interior spiritual landscape and the “self,” such as Guibert of Nogent’s Memoirs and Herman of Scheda’s Opusculum, have been immeasurably enriched and complicated by recent studies of contemporary Jewish texts that reflect the same concerns about “personal redemption and transfiguration.” Spiritual autobiographies reflecting a new sense of the “Ages of Man” in emotional and spiritual, as opposed to purely social and legal, terms explore adolescence as a liminal stage in both cultures, a time of self-reflection and regression, as well as a dangerously impressionable time. Just as Christian conversion, romance, and hagiographic texts reflect an esthetic revulsion toward “the other,” so Jewish texts “tapped cultural taboos and fears of pollution. The un-defiled Jew spurns the contaminating water of baptism (or the necrophilia of Christianity itself),” with Jewish authors employing “a conscious strategy to foster intellectual contempt and visceral antipathy for Christianity.”

The issue of conversion and apostasy necessarily heightened a practical awareness of the faculties discussed by writers, such as Peter the...
Venerable, in their treatises on reason, the nature of the senses, and the function of the will in distinguishing the essential nature of the Jew. Given the dangers of conversion to Christianity and Judaizing that is an ongoing theme in twelfth-century writings about “self,” the period of adolescence—beginning at the age of twelve or thirteen for both Jewish and Christian youths—becomes a focal point in stories about maturation. William Chester Jordan points out that an awareness of this age is equally important in stories about the choice of profession and the call to the religious life in contemporary narratives. Although there is no medieval counterpart to our modern notion of adolescence, texts about “self” and the meaning of identity within a cultic or observant faith offer us some parallels: a concern about freedom of profession and marriage partner, an anxiety about family and social pressures and obligations, and means to achieve power and the material stability that externally symbolizes such power. Of course, these are the themes in Hermann’s conversion story, as well as in Guibert of Nogent’s, Abelard’s Calamitous History, and in a text never examined as relative to these introspective texts—Thomas of Monmouth’s Vita of Saint William of Norwich.

Just as Hermann’s story presents us with the figurative “death” of a Jewish adolescent who unguardedly enters Christian space (a motif that is repeated in numerous Marian miracles, such as the famous story of the “Jew of Bourges”—preached by founding abbot Herbert of Losinga to the monks at Norwich), so Thomas’s Vita begins as a tale about adolescence, rather than childhood, an identification that becomes highly significant in his construction of William’s sanctity. Whether or not William was literally “twelve,” Thomas’s first audience—a monastic audience—was aware of the distinctive “Ages of Man,” infantia, puertitia, and adolescentia, in a spiritual trajectory consonant in hagiography. Not surprisingly, they shared a “transcendent ideal” that favored a childish


30 Ibid., 78.

31 William Chester Jordan warns us against empathy in historical reconstruction, but he does offer us these essential characteristics as correlatives to elements we currently identify with adolescence.

spiritual innocence but for the most part advanced the model of the "puer senex" or the premature virtues of old age: "maturitas, gravitas, and above all, sapientia." Anglo-Saxon hagiography especially honors this pattern of increasing wisdom and sanctity, and the "Life of St. Cuthbert," whose literary influence Thomas acknowledges in his own text, specifically adheres to it. In this influential English saint's life, Cuthbert is presented as "a thoroughly and deplorably boyish eight-year old" at the outset, rather than a precocious "puer senex." In this, the narrative anticipates an increasing interest in natural stages of life, which we see so frequently in later visual representations of human developmental progress in stained glass and manuscript illumination, as well as in poetry.

Undoubtedly, an intense focus on the implications of youth in incarnational theology—an attempt to construct a model of spiritual, emotional, and psychological development for Christians—led to the various literary speculations about Christ’s childhood and adolescence that we later see in gospel harmonies (such as the Meditations vitae Christi) and in the comical childhood miracles of Cursor mundi, wherein we have a child Jesus who is repeatedly chastised by worried community elders for everything from bringing clay birds to life to slaying other children. As early as the sixth century, an allegory of the Ages of Man was developed for two distinctive episodes in Christ’s life: the adoration of the magi and Christ among the doctors. As John A. Burrow notes of the latter episode, “the doctrine of the double nature of Christ led to some knotty problems concerning the development of his intellectual powers,” an issue essential to the role of memory, intellect, and will in a Christian anthropology. This episode from the second chapter of Luke’s gospel, in which the twelve-year-old Jesus remains behind in Jerusalem to debate with doctors in the temple, received popular literary and visual treatment, perhaps because it singled out adolescence as an essential stage in a "natural arc which culminates in the 'perfect aetatis' of achieved maturity."

The age of twelve held a widely recognized social significance to

---

34 Ibid., 105.
36 Burrow, Ages, 136.
37 Ibid., 137.
38 Ibid., 142.
twelfth-century audiences. Weinstein and Bell remark that in twelfth- and thirteenth-century hagiography, adolescence (which they define as the period between ages 11 and 17) began to be viewed as “the period of personality formation” and thus as a time of “personal responsibility and active involvement” in spiritual life. In contrast, eleventh-century hagiography underscores the necessity of parental guidance of more malleable adolescents who do not share the stubborn, rebellious, and self-determined natures of a Catherine of Siena or Francis of Assisi and thus do not desire their mobility. Although Abelard was singled out by Bernard of Clairvaux for his instability of life, his monastic disdain for what we might call Abelard’s “twelfth-century” self-fashioning, to borrow a term from early modern scholars, merely brought attention to a wider—however painful—cultural shift in mobility that complemented a new attention to psychological and spiritual development. Whereas the Church had traditionally viewed age twelve to fourteen as the physical and intellectual onset of maturation for boys and thus preserved social custom, allowing children to swear oaths only at an age of discretion (twelve to fifteen according to local custom), it had permitted child oblation. The introspective currents of twelfth-century writers undoubtedly impacted a wide range of habits, customs, and opportunities in relation to youths, both in the courtly and religious spheres.

Within the monastic sphere, and thus directly relevant and thematically important to Thomas of Monmouth, was the issue of child oblation, which experienced considerable change during this period. Childhood oblation, in which a child is given as a “gift” to the monastery, was widely practiced, especially by the aristocracy, in England until the twelfth century, when the practice fell into disfavor. The custom reminded observers and defenders of the practice of the presentation of Jesus or carried Eucharistic overtones evoking images of the Christ child as bread. “It took place in church at the point when the offertory of bread and wine for the mass was offered at the altar.

---

40 Ibid., 69.
41 Abelard’s protean nature is brilliantly explored in M. T. Clanchy’s Abelard: A Medieval Life (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).
43 The most celebrated example, of course, is Georges Duby’s “jeunes”—whose search for material and sexual happiness produced the genre of romance; see “Au XIIe siècle: Les ‘jeunes’ dans la société aristocratique,” Annales 19 (1964): 835–46.
44 Orme, Medieval Children, 224.
The child brought up the offertory, and when he had done so his parents wrapped his hands in the altar cloth as a sign that he too was offered for the service of the church.46 Although canon law prohibited religious profession before 14 only in 1234, one by one, the great monastic orders moved away from child oblation—the Cistercians in 1134, the Benedictines in 1186—under the impact of reforms that stressed interior conviction and spiritual maturation, surely in the wake of theological developments underscoring Jesus’s own free will in the process of redemption.47 John Boswell notes that “oblation accounted for a high proportion of monks from the tenth through the end of the eleventh century, and only began to decline in the twelfth”; between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries, oblation “waned markedly” and had a pronounced effect on the population and culture of monasteries, which by the thirteenth century became wholly adult communities where the practice of virtue was synonymous with a freely chosen vocation.48 Thomas’s immediate audience for the Vita was thus highly sensitive to the very issues he reports as most problematic in his first and second books: concerns with intentionality, spiritual maturity, and an imitatio Christi that would distinguish a holy martyr, however innocent, from a murder victim who had foolishly courted danger for material gain.

JESUS AT THE AGE OF TWELVE

The establishment of a clear boundary between the naivété of childhood and the increasing purposefulness of adolescence is thus critical to Thomas’s narrative. In the medieval conceptualization of the “Ages of Man,” childhood was a period of sensual frivolity, and there were obvious tensions in the idea of childhood sanctity, which presented contemporaries with “fundamentally opposed conceptions: the saint as innocent child alternated with the ‘old child’ who shunned immature sinfulness.”49 In their natural carnality, sensual reasoning, and appetitive and material leanings, children prior to the full age of reason shared those traits associated with the “Jews,” whose rejection of grace and illumination placed them in a state of enduring marginality.50 For children, the period of sense perception precedes the cognitive level

46 Orme, Medieval Children, 224.
47 Ibid., 224.
49 Weinstein and Bell, Saints and Society, 30.
of reason, so during this time of life they must be subjected to parental “law” most strictly. When twelfth-century writers like Odo of Cambrai and Peter the Venerable connected Jews to a sensual reasoning, and Jewish adherence to the Law as a kind of literalistic prescription, Jews moved into an even more debased position in the Christian paradigm of the human person. By their own choice, Jews refuse to move from the state of sensual reason to embrace the possibility of full humanity. This assumption is central to both Peter the Venerable’s and Odo of Cambrai’s polemics against the Jews. Anna Abulafia explains: “It is plain to Odo that the Law . . . passes the verdict of uncleanliness on a sensual basis, whereas the Gospel of Christ and the teaching of his apostles judiciously apply reason. Reason, he reiterates, is greatly preferable to the senses. Because the senses cannot reach the cognitive level of reason, they (the Jews) often consider its judgement to be stupid and insane. With this in place Odo is ready to differentiate clearly between what he sees as Jewish sense perception and Christian rational understanding.”51 The story of the twelve-year-old Jesus who neglects his parents’ comfort to assume his place as an adult among the Pharisees, symbolically entering into his ministry, is a paradigm of conversion from childhood to adulthood, from secular to religious profession, from the influence of parents to other figures of wisdom and authority. Aelred of Rievaulx, writing “Jesus at the Age of Twelve” for a friend in a Bedfordshire daughterhouse during the very years that Thomas of Monmouth composed the body of William’s life (1153–57), provides us with an interesting literary analogue for the tale of twelve-year-old William.

Three episodes of Christ’s childhood provided artists and illuminators with the opportunity to represent “Old Testament” Jews prior to Christ’s ministry: the presentation in the temple, the circumcision, and the adolescent Christ among the doctors. The visual tradition for all three is rich, especially given the prominence of books of hours in the later Middle Ages, which featured the first two episodes routinely as illustrations for the hour of None.52 The degree to which the Jews are negatively portrayed in these scenes depends upon a number of factors, including the manuscript date, place of origin, performative and ritual context, and expectations of both patron and artist. The episode of Christ among the doctors, however, provides the occasion for meditation upon the process of spiritual maturation and thus an exemplary moment to perform scriptural exegesis upon the event as the impend-

51 Abulafia, Christians and Jews, 109; on Peter the Venerable, see 88–92.
The Life and Passion of Saint William of Norwich

ing dethronement of Synagoga: all of the wisdom of the Jewish doctors cumulatively cannot exceed the truth spoken by the twelve-year-old Jesus—a Jesus on the threshold of his ministry and adulthood.

Aelred of Rievaulx’s “Jesus at the Age of Twelve” performs exegesis upon the scriptural passage with the meditative intention of arousing devotion. It is important to recognize that Aelred’s literary intent is to stimulate the devout imagination of a beloved friend, to move the heart—in the monastic sense—rather than the intellect. But, in participating in “the Christianization of reason” and thus turning to scriptural authority to expound truth, Aelred shared the intellectual assumption of monastic writers who did participate, marginally or centrally, in anti-Jewish polemics, such as Anselm of Canterbury, Gilbert Crispin, Odo of Cambrai, and Guibert of Nogent. In fact, at the end of his introduction to “the Historical sense” of the allegory, in which he examines the literal nature of the text, Aelred acknowledges this tension: “However, what you are looking for, my son, is not logical speculation but devotion: not something to sharpen your tongue but to arouse your affections.” Thus, while his rhetorical purpose is more in keeping with Thomas of Monmouth’s hagiographic objective—to imprint upon the memory through wonder and affection—he introduces Jesus as a “leader, a doctor, a teacher.” Jesus at twelve models for the reader how to receive illumination through Christian humility and obedience: “In this way made a Nazarene he comes into the temple not as a teacher but as a boy who learns, who listens and asks questions, and in all this he does not withdraw himself from the control of his parents.”

Aelred must deal with the facts of the story despite his intention for Jesus to model submission: that Jesus simultaneously asserts his own will in embracing his heavenly Father’s in what appears—at least to his worried parents—as an act of disobedience. He delicately fleshes out his historical imagining as a rite of passage in which Jesus’s maturation, the liminal stage of which is his pilgrimage from Nazareth to Jerusalem, is spiritually analogous to conversion of heart. The boy Jesus moves symbolically between the men and the women, who keep separate on the journey so as to prevent pollution in anticipation of their sacrifice. At this point, he need not stay exclusively with his father, for

53 Abulafia, Christians and Jews, 42–46.
56 Ibid., 6.
The Journal of Religion

it is not yet incumbent upon him to refute his mother’s authority. Aelred speculates upon the existence of Jesus during the three days of transition from childhood to adulthood: “Where were you, good Jesus, during those three days? Who provided you with food and drink? Who made a bed for you? Who took off your shoes? Who tended your boyish limbs with oil and baths? I know, to be sure, that as you freely willed to take our infirmity upon yourself, so, when you so desired, you manifested your own power; and therefore, when you so willed, you had no need of these attentions.”57 During these three days, Jesus began to manifest the “promise contained in the Scripture” to the Jewish elders and doctors, who had, until then, been its “guardians.”58 The allegory makes the association between the Jews as the preservers of the “literal” text, witnesses to the word, but presents Jesus as the “word made flesh” who endows Scripture with the meaning contained in its promise.59 It is only due to obedience and humility that he departs from the temple with Mary and Joseph, having planted the seed of his ministry and his first invitation to the Jews to convert. At the same time, Jesus models for the devout reader the process of spiritual maturation from childhood to adulthood, the passage from the period of the guardians to the fulfillment of text, manifested by a delicate balance of assertion of one’s own will and obedience to authority. In monastic terms, Jesus was ready to profess himself as an oblate, having reached an age of discretion borne out by his judgment and actions. Mary, Aelred assures us, knows and understands Jesus’s purpose, and so, when Jesus responds to his parents’ inquiry, she is silent, carefully committing to memory all of the things she has witnessed about Jesus so that she can later tell them to the apostles.

CONTEMPORARY SANCTITY AND THOMAS’S VITA

A learned man, Thomas of Monmouth’s narrative bid for William’s canonization fully reflects his intellectual currency. Following the Gregorian reforms, which culminated in a more stringent monasticism, “the majority of Christian society and thus most laymen were excluded from the sphere of saintliness.”60 Particularly in England, but in gen-

57 Ibid., 10.
58 Ibid., 11.
eral north of the Alps, sanctity continued to require a religious profession and an aristocratic birth or privileged social status, exemplified by the other saints Thomas references: Cuthbert, Thomas Becket, Edmund. As yet, the burgeoning hagiographic models of urban sanctity in the south had not spread to England, and martyrdom continued to be viewed as the dominant criterion for holiness. Although the crusades offered the opportunity for a death akin to martyrdom, "by the eleventh century, martyrdom as a route to sanctity was practically unattainable in Western Europe, and the veneration of murder victims was increasingly considered inappropriate." Given the twelfth-century emphasis on the inner person and the dominant view of childhood and adolescence as periods of instability and sensuality, it is hardly surprising that "only four children . . . were promoted through the canonization process" throughout the Middle Ages and that children who were locally venerated for their passive innocence as murder victims failed to meet the increasingly stricter demand that saints exhibit a mature piety.

Thomas is acutely aware that he is making a "novel attempt" in an argument for William’s sanctity, and both his rhetoric and selection of materials serve to rebut those criticisms within his community that William did not meet any of the traditional criteria of sanctity, even if he was murdered by Jews. From a Saxon family, whose most distinguished member was a married priest (later condemned by the author himself for exploiting his nephew’s cult), a twelve-year-old tanner’s apprentice, William is an unlikely candidate for sainthood in the 1140s. In book 2, Thomas chastises,

When these firstfruits of the miracles wrought by the merits of the blessed William were brought to light, there were many, ungrateful for the divine benefits or the signs shown, who mocked at the miracles when they were made public, and said that they were fictitious. Certainly, these, hard and slow of heart to believe, suggested that the blessed boy William was likely to be of no special merit after his death, who they had heard was a poor neglected little fellow when alive. There are others who, because they had known him as a poor ragged little boy living meagerly by his tanner’s business, hold him in contempt; and so can by no means believe that such an one, with no previous merits, should have arrived at such eminent excellence.

62 Ibid., 108.
63 "nouo scilicet operi ueniam concedendam" (Thomas of Monmouth, Life, 2).
64 "Clarescentibus itaque per beati Willelmi merita miraculorum primitis, erant plurimi qui dixerint uel beneficiis ingratii uel signis increduli cum promulgantur miraculis insultabant, eaque ficticia esse dicabant. Quippe duri corde et ad credendum tardi, beatum puerum Willelum nullius fore meriti post mortem autemabant, quem in uita pauperculum atque
In comparing William to Christ, Thomas counters the issue of class: “Let it not seem absurd to say that a boy of such sanctity and destined for such honour should by God’s will be born from lowly parents, when it is certain that He Himself was pleased to be born from among the poor.”

But Thomas’s detractors offer a more difficult criticism to refute when they object to William’s passive role in his “murder,” which cannot constitute martyrdom by any sense:

And there are some too, who, though they saw with their own eyes that he, whatever he was, was cruelly murdered, or heard of it with their ears, or read of it in this present record, yet they say: “We are indeed certain of his death, but we are entirely uncertain and doubtful by whom and why, and how he was killed. So we neither presume to call him a saint nor a martyr. And since it is not the pain but the cause that makes the martyr, if it be proved that he was killed in punishment by Jews or anyone else, who could confidently believe that this boy earnestly desired death for Christ’s sake, or bore it patiently for Christ’s sake when it was inflicted upon him?”

Scholars exploring the shift in attitudes toward Jews manifested by this early ritual murder text cannot afford to ignore that monastic models of interiority and new models of sanctity outweighed the perfidy of the Jews among some of the authoritative members of Thomas’s community in their appraisal of the boy’s holiness. Intentionality, and thus clear, rational comprehension of actions in the service of the will, is now essential to Thomas’s case. Although his narrative employs numerous themes of popular devotion, and Thomas exploits rhetoric for its emotional impact upon his audience in advancing his case, he must refute this claim that William’s murder does not reflect volition. He does so by employing a number of narrative devices in book 1 that garner for him the authority of hagiographic tradition. He represents the boy as a young Christ figure, loved by a virtuous mother who has
prophetic dreams about his vocation. William is a “puer senex” whose devotion to abstinence and observance of feast-day fasting at the age of seven, as well as his charity to the poor and knowledge of the Psalms, evidenced a “whole inner man overflowing with piety” and thus a spiritually premature being.67

Even in his apprenticeship, William revealed an unusual industry and maturity, quickly mastering his craft so that “he equalled some who had been his teachers.”68 Nonetheless, William is still a boy, and Thomas’s story of this twelve-year-old shares numerous elements with other contemporary lives that moralize the dangers of this liminal age. As an apprentice, living with his teachers in Norwich, William comes to the notice of the Jews, who appreciate his skilled work as well as—Thomas maliciously asserts—his youth, because they can barter more advantageously for lower prices.69 The Vita, like Hermann of Scheda’s conversion story, underscores the perils of Jews and Christians sharing civic space, religious time, servants, and identities—all issues redressed by the Third and Fourth Lateran Councils’ legislation on Jews. In book 1, devoted to a literal account of the crime, Thomas carefully sets forth the liturgical year to evoke the ritual passage of Christ’s life, citing Candlemas or the Virgin’s purification as William’s birthday and emphasizing that the Jews chose the boy as their sacrificial victim “at the beginning of Lent,” in preparation for the Passover that would coincide with Easter.

Like Jesus at the age of twelve, William must leave his mother’s influence to shape his own adult life: Thomas draws out the drama of William’s pleading with his mother to let him abandon his career as a tanner to follow the mysterious stranger (a Christian? a Jew?) who will guide him to a more advantageous place in the archdeacon of Norwich’s kitchen. The stranger, who refuses to wait for William until after Easter as his mother demands, “not for thirty pieces of silver,” is both Judas and demonic seducer of the foolish woman. However, fully expecting her son to be going to the archdeacon’s residence, rather than the Jewish quarter, she finally consents. That she is partially culpable is due to her feminine frailty, but, then, even Aelred gently asks of the Virgin, “Indeed, my Lady, if you will allow me to say so, why did you lose your dearest Son so easily, why did you watch over him with such little care, why were you so late in noticing that he was missing?”70 The

67 “Pietatis siquidem affluens uisceribus” (ibid., 14).
68 “et nonnullus quos doctores habuerat equiperavit” (ibid., 15).
69 “Ille etenim sibi maxime reputabant idoneum, siue quia simplicem et artificiosum didicerat, seu quoniam aurititia duci minori ipsum pacari precio existimabat” (ibid., 15).
70 Aelred, “Jesus,” 5.
The Journal of Religion

story of Jesus in the temple among the doctors increasingly came to be represented as a foreshadowing of his trial and Crucifixion in late-medieval gospel harmonies, drama, and visual representations. Thomas anticipates this popular tradition when the twelve-year-old William descends into the hellish underworld of narrow alleys and cesspools that constitute the Jewish neighborhood where the male elders of the community will celebrate the Passover and then ritually slaughter this lamb.

THE MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

In setting forth his intentions in the prologue, Thomas of Monmouth asserts that his first book will recount William’s birth and boyhood, his seduction by the Jews and subsequent Passion, the discovery of his abandoned body through divine signs and visions, and his first entombment in the monastic cemetery. The first chapter of book 1 reflects the chronology of events and reveals their causality: William “was accustomed to resort to the Jews, and for that was rebuked by his family, and so withdrew himself from them,” only to be “led astray by a messenger of the Jews” who will then ritually crucify him.71 Jewish deception and treachery are integral to his argument for William’s innocence and martyrdom. The messenger cautiously ushers William into the house of “a certain Jew. . . . Then the boy, like an innocent lamb, was led to the slaughter.”72 Although instructed to stay away from Jews altogether, William does not suspect danger and freely eats with them, despite the fact that they are clearly making preparations for the Passover; singing “the hymns appointed for the day in the synagogue, the chiefs of the Jews assembled in the house of the Jew.”73

The lengthy description of the Passion, sufficiently detailed to invoke a full sense of horror at the depravity and cruelty of the Jews who cannot satisfy “their inborn (innatum) hatred of the Christian name,” focuses more on the Jews than on William, who appears as a passive instrument throughout.74 Undoubtedly, the omission of any sign of heroic suffering or contempt for the Jews on William’s part raised doubts about his willingness to suffer for Christ in the minds of Thomas’s abbot and a contingency within the community who would deny him sacramentals. Following William’s murder, all of the elements that we

71 “Qualiter ad iudeos diuertere solitus et ideo a suis increpatus, se inde retraxerit . . . a iudeorum munto seductus fuerit” (Thomas of Monmouth, Life, 8).
72 “Porro puer, uelut agnus innocens ad occisionem adductus” (ibid., 19).
73 “Postera uero luce, que illis anno illo paschalis aderat, expletis que ad diem festum pertinebant in synagoga cantibus, iudeorum principes in memorati iudei domo pariter conveniunt” (ibid., 20).
74 Ibid., 22.
now recognize as essential to this genre appear: The Jews wish to dispose of the body in a latrine to "increase the shame and disgrace," but since their houses are hired, they fear that Christian tenants might later discover the corpse. Discovery will mean that "our race will be utterly driven out from all parts of England" or worse—subjugation and extermination. Thus the Jews prophesy the divine vengeance that will come as surely as did the destruction of the temple. They carry him into the woods on Good Friday, "a day of solemnity by reason of the sacramental rite of the adoration of the cross... when it was not the custom for the Jews to leave their houses." The body resists corruption and is discovered first, in a series of discoveries and translations, on Easter Sunday by a holy woman named Legarda, who ministers to the poor and the sick on the outskirts of town. The bodily evidence of crucifixion and the odor of sanctity make the Jews suspect immediately. The remainder of book 1 deals with the first translation of William’s remains to the cathedral church for veneration and burial in the monastic cemetery. Although numerous signs, such as the flowing of fresh blood from the newly washed body and the miraculous appearance of a suitable sarcophagus in the graveyard, reveal William’s holiness, drawing thousands of men and women to the cemetery for a sight of his ritual entombment, Thomas cannot persuade his community of William’s martyrdom.

Book 2 opens with invective against these doubters who are, to all purposes, Jews themselves; Thomas describes them as envious and hard of heart, likening them to wearisome dogs who, with "idle barking" and "currish biting," attack under the pretense of religious fervor and righteous doubt "divine mysteries, or, at least... turn them to ridicule." In his tirade, Thomas reveals a good deal about their reluctance to accept his cause. He claims that they are inconsistent in their determination of sanctity, "as if virtue and vice were not in the act but changed their character with the doers of the act." Here, I suspect Thomas refers to their preference for nobility and clear intention in martyrdom signaled by maturity. Further, some of his peers scorn the
The Journal of Religion

“local” nature of this event, claiming that one cannot merely claim a saint for the universal church on such slim evidence. Thomas counters that even King and Martyr Edmund and Cuthbert, revered throughout England, are “local” from the perspective of “the people of Greece or Palestine.” Because Thomas needs to construct a case for William’s sanctity in the universal church, the church triumphant and the community of saints, his second book moves quickly into a definition of saints. He begins by acknowledging: “Since the Gospel trumpet sounds forth to us that none is ever crowned unless he strives lawfully, it is certain beyond doubt that the heavenly crown is promised only to those who strive lawfully; and yet it is bestowed in return for special merits of some special persons.” Thomas evokes the image of the church triumphant in procession from the book of Revelation. Here, before the Holy Lamb, “the choirs of virgins follow him wherever he goes. To them alone is that privilege and prerogative granted, that they sing the new song that is above all others, since they have preserved the robe of their virginity pure and undefiled.” Thomas now begins his strategy of conflating the early Christian martyrs with the Holy Innocents, the infants under two years old whom Herod killed when seeking the Christ child.

The growing importance of the feast of the Holy Innocents, which falls on December 28, coincided with a focus on Christ’s humanity in medieval devotionalism. Michael Goodich notes that the prominence of the feast of the Holy Innocents was a marker of a new interest in childhood. Like the miracle collection that Thomas provides as evidence of William’s intercessory, prophetic, and thaumaturgical powers, the beginning of the thirteenth century saw greater attention to children in miracle collections. Childermas, as it came to be known in England, was observed with the wild play and role reversals epitomized by the custom of the “boy bishop,” the chorister or server who would assume not only the clothing but also the liturgical duties of the “bishop.” Nicholas Orme describes the manner in which the liturgical year in the later Middle Ages fostered a “children’s calendar” of festiv-

---

80 Ibid., 60.
81 “Cum tuba nobis personet euangelica, nisi qui legitime certauerit neminem omnino coronari, procul duhio constat solis legitime certantibus celestis brauii coronam repromitti, et tamen pro meritis singularum singulis retribui” (ibid., 62).
82 “Quibus solis ea privilegii concessa est prerogativa, quod soli illius excellentissime nouitatis consecunt canticum, quoniam puram et illibatam virginitatis sue conseruantes stolam domino purum mundite sue optulerunt celibatum” (ibid., 64).
84 Ibid., 86.
The Life and Passion of Saint William of Norwich

ity and celebration that were “semidetached” from adult celebration of feast days. Among promoters of the feast of the Holy Innocents figured Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux, and popular texts like the *Legenda Aurea*, which reached laypeople from the pulpit and in manuscript, guaranteed its celebration. The plays of the Holy Innocents in the Corpus Christi cycles and the incorporation of the liturgy from the feast day into Chaucer’s Prioress’s prologue as the devotional context for her tale indicate how significant this episode became by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In Thomas’s second book, Herod becomes a prototype of all Jews in conspiracy to kill the innocent. If intentionality is the deciding factor in William’s ability to reap due veneration, Thomas will find a new scriptural paradigm to justify his case.

Thomas argues: “And again, if they say that this is against him that no previous merits gave any evidence of his deserving sanctification, I point to the Innocents of two years and under, whom no previous merits distinguished in life, but only the grace of God glorified.” And “In a similar manner and for the same reason it was not their suffering which earned for the Holy Innocents the glory of martyrdom, but the grace of Christ who was the cause of their death.”

The William who emerges from book 2 takes on the character of a vulnerable child, rather than the twelve-year-old boy seeking independence and fortune who has already exceeded his masters in his professional skill. When the Christian servant who cleans the room after the murder comes forth to confess her knowledge, she reports that “she found a boy’s girdle, and hanging from the girdle a little penknife with its sheath and a style and a satchel.”

Thomas is like most hagiographers, especially of recently departed saints, in that he is hampered by conflicting drives. They all needed to provide a traditional authority familiar from canonical models, but they also had to report a good deal of highly original material provided by eyewitnesses, recipients of miracles, and contemporaries who were interested in specific, local details. Thomas of Monmouth, like other hagiographers who composed “shortly after the saint’s death was quite likely to produce a surplus of information that blurred the fine con-

86 “Denuo si hoc in causa esse dicant, quod ad sanctificationis merita nulla preceserint, innocentes opponimus biennes et infra, quos non uite meritum extulit, sed sola divina gratia glorificavit” (Thomas of Monmouth, *Liue*, 88).
87 “A simili propter eandem causam sanctis innocentibus non pena gloriam martirii contulit, sed Christi gratia, qui mortis eorum causa fuit” (ibid., 96).
88 “Dum vero ad hec et ad illa huc uel illuc se ageret, in secessu zonam pueri reperit et a zona dependentem cum artanulo uagnam et acus et thecam” (ibid., 91).
tours of the ideal.” Thomas’s many references to his exhaustive reportage, his awareness of repetition, of excess—“multiplicitas congesta miraculorum”—indicates his self-reflection as a writer of a problematic genre. Striving to establish William’s credibility, Thomas includes a wide variety of “evidence” in building a case for William’s sainthood, including miracles, visions, and an admittedly conjectural account of the trial of the Jew Eleazer (whose home was the site of William’s crucifixion). Some of this material is not only repetitive but also contradictory. Lewin’s Easter vision of Hell, the Earthly Paradise, and Christ enthroned in majesty depicts William as a boy of twelve in white raiment, resting on a golden footstool at the Virgin’s feet. A little girl from Mulbarton, who also has a vision of Hell and Christ enthroned, similarly sees William in the heavenly court, but as a boy rather than an adolescent. Perhaps there is little difference between these visions, but the “blurred contours” clearly held significance for William’s detractors, who saw in his death little justification for such spiritual favor, let alone a justification for reverence and burial within the community. Ever inventive, Thomas provides yet another narrative strand to satisfy internal critics who wish to reject the youth from their monastic community, comprised physically and spiritually of both the living and the dead. He subtly describes William’s posthumous maturation from martyrdom to oblation and full membership in the community throughout the remainder of his narrative.

WILLIAM AS OBLATE

William’s final resting place, after the third translation in the Vita, is within the church at the altar of the Holy Martyrs. But this final resting place has to be earned, so to speak, by the proof of William’s holiness as demonstrated through the cures and visions he provides and Thomas so determinedly collects. Geographically, William is moved from the woods, where his abused but incorruptible body is disposed by the Jews on Good Friday of 1144, to the monastic cemetery, then to the chapter house in the second translation of book 3, and then to the Chapel of the Holy Martyrs in his third translation, described in

90 Thomas of Monmouth, Life, 297.
91 Ibid., 69.
92 McCulloh claims that these visions are more similar than different, but he is not considering age and its role in the construction of sanctity in his research; see “Jewish Ritual Murder,” 271.
The Life and Passion of Saint William of Norwich

book 6. As John McCulloh reconstructs the *Vita*, book 6 was the final book (composed 1154–55) until Thomas resumed his task in 1172, completing another book (7) that in several ways differs from the earlier text.93

Although William’s body retains the characteristic incorruptibility and odor of sanctity in his journey to his final resting place, and its immutability reflected by the power of its relics to heal and produce healing springs, William’s own character changes as it develops over time in the narrative. It is as if William continues to mature emotionally and spiritually beyond his premature death, his translations a passage from a not very promising oblation at the margins of the community to full participation in the community that conducted the affairs of Norwich’s prestigious Norman cathedral. John Burrow has argued that “Medieval narrative displays a corresponding lack of interest in the process of change from one age to another. Most often a character will belong firmly to a single age-category and display the deportment appropriate to that age throughout the story. . . . When the case requires that a character should figure in the course of the story at more than one age, it is not the processes of change from the one age to the other which occupy the writer’s attention.”94 Yet this is not the case with stories about conversion, such as Hermann’s or Abelard’s, where there is a more nuanced sense of sexual, psychological, and intellectual growth that lays the foundations for religious life and profession. Further, as Patrick Geary has argued in his classic study of *Furta Sacra*, relics were not perceived as bone or dust, but as “alive, much more alive in fact than were those persons who called upon them for help.”95 William’s compassion for human suffering is all the more compelling for his own parallel growth as a “living relic” from adolescence to adulthood.96 Many of the miracles in Thomas’s collection represent flux (dysentery, hemorrhage) as deathly for both children and adults, but just as many focus on childhood paralysis, muteness, and disability as antithetical to the natural process of life, and the healing

93 I cannot discuss this issue here, but—perhaps under the influence of hagiographic accounts of Thomas of Becket’s sanctity—book 7 has a wider geographical scope than books 1–6 and also includes devotees of a higher rank. It appears to be making an argument for William’s reputation outside of Norwich. See McCulloh, “Jewish Ritual Murder,” 706.


95 Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 124. Geary notes that saints performed a number of functions appropriate to the living, underscoring their participation in their communities, including receiving gifts and offerings, witnessing oaths, and insisting upon their rights and obligations (125). William of Norwich clearly conforms to this idea of “living relic” as a member of the monastic community.

96 Ibid., 125.
of these is most poignant. It is as if William is eager to enable these children, humpbacked, on trestles, bent double, and silent, to have a palpable youth and adulthood that he sacrificed on their behalf.

In the third book, Thomas makes this theme of William’s religious maturation and profession most explicit. In this book, despite William’s translation from the monks’s cemetery into the chapter house, he still encounters resistance to the use of sacramentals—such as candles and a carpet for decorating the sepulcher—from Thomas’s superior.97 William generously performs miracles for a sleepless monk, for the sacrist with a toothache, and for laborers in the monastic community in this book, but his reputation is still provisional without the full approval of the bishop and prior. Thomas begins the book by recounting two visions in which the community founder, Herbert of Losinga, appears to him demanding the removal of William’s relics to a more suitable place. In the second vision, Herbert wakes Thomas with his pontifical staff, which he holds in his left hand, while he hold “by the right hand a little boy of 12 years.”98 Herbert orders Thomas to tell the bishop and abbot to remove William to “the place which he has chosen for himself that he may abide in, it is the Chapter-house and his tomb is to be placed among the boy’s seats.”99 In another dream vision, William addresses the Bishop himself: “Give order Lord and Father, that a little resting-place be made ready for me in the Chapter-house, because there for a little while, as a boy among the boys, I desire to rest. Hereafter I intend again to return into the Church.”100 William announces his own oblation, where he passes the years before he can make his profession as an adult, in terms that the community could not fail to recognize as traditional—especially in light of the growing disapproval of oblation. Prior Elias reluctantly agrees to this arrangement, which is to be carried out with the specific provision that the sarcophagus be level with the pavement—presumably to call less attention to it.101 The miracles that follow take place largely at his sepulcher and attest

98 “tenensque dextera puerum quasi duodennem” (ibid., 119).
99 “Locus uero quem sibi amodo manendum preelegit capitulum est, lapisque puerorum sedibus interponendus” (ibid., 120).
100 “Iube, domine pater, mihi lectulum in capitulo preparari, quia ibi paulisper inter pueros puer ipse pausare desidero, postmodum ad ecclesiam demuo reuersurus” (ibid., 121).
101 Ibid., 122–25.
The Life and Passion of Saint William of Norwich

to the prestige and potency that William brings the monastic community.

By book 4, William has proven himself to be, beyond the doubt of anyone but the hard-hearted Prior Elias, a saint worthy of adult respect; to his own peril, Prior Elias “by no means could be induced to expiate by a suitable honour the insult inflicted upon Saint William.”102 William evinces a less-than-childlike concern about his reputation and the cleanliness of his tomb, muddied and defiled with the spittle of the many pilgrims who come to plead for his intercession.103 He is increasingly vengeful, holding those who make vows to him accountable for their promises.104 By book 5, he is sufficiently grown-up to chastise his uncle, the priest Godwin Sturt, who has profited by dipping the teazle with which William was tortured into water to effect cures at a price. William slays Godwin’s whole flock of hens when he shamelessly demands a hen from a poor woman.105 In an oddly romantic episode, he demands a gold ring from the wife of Reginald, son of Philip; he appears to her during a dream, thanking her “affectionately for her devotion and refreshed her with kind speeches.”106 She pledges the ring “in signum amoris.”107 Finally, William appears to his mother in a vision, to help her prepare for a death that will at long last enable her to join her son and share in his joy. Like the apostles who gather for Mary’s dormition, the monks bury her with “every courtesy and service . . . for the devotion which we had to the son, we buried the mother with honour in our cemetery.”108 Book 6, which begins with William’s final translation to the chapel of the Holy Martyrs, is the culmination of this narrative of maturation. In book 6, William appears to have garnered a full acceptance from both the laity and the clergy, both in Norwich and surrounding areas. Thomas compares him to Edmund: “the one withstood the pagan raging against the law of Christ, the other endured the Jews repeating as it were in him the death of Christ.”109 Ritual crucifixion by the Jews is thus explicitly offered as a means of achieving the kind of death that is no longer possible in a

---

102 “Ut nullatenus ab eo possit extorqueri ut tapeti uelut supra dociimus tam uiliter sancto Willelmo sublati dedecus congruo corrigenderet honore” (ibid., 165).
103 Ibid., 171.
104 Ibid., 177.
105 Ibid., 195.
106 “Qui affectuose deuotioni eius gratias agens, dulci eam recreauit alloquio” (ibid., 195).
107 Ibid., 195.
108 “Ac deuotionis causa quam erga filium habebamus, matrem in cimiterio nostro honorifice sepełimus” (ibid., 210).
109 “Sustinuit ille paganos in legem Christi desueintes, pertulit iste iudeos in se quasi mortem Christi reiterantes” (ibid., 240).
Christianized Europe. However, the rhetoric of childish affection and innocence that characterizes Thomas’s traditional authorial apology at the narrative’s inception no longer seems appropriate to Thomas’s text. He claims in his prologue that his will be a “little work,” “as I am slow of wit and unskilled in eloquence.” Rather than a gushing fountain to quench the thirst of weary travelers, his devotional work will be a trickle "from some little spring in a tiny rill." Thomas’s conclusion, in contrast, is a magnificent story of a pilgrim who is visited by Saint Edmund and the recently martyred St. Thomas of Canterbury; grave and authoritative, they urge him to seek his health in Norwich (as opposed to Canterbury), where he indeed does, at Saint William’s tomb. This final episode, for which Thomas of Monmouth claims witnesses and a firsthand account, places William in a glorious circle far from his own—and the text’s—humble beginnings.

SAINT WILLIAM AND THE JEWS

The myth of Jewish ritual murder, whatever its origins, would evolve its own enduring rhetoric, the victim’s identity conflated with the Christ child in the Host, thereby reinforcing the doctrine of transubstantiation in a powerful drama of sacrament and sacrifice. Despite Thomas of Monmouth’s careful rendering of the template for this affective story, however, neither the Norwich Jews nor William attained the fame or notoriety Thomas hoped for, and one suspects the author himself suffered disappointment. Jewish intentionality for the Crucifixion would emerge as the major issue in determining “the proper status of the Jew in a rightly ordered Christian society,” but not in Thomas’s lifetime. The Jews of Norwich, according to Thomas’s reportage, may offer us some insight into the modest development of William’s shrine. In book 2, protected by royal edict and the sheriff, they taunt the Christians who demand consequences for William’s murder: “You ought to be very much obliged to us, for we have made a saint and martyr for you. Indeed, we have done you a great deal of good, and a good which you fling back upon us as a crime. We have done for you

110 “Aquam breuis uene stillantem fonticulo” (ibid., 3).
what you could not do for yourselves.”\textsuperscript{113} The mockery pointedly echoes the skepticism of Thomas’s own community, who identify the same difficulty in their appraisal of William’s sanctity. Even if the Jews did murder William, was he sufficiently directed in his intentions to satisfy the requirements of martyrdom? For without a defiant act of suffering in Christ’s name or evidence of a holy life in imitation of Christ, no amount of narrative reconstruction, however gifted the writer, can make a twelve-year-old boy into a saint. Thomas’s resumption of his role as William’s secretary, in 1172 after years of silence, gives us a final insight into his authorial endeavors.

Between 1172 and 1174, Thomas joined an illustrious host of hagiographers chronicling contemporary events, specifically Thomas Becket’s meteoric ascent to sainthood. Early hagiographers Edward Grim and Benedict of Peterborough witnessed Becket’s martyrdom (in contrast to William’s reconstructed crucifixion), and others who wrote an account of his martyrdom, such as his clerks John of Salisbury, William Fitzstephen, and Herbert of Bosham, knew Becket well.\textsuperscript{114} Thomas of Monmouth begins to chronicle again in a competitive spirit when the hagiographers of Thomas Becket are writing, and his final account of William’s miracle in healing the bloated and monstrous Gaudfrid of Canterbury brings him to Canterbury seeking eyewitness evidence. The similarities and differences between Becket and William are striking, and surely Thomas noted them as he surveyed the throngs of pilgrims, many coming from great distances to the opulent shrine opened to the public after Easter of 1171.

Like William, Thomas Becket was a commoner who, many thought, ambitiously strove beyond his deserving and provided little evidence of a saintly life. Nonetheless, as Benedicta Ward argues, his cult was embraced immediately by his own monastic community as well as by common assent because it belonged to the “oldest and most traditional kind, that of a martyr venerated at the place of his death.”\textsuperscript{115} Becket’s spilled blood sanctified holy space polluted by sacrilege, his prescient death coincided with the feast of the Holy Innocents, and his deliberation in facing down the powers that threatened the Church’s holy liberties outweighed the more recent (especially Cistercian) emphasis

\textsuperscript{113} “Gratias nobis persoluisse debueratis, quia sanctum ac martyrem uobis fecimus. Fecimus quidem uobis perutile bonum quod in nos retroquitis ad maleficium. Fecimus uobis quod uos ipsi uobis facere non potuistis” (Thomas of Monmouth, \textit{Life}, 95).

\textsuperscript{114} See Michael Staunton, \textit{The Lives of Thomas Becket} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); and Benedicta Ward, \textit{Miracles}, especially her comparison of William of Norwich’s cult and Thomas Becket’s, 104–5.

\textsuperscript{115} Ward, \textit{Miracles}, 109.
The Journal of Religion

on ascetic living and contemplative beatitude. Naturally, when the over-indulgent Gaudfrid swells into a mass of wind and pus as a result of overeating, he resorts to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket for healing. Becket appears to Gaudfrid in a dream, urging him to have a candle made in the name of St. William, to put the candle on his bloated head, and to visit the shrine in Norwich, when healed, offering the wax in thanks. Gaudfrid does as Saint Thomas advises and on his way to Norwich is miraculously attended by Saints Edmund and Thomas Becket. After he performs his vow at William’s shrine, giving thanks to all three holy martyrs, he reports his story to Thomas of Monmouth, who returns to Canterbury to resume his investigative work on Saint William’s behalf. His efforts, although they had little effect in promoting an enduring cult or establishing Jewish culpability for ritual murder, provide us with a rare glimpse into the dynamics of saint making in twelfth-century England.